

Chapter 19 No.19

Three Months Later

The organ music swelled, filling the vast, vaulted ceiling of St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was loud, triumphant, and undeniable.

New York in the spring was breathtaking. The air itself seemed to smell of sweet blossoms and old money.

I stood at the entrance of the aisle, grounding myself against the weight of the moment. My dress was heavy, a masterpiece of custom lace imported from Milan, with a long train that pooled around my feet like a spill of white water.

Beside me stood my father. He looked older today. Tired. Yet, a spine-straightening pride radiated from him. He had finally obtained what he had always coveted: an unbreakable alliance with the New York Famiglia, and a daughter seated on the throne.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice low.

I looked down the long stretch of the aisle.

Dante was waiting at the altar.

In his tuxedo, he looked devastating. His dark hair was slicked back, severe and elegant, and his shoulders looked broad enough to carry the weight of two cities without faltering.

He wasn't smiling. He was watching me with that intense, predatory focus that never failed to make my knees weak. He looked like a king waiting to claim his queen.

"I am ready," I said.

We started walking.

The faces in the pews blurred into a sea of anonymity. Capos, soldiers,

politicians—the elite of the underworld. They all stood as I passed. Respect. Fear. Awe. It all tasted the same.

But as I neared the front, my eyes caught a flicker of movement near the side exit.

It was the section reserved for distant associates. The pity section.

I saw the wheelchair first. It was stark black.

Matteo sat in it.

He looked gaunt, his suit hanging loosely on a skeletal frame. His left pant leg was pinned up; the leg was gone from the knee down. He was gripping the handles of another wheelchair.

And in that chair sat Luca.

Luca looked... empty.

His face was unmarred, the bruises long faded, but the light behind his eyes had been extinguished. He was staring at a stained-glass window, utterly fascinated by the dancing colors, his mouth hanging slightly open in a caricature of innocence.

Clutched in his lap was a small, worn stuffed bear.

He didn't look at me. He didn't know who I was. He didn't even know where he was.

The doctor's report had been thorough: severe frontal lobe damage, permanent cognitive regression. He possessed the mind of a five-year-old now.

Matteo looked at me.

Our eyes met across the distance.

There was no anger in his gaze anymore. Just a deep, crushing sorrow.

He nodded—a small, barely perceptible bow of his head.

Submission. Acceptance.

He was the caretaker of a ghost. That was his punishment to remember everything while Luca remembered nothing. To push the shell of his best friend through a world they used to rule.

I looked away.

I looked forward.

I reached the altar.

Dante took my hand, and his touch chased away the cold chill of the sight. He didn't look at the side exit. He didn't acknowledge them. To him, they were already dust.

He only looked at me.

"You are beautiful," he whispered.

I smiled, and for the first time that day, it was a real smile.

"I do," I said when the priest asked.

I said it loud enough for the back rows to hear. Loud enough for the ghosts to hear.

Dante kissed me. It was possessive. It was a promise.

As we walked back down the aisle—married, powerful, untouchable—I tightened my grip on his arm.

I didn't look at the side exit again.

The past was just a wheelchair in the corner. The future was the man walking beside me.

The vows had been shattered a long time ago.

But the silence?

The silence was finally mine.

[THE END]

