

Chapter Five

Natalia

I know your real identity.

I know where you're really from.

If you ever want to see them again, you'll bring me their father's head on a platter. I'll kill them the moment my patience wears thin.

Tick. Tock

My leg bounces up and down restlessly as I blink through swollen, blurry eyes, reading the note again and again, like the words haven't already been burned into my memory.

I know your real identity.

If you ever want to see them again...

My lower lip trembles, and I sink my teeth into it to keep from sobbing out.

I don't know how long it's been, I hadn't even bothered to f****g check. But when I'd woken up, disoriented and feeling weaker than I ever have in my entire life, it hit me like a sledgehammer.

My kids have been kidnapped.

And I don't know where to go, what to do, or where the hell I'm supposed to begin searching for them. I've felt choked all night. From the moment I'd pulled my heavy eyelids open to an empty house and a folded note tucked in my hand as I lay on the steps of the back patio, to right this minute, sitting in the same bus, on the same trail I'd taken ve years ago. To the one place I'd sworn never to go back to.

They have my children.

Hesitation is out of the question.

I have to get them back. And right now, there seems to be only one possible way how.

You'll bring me their father's head on a platter.

Cardan will never believe me. I dig my ngers into my scalp, tugging harshly at the roots as I lose myself in the different possible outcomes of my return.

He could send me away before I even get a word in.

Will I even be able to face Abigail?

To see them, together?

My heart clenches at the mere thought. My ngers trace the tiny indents at the base of my neck, the mark that's faded into what looks like two tiny birthmarks. I had always hoped that one day they would disappear for good. Given the fact that we weren't mates, and he never refreshed them, I thought they would be gone by now. But they're still here, lingering on my skin like a permanent and unwanted reminder of the one time in my life I wished to forget. A harsh breath shudders out of me.

What if... what if he doesn't help me? The note literally says the only way I can get my children back is if Cardan is dead.

What type of sacrice or effort is he willing to make for a woman that isn't his?

For children he's never met?

What if I never get them back?

The bus slows to a stop, and with my heart pounding in my chest, I get off, waiting till it pulls away before diverting into the woods.

I swore I'd never be back.

The familiar trail has anxiety eating at the surface of my skin as I make my way to the pack lands. It's the only way, I tell myself. What other choice do I have?

"And you are?"

An annoyed voice brings me out of my stupor. My eyes lift to the male standing a couple feet away from me, seemingly standing guard at the front entrance of a large cream-coloured canopy.

I swallow past the growing lump in my throat. "I'm here to see Prince Cardan."

A grin pulls up a corner of the guard's mouth. He lets his arm drop away from his sword as he says, "Cardan is no Prince any longer."

My heart stalls for a beat as his words sink in. it's been ve years...

King Cardan Salvatore.

Bile churns in my belly. Would they even let me see him?

"The King is otherwise occupied as is, to offer your congratulations, you'll have to wait till the ceremony is over, just like everyone else."

Congratulations?

"It's important!" I tell him, "Cardan will-" I pause.

Cardan will what?Be upset the guard didn't let me through?

Don't forget, you're nothing to him.

I lift my chin, "It's a matter of life and death."

"Well," The guards drawls, pinning me with a hard look, his patience obviously wearing thin, "This matter of life and death will have to wait till after the King's nuptials have been completed."

Nuptials?

Is Cardan... marrying again?

"Be my guest," The guards says, stepping aside from the entrance, "Feel free to wait till the ceremony is over. After that, I'm sure Alpha Cardan will be more than willing to attend to your urgent matters."

He holds open the curtain of the canopy.

Taking a deep breath for courage, as I walk inside on shaky legs. It's one of those things that seem small on the outside, but turn out to be massive within. The aisles are packed with people, hundreds of guests all focused in a single direction.

I don't want to look.

There's a loud ringing in my ears, a subtle ache in my chest that I suddenly can't breathe through.

How on earth do I intend to survive this?

I'm no coward though. If anything, right now I'm a desperate mother, willing to do anything in and out of the books to get her children back.

And so I lift my head, my gaze following the direction of the crowds' as I seek him out.

It's like a goddesdamned slap to face.

And my brows pull together in torment as I realize he's already watching me. Even through the distance, admist the swarm of people, ve years later and still, when his eyes meet mine it's still as though he's the only person in the room.

The only person in my f****g world.

My palms grow sweaty as I ght the urge to throw up. He's so different, and yet, nothing's changed. He's grown out his black hair over the years. The silky strands tied into a low bun at the nape of his neck. Golden brown skin, midnight blue eyes. It's my every fantasy and darkest nightmare merged into one perfect being. I force my gaze away from his, only then noticing the woman standing next to him, a woman that is most denitely not Abigail, their hands joined together and wrapped in red silk.

He is remarrying.

Her eyes are on mine, brows furrowed in question as she darts her gaze back and forth between Cardan and I. In fact, it seems as though everyone is staring at me, and I've only just realized their attention.

"Isn't that-"

"Nat." Cardan's voice carries through the space, sending shivers straight to my bones. My eyes meet his, feeling my chest caving as he pulls his hand away from the woman beside him, ignoring her sputters of complaint. He's transxed, wide-eyed as he steps down the dais, long strides carrying him over to me like I may be an illusion in the wind from that distance. Two lines form between his brows, his nostrils aring wider with every step he takes. Like he's searching for a scent.

"That's Natalia Forger."

"Holy s**t, I remember her!"

People talk all around us, but I can't focus on anyone else but him. I feel myself back up a step involuntarily as he closes the distance between us, but right then I immediately regret it, as a ash of something volatile settles in his eyes.

His wolf is coming to the surface.

But why?

In the next moment, the answer knocks the breath from my lungs. A vice holding onto my insides and refusing to loosen its hold, as he growls out a lone declaration, the force of it vibrating the walls of the canopy.

"Mate."