

Chapter 7 No.7

The first thing I registered was the sickening smell of burnt meat.

It took a few sluggish seconds for my brain to fight through the haze of morphine and register the horror of it. That smell was coming from me.

From my own left shoulder.

My eyes cracked open, fighting the heaviness of anesthesia. The room was white, sterile, and biting cold. It was the private clinic the Outfit used for bullet wounds and stabbings, not for burns caused by fireworks wielded by jealous, petty girls.

I tried to sit up.

A sharp, searing agony ripped through my upper arm and neck, stealing the breath from my lungs. I gasped, falling back against the stiff pillows as the room spun.

"Careful, Miss Vitiello."

The doctor was standing by the monitors, his back to me. He didn't turn around.

"Second-degree burns," he said, his voice void of sympathy. "We had to perform a debridement to remove the dead tissue. The skin grafts will scar. Permanently."

Scar.

I looked at the thick bandage covering my shoulder. I was marked. Ruined.

The door creaked open.

I didn't need to look to know who it was. The air in the room shifted, becoming heavy with guilt and the acrid scent of stale smoke.

Luca and Matteo walked in.

They looked like wrecks. Their tuxedos were disheveled, their ties gone, their eyes bloodshot and wide with panic. But they weren't injured. Because they hadn't been the target.

"El," Luca breathed, taking a hesitant step toward the bed.

He reached for my hand.

I pulled it away instinctively. The movement sent a shockwave of pain through my shoulder, but I would have ripped my stitches open before letting him touch me.

He flinched as if I'd slapped him.

"We brought you something," Matteo said, his voice rough. He held out a folded piece of paper.

It was pink stationery. It smelled like cheap vanilla perfume.

"It's from Sofia," Matteo said. "She wrote it in the waiting room. She's devastated, Elena. She hasn't stopped crying."

"Crying?" I repeated. My voice sounded like shards of glass grinding together.

"It was an accident," Luca said quickly, desperation leaking into his tone. "The tube malfunctioned. The kickback... it scared her. She didn't mean to aim it at you."

"If I shot her in the chest," I asked, staring blankly at the ceiling tiles, "would an apology stop the bleeding?"

"That's different," Luca snapped. "Don't talk like that."

"Why?" I looked at him, my eyes dry and cold. "Because she's fragile? And I'm just the Vitiello furniture you can burn?"

"She's innocent," Luca insisted, his voice rising. "She's terrified you're going to retaliate."

"She should be."

The voice didn't come from me.

It came from the doorway.

My father, the Underboss of the Chicago Outfit, filled the frame. He was wearing his long trench coat, his face a mask of unforgiving granite.

Luca and Matteo snapped to attention, their spines straightening out of deep-seated instinct.

"Sir," Matteo said, his voice trembling.

My father didn't look at them. He looked at me. He looked at the bandages. Then, slowly, terrifyingly, he turned his gaze to the boys.

"You had one job," my father said. His voice was quiet. Lethal. "Taste her food. Watch her back. Take the bullet."

"It happened fast," Luca stammered.

"You were protecting a rat while my daughter burned" my father said. He walked into the room and stood at the foot of my bed. "Hand over your guns."

"Sir?" Matteo paled.

"Badges. Guns. Now." Ⓜ

They hesitated for a fraction of a second, then placed their Glocks on the bedside table with shaking hands. The metal clattered against the wood.

"You are suspended," my father said. "You are stripped of your rank. You are not Soldiers. You are liabilities."

He turned to his personal guard standing in the hall.

"Find the girl. Sofia Ricci."

"No!" Luca stepped forward, forgetting himself. "Sir, please. It was an accident!"

"Correct the mistake," my father said to the guard.

Correction. In our world, that meant a beating. Or worse.

"She didn't mean it!" Matteo pleaded.

"Get out," my father said.

Luca looked at me, his eyes begging me to intervene. To save her.

I turned my head and looked out the window at the gray Chicago skyline.

I let the silence hang there.

An hour later, the silence didn't last.

The door burst open, shattering the quiet. The guards outside should have stopped her, but they knew the boys. And the boys were with her.

Sofia rushed into the room, her face blotchy, her eyes wide with a frantic, performative terror. Luca and Matteo were right behind her, flanking her like human shields.

"Elena!" Sofia screamed. "Please! You have to call him off!"

She threw herself against the railing of my bed. The impact sent a shockwave of white-hot agony through my burns. I gritted my teeth, swallowing a scream.

"Get her off my bed," I rasped.

"Your father sent men to her apartment," Luca said, his voice shaking. "They're going to hurt her, El. You have to stop it."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she's sorry!" Matteo yelled.

Sofia was sobbing now, great heaving breaths that sucked all the air out of the small room. "I'll do anything" she cried. "I'll pay for it. I promise."

She grabbed a fruit knife from the tray of untouched dinner on the side table. It was a dull, serrated blade meant for sawing through apple skin, not flesh.

"I'll pay the debt!" she shrieked.

She dragged the blade across her forearm.

It barely broke the skin. A thin, insipid line of red beaded on her arm. It looked like a cat scratch.

"Oh god!" she wailed, dropping the knife and clutching her arm as if it had been severed at the elbow.

"Sofia!" Luca gasped.

He grabbed her arm, inspecting the scratch like she was hemorrhaging. Then he looked at me. His eyes were full of accusation.

"Is this what you wanted?" he spat. "Blood?"

"That's not blood," I said, looking at the pathetic wound. "That is a papercut."

Luca's jaw tightened.

He picked up the fruit knife.

He didn't hesitate. He gripped the blade in his palm and yanked it out.

Blood—dark, rich, arterial blood—welled up instantly and dripped onto the linoleum floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"I bleed for her," Luca said, staring into my soul.

Matteo stepped forward. He took the bloody knife from Luca. He sliced his own palm open.

"We pay her debt," Matteo said.

The metallic smell of iron filled the room, overpowering the sharp scent of antiseptic.

I looked at their hands.

These were the hands that had sworn to protect me. They had cut those same palms ten years ago to swear eternal loyalty to the Vitiello name.

Now, they were cutting them to save a social climber who had burned me for sport.

Something inside my chest, the last tether holding me to them, finally snapped. It wasn't a loud noise. It was the quiet, final click of a lock sliding into place.

"You didn't pay her debt," I said softly.

I looked at the blood pooling near their expensive shoes.

"You just defaulted on your own."

I pressed the call button for the nurse.

"Get out," I said. "And take your trash with you."

Luca wrapped his handkerchief around his bleeding hand. He looked at me with a mix of defiance and pity.

"You've changed, Elena," he said. "You're cold."

"Winter is here," I whispered.

They helped Sofia out of the room, cooing over her scratch, leaving their blood staining my floor.