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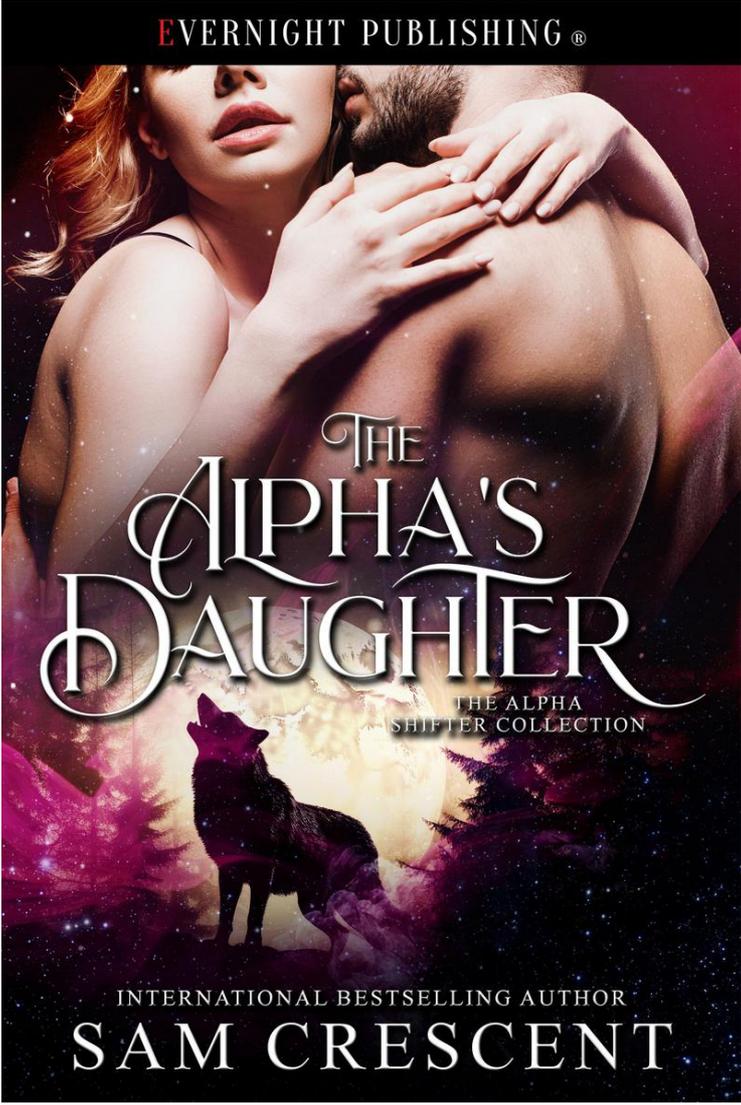


THE
ALPHA'S
DAUGHTER

THE ALPHA
SHIFTER COLLECTION

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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THE ALPHA'S DAUGHTER

The Alpha Shifter Collection, 20

Sam Crescent

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PROLOGUE

“It is too late to send her away,” William Westblood said, slamming his palm against the nearest tree. It shook for a few seconds, but didn’t fall.

“Sweetheart, you must calm yourself.” Patricia, his wife, rushed to his side, gripping his arms, trying to offer him comfort, but he shrugged it off.

This was a first for him, as he never refused his mate. He never wanted to, but right now, he didn’t know how he could save his daughter. For many years they had been blessed with five children. Three boys and two girls. Karina was his youngest child, and even though they don’t know what went wrong, his sweet wife had been ill during her pregnancy. It was the first time his mate was truly ill.

Karina was born too soon, and they had feared she would die. For the first time in his long life, he prayed. He sunk down on his knees and prayed to whatever god would hear him, to not take his daughter away.

He knew it was selfish. He already had four children, but he loved his mate, he loved his children, and he would die for all of them, including the pack he was alpha to.

Someone must have been listening because Karina made it through the night, then the next, and the next. Before long, months passed, then years. Now, she was twenty-three years old, but she was different.

The pack adored her. Even though she was different, they all took turns to care for her. Whenever she was injured, it

lasted a considerable length of time. He knew the pack refused to allow her to go out on adventures. The boys and girls of her own age were not rough with her and treated her like the delicate soul she was.

She was the only wolf he knew to get sick, and that was another little element about his young daughter—she was the only person within the pack who hadn't changed into a wolf. There was always a risk in keeping her.

He and his wife hadn't even thought about sending her away, but he knew there had once been whispers of forcing her to leave. He would never do that.

Karina was a Westblood.

He would die for his child, most of the pack would. Over the years those vicious threats and rumors had faded. He hoped the pack had learned to love his daughter. For him, it was unconditional. But now, she was at threat.

William knew he was powerful, but he also knew he wasn't infallible. There was talk of rogue wolves, almost feral, taking over packs, raping women, killing the men, turning them into soldiers. He would not allow that to happen to his pack, so he had reached out to another.

The other pack had no name, but the alpha was known as Rage. Fierce and feared. To bring their packs together, William agreed to let Rage have any woman he chose from the Westblood pack.

Running a hand down his face, he looked toward his wife, as fear once again took hold.

Karina was without a mate. As was his other daughter, but Rose was quite capable of handling herself. Unlike Karina, Rose was not a virgin.

“What can we do?” he asked, turning to look at his mate.

Patricia smiled at him. “Hope that he doesn’t choose her.”

He didn’t know if he could live on hope, but for now, it was all he could do.

CHAPTER ONE

Karina hated being in trouble which was exactly what she would be when she got home. Today of all days was not the day to mess with her father. He was already tense with that other pack coming. She had no idea what to call them, but she knew it was stressing her father out. Rose had already told her about the lineup.

Rage, the mystery alpha with no pack name, would have his pick of women or woman. Karina wasn't quite sure on the details and Rose was never the one to truly listen. Her sister often heard what she wanted to hear, and didn't really care about the fuzzy details between.

She hated the uncertainty of not knowing exactly what was going to happen and when.

The moment she got to the gate, her father was already there.

"Where have you been?" he asked. She heard the distinctive growl that fell from his lips. He never went all alpha on her as there was no point. She didn't feel his power. There were no goose bumps across her skin. Nothing to make her bow down or fear him. Another little part of her that her family attempted to call "special," but they all knew the truth. She wasn't one of them.

Even when they tried to make her feel a part of the pack, it was always denied.

She never knew when a full moon was close, never felt the warmth and heat that enveloped her. Unlike the whole of

the pack, she didn't feel the strength nor power of her wolf. Of course, it also meant she didn't have to go through the body twisting, bone grinding and breaking pain of each transformation. None of that was pretty.

However, it was a problem when she got the flu, or a sickness bug. Only then had the pack's healer been called and her skills truly tested. Karina hated feeling useless. Like now, she rushed inside while her father berated her.

"There is no time to change," her mother said. "We must hurry to the town square. We cannot be late for our guest's arrival."

Karina looked down at herself.

She'd opted for the white dress with sharp red roses along the skirt. The rest of the dress was white. Her mother hated when she wore white as she often came home with it a mess. This dress wasn't too long, though. Karina either wore skirts or dresses, but never trousers or jeans. She hated the feel of them against her skin.

Rose loved to tease her, calling her a "girly girl." She didn't care. She had tried the jeans and trousers when she was younger and hated them. She wouldn't be ashamed of it.

Even as she arrived home, there was no time to waste and within minutes they were back out, heading toward the town square. They rarely had any visitors and she was surprised her father would invite an unnamed pack into their safe one. She didn't know everything going on in her father's world, so she tried not to question him. Rose grabbed her hand and locked their fingers together.

They were close and had been ever since Karina could remember. She'd never had any wolf senses, no great hearing, strength, or the ability to sniff for miles, but for some strange reason, she sensed an unease in the air.

“What are you worried about?”

“I'm not worried.”

Karina wasn't convinced. “It's been a long time since you held my hand as we walked to the town square. I'm not going to get lost.”

“I just want to make sure you're okay,” Rose said.

This made her frown even more. “Why wouldn't I be okay?” None of this worrying made any sense.

“You do realize what is going to happen in a few minutes, don't you?” Rose asked.

Karina rolled her eyes. “Yes, all the young and willing females are going to stand in line while a brand-new alpha assesses us like we're big fat, juicy cows, and he's about to order a steak.”

Rose burst out laughing. “Wow, okay, yeah, that is exactly what's going to happen, we just won't be cooked on a grill afterward.”

She wanted to joke some more with her sister but sensed as much as Rose had laughed at her analogy, she wouldn't appreciate the continued mocking. “Why are you so worried?”

“You've got to stand in that line?”

“Don’t worry, standing straight shouldn’t be a problem. So long as there is nothing spiky or dangerous, I shouldn’t harm anyone.”

“What if he chooses you?” Rose asked.

This made her frown. “Why would he choose me?” That made no sense to her at all. “Rose, honey, darling sister, I’m not even a full wolf. I don’t turn. I don’t do anything. I’m pretty much a human with a wolf family. Trust me, I’m a dud and there’s no way he’s going to pick me. You should be more worried about him choosing you.”

“Shut up,” Rose said.

“What? You’re worried about him choosing me and what all that means, but come on, Rose. You’re beautiful, sweet, kind, and I’ve even heard rumor you can be a bit of a bitch.” She quickly pressed a finger against her lips to make light of the insult she heard thrown at her sister a few times—mainly from the males her sister wouldn’t bed, but that was beside the point. “Don’t worry about me. I will be passed over and you will not have to worry at all.”

They arrived at the town square and she already saw the women lined up like cows, ready to be picked. It was kind of sick and weird, but according to her father, this is what had to happen. This was the agreement.

She didn’t agree to any of it, not in the least, but she couldn’t argue with anyone, it wasn’t her place.

Rose didn’t let go of her hand but before she could join the queue, her father grabbed her and quickly pulled her in for

a hug.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said.

She didn’t like this.

“I know.” She rubbed her father’s back and then her mother pulled her in for a hug. This was unexpected, and then, one by one, her three brothers grabbed her and hugged her. This didn’t exactly bode well for her. Did they know something she didn’t? Gale, Sean, and Ben pulled her in against them, hugging her.

Rose got a similar hug as well, and Karina walked toward the line, and stood. She had a horrible urge to salute her family but chose not to. Instead, she held her sister’s hand, because Rose had grabbed it again.

“You know, everything is going to be okay?” Karina asked.

“Of course it’s going to be okay. Everything is fine. More than fine.”

“But you’re freaking out.”

“I know,” Rose said.

Karina looked at her sister and frowned. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m really, really not okay with any of this.”

There was no time to hug her sister and make promises she couldn’t keep. She watched the change in her father, how he seemed to tense up, and then exude what she assumed was his *alphaness*. Yeah, not a word, but there was no way to

describe what else he was doing, and Karina returned her gaze to looking straight ahead. She couldn't hear what was being said.

“Do you know what is happening?” Karina asked, whispering to Rose.

“Shh, I'm trying to listen.”

“Well, you could at least help a girl out here. You know, the one that doesn't have the greatest hearing.”

“Karina, shh.”

She rolled her eyes and still held her sister's hand. This is part of what she hated about being in the pack. This is what made her the outsider. With her free hand, she ran fingers through her hair, getting rid of some of the field where she'd been running around, singing and dancing till her heart was content.

It was rare for her to get a day off, but as this was happening today, she'd used the freedom to enjoy her time. Not that she had an actual job. Everyone allowed her to help, and even though no one would hire her, she had become a good sport in helping. All she had to do was show up and there was always a job for her to do.

This was so boring.

Rage had no interest in mating with any of Westblood's pack. He was a little surprised by the invite, but he knew it was coming. Even though he didn't want to join forces or run

the risk of weakening his pack, he had a great respect for William Westblood, and accepted his invitation.

He knew of the threat. He'd gone toe-to-toe with rogue wolves before, and they were not a nice bunch. They were worse than fighting a feral dog. A rogue wolf was stronger, their bite even more lethal, and of course they didn't tire, nor did they give up, until either their prey was dead or they were.

His pack were not happy to be making the trek out to the Westblood pack. He intended to turn down William's offer of mating with one of his women to join their packs together. Rage was an alpha. He wouldn't share that kind of responsibility.

"Rage, thank you for coming," William said, gripping his hand, firm and strong.

He couldn't help but smile at the force of the handhold.

"It's always a pleasure to see you, Will," he said. They were acquaintances. Rage knew he wasn't particularly liked. Being kicked out of his own pack many moons ago, in theory, he should have gone feral and been a problem. Unlike the rogue wolves causing problems, Rage had been removed from his pack, and in doing so, several had left with him. Their allegiance was sworn to him and him alone. Along the way, he'd found other people, and a pack had been born. One he did care about, but it was also a pack that had no name, because they didn't need one.

They lived not too far from Westblood, in a small town. Westblood had created his pack amongst the forest, where there was a small village, whereas Rage had taken over an

abandoned ghost town, with forest surrounding them. He made sure his village thrived, and it did.

Looking past Will's shoulder, he saw the women, at least twenty of them, lined up.

"We do not have to do this tonight," Rage said.

He wanted some food, a nice, strong drink, and then he'd deal with all things business in the morning.

"I promised you I took this joining seriously, and I intend to keep my promise." Will took the lead. "All of these women are consenting. They want to be here."

Rage heard a snort that was then covered up with a cough. He had a feeling not all of the women were willing.

Down the line, he saw Rose, and knew she was Will's daughter. She didn't look at him, but straight down at the ground with her hand over her mouth. She'd been the snorter.

So, Will's daughter didn't want to be his mate. That was probably a good thing, because he had no interest in Rose either. None of these women were worth his time, but he did the hospitable thing and shook their hands.

His own pack were aware of his annoyance, but like he had told them, they stayed back and didn't interfere with his business. He wasn't interested in anything they had to say.

However, once he got to the fifth woman, her grip was a little tighter and she gave him a sultry hello. Rage was about to respond with a curt acknowledgement, but then something happened he had never experienced before in his life. The

softest little hum. Just a subtle sound, but his wolf came crashing to the surface, shocking him into full awareness.

He'd always been in charge of his wolf. Always. But he felt compelled to move.

Pushing the sultry woman's hand off him, he moved down the line, and that was when he saw her.

Long, blonde hair that didn't even look like it had seen a brush. He spotted some twigs and a few leaves that were weaved in the strands.

The voice, though, was hypnotic. She wasn't paying him any attention. She just stood, bouncing on her feet, on the spot, running fingers through her hair, giving a soft hum.

Rose must have seen his intention, because the woman turned, and that was when he saw the shocking blue eyes, sharp and stunning at the same time, as she looked at him.

Once he was closer, her scent made his mouth water. Wrapping his fingers around her neck, he didn't squeeze, couldn't control himself. He pulled her close, pressed his face against her neck, and breathed in deeply.

Heaven—that was what he smelled.

Against all the fucking odds in the world, he'd come to Westblood for peaceful understanding, and right here, right now, he had found his mate.

Pulling away, he stared into her eyes, and was about to say the words to Will that he'd take her. The woman in his arms opened her mouth, and he waited for her to say that she'd

found her mate as well, only she screamed instead. A scream of fear.

He couldn't believe it and then, right before his eyes, his woman—his mate—was pulled from his arms. Rose stood in front of him, as did Gale, Sean, Ben, and a few of the pack. What the fuck was happening?

His own pack sensed the threat and were at his back, ready to fight.

They were trying to hide his mate from him and his wolf wasn't having any of it. He kept demanding to be let out, but Rage had a lot more control.

He spotted Patricia, Will's wife, going to his mate, pulling her against him, and that was it. With a hand on Rose's arm, he pushed her out of the way.

The three boys may have come from an alpha's loins, but they were not as strong as him, and he swatted them away as if they were nothing but flies. He pushed everyone out of his way, and then Will was in front of him.

“Rage, you must stop this,” Will said.

The other alpha was strong, but Rage knew, against him, he didn't stand a chance.

“She is mine,” he said, growling. “Who is she? Why did she scream?”

“Her name's Karina,” Will said. “She is my young daughter, and Rage, she is also ... a human.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Well, that escalated quickly,” Karina said, sitting on her bed. She couldn’t help but wrap her fingers around her neck where he’d touched.

There was no pain, just a hum, like she knew he’d touched her, which he had. Not hard either, but possessive. It was kind of hot and sexy, and yet very alarming. One moment, Rose had been scolding her for humming, the next second the alpha was in front of her, hand wrapped around her neck, and then everything got kind of fuzzy.

She knew she screamed. Who wouldn’t? That had been a pretty scary experience.

“Do you feel anything?” Rose asked.

“Silly, mostly. I screamed. Is Daddy going to be upset with me? I know humming can get on a lot of people’s nerves, but I was so bored, and I don’t even know why I had to join the whole lineup.”

Rose came to her and took her hands. “You don’t realize he chose you.”

“Nah, that is not ... no way, you can’t...” Rose kept giving her a strange, pointed look, that made her stop and frown. “You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t know exactly what happened, one moment he was talking to Felicia, and you know what she’s like.”

Karina shrugged. Yes, it was known that Felicia would spread her legs for any man willing to have her for the night.

She didn't like to trust vicious rumors, though, they tended to be a massive error in judgment, at least in her experience.

“The next moment, you started to hum and he came to you, because he chose you. I don't think it's just down to the humming, though. I've only ever seen men who are ... mated, do that.”

“Mated! That can't be possible. There is no way I can be mated to him. I'm not even a wolf. I don't turn into a wolf. I don't have any special abilities. I am useless.”

“You're not useless.”

“I'm the only one here that has to take cold medicine, Rose. Don't try to pretend otherwise. I am, for all intents and purposes, useless. You can pretend all you want, but we both know I am.”

“You're not, and I swear I will bite you if you keep saying horrible shit about yourself,” Rose said.

Rose had always been a biter, but because she was wolf, she had bitten her before, and that didn't exactly end well. Karina ended up in bed for three weeks after the bite. The wound had gotten infected and there might have been a pesky problem with nearly dying, but she didn't hold it against her sister. At least it cured Rose from her biting problem. Always a silver lining in her book.

