

A MAFIA ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

BLUE

*Blood*

THE FAMILY: BOOK 1

LILY RAGLEY

# Blue Blood

Lily Ragley



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# Author Note

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Family!

*Blue Blood* is the first book in *The Family* trilogy and can be read as a standalone. This is a fictional mafia romance and suspense. It contains sensitive elements that may not be suitable for all readers, such as murder, violence, sexual themes, and adult language.

If you enjoy this book, your review would be appreciated on [Goodreads](#) and [Amazon](#).

# Contents

1. Prologue
2. Chapter 1
3. Chapter 2
4. Chapter 3
5. Chapter 4
6. Chapter 5
7. Chapter 6
8. Chapter 7
9. Chapter 8
10. Chapter 9
11. Chapter 10
12. Chapter 11
13. Chapter 12
14. Chapter 13
15. Chapter 14

16. Chapter 15
17. Chapter 16
18. Chapter 17
19. Chapter 18
20. Chapter 19
21. Chapter 20
22. Chapter 21
23. Chapter 22
24. Chapter 23
25. Chapter 24
26. Chapter 25
27. Chapter 26
28. Chapter 27
29. Chapter 28
30. Epilogue
31. Afterword

# Prologue

Her mouth opened in a silent scream.

It echoed shrilly around in her mind, but no sound came out. Nothing except the breaths rushing closer and closer together as she observed the scene distantly.

Calm. That's how she should be. That's how she'd always appeared, her cousin had said—like a composed porcelain doll. Unmoved, even if the sky collapsed over their very heads.

That was, of course, until today. But who could blame her? She had never felt another person's blood before.

Her fingers flexed under the moonlight, watching as it glistened. The texture was unsurprising, but the smell...

Nausea rushed through her as she choked.

Oh, God.

*Oh, God.*

The pungent odor suddenly hit her, piercing through the veil of numbness blanketing her. Its stench thrust the last fifteen

minutes to the fore in a morbidly endless loop inside her head. *Help! Help me.* Quivering all over, she inched closer to the body, finally daring to approach it.

Deep breath.

In.

Out.

It was motionless, shrouded in darkness. The weapon in its back protruded at an odd angle, glinting at her tauntingly. When the night had begun, she could have hardly imagined it ending with a dead body on the expensive carpet. She'd tried her best to prevent it, to avoid it coming to this.

*Please, no!*

But she'd failed.

*Creak.*

The office door slowly opened, yet she could hardly move or look up. Footsteps rushed forward all the way until they encountered the flow of blood.

Deep red rivers.

“Ana...”

The soft alarm brought her eyes up to her aunt's horrified face.

“You shouldn't have come here.”



# Chapter 1

*One Year Later*

“You think the old geezer knows if you’re pure?”

Ana’s pale brown eyes rounded in the mirror. “*Emma*. That’s the priest. Show some respect.”

The blonde snickered under her breath, adjusting her glasses. “Who said I was talking about him? Maybe I was talking about your beloved fiancé,” she jibed, gently laying the intricate veil across two chairs.

Ana’s gaze anxiously traced the length of it, a monstrous ten-foot fabric with hand-embroidered silk flowers. It was the perfect classic statement piece to pair with her crepe silk ballgown dress, which was ivory white, with the skirt extending out to a large six-foot diameter.

Was it extravagant? Probably. But it was her wedding day, and one of the rare designs she had created for herself. She only hoped she lived long enough to enjoy it.

“You really think I should worry about Gio?” Ana regarded her gown forlornly.

Emma must have picked up the thread of fear behind her whisper because she refrained from cracking a joke. “We’re neck deep in the mafia,” she muttered. “Of course, I don’t trust any of these bastards.”

*Help me!*

*Please.*

Hands scrunched tight, Ana deliberately focused on the veil, counting every flower. Retaining every bit of calm that she could. But her aide continued, unable to resist another warning. “Gio isn’t an exception, though. He’s the rule. Hell, he’s already gone off the deep end with that bloody statement, executing his parents’ security guy right at their funeral like a freakin’ psycho. If there was ever a candidate for wife killer—”

“Emma,” she warned, her stomach roiling.

The petite woman pursed her lips, unabashed. “I’m sorry, but I just want you to be safe. And unless he reveals himself to be the Dalai Lama, I would not lower your guard around Gio Bernardi,” she spat.

“What’s going on here?”

The two of them tensed as the tall, thin woman appeared in the doorway along with another woman, who appeared to be the hairdresser. At Ana’s frantic gesture, Emma slunk off to the corner to busy herself with the wedding accessories.

“Auntie,” Ana greeted.

Her aunt harrumphed, eyeing Emma suspiciously as she came around to inspect the room. Ana's heart thundered as the woman surveyed the dress, the veil, and then her newly polished face and nails. How much had she heard?

She glanced at Emma, who looked unbothered by the intense scrutiny, and then back at her aunt, who gave nothing away as well. Her keen eyes were seemingly focused on the wedding preparations. But there was no telling what lecture awaited her once they were alone.

Badmouthing one's fiancé was inadvisable for any bride, but for her, it could mean a death sentence.

“Leave us.”

Shit.

Ana didn't dare lock eyes with Emma as she obeyed her aunt's command. Instead, she carefully smoothed over her silk robe, counting each frill along her sleeves. Unlike the wedding dress, it wasn't one of her designs, though it was exquisite. Perhaps she should expand to lingerie? It was already a challenge getting her hands on pure silk, though. Maybe Emma could try—

“You know what's at stake today, don't you?”

The low warning sent chills down her spine.

It was soft, but not entirely out of the hairdresser's hearing. That poor woman trembled as she plugged in the heating tools and powered them up, clearly sensing the tension in the room.

Or perhaps she'd been warned of the thousand ways she would suffer if she screwed up her job.

Her aunt didn't trust any of the help. Most of the Family did not.

Auntie stood with her arms crossed, monitoring as the stylist began constructing a simple but elegant updo. She stood tall, with a chin-length dark bob and hair parted in the middle. Her frame was trim, every inch of her polished.

"Make sure to add volume at the top," she advised, as if they hadn't already had two trials finalizing the hairstyle.

Ana grimaced as the stylist nervously yanked her hair. Years of etiquette training kept her pose intact even as pins and needles pricked her scalp. And that's what her aunt chose to remind her of when the stylist eventually left.

"So many years of teaching you poise." Her aunt circled her, observing every inch with a look that almost resembled... pride? "You've adopted it well."

Ana flushed, allowing a bit of vanity to sweep in at the praise and at the delicate picture she made in the mirror. Her light brown hair was gleaming, pinned into a large, sleek knot with a diamond hairpiece adorning it. It allowed her narrow face and long neck to be exposed, giving her an almost waiflike appearance.

"The last thing I want," her chin was caught between two fingers, "is for you to burn it all to the ground by gossiping about your new Don behind his back. Is that clear?"

Ice water poured over her.

“Ana?” Her aunt’s ice-blue eyes flickered, the wrinkles at the corner deepening.

She nodded quietly.

“Good. And like I told you many times before, fire that wretched girl.”

“But—”

“I’m sure you will resist me, as you always do. But if she runs her mouth in your new home like she does here, it will be her head. Not mine.”

At her silence, Auntie pursed her lips in frustration. “I’m telling you this for your own good. Gio is an unforgiving man. He took back promises to our faction because he trusts no one here. Not even you,” she said, eyeing Ana meaningfully. “But he is our new Don, and what he says goes. We can only be grateful that he chose your hand in marriage, granting us some assurances. So, don’t ruin it.”

“I won’t.” Her voice was threadbare.

But calm.

Utterly calm.

Her fingers traced over each frill on her robe as Auntie went to fetch a maid for the dress fitting, leaving Ana alone again. Trapped with her thoughts. None of her aunt’s warnings were new. She had lectured about Ana’s impending marriage and its strategic importance to their family almost a thousand times

now. But the wedding had felt so far away before. Now, there were only fifty-five minutes left.

A silent gong rang inside her chest.

11:05

11:20

Noon loomed over her like a storm she'd evaded for far too long. Did she really think she could avoid this forever? The Family did not deal in free will and self-determination. No, each and everyone's fates here were etched in stone.

*Help! Please...*

The flash of the photographer's camera blurred the past and present together, visions of blood in the moonlight dancing in front of her eyes.

"Bella! So lovely."

She demurred as the photographer left her to change. Most other brides would have had a roomful of bridesmaids, laughing and playing around as they dressed up. But Ana had no one. The only person she could think to call to join her in the photos was Emma, but she'd already left to check on the wedding arrangements. Auntie was also preoccupied with other duties.

She didn't mind being alone. It was what she preferred. But today, she desperately wished for someone to hold her hand.

The only person around, however, was the maid helping her with the dress. She gave Ana a pitying look.

*Sigh.*

At least her dress was perfection. The grand ballgown shape truly made her feel like royalty, and maybe she was. She would be mafia royalty after today.

With that heavy thought on her mind, Ana was escorted out of the dressing room and around the back hallway until she stood in the church abbey with her aunt and maid.

It was a grand old church. Its gray, nineteenth-century architecture looked majestic and eerie all at once. From the right wall, a gothic statue of a saint peered down at her, assessing her. Almost as if it could sense her fear.

Ana shifted from heel to heel, waiting breathlessly in the wings as the sounds of the crowd grew louder and louder. In just a few moments, her cousin would arrive to escort her from the abbey to the main cathedral, where over a thousand guests would watch her wed.

Some in jubilation, others in scorn.

“What was your wedding like?” Ana whispered to her aunt.

“Grand.” Her chin raised high. “We had over 400 guests attend, including all the other Capos from each region.”

“And your wedding night?”

“*Ana.*”

She stared undeterred, her large brown eyes wide with anticipation.

Auntie glanced at the maid and then at her with a pinched look. “Painful. It was horrifically painful. Just be glad mafia men prefer their mistresses.”



“Are we going to a funeral or what?”

Ana felt the first genuine smile of the morning hit her lips at the sight of the familiar face, all the tension oozing out of her.

With carelessly swept dark brown hair and bright blue eyes, the lean young man was a near mirror image of her aunt.

“Ten minutes late, Antonio,” Auntie scolded.

“Fashionably late.” He winked before kissing his mother on the cheek. With a broad grin, he came forward to wrap an assuring arm around Ana’s shoulder.

She sighed, leaning against her cousin.

He instantly began chattering away nonstop, joking with his mother and even the maid about all the fuss going on just beyond the abbey doors. But she didn’t pay them any attention. He’d thankfully managed to distract the other two women until all their voices blended into a muted hum, allowing her to take a moment to herself.

No fussing, no lectures. Just the calm peace inside her mind.

It was funny how Antonio was younger than her by five years and often acted like it, but he was immeasurably steady when she needed him the most.

“Ready?” He nudged her.



*No.*

There were too many people waiting just beyond the threshold, waiting to judge her. But she took a brave breath and looped her arm through his as the doors swung open.

In an instant, the decibel level all around them escalated through the roof.

There had been no one else in the narrow hallway, but here at the entrance, it became suddenly and painfully obvious just how large of a gathering this was. The waves of crowds turning toward her were so immense, they floored her. Beside her, Auntie's expression had become drawn and intensely focused, which exacerbated her anxiety.

It was the first time in decades that people were able to witness the marriage of a Don. Most of the prior Dons had ascended to power long after marriage and children.

But not Gio.

He was only thirty-one, four years older than her. But even though their ages were close together, people regarded them very differently. Girls were expected to adopt their duty and marry early in the Family. And at her age, she was nearly over the hill.

Would they all wonder why he had chosen her?

Would *he*?

“There he is.”

“Oh,” Ana gasped, so lost in her head that she’d scarcely noticed the two men at the altar. The priest moved into place, and the man beside him—

Her focus was suddenly diverted by the Wedding March launching on the church organs with a deafening boom, echoing through the vaulted hall. There was a tremendous rush as the room rose to their feet, and the man straight ahead of her turned to her. But she couldn’t look that way.

Her mind had gone completely blank, and everything blurred in front of her. Seas of eyes watched as Antonio smoothly escorted her down the aisle, observing her every feature with their curious, cunning gazes. They huddled together to whisper amongst each other, and she knew what they were saying.

Too old.

Too thin.

Miss Perfect.

A no-name upstart who had risen too far.

Ana smiled serenely at them all with each step, focusing only on the gentle sway of her drop earrings, the bouncing fullness of her skirt, and the magnificent veil with each of its thirty-one flowers.

Until they came to a halt at the altar.

Antonio’s hand gripped her with a sudden tension, and she startled, glancing up into the eyes of the one man she had feared and desired for almost two years.

*Gio.*

Had she said it out loud, or was it just in her head?

His name thudded over and over again as he loomed over her, his narrow, black eyes swallowing her up with such intensity that she could not breathe. His usual curly black hair was cropped shorter and slicked back. It should have given him a more refined appearance, but he seemed all the more dangerous with it.

When he turned to Antonio with a commanding look, her cousin finally let her go.

*No.*

Her fingers clenched around thin air, desperate at the loss.

Even Antonio looked oddly torn as he gave her a final glance before taking his seat. Her aunt also seemed subdued in her chair, for all the speeches she had issued about the importance of today's ceremony.

Would her life ever be the same again?

In a subtle move, she felt her fiancé catch her hovering hand in his cold grasp and lead her up to the altar. Placing her in her new position.

As his wife.



Everything that followed was an odd mixture of rushed frenzy and painfully slow crawls.

The worst part was the number of photos they were forced to take with each and every Family member. If the pomp and splendor of the day weren't enough pressure, then the intense barrage of photos and posing was certainly enough to kill her. Heaven forbid they skip someone's second cousin. They would be torn apart in the gossip circles.

She hated the attention, hated being around so many people. But she was glad that her dress was getting the appreciation it deserved. "So beautiful...very unique, no?" a middle-aged woman murmured to her husband, prodding at the fabric without care.

Ana winced as the woman's finger poked at her side, and then slumped in relief when Emma came up and curtly pried the dress from the woman's hands before shoving the couple along. Giving Ana an eye roll, she marched off to call the next family in line.

"Your friend is very efficient." A low murmur came beside her.

Ana's breath hitched, her eyes drifting to Gio, who had spoken for the first time since their vows. He hadn't even kissed her at the altar, at least not properly. With a prim peck on the back of her hand, he had led them down the aisle to thunderous applause and ended up straight here in the gardens, where the photographer had set up a shoot.

"She's my aide," she corrected softly. "I couldn't do much work without her...I hope she can continue?" she ventured tentatively.

Gio nodded. “Her background check cleared.”

Ana blinked.

Of course. Standard protocol. He wouldn't let just anyone enter his household, especially not now that he was Don. But she wondered suddenly just how far his eyes and ears were placed. Her gaze nervously wandered over to the guards at each entrance, standing ready with guns at their sides.

Just how much had Gio investigated *her*?

“And one last set with the happy couple!”

With a shaky breath, Ana shyly sidled up to Gio. His arms came around her waist. Painfully aware of the warmth of his skin along her exposed back and his fingers that kept absently shifting at her hip, she kept her back ramrod straight.

“Relax,” he ordered, pressing her infinitely closer to his side. “I won't chew you up...not yet.”

She jerked in his grip and swore she could almost hear a faint laugh. But when she finally gathered the courage to look up at him, he was focused on the camera.

After several more shots, Gio briskly dismissed the photographer and turned to confer with his advisor, leaving her alone.

Ana awkwardly stepped away, unsure of what to do after his abrupt dismissal. She spotted Emma directing the lingering guests toward the luncheon hall. After she was done clearing them out, she quickly returned to Ana's side.

“Ready to stuff your face?” Emma asked brightly.

“More than anything.” Ana smiled, squeezing her hand gratefully. “I hope you didn’t arrange any more photo ops inside.”

“Why? Tired of small talk already? This is going to be the rest of your life, you know.”

She groaned as the blonde chuckled evilly. Auntie had trained her to be the perfect socialite, and Ana could carry off the farce on most days—pretending like each conversation wasn’t killing her on the inside. Today, however, she was tired and on edge. Everyone’s eyes were on her, scrutinizing her every move.

“Better get your game face on.” Emma nudged her. “Your Boss is watching...don’t make him divorce you already.”

He was?

Glancing over her shoulder, she found that Gio was, indeed, watching them closely. The smile lingering on her lips faded as his coal-black eyes focused on it. But just as quickly, as if she’d imagined it, he turned back to his advisor. Back to business.

She shook her head, resigned. “Let’s go.”

In the grand hall, their table was thankfully nowhere near the rest of the guests. It stood on a raised dais at the front of the room, allowing them to overlook the enormous crowd.

The bride and groom’s chairs were in the middle of the table, with their families flanking them on either side: Antonio and

her aunt were to her left, and to the right of Gio's vacant seat was his sister. The girl was in deep conversation with Antonio, the two of them giggling.

Ana's heart warmed, as it always did, seeing the two of them together.

"Ana!" The younger girl grinned at her, reaching over from her chair to hug her. "Oh my God, your dress was amazing. It *is* amazing. You look so pretty."

"Gabi couldn't stop raving about you," her cousin chimed in, smirking. "I think she took a thousand pictures of you like a little stalker."

"Tony!"

