

Chapter 17

Sera arrived at seven a.m. and handed Nova a water bottle without ceremony.

"Today we work on close contact," Sera said. She was small, compact, and moved like every square inch of her had a specific job. "You're fast. Your instincts are good. Your technique is what's going to keep you alive when instincts aren't enough."

They worked for an hour in the penthouse gym — a room Nova had not known existed until Jax unlocked a door off the main hallway and revealed gleaming floors and equipment she recognized only half of.

She was sweating at fifteen minutes. Seriously challenged at thirty. By forty-five she had been thrown to the mat six times, gotten up all six times, and landed two clean blocks that made Sera nod once — which Nova was learning was Sera's version of applause.

"Again," Sera said.

"I've been on the floor more than standing today."

"That's the lesson. You get up. That's it. That's the whole thing." Sera moved into position. "Again."

Nova got up.

She didn't hear him come in.

She was in the middle of a sequence — blocking high, redirecting, countering low — when the back of her neck prickled and she knew without turning around that Jax was in the doorway.

She did not break form.



Sera called time five minutes later. Nova toweled off her face and turned.

He was leaning against the doorframe. He'd been there a while — long enough to have watched most of the session, she guessed. He straightened when she looked at him. Not embarrassed. Just present.

"She's quick," Sera told him without preamble. "Better than average natural instinct. Needs conditioning work and we're going to focus on disengagement — she's inclined to hold position and take the hit when she should be moving through."

"I don't run," Nova said.

"I didn't say run. I said *move through.*" Sera packed her bag. "There's a difference. Running is retreat. Moving through is using their momentum against them." She zipped the bag. "Thursday same time."

She left.

The gym was quiet. Nova took a long pull from her water bottle.

"You didn't have to watch," she said.

"I wanted to." He pushed off the doorframe. "You're good."

"I got thrown to the mat six times."

"You got up six times." He crossed to the small rack of free weights along the wall, picked up two, and held one out to her. "Show me your form."

She looked at him.

"I've been training for an hour."

"Five minutes," he said. "Then I'll leave you alone."

She took the weight.



He corrected her grip on the first rep — hand over hers, adjusting the angle — and she felt her wolf light up at the contact like a switch being thrown. She concentrated on the exercise and not on the fact that he was standing directly behind her adjusting her elbow position and his voice was very close to her ear.

"There," he said. "That's the right line. You feel the difference?"

"Yes," she said. Evenly.

"Good." He stepped back.

She did three reps.

"What do you want," she said.

"I wanted to check on you. After last night."

She set the weight down and turned to face him. He was watching her with that open, undefended expression she was still learning how to receive.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I know you're fine. That's not the same as asking how you are."

She studied him for a moment.

"Functional," she said. "Focused. Slightly angry at Sera, which is probably the point." She tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because tomorrow you're walking into a council chamber where three senior members have built a case for why you don't belong there." His voice was steady. "And I want to make sure you know that whatever they say—"

"Jax." She held up one hand. "I know who I am. I have known who I am since I sat on a gas station floor and decided my sons were worth building



a life for." She met his eyes. "I don't need the pep talk."

He looked at her for a moment.

"Okay," he said. "What do you need?"

The question was so careful. So genuinely open. She thought about four years ago — the boy who had never once asked that question, who had taken and deflected and armored up so thoroughly that she'd needed a full moon and bad judgment just to see underneath it.

"I need the council files," she said. "The three dissenting members. Their histories, their voting records, their connections to Voss." She crossed her arms. "If I'm walking into that room, I want to know everything I'm walking into."

He nodded immediately. "I'll have Marcus pull them tonight."

"And I want an hour tomorrow morning to go through everything before we leave."

"Done."

"And—" She stopped.

"What?"

She looked at him. She looked at the gym floor, then back up.

"I want to know what happened that morning," she said quietly. "At the frat house. Specifically. I want to know what was in your head when you said what you said." A pause. "I've had three years of my version of it. I want yours. Before tomorrow."

The room was very still.

He held her gaze.



"Tonight," he said. "After the boys are down."

"Tonight," she agreed.

She picked up her water bottle and walked past him to the door. His hand caught her wrist — light, barely a touch — and she stopped.

"Nova."

She turned her head.

"Thank you," he said. "For tomorrow. For all of it."

She looked at his hand on her wrist for a moment.

"Don't thank me yet," she said.

She walked out.

Her heart was doing something loud and complicated all the way down the hall and she let it, because she was alone, and in private she had decided she was allowed.

That night, he told her everything.

She listened without interrupting.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long time.

Then she said: "Okay. I needed to hear that."

She went to her room.

She didn't cry until the door was closed.

Then she let herself cry properly, once, and was done.