

Chapter 5 No.5

That night I had to make an appearance at the Social Club.

It was a mandatory gathering for the Outfit's younger generation, a place where alliances were forged over scotch and secrets. If I didn't go, it would look like weakness. It would look like I was hiding. And tonight, I could afford nothing less than absolute armor.

I wore black. A severe, high-necked, long-sleeved dress that fit like a second skin. It was elegant, intimidating and somber.

Mourning clothes.

When I walked in, the music didn't stop, but the atmosphere shifted. The air grew heavy. Whispers started slithering through the room like smoke.

"Where are her dogs?" someone muttered near the bar.

"I heard they have a new owner," another voice laughed, low and cruel.

I ignored them, keeping my chin high and my spine steel-straight. I walked past the groups of laughing heirs and heiresses, straight to the high-stakes poker room in the back.

I took the open seat at the center table. The dealer, a man who had known my father for twenty years, nodded respectfully and slid the cards across the green felt.

Texas Hold'em.

I peeled up the corners of my hand.

Two Jacks.

I stared at the painted faces of the Knaves. The servants. The foot soldiers. They stared back at me with hollow, mocking eyes, their painted smiles freezing in place.

"Are you in, Elena?" the dealer asked, his voice cutting through my trance.

I looked across the room just as the double doors swung open.

The room went silent.

Sofia walked in. She was flanked by Luca and Matteo, walking in a tight, protective phalanx.

She was wearing a short, bright red dress. It was tight, cheap, and screamed for attention. She was clinging to Luca's arm like a parasite, her head resting on his shoulder.

Matteo walked slightly ahead, scanning the room, playing the tough bodyguard. But his gaze didn't sweep the room for threats to me. It kept snapping back to her, checking if she was happy, if she was safe.

They didn't even look for me.

They had abandoned their post.

The entire room watched them. The disrespect was palpable, heavy enough to choke on. The Underboss's daughter—the Vitiello Princess—was sitting alone at a card table, exposed and unguarded, while her sworn protectors were parading a nobody around like she was the Don's wife.

I felt the weight of a hundred eyes on me, waiting for a reaction. Waiting for the tearful outburst. Waiting for the Princess to crumble.

"I'm folding," I said.

My voice was calm, carrying clearly over the sudden silence of the room.

I threw the two Jacks face up on the green felt.

"I'm discarding the trash from my hand."

The dealer looked at the cards—the two treacherous servants lying uselessly on the table. He looked up at me, understanding flashing in his eyes.

"You're out of the game, Miss Vitiello?"

I stood up, smoothing my black skirt with deliberate, icy precision.

"I'm done playing games," I said. "I'm changing tables."

I walked toward the exit. I had to pass them to leave.

As I approached, Sofia saw me. She smirked, a flash of victory on her face. She squeezed Luca's arm tighter, staking her claim.

Luca looked up. When his eyes met mine, he flinched. Shame flickered in his gaze for a microsecond—a ghost of the boy who used to carry my books—before he hardened his jaw and looked away.

Matteo glared at me, his chin jutting out, daring me to speak, daring me to make a scene.

I didn't say a word.

I didn't slow down.

I walked right past them, leaving them in the warmth of the club while I stepped out into the cold Chicago night.

They thought they had won because they held the attention of the room. They didn't realize that by leaving me unguarded, they hadn't just insulted me. They had signaled to the entire city that the Vitiello Princess was vulnerable.

And in our world, vulnerability was an invitation for blood.

I looked up at the moon, sharp and white in the sky.

"Enjoy the game, boys," I whispered to the empty street. "Because you just folded a Royal Flush for a pair of twos."