

## Chapter 18 No.18

Elena Vitiello POV

The world exploded in a symphony of screeching metal and shattering glass.

The impact was so violent it shook the ground beneath the tires of our SUV. The grey van had embedded itself deep into the side of the police cruiser, crumpling the heavy sedan like a soda can stepped on by a giant.

"Get down," Dante ordered, his hand firm on the back of my head, pushing me low.

I resisted. I pushed back against his grip.

"No," I said, my voice shaking but resolute. "I need to see."

I sat up.

The library plaza was a war zone.

Steam hissed angrily from the crushed radiator of the van. A car alarm was blaring nearby, a rhythmic, panicked pulse that matched the beating of my heart.

The driver's seat of the van was gone. Crushed against the steering column.

Sofia was still inside. Or what was left of her. There was no movement. Just a mass of red and grey where a girl used to be. She had gotten her wish. She had made her mark, but it had cost her everything.

On the pavement, near the twisted rear door of the police car, Matteo was screaming.

It was a high animalistic sound that cut through the alarm. His leg—the one he had already injured in the camps—was pinned under the wreckage of the cruiser door. It was bent at an angle that made my stomach turn.

He was lying on his back in the slush, ten feet away. His arms were spread wide, as if he were making a snow angel in the dirty ice.

His eyes were open. They were staring straight up at the grey winter sky. But they weren't moving. They weren't blinking.

A pool of dark blood was spreading rapidly from the back of his head. It mixed with the water from the sanitation truck and the crushed rose petals, blooming like a dark wine stain on a white tablecloth.

He looked peaceful. Terrifyingly peaceful.

Dante looked out the window. His face was hard, unreadable. He assessed the damage like a general surveying a battlefield.

"Is she dead?" I asked. My voice sounded strange to my own ears. Flat. Hollow.

Dante nodded once. "The girl is gone."

"And them?"

Dante looked at Luca. He watched the blood pooling, the stillness of the body.

"He won't be the same," Dante said quietly. "That is brain trauma, Elena. If he wakes up, the boy you knew is gone."

He looked at Matteo, who had stopped screaming and passed out from the pain.

"And the other one will never walk without a chair again."

I looked at them one last time.

My childhood protectors. The boys who had sworn blood oaths to keep me safe. They lay in the wreckage of their own choices, destroyed by the very obsession they thought was love.

I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

But it wasn't for them.

It was for the girl I used to be. The girl who believed in fairy tales and knights in shining armor. That girl died on this street, too, crushed alongside the roses.

"Let's go," I said.

Dante tapped the partition.

"Drive."

The SUV backed off the curb. We drove away. I didn't look back at the

flashing lights. I didn't look back at the ruin.

I looked at Dante. He took my hand. His grip was warm. Solid. Alive.

I held on tight.

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