

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

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ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies

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Only Love

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ONLY LOVE

Kit Tunstall

Chapter One

Elise tossed back her head and let loose a howl of pure joy. As she ran, her paws squelched on the damp earth of the forest as its fecund aroma filled her nostrils. A light breeze, chilled by the waters of the Strait, caressed her fur, blowing with just enough force to make her eyes water as she charged ahead with reckless speed. The woods were thick with undergrowth and towering trees but the light of the full moon provided ample illumination for her wolfish eyes to navigate.

She could taste salt in the air as she neared the edge of the island. Water from the Strait of Juan de Fuca lapped against the shores of Evergreen Island in a rhythmic motion that mimicked the beating of her heart. Standing there, she could forget all about the reasons she had fled her room and raced into the night, heady with the influence of the full moon and drunk on the sensation of being free, if only for one night.

Elise howled again, a throaty sound voicing her pleasure in the night. Not far away an answering howl rose, longer than hers, with a rough edge that spoke to her on an instinctive level. Her belly quaked at the male's call and her loins throbbed. The human side of her brain tried to lodge a feeble protest to seeking out the male, knowing it would only complicate matters but she let the animal side reign.

Her body thrummed with sensual energy as she ran in the direction of the wolf howling for her. An answering bay rose in her throat, speaking of eagerness and longing. Right then, she didn't care who owned the howl. She wanted him. Frenzied need allowed no room for logic or reason. Instinct guided her to him and she followed it willingly, having repressed the wolf side of her nature far too long.

He howled again from directly in front of her. Elise stopped mid-step, her green eyes watchful as the brush moved when he passed through it before emerging into the small clearing where she stood.

He was an impressive specimen, standing three feet tall at the shoulders with a powerful build. His fur was silver in the moonlight and she wondered what shade of blond it was when he was in human form. His brown eyes devoured her with equal intensity, expressing his interest, as his nostrils flared to better take in her scent.

They moved forward at the same time, meeting in the middle of the clearing. The night wind ruffled Elise's fur as she stretched her neck to sniff his muzzle. He endured the greeting stoically, his eyes watching her every movement.

When he lunged forward, she welcomed his weight on her, knocking her to the ground. They rolled together, growling and yipping at each other. He was warm and solid on her and she reveled in being at his mercy. There was no thought of resisting when he assumed a dominant position to mount her. Elise howled her pleasure at his possession, ignoring the shocked whispers of her human side, chastising her for behaving so recklessly, for losing herself in the moment with this unknown male.

As he pounded into her, his cock knotted to secure his possession, Elise let sensations consume her. Orgasm after orgasm crashed through her and she howled with each one. The tumescent moon was the last sight she allowed herself before closing her eyes and shutting off the human part of her brain to let her animal instincts surrender to the carnal enjoyment overwhelming her.

* * * * *

The first streaks of sunrise were just minutes away when Elise opened her eyes. The unfamiliar weight of an arm across her waist kept her from moving, though a stick poking into her hip was urging her to shift positions.

She turned her head to look at the face of the man with whom she had spent the night mating. Thick eyelashes the shade of burnt honey shielded his brown eyes from

her view. A generous bottom lip compensated for the thin slash of his upper lip, formed into a bow as he snored quietly. His nose was straight and long, going well with his lean face. Hair a shade darker than his eyelashes fell over his forehead and she barely restrained the urge to push it back.

Elise knew she had seen him before somewhere on the island but didn't know where. His name escaped her and she knew they had never formally met. He was probably an Omega member of the pack.

She should feel guilty for what she had done but the only emotion she experienced was desire. Her body, though sated from a night of intense sex in wolf form, still ached for the man lying beside her to please her in her current state. With a light touch, she moved the strands of hair off his forehead, pleased when his eyes fluttered open immediately. "Good morning."

They widened with shock and he seemed temporarily disoriented. With a blink, he cast off that impression and his eyes bored into hers. "Elise Marceau." Her name was more of a groan than a greeting.

She tried to ignore his obvious displeasure. Like her, he must have surely realized by now how many tenets of their society they had violated last night. At that moment she couldn't muster the energy to care. Instead, she traced a finger over his nipple, nestled in the pelt of soft golden hair covering his chest. "I'm sorry but I don't know your name."

"Why would you?" His stomach twitched under her fingers when she moved her hand lower. "Mical Edwards." As he gave it, his hand trapped hers, keeping it from going to his cock. "You should go, Miss Marceau. If anyone finds you—"

"Do you think we are perhaps beyond 'Miss Marceau'?" Her lips twitched. "You may call me Elise."

Mical shook his head. "This isn't a joke. Do you know what we've done?"

"Yes. I was there." She leaned closer, letting her breath waft across his neck. "I won't ever forget last night."

He groaned louder. "Tell me that wasn't your first time."

She remained silent, since he clearly didn't want to hear her affirmation.

Mical cursed. "How could I be so irresponsible?" He moved to a sitting position, distancing himself from her. Elise reached out to touch his thigh and he moved her hand away. Lips bowed in a mock pout, she scooted closer, raking her nails down his leg.

Air hissed between his teeth. "What are you playing at?"

With a sigh, Elise sat up. "I'm not playing. I know what we've done. I'm daughter of the current Beta and the promised mate of the next Alpha, while you are an Omega pack member. I'm not taking it lightly but I can't be sorry for what we've done." She shrugged. "Right now, I see nothing wrong with our actions. Last night was wonderful and I can't regret it."

Mical ran a hand through his hair, further disheveling the locks that framed his face and fell just past the base of his skull. "Miss...Elise, I didn't mean to imply last night wasn't perfect but I think you'll regret it when you've had more time to think. You've wasted yourself on an Omega."

Elise rolled her eyes. "Please. Many of the pack might not live in the present but I do. I identify more strongly with my human side than wolf pack dynamics. I believe I have the right to make love with any male whom I find attractive. What right does my or Jared's father have to promise me to him?"

Mical's eyes widened. "Um, sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." He dipped his head, perhaps an unconscious reaction to her forceful statement or her position in the pack.

Elise touched his chin, forcing his head up. "Don't bow to me. It's demeaning, especially after last night."

His eyes sparkled with independence, even as he inclined his head again. "Showing you respect isn't demeaning."

She glanced up at the sky, noting the sun was quickly rising. "I should go since there apparently won't be a repeat of last night in our current forms."

With a gentle stroke of his hand across her stomach, he caught her eyes when she looked at him. "I don't want you to be sorry about last night. I should be but I'm not. I had no right to touch you but I can't be sorry I did."

Her mouth curved and Elise leaned forward, brushing her lips against Mical's. "Thank you." Then she rose and ran into the forest, wincing as an occasional branch snapped under her bare feet, poking into her skin. When not in wolf form, she definitely noticed the texture of the forest floor. She tried to focus on the way ahead of her, forcing herself not to look back at the man she had left behind. Last night had been delicious insanity but she couldn't dwell on it. Too many obstacles stood between them. It was better to forget about him.

She was still telling herself that, struggling to believe it, when she emerged onto Syringa Ridge, where her parents' mansion dominated a bluff facing the sea. No one was visible on the grounds and she moved with as much stealth as her human form would allow, trying to shield both her presence and nudity from anyone who might glance out a window and see her.

Elise availed herself of the trellis against the side of the house to get to the second floor. The roses weren't yet in bloom but the thorns tried to keep her from ascending, digging into her flesh and taking bits as trophies of the struggle. The minor pricks were nothing compared to the satisfied ache between her thighs and she climbed rapidly, knowing time was against her. Soon, everyone would awaken and if she weren't in her room, her night's adventure would be exposed. Unless she wanted to live the next few weeks until the wedding under lock and key, she couldn't let that happen.

