

Chapter 16 No.16

Two Days Later

The plaza in front of Low Library at Columbia was usually a sanctuary of quiet study and rushing students.

Today, however, it looked as though a funeral parlor had violently exploded.

I stood at the top of the granite steps, looking down.

There were hundreds of red roses. No, thousands. They covered the grey pavement in a carpet of blood-red velvet, suffocating the stone. Candles flickered in the thin winter daylight, arranged to spell out a name.

ELENA.

It was massive. It was expensive. It was utterly humiliating.

Students paused mid-stride to take photos, their phones held high like religious icons. They were whispering, giggling, creating a buzz of unwanted speculation.

"Look at that," someone murmured nearby. "It's so romantic."

It wasn't romantic. It was a scream for attention from men who had lost the right to speak my name.

I saw them standing in the center of that floral sea.

Luca and Matteo.

They looked significantly worse than they had at the restaurant. Their clothes were rumpled and stained. Luca had a black eye that had swollen shut, turning the skin a sickly purple. Matteo was leaning heavily on a new cane, likely stolen or bought from a drugstore bargain bin.

They were shivering in the cold, waiting for me like dogs waiting to be let back inside.

When I appeared, the crowd went silent.

Luca looked up, desperation etched into his features.

"Elena!" he shouted. His voice was hoarse, cracking under the strain. "Please! Just talk to us!"

He gestured wildly to the flowers.

"We bought every rose in the city. For you."

I walked down the steps slowly. My heels clicked on the stone, a sharp, rhythmic countdown. Dante wasn't with me. I had told him I needed to handle this alone, to close this chapter with my own hands.

I stopped at the edge of the roses. I didn't step into them. I didn't want the cloying, sickly sweet scent of them on my shoes.

"Is this a joke?" I asked, my voice flat.

"No!" Matteo cried, shifting his weight painfully on the cane. "It's a declaration. We love you. We are sorry. We will do anything. Look at this!"

I looked at the candles. I looked at the petals blowing in the biting wind.

"It reminds me of a grave," I said.

Luca flinched as if I'd slapped him.

"It's a new beginning" he insisted.

"It's littering," I corrected.

I pulled out my phone. I didn't call the police. I called the number Dante had given me for "cleanup"—a generic contact for specific problems.

Barely two minutes later, a heavy rumble shook the ground.

A massive sanitation truck turned the corner, monstrous and yellow. It was loud, industrial, and smelled faintly of bleach and gasoline. It backed up onto the plaza, the reverse alarm beeping loudly, cutting through the murmurs of the crowd.

The students scattered. Luca and Matteo stood their ground looking

confused, like deer caught in headlights.

"What are you doing?" Luca asked, his voice trembling.

"Cleaning up the trash," I said.

The driver hit a switch.

High-pressure water jets blasted from the side of the truck with the force of a riot cannon.

They hit the roses.

Petals exploded into a red mush, pulped instantly against the pavement. Candles hissed and died, extinguished in a cloud of grey smoke.

The water hit Luca and Matteo next.

They were knocked back by the sheer kinetic force of it. Soaked instantly. Freezing water in the middle of winter.

They slipped on the wet petals, falling into the crimson slush. It was pathetic. It was a comedy.

I watched them struggle to stand, slipping and sliding in the mess they had made, grasping at stems that only offered thorns.

"Go home," I said, my voice carrying clearly over the roar of the water.

I turned my back on them. I walked back up the steps. I didn't look back.