“If you do bite me, it would give Dad something else to worry about,” she said with a shrug. “Can you hear them?”

Rage and her father were downstairs. She had no idea what was being said.

“No, you know when Dad built this house, he put in layers of soundproofing,” Rose said.

“Ah, yes, so we don’t hear them doing the frisky business.” She pressed her lips together. “I’m not his mate, am I? It can’t be possible.”

“I have no idea, but only mated men act like that.”

Karina folded her arms across her chest. “Is it wrong that I’m a little ... nervous? Dad wants this, doesn’t he?”

“The union between the two packs. Yes, he’s serious about it. There is a threat out there, Karina.”

“I know. There is always a threat.”

“And Dad usually knows what to do, but this time I think it has him spooked. He wants to do everything he can to protect the pack, to protect all of us.”

She sighed and Rose gripped her hands.

There was a sudden knock on the door and before any of them could invite the person in, her mother opened the door and stepped inside.

“Karina, we need you downstairs,” her mother said.

She looked at Rose.

“Why? I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?” She hated how close to tears she was. All she wanted was to be strong for her parents, and she felt anything but. She felt weak. Useless.

Those horrible, pesky nerves were attacking her again. She felt sick to her stomach.

Patricia rushed toward her, pulling her to her feet, and then hugging her tightly. “No, my sweet girl. You didn’t do anything wrong. There is no fault here. You are not to blame. You do not have to worry yourself like that. These things happen.”

“Men randomly come up, grab you around the neck, and sniff you?”

“Not ... normally, but as a mate, it can happen.”

“So, she’s his mate?” Rose asked.

Karina looked up at her mother in time to see a simple nod of the head.

“That can’t be possible. I have no idea what any of that means. I’m not a mate. Mom, I’m a ... person, a human. I didn’t feel anything.”

“We’ve talked to him. We would like you to come down and see him, without him scaring you. That’s all. Just to come and talk to him. He’s a good man, Karina, and he’s a little taken aback that he might have scared you.”

Yes, there had been a little fear, there was no denying it. Actually, there had been a lot of fear, but she had no idea what to expect. She was trying not to freak out right now.

Karina wanted to tell them no, that she didn’t want to see him, but that would be cowardly. Her father had wanted this union. Maybe, once Rage realized how useless she was, he’d move on and find someone else to mate with. She knew it didn’t quite work like that, but she could have hope.

“I can go and see him,” Karina said.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Rose asked.

“No,” Patricia said. “You can’t come, Rose.”

“But Mom!”

“No, no buts. This is not about you. This is about your sister.”

Karina looked toward Rose and saw the worry on her sister’s face. She tried to smile at her, but it was hard to do when she was equally as worried.

Her mother pulled her out of the room, and they headed downstairs. Karina felt her heart start to race and the nerves once again weighing heavily in her stomach. This couldn’t be real. It couldn’t be happening. Yet, as she stepped into the sitting room to see her father and ... Rage, she knew it was.

“Karina,” her father said, coming toward her. “I’d like you to meet Rage.”

She could be polite. Forcing a smile to her lips, she looked at the other man, and nodded her head. Words failed her. What was she supposed to say or do?

Rage took a step forward and Karina waited.

“We’ll leave you two alone,” her father said.

“Wait, what?” This was news to her. Crazy and insane news. There was no way they were going to leave her with this man.

The door to the sitting room closed and now she hated her parents for putting soundproofing in the house. What kind of parents were they?

She spun back around to face Rage.

“You’re nervous,” he said.

“It’s not every day that a guy grabs my neck.” She winced and pressed her lips together. “Just ignore me. I don’t have a clue what I’m saying.”

He raised a brow.

“Don’t you think you’ve made an error?” she asked.

“No.”

“So, you don’t want the women lining up so you can have another go at taking your pick?” She clenched her hands together, trying to combat the nerves that were being a bit of a pest.

“No.”

She hated that word. It was so final.

“Well, you must have made an error,” she said.

“I must have made an error?”

“Why are you repeating what I say?” She couldn’t help but tense up as he came toward her, closing that distance between them with just a few steps.

He was tall and she had no choice but to tilt her head back to look at him. Rage was handsome, no doubt about that. The sexy kind of handsome. She didn’t want to recognize any of this, not with him.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

No one had ever called her beautiful.

Rage replayed the conversation with her father in his mind:

“My daughter, she is ... she’s ... human. She is not a wolf. She can never be mated. She gets sick easily. There is no way your wolf could have chosen her. It is a mistake.”

“I don’t make mistakes.”

Staring at Karina, he couldn’t resist reaching out and sliding some of her hair back from her face. She tried to hide the flinch his almost-touch had created.

Rage had never met anyone like her. Unlike all the women in the lineup, she was wearing a dress. All the other women had been in pants or shorts, with a revealing top.

Not Karina. She wore a strappy dress that fit snug against her breasts to her waist, then flared out across her hips. The dress didn’t appear to have a lot of volume and melded to her curves.

That was another difference—Karina was soft. The other pack women were all muscle and hard edges.

Will was concerned about his daughter, and Rage understood that. Neither of them expected Rage to find his mate. He’d not been on the hunt for such a thing, but the fact he’d found her gave him a feeling of peace.

His wolf, on the other hand, just wanted to mate. Such basic instincts—the need to fuck, to claim, to take, to fill with his cum, and make her pregnant. He kept those feelings at bay and looked at her.

She kept averting her gaze. Those blue eyes would look at him and when he looked back, she'd quickly glance away, as if she'd been caught doing something naughty. She was a dream.

“You do know I'm human, right?”

“I know.”

“Great, right, so that is good, right? It means we know you made a mistake, and you can go and choose someone else?” Karina asked.

“No.”

She frowned. “Are you being stubborn on purpose?”

“No.”

“Ugh! I hate that word. Is that all you know how to say?”

“No,” he said, laughing.

“Oh, so now you're laughing. I'm so pleased I was able to amuse you.” She shrugged, then folded her arms and blew out a breath.

He reached out, grabbing her neck and pulling her close. Rage didn't want any distance between them, and as her body pressed against his, he felt his wolf respond. Not only did his wolf respond, but so too did he. His cock hardened and that arousing need went into hyperdrive.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he asked.

She gasped and then opened her mouth.

Rage had a feeling she was going to scream, so he silenced her by slamming his lips down on hers, kissing her. She gave a whimper, and he groaned as he plundered her lips, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

Karina didn't kiss him back at first. She was still in his arms.

“My daughter is pure. She is innocent. She only knows what protection feels like. She is not ready for you, for any of this.”

Karina was a virgin and he had a feeling, with how highly her father spoke of her, no man had ever tried anything with her.

Her hands were by her sides, but she wasn't trying to push him away. He reached out, taking those hands and placing them on his shoulders as he traced across her lips.

“Kiss me back,” he said, breaking the kiss long enough to give her the instruction.

“I don't know how.”

He chuckled. “Then let me teach you.”

Karina gasped and then pulled back. Rage didn't want to let her go, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Let me go,” she said.

“Don't be afraid.”

“You're not letting me go, and you're not helping me right now, and I feel the need to scream.”

“Why?”

She frowned. “What do you mean why?”

“I’m not hurting you. Are you afraid of me?”

“I...” She stopped and frowned. “I don’t know. You must know how silly all of this is. I’m ... you’re an alpha, and I’m nothing.”

“Don’t,” he said.

He got the sense that people had been treating her like she was nothing for a long time and he didn’t like it. Slowly, he traced his fingers down her cheek. There was something about her, besides the fact she was his mate, that he couldn’t let go.

“Why?”

“Because your family would come in and then we wouldn’t be here, talking, and you do like talking to me, don’t you?”

Her frown deepened. “I ... don’t know.”

This made him smile. “You say that a lot.”

“I guess as much as you say the word *no*.”

“Touché.”

Karina took a deep breath and looked down at his chest, but then tilted her head back and looked at him. “I’m human. I’m not a wolf. I don’t feel anything right now.”

“Right now, you don’t, but maybe, in time.”

“You’re not going to choose another woman?” she asked.

“No.”

“That pesky, irritating word again. Are you going to be this stubborn?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. “A different response. I kind of like this one.”

He winked at her.

Karina lifted her arms and then placed them on his. “You know, you could have your pick of women here.”

“You expect me to believe that most of them were lined up ready for me because they *wanted* to be?”

She nodded. “Some of them were. Rose and I had no choice. Dad said something about his daughters being ready and available, and about insulting. Dad said a lot of things. This ... union, or you helping him, I think, is important to him.”

“And you’re willing to do what it takes for your father?” Rage asked.

He didn’t want his mate to act out of duty, but he had a feeling that winning Karina over was not going to be easy. She was already nervous.

“I’m willing to do what is needed for the pack, but I don’t ... I’m not a wolf. I’ve never turned. I don’t have great hearing, and I feel in the last few hours I’ve said this a lot.”

“Your parents have told me. You’re human, which I find hard to believe.”

Karina laughed. “Trust me, my family found it hard to believe as well. They don’t know what to do with me. I know they fear me finding a man to marry.”

Rage growled. He couldn’t help it.

She opened her mouth and closed it.

“Don’t,” he said. “No other male is going to have you. You’re mine.”

“Okay, so new rules apply. Do you even have any idea what you’re doing? What this is?”

He shook his head.

“So, neither of us has a plan?” she asked.

Rage didn’t know if he should tell her there was no backing out. Karina was his mate. He couldn’t leave her alone. He could not leave his mate behind. Regardless of whether that was what she wanted, there was no getting away from him, from them. Whether she liked it or not, he was staying. He’d already told Will he wasn’t leaving without Karina.

Their packs would be joined through a true mating.

“I have a plan,” Rage said.

“Are you going to tell me what the plan is?”

“In good time.” She didn’t need to know yet that he planned to win her and make her his mate.

Her time at the Westblood pack was limited. Rage would win. He’d never lost a fight in his life and when it came to Karina, he would be willing to fight dirty.

CHAPTER THREE

“And then what happened?” Rose asked.

“Don’t you have an actual job to do?” Karina asked, picking up the plates that had been left outside.

Last night was still a little blurry for her. Rage had left and then her parents had told her to get something to eat and go to bed. They’d treated her like a child and she hated that more than being considered weak.

Now, her sister had decided to join her at the first job of the day—the diner. She loved working here and talking to the pack, loved their stories, and just genuinely feeling like she belonged.

She never told anyone this, ever, but she always felt like an outsider. There were times even when the pack talked to her, she never truly understood what was going on. She never turned into a wolf, didn’t feel the call of the full moon. She didn’t know what it was like to be mated.

Again, an outsider. She hated that feeling so much.

Everyone this morning had asked her how she was, what she was feeling. She didn’t like or want to be the center of attention, but in an odd twist of fate, that was exactly what she had become. She forced a smile to her lips and pretended nothing happened last night. That was the easiest thing to do.

“Come on, Karina, work can wait. I’m more interested in what you’re doing and what you’re thinking and feeling. I’m your sister.”

“Yeah, and I also know if I tell you now, everyone will hear. You know what happened. You were there. Nothing really happened.” She shrugged. “Now, you better get back to Sister Claire, otherwise, she’s going to be pissed.”

Sister Claire was the pack’s healer. They didn’t have a doctor as most of the wolves didn’t need one. That had been reserved for her alone. Thankfully, Sister Claire had worked with humans and even trained as a doctor. She was a woman who loved the difficulty and tried to learn everything she could. At least she’d been able to put her skills to good use, with the only pack human as the patient.

Rose growled. “Come on, sis, you’re no fair. People are going to come to me and want the whole update and stuff, and what do I have to show them? Zip, nada, nothing.”

“I’m not going to be the topic of gossip.”

“I hate to break this to you, but you’ve been the topic of gossip for a long time.”

Karina didn’t need reminding. They had all been curious about what would happen when she came of age. Nothing. That was what happened. A big, fat load of nothing. She was not important enough to be spoken about. Not important enough through any means. At least, that was what she tried to tell herself.

It didn’t help that just this morning alone, she had seen people from the pack pointing in her direction, whispering. If she had those pesky wolf superpowers, she’d know exactly what they were saying and whispering, but she didn’t have a clue. She didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. The last

thing she needed today was for someone to be talking about her, or at least, to hear them talking about her. She felt way too on edge already to deal with that kind of stress.

Keeping a smile on her face, she cleared away all the used plates, taking them through to the kitchen, then carried a bucket and cloth to wipe everything down afterward. She brushed her hair back, and she didn't know why she felt a sudden tension rush through her body, but it was there. Glancing up, she noticed the pack was looking toward her, but not quite at her, behind her.

She stood up and turned to find ... Rage, the alpha from last night, less than a foot away from her.

Karina had no choice but to tilt her head back a little. The sun was shining as she'd been outside of the diner, cleaning the tables. During the summer, the diner got very busy, and most of the pack loved eating outside. Some preferred inside, as even though they were wolves, bugs still irritated them as they ate.

"Hello," she said.

Her parents had always taught her to be courteous and nice. She smiled at him, even though a small part of her was incredibly nervous.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

He looked at the cloth in her hand. She frowned and held it up. "Cleaning, working, you know, what people do." She went to turn back to the table but Rage grabbed her arm.

Tensing up, she looked at where he gripped her arm, then gave him her full attention. It was strange, no one within the pack ever touched her. Was that why she was a little taken aback by his attention? Only her father touched her.

She had never thought about the reason why no one touched her. Nibbling her bottom lip, she couldn't help but tilt her head back and look at him. Rage was a good-looking man. No, not good-looking, he was sexy, and gave off a little dangerous edge, which was intoxicating.

This was insane. He scared her. That was it.

This had nothing to do with his thick black hair, blue eyes that seemed to be a little darker blue than her own. And it certainly didn't have anything to do with the thick heavily muscled body he was sporting. She didn't think anyone in the pack could even touch him when it came to sexiness, or muscle. Why was she even thinking about this now? It made no sense, because last night he had freaked her out.

“You work by cleaning tables and serving the pack?”

“I also do laundry, and take care of kids, and help at the florist, pack orders.” She glanced across the town square at the many different shops. Most of the pack were online, and she also helped to package most orders, and drive them out to the local sorting office to get posted. “There are a lot of jobs I do.”

She never stayed in one place. In a few hours, she'd move on to the afternoon story time for the kids, which she loved. The kids always picked a different story, and she sat for a couple of hours while they calmed down, ready for their parents to come and collect them.

Then after that, she sometimes went to the DIY store, or helped at the florist, or even just went out to cook for some of the older pack members. She did whatever job presented itself, and in doing so, she tried to make her father proud.

“And you accept this?” Rage asked.

She held the cloth in her hand and then frowned at him. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I take care of my pack.”

“And as you know, every single member has a place, and this is mine.”

“And what is your job exactly?” he asked.

“Doing everything...” She couldn’t quite finish.

“Doing everything that no one else wants to do?” Rage asked.

Karina didn’t know why, but she felt compelled to look behind her to see if anyone had heard what he said. Even from a brief glance, she saw how nervous the pack was. Was that it?

“I’m doing what needs to be done. I’m still pack.” *Even though I’m human and not as important as the rest.* She didn’t add that last part, because there was no need to. He’d already hinted at it. “Anyway, I don’t need to talk about what I do here, why are you here? Have you come to eat?” she asked, wanting any excuse to change the subject and divert him.

“I came to see you.”

“Oh. Well, there is nothing to see here. I’m busy. I’m sure my dad will be quite happy to show you around the pack

and stuff like that. You're here on business, aren't you?"

"You are part of my business." He moved closer toward her, and she didn't think it was possible, because he was less than a foot away from her, but it would seem Rage had other ideas.

She was very much aware of the pack watching.

"Don't you have a woman within your own pack?" she asked.

"No."

"You don't want me."

"I do."

This was insane.

"I think you're wrong."

Rage couldn't recall meeting someone so skittish before, and certainly not a wolf. Karina wasn't a wolf, though. He had no choice but to ask William if she was adopted, or if she was even his child.

William and Patricia had assured him that Karina was their daughter. He knew it was very rare for two wolves to have a human child. She was human, but she did smell like a member of the Westblood pack.

He found it utterly cute that she wouldn't quite meet his gaze. He did not like the fact that she was assigned the work that no other pack member would do. Glancing over her

shoulder, he saw the pack watching them. At the same time, the pack was also pretending not to watch.

William had asked him to choose someone else, but Rage couldn't. Karina was his mate.

“You think I'm wrong?” he asked.

Rage couldn't remember a time someone had accused him of being wrong. This made Karina even more exciting.

“Yes, you're wrong.” She shrugged. “There are a lot of other pack females who would suit you much better.”

“And now you know what will and won't suit me?” he asked. “Just like a mate.”

She opened her mouth then closed it. “You're messing up my words on purpose, aren't you?”

“How long have you been working?” he asked.

“Most of the morning.”

“So, you're due a break, sit and talk to me.” He pulled out the chair of the table she'd been cleaning, and pushed her into it. Rounding the small table, he sat down.

“I can't just take time off.”

“If I need to, I'll talk to your father. I'm sure as the alpha of the pack, he'd be able to make some leeway in the rules of hard work.”

She glared at him. “Why are you being so difficult?”

“What's good here?” he asked.

“Everything, and stop avoiding the question.”

“I’m not avoiding the question. I’m not being difficult. I picked you. You were part of the lineup last night, and you’re my choice. If your father didn’t want you to be chosen, he shouldn’t have put you there.” Rage would have still chosen her. The scent was driving him crazy. She made his mouth water.

All he wanted to do was press his face against her neck and breathe her in. There might even be some licking involved as well, but he wasn’t sure.

This morning, he’d gone to see William, hoping to catch sight of Karina, only to find her gone for the day. William tried to reason with him, but Rage told him he couldn’t be swayed. This wasn’t just about aligning their packs anymore. Karina was his mate, and he wasn’t going to leave without her. He couldn’t turn his back on her, and now no other woman in the world would ever be good enough.

He’d scented his mate, knew she existed. One day soon, Karina would know who she was, who he was, and what they meant to each other.