She fumbled with the window to her room, clinging to the trellis with one hand, while pushing against the casement with the other, trying to force it up. Elise nearly fell when the window flew up, propelled by someone inside her room. They remained obscured from her view, forcing her to enter the bedroom without knowing who

waited. With a deep breath, she clambered into her suite, squaring her shoulders in preparation for the coming confrontation.

A tiny breath of relief escaped her when she saw her mother standing before her. Olivia, impeccably groomed even in a pair of satin pajamas and matching lounge socks, thrust a robe at Elise, her expression betraying her disapproval. "Where have you been?" Her tone of voice revealed her worry.

Elise slipped on the peach fleece robe and turned away from her mother to walk to the vanity table. She sat on the padded floral bench to examine her unkempt reflection. Scratches marred her creamy complexion and short strands of auburn hair stuck up all over her head. Her cheeks had flushed from the chilly morning air and her green eyes were soft with satisfaction. As she lifted a wooden paddle brush, she asked, "Where do you think? I went for a run."

Olivia strode forward, the footfalls of her socks cushioned by the thick rose-colored carpet. Her hand was rigid when it dropped on Elise's shoulder. "During a full moon, when you're least able to control your impulses. You know that's forbidden."

She shrugged off her mother's hand and made a production of brushing her hair with the soft bristles. "I'm tired of everything being forbidden. I'm twenty-three, Mother and I have no freedom. I've never been off this island without an escort." She slammed the brush onto the vanity table. "I'm tired of it."

The chastisement left Olivia's voice, as her tone turned soothing. She replaced her hand on Elise's shoulder, patting gently. "I know it's frustrating but things will improve for you after you join with Jared. You will no longer need protection from other males. They won't dare harm the Lupina."

"Mother, I'm not marrying Jared." Saying the words brought an accompanying sense of liberation Elise hadn't expected. For more than a year, as the wedding date approached, becoming more of a reality with each passing day, thoughts of rebellion had circled through her mind but saying them crystallized her determination.

Olivia's hand fell from her shoulder and she gasped. "Don't talk like that. If someone heard you –"

"I'm not marrying him." She raised her voice to a louder pitch, hoping someone would stumble by her room and hear so they could carry the tale down the road to the Sundown family's mansion, saving her the trouble of confronting Jared with the news.

Her mother's face suddenly showed its age as it took on an inflexible expression. "You have no choice. Niall and Vasek made the agreement the month of your birth."

"This is the twenty-first century. Father had no right to promise me to someone. I am going to marry whom I decide, not your choice." The sharp crack of Olivia's hand against her cheek had her recoiling and touching her face with shock. The slap stung but what amazed her was that her mother had done it all. Never had she raised a hand to Elise.

Olivia appeared equally surprised as she balled her hand into a fist and shoved it into the pocket of her pajamas. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have struck you but you frightened me."

Elise raised a brow. "What?"

Her voice dropped and she knelt beside Elise, physically turning her head so that she was forced to meet her mother's gaze. "You can't speak like that, Elise. There is unrest in the Sundown Pack. Rumors abound that another male will challenge Jared's ascension. If you don't mate with him as promised, it will weaken his authority. It will also give grounds for a challenge to anyone intent on usurping Jared. He must be mated before he can take over the pack."

Nausea rolled through Elise's stomach and her spark of rebellion flickered, almost going out. She hadn't realized so much depended on her union with Jared. She glanced away from her mother, hoping to shore her defenses. "It's not my problem," she whispered.

"It will be if Jared is defeated. The first thing the new Alpha will do is reorganize the pack. He will force every member of the Sundown family to leave the island and

remove any of their supporters. As Beta, your father would be in danger.” Olivia shuddered. “Should this usurper ascribe to the old ways, he could kill any opposition outright and no one would stop him.”

Elise turned in her chair, grasping her mother’s hands. “Then let’s leave now, before the ascension. Let Jared and his family worry about keeping their power. We don’t need to be here. Father’s business is not dependent on the pack for success. We can build a new life.”

Sadness filled Olivia’s eyes and she withdrew from Elise’s hold. “Our life is here, Elise. Maybe if we were younger, your father and I could start over but it’s too late. We live as humans but we are still werewolves. We need the pack and they need us.” She shook her head. “Jared needs you. You must do your duty for the pack.”

The flame fanning her rebellion went out with what she swore was an audible whoosh inside her mind. Elise’s shoulders sagged and she nodded just once, not verbalizing her acquiescence but knowing it was clear, all the same.

Olivia straightened from her crouch, bending forward to kiss the top of her daughter’s head. “You’ve made the right choice, darling. It’s best if you don’t mention last night to anyone. There’s no need to upset your father or Jared.”

But no one cares if I’m upset, she thought with silent resentment. Why were her wishes, dreams and aspirations so unimportant? The pack was all about family and unity, putting communal welfare above personal happiness. She couldn’t understand why her parents clung so tenaciously to the status quo but what could she do? Pack mentality had been ingrained in her since birth and the responsibility of continuing their way of life rested in large part on her shoulders. There was no escaping her destiny. Being with Mical had been a transient moment of bliss, one she could never repeat. That, more than anything, filled her with sadness, opening a deep hole in her heart that ached so badly tears came to her eyes.

Chapter Two

Business was slow at the Evergreen Bar and Grill tonight, affording Mical ample opportunity to think, much to his displeasure. The last thing he wanted to do was spend time with his thoughts, replaying scenes from this morning when they had returned to their human forms. He couldn't rid his mind of Elise's sensual scent or her soft skin and the way her lips curled slowly into a smile. His cock couldn't help but respond to the stimuli provided by his brain, leaving him in a constant state of arousal, which only added to his frustration.

He wiped the bar with excessive force, hoping physical exertion would clear his thoughts of Elise and allow his erection to subside. The wood shone under his assault but he took no satisfaction in a job well done. Wiping down the bar was only a reinforcement of his position in the pack as a lowly bartender whose only purpose was to see to the needs of those above him.

It hadn't bothered him in the past. Maybe because he came from a long line of Alphas he had always realized his own self-worth, had never felt inferior to any of the Sundown Pack who ranked higher than he did. In the past, he had never concerned himself with the rank of a pack member with whom he mated.

Then again, none of his lovers had been the Beta's daughter and future Lupina. Knowing where he stood in comparison to Elise, at least among those in control of the pack, was enough to make him cringe. He could well imagine the look of derision her father would give him should he find out—right before either Niall or Jared tried to rip him to pieces for his insolence. It wouldn't matter to them that he should have been the Alpha of his own pack but for his father's weakness. That alone would be cause for rejection. According to what many of the pack believed, strength or lack thereof, flowed

from father to son naturally, which was why sons automatically inherited the position of Alpha, unless challenged.

How could he not feel inferior to Jared? How could he avoid contrasting what he could offer Elise with what the soon to be Alpha could give her? As an Omega, he had nothing that was truly his own to put forward. His status as the son of a former Alpha of the Rodesia Pack meant nothing because his father had been defeated and died in the challenge before Mical's birth. The Alpha replacing him had spared no pity for Mical's mother, forcing her to leave her home, though she had been eight months pregnant with twins.

With a disgusted sigh, he tossed the cloth onto the floor. Why was he even thinking like this? One night of sex didn't mean he was mating for life. For most members of the Sundown Pack it was permissible to have sex with whomever they liked. The majority could even choose their own mate without permission of the Alpha. Only a select few, like Elise, had no control over who their partner would be.

That was why he should put all thoughts of her from his mind. Last night had been amazing but they couldn't be together ever again. Even if she weren't promised to Jared, they could never mate. An Omega did not join with the daughter of the Beta without facing too many challenges to make it worthwhile. The only way it could happen was if they left to form their own pack and she certainly wouldn't want to do that. Why would she give up the security of her station in the Sundown Pack to face an unknown future with him? He doubted she had taken one look at him and tumbled head over heels into love, as he had done last summer when she had returned to the island after finishing university. No longer so closely monitored by a team of guards, as she had been while in a private apartment in Seattle for school, he had gotten close enough to really see her. It had struck him like a lightning bolt that she had turned into a desirable woman and his reaction had stunned him. He had experienced an overwhelming need to have her but had resisted, knowing it was unfeasible.

