



JULIE TRETTEL

FIGHTING
DESTINY

A Westin Pack Novel

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By

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Fighting Destiny

A Westin Pack Novel: Book Two

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Elise

Chapter 1

I smacked the alarm clock with a groan. Who got up at that ungodly hour? For the last two and a half months, that answer would be me. And why? Because the one person in this world I didn't want to see had come to town, and he wasn't leaving.

His auburn hair stuck out like a beacon anywhere I went, and like the coward I was, I hid every time. A part of me longed to look into his eyes and feel that final spark of recognition. What color were his eyes? I had wondered about that too often and immediately scolded myself.

Patrick O'Connell would give up and go home, eventually. He had only come here to kill my brother in that ridiculous mating ritual and take his one true mate. No doubt he hadn't smelled me coming until it was almost too late.

I had been out with my sister, Lily, and my brother's mate, Kelsey, to scout Kyle's latest challenger during the mating challenges. See, once a newly mated pair is announced there's a challenge period where an eligible wolf can issue a battle to the death for those mating rites.

Kyle and Kelsey's period was shortened due to extenuating circumstances. Basically, Kelsey's a super powerful she-wolf witch with all kinds of awesome powers that caused them to bond faster than should be possible. I had totally called it, but even still, they had to endure a month of absolute terror through the challenges.

Sure, Kyle being Alpha of our pack made his position much more sought after, but my position in the pack made me

only slightly less desirable, and I didn't have any super powers to lessen the challenge period. Four months. That's what I'd have to endure if I took a mate. Four months of hell. I couldn't do it.

Currently, Kelsey was expecting their first child. If it was a boy, some of the pressure would come off me. As second oldest in the family, should I take a mate, that would move the line of succession to him until, and unless, Kyle heirs a son. It was such a mess. My plan all along has been to just not take a mate until that happens, but then Patrick showed up and he wouldn't go away.

Anyway, back to my story. Lily and Kelsey and I went to scout out the Irish challenger that had just arrived. As we got close, my whole body started tingling, almost like I needed to shift to my wolf form, and then, I smelled him. It was the most delicious thing I'd ever smelled and it called to me. I saw the tall, strong man with the auburn hair from behind and he stiffened his shoulders and sniffed the air. I knew immediately who he was to me, like some blaring neon sign pointing and exclaiming, *this is your one true mate!* Of course, I did the only sane thing possible. I faked a headache and ran home with my tail between my legs, scared half to death.

Since that moment, I had done everything in my power to avoid one Patrick O'Connell. San Marco, the town my pack inhabits, is not an extremely big place. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone knows everyone's business. It's both a blessing and a curse.

Of course I knew Patrick had gotten whiff of his one true mate, and had no plans to leave without her, or rather, me. He had even reneged on his challenge against Kyle for Kelsey, telling my brother there was no way he could do that after he'd smelled me. My now sap of a brother thought it was pretty romantic and actually gave him clemency in Westin territory, and put him up in Kelsey's old cottage on the edge of town after she'd moved in with Kyle.

I couldn't even run through my favorite woods anymore for fear of running into him. My theory was that there had to be more than just his smell, but I knew if I saw his

eyes I'd be a goner. I had heard so many amazing, sigh-inducing stories of true mates. Not everyone was lucky enough to find theirs, and in my head I knew he was the only man for me, but I couldn't cave to that primal urge to reach out to him. So, avoidance it had to be.

My alarm sounded again, interrupting my thoughts. I turned it off instead of hitting the snooze button again and reluctantly got up, pulling on my robe and headed for the bathroom.

Four a.m. That was my new routine. Up at four meant in the office by five where I could hide out with little to no chance of crossing paths with him. I brought my lunch and ate in my office, alone, every day. It was what I needed to do to survive.

I knew my family was worried sick about me. Some days I even agreed they should be. It had become almost a sick obsession—avoid Patrick O'Connell at all costs. The alternative made me physically ill. Not him. Not meeting him, but I knew from everything I'd compulsively found out about him these past few months, that I'd likely fall head over heels for him. It wasn't that that scared me, exactly, it was the challenges. It was the thought of losing him. I'd rather just not have him at all.

I was twenty-five years old. I was a strong, independent woman. I was a wolf-shifter from one of the strongest bloodlines in shifter history. I didn't need a man. I didn't need a mate, not even a true mate, and I certainly did not need Patrick O'Connell

I grabbed a strawberry Pop-Tart from the pantry on my way out, trying to be quiet and not wake anyone. I was not a morning person, but I guess you had to do what you had to do.

At 5:01, I unlocked the door to my office and sighed in relief at the safety I now associated with the room. The Westin Foundation was a private company used to legally and gainfully employ wolf-shifters and keep up appearances of a normal community in the eyes of the humans. It didn't hurt

that it was extremely profitable and gave the Westin Pack a much plusher living than any other pack.

I had recently been promoted to VP of Human Resources and I loved my job. Part of what I loved most was the interactions with people. I was very much a people person, but lately my focus was on paperwork and it hadn't gone unnoticed. I was asked if anything was wrong or if I wanted to talk about it on a daily basis. They meant well, but I could never confess what a coward I was. Kyle had even called me in for two disciplinary chats, formally on my record. I still couldn't believe it. Who was I? I wasn't sure I even knew anymore.

It had been a quiet morning, but by lunchtime I was fighting a massive headache and considered going home. A knock on my door sounded, making the pain worsen. I considered ignoring it, but the banging just continued.

"What?" I snapped, opening the door.

"Is that any way to welcome your sisters?" Lily, my little sister, asked, with Kelsey in tow.

"Sorry, headache. This really isn't a good time." I tried to close the door, but she just stuck her foot in the way, and I knew they weren't going to leave peaceably.

"What?" I asked a little snappier than I meant as they barged past me. "Please come on in," I said under my breath, and not in a polite way.

"Don't mind if we do," Lily said, as Kelsey fished out an aspirin from her purse and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said, genuinely feeling like a tool for taking out my frustrations on them.

"Sit down," Kelsey said, motioning to the sofa in a corner of the room. Something told me she meant business and that I wasn't going to like it. "Shall I start, or you?" she asked my sister.

"Oh, I got this," Lily said with a wicked grin. "Elise, it's been over two months of the sulking, hiding, hermit crap. We've tried to be understanding and give you your space." I

snorted at her. “I said *tried!* Anyway, enough is enough. You don’t want to talk about whatever happened to you. Fine. But E, you’re really scaring us.”

“Kyle’s convinced you were raped and is ready to start interrogating every wolf in San Marco to get to the bottom of it,” Kelsey said matter-of-factly.

“What? Raped? He can’t be serious. Nothing happened to me. I appreciate the concern, but honestly I’m just busy, with a lot on my mind.”

“Bullshit,” Lily challenged.

“It’s just some personal stuff I’m dealing with, but I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. There’s nothing fine about you waking up at four a.m. and sneaking into the office. You are less of a morning person than I am. There’s nothing fine about locking yourself away from everyone, whether here in your office or at home in your room. If you had a smile on your face even once I’d think you were having an illicit affair you didn’t want anyone to know about, but E, you look completely miserable and it scares us.”

I sighed. I was going to have to stop being such a coward and start facing things. I certainly never intended to upset or scare anyone.

“I’m fine. I promise. How about we head to lunch? I don’t want you guys to worry about me.”

“If it’s the new position at work, Kyle will hire another assistant to help with your workload,” Kelsey offered, fishing out reasons for my behavior.

“No, I’m fine. I can handle it.” Oh God, they thought I couldn’t handle my job now? This was getting bad. I’d just have to prove to them that everything was just fine.

“I hear the Crate is serving lunch. How about we go there?” Lily suggested. I knew she was really hoping to see Cole Anderson, whose tattoo parlor was only a few doors down, and who Lily had been crushing on forever.

“Sure,” I said. Of course I didn’t want to go, but I had to get some of the heat off my back, and I just prayed Patrick O’Connell was nowhere in the area.

Planting on my best fake smile, I grabbed my bag and we headed for the door. Maybe lunch out with the girls wouldn’t be so bad.

As we entered the Crate, I couldn’t help but sniff the air and look around. No sign of Patrick. I tried to breathe a sigh of relief, but if I were being honest, I was a little disappointed by it, too.

The Crate was really a bar and a bit of a dive, but it was a popular hangout in San Marco. Dark paneling covered the walls, matching the dark wood floors. A bar, with stools for seating, ran along the back wall. To the right was a small stage mostly used for karaoke night, but occasionally a group of local kids would attempt to start up a band and they’d play there some nights. The current hot group in town was my youngest brother Chase’s band. They really were pretty good, too.

We headed off to the left towards the booths that ran along that wall. There were also several tables that sat in the middle of the room and at nights were often pushed aside to clear a small dance floor. The place may have been a little dark, but it was always clean and when Jesse, who owned the bar, had decided to open for lunch, it had become a popular eatery too.

“Hey, Misty.” Lily waved to the pretty blond waitress who was as much a staple of the Crate as Jesse himself.

“Hey ladies. Elise,” she said, surprised but happy to see me. “We’ve missed you. How have you been?”

Fake smile in place, realizing that gossip and concern had spread beyond my family. “I’m good, just really busy. How are you?”

We chatted for a few and she took our orders before flitting off to the next table. Misty had always reminded me of a hummingbird, the way she moved throughout the room. I

couldn't help but smile, genuinely smile, and realized it had been a long time since I'd done much of that. It felt good.

“So, Kels, how are you feeling?”

I didn't miss the shared look she gave Lily with my change in character.

“Overall, not too bad. It's still early. A little nausea in the mornings and a constant hunger, and I get overly emotional easily, which drives me nuts, but overall I can't really complain. Micah thinks I'm about ten weeks, but that seems farther along than I thought. I go for my first ultrasound next week, so we'll see.”

Everyone in San Marco knew Micah. He was the only doctor in town and the son of one of the Pack Council members.

“Okay, if you're listening to Kyle, you'd think she's about to pop any second, always fussing over her. It's cute and annoying.” Lily rolled her eyes. “Who knew that big strong wolf of a brother of ours would be such a kitten over his mate. It's hysterical.”

Kelsey glared what I'd deemed the “mom eyes” at Lily. “Lil, don't harass him. This is new for both of us and he's just nervous. I am too. We're going to be parents. I can't even believe it.”

I looked at her and said sincerely, “You two are going to be the best parents any kid could ask for.”

I hadn't meant them to, but my words started a flood from Kelsey's eyes. It made us all laugh.

“I'm sorry. I just get so emotional!”

Conversation the rest of the meal was light and friendly. They weren't on my case anymore and I was relaxed and actually enjoying our time together. Excusing myself, I headed for the bathroom. Staring at the mirror, I was surprised to see me staring back. Not the empty, hollow, scared coward I'd gotten used to seeing, but me, and I looked happy and alive again. I vowed to try to open up a little more and not let a certain wolf continue to drive me into darkness.

As I stepped out of the bathroom, I smelled him. Patrick was there. I was certain of it. My palms started sweating, and my heart began pounding in my chest. I peeked around the corner, out into the dining hall, and sure enough, there he stood with my brother at my table talking to my sisters. I watched him for a moment as he talked effortlessly and laughed with my family, but something in his posture was tight and I found him looking around the room like he was searching for someone. Then it dawned on me. He was looking for me. He knew I was there.

I flagged Misty over and asked her to tell the girls that my headache had returned, and I had gone home to rest. She looked at me with concern, but said she would. Like the chicken I was, I let myself out of the back door and fled once again from the man who haunted my thoughts day and night.

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Patrick

Chapter 2

The moment I entered the Crate my body warmed and relaxed. Her scent was everywhere. It was the strongest I'd smelled my mystery woman, my mate, since that very first day warming up before my challenge with Kyle Westin. I had reneged on the challenge, and it had cost me everything.

I was so grateful to Kyle and all the Westins for taking me in, allowing me to stay in their territory. Liam and Chase had become staples at my place. They hung out there all the time and it was great. I had a lot of brothers, five of them actually, but our father raised us in competition. His dream was to be the strongest, most powerful alpha in history. His plan was to keep Colin, my oldest brother, close to him, groomed to take over the pack someday. Then as other packs' firstborns began to mate we would each in turn challenge and defeat, essentially taking over that pack in alliance and dedication to him.

My brother, Finn, had done exactly as planned, challenging and defeating the alpha of a small pack in the Amazon. He seemed happy enough in life. When Kyle Westin mated, I was next in line. I had no choice in the matter and my father had sent my challenge ahead of sending me. I was prepared to do as I had been raised, to fulfill my father's dream. As alpha of the prestigious Westin Pack, I would have been top son in my father's eyes. It was all I had ever wanted, and while a very small part of me regretted it being Kyle, who had been a friend to me through our college days, I still knew what I had to do and was prepared to do so. Until I got one whiff of the woman that would change my life forever.

It had been a rash decision on my part to pull out of the challenge. I did not discuss with my father. I knew what he would have said. True mates made for weak males. But knowing she was there, I hadn't been able to think straight. My entire focus had shifted to her and I didn't even know what she looked like, but her smell was like a drop of rain amidst a drought. Even through my frustrations over her elusiveness, I could not find it in me to regret the decision.

I had given up everything for her. My father had disowned me, furious over the situation and calling me a fool, telling me I had thrown my life away for a little ass. The man I had worshiped my entire life had turned his back on me. I was forbidden to return to the Clan and it hurt. A lot. I could only hold on to the hope that he would change his mind in time and that she was truly worth it all. If only I could find her.

To say I was frustrated was an understatement. She was everywhere and yet I had never once laid eyes on her in the months I had been in San Marco. Every time I got close, she slipped away. After nearly three months, I could only assume that she was deliberately avoiding me. But why? Finding a true mate was everything to a wolf. Our very core sought out that one person who would complete us and while culturally our society had shifted away from the disappointment of never finding one's true mate to settling for a compatible mate, it was still every wolf's desire to find that closeness and bond with a mate. I had never known how badly I wanted—no, needed—it.

There was no way that my mate did not recognize me equally as I had her. I just didn't believe that was even possible. So, every time I got close and she faded away on me, I responded to the rejection and it was awful.

I knew the moment she had left the building, and even though a part of me realized my friend was asking if I was okay, I ignored him, turning and running for the door, only to see a small dark car pull out among a cloud of dust. She was running from me. There was no mistaking it this time and the physical pain that knowledge caused was staggering. Fighting

the primal need to change and give chase was the hardest thing I had ever done.

“Are you okay? Dude, what’s wrong?” Chase jumped from his truck and ran over to check on me. Liam was quickly by his side.

“Patrick? What’s wrong?” his brother asked.

I just shook my head, trying to clear it as much as push them away.

“I’m fine,” I said, rubbing the empty hole in my heart she had once again left behind.

“You sure? You don’t look so hot, man,” Chase assured me.

“I said I’m fine,” I snapped, and turned to walk back into the Crate.

Kyle was grinning and his face fell when he looked at me. “Dammit, she eluded you again?”

I sighed, trying not to let the full extent of my frustration show, even knowing that if there was anyone on this planet who understood, it was Kyle Westin. His mate had worked side by side with him for more than two years before ever showing a sign of mating. Daily rejection was his life, but even knowing he got it, I didn’t want to share my pain with him. So I just shrugged. “Safe to say she isn’t ready for me to find her.”

“What do you mean?” Lily asked.

“Every time Patrick gets close to his mate, she disappears on him,” Kyle informed them.

A shared look between the girls didn’t go unnoticed.

“What do you know about it?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” Lily said like I was crazy, and I felt crazy.

“I’m gonna head on,” I told Kyle.

He sighed, no doubt feeling my frustrations, and nodded. “Call me if you want to talk. This one put me through

absolute hell, but I can honestly say I'd go back and do it all over again. She's worth it, I promise." He grinned lovingly down at his beautiful mate.

"How about some Call of Duty to take your mind off things?" Chase offered.

"I will, yeah," I said sarcastically before changing my tone. "Sounds great," I replied, still with little enthusiasm. I really didn't want the company just then, but I couldn't tell the kid no. He meant well.

Kyle ended up blowing off the day to hang with us, too. All my frustrations and anger were geared toward kicking three Westins' butts. After awhile I started to relax and even enjoy just hanging out with my friends, who had grown to mean more to me than my own brothers. These three men were truly everything I had wished my brothers had been. They were so close and loving. They actually cared for each other and respected one another. A simple video game, such as that, would have led to bloodshed amongst my brothers, but while the Westins were competitive with me and each other, there was no animosity. Whoever won, won, and they congratulated each other and ribbed the losers.

I counted myself lucky to be a part of it, even in a small way. Why couldn't my mate have been their lovely sister, Lily? She was a little wild and still a little young in many ways I had noticed, but she was also sweet and fun. As we'd say in Ireland, she was craic through and through. But mostly she would have made me a Westin. I sighed, wondering where that thought had come from. It wasn't that I had a bad family and I loved my clan. It was just hard not to notice the differences there, and I truly envied the close relationship the four Westin siblings had.

"Oh slam! Yes! You suck!" Chase yelled, jumping up suddenly and shaking me from my thoughts. As if on autopilot, I raised my hand as he slapped his against mine. I hadn't even been paying attention to the game we were playing, but knew from my partner's enthusiasm we had just kicked some butt.

“Alright, alright,” Kyle said. “I’ve got to get back to the office. Tomorrow is the Winter Solstice run, but Friday night you’re on for a rematch, and Liam and I won’t go so easy on you guys next time.”

“Yeah, yeah, big words there, suit boy. No way will you two ever take me and Patrick.”

I laughed despite my melancholy mood. Chase could talk some shit. You had to love him.

“You’re running with us tomorrow, right?” Liam asked me.

I sighed. I had always loved the Winter Solstice run. The longest night of the year. It was the best, but it was a pack thing.

“Wish I could, but that’s a pack thing. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Patrick. Of course you are welcome to run with us. As long as you are staying in Westin territory, as far as I’m concerned you’re honorary Westin. Now I’m sure some would take exception to you showing up for a pack meeting, but I can’t imagine anyone will care about the run.” His face transitioned into a rather evil grin. “Plus, all pack members are required to run tomorrow. No exceptions. If your mate is truly Westin, she’ll be there.”

I didn’t know how to feel about what he said. My mate would be there. She couldn’t just run away from me. Well, not exactly anyway. I realized there were a lot of wolves in the Westin pack. I’m not sure anyone but Kyle probably knew for certain just how many, but a lot. In wolf form, I knew with certainty that I would hone in on her quickly despite the large number.

“We’ll start with a pack meal at the pack house and then we run. Hope you’ll seriously consider joining us, for dinner and the run.” Kyle added.

I nodded. “Sure, yeah. I will. Thanks.”

Nervous excitement caused goosebumps on my arms. Tomorrow night I was going to find her.

“Another round?” Liam asked after Kyle left. We spent the rest of the evening wasting away in video games. Don’t get me wrong, I loved playing and hanging with the guys, but I wanted some time alone to both sulk at the earlier rejection, and to relish in the knowledge that I would see her in less than twenty-four hours.

“Do you have anything to eat around here?” Chase asked as his stomach grumbled.

“There’s some crisps in the press,” I told him.

“There’s some what in the where?” he asked.

I just shook my head and walked into the kitchen to grab the bag of Lay’s from the cabinet next to the fridge. I threw it next to him and sat back down.

“Chips. These are called chips,” he informed me.

I rolled my eyes at him. “We will agree to disagree on that.”

We continued to play for several more hours.

“Last round. I’m wrecked. Gonna call it,” I informed them halfway through our current game. It was half eight at night. I was done.

“Ohhh, you suck. You suck,” Liam teased, less obnoxiously than his younger brother at the close of our final game.

I shook my head at them, suddenly sad that none of my brothers would ever tease me in such a manner. The Westins were truly a great family and they treated their pack fairly and with respect. Like they treated each other. Like family.

I had been around a lot of other packs. My father had seen to it that my brothers and I knew everyone in pack leadership for nearly every pack. We had been sent out to the best camps, schools, and eventually colleges for this purpose alone. Where other future alphas went, so did we. And we all knew that one day we would battle to take one of their lives and live that life with their mate. Having smelled my one true

mate, and knowing she was out there, it felt like the fear just thinking about it.

I couldn't afford to love this pack. I couldn't afford to fit in. Life just didn't work that way. My father was pissed, yeah, but I had to believe he'd get over it and accept me back to the clan when the time came. As much as I liked the Westins, it was customary for a male wolf to find his mate and bring her back to his pack, not follow her to another pack. That could be perceived as a sign of weakness, and after the mess I had made with the challenges for Kelsey, I didn't need any more ammo pointing towards weakness.

No, I would find my mate and take her home. I sighed, looking around the cottage I had grown to love. So why did it sometimes feel like I was finally home instead?

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Elise

Chapter 3

My alarm sounded at four o'clock. I turned it off and rolled over, curling the blanket up to my neck, and found my sweet spot. I had been having the best dream, and still felt pulled into that sense of lulling and comfort. I wasn't moving. I didn't want to. I closed my eyes and drifted back to sleep.

"Elise? Sweetheart, are you sick?"

I stretched lazily and rolled toward the voice.

"What, Mom?" I asked in a sleepy voice.

"Sweetie, it's almost noon. Kelsey just called, worried that you didn't show up for work and said you left early yesterday, not feeling well. Is everything okay?"

"Hmmm," I sighed, not quite ready to face the world again. "I'm okay. Actually, I feel great. I think I just needed sleep. I'm so comfy, I don't want to move or get up."

She laughed. "Okay, I'll call your brother and let him know there's to be no adulting for you today."

I smiled. "Yes, that would be wonderful."

"You look happy today. It warms my heart to see it."

I frowned. "I'm sorry, Mom, I never meant to worry anyone."

My mother gave me a knowing look. "You know, dear, I didn't handle things so well when I met your father, either."

"What?" I shrieked. "Mom, it's not ..."

She cut me off. “Yes, that’s exactly what I thought. You’ve met him, haven’t you?”

“Mom, no,” I tried, but even to me it didn’t sound very convincing.

She laughed at me. “No sense in denying it. Moms have a way of knowing these things. Let me tell you about the first time I realized your father was my one true mate. See, we had grown up together. He was an arrogant, cocky alpha’s son being groomed to take over the pack someday. Nothing he did was wrong and everyone loved him. All my eighteen years of life I hated him. Everything he did made me angry. He turned eighteen only two months before me, but he tried asking me out several times during that period. Needless to say, that didn’t go over so well. He said later he was always drawn to me and that getting me riled up had been one of his favorite pastimes.”

I smiled at the picture she painted and couldn’t fully reconcile my loving parents as enemies.

“Well, he did finally take no for an answer and found himself a girlfriend. Thankfully no one from this pack. He went off to college and I turned eighteen. When he came home that summer and I saw him for the first time, it hit me like a ton of bricks and I was pissed! Such a conflict between the pull of the bond between true mates and the history of the boy I knew. Needless to say, we had one rocky start.”

“Wow, why did you never tell us that? You guys always made it seem like Dad came home from college the summer after his freshman year and bam! Instant love and recognition.”

Mom laughed. “Hardly! But that’s how your father likes to remember it, and quite frankly I didn’t want to scare you kids with our nightmarish beginning.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said honestly. It helped to hear that she found her happily ever after despite a rocky start. Maybe Patrick and I would have the same down the road. Much, much further down the road. “Mom, can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly. You can always ask me anything, sweetie,” she said as she sat next to me on the bed and stroked my hair while I rested my head on her shoulder.

“Does the mating call eventually just go away? I mean, what if I don’t want to answer it right now? Will it still be there five, ten years down the road if we were to run into each other again?”

“Oh, E, why would you even want that? There’s only ever one true mate. If you’ve found yours, go to him and accept it, lest you settle for a compatible mate down the road. Trust me, a compatible mate will never satisfy you the way your one true mate will ... trust me on that!”

“Oh Mom, gross!”

She giggled. “I know the Jasper twins are back in town for the holidays. They haven’t been home in a while. I always suspected ... ”

“Mom, no. Don’t bother trying to guess, but no way, no how would I ever be mated to one of those clowns!”

She frowned and I could see her brain working overtime, trying to determine just who my mate could possibly be.

“Please don’t. I really don’t want to discuss it. I’m mortified that you even guessed it.”

I tried to bury my head beneath my hands, but she just pried them apart and forced me to look at her. “Elise Westin, any wolf bonded to you would be one lucky man. God does not make mistakes in his pairing, despite our initial reactions to it. Go to him. Have you even spoken with him?” I shook my head no. “That’s what all this recluse stuff has been about?” Tears ran down my cheeks as I nodded. “Be brave, my sweet girl, don’t hide from this. It goes against everything in your nature and will only make you miserable.”

“I know, Mom, but I’m so scared,” I whispered.

She left me alone to my thoughts, telling me she would call Kyle and let him know I was home sick today. I took the

time to clear my mind and instead of thinking, I quickly fell fast asleep.

The smell of smoked meat called me out of my slumber. My stomach growled as I realized I had not eaten anything that day and the sun had already set. I quickly got up and changed, went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth, deciding not to bother with my hair and just throwing it up in a loose bun. I made my way out into the kitchen, but it was empty.

It hit me suddenly, the smell must be coming from the pack house next door. I dressed quickly and walked over. The pack house would most definitely be a Patrick-free safe zone. Still, at the door I gave a quick sniff, just to confirm. Sure enough, no Patrick O'Connell.

Liam saw me from across the room and waved. It looked like everyone was finishing up their meal, so I quickly grabbed a plate and joined him, along with my other siblings and parents.

"E, I think the rest did you some good today, you look beautiful," my father complimented.

"Thanks, Dad, I'm feeling better, too."

"I'm really glad you joined us. It wouldn't look good if a Westin was missing from a Westin Pack run."

"Tonight?" I squeaked. "Tonight's the Winter Solstice run?"

"Yes, it is."

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad the smell of this meat woke me in time then."

I could see each of my family members visibly relax. I instantly felt guilty for it. It was a pack run. I'd be safe and free of the unmentionable. I was really looking forward to it. I hadn't spent a lot of time in my fur lately and the woods had been calling to me.

"You seem happy tonight," Lily said, giving me a hug on our way outside.

“I am, Lil. I told you I’m fine. No need to worry. I was just a little run down, that’s all.”

Still, I really didn’t want to be the center of attention, so when my siblings and parents made their way to the front of the already gathering group, I hung back, thankful no one commented on it. I watched from the back of the pack as Kyle welcomed everyone. Suddenly my body began to tingle and I swore under my breath. No way could this be happening.

“I know the Winter Solstice run is a pack run, but I have invited my good friend, Patrick O’Connell of the Irish Clan, to join us tonight. Please welcome him.”

There was a polite round of applause and no one questioned his presence, but me? I wanted to just walk up and punch my stupid brother.

The second Kyle gave the signal I shifted without even removing my clothes and took off at a full sprint, dodging bodies in my path with the ease and grace my wolf always seemed to have. It wasn’t long before we were head of the pack and I knew exactly where I wanted to go. Veering north I headed into the woods, jumping over the occasional small boulder or downed tree. I splashed through the creek, delighted by the cold water under my paws. There were others all around every which way I looked, but I felt alone—completely alone.

A small hidden path up ahead would lead me to my destination and I took it gracefully without disturbing the underbrush. I only slowed as dirt turned to rock beneath my feet and I stood on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the valley cloaked in darkness. Looking up at the sky, I realized for the first time that it was also a full moon. I howled up into the beautiful night.

My howl was answered so close by that I stumbled and nearly went over the edge of the cliff. My heart racing, I turned and saw a beautiful, large, red wolf at the entrance to the path that led back to the forest. He was lying down on his stomach like he was waiting for me to calm down and make the next move.

I had never felt such immense happiness as I stared into the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. Patrick. I had always imagined his eyes were green or perhaps brown. Never had I thought they would be blue. Bluer even than my own. They were beautiful and mesmerizing and I knew I would never forget them in a million years.

I walked towards him, hesitantly. His tail wagged hard with each step of my approach. And as I grew more confident his tongue even fell out to one side as he panted in obvious joy. I was doing that. I was making my mate happy and that made me feel stronger and more powerful than ever before.

I didn't know what came over me, but I strolled right up to him and licked the side of his face before jumping over him and running back through the short path into the forest. It must not have taken long for him to recover though, because he jumped on me, causing me to tumble into the brush before I made the first clearing. A weird sound came from my wolf that sounded as though I were choking, when in reality, I was laughing so hard it was escaping through my wolf form.

It must have made Patrick nervous, as he backed off and stared before nudging me with his nose. I tried to stand, but he growled at me. My instinct should have been to growl back, but I immediately submitted. Damn him.

He sniffed and nudged me all over until he seemed confident I was okay, then he stood back and barked, inclining his head towards the forest. I joined him by his side and we ran together for a long time. It seemed that at every possible opportunity our wolves rubbed up against each other. I couldn't have stopped mine if I'd wanted. I knew by the end of the night I'd be carrying his scent, but also to my surprise I was thrilled to know he'd be carrying mine, too.

We ran. We played. We splashed through the water. We tracked a rabbit together. He made the kill, but nudged it for me to take, and I did. I never much cared for hunting or eating raw kills, even in wolf form, but it had seemed important to him, so I ate.

Despite the woods crawling with our kind on the beautiful night of Winter Solstice, it felt as if we were entirely alone. I was grateful we never once crossed paths with my family, and I knew that there were so many black wolves similar to mine in the pack that most likely no one else would pay that much attention if they saw us together anyway. Then again, Patrick stood out with his beautiful rust-colored fur that blended in with the last remnants of fall.

Eventually, we made our way back to the boulder, which happened to be my favorite place on Earth. I suspected Patrick could sense my love of it as he led the way and I followed.

Despite having slept the day away, the night's fresh air had tired me. I couldn't be certain of the time, but suspected it was already well past midnight, and knew the oldest and youngest of our kind had likely headed back home already.

Patrick stood at the edge of the cliff looking out into the valley below, much as I had been when he found me earlier. I joined him at his side, surprised to find I fit perfectly next to him. Our bodies aligned like missing puzzle pieces. He looked down at me then up at the full moon shining brightly above, and he howled. I watched him in awe before joining him in perfect harmony. I had never imagined how beautiful howling with one's mate could be, until that moment.

When the moment broke, I lay down at his feet. Another sign of not just submission, but acceptance. Damn it. I had to pull it together and stop that nonsense, but while I scolded myself internally, he laid his much larger body beside me and I instinctively snuggled into him. I sighed. I would just live in the moment and deal with the consequences later. It wouldn't change anything, I tried to tell myself, but in my heart I knew it was going to hurt even more in the morning to resist him.

The next thing I knew, the sun was just starting to rise. I stretched and jolted at the feeling of the warm body lying next to me. He stirred and gave what I could only imagine was a "wolfy" grin. We stared out across the valley as it slowly

came to life in brilliant colors of oranges and golds in the morning light.

Realizing I needed to get home and change, I stood, stretched, and sadly turned my back on him to walk away. I was prepared to take off in a sprint the moment I hit the woods, but he nipped at my heel and nodded his head in the direction I knew was Kelsey's old cottage where he was staying. I shook my head sadly and started to walk away. Again he nipped at my hindlegs. I yelped and turned. He didn't look as happy this time and nodded his head again, walking in the direction I knew he wanted me to follow. Again I shook my head. Only that time I growled at him and saw his tail go between his legs as he lowered himself in submission to me. I didn't think wolves could cry, but I'm pretty sure there were tears in my eyes as I turned, fighting against my wolf to gain control, and took off at a full on run.

As the house came into focus ahead of me, I heard the heart-wrenching cry of my mate. I couldn't keep my wolf from returning the cry, but did push us both on to the safety of home.

I shifted quickly at the door and walked inside as quietly as I could. I started for the shower and then realized Patrick's smell was still covering me even in human form, and I couldn't stand to wash it off just yet. So I pulled on a nightshirt and snuggled into bed. My sweet spot didn't feel so sweet, and the normal comfort of my bed felt suddenly empty.

The mating call had been answered that night. My wolf had accepted his wolf, even if I wasn't prepared to accept the man. The bond that we would one day share had been ignited, calling me to accept my mate in every way possible. I cried myself to sleep, trying not to think of what I had done.

Patrick

Chapter 4

The Winter Solstice run had been the greatest night of my life. I had shared every moment of it with my mate. She was beautiful, with a solid black coat, except for the small, white, heart-shaped spot on her right upper-hind leg. I had only noticed it when I nipped her, trying to convince her to come home with me. She had made it clear that wasn't possible. It had nearly broken my heart watching her run from me.

I should have pursued chase, but I hadn't. Later, after I lay there for far too long, licking my wounds, I tracked her back to the pack house. The smells were too numerous and her trail too faint by then to tell where she went. I assumed the parking lot and then home. How I wished I knew where home was.

As her scent was still fresh and evident on me, I solidified a new determination to find her. Her wolf had accepted mine. Things were going to change now. No more running from me. I had to know who she was. I needed to look into those mesmerizing blue eyes in human form so badly it hurt.

It was Saturday afternoon by the time I really got moving. I headed into town to shop for the messages. There was really only one store to shop and. I didn't have much food left in the house. I didn't want my mate to see me as nothing more than a bachelor, incapable of caring for myself, let alone her. I grabbed the bare necessities and quickly took them home.

Back out, I headed for the Crate. There were a few other places to eat, but that was my favorite. I called Kyle and asked him to join me there. While waiting I ordered a burger and chips and a pint of Gat. When the order arrived, I sighed, seeing crisps on my plate. Fries, I reminded myself. Order fries next time. Starving, I dug in anyway.

When Kyle finally arrived I ordered another round for the both of us. I couldn't afford to get ossified in the midst of my hunt for my beautiful mate, but a Gat or two for courage couldn't hurt.

“So, how was the run last night? I didn't see you even once after it started.”

Nothing could have wiped the grin off my face. “I found her!”

“Patrick, that's awesome. I'm so happy for you. What's her name?”

“No idea.”

“Well, tell me where she lives, and I can help with a name.”

“No idea.”

“Can you tell me anything at all about her?”

“She's a solid black wolf. That's all I know for sure.”

Cole Anderson, who was on the Pack Council, slapped me on the back as he joined us. “Half of Westin Pack are black wolves. That doesn't help much.” Taking a long sip of his beer, he grinned. “Hell, my wolf is solid black, so that's one you can mark off your list, 'cause I sure as hell didn't run with you last night.”

Jesse, the owner and attending bartender, even joined in laughing at that.

“Cole's right, there're a lot of black wolves in this pack. Obviously, we can eliminate the males”—they all chuckled again—“but that doesn't narrow it down much, I'm afraid.”

“How about eye color?” Jesse suggested. “That could narrow the pool down a little more at least.

“Blue.”

“Blue?” they all questioned.

“Yes, blue. The most vibrant and amazing blue eyes imaginable.” I sighed, feeling like a lovesick pup, and knew it was showing as the men laughed harder.

“Dude, you got it bad,” Chase chimed in. He attempted to order a beer, but Jesse scolded him and gave him minerals instead.

“Have a Coke on the house, pup.” He laughed, handing him the minerals.

Chase pouted, and then shook it off in true easygoing Chase fashion. “Black wolf, blue eyes? I can still think of a dozen or more. We could start a list and go visit each of them.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” Kyle said. “Start writing.” He motioned to Chase as Jesse produced a piece of paper and pen. “Let’s see, Leslie Matthews.”

“Willow,” Cole added.

“Hmmm, Lacey.” Chase added to the list.

“Wait, how about Heather?”

“No, I’m pretty sure her eyes are brown,” Kyle said. “But, Christine is a black wolf with blue eyes.” They all got quiet.

“Christine? I’m not sure she’d be the type to hide from you, but yeah, maybe.”

“I say start with her.”

“Okay then, where would I find this Christine?” I asked, yet something didn’t quite feel right about the name. I laughed to myself. What the hell? Would I even know, I mean just know, if the name was right? I doubted it.

“It’s getting kind of late, maybe we should try tomorrow.”

I checked my watch it was quarter past ten. “Yeah, I guess it’ll have to wait till tomorrow. That feels like a donkey’s year, but I know it’s for the best. I’m just really anxious to find my mate. The sooner the better.”

Kyle gripped my shoulder in a friendly manner. “Tomorrow, Pat. We got you. We’ll find her. I promise.”

“I’ll keep thinking over the list tonight and add to it if I come up with anyone,” Chase volunteered.

“Thanks, you guys are the best.”

I tossed and turned half the night, too excited to sleep. Christine. I kept saying it over and over in my head, but to no avail. It just didn’t feel right to me. By the time the sun rose I was in a foul mood and exhausted.

Liam knocked on the door far too early.

“Hey man, Kyle said you were really anxious to start hunting for your mate. I have the list if you’re ready. We can get an early start. Early bird catches the mate?” He laughed at his own lame joke.

“Yeah, come on.”

“Man, Kyle said you were stupid excited about this plan, but you don’t look so happy this morning. You sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Sorry, I really didn’t sleep well, thinking about it last night.”

“Well, you’re going to scare an already nervous mate if you don’t settle it.”

“Sure look it, let’s go.”

He took me to a rather large, blue, two-story home. I was always amazed at the level of comforts the Westin wolves were afforded. An older man opened the door.

“Liam, what brings you by this morning?”

“Hey Morgan, I was wondering if Christine was around. This is Patrick O’Connell.”

I shook the man's hand. A sniff of the air told me this Christine was not my mate.

"It's nice to meet you, sir, and I'm sorry for the early hour. We'll catch her later." I turned to leave, but Liam was quickly by my side.

"What are you doing?"

"It's not her."

"How can you be certain?"

I looked at him like he was an idiot, but he really didn't understand, having never been mated himself. "I just know. Her smell isn't here. If she lived here, her smell would be everywhere. It's not. It cannot be her."

"Hey, what's going on?" Christine asked from behind us.

Liam turned to greet her. "Hey, Chris, sorry to bug you so early on a Sunday. This is Patrick. He's looking for his mate."

"And you thought that might be me?" She perked up and immediately started checking me out. I had been checked out by plenty of women in my lifetime, but this one was just arseways. I couldn't handle it any longer.

"No," I said rudely.

"Oh." Her face fell into a pout. "Well, what did you need, then?"

Liam explained. "We know his mate is from Westin Pack, but she seems a little skittish. We know she has a black wolf with blue eyes, so we're just going through the list of people we think might meet that description.

"Oh, how fun!" she said cheerily. "Can I help?"

"No," I said the same time Liam said, "Sure."

She looked back and forth between us and decided she like Liam's answer best. "So I know Lacey and Leslie. And I'm always getting mistaken for Willow. Oh, and Elise of course."

A shudder of recognition ran through my body when she said Elise. I had never heard the name before, but something about it resonated through me.

Liam laughed, “E? Not a chance. Don’t you think we’d know if it was her?”

“True, so then there’s Kendra. Yeah, Kendra’s shy and keeps to herself a lot, I’d totally bet it’s her! Can I come along and introduce you?”

“No,” I said again in unison with Liam’s, “Sure.”

Of course she tagged along.

The three of us piled into Liam’s SUV and headed off to meet Kendra. Pulling up in front of a pink rancher, I got out and took one sniff and decided this was not her. I tried to get back in the car, but Christine’s arm was linked through mine.

“Not so fast, just to be sure, I think you should meet her at least.”

Introductions were made, confirming Kendra was definitely not my mate. This set the stage for the remainder of the day. After our list was complete, Christine had pretty much taken over. I met fourteen additional single she-wolves. None of them were my mate. Half of them didn’t even fit the description.

I was irritated and exhausted by the time Liam finally dropped me home.

My phone rang and Kyle’s face flashed across the screen. I didn’t want to answer it. “Hello?”

“Liam told me it didn’t go so good today. I’m really sorry. I truly had hoped this would be the day you found her.”

“Thanks. I’m not ready to give up yet.”

“Have you tried tracking her?”

“Of course I have.”

“I mean truly give in to your wolf? Kelsey had no idea who or what she was, but when she’d let her wolf out, she

always found me. She had no idea I was a wolf shifter, but her wolf just knew. Might be worth a try.”

“Yeah, sure, can’t be any worse than today. Your entire pack of eligible she-wolves now has word I’m on the hunt for my one true mate and every one of them seems to think she could be it. Don’t they realize that the one and only would know, just as I do?”

Kyle laughed through the line. “Don’t sweat it. They all want their one true mate. That’s all. Grasping at straws and all that.”

I didn’t exactly understand what he was saying but I thought I got the gist of it at least. Grasping at straws? Sometimes I swore they spoke a different language entirely.

Sheer exhaustion helped me sleep through the night and I felt more refreshed and ready to do whatever it took to find her by morning. Heeding Kyle’s suggestion, I grabbed a backpack and threw in a change of clothes. I set it on the ground then shifted, grabbing the bag with my teeth and carrying it with me. I didn’t want to surprise my mate with a first time meeting in the buff.

I sniffed the air. I sniffed the ground. I closed my eyes and just gave in to my senses. Soon I was running. I ran through town and kept going. I came to the Westin Foundation and sighing, I shifted and changed into the clothes I had brought along.

I decided since I was there I might as well say hello to Kyle and admit yet another failure in my search. As I walked into the Foundation, I was floored. Her scent was everywhere. It was so strong and prominent. Could she really be there?

I walked to the front desk. “Kyle Westin’s office?”

“Down the hall to the right, it’s marked, you can’t miss it,” said the pretty brunette receptionist.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She smiled and I thought maybe she was flirting with me, but my mind was so consumed by my mate’s smell that nothing else mattered.

As I was walking in the direction she told me was Kyle's office, I passed an area marked "HR." Her scent was even stronger, if that was possible. My nose carried me forward. There were three doors and a small reception area, but no one was around. The door directly beyond the reception desk was hers. I knew it was hers. There was no doubt in my mind that my mate was there. I started to move forward, unable to stop myself.

"Patrick?"

I turned and saw Lily smiling at me. "Patty told me a handsome stranger was looking for Kyle. I should have known."

I gave her a smile, all the while needing to know exactly who was just beyond the door. So close, and yet so out of reach.

"This is Human Resources, he's three doors down. Come on, I'll show you."

"Okay," I said hesitantly. "Thanks."

I thought it was best if I approached Kyle and not alert Lily to my find. She was a sweet girl and fun to hang out with, but this was personal, so I let her lead me down the hall to Kyle's office.

"Hey Kels, look who I found wandering the halls," she said as we entered the office.

"Hi, Patrick. Let me check and see if he's free for a few. If not, I'm sure Lily can give you a tour of the place while you wait. This is your first time at the Foundation, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I admitted, hoping he was free right now. I needed desperately to get back to that room and see the woman beyond the door.

She smiled and nodded. "Go on in, he's free now."

"Thanks, Kelsey."

I knocked softly before opening the door to his office and letting myself in.

“Hey, what’s up? What brings you to the Westin Foundation,” Kyle asked.

I closed the door behind me, looking between it and him and back at it.

“It’s okay Patrick, there’s a soundproof barrier around the room that even my mate’s super wolf ears can’t penetrate unless I lower the barrier and want her to.”

I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“So, did you try what we discussed last night?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And that’s what led me here. Kyle, she works here. She’s just down the hall. I was about to barge into her office when Lily found me.”

“You’re sure?”

I stared at him like he’d lost his mind. “You’re mated, you should understand. Of course I am sure, yeah.”

“Yeah, I get it. Okay, well lead the way and let’s go find your mystery gal.”

He was almost as giddy as Christine Canine had been, trying to unmask my mate the day before.

“This way,” I said, suddenly very nervous.

Kyle stopped only long enough to tell Kelsey that he was taking an early lunch and would talk to her later. He kissed her and then her stomach. My heart lurched with longing at the sight. I needed my mate.

When I stopped at Human Resources, Kyle gave me a strange look.

“This way,” I told him, walking back into the small reception area.

He entered, and then closed the door to the main hallway behind him. I was already heading for the door I knew belonged to her, but Kyle stopped me.

“Um, Patrick, how sure are you really about this?”

“Really? I’m two thousand percent sure, Kyle. This is her. It has to be. Her scent is everywhere, concentrated strongest at this door.” I pointed to her office door.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Shit!”

“What?”

“Dude, that’s my sister’s office.”

“What? That’s not possible.” I said, my heart sinking. “I’m around Lily all the time. I’d know if it was her. This is not her smell. I swear it isn’t. Maybe she has a visitor?”

He looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Not Lily, Elise.”

That name again. It made my heart flutter irrationally.

“Elise? Who’s Elise?”

“Seriously? Pat, you’ve been here for months now. You are around my siblings all the time. How could you not have met Elise? I mean I know she’s been a little ...” His voice trailed off. “Shit!” He swore again. “How did I not see this?”

“What are you talking about? Who is Elise?”

His hair was mussed from pulling his hand through it. “Elise is my sister, Patrick. My other sister.”

“What?! I didn’t even know you had another sister. Yesterday was the first time I’d ever even heard the name before. Christine mentioned her as a possible wolf match, but Liam laughed it off and said it wasn’t possible.”

“Well yeah, I mean, she’s our sister! She hasn’t been around much lately’ cause she’s been dealing with some shit.”

“Yeah, looks it. She’s been dealing with hiding from me.”

He blew out a long breath. “Okay, okay, we can deal with this.”

“Look Kyle, I’m sorry she’s your sister, but you have to understand, I have to find her. I need to know for sure.”

He nodded before pushing me out of the way and knocking on the door. When there was no answer, he turned the knob and walked in. Her scent was so strong it nearly knocked me on my arse. It was her. I’d found her, only she was gone once again, but this time at least I knew. I had a name.

