

Chapter 5 No.5

The "Iron Fist" boxing gym in Queens was a cathedral of sweat. It smelled of unwashed wraps, leather, and the distinct metallic tang of blood. Hip-hop blasted from blown-out speakers, vibrating the floorboards.

Aurora paid the fifteen-dollar day pass with a twenty from Arthur's stash. The guy at the counter, a retired heavyweight with a nose that had been broken three times, looked at her slender frame and grunted. "Don't break a nail, princess."

Aurora didn't respond. She walked to the lockers, changed into a pair of worn leggings and a loose t-shirt she had found in her old suitcase.

She wrapped her hands slowly. The ritual was calming. Over, under, through the fingers, secure the wrist.

She approached the heavy bag.

She threw a jab.

It was weak. Her form was perfect—shoulder rotation, hip snap, extension—but the power wasn't there. Her muscles had softened during her three years as a trophy wife. The fight in the alley had been pure adrenaline and leverage; here, against the dead weight of the bag, her lack of conditioning was painfully obvious.

She gritted her teeth. Again.

Thud.

Again.

Thud.

She fell into a rhythm. Sweat dripped down her forehead, stinging her eyes. The pain in her muscles was good. It was real. It meant she was alive. She focused on technique on the snap, knowing that power would

return in time.

Half an hour later, the gym door opened.

A young man walked in. He was out of place. He wore designer compression gear-Under Armour, but the expensive line. His sneakers were pristine white. He had the confident swagger of someone who had never been punched in the face.

Julian Reed. Elias Thorne's nephew. The family playboy.

Aurora recognized him immediately. In her past life, Julian had hit on her at a charity gala while Sterling was in the bathroom.

Julian scanned the room, looking for a trainer. His eyes landed on Aurora.

He paused. He watched her strike the bag. He appreciated the curve of her waist, the sweat glistening on her neck.

He walked over, putting on his best charming smile.

Hey, he said, leaning against the pillar next to her bag. "You're hitting that thing like it owes you money."

Aurora didn't stop. Jab. Cross. Hook.

It does, she said, panting.

Julian laughed. "I'm Julian. I don't think I've seen you here before."

I'm busy, Aurora said.

Julian wasn't used to rejection. He stepped closer. "Come on. Let me buy you a protein shake. You look like you could use the calories."

Aurora stopped the bag with her gloved hand. She turned to face him. Her expression was deadpan.

And you look like you're about to injure your wrist if you hit the bag with that stance, she said, gesturing to his hands.

Julian blinked. "Excuse me? I've been boxing for two years at Equinox."

Equinox isn't a boxing gym. It's a spa with punching bags, Aurora said.

"Your wrap is too loose on the thumb. You'll sprain it on a hook."

Julian's ego flared. He was being lectured by a girl in thrift store clothes.

Is that a challenge? Julian grinned. "Tell you what. I'll hit this bag harder than you ever could. If I do, you have dinner with me. If I don't... well, that won't happen."

Aurora rolled her eyes. She began to unwrap her hands. "I don't date children."

I'm twenty-five! Julian protested.

Like I said. Children.

Julian stepped up to the bag. He wanted to show off. He wanted to impress the pretty girl with the sharp tongue.

He wound up for a massive right hook. He put all his weight into it, his form sloppy, his thumbs slightly protruding because of the loose wrap.

He swung.

CRACK.

The sound wasn't the bag. It was his wrist.

AHH! Julian screamed, clutching his hand to his chest. He doubled over, his face turning white.

Aurora sighed. She picked up her water bottle.

Told you, she said.

She walked past him toward the locker room.

Wait! Julian gasped, tears in his eyes. "Help me!"

Ice it. Elevate it. Go to the ER, Aurora called back over her shoulder. "And tell your Uncle Elias that hiring family is a liability."

Julian froze, forgetting the pain for a second. "How do you know my uncle?"

Aurora didn't answer. She disappeared into the locker room.

Julian sat on the dirty gym floor, cradling his swelling wrist. He fumbled for his phone with his left hand. He dialed a number.

Uncle Elias? Julian whined.

What is it, Julian? Elias's voice was crisp, impatient.

I'm at the gym. I think I broke my wrist. And... I met a crazy woman. She predicted it. She knew who you were.

There was a silence on the other end.

Describe her, Elias said.

Small. Brown hair. Eyes like... I don't know, like she was looking through me. She called Equinox spa.

Elias let out a sound that might have been a sigh.

Go to Queens General, Elias commanded. "I will send Graves to check on you. I have meetings."

You're not coming? Julian asked, hurt.

No, Elias said. He wasn't going to drop everything for a sprained wrist. "But Julian?"

Yeah?

If you see her again... do not engage.
