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Wolf

CARA CARNES

One act of kindness cements a destiny she couldn't fathom.

An Enchanted Story

As a child, the Lost Woods were Hannah's passion. A place where she dreamed of mysterious creatures, including one she saved—a man who magically changed into a wolf. Now, twelve years later, the woods are her refuge from a horde of marauders who killed her mother.

This time, it is the wolf who saves her. And he is no dream.

Stephan can't help but remember the time Hannah encouraged him to free his injured leg and continue the soul journey required of his kind. The child unwittingly bound herself to him, and now the woman tempts him like no other. Yet if she learns his secret, her fragile trust could be broken for all time.

Hannah doesn't see how she can possibly fit into Stephan's world—especially when their overwhelming passion reveals the one reason she should not trust him. Stephan has fought more than his share of battles, but the one for Hannah's heart is the one that could break his own...

Warning: Kickass, shape-shifting alphas will leave you breathlessly begging for Lost Woods. Be careful ...they may know what you think!!!

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Cara Carnes

Dedication

For my grandparents, whose happily-ever-after nourished the romantic within me, my mother, who strengthened my self-confidence and determination, and my brother, who kept the dreamer within me company no matter where I journeyed. Lastly, to all my friends for always being the light along the way and the readers who make the road worth traveling.

Chapter One

Dear Reader,

I pray this finds you open-minded, for I must right an injustice. Centuries have passed since I made my fateful venture into Lost Woods. I still remember most of those events as if they happened yesterday.

Time has a way of folding within itself. Perhaps some of you know this. Forgive me if verbiage of centuries past cedes with that of today. Stephan says it's to be expected.

Stephan.

He's why I'm writing this. Enough time has passed for our people to be safe, as long as I exercise caution and restraint. For his sake I shall keep names and locations vague. I pray you agree no precautions are too great for loved ones.

Forgive me. I have once again rambled on with my exuberance and failed to introduce myself.

I'm Hannah. You, dear readers, know me best as Little Red Riding Hood. I caution you, the tale I tell this evening isn't for the meek, nor is it a child's tale. But it must be told, and I beseech you to spread its truth for the sake of love and carry it in your heart.

Here is the true tale of my big bad wolf—Stephan.

I can still remember the first time I saw him. I was much younger then—a foolish girl wandering alone in the woods, who had disobeyed Gran yet again to wander off the beaten path. After all, who would want to remain on the road taken by all when there was an entire forest of thick pine to explore? It was my treasure, and I was the mighty pirate looking for my chest of wares.

Darkness had begun descending when I heard the first pained call—a howl more than a cry. Lonely and angry, it reverberated through the thick trees, bouncing off the bark with a rage my young, foolish self couldn't fathom. Instead of fleeing, I ran toward him as if his voice resonated from within me. A compulsion to save him from whatever pain he endured overwhelmed my undeveloped senses. Surely I, the mighty pirate of Lost Woods, could do something. I was fearless, determined and a mighty eight years old.

I can still feel the thicket scraping my skin as I raced through an unexplored patch of my treasure chest. Dark, dank and eerily still, the woods seemed to warn me of the threat with its deathly silence, but I paid it no heed. I ran harder. Faster. Even the air choked me with its thinness as I raced upward, deeper into the trees than I'd been. Surely farther than anyone of my meager village had been. Oh what an adventure—one only for me.

Except for him. His pained cries thrummed within my ears, deafening me with his need and burdening me with a weight I was so unprepared to carry. Tears glistened in my eyes as my scrawny legs raced faster than ever. My feet pounded brutally into the soft earth. Mama's wrath would be wrought on me for damaging my best shoes. My fingers throbbed, knowing they'd have to stitch whatever seams slipped from the treated leather skins. I bounded through the thicket and stilled when I saw him.

My heart ceased beating as I gazed in stunned awe at the shiny coat, glistening with moisture. A beam of moonlight splayed through the branches overhead, accentuating his magnificent pelt. I thought him a wolf like any other until I witnessed a shift. He howled his outrage as his body twisted and contorted before my naïve eyes. A young man lay before me, his leg mangled badly by a downed tree.

A sheen of sweat covered his brow as he looked at me, his eyes wide with fright or shock. I never found out which. It wasn't like him to speak of emotions. Not even then.

I can still remember his prepubescent voice, deep yet still childlike—nothing like the pained howls which had beckoned me to his aid.

"Leave this place," he growled.

I stepped forward. For some reason I wasn't frightened by the anomaly he presented. I felt only his pain. His need. Sympathetic waves of discomfort pulsed through my exhausted limbs as I took another step toward him and extended my hand.

"I'm Hannah."

Looking back at that moment, I admit my foolish naivety, and I certainly can't explain why I thought a formal introduction was in order. He regarded me as if I was daft. In all honesty, I probably was. What other reason would I have been there?

"My compulsion wasn't for you. It was for my kind. Leave this place before they..." He grimaced and bellowed as flesh gave way to the shiny pelt I'd been so enthralled by earlier.

I was close enough to touch him, to run my fingers across his front paw in a small measure of comfort, but I didn't dare. Not when his gaze pinned me in place a mere two-hand distance from him. So close, yet held in place by an unseen power. It felt like he was restraining me, but he couldn't have been.

A moment of fear raced through me, and then it was gone—both the fear and the sensation of not being able to move. I sat on the damp sod beside him as he shifted yet again to the charming boy with the soft golden eyes. I lifted my chin and mimicked the dithering look my gran had used on me for years. "You don't scare me. You need me. I'm not leaving you, whoever you are—whatever you are."

I glanced at the tree we both knew I was far too weak to move. I removed my favorite red cloak, the one my gran had given me two moons past, and folded it up. I placed and then gently ran my hand across his forehead. "They'll be here soon. They'll save you. I'll keep you company until they do. What's your name?"

His eyes closed and he growled. I could feel his skin shift beneath my fingers, as if he was fighting a natural instinct. “What makes you do that? What are you?”

“I won’t harm you.” His voice was soft. His breathing was labored as he opened his eyes. “I’m Stephan.”

“I know.” His skin was hot to the touch. “Why do you do it so often?”

“I can’t control it when I’m injured. I’m too weak.” Anger and pain punctuated his words. Surely boys of his kind were the same as those I knew, and my brother would never like admitting weakness. I admired the bravery he displayed in confessing his problem to me—a stranger. A girl. He relaxed into the soft pillow my cloak provided.

“You are far from weak. I heard you from a great distance. I will keep you company until they arrive.”

“Your kind can never know of mine. It is our code, and the code must be upheld. Leave this place. I don’t wish them to harm you.” His concern touched my young soul, strengthened its resolve to remain in the dark thicket of trees even as the biting cold breeze brushed across my flesh. I shivered. “Why are you not scared?”

“Gran taught us to embrace all creatures with respect and love. Only then will we get that love and respect back. Surely that includes you.” The wind bit into my flesh, and I shivered again. He closed his eyes. “Don’t fight your need to change. It doesn’t scare me. Rest and I will tell you about Gran and my village.”

His hand came up and pulled at an amulet dangling from his neck. Placing it in my hand, he spoke with determination. “Wear this at all times. It will keep you safe. Rest against me and I will keep you warm. Together we will make it through the night.”

And we did.

He shifted into the beautiful wolf with the thick, gorgeous fur my fingers longed to run through. But I dared not. I rested against his comforting warmth and began to speak about all the things that mattered to a girl of my tender years. My gran. My village. My meager existence in a small village nestled at the edge of a wood I shouldn’t have been in.

Hours ticked by, though it seemed like only moments. A sigh filled my ears, and I ran my hands down his skin. The fear etched on his face made me worry. Where were his people? Why had he been out so far from them?

“You are too like me, it seems, and ventured far from your people.”

“I must journey. It is my time. I will continue now.”

His words saddened me. “You are trapped.”

“It’s a soul journey.” His gaze captured mine. “Come with me.”

“How?”

He winced and reached for a bag on the other side of the tree. I moved and brought it to him. He removed two bottles. “Nalla gave me more than I needed. There’s enough for us both.”

“Who is Nalla?”

“She is one of my elders and is much like your gran. These are tonics she made from herbs.” He’d been listening. He’d heard the things I’d shared with him. No one aside from my mother and gran ever had.

“A tonic? My gran makes those sometimes.”

“Drink and we’ll journey.” He placed a bottle into my hand. My fingers grazed his, and I grew concerned at the chilled skin touching me. I wished for my gran or Nalla. Anyone who could take his pain away.

I drank. Perhaps only childish innocence can deem my actions naïve rather than foolish. Dizziness plagued me quickly, and I rested beside him, trusting Stephan to keep me safe. How could I place such trust in a boy I didn’t know? Yet, it felt right—as if I was destined to be there.

I floated in a dream of white, billowy clouds. My body thrummed with energy and my eyes worked to focus on the absence of all colors but white. “Stephan?”

“I’m here.” His voice was pained, distant.

“What do we do?” I moved toward him with my hands out in front of me.

“I don’t know.” I didn’t want to hear his fear in. I needed guidance, answers.

“Well, what is this place?” My eyes began to focus.

“A home for my soul. I’m supposed to build a home where my inner animal can safely come to grow and heal.”

A home all his own. Oh how I craved such a thing. Why couldn’t I be like him? I longed for a place all my own—somewhere I could be myself without retribution. If Stephan wasn’t going to build a place, then I would. I took a deep breath and stood.

“How do we build this home?”

He sighed. “Let us rest.”

“Rest?” I kneeled before his weary body and shook hard. “This was your idea, Stephan. Tell me, how do we build?”

“It requires focus, which means we must rest.” His words drifted as his eyes fluttered shut. I chewed on my lip and watched him. The journey had been hard on him, left him weak. It was the only sense I could make of the situation.

Focus. I took a deep breath and laughed. “We must add color. Lots of color. This place is too white. You need lots of reds, yellows and orange.”

“Bah. Those are the colors of a girl.”

I laughed as my mind painted the colors before me, creating a tapestry of hues that filled the area. “Perhaps, but at least I’m not resting. You shall need lots of flowers to fill the air with a beautiful aroma each morning.” Flowers began to grow, and my laughter echoed around us.

I taunted him as I continued to splash my colors around him, daring him to play his game with me. I longed for conversation, for anything beyond the still silence. My mind became brazen and filled the area with furniture. I tried to imagine what a boy such as he would need, but I knew nothing of boys. My brother paid little attention to me.

“What of your needs, Stephan? What would you want here?”

His grin awakened something within me. Pleasure. Shades of green, blue, brown and purple took control of the area, interspersing themselves with the light hues I’d spun. His laughter boomed and offered me hope that the friend I’d made would be all right.

We spent hours constructing his mighty fortress and dabbed it with welcoming colors and tokens of friendship and peace. He placated me at each turn, and soon we were both surrounded by the luxurious creation.

“This will be a fine home, Stephan.”

“Aye, it will.” He reclined on the bed and motioned for me to join him. I crawled to the area beside him and rested my weary head. “Were it not for you, my inner animal would never have found the strength to build it.”

“You would’ve built a dark and dreary home.”

“This is a grand private sanctuary for my soul.” His voice saddened me because I knew our play time was at an end. The cool air brushed across my skin as our newly constructed home disappeared and we were once again in the forest. I shivered and pressed against him. His arm wrapped around me. “You will always be welcome there, Hannah. Always. There and here, in my forest.”

I laughed. “This forest is not yours.”

“Perhaps not this evening, but one day it shall be.”

“It’s always good to dream.”

He and I were more alike than I realized back then. After all, he had to have strayed quite far himself for it to have taken so long for his kind to arrive. I could only assume they had when I awoke the next morning, wrapped snugly in my warm cloak and carefully placed at the very edge of the woods with a soft bed of earthen sod beneath me.

I would’ve declared it all to be a dream—a whimsical notion of a young girl—if it had not been for the amulet dangling at my bosom. He was real.

And somehow, even back then, I knew I was destined to meet him again.

Chapter Two

The stench of burning flesh mingled with the nauseating sweetness of freshly spilled blood. I awoke unprepared for such terror and destruction. It was my twentieth summer. Billows of thick, angry, blackened smoke rose in the air and filled my eyes and nostrils, coating my tongue with a vile taste which made the bile in my stomach rise.

They attacked shortly before dawn, when we innocent women and children still slumbered. We all anxiously waited for the village's men, who'd ridden to Tash to join the battle against the neighboring country. Their country. War had raged for three summers, with no end in sight. Screams from the outlying village huts signaled their arrival. The men had to have known there were no warriors amongst us to give them a fair battle, but they waged war on the sleeping masses anyway.

I ran.

Fear pummeled my veins with the same ferocity I'd seen the enemy use while striking my mother as I cowered under a pile of freshly skinned pelts, watching in horror and knowing I could do nothing to save her. Pain coursed from my bare feet and up my exposed legs, my thin chemise and unmentionables doing little to deflect the crushing cold wind whipping at my skin.

I tried not to look back, but the compulsion was too fierce. Male laughter suffocated the air behind me as I took to the woods I'd sworn to never venture in again.

But the forest had saved me once. Pain shot through my knees as I stumbled, tumbling over a moss-covered tree.

I couldn't endure what my mother had. My stomach turned at the thought of the men hurting me. I'd rather die than endure such an atrocity. Run. Anywhere would be better than the death I'd fled. Beams of crackling dawn broke through the thick forest, as if guiding my way. The forest thickened, cloaking me. Refuge was what I needed. I fled deeper into the dense landscape, even though my chaser's footsteps echoed around me. I would not surrender.

I'd heard stories. That's always how it was with me. Invisibility had been my existence much of my life. Except for my weary mother, few paid me much attention, not even my father and brother. Most chose to ostracize me for my foolish venture into the woods as a youth. Two villagers had succumbed to the winter winds while searching for me.

Perhaps their fate was to be mine.

I shivered as I halted and gasped crisp air. There was no time to stop. No time to panic. Surely I could outrun the pack of men weighted down by heavy armor. The metal clanked as they moved, signaling my run must continue.

The undergrowth pricked my skin, and I scraped my legs against the thick bark of yet another tree I'd overlooked. I crab-crawled backward, my eyes widening as I battled to see farther into the thickening darkness. Where was my sun?

It had been like this that fateful night so long ago—dark and menacing. Had I found my destination? I couldn't find the strength to run farther. I cowered behind the mighty tree. My heartbeat thundered in my ears as I fought to steel my ragged breaths. Sweat mixed with death and a week's dirt filled my nostrils as they entered the small glade.