"Don't tell me you didn't."

The two of them began squabbling, and Ana relaxed into her seat, glad that they were entertaining themselves.

Her aunt was busy as well. Ana spotted the older woman in the crowd, mingling with the other families. She was most likely bragging to everyone about the fabulously expensive wedding setup. Ana had urged her to keep it simple, but her aunt had been horrified at the thought of skimping on the 'wedding of the century.' And there was no denying it. Every inch of the room was covered in extravagant flowers and crystal décor, and bottles of the most expensive champagne were flowing like water.

Gio had never complained about the cost. But then again, she had seen him just a handful of times over their two-year

engagement.

She took a sip of her drink, glancing at his empty seat.

Pausing, she noticed, for the first time, another seat at the far right after Gabriella's. It was empty, except for a small photo frame. Leaning over, she sucked in a breath in recognition. *Gio's parents*. She had only met them twice before, once at Tony's betrothal and the second time at hers. They had been kind—far kinder than she'd expected from the leaders of the Family.

And gone too soon.

Her heart wrenched, surprised that Gio had taken care to highlight their memory at this grand occasion. Most other lesser men would have hidden any signs of sensitivity and grief. And until now, she would have expected Gio to be one of them.

What an odd man.

Now, her *husband*.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she downed the rest of the champagne. And as if she'd summoned him from her thoughts, Gio emerged from a back door with his advisor trailing after him. The short, balding man appeared agitated, arguing intently, but Gio was unbothered. He was as cool as ever as he waved off the man with a quick flick of his hand before striding up to the front of their table.

The crowd started to fall silent, murmuring as they noticed his presence.



Cold, commanding, and cunning.

Their Don.

With a regal nod, Gio turned to raise a champagne glass at his sister, who beamed happily, at her cousin and aunt, and then lastly, at her. Something shifted faintly in his eyes before he dismissed her just as easily as the rest.

Ana sat back, deflated.

Facing the crowd again, Gio stood with the glass high above his head and waited. He said not one word until hundreds of glasses rose from the crowd, following his command. Someone in the room clanged their fork against a glass, calling for attention. But it was unnecessary. Everyone watched him with rapt focus.

“Brothers, sisters,” his voice rang, crisp and clear, his eyes sharp. “Words cannot express the joy I have at your presence today. I am honored to have the support of the Family, and to have gained such an esteemed and beautiful woman as mi donna.”

Flustered, Ana managed to recover from the praise and smiled at the crowd.

“The Pittsburgh faction, in particular, has been a powerful and valuable force in the Family.” He gestured to her aunt. “I am glad to unite us through marriage. As Don, I vow to preserve our joint strength and increase our might against the forces that threaten to sever us.”

A round of cheers rang out.

Though, a few remained skeptical. Some of the men seated on the left visibly muttered under their breaths, leaving their glasses untouched. Gio tipped his glass in their direction—a direct challenge.

Their faces instantly colored.

“What my parents taught us most about the Family was its unbreakable bond. The way we are all tied together from birth until death, in fortune and despair. The sheer respect we have for each other, and above all...loyalty.”

Gio smiled glibly at the somber room.

“Without loyalty, there is no Family. This was a lesson my parents learned too late. The traitors who watched them *burn* to the ground continue to roam free, and every day that they still breathe is one too many.”

Whispers erupted around the room.

Chairs scraped noisily.

At her side, Antonio whistled low under his breath.

“So,” Gio said, undeterred. “To protect the sanctity of the Family, I ask all of you to remember and uphold these values.” His dark gaze swept around the room, watching, assessing. “And to root out traitors, so they get the punishment they deserve...”

*A bloody death.*

With that unsaid warning, Gio raised his glass to his lips and downed it in one go.

## Chapter 2

Pressure.

It had lived like a weight inside her since their betrothal two years ago, and perhaps even long before that, when she had entered the Mancini household. But the pressure had become particularly heavy after her engagement to Gio was announced.

Their union had drawn much attention, not all of it good. There were whispers and warnings from the start about her marrying such an eminent figure. Some laced with envy and others with alarm. They knew she had the poise but perhaps not the grit to survive him.

Maybe they were right. She was quiet and reserved, content with anonymity and her dresses, while Gio was ruthless and exacting, the most famous man in the Family. This was her duty, though. So she had bravely ignored all the warnings and tried to trust in the quiet man she had met two years ago. But there was no escaping the whispers today.

“What an inspiring speech!” An older man clapped her back as if she’d been the one to deliver it. “Giovanni respects the old ways...just like his father.”

“An ass-kisser like his father, you mean,” another man griped.

“Well, we could use an ass-kisser around here instead of a smug traitor!”

“Traitor? Ha! That boy is delusional and paranoid. Everyone knows the bodyguard did his parents in. He’s just startin’ up conspiracy theories to get sympathy support.”

“I would be paranoid too if my staff turned on me.”

“You’re always—”

The talk of guards and betrayals, along with their open criticism of her new husband, made her stomach burn. What did they expect her to do? Fight them? Sympathize with them? And which of those options would reflect best on Gio?

Ana’s mind screamed with an impending headache. She murmured an excuse, slithering out of their argument. Several other voices reached out to her, congratulating her and summoning her, but she bowed her head as her breaths rushed faster together.

It was all too much. There were too many eyes on her, too many ways she could fail.

She wasn’t fit to be a Capo’s wife; she had once told Gio.

So how could she be a Don’s?

Her throat closed in as her feet carried her desperately out, farther and farther away, into a narrow hallway where there was no one in sight. No guests. No sounds. Nothing except herself and her thoughts.

Closing her eyes, she smoothed the bodice of her gown, recounting each stitch and fold. Calming herself. She knew her duties and had been trained in them. But the weight of her new role—the pressure—felt crushingly heavy today.

Ana had helped her aunt with various social events in the past. But always from the shadows, never in the limelight. She had preferred it that way. Power and attention did not interest her, nor was she skilled in wielding them. As Donna, she could be perfectly mannered and courteous, but not a cutthroat politician.

But *this was her life now.*

Emma's earlier words, albeit a joke, were painfully true. It wouldn't be enough for Ana to just play around with dresses now. The Family would expect so much more.

Whispers suddenly became audible from somewhere down the hall. Two women, by the sound of it.

Ana grimaced, searching for an exit.

“You know why he said all that, right?”

“Why?”

Finding no escape, Ana had no choice but to flatten herself into the corridor and pray that they passed. The women's voices sounded familiar; maybe they were also from

Pittsburgh. They certainly reminded her of the gossipy housewives who frequented Auntie's dinner parties. Groaning softly, she waited as they walked ever so leisurely.

“There was a rumor that Gio was involved in the whole thing.”

A gasp. “Sophia told me about it too, but I can't believe that!”

“I can't either. But why else would Gio make such a fuss about his parents nearly a year after they died? It's probably to stomp out any gossip. I mean...the rumors *were* convincing. Who else benefited the most when the old Boss and his wife were killed? Who rose to the top overnight and became Don?”

A chill ran down her spine. The answer to their question came straight to her mind.

“But the speech about traitors—”

“All a tactic to stop the rumors, I'm telling you. Their bodyguard was already killed in the explosion. Who else will Gio even investigate now? No one else gained anything from his parents' deaths, except him.”

They continued chattering, their voices fading as they crossed the hallway, oblivious to her presence. Static rang in her ears, dulling everything around her.

For what felt like hours, Ana stood there clutching her dress, fear and disbelief paralyzing her. Once she'd collected herself, she glided out of her hiding spot to the gardens, where several guests called out to her. They summoned her to take just one

more photo. But she dazedly waved them along, her thoughts straying miles away.

The rumors were nothing new. Her aunt had been the first to share them, right after Gio's parents had been killed. But they had seemed innocuous and silly back when she was cooped up in her quarters in Pittsburgh. Here, on her wedding day, it was her reality.

The careful distance she and Gio had maintained for two years would soon be coming to an end. In a matter of hours, they would be alone.

Until then, she was in an intolerable purgatory—

Of fear.

Admiration.

Fear.

*And desire.*

All propelled by one man...

Visions of the man she'd met two years ago clashed with the one commanding the room today. What little familiarity and comfort level she had built with him then seemed grossly inadequate now. Gio had changed so much in those two years. Unsurprising, given all that had passed: his parents' brutal deaths, his ascent to Don.

She had changed a lot, too.

The faint scent of blood hit her.

As it did, Ana jerked. Dazed. She turned around in a half-circle, completely confounded to find herself standing in the hotel room. How the hell had she arrived here?

She had been so lost in her head, in the memories. The last thing she could remember was leaving the wedding luncheon hall. But everything after that was a complete mystery. She had simply kept walking and walking, possessed by an inexorable urge to escape. And somehow ended up here.

In the honeymoon suite.

Everything in her ached. Her feet felt awfully sore now that awareness of her escape was starting to hit her.

Shedding the heels and a few other accessories from her ensemble, Ana strode gingerly over to the windows and unlatched them.

*Ah.*

She wanted to cry in relief as she breathed in the crisp winter air, its numbing bite a welcome foil to the heat building up inside her.

The church and the wedding guests were still visible from here. They were laughing and partying away, completely unaware that she had fled. She should have informed Emma or her aunt. But several guards and guests had seen her leave, and most of them were staying at the same hotel anyway. Someone would let them know. There were no other festivities left, so she prayed that no one would come looking for her.



Ana stood there for almost an hour until her face was pink from the frost. A calm peace started to descend on her, quiet and lulling.

Until—

*Click.*

The door creaked open, and footsteps entered, approaching almost soundlessly. But she noticed them. They treaded on the carpet powerfully and surely, moving with measured intent—toward her.

Every hair on her body rose to full alert.

“Tired of the festivities already?” Gio asked silkily.

His suit jacket and tie were gone, she saw as she faced him. His carefully coiffed curls were starting to come undone, and the cut of his jaw was tight.

She shivered and could only imagine the picture she made, with all the pins ripped out of her long brown hair and her body clad in just a thin petticoat. His gaze slid down her bare legs before darting over to her dress, which was lying in a heap on the floor.

Ana flushed, embarrassed. “It’s been a long day.”

“With lots of probing questions,” Gio said knowingly.

She said nothing. He knew very well what the Family was like, and with a speech like that, the effect had been incendiary.

Annoyance pricked her, over him inciting the crowds, along with wariness as he circled around her. Ana held her breath until he moved past her and to the side. He picked up her discarded dress and laid it neatly on a chair before he began unbuttoning his shirt's cuffs.

She swallowed heavily.

With his back to her, Gio shook his head, chuckling to himself. "I wondered if you'd decided to run away."

Ana blinked, hugging herself. "And that's...funny?"

"Yes, because I would never let you."

Ana stared at him, her brain struggling to reconcile the foreboding words with the bland smile he threw over his shoulder.

She had been in such a trance earlier, something that had become alarmingly common for her in the last year. So she wasn't sure exactly how long ago she had fled the festivities. Naively, she hadn't expected anyone to notice her departure. Especially not Gio, with everyone in the Family clamoring to speak to him.

Was he upset with her, or...?

A million other possibilities flitted through her mind.

What she knew for sure was that the man in front of her was very different from the one she had been betrothed to two years ago. Both were ambitious, cunning, and frightfully intimidating. But the younger Gio had been more refined and circumspect.

Her *husband*, however, was utterly dangerous. He issued threats and commands with far greater ease, unshakably certain of his power.

Her mouth went dry as he shrugged his shirt off, exposing lean ropes of muscle and a smattering of dark curls along his stomach. Almost unconsciously, her eyes followed the trail of hair down before snapping up to find Gio watching her.

His expression was molten.

“It’s still afternoon,” he said stiffly, turning away to fold up his shirt. “You should get some rest.” He gestured at the bedroom, where she could see a king bed filled with rose petals.

It was tempting, so tempting after the tiring day. But the sight of the romantic décor and its implications hit her like a sledgehammer.

“Are we having a wedding night?” she blurted out.

Gio stopped and regarded her as if she’d lost her mind. And maybe she had because she couldn’t believe herself. But she *had* to know. She couldn’t possibly get any rest without knowing what awaited her on the other side.

“Considering you are my wife—yes.”

“But it has to be tonight?”

“Unless there is an alternate time you prefer?” he asked tersely.

Ana's eyes flitted past the doorway to the large bed, her heart thudding violently. The choice was hers. He was giving her a reprieve. It was not an opportunity he would afford her again; she knew.

*I would never let you...*

If she insisted on it, he would give her some space—for a few hours, even a few days—and she could escape reality just a little while longer. Letting the anticipation toil on inside her so much longer. That uncertainty and anticipation seemed unbearable. And so, there was only one choice.

“Now.”

Her brown eyes were pale. Frightened and determined.

She could do this. She could.

Gio's face, however, went completely blank. As the seconds ticked on, she began to feel mortified and wanted to retract her words. But then, in a swift move, he struck into action. He reached her in a few steps, grasped her hand, and tugged her toward the bedroom.

*Wait.*

Ana grappled for breath.

Shit. She'd made her decision. It had been entirely her choice. Though it wasn't supposed to unfold this way. He should have questioned her and confirmed if she was certain... or in her right state of mind. It would have bought her just a few more minutes—to do what, she wasn't quite sure.

But her consent was all that he needed, she realized in muted shock.

What had she *done*?

It had seemed so sensible a few minutes earlier, to get it over with. But the reality of it was an entirely different matter. She didn't know what to do or how to do it. She hadn't been in such close proximity to a man before, except for her cousin, Grandfather, and their family guards. She had definitely never been so close to Gio before.

Their every encounter had been respectful and proper. They had abided by every rule and had never crossed the invisible boundaries between them, not even for a single kiss.

Though not for a lack of wanting.

Ana inhaled, glancing at his full lips.

Her hand shook in his, and he clasped it more firmly, tugging her along—sending waves of heat up her arms until they cascaded throughout her limbs, electrifying her into a live wire.

Was this fear...desire?

Or madness?

There had always been awareness of him before. But now, with the physical boundaries stripping away, that awareness was growing dizzyingly by the second. She felt faint from it. The feeling of Gio's larger hand surrounding her thin one was already too much sensation to bear.

How could she survive the rest?

They came to a halt in front of the bed, and she stared down at the rose petals that formed a large heart. Her own thudded rhythmically.

Should she lie down? Or undress and lie down? The petals would probably have to be cleared as well.

She shifted uncertainly, freaking out with indecision.

Gio must have noticed because he released her hand and stepped closer.

The scent of his musky cologne surrounded her as his hands moved to the buttons along her back. There were eleven of them, one too many. With rising hysteria, Ana counted each one as they came undone, until his lips pressed hotly against the curve of her neck, sending her thoughts scattering away.

Her petticoat fell to the floor.

Only her panties were left now.

She was nearly naked in front of him...completely at his mercy.

A haze coated her eyes as ghostly hands closed around her throat, and she froze. Gasps started to come in short bursts, and everything around her faded.

She could do this. She could.

*Could she?*

They had spoken in person four months ago. They were practically strangers. Ana could count on one hand every

single one of their encounters. Even now, she remembered him staring at her in the corner when they'd first met, his lips amused as she'd tried to make small talk with him. Gio had been so much more relaxed and at ease then. But life had torn them apart in so many different directions since then. She was no longer as open and naïve; he was no longer as patient and forgiving.

*“My parents will ask for you.”*

*“Ask for me...?”*

*“To enter a betrothal with me.”*

*“What?” Her shock was obvious.*

*“You come from a respectable family,” he said gruffly. “Your pedigree and manner will make you suitable. Perfect. It will be an honor to have you.”*

*Perfect.*

*Honor.*

*Duty.*

*That's what this was about. That's all it ever could be.*

Until his touch began warming her, rubbing in slow circles around her stomach, Ana didn't realize that she had faded into the past. To a time when she had started to feel just a bit more comfortable with their budding relationship. More comfortable with him.

Before tragedy had struck them both.

The memory of a shyer and more diffident Gio, along with the coaxing touch of his present self, slowly unwound the tension in her. She started to melt back into him unconsciously.

His breath was hot against her ear as he stood tall behind her, his one hand continuing to rub soothingly, hypnotically, on her naked skin just above her panties.

She felt like a helpless prey in his grasp, scared...but curious.

They stood like that for a long time until she shivered and slumped fully against him. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she emitted a soft sound of distress.

“Shh, let me take care of you,” he said roughly. An assurance, a command. “I told you, didn’t I?... I won’t let you go.”

Her thighs rubbed restlessly together at his vow, and she heard Gio groan low before he slid a hand down her bare stomach. It drew in shyly at his touch. His hand trailed lower and lower until he cupped her *there*—oh, God—right at the core of her, sending her spiraling into burning heat.

A high keening sound spilled out of her.

“Fuck.”

Gio restrained her hips, and she realized in dazed mortification that she had been unconsciously grinding back against the rising bulge in his pants.

But she couldn’t stop.



The heat was eating her alive. He had done something to her. Spinning her around, Gio glared at her as if it were her fault. But it was *his*. He had coaxed her into his trap.

But, even as he glared, he didn't pause. Without averting his eyes from hers, Gio made quick work of the rest of his clothing, utterly confident in his naked physique.

Ana could not look away from his endless black gaze, certainly not to look *down* at him.