“Let’s be honest, my dad didn’t think you were going to choose me. He put me there as a sign of respect. That’s all. What has happened is crazy.” She gave a little chuckle.

He loved the sound.

“And I guess I’m going a little crazy.”

She sighed and sat back. “Can I get back to work?” she asked.

“No, I want you to sit and eat something.” He loved her curves. He also noticed that once again she was in a dress. She wore an apron around her waist with the ties in front. The apron hid her impressive tits, and he wanted to rip the offending item off her. In good time. He would have everything he ever wanted.

The full moon was approaching soon. He was going to need Karina to be prepared. He’d never been around his mate on a full moon, but after seeing some couples, he knew it could get intense.

He’d told William that as far as he was concerned, the packs were now united. The moment Karina became his completely, they would always protect one another. Rage’s pack wasn’t too far away, and he would make it his duty to protect all of those within the pack.

“I ate breakfast.”

Rage kept looking at her.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

He smiled at her. “You’re starting to understand the situation.”

“You’re a giant pain. Fine, everything on the menu is good, and I’m not just saying that. As wolves, I’m sure you can understand, they are not picky eaters, but they know when they don’t like something. Everything has been tried, tested, and approved by the Westblood pack. You will be safe with whatever you choose.”

He loved hearing her voice. “Will you pick for me?” he asked.

She folded her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him for several minutes. He could imagine her debating what she wanted to say to him.

“What are you in the mood for?”

He couldn’t exactly respond with saying he wanted her spread-eagled on his bed so he could worship every single inch of her body, so he shrugged. “Surprise me.”

“Do you have any food allergies?”

“No.”

She got to her feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Rage, at this point, didn’t completely trust her. She’d not exactly shown willingness in wanting to spend any time with him. He wouldn’t put it past her to try and run, so he followed her inside.

“You’re following me?”

“Yes.” There was no point in lying about the obvious.

She shook her head, but kept walking. Karina stopped at the main counter where a much older woman was bustling about. Rage knew enough to know they’d been listening in on their conversation, which he did find hilarious. He wondered if they had learned anything yet to report to their alpha.

He’d asked his people to listen and report to him if they sensed anything suspicious and untoward. Rage had never liked going into another alpha’s territory. It always came with

consequences and for the most part, he wasn't willing to pay those prices. William's request had come a little out of the blue, but he also understood why it had happened.

Karina ordered them both large cheeseburgers, fries, and some onion rings. He couldn't deny that it all sounded incredibly delicious. Once she was done, Karina grabbed his arm and led him out back to where they were seated.

"Was that so hard?" she asked.

"Tell me you weren't going to run."

"I may not have been born as a wolf, but I am still a Westblood and I will not run away like some coward." She sat down opposite him.

"You'd have stayed?"

"Yes."

She folded her arms once again and looked defensive.

"I'm not going to attack you," he said.

"I know."

This made him smile. "Do you think being around your own pack, they'll be able to protect you?"

"There are many of them, so I guess, in a way, yes."

"Then you'd be a fool."

"Why?"

"None of them would be powerful enough to stop me, not when they were trying to keep me away from my mate. You're my mate, Karina. Nothing would stop me."

“I can’t be your mate.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Why not?”

“I’m not a wolf. It’s just not possible.”

“Why? Because a few years ago, someone told you that since you’re a human, you’re not able to mate? That you don’t have those instincts?”

“I don’t, and I’m not just saying that either. You feel something, Rage. I don’t. I was humming last night because I was bored. I didn’t sense you. I didn’t feel you. I feel nothing. I’m not trying to be cruel.” She gave a little chuckle. “I don’t even know if I have stopped aging. The whole wolf gene and slowing down aging, none of us know if I’m going to age like a regular human, or slowly age like everyone else. It’s all under the assumption that I will just get one life. My parents will see me age and die. Is that what you want in a mate?”

“I know I want you,” Rage said.

He’d deal with all the other problems as he saw them. To him, Karina being a human wasn’t problematic, not yet. All it required was some attention to detail. Westblood hadn’t sought outside help when it came to his daughter. Rage imagined it was to keep her safe and as far away from those who would do her harm, which he understood, but at the same time, they didn’t have that luxury.

Rage would reach out to a couple of his contacts and ask them for help in understanding Karina’s limitations. He would do everything for her.

There was no choice in this. He felt the compulsion to protect her, take care of her, and make sure she never experienced pain again. Karina would belong to him.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Why bother? Why put him through this?” Karina asked, looking between her parents. She knew her brothers and sister were in the sitting room, listening in on the conversation but pretending not to be paying attention.

They always listened to each other’s intervention with their parents. Karina was the only one who had to rely on their good hearing.

“Karina, Rage is ... you are his mate.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

Her mother put a hand on her arm. “I know this is stressful right now—”

She pulled her arm away from her mother. “No, it’s not that this is stressful. I can handle that kind of stuff. This is something different. You’re asking me to give Rage a chance. To make him believe that we can be something we all know we cannot.”

“We don’t know that, Karina,” William said.

She opened her mouth and closed it. What could she say?

“Your father is right,” Patricia said. “We never for a million years thought you would be able to find a mate, and yet, here is Rage. He is drawn to you. The same draw that brings mates together.”

“Don’t you think that’s cruel?” Karina asked. “We don’t know anything about all this.” She pointed at herself. “None of

us know the truth, and yet we don't know if I'd even be able to give him children, or to stay with him for as long as everyone stays with their mates." She held her hands up. "This is not fair."

"Karina, please," Patricia said.

"No, I can't—"

"Think about him," Rose said, coming into the room, raising her voice to be heard.

None of her siblings had ever interfered before, and Karina didn't know what to say.

"Rose, this isn't your place."

"It's not like you're even trying to be quiet. I'm not even here because I'm thinking about what this union would mean for the packs. I'm thinking about Karina and I'm thinking about Rage." Rose stopped and took a breath. "He chose you from a lineup of women, and you've got to admit, Karina, there were quite a few women. I know he came to eat dinner with you today, and he even stayed and helped to clear the tables. He's an alpha and a guest. He shouldn't be cleaning tables, but he did. Then, he followed you to the florist, grabbed an apron, and got stuck working. Admittedly, Susan was there picking up some roses for her mother, and she said he packaged the most awful bouquet she'd ever seen."

Karina turned to her dad. "I fixed it. You don't have to worry."

William nodded.

As pack alpha, William had to deal with all kinds of complaints, even those that appeared to be mundane and not worth his time or effort.

“He even followed you to the DIY store to help. Rage followed you around, and I even heard reports from the locals that he made you laugh. He came to help Dad.”

“He came to find a mate,” Karina said, not wanting to give in.

“And he picked you. He has told you, you’re his mate.”

“I don’t feel it,” Karina said. She wanted to burst into tears. For as long as she could remember, she has watched couples come together. Not the sex, but realizing they were mates.

It was special and rare, especially when they stayed within a pack. There was a high chance that there were no mates within a pack. It was how a pack grew. Some men and women had gone out exploring, and come back with mates. Those mates, either male or female, had then sworn loyalty to William Westblood and settled down within the pack. It was always so beautiful.

Karina loved it, but she’d also known there was a chance she would never experience such beauty herself, and she accepted that. She hated it, but she accepted it, as there was no other choice. It had never stopped her from wanting it.

She never told anyone about her desire to feel that close to someone. To know they wanted her as much as she wanted them. This was her secret.

And part of her was so upset that Rage felt that way about her, but she didn't feel anything for him. Nothing.

She did feel sad, because it confirmed to her that the tiniest desire she did have would never happen. Karina would never feel or understand what it was like to be mated.

“So?” Rose said, shrugging. “That doesn't mean you can't fall in love, Karina. It doesn't mean you can't give Rage a chance. He's here. He wants to get to know you. Don't see it as some kind of duty. If you'd had the ability to feel his connection, we all know it would be sexy time right now.”

“Rose, I do not need to know this.”

“Come on, Dad, you think we don't know you and Mom do it every chance you get? It's gross, and you're not quiet about it.” Rose rolled her eyes. “Your daughters and your sons are of age, and do not even get me started and tell me it's different for boys. It's not different. We all want to enjoy sex.”

“We're getting off track,” Patricia said. “Moving on, Rose.”

Again, her sister did a nice, long eye roll at their dad, but then turned back to her. “You can't deny that a part of you isn't curious about what this could mean. Yes, he's a scary alpha. Yes, the safety of the pack is kind of riding on this working, but forget all of that and just focus on the two of you. That is all you need to do.”

Karina wanted to argue, but she was out of logical thought.

“Date. Enjoy him. Kiss. Maybe make out and feel what that’s like, you know? Enjoy each other. Give yourself a chance to just relax with him. Get to know him. Ask him questions. You know, do all the date stuff that I know you love watching on your silly, mushy romance movies. How does that sound?”

She smiled. “That actually sounds ... amazing.” She turned to look at her parents. “That’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” William said. “But only if you want to. I don’t want to force you.”

There was a knock on the door and Karina glanced over to it. Her mother had already gotten her dressed. Clothes had been waiting for her to change into. When it came to her mother, she knew not to argue, so she’d changed. She didn’t own any jeans or trousers, or pants of any kind. Even when she was little, she had hated wearing them, and she only ever wore skirts or dresses.

Clenching her hands open and closed, she smiled at them, then stepped away, and made her way to the main door. Her stomach was in knots, but she reached out and twisted the doorknob. There was Rage on the other side. He wore a pair of jeans and a checkered shirt that kind of reminded her of a lumberjack.

“Hey,” she said.

There was no denying he looked good. Real good. Kind of like one of those rugged heroes in the romances she loved to watch.

“Hey,” he said.

She took a deep breath and slowly released it. “Are you, er, are you ready to go?” The last thing she wanted to do was linger with her parents and run the risk of them embarrassing her. They had a history of doing exactly that, and she wanted to run a bit of interference before that happened.

“Yes.” He glanced behind her. “William.”

“Get her back before midnight,” William said.

Rose gave her thumbs-up, but the truth was, she wanted to kill her sister for sounding so reasonable and right. She took a deep breath, and then expelled it, slowly moving out the door.

Rage put his hand at the base of her back, and she did feel something. It wasn't scary or alarming, but it felt nice, which was strange. She went with it, following him out the door. She heard it close behind her and knew there was no turning back.

He didn't remove his hand, and she didn't see any car or bike, so they walked down the main street, heading toward the town square. It was strange to her that less than a few days ago, she'd been walking to the town square, oblivious of what was about to happen. Nothing could have prepared her for what was to come.

“You don't have to be nervous,” Rage said.

“I'm not nervous. Well, maybe a little, I guess. I just ... I feel guilty.” There, she blurted it out. She'd not been honest

with her parents or sister, she might as well be honest with him.

“Guilty? Why do you feel guilty?”

Rage stopped as Karina did. They were not quite toward the town square, but he knew the packs were mingling, getting accustomed to each other. He’d told his own members to get used to being around the Westblood pack. He wasn’t going to leave without his mate.

Karina looked stunning. The dress she wore was amazing as it melded to her curves in all the right places, cinching in at the waist, flaring out across her hips. The main dress seemed to help emphasize those glorious full ripe tits that made him want to strip her naked and spend a considerable time exploring. He didn’t do anything.

“You feel this,” Karina said. “I ... don’t. I don’t feel this compulsion to be around you, and I hate it.” She wouldn’t quite meet his gaze.

Rage loved any excuse he could find to touch her, so he placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head back, forcing her to look at him. Those blue eyes, not quite as dark as his, were striking.

“You’re upset.”

“You feel this. I feel nothing.” She took a deep breath. “I know some people would think that’s amazing, and great, and fun, but I ... don’t. I feel gutted.” She pressed her lips together. “And for that, I do feel guilty. If you’d found Rose,

or any of the other women, and they'd been your mate, there wouldn't be a second's hesitation. I'm the weird one."

"You're not weird."

"I come from wolf parents, and yet I can't change into a wolf. I get sick. I get injured. I don't heal quickly. For all intents and purposes, I'm a human, and I suck."

Rage pulled her in close. "You don't suck." It was probably wrong for him to think so, but he imagined her sucking on something else. He had to get himself under control because he didn't want to push her too far, too soon.

William had asked him to take his time, and he'd respect the other alpha, even though a part of him didn't want to.

Stroking her hair, then her back, he held her tightly. He felt that need rise up—the one that made him want to protect her, never let her fear anything ever again. He kissed the top of her head and Karina suddenly pulled away. She had a smile on her face.

"So, where are we going tonight?"

"I'm taking you to dinner."

"At the diner?"

"Yes, I happen to have noticed there is no other place in town."

"The diner is special. Everyone loves it. Most of the shops must be approved."

"Through your dad?" he asked.

“And the rest of the pack. We all know how temperaments are, and, well, he knows it can be a challenge getting people to agree, but he does it to help keep a fully organized and functioning pack. It works.” She shrugged. “The diner was willing to offer other kinds of food, which is why it won, and so far, other than the bakery a few shops down, no other restaurant has opened. We do have potlucks, though, and special tasters to help the diner grow, and stuff like that. It helps. It all helps.”

He loved hearing her talk.

Rage didn't give a shit how William ran his pack. The food he had at lunchtime was amazing. The burgers, fries, and onion rings had been delicious. Karina hadn't been able to finish her food. Again, another little note to the fact she wasn't a wolf. The diner served wolf-sized portions.

Stepping across the town square, it was aglow with fairy lights, giving it an almost magical feature. He liked it. It wasn't so much festive, but it was close to it. He could imagine for Halloween and Christmas, this pack went all out. Mainly because within his own pack, he did allow the festivities to run wild.

Rage was a sucker for the kids, and once they started to beg him for some fun tricks and then of course the treats, he'd done it.

He'd not thought about having children himself, but one glance at Karina, and he couldn't help but imagine her full and ripe with his child. Those tits looking fuller than they already were. His cock started to harden. Gritting his teeth, he had no

choice but to order to gain control of his erection. Entering the diner with a hard-on didn't show control.

Several of the pack stopped and greeted him. He was polite and nodded in their direction, but he also made sure to take hold of Karina's hand. He expected her to put up a fight, but she allowed him to take the lead. They were able to arrive at the diner, and the seats he'd asked to be saved were.

Walking Karina to her seat, he knew people were watching and whispering.

"Do you really think they're mated?"

"Karina can't mate, she's human."

"He is making a big mistake."

"They look so cute together."

"Karina is so lucky."

There was a mixed bag of feelings. He smiled and grabbed the menu, glancing over at it, and seeing Karina trying not to look at everyone.

"Relax," he said.

"Easy for you to say. I bet you can hear what they're all whispering about."

Just as quickly the whispering stopped. Karina couldn't hear, but he could.

"Yeah, I could," he said.

"What were they saying?" Karina asked.

Her curiosity got the better of her, and he saw her slowly relax. He didn't care what it took, as long as she did so in his company. Rage didn't plan to have to win over his mate. Karina not being a wolf had certainly thrown a wrench into the works, but at the same time, she had been an amazing person to find.

Rage did have every intention of denying a mate. He knew William had wanted to bind their packs together with a woman, but he'd not wanted to. His intention had been to show that they could come together with one objective—to protect each other against any potential attack. They didn't need women or money, or agreements, other than those of men keeping their word.

Karina had made him stumble. Now, he wanted her. He'd do anything for her pack, as he would for his own.

“That we look cute together. We're going to make gorgeous babies.” She blushed and he couldn't help but smile. “You know, that kind of stuff.”

He wasn't going to tell her that some of them were spiteful. If they ever hurt his woman, he'd deal with them, but for now, he wanted Karina to relax. The whispering stopped and Karina did eventually relax.

“I guess we better order,” Karina said.

“Yes, you already told me how amazing lunch is, so why don't you tell me what will be good for dinner?” he asked.

Karina's face was bright red. He couldn't recall ever seeing a pack woman blush. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled

her scent and even that was sweet cinnamon. His favorite.

“I think the spaghetti and meatballs. They’re winners, if that’s what you’re looking for?” she asked.

“Then I guess I’ll order.” He glanced around and saw there were no waitresses.

“I’m the only one that kind of acts like a waitress here,” she said, wincing as she did. “I can take your order.”

“No, I’ll go and deal with our orders.” He winked at her and then made his way up toward the counter.

He didn’t have to wait too long before another woman came toward him, took his order, and then smiled at him. “Treat her right,” she said.

“I will.”

There was no name tag, but Rage figured he’d get accustomed to the people who mattered to Karina.

Stepping back to the table, Karina once again looked nervous. He reached across the table and took her hand, locking their fingers together.

“Relax.”

“You keep saying that and it doesn’t actually help.”

“Tell me about yourself,” he said, wanting to distract her.

She took a deep breath and then gave a small chuckle. “I think it would be a lot more exciting if you told me about yourself.”

He raised a brow.

“Think about it, you pretty much know my history.” She gave a shrug. “The youngest daughter to the pack alpha, completely human, works everywhere and anywhere.”

“Tell me about that?” he asked.

“About what?”

“Why you work everywhere and anywhere?”

She nibbled her lip and then shrugged. “Okay, ugh, it’s not that complicated. I think to be honest, the pack didn’t know what to do with me. You know the drill. I get sick and injured, and then there’s the fear that I could potentially kill myself. Yeah, there is a thing there. No one wanted to hire me, so no one would. In the end, I hated feeling like I couldn’t help, so one day, I just helped. You know, I came here and saw the mess on the tables, and started to clean it. For some of the couples with the kids that were being a little unruly, I served them and helped where I could. The same for helping at the school. I started reading to the kids to help calm them down before their parents came to pick them up.”

“You made yourself available.”

“Yeah, but I think I prefer to think of it as useful.”

He loved her smile and knew he would do whatever it took to see her always smiling.

CHAPTER FIVE

Several Days Later

“And that didn’t terrify you?” Karina asked.

“Nah, what was there to terrify me?”

“I don’t know, being asked to leave, even though it was politely, I’d still be worried with the whole threat of going rogue, and I hear it’s quite an irritation,” she said, trying to make light of it.