Despite his resolve, his infatuation with Elise had been intense but now it was nearly all-consuming, after having spent the night with her. Was that why he had been so caught up in the moment last night? Had his subconscious recognized her scent and encouraged him to mate with her, without his conscious mind knowing who she was? He had never done anything like that before, always having too much self-respect to indulge in random sex with another pack member. Only with her and only because of her had he gambled everything and it was all for nothing. A future with Elise was impossible. He had to accept that.

Still, he should tell her in person, so he didn't hurt her feelings. Mical ignored the swell of excitement that filled him upon thinking of seeing her again. He schooled his expression into one of sternness, while telling himself he would only say goodbye. Nothing else could happen.

* * * * *

Elise was deep in a Nora Roberts novel when something hit her window. With a startled cry, she dropped the book and sat straight up on the bed. Her eyes fixed on the window as she slowly got to her feet, half tempted to call one of the security guards who lived and worked at the Marceau home to investigate.

Before she could, the sound came again and this time she recognized it as a pebble. Brow furrowed, she padded to the window to open it with quiet stealth. Something furtive in the means of contact urged her to respond in kind and she eased her head out the open window.

Her mouth dropped open with shock when she saw Mical standing on the ground below. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

The light of the moon provided enough illumination to show his shrug, though his face remained in shadows. "I had to see you. Can I come up?"

A refusal hovered on her tongue as her mind reviewed all the reasons why he couldn't. "Yes." She held her breath as he climbed the trellis. It creaked under his

weight and his muttered curses as the thorns snagged his flesh seemed like shouts in the quiet night. Any moment, she expected someone to burst into her room.

She didn't breathe again until Mical levered himself through the open window and closed it behind him. Then her mouth went dry and it was a struggle to breathe once more. He was as gorgeous in skintight jeans and an old T-shirt as he had been in the nude. In the hours that had passed she had somehow forgotten how sexy he was and when he grinned at her with a hint of self-consciousness, it took away her breath.

"Um, hi."

Her lips twitched at his boyish greeting. He had to be a few years older than she, judging by the creases forming under his eyes and around his mouth but right then he reminded her of a teenage boy on his first date. Her mouth drooped at the analogy, remembering she had never been on a date with a teenage boy. She hadn't been on any dates at all, unless last night counted.

When he brushed his thumb across her lips, she looked up at him with confusion. His touch was electric but was it because it was Mical touching her or would any male have done? She knew there was no chemistry with Jared but he was the only man with whom she had to compare and he had never even kissed her.

"You're frowning. Would you like me to leave?"

Elise wrapped her hand around his wrist, holding his fingers to her mouth. "No." She opened her lips and fastened them around his finger, nibbling lightly.

"I came here to tell you something, not to touch you but I don't think I can do it." Mical stepped closer, putting his other hand on her waist. "I see now that I shouldn't be here at all."

"No."

"You should tell me to go."

"No."

His eyes gleamed with a hint of teasing. "Is that all you can say?"

She released his digit to return his grin. "No."

Mical cupped her cheek. "What else can you say?"

Elise rubbed against his palm, reveling in the darts of heat that radiated from his skin. "Make love to me."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He closed the remaining distance between them, anchoring her tightly against him with his arm around her waist, his hand settling on the curve of one of her buttocks. His mouth slanted over hers and his lips coaxed hers open. Elise closed her eyes, letting her hand slide down his forearm before dropping it to his hip. Her other hand found purchase in the waistband of his jeans.

It was their first kiss, aside from the light one she had brushed on his mouth that morning. Mical more than lived up to her expectations. Alternately gentle and demanding, he changed the tempo of the kiss with each breath. When his tongue penetrated her moist depths, she moaned at the foreign sensation. As he traced the recesses of her mouth, her tongue tried to catch and pin his but he flitted away each time, finding a new spot to tease.

She pulled on his jeans, trying to bring him closer. His cock pressed into her stomach and she wriggled her hips as dampness spread through her pussy. Mical's tongue left her mouth and she tried to follow with hers but he blocked her attempts by drawing her lower lip into his mouth to suck on.

As he teased her lips with his tongue, Mical's hands slipped from her cheek and buttocks to pull at her sleepshirt, tugging it up to her hips, so he could grasp the hem. He peeled it upward in so smooth a motion that there was barely a moment of parting between them. Even as he tossed the shirt over his shoulder, his mouth was back on hers.

Elise turned her head to the side, breaking the kiss. Her brain cried for oxygen and she drew in several deep breaths as she cuddled against him. In just her panties, the room was chilly and she shivered. Immediately, Mical's arms enveloped her and he pulled her against the heat of his body.

She lifted her head to look into his brown eyes, finding them molten with desire. She wanted to say something witty or romantic but words escaped her. With the hope that her eyes spoke for her, she brought her hands to the hem of his T-shirt to tug it from the waistband of his jeans. His abdominal muscles fluttered under her fingers when she bared the skin by pushing the shirt up to his armpits.

“Elise.” He tried to capture her mouth in a kiss but she evaded the attempt, bending forward to place her mouth against his chest. She licked a patch of skin before exhaling on it, making Mical jump. She grinned at his reaction before extending her tongue and trailing it across his skin, seeking out one of his nipples.

He groaned when her mouth settled on the turgid peak. Elise flicked her tongue across his nipple and his hips surged forward, offering proof of his arousal.

As she tasted his chest, her hands worked on the zipper and snap of his jeans, freeing them with an ease she hadn’t expected. Passion must have given her the confidence. She folded open his jeans and reached inside to touch his underwear. Her eyes widened when her fingers instead found his cock, hard and ready for her.

With shy strokes she explored his cock, lulled by his low groans and the piston motion of his hips as he thrust against her hand. Sticky fluid leaked from the tip and she swirled her fingers through it as she lifted her mouth from his nipple and met his eyes. Mical growled low in his throat when she licked his arousal from her fingers and his eyes darkened further, if that was possible.

“Elise, I need you.”

Her insides quivered at the words and she nodded, expressing her reciprocal feelings. He released her long enough to peel off the T-shirt and shuck off the jeans, along with his shoes. During the seconds they were apart, her brain tried to remind her of her impending wedding, her duty to the pack and all the reasons why she shouldn’t be doing this.

Desire beat out logic and she walked with him to the bed, sprawling across it in what she hoped was a sexy pose. She parted her thighs and peered up at him through the veil of her lashes, waiting for him to join her.

Mical knelt between her ankles and his hands found purchase on her splayed thighs. Her pussy clenched with anticipation as his hands moved in agonizingly slow circles up her thighs until his thumbs were nestled on either side of her swollen lips. She parted her legs a bit wider, encouraging him to touch her.

“You’re so beautiful.” His voice was thick with emotion. “I had no idea you would be like this, Elise.”

Her brow wrinkled. “You’ve thought about me like this?”

He nodded, his eyelashes shielding his eyes. A hint of a blush suggested he was embarrassed. “Many times.”

She wanted to press for more information and perhaps he realized her intent because he distracted her by stroking her slit with the rough pad of his thumb. A gush of moisture accompanied his caresses and Elise arched her hips, wanting him to penetrate her.

Both of his thumbs were now exploring her lips, sliding up and down in opposing motions that were driving her mad. “Please, Mical.”

He pushed her lips together just at the point of her swollen clit, pressing down to apply pressure. “Please, what?”

“Don’t tease me.”

Mical shook his head. “I’m not teasing, honey. I want to know every inch of you. I’m just getting acquainted.”

