

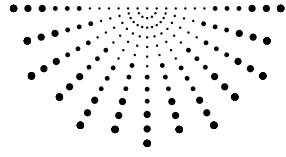
FATED MATES  
BOOK FIVE

*unforgivable*  
**FATE**

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR  
**JESS BRYANT**

# UNFORGIVABLE FATE

BOOK 5 IN THE FATED MATES SERIES



JESS BRYANT

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*There's no power on earth greater than fate.*

Nova DeLuca has devoted her entire life to fate. Born with the gift of foresight, she's a Seer who uses her powers to help guide her pack and her family in the right direction. Her visions help those she loves but she knows better than anyone that they can also hurt. It was her vision after all that set Maddox Clary's plan in motion all those years ago, leaving her an orphan, and her life changed forever. Still, she's never wavered in her belief that fate always ensures everything works out the way it's supposed to... until now.

*There's no power on earth greater than love.*

Griffin Clary has devoted his life to good. With a psychopath for an older brother, he's been righting wrongs for as long as he can remember. As the only surviving member of his family, it's his duty. That's why, when the expanding pack alliance reaches him with news of his brother's demise, and the massacre that Maddox left in his wake, he heads for Louisiana with nothing but the hope that he can somehow help the survivors. He expected to find resistance among the Crescent Pack, suspicion and hatred too, but what he didn't expect was *her*.

*Because in the end, if we're lucky, they're one and the same.*

There's no way that fate can be so cruel. Nova is certain of it. Her fated mate can't be the handsome man that looks so much like the devil that terrorized her and destroyed her family, can he? And if he is, will she ever be able to forgive fate for the ultimate betrayal?

UNFORGIVABLE FATE  
FATED MATES SERIES BOOK 5

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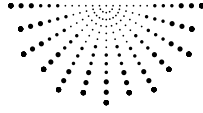
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## CHAPTER ONE



It was the end of an era. The moving boxes piled high in the small apartment were proof of that. The walls and shelves were bare and soon the rest of the room would be too. Only the larger items like the furniture and television remained, along with the area rug that she and her sister, Maya, had picked out together after they'd agreed to move into the little two bedroom space above the bakery because what they'd needed most at that point in their lives was one another and a fresh start.

Now, Nova DeLuca sat cross-legged on the faded rug and felt oddly bereft at the idea of the little apartment empty and deserted after all the years she had called it home.

It seemed, to her anyway, that the space was as much a part of her family as any of the living, breathing members were. It was filled with so many of their memories, both good and bad. It had been a fixture of her world, a safe place where she always knew she was welcome, even after she had moved out to give Maya some privacy after she'd bonded with her mate, Zander Leery.

Nova had moved back to Crescent Pack land over two years ago. The pack that her family had led for generations had always been as much a part of her as her wolf, even when she wasn't living in Crescent territory. Maya may have needed to get away from the pack and everything that it represented after the pain and loss that they had suffered there but Nova had only left to be with her sister, to look out for her and take care of her. Going back to the pack had felt like the most

natural thing in the world to her once she knew that Maya was happy and would never be alone again.

But now even her sister was leaving the apartment behind and the change was making Nova uneasy.

Logically she knew that Maya's family with Zander had outgrown the small space. Their niece was a pre-teen now and though Violet still split time between her aunts and uncles, she needed her own space and room to grow. So did baby Carmen, who was getting bigger every day. And, even if Maya hadn't admitted it yet, Nova knew just from the change in her body chemistry and the hormones her wolf had picked up on, that her sister was pregnant again.

There was no way this apartment could hold three children so she didn't blame Maya for moving out and moving on with her life but it still left a little hole in Nova's heart to think of it just sitting here empty.

She couldn't help but wish that her visions would show her this apartment's future. She yearned to see a time when it was filled with family and love and happiness again. But of course that wasn't how her visions worked, when they even worked at all lately.

NO MATTER how hard she tried, her gift had all but deserted her over the past few months.

NOVA WAS A SEER. She had been born with the gift of foresight. The ability had been a part of her for as long as she could remember. It was a rare gift in the packs these days, a coveted ability, and though the responsibility that came with her gift was tremendous she had always loved that she was the one that people turned to for answers. Being a Seer was what she was born to be, *who* she was born to be, and without it she didn't know what would happen to her.

She could still feel the magic inside of her that allowed her to glimpse visions of the future. She even caught snippets of other people's lives still. People from the pack, even strangers

passing through Noir on their way to somewhere else. People who were completely oblivious to the secrets that this little town and the people in it held. But her own future had always been a blank canvas to her and lately, more and more, she found it impossible to reach forward and pull a scene from the future of anyone she loved. Everything connected to her family seemed to be a blur with dark spots blotting out the important bits and she didn't know why.

She could feel that things were changing but she couldn't *see* it and she didn't like not knowing why.

It worried her that she could no longer see the visions that had once been so clear. The ones that had shown her Maya and Zander smiling at one another as baby Carmen learned to walk. The ones that had shown her that her older brother Leo and his mate, Darius, would become parents themselves in the most unexpected of ways. The ones of her sister, Luna, and her Moirae Pack Alpha mate, Michael, crying as their twins graduated high school. Even the ones where Zander's sister, Zoey, and her mate, Rafe, Michael's brother, threw a surprise party for their niece, Violet, when she turned sixteen. All of those futures that she had seen snippets of in the past were gone now, mere memories of a possibility that she was no longer sure would come to pass.

It scared her. Terrified her even. It chilled her to the bone to think that her visions no longer showed her big, happy, extended family because maybe they didn't have a future that looked like that anymore.

She had reason to worry too, because it had happened before, back when she'd been a child. She had told anyone who would listen about her vision of Luna as a Pack Alpha's mate. She had changed everything for all of them with that one vision and her inability to keep it to herself. Not long after, she had stopped seeing her parents in her visions of the future.

She hadn't put it together at first, certainly not in time to change it. It was only after that crazed psychopath, Maddox Clary, had murdered them that Nova realized why her visions of them had gone away.

Their futures had been wiped out. Erased from fate's board. All possibilities and paths gone because they were no longer alive to make the choices that would lead them to one outcome or another.

But she refused to believe that the same thing was happening now. It couldn't be. Because nothing on this planet could tear her family apart, not after everything they had been through together. Other than an apocalypse she couldn't figure out what could possibly have the power to wipe all of their futures from her mind and though the world might be shit most days she didn't think an actual apocalypse was upon them.

So, there had to be another explanation for her sudden lack of vision when it came to her loved ones... but for the life of her she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Nova?" Her brother-in-law's concerned voice pulled her out of her head and brought her back to the moment. She found him standing over her with a worried look on his face. He raised an eyebrow, "You zoned out. Did you have a vision?"

"No." She sighed, reaching up to take the toddler he was holding. "No visions today."

"Maybe that's a good thing." Zander watched as his two-year-old daughter tugged at Nova's curls. "Maya's always saying how distracting your visions can be for you. Maybe if they let up a little you can live in the moment for a change instead of always looking ahead."

Nova snorted, "Be impulsive you mean."

His grin was captivating when he shrugged, "Worked out for me."

Nova rolled her eyes as he went back to lugging boxes down the stairs. She held Carmen close, cuddling her precious niece even as she attempted to put Nova's hair in her mouth. She smiled as she unwound the tiny hands from her locs and sat Carmen in her lap, trying to distract her with the light-up alphabet set they'd been playing with earlier. With the baby smacking the buttons and the recorded voice speaking the

letters for her, Nova sighed and tried not to think about just how well things had worked out for Zander and Maya.

Zander Leery hadn't exactly lived a charmed life before coming to Noir, that was for sure. In and out of foster care, he'd been on his own most of his life. When he'd learned his older sister had been killed in a car accident and that she'd left her daughter, Violet, in his care, he'd impulsively decided to track down his estranged younger sister, Zoey. He'd come here, to this apartment, thinking it was where he would find his sister but instead he'd found Maya and a future full of love, happiness and family. His impulsiveness had led him to his fated mate so of course it had worked out for him.

"He has a point." Nova looked up as Maya came out of the kitchen with two bottles of water and offered her one. "It's not the one he thinks he's making but still..."

"Thanks." Nova took the water but only put it beside her on the rug, out of reach of Carmen's grabby little hands. "What point is that?"

"Come on." Maya perched on the edge of a chair a few feet away and watched her daughter play, "Don't tell me it hasn't occurred to you that maybe these blackouts in your visions are because *your* fated mate is finally coming into the picture."

Nova scrunched her nose, "You say finally like I'm getting old or something."

"Yet still young enough to purposefully miss the point." Maya gestured at her with her water bottle, "I'm serious. You've never been able to see your own future. Logic says that means you wouldn't see your fated mate either since his, or her, future is tied to yours. If that's the case, maybe the reason you can't see glimpses of our futures anymore is because pretty soon, your mate is going to be part of this family, hence the dark spot."

Maya looked far too proud of herself to have come up with this on the spot and Nova narrowed her eyes at her older sister. She'd been thinking about this, Nova realized. Really thinking about it hard. Though she'd given no outward sign that she

was worried about Nova's decreasing ability to see visions of their futures, Maya had clearly spoken about it with Zander and been thinking about it enough to have come up with this theory.

"It's possible, I suppose..." She hedged, because she'd never told her sister about her own theory, about death lurking on the horizon. "But if it's my mate, shouldn't I be able to tell that? To recognize them or at the very least not feel queasy whenever that dark spot blots out a vision?"

"Queasy? Yeah, I remember feeling queasy when I thought about being mated too." Maya laughed and Nova groaned.

"It's not the same. You didn't want a mate. You hated fate and expected the worst but I don't. I never have. I've always trusted my gift and the force that guides it. Even when the worst happened and we lost Mom and Dad. Even when it hurt, I trusted that everything we were going through was happening for a reason and it was. Michael saved us and mated with Luna just like my vision showed. Leo found his mate in Darius. Even you and Zander, that was fate."

Maya's face was soft and thoughtful when she shook her head, "Exactly. You're the one that constantly reminded me that fate is inevitable. It is what it is. Whether you can see your own future, see your own mate or not, there's a reason your visions are changing. You just have to trust that it's for a reason too."

Nova contemplated throwing something at her sister but the only thing she had handy was the toddler and she didn't think that would go over well so instead she scoffed, "When did you become the optimist? I don't like it. I want my cynical big sister back."

Carmen leaned on a letter that didn't light up and immediately started crying. Nova winced. She'd forgotten that the Z had stopped working on the little toy. Earlier she'd distracted Carmen from pushing that button, knowing it would infuriate her tiny temper because she associated the letter with her daddy but this time Nova hadn't been quick enough. She

smacked the letter again and again but it didn't light up and the tears soon became sobs.

Maya swooped in before Nova had a chance to figure out a solution. She picked her daughter up and held her close. She rubbed her back and spoke to her soothingly, rocking her back and forth.

Nova marveled at the change in her sister, at the softness of her. Maya had always been the strong one out of all of their siblings. She kept her emotions close to her chest. She was steel-willed and defiant to her core. But motherhood clearly agreed with her because all of her hard edges fell away when it came to her daughter and Nova knew Maya had finally let all of her old walls down so that she could love Zander and Carmen and Violet with her whole heart.

It was nice to see and she smiled up at her sister when Maya caught her eye.

“It's hard to stay cynical when I wake up with the man I love and our beautiful girls every day.”

Nova's heart gave a tug of envy but she only nodded. She understood and she was happy for her sister. She could only hope that Maya's theory about her visions was more accurate than her own because she wanted this for herself someday. She wanted someone to love, someone who made her better, someone to wake up beside and to kiss goodnight. She was still young and she knew that finding your mate, the one person in the world that fate had made just for you, wasn't something that could be rushed. But being around Maya and Zander only reminded her more that when she went home tonight she would be utterly alone, with not even a vision of the future to keep her company.

Since her mood was quickly souring, she held out a hand, “Help me up. I should get going.”

Maya used her free hand to help pull Nova to her feet while balancing the crying toddler on her hip, “Oh sure, Carmen starts crying and now you leave.”

“No, it’s not that.” She patted her niece on the back, “It’s not you, sweetheart. Auntie Nova just promised she’d swing by Uncle Leo’s on her way home.”

“Good lord, what’s that racket?” Zander came back into the apartment looking sweaty and out of breath and Nova couldn’t help but wonder if he’d literally come running at the sound of his daughter crying. He was such a good dad. He softened his tone and held out his arms as he approached, “Who hurt my baby girl? Tell me and Daddy will end them. Come here, baby.”

Maya let her husband take the child and scoffed when Carmen stopped crying the instant Zander tucked her against his chest, “It should annoy me that she instantly becomes an angel when her daddy holds her but I’m just glad the crying stops.”

Zander chuckled and pulled Maya against his side, kissing her temple, “Both my girls are angels to me.”

Nova pretended to gag and laughed, “That’s my cue to leave I think.”

“You’re heading back to Leo’s?” Maya’s brows knit together when she frowned.

“Yeah, he asked me to swing by before I went home tonight.”

Maya exchanged a glance with her husband but it was Zander that spoke up, “I know Maya has a theory about why your visions are blurry lately but I have a theory of my own.”

“Oh goody... I can’t wait to hear this one.” Nova rolled her eyes. “Everyone has a theory. Leo thinks it has to do with all of you being mated now. Darius thinks maybe the reason most packs don’t have Seer’s is because we outgrow the power at some point and that’s what is happening to me. Maya thinks it has to do with my fated mate but please, I’d love to hear your theory, Zan.”

Maya scowled at her, “Don’t be pissy about it. We’re all just trying to help.”



“It’s fine.” Zander reassured his wife. “I get it. I haven’t been a wolf for very long in the grand scheme of things. If none of you can figure it out, surely I can’t either.”

Nova rubbed her eyes, immediately feeling bad for snapping, “It’s not that. I’m sorry. I’m just on edge.”

“I know.” He shifted Carmen in his arms and then looked back at her, “And I think the reason you’re so on edge and your powers are off is because you’re using them too much.”

“What?” She tilted her head in confusion.

“Hear me out.” Zander hurried on. “You’ve been scrying for Leo for months on end now. You’re using your power every single day helping him look for other packs and more people like us. I think maybe you’re pushing yourself too hard, using too much magic, and you need to rest and let yourself recharge.”

Nova frowned because that idea had never occurred to her. Was it possible to use up all the magic inside of her? Did it need to be replenished? She wasn’t sure. She’d never given it much thought because the visions had always been with her, there to pick through or dismiss as needed. But she had been using her power a lot lately, reaching out past the Crescent Pack territory in search of others like them and more and more it had gotten harder to grab onto those visions. Was it possible she was using too much power and in a way she had never been truly trained for?

“Leo needs my help though. He and Darius are working so hard to bring the packs closer and form the alliance. We’ve made a lot of progress but there are still so many more packs out there, so many more lone wolves looking for safety. If I can help find them, I have to try.”

“I’m not saying you should stop scrying. I know Leo needs you and I know he would tell you himself to rest if he thought for even a second that what he had you doing was hurting you. But maybe you can just try it, for a little while, just give your powers a little time to rest and see what happens.” Zander’s eyes were soft and full of concern for her when he spoke

again, “We’re all worried about you and we only want the best for you. You know that right?”

“I know.” She nodded.

“All the theories in the world could be wrong but...” Maya shrugged. “Zander’s is the easier to give a try. Give your powers a rest and just, see what happens.”

Nova chewed on the inside of her lip but nodded, “Yeah. Okay, I’ll try.”

“But you’re still going to Leo’s tonight.” Maya snorted.

“I already told him I’d come by.” Nova admitted with a nod. “And besides, he didn’t say anything about scrying. He just said there was something he wanted to talk to me about. I promise, just talking tonight.”

“Well so long as you promise.” Maya smirked, “Give me a hug before you run off.”

Nova complied, hugging her sister tight and thanking her for an afternoon of mindless fun. She’d needed to spend a few hours playing with her niece and teasing her sister and brother-in-law. If Zander thought she needed to replenish her powers by relaxing then he had certainly helped today by simply letting her hang out and do nothing but keep Carmen and Maya company while he trekked up and down the stairs with boxes.

“Love you.” She kissed Carmen’s forehead and then Zander’s cheek. “And I’ll see you guys soon.”

“Soon enough to help unpack some of these boxes at the new house?” Zander chuckled.

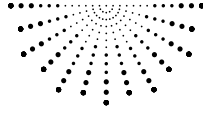
“Maybe not quite that soon.” She grinned back and waved as she headed for the door.

As she turned towards Crescent Pack territory, back towards home, walking towards the setting sun, Nova let herself get lost in the theories that her family kept supplying her with to explain her messed up powers. One of them had to be right, didn’t they? Or maybe none of them were. All she knew for sure was that she couldn’t be the one that was right

because if her visions were going dark because she was going to lose her family, she would never survive it.

Her trust in fate had always been complete and total. She'd always believed that everything happened for a reason. But if fate screwed her over by taking away her powers, or worse, she would never forgive it, or herself.

## CHAPTER TWO



**T**his was the beginning of something good. It had to be. He had come too far and given up too much to turn back now. This was where he was meant to be. He could feel it in his bones, all the way down to his soul, and his wolf agreed. There was something special about this place, something that called to him, and he would do whatever it took to make things right so that he could call this little town in the bayous of southern Louisiana home.

Standing on the front porch step of the Crescent Pack Alpha's house, Griffin Clary could feel eyes boring into his back and tried not to let it get to him.

The people of the Crescent Pack didn't know him. Not yet. They only looked at him and saw the collection of features that he'd been told more than once were handsome but in this place marked him squarely as an enemy. He had never given much thought to whether or not he resembled the brother who had murdered most of their family and then disappeared from his life but if he had wondered, the stares of the Crescent Pack members more than confirmed that the resemblance was there.

That was okay, he reminded himself. That was the reason he was here. Maddox had brought him here. It had come to him on the whispers of traveling lone wolves moving the gossip from one pack to the next but as soon as it reached him, he had known. As soon as he had heard of the attempted coup that resulted in a massacre he had known even before the name was spoken aloud who had been responsible.

Maddox. His older brother. In blood and name if nothing else.

And he'd spent so long, spent so many years trying to come to terms with what Maddox had done to their own family that he'd felt a connection to the people Maddox had put through that same pain. He'd felt like it was his duty as the last living member of the Clary family, the only one to survive Maddox's reign of terror, to at least try to make it right. So he'd packed up his meager belongings and begun the journey from out west to find the Crescent Pack and the beautiful little town of Noir that they called home.

He hadn't dared set foot into Crescent territory without warning so he'd paid for a room in a hotel outside of town and sent word to the Pack Alpha of who he was and where he could be found. He had thought at first that the Alpha might ignore him completely but the knock on his door mere hours later had put that fear to rest. Opening that door had brought with it a whole slew of new fears though and even now, nearly a week later and with an invitation to come to the Alpha's home, he could feel cold sweat prickling his neck.

Being here wasn't going to be easy but he'd known that when he set out on this journey. It was all the things he hadn't expected that were making him uneasy. He had expected hostility and instead received only careful wariness. He had expected to be sent away and instead he'd been invited in. And his welcome, while unexpected, wasn't even the strangest part.

The door of the house opened and a big man with olive skin and the type of body that looked as if it had been carved from marble stood on the other side. His dark hair stood up in places, as if he'd been running his big hands through it, and his lips pursed when he took in Griffin standing on the porch. He frowned but moved aside, motioning for Griffin to come inside and so he did, stepping uneasily through the doorway before it was slammed shut behind him.

“He'll be out in a second. Have a seat.”

Griffin did as he was told. He wasn't about to disobey this man. Not in his own home.

And that was one of the things he was still trying to wrap his head around. This big, gruff, Alpha wolf wasn't the Pack Alpha. He was the Pack Alpha's mate. The Crescent Pack Alpha was mated with a male. Happily mated from the interactions Griffin had witnessed. Not only that but they seemed to function as equals and were open about their relationship, not hiding it the way Griffin would have expected a Pack Alpha to do.

It wasn't as if sexuality wasn't open and fluid in the shifter communities that Griffin had grown up in. It was. Everyone was free to enjoy their pleasure where they could find it.

But he had been raised with a strict understanding that while Pack Alpha's might take men to their beds, they were required to mate with a female in order to procreate and continue their lineage. In Griffin's old pack, an openly gay Pack Alpha would have been seen as weak and when he had first met Leo DeLuca, he couldn't help but wonder if that had been part of Maddox's mad reasonings for doing what he did.

A door opened somewhere in the house and footsteps came down the hallway. Leo DeLuca paused as soon as he caught sight of Griffin sitting in his armchair and he visibly flinched. Griffin winced and lowered his gaze, hating that he was the reason for the tension that instantly filled the room. The first time he had met the Crescent Pack Alpha and his mate at the hotel outside of town, they'd both stared at him in horror for so long that he'd known all they could see when they looked at him was his brother. He hoped that with some time they'd come to recognize the differences between them more but it was still early days and he couldn't blame either of them for recoiling at the very sight of him.

Griffin cleared his throat, "I'm sorry. If I could do something to look less like him..."

"No. No. It's not..." Leo DeLuca started and then caught himself, shooting a glance at his mate who had moved to stand beside him. Whatever he saw in Darius Moreno's eyes, he relaxed a little. He smiled a soft, apologetic smile, "It's a shock at first, that's all."

“When I decided to come here, I didn’t think about there being a family resemblance.” He admitted. “I haven’t... hadn’t... seen him since I was a kid.”

Darius wrapped a protective arm around Leo as they moved into the room together, as one unit. They sat opposite Griffin on the couch. It was obvious they were both still tense in his presence but they were trying and he was grateful for that, even if he couldn’t help but notice the way the Alpha’s Mate put himself slightly forward and angled his body, protective of his mate in Griffin’s company.

“You mentioned that the last time we talked but I was too... surprised, to ask.” Leo smiled a little, as if surprised was the kindest word he could come up with at the moment. “How old were you when you last saw your brother?”

“Five. I was five years old and I had been sick so my mother took me to a healer in a nearby pack.” Griffin swallowed hard. “While we were away, Maddox attacked the rest of the family and killed them all as well as several leaders within the Pack including our father and uncle. My mother and I likely survived only because we were away.”

Darius frowned, “He was trying to take control of your old pack?”

“That’s the assumption but he was gone by the time my mother and I returned so it isn’t as though I ever had a chance to ask.”

“If he murdered everyone there for power, leaving once he had a clear path to becoming Pack Alpha seems strange.” Leo supplied.

“The only thing I’ve ever been able to work out about it, was that his coup didn’t go as planned.” Griffin sighed when they both stared at him, waiting for more of the story, “It was true that Maddox would’ve been the rightful heir after wiping out the rest of our family but he was still young himself then and I don’t think he had considered Tyrell or the support he would be able to gather quickly to his side.”

“Tyrell?” Leo raised an eyebrow.

“Our father’s bastard.” He winced at the words even as they left his mouth. “I never liked that word but, it’s the one my mother used when she told me about him. He was our half-brother but our father refused to claim him because his mother was only a Beta. She wasn’t his true mate. He left her and Tyrell when he met my mother but they refused to leave the pack no matter how badly they were treated by my father. When Maddox began his coup, he didn’t account for Tyrell or the way the remaining men would rally around him. I think he fled rather than be killed when he realized he was outnumbered.”

“That sounds plausible.” Darius hummed thoughtfully.

“Which also explains how he knew he’d need men on his side before attempting to undertake starting a coup here.” Leo shook his head sadly, “He had the numbers. He’d won them over with promises of power and who knows what else. He may have lost that first battle in your old pack but it taught him exactly what he needed to learn before attempting his plot again.”

“I am so sorry for everything he took from you.” Griffin spoke past the knot in his throat.

“It isn’t your place to apologize for him.” Leo shook his head resolutely.

“I’ve spent my entire life apologizing for him. I don’t know another way to live.” Griffin admitted.

Darius frowned, “You and your mother stayed with your pack after what Maddox did?”

“We did. For a long time we did. I grew up hearing the stories of what my older brother had done. Nobody let me forget that I had that same tainted blood running through my veins. Mom tried to protect me but Tyrell...”

“He took Maddox’s sins out on you?” Leo was scowling now but Griffin forced himself to nod.

“He’d always seen our family as the reason his own was broken. After Maddox... he had reason to hate us even more and we didn’t have anyone left to protect us. I was only a kid



and Mom...” Griffin looked away, “She was never the same. We stayed there for a lot longer than we should have and then we ventured out on our own. We took up with packs here and there but, nowhere ever felt like home.”

“That must’ve been hard.” Leo spoke softly.

Griffin shrugged, “It was just... life. I grew up knowing the damage my older brother had done to our family, to our pack, and I’ve spent my life trying to give back, trying to do some good and make the world better, trying to balance it somehow.”

“You said before, that’s why you came here.” Darius waited until Griffin looked back at him, “You want to make things right?”

“I heard the rumors of what happened here and I knew what happened somehow before I ever heard his name mentioned, that Maddox was the one responsible. I felt like, after all the years I’d spent trying to make the world a better place, that this was where I needed to be, to clean up after him and somehow give something back to your pack, if you’ll let me.”

Darius shook his head, “It’s been a lot of years since I made Maddox pay for what he did to this pack. We’ve put it behind us and moved on. The Crescent Pack is stronger now than ever before and the damage Maddox did, is long since healed.”

Griffin swallowed at the reminder that the man sitting across from him had been the one to kill his brother. Darius had told him the story the first time they’d met. Griffin wasn’t sure if he’d simply wanted to be upfront and honest or if he’d been looking for a reaction, to see if his admission would rile Griffin into action, but the only reaction he’d gotten was a nod of understanding. Because if he had ever had the chance to see his brother again after the way he’d slaughtered their family and ruined Griffin’s life, he would have decapitated him himself.

“Look,” he said. “I know it’s been years for you but to me, it’s still fresh. I only just learned about what Maddox did here

and that's because of the network your pack is working to put into place. The alliance is growing and I want to be part of that because without it, I might never have known where my brother ended up or what had happened here. I understand if you don't want me here, if the resemblance is too much or if there's just too much history for you to trust me, but I can assure you that I am nothing like my brother."

"I can see that much for myself." Leo leaned his shoulder into his mate, "Maddox would have already tried to take us out instead of having a conversation."

"He's got a point there." Darius smirked, his body seeming to physically soften at his mate's touch.

"We've talked about it since the last time we saw you and it's true that the resemblance might be hard to get past for some members of the pack, but you're not your brother. I won't hold you accountable for his sins. That's not the kind of leader I am and my pack knows that." Leo glanced from his mate back to Griffin. "I know you've traveled a great distance to get here and if you want to stay, we'll find a place for you."

"Really?" Griffin couldn't keep his shock to himself and Leo's flash of white teeth showed his amusement.

"I don't want you to decide right now whether this is the pack for you or not. Stay with us for a bit. Get to know the pack. Get to know the people and us. If you still want to stay after some time has passed and nobody in the pack has a good reason to cast you out, then we'll talk about you staying for good, but not until. Sound reasonable?"

Griffin felt something heavy that he'd been carrying around with him for far too long ease off his chest and he nodded quickly, "That sounds perfect."

"Good. I hoped you'd be agreeable." Leo offered a hand and Griffin shook it to seal their agreement. "When we invited you here today, Darius put the word out among our Enforcers not to bother you. We let them know you're not the enemy and that you're our guest here. You're free to explore the territory, meet people and get to know the place."

“I asked a friend of ours, Barrett, to give you a lift back to the motel to pick up your stuff. You’ll be bunking with him at his house since he has the extra space. I hope you don’t mind that we made that arrangement.” Darius eyed him with his intense green gaze.

Griffin smiled, knowing it was another test, but understanding why they needed it. They wanted him here, on their land, where they could keep an eye on him. He would be willing to bet that Barrett was more than just a friend. He was probably their best Enforcer too. He’d be more than just Griffin’s roommate. He’d also be acting as a spy and if need be, a guard.

“Fine by me. When do I meet this Barrett?”

“He’s actually waiting for word from us. He’s ready to give you a lift to the hotel now if that works for you.”

“You guys seem to have thought of everything.” Griffin conceded.

“We have a few...” Leo looked to Darius again and then cleared his throat, “family matters, that we need to tend to tonight but Barrett will help you get settled in and tomorrow we’ll show you the lay of the land and start introducing you to the others.”

Griffin took that as his signal and stood. The other two men followed. He shook both their hands again.

“Thank you for giving me this chance.”

“If you’ve heard of the alliance we’re building then you know that what we’re working towards is making the world safer for all the packs and that starts with communication and acceptance. Opening our packs and our families up to take in wolves that don’t have a place to call home is part of our mission. I hope you’ll find the home you’ve been looking for here but if you don’t, then we’ll part on good terms and you can move on knowing your brother didn’t destroy us.”

Griffin took a deep breath and held his ground. He wanted to hug Leo DeLuca for being such a great man but he didn’t dare. Not just because he knew they didn’t completely trust

him yet but because there was no way in hell he was risking the wrath of the Pack Alpha's mate for touching what clearly belonged to him.

"Thank you." he said again.

"Head back up the path you used to get here and then veer left at the fork. Barrett will be waiting for you there with his truck." Darius pointed in the direction he should go as he opened the door and escorted Griffin out of the house.

Griffin left the two men standing on their porch and waved at them over his shoulder. He felt lighter than he had when he'd first stepped foot onto Crescent land and he knew it was because Leo DeLuca had taken some of the pressure off of him. For as long as he could remember, Griffin had spent his life in the shadow of Maddox's wrongdoings. He'd done his best to be nothing like the brother he only barely remembered. He'd worked hard to learn skills that could help others and give back to the communities he was part of but never, not once, in all of his travels had he truly felt like he'd found a place he could belong.

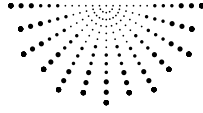
Until now.

He wasn't sure why he felt so drawn to this place, to this pack. He didn't know what fate had in store for him. But what he knew, innately, and what his wolf had recognized the moment they crossed over into Crescent territory, was that this place felt like home and that was something he had only ever thought of as a dream.

Maybe, here, in Noir, Louisiana, he could finally find the family that his brother had stolen from him all those years ago.

Maybe all he had to do was trust in fate.

## CHAPTER THREE



**N**ova hummed along to the latest Lizzo hit as she walked. The music in her earbuds was a nice distraction from all the noise of the real world and the one from the future that sometimes slid into place over it when she least expected it. She knew her visions were a gift and she treated them as such but a girl could only go stumbling into the river because a vision had distracted her so many times before she found a way to block the noise.

Her visions might be wonky lately but they could still overtake her at any moment.

She couldn't do anything about the big ones. The ones that stopped her in her tracks. The ones that warned of danger or an impending change that would drastically alter her life or the life of someone around her. Those came no matter where she was or what she was doing but the smaller visions, the ones that threatened to drive her mad with the constantly changing world based on every decision the people around her made, or didn't make, could be controlled.

Since her visions only seemed to abandon her when she was with those closest to her, she hadn't needed to worry while she was at the apartment with Maya and Zander. But walking back into Crescent territory opened her up to the entire pack. Her visions might have a blind spot and they might leave her more confused about the future than ever, but that didn't mean they'd abandoned her completely.

Over the years, she'd learned that having something to focus on could ground her in reality. If she was with other

people, she could use one of her family members or friends as a type of anchor to keep her in the present. It was more difficult when she was alone but she'd found that music worked almost as well as familiar voices. Now she always wore her earbuds on long walks and hummed or sang along to keep her mind in the present.

It was rare for a basic everyday vision telling her that the boy down the street would fall off his bike or that they were going to get rain could overtake her and she was thankful for the control that had come with age and understanding of her gift.

When she'd been a child, Nova had been carefree and careless with her visions. She had proudly told anyone who would listen about what she saw. Back then she hadn't understood that knowing the future could have consequences.

She'd predicted her oldest sister would mate with an Alpha outside their family's Crescent Pack and though Luna hadn't given her foresight much credit at the time, someone else had. Maddox Clary had been a power-hungry and crazed Alpha who wanted Luna and the Crescent Pack for himself. Hearing of Nova's vision, knowing his time was running out to claim Luna, he'd staged a coup that had ripped the DeLuca family apart and nearly destroyed them all.

Nova's mother and father had been killed in the attack. Her brother, Leo, had been driven from their lands and forced to go to the neighboring Moirae Pack for help because the traitors had also kidnapped Luna, Maya and Nova. It was a chain of events that Nova's visions hadn't foreseen until it was too late because they had also caused it.

It had taken her a while to come to terms with that and even now, knowing all the damage that would be done because of her vision, she couldn't honestly say that she would have kept it to herself if she'd known.

Fate was what it was. It was destiny. It was powerful. It had a way of always being right and fighting it did zero, zip, zilch. In the wake of Maddox Clary's attack, fate had gotten

her way and Nova had never been able to see a path to where they all were now without it.

Luna *had* mated with the Pack Alpha of the neighboring Moirae wolves. She and Michael Hudson were happy. They ruled their pack and were beloved by all. Their sons were wild and bold, the future of the pack ensured with their birth and they were the beating heart of the Hudson and DeLuca family alike.

Fate certainly worked in mysterious ways, but it also worked when it slapped you in the face with the worst days of your life, threatened to destroy you, and then sent you down a path you never would have taken otherwise.

Nobody believed in fate more than Nova. She felt it as though it was a part of her. Her visions were a gift from fate herself to help guide them all. And even if she couldn't see visions of her own future, she had always trusted in the greater power to put her right where she needed to be.

It was ironic really, that she was just thinking of how fate always had a plan, when she rounded the corner of a building onto the main square at the center of Crescent Pack territory and ran smack into something hard and broad and warm.

“Shit.” A deep voice growled as she all but bounced off of him, stumbling backwards, and then two big hands were latching onto her arms to keep her from falling. “Sorry, sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going.”

One of Nova's earbuds had fallen out at the moment of impact and she winced as the low voice invaded her head, overtaking the sound of Lizzo still belting it out against her other eardrum. It took her brain a moment to process that she had run into someone, not something.

Even as it did, her body reacted so viscerally that her breath caught and heat flushed through her, sparking at the point where those big hands held her arms and racing through every nerve ending in her body. She felt light-headed, weak in the knees, and a familiar sense of knowing settled in her chest before she even regained her footing enough to look up and find the man she had run into.

The man that fate had put directly in her path.

“No, I’m sorry, I...” Nova raised her head to look up and the heat that had raced through her flash froze the blood in her veins. Panic. Sheer, utter, terror and panic clawed its way up her throat and she shoved at the hands that were holding her, desperate to get away, to run, to fight, to do something. “No. No. No!”

She could hear the one word being screamed over and over but it didn’t sound like it was coming from her throat. That couldn’t be her voice. Shrill and horrified, a whine so keening that her wolf shuddered inside of her and shrank back to the farthest, darkest corner of her soul.

Maddox Clary was alive. He wasn’t dead like they all thought. Darius hadn’t killed him by ripping his head off all those years ago. He was here. Now. Standing right in front of her, gripping her arms even as she struggled to get away from him, and just like when she was a little girl and he was a grown man, so much bigger and meaner and scarier than her, he wouldn’t let her go.

“Nova?” Somewhere through her terrified screams she heard her name being uttered by her brother’s worried voice. “Nova, what the... oh, fuck.”

“Son of a bitch.” Darius was there now too though Nova’s gaze was snagged on the devilishly handsome face of the man in front of her so she couldn’t see him.

That face. She would know it anywhere. Dark skin. Full lips. Chiseled cheekbones. So handsome it hurt to look at him but it was a mask. Beneath the good looks he wasn’t a man or even a wolf. He was a monster.

“Let her go.” Darius ordered.

“I... can’t.” The man’s honey brown eyes didn’t leave Nova’s face and his grip on her didn’t loosen even though he lowered his voice to a soft whisper, “I’m not who you think I am. I’m not him. I swear to you that I am not him and I would never hurt you. Do you hear me? Never.”



“But you’re... you’re... supposed to be dead?” she whimpered as the heat in her heart warred with the cold lead taking up residence in her stomach.

“No.” The man shook his head again, “Maddox was my brother. He’s dead but I am not here to hurt you. I promise. I would never hurt you.”

“Nova, sweetheart... He’s not Maddox. He’s the reason we wanted to talk to you. He’s his brother.” Darius was saying from somewhere behind her, his voice soothing and then, quieter, “Dammit Leo, do something. She looks like she’s going to pass out. Make him let go of her.”

“I can’t.” Leo hissed.

“Why the hell not?” Darius demanded.

“Because I can’t interrupt a mate bond.” Leo sounded horrified and Nova’s legs gave out when the truth of what she was feeling hit her ears in the voice of the man she trusted more than anyone.

No, it couldn’t be. She shivered when strong arms caught her and swept her up before she could hit the ground. He looked like Maddox but Maddox was dead.

She met those honey-colored eyes again and they were so soft, so warm, that her brain finally began to believe that this wasn’t the demon from all of her nightmares. He couldn’t be. Unless this was a nightmare and she was asleep right now. She closed her eyes and willed herself to wake up but instead that deep voice sank inside of her again as the man holding her spoke.

“I’m not who you think I am.” He repeated but her heart was already sinking because that wasn’t entirely true.

Based on what she was feeling, based on what Leo had said, based on her gut instinct, he was *exactly* who she thought he was. He might not be Maddox Clary but he was her fated mate. He was her other half, the one person in the world that could make her whole.

And he had the face of the devil that had killed half her family and tortured the rest.

Fate had an awful fucking sense of humor, Nova thought, just before she fainted.

WHEN NOVA WOKE it was with a slow and dawning horror that what had happened wasn't a dream. She wasn't entirely sure how long she'd been out for, but she guessed it couldn't have been too awfully long because sunlight was streaming through the curtains. She winced at the sound of voices nearby but didn't move, instead taking a moment to survey her surroundings and listen in while they thought she was still unconscious.

She recognized the couch she was lying on. The room around her familiar, though not her own living room. She wasn't surprised that they hadn't carried her home but instead to Leo's house. It had the benefit of not only being closer but it also meant they'd adhered to her wishes that nobody was allowed to invade the private sanctuary of her home. It had been the first boundary she put in place when she'd moved back to Crescent territory and her brothers had always abided by it, apparently even when she was unconscious which was reassuring even if the reminder of why she'd fainted and needed to be carried anywhere was the opposite of reassuring.

It hadn't been a nightmare. She had been awake before and she was awake now. This was really happening and she knew it was real because even without looking she knew that he wasn't in the house, that he wasn't nearby, and the magical forces inside her body were urging her to go after him, to find him and be closer to him, even as her brain screamed at her to run as far and as fast as she could.

“You're awake.”

It was Darius coming back into the room that forced her to give up the pretense of unconsciousness and push up to a sitting position. He glanced over his shoulder, back towards the kitchen, and she knew that her brother would be coming around the corner any second. When he almost immediately turned the corner, nearly running into his husband, and then

sidestepping him to rush to her side and offer the cup of tea he was holding, she almost, almost, felt like smiling.

She didn't need a vision to know that Leo was as upset with this turn of events as she was.

"I made you some of Mom's special tea. Drink this." He forced it into her hands and she took it instinctively.

"Mom's calming tea?" She closed her eyes and smiled at the familiar scent before opening her eyes and glancing back up to where Darius still stood, "Please tell me you also made him drink a cup of this stuff."

"One hundred percent." Darius offered a soft smile as he moved into the room, taking the chair opposite the couch, "Not that it seems to have helped. He's been going out of his mind worrying about you." Darius pinned her with his intense stare, "We both have."

"We didn't know." Leo rushed in. "I didn't know. If I had even thought there was a possibility that he... that you..." Leo groaned, shaking his head as if the whole concept gave him a migraine, "I never should have agreed to let him come here."

"Of course you didn't know." Nova reached out and touched his knee with her free hand, "How could you? It's not as if you have the gift of foresight and mine hasn't exactly been stellar lately."

"I know." Leo put his hand over hers, "But I'm still so, so sorry that you were ambushed like that. It isn't at all how I intended to tell you he was here and I..."

"It's okay."

"It's really not."

Nova sighed, "No. It's not. But it isn't your fault and you don't have anything to be sorry for. The fates on the other hand..."

"About that." Darius cleared his throat when she trailed off. "We were talking while you were out and we think we may have figured out why your visions have been off lately."

“He figured it out.” Leo cast his husband a knowing smile, “He just doesn’t want credit.”

“We...” Darius continued, turning his attention back to Nova, “We think that he’s the reason your visions have gone dark when it comes to the family.”

Nova bit her lip and stared into her cup of tea for a long time. It made sense. Of course it made sense. She’d been considering it earlier after talking to Maya, and Zander suggested something similar? She just hadn’t realized they were right. Not until it was too late.

She had never been able to see her own future. It was part of the gift, a blind-spot. Her mate’s future was so intrinsically tied to her own that it only made sense that he would be a blind-spot too. His sudden appearance here, in Crescent territory, where his lifeline would twine together with those of her family and pack explained her sudden lack of foresight. And damn if that wasn’t the most annoying part because if she’d been able to see him coming she would have run the other way.

“Maya actually mentioned something along the same lines when I was with her earlier today.” She admitted.

“Damn. She’ll be unbearable about being right, you know that?” Leo huffed, playfully nudging her shoulder and then pointing to the tea. “Now, drink.”

She did as she was told. The herbal tea was one of the strongest memories she had of her mother. She’d only been a child but she could remember her mother writing the recipe down in careful, neat script as clear as a bell. She’d intended to pass the book down to Luna on the day she was married but she never got that chance. Nova realized now that it must have been left behind in the old house and Leo had been the one to find it and keep it safe all these years.

The warm tea soothed her throat and after a couple of sips she sighed, “Wh-where is he?”

Leo and Darius exchanged a look that told her she wasn’t going to like the answer.

Her brother cleared his throat, “He went back to his hotel to collect his things.”

“He’s leaving?” Her voice squeaked and she didn’t miss the look of disapproval Darius shot at her, clearly catching the relief behind it.

“No.” He spoke slowly and carefully, “To move his stuff in here.”

“Here?” This time she screeched and she couldn’t help it, she shot up off the couch. The hot tea sloshed onto her hand and she winced, trying to steady herself. “You’re letting him move in here? With you? What the hell?”

“No. No.” Leo was on his feet at her side, taking the cup before she dropped it and placing it on the side table out of danger. “He isn’t moving in here with us. That isn’t what Darius meant.”

“Then what did he mean?” She shook her hand, wiping the tea on her shorts as her gaze ping-ponged between them.

“He’s not moving in with us...” Leo looked at a loss, “He’s moving into Crescent territory, with the pack.”

Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head, “That’s insane. He can’t. You can’t let him.”

“Nova...” Darius was standing now too and his calming, steady voice only made her panic double.

“No!” She shook her head. “No. He can’t be here. Not after what he did to the pack.”

“That wasn’t him, Nova. That was Maddox.”

“You know what I mean.” She hissed when Darius corrected her and then turned her pleading stare on her brother. “You’re the Pack Alpha. You can’t let him stay. You can’t. If you tell him to leave then he’ll have to leave.”

“Nova.” Leo reached for her but she jerked away because he was using that same placating tone as his husband and she didn’t want to be calmed right now, not when she had every right to her panic and anger.

“No. Stop it.”

“Nova. He’s your mate.” Leo insisted and she felt the tears that had been welling behind her eyes spill over at the truth she didn’t want to accept.

“He... He can’t be.” Her voice broke on a sob and she collapsed back onto the couch, her head in her hands as tears choked her and she struggled to pull air into her lungs. “It isn’t fair. It’s not fair. It can’t be him. It just can’t.”

“I know.” Leo wrapped her in his arms and Darius was on her other side now, doing the same, forming a protective circle around her like they used to when she was little and was upset.

“It’s going to be okay.” Darius tried to console her.

“It’s not.” She sniffed. “Nothing is ever going to be okay about this.”

“You’ll figure it out. We all will.” Leo soothed but she only shook her head.

“I’ve done everything fate asked of me. I’ve believed even when all of you doubted, when you struggled with your bonds and with the hand she dealt you. I believed and this is what I get in return?” Nova sucked in a deep gulp and steeled her voice, “Fuck fate. Fuck her and fuck her plans for me.”

“Nova...”

“No. I’m done being fate’s little messenger.” She shrugged out of her brother’s hold and swiped at her cheeks, her anger returning. “Done.”

“Nova...” Leo tried again.

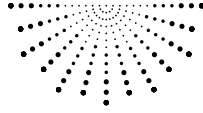
“I’ve forgiven fate for the shit hand she dealt us with Maddox, with our parents, with all of it but not this.” She held her chin up high and cursed the only higher power she’d ever believed in. “This is unforgivable and I’m not just going to go along with it.”

She wasn’t sure yet what she was going to do but it certainly wasn’t going to be whatever fate had in store for her. She wasn’t going to sit around and let life happen to her, not anymore. Not if this was what she got in return for her years of

service. She had helped guide each of her siblings to their fated mates but this was one bond that was never being sealed.

Everyone always said, you can't fight fate. Hell, *she* had said it all her life. But she was damn well going to try.

## CHAPTER FOUR



**G**riffin shoved his things into the spare room that Barrett had shown him to when he arrived and then tried to figure out what he should do next. It wasn't as if he had a lot of personal belongings to unpack. He'd never had much of anything to call his own and certainly nothing that he couldn't leave behind on a whim should it become necessary. He hadn't expected that to change just by walking into Crescent territory but it had.

He had a mate. A Fated Mate. Not only had he been given the greatest gift a shifter could ever receive, but his mate was powerful. Far more powerful than befits a man of his position, or lack thereof. He had always assumed that if he had a fated mate out there that he would find her during one of his many travels but considering his family's checkered past, he hadn't been holding out much hope that fate was willing to continue the Clary bloodline.

Then he'd turned that corner and come face to face with his future.

He hadn't realized who she was immediately. Sure he'd felt the flare of heat and the instant connection as his wolf scrambled to identify their mate. But he hadn't known *who* the beautiful woman was that had fallen into his arms, not until after she fainted and he'd been forced to face Leo DeLuca's horrified face.

He wasn't sure that he would ever be able to wipe that look out of his memory. No matter what came next, no matter if he was welcomed into the Crescent Pack or not, he would



always remember the way the Pack Alpha had looked at him when he realized a mate bond had sparked. Leo DeLuca had been utterly dismayed and it had stung what little amount of pride Griffin had left.

Not that he blamed the guy. He couldn't. Not when the next words out of the Pack Alpha's mouth had been, "*That's my little sister.*"

Fate had not only tied Griffin to the Crescent Pack but to the DeLuca family. To the pack and more specifically to the family that his own older brother had tried to destroy. Maddox had murdered the Pack Alphas, robbing the DeLuca children of a lifetime with their parents. Then Griffin had walked into town and sparked a bond with the youngest of the DeLuca kids, stealing her for himself when taking more from this family was the last thing he had wanted to do.

Nova DeLuca. They'd told him her name after he helped carry her to the house. His mate was Nova DeLuca, not just a powerful Alpha wolf descended from one of the oldest bloodlines in shifter lore but also, apparently, a Seer.

Griffin had never met a Seer. Not in any of the packs he had come across. He'd grown up thinking they were a myth. They were part of pack legends but since nobody he'd known had ever met one he hadn't thought they were real. After all, the kind of power a Seer possessed could only be bestowed by fate herself and the stories said she no longer trusted them not to abuse the gift.

But fate had trusted Nova DeLuca and that made her the most powerful shifter on the planet as far as he knew.

And she was his.

He wasn't sure how that was going to work. Leo DeLuca had insisted that he continue with his original plan to meet Barrett, get his stuff brought over and officially move into Crescent territory. Darius Moreno had all but escorted him out of the house even as Griffin shot backwards glances towards the couch where he had laid his unconscious mate. They'd told him they would talk with Nova and figure everything out but

based on the way she'd reacted to the sight of him, he wasn't so sure anything could be worked out.

The sight of him alone had terrified her. The idea of being mated to him scared the hell out of her. She had fainted to avoid dealing with him and though he knew, logically, that had been out of her control, he couldn't help but think it said a lot about the possibilities for their future together.

Slim to say the least.

A knock sounded behind him and Griffin spun around to find Barrett standing in the open doorway. It took every ounce of strength he had not to wince at the sight of the big man. It wasn't just that he was missing one of his eyes, the skin pulled tight where his shifter genes had tried to heal over the damage. He was scarred, physically and likely emotionally as well, but Griffin had a hard time looking at him only because he knew without a doubt that his brother had been the one to do that damage. Still, he didn't dare look away because it was clear Barrett was a proud man and wouldn't take kindly to Griffin's pity.

"What're you doin' in here?" The big man's Cajun drawl was thick as molasses.

"Nothing." Griffin regretted the word as soon as it escaped his mouth, making him sound defensive, or like he was hiding something.

"I may only have one eye but I can see that." Barrett snorted, "You ain't gettin' away with hidin' in here if that's what ya were thinking."

"I..." Griffin started and then shrugged, knowing instinctively that Barrett wasn't the kind of man that would let him lie to his face, "Yeah. Okay, I was hiding out. Trying to figure out what to do next."

"Well, I can help with that. Come on." Barrett motioned for Griffin to follow him as he turned and headed up the hallway, "What we're goin' to do next is have a beer."

Griffin followed him because really, what else was he going to do? The least he could do was share a beer with him

on his first night invading the man's house and no doubt dredging up memories he'd rather avoid if Nova's reaction to Griffin's face said anything about the resemblance he must share with the brother who had forever altered this man's life.

"You always look so serious?" Barrett narrowed his eye at Griffin as he opened the fridge.

"Probably." He admitted with a shrug.

"Whatcha thinkin' about that's put that look on your face?" Barrett pulled two bottles of beer from the fridge and slid one towards Griffin who caught it before it left the counter and went flying.

"I just..." He stared at his beer bottle for a moment before deciding that being straightforward was the only way to handle this situation. "Are you sure you're okay with me being here?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I got the space and Leo asked. We go way back. If he asked it's cuz he wanted you here and that's fine by me."

"But are you really? Or did you just agree because the Pack Alpha asked?"

Barrett studied him with his one good eye for so long that Griffin wished a hole would open up in the earth and swallow him. The big man sighed and took a long drink of his beer. When he was done he wiped his mouth with the back of a hand that was missing several fingers and then pointed one of the remaining digits at Griffin.

"You mean because of Maddox, right?"

"And who he was to me." Griffin swallowed hard. "I'm fairly certain you got those scars from a knife my brother wielded but here you are, welcoming me into your home and offering me a beer. How are you okay with that?"

Barrett looked thoughtful, "Well, for starters, I know you ain't your brother. He's dead and buried. Has been for a long time now."

"Apparently I look like him though. I didn't know that. Not until I came here. But doesn't that bother you?"

“Not gonna lie, kid. First time I saw you, it sent me reelin. It’s crazy how much you resemble him. But you ain’t like him, and that helps.”

“How can you be so sure?” Griffin couldn’t help but ask, awed by this man’s ease with him.

“Because if you were, Darius never would have let you get near Leo, or this pack. He’d have disappeared you before you even knew what hit you. But he didn’t.” Barrett shrugged nonchalantly before taking another swig of his beer and then his lips quirked into an amused tilt. “Darius didn’t kill you and Leo’s willing to give you a chance but don’t think just because I’m not at full strength I couldn’t hold my own if you tried something. Leo put you with me because I’ve always had his back and he knows if I sense anything suspicious, I won’t hesitate to tell him.”

Griffin snorted into his beer, the beginnings of a smile on his own lips now. He had guessed that much. They’d invited him in. They’d welcomed him even. But they hadn’t given him a place of his own. They’d put him in a house with a man they clearly trusted and whose opinion they valued. He was here because they wanted to keep an eye on him and that was the first thing about this whole situation that made sense to Griffin.

“I just told you they basically asked me to play spy and you’re grinning? What gives?”

“Nothing.” Griffin shook his head, “It just, makes sense.”

“And that amuses you?”

“It reassures me that this pack is a good one, with solid leadership.” Griffin shrugged, “Because I never would have let someone like me into pack territory without someone to keep an eye out.” He winced. “Sorry, poor choice of phrase.”

Barrett chuckled, “No worries. I said the same thing to Leo when he asked if I’d let you stay here. Don’t think there’s a one-eyed man joke you can make that I ain’t already made myself.”

“Is that so?”

“I don’t take offense easily.” Barrett swigged from his bottle again. “I reckon’ you must have tough skin too if you’ve really spent most of your life trying to clean up the mess that psychotic brother of yours made in your old pack.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged uncomfortably, wondering just how much of his story Leo had told the man.

“Can’t imagine they made life easy for you there.”

“An easy life doesn’t necessarily equate to a good life.” Griffin peeled the label on his beer bottle and dodged the true question, “I want to do better than Maddox. To right some of his wrongs if I can. That’s what brought me here.”

“Is it though?” Barrett’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“What do you mean?” Griffin frowned.

“I heard what happened this afternoon with you and Nova so I figure it was fate that brought you here. To her. To find your mate.”

He was already shaking his head before Barrett finished, “But I only came because I heard what had happened in this pack and I recognized my brother’s handiwork. I came because of him, to try and make what he did... well, not right but... better somehow.”

“Sure. Sure.” Barrett pointed his beer bottle in Griffin’s direction. “But the way I see it, and pardon me if it isn’t exactly 20/20 these days..” He smirked and Griffin groaned. “Fate’s always working in the background of our lives. You came here because of what your brother did but maybe, your brother had to do what he did in order to get you here to where you needed to be, at the right time to meet your match.”

Griffin gaped at the older man, unable to comprehend what he was saying. That was crazy. Wasn’t it? There was no way fate had guided Maddox through his murderous journey just so she could bring Griffin to Noir, at this particular time, to meet Nova DeLuca.

“You think fate made Maddox murder all those people?”

“No. That’s not what I said. Fate doesn’t force anyone to do anything. She guides. That’s all.”

“And you think she guided everything that happened to the Crescent Pack, to the DeLuca family, just so Nova and I could find our fated mate?” He scoffed, it seemed more than a little incredulous.

“A lot of people seem to think that fate has this one path for each of us but if I’ve learned anything from having a Seer around, it’s that our paths are always changing. We have free will and every choice we make alters our path. It’s only the end point that stays the same. So yeah, I think, based on everything that’s happened, Maddox was a simply tool that fate used to get her way.”

“What do you mean?”

Barrett tilted his head, “Nobody’s told you what really happened, have they?”

“About Maddox staging a coup and killing the Alpha? Yeah. I know about that.”

“No. No.” Barrett shook his head, “Not about Maddox. About Nova.”

“What about her?”

“The part she played in starting all of it.”

Griffin was gaping again, so much so he could barely pull his mouth shut to form the words, “What part did she play?”

“It was Nova’s vision of Luna, the eldest DeLuca sister, Leo’s twin, that put Maddox on the warpath. Little Nova saw a vision of Luna mating a Pack Alpha, someone outside our own pack, but Maddox had been trying to woo Luna for ages at that point. Likely in the hopes of getting his hands on some power in the pack since they weren’t fated but that’s not the point.” Barrett continued. “She was just a kid. She had no idea what would happen. How could she? She was just so happy for her sister to find her mate that she told everyone about the vision and as best as we’ve ever figured, Maddox realized time was running out to take control of the pack, which is why he led his revolt when he did.”

Griffin stared, “She had a vision of her sister... and that’s what set Maddox off?”

“Who knows really? But that’s what she thinks and I can guarantee you it’s what everyone else in that family thinks. Me too for that matter because fate works in mysterious and messy fucking ways.”

Griffin’s chest ached, “She must feel so guilty carrying that burden, even if she was just a kid.”

“She does. But riddle me this, why would fate give her that vision, knowing she was a child, knowing she adored her oldest sister, knowing what would happen, if that’s not exactly how it was supposed to go down?”

“You mean...”

“I mean.” Barrett elaborated. “Luna did mate the Pack Alpha of our neighboring pack but they only met because he was the one who freed her after Maddox kidnapped her and held her hostage.”

“Fate got her way.” He whispered.

“And not just with Luna. Leo escaped that night and he went to the Moirae Pack for help. That’s how Michael ended up here but it was more than that. Leo also met Darius when he went to the Moirae Pack for help.”

“Wait... Darius was Moirae Pack?”

“Head Enforcer.” Barrett confirmed. “They likely would have crossed paths eventually once Leo took over the pack since the Crescent and Moirae Packs have always cooperated due to our close proximity, but apparently fate didn’t want to wait.”

“So Nova’s vision led to the death of her parents, but it also led her two older siblings to their fated mates.”

“All three really, but Maya, the middle sister, hers took some time. She only found her mate a few years ago but he had ties to the Moirae Pack despite being human. If Luna wasn’t already the Queen of that pack, they might not have

come together the way they did and ended up as Moirae wolves.”

Griffin’s mind was spinning, “A DeLuca wolf is a Moirae Pack member now?”

“Yep.”

“That’s... impossible.”

“Not impossible. Unlikely. Unless of course you chalk it up to fate.”

Griffin scrubbed a hand over his jaw as he let everything that Barrett had just told him sink in. What Maddox had set in motion here, with the Crescent Pack, had been awful. He had murdered the elders and leaders of the pack. He had killed anyone who stood against him. He had held the DeLuca daughters hostage and ruined more lives than Griffin could count. But if Barrett was right, what Maddox had done was simply putting the wheels of fate into motion.

His brother had always been a murderous psychopath but was it possible that fate had brought him to the Crescent Pack for a reason? He had done horrific things but the pack had recovered. They were stronger than ever to hear Leo and Darius tell it. They’d created an alliance to better serve their kind and connect packs that had always been insular before which was how Griffin had even found out about his brother in the first place. Maddox had been the catalyst for the changes not just in the Crescent Pack but in the entire DeLuca family and now, there was this.

Nova DeLuca was Griffin’s fated mate.

Everything in his life had led him here, to this place, to her. So maybe Barrett was right. Maybe fate had set all of it in motion. Maybe nobody, not even Maddox, truly had a choice in how it all played out. But did he believe that? He wasn’t sure.

He had always trusted fate to guide him. As a shifter it was the higher power that guided them all. But he liked to believe they still had free will. After all, shifters refused their mate bonds sometimes. And Griffin didn’t believe that everything



happened for a reason. Fate wasn't a micromanager. They all controlled their everyday lives but fate was there to guide them towards where they were meant to be.

What did it mean that she had guided him here, now, to find his fated mate?

Griffin couldn't be sure what it all meant or how it had come to be but he did know one thing for sure. Nova DeLuca was meant to be his. Fate had split their souls in two and today they had found one another again. The spark had ignited the moment he touched her and when he'd looked into her eyes he'd seen his future looking back at him.

Even now, his wolf was pacing beneath his skin. He could feel Nova through the already burgeoning link that would soon solidify into the bond. He knew she was west of where he was, through the woods and only a quick run away. His wolf wanted to push to the surface, to take control and race towards her. He wanted to leap on her and sink his fangs into her soft skin to mark her as theirs forever.

It was only Griffin's well-earned self-control that kept his more beastly side at bay.

"Listen, all I'm saying is, maybe if Nova can come to understand that everything that happened led you here, that it brought her to her fated mate, then she can start to forgive herself and heal."

Griffin's head snapped up and he frowned at Barrett. The words struck a nerve. He remembered Leo DeLuca telling him that what Maddox had done was in the past. He'd said they put it behind them. He'd said they had healed and moved on. But from the way Barrett spoke, the way he looked at Griffin, he understood now that wasn't completely true, at least not for everyone that Maddox had hurt.

Hell, did he really need to hear Barrett say it to understand that Nova was still hurt by what his brother had done? Her reaction to him should have been more than enough. She'd been terrified and then horrified at the realization of who he was and who he was to her. Maddox might not have scarred her on the outside for the world to see like he had with Barrett

but Griffin knew better than most that sometimes the deepest scars were the ones inside of you that never seemed to heal.

“She fainted when she saw me.” Griffin winced. “I don’t think we got off to the best start but I’m definitely sticking around and I intend to show her that I’m nothing like my brother.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Barrett tipped his beer towards him and then a serious look overtook his face, “Respect her boundaries and be good to her. She’s had a rough time and she deserves the best in a mate.”

“I don’t know if I’m the best but...”

“Fate has decided you’re the best for her and that’s good enough for me.” Barrett cut him off, “Don’t prove me wrong. Don’t prove fate wrong or else you’ll have a whole pack full of Alpha wolf big brothers to deal with. She’s like a baby sister to all of us and we’ll tear you apart if you hurt her.”

The warning made Griffin smile, “I appreciate the warning but I told her and I’ll tell you, I’ll never do anything to harm her.”

“Good.” Barrett knocked back the rest of his beer and groaned, “It’s been a long day and I have a feeling tomorrow will be more of the same. I’m headed to bed early. You should tuck in for the night too. You’ll have to face the rest of the pack tomorrow, and Nova again.”

“Yeah. I’ll head to bed shortly.” Griffin nodded. “Thanks for the beer, and for the talk. I appreciate it, Barrett.”

The big man smirked, “Friends call me Bear.”

Tension Griffin hadn’t known was even there released from his shoulders and he smiled, “Goodnight Bear.”

“Night Griffin.”

He watched the other man lumber away down the hallway and sighed. Had he just made his first friend in the Crescent Pack? He hoped so.

GRIFFIN FINISHED his beer and put the bottle in the recycling bin where Barrett had dropped his. He headed to the room that was now his and changed out of his jeans and t-shirt before crawling between the covers. He stared at the ceiling and watched the fan spin in lazy circles but he couldn't get his mind to stop replaying that scene with Nova in the town square.

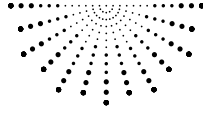
The spark of connection. The flare of heat. The dawning horror on her lovely face. The way she had felt in his arms, even unconscious. It had felt so right holding her there, against him, that he hadn't wanted to let her go.

He had, but only because he'd known that he had no choice.

Winning her over wouldn't be easy but he would do whatever he had to do. She was his fated mate. She was his and he was hers. She was here, in this place, a powerful Alpha wolf Seer, descended from one of the oldest shifter bloodlines ever documented. She was a Crescent wolf and he belonged with her. He belonged here.

Finally, he had found his home... now he just had to fight to keep it.

## CHAPTER FIVE



**W**hen the knock sounded on her back door, Nova didn't need a vision to tell her what was waiting on the other side. She already knew. She looked at the clock on her nightstand and smiled.

They were right on time. Well, actually they were a little bit late. She had thought they would come sooner but just so long as they came and she had a chance to say goodbye then she was convinced that she was doing the right thing.

She'd wanted to throw a bag together and hit the road as soon as possible but of course common sense had forced her to second-guess that plan because the bus that ran through Noir only ran once a day and she figured she may as well spend her last night at home, in her own bed, before she caught it tomorrow morning and left town for good.

She'd come to a decision about what she had to do. It hurt to even think about but it was the only way she knew to reject the bond. She had to run away and get as far from Noir as possible before anyone, especially Griffin Clary, realized she had left. She had to be on the other side of the country if not the world from him so that when the full moon rose and her wolf took control there was no way the animal could find her way back to him in time to seal the bond.

It would destroy her to leave her home, her land, her pack and her family. She had never even considered leaving as a possibility for her future. This was where she belonged. She had always known it, deep inside her soul. But if he was here then she couldn't be and that only left her one option.

Leaving everyone she loved behind, leaving behind the only life she had ever known, might destroy her but it couldn't possibly be worse than spending eternity waking up next to Maddox Clary's brother.

The knocking came again and she stood from where she'd been sitting on the edge of her bed, waiting, and went to answer it.

She didn't think they would force their way in if she didn't answer, at least not right away, but she thought it was best to keep up appearances at least for tonight. She would open the door. She would go outside and talk to them. She would listen to everything they had to say and then she would send them on their way, convinced they could talk more tomorrow when in reality she would be half a state away before they realized she was gone.

She couldn't tell them she was leaving. They'd try to stop her. She knew them well enough to know they wouldn't let her go without a fight and she didn't feel like fighting with them on the last night she got to spend here before everything changed.

Since she'd barred her family from entering her house, lest they touch anything that might give her a vision, she knew it would take them precious hours to realize she wasn't just hiding out at home tomorrow. She didn't let anyone inside her house. Everything in it had been specially selected by her, made by her or at the very least had been touched by her so many times that there were no visions left entangled in the objects past to surprise her. So long as nobody came inside the house, they couldn't bring visions of their futures inside with them.

It wasn't a foolproof plan. She had experienced plenty of visions without touching anyone or anything. But she'd found over the years that the less stimuli she encountered the better chance she had of keeping the normal, everyday visions at bay, and that meant keeping her home as peaceful and undisturbed as possible.

Her home was her sanctuary. It was her safe space. Normally her family didn't even bother coming to her house because they knew she'd make them sit outside on the back porch and they respected her boundaries. But she'd had a feeling that they would show up tonight, which was why she wasn't at all surprised when she slipped out the back door and found that it wasn't just Leo and Darius on the porch but all of them.

Maya and Zander stood near the picnic table talking to Darius. Michael and Leo were discussing something in low voices. Luna was the one closest to her, clearly her oldest sister had been the one knocking, and as soon as Nova saw her, tears she hadn't realized she was holding back filled her eyes and she launched herself into Luna's waiting arms.

Her sister wrapped her in a hug, holding her tight and Nova fell apart in a way she hadn't let herself since she was only a little girl.

She was touched by the fact that all of her siblings and their mates had come to see her. They all had families of their own now, children of their own, kids they'd had to leave at home in their beds, likely after finding someone to stay with them, just so they could come here and check on her. It wasn't easy for all of them to get away like this but they'd done it tonight, for her.

Which was just another reminder of all she would be leaving behind tomorrow.

"Shh." Luna stroked her back comfortingly, "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

"No." She shook her head, inadvertently wiping her eyes on Luna's shirt. "Nothing is okay about this."

"I know. I'm so sorry. Why don't we all sit down and talk about it?" Luna was using her motherly voice in an attempt to take control of the situation and Nova frowned.

She had thought her family was here to console her, to commiserate with her. She'd thought they would be full of sympathy. She'd wanted them to hug her and hold her and tell

her what a raw deal fate had given her. She'd at least thought she'd get more than a few minutes of comfort but from the way they were all looking at her, they'd already decided how this was going to go.

They expected her to calm down. They expected her to get over her shock and her horror. They expected her to simply go along with fate's decision because that was what she'd always done. She had always believed that fate didn't make mistakes but she'd been wrong and they were wrong too if they thought she was going to have a nice little chat about it and then accept that her fated mate, the man that fate had created to make her whole, the other half of her soul, was the brother of the man who had tried to destroy everyone she loved.

She moved back from Luna warily, "You don't really think we can just sit down, have a family meeting and work this out, do you?"

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?" Michael moved to his wife's side, sliding his arm around her waist. "Come on, kiddo. Let's talk about this."

She glared at him, "I'm not a kid anymore and I haven't been in a very long time. If what happened today isn't proof of that, I don't know what is. I'm not a child and I am sick to death of you all treating me like I am."

"I'm sorry." Michael looked immediately chastised, "I know you're not a kid anymore. It's just an old habit."

"Well it's an old habit that needs to die a quick death because I am not in the mood to be treated like a little kid right now. I'm an adult. Treat me like one."

"Then act like one." Leo shot back and she gaped at her brother.

"Excuse me?"

"Leo..." Darius whispered his mate's name softly, as if he was as surprised by the sudden outburst as much as she was but her brother only shook his head.

"No. I'm serious. If she wants to be treated like an adult then she needs to start acting like one." Leo turned his stern

gaze back on her. “I understand the shock you must have gone through when you ran into Griffin. I understand why you reacted the way you did and even that it was so overwhelming that you fainted. But after you woke up, you threw a temper tantrum and stormed out of my house without letting me explain anything. Now you’re snapping at us as if we’re the reason you’re hurting instead of letting us help you through this tough time. We’ve all been where you are...”

“Don’t even pretend you know what I’m going through. You never had to look into the face of your fated mate and see the man that still haunts your nightmares.” She hissed and Leo’s jaw clenched.

“That’s not what he was saying.” Darius put a supporting hand on Leo’s shoulder.

“You’re not listening or being reasonable.” Leo huffed.

Nova grit her teeth to keep from screaming at her brother. She could feel the tears burning the back of her eyes again but she refused to cry now. Not when he’d already accused her of throwing a temper tantrum and acting like a child.

But dammit, why couldn’t they understand just how upsetting today’s events had been to her? She’d thought if anyone would be on her side it would be her brother and sisters who had all lived through the trauma Maddox Clary inflicted on them right along beside her, yet here they were, trying to play devil’s advocate and convince her to give his brother a chance.

Everyone had lost their minds. Everyone but her. Yet somehow they thought she was the one that was being unreasonable!

“Fine.” She spit out the word. “Tell me what you were trying to say.”

Leo narrowed his eyes at her hateful tone but spoke calmly, “What I was saying is that we’ve all been in a position where we were caught off guard by the mate bond sparking to life. Not a single one of us was prepared for it when it happened to us. It took us time to accept the bonds that fate



forged for us even though we all grew up in the world of shifters and knew how it was supposed to work. Actually going through it, dealing with the changes it demands from your body and your heart and even your soul, is a huge adjustment and you're not alone in feeling freaked out by the hand fate dealt you. We've all been there and we're here to help you get through it."

Nova started shaking her head before her brother finished speaking, "It's not the same. It's not the same because fate didn't deal you a shit hand. She gave you a strong Enforcer to stand by your side. An equal. Someone to help you lead the pack. Someone loyal and caring. You can't compare being mated with Darius to the nightmare I'm living in right now when I think of spending my life next to Maddox Clary's brother."

"It wasn't always easy between us." Leo argued.

"Easy? No. I remember it wasn't easy. But it also wasn't impossible because when you looked at Darius you didn't see the face of our parents' murderer staring back at you. I do."

"He's not his brother." Darius spoke up from his position beside Leo. "Griffin isn't Maddox. We've met with him. We've talked to him. He genuinely came here because he wanted to give something back to the pack that his brother tried to destroy. We'd already asked him to stay even before your run in with him revealed what fate was planning and we did that because we trusted him enough to have him here. Doesn't that tell you something about his character?"

"Speaking of that decision..." Maya cleared her throat and scowled at her brothers, "While we're on the topic, when, exactly, were you two planning to tell the rest of us that Maddox Clary's brother was in town and you were letting him join the Crescent Pack?"

The accusation in Maya's tone gave Nova a little more confidence in her decision to refuse her fated mate. Maya was on her side. Of course she was. Even if she was here with the rest of them under the guise of talking Nova into doing something she clearly didn't want, Maya always had her back.

“We were planning to tell Nova first.” Leo explained.

“Why?” Maya countered. “Because you thought her visions might help uncover what he was really up to?”

“You think I planned for them to meet like that? Just so it might trigger a vision? You think I’d be willing to use our sister and her gift like that?”

“You seem pretty okay with using it to make your little pet project work.” Maya sneered.

“Are you serious?” Leo snapped, “My pet project is for the good of our entire species and Nova’s volunteered her help anytime we’ve used her visions. Maybe it’s convenient for you to have forgotten, but Nova is the only DeLuca other than myself who is still a Crescent wolf. She’s the only one I owed an explanation to about letting Griffin into Crescent territory. She’s still part of this pack. You’re not. Not anymore.”

Maya growled, “I’m still part of this family, asshole. I thought that meant something but clearly you’re more upset with the way my mating happened than you’ve ever admitted.”

“That’s not true.”

“The hell it isn’t. You can’t stand that you aren’t my Pack Alpha.”

Leo opened his mouth to respond again but Darius stepped between the fighting siblings, “Enough!”

“Stop it!” Nova yelled at the same time. “Just, stop it! Stop fighting! This isn’t about either of you!”

Everyone in her backyard turned towards her again and she sighed.

She didn’t want this. She had never wanted this. Usually her family was so close that they were all on the same page without even needing to say a word. They were all just as much friends as they were family and they chose to spend time together, to make time for one another. They were all the family any of them had left after their parents were killed and they’d clung to one another so tightly that it had been hard even letting the mates into their circle.

But tonight Leo and Maya were at each other's throats and Luna was standing off to the side with Michael not even attempting to play peacekeeper like she would have in the past. From the way her husband gripped her waist, Nova had a feeling he didn't want the Queen of the Moirae Pack involved in a fight in Crescent territory, even if it was with her family. As a Pack Alpha in his own right, Michael would feel the need to defend her and that would only cause more problems if the two Alpha's ended up at each other's throats.

Nova marveled at the distance between them all that she had only just noticed.

Had they really grown this far apart? Had she simply ignored the fact that they didn't operate as one unit anymore? Sure, there were boundaries in their relationships now that had never been there when they were younger. They were all adults with mates of their own, raising children or working within the pack. But the real line in the sand was the fact that they were no longer one pack. Leo and Nova were still Crescent wolves, just as every DeLuca before them. But Luna and Maya were Moirae Wolves now and as much as they all liked to pretend that didn't change things, it did.

The evidence was obvious to her now.

She'd let herself believe that it was normal for them all to spend less time together as they got older and made their own choices and ways in the world. Maybe it was normal. People grew up and grew apart all the time. But they were family, they were DeLuca's and they'd always stood together against the world, never against each other.

She collapsed onto the step where she'd been standing and put her head in her hands, "Please. Stop fighting. I hate it when you fight."

The yard around her was silent but she didn't glance up to see if they were exchanging looks or whispered words. She rubbed her eyes, promising herself that once they left she would curl up in bed and cry herself to sleep. She had time to cry later. Right now she needed to tell her family goodbye and

she didn't want her last memories of them to be tainted with the bitter tinge of anger.

"I'm sorry." Leo was the first to break the silence and Nova glanced up, surprised by the apology.

Leo's jaw was still tense but he lowered his chin a fraction of an inch. It was as close to admitting he'd been wrong as she would get. He was too much an Alpha to give her more than that but it was clear from the way he shook his head when Darius whispered something in his ear that he wasn't happy with how this little intervention of theirs was going.

"Me too." Maya spoke softly and Nova glanced over to find that Zander held Maya in his arms now and her eyes were red, face blotchy, as if she'd been crying too.

"I know. Just..." Nova shook her head, "Please, stop fighting."

"We are. We're done. Promise." Maya tried for a smile but it was wavering as she wiped at her cheeks.

"No. I mean it. Not just tonight. I need all of you to remember that we're family. We're the last of the DeLuca's and that means even if we disagree with one another, even when we don't see eye to eye, we don't take sides and battle it out. Our family is better than that. You're better than that."

"Nova I..." Leo started but she held up a hand.

"I'm not done."

"Okay." He nodded, letting her continue.

"Whatever happens between me and Griffin, it's my decision." She kept her hand up when she saw several of her family members open their mouths. "It's my life. He's my mate. It's my choice to decide how this plays out. I appreciate you coming here tonight and trying to convince me that it's all going to be okay and that fate always makes the right choice. I'm having a hard time believing it right now but maybe I'll feel differently tomorrow."

She swallowed hard as the lie escaped her lips. She never lied to her family but she had to this time. She wouldn't feel

differently tomorrow and she knew that but they couldn't. They had to leave here believing that she might come around to the idea.

“You're the strongest woman, the strongest wolf, I've ever known.” Darius spoke, his eyes never leaving her. “If anyone is strong enough to handle this kind of curveball from fate, it's you.”

She sniffled a little when she tried to give him a smile. She wanted to believe him. She wanted the man who had helped raise her to be right, but he wasn't. Not this time. She wasn't strong enough for this and she couldn't do it.

“I love you guys.” She managed before opening her arms to them. “Come on. Give me a hug and then go home. I just want to get some sleep.”

Leo moved towards her first, “We'll talk more tomorrow.”

She nodded and hugged her brother tight. Darius watched them embrace, lips pursed, but he didn't say anything as he hugged her next. If anyone had seen through her lies, it would be him but he didn't call her on it and she prayed he hadn't put together what she planned.

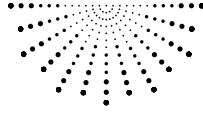
Her sisters were next and she tried not to be overly emotional with them. She hugged them. Let Maya ruffle tug one of her locs. Let Luna whisper that she was only a phone call away. She nodded and then she said goodnight and let them go, watching them all fade into the shadows of the woods, not knowing that what she'd really meant was goodbye.

There was nothing else to think about. She knew what she had to do. Fate had put her in an impossible situation that they didn't understand. How could they? Neither did she. All she knew was that she couldn't seal the bond with Griffin Clary.

She couldn't trust him. She certainly couldn't love him. And she would not be the weak link in her family again. She wouldn't let another Clary into her life, into all of their lives, only to watch him tear them apart the same way his brother had.

The past could not repeat itself and it was up to her to change her future.

## CHAPTER SIX



Call it gut instinct. Call it a feeling in the back of his mind. Call it the tiny thread of connection that simply touching Nova DeLuca yesterday had created but whatever it was, it had woken Griffin from a dead sleep and told him that she was going to run.

He'd followed her scent to a small cabin in the woods on the edge of pack territory, isolated from the other homes. It had been painted white, standing out like a beacon among the dense trees that surrounded it. There was a large wrap-around porch with what looked to be a lot of seating areas, he could only assume to accommodate her large family when they came over to visit. It was a nice place, a warm and welcoming home with ivy growing up one side and a little garden with peppers, tomatoes and zucchini in perfect lines. He couldn't help but imagine himself living there, with Nova, as he stood in the shadow of the trees just across the little path from her front door.

That vision of his future, of them living together, peaceful and happy, shattered into a million pieces when the front door opened and the woman that was meant to be his stepped outside with a large backpack slung over her shoulders and sad, puffy eyes.

Her wolf must have sensed him the same way his sensed her because as soon as she stepped outside, she spun around, her gaze finding him instantly. She took a step backwards, away from him, and then caught herself and tipped her chin up

defiantly. He held his hands up in a show of innocence and stepped from the shadows.

“I just want to talk.”

“No thanks.” She cleared her throat.

“Please?” He took another step towards her and she fidgeted with the straps of the backpack.

“I can’t talk right now. I’m... going for a walk.” Her eyes darted away, a clear indication of her lie, but she pulled herself back together and looked at him when she continued, “We can talk later.”

“Later?” He took another step, closing the distance little by little, and his wolf hummed beneath his skin, happy to be in the presence of their mate, even if she was lying to their face.

“Yeah. Totally.”

“When you’re back from your walk?”

“That’s what I said.” Her eyes narrowed into a glare.

“Only you’re not planning to come back from your walk, are you Nova?” He raised an eyebrow and she hissed.

“Don’t act like you know me. You don’t know anything about me.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But I’d like to.” He still had his hands up and was purposefully keeping his voice soft and steady so as not to spook her again. “How about you let me walk with you to the bus station?”

“Wh- How did you...” She caught herself and snapped her jaw shut. Her teeth ground together and defiance radiated off of her again when she glared at him, “How about I walk you to the bus station and you get on it so I don’t have to?”

God, she was gorgeous. Fierce, stubborn and proud. She was a tiny little thing, probably only a few inches over five feet, but she had curves that he knew would fit against him just right if only he could find a way past her defenses.

Her skin was lighter than his, with golden undertones that made it seem as if the sun had kissed her with its warmth. Her



locs were piled on top of her head the same way they had been yesterday, with only one or two escaping around her face and framing her angelic beauty. Her eyes were brown with a hint of that same golden light and her lips were full in a way that made him think of what they'd feel like pressed against his own. He had seen her yesterday but he hadn't really gotten the chance to take all of her in like he could now and the result was that she took his breath away.

"Stop it." she snapped, jolting him out of his stupor and he blinked.

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that." She shrugged her shoulders, jostling the large backpack, "It's making me uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry." He apologized instantly, "The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable, Nova. I just... I can't stop looking at you because you're beautiful."

She rolled her eyes, "I see the mating heat has already taken hold."

"It's not that."

"Sure." She all but snorted.

He tilted his head, "Do you really not know that you're absolutely gorgeous?"

"Smooth talking isn't going to get you anywhere with me. I grew up with two older sisters. Luna is the gorgeous one. Maya is the mysterious one. I'm just the cute little sister at best."

His lips quirked at her self-description, "You are cute, and little, but if nobody else has realized you're beautiful, it's because they're not looking."

She snorted, "They look. Trust me, they look. But all they see is the Pack Alpha's little sister."

"Not me."

"Yeah well..." She paused, frowned, and a little furrow appeared between her eyes. "You know what, I don't know

why we're talking about this. It's irrelevant. I was leaving before you showed up here like a stalker this morning."

"Okay." He smiled easily, "Let's go."

"No." she huffed, clearly getting frustrated with him, "I'm leaving. I'm leaving *you*. That's the whole point."

"No." He countered, "You said *I* should be the one leaving when I offered to walk you to the bus stop."

Her eyes narrowed again, "So you're going to catch the bus and I can go back inside and get some sleep?"

"No."

She growled and he chuckled. Oh he liked that sound. And from the way his wolf all but purred in response, so did he.

"I'll make you a deal. We'll walk to the bus stop together and if I can't convince you to give me a chance by the time we get to town, I promise you that I'll get on that bus and leave you alone. You can stay here with your family and you won't have to worry about me or the bond ever again."

Nova stared at him for a long moment and he tried his best not to grin. She hadn't immediately said no. That was progress. She hadn't totally shut him down. And before she'd caught herself she'd been opening up to him. With some more time he might actually be able to convince her that he wasn't the devil reincarnated.

"You promise?" She finally asked, studying his face and he did let himself grin then.

"Pinky promise. But you have to swear to actually talk to me while we walk. Get to know me before you decide to send your fated mate away."

"Fine." She didn't look happy about it but eventually she nodded, "But I'm not doing a pinky promise because I'm not touching you and letting the bond grow any more than it already has."

He shrugged, "Deal."

If she thought it took touching to strengthen the bond, that was her problem. He knew enough to know that a bond would form whether they were physical or not. Proximity alone was enough and opening yourself up emotionally was far more conducive to creating a strong bond than pure animal magnetism.

From the way she kept frowning, he had a feeling she knew that just as well as he did but didn't want to concede the point.

"Let's go then." She huffed, moving carefully past him, not waiting to see if he would fall into step.

She surprised him when she didn't take the path he had walked in on. Instead she looped around her house and he quickly jogged to catch up to her. She didn't say a word as they left the little clearing that served as her backyard and headed into the tree line. He trusted that she wasn't taking him to the middle of nowhere to kill him and hide the body but still, he decided now was as good a time as any to try for another first impression, maybe one that didn't lead to her fainting in terror.

"How about we start over?" He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, "My name is Griffin Clary. It's nice to meet you."

Nova's lips pursed, "I really wish I could say the same, Griffin."

He sighed, realizing she wasn't going to play along and instead decided to tackle the issue head on, "I'm not him."

"I know that." She bit out. "Because he's dead."

"I'm nothing like him."

"You say that but..." She shook her head, trailing off as she gracefully maneuvered around a fallen tree.

"But... I look like him." He finished for her. "And you can't imagine spending the rest of your life looking at his face, even if it belongs to your mate."