He was not as patient, however. When he was done stripping, Gio nodded jerkily at her last remaining piece of clothing. Urgency and a strange fervor had come into his movements, a stark contrast to the controlled movements he'd displayed just a few moments earlier. Those cool eyes seemed feral now—darkening to onyx pools.

With a timid swipe, Ana tried to do his bidding. Her clammy hands slowly pushed her panties down as she avoided his eyes. Cold air touched her body all over, sweeping up her legs. Making her all the more aware of everything that was now exposed.

In her periphery, she could finally see his full form as well, and it made her swallow thickly. His body was tall and lean, not an inch of him soft or tender. Ropes and ropes of muscle lined every part of him...and at the dip between his legs was a prominent bulge.

Ana gaped, seeing *it* for the first time. Its size seemed entirely too disproportionate to her core. Her entire body

blushed, and she felt those frenzied thoughts start to creep back in.

She couldn't do this. She couldn't—

Before she could step away and escape him, his long, firm legs came flush against hers. And with one soft push of his hand, she found herself falling...backward onto the plush bed. Dropping in a soundless thump.

He surveyed her like a marauder and then followed, prowling over her before caging her in his arms.

Ana nervously watched his taut face above hers. He looked positively *unhinged*.

Her fingers curled into the bedspread as she lay frozen. This was her duty, what was expected of her. It had to happen one day or another. Why not now, in the daylight, when things seemed less scary?

But she wasn't any less scared now as he loomed over her. His position above her put her on edge, until he moved down.

Down until his head dipped right into her.

She cried out involuntarily.

*Holy shit.*

Her legs splayed out as his tongue swiped through her folds, licking every inch of her before sucking sharply on her clit.

Whimpers burst out of her unwillingly. It was too much. She had never felt anything like this before. Torturous pleasure

wracked every single one of her nerves, singeing her from head to toe, as she lost her mind.

*Fuck. Fuck.* It was too much. Ana bucked, nearly throwing him off as she attempted to evade his touch. She was so sensitive, having come once already. But Gio persevered, licking her with intent focus.

The sight of his curly head bent over her mound, moving against her bare skin, nearly undid her. Ana squeezed her eyes shut, shivering all over.

”*Gio,*” she gasped.

Gasps...and gasps...and gasps.

That was all that emerged from her. There was nothing else she could even manage to say once Gio crawled back up. Her face was flaming red and overwhelmed.

Bending low over her, he growled something into her ear that made her clench all over again. “You taste sweet...mi donna.”

Sweet...?

Before she could analyze it with hot embarrassment, Gio positioned himself at her entrance.

Her lungs screamed.

*Fuck.*

This wouldn't work.

Every muscle in her body protested his size, stretched beyond belief as he began to nudge in with firm strokes,

pushing and pushing unrelentingly. All she could do was continuously gasp for air as he nipped her neck and then her breasts, feeling herself reflexively clench around his length.

There was no room to think, to retreat. She was surrounded by his indomitable masculine energy. The Don, the Boss...and she, his conquest. A pool of sensation that was his to command.

Ana felt herself strain, her thighs pushed to their limits as she quivered all over, trying to accommodate him. Beside her head, his arms were coiled with tense control. His dark eyes watched her closely.

Noting her every breath, her every whimper.

“That’s it...take it. *Take me.*”

Ana bowed back, unable to. There was too much heat everywhere. Crawling all over her. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. There was no escape from him. Not from his hand that slid down, working between them, lighting her up again. Not from his mouth that closed over the tips of her painfully sensitive breasts. Or the immense force of him invading her relentlessly.

Her legs seized.

As the inferno rose.

He grasped her chin before she could scream, joining their lips in the blaze.



The shower water was a relief.

So was the quiet in her mind.

Gio's soapy hands roamed down her backside, squeezing her butt before he placed a kiss on her shoulder and stepped out. She tried to catch his eyes to see what he was thinking, but he was already out of the shower and back into that cool façade again. As if the night had never happened.

Ana breathed unevenly, watching him cover up with a towel. She suddenly noticed her fingernail marks imprinted on his shoulder, and her face heated.

Oh, the night had *definitely* happened, and she still couldn't believe it. Hardly twenty hours ago, she had been a bona fide virgin. A mass of nerves and trauma. Now, she was taking showers with her new husband.

It had to be madness. What the hell had she been thinking asking him to sleep with her in the afternoon itself, when she had been so frightened?

The first time, she could understand. She had wanted to get her duty over with. To rip the band-aid off and hope that he was pleased enough with her performance not to place her on his vengeful warpath.

But the second and third times? From afternoon to night, he had let her sleep in for stretches before taking her again and again—and she had been unable to resist. It was like her mind had faded away completely, too lost in the blaze to even think about stopping.

It wasn't until this morning, the day after, that she belatedly realized the consequences. Her thighs throbbed painfully with every motion. Not to mention the deeper pain in the spot between her legs that felt as if it had been impaled with a rod...*which, in a way, it had.*

Ana covered herself up with a towel, shyly grabbing her toiletries from the counter without looking at her husband. All of this felt like an out-of-body experience. Sharing a bathroom with him, the bed, and the lingering feeling of him inside her. She observed their toothbrushes laid side-by-side on the counter.

In complete contrast to her existential crisis, Gio shaved his face calmly, completely unruffled by the enormity of what had happened.

Was this normal? Just another day in the life for a man like him?

She supposed she should be mature and sophisticated about last night. After all, many people had sex with complete strangers. The two of them were at least closer than that. They were acquainted with each other...somewhat. More importantly, they were now husband and wife. Intimacy was expected.

Though Gio couldn't have been short of other offers. Her eyes slid to his, watching him brush his hair, entranced.

Women in their world were much more constrained, while men were encouraged to sow their wild oats—past marriage and

even well into the grave. *Just be glad mafia men prefer their mistresses.*

Her face soured at her aunt's advice.

If she hadn't prompted Gio to get their wedding night over with, would he have even initiated it? Maybe he'd agreed so he could get it out of the way as well, releasing some pent-up tension and fulfilling his marital duty, before moving on to his usual bedmates. Leaving her to her dresses.

She fiddled with the lotion bottle, rubbing it in her hands. "Do you have a mistress?"

Gio quirked a brow, appearing almost amused.

Ana frowned. Was her question stupid? Intrusive? She didn't usually voice her private worries out loud, but they had somehow slipped out of her. Auntie would be rolling over in her metaphorical grave if she knew that Ana was questioning the Don this way. But lately, she wondered just how right Auntie was. The matriarch had cautioned Ana to watch her tongue a year ago, to never speak of that night to anyone. But the silence had eaten Ana up ever since. As the memories and secrets had built up inside her mind, they had consumed her, destroying her waking and sleeping hours.

Though she'd slept rather well last night...

It *had* been quite the workout.

She flushed at the memory. Just yesterday, she'd hoped that the wedding night would be a one-and-done event. Now...she didn't know. The urge to panic and flee was curiously absent.

“Mistresses are untrustworthy,” Gio responded curtly, breaking into her reverie, “and after betrothal, dishonorable.”

Ana stared at him in the mirror.

“And you’ve stuck by this...?” Her brown eyes widened. The possibility that he had taken their betrothal to heart stumped her. The wait between their engagement and wedding day had stretched out longer than expected. Two long years, during which they had seen each other only on rare occasions. Ana herself had almost forgotten about him at many points, so lost in her work and daily routine. Hadn’t he forgotten her too?

Gio shook his head sternly, all amusement gone. “Of course, I did. As Don, I would never stain our values by parading around a mistress. My actions impact everyone. The example I set—my men follow.”

Right. Ana slumped, subdued.

What did she think? That he’d decided to be faithful—for *her*? Gio cared far more for his principles and duties than for any woman. Hell, even his decision to marry Ana was because his mother had suggested it. He did everything for the Family.

“I called a meeting with some of the Pennsylvania leaders before they left town.” Gio moved on, clearly unconcerned with mistresses, imaginary or otherwise.

Ana nodded dutifully.

“Come join us.”

“*Me?*”



“You are my wife,” he said simply.

“But—” Women and business never mixed, were never allowed to mix. Her mind raced at the thought of being in a room with dozens of other patriarchal men. What would she say to them?

“You are also a business leader in their faction,” Gio added. “Your fashion business is very successful and yielded 4% of that region’s revenue. Not to mention other downstream revenues from that trade line.”

He’d finished getting ready and was watching her closely as she brushed out her long hair. How the hell he’d memorized that, she had no idea. “Do you know the figures for every region?”

“It’s my job to.” Gio shrugged.

“But your Capos—”

“—can be susceptible to incompetence and greed.”

Ana mulled over that. It made sense. Anyone with power could easily manipulate it to serve themselves. But even if they didn’t, she knew how men like Gio operated. They didn’t surrender power easily. He would want to inspect everything himself.

Speaking of inspections...he seemed to be absorbed in one now, watching her as she stalled on the last step of stripping off her towel.

“Uh, I’ll just wrap up here and be out shortly,” Ana said politely, hoping he would grant her some privacy. But he

didn't leave. He remained standing there, observing her closely.

“You are...well?” Gio asked quietly.

“Well?”

Dark eyes dropped to the soft swell of her cleavage visible above her towel before trailing down lower. His hand reached out and cupped her just below her stomach.

Ana inhaled.

Oh...*Well*.

“You weren't asking about mistresses because last night was hard on you?”

His question did not register for several seconds, and then it dawned on her. He thought she *wanted* him to seek out a mistress?

Gio's face looked set in stone as he waited for her response.

“No.” Her eyes were wide, sincere. “Yesterday was fine—good. I mean, I don't really have a barometer for comparison. It was my first time. But it was...nice.”

Gio's face smoothed into something that almost seemed like relief before it was covered up with that face made out of ice. Eyeing her towel one last time, he squeezed her hip and left her alone to change.



By the time Ana arrived at the meeting, she felt much more like herself. Calm and cool.

The wedding ceremonies were done. The wedding night—or afternoon—was done. Two of the biggest events she had lost sleep over for months were now behind her. She could resume normal life now, or whatever the new normal was with a Don for a husband.

Her long, silky brown hair was tied into a tidy chignon low on her neck. She wore another of her dresses, a simple blue shift dress. Putting on her fake, social smile, she entered the hotel conference room. And came to a halt as a dozen men rose to their feet upon her arrival.

Ana's fingers fluttered to her throat, and she nodded graciously at them.

Where was Gio? She glanced around. He had left almost an hour before her. She had been banking on him being here to lead the meeting, so she could remain quiet in his shadows, away from scrutiny. Alone, she felt like a rabbit thrown to the wolves.

They all watched her curiously.

Not knowing what else to do in the awkward silence, she hesitantly strode forward and greeted them. “I...hope you enjoyed the festivities yesterday,” she said quietly, scanning the room and recognizing several of the faces.

Gio's advisor and Consigliere, a stout, balding man, nodded stiffly. He seemed to be hunting for his Boss as well,

repeatedly glancing at the doorway. Beside him were two unfamiliar men, likely also from New York. They shook her hand enthusiastically. The rest were men she had seen before while growing up in Pittsburgh.

She grimaced at the familiar older man in the back, who was frowning deeply at her. He grunted a greeting and then returned to his seat. Before she could react to the snub, several others came up to shake her hand.

The last one was a towering, dark man who also reached forward to take her hand. Unlike the others, he was built entirely of muscle, his burly frame almost completely shadowing hers.

*A haze washed over her.*

*Ghost hands gripped her neck.*

No.

Ana blinked furiously as the room spun around her. When her vision gradually came back into the present, she noticed the burly man assessing her with concern. “Luke.” She cleared her throat. “Sorry, it’s been a long weekend.”

They all smiled politely.

Gesturing for them to be seated, she was relieved when they all relaxed and carried on their earlier conversations without her prompting. Small talk wasn’t her favorite; she had to watch what she said and inquire about things she couldn’t care less about. But her aunt had drilled the skill into her, and she

used it often in her business as well. Her customers, much like mafia men, enjoyed a lot of attention and ass-kissing.

Though she hadn't felt compelled to do so with Gio.

Checking her phone for any messages from him, Ana frowned, finding none. Where *was* he? She reluctantly turned back to the men and chit-chatted with them for the next few minutes. One of them beamed at her as he slid into the chair next to hers.

"Marco," she greeted warmly, "it's been far too long."

"Yes." He looked pleased. "Almost a year, I think, since we last met." With graying hair and slightly wrinkled eyes, he always appeared friendly. A rare quality for someone in his position as Capo of Philly.

"Isabella was an enormous help with the clothes donations over the winter. I hope she volunteers again next year."

Marco's face gentled. "I'm sure she will."

"She didn't come to the wedding?"

"Ah, both my kids are having winter exams. They were begging to come, but their track record with school has been *challenging*." Ana laughed as he hung his head in exasperation, but it was clear there was no heat behind it.

"Reminds me of Antonio," she mused fondly, thinking of her cousin.

"But he's become quite successful with the gold import business, hasn't he?"

“Yes...so there’s still hope out there for your kids.”

Marco chuckled deeply and then quirked his head, regarding her speculatively. “Don Giovanni is a smart man.” She glanced at him questioningly, and he wavered before leaning in, dropping his voice to a quiet tone. “He knew what he was doing by inviting you here today.”

He did? The invitation had been issued so spontaneously this morning. She wasn’t entirely sure Gio had thought it through. He’d probably just felt bad about leaving her alone in their hotel room so soon after their wedding night. Either that—or he thought she was the perfect ornament to dangle in front of the men.

Perfect. Pedigreed. *It would be an honor to have you.*

Because of the political advantage she could give him with her last name? Her family, the Mancinis, was one of the top elites in the Pittsburgh region. Almost everyone in this conference room had ties to them. Had Gio’s intent seduction of her yesterday all been a ploy to make sure she remained on his side? So she would sing his praises to the men from her region?

But the Capo seemed to think otherwise. “You’re a lot more talented at putting people at ease.” Marco gestured pointedly at the room of men, who were chatting away, relaxed. “They’ll be more open to Boss’s plans and less likely to offend him with his new bride in tow, especially one from their own region.”

Ana observed the others out of the corner of her eye. They had been polite and respectful, but she couldn't imagine their behavior materially changing just because of *her*. "You have a generous opinion of me," she said, uncertain about his assessment.

Marco hummed, noncommittal. His eyes shifted to somewhere behind her, and her skin prickled.

The air in the room shifted just before he entered, all conversation coming to an abrupt halt. Tension crept into her back, into the backs of everyone around her.

"Apologies," Gio's voice carried, his black leather shoes clicking on the floor before he appeared at her side.

One hand rested on her shoulder, silently urging her to stay seated as the men rose to their feet again.

Ana swallowed heavily at the sharp change in everyone's expressions. There was respect, but more than that, an undercurrent of fear. Each of them regarded Gio warily, including Marco, whose previous ease had vanished. Even though he was older than Gio, he bowed his head slightly in deference. The praise he'd issued her a few minutes ago started to make sense.

"What does a man have to do to get alone time with his new bride, hm?" Gio asked dryly, to everyone's nervous laughter. "I trust Ana took good care of you."

A statement, not a question. But they all nodded readily.

His black eyes met hers briefly, and Ana hesitated at his indecipherable look. She had been chattering away with all the men in his absence, trying as best as possible to make up for her shyness. None of the men seemed to mind it much...but what did he think? Had she stepped out of line?

Recalling Gio's fierce speech after the wedding, she knew he would not tolerate any mistakes, much like her aunt. Ana had grown up used to frequent scoldings whenever she failed in any little way. So she braced herself.

When Gio simply grabbed a seat and motioned for the others to follow, she released a breath.

"I appreciate all of you staying behind for this meeting." He met each man in the eye. "I know it's difficult for us all to be in the same city with our schedules, and I have no plans to be in Pittsburgh anytime soon."

There was a ripple of movement across the room as his meaning became clear. He did not trust anyone in their territory, not since his parents were killed there.

"It's not a place most people jump at visiting," Ana murmured deprecatingly, and a few men broke out in chuckles.

Even Gio's lips quirked. "Regardless of location, I want to unite our regions and strengthen our trade. We are all part of *one* Family. So I want to hear your thoughts on the businesses I can support."

"The Salieri arms business is our strongest," one of the leaders chimed in after an extended silence. "It has been



steady over the last two decades.”

That immediately prompted other voices to chime in, everyone shouting over each other with their opinions of the various businesses and which ones deserved the most funds. Ana sat back and observed them quietly. Most of the men seemed to watch Gio right after they spoke, as if checking his reaction to their ideas. They wanted to appear intelligent and valuable to the Don, but always carefully—without toeing the line.

The most vocal, however, was the old man who had sneered at her earlier. He was frustratingly combative, shooting down each one of Gio’s ideas. She knew him all too well.

“Are you tellin’ me that Vitello, a loyal man, deserves to have his shop shut down?” he thundered.

“No,” Gio rebutted calmly. “I am asking how a business that is in such losses can keep over three hundred staff on its payroll.”

“Because you take care of family! Not hang them out to dry when the going gets tough.” His wrinkly finger pointed accusingly.

“Then, we find other ways to earn them money. Not by lighting the rest of us on fire to save a failing winery.” Before a response came, Gio turned to Luke. “What are your thoughts?”