Elise.

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Elise

Chapter 5

I had two safe places in my life: my office and my bedroom. They were the only two places in all of San Marco that I knew I wouldn't run into Patrick, yet this morning I had smelled him there. I came back from a late lunch and his scent was all over my office. I wanted to storm down to Kyle's office and demand to know why he and Patrick were in there, but that would give it away. I shouldn't be able to recognize Patrick's scent, not as far as my brother was concerned. For a moment I wondered what he would do if he found out I was mated to his friend. His friend that I knew was on an all-out mission to find me.

Christine had called me the day before asking if I knew Patrick. I had told her of course I knew him, he was Kyle's good friend. She had confessed she had thought maybe from the description he had given her that I was the mysterious mate he was looking for. I knew I was, but I hadn't admitted that to her or anyone else for that matter, and had just laughed it off with her. She told me she had taken him around to every eligible she-wolf in the territory that she could think of, even ones that didn't meet the description he gave, but that he still hadn't identified her. She was on the mission then too. Everyone was determined to find me, not realizing I didn't want to be found.

I couldn't stick around my office with his scent everywhere. It was too overwhelming. I couldn't leave until I stopped crying, though. It was like I was an emotional mess and I didn't have the excuse of baby hormones like Kelsey. My emotions were just on overdrive. I longed for something, someone I knew I couldn't have. I forced myself to calm

down. I checked the mirror I carried in my purse, and didn't think anyone would notice the slight red puffiness around my eyes.

I gathered my things and left. I shot Kyle an email that I was taking an extended leave of absence and would explain later. I went straight home and started packing my bags. I jumped on the computer and tried to book a room at a spa I knew a few hours north. I thought maybe I could take a leave of absence to spend some time with our cousins in the Alaskan Pack. That would buy me a few weeks, maybe even a few months, but I knew I needed to move quickly.

Everything was booked solid. The smell of gingerbread wafted down the hall and it struck me that I didn't even know what day it was anymore. I checked my phone and was shocked to find tomorrow was Christmas Eve. Mom had started her baking and wouldn't stop until Christmas morning. The smells made my stomach growl, but I chose to wallow in misery, alone in my room until exhaustion finally took me into a restless night's sleep.

Waking the next morning, I quickly showered with hopes of feeling human. It was Christmas Eve and the realization hit me that I hadn't bought a single thing for anyone. I had selfishly been absorbed by my own drama. Grabbing my car keys, I was determined to rectify the situation.

It was an hour drive to the closest thing that could even be considered a city or anything close to decent shopping. Everything was last minute picked over, but after several hours of therapeutic shopping I had gifts for everyone. On a whim I grabbed a blue and green striped T-shirt and a much too expensive black watch. I was home and wrapping my presents before it dawned on me that I had already gotten all the guys' gifts. A small voice in the back of my head told me they were for Patrick.

I gasped. Looking at the shirt and watch, I knew they were both for him, and I knew they'd look great on him, but I hadn't consciously done it. What did that mean? I couldn't allow myself to think about it.

I headed to the kitchen and spent the remainder of my day baking and laughing and enjoying my family. I didn't want to break the news that I was leaving. I now realized that the next day was not only Christmas Day but also Tuesday, and you didn't mess with Mom's Tuesday night family dinners unless you had a death wish, especially not on Christmas.

I had managed to book a last minute room at a new resort and spa I hadn't been to before, four hours north of San Marco. I would be leaving after Christmas dinner and it was booked for five nights. From there I would decide if I was heading further north for a longer stay away or growing a pair and coming home to face the inevitable. I knew Mom wouldn't be happy about my decision, but I thought she'd understand.

Tossing and turning into the wee hours of morning, I couldn't sleep. The thought of Patrick alone for the holidays was making me sad and far more confused than I already was. I had carefully wrapped the shirt and watch even though I had no intentions of giving them to him. They stared at me from across the room, as if they had eyes, watching and taunting me.

It didn't take long for me to cave. In a moment of weakness, I knew what I was going to do. I put the gifts in a bag and left the house. I carefully undressed and left my clothes by the back door as I shifted, picked up the bag with my teeth, and ran to the cottage. I left the packages on his doorstep without a note and went home. Suddenly exhausted, I slept like a baby until the twins came in like two-year-olds, jumping on my bed, and excited to open gifts on Christmas morning.

My presents for everyone were already waiting under the tree. I didn't bother changing and walked out in my fluffy, pink pajamas. I sat on the couch and wrapped my arms around my knees, hugging them close to my chest. My family was all there, Dad, Mom, Kyle, Kelsey, Liam, Lily, and Chase, but the hole in my heart from the one missing person in my life was crazy. It both saddened and pissed me off at the same time.

I didn't want to miss him. I didn't know him well enough to miss him. I tried desperately to convince myself of that fact. I did not really know Patrick O'Connell. I didn't. Just because some primal part of me recognized him as our mate didn't mean I knew him, and it didn't mean I had to just accept it. Getting away was going to be a good thing. I needed it for my own sanity. It would give me time to reflect and get my life back on track.

"Merry Christmas," Kyle said, plopping down next to me.

I smiled at my big brother. "Merry Christmas."

"Crazy year, right?"

"Definitely. I mean, who would have thought this time last year that you would even be thinking about kids, let alone have one on the way, Daddy," I teased.

He looked at his mate and the love apparent on his face was fascinating. A year ago I hadn't known Kyle was even thinking about a mate, let alone had found her and kept it to himself for two years.

"How'd you do it?" I asked him.

"Do what?"

"Keep it from her. How did you live over two years of your life seeing your mate every day and not act on it? Not show even a hint of recognition?"

He frowned at my question. "It was a sacrifice I had to make, and in hindsight, knowing what I do now, I'd never have waited to talk to her, E."

I felt like he was trying to convey to me more than his words, but I didn't want the truth of them to resonate with me. I wanted his secret on how to deal, so that when the inevitable time came, I could face Patrick with as much indifference as he had shown all that time to Kelsey. I didn't want to make a fool of myself. I didn't want to be mean about it. But I was too scared to risk a life with him knowing I could lose him to something as stupid as the challenges. I knew my heart

couldn't take it. I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't love enough to endure that.

The heaviness in my heart lifted some as we sat around opening presents. I got a beautiful blue cashmere sweater, two new books I'd been wanting, a couple of gift cards, a planner for the coming year, and various other odds and ends. My favorite was a diamond heart necklace. It was stunning, but simple enough to wear every day. I adored it, but there was no tag on it and no one would confess who it was from. I didn't care. It was my favorite. I knew my siblings wouldn't tell me because it was over the fifty-dollar per-person limit we maintained to keep Christmas somewhat in control and sustainable. It was fine by me. I needed a little spoiling this holiday.

You would think our pack would go all out for Christmas, but it wasn't like that. We went all out for New Year's, whereas Christmas was a more low-key, individual family affair. It was intimate and I loved it. It was a time to just enjoy those closest to you.

I looked around at each of the people I loved, ending on Kelsey. "Kels, I'm so happy to have you here with us this year. We love you. You're not just pack, you're family."

I don't know why I said it, but it was true. Of course she immediately started bawling and Kyle shot me a death glare that made me smile. I hugged my sweet sister-in-law. She may have been strong and powerful, and could kick my behind anytime she wanted, but I loved her and sometimes you just needed to tell that to the people who mattered most to you.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed out. "It just hits me over the oddest things. I mean that was understandable, but sometimes it's like out of left field and I don't even know why I'm crying."

We all laughed and Mom and Dad launched into various stories of when she had been pregnant with each of us.

"Mom, Patrick doesn't have anyone here in San Marco. Can I invite him to family dinner tonight? I just hate knowing he's all alone on Christmas," Chase said.

Kyle's head jerked my way and he stared at me.

"What?" I mouthed to him.

"Nothing," he mouthed back, shaking his head, but he kept watching me oddly.

I started to panic. Did he know? How? No, there was no way he could possibly know Patrick was my one true mate. I was just being paranoid. And when Mom readily agreed that no one should be alone on Christmas, I immediately began thinking up excuses on how to get out of the dinner.

I knew I'd have to tell them before Patrick arrived. Maybe my trip would be cause enough to get me out of dinner. At that point it was worth the try.

"Kyle, can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked.

"Yeah sure, what's up?"

"Um, not here. Can we go to your office?"

Okay." He sounded skeptical, but we made our way to what used to be our father's office and was now Kyle's as Pack Alpha. "What's up, E?"

I was suddenly nervous, second-guessing telling him at all. I could just leave a note when I left. I didn't want to answer his questions about why, but I did have to give him a heads-up regarding work.

"I'm taking some time off of work between Christmas and New Year's. Maybe a little longer. I've been pretty stressed and everyone worrying about me here only makes it worse. So I'm going to a spa resort to relax and de-stress. I may even head up to visit Maya for a few weeks."

"Alaska?" he questioned. "You're going to Alaska? In December?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I'll keep you posted. Right now I'm booked for five nights in a brand new resort. It's sort of my Christmas present to myself."

He considered it for a moment before finally speaking. "I think that's a great idea, E. I really do."

“But ... ” I could feel the “but” coming on.

“But ... I don’t want you going alone. The Bulgarians declared war against our pack. I can’t in good conscience let you go off by yourself like that. It’s not safe. When do you leave?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight. I haven’t told Mom yet, but I’m sure she’ll understand. I was going to grab a quick bite to eat and finish packing, then hit the road.”

“What about Christmas family dinner?”

“I think Mom will understand. Patrick can take my place,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant about it.

“Patrick’s coming regardless,” he said defensively. “Okay, okay, give me an hour to round up an escort for you.”

“What? No.”

“Then you don’t go.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Kyle.”

“As your brother, that’s true, but I’m talking as your Alpha right now. We are at war. You are a Westin. You are not leaving our territory on your own,” he said, letting his alpha power flow over me.

I was livid. I couldn’t believe he had done that. As soon as he lifted his power I stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind me.

“Elise Cameron Westin. What on earth was that all about? You do not slam doors in your mother’s house.”

I growled at my father and without a word, turned on my heel and headed for my room. A soft knock sounded on my door a few moments later and I knew it was my mother. She opened the door before being invited.

“Elise? It’s not like you to fight with your brother. What’s wrong?”

Tears were free-flowing down my cheeks. She stared and then her eyes moved to the bed and widened.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. I am. I’m taking a vacation. I leave tonight.”

“Will you be joining us for family dinner?”

“No. I think it’s for the best. Kyle pissed me.”

“Language, my dear.”

“Kyle made me very, very mad,” I said spitefully, after being interrupted in my rant. “It would be best for all if I not attempt at pleasantries with him here. It won’t end well.”

“Tell me,” she said, sitting on my bed and patting the space next to her. I sat with a sigh and put my head on her shoulder.

“He’s treating me like a child. I’m a grown woman. He’s planning on sending an escort with me on vacation. It’s humiliating!”

“I’m sure he just wants to keep you safe.”

“I can take care of myself,” I demanded.

“I know you can. He knows you can, but we are at war, and it would make me feel a lot more at ease if you weren’t alone.”

“Mom! Not you, too? This is ridiculous. Let me be very clear. I am packing my bags and I am leaving. I will send you my itinerary so you know where I will be and when. That is it. Are we clear?”

She smiled a tight smile. “Crystal.”

As she left my room, I collapsed on my bed, still radiating in fury. After allowing myself a few moments to wallow, I sat up with newfound determination and began packing furiously. Screw hiding during dinner. I was leaving the second I was packed.

Patrick

Chapter 6

Nothing had shocked me more than opening my door that morning to the smell of my mate and a package on my front porch. Inside I found a new shirt and a really nice watch. After some internal back and forth, I had convinced myself they had to be from Elise. My wolf was doing the happy dance in my mind. Could it really be the first real acknowledgment from my mate?

Chase had called later in the morning asking me to join them for dinner. I wanted to ask if Elise was going to be there, but Chase said nothing for me to believe he knew. That meant maybe there was a chance she'd actually be there. Did she know I was coming?

I quickly showered, shaved, and brushed my teeth, making sure to use mouthwash and deodorant. I took my time fixing my hair and I wore the new shirt I was convinced she gave me, then carefully secured the watch on my wrist. I had never been this nervous or excited over anything in my life.

Today I would meet my mate, face-to-face.

I checked the clock and it was only quarter past four. Dinner was at six. I couldn't just show up that far in advance. Sighing, I sat down, trying to decide how best to pass the time. I was grateful when the phone rang, but concerned to see Kyle's name on my screen.

"Merry Christmas," I hesitantly answered, worried he was going to tell me not to come over after all.

"Hey, so we've got a problem."

“Bloody hell, I knew it. Don’t worry, I won’t ruin your Christmas dinner.”

“Dude, that’s not what I’m talking about. Hear me out. Yes, I’m sure E’s going to try and bail on dinner tonight. She knows you’re coming, but she’s also really angry with me right now and I fear she’s going to try to leave even before you arrive.”

“What? Elise is leaving? Going where?”

“I don’t know. Some resort spa place. Said she needs to get away and de-stress for a few days.”

“Okay, so why is she mad at you? Did you tell her she couldn’t go?”

I hated the idea of my mate being upset.

“No, I told her it was a great idea, but I was sending an escort with her. So pack your bags before you head over. If Elise really is your mate, good luck, ’cause you’re about to get five days of full access to her on a road trip. I’ll cover all your expenses, but mating stuff aside, I really need you to do this for me. Are you up for it?”

I didn’t hesitate to answer. “Yes, of course. There’s a war against the Westin Pack. What is she thinking, trying to go off alone like that?”

“Thank you! That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell her. She’s so freaking stubborn.”

I groaned.

“What?”

“I’m fairly certain that stubborn woman has her mind set against me. At least that was my assumption until this morning.”

“What happened this morning?”

“I had a Christmas present waiting on my porch, and it sure smelled an awful lot like your sister.”

“Wow, that’s great, man. I mean, I know we talked about it being her, but a part of me is still skeptical. I mean

you haven't actually seen her yet, not face-to-face and all. Don't think that I'm being negative, just realistic. I really like you, Patrick. E would be lucky to have you for a mate. I sincerely mean that. I just don't want you getting your hopes too high until you know for sure."

"Kyle, I appreciate that, but trust me on this. I know." I let that sink in before asking the question I was dying to know the answer of it. "Now, how'd she like the necklace?"

Kyle sighed. "She loved it. Like I've never seen her so excited about anything before, excited."

"You're serious?"

"Yes. She loved it. It was apparently perfect."

"Yes!" Somehow I had known she would. The moment I laid eyes on it I knew she had to have it.

"What did she get you anyway?"

"Shirt and a watch."

"You wearing it to dinner?"

"Absolutely!"

"Pack your bags, lover boy. E may never speak to me again, but we are at war and I need you to look after her. I figured it was you or Cole and I didn't think you'd appreciate me sending any other male with her."

"I'm happy to do it."

I hung up and pulled the suitcase out, packing as quickly as possible. Knowing she was angry and about to be on the run, I no longer cared about the etiquette faux pas of arriving too early.

With bags packed, I called Kyle to give him a heads-up of my arrival as he requested. He met me in the driveway and helped me put my bags into Elise's car. I frowned, seeing hers already there.

"Mom's insisting she stay for dinner. She's pitching a fit about it still. I don't envy you this. Gonna be a bumpy ride."

“Go way outta that!” I exclaimed happily.

“Huh?”

“Uh ... no problem, I meant.”

“Got it. Well, good luck.” He hugged me, taking me by surprise. “Keep your sniffer on her and see if you can get a locator on her, too.”

“A what? I don’t understand.”

“Secret weapon. The closer you get to your mate, the stronger this will be, but see if you can feel her emotions. See if you can tell which room she is in and most importantly when she’s going to run.”

“How exactly do I do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s a mating thing. It may still be too early, but worth a try.”

“Okay.” I stopped him as we reached the front door. “Do you think she’ll actually come to dinner?” I tried to keep the hope out of my voice, but even I heard it loud and clear.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath on it.”

Sure enough, while I was welcomed with open arms by the Westin family, there was no sign of my mate anywhere. I could smell her and I knew she was close by, but she refused to join us and I couldn’t help but think it was because of me. Rejection bit me once again.

The Westins were an extraordinary family and I was thankful they allowed me to share in the holiday as me and not as Elise’s mate. To the best of my knowledge, only Kyle was aware of the situation, yet they all welcomed me in like family.

We were just finishing up the main course when Elise’s smell shifted in the house. I gave Kyle the signal we had discussed and he excused us.

“She’s moving?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m not sure where, but her smell’s getting further away.”

“Dammit. I bet she’s going out the window. I should tie her up and beat some sense into her.”

I growled. It was so unexpected it shocked me and Kyle both. “Sorry,” I quickly apologized.

He just grinned. “No worries. That’s the first absolute sign of mating my sister I’ve seen yet.” He laughed. “Can’t tell you how many growls escaped me since Kelsey entered my world. Don’t sweat it. But I’d say it’s time. I’ll explain to the family, and you get going. If you aren’t in that car before her, she will leave you.”

I nodded and shook his hand. “Thanks, Kyle. I promise I’ll take care of her.”

“Wouldn’t be sending you along if I thought otherwise.”

I turned to leave.

“Patrick?”

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas.”

I smiled and nodded back to him, “Merry Christmas, Kyle.”

Closing the front door behind me, I quickly moved to Elise’s car and climbed into the passenger’s seat and waited.

Elise

Chapter 7

I did feel genuinely guilty for taking the coward's route once again. I climbed through my bedroom window and dropped to the ground. All my bags were already in the car. I would have gone out to say goodbye if the circumstances had been any different. With Patrick sitting at my family table, it wasn't the time to open that can of worms. Plus, I was still pissed at Kyle and didn't want to give him the satisfaction of lining up an escort. I would be just fine on my own.

I quickly snuck around the house, careful to avoid the windows, and ran for my car after I reached the front of the building. I had been smelling Patrick O'Connell for the last hour and his scent was driving me mad. I just had to get away. I jumped into the driver's seat home free, slammed the door shut, and froze.

His scent was so strong it overwhelmed me. With eyes about to pop out of my head, I turned to my right, facing the one person I had desperately avoided so well all these months.

"Hello Elise, I'm Patrick."

I sighed, trying to pull myself together at this shocking turn of events. "Get out, I'm leaving."

He eyed me curiously. "I know, I'm your escort for the trip. Didn't Kyle tell you?"

At that point I was just angry. "Get out, Patrick, I don't have time for this."

"I'm not going anywhere, love. Or at least anywhere without you." He smiled what other women would certainly

call a “panty melting smile” and I knew I was in trouble, but at that moment I was still more pissed at Kyle and way more than a little in shock at coming face-to-face with Patrick, so I put the car in reverse and drove off.

“Suit yourself,” I mumbled.

We drove in complete silence. Never in any dream or thought of the inevitable moment I would meet Patrick O’Connell did I envision this. I should have been a nervous wreck with his close proximity alone. I wasn’t. I should have been furious at Kyle for setting this up. I wasn’t. I felt more relaxed and at peace, being enveloped in his scent, than I had been in probably my entire life.

I had been driving for over an hour. We were already well out of Westin territory and I had absolutely no clue as to what to do about the situation. He just sat there in complete silence. The radio hadn’t even been turned on. I had been lost in thought and overwhelmed with shock, but what was his excuse?

I chanced a look and this time noticed right away he was wearing the shirt I had given him. It looked good on him. Really good.

“I knew you’d look good in that shirt,” I said aloud, and then quickly averted my eyes back to the road. I knew I was blushing.

I could see him grinning in my peripheral vision. “The watch, too.” He held up his left arm, showing off the watch I had bought for him. “They were a wonderful surprise this morning. Best Christmas I’ve had in years.”

His words warmed me, and then he spoke again. “And the necklace looks lovely on you, as I knew it would.”

I swerved in shock. “What?” I blurted out, trying to recover from the shock.

He reached over and steadied the wheel of the car. At his touch I felt a jolt so strong it was like the car had collided with a tree, only it hadn’t, thanks to him. No, it was like our hearts had collided and mine had just jumped from my chest

and now permanently belonged to him. I didn't have time to freak out as I recovered the car and just let the overwhelming sensation of the moment wash through me.

"I didn't know the necklace was from you. Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

I really couldn't stand the silence any longer. He was here. We had met. I would continue to keep him at a distance, and if he asked, I'd be honest about my fears. In many ways I kind of felt like this intervention on Kyle's part was a blessing, but I'd die a thousand deaths before admitting that to him.

"You were in my office on Monday. Why?"

My question seemed to throw him off guard. Good.

"I've been looking for you for a long time," he confessed.

"I know."

His forehead scrunched up in frustration at my admittance. "Kyle recommended I let my wolf loose to track you. I was quite disappointed to end up at Kyle's office. I went in to say hello while I was there and caught your scent. I knew exactly where your office was. He went to introduce us, but you weren't there."

"Kyle knows?" I asked, embarrassed, upset, and furious at the same time.

He nodded. "Does that bother you?"

"Yes! No! I don't know. He never said anything."

"It was two days ago, Elise, and if I'm not mistaken, you've been hiding, shopping, yelling, or not talking to him at all for much of it."

I blushed furiously.

"He was just as shocked at the realization. I hang out with your brothers and Lily all the time, and I never even knew they had another sister until yesterday."

“Seriously? It’s not like I’m some big secret or anything.”

He shrugged carelessly. “He said you’d been dealing with some personal stuff and hadn’t been around much lately. I guess it just never came up.”

I stewed over that for a bit. At times, I admitted to myself, I was frustrated and upset that Patrick hadn’t found me. I mean, he spent every single day with at least one of my siblings and never even wondered where I was? I suppose the reality of him not knowing about me explained the why.

“This is really weird, you know. I’ve spent months carefully avoiding you. This is not how I imagined our inevitable first meeting would go. Do you even have a clue where we’re going? Did you or Kyle even think to call ahead and get you a reservation? I’m going to guess no, because I never told him where I was headed.”

His brow furrowed again. “Hadn’t thought that far, love.”

My heart involuntarily raced at the endearment.

“So what? You’re just along for the ride then?”

He looked at me. I was watching the road ahead but I could feel his eyes on me. He had been careful for the most part not to do that, but now he took his time to look me over.

“No, I’m not just along for the ride. My job is to keep you safe, whatever that entails. It will always be my number one job, Elise.”

Oh boy, the way he said my name in that sexy accent made goosebumps spring up on my arms. We drifted back into silence but I could feel him studying me. I didn’t dare look over at him.

“You know, you’re not what I expected,” he finally said, breaking the silence.

I chanced a look at him and he looked contemplative, curious maybe. I snorted. “Yeah, I’m not exactly a Kendra, just so you know.”

He laughed out loud, thrown off by my admittance. “Heard about that, did you?”

“Oh yes. Christine called me right away to fill me in. By your description, according to her, I must be quiet, shy, meek, too nervous and afraid to face you, and if you could just find me, you’d make me see everything would be just fine.”

He was staring at me like a puzzle he couldn’t quite put together, but nodded. “Yeah, sure look it. But now, I don’t really get the feeling that’s you at all. I must admit I didn’t expect you to be quite so”—he seemed to struggle on the word before settling for—“forthcoming.”

“Patrick, you’re supposed to be my one true mate, I get it. You know it. I know it. What’s the point in denying it?” I wanted to be honest with him. He deserved at least that much from me.

“So why the hiding game? I’ve spent three months going crazy looking for you. Why did you keep running from me?”

I sighed; guess it was heart-to-heart time. Not like I had anywhere to run and hide this time. Pulling up my big girl panties, I decided to stick to the truth. “You know, it wasn’t exactly easy for me either. I’ve never been so miserable in my entire life, and despite what it appears, I’m not a coward. But I also have no intentions of taking a mate anytime soon, maybe not ever.”

Even I could hear the sadness in my voice and I swore for a moment I felt his pain as strongly as mine. I knew I was just imagining it. I’d certainly done nothing to encourage a bond between us. I had expected to feel relief at saying the words aloud, but it just made me feel even sadder.

“And I thought if I just stayed away, you’d get bored chasing me and go home. That it would just be easier that way.”

There was an awkward silence hanging between us as my words sunk in. Patrick kept balling his hands into fists and

relaxing them. Over and over. A part of me desperately wanted to reach over and comfort him.

“I’m Irish, you know? Quare Irish.”

I laughed, taken aback by his handsome face featuring a huge grin and a twinkle in his eyes.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, love, that I’m very much Irish, and that means I am very, very stubborn and can be as patient as you need me to be for as long as needed, but understand this, I have no intentions of going anywhere. I gave up everything in my life for you. You are mine, Elise Westin. Only mine.”

I sucked in a deep breath, unwilling to address the reality of what his words were doing to me. To my body. To my heart. To my soul. So much truth in them it scared me.

When the GPS on my phone started talking, alerting me to my exit, I looked at the clock and realized nearly four hours had passed already. I had survived four whole hours with Patrick O’Connell. I had been brave and spoken up, admitting my intentions—or lack thereof—regarding our mating status, and I hadn’t caved once. I was strong enough to do this. I just had to hold on to my convictions and remember why it was so important, because having him here like this was better than risking losing him forever.

Patrick

Chapter 8

As she started to pull off the exit, it began to snow. Big, white, fluffy flakes were coming down fast and hard by the time she pulled up to the resort. It looked very fancy and I doubted the one nice outfit I had thrown in “just in case” would cut it here for a week. I had never been in such a nice place, but as Elise got out of the car, stretched in a way that made my body ache for her, and tossed the keys to the valet, she looked perfectly comfortable and at home in this new environment.

I moved to quickly grab the bags from the trunk, but she told me to leave them as I watched a young man in a weird uniform begin retrieving them and placing them on a rolling cart.

It wasn't that I was uncultured or anything, though I dared believe the majority of wolf shifters were. I was well traveled, well educated, but this place was a whole new dimension out of my norm, and from the looks of it, Elise Westin was completely in her element.

She walked tall and graceful, carrying herself like royalty. People stopped and smiled as she passed by. She gave off an air of authority that, if I were being honest, intimidated the bloody hell out of me.

“May I help you?” the lady behind the counter asked.

“Elise Westin, checking in.”

“Yes, Miss Westin, we've been expecting you.”

She eyeballed me beside her and I couldn't help myself. I stepped forward and wrapped my arm around Elise's waist. I felt her body tighten, but she did not jump or pull away from my touch. I had to force my body to calm down, lest the desire I was feeling from the touch of my mate, would become embarrassingly obvious.

"The reservation was made for one. Has there been a change in plans?"

"Yes," I said quickly, giving the lady my best smile. "I was able to fly in and surprise her for Christmas, so she didn't know I'd be coming. Right, love?"

I saw Elise's jaw drop in shock and knew the protest was about to start, but with a stroke of good fortune, the lady checking us in began to babble.

"Oh, thank God! There's a terrible storm rolling in and we are booked solid. I would have hated to turn you out."

Well, if that was what they called the luck of the Irish, I'd take it!

"And it looks as if you have a massage booked for ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Would you like me to change that to a couple's massage?"

"You know, that would be fantastic." I knew I was laying on the charm and I knew it was irritating my mate. I loved it. I think the hell she put me through warranted a little fun with her.

I kept my arm around her as we walked to the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, she turned on me.

"What are you doing? You can't just stay with me, it's a king room. As in one bed only!"

She was cute when she was flustered.

"Relax. I can sleep on the floor," I chuckled. "That is if you really want me to?" When she glared at me, I winked at her and enjoyed the blush it caused. Then she smirked and something told me to beware of that look.

“Patrick,” she said sweetly, “have you ever had a professional massage?”

“No, love, I haven’t, but I have no doubt I’ll enjoy it immensely with you there.”

Uh-oh, there went that look again.

“You do realize we’ll be in the same room, but not within reach of each other, and naked, while you watch someone else rub his hands all over me.” She gave that sweet smirk again and despite knowing she was goading me, I couldn’t stop the growl that erupted from me. She looked at me, like, yeah, understand what you did, stupid?

“Gonna have to control that, wolfy.”

I couldn’t stop grinning at her teasing. I’d admit it, I was a complete sucker for her. I knew my mate had dark hair and blue eyes. Beyond that I had no idea what to really expect. I mean her siblings were all good looking, so I assumed she’d be too. I’d hoped at least. The fact that I had spent nearly every day with her family for three months and never even knew she existed, had me more than a little concerned, if I was being honest.

I had purposefully turned away as she was heading towards the car in front of her parents’ house. I had watched the door and waited for the full impact to hit me. And wow! What a sensation it had been. She was far more beautiful than I had ever imagined. Long, almost black silky hair hung loosely down her back. Her skin was flawless and radiant. Her long, slender neck begged to be kissed and more, and again I couldn’t think of the rest of her body without embarrassing myself.

I had been with more than my fair share of women, but not one of those experiences held a candle to how my body responded to just the vision of my beautiful mate.

“Wolfy? Come on, this is our floor.”

I was surprised to see the doors open and Elise already in the room. I had been so lost in thought, I hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh, uh, yeah, look it, we’re here.”

I had expected to walk into a hallway like a normal hotel, but no, the elevator delivered us directly into the largest, most magnificent room I had ever seen. There was a full kitchen in the thing—a living room, and a separate bedroom, plus an office. I eyed her suspiciously. She shrugged.

“The penthouse was booked already so I had to settle for the Junior Suite.” She sighed. “I told you it would be a little tight.”

I laughed a genuine full belly laugh. “Tight? Seriously? Princess, this place is enormous.”

She scowled at me.

“What? You were seriously worried about us sharing all this? There’s an entire couch for me to sleep on.”

For a moment I thought she was going to say I didn’t have to sleep on the couch, but I knew that was likely just wishful thinking. Our luggage arrived just in time to curb the awkward silence that had set in. Suddenly, Elise was flitting around, unpacking her things. I had never seen someone actually use the hangers in a hotel closet. Heck, I doubted I’d ever even moved my clothes from a suitcase to a drawer in one, but there she was hanging up dresses and jackets, and carefully placing her other clothes in drawers. By the time I walked in to use the jacks, it looked like the beauty department of a store had carefully thrown up in there. When all that remained to unpack was my one bag, she carefully removed and refolded my clothes, placed all my items in the one unused drawer, and then stowed our luggage in the top of the closet.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Guess we’re all moved in now, love. Good thing,” I said, looking out onto the balcony, “that’s some fierce snow we’re getting.”

She stood next to me, close enough that our arms touched, and my wolf rejoiced. Baby steps, I thought. I knew if I moved too quickly I would scare her away. She had laid her cards on the table and I had countered. I would proceed

with caution and stay positive that I would be able to sway her to reconsider the line she had drawn.

I still didn't understand why she was so adamant that she wouldn't take a mate. Five days. I had five days to get to know her and find out the answer to that question and figure out a way to change her mind. It wasn't much, but it was far more than I could have hoped for. I'd try hard to make the most of it.

"It does look like it's going to be a bad storm." I didn't know if she realized she did it, but she ran her hand up and down my arm before speaking again. "It's been a long day. I'm going to jump in the shower, then call it a night."

She left me standing there and it took everything in my power not to follow her into the shower.

I busied myself looking around the place, trying desperately to think of anything but my mate, naked in the next room. The thing about being part wolf in that moment that fucking sucked the most, was my heightened sense of smell. Even with earbuds in and the music from my phone turned up full volume to not hear the sounds of the shower, it did nothing to distract from the smell of her flowery soaps and shampoo and the imagines it conjured up. *Jesus Christ*, I swore to myself. *This girl is going to be the death of me.*

I was hard as a rock and brooding when she finally emerged, freshly washed, wearing sweats with a towel wrapped around her head. I had changed into a pair of sleeping shorts and was sprawled out on the couch as she entered the room. I heard her gasp.

"What are you doing? Put some clothes on!" she demanded.

"I'm fully dressed and ready for bed," I growled back at her. I couldn't exactly place why I was snapping at her. It wasn't like me, but I was so frustrated and physically uncomfortable from being around her and smelling her in the shower, that I didn't back down, nor did I bother trying to hide the evidence of the effect she had on me as I sprawled out on the couch.

She went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of orange juice, slamming everything in her path.

“You cannot sleep on my couch with practically no clothes on. It’s not right.”

After facing her in the car and listening to her admit how she had calculatedly avoided me for all these months, it did not at all surprise me to find my mate stubborn as any redheaded, full-blooded Irish, but if she thought that would sway me in any way she was sorely mistaken, because I was a redheaded, full-blooded Irish and proud of it.

“This is how I sleep. Anything more and I get too warm. Deal with it.”

“Well, that’s not going to work for me.”

“Well, what do you plan to do about it?” I challenged.

To my delight, thinking I had won, I grinned as she stomped back into the bedroom, leaving her glass of juice behind. For a moment I even considered getting up to drink it, but first I would learn the hard lesson of never underestimating my mate’s sheer stubbornness.

Elise stomped back into the room in the same fashion she had left only moments earlier, carrying one of my shirts and holding it out before me. If she really thought I was just going to take it, she would do best not to underestimate me.

“Here, put it on.”

“No.”

“Put it on, or I’ll make you put it on.”

My lips thinned as I tried to fight back the laugh threatening to explode from me, but before I could even respond she pounced on me like a fecking cat and I was so shocked, that bloody shirt was on me in record time. I grabbed her by the waist and she shrieked and tried to pull away.

“I warned you.” She snorted a little, clearly holding in a laugh of her own. “I have three brothers, you know. I know how to fight and I know how to get my way.”

She stood up, but I wasn't ready to let her go so I tightened my grip on her waist. I stared awkwardly into her eyes trying to just figure her out.

“Is this what you really want? Me covered up and out of sight?”

She sighed and for a second I didn't think she would really answer.

“I'm not immune to you, Patrick. There's just no reason to make this harder than it has to be, and you lying out shirtless makes it all kinds of harder.” She gave me a sad look and when she moved to leave again, I let her go.

I'm not sure what she thought she'd accomplish from such raw honesty, but all my wolf and I heard was “hope.” She found me attractive and that made me want to prance around in all my naked glory for her. She was struggling with her choices. That meant she could be swayed. Most of all, I was affecting her and seeing as she was more than affecting me, that was a bloody good sign in my book.

Elise

Chapter 9

I tossed and turned all night, torn between trying to forget the instances of the day and wanting to remember every second of it. A small, irrational part of me had hoped that Patrick would give up his search for me and just go home, while the logical part of my brain knew I would have been devastated if he had.

I had met Patrick O'Connell face-to-face. It was wonderful and terrifying. He was charming and flirty, but also serious and sometimes funny, and man—seeing him without his shirt on, I doubted that there ever existed a sexier man, and he was sleeping on the couch, respecting my boundaries. When I had attacked him physically, determined to cover him up for my own good, he hadn't tried to take advantage of the situation. For a moment I thought he might, but he hadn't.

He wasn't anything like I expected him to be, and yet he was so much more. If I could have just given into my instincts and let nature take its course, I knew in my heart he'd make me a very happy woman for the rest of my life. So fighting nature, and fighting my destiny, had just become so much more difficult.

The wind outside howled. The storm sounded brutal. When lightning streaked across my window and thunder cracked loudly overhead, I sat up and screeched. It just scared me—that's all. My heart was pounding in my chest. I had heard of snow thunderstorms before, but until that moment I had never experienced one myself. It was terrifying.

I had left the bathroom light on and the door cracked just a little in case I needed to get up. I wasn't scared of the

dark or anything, but new places always made me nervous at first. New shadows, new noises, and a big imagination weren't always a match.

When the light began to flicker off and on and then went out altogether I was working myself up to a full-blown panic attack. *No, no, no, no, this can't be happening*, I told myself in a whispered voice. No power in the worst storm of my life. I couldn't help but contemplate how long it would take to freeze to death. I heard movement near my door and I screamed.

"Shhh, it's just me, love. I think the electricity may have gone out." Patrick's voice soothed and instantly calmed my fears. "Did you hear that thunder a few minutes ago?" As if on cue another round boomed and I could see the shadowed outline of Patrick jump. "Bloody hell, I've never seen anything like it."

He went to stand by the balcony where we had stood earlier in the evening, and stared out into the darkened night's sky. The next lightning strike caused an eerie glow, magnified by the now white wonderland surrounding the resort.

"It's beautiful in a terrifying way, isn't it?"

"It is," I admitted, feeling overwhelmed.

"Well, if you think you can sleep through this madness, I should let you." Again he was being so considerate of me and I knew I didn't deserve any of it with what I had put him through. At the door he turned back to me and another round of lightning lit up the room just in time for me to catch a sly grin on his face. "Of course, if you find yourself getting too cold before the power comes back, just call. I can certainly help with that."

I had a snarky comeback right on the tip of my tongue, but a clash of thunder even louder than the first two had me screaming, "Stay!"

I'm not really sure who was more shocked by the request, me or him.

“Please stay. This storm is freaking me out and I’ll worry you’re too cold out there on the couch.”

I saw his shadowed figure nod as he made his way over to the bed. Again, I should have been nervous. I should definitely not have felt comforted, safe, and secure. My body and my mind seemed to be at war with each other.

He slowly and cautiously slid between the covers. He was careful not to get too close, but another clap of thunder and I was jumping to close the gap between us.

“I could hear your teeth chattering from the other room. Cold or scared?”

“Both!” I admitted.

“Come here, love,” he said, reaching out and pulling me close to him. Being tucked into his side made me feel cherished and protected like I had never experienced before. “Sounds like it’s coming on fast now. Likely the worst is on top of us. Shouldn’t be too long before it rolls on out.”

I could hear him talking, but more than listening to his words, I just felt him. His arms were wrapped around me firmly. I was lulled to sleep quickly by the steady beating of his heart despite the storm.

I had the most delicious sleep of my life. Groggy and fighting off the need to pee so I could stay suspended in that perfect bliss of comfort just a little longer, I tried to reach for my cell phone to silence the alarm going off. I didn’t quite make it before it suddenly went silent. I sighed in contented relief.

“Elise? Love? Your alarm says fifteen minutes till your massage.”

I froze, fully awake and suddenly very aware of my situation. Patrick O’Connell was in my bed. Why was Patrick in my bed? Oh yes, he followed me. Wait, this wasn’t my bed, I was at the resort. I was stretched out, practically lying across him, using his chest as my own personal pillow.

I had never been in a situation like this before. It wasn’t that I was a virgin. I had lost that to Bobby Mason in

my senior year of high school, but I had never had an actual sleepover. It had always just been sex, and then bah-bye, maybe I'll see you later. Waking up in Patrick's arms, with my drool dribbles on his shirt and my leg hiked up over his, felt so much more intimate than any other moment I'd ever had with a guy.

"Elise?" He tried again. "Do you want to sleep and I'll cancel our massages, or are you getting up?"

He started mumbling to himself and clearly didn't know what to do. Neither did I, which just made me giggle.

"I'm getting up," I said, slowly unraveling myself from him and refusing to look him in the eyes. Yeah, I was back to being a chicken, but really, was there any other way to handle an awkward morning after? Even if there hadn't really been an "after" to feel awkward about, and maybe that just made it all the more awkward?

I ran for the bathroom just as my phone started sounding off again.

"Turn it off this time. Don't hit snooze again," I yelled.

"Okay," he yelled back, and it just felt weirdly normal.

"Do I have time for a quick shower?" he asked as I exited the bathroom.

I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and checked. "Nope, not if you're actually getting that massage."

He grumbled to himself again as he headed for the bathroom anyway. I heard bits and pieces enough to get the gist that there was no way I was going to be naked and alone with another person in the room without him there.

I laughed. "Suit yourself, but no growling," I scolded, as we finally made it to the elevator.

"No promises," he teased.

Something in the awkward moments of our "morning after" made everything feel like it had shifted. I didn't want to think about it or examine things too closely. So I was

determined to just keep things light and fun, and enjoy a day of pampering.

We were amicably silent on the walk to the spa. I couldn't help but notice the tingling sensation I felt every time we brushed against each other. It was nice and nerve-wracking at the same time.

Urma and Nelson were assigned to us at the front desk, and showed us back to the couples' massage room. They dropped off fresh, clean robes and towels, and excused themselves while we changed. When the door closed, reality opened. I was nervous for really the first time around Patrick. Even being blindsided by his presence hadn't made me nervous—quite the opposite even—but here we were expected to strip and prepare for our massages. What had he been thinking, inviting himself along for this? I understood that nudity was basically the norm amongst shifters, but no one had warned me that being naked with my one true mate would make me a nervous, jittery mess.

I turned my back to him and quickly stripped. Even knowing he was watching me and knowing it was unnecessary. I couldn't face him and I couldn't turn around till I knew he was covered, too.

“Are you decent?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I'm covered. You can turn around. I certainly didn't peg you for being modest. It doesn't exactly come with the territory.”

I rolled my eyes. “Some things are best left to mystery,” I blurted out, thankful that Nelson had knocked, and then peeked in to check on us.

“Okay, you lovebirds, onto the tables. I'll grab Urma and we can begin.”

Before he closed the door back, I was already on the table getting into position. Nelson was bald and a little pudgy, and very likely gay. Patrick seemed more amused by him than intimidated. I put my face down into the hole on the table and tried to relax, even though every nerve in my body was hyper

aware of my mate on the next table over. While I had told him we would not be within arm's reach, the tables in the room were aligned so we absolutely could reach out and touch at any time. He proved that point as I lay there trying to ignore him and find some semblance of relaxation in a room that felt like it was suffocating me.

His hand gently glided up my side and across my shoulders.

“If you wanted a massage that badly, I'd have been happy to accommodate you last night.”

I chanced a look up and regretted it immediately. The smoldering look he gave me made me break out into a sweat all over. He was sitting on the other table with his feet dangling over the edge leaning over towards me. He was bare except for a towel wrapped low around his waist, so low I could see a cut V heading down into areas I couldn't afford to think about. A sly smile played across his face like he knew exactly how affected I was by him and I was thankful when the door opened and Nelson and Urma returned—only this time it wasn't Urma.

“Hi, I'm Kaitlyn. Urma had an emergency she needed to tend to, so I'm going to step in for her,” said a bubbly blonde, who couldn't be more than twenty years old.

“Hi Kaitlyn, it's nice to meet you,” Patrick said, offering her his hand, which she readily accepted. “I'm Patrick and this is Elise.”

He smiled at her and I bit back a growl threatening to erupt from me.

“Lie down and we'll get started,” Nelson told us. Of course, he was really talking to Patrick since I was already lying down and gritting my teeth the entire time. Nelson moved to remove my towel and for a moment I almost stopped him, but I didn't. I couldn't help but sneak a peek Patrick's way.

Big mistake! The bubbly blonde had already removed his towel too and was busy running her hands all over my

mate's back. Wolves are notorious for being territorial, but I didn't have the right to be territorial over him. Why didn't that message reach my heart?

I could feel Nelson's hands working my taunt muscles. He even commented a time or two about how tense I was. Normally I would be lying face down and enjoying this, but all I could do was stress over the fact that Kaitlyn's hands were on Patrick's body, and there was absolutely no chance of relaxing. It didn't help that the girl prattled on incessantly the entire time.

Patrick turned his head, likely sensing I was watching him. Our eyes connected and suddenly the annoying voice prattling on and on slowly disappeared.

"There you go, you're finally starting to relax," Nelson commented.

I knew it was no thanks to him. It was all Patrick. When he reached his hand out towards me, I met him halfway before my head even registered I was doing it. That simple touch was all it took for my muscles to loosen and my body began to melt. We just lay like that, staring into each other's eyes and holding hands across the empty space. Much too soon the moment was over, and so was the massage.

I heard Nelson talking, but my brain was too foggy to comprehend. "Sorry, what did you say?"

He gave me a knowing smile. Knowing what, I hadn't a clue. "I was just saying that Kaitlyn and I will be leaving you now, but you have another hour blocked in here for the private spa."

"Private spa? I don't remember that being part of the package."

"Oh, sweetie, that comes with all the couples' packages. And right now, the schedule's clear, so really take all the time you want." He winked and waved a quick goodbye on exit.

"That wasn't so bad. I even managed not to growl at him. Of course, you do realize he was more into me than you,"

Patrick said, laughing.

I rolled my eyes and laughed too. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure they both were.”

“I thought I heard a muffled growl coming from your way. Didn’t appreciate that pretty little blonde having her hands over me, now did ya?”

I sat up, quickly covering myself, and sulked over to the already bubbling hot tub. Dropping the towel at the last minute I sank into it and tried not to let him get to me. Still pouting, I finally exploded in curiosity.

“You really thought she was pretty?”

Looking over to where I had left him, my brain went into a complete fog. Walking towards me was a very fine, very naked Patrick O’Connell. He seemed oblivious to my mushed up brain that could no longer string together two words, let alone a coherent thought. He stepped up and into the hot tub while I just sat there and stared. I had never seen such a perfect specimen. There wasn’t a single thing about his body that I would change if given the chance. He was quite literally perfection.

The fog didn’t begin to lift until I felt his body sliding alongside mine as he chose the seat closest to me for his own. It was only replaced by sheer desire. It suddenly felt like I was sitting inside a furnace. I was so overwhelmed by it that it scared me. As if that wasn’t bad enough, after he was settled in, he turned to me and raised his hand, gently caressing my cheek.

“You have nothing to worry about, love. No other woman’s beauty comes even close to yours.”

Patrick

Chapter 10

As far as I was concerned, things were going great. Elise had been jealous of another female near me. She had accepted the offer of my hand to calm her. She had clearly been affected by my nakedness. Her pupils had dilated and her heart had sped up—hey, there were benefits to having heightened wolf hearing. And when my body touched hers and I caressed her cheek, she leaned in to me.