“It’s not that it’s a bad face.” She shot him another look and he could have almost sworn that there was a smirking tilt to her lips before she looked away again, “At least, it wouldn’t be, if it didn’t still show up in my nightmares.”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.” She didn’t sound apologetic but he shrugged it off anyway.

“I could grow a beard, maybe? Would that help?” He was certain she stifled a laugh so he kept going. “I could grow my hair out, or cut it shorter. Maybe get an eyebrow piercing? You tell me what would help and I’ll do it. I swear.”

Nova’s eyes had lost a little of their wariness when she glanced over at him again, “The resemblance really isn’t that uncanny. Not once my eyes really have a chance to look at you.”

“No?” He quirked an eyebrow, wondering if she realized she’d admitted to looking at him.

“His eyes were greener than yours are, for starters. Yours are more hazel and they’re warm where his were always like looking into glass, beautiful green sea glass but still hard, rough glass that would rip you to shreds in a second.” Nova tugged on her backpack straps again, clearly uncomfortable but he couldn’t tell if it was because she’d admitted to noticing his eyes and his warmth or because of that strange hint of something he didn’t understand when she talked about his brother.

Exactly how close had she been to Maddox before his coup?

“What else?” He insisted when she fell quiet.

“Your face is softer than his was. Rounder. And he never wore stubble. He was very particular about that.” Nova blew out a rough breath, “The differences are there when I look for them but at first glance, my brain doesn’t see them. I just see him and everything inside of me panics.”

“Maybe if we spent more time together you’d be able to differentiate us more easily and you wouldn’t see him

anymore, just me.”

Nova looked at him as she passed on the other side of a tree from him. She was still looking at him when she came back into his line of sight. She bit her lip and finally looked away.

“That part’s like him too.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not just that you’re handsome like he was. You’re charming too. Charming enough that some part of me hopes you’re right, that I can get past your resemblance to him, just because you want me to. He had that kind of charm too, the kind that made people want to do things for him.”

“He was charming?” He scoffed. “To hear everyone else tell it, he was the devil incarnate and I’m not about to argue that point. But charming?”

“That was the thing about him. He *was* charming... until he wasn’t.” Nova looked out through the trees, “Before he... well, before everything happened, I thought he hung the moon. I thought he was perfect. Handsome and strong and funny and sweet. I was sucked in by his charm, by the face he wanted me to see, but in the end it was only a mask he’d used to hide his monstrous intentions and I didn’t see it in time. He fooled me and my family nearly lost everything because of that.”

Griffin had to physically force himself to keep walking when his wolf balked. His animal side did not like hearing their mate talk about someone else like that, particularly not the brother they despised. The human side of him was no happier to learn that Nova had apparently held a childhood crush on Maddox but it did help explain a lot of the questions he had about why she didn’t even want to give him a chance.

She had trusted Maddox. She had liked him, maybe even loved him in the innocent way that children love. She’d probably held little girl fantasies about him being her white knight and then he’d turned into the monster in her nightmares. All she’d known for most of her life was that she

had let a handsome, charming man into her life and he'd murdered her parents, tortured her sisters and held her captive.

Of course she wasn't willing to take that chance again, certainly not with a man who not only looked like Maddox but shared his last name too.

"You know it wasn't your fault, right? What he did, you couldn't have known."

"I'm the Seer." Nova's eyes cut to him, hard and defiant once again.

"You were a kid."

"I was young but I was still the Seer and I didn't see what he was planning. I was too focused on my vision of Luna and her perfect Pack Alpha mate. The only thing I cared about back then, the only thing worth looking into the future for, was the mating bonds. I wanted to see and predict everyone's happily ever after." Her bottom lip trembled slightly but she bit it again and once she'd steadied herself she sighed, "I failed my family. I failed fate. Maybe that's why she sent me you as a fated mate. Payback."

Griffin winced at that low blow and his wolf whined. His wolf was only an animal. He didn't understand why they weren't just shifting and sinking their teeth into their mate already. She was theirs. That was all he cared about. Griffin would never force the bond onto Nova though and she was making it abundantly clear that he was the last thing on earth she wanted, fated mate or not.

He had lain awake last night in bed thinking about what Barrett had said. He'd tried looking at the situation from every angle. Hindsight was 20/20 but only if you chose to look through the right lenses. He wanted to believe that maybe Barrett had it right after all.

"Maybe..." He cleared his throat as they hiked up an incline and he saw the hint of buildings on the other side hinting they were far closer to the town of Noir than he had realized. She'd taken a shortcut, giving him less time than he'd imagined to convince her to give them a chance. "Maybe

instead of thinking of this as punishment, you could try seeing it a different way.”

“And what way is that?”

“I don’t know how much your brother told you about my past but, your family isn’t the only one Maddox hurt. He murdered everyone I loved when I was only five years old. My mother and I only escaped his massacre because I was sick and she took me to a healer in another pack. We came back to find Maddox gone and our lives changed forever.” He paused, waiting for her to say something but when she didn’t, he plowed forward, “What I’m saying is, everything that happened before, all the pain and the trauma that we’ve both gone through, losing our family, no, not just losing them but having them murdered by someone we thought we could trust, the same person no less... maybe that was all fate working towards this moment. Maybe that was fate’s plan all along to bring us together, to help us connect. She made both of us who we are and she thinks we’re a perfect match. Maybe our scars are what make us compatible.”

Nova paused as they crested the ridge and came out of the woods onto a road that led into the center of the little town, “Fate trauma bonded us? Is that what you’re saying?”

He snorted, “Not quite so eloquently but yeah, I guess I am.”

“I don’t think...”

He cut her off, “We’ve both been through a lot. We’ve had the weight and expectations of our name on us from a young age. We’ve both experienced losses. We both know the importance of family, you because you’ve surrounded yourself with the people who love you and would give anything for you and me because I’ve never had that, but I want it. I want it here, Nova. I want to call Noir home. I think it’s where I’m meant to be and I think fate got it right. I think you’re my other half and I’ll do whatever I can to prove that to you if you’ll give me half a chance.”

Nova was quiet for a long minute and he held his breath. She could still send him away. If she did he would have to go.

He'd promised her that he would and he wouldn't break that promise. He could only hope that he had gotten through to her somehow, shown her that he wasn't Maddox and he didn't have evil intentions.

"Do you see that building there?" Nova pointed up the street to where the road they were on intersected with the main street that ran through the center of town.

"The bakery?" He furrowed his brow, unsure about the sudden change of subject.

"Yeah. My... well, it's hard to explain but Zoey Hudson owns it. My sister, Maya, is married to Zoey's brother, Zander. They're sisters-in-law. But Zoey also happens to be married to Rafe Hudson, the brother of Luna's husband, Michael. So they're sisters-in-law too. Only in our family we don't make distinctions like that so I just call Zoey my sister, even if it means that sometimes people passing through town look at us funny."

"Why would they look at you funny?"

"She's a pale redhead and I'm... not." Nova smirked.

"Okay..." He raised an eyebrow, still lost but happy that she was still talking to him and without him prompting the conversation.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I've always hated that people make assumptions about my relationship with Zoey just because we don't look alike. Family is about more than blood. I've known that all my life." She turned back to look at him and her eyes were still wary but she was close enough to him that he realized he could have reached out and touched her if he hadn't thought it would spook her. It was the closest she'd let him get to her since that run-in yesterday. That had to be a good sign. "So you're right. I shouldn't punish you just because you share blood with the man that ripped my family apart. That isn't fair of me. It isn't fair to you and it isn't fair to fate. I've always trusted fate. As a Seer, it's my trust in fate that's guided me my whole life. Seeing you, learning who you were, it shook my faith but if what you say is true, maybe that's what fate wanted for me. To shake



things up. To make me question myself and everything around me. Even you.”

Griffin’s heart was beating so fast he could barely hear his own words, “Does that mean you’re not getting on that bus?”

“I’m not getting on the bus. I’m not running away.” She didn’t exactly look happy about it but the begrudging words caused him to grin.

“And you’re not putting me on the bus either?”

She rolled her eyes, “Go home, Griffin.”

“Home?” He was still grinning as she stepped away from him.

“Go back to Crescent territory, back to Bear’s house. I’m sure either he or my brothers are looking for you by now. You should head back.”

“And you?” He asked hopefully. “You’re coming back with me?”

“No.”

His smile fell, “No?”

She hid an answering smile at his crestfallen expression by turning her face away, “No. I need to talk to Zoey so I’m going to stay in town for a while but I’ll see you later.”

“You’ll see me later?”

She groaned, “You can stop sounding so damn happy with yourself. I have a feeling whether I like it or not, we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other if we let fate have her way.”

She didn’t sound pleased about that. She sounded more resigned than anything. But he would take what he could get for right now.

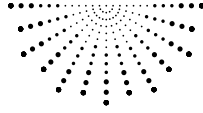
It was a start. It was a chance. It was the first step in the right direction which was exactly what he needed.

He grinned, “See you later, Nova.”

She rolled her eyes and stalked off towards town, leaving him on the side of the road. He watched her go. His wolf

clawed at his skin, wanting out, wanting to go after her, but he soothed the animal as best he could with promises that they would be able to see her again soon. And, if everything went the way he wanted, he might even be able to touch her, taste her, and seal the bond before the next full moon.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Nova was surprised to find Bear sitting on Leo's front porch when she went to his house the next morning. It was early and everyone that knew the big man knew he wasn't a morning person. He was leaned back in a patio chair, feet kicked up on the top of the porch railing and he was rolling a cigar back and forth in his one good hand.

"Hey." She called as she got close.

"Hey yourself." He smirked when he saw her. "Nice of you to grace us with your presence today. I thought your brother's head was going to pop off yesterday when you didn't show up to help with the planning for his big shindig."

Nova scuffed the toe of her shoe in the dirt, "I had some personal things to tend to."

"Oh yeah? The kind that had you sneaking out of your house with a backpack twice your size at dawn?"

She gaped at the big man, "Wh- how.... He told you?"

Barrett chuckled, "Didn't have to. Saw it for myself. I still got one good eye and when I train it on the right spot I see everything I need to."

Nova shook her head in amazement. He'd been there, she realized. He'd been somewhere in the woods when she'd come out of the house and found Griffin waiting for her. Only Griffin hadn't known he was there either. She was sure of it, which meant Barrett had followed him when he heard Griffin leave the house and been keeping tabs on him.

She remembered then, back when she was a kid, Leo would tell her stories about going into the woods with Barrett. He'd said his friend was the best tracker in the whole pack and his senses were out of this world good. She'd forgotten all about that in the years since but she realized now that Leo hadn't.

He had told her he trusted Griffin but he'd put him up in Barrett's house so that his oldest friend could keep tabs on the newcomer and report back if anything was amiss.

She felt her skin heat as she wondered what, exactly, Barrett had reported back to her brother about her walk yesterday morning. It was possible he'd heard everything she told Griffin about leaving him behind and running away. Was it also possible he'd followed them and heard even more?

"Now don't go lookin' at me like that." Barrett kicked his feet down, letting the chair legs hit the ground so hard the little piece of furniture threatened to buckle under his weight. "I didn't see any need to get your brother all worked up just because you took a little walk into town with our new friend."

Her mouth was dry but she swallowed anyway, "You didn't tell him?"

"Not a thing."

"Thank you." She all but sagged with relief.

"No need for that either. I'm just glad you changed your mind." Barrett smiled, "He seems like a good kid."

Nova groaned, "Not you too."

Barrett chuckled, "Give him a chance, *cher*. I think he'll surprise ya."

"I hate surprises." She deadpanned and that only made him laugh harder.

"Then I should probably tell ya he's in there now with your brother."

That pulled Nova up short, all amusement leaving her, "What? Why?"

“How should I know?”

“You’ve been sitting out here while he’s in there with my brothers and you weren’t eavesdropping? Not even a little bit?” She narrowed her eyes suspiciously but the big man grunted as if he took offense.

“I don’t eavesdrop on my Pack Alpha and neither should you, little miss.”

“I’m not going to eavesdrop. I’m going inside to make sure Griffin isn’t trying to kill my brother while you sit out here uselessly longing for the days when you smoked.” She huffed and her frustration only mounted when Barrett laughed at her again.

“I think you’d prefer if he was in there trying to kill Leo, wouldn’t you? Save you the trouble of having to make sense of fate’s plan.”

“Oh shut up Bear.” She growled, pushing the door open and slamming it behind her to cut off his laughter as she stormed into the house in search of her brother. “Leo? Leo, where are you?”

“In here.” His voice came back to her instantly and she tried hard not to scowl as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and found her brother bent over a map as Griffin held his finger to one spot and made a connection to a spot further down the map.

“What’re you doing here?” She glared at Griffin rather than telling her brother how stupid he was to let a stranger, a stranger with a blood connection to a man that had killed their family and that they had killed in return, just hang out with him in a kitchen full of knives and other possible weapons.

“Nova.” Leo frowned at her rudeness but Griffin only smiled when he saw her.

“No, it’s okay. She’s clearly worried about you being alone with me.” Griffin stood up to his full height, forgetting the map he’d been pointing to and meeting Nova’s gaze. “But obviously if I was here to harm your brother, I’d have done it by now.”

“It’s true.” Leo added. “He’s been here nearly an hour. He’s had plenty of chances to make a move. Instead, he’s been helping me just like he said he would.”

Nova motioned between the two of them, who looked far too familiar for her liking, “And Darius is okay with this?”

“Darius is out for his morning run of the perimeter but he knew Griffin was coming by.” Leo shrugged.

Nova ground her teeth together. She wanted to point out that if both Leo and Darius knew that Griffin was going to be here this morning then they could have warned her but she didn’t bother. They’d obviously thought that she wouldn’t come if she’d known and since they were right, she couldn’t very well deny it.

She may have decided that running away from her problems hadn’t been the best way to deal with the mating bond but she hadn’t changed her mind about trusting Griffin Clary overnight either. He seemed nice enough but she’d seen a Clary play nice before and she wasn’t going to be tricked again. She might not be denying the mate bond on principle alone but she also wasn’t ready to jump in head first and allow the chips to fall where they may.

Cautious and slow was how she planned to play it. After all, they had a couple of weeks until the full moon. She could get to know her supposed mate better between now and then and make a decision based on everything she uncovered about him.

She would just have to deal with the mating heat until she trusted him, or realized that she couldn’t. It wasn’t so bad. Not really. Sure her wolf was constantly pacing beneath her skin and she felt like she had some sort of internal radar that was always searching for him, but she could ignore a few aches and pains. She’d dealt with worse and wanting to jump the man’s bones wasn’t an instinct she was willing to give into, not even if he looked good enough to lick.

When she admitted he was handsome yesterday, it felt like too much. It had felt like a betrayal of her parents, her family, even herself. She’d thought she could remove her own feelings

from the matter, because it was a simple, basic fact of the way he looked.

Today, there was no keeping her feelings out of it though and she cursed the mating heat for causing her pulse to quicken and her stomach to flutter just from being near him.

It shouldn't be legal for a man like him to wear a plain white tee. It just shouldn't. It was too easy, too effortless, and yet it made women stupid. That thin white material against his dark skin begged for a second look and once you looked it was impossible not to notice the way the sleeves stretched to accommodate his biceps. It hugged his broad chest like it felt lucky to be there and at that moment Nova hated herself for being a little bit jealous of a stupid piece of cotton cloth.

“Turns out he's done a lot of traveling so he's helping me map out packs I didn't even know existed.” Leo was talking again, turning his attention back to the map.

Nova forced her eyes up from the hint of a tattoo that peeked through the thin fabric of Griffin's t-shirt and caught him watching her. There was humor in his golden brown eyes but also something else. Heat and possessiveness, a need that told her she wasn't the only one feeling the effect of the bond.

She looked away from him and moved to the other side of the table, effectively putting Leo between them. It was safer that way. She might be committed to taking this whole thing one slow step at a time but her wolf had no such compunction. She was practically vibrating beneath Nova's skin, just waiting for Nova to let down her guard so she could break free and take what she wanted.

“All of these marks are wolf packs?” Nova forced a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart, but it didn't help since she pulled in more of that intoxicating woodsy scent of her mate.

“No, that's the thing.” Leo was grinning like a kid who had just been handed a bag of candy. “He came across other types of shifters too. Like this one here...” Leo pointed, “This one is a pack of big cat shifters, cougars and mountain lions and bobcats, all living together peacefully.” He excitedly pointed

to another, “And this one is a group of raccoon shifters! Raccoons! I didn’t even know that was a thing!” Leo laughed, “And this one is a clan of bear shifters, which is good to know after our little run in a few years back. Isn’t this amazing?”

Nova looked for her overly excited brother to Griffin and then back again, “He’s fucking with you.”

Leo jerked his head up, “What?”

“There’s no such thing as raccoon shifters. That is ridiculous.”

“That’s what I thought too!” Leo grinned, pointing to Griffin, “Tell her. Tell her how you told me.”

“It’s true.” Griffin was smiling too as if he’d expected her skepticism. “Raccoon shifters exist. They’re small, and I’m not talking about the kind of animals they turn into. It’s a small pack and they’ve mostly been hunted out over the ages so they don’t interact much with outsiders. I stumbled onto them by accident.”

“And they just let a wolf into their midst and told you all about their history?” Nova scoffed.

“My wolf was out hunting and I came across one of them. Chased it down and the bastard tried to claw my eyes out. My wolf backed off a little and as soon as I did, the thing shifted into a boy of about fifteen. I was so shocked I shifted too.” Griffin shrugged. “We got to talking because what fifteen year old boy isn’t a little bit awed when he comes across a wolf that doesn’t eat him, and the next thing I knew I was having dinner with his family.”

Nova stared at him for a long moment, trying to gauge if every word out of his mouth was complete and utter bullshit or not. The thing was, he sounded genuine. Honest. As if he was as amazed by the experience as they were. She shifted slightly, wondering if he had more details he could spit out at the drop of a dime.

“So they look like regular raccoons then?”

“Slightly larger than your standard raccoon. Probably to accommodate for their human size though I didn’t ask about it



since it seemed like a personal question.” Griffin shrugged, “I mean, our wolves are all moderately bigger than a normal wolf so it makes sense.”

“I’m surprised they just let you walk out of their territory if they’re so worried about being hunted down and wiped out.”

“I stayed with them for a few days. Helped them with some projects they were working on like building a better alert system for when someone invaded their territory. I wasn’t a threat to them and they recognized that so when it was time for me to move on, they only asked that I not share their location with anyone who might be a threat to them which I happily obliged.”

“And yet, here you are marking their location on a map for my brother and telling us all about them.” Nova raised an eyebrow.

“The Crescent Pack isn’t a threat to them.” Leo frowned at her.

“How does he know that?”

Griffin snorted, “Because any pack willing to give me a chance after what my brother did to them isn’t going to go hunting raccoon shifters for sport. Leo is giving me a chance to prove I’m trustworthy. Maybe I’m giving him that same opportunity.”

Nova ground her teeth together because one again, it was a good answer. It was the right answer. Of course he wouldn’t just be giving their location out to anyone or everyone but for Leo, he’d passed along the story and probably even gotten a verbal confirmation that nobody in Crescent Pack would endanger them.

The damn man just kept saying and doing the right things and it was infuriating.

He seemed like a good guy. He really did. He was easy to talk to and she’d found herself opening up to him despite her reservations yesterday. Now he was here, helping her brother map out packs they could contact in the future about joining the alliance. She really wanted him to be as good as he seemed

to be but some part of her also wanted him to slip up just so she could prove to everyone that she had been right not to trust him.

She was going to lose her mind if she didn't get a handle on the back and forth between her brain and her heart.

"You said you'd give him a chance." Leo spoke softly, though with their superior shifter hearing there was no way Griffin didn't hear the reprimand in her brother's voice.

She glared across the table at him, "You told him?"

"He asked if we'd had a chance to talk yet and I told him we spoke some yesterday." Griffin shrugged a big shoulder and she groaned.

"Can nobody in this pack keep my private business private?"

"In his defense, it's his business too and I'm the Pack Alpha so he had to tell me once I'd asked." Leo plastered on a smile and glanced at the clock on the microwave. "Look at the time. Darius should be back from his run soon. I'll take his clothes out back to keep him from walking in naked and scarring your delicate eyes."

Nova snorted, "Been there. Done that."

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Keep Griffin company for me." Leo practically winked at her as he grabbed a pile of clothes off the counter and then went out the back door, letting the screen door slam shut behind him loudly.

The silence that followed was near deafening.

Her brother had just left her alone with Griffin. On purpose! Clearly with ulterior motives. She scowled at the door where he'd disappeared and contemplated turning right around and leaving through the front door. But when she turned back to Griffin he was smiling at her again, flashing those white teeth, and her heart skipped a beat without her permission.

"I'm glad you're still here." He spoke softly, as if he thought Leo might be listening from just outside the door,

which, really, she wouldn't put it past her brother to do.

"I told you I would be."

"As much as I want to know you, I don't yet, and trust is hard for me."

"Yeah, well, clearly it's hard for me too." She snorted, pulling her gaze away from his and from the mounting heat that felt like it was swirling around them. She focused her attention on the map. There were a lot of circled areas on it that hadn't been there when she looked at it last. The question came before she could convince herself that it didn't matter. "You've really been to all these places?"

"Yep."

"Why?" She glanced up in time to see Griffin fidget.

"When I left my pack, I didn't have any idea where I was going. I just knew I was looking for somewhere that I fit in, that I could start over. I didn't find it in the first place I stopped, or the second, so I just kept going. For a while I thought what I was looking for was a place where nobody had ever heard of Maddox or what he'd done to our family, to our pack, but once I came here I realized that wasn't it at all."

Nova watched him as he slowly moved around the table, "So what were you really looking for?"

Griffin's smile was soft, "Come on Nova, you know the answer to that."

She swallowed hard when he stepped close to her, "Said it anyway."

"You." He reached out slowly and gently touched her cheek, "I didn't realize it at the time but no matter where I went, it didn't feel like home because you weren't there. I was looking for the place I belonged, but I wasn't going to find it, not until I found my fated mate."

Nova's body felt like it was on fire from nothing but the simple touch of his palm on her cheek. Her breathing had turned ragged and when he darted a look at her lips she knew he'd noticed it too. She told herself to step back, to pull away,

to stop the mating heat from taking over and letting this happen but her body refused to move away from him.

His warmth and scent wrapped around her and she felt the strangest mix of safe and scared all at the same time.

“Nova...” His voice was low, husky, barely a whisper. “I want to kiss you.”

“I know but... Not here. Not now.”

“Why?”

“Leo’s just outside.” She clung to the truth of that statement even as her body swayed closer to Griffin. “He could come in at any second.”

“That’s why you think we should wait?” Griffin smiled down at her, stroking his thumb over her cheekbone. “No. I think that’s exactly why you’re going to let me kiss you right here and right now. Because you know it’s safe. Because he’ll interrupt us before we go too far and lose control. And that’s what you need to feel safe with me right? Control?”

Nova licked her lips, the words on the tip of her tongue to tell him that he was wrong. Only they didn’t come out. What came out instead was a small whimper that would no doubt embarrass her upon retrospection of this moment, but for now, she didn’t have an argument.

“Okay.” She managed a jerky nod.

“You want it?”

She nodded again.

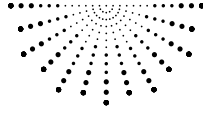
“Say it, Nova.” Griffin was still holding her face, still stroking her cheek, but his eyes were darker now, hungry with a desire that felt like it might swallow them both alive.

“I want you to kiss me.” She admitted and before she could think about how it would change everything, his lips were on hers.

Griffin kissed her and the rest of the world melted away. Her brain tried to hold on to logic and reason. It told her that it

was only a kiss, one kiss, but she knew it for the lie that it was.  
This was so much more than just a kiss and they both knew it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



**G**riffin couldn't believe it was really happening. He was kissing his mate. He was kissing Nova and she was kissing him back. And not only that but it felt even more perfect, even more right, than he had ever dreamed it would to have her in his arms.

She tasted like oranges. Sweet and tangy on his tongue. He loved it. Loved the way she parted her lips for him when he slid his tongue along the seam. She opened, letting him in, tilting her head back to give him a better angle as he delved deeper, licking and sucking that incredible taste of her into him until he was certain he'd never be able to eat an orange without thinking of her ever again.

The mate bond exploded between them, strengthening as their kiss went on and on.

He wanted to wrap her in his arms and pull her close. He wanted to press her against the counter and rub their bodies together. He wanted to lift her up so she could wrap her legs around his waist and grind herself against him but he knew better than to make any sudden movements.

Even as he kissed her and he lost sight of the rest of the world, of everything he had been before this moment and everything he would become after, he held on to his control like the lifeline that it was. He couldn't lose control with her. She didn't trust him enough for that. Not yet. And if he had a chance in hell of convincing her he was worthy of her trust then he couldn't push too hard and too fast.

His wolf growled inside of him, wanting Griffin to bite her, to draw blood, to mark her as their mate. He felt his wolf push at his skin and groaned when he felt Nova's wolf answer in response. Their wolves wanted one another and they were practically rubbing themselves against one another even though they were still stuck inside the confines of their human's skin.

That was enough, he tried to console his wolf. This was enough. Knowing that her wolf wanted this just as much as he did. It had to be enough for now because there was no way he could let his wolf break the surface in the Crescent Pack Alpha's kitchen.

Instead he mentally pushed his wolf back down and slid his other hand to Nova's face, cradling her cheeks as she sighed into his mouth. He could literally feel her defenses dropping as she gave in to the kiss. The bond surged again and he swore he could feel it thickening and growing into something that couldn't easily be broken.

This kiss, it was everything he had ever wanted.

This was his mate. His world. His everything. She had been made for him and he for her. This was just the first of a lifetime of kisses, he reminded himself. They had an eternity together and this was just the first step in sealing their bond.

Nova was sweet and soft against him. She felt so good in his arms. Kissing her felt like coming home and he knew the moment he was forced to release her lips that he would feel the loss like a kick in the chest.

When Nova's hands came up to clench at his shirt, Griffin forced himself to slowly withdraw from the kiss. Nova's lips followed him for a moment but he held her face steady. He pulled back enough to look at her and his heart ached at the absolute beauty of her with her lips soft and wet and her eyes hooded with desire.

He stroked her cheeks softly, meeting her gaze when she blinked up at him, "Was that okay?"

“I...” Nova blew out a shaky breath and nodded. “I’m okay.”

That wasn’t really what he had asked but he would take it. He brushed a light kiss over her forehead and then released her. He stepped back, giving her a little bit of space.

She touched her lips with her fingers and he tried not to smile. She looked absolutely wrecked from that kiss, as if he’d just turned everything she thought she knew upside down. Maybe that shouldn’t make him so damn proud but it did, because now she knew how good it could be between them.

His lips still tingled from the power of the kiss and he knew hers must as well. The bond, which had been just the barest hint of a string tied from his heart to hers this morning, was suddenly as thick as a braided rope and so strong he could already feel pieces of Nova through it. He could feel that she was struggling to reconcile just how much she’d enjoyed his kiss with her need to keep him at arms-length but he didn’t reach out to her or try to reassure her again.

He had a feeling if she realized just how much of her emotional response to him that he could feel now it would definitely spook her.

He didn’t have a chance anyway. Almost the moment he stepped back from her, the rest of the world came back into focus and he easily picked up the sound of voices in the backyard. Darius was back from his run and Leo was telling him to hurry up and put on some clothes because they were waiting. He turned as the screen door flew open and Leo rushed inside.

“Is everyone in here...” He stopped, going stock-still and his eyes darted from his sister to Griffin and back again. His eyes went wide and Griffin knew that the Pack Alpha had picked up on the vibes they’d been sending out. The room practically smelled of sweat and mating heat pheromones. Leo cleared his throat, “Well... I was going to ask if everyone was still alive in here but, it’s clear you are so, I guess I’m just going to ask if everyone’s okay?”



Griffin didn't respond. He only turned his gaze to Nova. He was more than okay but that wasn't what Leo wanted to know. She still had her hand to her lips and now it was her eyes that darted between the men in the room.

Griffin held his breath as he waited for her response. She could throw him under the bus right here and right now. She could lie and say he'd pressured her, that he'd taken a kiss she wasn't willing to give. She could turn him into the enemy with one well-placed untruth and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop her if that's what she wanted. But even as he tensed with the worst of possibilities running through his mind, he felt Nova relax back into herself.

"Everyone's fine." She dropped her hand from her lips and straightened her spine. She raised an eyebrow, "Where's Darius?"

"Right here." The big man came in the door just as she asked and he too paused to take in the inhabitants of his kitchen. His dark brows furrowed but he didn't say anything about the energy in the room. He had probably overheard his husband's question and Nova's response already anyway. Instead he moved past his mate and straight to the kitchen table, focusing his attention on the map. "Leo was telling me you'd been helping him fill in the map this morning."

"I did. Yeah." Griffin nodded, "I've traveled quite a bit so I've run across our kind in one form or another for years. Those are where the packs I visited are, or at least where they were the last time I was in their area."

"It's good information to have." Darius glanced up. "Thank you."

"I just want to be of assistance."

"You have been and it's appreciated. But now it's Nova's turn to help so, you can get back to whatever it is that Bear has you working on with him."

Griffin blinked, taken aback by the quick dismissal. He looked from Darius to Nova, trying to gauge if she'd given him a sign she was no longer comfortable having Griffin here.

She pursed her lips and frowned through, as if Darius telling him to leave annoyed her.

“Oh...” He nodded slowly, “Okay then...”

“No. Wait.” Nova surprised him by reaching out and grabbing his arm. She didn’t look at him, only at her brothers. “He already knows I’m a Seer. Clearly one of you told him as much while I was unconscious the other day.”

Leo winced, “Yeah, that might have been my slip up.”

“It’s fine.” Nova rolled her eyes, “Fate says he’s my mate so he would have found out eventually. Since he already knows what I can do, he may as well stay.”

Griffin looked between the DeLuca family members, “Nova’s status as a Seer is a secret?”

“Not within the pack.” Leo explained. “But yes, since most packs don’t have a Seer these days and their abilities are so rare and powerful, we keep Nova’s gift a secret from anyone outside the pack. It’s how we keep her safe.”

Griffin instantly understood and nodded, “I would never put Nova in any danger.”

“Of course not.” Darius agreed.

“I would never.” He turned to Nova, wanting to make certain she heard him. “Never, put you in danger. I told you before, the last thing I ever want is to hurt you.”

“I know.” Nova squeezed his arm before releasing him, “Which is why, if you want, you can stay and see how my gift works.”

Darius raised an eyebrow, his lips quirking slightly, “He can?”

“You hate having people watch you when you scry for a vision.” Leo narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah, well, as you’ve both been telling me, he’s not just anyone is he?” Nova huffed, clearly annoyed by their skepticism. “He may as well be here. After all, we have no

idea how my visions are going to affect him with a mate bond growing between us.”

“Wait... what?” Griffin frowned. “Affect me? I’m part of your visions?”

Nova sighed, “We don’t know. That’s the thing. There’s nothing in our histories about a Seer experiencing a mate bond and it’s not like we know any other Seer’s we can ask. I can’t be sure if the visions will travel through the bond, letting you see what I see, or if my gift will draw from your power to amplify them or... any number of things are possible I guess.”

“Wow. I hadn’t thought about that.”

Nova made a face that told him she had. She’d been thinking about it a lot. She had been thinking not just about their mate bond and what it meant for her but also about what it would mean for him and if her gift had the possibility of hurting him. He wanted to move towards her again, to touch her, to prove to her that he wasn’t worried about their bond harming him in any way, but she was scrubbing her hands across her face and shaking her head.

“What else?” he asked, getting the sense there was something more she was holding back.

Nova didn’t speak, only glanced at her brothers. Darius pursed his lips. Leo sighed and moved to stand closer to his sister, as if she might need his support, even though nothing about Nova DeLuca gave Griffin the impression she needed anyone.

“Nova’s visions have been... off, for a while now.” Leo explained.

“What does that mean?”

“It means sometimes she gets visions but sometimes she doesn’t. She hasn’t been able to see the future of anyone in our family for months. The visions she does get often have a dark spot in them, something blotted out that she can’t see.” Leo put his arm around Nova’s shoulders and lowered his voice, “But that shouldn’t be happening anymore, right? Not if he was the block?”

Griffin narrowed his eyes, “Hold up, I’m the dark spot in her visions?”

“It’s possible.” Nova sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration.

“I’ve only been here a couple of days. How could I have been screwing up your visions for months?”

“We think it has something to do with the mate bond.” Darius chimed in. “Nova’s never been able to see visions of her own future. It’s her one blind spot. We theorized that the reason there’s a lack of visions and dark spots in the ones she’s been getting lately are because you were about to come into her life. Her fated mate. We think maybe fate didn’t want her to see you coming.”

“Because she’d have run the other way?” Griffin snorted but Nova only winced at the joke that hit too close to home.

“It’s more that our futures are so tied together as fated mates that I can’t see your future any more than I can see mine. Since you were on your way here, that put you in the futures of all my family members and made it impossible to see visions of their future by association.”

“But you said that shouldn’t happen anymore right?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. If we were right, then you being here should have solidified certain future paths. I might be able to see more of what’s awaiting the others now even if I can’t see you.”

“You haven’t had any visions since he got here?”

“Not of anyone in the family.” Nova shook her head at Leo’s question. “But I haven’t exactly been trying since it’s all been a little overwhelming.”

“Well...” Leo shrugged. “Maybe it’s time to try for one?”

“Right now?” Nova’s eyes went wide.

“Yes, right now. You said you’d help me scry for more lone wolves but if your visions still aren’t working properly then there’s no point exhausting you for no reason. Besides, it’s just the four of us here.”

“And Bear on the front porch.”

Leo rolled his eyes, “Bear isn’t listening in. It’s part of his code of honor. So, like I said, it’s just the four of us. If you try and fail nobody knows but us and you already said you trusted Griffin with your secret.”

Nova opened her mouth but shut it again. She cut him a quick glance before looking away. Griffin tried not to let hope bubble out of him for fear she’d take it back but it felt damn good hearing those words. He hadn’t realized that was what it meant when she said it was fine he knew and stayed but Leo was right. Nova was trusting him with something big, not just to keep the secret of her gift from outsiders but clearly to keep the information about her visions being off from anyone outside the family as well.

This day was not going at all like he’d imagined and he was immensely enjoying the strides his relationship with Nova was taking.

“Fine.” Nova grit out, all but glaring at her brother. “Go and stand with Darius and I’ll try to reach into your future for a vision. You two have always come easily to me in the past so maybe it will work.”

“Sure.” Darius smiled, moving to stand next to his husband, “Use us as your guinea pigs.”

“Just remember if something goes wrong this was your mate’s idea. Not mine.” Nova smiled sweetly. “Come on, hold hands and then put each of your free hands in mine. Form a triangle.”

“Uh...” Griffin swallowed hard, unsure what was going to happen, “What about me?”

Nova turned her head, “Just stay where you are. No matter what happens, don’t break the triangle or I could get stuck in their future inside my head. Understand?”

“Don’t break the triangle.” He nodded, stepped backwards another few inches to give them more room.

Nova took a deep breath, “Let’s do this.”

Griffin watched, utterly fascinated by the control and command that Nova had taken of the room. She had not one but two Pack Alpha's in front of her, doing exactly as she said. He had known, logically, that his mate was a force to be reckoned with, but he had a feeling seeing it for himself was going to make him want to bow at her feet.

He watched as Nova took one of Leo's hands and one of Darius's as well. The two men held hands with their others. Nova took a deep breath in through her nose and closed her eyes. Slowly and steadily she let the air leave her body through her mouth.

He waited, but she continued to breathe out and his brain twitched uncomfortably. There was no way she had that much air in her lungs. There was no way she didn't need to take another breath yet. He had held his breath when she first closed her eyes and already he needed to breathe but Nova only continued to blow air out in a long, seemingly endless exhale.

His wolf was suddenly there, just beneath his skin, growling and Griffin couldn't figure out why until he felt it. The bond between them, the one he'd only just strengthened, was being tugged and pulled on. It felt as if the link between them was being stretched like elastic and his wolf didn't like it. Neither did Griffin for that matter because though he could see that Nova was standing right there in front of him, he felt as if she was slipping further and further away.

He was just about to step up beside her and see if she was in some kind of trance, her body jerked. Her head snapped back and she gasped in air. The sudden jolt knocked her backwards and she stumbled, letting go of Leo and Darius. With their triangle already broken, Griffin moved quickly to catch her before she fell.

Nova blinked up at him as he wrapped his arms around her. Her eyes were distant at first but as she continued to breathe and blink, he could see that she was remembering where she was and coming back to them. After what couldn't have been more than a few seconds she finally seemed to recognize him.

“Griffin?” she whispered.

Leo was across the space and at their side instantly, “Jesus, Nova. Are you okay?”

“What the hell was that?” Darius frowned.

Griffin frowned now too, “Is it not normally like that?”

“Not even close.” Darius glanced at him with a worried expression and then back at Nova who was still in his arms, still staring up at him with amazement shining in her eyes. “Are you okay? Did it work? Did you have a vision?”

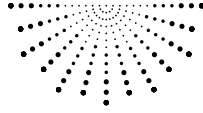
When she didn’t answer, Griffin’s stomach twisted with concern, “Nova? Are you okay?”

“They were right.” She finally said, softly, as if her throat hurt.

“What do you mean?” He searched her face for some sign that she was really there with him and not still stuck in some vision he didn’t understand.

“They were right. It was you. It was always you.” Nova fluttered her lashes and seemed to come back to herself more, shaking her head. “You were the block in my vision. The dark spot I couldn’t see coming. But now that you’re here...” A wide smile broke out over her face and the cold chill that had taken up residence in Griffin’s chest melted as her warmth soaked through the bond and back into him, “My visions are back.”

## CHAPTER NINE



Griffin heard Leo ask another question but he didn't hear it. Not really. He was too focused on Nova and on the way she was looking at him. It was as if this was the first time she was truly seeing him and her smile was for him and him alone.

"Nova! Focus." Leo snapped, jolting them back into the moment. "Are your visions really back? No black spots?"

Nova sighed, wiggling a little so that Griffin would put her down. He did, gently, but he didn't let go of her. She had been knocked out of that vision so violently that he wasn't sure she didn't have a concussion. She'd been out of it for a minute there even though her eyes were clear now, sparkling even, he worried about what she had just put her mind and her body through. He kept one hand on her back, steadying her, and she didn't pull away from him.

"Yes. They're back." She spoke to Leo but her attention was already back on Griffin, her eyes studying his face. "Did you see what I saw?"

"No." He admitted, "No. I didn't see anything but I felt..."

When he trailed off, Nova tilted her head slightly, "What did you feel?"

"Like I was losing you. Like you were here, but you weren't within my reach and I... I didn't like it. My wolf didn't like it." He admitted.

Nova's face went soft and she put a hand on his chest, just over his heart, "I felt it too. Like we were being separated by



time if not by space. I think that's what sling-shotted me back so hard. The bond jerked me back here, back to you."

"Interesting." Darius hummed thoughtfully.

"I wasn't here. Not in my head. I was in the future." Nova dropped her hand from her chest and shook her head, amazement in every word, "But my soul knew I didn't belong there, that I belonged here. It was the strangest feeling, like nothing I've ever experienced before with a vision. It was like... instead of just watching the vision I was actually there, like I was there, being me, in the vision, instead of just floating above it."

"Wait, you were in the vision? You saw yourself? Your own future?" Darius was watching her closely. "You always said that wasn't possible. Your own future is your blind spot."

"It wasn't my future though." Nova turned to him, rubbing her head and looking like she was still trying to make sense of it herself, "It was your future. I was just there, on the sidelines of it, and I couldn't see me, not really, it was more that I *was* me."

"That is... weird." Griffin looked between them, knowing that wasn't the right word but unable to come up with anything better. "Why would her visions be so different all of a sudden?"

"You?" Darius shrugged. "I don't know. That's the only thing we know of that's changed. Her connection to you. Maybe with the bond she can see more, go further than she could before because her mind knows that her soul will pull her back to you?"

"Seriously?" Griffin gaped.

"It's the only explanation I have right now but... I don't know. I need to think about it some more." Darius turned, as if he had suddenly realized Leo wasn't chiming in with his opinions on what had changed. "Hey, you okay?"

Leo's jaw was tight and he shook his head.

Darius immediately moved to him, "What's wrong? Do you feel strange? Did Nova's vision..."

“I feel fine.” Leo grumbled at his mate. “I’m just concerned that my sister isn’t telling us what she saw.”

“Oh.” Darius blinked, as if that part had completely slipped his mind.

“Yeah. Oh.”

“Calm down. It was a traumatic experience. I’m sure she’s going to get to the part where she tells us what she actually saw. There’s no need to immediately assume the worst.” Darius comforted his mate.

Griffin turned back to Nova. He wanted to ask why her brother automatically thought the vision must have been bad news if she wasn’t sharing it with him but he didn’t get a chance. Nova was already rolling her eyes and harrumphing right back at her brother, already back to her usual sassy self.

“Jeez, Leo. Let a girl get back on her feet before you start demanding answers.”

“I’ve asked multiple times what you saw and you ignored me.” He shot back.

“I was processing.”

“Process out loud and tell me what you saw.”

“Us.” Darius said more gently, “Tell us what you saw, please.”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Nova raised an eyebrow. “Because you’re well aware that if I tell you it could change the choices you make and the path you’re on.”

“It was something big then.” Leo stated, not a question. He glanced at Darius. “She wouldn’t be worried about altering our path if it was something small.”

“Babe, I don’t think something small could have knocked her off her feet like that.”

