

Chapter 22

She bought it at a pharmacy three blocks from the building.

She wore a hat. She paid cash. She felt ridiculous about both of these things and did them anyway because she wasn't ready — not for Jax to know, not for Marcus to find it in a security sweep of her receipts, not for any version of this conversation until she was absolutely certain and had a plan.

She'd been here before.

The gas station bathroom. The cold tile. The four-minute timer.

This time she sat on the edge of the penthouse bathtub in the private bathroom off her room, with the door locked and the fan running, and she waited.

Two minutes.

She thought about the night two weeks ago. She thought about how she'd told herself it was one night, biology, information not instruction — all the careful language she'd built around it to keep herself from admitting that something had quietly and completely shifted.

One minute.

She thought about three years of building a life alone and being proud of it, genuinely proud, and whether this meant that was over.

She thought about whether she wanted it to be over.

The timer went off.

She looked at the test.



She sat very still for a long time.

She did not tell him that day.

She needed twenty-four hours to hold it alone — to let it be just hers, the way Ryder and Blake had been just hers for the first hours after those two pink lines in that gas station. The time before it became a conversation, a negotiation, a thing that other people had opinions about.

She went through the day normally. Trained with Sera. Reviewed the security briefing. Made dinner. Put the boys to bed — Ryder's bath, Blake's three stories, the mutual argument about who got to turn off the light that had become a nightly tradition.

She sat in the kitchen after they were asleep and drank tea and thought.

It was different this time. That was the first thing she acknowledged. She wasn't alone in a city where no one knew her name. She wasn't three months pregnant with the children of a man who had told her to get out.

She was in a penthouse on the forty-second floor with the wards humming under her skin, and down the hall was a man who had gotten on his knees and told her the truth, who had taken notes when she talked about Voss, who had pressed glow stars to his ceiling so her sons would feel at home.

Who still had not earned everything back. She was honest about that.

But who was trying. She was honest about that too.

"You're still up."

Jax. In the kitchen doorway, same grey shirt and sweats as every night,



the Alpha King entirely off-duty.

"Tea," she said. Held up the cup as explanation.

He came and sat across from her.

She looked at him over her cup.

She thought: *I could tell him now.*

She thought: *I need one more day.*

"The council sent another letter," he said. "Elder Marsh is requesting a formal challenge to the registration."

"Let him file it. It'll take six weeks to process and by then the boys' first full shift will have happened and every pack in the territory will have felt it." She set her cup down. "Timing works in our favor."

He looked at her. "You've been thinking about this."

"I think about everything." She paused. "I told you. It's how I stay ahead of people who have more resources than me."

"You have resources now," he said quietly.

She looked at him.

"Nova." He leaned forward slightly. "Whatever I have is—" He stopped. Chose a different version of the sentence. "I'm not going anywhere. Whatever happens with the council, with Voss, with any of it. I need you to know that's not contingent."

"Not contingent on what?"

"On anything." His eyes held hers. "Not on the boys. Not on the



registration. Not on —" He stopped again. "You could leave tomorrow and take them and I would still spend the rest of my life making this right. That's not a bargaining position. It's just true."

The kitchen was very quiet.

Her hand was on her stomach without her noticing.

She moved it away.

"I know," she said.

He looked at her for a moment — something flickering at the edge of his expression, like he'd almost noticed the gesture.

"Get some sleep," she said. Gently. "You have the Pacific Northern summit in the morning."

He stood up. He looked at her one more time.

"Goodnight, Nova."

"Goodnight."

He went down the hall.

She sat with her tea until it was cold.

Tomorrow, she told herself. *Tomorrow she would tell him.*

Her wolf agreed, warm and patient and certain in the way she never was, that tomorrow was exactly right.

She didn't know that Jax had seen.



Not the test — he hadn't found that.

But the hand on the stomach.

The careful way she'd moved it.

He lay in his room and stared at the ceiling and did not sleep.

He was not going to say anything until she was ready.

But he knew.