

## Chapter One

Natalia

I'm trying my best to not let today get to me. I've never been the type to attend pack ceremonies, not when Cardan isn't by my side at least. For the span of my existence, living in my pack has been nothing short of a nightmare, and if I'm being honest, things would only get worse as the years go on.

I'm an Omega, the runt of the pack.

A weak, worthless wolf no one ever wants to associate with. Each day that passes, I'm treated worse than the dirt at the bottom of their shoes, like I'm less than the trash they toss out at the end of the day. I'm shoved, pushed, insulted and stared at like an abomination.

The abomination they all see me as.

Wolves aren't meant to be weak. We're strong, ruthless beings, only ever known for our greatness. But me? I'm a mistake, at least that's how they all look at me.

With hatred. And resentment. Every single one of them. All... except him.

Cardan Salvatore.

My saviour, hero and best friend. He's the only one I've ever had. The only wolf in this pack who doesn't look like he's plotting my demise the moment my gaze catches his. The only one who doesn't shove the fact that I'm nineteen and never shifted in my face. The only one... who looks at me like I mean something, like I'm valuable. He makes me feel like the most important female in the realm. And for that, I swallowed my fear today. Surrounded by hundreds of wolves gathered in the courtyard for the Coronation ceremony, my heart is in my throat. Every inch of me is locked up tight, and truly, I'm seconds away from bolting.

But then he walks up the dais, and my heart just... stops. Bare chested, a toothed golden necklace drooping from his throat, golden vines embroidered into his curly dark locks, he looks every bit like the King he'll one day become. It's his coronation. His official proclamation as Heir to the Alpha Throne of the Wild Wolves Pack.

"Prince Cardan is so handsome!"

"Ugh, his mate is gonna be so lucky!"

"He's definitely going to make one hell of an Alpha. I just can't wait!"

The she-wolves in the crowd practically fan themselves as they gush over Cardan. I roll my eyes, but bite my cheek to keep the smile off my face. They see Cardan as the breathtakingly handsome, formidable ruler he'll one day become. They see him as royalty. But to me, he's just plain old Cardan. The boy I've secretly had a crush on for the last ten years. He has on the traditional royal apparel, a thick dark tunic draped across his shoulders. As the healer gestures for him to drop to his knees, he places the crown on his head and the crowd erupts in honor of their future King. Watching him repeat the royal oath, a grin of pride splitting his father's face, I'm suddenly glad I didn't miss this for the world.

The ceremony wraps up, and I linger around the clearing for a while, waiting till when Cardan is less occupied so I can congratulate him.

"If it isn't the little omega rat!" A voice whistles behind me. "Never thought you'd be stupid enough to show up here."

My shoulders tense at the voice, and right then and there my right instincts kick in. Cardan isn't here to protect me this time, he's all the way on the dais. My feet move of their own accord, carrying me away from the voice. I'm almost at the entrance of the main pack house when something moves in my peripheral, a sharp kick meets my shin and I stumble with a grunt to the ground.

"What did you think, huh Nat the Rat?" A girl I don't recognize leans down, sneering at me like I've offended her, using the designated nickname unanimously chosen for me. Even as my heart pounds in my chest, I'm still not surprised. All the wolves in this pack found one reason or the other to put me down.

She pouts at me in mock concern, "Did you think you could get away from me?" Her voice comes out soft, "Did you think those weak little legs could out run me?"

"Bet she did." A male laughs, folding his arms over his chest as he stares down at me on the oor. I attempt to lift myself off the ground, but she stops me by pressing a boot to my chest.

"Stay down!" She growls. I let out a whimper, coughing up against the weight on my chest. A caterer walking by snags the girl's attention. She picks up a glass beverage from the passing tray. "You look a little parched, Nat the Rat, how about some refreshment?"

She empties the contents over my face. I sputter as the cool liquid dribbles down my neck, seeping into my nose and mouth. Laughter breaks around the area, surrounding eyes enjoying the spectacle she's making of me.

Don't cry.

Don't cry.

Don't cry.

The glass slips from her hands, shattering on the hard ground. I turn my head away at the sharp graze across my cheek.