“Do you want to know?” Leo reached for his partner’s hand and Darius twined their fingers together. “You know I do, but if you don’t…”

“I want to know too.” Darius nodded and they both turned their attention back to Nova.

Griffin felt, suddenly, as if he was intruding on an important moment. Whatever Nova had to tell them was big news about their future. They were all family but he wasn't. Not yet. He started to take a step back but Nova jerked her head towards him.

“Don't leave yet.”

He blinked, “How did you...”

“I felt your reluctance to be part of this but you're not intruding.” She glanced back at her brothers. “Is he?”

“No. Of course not.” Darius shook his head. “Whatever Nova has to tell us, you can be here for it. We trust you.”

“You're going to be part of this family. You may as well stay.” Leo offered before turning back to his sister. “What? Don't look at me like that. The man has something to do with you having stronger visions than ever and he's your fated mate. You can fight the bond all you want but we all know you're going to give in to it sooner or later.”

Nova narrowed her eyes at him, “Well since you seem to know everything, I guess you don't need me to tell you about the vision after all.”

Leo growled, “Nova.”

She grinned, “Teasing.”

“Come on Nova. Stop stalling and tell us what you saw.” Darius seemed as excited as Leo now. “We want to know.”

“Okay. Just remember you asked for it...” Nova pretended to be serious for a moment and then a huge smile broke over her face again, “You're going to have a son.”

The room went completely silent. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Griffin wasn't sure if the other two men in the room were even breathing.

Leo was the one who broke first, blinking in surprise, “I'm sorry... What?”

“You’re going to have a son.”

“No. I heard you.” Leo was shaking his head. “I just think maybe that vision finally made your brain malfunction.”

“Hey!” She yelped.

“I just mean, you do realize that we’re both male, right? We may be fated mates but we can’t actually procreate.” Leo looked bewildered as he turned to his husband. “We had the birds and the bees talk with her didn’t we? I would have sworn we did.”

“Leo.” Darius spoke softly, his voice cracking, and Leo stopped his teasing laughter instantly. “Do you think she means...?”

“We only just submitted the paperwork. She can’t mean...” Leo trailed off, seeming to realize what his husband was getting at. “Adoption. We’re going to adopt. They’re going to approve our application?”

They both turned to look at Nova and she nodded.

Leo put a hand to his mouth. Darius looked like he might cry. The two embraced one another in a tight hug and Griffin looked away.

He had been right. This was an important moment for them. Intimate. And they’d let him be a part of it because he too would be part of this family soon.

He glanced at Nova, “You’re amazing.”

She shrugged, “It’s a gift.”

Darius pulled back from the embrace with his husband and wiped at his cheeks, “I can’t believe it. You really saw us with a son?”

“I really did and not only that but, it wasn’t a distant future. He’s going to come into your life really soon.”

Leo wiped at his cheeks, “We didn’t tell anyone we were looking into adoption because we were worried it wouldn’t go through. We thought there was a possibility you’d have a

vision of our plans but then your gift went all wonky and... I just can't believe it. We're going to be parents."

Nova smiled softly, "You're already parents, at least to me. You helped raise me and you did a damn fine job if I do say so myself."

That earned a watery laugh and then Griffin watched as the three of them hugged and cried together. It was an incredible moment to be part of. Especially when Nova opened her arms and grinned at him.

"Come on. Get in here with us. You're in on another DeLuca family secret now."

Griffin chuckled and moved towards her. He slid an arm around her waist and his other around Darius. The four of them stood there like that for a long moment and it felt so nice to be included, to be part of a family, that Griffin thought he too might tear up.

Nova caught his eye and her smile lit up everything inside of him, "Come on. Let's give these two some time to celebrate their big news. We can try scrying some other time."

AS THEY SAID their goodbyes and left Leo and Darius to enjoy their happy news together, Nova felt like she was floating. She hadn't felt this good in months. Her visions were back and she felt more like her old self, like life had meaning and she had purpose. She had reached for the future and this time there hadn't been any cloudy, half-formed images or dark spots. There had only been the future, big and bright and beautiful, just waiting for her brothers to walk into it.

And it was all thanks to Griffin.

He was no longer a blindspot hindering her from seeing the future. He wasn't the thing that fate was trying to hide from her. He was part of the visions now. He'd been there, beside her, when she had been in that vision. She'd felt him with her and she had known that he was sharing his strength with her, helping her to power the vision, sending his support

through the bond to help her which was just too incredible to comprehend considering they weren't even mated yet.

She wasn't so far gone that she missed the significance of her subconscious using that word. Yet. Because after everything that they'd shared today, that kiss, the vision, those precious moments after she'd been knocked back into reality and he'd held her and looked at her as if she was the only thing in his world that mattered, she knew that her brother had been right.

It was only a matter of time before she gave in to what fate, her body and maybe even her heart wanted.

Even with her brain still chiming in to remind her that she needed to be cautious, that she couldn't trust him just because he'd been there for her today, she was flying high on the success of her attempt to see the future and the connection she felt to her mate. Her heart was racing and her blood was hot. The mating heat was pulsating in every cell of her body and she didn't feel like fighting it at the moment.

So instead of heading for the front door, where she knew Bear would be lounging on the porch waiting, she grabbed Griffin's hand and pulled him out the back. He went with her willingly. He laced his fingers with hers and let her tug him around the side of the house. She was fairly certain her brothers had been too wrapped up in one another to know anything except that they were gone and from this side of their house they were blocked from the town square by a gated fence.

"That was a pretty amazing thing you did back there." Griffin smiled at her as she pushed him back against the house and she smiled back at him, marveling at the easy way he trusted her and went along with what she wanted.

"It was, wasn't it?"

"Mmmhmm." He slid a hand around to the small of her back.

"That was partly you. You know that right?"

He tilted his head, "What do you mean?"

“You didn’t know you were sending your strength through the bond to help me?” Her heart fluttered at the way his eyes went wide and she groaned. “You were taking care of me while I was in the vision, even if you didn’t know it.”

“I’ll always take care of you. If you’ll let me.” He raised his other hand to her cheek and she rubbed against him like a contented cat. “What’re we doing out here, Nova?”

“Taking a moment to enjoy our success.”

“Oh yeah?” His eyes twinkled when he smiled, “And how do you intend to do that?”

“Like this.” She leaned up on her toes and kissed him.

It wasn’t the same soft kiss of earlier. This one was wilder. It started off hot and only spiraled out of control from there. They were both amped up from the power exchange and she knew that but in the moment, she didn’t care. All she knew was that she wanted him and that was enough for right now.

They licked and sucked and bit at one another without breaking the skin. Griffin’s hands cupped her ass and then her thigh. He lifted one of her legs, notching it around his forearm, giving her the angle she needed to grind herself against the rock hard erection in his pants. He grunted, straining against the clothing that kept them apart and she reached for the button of his pants on autopilot.

“Knock knock.”

They jerked apart, panting for air and searching the space for the intruder. Laughter came from the other side of the fence. Nova groaned and Griffin banged his head back against the house with what she knew had to be frustration.

“I know you’re back there.” Bear’s voice came again and Nova huffed.

“If you know we’re back here, why are you knocking?”

The older man’s chuckle was husky and loud, “Because as much as I want you two to seal the bond so we can all get on with our lives, I don’t think you want to be giving the town that kind of show.”

“Show?” Griffin glanced around. “There’s nobody back here but us.”

“We’re wolves, loverboy. We don’t have to see you to hear what’s going on back there.” Bear snorted another laugh, “Now say goodbye to the pretty girl and get your ass out here. We have work to finish today and you two can canoodle on someone else’s time.”

Nova groaned and banged her own head against Griffin’s chest. He was right of course. Now that the floaty feeling from the aftermath of her vision was waning, she knew that this wasn’t how she wanted to seal the bond with Griffin. She wasn’t ready yet, no matter what her body was screaming at her to do. She leaned back and looked up at him apologetically but he only smiled and played with one of her locs that had fallen free.

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.” She whispered back.

“You need more time. I understand.” He set her back away from him. “It’s probably a good thing he interrupted us when he did.”

“No probably about it.” Bear called from the other side of the fence and Griffin growled.

“Go. Away. Bear!”

Nova shuddered when he yelled but forced herself not to shrink back in fear. Instead she stepped back slowly, putting herself back together. She kicked the gate where she knew Barrett was standing on the other side and smiled when he gave a small yelp of surprise.

“Give us a minute alone would ya?”

Barrett sighed but she heard a muttered, “Yes, ma’am.”

His footsteps tromped away and she turned back to Griffin to see him staring at her with that look of amazement again.

“What?” she asked quizzically.



“I tell him to go away and he doesn’t budge. You tell him to go away and you get a yes ma’am.” He chuckled.

“It’s because I’m a DeLuca. Princess of the Pack, remember?”

“Oh, I remember.” Griffin pushed himself fully upright from the house, smile back on his handsome face, “My mate is not only a hella powerful Seer but also pack royalty. I have no idea why fate thinks I’m good enough for you but I feel damn lucky she does.”

Nova grinned back at him, “This was fun.”

“Yeah, it was.” Griffin stepped closer to her. “Maybe we could do it again sometime soon?”

“Maybe.” Nova tried and failed to hide a smile.

“I better get going before he decides he has to protect your honor by coming back here and beating me to a pulp.”

“We wouldn’t want that.”

“We wouldn’t?” He raised an eyebrow.

“What? You think I’d let him mess up that pretty face? Not a chance.”

They grinned at one another for too long. She knew it was silly. It was like having a childhood crush all over again. But that thought managed to break through her happiness and remind her that her last childhood crush had been Griffin’s brother and they all knew how badly that had turned out.

“I should go.” She glanced away, uncertain of how to extract herself from the situation she had started in a graceful way.

“See you again soon?”

He sounded so hopeful. She didn’t want to dash his dreams. But as much fun as the last few minutes had been, as incredible as it was to realize that their connection was already strong enough to power her through an intense vision, she really did need some more time to think everything through before she let her wolf sink her fangs into this man.

“Yeah.” She nodded, because as much as she might want to put distance between them, she had a feeling that fate, and her wolf, and the mating heat, would have something else to say on the matter. “See you soon.”

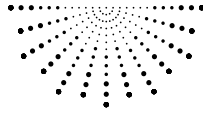
She turned and walked out the gate without so much as a backwards glance. She passed Barrett where he was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, looking for all the world like the badass Enforcer he had been meant to be before Maddox Clary got his claws in him. He smirked at her but she didn't have another round of banter in her, not now that she'd been reminded of just why she was hesitant to let fate run its course with Griffin.

She ducked her head and walked quickly home. She needed to get as far from Griffin as she could right now and the sanctuary of her house seemed like the best place to be. Nobody would bother her there. Hopefully. And maybe in the tranquility and peace of her safe space, she would be able to reconcile wanting a man that posed such a danger to her family's safety and her own.

History couldn't repeat itself. She wouldn't let it. So even if her own future was dark to her, she would do her best to reach into the future of the rest of her family and find out as much as she could about what would happen if she continued down the path that led to mating Griffin and spending the rest of her life as his wife.

Then and only then, would she be confident enough to do what she needed to do next.

## CHAPTER TEN



Nova had spent hours pacing around her house, unable to calm her racing heart or the insistent urge to run back to Griffin and leap into his arms. She wanted him. Her body ached for him, for his touch and more of his kisses. But she was logical enough to know that was just the heat of the mating and she wasn't going to give in to it that easily.

It had only been a couple of days. She didn't know him well enough. She still wasn't entirely sure she could trust him. And she didn't want to make another mistake that would hurt her family. She wasn't ready to seal the bond and that meant she couldn't give in and go beg Griffin to kiss her until all the voices in her head went quiet and there was nothing left but the overwhelming urge to bare her throat for him.

If there was anyone in the world who would understand the predicament she was in, it was her brother. After all, Darius had delayed their mating for weeks after they'd met and the bond had sparked. He'd said he needed time to work out his personal issues and get everything settled with the Moirae Pack before he could seal the bond with Leo. She had still been young then but she remembered the tension that had mounted between the two of them.

It was only later that she'd realized some of that tension had been sexual and it was only now, when she was facing her own mating heat, that she realized just how overwhelming it must have been for them. Putting off the mating once the bond had formed wasn't just difficult. It was downright maddening.

She'd thought she was dealing with it pretty well until today. Today, Griffin had kissed her. He had finally kissed her and she had kissed him back. He had touched her and she had let him. More than that, she had wanted him to touch her. She'd wanted so much more than just that one gentle kiss and so she had taken more and more and more and now she couldn't get the idea of it, or him, out of her mind.

She knew that going to Leo was the rational move but she just couldn't make herself do it. Leo might be her Pack Alpha. He might have been her surrogate father figure after their parents were gone. He might have helped raise her and even dealt with some pretty sensitive topics like when she got her period or having the conversation about the birds and the bees. But he was also still her big brother and she could too easily imagine the horrified look on his face if she tried to talk to him about the mating heat and just how desperate she was for Griffin's touch on her skin or what she might be able to do to staunch it for just a little while longer.

She contemplated going to one of her sisters but dismissed that idea just as quickly. Maya had tried to put off her mating bond with Zander and ultimately decided it was the biggest waste of time ever. Luna and Michael had sealed their bond within hours and so had Zoey and Rafe. They'd all made it clear when they were at her back door that they thought she needed to put the past behind her and get on board with this mating.

None of them were going to be any help in finding a way to delay the inevitable.

Finally, with no other ideas and the itch only growing worse, Nova dropped her clothes at the backdoor and stepped out onto her porch. She walked several yards out into the forest before she allowed the shift to come, letting her wolf take over the way it had been clawing to do for days now. She kept a tight rein on her animal side, reminding her that they were not going in search of their mate, and steered the animal deeper into the woods. Her wolf fought her at first, wanting to sniff out Griffin's scent, track him down and sink her fangs

into him, but when Nova threatened to take back control and shift back to her human form the animal finally gave in.

She was happy enough to be free that she abided by Nova's strict rule and took off running through the woods in the opposite direction of where Barrett lived, and where Griffin's scent was likely the strongest.

Her wolf ran at full speed. She darted around trees and over fallen logs. She raced after a rabbit and howled when she lost it in a hollow where she couldn't follow. She splashed in the water once she hit the river and she smacked at fish, batting them into the air before letting them drop back into the stream and swim on their way. Her wolf ran and played for hours and Nova sat back and let the wolf expend all the energy they had cooped up inside of them from fighting the mating heat and the bond.

It was only when the sun started to set that she guided her wolf to head back towards home. The wolf wasn't happy about it. She wanted to watch the sun set. She wanted to howl and listen for her packmates. She wanted to find them and play but Nova had to remind her that she would have plenty of time to see her friends when the full moon rose and not until. With a huff of annoyance that Nova felt all the way to her soul, her wolf headed back home at a lope.

Almost as soon as they got near her house, the wolf scented Griffin and all of her fur stood on edge. Nova strained for the surface, trying to spark the change before her wolf got any ideas about running off to find him. She'd forgotten that she'd let him into the backyard when she took the shortcut into Noir with him the other day. It was why she hadn't shifted on her back porch to start with but after the hours of letting the wolf run it had slipped her mind. Now all the energy she'd thought was dispelled into exhaustion was back and it took every ounce of her strength to force the wolf back down and find her human skin again.

Nova panted as she lay on the grass in her backyard. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. She felt helpless and she hated feeling helpless more than anything in the world. She didn't know what to do. Fate clearly wanted her to seal the

bond and mate with Griffin but she just wasn't ready and she wasn't sure how or when she would be.

Slowly she dragged herself up from the ground and plodded into the house. She headed straight to her bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as it would go. While she waited for the steam to build she dropped her old clothes into the laundry bin and found a pair of comfy underwear and a t-shirt she liked to sleep in. She tossed them on the bathroom counter and then wrapped her locs in a shower cap to keep them dry. After staring at herself in the mirror for another long minute, trying to decide if she looked any older or more mature than she felt, she gave in and climbed into the shower stall, letting the hot water beat against her skin until she went comfortably numb.

She stood that way for a long time, letting the water wash away the dirt and grime from her run in the woods but also just letting her mind go empty. She focused only on the basic necessities of washing. She rubbed body-wash onto a loofah and scrubbed until her skin flushed red.

She had always been the lightest skinned of her siblings and she'd hated it as a child. She hadn't understood as a kid why some people were darker than others, namely her. She remembered her sweet mother sitting her down to explain that there was nothing wrong with any skin color, even if some people decided to treat a person differently because of it. The Crescent Pack had black and brown and white skin-toned people but they were all shifters, all Crescent wolves, all family.

Nova's own family was mixed, as so many within the pack were after centuries of matings. Her mother and father had both been brown but they too had been one darker and one lighter and they'd explained that each of their children was unique and their skin colors were just further proof of that. Nova had tried to explain in return that she didn't care what color anyone else was, she just wanted to be dark enough that when she blushed it didn't show, which had made her mother laugh.

Now, as she rinsed the soap from her body and put her razor back on its magnetic hook, her mind drifted to someone else with skin darker than her own. Griffin. He was handsome, there was no denying that. With his warm, umber skin stretching over muscles that were well-defined she wanted to see more of him, to see all of him, to touch him and stroke her hands over his skin. With a groan of despair she flipped the water to cold and then off, snatching her towel off the hook and quickly drying herself.

It didn't matter what she did. She couldn't get him out of her head. He was constantly there. Slipping in even when she was actively trying not to think about him. Even when the things she was thinking had nothing to do with him.

Nova switched out her shower cap for a silk turban and then pulled on her underwear and t-shirt. Despite the fact the sun had only just gone down and it was early, she crawled into bed. She checked her phone, ignoring messages from her sisters telling her that they were available if she wanted to talk. She had a message from Leo asking her to come back by the house tomorrow to go over some more details about the alliance and typed out a quick message telling him she'd come by in the morning before plugging the phone in to charge and rolling over to stare at her ceiling.

When she was younger, she'd suffered nightmares after the ordeal with Maddox. She had expected them to come back when Griffin entered her life but so far they hadn't and she wanted to take that as a good sign. She knew that on the outside she didn't sport the same scars that Maya did from her time as Maddox's hostage but on the inside, sometimes she still felt like she was cut wide open when she thought of him.

Despite her reaction to Griffin and his resemblance to the brother he had only barely even known, the nightmares hadn't returned in the past few days and she was grateful for that, hopeful that it meant fate was right and she could trust him, but also annoyed because she had no rational reason to explain why she couldn't sleep.

Except that she couldn't stop thinking of Griffin.

Griffin as he'd been that first moment they met, wide-eyed and as surprised as she was, with hope in his eyes. Griffin as he'd looked that morning standing outside her house as if he'd known she was planning to run, disappointed but steadfast. Griffin with that teasing smile of his and the longing way he snuck glimpses of her when he thought she wasn't paying attention while they'd walked into town. Griffin crowding her space in the kitchen earlier, the soft brush of his breath at her ear and the feel of his body pressing against her back, encircling her, making her feel wanted and protected instead of threatened. Griffin grinding against her in the shaded part of the backyard, as desperate for her as she'd been for him.

Nova groaned and rolled over again, flipping open the bottom drawer of her nightstand and pulling out the pink bunny toy she'd bought online as a gag gift for one of Luna's birthdays before ultimately deciding just to keep it for herself. The thing had come in handy over the years, literally and figuratively. She didn't exactly buy into that whole notion that a shifter should save themselves for their fated mate, but she also hadn't been comfortable enough with anyone to go that far. Instead, she had Bunny and he had always been able to get the job done before when she was restless and couldn't sleep so she figured she may as well have a go at trying to get Griffin out of her system by using the toy to scratch the itch instead.

She slid her free hand down and pushed at her underwear, kicking them off. With a practiced finger she found the button to switch the vibrator on and then slid it down beneath the sheets. She spread her legs and closed her eyes as she let the length slide against her already slick pussy. She bit her lip as a shiver worked its way down her spine and straight into her core.

Of course she was already wet. She'd been thinking about Griffin. Wanting Griffin. Her body was primed for him but since she couldn't let herself have him she would give herself this instead.

With her eyes closed and her teeth sinking into her bottom lip, Nova played the vibrating wand over her slit a few times,



teasing herself. In her head, the images came to her unbidden. It wasn't the vibrator between her legs, it was Griffin. It was his hand sliding between her legs, cupping her, playing with her just to see her get even wetter for him. He glanced up at her as he did, dark lashes over those beautifully gold-rimmed eyes, hooded with desire.

*Does that feel good?* He asked in her head and she nodded vigorously. *Do you want more?*

Nova nodded again and shifted her hips. The tip of the wand found her opening and she moaned as Griffin, no, as *Bunny* began to push inside. Her body was so primed the toy slid in easily and her hips rolled to take more. Once it was fully inside of her she twisted her wrist until the little bunny ears rested against her clit and with another touch of her finger she turned the vibrating mechanism up higher.

Instinctively her body began to move but in her head, her imagination was busy replacing the fact that she was alone in bed with a toy with the image of Griffin in her bed with her, naked and desperate to make her feel good.

Now Griffin was buried inside of her and thrusting as he held himself up over her. She planted her feet on the bed to give herself leverage and met him with a roll of her hips each time he slammed into her. She pressed her free hand to the headboard, holding herself in place as the bed shook from the force of his movements. And all the while he held eye contact with her and talked to her.

He told her how good she felt, how she had been made for him, how he had needed this just as badly as she did. He whispered filthy words about how tight she was and how wet she was for him. He kissed her again and this time he wasn't soft or gentle, instead ravaging her lips as his tongue stroked deep inside, matching his thrusts. He bit her lip and the shiver of pain sent a cascade of moisture spilling through her.

Nova's body tightened and she cried out as he continued to thrust. Her orgasm was coming so fast she gasped and tilted her head back. Griffin groaned and told her he could feel her body trying to hold him deep inside where he belonged. He

used one hand to thumb her clit, sending her shooting nearly off the bed as the vibrations became too much and she cried out as the climax hit her hard, knocking the air out of her.

She shuddered and twisted. She moaned and rolled her hips. She rode out every second of the orgasm and it was only as it ebbed and the quietness of the room rose back up to greet her that the image of Griffin disappeared. She opened her eyes and remembered that she was alone.

With a sob she pulled the vibrator away and then threw it across the room. She felt empty and more alone than she had ever known was possible. Tears filled her eyes and she scrambled to pull her underwear back on and then rolled her face into the pillow and screamed so that nobody would be able to hear her as she cried and wailed at the injustice of it all.

She had thought the orgasm would make her feel better. Scratch the itch. Calm some of the raging need she had been feeling. But if anything, it was worse now.

As soon as she'd come back to reality, the ache for the man who had invaded her fantasies became even more unbearable. The release should have helped but it didn't because her body wasn't craving release. It was craving Griffin. Her body wanted him and only he would do because he was her mate.

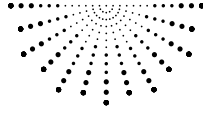
Only he could ease the mating heat and knowing that her fantasy of him likely didn't hold a candle to what the real thing would be like only left her grumpy, unsatisfied and more frustrated than she had ever been in her entire life.

It was him. She admitted to herself in the dark of her room. It was him or it was no one and she couldn't be alone anymore. She couldn't spend her life this way. Pushing people away because she couldn't trust them even when they'd done nothing for her to be distrustful of except want to know her.

He wasn't Maddox. Wasn't that what he kept telling her? Well, she knew that. But now she just had to find a way to believe it. Because if she could believe it, if she could let him prove it, then she could let him in.

And dammit, but she wanted to let him in, she realized. She wanted him. And she didn't think it was only the heat pushing her towards him. It was also fate.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Griffin threw a punch that was blocked. He immediately rotated and swung his leg out. His opponent jumped to miss having his feet kicked out from under him but when he landed Griffin was here. He shoved, taking him to the ground, and a whistle blew.

“Nice one, man.” His opponent, a guy named Blaine, held out his hand and Griffin took it, pulling him back to his feet.

“You too. I thought you had me for a second there.” Griffin chuckled.

“Next time.”

“We’ll see.” He clapped his new friend on the back before moving to the outer edge of the spectators to grab a bottle of water.

He’d been working out with the Crescent Pack Enforcers for almost a week now and this was the first day they hadn’t totally kicked his ass from the word go. He had never been an Enforcer before in any pack. He hadn’t been trusted enough in his old pack and he’d only been passing through the others. He knew he still had a long way to go to prove to Leo DeLuca that he was worthy of the honor of being one of his chosen Enforcers but he was trying.

When Darius had invited him to work out with them he’d thought the big Pack Alpha’s Mate was looking for a way to punish him for his brother’s sins. He had been pleasantly surprised to find he was wrong. Darius truly seemed to think he would make a good Enforcer someday. He never singled

Griffin out for a mistake or put him up against someone twice his size. He was a good leader and he gave advice as he saw necessary but otherwise simply took everyone through their exercises and moved on.

Griffin liked to think that Darius was giving him a chance even if Nova hadn't found it in her heart to do the same yet. If Griffin was sticking around, he would need to make himself a valuable part of the pack. If he was mated to a DeLuca wolf, a Seer at that, he would need to prove himself. Training with the Enforcers and then, hopefully, becoming one, would be a great way to show Leo DeLuca that he was serious about making things here work and being part of his family.

Something told him Darius knew that.

He was wiping sweat out of his eyes with the hem of his t-shirt when his wolf stirred inside of him, taking note. His senses instantly went on high alert and he dropped his shirt. He turned to where his wolf was nudging him to look and his heart leapt when he saw Nova strolling into the town square.

She hadn't seen him yet but he knew any second her own wolf would alert him to his presence so he took the precious moment before she caught him watching her to soak her in. She'd been avoiding him. He was sure of that much. Two days had passed since they'd kissed for the first time in the Pack Alpha's kitchen and then made out like horny teenagers desperate to get off in the backyard. Yet he hadn't caught sight of her since. He was worried he'd spooked her even though he'd tried his hardest not to and she was the one who had instigated the make-out session. Still, seeing her now, it took all of his strength not to rush towards her.

She looked beautiful, as always. Her locs were piled on top of her head again and she wore a long-sleeved shirt that clung to her small curves with cutoff jean shorts that showed off her legs. It was similar to what she'd been wearing the last time he saw her and he assumed it was her preferred look. It worked for her that was for sure.

Her eyes suddenly met his and he offered a smile and waved. She ducked her head a little but waved back before

averting her gaze and hurriedly walking on her way. She stuck to the other side of the square from where he and the Enforcers were working out and he sighed as he watched her disappear from sight.

“She still giving you the cold shoulder, huh?”

Griffin turned to find that Darius was standing close to him. He hadn't heard the big man walk up. He didn't know if that was because Darius was so well trained or if he had just been that distracted by a single glimpse of his mate.

He wanted to tell Darius that nothing about Nova was cold. All he saw when he looked at her was heat. The bond between them had sizzled just from that one moment of eye contact. But from what he'd learned of the pack, of the DeLuca family and of Darius Moreno's connection to them, he'd helped to raise Nova and likely wouldn't appreciate Griffin mooning over how sexy she was.

He cleared his throat, “I think we've reached lukewarm.”

“Sounds about right.” Darius chuckled, “How's the mating heat treating you?”

Griffin winced, “Slowly burning me up from the inside out. I swear it gets worse every day. I try not to think about it, try to keep my mind off her like maybe if I don't think about it then it won't hurt so much but...”

“But it doesn't work.” Darius finished for him with a knowing nod.

“Yeah. How'd you know?”

“I dealt with a drawn out mating heat myself so I know a thing or two about it.”

Griffin raised an eyebrow in surprise, “Leo was wary of your bond at first too?”

“No.” Darius gave a rueful sigh, “I was the wary one. I pushed him away, or I tried to at least. I refused to give in to the heat, certain that it had to be my choice and not some sign from fate or a biological response.”

Griffin knew he was gaping and tried to pull his mouth shut. He hadn't heard anything about the Pack Alpha's mating since he arrived here. He'd never had guessed there had been tension to the mating. After all, they were so good together and clearly in love. The male-male dynamic had surprised him since he'd rarely seen it himself but nobody in the Crescent Pack even seemed to realize it wasn't commonplace so surely that couldn't have been the issue.

Darius smirked, "It's not what you're thinking. I didn't fight it because he's male."

"I... well... I didn't mean..." Griffin fumbled awkwardly but Darius waved away his comment.

"It's what most people would assume. It's not as if male mating pairs are uncommon but, they weren't always as acceptable as they are today."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"No. It's fine. I brought it up, not you." Darius shrugged, "Just to be clear though, I didn't push Leo away because he's male. I never gave much thought to that part. For me, it was more about all the changes that came with accepting the bond to the Crescent Pack Alpha. I don't know what you've heard, or what Bear's told you since he's pretty much the biggest gossip in the pack, but when I met Leo I wasn't a Crescent Pack wolf. I was actually the Moirae Pack Head Enforcer back then."

Griffin's face heated and he was glad he couldn't blush, "Barrett might've mentioned that."

"Mmhmm. I'm sure he did." Darius chuckled, "Anyway, switching my loyalty and allegiance was big for me. Switching packs, leaving behind the only family I'd ever really known, it was a lot to accept and I thought I needed time to come to terms with all of that before I sealed the bond with Leo."

"If what you're getting at is that I should give Nova however much time she needs, you don't have to worry. I don't intend to push her into anything she isn't ready for."

"No. Actually I was going to tell you the opposite."

Griffin was taken aback, “What?”

“Push her. Keep pushing her. Don’t let her get away with avoiding you. Don’t let her forget you’re there and you’re waiting for her, not for a second.”

“Seriously?”

“That’s how Leo got to me.” Darius shrugged. “He refused to back down or give up. It’s not in his nature and in the end that’s what convinced me I could rely on him to have my back no matter what else changed in my life. Giving in to the mate bond was scary but once I accepted it, it was the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“Man, just being here, in this pack, in this place, knowing my fated mate was here and that fate sent me here? That’s already the best thing to ever happen to me.” Griffin admitted.

“But sealing the bond, making her your mate and your wife, making this place your home and being part of this family, it’ll make it even better.” Darius put a big hand on his shoulder. “Fate put you together for a reason. Remind her of that.”

“Thanks.” Griffin nodded, “I appreciate everything you’ve done to welcome me to the pack.”

“I believe in you.” Darius pulled his hand away, “Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.”

Darius tilted his chin towards the square and Griffin turned to see Nova coming from the opposite direction. He looked back towards Darius but the man had already walked away and was talking with the Enforcer who had been leading the exercise in his stead. Griffin turned back towards the square and watched as Nova stopped in front of a little house that sold the vegetables the couple grew in their garden on the front porch.

He watched her for a long minute, contemplating the advice that Darius had given him. Nova must have felt his gaze on her. His wolf was practically chomping at the bit to get closer to her. He imagined that despite her own misgivings



about him that her wolf was putting up no such protest. Nova knew he was there but she didn't glance over and look at him, steadfastly ignoring him just as she'd done for the past several days.

Enough.

Griffin swiped his face with the hem of his shirt, hoping to get rid of whatever dirt and sweat lingered there, and then he stepped off the grassy knoll where the Enforcers were training and into the square. Darius was right. He couldn't continue to let Nova ignore him and hope she would come around before the full moon. He had to show her that he wasn't going anywhere and now was as good a time as any.

"Nova." He raised his voice just enough to carry across the square and knew she heard him when her back straightened. "Nova, hey."

She turned to face him slowly and though there was still wariness in her eyes when he moved closer to her he saw something else there too. Heat. Desire. The flash of awareness wasn't one-sided after all. The mating heat was getting to her as well. She looked him over from top to bottom and he nearly groaned when she licked her lips as if she was imagining licking the sweat from his skin.

*Focus*, he grit his teeth and reminded himself. He wasn't going to maul her in the middle of town square no matter how she looked at him. Not even if his pride did take the opportunity to bask in the attention she'd finally decided to bestow on him. His wolf prowled beneath his skin but he held his beast at bay and tried to offer only what he thought was a pleasant smile.

"Hey yourself." Her smile was warmer than it had been the last time he saw her and that made his heart beat faster.

"What're you up to?" he asked inanely and watched her eyebrow quirk.

"Just running a few errands." She motioned behind him towards the group of men training, "I didn't know you were working out with the Enforcers."

“Darius invited me to join them.” He shook his head, “Not join them as in, become an Enforcer just... join them in their training sessions. He thought it would be a good way for me to meet some of the guys in the pack and let them get to know me. Obviously I didn’t mean that Darius made me an Enforcer. That would be crazy. I’ve only even been here a few days and...”

He cut himself off when Nova smirked. God he liked seeing that smile on her face even if she was laughing at him. He took a deep breath and tried to remind himself that he had spoken to women before, to this one in fact, and he needed to calm down.

“Sorry, I was rambling.”

“It’s okay.” She shrugged, “I knew what you meant.”

“Oh, good. Good. I didn’t want you to think I was forcing my way into a position of authority in the pack or trying to get in good with...”

“Griffin.” Nova cut him off with an amused shake of her head. “It’s okay.”

“It is?”

“I’m trying not to immediately assume the worst of you, ya know?” She put a hand on his arm and the contact sent delicious spirals of heat shooting through his bloodstream. She looked at the spot where they were touching as if she hadn’t meant to do it. Slowly she removed her hand and sighed. “You’re not your brother. You told me that. Leo and Darius have told me that. And while I might not know you well enough yet to trust you at your word, I trust my brothers. If they’re willing to give you a chance then I figure so should I.”

Griffin’s heart felt like it might beat out of his chest. She was here. She was talking to him. She had touched him, willingly, even if it had been the heat pushing her to do it. She said she wanted to give him a chance and that felt like a gift he couldn’t pass up.

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

Nova's eyebrows winged up in surprise and she took a half-step back before she seemed to catch herself and stand her ground. Griffin mentally punched himself for getting so excited he just blurted it at her. He shook his head, holding out a hand innocently.

"I meant to say, will you have dinner with me tonight? It's a question. Not a demand."

Nova's lips quirked, "You're good. You know that?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, honestly unsure what had made her look at him like that.

"You haven't even acknowledged that I've been avoiding you since that kiss the other day and you're not going to bring it up at all, are you?" She narrowed her eyes and snorted. "No, you're not. But it isn't because you don't care. It's clear that you do. You're trying to respect my boundaries, even if I haven't made it clear what they are."

Griffin nodded, wary of her insight and curious if she could see into his mind with that special gift of hers, "I don't want to push you and end up scaring you off."

"I don't scare easily, despite what my actions the other day might suggest." Nova admitted. "I agreed to stay instead of running away. I said I would give you a chance but I haven't, not really. And still, I don't think you'd have come over here now if Darius hadn't given you a push in my direction."

"How did you..." He gaped, snapping his head back towards where the big man was still working with his Enforcers. "Did you have a vision of him telling me to come after you?"

Nova laughed and the sound warmed very dark, cold part of him. He loved that sound. He wanted to hear more of it. He could spend his life listening to her laugh.

"No." She finally shook her head, "No vision. I literally saw him talking to you when I came back into the square and I know Darius. He's been giving me the stink eye for days because I refuse to talk about you with him. He's like a mother hen sometimes I swear."

“He wants the best for you.”

“I know.” She nodded, looking off to where Darius was standing, her voice soft. “And he’s more certain that means you that I could possibly be.”

“He’s a good guy and I’ve liked getting to know him but I wasn’t befriending him just so he’d put a good word in for me with you.” Griffin frowned.

Nova smiled as she looked back at him, “Oh, I know. Darius would’ve seen right through an act like that. The fact he’s gotten to know you and invited you to work with his Enforcers, who are his pride and joy for the record, speaks volumes. He’s basically given you his stamp of approval.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“It’s a good thing.” Nova confirmed. “I was never the kind of kid that rebelled against what the adults thought was best for me. They’re my elders and I was raised to respect their opinions. If Darius is pushing you towards me, I know it’s for the right reasons.”

Griffin raised an eyebrow, “Does that mean...?”

“Dinner.” Nova chuckled. “Yes. I’ll have dinner with you.”

“Awesome.” Griffin’s grin felt like it might split his face in half. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“Wait? Tonight?” Nova gaped.

“Absolutely tonight. No way I’m giving you time to rethink it and back out on me.” He winked, “Tonight at seven. Dress comfortably.”

Nova tilted her head, “Dress comfortably? Where exactly are you taking me to dinner?”

“It’s a surprise.” Griffin laughed.

“Griffin...” She started but he stopped her complaint by sweeping in and planting a soft kiss against her lips.

Nova gasped at their mouths came together and he took advantage, sliding his tongue along the seam and tasting her. The tip of her tongue darted out to meet his and his cock

pulsed with desire. He pulled back from the kiss despite his body's insistence that he do the opposite and go deeper, take it further, to kiss her until she was weak in the knees and desperate for him.

He smiled against her lips as he watched her lashes flutter. She looked up at him from beneath the dark lashes and this time he couldn't contain his groan. Her cheeks were flushed but despite the few wolf whistles he'd heard go up from the group of Enforcers across the square he didn't think her blush had anything to do with embarrassment.

She wanted him, even if she didn't want to want him.

"See you tonight." He gave her another quick peck on the lips before turning and jogging back towards the Enforcers.

He didn't look back. He couldn't. If he did, if he saw her staring after him with that mix of heat and desire in her beautiful eyes, the last shreds of his control would snap and he'd lose it. He didn't glance back but he knew she was watching him because he could sense her eyes on him and feel her nearness through the burgeoning bond.

"Okay, okay. Show's over." Darius barked at his men, "Get back to work."

"And you..." He pointed at Griffin, his hard stare at odds with the smile he was trying to hide. "You're running laps."

"What?" Griffin gaped.

"You heard me. Laps. Nobody walks out on my training sessions, not even my future brother-in-law." Darius laughed but nudged his head towards the dirt track, "You better get started or you're never going to make that date."

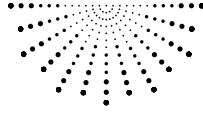
Griffin snorted, shaking his head but jogging to the track before picking up his pace. He should have known with their enhanced wolf hearing that Darius and the others had heard everything he said to Nova. Not that he cared that they'd been listening in since she'd agreed to go on a date with him. And he knew Darius was only making him run because it's what he'd have done to any of his wolves who walked away from a practice.

He ran sprints until he felt sick from the heat and was so exhausted he thought his legs might give out. He ran until Darius took pity on him and told him he could stop. And even when he collapsed to the ground, covered in sweat and panting for breath, he couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

Because Darius had called him his future brother-in-law. Because the guys were treating him like he was as much a part of the pack as they were. And because tonight, he had his first date with his fated mate.

*This, he thought, was what he'd been looking for all his life.*

## CHAPTER TWELVE



**I**t was two minutes until seven when the knock sounded on Nova's door. She narrowed her eyes and waited but the knock came again. With more curiosity than she could contain she moved to the back door where the knocking had come from. She'd been waiting by the front door but clearly Griffin was up to something since he'd snuck around the back and she couldn't wait to see what it was he had planned.

She'd been so nervous all afternoon that she'd called Maya to tell her what was happening. Her sister had sounded surprised that Nova had changed her mind about keeping her distance from her mate but she'd also seemed happy to hear it. All of her siblings had made it clear they thought she should give Griffin a chance and though she'd tried to ignore them, and him, she knew that she couldn't push him away forever. Maya had offered to come over and help her choose what to wear but she'd dismissed that idea. She was a grown woman and she could pick her own clothes, even if she'd never really been on a date before in her whole life. She'd promised Maya she'd call her tomorrow with the details and hung up with her sister feeling even more anxious for her first date than she'd been when she picked up the phone.

Her first date. Tonight was her first date with Griffin but it was also her last first date. He was her fated mate. However tonight went, she knew that she wouldn't be able to hold herself back from the mating heat and ignore the bond between them for much longer.

If she didn't give in to it before the full moon, her wolf would make sure that she did. Nova didn't want things between them to be like that. She might not know Griffin well yet but that was her own fault for pushing him away. She would get to know him better, starting tonight, and once she did then she was certain she'd know for sure if fate had been right to put them together or if it all really was some sick joke.

"Coming." She called before she pulled the door open, which was good, because if she'd waited until she saw Griffin she wouldn't have been able to speak.

The sight of him took her breath away.

He wore hiking boots with dark wash jeans. A simple army green t-shirt clung to his biceps and stretched across his broad chest. With the sun setting, the October night had a slight chill and he'd tossed a beanie on over his short hair which somehow had the strange effect of making him look adorable and dangerously sexy all at the same time.

He'd showered since their run-in earlier and she could smell the fresh, woody scent of his skin and something musky that could have been cologne or soap. Whatever it was, her wolf scented her mate the moment she opened the door and purred in response, pressing against Nova's skin, wanting to be set free so she could rub herself all over him and mark her mate.

Nova clenched her fists to keep from reaching out to him. All she wanted to do in that moment was grab him by the front of his shirt and pull him into the house. She wanted his mouth on her again, his hands on her body, and she wanted her fantasy to be made real.

"Wow." Griffin's deep voice drew her back to reality and she suppressed a shudder when she met his heated gaze. "You look incredible."

She shrugged as if she hadn't spent an hour agonizing over if she was too dressed up or not enough. She'd been frustrated as hell that he wouldn't tell her where he was taking her. Didn't he know that women needed to know their destination so they could dress appropriately? They weren't like men who



could get away with nice jeans and a pair of Timberland's anywhere from a fancy lobster house to a shack down on the bayou.

Eventually she'd decided that even though he'd told her to dress casually that there was nothing wrong with going a little bit above and beyond her normal attire of shorts and tank tops. She'd found a cute floral patterned sundress that she'd only worn a couple of times and tossed a knit cardigan over it to keep warm in case the restaurant was cool. She'd paired the dress with some sparkly sandals that she was certain she'd bought for a special occasion but never worn and to top it off she'd added a dab of eyeshadow and lipstick.

