

Chapter 1 No.1

The moment I pressed the 'Confirm' button on the university portal, my life in Chicago was over before my heart even had a chance to stutter.

The screen flashed a sterile green banner: Enrollment Finalized: Columbia University, New York City.

My hands didn't shake.

They should have.

I was Elena Vitiello, the only daughter of the Chicago Outfit's Underboss, raised in a gilded cage where loyalty was the only currency that mattered, and betrayal was a debt paid in blood.

Moving to New York wasn't just a transfer.

It was a defection.

Because New York belonged to the Famiglia. It belonged to Dante Moretti.

Even a thousand miles away, the name tasted like gunpowder and aged scotch—acrid, rich, and lethal.

And I was voluntarily walking into his lion's den. Because the wolves in my own house had already started to eat me alive.

My phone vibrated against the mahogany desk. A new notification from Instagram.

It was Sofia.

The caption read: VIP treatment at the Gala. So grateful for my boys.

I tapped the photo.

There she was, standing between Luca Rossi and Matteo Bianchi

My Luca.

My Matteo.

They were my sworn protectors, the soldiers who had cut their palms and mixed their blood with mine when we were ten years old, promising that nothing would ever touch me.

In the photo, Sofia was wearing a white silk gown.

My custom-made gown.

Around her neck hung a string of rare pink pearls.

My mother's pearls.

The ones kept in the biometric vault in my wing of the estate. The vault only three people had access to: Me, Luca, and Matteo.

A cold sensation spread through my chest, like someone had replaced my blood with liquid nitrogen.

This wasn't just theft.

It was a usurpation.

My phone buzzed again. A group chat named The Trio.

Sofia: OMG, the lighting in here is amazing! Also, thank you for the new MacBook and the iPhone 15 Pro! You really didn't have to.

Luca: Only the best for you, Sof. You need it for school.

Matteo: You looked like a queen tonight.

A queen.

I stared at the words until they blurred. I was the Vitiello Princess, but they were crowning a rat.

My fingers moved with mechanical precision.

Elena: Who opened the vault for her?

The typing bubbles appeared instantly. Then stopped. Then appeared again.

Sofia: Oh, Elena! I didn't know you were awake. The boys just let me borrow a few things. I wanted to fit in. You have so much, I didn't think you'd mind sharing right?

Luca: Don't start, Elena. She needed a dress. You weren't using it.

Matteo: We'll buy you a new one. Stop being a brat.

A brat.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath that shuddered in my lungs. Ten years of friendship. Ten years of them scaring away boys who looked at me wrong. Ten years of us against the world. Erased for a girl who knew how to cry on cue.

A notification from Venmo pinged.

Luca Rossi sent you \$5,000- For the dress. Chill out.

He had put a price tag on my dignity.

He thought cash could cover the stain of treason.

I didn't reply. I walked over to the full-length mirror. Taped to the glass was a polaroid from three years ago: me in the middle, Luca and Matteo kissing my cheeks. Written at the bottom: Blood Brothers & Their Queen.

I ripped the photo off the glass and walked to the shredder by my desk. I fed the photo into the machine's teeth and watched their smiling faces turn into confetti.

Then I opened my banking app and transferred the five thousand dollars to a charity for retired racehorses.

I didn't need their money.

I needed out.