

## Chapter Six

Natalia

I don't dare breathe. No, scratch that. I can't. Like some sort of screenplay where I'm the main attraction, the wolves around me gasp, voicing a level of shock I'm to paralyzed to vocalize.

Mate?

I back away from him further, hating the kick in my heart, the way my body protests at the distance. It's as if nothing's changed. As if all that time apart meant nothing. My body reacts to him like he didn't completely shatter my world years ago. And I hate myself for it.

But I hate him more.

For looking at me the way he is. For saying things like-

"She's his mate?" Someone says.

"But how is that possible?"

"Nat," Cardan breathes, his eyes are wide, like he is lost in some sort of scary trance. His eyes trail over my frame slowly, then rapidly, alternating between the two as if on auto pilot.

"Cardan!" The woman abandoned on the dais watches him with panic, wearing the emotion on her sleeves for all to see. "Cardan, what's going on?"

He ignores her, barely even twitching to the sound of her voice. It's as though we're the only two people in the room. But we're not.

My chest caves in, and I clear my throat, thankful to the moon goddess that my voice carries a lot stronger than how I actually feel. "Cardan."

His expression turns pained, a dip forming between his brows like he's been struck. I take a deep breath.

None of this makes any sense. Why is he calling me his mate?

Does he see a resemblance between Abigail and I? Is that it? My gaze moves to the woman he was literally seconds away from marrying till I walked through those curtains. Her eyes slide to mine, and I don't miss the way they narrow around the edges.

I turn away from her. She doesn't understand. She'll never have to worry about me. I came here for one thing and one thing alone.

"We need to talk," I say, forcing my eyes back to his midnight blue ones, swallowing past the lump that forms in my throat at the intensity behind them.

"Somewhere private." I add.

He takes a half step forward, "Nat."

I lift my chin, "Now, Cardan." I say, "It's important."

A beat passes as his jaw tenses, and then he nods once. The lost look on his face vanishes in the blink of an eye and a blank, collected mask falls in place. put the ceremony on hold. "His voice carries through the large canopy, and the entire space grows deathly silent. "Escort Fiona to the Palace. I want one soldier on my tail".

As he strides towards me, a group of guards moving towards who I now understand is Fiona to carry out his order, another single shoulder following closely but a couple paces behind him, it hits me.

King Cardan Salvatore.

These are his people now. He's their leader. I look back at Fiona one last time, as she watches Cardan with protests on her lips, ghting as the guards guide her out the back curtains.

She's going to be his queen.

I turn away, heading out the canopy and waiting for Cardan to show up outside.

It's barely been ve minutes in his presence and I feel like I'm about to burst at the seams. I take in deep lungfuls of air, trying to breathe in something that isn't all consuming and choking. Something not tainted by him.

"Nat," His voice takes on the soft edge once again, the tone I'd only ever heard him use with me in all the years I'd known him.

Did he use it with Abigail? The thought is bitter, unwanted and raw as it lls my head.

It doesn't matter. None of this does.

You're here for one thing, Natalia. I remind myself, do not let yourself get carried away.

"I have a cabin." Cardan comes out of the canopy, interrupting my thoughts, "We can be alone there, Nat."

My hands curl at my sides, a wash of fury licking at my skin. "Stop calling me that."

Cardan pauses. The guard behind him looks taken aback, his eyes are wide, as he shifts uncomfortably.

I just openly disrespected his Alpha.

"Sorry," I breathe through my nose, slowly loosening my arms at my sides. I might not be on good terms with him, but I know better than to openly disrespect him too. I need to get myself under control, or I'm not going to be able to make it through this. "Just... why not the palace?"

"My cabin is more private." He says, "You want privacy."

He's right, I do. But I'm not a hundred percent certain I'm okay with being alone with Cardan.

My eyes slide to the guard. We won't be alone, the voice in my head reminds me.

I exhale slowly, "Lead the way."

Cardan watches me carefully for a moment, not saying a word as he swallows, and then he moves ahead of me, checking behind him every now and then to assure I'm following.

It's small, modest but rened. The cabin that is. Located on the outskirts of the Pack grounds, a lone building with the Forrest as a backdrop. Did he get this place so he dissociate from the pack when he needs to?