"Thank you." She felt her skin heat at the compliment, "You clean up pretty well yourself."

"I'm glad you think so." He grinned that wide, white-toothed smile that made butterflies twirl in her belly. "Are you ready to go?"

"That depends. Are you going to tell me where we're going now?" She teased even as she flipped the porch lights on so she wouldn't be coming home to a dark house and stepped outside.

"I can give you a hint." He held up the hand she had only vaguely noticed he was holding behind his back and she laughed.

"Where on earth did you get a picnic basket?"

"Bear actually." Griffin grinned. "He dug it out of a closet for me when I told him what I wanted to do."

"He's one of the good ones." Nova agreed before glancing from the wicker basket back at her clothes. "Maybe I should change if we're..."

"No. Don't do that." Griffin reached out with his free hand and grabbed hers when she started to turn away. "We're not going far and you look beautiful. You don't need to change. Promise."

She raised an eyebrow, "We're not going far, huh?"

“Just to a little clearing I found when I got lost walking back from town on my own the other day.”

Nova laughed, “I didn’t think wolves ever got lost.”

“It’s a common misconception.” He slid his fingers through hers and tugged gently, pulling her with him as he stepped off the porch and onto the trail that led into the woods. “Most shifters say wolves can’t get lost because we have an innate sense of direction, which we do, but that only helps if you know the terrain. Since most packs are insular and generation after generation are born and raised on the same land, it makes sense that those wolves would never get lost because they’d know their territory like the back of their hand. For wolves like me though, wolves that aren’t tied to their birth pack, that bounce around looking for a place to call home, it’s a lot easier to get turned around on land you don’t know.”

Nova was so caught up listening to him that it took her a moment to realize that he was holding her hand. He’d twined their fingers together as if it was the most natural thing in the world and she hadn’t even noticed because it *did* feel natural. When she wasn’t overthinking everything about their bond and the past traumas that they shared, it was easy to just be with him. It was easy to get lost in how they fit when she wasn’t focusing on why they shouldn’t.

She resisted the urge to pull her hand away and put some distance between them. Her brain still wanted to fight the connection she felt to this man but everything else inside her wanted him despite all the warnings. It wasn’t just her wolf either. She couldn’t write it off as animal instinct when she was enjoying walking with him, listening to him talk, simply holding his hand and those were all very human things that had nothing to do with her wolf.

Her body wanted him of course. She could feel the heat from where their skin touched practically searing up her arm and making her blood boil with desire. He was handsome, she’d never denied that, but he also carried himself with purpose which she found she liked.

He could have lowered his head and kept his eyes down when he came into the Crescent Pack. After what his brother had done, Nova was certain there were members of the pack who thought that's exactly how he should behave. But despite her wariness when it came to his connection to Maddox, she didn't blame Griffin for what his brother had done and she didn't think it was fair for anyone to ask him to carry guilt for something that was no more his fault than the family he'd born into.

He was a strong wolf. He'd experienced a devastating loss of his own and he'd made it out the other side. She'd laughed at the idea of their shared trauma bonding them when he had mentioned it but after thinking on it more, she thought he was right. Fate had put them together for a reason and being hurt by Maddox was something they had in common, a place to start in building their own relationship.

“Nova?”

“Hmm?” she hummed, still distracted with her thoughts.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” She glanced up and smiled at him. “Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About making another run for it?” He raised an eyebrow and she laughed.

“No. Actually the opposite.”

Griffin tilted his head, “What's the opposite of running? Staying? I thought you'd already decided you weren't going to leave Noir and your family behind?”

“I'd decided to stay in Noir. You're right.” She bit her lip and pushed the rest of what she was thinking out, “I was thinking that maybe I didn't just stay for my family or even the pack. Maybe I stayed for you too. Maybe I can stay *with* you?”

His smile was slow, as if he wasn't sure he could believe his ears, “You mean it?”

“I think I do.” She confirmed. “I think, as angry as I was with fate when I realized who you were, that maybe I was a little rash in giving up on her. She put us together. She made us mates and that means if I have even a chance of being happy with you, then I have to try, right?”

“Nova.” Griffin stepped closer to her and she only realized then that they’d stopped walking. He raised his free hand to her cheek gently and met her gaze. “I’ll make you happy. I swear I will. Finding my mate and making a good life for us is all I’ve ever wanted. It’s why I could never settle in any of those other packs, because I knew, something inside me knew, that you weren’t there.”

“Griffin.” She leaned into his touch, his sweet words sinking in past all of her defenses.

He smiled as he bent his head towards hers, “I like the way you say my name.”

“Griffin.” She repeated on a whisper, making him chuckle even as he brushed their lips together.

It was like their first kiss. Soft and tender, but Nova didn’t feel his hesitancy with her this time. He wasn’t going slow for her sake now. He was simply kissing her with no intention of pushing further, of giving in to the heat that smoldered like kindling between them. He kissed her as if they had forever together and maybe that was the point.

They did.

He pulled back after he’d kissed her long enough to leave her dizzy and stroked his thumb over her cheekbone, “Come on, the place I wanted to show you is just a little bit further.”

Nova grinned, letting him take her hand and pull her after him. She somehow wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t forgotten all about their date in favor of taking her home and claiming her right then and there. She’d told him that she wanted to be with him and the heat between them was becoming nearly unbearable but still he wanted his date with her. It was then that she realized his strength of will, his strength of character, was far greater than she’d given him credit for.

After all the visions she'd been forced to endure of her friends and family and packmates being inundated with the first flash of the mating heat, after watching Darius and then Maya both attempt to put off their claiming, she had thought she understood what she was getting herself into. She had been wrong. The mating heat was so much worse than she'd ever imagined.

Her skin constantly felt tight. Her body ached with the need to be claimed and filled. Trying to scratch that particular itch had only left her worse off than before and she swore half the time she spent sweating lately had nothing to do with the sultry Louisiana humidity. As if that wasn't bad enough, her wolf was constantly threatening to break free of her skin and hunt their mate down.

Even now, maybe especially now considering that kiss and his close proximity, her wolf was growling and pacing inside of her. She wanted free so she could jump him and sink her fangs into him. Nova knew he must be feeling the same strain but he hadn't pushed her over the last few days and he seemed content to let their night play out as he intended it to.

Instead of letting his animal instincts take over, he was sticking to his plan to share dinner with her, to enjoy the picnic he'd prepared and their time together.

She wasn't sure she possessed the same self-restraint but hoped she'd last at least until they finished dinner before the urge to maul him overtook her.

"You know..." She smiled as she followed him past a fallen log. "If we go much further we won't even be on Crescent land anymore."

"Well it's a good thing we're here then." He grinned as he pushed a low limb out of their way, ducking and holding it so she could follow him. "Ta-da!"

Nova stepped into the clearing and her smile instantly fell. A cold chill ran down her spine but she knew it didn't have anything to do with the setting sun and cooling temperatures. She swallowed hard as a lump formed in her throat but she must have made an audible sound of horror, either that or

Griffin had been paying enough attention to see it written all over her face.

“Shit, what’s wrong? What is it? Are we not supposed to be here or something?” He glanced around as if trying to see the little clearing with the creek running beside them through her eyes. “Are we past Crescent territory and on someone else’s land?”

Nova shook her head, “No. No, it’s not that. Technically Crescent territory ends at the stream. This is our land. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Griffin frowned, “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“It’s fine.” She realized she was still shaking her head and forced herself to stop. “Really, it’s fine.”

“Nova.” He stepped right up to her, forcing her to meet his gaze. “We said we were going to really give this a chance, give us a chance, and we can’t do that if we aren’t honest with one another. Tell me what’s wrong. Please?”

Nova shook her head again but he refused to budge. He kept standing right there in front of her, not looking away, not letting her get away with avoiding his stare or the conversation she didn’t want to have. She wanted to go back in time, even by just a couple of minutes, and stop before they exited the tree line because if they weren’t here, she wouldn’t have to face the truth, not yet at least.

She had known that being with Griffin would mean talking about her past. So much of it had defined who she was. The things that Maddox had done, the way he had betrayed her, were the reason she couldn’t simply trust and open up to Griffin but they were also the same reason that she had to.

She’d just really wanted to put it off and pretend that she was okay.

“Nova.” Griffin’s brows furrowed and concern tinted his eyes. “Talk to me. Please?”

God, she was really going to have to do this wasn’t she? She winced and wiped at her cheeks only to realize that the

tears she'd been certain were falling weren't there. They were a distant memory, transported to here and now because this was the first time she had come back to this place. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her cardigan when he continued to look at her with that worried expression.

"This place... this clearing." She corrected herself. "It didn't used to be empty like this."

"What do you mean?" Griffin frowned.

"You stumbled onto this place and only saw the beauty in it. The green grass that grows tall on the other side of the creek. The old oak trees that form a semi-circle and give it shade. The flat rocks at the edge of the water that glisten in the sunlight." Nova felt her bottom lip quiver slightly when Griffin nodded for her to continue. "But that's not what I see."

"Tell me what you see."

"I see the way those same trees used to hug three sides of a little cabin on that side of the creek. It sat just outside of Crescent territory but not far enough inland to be on Moirae land either. I see the black smoke that filled the air when they burned it to the ground. I see the green grass that grew out of the ash that was left behind but also out of the blood that was spilled there." Nova couldn't look at him but she couldn't look at the empty space across the water either so she stared at the ground. "I can't see the beauty that's grown up in this place because all I see is the evil and the death that permeated it the last time I was here."

"Nova?" Griffin's voice was soft and he reached for her cheek again, this time forcing her chin up so she would look at him again. "What happened here? Is this where he... where he..."

He couldn't get the words out and Nova wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him for that. This was hard for him too. It had to be. So she put him out of his misery and shook her head quickly.

"No. He was dead by the time we found this place." She took a deep breath and let it out, "It was his cabin though, a

secret hiding place for him and his bitch of a mate. Carefully built outside the boundary of our land so I wouldn't be able to see visions of it. This was where they met to plan the attack on my family, on the pack, and when it all went bad, this is where his mate brought Luna with every intention of killing her, and Darius, and the rest of us."

"But you survived." He reminded her softly, "You're still alive. All of you are."

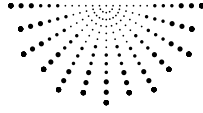
Nova almost smiled at the reassurance in his voice but she shook her head anyway, "Not all of us."

"His mate?"

She nodded, "I was so young then. Leo and Michael insisted I stay behind at the lodge while they went to rescue Luna. I didn't understand why at first. Not until after, when they came back to burn the place down and I secretly followed them. My visions... I saw it all, saw the way Luna's wolf ripped her into pieces to protect Michael and I screamed so loud and for so long that I couldn't stop. Darius had to pick me up and carry me back home. I had nightmares for a long time after that." She blew out a shaky breath, "Sometimes I still do."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



**G**riffin pulled her into his arms and she let him. She buried her face against his chest and let him hold her.

He loved the feel of her in his arms, loved that she fit him so comfortably, so naturally, and that she wasn't trying to hide this part of herself from him anymore. He held her until her shaking stopped and then he kept holding her because she didn't try to push her way out of his arms.

Damn it. He hadn't meant to trigger her like this. He'd thought the beautiful little clearing with the creek weaving softly through it would be a perfect place for a picnic. It had never occurred to him that this place would be part of Nova's nightmares, a place where true horrors had happened for her and her family.

He should have asked Barrett. He should have known that if there was a seemingly perfect little spot tucked away in the woods on Crescent land that the wolves who had lived here all their lives would know about it. The fact that he hadn't scented another wolf anywhere near it when he stumbled into the clearing that first day shouldn't have filled him with a sense of discovery. It should have filled him with a sense of dread because why else would the Crescent wolves steer clear of it if not because of the awful things that had happened here?

"I'm so sorry." He whispered against the top of Nova's head. "I wouldn't have brought you here if I'd known."

"How could you have?" Nova groaned against his chest. "It's not like I've opened up and told you about my past and

I'm guessing nobody else in the pack has bothered to give you the whole story of what Maddox did either, have they?"

"No." He admitted when she leaned back to look up at him.

"Nobody wants to talk about it, about him, but..." Nova motioned around them, "It happened. Pretending it didn't doesn't do anyone any good. And despite what people want to believe, what I wanted to believe, Maddox wasn't a monster. He was just a man, a shifter, a wolf with too big an ego and too small a conscience. He was power hungry and yes, he was crazed at the end, but he wasn't always like that. At least not with me."

Griffin bit the inside of his cheek but ultimately he had to ask, had to know for sure, "You loved him?"

Nova cringed, "No. Yes. Maybe? I don't know anymore. I was a kid and he was an adult. I had a crush. I felt a connection to him and he was always kind to me, giving me attention and bringing me presents. I thought he felt the connection too. That maybe someday when I grew up, it would turn into the bond everyone was always talking about."

She must have seen him flinch because she reached down and took his hand again, lacing their fingers and squeezing.

"I was a child, Griffin. I didn't understand what a bond even was. I was young and naïve and he took advantage of that to get close to me, to get close to my family."

"Maybe he wasn't just using you though." Griffin frowned. "Maybe he did feel the same connection that you felt, but it wasn't what you thought. Maybe it was the family tie we shared, even then, maybe you saw him as a potential love interest but it's possible if he was good to you then he saw you as a little sister. Because that's what you'd have been to him once we mated, if fate is really all powerful and she set all of this in motion to bring us together, he could have truly felt for you, Nova."

"I know." Her voice was so soft he barely heard it over the wind in the trees and the water in the stream.

“You know?”

“Yeah. That’s part of the reason I went to talk to Zoey that first day when we walked to town.” Nova released his hand and sighed, “Are we really going to talk about this? About him and everything that happened?”

“Do you want to talk about him?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Not really.” She shrugged, “But maybe we should. To clear the air once and for all.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay. If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll do.” Griffin looked around and shrugged, “I thought this would be a nice place for a romantic picnic. Turns out it is a deathbed of nightmares. We may as well lay out the blanket and pop the wine I brought if we’re going to do this right.”

Nova chuckled a little, “Yes to the wine. And the blanket. Please.”

“Anything you want.” He put the basket down and looked up at her from beneath his lashes, “I told you that.”

He would have sworn that the tips of Nova’s ears flushed which made him smile. He opened the basket and pulled out the blanket he’d put at the top. He unfolded it and Nova took two of the corners, helping him to place it neatly on a soft section of green grass. She started to move back to the basket to help him unpack it but he waved her off.

“Sit. I’ll get the rest of it.”

She looked like she wanted to argue but since he was already kneeling down across from her on the blanket and placing warm dishes in the middle she sat as well. She unbuckled her sandals and put them aside before tucking her feet beneath her. She watched him spread out the trays of meats, cheeses, vegetables and breads and smiled.

“Sandwiches? Our first date and you brought sandwiches?”

He grinned, "I like sandwiches."

"So do I but they're not exactly date food."

"Says who?"

"Says me." She laughed, snatching up a square of cheddar and tossing it in her mouth. "And everyone else who has ever packed a romantic picnic with something other than sandwiches."

Griffin laughed with her, "In case you forgot, we hiked out here through the woods. Sandwiches are light and easy to carry. Besides, I don't know what you like to eat yet so I figured a variety of meats, cheeses and breads would give you some options."

Nova was still grinning at him as she shook her head, "You're thoughtful in the strangest of ways."

"Thanks?" He tilted his head. "I think?"

"Now, open the wine while I make a sandwich." She ordered playfully, "And for the record, my sandwich of choice is pretty simple. Turkey with Swiss, lettuce, tomato, bell peppers and Dijon mustard on wheat."

He used the corkscrew to work open the wine and smiled, "Sounds delicious."

"What's your favorite sandwich?"

"Turkey, bacon and avocado." He grinned as the cork loudly popped free. "But Bear didn't have any avocado. Said it was nature's toe fungus."

"Gross." Nova squished her nose up adorably and he laughed.

"I may have called him an uncivilized beast. We argued. Now I get to do all the grocery shopping for both of us since I think I know better than him how to make a proper meal."

"Silly, Bear. He probably thinks that's punishment." Nova was giggling again as she finished putting her sandwich together, "What kind of sandwich do you want? I'll put it together while you pour the wine."

“Same as you.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Sure. It sounds good.”

“Okay.” Nova took the sandwich she’d just made and put it on the plate in front of him. When he frowned and started to argue with her she cut him off, “I’m making another that’s exactly the same. You can have that one in exchange for doing the heavy lifting.”

Griffin basked in the easy comfort they’d found together as he poured the wine and she made the sandwiches. Not even ten minutes ago she’d been in his arms, shaking like a leaf, telling him that this place was the scene of her nightmares. He hadn’t missed the fact that she sat on the blanket with her back to the creek and the empty space on the other side where the cabin must have once stood. She was purposefully blocking it out and letting herself enjoy their time together and he was grateful for that. So grateful in fact that he didn’t push her to resume the conversation they’d been having before deciding to sit down and make dinner.

Instead, he passed her a glass of wine in a stemless plastic cup and picked up the sandwich she’d made for him. They ate in comfortable silence for a long time. Between chewing and sips of wine, they made small talk about everything and nothing.

They talked about their favorite movies to watch over and over again (hers was *10 Things I Hate About You* and his was any or every *Terminator* movie ever made), and what they’d binged on Netflix lately (she’d just finished *Bridgerton* and he was working his way through every episode of *Ozark*). He told her what it had been like traveling all around the country and how different each pack he encountered was from the others. She told him about Leo’s mission to unite the packs and how she’d been using her gift to help him find others like them. He talked about traveling light and how his sole possession that held any meaning to him was a book his mother gave him on his last birthday before she died. She told him that the last thing her mother had given her was chocolate milk because

she'd begged for it even though she knew she wasn't supposed to have chocolate before bed. Her mother had given in but Nova hadn't gotten to drink it because she'd spilled it when the banging had started on their front door.

Griffin winced at the memory, knowing what it meant. Nova had been a child. Just a little girl getting ready for bed, likely already in her nightgown, only she'd pleaded for a glass of chocolate milk and gotten to stay up a bit later than usual for it. Then, the banging had started and she'd probably jumped, scared at the sudden and unexpected noise, knocking the glass over and spilling the liquid everywhere. He wondered if it had spilled on her too, covering her pajamas, or if she'd had to avoid the sharp, shattered glass as she scrambled back away from the men that pushed their way into the house.

Nova bit her lip and he sighed, putting aside the plates. It was time and they both knew it. They'd put it off and enjoyed the evening but night had fallen and the moon and the small lantern he'd brought were the only light left. If they were really going to talk about this tonight, they couldn't put it off any longer.

"Where do you want me to start?" She finally spoke, more softly than before.

"Wherever you want." He admitted. "I don't need to know exactly what Maddox did to hate him, Nova. I already do. For what he did to our family and for what he did to you. I wish I could go back and undo it so you never had to feel an ounce of pain or fear but I can't. So it's up to you, if you want to tell me more about him, you can, and if you've changed your mind and you'd rather not, that's fine too. Because the truth is, I don't care about him. I only care about you."

Nova worried at her bottom lip and stared at him for a long moment, "You really mean that don't you?"

"Of course I do." He reached out and touched her hand, connecting them again, "I want what you want. Whatever that is."

“Despite what I said earlier...” Nova sighed, “I don’t want to talk about him anymore. Not really. Not tonight.”

“Okay.” He nodded slowly.

“For a little while there, I actually managed to forget all about him.”

“Even looking at me?” He raised an eyebrow and she smiled.

“I told you. You don’t look as much like him to me anymore.”

“Because I’m better looking?” he teased, trying to lighten the mood again and grinning when she smiled in return.

“Absolutely.”

“Good to know.”

“But there is something I do want to explain to you. Something we were talking about earlier. The reason I went to see Zoey that first day, after you convinced me not to run away.”

“Zoey is Rafe’s wife. Michael Hudson’s brother. The one that was human before being mated to Rafe.” He shrugged when Nova raised a brow, “Bear has been schooling me on all the wolf connections.”

“That’s good.” Nova smiled. “And yes, Zoey was human before Rafe came home and scented her as his mate.”

“Came home? I remember something about him leaving the pack for a few years.”

“More than a few.” Nova admitted. “He and his wolf were traumatized after seeing their twin brother gunned down and their parents shot by hunters. He left the pack rather than fight Michael to lead it and he actually only came back when Leo got in touch with him, needing help convincing the Moirae Pack to aid him in taking back his rightful place as Crescent Pack Alpha and saving us.”

“I definitely didn’t know that part. Are you saying that Rafe came back to Noir and the Moirae Pack, where he found

out his mate had been all along, because Leo was on the run from Maddox and needed help saving you and your sisters?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Wow.” Griffin shook his head. “That’s...”

“Fate?” Nova finished when he trailed off. “That’s what you were going to say right? Fate?”

“Yeah.” he nodded.

“Because you think fate set all of this in motion, everything that happened with Maddox, just to bring us together.”

“Maybe not just us... maybe Maddox had to happen for everyone in your family to find their mate.” He winced when she frowned. “Hear me out because this is what I’ve learned since being here... Maddox sent Leo fleeing to Moirae territory where he met Darius. They brought Michael to Crescent territory where he found Luna and realized she was his mate. Now you’re telling me that Maddox is the reason Rafe came back to town and found out his mate was Zoey, who coincidentally enough has a brother who is now mated to your other sister, Maya. That’s a lot of cause and effect for it not to be fate, don’t you think?”

Nova scratched her temple, “When you put it like that, it’s hard not to believe it.”

“So explain to me why you went to talk to Zoey the day after I showed up here. Did it have something to do with what I was saying? Cause and effect?”

“Kind of. Maybe. It’s more that...” Nova twisted her lips, “I don’t think you’re going to like what I have to say at first but if you listen to me, I think you’ll see we are arriving at the same point.”

“Okay.” He narrowed his eyes.

“The thing about Zoey is that, before that night Rafe showed up back in Noir, everyone that knew her, everyone in the entire Moirae Pack, knew that she was in love with Michael.” He knew his eyebrows winged up in surprise



because Nova rushed on, “They’d been best friends since they were kids. Inseparable. They’d been absolutely convinced that when they came of age that fate would mark them as mates because of the connection between them... but it didn’t happen.”

“And they stayed friends after that?”

“They did. Best friends. Still inseparable.” Nova confirmed. “Zoey loved him and Michael loved her but they could never be together because they weren’t fated. It was a terrible situation that they’d gotten themselves into but for Zoey, it was worse.”

“Because she was human?”

“Because Michael told her that he couldn’t just let her go, let her leave Noir and the pack, even if it would make her life easier not to be around him. He still felt connected to her but it wasn’t like a mate bond.” Nova focused on his face and spoke slowly, “He told her that it felt like his wolf saw her as a sister.”

Griffin furrowed his brow, trying to figure out what that meant and why Nova was making such a point of it. Michael had loved Zoey but not like a mate should. He had loved her like a sister. That was the connection they’d shared. And that was what finally made it click in place for Griffin.

“Because she was Rafe’s mate. Even if they didn’t know it yet. She was always meant to be Rafe’s and being mated to his brother would make Zoey his sister.”

“Exactly.” Nova nodded. “So earlier, when you said that maybe the connection I felt to Maddox was real, that maybe he really did feel it too, I understood what you meant because I’d already talked to Zoey about it. It was the first thing I thought about after I got over the shock that fate would make the brother of the man I hated most in the world my mate.”

Griffin gazed at her in shock and awe. She had figured it out before he had. She had put the pieces together and gone to the only other person she knew who had dealt with something similar. She had done her best to make sense of her conflicting

feelings and then she had come back to the pack, and to him, and she had promised to give him a chance.

She was even more incredible than he had realized.

“So you see, I didn’t love Maddox. Not the way you think.”

“The way I think?” He blurted out, surprised by her words.

“I can feel your jealousy whenever I talk about him. It’s the bond. It’s so much stronger after the vision the other day and it’s getting stronger all the time. Strong emotions are easy to sense. Jealousy is a strong emotion but there’s nothing to be jealous of when it comes to Maddox or my silly childhood crush.” Nova snorted, “Trust me, that ended a long, long time ago and the only reason I’m even remembering how I felt about him before everything boiled down to hatred is because of you. It’s because you’re here and it’s bringing it all back up and making me face my past and realize things that I had forgotten or pushed down so far that I didn’t have to think about them.”

“I’m sorry I bring up all the bad memories for you. I wish...”

“No.” Nova reached out and took his hand, “No, you don’t understand what I’m saying. I don’t blame you for bringing it all back up. I mean, I did, at first, but not anymore. The more time I spend with you, the more I realize that I’d put a band-aid over a lot of the old wounds but I never gave them a chance to heal. You’re helping to heal them, Griffin. You’re healing me and making me better.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.” Nova smiled softly, her face lit by the glow of the lantern. “That’s how you’ll know I mean it when I say that I’m not scared of the bond between us anymore. I believe you when you say you’re nothing like your brother. You’ve proven it in every way you can since the moment you got here. I believe in fate and I believe you’re right when you say that everything that’s happened has led us

to this point, right here, together. Because you're my fated mate, Griffin Clary, and I'm yours."

His heart felt like it might burst out of his chest and he searched her face in the dim light for any sign of hesitation or concern, "You're mine?"

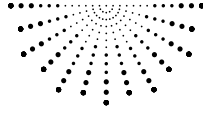
"And you're mine." Nova nodded, looking up at him from beneath her dark lashes. "Now come over here and kiss me because I've been aching to feel your lips on mine again since the moment you..."

He moved so fast she didn't get to finish her sentence. He pulled her across the space, rattling the dishes left on the blanket. He hauled her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers. He kissed her, just like she wanted, and just like he'd been dying to kiss her for what felt like an eternity.

This time she didn't hold back and neither did she. He kissed her and she kissed him back with every ounce of passion that he had known she was keeping locked inside of her. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and opened her mouth for him, deepening the kiss and sucking on his tongue.

Heat shot through his veins. His wolf growled. And he knew that there was no going back now. She'd said that she was his and he was going to prove it. He would claim her and if he was lucky she would claim him right back. She would be his mate, his partner, his other half. She was already his everything and would be for the rest of their lives.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Nova moaned as she settled onto Griffin's lap and he pulled her even closer. In this position, with her straddling him, she had the advantage of being able to move and so she did. She rolled her hips as she licked her tongue into his mouth and was rewarded with a low growl from deep in his chest and his big hands settling on her ass, cupping her and guiding her as she rocked herself against him.

God, this was good. So good. Perfect even. One kiss from him, one touch, and she lost the ability to think straight. She didn't want to think at all. Not anymore. She'd overthought their situation from every conceivable angle and the truth was, the answer was always the same.

He was her fated mate and it was about damn time she accepted it.

Nova nipped at Griffin's lip, tugging it between her teeth until he grunted with pain. She released it and immediately kissed the spot, laving it with her tongue. All the while, her wolf was just beneath her skin, begging to be set free, begging to truly sink her teeth into Griffin and mark him as theirs.

"Nova." Griffin's hands came up to her face, holding her gently but steadily as he pulled back from the inferno of the kiss. "Nova, wait."

"I don't want to wait anymore." She whispered, shifting her hips against the thick length of him she could feel beneath her.

“Nova.” He groaned her name and kissed the side of her neck, trailing kisses down towards the edge of her dress where her breasts heaved. “If we keep going like this, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.”

“Don’t stop.” She tilted her head to the sky and moaned as his tongue licked a drop of sweat as it trickled down her chest.

“The heat.” He reminded her but she only grabbed hold of his head and forced him to meet her gaze.

“I know. It’s driving me crazy too. You’re the only thing I think about. Just you. Touching you. Tasting you. Feeling you inside me.” She bit off a moan as her core clenched at the thought. “I just want to do it. Do it and get it over with and then we’ll be able to think straight again.”

Griffin jerked beneath her touch, “What?”

She was so caught up in the heat, in the moment, in the feel of him that it took her a second too long to realize he wasn’t kissing her anymore. She blinked and found him frowning at her. She opened her mouth to tell him to keep going but he pulled even further away from her, as far as he could go considering she was still straddling his lap.

“No. Nova. No.” He looked hurt as he shook his head, “I don’t want it to be like that between us.”

She rubbed her eyes, trying to force her brain to work again, but before she could speak he continued.

“I want you to want me. Just me. The way that I want you.” His voice was soft, distant, as though he’d retreated further away from her than she could reach. He removed his hands from her body with a heavy sigh, “Maybe we should just call it a night and head back.”

“No.” Nova’s heart clenched at the idea of him walking away from her. She met his gaze and softened her own. She did the thing she never did with anyone outside of her family and let her emotions finally bubble to the surface. “No. Please don’t. I’m sorry. You’re right and I’m sorry about what I said before, it was stupid.”

“If that’s how you feel...”

“It’s not.” She insisted. “It might have been, at some point, but it’s not anymore.”

“Then tell me how you really feel after everything we talked about tonight. Tell me what you want out of this mating, Nova. Because if we’re not on the same page, I don’t know what comes next.”

She swallowed hard and she realized it was panic spilling into her veins. This was the first time that Griffin had ever pulled back from her first. She was the one that was usually pushing him away. She was the one who had tried to run and he’d come after her. He’d been chasing her from the moment he got to town and now that he’d made it clear he wouldn’t chase her over this particular ledge she knew that she’d gone too far and the only way back was her bond to him, the lifeline that could keep her from falling, was him.

“I promised to tell you the truth so, here’s the truth.” Nova took a deep breath for courage and met his intense gaze. “I do want you, Griffin. I want to be with you and it would be easier for me to accept if I could blame it all on the heat but the truth is, getting to know you had been fun. I like you and that scared me because I’m not good at letting people in. I haven’t been since I was a kid because the last time I let someone I thought cared about me in, he hurt me and not just me but my entire family.”

“I know Maddox...” He started but she put a finger to his lips.

“Let me finish. Please.” She waited for him to nod before pulling her finger away, “I’ve let myself get to know you and I like you. I’m attracted to you of course and that’s only magnified by the mating heat. But beneath all of that, there’s a part of me that’s still scared.”

His eyes softened but he remained quiet and she continued before she lost her nerve.

“I told you that I knew you weren’t Maddox, that you’re not like him, but the truth is, I’m still scared. I’m scared because when I let the wrong people in my family gets hurt. I get hurt, and I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“Nova.” Griffin spoke her name like a prayer as he moved to cup her cheeks. “I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. I would never, ever hurt you.”

“I know.” She nodded quickly, a rush of emotions threatening to overwhelm her. “Logically I know that but I’m having a hard time getting my brain and my heart on the same page and I said something stupid, tried to minimize this thing between us, but I shouldn’t have said it and I don’t really think it. I’m sorry.”

Griffin’s dark eyes studied her face for a moment and she waited to see what his reaction to her outpouring was. He stroked her cheek with his thumb and she was surprised when she watched one corner of his mouth curl up. He looked down at her lips and then back to her eyes.

“Your heart’s involved?”

She felt the organ in question melt a little at the hesitant question and she leaned her forehead against his, “Of course it is. How could it not be? You’re my mate.”

“Nova.” He sighed but she cut him off before he could tell her again that they should call it a night and try to start again tomorrow.

“I want this, Griffin. I want you. Is that enough truth for you for one night? Is that enough? Am I enough?”

He smiled softly and when he nodded she felt something like relief soar through her, “Yeah. Yeah I think that’s enough. Definitely enough talking for tonight.”

“But not enough kissing.” She whispered softly, leaning back in slowly so he could push her away if he wanted.

He didn’t.

“Definitely not enough kissing.” He murmured against her mouth just before he took her lips in a searing kiss full of heat and possession.

Nova melted against him as he licked into her mouth and the taste of him flared through her. He traced her mouth with his tongue, going slow, learning every inch. She wrapped her

arms around his neck and tilted her head, giving him better access and his hands went back to her ass. He used his strength to move her against him, rocking her body against his and a dizzying need swept through Nova and settled deep inside her core.

This was what she'd been waiting for, she realized. The spark that the others in the pack talked about when they met their mate. It wasn't just the heat. It was the feeling of complete and utter rightness, of knowing that the person you were with was the only person you were ever going to be with, ever supposed to be with.

With a gasp, Nova broke the kiss, leaving Griffin panting for air and his eyes searching her face, "Is something wrong?"

"No." She consoled him immediately. "No. Everything is perfectly right."

"Are we stopping?" He tilted his head in confusion and she smiled.

"No. But I need to tell you something before we go all the way." She bit her bottom lip but met his gaze, "I've never been with anyone else. Never even come close."

"Oh..."

She raised her eyebrows at the one uttered word, her skin prickling with unease so that she rambled on, "It's not that I bought into the whole tradition of saving yourself for your fated mate. I always thought that seemed so misogynistic. The female has to cling to her virginity but the males don't have any such guidelines. If it's supposed to be this sacred, magical thing then it should be both parties. That's not my point, the point is, I told you that I don't trust easily and so, I've never let anyone close enough to want to be with them like this... only you. It'll be only you. My first and my last."

Griffin didn't speak for a long moment and Nova swallowed a groan. She'd thought he would want to know that she was still a virgin. She'd heard some men in the pack had been thrilled to learn their mates had saved themselves for their mating night. She wasn't sure what reaction she'd been



expecting out of Griffin, only that it wasn't the complete and total silence that he gave her now.

She frowned, "Griffin? Is that a problem?"

"No. God. No." He shook himself, literally, as if he had to push away whatever thoughts had trapped him in his head. "No, Nova. I'm glad you told me."

"Okay." She licked her lips, which still tasted of him and leaned closer, "Can we get back to the kissing then because..."

"I'm a virgin too."

She reeled back in shock, "What?"

"I've never been with anyone else either." He admitted roughly, his eyes everywhere but on her. "It's like you said. You don't trust easily. Neither did I after everything that happened with my family and my old pack. There were some women along the way, I won't lie and say I wasn't tempted, but we never went that far and after a while it just seemed like maybe there was a reason I didn't want anyone in that way. Maybe, when I found my fated mate, if I was lucky, we'd both be each other's firsts, and lasts."

Nova covered her mouth. She wanted to cry. She wanted to hug him. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to fling herself against him, tackle him and bite him right then and there. Instead she only shook her head in amazement.

"Each other's firsts and lasts." She repeated slowly.

"Is that a problem for you?" He posed her own question back to her.

"No, honey." She was the one to cup his face now, to lean close and brush their lips together. "It's perfect."

"Oh thank god." Griffin groaned and she giggled.

"Can we stop talking now?"

He nodded vigorously, "I have far better things to be doing with my mouth."

And he did.

When he kissed her again, all of the softness had evaporated from him. He kissed her like he would rather die than break away for air. He kissed her long and hard and his hands were busy pushing the cardigan from her shoulders and sliding the straps of her dress down.

Nova gasped when cool air touched her nipples and Griffin groaned as he finally tore his mouth from hers. She let out a squeak when he immediately lowered his head and took her right breast into his mouth, suckling so hard that she swore her moan reverberated around the clearing. When he let up, he licked and bit at her pert nipple until she was writhing against him, arching her back and moaning.

His answer to her pleading his name was to turn to the other breast and give it the same treatment.

Nova's skin felt like it was on fire. She could barely think to breathe, let alone to do anything else. Her body felt like it belonged to someone else, to him, and she was no longer in control of it. She tried pushing at his shirt, to rid him of some clothing too, but he didn't stop suckling her and she gave up the effort, instead only wrapping her arms around his head and letting her body rock against him the way it wanted to so desperately.

Her skirt was already bunched up around her thighs so the only clothing between them was a scrap of cotton from her underwear and his pants. Nova rubbed up and down his length. She was so wet she could feel her panties molding to the lips of her pussy, knew that if she looked down she'd likely see the proof of how turned on she was all over his pants but she didn't care. Not at that moment. All she cared about was the friction that moving against his hard length caused and the way it sent shivers skittering up her spine.

"Fuck." Griffin finally released her breasts with a grunt of approval. "I can smell your arousal, mate. It's driving my wolf insane. Driving me insane. I want to be inside you."

"Then get inside me." She groaned back at him.

Griffin didn't need to be told twice. He moved quickly. She scooted back enough to give her access to the button on

his jeans. He started to help her but she smacked his hands away.

“Shirt off. I want to see more of that sexy chest of yours.” She ordered, smirking when he grinned and complied.

She finished unbuttoning and unzipping him at the same time he threw his shirt to the side and she sat back in utter wonder at the glorious body beneath her. Hers. This was all hers. Her wolf practically purred with approval. Every single inch of him was hers to touch and kiss, to learn and love with her hands and mouth and lips and teeth.

“Your turn.” Griffin growled and Nova yelped as she was suddenly sprawled on her back on the blanket.

She didn’t have time to get her bearings because Griffin had shucked out of his pants and was looming over her in an instant. He pushed her dress up and tore her panties down her legs. She felt exposed as he looked down at her, with her dress rucked up around her waist, her breasts uncovered and her legs spread open to let him see every part of her. Still, she made no move to cover herself because if every inch of him belonged to her, then she belonged to him just as much.

“Gorgeous.” he spoke reverently. “So goddamn gorgeous.”

“Griffin.” she moaned his name, reaching her arms out to him and he gave her a look that she didn’t understand.

“Nova, I’m sorry. I want to go slow. It’s your first time. Hell, it’s my first time. We should go slow but I don’t think I can. It’s taking everything in me just to hold my wolf off and I need inside you, sweetheart.”

“We can try slow next time. Right now I need what you need. Please, Griffin.” She pleaded and nearly begged as he finally leaned against her. “Please?”

“It might hurt a little at first.” He looked pained at the idea. “I promised not to hurt you.”

“You won’t. You can’t. You’re my mate, remember? I was made for you.”

He grunted which was neither a confirmation that he believed her or a denial. Instead he leaned down and kissed her again. Nova wrapped her arms around him and bent her legs up, letting him fall between them. She twirled her tongue around his as she felt him position himself at her entrance and before he could second-guess the wisdom of rushing this, she lifted her hips, helping him to slide that first inch inside of her. She was so wet for him, so ready for him, that all she felt was a rush of pleasure as her body accepted him deep into her depths.

“Nova.” He whispered her name as he broke the kiss, leaning down to bury his face in her neck. “You’re mine.”

“Yours.” She promised, gasping when he pushed in all the way.

He had been right. It did hurt a little. She could feel her body trying to adjust to his invasion, to his sheer size and the depth he’d just reached inside her body, a place that Bunny had definitely never touched before. But even the small bite of pain reminded her that this was everything she’d waited all her life for, a mate of her own, her other half, the man that would fill her up and make her whole.

As Griffin began to thrust in and out, Nova wrapped herself around him and bucked her hips. Their bodies took over the ancient dance then, pushing and pulling at one another, climbing together towards the precipice. Nova’s breath caught as Griffin thrust into her harder, faster, and she felt the air around them shudder. The bond, the tenuous thread that had been building between them, caught fire in that moment and burned so brightly that Nova swore she could feel the flames licking against her skin.

“Nova.” Griffin grunted as his thrusts turned wild.

She glanced up and lost her breath again. Griffin’s eyes were gold, his wolf just on the edge of breaking free. His teeth were elongating and she knew what came next. She didn’t even hesitate. She turned her head, baring her neck for him and his growl ripped through the air a moment before he sank

his teeth into her shoulder and the bond solidified and locked into place.

The spark of pain and pleasure knocked Nova over the edge and her orgasm barreled into her. Her vision went fuzzy at the edges and inside of her, she felt her wolf lunge for the surface. Knowing there was no way to keep her back, knowing that this wasn't the time to try and retain control, she let the urge overtake her and sank her own teeth into Griffin's shoulder.

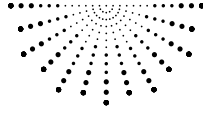
He cried out and thrust madly until a moment later he was spilling his seed inside of her and they were both biting and clawing and growling.

They writhed together for a while after as they came down from the high of sexual ecstasy mixed with magic. Nova closed her eyes and held tight to him though he didn't try to move away from her. He kept his face buried in her neck and they breathed in unison.

Nova marveled at the new connection she felt to him. Not something thin or fragile. Not anymore. They had sealed the bond with their human halves and it was so strong she swore she could feel Griffin's emotions, a mix of pleasure and shock at just how good they were together. She smiled as she held him close and thought about how everything in her life had been leading to this moment, to this man.

He was her mate now.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The lantern had been knocked over in their haste and the only light in the small clearing was from the moon overhead. It didn't matter. With his superior senses, Griffin could make out every detail of his mate's beautiful face as she lay cradled in his arms. Her dark lashes fanned out and her lips swollen red from their kisses, she looked so good, so right, with her naked body pressed against his, slick with sweat from their mating.

She looked like *his*. His mate. Finally. They were bonded.

The night was growing cooler and he knew he should get up and rearrange the blanket to cover her, or help her put her clothes back on, but he couldn't bring himself to move. Not yet. Not when it felt so right to have her here with him, her heart beating in time with his, gradually slowing as they recovered from their lovemaking and the force of the bond that had cemented itself in place between them.

He could feel her inside of him now. She was a part of him, an integral piece. Their souls were tied together and from now on he would always be able to sense her no matter where she was or what she was doing. More than that he could sense her emotions, which was how he knew she was as content as he was to simply lay together here for a while longer.

As content as he was though, his wolf was getting restless inside of him.

Technically, the bond wasn't fully sealed until their wolves had their chance to mark one another as well. The fact that

Griffin's human side had been inside of Nova had his wolf pacing, ready for his turn. Griffin knew he wouldn't be able to hold the wolf off forever, not when so much of the wolf's future was riding on sealing his part of the bond, but he was trying to give Nova some time to recover before he pressed her to complete the bond and make their mating official.