How many times had I inhaled that scent when our villagers returned battle weary? How many times had it filled me with solace and love? They'd kept us safe from harm. But those village men weren't here now, and that scent would never offer the comfort it once had.

Silence gave way to their laughter as they scanned the area in a circular pattern. My lungs burned, but I refused to take the breath I knew I needed. My crouch behind the large tree had gone unnoticed so far. My body pressed snugly against the mighty tree now covered by layers of moss and new growth.

I shuddered in revulsion as I noticed their scraggly beards. Blood-stained hands grasped swords still coated with the crimson remnants of their last encounters. Bile rose in my stomach as I studied the trophy scalps each of the men hung from their belts. Dry heaves threatened to ensue, but I fought them back.

Visions of my fate terrified my mind, freezing me in place. Their methodical steps neared my sanctuary, and I knew my chance to continue my desperate sprint to safety was lost.

"She's here. She has to be." The man skimmed the forest behind me. I dared a breath as he moved, his step crunching twigs two paces from where I hid. "Damn this darkness."

Blessed darkness. I wished it were darker, but small rays of light sprinkled in the glade—just enough for my eyes to acclimate to my surroundings. Soon theirs could as well. My pulse quickened.

"Maybe some of us should return to the village and see to our wounded."

The leader sneered. "We'll have no wounded. Sluts and children don't make formidable enemies. We find her. She'll sell for a worthy sum."

The men laughed. I shuddered in revulsion. I'd overheard enough whispered stories of the slave market a day's travel from the village to know I'd rather die than face the horrors there. Women sold for the most, depending on their age and comeliness. Few in my country—or in theirs—had my fiery-colored hair. Would that seal my fate?

Each waning second agonized me. My skin burned where I pressed against the bark. I wished I could dig away enough of the moss and undergrowth to crawl under the downed sanctuary.

My memory played tricks with my head as I suddenly found visions of myself lying beside a young boy so long ago. They drifted through my mind as it focused on the naïve chatter of that night, which was far more welcome than the crude amusement of my tormentors.

Pain shot through my head as one of the men dragged me up. One hand grasped my long hair and the other wound around my waist. He dragged my body flush against him. I screamed, my throat throbbing.

Laughter filled my ears.

“Scream all you want. No one will hear you.”

The truth he taunted me with bored into me as I let out another terrified scream. The two men sandwiched me between them as the others clustered at my sides.

I closed my eyes, terror keeping me from looking at the man. Pain rushed through my cheek as he struck me. “Open your eyes, slut.”

Tears welled, clouding my vision as I obeyed. My pulse leaped with desperation. A matted black beard masked a thin mouth, but I could see his lips turn upward into a smug grin as his hands cupped my breasts and squeezed so hard I let out a pained cry.

I clenched my fists and struck his face hard. He stumbled and I kicked. My knee hit him between the legs. He bellowed his fury, and I steeled myself for another blow. Cool air rushed across my skin as he ripped my chemise, exposing my breasts.

Part of me wanted to tremble and beg for mercy, but my mother’s cries had gone unheeded and had only fueled their lust. I refused to fall victim to their evil. Cramps sprinted up my arms as I moved my body, trying to angle myself for another kick.

The man raised his hand to strike me again. Flashes of grey filled my peripheral vision. Growls echoed through the small glade. The men screamed, and my arms fell to my sides.

Freedom.

I raced toward the trees, coveting their safety with the desperation of a child. I observed the battle unfolding around me, but my mind refused to process what was happening.

The men’s screams filled the air and drifted into the thick forest. My lungs burned, my legs ached. I accepted that small measure of pain as payment for freedom.

Somehow I’d been spared.

But how?

Who?

What?

Questions raced through my mind as I continued my flight. Destination, again, wasn’t as important as distancing myself from the horrors unfolding behind me.

Darkness hindered me, and I succumbed to the need to rest my aching limbs. I pulled my chemise together and tried to patch what the terrifying man had ripped. Not even a makeshift tying could stop an indecent amount of bosom from showing.

But it didn't matter.

I was safe. Alone, lost and panicked. But safe. A cool breeze whipped through the trees overhead, filling the air around me with the comforting sound of rustling leaves I'd delighted in as a child.

I sat on the mossy sod and rested against the thickest tree I could find. Time had escaped me, and I was unsure how long or far I'd traveled. Thoughts sliced me.

My mother was dead. My brother and father...had they lived? Would they return to the village and think me dead? Uncertainty must've clouded my senses, because I didn't hear his approach.

Beams of sunlight streamed through the trees, welcoming me to my new hideout. A limb snapped behind me, no doubt intentionally on his part. I gasped and leaped up. The movement sent sharp pangs up my legs. I backed away from him and admired his sun-kissed skin. Bare above the waist, he stood dressed in a pair of leather pants like my father wore, but made in a different fashion. They molded to his long legs and lean hips. Chestnut hair fell past his powerful jaw, detracting from his full lips and golden eyes.

A pang of familiarity trickled through me, but my fear drove me backward. My pulse accelerated, my breathing quickened. His thick arms crossed in front of him. His clean-shaven jaw twitched, but he made no step forward.

I swallowed the scream lodged in my throat, since I was unsure whether its release would help or hinder me. One man versus one woman was better odds than before.

And someone—no, something—was still out there. My mind filtered the events of the day and began processing my rescue for the first time. Flashes of gray melded with childhood memories. My gasp filled the area with my realization.

The boy from my past had been real. A wolf, yet a boy. His people must've been the ones who rescued me. Guilt flooded my veins as I glanced around, still unwilling to lock gazes with the man before me. Running away and leaving them to fight my battle had been wrong.

The man moved forward.

Was he one of them?

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am, Hannah."

My heart skipped a beat, my shallow breathing stilled as I absorbed his response. He knew my name. My hand went to my neck and my fingers traced the cord there down until they grasped the talisman hanging between my breasts.

The action moved his attention there, and my pulse quickened. He took another step forward, his golden eyes fired by a flicker of something I instinctively knew was desire. I knew I should look away, but found myself drawn to his talisman.

I closed the distance between us, my fingers moving to stroke the talisman resting against his chest. “Stephan.”

His name tumbled from my lips. Comfort awakened within me. Somehow, knowing the friend I’d made so long ago was here set my mind at ease. The terrified youth I’d befriended was long gone, replaced by a virile warrior who’d tracked my path through the forest.

His forest.

I shivered, and his lips curved into a welcoming grin. “One day we’ll meet and neither of us will be in grave danger.”

My mind raced to make sense of his presence. How did he know who I was when many summers had passed? Pieces of the horrifying ordeal locked into place, secured by the strength and resolve tumbling from him. “You saved me.”

The statement sounded more like a question, even though I already knew the answer. His nod affirmed my thoughts, and I looked down, now aware of my attire. I couldn’t fathom why my state of undress or my skinned legs and dirt-covered skin mattered—not when it had been the furthest thought. But it did.

I ran my hand down my hair. “Thank you.” I swallowed. For some reason I knew staring into his eyes would strip me of what little resolve I’d mustered.

I couldn’t let him sense my despair, my fear, my anguish. Today’s battles had left me defenseless, with nowhere to mend and no one to rely on. He, a stranger to me, had no need to know this. He’d already done more than I’d hoped.

“I and my family owe you a debt of gratitude.” I smiled, chancing a look into his captivating eyes. “Perhaps when you are near the village next time you may stop in so my parents can...” The sentence lodged in my throat as I choked on the realization that my mother was dead. Hadn’t I just thought that? And my father and brother. Were they alive?

My mind was trapped in a sickening maze of tangled thoughts so muddled I felt even more lost than before. A tear slid down my cheek. I swiped it away quickly and took a sobbing breath. I wished I could remain strong for a few more moments.

There was nothing left within me to bolster. Another tear fell, followed by another and another until the cascade left me gasping for air.

Strong arms wrapped around me, shielding me from a lone battle against torment. It might’ve been wrong, unseemly, for a maiden to take such comfort from a man—especially one who’d demonstrated his power with such ease.

“Easy, Hannah. Those men will never touch you again.” This man had killed for me.

I shivered, knowing the men who’d chased me were gone. The others of Stephan’s kind lurked somewhere. I pushed away from him even though I longed to remain within his embrace. “Forgive me. It’s been quite a day.”

His hand ran down my hair and under my chin. He raised it. “Are you injured?”

I shook my head no even as my legs throbbed. “If I could trouble you to point me toward my village, I’ll leave you be.”

Leaving him was the last thing I wanted. So many questions flowed to the tip of my tongue, but I knew now wasn’t the time to ask. He’d done enough for me.

“Your village?” Shock registered in his voice. “You intend to return?”

“Why would I not?”

“It’s unsafe.” He crossed his arms and looked into the trees behind me. “My pack took care of those who dared to venture into our lands after you, but there were surely more.”

Many more. I chewed my lower lip as I contemplated my diminishing options. My father and brother considered me cursed and wanted little to do with me, but they were the only family I had left since mother had joined Gran.

“Point me toward Tash, then. My father and brother fight there.”

“You want me to point you toward the war?” Amusement filled each word as his eyes glinted. “Danger isn’t something you fear, is it?”

Lifting my chin, I chose not to respond to his comment. My harrowing ordeal had been enough to deal with, and I had no intention of darkening his dreary day with the woes still befalling me. “I’ll find my own way.”

I moved toward the sunlit path. The streaming rays were brighter than I’d expected, and I could now make out a visible trail winding between the thickest of the trees. My fear must’ve obscured it before.

I could feel him behind me. His presence was more unnerving than I cared to admit. For some reason this man made my pulse race. I doubted much of what I was experiencing right now had to do with the earlier attack.

“I don’t need your escort.”

He paused when I halted my movement down the path. I glared at him, but his smirk didn’t add to my confidence. He was clearly not impressed by my determination. “You are injured, Hannah. Let me help you.”

I turned and chose to ignore him. My feet ached with each step. The path I’d chosen had smooth rocks embedded within the moss. They felt good against my injured feet. If only I’d had time to...

There were too many thoughts that would complete the sentence, and none of them would guide me toward what I should do. I needed to find my father, even though I doubted he’d care much about my

plight. After all, he'd tried to banish me when I'd returned. Then again, in all fairness, the man wasn't really my flesh-and-blood father. He'd been kind enough to take me in when he took my widowed mother as a bride.

The footsteps echoing mine annoyed me. I turned. "Do you have any intention of leaving me be?"

"In time, perhaps." He smiled, and I expressed my frustration through a heavy sigh and continued my steps forward, my feet moving toward the smooth rocks of their own volition.

I walked for an eternity, even though it was no doubt much less than that. My shadow continued behind me, his steps paralleling mine even though he didn't speak. My mind was too jumbled with emotions to deal with conversation, and I think he sensed that was the case. I didn't want to admit it, but I was glad for his presence.

The path ended as a thick brush clung to life between two large trees. I tried to peer over the overgrown shrub I hadn't expected to see. A large glade was on the other side, evident by the lack of trees for a wide distance that appeared almost symmetrical. Planned.

"I suppose you're going to continue following me?"

His lips curved into a grin that sent a shiver of anticipation through me. My pulse quickened. "Perhaps."

I sighed and turned. I pressed through the brush and gasped as I stepped on the other side. Homes made of wood filled the area in small circular bands as far as my eyes could see. Billows of smoke drifted through the air from cooking areas outside most of the huts. My stomach rumbled at the thought of what they were cooking.

A village.

People.

How had I not known this was here?

I'd ventured farther than I'd thought. It was the only answer which made sense. I searched for the mountain range that signaled the enemy's border. I was still within a safe region, even though I was much closer to Tash, which was perched on the edge of the land my people fought our enemy over. Many miles were left to travel, though. Many.

I turned toward him as he approached. "What village is this?"

His smile warmed me as a group of people approached us. I clung to his side without thinking. His arm wrapped around my waist and his voice danced in my ear. "Welcome to my home, Hannah."

Chapter Three

An older woman named Nalla took me from him shortly after arriving. Shock streamed through me swifter than the current of the river which flowed along the northernmost portion of the village. Realto. It was an odd name for a village, but somehow felt right.

There was an entire village within the woods! Children chased one another, their laughter echoing across the glade. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen such joy. Hundreds of questions plagued me, though I doubted my voice would find words anytime soon. There was too much to see to speak. Too much to absorb and learn.

These were Stephan's people. I swallowed at the thought. Were they as kind as he was? Would they accept my presence?

If I'd known how rare time alone with an alpha warrior was, perhaps I wouldn't have been so abrupt with him. The home I was taken to was made of wood, sealed with an earthen compound I was unfamiliar with. I was tended to by Nalla, who kept me occupied with whimsical stories of people I didn't know.

A week had passed, and I was tired of whimsical.

A warm blanket made of animal skin covered me as the healer Nalla treated my wounds. I smiled at her. "Your poultice reminds me of my gran. She always believed in using herbs."

The elderly woman smiled, her skin revealing a few wrinkles around her sparkling cinnamon eyes. "She sounds like a wise woman."

"She was." My heart swelled. "She passed five winters ago."

"The loss of a loved one is always hard on a soul. Stephan told me your mother was lost in the village battle." I was surprised her voice cracked with caring for my plight. "It's been many winters since we've lost anyone in our pride, but their memories still warm our hearts."

Many winters. The statement made no sense to me, yet I could tell her words were truthful. "You've surely lost many loved ones during your life. Does the pain stop?"

I needed to hear an affirmation—to know the searing slices in my soul would heal. I chewed on my lower lip and waited for her answer, even though I knew the weight of my mother's loss would forever haunt me.

"Our people live much longer and our bodies heal of their own volition. This has been the first time in at least sixty winters since I've had to use my poultices." Her words shocked me as I recalled the size of the village and the massive cluster of people and wolves I'd seen my first day here. Before I'd been secluded.

I longed to wander the village, but Nalla insisted I needed rest. A week had passed since my race to safety and, more than anything, I wanted to see Stephan. Weary of inactivity, I stood and began my morning pace around the small home. A large talisman similar to mine hung on the wall above the hearth. “Is this a pride talisman?”

Nalla smiled and pulled on her talisman. “No, it is my family pride. Stephan is my fourth generation.”

“Fourth generation?”

“My daughter is his mother’s mother’s mother.”

The idea astounded me, even though I recalled what she’d said about her people living longer. My mind again raced with questions, but guilt numbed my tongue. She’d already been beyond patient with me and my incessant need to know more about Stephan’s people.

Stephan.