“Why are you askin’ him?” the old man demanded. “He’s just a stand-in until my grandson takes over.”

“And where is *he*?” Gio bit out.

No one said a word.

“Hm?” At the continued silence, Gio said coldly, “If Antonio is not ready to lead, then I will defer to the man who is.”

In the ensuing hush, Luke cleared his throat. “I agree Vitello’s winery is goin’ downhill,” he spoke bluntly over the other man’s protests. “Can’t avoid the truth...but there are lots of investments and staff involved. It’ll be a shit show if we pull the plug too fast.”

Several of the leaders agreed, and Gio countered, “What if we can create a good exit plan?”

“Then, yes, pull the plug,” someone called out.

“Agreed!”

At everyone’s consensus, Gio nodded in satisfaction. The old man seethed visibly, loudly grumbling under his breath about Gio’s inexperience, which made many of the men avert their gazes uncomfortably. Her husband’s face grew tight with brewing anger, his hands curling around the file in his hand.

“I believe Luke started a business that is taking off?” Ana cut in quickly, desperate to dispel the rising tension. “The strip club.”

“Ah yes...” Gio murmured. “A favorite of Jon’s.”

The man turned a deep red, almost as if he was about to choke on his tongue, before he sank down lower into his seat. Ana’s brows raised at the barely restrained animosity Gio was

directing at his advisor. If looks could kill, Jon would have died instantly on the spot. No one else seemed to have noticed the exchange, but it sent a cold wave through her bones.

“I’d like to hear more. I’ll set up a meeting.” Gio nodded at Luke, who smiled gratefully at him and Ana.

She blinked in surprise. Had Gio agreed to meet with Luke solely based on her recommendation? Some of the men must have wondered the same because they regarded her speculatively—though not all of them were pleased by her influence.

“And I suppose your wife’s dress shop will get pumped with all of Vitello’s funds?” The old man eyed daggers in her direction from the back of the room. “How *convenient*.”

Ana stiffened, shrinking into herself. “I haven’t requested any funds.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts.” He sniffed.

She felt clammy all over at his disdain, the tone awfully familiar from all the years growing up with him. Even after all these years, after everything she had tried to do to please him, the old man still viewed her like she was invasive vermin. It twisted her insides into a tight knot.

Snapping his folder shut, Gio leaned forward sharply. “Ana grew her couture line organically. She took no salary, no staff, and invested all her earnings back into the business.”

She blinked in surprise as he rattled off each note.

“My wife raves about it,” one man chimed in.

“It helped us boost the gold imports too,” Luke added.

Gio spread his hands. “There you have it. And *no*, I did not coach them to say that,” he said sardonically to the old man, anticipating the retort. “Though, as her grandfather, I would think you’d be proud.”

“Grandfather? Please. She’s just a fil—”

“*Francisco*.” Gio’s voice was pure ice, so low, so dangerous that it made her heart stop in its tracks. The warning snapped across the room like a gunshot. “Watch it.”

The old man slumped back in his chair. Nobody stepped in to speak and fill the ensuing silence. They all watched with bated breath as the two men faced off. Gio was simmering with barely controlled fury while Grandfather glanced pointedly away. He didn’t look at her or offer any apologies.

“She’s not just your granddaughter now, but my *wife*. Your Donna,” Gio warned coldly. “An insult to her is an insult to the Family.”

He met each person’s gaze with dark intent before brusquely moving on.

## Chapter 3

Grandfather's harsh words came to her in her dreams that night. The same dream as all the other nights.

*The body on the floor.*

*The blood on the carpet.*

*Her staring down at it in icy shock...unable to move as shivers spread all over her, starting from her chest out to each finger and toe.*

*Everywhere around her was chaos—furniture toppled over, her clothing ripped and torn, and a scream trapped in her throat.*

*But before she could let out the scream, she was dragged away. Away from the dim, moonlit room with the body on the carpet—into another room where all the lights were on, glaring down at her.*

*The wooden chair she was forced into felt hard and unyielding under her worn body. But she was beyond sensation. Nothing seemed to register, not even the maids*

*whispering furiously around her, grabbing her hands and rubbing at them. They rubbed and rubbed, but the stains were too deep.*

*Bone deep.*

*Ana stared sightlessly at her hands. Scratches and blood were smeared all over them, reeking of him.*

*How strange.*

*Behind her, there was a hushed argument. Her aunt faced off with the austere old man seated at the desk, apologizing profusely to him. But he would not relent.*

*“I told you,” he spat. “All those years ago, I warned you and your soft husband of the disgrace of adopting her, but you did not listen. You let your husband sway you into bringing Ana here—into our house, into our family—all because of his useless pity for her!”*

*“Father—”*

*“Hush!”*

*His word was law, and everyone fell silent. The only sounds left were his harsh breaths, punctuated by his walking cane rapping on the floor as he stood up and circled around to Ana. Glaring at her hunched form.*

*“Centuries of pure Mancini blood tainted by a dirty little orphan.” Old, wrinkled eyes, brimming with fury, set upon her. “And look at what it reaped.”*

*Grandfather’s hand lifted and pointed straight at her.*

*“A filthy whore!”*

Ana jerked awake, her eyes flying open.

Sweat dotted her brow, and her breaths came with much difficulty as she wheezed convulsively. Her hands searched blindly around the bed, which was empty, save for her.

Ana was frozen for several minutes, waiting for the fog of the dream to fully fade. No, not a dream. A memory. One she'd had to relive every night since that fateful night.

She'd had a brief reprieve from the dreams around the wedding, too caught up with the preparations and the anticipation of her big day to sleep at all. But since that Pennsylvania leadership meeting, where her grandfather had called her out in front of all the men, the nightmares had resumed with a vengeance.

Not that she was ever allowed to call him ‘grandfather.’ Even though her aunt, his daughter, had adopted Ana decades ago, he laid no claim to her. He considered Antonio to be his only grandchild and heir, tied by the one thing that mattered to him most—blood.

Ana pushed back her matted hair and came up to a sitting position. She hugged her knees and rested her head on her arms as sadness filled her. Her grandfather's continued rejection and judgment should have become routine by now. But it still stung, even after all these years.

*Filthy whore...*

No matter how perfectly she behaved, she was never good enough for him. Her throat bobbed as she squeezed her eyes shut.

At least Gio wasn't around to witness her sorry state after the nightmare. She'd quickly learned that he was one of those bizarre people who willingly woke up every day at the crack of dawn to exercise and prep for the day's meetings. Ana, however, was a creature of the night. By the time she fell deeply enough into sleep, Gio was often ready to wake up.

It made it awfully easy to hide the nightmares from him. To hide herself from him.

A faint breath escaped her, and her eyes drowsily searched the inky blue sky. She scanned for some solace, for some answers. Wondering...if her aunt now regretted adopting her into the family...if what happened with the body that night would be discovered...and if Gio saw her as his wife or his duty.

*An insult to her is an insult to the Family.*

The pleasure of those words was dangerously alluring. It could have just been his pride and honor talking. As Don, Gio could never allow such a bold insult to his wife to go unpunished. It would make his men think he was weak.

But she hoped part of his response to Grandfather was due to his respect for her. Ana had no illusions about it meaning anything more—she certainly did not expect love. She had done without it for far too long to even miss it anymore.



And yet, the fact that he'd defended her, for whatever reason, elated her. It made her feel more secure in her place as his wife.

*My wife. Your Donna.*

Ana sleepily contemplated his words and his fierce defense of her until the sun slowly clambered up. It seemed like hours had passed, but she still could not wrap her head around her new husband. She could not make any sense of him.

Gio was as dangerous and unapproachable as her past-hidden in a dark sphere she could not reach. All she could do was tread carefully and stay away as much as possible.

Hoping that he would be busy at work and safely out of her way, Ana finally got dressed for the day.

She wandered out of their large bedroom suite into the hallway, observing her new home.

It was a majestic estate, centuries-old and sprawled over several acres of premium land in the Hamptons. It screamed luxury. At every corner was an antique made of insanely expensive material. Oil paintings and gold lamps adorned each wall.

Everything felt fragile and breakable. Almost like her.

Hugging herself, Ana glanced nervously at Gio's closed office door. She contemplated wishing him good morning, just to be polite. But just the thought of it stole her breath.

Instead, she took the stairs down to the first floor, wandering past the kitchens and the multiple sitting rooms to the large

room at the end that would be her new office.

It used to be a library, but Gio had cleared everything out for her arrival—even though she had never asked.

Ana fought the bubble of warmth at his gesture.

He was just being courteous; that's all.

She let her eyes sweep over the largely vacant room. It had only been a few days since their wedding, so many of her work items hadn't arrived yet. But she had already started mapping out how she would organize the room. On the right side, where the sunlight was strongest, she would place her desk with a sewing machine. Opposite it, she would keep her dress form to structure her latest designs. And on the empty bookshelves, she could place all her raw materials, fabrics, and tools.

Her hand slid along the wooden shelves and came away clean. Not even a speck of dust was on them. *Impressive.*

Ana smiled to herself as she breathed in the silence. She always felt so utterly at peace when she was by herself. Nothing could hurt her or judge her in the quiet solitude. It was only around other people that she grew agitated and unsure of herself, wary of their attention. Trying so hard to please them...and always falling short.

“The order for your sewing machine was placed today.”

At the sound of her husband's deep voice, Ana's breath stuttered. Her bubble of peace was pierced.

She was sitting almost crouched on the ground, with her hand still lingering on the lowest shelf. So when she turned to see Gio stride in, she felt completely overpowered, his tall figure towering over her hunched form.

The shadows around her spread as he came to a halt right in front of her.

Ana swallowed, taking him in. He was dressed sharply in a fitted shirt and slacks, and his dark curls were slicked back neatly. Her simple cotton dress and loose braid felt too plain in comparison.

“I hope the office is to your liking,” Gio said, his black eyes roaming over her face.

“Yes.” Her voice came out soft, almost dazed.

“I know it’s empty now. So, until everything is shipped in, you can use my office.”

“But—” Ana blinked. “Don’t you need it?”

Gio waved it off with a large hand. “I’ll manage. Just come in there.”

She stared at him, confused by the command. With a house of this size, there was no need for them to be squeezed into one office. She could do her work anywhere. Without her sewing machines, she would mostly be doing design sketches and computer work anyway.

The heat of his stare was strong on her, but Ana averted her gaze and busied herself with wiping the invisible dust on the shelf.

What was he even doing here? He was usually in nonstop calls and meetings. Gio had invited her to join some of them, but she was hesitant after that horrific meeting with Grandfather. She didn't want to put herself in the firing line again.

But what she was most afraid of...was Gio's pull, of the way he threatened her peace every time they were together. So, even though her office was completely bare, she'd been determined to come here to avoid her husband altogether.

Her effort was in vain, though.

Gio had still found her.

"I'll just organize a few things in here today." She gestured to the few piles of fabrics she had laid out.

Gio's gaze instantly fell on them. With intent focus, he reached over and, carefully, almost as if he was inventorying them, rifled through each fabric. Measuring and inspecting.

"You didn't bring any of your staff with you?" he asked.

"I don't really have many staff yet. Mainly Emma and a few temps."

"Emma was supposed to move here, wasn't she? Did something happen?"

Ana felt her pulse trip at the casual question. It seemed innocent on the surface, but his eyes had narrowed suspiciously. Her eyes fell on the fabrics that he had rifled through, before returning to his face, which bore into her with painful intensity.

“Was there an issue with her?” he pressed darkly.

*Was this an interrogation?*

Ana’s retort was stuck in her throat. At one time, perhaps a year ago, she would have voiced it. Today, she just wanted to run from the dangerous look in his eyes. The one that promised repercussions if she withheld the truth from him.

What did he think happened with Emma? Something nefarious?

He was so cautious and suspicious. He didn’t seem to trust anyone, especially not the staff. This large estate was barely staffed because of his paranoia.

“She was just torn about leaving her mother behind, so I thought it would be better if she worked remotely from Pittsburgh.”

Gio gazed at her for a long time, his eyes sweeping down her submissive pose on the ground. “Very kind of you,” he murmured. “Much kinder than I would’ve been with my staff.”

His gaze, she saw, was no longer on her, but on the housekeeper hovering at the doorway. The poor woman trembled as the Don narrowed his eyes on her.

“You told me to stop by, sir?”

“Yes...tell me, have you been helping with the setup of this room?” His hand waved at the empty room and at Ana, who sat alone on the ground, tidying her few belongings.

The housekeeper shifted uncomfortably, deliberately avoiding looking at Ana. “I-I was just waiting for the shipments to come in, sir.”

Gio tilted his head in sharp inspection. “I hope you know that Ana is your new Donna. My *wife*. I expect you to help her as you help me.”

“Y-yes, yes of course.” The housekeeper nodded obediently.

“Good. And what is the update on the shipments? Have you ordered the new sewing machines?”

“I uh was just going to put in the order...sir”

”*Going to?*”

His voice was as cold as ice. Brittle and frigid. It cut through the air in a terrifying swoop. Ana could practically feel the woman shrivel into herself, knowing she’d fucked up. She tried to smile reassuringly at the housekeeper, but the woman was beyond any sensation.

The housekeeper trembled like a leaf and quickly rushed to assure Gio that she would “put it in right now.”

And then she was off—racing away like her head was on fire.

Gio issued a long-suffering sigh and ran a hand through his hair. The slick curls started to come undone. When he glanced back at Ana, she couldn’t help a small smile of amusement. He stared at her until her smile faded away.

“It’s fine,” she said, clearing her throat. “I’m ahead on my orders, so I can manage without the machines for a few more

weeks.”

Gio glanced away stiffly and nodded.

Ana turned her attention back to the bookshelf, still in the same awkward crouched position. Her knees and calves ached like hell, but she could not move for the life of her. His presence made it difficult for her to breathe or do anything at all. She just prayed that he would return to his work, so she could return to her peace.

But when his footsteps began to shift, she felt her heart plummet. Disappointed. It felt like all the warmth and thrill that hovered in the air were disappearing with him.

“Ana.”

“Hm?”

She distractedly glanced back at him, expecting him to be further away by the door. With a start, she realized that Gio was still standing right by her, staring down at her on the ground.

He crooked his finger at her, and she unconsciously tilted her face up in response. Helpless to obey him.

In a smooth move, he bent down and caught her lips in his—stealing her breath away. Heat poured through every part of her, scorching her as his tongue tangled with hers. All her thoughts, anxieties, and self-consciousness vanished. The only thought that prevailed was *him*.

Just as quickly—it ended. Gio stood back to his full height and licked his lips, a satisfied look on his face.

“Come work in my office,” he ordered. “I’ll be expecting you.”

She watched in a daze as he strode away. Leaving the peace she’d sought in tatters.



## Chapter 4

It was a dream that awoke Ana again in the middle of the night. But it was a wholly different one than the nightmares that usually haunted her. This one did not wake her up with a terrified gasp—with fear throbbing through her.

No, this time she woke up *hungry*. For Gio.

Ana felt sweat dot the valley between her breasts and wetness dampening her thighs. She turned in the bed, which was empty again, and flushed from head to toe, remembering the dream vividly.

It had been a memory, a replay of what her husband had done two nights ago—her *devil* of a husband, who would not leave her alone.

After a busy day of meetings, he had somehow found the energy to coax her into two rounds of sex. Tirelessly, relentlessly riding her until she'd fallen into the deepest sleep of her life.

But even that hadn't been enough for him. After wearing her out thoroughly and completely, her indefatigable husband had woken her up again a few hours later. Nearly at dawn.

Ana hadn't realized what was happening at first. Her immediate thought had been panic, frightened that the nightmare was recurring again.

Until she'd noticed his head between her thighs.

She'd barely had time to fully wake up and process the position before his lips had clamped over her folds. Causing every part of her to break into sharp pleasure.

The climax had left her in such a breathless daze. And his arrogant smile—triumphant and smug—had threatened to steal her remaining air.

Gio had simply chuckled then, amused and insistent that she go back to sleep.

How the hell he expected her to simply *sleep* after that, she had no idea. But he had gotten up for his early morning workout, leaving her restless and hot.

The heat was eating her alive even now, two days later. The memory was playing over and over in her head—until she was a wanton mess. Desperate for relief, desperate for his touch.

It wasn't a surprise that Gio's touch was consuming her this much, not with the way he relentlessly seduced her each night. In the three weeks since their wedding, they had slept together every single one of those nights. Sometimes multiple times a night.

Ana still felt untried and gauche as she tried to mimic his movements in bed. But Gio hadn't voiced any complaints so far. Rather, the sounds he had made so far were encouraging.

Very encouraging.

Her cheeks flamed, and she covered them with her hands.

*Stop it.* Ana rubbed circles on her cheeks, hoping to calm herself down.

She'd never thought she could stomach such intimacy. All she had wanted was to fulfill her duty on her wedding night, before retreating back into her shell, where it was safe.

But her mind went curiously blank every time her husband touched her. It was a different touch than she was used to. Most people who approached her did so with scorn and malice, with judgment and disdain—just like Grandfather. She had never encountered someone like Gio, who touched her with intense authority and possession.

Claiming each of her climaxes like a prize.

