

Chapter 2 No.2

The industrial-grade incinerator behind the estate garage roared like a hungry beast, its maw glowing orange against the twilight. It was designed to erase sins—usually incriminating documents or bloody clothes after a job. Tonight, it was devouring my childhood.

I tossed a box of handwritten letters into the flames. They were the letters Luca wrote me from military school, filled with boyish promises of forever and painstakingly detailed accounts of his training. They curled, blackened, and turned to ash in seconds.

Next went a dried edelweiss flower, pressed between the pages of a book. Matteo had climbed a dangerously steep trellis to snatch it from the conservatory roof for me when I was twelve, just because I'd said it was beautiful. It vanished in a puff of smoke.

Finally, I pulled out a small, worn velvet pouch. Inside was a linen handkerchief, stained with three drops of dried, brown blood. Our oath. Our promise. Our bond.

I held it over the heat, the velvet smoking instantly, the acrid smell filling the air.

"Elena!"

A shout came from the driveway. Tires screeched on the gravel, a sound of panic and haste.

I didn't turn around.

I dropped the pouch.

It vanished into the inferno just as car doors slammed shut. I watched the fire curl around the fabric, turning our blood pact into nothing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Matteo's voice was rough, breathless. He grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. He was still in his tuxedo from the gala, his tie undone, looking like the reckless enforcer he was born to

be.

Luca was right behind him, his eyes scanning the fire, his face paling as he recognized the remnants of the letter box. "Are those... are those the letters?" Luca asked, his voice strained with disbelief.

"They were just clutter," I said. My voice sounded flat. Dead. Even to my own ears.

"Clutter?" Matteo released my shoulder as if I had burned him. He took a step back, his face a mask of wounded confusion. "That's our history, El. Our entire lives."

"History is just a record of things that don't matter anymore," I replied. I stepped back, brushing the spot on my shoulder where he had touched me, as if trying to wipe away a stain.

"We saw the biometric alert from the vault," Luca said, stepping forward, his voice a mixture of anger and anxiety. "You changed the codes to the West Wing. Sofia couldn't get back in to return the pearls."

The fact that their first concern was her access, not my sudden change in security protocol, was like another twist of the knife.

"Let her keep them," I said, my voice dangerously calm. "They're contaminated now. She can have them."

"Contaminated?" Matteo scowled, his fists clenching at his sides. "She's not a disease, Elena. She's just a girl trying to get by. Why are you being so cruel?"

"Cruel?" I looked him dead in the eye, letting all the ice in my veins seep into my gaze. "You gave an outsider the combination to a Vitiello vault. A vault that sometimes holds more than just jewelry. Do you have any idea what Father would do to you if he found out?"

Luca flinched. He knew the penalty for such a breach was severe. But his fear was quickly replaced by a chilling arrogance. "We knew you wouldn't tell him," he said, a note of certainty in his voice. "Because you love us."

He used my love as a shield to protect his betrayal. He weaponized my loyalty against me.

The last flicker of warmth in my chest died out.

"I'm going inside," I said, turning away from them and the fire that had consumed our past.

"No," Luca countered, moving to block my path. His jaw was set stubbornly. "We're going to dinner. The three of us. And Sofia. We need to clear the air. You're acting crazy, and it's scaring her."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're going," Matteo growled, his hand drifting instinctively toward the butt of the gun holstered under his jacket. "Don't make me carry you."

It used to be a playful threat, a promise of a fireman's lift up the stairs when I was being stubborn. Now, it was a threat. Plain and simple. The casual menace in his posture told me he was serious.

I looked from his hand, to his hard eyes, to Luca's unyielding expression. They were no longer asking. They were commanding.

"Fine," I said, the single word tasting like surrender. But it wasn't. It was a calculation. I would go. I would watch. And I would let them show me exactly how deep their betrayal ran.