"Mmm." She hummed against his chest, "I can practically hear your wheel turning."

"Sorry." He trailed his fingers up her arm soothingly.

"Want to tell me about it?"

"I was just thinking how beautiful you are."

She snorted, "Somehow I doubt all that swirling in your head is only about how I look."

"I am completely and utterly amazed that a woman as beautiful as you, as strong and powerful and gifted as you are, is my fated mate." He smiled when she made a face, "And I'm wondering why it is you don't seem to know how incredible you are."

"This is just me. I'm pretty awesome but I don't think I'm anything all that special."

"You're wrong. You are special. Even without all the other stuff, fate saw fit to give you the gift of sight. You're a Seer, Nova. That's the most special of gifts among our kind."

"I know. I guess I just take it for granted sometimes since I've always been able to see things most can't." She raised her hand and traced what he thought was a name, her name, on his chest with her finger. "I won't be taking them for granted anymore though. Not after having the future go all blurry and discombobulated on me for the last few months."

He took her fingers in his and kissed the tips one by one, "Do you think they'll change again now that we've sealed the bond?"

"Maybe. When I reached for Leo's future the other day, I wasn't expecting to get much of anything and instead it was the clearest vision I've ever had. I think that was due to the

link between us, to the strength and steadiness I was able to draw from you. I imagine with the bond fully sealed that yeah, they might come back full force or they might let me see further into the future or... something like that. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"Well, we'll have to wait until we fully seal the bond to be sure."

She smirked up at him from beneath her lashes, "Was that a hint that your wolf wants his turn now?"

Griffin chuckled, "Maybe? He's practically chomping at the bit to meet your wolf and claim his mate now that I've claimed mine."

"Yours." Nova smiled a little. "It's hard to believe it's really happening. I'm someone's mate."

"Not just someone. Mine. You're mine."

"Yes." She assured him with a smile, "I'm yours and that makes you mine."

"Don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing that."

"It's a little strange though, right?" Nova raised an eyebrow and he scoffed.

"What? No? What do you mean?"

"Just... I've seen a lot of matings in my visions. I thought I knew how they went. I guess I thought I knew how they felt but it's different with me and you. I don't know how to explain it."

"Maybe it just feels different because you're the one actually experiencing the emotions, going through the changes the bond makes inside of us instead of only watching from the sidelines?"

"Maybe." She bit her lip to hide a smile, "You want to hear something funny?"

"Sure."

"I've always been the little sister. The youngest in my family. The one they all treated like a kid because to them, I



was one. They all grew up and found their mates and started families and I was still here, alone, playing babysitter for their date nights like I was a teenager with nothing better to do.” Nova met his gaze and her eyes sparkled, “Being your mate, being bonded to you, it makes me feel weirdly more grown up than I was just a few hours ago.” She giggled. “They can’t call me a kid anymore. Is it strange how happy that makes me?”

He chuckled, “Not at all if that’s how you feel.”

She sighed, “You’re so understanding. I like that about you.”

“I like lots of things about you.” He replied seriously but she only giggled and rolled her eyes again.

“I bet you do.”

“You know what I’d really like right now, if you’re ready?”

She bit her lip teasingly, “I have an idea of what that might be.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” He laughed. “We have all the time in the world for that. I meant I want you to show me your other half. I’d like to meet your wolf.”

“You’re going to stay human while I shift?”

“Just for a minute so I can really take you in. I’m sure that’s about as long as I’ll be able to hold my wolf back.” He watched her carefully, “If that’s not too much for you for one night. We can wait if you want. I know some wolves like to wait to seal the wolf bond on the full moon.”

Nova wiggled, forcing him to release his hold on her as she rolled out of her arms, “Nah, I figure I made you wait long enough. If you’re ready for this, so am I.”

“Are you sure?” He watched as she climbed to her feet and stood before him completely naked and without a single bit of embarrassment.

“Griffin, I’ve told you. I don’t say things I don’t mean. I said I’m ready and god knows my wolf is itching to break free

and meet you so yeah, let's do this." She nodded and Griffin agreed, taking her at her word.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just sit there and give me a second to shift. It should be quick. She's just beneath my skin now."

"Okay."

Griffin watched, fascinated with the ease that Nova shook off her human skin and let her wolf emerge. One second he was looking at his beautiful, naked mate. He blinked a couple of times and suddenly, in her place, there stood a small black wolf with an almost perfectly white crescent moon on its forehead. His mouth gaped open as the black wolf shook itself and then looked directly at him, head held high as though she wanted to make sure he looked his fill before she moved towards him.

"Wow." Griffin rolled up onto his knees and opened his arms, "You're just as beautiful in this form."

Just as Nova always did when he gave her a compliment, the wolf snorted. He grinned. She moved forward and knocked her head into his hands, letting him smooth his palms over her fur. Griffin couldn't stop smiling as he felt Nova through the bond. She was the one just beneath the animal's skin now and he could practically hear her telling him to shift so she could see his wolf too.

"Did you know you have a crescent moon marking in your fur?" He spoke to her softly and touched the spot, petting her forehead, "Right here?"

Nova's wolf pulled her head away and shook again. He didn't hear anything new through the link. He made a mental note to ask her about when she was human again. For now, his own wolf was about to revolt if he didn't get free and he knew there was no holding him back any longer.

He focused on his wolf, on sinking back inside himself and letting his other half take control. It always hurt when he shifted. Always. It didn't matter that he was a born shifter. The breaking of bones and reshaping of his body into his animal

was always painful. This time was no exception in that, the only difference was just how quickly it all happened.

Just like when he'd been watching Nova, one moment he was human and then, before he knew it, he was on all fours peering out through golden eyes that saw everything perfectly clear despite the darkness.

He didn't have time to consider how much easier the transformation had been now that he was mated to Nova. He didn't have time to think about how the bond might allow them to draw from one another's strength to ease the transition. Because almost the moment his paws hit the ground, his wolf caught sight of Nova's and the mating heat rushed through his animal body, making him growl.

Nova's wolf spun in a quick circle, clearly eager to play. Griffin's wolf lowered his head and scuffed the ground with his paws. And then they were off, racing through the trees, Nova's wolf leaping over fallen logs and darting around massive bushes while Griffin's wolf gave chase.

It was clear that Nova's wolf knew the woods far better than his own, which was no surprise since he hadn't shifted to let his wolf run and learn them since he arrived. He'd been too worried the big brute would go straight to Nova and maul her. He'd kept his animal under lock and key but now he was free and he was happier than Griffin could ever remember him being.

He could feel the animal's excitement as they chased Nova's wolf. Not just because he knew at the end of this chase he would get to sink his teeth into his mate either. He was happy to be free to run and Griffin thought maybe that was because this was the first time since they were children that his wolf was on land that felt as though it were home. He knew that once the wolf sealed the mating bond, the circle would be complete and he would become a Crescent wolf for good.

It had been so long since his wolf had been part of a pack, so long since he'd felt the connection to others like him, that he knew it would be a big change. But his wolf wanted it just

as much as he did. He wanted to belong here, with her, and to make this place their home.

That was why, when Nova's wolf slowed enough for him to catch her, his wolf didn't hesitate.

He leaped on Nova's wolf, sending them rolling. It was a tangle of legs and writhing animal bodies and sharp fanged teeth. Nova's wolf was smaller than his own but strong. She put up a little bit of resistance, no doubt to establish that she wasn't weak, but without too much of a fight she let his wolf pin her down and sink his fangs into her shoulder.

This mating was rougher than their human one had been. The wolves scrambled and clawed at one another. Nova's wolf bit him in return as his wolf mounted her. The whole thing couldn't have taken more than a few minutes but inside Griffin's mind, inside the man who was beneath the wolf's skin, he felt every single electric charge as it moved through him and new connections sizzled into place.

Eventually their wolves wore themselves out and lay down together, nuzzling and licking at one another's bite marks. Soothing one another. The bond between them firmly in place by the time they gave up control back to their human counterparts.

The shift back into his human skin happened so easily, Griffin barely noticed it. He went from being curled up as a wolf next to Nova to wrapped his arms around her small body and pulling her against him just like they'd been laying in the clearing after making love. Only this time, everything inside of him had changed.

Nova nuzzled the mark on his neck where she'd bitten him twice now. It had healed already but he knew without looking there would be a white scar in a crescent shape that marked him as a mated wolf. He felt Nova's smile against his skin and tightened his hold on her, grinning up at the sky as happiness bubbled inside of him.

"How do you feel?" She spoke softly, continuing to nuzzle at the mark she'd put on him.

“I feel...” He paused, trying to think of the right words, “Like a Crescent wolf.”

Nova giggled, pulling back enough to look down at him, “Well, duh. You’re one of us now.”

He grinned back at her, “I can feel the pack. I can sense them without even trying. It’s like there’s a radar in the back of my mind and I know without even thinking about it exactly where Leo is. I can feel his presence even though he’s not here.”

Nova crinkled her nose, “That’s because he’s your Pack Alpha now. No doubt he felt it the moment your wolf bonded to mine and became part of his pack too. But let’s make a rule, huh? No talking about my brother when we’re naked? It gives me the heebie jeebies.”

Griffin chuckled but tugged her close again, brushing his lips over hers, “Deal.”

“You’re still smiling.” Nova kissed him back between her whispered words.

“I’m happy.” He admitted.

“I can see that.” She rocked her soft body against him and he groaned, fully aware that despite all the mating they’d done tonight that his cock was still more than ready to go another round.

“Don’t be a tease.” He chuckled, smacking her behind lightly before settling his hand there and holding her against him. “I want you. I want you all the time. I’ve been in this state since the moment I ran into you but I was wearing clothes and you were carefully not looking at me.”

“You’ve been suffering with a hard on all this time?” She looked both amused and slightly horrified when he nodded. “I had no idea the mating heat did that. I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t apologize. You weren’t ready and I respect that. It’s just an erection. It wasn’t going to kill me.” He laughed. “I had a few uncomfortable run ins with Bear at the house when I was trying to take the problem in hand, if you will, but nothing that won’t eventually be a funny story.”

Nova buried her face against his neck and laughed, “Oh God, he caught you...”

“Jerking off. Yeah.” Griffin smiled against the top of her head.

“Well, I don’t know that it’s quite the same but, it might make you feel better to know that I tried to scratch the itch as well.”

His eyebrows winged up, “You did?”

“I have a vibrator. He’s never failed me before.” Nova shrugged, “But Bunny just reminded me that my body didn’t want to simply get off, it wanted you.”

“Bunny.” Griffin repeated with a shake of his head, “I think you’re going to need to introduce me to your other boyfriend.”

Nova giggled, “Not a chance.”

“Oh come on, could be fun.” He teased.

“Impossible. I threw him in the garbage when I was mad.”

Griffin laughed with her, “I’d say I’d get you another but the idea of anything other than me making you cry out with pleasure makes my possessive side want to burn down the nearest sex toy shop.”

“I got it on Amazon so don’t do that.” She nuzzled her lips against his again. “And besides, you’re the only thing I need now, mate.”

“Mmm. I like the sound of that.”

“I thought you might.” She nipped at his bottom lip. “You’re smiling again.”

“I think it’s a sight you’re just going to have to get used to, sweetheart. I’m happy. You make me happy. Being a Crescent wolf makes me happy. For so long all I’ve wanted is to find the place I belong and now, I have. It’s here, in Noir, with you. This is my home.”

“Damn right it is.” Nova playfully bopped his nose but then pulled back to cover a yawn. “Speaking of home... we

should head back and get some rest.”

“You’re probably right.”

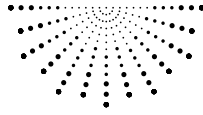
“I’m always right.” She teased as she rolled and jumped to her feet, offering him a hand to help him up from the ground. “Come on mate. Let’s go home.”

He took her hand, looking up at her with a hope he knew he couldn’t hide in his eyes, “Home? Together?”

“Well I’m not letting my mate live in Bear’s bachelor pad so yeah. We’ll get your stuff moved tomorrow but I’d like you to stay with me tonight. If you want?”

“Of course I want.” He pulled himself to his feet and then swept her against him, spinning them slightly, causing Nova to laugh and him to grin even wider, “There’s nothing I want more.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Nova stared out the kitchen window into her backyard, lost in thought. She'd come into the kitchen to get a glass of water but as she waited for the filtered water pitcher to fill, her mind had drifted. It had been doing that a lot lately, really ever since Griffin had moved in with her and they'd made their mating official. Her family had been overjoyed and wanted to throw her a party, wanted to start making wedding preparations for the new moon, but she'd asked them to give Griffin and her some time to settle into some sort of routine together before pushing anything else on them.

The truth was... Nova was happy. She was really and truly happy. She woke up beside Griffin each morning and she smiled. She didn't see Maddox in him at all anymore. He wasn't the brother of the man who had terrorized her family and broken her trust. When she looked at him now, all she saw was her mate, the man that fate had sent to complete her, and her whole body warmed with the knowledge that he was hers.

It was strange, because she'd have sworn to anyone that asked that she'd been happy before Griffin arrived in Noir. She'd loved her life then. She had spent her days helping her siblings, who were the most important people in her life. She'd picked up groceries for Luna when she couldn't get to the store with the twins. She'd visited Maya and babysat baby Carmen. She'd helped Leo more and more, stretching her visions to the breaking point to help him find and contact more wolf packs. Her days had been full of family and fun but



somewhere inside of her, she supposed she'd always known that something was missing.

She'd just never have imagined that something was Griffin Clary.

Being mated to him filled her with a happiness that she couldn't quite put into words. It wasn't just that the mating heat had become something else entirely. It was no longer a simple urge to have their naked flesh rubbing against one another. Their connection was deeper now. She wanted to be with him, to be near him, all the time. She felt more like herself when he was with her, as if his acceptance of all she was, all she had been and all she could be, gave her the freedom to accept her own flaws and failures and move on from them with hope for the future.

He made her stronger, and not just in the emotional sense. He truly made her stronger. Now that they were mated the bond had solidified and she could feel Griffin's strength and power. He could feel hers too, he said, and it flowed freely between them. If she felt weak or fearful, his power rushed towards her to help buoy her and give her whatever she needed.

That day in Leo's kitchen when her visions had come back had only been the beginning. Since then, she'd experienced more changes in her gift. Where before, she always felt as if she had no control over her visions as they swept in whenever and however they wanted, now she could call on them at will. She could also get through an entire day without being overtaken by the most basic vision of a woman dropping a can of tomato sauce at the store or a pack member coming down with a cold. She could only assume that the extra control she had found was because of her bond with Griffin and his constant, steadying presence in her mind due to the link.

Things between them were good. Better than good even. Once she'd stopped fighting the mate bond it had become the simplest thing in her life to accept.

She knew there were still some Crescent Pack members who glared whenever Griffin walked through town but for the

most part, he was being accepted into the pack. Her family had accepted him too, wholeheartedly, which wasn't a surprise considering they'd pushed her towards him from the moment he came to town. Griffin was a Crescent wolf now and despite his last name, a member of the DeLuca family, which meant that even those that might not fully trust him kept their mouths shut and their eyes averted, not daring to go against their Pack Alpha or their Seer who had mated with him.

All in all, things were better than they had been in a long time... which was why Nova knew that the way the hairs on the back of her neck stood up meant something was wrong. She had tried to dismiss the bad feeling in her gut as mere worry. After all, whenever she'd thought she was happy in the past, something had always managed to blow up and ruin everything, hadn't it?

"Hey. Hey!" Griffin's voice jolted her out of her thoughts and Nova blinked. "What're you doing?"

She could only watch as he took the pitcher of water, which was overflowing into the sink and all down her hand and arm. He put it to the side and flipped the tap on the faucet to turn it off. He turned her around to look at him and frowned at whatever he saw on her face.

"Nova? What's wrong?"

"I don't know." She frowned right now.

"Did you have a vision?"

"No." She shook her head, coming back to the moment as he grabbed a dish towel and dried her off. "It wasn't a vision."

"What was it then? You were completely zoned out. I said your name at least three times before I realized you weren't hearing me." He looked worried and she leaned against him.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just tell me what's wrong so I can try to fix it."

She smiled against his shoulder, "I wish I could but I don't know how to explain it."

“Try.” He gripped her arms and set her back from him so he could look into her face again.

She sighed, knowing she may as well explain herself because he wouldn't let it go, not after finding her zoned out in the kitchen with water pouring everywhere while she blankly stared out the kitchen window.

“It wasn't a vision but... it was something else. A bad feeling? Gut instinct maybe? I just feel like something is happening, or about to happen. Something important.”

“But you didn't get a vision?”

She shook her head again, “No. I didn't see anything. It was just a feeling that something bad is going to happen, or already is.”

“To you? To us?” He pressed and Nova rubbed her eyes.

“I don't know. I wish I did.”

“Well I don't like that at all.” Griffin was still frowning and he carefully ran his hands over her face and neck and shoulders, “You're tense. Maybe we should call Leo and tell him we'll come over later, once you've had some time to decompress.”

“He needs me there.” She shook her head.

“And I need you safe and healthy.” Griffin tipped her chin up. “You've been pushing yourself so hard trying to help him get the alliance up and running so he can host this big conference with everyone in one place. I worry you're doing too much.”

“You worry too much.” She turned her head and kissed his palm. “I'm fine.”

“You didn't look fine when I came in to tell you I started the shower for you.”

“You're too good to me.” She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him, rubbing her nose against his chest and taking his now familiar scent inside of herself. “Thank you. I'll just go hop in the shower and then we can go to Leo's place.”

He sighed and kissed the top of her head, “Maybe it’s just the full moon being tomorrow tonight? Maybe it’s messing with your gift.”

“Maybe.”

“Has that ever happened before? Your gift acting differently around the full moon?”

“No.” She pulled back to smile up at him, “But my gift has been acting differently ever since you got to town so who knows, maybe the full moon is just tugging on my magic in a way I don’t recognize and it’s making me imagine the worst.”

Griffin narrowed his eyes, “Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was just a weird feeling and I’m blowing it out of proportion.”

“That would be very unlike you.”

“It would. Wouldn’t it.” She smirked, raising up on tiptoe to brush her lips against his, “But I can think of something else that’s very proportional that could use a good blow... job.”

Griffin tilted his head back and cracked up laughing, “That might be the worst come on ever.”

She laughed with him, “It was funny though.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s what makes me so much fun.” She preened.

“That it does, my mate.” He leaned down and hoisted her off the floor, letting her arms and legs wrap around him, “That it does.”

“Mmm, is that a yes to going back to bed then?”

“I think if you want to get dirty we should take a shower.”

“Mmm, such a smart man.” She nuzzled his neck as he walked them towards the bedroom where the master bath was attached.

Halfway there, a loud knocking came from the back door and Nova groaned. Griffin sighed. Nova tucked her face against his neck and whispered that they should ignore it.

“Can’t. Special wolf hearing, remember? Whoever it is already knows we’re home.”

“Then they should be able to tell we’re busy and go away.” She didn’t bother to keep her voice down, frustrated by the interruption when she’d already been thinking of the delicious ways she could bring her mate to his knees in the shower.

“Nova?” A familiar voice called out from the other side of the door and her eyes went wide with surprise. “Nova, I’m sorry. I know you hate people showing up at your house but I need your help. Please. Come outside.”

“Just a second.” She yelled back, wiggling until Griffin let her slide down his body to her feet. She gave him an apologetic look. “She wouldn’t be here, or sound like that, if it wasn’t an emergency.”

“Sweetheart, I’m well aware that our lives are going to involve interruptions from your family members.” Griffin kissed her forehead. “Now go see what your sister needs and I’ll turn off the shower.”

“Thank you.” Nova squeezed his arm before moving towards the back door, thankful she’d pulled her t-shirt and shorts on from the night before when she went to get the water. Normally if she woke up naked, which happened a lot over the last couple weeks since Griffin moved in, she’d just stroll to her kitchen in her birthday suit and then crawl back into bed with him. Something had told her to get dressed this morning though and again, her instincts had served her well. She opened the door and her eyes widened when she saw the twins having a sword fight with downed tree limbs on top of her picnic table and her sister ignoring them despite their wild shouts, “Uh... hi?”

Luna stood on the back porch, not far from the same spot where she had stood the night she came to convince Nova to give Griffin a chance. That was just about the only thing that matched up with the memory of that night though. Instead of looking poised and in control, the dignified Queen of the Moirae Pack looked absolutely exhausted and as if she’d

dressed in the dark. Nova couldn't help it when she gaped at her sister's appearance.

Never, in all her years, had she seen Luna look so disheveled. Her hair was in a hastily put together wrap with curls springing free all over the place. She wore no makeup and dark circles made her eyes look puffy. Her eyes were tired, lacking the spark they usually had, and Nova immediately sensed the smell of sick on her older sister.

"Oh God... Luna?" She started to reach for her sister but Luna stepped back quickly.

"Don't. Not yet."

"Okay." Nova held her hands up innocently. "What's wrong?"

"I need your help."

"You said that already."

A big presence moved up from behind Nova and she instantly felt a rush of calm energy. It was Griffin's she knew. He was so good at that. He got even a hint of anxiety from her and he sent all of his practiced calm control through the bond to her.

"Hey, Griffin." Luna tried to smile at him but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm glad you're here too."

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"Would you be a dear and watch the boys, just for a little while? I need Nova to do something for me and I can't let the boys hear us talking." She bit her lip, as if she was in pain, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all. It would be a pleasure to hang out with them for a bit." He glanced to Nova, "Are you two going inside or do you need the backyard?"

"She prefers we don't come inside the house so you could take the boys on a little hike maybe?" Luna seemed to wince again and touched her head. She groaned and spun to her children suddenly, "Kobe! Kyler! Get off your Aunt Nova's table right now!"

“But Mom!” They both whined in unison.

“They’re fine.” Nova reassured her oldest sister. “And you can come in. The boys will be fine in the backyard with Griffin.”

Luna looked surprised, “Are you sure?”

“I have better control of my visions now than I used to so... yeah, come on in.” She moved aside and Luna slipped past with a grateful smile.

Griffin waited until Luna had turned the corner to the living room and was out of sight before he whispered, “She doesn’t look so good.”

“I know.” Nova frowned.

“You think this has something to do with that bad feeling of yours?”

“I think that has a better chance of being the source of the bad feeling.” She snorted, pointing out the door to where the twin boys were now jumping dangerously from one tabletop to the next, sticks still in hand. “Sorry you’re on twin terror duty. I’ll try to make it quick.”

“No rush. I like kids and I’d like a chance to get to know your nephews.”

“You say that now.” Nova smirked but tilted her head, “I didn’t know you were a kid person.”

“There’s a lot about me you still don’t know but I think the talk about kids should probably wait until your sister isn’t in our living room looking like she might keel over and your nephews aren’t on the verge of putting one another’s eyes out.” Griffin leaned down and kissed her softly. “Proud of you for letting her in by the way.”

“Thank you.” She flushed before shoving him out the door, “Keep them from blowing anything up Uncle Griffin.”

He grinned back at her and she shut the door before she changed her mind and went running out after him. He would be okay. Right? She didn’t miss the irony that just a few weeks ago she’d have been worried about leaving her nephews in

Griffin Clary's care. Now she only worried the little terrorists she called family would someone be a danger to her mate.

She turned and went into the living room to find Luna sitting on the couch, arms wrapped around her middle and looking chalky. Griffin was right. She didn't look good.

"Lu?" Nova pushed aside a magazine that was left on the coffee table and sat in front of her. "What's going on?"

"I've been sick for a few days. I thought it was just a stomach bug or something like that but, we don't normally get those little human viruses and if we do our bodies fight them off fairly quickly." Luna looked like she might be sick right there on the carpet and Nova frowned. "But this morning I woke up and I have this godawful pain in my stomach, like something or someone is stabbing me over and over again."

Nova pursed her lips, "And Michael?"

"It's not the mate bond." Luna spoke quickly. "Michael is fine. Up and out of bed for his morning run and then off to the lodge for a meeting. I spoke to him on the phone before I came here. He feels fine."

"And what does he think is wrong with you?" Nova asked and immediately groaned when her sister glanced away. "You didn't tell him you felt like you were dying?"

"I didn't want to worry him."

"So instead of going to a healer, you came to me? Why?"

"Leo told us about the vision you had for him and Darius. I want you to do one for me."

Nova balked, "No. No way. I don't want to look into your future just to find out if you're really dying. That's... No way, Luna."

"Nova. Please. I have two boys to think about. I need to know what this is and what's coming. Please. I am begging you. Try to see my future."

Nova scowled at the request but her heart ached and she knew there was no way she could deny her sister. Luna looked pale and sickly. She was clearly in pain and it was costing her



a lot to come here and ask Nova for this. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what Nova would see but for the good of her family, she'd come anyway. Nova blew out a rough breath and then held out her hands.

"Take my hands and hold on. It seems to work better with skin to skin contact these days." She explained as Luna gripped her hands tightly. "It worked better with Griffin beside me too. Maybe I should..."

"No. I don't want the boys to be left alone." Luna's eyes looked watery with unshed tears. "Just do it. Whatever you see, I need to know."

Nova swallowed hard, realizing her sister was absolutely terrified. She didn't want the boys to be alone. Not just right now either. She was worried something was truly wrong with her and she'd be leaving all of them, including her young sons, far too early.

"Okay. Here goes." Nova gripped her oldest sister's hands and closed her eyes.

She let the calmness that Griffin provided through the bond sink inside of her and then she reached out inside her mind for Nova's future, for the path that she was walking, and then further, to see where it was going. Just like in the vision of Leo's future, Nova wasn't a ghostly spectator. She was in the vision, right there with her sister and her whole family as they gathered together. There was crying but it wasn't sad. It was happy. People were hugging and slapping Michael on the back and somewhere nearby, a baby cried. Nova reached for Griffin and as easily as that, she was pulled backwards to the present and out of the vision.

Nova opened her eyes and had to blink a few times, realizing they were watery with tears.

"What is it?" Luna still gripped her hands.

"You're not dying." Nova wiped at her cheeks, a smile breaking onto her face as she watched confusion color her older sister's face. "You're pregnant."

"No." Luna gasped and Nova laughed.

“Yes.”

“That’s... not possible.”

“Honey, I’ve seen you with your mate. We both know it certainly is.”

Luna rolled her eyes pulling her hands away, “Not that. I just mean... it’s been years since the boys were born and no matter if we tried or didn’t, I’ve never gotten pregnant again. I guess I just thought we were done and heaven knows the boys are more than enough for me to handle.”

“It seems like fate’s decided that now’s the time because you’re definitely pregnant.”

“But I wasn’t sick like this with the boys. I had a few aches and pains but... nothing like this.”

Nova gave her sister a knowing look, “That’s because they were boys and this baby isn’t.”

“A girl?” Luna gasped again.

“Remember how sick both Zoey and Maya were with their girls? Those pregnancies were hard and they weren’t carrying twins like you are.”

Luna’s eyes went wide, “No.”

“Yes.”

“No.” She looked like she was going to cry again and Nova held back a laugh.

“Twin girls this time.” She smirked, “Congratulations?”

Luna laughed too. She laughed so hard she started crying. And Nova laughed with her. They hugged and held onto one another and Nova couldn’t stop smiling. She was going to have two more nieces very soon.

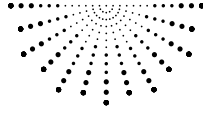
This couldn’t have been the source of the bad feeling she’d had earlier. It just couldn’t. This was good news. She pulled away from her sister and wiped the happy tears from her cheeks.

“We should go make sure your boys haven’t hog tied and strung up my mate.”

Luna laughed again, “I would say that maybe since Maya and I are both knocked up again, it’s possible after this full moon you might be joining us in this condition, but not if you don’t get that man away from my kids. They’re liable to convince him to never reproduce.”

Nova grinned. She was more certain than ever that nothing could convince Griffin not to live their life to the fullest. He’d said he wanted a home, a mate and a family. She had given him all of that but she could still give him more. She could make him a father and someday, she would.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Griffin waved as he watched Luna and her sons disappear into the tree line, headed back towards Moirae land.

Nova had walked her sister out of the house a few minutes ago and he had been happy to see that Luna looked much less frightened than she had when she arrived. He hadn't asked and Luna hadn't shared what she and Nova had seen or discussed. Instead she'd thanked him for looking after the boys and after he'd assured her it had been his pleasure, they'd said goodbye and promised to visit again soon, once Luna was feeling better.

"Thank you." Nova slid her arms around him once they were gone and he looked down at her curiously.

"For what?"

"Keeping Luna's kids alive while we were inside. I'm aware it's a much tougher job than most people realize."

Griffin chuckled, wrapping her in his arms, "They're not that bad. They're just boys."

"Shifter boys with a lot of energy and no sense of self preservation." She deadpanned and he shook his head.

"I think that's just part of being a kid. Not that I would know. I don't really remember a time when I got to just be a kid, not after what Maddox did."

Nova winced, "I'm sorry. I didn't think about being around them bringing up bad memories for you."

“No, it’s okay. Hanging out with them was a nice reminder that I have a new life here, a new family, and this time I’m going to enjoy every single second of it.”

“I like the sound of that.” Nova tiptoed up and brushed their lips together.

“Speaking of, I wasn’t trying to listen in, and God knows with those boys being loud as a parade I couldn’t, but I think I felt your emotions through the bond. You seemed... surprised but also... delighted, maybe?”

“Wow. You felt that?”

He nodded.

“This whole bond thing is a little weird.” Nova giggled. “I forget you can sense my moods.”

“Should come in handy so I’ll always know when you’re mad at me though.” He grinned before raising an eyebrow, “So, are you allowed to tell me what’s going on with Luna? She looked a little better when she left. Still sickly, but not so worried.”

“If I tell you, then you have to promise to keep it secret.” Nova smiled up at him.

“Scouts honor.”

“She thought she was sick. She was scared it was something horrible and asked me to look into her future.”

“And you were able to?”

“Yeah. Just like with Leo and Darius. I held her hand and let my mind search and all of a sudden it was there, as clear and bright as if it was happening right in front of me.”

“So what did you see?” He tilted his head curiously.

“She’s not sick.” Nova snorted, “Well, she is, but only because she’s pregnant again.”

“Oh wow.” Griffin grinned. “She’s pregnant?”

“Yep. With twins again. Girls this time.”

His eyes went wide, “Twin girls? A matching set just like the boys. That’s going to be...”

“Fun to watch?” Nova offered when he trailed off and he chuckled.

“I was going to say a blessing.”

She rolled her eyes, “Oh don’t tell me you’re one of those that wants a big family with a dozen kids.”

“I’d settle for four or five.” He grinned and pulled her closer, “I told you. I like kids.”

“We are not having four or five children.” She laughed, trying to squirm away from him.

“We’ll see about that.” He swung her up and over his shoulder and she squealed with laughter, “I think we should get started right away.”

“Griffin!” She smacked his ass playfully, “Put me down you big brute!”

He bit her thigh where it dangled close to his chin and she screamed again. He laughed as he carried her inside. She was wiggling so much he was certain he’d drop her if he tried to get them all the way to the bed so instead he changed tactics and flipped her back over onto the edge of the kitchen table.

“Rude.” Nova huffed, shaking her locs out of her face.

“Let me make it up to you.” He grinned, lifting her up enough to get a hand into her shorts and tug them down her legs before letting her drop back to the table, now naked from the waist down. “Mmm, you smell so good.”

“Griffin.” She hissed his name when he spread her legs and went to his knees in front of her. “I haven’t even showered yet.”

“You think that’s going to deter me?” He growled against her thigh, kissing the spot where he’d nipped at her. “You smell like us and it’s making my mouth water. I bet I can still taste us too. Making you come last night, spilling my seed inside you, makes me wonder if you might already have one of our babes growing inside you.”

He licked from her thigh to the crease between her legs and hummed. Nova gasped and arched her body. She might be protesting with her mouth but she wanted this just as much as he did. God, he wondered if there would ever come a day in their life that he wasn't absolutely ravenous to taste her and touch her and be inside of her.

"Griffin." she gasped when he put his mouth on and he groaned.

"You can try to convince me this isn't what you want but sweetheart, you're so damn wet. You're dripping for me. You love me talking about making you come and putting a baby inside you."

He glanced up, waiting for some smartass remark or denial but Nova only bit into her bottom lip and shook her head. He smiled. He was right and they both knew it. Seeing her like this, spread open for him, eyes closed and face flushed with pleasure, filled him with so much love that he almost told her right then and there.

Instead, he put his mouth back on her, deciding to show her instead.

He used his lips and tongue to kiss and suck on her. He told her he loved her without saying a word. The truth was, he'd loved her since that morning they'd walked through the woods together. He had fallen in love with her strength, with her sense of humor, with her beauty. Every day since he'd only fallen further under her spell but he didn't think now was the time to tell her that. She had tried to run from him once already. Tried to push him away. He didn't want to push her too hard and fast and spook her, not when they'd finally sealed the bond and were starting to build their life together.

Someday soon he would tell her and he hoped that she would admit she felt the same, but for now, this would be enough.

He licked and tasted his mate, her scent driving his wolf crazy and making his cock ache but he refused to rush this. He wanted to feel her come apart on his tongue. He wanted to drink in her orgasm and take more of her inside of him. He

wanted to drive her as crazy as she drove him so he wrapped his arms around her thighs, lifting slightly to give him a better angle and slid his tongue in and out of, teasing her hole and making her shudder against him.

“Griff...” She cried out his name and he heard her palms smack against the top of the table, holding herself steady for him.

He redoubled his efforts to make her come apart. He loved it when she screamed his name in ecstasy. He loved it even more when she was so lost in passion that she couldn't manage both syllables. The nickname squeezed at his heart and had him gripping her more tightly, finding the little ball of nerves at the apex of her slit and sucking hard.

“Fuck!” Nova's voice was a full out yell this time and he smiled against her pussy as he continued to suck and lick at her clit. He moved one of his hands from her thigh to between her legs. She was so wet for him, his thick fingers slid in easily and her body tightened around him as he began to fuck in and out of her with one digit and then two. “Fuck, Griff. Yes. Yes!”

He growled as her body rippled around him. She was close. So close. He had learned the signs over the last few weeks. He knew that just before she came she held her breath, as if clinging to the moment before the tidal wave of her orgasm washed over her. Her breath hitched and he curled his fingers inside of her, finding that sweet spot that always made her come apart and she squeaked, her hips bucking, as he stroked her g-spot and sucked her clit at the same time.

Nova erupted around him, shuddering so violently he had to squeeze her thigh hard enough to likely leave bruises to keep her from sliding off the tabletop. She arched and rolled her hips as he continued to stroke her through her orgasm. Her head dropped back and she cried his name towards the heavens and he couldn't wait a single moment longer.

Without any warning he pulled his hand from her and rose to his feet. He shoved his pants to his ankles and wrapped her loose limbs around him. Even as she was regaining her breath



from the power of her orgasm, he drove into her and forced her to scream out his name one more time.

“Again.” He growled, leaning forward to get the best angle and drive deep. Her body was still pulsating from her first orgasm. He could feel her pulling at him and his cock twitched, greedy for his own release. “Give me another, Nova.”

“Griffin.” She whined as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down for a kiss.

She moaned into his mouth and he growled as she licked at him, no doubt tasting herself on his tongue. He wrapped her more tightly in his arms and began short, hard thrusts that didn’t require him to pull back from the kiss. Nova panted against his mouth, biting at his lips and sucking on his tongue until they both ran out of air and she had to turn her head to suck in a gasp.

“Come for me again.” He demanded as soon as he had enough air in his own lungs.

“Make me.” She shot back at him, leaning back enough to use her arms as leverage so she could roll her hips against him, her ankles locked against his ass, as she used her lower body strength to force him deeper and faster.

“Fuck. Nova.” He groaned as he realized he’d lost complete control of the encounter when her lips curled upward in a dare.

“Come inside me. That’s what you want. Fill me up, Griffin. Put your seed so deep inside me that I’ll never be without you again. You want to put a baby in me? Do it. Fucking do it.”

He growled as he slammed into her harder, going as deep as her body would let him. His teeth elongated as his wolf stretched for the surface and he couldn’t keep his animal side at bay. He snapped his head forward and latched onto Nova’s shoulder, in the same spot where he’d already marked her and when he bit her, Nova cried out and came again.

This time, he went with her.

His body pulsed and his cock emptied into her. He kept thrusting, his animal roaring with the urge to breed with her. He came and then he kept going deep, pushing more of him into her, letting her body convulse around him and pull him in even further.

He had no idea how long it lasted. No idea how they didn't break the table with their rough encounter. But when he finally came back to himself he was leaning over Nova as she lay back on the table, his face buried in her neck and her arms wrapped tightly around him.

His cock had softened enough to slip from her body and he could feel the mixture of his seed and her wetness between them. She was still breathing hard and he sucked in a deep breath to try and steady himself. Their sweaty skin slid against one another but neither of them made a move to get up and clean themselves.

Griffin marveled at the absolute perfection of his mate. She was everything he needed. She was everything he wanted. She knew exactly how to push his buttons and he didn't mind in the least when she took control and demanded he give her what she wanted in return.

They'd made love more times than he could count since the night they sealed the bond but this had been the wildest, roughest, most craven experience yet.

He pulled back enough to look down at her, "You okay?"

"Mmm." she hummed, her lids heavy and her mouth swollen, "Better than. That was..."

"Crazy." He chuckled, kissing the spot on her shoulder that had already healed, licking away the dried blood.

"It was definitely that but I enjoyed myself immensely." Nova loosened her hold on his neck, sliding her hands to his cheeks. "I hope you did too."

"You know I did." He propped himself up on one elbow and moved his free hand to her chest, just over her head, "You can feel it, can't you? Right here?"

She smiled up at him and nodded, “I think that’s why it was so intense. I could feel how much you wanted me, how much you wanted to make me feel good. And you did. Lordy, Griff. You did.”

He smiled back at her, “You told me to put a baby in you.”

“Oh God. I did, didn’t I?” She laughed, “That was definitely your thoughts and emotions pushing through the bond.”

“Are you saying you don’t want it?”

“I do.” She stroked his cheek gently when he furrowed his brow. “Of course I do. I want us to have a family of our own. I want to give you that. But the bond is still so new and I like that it’s just you and me right now. We couldn’t have wild, crazy sex on the kitchen table if we had kids running around.”

“That’s a valid point.”

She smirked, “If I end up pregnant, then we’ll know it’s fate and if I don’t, then we’ll know the same thing. It’ll happen for us and when it does, it’ll be the perfect time and exactly what we both want and need. For now, can we just focus on learning to be with one another and be what each other needs?”

“Of course.” He leaned down and kissed her softly. “Of course, sweetheart.”

“And can we agree on three kids, max?” She grinned again and he laughed.

“That’s not a compromise I’m willing to make quite yet.” He nipped at her bottom lip which only made her laugh with him.

They lay there together, kissing softly and talking about the future for a long time. Griffin knew they needed to get up. They had things to do. They had places to be. But he was enjoying simply holding Nova in his arms and thinking about their future together.

She was the one that finally groaned and banged her head into the table, “We have to get cleaned up.”

“I know.” He sighed.

“I’m definitely going to need that shower now.”

“Me too.”

Nova’s eyes twinkled, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

His cock twitched, coming back to life, “Conserve water by showering together?”

“It’s like you read my mind.” Nova wrapped her limbs around him again and laughed. “Carry me?”

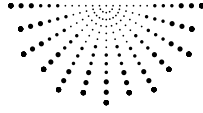
“As if you could convince me to let you go.” He snorted, getting his arms around her and lifting her up.

He got tripped up in his pants and underwear and nearly dropped her. She didn’t let go. Only laughed and clung to him more tightly. Eventually Griffin righted them and fully nude and covered in their own juices, he carried his mate to the shower to wash her off, with every intention of getting her dirty again in the process.

All the while, he couldn’t stop smiling. Because this was the life he had always longed for. The life where he didn’t have to worry about his past, didn’t have to think about all the bad things that lay behind him. From now on all he had to do was hold his mate, love her and keep her close, and together they could plan for the future.

One that seemed brighter than it had any right to, now that he’d found her.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Nova laughed as Griffin nuzzled her neck, finding the ticklish spot behind her ear as she finished applying a dab of lipstick, “Don’t even think about it.”

She could feel his answering smile against her neck, “Think about what?”

“You know exactly what. I had to text and postpone going over to Leo’s once today already because of your insatiable appetite. It’s not going to work this time. We’re supposed to be at Leo’s to discuss the alliance in ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes. Plenty of time.”

Nova laughed, loudly, and met Griffin’s eyes in the mirror as he settled his chin on her shoulder, “Not even close.”

“You’re right.” He chuckled, kissing her neck again.

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? I’m always right.”

His teeth nipped her skin, “I bet I could prove you wrong though. My head between your legs? You loved that. I bet I can make you scream my name in less than ten.”

Nova smoothed the lipstick she’d just applied with a finger, “While I’d delight in letting you do just that, I don’t think we should show up to my brother’s house with the smell of sex on us.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” He chuckled and she pretended to be annoyed by trying to hide her smile.

“There may be other Pack Alpha’s there.” Nova sighed and turned in Griffin’s arms until they were face to face. “And as much as I love having your scent all over me, and mine on you, I don’t want to accidentally insult some random pack just looking for a reason to back out of Leo’s Pack Alliance.”

Griffin leaned his forehead against hers, “Good point. Again.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, leaning up to brush her lips over his.

“Mmm.” He kissed her softly and then pulled back, “Come on then. If I can’t ravish you again, we may as well get going.”

