



## Chapter 21

Nova recognized him before he said a word.

Stone Mercer. Jax's former teammate. The one who had laughed the loudest in that hallway four years ago, filming it on his phone while she got dressed in silence.

He was standing in the lobby of the Wilder building when she came back from Sera's training session, talking to one of the front desk staff with the particular ease of a man who had spent his whole life assuming rooms would receive him well. Broader now. Better dressed. The kind of alpha who had decided his college cruelty was a character trait worth keeping.

He saw her at the same moment she saw him.

Something moved across his face — surprise first, then recalibration, then a smile that didn't reach anything real.

"Nova Ellis," he said. Like they were old friends. Like the name in his mouth was something warm.

She walked to the elevator and pressed the button.

"It's been a while," he said, moving toward her.

"Stone." She looked at him directly. "I know why you're here and you should go."

He stopped. The smile adjusted. "I have a meeting with Jax —"

"You have a request in to Jax's assistant that has not been confirmed." She'd seen the name on the morning briefing sheet — she'd started reviewing those with Marcus three days ago. "He hasn't agreed to see



you."

Stone looked at her for a moment.

"You run his schedule now," he said.

"I run nothing of his. I just pay attention." The elevator opened. She stepped in. "Go home, Stone."

He moved forward and caught the door before it could close.

She didn't step back.

"Look," he said. His voice had dropped — the performance-ease gone, something more real underneath. "I heard about the registration. The boys. I just want to talk to Jax."

"About what?"

"About—" He stopped. He looked at her face for a moment. Then: "About what happened. Freshman year. I've been trying to get a meeting for weeks."

She studied him.

She had imagined this encounter before — idle, middle-of-the-night imagining, the kind she never indulged in on purpose. She'd imagined being cold, or sharp, or saying the specific sentence that made him understand the full weight of what that morning had cost her.

Standing here now, she mostly felt tired.

"That's between you and Jax," she said. "Not me." She looked at the hand on the elevator door. "But I'll tell you this once: those boys upstairs are building their idea of what men are supposed to be. Every man who



walks into this building, they're watching. They're filing it." She held Stone's eyes. "Make sure what you bring in here is worth filing."

She let the door close.

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Jax found out from Marcus twenty minutes later that Stone had been in the lobby. He came to find Nova in the west wing wearing an expression she was learning to read — controlled surface, something hotter underneath.

"He didn't—"

"He didn't do anything," she said. She was at her desk, manuscript open. "He was harmless. More regretful than harmful, honestly."

Jax stood in the doorway. "I'll have him removed from the cleared-entry list."

"You don't have to do that on my behalf."

"I know." His voice was even. "I'm doing it on mine." He paused. "He doesn't get to stand in the same building as you and the boys like it cost him nothing."

She looked at him.

"Jax. If he genuinely wants to apologize—"

"Then he can write a letter." His jaw was set. "He filmed it. He sent it to people. I know what I did that morning and I carry it. But he \*amplified\* it, on purpose, for sport. That's a different category."

She was quiet for a moment.



"Okay," she said.

He nodded once. He turned to go.

"Hey." She stopped him. He looked back. "What you just said — that you know what you did and you carry it." She met his eyes. "That's different from four years ago."

"Everything is different from four years ago."

"I know." A beat. "I just wanted to say it out loud."

He looked at her — that open, undefended look — and something passed between them that didn't need words and she let it, just for a moment, before she looked back at her manuscript.

"Close the door on your way out," she said.

He did. Quietly.

She sat at her desk with the manuscript unread in front of her and allowed herself exactly thirty seconds of feeling something she didn't have a word for yet.

Then she went back to work.

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Stone left the building.

He stood on the street for a moment in the thin Seattle rain.

He thought about the girl in the elevator — steady, direct, carrying nothing she didn't choose to carry.

He took out his phone.



He opened a new message to Jax Wilder.

He typed: \*I owe you both an apology. Whenever you're ready. No agenda.\*

He sent it and walked away.

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Three floors above, Ryder looked up from his drawing.

"Mama," he said. "Someone sad was just downstairs."

Nova looked at him. "How do you know?"

"I could feel it." He considered the drawing in front of him — a careful crayon rendering of four people standing on a balcony. "Sometimes I feel things from far away."

Nova looked at the drawing.

Four people. Two tall, two small. Holding hands.

"Yeah, bug," she said quietly. "Sometimes we do."

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\*Stone's apology sat in Jax's phone unread for six hours.\*

\*When Jax finally opened it he sat with it for a long time.\*

\*Then he showed it to Nova.\*

\*She read it and handed the phone back.\*

\*"Your call," she said.\*



\*He thought about it for a week.\*

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