I’d broached my desire to know more about him my second day here, but Nalla hadn’t been forthcoming. Maidens of my village rarely ventured to ask such questions of the men, so I understood my lack of right to ask. The compulsion overwhelmed me, though, even after a week with Nalla. Nothing she taught me mattered as much as learning more about him. “When will I see Stephan again?”

Nalla set the remaining poultice compound on the small table beside her. She stood. Silence made me apprehensive. Heat stained my cheeks as I imagined her studying me. The scrutiny was new to me. Few within my village offered me more than a dismissive acknowledgement. Yet this woman listened attentively, as if she wanted to know more about me. As if she understood.

She cared.

“You think of him often.”

Denying the truth of her statement would accomplish nothing. “I’m indebted to him and your people for saving me. It would be impossible not to think of him.”

Her lips curved into a grin reminiscent of Stephan’s. “You have no reason to hide your curiosity. Many maidens of our pride have interest in Stephan. Even more vie to be his mate.” She lifted a pot of hot water from the fire pit and poured a cup. She dribbled drops of a liquid into it. “Drink this. It will aid your healing.”

I took the cup and sipped, allowing the warm liquid to heat me, as it had each time she’d given it to me. “Thank you.”

Silence met my gratitude. I chewed my lip. Asking my question again would be disrespectful. I should be grateful for all she’d done. But I longed to see Stephan again. Surely I could find him on my own. The glade hadn’t seemed that large. “Perhaps I could walk around the village today? Osana mentioned she’d take me.”

“Osana is young, only fourteen winters. Escorting you through the village isn’t something she should do.” Nalla approached me. “Not all our people welcome your presence.”

I'd suspected as much, but hearing it increased my growing guilt. "I'm willing to earn my keep. Hard work is something I'm used to."

She sat beside me on the small cot and took my hands. Her fingers trailed across my bruises and rough palms. "I have no doubt you toiled over labors much of your day."

"I launder well and tend fires and gather wood. Cooking escapes me at times, but I skin and salt meat with skill. My father wouldn't have it any other way." I hoped she'd realize the importance I placed on helping.

"Do all maidens in your village do so much?"

I shook my head. "My situation was quite different." To say the least. Tending the fires, clothes and wood needs for three families often took from dawn to well past dusk, especially in the seasons when there were skins to tend to. "I had much to atone for."

"What could you possibly have done to bear such burdens?"

I swallowed my resentment, knowing my emotions weren't something she needed to deal with. "Two men died because I foolishly ran into the woods. I must tend for their families as if they were mine. My father demanded it as one of my punishments."

I must've been fumbling with the talisman without realizing. Her fingers touched it, the soft caress too much like my gran's. My mother's. "You bore much for naught. What you did for Stephan should've been praised."

"They thought my story a foolish tale."

I could tell she wanted to comment, but she stood instead. A cool breeze flowed into the room as the door swung open.

Stephan.

My pulse quickened and I fiddled with the hem of my borrowed dress. I gawked at his powerful body as he greeted Nalla. His eyes danced with adoration when around her, and I wished I could see the same glimmer in his eyes when he thought of me.

The same type of clinging leather pants molded against his powerful thighs. Muscle rippled across his stomach, partially visible through the open wood-colored vest. His chest was unmarred by hair. My fingers longed to trace the contours of his smooth skin.

Heat spread through me to center at my nether regions. I squeezed my thighs together and looked down because I was afraid my cheeks were stained with shame. My attraction to him had grown, and my body refused to behave.

His long legs brought him to me faster than I was prepared for. I stood, my legs wobbling as my breathing accelerated. His hands grasped my arms, steadying me with a strength that made me shiver. Not even the mightiest of my village's fighters were so honed and muscular. I'd seen enough of his people to know none of the men in his pride were like the men I was accustomed to.

“Thanks.”

Thanks. Not only was it a naïve and foolish thing to say, but it came out with a meekness that made my mind scream at my blathering tongue. I’d thought of clever retorts and envisioned conversations with him about many things for the past few nights. I’d even fantasized about him.

And all I had to say when he stood before me was “thanks”. A flicker of darkness appeared and disappeared in his golden eyes.

Nalla shuffled a chair. The dragging sound across the bare floor of the eating area pulled me from my lustful thoughts. I focused my attention to where his fingers touched my skin. Tingles danced there and spread through me like molten fire. Heat rushed to my core. My pussy moistened. My nipples hardened.

I fought the urge to tug on my dress or look down to see if it was apparent. I refused to sever my contact with him.

“She’s been asking about you.” Nalla’s voice quashed the connection I’d felt. I stepped back enough to allow my heartbeat to slow, but his assessing gaze remained on me, and I was lost in the tumbling waves of desire his presence had incited.

“Really?” His voice, filled with curiosity, made me smile. “I’ve been catching up on pride issues. Some of it is quite tedious. I’m sure your company would have broken up the monotony.”

“She has a restless spirit, much like you.” Nalla chuckled. “Were she one of us, she’d be prowling in animal form.”

Stephan grinned. I couldn’t understand their amusement, but I knew she had no ill regard for me. She sat at the table and regarded us.

“Is her leg healing well?” he asked.

I hadn’t realized how injured my leg was until Nalla had begun treating it. “Those poultices of hers don’t burn anymore. Surely that’s a good sign.”

Nalla laughed. The rich tones of her wise voice soothed me. I hadn’t realized I missed my gran until that moment. They were too alike for me not to be drawn to her.

“She’s been asking about your talisman and wanted to walk the village. Perhaps you can appease her.”

“Sure.” His voice was low. “I’ll gladly tell her why she has our talisman and what it represents.”

“Your father wouldn’t approve.”

“Then it’s a good thing I stopped heeding his advice long ago. If anyone has need of me, send Fallon for me.”

Fallon. “He’s your brother, right?”

“I see you’ve been learning of my family. I trust Nalla’s delighted in telling you many stories of my foolish youth.”

I wished that was the case. The woman had offered nothing.

“I will, now that I see you approve.”

Stephan chuckled and touched my arm. The contact made my skin tingle. “Let us go before she starts now.”

His arm rested on my back just above my waist. Cool air whipped through my hair when we exited the home I’d been locked away in. Unable to contain my glee, I paused and took a deep breath.

“I should’ve come sooner, but Nalla kept telling me you needed to heal.”

“She’s very protective.”

“It’s in her blood. Women in my clan have been healers for many generations.” His hand fell away from me when we began to walk through his village.

Everyone halted their activities as we passed. I found their scrutiny disconcerting. The first few moved to their knees as if about to undertake a chore I didn’t understand. All the homes we passed resembled one another. Most displayed a talisman on the entry.

I tried to study them without being obvious, but decided it best not to when Stephan drew me closer to him.

“Your people don’t like me.”

“They’re unaccustomed to strangers. There’s a difference.” The sincerity calmed my nervousness even though I doubted it was the truth for everyone.

“I’ve heard some of them yelling at Nalla.” I winced when his jaw twitched. “She tries to hide it, but I hear them. They want me gone.”

“She should have told me this. I would’ve dealt with their meddling myself.”

I shook my head. “They have a right to be upset. I’m doing nothing to earn my keep and am not of your pride.”

We continued our path toward the woods and my pulse quickened when I realized he didn’t intend to remain within the village. A few awkward smiles greeted me once we neared a group of homes with the same talisman that I wore around my neck.

“This is your family’s area?”

He nodded. “On my father’s side.”

“Why isn’t Nalla here? She displays this talisman, yet is on the other side of the village.”

“She’s on my mother’s side, but may display whichever talisman she feels within her soul since she’s a healer. She’s chosen this one since it’s stronger than her other option.”

“Do all your kind get that option?”

“Only the healers or those within the royal line.” His hand returned to my back and drew me toward him until my thigh brushed his as we walked. “You gather information well.” My mind swelled with his admiration.

He paused and turned me to face him. His attention moved to the village, now a good distance from our secluded cove. I was fascinated by the large tree misshapen by time. Its trunk was hollowed near the base. A small sitting stool rested within the area.

“This is my retreat.”

“It’s beautiful.”

His fingers grazed my cheek. My heart flailed in my chest. He’d brought me here—trusted me with his private spot. Could he be feeling the heat between us as I did? My breathing became ragged. My nipples ached with a hardness my naïve mind couldn’t deny. My entire body yearned for Stephan.

“You have no idea what hunger you incite in me, Hannah.” His breath fell against my forehead as he drew me forward until my hips collided with his groin. “Your thoughts drive me mad with the need to possess you.”

I stumbled on his statement, but any attempt to understand it vanished when his hand wrapped in my hair and he drew me to his lips. I closed my eyes. Unable to breathe, I prayed my pounding pulse wouldn’t explode with the turbulent flames of anticipation burning me.

His lips caressed mine and his tongue tasted my mouth, tracing the contours before foraying to my tongue. I swallowed his groan, thinking it more of a growl. My arms wrapped around him.

The kiss was unexpected and unlike any of the wayward advances village men had made—not that many had tried. I followed his lead and clung to him, my body burning with a need I didn’t understand or know how to sate. All I knew was Stephan would absolve me from my raging desires.

His kiss grew more demanding, more consuming. I relished his body crushed against mine. Heat spread through my legs as he lifted my dress. I moaned when he guided me toward the tree until my back was pressed against it. His hand ran up my thigh while his mouth claimed mine.

His other hand rubbed an aching nipple through my dress. I longed to strip and feel his fingers on me there. A growl echoed around us and mingled with my gasp as his fingers found my pussy.

Hot lips moved to my ear. The huskiness of his voice rumbled through me. “You’re so wet for me, Hannah.”

He slid a finger into my pussy. I writhed, savoring the contact as his thumb rubbed my sensitized bud. The contact was so new to me. I had no idea how to react. Clinging to him, I ran my hands down his back, then up and under his vest. I clawed at him as his mouth claimed mine.

Stephan’s fingers tormented me. Rushing waves of desire overwhelmed me. Pleasure hummed within my blood. He growled as I climaxed, my pussy clenching his fingers.

“That’s it, Hannah. Come hard for me.”

I did.

Pleasure exploded within me. I thought I was on the verge of death. My breathing was ragged and my nails dug into his back, moving downward to draw him even closer.

The passion he drew from me sated most of the pulsing need I'd felt, but I knew there was more. There had to be.

His hands cupped my face moments after my reasoning returned. Minutes sped away as he held me afterwards, his soothing voice massaging away all thoughts except one.

Stephan.

"You all right?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I'd screamed and gasped such pleasure I doubted my ability to speak at all.

He looked over his shoulder as I kissed his throat. "Death had better be taking one of our pack, or you'll incur my wrath."

Unease filled me. Something had stopped him. Someone was here. How could I have been so foolish as to do these things with Stephan where anyone could see? My senses returned with crushing speed. Heat spread through my cheeks as I noticed the man who resembled Stephan too closely not to be Fallon.

"We have need of you, my king."

Chapter Four

A king.

Few things surprised me after the harrowing ordeals I'd been through the past week. I was stunned. My gaze met his, but he turned away. "We'll be there shortly, Fallon."

"You're a king?"

He couldn't be. Not Stephan. Not the man who'd brought me to such all-consuming passion. I would've gladly gifted him with my maidenhead right there—in the forest.

A king.

Anger boiled within me as I realized he'd withheld the information. All the whispered conversations and sidelong glances when I asked about him made sense.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

His whispered response made my heart patter faster. "The only man I wanted you to know was the one the boy became. My throne has nothing to do with what exists between you and me."

I shook my head but couldn't bolster enough anger to shove him away. The need to believe him clouded my doubts. "But you're a king. That's who you grew to be."

I accepted the bitter bile of reality rising in my stomach. A common peasant had no business befriending royalty—even if it was royalty from a different group of beings. Lusting for a king. What would my father say?

A king had just kissed me. Had his fingers inside me. Made me come.

Guilt and shame flooded my mind, drowning the embers of desire he'd stoked to life. He turned to speak to his brother, and I noticed the fresh scratches running down his back. I'd marked him.

As if I had the right to claim him.

"I need a moment, Fallon."

"I'm sorry, brother, but I cannot give you more time than I already have."

Stephan sighed and I wondered how long Fallon had waited. Had he seen us? Heard us? I refused to venture down that path.

"What is it?"

"A legion marches from Tash."

Fear pummeled me as I imagined surviving another attack. I couldn't witness more death and destruction. Not again. My nostrils flared as I recalled the stench of burning flesh. There was time to run,

but where would I flee? Stephan's arm circled my waist, and he drew me toward him. I gasped panicked breaths.

"Summon all the alphas. I'll be there momentarily."

"We have nothing more to discuss." There was nothing he could say. He'd kept his true identity from me. Not that it should matter. It did. Part of me knew a peasant had no business with someone of his stature—no matter what he might think.

But a bigger part of me longed to overlook any class distinctions and pick up where we'd left off. His fingers inside me had brought more pleasure than I could have imagined. My body still hummed with the release I'd experienced. Would it always be so?

"I hope that includes her thoughts thundering through the air like a blast of hot wind."

Stephan's face reddened slightly when he glared at his brother. "You have no tact."

"I have no mate. A couple more nights of those lusty thoughts of hers and I'll bed her myself."

I stared at Stephan, too stunned to respond to his brother's statement. Fallon walked away.

"We have much to discuss, but now is not the time. I must go."

I had to have some semblance of answer. "Can your people read my thoughts?" It seemed unfathomable, a diabolical and twisted notion of wizardry only old villagers could concoct.

"It's complicated."

I clenched my fists and took a deep breath. I didn't want to hear his answer, but I knew I must. "Yes or no?"

"Yes, but..."

I stormed toward the village, too infuriated with the breach of trust to speak to him. Someone should've warned me. He should have told me. Had he been privy to all my thoughts?

I spun around and found myself nose-to-nose with him. "You read *all* my thoughts?"

He grinned. A twinkle of fiery flecks spotted his eyes. "I found the late night arguments quite interesting. No one has ever practiced calling me a lummoX before." He ran his fingers down my cheek and rested his thumb on my lips. "Tell me, Hannah. What of our encounter do you think I should practice more?"

My pussy clenched. My mind whirled with lustful memories I longed to feel him holding me again, tasting my lips. His kiss was heady ale I knew I shouldn't drink, but my thirst was too fierce to ignore.

"Stephan," Fallon said insistently.

"Go to your people. What may or may not exist between us can wait."

"Tonight we will finish this."