She bit back a groan of frustration as he resumed his light strokes. Her pussy convulsed, trying to take in his fingers but he ignored her involuntary reaction. When he parted her lips, she thought he was finally going to stop teasing and had to bite back tart words when all he did was circle her clit with his forefinger.

Elise was certain she couldn't take any more and was close to pushing him away and burying her own fingers in her pussy to find relief. As she contemplated doing just that, Mical leaned forward, bringing his mouth to her pussy. A moan escaped her when his breath brushed against her clit and she lifted her hips off the bed, forcing his mouth against her slit.

His tongue squirmed into her opening, seeking out her secret places. Elise grabbed handfuls of the flannel comforter to keep from screaming when he sucked her clit into his mouth and flicked his tongue across the sensitive bud. Her hips had a mind of their own, mindlessly pumping, demanding more of his tongue. He complied by sweeping it to her opening and penetrating her. She moaned at the sensation as her pussy and thighs clenched. Shudders racked her body, emanating from her pussy.

She could have sobbed when his tongue left her opening, until it returned to her clit. As he suckled it, two of his fingers penetrated her pussy, thrusting in and out of her in time with each stroke of his tongue. Convulsions exploded from her womb, swept outward and consumed her. Her body quaked violently and a cry of satisfaction escaped her as she came, her juices flooding his fingers.

He moved quickly, silencing her mouth with his to hold in the rest of her cry. Her taste was on his tongue, salty and unfamiliar but not unpleasant. Elise drew his tongue into her mouth, sucking on the appendage to keep from screaming as her pussy convulsed several more times with the force of her orgasm.

When she finally had hold of herself again, she lay under him, staring into his eyes. They were both tense, waiting to see if anyone had heard her reckless cry. As the minutes ticked past, it seemed obvious they hadn't and she relaxed. A moment later, his coiled muscles loosened and he sank on top of her, pressing her into the soft mattress with his weight. It was a comforting feeling.

In a whisper, she said, "I didn't know it would be like that. It's different in wolf-form. More orgasms but they're less intense."

He nodded. "I prefer to make love this way but last night, I needed you. It was so intense I couldn't have walked away even if I had known who you were."

"Do you want to finish?" Her face was warm. It was disconcerting to be embarrassed about discussing sex at her age, though no surprise, considering how sheltered she had been.

He nodded. "I ache to be inside you." His hand moved across her thigh, seeking out her hand, which he brought to his cock. "Can you feel how eager I am for this?"

"Yes." Elise bent her legs, leveling her feet on the mattress as Mical shifted positions to align their pelvises. With one hand he guided the head of his cock to her pussy, nestling against her opening. He hesitated and she lifted her hips to take him inside her wet sheath. Even this felt different from last night but was just as amazing. He was larger and wider but without the knot in his cock to keep him anchored to her for hours. The walls of her pussy were more sensitive to appreciate every vein and variance in skin texture of his cock and when he thrust deep inside her, she couldn't breathe for a moment, it felt so good.

His thrusts increased in speed and her hips rose to match each one. Although she wouldn't have believed it was possible, her body was ready for another orgasm. When Mical's hand slipped between them so he could caress her clit with his thumb, convulsions tightened her pussy around his cock. He responded in kind, pushing in as deep as he could and staying that way as he loosed his seed into her.

Elise bit down on her tongue to keep from crying out when she came again. Every muscle in her body tightened for a millisecond and she couldn't breathe as waves of pleasure crashed over her. When the assault finally ended, a harsh exhalation escaped her and she melted into the bed in a state of boneless relaxation, incapable of moving right then.

He didn't seem inclined to move either. Mical eased his weight onto her, while keeping his cock inside her. Together, their breathing slowed and Elise's heartbeat

returned to its normal level. Perspiration slicked her skin and when she looked at Mical she saw his face was still red from their passionate exertions.

Her eyes fluttered closed despite her best efforts to keep them open. She couldn't stave off sleep, though there was so much she wanted to say to Mical and she knew he would be gone when she woke up.

Chapter Three

As she had expected, Mical was gone when she awoke the next morning. Four times more during that week he came to her and each morning he was gone when she awakened. Elise never heard him leave but always seemed to realize it in her sleep because her dreams would turn to nightmares where she was always alone, seeking Mical but unable to find him.

Try as she did to hide their affair, she couldn't seem to stop dropping into moments of introspection, regardless of what she was supposed to be doing. Elise tried to maintain a front, to act as she always had but hadn't done as well as she had hoped, as evidenced by Olivia's confrontation a week after she had caught her daughter sneaking into her room.

She had just bitten into a piece of toast when Olivia sat at the breakfast table, her expression stern. "What is the matter with you, Elise?"

The toast turned to paste in her suddenly dry mouth and Elise choked when she tried to clear the bite by gulping down orange juice. Her mother watched impassively as she struggled to get down the mouthful. Her voice emerged as a croak when she was able to respond. "What do you mean?"

"You're so distant." Olivia shook her head. "I know you aren't happy about the union with Jared but you might muster a little enthusiasm for your wedding plans."

Elise bit back a groan. Why would she be excited about planning a wedding that would trap her in a marriage she didn't want? "I'm content to let you handle it."

"That would be fine but people are beginning to talk. The florist's assistant has made several pointed remarks about your lack of interest in picking out the flowers. The caterer mentioned to me that you weren't very enthusiastic." Olivia sighed. "Your apathy is getting noticed."

With an exasperated sigh, Elise pushed away her breakfast plate. "Fine. What shall I do to fix it?"

"You could take a more active role. We're meeting Jared and his mother at their estate today to decide where to place the tent. Do you suppose you can feign some interest?"

"Sure." All she had to do was pretend she was with Mical and she could muster more enthusiasm than her mother could imagine. Her lips twitched at the thought, somewhat buoying her from the gloomy mood threatening to possess her when reminded of the reality of the approaching wedding, now less than two weeks away.

* * * * *

Jared's body language and air of distraction made it clear he was as disinterested in where their mothers would place the tent as she was. Elise walked beside him as they trailed behind their mothers, who chatted animatedly. Occasionally, she glanced up at him, always finding his dark eyes scanning the estate while the brisk March breeze whipped overly long dark hair into his face.

As they topped a hill about a quarter mile from the sprawling manor where the Sundowns resided, Jared said, "Mother, could you please select a spot? I have other matters to attend to."

Charlotte turned from Olivia to shake her head at Jared. "Have some patience. We'll soon have this sorted out and you can return to your *important business*." She emphasized the last two words and shared an indulgent glance with Olivia.

Elise sighed, silently agreeing with Jared but wise enough not to say that to their mothers. After Olivia's chastisement that morning, she didn't dare appear anything less than engrossed in deciding where to place the tent. For her part, they could stake it anywhere on the grounds. The ample expanse of greenery, framed by old-growth hills, offered many choices.

The neigh of a horse distracted Elise from the direction where Charlotte was pointing and she turned to see a young woman riding toward them on a midnight-black horse with an impressive build. She seemed in complete control of the animal and reined him in inches from Jared before sliding to the ground.

Nearly as tall as Jared and towering over Elise, clad in a black jacket and jodhpurs with highly polished black boots coming to her knees, she was an impressive figure herself. The woman looked familiar to Elise, especially when she removed the riding helmet to release a fall of golden-brown hair.

Jared gave her a distracted nod but his eyes remained focused on the horse. "Is this the new stallion?"

"Yes, Mr. Sundown. He came in this morning. His handler said he handled the ferry ride extremely well." As she spoke, the woman patted the neck of the anxiously prancing animal. "Settle, Achilles." At her firm tone, he immediately quieted.

Charlotte and Olivia stood a few feet away, their impatience evident, as Jared examined the horse. Elise walked over to the stallion, feeling a stir of fear when he jerked away from her. Most animals initially feared her, probably sensing the werewolf inside, so she had never formed a bond with one. Even as a child she had shied away from keeping pets because their initial fear and hesitation bothered her. With this horse, she didn't sense fear. Rather, he seemed to be challenging her for supremacy.