"This is the type of s\*\*t that happens when you try to be someone you're not." She tells me, "Never forget that you're a weak little worthless omega who's never even had her st shift." She shoves her foot off my chest roughly, "Pathetic."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

It takes a second for his voice to register through the fog of mortification.

The girl shies away from me, her bravado lost. "Uh, w-we were just-"

He walks over to my side and crouches down to my level. He lifts my face and I look down, hating myself for being so weak, for letting him see me like this, unable to even defend myself.

"Apologize to her."

The girl covers away in fear, and suddenly she doesn't seem as threatening as she did minutes ago.

"I'm s-sorry." She stutters. Her voice is so low that if we weren't so close to her, I would have missed it. Cardan looks at me, and I nod, signaling my acceptance of the poor excuse of an apology.

He sighs, reaching for my hand, "Let's get you cleaned up."

Once in his room, Cardan sits on the bed as he waits for me to get cleaned up.

I go into the bathroom and let my ruined dress fall, forming a pool around my legs.

Stepping into the tub, I take a second to revel in the hot water as it cascades down my body, removing the traces of the shitty night.

The ruined dress cost almost every penny I'd saved up from the menial jobs I work around the pack from time to time. I bought it on my nineteenth birthday, saving it to wear on a special day. I wanted Cardan to think I looked pretty tonight, even put on lipgloss and mascara which I never did. But it was all for nothing, I looked like a raccoon when I spotted myself in the mirror. Sighing, I spot an array of his bath products and decide on a whim to use them, smiling at the prospect of smelling like him. I wash my hair so hard, my scalp is smarting by the time I'm done. I grab a towel hanging from the rack and wrap it tightly around myself before stepping out.

I'm sure I had spent a long time in there, and I'm surprised when I come out to still see Cardan sitting in the same position. He looks up at me as soon as the bathroom door closes, and I swallow when I realize this is the first time he's seeing me in this state of undress, however innocent. I watch as his eyes trail down my body slowly, almost reluctantly. A muscle ticks in his jaw and I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly conscious of how I might appear to him.

He's never looked at me the way all the others do. But still, that doesn't mean he's ever looked at me the way I've always yearned for him to either.

I clear my throat nervously, "Do you have something I could wear?"

He nods once, running a hand through his disheveled hair as he rises from the bed. He holds my gaze as he closes the distance between us. I press myself further into the wall, feeling the oxygen in the room thinning out.

Why am I reacting like this?

It's not the first time we've been alone together for goddess sake. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I'm half naked and he's looking at me like he hasn't seen a woman all his life. It's like he's waging an internal battle within himself. Fighting his natural reaction to an indecent woman in front of him and trying desperately to respect his best friend. The tunic has been discarded, leaving him in all his bare chested glory. I take a second to drink him in. My eyes trailing over the hard muscles of his abdomen, down the line of hair disappearing into the deep V of his hips. Everything about him is perfect, and my chest constricts almost painfully at how beautiful he is. He pulls out a t-shirt from his dresser, holding it over to me. Just as reach for it, his other hand caresses my face, making me wince as his thumb smooths over the sharp cut from the glass earlier.

"You're hurt." He states.

"It's nothing." I say, reaching for his hand and pulling it away. I smile up at him, "Just a scratch."

He sighs, taking hold of my wrist and walking us into the bathroom. I let out a squeal as he lifts me onto the counter top. My hand stabs the material of the towel at my chest, hopping desperately it doesn't loosen. He reaches into the cupboards, pulling out a first-aid kit. After disinfecting the wound, he covers the cut with a tiny bandage strip.

"Better?"

I nod at him, holding my breath as he leans forward. His minty breath fans my temple as he brings his mouth to the top of my cheek, kissing the bandage softly. Warmth wells in my chest at the sweet gesture, and I try to swallow past the lump of emotion swelling in my throat. He cups my cheek, his calloused fingers drawing delicious patterns over the surface of my skin, making my eyes utter shut. I feel his hard exhale, a second before he starts to pull away, his body heat leaving mine. I have no idea what comes over me, but I reach out, looping my nger into his belt buckle to keep him in place. I'm not ready for this moment to end yet. His hands grip the counter on either side of me, his head hanging low between his shoulders.

He's refusing to meet my eyes.

"Cardan," I breathe.

He shakes his head, as though to dispel it of unwanted thoughts, "What are you doing, Nat?"

