

Chapter 9

Nova almost made it.

The event wound down at eleven-fifteen. She turned in her tray, collected her envelope from Hana, and was moving toward the exit with three other servers when she felt him fall into step beside her. Not touching. Just there — the way a large weather system is just there.

"My car's outside," he said quietly.

"Mine's two blocks down."

"It's raining."

"I have an umbrella."

She pushed through the side exit door into the wet Seattle night. He followed her. His security detail materialized from somewhere — she registered them in her peripheral vision — and he made a small gesture and they dropped back.

They walked in silence for half a block. The rain was steady and cold, the kind that got through umbrellas sideways. Nova kept her eyes forward.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "After the stadium. Where did they take you?"

She didn't want to have this conversation on a wet sidewalk at eleven-thirty at night. She didn't want to have it anywhere.

"Oregon coast," she said. "Rogue safe house. They thought I was connected to your pack — they used me for leverage trying to reach your council. When it didn't work they dumped me at a bus station in Portland." A pause. "Took me a week to figure out what had happened back at the



stadium. By then I'd already decided to disappear."

He was quiet for a moment.

"You decided to disappear," he repeated.

"I was three months pregnant, alone, and the last thing you said to me was to get out of your face." She kept her voice even. "What would you have done?"

He didn't answer. She hadn't expected him to.

They reached her car — a twelve-year-old sedan with a dent in the rear bumper that she kept meaning to fix. She unlocked it and turned to face him.

He looked at the car. Then at her.

"I want to meet them," he said. "Tonight."

"It's almost midnight."

"Nova—"

"They're *asleep,* Jax." For the first time her voice had an edge. "They are three years old and they are asleep. You don't get to walk into their lives at midnight because you had a realization at a party."

He absorbed this. "Tomorrow, then."

"I need time."

"How much time?"

"I don't know." She opened the driver's door. "I need to think."



"Give me your number. Please."

She looked at him over the top of the car door. He was standing in the rain — hadn't even reached for an umbrella, his suit jacket getting soaked, and either he didn't notice or he didn't care. His eyes were doing the thing she'd always found impossible to look at directly: completely open. No armor.

She pulled out her phone.

She gave him her number.

He texted at 7:04 a.m.

I'd like to see them today.

She stared at it for a long time while the twins ate toast in the next room and Blake narrated an elaborate story about a dragon he had apparently met in his dream.

She texted back: *noon. Seward Park. Public place.*

I'll be there, he replied instantly. Like he'd been waiting.

She told the boys they were going to the park to meet someone. She did not say who. She was still working out the words for that conversation — they existed somewhere, she was fairly sure, but she hadn't found them yet.

She parked and got the twins out of their car seats and they were off before she could grab their hands, running for the grass with the single-

minded velocity of three-year-olds who had been in a car for twenty minutes.

Jax was already there.

He was standing at the edge of the path in jeans and a dark jacket, and he looked so different from the Alpha King in a suit that it almost hurt. Younger. More uncertain. His hands were in his pockets and he was watching her approach with an expression she had never seen on his face before.

Then he saw the boys.

She watched it happen from twenty feet away. Watched his whole body go still — that complete, locked stillness she recognized from the ballroom. But different this time. Less shock. More something that didn't have a clean name.

Blake ran straight at a flock of pigeons and scattered them, delighted. Ryder stopped running and looked at the stranger on the path with the direct, assessing stare that always made adults uncomfortable.

"Who's that?" Ryder asked without looking away from Jax.

Nova crouched beside him. "Someone Mama knows," she said. "From a long time ago."

Ryder studied Jax.

Jax crouched down to eye level — slowly, deliberately — and met her son's gaze.

"Hi," Jax said.

Ryder was silent for a long moment in the way he always was before he



decided something.

"You smell like Mama," he said.

Nova's throat closed.

Blake appeared from nowhere, crashing into Ryder's side the way he always did. He looked at Jax with zero caution and all curiosity. "Are you the man from the park? Mama said we were meeting someone from before."

"I am," Jax said.

Blake pointed at him. "You look like me."

The words landed in the park like something dropped from a great height.

Jax looked up at Nova. His eyes were bright in a way she wasn't prepared for. She looked back at him and said nothing because there was nothing to say — Blake had said it with the devastating accuracy that only small children could manage.

"Yeah," Jax said, his voice rough. "I think I do."

Ryder reached out and grabbed Jax's hand.

Just grabbed it. Like it was already a thing they did, like his wolf had already figured out what Nova had been working up to telling him for three years.

Jax looked down at the small hand in his.

Nova watched the Alpha King's jaw work.

She watched him blink, once, hard.



"I missed you," Ryder told him seriously. "We didn't know you yet. But I missed you."