As Jared ran his hands down the horse's neck and side, the woman took a couple of steps backward until she was beside Elise. With a casual move, while appearing to stretch her neck, she said, "Mical's waiting in the stables."

Before Elise could completely process the information, Charlotte said, "Alyra, please return that animal to the stables so that we might have a few moments of Jared's time."

Alyra inclined her head. "Of course, ma'am." With a graceful movement she slipped into the saddle and turned Achilles back in the direction from which she had

come. Jared watched them ride away for a second before returning his attention to their mothers.

Elise watched the three of them, her mind searching for a way to meet Mical without arousing suspicion. "Excuse me, I must return to the house for a few minutes to freshen up."

To her relief, no one proffered an objection. They continued discussing the merits of the location where they stood as she turned and hurried back in the direction of the house. Once out of their sight, she veered away from the towering mansion to make her way to the stables across the clearing where her lover waited.

The stables smelled of hay and horseflesh when she stepped inside. The faint but pungent, aroma of manure clung to the air and several horses nickered a greeting to her as she passed their stalls.

Mical stepped out from one at the end of the aisle and she broke into a jog, eager to join him. They didn't bother with exchanging greetings, other than the joining of their lips in a hungry kiss, as he pulled her into the semiprivate of the horse stall. Heat pooled in Elise's stomach and trickled lower as he cupped her buttocks, pulling her close. His cock pressed into her stomach and her hand moved between their bodies to stroke it over the worn denim of his jeans.

When he lifted his head, gasping for air, his cheeks were red with passion. "I didn't know if you could meet me. It's so risky."

She nodded. "I don't have much time." Elise tilted her head. "How did you know I would be here?"

Mical laughed. "I didn't, honey. I came to see my sister. When I saw you strolling across the grounds, as perfect as a picture in that spring dress and white sweater you're wearing, I convinced Alyra to deliver a message for me."

That's why the woman had looked so familiar. Now that Elise knew they were related, the family resemblance was unmistakable. They had virtually the same shade of hair, the same color eyes and a similar bone structure, though his sister's was more

delicate. "She said you were waiting." With a coy smile, Elise allowed her fingers to hover on the snap of his jeans. "What were you waiting for?"

Mical groaned when her fingers flitted over his hard cock and his breathing roughened. "To see you, touch you." He groaned again when she pressed her palm against his crotch, rubbing lightly through the denim. "Elise, what are you doing to me?"

"The same thing you're doing to me," she said in a breathy whisper, bringing her other hand to his waistband to unsnap the jeans. The zipper was next and she frowned upon encountering the barrier of briefs. "You're wearing underwear."

Mical's chuckle sounded strained. "I didn't know I'd be seeing you, honey. It's not a fun experience to catch my short hairs in the zipper."

"Hmm, let's see what we can do to have some fun then, shall we?" With both hands, she freed his cock from the restrictive briefs and her mouth watered at the sight when it sprang free, purple with arousal. She braced a hand against his upper thigh as she knelt in the hay lining the floor of the stall, wincing as the sharp stalks poked through the cotton dress and silk nylons covering her legs. The discomfort was minor and she focused her attention on his erect cock, grasping the base with her other hand.

He cupped the back of her head, grasping a handful of her short hair and guided her mouth toward his cock. Elise licked her lips to wet them before touching them to the head of his cock. Mical's grunt of pleasure echoed through the structure before cutting off abruptly, as if he was reining in his response.

Elise enveloped his cock in the moist sheath of her mouth while applying pressure to the base with her thumb. Her tongue swirled over the head, moving to trace the corona. Mical's hips bucked when she tongued the bundle of nerves centered in the V and fluid trickled from the tip. She responded by applying suction and moving her mouth up and down while squeezing his shaft.

As he arched against her face, his hand buried in her hair, Mical said her name in a tender whisper several times. His tone of gratitude brought tears to her eyes and she

looked up at him as his face contorted with pleasure. His cock spasmed in her mouth, bringing a rush of release. He had thrown back his head and a nearly silent howl escaped him, raising the hairs on the back of her neck.

Her body throbbed with need for him as he came but not just with desire. As she saw him overwhelmed by the pleasure she brought him, her heart ached. The realization crashed over her suddenly that somehow in the course of the week they had been together, she had fallen in love with him. How could it be possible on such short acquaintance?

Surely, it was just passion and perhaps the delicious taboo of their relationship. She couldn't really have deep feelings for him, could she?

He sagged forward as his pleasure passed and Elise removed her mouth from his cock. Mical's eyes were tender when he gazed down at her. He didn't need to say anything to express what he was feeling. She already knew, because she was feeling it too. Love. As crazy as it seemed, she had fallen for him in just a week.

No, that wasn't true. She had fallen for him in a night, drawn by his scent and dominating presence, fueled by the freedom of the full moon, she had surrendered her heart and body to him right then. It had just taken her brain a few days to catch up with what her heart already knew. Mical was her mate. Their modern sensibilities permitted sex with multiple partners but the very nature of the wolf was to mate for life.

She could never feel this way about Jared. Knowing how she felt about Mical, she couldn't possibly marry the other man, regardless of her duty to the pack. Duty to her own heart came first.

After fastening his jeans, Mical helped her to her feet. His arms enveloped her and his breath was a warm whisper against her cheek. "You're so quiet."

She notched up her chin to meet his eyes. "I'm just thinking about things."

"What things?"

Shyness assailed her then and she dropped her gaze to his T-shirt, reading the name of a famous alcohol brand several times before finding the courage to continue. "Jared."

He stiffened and his arms felt less warm and welcoming. His voice took on an icy edge. "I see. Eager for the wedding?"

She opened her mouth to reply but he continued before she could speak.

"I'm a fool." He stepped away from her, crossing his arms over his chest. "I haven't been anything but a last fling for you, have I?" Mical's lips curled into a sneer. "One tumble with an Omega who wouldn't dare tell anyone before going to your life as queen of the manor."

She barely restrained a grin. His words might have hurt her, if she hadn't understood what prompted them—jealousy and heartsickness. After all, how would she feel if Mical were the one engaged to marry another? A wave of anger swept through her, prompting her to end his tirade and uncertainty. "Actually, that's not what I was thinking."

His expression of disgust changed to confusion, with a barely visible trace of hope. "No?"

Elise shook her head. "I was wondering how I'm going to tell Jared I can't marry him."

Mical swallowed visibly. "Why can't you?" His voice was little more than a dry rasp.

She stepped closer, putting her hand on his shoulder. "It wouldn't be right to marry him when I'm in love with you."

His harsh exhalation seemed to resonate around them. In seconds, his arms were around her again and his mouth slanted over hers. Elise parted her lips and accepted his tongue, threading her fingers through his hair to hold him tighter to her.

Her ardor, which had banked temporarily, sparked to life and she pressed her hips against him. The kiss continued and she was about to throw off her clothes and mount him when the sound of voices broke them apart. She turned in the direction of the door, just able to make out the forms of Jared, Olivia and Charlotte speaking to Alyra.

Her voice carried to them. "I haven't seen her, ma'am."

"They're looking for me." Elise touched Mical's cheek briefly as she stepped away. "I have to go."

His hand clamped around her forearm. "Did you mean it? You aren't marrying him?"

"No. I love you."

Mical kissed her once more, for just a moment. "I'll come to your room tonight."

"No. I need to speak to my parents and Jared. I'll call you tomorrow."

He looked reluctant but nodded. "I'll be waiting."

Elise smoothed her hair and wiped at her mouth in preparation of stepping out of the stall. She squeezed Mical's hand as she opened the door that had closed behind them.

"Go out the back. You can sneak around to the main house." He pointed in the direction of a discreet door visible through the tack room.