I hesitate, "I don't know."

His jaw hardens, he reaches up suddenly, cupping the back of my neck as his thumb slowly traces my jawline, "What do you want?"

Again, I hesitate, "I don't know."

His nostrils are. "If we do this... there's no going back."

I watch him, silently, letting the words echo in the room between us.

His grip tightens around me, "If we do this, Nat," His voice takes on a dark edge, "There won't be anyone else."

My chest swells.

Does he mean what I think he does?

"I don't understand." I whisper.

He brings his face within an inch of mine, I feel every breath grazing across my lips as he tells me, "If we cross the line, there's no going back, Nat. It's just you and me. Forever."

Forever.

"Forever?" My voice cracks.

The depths of his blue eyes swallow me whole, "Just us." He says, "No one else. I'm yours and you're mine."

I feel my entire body just... thaw.

"You promise?" I'm weak, so f\*\*\*\*g weak.

"I do." He doesn't hesitate.

"Okay." The word is barely from my lips before he swallows my next breath in his mouth. It's sublime. Everything I've imagined it to be. I've gone through this scenario in my head more times than I can count, and the fact that it's actually happening now is too surreal to fathom. His arm snakes around my waist, pulling my body off the counter and moulding me to him as he prides my mouth open, deepening the kiss, his tongue delving in and stroking masterfully.

I whimper at the sensation, and he groans, pulling me closer.

I want more, need more

I cradle his face and stand on my tiptoes, silently begging him for something. I don't even know what I want, I need everything.

I stie a moan, losing my train of thoughts when my body molds against the hard lines of his. He touches his forehead to mine, and pulls back, looking at me, a question in his eyes, and I nod giving in to whatever it is. And then he's kissing me again, and this time, my body goes up in flames.

The heat is searing, all consuming. I let go of my towel and it falls to the ground between us. My first instinct is to hide my body, to cover as much as possible with my hands, but with the way he's gazing at me? I feel so beautiful. I want to be seen.

He picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist of their own volition as he walks us to his bed, telling me down gently on the soft bedding. He kisses my neck, and trails downward till he reaches the swells of my breasts. My nipples have hardened into tight buds, and he trails his mouth over the valley between them before he takes one in his mouth. A strangled moan escapes me at the wet pull.

He releases me with a graze of his teeth, pinching the nipple between his thumb and forefinger as he takes the other into his mouth, giving them both equal attention.

I'm a moaning mess, tugging on the strands of his hair as my hips rock into his erection.

Suddenly, he moves away from me. Getting to his feet, he makes quick work of the rest of his clothing and I watch in awe he stands bare in front of me. Every inch of him perfectly glorious.

I'm struggling to breathe.

Crawling back over to me, he takes my hand in his, placing them on his chest, right over his heart. It thumps to a rhythm just as frantic as mine.

"This is what you do to me, Nat." He says, his voice sounding as though it's been raked over hot coals, "This is all you."

I run my hands down his back, feeling every ripple of muscle beneath the expanse of my palms. He takes my hand and guides it down, showing me exactly what he wants. I take his length in my hand and stroke it. He squeezes his eyes shut and makes a low sound in the back of his throat. He then takes me into his arms, hitching my legs around him, then he touches me with his fingers, each stroke sends different waves of pleasure through me, until I feel like I'm about to burst. My legs shake as I come, muing my cries in his shoulder. His body tenses above mine, as he nudges my entrance, teasing me. Slowly, he pushes in. I feel a slight sting of discomfort, as my body struggles to stretch to accommodate him, but it is soon replaced by pleasure when he begins to move. Slowly at first, then faster. I rake my nails over his back, until I draw blood, but he remains unfazed, maintaining the same careful pace. He holds me delicately, his mouth covering every inch of my skin as he kisses me, whispering words of praise. He tells me how much this means to him. How much he values me.

Tears spring to my eyes as his body tenses over mine.

I've never be happier in my entire life.

He makes a guttural sound as he comes, burying his face into my neck. I feel his canines lengthen, stretching past his mouth as he grazes his teeth over my skin. My breath catches in anticipation, and I can't ght the release that shudders my bones as he sinks his teeth deep into the base of my neck, marking me as his.