“I didn’t have any parents. I was found by an elderly wolf couple, and they knew I was a wolf.” He shrugged. “It’s rare for wolves to abandon their children, but it does happen. No one could have anticipated that I’d be an alpha, and for those alphas, it’s common knowledge that they must either submit to the ruling of another alpha, or go and find their own way.”

“So you went and found your own way.”

“Some of the pack left with me,” Rage said. “So I kind of left with a small pack.”

“People left with you?” For the last couple of days, Karina had spent a great deal of time with Rage.

From the moment she went down to breakfast, he was there and waiting, and until she went to bed. He was there. He’d joined them for breakfast and he took her for lunch. Dinner was either at the diner or at her parents’ place, seeing as she still lived there.

Rage and his pack were currently staying at a small bed-and-breakfast on the outskirts of town. The pack sometimes rented it to tourists or people just passing through. This time, it was all for Rage's pack.

"Yeah, people left with me. Some of them didn't want to be under the old alpha's rule, and others wanted a fresh start. You know the drill."

"I really don't. I've never left Westblood, not even to visit anywhere. I think they've been afraid of something happening." She did air quotes for the last part, as it was something her parents had said to her a lot.

Rose, Gale, Sean, and Ben could leave the pack, visit the town or the mall, or whatever. Not her. She had to stay within the limits of the pack. Karina hadn't minded. She was human, and when she was next to the pack members, she did feel like the odd one out.

"Well, how about I take you out on a date, outside of the pack's limits?"

She stopped packing the roses she and Rage had been working on. They'd already done their work at the diner, and done the laundry. She was finishing her day at the florist. School wasn't in as it was a Saturday, so she didn't have to read any stories.

"You'd do that?" Karina asked.

"It's not hard. We can drive or walk. There's a village about thirty minutes from here. I've been told they have amazing coffee and fantastic cinnamon rolls."

She opened her mouth and closed it. “I ... ugh, what about my dad? I know he’d be uncomfortable if I went and did something like that without telling him first.”

“I’ll ask him. Only if you want to go, though, no pressure, Karina.”

Going out of the pack limits, seeing something other than the diner and bakery, not having any of the pack looking at her—it was tempting. “I’d love to, but only if my dad will allow it.”

She didn’t want to upset her father. Even though William was encouraging her time with Rage. He didn’t seem to mind having the other alpha at his home for breakfast or dinner. William was also always encouraging them to spend as much time with each other as possible. At first, she did mind, but Rage helped her feel relaxed.

After each *date*, Rose was always waiting for her to tell her the details, but Karina had nothing to tell. What could she say? They enjoyed long conversations about their lives. She had come to learn a great deal about Rage.

It was a shock to her that he lived close by and it wasn’t that much of a journey for him, but he didn’t want to spend his time going back and forth. Some of his pack did keep going back to be with their family and some took their place. They hadn’t gotten to the true details of why he was here, or why her father was so concerned, and required him to be here.

For now, she just wanted to get to know him. She had just learned he’d been politely asked to leave by his previous

pack. To Karina, this was unheard of. She had never known a pack to turn its back on a member.

Rage was found, though. He wasn't born into his previous pack, he'd been abandoned in a forest near his old pack and an elderly couple had stumbled upon him. They had known he was a wolf, and rather than leave him or send him out to be adopted, they had taken him in. They'd given him a home, a place to grow. They had guided him. From the very beginning, they had been honest with him that he had been found, and he wasn't their child. Karina had thought that part a little cruel, but they were just helping Rage know why he might feel differently around the pack. She couldn't hate them for that. They'd given him a home and a chance, when as a child, that was all he wanted.

Unfortunately, Rage had alpha traits, which meant he did butt heads with the main alpha, and doing so caused him some trouble. He was asked to either submit or find his own place to rule. There was no fighting. Rage decided to leave the pack.

“Did you ever look for your parents?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Did you find them?”

Rage nodded. “Yes, they had been killed in a rogue attack. That was why they had left me.”

Karina frowned. “How did you find that out?”

Rage took a deep breath. “I spoke to a medium.”

“A medium?”

“Someone who can communicate with the other side. I had nothing to go on. No identity. My parents didn’t know where I came from, only where they found me, and twenty years is a long time for places to change, to grow, to develop.”

“So, you went to a medium?” Karina asked. “I thought they were fake.”

“Like packs and wolves?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Because they do exist. I’ve seen it.”

“Ah, so you’re only interested in things you think exist.”

She frowned. “I never thought about it. You’ve spoken to a medium?”

“Yes, and I have contacted my parents. They told me what happened. Their pack got attacked by rogue wolves, and while trying to escape, they were injured. They didn’t know what to do, but knew of a pack that was close, and hoped and prayed I’d be found.”

Karina wanted to hug him and tell him it was all going to be okay. “Were they not able to heal?”

Rage blew out a breath. “That is the problem with a rogue wolf, Karina. Their bite—their attack—is toxic.”

“What?” She’d never heard of a rogue wolf bite being toxic. Why wouldn’t anyone tell her that? “How is that even possible? What about wolves’ ability to heal? Can it be from a single cut or a bite?”

“No, not a single bite or cut. Those can get infected if not treated and yes, if they remain infected, it can then lead to death. The attacks on my parents were not just a single cut or scratch. They were gouges of flesh torn out. It was a full-scale attack.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Me too.”

“What leads to these attacks? Are they planned?”

Rage sighed. “That, unfortunately, no one knows.”

“How can no one know?”

“A rogue is unpredictable. They do and act however they damn well please. There’s no stopping them. It’s why their attacks are so lethal. They come out of the blue and there’s no way to stop them. All anyone can do is hope and pray the pack is strong enough to fight them off.”

“I had no idea. I can’t believe no one ever told me about this.” Karina looked down at the beautiful bouquet of roses they had packed, but she didn’t see the beauty. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? There’s been an increase in rogue attacks, and they’re getting close to the pack.”

Rage took her hand and rounded the table they’d been working at on opposing sides. He locked their fingers together and then placed his palm flat on her back. “Yes, it’s why I’m here. Your father is concerned about the attacks happening in the area. He is worried for his pack, and he wants to make sure that if one ever happens, there are other alphas out there who have his back.”

“Why you?” she asked. “I’m so sorry, that is rude.”

“I’m close, but I’ve also dealt with rogue wolves before.”

Karina couldn’t help but glance down at the couple of scars he had on his arms. “From a rogue?”

“Yes.”

“I’m so sorry. They didn’t get infected?”

“I treated them.”

She couldn’t help it. Stepping close, she wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body flush against him. It was an odd sensation to have, but she felt the need to offer him as much comfort as possible.

Rage hadn’t seen the point in explaining his scars. They were from rogue wolves, but they were not pesky little scratches either. At one point, he’d been surrounded, teeth had sunk into his flesh, claws had been about to tear out parts of his body, but he’d fought them off.

After he’d killed them all, it had been touch-and-go about whether he’d survive the night. The injuries had been so severe, his pack hadn’t known what to do. He had told them to return to their previous packs or appoint another alpha immediately.

They hadn’t left his side, nor had they made the decision for him to be replaced. His pack believe their vigil had helped him heal. Rage knew he’d been close to death. He had felt it

washing over his body like a wave of water, waiting to swallow him whole. But he'd fought that light. He'd fought death, and he'd come back, healed, and made sure there was no way in hell any other rogue would ever attack.

He knew that was why William had reached out to him. There were many rumors surrounding him, some of them good, others bad. Of course, there were the usual ones that claimed he was also part rogue. His parentage was called into question. Others believed him to be some kind of super being. He knew he had the pack to thank, and he was loyal to his men and women that joined him.

"No, absolutely out of the question," William said.

"You won't allow me to take Karina out of the village for one day?" Rage asked, folding his arms as he looked toward the other alpha.

William wasn't behaving like an alpha, though. He stood in front of a concerned father.

"I know to you this may seem quite silly but Karina has never left the safety of the pack. You know how delicate she is. I don't think she should leave. We have no idea what could be waiting for her!" William slammed his palm on the table.

Rage understood him. There was fear in his eyes.

"William, I know you're worried about the rogues, but you don't have to fear them attacking her."

"You don't know that. You've heard the rumors, you've seen what they've done."

“Yes, and I also know there’s no logic when it comes to them attacking. They don’t plan, William. They don’t take time to learn the area, to see a person’s weakness. This is what makes them different from hunters, or even from fellow wolves hoping to take over packs. Rogues don’t have any such goals. They’re mindless. They won’t be waiting for her and if they are, then they’re already coming for the pack.”

“Karina is human. She cannot protect herself. Only we can protect her!” Again William slammed his hand down on the desk.

Rage took another long, deep breath. He was in another alpha’s territory but he felt his wolf was close to the surface, wanting to dominate, to take control for the sake of his mate. Once he had him under control, he looked at William.

“Listen to me closely. I wasn’t asking your permission, William Westblood. I was here as a courtesy to you, to let you know I will be taking my mate out for a short trip to the nearby village, so I can spend some time with her.” He took a step toward William, but then stopped himself. He wasn’t going to allow this to elevate any further. “You promised me that when it came to Karina, you would not stand in my way.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“And she’s my mate. You asked me to come here. You wanted an alliance, for me to find a woman. My mate was right here, and I’m not leaving without her. I’ve followed all your rules, now you will keep your word and not interfere with my business. Karina is mine and she will still live a life, even

with the constant threat of attack. I will protect her. I will do whatever is necessary to make her happy.”

There was a knock on the door and in response, William growled, but that didn't stop Patricia from stepping over the threshold and closing the door behind her.

“We're talking,” William said.

“I heard, and I'm pretty sure the whole house heard, apart from Karina, who is changed and ready, hoping her father will allow her to go with Rage.” Patricia went straight to William and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I'm here, my love. I know you're worried. We all are, but this is Karina, she won't do anything stupid. You know this.”

“She's our baby girl,” William said.

“And when we placed her in that lineup, there was always a chance she would be chosen, human or not. Rage picked her. They belong together, and if you stop them now, then it would be like our parents stopping us.”

Another growl from William.

Patricia chuckled. “Exactly.” She turned back toward Rage. “You may go. All we ask is that you protect our girl.”

“Always.”

He looked toward William, who gave a nod of his head. This wasn't the alpha, but a concerned father. Rage had never fathered children, so he didn't have a clue how he would react if another man thought he could protect his own daughter. He imagined that time would come.

Leaving William's office, he found Karina sitting on the steps. She wasn't wearing a dress this time, but a skirt and top. The skirt melded to her sexy curves, and the top seemed to billow out at the arms. She looked amazing.

"Did I dress okay? Rose helped me. We didn't exactly know where we were going." She glanced down at her body, and he held his hand out for her to take.

She slid her hand into his, and he gripped hers tightly, trying to offer her as much comfort as possible.

"Is it too much?" she asked.

"Karina, you look perfect."

And there was that blush he loved so much. "Thank you."

He pulled her in close, pressing his face against her neck. The last time he did this, Karina had tensed up in his arms, but now she rested against him. There was a change in her. It was slow and subtle but it was there.

Running his hands down her body, he gripped her ass and pulled her in closer to him. Karina released a gasp and pulled away from him. Her teeth had sunk into her bottom lip, and he cupped her face.

He heard the clearing of a throat, and he looked over Karina's shoulder to see her siblings watching. Rage had completely forgotten they were not alone, but he just couldn't help it. Whenever he was close to his mate, he had this compulsion to touch her, to hold her, to get as close to her as physically possible.

“See you later,” Rose said, with a smirk on her lips.

Karina brushed past him and opened the door. “Bye.”

She pulled him out of the house, closing the door behind him. His car was waiting for him.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever been in a car,” Karina said.

This made Rage pause. “No car?”

“Dad never wanted me to leave the pack. Whenever he left to go on trips, I stayed home.” She shrugged.

“Well, then, it’s going to be my pleasure to introduce you to new and exciting things.”

She smiled at him, took his hand, and climbed into the car after he opened the door. He closed the door, rounded the car, and climbed straight in. Rage got the sense they were being watched, and one glance back at the house, and he saw the curtain twitch. Of course her family would be watching their every move.

“They’re worried,” Karina said.

“You saw them?”

“No, I saw you look back at the house. When you’ve been in a pack for twenty-three years, and you’re not a wolf or have any special abilities, you learn to read your fellow pack mates. I’m not pack, but I am. I watch their reactions.” She smiled. “They’re watching, aren’t they?”

“There was a curtain twitch.”

“See, a telltale sign. It can’t be helped.”

Rage leaned over her and slid the seat belt into place. “Road safety always comes first.”

“Always.”

He sensed her arousal. Rage stopped and looked into her eyes, wondering if he would see something, anything that would give him a single clue as to what she was thinking or feeling. Karina at times was an open book, but there were times, like now, when there was no such thing. He wanted to get to know her. To learn everything there was to know about her.

He also wanted to mate her. There was no doubt about that. His nights were lonely and he sensed his wolf pining for the closeness. Rage wanted to fuck his mate.

Not only did he want to fuck her, he also wanted to make love, to do everything with her. To love her. To hold her, cherish her, worship every single inch of her body.

He wanted to have it all with her.

CHAPTER SIX

The town was like any other pack town, only full of humans, and the shops were slightly different. There was a mall not too far from the town, so several shops were empty, which she did find sad.

Her mother loved shopping online, and her dad got a little annoyed that she'd do so, rather than use the pack. Karina loved it, though.

Not only was there a diner, but an Italian restaurant, Mexican, as well as Chinese, and French. They had already passed a fast-food place with amazing smells. She asked Rage to choose where they ate, and he'd opted for the Mexican place. The scents were making her mouth water. She struggled to keep her reactions in check. She didn't want Rage to think she was a child.

Karina completely understood why her parents kept her so close to them. Having a human child, especially as a wolf, could be scary. She didn't heal fast, got cold and flu, as well as other sickness bugs. She was weak in their eyes. But, she always hated it when she was never chosen to go with her father on out-of-town trips. Her sister was, and always came back with stories.

"This is amazing," Karina said.

One of the waitresses had placed a large platter on the center of their table, with crispy tortilla chips and salsa to get them started before their meal arrived.

"I'm glad you enjoy."

“Dad wasn’t too happy, was he?”

“Did you hear him?” Rage asked.

“Kind of hard not to. He was loud. I think if I had all those lovely senses you have, I would have sensed the alpha coming through?”

Rage shook his head. “I wasn’t dealing with the alpha earlier. I was dealing with a concerned father.”

“Ah,” she said. She picked up a tortilla chip and slid it through the salsa before taking a bite. “This is incredible.” She closed her eyes, enjoying the taste, and then went back in for a second. “I wouldn’t take it too personally. It’s because I’m ... you know, human.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask you ... how do two wolves make a human baby?” Rage asked.

She finished chewing her chip, and then grabbed her water, taking a sip. “There are potentially two reasons for why I am the way I am.”

“Your mother had an affair?”

Karina rolled her eyes. “You know, that’s not even funny. Mates cannot cheat on one another.”

“I know that.”

“Mom was sick when she was pregnant with me. Rose told me it was the first time she ever saw Dad worried. No one knows why she was sick, which then leads into two other options. Either Mom was poisoned while she was pregnant

with me, or ... someone was trying to weaken Mom with a tonic or something.”

Karina reached for another tortilla.

“Wouldn’t your father have been able to find the culprit?”

“No one ever could know. There were no tests. One day Mom was weak, and once she had given birth to me, within twenty-four hours, she was safe and healing. There’s kind of ... a, er, it’s rare, but if my blood type is different from my mom’s, I think I could have been making her weak. It is rare, but it does happen from time to time.”

“Wouldn’t that have killed her?”

“Not with her wolf. I did a small amount of research, but I don’t know what blood type I am, and Dad doesn’t allow our blood to be drawn.” No wolf had their blood drawn. “If my blood type was different from my mom’s, then technically, her body might have been rejecting me, but then her wolf wouldn’t do that either. Her wolf was healing as I was in there.”

“Which one do you think it is?”

“I like to think it’s the whole different blood thing. The other suggests there was someone within the pack who wanted to poison my mom, and I don’t like that.”

No one was ever found. Her father couldn’t figure it out. Neither could her mother.

She had never been sick with any of her other children. Patricia had given birth to four healthy wolves. They had all

made the transition at eighteen years of age.

Karina knew from birth she'd been smaller, weaker. No one would allow her to forget it. She had even heard that her father wouldn't touch her in the first few months after she'd been born. She cut those thoughts off, instantly.

“And you've not been able to turn?” Rage asked.

“Nope. I can't hear random conversations. I don't have excellent hearing. I'm always having to rely on my brothers and sister. I don't have that lovely sense of smell. Yeah, that one is quite freaky. Rose told me there were a couple of bunnies in the forest, and I don't want to know why she could smell them. I don't want to think of my family as killing bunnies in wolf form. I cannot watch any of those animal documentary things. The whole dog-eat-dog world. Don't like it.”

Rage burst out laughing.

She loved the sound.

“I can't open jars either, which my brothers and Rose find amusing. Dad had to buy me a tool because it's so bad. Everyone else, *pop*, and the lid is off.” She mimicked opening a jar for everyone else. “Not me, I look awful, red face, gritted teeth, the works.”

“Do you wish you were a wolf?” he asked.

“Sometimes. I think it might be a little easier for my parents, for the whole pack. No one says anything, but I am the odd one. The outsider. When they go out hunting, I stay home. It gets kind of lonely.”

“They don’t allow you to go out in the full moon?”

“No. They don’t want me to get hurt.”

“You’re pack. Even in wolf form, they’d be able to scent you. I can tell you’re a Westblood, by scent alone.”

She chuckled. “Yay, that can be my superpower. I smell real bad.”

“I didn’t say you smelled real bad.”

Karina laughed. “Please don’t worry about it. At least I know I smell of pack. That is kind of nice.”

“How about at the next full moon, you and I go out?”

“Together?”

“Yes, I’ll take you into the forest.”

“And have your wicked way with me?” she asked, kind of kidding. Was she kidding? She didn’t know if she was or not.

“If you’d like me to.”

Karina looked into Rage’s eyes, and there was something, a gleam, or a hint, a promise.

