

Chapter 8 No.8

My room resembled a skeleton, stripped down to the bone.

The closets gaped open, empty and hollow. The shelves were bare, gathering the first specks of dust. Three large suitcases stood like sentinels by the door.

My mother swept into the room. She looked elegant, as always, but weighed down by a profound sadness. She pressed a slip of paper into my palm.

"Dante Moretti," she said, her voice low. "This is his private number. He will meet you at the hangar in New York."

"Does Father know?"

"He knows you need to leave," she replied, her eyes searching mine. "He knows this city is too small for his anger and your pain. And he knows that if you stay, you will eventually kill those boys, or they will kill you with their stupidity."

She leaned in and kissed my forehead, a lingering touch.

"Be a Queen, Elena. Not a martyr."

Through the open window, I heard the crunch of tires rolling over the gravel driveway.

"They're here," I said.

My mother nodded once, a sharp, final gesture, and left the room.

I dragged my suitcases downstairs, the wheels bumping rhythmically against the steps.

Luca and Matteo were waiting in the foyer. Their hands were still bandaged from where they had cut themselves in the hospital. Their eyes widened when they saw the luggage.

"Whoa," Matteo said, letting out a low whistle. "Packing heavy for the dorms? It's only twenty minutes away, El."

They still thought I was moving to the University of Chicago dorms. They thought this was just another semester, another phase where they could hover around me and pretend nothing had changed.

"Just the essentials," I lied smoothly.

"Let's go," Luca said, stepping forward to grab the handle of the largest bag. "We'll help you set up. Sofia wanted to come help decorate, but she had a... thing."

We walked out to the waiting car. The driver was already hoisting the bags into the trunk.

Suddenly, Luca's phone rang.

It was a shrill, piercing sound that cut through the morning air.

He answered it instantly.

"Sof? Slow down. What happened?"

The color drained from his face. His knuckles went white around the phone.

"Where? We're on our way."

He hung up, his hand trembling.

"Sofia was in a crash," he said, breathless. "On I-90. She says her neck hurts."

Matteo dropped my suitcase. It hit the pavement with a heavy, sickening thud.

"Is she bleeding?" Matteo demanded, his voice tight with panic.

"She's scared," Luca said, his eyes wild. "We have to go."

They looked at me then.

I was standing there with my broken arm in a sling, my burns still

throbbing under my clothes, and my entire life packed into bags at my feet. I was leaving forever, and they didn't even know it.

"Elena, take the town car," Luca said, already backing away toward their SUV. "We have to get to her. The ambulance might take too long."

"Go," I said. My voice was flat.

"We'll come by the dorms later!" Matteo yelled over his shoulder. "We'll bring pizza!"

They sprinted to their car. They tore out of the driveway, leaving black tire marks scarred onto the stone.

They didn't even check if I was okay. They ran to a minor fender bender for a girl who had hurt me, and left me standing at the funeral of our friendship.

I climbed into the town car, the silence of the interior wrapping around me.

"The airport," I told the driver. "Private terminal."

I pulled out my phone.

I opened the group chat one last time.

I typed: I leave you both to her.

Sent.

I popped the back of the case and removed the SIM card.

I rolled down the window.

With a sharp snap, I broke the little plastic chip in half and flicked it onto the driveway.

It disappeared into the grass, gone forever.

"Drive," I said.