Before he retreated back to his business and his cool façade again.

That was the part that unsettled her the most. Not the sex or the pleasure. But the way he retreated just when she felt closest to him.

Gio was too skilled at power games. Cold...and cunning. Her Boss. He was a masterful politician in all ways, even in the bedroom. He wielded pleasure so skillfully that she could not resist, even as he kept himself aloof.

Was she so lonely from years of neglect from Grandfather that she had caved this quickly to Gio's affections? Letting him seduce her, knowing that he was keeping many parts of himself closed off.

It was safer this way, Ana told herself. It was bad enough that she was getting carried away by their physical connection and letting down her guard. At least with emotions out of the picture, she could retain some peace and sanity in this marriage.

And maybe that's what Gio wanted as well, as he freely took her body without opening up in return—to maintain a safe distance from her.

It was hard to tell. Gio was so guarded, so wary of everyone around him. He treated everyone like pawns on a chessboard, nudging them in one direction, only to close in on them from another.

All part of his larger quest to uncover his parents' traitors and gain control of the Family.

Ana's every interaction with him was much the same. Whether it was him watching her as she worked in her empty office...or him rifling through the piles of fabric—no matter what, he was always assessing her. Even when he appeared relaxed, chatting and coaxing her shy smiles with ease, she knew—his mind was whirring away.

Calculating and plotting.

Testing and gauging...waiting to see if she would finally crack.

And do what?

Scream, cry, or *submit*?

What did he want from her?

Wasn't it enough for him that she carried his name and did her part to make him look good in front of his men? Why did he have to make her a slave to sensation on top of it all?

Ana huffily tried to flop back into sleep. But the memory of his touch and the dream began to invade every part of her... intensifying the slick feeling at her core.

The bedsheets chafed her skin as she tossed and turned.

After another half hour of lying in bed wide awake, Ana sighed, exasperated. She wasn't going to fall asleep again. She felt too hot and restless. Plagued by both the dream and thoughts of her husband.

With a resigned push, she shoved off her blanket and swung out of bed. Padding across the bedroom, she quietly opened the door and crept down the hallway toward the one room with a light on.

She stiffened as the cooler air in the hall instantly made her nipples peak beneath her nightgown.

*Great.* As if her body wasn't already in turmoil.

She rubbed her arms, warming herself up, as she crept closer.

Near the lit doorway, the sound of rustling papers became audible. Inside, Gio sat with framed glasses on, meticulously reading through a file.

Her chest ached at the picture he made, so serious and studious. His short black curls were tousled from all the times she'd run through them last night. Her fingers itched to do it all over again.

But knowing he had too much work to do, she resisted the urge and turned back.

“Ana.”

Low, but imbued with power.

She was helpless to resist, peering around to see Gio waiting expectantly, his glasses now set aside. Even at this early hour, he appeared every inch the Don, seated behind a magnificent oak desk and a high-backed leather chair. The entire wall behind him was filled with books and portraits of the rulers who came before him.

Ana walked in sheepishly, like a child summoned to the principal's office. But the way she felt was anything but childlike. Awareness thrummed through her as his eyes dropped to her thin, silk nightie.

Ana crossed her arms, covering her breasts.

Gio regarded her knowingly. “Couldn't sleep?”

The memory of his head between her legs sent a wave of heat through her. She nodded shyly.

“Well, the staff is working quickly to set up your office. The sewing machines should be shipped over by Friday.”

“Oh.” Her bare feet curled into the carpet. Was he hinting that she should leave him alone? “That’s uh good.” She hesitantly stepped back. “I won’t be interrupting you as much once I furnish my office.”

She laughed lightly, self-deprecating, but he merely frowned.

“You’re my wife,” Gio said simply.

But what did that mean? He’d said it more than once in the last few weeks, to his staff and his men. As if that statement was explanation enough. When Grandfather had dared to insult her...or when the housekeeper had neglected to help Ana with her office.

*She’s my wife.*

If he were any other man, she would have thought it a sign of pride. But Gio always looked so guarded as he said it. As if he didn’t want her to think too deeply about his declaration.

“Do you need any more staff for your business?” he asked her in that same cool tone.

Ana thought back to Grandfather’s jibe at the meeting, about Gio funneling funds to her dress business. “No...I’m good.” There was no way that she’d give the old man the satisfaction. She would make it on her own, even if it killed her.

But Gio must have forgotten about that exchange because he insisted that she think it over again. Ana came around to where he was pointing at a list of at least a hundred names. At the top

of the printout was the header: *Vitello Vineyards-Full-Time Payroll*.

“You’re trying to help Vitello’s employees?” Surprise filled her.

“Mm. I’ve been going back and forth with Luke on this. We have to pull the plug on his wineries. They’re bleeding way too much money. But he has over 300 staff across all his shops. We can’t just blow up their lives.” Gio rubbed his jaw, while she reeled.

Most men in power behaved callously, without any regard for the people who served them. It would have been so easy for Gio to do the same—to focus on the finances, leaving the employees to their fates. No one would have blamed him for it. And yet, he was trying.

Her throat felt heavy with respect.

“I could use an extra seamstress and someone to monitor emails,” she admitted. “Emma has been handling everything really well, but if anyone needs a new job, we would be happy to have some help.”

He nodded, scribbling a note. “I’ll get some more details from Luke on who might be a good fit. I’d ask Vitello, but—”

Right. The man’s business was being razed to the ground. He wouldn’t be in a cooperative mood. Not to mention, he was a close friend of Grandfather’s. The old man had probably already turned Vitello against Gio since that meeting.

“What are your thoughts on Luke?” Gio asked her suddenly.



“Luke?”

“Yes, is he a reliable man?”

What a loaded question...

Ana glanced out the window, where speckles of pink hinted at dawn’s arrival. “I know my uncle trusted him. Luke was his Captain, and before he passed, he entrusted Luke with the territory until Antonio came of age. So far, I haven’t heard of any major issues. Luke seems to run a tight ship.”

“No major issues, except *one*.”

She inhaled sharply.

His parents’ murder—of course. It had occurred on Pittsburgh grounds, while Luke was in charge of the region.

Her mind raced at the insinuation as Gio watched her closely, revealing none of his own thoughts. At the Pennsylvania faction meeting and even now, she thought the two men were getting along well.

But now she questioned her observations.

Gio was not one to trust easily, even if he projected otherwise.

Cunning, many in the Family called him.

Perhaps the old adage was true for him...*keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

Goosebumps rose along her arms. What were his true intentions? With his men, with her.

Ana was lost in thought for several minutes. When his hand curled around her waist, resting on her hip, she noticed him looking oddly hesitant. “Do you have any major appointments today?” Gio asked with uncharacteristic hesitance.

“No, not until my office is set up. Why?”

“My sister didn’t want to bother you until you were settled. But if you are free, I hope you can spend some time with her today.”

“Oh, *of course*. I would love to.” Ana smiled happily, pleased that he’d asked her.

Gio returned her smile, almost as if he couldn’t help himself as he gazed up at her. He looked relieved at her ready agreement. It was...sweet, for such an aloof and dangerous man to be so worried about his little sister. She would have agreed to meet Gabriella regardless, but seeing his reaction bolstered her decision even more.

Tenderly and unconsciously, she found herself brushing her fingers along his smile, tracing the expression there. Savoring it.

The look on his face grew sensuously intimate at her shy touch, smug and satisfied at her obvious craving for him. His eyes drew her in with that nameless pull that tethered her to him every time they were in the same room. And they were together quite *often*. But it never seemed enough. He inspired so many conflicting emotions in her, yet, above all, he mesmerized her. Making it difficult to avoid him for too long.

She wasn't sure she wanted to anymore. She wanted the pleasure, the freedom from her own thoughts that only his touch could provide.

As his hand absently rubbed circles around her hip, Ana shifted restlessly. Her legs parted unconsciously in an effort to alleviate the ache that had been building since she'd woken up.

At her movement, Gio paused and inhaled sharply.

Her pale brown eyes silently flared as his hand snaked up one leg. He went past the hem of her nightgown, watching her with each torturous inch as his hand slid higher and higher up her silky, bare skin.

Before Gio could reach his destination, however, Ana impulsively put a hand on his chest.

A flame of defiance lit within her.

Why did she always have to lose her peace of mind while he remained in control? For once, she wanted to make *him* come undone. To shake him out of that cool and careful façade.

Would he become angry?

Would he sneer at her rebellion?

Would he...force her...?

Fear and curiosity filled her. In a daring move, Ana pushed him until he was forced to lean back in his chair.

A dark brow rose, but he didn't stop her.

Nervous excitement flowed through her at his submissive pose. She knew he was anything but submissive; he was just

indulging her. But it gave her the courage to take the reins and explore him for once.

And what a specimen of a man he was...

Her hooded eyes took in his short, messy curls. His full lips. The top buttons of his shirt were left open, exposing a tanned throat and chest. Below that was a tapered waist that led to long, endless legs, which spread wide, revealing the part of him that made her blush.

Her perusal had clearly left him aroused.

At her continued stare, a low groan left him.

She knew she should look away. It was obscene—and frankly, she had no idea what the hell she was doing. He had guided all their sexual encounters so far. But she just couldn't stop staring. She felt gripped by some sort of strange compulsion that overwhelmed her with desire and defiance. Her eyes roamed desperately all over him before landing on his arousal again.

Ana swallowed.

“If you want something,” his hand gripped hers, “take it.”

Her eyes widened. The challenge was clear.

*Take it.*

Before courage deserted her, Ana sank slowly to her knees and tentatively placed her hands on his thighs. The muscles there bunched tightly. Gio stifled another groan, but she could

not quite hear him. A heady buzz filled her ears as she contemplated her next move.

Her chest heaved up and down. Fingers traced up the seam of his pants, stopping at the zipper that was straining against his bulge.

“You—you’ll guide me?” she whispered.

Gio’s eyes turned black.

With a rough jerk, he released his cock and guided her hands until they gripped him firmly.

Her small hands tested the weight of him before moving along the length in soft fascination. Without his bidding, she bent over and took him into her mouth.

Gio cursed. He muttered obscenities and commands so graphic they would have shocked her if she wasn’t so completely delirious herself. Gripped by a madness that would not abate.

Tasting and tasting him until his head fell back on a pained shout, Ana felt power and thrill, unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. It surged through her, relentless and ravenous.

For a moment, another insidious voice penetrated...

*Filthy whore.*

But it stood no chance as she gazed up at him. Breathless.

He was beautiful in his abandon, his muscles rippling and releasing every few seconds afterward, his face soft and

relaxed. When Gio's eyes opened again, he was slumberous and satisfied.

She waited for him to break then, to snap at her for taking control.

But he simply wiped her lips with his thumb...and smiled with pride.

Leaving her undone.



The blush on her face must not have faded, if Gabriella's wide grin was anything to go by.

Ana covered her cheeks, cursing herself for wantonly interrupting Gio's work this morning. She should have been more scared and nervous. But it was like a trance had come over her. What was she trying to accomplish by mauling her husband in his office?

To prove she could control him?

Or that the past didn't control *her*?

Ana feared she was only falling deeper into Gio's hold, yielding further to him. Thankfully, it wasn't all one-sided, as he'd done plenty of mauling of his own over the last three weeks. He was yielding to her in small ways, at least physically.

She felt her cheeks flush again and hid it with a delicate sip of her tea. The midmorning nap should have refreshed her before she met with Gio's sister, but Ana was still painfully

aware of the rug burns on her knees. Her lips also felt like they'd swollen to twice their normal size.

“Things are going well with my brother?”

Ana choked on her tea. “Y-yes, of course. He has been a gentleman.”

*Liar.*

This morning, he wasn't.

Gabriella cocked her head, her long, waist-length curls spilling over her shoulder. A broad grin filled her face. “I never thought you'd be the type to blush so much.”

“I'm not,” Ana blustered as the younger girl burst into laughter.

“You *are*, and you know it. It's hilarious. I always thought you were so serious and proper.” Gabriella's eyes twinkled cheekily. “I didn't think you were excited in the least by this marriage.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hm. I figured you were just going through with it 'cos Gio became Don.”

It was an unsubtle way to ask about her intentions, but Ana didn't mind. She was glad Gio had someone in his corner to protect him. Most women were dazzled by his position and wanted to marry him for status.

But how could she explain why she had agreed?

“I don’t know why I accepted, actually,” Ana said honestly. “It all happened so fast. I’m not sure I ever processed the betrothal, the wedding, or even this—” Her hands waved at the large estate that was her new home. “But I agreed...because I wanted to.”

A boyish image of Gio flashed before her. So determined, but respectful. Saying no to a man like him wasn’t even an option, regardless of the pressures of the Family and his rank. She just could not resist his pull. Even after everything that happened last year, something in her still yearned for him.

This morning had proved why. Even though she’d fully expected Gio to resist and assert his dominance, he hadn’t. He had let her take control, submitting his body to her. The thrill from it still innervated her now, hours later. It gave her hope that he wanted a true partnership with her, as equals.

Ana glanced at Gabriella, who was beaming in satisfaction, making her blush harder at what her expression had revealed. The last thing she needed was for Gio to hear his sister spouting off romantic nonsense after this visit. Neither she nor Gio were in love. They were just getting along well so far, and that’s all she could hope for.

“And how’s Tony?” Gabi asked.

Grateful for the change in topic, Ana filled her in on Antonio, detailing his latest squabbles with his mother and the latest adventures with his friends. Gabriella ate up every story, her one good foot tapping happily on the floor while the other



lay motionless in her wheelchair. The sight of it made Ana's heart wrench.

She didn't want to ogle it like most others did. So Ana pointedly ignored it, hoping to give the girl a semblance of normalcy. But the sadness and anger at such a fate befalling the happy young woman choked her.

Growing up, she recalled Gabriella always being on the go, running and tearing through the gardens with Antonio and his other friends whenever she was in Pittsburgh. And when she wasn't, Gabi was always on stage. Dance recitals, theater, and plays...so full of energy.

The first time Ana had seen her live, Gabi had been dancing a ballet rendition of Romeo and Juliet, and it had simply taken her breath away. Gio had invited Ana to attend it just after their betrothal, and she had promised the girl that she would come watch all her future shows too.

But that first show would soon become Gabi's *last*.

The girl shifted in her wheelchair, grimacing as pain shot through her leg.

"Are you okay?" Ana set aside her teacup and got up.

"I'm fine." Gabi waved her back, clearly not fine in the least. Ana hovered hesitantly before deciding to approach her, sinking to a crouch by her side.

Offering a hand, she hid her grimace as the girl squeezed hard, her nails digging in as another wave of pain rolled through her. "I'm calling Gio," Ana insisted urgently.

“No! Please. I’ll be bedridden for the next week then,” Gabi joked weakly.

Ana gazed helplessly at her, continuing to hold her hand. She waited patiently until the phantom pains seemed to pass and a calmer look washed over the girl, along with deep exhaustion.

“It was all my fault.”

The whisper was so quiet that she almost missed it. Ana tensed, waiting for her to continue.

But Gabi seemed lost in thought, silent for several seconds. “I asked my parents if I could stay behind a little bit longer in Pittsburgh. The whole week my parents were there, I was forced to attend all these parties and boring introductions. I was so *frustrated*. I snapped at them and told them to head back to New York without me.”

She shook her head bitterly.

Ana barely breathed for fear of spooking her. The only other sound was the ticking clock.

“I felt bad and had this burning urge to go say goodbye.” Gabi’s voice choked, a tear sliding down her cheek. “So I snuck back to their guest house...just in time to watch their car implode.”

Ana’s fingers came up to her lips. Horrified.

There were no witnesses; that’s what everyone had said. All the staff at the guest house had been dismissed right before their departure, and the property had been locked up.

But Gabi had seen it?

“I lost my mind and just ran straight to their car,” she said in a wretched tone, her eyes haunted. “I don’t know what I thought I would do. I should have called the police or Gio, or done something else that wasn’t so idiotic.”

“Gabi—”

“No,” she insisted tearfully. “It *was* idiotic. I didn’t realize it then, but there was a second bomb that hadn’t detonated yet. Just when I got close, it went off and...”

Her shaking hands pointed at her leg. Mangled and burned.

The rest of Gabi’s skin was fully covered, from her neck down to her fingers and toes. So it was hard to guess the extent of her injuries. But what was visible was horrific.

“I keep seeing it even now, the flames...and this sinister face coming for me.”

Ana shuddered at the terrifying image, her skin crawling as she tried to wrap her mind around everything the girl had gone through. There were many rumors about what had happened to Gabi. The official story was that she had experienced a similar, but separate attack from her parents’. But no one knew when or how it had occurred.

Ana realized now that she’d been caught in the same explosion.

She didn’t know what to say; she couldn’t say anything that wasn’t incredibly trite. So they sat in silence, hand in hand, as the minutes ticked past.

“I’m glad that at least you and Gio are fine,” Gabi said croakily.

“That will be you and Tony soon,” Ana said fervently.

But the girl’s expression was closed. “Gio is too busy for another round of festivities,” she said obliquely. “He’s probably waiting for Tony to take over Pittsburgh first. But that’s all far away.” She waved a hand. “You both should enjoy your newlywed life and focus on each other. Knowing my brother, you’ll have to drag him out of the office every few days to make sure he’s alive.”