Nova giggled but followed him out of the bathroom. They did need to get going. She didn’t want to be late. Leo hadn’t seemed happy when she texted earlier in the day to say they weren’t going to make it for the morning arrivals. He’d wanted her with him to welcome the Pack Alpha’s who had agreed to meet with him and she’d felt bad about putting him off. She’d just have to make up for it by being as charming and helpful as possible tonight with the late arrivals.

Leo hadn’t explicitly said that he wanted her there to know if she saw any visions from their guests but he didn’t have to. She knew he relied on her visions. He needed her gift and she wanted to be there to help him and her pack.

Griffin was going with her because, since they’d bonded, she’d realized that her gift worked better when he was nearby. She couldn’t explain why. She didn’t know what it was about the mate bond, about their connection, that strengthened her gift, but it did. She was actually hoping that with all of the new connections Leo was making with these packs that she might find another Seer and be able to talk to someone who had experienced the things she had.

After slipping her shoes on, she let Griffin hold the door for her and then waited for him on the porch. He slid his hand into hers and she smiled as their fingers automatically laced together. He liked holding hands, liked to feel the connection between them pulsate when they were skin to skin. Nova had

never been big on touch since it usually brought visions but with him, it soothed her and gave her strength.

They walked through town like that, holding hands and waving or speaking to other pack members as they passed. She promised Tina that she'd stop by on their way back to pick up some vegetables for the dinner she wanted to make. Griffin asked Ray about the different kinds of peppers and how he grew them so hot. They were still smiling and holding hands as they moved on but once they neared her brother's house Nova's senses went on high alert and her wolf stirred beneath her skin.

After their morning of lovemaking, she'd completely forgotten about the bad feeling she'd woken up with. It had faded away and she'd thought maybe she was just imagining the worst because it's what she'd grown up expecting. But now, in a split second, the feeling was back and her stomach twisted with anxiety.

She glanced at Griffin, "Do you feel that too?"

"Tension." He nodded. "So thick you could cut it with a knife."

Nova frowned, "I don't know what's happening but clearly Leo is annoyed and it's bleeding out to the pack."

"Maybe we should come back later?"

"No." She shook her head. "We need to find out what's happening. Maybe one of the other Alpha's showed up early and I can help settle things down."

"It could be dangerous." Griffin frowned but Nova only shook her head.

"Our family is in there."

"You're right." He winced but nodded, "You're right. You're always right. Come on, I'll go in first just in case..."

He trailed off but Nova didn't need him to elaborate. Her mate wanted to protect her. He wanted to be first through the door and though her Alpha side wanted her to remind him that she could take care of herself, she bit her lip and nodded her

agreement. It was sweet that he wanted to put himself in front of whatever trouble might be on the other side of the door and her wolf was only so on edge because of the tension Leo was radiating through the pack connection.

Griffin took her hand again, “Let’s see what’s going on.”

Nova let him knock on the door and then open it without waiting for a response. She’d learned a long time ago not to walk into the home Leo shared with Darius unannounced unless she wanted to find them in a compromising position. This was different though since they were expected and since they knew their Pack Alpha wasn’t alone inside.

“Hey, we...” Griffin was clearly trying to keep his tone light as he pushed into the room but he faltered in the doorway, going stock still, and Nova ran smack into his backside when he didn’t budge.

Nova furrowed her brow as she stepped around him, trying to see what had brought him up short. She glanced up at her mate but he didn’t look down at her. She wasn’t even sure he blinked. She turned her gaze from him to the room, taking in first Leo’s tense stance near the bookshelf and then the way Darius was poised on the edge of a chair, putting himself between his mate and their guests but doing so in a way that might have seemed casual if the entire room wasn’t clogged with Alpha testosterone, anger and frustration.

She turned her eyes to the men that sat on the couch and felt the air rush out of her as if she’d been punched in the stomach.

The man sitting in the middle was a relative of Griffin. He had to be. Because just like she’d first looked at Griffin and only seen Maddox, she looked at this man now and saw the same thing. It wasn’t even that he looked more like Maddox than he did Griffin. He had Griffin’s eye color and build, he had the softer, rounder face, but that was the only thing soft about him because behind those eyes wasn’t the warmth and empathy her mate carried but the cold, psychotic gleam that was all Maddox.



She swallowed down the rush of terror and darted her gaze back to her brother, looking for an explanation. When he didn't immediately speak she pursed her lips. A glance at Darius told her he was too busy managing whatever conversation he and Leo were having through their mate bond to fill her right now. She straightened her shoulders and stared at the man on the couch.

"I'm Nova DeLuca, the Pack Alpha's sister and a princess of the Crescent Pack. Who are you and why are you here?"

The man on the couch might have smiled but all Nova could see were his bared teeth, "A princess? Nice. Never let it be said that we Clary men aren't attracted to a powerful female."

"Your name." Nova demanded, her voice steady despite the confirmation that this man was related to the psycho who had murdered her parents... and by default her mate as well.

"His name is Tyrell." Leo finally spoke up, his voice carefully neutral, "He's the Alpha of the Clariden Pack."

Nova sucked in a quick gasp of air. She'd already known that much, hadn't she? Still, hearing the words aloud, spoken here of all places, made her feel sick to her stomach. Griffin had told her about Tyrell but never in a million years could she have imagined being face to face with the man himself and in Leo's living room no less.

He made a teeth sucking sound and leaned forward on the couch to point a finger at Griffin, "There's also the added detail that I'm *his* half-brother and man, I am so happy to have finally found him. Been looking for him a long... long, time."

A chill went down Nova's spine at the threat laced in every word but she held herself straight and didn't shrink back. She gripped Griffin's hand still and she squeezed it, trying to reassure him, trying to send it through their bond. But he didn't budge, didn't even blink, just continued to stand stock still as if he'd been turned to stone.

The bond was too new, dammit. She couldn't reach into his mind yet. She couldn't talk to him the way that Leo and Darius

could talk to each other without saying a word. Clearly he was in shock but she didn't know how to make him snap out of it without showing weakness in front of these strangers and that was the last thing she wanted for her mate.

“You never did actually tell us how you tracked him here.” Leo's tone would have seemed civil, even moderately polite to a stranger, but Nova could tell when he was gritting his teeth and grinding his molars.

“Didn't I?” Tyrell sat back on the couch again, as if getting comfortable, and the men to the left and right of him, men that Nova realized must be Enforcers of his own, shifted slightly to give him more room. “Well, see, that's the thing. You helped me find him.”

“Me?” Leo looked skeptical.

“Uh-huh.” Tyrell sneered proudly, “Every pack in the country has slowly been getting word about one of the old bloodlines down here in Louisiana being attacked. Their Alpha challenged and killed. The new Alpha only surviving because he made a run for it, leaving his dear little sisters behind.”

Nova wanted to scream. That wasn't how it had happened. She snapped her gaze to Leo to see that his grip on the bookcase was making his knuckles blanch with color. She grit her teeth and swallowed her protest when she realized that Tyrell was trying to bait them. Her brother was too smart to fall for it though, and so was she.

“Gossips kept talking about how once the usurper was dead the True Alpha took power and made some changes. Been trying to get all the packs to work together, to trust and communicate. Strange stories but...” Tyrell shrugged as if the mere idea blew his mind, “Turns out they were true. I heard about your little meeting of the minds for a bunch of the packs that've agreed to join your little alliance and I thought to myself... you know, that attack story sounds awfully familiar. See, Maddox tried something similar in our pack. Didn't quite succeed though. We were going to put him down but he slipped away in the middle of the night before we could make him pay for what he'd done.”

Tyrell was staring at Griffin now and the pure hatred etched onto his features made Nova want to put herself in front of her mate. She wanted to protect him just as he'd wanted to protect her by entering the house first. It was clear that Tyrell still wanted to punish Griffin for Maddox's sins and she wouldn't allow that to happen.

"So you just decided to show up here out of the blue, without any attempt at communication, because you heard some rumor about an attack that happened more than half a dozen years ago?" Darius spoke up this time, his eye roll contained but still very much clear in his voice.

"Nah." Tyrell smirked back at him. "I wouldn't have bothered with the trip if that was all. I sent a scout ahead to check it out and wouldn't you know, they called home to report that the name Maddox Clary was well-known in these parts but even more intriguing, they told me they'd seen Griffin, my only living blood relative, the last of the Clary line, except for myself of course, right here in little bitty Noir, Louisiana too. I just had to come and see it for myself."

"Well, you've seen him. Now you can go."

"Sure thing." Tyrell pushed to his feet suddenly and everyone in the room shifted in response.

Darius was standing in a split second, his big body positioned between Leo and the intruding Alpha. Nova stepped in front of Griffin too since he still hadn't moved. Tyrell's Enforcers flanked him, exchanging a look when their leader gave only the smallest shake of his head.

"I understand why you wouldn't want us here, what with everything Maddox did to you and yours." Tyrell spoke directly to Leo, "So I'll just take Griffin off your hands and you'll never need to think about the Clary name again."

Nova growled. Her wolf snarled. She knew her eyes had shifted gold and she could feel her teeth beginning to elongate into fangs.

There was no way this man was taking her mate away from her. None. She'd rip his throat out before he so much as

touched a hair on Griffin's head.

"Nova." Leo hissed her name and her wolf cringed back inside of her. "Stand down."

Her wolf whimpered and Nova shook with a fury the likes of which she had never known. He had used his Alpha voice on her. He had ordered her and when a Pack Alpha gave a command in that tone of voice, a member of his pack couldn't disobey. Her wolf went still and quiet, thoroughly chastised, even as she leveled a glare at her brother that promised she wouldn't forget this betrayal.

Leo turned back to the other Alpha, his voice calm and controlled again, "I'm sorry but that's not possible."

Tyrell quirked an eyebrow, "Which part?"

"You can't take Griffin."

"He's my brother."

"He may be your half-brother, as you said, but as an Alpha in your own right I shouldn't have to tell you that he isn't one of your wolves anymore. You should be able to sense it, to smell it on him. He's not yours. He's one of mine."

Tyrell snorted. "I don't care if he has that bitch's scent all over him. He's my blood."

"And he's my wolf. He's a Crescent wolf now and he's not going anywhere with you." Leo raised his voice, power booming through the room as he made his position abundantly clear.

Tyrell snarled, his head whipping back towards where Griffin stood, Nova just in front of him, "You all called me the bastard but you're the ones that lie and deceive. I should've known you'd try something like this eventually. You're just like your brother. Looking for safety between some bitch's legs instead of fighting your own battles."

"Careful." Darius had moved so quickly Nova hadn't even registered it but he now stood beside her, shoulder to shoulder, and glared at Tyrell. "That's a Crescent wolf you're speaking to, in the Crescent Pack Alpha's home, and if you call our

sister a bitch again, I'm going to be forced to rip your head off the same way I did Maddox."

Tyrell did that teeth sucking thing again, narrowing his eyes as he looked from Darius to Griffin and back again, "So you're the one that did the deed and took Maddox out of this world?"

"I am." Darius confirmed without so much as blinking.

"Well, I guess I owe you one for dealing with that particular problem for me." Tyrell sniffed, "So we're going to go now."

"I think that's a damn good idea." Leo had moved too, standing on the other side of Darius.

"Come on." Tyrell motioned to his Enforcers, "Seems we've overstayed our welcome."

Darius moved aside, stepping to the left, towards Leo, to give them space to move out the door. Nova stepped to the right, careful to keep herself between Griffin and the others. Tyrell reached for the door and then seemed to reconsider. He turned back to face them and there was nothing but cold hatred in his eyes again.

"If you think I'm just going to go home and let you live here with them, you're dumber than I imagined little brother. You can hide behind them now but not forever and when you least expect it, I'm going to be there to give you exactly what you deserve."

Nova's fists clenched but before she could act on the instinct to punch this asshole in the face, Darius growled. It was the meanest, deadliest sound she'd ever heard. It made her own wolf shrink even further down inside of her and it must have gotten through even Tyrell's dense skull because he held his hands up innocently.

"We're going."

"See that you do." Leo snapped. "Because you aren't welcome in Crescent territory anymore and if we see you trespassing on our lands again, you'll be dealt with accordingly."

Tyrell smirked and pushed out the door, his Enforcers a step behind him. The door was left hanging open behind them but nobody made a move for it. Nova was vaguely aware of Leo telling Darius to gather the Enforcers and make sure Tyrell and his people got out of their territory without making any pitstops. He said something about going to spread the word to be on the lookout for strangers within the pack. She understood why Leo had to do it and why Darius had to go too but she was more worried about her mate who had stayed mute and frozen throughout the entire encounter.

“Griffin? Griff? Honey?” She reached up and pressed his face between her hands, pulling his head down so he had to look at her. His eyes weren’t quite vacant but they were distant and glassy. She swallowed the urge to panic and kept her voice calm, “Can you hear me? Are you okay? Griffin, honey, I need to know if you’re okay.”

When he gave a small shake of his head, her heart felt like it finally started back up again. It was something. Even if it hurt, it was a response. He was still in there, just scared and panicked.

“It’s okay.” Nova kept her hold on his voice and willed him to open the bond enough to take some of her warmth, her comfort, her love. Because that was what she’d realized when she thought someone might try to take him from her. She loved this man. Loved him fiercely and she wouldn’t lose him. She couldn’t. She’d already lost too many people she loved in this life. “They’re gone now.”

Griffin shook his head again but she hushed him softly.

“They’re gone. Darius is making sure of it. They’re leaving and whatever they did to you in the past, they can’t hurt you anymore. Do you hear me? He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Griffin’s muscles trembled beneath her hands and she watched his Adam’s Apple bob as he swallowed hard. He wet his lips with his tongue. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and then, only once he had torn his gaze from her and was staring at the floor again, did he finally speak.

“You’re wrong. You don’t know how wrong you are. I spent so long running from him and I thought I was safe here but I was wrong. I was wrong and now I’ve put you and your family in danger.”

“No.”

“Yes.” His voice was clipped, “Maddox may have murdered your parents but I’m going to be the reason Tyrell comes after the rest of you. I can’t have that. I can’t let him hurt you or our family. I have to go with him.”

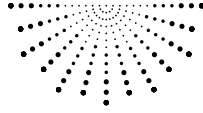
“No.” Nova whispered as horror sank in past her concern.  
“No.”

“It’s the only option. I’m so sorry, Nova. I should’ve gotten back on that bus the first day I got here and never looked back. I have to go.”

Nova’s hands slipped away as Griffin turned and walked out the door. She watched him with her mouth gaping open. He was walking away from her? After everything they’d been through, after everything they’d promised one another, he was just going to give up and walk away as soon as things got hard?

Oh, hell no. That wasn’t happening. Not today and not while she still had breath in her lungs.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Griffin was in a daze. He knew that Nova was beside him, talking to him, but all he could think was that he had to get as far away from her as possible. He had to run again, just like he'd been running for most of his life. He would have to leave this home that he had finally found and made for himself, leave the family he had only begun to think of as his own, in order to keep them safe.

It was the only way.

He'd been certain when he walked into Darius and Leo's house that he was seeing things. He'd thought it was a nightmare, and it was, but he wasn't asleep. This was really happening. Tyrell was really here. He'd found Griffin, tracked him down, and now he would fulfill the promise he had made all those years ago and kill him.

But if he knew Tyrell, it wouldn't just be Griffin that he went after.

He would want to inflict as much pain, deliver as much torture as he could before he landed the final blow. He would come for Nova. He'd made that clear. But he would also be coming for Leo and Darius since they had stood with Griffin, stood against him. He had no illusions that his half-brother was any less of a power-hungry psychopath than Maddox had been and he'd made it clear from the moment he took over the Clariden Pack that he was only leaving Griffin alive so that he could punish him and when he tired of that, when his value waned, he would end him and ensure that Tyrell's was the only Clary bloodline left so nobody could ever claim his throne.



It didn't matter that Griffin had never wanted to lead a pack. He had never wanted power. Not like Maddox. He'd only ever wanted a quiet life where he could live comfortably, to find his mate and create a family, one that honored and cherished one another and would never, ever consider murder a valid option for claiming more than they had.

He'd found all of that here but now Tyrell had come to take it all away and there was only one thing left for Griffin to do.

He had to run again.

"Griffin." Nova snapped, moving in front of him as he rushed into their home to collect his things. "Griffin, stop."

"I can't." He stepped around her.

"You have to. You have to stop and talk to me. Tell me what you think is going to happen. Tell me why you think you have to leave."

"I don't think it, Nova. I know it. He's going to hurt you."

She scowled at him, "He can try but he won't succeed."

"You don't know him." He shook his head as he opened the closet and found the weathered bag that he'd been toting around for longer than he could remember. He tossed it on the bed and went to the dresser to start pulling out his socks and underwear. "He doesn't play fair. He won't issue a challenge and go through the proper channels. He'll take what he wants and he'll hurt or kill anyone who gets in his way."

"So he's a lot like Maddox then." Nova shrugged, "We dealt with him and we'll deal with Tyrell too."

"Maddox only wanted the power of a Pack Alpha. Tyrell *is* a Pack Alpha. He's the firstborn. He was always the True Alpha whether my father saw him as a bastard or not."

"We have a True Alpha too in case you've forgotten." Nova countered, pulling clothes out of his bag as quickly as he could toss them in.

"Leo will die." Griffin stopped and stared at her, trying to convey that he understood how much that would hurt her.

“Leo will die because he’s a good man. He won’t cheat. He won’t stoop to Ty’s level. He’ll be honorable in a fight and it will get him killed. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let him hurt any of you.”

“You need to have more faith in your Pack Alpha.” Nova frowned.

“Nova.” He ripped his socks out of her hand and threw them on the bed. “Please, listen to me. Tyrell is worse than you can even imagine. He’s worse than Maddox because Maddox only wanted power. Tyrell already has power and he uses it to hurt people.”

“What did he do to you? Tell me. Help me understand why he scares you so much.”

Griffin grit his teeth and looked away. He’d been hoping, praying, that he would never have to tell Nova the truth about the worst parts of his past. He’d given her enough information to help her understand what he had left behind but not so much that she would pity him. He swallowed hard and collapsed to the bed, sitting on the edge with his head in his hands.

Nova sat down beside him and put an arm around his back. She stroked in soft circles. Her nearness calmed the worst of the panic he was feeling but also reminded him of all he had to lose now that he had found his fated mate. He couldn’t and wouldn’t let anyone or anything harm her.

“I told you I was five when Maddox murdered our family.” He spoke slowly and felt Nova nod. “I’d been sick and our pack didn’t have a healer so my mother took me to our neighboring pack. By the time we returned, my father and uncle, my brothers and sisters, they were all dead and Maddox was gone. Tyrell was in power and instead of taking us in as the last surviving members of his family, he locked us in the prison and interrogated us for days on end.”

Nova’s hand stopped moving but remained on his back, “Interrogated?”

“Tortured.” He answered plainly. “He beat me, broke my bones, nearly drowned me, held a gun to my head, all while

my mother watched and screamed that we didn't know anything about whatever plan Maddox had put in motion and certainly not where he had gone when he left."

"Oh, Griffin." Nova leaned her chin on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"When he couldn't get my mother to talk, he turned the torture on her and asked me the same questions." His voice caught but he pushed on, "I had to watch as my mother was beaten and assaulted, knowing that I couldn't give Tyrell the answer he wanted to stop it. I couldn't help her."

"Of course you couldn't. You were five, Griffin. You never should have been put in that position."

"You're right. I was five and I couldn't stop Tyrell from hurting my mother. But I'm not five years old anymore and I know exactly how to stop him from hurting the people I care about now." He turned to face her and sighed, "I have to go, Nova."

"You're not going anywhere." Her voice instantly hardened again. "Stop saying that. This is your home and you're not leaving it, or me, just because that monster showed up here and made a few threats."

"If I leave, he'll follow me. If he's really been looking for me all these years, and trust me, I believe that he has, then he'll leave to come after me and you and the pack here will be safe. He's only a threat to you if he thinks you mean something to me. He doesn't want me to be happy, to have a home or a family or a mate. If I prove to him that I don't care about you, if I leave you behind, he won't bother harming you."

"Griffin." Nova's voice cracked on his name and it was enough to make him pause and really look at her, to see the hurt on her beautiful face. "Do you hear what you're saying right now?"

"I'm trying to protect you."

"No." She shot up from the bed and wiped at her cheek, at a tear that had fallen from her watery eyes. She spun on him,

eyes still damp, but there was fire behind them too. “You’re scared and you’re running away because that’s what you’ve always done in the past but it’s different now. This isn’t some random pit-stop on your journey. This is your home, Griffin. This is *our* home.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“When we bonded, you promised that you would never hurt me, remember? Well, you’re hurting me. Right here and right now, you’re hurting me. You’re pushing me away, threatening to leave me behind. You just said you had to prove to him that I don’t matter to you, Griffin.”

“Of course you matter to me, but if he realizes that, it will make you a target.” He stood back up too, trying to reach for her but she pulled back, out of his reach and he felt it like a punch to the gut. “Nova, please.”

“You are not leaving me, Griffin Clary. Do you hear me? You are my mate. We’re bonded. If you leave, that hurts me and not just because the bond might not survive the distance. *I* can’t lose you. I can’t let you go. Not when I’m only just beginning to realize that I’m in love with you and we have our entire future together to plan.”

Griffin stopped breathing. He barely blinked. He was certain he’d heard her wrong but the vulnerability on her beautiful face made his heart beat fast and then faster still. Was it possible? Did she really mean it? She hadn’t told him that she loved him before now and maybe she was only saying it to keep him here. But as soon as his brain proposed that idea his heart shot it down. Because Nova didn’t say things she didn’t mean and if she was telling him now, it wasn’t some ploy to win the argument, it was because those words were the only thing left to say.

He swallowed hard, “You... love me?”

Nova’s bottom lip trembled and she wiped at her cheeks again where more tears had broken free, “Yes, you idiot. I love you. Do you think I’d have thrown myself in front of you when Tyrell came at you if I didn’t? I love you and you damn well better love me enough to stay and figure out another way

to beat him or else he's not the threat you're going to have to worry about. I promise you that."

"I do love you. I do. Nova, sweetheart, I've loved you since the moment I met you."

"That's impossible." She snorted but he stepped closer to her and she didn't back away this time.

"It's not impossible. Not with us. Not when you realize that fate put us together because we're perfect for each other. I love you with everything that I am or ever will be. You're my other half, Nova."

"And you're mine, so you can't leave me."

He winced, knowing it was an argument that he'd just lost but needing to give it one last shot anyway, "You could come with me. We could go and..."

"I'm not leaving my family behind and neither are you. They're your family too now. You told me this was all you ever wanted, a place to call home, a pack that accepted you, your fated mate and a family. You can't leave it behind just because someone threatened us. You ran in the past because you had nothing to stay for but this time, you do."

"I can't ask Leo to start a war with Tyrell's pack over my family bullshit."

"You're not asking." Nova reached up and touched his cheek tenderly, "We're family. We have each other's backs and we fight for each other. We'll fight side-by-side with you if need be."

"Nova I..." He shook his head, completely overwhelmed by the offer.

He'd never had anyone fight for him, certainly not with him. His mother had been his sole source of support in his childhood after Maddox had murdered the rest of their family but she herself had been a broken mess after the loss of her mate. She hadn't been able to protect him any more than he could protect her.

He'd convinced himself over the years of being on his own that he didn't need anyone to protect him, that he was fine on his own. He had always been able to make it work for him. He gave back what he could to the packs he came across and then he moved on. In the back of his mind he'd always known that if Tyrell was looking for him that it was safer if he kept moving.

But then he'd come to Noir and he had let himself put down roots.

He loved Nova. They were mates. They'd sealed the bond and would be married officially sometime soon. She was right that he couldn't just leave her behind. Breaking the mate bond would hurt her and that was the opposite of what he wanted to do. He wanted to protect her and keep her safe so she was right.

He couldn't run anymore.

He had to stay and fight.

If Tyrell came for him, or anyone that he loved, he would have to take him down, once and for all.

He was a strong wolf. He knew that. He had Alpha blood in his veins. He could handle himself. But he knew Tyrell enough to know that he was not only bigger, older and stronger but that he wouldn't fight fair. If Griffin had any chance at all of beating him, he'd have to do it by ignoring the rules he'd spent his entire life vowing to live by. He would have to play dirty. He would have to resort to trickery. And he wasn't comfortable asking the DeLuca's to do the same for him.

"You're family." Nova spoke again, holding his face. "We aren't going to let him hurt you."

He shook his head, "I appreciate that. I do. But we both know that if Tyrell comes for me, the only way I'm going to be able to stop him is to kill him and I don't want that blood on your hands."

"If it means protecting my mate, I'll bathe in his blood." Nova's eyes were fierce and fiery and Griffin's heart melted at

her support.

“No. You can’t be involved. I won’t be the reason you have any more nightmares about my family.”

“Griffin, I’m not a little girl anymore.” She frowned, “If Tyrell needs to die to save you and to keep our family protected, then that’s what we do.”

“He’s my brother.” He winced. “Half-brother. But still my brother.”

“You don’t think you’ll be able to do it?”

“No. It’s not that.” He sighed, “Tyrell is the last living member of the Clary family besides myself. I have no idea if he has sons to take over the pack. If I kill him, they may want me to return to lead the pack in his place.”

“Oh...” Nova blinked as if she hadn’t considered that result. “Because he’s the Pack Alpha. You’re right. You might be the next in line to lead your old pack.”

“Only I don’t want to lead my old pack.” Griffin shook his head, “They were never my pack to begin with. My place isn’t with them. It’s here. With you. I’m a Crescent wolf now and I don’t want that to change.”

“We’ll figure out a way around it.” Nova nodded firmly. “We will. We’ll talk to my brothers. We’ll make a plan. You aren’t going to leave me though. Whatever happens, you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.” Griffin nodded.

“Say it again.” Nova’s face was softer and her words didn’t come out as an order so much as a fervent prayer.

“I’m yours, Nova DeLuca. I’m yours and I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

“Good.” She leaned up and brushed their lips together, “Now prove it.”

Griffin smiled against her kiss until she bit at his bottom lip and he groaned. Her tongue licked out to taste him and he slid his hands to her ass. He lifted and she wrapped herself

around him. He moved them back to the bed, laying her down and covering her body with his.

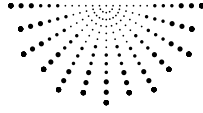
They made love, soft and slow, with murmured endearments and loving praises. They touched and stroked one another, crying out until their climaxes wrung every bit of pleasure out of them. And after, when they lay with their naked bodies wrapped around one another, he stroked her skin and hoped with everything inside of him that he was making the right choice by staying and fighting for more of this.

More of them.

Later they would talk to Leo and Darius. They would come up with a plan. They would figure out the best way to handle Tyrell and the threat he posed. But for now, he was content simply to hold his mate, to love her and to bask in the knowledge that she loved him in return.



## CHAPTER TWENTY



**I**t was Nova that came up with the plan to take Tyrell out before he could hurt anyone she loved. She'd never been much of a fighter herself. Leo was the Pack Alpha and Luna was a Queen so both had grown up learning to protect themselves. Maya was the one that trained to become an Enforcer and all the while they'd kept Nova safely protected behind them, the little sister and the Seer who was meant to be sheltered. But she was sick and tired of people threatening her family and she wasn't about to let another Clary try and rip that apart.

She had nearly sent Griffin away because the need to protect her family was so strong. That would have been a mistake, she knew now. But getting rid of Tyrell Clary wasn't just the right decision. It was the only one. So, after she'd made love to Griffin she'd lay beside him in bed last night and come up with a plan.

This morning, she'd told Griffin about it and then they'd taken it to Leo and Darius. They'd all agreed it was as good a plan as any they could've come up with themselves. Plus it had the added benefit of, hopefully, keeping Tyrell's blood off their hands.

The plan had started with Griffin sending a note to the hotel outside of town. It was the only place Tyrell and his Enforcers could possibly have been staying. The messenger delivered it and came back with the news that Tyrell had agreed to meet Griffin alone in the clearing by the creek an hour before sunset.

The meeting spot had been essential. Nova had known that if they suggested meeting on Crescent land that Tyrell would balk. He wouldn't want to be on their land, in their jurisdiction, where Leo could have the full force of his pack at the ready. Instead, the clearing where Maddox and Sasha had plotted to destroy the DeLuca's was the place Nova had decided Griffin should make his stand. It was neutral territory, but even so, the Crescent wolves knew the pros and cons of the area better than Tyrell ever could, especially since they didn't give him time to scope it out in advance.

Griffin had gone to the clearing far earlier than he needed to. He'd been certain Tyrell would try to beat him there and set up some kind of ambush. But Nova had a plan for that too.

She wasn't letting her mate walk into this fight alone.

Instead, she was hidden in the treeline, out of sight, waiting, and she wasn't the only one. Leo was positioned a few yards to her right. Darius a few yards beyond him and on the other side of the creek, the Moirae side, Michael, Zander and even Rafe helped them form a loose circle around the perimeter.

Luna and Maya had wanted to come as well but the men had steadfastly refused and Nova had agreed with them. Her sisters were pregnant and didn't need to be in the middle of this if a fight broke out. Zoey had agreed with her too and offered to stay back with them and make sure both of them stayed safely at home.

Even without her sisters, the outpouring of love and support from her family when she'd told them about her plan had nearly brought Nova to tears. They had accepted Griffin, accepted him completely, even before she had and now they were ready to defend him as one of their own.

Even Bear had offered to come, ready to take down whatever threat there was to his new friend and packmate, but Leo had asked him to stay behind. Somebody had to be there to help the pack in case things went sideways. He hadn't been happy about it but he'd done as his Pack Alpha asked. He'd

also told Griffin that he better whip some ass and then hugged him and told Nova to bring him home safe.

Nova had tried to pull a vision of Griffin's future to use as proof that she was doing the right thing but as usual fate had remained stubbornly silent. Nova couldn't see Griffin's future because it was tied too tightly to her own. She had to hope that meant they were going to live a long and happy life together because she couldn't let herself think of how she would manage if he didn't survive this.

She'd spent so long convincing herself she could walk away from her mate but she'd been wrong. She couldn't breathe without him now. He was as much a part of her as her own soul and it made her sick to think that their future was hanging in the balance, at the whim of yet another violent psychopath who wanted something he couldn't have.

Footsteps sounded against the rocks of the riverbed and Nova smiled to herself.

With her plan, they'd taken a chance using the surrounding forest on both sides to hide them. But it had been one she was certain would pay off. She'd been sure that Tyrell wouldn't follow the maps or directions to this spot and would instead choose to follow the creek up from the road rather than step foot into either pack territory, and she'd been right.

A few minutes later, when Tyrell stepped into sight and she saw that he'd brought both of his Enforcers despite the agreement to meet alone, she had to swallow a growl. Her wolf was itching to break free and close the distance between them. Nova might have reservations about ripping the bastard's throat out but her wolf did not share the same reluctance.

The fact that the full moon would be rising in mere hours meant every wolf in this clearing was on edge. If it was up to her, she'd have waited to deal with Tyrell until after, once they were all a little calmer, but neither she nor Griffin had trusted that he wouldn't try something tonight. It was better this way too because she was counting on the fact that Tyrell's own

Enforcers, who she'd known he would bring, would be on edge too.

Griffin stood his ground, back straight and chin high as he faced his evil half-brother, "I thought I asked you to come alone."

"And I'd have thought you knew me well enough to know that wasn't going to happen." Tyrell smirked back at him.

"It's fine." Griffin sighed, as if he was resigned to the duplicity, but held his arms out to his sides. "I didn't come alone either."

At his signal, Griffin's true family stepped from the trees.

Tyrell's eyes flared gold and he snarled with anger as he looked around, realizing he was outnumbered despite his treachery. He spun in a full circle, growling when he saw the Moirae wolves at his back. When he turned to face Griffin again his face was twisted with pure hatred the likes of which sent a shiver down Nova's spine.

He looked so much like Maddox in that moment she almost took a step backwards. Almost. She caught herself, reminding herself that this wasn't Maddox and she wasn't a little girl. She wasn't alone either. She reached for Griffin through their mate bond and felt his reassuring energy press back against her, wanting her to stay safely out of reach of Tyrell and his Enforcers.

"You've really convinced them you're worth starting a war?" Tyrell spit at him. "You must be fucking that bitch mate of yours real good to get her to run to big brother and get the whole pack involved."

Nova growled and Tyrell sneered in her direction. She knew he was simply trying to provoke her. Her wolf pressed just beneath her skin, wanting to tear him apart, but Nova held her control and stayed where she was because Griffin's energy was still strangely calm despite the danger.

"First off." Griffin spoke softly, his words clipped but clear. "There isn't going to be a war. And second, if you say

another word about my mate, I'm going to rip your throat out. Do you hear me?"

Tyrell narrowed his eyes and Nova calmed considerably. He was surprised, she realized. He hadn't expected Griffin to stand up to him and he wasn't quite sure how to regain the upper hand. He was off balance not being feared and she urged Griffin to continue before the other Clary decided to attack.

"You seem pretty sure you're not starting a war right here and right now." Tyrell taunted.

"I'm not."

"You sure about that?"

"One hundred percent." Griffin confirmed. "Because if you try to make this a war, you're going to lose."

"I..." Tyrell started but Griffin spoke over him.

"You're outnumbered and you're far from being strong enough to take all of us. You might be an Alpha but do you really think you can survive a fight with two Pack Alpha's and four trained Enforcers? You come at me, we'll take you down, and I can guarantee you it'll be me who delivers the killing blow so I can ensure nobody has a reason to argue when I proclaim myself as Clareden Pack Alpha once you're dead."

Tyrell snarled, "They'd never accept you."

Griffin only shrugged, "Maybe not, but you'll be dead and I'll be the last Clary alive."

"Not if I have anything to do with it." Tyrell took a step forward but Griffin held up a hand and made a tsking noise.

"Now, now. Don't let your temper get the better of you." He taunted with his perfectly calm demeanor, "My mate is here. My family is here. I don't really want to be the Clareden Pack Alpha but I'll take it from you if you make me. After all, I could always appoint someone else to run the pack in my stead. I could pass the leadership over to a trusted ally, someone who has served the pack well in the past and is ready for a chance to prove themselves capable."

As he spoke, Griffin's gaze shifted from Tyrell to the Enforcers at his side and Nova watched as they exchanged a glance. It was working. Her plan was working. She could see it in their shifting stance. They were questioning if it was possible to take Tyrell down themselves and earn that Pack Alpha title. They were gauging their odds of teaming up to take him on and then if they could beat one another down enough to give up.

“Or, maybe you walk away from here and never come back. I can let you do that. I'll promise not to touch a hair on your head so long as you leave this territory and never bother me and mine again. Never even think of me again. Whatever happens to you and the Clareden Pack after I walk away... that's your business. Not mine.”

Nova could practically see the bloodlust on the faces of Tyrell's Enforcers as they came to a decision and he must have felt their betrayal too because he turned away from Griffin to glare at them. Nova's wolf growled in approval. She wanted some bloodshed even if Nova's whole plan had been to avoid it.

“Don't even think about it.” Tyrell sneered at his Enforcers as they began to circle him, moving around him as he spun to try to keep them in his sights.

Tyrell was a Pack Alpha. He was more powerful than either of them but they had it two against one which might be enough. She had to hope that Tyrell had brought his best Enforcers with him to track down Griffin. He had come all this way with only two of his men so she figured it was safe to assume they were both as deadly, violent and bloodthirsty as he was. They'd just needed a push in the right direction and Griffin's words had given them that. They would take care of Tyrell for them and that would be the end of the Clary threats against the Crescent Pack.

Griffin stepped back out of the fray and shook his head, “Goodbye, brother. I didn't want it to come to this but...”

“Don't you dare walk away from me!” Tyrell screamed, eyes gold with fury and his teeth elongating. “This isn't over!”

“Yes. It is.” Griffin moved to Nova’s side and took her hand, lacing their fingers together and she smiled at him with all the love she felt in her heart. “I’m not a Clary anymore and I don’t want the name or any claim to the old pack. I’m a DeLuca now and a Crescent wolf. If I sense any member of the Clareden Pack on our land when the moon rises, it will be seen as a declaration of war and if any of you ever come back here, we’ll kill you too.”

The words were for the Enforcers, not Tyrell. Nova knew that. But still Tyrell seemed to think he was in control. He sneered at the man that shared half of his DNA.

“You’re not any better than us. If you let them do this, you’re not any better, Griffin!”

Griffin let out a long sigh, “Maybe I’m not, but I want to be. I try to be. And knowing you’re not in this world anymore, that you’re not hurting people and wreaking havoc against innocent people, knowing that no more Clary’s will ever walk this earth, seems like a fair trade.”

“Dammit, Griffin! Griffin! Griff!”

Griffin turned and pulled Nova into his side, kissing the top of her head. She squeezed his hand and leaned against him as they turned and walked away. Tyrell continued to yell for Griffin to come back until they reached the woods and as they stepped back into the cover of the trees, Tyrell’s angry yells turned to painful screams. The sound of snarling wolves and the scent of blood filled the air but they didn’t turn around.

They kept walking, back to Crescent land, back to their pack, back to their home.

This was for the best, Nova reminded herself as she held Griffin’s hand and tried to drown out the noise of death behind them. Tyrell deserved to die for what he’d done to her mate all those years ago. His death was the only way to ensure they were able to live without a constant threat hanging over them. But she’d known that Griffin couldn’t live with himself if the blood was on his hands so she’d devised a way to let Tyrell’s own men handle him. Griffin may have planted the seed but

they weren't good men or they wouldn't have been with Tyrell to begin with and their easy betrayal of him proved as much.

Griffin was a good man and he had handled himself with strength and grace and walked away better for it.

Nobody spoke during the walk. At one point she heard Leo's phone buzz and saw him pull it out to check his messages. She assumed it was Michael texting to confirm they'd all made it back home safely. She was grateful that none of them had been forced to fight tonight and prayed that they would never have to resort to what they'd done again.

Once they were out of the woods, coming out near Nova's backyard, everyone grouped together. Nova hugged her brother. Darius and Griffin shook hands. They moved in a circle, embracing and patting one another on the back for what felt like a long time, as if they were all as grateful as she was to have walked out of those woods in one piece, with the people they loved.

"Michael texted that they made it back home." Leo confirmed.

"I'm glad." Griffin spoke softly and then cleared his throat, looking between Leo and Darius, "I'll go and thank him and the others personally tomorrow but for tonight, thank you. Thank you for having my back. Thank you for trusting me and believing in me. It..."

Griffin's voice broke and Nova felt tears well in her eyes. She watched as her brother put a hand on her mate's arm. Griffin looked up, undoubtedly commanded to do so by his Pack Alpha even if Leo hadn't spoken a word. His eyes were watery but he met Leo's intense gaze.

"We're family and family sticks together. Always." Leo gave him a small smile.

"Family." Griffin nodded and Nova's heart felt like it was melting.

The past was firmly in the past where it belonged. It was over now. Done. Nothing about it could hurt them anymore.



Tonight her mate would shift with her and her brothers and their pack. It was Griffin's first full moon as a Crescent wolf and she was excited at the prospect of having him by her side as her wolf ran free. She felt lighter now that Tyrell was gone and she realized that even before he showed up yesterday, she'd still been holding her breath, expecting the worst because in her family, there always seemed to be some final barrier they had to overcome to find their happiness.

Now, as she watched Griffin and Darius talk and saw the way that Leo leaned against his mate's side, unafraid to show affection or what some might call weakness, she didn't need to see the future to know that it was a good one. She slid under Griffin's arm and smiled when he automatically pulled her closer without stopping his conversation with Darius. She smiled at her brother and Leo smiled back, as if they were the only two in on the secret that this was the start of something wonderful, the start of the rest of their lives.

It took Leo nudging his mate in the side some time later for Darius to groan and pause his in-depth talk with Griffin about pack roles and training schedules, "I know, I know."

"What?" Griffin looked from Darius to his Pack Alpha.

"The full moon will be up soon and we have a pack to gather." Leo smiled. "A pack that includes you now."

"Right." Griffin grinned. "Right."

"We'll leave you two to decide how you want to spend your first full moon." Leo glanced from Griffin to his sister. "If that's alone, we understand, but we'd love to see you run with the pack too at some point. Let them get to know your wolf the way they've gotten to know you."

"We'll find you later." Nova agreed. "But for now, I'd like to keep this one to myself for a little while longer."

"Mmm, now there's a DeLuca sentiment if I've ever heard one." Darius hummed, playfully nudging his mate. "Come on. Let's leave them to it. We have responsibilities to tend to."

"Thank you again." Griffin called as they waved and headed around the house.

“Stop thanking us.” Darius called back. “Family. Remember?”

“Family.” Griffin was still grinning as he turned to Nova and she wrapped her arms around him, looking up at him with all the love she felt in her heart.

“Do you feel lighter?” she asked. “Now that you know Tyrell isn’t out there anymore, a shadow just waiting to descend on you, how does it feel?”

“It feels good.” He wrapped his big arms around her, “Thank you.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything.”

“You did. You did everything. You came up with a plan so I wouldn’t have to fight him. You rallied the family for me. You believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself and you kept me from throwing away our life together just because I was scared.”

“Well, if you need sense knocked into you, I’ll always be here to help with that.”

He snorted, “Thank you for showing me what family truly means.”

“Thank you for helping me realize that trust isn’t a bad thing.” She grinned back at him.

“Thank you for loving me.”

“Mmm.” Nova leaned into his embrace, “I do love you, Griffin. So much. You’re easy to love.”

“You make me a better man and I can’t wait to...” He yelped when she jabbed him in the ribs with her finger, “Hey! What’s that for?”