So, when she did a complete one-eighty on me, I found myself staring at her from across the hot tub, and began to wonder if she was bipolar.

“Boundaries,” she said. “We need to establish some boundaries. You can’t do stuff like that. It just makes everything ... harder,” she sighed.

“Harder for whom? Because it seems that not touching you is quite difficult for me.”

“Patrick?” She looked so sad it broke my heart. “I just can’t. I can’t afford to bond with you. I need you to understand. Nothing can ever happen between us. It just can’t”

She got out and I was so devastated by her rejection that I couldn’t even appreciate her perfectly naked body. She dressed and left me sitting there to digest her words.

Eventually I got out, dressed, and made my way to the lounge. I ordered a stiff drink at the bar and pulled out my phone.

“Hello?” Kyle promptly answered his phone.

“Hey man, just checking in.”

“Patrick. Thank God! Heard there was a massive storm to the north and realized I had no idea where you two were headed. Everything okay?” he asked hesitantly.

“Sure, yeah. We’re at a resort about four hours north. The storm started brewing just as we arrived last night.”

“How’s my sister?”

“Stubborn. Pigheaded. Exasperating.”

He laughed on the other end and I could hear his mate starting to ask questions.

“Hold on,” I heard him say in a muffled voice. “Sorry, Patrick. Kels is dying to hear every detail. Putting you on speaker, if that’s okay.”

“Sure, yeah. It’s fine. Not exactly anything to tell.”

“What?” Kelsey screeched. “Is she not your one true mate?”

“Oh no, she definitely is. No doubt on that.”

“Dude. I put you two together. Four hours alone in the car, plus staying at the same resort with your one true mate, and you couldn’t close the deal?”

“First, I wouldn’t just do that. As long as I’m living in your territory I’ll get proper approval if and when that time comes.”

“No need,” Kelsey informed me.

“Yeah, she’s right. Our pack doesn’t require it for true mates.”

“Trust me. We already broke down that protocol.” She giggled.

“Good to know, but doesn’t really matter right now anyway. Elise has made it painfully clear she has no plans to take a mate.”

“I heard true mates can start off rocky. Just give it time.”

“No man, you don’t understand. Elise has no plans to take a mate, ever.”

“What?” Kyle asked.

“No, that makes sense,” Kelsey added. “Think about it. This is Elise we’re talking about. She was every bit as neurotic during our mating challenge period as I was. You don’t think it’s you specifically, do you, Patrick?”

“No, actually, the rare times she lets her guard down, everything seems perfect. Then she freezes me out and sets up boundaries and it fucking sucks.”

“I know that feeling all too well. Try dealing with that shit for two years.”

I heard some commotion followed by, “Ow!”

“Don’t listen to him, this is not the same. I’m telling you, she’s terrified. Not of you. It’s probably killing her denying you. She’s terrified of the challenge period.”

“Why? That’s a normal part of mating.”

“Men can be such idiots sometimes. Patrick, Kyle and I had only one month of challenges and they were brutal and started a war. You already know there were extenuating circumstances to it, but E had an up close and personal seat for it all. It sucked badly, and she’s my best friend and Kyle’s sister, so it was just as difficult on her as it was on us. I don’t really blame her after witnessing all that, but she has to know it was absolutely worth it.”

“Kyle’s a Pack Alpha, so of course the challenges were much worse than usual. Do you think she doesn’t realize it wouldn’t be the same for us?”

“Actually, E’s second oldest and her mate will become next in line for Pack Alpha unless or until we have a son.”

“Jesus Christ. No wonder she’s freaking out, especially with a war on your hands and so much unease between the packs. Bloody hell. If my father gets wind of any of this he’ll have a price on both your heads to secure an Irish Pack leader of Westin. No one would even have to fight for it.”

“Uh, you aren’t getting any crazy ideas are you?”

I could hear the humor in his voice and laughed. “No way do I want that job.”

We hung up shortly after and I had a ton on my mind to consider. Giving me time to think and Elise the space she requested, I ordered food and ate lunch at the bar before taking some time to explore the rest of the property. Finding the gym proved to be the best part of my day—well, the best since Elise’s rejection, that is.

I wasn’t sure how long I was working out, but when my stomach started growling again and a peek outside showed me it was dark already, so I thought it best to head upstairs. I only hoped Elise had calmed down some by then.

The second the elevator doors opened into our junior suite, I knew something was very wrong. The most awful feeling washed over me. My mate was upset or hurt. Panic flooded me as I ran to the living room. No Elise. Without stopping, I barged into the bedroom.

Elise startled and stared at me with watery eyes.

“Are you hurt?” I growled through clenched teeth, trying to get a grip on my emotions. I wasn’t what one would call an emotional guy, so the feeling of completely overwhelming fear and an insatiable need to protect and claim my mate hitting me all at once, was too much.

“You’re here,” she said, sounding surprised by the revelation.

“Of course I am, love.” Suddenly something worse than fear—rejection—started to creep in to my emotional pool. “Wait, when you were talking about the boundaries, did you mean I should get my own room?”

“What? No, of course not.”

I was a little taken aback by the bit of relief that caused. I couldn’t believe how quickly I was turning into a fecking dog just waiting to wag my tail at the slightest bit of attention, encouragement, or praise from her. Pathetic.

“It’s just, well, you didn’t come back. And I didn’t know where you were. I thought maybe you were mad enough to leave.”

She sounded so sad and tears were streaming down her face. It broke my heart. I was torn on what to do. My instincts screamed to go to her and comfort her. Show her I was there and everything would be okay, but she’d been so insistent on keeping our boundaries and I wanted to respect her wishes. So I stood there at the door, fighting every instinct in my being. My wolf was furious and surging to take control.

“I’m not mad. I’m not. I’m just trying to understand. This is all new to me too and I really don’t know what to do here, love.” My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten in quite a while. “I’m going to order room service. Can I get you anything?”

When she nodded and gave me her order, I couldn’t help thinking of the damn dog image again. A giant puppy dog. That’s what she’d turned me into. If I were in my fur, I knew my tail would be happily wagging of its own accord, simply for having the pleasure of tending to my mate’s needs, even if she was adamant that she’d never actually be my mate. Still, I knew in my heart there’d never be another. Elise Westin was it for me and it bloody sucked.

While waiting for the food, I took a moment to shower and change, thankful to get out of the sweaty clothes from my workout. I tried to keep my mind clear. I couldn’t keep dwelling on the ups and downs of life with Elise. I had to just believe she’d come around.

Dinner was quiet, but companionable. She didn’t run off and hide. She stayed and ate her meal with me. When she finally retreated to the bedroom, the moment her last bite was gone, I tried not to take it personally. Laid out on the couch, alone in the dark, was the toughest part. It hurt so badly knowing my mate was in the next room and I couldn’t even close the gap to touch her, and she was just as restless as I was. I could hear her tossing and turning.

“Patrick? Are you still awake?” I heard a small, unsure voice.

“I am. What do you need?” I said, wanting to run to her side, and although I had to battle my wolf to stay put, I did just that.

“I don’t know. I can’t sleep and I hate that I upset you today.”

“It’s alright, love. I’m a big boy. While I’m not known for my patience, for you, I will try.”

She was silent for a while, but I could tell by her breathing she was still awake, just as I knew she knew I was still awake.

“Patrick?”

“Yes, love?”

“Can you sleep in here again tonight?”

I didn’t wait to confirm her request. I was off that couch and pulling her into my arms faster than she could blink. She giggled nervously.

“I’m really not trying to send mixed signals, and this doesn’t change anything. This isn’t easy on me either. I hate hurting you. It hurts me too, but it’s for the best. When the snow lifts and we leave here, I think we should try and keep our distance. It’s just easier that way.”

I tried to man up and not let her words affect me. On the one hand she was calling to me and needing my touch as much I needed hers, but on the other, her words stung, slicing a deep hole in my heart.

“I haven’t anywhere to go,” I whispered to her. The reality of my situation was terrifying. My father would not take me back into the clan, at least not yet. That much I was certain, but I couldn’t ask Kyle to continue sanctuary within Westin Pack if Elise was never going to accept me.

“It’s okay for now. I have friends in Alaska I’ve been wanting to visit. I’ll go away for a while so you can figure out what you want to do.”

I breathed her scent in deeply and kissed the top of her head. It was the first time my lips had ever touched her and it helped calm the wolf inside that was desperately trying to get out and take control.

“I won’t run you from your home, love. I’ll figure something out. You don’t need to worry about me.”

I didn’t know what I was going to do and had never felt so low in all my life. The only thread of sanity I was holding on to was in the form of the woman condemning me to hell. She was keeping me grounded and able to breathe, but only for the moment. It was an odd reality to be in. I knew she was terrified and I knew she wasn’t going to open up to me any further. I just had to figure out how to fix it all.

Whether she realized it or not, we were meant to be together. Holding tightly to one another, we both drifted soundly to sleep, but when I awoke the next morning, she was gone.

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Elise

Chapter 11

Sleeping with Patrick again had been stupid of me, because waking up in his arms had been wonderful and hopeful, and I couldn't take it anymore. His pain had been so evident, and the guilt that struck me knowing I was the cause of it all, was too much to bear. He was going to leave me. *Because you basically told him to, idiot!* I said to myself.

I didn't know what I was doing anymore. I didn't know why I was doing it. Could the challenges really be much worse than the constant pain of rejecting him? Kelsey had rejected Kyle every day for two years and did it with such grace that no one even suspected she liked him, let alone felt the mating call towards him. Were my feelings just that much stronger? Or was I just that much weaker?

He was snoring softly and I took some time to look him over. Why did he have to be so handsome? Why did he have to be so sweet and considerate? Why couldn't he just get mad and yell at me? It would have made life so much easier ... for me. I was quickly coming to understand that just wasn't Patrick's way, and I wasn't a fighter, so why would I think that God would pair me with one?

I couldn't stand the guilt a moment longer, though I couldn't help but breathe in his scent deeply one last time, before getting up and quietly packing a small overnight bag. I left him the keys on the dresser and knew he would get the remainder of my stuff home. I grabbed my phone and pulled up my Uber app. I'd get a car to take me to the airport and I'd go visit Ramone and Patrice in Alaska. It had been ages since I had last seen them and I desperately needed the distraction.

With the plan in place, I chanced one last look at this beautiful sleeping man who would be my mate, if I could only let go of the crippling fear the challenges would bring. Then I whispered a goodbye and left.

Tears were streaming down my face by the time I reached the lobby. The pain was almost too much to bear and I wanted desperately to just run back to the safety I felt in his arms. But I knew what I was doing was the right thing for both of us. My cowardice wasn't fair to him. He deserved a stronger mate than I could be.

"Ms. Westin, are you alright?" the receptionist asked, startling me.

"I'm fine," I said unconvincingly, while I wiped tears from my cheeks. "I have a car coming," I tried to explain.

She gave me a sad smile and then offered to let me sit in the back office, because apparently I looked that bad. Mortified, I gratefully accepted. She led me down a small hall behind the front desk, passing a few doors before we came to the one she unlocked and ushered me into. I thanked her. I was too distraught to find the situation odd and in hindsight I should have immediately gone on alert. Instead I thanked her and she nodded, gave me an apologetic look, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Looking around the room, there was nothing more than a desk and a chair. The office was entirely void of anything personal. And it didn't take me long to start to feel uncomfortable and a bit claustrophobic in there. I calmed down, pulled myself together to face society once again, and reached for the doorknob, only to find it was locked. I jiggled the handle again. Nothing—definitely locked. Then I began to panic.

Grabbing for my phone I was ready to call Patrick, but it dawned on me that I didn't have his number. I immediately called Kelsey. It rang and rolled to voicemail. I knew it was still very early and they were likely asleep. I didn't want to freak her out too, so I tried to lighten my voice as I left a message.

“Hey, Kels, it’s E. I sorta, kinda did something stupid this morning and now I’m locked in this office down off the main lobby of the resort. But I don’t have Patrick’s number. Can you text it to me when you get this? I know, I’m an idiot.”

I hung up, hoping I hadn’t overdone it too much. Would Patrick wake up and come looking for me? I hadn’t left a message or anything. I had just left. What had I been thinking? While I mentally beat myself up, I started pacing and assessing the situation, trying not to freak out. There was only one door. I banged on it a few times and put my ear to the door, listening for anything at all, but heard nothing.

I looked up for some sort of air vent to climb through like you see in the movies, but no one was getting through the tiny round vent above me. I inspected high and low. Nothing. I banged some more, louder this time, and yelled, too. Nothing.

Checking my phone again I saw I only had three percent power left, because I had forgotten to charge it the night before. I slumped down against the door and wondered what else could possibly go wrong. I gave in and tried Kelsey again. Relief washed over me as I heard her voice.

“Hello? E? It’s really early, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Kelsey! Thank God!” I gushed. “I’m locked ...”

The beep of the phone told me we had just been disconnected. I looked down to see my phone shutting off, out of power. I banged my head against the door in frustration.

I’m not sure how long I sat there, but eventually I did hear voices outside. My instinct was to pound on the door and scream for help, but I wanted to be sure this time I wasn’t fooling myself again. So I leaned in close with my ear against the door and my heart leapt when I was certain I was hearing voices. I pressed closer, channeling my wolf’s hearing, and listened.

“The boyfriend’s been down here three times already. I told him the Uber driver picked her up, but apparently she’s

got her cell phone on her and had already called out for help. You swore this wasn't going to affect me."

"Shut up. You got your money, now go away. This doesn't concern you."

"And you're certain? You are absolutely positive no one can trace this back to me? I can't afford to lose this job and five thousand dollars isn't enough if there's even a chance."

"If you'd just shut up and go back to work, and forget you ever saw her or us, then there'd be no problem. Now get."

My heart started pounding hard in my chest. Were they talking about me? What could anyone possibly want from me? I wasn't sure and prayed I had just misunderstood everything I had heard, but just in case I crawled to the desk, eased out the chair as quietly as possible and hid under it. I replaced the chair and held my breath. I'd never been so scared in all my life. Suddenly, every fear where Patrick was concerned paled in that moment.

The door opened and I held back a scream.

"Where the hell is she?"

"That bitch tricked us?"

"Oh, she's dead for this! Come on."

The door slammed behind them and bounced back open. I counted to ten and then slowly crept back out. I rose and peaked around the door and held my breath while I checked the hallway. How they hadn't heard my heart beating a mile a minute was beyond me. The hallway was clear. I breathed a sigh of release. I knew the girl had brought me in from the right, but I also figured that's the direction the men went in search of her, so I chose to go to the left. There were a couple of rooms with washing machines and one with lockers. No one was in sight. As I came to the end of the hall, it dead ended at an emergency exit.

I heard footsteps in the hall behind me, and the lady screeched that I had to be in there. I had two options. Continue to hide, trying my luck in the washing room or the locker

room. Or, chance an alarm on the door and make a run for it. I knew I was faster than any human, so I chanced the door, took a deep breath, and pushed.

The alarm was blaring, but I didn't wait. I pushed through and took off at a run, hearing voices yelling behind me.

Before I even hit the parking lot, one of the men had caught up to me. No way was he human, I thought, seconds before I was grabbed from behind.

"Not so fast there, miss," my captor said. I flailed out and smacked him as hard as I could. He didn't lessen his grip. I kicked back landing a hard one right to his balls. He loosened his hold on me as he started to drop to the ground, but his friend was there and a dark cover was yanked over my head from behind before I could take off again.

"Bitch!" one of them yelled. I assumed it was the one now on the ground.

I continued to fight, praying someone would see and help. The one holding me yelled to the other to hold me down. He grabbed my arm hard and twisted. I felt a sharp sting and everything faded to black.

Patrick

Chapter 12

I saw the keys to the car, and Elise's key card to the room lying on the dresser. A quick check showed she'd cleared out her stuff in the bathroom, and at least one of her bags was missing. She had so many, I couldn't be certain it was only one. My heart plummeted into my gut and I ran back to the bathroom fearing I would vomit. The worst of the fear I'd ever had, after a night I couldn't remember at the bar, was nothing compared to this.

I called down to the front desk and a polite voice answered. I described Elise and asked if she was down there. The lady assured me she was not and even told me she had not seen her all morning.

Something didn't add up for me, so I threw on fresh clothes and ran to the elevator. On the way down, I called Kyle to let him know his sister might have run while I was sleeping. It was early, but he answered quickly, laughed at my inability to land my mate, and wished me well. It wasn't until I hit the cold tile floor of the lobby that I realized I was barefooted, having forgotten to put on shoes. At the front desk, I found a woman behind the counter and, describing Elise, asked if she had seen her come through. I immediately recognized her voice from the lady over the phone. This time she told a different story. She had been down in the lobby with her bags, but she hadn't seen where she went.

I thanked her and began checking every inch of the lobby and common areas. I went to the gym, the spa, the restaurant, every nook and cranny I could find, but no sign of Elise.

Returning to the front desk, the woman was gone. I obnoxiously banged on the little bell until at last she appeared again.

It took me only a little amount of time to explain that I desperately needed to find Elise and straighten out a misunderstanding. I begged her to think of where she had last seen her. She did not look sympathetic to my cause at all, while telling me that my mate had been picked up by Uber a good half hour earlier, but didn't want to tell me that to give her time to get away as she had been upset and anxious to leave. She made no qualms about her opinion that I was the reason for E's hasty retreat, and I would have believed her too, if I hadn't noticed her agitation and smelled the anxiety wafting off her. At least there were some benefits to being a shifter.

I dismissed her scent as my own paranoia and suspected my facial expressions were less than friendly. I thanked her and walked to the front door of the lobby. I walked outside, not caring about the pain spiking up my legs from the cold, frozen ground. I took a deep breath. Nothing. There was no sign of Elise.

I sniffed the air half a dozen more times to be sure. If my mate had been there within the last half hour, I would have smelled her lingering scent, but there was nothing. I quickly returned to the lady at the front desk, barely keeping my anger in check.

"You're lying," I challenged.

Her pupils dilated, her cheeks flushed, and her voice waivered in her attempt to challenge me.

"I-I-I'm not. You have no proof or reason to say such th-th-thing," she awkwardly stuttered.

"I'd like to see your manager," I demanded.

The woman paled and I had a bad feeling in my gut that there was a lot more to this story and that I wasn't going to like it one bit. I bit back the anger flaring in me, and gritted

back against my wolf as he surged to take control of the situation.

‘H-h-he’s not here and won’t be in today on account of the storm.’

“The same storm you say that Uber drove through, picked up my”—I struggled with the right word, knowing “mate” wasn’t right in the human world—“my friend, and then left in?”

“Y’y’yes, that’s correct.” She blatantly lied, and I knew that she knew, that I knew she was lying.

Knowing she was lying and knowing I was going to do something I might potentially regret if I did not step away, I turned and left her, heading for the elevator and back to my room.

I checked my cell. No missed calls. I called Kyle as I pulled on warm socks and boots.

“Hey, did you find her?” Kyle answered the phone.

“No, and the lady at the front desk is lying to me, Kyle. Something is seriously wrong here. I mean her stuff is gone. She was definitely running, but at first the lady said she hadn’t seen her. Then she said she was around somewhere, but there were no signs of her anywhere. Then her story changed again. This time an Uber picked her up, but man, I’m telling you, I may not be a tracker, but I know my mate’s scent, and if she had been in that doorway I would have smelled it. She didn’t go near the front of that lobby, let alone out that front door. I’m about to lose my shit, Kyle. Where can she be?”

“Something’s definitely wrong. Go back down and keep looking. I’m sending reinforcements now, but it will be a few hours before they get there. Send me the exact name and location of the resort you’re staying at. And Pat, find my sister.”

“I won’t rest until I find her.”

“I know,” he said and I heard some whispers and commotion in the background. I was about to hang up when he came back on the line. “Patrick, sounds like E got herself

locked into an office off the main lobby. Not sure on the details, but she left Kelsey a voice mail this morning saying she was locked in and needed your number. She called back a second time, but the phone disconnected while they were talking and it's going straight to voicemail now. I don't know what's going on, but check the offices near the lobby."

As I hung up the phone, the reality of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. I could only imagine the worse. What if someone harmed my mate? I knew without a doubt I would kill them, human or not. What if she'd had an accident and was unable to get help? Every possible negative scenario played through my head until I was pacing the room and itching in my own skin.

Sitting around the room sulking and thinking up nightmarish situations was not doing her, or me, any good. I forced my feet to move once again and headed back down to the lobby.

"Elise called for help. She said she was locked in one of your offices before the phone disconnected. I will find her, with or without your help," I told the lady behind the desk.

It was clear I was agitating her. But why? I watched her cringe at my words, but stand firm, her back straight and her shoulders erect. I knew I wasn't going to get anything further from her, so I made my rounds once again throughout the common areas of the resort and by walking the hallways. Anywhere I thought she might be. I couldn't find any offices near or off the lobby. It didn't make any sense. I even let my wolf surge close to the surface to heighten our senses in the search.

My hunt left me once again empty-handed. There was absolutely no sign of Elise anywhere and I fought back the bile as it rose into my throat and worry consumed me. The best I could hope for was that the woman behind the counter was telling the truth and she had left with an Uber driver, and maybe it had been longer than the lady had thought and enough time had passed to dissolve her scent in the air. I didn't really believe that, but it was so much better than the alternative.

Deciding on a new course of action, I headed back to the front desk for what felt like the millionth time. This time I would ask her to describe the Uber car. That way, I could begin the research towards identifying whoever had picked her up and where they went. I would demand to see video footage of the front door to confirm her response, because I knew I could not trust this woman, but also because it would hopefully give me a time and direction to continue my search for her.

With my wolf still so close to the surface, I took a big whiff as I approached, and I smelled her. I smelled Elise. It wasn't the freshest trail, and it wasn't leading to the front door, either. I walked around the side of the front desk and pushed past the lady as she attempted to stop me in protest. My heart leapt with joy at the smell of my mate.

"You can't be back here," she demanded, culling my enthusiasm. "I'm calling security."

"You do that. I'm sure they'll be happy to hear how my girlfriend was not picked up by Uber, and that you are lying. Perhaps they will be more helpful in locating her than you are."

I saw her sway, looking simultaneously furious and scared. The mixed scents she was putting off told me it was a little of both. I continued on the trail I had picked up, ignoring her constant protests at my back.

I heard heavy footsteps ahead as I zeroed in on a room to my left, down a long, dark hallway. It was cracked open and I nudged it the rest of the way as security reached me, but not before I saw Elise's bag sitting in the room.

"Elise!" I yelled, as two hands grabbed each arm and pulled me back. "Elise!" I yelled again, but she didn't respond.

I shook off the security officers.

"Sir, you can't be here. This is an employee-only area."

I stopped and turned towards the two men more calmly than I felt.

“That’s my girlfriend’s bag,” I said, pointing into the abandoned room. “The same girlfriend she assured me took an Uber this morning.” I pointed to the woman who had continually lied to me all morning. “Look, I don’t want to cause any trouble here. I just want to know where my girlfriend is, and why she’s been lying and giving me the run around all morning.”

The security men stopped and eased up on their grips. They turned to the lady and she opened her mouth, then shut it tight. “I don’t know what he’s talking about,” she finally settled on, but I could tell that her response and body language weren’t sitting well with the security guys, either.

“Check that bag,” the heavysset one told the other.

“Shit,” I heard the lady say under her breath.

The short, scrawny officer looked throughout the room. There really wasn’t much to look through, but he found scratch marks on the back of the door, and under the desk in the center of the room they found Elise’s purse. A quick check for identification in the wallet confirmed it was hers. But where was she?

I turned back to woman. “Where is she?” I demanded.

She paled, but her jaw was clamped tight.

“Come on,” the heavysset one said, letting go of me and grabbing her by the arm instead. I followed them to a room filled with video cameras on the opposite side of the building. I fought the itch to change into my fur—or throw up—as we made the walk there. I wasn’t really sure which was worse, the anger surging irrationally, or the bile burning my nose and throat as I tried to hold on to any sliver of control.

“Take a seat.” The little guy nodded towards me, then an empty chair. I wasn’t sure I could sit, but I somehow forced myself to comply. Showing aggression now was not going to help the situation.

“Viv, you have a lot of explaining to do. What was this girl’s stuff doing back in the office?”

“How should I know?”

I bit my tongue hard, tasting blood, as I struggled to allow them time and space to find the answers that eluded me.

“Did you see Ms. Elise Westin this morning?”

“How should I know?” she said again, before adding, “I see hundreds of people a day, think I can really tell one from the other?”

She was lying again, only this time I wasn't the only one who knew it with certainty.

The big guy had seemingly been typing away at a laptop, ignoring the situation, and truthfully, pissing me off, but he swung the laptop around toward us and pointed to a slender, dark-haired beauty I'd recognize anywhere. Elise.

“Is this your lady friend?” the man asked me, and I nodded in confirmation, unable to speak as I watched the lady convince Elise to follow her, then lead her down the hall I knew would lead to the room we found her stuff in. The lady returned on the screen a few minutes later. Two men appeared, their backs to the camera, but we could tell she was talking to them, then she ushered them off into the same direction she had taken Elise. The desk sat empty for what felt like an eternity on the screen before I appeared, banging on the bell in frustration. I knew the exact moment, and knowing now that Elise had been just down the hall made me feel lower than I could ever have imagined. My mate had been in trouble just a few yards away, and I hadn't been able to stop it.

“I want a lawyer!” the lady cried, interrupting my self-deprecation.

“This isn't a jail, Viv, and we aren't real cops, but if you don't cooperate with us, we'll be forced to call them in.”

She took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. Tears sprang from her eyes and her nose instantly turned an ugly shade of red.

“Those two men,” she began as the story spilled from her, “they contacted me about an hour after she checked in. I told them the boyfriend was there, but they didn't seem to care. Should she find herself alone, I was to assist and keep

her isolated in a safe place, and call them. They weren't staying here, but they couldn't have been too far away, because they got here within about twenty minutes from when I called."

"How much?" I asked, sounding deathly calm.

She shivered and refused to make eye contact with me, but she answered. "Five thousand dollars. Look, I have student loans and money's tight. I needed that money and they promised no one would get hurt and there would be no way to trace it back to me."

"And you believed them?" I spat out, disgusted by her.

"Tell us everything you can about the men. Did they take her off-site? What did they look like? Any distinguishing features?"

"They both had heavy foreign accents. It was hard to even understand them sometimes," she confessed. "They were going to take her out the back door, you know, the employee entrance, but when I unlocked the room you found her luggage in, there was no sign of her at all. They were really angry, but I had to leave because you were banging on the bell and causing a scene. By the time I'd gotten rid of you, there was no sign of any of them. I swear, that's all I know."

"Check the emergency exit footage. We had an alarm go off there this morning, could be around the same the time. I'd been on a smoke break at the time and came back in to the noise, glanced at the monitors, but didn't see anything suspicious, but maybe I missed something."

Desperation clawed at me from within.

"Look at this," the big guy said, pointing to the screen again. Just off-screen, one of the cameras picked up evidence of a struggle. For a split second, I saw Elise appear, running, before being jerked backwards and out of view. What appeared to be her leg shot out within view of the camera on two occasions, then nothing. A few minutes later an ugly burgundy-colored work van with faded white lettering on the side—that none of us could make out—passed by. Following it

on the perimeter cameras in the parking lot, we could see it turn right out of the resort, then head north before it disappeared entirely.

My breathing was coming too quickly and I could feel fur sprouting on my feet and legs. If I didn't reign it in, my wolf would overcome me. Our mate was in trouble and he was desperate to join the search for her. Excusing myself, I walked out of the room in attempt to regain my composure and phoned Kyle to fill him in on all we'd found.

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Elise

Chapter 13

My head was throbbing as I rolled over with a groan, unable to force my eyelids open. I was surrounded by unfamiliar sounds and smells, and didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I felt like I was waking up from the dead, my body stiff all over, and as I went to roll onto my stomach, a searing pain shot through my left wrist. I cried out from the pain and began the excruciating process of opening my eyes.

“Patrick?” I asked to the darkness still enveloping me. Hearing my voice aloud jarred me back to reality. I had left Patrick. The lady at the front desk of the resort had set me up. Two men—I sat up quickly, my eyes now wide open with fear.

I looked around the room I was in, instantly relieved to find I was alone, but that relief was short-lived as I realized my left wrist was handcuffed to what felt like a metal bedrail. I imagined some sort of hospital bed, but nothing else about the room itself screamed hospital. Not the lack of lights, the sounds, or the smells.

The room was so dark I couldn't make out whether it was day or night. *Hadn't it been morning when they took me? How long have I been out?*

My head continued to throb, making it difficult to think. I wasn't sure what they had knocked me out with, but it left a bitter taste in the back of my throat and my mouth was uncomfortably dry. Wishing for a toothbrush and some mouthwash caused a hysterical giggle to erupt from me. I knew I had bigger issues than a severe case of morning breath.

I paused. *Think, Elise*, I demanded of myself. Calling my wolf close to the surface, I channeled my wolf hearing and listened. I couldn't make out any sounds. It was eerily quiet.

I jiggled the handcuffs and had a momentary feeling of nostalgia. In a warped way they comforted me. It hadn't been that long ago that my rambunctious youngest brother, Chase, had gone through an obsession with law enforcement. He carried a real, cop-issued pair of handcuffs everywhere and frequently used them on his siblings. Sadly, it wasn't the first time I had awoken to find myself locked to a bed. I knew from experience that attempting to change into my wolf form while in handcuffs, was a very bad idea.

Smiling at the memory and thankful for horrible lessons learned, I used my free hand to reach into my pocket. I could almost guarantee to always find a hair tie and a few bobby pins in there. I felt around, thankful to find I was still wearing jeans, and relief washed over me as my fingers closed around the cool metal pin.

I quickly pulled it out, using my free hand and teeth to straighten the pin. It took me no time at all to pop the lock on the handcuffs. When your brother goes through a handcuff phase like we had to endure with Chase, you learned quickly how to break out of them.

"Thank you, Chase," I whispered into the darkness.

Taking a moment to take inventory of myself, I patted my body down. My clothes seemed to all be in place. I didn't feel like that had been an issue anyway and the reality of that was a huge weight lifted that I didn't realize I was carrying. I wiggled my toes next and found my shoes missing. That was okay. Sure, I loved those shoes, but if I could just get outside, I could change and run, and wouldn't be able to take them with me anyway.

I jumped out of the bed and carefully felt into the darkness around me. I shrieked and jumped back when my hands hit the wall. My heart was pounding so hard it was escalating my headache and causing a slight roar in my ears. I

took a deep, cleansing breath, held it for a moment, and let it out, trying to calm myself and just breathe.

Reaching out for the wall I carefully and slowly followed it around the room until I hit something soft. Grabbing hold of the fabric and pulling it back, I winced and shut my eyes at the bright light of day. Still daytime. Maybe I hadn't been out so long after all.

I peeled back the blackout curtains, throwing light across the room. When my eyes finally adjusted, I saw a small room. Only the one window and a door adjacent to it. It was entirely empty except for the bed. Wood-paneled walls and a wooden floor should have given it a more homey feeling than the vibes I was getting from it. It reminded me more of a prison cell.

Turning back to the window, I found it locked, but unlocking it was not helping my cause. On closer inspection I saw large, thick nails hammered in at an angle from the outside, halting any thoughts of opening that window.

I went to the door and leaned my ear against it; still I heard no movements on the other side. I jiggled the handle. Locked.

Fear began to set in stronger than it had since I first woke. I was locked in this small room and running out of ideas.

I went back to examining the window again. I tried with all my strength to lift it, wanting to snap the nails that held me captive. Whoever had brought me here clearly meant to keep me. I looked to the top of the window and wondered. The windows looked old and wooden. I grabbed on to the slat across the top half of the window and gave a jerk down. Sure enough, the window budged and slowly lowered. Whoever my captors were, perhaps they weren't quite as smart as I thought. They had secured the lower window pane, but left the top unattended, and on a double pane window the top half slid easily down to rest on the nails used to secure the lower half of the window.

It didn't look like much, but it gave me great hope. The act of actually climbing up and through the small opening would prove a much harder task, but no matter what, I was going through that window. Not knowing why I had been taken to begin with meant this was life or death, as far as I was concerned.

The windowsill was proving just tall enough to keep me from climbing up, and I didn't think it wise that I try to go headfirst out the window I pulled the bed over as close to the window as I could, holding my breath as it screeched across the hardwood floors. I listened closely for any movement beyond the room in the moments that followed. Nothing. Breathing a sigh of relief, I climbed up on the bed and evaluated my options.

The thought of going headfirst still didn't appeal to me. I could see through the window that it wasn't a very far drop and I was definitely on the first floor of the building, but still, headfirst. No thanks. Planning what I knew would not be a graceful exit, I made my first attempt at being a contortionist, only to get one leg out up to my knee before getting stuck and unable to move the other. Pulling back into the room, I fell ungracefully on the bed.

Frustrated, it took six more attempts before I ended up in some sort of awkward handstand on the windowsill with both legs out, hinging at my waist, as I tried to get a foothold on the outside. Finally my toe caught the outside sill and I slowly began walking my hands up and exiting the window. With my balance still in question, and only my shoulders, head, and arms remaining inside the room, I prepared to launch myself backwards and prayed for a soft landing.

You can do this, E. I gave myself a last minute pep talk. *One, two, thr—*

Large hands grabbed my waist from behind and pulled hard, my neck and face scraping against the top of the window as I was dragged from behind. In my focus to get out of the window, I had not heard the approaching man. My heart thudded hard in my chest, and as soon as I was clear I began kicking, screaming, and flailing my arms out. He dropped me

with a hard thud to the ground. I began crawling as fast as I could to get away and just on the precipice of shifting he grabbed me by the feet and yanked back, hard. My wolf growled in anger.

“Get the medicine,” I heard him say in a deep foreign accent. “Quick, she’s a feisty one.”

“Hold her still,” said a second man with similar accent.

I was pushed face-first into the ground. With my wolf so close to the surface already, a deep inhale heightened my fear just before everything went black again. Bulgarians. I recognized their scent.

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Patrick

Chapter 14

Pacing a circle around the front lobby of the resort for more than twenty minutes was not proving beneficial. My wolf was getting more irritated by the second. At last check, Kyle's trackers were still several hours out. I knew I couldn't wait that long. My mate was in trouble and I had to find her.

I hadn't been able to stop the local police from getting involved. The head of resort security had insisted, with the evidence that Elise had been kidnapped. They asked me to sit tight and wait while they ran their investigation. They asked too much.

After hanging up with Kyle, I needed some fresh air. As soon as I walked outside my skin began to crawl, like an itch all over that couldn't be scratched. I needed to change and I needed to change soon. My wolf felt my anxiety and heightened his need to find our mate.

I walked across the parking lot and headed up the street in the direction the red van had driven off. I couldn't help but continue to sniff the air. I had spent so much of the morning watching the security camera videos from every possible angle that I knew the second I was out of view. I shifted and sniffed the ground for any signs of Elise.

Remembering how my wolf had followed her to the Westin Foundation, even as I was in disbelief of his abilities, I gave myself over to the animal inside and set my wolf free. Within seconds we were off running. I didn't turn off my humanity entirely. That was too dangerous a thing when out in the human world. I would only chance such a thing in a controlled situation, like in a mating challenge arena.

I diverted us to the edge of the woods along the road. I couldn't risk humans seeing my wolf on the hunt. He wasn't happy with my decision as the smells were stronger on the road, but it wasn't safe for us.

Stopping to sniff the air, my nose raised to the sky and I let out a satisfied howl. My wolf had caught the scent of our female. My feet pounded against the forest floor, dodging around trees and jumping over underbrush. Moving so quickly, I lost my sense of direction, but I was confident my wolf would see us through. After what felt like several miles, we checked up and slowed. Coming to a clearing, I forced the wolf down on our belly when he wanted to continue at full speed to our mate.

There was a small cabin in the woods, far off from any main road. It was almost like it appeared out of nowhere. The red van seen on the security tape was parked in front. A low warning growl erupted from me before I could stop it.

There appeared to be no movement coming from the house, so I lay down and watched and waited. I was alone, without backup. I couldn't be stupid. I needed to know how many I was dealing with. Who were these guys? And what did they want with Elise?

After what felt like an eternity, a large, stocky man walked out on the front porch. Before he lit the cigarette in his hand I saw him raise his nose to the wind and sniff. My hackles stood up. This wasn't a human. He was wolf. I already knew I was well downwind. Unless he was a very good tracker, it was unlikely he would smell me, but as he looked around, lighting his cigarette and letting out a puff of smoke around him, I stayed perfectly still.

He may not have been able to smell me, especially with the added smoke surrounding him, but any movement and he would see it. I only allowed my eyes to move, scanning the area for any other possible threats.

My human side was regaining control, despite the urge of my wolf to attack, regardless of this man's human form. It was a shifter's most sacred vow, never take a human life, or a

wolf shifter's while in human form. As long as he remained in his skin, I couldn't touch him, but that didn't stop the animal desire within me from wanting to.

"Toma, get in here," I heard a voice from inside the house yell.

At least two, I thought. Toma, and another male. I committed the name, the voice, and their smells to memory. I could not allow them to live after what they had done. First, I must rescue Elise. Once she was safe, I would come back for these men. There was nowhere they could hide that I would not one day find them.

I knew Elise didn't want me as a mate, but that could never stop my need to protect her, and seeing her captors dead was my vow of her protection.

There was a significant distance between the edge of the woods, where I lay, and the house, all open space. I couldn't stand her being in there for even a second longer, and I knew, without a doubt, that my mate was inside that house.

My options were to wait until nightfall, go get help from the humans, or wait for Kyle's men to track us. In truth, a combination of the second and third options would be the fastest and likely safest, means of rescue, but I could not bring myself or my wolf to leave her. If they moved her while I was out seeking help, I'd never forgive myself. No matter what, I just couldn't head on.

For the most part, the entire area, even inside the house, was quiet. I strained my ears to hear any true sign of Elise, but nothing. We didn't have a bond for me to know she was okay and the thought put my heart crossways in me. I needed to know she was alright.

It felt like donkey's years before anything else happened. All the while I lay there watching the house, my wolf ears on high alert. The sound that distracted me wasn't coming from the house though, it was in the woods, a good mile out. If it wasn't so out of place in the midst of the quiet forest and noiseless house, I would never have tuned into it.

I raised my head and scanned the area, but could see nothing. Still, I knew the noise was coming from somewhere beyond and I needed to investigate. Keeping my eyes on the house, I headed towards the backyard, staying to the tree line. As I rounded the back corner the wind blew, and I caught a whiff of Elise. My footsteps stilled and my heart began to thump in my chest. It was definitely her scent, but tinged with a strange, bitter smell. *Were they still drugging her?* I hadn't considered that while formulating multiple exit strategies to pass the time.

Another sound drew my attention back to the task at hand. I continued around to the other side of the house before heading deeper into the woods. I smelled the petrol wafting off the motorbikes before I saw them. Three men, all with binoculars, watching the house carefully. I crouched low and approached as slowly and quietly as I dared. I needed to clearly hear what they were saying.

"Police report just came through. An Elise Westin was taken against her will from a nearby resort. Description of the van they caught on camera matches our boys."

"Holy shit! What are they up to?"

"A Westin? I can't believe the Bulgati brothers have the balls to pull off such a thing. They're insane."

"I'm just glad we've had them on surveillance since they entered the country last week."

"Can you even imagine the shit that would hit the roof if the Westins find out the Bulgarians attacked one of their own?"

"Alright, I know our mission is to never interfere with the packs, but we have to get that girl out of there or all hell is going to set loose."

To say that was a fret would be the understatement of the year. These blokes smelled human. What the bloody hell were humans doing monitoring pack activity? Who the feck were these guys? Jesus Christ, Elise, what have you gotten in to?

I said a quick prayer for her safety and tuned back to the three humans.

“What’s the plan, boss?”

“I don’t know. We’re going to need one heck of a distraction, but with only two of them, I think we can overpower them and get her out.”

“They’re wolves, Larry. What if they shift?”

My hackles were standing up and I was fighting back a growl with my unease. Why did these humans seem to know so much about my kind? The only salvation was that they appeared to be on Elise’s side and for that I would help them and be thankful and worry about the details of who they were later.

“I have a few tranq darts, but they’ll take a few minutes to go into effect. Without that distraction, or some way to draw them out, we’re useless. Sorry, but I am not walking into a house of horrors like that until I know Toma and Valko Bulgati are subdued.”

So, they needed a distraction, a way to lure them out of the house. That I could do if it meant these men would help rescue my mate. A part of me knew I wasn’t thinking rationally when I strolled up to them. I couldn’t just change into my skin in front of them. Even knowing what we are, seeing it up close and personal could be an entirely new experience for them, and the last thing I needed was for them to freak out and not follow through with their plan.

If I changed and then walked in, well, I’d be naked. Jesus, for some reason, humans didn’t seem to handle nudity well. At least that much I knew. So I would have to stay in my fur and find a way to alert them to be ready.

“Dave, you got any ideas?” the blonde, whose name I didn’t yet know, asked.

The man called Dave responded. “I don’t know, man. This is crazy. I never signed on to fight a werewolf!” He was nearing hysterics and I knew we needed to act soon and fast.

“Well, if we had a distraction I could man the gun and you two could each take one of the Bulgatis and make sure they’re subdued. Then one of us will have to go in and get the girl,” the one they had called Larry offered.

A growl bubbled out of me before I could stop it.

“Holy shit, what was that?” the blonde yelled, jumping behind Dave and shoving him forward.

There was no sense in hiding any longer. I had alerted them to my presence, now it was time to move. I walked out of the shadows and towards the one called Larry. He seemed to have the best plan and was the most levelheaded of the three.

He reached for his gun and I shook my head in warning. He threw both hands in the air.

“Is it one of the Bulgarians? Did we miss one?” the blonde asked in a hysterical, squeaky voice.

I shook my head no.

“You’re here for the girl, aren’t you, boy?” He talked to me like a fecking dog, and I fought to roll my eyes, knowing the motion would be human enough to potentially frighten them further, so I just shook my head up and down in confirmation.

“I think he’s on our side,” Larry finally said. The other two seemed to relax just a little.

“I can’t believe it,” Dave said in awe. “Look how magnificent he is, and clearly he’s communicating in his wolf form. It’s incredible.”

“Guess that confirms that question. They clearly do not lose all humanity in wolf form.” The blonde was so excited he was practically dancing around.

The second cardinal rule of shifters, never, ever, under any circumstance, present yourself to a human, but for Elise Westin, that’s exactly what I was doing, and damn the consequences. Clearly these men were already aware of us anyway, and I needed their help. I couldn’t wait for the police to stumble on the place and hadn’t seen or heard anything

from Kyle's trackers. With no true concept of time, I wasn't even sure they had arrived yet.

"Calm down, you fools," Larry said. "I don't want to scare him off."

"Larry," the blonde whispered, "do you think it could be a trap? I mean, how do we know it's not one of the Bulgatis?"

"We've been watching that house all day. We saw them boys arrive this morning, carrying the girl. Damn it, if I had known it was a Westin, I would have intervened right then."

"We aren't supposed to intervene at all."

"It's too important not to," he continued. "Anyway, they both left, and we should have gone in after her then."

"I tried to say that," the blonde chimed in, receiving a swat across the back of the head.

"Yeah, we should have, but we didn't. They returned, they dragged that poor girl around the building and back in." I growled at hearing that. "It's okay, boy. I think she tried to escape, but they caught her and drugged her again. Can't see the back of the house clearly from here, but I don't think those Bulgati brothers are smart enough to sneak out the back and around here to us. So no, I do not think this is a trap."

"Can you lure them out for us?" Larry asked me, and I nodded. "Good. You cause the distraction. Dave, Martin, you each have to keep one of the brothers down, but before you approach, give it a few seconds for the tranquilizer to kick in. I won't miss the first shot, but if the second one moves too quickly you may have to intercede."

They both gulped loudly, but nodded.

"You ready?"

Boy was I ever. I took off at a full sprint straight for the house. Being upwind, the chances of them smelling me before I reached the house were probable. How they hadn't

smelled the humans was beyond me. Maybe it was all that cigarette smoke surrounding them.

Fecking Bulgarians. The Grand Council was already in peace treaty mode after their attempts to start a war over Kelsey. Kyle hadn't yet signed it. If this was in some way an attempt to force his hand, they were sorely mistaken. Even if it was a personal war of one, the Bulgarians would face my wrath after this. I would make sure every one of them paid for harming my mate.

I had never felt such rage coursing through my body as I ran towards her captors. The one called Toma came back out on the porch for another cigarette just as I broke through the forest line and into the clearing.

“Valko! Valko!” he yelled for the man I now knew was his idiot brother. “Wolf!” he yelled seconds before a large grey wolf stood before me. He was skinny, clearly malnourished. I already knew I was stronger and capable of defeating him, but when his brother emerged snarling and snapping his jaws, I knew he would be the bigger challenge.

Ignoring Toma, I lunged for Valko, gnashing my teeth and growling menacingly before turning and running back towards the woods. The moronic wolves gave chase, as I suspected they would. As soon as I veered right at the tree line, the first shot rang out and I saw in my peripheral vision as Toma tumbled to the ground. Valko let out a haunting howl and looked torn between protecting his brother and continuing to give chase. In the seconds he checked up, the second shot rang out and he slowly stumbled to the ground.

