

Chapter 7

He was taller than she remembered.

Or maybe it was the way he carried himself now — like the ground had decided to cooperate with him, like every room he entered quietly rearranged itself to make him the center. He wore a black suit that fit like it had been made for the specific purpose of making people feel underdressed. His jaw was sharper. His shoulders were broader.

And he was scanning the room.

Not the way guests scan a room — idly, socially. He was doing it the way an alpha sweeps territory. Slow. Systematic. His dark eyes moving from face to face with a kind of quiet authority that made people step aside without knowing why.

Nova turned her back.

Tray. Focus on the tray. Focus on the job.

She crossed to the far side of the ballroom, putting as many bodies between herself and the entrance as possible. Her heart was doing something loud and unhelpful in her chest. Her wolf was pressed forward, straining, doing the exact opposite of what Nova needed her to do.

Down, Nova thought at her. **Not now. Not ever. Down.**

She distributed six glasses of champagne. She smiled at two council representatives. She doubled back to the service corridor, took exactly three seconds to press her back against the wall and breathe, and then she walked out again.

He was on the other side of the room. His back was to her. He was

shaking hands with someone who looked like old pack money — silver-haired, diamond cufflinks. He was nodding, saying something, still performing the effortless authority of the Alpha King.

She made herself look.

She needed to see him as he actually was, not as the ghost she'd been carrying for three years. She needed him to be just a person — powerful, yes, unreachable, fine, but *just a person* — so her wolf would stop acting like the moon had risen early.

He was just a person.

He was standing forty feet away from her and her hands were shaking.

Okay, she admitted. *Maybe not just a person.*

The event coordinator appeared at her elbow — a brisk woman named Hana who moved like she was always running two minutes behind. "Server six? I need you on the east corridor for the next hour. VIP guests only."

"I can stay in the main—"

"East corridor," Hana repeated, already walking.

Nova followed.

The east corridor was quieter. Smaller tables, better whiskey, the kind of conversations that didn't happen in front of cameras. Nova moved carefully, professionally, invisibly. She was so focused on staying small and unnoticed that she almost walked straight into him.

She stopped herself just in time.

He was standing at the end of the corridor with his back to her, finishing a conversation with two men she didn't recognize. His security detail stood a discreet distance away — two massive wolves in good suits who tracked every person in the hallway without ever appearing to.

Nova reversed direction immediately.

Turned around. Walked back the way she'd come.

She made it eight steps.

"Excuse me."

His voice.

She stopped walking. Every muscle in her body went rigid. Her wolf let out a sound that was half whimper, half snarl.

Don't turn around, she thought. *Keep walking. You're a server. You heard nothing. Keep—*

"Excuse me — can I get—"

She turned around.

His eyes landed on her face and everything stopped.

Not almost stopped. Not slowed down. *Stopped.* Like someone had pulled the sound out of the room. His sentence died in his mouth. The men he'd been talking to looked between them, confused, and then quietly decided to be somewhere else.

Jax Wilder stared at her.

She stared back.

Three years sat between them like a country neither of them knew how to cross. She watched his face cycle through things she couldn't name — shock, and something rawer underneath it, something that looked almost like grief surfacing too fast to stop.

"You—" His voice came out wrong. He cleared it. "*You.*"

"I'm sorry, sir." Her voice was steady. She had no idea how. "Wrong hallway."

She turned around.

"Nova."

The way he said her name — she hadn't heard it from him in three years and it still hit her in the same place it always had. Low. Certain. Like her name in his mouth meant something different than it did anywhere else.

She stopped walking.

Don't, she told herself. *Keep going. He doesn't know about the twins. He never has to—*

"You're alive," he said.

She turned slowly.

He hadn't moved. He was standing at the end of the corridor with his hands at his sides and his face doing something she had never seen from him before. Something completely unguarded.

"I thought—" He stopped. His jaw worked. "We searched for six months. I thought the rogues had—" He stopped again.

She looked at him carefully.

He wasn't performing. There was no audience here, no teammates, no one to play the Alpha King for. Just him, and her, and something sitting in his eyes that looked very much like a man who had been carrying something heavy for a very long time.

Her wolf pressed forward.

Not now, Nova told her firmly.

"I have to get back to work," she said.

"Nova—"

"I have to get back to work," she repeated. Quieter. Like a door closing.

She walked away.

This time he didn't call her back.

She made it to the service corridor, pushed through the door, leaned against the wall, and pressed her hands flat against her thighs to stop them shaking.

He thought she was dead.

She hadn't known that. She hadn't let herself wonder.

She breathed in for four counts. Out for four counts. The way her therapist had taught her after the birth, when the panic attacks were bad.

He thought she was dead and he looks like someone who never stopped thinking it.

She pushed that thought down as deep as it would go.

She had a job to finish. She had twins to pick up from Mrs. Reyes by midnight.

She had a life that was **hers** and she was not going to let one haunted look from Jax Wilder shake the foundation of it.

She straightened up, picked up a new tray, and walked back into the ballroom.

She didn't notice him follow her in.

She didn't notice him stop.

She didn't notice the exact moment he caught the scent.