



A NEW PROSPECT

A WESTIN FORCE NOVEL

DELTA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE TRETTEL

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By
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A New Prospect

Westin Force Delta: Book Four

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Thanks and Acknowledgments

This one is for all of my Book Lovers. Your hatred of Annie has been the most entertaining thing I've experienced since starting my career as an author. I feel like a new author achievement has been unlocked. Thank you for loving to hate her so much. Now, this is the story that was always meant to be...

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Annie

Chapter 1

“I hate my life.”

Sometimes just saying that out loud helps.

Once upon a time I dreamed of what life would look like for me and Tucker. I had visions of a white picket fence, maybe even a dog. I would have the hottest mate in the whole pack and be the envy of everyone. We were supposed to have a picture-perfect life. I'd done a lot of things I wasn't proud of to ensure that happened.

But moving halfway across the country so he could play GI Joe wasn't supposed to be part of the plan. I had no one here, and it was clear they all hated me. I just wanted to go home. Was that really too much to ask?

The longer we stayed here, the bigger his balls seemed to grow, and I wasn't happy about it. He never used to stand up to me. He did what I wanted, when I wanted, without question. I didn't like the recent turn of events. He needed to be put in his place once again.

The last time he got to this point was shortly after our wolves came in and he'd actually tried to dump me. Me! It was unbelievable, as if he could ever do any better. He had dreams of his one true mate. I've told him a million times that's nothing but fairytale stuff—complete make believe. It was bullshit that so many of his so-called friends were suddenly finding their true mates. I didn't believe it for even a second.

This place made it feel like everyone finds their true mate, and that's just not possible. It's rare at best. Still, he'd wanted to wait and find his. I'd done the only thing I could to ensure that wouldn't happen. He was mine, and I knew in time he'd realize that. We were meant to be together.

I'd told him I was pregnant. I knew he always wanted to be a father with a whole litter of pups. I knew he wouldn't leave me then, because I know Tucker better than anyone.

And it had worked.

I never even wanted kids, ever. But I'd lied and said I was pregnant

knowing he would bond with me and do “the right thing”. I rolled my eyes just thinking about it. He was so gullible, like putty in my hands.

If I had gotten pregnant, I would have had an abortion so fast he’d never know about it. Fortunately, that never happened.

But just the thought of me being pregnant was enough to seal the deal, just as I knew it would be. The deed was done. He’d bit me and I bit him, marking each other and bonding us for life.

At the time I thought everything would work out and I’d be so happy.

A few weeks later I’d “lost” the baby. He was devastated, and I’d faked mourning a kid that never existed. It wasn’t until he started pressing for us to try again that the truth had tumbled out.

He’d been upset, but he was loyal to a fault.

I supposed the joke was on me though, because he never took his frustrations out on me. He wouldn’t dare. He didn’t even have it in him to raise his voice to me, let alone his hand. Instead, he’d dealt with it in other ways, like blowing things up and shooting guns. Ironically, that stupid hobby was what landed him an opportunity with Westin Force.

My only true regret was agreeing to let him come to San Marco in the first place.

At first, he’d landed a coveted spot on Bravo team. They traveled a lot, and there was no way I was putting up with a mate who was gone all the time.

I wanted him to come home where he belonged and where I could keep an eye on him. But he’d convinced me to give it a try, promising this grand adventure. So, I’d moved to San Marco too, and I’ve hated it every day since.

Letting him come here was the biggest mistake of my life.

When he was just running perimeter detail, working out in the gym, and pushing papers in the office, it wasn’t so bad. I still hated the area and the people here. They weren’t Pack and never could be. But at least I’d had Tucker home in bed with me every night.

There had been benefits to that arrangement too. When he was bored with his work and working out more, sex between us was at its hottest—I loved it. But when he was satisfied with his life, it was mediocre at best.

Lately, he was so happy. I didn’t see him as much either. So I was lonely and scared he was slipping away from me. He’d even stood up to me

in front of his friends a few times, and that couldn't be allowed.

I knew he was avoiding me, too. I was going to have to do something drastic to get him back under control. And I had a meeting personally set up with his team lead, Michael, to demand he be removed from travel detail. I wanted him home, period. If that had to be here in California, then fine, I'd deal with it, but I wasn't going to stand for him traipsing all over the world while leaving me stuck in this hellhole.

I deserved better.

I demanded better.

My phone rang, and I rolled my eyes at the name that popped up on the screen. Christine.

The holidays were coming up and she was envisioning Thanksgiving dinner as one big happy Delta team family. Just the idea of it all made me want to puke. I'd tolerated enough time with those people already. I didn't want to be a part of their little clique. I wanted to go home for the holidays.

I let the phone roll to voicemail. I'd deal with her later.

Instead, I called my mom. She answered on the second ring.

"Lovey, how are you?" she answered, making me smile.

"I'm fine, Mummy. I just miss you."

"Why don't you and Tucker come home for Thanksgiving next week? I insist on it."

I smiled to myself and nodded.

"That sounds wonderful. I'm not sure Tucker can get away though. You know how awful his job here is."

"Then perhaps Daddy and I will come to you this year. I miss my baby girl and he owes me a trip. Of course, Cabo, or the Maldives would be better, but it wouldn't be entirely wasted because I'd at least get to see you."

Her words cut me to the core. All I'd ever wanted was to make my mother proud of me. She adored my mate, so I did too. A shrink would likely say that was why I'd taken such extreme measures to keep him and make him mine. But I did love him, too, or at least the possibility of him if he ever got his act together and lived up to my expectations.

Lately he wasn't even coming close to the bar I'd set for us, and I was miserable because of it.

"Do you really think Daddy would take time off to come out here?"

"Well, we can always ask, lovey. It never hurts to ask."

When it came to my father, my mother shrank away. It was always his way, like a one-sided relationship. And while I adored my mother, I didn't want to ever be her. I aspired to be more like my father in personal relationships.

Tucker growing some balls and talking back to me was terrifying. I hadn't spoken to him in days because of it.

We'd been at one of his friend's little get-togethers and I'd made mention of how I thought it was horrible that Michael and his mate Callie had adopted a set of opossum shifters and brought them here. Those kids shouldn't be allowed to go to school with wolves. Wolves were far superior to opossum.

The room had gone completely quiet, but I'd just rolled my eyes. It wasn't like I hadn't said exactly what everyone else in the room had been thinking.

Callie had physically taken the girl from the room when she'd dared to talk back to me. Good thing too, because I never would have sat there and taken crap from that brat. She was beneath me and irrelevant. It was disgusting that I'd even been forced to associate with them at all. If my parents had seen me interacting with opossum, they would be horrified and likely disown me. Why couldn't Tucker realize that?

"Lovey, Mummy has to go now. I have tea at the club in half an hour. Toodles. We'll talk soon."

"Bye . . ." I said, but she was already gone.

That was it. I'd had enough.

I called Tucker, and just like always, he picked up immediately.

"Hey. I'm kind of busy here."

"I need you to come home for lunch."

He sighed. "Can this wait?"

"No, it can't."

"Fine. I'll be there in an hour."

"Love you," I said sweetly expecting to hear it back, but instead, he hung up on me. Me!

I stared down at the phone in my hand in complete shock. I knew he wasn't happy, claiming I'd embarrassed him in front of his friends, but what about me? He'd embarrassed me by forcing me to be there in the first place. I was making an effort at least. I'd gone, but opossums? Had he lost his mind?

I knew what I had to do. I had to get him as far away from this place as possible. And if he refused to go, then I was going to have to leave. I knew he'd follow me with his tail between his legs. He was as predictable as they came . . . until lately . . . and that was the problem.

Tucker

Chapter 2

“Is everything okay?” Michael asked as I hung up the phone.

“Yeah, fine. I gotta head home in a bit for my lunch break.”

“I thought you were swinging by Birdie’s for lunch.”

“Which is why I told Annie I’d be home in an hour. Is it cool if I go ahead and cut out?”

Ever since Birdie’s drastic attempt at gaining the attention of the new Sheriff, I’d been stopping by to do regular well-checks. She was healthy as a horse, but she was also very old and lonely. It was considered part of my routine job at this point and truthfully, I enjoyed our daily chats.

“Go on. Get out of here,” Michael said.

“Thanks. I’ll be back after lunch.”

Maybe I should have driven straight home. I knew Annie and I had a lot of shit to work out. But I hadn’t been this angry with her since she’d confessed to tricking me into mating her.

Kevin and Autumn were good kids. So what if they could shift into opossum? They hadn’t deserved to be spoken to or about like that in their own home. Annie was wrong. Maybe that was the problem, and why I was avoiding her lately. In Annie’s world, she was never wrong. Everyone else was, but never her.

I understood that about her, and I knew that a lot of it stemmed from her parents and how she was raised. It wasn’t entirely her fault, but she’d gone too far this time, and I needed time to calm down before discussing it with her.

Annie had a terrible temper and a self-righteous attitude. I knew exactly how bad it could get if I didn’t tread carefully. Lately I just haven’t been caring as much, but also not wanting to face her wrath, I had taken to avoidance.

I was a chicken. And I hated myself for it.

But I pushed all that aside and put a smile on my face as I parked my

car and walked up to the big front porch of Birdie's house. She was already there waiting for me with tea and these little finger sandwiches she loved to serve. In truth, they were just a tease. I'd get a real meal on my way home because I didn't trust Annie to have anything ready for me. She rarely ever thought of such things.

"Hello Tucker. I had a feeling you'd be dropping in to check on me today."

I grinned. This had become a daily routine of ours for weeks now.

"I don't know what I did to deserve your attention, but if you let me know what it is, I'll do more of it."

I laughed. "How are you today, Birdie?"

"Better now that you're here."

"You need to be careful my mate doesn't hear you saying that."

She laughed and slapped her knee.

"When are you going to bring her around to meet me?"

"Birdie. You know better than that. A man never introduces his mate to the other woman." I winked at her, and she hooted with laughter once more.

"You are such a flirt. Sit down, have some tea and a snack."

I did as I was told. It was a beautiful day, a bit cool, but our wolves helped to regulate our temperatures in cold weather. I had on a long-sleeved T-shirt, and Birdie was dressed in only a light sweater to ward off the chill.

The sky was sunny, though, and you could see the rays dancing off the pond down the street.

Birdie lived in the middle of downtown San Marco. Not that it was much of a downtown, but for us it was the hustle and bustle of Pack life.

Vada and Susan walked by pushing strollers. They were mated to members of Bravo team. I gave them a little wave as they passed.

While I wasn't from here, I'd moved to San Marco some time ago to join Westin Force, a special ops program designed to protect shifters around the world. I was originally placed on Bravo team, so I knew the guys there well. And while I wasn't around when they started finding their own mates, I still hung out with them often.

Westin Force was like one big extended family with each team being a closer, smaller family. We all worked together, but each team also specialized in a specific area.

Bravo team was the most elite team in the Force. They were the truest special operations unit traveling all over the world on the coolest cases. Spots on Bravo were the most coveted. I'd been a part of that until Annie had put her foot down and insisted I leave the Force or transfer units to one closer to home.

It wasn't just because I was away on missions all the time. Annie wanted me around when she wanted me, and beyond that, she really didn't give a shit what I did. There was some of that conflict though since I couldn't be at her beck and call, and that was the excuse I had used to transfer teams.

The truth was, Annie hated that I was working under a gorilla shifter. Add in the fact that there was not one but two gorillas, a bear, and a fox on the team, and she was absolutely furious.

"No wolf should answer to the likes of that," she had said constantly.

It had pissed me off to the point we'd fought about it, and I rarely fought with her because there were always serious repercussions to my standing up for myself. Because of that, I'd mastered the skills of passive aggression.

And since we had already moved to San Marco and the only other unit based right here was Delta, I'd convinced her to stay if I transferred units.

Delta team was responsible for Westin Pack security and the protection of the Alpha, Kyle Westin, the Pack Mother Kelsey Westin, their two sons, and their large extended family. It wasn't always as exciting as Bravo's missions, but it was steady, important work. It mostly kept me home, though lately we'd had several missions along Bravo tracking down Collectors.

Collectors were humans who collected shifters, but not just any shifters, they captured and kept prisoners only the most special amongst us. We called them witches, but really, they were just shifters with extra powers.

Our Pack Mother was a witch, and when a Collector came for her, Delta had been there to stop him. Because of that, we'd earned our right to be involved in any case concerning a Collector.

Annie was furious about it. More than once lately I'd heard her mention packing us up and moving back home. But to me, this was home.

"You look a million miles away right now," Birdie said. "Is everything okay?"

I shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle."

"Family issues?"

"Huh?"

"It's always family. They are the ones close enough to truly hurt you hardest."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," I said, trying to get the focus off of me because she was dangerously close to being correct.

"Of course I am. You don't get to live as long as I have and not bear the scars of family."

"I didn't think you had any family, Birdie."

"Oh please. I've lived several lifetimes it feels like, but I was young once and in love."

"You had a mate?"

"I did, my true mate. He was my entire world. We hadn't fully bonded though when he left me."

"He left you?"

"Dead, dear, keep up. My Richard died in a boating accident out on Lake Tahoe. What the hell was a wolf doing on water? It was ridiculous. Fancied himself a fisherman. Left me a widow with a young daughter."

My brow furrowed. "I didn't know. Who's your daughter?"

"Oh, no one you know. She's been gone a very long time. Always had a fascination with the human world. So much so that she packed up and moved to the city, found a man and fell in love. He was human of course. I kept in touch as best as I could, but she turned her back on her wolf spirit and wanted nothing to do with our kind. I guess it worked for her. To the best of my knowledge, she never shifted again. It just breaks my heart to think about it."

"What happened to her? Where is she now?"

"Dead. Her *husband*," she spat the word like it left a sour taste in her mouth, "died young. Guess she and I had that in common. She had a daughter, and I kept up with her much of her life, even after my daughter passed on. My granddaughter had a daughter as well. Then a few years back, I was notified that the two of them died together in a car crash. T-boned by a drunk driver. They said both of them were killed instantly."

"Wait, you had a great-granddaughter too?"

"Oh yes. I also have a great-great-granddaughter still alive."

“Do you see her often?”

“Never. I didn’t even know she existed until a bank called regarding a trust account I had opened in my granddaughter’s name, well, not me, but my lawyer who oversees my accounts. Humans get a little skeptical dealing with someone my age. In their world, I shouldn’t even be alive right now. So they contacted my lawyer over at Westin Foundation regarding the account. They were told to move it to my great-granddaughter’s name.”

“And that’s when you found out she had died as well?”

“Yes. But there was a surviving heir, Abigail, my great-great-granddaughter. I didn’t even know she existed.”

“When was the last time you saw your granddaughter and great-granddaughter?”

“Oh, it’s been years and years, Tucker. My granddaughter never received a wolf spirit. I loosely stayed in touch until my great-granddaughter came of age. There was no wolf for her either. My lineage was dead, and my daughter asked me to disappear before questions arose. So, I did.”

It broke my heart hearing her story.

“But now that you know about Abigail, what will you do?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

She cut her eyes in my direction.

“What are you up to, Birdie?”

“Well, I was just curious, you know. So I talked to Nonna about it, and she had Susan and Tarron run a background check on her.”

“And . . .”

“She’s a writer, Tucker.”

She held up a book with Abigail Matroni listed as the author.

I raised an eyebrow as I read the title.

“A Werewolves Heart. What kind of nonsense does she write?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. Well, I’ve only read the first three chapters, but it’s off to a good start. It’s basically a romance where a werewolf finds true love with human and turns her to be with him for always.”

I laughed. “Turns her into a werewolf? That’s Hollywood nonsense.”

“I know, but remember, she doesn’t know about our kind, yet she chose wolves to write about. It has to be a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“That she’s one of us.”

“Birdie, her mother was human, so unless her father was a shifter, then I don’t see how that’s possible. She’s not like us. You said it yourself, your bloodline died with your daughter.”

“A girl can hope,” she said.

Birdie always did have a flare for the dramatic.

My phone rang, and I winced when I saw it was Annie. I ignored it.

“I have to run.”

“Wait,” she said, reaching out to grab my arm.

“What?”

“Promise me, Tucker, if anything happens to me, you’ll take care of my Abigail. You and Colin. Promise me.”

“Birdie . . .”

“Promise me.”

“Okay, but how would we even find her?”

She smiled with a twinkle in her eye. “She is now the sole heir to my estate. I would think it shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Sure, okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. Not that I even need to. You’re gonna outlive us all, Birdie.”

“Lord, I hope not.”

Just as I was leaving, her friends, Nonna and Tabitha, strolled up to the front porch.

“Tucker!” Nonna beamed.

“Nope, I’m late. Gotta go.”

I gave Birdie a kiss on her wrinkled and weathered old cheek and took off before the three of them sucked me into an afternoon down memory lane. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time. Those three together were nothing but trouble.

Annie

Chapter 3

He was late and wasn't answering my calls. I started pacing the floor in irritation.

Where the hell was he?

At last, I heard his truck pull up to the house and waited with my arms crossed over my chest.

The second he walked in, I attacked.

"Where were you? You said an hour and it's been almost an hour and a half."

"Sorry. I'm working today, Annie. I got tied up. Now what's all this about?"

"What's this about?" I scoffed. "Are you kidding me, Tucker. You've been acting like a goddam baby for weeks. I am not apologizing for what I said about some stupid opossum. You know how I feel about their kind."

He closed his eyes and his jaw tensed, but he took a deep breath and smiled.

"I know how you feel, but I need you to try to get along with them, or just keep your mouth shut for once. Just because you think it doesn't give you the right to say it."

"I can say whatever the hell I want to say. This is a free country protected by freedom of speech last I checked." I yelled, unable to believe he just said that to me.

"I know," he said softly.

I could see the fight fleeing him, and I knew I'd already won this battle.

"Mummy and Daddy are coming here for Thanksgiving. Isn't that wonderful?"

"That's it?"

"What do you mean that's it? It's wonderful news. I thought you'd be happy."

“To have your parents here?”

My eyes widened and my jaw dropped.

“What’s wrong with my parents, Tucker?”

“Nothing. Forget I said anything. They’re coming for Thanksgiving. Yay!”

I could hear the sarcasm in his voice but chose to ignore it this time.

“We should celebrate. Take off your clothes.”

“What? Annie, it’s a workday.”

“But I’m horny, Tucker. I need you,” I pouted. “So take off your clothes.”

He obeyed and soon stood there before me, vulnerable and naked, just the way I liked it.

I licked my lips. “Now take off my clothes.”

There was something so powerful and gratifying playing puppet master to this man. It was the ultimate high, the best aphrodisiac in the world.

As his hands reached out and pulled my shirt over my head, I was heady from the control.

I took his face in my hands and kissed him.

“Make me feel good,” I demanded.

He knew exactly what I liked and how to make love to me as he cupped my breasts in his large, calloused hands and dipped down to lick and suck just as I’d trained him to do.

Sex was always great because we knew each other so intimately and because he knew how to please me.

I was lost in the sensations as he touched my body.

“On the floor,” I told him, and he drew me down to the floor right there in the living room, just as I wanted.

I kissed him hard, and he moaned as I straddled him, rocking myself against him.

It felt so good, so right. Why couldn’t he see how perfect we were together?

I held his shaft as I slowly lowered myself down onto him. My body shuddered needing a minute to adjust to his girth. My man was the envy of every woman, and I knew it. My eyes fluttered shut as I took it all in. And then I started to move up and down, slowly.

Opening my eyes, I saw he wasn’t focused on me at all. I lifted my

hand and smacked him across the face leaving a bright red mark on his cheek.

“Look at me when we’re making love,” I growled.

He said nothing, but stared into my eyes as his hands grabbed my hips and started picking up the pace. It was too fast. My body was already strung tight with the need of release.

Channeling my wolf, I called my claws forward and stabbed him in the arms dragging them down and drawing blood.

“Not that fast. I’ll do it.”

It took me a few minutes to find my groove, but when I did, it felt so good. I was lost in the sensation, closing my eyes and just enjoying the feel of him within me.

When he groaned, I felt him harden inside me.

My eyes flew open.

“No!” I yelled. “You will not come before me.”

His jaw tightened, and for a second, I thought he was going to actually defy me. Instead, he reached out his hand and touched me.

“Oh God! Yes!” I cried as an orgasm ripped through me.

I rode him until I was thoroughly sated. And then I leaned down and kissed him.

“Thanks, babe.”

He started to pump his hips, but I rolled off of him and left to clean myself up.

“Are you kidding me right now?” he yelled at my retreating back.

“What? You can take care of the rest yourself.”

It wasn’t like he hadn’t done it plenty of times before. I didn’t know what the big deal was, but I sensed he was really pissed today. And by the time I was done cleaning myself up and freshly dressed, he was still hard and angry.

“Are you going to take care of this?” he asked pointing to his dick.

I scoffed. “No. Go back to work before they fire you.” I paused at the thought. “Hmm, better yet, stick around a while. Maybe they actually will fire you.”

He shook his head and glared daggers at me.

“I have an appointment to get my nails done.”

“Thought you wanted to talk,” he said coldly.

I rolled my eyes. “No, I was just horny.”

He was cursing under his breath when I left.

His attitude lately was really starting to annoy me.

I might just see if there's an opening for a massage while I'm at it. A full spa day sounded like just what I needed.

San Marco was a rinky-dink little town with nothing worth anything. I wouldn't trust that little hole in the wall they call a salon for anything. So, if I wanted anything done, it required a drive down the mountain into a real city. Sure, it wasn't anything to write home about either, but at least there were some decent places.

I'd found a great day spa there that I was highly addicted to. Tucker didn't make much money working for Westin Force and since we weren't living in Pack territory any longer, our Alpha had cut us off from our Pack stipend. It sucked. I hated being poor. Tucker would just have to find ways to make us more money because I was not giving up on my needs.

Getting my hair and nails done, and really just being pampered was important to me. Mummy would freak if she knew I wasn't taking care of myself like that. I deserved it, and Tucker was lucky to have someone as hot as me on his arm. No one else would put up with the crap I had to live with.

My neck was a knotted mess by the time I arrived.

"Hello, Annie. I have you down for a mani-pedi today. Would you like to add anything else?" the receptionist asked.

I pouted. "I've had just the worst day. Give me the works. I don't care what it costs."

She smiled triumphantly as she updated my booking.

"Janet, please take her back immediately and take extra special care of her. She is one of our top clients."

I flashed a smile and gave a little finger wave to the receptionist as Janet took me back to the spa.

"You look a little tense today, why don't you start with a soak to loosen those muscles. She booked you in a private room."

"With television?" I asked.

"Of course."

When she left me alone in the room, I stripped and sunk into the hot water. Instantly my muscles began to relax. I grabbed the remote and turned on my favorite soap opera.

This was "me" time. I deserved this.

Tucker was stressing me out so much lately that I was terrified I was going to prematurely wrinkle. With that thought in mind, I grabbed some cucumber slices off a plate and put them over my eyes. I'd rather die than get wrinkles.

For a whole hour I was blissfully alone before Janet returned to tell me the masseuse was ready for me.

Another ninety minutes passed as she worked me over, removing all the kinks and tension in my body before passing me over for my mani-pedi.

I chose brown for Thanksgiving with highlight nails in yellow and orange. It was perfect for the holidays.

Lastly, I was taken to the stylist who massaged my scalp and my hands up to my elbows while making me even more gorgeous than I already was.

It was a perfect day, and I felt fabulous walking out of that spa. So much so, that I stopped by Roberto's and picked up dinner for us before driving back up the mountain.

Tucker better be home on time for once.

Tucker

Chapter 4

I was still furious with Annie for leaving me hanging like that at lunch. It wasn't like I shouldn't have expected it. She'd been doing it a lot lately, but not every time. So when it did happen, I was just left lying there in shock ready to murder her.

She did it on purpose. It was a control thing, and I knew it. She'd also drawn blood on my arms and cheek this time. I'd had to shift and let my wolf heal me before heading back to the office. It had made me late, and Michael had noticed.

Despite the consequences, I was going to have to put my foot down and stand up to her.

Annie hated being told what she could or couldn't do.

Normally, I let it go because I'd faced her wrath before, and it wasn't pretty. But this was unacceptable. I knew she would be thrilled if I got fired from Westin Force, but I couldn't let that happen. It was the one thing I had for myself.

A text alerted on my phone, and I sighed as I checked it. Her bank account had breached the two hundred dollar minimum I'd set on it. This wasn't out of the ordinary either. No matter how much I tried to explain to her that we didn't have tons of money to blow frivolously, she didn't listen. Her spending habits were getting worse, not better. Today it looked like she had taken full advantage of the spa and gotten a ridiculously expensive meal at Roberto's.

Pay day was still two weeks out, leaving only one hundred and eighty-two dollars in the account until then.

Normally I would transfer some extra funds over and tell her I had picked up a paying side-job to get us through the month. This time, I was going to leave it as is. I could eat Ramen and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for a few weeks. She, on the other hand, would bitch non-stop about it, but I was prepared for that. It wouldn't be the first time I've heard

how pathetic and incapable of providing for her I am.

I'd survive it.

In truth, I didn't trust Annie with money. So I had a decent living wage directly deposited into our joint account. She had no idea I also had a sizable savings account and two other checking accounts. We weren't hurting for money at all, but we would be if she knew about it.

Annie had always had high dollar expectations. It wasn't her fault though. She had been raised like a princess, never wanting anything in life. Her father had spoiled her, and her mother empowered her to believe she deserved it all.

Sometimes, I had to remind myself that I'd known that about her before mating her. It had been my choice. Sure, she'd manipulated me into that, but I had let go of that a long time ago. I could choose to be miserable for the rest of my life or accept that my mate wasn't perfect but she was mine.

Still, when the guys started talking shit about her, I no longer stood up for her. I didn't say a bad thing about her and the few things I had shared were simply facts.

Fact: She had lied to get me to mate her.

Fact: She has a superiority complex that was groomed into her from a young age.

Fact: She loves me despite it all.

I had to believe that last one and hold on to it. Some of the shit she put me through would be meaningless if I didn't have that one thing.

She'd isolated me from my own family. We no longer talked. When we went home for a visit, it was to spend time with her family, never mine. She'd run them off years ago, and they made it clear that they weren't comfortable around her. So, I would sneak over there for a quick visit while she and her mom were out doing whatever girlie thing they were doing, usually shopping. For years I'd made excuses for why she wasn't there with me, but knowing how my family felt about her anyway, I didn't even bother with that anymore.

I could see the signs now. It was like reliving a nightmare. Replace my parents and family with my unit and extended Westin Force family. If I wasn't careful, she was going to alienate me from all of them, too, and I could not let that happen.

She never seemed to understand that I needed them. I don't just work there. They are my brothers of the heart. Their mates and children are my family. Her putting down Kevin and Autumn was putting down my family once again. It had resurfaced old feelings that I was struggling with.

Before heading home for the night, Lachlan caught up with me.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Fine."

"You don't look fine, Tucker."

"Just drop it, Lachie. I said I'm fine."

"Why were you really late getting back from lunch?"

I smirked. "I had things to do."

"I can see the scratch and bruising on your cheek. It wasn't there before lunch. What happened?"

"You really don't want to know."

"I do actually, because I care. I'm worried about you."

It had been a long day, and I was just done.

I turned to Lachlan and told him the truth. "You really want to know?"

"I do."

"Fine. Annie got a little rough."

"She's hitting you?"

"Sex, Lachlan. She got a little excited during sex over lunch today. Her ring scratched me. I had to shift and let it heal so I wouldn't have to deal with these sorts of questions."

"Sex?" he muttered to himself.

"Rough sex. Clearly not your thing." I chuckled but the truth was I wasn't into it either. And with Annie, it was a lot more than that. He was probably closer with his first allegation, but I was too prideful to admit to that. Better to let him know I was a freak in the bedroom.

"Rough sex? Huh? Okay. So everything's good with you and Annie then?"

"Never better," I lied, slapping him on the shoulder and getting the hell out of there quickly.

I walked in the house to find Annie pacing the living room floor.

“You’re late!”

“Sorry. Got tied up at work. Lachlan wouldn’t stop running his mouth.”

“And now dinner’s cold. Do you hear me? I made you a nice dinner tonight. I was expecting you home two hours ago.”

“Michael added some extra hours on me because I took a long lunch break.”

“Why the hell did you do that?”

I glared at her. “Are you kidding me? I was bleeding on my face and arms. I had to shift and give it time to heal.”

She rolled her eyes. “Didn’t want your friends to know I messed you up a bit?”

“How was the spa?” I asked, changing the subject.

Annie’s favorite topic was Annie, but this time, she frowned.

“It was great until I got an alert that we’re broke, and my mate didn’t bother to come home for dinner. I had to eat mine before it got cold. You better eat yours anyway, because it’ll be the last good meal we’re going to eat this month if you don’t get your worthless ass out there and make some extra money.”

I bit my tongue and counted backwards from ten, then took a deep breath.

“I’m really busy at work right now. I don’t know if that’s possible. I warned you it might be a tight month and not to spend frivolously.”

“Frivolously?” she screeched. “Going to the spa is therapy for me. You know that, Tucker. It isn’t frivolous.”

“I know,” I said.

Her temper was rising quickly. The best way to calm her down was to just agree with her.

“Damn right. Now go eat your dinner and since we’re so poor, don’t you dare waste electricity on heating it back up.”

She stormed down the hall to the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

I sighed; grateful she’d walked away.

She’d already put the food in the fridge, but I found it easily because there was next to nothing else in there. She didn’t cook and had never really

learned. She could make a sandwich and like two dishes. That was it. She either got takeout or expected me to feed her.

I knew she was trying to punish me by telling me to eat it cold, but the joke was on her because I loved cold pasta. It didn't bother me in the least.

Roberto's was like the kind of place the rich and famous went to. It was a special occasion date night restaurant. They had damn good food, but for the price it should be. And every time Annie went into the city, she came back with it.

That woman thought money grew on trees. Feeling spiteful and knowing I was holding cards she wasn't aware of, my decision to make us slum it out for the next two weeks had solidified.

The rest of the evening I spent in blissful peace. I even considered sleeping on the couch, but I knew that would just rain down a shitstorm in the morning.

When I was exhausted and ready for sleep, I walked into our bedroom and got ready for bed.

"We can't be broke right now," Annie finally said. "I told you, Mummy and Daddy are coming for Thanksgiving next week."

"We were invited to Michael and Callie's. They can go with us."

"You are such an idiot, Tucker," she screeched. "I am not taking my parents to their house to have dinner with those kinds of people."

I gritted my teeth and counted to ten once more, first from one to ten and then from ten to one before I said something I knew I'd regret.

"I can't just make money grow on trees, Annie."

"It's my parents. Do you really want them to know how worthless you are? How you can't provide for their little girl? Is that what you want?"

"Whatever you feel is necessary," I muttered.

I knew I could easily fix this by a simple transfer, but there was a lesson to be learned here.

"If you're that worried about it, I'm sure you can pick up some work in town," I blurted out.

My jaw dropped in shock over my own words.

I barely even felt the sting of her slap.

"I can't believe you just said that to me. You're an asshole, Tucker, a worthless, good for nothing, asshole. Daddy was right. You aren't good enough for me, and now I'm stuck with you. I hate my life. I hate this place.

If you can't find a way to provide a proper Thanksgiving feast for all of us here without your skanky friends, then we're going home for the holidays instead."

"I don't have that kind of time off and you know it."

"Then quit playing GI Joe and get a real job. You know Daddy offered to take you on. We could move home to be with family. We wouldn't be poor anymore."

She was practically purring as she said it.

"No."

"Did you just tell me no?"

"No, I mean, yes. I said no. I'm not giving up my career to go work for your daddy. It's not happening, Annie."

She screamed like a banshee as she attacked me, arms flailing in every direction. I didn't even try to fight back. I knew I'd provoked her, but my line was drawn in the sand. She could do whatever she wanted to me. I was numb to it all after years of her abuse anyway, but I would not compromise on this. I wasn't going to give up my team. They were my family now. I'd compromised one before and lost my own family because of it. I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"You're pathetic! Worthless! Unlovable! How can anyone love a mutt like you? I hate this life! I hate your job! I hate you!"

I knew she didn't mean it, but her words still cut my heart.

I'm better than this.

I am not pathetic.

I am not worthless.

She loves me. She's just upset.

I did this to her.

It's my fault.

She'll calm down soon.

I was numb. I didn't feel the pain she was trying to inflict. I just stood there and let her get it out of her system.

When she finally stopped, she was sobbing.

"I'm sorry. You just make me so mad sometimes."

"I know," I said.

"You can't provoke me like that."

"I know."

“It’s all your fault.”

“I know.”

She kissed my swollen lips. I could taste my own blood from where she’d split it.

“I just love you so much.”

“I know.”

And I did know it. She was my mate. I couldn’t change that. And in some sick way, I knew Annie really did love me.

“You’re a mess. Go clean yourself up and heal this.”

I did as she said, knowing I’d be sleeping in my fur tonight. This was just my life, my normal. I was trapped with no way out because shifters didn’t have anything like divorce. Wolves mate for life.

Tucker

Chapter 5

“Move out,” Michael barked.

I’d snuck out of the house quietly this morning leaving Annie sleeping. She was going to complain about it later, but I really didn’t want to deal with her yet.

We were going for a perimeter run as a full unit. Michael was in the lead followed by Walker and Linc. Then came me with Colin by my side and Lachlan bringing up the rear. These five men were closer than blood to me. We were brothers of the heart.

I’d loved my time on Bravo team, but I’d never connected to them the way I did here on Delta. Switching units may have largely been Annie’s doing, but it had turned out to be the right decision for me. And it wasn’t that I had anything against gorilla, fox, and bear shifters. I’d lay my life down for those guys too. But sometimes in life you just connect with people, and that’s what it had been like for me in Delta team.

When Westin Force first started it had been an exciting time. There was only one team back then, now there were so many I couldn’t even keep up with them all. As we expanded, some of us that had been around from the beginning had been realigned to other teams. So it wasn’t that big a deal that I had transferred.

“Are you coming to Michael’s for Thanksgiving?” Colin asked me.

“Probably not.”

“What? Why not?”

“Apparently Annie’s parents are coming to town.”

“You can bring them along,” Michael yelled from up ahead.

I cringed. “Not a good idea,” I whispered to Colin, but there was no such thing as a whisper around a bunch of shifters with accelerated hearing.

“Why not?”

“Uh, because you saw how Annie reacted the last time we came over,” I blurted out. “Do you guys really think those prejudices just

appeared? Her parents are ten times worse. Shit! I shouldn't have said that."

"It's good to talk about it," Lachlan insisted.

Colin snorted. "No one wants to be psycho-analyzed on a run."

"He has a point," Linc agreed.

"I'm just saying that talking about it is good. She's your mate. We're trying to incorporate her into our family dynamics, but she seems a bit resistant," Lachlan said.

"And not just because my kids are opossums," Michael added.

I groaned. "I don't know how to make things better. She's my mate, you guys. She's not perfect, but she's mine. I love her. Of course, I want her to love all of you and want to spend time with your mates too, but I don't know how to make that happen."

"You can't," Walker said. "And if that kind of prejudice was engrained to her as a child, then there is likely nothing you can do to change her mind or make that better."

"Sorry. Short of building a time machine and going back and not mating her, Walker's right," Colin agreed.

"Guys, that's his mate you're bashing," Linc said.

I was grateful that he was willing to come to my defense, but they weren't wrong either.

This silenced everyone as we ran along without talking further until we rounded a corner and saw a group of teens playing in a field about half a mile from the high school.

"Kevin!" Michael barked.

"Oh shit, dude. It's your dad," someone said.

"Run!" another shouted.

"Freeze!" I yelled, and much to my surprise, they all listened.

"Man, we're so busted. My mom's going to kill me for this."

I knew that kid and walked over to him.

"You're Liam's boy, right?"

"Oscar, sir."

He was the Alpha's nephew. Kyle wouldn't be happy to hear he was skipping school.

"What are you doing?"

Oscar groaned. "It's not what you think. We're not exactly skipping school."

“You aren’t?”

“Not really. It’s technically lunch time, and I have study hall next period so I’m not missing anything.”

“You all have lunch and study hall?”

I could tell by the way some of them hung their heads that it wasn’t true.

“Where are you going?” Linc asked them.

“Kevin?” Michael said when no one else spoke up.

The boy cringed, but then lifted his chin to speak. “Joseph dared Jett to do the challenge course. He said Jett couldn’t do it, that he was too weak.”

“My challenge course?” Linc asked.

“Yes, sir,” Kevin confessed while the others nodded.

Linc had built an entire Survivor-esque course for his mate who was a huge fan of the television show. We’d left it up, but technically the area was off-limits.

“You know you aren’t supposed to be out there. It’s dangerous,” Michael said.

Kevin winced. “I know.”

“So what were you thinking?”

“Kevin tried to stop us,” Joseph said.

“He did. He told us it was off-limits, and we’d get in trouble,” Jett agreed. “But it was a dare, sir. I can’t punk out on a dare.”

I bit back at grin.

Michael groaned.

“We’re really sorry,” Oscar said.

“Look, how about you guys get back to school and we’ll make a deal with you,” I suggested.

“Not a good idea,” Michael argued.

“If he’s about to say what I think he’s about to say, it’ll be okay. We can supervise it,” Colin said.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Walker added.

“Sounds like fun, yeah?” Lachlan said.

Michael’s body language told us he wasn’t going to argue it.

“Go back to class,” Linc said, “and Saturday at ten a.m. we will supervise this challenge. But I don’t want to hear that any of you are going out there and screwing around without us, or I swear I’ll take it down faster

than I put it up. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the boys said as excitement sparked the air.

“Do not make me regret leaving it up. Now get.”

The whole group of them turned and ran back towards their school.

I laughed. “If that’s the worst thing we have to deal with this week, I’ll consider it a damn good week.”

No sooner were the words out of my mouth, than my phone rang.

I groaned as I answered it.

“Sheriff?”

“Tucker, I need a favor.”

“What’s up? I’m out on a perimeter run right now.”

“Nonna called.”

I groaned. “What is it this time?”

“Said she was worried about Birdie and couldn’t get in touch with her. She’s requested a home check again.”

I chuckled. “Like the time you found Birdie naked in the bathroom faking a fall? Or the one where they slit the tire in her car and cried broken down? How about last week when Birdie got up on the roof pretending to hang Christmas lights and kicked the ladder away so we’d come and rescue her? We got stuck hanging her lights for her, remember? I checked on her yesterday. That woman is healthy as a horse and going to outlive us all.”

“I’m not saying I disagree with any of that, but despite their shenanigans, we still have to check.”

“Send Callie or one of your deputies out then.”

“The school called and reported missing kids, as in plural. My guys are out looking for them now.”

“Well, that crisis is over. We ran into them and sent them back. They should be there shortly.”

“Really?”

“Really. They should be back any time now.”

“Great, and that means you’ve got to be pretty close to town.”

I groaned. “Dammit, I walked right into that one, huh? I’ll see if Michael will spare me and go check on her.”

Hanging up the call, I looked around to find all the guys watching me.

“That was Lane.”

“What are those crazy old ladies up to this time?” Michael asked.

“Who knows.”

“I’ll go with you,” Colin said.

“Birdie hates when you show up,” I reminded him.

“That’s because I’m not afraid to call her out on her bullshit.”

“Fine, you two head on over to Birdie’s. The rest of us will ensure the boys get back to class and then finish up the perimeter. We’ll see you two back at headquarters later,” Michael instructed.

Without protest, Colin and I took off at a jog in the direction of Birdie’s house.

It didn’t take us long to get there. The house was dark, but as usual, the front door was unlocked.

“Birdie!” Colin yelled out. “Whatever you’re up to, I’m not buying.”

“Where are you, Birdie? Lane sent us over for a well-check again. What are you and Nonna up to this time?”

But she didn’t respond to either of us.

We both stood silent for a minute.

“Listen,” I said.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly. I’m not picking up anything. Is she even here?”

“Where would she go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she had a meeting with her lawyer.”

“He always comes here,” Colin insisted. “Everyone comes to Birdie. She’s got the whole town wrapped around her little finger. She only goes out when and where she wants, and rarely without Nonna or Tabitha in tow, or both.”

“Well I don’t think she’s with Nonna since that’s who called it in. Maybe she went to visit her great- great-granddaughter and forgot to tell us.”

“Birdie doesn’t have any living family.”

“Sure she does. Her great- great-granddaughter, Abigail, the author. She told me all about her yesterday.”

“I don’t know anything about a great- great-granddaughter, and I’ve known Birdie my whole life.”

I started to fill him in but realized it really didn’t matter.

“Let’s just do a quick room check and then we’ll go from there,” he said.

“Okay,” I agreed.

Colin looked nervous. It made me nervous too. We were used to Birdie's shenanigans, but this seemed out of character for her.

"I'll take upstairs, you check down here," he said, taking the steps two at a time. "Birdie!"

I did a full sweep of the kitchen, dining room, living room, and her favorite little parlor room with the big bay window where she served tea when it was too cold to do so on the front porch.

Next, I moved down the hall to the bathroom and beyond into her bedroom. The door was shut so I knocked first and listened for any movement, but I heard none.

It felt like an intrusion to walk into her personal quarters, but I knew we couldn't leave until all rooms had been checked.

I peeked inside and there she was still fast asleep in bed.

"Found her," I yelled up to Colin. "Birdie, wake up."

I was half expecting her to jump out of bed and try to scare me or something. She was always up to something.

"Birdie?" I said again.

Slowly I approached the bed. She looked so peaceful, but when I reached out to give her a little shake, I knew something was very wrong. Her body was rigid and cold. Her eyes were closed, and she looked so peaceful.

I checked her pulse, just to be certain, as Colin walked in.

"She's gone," I said in shock. "How can she be just gone?"

He shook his head, "Birdie, stop messing around and wake up. Get up Birdie."

He started to shake her, but I stopped him.

"Colin, she's gone."

"She can't be. She can't. Aside from Mirage, she's like the closest thing to family that I have."

"That's not true. You have us. We're your family too."

He nodded sadly. "I just can't believe it. How does someone larger than life just fade away like this?"

"She lived a good long life. You know that."

He just kept nodding as his head bobbed up and down.

"Stay with her. I'll call it in."

"Okay. Kyle will want to know."

"I've got it."

I called Kyle first. He was our Alpha, and Birdie had been the matriarch of Westin Pack.

“Kyle Westin.”

“Kyle, it’s Tucker. I have some bad news.”

“Just give it to me. What are we dealing with? And why isn’t Michael calling me?”

“It’s not a security thing. Lane asked me to come by and check on Birdie. Nonna called him for a wellness check again.”

“What are those two up to this time?”

“Birdie’s dead, sir.”

“What? No.”

“I’m afraid so. Colin and I are here with her, and I’m still struggling to believe it.”

“Damn. Birdie’s dead?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you let Lane and Micah know?”

“Not yet. I’m going down the list starting with you.”

“I appreciate that. If you don’t mind, go ahead and let them know. I’m on my way.”

The next few calls weren’t any easier. Everyone was in disbelief. I was just grateful that the three of them had arrived before Nonna came over to find out what was going on. Seeing her break down hysterically crying over the loss of her friend was more than I could bear.

The rest of the day crawled by. And the next two weeks passed by in a blur.

Even Annie didn’t bother beating me down because I was grieving for my sweet friend. I missed our tea parties and even her crazy antics. I’d gotten to know her well only to lose her.

Annie’s parents made some excuse not to come out for Thanksgiving, and for that I was grateful. We didn’t even bother celebrating. Michael tried to insist we come to his house, but I wasn’t about to drag Annie there only to have her embarrass me again. Instead, he dropped off meals for the two of us and I spent my day off doing absolutely nothing but watching football and eating someone else’s leftovers.

“Snap out of it,” Annie finally said. “This is getting to be ridiculous. She was just an old biddy. Sure, it’s sad, but she was really old and bound to

die eventually. No one lives forever, Tucker. And I'm tired of being ignored."

If she thought being an inconsiderate bitch was going to get her more attention, she was wrong. Instead, I threw myself into work. I went in early and stayed late. She was furious, but I was too exhausted to even care each night as I came home and fell into bed completely spent.

"We're going to need to start going through her house and cleaning it out," Colin finally told me one morning. "It should be us."

I nodded. "I know. Let's start this weekend."

Abby

Chapter 6

I stared down at the letter in my hand unable to believe it.
Two million dollars.

I was certain it had to be some sort of joke, one of those scams or something that try to get your banking information. So I ignored it. Besides, it was supposedly from my great-great-grandmother. I didn't have a great-grandmother living, let alone a great-great-grandmother. She'd have to be like a million years old. It simply didn't make sense, so I ignored it. Until Liam Westin came knocking on my door.

“Hello, Abigail. I'm Liam Westin. I was in charge of your great-great-grandmother's estate. You should have received some paperwork by now from my company, Westin Foundation.”

My jaw dropped at the handsome man in a business suit standing outside my tiny apartment.

“Uh . . .”

His brow crinkled. “It was sent via certified mail.”

“Yes, I remember. I just didn't think it was real,” I blurted out.

He chuckled and nodded. “You didn't know Birdie, did you?”

I shook my head. “No, I didn't know her. To the best of my knowledge, I don't have a single living relative. And suddenly there's this great-great-grandmother that's been alive all this time? Where? How? She'd have to be . . .”

“Very old. Let's leave it at that.”

“Where has she been all my life?”

“I'm afraid I don't have the answers you're looking for. But we do need to discuss her will. She did name you as her sole heir, including a sizable trust fund.”

“Two million dollars. Your paperwork said two million dollars.”

“Yes, but that's just the trust fund. It doesn't include her stocks, personal investments, checking, and savings accounts, as well as her personal

assets including her house.”

“A house?”

“You heard me correctly.”

“This cannot be real. Stuff like this doesn’t happen to me.”

He smiled warmly. “I assure you it did.”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“That’s entirely up to you. Westin Foundation is happy to continue handling your investment portfolio and trust if you’d like. Or if you have a bank or firm you’d rather work with, I am here to assist you with transferring the accounts.”

“And the house?”

“She doesn’t have any other living family, Miss Matroni. But we’re a small community and she had lots of friends who cared about her. I believe she had charged someone to oversee liquidating the assets should you not want to deal with it. Or the house is technically yours. I can call them off and you can deal with her belongings as you see fit. The ball is in your court.”

“This is all a bit overwhelming as I’m sure you can imagine.”

His smile was once again warm, and while I was probably being a naïve idiot, I trusted him.

I worried my bottom lip with my teeth as I considered the options he presented.

“I need to see the house. Is that okay? It just doesn’t feel real. None of this. Maybe if I see it for myself, then it will.”

Or I was going to blindly follow this stranger into the woods and be murdered. *Way to go Abby!*

“I’ll make the arrangements whenever you’re ready.”

I considered my upcoming schedule. Knowing that my first Christmas without my mom and grandmother here might be more than I can emotionally handle, I purposefully pushed my next release back into the new year.

“I have a few weeks free now. Would that be enough time to get her affairs settled?”

“We’ll make it work. I have a plane waiting. Would you like to pack a bag and leave today?”

“Now?”

He grinned and nodded. “Now.”

“Shit. Now? That’s so fast. Okay, yeah, I guess I’ll go pack.”

“I’ll wait.”

It was more than a little unnerving. And without a doubt, this was the dumbest thing I’d ever done in my entire life. Taking off with a complete stranger was absurd, but there was a part of me that was too curious to pass it up.

I had no one left in my life. I could snap a pic of this man just in case, but who was I going to send it too? My editor? My cover designer? There’s wasn’t anyone to watch my back anymore, so foolish or not, I was going to take a leap of faith and do this.

Liam gave me a few moments to pack a bag, and then I left with him.

This is insane, Abby. You’re going to get yourself killed. You’re smarter than this.

I know it was all true, but I didn’t care. My mother would be furious if she knew I was doing this. Not just because of the safety concerns either. My grandmother’s family heritage had been completely off-limits. I wasn’t even allowed to ask questions regarding that side of the family.

I knew that somewhere down the line there was a falling out. I believe Granny told me it was between her mother and her grandmother. That would have been my great-great-grandmother, and she was alive all this time. She had to have been like twelve when she had my great-grandmother. And then she would have had to have been very young when she had my Granny. And even still, the math wasn’t adding up right.

None of this made any sense.

“Why would she just leave all of this to me?” I asked Liam as we pulled up to a remote airstrip.

I gulped hard. *Yup. I was going to die.*

“You’re her blood,” Liam said, like that obviously cleared it all up.

“Her blood? Are you serious? She never even met me. I didn’t even know she existed, or at least that she was alive.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, Ms. Matroni.”