“Yeah, I don’t think my dad would allow us to do that. He didn’t want us to come here, so I don’t think that’s going to happen.” She wanted to break this ... feeling. She had no idea what it was, but it was sweeping over her whole body. Her nipples felt tight and hard.

“You’re my mate, Karina. Your dad can try, but I won’t let him come between us. If you want to spend time with me at

the next full moon, then say the words and I'll make it happen."

Could she do that? What if it angered her father? But the truth was, she was so curious about what it would mean to be in the moonlight with Rage.

In her mind, she imagined him naked. All the pack ended up naked after their initial change. Most of them abandoned their clothes. For days afterward, Karina often gathered up the clothes and placed them in a large box in the town square for others to come and claim. After twenty-four hours, the box was empty.

"I'd like that."

"Then consider it done," Rage said.

Her heart raced and she felt a tightness in her gut. This wasn't fear, though, but anticipation.

They finished their meal, which was amazing. She loved every forkful, and the pudding was just as delicious. She didn't think she'd love such dark chocolate, but it was glorious. Everything was amazing.

Rage drove them home, and she was aware of the curtains twitching once again. He got out of the car and walked her up to the main door.

There was no way for anyone to be sneaking looks at them, unless they were behind the main door.

"I had a wonderful time tonight."

“I did as well,” he said. He reached out, tucking some of her hair behind her ear, and then gripped the back of her neck, pulling her in close. “Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to control myself when I’m around you?”

“You’re having to control yourself?” Karina asked.

He pressed his face against hers. She felt him inhale. “Around you, always.”

“Rage?”

“I want to kiss you.”

She had never been kissed before like this, apart from that other kiss they had shared, but that didn’t count because he’d done it to silence her.

“Tell me to stop.”

“I can’t. I don’t want to.”

He gripped the back of her neck, pulled her in close, and then pressed his lips against hers. At first, the kiss seemed a little strange, but then it changed. Karina pressed her hands against his chest and slowly slid them up, wrapping them around his neck.

Rage sunk his fingers into her hair, deepening the kiss.

All thought left Karina. All she knew was that she wanted Rage and she didn’t want this kiss to end.

“What kind of chemicals could have been used?” Rage asked, looking across the room at Sister Claire.

“Why do I feel like this is an accusation?” Sister Claire asked. “I have done everything in my power to make sure Karina is a healthy young woman.”

Rage sighed. “I’m not accusing you. I’m just curious if there’s anything that can be given to a woman to make her sick and potentially abort her child.”

“Of course there is. There are many different concoctions. Women throughout generations, across hundreds of years, have been able to do it. Everyone knows this. It’s common knowledge.”

“Then how about twenty-three years ago?” Rage asked.

“You’re talking about Karina?”

“Someone tried to abort that baby,” Rage said. “You and I both know it. I’ve already talked to William. He couldn’t find the culprit, or any reason as to why his healthy wife got sick and struggled with her final pregnancy.”

Sister Claire took a deep breath. She wasn’t hiding anything. He saw the concern in her eyes.

He folded his arms and looked at her. “You feel the same way?”

Sister Claire tapped her fingers on the counter. “Patricia is a strong woman. Everyone knows this. Her mating with William was the perfect fit for everyone, especially when it came to the pack. Everyone knew it would make the pack strong. She had three strong sons, then Rose, and everyone thought that was it. Her fifth pregnancy came as a surprise, but it also came with ... consequences. Patricia never suffered in

terms of morning sickness or any other problems, until this pregnancy. It started with morning sickness. It was bad. She struggled to keep food down. She lost weight, and then the weakness started. This was bad.”

“She got worse?”

“At times, there was bleeding. Patricia and William thought they had lost the baby, but Karina was strong. Healthy. She wasn’t going to give up without a fight. Back then, I was still new. I was learning on the job. There are not exactly many books on wolf pregnancies and babies, or complications. In ninety-nine percent of cases, they are easy.”

“This one wasn’t.”

“Patricia nearly died giving birth to Karina. There was a lot of blood, and when we finally got Karina out, I think we all knew she was going to be different.” Sister Claire rubbed at her temple. “For a long time, William would question the pack. He’d do so individually, then in the town hall, asking, and at times begging, for someone to come forward who knew the truth of what happened.”

“No one came forward?”

“Who would come forward with the admission of potentially poisoning the alpha’s mate? It’s unheard of.”

“Since then?”

“I’ve kept an eye on Karina. She is the only member of the pack I must treat on a regular basis. I also went and did formal training amongst the humans, so I knew how to handle

Karina's body. She is delicate in comparison to a wolf, but she is strong in terms of a human."

"Do you think she'll be able to survive as my mate?"

"That I don't know. I don't even know if Karina will age like us, or like that of a human. She is one of a kind, Rage."

"Do you think someone was poisoning Patricia twenty-three years ago?" Rage asked.

"Yes, but I have no idea who would. We've always been a close pack, Rage. We are all one big family. It's why we all take care of Karina." Sister Claire sighed. "She was the whole pack's baby. William, after Karina was born, made sure all of us knew she was his blood, she was his baby, and that we would all take care of her. None of us would treat her differently."

"But you all do," Rage said. It was subtle but he had seen it. They all treated Karina differently. He'd never seen any of the other pack waitress or clean tables in the diner. That was Karina's job. She took out the trash, and did all the work the pack refused to do. "Has Patricia been ill since?"

"No."

"What about Karina?"

"She gets sick at different times of the year. Every time she's ill, I am called, and I take care of her. I monitor her, and at no point is she ever alone. There's no explanation."

Rage didn't like where his thoughts were going. "Thank you."

“Do you love her?” Sister Claire asked.

“What?”

“Karina. I know you are mated with her, but I’m curious about whether you love her. She is different. There is no denying that. But is that something you love about her, or is all of this because she is your mate?”

“I love her,” Rage said. “And she is my mate.”

He opened the door and stepped out of it. The moment he did, he tilted his head back and inhaled, scenting his mate. She was close by and he didn’t have to go far to find her. Across the town square, outside, cleaning up the tables, there she was.

Go to her.

Be with her.

Rage didn’t fight his wolf.

The full moon was fast approaching, and he had already seen William about taking Karina out with him. At first, her father wasn’t happy, and he understood why. He was concerned about what was going to happen to her, but he didn’t need to be. Rage would take care of her.

He didn’t lie to Sister Claire. He did love this woman.

That kiss he’d taken last night had set his body aflame. He wanted her so badly. His balls ached to get her naked, to explore every inch of her.

Within seconds, he was right in front of her, and without waiting for an invitation, he gripped the back of her neck,

pulled her in close, and then took possession of her lips. He sensed the pack, but they faded away as he focused on his mate. Sliding his tongue across her lips, she gasped, and he took full advantage, pressing his tongue between her lips, and she met him halfway, kissing him back.

At the sound of a throat clearing, he broke the kiss but wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her in close.

Rose gave a little whistle. “Sexy, I like it.”

Rage looked at Rose. The pack hadn’t been able to find the culprits, which left only two people. Patricia and Rose. Is that why William hadn’t found the culprit? Had he come to the same conclusion?

“Rose, stop.”

“What? Can I not be like super happy with my favorite sister in the whole wide world?”

“I am your only sister in the whole wide world.”

“Sassy, I like it.” Rose gave him a wink.

Karina groaned, pressed her face against his chest, and then pulled away. “Why are you here?”

Rose pressed a hand to her heart and gasped. “Oh, the pain, I don’t know how I am going to be able to handle this. You hurt me so much with your accusations.”

But he didn’t see it. Rage saw the love Rose had for her sister. Even on the night he had picked Karina, Rose looked ... angry and also a little afraid for her sister. Something didn’t quite add up.

What was he missing?

“Seriously?” Karina asked.

“Actually, Dad told me to come and take over for you.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, Dad wants you to spend more time with Lover Boy, and I’m guessing less time working.” Rose turned to him.

“Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?”

“I asked your dad if I could spend the day with you,” Rage said. He was getting tired of the stolen moments, and he wanted more time with her away from the pack.

“You did?”

He looked at Karina and saw the smile on her lips.

“Yes.”

“Ah, look at the two of you. You’re both so cute. It’s just adorable seeing you two together.” Rose reached her hands out as if to pinch their cheeks. “So cute.”

Karina removed the apron she was wearing and threw it toward her sister. “Yeah, cute.”

His mate moved toward him and slid her hand inside his. “Where are we going?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Karina couldn't have imagined he'd choose such a spot, but it was perfect. Her father had forbidden her from going deep into the forest. She was allowed to venture around the edge when she picked up the pack's clothing, but never to go too deep. He always complained how dangerous it was.

There were times she craved to see what the pack felt or at least could see during the full moon.

"This is incredible," she said.

The full moon wasn't too far away. She knew the pack were already getting ready. Her mother was preparing her famous casserole. After every single turn, the pack were always hungry. It was one of the few twenty-four hours within the pack that she truly felt like she didn't belong.

They would come back, most of them naked, ravenous. Some of the pack would stay behind and have sex well into the night, and then return in the early hours of the morning and wait for the diner to open, to get their fill of food. Karina didn't mind serving them.

"You look excited," Rage said.

"It's ... so beautiful. Is it like this when you turn?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I guess it's silly of me, but I was wondering if you ... I don't know ... take a moment to

appreciate what you can do. The beauty that surrounds you. Do you love it?"

He tilted his head to one side.

"Ignore me."

Now she felt foolish. She went to move away, possibly even make her way back home where she wouldn't make such stupid and idiotic statements.

Rage caught her around the waist and within seconds she was pressed up against a tree.

"You don't need to run away from me." He pressed his face against her neck, and she couldn't deny how much she loved it when he did that.

Over the last few days there was a lot about Rage she was starting to like and even dream about. Like his hands. She loved how big they were, as if they were designed to hold her, take care of her, make love to her, and even fuck her. Karina couldn't believe she was having thoughts like this, but they were invading a lot more of her day. She imagined what it would be like to be with him. Clothes off, nothing between them, and to be his in every sense of the word.

Placing her hands on his arms, she stared up into his eyes and waited.

"I've been running at the full moon for as long as I can remember, and I have taken it for granted, whereas you, you don't. It is still young and fresh."

"I will never know what it's like to run at the full moon," she said. "I'll never get to have that experience."

It had been a long time since she felt envy for anyone. She had accepted that this was her life. She'd never know or understand what having a wolf was like, but as she looked at Rage, she couldn't help but yearn just a little bit.

“Then how about at the next full moon, I take you with me?”

“Dad won't allow it.”

“If I make sure you're with me, he won't be able to stop me. You're my mate, Karina. I can organize it for you to come back home with me. You're going to be with me. You're mine.” He let out a little growl and she couldn't help but feel a warmth flood her pussy.

She pressed her legs tightly together in a hope of stopping the arousal, but Rage let out a little growl and then breathed in deeply.

“You smell so fucking good,” he said.

“Rage?”

Her nipples had tightened and she couldn't stop looking at his lips. She wanted him so badly, and it hit her hard and fast. She heard him inhale deeply, and then one of his hands had sunk into her hair, and then his lips were on hers, kissing her hard and deep.

Another moan fell from her lips, and she couldn't stop it, didn't want to. All she wanted to do was kiss him back. Sliding her tongue out, she touched his lips with her own, and he opened up.

She felt his tongue, and another moan spilled from her lips. Wrapping her arms around his body, she held on as tight as she could. Rage pressed her back against the tree and as he did, she felt the hard ridge of his cock against her stomach. It felt so good.

Karina had expected to feel fear at his blatant arousal, but all she felt was ... on fire. The need burned inside her. All she wanted to do was touch him, to feel him.

Letting go of her grip around his neck, she slid her hand down, going toward his dick. Rage didn't stop her, and the closer she got to his cock, the more she wanted it. The moment she touched him, it was like he got harder. He released another growl, but rather than be afraid of it, she felt herself grow even more excited.

“Rage?”

“I need to touch you,” he said.

His hand slid down her stomach. She didn't want him to stop. There were nerves, but also excitement about what was going to happen.

Rage bunched up her skirt, and then the tips of his fingers grazed across her thigh, traveling up until he got to the edge of her panties. She'd never been touched like this, had never felt this need filling her body.

It was incredible, and she didn't think it could get any better, but then his hand gripped her panties, and he tore them from her body. The force shocked her, but then he threw them

to the ground, and his hand covered her pussy. Heat filled her cheeks as he slid a finger between her slit.

“Oh, Karina, you’re so wet for me. So fucking wet and you smell so good.”

Rage had let her go, but then he moved her hand out of the way and she glanced down to watch as he released his pants, pulled down the zipper, and then there was nothing between her hand and his cock. He took her hand, wrapping her fingers around his length.

“That is how you touch me,” he said.

She held him within her grip, but not too tight, just enough.

Rage groaned and he thrust his hips against her hand. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

Karina was about to ask him a question, but that fled her mind as his fingers started to stroke her clit. It was like he touched the exact spot on her body that made her forget everything and everyone, and all she could focus on was Rage and this burning desire inside her.

She couldn’t stop it. Not that she wanted to. It felt amazing, incredible, and she just craved him.

“Please,” she said.

“I know what you want, baby. You want to come, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

He didn't stop touching her. His finger stayed on the right spot, drawing her closer toward orgasm.

Being outside in the forest, with her mate touching her, Karina never thought she would feel this sense of peace, of joy, of everything, but it was right there, fulfilling her.

She didn't want it to stop and a part of her hated her treacherous body for bringing her to orgasm so soon, but there was no stopping it as she went over the edge, screaming his name, begging for more, wanting it so badly.

"Please, please, please," she said, moaning and whimpering.

Rage seemed to know exactly what she wanted, and he pushed her toward a second orgasm within as many minutes as he'd created the first.

Through her orgasm, she hadn't stopped touching him and now she wanted to know what it would be like to make him lose control.

She worked his dick, watching him, and then pushed him over the edge. Rage pressed his face against her neck, and she felt his lips dancing on her flesh as he kissed her. His touch once again set her on fire, hungry and desperate for more. She didn't want it to stop. It was like an ache within her that she couldn't shake.

She had taken care of her mate, brought him to orgasm, and it was an odd feeling. All she wanted to do was be with Rage. She hadn't told anyone, not even Rose, that with each passing day she felt this need to spend more time with him.

It was a feeling she hoped never went away.

Convincing William to allow Karina to come to his pack hadn't been easy. The old alpha was a stubborn man, but Rage understood why. He was protecting his daughter, and he couldn't fault him for that. So, William wouldn't fear him stealing Karina away forever, he allowed some of his pack to stay behind. It was a sign of good grace and the beginning of trust.

He only allowed those of his pack who wanted to stay behind to do exactly that. He never forced anyone to do anything they didn't want to do. They were all free to do exactly as they wished.

"It's similar to home," Karina said, on their arrival.

His pack lived closer to another human village and his pack also had businesses that were helped by visitors, explorers, and those seeking adventure.

Rage was always careful about those he allowed through the village and he kept a close eye on everything. His pack was precious to him. They had put their trust and faith in him, and he made sure he never let them down.

"You're nervous," Rage said, pulling her into his arms.

"I ... I don't think your pack is going to like me. I'm not a proper wolf. I ... are you sure this is a good idea?"

The pack had already spotted her, but they knew not to alarm her by surrounding her.

“The pack will accept you, Karina, because I accept you. They have no choice. You’re my mate, and they will not harm you. Not at all.”

“Don’t you—” She stopped and shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Tell me. I can’t answer those questions you’ve got burning inside your head unless you trust me with them.”

“Some of them are stupid.”

“Try me.”

“Don’t you hate that you have no choice in who you’re mated with?” she asked. She pressed her lips together and shrugged. “I’m pretty sure you would have preferred a mate that, you know, was as strong as you, and could help you defend your pack, and be everything you need them to be.”

He gripped the back of her neck and pulled her in close. Each time he did this, he couldn’t help but take a moment to breathe in the scent of her. She was so intoxicating to him. He just couldn’t help himself. She was an addiction he didn’t want to beat.

“I am happy with you, Karina. You are a mate to cherish.”

“I’m not strong, Rage. You have even said yourself, there are rogue wolves out there. They’re dangerous. You don’t need a weak female when they attack.”

“I need you,” he said, and then he kissed her.

Rage had come to learn that she was unable to deny his kisses.

Sliding his hand from her back, he ran his fingers down toward her ass. Another part of her body that he found irresistible. He loved her body, ached for it, and craved it, desperate for her.

“I want you.” This time he pressed a kiss to her neck. “Don’t you want me?”

“I do want you.”

This surprised Rage. He pulled back from kissing her and looked into her eyes. He saw the blush in her cheeks. She opened and closed her mouth, and then glanced down at the ground.

He placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head back. “What did you say?”

There was no time for her to answer. His pack had such bad timing, as one of the first couple, Edwina and Malcolm, came to say hello.

He did send a message to the pack that when he brought his mate, they were to take their time in introducing themselves to her. Rage knew his pack would be more than willing to do whatever necessary to help win over his mate, and they were doing it now. He appreciated them, even though at the same time he wanted them out of the way so he could continue his conversation.

Karina had never been open with him as she just was, and it was so typical that his pack now wanted a full-blown

introduction just as he was starting to make headway. The first couple moved away, and that only made way for a few more.

It took him over two hours to get her away from the pack, and he could see they were smitten with Karina. She may not see her value, but he and the rest of his pack did. Just by being her, she made him happy, and that was enough for his pack.

Rage also appreciated everything he had seen her do. Karina was a hard worker and even if those in the Westblood pack didn't see it, when she came to live with him indefinitely, there would be no denying the role she played. There were times he felt her pack used her.

No one else was willing to wait tables, clean up the messes the pack made. He heard the pack talking about how Karina picked up their clothing after each full moon, washed it, and prepared it, leaving it for them to come and collect when they were able. She read to the children, taking time out of her day to care for the next generation.

There was a lot she did, and none of them thanked her for it. They saw her as a human, and they allowed her to do the work they didn't want to do themselves.