Their gazes locked and she was in danger of drowning in the brown depths, of throwing all caution to the wind and marching out with him, hand in hand. With a sigh, she broke eye contact and slipped down the aisle, hoping no one saw her during her dash to the tack room.

Once she was through the back door, Elise relaxed slightly, knowing she wouldn't be caught with Mical if they found her now. She wasn't ashamed of loving an Omega pack member but his life would be in danger if Jared challenged him. She couldn't risk that. However she broke the news to her fiancé, she couldn't let him find out about her lover. He didn't love her but pride would dictate a confrontation nonetheless. Their strength was evenly matched but Jared would be determined not to lose, because doing so would not only cost him Elise but also his future position as Alpha. It would humiliate him to yield to an Omega. He would rather die than do so—or kill Mical to avoid that outcome.

She made it back to the main house without running into anyone. Once around the side and back in view of her mother and the others, she stopped moving furtively and walked toward them, a bright smile on her face. Relief lightened her step and she didn't feel a shred of remorse for her plans to break the engagement. Maybe if Jared loved her, she would feel some regret but his heart wouldn't be broken. He was a strong man and would find a way to take his position of Alpha, challenger or no.

Olivia wore a frown as Elise approached. "Where in the world were you?"

The hint of suspicion in her eyes gave Elise pause but she swallowed her apprehension and forced a shrug. "I was using the facilities."

Charlotte brushed aside her disappearance. "We've decided on the hill."

Elise nodded, deciding now wasn't the moment to tell Charlotte there wouldn't be a wedding. She had to tell her own parents first and then Jared. He could inform Vasek and Charlotte of the change of plans.

"Well, we should go." The cheerfulness in her mother's tone was jarring because it sounded so counterfeit. With a frown, Elise waited for Charlotte or Jared to realize something wasn't right but neither seemed to.

Charlotte nodded. "Of course. There is still so much to do and I'm sure Jared has matters to attend to." She leaned forward to kiss Olivia's cheek, receiving a reciprocal parting.

Elise endured the sticky brush of Charlotte's lips against her cheek, resisting the urge to wipe at the pink lipstick print she was sure the woman had left behind. Then she turned to Jared, holding out her hand. To her surprise, he ignored their standard way of meeting and parting to lean in close, as if about to kiss her.

Instead, he inhaled deeply, his brow furrowing. Elise's stomach churned with anxiety as he stared at her, sniffing lightly. Did he smell Mical on her? She held her breath, wondering if all hell was about to break loose, until he eased away from her. With a sharp nod in her direction but no words of parting, he turned toward the main house and walked away. She allowed herself to breathe again, though a shred of fear

remained, making her head spin. She tried to tell herself she was imagining things but Jared's untoward behavior needed some explanation. Her mind insisted on supplying the worst one she could summon – he knew about Mical.

Chapter Four

As soon as they entered the Marceau home, Olivia called for Niall. Elise frowned at the strident tone of her mother's voice and resolved to disappear to her room before her father tore himself away from the stock reports to answer her mother's summons.

Olivia had other ideas. Her nails dug into the skin of Elise's arm when she arrested her flight in mid-step. "No, you don't."

Niall appeared, looking annoyed at the interruption. He squinted at them, his glasses pushed onto his forehead. Although he did most trading from home, he still insisted on wearing a suit each day. The cut of the brown jacket he wore did nothing to conceal the subtle softening in his physique and the buttons strained against the small paunch he sported. Still, he was an imposing figure and more than capable of enforcing his position of Beta.

Elise swallowed down a protest at her mother's hold and waited. Her stomach sank into her feet as her mother began speaking, her voice brittle with fear.

"Elise is deliberately trying to sabotage the wedding."

Her mouth dropped open in much the same way as her father's, before he composed himself. Elise shook her head when his stern gaze settled on her. Although he had never given her cause to fear him, under his powerful gaze, she shivered with dread. "I'm not trying to sabotage anything." The words flew from her in a rush and heat scalded her cheeks.

Olivia shook her head. "She told me last week she didn't want to marry him. Today, she disappeared. I don't know where she went but when she came back your daughter was disheveled and there was hay stuck in her nylons."

Elise looked down, horrified to see a couple of golden stalks lodged in her pantyhose.

“Where were you?” Niall’s level voice was all the more intimidating for its lack of force.

She ignored the question, determined not to let their tag team tactics intimidate her. She raised her chin, firmed her shoulders and met her father’s eyes. “I’m not marrying Jared. I don’t love him and he doesn’t love me. I deserve better.”

A wail escaped Olivia, who was not given to fits of hysteria. Niall jerked in response and Elise held her breath, wondering which of them would start in first.

Her mother began listing all the reasons why she had to marry Jared but in such a high-pitched, fast voice that few of the words were comprehensible. Elise shook her head and turned to face her father. His expression of disappointment was worse than the stern look he had given her just moments before. For a moment her resolve crumbled, until Mical’s face filled her mind, strengthening her determination.

“You don’t have the luxury of choosing a mate for love, Elise.” Niall sighed, as if bearing a heavy burden. “Your role was decided from the moment of your birth.”

“By you, not me.” She shook her head, ignoring the dart of shock in his gaze when she spoke back. “I’ve made my decision. I will speak privately to Jared but felt you should know first.” Her mother wailed again and she glanced briefly at her. “My mind is made up.”

Before either could respond, Elise turned and walked from the sitting room, ascending the stairs with what she hoped was poised grace. She swore she could feel their eyes boring into her and her mother’s soft sobs filled the room below. Still, she kept walking, determined they wouldn’t change her mind.

* * * * *

“Mical?” Elise kept her voice to a whisper, pressing her mouth into the receiver to avoid alerting the guard posted outside her door. His presence still shocked her. She never would have believed her father would lock her in her room until she “came to her senses” as he phrased it.

“Elise?”

“Yes.” Relief swept through her at the familiar sound of his voice. “I need you, Mical.”

“What’s wrong?”

The worry in his tone comforted her and she knew he would come for her. “My father has locked me in my room like some frigging princess-in-the-tower fairy tale. Can you come get me?” She might be able to scramble down the trellis and make her escape as she had done at the last full moon but the thought of doing it alone frightened her. The feminist part of her brain urged her to ignore her fear and go it alone while the rest of her yearned for Mical at her side. The weaker side of her had won the internal argument, despite logic urging her not to risk their relationship to exposure yet by having him come to her.

His lack of hesitation bolstered her confidence. “I’ll be there soon, honey.”

She blinked back the tears threatening to overwhelm her at his affirmation. “Don’t get caught. I don’t want you hurt.”

“Nothing will keep me from you. I love you, Elise.”

She had known that but hearing him confirm it made her own love that much more of a reality. “I’ll be waiting.”

Elise remained glued to her window for the next twenty minutes, searching for any sign of Mical. Her shoulders were so tense with anxiety that they ached when she slumped forward upon catching a glimpse of him below, padding across the grounds in wolf form.

She held her breath as he neared her window, waiting to see if anyone had noticed his presence. Her harsh exhalation shattered the silence in the room as he morphed to his naked human form and began climbing the trellis. Breaking her paralysis, she fumbled with the window, pushing it open.

Mical slipped inside, immediately taking her into his arms. “Are you unharmed?”

She nodded, her forehead pressing against his bare chest. "I'm fine. Just frightened. I can't believe my father has done this."

He tipped up her chin. "He's probably as frightened as you but in a different way. Your rejection of Jared has widespread implications. And if he knew about me..." A frown marred his expression. "I assume he doesn't?"

She shook her head, clearly reading the defensiveness in his posture. "No, he doesn't but not for the reason you think. I'm not ashamed of you." Elise cupped his face in her hands to keep his eyes from avoiding hers. "I want to protect you from what my father or Jared might try to do."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know." She leaned forward, touching her forehead to his chin. "I love you and I don't want you hurt."