“Abby, or even Abigail,” I corrected.

He smiled. It was a reassuring smile that gave me hope that just maybe he wasn’t a crazy stalker or even an ax murderer after all.”

“Abby, I know this all sounds insane, but I’m not some stalker or murderer luring you away from your home to have my way with you. I’m a

happily mated man. You're welcome to meet Maddie while you're in town. I'm sure she would love to meet you and have you over for a visit."

"You're happily mated? What does that mean?"

He grinned. "Sorry, inside secret. Married is what I should have said."

Married made sense to me, but he had clearly said mated. My mind started to weave all sorts of fantasies in my head. Not the sexual kind, more like the sort of paranormal fantasies I wrote about. My current book, "A Vampire's Desire", had my main male character, Vincent, on the hunt for a mate. It was a common fated mates trope in the literary world. But I'd never heard someone use it so casually in the real world.

Was he making fun of me?

He'd clearly done his homework well enough to find me. Surely, he knows I'm an author. Perhaps he even read one of my books and that's why he had used the term. Just being cheeky or something.

I'd always had a vivid imagination.

"Abigail! Get your head out of the clouds and your feet back on solid ground." That's what my mother would always say.

We didn't go to the airport. No, he took me to a small airstrip I didn't even know existed and I'd lived here my whole life. I gulped hard. There was a private plane waiting on the runway. I was about to get on a private plane and disappear, possibly forever, with this insanely handsome, mysterious man promising me unimaginable gifts on the other side.

Yup, I'm gonna die. But I'm gonna die on the craziest, biggest adventure of my life.

"Let's do this," I said to myself.

Liam smiled and helped me out of the car when it came to a stop. The chauffeur retrieved our bags and took them to the plane.

Once on board, I couldn't even believe what I was seeing. It was so plush. The seats were thick and so comfortable I felt like I was going to melt into them. There was a stewardess there offering me champagne in a fluted glass and asking me what I would like to eat.

"I'll have the filet mignon rare, baked potato, and mixed vegetables, please," Liam told her before turning back to me. "We'll be a few hours in the air, Abigail. Is there anything you'd like?"

"Um, I guess I'll have the same," I said.

This was luxury at its finest.

Discreetly I reached over and pinched myself.

Ow.

Yup, this was really happening.

The food had been delicious and the seats were so comfortable that I had fallen asleep for much of the flight. I'd been having these strange dreams for the past several months, even before the accident. They were ridiculous, but still felt so real.

I'd dreamed that I turned into a werewolf. It wasn't quite the bone breaking excruciating experience I usually wrote about, and it wasn't about a character, it was me. I'd even woken up on the couch one day and swore I saw dog fur all over it.

Never had I confessed that to anyone before. Surely, I'd be committed to a psych facility if I had.

My mom and I had shared everything. We were so close, and she was often a sounding board for my stories. She loved my wolves as much as I did, but Granny was never comfortable with it. She was raised to believe wolves were evil or something like that. She didn't like them, dogs either, but I had always been drawn to them, fascinated by them even as a child.

But dreaming I was the werewolf each night had freaked me out. So I hadn't been sleeping well for quite some time. It was also the reason I was writing a vampire love story. I knew I needed to step away from my wolves for a bit.

"We're here," Liam told me.

I stretched and yawned. "I can't remember the last time I slept so hard. Sorry."

Maybe he drugged you, my crazy brain thought.

"I'm sure it hasn't been easy losing your mother and grandmother so suddenly like that."

"No, it hasn't."

There was something about Liam Westin that just made me trust him. *They said the same thing about Jeffrey Dahmer.*

I pushed that thought aside.

As the plane landed, I followed Liam outside and waited for someone

to unload my bags. A black SUV with dark tinted windows was waiting for us. The door opened and another insanely handsome man stepped out.

“Abigail, this is Colin. He’s about as close to family as Birdie had.”

“Abby,” I corrected as I shook the guy’s hand.

His smile was warm and friendly, too, immediately setting me at ease. Combine that with the smells around me, and I had no fear whatsoever. It was strange. The air just smelled better here. It relaxed my body and made me feel like I was coming home. It was similar to walking into my Granny’s house at Christmas and smelling fresh cookies in the oven. But I was most definitely not in Kansas anymore.

I sniffed the air and sighed happily.

“Where exactly are we?”

“San Marco,” Colin said. “California.”

I looked around the area, it didn’t look like sunshine and beaches or anything at all that I would think of in California. I didn’t say anything though. Right now, they’d given me no reason not to trust them, and California was a pretty big state. It couldn’t all be beaches and Hollywood, deserts of Death Valley, or the rolling hills of Napa Valley.

Liam motioned for me to take the front seat as he slid into the back and Colin put our luggage into the back before getting into the driver’s seat.

“It’s a few minutes yet to get up the mountain.”

I nodded and stared out the window as giant trees rushed by.

“So you knew my uh, great-great-grandmother?” I asked him when I couldn’t stand the silence a second longer.

“I did. Birdie was the best. Quite the character.”

“I didn’t even know she existed until Liam contacted me.”

“I’m sorry. She never mentioned you either. I’ll admit, I was taken by surprise to hear she had an heir.”

I snorted. “An heir?”

“Yeah. Anyone who lives as long as Birdie did is bound to acquire a lot. My buddy Tucker and I were just about to start cleaning out her house when Liam notified me that he had found you.”

“Was your friend close with her too?”

“He was. I think he snuck over there to have tea with her nearly every day. He’s the one that found her.”

I sighed. “Sorry. I’m sure that must have been hard.”

“I think we’re all still in shock. The whole town is. It just doesn’t feel real yet. Birdie was the matriarch of this place. She meant a lot to a lot of people.”

I considered that for a minute. It was surreal to hear about her. I didn’t know this woman. I didn’t even know she existed, but it was clear she had this whole life here and meant something to these men. They painted her as a person I would have liked to get to know and that left me with so many unanswered questions. Things, I knew I’d never get answers to.

Finally, Colin pulled up to a big old Victorian home. It was well kept and absolutely stunning, and it was beautifully decorated for Christmas.

The house sat on what looked like a main road, but it wasn’t exceptionally busy, at least not at this time. There were people out walking along the sidewalks, and I could see a big open field with a playground and a large pond across the street. People were gathered around there too. It looked like the sort of small town that was written in books.

“So, here we are,” Liam said. “I’m afraid I haven’t been able to locate a key yet. Birdie never locked her door so it could have been missing for decades for all I know,” he said with a chuckle. “But I can assure you, you’re safe here. No one will mess with you.”

Was he insane? I wasn’t staying in a house with no locks.

“The locks work just fine. So you can lock yourself in if that makes you feel better, just don’t lock yourself out. I know you’re from the city and the idea of having an unlocked house is probably terrifying. Things are just different around here. We trust each other and keep to ourselves. No one’s going to barge in on you or try to break in and steal anything. I promise you that.”

“Liam’s right. But if it makes you feel better, I can arrange to have the locks changed with new keys. The hardware store is closed for today, but I can pick up locks in the morning and get them changed for you.”

“Okay. Just call first, please.”

“Of course.”

“Can we get you anything? Dinner perhaps?” Liam asked.

“I’m not really hungry, yet.”

Colin cringed. “I wouldn’t advise eating anything in the fridge. Freezer should be fine, pantry is mostly fine, but we haven’t cleaned out the fridge yet, so I wouldn’t trust anything in there.”

“I’m sure I can just order something in.”

They shared a look and then laughed.

“No delivery?”

“Not usually on the weekdays. You can call and ask, but I wouldn’t hold my breath either. I can have Maddie drop something by later. Or there are a few restaurants in town that are within walking distance.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Mirage could bring you something as well. I’m sure she’s dying to meet you.”

“Mirage?”

“My ma—, uh, wife.” He grinned.

Was he about to say mate? I pushed the thought aside.

“Thanks, but I can fend for myself. It’s not a big deal.”

Besides, a hot shower and some quiet time writing sounded like just what I needed, after snooping around some first. I couldn’t wait to get inside and start investigating the life of this woman I never got to know.

“Okay, well, we’ll leave you to it then. You have my number if you need anything at all,” Liam said.

Colin didn’t look like he was ready to leave, but one look from Liam and he agreed.

“Yeah. We should go.” He pulled out a card and handed it to me.

“That’s my cell number. I’m on call this week so feel free to use it day or night. It’s no problem.”

“Thanks for everything, both of you.”

As they left, I turned and stared up at the house. It was huge and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined.

Feeling like a total creeper, I walked up the stairs to the big wraparound porch. There was a table and chairs set, a big swing, and various other seating arrangements. It had quite the eclectic classic chic appeal. I could see myself sitting out there in the evenings sipping a cup of coffee and writing.

Hesitantly, I forced myself to go inside. My curiosity was piqued. Still, it felt like I was a trespasser walking into someone’s house. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that I was going to inherit all of this.

Inside was much like I expected based on the furnishings and decorations of the porch. I spent some time wandering around the house just

getting a feel of the place and trying to imagine what Birdie must have been like.

Colin had called her a character, but everything about this house told me she was a lady in the truest sense of the word. What had her life been like? Who was she? Who had she loved? Why wasn't she around? Why hadn't anyone mentioned that she was even alive?

I had so many questions.

Deciding it was all too much, I found a bathroom and bedroom on the first floor. Judging by the clothes in the closet, I knew it must have been her room, but I was too tired to care. It had been a long day.

I jumped in the shower to wash up and fished out clean pajamas from my suitcase before crawling into the big bed.

Two seconds later, I was jumping back out and on the hunt for fresh sheets. Once I located them, I changed the bed linens.

The smell of fresh laundry detergent tickled my nose, but it was better than the overwhelming scent of lilac that I suspected was all Birdie. Combined with the natural woody odor that seemed to permeate all of San Marco, all of the smells were overpowering my senses, and I knew I wasn't going to sleep until the sheets were changed.

I took the discarded ones down to the laundry room off the kitchen, and though it was late, I started a load. Worst case, I fell asleep and finished it in the morning.

Before I went back to the room, I made sure to lock the front door. But as I was turning around, I heard a noise towards the back of the house.

"Hello?" I yelled out, but there was no reply. "Of course, there wasn't going to be. No one else is here. Liam and Colin assured me it was safe here," I reminded myself. "And now I'm talking to myself."

I groaned. But when I heard something moving around off the kitchen, the hair on my arms stood up and my heart began racing.

"Who's there?" I yelled out a little louder as I grabbed a heavy metal candlestick off one of the fireplace mantels and carried it like I would a baseball bat ready to strike.

This time I was positive I heard something.

Someone's in the house.

I grabbed my phone from the pocket of my pajama bottoms and dialed 911.

“Hi. You’ve reached the Sheriff’s office, what’s your emergency?” a woman answered.

“Someone broke into my house,” I whispered before rattling off the address I’d already memorized. “Please hurry.”

I hung up when I heard a crash followed by some cursing.

“Colin? Liam? Is that you?”

As my panic spiked, I couldn’t remember their wives’ names, but why would they be in my house snooping around?

“Hello?!”

I quietly walked into the kitchen. If this was truly my house then I had to protect it, at least until I decided what I was going to do with it.

A man dressed all in black stepped out from the shadows and into the kitchen. He was wearing headphones and didn’t even seem to notice me.

That didn’t register in time as a scream ripped through my body and I let the candlestick fly from my hands.

He ducked just in time as it lodged into the wall.

I turned to run as he jolted in surprise and ripped his headphones off.

“Are you insane?! What are you doing here?”

I forced myself to face him. My breath hitched. Was every guy in San Marco this hot? I mean sure, it’s California, everyone thinks sexy actors and superstars, but we were out in the middle of nowhere and this one was easily the hottest guy I’d ever seen in my life.

I couldn’t even process it fully, so instead, I just yelled at him.

“What am I doing here? What the hell are you doing here? This is my house!”

He looked genuinely confused.

A knock at the door had me jumping out of my skin.

Someone rattled the front door and then yelled out. “Police, open up.”

I looked at him, then turned and ran for the front door to unlock it.

“He’s back here,” I yelled running back towards the kitchen.

I fully expected the man to have taken off, but instead, he was sitting on the countertop waiting for us. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared at him.

“What the hell is going on, Lane? Who is this and what’s she doing here?” the stranger asked.

I didn’t know who Lane was until the Sheriff spoke up.

“Tucker,” he said with a nod, then turned to me. “I presume you must be Abigail Matroni, Birdie’s heir?”

Recognizing his name, I looked back at the man that had invaded my personal space.

“Tucker? You’re Colin’s friend? He said you were close with my, uh, Birdie.”

“Abigail? Liam didn’t think you’d actually come out so soon. I’ve been trying to fix a few things up around here before you arrived. Sorry. They didn’t tell me.”

“So, it looks like it’s just a misunderstanding then?” Lane asked.

“I guess so,” I relented.

“Tucker? You good, man?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Alright then. Call if you have any further concerns, Ms. Matroni.”

“Abby,” I correct.

He nodded. “Welcome to San Marco, Abby.”

Tucker

Chapter 7

Abigail Matroni, the writer. Or Abby, as she had told Lane.

“Look Abby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. I honestly had no idea you were here. I didn’t even know Liam was back from talking to you.”

I shrugged. “It’s been a crazy day,” I confessed.

My eyes drifted appreciatively over her. She was a beautiful woman, but I had no doubt in my mind that Birdie had been a stunner in her younger days too.

I knew it was getting late. I’d gone home after work to find Annie in a foul mood, so instead of sticking around and dealing with it, I faked an emergency and came to work at Birdie’s. I hadn’t lied when I told her I was trying to fix some things up before she flew out.

“What are you even doing here? It’s late.”

I shrugged. “It feels later than it actually is.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said after looking down at her watch.

“You’re from Kansas, right?”

“Yeah.”

“The time difference is just screwing with you.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m sure you’re tired, so I’ll get out of your way.”

She didn’t move to stop me, so I walked past her and towards the front door to let myself out.

“Are there still things you need to fix here?”

I smirked. “Yeah, and now add that wall you just busted to the list.”

She blushed. It was cute.

“Right. So, maybe you could come back tomorrow and help me tackle some of this? It’s all a bit overwhelming. Plus, Colin mentioned you knew her. You knew Birdie. Would you tell me about her?”

I smiled and nodded. “I’d love that. She was one of my favorite people in the whole world. But you have to promise not to throw deadly

objects at my head again.”

That earned me a sly smile that I wasn't expecting. “No promises, but I'll try.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “See you tomorrow, Abby.”

I was still smiling while driving home and letting myself into my house. But that all changed when I saw Annie standing there with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Michael stopped by and was surprised to hear you had an emergency call.”

“Did I say it was for work?”

“Where the hell have you been, Tucker?”

I sighed. There was no sense in lying to her.

“I was over at Birdie's working. Her heir came into town today, so there was a lot to do ahead of their arrival.”

“And that was an emergency?”

“Well yeah. I didn't expect her to come in today so had to put a rush on a few things.”

“Her?”

“Her.”

“What is it with you and little old ladies?”

I shrugged, but kept my mouth shut. Annie didn't need to know that Abby was definitely not in the old lady category.

“So did she make the trip okay?”

I nodded. “Mm-hmm. But I'm pretty beat today and have an early morning, so I think I'm going to call it a night.”

She scowled, but for once didn't say anything, and I was grateful for it.

Annie was preoccupied on the phone when I left. If I had to guess, I'd say she was talking to her mother. Since her parents ditched out last minute on Thanksgiving, I suspected she was trying to talk them into coming for Christmas now.

I was trying not to stress it too much.

Heading into the office was first on my agenda. I had to give Michael

a heads up that I was going to be spending some time working on Birdie's house for a few days. When I got in, the team was warming up for a run.

"Michael, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure, what's up?" he said as he ushered me into his office for some privacy. "Is everything okay? I stopped by your house last night and Annie told me you were out on an emergency call, but I know I didn't call you. What's going on with you?"

I ran a hand through my hair. "Everything's fine. I called it an emergency so Annie wouldn't give me shit for it."

"For what, Tucker?"

"I was just over at Birdie's place. There're a few things that need to be fixed up."

"The new owner can take care of that," he said.

"The new owner shouldn't even be here, man."

"What do you mean?"

"According to Birdie, she's human and knows absolutely nothing about our kind. Her line died out three generations ago. So really the best thing we can do is help her get the house in order and sold so she can get the hell out of here."

"Shit. I didn't know."

"And I didn't know she was going to be arriving so soon."

"What the hell? She's already here?"

I looked down at his desk and saw the folder labeled with Abby's name and picked it up to hand it to him.

He groaned as he thumbed through it.

"Shit. Patrick must have put this on my desk after I left last night. I didn't even notice it this morning."

Patrick O'Connell was one of Kyle Westin's Betas. He was a good guy and helped oversee pack security, including heading up Westin Force. He wasn't someone you ignored when he put folders on your desk.

"Are you okay?" I asked Michael.

He sighed. "I'm fine."

"That doesn't sound fine. You look stressed. What's going on?"

For a second I didn't think he was going to tell me, but then he started talking. "Callie is obsessed with giving Autumn and Kevin the best Christmas ever. She's driving me insane with this shit."

I looked at him like he was crazy.

“Dude, it’s your first Christmas as a family. Of course she wants everything to be perfect.”

“Obsessed, Tucker. I was coming over to your house to hide from her last night.”

I laughed. “And I was over at Birdie’s place hiding from Annie.”

His face instantly morphed into concern. “Are you and Annie fighting?”

I stared at him like he had two heads. Sure, I didn’t talk about my relationship with my mate, but somehow, I just assumed they all knew something wasn’t quite there.

“Annie and I fight all the time. Or rather, she fights, and I just shut my mouth and take it.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry man. That sounds miserable.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is. I know how to choose my battles.”

“But you shouldn’t have to. Your mate should be your best friend in the entire world, the one you take all your problems to, not the one you run from.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love her. I’ve always loved her. She just isn’t always the easiest person to live with.”

“I have a mission coming up that’s out of town. Elise is taking a trip to Collier to visit Lily. Patrick can’t go with her this time so is requesting a full security detail.”

I groaned. “Give it to Walker. It’s less than three weeks until Christmas. Annie would lose her shit if I left territory right now, and sorry, but Elise isn’t worth all that right now. Not that she’s not worth the detail, just . . .”

He laughed. “I get it. I’ll offer it to Walker.”

“Great. So, about Birdie’s place . . . Abby wanted to know if I could come by today and help with a few things. She wanted me to tell her stories about Birdie as well. So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Abby?” he asked as he looked over her paperwork.

“Abigail. Ms. Matroni. She prefers Abby.”

“I see.”

I glared at him. “It’s not like that, dude. I’m happily mated.”

“Happily?” he challenged, catching me off guard.

“Whatever. I’m mated,” I said, unable to confirm my “happily” status.

“Relax, I’m just teasing you. Colin already hit me up. Run, don’t run, whatever, he begged for the two of you to be off to babysit our new human resident. I’m sure he’s waiting on you now.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“This Abby, is she cute?”

“What? What the hell does that matter?”

“Is she?”

“Yeah, sure, she’s cute. Why?”

He shrugged. “Wondering if I should send Walker or Lachlan over there to help out. They could use a good mate.”

For some reason, that didn’t sit well with me.

“Human, you asshole.”

I shook my head and left his office to find Colin along with the rest of the team waiting on us. I looked him over and my face scrunched up in frustration.

“You’re going to run? Michael said we didn’t have to.”

“What? They’re getting out of it?” Walker asked. “Why?”

“Because they’re on their own sort of babysitting mission right now,” he explained. “The rest of you fall in.”

I laughed and stuck my tongue out as the guys jogged out in formation.

Archie, a mole shifter and head of cyber security, just shook his head at me and snorted.

“You’re an idiot.”

Without any further words, he walked right past me and into the data center.

Colin shook his head and laughed as he slapped me on the back and made his way out and back up to ground level. I followed.

Westin Force Home Base was housed in the basement of Westin Lodge, a giant cover operation that also brought income to the Pack functioning as an actual travel destination. A lot of the single guys lived at the Lodge. And while I was certainly jealous of their elevator ride commute, I had never lived there.

The second I moved to San Marco, I had secured a house in town for myself and for Annie. She may not have moved with me initially, but I

wanted to be ready knowing she inevitably would. For a long time, my unit didn't even know I was mated.

"I'll meet you there," Colin said. "I'm going to swing by Silver Bells and pick up some breakfast. You want something?"

"Yeah, sure. Grab a couple of bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits. I'm sure Abby will appreciate it."

"Abby? How the hell do you know she goes by Abby?"

"Huh? Oh, I met her last night."

"When?"

"When I stopped in to get some work done not knowing she was arriving yesterday."

"And she let you in? She seemed exhausted and a little skittish when I dropped her off."

"That's probably why she threw a candlestick at my head and called 911."

He chuckled. "You're lying."

"I swear it's the truth. Just wait. We get to add wall repair to the list now, too."

Colin was still laughing as he got in his car and drove away. I followed him back into town but split off when he turned to head to the diner while I went straight to Birdie's.

When I pulled up, the first thing I noticed was Abby sitting on the front porch sipping her morning coffee and typing away on her laptop.

I quietly got out, careful not to disturb her.

She was focused on whatever she was doing as I managed to walk up the stairs without interrupting.

I leaned against one of the large columns and crossed my arms over my chest just watching her.

"You know, you look a lot like her," I said.

She screamed, jerking back and spilling the dark liquid all over the keyboard of her laptop.

"No!" she shrieked as she started sopping up as much of the liquid as she could.

I jumped into action to help.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you like that."

"You can't just sneak up on a girl."

She smacked my arm, but it was so soft I barely felt it. Annie would have probably decked me so hard it sent me flying off the porch.

I shook my head to rid myself of that thought.

“I’m really sorry, Abby. Let me help.”

“You’ve done enough, Tucker.”

The screen flickered and then died.

She sat down hard and started to cry.

I felt horrible.

“Let me help. I can get this fixed.”

“It’s gone forever,” she said dramatically.

Cursing under my breath, I grabbed my phone and dialed Tarron’s number.

“Tarron here.”

“Hey, man, it’s Tucker. Can you spare a few minutes, or perhaps your mate, and one of you get over to Birdie’s place? It’s an emergency.”

“Sure, we’re on our way.”

When I hung up the phone, Abby was staring at me funny, but at least she’d stopped crying. I wasn’t used to women’s tears. They made me uneasy. Annie never cried, well, maybe not never. But she used them to manipulate me knowing I would do almost anything to cheer her up.

Abby’s tears seemed genuine, and that tore at my heart with guilt.

“Help is on the way.”

She shook her head. “It’s dead. There’s no resurrecting this. I’ll be lucky if I can get the data restored off the hard drive. I’ll have to send it off. I back everything up to the Cloud, so it’s really just what I wrote today because I couldn’t find a Wi-Fi connection. At least I’m not on deadline and it was only a few thousand words . . . really good words.”

She pouted as she stared down at the sopping wet laptop.

Tarron’s car pulled up and Susan jumped out before he had it in park.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in a huff.

I pointed to the laptop and then picked it up as coffee poured from it.

Susan huffed and then smacked me on the arm. It was a lot harder than Abby had hit me just a few moments ago.

“What?”

“Tarron said it was an emergency.”

“It is. She’s a writer, Susan. She has to have her data restored and this

thing dried out and fixed or replaced. It's important."

Tarron groaned as he walked up. "That's what you dragged us out here for? Give me that."

He ripped it from my hands as he started to examine it.

"Don't power it back on while it's still wet," Susan chastised.

"I know that."

They started bickering over the best options for resolving the problem.

"Guys, cut it out. This is Abby, Birdie's great-great-granddaughter."

They stopped arguing with each other and turned their attention back to us.

"Oh, hi. I'm Susan and this is my mate, Tarron."

"Can you fix it?"

Tarron shrugged. "We'll have to dry it out before we can tell what we're dealing with."

"But data recovery shouldn't be a problem. I'm happy to do it," Susan responded.

"Are you sure?" Tarron asked her.

"Yes, please. I need something to do. Something more than just staying home with the baby."

"Fair enough," he said, giving her a quick kiss on the lips before addressing Abby. "Can we take this with us?"

"Uh, yeah, sure."

"Great. It was nice to meet you, Abby. We'll be in touch soon."

Abby

Chapter 8

Mate. He'd clearly called her his mate. Tucker had used the word too while on the phone with him. Casually I reached under the table and pinched myself.

Ow.

Yup, still awake. Everything about this situation was weird and I was convinced I was just going to wake up at any moment and find that it was all just a crazy dream.

"They really are the best of the best when it comes to technology and stuff," Tucker said.

"Uh, yeah, thanks."

Before things got too awkward, another car pulled up. I immediately recognized Colin as he got out and grabbed a bag from the backseat.

"Breakfast?" he asked holding it up and grinning. He looked back and forth between me and Tucker. "What's wrong?"

"I ruined her laptop."

"It was an accident," I said, feeling some strange need to defend him.

Last night had been too much for me for one day. Once Tucker had left, I'd curled back up in bed and passed out. I'd had that dream again where I was suddenly a wolf and when I woke up this morning, I was naked on the floor. I couldn't find my clothes anywhere, and it was freaking me out. I'd come out here to write just to destress from everything.

"Hungry?" Colin asked, watching me warily.

"Starving," I admitted.

They both joined me at the little table as he fished out sandwiches to pass around. Without another word I opened mine and sunk my teeth into it. It was delicious. I closed my eyes and moaned in pleasure. When I opened them again, both men were staring at me.

I blushed. "Sorry. This is really good."

Tucker grinned and nodded. "Yeah, it is," he admitted without

making a big deal of it.

“Can you guys tell me a bit about Birdie. What was she like?”

“A character,” Tucker said.

“What does that mean?”

“She was really good friends with my grandmother. I spent almost as much time here as I did at home growing up. I was raised by my grandparents. Birdie just had this light about her. She used to be an actress back in the day and was definitely prone to theatrics,” Colin explained.

“Before she died, she’d somehow gotten worse,” Tucker said.

There was a distant look in his eyes like he wasn’t really there anymore. I knew that look. For him it was reliving the past. For me it was always a storyline playing out in my head.

“You’ll have to meet Nonna and Tabitha for sure. The three of them always ran together,” he continued.

“Trouble is what they were. The three of them together was always trouble,” Colin said with a laugh.

Tucker chuckled and nodded. “Just last month, shortly before she died, Nonna called in an emergency.”

“Wait, you have to understand, she would call in emergency well-checks all the time for Birdie, and we never knew what we were going to walk in to.”

“Like the time she was lying on the floor naked pretending she’d fallen,” Tucker said. “But this time she had climbed up on the roof of the house and then pushed the ladder off and pretended to be stuck on the roof.”

“Wouldn’t she actually be stuck then?” I asked.

The guys looked at each other and shrugged.

“It didn’t matter, she only did it to get us and the fire station out here so we’d hang her Christmas decorations and lights for her.”

“Seriously? She sounds hysterical.”

“Oh she was,” Colin said. “So many memories here in this house. What are you going to do with it?”

I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know yet. It’s all so surreal. I didn’t even know she existed. How could I not know that? Why didn’t my family know that? I have so many questions and no one’s left to give me the answers.”

Tucker reached out for my hand and squeezed. It comforted me. I

didn't know why I was being so open and honest with these men. It wasn't like me at all. They were strangers, but they didn't really feel like strangers.

"It's a great house," Tucker said. "I'm sure you could get a good price for it."

"Maybe. What if I just want to move in and live here?"

I nibbed on my lower lip. Where had that idea come from? I wasn't going to just move here, right?

As I thought about it, I realized I really didn't have any reason to stay where I was anymore. I only had a few friends in Kansas, and I never saw them anymore. Everyone else I cared about had died. I was all alone. But in the short time I'd been here, I didn't feel quite so alone.

There was something in the smell of the air and the friendly smiles of everyone that passed by me that just made me feel comfortable here. Maybe I should stay. Why not?

But I didn't miss the worried look that passed between Colin and Tucker. Though I didn't understand why. They seemed nice, but it was clear they didn't think me staying was a good idea.

I sighed. "Or maybe I'll just sell it and go home."

The thought made me sad while also feeling like a part of me was angry about it.

"Well, I guess to start with, I need to go through the house and decide what to do with everything. There's a lot of stuff here."

"She lived here for a hundred years, Abby. You realize that, right?" Colin asked.

"It's insane, and I don't even know how it's possible, but that's what I've been told."

"Probably the fresh air or something," he muttered.

Yeah, I was sure that was it. I refrained from rolling my eyes.

Without another word, I got up and walked inside. Standing at the door, I looked around, feeling overwhelmed. I was used to cleaning out houses after this year. Lord knew I'd done more than my fair share of it this year. This shouldn't be difficult, but there was so much, and it was all unfamiliar to me. I had no idea where to even begin in a place like this.

Tucker walked up behind me and rubbed his hands down my arms. His touch warmed me all over.

"One room at a time," he said, as if he could somehow read my mind.

“Okay.” Taking a deep breath, I held it for a fraction longer than was comfortable and then blew it out. “I can do this.”

The living room was the first large room I came to.

“I’m going to need boxes.”

“Already on it,” Colin said, carrying in a large armful.

“There’s so much stuff here. Is there anyone around here that she knew that might want some of these things?”

“Nonna and Tabitha maybe?”

I noticed a shelf for the first time that was covered in wolves.

“Look at this. Did she love wolves too?”

Tucker had a funny look on his face, like he couldn’t figure out how to answer such a simple question.

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

“She loved wolves,” Colin said. He was much more convincing.

“I do too,” I said softly.

“Is that why you write about them?” Tucker asked.

I blushed. “How do you know what I write?”

“Birdie told me.”

My eyes widened. “She knew?”

“She was very proud of you.”

A tear slid down my cheek.

“I didn’t even know she existed. How could I not know?”

I felt like a blubbering fool. Colin seemed uncomfortable with my sudden emotional breakdown, but Tucker stayed by my side and even rubbed soothing circles with his hand on my back at times.

Finally, I sniffed and pushed the emotions aside. There would be time for that later. I had work to do.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don’t be. We’re all grieving. The whole . . .” he paused, and his face pinched as he seemed to be searching for the right words. “Town. The whole town is mourning the loss of her. There will even be a life celebration coming up if you would like to be a part of it.”

I cheered up and nodded. “I’d really like that.”

“I’ll talk to Kyle and see what I can do.”

“Did someone mention my name?”

I jumped and looked back at the doorway to find a man I’d never seen

before. He was tall, handsome, and something about him screamed authority.

If I were writing this story, this man would be the Alpha for sure. He commanded attention just standing there. It was the craziest thing I'd ever experienced, and I wanted to giggle at the thought.

My werewolves weren't always communal, or rather they didn't live together like one would imagine a wolf pack. But there was always one Alpha overseeing like a whole city of beasts. Most of them were shady or downright evil at times, but suddenly I could picture a pack of werewolves living in a small, remote town like this. How fun would that be? This guy looming before me would definitely be the Alpha.

"Hey Kyle. This is Abigail Matroni, Birdie's heir. She prefers to go by Abby."

I smiled at him; grateful he had mentioned that. Normally, I was always having to correct people when meeting them, unless it was within the book world. There, I was Abigail now. I'd learned to deal with it, but outside of work, I still preferred to be called Abby.

"Hello, Abby, and welcome to San Marco. I'm Kyle Westin, the, uh, mayor here."

"Mayor? Oh right, Mayor Westin," Tucker said.

They sounded like they were lying, but why lie about something like that?

It just didn't make sense, so I tried to dismiss it and move on.

"I'm very sorry about Birdie. She was a special lady and will be greatly missed," he said.

"Thank you. I wish I had known her."

"Well, if there's anything you need, please just let me know."

I nodded. "Thank you."

He started to leave, but not before stopping and shaking his head as a blonde woman walked in carrying a casserole dish. Juggling it with one hand, she put her other on her hip and stared at him shaking her head.

"Why didn't you tell me you were headed this way?"

Kyle chuckled. "Abby, this is my, uh, wife, Kelsey."

The way he looked at her with love in his eyes made my romance-loving heart downright giddy.

Kelsey turned away from him and came right towards me. She set the dish on the table and pulled me into her arms.

“We’re so sorry about Birdie. I brought you a meal and started a food train. You won’t have to worry about a thing while you’re here. I see you’ve met Colin and Tucker already. Are they helping or more of a pain in your ass?”

Tucker laughed. “Love you too, Kels.”

She flashed a hundred-watt smile at him. For some reason, I liked her immediately.

“If there’s anything at all that you need, please just call me. I wrote my name and number on the dish. And I mean it. We’re all here for you. Whatever you need.”

“Well, Colin just brought boxes in, so I think I’m okay for now.”

“Packing materials? Tape? Anything?”

“I forgot tape, but Mirage is on her way with some,” Colin yelled from somewhere else in the house.

I laughed out loud and then apologized for it.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about something someone told me.”

“What?” Tucker asked.

“Well, Liam Westin was the one who brought me here . . . wait! Kyle Westin, you said. Are you related?”

Kyle nodded.

“Brothers,” Kelsey told me. “What about Liam?”

“Well, he told me there was no key to the lock on the door, but not to worry because no one would bother me or stop by unexpectedly, yet it’s been a constant stream of people today.”

Kyle’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry. Would you prefer your privacy while dealing with this? I can make that happen.”

“No,” I tried to assure him. “I really appreciate the help and hearing stories about Birdie. It was just funny, that’s all.”

I felt like an idiot for sharing that with them.

I’d always been a bit of an outsider. There was a reason I wrote the kind of books I wrote. It was an escape from real life and all about feeling like there was this missing piece of yourself, like you weren’t whole without it. I’d always felt like my life was missing something, and I wasn’t great at connecting with people, well, not in person at least. Here, that was all different, and I really couldn’t put into words why I felt that way.

Me! I couldn’t find the words. The thought was ridiculous. I was

never at a loss for words.

“Do you want to get started?” Tucker asked.

I slumped down onto the old clawfoot couch and huffed. “I honestly don’t even know where to begin. I don’t know what to do with any of this stuff. Is there an estate manager maybe who could just do an estate sale on it all? Would her friends like to come by and take what they want first? Is there a place around here to donate things?”

“What I’m hearing is that you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed with everything right now,” Kelsey said.

“You could certainly say that.”

“How about some help?”

“That would be nice.”

“Colin and I are already here to help,” Tucker argued.

She rolled her eyes and sat down next to me.

“I’m going to call in some resources, but when you hit a break point, just say the word.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Kelsey made some quick phone calls while Tucker put the food in the fridge.

When she took a break, Kyle knelt down next to her.

“Babe, I have to run. I have an eleven o’clock meeting. Do you need me for anything?”

“Not at the moment.”

He kissed her, letting it linger just a little longer than was appropriate for company. The two of them looked deliriously happy and I suspected they were newlyweds.

“How long have the two of you been married? Was it recent?” I asked once Kyle left.

Kelsey snorted. “No. It’s been quite some time. Our oldest son turned eleven this year.”

“You have kids?”

“Two boys.”

“Wow. The way he looks at you, I just assumed it was new.”

She smiled. “Nope. I’m just a lucky woman.”

“I’d say so.”

As the morning passed, people came and went. I got to meet Colin’s

wife, Mirage. They seemed deliriously happy too. Others came and went. Food was plentiful, though most of it I'd never even seen enter the house. It was like magic, just appearing out of nowhere.

I gave a blanket order that if anyone wanted or needed something to please take it. It was my way of giving back. I had no sentimental connection to any of it, and my little home back in Kansas was just the way I wanted it. I didn't need any of this stuff. I just felt responsible for it with no clue what to do with it all.

"Abby, this is Christine and Callie," Mirage said as she introduced me to her friends.

Callie was dressed in uniform, and I blushed thinking about how I'd called 911 to come and get my intruder who was now a constant comfort and familiar face amongst a sea of strangers throughout the day.

Tucker had stayed by my side through everything, and when I started to feel run down, he seemed to recognize that and buffer me from it all.

Callie gave me a warm smile. "So Tucker, I hear breaking and entering is your new thing."

"That's classified," he said without hesitation.

"Does Annie know you're sneaking into other women's houses in the middle of the night?" she teased.

He groaned. "It wasn't in the middle of the night, and I didn't know she was here."

"What did Annie say about it?" Christine asked.

"What did Annie say about what?" a new voice asked.

They all quieted and the room was suddenly filled with tension.

"Shit!" I heard Tucker say before he left my side and ran to stand with her.

"Who are you?" the woman asked as she brushed Tucker's hand from her arm.

"I'm Abby, Birdie's heir."

"Her heir?" she practically yelled at Tucker as he shoved her from the room and out of the house.

"What was that?" I asked.

"His mate," Christine said.

Callie elbowed her. "His wife. She meant his wife."

An unspoken conversation seemed to be going on around me.

“She’s human. She doesn’t even know what that means,” Callie whispered to her.

I shook my head. There was no way I heard that right. Clearly, I had met my breaking point and now I was just living half in real life and half in a new story. But if I couldn’t tell which was which, I was in big trouble. Either that or these people were totally messing with me.

Did they all know I wrote paranormal romance? Because it kind of felt like I was living in one.

Tucker

Chapter 9

“You told me she was a little old lady. That did not look like a little old lady,” Annie yelled as we stepped outside.

“Would you keep your voice down? Stop causing a scene.”

“I will cause a scene if I want to cause a scene. You lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t. Never once did I say she was a little old lady. I told you I was working over here to help Birdie’s heir. That’s it.”

“So what? You just conveniently forgot to mention she was young and gorgeous?”

“What does it matter?”

I should have denied that she was gorgeous, because I knew that was what Annie wanted to hear. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Just because I was mated didn’t mean I was blind. Abby was a beautiful woman. So what? She was still Birdie’s heir. And for some odd reason I felt responsible for her.

I marched her back to her car, opened the door, and shoved her down into the driver’s seat.

“I’m not just going away so you can hang out with her all day. Are you insane? I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

“Annie, I’m working,” I barked.

“It didn’t look like work to me.”

Michael had just arrived and walked over to us. A few people were out on the front porch now watching the fireworks.

“Tucker. Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” I snapped.

“Maybe you should take a break and go home to sort this out.”

“Yes, Tucker, maybe you should,” Annie said snidely.

My jaw was clenched as I gave Michael a nod and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Drive!”

Annie’s eyes were shooting daggers at me. She was furious.

She drove us home in tense silence then sat there counting to ten when she parked.

“Seriously?” I asked, shaking my head as I got out of the car and slammed the door behind me.

Before I reached the door, Annie was at my back. I opened the door, and she shoved me hard inside and slammed it behind her.

“I am so done with this, Tucker. You are my mate. Does that not mean anything to you?”

“That means everything to me, and you damn well know it.”

I was so sick and tired of her trying to manipulate me. I was done feeling guilty all the time. I loved my life and most of the time I loved my mate, or at least that’s what I told myself.

“Are you seriously jealous of her?”

“I saw the way you looked at her.”

“How the hell did I look at her, Annie? She’s just a girl who’s here for a short time and needs some help right now. That’s my job. That’s what I do.”

“I didn’t see the rest of your team there.”

“Then you should have looked around. Colin’s been there all day, too. Michael just arrived. Walker and Linc were on their way and while Lachlan was tied up with something today, he’s scheduled to come by tomorrow and talk to her to see if she needs any grief counseling. We have a human in our territory. It’s our job to watch over her and ensure that the Pack is safe. That’s what I do.”

She glared at me with daggers in her eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

“You know what? Believe what you want, Annie. Do whatever the hell you want. Clearly you don’t care about what I want or need. Maybe you never did.”

“Stop your whining. It’s not attractive. So I’m going to just tell you how this is going to go.”

“You always do,” I muttered.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, and you will get your ass in the bedroom and pack our things. We’re leaving. We’re done with this place.”

I scoffed. “And where the hell do you think we’re going to go?”

“Home.”

I clenched my jaw and shook my head. “We are home.”

“This is not my home. This is not our home. Tucker, we’re going home once and for all. I’m done playing these games. You had fun as GI Joe and now it’s time to grow up and go back to our real lives.”

I sighed. This wasn’t the first time we’d had this argument, but something about it was different this time.

“Look, I know you’re upset that your folks didn’t make it up for Thanksgiving and probably won’t for Christmas either, so why don’t you just go visit them through the holidays and then come home when your head’s clear again.”

I felt the sting before I even heard the slap, but I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction this time by reacting to it.

“Did you seriously just call me crazy?”

“I didn’t say a damn thing about you being crazy. I know you’re stressed and upset right now. So go, cool off, calm down, and enjoy some time with your family.”

“Let me make one thing painfully clear, Tucker. If I leave here, I am never coming back. You heard me. I hate this place. I’m already living in hell; a rejected bond can’t be any worse. But you’re too weak to tolerate that, and we both know it. So I’m going to go knowing that in a few days, you’ll come to your senses and be following me home, begging me to take you back. Because we both know you can’t live without me.”

I shook my head and then stomped out of the house before I said anything I would seriously regret.

My destination: The Crate.

“Jesse, how about a beer?”

I sat down next to Cole Anderson, another one of Kyle’s Betas.

“You okay?” he asked me.

I started to lie and tell him everything was fine, but it wasn’t fine. Annie was threatening to leave me, and then what?

When Jesse slid the beer across the bar, I picked it up and took a long swig.

“What was it like?” I asked Cole.

“What was what like?”

“Living with a rejected bond?”

“It was hell.”

I took another long drink before setting my glass down.

“Annie’s leaving me.”

“What? She can’t just leave you. You’re already mated to her. It’s not the same as what Elizabeth and I went through.”

“Well, she’s leaving, and I’ve been given an ultimatum of going with her and staying behind to suffer.”

“Excuse me, handsome men. Did I just hear my name?”

Elizabeth walked over and threw her arms around Cole’s neck, kissing him hard on the lips while he grinned like a fool.

Why did they make mating look so damn easy? It wasn’t easy at all.

Next, Emma came stumbling over. She was mated to Painter who was on Bravo team. I tried not to laugh. The two of them drinking at The Crate was never a good thing, yet always fun to watch.

“How many drinks have you two had?” Cole asked.

“One or two. Nothing serious.”

We both looked to Jesse to confirm. As nonchalantly as possible, he shook his head. As if we couldn’t tell it had clearly been more than two for each of them.

“So what’s going on?” Elizabeth asked.

“Annie’s threatening to leave Tucker,” Cole explained.

“That bitch!”

He shot me an apologetic look, but I just waved him off. She wasn’t wrong. And I was too distraught to come to my mate’s defense. I knew she could be manipulative. I even knew she knew all of my weaknesses and every button to push. She knew I was terrified of a rejected bond. It was why I’d stayed with her all these years no matter how horrible she could be. She knew I’d follow her anywhere to keep that from happening.

“Oh, oh, she’s like as bad as that pastry you always love,” Emma said.

“I think it’s time we call Painter to come and get you. That made no sense.”

“No, I get it. Pop-Tarts!” Elizabeth yelled as the two girls cheered like they’d just won a round of Taboo or something.

“How does the saying go?” Emma asked.

“She’s as bad as a Pop-Tart without icing,” Elizabeth said.

“That’s it! That’s your Annie,” Emma said triumphantly.

I groaned.

“That was horrible.” Cole snorted. “That’s his mate. I can’t believe you just compared her to that vile piece of cardboard you love so much.”

“Hey, don’t harsh the Pop-Tart,” his mate warned him.

“You’re not getting any tonight talking that,” Emma added. “But damn, I’ve had too much to drink. Where’s Painter? I need one of his epic orgasms. Right now!”

The whole bar went up in cheers as Painter walked in.

“There’s my man! Take me home and give me an orgasm.”

He groaned and shook his head, but the grin on his face said a million other things.

Hugging his mate, he looked at me and winked. “I love when these two go out drinking.”

Cole laughed. “I’m probably going to have to go home and clean up puke when she realizes just how much she drank, and you get sex. How is that even fair?”

Painter just grinned even bigger as he escorted his mate out and took her home.

The whole Pack was well aware of his love life thanks to his unfiltered mate.

I sighed. They made it look easy too. I wished it could be that easy for me.

“So what are you going to do?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know,” I told him honestly.

Reluctantly, I got up and walked out. Getting drunk never solved anything and wasn’t a habit of mine. No matter how hard things got, I faced my problems head on.

Annie was spoiled long before I met her, but there had been good in her. I know there had been. I would never have fallen in love with the woman she was now turning into, but I had loved her. Maybe I still did.

Everything was just out of control, and I knew she was just feeling trapped here. She didn’t like it, that was fine, but there was no way in hell I was giving it up to go be her daddy’s puppet back home. Every time we got together he’d pull me aside and let me know that the offer was still there to join his company, and the door remained open, but it wasn’t a door I ever

wanted to walk through. It came with too many strings and compromises. I had enough of that dealing with his daughter, how much worse would the man who created her be?

No, I'd seen the other side of that curtain, and I wasn't going there, not even for her, not even if it meant a lifetime of misery being separated from my mate.

That thought had always terrified me, to the point I'd put up with everything she'd ever dished out just to keep her close to me. But I wasn't caving on this. I couldn't. Because as hard as being away from her may be, the alternative scared me even more.

I drove home, resolved to do what I knew I had to do, but she was already gone.

Annie

Chapter 10

I wasn't about to let Tucker treat me like sloppy seconds, and that's what I'd allowed to happen. Oh, I wasn't worried about the pretty little human. Even if he had the balls to have an affair with her, it would be short lived. Hell, maybe I'd respect him more if he actually did.

Tucker was my little bitch, and I had him exactly where I wanted him.

I was well aware that his biggest fear was living with a broken bond. I knew it even before I'd tricked him into mating me. That was the one thing that made what I did a safe bet. Once I'd locked it down, he was mine forever. But I never dreamed it would end up like this.

When he walked out on me, I knew drastic measures were going to be needed. He was trying to grow a pair, forgetting I'd castrated that shit long ago. He just needed a reminder, some time alone, and then he would be begging me to come back. When I refuse, he'll finally quit his stupid job and follow me anywhere.

If only I'd stood my ground from the start, this wouldn't even be happening. He'd be working for Daddy, and we'd be happy. We could never be happy in San Marco. It was time to go home, and Tucker would soon realize that too.

So, before he returned, I packed up my bags, cleaned out everything I cared about, loaded my car, and I left.

Some lessons just needed to be learned the hard way.

I didn't stop until I got down the mountain and then I grabbed a quick bite to eat before I got on the highway. An hour later I was on the highway and getting more pissed by the second.

Why hadn't he called me? He should have called by now.

When my phone finally rang sometime later, I nearly wrecked the car. I reached for my phone, and it fell onto the floor. I stretched to retrieve it, swerving off the road. When I heard the rumble strip, I jerked the wheel back.

A horn blew as I righted my car, and the asshole flew by giving me

the finger.

By the time I tried to answer the call, it had already rolled to voicemail.

I double checked to ensure it was Tucker, and when I confirmed it was, I tossed the phone back onto the seat beside me.

“Let him sweat. I knew he’d come begging.”

Feeling satisfied, I cranked up the music and sang along as I sped down the highway.

Before I crossed the state line to officially leave California in my dust, I remembered that I hadn’t warned Mummy that I was coming.

I picked up my phone and dialed her number. When I looked back at the road, the cars in front of me were all coming to a complete and sudden stop.

I screamed and grabbed the wheel with both hands as my phone fell into my lap. I swerved to the right as a car shot into my lane, narrowly missing me.

My heart was racing, and my head was pounding. Everything around me seemed to be moving at warp speed while I was at a snail’s pace as I resolved myself to my fate.

Closing my eyes, I slammed on my brakes and waited as they came to a screeching halt.

I heard the crunch of metal and the squeal of tires all around me, as I braced for the impact that didn’t come.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and saw devastation right beside me. A five-car mashup that ended mere inches from my door. If I hadn’t swerved into the emergency lane already, I would have surely been involved.

A bloody hand pressed against shattered glass right next to me, but the blaring of a horn behind me jolted me into action as I crept away from the accident I’d narrowly missed.

“Annie?” my mother yelled.

I grabbed my phone and turned it on speaker then gripped the steering wheel with two hands as my knuckles turned white from the pressure.

“I’m here,” I said breathlessly.

Mom was half hysterical.

“Oh my God. What happened? I thought you were dead. There was this horrible noise and you screamed.”

“I’m sorry. Just an accident beside me. I swerved out of the way.”

“Oh thank heavens. You scared me half to death.”

“Me too,” I said with a maniacal laugh.

“Just breathe, Annie. You’re fine. There’s no need to be so dramatic.”

“Mummy, I almost died. I’m pretty sure people right beside me did die.”

