

Chapter 14 No.14

New York in the winter was a beast of grey ice and biting wind, but the cold never touched me. I was usually draped in fur, or better yet, draped over Dante's arm.

We were at Le Bernardin.

It was our one-year anniversary. Not of marriage. Of my arrival. Of my rebirth.

I was wearing a dress made of emerald velvet that clung to my curves like a second skin. The back was low, dipping just enough to show the edge of the silvery scar.

I didn't hide it anymore. It was proof that I had survived the fire.

Dante sat across from me, swirling a glass of red wine. He looked regal. Terrifying. Beautiful.

"You're staring," he said, a smirk playing on his lips.

"I'm admiring my property," I shot back.

His eyes darkened, pupils blowing wide. "Careful, principessa. Or we won't make it to dessert."

My phone buzzed in my clutch. I ignored it.

Then Dante's phone buzzed.

He frowned. He pulled it out, read the message, and his jaw tightened until a muscle feathered in his cheek.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The Chicago delegation," he said. "They landed early."

"And?"

"They're here."

I froze.

"Here? In New York?"

"Here," Dante said, looking toward the entrance of the restaurant. "In the building"

I turned my head.

The hostess stand was in chaos.

Two men were pushing past the flustered maitre d'.

They were taller than I remembered. Broader. Their faces were harder, stripped of the boyish softness I had grown up with. Time and the training camps had carved them into weapons.

Luca.

Matteo.

They were scanning the room, their eyes frantic, desperate. Hunting.

Then, Luca's eyes locked onto mine.

He stopped.

It was like watching a car crash in slow motion.

He saw me.

He saw the velvet dress.

He saw the wine.

And then he saw Dante.

The restaurant was quiet—the kind of hushed, reverent silence that costs a thousand dollars a plate—until the ghosts walked in.

Luca and Matteo cut through the maze of tables like a storm front. They ignored the waiters trying to intercept them. They ignored the indignant

glares of the other diners.

Their eyes were fixed solely on me.

Luca looked... hollowed out. There were dark circles bruising the skin under his eyes, shadows that no amount of sleep could ever fix. Matteo walked with a slight limp, a visceral reminder of the camps.

They stopped five feet from our table.

Dante's bodyguards, who had been blending into the wainscoting materialized instantly. They became huge silent shadows blocking the path.

"Elena," Luca breathed.

His voice was cracked. Raw. It sounded like he hadn't spoken my name in a year, or maybe like he had been screaming it every night in his sleep.

"Mr. Rossi," I said.

My voice was cool. Polished to a lethal shine.

"You're interrupting my dinner."

"We need to talk," Matteo said, trying to step around the wall of muscle in front of him.

A massive hand shoved him back.

Matteo snarled, his hand twitching toward his jacket where a gun would be.

"Don't," Dante said.

He didn't even look up from his wine.

"You pull a piece in my city, Bianchi and the only way you leave is in a pine box."

Matteo froze.

Luca ignored Dante entirely. He was staring at me, his eyes drinking in every detail as if he were dying of thirst.

"You look..." he started, then choked on the words. "You look incredible"

"I know," I said.

"Elena, please," Luca stepped closer, his hands open in a pleading gesture. "We made a mistake. A horrible mistake."

"We fixed it," Matteo added, the words tumbling out fast and desperate. "Sofia... she's gone. We cut her off. We destroyed her for you."

I let out a short, dry laugh. It sounded sharp like breaking glass in the tense air.

"You think I care about the rat?" I asked.

I picked up my wine glass, idly twirling the stem.

"You destroyed her because she was inconvenient. Not for me."

"That's not true!" Luca cried. "We did it because we realized... we realized she wasn't you."

He fumbled a phone out of his pocket.

"Look. Photos. She's ruined. We made sure she paid for the burn."

He thrust the screen toward me—a grotesque image of a scarred, beaten face.

I looked away, revulsion curling in my stomach—not at the blood, but at their pathetic attempt at redemption.

"Disgusting" I said. "Put that away."

"Elena, come back to Chicago," Luca pleaded. "We're Lieutenants now. We earned our rank back. We can protect you properly this time."

Dante set his glass down.

The sound of the crystal hitting the table was soft, but it echoed like a gavel signaling a death sentence.

He stood up.

He towered over Luca.

He buttoned his suit jacket with slow, deliberate movements.

"She doesn't need protection from you, boy," Dante said.

He stepped around the table and moved to my side. He placed a hand on the back of my neck. His fingers were heavy, possessive.

A claim.

"She has me."

Luca's eyes dropped to Dante's hand on my skin. His face twisted in pure agony.

"She was ours first," Luca whispered, the admission sounding like a wound.

"She was never yours," Dante said, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "You were merely keeping her seat warm until the King arrived."

Dante looked at his guards.

"Remove them."