Rage finally pried her away, taking her to his home on the edge of town, near the forest. It was a large house, and it had started out as a cabin close to the woods, but over the years, he'd converted it into a home. A family home with four bedrooms, three of them ready for children, even though they had plain walls and no furniture.

His pack was convinced he was getting ready for his mate. They had been right. All he'd been doing was waiting for the right person, and Karina was that person.

Stepping over the threshold into his home, for the first time since meeting Karina, he felt his wolf start to relax. They finally had her home. She was safe. And they were not going to let her go. She wasn't their prisoner, and she would be safe.

Karina had packed a small bag and he took it from her.

Rage gripped the back of his neck as he closed the door. "I want to warn you that I only have one bedroom with a bed. I don't have furniture in the other rooms."

"Oh, well, that's okay." She looked toward his living room. "The sofa looks big enough. I could sleep there."

"No, I'll sleep downstairs. You take the bed."

He had hoped to sleep beside her, but he also wasn't willing to push Karina too far. At least not yet. There would be time for that soon enough. For now, he was happy to have gotten her to his home.

Rage gave her a tour of the house, showing her the living room, where she'd be sleeping, the dining room, study, kitchen, and laundry room. There was even a game room, but there was only a pool table set up. He grabbed her bag as they made their way upstairs, and he showed her the empty bedrooms, the bathroom, and then his bedroom.

It had been a short time since he was last here, but the pack had been sending in cleaners to keep it dust-free. He

placed Karina's suitcase on the bed, and then moved toward his walk-in closet and opened the doors.

"There's plenty of space to put your clothes, so they're not all creased."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

He didn't think of absolutely everything, otherwise he wouldn't be thinking of ways to get her into bed to fuck. The full moon was getting close and he felt the heat consuming his body. Karina's scent was driving him crazy. Now that he had her alone, and within his pack, the need to mate with her was strong, and getting stronger with every passing second.

He wanted to fuck her, to claim her, to tell her she was never going back to her father's pack. Rage kept in control. His wolf grumbled, but unlike back at the Westblood pack, this time, his wolf knew who was boss. They had her home, and for now, that was all they were going to get.

"It has been a long night," he said. "There's an en suite through there." He opened the door for her to look inside. "There's a spare bathroom, which you saw outside. I'll use that one, and I think it would be best if we both went to sleep."

Rage needed the space to gain control of his senses so he didn't do anything he'd regret. Karina trusted him, as did her father, and he wouldn't spoil that trust.

"Oh, okay," she said.

"Are you hungry? Is there anything you need?"

"No, nothing. There's nothing I need."

He stepped toward the door and couldn't resist another look back. There was so much more he wanted to say and suggest, but instead he wished her a good night and closed the door.

Rage went straight to the bathroom, closed, and locked the door. He gripped the edge of the porcelain sink and took several deep breaths. "I've got this. I've got this." He had to convince himself that he was in control.

With her scent everywhere, it was difficult for him. His cock was thick and heavy, and his balls felt so tight. All he wanted to do was fuck his virgin mate, fill her with his cum, and mark her as his. Instead, he took a deep breath and expelled it.

Stripping out of his clothes, he turned the shower temperature to icy cold, and stepped beneath it the moment he was naked. The cold did nothing to his cock. It was still hard as rock.

Rage wrapped his fingers around the length, and he thought about how sexy Karina looked when she did this. How she held him. He sensed her nerves, her innocence, and it set him on fire with a need he couldn't deny.

Karina was everything.

He didn't even realize he'd been searching for his mate, and now that she was close, the craving he'd been denying was in full swing. Rage wanted her. Was desperate for her. Hungry for her. And it wasn't going away.

All he could hope was that he had enough control not to ruin the trust he had gained.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Karina lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. She had already made a phone call to her family letting them know she had arrived safely. William wanted to make sure she was safe and she talked to him, letting him know she was safe and well, and he wasn't to worry about anything. Rage was taking care of her.

Her brothers wished her well, and then Rose stole the phone asking if they had sex yet. Karina hoped she was far away from her father when she asked those kinds of questions.

“Come on, you can spill the beans with your sister. Rage is no longer in Daddy's territory. He doesn't have to play the good boy. Please tell me he's being so bad and is giving you a good time.”

“I'm not even going to answer that.”

“Karina, seriously, you're alone with your mate. I know you're not full wolf, but you have some of our ... traits. They're subtle but they are there.” Rose groaned. “Stop being a pain in the ass. You and I both know you have a mega crush on Rage. You don't even have to pretend, you can just embrace it and love it, and you know, enjoy him. Dad is not there to go all alpha on him. You can enjoy some sexy times with him.”

After that, Rose ended the call, and now Karina was in bed staring up at the ceiling, aware that her mate was downstairs. She may not have the sensation Rage had, knowing without a doubt that they belonged together, but they

were mates. There was no denying it. She had started to sense when he was close by. And she also started to crave his touch, and she felt a sense of relief when he did touch her. There was also the mind-blowing orgasm he'd given her, which had been amazing. She had loved every second of that.

Nibbling her lip, she tried to think of everything they could have.

Her father wasn't around, nor was any of the pack to do his bidding. It was just her and Rage.

Rolling over, she saw the light of the clock glaring at her. It was two in the morning. Sleep was the furthest thing from her mind. She wasn't going downstairs for anything other than a drink of water. At least, that was what she kept telling herself—just having a drink of water.

Nibbling her lip, she padded across the room and opened the door. Her heart raced and excitement flooded her body at the thought of Rage being awake.

Karina had no idea what she was doing as she made her way downstairs, but she didn't go to the kitchen to get herself the glass of water. Instead, she went straight to the living room where Rage was, and it looked like he was fast asleep.

She tried not to make a sound as she stepped into the room. The sofa had been made into a bed. It was one of the fold-out sofas, and it did look comfortable. Rage had a couple of blankets on and he was lying on his back. She glanced down at him and then he opened his eyes.

“Couldn't sleep?” he asked.

“Did I wake you?”

“No.”

He reached out and took hold of her hand.

Karina expected him to pull her against him, but instead he circled her wrist and then slid his fingers down, locking them together with hers.

“You couldn’t sleep either?”

“No. My mate was upstairs and I heard her tossing and turning.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said. “Tell me what you want. Tell me what you’re looking for.”

What was she looking for? She looked at him and then down at the grip he had on her wrist.

Karina didn’t know what came over her, but rather than say what she wanted, she let her body do the talking. She had no idea where the confidence came from, but she lifted her nightshirt up as she climbed on the bed. She didn’t slide into his side, instead, she moved to straddle his waist. The blanket was the only thing between them, and whatever he wore.

She didn’t have on any panties. She never wore panties for bed. The hard ridge of his cock pressed against her core.

Staring into his eyes, Rage let go of her hands, but he touched her thighs, running his hands down toward her ass. She put her hands either side of his head and stared into his eyes.

“Tell me what you want, Karina?” he asked.

“I want you. I want this. I don’t even know where it came from but I want you so badly.” She had no other way of describing it. “There is nothing holding us back. I mean, we are mates, right?”

“We are.”

“Don’t you ... want to? I mean, I totally understand if you don’t want to do anything with me. I do get it. I’m human and I’m not strong enough to be your mate and I know there are plenty of women—”

Rage sat up and captured her hair within his fist. The tight hold he had on her silenced her. “Shut up,” he said.

She pressed her lips together as he tilted her head back.

“I don’t give a flying fuck if you’re human, Karina. I want you. I crave you, and you will be my mate, but I also know this sexy virgin cunt has not known a cock. I will be your first.”

Those words shouldn’t arouse her, but they did. They were filthy and dirty and everything she wanted to hear. There was no way for her to press her legs together to alleviate the pleasure. All she could do was feel and crave and need, with a passion that took her by surprise.

“Yes,” she said.

Karina didn’t know if he was waiting for her to tell him the truth or if he was just stating facts. Rage had been her first kiss, and he would be her first with everything. She’d never desired any other man. There was only Rage.

“So, tell me what you want,” he said.

“I want you.”

“You want my cock in this tight, virgin pussy?”

“Yes.”

There was no point in lying or evading what she wanted. She'd come to his pack to be with him, and now that they were alone she felt her need for him, even more hungry than before.

Rage suddenly turned her, taking her so that she was beneath him. This time, there was no blanket between them. She stared up at him, waiting, anticipating what he'd do next.

He gripped the edge of her nightshirt and with one tug, tore it from her body as if it meant nothing. The sheer strength of him shocked her to the core, but at the same time aroused her.

Now, there was nothing between them. No blanket. No lingerie or boxer briefs. They were completely naked.

“I'm going to worship you,” Rage said.

He took possession of her lips before she got the chance to ask him what he meant. His lips answered all the questions. She closed her eyes and at first she didn't touch him. Karina didn't know where to touch him, his back, his shoulders, his arms, his chest.

The kiss stole her breath. He slid his tongue across her lips and when she gasped and he plundered her mouth, he melted against her.

Rage didn't linger on her lips for long, though, as he began to kiss down her body, breaking from her lips and traveling down. He touched against her neck, setting her whole body on fire with a need that took her breath away. There was no controlling it.

She wanted him so badly.

Rage took his time, enhancing her need, making her ache for more. He nibbled on her neck, making her moan his name, and then kissed down to her breasts. The moment his lips touched one of her nipples, Karina truly believed she had gone to heaven. There was no other explanation for it. She must have, because it felt so good.

He sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, and then moved onto the other, licking and sucking at the tips. He moved between each one, and then when his teeth took over and created just enough pain to make her gasp, he soothed it with his tongue.

Rage wasn't done there, as he moved down her body, kissing her stomach and then spreading her legs. She was already so wet and as the tips of his fingers gripped the lips of her sex, he spread her open.

Karina didn't know what was coming next, but then his tongue danced across the bud, flicking from side to side, then circling, and sucking her clit into his mouth.

His name spilled from her lips. The pleasure mounted with every passing second. She had never felt anything like it and she didn't want it to stop, but she also knew she was so close to orgasm.

Rage threw her over the edge, and she found that precious release that took her completely by surprise. Even before her orgasm was finished, Rage moved up in between her legs, and she stared up at him in wonder and a little bereft that he'd stopped.

"I'm sorry," he said.

And then the pain she knew was coming swept over her body as he tore through the thin veil of her virginity, making her his once and for all.

Rage didn't want to cause her any kind of pain. Karina being a virgin, he knew there was going to be pain. There was no getting away from it. He would have gladly spent all night licking and sucking at her clit, but he also wanted to give her pleasure. He didn't want this first time to be all she thought about.

Rage wanted to make more memories.

The tears glistened in her eyes, but he noticed they didn't fall down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

She shook her head and then offered him a smile. "I know you didn't want to hurt me."

He stayed perfectly still within her. Now that he'd claimed her virginity, and he'd gotten the pain out of the way, he was going to wait until she was ready to finish. His cock was rock-hard. He wanted to fuck her, but he always kept a

tight control over his body. Only when Karina was ready would he finally take her.

Staring down into her blue eyes, seeing her blonde hair spread out on his pillows, he knew this was heaven. This was what he'd been waiting for and he didn't even realize it.

His life was bound to Karina's, for eternity or for however long his woman was meant to be his. He wouldn't waste a single moment. He'd cherish her for the rest of his life. He would love her and give her everything her heart desired.

"You're not hurting me anymore," she said, and then tentatively put her hands on his back.

It was the first time she had touched him. He sensed that she wanted to, but she held herself back. Even though he'd hungered for her touch, he was prepared to be patient for her. He would do and be anything for her.

Feeling her hands on him made him realize what he'd been missing. He'd been missing his mate.

He let out a growl and arched up, wanting her hands all over him. She pulled away and he opened his eyes to look down at her.

"Why have you stopped touching me?" he asked.

"I was hurting you, wasn't I? I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not hurting me, Karina. It feels incredible. Put your hands on my body, please."

She slowly placed her hands on his body. He couldn't help but let out a moan. Even to him it was a deep, guttural

sound, one he couldn't help because he just had to have her touching him.

“Put your hands all over me,” he said.

At first, she didn't move, but then she began to explore his body, staring at his back, and then moving up to his shoulders. She slowly slid down his arms, going toward his wrists, where they were still pressed either side of her head.

Rage watched her, mesmerized. She let go of his hands, but before he could complain and demand she touch him again, she placed her palms on his stomach. This time, she drew them up his body, going toward his chest. She placed her palms flat on his chest, with one of her hands directly over his heart.

His heart beat for her and her alone. She was the only person he wanted.

Rage felt her pussy twitch around his cock. Seconds later, she wrapped her legs around his waist, and then she began to wriggle on his dick. He was a little taken aback at first, but as he looked down at her, he saw the yearning in her eyes. His mate never yearned and never wanted for anything.

At first, he pulled out of her tight cunt, taking it slow, allowing her to become accustomed to the feel of him. Then, staring into her eyes, he began to fill her up, inch by inch.

He listened to the moan that spilled from her lips. There was no pain. Just pleasure.

He began to thrust, shallowly at first, then he started to build up his speed, deepening his thrusts. Karina rocked

against him, and feeling how tight and wet her cunt was, it was impossible for him to hold back. Rage hadn't been a teenage boy in a long time, but he felt his orgasm so close to the surface. There was no controlling it. He wanted to come.

He wanted to fill her tight cunt with his cum, to flood her womb, to make her pregnant. He wanted to bind Karina to him for all eternity. To have her as his mate.

Rage tried to hold back, tried to prolong this pleasure, this journey, but his body had other ideas. He came, and he slammed to the hilt and pulsed wave upon wave of his orgasm inside her.

It was the best orgasm of his life. Better than anything he'd ever experienced, and he knew it was all because Karina was his mate. She belonged to him.

Rage knew throughout his life he'd enjoyed possessions. The pack belonged to him, this house, the trinkets, the keepsakes, but nothing meant anything to him. Karina was everything.

Collapsing against her, he quickly moved so that he didn't crush her with his weight, but he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, not wanting to let her go.

He pressed his face against her neck and breathed her in.

His mate.

His world.

His forever.

Karina let out a little giggle, and she turned her head toward him. “It tickles a little.” She touched her neck. “Are you having any regrets?” she asked.

“None. Are you?”

“None, but I don’t think my dad is going to be too happy with me right now.”

He groaned, and not in a good way. “Don’t think about your dad when my dick is inside you.”

“Ew, gross. I’m not thinking about him like that. I just realized I can’t go back to my pack, can I?”

Rage cupped her cheek and stroked the tender flesh, staring into her eyes.

“I’m really your mate and it’s so strange, I feel this ... energy when I’m here.” She frowned. “Maybe I’m just tired. Ignore me.”

“What kind of energy?” he asked. Karina wasn’t tired, neither was he.

“I don’t know, it’s like everywhere I am, it’s alive and thriving. Like I’m supposed to be here. I feel ... at home.” She nibbled her lip. “Is that crazy?”

“You were meant to be a wolf,” Rage said.

She sighed. “But I’m not.”

“You were born of two wolves, Karina. I don’t know exactly what happened, but you were meant to be a wolf. Whatever happened to you in the womb, it ... made sure you stayed alive. You may not be a wolf or be able to turn into a

wolf, or have wolf traits.” He pressed his nose against her neck. “But I sense you as pack.”

“I’m your mate.”

“So? If you were human and my mate, I’d still be able to scent the human side of you, but I smell pack. There is still some part of you that is pack, that is wolf, and there is no changing that. No one can take that from you. We can go back to your pack, Karina, anytime you want.”

“But I never feel like this when I’m there.”

“Feel like what?” he asked.

“Like I’m finally home. I feel *home*.”

Rage couldn’t believe it, but he pulled her close and kissed her. “Then you are home,” he said. “And we can still go and visit your family, but I am your family, my pack is your home, and this is where you’re going to stay.”

He would fight William if he had to, and he’d make the necessary arrangements. There was no way he would let Karina go back to a pack she didn’t want to be with. She belonged with him and that was how it was going to stay.

CHAPTER NINE

The full moon was high up in the sky and Karina was already disobeying her father's order. Every full moon, he had commanded that she stay indoors, away from any danger or threat.

All her life, Karina had been fascinated by the full moon, but she'd not felt a compulsion to be outside, or run the risk of invoking her father's wrath. He could get loud, and she hated when he did that.

She wasn't at home now.

Her father had called and he had tried to command her to stay indoors, and to a point, she had promised him she would stay safe. After the call had ended, Rage had been there, listening to every single word he said.

"Do you really want to stay in?" Rage asked.

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

And so, she stood out in the forest, staring up at the moon through the thickest of trees. The leaves didn't hide the view, so she looked up and she felt the warmth as it spread through her whole body. She felt alive. Ready to take on anything.

This was what she had been missing.

She didn't close her eyes, but she remembered Rage's lips on her body, waking her up from the deep sleep.

After they had sex that first time, Rage had listened to her talk. She'd been in his town less than twenty-four hours,

and she already felt like she belonged here. The pack was no different than the ones back home. The people were so friendly and welcoming. She felt their love for their alpha, and even their respect for her, which surprised her. She didn't expect to feel any of that.

Their feelings seemed to surround her. She wasn't a nuisance to them, or someone they had to protect. To them, she was their alpha's mate.

And for the first time in her twenty-three years, she felt the warmth of the full moon on her flesh.

She wasn't sitting at home, listening to the howls as the pack ran, knowing she couldn't be part of it. Karina heard the howls, relished them, and she wasn't afraid.

Rage promised he would find her. He told her not to panic, to just enjoy. The pack wouldn't harm her. They would only protect her.

Closing her eyes, she placed her hands on the tree, and it was like in her mind's eye, she could see the pack. They were running through the forest. The young men chasing the women, wanting to capture them and prove they were worth their time. Couples were dancing together, teasing, preparing to mate.

Then she sensed Rage.

He was getting closer. She had no desire to run, to be chased. All she wanted was for her mate to come and get her. There was no need for any battle. She belonged to Rage. Just

as she'd belonged to him that very morning, as he'd woken her up to give her an orgasm, and then to make love to her.

He had promised he would give her time to heal, seeing as she wasn't like a wolf. But, she was able to convince him to take her again in the shower. It was like he had awakened something inside her and she couldn't get away from it, nor did she want to.