"I'm the only one who ever comes here," he says, as if reading my mind, "I don't often though." He pushes open the door, gesturing for me to walk in ahead of him. "Wait outside." He says to the guard, making my steps falter. You've been alone with him more times than you can count, it'll be ne. I repeat it like a mantra.

As I walk through the threshold, I don't miss the way his head follows my movement, his nostrils aring as he takes a deep inhale that's anything but subtle.

Why does he think I'm his mate?

Is he trying to trick me? Is this some game of his? But what does he hope to achieve?

The sound of the door shutting behind him stiffens my shoulders. Inhale. Exhale. Breathe, Natalia.

I turn to him, and a gasp lodges in my throat as he eats up the distance between us in rapid strides. I back away instantly, pressing myself against the nearest wall and holding my hand up, hitting his chest as he reaches me.

"Stop." I say. He grabs my wrist, pressing his body harder into my palm. "Stop it, Cardan!"

"You're back," He breathes, unrestrained. His reaction now is unlike what he displayed at the ceremony. Before the eyes of everyone else, he somehow managed to keep a lid on his composure, but now, all hell breaks loose. He tugs my arm to the side, pushing my body against his as his ngers slide to the back of my neck.

I shiver.

He pushes his head into my neck, taking in a lungful, "f\*\*k, Nat, I've searched for you everywhere."

The rough sound of his voice seeps into my very bones. Tears bite the backs of my eyes. It's still the same, he still has the same effect on me as he did all those years ago. The shame pushes me over the edge. I push against him with all my strength, "Let me go!"

His head draws back, dark, heavy eyes locked in on my face. Goddess.

I'm not his mate.

What the hell is this?

"Nat."

"And stop f\*\*\*\*g calling me that!" I shove him away, slipping out from his grip as soon as it loosens. Turning around, I x him with a glare, the animosity bleeding into my eyes as I watch him, "I'm not your Nat and I'm not your goddessdamned mate!" I growl, "Don't touch me again, Cardan."

He shakes his head, his ngers dig into his scalp till a few strands come loose, "Nat, please just-"

"Listen," I say, holding my nger up at him, "This," I gesture between us,

"Doesn't exit."

"Nat, wait."

"I'm not here because I want to be, Cardan." I say, "I have no other choice."

His brows furrow.

"I need your help," My voice cracks.

His frown deepens further, "I'll help you, Nat. I'll give you whatever you need."

"No!" I shout, "It's not that simple! You don't understand."

He's beside me in an instant, "Make me understand. What happened?"

My breaths come out in short pants.

How do I tell him?

How the hell do I begin?

How am I even sure he's going to be of any use? He's never met them, he doesn't even know them. I shake my head, a tear slipping down my cheek.

"Hey," His arms encircle me, shifting my head till I'm looking at him, "Look at me, hey, Nat. What is it? Tell me, you can tell me anything."

Can I?

My hands lift to my shoulders, curling around my body till I'm hugging myself protectively. Like a shield for what's about to come. "I lost them." I whisper.

"Lost who?" His voice is soft, laced with that familiar concern he's always had for me,

"Lost who, Nat?"

A broken breath slips out of me, "My children."

His body grows completely still.

I don't meet his eyes, keeping my gaze downcast.

"You..." He trails off, his hands tightening around me. I hear his swallow,

before he starts again, "You have kids?"

Slowly, I nod my head. He lets out a rough exhale. "Wow, that's-"

"Cardan," My lip trembles. My entire body trembles.

"I'm here." He says, stroking my sides gently, "I'm here, Nat. I'll help you.

Who... where..." He pauses again, "Did you come alone? Where's their father?"

A sob slips out of me.

"f\*\*k, Nat."

"Cardan," I take in a deep breath for courage, "I have to tell you something."

Goddess, what if he doesn't believe me?

"I'm listening," He says, "You can tell me anything, you know that."

"When... ve..." I stop, trying my best to remain calm.

His blue eyes search mine, imploring me to go on.

"When I left, ve years ago, I..." f\*\*k, "I... I was pregnant."