



## Chapter 12

The twins found Jax at six-fifteen in the morning.

Nova heard it happen from her room — small feet on hardwood, a knock that was really more of a palm-slap, and then Ryder's voice carrying clearly through the wall: "We're awake. What do you do for breakfast?"

There was a pause.

Then Jax's sleep-rough voice: "...what do you want?"

"Eggs," Ryder said. "Blake wants the yellow kind."

"Scrambled," Blake clarified from somewhere close behind him.

Another pause. Longer this time.

Nova lay in bed with her arm over her eyes, listening.

"Give me five minutes," Jax said.

Nova got up.

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She came into the kitchen to find Jax at the stove in a grey shirt and sweats, cracking eggs into a bowl with the focused expression of a man taking a task seriously that he had never done before. Ryder was sitting on the counter — already — offering instruction. Blake was spinning slowly on a barstool, arms out for balance, in his own private universe.

"You need more butter," Ryder said.

"I have butter."

"More."

Jax added more butter. Nova stood in the doorway and watched. Something warm moved through her chest before she could stop it. She moved it back out.

She made coffee. She sat at the island. She did not say anything about the fact that this looked, from a certain angle, exactly like something she'd never let herself want.

The eggs were slightly overcooked. Nobody said anything about it. Blake ate his entire portion and immediately asked for more. Ryder ate his with the measured thoroughness of a child who felt strongly about finishing what was in front of him before making any judgments.

"These are good," Ryder announced eventually.

Jax visibly relaxed.

"I could teach you a better way," Ryder added.

"You're three," Nova said.

"I watch you cook every day."

Jax looked at Nova across the island. His expression was doing the thing she was learning to brace for — private, warm, the corners of his eyes soft in a way that had no business being aimed at her over scrambled eggs at six-thirty in the morning.

She looked at her coffee.

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She worked from the west wing that afternoon while Jax had his security

briefing. Marcus had sent three manuscripts that needed line edits by Friday. She sat cross-legged on the bed with her laptop and worked steadily, listening to the twins play in the adjacent room, checking in every forty minutes.

At three o'clock she heard voices in the main hall.

Blake's laugh — the big one, full-body and shameless.

She got up.

Jax was lying on the living room floor with both boys sitting on his back while he did push-ups. Blake was counting, though not in numerical order. Ryder had appointed himself quality control and was scrutinizing each repetition with narrowed eyes.

"That one didn't count," Ryder said.

"It counted," Jax said, muffled by effort.

"Your elbow bent wrong."

"My elbow—" A breath. "—bent exactly right."

"Again," Ryder said.

Jax did it again.

Nova leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms and did not smile.

She absolutely did not smile.

"Dinner at seven," she said. "Boys need baths at six."

Jax looked at her upside down from the floor. His hair was a disaster. He



looked younger than he had any right to look. "You cook or should I—"

"I cook," she said.

"I'm a fast learner. Ryder said so."

"Ryder is three and very generous." She pushed off the doorframe. "Back to work."

She went back to the bedroom.

She sat down at her laptop.

She stared at the manuscript without reading it for approximately ninety seconds.

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Dinner was pasta. Simple. The boys ate without incident. Afterward, during the bath-and-bedtime stretch, Jax appeared in the hallway and she handed him a small boy in pajamas without planning to. He took Ryder without hesitation — one arm, like he'd been doing it for years — and read the book she pointed to without asking questions about why she'd chosen that particular one.

His voice doing the voices was going to be a problem.

Both boys were asleep by eight-fifteen.

She and Jax stood in the hallway outside their room and the apartment was quiet around them.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For today."

"Nova, you don't have to—"



"I'm not being polite. I mean it." She looked at him directly. "They had a good day. That matters."

He looked back at her. The penthouse was dim and warm and the city glittered through the windows at the end of the hall, and he was standing close enough that she could smell him — pine, something darker underneath — and her wolf went very alert and very unhelpful.

"I want more days like this," he said.

"I know."

"I'll take whatever you decide to give me."

She studied his face for a long moment.

"We'll see," she said.

She went to her room.

She sat on the edge of the bed in the dark.

Her heart was doing something loud and complicated in her chest and she let it — just for a minute, just in private — before she squared her shoulders and told herself firmly that \*whatever this feeling was, it was information and not instruction.\*

Then her phone buzzed.

Unknown number. One line of text.

\*We know where the boys are. The Alpha King can't protect what doesn't belong to him.\*

Her blood went cold.

Chapter 12

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\*The rogues already knew.\*

\*And they had her number.\*

big sale: 100 bonus free fou you

get it

6/6

Commented [Ma1]:

Commented [Ma2R1]: