

Chapter 10

They stayed at the park for two hours.

Jax pushed Blake on the swings. Ryder ran a formal test of Jax's intelligence, which involved seventeen questions about dinosaurs, trains, and whether dragons were real. Jax answered every one with complete seriousness — including the dragon question, where he said "I've never seen one, but I've met people who fought like them," which Ryder accepted as valid.

Nova sat on the bench and watched.

She had prepared for a lot of things. She had not prepared for *this* — Jax on one knee showing Ryder a push-up. Blake climbing onto his back without asking, and Jax just taking the weight, adjusting, carrying on like it was something he already knew how to do.

Her wolf was doing something unhelpful in her chest.

She told it firmly to stop.

When it was time to leave, both boys hugged him. Ryder was brief and dignified. Blake held on for fifteen seconds — which was longer than Blake held on to most adults.

She loaded them into the car and walked back to where Jax was standing.

"Same time next week?" she said. She'd decided on the walk over. Not for her, not for him — for them. The boys deserved a father.

"I want more than weekly park visits," he said.

"That's where we start."



"Nova—"

"You've known about them for fourteen hours," she said. Even. Steady. "This is where we start."

His jaw tightened. Whatever he was holding in stayed in.

"There's a security issue," he said.

"What?"

"The rogues. The same group that took you three years ago. We've had intelligence for six weeks that they're targeting my bloodline." His eyes locked on hers. "My council thought it was a hypothetical threat. I didn't know I *had* a bloodline outside my brothers." A pause. "Nova. Those boys are sons of the Alpha King. They're not safe in a two-room apartment with no pack protection."

She stared at him.

"You've known for fourteen hours and you're already—"

"I'm telling you a fact. Not giving an order." He stepped closer. Not crowding — just close enough that she couldn't dismiss the weight of what he was saying. "The rogues who grabbed you weren't random. Someone sent them. That someone has ears in this city."

She wanted to argue.

She thought about the man at the gala with the rogue brand burned into his throat.

"What are you suggesting?" she said carefully.

"My building. Full security team, pack enforcers, perimeter wards."



"They'll be protected."

"That's not a suggestion. That's a takeover."

"I'm *asking*."

"You've never asked for anything in your life."

Something moved across his face. "I know. I'm working on it." He held her gaze. "I know what I did. I know what it cost you. I'm not asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to let me keep them safe."

She looked at him for a long, honest moment.

She thought about Ryder's small serious voice: **we didn't know you yet. But I missed you.**

She thought about the rogue brand.

She thought about the broken water heater.

"Separate floors," she said.

He blinked. "What?"

"If we come. Separate floors. The boys see you when I decide. No showing up unannounced. No alpha commands in my presence. And the second I say we're leaving — we leave. No argument."

He studied her.

"Okay," he said.

"I mean it."

"I know." The edge of his mouth shifted — not quite a smile, something



more careful. "You've always meant everything you've said to me. It's one of the most unsettling things about you."

She did not smile back.

"I need to go home and pack," she said. "We'll come tonight."

She walked to the car.

"Nova."

She stopped without turning.

"Thank you," he said. Low. No performance in it. The voice she recognized from three years ago — stripped down, real.

She got in the car.

In the back seat, Blake was explaining something urgent to his stuffed bear. Ryder was watching the window with that old-soul expression he'd had since he was eighteen months old.

"Mama," Ryder said.

"Yeah, bug."

"Are we going to see him again?"

She pulled out of the parking lot.

"Yeah," she said. "We are."

Ryder nodded slowly. Like his wolf had already told him, and he was just waiting for her to confirm it.

"Good," he said.



Nova told herself this was about safety.

She believed this completely — all the way up until Jax opened his penthouse door and her wolf, for the first time in three years, went quiet and still and finally, terrifyingly, at peace.

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