They both giggled.

“He’s so serious, just like you. Two peas in a pod.” Gabriella nudged her arm affectionately. “I really am glad you two are getting along. For a while there, I was afraid—that, like you, he was going through with the marriage because he *had* to.”

Ana smiled, feeling the edges of her lips strain.

## Chapter 5

*Two Years Ago*

Why was he marrying her?

An orphan. A woman too shy and quiet for leadership.

That's what their families were whispering furiously about, dissecting her from every angle. But Ana bowed her head resolutely over the sewing machine, losing herself to the lulling hum. The low sound drowned out all the thoughts inside her head, dulling the rising anxiety inside her.

One row of stitches—done. Two rows of stitches—done. She counted each one, tugging at the fabric to check for any slack. And then pumped the pedal again as she repositioned the bodice.

A prickle of awareness crept up her spine. Without pausing, she glanced over her shoulder...and inhaled at the imposing presence there.

Gio emerged from the shadows, watching her slight hands move skillfully over the machine. When she hesitated, he

flicked his hand, encouraging her to continue.

Ana felt that odd mixture of fear and thrill surge through her again in his company. Especially when he chose to sit in the chair directly in front of her. He crossed his legs and observed her intently.

His curly black hair fell over his eyes, putting her at a disadvantage as she could not easily observe him in return.

“Are—are the betrothal discussions still going on?” she inquired hesitantly. Their families had been meeting all morning to finalize their engagement details.

“Hm.”

He seemed distracted, deeply engrossed with the movements of her hands over the sewing machine. Flustered, she averted her gaze back to the dress. She shifted the fabric to the right angle and reengaged the machine, trying her best to focus on the task at hand.

“I didn’t know you handmade each dress,” he remarked.

“Oh. Yes. I’m up to about three orders a month. It’s becoming steady work.” Ana smiled, happy with the progress.

“Admirable.”

Their eyes met, and she saw the sincerity there. If there was anything she had learned about Gio thus far, it was that he had no time for false flattery. He was ruthlessly honest, to a fault.

“Thank you,” she murmured, flushed with warmth.

Very few knew of her hobby-turned-business. Her aunt thought it was a waste of time, especially now that she was poised to become the wife of a high-ranking Family man. She kept insisting that Ana sell off the inventory to one of their friends and start over as a housewife—or rather, a trophy wife.

At least the man in front of her seemed to appreciate it. Her *fiancé*.

She still couldn't believe it.

“Are you disappointed by the betrothal?” Gio asked lowly, an odd note lying there. His pose was just as relaxed as ever, but she noticed the tight clench of his fist and wondered at the source of the sudden tension.

“Disappointed?”

Since the day she heard the news, there had been a riot of emotions roiling through her. Tumbling all together until she was anxious, nervous, and breathless—at the thought of binding herself to such a controlled and powerful man.

But disappointed? “No.”

There were far worse prospects for a woman in the Family. She thought back to some of the horrifying marriages her peers had to endure with abusive, unfaithful men...men old enough to be their grandfathers. Men who sought to acquire chattel.

But Gio seemed different, at least so far. He certainly wasn't old.

Ana felt herself blush at the sight of his lean body lounging languidly in the chair, his earlier tension seemingly gone.

“I was promoted to Capo of New York last month,” Gio said casually.

“Oh.” Ana’s lips rounded as she sat back. “That’s wonderful! You should have said so earlier.” But then caught herself. He was an extremely busy man, and communications between an unmarried couple were frowned upon in their world.

But he nodded in understanding.

“I’m happy for you,” she said, smiling.

“Really?”

“Of course.” Her brows furrowed.

“Many people feel it’s too low of a rank for a Don’s son,” Gio explained. “They think I wasted too much time working with soldiers.” His jaw worked in irritation as he looked away, staring out the windows. “You were also promised to at least be an Underboss’s wife.”

Ana tilted her head. “I was promised to be *your* wife.”

He was arrested at her soft correction, the first time she had seen him so thrown. It was as if she had told him the skies were turning red.

Uncomfortable with his reaction, Ana added sheepishly, “I’m not sure I’m suited to be such a high-ranking wife, anyway.”



He didn't smile at her or even move. There was some odd expression passing over his face that she could not decipher. He opened his mouth as if to say something in reply, but then thought better of it.

"You're suited," Gio said gruffly.

Her chest grew tight at that, sharpening the longer he stared at her. She fiddled with the machine, deliberately shifting her gaze. It was too difficult to breathe with his intensity. Whether he was scrutinizing her every move out of suspicion or boredom, she could not tell. Whatever his intention, it certainly unnerved her.

So she positioned the fabric and changed the topic. "You never said why you started working as a soldier after school. Did your father ask you to?"

"My father?" Gio asked. "No. He just introduced me to his men and made sure I gave them my respect. But he didn't expect anything more. I was the one who asked to join the troops."

"To learn the ropes?"

The hum of the machine droned on as he nodded. "Everyone assumed I was going to spend my time rolling out of bars and strip clubs and then have a high rank handed to me." Gio laughed dryly. "That's what those soldiers thought too...and I couldn't accept that. I didn't want to just give respect; I wanted to earn it too. The honor of the Family is in my *blood*, and I won't stop until I prove myself."

The room was hushed in the wake of his pronouncement. Only punctuated by the machine's relentless hum.

Their eyes met together like magnets that couldn't part for too long. And her breaths came heavier and heavier. Respect blended with fear, in a cocktail that was so heady it choked her.

He was relentless.

Unbending.

The course of his life was mapped out in detail, meticulously planned. Hers seemed so small and simple in comparison. Fear thrummed louder within her as she wondered with dread—could she withstand his power and ambitions? Or would she be left trampled in his path?

## Chapter 6

*Present*

Her memories and nightmares morphed into a new form tonight, absorbing everything that had been weighing on her the past few days.

Gabriella's haunted words. Gio's cunning gaze on the day of their betrothal...and even now, with his intent inspection of her, gauging and measuring her every time they were together.

*The honor of the Family is in my blood.*

*Blood.*

*Blood.*

*Glistening on her fingers.*

All of it blended together into a dream that was erratic and confused. As Ana blinked and tried to orient herself, she noticed something on the ground. Bloodstains...leading her out of her old bedroom.

They led down the grand staircase.

Past her grandfather's office...

And out to the backyard.

Ana knew she should turn back. Nothing good ever came of spilled blood. But her steps took her farther and farther away until she saw it. A lone figure.

*Hello?*

It was hunched over and sobbing, an agonized sound that struck fear into her heart. The darkness made it hard to see, but when her eyes adjusted, she saw it had long, curly black hair.

*Gabi...*

She gasped, scared and alarmed, and rushed to help the girl. But when Ana reached out to her with trembling hands, Gabi whirled around—and she shrieked, loudly and horrifically, scrambling back until she fell backward.

The moonlight exposed Gabi's grotesque, disfigured form, covered in black soot and ash. Every inch of her body was burned beyond belief.

*Help me.* Her hole of a mouth opened.

*Help!*

Ana wheezed, jolting into wakefulness with a gasp. Her surroundings blurred around her as her head spun.

*God.* What the hell was that? The dreams had never felt so real before. The screams were so loud, she could almost hear them even now, echoing throughout the house. Blaring through each room.

Wait.

She sat frozen in the empty bed. After several minutes, she heard it again.

Scrambling out of bed, Ana quickly crept to the door and paused. It wasn't her imagination. Someone was screaming—*here* in the house.

Her mind immediately went to Gio, and she ripped open the door, seeing a faint light coming—not from his office—but from somewhere beyond. She rushed down the hallway, fear choking her with the possibility that something had happened to him. That someone had broken in.

Voices grew louder.

One was moaning and pleading.

Heart thudding, Ana slowed, edging toward the balcony. She was able to see the living room below from this vantage point, and the sight there arrested her. In disbelief, she saw who it was that was screaming for his life.

His bald head glinted in the dim light.

Jon. Gio's Consigliere and advisor.

The man was on his knees, hands behind his head, with a gun pointed at his temple. Moans and whimpers spilled out of him as he kept pleading and apologizing. Three other men surrounded him, immune to his pleas.

A guard holding the gun, Luke...and Gio.

Her stomach dropped.

The expression on her husband's face was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. So cold, it froze every nerve ending until she started shivering uncontrollably. If she'd thought him intimidating before, it was nothing compared to him now. The pure revulsion and rage radiating off him were noticeable even from here.

"H-he's lying! I swear."

"Is he?" Gio asked coldly. "What do you think, Luke?"

The burly man, who just days ago seemed mild-mannered and polite, snarled. Teeth bared in the night. "I gave you all the files, Boss. When you mentioned Jonny Boy here loving strip clubs, I remembered seein' him there before. And I have the footage to prove it."

Satisfied, Gio turned back to the kneeling man. "Hear that, Jon? Someone committed to doing their job. Unlike you."

"He's lying! He's just trying to suck up to you!" Jon cried.

"Maybe...but that doesn't negate your lies."

Luke also seemed unbothered by the accusation. His large arms were crossed as he watched the simpering advisor, bored. Gio, on the other hand, was coiled tight. He circled the prone figure, never shifting his gaze for even a second.

"Your responsibility as my father's advisor was to oversee his staff, including his head of security," Gio said, glaring down at the man. "That fool didn't monitor the bodyguard's moves before the attack, and neither did you."

“There w-was nothing!” Jon protested. “I showed you all the logs and background checks. The bodyguard’s file was spotless.”

“I agree.”

“You do...?” Jon sat back on his haunches, confused.

Gio nodded assuredly. “I reviewed all the files myself, and there were no warning signs that the bodyguard was going to betray them. That’s why I kept you on for this long. Because you, like me, missed all the signs.”

The Consigliere slumped, relieved.

Ana’s fingers dug into her palms, every tick of the clock throbbing in time with her pulse. Her neck ached with the strain of watching them without coming into their view. Was there no other staff here? No one else to witness the scene except her?

She sucked in a breath as Gio bent low until his face was in line with the bald man’s. “But you’re not here on your knees because of that.”

“W-what?”

“You’re here because of what happened that morning. The security head was in New York, but you were there in Pittsburgh with my parents. You could have checked my parents’ car in the security head’s absence. But you were busy, weren’t you?”

“I told you—”

“Because you were in the *strip club!*” Gio’s voice bellowed, a thunderclap that split through the house. “At eleven in the fucking morning! Instead of talking numbers with the failing businesses, like you claimed you were, you were busy getting lap dances and God knows what else!”

Ana clapped a hand over her mouth. Shocked.

“My parents were defenseless,” Gio spat. “No one to protect them that morning. All the other staff were dismissed early because you told them to go!” The advisor shook his head frantically in denial, scrambling back even as the gun jabbed his head harder. “Did you want my parents to hurry up and get out of town so you could get your rocks off?” Gio demanded. “Or were you hoping to swoop in and secure my father’s place for yourself?”

“No! Gio–*Boss*, please.”

Her husband’s dark curls fell over his face, casting it into the shadows. Making him so much more fearsome than before.

“I put someone in my p-place. I swear. Please, I thought they had it cover–”

“Who?” Gio demanded edgily.

“I don’t know. The bodyguard said a guy or someone from–”

Gio’s bitter laugh sent chills through her as he cut the advisor off, rubbing a palm over his face. Ana’s throat closed as she watched her husband lose it, laughing hysterically. The other two men stood stoically, unmoving, as their Don rose to his feet and looked heavenward.



“You trusted the bodyguard, the man who betrayed them, with finding his own backup?” Gio asked.

The statement was so ridiculous that the other men chuckled. But Gio was unamused. His voice was hoarse as he stared down at him agitatedly. “My parents, my family, everyone’s lives were *shattered* because you could not do your job.”

“B-oss...”

“I’ve been pruning bad businesses all week, removing everything that’s weighing down the Family. I have no room for staff who reek of incompetence.”

“Boss!” Jon screeched as Luke swooped him up with one hand and lifted him high in the air, his toes dangling inches from the ground. “Please, give me one more chance! I swear, I did my best! I did!”

Gio put his hands in his pockets and turned away, his eyes drifting away from the scene and the men until his gaze lifted up...and rested on her.

Her lips parted.

*The honor of the Family is in my blood, and I won’t stop until I prove myself.*

Gio watched her unnervingly, unwavering, as she quivered in the twilight hour—unable to look away. He never broke their connection, not even as he issued his final verdict.

“Unless your best can bring back the dead,” he muttered, “it’s not good enough for me.”

Jon's scream ripped through the house before the gunshot silenced him at last.

## Chapter 7

Calm.

Calm.

Calm.

That's all she allowed herself to feel...nothing but the hazy hues of denial blanketing her. It was supposed to be easy, going back home—escaping from it all. But staring out the window of her childhood bedroom, all Ana was reminded of was the man she'd left behind.

Her chest ached down to the bone. It was strange how quickly attachment could form. After only a month, her old routine felt unfamiliar. Lonely. At nightfall, her hands searched the empty bed. At daybreak, when nightmares shook her awake, her feet drew toward his office.

But Gio wasn't here. No knowing looks or heated touches. No encouraging her to leave her office and bring her laptop to his, so they could work across from each other.

Ana had felt special to him whenever he answered her curious questions and shy smiles with ease, giving her the soft looks and patience that he rarely gave others.

Sure, Gio rarely revealed his own thoughts and plans. But that hadn't bothered her too much. She had still felt close to him, warmed by even those small intimacies they'd shared. She supposed it was what they called a honeymoon phase. A beautiful illusion.

"Gio hasn't called since you arrived," her aunt remarked coolly.

The barb hit home, but Ana remained poker-faced. She closed her laptop as the thin woman entered the room, inspecting her closely.

Ana shrugged evasively. "He knows I'm here on business, so he didn't want to disturb. There have been so many meetings I've hardly been able to sit down."

Her aunt regarded her skeptically. "It has nothing to do with him skewering his advisor like a pig?"

*God.* Her stomach revolted.

Auntie had no idea. She thought Ana had discovered the news of Jon's death like everyone else, through the Family grapevine. But no one knew just how well acquainted she was with every gory detail. The vision of Luke squeezing the life out of the man haunted her. Along with Jon's agonized screams.

But it wasn't the murder itself that had driven her away. It was what happened after. After cowering in the bedroom for a full day, she'd foolishly gone straight to the devil himself for answers and burned for it.

*"Are you questioning me?"*

*Gio's eyes were cold...so cold.*

*"You think I should have spared him?"*

*Ana's hands spread out helplessly. "I-I don't know. If Jon was responsible, he definitely should have paid." The image of Gabriella weeping in her wheelchair lingered with her, filling her with such grief that she couldn't imagine how Gio felt.*

*Who was she to judge the blood on his hands?*

*Hers were just as stained.*

*"But everyone is talking about his death, wondering—" She bit back the words. "They just want to feel safe and hopeful, which is hard with the past anchoring them down. Maybe now that the culprits are dead, you can...issue a message about unity and forgiveness? Look to the future." Ana smiled encouragingly, even as her hands trembled.*

*But Gio eyed her balefully.*

*It was clear a response was bubbling up inside him, but he said nothing. He simply stared at her for several long seconds before huffing loudly. "The deed is done, and I won't hide it. It'll make people think I'm soft and encourage other traitors who are lying in wait."*

*“What other traitors?” she asked, perplexed. “You’ve caught them all, made sure they were punished.”*

*“Not all.”*

*“What?”*

*Gio’s jaw tensed, agitated. “I didn’t catch one.”*

*Because the main culprit, the bodyguard, had already killed himself in the attack.*

*Ana blinked slowly in realization, and Gio gave her an indecipherable look.*

*“Gio...” she whispered plaintively, reaching out to wrap a delicate hand around his arm. “I...can’t imagine how frustrating it is not to be able to confront him.” The crazed suicide-bomber bodyguard who’d ruined his family. “But he’s gone. And if you keep looking for traitors, you’ll find them on every corner. I’m afraid the Family will become tired of it and turn their backs on you.”*

*As if in mockery of her words, he turned sharply away.*

*She sighed, dejected. “This isn’t the Don I thought you would be...”*

*Her mumbled words hung heavily between them, suspended in the air, until he sliced through them with an incinerating look. “And I thought I was getting a good mafia wife—submissive and silent.”*

*Ana rocked back on her heels as if she’d been slapped. The words cut her down to her core.*

*Gio didn't see her reaction, facing the window with his arms taut and crossed, while she stood dazed for a long time. Waiting for him to say something, to take it back.*

*But he didn't.*

*Her heavy feet drifted toward the door as numbness spread through her. For so long, she had remained quiet and poised, trained just as her aunt had raised her to be. But her husband had been so kind and receptive to her that she'd slipped up. She had weakened her armor and let him through.*

*Hurt and embarrassment coursed through her.*

*A thousand curses spilled inside her head.*

*But, as she glanced back at his stiff frame shrouded in the shadows, what she felt most was sadness...at just how lonely he looked.*

Emotions poured through Ana at the memory of that day last week. Sadness filled every part of her, with nowhere to go.

She foolishly thought he was growing to accept her. Not just as a Mancini, not just as his dutiful, arranged wife. But just her, as she was. Why? Because he enjoyed sleeping with her and tolerated her presence in his house?