Dave and Martin flew out of the woods and lay across the struggling wolves. Shaking my head in disbelief at their bravery, or stupidity, I found I had no choice: I changed right there in front of them. Their mouths dropped open, stunned as I stood there naked as the day I was born.

“Larry,” I yelled. “How strong is that tranq?”

He was approaching the edge of the woods and froze in disbelief at the site before him. “Larry, the dosage?”

“I-I-I used the equivalent of what we’d take down a bear with. They should be out for quite some time,” he said proudly, after the initial shock wore off.

I shook my head. “Not very likely in wolf form. They’ll burn it through their system quickly.”

“What do you suggest?” he asked, looking wildly around.

“Check the van for anything to tie them down with. It’s not impossible, but quite tricky and almost always a painful mess trying to change forms while tied down.” It never even dawned on me that I had just given these humans vital information regarding shifter secrets. “I’m going to check on Elise.”

I ran into the house and started calling out for her. “Elise! Elise! Where are you?” I checked each room, finding the one at the end of the hall locked. With the amount of adrenaline pumping through me, it took little effort to break down the door. There she was. She looked so still and pale and she had both wrists handcuffed to the bed she lay in.

“Elise?” I said, trying to sound calmer than I felt. “Love, please, open those beautiful blue eyes for me.” She stirred only slightly.

I didn’t have time to hunt down the key. I grabbed the side of the cuffs attached to the bed and pried them apart. My wolf was still agitated and so close to the surface that our combined strength snapped them in two, freeing her. I ran to the other side of the bed and did the same, before carefully lifting her into my arms.

She sighed and snuggled into my chest. The relief it gave me began to finally calm my wolf. I walked back outside with my prize. Larry and his boys had the Bulgati brothers tied up.

“She alright?” he asked, nodding towards Elise.

“No, but she will be.”

“What happens now?” For the first time, he looked a little uncomfortable and I watched his hand grip tighter to his

gun and heard his heart rate pick up.

“You are not my enemy. I do not know how you have come to know of my kind, but I urge you to forget all you’ve seen and heard here today. Get on your bikes and get out of town. Leave those bikes behind as soon as possible, and in a public place. Switch vehicles at least three times and get as far as you can before stopping. The fumes of those bikes will be too easy to track. If there are any others in the area with them,” I said, nodding to the Bulgati brothers, “they will easily track you down. You do not need to fear her people. They will know of your bravery and sacrifice, but they will also know that humans are aware.”

He looked uncomfortable at that thought. “It would be best for all if they did not know. We mean you no harm, and while we could not sit by and let harm come to her, we also broke every vow by interceding.”

“I understand. I too, broke plenty today. Perhaps it would be best if we both forgot the other was ever here?”

Larry smirked and nodded. I sighed in relief.

“The girl, is she really Elise Westin?”

Panic flooded my face as my need to protect her flared in me again.

He shook his head and put his hand up in retreat. “Doesn’t matter. I can see she is important to you. Is she your mate?”

I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face as I looked down at the beautiful woman in my arms. “Aye, she is.”

“We’re leaving now, unless you need us for anything else?”

I shook my head.

“Wait,” Larry yelled. “Here.” He handed me a fresh set of clothes. “You can use them more than me.”

“Thank you, my friend,” I said, taking his offering. “Larry?” I was hesitant to ask. “Can you hold her while I change?”

“Of course,” he said, stunned. “Dave is a doctor. Would you like him to take a look at her?”

I looked at Dave, then back at Elise and nodded slowly. Dave quickly approached and checked her vitals. My eyes never left them as I quickly dressed.

“She should be just fine—perhaps a headache similar to a hangover when she wakes, but otherwise, she should have no long-term effects.”

“Thank you,” I said in earnest.

Larry passed her into my arms. “We’ll call in an anonymous tip to the local police as we head out, unless you want to wait for them here.”

“No, I want to get her as far away from here as quickly as possible, and the police will only slow that task.”

“Understood, and we wish you the best of luck. I cannot tell you what an honor it has been meeting you.” He then did something so shocking, that I just stood there speechless. Larry, followed by his two peers, each in turn dropped their heads in reverence and bared their necks to me before turning to hurry back to their bikes.

“I’ve always wanted to do that!” Martin exclaimed excitedly before they were out of earshot. I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Elise

Chapter 15

My head was pounding once again as the world began to slowly right itself. I fought to remember what had happened and as it all came flooding back to me, I jumped up and frantically looked around the room. Where was I?

The obvious motel room I was in stank of mildew and old cigarettes. I wasn't in the little room in the cabin that I had last awoken to. I was thankful my arms were no longer bound to the bed. Coffee was brewing and a peek around the curtain showed me it was now dark outside. The unease of having lost an undetermined amount of time did not sit well.

Looking around the room, I had no belongings of my own, so I quickly made for the door, fumbling with the latch. I heard noise coming from the bathroom behind me and fear gripped me, making it impossible to undo the simple lock at the top of the door. Standing there frozen, I watched the door fly open. I screamed.

“Elise, it's okay. You're safe now.”

Large, thick arms wrapped around me, pulling me close to a hard, finely cut chest. I was shaking all over, but as I breathed in, my entire body relaxed. Salty tears masked my face and seeped into my mouth.

“Patrick? Oh God, Patrick!” I cried hysterically, holding on to him for dear life. “What happened? Where are we? How did you find me?” My questions just kept coming as I shook in his arms. He held me tightly and let me fall apart until there were no more tears to cry.

“Shh. It’s okay, love. You’re safe now.” His voice soothed my wolf and I hugged him closer.

“I’m so sorry. I never should have left you like that. I thought it would be easier for you if I just left. I didn’t want to hurt you anymore. I hated seeing the pain in your eyes from my rejection. I didn’t know what else to do. Who were those men? They smelled familiar.” I thought hard, remembering their scent. “Bulgarians,” I said with certainty.

“Yes, but I still only have speculation as to why they took you.”

“Did you find me?”

He nodded, but seemed hesitant to tell me. I decided not to press him. The haunting look in his eyes told me it was for the best. We’d talk later; for now I desperately just needed to feel his closeness and I didn’t care about the consequences.

“Can you at least tell me how long I was gone?”

He tensed and sighed. “It’s still the same day you were taken.”

The same day? How was that even possible? I thought.

“You were only gone a few hours before I found you, but I had to show restraint for fear of making things worse. Two Bulgarian captors were subdued by humans in the area. The Bulgati brothers, Toma and Valko. They had you.” He paused, taking a deep, cleansing breath. I could feel his muscles tighten as his body shook beneath my fingertips. “They had you drugged and chained to a bed. They should not have been allowed to live, but I had—I had to get you away from there.”

My head was still a little foggy and I couldn’t quite grasp all he was telling me. I yawned despite the fact I had been sleeping nearly the entire day.

“It’s late. You should sleep.”

I shook my head. “I was so scared and they kept drugging me with shots of this awful stuff that left a bitter

taste in my mouth. I don't want to close my eyes again. I'm afraid you're just a dream and I'll be back in that room, handcuffed to the bed, when I wake."

He kissed the top of my head and growled. "I'm never going to let that happen again."

A chill of excitement tainted with fear ran down my spine. I let him lead me to the bed and pull me down on top of him. He readjusted us and I snuggled into his side as he pulled the covers over us. With my head resting on his chest, I could hear the steady thump of his heartbeat trying to lull me to sleep.

From his words, I knew I hadn't been gone long, and nothing seriously bad had happened, but knowing that, didn't change the awful feeling of being violated. I knew they hadn't touched me. My clothes were still intact and there was no indication they had done anything but drug me and handcuff me to that bed, but that was violation enough.

Why? Why? Why? That question was stuck on repeat in my head. *Why would anyone want to do that to me?*

"Why would the Bulgarians want me? I just don't understand, Patrick."

He squeezed me closer. "To get back at Kelsey and Kyle? That's the only reason I can think of. They are protected and unreachable without a serious proclamation of war, but you were alone and vulnerable, and it's all my fault. I'm so sorry. I don't think I can ever forgive myself for this."

"What?" I sat up and stared into his eyes. I could see the pain and hurt there, and desire to erase both from them flared in me. I reached out and stroked his cheek softly with my hand before I could even stop myself. "This was not your fault. I was the coward who ran away. I was the one who left you, and then left myself vulnerable and not paying attention. This was not your fault, it was mine."

His stare scorched my soul. "You are my mate, Elise. My one true mate. It is my job to protect you. I let my guard down and you were harmed because of my inadequacy. I do

not deserve your forgiveness, but I will do everything in my power to see that something like this never happens to you again.”

His fierceness terrified and excited me. Before I could let his words sink in, his hand snaked around to the back of my head and pulled me roughly towards him. When his lips met mine, firm and determined, I was more shocked than anything. My eyes were still wide open, but as my body shuddered at his touch, I sighed and relaxed into him for the first time. His mouth softened against mine and after all that had happened, I couldn't hold back from the connection to the one thing I had so stubbornly withheld from myself. The only thing, the only person, I truly wanted.

As I moaned into him and parted my lips to his, he growled against me and plunged his tongue into mine. I felt desired, needed, and devoured all at once. It was the most intense moment of my life. I kissed him back with a wild abandon, blurring anything and everything else from my mind. There was only Patrick, and my need for him was all-consuming. My lungs burned from the lack of oxygen, causing me to pull back, panting heavily, and sucking in air as I tried to regain some semblance of composure.

Running my tongue across my lips I felt them plump and swollen from his kiss. Staring into his eyes, I was taken aback from the pure desire showing there, and I knew he had been holding back for me. That thought was the only thing that shook me from my lust-induced fog that only saw and wanted my mate. I had valid reasons for keeping my distance. They may have been more from fear than desire, but they were important.

Not wanting to see the disappointment in his beautiful blue eyes once again, I slowly lowered myself back down and repositioned myself next to him, unable to completely deny him or lose the connection I so desperately craved and wouldn't allow myself to have.

He took a deep breath and kissed the top of my head as he played with the tips of my hair, inadvertently rubbing my

mid-back in the process. It felt so good, so right. Combined with the steady beating of his heart, I let it lull me into sleep.

Waking with a start, I stared around the room, quickly pulling my arms to me. My heart was racing and there were little beads of sweat covering my body. I gulped in air as anxiety enveloped me.

“Motel. No threat, no handcuffs,” a deep voice rumbled from behind me, and I felt strong arms tighten around me.

In my heightened paranoia I didn't at first recognize them, but my body seemed to and began relaxing before I realized what was happening.

“Patrick?” I whispered.

“I'm here, love. Try and get a little more sleep.”

It wasn't long before we both realized that wasn't going to happen.

“Maybe we should just get on the road,” I suggested.

“Yeah, let's go. No doubt your brother is freaking out by now.”

“You didn't call him?”

“Lost my cell phone when I shifted in the woods. Lost your keys, too. Sorry.”

“How did we get here exactly, then?”

He gave me a smirky smile that made my body warm all over. “I didn't want to risk taking you back to that place. So I carried you back to the parking lot and broke into your car and hot-wired it. I just had to get you as far away from there as possible. The rational side of me knew I should talk to the police and tell them you were okay, but my wolf and I were not thinking rationally.”

“So my family doesn't know where I am or that I'm safe?”

“No.” He cringed as he thought it through.

“Phone,” I said, holding out my hand and waiting for him to pass me the hotel phone on the nightstand next to him.

He set it on his chest and I quickly dialed Dad’s number.

“Hello?”

“Dad? It’s E. I’m okay and we’re coming home.”

I could hear muffled voices on the other end before Mom grabbed the phone away.

“Elise? Baby, is that really you?”

“I’m here, Mom. And I’m fine. Patrick made sure of it.”

At some point they must have put me on speaker phone.

“Patrick’s with you?” I heard Kyle ask.

“Yeah, he got me away from there.”

“E, what happened?”

I choked up and couldn’t talk. Patrick was watching me closely and slowly took the phone from my shaking hand.

“Kyle? It’s Patrick. Sorry I didn’t phone sooner. I had to get her away from there and make certain she was safe first.” He sounded apologetic, but also like he knew Kyle would understand, and I guessed if anyone would, it would be my brother. Mating males were not exactly well known for rational thinking when their mates were in trouble.

“We’re only about two hours out. I’ll explain everything when we get there. In the meantime, tighten up security around San Marco. The Bulgarians were behind this.”

I could hear my brother drop an F-bomb through the phone. It was so out of character for him that it made me giggle nervously.

Patrick quirked one eyebrow at me and I snorted, trying to hold back a full laugh, and smacked him lightly. My

playful gesture took some of his worry away as he said goodbye and hung up with my brother.

“Come on, let’s hit the road. I think Kyle may have a firing squad waiting for me. I should have called him the second you were safe. I just wasn’t thinking about him, only you.” He smiled apologetically and brushed a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

“Can I take a quick shower first?”

His face flushed and his cheeks started spotting red as he looked between me and the bathroom door before nodding. I didn’t need to hear his thoughts to understand what he was thinking. I shook my head, laughed, and headed for the bathroom. It felt good, yet wrong, to laugh at a time like that.

I turned on the hot water and watched as the room began to steam. I stripped and stepped into the shower. As the water cleansed me, the emotions of the day overwhelmed me and I sunk to the floor crying. It was a cleansing cry, and as I pulled myself back together, I felt better and stronger because of it and knew I was going to be okay.

Towelng off, I realized I only had my dirty clothes. Wrapped in the towel, I opened the door and stuck my head out. Patrick wasn’t there, but a clean set of clothes laid on the bed, waiting for me. I wondered briefly as I began to dress how I had gotten so lucky in the mate department.

Halfway through pulling my shirt on, I froze. My mate. Patrick O’Connell was my mate. It was the first time I had really allowed that thought to sink in. He cared about me. He wanted to protect me. In my time of need, I had let him. I had not considered for one second anything else. When I wasn’t stubbornly fighting our destiny, it was so easy to just be with him.

I had let him kiss me. Was it too much? Had I gone too far in kissing him back? All of my fears and concerns were still there, but were they as important today as they had seemed yesterday? I didn’t have time to digest it all before a little knock came on the door. I tugged my shirt down the rest of the way and waited as he peeked his head inside.

“Ready?” he asked, flashing me a gorgeous smile.

“Just a sec,” I said, as I ran back to the bathroom and quickly gathered my dirty clothes. Looking around the room, I realized I didn’t have anything else.

Patrick escorted me to the passenger door. It felt kind of odd. It was my car and I hadn’t considered not driving, but as he opened the door and waited, I couldn’t bring myself to argue it either. My car was my baby, and I rarely ever let anyone drive her. A black Ford Mustang convertible I had been given for my sixteenth birthday and nearly a decade later, she still ran like new and I couldn’t imagine ever parting with her.

Patrick rummaged some loose wires that were hanging around his knees. Suddenly a small spark ignited when he pressed two of them together and she roared to life.

I gasped. “You are fixing her the second we get home!” I rubbed the dashboard. “I’m so sorry, baby, he’s going to make it all better soon. I’ll never let him hurt you like that again.”

Patrick stared at me like I’d lost my mind and laughter filled the car. I couldn’t stop the grin that spread across my face.

“Don’t make fun of us. Betsy and I have been through a lot.”

“Betsy?”

I nodded.

“The car? You named the car Betsy?”

“Yes, her name is Betsy, and you are fixing that mess you made the second we get home.”

He continued to laugh as he pulled onto the highway and after a short argument over radio rights that I won, we settled into comfortable silence with country music playing in the background. From the occasional scowl on Patrick’s face I could tell he was not a fan. If he truly wanted to be with me, he’d have to learn to live with it.

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Patrick

Chapter 16

Elise was snoring lightly in the passenger seat, with a tiny bit of drool dribbled on her chin. The sight of her just made me happy inside. We hadn't talked about our bond. She hadn't accepted me as a mate, but last night something had changed between us and it gave me hope.

I was grateful she passed out. If I had to listen to one more song about a dog, a truck, or a cheating spouse, I might have ripped the radio out of Betsy and tossed it out the window.

Betsy? I chuckled. She had named her sports car Betsy. It made me realize I still had a lot to learn about my beautiful, elusive mate.

Pulling into the drive in front of the Alpha's house, I sighed, wondering how much heat I'd take for this. I also worried that Elise would continue to keep me at a distance, and I knew no matter what, the insatiable need to protect her would barely allow her to leave my sight.

I didn't have time to stress over it before the Westin family descended on us the moment the car was in park. Elise woke with a start, nearly tumbling out of the car as the door was flung open. I grabbed for her arm to keep her from falling out. She gave me a sleepy, thankful smile that flipped my heart in my chest.

"Is she okay? What's wrong with her?" Mary Westin demanded.

"Nothing. She had fallen asleep. Give her a little space and a few minutes to wake." I tried to hold back the growl

threatening from my agitated wolf with the commotion and excitement of our arrival.

A fresh layer of snow covered the mountainside of San Marco and the air was crisp as I stood and stretched. Liam and Chase descended on me quickly.

“What happened, dude?” Chase asked.

“Trackers arrived and couldn’t find any sign of you. Then an anonymous call came in to the locals and they apprehended two foreigners. They couldn’t substantiate the kidnapping, though there were enough signs that they believe that’s where she was being kept,” Liam informed. “Why didn’t you call and tell them she was safe sooner?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, throwing my hands up in warning for them to back off. “I had to get her to safety first. I knew the trackers were likely there, and I knew the Bulgarians wouldn’t come after us, but I just had to get her away from there. I can’t explain it, I just had to.”

“Relax, and back off boys. His mate was in danger, and a mating male rarely thinks rationally in such cases.”

A part of me was embarrassed by the description, but also grateful that Jason Westin seemed to understand where I was coming from.

“Dude, you had the trackers going crazy out there.”

“I’m sorry. Really, I’m sorry, but she’s fine, and that’s all that matters to me.”

Elise looked back and gave me a wary smile as the women fussed over her and escorted her into the house. The second she was out of sight, my wolf began to panic. It must have shown on my face too, because when Kyle came around the car to lay into me on everything I had done wrong in the last twenty-four hours, his father interceded.

“Kyle, he’s a mating male. Give him space, and get him in the house quickly. He needs to stay near your sister for now. I can feel how on edge his wolf is with her out of sight.”

They shared a knowing look and I was escorted into the house. Elise was sitting on the large sofa surrounded by her mother and sisters. I was grateful for them, but I needed to touch my mate and assure my wolf she was fine.

“Lily, move and let Patrick have that spot.” I looked at her father in surprise, but he smiled and nodded. “I was a mating male once before, you know. We don’t need any unnecessary trouble today. Do what you need to calm yourself.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. The only thing that would absolutely calm my wolf would be to complete the mating bond with his daughter and I knew that wasn’t happening anytime soon.

The older man pursed his lips and bit back a grin before clapping me on the shoulder as I lowered next to my mate. I was grateful the Westin family seemed okay with me for Elise. I hadn’t discussed it with her father and had never been around her and her family together before. It felt natural, like I belonged, and no one seemed to mind me there.

Elise’s back was towards me, but our legs touched at the thighs and that alone began to settle my agitated wolf. As Lily moved to sit on the floor in front of her, Elise shifted to face the women and, likely without realizing it, she settled easily against me. I kept my arm on the back of the sofa, fighting my instincts to wrap it around her waist and pull her even closer to me. I knew she needed her space, but her actions were more accepting than her words and I was elated that as the day progressed and she filled everyone in on our adventures, that she seemed to naturally mold into my side and it just felt right.

After answering everyone’s questions and the excitement died down, Mary went off to make lunch and people began to scatter. Kelsey had gone to the bathroom for like the tenth time and Kyle had retreated to his office, though his glare told me we’d have further words later.

Elise relaxed next to me and tugged my hand resting on the back of the couch to wrap it around her small waist. She

nestled her head into my shoulder and sighed. I was so shocked I didn't want to move a muscle, but it only took a few minutes for me to hear the soft cadence of my mate sleeping in my arms. I readjusted to get comfortable myself and drifted off to sleep, feeling more content than I ever remembered feeling.

“Aww!”

I startled awake to a screeching noise. Elise shifted in my arms and stretched seductively. “They're sooooo cute.”

“Shhhh.”

I opened my eyes to see Kelsey trying to quiet Christine Canine.

“You found your mate! I told you it was Elise. How did you not find her sooner?”

E giggled. “Still hide-and-seek champ.”

Christine started laughing. “Wow, did you ever do a number on him. I'm glad you guys worked it out.”

I felt Elise stiffen next to me. It had felt like we were finally making some progress over the last twenty-four hours, but feeling her change at the mention of us together, I knew we still had a long way to go.

“Oh good, you're awake. E, my office, now. We need to talk,” Kyle said as he walked through the room.

I moved to follow.

“Alone.”

I bit back the growl as anger fired within. I wasn't ready to let her out of my sight—surely he could understand that.

“It's fine,” Elise assured me with a quick hug as she got up and followed her brother. I felt only a small amount of relief in the comfort of her small gesture. I didn't want to get my hopes up, but it felt like she had known exactly what I needed in that moment.

I didn't have long before Kyle returned and summoned me to his office. There was something in his posture that let

me know this wasn't going to be a pleasant chat.

"Close the door and take a seat," he said from behind his desk, without making eye contact, and nodding to the chair across from him.

"Rather stand, thanks," I said. My wolf was on high alert and I fought the need to pace the suddenly too small room. "What's this about, Kyle?"

"You and I have been friends for a long time, Patrick, and I'm grateful for you stepping down where Kelsey was concerned, but this isn't about that. I've talked to Elise and heard her side of the story. I know the two of you have not mated. Given her confession of hiding from you, and her attempt to run from you leading to her kidnapping, I can only assume she has no desire to take you as a mate."

The room spun and my world came crashing in around me. I sat down hard and defeated.

"She told you that?"

"No, she said enough, though." He paused and I didn't want to hear the next words from his mouth. "Pat, I think it's time you went home."

"Kyle, I can't. You know that. I just found her, and maybe it wasn't the greatest start, but we're getting there. She's coming around, you'll see."

"You failed to protect your mate." His words felt like a punch to the gut, knocking all the breath from me. "She's my sister, Patrick. How could you let this happen? I know what the mating call feels like. I don't understand how you could let this happen."

Everything inside me hardened into darkness. Kyle Westin couldn't possibly understand something like this. Through gritted teeth I tried to explain.

"You can't possibly understand how it feels to wake up to an empty bed with no idea where your mate is. To be told over and over that she didn't want you, that she chose to leave. To see her feet on surveillance flailing out in fight before going limp as you watch helplessly as she's tossed into the

back of a van, unsure if she's dead or alive. To be told to sit and wait for others to come to her rescue. I pray you never know what that feels like."

I could see the pain and even a little sympathy in his eyes as I moved for the door. I couldn't take it any longer. I had to get out of that room.

"Patrick, I'm not sure she's ever going to take you as a mate, but for now, I need you to leave. It was wrong of me to let you stay in Westin territory. You have twenty-four hours. I'm sorry, but it's for the best."

In that moment, with all the stress of the preceding days, I wanted to fight him more than ever, but I held back.

"Best for who?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"My sister."

I slammed the door behind me and ignored all protests at my back as I left the house. The second I was outside I shifted, clothes be damned. I had always had the classic Irish temper. I just did a better job of hiding it than my siblings, but that additional beast inside gnawed at me to be free. I ran and I ran until the hate and anger subsided and I felt slightly more in control before returning to my empty cottage.

Chase was waiting on my back porch.

"Go home," I said, after shifting and walking past him into the house.

"You're not just going to leave, right?"

"Chase, you're young, you don't understand. I failed to protect to my mate. I don't deserve her. Your alpha has issued my banishment. I have no choice but to leave."

"Without even fighting for her?"

I cringed.

"I didn't mean that, and no one else sees what happened as your failure to protect her. Dude, you saved my sister."

I shook my head. "Doesn't matter."

“Where will you go?” He sounded genuinely concerned.

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t let that part sink in yet. I truly had nowhere to go.

“Will your dad take you back?”

I shook my head no. The kid was clearly getting upset. “Don’t worry about me. I’m a survivor. I’ll figure something out.” I hugged him. “You should go.”

He had tears in his eyes and his head down as he left. “You have my number if you need anything. I don’t care what Kyle says about it. You need anything, you call.”

I nodded, feeling overwhelmed with emotions.

“Take care, Pat.”

Then he was gone and I was more alone than I’d ever been in my entire life.

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Elise

Chapter 17

I hadn't meant to fall asleep when I had gone to lay down after talking with Kyle. Going over the details and confessing what a coward I had been hadn't been easy. He seemed so pissed by the time I was done that I had retreated to the safety of my room. Once I lay down, exhaustion overtook me.

Waking to a dark room and an empty bed had flared my anxiety. I reached for Patrick, but he wasn't there. My heart had sunk and fear had taken over. I breathed deeply in, then out. In and out, willing my heart rate to slow. It had been the first time I'd woken without Patrick since the rescue. The amount of need I had for him kind of freaked me out, yet confusingly I found comfort in it, too.

Knowing he'd be worried, I got up and went to look for my mate. I smiled and shook my head. It hadn't escaped me how somewhere in the last twenty-four hours he had gone from the man I'd refused to recognize, to my mate.

"Hey, Lil," I said cheerily.

"Uh, hey," she responded, sounding confused.

Chase glared at me.

"What's up with you?" I asked him.

"He has nowhere to go, E. Did you even stop to think about that?"

Liam walked in, shaking his head. "Got big brother to do your dirty work, eh? You know, I can't even look at you right now." He started to leave then turned around. "Like it or

not, he is your one true mate. Why doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Chase followed him from the room, still glaring at me. My stomach flipped, and I felt like I might throw up. What had happened?

"Lil, where's Patrick?"

"I dunno, E. He may still be at the cottage. He was packing when Chase left. Kyle gave him twenty-four hours. He was really pissed when he stormed out. Clothes-shredded-on-the-front-porch pissed."

He wasn't the only one pissed. "Where's Kyle?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Lily's eyes widened as she pointed down the hall to his office. I stormed off in that direction, not stopping to knock, as I threw the door open and barged in.

"How dare you!" I yelled, barely registering that the Pack Council was all present.

"Elise, calm down. We're in a meeting. We can discuss later."

"Later," I snorted, "like twenty-four hours later when my mate has already been evicted. Have you lost your mind? He's my mate!"

By this point I was shaking in anger and had drawn the attention of everyone in the house. I hated that tears started streaming down my face. I had never felt so betrayed in all my life. I turned and pushed through my family, who had gathered at my outburst. Kyle caught up to me just outside the house.

"Elise, wait." He grabbed my arm and I turned and growled at him. He threw his hands up in surrender. "Your actions showed you didn't want him. We almost lost you because of him. I'm only trying to protect you. He's my friend. Do you really think this was an easy decision for me?"

"It wasn't your decision to make, Kyle! And you will take it back. Do you hear me? You take it back. You cannot ban my mate."

He actually grinned at me. “That’s twice now you’ve called him your mate.”

“Shut up. What if he’s already gone, Kyle? What am I going to do?”

“Just tell me what to do, E.”

I turned on him, still angry and betrayed. “Stay out of my personal life.” I stomped out of the house and headed straight for my car.

I was an emotional mess driving over to Patrick’s. I had successfully avoided the place since his arrival, even before Kelsey moved out. Now I just prayed I would find him there.

I finally breathed in relief when I pulled up and saw his car still in the driveway. I wasn’t too late. I could even begin to let myself think of how much it meant to me. I jumped out of the car, unsure if I even turned the engine off, and sprinted up the front steps, immediately banging on the door.

It felt like an eternity before he opened the door. His eyes looked hollow and miserable. It broke my heart and I threw myself into him, wrapping my arms around his waist and breathing in his delicious scent.

“Don’t leave me.”

Though his arms were still down at his sides, his body shook beneath my arms, and then ever so slowly, he wrapped his tight around me. We stood there holding on to each other like a lifeline until a voice cleared behind us. I hadn’t heard him arrive, but I knew it was Kyle. I didn’t even try to hide the growl of warning that erupted from me as I turned and shielded my mate from him.

Kelsey stood behind him with her arms crossed. She didn’t look happy and I briefly wondered if she was angry at me for yelling at Kyle. He looked at his mate and she stared at him, determinedly nodding our way. Kyle’s head hung, reminding me of when he’d gotten into trouble as a little boy.

“I’m sorry, Patrick. I was upset and may have overreacted. I was honestly just trying to protect my sister, who clearly reminded me, my family, and the entire Pack Council, that she is a grown woman capable of making certain decisions for herself. Your eviction has been suspended indefinitely. I will not make that mistake again,” he said, more to me than Patrick. Then he went back to addressing my mate, who was still standing behind me. “You are welcome in Westin territory for as long as Elise wants you here.”

I didn’t turn to see Patrick’s reaction, but he must have accepted the apology, because Kyle nodded and walked back to his car with Kelsey fussing quietly the whole way.

I shut the door and turned to face Patrick. His face was full of wonder as he stared at me.

“You fought for me.” He said it with awe, as if a fact. “Why? I mean, you’ve made it clear you don’t want me as a mate. Why would you do that?”

I shrugged, not knowing how to explain. Feeling braver than I was, I stood on my tippy toes so our eyes were level, and grabbed his shirt in my fists. Meeting his eyes, I told him, “You are my mate. My one true mate. I may be scared and try to fight it, but I don’t deny that fact. I don’t deserve you, not the other way around.”

I’m not sure how it happened, but the next coherent memory was of me passionately kissing Patrick O’Connell. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. I had made it clear to us both that we could never be together. Hadn’t I?

A groan of disappointment escaped me as his lips left mine and trailed across my cheek and down my neck. At the base of my neck where it met the top of my shoulder, he paused and nuzzled into it, kissing the place where his bite should mark me. He blew his scent on me, causing shivers to run through my body.

I felt my teeth elongate in anticipation. The reality came crashing in on me and I threw my head back to look at him, then boldly brought his lips back to mine.

His hands gripped my ass, pulling me closer to him. I could feel exactly how much my mate needed me, physically. I wasn't ready to give him everything, but this I could do. This, I wanted to do.

I kissed him harder, deepening it as I explored his mouth. My wolf was unusually quiet and content in his arms. When he lifted me for better access, I wrapped my legs around his waist, locking my ankles. This helped steady us, but also brought us more intimately close. Very intimately close. I could feel him pulsating beneath me and I was more ready than I knew possible to take things to the next level.

His lips never left mine as he carried me down the hall to his bedroom. I would have been okay if he had just taken me right there up against the wall, fast and frenzied, but I knew Patrick well enough to know that he was going to take his time and make our first experience together memorable.

He gently laid me on the bed and looked at me like I was fragile enough to break. My breath hitched when he took off his shirt and tossed it to the ground. I had seen Patrick naked before, but this time was different, and truthfully, I didn't think it would be possible to ever tire of that view.

His predatory gaze had goosebumps popping along my skin. I had never seen anyone look so fierce, yet when he finally touched me it was with the gentlest of hands that warmed me inside and out. He peeled away each layer of my clothing as I allowed him to take full control. I could see the wolf in his eyes, just below the surface, and understood he needed to feel that control.

His skilled hands wound their way up my body and it felt like I was truly being touched for the first time in my life. New and exciting, and right. I fought back a growl at the realization that this was a man who knew his way around a woman's body. Pushing those negative thoughts away, I gave in to his touch and just felt.

Before our bodies joined at last, he had sent me spiraling over the edge, twice. I wasn't sure I could handle another, but as he settled above me, and we were one, at last, a

new sort of frenzy began. I had never felt so free. My body was on fire and the mating call beckoned to me. If there had been any doubts he was my one true mate, they were put to rest in that moment.

We moved in complete syncopation. My heart pounded in my chest as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. I pushed him harder, demanding more. I didn't know there was anything more, but as I began to climb again, I feared I might plunge into darkness, but the sensation that took over made me feel like I was floating on a cloud.

His body quivered in my arms with irregular breathing matching my own. His eyes locked with mine and I pushed back the need to heed the mating call. His head slowly lowered to mine in the softest kiss that stole my breath. He didn't say a word as he rolled to his side and pulled me close to him.

My head rested on his chest, still heaving from our lovemaking. In the past this would have been the point where I'd be heading for the door as fast as I could, but I could not think of anywhere else I'd rather be. My eyes felt heavy and I slowly drifted into sleep.

I'm not sure how long I slept, but it was dark outside when I finally opened my eyes. I was surrounded by Patrick's delicious scent. Planting a kiss on the light patch of hair scattered across his chest, I stretched, surprised to find my body heavy and my muscles sore. I groaned.

Patrick stiffened in my arms. "Are you okay?"

I didn't look up at him, but nodded my head yes. I wasn't quite ready to face him.

"Are we okay?" he asked, hesitantly.

That made me look up into his bright-blue eyes. They were cautious, but hopeful. I studied him for a while, watching him squirm at my scrutiny before smiling. "Never better."

"Thank God," he said, before his mouth descended on me again.

I smiled through his kisses, not ready to elevate things again. We needed to talk. I needed to talk. I had never been a pillow talk kind of girl before. Heck, I had never stayed after sex in the past. This was all new territory. I didn't like feeling out of my element, yet I couldn't make myself leave.

"I'm sorry about earlier," I confessed.

"What happened?" he asked. "Kyle was pretty upset when he told me to leave. I'm still a little confused about it."

"He wanted to know what had happened. He was really pissed after hearing it. He asked me what happened between us. I told him nothing, but I had mentioned that I was upset and trying to leave you when I was kidnapped. I think he took it the wrong way. I was furious when I found out he had banished you from Westin territory. I don't think I've ever been that mad in my life, and I'm not exactly known for having a mild temper."

He chuckled. "Thank you for straightening it out with Kyle. I'm not sure I've ever felt so lost, knowing you'd never want me, knowing my father would not take me back into pack. I wasn't sure where I'd have gone or what I'd have done, if you hadn't stepped in when you did."

He sounded so lost and broken. It hurt my heart. "You'll always have a home here," I told him, and I meant every word. "Always."

He smiled, but it was a sad smile.

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Patrick

Chapter 18

How can the same day be your worst and your greatest? Elise was telling me that I would always have a home here in Westin, but I had felt her stiffen in my arms and pull away when I had gotten near her neck, where every part of my being craved to mark her and complete our mating bond. She had given her body to me, but she was still not ready to give me her heart. I didn't think she was aware of the fact that she already owned mine.

If I had had any doubts before, they had been laid to rest when I opened that door and saw the fury and fire in her eyes. At first I had thought it was directed at me, but my heart had nearly burst with happiness to find all that passion was directed for me. She had fought for me. She had fought for us, even if she didn't seem to realize it, because without her, Kyle was right, there was no reason for me to remain in his territory.

I wanted to believe that she would come around, that we'd complete our mating bond. I could wait and give her some time. Being with her had shown me that a lifetime with her would be worth whatever frustrations and rejections necessary until she was ready. For the first time, I had hope in a future together, but I would have to channel patience I didn't feel I had when dealing with my mate.

Something that had been weighing on me lately was the thought of what I was going to do with my life. I had always been groomed to someday be an alpha, or die trying. That took a lot of work, and I had started to learn the ways of the pack and had been put to work at a very young age. Since coming to San Marco, I hadn't done anything but chase after

my mate. It had consumed me. When I wasn't looking for her, I was sulking or wasting time each day just hanging out with Chase and Liam, and occasionally Kyle. I'd have to do something, be able to support us even, if this was going to work.

"What are you thinking about?" Elise asked me.

I hadn't realized I had spaced out in my own head. "I was just contemplating what I'm going to do now."

"What? What do you mean?" she asked, sounding a little freaked out by my confession.

I rubbed her back in a soothing circle. "Well, if I'm going to stay in Westin territory indefinitely, I've got to come up with a plan for something to actually do for a living." I didn't like confessing to my mate that I had no valuable skills to provide for her. "My whole life I've been groomed to be Alpha." I gave her a weak smile. "Not exactly an available job around here, and I've never really considered any other options."

"I hadn't thought about it like that," she said softly. "You've given up so much to be here."

"Hey," I said, raising her chin so she would meet my eyes. "You are worth it. I'll figure something out. I'm not entirely without skills, and I'll find some way to support us. I don't want you worrying about it."

She gave me an evil grin. "I'm Vice President of Human Resources at Westin Foundation. I can find you a job, or"—she hesitated and her grin grew bigger—"I can just be your sugar mama."

Her comment was so shocking I was momentarily put off, then it was like all the stress that had been building released in a laugh. She joined in and it felt so good and right just laughing with her. I knew we'd make it through anything. I just needed her to realize it, too.

"You'd be my sugar mama?" I asked her seriously. When she said things like that, it only encouraged my hope.

"Yeah, least till ya figure out what you want."

My eyes burned with desire. “I know exactly what I want.”

She wiggled awkwardly under the power of my words and I captured her mouth with mine before she had a chance to protest. She was the best thing I ever tasted, and like a man in the desert stumbling upon water, I didn't think I could possibly ever get enough of her, especially now that I had had her.

The phone rang, interrupting my conquest. I groaned as she pushed away to check her cell.

“Don't answer it,” I protested weakly, not wanting to return to reality. I liked the little bubble of us we had created that afternoon. As if a sign depicting just how long we'd stayed in that bubble, my stomach growled loudly. She giggled as she answered her phone. I took a second to check mine for the time and was surprised to find it was nearing dinner. I hadn't eaten all day. I knew, no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't survive on Elise alone.

Not bothering to dress, I rolled out of bed and headed to the kitchen as I heard her say, “Yes, Lily, it's fine ... Of course, I had Kyle fix things. He shouldn't have interfered with my life to begin with ... I'm at Patrick's ... What? Tell them to stay away. We're, uh, talking ...” She blushed, causing a deep rumble of laughter to erupt from me, shortly followed by a pillow smacking against my back.

I didn't think anything could wipe the smile from my face as I reached my kitchen and began checking the press for food. I cringed, realizing I was going to have to go shopping. I couldn't have my mate starving because I didn't like going to the shops for the messages.

With a thud my clothes landed at my feet. I looked up and saw Elise fully dressed and standing in the doorway. My eyebrow raised in inquiry. She gave me an apologetic look.

“My siblings are on their way. All of them. I'm sorry. My family can be a little protective and they want to make sure I'm okay.”

“Love, your siblings practically live here.”

“Huh?”

I laughed at her surprise. “Chase and Liam are here more than they are home, and Lily’s not much better. Kyle and Kelsey come over at least three times a week. Yeah, imagine my surprise to suddenly discover there’s another Westin that I didn’t even know existed when the rest has practically been family to me since I set foot in this territory.”

“Really?” she asked, sounding genuinely surprised. She frowned. “I guess I’ve been so busy avoiding you that I hadn’t even realized or stopped to think about what they were doing.”

I wrapped her in my arms and held her close. “It’s okay.” I’m not sure if I was reassuring her or me. That woman had put me through bloody hell, and knowing she was deliberately avoiding me all that time still hurt.

She was still holding her cell and I had left mine in the bedroom. Taking it from her, I easily found Liam’s number.

“We’re coming, E. You can’t hog him to yourself forever,” Liam grumbled on answer.

I chuckled. “Actually, I was hoping you would stop by Pino’s and pick up a couple pies.”

“Oh, hey man. Yeah, sure. The usual?”

“Yeah, and—” I took the phone away from my mouth and asked, “What do you like on pizza?”

“Pepperoni, mushroom, and pineapple.”

“What?” I asked, genuinely surprised, and thought she was pulling my leg. What are the fucking odds that we’d have the same favorite pizza? Most people made fun of my beloved combination.

Laughter rang through the phone. “Didn’t know she was as sick as you, eh? Yes, you both have the same disgusting taste in food. I’m assuming since you’re asking that you still haven’t gone to the grocery store for—er, what do you call it? —the messages.”

“Give me a break, I just got home today. Been a little too busy to worry about that.” I grinned, playing with a strand of her hair as I watched her blush at my insinuation. She smacked me loud enough for Liam to hear and understand.

“Piece of advice—she doesn’t mind the occasional pizza, but she’s not as crazy about carryout as you are, my friend.”

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“I’ll send Chase to get the ‘messages,’” he said in an obnoxiously exaggerated, terrible attempt at an Irish accent, “to pick up some Cokes and chips, I mean, minerals and crisps, and a veggie tray, but you owe us big for that one. Trust me on this.”

I laughed, “I trust you. See you in about an hour?”

“Yeah, but do us all a favor and get dressed and don’t try and fool around with my sister anymore. The girls are on their way over already.”

“Fine, I’m getting dressed.”

“Liam!” Elise screeched in horror.

“Oh gross!” I heard Chase yelling in the background.

I laughed as I hung up the phone.

“What?” I asked her innocently, stealing a kiss before heeding my friend’s warning and dressing quickly.

It took me a moment to realize that the clothes she had thrown at me were not the ones I had worn earlier. As I pulled the navy-blue and dark-green, striped polo over my head, I knew she had to have dug around in my closet choosing the outfit, and I knew from the way she dressed and carried herself, that appearances were important to Elise. My mate had just groomed me. I didn’t know if she was even aware of it, but to me it was just another sign of acceptance. I was going to get harassed for the perma-grin glued to my face, but I really didn’t care either.

I had barely pulled on my pants when there was a knock at the door. Sending up a silent thanks to Liam for the

warning, I went to answer it. I knew my mate would not have been pleased if they had arrived and I was still getting dressed.

No surprise, Lily and Kelsey were at my front door. As I turned around and welcomed them in, I saw Elise casually sitting on the chaise with her bare feet tucked up under her. It caught my breath seeing her like that. She just looked comfortable and right at home, in my home, and my heart did all sorts of crazy dancing that I'm sure the guys would give me shit for if they knew.

Lily was already far too comfortable at my place, and it had been Kelsey's before I had moved in, so awkwardly, I was the odd one out suddenly, in my own home. Staying out of the way, I let the girls catch up and talk, excusing myself to the kitchen. Fortunately it wasn't long before the boys arrived.

"Jesus Christ, I didn't think you lads would ever get here."

The girls were giggling and talking in hushed tones in the living room.

"Dude, this sucks. Having Lily hang around is bad enough, but Kelsey and Elise together are like estrogen overload," Chase complained.

I laughed. Kyle punched him. Liam just rolled his eyes.

"Can we convert the basement to a man cave if E's gonna be hanging out around here much?"

"I heard that," she yelled from the next room.

I laughed. "Smooth. I'll talk to her and see."

"Oh my God, you're whipped already?" Chase exclaimed loudly enough to make those in the other room laugh. I may have blushed a little, but I didn't care. Whatever Elise wanted, she'd have. If she wanted to move in with me today, I'd say, "Hell, yeah!" But I knew it was going to have to be all on her terms and I was going to have to be okay with that. Whipped? Maybe, but that was fine by me!

The girls joined us in the kitchen for pizza. I still couldn't get over the fact Elise liked pepperoni, mushroom, and pineapple, too. I grinned at her and she smacked me.

"Don't laugh at my pizza," she warned. "You didn't have to get a large though, since I'll only eat a slice or two."

"Good, then there will be plenty left for me," I said, reaching around her to grab a slice. She glared at me. "What?"

"E, it really is his favorite too," Liam intervened. "He practically lives off the stuff."

"Really?" she asked, sounding amazed.

"Yeah, no idea why these fecking losers find it odd. Best damn pizza ever."

The rest of the evening remained light and casual fun. I think all of us needed that. Lily and Kelsey were quite protective of my girl, but overall it was just another day with the Westins, only better because my mate was there, too.

They stayed until late in the evening. It wasn't uncommon for the boys to just crash over. Not Kyle, of course, but Chase and Liam regularly stayed over. I wasn't sure what was going to happen this time.

Kyle and Kelsey were the first to leave. Liam was in training to take over his position as CEO of the Westin Foundation, but Kyle was still working full-time and handling all Pack business as the new Alpha. Kelsey was his administrative assistant and worked just as long and hard. She would submit to her duties as Pack Mother once Liam was up and running and had chosen her replacement. In the meantime, she and Kyle were both extremely busy.

"I'm heading out, too. That woman is a slave driver," Liam joked, pointing behind Kelsey's back.

"I heard that," she warned on her way out the door.

Chase looked at me, then at Elise who hadn't made a motion to move at all, then back at me. "I guess I'm out too, since I rode over with Liam."

Liam raised an eyebrow at me, but didn't question it. I hadn't told Chase he couldn't stay. He must have felt the shift in dynamics with Elise's presence. I stood and began to tidy up the mess they had left behind.

"I'll get that in a little bit, Patrick. Don't worry about it."

I smiled at my mate. Her desire to take care of me and my home was just another step in the right direction towards acceptance and it made me enormously happy.

"I've got it. Lily's been holding back all night, but I can tell she's dying to talk to you."

"Well I'm not exactly going to quiz her about you, with you standing right there," Lily grumbled.

I always appreciated Lily Westin's unfiltered honesty.

"Just let me straighten up, and I'll go for a run."

Elise pouted. "I could use a run, too."

"Later," Lily told her. "Loverboy, get out and go for your run. We'll take care of clean up, and then I don't have to feel bad about talking about you. So, shoo."

I laughed, but looked at Elise honestly. "You sure?"

"Yeah, she's like a dog with a bone sometimes. She won't stop till she's satisfied. Maybe we could go for a run later?" She sounded hopeful and little shy asking as she nibbled her bottom lip.

I desperately wanted to be the one sucking on that lip, but knew that line of thought was not going to get Lily out of my house anytime soon. "I won't be long, so grill her quickly."