I nodded, knowing I had no intention of doing so. My time in his village had neared its end, and the sooner I accepted it, the better I'd be. His people had no desire for my presence, and it was clear now there were many reasons to avoid remaining. I couldn't control my thoughts any more than I could my breath.

I returned to the village with a heavy soul. Leaving Stephan would be difficult, but I knew it was the necessary decision. Perhaps I could find my father and brother. They might not approve of me or my circumstances, but they were my family.

What was the rest of Stephan's family like?

Nalla wouldn't have a poultice to heal what pained me now. I made my way to her home anyway, knowing nowhere else to go. Only she had welcomed me with open arms. She and Stephan.

Guilt mingled with self doubt and insecurity as I walked into her home. She could read my thoughts, knew what I'd been thinking all week and had said nothing. I was unsure whether that fact hurt or angered me. Perhaps I understood the need for security. After all, I was a stranger to her and her people. They had a right to protect what they held dear.

No doubt Stephan was at the top of that list.

More than anything I wanted to block my thoughts from them. There was surely a way. How could they all live with such open minds? I couldn't envision a life like that.

Nalla turned and smiled as she poured a mug of piping hot water. She dribbled drops of the same liquid I'd consumed all week into the brew and passed the cup to me. I smiled awkwardly and wondered how much she knew of what had happened. How did all this work?

"Sit, child. I can tell much is on your mind." She motioned toward the table, and my legs moved of their own accord, my mind still too jumbled with questions to do aught but comply. Her hand covered mine and she smiled at me across the small seating area. "It pained me not to tell you what you needed to know, Hannah. Our people survive because we are elusive and secretive. Allowing outsiders to know of our existence could mean our destruction."

I listened. My mind processed her words and understood, but I still ached from the loss of trust I'd believed in before.

"You are very important to Stephan."

A small portion of me clung to her statement, desperate to believe what she offered. For some inconceivable reason, losing Stephan terrified me. I choked on the thought and swallowed back the angered tears of frustration.

"There's much you need to know, but that needs to come from him. I beg your patience before you do anything rash." Her cinnamon gaze locked on to mine. If she knew my intent to leave the village, then Stephan did as well. "He'd chase you to the ends of the earth. We cannot lose his leadership when our people are lodged in a war which is not ours to fight."

"I could never belong here, knowing everyone reads my thoughts." I searched her face desperately. "Even if he wanted me to stay, I'd never fit in."

“You would.” Nalla’s hand squeezed mine. “Give my people time to learn your true soul, child.”

My true soul.

How could they learn of it when I had no idea what it was myself? I’d been an outcast my entire existence, even before my journey into the woods as a youth. My ostracism from the village because of the two deaths had been the final shunning which left me stranded in the depths of a loneliness I couldn’t flee.

Only my gran and mother had embraced me, shown me the love I’d sought with such desperation. But even they had distanced themselves from me before they died. It was a startling realization I didn’t want.

“Some souls are meant to wander alone.”

“Perhaps.” Nalla’s eyes clouded. “Some are so locked into their future fate they think themselves alone because their journey to happiness has barely begun.”

I remained silent. My contemplation brought me nothing but more questions I knew would have to wait. This discussion was one intended for Stephan, even though I longed for some solace before then. “Everyone’s read my thoughts of Stephan? Of them?”

Nalla nodded. “Your curiosity and lust for Stephan is more brazen than our people are accustomed to, but only because our maidens grow up with the alphas and are so familiar with them that it takes much more to stir such passions.”

Heat rose in my face. I’d thought myself alone in my naïve fantasies each night. Surrendering to his kisses and enjoying foolish notions of more seemed harmless—a grand way to pass the long, lonely nights. If I’d known Stephan and his entire pack knew what I dreamt, I would have surely been less bold.

“Do not shun your desires, Hannah. Our males covet passions such as yours. I assure you your attentions will be highly sought if Stephan allows it to be so.” Nalla smiled. “I was quite brazen when I was your age.”

I smiled. “I expect you were.”

“I will tell you a story I haven’t even shared with Stephan.” Her eyes twinkled as she refilled my mug and dribbled another dose of droplets into it. Moving it toward me, she sighed. “My Antonio was to mate with another, even though I knew he lusted for me. I wasn’t the type to sit idly by and allow my heart’s mate to take another to his bed for eternity.”

I listened, my mind swirling with thoughts of what I’d do if it was Stephan. Could I handle another being in his bed? I shivered, knowing it would strike my soul like an axe.

“He was determined to fulfill his father’s wishes and mate with Sedonia, so I had no recourse but to pursue him. This was quite some time ago and women never did such things. The mere thought of being bedded by a man was unfathomable to maidens back then because the alphas could read those thoughts and take us to their chambers immediately—even if they were not intending to mate with us permanently.”

I shivered. My darkest thoughts toyed with the notion, and my pulse jumped at the thought of Stephan dragging me to his bed and taking me with such passion simply because I’d fantasized of him. Would he?

“Stephan’s generation is much like Antonio’s in that regard—they’ve moved back to the more traditional way of dealing with maidens and their passions. It’s why Stephan has had you locked away in this section of the village, where the elders such as me who have lost their mates reside.”

I swallowed. “They read my thoughts as well?”

Nalla nodded. “I doubt they could resist.”

“I should leave the village, then.”

She tugged on my hand and kept me from rising. “The talisman marks you as Stephan’s. They would never drag you to their bed, for his wrath would be too great.”

The talisman marks you as Stephan’s.

I grasped the talisman I’d found around my neck as a child in disbelief. “But how can that be? This was found on me when I returned from the forest. We were children.”

“Perhaps your mind was that of a young girl still outside of her lusting years, but Stephan was raised to lead this pride. His passions were great even as a youth.”

What she said wasn’t the consolation I needed. “I don’t even know where this came from. I woke with it around my neck and I was back in the village. It could’ve come from anywhere.”

“Stephan can tell you what happened that night. It’s his memory to tell, not mine. But I ask you to give him the chance to do so. There’s much for him to deal with right now. You need to be here—at his side.”

At his side.

It was the last place I should be. I knew nothing of their customs and traditions. My ignorance was no excuse for whatever rifts and turmoil my presence had created. The hidden arguments I’d overheard must’ve been because of my thoughts. I desperately wanted to stop them from being read. I had to.

“I’ll show you how to build barriers in your mind—a fortress to hold your most intimate thoughts. Stay with me. Stephan and I will both show you what you need to know.”

“I can’t. I doubt I can do the things you can. I’m a peasant from the village. I’m not like you.” Self-doubt rose within me. I hated the way it drowned the buds of hope her words had formed. “I’ll try what you show me. I don’t want to bother Stephan with this, though. He has enough to deal with. I refuse to put your people or him at risk anymore than I already have.”

“This war might have hit your village first, but it’s one we’ve been bracing for, for a long time. Don’t blame yourself for the ills of greed.” Nalla stood and leaned down. Her arms wrapped around me. “Land has become a coveted item. These forest lands will never belong to any but our people.”

“My people said the same about our village. I’m afraid that it’s been taken.”

“You were attacked by cowards. No true warrior would attack women and children.” Her scorn was clear. “Let us take you to Stephan’s. There are plenty of rooms for you to rest in until he returns from his meeting with the alphas. I suspect it will be brief.”

Stephan's.

I stammered, unsure how to respond. A part of me wanted to remain within the confined safety Nalla's home offered. I couldn't risk anymore than I had if I was tucked away here. "He may not want me there."

"He wants you there."

She smiled and held out her hand. Anticipation pulsed to life. I stood and followed her outside and through the village on the same path I'd traversed with Stephan earlier. Again, cautious gazes followed my movements. A few of the villagers smiled and a few waved, but even more scowls greeted my presence as Nalla led us toward the section where I knew Stephan's family resided.

I scanned the homes nestled in a tight semi-circle. Which was his? She moved past the homes visible from the main path and followed a trail through a patch of dense vegetation. I pressed through the brush and shrubs and gasped as another glade came into view.

A large structure dominated the area. At least six or seven of the homes I'd seen would fit within it, with much room to spare. Perhaps nine. Six men stood outside of a large entryway. Emblazoned on the wood door was a talisman resembling mine.

Stephan's.

My head spun. Nalla's hand went to my back and urged me forward as the six men watched us. Bared chests rippled with muscles that reminded me of Stephan. The same dark pants covered powerful thighs and long legs. Each of them exuded power. Virility.

I shivered and suppressed any more notions of them, afraid they'd read my thoughts. My mind raced as we approached the massive structure of makeshift steps. I counted as I moved upward. Twelve steps. I didn't know why my compulsion to know was so great. Perhaps my mind needed something to concern itself with beyond what was behind the massive doors one of the six men moved to open.

I swallowed the fear trampling me as Nalla pushed on my back, nudging me through the entrance. I admired the massive structure's interior. A large room draped in lush pelts of assorted colors covered the wooden floor. Three sets of double doors loomed across the way.

"It's not as large as it appears. Most of the space is for pride business—rooms where our alphas, and elders such as myself, meet to deal with matters that require our attention. Training quarters for our young alphas are also here. There are many times when they must remain together so they learn to fight as one mind and one body."

I listened, awestruck by it all. My footsteps followed hers, even though my mind reeled. "And the other?"

"Is Stephan's private quarters."

A large seating area filled the east wall of the large room. I moved toward it, but Nalla pulled on my dress. "This way, child."

Four more men guarded a set of double doors I hadn't seen before. "What's the fourth set of doors?"

"The meeting room. It's where our pride goes when the king wishes to address them."

The doors swung open, and I gulped my nervousness as Nalla led me through a long corridor of closed doors. We passed at least six before she paused in front of a door to my left and opened it. "You wait here, Hannah. Someone will be here to tend to your needs shortly. I'll see you in the morning."

In the morning?

I gasped and stuttered my confusion. "You're leaving?"

"I have matters that require my attention." She hugged me before turning and heading back down the hall. I stood in the entryway of the strange room in shock, unable to believe Nalla had abandoned me.

I moved into the room and closed the door. I admired the luxurious pelts covering the furniture in the room. A small basin sat on a wooden table in the corner. What was this room?

The door opened and a woman who appeared to be around my age walked in, her lips thinned. She scrutinized me before she met my eyes. "I must prepare you to be bedded by the king."

Chapter Five

“He will not be bedding me.” Even as denial tumbled from my lips, my pulse pounded in my ears. My pussy grew wet and heat spread through my body until it rested between my legs where he’d stroked me to passion with his fingers.

The woman regarded me with abhorrence. “He will.”

I had no idea who she was. She moved with efficiency. My arms were raised above my head and my dress stripped from me before my astounded mind could bolster a response. I held my hands over my breasts and gasped my outrage.

She swept my hands away from me. “You are a virgin?”

Her rudeness stunned me, but I nodded.

“You should break your hymen before he beds you. A king shouldn’t have to attend to such matters.” Her gaze skimmed my body. “He’ll likely fuck you into the dawn. I’ll leave some herbs to help you sleep afterwards. You’ll need it.”

Tossing my dress over her shoulder, she turned and headed for the door. I followed her, but leaped back into the safety of the room’s farthest corner when she swung the door open. “I need my dress.”

She laughed. “Someone else will be here shortly. They’ll provide your attire, if you’re found suitable.”

Suitable?

I stared at the door after it slammed shut. Whoever the other woman was, she needed to arrive quickly. I covered my breasts, but soon surrendered my shyness as moments ticked into what seemed an eternity. My heartbeat accelerated when the door opened. I stood, too chilled and desperate for clothing to care if a strange woman saw me naked.

I was shocked when a large figure moved into the room and shut the door.

I was startled to see Fallon, who admired my naked flesh. I moved to cover myself, but he captured a wrist before I could. “It’ll go quicker if you don’t, Hannah.”

“What is the meaning of this?” I moved backward, my hands covering my breasts.

I didn’t understand why he was here. Did Stephan know? I couldn’t have anyone seeing me... I swallowed. Naked. Running from him seemed senseless, given the sheer number of men looming at the end of the corridor.

“Easy. I mean you no harm.” His words didn’t console me. I shook my head and backed away when he stepped toward me, reaching out to my face. I turned away from his touch. “Calm yourself. I will not hurt you.”

“Leave me be.” Fear lanced my words.

“This is customary. The man-of-arms must ensure you don’t possess any weaponry before entering the king’s private chambers.” Fallon’s eyes blazed with the same fiery embers I’d seen in Stephan’s.

“You strip maidens down for no reason?”

“There’s always a reason.” His voice was low, sensual. His fingers ran across my hair. “We’ve had problems in the past when it came to the king.”

“He’s your brother. Why do you refer to him as the king first?”

“I do only when I must remind myself duty comes before preference.”

“And your duty?”

“To protect the king, even if the brother is blinded by a passion so strong he’d lead us to war.” Fallon wet his lips and I shivered, unable to control the curiosity tumbling within me. He resembled Stephan so much, and his mannerisms made it too easy to think of them as one and the same. “My brother would rip out my throat for the things I wish to do with you.”

I swallowed. I’d never had a man look at me with such hunger. Except for Stephan. But the two men were brothers and I had no intention of creating trouble. I was a peasant and not of their people. “Some would consider such statements rude.”

“But not you.” His whisper trailed through the air between us and ignited my memories of Stephan’s kiss. “Your maiden passion and curiosity stirs the blood of all our alphas. Many prowl the village in their feral form, too enthralled by temptation to remain in their skin.”

“I’m unaccustomed to such mental meddling.” I was too aware of his ability to read my thoughts of him and the others. Of Stephan. “Doesn’t it shame you to pry into thoughts not meant for you?”

He chuckled. The sound rumbling through the room made me shiver. “It is the way of our people. Thoughts of all females are available to the pride. It maintains order, security. We know all things occurring within our pack through the females we protect and mate. We treat the thoughts as if they were our own and protect the person’s right to express them without restraint. Few wield such temptation as yours, though. Not since Nalla’s generation.”

Fallon’s words did little to comfort my surging thoughts. I needed to be with Stephan and feel his arms around me again. His presence always calmed my agitation, even if it did leave me writhing in need for his touch.

“Even now your words incite passion, despite an intimidating situation. You lack the fear of a maiden and possess the desires of an alpha. You will be a worthy companion for my brother.”

I shook my head. “He is a king of your people, and I am merely a peasant.”

“You see the man before you think of the king. That is all that matters, for you are the first and only to do so.” His smile calmed my nerves. He turned and left the room. My pulse quickened when he returned and held out a dress for me to wear.