My heart was still racing, and I felt like I might throw up. That was one of the scariest moments of my life and she was telling me not to be dramatic about it? That’s the same woman who made me rush her to the hospital for a papercut because she read a story on the internet about a woman who had one that got infected and ended up losing her entire hand. Yet, I was the dramatic one.

“Oh Annie, all so much drama. Let Tucker drive if you can’t handle it.”

“He’s not with me.”

“Oh. Did you go down into the city for an Annie-day?”

“No, Mummy, actually, I’m coming home to visit you and Daddy.”

“Without Tucker? Is he on one of his missions again? When are you going to tie him down once and for all.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried. It’s a hopeless cause.”

“He’s your mate, Annie. It’s never hopeless. You have that boy so whipped he’d do anything for you.”

I used to think that was true, but dammit, why hasn’t he called yet?

“Well, for now, I just want a break. I’m coming home for the holidays.”

Traffic came to a complete stop once more, but I wasn’t going fast enough to freak out again. When no one crashed around me this time, I started to relax some.

“Of course we’re happy to have you home, but through the holidays? That’s like two weeks, Annie. Are you sure you should be away that long?”

“Mummy, it’s fine,” I snapped.

“Out of sight, out of mind. How many times have I warned you of this? Do you want Tucker to stray?”

He probably already is, I thought.

I thought of the pretty little human and growled.

“Did you just growl at me?”

“Sorry Mummy. I’m just stressed out in this traffic.”

“So find a way around it.”

“Yeah, I think I will. Let me hang up and see if there’s a reroute while I’m stopped.”

“Call me up the road if you need to chat. Ta-ta.”

“Bye, Mummy.”

I disconnected the call and pulled up my GPS. There was another road across the mountains, but the closest exit was still two miles up the road. At this rate it would be another hour or more to get there. The frustrating part was that I could see the road off to my right.

Fifteen minutes passed and I hadn’t moved. People were putting their cars in park, and a few had even gotten out to stretch. It was painfully clear that we weren’t going anywhere anytime soon.

My wolf was on edge and feeling trapped. A part of me just wanted to shift and take off across the desert and into the mountains I could see just up ahead. But no matter how much I may want it, even I wasn’t dumb enough to actually do it, not here in front of all these humans.

As if reaffirming that, I looked to my left to find some bratty little kid with his nose pressed up against the window watching me.

Another fifteen minutes went by, and I was at my wits end. I couldn’t just keep sitting here and doing nothing. I watched as a car drove across the desert and onto the other road. Once he successfully made it, I put the car back into drive and turned to drive right off the road. The ground shifted beneath me, and my tires started to spin.

“Come on!”

With a sudden jerk forward, the wheels found traction and I slowly made my way across the sandy earth.

“Yes!” I screamed when I drove back onto solid ground. “I did it!”

I looked back to see others trying what I’d just successfully done, and several were stuck and unmoving. A few turned back. It was fine by me because I was ready to leave them all in my dust as I sped away with nothing but the open road ahead.

It was exhilarating, and I was so ready to get moving again. That accident had really shaken me up. I wanted to call Tucker and tell him about it, but I could hear my mother’s voice in the back of my mind. “Never whine to your mate. Don’t burden him with your issues. He’s the male of the house

and has his own stuff to deal with.”

It pissed me off. That was her. That wasn't me. I didn't want to be like her but shit like that had been instilled in me from such a young age that it was difficult to let it go. And yet, I still couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone.

Feeling frustrated, I revved the engine and picked up my speed, ready to put as much distance between myself and Tucker as possible.

Cranking up the radio as loud as my ears would tolerate, I settled in for the long drive ahead of me, bobbing along to the music and singing at the top of my lungs. Anything to drown out the voice in my head reminding me that I just may have screwed up once more.

Tucker wasn't going to call. I'd pushed him too far this time. Yet stubbornly, instead of just calling him or turning around and making things right, I continued onward.

Evening came and soon it was so dark I could barely see up ahead of me. I was in the middle of nowhere, but the GPS was still telling me I was on the best path. There wasn't a single light to be seen in any direction. It was pitch black.

I could tell by the popping of my ears and the pitch of the car that I was climbing steadily upwards now, but beyond the light of my headlights I couldn't see anything. That light was enough to screw with my built-in wolf night vision, limiting my view. And I was starting to worry.

My mind started conjuring up old horror movies I occasionally forced Tucker to watch because I knew they creeped him out. It wasn't so funny now.

The light from my headlights briefly reflected off of something and then it jutted out across the road. I simultaneously hit the brake and swerved to avoid hitting whatever it was. My back tires hit loose gravel and started to fish tail.

I jerked the wheel and overcorrected. Suddenly the car was spinning in a circle.

My foot slipped off the pedal as I screamed for dear life and then slammed it down again, but I missed the brake and accidentally hit the gas. The car stopped spinning and shot forward, in what direction, I wasn't sure.

For half a second—despite the loud music, the thumping of my beating heart, the pounding in my head, the roaring in my ears, and my own

screams into the dark abyss—I felt perfectly at peace. There was this odd calm that felt as though I were floating on a cloud. And then I started to fall.

The car hit a tree, hard. The impact of it deployed the airbags all around me. It felt like I'd just been shot in the face with a cannon and still I continued to fall. Up and down had no concept any longer. It was just an endless cycle of pain and fear.

I could smell the blood, but I had no idea where it was coming from.

As the car hit the next tree, the collision was on my side. My body was thrown towards the middle, but I was trapped and held in place by the seat belt. Glass shattered all around me. I could feel it slicing my skin.

The final hit was more like a large boulder crashing headfirst and compacting the car all around me. I was pinned and hanging upside down as it finally came to a stop.

The world was spinning out of control. Searing pain radiated out in so many places that my body began to go numb. I called upon my wolf for help, but she never came.

Time lost all meaning as I laid there praying someone would find me in time. My bones were undoubtedly broken beyond my repair, because I couldn't channel her. I couldn't even feel my wolf's spirit within me, and that scared the shit out of me.

I was all alone. No one knew where I was. How could anyone find me?

The music was still playing so loud that it echoed through my head and out into the night. It was torturous but I couldn't reach the radio to turn it off.

Blood and sweat ran into my eyes, burning them, and I laid there, suspended upside down for what felt like a lifetime, listening to my blood drain from my body one drop at a time. I could hear my own heartbeat begin to slow. And blissfully, the roaring in my ears dulled the sounds of the music.

I started to fade in and out of consciousness, praying each time that I just wouldn't wake up again.

There was no telling how long I'd be there, but eventually the sky began to lighten, and I could see the massive carnage around me.

How did my leg get over there?

I couldn't move my limbs.

I was stuck.

Scared.

Trapped.

Everything kept going in and out of focus as I started to drift off again.

Day turned to night once more and then back to day.

Please let this be the end.

I was ready to beg to every god throughout history as long as one of them would end my suffering.

Suddenly my phone rang, jolting me slightly in surprise.

I looked around and saw it up on what was left of the windshield. It was a miracle it hadn't flown out, and it didn't look that far, but I couldn't make my arm reach out and touch it. Squinting my eyes, I focused hard enough to see Tucker's face smiling back at me.

My whole body started to relax.

He called.

Smiling hurt worse than anything, and I wanted to curse him for making me do it. But he had called at last, just like I knew he would. Despite the agony I was in, I smiled victoriously.

My eyes fluttered shut once more and the world around me went dark.

Abby

Chapter 11

I jolted awake suddenly. My whole body felt like it was on fire, and I was itching all over.

“It was just a nightmare,” I said into the dark.

But I couldn’t break this feeling that something bad had happened.

I’d forgotten to take a sleeping pill before bed, which I took most nights to help me sleep. There was always a story running through my head, so melatonin was the only way I ever got my brain to settle enough to actually sleep.

It didn’t feel like the start of a new story though. I didn’t even feel like reaching for my laptop. Not that I could, since Tucker’s friend still had it.

Mostly though, I just couldn’t shake this feeling of doom.

Checking the clock, I realized it was four in the morning. Much too late to take a pill.

I got up and went to the bathroom, then washed my hands and my face. I was going to have a long day ahead of me.

Feeling that it was just too early to wake up, I climbed back in and tried to will myself back to sleep for a few more hours, but it was useless. I was wide awake as I laid in bed scratching all over.

If I took Benadryl now, I’d crash out hard and sleep half the day away. And I knew from experience that any daytime allergy relief wouldn’t touch this.

I didn’t have issues as a kid, but somewhere around age twenty I started having occasional issues like this. Instead of getting better, they seemed to be getting even worse. I knew stress could bring them on. With all the weird stuff happening lately, it was really no wonder this was happening now.

I’d woken up on more than one occasion naked on the floor. I’d found my clothes cut into random little pieces but couldn’t find the scissors anywhere. I’d tried to even blame it on an intruder or some stalker, but there

was no way someone followed me here. I'd been swept away on a private jet for crying out loud. Yet, it had happened here too.

I felt like I was going crazy. And there was no one to talk to about stuff like this without being committed in a psych ward. It was just messed up, and even my overactive imagination was struggling to understand what was going on.

I started to think about it some more, and that sense of doom hanging over me wasn't happening in the least.

I closed my eyes and felt this sort of peace wash over me. I felt different, but not in a way that I could really explain.

It dawned on me that I wasn't itching anymore, and I sighed with relief. But when I looked down to investigate the rash area, I instead found myself covered in fur.

At first, I thought it was some sort of a joke. And then I started to freak out, but when I screamed it came out sounding like a howl.

This has to be a dream. It has to be. Wake up, Abby!

I started to panic. What was happening to me?

When I jumped from my bed, I landed on four paws. There was no denying it, I could feel the floor beneath them. It was like it was me, but it wasn't.

This wasn't like any dream I'd ever had before. I'd had dreams like it before, but never quite so vivid. Unlike my stories, there had been no pain during the transformation. It had happened in the breath of a moment. One second I was me, and the next I was something else.

What was I? A wolf like one of my stories?

I started to laugh, but to my ears it came out like a strange chuffing sound.

My legs seemed to move of their own accord, and as I ran past a floor length mirror in the corner of the room, I saw myself for the first time.

A wolf!

I was a wolf? I knew it was only a dream, but this had to be the coolest dream ever. My imagination had never been quite so vivid before. The small black wolf stared back at me through my eyes. There had to be some sort of deep-rooted reason for this, but I was much too lost in the moment to try to interpret any of this.

The wolf went to explore the house and then somehow found a way

out of the house. I had a momentary moment of panic thinking if we could get out of a locked house so easily that surely someone could get in.

It was a ridiculous thing to think in the midst of everything.

Once outside I took off running down the street. The sun was just beginning to light the sky and people were starting their day. I recognized several of them as I marched right down Main Street.

Callie was there in her uniform watching me curiously. She tried to approach, but I didn't want her to catch me, so I took off running while she grabbed her radio to make a call. Probably letting the whole town know there was a rabid wolf on the loose and to beware.

I didn't want to get in trouble. I didn't want to go to jail for this. And I certainly didn't want to get put in a hospital and be poked and prodded like some freak experiment, so I took off running into the woods.

Feeling the wind in my fur was the most exhilarating thing in the world, but it also felt familiar, like I'd done this before. I didn't remember doing this, though.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment and just enjoyed the freedom of running as a wild animal. There were no responsibilities, no bills to be paid, no funerals to arrange, no uncertainty in life. It just felt natural.

This was nothing like what I imagined my wolves in my books going through. First, I hadn't been bitten or turned that I could remember. Second, there had been no excruciating pain during the transformation, it had just happened smoothly and naturally.

I stopped and laughed once more, and then laughed even harder at the odd chuffing sound I produced.

Naturally? There was absolutely nothing natural about this. It was the most ridiculous thing in the world.

Me? A wolf? It was completely absurd.

Before I could continue down my checklist rant trying to compartmentalize everything I was experiencing, I heard a sound in the woods ahead to my right that perked up my ears.

The thunder of heavy paws beating against the forest floor. Something was coming towards me, and it was coming in fast.

I needed to move, to run away. My heart was pounding in my chest, but I was frozen in place when a large black wolf stepped out of the shadows and ran right towards me.

He stopped and quirked his head to the side like he was studying me. My fear rose because this was a real-life wolf staring me down.

Wasn't it?

The eyes watching me were intelligent and when I sniffed the air, it was a familiar scent.

Tucker.

Where had that thought come from? Sure Tucker was cute, or more like drop dead gorgeous, but he was married. I didn't play that sort of game. I wasn't that type of woman. But oh, in my dreams, I just might be.

Was that why I was envisioning him as a wolf too?

Guilt consumed me. I didn't want to want a married man. But none of this was real, so what difference did it make? Maybe wolf Tucker would go for a run with me. After all he was really one of my only friends here. It didn't have to be anything more than that. This wasn't one of my paranormal romance novels or anything.

I grinned at the thought and took off running.

Just as I'd hoped, he gave chase. We ran on and on side by side, and I felt safe and protected with him there. It was the most fun I'd had in, well, forever. I could run and splash and play every second for the rest of my life.

But eventually I did get tired, and sadly, I slowed my pace and somehow found my way back to my great-great-grandmother's house.

I wasn't sure what was more absurd, the fact that I had just lived out some odd wolf fantasy or that I was currently staying in some long-lost relative's big house after inheriting millions from her.

None of this was my life. None of it was real.

As I let myself into the house the same way I'd gotten out, I walked back to the bedroom and jumped up on the bed. I was exhausted. My eyes started to drift closed as I curled down, but I was startled awake when Tucker's wolf walked into my room.

One second he was a large black wolf, and the next he was standing before me completely naked.

I gasped, unable to believe what I was seeing. My eyes glanced down and my jaw dropped. Tucker of my dreams was certainly well endowed. Holy hotness. His body was like a walking, talking, real-life book boyfriend in the flesh. I couldn't stop staring until he awkwardly left to cover himself, returning with what looked like one of Birdie's silk robes.

I laughed at him, and the chuffing sound that came out of my mouth surprised me as it resonated throughout the room.

Tucker crossed his arms over his body looking less than impressed and not at all scared of me in my wolf form.

I started to laugh again. Thank God this was all a dream. I wasn't sure I could face him in the light of day otherwise. Hell, I wasn't sure I'd be able to look him in the eyes the next time I saw him anyway.

Thank God it was all just a dream . . . right?

"Abby, are you okay?" Tucker asked.

I gulped. Most of my story dreams didn't call me by my real name. What the hell?

He came and sat down on the edge of the bed. I could feel it give under his weight.

"Why didn't you just tell us? We thought you were human."

In the blink of an eye, I went from being a wolf to back to me.

"I am human," I blurted out, surprising myself because I honestly hadn't felt the change.

He turned and then looked away just as I looked down and realized I was buck-ass naked in bed with Tucker sitting right there.

I squealed and grabbed for the blanket to cover myself.

"What is happening to me?"

"You're not entirely human, Abby. You're a shifter."

"What the hell is a shifter?"

"Kind of like one of the werewolves in your books."

"But I wasn't bitten. No one attacked me. There was no near-death experience. No blood transfusion. No nothing."

My voice was rising as hysteria rose within me.

"Abby, that's not how the real-world works. You can't turn someone into this. You're either born with it or you're not."

"But I wasn't. This has never happened to me before."

As soon as I said the words out loud, I knew it was a lie. How many times had I awoken naked on the floor? How many piles of shredded clothes had I found? This wasn't the first time this had happened, just the first time I was consciously aware of it.

"It wasn't your first time, was it?"

"I don't know."

I was so confused.

“This can’t be real,” I whispered. “It’s just a dream. A very real and ridiculous dream. Nothing more.”

“You’ve had a crazy morning. Why don’t you try to get some more sleep and we’ll talk more when you’re ready.”

“Yeah. Sleep is good. It’s just a dream anyway.”

He sighed and left the room. I closed my eyes but couldn’t seem to fall back to sleep. My mind was going a million miles a minute and I wished I had my laptop to just sort out my thoughts. Instead, I got up and dug in my bags to find a notebook and pen. I started writing down what happened and my feelings about it all. It was so confusing but felt good to just get it out.

I still wasn’t convinced it was anything more than just the weirdest dream I’ve ever had in my entire life.

Eventually I started to drift off and fall asleep.

Tucker

Chapter 12

Abby had proven to be a good distraction for me. I was a little surprised to find out she was a shifter. There had been no indication, and it was clear she didn't know anything about our kind.

I gave her some space, but I didn't go far. The last thing I wanted to do was go home to an empty house.

Annie had left and hadn't even bothered to call me. I was pissed, and stubbornly, I wasn't going to call and give her the satisfaction of winning this battle. She had made her stance clear, but I also knew that some time away with her parents would settle her down and she'd come back to me. This wasn't the first round we'd gone through over the years.

When she was away from them she clung to good memories, forgetting how difficult and controlling they could be. Annie liked to be the one in control, not being told what to do. She'd tire of it and come back to me. She always did. Though I had to admit to myself that something about this time felt different.

Normally I felt relief when she left home. I didn't have to put up with all the bullshit and feel guilty for just getting up and going to work each morning.

She would have flipped out if she knew I'd been called out so early for a strange wolf. Sure, I was on call and Callie had been right to notify me, but I certainly hadn't expected to find Abby out there.

Shifting into my wolf, I ran home to change instead of doing the walk of shame home in Birdie's robe. That would certainly have gotten tongues wagging around this place.

Once home, I jumped in the shower to clean up. When I got out, my phone was ringing.

"Hey Cal," I said, answering it.

"Hey. Any luck on that rogue wolf? I didn't recognize her, though we have so many black wolves in this pack that I honestly don't know them all

and it was from a distance.”

“It’s all sorted. Nothing to worry about.”

“Great. Sorry I dragged you in for that. It was just odd seeing her stroll down Main Street like that.”

I laughed. “Not all that uncommon around here, but you did the right thing. Always lean on the side of caution.”

“Okay. Well, thanks anyway. I’m glad it was nothing.”

I wasn’t sure it was nothing, but at the same time, it didn’t feel like my secret to tell. The only one that absolutely needed to know was Kyle.

I dried off and dressed for the day before calling him.

“Tucker? What’s up?”

“Are you busy this morning?”

“No more than usual. Did you need something?”

“Yeah, I think you should come over to Birdie’s place. I’m getting ready to head back over there now.”

“Sounds serious. I’ll head that way now.”

I took a few minutes to grab some groceries from the fridge to take with me. I was starving and needed breakfast, but I didn’t want to be away that long with Kyle coming over and Abby sleeping, or at least I hoped she managed to get some more sleep.

The drive over was short. Kyle pulled up to the curb behind me.

I jumped out and grabbed my bags.

“Hey, thanks for coming. Let’s go inside to talk.”

He gave me a curious look but didn’t argue.

Once in the house, I went straight for the kitchen and unloaded my groceries. I cringed at the sheer amount of food crammed into the fridge.

Nonna and Tabitha had been mysteriously missing. To the best of my knowledge, they hadn’t even come by to meet Abby yet, and I didn’t know why. But they did activate the Westin Pack Food Train for her, and it was insane just how much food had been brought for just one person.

I shook my head and got to work making bacon and eggs.

“Hungry?” I asked Kyle.

“You brought me here for breakfast?”

“Nah. But I’ll make it if you want it.”

“Already ate, thanks. Now what’s all this about.”

“Got a call this morning from Callie about a black wolf strolling

down Main Street. She couldn't make out the wolf and it seemed out of place to her."

He snorted. "In San Marco? That's not uncommon. A lot of my wolves are black."

"That's what I told her, but I also went to investigate."

"And is it something I need to be concerned about?"

"It was Abby, Kyle."

"What?" he asked. "But I met her. I didn't sense anything off."

"You probably weren't looking for it either. Plus, there were a lot of wolves around at the time."

His brow furrowed. "I should have known though. I mean a rogue wolf was right under my nose. How could I not notice that?"

"Kyle, she smells like Westin."

"What?"

"Maybe I'm going crazy, or maybe it's because she's Birdie's descendant, but she smells like any other Westin wolf."

"That's not possible, is it? Who's her Alpha? Why wasn't I notified of this when she arrived."

I shook my head. "I don't think she knew."

That surprised him more than anything else.

"Tucker, she's well above the age of maturity. She knew."

I shook my head. "You weren't there. She was so distraught and confused. She thought she was dreaming. That it was just one of the stories in her head or something."

"So a first shift?"

"No. I don't think it's the first time she shifted. Everything was too smooth. She was too in control. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

"Anyway, I just thought you should know, but I have a feeling it's not something she's ready to accept, let alone have as public knowledge. She was pretty freaked out and trying to go back to sleep to convince herself it was just a dream when I ran home to change."

"So you thought I should be here to talk to her?"

"You are the Alpha."

"But I'm not her Alpha."

"But you might be the closest thing she has to one."

We shared a look, and he slowly nodded as everything I had just revealed started sinking in. Abby was likely a lone wolf. I doubt she even realized it and was going to have a ton of questions. But she was in Westin territory and Birdie's heir, the responsibility to help her through it all fell on Kyle's shoulders now.

"You should go wake her," he said. "She knows you and seems comfortable around you."

"No need," Abby said.

We both jerked our heads towards the doorway.

"Is that bacon I smell? I would kill for some bacon right about now."

I grinned. "Coming right up. Why don't you take a seat."

She did, and then eyed Kyle suspiciously.

"What brings you by this morning, Mayor?"

I coughed, trying to hide my smile.

"It's Alpha, actually, Abby. I think we need to talk."

Her face blanched, and I watched as she started wringing her hands together.

"What's this all about?"

"Tucker tells me you had a bit of an adventure this morning."

Her wide eyes shot towards me. Her mouth set in a firm line.

"I don't know what you're talking about or what he's told you," she defiantly said.

I could practically see the wheels turning in her head trying to distinguish fiction from reality.

"It happened, Abby. You're going to have to accept that. But we can help you."

She shook her head, and I knew she was about to bolt.

The room suddenly filled with the calming sensation of Kyle's Alpha powers.

"It's okay, Abby. You're safe here."

"Nowhere in the world safer," I confirmed.

She shook her head again.

"No! This is crazy. You can't possibly know about anything I dreamed. It was just in my head. Just like any other story."

"This isn't a story," Kyle told her. "Tucker said he saw you shift with his own eyes. I trust him. This isn't something he'd just make up."

“It’s not possible,” she whispered.

“Have you done a thorough background check on the family?” Kyle surprised me by asking.

“Not really. Birdie explained most of it to me before she died. Her daughter married a human. They had a daughter. Her wolf never came in. She grew up and married a human. They also had a daughter. She said she kept loosely in touch long enough to confirm she too was only human. It was assumed her blood line died with her. She didn’t even know about Abby until recently. I didn’t see any reason to fact check any of it. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Chances are high that nothing would have turned up anyway. You were right, she definitely doesn’t seem aware of her ancestry.”

“Are you saying that my great-great-grandmother was a werewolf? And that somehow makes me a werewolf too?”

“Wolf shifter,” Kyle and I said at the same time.

“A what now?”

“Wolf shifter,” he repeated. “Werewolves like you see on TV or read about in books are all make believe.”

“And yet you want me to believe that I’m somehow a wolf?”

“Shifter. Wolf shifter,” I corrected.

“Explain. How is that any different?”

“You aren’t bitten or turned or any of that nonsense,” Kyle explained. “You’re born this way. It’s in your blood. It’s who you are, not what you are.”

“I’m not understanding what you’re saying.”

“Think of it like this,” I said. “Genetically we’re very similar to humans. But there’s a gene inside of us that differs. You have the gene. Whether it was triggered recently, or you’ve been unknowingly living with your wolf spirit for quite some time remains to be seen, but you are most definitely a shifter.”

Kyle chuckled. “I’m not sure that’s exactly how it all works, but close enough. The point is, you are a wolf shifter. This isn’t make-believe. It is who you are.”

“Well make it go away.”

“I can’t. And denying it will only drive you crazy.”

“I already feel crazy. This is insane. Do you even hear yourself?”

“I don’t have to see your wolf to know it’s there, Abby. I can feel its

presence. I'm only sorry I didn't notice it earlier when we met the first time."

"She's a Westin wolf," I argued.

He seemed concerned by that but nodded. "It certainly seems to think so. And you're right. She smells like Pack. It's no wonder I didn't notice before when surrounded by so many others."

Abby

Chapter 13

I started to giggle.

Did they even realize how ridiculous this sounded? Sure, I was some ancient wolf breed, shifter, or whatever they called it.

My mind started spinning a million miles a minute with new book ideas.

“Don’t even think about it,” Tucker warned.

“What?” I asked, trying to sound innocent.

There was no way he knew what I was thinking.

“This isn’t some new story idea for you, Abby.”

Damn! How did he know that was what I was thinking.

“Well, it would make a great one,” I tried to argue.

“No one can know what you are, Abby. It’s not safe. You shouldn’t even be around humans, at least until you know how to control it.”

“She can control it, but he’s right. You need to be more consciously aware of what’s happening to you.”

“From what you both said, nothing’s happening to me. This is all perfectly normal. I was born this way. Right? So if this is my family legacy, why didn’t my mother tell me about any of this? Why didn’t my grandmother? Where the hell was Birdie all my life?”

Grief struck me hard and sudden. I wasn’t prepared for it this time and tears escaped before I could stop them. Their deaths were still too fresh. They were all gone, and I was stuck in this crazy new world I didn’t understand.

In my books, I could make up the rules. There were always rules. Here I just felt naïve and out of control.

Kyle and Tucker shared a look, but I brushed them off. I didn’t need their pity or their comfort. I’d been left all alone in this world and there was nothing they could do to change that.

“You aren’t alone,” Tucker said softly, like he could somehow read

my mind again.

It only made me cry harder as the two of them stood there watching me. It was humiliating, and I wanted to just crawl back in bed and restart this day without any of the wolf stuff.

Once the tears had dried, they sat me down and started telling me these fantastical stories about how shifters came to be back in the days of Noah from the Bible. It was crazy, yet it kind of made sense—if anything like this could actually make sense.

They told me all about this human faction called the Verndari that watched over and protected our kind and how all the supernatural myths throughout time had been concocted to protect shifters.

“Even vampires?” I asked.

“Even vampires,” Kyle confirmed.

“But if werewolves are real, then why can’t vampires be, too?”

Tucker sighed and rolled his eyes at me.

“There’s no such thing as vampires, or werewolves, at least not like they’ve been portrayed.”

“But we can be killed with a silver bullet, right?”

Kyle chuckled. “No.”

“But it is sort of a rite of passage for kids. You know, not uncommon for one of them to dare another to touch silver and stuff,” Tucker said with a smile.

“And this morning certainly wasn’t a full moon out, so that’s bullshit too?”

“Complete bullshit,” Kyle confirmed. “We can shift at any time.”

“Prove it,” I challenged.

Tucker groaned and nudged me with his elbow.

“Make a note, never, ever, ever challenge another wolf, but especially not an Alpha,” Tucker explained.

“Did I just issue a challenge?”

“Yes,” they both said.

“But I’ll let it slide this time.”

He winked at me, and then he started taking his clothes off.

“Uh, what the hell are you doing?”

“Don’t question the Alpha either,” Tucker said under his breath covering it with a fake cough.

“It’s okay. You have questions. That’s only natural. But I lose enough clothes shifting as it is. I don’t need to purposefully do it on a demonstration.”

“And Kelsey’s just okay with you being naked in front of another woman?” I blurted out.

I’d met his mate, and she was gorgeous. I doubted she was all that worried about her man stepping out on her, but it just seemed weird and made me super uncomfortable. It was bad enough I’d already seen Tucker naked today.

“Nudity is no big deal amongst shifters,” Tucker explained. “Next week is the winter solstice and we’ll do a big Pack run. If Kyle approves, you could probably come to it. But fair warning, everyone gets naked first.”

“So this is some sort of nudist colony?”

He laughed. “Not even close. But no one would think twice about it if it were. It’s honestly just not that big a deal.”

“And your wife doesn’t mind?”

His jaw locked, and I could see the stress in his face at the mention of her.

“No,” he simply said.

Something told me that was a lie.

Kyle stood before us completely naked, and I had to practically pick my jaw up off the ground.

“Do you want to see the transition or not?”

“Uh, yes. Yeah. Sure,” I stammered.

In an instant, he transformed before my eyes, and a large brown wolf stood before me. Then, just as fast, he was back in his skin.

It literally had taken him longer to undress than it did to shift and shift back.

“No moon,” Tucker said just as Kyle turned around and bent over to pick up his clothes from the floor. “Oh, wait. Nope, I was wrong. There it is.”

He pointed to Kyle’s bare ass and then burst out laughing.

My jaw dropped open in surprise, and then I started to laugh too.

Kyle turned and scowled, then threw his shirt at Tucker’s head.

“You’re an ass.”

“Dude, you made that too easy.”

I thought the Alpha was going to get mad, but he just grinned and

shook his head.

“Are you really supposed to provoke the Alpha like that?” I whispered to Tucker.

“Not if he had any brains in that head of his, which clearly he does not,” Kyle teased.

Something about their easy bantering was comforting to be around, making me feel like I wasn't quite so alone.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Well, that's up to you. You have this house and are always welcome to stay as long as you give me your allegiance.”

“What does that mean?”

“I'm going to leave Tucker to answer that.” Then he turned to address him instead of me. “And you are officially assigned as her guardian. I'd like for her to adjust some before she makes any decisions. Give it time to seep in first. Abby, I know this is a lot to take in, so take your time. I can't have a lone wolf running wild, but you aren't going to be on house arrest or anything either. You're free to roam my territory. I would just be more comfortable if Tucker was on escort duty for the time being.”

“Shouldn't we call Walker in for this? He's much better at it than I am.”

“You can, but I'd still like for you to oversee things. I'll let Michael know I've personally assigned you and that you may require some assistance.”

“But you're not going to tell him why, right?” I asked, suddenly panicked at the idea of anyone else knowing. Would they even understand? Were they all shifters too? I still had so many questions I needed answers to.

“If that's what you wish. We'll keep it between us for now,” Kyle agreed.

“Thank you.”

He left a short time later, leaving me awkwardly alone with Tucker.

“I was about to start making breakfast before all of this. Would you like some?”

“Sure. What can I do to help?” I asked, intrigued that he would offer to cook.

“Just sit back and relax. You've already had quite the day.”

I pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and watched him get to work.

Soon the smell of freshly cooked bacon filled the air and made my stomach rumble. He cooked two packs of it and then a dozen-and-a-half eggs.

“Are we expecting company?”

“What? No. Just us.”

“All of that? Just for us? That’s insane.”

He just smirked, and when he set a heaping plate full of food in front of me, my stomach rumbled loudly. I dug in.

“Mmm, this is delicious, Tucker.”

He smiled. “Shifting takes a lot out of you and often leaves you famished. Some like fresh meat in their fur, but most of us prefer to protein up after the fact. So while it may look like a lot of food through your human eyes, don’t hold back, because your body needs it.”

“Shouldn’t I be carbing up instead?”

“No, never. Protein is the best nutrition you can provide for your wolf. I’m not saying we only eat meat. We are still carnivores, but especially when you’re just starting to shift more regularly, you’ll want the extra protein. Trust me on that.”

I looked down at my plate and blushed. I’d already easily eaten half of it. And now I felt like a pig for it.

He laughed. “That’s human thinking. Stop it.”

“How do you seem to always know what I’m thinking?” I blurted out.

His smile was warm. “Your face reads like an open book.”

Fresh tears pricked my eyes. “My mother always said that too.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong. Now, I know you must have a ton of questions, so let’s have them.”

For hours we sat there talking as he patiently answered every question I could think of.

Pretty much since the second I arrived in San Marco there had been a steady stream of people coming by. I’d had so much help it was overwhelming, but as we talked into the afternoon it dawned on me that no one had disturbed us.

“Where is everyone today?” I finally asked.

He shrugged. “My guess, it’s Kyle’s doing. Probably put out word that you needed a break.”

“He wasn’t wrong.” I yawned. “A nap is what I really need.”

“Go on then.”

I started to do as he said and then stopped. I bit my lower lip as I turned back to him.

“I’m not going anywhere, Abby. It’s okay.”

“Promise? You’ll be here when I wake up? I’m terrified all this information is going to give me nightmares.”

I’d battled nightmares since the accident. The worst part of them was always waking up alone.

“I promise.”

Before I made it to the bedroom there was a knock at the front door.

“Go on. I’ll get it,” he hollered back at me.

I hesitated and listened as Tucker answered the door.

“I was wondering when you two would show up.”

“Don’t joke about this, Tucker. It’s not easy for us to be here,” an older woman said.

“We miss her terribly,” another voice said.

“Where’s the girl? Susan said she looks just like that picture of Birdie hanging in the upstairs hallway from her younger days. I need to see for myself.”

“Nonna, she just went to lay down. She’s exhausted.”

“But it’s the middle of the day.”

I sighed, and then turned back to meet the infamous Nonna. I’d heard tales of her, Tabitha, and Birdie. They were enough to make me pee my pants by laughing so hard. These were women who had clearly meant a lot to my great-great-grandmother, and I owed it to her to at least be courteous.

Tucker shot me a frustrated look when I walked into the room.

“I’m fine,” I assured him before smiling at the two old ladies.

One of them grabbed the other’s arm.

“Oh Tabby, look at her. She’s the spitting image of young Birdie.”

Tabitha had tears in her eyes when she nodded.

Before I knew what was happening, the two women surrounded me in a strange threesome embrace. I’d never met these ladies before, but there was something so comforting in their arms that I started to let my guard down and cried.

“There, there child. Let it all out,” Tabitha said as she stroked my back.

“This is stupid. I didn’t even know her. I should be comforting the

both of you right now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She was your blood kin,” Nonna insisted. “And she told us about your mother and grandmother. You’ve had a lot of loss for such a young pup.”

My body tensed a bit at her use of the word pup.

My questioning eyes shot towards Tucker who nodded in confirmation. These women were wolves too.

After my initial meltdown we headed into the little parlor, which they told me was Birdie’s favorite place for a friendly chat, aside from the big front porch.

They spent the whole afternoon with me, telling me stories of Birdie. We laughed and we cried as they shared a lifetime of memories.

“Birdie sure did love Christmas,” Tabitha said.

“I heard all about how she managed to get her outside decorations up this year.”

They laughed at the memory.

“She was a hoot. And she would have loved you, child.”

“Do you think so?”

“We know so,” Nonna said. “She was so excited when she found out about you. Ran out and bought three copies of your book, *A Werewolf’s Heart*, and started a book club for the three of us.”

“I must say it’s very good,” Tabitha added.

I blushed, thinking of chapter eight where he takes her doggy style to prove his claim over her.

“Oh yes. Very good,” Nonna said with a sly grin and a wink.

“Chapter eight nearly sent this old heart into cardiac arrest.”

I buried my face in my hands and shook my head.

Tucker

Chapter 14

I really didn't mean to eavesdrop, but with my wolf hearing it was kind of hard not to. The way they were talking about her book had me intrigued. What happened in chapter eight? I was going to have to pick up a copy and find out for myself.

Nonna and Tabitha stayed quite a while.

As the afternoon passed, I heated up leftovers from the fridge for all of us. First for lunch and later for dinner. Once we'd finished the final meal, I knew I had to take control of the situation.

"Ladies, I know Abby appreciates the time you've taken with her today, but it's been a long day and I know she's exhausted. Why don't we call it a night?"

"He's right. But promise me you'll visit again before I leave."

They both promised, and much to my surprise, left graciously and without complaints. I wasn't used to either of them being quite so cordial. They didn't even question my presence all day.

Abby yawned. "Thanks. I didn't want them to leave, but I was struggling to keep my eyes open."

"I noticed. Why don't you call it a night."

She hesitated, troubling her lip. I noticed she did that when she was worried, stressed, or had questions she didn't know how to ask.

"Tucker. Do you think you could stay? At least until I'm asleep?"

"I'm not going anywhere Abby. Sleep well. I'll be here when you wake up."

She looked so relieved that I didn't have the heart to tell her it was my job. I'd been ordered by my Alpha not to leave her side without assigning someone else to watch her. Plus, I was worried that her wolf may surface again while her guard was down as she had that morning.

Was that really today? So much had happened that it seemed impossible to believe.

“What will your wife say?” she blurted out.

“Mate,” I corrected. “I don’t call her my wife. She’s my mate. And she’s out of town visiting her parents. She left yesterday.”

After she stormed out of here, I thought.

I could see the questions in Abby’s eyes, but to her grace, she didn’t ask. It wasn’t any of her business anyway.

“Okay,” she said, biting her tongue to keep from pressing for more information before walking into the bedroom and closing the door.

Annie.

It had been such a long, crazy day that I hadn’t even had time to think about her. Where the hell was she, and why hadn’t she called me yet?

I wasn’t ready to give her the satisfaction by calling her first.

Still, I checked my phone for any missed calls or texts . . . nothing.

When two days had passed, I was starting to worry a bit. I had thought for sure Annie would have called me by now. I was worried, but I just couldn’t bring myself to pick up that phone. She was the one who’d left me.

I knew this was just some sort of game for her.

But I’d had Abby to preoccupy my time. She continued to ask questions as we went through the house marking the things she liked and the stuff she knew she didn’t want. She’d even invited Nonna and Tabitha back over to spend a second day with. I thought it was particularly kind of her to allow them to take anything they wanted from the house.

“You have more memories here than I do, so it’s only fitting,” she’d insisted.

“That was really nice of you to do that,” I told her after the ladies had left for the day.

She shrugged. “It was nothing.”

“Some of that nothing was probably worth a lot of money?”

“Birdie left me more than I’ll ever need. Besides, they were just things. If they bring a bit of comfort to her friends, then great. My mom always told me people are more important than things.”

I smiled. “My mother always said that too.”

My phone rang and I looked down to see Annie's mother's number.

"Excuse me," I told Abby, heading into another room to take the call I'd been waiting for.

I took a deep breath and let it out quickly before answering. "About damn time."

"Excuse me?" a woman who was clearly not my mate, but her mother, said.

"Uh, sorry ma'am. I honestly thought it was Annie and she just forgot to charge her phone again."

There was a long pause of uncomfortable silence.

"Are you telling me she's not with you?"

"What?"

"Tucker, is Annie with you?"

"No," I said. "She left to drive home to you two days ago. I haven't heard from her since."

"She called me from the road the other night saying something about an accident and a big backup. When she didn't call again and never showed up here, I just naturally assumed she'd turned back."

"It's a couple days drive, so maybe she just stopped along the way."

"And you're sure she's not at home."

"Honestly, I've been on an assignment and haven't been home, but I don't think she returned."

"Are you in territory?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Then go home and find out for sure."

"Yes ma'am. I'll call you back shortly."

I hung up the phone, then yelled down the hall. "Abby, I have to step out for a few minutes. I'll be back soon."

"Okay," she responded.

I left before she could ask any questions and drove straight home.

Annie's car wasn't in the driveway, but I jumped out and ran inside anyway.

"Annie! Annie! Where the hell are you?"

It was clear she hadn't returned. Everything was exactly as I'd left it.

On my way back to Abby's house, I broke down and called her.

The phone rang and rang until it rolled to voicemail. I hung up and

dialed it again.

“Dammit! Pick up the phone,” I yelled.

I was still growling in frustration when I walked back into the house. Abby startled.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I snapped.

“You don’t sound fine.”

“Annie’s been gone for two days. She was mad at me when she left, and she hasn’t called me since. I just found out she hasn’t made it to her parents’ house yet.”

“I’m sorry. Was she mad about me? I noticed the look she gave me when she came by.”

I sighed. “That was my fault. She assumed Birdie’s heir was another little old lady. Then she showed up and well, you’re clearly not.”

When she tried to speak again, I dismissed her concerns. It wasn’t her problem.

“How about we just get back to work?”

Working was good. It would keep my mind off of Annie for a while.

Abby looked like she wanted to say something, but then stopped and nodded. “Okay.”

We walked up the stairs with her just ahead of me while I thought about Annie and questioned where the hell she was. I looked up just as Abby reached the top platform and turned back to look at me with a smile.

In that instant my whole world shifted.

Mate, my wolf growled in my head.

In all the years I’d spent with Annie he had never said that before. On instinct I looked around, expecting her to jump out or suddenly appear from thin air, but she wasn’t there.

When I looked back up at Abby, I clearly heard him again.

Mine!

My heart started racing, and I was struggling to breathe.

No, I argued.

Mate! he growled again when I looked at Abby.

I’d spent days with Abby and my wolf had never reacted to her in any way.

Why now?

And then it dawned on me. The only way that my wolf would look at another female was if my mate was dead.

Nausea hit me hard as I stumbled back down the stairs and made it to the kitchen sink before hurling.

“Tucker!” Abby yelled as she ran after me.

When she reached out to touch my back, my entire body jolted like I’d just been electrocuted, but not in a bad way, in a very good way that shot straight to my pants.

She jumped back at the sensation, and I knew without a doubt that she was feeling it too.

“This can’t be happening,” I muttered.

I splashed cold water on my face again.

“What’s happening?” Abby asked softly.

When I turned to face her again, I braced for the impact.

Mine! my wolf insisted.

I didn’t know whether to cry or laugh. Annie had to be dead and all alone out there somewhere. Was that why she hadn’t picked up the phone?

But my wolf suddenly wanted to claim Abby? He was aggressively letting me know it. The emotions of realizing Annie probably wasn’t coming home and that I suddenly had a new mate to look after was already screwing with my head.

How could this happen?

What were the odds that I’d find another mate so quickly?

Not just any mate, but my true mate, I thought as I stared at her, feeling like the entire world was spinning out of control around me.

“Do not pass out on me, Tucker. You’re freaking me out. And there’s some strange voice in my head yelling at me. I don’t even know what it means. I keep hearing ‘*Mate*’ every time I look at you and that’s not happened before. It’s freaking me out. I mean, I always have voices in my head, but not this one. It’s different, and I don’t know what’s going on right now. I really need you to explain this to me. I already felt like I was having a psychotic break, but this, this is different, and . . .”

To stop her rambling, I reached out and crushed her to me, wrapping my arms around her and just holding her. The immense calm that came over me was something I had never experienced before. It was more powerful than I ever dreamed.

My heart was torn in two as I stood there holding Abby for the first time. Annie was gone, she had to be. If she wasn't dead, then she had somehow found a way to sever our bond.

But Abby was here, she was alive, and she was mine. My wolf wouldn't be acting so possessive over her if it wasn't the case. And I'd heard stories of true mates before. I'd even seen my friends fall to theirs in an instant. But I'd made my choice, right or wrong, and never expected to experience any of this myself.

Mine, my wolf whispered in my ear.

Mine, I accepted without question.

I didn't fully understand what was happening, but instinctually I knew that Abby was now my responsibility. She was mine to protect and cherish, and I'd deal with the rest later.

"I'm okay," she finally said as she pulled away from me.

I instantly missed the feeling of her in my arms and the peace it had brought me. But that feeling was also tainted with guilt.

She stared up at me and my stomach felt like it was full of butterflies.

Mate, my wolf sighed happily.

He'd never been this happy or content with Annie, and it was hard not to compare them right now.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," I told her honestly.

"What's going on, Tucker?"

I sighed. "I think Annie just died."

"What?" She looked around like she was expecting to see a dead body in the middle of the floor or something.

"My mate is dead. I'm sure of it."

My wolf growled angrily at me. I could feel him physically turning my head back to Abby.

Mate!

"H-how do you know that?"

I looked at her, helplessly trying to find the best words to explain it all. Her life had already been turned upside down. I hated to burden her with this too. But what else could I do?

"It's not easy to explain or talk about, especially to you. Wolves mate for life. Did you know that?"

She nodded. “I mean real wolves in the wild do. I’ve done my research for books and stuff.”

“Well wolf shifters aren’t much different. When we take a mate, it’s for life. But there are two kinds of mates: compatible and true.”

“What’s the difference?”

“They say a true mate only comes along once in a lifetime. Our legends tell us that God himself handpicks two wolves destined to be together. It’s the strongest bond in the world. But finding one person amongst millions on this planet can be difficult.”

“But if God chose them then he must have a plan for them to cross paths and meet, right?”

I could tell her brain was shifting from the reality of what we were telling her and getting sucked into the story instead. I could practically hear her literary wheels kick into overdrive.

“I suppose. I never really thought about it like that before. Besides there is an infinite number of compatible mates, ones that your wolf will accept.”

“Which was Annie for you?”

That little word—“was”—hit me harder than I expected. Annie had made most of my adult life as miserable as possible. I should feel relief that it was over, but I didn’t. I couldn’t look Abby in the eyes as I thought about it. My mate was dead.

The second I thought the words, my neck turned back to Abby of its own accord.

Mate!

I sighed. “Annie was a compatible mate.”

“You chose not to wait for your true mate?” she asked, sounding a little hurt.

It affected me in ways I wasn’t expecting.

“What? No! That wasn’t it at all. There is so much to that story, but I guess yeah, ultimately, I made a decision. I was young and naïve, and I thought everything would work out okay.”

I didn’t want to explain all of that or how horrible mated life had been for me. And I certainly didn’t want to tell her that I didn’t want to ever put myself in that position again.

My wolf growled once more and this time it escaped me, causing her

to jump back away from me.

I instantly felt guilty for it.

What was happening to me? I shouldn't be feeling things for Abby like this.

Mine! my wolf insisted.

I should go and clear my head before I say too much. I was just going to scare her at this rate, but I also couldn't force myself to walk away from her.

Growing up I always said I would wait for my true mate no matter what. But when push came to shove, I had caved to a lie. Sure, I didn't know it was a lie at the time, but that's the basic gist of my life story.

Now, standing before my true mate, the woman I always dreamed of, and suddenly knowing without a doubt that this beautiful woman was always meant to be mine just made me feel guilty for not waiting for her. She deserved better than me.

So I was guilty over Annie, and I was guilty over Abby. Emotionally I was a mess and didn't know how to process anything I was feeling right now.

Abby

Chapter 15

I didn't really understand what was going on here. Tucker sounded guilty when he told me he'd taken a compatible mate. I was sure I was just reading too much into it.

Mate! a voice inside my head said again.

Every time I looked at Tucker, there was a persistent voice repeating that one single word.

What did it mean?

He seemed so sure that his mate was dead. How awful for him, and yet there was something satisfying about hearing him say it, which really made me a horrible person. I wouldn't wish death on anyone, and I knew what it felt like to lose someone you love.

I just wanted to pull him into my arms and reassure him that everything was going to be okay. Grief affected everyone differently. I knew that already. But Tucker seemed more in shock than sad, and that was a little concerning. He'd already thrown up, and I thought a few times that he just might pass out on me.

Pushing my personal feelings aside, I just wanted to be there to help him, the way he'd been helping me deal with everything since I arrived here.

And maybe a bit more than that. I pushed that thought out of my mind.

His mate just died and here I was ogling the man in the midst of his grief.

I'd always thought he was handsome, but suddenly, it felt like more than just a simple attraction or appreciation of a good-looking man. I couldn't even put it into words, but it was like he was suddenly the most gorgeous man on the planet, like everyone else in the entire world paled next to him. And more than that, I knew I would do absolutely anything he asked of me if it meant shielding him from the pain I could see in his eyes.

"Is there someone I can call for you?"

He shook his head. “No. I don’t want to alert her family until there’s confirmation.”

I still didn’t understand how he could suddenly decide his mate was dead.

That voice growled in my head this time. *Mine!*

It was starting to freak me out a little. Tucker seemed to know it too.

He rubbed his hands up and down my arms. It filled me with comfort in a way I couldn’t really explain.

“It’s going to be okay, Abby. It’s going to be okay.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” I told him.

“Me either. Not really.”

“How can you be so sure she’s dead?” I asked again.

He snorted. “You must think I’m a freak or something. You’re still learning about our kind and now this.”

“What?” I demanded.

“Our wolves mate for life, Abby. For life.”

“You said that already.”

I really wasn’t getting the correlation.

“That voice in your head, you said it was saying ‘Mate’ right?”

I slowly nodded.

“That’s your wolf talking to you. And there’s only one person in this entire world that she would say that for.”

I gulped hard. “My true mate?” I guessed.

“Yup. But my wolf was bonded to Annie’s. As long as that bond was intact, I didn’t know who you were supposed to be to me.”

“But now you do?”

“Yup, which can only mean one thing.”

“Annie’s dead,” I whispered.

He nodded. “And you are mine.”

Mine! my wolf agreed.

My entire body reacted to his words. I squirmed a bit just trying to relieve some of the pressure between my legs. *Now isn’t the time for this,* I thought to myself, willing my body to calm down.

“You’re guilty about it, aren’t you?”

