

## Chapter 6

Three Years Later — New Life

6:14 a.m.

Nova was already on her second coffee when the twins destroyed the kitchen.

It started with Blake deciding cereal was better as a floor mosaic than breakfast food. That triggered Ryder's deep personal need to outdo his brother in every category. It ended with both of them covered in milk and Nova standing in the doorway holding a dish towel, making a sound that wasn't quite a word.

"Cleanup," she said.

"He started it," Ryder said.

"He \*breathed\* on me first," Blake said.

They were identical. Same dark eyes, same strong jaw, same stubborn furrow between their brows when they decided they were right about something. Nova had spent three years watching that face on two small people — loving it fiercely while pretending it didn't hollow her out sometimes, late at night, when she thought about where that face came from.

She handed them both paper towels.

"Cleanup. Then shoes. Mrs. Reyes picks you up at seven."

They cleaned up. Because they were good boys. Because she had raised them in a small apartment with no pack, no backup, no one to fall back on but each other — and they had turned out, somehow, \*good.\* Bright

and loud and full of opinions and already, at three years old, showing the early flickers of alpha temperament that made her heart swell and twist at the same time.

She tied Ryder's shoes. Blake did his own — something he'd mastered two months ago and was still extremely proud of.

"Mama," Ryder said, tugging her sleeve.

"Yeah, bug."

"Are we going to Mrs. Reyes' forever?"

"Just today. And tomorrow. And Thursday."

"Why do you work so much?"

Nova looked at her son's completely serious face. Three years old and already asking adult questions.

"Because I love you two more than anything," she said. "And loving you costs money."

Ryder thought about this. "I could get a job."

"You could," she agreed. "But first — preschool."

He seemed to find this acceptable.

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The morning rush at the café was the kind of controlled chaos Nova had learned to love. Howling Grounds had been her Wednesday-through-Saturday anchor for fourteen months. It paid the smaller half of the rent. The larger half came from freelance editing she did between midnight

and two a.m., on the nights she could keep her eyes open.

She was tired. Always tired.

But she was *\*fine\**. Actually, genuinely fine — not the brittle, performed version she'd practiced in a gas station mirror three years ago. The real kind. The kind built from the ground up with her own hands.

The apartment was small but it caught afternoon light. The twins had a bedroom with glow stars on the ceiling that she'd put up herself with a step stool and leftover adhesive. She had friends: Dani from the café, Marcus from her editing network, Mrs. Reyes downstairs who had quietly, unofficially adopted all three of them.

She had a life.

Not the one she'd imagined at eighteen. But it was *\*hers\**. That mattered more than she could explain to anyone who hadn't had to build it from scratch.

"Nova." Dani appeared at her elbow, phone out. "Did you follow up on that catering gig? The Halcyon charity event? Your name's on the confirmed list."

Nova wiped down the counter. "I applied weeks ago. Forgot about it."

"Saturday. Six hours. Three hundred dollars." Dani raised an eyebrow. "You mentioned the water heater."

Three hundred in one night.

"What's the event?"

"Some supernatural business summit. Hosted by—" Dani squinted at her screen "—the Wilder Foundation."

The name dropped into Nova's chest like a stone into still water.

She kept her face completely neutral. She was very good at that.

\*Wilder.\*

Seattle was Wilder territory. Had been for two years, since Jax took the Alpha King title. She'd known that when she moved here — had spent two days arguing with herself about it before deciding that a city this size was a different universe from whatever tower he occupied at the top of it.

Three years. Not one close call.

One event. Six hours. Three hundred dollars. The twins had been showering at Mrs. Reyes' place for three weeks because the water heater was dead.

"Fine," she said. "Tell them I'll be there."

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The Halcyon Hotel ballroom was everything Nova's apartment wasn't — soaring ceilings, gold light, flowers worth more than her monthly rent. She collected her server's uniform, clipped her hair back, and put on the expression she'd spent years perfecting: pleasant, present, \*invisible.\*

Six hours. She could do six hours.

She loaded her first tray and moved into the ballroom.

Guests were arriving in clusters — supernatural money in expensive clothes, pack representatives from across the Pacific coast. Nova moved between them smoothly.

She was fine.

Then the room shifted.

Not physically. Not in any way the humans present would have noticed. But every werewolf head turned slightly toward the main entrance at the same moment — that wordless instinct that happened when real pack power walked into a space.

Her wolf, dormant and well-behaved for three years, snapped awake.

\*Don't look,\* Nova told herself.

She looked.

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