

## Chapter 11

The penthouse took up the entire top floor.

Nova stepped out of the elevator and stood still for a moment. Floor-to-ceiling windows. City lights spread below like scattered coins. Furniture that cost more than her car. A kitchen that had clearly never been used for anything messier than reheating coffee.

Behind her, Blake said "WHOA" at a volume the neighbors three floors down probably heard.

Ryder walked in like he was conducting an inspection.

Jax stood to the side, hands in his pockets, trying not to look like he was holding his breath.

"West wing," he said. "Three bedrooms, private bathroom, separate entrance from the main floor."

Nova nodded once. Practical. Professional. Temporary — she was treating this as temporary and she would keep treating it that way.

"Boys. Stay where I can see you."

This was ignored immediately. Blake had found a bowl of smooth stones on the side table and was holding one up like a geologist. Ryder had walked straight to the window and pressed both palms flat against the glass.

"We're very high up," Ryder reported.

"Forty-second floor," Jax said.

Ryder considered this. "Can you see dragons from here?"



"Haven't spotted any. But I keep looking."

Ryder nodded, satisfied.

Nova carried their bags to the west wing and stopped in the doorway of the boys' room.

Two low beds. Dark blue rugs. And on the ceiling — glow stars. Pressed into the rough shape of Orion's belt.

The exact same pattern she had on their ceiling at the apartment.

She stood in the doorway for a long moment.

"I had someone describe your place," Jax said quietly behind her. "What it looked like for them."

She turned.

He was in the doorway with the open expression — no armor, no performance. Just a man who had done something careful and was waiting to see if it landed.

"You had someone look at my apartment," she said.

"Security purposes."

"Jax."

"The stars were yours." He held her gaze. "I wanted them to feel at home."  
"

She looked at the ceiling. Back at him.

"Don't do things like that," she said.

"Why?"

"Because it makes it harder to stay angry at you and right now I need the anger." Plain. Honest.

He was quiet. "Fair enough."

From the main room came a thump. Then Blake: "I'M FINE."

---

Both boys were asleep by nine. It took forty-five minutes, two glasses of water, and Ryder demanding a full explanation of what the forty-second floor was forty-second \*of.\*

Nova came back to find Jax sitting on the kitchen counter eating cereal.

She stopped.

"Alpha King. On the counter."

"I was hungry." Completely unbothered. "There's more if you want."

She sat at the island. He put a bowl in front of her without asking. She ate because she hadn't had anything since noon.

They sat with the city below them, eating cereal in the kind of silence that had too much history for comfort but too much exhaustion for tension.

"Ryder is you," Jax said after a while. "The way he watches everything. Like he's filing it."

"He's been that way since he could focus his eyes." She wrapped her hands around her glass. "Blake is how you are when no one's watching."



"When the performance comes off."

Jax was quiet for a moment. "You paid that much attention."

"I had to. I was trying to figure out if you were worth it."

"And?"

She looked at him. "The jury was out for a long time."

Something passed across his face — not offense. Something closer to deserved.

She rinsed her bowl and put it in the rack.

"I meant what I said. About the rules."

"I know."

"My timeline. My calls."

"I know, Nova."

She looked at him one more time — the Alpha King on her counter, looking for half a second like a twenty-two-year-old holding something he'd broken and found again and still didn't know how to carry — and she walked down the hall and closed her door.

She lay on the bed staring at the ceiling.

She could hear Ryder's even breathing and Blake's soft snuffling through the wall. The building's wards hummed low against her skin — old pack protection, deep and solid.

Her wolf let out a slow exhale and settled into something she hadn't felt in three years.



\*Home,\* her wolf said.

"Stop it," Nova whispered.

Her wolf did not stop it.

---

\*Down the hall, Jax sat on the counter for another hour.\*

\*Not eating. Just listening to the sound of his sons breathing through the walls for the very first time.\*