I wasn’t sure how I knew that, but I did, with absolute certainty.

“I don’t know what to think right now.”

“How did I know that?”

“You can sense my emotions. It’s weird. I never really experienced it before.”

“You mean with Annie?”

There was a sting of pain when I thought of him with her. It made no sense. I shouldn’t feel hurt that he had a mate before he even knew I existed.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, like he could somehow sense my feelings too.

“This is all so weird.”

“I know. It’s freaking me out too.”

I wasn’t blind to the fact that he hadn’t shed a single tear with the revelation that Annie was dead. What did that mean? What did it say about him?

“I, uh, I don’t know what to say or even what to ask right now.”

He nodded. “I know. It’s a lot. And there’s so much I’m going to have to tell you, but right now, I’m just not ready.”

There was a sharp pain that shot through my chest at his words.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I just need time to process all of this,” he said before reaching out and pulling me back in for a hug.

I had never felt safer than in the sanctuary of his arms. Without realizing what I was doing, I sniffed him, taking in his scent and committing it to memory.

Mate, my wolf sighed contentedly.

We worked late into the night like we were both afraid to end the day. And we both seemed to try hard to get the day back to normal, but there was this new awareness in play. No matter where Tucker went or what he did I was aware of it, hyperaware. It was very distracting.

Finally, I couldn’t take anymore. I was both physically and mentally exhausted.

“I have to tap out. I’m wiped,” I finally admitted.

He nodded. “Me too.”

But in saying that, the air around us seemed to electrify. All sorts of ideas started popping into my head, the sort of things I only wrote about in

books, like chapter eight that Nonna and Tabitha had mentioned.

I blushed as images of Tucker over me swam through my head. The tension between us had been building throughout the day. It felt almost tangible.

Pushing them aside, I turned and fled. I didn't even ask him if he was staying, because I didn't know what that would mean.

I got ready and crawled into bed, but sleep didn't come. I was hot all over and every nerve in my body seemed to be standing on edge. Without some relief, I wasn't sure I was going to get any sleep.

Straining my ears, I tried to listen and see if Tucker was still in the house. I hadn't even stuck around to find out. He'd stayed last night. Would he again? Technically he was still on assignment from the Alpha to keep an eye on me. Would that change now? Surely, he wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened today.

Not sensing him with my newfound Tucker detector, I tried to relax and close my eyes, but my body was strung too tightly. I knew there was only one thing that was going to calm me down enough to sleep tonight.

Feeling just a bit naughty, I slid my hand down my body and let my fingers tease the sensitive spot between my legs. I didn't often touch myself, but tonight it felt like the only thing to do. I needed an orgasm to ease the tension that had been building within me for hours. I was desperate for it.

One finger slipped inside of me, and I closed my eyes trying to enjoy the sensation it caused.

When the door creaked open, I shot up and stared at Tucker standing there watching me. It was easy to let myself believe it was all just a dream, so I didn't stop as I watched him watching me please myself.

With a growl, he crossed the room and climbed into bed with me.

"Let me," he whispered as he reached for my hand and replaced it with his own.

His lips crashed against mine and sent bolts of electricity slamming through my body. I groaned and clung to him. I was breathless and desperate as he pushed me to the edge and sent me over the cliff.

My entire body froze up and then snapped free.

He kissed me once more.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't lay there and listen. I needed to touch you."

I should have felt guilty about it. The man had just lost his wife. I

couldn't even bring myself to call her his mate again. My wolf made it clear that she didn't like it because I was his mate. He was mine, and in this post-coital bliss, I was more than ready to accept whatever the hell that meant.

"Don't ever apologize for that," I said sleepily as he relaxed down onto the bed and curled me up against him.

Tucker didn't make any further moves. He didn't insist that I repay the favor or anything that I would have expected from a man. Instead, he just held me. I could feel how my closeness relaxed him as I drifted off to sleep.

That night, I dreamed happy dreams. There were no nightmares, and I was pretty certain I hadn't shifted in my sleep as I'd apparently done before.

The last few days felt like nothing but dreams when I awoke the next morning, except Tucker was still there, holding me.

Waking up in his arms wasn't something I could describe with words and that terrified me. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to move or wake him.

"I'm awake," he mumbled. "What time is it?"

I peeked over him to see the clock on the nightstand. "Almost nine."

"Shit! We overslept. I have to check in."

He rummaged in his pocket for his phone but made no move to actually get up. Instead, his arm wrapped tighter around me and held me close to him like he had no intention of going anywhere.

It was then that I became acutely aware of the fact that he was still fully clothed, and I was in nothing but an oversized men's T-shirt I'd bought to sleep in.

I really hoped he didn't think it was some other guy's or anything.

Memories of his lips and hands on me were still fresh. It had all happened.

It was real.

That thought was almost too much to process.

He held his phone to his ear and stared into my eyes while he spoke.

"Sorry I missed morning workouts."

"Kyle already gave me a heads up that he personally gave you a mission and you might be out for a few days to a few weeks," I heard a man say.

"I didn't think that meant I was excused from workouts and meetings."

"When Kyle Westin gives you a direct order, Tucker, nothing else

matters. See it through and we'll catch up when you get back."

"Wait, catch me up on what?" There was a long pause. "On what, Michael?"

"We have a new lead on a Collector. This one is in Napa Valley, much too close to home. There's nothing concrete yet, but intel looks promising."

Tucker stiffened. Without thinking, I reached out and rubbed my hand over his chest, smiling when the tension in his body started to ease. I had done that. My touch seemed to calm him in the same way his settled me. It was a heady and powerful feeling.

"Keep me posted. There's no reason I can't video in for meetings."

"You're sure it won't affect this secret mission you're on?"

"Don't be an ass. I'm not leaving territory. I can still maintain most of my normal routine if necessary."

"Kyle wouldn't even give me details on this job, so whatever it is, it must be important."

He looked down at me and smiled. "It is."

"I'll keep you posted on any developments."

"Sounds good. Thanks Michael."

He disconnected the call and put it back in his pocket.

"What do you do exactly?" I asked when he made no move to get up.

His fingers drew lazy circles on my shoulder as he spoke.

"I work for a special ops team called Westin Force. My unit is Delta, and we are mostly in charge of protecting Westin territory." He hesitated to go on. "Sometimes it requires me to be away on missions."

"So you're sort of like GI Joe then?"

He cringed at my question.

"What?" I asked.

"Annie hated me working for Westin Force. She used to say it was just a waste of time and I needed to stop playing GI Joe and get a real job.

This time it was my turn to cringe.

"Guess I picked the worst possible words then, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Do you love what you do, Tucker?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Does it fulfill you?"

“Definitely.”

“Are you doing good for this, uh, Pack?”

“Always.”

“Then it sounds like a pretty worthy job to me.”

He looked at me in fascination and reached out and caressed my cheek.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Tucker

Chapter 16

There was no way for Abby to know just how much her words meant to me. Annie had always hated my job, but it was a huge, important part of my life. I'd tried to make accommodations to satisfy her and nothing had ever worked.

Abby seemed okay with it, but for now, that job had me sticking to her side, where it felt we both needed me to be right now. But what would happen later? How would she react when I was called out of territory for days or even weeks on end and minimal contact allowed? Would she freak out or change her opinion then?

It was really weird to me how holding Abby could feel so right when Annie just died. What I felt I should be feeling right now and what I was actually feeling were at war with each other. I tried not to think too much about that and just live in the moment. Because if I allowed myself to really think about what Annie's death meant, then it would open a door to a whole lot of shit I wasn't ready to deal with.

"So what exactly is your secret mission right now?"

"You," I said with a smirk as I leaned down and kissed her.

Getting lost in my mate was an easy way to procrastinate dealing with all the other feelings threatening to overcome me.

My mate. I sucked in a deep breath at the thought and stared down at her in wonder.

"You are my mate, Abby. You do understand that, right?"

"Yes, but I also don't exactly know what that means."

"It means that you were always meant to be mine."

"You make it sound like I'm a possession or something."

"It's not like that. We were made to be together, like two halves of one whole."

"I feel a little guilty about how I'm feeling about you right now. I mean she just died."

“I know. Me too.”

But Abby didn't know everything. And she certainly didn't know that the bulk of my guilt came from relief. I was finally free. That was a pretty ironic thought though as everything inside of me screamed to claim Abby right now.

“Yesterday morning I thought you were cute and nice. At times I didn't like you very much because I didn't like what you were telling me. I was scared of what you were saying. And now today, it makes me physically ill to think about having to go home and leave you. That's a terrifyingly fast change. Kind of like whiplash.”

“I know. I feel it too. But from everything I know about true mates, that's pretty normal. It also makes me a mating male.”

“Huh?”

I hadn't gone through this stage with Annie. Voluntarily mating was very different than what I was experiencing right now. I'd never felt as possessive about Annie as I did Abby right now. I didn't even want to think about an unmated male coming near her, because I had no idea how I would react to that.

“Mating, that's what we call it when true mates find each other. It can be a bit of an unstable period. I'm not sure I could stay away from you even if Kyle hadn't ordered it. From what others have explained and from what I've witnessed when my friends went through it, it basically makes male wolves go insane.”

She snickered.

“I'm serious. Michael kidnapped Callie. He was on a mission and needed to get back home, so he handcuffed her to a truck and drove away with her.”

This time she laughed, even though I wasn't kidding.

“Sounds like this mating stuff can get serious.”

“Yeah.”

It was all new to her and she needed to know what she was getting into. Technically it was new territory for me too, but I at least had some knowledge of what to expect.

“Are you trying to scare me off, Tucker? Because it's not working.”

I looked down at her and grinned. Then before I could stop myself, I kissed her. My heart leapt in my chest when she returned it, kissing me back

until my head was spinning.

It had never been like this with Annie.

I couldn't stop that thought from seeping in, couldn't stop comparing the two. When I'd mated Annie it was comfortable, familiar. But with Abby everything was new and exciting. But my biggest fear was that Abigail Matroni, my true mate, had the power to destroy me like Annie never could, try as she might.

A knock at the front door had us both shooting up out of the bed like we'd just been caught doing something wrong. My heart was racing, and Abby's eyes looked frantic, though her hair was mussed, lips swollen, and cheeks a rosy red.

She was beautiful.

Mine, my wolf reminded me, as if I could forget.

"Hello? Abby are you home?" Nonna called out.

"Maybe she went out for lunch or something," Tabitha said.

I was perfectly okay with staying very still in the hopes that they would leave, but in Abby's rush to get out of the bed, she tripped and banged her shin against the bed.

"Hide," she mouthed as footsteps in the hallway grew closer.

I growled, but she gave me a staunch look that told me I had better do as she said.

Reluctantly, I hid in the closet just seconds before Nonna burst through the door.

"Found her back here, Tabby."

"Um, hi."

"Child, what are you doing wasting the day away in bed?"

I rolled my eyes and waited for them to leave the room before sneaking back out. Fortunately, there was a window in the bedroom that didn't face the road. The view was mostly covered by a large holly bush that Birdie didn't want cut back. Maybe this was why.

I looked up to the sky and whispered, "Thanks Birdie."

But as I snuck out the window, a voice cleared. I looked up to see Walker standing there, leaning against the house with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Shh. Keep your voice down, Nonna and Tabitha are in there. What

are you even doing here?”

“Michael wanted me to swing by and check on our little human guest since you were tied up with some secret mission Kyle gave you. I’m pretty certain this isn’t it.”

“Actually, it is,” I stubbornly told him.

“Come again?”

“I’ve been assigned to keep an eye on Abby while she’s here.”

My wolf growled in my head at the thought of her leaving us, and I had to grit my teeth and force a smile on my face.

“What’s going on, Tucker? This isn’t you. You don’t sneak around with other women, human or not, and you certainly don’t give any reasons to be caught climbing out of bedroom windows like this.”

I groaned. “It’s not what you think.”

“Really, because it looks like you stayed the night with Ms. Abigail Matroni and then snuck out of her bedroom window so Nonna and Tabitha wouldn’t catch you.”

I sighed. It was exactly what it looked like.

“It’s still not what you think,” I stubbornly said.

“Annie is going to lose her shit if she finds out about this, innocent or not.”

Guilt slammed into me, but I shook my head.

“Actually, she won’t.”

He snorted. “Dude, I’ve met your mate. She’ll be pissed just knowing you were here at all.”

“Walker, shut up. Annie’s dead.”

“What? When? How?”

“Last night and I don’t know how. And I don’t want that getting out until it’s confirmed.”

“What did you do? Whatever it is, we can cover it up. I’ll never tell a soul. Just point me in the right direction.”

I chuckled. “It’s not like that, but thanks. She left two days ago to go home to her parents’ place for the holidays.”

“So not dead?”

“Pretty sure she’s dead.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Got a call from her mom that she didn’t make it. And she’s not

returning calls.”

“She’s a bitch. She’s probably just ghosting you to make you squirm.”

I lowered my voice. “Then why the hell is my wolf demanding I claim Abby all of a sudden?”

He gasped. “No. But she’s human.”

“Not so human after all,” I whispered. “And she’s still adjusting to everything. Man, it’s insane. Only Kyle knows. I was assigned to watch her while she’s in territory.”

“So, like, forever? I mean if you’re right and Annie’s dead, and Abby’s your true mate, then she isn’t going to be leaving, right?”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Dude, this is really screwed up. You don’t even know for sure if Annie is dead, but if she’s not and she comes home to find you shackled up with Birdie’s heir, you’re going to be dead, and we both know it.”

I sighed. “I know. But Walker, I’ve been working with Abby for days and there was nothing between us. Even after I knew about her wolf, nothing. And then yesterday it was like a light switch had been turned on and I knew she was meant to be mine. I don’t know how else to explain it. And if Annie was alive that should never have happened, right? I swear I’m not going insane here, and I didn’t do anything to Annie.”

“I mean, no one would blame you if you had.”

I glared at him. “What? I’m just saying. Look at you, you’re not even upset about it.”

“Confused is more like it.”

I couldn’t deny that I wasn’t devastated by the idea of her being dead.

“What does that even say about me? We’ve been together since we were kids, and I haven’t shed a tear over the idea of her being gone. I’m a horrible person. Or maybe I just want her to be gone because I’m feeling all these things for Abby now. I don’t know what to do. Walker, tell me what the hell to do.”

“For starters, calm down. Your wolf wouldn’t be alerting you to Abby as a potential mate if something wasn’t wrong with Annie. And no one would blame you for not being upset over her. That woman was a living nightmare for you.”

I nodded. Over too many shots of tequila one night, I’d opened up some about Annie and the things she did. Walker had wanted to put her down

that night, but I'd protected her, just as I'd always done. This time, I hadn't been there for her, and I'd be lying if I didn't say I was harboring some guilt for not being there.

In my heart she was gone. I just knew it. The guilt was starting to gnaw at my insides, not just for letting it happen by watching her walk away without stopping her and not feeling bad about it, but also because I was relieved.

Walker was right. My life with her had been a living nightmare. I could handle her outbursts and punches. I'd never hit her back or raised a hand to her. That was all bad, but the worst part was her mind games. I tried every single day of our life together to start my day by looking in the mirror and telling myself something positive about me, and then I'd put a smile on my face and go to work.

Some days were harder than others. When you're constantly being told that you're worthless and not good enough, it takes its toll.

I'd tried to shield my friends from it as best as I could. They didn't understand that they were my sanctuary, my safe space, and that by trying so hard to include her only made things worse for me. A lot of the time I had just made excuses for her without ever even telling her stuff was going on. Not at first, but definitely more and more as the years went on.

When she did show up, there was always something I'd have to apologize for or make right afterwards. She would look down her nose at my friends. She hated my job, hated our house, hated life in San Marco, and absolutely nothing I did ever made it better.

Still, I shouldn't feel so relieved that someone I had loved and cherished for most of my life was dead.

"Don't," Walker said.

"Don't what?"

"Dude, you're spiraling right before my eyes. Your pain is like an open book."

I snorted. Hadn't I told Abby the same thing, only about her?

"I'm fine."

"There is no way you are fine with all of this. We should call Lachie in."

"What? No. I'm not ready for anyone to know about this. I wouldn't even be telling you if you hadn't just caught me sneaking out of her

bedroom.”

“You need to talk to someone about this.”

I shook my head and then shrugged. “I’m talking to you.”

“Don’t drag me into this shit. You are far too screwed up for my pay grade.”

I scowled, but we both knew it was true. That was the bitch of it all. Because as wonderful as Abby made me feel right now, I knew I was never going to be good enough for her. And eventually, I was going to have to deal with a whole lot of shit bottled up within me.

Abby

Chapter 17

When Nonna and Tabitha showed up out of the blue, I panicked. It wasn't fair for me to make Tucker hide. Was he supposed to just hang out in the closet all day? Because it was clear pretty quickly that these ladies weren't going anywhere anytime soon.

"She looks a little flushed, doesn't she Tab?" Nonna asked.

The older women looked me up and down and frowned.

"She does. Are you feeling well, dear?"

"I'm fine."

"You should call Micah to check on her. Micah's her grandson and our town's doctor. He'll fix whatever's ailing you."

I wasn't sure embarrassment was something that could simply be cured, but I didn't tell them that.

"No, it doesn't look like anything too serious. I'll call Lucy instead. She'll take good care of you."

"Lucy?"

"She's Micah's mate and a healer," Nonna explained.

I was envisioning a hippy sort of woman, a free spirit who believed in holistic medicine, not the perfectly normal woman that arrived in scrubs with a baby on her hip half an hour later.

And where was Tucker? Was he still in the closet?

My face flushed once more at the thought.

"Oh, you poor thing. Lucy, this is Abby. I don't think she's feeling very well. Can you help her?"

"Hi Abby."

"And who's this?" I cooed at the little boy she was holding.

"This is Maddox, my youngest. Vada is at preschool right now. This little man is going through some separation anxiety, so he's pretty much permanently attached to me these days."

I had never really given much thought to having kids myself, but I did

like them. I supposed if I found myself in a long-term committed relationship, then I'd figure out the whole family thing. My dad had died when I was still young, and my mom had struggled raising me on her own. I'd seen the toll kids could take on a person, and so it wasn't ever a priority for my future.

Mate, my wolf reminded me as an image of Tucker popped into my head.

Maybe, I thought.

"See, Lucy. Poor thing is just so flushed. I'm worried."

"I'm sure she's just fine, Tabitha. Here, take the baby and then you two scoot and give us some privacy."

I expected the boy to fuss after what she'd said, but he happily went to the old woman.

"Crazy right? She's about the only relief I get these days. Maddox absolutely adores his great-grandmother." A little louder she said, "Privacy, ladies. There is a thing called patient-doctor confidentiality even amongst shifters."

She rolled her eyes.

Nonna gasped and came running back to whisper in her ear.

"She's human."

I pretended not to hear.

As Nonna left, Lucy turned towards me, unsure of what to say.

I craned my neck to see if they had left while Lucy closed the door and then plugged in some sort of device.

"Okay, you're free to talk now. They can't hear us."

I frowned. "From my experience wolves have super hearing and those two are no different," I whispered.

She laughed. "I thought you weren't supposed to know about that."

I shrugged.

"Not so human or just good with weird?"

"Maybe a little of both," I admitted. "It's all pretty new to me. This week has been quite the revelation."

"You really didn't know before coming here?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I would say you're doing pretty awesome. That's a lot to take in."

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you really feeling bad?”

“I’m fine,” I said with a sigh.

“So why do those crazy old ladies think otherwise?”

My cheeks were on fire.

“Tucker, you can’t go in there,” Nonna argued as the door opened.

“They said you’re sick?”

“I’m fine. Oh God, please just make it stop,” I said crushing my face into a throw pillow.

Without even caring about Lucy standing right there, he sat down next to me and pulled me into his arms. I clung to him, letting his touch calm me down.

“That’s better. Now, what’s this all about?”

“Nothing. They are literally blowing it out of proportion. They barged into the bedroom. I was embarrassed. I’m not sick. I was blushing, and they seem to think if my face is flushed, I must be sick.”

Lucy cleared her throat.

“Oh, hey, Luce,” Tucker said.

“What the hell is going on here, Tucker?”

He sighed. “This falls under patient-doctor confidentiality, right?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Does it or not?”

“Yes. For the moment, Abby is my patient and therefore confidential.”

“Okay then, because you can’t tell anyone, not yet at least.”

“Tell them what exactly?”

He looked down at me and smiled. “Abby’s my true mate, Lucy. My one true mate.”

“What?” she screeched. “B-but Annie.”

“She left and my guess is she died.”

“I need to sit for this. Are you serious?”

“Would I lie about something like this? I think I knew the second it happened because my wolf turned on in the blink of an eye. One minute I look at her and there’s nothing there. Sure, she’s cute and funny. I like her just fine, and the next, it’s like the entire world shifted and all I see, all I smell, is her.”

“Plus, the whole wolf talking in my head thing.”

He smiled and nodded. “There’s definitely that too, for both of us.”

“This is incredible. I mean, what are the odds? But are you okay? I mean Annie was your m—”

“Don’t say it,” he interrupted. “I was with Annie for a long time—most of my life—but my wolf really doesn’t like her being referred to as that.”

“But you marked her, and she marked you. That’s not just irreversible.”

His whole body sunk back against the couch, but he shook his head. “It has to be, because I’m telling you this is happening. I’m not going crazy, and neither is Abby, Luce. This is real, the realest thing I’ve ever felt in my life.”

There was a bang on the door.

“If Tucker can be in there, so can we.”

He looked over at me and gave a weak smile. “I’ll go distract the old bats. I just had to know you were okay.”

“I’m fine.”

He started to get up, but I grabbed his hand until he looked back at me.

“And I’m glad you found a way to sneak out of the closet.”

He laughed as he left the two of us to talk.

An awkwardness set in, and I didn’t know what to do or say to her. She clearly knew Annie. Were they friends? How much more of an outsider could I possibly become around here? Adding adulterer to my list of screw-ups wasn’t something I was proud of.

“Um, so, yeah. Not feeling sick. They just overexaggerated things. I’m sorry you got dragged out here.”

“You really hid him in the closet?”

“I panicked. They just walked right into the house and into my bedroom. What was I supposed to do?”

Lucy burst out laughing. “That’s hysterical. It’s not like you were doing anything wrong.”

“Huh? You’re okay with this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Um, did you know Annie?”

She shrugged. “No more or less than anyone else. She was a miserable person. I don’t know how Tucker ever put up with her.” A dark look crossed her eyes.

“What is it?”

She shrugged. “Not really my story to tell. You should ask him about her.”

“I guess. Is it weird that he didn’t even shed a tear? Shouldn’t I be worried about that kind of man?”

“That kind of man is the best kind I know. If he didn’t cry, well, he has his reasons for that. I’d be willing to bet he’s feeling more relieved than sad, and with you thrown into the mix, he probably doesn’t even know what to think or how to feel right now.”

“Are you mated?”

“Yes. Micah. And he’s my true mate. I know how crazy life can be for a mating pair.”

“It doesn’t seem proper wanting him the way I do when he just lost his mate. I feel guilty about it.”

“That’s human thinking. When it comes to true mates you can’t stop the attraction. And I don’t know how it works since he’s been mated before. I can talk to Micah about it, but only with your permission since Tucker asked me to keep it to myself.”

“Micah’s your mate? And a doctor, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I guess it would be okay then.”

“Have you spoken with Kyle yet?”

“Not since I got busted shifting and running through town.”

“That was you?”

I groaned. “You heard about that?”

“Nothing stays a secret for long around here. And you guys should probably let Kyle know about the whole mating thing before rumors start.”

“Kyle assigned Tucker to monitor me while I’m here. Escort duty or something like that.”

“Well, that’s good. No one will think much of him spending time over here then.”

“This is bad, isn’t it?”

I didn’t really know Lucy, but she seemed nice enough, and she was

there when I desperately needed someone to talk to.

“It’s not bad,” she reassured me taking a seat next to me and reaching out for my hand. “Granted, the circumstances are a little odd, but there’s never a bad time to find your true mate. It’s supposed to be exciting and wonderful. Kind of like a miracle, and this is the season of miracles, right?”

I shrugged. “I guess. Is that how it was for you?”

“Me? Oh God no! Are you kidding? I was terrified. My history with people wasn’t so great. I had been abducted by these humans that were running all sorts of experiments on shifters. They impregnated me. My daughter is literally a walking, talking lab experiment. I tried to go home when Westin Force rescued us, but my family and former pack were terrified of Vada.”

“But she was just a baby.”

She shrugged sadly. “A baby who to them was a monster. So we came back here. Kyle and Kelsey have been wonderful and very welcoming. Actually, everyone here has been. And there are a few other kids like her here too. It was supposed to just be a temporary stay until I got back on my feet and figured things out and turned out to be a whole new beginning. I met Micah and he’s pretty great. He accepted Vada and I without question, but it took me a while to get on board.”

“Of course. You had your daughter to think about.”

“Exactly. But in the end, everything worked out. Mating isn’t easy. Once your bond is sealed it does get better though. And he’s worth it.”

“Are you talking about Micah or Tucker?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile. She squeezed my hand and then got up. “Since you obviously aren’t sick, I’m sorry to say I need to go. My boobs are telling me little man must be hungry.”

I nodded. “Thanks for talking to me, Lucy. It was really great to meet you.”

“Anytime. And I mean that. Tucker has my number, so get it from him and text me with your number, okay? Call me anytime you need to talk. I know what it’s like to be in your shoes in a new place with the insanity of mating. You aren’t alone, Abby. Oh, and welcome to San Marco.”

I sat there hugging the pillow after she left, thinking about all she’d shared. It sounded so fantastical that I couldn’t even wrap my head around it all.

Tucker peeked his head into the room. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good."

"I don't know if you met Walker yet, but I wanted to introduce you real quick. He's the best we have for escort duties and may need to pitch in every now and then."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Nowhere, but if I do get called away or need to run home, he'll be here with you."

"Do I really need an escort around here? Like, what if I wanted to go to the store?"

"Walker or I will show you the way."

"Tucker, you can't follow me around twenty-four seven."

"Wanna bet?"

"Tucker!"

He grinned sheepishly. "I know, but humor me. Walker, come here. This is Abby."

Walker was tall and handsome with dark hair and eyes that sparkled with mischief. He came right over to me, sat down, and hugged me.

Tucker growled menacingly.

"Just checking," he said with a smirk as he winked at me.

My jaw dropped. "You told him?"

"I had to. He busted me crawling through your bedroom window."

I bit back a laugh. "That was your best plan?"

"How the hell was I supposed to know he was creeping around here?"

"Yeah, because I'm the creeper in this scenario?" Walker challenged.

"You know what? This is a terrible idea. Stay away from my girl. I'll get Colin to help if I need it."

"Why would Colin be better than Walker? You just said he was the best."

"But Colin's mated and I'm perfectly single."

He gave me a smug look that told me he was purposefully messing with Tucker.

I gave him a little shove. "You've got a wicked streak in you."

"Maybe, but I also would never come between true mates. Just ask Shelby when you meet her."

Tucker laughed. "I still can't believe Ben hasn't ripped your throat

out yet.”

“Never. I’m practically part of the family. He loves me.”

“Walker was dating Shelby when Ben came into town and turned out to be her true mate.”

“I’m not a complete asshole. I stepped aside as soon as she told me. Besides, I already knew she still had old feelings for him anyway. And I wouldn’t come between you two lovebirds either.” He looked at me and winked again. “But I don’t mind terrorizing him some either,” he said in a lower voice.

“I heard that, asshole.”

Walker grinned triumphantly.

“You are definitely trouble, Walker.” Of that I was certain.

Tucker

Chapter 18

Several days went by and somehow, I'd managed to keep Abby all to myself. Walker even stayed true to his word and didn't tell anyone. As best as I could tell, neither had Lucy. It had given us time to get to know the little things about each other without being thrown under a microscope. And with each passing day, I knew with certainty that Abby was meant to be mine.

Life wasn't entirely rainbows and roses though. Every single day Annie's mom called me begging me to do something, anything. I didn't know how to tell her that I was ninety-nine percent sure her daughter was dead. Without proof, there was still that one percent chance hanging over my head.

To appease her, I finally broke down and told Michael some of what was going on. I left Abby out of it entirely.

"Hey, can we talk?"

"You're alive. How's the big secret mission going?"

"As if you don't already know."

He laughed. "I know how much you hate escort duty. I can reassign Walker to her for a while."

"No," I said a little too quickly. But I pressed on before he had a chance to question it. "I'm here on a personal matter. I have a pretty big favor to ask."

"Anything. What is it?"

I sighed. "I know it's wrong to ask to use Westin Force resources for personal matters, but I have a situation."

"Tucker, just spill it, man. What's going on?"

"Annie's missing."

"What?"

"Annie is missing."

"For how long?"

"About a week now."

"And I'm just now hearing about this?"

“I didn’t want to worry everyone.”

“Worry us? Dude, I’m worried about you.”

I hadn’t really considered that. In my heart I knew I was already moving on, but I wasn’t ready to share that with him or anyone else. So, it made sense that I would be his biggest concern. She was supposed to be my mate after all.

“I’m okay. We got in a fight.”

He growled before I could continue. “Did she hurt you?”

“What? No.”

He stared me down until I cracked.

“Not this time. I swear. She was back on a rant about me quitting the Force and moving back home to work for her dad again. I told her that wasn’t going to happen but suggested she go home for the holidays and regroup before returning.”

“Good for you.”

“She never made it home, Michael. Her mother has been calling me every single day. At first, I thought she was just being a bitch, but now I think something happened to her.”

“Has she ever done something like this before?”

“Not for this long.”

“Okay. I’ll have Archie run her credit cards and bank statements and make sure she’s not holed up at a spa or something just trying to torment you. Sorry.”

“No, you’re right. But I’ve checked all of that too. She hasn’t used any of them since she filled up with gas down the mountain when she left.”

“Could she have an account you don’t know about?”

I shrugged. “I guess it’s possible, but not her usual motive. She prefers to make sure I know exactly what she’s doing without me.”

“She can be manipulating. Sorry.”

In the past, I would have defended her, but I just couldn’t anymore. He wasn’t wrong.

“Michael, I don’t really know how to explain it, but I know something is wrong. I just know.”

He looked a little skeptical. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks.”

When her mother called me again as I was leaving headquarters to

head back to Abby's house, I at least had something to tell her.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked hopefully, making my heart go out to her.

"No, but I escalated it to Westin Force. They have resources to help track her. We'll find her. I promise."

She was crying when I hung up, and I felt like shit walking into Abby's house.

"Tucker? Is that you?"

"Yeah."

She walked out of the kitchen with a bit of flour on her cheek, her hair thrown up in a messy bun, looking like a hot mess. I had never seen anything more beautiful.

The smile that crested my face was real and natural. It felt good. Being with Abby just felt right.

"What?" she asked with a lightness in her smile that Annie never had.

"What are you doing?"

She groaned. "Baking cookies, or at least attempting to bake cookies. Want to help?"

"Absolutely."

I followed her into the kitchen and then pulled her into my arms. I had to kiss her. So I did.

She smiled against my lips. "I could get used to this."

"I sure hope so."

"So, I noticed Birdie got the outside of this place decorated for Christmas, but the inside is lacking. I figure if I'm sticking around for the holidays, maybe we should rectify that."

My heart leapt in my chest. "You're staying?"

"At least through New Year's. I'm not ready to leave. And I'm pretty sure that's your doing."

"I'm happy to take the blame for that, because I don't want you to leave. Not ever."

Her breath caught, and before she could respond, I kissed her again. This time I didn't hold back.

I'd been practically living with her for a week already, but even though she slept in my arms each night, I mostly managed to keep my hands to myself. With exception of that first night when I'd walked in on her

touching herself.

Everything was so confusing. I didn't know how I should be feeling, so I tried hard not to feel anything at all. Tonight, I was throwing caution in the wind and letting myself have exactly what I wanted.

"I need you," I whispered. "I want you, Abby."

"I'm already yours," she said.

With a hungry growl, I swooped her up into my arms and headed for the bedroom.

"Wait."

My body was on fire, and I wasn't even sure I could wait long enough to make it all the way down the hall.

"What is it?"

She gave me a sly smirk. "Make sure the front door is locked this time. I don't want any unexpected guests to barge in again."

My grin hurt my cheeks as I nodded and kissed her again as I walked us to the front door, setting her down only long enough to fumble with the lock.

Pressing her back against the door, I kissed her hard and let my hands skim down her sides, brushing the edge of her breasts. I could feel her moan rumble through my body. She was hot and ready for me, and I'd never wanted anyone as badly as I wanted her right now.

My hands found the curve of her ass and I lifted her gently as she wrapped her legs around my waist and ground herself against me.

The sounds of kissing and moans filled the air, and I almost took her right there against the front door.

I fumbled for the hem of her shirt and lifted it up and off her body, getting a good look at her for the first time. Her lacy black bra left little to my imagination, and I couldn't get it off fast enough.

"You're so beautiful," I told her, and I really meant it.

The heat of her core so intimately pressed against me was driving me insane, but I wanted to savor every second of this moment.

Despite the frenzy within me to take her fast and hard, I slowed my pace and gently caressed her, relishing how responsive she was to my touch. In this moment, no one else in the entire world existed but us.

I trailed kisses from her lips, across her cheek, down the column of her neck, and lower until I took her perfectly pink nipple in my mouth and

teased her with my tongue and teeth.

She quickly grew needy. I expected her to tell me what she wanted, but when no words came, I savored every second.

We didn't make it to the bedroom, but I did manage to find the couch as I carefully sat her down and made quick work of her pants and underwear until she stood unabashedly naked before me.

"You are wearing far too many clothes," she finally said.

I started to apologize and strip for her, but she stilled my hands and took control herself, teasing my body as she did.

I shuddered with need. Annie had never cared about my needs before, but Abby seemed to enjoy driving me crazy as new sensations drove me to the heights of madness.

When I couldn't take it a second longer, I tossed her onto the couch and stared down at her in awe.

"I have to have you," I said with a growl as I pushed inside her with one quick thrust.

I wanted our first time together to be perfect, but she had me so worked up that I felt out of control. I needed her with a desperation I'd never experienced before.

"Mine," I growled out as I lifted her legs over my shoulder, allowing me to penetrate her even deeper until I no longer knew where I ended and she began.

I was consumed by her smell, the sounds of her pleasure, and my own desires.

"Abby!" I cried out as I gave in to my own needs for the first time ever.

The sudden awareness of what I'd just done startled me. She was going to be so pissed that I'd finished first, but when I stared down at her, she didn't look upset at all. Her eyes were glazed over, and she was panting heavily right on the verge of an orgasm.

"Come for me, baby," I begged her as I reached down between us and used my fingers to help push her over the edge.

The sound of her screaming my name nearly had my dick hardening once more. I felt on top of the world, completely invincible.

I was in shock. I didn't know sex could be like that. I had no idea what it was like for someone to care about making me feel good and not to

scream and hit me if I blew my load too soon. Even my very first time with Annie, before any of the abuse really began, it had never been like this.

I started to shake all over. I needed to check on Abby, make sure I hadn't hurt her, but I was paralyzed to the overwhelming emotions threatening to consume me.

I had no idea what my face must have shown, but it had Abby scrambling to sit. When she reached out to me, I flinched away from her, closing my eyes and bracing for impact, for the blissful bubble I'd been enraptured by to burst.

She pulled her hand back slowly as she watched me.

"Tucker, are you okay?"

"What?" I asked in surprise as I opened my eyes slowly.

There was concern in her eyes, not anger.

She took my hand in hers and guided me to sit next to her. As her arms wrapped around me and she snuggled against me, I could feel my body relax.

"Are you okay?" she asked again.

I sighed as tears pricked my eyes and I held on to her for dear life.

She cared, like really cared.

About me.

She really, truly cared about me and how I was feeling.

My mind wasn't ready to accept it, making me feel like my internal wiring was starting to short-circuit.

"I'm fine," I whispered, kissing the top of her head. "Better than fine."

She looked up at me cautiously.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" I asked. It would kill me if I had.

She chuckled. "Definitely not. That was amazing."

"Really?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Why do you sound so surprised by that?"

I shrugged. Abby was light and goodness. I wasn't ready to taint that with the knowledge of my past.

"I'm glad," I said, choosing to deflect her question.

That night, I slept better than I could ever remember with Abby curled up against me. As I drifted off to sleep, I couldn't help but wonder . . . *is that what love is supposed to feel like?*

The next morning, I was awoken by a text from Michael.

MICHAEL: Stopped by the house, where are you?

I started to type Abby's, then deleted it.

ME: Birdie's.

MICHAEL: This early?

ME: What's up?

MICHAEL: I'm coming over.

"Shit!"

Abby groaned. "What?"

"Michael's on his way over. I'm so sorry. Please don't be mad."

Her head shot up. She was watching me closely.

"Why would I be mad about that? At least he called first, which is more than I can say for a lot of people around this place."

I froze and considered that for a moment.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

I quickly got dressed, walked to the kitchen first to make coffee, and then ran to the living room to straighten up after our love making there last night.

I had just unlocked the door and stepped outside with a fresh cup of coffee in hand when I saw them.

There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as Michael and Lane approached.

"Tucker, we need to talk," Lane said.

I nodded sadly. "You found her, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I just got a call. They fished her car out of a ravine. It was well off the normal path we all expected her to take. They said that based on her GPS it looked like she'd taken some obscure detour across the mountains to avoid a big accident they had the day she left. I'm so sorry."

I nodded sadly, riddled with both guilt and relief.

It was over. I wasn't going crazy. My feelings for Abby were real because my wolf had known the second our connection to Annie had been severed.

As if sensing my pain, Abby came running out of the house and threw

her arms around me.

“Are you okay?”

I held her tightly.

“Yeah, I’m okay. They found Annie’s body. She’s dead.”

This wasn’t exactly news to her. I’d already told her my suspicions.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay.”

I felt guilty that I wasn’t sorry. That woman had put me through hell and back. And now, it was all over. My wolf had already moved on, but I knew my human brain would take some time still to really understand it all.

Annie was dead. She was really dead. Knowing it and hearing it were two very different things.

Michael and Lane were watching us closely, shocked by what they were seeing.

My hands rubbed up and down Abby’s back, bringing me comfort in a way I had never known was possible. Maybe it was selfish of me to want to move forward with her, but I knew I’d regret it more than anything if I didn’t.

She was mine.

She was always meant to be mine, and a part of my guilt was that I hadn’t trusted that and waited for her instead of ever having taken Annie as a mate to begin with.

With one last squeeze I pulled back from her embrace.

“I need to go with them and take care of a few things. I’ll be home later, okay?”

Home? When the hell had Birdie’s place become home to me?

But I knew the answer to that. Any place Abby was at was home now. My feelings for her were so strong and so sudden that they terrified me, yet I had this sense of calm and understanding that I couldn’t even fully put into words. She was mine. My true mate.

Abby nodded. “Yeah, of course. Do what you need to do.”

I couldn’t help myself; I pulled her to me, and I kissed her right in front of them, claiming her in my own way.

She smiled and placed her hand against my cheek as I leaned into her comfort. And for just a moment we were locked there just staring into each other’s eyes. Nothing else in the world mattered.

Mate! my wolf affirmed.

I nodded silently, breaking the spell she had me under.

“Call me if you need anything. I’ll have Colin come by to stay with you today.”

“I will, but not Walker?” she teased, making me growl as she laughed.

And then she turned and left me with Michael and Lane gawking in the awkward moments it took for Abby to get out of earshot.

“Uh, what the hell was that?” Michael asked.

“It’s not what you think.”

But yeah, it also was.

“But she’s human,” Lane blurted out.

“She’s not actually. She’s one of us.”

“What? How?”

“Dormant wolf gene,” Michael said. “It’s rare, but there have been documented cases.”

I nodded. “She’s got Birdie’s blood.”

“You’re certain about this?”

“Yeah. I’ve run with her wolf. Seen it with my own eyes.”

“You didn’t look surprised when I told you Annie was dead,” Lane challenged. No doubt it was a bit of that skeptic cop coming out in him.

“I wasn’t. I knew the second she died.”

“How?” Michael challenged. “You and Annie never fully bonded. Of that, I’m certain.”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Then how could you possibly know?”

I sighed. “Because I was with Abby when it happened. One minute we were working, friendly enough. I mean I always liked her. It’s kind of hard not to. And the next . . . it was more.”

“Oh shit! You’re saying she’s your true mate?” he asked.

I grinned as he put the pieces together. “She is.”

It surprised me just how easy that was to admit and how proud I was to say it.

“I didn’t know. And then suddenly I did.” I shrugged. “I guess somehow my wolf knew the moment my m—” I couldn’t even say the word. She wasn’t my mate, Abby was. “The moment Annie died.”

“Wow. Okay then. I don’t even know what to say.”

“I know. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to feel either.”

He nodded sadly. “How about we set aside some time for you to work through all this with Lachlan?”

I groaned. “I don’t need to talk to a therapist.”

“Yeah, you do. This is pretty screwed up, Tucker. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. Grieving one mate while bonding with another would screw up even the sanest of people. And last I checked; sanity was certainly not a requirement for Delta team.”

I laughed, thinking back to how Michael had kidnapped Callie during their mating process.

“This is bullshit!” Lane blurted out.

Michael and I turned and stared at him.

“I’m serious,” he continued. “You had a mate already. And now you find your true mate. Where the hell is my true mate?”

I looked at Michael and we both started laughing.

“Annie just died and that’s your takeaway from this?”

Lane grinned. “Hell yes. It’s not fair. That’s all I’m saying.”

I groaned. “It’s not like I planned this.”

Planning and preparation were things I was good at, but there had been absolutely nothing I could have done to prepare myself for her.

Abby

Chapter 19

He'd been right. Annie was dead. I had no idea what Tucker was going through right now. I mean, they were together for a while, and he must have loved her. But there had been signs that maybe things hadn't been so great between them.

The look of panic after we'd had sex was something I struggled to get out of my mind. And the way he apologized for everything. And then, he'd flinched when I'd tried to reach out to him, and that had nearly broken my heart.

What the hell had she done to him?

The sheer relief I'd felt from him when hearing, officially, that she was dead, scared me.

I was still trying to make sense of it all when there was a knock at my door. I fought back a groan of frustration as I reluctantly answered it.

Kelsey, Lucy, Callie, Christine, and Mirage stood on my front porch staring at me. I'd barely even met some of them, but fortunately I was good with names and faces.

I wanted to tell them that now really wasn't a good time, but I suspected they'd insist on staying anyway.

"I thought Colin was coming over," I mumbled.

"He is?" Mirage asked, a huge smile crossing her face.

I couldn't help but wonder if I lit up like that at the mention of Tucker's name. It was cute.

"So what are you up to today?" Kelsey asked.

For a second, I thought maybe it was just coincidence and bad timing that they were here.

"Uh, Christmas decorating, I think."

"I thought you were boxing everything up," Callie challenged.

"Change of plans."

"You're staying through the holidays then?"

“I am.”

“You were spotted kissing Tucker on the porch this morning. It’s making its way around the Pack gossip train already,” Lucy blurted out.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“You knew?” Christine yelled.

Lucy shrugged. “Patient-doctor confidentiality.”

“Does Michael know?” Callie asked.

I blushed. “Well, he does now.”

I threw my arms up in the air and flopped backwards onto the couch. The same couch I’d had sex with Tucker on just last night. They could probably smell it. I was busted, forever to be known as the trollop of Westin Pack. My cheeks burned even brighter.

Kelsey burst out laughing and the others joined her.

“I’ll admit, I never suspected a thing. Tucker? He’s like the most loyal man on the planet. I can’t believe he would have an affair like that,” Christine blurted out. “Good for him. That she-devil doesn’t deserve him.”

Callie nudged her in the rib cage and shot her a look.

“What? You know it’s true. She’s downright evil.”

“Colin thinks she abuses him.”

“Well, we’ve all seen that firsthand. If ever there was a case of verbal abuse . . .” Callie let her voice drag off.

“I don’t mean just verbal,” Mirage said.

“Sorry, Abby. Probably not appropriate conversation. We’d just strongly recommend getting out of town before she catches wind of it. She’ll kill him,” Callie said.

The look on her face told me she wasn’t speaking figuratively.

I growled at the thought.

She’s dead, I told myself. She can’t hurt him anymore. She’s dead.

I closed my eyes trying to blot out the words they’d just put to my suspicions. It was a damn good thing Annie was dead, because if she wasn’t, I’d kill her myself.

“What did you say?” Callie demanded.

“We’ve known for a while now, but the Sheriff confirmed it this morning. I wasn’t trying to make a spectacle of myself, I just wasn’t thinking and was trying to comfort him.”

“With your tongue down his throat?” Christine teased.

Kelsey walked away and I felt terrible. She may have been a horrible person, but she was still a person and she had died. That should matter to someone.

Almost as soon as she left Kelsey returned, nodding her head.

“Kyle just confirmed it. Annie’s really dead. They found her body this morning. Apparently, she took a detour driving home for the holidays and her car went over a ravine. It was an accident.” Then she looked at me and frowned. “You could have just told us you were mating him.”

“Uh, Kels, she’s human,” Christine whispered.

“No more so than the rest of us,” Lucy surprised them all by saying. I gave them a sheepish look and shrugged.

“Why would you lie about something like that?” Callie asked.

“I didn’t. I write books about werewolves. I had no idea there was a wolf living inside me. It sounds ridiculous even saying it aloud.”

“You just found out you’re a shifter?” Mirage asked.

I nodded.

“And Tucker, is that just a fling or are you really mating him?” she pressed.

I shrugged. “He says I’m his true mate, but I’m still struggling to fully understand it all. It’s been a lot to take in.”

“Are you really planning to stay for the holidays?” Kelsey asked.

I bit my lip and nodded. “I don’t really know how to explain it, but I don’t think I can leave.”

It was stupid and embarrassing to admit.

“Because of Tucker?” Mirage asked.

I sighed and nodded again.

She squealed and hugged me. “I’d never wish death on anyone, but I also won’t shed a tear over Annie. I already like you a million times more.”

“Has he told you about his job?” Callie asked cautiously.

“A little.”

“About Delta Team?” Christine added.

“Not much, but I know a little.”

“Well, Tucker works for Westin Force, on Delta Team,” she explained.

“I know that much.”

“And we’re the ladies of Delta. Michael’s the leader,” she said pointing to Callie. “And the rest of the team is comprised of Lachlan, Walker, Colin,” she pointed to Mirage. “Linc,” she pointed to herself. “And Tucker,” she finished by pointing to me. “We’re a pretty tight family unit and very protective of our men. So if you’re planning to walk away from him or hurt him in any way, you’ll regret it.”

“We’ll make sure of that,” Mirage said.

Lucy laughed. “You guys are intimidating her.”

“Good,” Callie said. “Because that boy has been through more than any person deserves. Annie was already in the picture before we came around and so we just tried to smile and endure her. But there is no chance we’ll ever let that happen again. He deserves better.”

“I don’t know what all he’s been through. We haven’t talked about it,” I admitted.

“But you’ve suspected,” Christine said.

I nodded. “It’s just the little things and how he reacts to stuff. It worries me.”

“Tucker’s the best of the best, and he’s strong. How that bitch hasn’t broken him is beyond me,” Christine said. “Just love him. He needs it more than he’ll ever admit.”

Love?

I started to panic, and then I realized I wasn’t panicking over the idea of loving him, but over me not panicking about the deal of it. Did I love Tucker? Could I? It was really just too soon for me to tell, and clearly there were some things I really needed to know and understand better before I could logically make a decision on my future.

Mine! my wolf growled angrily at my thoughts.

And then there was that. Something told me my heart and my stupid wolf weren’t going to act rationally or logically no matter what.

“Do you want some help decorating this place?” Kelsey asked out of the blue.

“Uh, that would be great.”

“Ladies, we have a new wolf in town. We’ve all been through the mating craze and know what an emotional rollercoaster that can be. So, how about we just stop talking about it, put on some Christmas music, and decorate this place in a fitting tribute to Birdie and as a welcome to

something new for Abby.”

They all smiled and agreed.

“The fact that she’s even talking to us is already an improvement,” Mirage whispered to Christine as I led the way to the upstairs room where we’d been moving all the decorations to while going through Birdie’s things.

“Wow, that’s a whole lot of Christmas,” Callie said.

“Birdie always had the prettiest house of all, and she would open it up for everyone to stop by anytime. There were always cookies and a hot cup of tea waiting,” Christine said.

“So you knew her then?” I asked.

“Yes. I did. She was the best.”

For the rest of the morning, she shared stories with me as we all pitched in to decorate the house. There was an overwhelming amount of Christmas, and I hadn’t been able to find a tree in the house, but it was still beautiful.

