

Chapter 23

She told him in the morning.

Not dramatically. Over coffee, while the twins were in the next room arguing about clouds. She sat across from him at the kitchen island and said: "I need to tell you something. I'm pregnant."

He didn't say anything for a moment.

Then: "I know."

She stared at him. "What?"

"Your hand. Two nights ago." He held her gaze. "I wasn't certain but I suspected. I didn't say anything because I was waiting for you to be ready."

She looked at him for a long, searching moment.

"You waited," she said.

"You always needed to hold things alone first," he said. "I was paying attention."

She sat with that.

She thought about four years ago — the boy who had never waited for anything, who had taken and deflected and decided for her what she needed. She thought about the man sitting across from her now, who had apparently been lying in his room knowing something enormous and choosing not to make it his until she brought it to him.

"I don't know what this means for us," she said. "I need you to know that. I'm not — this doesn't automatically—"



"I know," he said. "Nothing has to be decided today."

"Okay." She wrapped her hands around her cup. "Okay."

From the next room: "*Ryder, that is NOT a storm cloud, that is CIRRUS ___*"

"*Blake, I have told you seventeen times --*"

Both of them looked toward the sound.

"They're going to be insufferable at school," Jax said.

The laugh came out before she could stop it — real and slightly undignified — and she pressed her hand over her mouth. He was looking at her with an expression that she'd stopped trying to translate and had started just allowing to exist.

The marking ceremony had been Jax's idea, proposed carefully the week before, and Nova had taken three days to answer.

Not a mating ceremony — he'd been clear about that. Not a binding, not a permanent claim. A public acknowledgment, an official announcement to the pack that she was under Wilder protection and that the boys were recognized heirs. The mark itself would be symbolic — a pack sigil, not a mate mark. Her choice, revocable, hers.

She'd said yes.

The evening was smaller than she'd expected. Not a stadium. Not a council chamber. The Wilder estate's west terrace — open to the sky, maybe two hundred pack members gathered below. Enough to matter. Not so many that it felt like performance.



Nova stood at the top of the steps in a dark dress that fit properly, which was a novelty she had not fully adjusted to, her hair down, the night air cool on her shoulders.

The boys stood beside her.

Ryder was wearing a small blazer and had strong opinions about it. Blake had already found a moth and was showing it to the nearest enforcer, who was being extremely professional about the situation.

Jax stood in front of her.

The pack below had gone quiet.

He spoke the formal words — the recognition of the heirs, the announcement of intent, the registration of her name. She watched the pack's faces as he spoke. Some were neutral. Some were warm. A few, at the back, were the faces of people who were logging information and would need time.

She was used to that.

Then he stopped speaking the formal words and said, in his own voice — stripped of the Alpha King's cadence, just Jax — "Nova Ellis walked into a room full of people who expected her to be invisible, and spent four years being the most present person in it. She built something out of nothing and she did it better than most people do with everything." A pause. "I'm not asking the pack to trust her. She's going to earn that herself, the way she earns everything." He met her eyes. "I'm just saying her name out loud so there's no confusion about who she is."

The pack below was very quiet.

Then someone started clapping. Two people. Ten.



The boys heard their names said — *Ryder Wilder, Blake Wilder* — and Blake said "that's me" loudly, and the crowd laughed, and Ryder squared his small shoulders like he was accepting a knighthood.

Jax crouched down to the boys' level. He put a hand briefly on each of their heads — the wolf's gesture, territorial and gentle. Their small wolves responded: she could feel it in the air, that same resonance from the kitchen, contained and warm.

He straightened.

He looked at Nova.

The ceremony was over. Two hundred pack members and a formal registration and a speech she hadn't expected.

She stepped forward.

She pressed her palm flat against his chest — over his heartbeat, deliberate and open, the way a wolf told another wolf: *I see you. I'm not running.*

His hand came up and covered hers.

"*Okay,*" she said. Quiet. Just for him.

He exhaled.

From beside them, Ryder said in a carrying whisper: "Are they going to kiss now?"

From Blake, equally carrying: "I hope so, I've been waiting."

The pack laughed.



Nova looked up at Jax.

He kissed her.

Not long. Not performed. Just real — warm and certain and four years of hard road finally finding level ground.

The pack cheered.

Blake said: "FINALLY."

She was marked.

He was hers.

Three miles south, Voss's phone rang.

"They just held a ceremony," said the voice on the other end.

"I know," said Voss.

A pause. Then: "It's time."