My fingers trembled as I donned it. His gaze never left my body, which was tingling at the realization the time to see Stephan again had arrived. Nothing mattered beyond that. Fallon held out his hand and I took it, following his long stride out the door and down the expanse of corridor we hadn’t traveled before.

“There will be no alphas or attendants within the corridor once I leave you with Stephan.” I wasn’t sure whether his statement was supposed to calm my nervousness, or incite my curiosity as to why.

I knew why.

Stephan intended to pick up where we’d left off in the woods. My mind couldn’t absorb the thought quickly enough. Fallon moved with haste, as if the destination had become one of paramount need that matched the growing desire burning within me. He opened the doors and stood aside for me to enter first.

My steps faltered, and I swallowed when I glanced in at the large room. A large bed loomed in the center, engulfing the bulk of the space. Never had I seen such a large sleeping surface.

Stephan stood at the end of the bed, wearing a pair of snug, chestnut-colored pants. My pulse quickened after I noticed the prominent bulge he didn’t move to hide from me.

He wanted me.

Fallon pressed me forward, sending a wave of heat through my tingling spine. “If you don’t enter, he’ll likely drag you to the bed. Your thoughts have undone much of his restraint already. Take heed not to stir more of his passion.”

How?

My mind reeled, unable to discern how I was to act. Stephan smiled and stepped forward when Fallon shoved me hard into the room. My footing faltered, and I glared back at the alpha who made me feel like an awkward youth still unaccustomed to walking. He smiled and closed the door, sealing me into the bed chamber.

Alone with Stephan.

He made his way to me, his steps those of a prowling creature intent on possessing the one he wanted. Me. I stammered for something to say to break the raging tension between us, but fell silent when I realized what was between us was far more than tension.

I stepped toward him, and he growled, closing the distance with a speed which matched my flailing pulse and breathing. His fingers wound in my hair, and his mouth moved toward mine, pausing close enough for his breath to dance across my lips and send shards of awareness down to the pool of desire between my legs.

“Once I taste your lips I will not have the control to do less than possess you fully, Hannah. Decide now, for I have not the heart to do anything other than sate our raging needs.” My hands went to his chest.

The fiery inferno within his eyes swallowed my fear whole and replaced it with a determination to pleasure the king before me.

“It’ll be the man tasting the nectar of your passion. It’ll be the man fucking you senseless until you surrender from exhaustion. It’ll be the man savoring your beauty as you abandon your inhibition and come hard on my cock.” His words ignited my lust and left me weak at the reminder he knew my every thought. “The king will never be in this bed with you, for the man wanted to possess you long before he was king.”

Defenseless to the imagery assailing me, I ran my fingers down his bare chest and dug my nails into his firm abdomen. “Birds of prey soar within me right here. Will you make them vanish?”

“I will.” His lips feathered mine, fluttering across my mouth. I shivered and longed for a deeper taste of him. “Say you are mine, and you will taste me fully. I must hear the words to quell the beast within me.”

I couldn’t believe there was any doubt. “I am yours.”

His growl lodged within my mouth as his kiss consumed me. My hands went around him, drawing him to me. His hands glided down my body. The material covering me ripped easily under the weight of his tug. I gasped.

He severed the kiss which left my mouth burning for him. He cupped my breasts and observed them within his grasp. “I wanted to be the first to see you.”

“They warned me I stirred too much of your passion.”

Concern filled his eyes. “I will not ravage you tonight, though I may long to. I may not be as gentle as your first lover should be.”

“I never asked for that.”

His thumbs flicked my nipples. They hardened with his touch, sending shards of awareness through my body. My moan mingled between us while I ran my nails down his arms, urging him to savor my body.

“I should’ve allowed our customs to remain intact and allowed another to bed you the first time. I fear my passion is too great to be the gentle, detached lover a maiden needs.” His fingers grazed my cheek as his lips hovered above mine. “But I’d have to kill whoever bedded you.”

I groaned, and his mouth crushed against mine. My tongue battled with his for control of the kiss that enflamed my senses and drove my passions until they raced across my skin and longed to escape. A growl filled the air, and he led me to the bed. My mind played tricks on me because I could swear I could hear his beating in time to mine.

Stephan placed me in the center of the bed. The pelts were soft against my flushed skin. His hands moved swiftly to remove his pants. Finally, I’d see the rest of the golden skin that had taunted my most intimate thoughts. I’d heard tales from fallen doves within our village of a man’s privates. Wild stories of lust had branded them all as stories for the foolish.

Stephan’s body left mine unable to move. Never had I expected to see such magnificent power honed into a body worthy of a god. No, a king. I memorized each glorious inch of skin while he stood before the

bed. His cock was hard, long and thick with need. My fingers itched with the compulsion to surround his shaft and feel it pulse within my grasp.

Somehow I knew it would. How did I know that? Perhaps it had been in one of those tales I'd heard and dismissed. Perhaps a part of me had always been meant to be here—in his bed. My pussy clenched as I thought of his large cock filling me. A moment of virginal fear brushed across my thoughts, but I knew Stephan was the one meant to be my first.

No one else stirred the depths of desire he did. I took a shaky breath when he moved onto the bed and hovered over me. His mouth moved to my neck, his tongue lapped at my raging pulse. My hands rested on his arms as my skin heated under his touch, which slid from my arms down the sides of my breasts and to my waist.

His cock grazed my pussy as he positioned himself. I gasped at the sensation of skin-on-skin and longed for Stephan to close the distance between us. But his mouth moved, tasting its way down my flushed skin. A trail of kisses across the swell of my breasts made me shiver in anticipation. His hand cupped my breast and flicked an aching nub. He lowered his mouth, and I gasped as he took my nipple and laved it with his tongue.

I thrust my body upward, but his other hand settled me back against the bed and his lower body pinned me. His cock ground against my thigh while his mouth worked on both my breasts with equal measure. Fire erupted within me, centering at my pussy. I remembered how his fingers felt there and longed for the bursting pleasure he'd given me before.

Would it be the same this time?

His mouth returned to mine, and I kissed him. Sating the raging need to know each inch of his skin as he was learning mine drove my actions. I pulled at him and hissed my displeasure until he lowered his chest. He trembled, his skin surging beneath my lips. My pulse beat wildly when he growled, and I knew I incited the same depth of need in him as he did me.

I moved my hand down his stomach.

"Don't, Hannah." His growl made me smile. His golden eyes were now swallowed whole by the fiery embers I'd always found so fascinating. "Touch me there and I will lose what little control I have."

"Good." My brazen response empowered me as my palm touched the tip of his cock. A stream of emotions rushed across his face as my fingers slid slowly down the shaft. "Does it pain you when I touch you here?"

Stephan settled his weight on one arm and brought his free hand between us. My breathing stopped when his fingers grazed my slickened pussy. "So wet for me."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Does this pain you?"

He slid his fingers across my pussy and massaged my clit. I dug my nails into his side and moved my other hand across his cock. "It makes me want something, but I don't know what."

He kissed my neck. "Let me show you."

I groaned when he removed my hands from him and pinned them above my head. His tongue delved into my mouth and suckled mine. I moaned as his cock filled me. I cried out when he pushed past my virginal barrier. Stephan stilled all but his kiss, which sent flickers of hunger coursing through me.

My pussy clenched his cock. The need for him to bring me to the pleasure I'd felt before overwhelmed me. Unsure how to convey my wants when I didn't understand them myself, I dug my nails into his arms and hoped he still read my thoughts. For once I was glad he knew my desires, for surely he'd know how to sate the fires burning within me.

He growled against my mouth, his hips moving as he plunged his cock slowly in and out of me. I whimpered with the loss of him in me and reveled in his return. I longed for the sensations our passion created to continue forever. I remembered the harsh words of the woman saying he'd bed me until dawn. I hoped she was right, for I couldn't imagine wishing an end to such heady desire.

Waves of pleasure crashed around me. I met his thrusts and guided his mouth. He laved my skin as I did his, but nothing detracted from the way his cock moved within me. My pussy gripped his shaft as the fires within me erupted into an inferno that spread through my body.

Stephan's growl filled my ears and his movements stilled. I cupped his buttocks, squeezing and begging with my hands for him not to retreat because I couldn't trust my voice. His name tumbled from my throat again and again, as if saying his name would prolong the immense bursts of sensations.

His raspy breathing mingled with mine when he drew me into his embrace. I wished he'd remained atop me, because the loss of his weight stirred my vulnerability. His arms wrapped around me and drew me closer, his body flush against my back. "The depth of your passions amazes me, Hannah."

I allowed my thoughts to tumble freely within my mind, knowing I had no will to control them even if I knew how. I refused to allow anything to meddle with the waves of sensations wafting through me. "Is it always like this?"

"With you it will be."

His words made my heart swell, even though I doubted there'd be much of a future for us. After all, I wasn't a part of his world. "What of the legion marching?"

He sighed, his breath caressing my neck as his finger slid across my hip down to my stomach and to my breasts. "Our alphas will strike them swiftly, but we move to join forces with the remaining fighters of your village and the neighboring Timbria in the morn."

"You would expose your people?" His words shocked me. Concerned me.

“In times of war it is a necessity. Our mutual enemy already clears forest to the north. I won’t have our village suffer the burning Nalla’s generation did the last time we were at war. Telling your people of mine is the best plan.”

I prayed he was right and that whichever of the villagers remained would be more understanding of him and his people than they had been of me when I returned to the village as a youth. “When do you go?”

“At dawn. We’ll return with whichever leaders of your people we can find and discuss our battle plans from there.” Sadness filled his voice. “We will be together again by dusk. I promise.”

Chapter Six

A week had passed since then, and Stephan was finally returning. I took little comfort in Nalla's company, and the heady concoction she continued to give me to calm my raging concerns. Troops had advanced sooner than anticipated, and Stephan had led the alphas into battle before seeking the joined effort of the remaining villagers from the area.

"They have returned," Nalla said.

Stephan.

"It will take some time for him to greet you, child. Patience."

I nodded, but prayed she was wrong. All I sought was a moment to guide my hands across his body and ensure for myself he was safe. Whole. Alive.

Still mine.

The door to Nalla's home swung open. Nalla's eyes widened. "Xavier. What's wrong?"

How could Nalla know something was wrong merely by an alpha's presence?

"Xavier is one of the outer alphas. He never enters the village and serves our pack by being the leader of the outer legion of our forces."

"You are Hannah." His gaze roamed my body briefly before settling on Nalla. "Fallon is injured."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough to have me here. Come." He turned and left.

Nalla moved with swiftness, throwing varieties of potions and herbs into a sack. "Come with me, child. You have learned much of my herbs while here. You will assist me if needed."

I followed her, her steps faster than I'd expected from someone of her age. She moved toward the palace. I hoped Fallon's injuries weren't severe. How was Stephan?

The guards allowed her entry, but prevented my passage. Nalla turned. "Allow her entry, or I will show you why so many fear me."

The two alphas stepped aside, and she and I moved hastily through the corridor I remembered all too well from last week. We made our way to the door nearest Stephan's. A large cluster of men stood there. They all watched Nalla walk toward them, expectation and worry etched on their handsome faces.

She pressed past the crush of bodies and into the room, her hand dragging my nervous body behind her. My gaze moved to Stephan of its own accord, drinking in the sight of him. His eyes were filled with

pain, fear. I longed to soothe him. I swallowed back my thoughts, determined not to add to what grief he experienced.

Not now.

Now Stephan needed Nalla. Fallon needed aid. Here Stephan was king, not the man I longed to welcome back. I moved to stand beside the aged healer when she sat on the bed and peered down at Fallon. Blood coated much of his pants. An angry gash covered his stomach with oozing crimson which made me nauseous. I fought the nausea and waited for Nalla's guidance.

Their people healed quickly. Nalla had taught me much the past week in an effort to expend my concerns over Stephan. She'd assured me there were no injuries that could down an alpha—at least none a human could inflict easily. Only the loss of their heart or head could stop them from living. Yet Fallon lay like the dead, his body limp and lifeless. His eyes were hollow as they moved from Stephan to Nalla and then to me.

His lips curved into a grin, and he looked over to Stephan. "See, brother. I told you she'd still be here and hungry for your touch. You worried for naught."

"What injury downed him so?"

Nalla's hands moved swiftly over his body. I instinctively grabbed a cloth and dampened it, knowing the excess blood needed to be removed so she could see the injury. It was what my people would do. Surely the same would be needed here.

I gave her the cloth, and her hands swiped around the injury until more of his stomach was clear of the vile crimson stains. An angry wound resembling that of a sword sliced through him, the edges sizzling as if burning him from the inside.

"What do you feel, Fallon?"

"Their swords were different. They sliced and burned when they entered." His words were choppy, half whispered as he closed his eyes.

"Remain with me, brother." Stephan's voice boomed with authority.

Fallon's long lashes fluttered. "Just a moment's rest."

I squeezed Fallon's hand and chewed on my lower lip, unsure how to aid him or Nalla.

"This is most strange. I've never seen anything such as this," Nalla said.

"Some thought the alloy a poison to our blood."

Nalla's eyes widened with shock. "Were there casualties?"

Stephan nodded, his face grim. "Four."

"Dear heavens!"

The number seemed miniscule to my ears, but I knew by their standards that was many. Only three of their kind had died in the past three hundred years. Death was rarer than pregnancy, which occurred only infrequently.

“Leave us.” Nalla glanced over her shoulder at me. “We must cleanse this wound fully. Perhaps that will stop it from eating his flesh.”

I studied the wound, now able to discern the visible hole slowly growing. I suppressed my gasp, but knew from Stephan’s pained look it did little to quell the growing concern cramping the room. Nalla motioned to all the alphas looming behind us. “Leave us.”

They moved swiftly from the room. Stephan stood and began to pace.

“That included you.” Nalla pointed to Stephan. “Fallon can sense your distress. Leave us.”

“You kick out the king?”

“No. I kick out the big brother. Leave us.”

Stephan’s gaze slid over me and he smiled softly. “This was not the reunion I longed for.”

I nodded, knowing I’d ensure he got a better greeting once Fallon was safe.

Exhaustion plagued me by the time we left Fallon’s quarters. Already his blood had begun to expend whatever dreadful compound had downed him. Nalla had worked furiously, mixing herbs and creating concoction after concoction and shoveling it into Fallon with a determination like none I’d seen.

The alpha had spewed and sputtered his aggravation, but obeyed his elder. The fiery embers returned to his eyes an hour before Nalla pronounced he’d live. A flood of joy filled my soul when I saw Stephan’s relief.