They agreed to stick around for a lunch of reheated casseroles before dispersing and leaving me alone for the first time since learning about Annie.

I couldn’t help but wonder what she was like and what her relationship with Tucker really looked like. He seemed so strong and capable to me that I could even fathom the idea of him allowing someone like they described into his life.

It was also a stark reminder that while Tucker and I had basically been playing house together lately, I really knew very little about him. I knew things like his favorite color and what he liked and didn’t like to eat. I knew he slept with one foot outside the blanket, but I didn’t really know him. And since I was putting my entire life on hold for him, that was probably something I needed to find out.

Pacing the floor and trying not to think about it all, I decided to tackle Birdie’s office. It was a room I’d ignored so far. There were several filing cabinets and stacks of boxes and papers that should probably be gone through.

I cranked up some Christmas music and got to work.

A few hours in, I uncovered a MacBook Pro box. I assumed she was just one of those people who kept all the boxes, but when I went to move it, it had some weight to it.

Carefully, I set it down and opened the lid with a gasp. There sat a

brand new, never been touched laptop. I pulled it out and opened the lid, lovingly running my fingers over the keys. My own laptop hadn't been returned yet, and I itched to sit down and write.

Before I could stop myself, I plugged it in and waited for it to boot up. The configuration screen popped up. It was brand new.

Excited, I ran to get my cell phone and dig out a business card I'd been handed.

"Liam Westin's office. How can I help you?"

I immediately recognized the voice.

"Christine?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Hi, it's Abby."

"Oh, hey Abby. What can I do for you?"

"Is Mr. Westin available? I have some questions for him about Birdie's estate."

"Sure thing. Let me patch you through."

Almost immediately a deep male voice was speaking.

"Abby? This is Liam, what can I do for you?"

"This may sound stupid, but when you told me that Birdie left everything to me, does that include any contents within the house?"

"Of course. I thought we'd already gone over this."

"But anything? Like what if I found something in the house?"

"All yours."

"Really?" I wanted to cry. I didn't care about the money or the house as much as the idea of this new laptop. That was enough to make me insanely happy.

"What did you find?" he asked.

"A brand-new MacBook Pro still in the box, never been used. And my laptop had an accident shortly after I arrived. Susan and Tarron took it for recovery, and I haven't heard anything more about it since. I haven't written since I got here, and well, I write best under stress, and this has been stressful to say the least."

He chuckled. "Well Merry Christmas from Birdie then. Who knows what other treasures you'll unearth in that place. She lived there for over one hundred years."

"I can't even fathom that. How is it possible?"

“Let’s just say you come from strong genes.”

“Do all wolves live that long?”

The line when silent.

“Hello?”

“You know about that?”

“Relax. I’m a wolf too.”

It felt so natural and normal to say that out loud that it made me giggle.

“You are?”

“I am. And I suppose it’ll be common knowledge soon anyway; the way rumors fly around this place.”

“Ah yes, the kissing incident this morning. Just be careful, Abby. Tucker’s mate isn’t someone to be messed with.”

“No, I’m not,” I agreed before I realized he meant Annie. “Oh, wait, you mean Annie.”

“Uh, yeah. What did you mean?”

I groaned. “It’s complicated, and you’re behind on the rumor mill. Annie’s dead.”

“What? When?”

“Recently,” I vaguely said. No one needed to know that we could clock the exact moment it had happened. That was just too weird to even think about.

This morning I would have felt bad about just blurting it out so matter-of-factly, but after what the ladies had shared about her, I didn’t feel bad in the least.

After hanging up with Liam, I got to work configuring the laptop and installing a few programs before opening up a blank document and writing.

It felt wonderful. I didn’t even realize just how badly I needed it.

At some point Colin and Walker came by to check on me, but I shooed them both away, shut myself up in the study and kept writing.

I was really hoping that my data would be recovered, so I picked up on the next scene from where I could remember stopping.

Words flowed from me, easing the tension in my shoulders as I got lost in my own little world.

I was vaguely aware of Colin bringing me dinner, and while the plate was empty by the time I wrote “The End,” I couldn’t actually remember

eating.

And when I rose from the chair, satisfied with the last act of the book, I was surprised to find my muscles tight as I stretched them out and saw it was dark outside.

I frowned and checked the clock, unable to believe the time. I'd been at it for hours.

Feeling elated and more like myself, I left my little sanctuary and took the dishes back to the sink. Walker was snoring from a chair in the den. He was startled when I walked in.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey. What time is it?"

I told him and he frowned. "Tucker should have been back by now."

I momentarily froze as panic started creeping in, but before I could begin to freak out, he strolled through the front door looking exhausted.

I walked right into his waiting arms. He kissed the top of my head and started to relax.

"Thanks for watching my girl."

"Your girl? Is that public knowledge now?"

"I'm not hiding it. All good here?"

"Yeah, she's been holed up in the office writing all day."

He looked down in surprise. "Did Susan get your laptop fixed?"

I shrugged. "Haven't heard, but I found a new one still in the box. Liam said if it's here it's mine."

I practically squealed with excitement.

"Sounds like you've had a good day." He smiled and then frowned as he looked around. "You decorated without me?"

"Sorry. The girls came by this morning and helped."

"Girls? What girls?"

"Um, Kelsey, Lucy, Callie, Christine, and Mirage."

He froze and took a step back to stare at me with a weird look on his face.

"The Delta ladies were here?"

"Yes. Why? Is that bad?"

"You let them help?"

"Sure. They seem great. Why? Do you not want me to be friends with them?"

“Yes, I mean no.” He growled. “I would love for you to be friends with them,” he said cautiously.

“Oh good, because they invited me over to Callie and Michael’s this weekend for a holiday party. They said you would be there too, and I should come.” I didn’t know how to interpret the look on his face as he just stood there staring at me. “But I don’t have to go. It’s no big deal,” I blurted out.

Walker got up and walked over to us, clapping Tucker on the back.

“It’s okay, man. Just breathe. I’m going to call Lachie to come hang out for a bit.”

“No,” Tucker said. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.”

Unshed tears pricked my eyes, but I smiled anyway. Being with the girls and having Tucker in my life made me feel alive again, like I had a life again. But if he wasn’t ready then I wasn’t going to push him. That wasn’t fair. He just lost his mate, and I knew better than anyone how strange grief can be.

“I don’t have to go. It’s fine. I have work to do anyway.”

I was trying to play it off and be strong for him, but the more I said, the more it seemed to backfire on me.

His face drooped into a sad frown.

“Oh, so you don’t want to go then?”

I wasn’t really sure what we were even talking about anymore, but Walker put his phone down and intervened.

“Abby, we’d love to have you come to the party, but Tucker doesn’t want you to feel obligated to go. Annie rarely did.”

Ouch. That stung a little. I suddenly realized I was being compared to her, and after what the girls had told me, I really didn’t like that.

“Well, I’m not Annie,” I snapped, and then turned to walk away before either of us accidentally said something we’d regret later.

Tucker

Chapter 20

Abby confused me. I never knew how she'd react to something, and it was never how I expected her to. Seeing her storm off though, that I understood. In a sick way, I was relieved for it. I expected it. But it also made me feel terrible.

"You should go talk to her," Walker said.

I shook my head. "No. Let her cool down."

"She's not mad, you idiot. She's just frustrated. You made it sound like you didn't want her to go."

"What? No. Of course I want her there. But I don't expect her to want to go."

I didn't really know how to explain it to him, and before I could find the words, Lachlan strolled in without knocking.

I groaned. "Seriously? I told you not to call him."

"You looked like you were spiraling. Talk to him. It's what he's good at."

"Uh, thanks. I think?" Lachlan said. "I was wondering if I was ever going to get this call. Heard about Annie. I'm so sorry."

"Why?" I snapped.

"Why what?" he asked.

"Why would you say you're sorry? All day everyone's been telling me how sorry they are. She was a miserable bitch who prided herself on making my life hell. No one is sorry she died, so stop saying it."

My outburst was uncalled for, and I immediately regretted it. I'd been putting up with this shit all day as people felt obligated to give me their condolences, and why? No one liked her and she hated all of them. I'd stuck by her all these years out of obligation and nothing more, at least for the past few years.

Before that, I'd tried to love her and do my best by her, and it had never been enough. I had never been enough. I hadn't been good enough for

Annie, why the hell would I delude myself into believing I could ever be good enough for someone as wonderful as Abby?

“He’s spiraling again,” Walker said.

“I can see that. Tucker, what are you thinking right now?” Lachlan asked.

I shook my head and turned to leave, but they stopped me.

“Where are you going?” Walker asked.

“Home.”

“Where the hell are you right now?”

“What?”

“Aren’t you already home?”

“No. This is Abigail’s house.”

“Abigail? Your mate. What’s yours is hers and hers is yours and all that happy crappy horseshit. I’ve been through it with enough of you already. So again, where the hell are you going?”

“What?” Lachlan asked. “Your mate? When the hell did that happen?”

“The second Annie died. He’s known for days that she was dead. He just hasn’t fully processed it all before today.”

“Shut up, Walker.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“About Abby being your mate?” he specified.

“Yeah, Abigail Matroni is my one true mate.”

“And she *wants* to come with you to the party,” Walker said, but I shook my head.

“It’s too much to hope for.”

Walker hugged me. “It’s really not, brother.”

“He’s right. Why don’t you let her decide for herself?”

“She seemed pretty happy about it,” Walker insisted.

“I guess so. I just sort of freaked out. I’m not used to that. Getting Annie to go anywhere with me was a fight.”

“We know,” Lachie said. “But Abby isn’t Annie.”

I nodded.

“I should go talk to her.”

“Okay, but tomorrow, my office, ten o’clock. No excuses,” Lachlan

said. “You really need to talk through all of this. It’s not healthy to just busy your feelings all the time.”

I nodded. I didn’t have any fight in me tonight.

“I’ll be there,” assured him before thanking them both and escorting them out. I made sure to lock the door behind them.

And then I took a deep breath, bracing for the worst, and walked to the bedroom to talk to Abby.

I was prepared for her to be angry. I was ready for a fight. I thought she would yell at me or something. But what I wasn’t ready for was to see her sitting on the bed crying.

She quickly wiped her tears away when she saw me.

Seeing her like that destroyed me and activated a protective side of me that I had never even known I had.

I growled and cursed under my breath until I realized that all I was doing was scaring her.

“Abby, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t get it. When it’s just us, everything feels right, great even, but you don’t want me hanging out with your friends or getting to know them? Why? Are you embarrassed of me?”

My jaw dropped and then I scowled. “No. Never.”

“Then why don’t you want me to go to the party?”

“I do.”

“Huh?”

“Baby, I do want you to go to the party. I want it more than anything. It’s just . . .” my voice trailed off as I thought of how many times I’d begged Annie to go with me to things like this. How much it had meant to me when she would begrudgingly agree and how horrible the night would inevitably end up. All I’d ever wanted was for her to want to be there too. I just couldn’t understand why Abby would want that now.

“It’s just what, Tucker. Help me understand.”

I shook my head. To admit everything I’d survived and try to put that into words was too much.

“Tucker, please. Talk to me. I don’t have to go to the stupid party if you don’t want me there.”

“No. I do want you there. I want it so bad that I’m terrified to even hope for it. What I don’t want is for you to go for me. I only want you there if

it's what you want."

She sighed. "I was excited to be invited even before I found out it was a Delta thing and you'd be there."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Really. But I don't want to go if you don't want me there."

"I do," I said softly.

"Today, the girls came over and it was great. I've never really had that outside of my mom and grandmother before. It made me miss them in a way, but it was fun and new too. Your friends seem really great, and I'd like to spend time getting to know them better, but not if it bothers you this much. I've been a bit of a loner most of my life. I'll be fine."

But she sounded sad as she said it.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling a bit deflated. "I reacted badly. It's not you, babe."

"It's Annie," she said with a nod. "Don't get mad, but they told me some things about her."

I sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised to hear it. Annie wasn't exactly easy to live with. She never liked the team and resented them all for having to move here. She was miserable, but the thing is, she was miserable before we ever came here. I just didn't see it as clearly back then."

I laid down and pulled her to me.

"Would you like to hear about her?"

"No, but I think you need to talk about it. I've heard enough to get the gist of it."

I nodded. "Things were far worse than my friends suspected. This isn't easy for me to talk about. I've shared pieces here and there with some of the guys and the girls formulated their own opinions from interactions with her. It was worse than any of them suspected but hadn't always been that way."

"Go on. Tell me everything."

"She was the first girl I ever loved, or so I thought. We were young, not even teenagers yet. Growing up we were the couple everyone envied. I was captain of the football team, and she was the head cheerleader. If I'm being honest, she wasn't the nicest person even back then, but she'd always been great to me, and I really did love her."

“She knew how much I wanted to wait for my true mate. I didn’t even want to have sex before I found my mate . . . you Abby. I wanted to wait for you.”

“But you didn’t,” she said.

Those words cut me to my core.

“No, I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

“Tucker, don’t apologize for something that happened before we even met. Do you think you were the first man I ever had sex with?”

I growled and she smacked my chest.

“I’m just saying. It’s okay you were living a life before you even knew me. I have no right to be upset about any of that.”

I sighed. “I guess so.”

“But go on. You wanted to wait, but . . .”

“But I got really drunk at my senior prom and threw my virginity away.”

“To Annie?”

“Yes, to Annie. And a week later my wolf finally came in. I’d convinced myself that she had to be my true mate. There was no question in my mind, but she wasn’t. I tried to break it off with her then. She knew exactly how I felt about compatible mates and that I wasn’t going to take one. I was going to wait for you.”

“But you didn’t. Why?”

“Just after graduation, she came to me crying. We’d already broken up a few weeks earlier. I still cared about her, but what she told me changed my life forever. She was pregnant and scared. So I didn’t hesitate to make it right. I claimed her that night, just as she knew I would.”

“What do you mean?”

“She played me. She knew I’d do the honorable thing, so she tricked me into mating her. There never was a baby. I was so mad that I took a job with Westin Force just to get away from her. I didn’t even tell them I had a mate back home, and since we traveled a lot Annie stayed home. But eventually that wasn’t good enough for her and she demanded I make some changes. What she meant was that I should move back home and work for her father. Instead, I asked to be reassigned to Delta and moved her out here, and she made my life hell every day she was here. She hated it here. She hated my friends. She became a miserable person hellbent on breaking me.”

“They told me she was a bitch, but I didn’t know it was that bad. They said she was verbally abusive.”

I gritted my teeth and nodded. I hated that they knew that.

“And they suspected she was physically abusive as well.”

“She was,” I agreed.

Abby was quiet for a minute and then turned to look at me.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” I told her. I’d already been more open and honest with her than I’d ever been with anyone.

“Did she hurt you with sex?”

“What?”

She nibbled on her lip and then turned her worried eyes up to meet mine. “You freaked out a little during sex the other night.”

“I did?”

“It wasn’t that bad, just that you apologized for things I didn’t think you needed to apologize for.”

I groaned. “You mean for coming first?”

She nodded.

“Annie would have been furious over that. She would have hit me until I bled, maybe even until I was unconscious for that screw up.” I shrugged like it was no big deal, but I felt raw and vulnerable. I’d never shared intimate details like that with anyone. “I spent a lot of time in my wolf form healing and hiding her wrath. But she wasn’t wrong. A true gentleman always lets a woman go first,” I said.

My stomach clenched and I locked my jaw, sucking in a deep breath of air to stave off the nausea.

“You flinched when I reached for you afterwards. Did you think I was going to hit you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “You keep doing and saying things I don’t expect. It’s confusing.”

Her fists clenched around my shirt. “What the hell did that monster do to you? I’m glad she’s dead. I don’t care how bad that sounds. I’m glad she’s dead. She can’t hurt you anymore. Do you hear me?”

It was too much to hope for, but I nodded and grinned. Deflection was a talent of mine when things got too real.

“So does that mean you want to go to the Christmas party with me?”

She groaned. “Yes.”

I expected her to call me an idiot, or something, even if just playfully, but those words never came, and I started to relax, feeling exhausted and emotionally spent after a very hard day.

Abby

Chapter 21

Having suspicions of Tucker being abused and knowing it as fact were two very different things. I couldn't help myself; my guard was up and I was constantly biting my tongue to keep from saying anything remotely questionable. It made it hard to relax, like I was constantly walking on eggshells.

He'd been mostly preoccupied and didn't seem to notice. There were always things to take care of after a death—paperwork, accounts to be settled, assets to secure. It was a mess. I should know. I was still dealing with Birdie's estate, though Liam had proved to be quite adept at handling things on my behalf. For the most part, he seemed to be taking care of everything. All I had to do was sign a few papers.

"Yes. I understand. I have to clear the leave time and then I'll let you know." He hung up the phone and then yelled out his frustrations.

I now knew that he had never been able to do that with Annie. She would have freaked out on him, but I tried hard to be understanding. He had a lot of pent-up emotions right now, and sometimes it just felt like I was in the way of his healing.

He was seeing Lachlan for therapy sessions now, and I was encouraging him to open up and share some of the things he had told me. I wasn't qualified to handle all of this on my own. Which was why I was now seeing Lachlan too.

I'd been introduced to a whole new world when I found out I was a shifter, and then on top of that, as Tucker's mate, I was privy to the secret world of Westin Force. Lachlan's office was down in the bowels of their headquarters beneath Westin Lodge.

The first time I arrived, I'd been frisked by a short portly man with glasses. In the human world, glasses were normal, a part of everyday life, but I'd noticed that wolves seemed to have excellent vision. So it was odd to see him with glasses, especially when I learned he was a shifter, just not a wolf

shifter. His name was Archie, and he was a mole. And from what he explained to me, moles didn't have the greatest vision, hence the glasses. Who knew?

Each time I saw him, I tried not to laugh, picturing him in rodent form.

"I'm not experienced enough for this," I whined as I laid on Lachlan's couch during a session.

"Experienced for what exactly?"

"Any of it. I'm not a therapist. I don't know how to help Tucker. I don't even know how to be a wolf. Until recently, I was a perfectly normal human."

He laughed and tossed a basketball into the air, catching it on one fingertip and holding it there.

"You were never fully human, Abby."

I growled.

"See."

"Are you just trying to piss me off or are you actually going to do your damn job, Lachie?"

"You are really worked up today. Why is that?"

He was infuriating.

"Have you not listened to anything I've said?"

"Look, Tucker has his baggage, but we aren't talking about him here. I get enough of that in his sessions. We're talking about you. Why is it you find it necessary to tiptoe around him?"

"Because I don't want to upset him."

"Why?"

"Because he's dealing with enough shit right now."

"But that's him. Why are you so concerned?"

"Because I don't want to upset him."

"Nope. You already said that."

"Then why don't you just tell me the answer you're looking for?"

"Aw, come on now. What fun would that be, yeah?"

I growled and got up to leave. We were getting nowhere.

"Abby, sit down and listen to the question."

Hesitantly, I did as he asked. He waited until I was sitting again before proceeding.

“Now, why are you tiptoeing around Tucker? Are you afraid to upset him?”

“No. Yes. I don’t like seeing him in pain and sometimes he reacts to even the most benign little thing. I don’t even think he realizes he’s doing it at times.”

“And why does that bother you?”

“Because I know too much. He’s suffered more than any one person should.”

“But that’s his baggage. Why does it bother you so much?”

“Because I should have been there to protect him.”

“You didn’t even know he existed.”

“But I should have, right? That’s what this whole mate stuff is about.”

“No, it’s not. Are you mad at him for taking Annie as a mate and not waiting for you?”

“No, maybe, but only because I know if he had he never would have suffered like this.”

“Because you won’t hurt him?”

“Never.”

“Never?”

“Not on purpose.”

“Fair enough. But why do you care so much?”

I was so sick and tired of all the questions.

“Why, Abigail?”

I growled. “Because I love him, you idiot.”

I gasped and my hand flew to my mouth.

“Well, that was unexpected. I was just going for the fact that you care. Huh.”

I stood up and punched him in the arm, acutely aware that I couldn’t react that way around Tucker even in a joking manner. I wasn’t feeling playful right now, though.

“I can’t believe you made me say that, you jackass. I haven’t even told him that yet.”

I hadn’t even known for sure that’s how I felt until he pressed.

“Well, maybe you should. I’m not sharing confidential information when I tell you that he’s a lot more insecure than he lets on, especially where you’re concerned. Talk to him.”

“We have that party tonight.”

“Talk to him. You march right into the gym, and you take him home, and you talk to him. You owe the both of you that.”

“Okay,” I said.

I left his office before I could talk myself out of it and went straight to the gym. The guys were all there except Lachlan. They stopped and stared at me when I barged in then turned to look at Tucker.

“Uh, sorry.”

Like a chicken, I turned and left as quickly as I could without drawing any more attention to myself.

“Wait up, Abby,” Tucker yelled as he ran after me. “Is everything okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Are you sure?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m supposed to take you home so we can talk.”

“Was that Lachie’s advice.”

“Yes, he said I should be assertive, but I chickened out, if you must know.”

He smiled and seemed relaxed.

“Give me a second to grab my things. Wait here.”

“Okay.”

“Abby?”

I turned around and saw Susan walking towards me. I hadn’t seen her since the day she took off with my laptop.

“Susan, right?”

“Yes. I’ve been meaning to catch up with you, it’s just been crazy, holiday season and all. But I have your laptop.”

“How bad?”

“Relax. All data was recovered, and I replaced a few parts that were fried, but she’s good as new.”

My jaw dropped.

“How much is that going to cost me?” I blurted out.

She laughed and shook her head. “On the house. Let me know if you find anything missing and I’ll take another look.”

She handed me a laptop bag.

I stared down at it and then back to her before throwing myself at her

in a big hug.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! You are a lifesaver. I really thought I was going to have to rewrite the majority of this book.”

“You’re welcome.”

Tucker came back just as Susan left.

I squealed and hugged him too.

“What’s this all about?” he asked, leading the way out.

“Susan was able to recover my old laptop. She saved my book!”

“Oh thank God. I felt terrible about that.”

I smiled fondly thinking back to that first morning after we met.

“We didn’t exactly get off to the best start, huh?”

“911 and a fried laptop? Definitely not my smoothest moves.”

I laughed, and it felt good, like some of the tension between us had eased. Things continued to remain light between us as we drove home.

Tucker had practically moved in. I’d never even been to his place, and since word had gotten out about us, he no longer even bothered to pretend to go home anymore. Everything was moving at warp speed, and if I was being honest, it was freaking me out a little.

Maybe that had a bit to do with me always feeling like I was walking on eggshells lately too. It wasn’t all Tucker. It was me.

“I can practically hear the gears turning in that brain of yours. New story? Or is something bothering you?”

“I love you,” I blurted out.

“What?”

“I’m falling in love with you. This wasn’t supposed to happen. My life might have been a little lonely at times, especially since the accident, but I was okay, and then I came here, and life has been a whirlwind. I can’t keep up with it all. This is insane Tucker. I want to blame this bond or whatever you call it, but I know how I feel, and it’s not some weird connection with you, it’s everything. And yet, I’m terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing. It kills me to see you flinch away from me, and while I know it will just take time and healing, I know I overcompensate, making me feel like I’m walking on eggshells now. And I hate that. But I love you. And I want to take all your pain away. It makes my day in those moments I see you truly happy. I so badly want that for you all the time, but I know there will be times that I’m going to screw up and say the wrong thing or move too abruptly and

spook you. And . . .”

He kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back.

“Will you shut up for a second so I can talk?”

“Oh, okay.”

“Until you came into my life, I didn’t talk about my feelings or let anyone in. Not my family, not my Delta brothers, no one. Michael tried and tried to get me into counseling, and I refused. I didn’t want people’s pity. I had created the situation, and it was my burden to bear.”

“You’re not alone,” I told him.

“But I was for a long time. I was told daily that I wasn’t worthy, and every morning when I woke and every night before bed, no matter how hard things got, I told myself she was wrong.”

“But you didn’t always believe it, did you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. And now here you are, and you’re so good in every way she wasn’t. And while I never believed Annie and always tried to balance the damage she created, in the back of my mind, I still hear those words, only now, I believe them. I’m not worthy of you.”

Pain shot through me in a sharp and unexpected wave.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“What? No. I was just going to say that even though I know I’m not worthy of you I damn well want to try to be. It’s probably the most selfish thing I’ve ever wanted in my life, because you don’t deserve a broken mate like me.”

This time I kissed him to shut him up.

“Don’t you dare freak me out like that again. You hear me? I don’t care if you’re broken, Tucker. I love you just the way you are, and you’re just going to have to get used to hearing that until it sinks in that thick skull of yours. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said, pressing his lips to my forehead. “Okay. I can’t believe you love me.”

“Well, get used to hearing it.”

“I’m pretty screwed up.”

“I already know that.”

“I’m going to have bad days.”

“And I’m going to trigger you at times and guarantee I’ll piss you off

now and then.”

He chuckled. “Is that a threat?”

“Maybe, but right now we have a party to get ready for, remember?”

He smiled. “You really want to go to this thing?”

“Of course I do. I ordered a new dress and everything.”

“It’s not going to be that fancy.”

“That was before. This year, everyone’s dressing up.”

“What? No.”

“Yes. It’ll be fun.”

“Who told you that?”

“Callie.”

“You talked to Callie?”

“Every day. Why?”

“How did I get so lucky finding you?”

I just grinned and then walked away to change, but before I got too far, I stopped at the door and turned back.

“Actually, I think I’m the lucky one.”

It hadn’t gone unnoticed that I’d shared my feelings for him and he hadn’t returned them. I was a bit relieved he hadn’t, because I was beginning to suspect that Tucker didn’t have a clue what it was like to love someone unconditionally. But I will show him every single day until he finally gets it.

Tucker

Chapter 22

I stood there waiting in my suit and tie feeling like an idiot.

“Abby, we’re already late.”

“I’m coming,” she yelled.

I’d had to get dressed in one of the guest rooms because she wouldn’t let me see her while she got ready. I had no idea what to expect, and it was making me nervous.

At last, she finally came out of the room and all I could do was stand there staring. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was drool dripping down my chin.

Abby was wearing a little red dress that showed off her slender figure and hugged her curves in all the right places. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Wow,” was all I could manage to say.

She grinned. “You don’t clean up half bad yourself.”

Reaching for my necktie, she straightened it while my hands found her hips and pulled her against me.

“Screw the party. I don’t want to go.”

She pouted. “Tucker, I really would like to hang out with your friends. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“Why?” I asked, like an idiot.

She glared at me and started to pull away. I didn’t let go though.

“I love that you want to spend time with them, because they are important to me, but I don’t want to share you when you look so incredibly sexy in that dress. Do you have any idea how tortuous tonight will be if I have to look at you in this all night just counting the seconds until I can rip it off you?”

She squirmed but smiled brightly. The fact that I could smell her arousal did not help her case to leave one single bit.

“We’re going.”

I groaned. "You're evil."

"It's called foreplay," she teased, taking my hand and practically dragging me out of the house.

Reluctantly I drove. But as we pulled up to Michael and Callie's place, I started to panic.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

All I could think of was how rude and disrespectful Annie had been the last time I'd been to a party here.

"Um, Michael and Callie have two adopted kids. I forgot to tell you."

"Kevin and Autumn."

"Right. Well, they aren't wolves."

"Oh, is that a problem? I mean I just found out I'm a wolf so it's all still new to me, but are we supposed to not like opossums or something?"

"You know they're opossums?"

"Well yeah, Callie explained it to me. I haven't met Kevin yet, but Autumn's a sweet girl."

I shut my eyes tightly just trying to breathe and get a grasp on my emotions.

"Annie had a problem with that, didn't she?" she guessed.

"Yes, and the last time I was over here for a party she came with me. She was furious that I allowed her to associate with such vermin. She caused a big scene. It was really embarrassing. Kevin and Autumn are good kids. They didn't deserve to be treated like that, especially not in their own house."

"I'm not her, and I would never treat anyone like that."

"I know. I just had a momentary flashback. I made the mistake of not telling her sooner. I didn't want to make the same mistake again."

"Thanks, but that isn't necessary in this case. Even if I found out in their presence, well, especially then, I wouldn't react that way. Honestly, I wouldn't even think anything of it. I mean Archie's a mole. I'm sure there are other species of animal shifters around here too. I thought it just was normal."

I grinned, loving that about her.

"Most wolf packs are just wolves. But with Westin Force supporting all shifterkind, we're a bit unique here, so you never know what you'll find."

"Good to know. Now stop stalling and let's get inside."

I proudly escorted her into the house, knowing this time everything would be different. But I wasn't prepared for just how much so until we

walked through the door, and she was ripped from my arms.

“Abby! It’s about time you got here. Come on. Mirage can’t remember that punch recipe you gave her. I think we have all the ingredients,” Christine said, jerking my mate away.

I stood there in shock as I watched them go.

“Well, this is different,” Michael said.

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you okay?” Lachlan asked.

“Don’t be a pain in my ass tonight. I’m fine. Better than fine,” I said, watching my mate laugh along with the other ladies like she was born to be a part of us. And when Autumn walked in and Abby hugged her, I nearly cried.

“Callie can’t say enough good things about Abby,” Michael told me.

“Christine too,” Linc added.

“Mirage never shuts up about her. I think they’re like besties now or something,” Colin teased. “From what I’ve heard, she’s great with Bella too.”

“It’s everything I’ve always wanted,” I confessed.

“A woman good with kids?” Linc teased.

I shrugged. “I like kids. I’ve just never really allowed myself to think about it much. After losing the first and all.”

“The fake baby?” Michael asked.

I growled in frustration. “Don’t be an ass. I didn’t know it was a fake baby at the time, so it felt real. Anyway, after all of that, I learned that Annie absolutely didn’t want kids, so there was no point in even thinking about it.”

“Thank God for that,” Walker said. “I’ll bet Abby will make a great mother someday. She’s a keeper. But of course, if you don’t agree, I’d be happy to take her off your hands, especially if she comes in that dress. Damn.”

I growled and bared my teeth to him while he sat there grinning like a loon, not at all intimidated by me.

“That’s what I thought.”

“You’re an asshole,” I mumbled.

The guys burst out laughing.

“Whose idea was the monkey suits anyway? I hate wearing a tie,” Colin complained.

“I don’t mind,” Walker admitted.

“My guess is Abby convinced them it was a good idea,” Linc said.

“What? Why Abby?”

“She’s the new one.”

“So is Mirage. Hell, none of them were here last Christmas. Annie wasn’t interested in hanging out with a bunch of bachelors, and we had the best Christmas party ever, remember?”

Michael cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. This year is so much better than last.”

I looked up and saw Callie standing right behind me.

“Damn right it is,” she said.

The guys burst out laughing.

“You’re all so whipped,” Walker teased.

“Big talk, buddy. Just you wait. Your turn’s coming up. I can feel it in the air,” Colin told him.

He shrugged. “I’m okay with that, but I’m also doing just fine on my own.”

“We all say that right up until we meet our mate,” Linc confessed. “And then, everything changes in the blink of an eye.”

“It sure as hell did for me,” I admitted.

The chime of the doorbell announced the arrival of Micah and Lucy.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

“Crashing the Delta party of course,” he said.

“The girls insisted on it. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be,” Michael said.

“As much as you’ve stitched our asses up, you should be an honorary member of Delta anyway,” Linc said.

“Your ass. He stitched your ass up,” Colin teased.

The dinner was more formal than anything we’d ever done before. But the guys were right, none of these yahoos were mated a year ago. It was crazy to think about because it was hard to remember life before their mates came into our lives.

The thing about a unit like ours is that when one of us takes a mate, it affects us all. We may not be blood, but brothers just the same. These women mated into our family. Annie had never understood that. To her we were nothing but a boys’ club that she didn’t need anything to do with. But Abby? It was pretty clear by her actions that she got it.

And if I had any doubts about that, they were laid to rest when the

Christmas presents came out after dinner. We all gathered around the tree to exchange gifts. Abby walked over and sat down in my lap.

“Shit!”

“What?” she asked.

“I’ve been so distracted with everything that I didn’t even think to go shopping.”

“I know,” she said, biting her bottom lip.

Michael quieted the room as he started passing out gifts.

“Walker, this one’s from Tucker and Abby.”

I looked up at my beautiful mate who was blushing as she shrugged like this was no big deal.

Walker grinned and held up a new pair of headphones. “Thanks guys. I’ve wanted these for a long time. Noise cancellation and everything. They will be perfect for tuning you fools out during workouts, and to eliminate that awful engine noise on flights. But seriously, I know this is way out of budget.”

Abby’s face dropped as she looked around the room.

“There was a budget? No one told me that!”

They all laughed as she groaned and leaned back against me.

“You did all this?” I whispered to her.

She shrugged. “I’ve had to deal with more than my fair share of estates this year, and I know you’ve had your hands full with everything. Plus, Birdie left me all this money I’ll never use on myself. And it was nice to have people to shop for this year.”

I pulled her down to kiss her. I’d been dealing with my own shit and not even thinking about how this would be her first Christmas without her family. I felt like an ass.

“I hope I didn’t overstep. I didn’t mean to, but I might have gotten just a little carried away.”

When Kevin opened a brand-new Xbox that had just been released, he let out a loud whoop and then ran over to tackle hug the both of us.

“That is not going in your room,” Michael said.

“Yeah, cause we’ll never see you again,” Callie griped.

“Put it in the family room. It’ll be safe there,” Michael insisted, but that just made him an instant target to get roasted.

He grinned good-naturedly. “It was worth a try!”

“You included Kevin and Autumn too?”

“Of course I did. And Bella. I didn’t know for sure if Lucy and Micah were coming, or if they were bringing the kids, so I didn’t bring their gifts. I’ll give them to them later.”

She made it sound like the most normal thing in the world, and it should have been.

“Thank you,” I told her, unsure that she could comprehend just how much this meant to me. “But how? When?”

“We’ve been planning this party for the last week. I wasn’t sure if I should mark them from the both of us, but all the other couples were, and I was pretty sure you hadn’t had time to shop yourself.”

“I honestly didn’t even think about it. Thanks for having my back.”

“Always.”

As the festive night ended, no one really wanted to go home.

“And that is the sign of a great party,” Christine insisted. “But it’s time to go.”

She hugged each of the girls then grabbed Linc and left.

Abby followed her lead, making her rounds.

“Are you sure you don’t want some help?”

“We’re good. Take that man of yours home. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Michael put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed as we watched them embrace and say goodnight. I suspected he knew just how much this all meant to me.

I was quiet on the drive home. A part of me was still waiting for catastrophe to strike. This wasn’t the life I knew, but it sure did feel wonderful.

As we got home and I walked her up to the front porch, I stopped and pulled her into my arms to kiss her.

“Thank you for everything tonight.”

She rolled her eyes and grinned. “You don’t have to thank me for that.”

“Yes, I do. You can’t possibly know how much I appreciate it.”

When I kissed her again, things heated up quickly.

I fumbled for the doorknob and couldn’t get us inside fast enough. And before we reached the bedroom, I had her dress unzipped and abandoned in the hallway along with most of my clothes, as she had ripped them from

my body.

We hadn't had sex since that first time, but the tension and desire between us was always there. Most of the estate stuff was already handled, and Annie was to be cremated and sent home. Having all of that finalized gave me some of the closure I needed to truly move on without hesitation.

Tonight was just a first step towards ridding myself of my toxic past. And right now, my future looked brighter than ever with Abby by my side.

"I need you," she moaned between greedy kisses.

I didn't even hesitate as I pulled her panties aside and pushed into her. I had just laid her on the bed but was still standing next to it myself. Seeing her lying there like that filled with passion and love was almost more than my heart could take.

I smiled as I made love to her without fear of doing something wrong, and with the freedom to know it was okay to enjoy myself too. *This is what a healthy relationship should feel like*, I realized. Everything with Abby was experiencing life for the first time. And when it came to sex, she'd never once shied away from me, but also didn't have to be in control of everything. I didn't know how much I needed the bit of control she willingly gave me.

Being with her made me feel powerful and heady. But more than that, I didn't just have to please her, I wanted to. I wanted to give back everything she was giving to me and more.

And so, I staved off my own desires this time, waiting for her. When she finally crested, tightening around me, I let go too. My body shattered into a million pieces right alongside her, but it was okay, because I knew that she'd just pick up the pieces and put me back together stronger and better than ever.

Love, I thought. *This is what love should look like.*

Abby

Chapter 23

Christmas was approaching quickly, and I still didn't have a tree.

As far as Tucker and I were concerned, everything was going really well, but we hadn't had "the" talk. I'd told him I was staying through the holidays, but eventually, I was going to have to go home, even if just to pack up my house and move here permanently.

Likewise, he still had the house he and Annie had lived in. I'd never been to it, and as far as I knew, he hadn't been back there in weeks. But decisions needed to be made on that too.

My life felt like it was in limbo. And the more anxious that made me, the more I felt the need to shift. Lachlan had helped me realize that's what it was, but I was scared to try again.

With Tucker sleeping over each night, my wolf was at peace and didn't struggle to be set free while I slept. But I could feel her constantly there now. Sometimes it still creeped me out and felt like this was all just some crazy big dream. Maybe I was just imagining all of this. Deep down, I knew that wasn't the case. This is my life now.

Nonna and Tabitha stopped by bearing gifts.

"Where's the tree?" Tabitha asked.

I sighed. "I haven't gotten one yet."

"What? You can't have Christmas without a tree," Nonna insisted.

"I know."

No matter how tight things had gotten in my childhood, my mother had always insisted on having a tree. I was a little sad thinking I was going to let her down if I didn't get moving.

"Tucker and I were going to pick one out together, but he's been so busy at work after taking time off to watch me."

Once word got out about it, Kyle basically said that I was no threat to the Pack, and as Tucker's mate, he couldn't justify his time away just to hang out with me. So Tucker went back to work.

I missed him during the days, but since the night of the Christmas party, he had generously made up for it every single night.

“Where is that boy?” Nonna asked.

“Work,” I said with a sigh.

The two ladies shared a look.

“Oh, really,” she said.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“You make the call; I’ll get into place.”

Tabitha looked downright giddy.

“Okay. Do it,” Nonna yelled from the kitchen.

Tabitha grabbed my phone from the table and dialed 911.

“No!” I yelled as she gave me a sly wink.

“Hello? Hello? What’s the emergency?”

“There’s been an accident at Birdie’s place. Send help quickly and alert Delta.”

She hung up the phone as I stared at her with my mouth hung open.

“What did you do?!”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ve got this. We know what we’re doing.”

I thought back to some of the crazy antics people had shared about Birdie with me. Clearly it wasn’t just my crazy old great-great-grandmother. Her friends had likely been in cahoots with her for every single incident.

Cahoots.

That was a funny word.

A nervous laugh bubbled up from me.

“Nonna, she’s cracking in here.”

“Pull it together, Abby. We’ve got to sell it when they arrive,” Nonna yelled.

Not five minutes later Lane burst through the door with Colin and a terrified Tucker in tow.

“What happened?” he demanded as Lane and Colin followed Tabitha back to the kitchen. I had no idea what they would find there.

“Are you okay?”

“No. They’re crazy!”

Lane walked back out shaking his head as he grabbed his radio.

“Dispatch, call Micah and get his ass over to Birdie’s. This may

require stitches.”

“Oh no! What did she do?” I asked.

“Best guess? She cut herself with a knife and then faked a fall. What I can’t figure out is why,” Lane said.

“Who knows with those two. You’re okay though, right?” Tucker asked me.

“Oh, is that Tucker?” Tabitha asked innocently.

We walked back to the kitchen. There was blood all over my floor.

I gasped and ran to check on Nonna.

“Just a scratch,” she whispered with a wink.

“Tucker, it was brought to our attention that Abby is without a Christmas tree,” Tabitha said.

“Excuse me?”

“A tree, boy. You can’t expect to have your first Christmas together without a tree,” Nonna chastised him. “So, since you’re here and I’m gonna be fine, thanks to the quick response of our favorite Sheriff and friends, then you just go and rectify this situation.”

“What situation?”

“The tree!” Tabitha said. “Take your mate and get a tree already.”

“I swear I didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“The girl is innocent,” they both agreed.

“But you, sir, are not. Shame on you. Go fix Christmas,” Nonna told Tucker.

Lane and Colin laughed.

“Did you put them up to this?” Colin asked. “You were just saying this morning how you really needed to find time to get this tree situation sorted.”

“You did this?” Lane teased.

Micah showed up and shook his head when he saw the culprits.

“I really thought that after Birdie passed these antics would stop ladies.”

“What? I slipped,” Nonna insisted.

I snorted. “Pretty sure Birdie was the innocent victim all along.”

“What do you mean?” Lane asked.

“I suspect Nonna is the brain of these operations, but this one here is the instigator.”

“There’s a code, Abby. You can’t sell us out now,” Tabitha insisted. I laughed and so did the guys.

Micah shook his head as he cleaned the wounds.

“I should take you in and stitch this up.”

“Pfft. It’s just a scratch. Half hour in my fur and I’ll be good as new.”

“So another ‘filing a false claim’ ticket then?” the Sheriff asked.

She shrugged. “Do what you must, as long as Tucker takes Abby to get a tree.”

I groaned.

Colin nodded towards the door.

“Go on. Get that damn tree before they escalate to something more drastic. You know how these two can get.”

Tucker didn’t seem upset about it. If anything, he looked amused.

“Well, you don’t have to twist my arm, but if Michael gives me shit for this, I’m throwing you both under the bus.”

Much to my surprise, he was true to his word. We left all the chaos and walked down to the tree lot a few blocks away.

“Uh, there were still people in our house.”

“It’ll be fine. No one will mess with anything,” he insisted.

“I’m really sorry about all of this.”

“You could have just asked. I would have taken off at lunch if it meant this much to you.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “All I said was that you’d been working a lot, and we hadn’t found time to get a tree when they asked me about it. I had nothing to do with any of that.”

He smirked. “I know. But that’s not what I’ll be telling our great-great-grandchildren someday.”

I gulped but didn’t say anything.

Tucker and I had only known each other for such a short time—weeks, not even months. And in that time, he’s lost his wife, and I wasn’t oblivious to the fact that he hadn’t actually mourned her yet. Now he’s talking great-great-grandchildren? If that’s not full long-term commitment, I didn’t know what was.

In my heart I knew this was right and exactly where I needed to be, but when I stopped and let myself really think about it all, it totally freaked me out.

“You okay?” he asked. “You got really quiet.”

“Sorry. It’s just, well, it’s weird, right?”

“What?”

“Everything. This place. Us.”

He shrugged. “I guess for you maybe. I grew up in this world. To me, it’s normal.”

“Tucker, you lost your mate.”

“I found my mate,” he argued.

“Annie was a part of your life for a very long time. Do you miss her even a little?”

“No,” he surprised me by saying. “But I do hate that I don’t feel guilty for saying that. She made my life a living hell, and I thought that’s just how things were and there was nothing that could change that, but you’ve already showed me that there can be so much more and that’s new and exciting.”

“You barely know me.”

“True, and you barely know me, yet you told me you love me.”

I sighed. “I know, and I meant it. I’ve always had a pretty good life. Sure, we had our struggles, but it wasn’t a bad life. Then this last year everything changed. It made me really appreciate just how fragile and short life is. Important enough to not waste time with formalities and tell the people you care about just how much they mean to you before in the blink of an eye it can all be taken away.”

“Or in the blink of an eye, it can all change for the better, like that moment I looked up and really saw you for the first time.”

I hugged him.

“But that was the moment she died too,” I whispered.

“I know. Everything changed in that instant. And I’m dealing with Annie and all of that. Hell, I’m even going to counseling regularly to handle all the emotional crap. I’m not suppressing it or just forgetting about her and moving on with you. It’s a lot, Abby, but I am okay, and we’re going to be okay. You’re my true mate, and that’s not something I’m going to walk away from. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

“I know. Sometimes I feel guilty about it, though. I know I didn’t know her or anything, but it’s hard not to feel like I’ve just moved into her life. The weirdest part of all is that everyone around us seems perfectly okay

with it.”

He rubbed his hands up and down my arms and stepped back to look at me.

“Because it is okay.”

And then he kissed me right there in the middle of Main Street for the entire Pack to see.

I almost giggled at the thought. Living in a werewolf Pack, or wolf shifter Pack, and finding my true mate who I fell instantly in love with sounded a lot more like one of the books I write than reality. Yet this was my life, or all those stories in my head finally caused me to crack and I truly am insane living in my own make-believe world. But if that’s the case, I’m okay with it.

“Get a room,” Callie yelled from across the street before jogging over to us.

I blushed but Tucker just grinned.

“Callie.”

“Tucker. I heard there was an emergency at your house, Abby. Is everything okay?”

I groaned.

“Nonna and Tabitha are just up to their old tricks and meddling ways.”

She laughed. “So nothing serious?”

“Apparently the purchase and decoration of a proper Christmas tree now constitutes an emergency that they will go to great lengths to resolve.”

“We’re going to pick out a tree,” I explained.

She laughed. “So they won this battle.”

“They win every battle. Who are we even fooling? They have decades of scheming on us. We don’t stand a chance.”

“Well, I won’t keep you. I’m glad it wasn’t anything too serious.”

Kyle and Kelsey were working the Christmas tree lot themselves, along with an older couple when we arrived.

“Oh, hello,” I said, surprised to see them there.

“Tucker and Abby, what a surprise,” Kyle said.

Tucker groaned. “You already heard?”

“I heard. We’ve been expecting you,” he replied with a chuckle. Abby, this is my mother Mary and my father Jason.”

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you.”

I was a little surprised that his father was alive. Then again, I had no idea how Alphas were chosen in this world, only how my werewolves picked them. I knew other authors who had different ideas on that. It suddenly dawned on me that this could be the opportunity of a lifetime to find out, and yet, I didn’t ask. I couldn’t, because I knew that to write this story, my story, well, it could never happen. I wouldn’t risk my life or Tucker’s to do something like that.

I considered that for a moment.

“Are vampires real too?” I blurted out.

They all stopped and looked quizzically at me.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about something and that sort of popped out.”

“Well, the answer is no, vampires do not exist. But I really need to know what you were thinking about just now,” Kelsey asked with a warm smile on her face.

I blushed and sighed. “Well, my go to for writing has always been werewolves, but I can’t exactly write about those anymore now, can I? So that made me wonder, are vampires real too? Or are they safe to write about still?”

The five of them all laughed.

“Oh, I like you immensely,” Mary said.

“Kelsey’s right. Vampires are not real but you’re also right, we’d prefer it if you did not write about our kind. I’m sure your werewolves are just fine though. Most are so factually wrong that it’s comical,” Jason admitted.

I frowned and shook my head. “Nope. Knowing I’m a wolf and that if anyone out there in the real world found out it, well, I shudder to think what would happen. Best to retire my werewolves and move on. I’m currently writing a vampire series, so if that’s still safe, I’ll stick with that for sure. It’s still paranormal at least. Anyway, how about that tree?”

Tucker just kept smiling at me, but there was no more talk of werewolves and vampires as we walked around the tree lot looking for the perfect tree.

The others let us be to wander around. He reached for my hand and linked our fingers together. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking just how

perfectly this scene would play out in a book or movie.

“What are you thinking?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know. My mind is a ridiculous place. But look at this one. It’s perfect.”

“It’s big.”

“But not too big. I know the perfect place.”

“Abby, this tree is huge.”

“Tucker, it’s perfect.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to be able to say no to you.” He motioned for Kyle to come over. “We’ll take this one.”

“First, a picture,” Mary insisted, pulling out an old Polaroid camera and snapping a picture of the two of us with our very first tree. “One more. Aw, cute. Here’s one for you and if it’s alright with you both, we’ll keep one to add our holiday board.”

“Sure,” I said, agreeing for the both of us.

If Tucker had an issue with it, I assumed he would have spoken up. Instead, he, Kyle, and Jason loaded up the tree and walked it back to the house.

“I guess I should follow them. Thanks again.”

Back at the house, I ran ahead and grabbed the tree stand I had found alongside Birdie’s piles and piles of decorations. Putting it where I wanted the tree to go, the men were happy to accommodate me and set it down into the stand, being sure to level and secure it.

“It’s huge,” I said, staring in wonder.

“Yeah, but you were right. It fits perfectly right here.”

Tucker stood behind me and wrapped his arms around me as we both stared at it, imagining the full potential of our tree.

“Thanks for helping me get it home,” he said, shaking hands with the two men before they saw themselves out.

I just stood there happily looking at it.

“I’ve never had a tree this big.”

“Me either. Are you ready to decorate?”

“Wait,” I said. “First, we need to start the cookies and turn on some Christmas music. It’s tradition.”

