

Chapter 8

Jax had been Alpha King for two years.

In that time he had negotiated three pack treaties, ended one territorial war, and built a foundation that had put seventeen hundred displaced omegas into stable housing. He had stood in front of councils and cameras and rival alphas who wanted him dead and he had not once, in two years, lost his composure.

He lost it now.

It was the scent that did it.

He'd caught it in the corridor — her — and his wolf had gone from dormant to feral in the space of a single inhale. He'd been so focused on her *face*, on the fact that she was standing in front of him alive and breathing when he'd spent six months tearing apart rogue dens looking for her body — that he hadn't processed the rest of it immediately.

He processed it now.

He stood at the edge of the ballroom and watched Nova cross the room with her server's tray and he let his wolf do what wolves did — catalog, identify, understand.

Her scent had changed.

Not gone. Still her, still that particular thing that had been making his wolf restless since September of their freshman year, still the thing that had pulled him back again and again despite every wall he'd tried to build. But layered underneath it, threaded through it—

Pups.

He went completely still.

Not metaphorically. Literally still — his security detail noticed immediately, Marcus stepping closer, scanning the room for threats.

"Sir?"

Jax held up one hand without looking at him.

His wolf was pushing so hard he could feel the change trying to happen — the urge to shift, to close the distance between himself and that scent, to understand what he was smelling before his human brain could catch up and tell him what it meant.

Pups. His pups.

Somewhere in this room, or attached to the woman crossing this room — children.

His.

He knew it the same way he knew his own heartbeat. Not because he could prove it. Because his wolf had stopped pushing forward and gone very, very quiet in the way wolves only went quiet when they recognized something that belonged to them.

He moved through the crowd.

He wasn't running. He was barely walking fast. But people got out of his way — they always did — and Nova was crossing to the service entrance and he was not going to let her disappear again the way he'd let her disappear for three years while he told himself it was because he'd had no choice.

"Nova."

She turned around. Slowly. Like a person who had already decided what expression she was going to wear.

She was wearing it. Calm. Pleasant. A closed door.

"The event finishes at eleven," she said. "I'd appreciate being able to finish my shift."

"How old are they?"

The question came out before he could build any architecture around it. No preamble, no strategy. Just the only question that mattered.

Her composure cracked — barely, just for a second. Something moved behind her eyes.

"I don't know what you're —"

"I can *smell* it, Nova."

Her jaw tightened.

The ballroom moved around them — three hundred people who had no idea that the Alpha King was standing in the middle of their charity gala with the ground shifting under his feet. A string quartet played something soft in the corner. Glasses clinked.

"How old," he said again. Quieter.

She looked at him for a long time.

"Three," she said.

The word hit him like a wall.

Three. Which meant they were conceived before — which meant that

night was—

"They're mine," he said. Not a question. He already knew.

Her silence was its own answer.

He looked at her face — really looked — and saw something he'd never let himself see clearly when they were nineteen. The specific kind of tired that came from doing something enormous alone. The careful way she held herself, like she'd learned that no one was coming to hold her up so she'd better get good at it herself.

He had done that.

He had stood in a locker room and told her to *get out* and then a week later he'd told himself she was dead and he'd — what? Grieved? Moved on? Become the Alpha King that everyone needed him to be?

He felt sick.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Safe," she said. "Far from here."

"I want to meet them."

Her chin came up. "That's not your decision."

"They're my sons—"

"You don't know that."

"Nova." He said her name the way his wolf said it — stripped of the Alpha King voice, stripped of everything. "You know I know. Don't do that."

She looked at him.

He watched her wolf surface in her eyes — still there, still sharp, still the thing that had always looked at him like it could see straight through every layer of armor he'd ever built. Three years of hard living and hard choices and she was still the most unsettling person he'd ever stood in front of.

"I have four hours left in my shift," she said.

"I'll wait."

"Jax—"

"I'll *wait,*" he said again. Still quiet. Not a command — he was not going to use his alpha voice on her, not ever again. "I have spent three years thinking you were dead. You can give me four hours."

She studied his face for a long moment.

"Don't make a scene," she said finally.

"I won't."

"Don't come near me while I'm working."

"Okay."

Another long look. He held it. He had nothing left to hide behind and she seemed to understand that because some of the hardness around her eyes shifted — not softened, exactly, but changed.

She picked up her tray and walked back into the crowd.

Jax stood at the edge of the ballroom and waited.