Warm hands massaged my aching shoulders. I didn’t turn around because I knew from my rapid pulse it was Stephan. His long legs grazed my skin from behind, his body flush against mine. “I missed you, Hannah.”

“And I you.”

“Show me.” His steps pushed me toward his room.

“I doubt you are ready for my passion.” Bravado streamed from me, emboldened by the feel of his hard cock pressed against my back as we moved into his bed chamber. He shut the door and I shivered, knowing many alphas stood in the hallway. For now I didn’t care who heard me. I needed to feel him touching me, tasting me, fucking me.

He lifted me, and I gasped as his mouth claimed mine. Gone was the gentle lover’s touch from before. His fingers pinched and tormented while he stripped me of my clothes. My nipples budded and surrendered to his ministrations. He laid me on the bed, and I finally felt the weight of his body on mine that I’d longed for all week.

His growl echoed through the chamber as he stripped down. My hands greedily wrapped around the thick shaft of his erection. He moved to free it, but I ran my nails down his thighs and made my own attempt at a growl. His chuckle softened the desperation flowing through me.

Stephan was going nowhere.

My lips moved over his stomach. "I've longed to taste your skin."

He groaned and wrapped his fingers in my hair.

"I used to hide outside and listen to the newly married women speak with one another of their intimacies. I remember wondering if they were right when they spoke of tasting a man everywhere."

Stephan's body tensed when my fingers slid off his cock and around his hips to grasp his buttocks. I placed a soft kiss on the tip of his cock and felt his entire body shiver. Desire surged within me. I laved the tip and savored the taste of him on my tongue.

I grasped his shaft and began sucking the tip, hoping he'd guide me to what pleasure he sought. He growled and I continued my ministrations, savoring the tightening of his muscles and his groaned responses.

His hands removed me from his cock, and I looked up at him, angered by his stopping me. The hunger in his eyes halted my breathing. He pressed me down onto the bed and covered me with his body. His mouth captured mine, demanding control of the passion between us. I surrendered to him.

Something stirred within me when he tasted my flesh, his tongue moving down my neck and across my breasts until foraying down my stomach. A flutter flowed under my skin, and I shivered. He growled his breath hotly against my abdomen. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear your inner animal wants to mate with me."

"If I had one, she'd be holding you down to the bed so I can fill you with my cock."

"Such talk will keep you under me all night."

"Promise?" I taunted him through a gasped breath as his fingers found my wet pussy.

He settled between my legs, his mouth placing a warm kiss on my stomach. "I've longed for a taste of your sweet nectar, Hannah."

I stirred, restless and unsure what his words meant. His fingers dipped inside me, spreading my folds as his tongue laved at my slit. I thrust my body upwards, arching until his other hand pressed me back to the bed and held me firmly in place while his mouth moved across my pussy. Fire spread through my loins, engulfing me in flames of passion. I grasped the pelts under me and rode the sensations consuming me.

I gasped for air when he moved from me. I'd come hard, though I couldn't remember much of the past few minutes. The pleasure had stolen my senses from me, leaving me a bundle of nerves at his mercy and under his control. A grin formed on his handsome face. He knew what he'd done to me and, mercy me, I wanted more.

I claimed his mouth, dragging him down to me. My hands roamed his body as his had mine. His cock was hard and throbbing under my touch as I began stroking it again. He moved to mount me, but I pressed hard against him until he obediently rested his back on the bed. I straddled him quickly and relished the way his fingers moved across my skin as the fiery embers of his eyes swept across me.

I'd never have my fill of Stephan. I moved over him and slowly filled myself with his hard cock. I moaned at the awkward sensation of being atop him, astride such a powerful body. I intended to have him.

His hands rested on my hips, and his growl filled the air, mixing with my moan of delight when he filled me fully. I'd fantasized of taking Stephan in this way for three days, ever since discovering two of his people at the river. The maiden had ridden the alpha hard, and my guilty conscience couldn't drag me from it.

Stephan groaned under me, and I remembered he could read my every thought. I moved atop him, choosing to move however it felt best for my pussy. My nails ran down his stomach. I knew continuing to mark his glorious flesh was wrong, but I wanted everyone to know this man was mine.

"Mine." The groaned word erupted from him as he moved under me. "You are mine, Hannah. No one else will ever fuck you."

I whimpered, unable to imagine myself allowing another to be this intimate with me. Only Stephan drove me to the depths of passion and ignited such need within me. Only his cock could command my body's darkest desires.

I fucked his cock, riding him with all the passion I'd bolstered for the past week. It had been too long since I'd had him. His growl filled the air as he maneuvered us with a speed that made my pulse race. His strength shocked and thrilled me. Confusion set in, and I was on all fours before I knew what happened. He was behind me, his cock filling my pussy.

Stephan's fingers were in my hair, tugging my head until his mouth could take mine. His kiss was hot and hungry and his cock fucked me hard and deep. "I will fuck you each night."

His thumb found my clit and massaged. The assault swept me into the fiery pleasure I'd climbed out of before. I surrendered to my release and savored the sound of him expending his need within me. I turned and fell on the bed, my back resting on the soft pelts. Stephan's body covered mine, his mouth hot on my ear. "You taunt the animal within me with those lustful thoughts of yours."

"I cannot help what you incite."

"I'm afraid I will never gain control of the beast within me. He longs to be in our bed."

"Then he shall always be welcome." I ran my fingers down his chest and traced the healing scratches I'd left on him. "I handle him well enough, I think."

"You fuck him hard." Stephan pulled me into his arms. "I missed you."

"And I you."

"How was your time in the village?"

"Nalla showed me much in the way of herbs and medicine. I made friends with Petra and Morena."

"I'm glad to hear that. They are good women. Many of our alphas wish to mate with them, but they've shunned their advances."

The two women had befriended me shortly after the departure of Stephan and his alphas. I had been pained by the sudden loss of one of my only allies. Their company had kept me sane—along with Nalla’s patient and calm presence. “Petra has eyes only for Fallon.”

“They’d be a worthy match, though I doubt she’d enjoy his bed past the first night. My brother’s needs are great and have gotten worse with you in the village.”

I swallowed, unsure how to respond. I hadn’t expected Stephan to know of Fallon’s desire for me.

“We’ve always coveted the same women. You are a passionate lover. Many of the alphas wish to be your mate.”

I shivered, unused to such open desire. I couldn’t handle the thoughts tumbling through my head about the future and my place within the village—assuming I had one. “What of the battle?”

“We held our own and pressed them away from the forest lands. They’ll be back with reinforcements, though, so we must march again.”

“But what of the alliance with the villagers?” The flicker of emotions rushing across his face transfixed me.

“A leader of each village has been brought here. They’ve been met with by me on the way here and by my closest council members—except Fallon.”

I listened, fear pummeling my veins as concern filled his eyes.

“Your father is here.”

He’d lived. I doubted my father cared whether I’d survived the village attack, but I was relieved to know he’d survived the battle. “And my brother?”

“I know not of him, but you may see your father on the morrow.”

I rested against Stephan and closed my weary eyes. For now, all was right.

Chapter Seven

The following evening, the alphas returned from their meeting with the two village leaders. I was surprised to learn one of them was my father. He'd never been a leader of much, except perhaps tempers. It left me thinking few of my village remained. Why else would he have taken command? His hot-headed temper and angry ways did naught but destroy. He couldn't be trusted, and I hoped Stephan could sense the evil within the man who'd raised me.

Guilt plagued me at my judgmental thoughts. I had no right to think such things of my stepfather because he'd provided for me as best he could. I knew he deserved my respect, though a part of me refused to comply. I was relieved his blood didn't surge through my veins. My mother said his heart had blackened shortly after they'd wed, and that thought saddened me as he came from the meeting chamber. His face was devoid of emotion.

There was no joy or gratitude for my safety, no expression of love or concern for all I'd been through. He headed toward me, his body cold and distant when he hugged me in a half-embrace too reminiscent of past forced emotional displays in the village for me not to know it was show and naught else.

"My heart rejoices for your return."

My words were forced, and one look at Stephan and his guarded stance signaled he knew all was not right between my father and me. His alphas stood at attention, their stance the same as his—arms at their sides and their knees unlocked. Many would see the stance as a sign of comfort, but I'd seen enough of the youth practicing the past few days to know it was one of battle. Their bodies hummed with the urge to shift. I had no idea how I discerned that, but I knew it to be the truth when I saw the crystallized depths of Stephan's eyes.

"Let us speak alone. I wish to know how you've fared." My father wrapped his fingers around my upper arm and began pulling toward the exit blocked with guards.

"We have plenty of private quarters within the palace you may use." Stephan's voice boomed within the circular room. "I'd prefer you take your rest within these walls, where your needs can be met fully."

My father glanced about the room with the half-hooded evil glare I'd seen a hundred times. Whatever thoughts this man had were diabolical and not intended to aid Stephan's war against our enemy. The unknown man from the other village near mine used an easy stance as he spoke with Xavier. His voice was filled with awe while he conversed with the alpha shifter.

My father's nod was curt. He followed Stephan, who led us to a chamber within a long corridor I'd never been privy to before. My heart raced when I moved into the room and Stephan left me alone with my father.

Silence engulfed the room before he began pacing, his steps sliding across the room in the half-lazy manner he'd used for years. Step, drag, step. Step, drag, step.

"How is Michael?" Mentioning my brother was a risk, but one I had to take. Despite my father's scorn, my brother still carried a bit of familial love for me. At least he had before marching to war. Had he been changed by battle as well?

My mother had always excused my father's actions because of the war—saying it changed men. After seeing Stephan and his men, I wondered if that was true. None of those I'd spoken to seemed half as blackened in their souls as my father.

"He's dead."

I swiped the tear which slid down my cheek quickly. But he'd already noticed. His sneer made my blood freeze. I backed up, but said nothing.

"You cry for him?" He choked on the words as he moved closer, but I held my ground. "At least I didn't run like you. I buried him. My own son."

"I'm sorry, Father."

"You are sorry. Sorrier than I'd imagined. You know what it was like for me to return to the village and find out from the few who lived that you ran? You ran and didn't even bother to come back and deal with your own mother." His anger boomed through the room. "I had to bury her myself. Her corpse was days old. I should make you dig her back up and dig another hole yourself. After all she'd done for her worthless daughter, you turn and prove I was right all along."

I allowed his rage to boil and fester into the angry wounds I'd numbed to long ago. Tears slid down my cheeks, but I allowed them to, knowing he enjoyed seeing my regret and self-loathing run unhindered like fresh blood. "She made me promise to run as soon as I could. I swore."

"Of course you swore. You worthless slut." His voice made me jump, but I remained calm, determined to hide the fear trickling to life within me. Would Stephan pick up on my emotions?

I focused on him and what he made me feel. War was upon us, yet I felt safer within Stephan's world and his embrace than any other time I could remember. My father glared into my eyes.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Of course, Father."

He sneered. "Have you been acting like a slut with one of these men?"

I shook my head. "Of course not, Father."

"You better be telling me the truth."

I was. I might've surrendered to my desire for Stephan, but I was by no means a slut. "I'm sure the king has quarters within the private area for you."

"He'd better. It's the least he can do for dragging us here with all of *them*." His hatred and scorn were etched within his words, and my blood ran cold.

"Will you have the village men march beside him against the enemy?"

He looked at me. "We march on the enemy in the morning, but my wound keeps me from being there. I'd love to see their faces."

A stain coated his tunic. "We should have Nalla take a look at that, Father. She is a skilled healer."

"I don't need any of their help." He bit his lip. "I'll be fine. Show me where I sleep and then work on getting me some food."

My father was placed in the room across from Fallon's and shared a wall with Stephan's. My body hummed with the need to spend time with Stephan, but that was not destined to happen until after the battle.

My father's hateful glare never left me, leaving me no time to spend with Stephan before he and the alphas moved to engage in war. I longed to be at his side. I prayed he heard my thoughts and knew my desires before he left. Surely he could still read my mind.

The morning dawn splayed through the glade and into the small window of my father's room as I made my way in. I smiled, my nerves rattling like the dishes on the platter I carried to him. The smile he gave me back made my skin crawl with concern, but perhaps I'd been too skeptical of him.

"Nalla offered to tend your wound if you'd like."

"I want none of their kind around me. They're evil incarnate."

My gasp echoed through the room. I set the tray down, afraid I'd drop it from the shock filling me. "They saved my life."

"Irony that their trust in you will be their downfall. Without it I would've never found this place." His laugh made my heart stop as my mind raced to comprehend what he'd said.

"What are you saying?"

He sneered. "You always were stupid, like your mother."

"Don't ever speak of her that way."

My face stung with his slap. I spat in his face, and he drew back to hit me again. I braced myself for the blow, but it never came. Behind him, an enraged Fallon dragged himself into the room. His body shook from the effort he'd expended to make his way to me.

My father struggled against Fallon's restraint, but the alpha, even injured, was stronger than my father. "You have no right to interfere between me and my daughter."

"I do. More than you realize, I do." Fallon looked to me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "He speaks of a plan against Stephan, Fallon. We must warn him."

"Our pack is too far to warn them now. Stephan is wise and doesn't trust your father. All will be well." Fallon's pained voice offered me strength I couldn't find alone.

"He doesn't trust my father?" Hope filled me.

"No, because you didn't."

Two men appeared, and my father's outrage filled the room. "I should kill you for daring to hold me like a prisoner."

"Were I my brother, your heart would be flailing on the floor beside your worthless body."

"He wouldn't dare."

"I assure you he would, since you dared to harm a female."

"She's not your concern."

"I'll leave Stephan to respond to that." Fallon nodded and the two men dragged my father out.

I moved to Fallon. His wound seeped from the excursion from his room. "Let's get you back where you should be before Nalla hears of this."

"There's no hiding from her." Tenderness reflected in his voice as I led him across the hall.

"Thank you." My gratitude seemed too small compared to what he'd done. "No one's ever interceded like that for me."

"Stephan won't be happy to learn of his treatment of you."

I didn't think Stephan needed to be troubled with such matters. Fallon's low laughter made me think it would be otherwise, though. Opting to change the subject, I moved to the hearth and poured some hot water. I sprinkled in the herbs Nalla left and gave the mug to Fallon. The tonic smelled like the one I drank daily now.

"I know this is bitter, but it does taste better over time."

He took the mug and drank. He continued observing me while he set the mug down. "You've had this before?"

I nodded. "Nalla began giving it to me my first day here. I drink it daily."