He shrugged. “Okay. If that’s what we must do.”

For the next hour we rolled out dough, and cut and decorated cookies

with Christmas music blaring in the background. There were lots of laughs and stolen kisses. Tucker had flour in his hair, and I was sure I looked like a hot mess. But it was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

With the cookies in the oven and the timer on, I turned to Tucker. "Now we can start decorating the tree."

He had a weird look on his face as he looked at me.

"What?"

"Is Christmas always this magical for you?"

I shrugged. "We didn't have a lot when I was growing up, but we always had enough, and my mom always made sure to keep the traditions fun and alive no matter how tough times got. What was Christmas like for you?"

"Lately? Just another day of the year, a stressful one, but just another day."

"That's really sad, Tucker."

"It is what it is. Annie was obsessed with gifts and money. And if we did go back home for the holidays it was even worse. Her parents are very concerned with appearances and what people think. Gifts were over the top and often ridiculous, but the more extravagant they were the bigger the bragging rights."

I scrunched up my nose. "That sounds miserable."

"Basically," he agreed with a laugh.

"What about as a kid? Was it like that for you too?"

"Oh no. My mom was the best. She always went out of her way to make Christmas special for us kids."

I frowned. "Kids? You have siblings?"

"Yes, an older brother, and a younger sister."

"I don't have any siblings," I said sadly, "but I always wished I had. Where are they now?"

"Still back home."

"And your mom? When did she die?"

"What? She's not dead."

"Oh."

"Why would you think that?"

I shrugged. "You sort of talk about her in the past tense, so I just assumed."

He shook his head. "No. Both of my parents are alive. I'm just not

close to them anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you have a falling out?”

“No. Annie.”

“Huh?”

“My family wasn’t rich like hers. We were just a normal, average family.”

I must have given him a look, because he chuckled and clarified his statement.

“Fine, as normal as a wolf shifter family could be. But they embarrassed Annie, and it was a constant fight, so after we mated, I had to let them go. I still talk to them on occasion, especially if I’m back home. Annie didn’t know that.”

“That’s so sad. I can’t even imagine. Sorry, but I don’t care who you are or what you are supposed to be to me, if my family were still alive and you had a problem with me spending time with them, or even if you didn’t want to spend time with them, I’d drop you like a hot pan burning my hand.”

“What if I told you I wanted to invite my entire family here for Christmas?” he asked, giving me a look like he was somehow trying to make a point.

I walked over and picked up my phone and held it out to him. “Call them and do it.”

Tucker

Chapter 24

I stared down at the phone and then back up at Abby. She couldn't possibly be serious. I hadn't had Christmas with my family since Annie and I bonded. It had been years. I couldn't. But oh I wanted to.

Spending the day with Abby picking out a tree, baking cookies, and listening to Christmas music had brought back so many warm memories for me. I wasn't even sure how we got on the subject of my family, but for the first time in a very long time, I allowed myself to miss them.

Before I could respond, the buzzer on the oven went off. We hadn't even started hanging lights on the tree yet, standing there talking instead.

"Tucker, I'm serious. Call your mom. We haven't really talked about finances and life stuff yet, but Birdie left me a lot of money. I mean a *lot* of money. More than I could ever spend. I know your job keeps you here, but if they are willing to come here, I'll pay all their expenses."

"What? Why?"

There was no doubt in my mind that she was completely serious.

"Because I don't have any family, Tucker. None. Not a single living relative left. And family has always meant everything to me. You shouldn't be estranged from family, especially not during the holidays."

The night and day difference between Annie and Abby was terrifying. I'd gotten used to how things were, but Abby was here trying to change it all up and fix things that were probably best left broken.

"I'll think about it," I told her so she would go before the cookies burnt, and because I didn't want to say no, yet I was terrified that if I did reach out, they'd just tell me it was too late.

When she returned with hot cookies in her hand, she didn't press me again about my family. Instead, after sampling our work, we got down to business hanging lights on the Christmas tree. And then we started with the tinsel and ornaments, some of which were very old.

Abby held up one in particular and stared lovingly at it.

“I wish I knew the history behind some of these. I wish I’d known Birdie and had her share the meanings behind these ornaments.”

“They are quite the eclectic mix,” I said fondly.

As she went to hang it on the tree, my phone buzzed. I looked down and frowned.

“Michael found you?”

The text was calling for an emergency meeting. I knew damn well what that meant. We had a new mission.

“Tucker? Are you okay?”

I looked up at Abby and was torn on what to do. If I left now, would it ruin everything? How mad was she going to be when she found out I was likely leaving town? I thought I was going to be sick as all the fights and arguments Annie and I had over the years came collapsing in around me.

“Tucker? What’s wrong?”

I shook it off and looked up to find Abby watching me, worried.

“Um, Michael called an emergency meeting. I’m so sorry, but I have to go.”

I was bracing myself for the fallout that would shatter the happy little bubble I’d been hiding in.

“Okay. Do you want me to wait to finish this or can I keep going? I mean it’s more fun with you, but once I get started . . . I really just want it done now.”

“Uh, yeah. Keep decorating. But I have to go.”

“I know. You said that. Are you feeling okay?”

“Abby, I’m leaving. It’s an emergency meeting and we’re likely going to be deployed on a mission.”

She hung the ornament in her hand and then turned to me. Taking both of my hands into hers, she stared at me for a moment, like she was trying to read my mind or something. And then, instead of saying anything she pulled me into her arms and just held me.

My whole body shook and started to calm.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s your job. You must go. I’ll still be here when you get back.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out about this?”

She shrugged and pulled away to look at me when she spoke.

“The girls explained how things work. There’s been talk about a new

mission coming up. The Collectors, right? And yeah, I'm going to miss you, but what you do is important, Tucker. You keep us all safe. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine, and I'll be right here waiting for you to return."

My phone buzzed again, and I cringed.

"Sounds like you better hurry."

She was right. While I couldn't wrap my head around why she was reacting this way, I knew I had to leave.

I gave her a quick kiss.

"I'll keep you posted if you want to know."

She scoffed. "Of course I want to know."

Her phone rang and she smiled as she held it up to show me Christine was calling. With one final kiss, she answered the phone and shooed me out the door.

"Yeah, he got the call. He's heading in now. Do you know anything yet?"

The drive to headquarters didn't help to clear my head any. Christine had called, and Abby had answered. She was already networking with the girls. She hadn't yelled or thrown a tantrum over the idea of a mission. Surely it was just because she didn't fully understand it all yet.

I was still stressing over it all as I walked inside.

"Uh-oh. What's wrong?" Lachlan asked when I reached the conference room.

Everyone else was already there and waiting.

I tried to brush him off, but he insisted.

"Tucker, what happened?"

"Nothing," I blurted out. "Nothing happened. She didn't get mad. She didn't yell or scream. She told me what I do is important. She didn't demand I quit on the spot. And now she's talking to Christine."

They all just looked at me.

"Well, yeah, Chris called all the girls to give them a heads up when I got the call," Linc explained.

"That's what they do," Colin agreed.

"They do?"

"Annie just never answered the phone," Michael said. "They did try to include her too."

I nodded. "And your mates, they never get mad or upset when an

emergency call comes in?”

Colin shrugged. “I mean, Mirage isn’t exactly excited about it. She knows what we do can be dangerous at times, but she’s still supportive.”

Michael and Linc nodded in agreement.

“Hearing you guys talk like this makes me glad I don’t have a mate,” Walker chimed in.

Lachlan snorted. “You don’t have a mate because no one is willing to put up with you and your flirtations.”

Walker just laughed and shrugged. “It’s just who I am. Any mate of mine is going to have understand and accept that.”

“Like Ben does?” Michael challenged.

Walker laughed. “Ben loves me. I’m his kids’ godfather for crying out loud.”

“I can’t believe he’s never kicked your ass for continuing to flirt with his mate,” Colin pointed out.

He just shrugged again. “I’m harmless. Ben knows it. Shelby knows it. We’re just friends.”

I shook my head. “If I’d had a friend like that, Annie would likely have castrated me.”

“Ohh,” a collective groan sounded around the room as each of them reached to cover their junk.

“Well, on that note, let’s get down to business,” Michael said.

For the next two hours we were briefed and prepped on a new known enemy, Xavier Fortin. Bravo team had discovered him and confirmed him as a Collector. The problem with this one was that he was way too close to home, based right here in California.

“We need to act quickly. He’s within a few hours’ drive and practically in our backyard. It’s bullshit,” Colin said. “How the hell am I supposed to sleep at night knowing this? When do we move out?”

Mirage was a witch. She had the power to basically blind people. Not really blind them, just change the image of the world around them. We’d rescued her from a collection along with numerous other witches, many of which still resided right here in San Marco.

It was understandable why Colin was so passionate about removing a Collector so close to home. But it also resonated with the rest of us. We protected our own, but part of our sole mission as Delta team was to protect

the Alpha and his family.

Kelsey Westin was our Pack Mother, but she was also a very powerful, very rare, and special witch.

“Wrap up your affairs and gather your things. We’re going by bus this time, and it leaves from right here at headquarters in three hours, giving us time for transport and to get settled into our hotel before it gets too late tonight. Everyone will be briefed on specific duties en route. Bravo’s taking the lead on this, so we’ll be at their disposal. I need you all to be flexible with this mission and try to keep your heads on straight. I know we all want to protect Mirage. She’s family. But we also have a greater mission here. Colin? Understood?”

“I’m fine. Really. Let’s go get this asshole.”

We were dismissed and sent home as was customary. I still kept my go bag in the trunk of my car because I knew that if I went home and faced Annie with the news, all hell would break loose. And I wouldn’t have put it past her to tie me up and refuse to let me leave. So I wasn’t in the habit of going home after news like that.

Abby isn’t Annie, I reminded myself for the millionth time.

And she didn’t know what to expect when it came to a mission. This was a first for us. I owed it to her to explain things. But mostly, I just wanted to see her before I left. So I drove back to Birdie’s house and let myself inside.

The house smelled warm and inviting from the freshly baked cookies. I stopped at the tree to find it fully decorated. I wasn’t sure there was a free branch to even put another ornament on. It was beautiful, but she hadn’t lit it up yet.

Abby walked into the room and stopped, then her whole face lit up.

“That was faster than I expected. What’s the word?”

I swallowed hard. “I, um, have to leave. I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know what else to say. And a part of me was still waiting for her to freak out and yell at me.

“How long do we have?”

I grimaced. “Three hours.”

She nodded. “Okay. Well, first things first. Can we light up the tree now?”

I wasn’t sure there was anything she could have said that would have

thrown me off more.

“Um, yeah. Sure.”

The tree? I tell her I’m about to go on a mission, the sorts of which people sometimes didn’t return, and she’s worried about the tree?

But I appeased her by going over to the outlet, counting down to make it more dramatic before plugging it in.

She was beautiful as she smiled up at our creation and clapped her hands. Then she threw her arms around me.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered.

We stood there for a moment, and I almost forgot I was supposed to be getting things in order.

“Three hours?” she finally asked.

“More like two and a half now,” I said sadly.

She looked up at me and there was a smirk on her face. Without a word, she took my hand and led me down the hall.

Abby

Chapter 25

When Christine called to give me a heads-up about the mission, I'd already known about it from Tucker, but it had been clear that he was a little freaked out and I hadn't fully understood why.

"Annie," Christine had said.

"Yup, Annie. She didn't exactly handle out of town missions well from what I'd heard," Callie had added after Chris conferenced her and Mirage in.

"He's probably expecting you to fly off the handle, yell, scream, something," Mirage agreed.

"I'm not going to freak out about this. He loves his job and if you guys can survive it, so can I," I told them.

"Don't tell us. Show him," Callie suggested.

"How?"

"Well, the second Linc gets home, I'm getting naked," Christine confessed.

"Same," Mirage agreed.

"Damn. Why didn't I think of that? I usually go for keeping it cool and as normal as possible," Callie admitted. "I'm absolutely taking the rest of the day off now."

I laughed. "So normal day, with sex?"

"Yes!" They all agreed.

"I do like the sounds of that."

So when Tucker came home, I finished off the tree with our official tree lighting celebration, because that seemed like the normal thing to do. And then I took him to bed.

"We should talk about this," he said as I led him down the hall and right into the bedroom.

"I already know what to expect," I explained. "The girls filled me in on everything I needed to know. There's no way to know for sure how long

you'll be gone," I said, pulling his shirt up and over his head. He didn't resist. I trailed kisses across his chest. "So there's no point in asking that. And you probably only have partial details that are confidential anyway so you couldn't tell me even if I asked. Though mates are privileged to more than the average person because true mates should never keep secrets from each other."

"I see," he said in a thick voice, as I unbuttoned his pants and pushed them, along with his boxers, down to the floor.

I stepped back to look him over. God, he was gorgeous. I would never get tired of just staring at him. But time was limited, and I had things to do.

With a smirk and a lick of my lips, I dropped to my knees.

He gasped, but I didn't waste any time as I took him into my mouth and sucked as much of him as I could.

"Abby," he moaned.

I swirled my tongue around his tip before taking as much of him in as possible.

The guttural noises coming from him as his hands fisted in my hair spurred me on to move back and forth. I could feel him growing harder each time as I bobbed my head, licking and sucking to please him.

"Oh God. Oh God. Abby!"

I smiled and then gasped as I popped off of him and was pulled up and tossed onto the bed before I knew what was happening.

My clothes shred as he ripped them from my body and crashed his mouth against mine. He was hot and needy. I'd never been more turned on. I didn't even know doing something like that could turn me on, but it most definitely had.

My breath caught as he slammed into me and then froze as he lingered above me. His eyes were wild, and I knew he was so close to coming. This wasn't going to last long, but it was okay, because I had never felt stronger.

Assaulting all my senses at once, he nipped at my breasts with his mouth, as his hand circled the sensitive nerves at my apex, all while he found a steady rhythm that was certain to please us both.

It didn't take long, though, because the rhythm became sporadic. My hips bucked against him, and my nails dug into his back as his muscles tensed and he swelled once more.

“Tucker!” I cried as my body shuddered in a hard orgasm, leaving me a quivering mess as he thrust once more and fell apart in my arms.

He rolled to the side so not to crush me and then flopped over on his back panting heavily as he stared up at the ceiling in shock.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Wow.”

He reached my hand and gently held it even while he tried to regain himself.

We’d had sex before, great sex, but it had never been like this.

“What the hell was that?”

I rolled to my side and kissed his shoulder. “A guarantee you come back to me.”

That sobered him some as he pulled me back into his arms and kissed me sweetly.

“It’s just a standard mission. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I know,” I said, feeling like I needed to be strong for the both of us.

We laid that way for a while, and then his smile grew.

“No one has ever done that to me before.”

“What? Make you lose all control like that?”

“Well, yes, but also, *that*.”

“What?”

“*That*,” he said pointing down.

“Seriously? Never?”

“Never.”

“Well, I’ve never done that either, so at least you have nothing to compare it to.”

I started to giggle, and he joined me as we lay naked in bed laughing.

When the alarm on his phone went off, I jumped.

“That’s my one-hour warning.”

“Almost time to go?”

“Yup.”

“I’m going to be okay, Tucker.”

“I know. And I promise to come home to you.”

“Don’t.” I knew the risks of his job. I wasn’t going to be naïve about it. It was dangerous, but also important. There was always a chance he wouldn’t come home. That was something I was going to have to learn to accept. But somebody had to do the hard stuff, and I was proud of him for

making the sacrifices. No, life wouldn't be easy, but I was strong enough to support him. "I know the risks. But also, no goodbyes, okay? Just a kiss and a see you later."

"Okay," he said.

We laid there a few more minutes before he got up and pulled me along with him. He refused to take a shower, claiming he didn't want to wash away my scent just yet, but we got dressed and left the house hand-in-hand.

He kissed me and it felt like goodbye.

"Wait." I stopped him.

"What?"

"Are we just parting ways here? I thought I got to see you to the airfield."

"We aren't flying. The bus is meeting us at headquarters."

"Don't the mates go to see you off there?"

"Well, some. Do you want to do that?"

"Yes."

He seemed surprised to hear it, and I tried not to take it personally.

"Okay. Do you want to follow me then?"

"No, we can ride together. I can catch a ride back with Callie."

"You really are spending time with them, huh?"

"Of course. They're family, right?"

He beamed back at me. "Right."

We didn't say much on the drive over, but it was a comfortable silence. His stress levels had certainly decreased some.

As we pulled up to the Lodge, there was already a bus waiting and lots of couples hanging out in the parking lot. I knew all of the Delta guys pretty well already, but I hadn't expected to see another team there too. I was pretty sure it was Bravo team. I'd met a few of them, and a couple of their mates, but I didn't really know any of them.

Tucker and I got out of the car and walked over to join everyone. Michael smiled at me and nodded when we approached. Lachlan gave me a thumbs up.

It was pretty clear to me by Tucker's actions and the response of my arrival that Annie hadn't embraced life alongside the other Delta mates, and I highly doubted she ever showed up to see him off. It made me sad, catching glimpses of all she'd put him through. I couldn't fix his past, though. All I

could do was ensure his future was better, or at least I hoped I made it better.

Christine gave me a quick hug. “Shelby took off the rest of the afternoon and is hosting all of us once the teams are off.”

“What for?” Tucker asked.

“Oh, just support group. While you guys are off doing crazy dangerous stuff and having the time of your lives, we’re back here worrying about you. It helps to be surrounded by others who get it. Since you guys have been working with Bravo a lot lately, they’ve sort of adopted us too.”

“That’s nice, actually. Thanks for including Abby.”

“We always included Annie, too, Tucker. She just refused to have anything to do with us.”

He sighed and nodded.

She gave me another squeeze. “But this one is most definitely a keeper.”

“That she is,” he agreed.

I was feeling a little awkward with the Annie talk, so I quickly changed the subject.

“Which one’s Shelby again?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. You’ll officially meet everyone today.”

“Okay.”

Michael had walked away to talk to some of the other guys. And I knew it was getting close to time to say goodbye.

I turned to Tucker, and he pulled me into his arms.

“This isn’t a big deal, just standard operation.”

“I know.”

“I’ll be back before you can even miss me.”

He grinned, but I scowled back at him.

“I already miss you.”

He surprised me by kissing me right there in front of everyone.

Walker and Lachlan even let up a whoop and cheered for us.

My cheeks burned as I laughed and buried my face against his chest.

Michael returned and pulled Callie into his arms.

“It’s time,” he said. “Say your goodbyes.”

I hated how solemn everything turned in an instant.

“No goodbyes,” I reminded him. “I’ll see you later.”

He kissed me again. “See you later, Abby.”

We all stood around watching them load up onto the bus and waved as they drove away.

“Are you okay?” Mirage asked. “My first time seeing Colin off was hard.”

“I’m okay,” I assured her.

“Up for some wine and girl time then?” Callie asked.

“Absolutely.”

Shelby’s house was nice and surprisingly had plenty of room for everyone.

“Kids to the playroom,” she directed as we arrived. “Oh wait, Delta doesn’t have any kids yet, do they?”

“Not yet,” Christine said.

“Is that code for an impending arrival?”

She grinned. “Not yet, but not for a lack of trying.”

“Christine, you and Linc are trying to get pregnant?” a woman asked and came over to hug her.

“Yes, but it hasn’t happened yet, so don’t get too excited.”

Shelby linked arms with the woman. “Emma is mine. You cannot have her.”

They all laughed.

“Hi, I’m Abby,” I said offering her my hand.

“Tucker’s good mate, right?”

My jaw dropped. I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“True mate,” Callie clarified.

“We heard about Annie. Is Tucker okay?” someone asked.

Mirage snorted. “So much better than okay. I’ve never seen him so happy. That’s all because of you, Abby.”

I sighed. “I know. But I also feel so guilty about it.”

“Hold that thought. This is turning serious and that requires wine,” Shelby said. “Take a seat and meet the rest of the team.”

I was escorted over to a couch where Callie, Christine, and Mirage joined me. It felt like they were showing a solid front for the others, like they were protecting me.

“I’m really sorry if Annie was good friends with any of you. I swear I’m not trying to just replace her.”

They all looked at each other and then back at me.

“Annie, well, she wasn’t exactly friends with anyone around here, as far as any of us know. I’m Olivia, Baine’s mate.”

“Hi, Abby.”

“Abby, you’re more than welcome here and we’re all pretty excited for Tucker,” Susan said. “I don’t know who you know or don’t know here, so I’ll just go around the room real quick. I’m Susan, mated to Tarron. This is Emma, Painter’s mate. Vada belongs to Silas, the Bravo team leader. Olivia has Baine, Alaina and Jake, Shelby and Ben, and then Taylor is sort of one of us too.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, she’s actually on Bravo team, but so is her mate, Grant. Obviously, she can’t be with us during deployment, but otherwise she’d still be here. Sometimes Marie joins us too. She works for Westin Force, but sometimes gets called away too.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention . . .” Shelby stopped when the door rang.

Emma opened it and a guy walked in.

“Hey, I’m sorry I’m late.”

“I forgot to mention I invited Holden to join us,” she finished. “Since Marie’s out with the teams.”

“Hey Holden. This is . . .”

Callie started to introduce me, but he cut her off.

“Abigail Matroni. It’s nice to finally meet you. I work over at Westin Foundation and Liam has me working on your portfolio.”

“Oh, well, thanks.”

“Wait, hold up,” Olivia said. “Abigail Matroni? Like the author?”

There were murmurs all around me.

“Uh, yup, that’s the one.”

“Oh my gosh! I absolutely adore your books. A Werewolf’s Bride was my favorite.”

“That’s her?” Alaina asked.

“That’s me,” I confirmed.

“Oh my gosh. I can’t tell you how much A Werewolf’s Bride helped

me.”

“Huh?”

“Olivia got me hooked on it, starting with that one. It’s my favorite because she’s human and all. Not that Jake is a shifter, but because he dragged me into this world so I sort of felt like I could relate to her so much.”

“Jake’s human?” I blurted out. “You’re human?”

“Yes,” Alaina said. “I am just human, but don’t worry. You’re safe.”

I snorted. “Just a few weeks ago, I thought I was human.”

“Seriously?” Vada asked. “Why?”

I looked at her like she was crazy.

“Because all of this was just fantasy in my stories. Not real life. I didn’t even know what a shifter was or anything. I’m still struggling to wrap my head around it and most of the time I’m convinced I’ve had a complete mental break, because this can’t possibly be real.”

Alaina laughed. “I know how you feel, but I assure you, it is.”

“Wait, you wrote about werewolves, and you didn’t know you were a shifter?” Olivia asked.

“Never once suspected.”

“And you found out when you got here?”

“Not exactly. I was apparently shifting in my sleep and thought it was just vivid dreams, until Tucker found me and explained some things.”

“Like how he’s your true mate?” Alaina asked.

“No, that came much later.”

“Why?” Emma asked. “You’re his true mate, right?”

I nodded.

“I know he’s a wolf. Are you a wolf?”

“I am.”

It felt so weird to admit that out loud.

“Then shouldn’t you have known the second you met?”

“He was mated to Annie when we met,” I blurted out.

“But you’re his true mate,” she argued.

“But we didn’t know that until after she died.”

The room went perfectly silent.

“It makes sense,” Holden said, as all heads whipped towards him.

“Tucker’s wolf was bonded to another. It wouldn’t matter if you were his true mate or not. But the second that bond was severed, he saw you for the first

time, right?”

I nodded.

“My friends and I have speculated how that would work. One of my fraternity brothers was going to take a compatible mate. As far as I know they’re still together but haven’t bonded yet. Anyway, part of Brian’s concerns was that if he mated Amber and then found his true mate, what would happen then?”

“Apparently nothing. I mean, if they were mated. Or at least Tucker didn’t sense anything, and honestly neither did I.”

“And then what? You saw him again and just knew?” Mirage asked.

“I didn’t even know what was happening. One second, he’s just Tucker, a cute, funny guy who was helping me out with Birdie’s estate. And then I guess I blinked, and he was something . . . more. I don’t know how else to explain it. And this is going to sound insane, but there was like this voice in my head telling me that he was mine, my mate. Don’t laugh. I’m not crazy.”

They all burst out laughing, and I groaned as I hid my face in my hands.

“We know you’re not crazy, Abby,” Susan said. “Stop laughing you guys. I swear it’s not because you’re crazy, it’s just funny that you think you are. That was just your wolf talking to you. We all went through it when we met our mate too. No one could ever forget that first ‘mine’ or ‘mate’. Your spirit animal gets pretty obnoxious with those reminders during the mating period.”

“Oh, it’s normal? So your wolf also did that?”

She smiled. “I don’t have a wolf.”

“You’re human? Are you all human?” I blurted out.

“No, far from it. I’m a fox.”

“Come again?”

“A fox. I’m a fox shifter,” she explained.

“That’s a thing?”

They laughed again as she nodded.

“Emma and I are gorillas,” Vada said.

My jaw dropped. “You guys are messing with me, right?”

“No, they aren’t,” Olivia said. “It’s said that in the days of Noah’s Ark, God sent animal spirits to certain humans representing animals of all

kinds to carry their spirits into the new world after the floods. Our ancestors were those people. So basically, there could be a shifter for every animal species on the planet, though some have died out.”

“That leads to extinction. As long as there is a shifter, we can repopulate our species in animal form,” Emma explained.

I scrunched up my nose. “You do it in animal form?”

They all shook their heads.

“No, but if it came down to preserving a species, then yes,” Shelby said. “It’s our calling to do so. Fortunately, wolves are populating just fine on their own right now.”

“There are very few of our kind left though. The few shifters I’ve known outside of us, have mostly taken to their fur,” Emma said. “It’s hard, but necessary to save the gorillas. Most choose to go wild afterwards.”

“What other animals are you guys?”

“Most are wolves. This is Westin Pack,” Olivia said. “But I’m a bear. Baine and I come from a Clan in Colorado.”

“This is unreal. It sounds crazy right?”

She shrugged. “I grew up in the Clan so it’s not as weird to me. I can imagine from an outsider’s point of view, it’s completely unbelievable though.”

“You can say that again,” Alaina admitted.

Being here with everyone was nice. It wasn’t just good to keep my mind off whatever Tucker may be doing, but for the first time in my life, I felt like I’d found friends that I was comfortable enough to open up to.

Tucker

Chapter 26

The ride to the hotel was an easy one. We had been briefed and I was assigned to work with Ben. They needed more than one pair of eyes in the sky for this mission. For me, it would be an easy one. Set up perch and watch. I wouldn't even be going in. For a job like this, it was about as safe as it got.

Once we were given our assignments, I rolled my eyes, finding myself stuck in a room with Lachlan. It wasn't that I didn't like the dingo. It was just that he was worried about me, and I knew it. I'd actually opened up in the last few therapy sessions we'd had, and I worried it would change things between us now. Not that he'd done anything or said anything to make me believe that, it was just a fear.

"Looks like we're rooming together."

He was younger than me by a few years having graduated college not all that long ago. He also wasn't mated so we'd been in different places since he joined the team. We didn't exactly hang out much or anything.

Actually, I rarely just hung out with anyone.

Annie, I thought.

She'd hated the idea of me having friends. I'd turned into a workaholic just to find excuses to hang out with the guys . . . and get away from her.

When I really thought about it, things hadn't been right with Annie for a very long time. I knew the things she said and did weren't okay, but only in hindsight now could I allow myself to believe that. When I was living it, it was easier to tell myself that it was just normal, a part of mated life.

For a long time, I believed that, too.

Now having Abby in my life, I was starting to see just how wrong I was. Things hadn't been normal with Annie. Or maybe they had and what I have now with Abby is something special.

I preferred to believe that than to allow myself to accept that I'd let

things escalate to the point of abuse with Annie. It was a hard pill to swallow. But I never dreamed life could be so drastically different.

Seeing Abby with the other mates, supporting them and accepting their support too, it had meant the world to me. How many times had I begged Annie to give them a try and get to know them. She'd appease me once in a while, but rarely, and after a while I just stopped asking.

In contrast, Abby had jumped right in. I didn't even know they were meeting up and then going to hang out. It was like she had a bit of a life of her own, and that wasn't something I was used to. If nothing else, I always knew where Annie was and what she was doing . . . hadn't I?

"Are you okay?" Lachlan asked.

I groaned. "Is that my friend or my therapist asking?"

He considered that for a moment. "Friend."

"Then I'm fine."

He rolled his eyes but didn't press me to talk about it. So of course, that just made me want to talk about it.

"Can I talk to my therapist instead?" I blurted out.

He grinned. "Yes."

"I don't know how to handle any of this. With Annie, I knew the rules and all her games. I didn't feel anything but obligation to her."

"And now with Abby?"

"It's all different. I really care about her, and if I had any freaking clue what love felt like, I may even admit I'm falling in love with her. But it's all happening so fast and it's terrifying. Before Annie and I mated, we'd been happy too. What if everything changes again if I take Abby as a mate?"

He scoffed, "If? She is your mate, Tucker. Your true mate. You aren't complete without her. I'd wager money that you'll not only bond with her but will do it before the new year."

I rolled my eyes. As fast as things were moving with Abby, I couldn't deny that possibility. But thinking about it scared the shit out of me. I was finally free and some part of me just wanted to dive headfirst back into another long-term relationship. It was messed up.

"No comment?"

I shrugged. "I don't know what to say. I don't know anything anymore."

"Is Abby treating you okay?" he asked seriously.

“Better than anyone ever has in my entire life. She’s not just gorgeous and fun, but she cares. She listens to me when I need to talk and seems to know not to ask when I don’t. She’s integrating herself into every aspect of my life.”

“And this bothers you?”

“Not at all. But that fact that it doesn’t bother me also scares the shit out of me.”

“Explain.”

“One second I’m in a terrible relationship where my homelife is hell. The next, everything’s perfect, exactly what I always imagined it could be.”

“And you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop now.”

I nodded. “Exactly. You know the messed-up thing? All these years Annie has begged, pleaded, and demanded for me to quit this job. She had a thousand excuses about why it would be for the best. And I always told her no. Abby never once asked me to quit, but the second I got the text today, the first thing through my mind was that maybe it was time to quit and try something new.”

“You’re quitting?”

“No. But I briefly thought about it.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Abby. She said what we do is important and that I couldn’t worry about her, she can take care of herself.” And then there had been more, oh so much more, but I damn sure wasn’t going to tell that part to Lachlan. “Talk about night and day.”

“Reaffirms my stance on waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“My own true mate.”

I sighed. “I feel like I should feel guilty for moving on so quickly.”

“But you don’t?”

I shook my head. “Instead, I feel more guilty for not having waited for Abby in the first place.”

“And if you had, would you have stayed in your home pack? Would you even have come here to Westin Force?”

“I don’t know.”

“But if you hadn’t, would you even have crossed paths with Abby?”

I growled.

“Relax. I’m just saying there was a chain of events beyond your control that brought the two of you together. How can you be so certain that Annie hadn’t been part of that plan all along?”

I groaned. “Now you’re just trying to screw with my head. We have a long day tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond before turning out my light and rolling over to go to sleep, but not before I picked up my phone to text Abby.

ME: Made it safely to the hotel. Calling it an early night.

I waited for the reply, but for a few minutes, nothing happened.

At last, the ding rang like music to my ears.

ABBY: Sweet dreams. I’m lying here naked wishing you were here.

What the hell?

I instantly grew hard at the thought.

ME: I’m stuck sharing a room with Lachie.

My phone rang, and I smiled when I saw her name on the screen.

“Miss me already?”

“Always,” she said.

It was crazy how much her voice soothed my wolf. Just hearing her talk brought me unexplainable peace.

“Is it okay that I called?”

“Of course. We’re settled in for the night, nothing to worry about.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Are you really naked?”

Lachlan cleared his throat and rolled his eyes as I looked over at him guiltily.

He got up and left.

“You have half an hour. I’ll be down at the bar.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“I’ve been on the sidelines of more true mates than you can possibly imagine. Trust me, it’s fine. Take care of your, um, business. But I’m calling it a night in thirty.”

I chuckled as he left.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Nothing. Now are you serious about being naked?”

“I am.”

“Touch yourself and tell me how wet you are.”

“Tucker,” she said in a husky voice.

“Do it.”

I had never been the dominant one in a relationship before, and truth be told, I wasn't now. Abby and I were more like equal partners, where I could take control or relinquish to her depending on the moment. I enjoyed it immensely.

She giggled. “You're lucky I had lots of wine tonight.”

I wanted to hear about her day, but I wanted to hear her come even more.

I had gone to bed with a smile on my face and woke up grinning the next day.

“Did you find a way to smuggle Abby in your suitcase or something?” Walker asked.

“Phone sex,” Lachlan said.

“Dude, what happened to patient confidentiality?”

“That was not me, the therapist, you displaced for a freaking hour last night. I was trying to be nice by giving you half an hour.”

“I'm sorry we ran long.”

This caused several chuckles, but I was too happy to even care.

“Settle down,” Silas barked once we had all boarded. “I don't give a shit about Tucker's love life. It's time to get serious. Our intel indicates a potentially large collection here. How this asshole managed to slip under our radar so far is beyond me. We're walking in largely blind though.”

He passed out folders with more details.

“Xavier Fortin. He's made his fortune in wine.”

“Damn good wine,” Jake said, causing everyone to chuckle.

“There's a cellar in the marked quadrant in your folders. It's supposed to be one of five wine cellars on property but the only one currently not used for wine. Taylor was able to confirm his sale of seven new shifters at a recent auction. Heat signatures show a lot of people at this location, yet it is marked with signs depicting danger and keep out.”

“You think that's a cover for the witches?” Colin asked.

“We do.”

“Couldn't it be a drug lab or something?” Lachlan asked.

“Wouldn’t be the first meth lab we’ve walked in on,” Baine said.
“Those are always fun. Big booms.”

“You are seriously sick,” Grant told him.

“Whatever. I like to watch things explode, and those are almost always epic.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. I liked to blow stuff up too, but not like Baine.

Ben slid into the seat next to me and pulled out his schematics to compare to mine.

“I’m going to take the east side, and you’ll be off to the west. I need you to cover this south corridor because it’s a blind spot from where I’ll be over here.”

“That’s not a problem,” I assured him.

This wasn’t the first case Ben and I had worked together. Although he had joined Bravo shortly before I switched over to Delta, our two units had merged on numerous jobs over the years. I liked Ben a lot. He was easy going but had laser sharp focus. I appreciated that.

Being a sniper had never been my dream and it wasn’t the only skill I possessed on the Force, but I was damn good at it. For Delta, it wasn’t as necessary to have a sniper as Bravo team. So I filled in when needed, like times such as this.

“The bus is going to drop off here, and while the others are readying, you and I will take off right away. It’s important that we get set in position as quickly as possible.”

“I know the drill, Ben. I have done this a time or two.”

He smiled. “I know. I just want to make sure we’re all set and that you know not just your job but mine as well.”

There weren’t a ton of trees around the vineyard, but there was a small patch near the cellar. Ben would be taking to the sky, but I had two options, one in the tree, and one on the ground. I had already looked over the plans and knew that I was going to have to make a judgement call as to which was my best vantage point once we got there.

I also know that if things went smoothly, this was going to be a hell of a boring mission for me. As I thought of Abby, I realized that, for once, I was okay with that.

Twenty minutes later, we were exiting the van and pairing off to

prepare for the mission.

Ben and I grabbed our gear and took off running. When we reached our mark, he veered off to the east while I headed west. Quietly, and under the cover of a small patch of trees, I made my way to my position.

The tree that was identified as a possibility wasn't viable without climbing gear, something no one thought would be necessary, so instead, I found a section of heavy brush and settled in. I could easily see the door as well as the entirety of the area to the north where I knew Ben had a few blind spots. Overall, it was a good spot.

“Eagle One, this is Eagle Two. I'm in position.”

“Copy that, Eagle Two. Give me three minutes. Watch my six.”

I pulled out my binoculars and scanned the area. It was next to impossible to see him, but since I knew his general location, it helped.

A truck was rolling in from the north, and I knew damn well it wasn't our guys.

“Eagle One, hold your position. We have company incoming.”

The truck came to a stop no more than twenty yards from me. My heart was racing as three women were pushed out of the back in handcuffs and escorted by two armed men.

“How many?” Ben asked. “Can't make it out from here.”

“Five. Two armed. Three victims.”

“More witches?”

“Can't tell from here.”

“Toss them in with the other freaks,” one of the guys said.

I had to fight back a growl.

“Are we sure these cuffs are working? That fire breathing one we had to put down last week scared the shit out of me.”

“How many times do I have to tell you they work? Curbs their powers or some shit like that.”

“We've never had so many at once. What if they try to escape?”

“They won't. And it doesn't matter. They'll be gone tomorrow and no longer our problem. Abominations are what they are. Killing them is our only option.”

One of the girls tried to scream and run, but the bigger of the two men grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder. The others followed orders without complaint.

“I see them,” Ben said as they rounded the corner to the front of the cellar. The other man opened the door and then shoved the two inside. I heard screams and noises that sounded like they were falling down stairs.

“Hold the door,” the big one said as he pulled the girl off his shoulder and then tossed her inside like he was taking out the trash.

“Did you see that?” I asked Ben.

“I saw. They have no care for humanity.”

“I don’t think they see them as humans.” I relayed what I’d overheard as I watched them get in the truck and drive away.

“I’m going to call it in and let the team know we need to move now.”

Things moved quickly as four small units positioned around the cellar. Silas’s team moved in first as Baine blew the lock off the door. They stood guard at the top as both Michael and Painter’s teams went inside while Linc headed up the final team helping to stand guard outside.

Movement caught my eye, and I pulled out my binoculars once more.

“Shit! We’ve got incoming to the north.”

“I see them, but I’m not high enough to get a shot. Go for the tires, Eagle Two.”

“Yes sir.”

I sighted in my rifle aiming at the front driver’s side tire. My silenced weapon gave little more than a pop as I pulled the trigger. The tire blew as the driver swerved before hitting a tree.

“Down for now. We need to move faster.”

“We’ve got a problem,” Michael said.

“We don’t have time for problems,” Silas barked.

“These people are half starved. Most can barely make up the steps let alone all the way back to the bus.”

“Shit! How many are there?” he asked.

“Dozens. Thirty or forty at least,” Michael said.

“Grant and Colin, fall back to the rendezvous point. We’ll get as many as we can. Set up medical.”

“Two coming in on foot,” I reported. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get tranquilizers before they get any closer,” Silas ordered.

“Eagle One?”

“I don’t have the shot. Take it Eagle Two.”

I didn’t relish shooting another living being, not even assholes like

these, but I knew I had to do it for the safety of all involved and those poor innocents scheduled to die.

Without overthinking it, I quickly and quietly removed the bullets and readied the tranqs.

I said a quick prayer, lined up my first target and shot. Before the bullet even hit, I moved to the next and shot. The first one went down, and before the other could even react, he too fell to the ground.

“Shots taken. Two successful hits. All’s clear.”

Silas barked some more orders and in a matter of minutes, the first of the witches were being removed from the cellar. One by one, each person appeared with at least two of the victims draped across their arms.

They ranged in age from four to one hundred and two. Many were covered in sores, and they all looked half starved.

I wanted to leave my position and help with the rescue, but I knew I couldn’t. Even though eminent danger was down, someone else could drive up to check on them at any second.

“How many more?” I heard Ben ask.

“Six,” Michael replied.

Something caught my eye as my head whipped to the right. I thought I was just imagining it, but then I saw it as the sun glinted off the barrel of a gun.

“Get down,” I yelled as I picked up my rifle and shot, missing in my haste. “Shit!”

“I see him,” Ben said calmly.

Seconds later I heard the ping of his silenced gun and saw the threat neutralized through my scope.

“Nice shot, Eagle One.”

“You almost had him. I just had a better angle. Good spotting.”

My heart was racing as I scanned the area for any further signs of threat.

“All clear,” I said.

“All clear,” Ben confirmed.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Silas announced as I watched the others retreat with far too many rescues. It made me sick to my stomach to think of it.

Just like Ben and I were the first to arrive and set up, we were the last

to retreat. After the almost sneak attack, we were both on high alert watching closely for any signs of trouble.

“Move into position two,” he finally told me.

I grabbed my things and took off running, sliding into place and pulling out my gun to sweep the area as they loaded everyone into the bus.

“Eagle Two in position. All clear.”

A few minutes later, Ben confirmed the same.

We stayed on watch until everyone was safely loaded.

“Shit! We have incoming,” I said as two more trucks pulled onto the practically hidden path we’d driven in on. “Exit one is compromised. Two vehicles coming in hot.”

“Get them out of here,” Ben said. “Move to backup plan. We’ve got your six.”

I wanted to groan, knowing what that meant. Ben and I would stay behind and do whatever necessary to allow the others a clean escape.

The bus pulled away minutes before the incoming trucks arrived on site. They didn’t give pursuit, instead they turned down towards the cellar at a fast speed. I relaxed a little knowing it would allow time for the bus to successfully get away.

As was customary, Ben and I stayed in our position for extra minutes. Just as I was about to move, gunshots rang out through the air.

I looked up to Ben almost entirely camouflaged in his hidden spot. If I didn’t know exactly where he was, I wasn’t sure I could find him. He was damn good at what he did. And I knew from his vantage point he could see down the road to the cellar, whereas I was watching the entrance from the road.

My biggest concern was that no one was watching the secondary plan exit, unless Tarron set up video surveillance there. I’d been too focused on my own part of the mission to ask.

“Stay put,” Ben said.

For hours we sat there watching and waiting. On my end there was nothing further until two of the three trucks we’d encountered pulled out, passing by me within a few feet as they left the way they’d come.

By then the sun was setting in the sky and I knew it was going to be a long night ahead of us as we packed up and made our way on foot to the next rendezvous point once Ben gave me the all clear.

Abby

Chapter 27

Tucker had been gone for three days already and I missed him terribly. It was odd to me that I could miss someone I'd just met. In such a short time he'd become my whole world, and that was a little terrifying.

Instead of stressing about it, I poured myself into a new book. It wasn't even something I'd planned, and it was another werewolf book. When I'd found out I was a wolf shifter, I'd sworn to myself that I wouldn't write another one. But it felt a bit therapeutic as I processed everything that had happened since arriving in San Marco.

It wasn't like I was writing my life story or anything. I was just channeling some of my questions, fears, and concerns into a story. It helped me process my own emotions in a way that would probably concern Lachlan if I tried to explain it in one of our sessions.

But whatever. This was me and how I dealt with the hard stuff, like falling in love with a married man. Maybe I hadn't fallen for him when he was still married, or mated, or whatever, but I couldn't deny that it had happened pretty quickly after her death.

Was that just the bond I was feeling? Or was it really love? I'd told him love, but did I even know what that meant? I'd never really been in a serious long-term relationship. Was I even capable of one?

I didn't know what the hell I was doing here anymore, and without Tucker, my wolf was going crazy, making me feel uneasy in my own skin. I jumped at the slightest noise, like the ice falling into place in the freezer or a branch scratching a window upstairs.

All of my senses were heightened, and it made me edgy.

There was a knock on my door that had me jumping as I screamed.

Callie burst through the front door with her gun drawn as she moved from room to room, stopping when she saw me.

"What's wrong? I heard a scream."

"I wasn't expecting you. It startled me."

“When I knocked?”

“Yes.”

She groaned.

“I’m sorry. I’m just a bit jumpy right now.”

She gave me a sad look.

“What?”

“It’s just not that uncommon.”

“It’s not?”

“No. Abby, you’re still mating and that, well, it makes you a bit crazy.”

“Definitely feels more crazy than usual.”

She laughed.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Just stopped by to check on you. Both the kids are staying over at friends’ houses today so I’m not in a hurry to go home to a silent house.”

“I was just writing, but I can put a pin in it for a movie if you twist my arm.”

“Want me to call the girls over?”

“Definitely. I’ll make some popcorn.”

While I went to the kitchen and started the popcorn, I started to go into sensory overload again. I could hear the oil sizzling and when the first kernel popped I jumped.

I must have squealed a little because Callie came running in to check on me. At least her gun wasn’t drawn this time.

“Are you okay? Did the grease get you?”

“No. I’m fine.”

She looked me over with her lips pursed into a straight line.

“What is it, Abby?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just really on edge and it’s like I can hear everything. My senses feel like they’re overloaded or short-circuiting or something. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Is that all? Callie, something is wrong with me.”

She smiled and reached over to pat my hand.

“You haven’t been shifting for long, have you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know.”

“How do you not know?”

“Because I was apparently shifting in my sleep and thought it was a crazy dream, so I have no idea when the dreams started becoming reality.”

“Oh, you poor thing. When was the last time you know you shifted?”

“The day Tucker found me in my fur. You remember. You saw me running through town and called him to find me.”

“Abby, that was weeks ago.”

I nodded.

“Your wolf wants out. Let her out.”

“I don’t know how,” I admitted. “I didn’t do it on purpose that time. I thought I was dreaming up a new story or something. It didn’t even seem weird that you and a few others were in it because I’d just come to town and you were all new faces to me.”

She shook her head. Okay, well Christine and Mirage are on the way. When they get here, we’re going for a run before movie time.”

I groaned. “But Callie, I really don’t know how.”

“You did it once. You can do it again. Besides, your wolf knows. All you have to do is set her free.”

She made it sound easy, but how the hell was I supposed to set my wolf free?

Once the girls arrived, Callie filled them in on the change of plans. Then she led us all out to my back porch.

I started to get uncomfortable when they began taking their clothes off.

“I can’t do this,” I told them, turning my back on them, ready to bolt.

“Stop,” Mirage said. “You’re just nervous. But Callie’s right, you shouldn’t let your wolf stay cooped up for too long. Trust me on this. I went years without shifting and thought I would go insane. But when Colin came into my life, it got even worse, and she was more demanding than ever. You need to do this, Abby.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Just follow our lead. Callie and Christine will shift first and I’ll stay back and make sure you transition okay. Then we’ll all go for a run, and it will be great. You’ll see.”

“This is insane. You know that right? You’re all naked. Anyone could come by and see you.”

“They won’t think anything of it,” she insisted.

But I was starting to panic.

Suddenly everything around me sort of shimmered and I was standing in the middle of a forest.

“What’s happening? Where’d you guys go? Callie? Christine? Mirage? Is anyone out there?”

Even while I was on the verge of freaking out, something about the trees and the leaves blowing in the wind soothed me. My racing heart began to slow.

“Relax, Abby. I’m right here,” Mirage said, but I couldn’t see her.

I reached out my arms and started to feel around like I was blind or something.

She giggled and then suddenly appeared in the woods with me.

“Where are we?”

“Still standing on your back porch. I thought this might help you calm down some.”

“How are you doing this?”

“You’ve heard a bit about the Collectors and how our men are out there rescuing shifters with special powers. Well, I’m one of them. That’s how Colin and I met. He came to rescue me. I’m what we call a witch and have the gift of mirage. That’s where my name comes from. As long as it’s a place I’ve been to or at least seen on TV or in pictures, I can transport you there in your mind. Physically we’re still at your house, but mentally this is one of my favorite places to run to. Callie and Christine have already shifted. And as you can see, I’m still naked.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “That part’s going to take some getting used to. I was raised pretty modest. Getting naked around Tucker is one thing, but with everyone else feels a little weird.”

She smiled. “Try not to think about it and just take your clothes off.”

I snorted.

“Trust me. It’ll save you a ton on clothes later. Otherwise, they’ll just shred to pieces and have to be replaced.”

“That’s basically what Tucker told me too.”

“So clothes off and let’s do this. We can even run here if you want. I can show you the way.”

I took a deep breath, held it, and then released it all at once. “Okay. I

can do this.”

“You can do this.”

Still, I turned my back to her as I stripped out of my clothes.

“Now what?”

“Just set your wolf free.”

I stood there waiting for something to happen, but it didn't. So, I closed my eyes and tried to will it to happen. Still, nothing.

Frustrated, I huffed. “It's not working.”

“Open your eyes, Abby, and look out at the trees I'm showing you. Now relax and just breathe normally. Clear your mind and feel your wolf's presence.”

I did as she said, but my eyes drifted shut once more. In that moment my whole body quivered.

“You did it!” she cheered.

I opened my eyes and had to look up at her. I looked down to see two black paws where my feet should have been.

An odd chuffing sound came out of me when I tried to talk.

“Okay, I'm lifting the blind now. Don't freak out. We're still on the porch.”

Suddenly the trees disappeared and sure enough, we were on my porch with two wolves staring curiously at me. In the blink of an eye another appeared beside me. I knew it was Mirage, and somehow, I knew the other black wolf was Christine.

Callie's wolf barked and led the way as the four of us ran down the stairs into the yard, and then around the house, crossing the street, and heading towards the park, then beyond and into the woods.

