

## Chapter 6 No.6

The waterfront was a chaotic sea of bodies for the Outfit's annual Fourth of July celebration. The air was thick with the heavy, cloying smells of grilled meat, cheap beer, and the sharp, metallic tang of gunpowder.

I shouldn't have come. My stomach was twisting in knots, and the memory of the Social Club still burned like acid in my throat. But my father had been adamant.

"You are a Vitiello," he'd said, adjusting his cufflinks. "Show your face, Elena. Show them you are strong. Hiding makes you look like a victim."

So I stood by the iron railing of the upper deck, watching the dark, churning water of Lake Michigan below. I felt anything but strong. I felt like a ghost haunting a party I wasn't invited to.

"Wine?"

I turned at the voice.

Sofia was standing there, holding two glasses of deep red vintage. She was smiling but it was a smile that didn't reach her eyes; they remained cold, calculating, predatory.

"A peace offering?" she asked, tilting her head. "The boys said you were upset."

I didn't reach for the glass. "Get away from me," I said, my voice low and vibrating with warning.

"Oops," she chirped.

With a deliberate, casual flick of her wrist, she tilted her hand.

The red wine splashed across the front of my white silk dress.

It wasn't a clumsy spill. It was a targeted strike. The cold liquid

saturated the fabric instantly, rendering the expensive material translucent. It clung to my skin like a second layer. My bra, the curve of my stomach—everything was suddenly visible under the harsh, unforgiving dock lights.

It wasn't just embarrassing; it was a violation. A calculated move to humiliate me in front of the soldiers, the families, the entire organization.

"Oh my god!" Sofia gasped, her hands flying to her mouth in a flawless performance of shock. "I'm so clumsy! I'm so sorry, Elena!"

Heads turned. The low hum of conversation shifted into sharp whispers. Whistles cut through the air from the civilian side of the barrier, hungry and crude. Catcalls erupted, each one a small, sharp stone thrown at my dignity.

I crossed my arms over my chest, shielding myself as a hot, shameful blush scorched my cheeks. I looked around for help.

"Cover her!"

Luca's voice boomed over the crowd, a command filled with righteous fury.

He and Matteo rushed toward us from the bar, their movements synchronized. They were already stripping off their suit jackets—the ones with the Vitiello crest embroidered on the silk lining.

Thank God, a foolish, desperate part of me thought. They're finally stepping up. They see what she did.

I reached out, my hand trembling slightly, waiting for the heavy wool of Luca's jacket to settle over my shoulders, to shield me from the prying eyes.

But he brushed past me.

He didn't even glance in my direction.

He wrapped the heavy jacket around Sofia.

"Are you okay?" Luca asked her, his voice laced with a deep, tangible concern as he checked her hands. "Did the glass cut you? Let me see."

Matteo was right behind him, draping his own jacket over Sofia's shoulders as well, doubling the warmth, doubling the protection around her.

"She's shivering" Matteo noted, his voice rough with worry as he rubbed Sofia's upper arms. "It was an accident, Sof. Don't cry."

I stood there.

Wet.

Exposed.

Shivering violently in the wind whipping off the lake.

They covered the girl who spilled the wine. They left their Princess naked to the world.

"Let's go watch the fireworks," Sofia giggled, her voice trembling theatrically as she snuggled into the scents of their jackets—into my protection. "I want to light one to calm my nerves!"

They led her away toward the launch zone, their backs to me. They formed a protective wall of broad shoulders and expensive wool around her, leaving me utterly alone.

I stood frozen, the wine drying sticky and cold on my skin, each gust of wind a fresh torment. I should have left. I should have run.

But I watched.

I watched them descend to the lower dock. Sofia picked up a Roman Candle. It was a large tube, industrial-grade, meant to be staked firmly in the ground for safety.

"Be careful, Sof," Luca laughed, indulging her like she was a precocious child.

She lit the fuse.

Sparks hissed and flew into the night. She laughed, spinning around in a drunk circle. "Look at me!"

Then, she stopped spinning

She leveled the tube.

It wasn't random. She wasn't dizzy. She aimed the mouth of the cannon directly at the upperdeck.

Directly at me.

I saw it then, sharp and clear in her eyes, illuminated by the fizzing fuse. It wasn't a prank. It wasn't a mistake. It was pure, unadulterated malice.

It was a hit.

"Sofia, no!" Matteo shouted, finally realizing the danger, but he made no move to lunge for her, no move to knock the tube away.

Boom.

A ball of green fire shot out.

It smashed into the iron railing inches in front of me, exploding in a shower of sparks that stung my face like angry hornets. I flinched back, stumbling over my heels.

Boom.

The second one didn't miss.

It struck my left shoulder with the force of a physical blow, a hammer made of heat and light.

The pain was instantaneous and absolute. The silk of my dress, soaked in the alcohol of the wine, caught fire immediately.

"Ah!"

A raw, animal scream tore from my throat. I slapped uselessly at the flames climbing up my neck.

The fire ate into my skin, devouring it. The air filled with the sickening scent of burning hair and cooking meat—my meat.

I dropped to the ground, rolling, thrashing, trying desperately to smother the inferno that was consuming me.

Through the agony, through the choking smoke, I looked down at the dock.

Luca and Matteo were moving.

But they weren't running to me.

They were grabbing Sofia, pulling her away from the still-sputtering firework.

"Did the kickback hurt you?" Luca was asking her, frantically checking her hands for burns, for splinters, for anything.

"I'm scared! It went off wrong! It malfunctioned!" she was crying, burying her face in his chest, wrapped in the jacket that should have been saving me.

They checked her for scratches while I burned alive.

They hesitated.

In our world, hesitation is a death sentence. And their hesitation was the bullet meant for me.

A stranger—a waiter—rushed forward and threw a bucket of ice water over me.

The fire hissed and died, leaving steam rising from my charred flesh. The sudden cold was another shock, another layer of pain on top of the burn.

But the damage was done. My skin was ruined.

Yet, as I lay on the wet concrete, staring up at the stars spinning dizzily above me, breathing in the smell of my own burnt skin, I realized the burn on my shoulder was nothing.

The real scar was the one they had just carved into my soul.

They let me burn.

And from those ashes, Elena Vitiello died.

And something else—something cold, hard, and unforgiving—began to rise.