

## Chapter 15 No.15

The dessert never arrived.

Dante had lost his appetite for sweets, and frankly, so had I. The air inside the restaurant had grown thick, tainted by the lingering tension of the evening.

We stepped out into the biting New York wind ten minutes later.

My coat was heavy, a shield against the elements, but I didn't button it. I wanted the cold to sting. I wanted to feel something sharp and real to displace the dull, throbbing irritation that Luca and Matteo had brought with them like a bad smell.

Dante's hand settled on the small of my back. A solid, unyielding weight.

We reached the curb where the line of black SUVs waited.

But they were there.

Of course they were there.

Luca and Matteo stood by a lamppost, breathing hard, their suits disheveled from the earlier struggle with Dante's men. They looked like stray dogs waiting for scraps.

When they saw me, they straightened.

"Elena."

Luca stepped forward, ignoring the wall of bodyguards who tensed instantly. He held up his phone again. The screen glowed harshly in the dim streetlights.

"Look at it, Elena."

His voice was desperate, cracking at the edges.

"We did it for you. We fixed it."

I stopped. Dante stopped with me, his grip tightening imperceptibly.

I looked at the screen.

It was a photo of Sofia. But it wasn't the Sofia who had sneered at me in the Vitiello hallway. Her face was a ruin. Mottled with purple and black bruises, eyes swollen shut, with stitches running through her lip like a grotesque zipper.

She looked broken.

Luca held it up like a trophy. Like a cat bringing a dead bird to its owner's doorstep.

"See?" he said, his eyes wild with hope. "She paid. We made her pay. The debt is settled."

I looked from the phone to Luca's face. He was waiting for a smile. He was waiting for me to throw my arms around him and thank him for his brutality. He thought violence was the currency I traded in.

He was wrong. I traded in loyalty. And in that market, he was bankrupt.

"You are pathetic," I said.

The hope on his face shattered.

"What?"

"You think breaking her face fixes what you broke in me?" I asked, my voice low and steady. I took a step closer to him, safe in the circle of Dante's power. "You didn't hurt her because you love me, Luca. You hurt her because you realized you bet on the wrong horse."

"No," Matteo interjected, limping forward. "We love you. We always loved you. We were just... confused. She manipulated us."

I laughed. It was a cold, sharp sound that seemed to freeze the mist in the air between us.

"She was a girl from the slums with a cheap laptop and a sob story," I said. "And she played two Vitiello soldiers like fiddles. That doesn't make her a genius, Matteo. It makes you idiots."

Luca lowered the phone. His hand was trembling.

"Come home," he whispered. "Please. We can go back to how it was. The three of us."

Dante moved.

He didn't lunge. He just stepped between us, blocking my view of them. He was a wall of black wool and muscle.

"There is no 'three of us,'" Dante said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet ringbox.

He didn't kneel. Kings don't kneel.

He opened it, revealing a diamond that caught the streetlights and fractured them into a thousand sharp glitters.

He took my hand. He slid the ring onto my finger. It was heavy. It felt like a shackle, but it was a shackle made of gold and power, and I chose it willingly.

"She is not Vitiello anymore," Dante said, looking down at Luca. He turned his hand so the ring flashed in Luca's face. "She is Moretti. She is my fiancée. And soon, she will be my wife."

Luca stared at the ring. He looked like he had been shot in the gut.

"No," he wheezed. "No. You can't."

Dante put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side.

"Go back to Chicago boys," Dante said. "Before I decide to send you back in pieces."

We got into the car. The heavy door slammed shut, sealing out their desperation.

"Drive," Dante ordered.

But we didn't go far. At the end of the block, Luca broke into a sprint. He chased after the car, shouting my name. Matteo tried to follow, but his limp betrayed him, his bad leg dragging like dead weight against the

asphalt.

Dante sighed. He picked up the car phone.

"Deal with them," he said.

He didn't shout. He didn't sound angry. He sounded bored.

The car turned a corner, but I looked back.

Two of the trailing SUVs stopped. Four of Dante's men got out. They didn't draw weapons. They used their fists.

I watched as Luca caught up to them. He tried to fight. He threw a punch wild and desperate. The lead bodyguard ducked and drove a hard fist into Luca's stomach. Luca folded.

Matteo arrived a second later, swinging his cane. Another guard kicked his bad leg out from under him. Matteo went down screaming.

It wasn't a fight. It was a correction. A master disciplining unruly dogs.

"They will learn," Dante said quietly, "or they will die."