Elise turned red in the face and Lily hooted with laughter as I left them to talk, stripped on my back porch, and ran. The wind in my face from the crisp night air was exactly what I needed to clear my head. It had been a long, hard, emotional day. I'd gone from the lowest point in my life to the greatest moments of my life all within the last twenty-four hours. I didn't want to feel or think anymore, so I gave fully into my wolf and just ran.

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Elise

Chapter 19

Lily started grilling me the moment the door closed behind Patrick. It had been a fun evening. He really was close to my siblings and at times I felt more like the outsider than he did amongst my own family.

You brought that on yourself being a coward, I internally scolded myself. While I was busy ignoring the issue and hiding from him. Patrick had begun making friends and settling into my pack, my family.

“Come on, spill it. I can smell that you haven’t closed the deal, but you seem closer, happier, than you did last night, and definitely this morning. What was that all about anyway?”

“I made the mistake of telling Kyle I didn’t want to take Patrick as a mate, and I don’t. At least, I think I don’t. I don’t right now. I can’t. Maybe if Kelsey has a son I’ll think differently, but Lil, I’m so scared of losing him.”

“You mean in the challenges?”

I nodded.

“You realize how stupid that sounds, right? With everything you’ve been through, you’re worried about that? Girl, you were kidnapped. Just two days ago, you were being held captive and we didn’t know where you were or if we’d ever see you again, and you worry about the fucking challenges?”

She was very clearly upset, but her use of the word “fucking” only showcased how close and influential Patrick really was in my family, and it sent me into hysterical giggles.

“This is not funny, E. You don’t know how terrified we all were, and that man out there, he brought you back to us. He didn’t even wait for reinforcements. He’s not a tracker, but he found you. I don’t understand why you would put him off after all you’ve been through.”

“Wait,” I asked, sobering. “Are you lecturing about my responsibility to him? Are you seriously making a claim that I should already have completed the mating bond?”

“Yes,” Lily said, exasperated and throwing her hands in the air. “That is one fine wolf you have. What on earth are you waiting for? If—no, when—I find my one true mate, you better stand back, because nothing will stop me from being with him. Nothing.”

I laughed. Oh, was she going to be in for a rude awakening! “You know, when you meet your one true mate, Lil, I’m going to remind you of this conversation and watch you eat your words. It’s just not what you think. On the one hand, Patrick is right here, and he’s perfect. He’s even trying really hard to be understanding and give me time to work stuff out. On the other hand, I feel like, I dunno. Like I thought I would fall in love and it would be magical.”

“And it’s not?”

“How do I know?”

She looked at me like I was insane.

“You don’t understand it, Lil. How do I know it’s love and me wanting him, and not just some destiny making it happen?”

She still looked at me like I had two heads, but she spoke this time. “I really wish Kelsey were here. She’d have more insight than I do, but E, he is your destiny! Why are you fighting it?”

“I don’t know.”

“When Kyle banished him this morning, you went crazy. I mean ca-raze-zee. You were like a rabid beast going off on him.”

I laughed at her description and threw a pillow off the couch at her head. "I was not."

"Yes, you were. You didn't even realize it. Kyle was terrified of you. We all were. Kelsey said there's no way you don't have at least a little alpha in you, too."

I rolled my eyes. Lily was famous for her exaggerations.

"Okay, I won't grill you too hard about it today, but tomorrow, I'm declaring girls' night! We'll kick Kyle out and take over Kelsey's place. No arguments. It's happening." She gave me a stern look. "I know it's been a long day and a tough week for you, but I'm really glad you're home safe and sound." She hugged me. "You really had us worried. It's nice to see a glimpse of my sister back."

I was saddened that I had put so much stress on my family. I loved them and had been so selfish, trying to deal with all these crazy emotions on my own. "Love you, Lil!"

She gave me a sheepish grin and I knew I wasn't going to be off the hook that easy. "So the big question next. Are you coming back to the house, or you planning to spend the night here?"

I blushed. I couldn't help it. It was a question I'd been asking myself all evening. "I don't know. I don't know what to do," I blurted out.

"You are not a virgin. I already know you gave that away to Bobby Mason in high school. So, you definitely know what to do."

"Lily! That's not what I'm talking about."

"Oh, so you have at least made it that far already, just not ready for that final bite?" She wagged her eyebrows up and down in a comical way. My sister was hard to take seriously sometimes.

"It happened once, today," I confessed.

"And ..."

“And I’m not talking about it. I think he’d like me to stay, and let’s face it, I’ve put the man through hell. He’s a really good guy, Lil. He doesn’t deserve all this. I don’t want to hurt him. I’m just . . . scared.”

“Well stop! Our daddy didn’t raise any kittens. You are a wolf shifter, Elise, and not just that, but the eldest daughter of one of the strongest Alphas in shifter history. You can overcome any fear, if it’s worth fighting for. Is he worth fighting for? Do you love him?”

I shrugged. That was the other part of it. I had very strong feelings for Patrick O’Connell, but I didn’t know what this kind of love was supposed to feel like. Before I could answer her and explain, I heard Patrick’s heavy footsteps on the back porch.

He peeked his head in. “Is it safe to come in again?”

I giggled nervously. *What was I going to do now? Should I go home? Should I stay?* There was still so much unresolved between us, but I didn’t think I could handle dealing with any more tonight.

“All clear,” Lily yelled back to a relieved Patrick.

“I’m heading home. See you guys tomorrow. Oh and Patrick?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve declared girls’ night tomorrow night, and I’m stealing our girl. No getting her out of it.”

“Wouldn’t dare.” He gave a cute boyish grin that made my heart flip. *Was this love? Did I love him? Could I?*

Before I knew for sure what she was doing, Lily hugged me and made a quick exit. Suddenly, there I was. No car, and my sister had just insinuated I was staying.

“I’m going to take a shower after that run.” He stopped at the door and seemed to hesitate. “You, uh, want to join me?”

“Hmm, I guess that depends,” I told him. “Are you taking a cold shower?”

“Hmm, I guess that depends,” he said, mimicking me. “Are you staying the night?”

There it was out in the open and all I could do was laugh.

“Would that be okay with you?”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

I smiled and followed him towards the shower.

We didn't exactly get much sleep that night, or the next. I think we'd christened most of the house and my body was stiff and sore from it. Deciding against the big pack festivities for New Year's Eve, we pushed out girls' night back to that evening. So much had happened that I wasn't up for any more excitement. The girls had agreed and Kyle was going to be tied up anyway. Sometimes things got a little too crazy and out of control on New Year's Eve, so he would be monitoring additional security runs and keeping an eye on things around San Marco.

I'm not sure my eyes had fully closed when the alarm on my phone sounded off at the usual four a.m. Groaning, I turned it off and snuggled back in next to the hard, firm body that I had gotten to know very intimately over the last forty-eight hours. First there had been the shower, then he'd taken me to bed ... twice. A late night run to the kitchen for cold pizza when we both were ravenous may have led to christening the kitchen table. And knowing my baby brother practically lived on that couch? Yeah, I'm not sure I'd ever be able to look him in the eye without blushing, knowing what we did last night on the couch he sleeps on more than his own bed. I sighed contentedly, and happily drifted back to sleep.

My phone rang and I checked the time. Nine o'clock. I groaned. When was the last time I had overslept? Not all that surprising given the weekend's activities, but it wasn't like me, or at least not like the recent me.

“Hey, Liam.”

“You okay, sis?” Liam asked as I gave a grumbly okay. “Well, it's after nine and I'm a little spoiled when I need

something from HR, because my VP is always in by five a.m. Kelsey has a check-up with Doc this morning, so I really wanted to look over those two applicants you mentioned while they aren't micromanaging my life to death."

I laughed despite it all. "You realize I took two weeks leave, right? And it's New Year's Eve?"

"Oh come on, you aren't hiding from him anymore, and I need to get this done. Even if just for a few hours, you can come in, right?"

"Yeah, fine, okay. Let me get up and I'll head on in."

"Pat keep you up late last night? Man, was Chase butt-hurt when he had the grand epiphany that he might not have his escape couch to hide from Dad anymore."

My face felt like it was on fire thinking of what Patrick and I had done on that couch just a few hours earlier.

"What the hell did he say to you? Your face is some new shade of reddish purple I've never seen before," said a deep, sexy voice next to me. I could tell he found it funny as I could feel the rumble of laughter, shaking at my back, as he tried to contain it.

"Ew! Elise. Tell me you didn't do it on Chase's favorite couch?" Liam was practically yelling into the phone. I said a quick prayer that he was in Kyle's office with the door closed at least, so that the entire office hadn't just heard that. Patrick definitely heard it, though, and started laughing as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me flush against him, spooning me from behind. I elbowed him in the gut, but he just kissed the top of my head.

"Top of the day to ya, Liam," he said in a rich accent more reminiscent of the leprechaun on the Lucky Charms commercials than him, and I assumed it was some sort of inside joke with them, 'cause Liam whooped with laughter.

"I don't even want to know what that was all about." I dared a look back over my shoulder to find a very happy mate. He thoroughly kissed me good morning.

“Um, guys, I can hear that. Gross! Release my sister and send her back to work already.”

“Fine, she’ll be there within the hour,” Patrick assured him.

“Half hour ... get your ass in here in the next half hour, Elise ...” His voice trailed off in protest as Patrick reached over and ended the call.

“I really have to go.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to.”

“I can come back tonight,” I offered.

“Ladies’ night. I’m not crossing Lily on that. You’re going.”

“But I’d rather spend time with you,” I blurted out, and was shocked to realize it was true. I loved my girls, and I loved ladies’ night, but I wanted to be with Patrick. I really, truly didn’t want to be anywhere else. It made me hesitate and my head whirl at the realization. Once I let my guard down and stopped fighting it, being with Patrick was as easy as breathing. There was nothing awkward or uncomfortable about it. I had slept better in his arms than I could ever remember sleeping in my life, and the thought of coming home to him tonight made me ... happy. Knowing it equally terrified me.

“You are welcome to come back after ladies’ night.” He got up from the bed as I protested the cool air that replaced his warmth surrounding me. He opened his dresser drawer and pulled out something, then walked over and handed me a key. I knew it was a key to his house. I knew I shouldn’t accept it. So much had changed in the last few days that I was overwhelmed. “I’m not going to ask you to move in here, though you are certainly welcome whenever you are ready, but I want you to have this and know you can come and go as you please. I will happily take whatever time I get with you. I also want you to understand that for me, there will never be anyone else, Elise. What’s mine is yours. I know I don’t have much to offer you yet, but I will never stop proving I’m worthy.”

I wanted to protest that he had nothing to prove, but I was too surprised by the tears that sprung up in my eyes, and found myself nodding. At what, I didn't even know. I took the key he offered with a deep, cleansing breath.

“There's always wine at ladies' night. Even with Kelsey not partaking, that just means more for me and Lily.”

“Are you saying I'm going to be a drunk booty call tonight? You're going to get ossified and take advantage of me?”

The grin on his face told me he was just teasing, but the potential was definitely there.

Liam was waiting in my office when I arrived at work. Several people had stopped me and said hello and tried to catch up. I realized just how out of touch I'd been and vowed to fix it. No more hiding.

“Morning, sunshine. Nice of you to join us before lunch.” He was turning circles in my chair like we did in Dad's when we were kids.

I pulled out the files he was waiting on and dropped them on my desk, taking the chair across from him instead of fighting for my seat.

“Christine? You think Christine Canine would be a good assistant for me? After everything?”

“Yeah, I do.” Of course I knew what he was talking about. Christine had been a huge pain to Kelsey. She had challenged her and shouldn't be alive today. Only thanks to Kelsey's mercy and grace was she still breathing. “Give her a chance, Liam. The challenges, they changed her ... some. Okay, she can still be a little annoying. She's called every day checking to see if you've made a decision yet, even while I was away. I just ignored them, but every day her name flashes across my phone.”

“So I'm supposed to take her, just so she'll stop bugging you?”

I snorted. That would be okay with me, actually, but I didn't say that. “Of course not, just look over her credentials.

Both of them. If neither is of interest, I'll start my search back up. You should consider bringing them both in for a trial though, and really, don't discount Christine just because of who she is and what she's done."

"Okay, thanks for the advice. I can see why you made VP. You're actually good at this stuff."

Liam left a short while later and I got busy with work, though the quiet and solitude wasn't as comforting as it once had been and I found myself wandering the building, catching up with others, throughout the afternoon.

I didn't even have time to go home to change before Kelsey and Lily descended.

"You ready?"

"Can't I run home and take a shower and change first?"

"No," they said in unison.

"Fine, what's the plan?"

"Kyle's going out with the boys. I think they're heading over to your new place, afterward hitting the Crate. They'll be distracted and probably called away to handle some chaos or another tonight anyway. You know how crazy New Year's Eve can get," Kelsey informed.

"By 'my new place'—I made little air quotes with my fingers—"I assume you mean Patrick's?" They both nodded and I rolled my eyes, not bothering to correct it. "And you guys are okay with missing the festivities tonight? I mean, it is New Year's. Parties everywhere, even in the streets. It's kind of a big night to just curl up with some wine and girl talk."

"I'm not much into those parties. I have stayed home every New Year's since I got here. Not interested. Especially not interested when I can't drink, and starting to feel like I waddle when I walk."

"I can party anytime. This is more important, and it'll be fun!"

They wouldn't even let me drive myself, insisting I leave my car at the office. It hit me again just how much I had let them down by my cowardice. The house smelled of delicious food when we opened the door. It made my mouth water.

Kelsey ran to the oven and, looking like Ms. Suzy Homemaker, she carefully removed a casserole. It looked picture perfect and smelled divine.

"Some sort of Mexican casserole. Don't worry, Kyle made it, I just heated it through. Promise!"

We all laughed. Kelsey was a terrible cook, but Kyle was the best. I was suddenly starving and couldn't wait to dig in. The wine came out and we settled down at the table. Before Lily could start, I took lead on the conversation.

"Kels, Liam said you had a doctor's appointment this morning. How'd it go?"

She caught us up on all things baby. She looked so happy talking about it and rubbing her ever-growing stomach.

"Mostly I'm just grateful to eat again. Morning sickness was more like all day sickness and it was the worst."

We finished eating and made our way to the living room with the bottle of wine.

"Have you started thinking about baby names yet?"

"What do you think of Edward?" Kelsey asked.

"Who's Edward? Do I know him?" Lily asked her, coming in from the kitchen mid conversation.

"No, Lil, for the baby. If it's a boy. What do you think of the name Edward?"

"No, just no! You are not naming my nephew after some sparkly vampire."

Kelsey sighed. "Jacob?" she asked hopefully.

"No. No Jacob, Sam, Seth, Embry or Quill." I chimed in. "What is your hang-up with that series anyway?"

Kelsey shrugged. "I guess it was just nice watching a show of monsters living among humans, when ..." Her voice trailed off as my heart broke again for the girl so alone in the world that she had once been. Shaking her head to clear the bad memories, Kelsey grinned. "Remus?"

"No."

"Klaus?"

"No!" I said louder, trying not to laugh.

"Roland? Peter? Decebel? Costin? Fenrir?"

"Stop," I said, laughing. "Please, no more fictional werewolf names. Why not just call him Junior? Kyle Alexander Westin, Jr."

"You could call him Alex for short," Lily offered, "or better yet, Zander?"

"Zander. I like it, but no Junior."

"Okay then," Lily said. "How about Alexander Cole? Has a nice ring to it, right?" my sister asked as she grinned evilly and wagged her eyebrows up and down. It was too much, and Kelsey started full belly laughing.

"Dang it, Lil, you can't do that to me," Kelsey said, grabbing her belly with both hands and shuffling to the bathroom while clearly gripping her thighs tight.

She returned a few minutes later. "My bladder is like the size of a tic-tac right now. One day soon I know I'm gonna pee myself."

Lily shrugged. "Fortunately for you, wolf pee has lots of great properties, so if that happens just shrug and say, 'Sorry, my maternal instincts to protect this child just kicked in and I just had to mark this seat in warning.'"

I just looked in shock at the evil genius that was my sister and we all collapsed into hysterical laughter.

Patrick

Chapter 20

It was after eleven. The guys had been over for a while and we'd had a good time, but when they headed off to the Crate, I didn't join them. There had already been a few reports of fights breaking out on Main Street and one wolf got so ossified he was trying to mark every building in San Marco. I just wasn't up for dealing with it all.

I was hoping Elise would come home, but also wished she'd have called to let me know she wasn't coming. Was that really too much to ask? I knew it was still early, especially on a holiday night, but I couldn't help but worry. She had been kidnapped, for crying out loud. I think I had cause for irrational worry.

I debated going for a run, even knowing I'd run right over to Kyle's to see if she was still there. I couldn't help it. I had to know. I headed for the backyard and stripped off my shirt on the back porch. I let the cold winter air wash over me, causing goosebumps to prick my skin. It felt like snow was in the air, and I loved that white stuff. Winter was my favorite time of year, and since my first night ever holding my mate had been in the middle of a massive snowstorm, it was my new favorite thing ever. I hoped we'd get one here soon with enough snow that Elise and I would be snowed in for several days. Undisturbed.

As I reached for the button of jeans, there was movement in the woods that caught my attention. My wolf tensed, on high alert. I sniffed the air, curious at the familiar scent greeting me. My eyes scanned the forest line. It was dark, only a sliver of a crescent moon, mostly obscured by

clouds. A dark object was exiting the cover of the trees and heading to me.

Just as I was about to change, the strangest howl I ever heard pierced through the night.

“Aroooooo! Arooo! Aroo!”

It sounded more human than wolf, yet I was quite sure the object now stumbling across the yard was wolf. Most definitely a shifter. I had seen human-like expressions from a shifter in wolf form, but human-like sounds? I had never heard of such a thing.

Stumbling in a crisscross pattern, I watched the dark beast. When the wind shifted and I clearly caught the scent of my mate, my wolf settled. I didn't bother to shift. I just waited with amusement as she walked first the right, then to the left, then back to the right. I thought maybe something was seriously wrong with her, but there was an unusual sweetness mixed with her scent that I couldn't quite place.

I walked out to meet her. “Love, are you okay?”

She quirked her head to the left and looked at me, a slow smile of sorts spread across her face causing a fierce, strange, toothy smirk on her wolf. She leaned and her wolf brushed against me. I heard a small growl, or something like it, coming from her as she pressed further into me. I reached down and felt her soft fur. She nuzzled into my hand and licked it. That was only the start; it was like she was determined to mark me with her scent as she rubbed up against my legs. The soft fur covering her head tickled against my exposed abs.

“Stop that,” I scolded, trying to hold back my amusement.

When she threw her head back and howled, I got a full dose of the scent that was mixed with my mate's. It was alcohol. Elise was ossified. Very drunk, if I wasn't mistaken.

“Come on. Let's get out of the cold. Can you change back?” For a minute I was concerned she couldn't, she was so

intoxicated. The smell of alcohol was strong now that she was close.

She struggled in her attempt to follow me back to the house. I picked her up, amazed at how much heavier she was in wolf form. As we reached the porch, a shiver racked her body and suddenly I had a very naked Elise Westin in my arms. She hiccupped and giggled.

“Sorry, I’m okay. I didn’t want to stay at Kelsey and Kyle’s and they wouldn’t give me my keys to drive home, so I ran.” She was slurring her words and had a glazed look in her eyes as she spoke.

I snuggled her close to me and let my body warm hers in the cold night air. I didn’t set her down, fearing she may collapse, until we reached the bedroom. I carefully laid her on my bed. She made a strange sound and posed in what I thought was meant to be a sexy position, but she was so trashed it was more comical than sexy. She was definitely going to face the fears in the morning.

I didn’t bother to try and dress her. It wasn’t like she had any clothes at my place yet anyway. I just stripped and joined her in bed. Her arms and legs wrapped around me and she started kissing my chest and working her way up, along my collar, and she stopped right where her mark should be. She kissed the spot and licked it. It felt like a bolt of lightning shot through me and I had to remind myself she was drunk and I would not take advantage of it, but my body responded despite my resolve. I was only human, after all—or at least mostly, in this state.

“All I have to do is bite,” she said, kissing my neck again.

My breath hitched. I felt her canines press into my skin, just slightly. I held my breath as blood rushed to my head. A part of me rejoiced. It was finally going to happen and my mate was making the first bite. The other part of me screamed NO! I couldn’t let her make such an important decision ossified. It wasn’t right. Yeah, I wanted it, but I knew she was still uncertain.

“Love,” I said, my voice barely recognizable as I grasped for the slightest bit of clarity. My wolf instincts were on high alert and pressing me to complete the bond. My head was spinning. “Elise, stop.” I tried gently at first, then I had to physically pick her up and dump her back on the bed as I leapt from it and began pacing, breathing heavily and trying to keep control. My wolf was furious, and Elise was wide-eyed in shock, followed immediately by sadness and regret as she began crying.

“Shit! Love, don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” I returned to the bed and held her in my arms. Her tears ran down my chest and I felt like a fucking tool. *Had I made the right decision?* I didn’t know.

“You-you don’t want me?” Elise sobbed out.

“Of course I want you. I just want you to be sure.”

“I’m sure. I’m ready.”

“You’re ossified. You aren’t thinking straight.”

“I’m not ossy-whatever you said.”

I chuckled. “You’re drunk, love. We aren’t completing our bond while you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk. I’m not.”

I knew better than to argue with a drunk, so I just held her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. I never wanted to hurt you, you know. Please tell me you understand. That I didn’t mean to hurt you, and I didn’t mean to get kidnapped. It was stupid. I am stupid.”

She was rambling and I didn’t like hearing her putting herself down.

“Hey, hey, calm down. I’m fine, and we’re going to be fine too. I promise.” I wasn’t sure if I was trying to convince her or me.

I stroked her hair and her sobbing slowed to a stop. Her breasts rose and fell pressed up against my chest. I dared a

glance down. Her face was glistening from the tears streaking down her cheek. Her eyes were closed and her breathing began to level. I stared unabashedly down at my beautiful mate. The next thing I knew, her mouth fell open and she let out the loudest, most unladylike snore I'd ever heard. I stifled a laugh as I transitioned her down to the bed and snuggled in next to her, wondering just what had happened at ladies' night.

Kissing the top of her head, I whispered, "Happy New Year's."

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Elise

Chapter 21

My head was pounding and my mouth was dry. I ran my tongue across the roof of my mouth, noting the cotton-like texture. For a moment I didn't know where I was. My eyes were heavy and didn't want to open. A stray piece of hair was plastered to my face and tickling my nose. I reached for it to no avail. My hands were trapped.

Suddenly I realized I was back in the cabin, that sterile room, handcuffed to the bed. My heart was racing and the pressure was pounding in my ears. I jerked my body, trying to free my hands, and a hoarse scream erupted from me. I wouldn't let them drug me again.

Large hands wrapped around me and I jerked and fought back.

“Elise! Elise! Calm down, it's okay. You're safe. Nothing's going to hurt you.”

I calmed instantly at his voice. Patrick. My mate. I panted as his hands wrapped around mine and pulled them to his lips. He kissed them as they trembled.

“Shhh, it's okay. It's okay.”

Slowly I opened my eyes. “Patrick?” I asked, still feeling dazed and confused and gasping for air against the panic that had set in. “I thought ... I thought I was back there. I couldn't move my arms.”

“Sorry,” he said, sounding sincere. “Guess I rolled over in my sleep and pinned you beneath me.”

His deep morning voice sent unexpected chills of excitement through me. All of my senses were heightened, in part from the fear and panic that had gripped me, and another part from the strong male presence still pressed firmly against me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

Talk about it? Talk about what? How badly I wanted him in that moment? How hard it was to fight the mating call that reached out to me in constant torment, even when he wasn’t right there with me? Or was he asking about the kidnapping and how helpless and weak it had made me feel?

My elevated awareness of him caused an arousal in me that was borderline painful. I needed my mate. My fears of the kidnapping were at the surface, too. He protected me. He saved me. I knew that perhaps there was still too much alcohol in my system from the night before. Lily and I had polished off five bottles and I think I had taken the brunt of that while pouring my heart out to the girls. The overall consensus was that I was a chicken and needed to stop fighting my destiny. Patrick O’Connell was mine.

I had come to his place the night before to make things right, to complete our mating bond once and for all, but he had rejected me. I couldn’t remember a lot from the previous night, but the sting of his rejection still radiated with me.

“You rejected me,” I said sadly.

“What?”

“Last night,” I said, trying to sit up, though my head was throbbing so much it hurt to do so. “Last night, I tried to complete the mating bond, and you rejected me.”

He sighed and rubbed his face and the day old growth there. “You remember that? You were so gone, I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I remember. You don’t want me as a mate, so what are we doing here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I want you as a mate, love. I just—” He paused like he was trying to determine how best to word his next statement. “I just needed to be sure it’s what you truly want. You weren’t in a condition to make that decision last night. You weren’t. I had to carry you home. Even in wolf form you couldn’t walk a straight line had your life depended on it. You’ve been struggling with the thought of taking me as a mate. It would have been selfish of me to take advantage of the situation last night. I couldn’t do that to you.”

He toyed with a piece of hair framing my face before tucking it behind me ear and cupping my cheek.

“Look at me, Elise.” There was authority in his voice that my wolf demanded I submit to, so I looked him in his sparkling, deep-blue eyes. “There is nothing I want more in this world than to be your mate, to bond myself and my life to you, but if you don’t feel the same, if you have any doubts at all, I can wait. Stopping you last night was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life, but I want you to come to me on your terms, and if you need that much in spirits to do it, then you aren’t ready, and that’s okay, love.”

I sighed. “I know I drank a lot last night. It was girls’ night. They helped me see things more clearly, but trying to explain it all to them took a lot of liquid courage.” My head throbbed and I rubbed my temples. “A lot. I’ve been such a chicken, and haven’t handled any of this well. Kyle and Kelsey had a really difficult time through the challenges. Hell, it led to a war. We’re at war, Patrick.” I shuddered. “Those wolves, they kidnapped me to get to Kyle. What do you think they will do to get into this pack? If I take you as a mate you’re as good as dead. My position in the pack is too high. It scares the shit out of me.” I had never voiced it so honestly aloud before, and it felt like a huge weight being lifted from my shoulders.

He smiled sweetly. “Have a little faith, love. God doesn’t match true mates wrong. I am strong enough to accept the risk and pack position you offer. I’ve trained my entire life to dominate the strongest alphas out there. I’ve got this, and

I'm honored to have the opportunity to prove that to you ... someday."

"I know that. I do, but it doesn't stop the fear." I laid back down beside him and nestled into his side, using his broad chest as a pillow. We had argued. We had made love. We had never truly just talked.

"I worry too, you know." He took a deep breath and I felt like talking about feelings wasn't really his thing, but I needed to hear how he felt. "When you went missing—" He struggled to continue and I stayed quiet to give him time. "I thought I'd lost you forever. You don't know how terrified I was. I had just found you and then you were just gone. My first job as your mate, and I hadn't been able to protect you. I didn't fight Kyle on his decision to banish me, because I couldn't disagree with him. My most important job should be to protect you, and I didn't."

"You couldn't, because I didn't let you. Not because you weren't capable, but because I was fighting you every step of the way. It's not fair to take that all on yourself."

He squeezed me tightly, but remained quiet as he battled his own demons. This was my fault. Not his.

"If I hadn't run away like a coward, if I had just had the guts to talk to you about how I was feeling, none of this would have happened and I'm sorry."

"Don't take that all on yourself. Neither one of us handled this well. You were the last thing I expected to find coming to San Marco, but once I had your scent, it was like I was obsessed. I was arrogant and hurt at the same time, and I should have just been grateful to have found you. I should have tried to understand what was going on with you. My obsession made you more of a conquest than anything and I was blinded to your needs. I'm sorry."

"We both need to just stop apologizing. I'm tired of being scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. I'm tired of hiding from the people I care about. Peggy, from work, she mated last month and I didn't even know. I've not just been hiding from you, but from my life and everyone in it, and I'm

just tired of it. I've missed just being me. Sometimes I wonder if I even remember who that is anymore, and I know you've never actually met her."

I chanced a look up at him. I was raw with honesty and didn't think I could handle it if he laughed, joked, or rejected me in this moment. I had never felt this vulnerable in all my life as I was lying there, literally naked, pouring my heart out in Patrick O'Connell's arms.

He smiled. "I haven't exactly been at my best either. Tell you what. Why don't we stop worrying about the bond and just get to know each other?"

"Huh?" I wasn't sure I had heard him right.

"Elise, we have the rest of our lives together. I want to know who you are, the real you. I want this to work, and I want to do it right. So, Elise-I don't even know your middle name-Westin, will you go on a date with me tonight? New year, new start."

It was my turn to smile up at him. "Cameron. Elise Cameron Westin, and yes, I would like that."

"It's a date then!"

My mind was suddenly swirling. A date! I had a date with my mate. That was quite unorthodox, but I loved the idea of spending time with him and getting to know him. I cared for Patrick O'Connell, but I couldn't say I loved him, not like Mom loved Dad or Kelsey loved Kyle, that forever kind of love. At least I didn't think so. Time to get to know him and maybe even actually fall in love with him seemed almost like too much to hope for.

The phone rang, reminding me that my headache was still there. I saw Kelsey's face smiling back at me and wanted to throw it across the room. "Hello?"

"Well, good morning to you, too. Wanted to check and see how you were feeling this morning. Lily already called in sick. Massive hangover. Figured you were even worse off, but Liam said Christine was coming in this afternoon for an interview and you're apparently expected to be here for it."

I groaned, “Yeah, okay. What time?”

“Two o’clock.”

I glanced at the time on my phone. It was already eleven. “I’ll get moving and head on in.” I grinned up at my handsome mate, and he quirked an eyebrow up at me. “And then, after that, want to play hooky and go shopping? I have a hot date tonight and could use a new outfit.”

Patrick laughed. “Uh-oh, what have I gotten myself into?”

I showered quickly, shooing Patrick away before he tried to join me. When I got out I was mortified to realize I didn’t have anything to wear. I mean literally nothing. I had no clothes at his house and I had arrived in my wolf form. Embarrassed, I wrapped in a towel and made my way out of the bathroom, finding him in the kitchen making peanut butter crackers and heating up a can of vegetable soup.

He shrugged and gave me an apologetic look. “It’s not as gross as it sounds, and the only thing I really have here. I promise to go to the shop for the messages today and stock up. Your brothers already warned me that pizza and carryout weren’t going to cut it if you were going to hang around here.”

My heart might have melted a little at his thoughtfulness. “I’m really happy you get along with my family so well. The other night with everyone here was nice, though I may have been a little jealous at times. I think you fit in better with them than I did.”

He frowned. “That’s not true, they love you.”

“Oh, I know. Enough that from what I heard, they practically lived here, and yet you had no idea I even existed.” I was joking, but a part of it really did hurt.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me, leaning his forehead against mine. “In hindsight, yes they did. I was the dense bloke who didn’t understand it. I thought ‘E’ was a nickname for Lily, and some of the things they said never quite fit what I knew of her. I know now they were actually talking about you, not her. Your siblings love you. I’ve never

seen such closeness in a family before. If anyone's jealous here, it's me. I didn't even know a family could be like yours, and it makes me envious because mine was nothing like that. Sure I'm close with my brothers in our own way, but it's just very different."

He sounded a little sad and I realized I really didn't know anything about his family, or his life. Chase had told me he didn't have anywhere to go after Kyle had tried to banish him. Had he really given up everything? For me?

The soup was bubbling and he moved away to turn it down. "Lunch is ready. Sorry it's not much."

We ate in companionable silence, each of us seemingly lost in our own thoughts. I watched him dip a peanut butter cracker into his soup, and I crinkled my nose in disgust. Side by side was one thing, but literally eating them together looked gross.

"Don't judge me until you try it."

"No way."

"Come on, one bite," he challenged as he dipped another cracker and held it out in offering. I leaned in and ate it from his hands, watching his eyes dilate in surprise.

I knew I had made an awful face and I had prepared to tell him just how gross it was, but much to my surprise, it was actually really good.

"Huh?"

"See," he grinned in triumph. "It's good, right?"

I shrugged. "It's not bad, I'll give you that much."

He moved the plate of peanut butter crackers closer to me and even though I tried to resist them, I couldn't. There was something about his odd combination that was quite addictive.

After lunch I remembered what I needed to ask him. "Um, Patrick?" I started awkwardly, blowing out a breath as I prepared for the ultimate walk of shame. "Can I, uh, borrow some clothes to get home in?"

He tried to hold in his smirk. My needing him, or at least his stuff, seemed to really please him. “What’s mine is yours. Take whatever you need.”

I rose and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.”

Going through his drawers I settled on a pair of his boxer briefs that made for great shorts—I could get used to these—and a T-shirt that was easily two sizes too big, but would have to do.

“My underwear?” he asked, sounding amused.

I shrugged, “Who knew!” With my hand on the doorknob, I turned and asked, “Um, so tonight?”

“Pick you up at six?”

I nodded happily. “See you at six.”

I ran home to change quickly, thankful no one was around to see my walk of shame. Once at work, I was bombarded with questions from Kelsey as I started to fill her in

“A date, huh?” She asked.

“Yeah, Patrick’s idea.”

She walked close and took a big sniff, frowning. “What happened to ‘Operation Go Get My Mate’ last night?”

“Didn’t happen. He said, ‘This isn’t happening when you’re so ossy-something.’ I can’t remember what the word is he uses for drunk! I was drunk and he wasn’t going to take advantage of that. Leave it to me to find a stubborn, considerate mate who refuses to let me take advantage of him with a little liquid courage.”

She laughed, but I cringed, remembering how obnoxious I had been and how I had announced to the girls that I was not backing down or changing my mind, that I was going straight to Patrick and completing the bond once and for all. It had been a stupid plan, and I was grateful he hadn’t let me go through with it. He was right. I would have felt terrible about it afterwards, just given the situation and being so wasted. Books and movies always played up how romantic

and perfect wedding nights were, and for shifters, that was equal to completing the mating bond. Sex usually played a big part of that, but it wasn't a must for the actual bonding either.

The bond between shifters was solidified when, either in turn or at the same time, they bit each other, marking their mate and sealing it through the exchange of blood. It was very sacred amongst shifters. The idea of it was a little gross. I mean, I had to bite him, and then suck his blood. Not much, just a little, but still, gross. I had heard that the sharing of your mate's blood created a sort of frenzy and a deep need from within, hence why bonding and sex seemed to go hand in hand. They said that a mated pair was never closer than in that first moment when they sealed their bond. The idea of it all both frightened and excited me.

Most true mates sealed their bond quickly once they found each other, like in the first few days, because the pull was so strong that it was like a drug that you couldn't resist. Kelsey had resisted it for two years! I had been fighting against it for several months already, but it wasn't until I had actually come face-to-face with Patrick that the need began to overwhelm me at times.

After our talk that morning, I had begun to already resign myself to my fate. No, to our fate. It was like suddenly coming to peace with it had settled me. I was ready to take the next step, but I also loved the idea of getting to know him better first. I was excited and a little nervous about our date.

Fortunately, the interview I had to sit in on with Christine and Liam helped occupy much of the afternoon. It was awkward at first. We had known Christine forever. She and Kyle had been inseparable for years. At one point everyone had thought they'd end up together, but when they came of age and discovered they were not true mates, she had turned into a complete bitch. Almost losing her life in her challenge against Kelsey had changed her. Kelsey didn't have to save her. No one would have thought less of her for it, but she hadn't been able to go through with it. She told us that Christine was pack and pack needed to be protected, not

killed. I think that was probably the moment everyone realized what an awesome Pack Mother she'd someday be.

No one thought that someday would come so quickly. My dad had been seriously injured in the first battle of the war with the Bulgarians, and pack power had transferred to Kyle in the process. Kelsey had saved Dad's life, but it was too late; in order to restore his Alpha rights, he'd have to fight Kyle to the death for the position, and that was never going to happen. I think Mom and Dad were both settling into retirement better than any of us suspected, and looked forward to having a grandchild soon to, no doubt, spoil rotten.

With the new pack responsibilities, Kyle was turning the Westin Foundation over to Liam. I'll admit, even I had my doubts on that decision, but he seemed confident in our younger brother's abilities. At only twenty-three years old, Liam still had a lot of growing up to do. Dad was going to be stepping in and helping out some, too. In that regard, I felt a little sorry for my brother. Neither Dad nor Kyle were fully ready to let go of the reigns, all the while putting the expectation on Liam that they were doing just that.

"So? What did you think of Chris?" I asked Liam after walking Christine out at the end of the interview. I thought it had gone well, personally.

"Better than I expected. You were right, E, she's not the same person she was before the challenges."

"We still have Merriweather to interview, and you can either make a decision then or I'll go back to the drawing board."

"No offense, but Merriweather is an old gossipy crow. That's the last thing I want up in my office."

"Liam, be nice." I laughed, even knowing he was telling the truth.

"Chris really surprised me. She took the interview seriously. She was polite and professional. She answered all my questions well. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I

think she's going to work out okay. Or at least, I'm willing to give her a chance."

He opened the door to his office as I went to leave, but I threw my arm around my brother and squeezed. "I'm glad! I think she'll be an excellent assistant for you, and the sooner we get Kelsey out of here the better. She's only going to get bigger and doesn't need the added stress of this place."

"Hey," Kelsey frowned, overhearing us from the doorway between their offices. "I love working here. Don't be too quick to throw me out. I take it the interview with Christine went well?"

We both nodded.

"Are you sure you'd be okay with training her for your replacement?" Liam asked, sounding sincerely concerned about it, given her and Christine's history.

She smiled. "Chris and I have no issues that I'm aware of. It will be fine, I promise."

He nodded. "Well, okay then."

"You still need to get through the Merriweather interview." He grimaced and I linked my arm through his, escorting him back to his office. "It's the right thing to do."

We said goodbye to Liam after that, as I explained I was kidnapping Kelsey for the rest of the afternoon. We first hit the Dress Code in town. It was a small, chic boutique that I loved, but they didn't quite have what I was looking for. Of course I really didn't know what I was looking for, but knew I'd know it when I found it. Kelsey suggested we head down the mountain to the city. Okay, so we called it a city, even though it was really just a big town. They had a mall, a Walmart, and several fast food joints. Compared to San Marco, it was a big city.

I checked the time and agreed. We'd have to be quick and efficient in our shopping and I said a little prayer I'd find what I wanted right away if we were to make it back before six.

I had a lot of fun shopping with Kelsey. I had been looking for a new little black dress that would wow Patrick, but when I slipped on the short red number that made Kels describe me as a “bombshell,” there was no doubt it was the one. I wasn’t sure where he was taking me or what we were doing, so I grabbed a pair of skinny jeans too, and planned to pick up my new blue cashmere sweater I’d gotten for Christmas that made my eyes pop, to change in to if I needed.

I couldn’t resist the black, leather, knee high boots I had seen in the window of a new shoe store on our way out. The best part was they looked fabulous with both the dress and the jeans. Kelsey nodded her approval and we made our way back up the mountain with little time to spare.

Once home I took time to shower and blow out my hair, brushing it till it shined. Lily helped me fix my hair, opting to leave it down. She carefully straightened it and offered suggestions as I meticulously applied my makeup. Dressing, I examined myself in the mirror, feeling particularly sexy and satisfied with the look, though a little nervous, too.

“Are you trying to kill the man?” Lily asked as I stepped out in my new red dress and boots. My black leather jacket completed the look to perfection. “Girl, he is going to have a heart attack when he sees you in that. You look gorgeous!”

I hugged my sister. “Thanks Lil, and thanks for doing my hair on such short notice, too.”

I packed my new outfit, along with the clothes I had borrowed from Patrick that morning, two additional casual outfits, two work outfits, a pair of pajamas, and underwear to leave over at his place. Maybe it was too soon, but I was not going to let what happened this morning ever happen again. In the bathroom I grabbed a spare deodorant and toothbrush to toss in. I could always leave it in the trunk of my car if I chickened out trying to claim my space in his home.

A low whistle sounded as I left my room and I smiled at my dad and did a little twirl, showing off my new dress.

“Since when do we go all out like this for family dinner night? You look beautiful, sweetie, but I’m afraid I’m a little underdressed.” He gave me a quick hug and my heart sunk.

“It’s Tuesday? It can’t be Tuesday.”

He frowned. “So we’re not dressing up for family dinner night, I take it?”

Mom joined us and eyeballed me suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

I slumped down onto the couch, quite unladylike, and pouted. “I didn’t even realize it was Tuesday family dinner night. I need to call Patrick and change our plans.”

“Wait, wait, wait. What’s this about Patrick and plans? Tell me.”

I took a deep breath. “Patrick asked me out, like on a date ... tonight.”

My mother sniffed the air around me and I snorted and pushed her away. “No, we haven’t mated. He knows I’m not ready and thought we should just take some time to get to know each other instead of stressing about it.”

She smiled back at me. “That is a smart man you have there, Elise. A good man. I like that Patrick O’Connell very much and clearly he knows what you need and is patient enough to wait for you. That’s not easy on a mating male.” She glared at me like she was trying to make it more impactful or something, like I didn’t already know that much about him. “Go. Enjoy your date, but I expect you both at family dinner next week. No excuses. Are we clear?”

I squealed a little in excitement and jumped up and hugged her. “Yes, we’ll be there. Thank you, Mom!”

Patrick

Chapter 22

A date? I had never been on a date in my entire life. What had I been thinking? Shifters didn't date, that was a human thing. What was the point? She was my mate. We had a lifetime together to get to know each other. Doing it now wouldn't change anything. I wasn't even sure what people did on a date. Da had never let us watch much TV. It was a waste of time that could be spent training.

I found myself wandering over to the Crate by mid-afternoon. Lunch hadn't been much, so I ordered a burger and chips, careful to remember to call them fries this time. Last time I had gotten a plate full of crisps with my burger. At least Jesse was working and didn't ask me to translate when I ordered a pint of Gat to go with it. I was slowly breaking them in.

"Jesse?" I finally found the courage to ask. "What the feck do people do on a date around here?"

He laughed heartily. "Elise making you take her on a date?" Clearly word of our mating had spread throughout the little town, as he said it as if it were common knowledge.

"Don't know what I was thinking. Jesus Christ, I've never even been on a date before, what the hell am I doing?"

Cole Anderson sat down beside me and patted me on the back. "We got you."

"Is this a casual date or a formal one?" A bloke I didn't know, but had seen at the bar before, asked.

"I dunno. It's just a date."

They all stared at me in disbelief.

“Okay, Elise Westin, right?” the guy asked.

I nodded my confirmation.

“She’ll want to dress up fancy,” Cole informed me.

“What?”

“She’s going to look nice. Probably wear a pretty dress for you. Means you gotta take her somewhere nice.” He looked around. “Definitely nicer than this place.”

“Hey,” Jesse chimed in. “Plenty of people find this place great for a date.”

“Not for a first date with your one true mate,” Cole pointed out, to which Jesse conceded.

“I know a place. Down the mountain, ’bout forty minutes. Italian. Nice place. Expensive.”

“I don’t care what it costs. If that’s what you think she’d like.”

“You talking about Roberto’s?” Cole asked.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Yeah, that’s a really nice place. You’ll need a suit and tie.”

“Bloody hell, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

They all laughed.

“If you’re going to do it, do it right,” Cole encouraged.

“Yeah, okay. Do I need a reservation?”

“Can’t hurt. I’ll call ‘em right now.”

Cole grabbed the phone from his hand as it started ringing through. “Bernie, why don’t you let me take care of that.”

The man named Bernie just waved him off, but didn’t make a move to take his phone back. “Pint of Gat for me and me lad,” Bernie told Jesse, smacking the bar.

I left the bar to run home and change in plenty of time to pick up Elise. I was actually nervous. I worried I was overdressed and cursed myself for listening to the guys at the bar. It was too late to turn back now. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door to the Westin house.

Jason Westin answered the door. Former alpha of the Westin Pack, but even more intimidating, Elise's father.

"Good evening sir," I said, offering my hand, which he took and shook firmly.

"Patrick," he said, looking me over. "You clean up nice. Come on in."

"Thanks," I said, breathing a sigh of relief that he didn't seem to think I was too overdressed. "Elise will be down in a minute."

I stood awkwardly in the foyer with no idea what to do or say. I was so far out of my comfort zone. It wasn't that I wasn't trained to deal in social settings, just that those situations were directed towards business. Dressing up and taking my mate to a pack dinner or holiday party, sure, that made sense. It had a purpose. Just because? It didn't make sense to me and I didn't like feeling out of place. I rocked back on my heels with my hands clasped behind my back, waiting and wondering where the hell Elise was and how long she was going to leave me down here to suffer.

"Dude," Chase said, coming from the living room and shaking my hand formally. "Sweet threads. Hey, Liam, get your ass in here and check this out."

Jason glared at him as Mary Westin entered with a scowl. "Language, Chase."

"Sorry, Mom."

"Whoa. Look at you!" Liam grabbed my hand and with his other arm gave me a bro hug. "Where you headed tonight?"

"Roberto's?" I didn't mean it to sound like a question, I just felt so damn unsure of myself, something else I wasn't

used to and didn't like. "Some of the guys down at the Crate recommended it."

"Roberto's is lovely, Patrick. I'm sure you'll both have a wonderful evening."

Her words weren't really meant to be encouraging, but they sure felt like it anyway.

A loud cat call whistle drew my eyes to the stairs. "Look at you!" I couldn't help but smile at the similarities between Lily and her twin. Hadn't Liam just said the same thing? She gave me a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "Misery almost over. She's grabbing her purse," Lily whispered and I gave her a look of gratitude.