"Really?"

"I expected it to end after I recovered, but I'm up to two mugs a day."

"Interesting."

"Of course, it may not be entirely the same. She puts droplets of some kind in mine."

"And she's done this in front of Stephan?"

"No." I was curious by his inquisitiveness. "Why does this matter?"

He shook his head and grinned. "It doesn't."

"What will happen to my father?"

Fallon reclined on the bed. I moved to his side and removed the soiled dressing. My mind was swept into the consuming concern for Stephan and those he led.

“He’ll be all right. Stephan’s a mighty warrior.” His lopsided grin made me smile.

“This alloy they used concerns me. It sounded like it worries Nalla as well.”

“She worries for naught.” Fallon winced as he repositioned his body to ease the tension from his stomach. “The alphas will return with a sample.”

A crisp breeze slid through the glade as villagers gathered around the alphas. My heart swelled in a mixture of gratitude and regret when Stephan and his men led the restrained remnants of my village’s fighters into Realto.

The other leader from Timbria walked beside Xavier. Both men smiled and spoke with easy tones. Timbrian fighters walked amongst the alphas. Their presence was clearly welcome.

Relief and joy filled me upon seeing Stephan. Nothing beyond him being safe and back home with his alphas mattered. Again I longed for a moment alone with him so my hands could run along his body and offer me first-hand proof he was all right.

My pulse raced when I saw him. Fiery embers flared in his eyes, visible to me from ten wide paces. My soul soured.

Fallon escorted my father toward the other men of my village, who clustered farthest from Stephan. Evil glinted from his face, and his mouth turned upwards into the grin that always coiled my stomach for...

Danger.

The thought tumbled from my mind in a scream. Alphas moved to encircle Stephan. I felt his gaze on mine as he maneuvered from the pack toward me. I shook my head. Fear for him and his people burned my insides. Somehow my father expected his diabolical double-cross to be fulfilled.

I glanced though the thick mass of fighters. Desperation consumed me while I tried to recall the faces of all the villagers. I might know why my father seemed enthralled by the scene before him. Faces blended in my mind and distorted my fear into a raging inferno of consummate desperation.

Fallon was at my side. Stephan’s booming command to release him reverberated through the glade.

“Answer me, Hannah.”

I hadn’t heard Fallon’s question.

“You must calm yourself. Your agitation erupts Stephan’s protectiveness and that of our alphas sworn to protect him. What frightens you?”

“My father...his face.” I continued to search.

Nothing.

A bustle of movement to my left drew my attention. I moved toward Xavier and the Timbrian leader. From there I could see the remaining faces.

I hoped.

I had to figure out what my father's diabolical plan was. These people had allowed me to remain with them when I had nowhere else to turn. Their warriors had saved me from a horrendous fate I refused to fathom. I owed them my protection. Even if it was from my kin.

Michael.

He lives!

I blinked and he was gone. Fallon and Xavier moved swiftly. Only I knew my brother's face. I and my father. Finding my brother was paramount.

He lives.

Surely that was my father's insidious plan. Michael served the Timbrian. Their leader was at my side along with Xavier, whose words mimicked my thoughts.

"Have you any new among your men—any strangers?"

"Only one. He came from Tash and swore his allegiance just two risings past." The man glanced at the thick mass of bodies. "I don't see him."

Something within me stirred to life when my gaze met Michael's. An evil grin etched his face into a sinister reminder of my father's. I screamed his name when his arms moved. An arrow aimed toward Stephan—who'd broken from the crush of alphas determined to confine him to the safety of the inner circle.

Xavier and Fallon moved toward where I stared, but many had drawn their bows, ready to strike whoever amongst them dared to assault the king.

Stephan.

I leaped when the arrow fired, unsure of my plan. I doubted my mind ever formed anything beyond the overwhelming need to protect Stephan and his people from my flesh and blood.

Pain slammed into my shoulder and leg where I fell to the ground. Menacing growls severed Michael's enraged cry. Dizziness assailed me, and my hand moved from my wound then above my face to where I could see the crimson droplets falling onto me.

Chapter Eight

I grabbed the arrow, but a steady hand pried my fingers from it. Someone lifted and embraced me. I blinked, trying to focus on Stephan.

“Nalla!”

“Easy, brother. She comes already with her potions.” Fallon’s steady voice filled my ears, his tone a forced calm to offset Stephan’s pained cry.

“Oh, Hannah. My heart can’t bear your loss. You must fight.”

I squeezed his arm and moved my hand to his face when my vision finally obeyed my confused mind and focused. Golden eyes filled with grey flecks peered back at me, their sadness tugging at my flailing heart.

“We need an elder to walk our king through the passage.” Gasps followed Fallon’s shouted statement.

“I will journey with our king.”

“As will I.”

Their voices drifted through my mind. I swallowed back my turbulent emotions and focused on Stephan.

“Stay with me, Hannah.”

“Go.” Fallon removed Stephan’s hand from me and I moved to reestablish contact. “Prepare yourself for the journey. I will see to Hannah and aid Nalla.”

“But she cannot journey.” His voice was low and pained, not the Stephan I loved.

Love.

I choked on the realization and hoped Stephan knew the depth of my devotion to him.

“She can. She has. We both know this,” Fallon said. Silence filled the air around us. “Go, Stephan.”

My lips moved to express my love, but I knew he wouldn’t hear, wouldn’t know what he meant to me.

“He does.” Fallon lifted my head. “Calm your mind. Nalla’s meddling has given us hope for a joyful end.”

How?

Blackness descended, and I held on to Fallon as my hearing abandoned me. My limbs grew weak, but something within me continued to trickle morsels of life to my faltering body.

My senses returned and Fallon patted Stephan’s back. “She has the resilience of a queen.”

“And the passion of a mate.” Stephan’s lips grazed mine. “Never will I find a way to repay Nalla for the gift she’s given me.”

Confusion befuddled my ability to speak.

“Don’t thank me yet. Much resides on the connection you two have and its strength to remain on your journey.”

Journey? I wasn’t fit to move—couldn’t speak or see clearly.

“Ease yourself, child. The tonic I’ve been giving you was to awaken your inner animal. We’re all gifted with one by the maker, but your people’s remain dormant. I’ve been waking her for you.” The woman’s whispered. “For Stephan.”

Stephan. I clung to the name since it was all that made sense to my mind.

“We begin now. Her animal is still weak and too young for such pain. She’s consumed the blood and tears of an elder,” Nalla stated.

“As have I,” Stephan replied.

“Let us begin.” Fallon stood.

“Drink, child.” I choked on the liquid streaming down my constricting throat. Something massaged me there, and I swallowed. “That’s it, child. Drink it all and sleep the sleep of the lovelorn.”

I sighed as she set my head down. Her words drifted through a hazy delirium.

“You must take the brunt of the journey, Stephan. Draw her out. Hold on to her inner animal and grow the love between you. Hannah is too weak to do aught but respond.”

“I will not fail her.”

“Restrain your inner wolf. It is strong, more powerful than any other. It could frighten her animal away.”

“He will be restrained.”

“Then drink.”

My senses detached from all but the colorless cloud of bliss drifting me through my headiest notions. Stephan. My eyes adjusted to the sterile surroundings as shards of color formed around me. Fiery crimson swirled, and hues of blue and purple jutted from the surface near me.

Stephan.

The colors reminded me of the game we played as children to pass the bitter cold night we’d been lost in.

“I take blue and purple and green.” His voice wrapped around me like fine silk. Gone was the youthful voice of the past.

“You’re here.” I wrapped myself in his arms, able to move only enough to secure a place against his body. I couldn’t see him, but I knew it was him. My Stephan. “Rest with me.”

“There’ll be eternities to spend here resting, Hannah. Let’s weave our souls’ home. Together.”
Pleasure spiraled through my weary frame. My limbs were hardened and unmoving.

“Later.” I hissed my displeasure and nestled my head into the crook of his arm. “Let us rest.”

“Come, Hannah. Create our world with me—build a home for our souls to slumber in together each night.”

I sighed my contentment. “Were it our home, slumber would never be.”

His breath fell hot against my neck. “Your passion tempts me, but this is a journey of our souls to grow together. Join with me, Hannah, as you did once before. Let us rebuild what time stole from us.”

His laugh tugged at my desire to share this with him. Color continued to erupt around me. Hues of purple, blue and green spread. Lush furniture draped in pelts and materials formed around me.

“You make this place dreary with darkness.”

“Show me how you wish it to be.”

The challenge consumed my mind. I focused on the beauty of the sunrise and the warmth of the waning sunset. Tapestries of orange, yellow and vibrant red wove with his colors.

I nestled against his arm and wiggled my ass against his cock. My pulse began to beat more strongly, my breathing stabilized. “There.”

“Tell me of our bed.”

I moaned. “Big, hard and all mine. Just like my Stephan.”

A massive bed appeared beneath us. I whimpered at the loss of lush comfort I’d had. Stephan’s hands moved to cup my breasts.

“I wish our bed to be soft, silken and sensual just like you.” Pillows formed beneath me, enveloping me in their warmth.

“Were this our bed, I would ride your cock every night, for not having you each night would pain my soul.”

“As it would mine.”

Silence fell between us as my eyes focused. The buzzing in my mind dissipated.

“But we would need more than a bed to feed our souls, Hannah. Tell me of your every desire.”

No one had ever asked that of me. I chewed on my lips and possibilities ran through my exhausted mind. “A garden for my herbs and roots so that I may be like Nalla and mend the broken. Like me.”

His hands moved down my body, fueling a hunger within me. “What else?”

I sighed and settled against him.

“Tell me.”

“What of your desires?”

“I desire a hearth filled with the crafts of our young.” His hand rested on my belly, which had begun to mend. “You wish to bear my children?”

“Aye, many. And may they all have your fiery golden eyes.” My fingers splayed across his. “I wish to always feel our child within me.”

He groaned. “Were it possible, you would.”

“I wish for no anger to separate us when we slumber. And may we never strike in fury.”

“Never. I vow to you.”

I believed him. The love within me spread, cleaning my soul of the scorn and negativity I’d experienced. The future with him would be different. Filled with laughter, joy and love.

I sighed. A rustling under my skin made me stir. “I feel as if something in me wants to crawl from me, Stephan.”

“Don’t force her. She’ll come to me when she’s ready—when she feels the love my inner wolf offers.”

Confusion and sorrow filled me. “I have no animal. I’m not like you.”

“You do, Hannah. Nalla awakened her for me. Tell me what she needs to feel safe. Tell me what she desires to feel loved.”

I thought of acceptance, and his people. “What of your people, Stephan? My presence troubles them and I don’t wish to wedge myself between you and your pack.”

His hand cupped my chin. Warmth spread through me when his lips feathered mine. “You are the light in my soul. You always have been.”

The truth reflected in his eyes. “But how?”

“You built my soul’s home. You poked and prodded and created it where it should reside when I was at death’s door. You dragged me into my soul’s home and breathed life into me with your kindness and pure heart. Were it not for you, my soul would’ve been eternally darkened by the misery and pain of my journey that day. You brought me life. Hope. Light. Joy. Love.” His lips grazed mine. “Live with me, Hannah. Love me.”

Streams of light filled my mind. Something stirred within me. I held to Stephan and tasted his mouth. He loved me.

My skin glistened with life, and a low growl tumbled from my lips. His responding growl melded with mine and echoed around us.

He drew my body against his, and he groaned. “Your animal moves to welcome mine. I feel her heart beating in time to mine.”

“You do?” I longed to sense it too.

“You will. Give her time to grow and you’ll soon sense me, no matter the distance. It’s how soul mates are within our people, and you are my soul.”

“Soul?”

“Unions within our people are different than they are with yours. Our souls become bound to one another. Our inner animals rejoice in a mutual love and strengthen the home our hearts will share. Nothing will sever our love. You are my soul, Hannah.”

“And you mine.”

Sunlight streamed across the glade when I opened my eyes and observed the gathering of Stephan’s pack. He stirred beside me, and the crowd cheered wildly as he rose and lifted me.

His lips captured mine as he set me down gently to stand at his side. Happiness filled me. Fallon clapped Stephan’s back. “It was a beautiful journey, brother. You have found a worthy soul mate.”

“Aye, I have.”

My heart swelled with his love. I clasped his hand.

“Welcome to our family and our pack, Hannah.” Fallon hugged me. “I can only hope to find a mate such as you.”

The change within everyone startled me and filled me with confusion. Stephan smiled and moved to sequester me from the mass of people vying for my attention.

“Your joy for us overwhelms and fills our hearts. Please, let us celebrate at another time—after my mate has had time to absorb today’s events.”

Nalla moved to my side. “You were remarkable, child. You’ve gained the hearts of our pack with your willingness to die for the king. You proved your soul is that of a queen.”

Queen. I smiled. What I’d done had always been for the man. He knew.

I took a deep breath. “We’re mated?”

“There will be a ceremony, but it’s more for celebration. The upcoming weeks will be filled with you meeting the pack.”

The pack. I’d never envisioned so many wanting to know me. It was all because of Stephan. How could we keep them safe now that so many knew of them?

The Timbrian leader stepped forward and extended his hand. “I’m Rall. Your bravery on this day fills me with pride for my brethren fighter. He is a lucky man to have a woman such as you.”

“Thank you.” The man clasped Stephan’s hand.

“We will tell a mighty tale of a young girl who got lost in the woods and that of a dastardly wolf. It will become the pastime story for our children, to instill their respect for the forest and incite fear in anyone who dare venture here.”

“That’s a fine plan,” Stephan said.

Fallon and Xavier worked to restrain the crush of people as they moved toward their king. My pulse raced and my breathing became labored at the concern pressing in me. How could I think to be a queen to these people?

“Don’t let this all overwhelm you, Hannah, for at the end of the day we are but one man and one woman eternally in love.”

I sighed and wrapped my arms around him. “Show me.”

Had I known the virility of their fairy tale rivaled that of my Stephan, perhaps I would’ve altered a few details. Red never suited me, and Stephan’s luscious, golden eyes deserve their own place within history. Even after all these centuries, his eyes still burn with passionate fiery embers, just as my heart continues to beat in time to his.

I might not have been graced with a Prince Charming on a white steed, or been gifted with a fairy godmother with the power to turn a pumpkin into a golden chariot. But what I, the mighty pirate of Lost Woods, managed to scour from my chest of wares is far more valuable—a love which has strengthened each day and a family so large it defies belief.

I pray if you recall only one thing from this true tale, it is that happily-ever-after does exist.