How foolish.

Her aunt watched her like a hawk, tutting under her breath. "That man is ruthless, Ana. He just wants his vengeance, loyalties be damned. Men who've been faithful to the Family for years are being questioned like criminals." Auntie shook

her head, appalled. “You know, he even interrogated all *our* staff? What will people think?”

Irritation replaced Ana’s sadness, releasing in a long-suffering breath.

It was the same old rant from her aunt. If it wasn’t Gio, then it was another mafia leader out to ruin their family legacy. That was all Auntie cared about—the Mancini name. And since the betrothal, Gio had become her favorite target. Auntie constantly bragged about bagging a Don as an in-law. But if Gio didn’t bend over backward to give them all the perks that came with his position, Auntie would fume over it for days.

“Do you want me to ask him—?”

“No,” Auntie quickly backtracked. “Don’t say anything. He’s the Don and on a killing spree.”

*Not really a spree with one victim.*

“Just butter him up and make us look good, okay?” Auntie said. “Especially Antonio. After everything I’ve done for my boy, he deserves to at least become a Capo.”

Ana wanted to roll her eyes at that, knowing exactly what her cousin thought of that idea.

As if sensing her disregard, Auntie narrowed her eyes. Making her thin face appear even more severe. “I warned you this would happen, remember? When you wanted to run and spill to Gio what happened that night.”

Ana stiffened, her skin running cold.



“You didn’t believe me then, but now you know.” Auntie nodded confidently. “Your husband is an unforgiving man. He will not tolerate faults in others, not even in you.”

Recalling Gio’s cold face, Ana could not say anything in his defense. He wanted her to be his submissive wife—silent and compliant. Anything else was a danger to his control.

When Emma walked in minutes later, she wanted to cry in relief. She could not handle her aunt’s judgment right now, not when she was already so heartsore. Thankfully, Emma seemed to have just the distraction, as she rushed in with a phone in hand. She brazenly nudged the older woman aside, who shot her a disgusted look.

“Sorry,” Emma said, without an ounce of remorse. “Duty calls.”

She shoved the phone at Ana.

Auntie muttered savagely under her breath before leaving them in a huff. When the bedroom door slammed shut, Emma let out a deep exhale. “Thank, God. I thought the bitch would never leave.”

“Em!”

“What? Don’t tell me you haven’t thought that in your head, Miss Perfect.” She lifted a brow.

Groaning at the stupid nickname, Ana gestured at the phone. “Who is it?”

“Russo.”

*“Again?”*

Emma nodded, rolling her eyes. “I emailed him several times, but he wants to hear it straight from Antonio’s lips.”

“...which means me.” Ana sighed in resignation. Taking the phone with a deep breath, she greeted the client cheerfully, “This is Antonio Mancini’s secretary.”

Emma paced back and forth as Ana listened patiently and pacified him. “I understand. Yes, yes. Of course. Mr. Mancini is—” She paused as Emma rushed to mouth a suggestion. “He’s meeting with the supplier tomorrow. You should know by then.”

Ana’s fingers rubbed along her dress hem, tracing each embroidered flower as he rambled on. “The rate hikes? Well, those were already signed off by the lawyers last year. Yes, I know—” The client oscillated between irate demands and cool calm for another fifteen minutes, until he relented at last, allowing Ana to hang up.

She rubbed her eyes tiredly. It felt as though she’d emerged from a battlefield, stabbed and pummeled all over.

As if she hadn’t had enough fights in the past week.

“You can’t do this much longer, you know?” Emma peered at her, concerned. “The fashion line was already a full-time gig. Now we’re helping with Antonio’s business too. I can still move out to New York to help you. That was our original plan.”

“No, please,” Ana said. “We talked about this. Your mom needs you more than I do.”

The half-lie slipped out easily. Ana wanted nothing more than to have her trusted aide by her side. She was so lonely out there in New York, with Gio offering affection and then snatching it away just as easily. But she couldn’t place that guilt on Emma and tear her from her only family, not when they were able to handle most of the administration for the fashion line remotely. Only these month-end shipment reviews required in-person meetings.

“Besides, we’re getting new staff from Vitello’s company,” Ana added. “Two customer service reps and a part-time seamstress. That should help.”

“And who will support this second business with Antonio?” Emma persisted. “Someone will eventually figure out that his ‘secretary’ doesn’t exist.”

“Shhh.” Ana glanced worriedly at the closed door. “It will be fine. I’m only stepping in for the difficult customers. Antonio is able to handle the bulk of the calls.”

“With *much* support,” Emma scoffed.

She spread her hands out helplessly. “We can’t just drop the ball on it, Em. The gold line has grown tremendously.”

“Then Antonio should ask for staff!” Emma cried. “I like the work, Ana. I do,” she conceded. “But Daily Couture is growing well too, and that’s the business that has *your* face on it. We can’t neglect it to help him.”

Ana had no rebuttal to that.

“Why can’t Tony just admit he can’t do it on his own?”  
Emma grumbled.

Ana snorted. He would never. The male ego was notorious, and in the Family, it was especially strong. There was no way Antonio would ever admit to failing, not with his mother, grandfather, and the entire Pittsburgh faction breathing down his neck. But she also suspected another reason for his obstinacy—

*He’s probably waiting for Tony to take over.*

Gabriella’s words floated through her memory. Gio would never allow their wedding to go through if Tony didn’t prove himself and accept his birthright: to rule over Pittsburgh. But if Tony was struggling to manage one business, how could he manage an entire city?

At that thought, a wave of pity cut through Ana’s earlier frustration. There were a lot of expectations on her cousin’s shoulders, and she understood them all too well. In the Mancini family, there was no room for failure.

“Maybe I can ask Gio for some additional staff on Tony’s behalf,” Ana murmured.

Emma’s eyes flared in alarm. “You haven’t told him about any of this, have you?”

No way. Who knew how he would react? His sinister expression from that murderous night flashed in her mind, along with her aunt’s warning about him. Gio would not

tolerate lies and secrecy. But Ana was drowning in nothing but secrets.

The anxiety must have been evident on her pale face because the blonde leaned in to hold her hand, inspecting her worriedly. “Is everything good...with Gio? He isn’t some abusive asshole, is he?”

Ana’s throat closed, moved by her concern. “No, nothing like that. The last month has been fine.” More than fine, actually...until it wasn’t.

“Hm.” Emma eyed her closely. “And you coming here a few days early has nothing to do with him?”

The question echoed her aunt’s earlier one. But with Emma, it was hard to be as evasive. She had been Ana’s sole confidante for the past few years. It was futile to conceal the truth from her.

“Things were...difficult between us after what happened with his advisor,” Ana admitted. “I know justice is needed. What happened to Gio’s family was so horrific, I can’t even fathom it. But—I fear the past has him in a chokehold.”

Emma frowned in understanding. “I hate to say it, but I get him. If someone did that to my family, I’d fuck them up too.” Her threat was deadly serious, with not a hint of her usual humor. “But still, Gio just let you go after that? He didn’t try to come with you?”

Ana shrugged, the sting still so sharp. “I never expected him to join me here, even before our tiff. Everyone knows he

refuses to step foot in Pittsburgh.”

That had played a large factor in the two of them not meeting as much before their wedding. Gio had visited her in Pittsburgh during the early days of their engagement, but he had come to detest the town after his parents’ deaths. He distrusted everyone in the region. So Ana had tried to visit him instead, traveling up to New York once or twice. But it had been hard. She’d been suffering through her own trauma while Gio had grappled with his new role as Don.

He had been so busy...always busy.

But she wondered now if the distance was simply his way of breaking it off. *I was afraid that he was going through with the marriage because he had to.*

Without his parents, there was no reason for Gio to abide by their betrothal and marry her. But he was a man of his word. He would never sever the engagement.

Did he wish *she* had?

Ana’s head pounded, the doubts collapsing in on her, undoing all the progress she had made in opening up to her husband. She now questioned every moment between them. One single fight—one brutal murder—had eroded the calm and peace that had started to settle over her the past month, shadowing her visit here. Work had thankfully consumed all her energy and thoughts. But in every quiet moment, she felt despair creep back in, along with deep loneliness.

Did he care that she’d left early? Had he *ever* cared?

Sensing that Ana needed a diversion, Emma placed her laptop on the desk and nudged her into reviewing their recent work orders.

They continued working for several hours, stopping only for lunch, which they scarfed through at the desk.

When dusk started to settle in, Emma cracked her neck and got up, stretching her hands. “I have to go help Mom with dinner,” she said apologetically.

“Of course. So sorry. I didn’t realize the time.”

“No, no.” Emma waved her off. “That’s what I’m here for. We’re all set for April deliveries, so we should be good until next month. Unless you need anything else?”

Ana clicked through her planner and confirmed there was nothing else.

“Great. Are you heading back to New York then? Or sticking around?”

Everything on the checklist for their in-person sync was complete. There was nothing left work-wise that they couldn’t continue remotely. But Ana couldn’t imagine returning to New York just yet. She couldn’t face her husband again, not with the sadness still coursing through her.

“I’ll stick around a few more days,” Ana muttered. “I didn’t get to spend much time with Auntie or Tony. I should at least have a proper dinner with them.”

At any other time, Emma would have called her out on the poor excuse. But she seemed too worn out for it now. Undoing

her severe blonde bun, Emma groaned tiredly and mumbled distractedly about dinner plans as she packed up all the files scattered around the bedroom.

Grabbing her laptop and stacking the files on top of it, Emma strode over to her bag lying by the window. But as she glanced out of the immense glass panes, she froze.

Dread seeped in as Ana grew still.

“What?” she whispered. Her blood ran cold. Flashes of her nightmare, that night, hit her. With danger reflected through similar windows.

When Emma said nothing, Ana inched up behind her.

And came to a halt.

A familiar figure stood on the driveway, closing the car door behind him. In the setting sunlight, his image was refracted into a thousand colors through the glass windows...making her wonder if it was an illusion. But others had noticed him too. The housekeeper rushed forward and obediently collected his coat, while her aunt emerged from the house, inaudibly greeting him.

His dark eyes darted past them, ignoring their attention as he searched higher and higher—

And landed on her.

All the breath squeezed out of her.

“I thought your husband swore never to come here?” Emma whispered, sounding just as shell-shocked.



He had.

Heart thumping, Ana stared. Unable to look away.

*Gio.* He was here...?

Her aunt tugged him inside just as Emma nudged her, breaking the spell. Ana breathed unevenly, calming her racing heart. It felt like a fever dream. Like something she had conjured up. What was he doing here?

In a haze, they both quickly tidied up the rest of the room and made their way downstairs, where she could hear Gio chatting with her aunt, inquiring about their weekend plans.

“Ah, there she is!” Auntie’s voice was thin, clearly on edge. “Let me go check on dinner.” She politely excused herself and dragged Emma along, giving Ana a pointed look.

*Entertain him.*

Her husband.

Standing stiffly with his hands in his pant pockets, in the one city he’d forsworn.

Their eyes locked, drawing them together in a hushed compulsion that seemed to pervade their every encounter. His eyes were shadowed as he watched her warily, his hands flexing visibly in his pockets.

Ana felt a little self-conscious at his appraisal. After a long day’s work, she was a little worse for wear. Her silky brown braid was coming loose over her shoulder, and her clothes were wrinkled.

She bit back her questions and waited for him to break the silence. Determined not to cave first.

But he didn't either. He simply stood there, painfully aloof.

A minute passed.

Then, two.

“Did an issue come up here...?” Ana ventured, at last, clasping her hands together stiffly. At his uncomprehending stare, she clarified, “With the Pittsburgh leaders or the strip club owners—after Jon’s death.”

Gio’s face darkened at the reminder of the man he had murdered, and he denied it. “There’s been no—” he began to explain, but then a visible resolve set into his face.

It was like a crack had lodged in his cool demeanor, spreading emotion out like fractured shards until every muscle and every bone came alive and became focused on her. Determined, he stepped closer, watching to see if she would flee. But her feet held firm, chained by his unbending attention.

“There were no issues,” Gio said roughly. “I came here—for you.”

Her pale brown eyes went wide. “But...I was going to return on Monday.” Only two days away.

“*Were* you?” His suspicion chilled her.

“Of c-course. I just had to get through work, but I would’ve come back then.” As soon as she’d worked up the courage.

Gio searched her face intensely, assessing the sincerity of her words, before dipping his gaze to the base of her neck, where her pulse jumped with nerves. “I couldn’t take the risk.”

...of her escaping?

“Besides...I don’t trust the security here.” His eyes narrowed on the hallway where the staff had disappeared. “Before you left home, I inspected your car. But I could not allow you to travel back from here without the proper checks.”

*Oh.*

Warmth flushed through her, along with surprise. Gio hadn’t even said goodbye to her or acknowledged her in those last days before her trip. So knowing that he’d secretly checked on her safety threw her for a loop. She didn’t know what to say to that. Pain and anger still stung her, but his gesture had thrown bittersweet joy into the mix, confusing her.

Ana did not respond for a long time, still silent and distant as she processed his statement. She looked out the window to see if he had brought his own driver, when Gio suddenly reached for her hand.

“Forgive me,” he rasped, his large hand tightening around hers. “It was wrong...for me to let you leave like that.” His eyes were wild and dark at her silence, looking so tired, as if he hadn’t slept in days. “The house has been too empty.”

Ana’s lips parted. Gio looked so open and tender then, the way he did only when he spoke of his family. She never

thought he would ever glance at her that way, not even for a second.

She felt something in her crack then. All the emotions she'd bottled deep inside over the last week, the hurt and sadness at their separation, seeped out of her. Drowning her. This whole time, she'd feared he did not care. That she alone had been swept up in the madness, foolishly carried away by the precious few affections they had shared. But seeing Gio now, staring at her with such painful vulnerability, it was clear that no matter what he felt—he was not immune. He looked like he'd lost as much sleep as she had in the past week.

He had come all the way here...to the place where his parents had been brutally murdered—*for her*.

Unable to keep up her guard any longer, Ana reached up to him and gently touched his jaw, rubbing the faint stubble there.

The muscle clenched under her touch.

Her lashes lowered to half-mast at the effect she had on him, and she swayed forward. Thrusting her fingers into his thick hair, Ana pulled him until their lips fused together.

## Chapter 8

Muffled whimpers escaped from her.

Followed by a rough thump.

“*Gio*,” Ana cried out when he pressed exceptionally hard, pleasure licking through her core until she was trembling all over.

“Shh.”

The harsh command only made her clench tighter around his length.

He cursed viciously, dropping his head to the curve of her neck as he gathered himself, his breaths puffing against her skin. Beyond him, Ana stared blindly at the fireplace and portraits hanging above it in the lavish living room. She watched in a daze as the paintings visibly shook under the force of their movements.

They had lost their minds. There was no other explanation for it.

At any moment, her aunt or the half-dozen household staff could walk in here and find them against the wall, where they were still fully dressed, except for where they were joined. But it did not deter them. His resumed thrusts sent tremors through her, her legs shaking.

“I c-can’t.” It was too powerful. She could sense it now as it built rapidly, stealing her breath.

But Gio did not relent.

“So sweet...” he muttered. “Too sweet for me. I don’t deser-”

Crying out, Ana jerked before he could continue, undone by his scent and his thrusts. Her back bowed at the impact of her climax, struggling between the wall and his lean frame. His movements didn’t pause, though. If anything, they grew stronger, driving her climax to a painfully acute peak.

*God.* Her head swam, barely registering his kisses on her breast. Or him gently separating from her.

Gio’s hair was in her favorite state—wild black curls mussed from her touch. Not that he cared. His attention was solely on her, cataloging her from head to toe. Ana wondered at the picture she made: lips swollen, dress rucked up to her waist, and silky hair loose with her hair tie discarded somewhere on the floor.

Most indecent of all was the come she could feel leaking down her legs. Gio’s eyes were obsidian as they traced its path.

“Anyone can come in,” Ana whispered in warning, and he nodded stiffly.

But neither moved, the urge to go again insistent.

Thankfully, Gio heeded her warning and moved to cover himself. He produced a handkerchief from his pocket and dropped to a knee before gently cleaning her up.

*Fuck.* What a picture he made.

Ana squeezed her eyes shut, unable to take in any more stimulus. Like a listless doll, she waited as he put her to rights and drew the hem of her dress back down to her knees.

“You carry a hanky?” she mumbled awkwardly when he tucked it back into his pocket.

His eyes twinkled. “An old habit. Not that I expected to use it like this.”

At her bright red face, he burst out laughing.



They never made it to dinner.

She should have been embarrassed, especially when the staff brought up a tray of food. But her mind was a blissful blank slate after another two rounds of them going at it like teenagers. Apart from the twinge of pain at her hip, nothing else penetrated her senses.

Gio covered her hand where it lay on his stomach. They were both sated, gazing out the window at the starry sky.

It used to be her favorite thing about this house—the beautiful, large windows. Until it became her nightmare. For the first time in a while, however, she admired the night view in peace.

“Your room reminds me a lot of mine.” She felt his rumble by her ear.

“Really?”

“Hm, not many things around except for work items.”