As Elise descended the stairs, her mother clapped in joy. "Oh baby, you look beautiful." I noted that Jason Westin, although quiet, was a little misty-eyed. I followed his eyes to the staircase.

I knew my chin had dropped in surprise. Elise Westin was descending the stairs in a short red dress accentuated by knee high black boots and a black leather jacket. Her hair was left down, running straight down her back, and brushed to a shine. Her blue eyes sparkled.

"Wow!" It was the only word I could seem to formulate. Lust filled me, a sort of raw need for my gorgeous mate. From the way Lily's head whipped around, and the acknowledgment I saw in my mate's eyes, I knew the scent of my arousal was everywhere and I was too captivated to even try to hide it.

Elise was a beautiful woman, there was no denying it, but standing in front of me was a goddess. The sexiest, most stunning woman I'd ever laid eyes on, and she was my mate. I felt like the luckiest man alive.

"Okay, okay, break it up. You guys are acting like this is prom or something. It's just a date with my mate. So disperse."

Chase snickered, "That's the first time you openly admitted he's your mate. The rest of us had to find out from

Kyle.”

“Chase, leave your sister alone,” their mother scolded. “She would have told us in her own time.”

When Elise finally reached my side, her smell overwhelmed me. I wasn’t the only one not hiding their arousal. She gave me an apologetic smile.

“You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I took her arm and escorted her to the car as we said a quick goodbye to her family. Her parents stayed on the front porch waving, and I thought I heard her mother cry as we drove off. I only hoped it was happy tears. I had never stopped to consider how her family felt about me mating Elise. It wasn’t like we chose our mates, so I had never thought much of it, but their acceptance would mean everything to me.

“You really look beautiful,” I told her.

“Beautiful, huh?” she sighed. “Too bad, I was going for smoking hot.”

Her unexpected answer had me choking on a laugh. It definitely cut the nervous tension I was feeling. “I was being polite. You definitely didn’t miss the mark on that.”

Her smile was radiant and I was having a hard time keeping my eyes on the road and off her. It didn’t help that when she crossed her legs the hem of the short red dress rode up, showing off firm, muscled thighs that I wanted to explore with my hands. Thankful for an automatic car for once, I slid my hand over to her thigh and grinned when I heard her breath hitch.

“I’ve never been on a date,” I confessed. “I’ll admit, I didn’t know what to expect. The guys at the Crate gave me some pointers. I thought they were crazy when they told me to wear a suit. Seeing you in that dress”—I let my eyes wander appreciatively across my mate—“I’m glad I listened.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

I was beginning to relax some, though I didn't think the sexual tension between us would wane anytime soon. Certainly not as long as she was in that outfit. The thought of getting her out of the dress flashed through my mind and I was instantly hard. It was going to be a long night.

"Roberto's for dinner down in the valley, if that's okay? We have reservations at seven."

"I'm impressed, and I love Roberto's."

I had noticed as we left, she had grabbed an overnight bag off the porch. I didn't want to get my hopes up too much, but I really wanted to take her home with me tonight. "What's with the bag?" I asked, trying to sound casual about it.

From my peripheral vision I could see her blushing, but I didn't let the knowing grin spread across my face.

"This morning was awkward. Not happening again."

I frowned. Waking up with me was awkward? She still didn't want me? I'm sure she heard my heartbeat rise as panic set in. A small hand was placed on my leg that instantly calmed me. It was almost surreal, the affect her touch had on me.

"I didn't mean you and me awkward. I meant being stuck without any clothes and having to borrow yours, awkward." She giggled like she knew the discomfort she had just caused me. "It's just some extra clothes and a toothbrush. I'm not asking for you to clear a drawer or anything, just figured I'd keep it in my car, just in case."

I took her hand and pulled it up to kiss the back of it. "You can have the whole fucking dresser." Nothing made me happier than the thought of her moving in—even if it was just a couple of outfits and a toothbrush, it was a step in the right direction, as far as I was concerned.

The forty-five minute drive down the mountain turned out to be great. After the initial awkwardness subsided, we just talked. Nothing seemed off-limits. Little things, like finding out her favorite color was blue and Chase's constant use of the word "dude" annoyed her. We didn't touch on anything too

serious, but it was these little, everyday things that added up to truly knowing a person. By the time we reached the restaurant I felt like we were friends and I was suddenly excited for the night ahead of us.

“Trust me, just use valet. This place is always packed and parking is terrible.”

Taking her advice, I pulled to the front and tossed the guy my keys. I was pleasantly pleased she waited in the car for me to open the door for her. Offering her my hand, I pulled her to stand and gave her a quick kiss before escorting her into the restaurant.

Roberto’s wasn’t quite as fancy as Bernie and Cole had made it seem. Looking around, we were probably a little overdressed for the place. There seemed to be a great mix of semi-formal to casual. I definitely could have worn jeans, but I definitely looked the part next to my mate in a suit, so I was glad I had listened to the guys.

We were led to a table in the back corner. It was more secluded with a window and beautiful view of the mountains. I could see immediately why the others had recommended it. I wasn’t worried about the prices. My da was a paranoid man. He had taught us to save and secure our own futures at an early age. I rarely spent extra money on anything, so I had a sizable nest egg tucked away that would last me for several years if need be. I hated living off it, but I no longer had clan funds coming in. Da had pulled them the moment he learned I’d reneged on the challenge against Kyle.

“Order whatever you like,” I assured her. She went cheap with a Mediterranean salad. I ordered lasagna. “Are you sure that’s all you want?”

She sighed. “I know our kind tends to eat big, but it’s just never been me. I don’t know why. Mom harps on me all the time for it. Most are borderline carnivores, but I prefer vegetables. I eat a lot of salads. You’ll get used to it.”

I smiled reassuringly. “I don’t care what you eat, love. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t just order the cheapest thing on the menu for my benefit. Da may have cut me off, but

I am far from destitute. I have plenty of money to support us for several years. Eventually I'll have to find work, if we do not return to the Clan right away, but for now, we're more than fine."

She looked a little shocked and confused, then her face turned down into a frown. I didn't like the sadness that washed over her.

"I-I guess I never really thought about it. I mean I know traditionally a girl moves to her mate's pack. I've just never even considered leaving San Marco, my family, my job, my friends. It's, uh, going to take me a little time to adjust to that idea."

My heart was sad for her. Truth be told, I didn't want to leave either, but what choice did we have? "I love San Marco, your family, all of it, love, but my Clan is in Ireland. I had always imagined I would move and take over another pack. That was my Da's plan for all of us—that or die trying in the challenges."

"Don't say that," Elise said with fire in her eyes. "I don't want to hear that from you again."

"I know. I know it scares you," I said taking her hand, "and I'm not going to let that happen. I told you, I was trained to defeat the strongest alphas on Earth. They won't be challenging me. Anyone else will be a breeze to defeat. I'm not trying to sound cocky," I assured her as she started to protest, "I'm being honest with you. Your brother is strong, probably the strongest Alpha alive today, but I would have been equally matched against him in that challenge. It could have gone either way. I've prepared my entire life for that. You don't need to worry about me in the challenges."

"But I will, anyway." She smiled, a little wary still, but a little ornery, too.

"I really don't know what the future is going to bring for us, Elise. I'm not going to lie to you, right now I'm cut off from my Clan. I don't think that will hold forever. My da is ruthless, but he's not heartless. I have to believe he'll accept us back into the Clan when the time comes. He'll need a little

time though. With Kyle's permission, I'd like to look for work around here in the meantime. Liam's working now, and Chase will be heading back to school soon. I need to do something and feel like I'm providing in some way while I'm here. Would that be okay with you?"

She seemed surprised that I would ask, but as far as I was concerned, we were now equal partners in life and I didn't want to do anything against her wishes.

"Of course. I think that's a great idea." I could see the gears spinning in her head. She was formulating her own plan. "What if Kyle lets us stay here, indefinitely? Would you ever consider joining Westin Pack? Officially, I mean?"

Change packs? Change my allegiance? I didn't know if I could do that. I was Irish. Ultimately it was who I would always be. The only time in my entire life I had gone against my Clan, against my Alpha, was for her. Could I do that again? If Da ordered me back home, could I resist?

"I don't know." I squeezed her hand when her face fell. "But I'll consider it, okay?"

She brightened. "Thank you, that's more than I have a right to ask of you."

"We're in this together, E. It's not fully my decision. If you stubbornly refused to leave here, I'd have no choice but to stay"—her smile grew at the thought—"but I hope you'll consider what's best for both of us before going to such lengths."

She nodded in agreement. I had never once considered that my mate may not want to accept my pack. I couldn't stress about it, and wouldn't let it ruin our night. We would face many obstacles in our lifetime together. I just had to have faith that we'd work through them.

After we ordered dessert, Elise excused herself to go to the jacks. As I stood on her exit, my eyes scanned the room and I was surprised to see a familiar face in the crowd. The human, Dave, who had assisted in her rescue, was standing by the hostess, watching my mate.

I walked over to him and he smiled when he saw me, offering his hand he nodded towards Elise. “She’s looking much better than the last time our paths crossed.”

I didn’t feel any threat coming from him, and neither did my wolf, so I smiled back and nodded. “She’s doing well. I can’t thank you enough for all your help.”

“It was nothing.”

“What are you doing here, Dave? There’s not another threat you’re following, are you? Nothing I need to be aware of?”

He sighed. “We aren’t supposed to talk, Patrick, you know that. People could be watching.”

“If there’s a threat to my mate, I need to know about it, Dave.” I pleaded with him in a hushed voice.

“There’s been no activity that I’m aware of. I’m just doing a usual check of the area around San Marco.”

“You scare me with how much you know of us.”

“And if my people find out that you know of us, then we’re equally screwed.”

I nodded. Humans were watching the packs. I knew that now, but I didn’t know exactly who he worked for or if they were good guys or bad. I trusted Dave, but I didn’t know if I trust his kind.

I took out my wallet and slipped him a business card. It had all my contact information on it. “If you do hear of activity, especially with the Bulgarians, I’d appreciate an update. I know I already owe you big time for what you did.”

He hesitantly took the card and pocketed it. “Okay, I will.”

I had to trust he’d keep that promise. Before Elise returned I settled back down at our table. We finished a companionable dessert, joking and chiding each other with much lighter conversation than earlier. I paid the bill and we headed out.

“Patrick?” someone asked while we were waiting for the valet driver to bring the car around. I turned to find the blonde human walking our way. He really wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer.

I extended my hand in greeting, “Martin. What a surprise to see you here.” I eyed him suspiciously.

“It’s great to see you,” he said as if he was talking to a celebrity, and it dawned on me from my brief memories of him, that that was exactly what it was like. He had been overwhelmed and excited to meet a real, live shifter and that excitement clearly hadn’t worn off.

“You too. We’re just on our way out.” Elise cleared her throat and I knew I’d have to introduce her. “Martin, this is my m ...”—I caught myself—“my girlfriend, Elise.”

He shook her hand excitedly. “Elise, it’s an honor to meet you.”

Dave came to the rescue. ”Martin, our table’s ready.”

I nodded thanks to Dave, and when the car arrived, we made a quick exit.

The door had barely shut when Elise rounded on me.

“They were human, Patrick.”

I nodded.

“How do you know them?”

I had a terrible feeling in my gut that she wasn’t going to like it, but I couldn’t lie to my mate either.

Elise

Chapter 23

Humans! Patrick just introduced me to two humans! I was trying not to freak out. They didn't have foreign accents either, so I knew they weren't people he knew from home. When had he met them? How did he know them? I couldn't help the questions flying through my head as I fought to keep them from flying out my mouth.

Patrick sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not supposed to talk about how I know them, love."

"Patrick. How do you know them?"

"They are part of a secret human organization that monitors shifter activities."

"What?" My heart was racing at the thought. I couldn't have heard him right.

"We aren't supposed to know they exist, just like they aren't supposed to know we exist. You cannot tell anyone about them, Elise. It's not safe for any of us, and right now, we need them."

"What do you mean, we need them?"

"Martin's not the brightest of the bunch, and he was super excited to meet a real shifter when we met. He's still a little excitable, if you hadn't noticed. The other guy there, Dave, is a doctor of some sort. They were in the woods monitoring the Bulgarians that captured you when I came across them. They were already formulating a plan to rescue you. They knew there was unusual activity between the packs, but not much more. They suspected the Bulgati brothers were

trying to start a pack war when they kidnapped you. They already knew who you were, E. I gather they've been watching us all for a very long time. They have an "observation only" rule amongst their people. They could get in just as much trouble as me if anyone found out we worked together to rescue you."

Humans rescued me? I vaguely remembered Patrick mentioning something about humans, but they were actually involved with the rescue? They helped Patrick? He worked with them? It was too much to process.

He pulled the car over to the side of the road. "Hey, hey, hey," he said, taking my face in his hands and forcing me to look at him. "They aren't a threat to us. I promise you. They helped me save you. I owe them a lot, E. Do you understand?" I nodded. It wasn't that I was scared of humans, but the thought of them watching us, monitoring our activity, and just knowing our kind existed was overwhelming. "Dave will contact me if there is any unusual movement with the Bulgarians. It gives us an advantage since they are already tracking their movements. He's a good ally to have right now."

I nodded. I did understand what he was saying. Martin seemed like a nice man, but we couldn't keep this to ourselves. "We have to tell Kyle."

Patrick looked at me in surprise. I knew he wanted me to keep his secret, but this was bigger than us. Still, I knew I wouldn't go to Kyle without him. I wouldn't go against my mate if he insisted we keep it to ourselves. He had trusted me enough to tell the truth about them, and for me, that alone was like the final straw. I couldn't and wouldn't fight our bond any longer. He had said we were in it together. He may not have realized it, but he had just proven that to me without a doubt by sharing this with me. My heart soared and I realized that somewhere in the midst of this date, I had started to fall a little for my mate. Maybe I had always been and was too stubborn to accept it, but I knew without a doubt now. My feelings were changing. Maybe it was love or at least the promise of it someday.

“I won’t go to Kyle without you. Your secrets, no matter what, will always be safe with me, but I think he needs this information, Patrick. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I don’t want to cause unnecessary alarm. I gathered from listening to them that this is not a new organization. They’ve likely been watching and aware for a long time, longer than our lifetime at least. Being aware of them could be enough to trigger unnecessary fear.”

“Kyle won’t freak out. He’ll know how best to handle it for our pack.” I realized I said “our pack.” Patrick had made it clear that we would be moving to his Clan someday. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. I knew as a female that if I mated outside of my pack that would be the case, but I wasn’t ready to accept the reality of that. He fit so well into Westin and I knew the pack would accept him fully. I just needed to convince him it was best for us. I didn’t want to leave San Marco.

“You really think it’s for the best?”

I nodded. “I do.”

“Does it have to be tonight?”

I shook my head no and gave him the sexiest look I could muster, and hoped I didn’t look stupid trying, “I have other plans for us tonight.” As his breath hitched, I tugged on his tie and pulled him close to capture his mouth with mine. I may not have been an alpha like Kelsey, but I didn’t mind taking control every now and then either. “Take me home, Patrick.”

I saw the look on his face, the surprise in his eyes. I had purposefully said “home” and he clearly recognized that I did not mean Mom and Dad’s place. Our lives were already intertwined. Tonight, I planned to seal our bond once and for all.

When we got back to the cottage, I wasn’t nervous at all. I had no doubt that Patrick would not reject me this time. I was careful not to have any alcohol with dinner.

He was a perfect gentleman, up until the moment we walked in the house and he closed the door behind us. That door shut and I found myself pinned up against the wall as his mouth crushed mine. There was nothing sweet or gentle about it. I could smell his arousal strong in the air. He wasn't even trying to hide it from me, and truth be told it was like a delicious aphrodisiac causing a heightened awareness in me.

He lifted me and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He groaned as I pressed into him. With my back against the wall and his hands roaming up the back of my thighs, under my dress, it took every ounce of willpower to slow things down.

“Patrick,” I panted. “We need to talk.”

He growled at me and it turned me on even more. “Later,” he said in a deep, lusty voice I couldn't argue with. He pushed me harder into the wall to balance me as he quickly removed his pants. I pushed the jacket of his suit from him. We both were moving frantically with fumbling hands. I squeaked in surprise when he ripped the thin lace panties from me. He didn't bother to remove my dress, and there was nothing graceful about it when he plunged into me as my back slammed against the wall. I fought off the need to come with the first thrust. I realized that all night this tension had built and I gave in to my needs, equally matching his stroke for stroke. Panting, breathless, and calling out his name, I soared to new heights as he followed. It had been fast and furious, and had me aching for more as I clung to him.

His body was still shaking as my legs dropped to the ground. His breathing was uneven as he tried to regain some control.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

I looked at him like he was crazy and threw my head back and laughed. “Do not ever apologize for that!” I kissed him until his body began to relax and his breathing started to even. Without a word, I took his hand and led him to the bedroom. It would have been easy to have sealed our bond during our frenzied foyer adventure. I felt my fangs begin to

descend twice, but after all I had put him through, I needed to do this with a clear head. His pants, underwear, shoes, socks and jacket were strewn throughout the front room, wherever they happened to land. He then made quick work of removing his shirt and tie, and sat on the edge of the bed with his feet dangling. He watched me closely as I slowly stripped off my own clothes, my eyes never leaving his. I was naked and vulnerable in front of my mate as I closed the gap between us.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked, his voice still heavily lust laden as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me flush against him.

I couldn't speak. I pulled my hair together at the base of my neck then brushed it to one side. I bared my neck to him. He leaned in, trembling, and kissed the spot where I knew his mark would soon be. I could feel the longing in him. It surprised me, as it was the first sign of our bond truly taking root.

“It's time,” I told him.

His eyes widened and darkened, staring at me with questioning surprise. I nodded and kept my neck exposed.

He sucked in a sharp breath. “You're sure of this?”

“I don't think I've ever been more certain of anything.”

His eyes flashed with something I didn't recognize and when he smiled, I saw his fangs descending. My mate was as ready as I was. His hands skimmed up my waist sending shivers through me and he nudged me closer. I kissed him and knew he was going to try and escalate it, but I pulled back. He looked confused.

“I'm ready, now,” I told him.

He shook his head. “E, there's a reason sex and the bonding seal go hand and hand. It's supposed to take away the apprehension and the sting. I don't want to hurt you.”

I smiled. “You won't, and I don't want to be influenced by sex or anything else. Okay?”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded. He took my face in his hands and kissed me gently. He didn’t move to seal our bond right away and for a minute I thought I may have to be the one to start. He placed his forehead against mine and breathed my scent in deeply.

“There’s something you need to know before we do this.”

I stiffened. It sounded important, and at a time like this, I couldn’t imagine what could be more important. His eyes were clear blue and sincere staring into my soul.

“I love you, Elise. You may drive me insane sometimes and I’m probably going to go prematurely bald with you around, but I need you to know, I want you, not just because of the mating call. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him close. It’s what I had always wanted in a mate. He didn’t know just how much his words meant to me.

As much as I wanted to say them back, I just couldn’t. I wasn’t ready, but I felt the prick of his teeth against my neck, and I followed his lead as my own fangs descended and pierced his skin. For one perfect moment frozen in time, our bond sealed. The taste of his blood was better than I ever imagined and it consumed me in lust. Before we separated he was deep inside me once again. For one perfect moment we wholly joined in body, soul, and heart. I couldn’t say the words yet, but I could show him in my own way.

Afterwards we lay in each other’s arms just grinning. I didn’t think the smile was coming off Patrick’s face anytime soon and my face hurt from smiling so much.

“It’s really late, love. We should at least try to get some sleep.”

“I have a better idea. How about a run?” My wolf surged forward and I imagined her wagging her tail happily at the idea.

“Okay, let’s do it.”

We walked outside hand in hand, not parting until we were ready to shift. I had run with Patrick's wolf before, but that had been different. I was still trying to hide from him then, and while my wolf had refused to cooperate, we were not at peace that night in our disagreement. There was something extra special about shifting with him and staying by his side the entire time. Our wolves wouldn't stop rubbing up against each other. I could already smell our combined scent and knew everyone would know the moment they saw us together. I didn't care. It was done and I wanted every available female within five packs to know and understand that this one was mine. I was finally ready to accept whatever challenges lay before us, and I knew what Kelsey had tried to get me to understand. This, him, it was all worth it.

We headed out to my favorite overlook and watched the sun rise. A light snowfall had covered the ground throughout the night, but it only added to the magic for us.

Heading home, we didn't bother to dress before falling exhausted into bed. As I started to drift off to sleep, I grabbed my phone, and shot a text to Kyle and Liam, letting them know I wouldn't be in the office, then snuggled into my mate's awaiting arms and fell fast asleep.

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Patrick

Chapter 24

Date night had certainly been a success. I had been shocked when Elise had told me she was ready to complete our mating. It had been nothing like I had imagined it would be, but I cannot think of one thing I would have changed about the night. From start to finish, everything was perfect.

I looked over at my beautiful mate asleep in the bed next to me. The need to protect and love her was overwhelming me. I thought the feelings would subside after the bites, but it seemed to escalate instead. I made a mental note to ask Kyle about it as I got up and made my way into the kitchen. I was famished and I knew my mate would be too when she awoke.

I pulled out bacon, eggs, toast, hash browns, and pancakes and started cooking. I wasn't a great cook. Hell, I wasn't even a good cook, but I could fix a fine breakfast. They didn't have everything I'd like for a proper Irish breakfast, but this would certainly do nicely.

I knew the moment Elise woke. I didn't quite know how to explain how I knew, I just knew. It was like I could feel her waking up. It was one of the earliest signs of a bond strengthening and it made me downright giddy in excitement to feel that connection to her.

"Oh my gosh, that smells amazing. I'm starving," she said, entering the kitchen. I quickly noted she hadn't bothered to dress. I suspected clothes were going to be optional around here unless company was expected. I knew I'd never tire of seeing my mate naked, so it was fine by me. I had tossed on a

pair of gym shorts out of courtesy, without bothering with underwear. It was good to know I needn't bother in the future.

She sat at the table, pulling her knees up to her chest and watching me, grateful for the cup of steaming hot coffee I set before her. I dished out our plates even knowing I put too much on hers, and sat down next to her.

We dug in, and I was pleased with the moans of pleasure she gave over my meal. Who knew something as simple as providing a meal for her would please me so much? This whole mating thing was a heady experience.

After breakfast we showered quickly and dressed. I called Kyle to make sure he and Kelsey were home. I had taken to heart what Elise had said about telling him about the human faction watching us. I already knew there was nothing I would ever hide from my mate, so I did not expect him to keep this from his mate either. He invited us over for dinner. Looking at the clock, that was only an hour away. I didn't tell him we had just woken and had breakfast. As my friend, I knew he'd understand. As Elise's brother, I wasn't even going there.

We drove over to Kyle's in companionable silence. Before we even knocked on the door, Kelsey rushed us on the porch. She hugged Elise and took a deep sniff.

"Totally called it," she yelled back into the house. We followed in where she poked her mate in the chest. "You owe me. I win."

"Seriously? That was fast." Looking at his sister with disappointment, he shook his head. "One date was all it took? Must have been some date."

I couldn't help it. I could not stop grinning and I even shook my head in hearty agreement until a sharp elbow connected with my ribcage.

"Do not encourage him," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am!" I said in my most American accent.

"So you've come to celebrate then?"

“Not exactly,” I told him. “Can we sit? I have some things that Elise and I feel you should know about.”

“This sounds serious.”

“It is,” she assured him.

We all sat down. “Is this something safe to talk about here?” Kyle asked hesitantly.

Elise and I looked at each other. “How many people would you expect to pass through here tonight?”

“Probably none.”

“Then we’ll likely be okay. What we say here needs to stay here, Kyle. I was hesitant to even tell you, but Elise assured me it’s the right thing to do.” She squeezed my hand and smiled encouragingly.

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“I’m not sure where to begin,” I said nervously, knowing he wasn’t going to be happy that I had kept it from him initially.

“Start with the day I was kidnapped,” my mate advised, and I nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, sure look it. You know I went looking for Elise on my own after she went missing, and I found her in a cabin, drugged and chained to a bed by two Bulgarian brothers. What I didn’t tell you, or anyone, until yesterday, was that in the woods, watching the cabin, were three humans. They’re part of some human faction that monitors shifter activity around the world. They were tracking the Bulgati brothers after word of issues between the Bulgarians and Westins arose. They only observe. They aren’t supposed to get involved in any way, but they broke their protocol and helped me rescue her.” I paused to let that sink in.

“You’re serious? You showed yourself to humans?”

“Kyle, you aren’t listening. They already knew about us. They told me about the Bulgatis. They brought tranqs to go in anyway if it came to it, knowing it was Elise the Bulgarians had captive. The humans, they knew her by name, Kyle. I was

desperate to save her and they wanted to help. They made the anonymous call to the cops after I had her safely away.”

“Do you hear what you’re telling me? Humans are aware of our kind? It doesn’t make sense. If humans knew about us, they would hunt and kill us all. We’ve seen it happen throughout history.”

“I’m telling you, you’re wrong about these guys.”

“I met two of them last night, Kyle. He’s not lying. My wolf felt no aggression towards them or from them.”

“What?” he growled and my wolf started to cower. “You knowingly endangered my sister?”

“Enough,” Elise said, and I could feel her irritation rolling off her. It was hard to keep the smile off my face, feeling her emotions. It was such a new and awesome sensation. “I told him you would understand. I told him you would handle this okay. These guys, they weren’t the boogeyman coming after us. If anything they are our allies. Kyle, they helped him save me. They promised to call if any odd activity with the Bulgarians surfaced. This could be the advantage we need if this war continues, but if you tell the Pack, or even the Pack Council, fear will set in. We don’t need that right now.”

“Elise,” he started, raking a hand through his hair.

“Kyle,” Kelsey interrupted. “They’re right. If there’s movement with the Bulgarians and they alert Patrick to it, it could be the advanced warning we need. We’re at war here. Why wouldn’t we use every means possible, including the humans?”

“Kelsey, you don’t seem as shocked to hear about the humans,” I observed.

“Patrick, I was raised in the human world. They don’t scare me like they do others here, where their only exposure is occasional business meetings.”

“I’m not scared of humans, but hearing they know all about us is more than a little unnerving,” Elise confessed.

“I don’t disagree with that, but if Dave is true to his word, he’ll contact me with anything suspicious. So when I come to you with random knowledge that you would demand to know how I came by it, you’ll know and won’t need to question it.”

“That’s it?” Kyle asked.

“That’s it. Look, it was my impression that they’ve been watching us for a very long time, and I don’t mean us specifically, I mean our kind, most likely back several generations at least.”

“Jesus, Pat, that’s insane. You know that right? How is that even possible and we haven’t been aware of them in any way?” Kyle began to pace around the room.

“How have we lived and survived all these generations and the humans not know we exist? Think about it.” I said.

“It’s a lot to take in, but if you’re confident they aren’t a threat, then I don’t see need to share this with anyone outside of the four of us. I mean no one. Are we clear?” The alpha in Kyle’s voice was evident.

I nodded along with Elise and Kelsey.

“That decided,” Kelsey said, “how about dinner? We’re starving.” She rubbed her stomach to show us the “we” she was talking about. I chanced a look at Elise who just gave a short shrug. Yeah, neither of us were about to tell her overbearing brother that we had just finished breakfast before coming over.

“One more thing we need to discuss,” Kyle said. “When are we announcing to the pack about your mating? The sooner the challenge clock starts, the better. Trust me on that.”

“Easy for you to say, you had one month to endure. We have four,” Elise grumbled. I rubbed her back reassuringly. I had to believe we’d be fine and both come out triumphant. No other option existed in my mind.

“The next pack meeting isn’t for another week and a half.”

“Yeah, but we can send out a notice and follow up with the formal stuff at the pack meeting. I’ll start the clock as soon as you tell me to send it.”

“Today,” I told them. Elise’s eyes were wide with shock.

“Today?” she shrieked.

“The sooner, the better. Let’s get the countdown rolling.”

“We haven’t even broken the news to my family yet. Look, it’s Wednesday. We missed family dinner yesterday. Go ahead and type up the email, Kyle, and I’ll tell Mom we’re ‘rainchecking’ for tomorrow night to make it up to her, and we’ll tell everyone then. You can send it out afterwards.”

I conceded. “Yeah, okay. That sounds good.”

“Okay, well, let’s eat.” Kelsey led the way to their dining room.

Kyle slapped me on the back. “Congratulations, man, and welcome to the family. She looks happy and I’m really happy for the both of you.”

I nodded my thanks. To be accepted into the family was more than I had hoped for taking a mate. It made me once again reconsider the idea of leaving.

Dinner with Kyle and Kelsey was nice. It felt good to be a part of their family, and at the end of the night, Kyle told Elise to take the next two days off. Two more entire days alone with my mate, and then two more through the weekend, was the best mating gift anyone could give us, and I planned to make the most of it.

In the car on the drive home, Elise sounded a little worried. “Kyle freaked out about the humans a little more than I expected,” she said.

“You were right, love. He needed to know. He’s a good alpha. He’ll do right by the information. You seemed a little more freaked out,” I said, using her choice words, “by our mating announcement. Are you okay?”

She nodded, “Yes. It’s just all so, I dunno, real, I guess, talking about making the announcement.”

“Elise, this is the most real thing in my life. We’re going to get through this. The next four months will fly by, just wait and see.” I said a quick prayer that I was right.

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Elise

Chapter 25

When Kyle gave me two days off to spend with Patrick, I was thrilled. We needed that time to finish getting to know each other. I had been thinking intimately, but it turned out that he was really easy to just talk to and laugh with. Not that there wasn't plenty of time play around, too. I grinned and knew I was blushing just thinking about it.

I already knew I was falling in love with him, but those two days, alone with no other worries in the world, had solidified our bond, and my heart. I was ready to face the challenges, or anything else life might throw our way.

Mom and Dad had plans for Thursday night and had postponed us till Friday. That had worked out just fine for us, but now it was time to face my family.

"Come on, get up. You have to get dressed or we're going to be late," Patrick scolded me as I lay sprawled out across our bed, watching him pull on a pair of snug fitting jeans and the shirt I had bought him for Christmas, admiring the strong muscles and trim waist that I now knew every inch of.

At some point over the last few days, I had already gone from thinking of the place as his and everything in it his, to ours. Mom and Lily had called to check on me a few times, and I just explained that I needed a little time alone with Patrick. They didn't ask too many questions or make me feel bad for it. I knew my brothers had serious bro-crushes on my man, but I thought my parents and sister liked him well enough, too. I didn't know that had really mattered to me. I mean, our entire lives we're taught that God picks your one

true mate, and if you're lucky enough to find him then it's meant to be, but for them to genuinely like him, not just accept him because it was my destiny, meant a lot to me.

“Why must we? I think I could be perfectly happy never wearing clothes again.”

Patrick snorted on a laugh, “You wouldn't get any complaints from me, love, but I'm thinking your father may not like that plan much.”

“Ugh. Fine! I say, until we have children old enough to know the difference, we keep this place a clothing-free zone.” I jumped up and snagged him around the waist, placing a kiss to the back of his shoulder.

He was grinning. “So you want my babies, do you?”

“You know I do ... someday. I want you all to myself for a while before we start thinking about it. Kelsey got pregnant really fast, but I know that's not normal for shifters. Plus we just need some more time just the two of us ... without clothes.” I gave him my sexiest stare as I headed into the bathroom to get ready.

As I was slipping on the new skinny jeans I had bought when shopping for our date, he grabbed me around the waist from behind and I squealed in happiness. He planted kisses along my neck and shoulder, stopping to admire his mark.

“I am more than fine with your no-clothes rule, woman, as long as you realize your youngest brother is probably going through withdrawals and already texted asking to spend the weekend here.”

“Fine, I suppose he counts as children old enough to know better.”

He laughed and put me down. “Hurry it up, love. This is my first family night dinner. I don't want to make a bad impression.”

“Oh, please, they're probably already making bets on whether we'll actually show or not.”

I quickly finished dressing in the blue cashmere sweater Lily had given me for Christmas. I applied very little makeup, just enough to make myself presentable, and was putting on my boots when Patrick came back into the room. He stopped at the door.

“You’re not wearing that.”

“What? What’s wrong with this?”

He growled and I looked up in shock to meet lust filled eyes. “This is my first time officially meeting your family. We are about to announce our mating to your entire pack, and by proxy, mine too, tonight, and you want to torture me looking like a sexy goddess in that. I won’t be able to think straight all night with you looking like that.”

I laughed, grabbed my purse and then his hand as we headed out the door. In the car I saw him shudder and breathe in deeply. I knew he was taking in my scent and it pleased me greatly.

“I wasn’t really joking about the outfit,” he told me honestly, halfway to Mom and Dad’s.

“There’s nothing wrong with this outfit.”

He stopped the car just as the house came into view. “No, there certainly isn’t.” The smoldering look he gave me shot heat straight to my core. As he pulled me close and kissed me senseless, the windows fogged. I threw my head back and laughed.

“You’re worried about first impressions, huh? Cause showing up with fogged windows and mussed hair is probably worse than the ‘I’m sorry, I just can’t take my eyes off your daughter’ impression.”

“You’re an evil woman.”

I shrugged. “Should have thought about that before you bit me, because now I’m your evil woman.”

His grin stretched his entire face and sparkled in his eyes. “Yeah, you are.”

As we finally made it to the house, almost twenty minutes late, Chase was waiting on the stairs. He took one look at us and grinned.

“Pay up, twins. They are definitely good and mated!”

I smacked him, knowing my face was turning all sorts of red. “Chase!”

“Chase Michael Westin, you stop embarrassing your sister,” my mother scolded as she came to greet us. One look and she started smiling as tears fell from her eyes.

“Mom,” I said, hugging her.

She reached out, grabbed Patrick, and pulled him into the hug, too. “My little girl. All grown up and mated.” Letting him go, she took my face in her hands. “You’re happy?”

I looked over at my handsome mate and nodded. “Yes, Mom, I really am.”

“My pups just keep multiplying around here. This is definitely cause for celebration.” She linked her arm through Patrick’s and escorted him to the back of the house where all my family waited, as I followed, making the announcement for us and introducing her newest son, even though everyone of course already knew him.

“Pumpkin, this is what you wanted, right?” Dad pulled me aside and asked, as if it mattered in a room full of wolf shifters.

I nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

He sighed sadly. “Can’t say I was ready for this one, but I know Patrick O’Connell to be a good and fair man. He’ll be a strong mate for you.”

“He is a strong mate for me.”

He sighed. “What happened to asking for permission first? What is it with my children acting on impulse for such a big decision?”

Patrick came to stand by my side. “It may seem fast to you all, but she put me through hell getting here. It definitely

wasn't on impulse.”

The others laughed and my dad shook my mate's hand. I knew everything was going to be okay. Patrick, as I knew he would, fit seamlessly into my family. There was no awkwardness. He was immediately included into the typical sibling teasing and he seemed to take it in stride. The fact that they had all grown close through my hiding days helped, I'm certain. As far as my siblings were concerned, he had already been included as family even before they knew he was my mate. My heart was full.

After dinner as we all sat around, the guys decided to head down to the game room and play a few rounds of pool. That left me time with just the most precious women in my life. Mom excused herself to wash the dishes despite our protests and refused to let any of us help.

“I'm really happy for you, E,” Lily told me. “He's a really great guy.”

“He is, and I'm sorry I didn't confide in you two sooner about him. I was just so freaked out and overwhelmed.”

“In hindsight, we should have known. I mean, all the signs were right there screaming at us, we were just too distracted to put the pieces together,” Kelsey said.

“You've always had to do things your own way so honestly, I think it was probably for the best.” I nodded in agreement with Lily.

“Kyle's sending out the official notice tonight. He's notifying our pack, plus the Irish Clan, out of respect. The Grand Council and the closest three packs will be notified later this week. We'll do the official acceptance at the pack meeting next weekend, and Kyle already said he could join us in the pack run Saturday night.”

I paused and bit my lip. “Is it weird that I'm nervous about that?”

“Patrick's already run with our pack, E. What's to be nervous about?” Lily asked.

“I don’t know. It just feels different, more real somehow this time.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to it. I can’t believe how long it’s been since I last went for a run. The weird part is that usually I’d be crawling out of my skin by now, but I haven’t even felt the itch to shift since this little one surprised us. So this weekend should be fun,” Kelsey confessed, rubbing her protruding belly.

I gave Lily a worried look. Kelsey wasn’t raised in a pack. We often forgot or took for granted the things she still didn’t know.

“Um, Kels. I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry. Talked to Doc this morning and he said now that I’m in the second trimester I can go back to all my normal activities.”

My mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out. I didn’t even know where to start to explain how and why that wasn’t going to happen.

“Mom!” Lily yelled.

“What on earth are you yelling about?” my mother asked.

Mary Westin was a small, unassuming woman, or so one would think on first impression. They’d be wrong. My mom had been a strong alpha’s mate and pack mother for nearly thirty years. Even now, just because Kelsey was technically the current pack mother, didn’t mean my mom wasn’t still keeping charge. No one crossed that woman, not even my dad, and he could be downright scary at times. Strongest male I knew. He cowered to no one—except Mom.

“Now what’s this ruckus all about?”

“Um, Mom, Kelsey’s looking forward to running next weekend. Uh, forget to explain a few things?”

I wasn’t sure why Lily and I couldn’t just explain it, we just couldn’t. Pregnant shifters were our most vulnerable

and highly protected, though I doubted Kyle had the balls to explain that to his mate, either.

Kelsey wasn't like normal females. She was an alpha in her own right with extra powers I hadn't known existed before she came into our lives. She had been sentenced to death at the ripe age of four along with her triplet sisters. Her sisters had died, transferring their powers to Kels, but she had gotten away and been hidden from the world until her parents had died a gruesome death, leaving Kelsey alone, shifting into her wolf form far too young and bearing the burden of thinking herself a Hollywood werewolf monster. I thanked God daily for bringing her to our territory, and not just because she's my brother's one true mate.

"Oh, dear. Oh dear, dear, dear," my mother started, pacing the living room floor. "It's always these little things that catch me off guard."

"What's going on?" Kelsey asked.

"Dear," my mother started, "I'm afraid you won't be running for the remainder of this pregnancy."

"Oh, but Doc said—"

Mom cut her before she could finish. "It's not that, sweetie. You physically cannot change while pregnant. Try all you want, but it will not happen."

"Oh, I didn't know." She turned and looked at me accusingly. "Why didn't you just say so?"

I blushed. I didn't know how to explain it all to her. She made it sound so simple, but it wasn't simple to a female wolf shifter. It was our biggest burden, shame, and pride all rolled into one package, and while the knowledge was passed from mother to daughter it was otherwise never discussed, sort of like how the humans avoided the S-E-X talks. Sex to a shifter, no big deal—our reproductive legacy—a very big deal.

"Why don't we move to Kyle's office for this conversation?"

"Heard it all before," Lily said. "I'm out."

“You guys are starting to freak me out,” Kelsey whispered to me, even while knowing whispering around wolves was a moot point.

I giggled. “It’s okay, kind of like the birds and the bees talk with humans. Not bad, just awkwardly uncomfortable.”

“I learned that from a textbook at school,” she whispered back.

I snorted. “Then you’re in for a real treat.”

“Sit down, dear,” Mom said as she pulled up a chair and sat face-to-face with her. She took Kelsey’s hands into her own and stroked them lightly. I rolled my eyes. Mom made exactly the same big deal about it when she sat me down for the “talk.”

I took the big, comfy chair behind Kyle’s desk and propped my feet up, making myself comfortable. I already knew we’d be here awhile.

“Kelsey, I’m going to assume no one has ever told you about how our kind came to exist?”

She shook her head no.

“Let’s back up and start there then. You were raised in the human world, so do you know the story of Noah’s Ark?”

“Yes. Where the old guy, Noah, built an ark and all the animals came two by two and joined him. God condemned the Earth, killing everything and everyone except those on the ark. It rained for forty days and forty nights and he repopulated the land.”

“Good, but that’s the humans’ version and not entirely accurate, at least not in the details. It sounds like quite the fantastical tale, right? Now, ever wonder why the animals didn’t eat each other or Noah? Or how they could survive locked in a wooden vessel without dying from the stench alone for forty days?”

Kelsey giggled. “Actually, one of my foster moms made us all go to Bible school one summer and I got kicked out for asking that. Well, really I asked, ‘With all those

animals, what did they do with all the shit?’ She asked I be reassigned shortly after.”

My eyes welled up with tears, first from holding in laughter, then for the sadness I always felt when hearing her childhood stories. Kelsey didn’t talk about her foster families often, but when she did it broke my heart for the little girl she had been, and it was often hard to reconcile that little girl to the strong, compassionate, loving woman before me.

“The part not found in the human Bible pertains to us, the shifters. It was omitted to keep our kind safe. When God called Noah for this task, he also called forth many faithful followers. He placed a spirit animal inside each of them to carry his beloved creatures into the new world. With their human minds intact, they lived peacefully on the Ark, for the most part. Our legends say that there was a fight that broke out between a tiger and a lion who was sniffing around a female tiger. The male tiger shifted, to the shock of everyone. They knew their mission was to carry the spirit of the animals into the new world and had thought the shift would be a one-time deal turning them into animals forever, but God left the free will of their human hosts intact. The people aboard were able to subdue him and he shifted back, naked and vulnerable. That was the start of our kind.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Are you telling me that there are others kinds of shifters? I mean, not just wolves?”

“Sweetie, for every animal that walks this Earth, at some point there was at least one male and one female shifter of their kind.”

“Do they still exist?”

“Yes, well, some of them. Wolves are pack animals, so our kind, specifically, have thrived better than most. Some, we fear, are gone entirely. Like the elephant. Seeing their numbers in the wild dwindling, tells us that their shifters are no longer around, or have not found mates if they still exist at all. If they were, they would have stepped in and repopulated.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean by the shifters would repopulate the animals?”

“It’s what we were designed for, Kelsey. Ultimately, it’s why we were created.”

“But you had Kyle ... and E, the twins, Chase. Are you saying my kid could be an animal instead? Or are all animals actually shifters?”

“Our purpose in creation was to ride the Ark to dry land, allow our animal spirits to take over and mate, essentially repopulating the Earth of our animals, and they are animals, Kelsey. Wolves conceived in wolf form have no humanity, they are all animal. It is especially hard on a female shifter and most will choose to give up their humanity to stay with their pups. There are times when certain animals are called forth to keep their animal-kind from extinction. It is the ultimate sacrifice for any mother.”

Kelsey was crying, no doubt for the loss of those shifter moms placed in that situation. It had gotten to me the first time I’d heard it too, and I hadn’t been pregnant and hormonal at the time.

“When a pup is conceived in wolf form, the female will not change again until the baby is born, and like I said, many never do again. Likewise”—my mother reached over and affectionately rubbed Kelsey’s belly—“when two shifters conceive in human form, a new tiny animal spirit is placed inside that will grow and be nurtured until he or she emerges, usually around the start of adulthood, though as you know that’s not always the case. Some turn earlier, some later. Still, while you are pregnant, you will not be capable of shifting. That’s just how it is. So no run for you next weekend. Not having the ability to shift makes pregnant shifters extremely vulnerable and makes their males crazy, so have a little patience with that son of mine.”

I smiled and nodded, trying to encourage Kelsey as she tried absorbing all that Mom had told her.

Patrick

Chapter 26

I saw Da's face flash across the screen of my cell and my stomach fell. It felt like donkey's years since I'd last spoken to him. I had called and told him I reneged on my challenge with Kyle Westin and had found my one true mate. I've never heard him so angry and was grateful I was half a world away. The words we had parted with would be burned into me forever. He had cut me off, disowned me, and told me to never return to Ireland again. I hadn't confessed that to Elise because in my heart I believed he'd take me back someday.

"Da?" I answered.

"Patrick," he replied, followed by a long, awkward silence. He had called me and even though I knew it must be that he had gotten the news of my mating to Elise, I wasn't about to be the one to carry the conversation. The announcement had gone out six days earlier. A part of me rejoiced that he had finally reached out, even though I knew that nothing good would come out of it. I also knew it was still too soon, but the part of me that only ever wanted to please my da, was holding on to the hope that maybe he'd find my mate acceptable and say he was proud of me.

"Elise Westin," he finally said. "It's a good catch. Second-in-command of Westin Pack as long as Kyle's mate doesn't give him a son. Maybe you're not quite the idiot I thought. You blew it with Kyle, but maybe there's hope for Niall."

"You called to tell me you're sending Niall into the challenges? I'm afraid I've been out of the wolf hierarchy of

late. Who will he be challenging?" There was something in his tone that didn't sit well with me.

"I'll admit I was very angry with you when you reneged on the Westin challenge, but I hear you've gotten strategically close to the family and I must admit, it's an angle I had not previously considered. I want you to know that whatever happens, son, I forgive you. Be sure to say hello to your brother for me."

My heart had momentarily soared before crashing hard in the realization of what he was saying.

"WHAT?" I roared. "You cannot be serious, Da. You're sending Niall to fight me in the challenges for my mate? Why? How could you? I'm your son, too!"

"How many times do I have to beat it into you, Patrick?" he growled, but my wolf did not cower. "True mates only make you weak. You were the strongest of all my sons. I had big hopes and dreams for you, but you have turned into the biggest disappointment of all. Niall will serve the position better. His emotions will not be as affected by the female. I cannot trust you in that position. You're too far gone and will always follow your heart instead of orders. You do not know how it pains me to say that. I want Westin Pack. You knew that more than anyone and you had it right there in the palm of your hands and blew it. Niall will not make the same mistake. I wish things could be different. Goodbye, son."