Know that Stephan and I flourish. Our pack has evolved, and many have left the forest we call home. Some live among you. Others carry on the more traditional lifestyle within the remotest regions possible. We laugh, love and share our knowledge with our brethren shifters—the jaguars.

May we all hold to our happily-ever-after and relish the knowledge that the conventional trappings of the fairy tales which enthrall us as children aren’t the morsels which feed our soul. It’s not the grandness of our life or love that unites us.

It’s that we love.

About the Author

To learn more about Cara Carnes, please visit www.caracarnes.com. Send an email to Cara Carnes at cara@caracarnes.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Cara! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/caracarnes>

Love can be a force of nature.

Serengeti Lightning

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Serengeti Shifters, Book 3

Mara Leonard is through hitting the snooze button on her biological clock. The Three Rocks Pride schoolteacher is ready to get serious about starting a family, and she needs a serious man to make that happen.

Regrettably, that means crossing less-than-serious Michael Minor off her list of potential mates. Michael is impulsive and passionate, but his spontaneity leaks into shapeshifting whenever his emotions run high—a tendency he should have outgrown long ago. As a sex buddy, he's delicious. Daddy material? Disqualified.

Michael is blindsided by Mara's rejection. Nine years separate them, and his genetic malady means no one in the pride treats him as an adult. But if she thinks he'll simply slink away to lick his wounds while she steps into the arms of another man, she has seriously underestimated him.

The tricky part will be convincing his over-analytical lover that he's more than a disposable sex toy. That real bravery means tearing up her damn checklist and following her heart. And doing it without letting their explosive sexual chemistry expose the Pride's secrets to the outside world.

Warning: This book features break-up sex, make-up sex, a lioness who's a cougar and a hot young lion who's grown up in all the right ways. Note: All electrical shocks are purely metaphorical.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Serengeti Lightning:

He'd wanted tonight to be perfect. This date was his chance to prove he deserved her, to show they were more than just hot sex. He knew she didn't think he was steady enough to be her mate, but he'd hoped to prove her wrong tonight.

Instead, all he'd proven was that he hadn't changed at all.

His sister, Ava, would remind him it wasn't his fault. He couldn't help it. The pride doctor said Michael was missing a neural inhibitor that drew the line between animal and man.

The science was small comfort. He would never be worthy of the woman curled against his side. How long could he expect her to stay with someone who could never give her the stability she craved? One more month? Two? Then who would she run to?

Michael forced the thought of the man who would take his place out of his head. Jealousy was savage—more likely than any other emotion to bring on a shift. He needed to get her back to the ranch, back onto pride lands, where a loss of control wouldn't expose them all.

He started to set her away from him, preparing to load her into the front seat, but her scent curled around him. Michael froze in place, his hands tight on her. He barely managed to keep his claws from snapping out.

Intermingled with the sweet twist of jasmine was the sinuous spice of lust. He could taste her desire on the air. While he'd been contemplating his sabotage of their relationship, Mara had apparently been thinking more much luscious thoughts. *Naughty girl.*

"Michael?" She spoke softly, a whisper on the warm spring breeze, but he felt that sigh of sound like a fist around his cock.

She slipped between him and the SUV, rubbing her body against his front every inch of the way.

Over the last few months, they'd learned one another's wants and needs. At first, they'd both assumed they would eventually grow tired of each other, but familiarity had only intensified each experience. They'd learned to play to their personal vices. He knew exactly how to touch her to get her wet in a heartbeat. And she knew he went hard at just the idea of pinning her to things—walls, doors, slippery shower tiles. He couldn't seem to get enough of crowding her against firm surfaces until she had no choice but to yield her softness to him.

Michael leaned into her, looming over her and pressing her back against the door until he heard the telltale catch in her breath. She loved this too. Mara may be dominant, but she almost never wanted to be on top. She wanted the man who would push her until she gave in, trusting her pleasure to his strength. She wanted *him*.

Now if only he could convince her their compatibility didn't end at the bedroom door.

Heavy-lidded eyes beckoned him. "Your wildness makes me feel wild," she purred.

Michael hesitated. Mara was never reckless. She reasoned things out and made the good decision, every time. So there was absolutely no explanation for her current behavior.

He had calmed. He was ready to take her home. All she had to do was hop in the car and drive back to the safety of the ranch. So why was she inciting him?

She urged him forward and he followed her lead. He bore her back against the metal wall of the SUV until the vehicle rocked slightly. She seemed to bask in the warmth of his body, drawing him tighter against her, if that was even possible. A small, sinful curve of a smile flashed out around her mouth.

Was she thinking what he was thinking? If he took her here, against the Cherokee, would they tip it? He knew he shouldn't want to try, but was captivated by the image teasing his thoughts. When she bit her lip, he wanted to bite it for her then suck that plump curve into his mouth.

"We should go." His voice was as rough as the gravel beneath their feet, but he kept his hands gentle as they stroked down her sides, over the flare of her hips, pausing above the hem of her skirt.

They *should* go. He should back away. He could yank up that little skirt, wrap those long legs around his hips and fuck her senseless just as soon as they were back on pride land. A fucking parking lot, no

matter how late it was, no matter how deep the shadows, was no place for this kind of game. He gripped her hips, fully intending to step away, but Mara—never, ever reckless Mara—forced his hand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed up onto her toes and captured his mouth in a ravenous, open-mouthed kiss. She begged him with her mouth, drawing him into her madness with each longing pull of her lips and strong sweep of her tongue. Or was it his madness she was surrendering to? Right now, he didn't know or care. Her willing heat fried his last working brain cells and he fell into instinct and need.

Michael took command of the kiss. He sucked that luscious lip and gently scraped his teeth across it. His hands fisted in her skirt, jerking the stretchy fabric up, and Mara sighed into his mouth. God, he loved the noises she made, the little murmurs and sighs, not quite caught in her throat. She was musical in her passion, an instrument his fingers loved to pluck and strum.

The skin of her thighs was satin beneath his fingers. He wrapped his hands around the backs of her thighs. His fingertips brushed against her heat and he hissed out a curse.

She wasn't wearing panties. And she was dripping already. His slightest touch called forth another rush of moisture. Her need hit his nostrils, fogging his already blurry thoughts.

With one swift pull, he lifted her. Her legs wrapped snugly around his hips. He notched his denim-covered erection against her pussy, but he didn't push like he wanted to, concerned about the rough fabric against her sensitive flesh. He shouldn't have worried. Mara ground herself on him, tearing her lips away from his to gasp out his name.

"Easy," he murmured into the hair at her temple, barely recognizing his own voice. He slid his hand between them and slicked a finger through her folds. The touch was designed to be more soothing than arousing. He wanted to wind her up a little tighter before he let her take off.

To fight this evil, they'll have to make love. Lots of love.

Awakening Beauty

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Fairytale Fantasies, Book 3

Joel Thorne feels as if he's been sleepwalking through his life. Wealth and success are his; now he's at a crossroads. Politics beckons, a move that would be made easier with a loveless marriage of convenience to his ambitious friend and ally, Vee Gabor. During a long mountain hike to clear his head, he discovers a castle overgrown with thorns and, inside, a beautiful sleeping woman.

When Princess Aurora opens her eyes, Joel's handsome face is imprinted on her heart—then she's swamped with grief and loss. An evil fairy tried to take her pure blood to gain power, and though her other godmothers fended off the worst of the curse, she's been asleep for a thousand years. Worse, she's been erased from history and from the memories of all she loved. True love brought her back, but to what future?

Despite their instant, strong attraction, Joel's practical nature wars with the possibility that magic is real. Yet with every touch, every kiss, the heat and emotion grow more real than anything he's ever known. Their union also reawakens something else. Something darker. An evil fairy's centuries-old vendetta that just won't die.

Warning: Contains explicit, edge-of-your-dreams sex, a newly minted hero in training, and a fairy princess who kicks butt for the man she loves. No fairy dust was spared in the making of this book.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Awakening Beauty:

Joel walked toward Aurora and crouched down among the dustier cushions beside her. "How do you feel?"

She swallowed. "Sore. Confused." She closed her eyes on the upsurge of tears. "Desolate," she whispered.

"Aurora." Her name on his lips soothed, as did his hand when he laid it on hers, warm and comforting. "Don't worry. We'll work this out. It's dark now, so we'll stay here tonight. Tomorrow, I'll take you down to the village and we can find a doctor who can help you."

She stared at him. "Will he give me back lost time? Will he give me my mother and father? My friends and my betrothed?"

There was a pause while he searched her eyes. He wasn't remotely intimidated by her anger. "I don't know," he said at last. "But I hope he'll give you something that helps."

He took his hand away and she felt curiously forlorn. But he only reached across her for his backpack. Clearly he had no concept of maintaining a respectful distance, for the hair on his arm, at once crisp and soft, actually tickled her chin. Even more strangely, she didn't mind. She liked the smell of him, warm, a

little faint sweat from exercise, something both elusive and alluring that reminded her of spice and orchards in summer.

He heaved the bag over her and dumped it between his long legs while he rummaged inside. “Hungry?”

Bemused as much by watching him as by his strange, curt speech, she had to think before she answered. “Um—yes, I think so...”

“Good.” He brought out some odd, light containers, pulling the lids off each with a mocking flourish. “Help yourself.”

Aurora closed her mouth. “What is it?”

“Bread, local cheese, salami and ham, some salad. Fruit, chocolate.” Misunderstanding her hesitation, he added, “There’s enough for two.”

It wasn’t what she was used to. Frankly, it was peasants’ food, but she’d been brought up never to be rude to her inferiors, and so she thanked him politely and reached into one box to pick up some cheese. He cut off a hunk of bread from the loaf, using a knife that unfolded from a short, rounded silver stick and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said again.

He took out a couple of bottles, one the clear water bottle she’d drunk from already, and the other a dark green color. He glanced at her. “There’s water and beer. I’d advise the former until you’ve seen the doctor.”

“I’ve never drunk beer in my life. Don’t you have any wine?”

“No.” He didn’t have to sound so pleased about it.

Sniffing, she took the water bottle, remembering to thank him once again. Her stomach rumbled and, as she bit into the bread and cheese together, she realized how good peasants’ food really was.

“So, Aurora, what’s the rest of your name?” he asked, placing two slices of salami and tomato slices onto one piece of bread.

“Alexandra Maria Helena, daughter of King Hubert Wilhelm George and Queen Elizabeth Annaliese.”

“I meant your surname.”

She frowned. “Do you jest? We are the royal family. Our lineage stretches back to the beginning of time.”

“The royal family, eh?” His tone still suggested that he doubted her word. “Schlaushagen is ruled by a democratically elected government these days.”

“Oh.” Aurora was at a loss to imagine a time in which her country did not have a monarch. How had such a thing come to pass? “Lauchevitzerstein is our family name.”

“My last name is Thorne,” he said and a quick smile flashed across his mouth. “No string of names and definitely no noble lineage. You can just call me Joel.”

He took a bite of his bread and Aurora found herself watching with fascination as his strong white teeth tore free a large chunk, taking it efficiently into his mouth and chewing close-mouthed. At least he didn’t have a peasant’s table manners.

When he’d swallowed, he picked up the green beer bottle and took a hefty swig. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen. It was my birthday when I...” She broke off, swamped once more by the memory of the glowing spinning wheel and the sharp, unexpected prick when she’d touched it.

“When you what?” he prompted.

“It was my birthday,” she repeated more slowly. “My parents had invited our friends, all the most powerful nobles from our country and from Karl’s, because our betrothal was to be announced. I was dressed for the ball, but the maids were so busy fussing over the correct jewelry for me I got bored, and wandered off.”

She stared in front of her, picked up the water bottle as if it held the secret of this mess. “I wanted to go to the south tower. I don’t know why. My parents had always forbidden it. But I’d snuck up there once before when I was a child, following one of the maids. It was full of sharp things, the things I was never allowed to go near—scissors and needles, pins, spinning wheels. So many that they positively *glittered*. That time the maid turned and saw me and quickly slammed and locked the door again.

“The night of the ball, I was drawn to return. I was nineteen and soon to be married. I didn’t want to be a child, so over-protected that I couldn’t even look at a pin! And so I went up there, even knowing the door would be locked. It always was.”

She looked at Joel, almost wondering at the effort of memory that seemed like yesterday and yet was hazy and confused. She couldn’t properly explain the compulsion that had drawn her to the tower. He gazed back steadily, waiting.

“It wasn’t. That’s the funny thing. The door wasn’t locked at all. When I pushed, it opened immediately and now all that was there was one solitary spinning wheel. It glittered too. In fact, it shone so brightly I just had to touch it, to find out what it felt like. So I walked over to it. Despite what my parents had always said ever since I could remember, I knew I was an adult now and nothing as trivial as a spinning wheel could possibly damage me. I reached out and touched the spindle.”

“Then what?” Joel prompted when she fell silent.

“I pricked my finger on it.” She lifted the finger, examining it. “Look.”

He leaned over, taking her hand, and gazed down at the healed scab on her right forefinger. He smiled and lifted the finger to his lips, kissing it lightly, briefly.

“You look, Aurora. That’s not a thousand-year-old scab. And I have to say, none of you looks a thousand years old. I think you fell up there and hurt your head. It’s quite a vivid story you’ve concocted for yourself, but with a doctor’s help, I’m sure your true memories will come back.”

Stricken, she stared at him. “But I want these ones. They’re all I have. Joel, I want my mother...”

Joel said something beneath his breath and put his arms around her, drawing her close into his arms. “We’ll find her,” he promised. “We’ll find everyone you’ve lost, everyone you need.”

Stunned by his familiarity, she held herself rigid, but then, suddenly terrified he would let her go, she relaxed into his solid comfort and let the tears come. Suddenly she didn’t care if he was a peasant or some strange lord from a future time that terrified her. She clutched his arms, his shoulders, as if they were her one salvation, buried her face in his chest and wept.

He held her in a big, rocking hug, stroking her hair until the storm had passed. Even then, when she slowly, shame-facedly, lifted her head, he didn’t let her go. His lips tugged upward and, in shy response, she let hers follow.

He bent his head and softly kissed her mouth.

At the first touch of his lips, something surged through her, vital and desperate. It was a brief kiss, less even than she had shared with Karl the night before the ball she’d never got to, and yet it changed everything. He drew back slightly, and she realized he meant it as no more than comfort. Comforting the child that she wasn’t. She needed... She didn’t know what she needed, except him.

So she reached up and fastened her mouth to his.

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