His palm was warm through the flannel of her shirt when he caressed her back. "It's inevitable that there will be challenges, honey. No one will be happy if we mate. I'm just an Omega. When the rest of the pack finds out, it's going to be bloody." His shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "But you're worth it. No one will best me with you as my reason for fighting."

She touched her fingers to his lips, interrupting him. "Let's leave."

Mical's eyes widened. "What?" Her finger muffled his voice and his lips tickled.

"We'll form our own pack. After awhile, my family will accept my decision and we'll tell them where we are."

He shook his head. "I don't want to sneak around."

"We aren't." Elise sighed. "We're starting over. We could never be happy here on Evergreen Island. Too many pack members would always be minding our business. I want to be happy with you and what would make me happiest is forming our own pack."

He hesitated, his conscience clearly warring with his own desires. "Your family —"

“Will have to accept my choice.” She stroked his cheek, not missing the way his skin fluttered under her fingers. Even in the midst of the most important discussion of their lives, he still responded to her proximity as she did to his. Her nipples were hard beads in her bra, pushing against the lace insistently, seeking his fingers.

“I’m not afraid to stand up for us, if you want to stay.” Mical’s shoulders slumped and he nodded. “However, I know you’re right and it’s what I want too. I’ve thought about this before but assumed you would never want to.” A crooked grin slashed across his lips. “It seemed impossible that you would give up designer shoes for department store brands.” He winked. “I’ve never seen you wear the same pair of shoes twice.”

She grinned. “I’d go barefoot for you, Mical.”

His eyes darkened and his tone was smoky. “And pregnant?”

“Of course.” The thought of bearing his children filled Elise with warmth and she embraced him. “I might be already, you know. We haven’t used any protection.”

Mical cupped her stomach. “It would be bad timing but I can’t help hoping you are. I’ve often imagined you swollen with my child, walking proudly beside me, letting the world know you are my mate.”

“You’ve had a busy week,” she teased. “I’ve only managed to fantasize about your hot body during the few times I’m not with it.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and a hint of pink tinged his cheeks. “It’s been longer than a week. Ever since you returned from the University of Washington last year, I’ve been in love with you.” The blush deepened but his eyes didn’t stray from hers. “I tried to deny it, to dismiss it as an infatuation but it was more than that. Making love with you was both torture and absolute pleasure because it was even better than I had built it up to be. But I never dreamed you would choose me.”

Elise blinked, shocked by his revelation. “Why didn’t you say something?”

His brow quirked. "And you would have responded enthusiastically, right? You didn't even know my name, honey. A sudden declaration of love would have freaked you out."

She nodded, acknowledging the truth in his words. "Well, it doesn't freak me out now."

He touched his lips to hers but the kiss was too brief. "We have to go if we're going to do this."

She nodded. "We are." Elise stepped away from him to scoop up the backpack she had stuffed with essentials before calling him earlier. "The trellis?"

He nodded, moving to the window, offering her a hand when she swung her leg over the casement. Elise grasped the white wood to begin her descent, looking up as she went down, waiting for Mical to join her.

As his foot appeared on the trellis, a crashing sound came from her room and voices shouted for him to stop. Elise began climbing upward again, arriving level with the window as three men from the security team dragged her lover back inside and detained him as he struggled to throw off their hold.

She scrambled into the room as her father stepped forward, every inch the powerful Beta. A gasp escaped her when he struck Mical across the face with the back of his hand. "Father." She ran forward, placing herself between Niall and Mical, who had surged forward to meet the challenge, despite the men holding him. She put a hand on his chest, while saying, "Don't touch him." Not even Elise knew for certain whether she was speaking to her father or Mical. She couldn't bear the thought of either of them injuring the other. Even the men restraining her lover wouldn't deter Mical for long. She knew he would defend their joining to the death and that was the last thing she wanted.

"Is he the man your mother saw you with today?"

Elise gasped again and her cheeks burned. "She saw me? But she didn't say anything."

Olivia stepped through the doorway then. "Of course not. I couldn't be certain. I only saw his profile as I saw you run through the stables. I hoped it was just my imagination." She shook her head. "How could you do this, Elise? You know how important it is for you to join with Jared."

"She doesn't love him." Anger iced Mical's tone and his resisting body succeeded in throwing off the hold of one of the guards. "Elise is my mate and I won't give her up."

"You're just an Omega." Niall spat the word, not bothering to hide his disdain. "She could never be happy with you."

"You don't know what you're talking about, old man. No one is going to keep us apart—especially not you." Mical met her father's cold gaze with one so hot with anger that Elise almost expected her father's eyes to start smoking.

Elise stepped closer to Mical, giving the security member closest to her such a dark look that he released his hold and stepped back. The other man followed suit and she put her arm around her lover's waist as he pressed himself against her. "You might not understand it Father but I love Mical and I'm going to be with him. Either you can let us go peacefully or you can watch us tear apart the Sundown Pack. I will not marry Jared and I will not give up Mical."

Niall sputtered, clearly having trouble finding the words to express his rage. He turned to Olivia when she touched his arm, as if hoping she could verbalize what he wanted to say. His eyes widened with shock when she spoke.

"Let them go, darling. Can't you see how much she loves him? It's not fair to make Elise marry a man she doesn't love, who doesn't love her, when she has a chance to be happy with this young man. I was lucky to fall in love with you but not all arranged marriages have such a blissful outcome. I want her to love her husband as much as I love you."

"Olivia..." His mouth fluttered for a moment before he began speaking again. "Do you know what this will do to us, to Jared?"

She nodded, appearing serene. "It doesn't matter. Our daughter's happiness is more important."

Elise's mouth was agape when her mother stepped away from her father to give her a hug. "Be happy, Elise." Her shock increased when Olivia turned to Mical, assessing him with a level stare. "You will treat her well or answer to me."

"Yes, ma'am." Mical appeared as overwhelmed as she felt. His head was a little shaky when he inclined it to Olivia.

With a sigh of defeat, Niall waved away the security men and allowed Olivia to lead him from the bedroom. In the ensuing silence, Elise and Mical exchanged a look of astonishment. A happy laugh exploded from her and she threw herself into his arms, pressing kisses to his face as she strained on tiptoe to reach him. "I can't believe it."

He shook his head. "I'm still in shock. Is it really over?"

Elise nodded. "Yes. No one will stop us from leaving now."

Mical seemed to be having trouble absorbing what had happened. With a gentle smile, Elise took his hand to lead him to the door but paused before stepping into the hallway. "You can't go out like that."

He looked down at his nude state, shaking his head. "I have clothes in the forest."

She released his hand long enough to run into her bathroom, where she took the towel from the rack. Mical caught it deftly when she tossed it to him upon reemerging into the bedroom and had fastened it around his waist, sarong-style, by the time she joined him by the door.

Together, they stepped through the doorway, hands firmly entwined. No one stood in the hall to block their way. Elise remained watchful as they walked down the stairs but didn't expect her father to try to stop them. He hadn't given his blessing but she didn't think he was going to fight any longer.

When they stepped onto the first floor, they found Olivia and Niall waiting for them in the sitting room off the main hall. Elise and Mical exchanged a bracing look

before stepping into the room when her father summoned them. Whatever he said, she knew her father couldn't convince them to separate.

Niall appeared disconcerted but her mother was composed. She placed a hand on her husband's shoulder, as if offering silent support. "We want you to have this."

Elise didn't miss the slight nudge her mother gave Niall before he stepped forward, extending a check to Mical. She glanced down, surprised to see both of their names in the "To" field, along with a generous sum. Guilt squirmed through her that her father would know every member of the pack while she had remained in her figurative ivory tower, interacting only with those in her class.

Mical's shoulders took on a stubborn set. "We don't need your money."

