

## Chapter 19

The news cycle hit by three p.m.

Nova watched it happen from the kitchen — Jax's phone buzzing in steady waves while Marcus briefed him on which packs were responding with support, which were staying quiet, and which were generating the kind of noise that needed managing.

The press wasn't kind about her, but it wasn't cruel either. \*Unknown omega. No pack affiliation. Single mother.\* The more neutral outlets led with the twins — the Wilder heirs, the bloodline question answered. The less neutral ones led with her scholarship record and a photo someone had dug up from the university's freshman directory, four years old, Nova looking directly at the camera with the expression of someone who had recently decided the world owed her nothing and was fine with that.

She actually liked that photo.

"You should let the communications team put out a statement," Jax said.

"About what?"

"Your background. Contextualize it before someone else does."

"My background is public record and I'm not embarrassed by any of it." She set her coffee down. "Let it breathe. People will form their own opinions. A statement from the Alpha King's team makes it look defensive."

He looked at her for a moment.

"You're better at this than I am," he said.

"I've been managing how people see me my entire life," she said. "Rich



alphas don't get that education."

He took that without flinching.

The twins, for their part, were entirely unaffected by the news cycle. Ryder asked what a \*bloodline\* was and Nova told him it meant his family and he nodded and went back to his drawing. Blake asked if the news people were going to come to the house and Jax said no and Blake seemed satisfied.

By evening the tone online had shifted.

Someone had found her editing portfolio. Someone else had dug up her university awards — two academic prizes, a research commendation — and the conversation moved from \*who is she\* to \*she's actually accomplished.\* Not because of Jax. Despite everything that had tried to make her small.

Nova sat on the floor of the boys' room helping Ryder build a block tower and didn't look at her phone.

---

Jax found her there an hour later.

The boys were in bed. She was sitting with her back against the wall, knees up, reading the manuscript she'd been neglecting for two days. He sat down on the floor beside her without asking.

She lowered the manuscript.

"The three council members released a joint statement," he said. "They're calling the registration irregular and requesting a full review."

"Let them," she said. "It buys us time and it makes them look



reactionary."

"That's what I thought." He rested his elbows on his knees. He was quiet for a moment — the particular quiet of a person working up to something.

She waited.

"I've been trying to figure out how to do this right," he said finally. "I've looked at it from about forty different angles. There's no clean version."

She looked at him sideways.

He shifted on the floor — and then, without any announcement, he moved from sitting to kneeling.

Right there. On the floor of his sons' bedroom, in the glow-star light, in front of no one but her.

She put the manuscript down.

"I stood in a hallway four years ago," he said, "and I looked at you in front of my teammates and I made you into something small because I was terrified of what you actually were to me." His voice was even. No performance. Just the words, carefully chosen. "I told you it was nothing. I told you to not get attached. I told you to get out." He held her eyes. "And then when you came to me with the most important thing you've ever said to me, I called you a liar and turned my back."

She was very still.

"I have spent four years," he said, "being very good at everything except the one thing that mattered. And I need you to know — not because it fixes anything, not because it earns me anything — that I understand what I did. All of it. The full weight of it." His jaw was tight but his eyes



were steady. "You raised our sons alone because I was a coward. You built a whole life alone because I was a coward. And you walked into that council chamber today and took on three of the most powerful people in this territory because that's who you've always been, and I have only ever made it harder."

The room was quiet.

Nova looked at him — on his knees, unguarded, no armor anywhere on him.

She thought about the gas station floor. The editing jobs at midnight. Ryder's small hand doing up his own shoelace for the first time. Three years of being the only person responsible for two lives and never once letting herself break all the way down because she didn't have the time.

"Get up," she said.

"Nova—"

"Get up, Jax." Her voice was quiet. "I heard you. I believe you." She reached out and put her hand on his jaw — the first time she'd touched his face in four years, deliberate and certain. "But I don't need you on your knees. I need you upright beside me. That's the only place you're useful."

He looked at her for a long moment.

He covered her hand with his.

"Tell me what to do," he said. "From here. Whatever you need."

"Be here," she said simply. "Consistently. Without performing it." She dropped her hand. "The boys need that more than either of us needs the apology."



He nodded.

He sat back down beside her. Close — their shoulders touching. He didn't make anything of it and neither did she.

She picked her manuscript back up.

He sat in the quiet with her.

After a while he reached over and pointed at a line she'd edited and said: "That sentence is better without the second clause."

She looked at it.

"You're right," she said.

They stayed there on the floor until the city outside went fully dark.

---

\*He'd gotten on his knees.\*

\*She'd told him to stand.\*

\*That was the moment things stopped being about the past.\*

\*The question now was what they were building toward — and whether it could survive what was coming.\*

big sale: 100 bonus free fou you

get it