With every second that passed, he was getting closer. Excitement started to fill her. And when she knew he was there, she opened her eyes.

Karina had never seen a wolf before. Part of her father's command was that no one was to show her their wolf. She didn't know if he was doing it to protect her, or so she didn't know what she was missing.

Rage was amazing. His wolf was covered in luscious black fur, thick and soft, like his hair. His eyes were a deep blue, but there were also sparks of amber that shone back at her.

She couldn't get enough of him. The desire to touch him was so strong and as she reached out and ran her fingers through his thick fur, there was a growl, not scary, but a contented growl.

Within seconds, the wolf was gone, and her mate stood before her.

“What about the full moon?” she asked.

“I'm here, with you, this is the perfect full moon.” He pressed her up against the tree, and she couldn't help but run

her hands up his body, circling his neck.

Rage lifted her up as if she weighed nothing, and she circled her legs around his waist. He'd picked out one of her skirts, but he had forbidden her from wearing any panties. She felt the hard ridge of his cock as he pressed against her core.

Rage rested her against the tree and his body, reaching between them to grip the base of his cock. He didn't tease, but found her entrance, and then, inch by inch, he sank balls-deep inside her.

Karina gripped his shoulders, trying to find anything to hold onto, not wanting to let him go. He was so big and he filled her to the brim. She knew there was a risk of her getting pregnant, but in that moment, she didn't care.

Karina wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, to have his babies, to be his mate. She didn't want to go home, where she was the alpha's human daughter. She wanted to be Rage's mate.

"You're mine," he said.

"And you're mine."

"Always." He captured her lips, and she sunk her fingers into his hair. This felt different to her.

Rage didn't hold back. He wasn't afraid of hurting her. There was no reason to be. She could handle this. He pulled out of her pussy, and then slammed back inside, making her cry out.

Suddenly, he pulled out of her pussy but then took her to the ground, placing her on her knees. Rage surprised her

further by tearing the skirt from her body. The shirt she'd been wearing didn't last either, nor did the bra. They were shredded and on the floor.

Naked and exposed, Karina didn't care. It felt so good to be in the open, with her mate.

He spread the cheeks of her ass, and within seconds, he was balls-deep inside her again. From this angle, he'd gone deeper than ever before, and she sunk her fingers into the earth.

The scents that surrounded them were intoxicating.

Rage ran his hands up her back, then down to her hips, gripping them tightly. She knew there would be bruises where he held her, but she didn't care.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?" he asked. He gripped her hips, pulled all the way out of her until only the tip of his cock remained, and then slammed hard and deep, making her gasp.

He went so deep within her that she wasn't sure if it was pain or pleasure, or a combination of the two she felt. She whimpered his name and he growled.

"No," she said. "What do I do to you?"

He held himself deep inside her, making her feel unbearably full. Rage was not in any rush to answer, but she felt a need to come. Rage traced little patterns on the base of her back, and she was sure at one point he'd written, *Rage's mate*, but she couldn't be entirely sure.

Her whole body felt so sensitive, on fire, and the need consumed her.

“You make me forget everything.” He pulled out of her and slammed back inside. He did this twice more, then paused once again.

She was so close to orgasm. “What do I make you forget?”

“That I didn’t want to have a mate. That I didn’t want to have children. That a part of me didn’t want to settle down.” He let out a little growl.

“I make you forget all of that?” she asked.

“You make me want to forget it all, and to have it all. I want to mate with you, Karina. I want to have a life with you, and children. I want to fill that house with the sounds of children’s happy screams. I want to come home to find you there, waiting for me. Naked, or surrounded by our kids. I will do whatever it takes to make you mine. Be mine.”

He leaned over her and kissed her neck. One of his hands moved from her hip and delved between her thighs. He began to stroke her clit, and Karina forgot the answer to the question.

Wait, he wanted forever with her?

Karina didn’t know if she could give him forever. No one knew how long she would be alive. Could she promise him forever, when she might only have twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years left?

For the first time in her life, Karina hated what had happened to her. She hated that she was human with an unknown length of time. That was cruel. Giving her a mate that she knew she was falling in love with, which was crazy. She had started to feel close to him, connected, and that could all disappear if she got sick.

Tears filled her eyes, but she pushed them back and out of her mind. She only had now. There was no way she could offer Rage anything more than now.

Pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind, she tried to ignore the pain blooming in her chest at the sheer loneliness. She hated being her, hated what she couldn't have.

There was no choice, for Rage's sake. She would have to let him go.

Rage rolled over and reached out toward his woman, his mate. He had known the moment he got her to come to his pack, to his town, to be part of his life, he'd win her over. At home, she'd been too protected, too isolated. He sensed her need for freedom, and he was more than willing to grant it. All he could see for the two of them was an amazing life. He couldn't help but imagine children running around, laughing, and screaming in excitement. Karina gave him the opportunity to dream of a future he didn't even realize he wanted.

The bed was empty.

Sitting up, he looked over. Karina had slept beside him. Her scent, though faint, still lingered on the pillow.

“Karina?” He called out her name, to which there was no answer. Throwing the blanket off his body, he climbed out of bed, and made his way toward the bathroom, but there was no sign of her.

He did a quick check of her closet, and he found some of her clothes were still there, but he noticed her bag and a few items had been taken.

“Fuck.”

Rage knew something must have happened to set her off. Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed William’s number. There was no answer, it just kept ringing and ringing.

Panic flooded him. Had a rogue wolf taken his mate? No, that wasn’t possible. He’d have sensed another wolf within his home.

He ran through the house, but there was no sign of Karina, not even a note.

She couldn’t have been gone long as her scent was still quite strong. Rushing back upstairs, he changed into a pair of jeans and a shirt, and then made his way out of the house. This time, he didn’t opt for the niceties of driving, but took off through the woods.

He didn’t need to change into a wolf to get the speed he needed.

All he thought about was Karina. He had no idea why she had taken off the way she did, but he was going to get answers. His only focus was his mate.

She'd wanted him. He knew for a fact she also wanted to share the life he imagined. Karina would make an amazing mother, so what had sent her back to her family? None of it made any sense to him. There was no way he was going to allow his mate to leave him that easily.

He arrived at Westblood's town within the hour. The last time he arrived, he should have just run, but then he didn't have the focus he did now.

All William wanted was an alliance. Rage wanted his soulmate, his very reason for existing.

Several of Westblood's pack stopped and stared at him. He didn't have time for their gossip, and he certainly wasn't interested in listening to anything they had to say. Instead, he made his way to the alpha's house.

William didn't make him knock on the door, as he stepped out of the house. Rage sensed the alpha was about to showdown with him. He didn't want to fight William.

"Where is she?" Rage asked.

"She's safe. She is home."

"Why?" He needed answers.

"I don't know why. She contacted Rose and asked her to come and pick her up. They arrived twenty minutes ago."

"You cannot keep me from my mate."

"I do not want to fight you, Rage, but I did warn you many times. Karina is not like us. She doesn't understand what it means to be a wolf."

Rage looked at William as the door opened and Patricia stood there.

“I know what happened,” Rage said.

He noticed the way William tensed and Patricia’s gasp.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rage ignored him and carried on. “At first, I thought someone within the pack couldn’t stand their alpha being happy. You have five children and Karina is the youngest. Then I wondered if someone was willing to poison the alpha’s mate, why didn’t he do anything about it. Is he a coward?”

William growled. Rage ignored the warning.

“And then I thought about how important it is for you to have this alliance with me. Karina is your blood, as she is Patricia’s, yet she cannot turn into a wolf. Then I realized something. Our wolves do what they can to protect us, to heal us. Your overwhelming fear of the rogues makes sense. Patricia, while pregnant, was harmed by a rogue, wasn’t she? Karina’s wolf did what it could to protect Karina in the womb, but in the process, the wolf died, and allowed her to live.”

Patricia placed a hand on William’s shoulder.

“Yes,” Patricia said. “William and I had gone out without the pack to enjoy a final run. When a woman is pregnant, as you know, she can only transition so many times, and then she must remain in human form until she gives birth. Karina was a strong baby, kicking and making her presence known. So active. During our ... final run, I was attacked. We’d been playing and enjoying each other when the wolf

attacked and in doing so, I got hurt.” Patricia stopped and lifted the shirt she’d been wearing.

Rage hadn’t even realized that Patricia kept a certain part of her body hidden. Across her stomach, where Karina would have been inside her womb, was the scar from a giant slash.

“I killed the rogue, but he’d gotten his claws into my mate,” William said. He grabbed Patricia around the back of the neck and pulled her in close.

“The toxin from the attack, Karina, my beautiful bouncy baby, even inside me, she ... she went silent. We thought we had lost her. Our whole family had been looking forward to Karina’s arrival. Gale, Sean, and Ben wanted another little sister. This time, one that wasn’t a giant pain in the ass,” Patricia said, smiling.

“And Rose wanted a baby sister to boss around.”

“Karina wasn’t dead, though.”

“No,” Patricia said. “Sister Claire told us that Karina was alive, but she was weak.”

“None of the pack knew about the rogues,” Rage said.

“I would not allow my pack to feel fear.”

“And Karina paid the price. Her wolf did. Her wolf is still inside her, in parts,” Rage said. “It did what it could to protect her.”

William nodded, as did Patricia.

“We promised we would protect her. That nothing would ever harm her.”

“I don’t want to harm her. I love her, William. She is my mate and I will do whatever is possible to win her over.” He took a deep breath. “I know she can hear me. She’s in there. Tell her I love her more than anything in this world. That with her, I see a future. One filled with love and children. I will do whatever it takes to make her safe. I love her so damn much and if she feels for me at all, then have her come to the diner. I’ll be waiting for her.”

With that, he turned and made his way across the pack, heading toward the diner, where he sat outside. He didn’t order anything, but a coffee was brought out to him. The sun was high up in the sky. His coffee was replaced.

Rage must have been sitting there for a couple of hours when Rose finally came to sit in front of him.

“You’re not Karina,” he said.

“I know I’m not Karina, but I thought I should come and tell you what’s going on here. She’s not going to come here.”

Rage felt his heart shatter.

Rose rolled her eyes. “Not because she doesn’t love you. Give me strength against judgmental men. You’re an alpha, with your own pack, so to a point, you know what it means to rule. My sister doesn’t have that luxury. All her life, every single year, she has been told that she’s weak, that she cannot be part of a pack in a certain way. Everyone here has made concessions for her. We’ve all done whatever it took to make

sure she stayed alive. That is what we do. We're a family. You're not part of that family, and she is terrified of fucking everything up."

"What?"

"You heard me. Karina is afraid of ruining your life. You're a big, scary alpha, and I don't know, something happened between the two of you. I'm guessing it's not the sex, because she looked super happy when she talked about it. I'm talking seriously into it."

"Karina is worried about me?"

"She's human. She's afraid that she'll make you look weak. She said your pack is awesome. I've been trying to make sense of everything that's been going on, and she doesn't really have anything to say about it." Rose shrugged. "She's scared, but I know she does love you, like a whole lot. I know she didn't come to this diner and show her feelings for you, but maybe what you need to do is come with me, and I'll sneak you into her bedroom and you'll get to see for yourself or maybe even sniff that she does love you. Also, she is crying in her room as well."

"You know you don't make any sense?" he asked.

"I make perfect sense, but come on, I know a way of sneaking you past my parents and even my brothers. All we want is the best for Karina. Yes, she's run away right now, but she came back home, and it's out of fear. None of us really know what's going through her mind. Until you let the cat out of the bag, none of us realized that Mom was attacked by a rogue. That was all news to us. It's kind of sad, if you think

about it. Karina's wolf died within her. I know that our wolves are a part of us." She shrugged. "It must be lonely for her at times, especially being around all of us."

Rage hadn't thought of it like that.

Karina hadn't come to him, but he didn't know what it was like to be human with a wolf mate.

He asked her to come to him. Why did he have to go to her?

CHAPTER TEN

Karina, more than anything, wanted to go to the diner. She had stood up from her bed and made her way toward the door multiple times, but each time she put her hand on the doorknob, she stopped herself from stepping through.

Rage deserved someone better. Yet, even as she thought that, she couldn't help but feel anger at the prospect of another woman taking her place.

None of this made any sense. There was no way she could be jealous of another woman if she had already stepped aside. That was unfair and it was cruel.

So, back to the bed she went and sat on the edge, arms folded, a little annoyed with herself. She felt sick to her stomach, because all she wanted was to be with Rage. Climbing out of bed and walking away from him that very morning had been one of the hardest things she had ever done.

Rose had agreed to come and collect her, but she hadn't come without questions. Her sister believed she was being stupid and cowardly. Relationships were always complicated but Rage had chosen her.

It didn't matter what argument she tried to make, Rose had found some way to combat it.

She was human—Rage chose her.

What if she couldn't help raise babies—did it matter? Rage picked her.

She was never going to be enough for him—that was stupid, but Rage picked her.

Most of the arguments had ended with the same words—Rage had chosen her.

Did it really matter that Rage had chosen her? He'd made a mistake or his wolf had. She wasn't good enough for Rage.

There was a knock at her door. Karina hadn't even realized she'd been crying, but she wiped at her cheeks to find them wet.

“Who is it?” she asked.

The door opened and she expected to see her mother, but it was her father.

“It's me, honey.”

“I'm fine. Just ignore all of this.”

William stepped inside the bedroom and closed the door. He moved toward the bed and sat down beside her.

There had been many times over her life that her father had come to her bedroom and found her crying. One of them had been because she'd been having an adventure at school, and she'd fallen. The stupid rock she'd fallen on had cut her head, and it had bled really bad, causing her teacher at the time to call her father.

Karina remembered hearing the conversations between her parents, that maybe it would be best if they sent her to a human school. She didn't want to go, and she'd begged them

not to force her away. It was bad enough being part of a pack, and they were always so careful with her.

“I’m not crying,” Karina said.

“I know. I remember the drill. They’re not real tears. Your eyes have gathered too much moisture from the atmosphere, and they’re raining so we have lovely weather.”

Karina burst out laughing. That had been one of her excuses for crying.

“That sounds so bad. How did you not burst out laughing at how stupid that sounded?”

“You’re my little girl and I knew you were hurting. I wasn’t going to do anything that would make you even more upset. You didn’t deserve it.”

She took a deep breath and sighed. “I don’t know, Dad. I think I’ve been a horrible person.”

“Ah, you mean because your mate is alone at the diner, waiting for you because he has declared his love for you, and he wants to spend the rest of his life with you. He doesn’t care that you’re human.”

“He loves me?”

“Yes, Karina, he loves you.”

“I’m a horrible person.”

“No, you just don’t have the best hearing.” William reached out and slid her hair behind her ear. “What are you afraid of?”

“Not being enough for him. He’s an alpha, Dad. You’ve told me all the time that I must be careful. I’m not like the other pack members. I get sick. I get hurt. I don’t heal. I may not even be able to age slowly.” She shrugged. “I don’t know anything.”

William took her hand. “These are all words of a concerned mother and father, Karina. Now tell me what your heart feels.”

Karina sighed and took a deep breath.

“I ... I...”

“Only what your heart feels, sweetheart. Without any judgment.”

The tears she had been trying to keep at bay since her father came into her room finally released. She couldn’t hold them back anymore.

“I love him, Dad. He is so kind and caring, and he doesn’t want me to hide away. He wants to take me on his adventures with him, and he makes me feel I can do anything.”

William smiled. “So, what is the problem?”

“I can’t do anything, can I? I have to be careful.”

“Karina, honey, we all have to be careful. You, me, your mother. I have never told you this, and I never wanted you to find out, but your mother didn’t get sick or weak for no reason. There was a reason.”

She listened as her father explained what happened. He told her about the rogue, the scar she had seen on her mother’s

stomach, but never knew what it was.

“You must have been so disappointed in me,” Karina said.

“No,” William said, pulling her in close. “I was never disappointed in you. Not at all. You are an amazing person, Karina. You’re a daughter I can be proud of. Even when I forced the whole pack to protect you, you went and stood your ground and forced them all to see that you were capable of being a member of this pack. I wanted to protect you, but I see in my protection, I was wrong. You’re a wonderful person, Karina. A star, a gem, and you are more than prepared to be an alpha’s mate.”

Karina stood up. She hugged her father and then glanced toward the clock on her wall. There was still time.

“I’ve got to go. Thank you, Dad, but I’ve got to go to Rage.”

She rushed out of her room without another glance, and raced downstairs. What the hell had she done? Why had she left Rage like that?

She was an idiot. No doubt about it.

She flung open the door and stepped outside, but then she spotted Rose and Rage making their way around the back. It was the path Karina knew Rose liked to try and sneak boys into her room. Rose had never been successful. Closing the door, she ran to catch up with them. Rage heard her coming and spun around.

Now, as she stood face to face with her mate, with Rage, words failed her. He looked so good, but she saw the frown on his face. She'd caused that. In trying to do right by her mate, she had failed, big time.

“Rage,” she said.

“Ah, I see my sister has come to her senses. I will leave the two of you alone.” Rose was gone, leaving her and Rage to look at one another.

“Karina.”

He took a step toward her and she placed her hand flat against his chest.

“Wait.” She wanted more than anything to be in his arms, but she had to do this. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. You’re okay, that is all that matters.”

She sighed. “But, I shouldn’t have left you.”

Rage gripped her wrist and pulled her in close.

Karina didn’t fight him. It had been only hours since she had last been in his arms, but that had felt like a lifetime ago. She wrapped her arms around him, not wanting to let go.

For several seconds, she just breathed him in. It would be so easy to just give in, but she needed Rage to hear her. She pulled away, but stayed into his arms.

“I love you. I love you so much and I’m scared. I thought I was going to ruin your life.”

“You could never ruin my life, Karina.”

“I’m not a wolf, and I don’t know how long I’ll be able to be with you. I know how the pack looks up to my mom. What if your pack doesn’t want me?”

Rage cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. “My pack will love you, because they know that I love you. I get it, okay? I get that you’re nervous, and you don’t know what the future will bring. None of us do, but what I do know is this, Karina. If you’re only with me for fifty years, or a hundred years, or even for fucking ten years, then I don’t want to waste a single moment of them. I’ve been alive a lot longer than you. I know what it means to be lonely, to be hunting for something and having no clue what I’m looking for. I love you. You’re my mate—my soulmate—and I will do whatever it takes to keep you.”

Tears blurred her vision.

“I was supposed to give the big speech. I don’t want to live without you, Rage.”

“Then don’t. Don’t run away again. Always come to me, whenever you’re scared or uncertain.” He kissed her lips and Karina melted against him.

His kisses were everything.

His touch was everything.

This man was everything to her.

“Does this mean my dad has his alliance?” Karina asked.

Rage chuckled. “It means that if I ever hear of a rogue, it better run away because I’m going to hunt them all fucking down.”

“Are we having a Christmas wedding? Halloween? Karina could dress up as a wolf?” Rose asked.

Karina sighed and shook her head.

She turned to see her father, mother, three brothers, and sister had all come out of the house. Karina had known her father knew about Rose’s secret sneak path.

“William Westblood, I would never have turned my back on you, but now we are bound by more than an agreement, we are bound by blood and by family.”

William nodded.

Karina rested her head against her mate’s chest. There was still fear, but she had a feeling with him in her world, she would be able to tackle anything.

EPILOGUE

Twenty Years Later

Rage finished changing the diaper on his youngest daughter. At six months old, she had to be the only child to create the biggest stink.

“Dude, she is so gross,” Lee, his six-year-old, said, complaining as he always did.

“You were gross as well,” Adele, his eldest daughter, said.

Adele was eighteen years old, his firstborn daughter, and currently about to head out for her first transition.

Karina was running around upstairs, preparing the beds for the kids. They had seven children.

Adele was the eldest at eighteen. They had been together, married, and mated for two years before she came along. The pregnancy had made his and the Westblood’s pack very nervous.

Rage had spent a great deal of time reading about human births. Sister Claire had stayed over. She was the only person Karina had wanted with her, besides her mother. She refused to go to a doctor. She was convinced their children would be wolves, and they all had been.

Over the past twenty years, there had been several threats from the rogues. William and himself, along with the strongest men of their pack, had fought against them. They were always a threat, but they had learned how to detect them.

Members of the pack were assigned to look for the clues of a rogue, and when one was close, the hunt was on.

Back to their children: Adele was the eldest. Billy, Maxwell, and Kyle, had come next. Then, Susan, Lee, and finally Petal, who had just filled the diaper so badly.

He heard his mate coming downstairs, and she rounded the corner. So far, she didn't look any older than the day he had met her, even after seven kids and twenty years had passed.

Her parents were always worried, and he was pretty sure Rose, his sister-in-law, always did a going-grey test on Karina whenever she was around.

Rage always made sure he took care of his woman. He didn't allow a single day to go by without telling her he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. She looked at him and smiled.

This day had been coming for so long. He had to prepare Adele for what was to happen.

“Come on, Maxwell, Kyle, Susan, and you, Lee, it is time for bed. You're not going to give Billy a hard time. Come on, come on, no arguing. You know this is an important day for your sister.”

“If it is so important, why can't we go and see her?” Lee asked.

“And when it comes to your turn, you'll be happy for everyone to watch you as well?” Karina put her hands on her full hips.

Lee grumbled, but as with all their children, Karina knew how to handle them, and she got them all to bed within twenty minutes. Billy was given his instructions, which also included no parties.

On one of the days he went to visit Westblood, Billy had attempted to have a private party, but it ended in chaos. Rage had no choice but to punish him for a good month afterward. Every bad chore he could think of he gave to his son. It had resulted in an apology a month later, and so far, he'd not done anything to disappoint.

With Billy now in charge, he took Karina's hand and they made their way out toward the forest, where the rest of the pack and their youngest children were.

Adele stepped away from them, and he sensed the moon rising in the sky.

It was powerful.

"Will she be okay?" Karina asked.

"Of course. She's our daughter, but she has your spirit. She'll be able to handle anything."

They had already shared twenty years together, and Rage had cherished them all. He would never take a single moment for granted. Karina had given him something to live for, and she was his soulmate.

Karina never did go grey. They also didn't only have seven children, but ten, and that was their limit.

She also didn't leave him after fifty years.

Against all odds, Karina was with him for life, and then some.

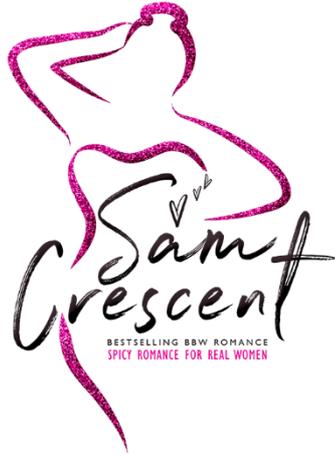
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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

LAYLA'S CHOICE

Disaster of the Otherworld, 2

Sam Crescent

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Sample Chapter

Layla stared up at the sky. It was dark and she saw the edge of the moon peeking out of a thick blanket of clouds. There were only a few days to go before the full moon. During that time, she'd help with all the festivities. Wrapping her arms around herself, she kept looking at the moon, wondering what the hell to do with her life.

Four months ago, her best friend, Elle Smith, had been mated to the Alpha of the pack, Brandon. She and Elle were not wolves. They were one of the few humans residing in the Northern Forest Pack in Grace Hill. Her family had moved here a long time ago. So long ago that it was even natural to her how the wolves treated them. The wolves liked to use the single, human women, not the ones that had a husband or family.

She was single, a virgin, and had a short time ago been in love with Lewis, one of the men who was close to Brandon. Not anymore, which was quite hilarious to her, considering Lewis now spent a great deal of time with her.

When her best friend mated with Brandon, a lot was going on in Grace Hill, including a meeting between all paranormal factions. There had been bears, witches, warlocks, vampires, and several other sectors.

She struggled to keep up with them all. She preferred her little bubble of humans and wolves, but if it hadn't been for that meeting and the possible threat, she wouldn't have met Alexander. He was the reason she came out late at night. The vampire hadn't left like so many of the otherworld species had.

If Lewis knew she snuck out to enjoy some peace and quiet and to meet up with the other man, he'd go crazy. He told her it wasn't safe for her to come out at night. For the first few weeks, she'd believed him, but then, little by little, she had started to rebel against his order.

Lewis didn't care about her, and she was fine with that. More than fine. She didn't want him, especially as she knew the moment he got what he wanted, he'd never want to see her again. She wasn't interested in being a one-night stand, or some casual fling.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she stared up at the sky and took a deep breath. There was a time when thinking about Lewis brought her pain. She had known he would only use her, even before witnessing Brandon and Elle's mating. Now, she felt at peace. She and Lewis were never going to happen. She wasn't his mate and after seeing what Brandon was like with Elle, Layla knew she would never make that mistake.

It was probably silly, maybe even old-fashioned, but she didn't want to give herself to just anyone. Her virginity was not going to be taken without it meaning something.

"I sense you're in deep thought," Alexander said.

This made her smile and she tilted her head just a little to the right, and there he was. He was tall but unlike most vampires she imagined, he wasn't super thin, he was large and muscular. She had no idea how old he was, but according to Elle, he was old, possibly even ancient. He'd seen the world through many different times, decades, and eras.

"Not really."

Alexander inhaled and then chuckled. "You don't smell like the wolf."

The other night he'd complained that she had a horrible scent of dog on her. She could only imagine that was Lewis.

"I remembered what you said." She had a shower, being sure to use plenty of her scented shampoo. The last thing she wanted was for him to hate coming to see her.

She didn't know if the vampires had a smell to the wolves, but she probably could guarantee it with the way they seemed disgusted with each other.

"You're a sweet woman," he said. "Tell me, what troubles you tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Are you still having thoughts of leaving?" he asked.

She sighed.

"Yes?" he asked again before she could answer.

"I honestly don't know. When Elle was talking about it before she accepted Brandon, I thought she was crazy to even think about leaving Grace Hill, but I don't know if I can stay here."

"Why?"

"There's nothing for me here."

"Your wolf is not satisfying you?"

She felt her cheeks heating. "No. Absolutely not. Lewis and I are not, like, together or anything. We've never been together. I haven't slept with him. Crap, I don't know what I'm saying."

Alexander chuckled. "You're still a virgin, Layla."

She loved the way her name just seemed to roll off his tongue. How did he make everything so sensual?

She could barely think straight.

"Yes. How did you know?" she asked.

"I have my ways."

"Is it smell?"

"No. Unlike the wolves, my sense of smell doesn't include the scent of innocence."

Layla frowned. "How do you know?"

"Our conversations, sweet one."

"Oh." This made her frown. "I never told you I was a virgin."

Alexander chuckled. "You told me you'd never been with a wolf, and for that matter you've never been with a man, and you would never be used by anyone of the opposite sex."

She felt her mouth fall open. What was she supposed to say? She had said that, not too long ago.

"Your blush is incredibly charming."

Layla covered her cheeks.

"You don't need to be embarrassed," he said.

"How can I not be embarrassed? I ... I'm sorry."

Alexander touched her arm. It wasn't hard, but soft, almost like he couldn't help himself. The moment he let her

go, she wanted to touch that spot again, just to be sure she had felt him touch her.

“You don’t need to be sorry. There’s another way for me to know you’re innocent but that is rather more ... personal.”

“How?” she asked.

She loved that Alexander didn’t lie to her, nor did he evade the truth. He told her straight. No matter what the question, he answered. It was how she knew the cult that were calling themselves “Disaster of the Otherworld” wanted the total destruction of all beings so their rules and power would be the only ones followed.

Elle had told her something bad was out there, but Alexander was the one to fill in the blanks. Lewis had told her it was nothing for her to worry about, which translated to: she wasn’t important enough to be told what was going to happen.

Alexander told her about the threat, how a vampire when Elle was sixteen had placed an enthrallment on her, which stopped her from being truly and completely mated to Brandon. The vampire had wanted to remove Elle as Brandon’s mate, which would have set about the Northern Forest Pack’s destruction. Their plan had failed, but Alexander believed there were more ways to begin war.

“Are you sure you want to know the answer?” he asked.

“Yes.” She offered him a smile, to which he picked up her wrist and traced across her pulse.

“Right here, by tasting your blood.”

She frowned. “Does it have to be the blood from my wrist specifically?”

This made Alexander laugh. “No, any of your blood would do at any place on your body.”

“Ah.”

He let go of her wrist and she had to wonder if he felt her pulse racing. Alexander didn't have a pulse or a heartbeat. He'd allowed her to touch his chest at one of their first meetings. She'd done so and marveled at the lack of sound.

This man did fascinate her.

“It is getting late and I sense you're tired.”

“I'm fine.”

“I may not be able to see you throughout the day, my sweet, but you're working hard, and I see the paleness of your skin. You're tired. Even the marks around your eyes are dark with exhaustion. You shouldn't be wearing yourself out.”

She wanted to argue with him, but even though she had asked Daisy, the wolf who owned the diner, if she would consider opening late at night, and she'd take the shift, Daisy had declined.

She only got to see Alexander for a few hours, but they were hours she longed for, cherished, and it was why she kept coming out late at night, following the same path Alexander had showed her. He'd promised her it was safe, and she believed him.

Elle had told her to be careful, that she couldn't trust the vampires. Brandon was wary of them as well. If he was worried about them, why hadn't he kicked them out of Grace Hill?

Alexander had helped Elle, he'd saved the pack, why did that make him a threat?

"Will you walk me home?" she asked.

"I'd love to."

Alexander watched as Layla snuck back into her home. She still lived with her family, and as she made it through the doorway, she turned and offered him a wave. He lifted his arm and waved back, in a completely human reaction, which rather entertained him.

"You shouldn't be entertaining the girl," Charles said.

Alexander didn't stop looking up at the house. Layla was a special woman. He sensed a beauty inside her. A power. He didn't know exactly what, but he couldn't help himself. Each night, he promised himself it would be the last he went to visit her, but every time he did make that promise, he'd find himself going back to that special point in the forest. The one that Crazy Lizzie had told him was sacred, how no one would be able to see what happened there. No one would sense or know of their meetings.

He wasn't ashamed of meeting with Layla. It was the highest point of his day. However, Charles was starting to bore him with his constant moaning.

“And you shouldn’t be away from the books,” Alexander said, finally stepping away and leaving Layla to rest.

The young woman was wearing herself out, and he knew from experience that if she wasn’t strong, she wouldn’t be able to fight off any potential threat that could come at any moment.

Crazy Lizzie had told him evil was coming.

One of the few nights he’d been alone with his thoughts, Crazy Lizzie had come to him, her green eyes almost glowing as she told him death would come, that it would take something precious, something that was needed to help stop this war they were getting closer to.

Disaster of the Otherworld were a pain in the ass, and he should know, he’d lived for over a thousand years. He wasn’t as old as Lizzie, but he was indeed old. Compared to some of the beings he’d met, he was freaking ancient.

He was growing tired of the young believing they knew better. They hadn’t seen enough of the world to even realize they were playing a foolish game.

“The books tell of nothing. You know this. We should have taken Lizzie when we had the chance.”

Alexander stopped, wrapped his fingers around Charles’s throat, and held on tightly. Charles was not as old as him. They were not true brothers, but they were from the same family line.

There were humans alive today from his line. Not all of them had been turned into vampires. He made sure they were

protected. Over the years, he'd done deals with witches and warlocks alike, to provide the right protection to keep them all safe.

His human family of today didn't know their history. Alexander had been sure to wipe his existence from any of the books. He had done this the moment he learned of the Disaster of the Otherworld threat.

To make sure his line survived, he had no choice. There was a chance some being would be able to detect the magic he had acquired but they would have to be very powerful.

With how young and weak Charles was, he still believed he had the power to breathe, and this made it easier to control him.

Charles hadn't adapted to becoming a vampire. It was why Alexander had no choice but to keep him close. The truth was, Charles was a bane to his existence. If it wasn't the fact he was family, Alexander would have killed him a long time ago.

Instead of killing him, he'd made sure to keep him alive, and he'd also stopped anyone else from killing him. Vampires were hunted. There were even humans who still believed they could wipe out vampires from existence, Elle's father being one of them.

It had been a long time since Alexander had met a human with such disdain for his kind. He'd not even had to say a word, but he knew the man, Raymond, hated him. There had been a great deal of garlic placed at the meeting house,

and he and Charles had been confined to the basement. Silly man.

Garlic affected the young vampires, including Charles. For Alexander, it didn't make much of a difference. Holy Water, on the other hand, now that was a pest and would create some painful boils and sores, melting away his flesh and also stopping him from being able to heal for a long time.

“Look at me, Charles.”

The man continued to choke, but there was no air that he needed to survive, so his flaying was unnecessary.

He waited.

Watched.

And was bored the whole freaking time.

He had no desire to kill Charles, but he didn't like the way he wanted to find the truth. Charles was a coward and believed kidnapping Crazy Lizzie and torturing her was the way to get her to tell the future.

It might work—*might*—but that was not how Alexander worked.

Crazy Lizzie was a friend. The closest he had to a friend.

Yes, he knew he had a horrible reputation, but that was in the past. It had been close to a hundred years since he had taken a human to be his sex toy. He no longer had a harem of women. He was alone.

Of course, the rumors about him still ran rife, and he was more than happy to keep up the falsehoods. Even dead, he

had found the time to grow as a vampire. Enthralling humans, treating them as sex toys, had long lost its luster. Crazy Lizzie had seen to that.

“Rooms filled with women. Hours filled with delight, and yet, none of them are there for you, just eternal life.”

The women he'd taken had wanted something from him—eternal youth, eternal life—and he had given it to a few, but they were evil, so he had no choice but to rid the world of their presence. Being a vampire wasn't about slaughtering and selfishness. He had a responsibility, just as they all did.

If vampires didn't keep themselves in check, there would be chaos, bloodshed, and death. Every kind hated vampires. They were considered the vermin of the otherworld. But it didn't stop any of them from needing their kind.

Vampires were the only ones who could enthrall. Their ability wasn't confined to looking in a person's eyes. If he wished to, he could control mass crowds and even create his own army. They were deadly.

Charles hadn't mastered any of the skills. From the moment he turned, he had struggled to consume blood of any kind, be it animal or human.

Alexander enjoyed a varied diet. He was old and didn't need much blood to sustain himself. Volunteers and deals were made for the blood he drank, but other than that, he enjoyed a great deal of food. He rather was partial to a cheeseburger and fries, as well as steak and potatoes. Chicken was okay, but he much preferred the thigh meat, much more tender and juicier.

“You speak of utter madness and I do not have time for it. Crazy Lizzie is not your personal eight ball. You will learn some futures are not meant to be foretold.”

Charles was shitting himself. He feared death, even though he did absolutely nothing to help himself. He wasn't willing to try and become a great vampire, all he did was complain. Charles feared the Disaster of the Otherworld. It was the paranormal equivalent to the bogeyman, only they existed. The bogeyman didn't.

Alexander always found it a rather entertaining tale. He let Charles go.

“Get back to the house and read those damn books,” Alexander said.

Charles stumbled away, putting a hand to his chest as he tried to catch his breath. Breath he didn't have.

Shaking his head, he glanced back toward Layla's house. He hoped she slept well. He sensed her soul was troubled and he wanted to be there to put it right. It had been a long time since he cared about a human. Layla was different, though. After spending a lifetime with men and women, humans and not, staring at him with utter disgust, Layla was the first person to see him as a man. He found it a rather heady experience and one he wanted to continue to repeat.

Spinning on his heel, he came to a stop as he saw Crazy Lizzie in his path. Her eyes glowed red, and her skin seemed to shine.

“You’re all in danger,” she said. “They’re coming. They intend to take her. They’re going to destroy us all. Elle was only the beginning, they won’t stop until they find her.”

“Find who?”

“The five-pointed star.”

And then like a flash, Crazy Lizzie was gone.

The witch had been doing this to him for centuries. She had been the one to warn him about Charles. Running a hand down his face, he didn’t know when he’d become the messenger.

End of sample chapter

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