

Chapter 14

Three days passed.

They found a rhythm, the four of them — which surprised Nova more than almost anything else had. She had expected awkward. She had expected the boys to act out, the way children did with disruption, or for Jax to be stiff and uncertain with them in a way that made everyone uncomfortable.

Instead, Ryder had essentially adopted him.

It was a quiet, formal adoption — Ryder did everything quietly and formally — but it was complete. He brought Jax his important observations throughout the day, required Jax's opinion on matters of dinosaur taxonomy, and had begun explaining, at length, his system for ranking the clouds visible from the forty-second floor.

Blake, meanwhile, had decided Jax was a piece of playground equipment. He climbed on him during breakfast. He ran at him full speed in hallways on the assumption that Jax would catch him, and Jax always did, and this had become a game with no rules and no end.

Nova worked. She trained — the combat trainer Jax hired was a compact, businesslike woman named Sera who did not take excuses and had Nova's footwork looking entirely different in forty-eight hours. She cooked dinner. She kept her door closed at night.

She kept her distance.

She was good at it. She'd been good at it for three years.

The fourth night she couldn't sleep.

It wasn't the rogues — the perimeter had been quiet, the building was

locked down, the boys were safe. It was something else. Something low and persistent that she recognized from her biology textbooks: the pre-heat restlessness that came when an omega's wolf decided it was done being ignored.

Not now, Nova told her wolf firmly. *Absolutely not now.*

Her wolf informed her, without words, that the timing was not her problem.

Nova lay in the dark and stared at the ceiling and counted backwards from a hundred, which her therapist had recommended for anxiety and which was not helping because this was not anxiety. This was her own biology staging an inconvenient protest.

At midnight she gave up and went to get water.

He was in the kitchen.

Of course he was.

Different night, different cereal, same counter. He looked up when she came in and they both stopped for a second — the specific pause of two people who had both thought they were alone.

"Can't sleep," she said. Not a question.

"Never sleep much." He slid off the counter. "I'll go."

"You don't have to."

He stopped.

She got her water. She leaned against the counter on the opposite side of the kitchen and drank half of it. The city hummed below them. The



apartment was warm.

She could smell him from here.

This was the problem.

She'd been managing it during the day — movement, distance, the buffer of two small boys and a full schedule. But at midnight in a quiet kitchen with no buffer, her wolf was pressing hard against the back of her ribs and making its opinions extremely clear.

"Nova." His voice was low. Careful.

"Don't," she said.

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"I know what you can smell." She looked at him levelly. "And I need you to pretend you can't."

He was quiet for a moment. His jaw worked. She watched him physically take hold of whatever his wolf was telling him and lock it down.

"Okay," he said.

"This doesn't mean anything. It's biology."

"I know."

"It happens to omegas when they're—" She stopped. Started again. "It's involuntary. It doesn't mean anything about how I feel or what I want or —"

"Nova." Quiet. Steady. "I know. I'm not going to use it. You have my word."
"



She looked at him for a long moment.

She believed him.

That was its own problem — she was starting to believe him about things, and that was more dangerous than any rogue with a burner phone.

"Go to bed, Jax," she said.

He set his bowl in the sink. He crossed to the hallway door. He paused.

"For what it's worth," he said without turning around. "It's not just biology. On my side." He paused. "It hasn't been just biology since September of freshman year and I have been lying to myself about that for a very long time."

He went down the hall.

Nova stood in the kitchen with her glass of water and her wolf absolutely howling at her.

She stood there for a long time.

Then she set the glass down, walked down the hall, and stopped in front of his door.

She stood there.

This is a terrible idea, she told herself.

She thought about three years of doing hard things alone. She thought about building something from nothing and being proud of it and not needing anyone to fill in the gaps.

She thought about what he'd just said.

It hasn't been just biology since September of freshman year.

She knocked.

One knock. Quiet.

His voice, immediately, like he was right on the other side: "Come in."

She opened the door.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, head up. Waiting. Not assuming — just waiting, the way he'd been learning to wait since the park.

She stood in the doorway.

"I'm not forgiving you," she said.

"I know."

"This doesn't fix anything."

"I know that too."

"I just —" She stopped. She pressed her lips together. "I'm tired of being alone in there."

He stood up. Slowly. He crossed the room and stopped in front of her and looked at her face for a moment — long enough to be sure — and then he reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear the way he had at that frat party four years ago, when everything started.

"You don't have to be," he said.



She stepped inside and closed the door.

She told herself this was one night.

Her wolf said: finally.

Somewhere down the hall, Ryder opened one eye, smiled a tiny private smile, and went back to sleep.