I loved the feeling of the wind in my fur as my legs stretched out in a full sprint. I could hear the beat of our paws hitting the ground in a natural cadence. The birds chirped a little louder. The scurry of small animals in the forest was pronounced. And everything around me just smelled stronger and looked brighter. It was surreal.

Mirage took over to lead the way jumping over logs and splashing through a stream. It was the most fun I could remember having in a long time. And soon we were there in the woods just as I'd seen standing on my back porch.

Time lost all concept, and I had no idea if we'd been gone ten minutes

or ten hours when Christine barked and nodded her head back towards the way we'd come.

I was a little sad to return, but I stayed with my friends as we ran all the way back to my house.

When they shifted, so did I. I was too pumped up with excitement to even notice we were all standing there naked.

"That was amazing!"

They smiled proudly at me and nodded.

"Oh my gosh. You guys, I'm a wolf!"

"We already knew that," Chris said.

"No, I mean it. I'm a wolf! Like a real wolf." I looked up to the sky and I howled. "Arrooo!"

The others giggled but followed my lead.

"Arrooo!"

"Until now it just hasn't felt real, but this is real and I'm a freaking wolf! This is the coolest day ever."

I felt like I had just won the lottery or something. And I supposed if I stopped to think about it all, it really was like winning the lottery . . . the genetic lottery.

Life suddenly seemed so clear to me. I was Abigail Matroni, New York Times bestselling author, living my own paranormal romance. I was successful. I had just inherited a small fortune. I had friends and the hottest boyfriend ever. But most importantly, I realized I had found my tribe, my pack. After my mom died, I never expected to have that again. But as I looked at these women standing naked before me, I just knew. This was my family now and that made me feel like a part of something special again. This was exactly where I was meant to be.

"How about that popcorn and a movie now?" Christine suggested.

We dressed and headed back inside. My heart was full. Everything I'd ever dreamed of was right here in San Marco.

Tucker

Chapter 28

The extraction had been a clean one, or as clean as we could hope. Once Ben and I packed up and headed out, we spent the better part of a few hours carefully making our way off Fortin land and ensuring we left no trace behind. That included hiding tire tracks the bus had left behind in a few muddy places. At that point we were on cleanup duty, making it as impossible to track us as humanly possible.

There had been no signs of a tail and once we finally reached the edge of the property, we hauled ass along the edge of the road until we reached a gas station three miles away. At that point we'd called in our location and were given pickup coordinates another five miles away.

It had been a long night and by the time we got back to the hotel, I'd crashed hard in bed.

Expecting to go home the next day, I was surprised to find we stuck around a few more days interrogating the victims we'd rescued.

"Policy changes," Colin finally told me. "Since we rushed home on our last major mission and led Mirage's Collector right to our doorstep, they are taking every possible precaution now."

I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not, because two days later, a few of Fortin's goons showed up at the hotel looking for their "property". Lachlan and Jake had intercepted them. Whatever they said had been enough to get the men to leave, but we were packed and ready to roll out within the hour, not wanting to risk their return.

"Tarron's done a thorough check and hasn't found any tracking devices," Silas assured us once we were loaded up on the bus.

"So how the hell did they find us?" Walker asked.

"Simple. It's a relatively remote area and Fortin has the finances and resources to reach out through the community. Rookie mistake. I'd bet money on the hotel staff. This is why we should never stay in a hotel as a large group, let alone bring these victims back there with us. It draws too

much attention and makes us sitting ducks,” Taylor insisted.

“She might be right,” Michael agreed.

“We’re headed for a safehouse. Turn in your phones,” he said, passing a metal faraday box around.

I hadn’t gotten to call Abby and let her know I was okay. Now I had no clue when I might be able to do that. The thought didn’t sit well with my wolf.

“Stay calm,” Walker warned me as he took the seat next to me. “We have a bus filled with terrified witches. We do not need you losing it right now.”

“Is it that obvious?”

He smirked. “Seen it a few times now. I know the signs to look for, and you sir, are very much a mating male.”

“Abby’s fine,” Michael said, turning around in his seat in front of us. “I spoke with Callie this morning before all this shit happened. The girls stayed the night with her last night, even coaxed her wolf out to go for a run. She’s just fine, and she’s safe. I promise.”

“Thanks, man.”

It warmed my heart to know that she was accepting the other mates into her world. Annie never had and that had always made me worry even more for her, though I knew she was strong enough to take care of herself. It wasn’t that Abby was fragile or anything, but in a matter of weeks she’d discovered she had a distant relative die, inherited a large estate and trust, moved halfway across the country, discovered she wasn’t exactly human, and dealt with the mating call to me like a champ. It was a lot for any person to take on. But she had done it with grace. I just feared the reality of it all would come crashing in around her at some point, and I wanted to be there for her when that happened.

This mission was shit timing.

Of course, I could have begged off. Between Abby and the mating stuff, and then Annie’s death and all that shit to sort out, no one would have faulted me for staying behind. Hell, I was shocked Michael hadn’t insisted on it. But I knew my job, and I took it seriously, even when it meant putting my life and needs on hold temporarily.

“I’m okay,” I said aloud. “We’ll be heading home soon, and everything will be just fine.”

The safehouse was a few hours away and not in the direction of home. I knew that was on purpose and precautionary, but it still sucked.

By the time we arrived, settled into the house, and set up surveillance, my wolf was fully stressed. I started pacing the living room floor as I talked with some of the people we rescued.

They had been in worse shape than any other rescue mission we'd seen. Grant had spent hours patching some of them up, and we'd had to allow some of them to shift upon arrival at the safehouse to heal enough to proceed with interrogations.

Of all the witches we saved, only five were hanging out in the living room okay to talk.

"Is he okay?" one of them asked.

Walker looked up at me and shook his head.

"He's fine. Mating male," he explained.

"Oh. Where's his mate?"

"Back home."

"Where exactly is that?" a guy asked.

"Sorry. We're asking the questions right now. You'll be briefed on all of that later."

The guy growled at us.

"Wolf?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"What's your name?"

"Nate."

"How long were you inside?"

"I was bought last week at an auction. This was my third collection, but man, I'm telling you, something was not right there."

"It wasn't really a Collection," a girl argued.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, that guy was no Collector. He was evil and he was going to kill us all. He called us abominations and told us his mission was rid this Earth of our evil filth."

"What?" Walker asked.

"You heard me. I've been in other Collections. Collectors usually care for us. Even though we're still prisoners, it's not a terrible life. But this guy was going to murder us all. That's why so many are injured."

“I saw them throw a few of you into the cellar, and from what I heard, I believe her,” I told them.

“There were stairs that led down from the entrance. He literally threw those poor girls down the stairs. He didn’t care about us. We weren’t even human in his mind. I mean, I know we’re not exactly, but at the same time we are,” she insisted.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Avery.”

“And your spirit animal?”

“Panther.”

“How long were you there?”

“About a week or so. It’s totally dark down in that hole so it’s hard to tell for sure.”

She hugged a smaller girl to her.

“This is Kaira. She’s just a cub. Hasn’t even shifted for the first time yet.”

“What are you, Kaira?” I asked.

She shrugged and looked up to Avery for help.

“Her mother was a lioness, but her father was a tiger. Or at least they think he was a tiger. Her mother was raped by what she believed was a gang of tigers.”

I cringed thinking about Liam’s mate back home. Maddie had gone through something similar and had a son, Oscar, as the result. Oscar had been raised in the Pack not knowing if he was wolf or tiger. I knew for a fact he was a tiger, but he’d also begged me to keep that secret as he wasn’t ready to tell his family, but I’d caught him shifting out on rounds early one morning. I felt sorry for the kid, so my heart immediately went to Kaira. She looked so young and scared.

“You’re going to be okay, Kaira. In fact, if you and your mother would like to return home with us when we’re done here, I have someone I’d really like you to meet.”

“You do?” she asked, speaking for the first time.

“Yes. His name’s Oscar and he doesn’t know what he is either. His mom is a wolf, and his dad was also a tiger.”

Her eyes widened. “Like mine?”

“Exactly like yours I’m afraid.”

I knew that Maddie and Liam had allowed that asshole into Oscar's life after confirming paternity, but every time I saw him, I just wanted to rip his throat out for what he had done to her. But then I had to remind myself of something Liam had told me when I asked him why he hadn't.

He simply said, "Without him, we wouldn't have Oscar. I wouldn't have my son."

That had stayed with me over the years. Some may see him as weak for not ending the guy's life, but I respected the hell out of him for it. He was a far better man than I could be, and no kid could ask for a better father.

"I'd like to meet him."

"Great. Where's your mother? We can discuss it with her."

She got quiet and looked up to Avery.

"Her mother died shortly before I arrived."

"He killed her in the last round. I hid like a coward. I should have died with her," Kaira told me.

"Who killed your mother?" I asked.

"Xavier Fortin. He's a monster."

"How did you hide?" Walker asked her.

She looked up at Avery who nodded.

One minute the girl was sitting there and the next she vanished before our eyes.

"Invisibility?" he asked.

"More like camouflage," Avery explained as she reached over and touched her.

I could just barely make out the shape of the girl still sitting exactly where we'd last seen her.

"Cool," I said with a smile.

She reappeared, grinning back at me.

"Mom told me to hide, so I did. I haven't quite mastered how to hide someone else yet." She looked so sad. "If I could, then Mom wouldn't have died."

"That's not your fault," Avery insisted.

"She was a really good Mom. She wasn't even a witch but had convinced our first Collector that we had to be taken as a pair and so from there we'd always been sold as such."

"She latched on to me when I arrived at the cellar and I've barely let

her out of my sight since,” Avery insisted.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Nate asked.

The others had been listening in the whole time, but at his question, they perked up and turned their undivided attention to me and Walker.

“Once we have the all clear and know we’re safe, we’ll take you back to our headquarters. You’ll be safe there for as long as you’d like. We have resources available to get you home, if you choose, or help get you back on your feet,” Walker said.

Nate scoffed. “Home? I don’t even know what that is anymore.”

“Me either,” another mumbled.

A young woman grabbed a notebook from the table and quickly jotted something down before handing it to me. She was small with blonde hair. Her gaze wouldn’t quite meet mine, but as she shoved the notebook into my hand after I didn’t take it right away, her shockingly beautiful eyes met mine. One was blue and the other a vibrant green.

She instantly reminded me of a friend of mine, Susan’s sister, Sapphire. She too had unique eyes like that. It was such a rare combination that I wanted to see them again, but the girl quickly looked away. She stared at the floor wringing her hands in her lap as I finally read what she wrote.

What kind of collection is this?

I looked back at her sadly, though she still wouldn’t meet my gaze again.

“What’s your name?” I asked her, handing her the notepad once more.

Her handwriting was practically unreadable, so it took me a moment to figure it out when she handed it to me.

“Shayne?”

She shook her head as she stared at the floor.

“Schlee?”

Frustrated, she grabbed the notebook and tried again.

“Shyanne?”

She grunted a little as she shook her head once more.

I stared down at the letters.

“Shy.”

She nodded and hopeful eyes briefly shot up to meet mine before looking away again.

“Lee. Shylee?”

That earned me a little smile.

“Well Shylee, we aren’t Collectors. We’re Westin Force and when we find a Collection like this, it’s our job to come in and shut it down. We rescue people like you and help you get back on your feet. It’s a fresh start, a new life. Do you understand?”

She shook her head.

Nate laughed. “There is no new life for people like us. Everyone wants us for our powers. I’m forty-three years old. I was born into a Collection, as my mother was a witch too. I was only five when they separated us, and I’ve lived my whole life in captivity. Many of us here have similar stories. So no, we don’t understand what you’re saying. In a Collection we’re provided shelter, food, clothing, and all of our needs are met. We’re told what to do and when to do it. We’re like robots that need guidance. Are you going to provide for that?”

“To an extent until you acclimate to life on the outside. You’re free now or will be shortly. No one owns you. We aren’t going to tell you what to do or when to do it. But we will help guide you towards that independence, for those of you that need it.”

I hated hearing about someone born into this life. To live decades in captivity and not know anything else was unfathomable to me. It put my wolf back on edge as I started pacing once more. But my pacing seemed to unsettle Shylee so I tried to force myself to calm down.

Lachlan had come in at some point during our conversation and walked over to me.

“Take a break, Tucker. Walk away.”

“That guy wasn’t a Collector, Lachlan. He was a murderer.”

He nodded. “I know. I’ve spoken with a few of the victims already. Some of them are in rough shape. I’m just glad we brought Marie along for this one.”

“Is she getting the information we need?”

Marie was a powerful witch. She could look into a person’s eyes and see straight to their soul, all their darkest secrets. No one could hide anything from her. I’d seen enough to know I didn’t want her ever looking closely my way. I shuddered to think of the darkness she’d find there.

“She’s not on intel right now. Grant’s out of pain meds. She’s keeping the worst of them as comfortable as possible.”

I realized what he was saying and nodded somberly. I wouldn't trade places with Marie for anything in this world. Her gift was not only terrifying, but unimaginable to me. I had no desire to know the inner workings of anyone's mind, except maybe Abby's.

"Hey, is there a phone that's been cleared for use yet?" I asked him.

He stared at me for a moment and then rolled his eyes. "Go talk to Tarron."

I smiled. "Thanks."

I desperately needed to talk to my woman. It was a strange feeling, because in all my time on the Force, I'd never once even considered calling Annie while on a mission.

Abby

Chapter 29

I was out at the small grocery store in town when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number so I declined it. Seconds later the same number rang through. I wasn't in the habit of answering calls I didn't recognize, but something told me I needed to answer this one. Tucker was away on a mission and who knows what was happening.

With a shaky hand, I swiped to accept the call.

"H-hello?"

"Babe? What's wrong?" Tucker asked with a low growl.

"Tucker?"

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

A thrill shot up my spine at the sound of his voice and I smiled so hard it hurt.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just didn't recognize the number and was bracing for the worst when you called twice in a row like that."

"Sorry. We ran into some complications and had to turn in our phones. Tarron's loaning me this one to check in with you just because we're still mating."

He sounded irritated by that.

"How are you?" I asked.

The girls and I had had a big heart-to-heart talk, and they explained a lot about life as a Delta mate, including things we should ask and things to avoid if you were lucky enough to get a call while the guys were away. Like I knew not to ask where he was or how the mission was going, but it was okay to ask how he was doing personally.

"Much better now that I get to hear your voice. I miss you," he admitted.

Somehow my smile grew even bigger, so much so that it made my cheeks ache, but I didn't care.

"Miss you too."

“What have you been up to?”

“Let’s see, the house is all decorated. I’ve almost finished my Christmas shopping, I started a new book, and have had more girl time than I’ve had the rest of my life combined.”

“Are you okay with that? I can ask them to back off if it’s too much.”

“Too much? Tucker, I love it. It’s been wonderful knowing I’m not alone here worrying about you and missing you.”

“I’m glad. Makes me worry just a little less. I’ll be glad when we get back home.”

It was easy for me to be open and honest with him now. If I’d learned anything this year, it was to embrace the moment and not waste time on the stupid stuff. Tell the people you care about how much they mean to you every single day, because it could all be gone in the blink of an eye, and if something happened to him, I would never forgive myself if he didn’t know exactly how much I loved him.

“I love you, Tucker.”

“I gotta go. I was lucky they let me call at all. I’ll see you soon, Abby.”

He hung up the phone and I sat there staring at it. I sighed. I didn’t fully know all of what he had lived through with Annie, but I knew it wasn’t good. I’d once again put myself out there and he hadn’t returned the sentiment. I really tried not to let myself be bothered by it. I hadn’t said it so he’d say it back. I’d said it because I meant it, and because I knew if something happened to him, I would forever regret not saying it. But still, the way he’d gotten off the phone so quickly afterwards didn’t make me feel great either.

He’s just busy, Abby. Stop reading too much into it, I chastised myself.

I knew if I went home now, I would just sit around rethinking everything to death.

“Is everything alright, young lady?” the man behind the meat counter asked.

“Great,” I told him. “My boyfriend called. He’s out of town right now.”

“Boyfriend, eh?”

“Uh, mate.” I blushed.

“That’s more like it. Now, what can I do for you?”

I hadn’t planned on buying anything special. I was still used to pinching pennies. Even after my books started taking off and making plenty of money, I’d invested it into the business and paid myself a very small paycheck each month. Technically, even before inheriting so much from Birdie, I’d been well off. My business thrived, but personally I’d remained poor, determined not to be wasteful with everything I had.

“You know what? How about four of your best steaks?” I told him, throwing caution to the wind. I could call the girls over for a nice dinner as a thanks to them for taking me under their wings and really showing me the ropes as a mate, a pack member, and a lady of Delta.

“You’ve got it. Celebrating anything special?”

“Not really, just a thanks to some pretty great friends.”

“Asparagus is on sale and goes well with a fancy meal, but Mirage hates the stuff, so don’t buy it.”

I was surprised at first, but then remembered what they’d warned me about. San Marco was a small town, and everyone knew everyone else’s business.

“I didn’t know that. Thanks, Mister . . .”

“Samson. Just call me Samson. Here you go. You girls enjoy your evening.”

“Thanks, Samson.”

I took the steaks and put them in my cart, trying not to gawk at the price tag he affixed to it. This was a special occasion and not a habit I’d allow myself.

I finished my shopping, being sure to avoid the asparagus and paid for my groceries.

As I was leaving the store, I saw a couple yelling at Kyle and Kelsey on the corner. It looked heated. I averted my eyes and tried not to listen. I still didn’t know much about Pack life, but from what little I did know, no one should ever speak to an Alpha the way this woman was.

“My Annie’s body has barely cooled and he’s just out on a goddamn mission? He should be home in mourning. He hasn’t answered any of our calls.”

“Miss, I told you, he can’t take personal calls when he’s away on business,” Kyle said in a tone that told me he was about done with this lady.

But at the mention of Annie's name, the hair on my arms stood up.

"You'll have to excuse my mate, Alpha. Annie was our only daughter, our everything, and we're simply beside ourselves with grief. When we couldn't get through to Tucker, we didn't know what else to do, so we got in the truck and drove straight here," the man said.

My hands started to shake, and I dropped the bag of groceries. An apple popped out and rolled right in their direction. I stared at it, horrified.

It bounced off the woman's foot and she turned, then sniffed the air, and growled at me.

"Simmer down," Kyle ordered in a much less understanding manner. "You will not come here into my territory and growl at my people. Are we clear?"

Kelsey picked up the apple and walked over to hand it to me.

"Go home," she mouthed.

I nodded.

I was shaking all over and hair was sprouting up my arms when I stumbled through the door. Because I'd paid too damn much for the steaks to begin with, I took a second to put my groceries away, and then I ran back to the bedroom and climbed into bed, hiding under the blanket.

When my phone rang, I jumped. It was Christine.

"Hey, I was wondering what you're up to tonight."

"Annie's parents are here," I blurted out. "I saw them yelling at Kyle. They're looking for Tucker."

"They were yelling at Kyle? That's not gonna get them very far. Kyle has the patience and understanding of a saint, but trust me, he has a temper too. He won't tolerate that kind of behavior."

"I know, he told them as much when she growled at me. There's no way she could know, right? About me and Tucker I mean?"

"I mean it's possible she could smell him on you."

"But I've showered several times since he left."

"Yeah, but since you're mating, your scents will combine, so while it isn't his scent exactly, it could be strong enough to be familiar to her. Just depends on how close they were to him. Honestly, I'd have to sniff you to tell. Both of your scents are too familiar to me to notice unless I'm purposefully trying."

"What should I do?"

“Nothing. With Tucker out of town, it’s Kyle’s problem to deal with. Just stay away from them. I’m sure they won’t be here long.”

“Why do I feel so guilty, like I’m doing something wrong?”

“You’re not. That’s just your human upbringing talking. You’re his true mate. Shit timing maybe, but it’s not like either of you could help it.”

“What do I do, Chris?”

“Stay put, I’m coming over.”

“But aren’t you working today?”

“Yeah, but Liam won’t mind.”

True to her word, half an hour later she was on my front porch, and she wasn’t alone. I started to tear up at the sight of the three of them.

Callie opened the door and pulled me into her arms.

“It’s going to be okay, Abby.”

I nodded against her shoulder, feeling a little embarrassed.

“I bought ridiculously expensive steaks for dinner.”

“Can we save it for tomorrow? I ordered pizza. It’s being delivered,”

Mirage said.

I nodded. I didn’t feel like cooking now anyway.

“I love pizza,” I told her.

“Grab your purse. We’re taking you out first,” Christine told me.

“I’m not in the mood to go out.”

“You need a pick-me-up. Come on,” Callie said, leaving no room for argument.

I went back inside to get my purse and begrudgingly let them take me out.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” Callie said.

“Only my favorite place in all of Westin Pack,” Christine added.

Mirage just giggled. “It’s an experience.”

I had no idea what they were getting me into, but when we walked into a small boutique I’d seen in town I started to relax.

“Shopping therapy?”

“Sort of,” Christine said. “Sheila?” she yelled out as a woman came out of the back with Lucy, who was blushing furiously as she clutched a bag to her chest.

“Hi,” Lucy squeaked out as she practically ran from the store.

Callie and Christine both laughed.

“Micah is going to be a happy man tonight,” Mirage said.

I had no idea what they were talking about.

“Ladies. It’s wonderful to see you all. Feeling a little lonely with your men out of town?”

“Not exactly. Sheila, this is Abby. Abby, meet Sheila. She’s here to help with anything you might need. If you can dream it, she can get it,” Chris said.

“Uh, okay. Whatever that means. Hi Sheila. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you too, Abby. I was wondering when you’d get around to visiting me.”

“Sheila has the best kept secret in San Marco,” Callie said.

“It’s not a secret when everyone knows about it,” Mirage insisted.

“Come on. We’ll show you.”

Sheila nodded as the girls led me back to another room. Once inside I gasped, and my cheeks burned. I’d heard about places like this before, but I’d never been inside a sex toy shop before.

“Okay, so my treat. Pick something for you and something for Tucker,” Christine said with a wicked grin.

“I couldn’t possibly,” I blurted out.

“Yes, you can,” Mirage insisted. “We’ve got this. No problem. Come on, I’ll help.” In a very low voice barely audible she whispered, “I am strong. I am beautiful. I am powerful. I am a fighter. I will survive.”

“Mirage, you don’t have to be in here,” Chris said.

She stiffened beside me. “I’m okay. Colin and I have been here a few times now and it’s getting better.”

I didn’t know what they were talking about, but I knew I shouldn’t ask. It sounded personal, and if Mirage wanted to share with me, she would.

“I was in captivity for much of my life. Some of the seedier items in here can be triggers for me. I’m getting better though,” she explained.

I wrapped an arm around her, wanting to protect her from it all.

“We can go. I don’t have a clue what to do with any of this stuff anyway.”

“No, I’m good. Some of it’s fun even,” she confessed.

“Like what?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“Let’s see. Avoid anything on that side of the room.”

I looked up and gasped, seeing whips and leather things I had no idea what anyone would do with.

“But if you’re curious about them, just talk to me,” Christine said with a wink.

Mirage rolled her eyes. “She’s a first timer here. Go easy on her.” She walked me over to a shelf of bottles. “Massage oils, I do like these. There are all sorts. Some are even edible, but a can of whipped cream or bottle of chocolate sauce works even better.”

“Mirage!” Callie exclaimed. “I can’t believe you just said that. You’ve come a long way in a short time.”

She shrugged. “I don’t mind being a little adventurous, but only to an extent.”

“You’re sure you’re okay in here?” Callie asked.

“I wouldn’t be here if I couldn’t handle it,” she confirmed. “So, oils?”

“Maybe a massage oil and some sexy lingerie.”

It was the sort of thing I might write about in a book, but I’d never even think to do it myself.

“Okay,” I said, surprising myself.

They had me try on several different ensembles and insisted I model them. I was mortified.

“Girl, we’ve seen you naked. Get out here,” Christine ordered.

Reluctantly, I did. And it earned me some cheers and a catcall by Callie.

On my third set, she jumped up and threw her hands in the air.

“That’s the one! Oh my God, you look hot.”

“Yeah, Tucker’s going to trip over his own tongue when he sees you in that,” Christine assured me.

I was pretty sure I’d be way too embarrassed to ever show him, but I wasn’t about to tell my friends that.

For the oil, I settled on a non-edible one that was recommended for back massages and not internal use. I tried hard not to let those words of warning seep into my brain.

“Now something for you,” Chris said.

“Wait. Isn’t this all for me?”

“No. I mean you’ll enjoy it all, but you’ll want Tucker there to use it. You need something for those nights when he’s not there.”

Mirage rolled her eyes. “She means a vibrator.”

“Every girl needs one,” Christine insisted. “Especially on lonely nights when your mate is on a mission.”

I blushed furiously thinking back to the phone sex I’d had with Tucker.

“I have to know what’s going through your head right now,” Callie said.

“I don’t need a vibrator for that,” I blurted out.

The girls whooped with laughter.

“Just try it,” Christine finally said. “Here, this one’s my favorite.”

“Okay,” I conceded, just hoping it would get me out of that place faster. This was one of the craziest things I’d ever done in my life. Maybe that didn’t say much about me, but it was the truth. All words and little to no action . . . until Tucker.

Who knew? Maybe I would take a walk on the wild side and see what may come.

Tucker

Chapter 30

One call from Patrick O'Connell, head of Westin Force and Beta to the Alpha, and I was pulled from the mission. They'd given me no reason for it, which only made me think the worst. Something must be wrong with Abby.

When Annie had died, I'd known it immediately, but was that just because I was with Abby, my true mate, when it happened?

Would I know with such certainty if Abby died?

I wanted to throw up at the thought. I couldn't lose her.

Still, no one would tell me anything as I was given keys to a rental and told to drive straight home and report directly to Kyle.

I sped the entire way.

Wanting desperately to swing by Birdie's and ensure my mate was safe but following orders instead was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my entire life.

I'd been given my phone back and I'd tried to call her, but there had been no answer.

By the time I knocked on the door of the Alpha house, my wolf was ready to surge at any second.

"Oh, shit. Calm down," Kyle demanded when he saw me.

I growled and snapped my teeth at him before I regained control.

"I'm sorry, Alpha. Just tell me, is Abby okay?"

"What? Of course she is. Tucker, your mate is fine. Why would you think otherwise?"

"I was told Patrick pulled me from the mission and was ordered to report to you straight away. No one would tell me why or any details."

"Dammit. I'm sorry, man. No wonder you're a mess right now. I didn't have you pulled because of Abby."

"You didn't?"

"No."

“Then why?”

“Rhett and Dorothy are here.”

I thought for sure I was going to throw up now.

“Annie’s parents are here?”

“Yes. They demanded to know why you were out on a mission and not in mourning. And why a proper funeral hadn’t been established yet.”

“Do they know about Abby?”

“No.”

“So what did you tell them?”

“That if they thought they could demand anything in my territory, I’d have them kicked out faster than their heads could spin.”

I chuckled. “Now that I’d have loved to see. Where are they?”

“At your place.”

I groaned.

“They know you were out of town.”

“Good,” I said. “The last thing I need is for them to know I haven’t exactly been living there much lately.”

“People talk. You know that. I can’t guarantee someone won’t mention Abby to them, but given their attitudes upon arrival, I have confined them to your home. So really, it’s up to you what you decide to share with them.”

I sighed. “They’ll never understand.”

“I know. But here, this may help some.”

He handed me an urn with a plaque attached with Annie’s full name and dates of birth and death.

“I don’t want it,” I told him. “I need to put her in the past and keep her there.”

“I understand, but perhaps her parents would want her remains.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. I suppose I could ask.”

“They are requesting a funeral.”

“Here? But she hated it here and everyone in San Marco.”

“I know that, but I don’t know that they know that. So if it is what you need, just say the word. Kelsey is already making up some tentative plans. We were already working on plans for Birdie’s Life Celebration. It will mean a lot to the Pack to have a chance to say goodbye to her.”

“And Annie?”

“The Pack will come together for you in whatever you need, Tucker.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I’ll think about it.”

“I’d advise going to see your mate and calming down some before going home, but you are going to have to deal with them.”

“I know.”

I left Kyle’s and drove straight to Birdie’s. On the way, I tried Abby’s phone again, but no answer. I was still calling it even as I parked and jumped out to run into the house.

“Abby, Tucker’s calling you. Looks like you’ve had a few missed calls,” Mirage yelled.

“That’s weird. I haven’t heard from Michael yet,” Callie said.

I sighed in relief. She was here and she was fine. I took a moment to calm my wolf before I barged in and scared her.

“Get your sexy ass out here and let us see it,” Christine yelled.

That piqued my interest, and I walked inside, curious, just as Abby strutted down the hall and into the room in the sexiest lingerie I had ever seen.

A growl of approval ripped through me, causing the ladies to gasp and turn in my direction.

“Tucker?”

I just stared at her trying not to drool. All thoughts of my in-laws were long gone as she ran into my arms and kissed me.

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to need the vibrator now,” Christine said with a snort.

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I was down for it. Visions of pleasuring my mate ran through my head.

“You guys are back?” Callie asked. “I didn’t get a heads up or anything.”

Her questions felt like I’d just been hit with a bucket of ice water.

With a sigh, I eased my embrace and frowned.

“The team isn’t back,” I told her, remembering why I was here.

“What? How come you’re back early?” Mirage asked, suddenly worried.

I took a step back from Abby but reached out for her hand to keep me grounded.

“Annie’s parents are here. So I got called back early. They didn’t tell

me why until I got here though. Nearly took Kyle's head off thinking something had happened to you."

Abby hugged me, probably sensing my wolf was still on edge.

"I'm fine."

"She's fine," Callie assured me.

"More than fine," Christine insisted.

"We took good care of her," Mirage added.

"Thank you," I told them. "Genuinely, thank you. I owe you big time."

"No you don't," Christine insisted. "Us Delta girls, we stick together. I'm sorry Annie never understood that. But we've already decided that Abby has no choice in the matter. She's stuck with us."

Abby beamed back at them.

"I'm okay with that."

My heart swelled. She was one of us. Abby fit into my life in a way Annie never had. I didn't relish dealing with her parents, but I wasn't ashamed of Abby. Sure, the timing wasn't great, but we couldn't help that. She was made to be mine and if Annie's folks couldn't understand that, then that was their problem, not mine.

"We'll get out of here and leave you two alone," Callie said.

"Actually, I have something I have to take care of. Can you guys stick around and keep my girl company?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Abby asked.

"I do want you with me, but this is something I need to handle myself. I owe Annie that much."

She nodded in understanding, and she quietly kissed me.

"I'll be here when you're ready," she said.

There was a new confidence about her. It was sexy as hell, and I didn't think it was entirely because of the outfit she was in.

I swallowed hard, taking a good long look at her once more.

If I didn't get the hell out of there, I knew I wasn't going to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Forcing myself to walk away was difficult, but it was the right thing to do.

I'd wanted Abby to come with me, but I knew the shitstorm that would potentially cause. I owed it to Annie to take care of her parents and deliver her ashes to them so they could lay her to rest.

Before I had the car in park, Annie's mother was running out of the house. I grabbed the urn and got out to meet her.

"Tucker," she said already crying.

I hugged her and kissed her cheek while juggling Annie in one arm.

"I'm so sorry, Dorothy."

I genuinely meant it. My wolf had moved on and I was happy with Abby, but I would never have wished death on Annie. Never had, never would have. She was my mate while she was here. For better or worse, till death do us part and all that shit. And I'd honored that vow to her right up to the very second she died.

Rhett came out and pulled his distraught mate from my arms then turned to shake my hand.

"Come on in," he said.

I had to fight the urge to remind him it was my house, not his.

We sat in the living room. It was awkward at first as they consoled each other. I set the urn on the table and they both quieted as they stared at her.

"Is that her?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You kept her with you?" her mother asked.

Instead of telling them that I'd just picked her up from Kyle, I just gave a weak smile.

"Oh, Tucker, you must be beside yourself. She took such good care of you all these years and she loved you so much," her mother gushed.

In her moment of grief, I wasn't going to correct her. Nothing good would come of it.

"What do you plan to do with it?" her father asked.

I sighed. "I wanted to know if the two of you would want to keep her. She never fully felt at home here and I think it would have made her happy to be back home."

Her mother beamed through tears and nodded. "We'll do a ceremony

for her at Christmas back home. You'll come back with us."

I frowned and shook my head "I can't. I'm in the middle of a big mission right now. I was actually pulled away from it when you arrived and need to meet back up with my team in the next few days."

Rhett growled. "You always did put that job above our little girl."

"Rhett. Now is not the time," Dorothy warned him.

But the guilt from his words pierced through my heart, and I made a silent vow to do better by Abby.

"So you're staying here then?" he asked.

I had refused to move back home when she was still alive, why the hell would they think I'd want to do it now?

I gritted my teeth, then forced myself to relax.

"This is my home now."

"She never deserved the likes of you," her mother spat at me.

I nodded. "I know."

"We're taking our daughter home," Rhett told me, leaving no room for argument.

I nodded. "I know."

"I can see why our Annie hated it here. I won't stay even a single night in this place," Dorothy insisted. "Grab her before he changes his mind. We're leaving."

In a flurry, she held true to her words as she dramatically stomped out of the house with her mate scrambling to keep up.

I stood in the doorway and watched as they got in their rental and drove away.

It should have felt like a piece of me was leaving with them, but it didn't. All I felt was relief that Annie was finally where she needed to be and I was officially done with the nightmare that had been my life for so long.

I wasn't sad. I had no regrets. I was a survivor. And now I could leave it in the past.

A smile crossed my face as I thought ahead to my future.

I picked up the phone and called Kyle.

"Abby's fine, just as I told you she was, right?"

I snickered. "Yeah, she's great."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

“Are you heading over there now? I can go with you if you’d like.”

“Done.”

“What do you mean, done?”

“I met with Annie’s parents. They’re obviously upset.”

“You told them about Abby?”

“I didn’t.”

“You just mean about Annie then?”

“Yeah.”

“Did they say anything more about a funeral?”

“Yes. They wanted to do it over Christmas back home.”

“As in they want you to go back home with them? I’m not so sure that’s safe given you’re still mating.”

“I’m handling that okay,” I argued.

“That was okay when you arrived just an hour ago?”

I cringed. “Sorry about growling at you.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I told them I was tied up on a mission and wouldn’t be able to make it. That didn’t sit well, they got mad, aired some words, then grabbed her urn and took off.”

“Are you okay?”

“I am. I feel like I can officially put her behind me now. She’d have been much happier with them anyway. I think it’s what she’d have wanted me to do. I’m ready to move on, Kyle. Does that make me a terrible person?”

“No, it doesn’t. If it was anyone else, I’d say, maybe, but Abby’s your one true mate and if anyone deserves a little happiness, it’s you.”

I didn’t know exactly what he knew or what he thought he knew, but it was clear he knew enough.

“Do you want to return to the mission? They’ll be wrapping up and will be home within the next forty-eight hours.”

Another call rang in, and I grinned thinking it was Abby checking up on me, but when I looked down, my heart stilled.

Mom.

“Kyle, I need to call you back. I have to take this call.”

“Sure . . .”

I didn’t even wait for him to finish before disconnecting and answering the incoming call.

“Mom, he probably doesn’t want to see us. Just hang up,” my brother’s voice was loud and clear among chatter and noise on the line.

“Mom?”

Everything went quiet on her end.

“Mom?” I repeated.

“Tucker? Is that really you?”

I smiled sadly. “You called me, remember? What’s up?”

“We heard about Annie. I know her parents are here and all, but we’re your family, Tuck. I just had to know you’re okay. And I’m sure you don’t want to see us, but we’re here if you need us.”

“Here?”

“Hi son. You know how your mother gets when she sets her mind to something. Well, maybe you don’t.”

“He doesn’t care, Dad,” my sister said.

“Give him a chance,” another female voice said that I didn’t recognize.

I realized they meant hypothetical “here”.

“I’m fine,” I told them. “Rhett and Dorothy just left. They’re bringing Annie back home.”

“We dropped everything and drove out here for nothing? He’s heading back home?” my brother Eric said.

“Wait. Where are you?” I asked.

“We just checked into the Westin Lodge, you dummy,” my sister, Shana, said. “Mom insisted we all come just in case you actually wanted to see us or needed your family.”

“You’re here, in San Marco?”

“Now, don’t get mad. Your mother means well.”

“I’m not mad. I just can’t believe you did that. All of you?”

“The whole family’s here,” Eric confirmed. “If you can try not to be a complete arrogant ass for once, my son, Trey, would love to meet you.”

I stopped and my hand went to my chest. “You have a son?”

“I do. He’s three and dying to meet you. I know you couldn’t come out to see him when he was born, and I’m trying to let go of you coming home two years ago and not even calling. Ow. Mom. I’m trying here.”

Three? I had a three-year-old nephew that no one ever told me about?

“Why am I just hearing about this?” I asked, feeling hurt. “Hell, even

a text message or email would have been better than nothing.”

“What are you talking about? He called you. You were too busy. Annie made sure to remind us just how important your job is and all,” the other female said.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“That’s Pammy, my mate. Dude, we send a Christmas card every single year. You act like this is new information or something. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Tuck, are you okay?” Mom asked. “I know we’re supposed to keep our distance and you don’t want anything to do with us, but . . .”

“What?” I yelled with a growl. “What the hell are you talking about?”

They all went quiet.

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

“No. I’m not okay. Eric’s mated? I have a nephew I didn’t know about? I know things have been a little estranged the past few years, Annie always put priority on her family, but I tried to see you guys the last time I was in town. Annie told me you called and were too busy to see me.”

“That bitch.”

“Shana,” Dad warned.

“What? Eric called you from the hospital to tell you about Trey.”

“I spoke with Annie,” he said.

“When you were in town last, Annie told us that you didn’t want to see us,” Shana added.

I growled. “I’m sorry,” whispered trying to calm myself down.

I started pacing the room unable to believe all they were saying. I didn’t want to believe it. She may have put me through hell, but this was too much.

Abby

Chapter 31

“Something’s wrong,” I blurted out.

“Calm down. Nothing’s wrong,” Christine said.

I shook my head. “No. I’m telling you; something is wrong. I don’t know how I know it. It’s like, I can feel it. I should have gone with him. Screw her parents’ feelings.”

“Wow. Your bond must be getting strong if you can sense his feelings like this,” Mirage said.

I didn’t even know what she was talking about, but the pain slicing through my chest wasn’t my own emotions. I just knew it had to be Tucker.

“Screw this. Come on,” Callie said.

“What?”

“We’re taking you to your mate. Whether it’s him or you, doesn’t matter. It’s clear you need him right now.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I nodded.

I’d been fine, and then in the blink of an eye, everything wasn’t fine. I remembered how it felt when I’d really seen Tucker for the first time. It was sort of like that, only not in a good way.

“What if something happened to him?” I asked, fighting back the hysteria as they loaded me into Callie’s cruiser, and she put on her lights as she flew through town.

“He’s fine,” Chris insisted.

I had no idea where they were taking me. I was pretty sure he was at his house. I’d just never been there before.

When I saw his car in the driveway, I relaxed just a little, but another spike of stress had me bolting from the car and into the house. I didn’t give a shit if her parents were there or not.

Tucker was on the phone, pacing back and forth. I could see the faint line on the carpet.

I looked around but he appeared to be alone.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded as I flew into his arms causing him to drop the phone.

His whole body shuddered at my touch and my wolf instantly calmed down.

“I’m okay. Thanks. I needed that.”

“I could feel something was wrong. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to freak you out or anything.”

“How did I know you were upset? I shouldn’t just know something like that.”

“You’re my mate. Of course you should.”

“Did he just say mate?” I heard someone say through the phone.

My jaw dropped as I stared down at it on the floor.

“Annie’s alive?”

“What the hell?”

“Why would her parents tell everyone she was dead?”

“Well, this was a waste. I’m telling you, it’s her, not him.”

Tucker groaned and picked up the phone.

“Guys, enough. I’m going to text Mom an address. Meet me there. And yes, I want to see you. I’ve missed you all so much. And I was never too busy for you guys. That was Annie talking for me. I’ve got a lot to explain. Please come.”

I could have sworn I heard someone sob.

“He wants us to come. We’re going.”

Tucker grinned and disconnected the call then sent off a text.

“What’s going on?”

“We are going home.”

“Isn’t this your home?”

“It can be if that’s what you want. Or if you’d rather stay at Birdie’s, then that’s where we’ll live.”

I bit back a grin. “Are you trying to move in with me?”

“Thought I already had,” he mumbled.

“This place is nice.”

He shook his head. “Too many bad memories. We can build. We can buy. Or we can keep Birdie’s place and make it our own.”

“I do still have a home in Kansas.”

He looked frustrated. I reached up and smoothed the crease on his

forehead.

“I’m going to have to pack it up and move all of that stuff.”

Tucker smiled. He picked me up and twirled me around.

“You’ll stay?”

“I’ll stay.”

It felt like an impulse decision, and yet I was more certain about it than I’d been about anything in my entire life.

As we walked outside hand in hand, the girls were still waiting to make sure everything was okay.

“All smiles. That’s good, right?” Mirage asked.

“Very good,” Tucker said. “Abby’s moving here.”

“She damn well better be,” Christine said.

I grinned. “Thanks for helping me through my freak out.”

“But now, I’m stealing her away. We have plans,” Tucker said.

The girls started whooping and cheering as he helped me in his car.

“Not like that,” I warned them.

“Boo!” Callie said. “Man up and seal the deal already, Tucker. We’re not giving this one up.”

My cheeks burned as he jumped in the car and drove away.

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Do you want to seal our bond?”

I sighed and shrugged. “Honestly?”

His stress line was returning again, but he nodded. “Always.”

“I don’t have a clue what that means. The girls have been talking about it, and I just grin and nod because it sounds like something I should know about and didn’t want to sound stupid by asking.”

He chuckled. “We’ll talk later. Okay?”

“Okay. But where are we going?”

“Home. Or at least home for now. I wasn’t kidding when I said we could move wherever you like, but I’m selling my house.”

I didn’t even argue that. I had no desire to live in Annie’s house, especially when I knew how miserable she’d made him there.

“Who was on the phone back there?”

He practically beamed with happiness.

“My family. They’re here, Abby. They came for me.”

“I didn’t know you talked to them.”

“I didn’t. And apparently my brother took a mate and I have a nephew I knew nothing about.”

I was sad for him. My family had been my entire world.

“How could they not tell you about that?”

“Annie.”

“Annie?”

“I think Annie knew. She kept it from me.”

It made me sick to my stomach that she was so cruel that she would do something like that.

“I would never do that to you,” I told him. “Family is everything.”

“I know.”

“So are you taking me home and then meeting them?”

“No, they’re coming to our house.”

“What?”

“They’re on their way now. I can’t wait for them to meet you.”

I gulped hard. I was still in the freaking lingerie Tucker had walked in on me modeling and now I was going to meet his family? It was too much to even process.

“Relax. They’re going to love you.”

“Like they did Annie?” I blurted out.

He growled. “It’s not the same.”

I truly hoped he was right, but I didn’t say anything.

By the time we got home, Kyle and Kelsey were there waiting. And before we even had a chance to explain, a van pulled up and a group of people unloaded. They seemed hesitant at first as they all just stood there staring at Tucker as he froze, staring back at them.

I nudged him.

“Mom!”

I watched as my mate ran to the older woman and scooped her up in his arms. Her feet no longer touched the ground, and I teared up as his father joined them in a big hug.

Kelsey squeezed my shoulder.

It was too much. I wanted to retreat, but I also wanted, no, I needed to support Tucker. I didn’t know the whole story, but I knew enough to realize this was a very big deal.

“What is this place?” his mother asked.

Tucker looked up and winked at me as I ran through a quick mental freak out trying to remember how I’d left the house in my mad dash to check on him.

Remembering the bag of massage oil and the vibrator, my eyes widened.

“Oh crap.”

I turned and bolted into the house ahead of everyone else. I snatched the bag off the coffee table in the living room and ran it back to the bedroom. Then I worried he was going to give them a tour of the house, so I shoved it into a drawer and quickly picked up the room and made the bed.

There was a soft knock on the door before Kelsey walked in.

“Are you okay? Can I help with anything?”

I threw my arms out in a dramatic shrug.

“I don’t know. I think it’s okay. There’re probably a few dirty dishes in the sink, but I don’t think it’s anything too bad.”

“Just breathe, Abby. It’s okay. When I first met Mary and Jason, I was invited to dinner at their house as a last-minute change of plans. They didn’t know I was coming, and Mary had invited another woman over trying to set Kyle up with her. Everything worked out just fine for us. Trust me, this will be a breeze compared to that.”

“Okay. But the girls took me to Sheila’s.” I saw the recognition on her face as she bit her lip trying not to laugh.

“Is that what was in the bag you grabbed?”

“Yes! And I’m still wearing the lingerie.”

“Well, only you and Tucker will know about that part.”

I groaned as she dragged me from the room, but just outside my bedroom door was a younger woman with her hands on her hips eyeing me suspiciously.

“What’s in the bag from Sheila’s?”

My face reddened.

“Nothing.”

She shoved past me into the room.

“Hey,” I protested.

She looked me over like she could see right through to me, right through to the sexy lace lingerie that barely concealed anything.

I blushed even harder.

“So the lingerie for my brother is nothing too?”

I groaned.

“You’re Tucker’s sister?”

“Awkward,” Kelsey said.

“Not helping,” I muttered.

“How about I leave you two to talk. I think Kyle needs me.”

“You suck,” I whispered under my breath at her retreating back.

The girl’s jaw dropped.

“You can’t talk to a Pack Mother like that.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Are you insane? I mean, clearly my brother likes you, so you must be. Crazy is definitely his type. And you are definitely not his mate.”

I growled before I could stop myself.

She eyes me curiously. “Interesting. I’m Shana. And you are?”

“Abby. Abigail Matroni.”

All her bravado halted.

“The Abigail Matroni? Like *A Werewolf’s Heart*, Abigail Matroni?”

“Yes,” I squeaked, cleared my throat and spoke more assuredly.

“Yes.”

Shana squealed and threw her arms around me.

“And you’re a wolf shifter?”

“I am,” I said without hesitation. “Ironic new discovery actually.”

“Oh my gosh. You’re like my favorite author ever. Pammy’s not going to believe this. You have to meet her.”

Sheila’s, the lingerie, and the whole I’m sleeping with your brother thing seemed long forgotten as she grabbed my hand and dragged me down the hall and back to where all of her family was awkwardly standing around making small talk.

“Pammy! This is Abigail Matroni,” Shana squealed.

“The Abigail Matroni?”

“Abby, please,” I insisted.

Pammy squealed, tossed the boy in her arms to the man standing next to Tucker, who looked a lot like him, and assaulted me in a hug too.

“We are like your biggest fans.”

Tucker just grinned and shook his head.

“Guys, this is Abby.” He came to stand by my side and wrapped an arm around me. “My true mate.”

His mother gasped, and I wanted to bury my face against his chest and pretend this wasn't happening.

“Abigail Matroni is your one true mate?” Shana blurted out.

“A true mate? When? How?” his father asked.

“What happened to Annie?” the other man blurted out.

“Eric,” Tucker's mom admonished.

“It's a long story, but first, I want to meet your mate and my nephew.”

Eric beamed. “It's about damn time little bro. This is Pammy and this is our son Eric the third. We call him Trey. Trey, this is your Uncle Tuck.”

“Hi,” the boy said shyly.

“Hi Trey,” Tucker said, crouching down to the boy's level. “It's really nice to meet you.” Then he looked back up at the woman who had last assaulted me. “You too, Pammy. I'm really sorry it's taken this long.”

“What the hell happened, Tucker?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, that's a long story.”

“Kelsey and I are going to head out. Just know that you are all welcome in my territory for as long as you'd like. Tucker, I'll let Patrick know that you won't be returning to the field. Your team should be back soon anyway. Take some time with your family. It's the most important thing in the world.”

He nodded. “Thanks Kyle.”

“He's right and you guys have a lot to catch up on. I'm going to just disappear and let you catch up.”

“Oh no, you don't,” Shana said as she snaked her arm through mine. “You two aren't going to drop the true mate thing on us and then you just disappear.”

“My daughter's right. Take a seat,” his mother said. And then she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she smiled tightly. “I'm sorry. That wasn't my place. I would very much appreciate it if you would stay. We'd like to get to know you.”

I glanced back at Tucker who nodded.

“Okay,” I said.

We settled in around the room. I took a seat on the end of the couch and Pammy, Shana, and Tucker's mom joined me. I was grateful that he

didn't leave my side though. Instead, he sat down on the floor at my feet.

"I'm sorry we don't have any toys little man. We'll have to fix that."

"Oh wait. You can open the two big packages under the tree."

He looked up at me, confused.

I shrugged. "I did some shopping while you were away. Those were supposed to be for Lucy's kids, but it's fine. I can pick up something else for them before Christmas."

"It's only a few days away," his mother reminded me.

"Will you all be staying for Christmas?" I asked.

The whole room went quiet as they just stared at me.

"What? It's Christmas and it's only a few days away. You're here.

Why not stay?"

"You'd be okay with that?" Tucker asked me.

"It's your family. Why wouldn't I be okay with that?"

"I love her already," his mother said, swiping tears from her cheek.

"But really, we don't want to intrude. This is already so much more than I allowed myself to hope for."

I lightly kicked him with my foot, but he just stared at me like I had two heads.

"Annie didn't like him even talking to us. We thought she'd corrupted him, but I'm thinking maybe she just never told him or gave him the cards we sent," Eric explained.

"That's awful. I'm so sorry for all of you."

"Is your family here in town?" his father asked.

The full impact of loss hit me hard and Tucker reached up and squeezed my hand.

"I lost my family earlier this year. There's no one left."

"That's not true. You have Tucker," Pammy said.

"And all of us, if you'll allow it," his mother added.

Tears flowed down my cheeks, and I couldn't stop them.

"I'd really love that. I've been dreading the holidays and overdoing it shopping for everyone I've met here just trying to get through the month. But only if that's what Tucker wants."

I hated putting him on the spot. He didn't say a word as he stared up at me.

"Sorry." I wiped my tears away. "I shouldn't have put you on the spot

like that. We can talk about it later.”

“You’d really be okay with that?”

I nodded.

“We’re already at the Lodge. I can see if they’ll extend our stay. We won’t get in your way except when you tell us too,” his dad said hopefully.

It broke my heart.

“No,” I blurted out and watched as all their faces dropped, including my mates. “There is more than enough room here, and we have Tucker’s house too. We can make it work. Family should be together for the holidays.”

“Babe, are you sure?”

“If this is what you want, I am. I’m not trying to force you into something you don’t want to do.”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

“Really?”

“Really?” his mother echoed me.

“Really. Please stay. It’s been far too long since I had a true family Christmas.”

All the tension left the room as Tucker retrieved the presents and let Trey help him open them as they played with large blocks and read books together. The boy even loved the doll I’d gotten Lucy’s little girl.

I gave the ladies a quick tour of the house. I was thankful I’d cleaned and dusted the upstairs as I was packing away some of the stuff.

“How long have you lived in this house?” his mother asked.

I cringed. “A few weeks.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m all ears.”

So I told her about how my mother and grandmother had died leaving me all alone in this world and how I’d suddenly inherited all of this from my great-great-grandmother who I had no idea was still alive. I told them how I’d met Tucker and the moment we knew Annie was dead and there was something more between us. And I told them how before coming here, I had no idea that werewolves, or rather wolf shifters, were real, let alone that I was one.

“That’s an awful lot in such a short time.”

“Honestly, if I stop and think about it for too long, I start to freak out.

But it feels right. I know that sounds stupid when I say it out loud, but it just does. Being with Tucker just feels right.”

“That doesn’t sound stupid at all. I always hated that he settled for a compatible mate. I understood at the time why he’d done what he’d done, but I always hated it for him. And maybe that projected out on Annie. She probably wasn’t the only one at fault. His father and I are true mates. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for my children. He’s not the same person around you that he used to be. He’s not as guarded or scared.”

“I’ve heard enough to understand why.”

“Then I sure wish you’d explain it to me.”

“It’s probably best to leave that up to him. Just know, I’d never intentionally hurt him or ever keep him from family. Family was everything to me and it’s been quite lonely without them. I’ve made really great friends here, but it’s still not the same.”

She hugged me. “I feel like, just maybe, you’ve given me my family back this Christmas season. Or at least I’m feeling more optimistic than I have in years. And while I know we can never replace your family, I’m happy to welcome you into ours.”

Tucker

Chapter 32

I'd walked in on my mother embracing Abby and welcoming her to the family and it had nearly broken me. It wasn't like I didn't know she would have done the same for Annie. Annie had forced a wedge between me and my family, one I never thought would heal. Yet here we were two days till Christmas and my entire family was under one roof celebrating the holidays together.

For the last thirty-six hours, I didn't think I'd stopped smiling even once. I'd say that was all Abby, but in truth, it was my family too. They'd come through for me. They came when I didn't even know just how much I needed them.

I supposed that was just what family did. It had just been a long time since I'd allowed myself to experience it. And they wouldn't have stayed had it not been for Abby's kindness, generosity, and hospitality.

I didn't think Abby could possibly understand just how much this meant to me. It was the greatest Christmas present she could have given me. Well, second greatest. There was still one thing I wanted even more, and if I'd had any doubts before, they were now laid to rest. I wanted my mate, forever. I wanted to mark her as mine and proudly bare her mark on me.

It was strange when I looked in the mirror now. I wasn't even sure when or how it had happened, but the mark Annie had given me was gone now. Vanished. I had always thought mating was a forever thing. Wolves mate for life and all that stuff, yet here I was, getting a second chance, a fresh start.

Today wasn't that day though. We had things to do, and I was late reporting in for work. The teams had returned the night before, and I knew I was going to need to be there for the debriefing, but it was hard to leave.

We were all hanging out in the kitchen. Mom had made her special eggs in a hole, or Mommy eggs as we'd called them as kids, a massive stack of bacon, and a leaning tower of pancakes. It was heavenly. I had no idea

how much I'd missed her cooking.

Truth was, I had no idea if Abby could cook or not, and I really didn't care. Annie had never bothered to learn to cook. I would have wondered how she hadn't starved while I was away if it hadn't been for the mound of delivery receipts I always had awaiting my return.

So, who cared if Abby could or couldn't cook? I knew enough to know she could at least reheat casseroles, because that had been the bulk of what we'd eaten since her arrival after the outpouring of food the Pack had given her. So far, she was more capable in the kitchen than Annie had ever been.

"Tucker, you're going to be late," she reminded me.

I looked at the time and groaned. For the first time in my entire adult life, I didn't want to go to work. It wasn't the escape I had desperately needed all these years—not anymore. But I also knew I couldn't let my team down.

With another groan, I begrudgingly got up, snagged a piece of bacon, kissed my mother's cheek and thanked her for breakfast, and then kissed my mate.

My little sister cheered at my display of affection.

"Don't have any fun without me," I warned them before stealing Trey from his mother. "You hear that, little man. Don't you let them have any fun until I get home from work."

I gave him a quick kiss too, passed him back, and forced myself to leave the house all while praying it would be a quick and easy day.

But an hour later, I knew that wasn't going to be the case.

"He's collecting witches to burn them at the stake," Walker explained.

I couldn't even wrap my head around it.

"We have to get the word out to other Collectors," Taylor insisted. "I've got enough contacts already to get that ball rolling. The majority of them take great pride in their Collections. Yes, it's sick, but they aren't murdering them in cold blood, and I highly doubt they'd appreciate hearing Xavier Fortin was doing just that."

"It could work," Walker said. "We'll have to tread lightly. There's too much at stake to screw it up."

"Do it," Silas said.

"Just be careful about it," Michael added.

One by one each of the victims we'd rescued came in and gave their account of what had happened and explained their time in the cellar.

"It's not a Collection," Nate insisted.

"We are aware," Patrick told him.

"What he's doing is wrong," Nate continued.

"What they're all doing is wrong," Walker said.

Nate shook his head. "You can't possibly understand. I was literally born and raised in Collections. It's not all bad. There are good Collectors out there. Hell, this is the freest I've ever been, and it's terrifying. I'd give anything to go back. Not to the cellar, but to a reputable Collector."

I didn't think the guy realized what he was saying. How could anyone wish to live in slavery?

"It's all I know," he said softly.

"Would you be willing to help us take down these collections? The bad ones of course," Walker asked.

Michael shot him a look of warning.

"I'm serious. We could infiltrate Collections from the inside. Nate gets purchased and we have inside eyes.

"If he dubs it a good one, we pull him out," Taylor said.

"How exactly would you do that?" Grant asked her.

"Simple. I'll make it known I have a fondness for him."

"And I'll make it known that I'm not happy about it, so every time she brings him back, at likely an outrageous price once word gets around, then I'll make a stink and resell him."

"We're talking about a human being here, guys. You can't just sell him. It's not right," I insisted.

"No, please. Sell me. I'm in. Use the money to fund your cause. I'm happy to take down the bad Collectors like Fortin. Let's flush them out. Put me in."

It disturbed me just how excited this guy seemed to be about being sold into slavery. We were dealing with human trafficking here, and he was all for it.

"I've been long-term undercover before," Jake said. "It's not easy, and he clearly already has an affinity towards this. I would strongly recommend a full psych eval before continuing this line of thought."

"Agreed," Michael said.

“I can do it,” Lachlan said. “I’d like to be given some time to fully evaluate him though. I don’t think this is something we should rush into lightly.”

“The dingo’s right,” Silas said. “We proceed slowly with this. It’s going to require a great deal of patience because we cannot pull him and then instantly resell him to a new Collection. This could be a very slow and long game we’re playing here.”

“Even better,” Nate said happily.

It disturbed me on so many levels, but I didn’t speak up and say so. I glanced over at Colin and was pretty sure he was biting his tongue at the moment too. His mate had been raised up in various Collections and we were well aware of the trauma that had caused her. I highly doubted anyone on Delta wished to see this guy return to captivity. To me, it was no different than throwing Mirage back in.

Our job was to extract and protect. How was putting a civilian undercover in harm’s way not going against our directive?

Yet Patrick O’Connell, head of Westin Force, was sitting right there taking notes and not giving his opinion one way or another.

“I don’t know how one becomes a part of Westin Force, but I’m happy to do it. I’ll go through training and everything. Whatever you want. Just put me back in.”

“We’ll see,” Patrick said. “We’ll see.”

With that he finally dismissed us for the day. But Michael immediately spoke up, calling for a Delta team meeting.

We waited until the others cleared out and he checked to see that the dampener was still on.

“Thoughts?”

“This is bullshit,” Colin said. “We can’t do this to this guy.”

“He seems willing and ready,” Walker said. “We could make this work and it would give us a unique perspective from the inside.”

“We’ve had that from Mirage,” Colin argued.

“And we shut that Collection down permanently, but what about all the other Mirage’s out there still waiting for a rescue? If Nate can get inside and get us the information we need, we could truly start making a large-scale impact. He’d be our spy, a man on the inside, not after the fact but in live time. I’m just saying, if he’s sane enough and qualified for the job, we should

consider it. I'd much rather take a lifer volunteering than sacrifice someone like Marie for the job."

"Walker does have some valid points, but this isn't going to be something that we take lightly. In fact, I don't want to hear another word about it this year. And maybe into next year. Bravo will be taking lead on it, though you'll need to assist them, Lachlan. I want that guy fully checked. If he's going to do this, we have to be certain it's for the right reasons," Michael said.

We all nodded. And I could respect that. We all had our reasons for dedicating our lives to Westin Force. Who was I to say this guy shouldn't have that opportunity too, even if I didn't agree with the mission he was requesting to be on?

"So are we off for Christmas then?" I asked.

Linc snorted. "Someone's anxious to get back to his new little mate."

I grinned and shrugged.

"Are you ever going to tell us just how you managed to get pulled off this mission early, you know, so the rest of us know what to tell our mates to do next Christmas?" Colin teased.

I laughed. "It wasn't Abby."

"Then what was it?" Michael asked.

We all turned to look at him.

"You didn't even know?" Walker asked.

Michael shook his head. "I was just issued an order to get him home. Nothing more. And I knew better than to ask."

"It was about Annie."

"Is everything okay?" Lachlan asked.

"It is now. Her parents showed up demanding to know the funeral details and why they haven't been included. Annie's ashes had been returned so I gave her to them. It's what she would have wanted anyway. They got angry. We had words. They left."

"They found out about Abby?" Walker guessed.

"No, as far as I know, they do not know anything about Abby. I didn't feel it was any of their business to know. It was uncomfortable, they said their peace, I did what I felt was right for Annie's remains and I said goodbye in my own way. I can put that all behind me now with a clear conscience. And then, my family arrived."

“What?” Lachlan asked. “I didn’t think you were even speaking to them.”

“I wasn’t, but that was because of Annie. I’ve always loved my family and hate how much time slipped by. But they heard that Annie had died, and they came to be here for me.”

“That’s incredible, man,” Colin said. “This is a good thing, right?”

“A very good thing.”

“Are they staying for Christmas?” Michael asked.

“They are. Abby invited them to stay with us. Which reminds me, I know Callie was going to host Christmas Eve this year, but if she wouldn’t mind too much, I’d love to offer up our place instead.”

“Our place as in your house or Birdie’s place?” Colin asked.

I smiled. “Birdie’s.”

“Does that mean things are going well for you Abby?” Lachlan asked.

“Seems like it. So, Michael, if you think Callie wouldn’t mind too much, maybe you could talk to her about it?”

“No need. If you’re volunteering, then a hundred percent, yes! I love her, but she’s going to kill herself trying to make this the most perfect Christmas ever for Kevin and Autumn. She doesn’t need the added stress of entertaining. I just didn’t want to put anyone else out. But if you’re willing . . .”

“My family will be there, but as long as that’s not a concern for anyone, then yes.”

“Alright then. I think this is going to turn out to be a great Christmas for all of us,” Linc said.

It was settled, and I couldn’t wait to get home to tell Abby.

The second Michael adjourned us, I was racing for the parking lot to do just that.

I couldn’t get home fast enough.

As I pulled up to the house, I saw Abby alone out on the front porch. I jumped from the car and kicked the door closed in my haste to get to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked when I saw the distraught look on her face.

“I’m fine. Mirage is picking me up in a few minutes to go into the city to finish my shopping today. I didn’t think you’d be home so soon.”

It hadn’t felt soon enough to me, but I didn’t say so.

“So what’s wrong?”

“I know this sounds crazy, but I just wish we could have Christmas Eve here. I don’t want to be rude to Callie and Michael because they’ve been so wonderful to me, but then so have a lot of people, and I would love to just thank them all and do like a big Christmas Eve open house or something. Maybe we could do that for Christmas day? Or New Year’s Eve? Just stop me. I feel like I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Well, if you are, then so am I. Michael would love it if we would host Christmas Eve for the team.”

“Here?”

I nodded and then I cringed realizing what I’d done. I knew better. Women didn’t like men making plans for them or throwing a last-minute party on them.

Her hand came up so fast that I reacted without thinking, covering my face and stepping away from her.

When the impact didn’t come, I dared to look back only to see the horror in her eyes.

Slowly I straightened, confused.

This time she approached more slowly as she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly.

“Thank you. I think it’s a fantastic idea. You’re sure they don’t mind?”

“Michael was relieved for it,” I told her still feeling off-kilter by her reaction.

A car horn made me jump.

“That’s Mirage,” she explained. “I don’t have to go.”

“No, it’s fine. Really. If it’s okay with you, I’m going to elicit my family’s help to get things ready for the party then?”

“Um, yeah, that would be great. Tucker, do you think it would be okay if we invited people to come by earlier and then trail into our Delta party on the later side? I was thinking maybe even doing a little tribute to Birdie and inviting her friends over to formally say goodbye.”

“You want to have a funeral on Christmas Eve? Here?”

“Not exactly. Nothing formal or sad. Just sort of an acknowledgement, like a celebration of her life.”

I smiled. “I like that. Let me talk to Kelsey. I’ll take care of everything. You go have fun with Mirage.”

“Oh, okay,” she said.

I hated the way she grew hesitant when she leaned in to kiss me.

Why did I ever think even subconsciously that she was going to hit me?

I felt terrible about that. Abby was definitely not Annie. So why did I have to keep reminding myself of that?

Abby

Chapter 33

“You’re really quiet today. Everything okay?” Mirage asked me on the drive down.

I had my notebook and pen out to make additional notes for the party, but I hadn’t written a thing. My brain was in an entirely different place reliving the moment I went to throw my arms around Tucker to thank him and realized he had actually thought I was going to slap him or something.

It broke my heart. I never wanted him to feel like I would intentionally hurt him, not ever. But it was clear there were some serious psychological issues left over from *her*.

I knew it was wrong of me to hate the dead. I’d only laid eyes on her once, and while I’d felt a little embarrassed and upset about her vocal accusation at the time, I’d just brushed it off as no big deal. I didn’t know how much Tucker would come to mean to me then. And I knew it was just a jealous spouse. Who could blame her? Even then I knew Tucker was very good looking.

But now I knew the depth of her venom. It was in his nightmares and his response to a quick movement.

“Earth to Abby. Are you okay? If you don’t want to do this today, we don’t have to.”

“No, sorry. I need to do this. Really. There’s simply no more time. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and Tucker and I are hosting a party, so there’s just a lot on my mind.”

“You’re hosting a party? I thought we were all going to Michael and Callie’s to celebrate tomorrow night.”

“Tucker just told me it’s been moved to our house.”

“Does Callie know this?”

“I don’t know. I assume so.”

Mirage hit a button on her dashboard. “Call Callie.”

“Would you like to call Callie?” the car asked.

“Yes.”

“Calling Callie,” the car replied.

“It takes some getting used to,” Mirage said with a chuckle. “I’d never even driven a car when I arrived here, let alone talked to one. I didn’t even know it was possible.”

I was aware of the technology, but it certainly wasn’t something my old car back home was equipped with.

“Hey. What’s up?” Callie’s voice rang through the speakers.

“Has Michael talked to you about a change of plans tomorrow?”

“No, why?”

“Tucker told me the Christmas Eve party was moved to our place.”

“What? When?”

I groaned.

“Men,” Mirage commented.

“I’m sorry Cal. I don’t want to step on any toes or anything.”

“Hold up now. Did you volunteer to do this?”

“I think Tucker did.”

“But it’s not something you want to do?”

I bit my lip.

Mirage snorted. “From the look on her face, it’s absolutely something she wants to do.”

“Really? You can say no.”

“I feel bad. I’m sure you’ve worked so hard to prepare already.”

“I haven’t,” she admitted. “I haven’t done a damn thing. I’ve been so wrapped up in making sure Christmas is incredible for the kids, with it being our first Christmas as a family and all, that I haven’t even begun to prep for Christmas Eve. It’s okay. I can do it, but if it’s something you want to do.”

“I do,” I blurted out. “I really do. I want to host an open house earlier in the afternoon and evening and then end with the Delta party if that’s okay with you guys.”

There was a pause and I started to feel bad for even mentioning it.

“That sounds amazing! Thank you. Thank you. A million times thank you. I didn’t want to put anyone else out and no one volunteered, so I was just going to do it, but if you don’t mind, I would love to move it to your place. The few things I’ve already done can be contributed to the night, and I’ll pitch in however you need, but not having to clean up afterwards will

make Christmas morning so much better for me.”

“Done,” I said, grinning and suddenly excited for the holiday.

“You really don’t mind?”

“If you could see her face right now, you’d know she doesn’t.”

“Well, my stress levels just went down like a thousand percent. What can I do to help?”

The three of us came up with a plan before ending the call.

“Can I, um, ask you something?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“When you guys say Tucker and I are mating. What does that mean?”

“For compatible mates it’s nothing more than dating. But you and Tucker are true mates, and that is so much stronger. The males in particular can become very aggressive and protective.”

I thought back to a few occasions I’d seen Tucker overly react to things, and I didn’t mean residual Annie stuff.

“Okay, so then what’s the difference between mating and bonding?”

“Well, as true mates, you already have a bit of a bond created. Think of it as an invisible string. One end is tied to Tucker and the other to you. The closer you get, the shorter and stronger that string gets. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose so, but what happens to seal the bond?”

I’d heard others mention that and I just wanted to understand what was happening. This world was still so new to me that sometimes it made me feel ignorant, and I didn’t like that very much. If I didn’t know something, I was an avid researcher and would normally just figure it out on my own. But in this case, it wasn’t like I could just Google “how do wolf shifters bond” or anything.

Mirage blushed.

“That bad or that good?” I asked.

“Well, it usually involves sex.”

“We’ve already done that. Does it mean we’re already bonded.”

“No, but it often goes hand-in-hand with it. Look, I’m probably not the best person to ask about this. Colin and I had sex for the first time, and I didn’t even know that’s what we were doing. I just knew it felt good and right. I was mortified when I found out what we’d done.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Long story, but basically, I didn’t have the healthiest examples of sex prior to him.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

I knew better than to press her for anything more. If she wanted to talk about it, I’d be there to listen, but only if that’s what she wanted or needed.

“It’s fine. Colin’s the best.”

“He’s very sweet. But back to my question. How does one seal a bond?”

“Well, he bites you, leaving a permanent mark on you, and then to seal your bond, you have to bite him in return, marking him as yours.”

“I have to bite him? Gross.”

“Oh, it’s really not. Trust me on that.”

“But you said a permanent mark. If that was the case, wouldn’t I have seen Annie’s mark?”

She shrugged. “In theory.”

“What does that mean? Because I’ve seen Tucker naked. There’s no obvious mark that I’ve noticed,” I blurted out.

“Well, I heard a theory that where a true mate marking should last forever, a compatible mate’s mark only lasts until death, unless they have fully bonded.”

“I thought if you bite him, and he bites you that it means you’re fully bonded.”

“Oh, it’s way more than just that.”

I groaned. “I’m never going to fully understand this world. How is fully bonded and bonded different?”

“Once you’re bonded things start to happen. Some of it you might even start to feel sooner because he’s your true mate.”

“What sort of things?”

She shrugged. “At first you might not even notice. You’ll start to sense him when he’s near. You may be in tune with his emotions and know when he’s upset.”

“That just happened the other day. He was really upset when Annie’s parents were here and then his family showed up. I knew something was wrong, so I went to check on him.”

“That’s good, Abby.”

“It is? It didn’t exactly feel good.”

“It’s a sign your bond is strong and growing. Over the years you’ll become even closer until eventually, many years from now, it will seal forever. When that happens, you’ll be completely in tune with each other. You’ll be able to talk to him telepathically. Oh, and you’ll start to feel his pain. I’m not sure I’m happy about that one, but for us wolves, that’s the last stage before the bond seals forever. And when that happens, if anything happens to Tucker, you’ll simply slip away too, following him into the afterlife.”

“You mean if he dies, I’ll die?”

“Exactly.”

“Why? Why would I ever want that?”

“Because by then, you’ll never want to live a day without him anyway. It’s romantic.”

“It’s morbid.”

“It’s not,” she insisted.

“I guess he and Annie weren’t fully bonded then.”

“It’s super rare for compatible mates to ever bond to that degree, but it’s something true mates strive for. I can’t imagine living without Colin. I know we have a long way to go before we reach that level. But think about it, if Annie had been Tucker’s true mate, he’d be stuck here, for the remainder of his life, all alone. Wolves aren’t meant to be alone. Sure, he’d have Delta and the Pack, but no mate, because true mates are forever.”

It was a lot to digest, and I didn’t think I was ready to hear anything more. I was still trying to get over the part where I was going to have to bite him. The thought of tasting blood repulsed me. And I wasn’t at all ready to unlock my emotions on the whole fully bonded thing. It certainly made the vows “‘til death do us part” take on an entirely new meaning.

I didn’t pepper her with any more questions. Instead, Mirage and I spent much of the day shopping and prepping for the party. When we got back, Colin came over to help and meet Tucker’s family. Everyone was great, and since Tucker had already cleaned and straightened the house while I was out, the evening went smoothly.

I must have thanked Mirage a million times before Colin finally whisked her away. Pammy and Eric said goodnight and carried Trey up to bed, leaving just me, Tucker, Shana, and their parents.

When I walked over to join Tucker on the couch, he set his cold soda can right on the freshly waxed wooden coffee table.

“Just cleaned that,” I reminded him.

Tucker snatched the can back as fast as he could, spilling it in the process.

“Annie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

It felt like a slap to my face. Instinctively I went on the defense and crossed my arms over my chest as I stared at him in disbelief.

“I’m Abby, not Annie.”

He started to nod. “I know. I know you’re Abby. I’m sorry.”

In that moment I heard Lachlan’s voice in my head saying something he’d told me during one of our sessions. *You of all people know the power of words, Abby. Be mindful of that. He needs positive words in his life to blossom. He needs love.*

He immediately started to clean up, but there was already a ring where the can had sat.

“I should have used a coaster. I know. I can get this out.”

He looked scared and upset. It broke my heart.

I forced myself to relax and not react, then I slowly sat next to him on the couch and pulled him into my arms to hug him.

“I can fix it,” he said softly, but his body relaxed at my touch.

“Leave it. My mom always said rings on a coffee table gave an old piece of furniture character. I like it.”

He nodded against my chest as I sat there cradling him and rubbing my hand down his back to soothe him.

“I know you’re not her,” he whispered. “But sometimes I expect you to act the same. I can’t help it.”

Shana stood up with tears streaming down her face and left the room. I suspected it was the first time they’d seen him like this. It broke my heart too, but I was well aware of the damage that bitch had done to him. All I could do was try to love him even harder and show him what true love should look like.

He was so broken at that moment. I just held on tighter until he regrouped.

“I’m not mad,” I told him. “It’s okay.”

Over his head his mother gave me a watery smile and nod of

encouragement before taking her mate's hand and quietly leaving the room.

That night, Tucker didn't come to bed. He said he was going for a walk to clear his head, but when I went to check on him later when he hadn't returned, I found him fast asleep on the couch. I could smell fresh cleaner and saw no signs of the ring on the table or the spill along the couch and carpet.

Not really sure what to do, I found a throw blanket and laid it over him then leaned down and kissed his head, taking a minute to breathe in his scent, and then I forced myself to go to bed.

Tucker

Chapter 34

When I awoke the next morning, I was on the couch and my whole body was sore. Memories of the night before came crashing in around me.

I had called her Annie.

I groaned.

Abby was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and there was no bigger way I could have hurt her than that.

Something in the tone of her voice or the way she looked at me had been an uncontrollable trigger for me. Still, she hadn't gotten mad or run off. She didn't call me names or remind me what an idiot I was. Hell, she didn't even walk away from me, let alone strike out in anger.

I had thought about it before, but her actions showed me over and over again that she was truly everything Annie had never been.

The smell of fresh coffee had me rising and making my way to the kitchen. I didn't relish facing my family after what they'd witnessed, but there was no hiding it. They'd been there. They'd seen it all.

Dad held out a steaming mug of liquid black gold to me. I inhaled the aroma and sighed.

"So she put you in the doghouse, did she? I've certainly had my fair share of nights on the couch too. And I know, Annie, Abby, they're close, but son, try not to mix up the names too often. Women don't like that."

I scoffed and shook my head. "Not my finest moment. And Abby didn't make me sleep on the couch. I went for a run and then cleaned up my mess. Just thought it was best."

"So since she didn't punish you, you decided to punish yourself?"

"What? No. It wasn't like that." But it had been exactly like that. I'd royally screwed up this time. I wasn't even sure how I could face her again after that.

"That bitch sure did a number on you."

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

There was nothing I could do to take it back now. Still, I hated how weak and small it made me feel. She was dead but, in that moment, it was like she was back and haunting me from the grave.

“We suspected it, you know. And by we, I mean your mother. She always said that she instilled strong family values in you and that the only thing that could keep you away from us was that bitch of a mate.”

I growled. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. She was your mate.”

I growled again. “Can you stop referring to Annie as that? My wolf really hates it.”

He smiled. “Oh. I thought it was because you still had feelings or something.”

“Dad, as horrible a person as this makes me sound, I don’t have feelings towards her. I hadn’t for a very long time. Her death was a relief, and the only guilt I feel is over the joy of being out of that nightmare. I’m a terrible person for it, and I jumped right into a new relationship literally the second I knew she was dead. What kind of person does that?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, son. That girl is your one true mate. No matter what, you’re going to be drawn to that, to her. You can’t help the timing. Just be grateful you found her.” He got a dreamy look in his eyes. “I still remember the first time I caught your mother’s scent like it was yesterday. I was dating someone else. The timing was terrible, but none of that mattered. True mates are a mighty strong connection. You’re only half human after all. And the other half, well that half has been searching and waiting to find it’s match and make you whole.”

“I’m so broken, Dad, I don’t know if I can ever truly be whole again.”

“You thank the Lord you’ve found your Abby. She’s a good woman.”

“The best. And she deserves so much better than me.”

“That’s hogwash. If your grandmother were still alive today, she’d grab you by one ear and wag her finger in your face. Then she’d tell you that you were put on this Earth for one purpose and one purpose only, to find your other half and spend the rest of your life loving her as best you can.”

“What if I don’t know what love is, Dad?”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You’ve been loved unconditionally every day of your life. We may have done it from afar for a while, but don’t tell me you don’t know what love is. And if you’ve truly forgotten, you just

take a real good look into your mate's eyes because she's beaming with it."

I didn't know how to tell him that my biggest fear was that all I would see was pity and concern.

"Yes, sir," I said nodding.

He couldn't possibly understand.

I did love Abby as best as I knew how, but was it enough? Was I enough? I loved her more than anything, enough to know that if it came down to what was best for her, I'd let her go.

As if she somehow sensed my thinking, Abby walked into the kitchen. She was still in her pajamas looking mussed and tired, but oh so cute.

"Sleep well?" Dad asked her.

She grumbled incoherently as she poured herself a cup of coffee, closing her eyes to take a long sip of it. I was pretty sure I heard something about me not coming to bed, but it could have just been my guilt talking.

Dad laughed. "That good, eh?"

She sighed and gave him a smile. "Thank you for making coffee."

"You're welcome. I know you have a busy day today, so put me to work."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. It's the least I can do to thank you."

She waved him off dismissively. "You have nothing to thank me for."

"You gave me back my son. And you're ensuring my family is together this holiday season for really the first time ever. Pammy, Trey, and you have never experienced a true family Christmas with us."

"Should I be scared?" she joked.

The easy nature between her and my father warmed my heart.

Dad was right. It wasn't one thing. It was a million little things that Abby did or said every single day. Being with her was effortless, and I knew I could be a good mate. Annie may have complained most days, but it wasn't because I hadn't been the best mate I could be for her.

But it had never been enough, a little voice in my head reminded me. *Abby deserves better.*

"I have to run. I have some things to work out with Kyle before tonight," I told her.

I walked over and kissed Abby, but it felt forced, chaste. And I

couldn't help but feel like there was a chasm between us that I didn't know how to breach.

She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"You'll be here for the party, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." I tried to keep things light, but I knew we were going to have to sit down and have a very serious conversation soon.

For now, I resorted to my flight mechanism, but not entirely. I really did need to finalize things regarding Birdie's life celebration with Kyle and Kelsey. But I knew how it looked and I feared if I looked back, I'd see a sad mate and a disappointed father.

By the time I made it to the Alpha house, I was in a low place.

"Tucker, come on in. Kyle's waiting for you in his office," Mary Westin said when I arrived.

"Thanks, ma'am."

"It's Christmas Eve, Tucker. Don't look so glum."

I smiled. "I'm fine."

"I didn't ask if you were okay, and the fact you clarified tells me you most definitely are not fine. Is this about your new mate, or the old one?"

I groaned. "Everything's happening very quickly."

"Well what do you expect when the universe is trying to right itself?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You chose a compatible mate. She was the wrong girl for you all along, and I think you know that already. When she died, it was an opportunity for things to be set right. Of course it's going to move quickly. God doesn't like things out of place."

I didn't know how to digest what she was saying.

"Mom. Leave him alone. Everyone has a right to decide on a mate for themselves," Kyle told her.

Mary shrugged. "I'm just saying. A true mate is always the right choice. It doesn't matter that the timing is bad. She was made for you and you for her. So the question you should be asking yourself is whether or not Abigail Matroni is indeed your one true mate."

"I already know she is."

"Then there you have it. The timing may seem off or rushed to you given you're still in a state of grieving, but trust me on this, God doesn't

make mistakes when pairing true mates.”

Kyle stood behind his mother mouthing the words and rolling his eyes.

“Kyle Alexander Westin, do not mock your mother.”

“I wasn’t,” he insisted.

She turned on him. “Don’t think I don’t know better.”

I bit back a grin watching the larger-than-life Alpha cower just a bit to his mother’s stern reprimand. But then she whipped back around to me.

I gulped hard at the fierce look in her eyes.

“If you need time to grieve Annie, Abby will understand. Just be open and honest with her, and not stubborn and pigheaded like is typical for your kind.”

“My kind, ma’am?”

“Males. The whole lot of you should be mule shifters because you’re all just stubborn asses when it comes to matters of the heart. But if you’re worried about appearances, don’t be. This Pack has a long history of celebrating true mates, and from what I’d heard, Abby has already been welcomed with open arms. We’ll protect the both of you as if you were born into this Pack. Right Kyle?”

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am. Come back to my office and we can talk in private.”

“Grief comes in many ways, Tucker. Take your time to heal those old wounds, but not at the expense of your new mate. You hear me?”

I nodded but didn’t say a word. I didn’t know what to say. So much of what she’d spoken had been weighing heavily on me. In some weird way, it felt as if Mary had just lifted some of the guilt and burden I’d been carrying.

“My mom is quite passionate about true mates. Sorry about that.”

“Do you think she’s right though?”

“About the Pack supporting you and Abby? Of course.”

“About it being okay that I’ve moved on so quickly? I feel guilty for not mourning Annie.”

“Dude, mourning is for the living. She’s gone, and she’s not coming back. It doesn’t matter if you grieve her or not, that’s for you and your conscious. Nothing more. A true mate bond will drive you nuts and at times you’ll wonder if it’s really what you’re feeling or what the bond is trying to make you feel, but in the end, I do agree with my mother. True mates are a

bond beyond comprehension and sense. It's the way things should be. Don't ever tell her I said that, because I will deny it lest I never hear the end of it."

I chuckled. "Thanks Kyle. I needed to hear that."

I didn't realize just how badly I needed to hear that, like permission to love Abby.

We got down to business after that.

"Abby and I would like to host an open house this afternoon and evening for anyone in the Pack that would like to stop in. I know it's late notice, so I'm hoping you can send out a full pack notice. Not an order, but just letting them know they're welcome. It's as a thank you for welcoming Abby."

"I can certainly do that."

Kesley walked in to join us. "He'll get right on that."

"I thought you said we could talk privately."

Kyle pointed to his head. "Fully bonded mate privileges. I have a feeling you will someday understand."

I knew that meant they could speak telepathically through their bond, but I'd never dreamed that could happen to me. Though, if I sealed my bond with Abby, it could someday. I couldn't yet hope for such a thing. I wanted to make her happy, but I didn't know if I was ready to take another mate so formally. Would I ever? My first one hadn't exactly been stellar.

She's not Annie, I thought.

Mine! my wolf growled.

"Abby also wanted to ask about setting up a small tribute to Birdie too. So as people come by for the holidays, they can pay their respects without a big ceremony. In fact, we could just say that the house will be open for visitors from today through New Year's Eve."

"Why New Year's Eve?" he asked.

"Because, when the clock strikes midnight and we welcome in a new year, I need it to be a fresh start and leave the past in the past."

"I love this idea," Kelsey said. "What can we do to help?"

Abby

Chapter 35

Tucker's mom, sister, and sister-in-law were so much help as we added a few more decorations, wrapped presents to put under the tree, and cooked a feast for the party. It wasn't long before my girls came to help.

I quickly introduced Mirage, Christine, and Callie to the other ladies. Someone cranked up some Christmas music and we danced and sang along as we prepared for the party.

Callie's phone dinged with an incoming text.

"He did it! The word is officially out and from Kyle no less. But you didn't tell me you were also including a memorial for Birdie."

"What?" I asked, grabbing the phone from her hands, and quickly reading the text. I grinned. "I mean, I mentioned that it was something I would have liked to have done, but I thought it was too late to pull it off."

"A man in love will pull off anything his mate desires," Shana said. "Right, Mom?"

"You are correct, young one."

"I can't believe he actually made it happen."

No sooner were my words out of my mouth than there came a knock at the door.

I went to answer it, opening the door to two familiar faces.

"We just heard. What can we do to help?" Nonna asked.

"Put us to work," Tabitha said. "And this is my mate, Marshal. He's here to help as well."

"Hello," he said. "My son and grandson will be along shortly. I know Birdie's got more lights than this around here. Would you like us to light up the house the way she used to?"

"Uh, sure. Come on in."

I didn't have to run through introductions again as Nonna took over, made acquaintances, and along with Tabitha, began directing the madness.

Tucker returned with Kelsey, who had a tripod and large picture of

Birdie that she set up as a vigil to Birdie in the small parlor at the front of the house. I already knew from her friends that it was her favorite place to take tea. It also had two entrances, making an easy one-way path from the foyer to the dining room and then back to the foyer where the kitchen and living room could easily be reached.

“Aw, this is perfect,” Nonna praised. “She would have loved this. You two are doing a wonderful thing here.”

I dared a glance at Tucker. We’d been so busy that I hadn’t had even a second to talk to him. He was watching me, but I couldn’t read the look in his eyes.

As he walked around to stand next to me, my heart fluttered.

We’re going to be okay, I thought.

“Abby, we need to talk,” he whispered, and then took my hand and walked me back to our bedroom.

He looked so serious that it scared me. I sat down on the bed and waited.

“I’m not good enough for you, no matter how much I wish I were.”

“Isn’t that for me to decide?”

He flinched, and I had to take a deep breath and remind myself to watch my tone and not lash out at him.

“I’m sorry. Go on.”

His brow furrowed. I wanted to reach out and smooth it, but I didn’t dare. It tore at my heart every time he froze or pulled away from my touch because I knew without him saying it that he expected me to hit him.

“Annie.”

I glared at him before I could stop myself, but I didn’t say a word.

He sighed. “I know you’re Abby. Not Annie. I wasn’t calling you that. I was just going to say that Annie would have yelled if I’d said something she didn’t like. A simple ‘we need to talk’ could have set her off. And depending on her mood, yelling and cursing would have transitioned into smacking and sometimes into using me as her personal punching bag where I would be spending Christmas Eve in my fur trying to conceal the evidence of her abuse.”

My jaw locked and tears welled up in my eyes. I knew all of this, or at least I had suspected as much, but to hear him say the words broke a piece of my heart. I didn’t know how to heal him from his past, and I didn’t know if

there was even anything I could do to make him whole again. But I didn't care about any of that, because he was mine. All the messy, broken parts within him, they made him into the man I loved.

"Tucker . . ."

"Shhh. Please let me talk."

I nodded.

"She wasn't a good person, Abby. She was mean, selfish, and sometimes violent. But mostly, she was miserable, and there's a part of me that still blames myself for that because she wasn't always like that."

He thinks he's going to break me too, I thought sadly.

"But you, you're everything she never was. You're good, the best person I've ever known. Far too good for me."

I started to protest, but he silenced me with one look. It was the pain behind his eyes that had me freezing into place. In this moment, he was being raw and open, and I knew that no matter what he had to say, I had to sit there and listen. And if in the end what he needed from me the most was to leave and let him work through things on his own, then I was going to have to be strong enough to give that to him, because I loved him.

It really was that simple. I loved Tucker. And while I couldn't change who I am, I could try to respect whatever it was that he needed and give that to him. No matter how much it might hurt me.

Pain sliced through my chest at the thought, and I winced. He was too busy thinking through his next words to notice.

"You don't deserve to be saddled with me as a mate."

And there it was. My heart was on the verge of breaking into a million pieces, and I wanted to beg him to stop and not say another word. It was Christmas Eve for crying out loud and his family and our friends were just down the hall in my house.

My jaw locked as I faced this head on wondering why now? What had happened? Why was he choosing this moment to do this?

He blew out his breath and started to pace.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize this would be so hard to get out. I've never actually admitted that to anyone before. Sure, people suspected, but it's hard to say it, to admit that I'd allowed it to happen. I'm strong. I could have stopped her, and I don't expect you to understand. She was quite manipulative and after one of her fits, she would cry and swear she was sorry.

It wasn't that I fell for it or believed her, but she was my mate. What else was I supposed to do?"

He paused and ran a hand through his hair.

"I need you to understand this."

"So it'll somehow hurt less when you tell me to leave?" I whispered.

His head whipped towards me, and his eyes were wide with shock.

"What? No!" he shouted, confusing me with the passion behind that one little word.

"No?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

"You seemed to be building up to that," I muttered. "You know with the whole 'I'm not good enough for you'. Next comes the 'it's not you, it's me' speech."

His jaw dropped and then he shut it.

"I'm not mad," I assured him. "But if that's what you want, I don't know that I can give it to you. I want to, I mean if that's what you *really* need, I want to, but I don't know if I'm strong enough to just walk away. Because while you may think you're not good enough for me, I don't think there's another man in this world who's better than you. And I want you to fight for us, Tucker. We can make it, and we can be happy. I know we can."

"Would you just shut up?" he said as his lips crashed against mine.

I gasped and kissed him back, pouring all the love I had for him in that kiss.

He slowly pulled back and rested his forehead against mine.

"You'd really leave me if that's what I thought I needed?"

"I said I'd try," I argued, feeling more than a little confused.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I love you and I want the best for you. And if that's not me, then . . ."

He kissed me again. I smiled a little this time.

"That wasn't the speech I was trying to work myself up to."

"It wasn't?"

"No. What I was trying to say is that while I know I'm not good enough for you, you make me want to strive to be. What I need most in this world is you, Abby."

"You do?"

“I do. And I know we haven’t talked about the logistics of what happens, and that this may seem rushed to you, but I want so badly to seal our bond and make you mine forever. And I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life proving myself worthy of your love, because I love you so much.”

He moved to kiss me again, but I put my hand out, flat against his chest to halt him.

I didn’t miss the pain behind his eyes, but I ignored it. With a sly smile, I turned my head to the side and then brushed my hair back to fully expose my neck to him.

I didn’t care that we had a house full of people just down the hall. I didn’t care that they might hear us, or somehow know. I didn’t even care about the blood and the whole biting thing. All I cared about was making this man mine. Right here. Right now.

We had a party awaiting us where we could celebrate with our family and friends after the deed was done and we were officially bonded.

He gasped.

I shrugged my opposite shoulder. “Mirage clued me in.”

“You’re sure about this? There’s no such thing as divorce amongst mated wolves.”

“I’ve never been surer about anything.”

He pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it onto the floor. I followed his lead and removed his too.

I was a little nervous since I had no idea what to expect.

He licked his lips. “Last chance to back out.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Tucker,” I assured him.

Without another word, he kissed my neck and then across my collarbone landing on one spot that he seemed to stall at. I could feel the smile of his lips against my skin before the barest of pricks.

I gasped, noticing my own teeth had elongated.

For a second, I started to panic thinking I was about to shift, but Tucker sucked on my neck and my body buzzed.

A calm came over me as I sunk my teeth into his skin.

His warm blood flowed into my mouth, but it wasn’t disgusting at all.

I moaned when he rubbed against me, suddenly desperate to have him inside of me.

It felt like I had lost all control as I broke the button of his jeans trying

to get them off of him as quickly as possible. I was in a skirt that he didn't even bother to remove, just shoved it up and pulled my panties to the side before thrusting into me.

I growled and sucked on his neck again.

Together we fell onto the bed in a fast and furious frenzy. I couldn't tell where he began and I ended. In that moment we were perfectly one in mind, body, and soul.

When I began to struggle to breathe, I had to pull back as my teeth retracted.

"Tucker!" I cried out holding on to him for dear life.

As he released his bite on my neck, I instantly missed the completeness we'd shared, though in the throes of passion, I couldn't protest.

"Oh baby. I'm so close," he moaned.

All my muscles tightened, and I cried out as I shuddered around him.

"Abby," he said as he followed me over the crest.

We just laid there unable to move for a moment. I didn't even care about his weight on top of me. We stayed in that position until the rhythm of our hearts slowed. I couldn't help but notice how they beat as one, as if we were somehow complete. Two parts of the same whole.

Finally, he rolled to his side and carefully checked on me.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Is it done? Are we bonded now?"

"Yes."

"Then I've never been better."

Abby

Epilogue

One week later.

Tucker and I stood in front of our house with our arms around each other staring up at the lights adorning it. Marshal and his team had outdone themselves, and each night since that magical Christmas Eve, we'd come out here to stand on the sidewalk just to stare up at it in awe.

So much had happened in just a week. Hell, my entire life had changed in the last month, but I had no regrets.

After we'd mated, we'd had to face an outpouring of congratulations as our Christmas Eve open house slash Birdie's Life Celebration slash Delta party turned into a welcome to the Pack for me. More people than I could possibly put names to faces had stopped by then and throughout the week to wish us well and congratulate us on our mating.

The remainder of the week we'd spent going through his house, sorting out things to keep and things to donate. It was empty and clean now, awaiting a new family. We both knew that eventually I was going to have to deal with my place too, but that would wait a few weeks until he had his leave approved to go with me.

It hadn't been easy on Tucker, and I knew it wasn't going to be easy on me either, but together we were facing it all head on.

I had never felt so wanted, cherished, and loved as I did by this man and in this place. This was my home, and exactly where I was always meant to be. Right here, in this house, in this Pack, with this man by my side.

His family was still with us. I knew we'd both be sad to see them leave in a few days, but it had opened up new doors and healed old wounds. I knew we wouldn't wait long to see them again.

Our Christmas Eve Party had been such a success, that we were doing it again tonight for New Year's Eve. I told Tucker about a tradition my mother and I had to ring in a new year and a fresh start every New Year's Eve. Delta team had caught wind of it, and that spread to Westin Force, then

throughout the Pack until Kyle had personally requested to make it a new Pack celebration.

The house was still decked out for the holidays and even more food was now spread out across every flat surface of my house. People were coming and going well before dark, and I knew it would continue into the wee hours of the new year.

Tucker turned us around to look out over the park and pond across the street.

Tears pricked my eyes as I saw bonfire after bonfire scattered across the field.

“My mother would have loved this,” I said.

“So would Birdie. She always loved it when the Pack came together, especially for a good party.”

I laughed and wiped my eyes.

“Did you bring it?” I asked.

He nodded.

Tucker had chosen a piece of clothing he knew Annie had always loved and I had a special shawl that had been my mother’s. A part of me wanted to keep it, but I knew in my heart that this is what she would have wanted.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded as we walked across the street to stand beside one of the empty bonfires. It didn’t stay empty for long, though, as our loved ones gathered around us.

Christine rubbed my back encouragingly as I gripped the shawl and spoke.

“It’s time for me to set you free, Mom. But don’t worry about me. I’m going to okay.”

Tucker’s mom hugged me as I tossed it into the fire, letting the tears run down my face.

“I’m sorry, Annie, for not being able to give you the life you needed. I know now that we’d been wrong. A true mate really is worth the wait. I hope you can be at peace now. Goodbye.”

He threw her shirt into the fire as we stood there watching them burn together.

“Are you okay?” I finally asked him.

He nodded and pulled me into his arms.

“Never been better.”

He kissed me as I blushed, remembering the words I’d said to him after our mating.

Others were tossing their own items into the fires all around us. Not everyone had such deep things going on in their lives, but there was always something you just needed to leave behind and not carry the burden of into the new year.

Kyle and Kelsey found us still wrapped up in each other’s arms.

“It’s time,” Kyle said.

“Are you sure about this?” Tucker asked.

“Absolutely.”

There was nothing I wanted more, except maybe a daughter of my own someday.

“Everyone gather around,” Kyle yelled out.

People were already starting to strip out of their clothes, which was still a little weird for me, but I tried to ignore it and focus on Kyle.

“Tonight we leave behind a year and enter into the next with a fresh start. No one understands that more than Abby. So before we countdown to a new year and enjoy our first Pack run of the year, there’s something we need to do first.”

“Abigail Matroni, great-great-granddaughter of Birdie, has formally requested to join our Pack.”

“And we accept!” Kelsey finished for him as the entire Pack cheered.

“Abby, take a knee.”

I did as I was told, lowering myself to both knees and then baring my neck to my Alpha.

“Ten.”

“Nine.”

“Eight.”

“Seven.”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

Tucker reached for my hand and helped me to my feet.

Kyle lifted his head and howled to the moon.

I got goosebumps as hundreds and hundreds of other shifters followed his lead and did the same.

“Let the run begin!” Kyle yelled as he and Kelsey spontaneously shifted, sending shreds of their clothes in all directions.

Tucker beamed at me with pride.

“Strip or go?” he asked.

“Go!”

Together we shifted, ruining our clothes.

He howled.

I howled.

And then we ran.

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About the Author



Julie Trettel is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Paranormal Romance. 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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