

## Chapter 3

The Velvet Room wasn't just loud; it was deafening.

The bass reverberated against my chest, mimicking a second, frantic heartbeat.

We were perched in the VIP section, a dais raised above the main floor like a throne room, separated from the commoners by a velvet rope and two bodyguards the size of vending machines.

Dante occupied the center of the sprawling leather booth.

I sat beside him.

His arm was draped heavy over my shoulders—not an act of affection, but a territorial marker.

His Capo, Luca, sat across from us, flanked by a few other soldiers from the Fazio family.

They were knocking back scotch that cost more than most people's annual rent.

I wore a red dress.

It was tight, a second skin of silk.

It was armor.

I scanned the room, my gaze cutting through the strobe lights.

I saw her immediately.

Mia was working the floor, dressed in a skimpy waitress outfit that left little to the imagination.

She looked up at the VIP section, and her eyes didn't wander.

They locked instantly on Dante.

Then, slowly, they slid to me.

She smirked.

Instinctively, I touched the diamond ring on my finger.

In response, she touched the silver chain around her neck.

The ring wasn't on her hand, but I saw the distinct outline of a band pressing against the fabric of her shirt.

She was wearing it on a chain, close to her heart.

Dante signaled for a waitress.

Mia came over.

Of course she did.

She carried a tray of crystal glasses and a bottle of Blue Label, her hips swaying with a practiced rhythm.

She set the tray down on the table, her eyes lingering on Dante like a caress.

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Fazio?" she asked.

Her voice was breathless, a performance for an audience of one.

"We're good," Dante said.

He sounded casual, dismissive even, but I felt the muscle in his arm tense around my shoulders.

Mia turned to leave.

As she spun around, her hip bumped the edge of the table.

The tray tipped.

Gravity took over.

The bottle of scotch shattered on the floor, sending shards of glass flying like shrapnel.

Amber liquid splashed onto Luca's pristine Italian loafers.

"Fuck!" Luca yelled.

He jumped up, his face twisting in rage.

"Watch it, you stupid bitch!"

The music seemed to cut out.

The VIP section went dead silent.

Mia gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

"I'm so sorry! I slipped!"

Luca stepped forward, his hand raised high.

It was a reflex.

In our world, clumsiness was not tolerated; it was punished.

"Don't touch her!"

The shout came from beside me, primal and sharp.

Dante was on his feet before I could blink.

He moved with such speed that he knocked his own drink over, ignoring the spill.

He stepped between Luca and Mia, a human shield.

He shoved his own Capo back with a force that rattled the table.

"Back off, Luca," Dante snarled.

Luca looked confused, his hand freezing in mid-air.

"Boss? She ruined my shoes. She wasted a three-thousand-dollar bottle."

"It was an accident," Dante snapped.

He turned his back on his men and faced Mia.

"Are you hurt?"

He reached out and took her hands in his.

He checked them for cuts, his thumbs brushing over her skin with tender familiarity.

I sat there, frozen in the red light.

The entire table was watching.

The soldiers were exchanging uneasy glances.

This was a violation of the code.

You did not defend the help against your own men.

You definitely did not do it while your fiancée was sitting two feet away.

"I'm okay," Mia sniffled.

She looked at me over Dante's shoulder.

Her eyes were dry.

They were triumphant.

"I was just... nervous. Because of the special guests."

Dante turned to the manager, who had rushed over in a panic.

"Clean this up," Dante ordered, his voice dropping to a growl.

"And get her a bandage. She's bleeding."

I looked closely.

She had a microscopic scratch on her pinky.

Dante sat back down.

He was breathing hard, his chest heaving.

He realized what he had done.

He looked at me, guilt flashing in his dark eyes.

"She's just a girl, Elena," he said defensively.

"Luca was out of line."

"Of course," I said, my voice steady.

I took a sip of my water to wash down the bile rising in my throat.

"You are very chivalrous, Dante."

The tension in the air was thick enough to choke on.

Luca sat back down, muttering curses under his breath.

He looked at Dante with something new in his eyes.

It wasn't respect.

It was doubt.

A few minutes later, the drinks were replaced, but the atmosphere remained shattered.

Someone suggested a drinking game to break the ice.

Truth or Dare.

It was childish, but at their core, these men were just violent boys with expensive toys.

The empty bottle spun on the table.

It slowed, wobbled, and landed pointing directly at Mia.

She had lingered near the booth, pretending to clean a spot on the railing that was already spotless.

"Dare," she said boldly.

One of the soldiers, drunk and trying to be funny, grinned.

"I dare you to hug the most handsome man in this section."

It was a setup.

He expected her to hug Luca to apologize, or maybe just laugh it off.

Mia didn't laugh.

She walked straight past Luca.

She walked straight past the soldiers.

She stopped directly in front of Dante.

"A dare is a dare," she giggled.

She leaned down.

She wrapped her arms around his neck.

She pressed her chest firmly against his face.

Dante didn't push her away.

For a heartbeat, his hands came up to her waist.

He held her.

I watched them.

I watched my fiancé hold his mistress in front of his men, in front of me, in the middle of a public club.

It was the ultimate insult.

I stood up.

The movement broke the spell.

Dante snapped out of it and pushed Mia away gently.

"Elena," he said, reaching for me.

"I need the restroom," I said.

I walked away.

I didn't run.

Queens don't run.

But inside I was screaming.