

Chapter 3 No.3

The restaurant was one of those dimly lit, old-world Italian places that smelled of garlic, expensive wine, and secrets. It was a neutral ground often used by Outfit members for tense negotiations. Tonight, it felt like my execution chamber.

Sofia was already seated at the best table in a secluded alcove, the one usually reserved for my father. She waved when she saw us, the pearls—my mother's pearls—shimmering around her neck like a trophy. Her smile was bright, victorious, and utterly devoid of warmth.

"I was so worried!" she chirped as we sat down. "I'm glad you guys could convince Elena to come. I ordered for everyone, I hope you don't mind! I wanted to make sure we got our food quickly."

Luca slid into the booth next to her, his thigh pressing against hers in a way that was far too familiar. "Of course we don't mind, Sof. What did you get?"

Matteo took the chair opposite, his focus entirely on her, a soft, dopey look in his eyes I hadn't seen since he was sixteen and infatuated with a pop star. I was relegated to the end of the booth, exiled to the periphery of their perfect little picture.

"I got the spicy arrabbiata for the table to share," Sofia announced, beaming as if she'd just solved world hunger. "It's their house specialty. I told them to make it with extra chili flakes, just the way you boys like it."

The air in the alcove instantly turned to ice.

Luca froze, his hand halfway to his water glass.

Matteo, who had been pouring wine for Sofia, stopped, the bottle hovering over her glass.

They knew.

They knew as well as they knew their own names that I had a severe

stomach ulcer, a chronic condition I'd battled since I was a child. It was a closely guarded secret, a weakness I hid from the world. A weakness only my sworn protectors knew about, because part of their duty—a duty they had performed hundreds of times—was to taste-test my food at public events to ensure it contained nothing that could incapacitate me. Spicy food wasn't just painful; it was a guaranteed trip to the emergency room.

For a heartbeat, I saw panic in their eyes. They remembered.

Then, I watched them make a choice.

Luca slowly completed the motion of picking up his glass, his expression smoothing over into a mask of casual indifference. He took a sip of water and gave Sofia a smile that was a masterpiece of deceit. "That sounds great, Sof. We're starving."

Matteo nodded, resuming his task of pouring her wine. "Yeah, good choice. I'm in the mood for something with a kick."

My stomach clenched, but it wasn't from the ulcer. It was from the nauseating, gut-wrenching realization washing over me.

They didn't just forget. They were actively choosing to ignore the truth to avoid upsetting her. They were choosing her comfort over my physical safety.

The waiter arrived, placing a large, steaming platter of pasta in the center of the table. It was a vicious, angry red, practically glowing with chili oil and flecked with a blizzard of red pepper flakes. The sharp, acidic smell of the chili hit my nose, and I could already feel the phantom pains starting in my gut.

"Eat, Elena," Sofia said, her eyes wide with a practiced innocence that made my skin crawl. "Don't be rude. I ordered it for all of us."

I looked at Luca. He was already serving a large portion onto Sofia's plate, laughing at something she whispered in his ear. He didn't look at me.

I looked at Matteo. He was twirling pasta onto his fork, his attention fixed on Sofia with a besotted grin. He didn't look at me either.

My designated tasters...

My shields.

My childhood friends.

They had just served me poison and were encouraging me to eat it with a smile.

I reached for my water glass, my hand steady despite the tremor in my soul. "I'm not hungry" I said quietly.

"Suit yourself," Matteo mumbled through a mouthful of pasta, pointedly refusing to meet my eyes. "More for us."

I took a sip of water. It was cold, clean, and the only thing at this table that wasn't trying to kill me. I watched them laugh and eat, a perfect, happy trio. They looked like a family.

And I looked like the ghost haunting their dinner. And for the first time, I truly felt like one.