

Chapter 5

Elena Vitiello POV:

The sensor lights in the hallway of the Manhattan penthouse flickered to life at exactly three in the morning. I sat in the pitch-black living room, a half-empty glass of red wine in my hand, my eyes locked on the high definition security monitor.

Dante stumbled into the frame. His expensive suit was crumpled, and even through the screen, I could almost smell the stench of expensive liquor mixed with the cloying, sweet vanilla perfume he always brought back with him. It was the scent of his arrogance. The scent of Mia.

He leaned heavily against the heavy double doors made of solid oak. He pressed his thumb against the biometric scanner of the smart lock. The system immediately emitted a sharp, cold red flash and a harsh beep, indicating a failed attempt.

I did not move. I just watched him. I had spent my entire childhood watching my mother wait by the window for a man who smelled like other women. I had sworn on her grave that I would never become a woman who waited in the dark, crying over a man who did not respect her. Tonight, I was not waiting. I was observing.

Dante frowned at the scanner. He clearly thought it was a system glitch. He raised his fist and slammed it against the keypad, aggressively punching in the six-digit code he believed was absolute.

The electronic lock shrieked again. The tiny screen flashed a message indicating that the administrator had reset the password two hours ago.

Dante froze. For a single second, confusion washed over his handsome face. Then, the alcohol-induced numbness vanished, replaced instantly by sheer, humiliated rage. His eyes widened in disbelief.

He lifted his foot, clad in a custom-made Italian leather shoe, and kicked the heavy security door with zero grace.

The dull thud echoed through the empty hallway. Inside, I did not even blink. My heart was a pool of dead water.

Dante pressed his face close to the door. His voice, low and trembling

with suppressed fury, bled through the thick wood. He ordered me to open the door immediately.

I gently swirled the wine glass. I watched the dark red liquid coat the crystal sides, completely deaf to the barking dog outside my sanctuary.

A few minutes of dead silence passed. Dante's patience completely ran out. He began to hurl insults, using the most degrading words a mafia heir could muster.

He threatened me. He shouted that if I kept playing these hard-to-get games, he would cancel the family alliance agreement the very next morning.

I listened to his tired, unoriginal threats. A highly sarcastic, cold smile crept onto my lips. He really thought he held all the cards. He thought I was just throwing a tantrum because he left the banquet early. He had no idea that I saw right through his pathetic affair.

Dante took a step back and tried to throw his shoulder against the door. The solid wood did not budge. Instead, the impact sent him staggering backward. He hissed, sucking in a sharp breath of pain.

The sharp pain in his shoulder seemed to bring back a fraction of his reason. He realized he was not getting inside tonight. He yanked at his tie, loosening it with a frustrated growl.

He glared up at the security camera. He raised his hand and flipped a crude, aggressive gesture right at the lens, shouting that I would pay the consequences tomorrow.

He turned and walked away. The sensor lights slowly dimmed as his angry footsteps faded down the corridor, plunging the hallway back into darkness.

I watched his back disappear from the monitor. I tilted my head back and swallowed the rest of the red wine in one gulp.

I stood up. My bare feet stepped onto the freezing marble floor. I walked to the entryway, stopping in front of the hidden wall safe.

I typed in a complex sequence of numbers and pressed my thumb to the scanner. The heavy steel door popped open. Inside sat a velvet box holding a priceless pink diamond engagement ring.

My eyes held zero emotion. I picked up the ring, the symbol of all my past foolish fantasies and compromises, and shoved it into the deepest, darkest corner of the safe.

I turned around and pulled open a junkdrawer in the console table. I dug through the clutter until I found a cheap, gaudy rhinestone ring I had bought at a flea market years ago for a few dollars.

I took the piece of glass that reflected nothing but fake, hollow light. I placed it perfectly in the center of the velvet tray on the entryway table, right where Dante dropped his keys every day.

I turned off the security monitor. I walked back to the master bedroom and locked the door from the inside.

I lay down on the massive king-sized bed. I closed my eyes and welcomed the most peaceful sleep I had experienced in months.

At seven o'clock the next morning sunlight pierced through the clouds. A harsh, metallic grinding noise echoed from the front door. Someone was forcing a mechanical key into the lock cylinder.

Dante pushed the heavy door open. He brought the violent, aggressive energy of a terrible hangover into the apartment. He had clearly bullied the building manager into giving up the master override key.

He marched straight into the empty livingroom. He was ready to unleash his fury on the woman who dared to lock him out.

But the apartment was dead silent. The kitchen was cold. There was no smell of coffee, no breakfast prepared, no wife rushing to apologize.

Dante let out an irritated breath. He ripped off his suit jacket, preparing to throw it onto the entryway table. His eyes suddenly locked onto the velvet tray.

He stared at the cheap, plastic rhinestone ring sitting exactly where his priceless pink diamond should be. His face turned an ugly shade of pale green.

"What is this cheap garbage!"



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