"I...I know but I want you to have it." Niall's voice, though low, didn't lack conviction. "Please take it, so that you can take care of my daughter."

Elise held her breath as their gazes clashed. A silent contest of wills seemed to be taking place between the men and when her father's shoulders slumped. She assumed Mical would tear up the check but he took it in a brisk motion. His "Thank you" lacked sincerity but his expression had warmed, losing the wary watchfulness it had exhibited since they stepped inside the room.

The partings were quick after that and Elise could still feel a phantom sensation of her mother's arms around her from the tight hug she had pressed upon her before they left the house, cutting through the forest to find Mical's clothes and car. When they drove off, she had looked back just once, waiting for a pang at leaving but experiencing none.

As he turned onto the main street that would take them to the dock, negotiating the sharp turns easily with his compact car, she asked, "Why did you take the money? Father wasn't going to press us to."

He shrugged. "I had to."

A sigh escaped her. "I don't need all the trappings I've lived with. I'm content with whatever we have as long as we're together."

He surprised her with a chuckle. "It wasn't for you, honey. I took the check because he was showing his acceptance. Money is his way of bestowing his approval. I don't know if we'll use it or not but I couldn't refuse it without rejecting his blessing."

How had he figured out her father's personality in such a short time when she hadn't realized what her father's gesture represented and she had known him all her life? "I'm glad you took it then."

He didn't reply as he parked the car in the parking lot of the boat launch. Once the engine was silent, he turned in his seat to look at her. "Where will we go?"

"Anacortes. And from there...who knows?" She shrugged, filled with a heady sense of freedom. "The possibilities are limitless."

He grinned. "What will we do with ourselves?"

"We'll get a small apartment and live like normal people." She tilted her head. "I'll finally get a chance to use my degree in botany and you can own your own bar, if that's what you want to do." She lifted his hand from the gearshift, squeezing it. "We can do anything we want now because we're free."

"Sounds perfect." His voice was husky and he squeezed her hand for a long second before releasing it. "We should go. Um, which boat is yours? You do have one, don't you?"

She laughed. "Father does. It's that one." She pointed to the yacht across the marina, about a quarter mile from their spot in the parking lot. "The *Marietta*."

Mical shook his head. "It has to be seventy feet long."

"Eighty-one."

He shook his head again, more emphatically. "There goes our discreet escape."

She laughed. "Does it matter? No one is going to stop us."

He took her hand and they began walking in the direction of the yacht. "Might as well leave in style, I guess. We'll park it in Anacortes. Does your dad have a slip there?"

“Yes, at the Cap Sante Boat Haven.” She slanted a teasing grin at Mical as they approached the yacht. “We could borrow it for a while longer, maybe take a long cruise and lose ourselves on a tiny island.”

He growled low in his throat as he pulled her against him. “You could lose your clothes anyway. I could get used to the native lifestyle if it meant you never wore a stitch.”

She giggled. “We could feed each other fruit.”

“Forget the fruit. Your lips are much sweeter.” His mouth captured hers in a deep kiss, while his hands cupped her buttocks, kneading them in rhythm with his tongue darting in and out of her mouth.

The scrape of a shoe on the asphalt caused them to jerk apart. Heat invaded Elise’s cheeks when she saw Jared standing in front of them, his eyes narrowed and his hands balled into fists at his side.

“It’s true then.” The only emotion revealed in his icy tone was anger. “When one of your father’s security men called me, I couldn’t believe what he told me. After smelling him on you, I knew about your affair but I thought you’d have the sense to end things before the wedding.” Jared shook his head, disgust evident in his expression. “You would choose an Omega over me?”

As Mical stepped partially in front of her with a protective air, Elise notched her chin higher, meeting Jared’s dark eyes. “Yes. I love him.”

He took a step toward them, his eyes fixed on Mical. “There are more important things than love, Elise. You’re the Beta’s daughter. Our union is expected...necessary, even.” A shadow of strain flashed across his expression before he shielded his emotions again.

With an impatient sigh at the way he kept blocking her, Elise stepped around Mical, who tried to stop her from approaching Jared by grasping her wrist. She turned her head to give him a reassuring smile, squeezed his hand and kept walking toward Jared,

stopping a couple of feet from him. Mical's presence was a reassurance when he followed her, pressing his bulk against her back in a show of support.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I'm sorry, Jared. I didn't plan for this to happen but I'm not giving him up. The pack is important to me but not as important as he is." She lowered her voice an octave, ensuring no one except Mical heard what she said next, in case someone lingered in the bushes, watching. "Mother told me there is rumor of a challenge to your ascension. I know my leaving puts you in an uncomfortable spot but you'll cope. You are the next Alpha and no one will defeat you."

He snorted. "I'm not concerned about a physical challenge, Elise. Not being mated automatically precludes me from taking over my rightful role."

Mical's hand on her shoulder gave her the courage to say, "I don't love you and you don't love me. We deserve to be happy. You will find a solution but I'm not it. Even if you were to challenge Mical and defeat him, I still wouldn't mate with you."

"That won't happen," Mical said with a low growl.

The testosterone swelled, lending an increasingly menacing air to the atmosphere. As the two men stepped toward each other, Mical trying to push her aside, Elise dug in her feet, refusing to budge more than the couple of inches he was able to propel her. "No, don't do this." She put a hand on each of their chests, pushing apart with all her might, which accomplished nothing. "There's no point."

Once again, she turned to Jared. "Would you really want me, knowing I love someone else? And if Mical wins, you'll lose all chance of being Alpha. Just let us go, Jared."

For a half minute the men maintained their threatening poses, seemingly on the brink of tearing into each other without the formality of morphing into their wolf forms. It wasn't until Jared's shoulders relaxed and Mical took a step back that Elise was able to breathe again.

"I hope it's worth it to you, Elise. Your actions might bring irreparable change to the Sundown Pack's dynamics."

A twinge of guilt assailed her but Mical's warm body, so close to hers, overwhelmed it. "It's worth any price." She wanted to offer words of how she knew Jared would find a way to maintain his claim but his stance indicated he wouldn't be receptive to anything she might say.

With a last shake of his head, Jared turned his back on them to stalk away, his anger no less palpable than it had been when he had first confronted them, though more under control.

She and Mical watched him leave, until he disappeared from sight. Then Elise turned in his arms, sagging against his chest. "It's over."

Mical held her tightly against him. "I hope so. My mother and sister are still in Jared's reach."

She touched his cheek. "Jared won't do anything to them. They're, first and foremost, members of his pack. He's obligated to protect them."

The worry faded from his expression. "I know you're right. Still, I hope they understand why I left without saying anything."

"I'm sure they will." She snuggled closer. "And it's not like you'll never see them again. Once we're settled, we'll send for them."

A gleam of pleasure sparkled in his eyes. "I'd like that. As a former Lupina, my mother deserves better than owning a housecleaning service that caters to the richer members of the pack and my sister should be more than an Omega."

She grasped his hand and they resumed walking toward the *Marietta*. "I didn't know your mother was once a Lupina."

"There's a lot you don't know about me and that I don't know about you." He looped his arm around her waist. "That's nothing a nice, long cruise can't remedy, honey."

Elise inched closer, imagining the time looming ahead of them—days of sun, lovemaking and conversation. She wouldn't trade it for anything. Right then, she could

have wept with gratitude that she had met Mical before it was too late. That she had found the one meant to be her mate for life. She didn't experience even a dart of regret for everything she was leaving behind as she stepped onto the boat. Her gaze remained focused squarely forward on the future she would have with Mical.

About the Author

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband, son and dog-children. She started reading at the age of three and hasn't stopped since. Love of the written word, and a smart marriage to a supportive man, led her to a full-time career in writing. Romances have always intrigued her, and erotic romance is a natural extension because it more completely explores the emotions between the hero and heroine. That, and it sure is fun to write.

Kit welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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