“You were supposed to say I’m easy to love too!”

He laughed and Nova grinned. She loved that sound. Couldn’t wait to spend the rest of her life listening to it. He hauled her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, holding herself up.

She brushed her lips over his, “Say it.”

“I love you.”

“The other thing!” She insisted with a faux petulant pout and Griffin laughed again.

“Nova DeLuca, you, my fated mate, the love of my life, the other half of my soul...”

“Yes?” She pressed.

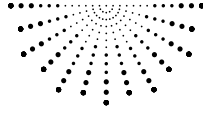
“I forgot what I was going to say.” He smirked and growled.

“Oh forget it. Just kiss me already.”

“Demanding little mate.” His voice turned husky. “Come here and give me those lips.”

She leaned down and he tilted his head up to kiss her. She sighed with contentment as the familiarity of his kiss warmed every part of her. In that moment, it didn't matter that the full moon was rising or that they'd just escaped a fight for their life. All that mattered was that she knew without even needing a vision that she was going to spend the rest of her life loving this man and letting him love her in return.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Griffin groaned as the morning sun woke him from a peaceful dream. He cracked an eyelid and it took his brain a moment to put together his surroundings. He wasn't at home, in bed, with Nova. He was outside, curled on the ground in a patch of green grass and he didn't need to turn his head to know that his mate was beside him. It took another second for him to remember that last night had been the full moon and then it all clicked into place.

When the moon rose high in the sky, he and Nova had shifted together, letting their wolves take control for their one night of total freedom a month. The wolves had enjoyed themselves. They had run through the woods, playing chase and tag. They're frolicked in the stream, splashing one another and wrestling. They had hunted a rabbit together for a while before getting bored and running off to sniff out a new scent.

Eventually they'd calmed enough to come together and the animals had mated under the full moon for the first time.

Griffin might have been stuck inside his wolf, only allowed to watch, but he'd felt the connection his animal had to Nova. He'd realized as they moved together that they were even more connected than he and Nova were themselves. They were so in sync, they communicated without needing words, and maybe that was because they were animals and couldn't speak but also, maybe it was also because they had never fought the bond, had accepted it from the moment they scented one another. There was something special about their bond,

just as unique and powerful as his own was to Nova's human half.

When the animals had eventually tired themselves out, they'd curled up together in the grass to sleep.

With the sun up, they'd shifted back to their human selves without even realizing it. They must have been exhausted to sleep through the change. Griffin stretched and he could feel the tightness in his muscles from a night spent sleeping on the ground after being in his wolf form and he knew that Nova would be uncomfortable when she awoke too.

He smiled as he watched her sleep. She was so beautiful it took his breath away. Her skin practically glowed in the morning sun. Her locs were splayed out everywhere which he found absolutely adorable. Her body was all curves and softness and just looking at her made his cock twitch to life.

Nova didn't open her eyes when she whined, "Stop staring at me and go back to sleep."

He chuckled, "Can't."

"Can't stop staring or can't go back to sleep?" She peeked one eye open.

"Both. Neither. The sun is up and my beautiful mate is naked and looking sexy as hell. Sleep is the last thing I'm thinking about right now."

Nova harrumphed, "I need a shower before you go getting any ideas. I feel gross. I think my wolf rolled in a dead animal's remains or something."

Griffin laughed, "I don't smell anything."

"You're nose blind then, because you smell terrible too."

He caught her around the waist and tugged her until she was draped over his side, "Well, if we both smell terrible, there's no point keeping our distance."

"Griffin." She groaned, "You know I'm not a morning person."

He did. He had learned that very quickly once he'd moved in with her. Nova could be an absolute bear if you woke her up before her alarm went off. The woman loved her sleep and robbing her of even a moment could get someone on her grumpy side for the entire day.

“Let's go home then. We can shower and go back to bed. Our real bed.” He pointed over her head, “I can see the top of the house from here. We almost made it all the way home last night so there's not too far to go.”

“I'm too tired to get up and move right now.” Nova yawned, “Let's just stay here for a while longer.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Just for a little while longer.” He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head.

Griffin stared up at the brightening sky and breathed in the cool autumn air. This, right here, was perfection. It was everything he'd ever wanted, far more than he needed, and he would never give it up.

This was home. He had finally found it. After all the years, all the packs, all the traveling, he'd come to Noir to set his brothers' mistakes right and ended up finding the life that was right for him.

His mate was here. A powerful Alpha wolf from one of the oldest known shifter bloodlines. A Seer with a magical ability to predict the future. Nova DeLuca was beautiful, smart, powerful, sassy and his perfect match in every way.

She had given him a family, one completely unlike the dysfunctional mess he'd left behind. Her family, his family now, was the kind that looked after one another and considered themselves friends just as much as relatives. The DeLuca's defined close-knit with all of the sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews.

He couldn't wait to add to their numbers, to grow their family, when he and Nova decided it was time for children of their own. And the time would come. He knew it would.

Because they were going to spend the rest of their lives together.

“Nova?” He slid his hand to where hers rested against his chest and she sighed.

He smiled as her fingers laced through his. He’d known she wasn’t asleep despite her protestations. She’d just been enjoying their quiet morning together like he was.

“Hmm?” She hummed without raising her head.

“I think we should get married.”

That jerked her upright and he grinned at her wide-eyed response, “What?”

“I want you to marry me, on the new moon. I want you to be my wife.”

Nova blinked, “The new moon is coming up fast...”

“We can be ready in time. I know we can. We have the whole family to help after all.”

“Are...” She paused and bit her lip, “Are you sure?”

He sat upright so they were face to face, “Nova, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. You’re my mate. You’re already mine by pack law but I want to make it official even outside the pack. I want you to be my wife and I want to be your husband.”

“My husband.” Nova murmured the words as if they were unheard of and he took her hand in his again.

“Nova, will you marry me?”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she nodded, “Yes. Yes. Of course I will. I want it to be official too. Let’s do it.”

“It’s my turn to ask, are you sure?” He searched her face for hesitation and breathed a sigh of relief when he found none.

Her chin jutted out, “I’ve told you before, I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“See, the thing is, you say that... but you also told me that we were never going to be together when I first got here.”

“I didn’t say that.” She huffed.

“Fine. You implied it. Multiple times if I remember right?” He snorted.

“But I never said it, not out loud, not to you.” She shrugged, “Because deep down I knew that no matter how hard I fought, you were my fated mate. I could try to push you away, try to drive you away, but I think I always knew we’d end up right here anyway, even without my visions to guide me.”

“Fate’s a powerful thing.” He agreed.

“Yes.” Nova nodded, “Yes she is and now that I have you, now that I have my visions back and they’re more powerful than ever before, I think I’ve learned that I should never, ever, doubt her again.”

“Such a smart mate I have.” Griffin murmured, leaning forward to brush his lips over hers.

She smiled against his lips, “I used to say, you can’t fight fate, but I don’t think I ever realized just how right I was.”

“Oh you can fight it.” Griffin nipped at her bottom lip, “And you certainly tried to. But fate doesn’t like to lose.”

“No, she doesn’t. And she’s not afraid to play the long game either.” Nova caught his face between her hands and met his gaze, “Everything that happened to us. Maddox murdering your family. Coming here and trying to ruin mine. Everything that he did, I believe now that destruction was just part of his destiny, that he was a weapon fate wielded to force the paths she wanted for us into place.. It’s hard to blame him for it knowing that now.”

“I can still hate him though.” Griffin frowned.

“Absolutely you can. But you don’t have to, and I think that’s what I’ve learned through all of this.”

“You have a big heart, Nova DeLuca. I’m glad it’s mine.”



“Me too.” She wrapped her arms around him.

“Speaking of my family...” Griffin leaned his forehead against hers, “I meant what I said to Tyrell. I’m not a Clary anymore. I don’t want anything to do with that name so, if it’s okay with you, and if it’s okay with Leo, I’d like to take your name when we get married.”

Nova’s smile was so bright it rivaled the sun overhead, “You want to be a DeLuca?”

“I do.” He nodded. “I want you to keep your name and I want our children to have your family name because they’re the family that will be there for them. The Clary’s have done nothing but hurt and destroy while the DeLuca’s have united and built this pack and the entire shifter community into something better. I want us to be DeLuca’s but if Leo doesn’t...”

“Oh screw Leo.” Nova tackled him to the grass. “He’ll say yes but even if he doesn’t, we don’t need his permission. It’s my last name too and I’m more than happy to share it with you.”

“And all four of our kids?”

Nova cackled with laughter as he rolled her to her back, looming over her, “I told you. Two. Anything more than two we’ll have to discuss at a later date.”

“I can work with that.” He grinned and then swooped down to take her lips with his.

He kissed her softly, slowly, enjoying the way she sighed and melted at his touch. He would never get tired of this. Never. He was certain that he would want her with this intense, insatiable need for the rest of their lives and the thought thrilled him.

“Griffin.” Nova sighed his name as he moved his lips down her neck.

“Hmm?” he hummed, licking one pert little nipple.

“I want you.”

“I always want you, sweetheart.”

“Now.” She dug her fingernails into his biceps hard enough to sting. “I want you now.”

He smiled against the shallow hollow between her breasts, “I thought you wanted to shower first.”

“I changed my mind.” A quick intake of air accompanied him sliding his hand up her thigh to cup her mound. “I want you to make love to me. Here. Now.”

He groaned because he knew that she was well aware what that word did to him. It still felt so new and he hoped that lasted forever too. The way his heart swelled with pride when she told him she loved him was enough to make him give her anything she wanted.

“Someone could walk by and see us.” he teased. “The whole pack was out here last night and they’ll be getting up and heading home soon if they haven’t already.”

“Let them watch.” Nova moaned as he twisted the hand between her legs, sliding one finger between her slick folds and finding her clit. “Maybe they could learn a thing or two.”

He chuckled, “You think we’re that good, huh?”

“I know we are.” She reached down and tugged on his head, “Come back up here and kiss me again.”

He did as he was told, enjoying the way she got bossy when she was horny. Hell, who was he kidding? He liked her bossy whenever and wherever. He wasn’t the kind of man or wolf that needed to show he was in control of his mate to anyone. Least of all her.

“I’m here.” He brushed his lips over hers teasingly, “Now what would my mate like?”

“Take your cock in your hand.” Nova bit her lip and smiled up at him seductively.

He groaned but did as he was told, holding himself up with one elbow, “And?”

“Put it inside me.”

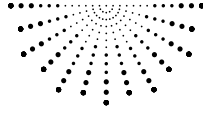
“Anything for my mate.” He grinned as he positioned himself at her entrance and thrust deep. Since he was in a playful mood he stilled his body despite the urge to buck hard and fast and waited. When Nova narrowed her eyes and glared at him he played innocent. “You didn’t tell me what to do next.”

“Make love to me.” She growled, her eyes going gold momentarily and she looked so lovely with her wolf just beneath her skin, so fierce and proud and his, that he did exactly that.

He made love to her in the grass, outside, in the morning sun where anyone walking by could see. He went slow and worshipped every part of her. Kissed every inch of her. He dragged it out, never wanting to leave her body, and when they finally crested the hill and their climax overtook them, it was his name that Nova cried out and nothing had ever felt more right to him.

It was that moment, right then and there, that he knew he would look back on in ten, twenty maybe even sixty years’ time and smile, because it was the start of their happily ever after.

## EPILOGUE



Nova stood in Leo's living room, surrounded by her sisters, wearing a cream colored gown that had once been her mother's wedding dress.

It had been altered to fit her and a few changes had been made to update it. The puffy sleeves had been removed and put into storage along with the large bustle. It left Nova in a slip of cream satin and lace that skimmed her body like a lover's caress and made her feel beautiful without the added feeling of being a kid playing dress up.

The dress was perfect and nobody was more surprised when Luna produced it than Nova.

She had cried when Luna carefully unpacked it. She had argued that she was the youngest and one of her sisters should have had the honor of wearing it. But both Luna and Maya had assured her that they'd been keeping it safe for her, not themselves.

She was the youngest, that was true, but in so many ways she was also the strongest of them and this, her sisters and eventually even her brother, had assured her, was what their mother would have wanted.

Nobody really understood how it had managed to survive all these years though.

Most shifter wedding gowns were shredded on the wedding night. It was tradition after all for the newly wedded couple to shift together and run through the woods. But Nova could just imagine her mother holding out a finger to keep her

new husband back and threatening he'd never have an heir if he so much as snagged her beautiful gown.

But it wasn't just that it had survived their wedding night. It had survived Maddox invading their home and imprisoning Luna in the basement. It had survived the fight that ensued when Michael, Darius and the other Enforcers from the Moirae Pack came rushing in to save them. It had still been there, untouched and all but forgotten, when Luna had finally worked up the nerve to revisit their old home and go through their parents belongings.

Luna had already been married then. She'd mated Michael and they'd completed a joint wedding ceremony with his brother, Rafe, and Zoey. So Luna had left the dress in the box and taken it to show Maya. Maya, being Maya, had sworn at the time she was never getting married or mated and didn't want a thing to do with the dress. When that had changed, when she'd met Zander, Luna had talked to her about the gown again but they'd both decided that their mother would have wanted Nova to have it.

She was the last of them. The baby of the family. Her mother's pride and joy. So they'd kept the dress stored away and surprised Nova with it only once she told them she'd agreed to marry Griffin.

Now, standing in the dress, knowing that the rest of her family and the entirety of the Crescent Pack was waiting for her on the other side of that door, just as they must have waited for her mother all those years ago, she felt tears well in her eyes again.

"Hey." Luna put a soothing hand on her back, "None of that now. You'll ruin your makeup."

"Did you change your mind? You want to run?" Maya raised her eyebrows. "Because my bike is..."

"Oh my God." Zoey smacked Maya in the shoulder, "Do not tell me that you brought a getaway vehicle to this wedding."

"I..."

“I said don’t tell me.” Zoey covered her ears and Nova couldn’t hold it in anymore, she burst into laughter.

All of her sisters stared at her as she laughed and tried desperately to hold her fingers under her eyes to catch the tears that slipped free before they destroyed the makeup they’d all painstakingly helped her apply. She saw them exchange looks that clearly questioned if she was okay and she only laughed harder. It took her a moment to get herself under control and when she did she shook her head.

“They’re not sad tears. I promise.” She unceremoniously wiped her damp fingers on the bouquet of flowers and ignored the way Luna’s lips pursed. “I’m just happy. I’m really happy.”

“So you don’t need a getaway car?” Maya smirked, moving quickly to avoid another smack from Zoey.

“No. I do not need a getaway car.” Nova laughed. “But I do appreciate that you’re always prepared for the worst.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Luna studied her face.

“I’m sure. I was just thinking about Mom, and about how, when she was killed, I thought I’d lost her for good but... I realize now that I haven’t. She’s here with me, with all of us. Not just because I get to wear her dress and have her be a part of my wedding ceremony either. She lives on in you, Luna, in the way you lead your pack with love and generosity, just like she did. She’s in you, Maya, in the way you question everything and would fight for everyone you love without us even needing to ask. She’s in Leo when he puts the pack ahead of his own needs and how he can be strong for them but soft with the people he loves. She’s within all of us and I think I only just realized that means she’s within me too.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Luna looked like she was on the verge of tears herself by the time Nova finished speaking, “Of course she is.”

“You look the most like her.” Maya offered a watery smile of her own.

“And you’re just as stubborn as she was.” Luna sniffed. “You’re so much like her that sometimes I forget you had less

time with her than any of us instead of more. You're the best of her, Nova. The best of all the DeLuca's really."

"Thanks, sis." Nova blinked back more tears and hugged her oldest sister.

Another set of arms wrapped around her and Maya harrumphed, "I'm not getting left out of this."

Nova smiled and then laughed as another set of arms wound around them and when she glanced around she saw Zoey had been crying too, "I love you guys."

"We love you too." Nova managed to grip Zoey's hand and squeeze as they all hugged for a moment longer.

"Okay. Okay. That's enough." It was Maya of course who pulled back first, breaking the circle. "We're all going to ruin our makeup if we keep this up."

Zoey dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, "Speak for yourself, mine is already smeared."

"Oh come here." Luna sighed, pulling her sister-in-law to the side and helping her to fix her smeared mascara. "There. Now it just looks like a smoky eye."

"Perfect." Zoey smiled. "Thanks sis."

"Don't mention it." Luna blew her an air kiss and then turned back to them, shoulders straight and chin up, going back into Alpha mode. "Now, we better get out there before they really do start to wonder if we made a getaway out the back."

Zoey chuckled, "I think I'm first."

"Yes. You and then Maya and then me and then Nova." She turned to her youngest sister, "If you're ready..."

"I am." Nova confirmed with a deep breath. "I'm ready to marry the man I love and I'm so thankful I get to do that surrounded by my family."

"You got this girl." Zoey winked before stepping out of the house.

With the door open, the music was louder. It also helped that all of the dozens and dozens of voices that had been creating a steady buzz went quiet at the sight of the first bridesmaid. It wasn't the usual way for a pack ceremony but this was how Nova had wanted it. She hadn't wanted to be left alone in the house so instead of having her whole family and the pack waiting for her outside she'd decided to take from popular culture and have her sisters walk ahead of her like bridesmaids. This way they could stay with her until the last possible second and maybe she would feel a little less like the spotlight was centered completely on her.

A wolf whistle went up and Maya rolled her eyes, "I'm guessing Zoey just got close enough to Rafe for him to grab her and haul her into a very obvious display of PDA."

"Some things never change." Luna giggled slightly. "Go. It's your turn."

Maya kissed her younger sister's cheek and then stepped out of the house to make her way through the crowd and find her own husband on the front row.

When it was just Luna and Nova standing inside the house, she turned to her sister, "Thank you."

"For what?" Luna tilted her head curiously.

"For helping shape me into the woman I am today. For always being so strong but also so understanding. You set an amazing example for me of the kind of woman, and wolf, I wanted to grow into and I hope every day that I make you proud."

Luna bit her lip and fluttered her lashes, "You do, Nova. I'm so proud of you. You've overcome so much and you didn't let it make you hard or cruel. You deserve every happiness in the world and I'm just so glad that you found and accepted the man fate knew could give it to you."

"I love you."

"I love you too." Luna sniffled, "Now, wait sixty seconds and then follow me. We'll all be waiting for you."



Nova watched as her sister straightened her spine and stepped out the door, looking every bit the Pack Alpha's mate that she was. Nova closed her eyes and forced a couple of deep, calming breaths once she was alone. She forgot to count like Luna had coached her to do when they practiced the ceremony but when the crowd went quiet outside the door and the music swelled, Nova knew that it was time.

Deep within herself, she reached for the bond to her mate and felt it sizzle with heat and awareness. She had only meant to draw Griffin's strength up and around her. She'd wanted to feel him as she walked towards him. She'd expected to hear his voice inside her head but instead she gasped as a vision filled her head.

Images piled on top of one another, spinning faster and faster, making her dizzy with the speed and quantity of them. It was like nothing she had ever seen or experienced. It was a vision but she knew without being told that it was also a gift.

A wedding gift, from fate.

For the first time in her entire life, she'd been given a glimpse of her own future. She'd seen herself in the visions. Images of her from the future as close as the next few minutes, when she would be surrounded by friends and family and pledging her life to her mate. Images of her older, belly swollen and Griffin beside her in a rocking chair. Images of them as wolves running through the forest, little wolves trailing behind them or wrestling in a patch of green grass. Images of them older still, holding hands as they watched their family celebrate something together, a birthday perhaps. Images of them at a wedding ceremony, gray-haired but beaming as everyone cheered. And then, as quickly as they'd rushed into her, the visions were gone and she was left gasping in the wake of the future fate had shown her.

Nova wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream at fate for withholding her visions for so long only to allow her this now. She wanted to fall to her knees and thank the same fate for giving her such an incredible opportunity to see the path that lay before her, to see the proof that this was

the right choice and that she and Griffin were indeed fated mates, with a long and happy future ahead of them.

Instead of doing any of that, she tilted her chin up just as she'd seen her sisters do. She pressed her shoulders back to stand up tall. And then she stepped out of the house and into the late afternoon sunlight to go and meet her future.

As was customary, the altar was set up in the middle of town square. It was a beautiful arch of natural wood, flowers, greenery and limbs picked up from their own land and built specifically for this occasion. All around it, pack members formed circular rows that led inward, getting smaller until the front row was filled with family and those closest to the couple. At the sight of Nova in her gown, one by one, the rows began to part to allow her an aisle to the front and then as if on a cue, they dropped to one knee.

It wasn't often that shifters went to their knee for anyone. They kneeled for their Pack Alpha when ceremony called for it or when they were begging a favor. But long ago, someone had decided that the traditional shifter wedding ceremony required every pack member in attendance to kneel at the entrance of the bride in a show of respect and acknowledgement of the commitment she was making both to her mate and to the pack.

Nova had always thought it was an outdated practice. After all, not every couple had a bride these days and not only that but those that did weren't necessarily agreeing to the covenant to continue the pack lineage by producing heirs as had been the original purpose. But she forgot all about her personal feelings towards that aspect of the ceremony when she caught sight of Griffin standing at the altar, smiling at her and waiting for her to come to him.

Her breath caught and she realized in that instant that maybe the old ways weren't just about respecting rituals. With the crowd kneeling, she could walk the entire way to the center of the circle without looking away from her mate. If they'd been standing she wouldn't have been able to see him until she was through the pack but this way was so much better.

She offered a soft smile back at Griffin as she walked towards him.

He wasn't the only one that was still on his feet though and her heart felt like it grew two sizes when she met her brother's eye. Leo was standing next to Griffin because he'd agreed to be the one to marry them. As Crescent Pack Alpha, he married a lot of the other pack members but since Luna and Maya were both Moirae Pack by the time they had their ceremonies, Nova was the only one of his siblings he would be officiant for and the pride beaming off him told her he was as thrilled about it as she was.

She smiled at her brother before turning her head to where her sisters and their husbands stood. Since they were all Moirae Pack wolves now they weren't required to kneel for a Crescent wolf wedding ceremony. Yet, as she watched, each of them lowered their heads for her as she drew near and Nova had to fight the tears that wanted to swell behind her eyes again.

Michael and Luna had their boys between them, clearly in an attempt to maintain order with the twin whirlwinds. Maya held Zander's hand and he held little Carmen on his other hip. Beside them, Rafe and Zoey had their arms around one another, their girls and Violet filling out the space before the circle wound back around. Darius knelt at the end of the circle but he looked up to wink at her as she walked past and it took everything in her not to drag him to his feet and insist he walk her the rest of the way to the aisle since he'd been so much of a father figure to her over the years.

She swallowed back her tears and stepped up to where Griffin waited for her, taking his hands in hers and squeezing. He had tears in his eyes too and she wanted to throw herself into his arms and hold him tight. She reached through the bond, using their connection and pressing her thoughts into his mind to ask if he was okay. She thought maybe he was looking around at everyone and wishing he had family of his own to fill out the first circle but the answer she got only reminded her why she loved this man so much.

He wasn't sad that he didn't have his own family here. Because he did. Because her family was his family.

"I love you." she whispered aloud, just for him and he released one of her hands to reach up and brush a stray tear from her cheek.

"I love you too." His eyes gleamed with unshed tears and his smile was knowing when he whispered back. "I can't wait to start the rest of our lives together. It looked like it's going to be everything I hoped for and more."

Nova gasped before she could help herself and her eyes scanned his face in surprise, "You saw it too?"

Griffin nodded, "I did. Shocked the hell out of me. I nearly collapsed I was so unsteady for a second there."

"But you're okay, right?" She searched him top to bottom but he squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"I'm better than okay. I'm marrying the woman I love, the woman that fate created as my other half. I'm ready to start the rest of our life together, if you are."

"I'm ready." She nodded, shooting Leo a sidelong look because she knew he'd been able to overhear everything they'd said.

He raised an eyebrow, "A shared vision?"

She nodded.

"Fate's full of surprises." He smiled softly, "I wish you a lifetime of them. But first, let's get you two married, what do you say?"

"I say, I do." Griffin grinned and Nova giggled happily.

"Me too." She pulled him close and kissed him, "Me too."

## **BONUS EPILOGUE – 10 Years Later**

IT SEEMED, Nova thought as she sat in a rocking chair on Rafe and Zoey's back porch, that both everything and nothing had

changed since the first time they held a party here with all of the family in attendance. There were far more members of the family, that was certain, but at its core it was the same family gathering they'd been having for years upon years now. Since there were so many of them these days there was never a lack of birthdays, births or anniversaries to commemorate. But today was special and for more reasons than one.

They were gathered today to celebrate Violet's return to Noir. The shy little girl who had shown up with her Uncle Zander, in a beat-up old Bronco a dozen years ago was virtually unrecognizable from the woman who stood with a glass of wine in her hand and a bright smile on her face in the yard now.

Like so many of them, Violet had lived through a traumatic childhood marked by the loss of her mother, but in Noir she had found more family than she could ever need. Not just her biological Aunt and Uncle in Zoey and Zander, but also everyone else in the family. She might have kept the last name Leery but she was just as much a Hudson and a DeLuca as the rest of them and they had all welcomed her with open arms.

Aunts and Uncles, cousins and friends, were all crowding her now to offer their congratulations for her college graduation and to celebrate her decision to return to Noir instead of staying in Baton Rouge. She had plans to open a veterinary clinic which, Nova thought, was pure genius considering a good majority of the town's inhabitants turned into animals at least once a month. It was a good move for Violet and a necessary step towards the future that Nova had seen for her in a long ago vision, one that involved a fated mate of her own... but that was still a year or two away.

Zoey and Rafe, though clearly proud of their niece, were distracted at the moment with their eldest daughter, Gabby. At eighteen, she was gorgeous, headstrong and as stubborn as a mule. Nova guessed, since the three were too far away for her to listen in on, that they were once again arguing about Gabby's choice to go to university all the way out in Washington State. Nova had tried to tell them all that there was no reason to worry, she hadn't seen any visions of Gabby

facing trouble but Rafe was worried about her shifting alone in another pack's territory and Zoey was nervous that her daughter would spend all her time with her head crammed in her books and miss meeting her fated mate here in Noir. While Nova understood their concerns as parents, she also knew this was one argument they weren't going to win and that in winning it, Gabby would gain far more from her time away from the pack and their family than she ever could have if she stayed just to reassure her parents.

Nova lost interest in their squabble quickly and smiled when she realized that Rafe and Zoey would have better spent their time hovering over Mickey. Their middle daughter was in the swimming pool and clearly flirting with a boy who had come as Leo's guest since he was visiting the Crescent Pack. He was nineteen to Mickey's seventeen if she remembered correctly from their introduction and no doubt when Rafe caught sight of his middle daughter in her bikini on the boy's shoulders there would be hell to pay.

Watching Rafe losing his mind over his teenage daughters being interested in boys was one of Nova's new favorite hobbies.

Luckily, or not, it was Darius that told the teenagers to separate themselves and they groaned but complied under his stern, watchful gaze. Nova smiled to herself, remembering the weight of his authority when she herself had been a teenager. He'd been a good guardian to her and he was a great father to Neal, the son that he and Leo had adopted. The boy had been eight when he came into their lives, fleeing a pack that saw him as nothing but trouble, and they'd taken him in. He'd never left again and now, at almost eighteen, she knew Leo was having a tough time with the idea that he might want to go out in the world on his own for a while. She'd told him it would be okay but she hadn't shared any of her visions about the boy's future, not yet. She didn't want to accidentally change anything.

Darius returned to a picnic table set up in the yard, sliding in next to Leo and kissing his cheek. Across from them Michael and Luna were talking animatedly. She knew the four

of them had been thinking of expanding the alliance that Leo had formed nearly a decade ago and assumed that was their topic of conversation as per usual these days.

The Alliance had gotten off to a rocky start after what happened to Tyrell since he was last seen visiting their land, but with a lot of hard work and trips around the country to visit new packs and talk to them in person, Leo and Darius had finally seen their dream become a reality. The Alliance now consisted of over a dozen wolf packs. Their Alpha's met quarterly in a neutral location to exchange information that might be relevant to the others. In between those meetings, they had phone calls and were always available to one another to send aid if need be. It was an incredible step in the right direction for their kind, a step towards acceptance and cohabitation, but Leo wasn't done yet.

He wanted to expand to other types of shifters too and she knew her own mate had played a role in that idea. She still wasn't sure she believed in raccoon shifters, since they'd been gone from the area when Leo and Darius traveled north to try and find them, but she knew for a fact bear shifters existed and she wasn't sure she wanted them anywhere near her family. Leo had a lot of work ahead of him if he wanted the packs to accept bear shifters into the mix.

And speaking of bear shifters, Maya stood from her spot next to her brother and walked away with a shake of her head. Zander made an apologetic face but also got up to follow his wife. They spoke quietly but didn't return to the table, instead moving towards the group of smaller children on a picnic blanket in the grass a good distance from the pool.

Nova followed their path, looking for the youngest of Rafe and Zoey's daughters and finally caught sight of her sitting in the grass with a group of other pre-teens. Maya and Zander's daughter, Carmen, was beside her, whispering in her ear and making Nora laugh. Nova didn't like to play favorites with her nieces and nephews but she could admit, at least to herself, that Leonora, named for her own brother and Rafe's oldest friend, Leo, was the one whose future she knew without even looking, was going to be full of excitement and adventure.

Also in the little group having a makeshift picnic were Luna's ten year old twin girls, Serena and Simone, and Maya's ten year old daughter, Daria, named for Darius.

Nova loved that they were all such good friends. They were cousins after all. It was sweet seeing them play together and nice that they would get to grow up together, knowing that there were always friends just around the bend for them to have fun with. Nova had loved having three older siblings to rely on and while the group of ten to twelve year olds on the blanket all had older siblings as well, the five of them were like an inseparable little pack unto themselves.

Sometimes, seeing her sisters' daughters together like this, Nova wished that she hadn't waited two years after mating with Griffin to get pregnant. It would have been sweet to see her own children among their little pack. But then she thought of all the fun she and Griffin had experienced traveling and growing over those first two years together and she knew that the babies had come when they were meant to and not a day before.

Of course, they weren't babies anymore either.

She turned her head and saw Griffin playing touch football with their twin boys, eight year old Lucas and Marcus. They looked so much like their father it made her heart swell with pride. She could remember a time when his looks, though handsome, had worried her, but that was all long since forgotten. Now her heart raced at the sight of him and when he caught her watching and grinned, everything inside of her still ached to reach out for him.

Kobe and Kyler, now sixteen and growing into their full height and build as Alpha wolves, were her own twin sons heroes. They were good boys too, even if they were still rambunctious and constantly breaking things because they forgot about how big they'd grown. They were good sports with their younger nephews though and played with them as Griffin tossed the football over. Kyler caught it and ran in circles around Lucas, making him giggle. Marcus came to his brother's defense, kicking Kyler in the shin. Kobe caught him



up and tucked him under his arm like a football, running around with him until all four boys were laughing.

Griffin climbed the porch steps slowly and his smile was so big Nova couldn't help but smile back at him. God she loved this man. Loved him more with every passing year. The visions she'd had of them on their wedding day had only been the start of their incredible life together. And there was still so much more of it to share.

"Is she asleep?" Griffin kept his voice quiet as he approached and Nova nodded.

"Out like a light."

She was holding their two year old daughter, Ivy, in her arms. The toddler was asleep now after indulging in too much fun in the sun and in the pool with her cousins earlier and Nova didn't want to risk waking her by trying to get out of the chair. Especially because her belly was swollen to the point that she had to strain to get upright out of a normal chair. She was bound to tip over the rocking chair if she attempted to rise with her daughter in her arms.

"Want me to take her?"

"Nah. She'll wake up if we try to move her and then there'll be hell to pay."

"True. She has a temper, just like her mama." Griffin winked playfully, taking the rocking chair beside her. "She's beautiful like her too. Especially when she's peacefully sleeping."

"Ha-ha." Nova mock laughed. "Very funny."

"Can I get you anything since you're stuck here for a bit?" He offered. "You should drink some water. It's a hot day."

"I'm well aware how hot it is, Griffin." Nova shot him a dirty look. "I'm pretty sure if I could stand up, sweat would pour down my legs and everyone here would think my water had broke."

"Sorry." He looked only mildly apologetic and Nova snorted.

“Don’t you give me that sweet-faced look.” She chided. “This is your fault. You and your four kid family plan.”

“Hey, you knew how many I wanted from the start.” He reached for her free hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the back softly, “And you agreed, eventually.”

“I did.” She smiled at him, pushing away her annoyance because she knew it was only due to the heat and her very pregnant state that her nerves were wearing thin. “You can be very convincing when you want to be.”

“It helps that we make beautiful babies.” He nipped at the pad of one of her fingers and unbidden, heat coiled low in her belly.

“Don’t even start that smooth talking seduction of yours, Griffin DeLuca.” She snatched her hand back. “That’s how I got into this situation in the first place.”

He chuckled, “They say making love can put you into labor and I know you’re ready for our new baby girl to join us. Just thought I’d offer my services.”

Nova rolled her eyes, “Griff, I feel like a beached whale. My boobs hurt. I’m gassy. And I’m holding a two-year old that cries whenever I put her down. Even if I was in the mood, I seriously doubt we could find ten minutes of alone time to make that happen.”

“Ten minutes.” He shook his head with a wry smile. “Still doubting my prowess even after four kids I see.”

“Not at all. Ten minutes is exactly how long it took to make this happen.” She pointed to her belly and Griffin chuckled.

“God I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Give me those lips, sweetheart.” He leaned over and she only had to turn her head slightly.

He brushed his mouth over hers, keeping it soft and sweet. She smiled into his tenderness, constantly amazed that he

always knew exactly what she needed. He leaned back after a few moments and stroked her face.

“My beautiful mate, I don’t know what I ever did to deserve you, or all of this.” He motioned around the yard. “But I’m happy fate saw fit to bless me because I can’t imagine my life without you.”

Nova blinked back the tears that came far too often with this pregnancy. She felt the same way. They’d been through a lot, both before they’d met and after. But they’d found their way through and made a good life for themselves.

People had tried to take that happiness from them, from all of them, but looking around at the Hudson and the DeLuca families so intertwined, at the shifters and the humans so easily mingling, at the Crescent and Moirae packs that couldn’t be closer because of the love that they all shared, Nova knew that no matter what life threw at them, they would be okay because they had each other.

And because, despite what they’d all thought at one point or another, fate always had their backs.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you're reading this, thank you. It means you've made it through all five books in the Fated Mates Series, a series that wouldn't exist if it wasn't for you.

Way back in 2018 I decided to try my hand at a wolf shifter romance. I wasn't sure I'd be any good at it. I wasn't sure anyone would read it. So I planned for it to be two books worth of spicy paranormal romance, I put them out into the world and then I went back to writing my usual kind of novels.

Only, *Unbreakable Bond* and *Unbelievable Faith* didn't go unnoticed the way I thought they would. *Unbreakable Bond* won the 2018 Fresh Fiction Award for Paranormal Romance. It sold and sold and kept on selling. Tantor Media picked up the duet and released Rafe, Zoey, Michael and Luna in audiobook and new readers just kept finding their way to my little duet with two happily ever afters. As you did, you asked for more wolf books and despite the fact that four years passed and my schedule was packed with contemporary and M/M novels, you never stopped asking. So, this book and the two that came before it, are all thanks to you.

Thank you for believing in me and for loving this world that I created just as much as I do. I hope you're happy with the way things ended. Everyone got their HEA, the kids are growing up and who knows, maybe someday soon, they'll all be old enough for a Fated Legacy Series. ;)

I also need to thank the people who help me make the stories in my head come out on paper. Leanne Jerusal, Maren Lee, Tarrah Anders, Brittany Franks, Melissa Gill and Sara Miller.

You each make me a better person and a better author.

I also need to thank Meka L. Rascoe for naming Kobe and Kyler. How did I get through so many books without naming them? We may never know. But I'm thrilled that the "Devilish Duo" aka Michael and Luna's twin boys, have such great

names now... and the possibility for books of their own one  
day.

This book wouldn't be the same without each and every one of  
your contributions.

Xoxo, Jess

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jess Bryant is an avid indoorswoman. A city girl trapped in a country girl's life, her heart resides in Dallas but her soul and roots are in small town Oklahoma. She enjoys manicures, the color pink, and her completely impractical for country life stilettos. She believes that hair color is a legitimate form of therapy, as is reading and writing romance. She started writing as a little girl but her life changed forever when she stole a book from her aunt's Harlequin collection and she's been creating love stories with happily ever afters ever since.

Jess holds a degree in Public Relations from the University of Oklahoma and is a lifetime supporter of her school and athletic teams. And why not? They have a ton of National Championships! She may be a girlie girl but she knows her sports stats and isn't afraid to tell you that your school isn't as cool as hers... or that your sports romance got it all wrong.

For more information on Jess and upcoming releases, contact her at [jessbryantbooks@gmail.com](mailto:jessbryantbooks@gmail.com) or follow her on her many social media accounts for news and shenanigans.

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# UNBREAKABLE BOND



## FATED MATES BOOK 1

### **Sometimes fate gets it all wrong.**

Zoey Kent has lived with that fact ever since she turned

eighteen and learned that the man she loved could never be hers. He's a born shifter, a wolf, and she's a mere human. Fate doesn't care if on paper they're a perfect pair. She isn't his fated mate and she's resigned herself to the knowledge that someday, she'll have to watch Michael mate with another. It's never crossed her mind that there might be someone else out there for her, that she would be the one to mate another, to choose another over everything she's ever known or wanted.

### **Sometimes fate gets it all right.**

Rafe Hudson left his pack behind years ago. Physically and mentally scarred from an attack that left his parents and twin dead, he walked away from his responsibilities as Alpha. He never intended to return but lone wolf or not, he can't leave Michael open to an attack he's learned is coming for his only brother. What he didn't know was that going home would mean scenting his mate, the one person in the world that could make him whole again, that could give him everything he thought he'd lost. His pack, his home and his family.

### **But fate always has a plan.**

There's no way Michael's brother is her future, is there? Just like there's no way that the girl his brother has loved since they were kids, was always meant to be his, right?

Only fate knows why they were brought together but there is one thing for sure, the sparks between Zoey and Rafe are undeniable. The bond between them is unbreakable. And together... they'll change the face of the pack forever.

# UNBELIEVABLE FAITH

## FATED MATES BOOK 2

### **Fate can be cruel.**

Luna DeLuca has lost everything except for her faith in herself. Kidnapped, tortured and threatened by a male that's already killed half her family, she knows the only way to save the other half is by offering herself up to him. To save her sisters, she's willing to do anything, even accept a claim from a male that isn't her mate, a mark on her soul that will ruin her forever. But if that is what her family needs, what her pack needs, she'll do it to save them all.

### **Fate can be twisted.**

Michael Hudson thought his mission to save the neighboring Crescent pack was about helping out a friend. He thought it was about avenging an attack on his own. But the second he sets his eyes on the beautiful girl locked away in a dank basement he knows she's why he was put on the face of this planet. She's the reason he's here. She's everything. She's his. His mate. His fate. His future. Only, she bears the scent of another and is nothing like what he imagined his fated mate to be.

### **But fate can also be kind.**

As brave as she is, Luna's wolf is submissive and submissive wolves aren't meant to lead packs. They aren't meant to be Queens. She knows that. So does Michael. But when he refuses to give up on her, refuses to walk away or back down, she begins to see why fate put them together. She softens him and he strengthens her and maybe, just maybe, if

they believe enough in each other they can find their way to forever.

# UNAVOIDABLE TRUTH

## FATED MATES BOOK 3

*Sometimes the thing you least expect, is exactly what you've been looking for.*

Darius Moreno knows his place. He's the Head Enforcer of the Moirae Pack. He protects and councils his Alpha. If it came down to it, he'd give his life to save each and every one of his packmates. They're the only family he's ever known, or needed. He never planned to mate, knowing it would take time away from his duties, but fate has other plans for him.

Leo DeLuca knows who he was meant to be. The Alpha of the Crescent Pack, he was born to power and raised to lead. But when a crazed wolf murdered his parents and kidnapped his sisters, his entire world turned upside down. He knew that asking the Moira pack for help was the only way to save his family, but he never imagined it would lead him to his fated mate.

Two males from different packs. Two fierce, dominant personalities. Two alpha wolves vying for power. It should be a recipe for disaster but when fate chooses, the truth is unavoidable. Darius and Leo were made for each other, two halves of a whole. Now, if they can stop fighting fate and each other, they may finally realize they're stronger together than they could ever be apart.

# UNMISTAKABLE MATE



## FATED MATES BOOK 4

*We make our own family.*

Zander Leery gave up on the idea of family a long time ago. He grew up bouncing around the foster care system, never finding a home to call his own. He has no ties to anyone or anything so the last thing he expected was a phone call saying his estranged older sister made him guardian to a niece he'd never known existed.

With no idea what else to do with the child, he heads for Noir, Louisiana in search of the younger half-sister he barely remembers, but what he finds in the little bayou town will change his life forever.

*We make our own fate.*

Maya DeLuca gave up on the idea of fate a long time ago. She has no use for a fate that let a crazed wolf kill her parents, kidnap her sisters and torture her. She's worked hard to overcome her traumatic past, to grow into a strong, independent woman and a fierce Alpha Wolf. She makes her own decisions, not some almighty force.

She has her own plans and they don't include the very human mate who just showed up on her doorstep with no idea that the supernatural world even exists.

*We make our own happily ever after.*

He's human. She's a shifter. But their connection is unmistakable. Can Zander accept this new world that he's stumbled into? Can Maya believe in the possibility that fate

chose right? And if they can find common ground, will they discover that sometimes it's our mistakes that lead us to exactly where we were always meant to be?