I sat down hard, staring at the dead phone in my hands. I had truly believed he would be okay, that he'd see and understand that what I had done was right. He was sending Niall to punish me. Did he really think my younger brother could best me?

I didn't hear Elise walk into the room, but I felt her soft arms wrap around me. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

I sighed. "Heard that, did you?"

"Wolf ears." She smiled against my shoulder. "Kind of hard not to."

"I really thought things would be okay, E."

“They will, Patrick.”

“No they won’t, Elise. You don’t understand. I may not have the title of alpha, but I was raised to be one. I thought Da would take me back, give me a leadership role in the Clan. A man is supposed to take his female home. I don’t have a home to take you to.” A single tear slipped down my cheek and it made me angry. I didn’t want to feel sorry for myself. I didn’t want to let his words hurt me, but they did hurt.

“Your father’s an asshole,” Kyle said from the doorway.

I looked up to see all the Westin kids make their way into my room. Great, they all heard. I knew it from their faces. They all were there to witness me as an emotional wreck. I’m not sure which was worse. Kelsey started crying. She ran over and hugged me close.

“I didn’t have a pack either, Patrick, till Westin, and we already think of you as family. This is your pack, too.”

I shook my head sadly. “It’s not the same, Kelsey.”

Chase spoke up. “Honestly, none of us wanted you to leave anyway.”

“Westin Foundation couldn’t function without E,” Liam added. I hadn’t considered that, but it didn’t change things.

“You don’t have to worry about your brother. I’ll kill him if he tries to step foot on Westin territory. He’ll never make it to the challenge,” Lily said with such vengeance that I believed her, and when I looked up, all the others were nodding in agreement. “You’re Westin now. It wouldn’t matter where you and Elise ended up living. You’re still Westin, now and forever!”

“And you guys will always have a home here. We all understand you have to do what you have to do. I know the traditional method is for a male to take his mate back to his pack, but your dad never raised you for that either, Pat. He always intended for you to have a pack of your own, and you do. Here.”

I knew there was some truth in Kyle's words, but they didn't quite sink in. It was hard enough being disowned, but I thought it was temporary. Now I find out my own father wanted me dead. It was a lot to absorb.

"We have plans tonight, and that asshole isn't ruining them. E promised us a family fun night, and I don't care how bad it sucks to hear what that jerk said, life's too short to let people like that tear us down."

"That was pretty profound, little man," Kyle told Chase.

"Thanks," he said, grinning, and it was hard not to smile along with the kid.

"I can't go into game night without my best partner. What do you say?"

I took a deep breath. Elise's eyes were full of hope and encouragement and I knew I wouldn't let her down. "Whose arse will we be kicking first then?" I wasn't okay. I was far from it, but I was better, just knowing these guys had my back.

As we headed into the living room, Kyle put his hand on my shoulder and stayed me. "There's something I've been wanting to discuss with you. Can you come by my office tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Alright, good. Well then, I believe it is my ass you will first attempt to kick, so let's get on with it."

I wasn't sure anything would pull me out of the despair of dealing with my father, but leave it to my mate and her siblings to change my mood. A couple dozen rounds of video games with Chase as my partner helped a ton. It was hard to be angry or upset with that kid around, especially when we were winning.

The night ended much too soon, but I felt a lot more at peace by the end of it. It made me realize that Elise and I already had a life here. Yeah, sure, maybe it wasn't conventional to stay in her territory, but I could try to make it work. I definitely needed to find a job. The Westin Foundation

was the most lucrative and best option. I knew they'd give me something even if I wasn't qualified, and that made the Irish pride in me consider other options before resorting to asking Elise for help. I decided after my meeting with Kyle the next morning, I would head into town and see if any of the shops were hiring. It wasn't much but anything would be better than nothing at this point.

"Are you okay?" Elise asked, once the others had left.

"No, but I will be," I assured her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her close to me. I let her touch calm and soothe me.

We made love slowly and lazily before drifting off to sleep in each other's arms.

Morning came much too soon. The alarm went off and E got up and headed to the shower. I used the bathroom, then went to make breakfast for us. It was already becoming our routine and I loved the consistency and familiarity of it.

"What are you up to today?" she asked.

"Heading over to talk to Kyle, then I think I'm going to look around and see what's available job-wise."

She looked surprised. "You're considering staying?"

"Do we have a better option at the moment? The most important thing, love, is that we have a roof over our heads and food in our bellies. I won't let my pride get in the way of supporting you. You are the most important thing in my life. You are my family, and as long as we're together, we'll make it work."

She threw her arms around me and jumped into my lap with a shriek of excitement. "You mean it? We can stay?"

I was taken aback by her joy. She had hinted of staying before, but I had no idea it would mean so much to her. Suddenly my da's banishment didn't feel like the end of the world. It was rare that another pack would take in a banished wolf like me, but then I knew there were extenuating circumstances to our situation. Knowing it pleased my mate so much, made me happy.

I wasn't sure what Kyle wanted to discuss, but I needed to talk to him about switching pack allegiance formally and if it was truly even an option. I gave him a quick call and he told me to come by his office at the house. Mary Westin greeted me at the door with a hug when I knocked.

"Patrick, what a nice surprise. We haven't gotten the chance to really get to know each other and I was hoping you'd stop by eventually."

"Mom, he's here for a meeting."

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed.

"If you have time after my meeting with Kyle, I'd love to sit down and talk." I had no idea why those words came out of my mouth. She had looked so disappointed that I couldn't stop myself from trying to fix it, and she brightened immediately and nodded, telling me that she'd bake some cookies, and to come find her in the kitchen when we were through.

"Sucker," Kyle snickered as we headed back to his office.

Finally behind closed doors, I wanted to get right down to business. I had things to do and now I'd just added who knew how long with Elise's mother.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"First, I want you to know that this has absolutely nothing to do with anything that happened with your dad yesterday. I was waiting to see if you and E actually went through with the mating before approaching you. It is totally just coincidental. I promise."

I was getting a little nervous about where this conversation was going.

"Look." He was interrupted by a knock on the door, seconds before Cole Anderson peeked his head in. "Hey man, good timing. Come on in. Won't have to repeat myself this way."

Now I was thoroughly confused, but I acknowledged Cole and sat back down, curious about what he had to say.

“Okay, so you guys know I’m really young to be an alpha and this pack is at war with the Bulgarians. To them that makes me weak and this pack vulnerable. They’d be wrong, but with the attack on Elise it’s really had me thinking. We need to beef up security on our borders. We need to make sure this pack is protected.”

I didn’t miss the look Cole shot me.

“I don’t mean to be out of line here, Kyle, but shouldn’t this be a discussion with the Council?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Patrick, no offense, I like you just fine, but Kyle, this is a pack issue.”

“Pat’s family now, Cole. It’s okay, and what I’m about to ask is for the both of you, so please just hear me out?”

“Family? I don’t remember a petition for pack,” Cole questioned

“It’s coming, or at least I’m hoping it is. Part of what we’re going to talk about, but I meant my family,” Kyle informed him.

“Elise and I are mates.”

“I hadn’t heard. Congratulations. Guessing the date went well?”

I couldn’t help grinning, thinking about that night, the night we mated. “Yeah, it did.”

“Good for you, and welcome to Westin. I know not everyone will think the same, but I’m with Kyle, that definitely makes you family.”

“Thanks, appreciate it.”

“So, here’re my thoughts. I know I’m blessed to have Dad here for guidance, but he’s still not one hundred percent. Plus, we have a strong Pack Council. My dad put that into effect, mirroring the Grand Council. It’s worked well and fair

for Westin. I have no plans to change that, but with the work load at The Foundation still in transition, plus the baby on the way, I feel like I'm drowning here in responsibilities. After discussions with Dad and a look through pack history, I want to reinstate positions we haven't used in quite some time here to disburse some of the everyday duties. Starting with the two of you. I'd like to ask you both to consider taking on the role of my Betas."

Beta? I looked at him questioningly, wondering if I had heard that right. Kyle Westin was offering me a leadership position in Westin?

"Of course, Patrick, your allegiance would have to formally change to Westin, including going through the trials. I know you'll breeze through them. I wasn't sure how you were going to feel about that, but after last night, well, let's just say it made me hopeful."

"What happened last night?" Cole asked.

"My da's an arse, sending my brother to fight me in the challenges."

His eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "You're serious?"

Kyle nodded. "And truth is, that while no one would have come out and said so, or pressured you if circumstances were different, truth is, none of us want Elise to go. I know she's your mate and that's tradition, but she's really important to the Foundation, the pack, and this family. I can't imagine not seeing my sister every day, so yeah, maybe it's a bit selfish of me, but I'm really hoping you consider staying here, permanently."

I was floored by his confession. I had been fairly sure he would agree to keep us, and let me stay in the pack, but he actually was hoping we'd stay and offering me a leadership position in the pack. That would definitely provide for us and secure a good life for my family someday.

"Elise and I have talked a bit with everything that happened. I hadn't realized how important it was to her to stay.

I was planning to discuss the possibility with you today and ask if I could start looking for work in the territory.”

“Done,” Kyle said, excitedly. “You already have a place to stay. I bought it off the ole guy that owned it when Kelsey moved in. He wasn’t pack and we hadn’t pushed it sooner only because he so rarely came up to it that it wasn’t an issue. You can stay there for as long as you want or until you decided to build. Job, done. Beta will have similar perks to Alpha, but we’ll hash out those details later. Thanks to the success of the Foundation, all pack members get a cut of profits.

“We don’t discuss such things outside pack, but it’s more than you’ll ever spend in a lifetime. It’s the reason I can afford to run a tattoo parlor out here in the middle of nowhere. It’s really just for show in the town and something I happen to love,” Cole proudly said.

I sucked in a deep breath. No wonder Elise hadn’t been worried about money or me being able to support us. She really didn’t need me to support her. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. It would certainly take some getting used to.

“I’ll need to discuss with Elise before I give you a final answer.”

“Understood. She’s going to be thrilled with the idea, but I understand.”

“Out of respect, we should run it by the council too, Kyle,” Cole suggested

Kyle cringed. “I already did. They voted unanimously ‘yes.’ You weren’t invited because of a conflict of interest.”

Cole frowned. “Will I be asked to step down from the council?”

“No. We all agreed there’s benefit to having one of my betas in a more administrative role and part of the council.”

He smiled, like he was relieved to hear it.

“Okay, well, any questions or concerns?” Kyle asked.

“No,” I said, “and thanks for the offer, Kyle. I really appreciate it. I’ll give you my answer after I discuss it with Elise.”

“The pack meeting is Sunday, but the pack run is tomorrow. Do you think you could have an answer by then?” Cole asked me before addressing Kyle. “I think it may be best to introduce him fully and make both announcements then before the run.”

“That’s a good idea, Cole. What do you think, Patrick?”

“Yeah, look it. I think we could have a decision by then. I’ll let you know as soon as I talk to her.”

“Those females have you all whipped. Just glad it’s not me. I’ll be happy if I never find my one true mate,” Cole joked.

“Yeah sure, we’ll be there to remind you of that when the time comes.”

“Never going to happen.”

Kyle adjourned the meeting and I headed for the kitchen to tell Mary I’d have to take a rain check, I had a lot I needed to discuss with my mate.

“Perfect timing. They’ll need about five minutes to cool, but come on, here,” she said, shoving a pair of pot holders at me. I quickly removed the cookies from the oven. “Wonderful.” She linked her arm through mine and led me to the table. I felt trapped. I wanted to go see my mate and figure things out, but the woman was bloody hard to say no to.

“Tell me, dear, how are things going with Elise?”

I smiled. Couldn’t help it. “We’re good.” It was the truth, and we were finding our groove together as the days passed.

“Do you love her?”

Wow, this woman didn’t hold anything back. “Very much,” I assured her.

She scrutinized me closely, then smiled like she was satisfied with my answer. “Let me tell you a bit about my Elise.”

She leaned in and placed her hand on my arm as she talked. It was an odd sensation to me. I had never much been around a mother before. My own had died in childbirth to my youngest brother. I had often wondered if the pain of it had been too much for my da and that was why he was so adamantly against his sons taking true mates. He and Ma had not been true mates, only compatible mates, but I was old enough to remember the change in him after her death. He never seemed to realize that had they been true mates and properly bonded, he never would have felt that pain, as he would have followed her into death peacefully.

“My little girl must love you too,” she continued. “Most shifters are so thrilled to find a true mate that the pull of the mating call is enough, but not our girl. She needs love, and lots of it. She could never have mated you if she didn’t truly love you. Never forget that, Patrick.”

“She hasn’t said it yet,” I confessed.

“Have you told her how you really feel?”

“Yes,” and it hurt that she wouldn’t or couldn’t say it back, though I didn’t admit as much.

Mary seemed to ponder it thoughtfully. “She’ll come around to saying it. The more important thing is, does she show it?”

I thought about that for a minute. When we were together we were completely together. I felt like she gave herself to me. There were little things too, like how she snuggled into me on the couch watching TV, or the sly smiles she gave me when others were around and I knew she wanted to be alone. Mostly I just felt loved in her presence, so I supposed she did show love even if she hadn’t actually used the words.

“Yeah, I think she does, at least.”

“You just keep loving my girl. That’s all she truly needs. There’re a few other things you might want to know about her.” I settled in, suddenly curious as to what other gems of knowledge she would bestow on me. “Elise likes things organized. She loves to read, and sometimes just needs her alone time. When she first started shutting herself away, no one thought anything of it. A lot had been going on and she just needed time to decompress. That’s how she reacts to high stress situations. You’ll do well to remember that.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Now tell me. What are your plans long-term? I won’t lie and say I’m ready to lose my baby, but I’m not going to try and guilt you into sticking around here either. I was blessed to find my mate within my pack, and I always knew my boys would likely never leave, but it’s heartbreaking for a mother to watch her daughters grow. My hope is Lily doesn’t find her mate for a very long time.”

I laughed.

“Oh, she’s young, and has plenty of time, so spill it. What’re the plans? Are you taking her back to your Clan?”

I cringed. I didn’t want to confess that I’d been banished, that I had no pack to take my mate back to. My head hung in despair.

She reached over and lifted my face in both her hands. “It can’t be all that bad.”

“It is actually. Had I known with certainty, I would not have condemned Elise to a life with me.” I swallowed hard before spitting the words out. “I’ve been banished, Mary. I-I don’t have a pack to take Elise home to. I honestly thought he’d move past it, that everything would be fine, but it’s not fine. Kyle wants me to take the trials to switch to Westin, but I don’t think he fully gets it. My dad isn’t just angry, he banished me. I’m a lone wolf that no pack should want, and now I’ve condemned Elise to that too.”

“Why did he banish you?” a strong voice said from behind me, and my wolf and I both cringed. Jason Westin.

I turned and started to stand, but he motioned for me to stay seated and made his way to a chair next to his mate.

I struggled to meet the man's eyes, lasting only a brief moment before dropping my gaze to the table. "Da was angry that I had reneged on the challenge against Kyle. I had already gotten a whiff of Elise, and I knew I couldn't settle for Kelsey after that, not to mention the distraction would have likely gotten me killed. I explained it to him, but he was pissed. Kyle said I could stay in your territory until I found my mate. I honestly thought he would have calmed down and things would have blown over by now." The pain of admitting my failure to these people was awful and humiliating. "It hasn't blown over. I've been banished, sir. I'm not welcome in the Clan again, and honestly, I'm not sure he's going to change his mind." I took a deep breath; the next words were somehow even harder. "He's hoping I die in the challenges for my insubordination. He's sending my brother, Niall, to challenge me for punishment, because banishment isn't enough." I was struggling to stay seated and needed to move. I was so hurt and pissed. "He believes true mates are the ultimate weakness for a male."

I dared a look at Jason Westin. His jaw was set and twitching. He looked angry.

"I'm sorry, sir. I would not have mated her if I had known." It was true, too. I would have suffered great agony and depression walking away from my mate, but I would have done that before tying her to a banished lone wolf.

His eyes flashed in disgust. "Patrick, I do not believe as your father does. I've heard the rumors of how he's raised you boys. It is disgusting. I am proud of you for following your heart, son. You will never be a lone wolf with your mate by your side." He paused and I felt him sizing me up. "Kyle talked to you today?"

I nodded.

"Then you know that we do not care about your banishment. I can appreciate the pain and concern it must have

on you, but you have a pack here, if you want it. You're family now."

I was overwhelmed hearing his words. "I appreciate that, sir."

"Did you give Kyle an answer yet?"

I looked at him, partially surprised. "He told you about that?"

"About what, dear?" Mary asked her mate. Jason looked at me and waited.

I sighed. "Kyle asked me to consider taking the trials to join Westin Pack and be his Beta, or one of them, at least."

"Kyle's reestablishing the Beta program?"

"He is and he's asked Patrick and Cole to be his Betas."

She seemed to consider what he was saying and nodded. "Very good choices, but I don't understand—you didn't give him an answer?" She sounded concerned.

"No mum, I told him I needed time to discuss with Elise."

Her parents gave each other a knowing look and smiled.

"Well then, what are you yapping with me for? You have more important things to do. Please do let us know what you decide. No pressure, but ..."

"Mary!"

She glared at her mate, but continued anyway. "But we want you both here. You belong here. I know I don't have a say or a right to even open my mouth, but I am a mother and I'm going to do it anyway. We love you." She took Jason's hand in unity and he nodded in agreement. "We are so proud of you and Elise taking this big step and you're doing a great job with it. I know, I have eyes and I've watched you closer than you think. So, go talk to your mate, and then the both of you come by for dinner tonight and we'll celebrate."

She hugged me goodbye, as did Jason Westin, and I was shaking my head laughing as they shooed me out of the house.

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Elise

Chapter 27

Patrick was supposed to come by for lunch after talking to Kyle. I didn't know what my brother was up to, but something told me I should worry. It was already past two and I hadn't heard anything from either of them. I had taken to pacing my office, which I didn't like. It was stupid. They were probably just down the hall.

I decided to walk down to Kyle's office. I just couldn't take it anymore.

"Hey, Kels. Are they still in their meeting?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Haven't heard from them. Kyle's working from the pack office today."

"Oh," I said, sounding disappointed. "Do you know what he wanted to discuss with Patrick?"

I could tell on her face that she did. "Please don't ask me. Kyle asked me not to talk about it and I really don't like to go against his wishes on things like that."

"It's okay. I understand," I said pathetically. "Was it good news?" I couldn't help but pry at her.

She sighed. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"I just want to know what's going on. Patrick was supposed to come by for lunch, but I haven't heard anything from him. He's not answering his phone, and their meeting was five hours ago. Should it really take that long?"

"No, it shouldn't have taken five hours unless they're just hanging out afterwards."

“Do you think maybe he’s upset?”

She shrugged again. “Kyle wasn’t real sure how he’d take it, but we hoped it would be good news.” She suddenly didn’t seem quite so confident. “I’m sorry, but it’s really something you need to discuss with him, not me.”

“I know.” I plopped down quite unladylike in one of the waiting chairs. “I wish we could communicate through our bond like you and Kyle do.”

“It’ll come, it just takes time. Remember, I’m an abomination,” she half joked, causing me to glare at her.

Kelsey was sentenced to death as a small child because of having extra-special powers. She’s also a female alpha and the Grand Council doesn’t like people like her to exist. They are too powerful and that scares them. Kelsey is very powerful with some amazing skills. My dad would have died last year if it hadn’t been for her extra gifts. So, maybe I’m a little sensitive where she’s concerned. The whole pack is very protective of our new Pack Mother.

“Oh come on,” she begged. “That was funny!”

“Not.” I knew I had been scowling at her. I didn’t like when she made comments like that.

She frowned. “Fine, but still, it will come with time and then you’ll be in here telling me, ‘Kelsey, I wish he’d just shut up already. He’s driving me crazy always inside my head.’”

I laughed, knowing that was a very probable scenario in our future.

“Hey, Kelsey, you seen E ...”

“Where have you been?” I asked as my mate entered her office looking for me. I jumped up and wrapped my arms around him, letting his touch calm me.

“Next time, just pick up the phone.” Kelsey advised.

“Shit, it’s in the car charging still. I’m so sorry. I forgot all about it.”

“What took so long?” I asked, taking his hand and waving goodbye to Kelsey as we headed back to my office.

He stopped and gave me a quick kiss and a grin. “Your mother. Need I say more?”

I rolled my eyes. That really didn’t surprise me. “Oh, no. I know she’s been dying to get you alone. I hope it wasn’t too bad.”

He smiled and shook his head as I chanced a look up at him. “No, it was really nice, actually. I don’t have a mother of my own and barely remember her, but freshly baked cookies and a little fussing over seemed quite motherly to me and felt nice. I just didn’t know how to get away from her.”

I laughed. “You’ll learn, and I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I never really thought about your mom. I didn’t know she wasn’t around.”

“It’s okay, it was a really long time ago. My parents weren’t true mates. She died in childbirth with my youngest brother when I was seven.”

My heart broke for him. I knew a little about his life growing up, but not much.

“Hey, don’t be sad for me. It’s okay. Life happens. Mine may not have been ideal through it all, but no regrets here. I found you despite it all, didn’t I?”

I grinned and rose to my tip toes to kiss him as I closed the door to my office behind me. “That you did. Now, come on. What did Kyle want today? It’s been bugging me all day. Is everything okay?”

“Um, yeah, sure. Look it, take a seat, we need to discuss a few things. Decision time and all that mess.”

I was a nervous wreck. What did that mean? I tried to clue in to his emotions. It was still a new sensation and I wasn’t always sure I was really feeling him or imagining I was.

“Calm down, love. I can feel the nervous energy flowing off you.”

I grinned and relaxed. “Really?”

He smiled, and warmth and love flowed over me. My eyes widened. “Was that you?”

He smiled bigger. “I think so. It’s kind of weird, right?”

I shrugged. “I like it.”

“Me too.” We fell quiet for a minute, just looking at each other, but not in some awkward way, more like just in our own little bubble shutting out the world, until he cleared his throat and started again. “So, about the meeting.”

“Yes,” I said, clearing my head and trying to focus. “What did my brother want?”

“You know that most of your family heard what happened yesterday. There’s no way I can hide the fact that I’ve been banished, which means, we’ve been banished. I’m so sorry, Elise. If I had known he was actually going to go through with it, I never would have completed the mating and subjected you to that.”

My heart sank. “What? You think I care that your asshole father banished you, or us, or whatever? Because I don’t.” My emotions were raw and unsettled. “You really wouldn’t have taken me as a mate over this?” Tears welled up in my eyes and I couldn’t stop them from flowing. I had been thinking the worst all day, stressing over what they were talking about and what it would mean to us. “I know what it means to be a banished wolf, Patrick. I know that technically we are pack-less at the moment, but I don’t really care. If Kyle doesn’t want us to stay because of that, it’s fine. We’ll be fine. As long as we’re together.”

He was kneeling in front of me, pulling me into his arms. “Shhh, I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ve been more than a little freaked out with the situation, but you’re right. I have you and that is the only thing that matters in this world. I don’t want you worrying over this. I just wanted to make sure you

understood the situation. Others may talk. It can be seen as a sign of weakness for another pack to accept a banished wolf, but, Kyle doesn't seem to care about that."

I sniffled, not caring that my tears, and probably a bit of snot too, were soaking his shirt. "Kyle wants us to stay, doesn't he?"

He nodded. I knew he would. Until this very moment, there had really been little doubt in my mind about it. My family would protect us. My pack would accept him with open arms. We were going to be okay.

"We need to talk about this, okay?"

"Okay." I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. "Tell me, what did Kyle want today?"

"First, he wanted me to know that I'm not just welcome in Westin Pack, but that he was never a fan of the idea of us relocating back home. He does not want to lose you just because we mated. Neither do your parents. They are all really hoping I'll consider taking the trials to formally join Westin Pack. How would you feel about that?"

I tried to control my excitement. He looked a little optimistic and nervous asking. I knew I had to take his feelings into consideration, but I had never wanted to live anywhere outside San Marco. Visiting was fine. I liked to travel, but I barely tolerated my college years, and despised being sent off to summer camps as a child, I loved my town and my pack.

"I really need you to tell me how you would feel about it, 'cause if I'm honest, I've never wanted to live anywhere but San Marco."

He seemed to visibly relax. "I can understand why. I've been around a lot of packs, Elise, and nothing compares to this place. It's fucking amazing. I won't lie to you. It's tough on the pride facing this banishment, but it's only pride. You have a good job here, a life. We have a family that loves and supports us. I can't let my stubborn pride get in the way of

considering that. I've never had the support you have here. Your parents, they love you so much."

I nodded my head, I knew it was true. I knew how lucky I was. Hearing stories like his and Kelsey's, they just broke my heart. I'd never know what it's like to have no one. I'd never know what it's like to feel like I don't belong.

"I think you already know how much my family means to me, but it's more than that, too. I have a big responsibility to the pack. To this company even. We haven't talked much about things like finances and stuff, but this place affords our pack a different kind of life, a better one. I know that's not normal for other packs. Many struggle just to hunt enough food not to starve. I know that, but I've never lived that. We aren't supposed to talk or gloat about such things, but if you do decide to go through the trials, they will cover all of that. You'll see quickly that we have no real concerns about stuff like that," I said earnestly.

"Cole was already explaining a bit about that and how the Foundation funds the pack."

"Cole was at your meeting with Kyle?" I asked.

"Yes, because there's more I need to discuss with you besides what pack we're going to submit to, but I'll get to that in a minute. Don't spare my feelings or hold anything back. Do you want to stay here in San Marco, permanently?"

"Yes," I said, without hesitation. "I've always known that someday I'd take a mate and if he was from out of pack that I'd have to follow him, because that's just what the female does, but I've always thought it was stupid and archaic. Why? Even if banishment wasn't in the picture, why can't we choose which pack would be best for us?"

"And you think that would have been Westin regardless?"

"You said you wanted complete honesty, so yes. I have a great job here. My family adores you. You were already part of the family before we even officially met. I know it sounds selfish, but you fit perfectly into my world, and I don't want

things to change, but I know it's not all about me either. We have to consider what's best for you, too. No, what's best for us."

"You have a great job here that you seem to love. You wouldn't have to give that up if we stayed."

"No I wouldn't, but what would you do, Patrick? Would you want to come work at the Foundation? What is it you want to do?"

"Honestly, no one has ever asked me that before. I was raised to be an alpha and that's never going to happen, but Kyle offered me a job already, and E, it's pretty damn close. I don't know if I can turn down this offer."

My interest piqued. I could see the sparkle in my mate's eyes and I could feel his excitement. "What? What did he offer?"

"He's reinstating Betas for Westin. Two of them at least. He said with the Foundation, the baby on the way, and all the added Alpha duties, it's too much for one person. He hadn't intended to take over the pack for several more years, and your dad and the Council apparently suggested that it would be the perfect time to consider reinstating the Beta program. He's asked me and Cole Anderson to take on the duties. It's not alpha, but it's leadership and that's all I've ever studied to be. What do you think?"

I wiped tears from my eyes again. It was perfect. "You could be happy as Beta?" I could see he was barely containing his excitement.

"Yes. It's more than I could possibly have wished for. If I accept this, we'll stay in San Marco. He said we could have the cottage for as long as we want, until we decide to build for ourselves. You can keep your job here for as long as you want it. We could have a good life here, E. I discussed it with your dad, too. He feels strongly that the pack will accept me completely. Of course I still worry about the stigma of banishment, but they really went out of their way to try to convince me that wasn't going to be a problem."

“It won’t. Not here,” I tried to assure him. There had been a time I had prayed that I would find my mate within Westin Pack, even knowing there wasn’t one single boy of interest for me here. I just didn’t want to leave my home and family, but this, this was even better.

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Patrick

Chapter 28

I gave Kyle my official acceptance Saturday morning. He was genuinely happy with my answer. He called an immediate meeting of the Council for approval. I had been in Westin territory for long enough that I already knew each of the Council members well. I had joined Saul and Mallick at the Crate for poker night on several occasions and they were itching to win their money back from me.

“Tuesday night, poker night,” Saul informed me.

“Sorry, old man, but that’s family dinner night, and Mary Westin would skin my hide if I skipped. Not chancing it.”

The entire room laughed.

“I’d heard the rumors, and received the pack notice,” Quinton told me, offering his hand. “Congratulations, son.”

“Thank you,” I said, genuinely meaning it.

The Westin Pack Council was made up of six men, plus Kyle and now his father, Jason, Ambrose, Saul, Mallick, Quinton, Neil, and Cole Anderson made up the whole of the group. Ambrose liked to have an evening Scotch, so we often talked at the bar several times throughout the week. Quinton owned the bank in town. I may not have much compared to Westins, but he had been instrumental in getting my personal funds transferred out of my Clan’s bank before they too were frozen. Neil was a quiet, serious man, and working closely with Quinton for me, handled some of the legal—or rather illegal—aspects of my da freezing my primary accounts. These men were influential in the Pack and knew me well. If

they were willing to accept me, then maybe I really didn't have anything to worry about.

"Used to be a time when you young people came to us for guidance and approval before mating," Ambrose told the room, sounding more nostalgic than critical.

"My apologies, sir. I was told specifically that it wasn't necessary when I inquired, because Elise is my one true mate."

"No need for apologies. You were informed correctly. My mate says I like to gossip more than the church ladies. May be some truth there, or at least I like being in the know around this pack." That caused chuckles throughout the room. Even I knew that the real reason Ambrose took his Scotch at the Crate each evening was for the town gossip.

"Alright gentleman, if you could all come to order." Kyle formally opened the meeting. "We have a few quick things to discuss ahead of tonight's Pack Run. Nothing too surprising, I hope. Just formality."

"Thank you all for welcoming Patrick O'Connell. I can already see that introductions are probably not necessary. Anyone here who hasn't met Pat, yet?" The entire room shook their heads and remained quiet, so he continued. "Great. First, I'm sure you all received the pack notice that went out earlier this week regarding the mating of Patrick and my sister, Elise. My family and I are very happy to welcome him to our family." Nods of approval and congratulations were aimed in my direction.

"Thank you," I told them.

"Next, Patrick is formally submitting request for pack transfer and is prepared to face the trials that go along with that request." There were a few murmurs throughout the room. "Are there any concerns or objections to this request?"

My hands were clinched tight with nerves. What happened if they refused the request?

Mallick motioned to speak.

"Mallick, go ahead."

“Thank you, Kyle. Patrick”—he started directly talking to me—“I’m not certain what everyone here knows, or doesn’t know about you, but could you please give us a brief introduction?”

I cleared my throat and stood, waiting for Kyle’s nod of approval. “I’m Patrick O’Connell, mate of Elise Westin. I’m the third son of Aidan, Alpha to the Irish Clan. My brothers and I were all groomed to take over as alphas someday. I was sent here to Westin to challenge Kyle for that position.”

“Yet, you reneged on that challenge. Why?” Mallick asked, even though I knew he knew the answer to that already.

“During warm-ups for the challenge, I caught a whiff of my one true mate. Upon meeting Kelsey, it was very clear to me that she was Kyle’s true mate, and after smelling mine, I knew that I could not accept anyone else, nor could I take him away from his.”

“I’ve known your father practically since birth.” Ambrose, the oldest member of the Council, spoke. “How did he handle such insubordination?”

I took a deep breath. “Banishment.”

There was some surprise and even outrage in the room.

“To be clear,” Saul asked, “you want us to approve the acceptance of a banished wolf into the Pack?” Kyle’s head nodded yes. “And you, Kyle, you were fully aware of his status prior to this meeting?”

“Yes sir, I was, and given the extenuating circumstances, I stand by the request.”

Neil’s hand shot up.

“Neil, you have the floor.”

He stood. “I’ve worked closely with Patrick on some legal issues we’re trying to resolve. I would say that there are many extenuating circumstances here. Not only has he shown our current alpha the utmost respect by reneging in the challenges, but he did so knowing the potential negative impact it would have on him. Perhaps slightly selfish in that

his true mate played a factor in that, but we also have to consider that his father is an enormous ass. His banishment is a personal punishment, nothing more. His bank accounts were illegally frozen. Clan payments to his accounts stopped, but that was not enough for Aidan of the Irish. He took it to the next step when his son did not fall into line and rush back to beg for mercy. I support Patrick O'Connell's request one hundred percent. I would not send any pup of mine to live under that tyrant, nor would I wish it for Elise. Banishment makes an easy decision as far as I'm concerned. Patrick and Elise stay in San Marco."

He said it with such authority, like it was non-negotiable, and no one said a word to rebut him.

"Go ahead and take the vote," Mallick told Kyle.

"Do I need to step out?" I asked.

"No, son, you're fine right there. Best to learn your fate right away," Saul told me. I gulped and took a deep breath. *Okay, here goes*, I thought.

"Patrick O'Connell has requested pack transference and is ready to face the trials. Ambrose, how do you vote?"

"Accepted."

"Saul?"

"Yes."

"Mallick?"

"Absolutely."

"Quinton?"

"Your father's an ass, and we'd be proud to welcome you at Westin."

"Neil?"

"One hundred percent, yes."

"Cole?"

"Hell, yes."

"And Dad?"

“I already consider him a Westin. Yes.”

Relief washed over me and I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding.

“That's a unanimous YES. Your petition for pack transfer is accepted and your trials will start immediately. Congratulations, Patrick.”

The men rose and each in turn shook my hand. If I was honest, it was the most accepted I'd ever felt in my entire life, aside from Elise, of course. I felt like I had finally found my place.

“There's more, so settle it back down. There will be plenty of time to celebrate tonight at the pack run. Patrick, as part of the trials, you are invited to join us at the pack house for dinner followed by the run tonight,” Kyle informed.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Now, Patrick and Cole, please join me up front.” He paused, giving us time to get in place. “Next on the agenda. A special council meeting was held this week to discuss the reinstatement of the Beta program. I'd like to formally introduce my first two candidates, Cole Anderson and Patrick O'Connell. Of course, Patrick's final acceptance will be contingent upon his completion of the trials.”

“And surviving the challenges,” Cole pointed out.

I cringed as images of fighting Niall to the death made my stomach roll.

“You nervous about the trials?” Quinton questioned, reading my unease. “It's quite likely you won't even receive any challenges from within Westin and we only submitted notice to the nearest three packs. After what Kyle and Kelsey went through and the disagreement with the Bulgarians, I really wouldn't expect much to come of it, especially with Kelsey expecting a child.”

“And the Clan,” I said.

“What?”

“The Irish Clan. My banishment came, officially, after the notice of mating was released. Likely because of it even. Because it was my pack at the time, they too were notified. My da’s sending my brother Niall to challenge me and make up for my failure to the Clan. I’ve already been notified.”

The room was silent.

“You’re serious?” Jason Westin finally asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Did you know about this?” he asked Kyle.

“Yes, sir. While he did not formally notify me, I was present when he told the plan to Patrick.”

“Asshole,” Neil said. “We cannot let him get away with this.”

“Official war has not been declared. I cannot reject a potential challenger on the basis of his alpha being an asshole.” Kyle said.

I had made the mistake of taking a sip of minerals at that moment and nearly choked.

“What is the Grand Council waiting on? Because as far as I’m concerned we are at war. The Bulgarians attacked us on our own soil. They were behind the kidnapping of Elise Westin. Alliances are already being drawn. We are at war. It’s only a matter of time before they try to attack again. If the Grand Council can’t recognize that, then maybe it’s time we removed Westin from the Council’s holdings,” Quinton said.

“They’d never agree to that. Westin fronts more than seventy-five percent of the Grand Council’s funds. They cannot afford to lose us,” Neil informed them.

“Then why aren’t we using that power to force their hand? No one is doing anything about the Bulgarians. We need to step it up and push back,” Quinton argued.

“I’ve already requested an audience with Omar,” Kyle informed them. “He’ll be here next week representing the Grand Council. They are still looking into the kidnapping allegations of Elise. I’m not sure why they are dragging their

feet on it, but I will be pressing for answers next week. In the meantime, we have a pack dinner and run, and tomorrow is the pack meeting and another dinner. Let's be thankful for all we have and enjoy this time of calm, together."

"I'll second that," Saul said, and Kyle dismissed the meeting.

Cole turned to me, shaking his head. "I don't envy you. You have one hell of a crazy ride coming up. The trials, the challenges, Beta training, a new mate—man, you're crazy."

I laughed. "Maybe not quite what I had planned, but I have a whole life ahead to build with my mate."

"Really? You lovesick fools disgust me sometimes."

Kyle and I shared a knowing look. Yeah look it, someday we'd be making him eat crow.

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Elise

Chapter 29

I've always loved pack runs. They were one of my favorite things each month. The meals before them were great. As a little girl I'd run around with my siblings and friends, playing games. Watching all the grown-ups line up and shift as one pack never ceased to amaze me. As a teen, I'd often hide out with my boyfriend of the day, occasionally making out behind the shed out back. I'd had my first beer behind that shed on a pack run night.

I shifted for the first time just before my eighteenth birthday. I would never forget my first true pack run. It was the first time I had been allowed to stay out all night. The moon was fuller and brighter somehow. The stars twinkled in the dark sky. It was magical.

As I sat around looking at my family and packmates surrounding me, welcoming my mate to the pack and congratulating us, I knew that it was going to be another unforgettable, magical run.

Patrick looked relaxed and happy by my side. The Council meeting had gone well. We had a crazy couple of months to survive ahead of us, but I knew that together, we were unstoppable. There was lots of talk about our mating around the tables, but the official discussion wouldn't come until the next night when we'd get a glimpse of our potential challengers.

The dinner was my first time really seeing Patrick with my pack. I had seen him with my family and knew he got along famously with them, but what I hadn't realized was that in his hunt to find me, while I was cowardly hiding from him,

he seemed to have befriended everyone. I had started to make introductions as people came by to talk to us, but there had been no need.

“Is there anyone here you don’t already know?” I finally asked him, literally floored by the realization.

He looked around. “No, I don’t think so, why?”

“How do you know so many people?”

“Love, I spent a lot of time around here looking for you. I wasn’t the one hiding, and I wasn’t afraid to pull any and all resources offered.”

As if on cue, Christine came bouncing over to us and threw her arms around Patrick.

“I’m so happy for you,” she squealed. “Finding your true mate, sealing the bond, changing packs to be with her. It’s so romantic.”

A loud warning growl escaped me. It came out of nowhere.

Christine just smiled and brushed it off. “Can’t tell you how many times she growled at me before the challenges were over.” She was pointing over her shoulder at Kelsey. I was a little taken aback by how nonchalant she was about it. Christine had almost lost her life when she challenged Kelsey. I couldn’t believe how casually she tossed that around.

Meanwhile, Kelsey was laughing hysterically. “See, I’m not the only one,” she struggled to say. Then her face turned serious and she jumped up, holding her belly, and waddled off in the direction of the bathroom. “Dammit E, you can’t make me laugh like that.”

Lily let out a whoop and my momentary aggression disappeared completely as I joined her.

“You okay, love?” Patrick asked, rubbing my shoulder.

I nodded, “Yeah. Sorry, Chris. I don’t know where that came from.”

“It’s okay. Just a mating thing. You’re about to go into the challenges, where your mate will be threatened. It’s only natural, but trust me, I’ve learned my lesson.” She kneeled, lowering herself beneath me, and bared her neck. “Full acceptance and support. Patrick’s a really great guy, Elise. You wouldn’t believe the shit he went through to find you. I’m really happy for you both and would never try to come between you. Heck, I’d never try to come between true mates ever again!”

I knew her words meant to be comforting, but they really had the opposite effect. I felt terrible for everything I put him through and for showing aggression like that. That growl had just jumped out of me.

Patrick leaned in and kissed my cheek before whispering in my ear. “You are worth all the shit, and I think it’s pretty fucking sexy hearing you growl on my behalf.” He winked at me and I blushed furiously.

Just as we were about to head outside to kick off the run, Patrick’s phone rang. He looked at it with a scowl. I glanced down. Blocked number.

“Hello?”

“It’s Dave, get somewhere you can talk.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. Dave. The human. He would only call if there was a problem. Trying not to alarm anyone, I casually stood and took his hand. He tried to tell me no, but I glared at him and nodded my head yes. Planting a fake smile on my face to hide my fear, I led him outside and across the street.

“E, Kyle’s about to start the run, come on. I may not be able to join in the fun, but I’ll still be there in spirit,” Kelsey said pathetically, still sad about not getting to run.

I gave her a quick hug. “Do you have the keys for Kyle’s office?”

Her eyes were marked with confusion, but she nodded and handed them to me.

“It’s Dave. We need a safe place to talk.”

“Kyle has to get the pack run started, but I’ll let him know.” She pointed to her head and I understood that she would communicate telepathically through their bond so there was no chance of being overheard.

I nodded and picked up the pace as we headed for Kyle’s office. As soon as the door was closed behind me, I turned to him. “You’re free to talk openly. No one outside of this room will hear anything.”

“Sorry Dave, but I had to get to someplace safe. Wolf ears and all makes that a little difficult sometimes.”

“We’re seeing movement heading in your direction. There’s a small group from your Clan that entered the US yesterday. Sorry I was tied up and couldn’t get away to warn you. They are likely on your doorstep by now,” I heard Dave tell him. I didn’t need the phone on speaker mode with my wolf ears. It was a benefit and downfall at times.

“They aren’t my Clan anymore. I am Westin, and I’ve been expecting them.”

My heart soared with pride hearing Patrick say that, but fear prickled me knowing it was his brother coming to challenge him.

“Okay, good. There’s at least one Bulgarian shifter traveling with them. There’s also another Bulgarian group currently on a flight to San Francisco. The strange thing about that other one is that it’s a group of females.”

“The Bulgarian women. Do you have any names?”

“There’s a Raina something and ...”

“It’s okay. Raina is friendly—at least, she’s shown no reason for us not to trust her. The Clan group is my brother coming in for the challenges. It’s a shifter thing.”

I was surprised at how forthcoming and honest Patrick was with this human. I realized he truly did trust him. He was looking at me like he understood what I was thinking and gave me a wickedly sexy grin. This was serious, and I needed to stay focused, but my body was starting to tingle all over and I was getting seriously turned on. Bad timing, I knew.

I also knew the exact second Patrick knew it too. His nose flared and he must have smelled my arousal. He turned big questioning eyes my way before fighting back a knowing smirk.

“Dave, the number you called on is blocked. Is there a way for me to get in touch with you?”

“It’s too risky, Patrick.”

“Not as risky as a blocked number, Dave. I can program you in as a fake name so as not to alarm anyone, but multiple blocked numbers could draw suspicion.

“Shit, you’re right. I knew this wouldn’t work.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll just delete it as soon as we hang up. I don’t want you to freak out. This information is more valuable than you know. My Alpha”—I loved the sound of that, as I knew he was referring to Kyle—“will be talking terms with the Grand Council this week. You should know, Westin’s preparing for war. We won’t go out looking for a fight, but if they come to us again, it will be a lot bloodier than the last time. Keep me posted on any more movement you notice.”

They wrapped up their conversation and my mate turned to find me grinning.

“That turned you on?” he asked, not holding back anything.

I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss that escalated so quickly I thought my body would combust. His hands skimmed up my body, leaving a fiery trail in their wake. I wasn’t sure what was happening to me, but I needed him so bad it hurt. Clothes quickly piled up on the floor and I only broke our kiss long enough to get the shirts over our heads.

“Elise,” he groaned against my mouth, making my whole body shiver. “We need to ...”

I silenced him, pushing him down onto a chair and straddling him. I wasn’t sure what was happening with me, but

I knew what I needed and exactly what I wanted and I was going to get it.

Relief washed over me as I settled on top of him.

“Mine,” I growled, moving against him.

I didn’t hear the movement of the door until Patrick let out a warning growl of his own.

“What the ... ” Kelsey cut him off.

“Out!” I yelled

“Ewww,” I heard Kelsey whine and laugh at the same time. “Kyle, stop, she’s not really had him around the pack before today. Let her, uh, mark her territory, and then we can talk,” I heard her say as she pushed my brother from the room.

I knew I should have been embarrassed. Patrick was frozen in place. I was pretty sure he was beyond horrified, but I needed release so badly I didn’t care.

“Mine,” I growled against his throat before nipping my mark on his neck. That definitely fired him back up. In my opinion, we were done much too soon, but I did feel a lot better and some of the aggression that had been building inside me throughout the evening had released.

Patrick quickly dressed and threw me my clothes, still looking horrified.

“I cannot believe we just did that.”

I stopped him and kissed him, shrugging. “So, Kyle may be scarred for life. It was worth it.”

I saw my mate melt a little at my praise and affection, but I did dress quickly and open the door to welcome them back in. My face was definitely red, but more with satisfaction than embarrassment.

Patrick was trying to fix his mussed hair and pacing the room when they walked in. Kyle looked ready to murder him, but I growled at him to back off. Kelsey busted out laughing.

“Patrick, I’m so sorry,” she started as Kyle stared at her like she’d lost her mind.

“You’re sorry?” he questioned.

“No, really guys, I’m sorry,” Patrick said. “I’m not even sure what happened. One minute I was on the phone, the next, it, well, it just happened.”

I turned to look at my mate, upset by his words, but I immediately relaxed seeing the look of complete satisfaction in his eyes. I also noticed the unmistakable silent interaction going on with my brother and his mate.

She laughed again. “Honestly, Patrick, it’s not your fault. I swear to you it is an actual Westin thing.” She shot me a knowing look. “You would not believe some of the places Kyle had to stake his claim. It’s like they have this spontaneous need that just consumes them.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what it felt like!” I told her.

“My office, E?”

I just shrugged, happy to know I wasn’t going crazy.

“Oh my gosh! There was this one time, that Kyle—” My brother put his hand over his mate’s mouth to physically shut her up.

“Let’s just make a pact to never ever, under any circumstances, speak of this again.”

“Deal,” Patrick quickly chimed in.

Kelsey wrapped an arm around me, but didn’t say anything further, so I didn’t either. I laid my head on her shoulder, trying to thank her for the support as the guys got down to business.

Patrick

Chapter 30

I didn't know what had gotten into Elise. It had been amazing and terrifying all at the same time. As I relayed Dave's information, I kept looking over at her, but she seemed fine. Happy. Content. She and Kelsey excused themselves, leaving me alone with her brother, who I was certain wanted to kill me.

"You're totally taking that chair home. You know that, right?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing my face was probably redder than my hair, and not just my face, but I could feel the heat spreading down my neck and on my ears too.

Kyle burst out laughing. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. I hung up with Dave and she just sort of attacked me."

"Oh God, no details, please."

"Jesus, Kyle, is that normal?"

"Are you really complaining?"

How did I tell her brother that it was probably the most turned on I'd ever been in my life when she took control? I didn't really have to answer his question, because I was quite certain my face told him all he needed to know. I was having a hard time keeping the smile off my face.

"Okay, look," he finally said. "Dammit, that's my little sister." He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Don't think about

that,” he said more to himself than to me. “I’ve been there man. The pack meetings and stuff suck the most, or not. I guess it depends on how you look at it. Didn’t you feel a little possessive with all those males around?”

“Not really, but I didn’t really see her talking to many other males either, aside from those in your family.”

“Okay, yeah, that makes a difference. I saw Christine throw herself into your arms. She was lucky E didn’t knock her out right then. It’s normal to get very territorial before and during the initial mating, but in my experience the worst of it is during the challenge period. Kelsey could barely tolerate me around my sisters at times, and I know I wasn’t much better. It subsides, a little afterwards, but hell, Kelsey was pregnant shortly after and it gets even worse then, at least for me. It’s calmed her down a lot though.”

“Thanks for, uh, understanding,” I said awkwardly.

“Next time, just remember she does have a bedroom down the hall, and I’m serious, you are taking that chair home.”

I grinned back at him. “So it really doesn’t sound like we have much new or concerning on the travel front. At least nothing we weren’t somewhat aware of. I’m surprised to hear Raina has travelers with her, but she did say she’d be back towards the end of the pregnancy, didn’t she? It’s still a little early for that, but it’s Raina. She’s kind of unpredictable, but so far harmless.”

“Your job as Beta, I think, is going to be primarily focused on security. You’re already in communication with the humans and it just makes sense. You were trained to be an alpha. You know how to spot weaknesses in the pack and perimeter as well, maybe even better than, me. If you think you’re up for it, that’s where I’d like your focus.”

“You sure? I mean technically I’m still an outsider, Kyle. You really trust me enough to take on that responsibility?”

He looked me over with scrutiny. Staring straight into my eyes and making my wolf begin to cower, he asked, “Do I have any reason not to trust you?”

“No,” I said, holding his stare long enough to show my sincerity. “You have my full allegiance, Alpha. I am up to the task and will begin walking our borders tonight on the run.”

“You can take the night off and . . . ew, I almost said enjoy time with Elise, but we both know you already did that. So yeah, go do something beneficial like walking the North Pass.”

I laughed. Poor Kyle might be traumatized for quite some time—me too, if I were being honest.

I found Elise talking and laughing with Kelsey, seemingly unaffected by our earlier indisposition. She was so beautiful, she took my breath away. I still couldn’t believe she was mine.

Sensing my presence, she smiled and turned bright-blue eyes my way. My heart did a little flip in my chest, and my cheeks began to burn. I could feel my neck reddening and she laughed as she hugged Kelsey goodbye.

“Do I even want to ask what you’re thinking?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t even been thinking anything inappropriate, but remembering instead.

I cleared my throat. “I’m going to join the run and a quick perimeter check of the north pass. Would you care to join me?”

“Yes, I would,” she said, still grinning and linking her arm through mine.

Outside we changed quickly. Elise looked back over her shoulder and took off at a full sprint. I did the only thing I could. I gave chase.

We ran, jumping over rocks and dodging under low-lying branches. My wolf had always been dominant, but he seemed perfectly content to follow our mate’s lead. He certainly had shown no signs of aggression when she had

taken control of things earlier either. I thought for a moment. He had even been subdued with Kyle.

I had always struggled with my wolf, who was more dominant than any of my brothers, and often tried to challenge my father, too. Since coming to San Marco, my wolf and I had largely been one, at peace. It made me consider that maybe we were exactly where we were meant to be.

I was enjoying the playful side of my mate's wolf until I smelled him. Niall. And he wasn't alone. I sniffed the air and grunted my displeasure as I alerted my mate. My chest puffed as her hackles rose, but she moved to stand behind me.

I sniffed the air again. Gregory. Da must have sent him to make sure Niall went through with the challenges. Gregory was the youngest of my brothers. He was also arrogant and spoiled, but perhaps the most ruthless of us all. My wolf growled a menacing sound to warn them back. He did not like their close proximity to our mate.

I stayed low to the ground and watched and waited until they slowly came through the North Pass. The North Pass was the same section the Bulgarians had entered our territory when they came for Kelsey and I immediately noted the need to close it off or provide more security to this section of our land. Distracted by my brothers and their companions, the thought of thinking it being "our" and, as if it in some way belonged to me too, was missed. In that moment, I was Westin and my enemy just encroaching on my territory.

The first wolf to come through stopped and stared at me. Recognition flickered as I saw my brother. Niall immediately changed and put his hands up in peace. My wolf snarled and snapped his jaws. My brother did not move. He spoke softly, telling the others to change. He knew I could never attack him while in wolf form as long as he was in his skin.

"Brother, I come in peace."

I was standing on two legs, furious, before I even knew what was happening. "You come in peace? Peace? Bloody

hell, Niall. What the feck are you thinking? You come here to challenge me for my mate. MY. MATE,” I screamed.

I heard movement behind us quickly approaching. As a pack of Westin wolves breached the clearing, Elise turned to them and barked once. They all heeded and sat to watch, waiting for the moment they were needed. I knew they had my back and I knew my brothers wouldn't stand a chance if they tried anything.

The realization that I was thinking like that about my brothers, my own flesh and blood, made me sick to my stomach, but this was the position our father had put us in.

“I don't want to fight you, Patrick, but you don't know how furious Da got with your betrayal.”

I snorted at his choice of words. Da would always see it as a betrayal. I knew it with certainty. I would never regret what I had done though, not even for him, the man I had once idolized.

“You fight me, you will die. Do you understand that? I don't want to kill you, but if you choose to go through with this, I will not spare you.”

I watched him pale at my threat. He knew my capabilities and my strengths and weaknesses in a fight, but he had never felt the power and possession that came with a true mate. There was no way anyone was taking her from me.

As if sensing my heightened anxiety, I felt Elise's soft fur brush up against me and I began to relax. I turned to the wolves and nodded my head for them to leave us. “Go,” I said. “Enjoy the rest of the run. They will be escorted off pack land and guarded till morning. They will not interfere with the pack run in any way. This I assure you.”

Several howls broke out as the wolves dispersed. Elise was the only remaining and she did not leave my side, nor did she shift back to her human form. For this I was very thankful. I understood now what Kyle had warned regarding other males around my mate, but neither could I stand to have her out of my sight, and I knew if she returned to her human form, I

would be as quick to attack her as she had me just a few hours earlier.

“You’re approximately fifty yards into Westin pack territory. There’s a pack run going on tonight and you will exit our land and leave them to run in peace. You can set up camp for the night and I’ll arrange a meeting with Kyle in the morning.”

Niall looked surprised, and a bit of hurt and confusion crossed his face at my words. Gregory scoffed in disgust. Jack, an old childhood friend of Niall’s who was practically another brother to me, shook his head and turned to leave. The last remaining was the stranger that came with him. I didn’t recognize his scent, but I suspected he was the Bulgarian Dave had warned me of.

“Bulgarian,” I said, watching shock, fear, and anger simultaneously register. “We’ll be watching you especially close.”

A low growl came from him, but he turned and stomped off with the others.

The good thing about the North Pass is that it was literally that, a pass. A steep mountain that sloped down to the valley on one side and a rock face comprised the other. It was thirty feet long and about five feet wide, just enough to comfortably walk it in single formation. Side by side was possible, but could be scary as hell. Just on the other side of the pass it opened up, and I knew they could find a place to camp.

I shifted to my wolf form and walked over to the pass. About ten yards in I could just see around to the entrance on the other side. I dropped to the ground with a huff and knew it was going to be a long night. Elise’s soft fur snuggled into my side. I looked at her and she grinned, giving me a big sloppy kiss across my nose. The noises that followed from her were kind of creepy, but I knew it was her laughing through her wolf.

While my mate tended to be more serious and guarded in human form, her wolf was extremely playful, carefree, and

affectionate. I had caught glimpses of that personality in Elise too, when she let her guard down. I longed for the day that her guard stayed permanently down. We were making progress, but I still felt like there was a part of her that she held back from me.

She settled down and went fast to sleep as I kept watch.

As the sun began to crest through the trees, I stirred at a nearby noise. A snap of a twig had me jumping to my feet with a menacing growl. I had fallen asleep. Elise was still sound asleep on the ground next to me as if she were completely unaffected by anything in the world. So peaceful.

The sound of approaching footsteps had my wolf baring his teeth as a low rumble shook through my chest.

“Whoa, boy. Whoa!” Jack said as he stumbled back a few steps.

I shifted. “Bloody hell, Jack, what are you doing here?”

“What am I doing? You nearly put the cross sideways in me heart, Patrick.”

I shook my head, trying to calm my nerves. I shifted and breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth as my racing heart slowly subsided.

He sat on the ground in the middle of the path a few feet away from me and I slowly did the same, acting as a buffer between him and Elise, careful not to leave my mate unprotected.

“She really worth it?”

I looked back at the still sleeping black wolf and smiled. “Yeah, she is.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Stupid sappy smirk on your face. Who’d ever have thought it? You? Patrick O’Connell? Favored son of Aidan, Clan Alpha? I didn’t believe it when I heard it. Now look at you.”

“Never happier in all my life, Jack.”

“She really that good?” Jack asked, wagging his eyebrows up and down and making obscene gestures with his hand. I tossed a rock at him, trying to keep my composure. I knew he was only trying to get a rise out of me.

“Fine,” he finally conceded. “This place got a good tavern at least?”

“Aye, it does. The Crate. It’s down in town.”

“Good to know. So, all that talk last night about ‘my territory’ and ‘my pack,’ you can’t possibly believe that. You’re an Irish wolf. You belong in the Clan. We’re not here to fight you, Patrick—we’re here to take you home.”

I looked at him in confusion. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Jack, Da banished me from the Clan. He sent Niall to fight me for my mate and take over Westin Pack. I’ll never return to our homeland.” The thought saddened me, but not as much as I expected it should. It was true: for me, at least, San Marco was already home. Westin was my pack.

Jack looked horrified. “No, that’s not right. Niall’s orders were to come and bring you home.”

“No, Jack, they aren’t.”

“He can’t. He can’t fight you. For her?”

I shook my head. “No, for Da.” I let that sink in a bit before hitting him with the next question. “You gonna tell me why a Bulgarian is traveling with you?”

“A Bulgarian?” he snorted. “I don’t know what you mean. You talking about Bruno? He’s no Bulgarian. Found him in the woods, we did. A lone wolf. Your da took him in and has been counseling him. Thought it would be good experience and extra help to get you home.”

I stared at him like he was an idiot. “He’s a Bulgarian, Jack.”

“No, he’s not. Niall would have told me.”

“Like he told you about his challenge?”

“I don’t know what you’re playing at here. Our orders are to grab you and get back to the Clan as quickly as possible.”

“Then why didn’t you just grab me last night? We could be hours away from here by now, but where’s Niall?”

“He-he said we needed to rest first,” Jack confessed, stumbling over his words and thinking things through. He jumped up, irritated. The tips of his ears were turning a dark red. “No bloody way. I don’t believe you.”

As the sun was steadily rising in the sky, and Jack stomped off to talk to Niall, I woke up Elise. She stretched her front paws and yawned, turning sleepy eyes towards me. Her sleek black coat shined in the morning rays. Her wolf was truly as magnificent as she was.

“Love, I need you to go and alert Kyle that we have company.”

“No need,” Kyle said exiting the woods fully clothed with Cole Anderson and several others flanking him. He tossed me a clean set of clothes from a bag and threw the bag itself at E. With a nod of his head, she gave me one last look and headed off into the woods.

I quickly changed just as Niall and his party entered the pass.

“Patty, it’s morning. Your pack run is over. Let’s just get this whole ordeal over already. Take me to Kyle Westin, alpha of Westin Pack, so I can formally enter my challenge.”

“Bloody hell, I swear I didn’t know, Patrick,” Jack swore.

“That will not be necessary,” Kyle spoke, entering the pass and sizing up the arriving party. “You travel with my enemy,” he spat out, staring down the one they had called Bruno. “And as such your challenge will not be accepted, nor will any of you be permitted to enter Westin territory without declaration of war.”

Turning to the Westin wolves, he made an announcement. “Last night I had an emergency meeting with

the Grand Council via video call. In light of the attack, and the kidnapping of my sister, a formal declaration of war against the Bulgarians has been issued. Since you travel with a Bulgarian in your party, that makes you my enemy as well. You will leave the area at once and return to your alpha. Not doing so would be very, very bad.”

I could feel the release of Kyle’s alpha powers. They were so strong even my wolf struggled not to kneel in complete submission to the man, but when Kelsey walked out, surrounded by five wolves, his power strengthened even more. She held her head high and I could see she was pissed.

“How dare you interrupt a pack run,” she said as the wind picked up and began to swirl around us.

“Looks like someone needs to learn how to keep his bitch in line.” Gregory grinned arrogantly.

A small tornado started just beneath his feet, knocking him on his arse and sending him up into the air and over the side of cliff, suspended by the whirling wind beneath him. He screamed.

“I am a grade-A certified, one of a kind, alpha she-wolf witch bitch, and I am very pregnant and hormonal. You would do best not to piss me off any further.” With the wave of her hand my youngest brother went flying back into the rocks with a hard thud that projected him forward. Jack and Niall grabbed him just before he went over the cliff edge.

I had never seen Kelsey’s powers before like this.

“Babe, you’ve been practicing,” Kyle said proudly, and her anger deflated at his praise.

“Yeah, it felt good, too. All those hormones just kind of exploded.” He gave her a quick hug and I smiled, watching them.

A small hand clasped mine and I didn’t need to turn to look to see my own mate had joined my side.

“Bulgarian,” Elise yelled to Bruno, who raised his chin in defiance. “Learn your lesson yet? No Bulgarian is welcome in Westin, and no Bulgarian sympathizer or supporter is,

either. Go home, or face the full wrath of Westin. You'd do well to inform your pack. We won't put up with any further attempts to hurt anymore members of our pack."

His arrogance got the better of him. "The Bulgati's are idiots who screwed up their mission. It was never to hurt you," he spat in disgust. "You were no more than a tool to hurt Kyle and negotiate for Kelsey." Turning to Kelsey, he addressed her directly using her birth name. "Elena, you belong to Bulgaria. We will have you, no matter the cost."

There was some commotion behind us and I saw Bruno pale. I turned slowly to see Omar of the Grand Council exit the woods. He nodded at Kyle.

"I really wish you hadn't said that, but in light of the confession just made, Bruno of Bulgaria, the Grand Council will affirm the war between the packs. You've left us no other choice. A threat to Westin's Pack Mother is a serious crime against the wolves and will not be taken lightly. Kyle, you have your affirmation of war."

"You were bluffing. You said the affirmation was already confirmed. You were bluffing," he snarled.

Kyle just proudly grinned and shrugged. "And you just got outsmarted by two female bitches."

Elise squeezed my hand and I looked down to my smiling blue-eyed beauty as I slowly began putting the pieces together.

"The Grand Council was still pushing for peace, saying the reports that the Bulgarians were behind your kidnapping could not be substantiated."

She nodded. "All I had to do was get him to confess."

I pulled her into my arms and proudly kissed her for all to see, before turning back to my brothers. "Go home, boys. Tell Da our borders are closed, and if he continues to mingle with Bulgarians, we'll be adding the Irish to our list of enemies."

"Bloody hell," Jack said. "I swear we didn't know he was Bulgarian, Pat."

I could see on both my brothers' faces that was not the truth.

“My challenge. I have the right to challenge Patrick O’Connell in the legacy of mating rituals. Kyle, I officially place my chal—”

Kyle cut my brother off. “Challenges will only be accepted from Westin wolves and officially allied packs, as per the Wolf Packs War Treaty. As the Irish clan had not previously chosen a side, but is working with my enemy, I do not accept your challenge, or any Irish wolf’s challenge proclamation here.”

“Patrick is Irish,” Gregory sneered. “You cannot dismiss Niall’s challenge against our clan-mate.”

“Actually,” Kyle said, “Patrick is Westin now. Officially requested, accepted, and as of this morning, trials have been completed and unanimously signed off for transfer by all Pack Council members. Go home. There will be no challenges from you.”

I knew my eyes were practically bulging out of my head. Was Kyle bluffing again?

Snarls and a few growls came from my brother’s group, but they finally turned tail and left without further incident.

Omar approached me and handed me an envelope. “Your official pack transfer papers, as recognized by the Grand Council. Congratulations.”

I stared down in shock at the papers in my hand. “This is real?”

“It’s real, man,” Kyle told me.

“We got you, bro,” Liam said, slapping me on the back.

“Dude, we told you, you’re Westin now.”

Saul approached. “I know it’s a little unorthodox, but we have a list of requirements for Westin transfer, mostly surrounding pack loyalty. Last night I stayed and watched you interact and speak with the foreign wolves. There was no

doubt in my mind where your loyalties lay. When Omar arrived this morning, and an emergency pack council gathering was called, I made motion to close the trials as complete for you. Welcome to Westin, son.”

“Thank you, Saul. I really don’t know what to say.”

The others laughed and congratulated me. Elise stayed by my side through it all, but had remained quiet. Smiling and supportive, but quiet. The morning seemed to drag on with formalities and conversations ahead of the night’s pack meeting where I would be officially introduced as the newest Westin pack wolf, and our formal announcement of mating and opening of the challenges. It was so much to absorb that it overwhelmed me. The only thing grounding me was the constant presence of my mate.

At last we finally found ourselves alone and I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. Looking into her eyes, I needed my final affirmation.

“Elise, you’re okay with all of this? I mean, it’s happening so fast. I’m a little overwhelmed by it all.”

“You gave up everything for me, Patrick. You switched packs, for me. I don’t know how I’ll ever make this up to you. I—” she started, and shook her head smiling up at me. “You can’t possibly know how much this all means to me.”

I hugged her close. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, love. Don’t you know that by now? I love you.”

With tears glistening in her eyes she stared at me in awe. “I love you, too.”

Elise

Epilogue

Kyle glanced down at his watch then looked around the room. “Final call for challenges,” he announced. “Anyone? Anyone?”

I smacked him affectionately.

“Okay, well, if no one has any last second challenges, then Elise and Patrick, you are officially, one hundred percent, cannot be challenged again, mated. Congratulations!”

“Challenged again?” Lily whined. “That would insinuate they actually had a challenge to begin with. So unfair.”

I laughed happily and pulled Patrick to me for a kiss as cheers rang out all around us. It was true. We’d survived the four-month mating period without a single challenge to either of us. Of course, the limited pool of challengers due to the war had helped our cause some. It made me feel more like an idiot for all those months of running from him in fear of the challenges. I was grateful he had never once pointed that fact out or commented on my stupidity.

Patrick had officially accepted the role as Beta. He was in charge of pack security and he seemed happy with his new job. His first order had been to close off the North Pass entirely. Given its history, I’d say that was a pretty smart move.

We had had a few skirmishes with other packs, but mostly just threats in the four months since the war was officially recognized. Dave, Patrick’s human friend, had warned us that Raina and some Bulgarian women were headed

our way at the same time Patrick's brothers arrived, but she had never made it. She had promised Kelsey she'd be back before the baby was born, but there had been no word of her or Dave since that night. It was still just another mystery that we couldn't allow ourselves to be consumed by.

Kyle believed Raina had gone home due to the border closures and proclamation of war, but it didn't entirely sit well with me. She had been so excited about the baby's arrival when we had last seen her.

As if on cue, Kelsey yelled out from the next room, and a hush passed through the crowd as they waited outside the alpha's home for the impending news of our newest Westin.

"I think I'm being summoned." Kyle said to several chuckles as he ran back into the house.

Having wolf hearing wasn't always a positive thing. We could all hear every second of her labor and it sounded so bad, I was reconsidering ever having kids. Several had begun pacing in anticipation as her groans and cries grew closer and closer together.

"Patrick, Elise, can you guys, uh, help?"

We both looked at each other, a little freaked out by the request, but how could you possibly turn down your brother asking something like that at a time like this?

"What's up?"

He grinned at us both as we stood in his living room. "Kelsey and I would really like it if you two would be present for the baby's birth."

"No way," Patrick said, throwing his hands up in the air and turning white in horror.

Kelsey screamed, followed by a powerful command sent with her she-wolf alpha powers that had us on our knees and ready to submit to anything she asked. I laughed and followed Kyle down the hall, dragging my mate with me.

"Oh, God, you're here, finally! Thank you!" she said. She was soaked in sweat but smiling despite the horror film

cries we'd been listening to from outside. "Did you ask them?"

"No, I was getting there, though." He looked at me and Patrick and, taking her hand in his, they shared a secret smile before turning back to us. "Kelsey and I would really love it if you two would be the baby's godparents."

"Seriously?" Patrick asked.

"Yes, now please hurry and say yes, 'cause this kid is coming fast." She groaned, and turned a pale shade of green I'd never seen on a person before.

"Yes," I blurted out. "Of course we will." I looked up at Patrick, and though he looked terrified, he nodded his agreement, too.

"The baby's crowning," Doc announced. "Come on Kelsey! Give me one more good push."

She grabbed hold of Kyle's hand and squeezed hard. I watched as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. She screamed one last time and then her whole body relaxed. It was fascinating to watch. I looked back at Doc and saw as he pulled a tiny brown-haired thing from her.

I reached for Patrick, who was staring at me and smiling. It was such a beautiful moment, and when that tiny little bundle let out a wail and cheers went up from outside, it was a perfect, magical moment.

Kelsey cried as they laid the baby in her arms. I was crying, too. I looked up at Patrick and saw his eyes were glistening, also.

"It's a boy," Micah announced and the noise from outside was almost deafening as the pack celebration began for the new heir of Westin.

Kyle took the baby from Kelsey as she nodded and smiled through her tears. He spoke softly to the child before placing him in my arms.

"These are your godparents, Aunt Elise and Uncle Patrick." He looked proudly back at us. "Meet Alexander Patrick Westin."

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Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Fighting Destiny. Westin Pack has been such fun to write and share with you all. I love the characters in this series as I know many of you do too.

Liam Westin is up next. His book still doesn't have a name and despite several great guesses as to his mate, I'm afraid you haven't met her just yet. Keep reading though for a Sneak Peek of the first two chapters and meet his mate, Madelyn Collier.

For further information on my books, events, and life in general, I can be found online here:

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With love and thanks,

Julie Trettel

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SNEAK PEEK

(To Be Determined):
A Westin Pack Novel

By
Julie Trettel

Coming January 2018
(maybe sooner!)

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Liam

Chapter 1

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. Pushing back from my desk, I let the chair drift and looked around my office, reflecting over the last two years. Two years ago I was fresh out of college. I had majored in Business, unsure what aspect of the family company I wanted to someday work. All through high school and college, I had managed to stay as far away from the Westin Foundation as possible. So, what the hell was I doing here, a twenty-four year old CEO of a multi-billion dollar company?

The Westin Foundation was largely an investment firm. We had other holdings, but for the most part that's what we did. Mostly it was just a front to legitimize the small town of San Marco housing potentially the largest pack of wolf shifters ever known. It was hard to know that for fact as packs were close units that didn't always share correct info due to old fears and rivalries, but Westin Pack was certainly large enough to be a top contender for the title. Even I didn't know exactly how many wolves made up Westin Pack, only the alpha knew for sure, but we each carried a slightly unique pack scent that always let you know if someone was pack or not.

As a pup, I had grown up the second son and fourth child of the alpha. My twin sister, Lily, was technically only three minutes older than me. She'll never let me forget it either. Growing up in the royal family, so to speak, had its ups and downs. I wasn't ever one that required a lot of attention or enjoyed the spotlight. Good thing too with Lily always around.

Most of the spotlight revolved around my oldest brother, Kyle. Kyle was a great guy, and when the first battle of the war with the Bulgarians began, leaving my father critically injured, he had stepped up to become a great Alpha, too.

Before the war began, wolf shifters had lived in relative peace, governed by the Grand Council, compromised of five men who gave up their own packs for the betterment of all wolf shifters. This had worked for hundreds of years and during this time of peace, my ancestors had started and grown what we know today as Westin Pack, and also the Westin Foundation.

Wolves of Westin had much better lives than other packs because of the Foundation. All profits were split between the pack members providing us with a very comfortable lifestyle. Not all packs agreed with how Westin managed its pack, its money, or its wolves, but I've learned through experience, that is almost always jealousy talking.

Almost two years, my brother Kyle found his one true mate, Kelsey. There can only ever be one, true mate. Those wolves that don't find their true mate at a young age, often settle for a compatible mate. There could be hundreds or even thousands of compatible mates, but only ever one true mate.

Kelsey had been a lone wolf that moved into Westin territory without any proper protocol. I had been away at college for much of their early years, but I heard it had heard of the scandal and uproar it had caused. Kyle had been CEO of Westin Foundation at the time having taken the position over from our dad after he had graduated college. He had hired Kelsey and made it clear no one was to touch her. It had been years later before we all found out that was because she was his one true mate.

I saw how crazy the mating call had been for my buddy, Patrick, once he had gotten a whiff of his one true mate, who turned out to be my sister other sister, Elise. I consider it a blessing that I had been away during that period of Kyle's life, especially since he had been such an idiot and refused to act on it.

Later on we all learned that Kelsey knew she was a wolf, but she thought she was a werewolf like they depict in scary movies. She didn't know anything about shifters. If he hadn't been so stubborn, they'd have gotten together a whole lot sooner. Turned out there was a reason Kelsey didn't know

who she was though. Her backstory was pretty rough to discover. She's an alpha she-wolf. For thousands of years, alpha she-wolves had been thought too dangerous to live. Death sentences were placed on them at very young ages when their powers first surfaced. In Kelsey's case that had been age four. She had been a triplet. When her sisters had been killed, their individual powers had all transferred to Kelsey.

I don't really understand how all that works, but her parents had smuggled her out before she was killed and had kept her hidden away until they were killed when she was twelve years old. They had never told her what she was. It had been difficult for her to find out everything, but also a relief to no longer be alone. Wolves by nature don't do well in solidarity, though sometimes, it would be nice to have some alone time. Having four siblings, even with all of us grown, there never seems to be a dull moment or time alone.

Kelsey, we now knew, was from the Bulgarian Pack and their alpha broke all truces amongst the packs to get her back and finish what had been started when she was four years old. That didn't go over so well with Westin. Kyle and Kelsey had already mated by the time her past came to light. The first of several battles had left my dad near death. Mom too, as they are fully bonded.

My phone beeped with a reminder. My nephew, Zander, was turning one and the family was celebrating at mom's Tuesday night family dinner. I still had to run out and pick up a gift for the little guy. I glanced at the time on my phone. One thirty. I had worked through lunch again, a bad habit I'd gotten into trying to just keep things in order. There was always some sort of emergency or some fire to put out in the office. It was never-ending and often overwhelmed me.

A year ago if someone had told me that I'd be flying solo in the CEO position, I'd have laughed in their faces. Kyle was trying to transfer the position over to me before the baby was born, and dad had recovered enough to try and step in to "help". I love them both, but they are both control freaks that weren't ready to let go of the reigns. Even after Kyle finally

stepped back, consumed with his new alpha duties, I still had Dad hovering around.

Dad's injuries in the first battle with the Bulgarians had been extensive. Kelsey's extra powers, one being healing, had saved him, but weakened him to the point that pack power had transferred to Kyle and without a fight to the death, there was no getting it back. Dad would never fight Kyle for a position he would have eventually held anyway, so that left him plenty of time to groom me for the duties of a Westin Foundation CEO. It had been a very trying time for both of us, but once Zander was born, he and Mom had been so consumed by love and grandparent duties, that he had slowly eased up on me and channeled all that focus on Z.

Sorry little man. Someday I was going to owe that kid big time for it.

I pushed the intercom button on my phone, "Chris, what's on my schedule for this afternoon?"

"Nothing, sir. You had asked last week to clear today for Zander's celebration."

"Thanks," I replied, grateful for the break.

Chris, or Christine Canine, was my administrative assistant. I hadn't wanted her to be at first, but she had turned out to be a damn good one. I couldn't function day to day without her... not that I'd ever admit that to her. Chris and Kyle had been close friends growing up, so I had known her forever. When they had turned eighteen and discovered they were not true mates, she had changed into someone I couldn't stand. Heck, most people couldn't! When Kyle mated Kelsey, they had to face what we call the Challenges. It's a pre-determined period that any wolf can challenge either mate for pack position. It's used often to advance one's place in the pack and as future alpha, with the Pack Mother role on the line, Christine had jumped at the chance to battle Kelsey. She had lost, but while the challenges are usually a fight to the death, Kelsey had chosen to spare her at the last minute. The gesture had humbled Chris and although she could still be a bit

high strung, overall, we'd found an easy routine and worked well together.

Grabbing my keys off my desk, I headed for the door. "I'll be out the rest of the afternoon. Call my cell if there's any emergencies. I'm going to head down the mountain to see about a present for the little man."

"Sure thing, boss. When I saw him last week at the park, he was mesmerized by a group of guys playing basketball. If he doesn't already have a hoop, but consider that?"

Basketball? For a one year old? I shrugged. "Seems like a weird gift for a toddler, but I'll look into it. Thanks for the suggestion."

The phone rang and I used it as my signal to leave. If there was one major fault with Christine Canine, it was that she loved to talk and sometimes it was hard to escape her.

Driving down the mountain with the music blaring, I felt strangely relaxed. I had been so stressed of late that I wasn't sure I remembered what it felt like. It was so nice of a change, that I decided to stop at the Watering Hole to grab a beer before beginning my hunt for the perfect gift for my nephew. The Watering Hole was appropriately named, a restaurant and bar on the lake at the base of the mountain below San Marco. The views were gorgeous and it was a popular eatery for tourists too.

As I sat at the bar and ordered a root beer, a small child climbed up in the seat next to me. I looked down at him as he stared back at me. He couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old. The bartender noticed our new arrival and shook his head with a scowl.

"What's your son having?"

I started to protest, but the kid answered instead. "Chocolate milk, please."

"I know it's crowded this time of you, but kids really don't belong at my bar," the man said when he delivered the

drink, though he did not force us to leave and for some reason I didn't bother to comment.

"I'm Liam," I told the kid.

He nodded with that serious expression he'd originally given me. "Oscar."

"Your folks here?"

He nodded again, "Mom, Mimi and Papi. They're waiting for a table."

"Don't you think they'll wonder where you are?"

He shrugged and turned to scan the front waiting area. He waved at a man that didn't look much past forty who waved back.

"That's Papi, it's cool."

I was strangely impressed by the kid. I wasn't sure anything in this world bothered him. How I wished I could go back to those days when the weight of the world didn't feel like it was constantly pounding me into the ground.

I took a long sip of my beer. "You like basketball?" I asked the kid, remembering Chris's gift suggestion.

"Sure, who doesn't?"

"How old does one start playing?"

He looked at me with an odd expression and smiled for the first time. "My mom bought me my first basketball for my first birthday. Still have it. I've always played basketball."

I smiled. Maybe Chris wasn't so crazy after all. "Thank you, I told him. My nephew's turning one today and I was trying to figure out what to get him for his first birthday."

"Oh, you can't go wrong with a basketball, and be sure to get the little kid hoop that adjusts down to his size. He'll love it!"

"They actually have something like that for a one year old?"

“Oh yeah. It adjusts. I grew out of mine last year and got my first real hoop for Christmas.”

“You just might make me the coolest uncle ever then.”

The kid scanned me from head to toe. I wasn't sure I had ever felt so exposed in all my life. Then he shrugged, “Maybe.”

I laughed as I drained the last of my beer.

Offering him my hand, he took it and shook it. I left enough on the counter to cover us both. “It was nice to meet you, Oscar. Thanks for the advice.”

“Sure, anytime,” he said and then tuned me out as the bartender turned on a basketball game on the big screen above the bar.

As I exited the bar, a sort of frenzied excitement hit me. It was so sudden and unexpected that it freaked me out. My skin felt like it was crawling and I had a sudden urge to change. Something like that had never happened to me. My wolf wasn't an alpha, so I had never had the struggles Kyle did to control him. I scanned the area in a panic, ready to run for my car.

A commotion on the bench out front distracted me for a moment.

“Jane, honey, you're safe. I promise. We're not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Annie, you don't understand. I can't explain it, but we cannot stop here. Please, just get them and let's go.”

“It's not good for you to be so agitated. You were making such good progress.”

I gawked awkwardly at the young woman pacing back and forth. The hair on my arms stood up and I couldn't believe what my heart was telling me.

I saw her sniff loudly in the midst of her hysterics and her whole body froze. She turned slowly and golden brown eyes locked with mine. My super charged body slowed and I think I forgot to breathe. Somewhere in the back of my mind I

knew I was staring at my mate. My one true mate, but all I could think was this can't be real. I was seeing a ghost. Maddie. An incoming group of people passed between us and just like that, she vanished before my eyes.

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Maddie

Chapter 2

I had fallen asleep in the car. We were heading down to San Francisco. Jacob had a medical conference and I thought it would be fun for me and Oscar to explore the city. Out of fear I had chosen to homeschool him, but I often worried my son needed more than one on one time with his high school dropout mother every day. Sure, he was a great kid. I couldn't be prouder of him, but when the occasion presented itself, I tried to step out of my comfort zone and do what was best for him. He was so excited about the trip, that even when my anxiety started to set in two days earlier, I just couldn't disappoint him.

Annie had given me a sedative of some sort for the ride, and for that I was grateful. It made things easier when traveling. I didn't do well in crowds. Not since the night it all happened.

I was sixteen years old. My best friend Jordan and I had gotten tickets to this concert for some big popular boy band. They were great seats and we were so excited. So much so that I hadn't been able to concentrate on my chemistry test that day and though I tried to hide the resulting F from my dad, it had all snowballed on me and I'd been grounded.

Grounded? On the biggest day of my life? That was never going to fly. I snuck out and Jordan and I went anyway. The concert was really good, and some college boys near us had offered us some beer. I wasn't big on drinking, but they were college guys. I wasn't going to look like a baby and turn that down. Jordan had, and she'd gotten pissed when I hadn't. Just before intermission she had stormed out. I had shrugged it off as no big deal and didn't go after her.

One of the guys had started dancing really close to me and it had made me feel a little uneasy. He didn't know I was a wolf shifter and could have snapped his neck in two with one

snap of my jaws. I remembered giggling just thinking it. Of course, I was only sixteen. My wolf hadn't emerged yet, but the signs were there that she would soon. Most shifters didn't change till sometime between eighteen and twenty-one. My mom always said I'd be an early shifter. I was very excited about it and couldn't wait for my wolf to show.

By intermission I'd had five beers and the room was spinning around me. I was upset with Jordan for not joining me and I was having the time of my life. Six college guys and all their focus was on me. They told me they had a clubbox upstairs and invited me to join them. Hell yes. I was ready to party!

The small room was so cool. My Dad was our pack alpha. I used to luxuries other shifters weren't, but this was just awesome. It was entirely soundproof. There was a private balcony of seats you could join in for the concert, and if you opened the door you could hear the louds squeals and cheers as the band took the stage again. I opened the door and closed it three times reveling in the noise to total quiet. The guys were fun and joined in with my excitement. One flicked on a button that suddenly had the concert mic'd into the room. We danced and sang along. It was the best night of my life, and then it wasn't.

I don't remember any of their names. Only in my nightmares can I even remember the vaguest detail of them. I was so drunk, and then the room started spinning out of control as we danced and my body went limp. Someone caught me before my head hit the floor. I couldn't move. It was like I was paralyzed.

"How much of that shit did you give her?" I remember one of them asking.

"Enough," someone else responded, laughing.

"I want her first."

I could move my eyes frantically, but for some reason I couldn't make a sound and no matter how hard I fought with my own body, it wouldn't respond. I could hear them and I could see them though. Stuck in that awful state of awareness I

watched and listened as they each in turn beat and raped me to within an inch of my life, as they cheered each other on. A heightened state of awareness allowed me to feel every second of it too. At some point I had blissfully blacked out, only to awaken two days later stuffed in a bag in a dumpster behind the coliseum.

A homeless man had found me and I was rushed to the hospital. I was too embarrassed to tell them my name. Annie Winthrop was my legally assigned state appointed guardian while they sorted it all out. I wouldn't talk to her or anyone. They listed me as Jane Doe and I kept the name Jane as the years went by. I was broken beyond repair and somehow I knew that my wolf had died that day too.

I was assigned to a girls home, but continued to meet with Annie three times a week after they released me from the hospital. From the medical reports they had a pretty clear picture of what had happened to me, but I had never once told anyone, not even her.

The girls home was hard. The others could be downright cruel, but by then I was so withdrawn and depressed that I just didn't care. There was no life left in me. They had destroyed me. Twice I was put on suicide watch, and for good reason.

Six weeks after being released from the hospital I had withdrawn to the point I wouldn't eat, and when they forced me, I'd just throw it up. Annie had fought for me. She begged me to live. She begged me to talk about it. I didn't want to do either. Then it was confirmed. I was pregnant.

Sixteen. Pregnant by a vicious group rape. I couldn't go home. There was no way I could ever face my family again. The thought of a lifetime of grounding wasn't what scared me. I would be an embarrassment, a failure, the joke of the entire pack, and I could never do that to my parents, or my brother and sisters. My scandalous behavior would not destroy them as it had me.

Annie and her husband Jacob took me in after the pregnancy was confirmed. They were granted permanent

guardianship of me and the baby until I turned eighteen. I didn't want a baby. I didn't want a constant reminder of what they had done. I would never even know who the actual father was. It was too much for one small girl to handle.

Annie sat me down one day and she told me, "Jane, stop sitting around feeling sorry for yourself. I know whatever happened to you was horrific, but that child you are carrying can not be blamed for it. You have to eat to be strong for him. You have to sleep so he'll rest too. You have to get up and start living again, for him. God doesn't make mistakes with babies, but we humans can. You are going to be a mother for a reason, child, now get up and start acting like it."

I hadn't spoken in days. My throat burned when I finally asked, "How do you know it's a boy?"

She had smiled back at me like she had all the secrets of the world. "I don't, but there's a fifty-fifty chance I'm right."

Six months later making an appearance a little early at a whopping four pounds ten ounces, Oscar Jacob Winthrop was born. I had come back to life, for him. I had survived, for him. Seeing his tiny body stuck in the NICU those first few days had suddenly been the worst and hardest moments of my life as I watched my tiny newborn fight to survive. Not the rape. Not giving up everyone and everything I had ever known. Not a teenage pregnancy. Not even losing my wolf. That helpless feeling of watching your child struggle, knowing there is nothing you can do, that was the hardest thing I have ever been through.

I turned eighteen shortly after Oscar's first birthday and I prepared myself to leave the Winthrops and set off on my own course in life, but they had other plans in store for us. They had opened their home, their lives, and their hearts to me and Oscar and we would forever be grateful. They were our family.

Seven years later, I still struggled with anxiety. Annie, who specializes in child psychology, attributes it to post traumatic stress syndrome. She never pushes me to talk about

what happened, but has been instrumental in helping me with coping mechanisms. For the most part now, seven years later, I'm fine, but changes in life, even little ones like a trip to the big city, are difficult struggles I push through for Oscar's sake.

He's a great kid. Super smart, serious, but very laid back, calm. He soothes me in a way I can't fully articulate. I honestly do not believe I'd still be alive today if it weren't for the kid.

I shouldn't have fallen asleep in the car. I mean, I was grateful for the sedatives Annie gave me, but when I did finally wake after the usual flood of memories that haunted me, Oscar wasn't there. I still relied on smells more than a normal human. It's sort of a wolf thing and even though my wolf had never surfaced and I no longer felt the connection to her that was starting to form before the rape, there are certain attributes, like smell, that I have never been able to fully stop.

One sniff of the air around me and I knew we were far from home, but not yet in the city. There were too many unfamiliar smells, and I knew before my eyes opened that Oscar was no where around. That set my anxiety on high alert and I started to go into a panic.

I jumped from the car and searching around frantically I was surrounded by a much too familiar scent. Wolves. Where were we? I quick check around the area and I knew we must be in or near Westin Pack territory. I had grown up attending summer camp every year with Lily Westin and her siblings. We had been practically inseparable. Someone could recognize me here. It was a long shot. I had changed so much, but it wasn't a risk I was willing to take either. By now I knew my family would have celebrated my death, made their peace, and moved on. I wouldn't give them false hope that I was still alive, because the Madelyn Collier they knew wasn't. Jane Winthrop wasn't that same girl.

I spotted Annie sitting on a bench outside a restaurant we had stopped at. I didn't have to say a word, it was like she knew I was freaking out before I even reached her and she immediately began soothing me with confident, safe words.

Sometimes Annie just seemed to have a way of knowing things she couldn't possibly know.

“Jane, honey, you're safe. I promise. We're not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Annie, you don't understand. I can't explain it, but we cannot stop here. Please, just get them and let's go.”

“It's not good for you to be so agitated. You were making such good progress.”

Goosebumps stood up across my entire body and I quickly scanned the area settling on a man. He was tall, muscular. I could tell even with the impressive suit he wore. He had sandy brown hair and when I met his golden eyes I felt more exposed than ever. A ripple of calm started to flow through me from my head down to my toes. It resulted in a full on panic setting in.

When a group exiting the restaurant broke my view, I turned and grabbed Annie and drug her into the building. They were just calling Jacob's name for a table and he smiled as we approached, then instantly frowned.

“What's wrong?”

“We have to go. NOW. I can't explain it, just please. Where's Oscar?”

I could feel my heart beating fast in my chest and I was struggling to breathe evenly.

“Okay, okay,” Annie said rubbing my back in a soothing manner. “Jacob, get Oscar and meet us in the car. Jane, just breathe, sweetie. In and out. In and out.” She kept talking calmly all the way to the car.

When Oscar saw me he just smiled sadly, climbed into the backseat next to me as Jacob started the car and pulled out, and my son wrapped his small arms around me. “It's okay, Mama. Their chocolate milk wasn't even that good.”

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The Compounders: DISSENSION

Book Two



Holly Jenkins spent most of her life sheltered by the Compounders in a secure bunker on a remote mountain in western Virginia. After a battle with the AMAN, the oppressive group that reigns over the area, her life is set on a new course. Leaving behind the comfort and safety of the Compound isn't a choice for her. It's something she has to do.

When Griffon Maynor is captured by the AMAN, Holly's squad springs into action on a rescue mission without question, even when it becomes obvious to them that her feelings for him have changed. But can they rescue him in time?

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DISCONTENT

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Charlie Jenkins has big shoes to fill in the wake of his father's death. He hasn't always done the right things in the past, but he's trying his best for his family, the Compounders, and all the residents of nearby Wythel, Virginia, the small town just down the mountain from the Compounder's bunker. When his sister, Holly, goes missing, Charlie is fueled by anger, hatred, and resentment. Can he get past his emotions to be the man he was raised to be?

They aren't safe. People are scared. The stakes are high. The enemy now knows exactly where they live. Change is inevitable. With the Compound once compromised, and Wythel more vulnerable than ever, it's clear that both need a leader who can step up and give them hope. Can Charlie be that leader ... or will his anger drive him to destroy them all?

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One True Mate

A Westin Pack Novel



Kelsey Adams is alone, and has been since childhood. Running away is all she knows and necessary to preserve her deepest, darkest secret. She can not afford for anyone to get close, or know about the monster within. But when she lands a lucrative job as an administrative assistant to Kyle Westin, CEO of the Westin Foundation, her life changes and everything's at stake. Can she conceal her growing feelings and her true self from this enigmatic, strong willed man, or will her world fall apart?

Kyle Westin, an alpha male who always gets what he wants, has watched and waited for the little she-wolf he knows is his perfect mate to show any signs of recognition. For two years he endures her unnecessary formality and daily rejections with a patience he did not know he possessed. But even Kyle has his limits.... Can he make Kelsey notice him as someone other than her boss and break down the walls she built around her heart? Or will Kelsey do what she has always done – run?

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About the Author



Julie Trettel is author of the Compounders and Westin Pack Series, a full time Systems Administrator, wife, and mother of 4 awesome kids. She resides in Richmond, VA and can often be found writing on the sidelines of a football field or swimming pool. She comes from a long line of story tellers. Writing has always been a stress reliever and escape for her to manage the crazy demands of juggling time and schedules between work and an active family of six. In her “free time,” she enjoys traveling, reading, outdoor activities, and spending time with family and friends.

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