It was true. The walls were blank, and her desk was neat and clear. All her dress fabrics were organized inside the drawers. Next to the desk was a dress form with her latest design pinned to it. Apart from that, the room was bare.

“Did you clear it all out when you moved?”

“No,” Ana mumbled. Clutter had always overwhelmed her. But the emptiness in her room wasn’t just due to her desire for tidiness. Ever since she had been adopted, she supposed it had all felt temporary—this mansion, her family. Everything was like a life she had leased.

So it was all the odder that she’d grown so attached to their life in New York in just a month. To him.

He pressed a kiss against her hair.

“I still can’t believe you came here,” she said.

Gio met her happy gaze with satisfaction. “I can’t believe you left early,” he countered in a low murmur, amusement and



something darker in his tone. “Just because we argued doesn’t mean you have to run off.”

Ana blinked, befuddled. Had she run?

Maybe. But it had seemed like the best course of action at the time, given his cold treatment.

Then again, it was all she had ever known: to be perfect and obedient and to stay out of the way when things got heated. That had made it difficult for Grandfather to find faults in her—though he somehow found a way—and it had made Auntie proud, extending the life she had leased with them.

She had assumed that’s what Gio wanted too: perfect obedience. But she wasn’t sure anymore...not after his arrival here.

“Besides,” Gio murmured, caressing her cheek, “did you forget what I said about you running away?”

A vague memory came to her from their wedding day, when she’d been terrified, anxious, and enthralled by the reality of being married to this man. A day that felt like it had occurred both decades ago and just yesterday. As his past words trickled back in, her heart skipped a beat.

*“That I would never let you.”*

## Chapter 9

“You look like you’ve been up all night bangin’.”

*“Antonio!”*

Ana choked on her drink as Auntie whipped around to reprimand her son, who sat wholly unrepentant. He smirked at Ana’s flaming red face across the dining table. Gio, on the other hand, merely raised a brow.

“Please forgive him,” Auntie said nervously.

Gio brushed it off. “It’s fine. I just look tired from my travels.”

Antonio snorted under his breath. His mother glared at him before glancing sideways again at Gio apologetically.

It was rare to see her aunt so docile. She had always been so fearsome and proud. But with Gio as Don, she was overly deferential and careful not to lose his favor. Not that Tony cared. He popped a grape into his mouth, enjoying the drama he’d stirred up.

“A lovely breakfast. Thank you, Marta,” Gio said cordially, folding up his napkin. “Unfortunately, we have another long journey back today.”

“Oh. Our driver is ready.”

“No need. Ours came with me.”

Ana smiled reassuringly at her aunt, who looked disappointed. Maybe Auntie had expected to be included in Gio’s inner circle by now. But Ana wasn’t sure if she had entered it herself. He’d certainly grown closer to her and had come all the way here for her. But trusting someone with your life was another ballgame.

Before the awkwardness could linger for long, Gio leaned forward in his seat solicitously. “I would like your help on another matter.”

Her aunt perked up.

“We have our annual New York gala coming up in June. I was thinking of opening it up to all regions this year, including Pittsburgh.”

“That sounds wonderful!”

“Good. It was Ana’s idea.”

*It was?* The older woman regarded her questioningly. Ana stared back, equally surprised.

Gio nodded at them. “I’ve been so focused on old business. Ana reminded me that I should think of the future and give a proper welcome to our factions.”

Understanding suddenly dawned on her. It was what she'd argued in their fight, urging Gio to leave the past behind and focus on a message of unity. He had actually listened. Pleasure filled her chest, and she reached for his hand, squeezing it gratefully. Gio held her gaze fiercely.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Tony mock-gagging at their mutual adoration. She rolled her eyes at him, gesturing for him to behave before his mother noticed.

But Auntie was oblivious to his antics. "I will definitely pass on the invite and encourage the families here to attend," she confidently assured Gio.

"Appreciate it. If you have the bandwidth...I would love your help in planning it as well—along with Ana and our staff, of course."

"Oh!" Shock and a volley of other expressions crossed her aunt's face before she settled into a triumphant grin. "I would love to! I have plenty of experience at events like this."

Ana could already see the ideas spinning inside her aunt's head, and she internally groaned. There was nothing else her aunt loved more than event planning, especially an extravagant one like this. It would give her bragging rights with the ladies of Pittsburgh for at least a whole month.

"Ana, let's have a weekly call set up to start organizing." She took out her phone and began furiously typing notes. "We have less than two months!"

*Oh, joy.*



Her aunt was *insufferable*.

Annoying and over-the-top.

After ranting about Gio not trusting them, Auntie did a total 180 as soon as he delegated the gala to her. In every call, she raved about him and how Ana's marriage had proved its use at long last. Annoyance hit Ana, along with a raging headache. She always knew her aunt wanted their marriage for its status advantages, but it pained her more than she wanted to admit.

For the last two years, their every conversation had been about Gio—how to please him, how to satisfy him, and constant questions about whether he trusted them.

It had suffocated her. With relief arriving only after the wedding, once Ana had left home and settled into a new life with Gio.

But the old resentment returned swiftly during this gala-planning. After a month of weekly calls with her aunt, Ana was fed up. She knew Gio was trying to be attentive to her suggestions, and that's why he had roped her into the gala planning with her aunt. But Ana had her own business to attend to. She couldn't entertain Auntie's constant fretting any longer.

Gathering her files, she exited her office and headed upstairs to find Gio.

Things were in a stable state with the planning so far. Hopefully, he'd agree to hand off the remaining plans to her

aunt. After their fight last month, he had been overly accommodating to Ana's thoughts and suggestions.

Sweet...and such a contrast to the man he was with the Family—strict and unforgiving.

Ana's footsteps echoed as she slowly clambered up the steps, tired to the bone. Nightfall had descended hours ago, bathing the house in darkness. Only a few lamps lit the hallways.

Most of the staff had also left or retired for the night. But Gio and Ana often worked well past the others, the nature of their jobs requiring it.

Flashes of light and shadow played with each other as she passed each lamp on the stairs. But she barely paid her surroundings any attention, deeply engrossed in replying to emails on her phone. Her body already knew every nook and cranny of this house, leading her sightlessly forward.

So when she reached the top of the stairs and turned toward her husband's office on the right, she almost missed it—

A long shadow stretching across the shining hardwood floor, shifting to face her.

The phone slipped from her hands, clattering onto the floor as terror gripped her. Halting her in her tracks.

It was difficult to see clearly. A faint light was visible from Gio's closed office door, barely penetrating the darkness. But there was definitely someone there.

The figure suddenly drew closer, forcing her to retreat frantically back to the steps.

When the lamps by the staircase finally illuminated him, Ana froze, recognizing the uniform.

A black blazer with a lion's crest embroidered on the breast. The Family insignia and the mandated outfit for every bodyguard.

“Ana?” his voice echoed.

*No. It cannot be.*

Eyes wide and unseeing, the past collided with blunt force.



### *Eighteen Months Ago*

“Ana?”

She had been so lost in thought, wandering the halls alone after dinner, that she almost passed him. The man lingering outside Grandfather's office.

Startled at the sight of the stranger, Ana tensed and then relaxed once she noticed his uniform.

A bodyguard. Likely one of their newer recruits.

The news of Gio's parents' deaths broke just a few weeks ago, sending shockwaves throughout the Family. Everyone was on edge. In every gathering, they whispered fearfully about the murder and wondered if there were other traitors lying in wait, especially within their own households. Most families had chosen to replace their staff and security detail to be safe. Her aunt had also become anxious since the murders and had made some staffing changes.

There was nothing immediately noteworthy about this new bodyguard, however. He was nondescript, his clipped black hair and squared jaw nothing unique. His height was rather average as well. But there was something about his thin, almond-shaped eyes—and the way they tracked her—that set her nerves abuzz.

Maybe the paranoia gripping the Family was starting to get to her too. Shrugging off the feeling, Ana nodded politely and walked on.

“Our new Boss’s fiancée, right?” he called out.

Glancing over her shoulder, Ana saw that the guard was looking not at her face, but down.

At her ass.

Her back stiffened.

Dinner had been a casual affair, so she’d worn a cropped sweater and leggings. But with the way his gaze was devouring her body, it may as well have been nothing. Discomfort crawled through her, along with confusion. She’d never been in such a situation before. All the staff in their house were overly respectful and maintained their distance.

Was she imagining it?

Eyes fixed on her, he murmured, “Lucky man.”

An odd way to describe someone who’d just lost both his parents in a fiery blaze. Ana ignored him and stiffly turned to the stairs, abandoning her earlier plans to visit Grandfather’s office.



But the guard angled himself sideways, obstructing her path.

The earlier discomfort exploded into alarm as her eyes shot up to his.

Everyone else in the family was all the way down the hall, chatting in the dining room. But she had excused herself to retire early. Thoughts of Gio had preoccupied her all night, wondering how he was doing since she'd seen him at the funeral—if it was appropriate for her to reach out while he was grieving and neck-deep in learning Don duties.

She had hoped for some quiet time in the corner office to dwell on it, but now she regretted it. If she called out from here, would anyone hear?

As her gaze searched the halls for the others, he lifted a hand, callused and bruised, to her cheek.

In a flash, hers shot out—*Slap!*—smacking his hand away.

Quivering, Ana stepped back as his eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Let me pass.”

“Or what?” he taunted.

“I-I will tell my grandfather.”

“That I said hello to you?”

“That you *touched* me.” She hugged herself.

“And?” He tilted his head.

Ana faltered at his defiance.

“And what?” the guard pressed, emboldened. He was hardly three inches taller than her, but he appeared to loom over her, casting her into the shadows. “You think they’ll fire me? Throw away my experience for someone who isn’t even a Mancini?”

He chuckled, seeing her pale.

“I know everything about you and your *family*. So don’t threaten me, sweetheart. I’ll be here a long time.”

Bowing mockingly, he moved aside, allowing her to pass. His whisper reverberated in the darkness.

“Sweet dreams.”



*Present*

Glass shattered in the night.

A vase, she saw dimly. Knocked over by her fearful retreat. The sound broke through the haze of the past, but not hard enough to shake its chokehold. Not when it was recurring all over again.

“Ms. Ana?” the bodyguard repeated, his voice low.

He was so tall, taller than she remembered. So much stronger too. She began trembling all over, unable to take the onslaught of sensations. As she did, he jerked forward, rushing to her.

No.

*No.*

“No,” she whispered pleadingly, squeezing her eyes shut.

Arms closed around her, holding her down.

“NO!”

“What the *hell* is going on here?”

All the noise, movement, and air around them stilled.

Save for him.

“Sir, I—”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Her eyes flung open at that, startled to hear the vicious curse from her otherwise restrained husband. In the shadowed hallway, Gio stood glaring at the bodyguard, his face a picture of cold fury. His shirtsleeves were half-rolled up as if he'd arrived in a rush.

The other man bowed his head apologetically, and she belatedly realized, after inspecting his features more clearly, that he was someone entirely new.

Not *him*.

Shame filled her, along with painful embarrassment. What was wrong with her?

The two men were arguing, but she barely registered it. Wiping a hand over her clammy face, she turned away and breathed shallowly. Spots still danced around her eyes. At the muffled crunch under her shoes, she paused and noticed

broken blue glass on the floor. Glinting. Mocking her madness.

“Ana?” Gio’s voice was soft. Too soft.

As if worried that she would break too.

Numb, she glanced back and saw that the guard was gone. “I dismissed him,” Gio explained. He searched her face intently before reaching for her hand.

“Come.”

“The vase—”

“The staff will clean it.”

What little light lingered by the staircase was soon extinguished as they headed toward the bedroom. No lamps were lit in this part of the hallway, and her pulse picked up, remembering another hallway just like this, where she’d been trapped by the guard. Only Gio’s hand, clasped firmly around hers, anchored her as she blindly ambled along. Scared of what lay beyond.

Gio opened the bedroom doors, and she noticed with relief that the lights were on. Some of Gio’s work items and his phone were lying on the sofa. At the far end, the windows were cracked open, making the curtains ripple intermittently.

Her whole body was encased in ice, teeth chattering quietly.

Hearing it, Gio strode over to the windows and briskly latched them shut. But he didn’t turn around immediately. The

muscles in his back tensed as he gripped the frame white-knuckled.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” he bit out tersely.

Her mind jumped to the vase she had broken, and she wanted to curl in on herself.

“Where was Sarah?” he asked.

*The housekeeper?*

“I...uh...” The piercing tension in the room and the haze all around her made it hard to think back and retrace her steps. Ana shifted on her feet, racking her mind. “I think she was in the bathroom when I came up. Or, m-maybe she retired to bed.”

“Well, she wasn’t supposed to.” Gio’s jaw was tight as he turned around. He attempted to don a thin smile at the sight of her fright, in an effort to appear calm and unthreatening.

It was unsuccessful.

He was like a caged animal, his clenched fists noticeable even through his pant pockets.

“I told Sarah to alert me when you wrapped work, so I could dismiss the guard first. I didn’t want you to meet him until morning. But of course, I miscalculated,” he cursed to himself. “I always miscalculate when it comes to you.”

Ana’s pale eyes blinked up at him. Gio never admitted a fault. The only time he had was after she’d fled to Pittsburgh

last month. She couldn't let him shoulder the blame for tonight, though.

“There's no way Sarah can watch me 24/7,” she murmured shakily. “And I—well, I decided to wrap a little early today. The gala planning was getting a bit much, so I thought I'd—” She shrugged jerkily. “Regardless, I'm fine. I was just a little startled.”

He regarded her for a long time, holding her gaze until she was forced to drop hers, afraid of what she would reveal.

“It won't happen again,” Gio said decisively, ignoring her assurances. “I'll introduce the guard in the morning. Properly. Reggie was thoroughly vetted and passed three background checks.”

“Is he...joining the grounds staff?” The tentative hope in her voice must have been obvious because he grimaced and ran a hand through his hair.

“Reggie...is our new personal bodyguard,” Gio corrected quietly.

The low hum of the room heater was the only sound as she stared in denial.

“I know.” Gio's mouth twisted disdainfully. “It's the last thing I wanted again, to hire a bodyguard after what the last one did to my parents. You must also be anxious after what happened with the guard in your aunt's home—the thief.”

*Thief?*

She wanted to laugh hysterically. That man had stolen far too much from her.

“The situation is beyond my control, though,” Gio admitted with difficulty. “There are credible sources of threats that pop up every few weeks. Most get resolved by the larger security team. But that team is stationed here in New York. We need someone reliable to accompany us when we travel to other regions.”

He eyed her, imploring, “I can’t leave us unprotected, Ana. There are too many eyes on us.”

She sank onto the bed, averting her gaze. Frustration and fear paralyzed her. She’d never wanted this position, this pressure. At their betrothal, she had told him as such...*I’m not suited to be a high-ranking wife.*

Gio was the one groomed for leadership. For danger. Not her.

Even after the lethal betrayal by his parents’ bodyguard, a trauma so deep she could not fathom it, Gio had emerged stronger than ever. Strong enough to move past it and embrace a new bodyguard for the sake of their safety.

While she was a mess.

Anchored down by the past, while he rose unfettered.

Ana had foolishly thought that she was growing free of the past and the memories. Apart from the occasional nightmare, she was able to live a normal life. She had opened up to her husband in ways she never thought she could. But all her

bravado had come crashing down with just one glimpse of the new bodyguard.

What must Gio be thinking? How could she even explain her reaction?

Auntie's warnings had silenced her for so long, and they still did. *If he knows what happened, he'll never look at you the same again...*

Her heart sank. That was all she'd been taught her whole life—to be silent and unseen. The perfect model doll. She felt ill-equipped to rise to the role Gio had given her, with all its dangers and threats. She'd barely escaped unscathed the last time.

“Ana.”

The bed dipped as he came close, fingers sliding into her hair.

“Trust me.” His breath warmed her skin.

Ana closed her eyes and leaned against him, seeking his strength even as she desperately wanted to flee. There was no other choice. Not when it was so logical. Not when he was being brave too.

“I'm sure you did all the right audits and checks,” she said hoarsely.

“I did.” Gio squeezed her shoulder. “I would never let anyone into our house without them. Reggie passed three independent checks by investigators inside and outside the Family. He even passed the last test tonight.”



“Tonight?” Her eyes flew to his.

Gio paused, a pained expression crossing his lean face. Something almost akin to guilt. “It was why Reggie was in the hallway,” he said. “I told him I had to take a call in the bedroom and left my office unlocked. I wanted to see what he would do.”

Ana stared, uncomprehending. “But...why? You said you did three checks.”

Gio scoffed. “Reports can only tell you so much. You have to see how people react under fire. Offer them the right incentive to see if they will bite. But don’t worry.” His fingers rubbed the back of her neck. “He passed all of them.”

Long after they went to bed, after he fell asleep, she lay unmoving.

Wondering.

How could he be sure the tests he’d given the guard were enough?

And what tests had he secretly given *her*?

# Chapter 10

Ana fought it.

The nightmares.

On edge after the run-in with the new bodyguard, Ana could feel them coming deep into her bones. She tried to stay up as long as possible to stave them off. Maybe if she exhausted herself enough, she would fall straight into a deep sleep.

But her body was wired and on alert, reminding her of all the previous nights like tonight, where she had been caught unawares. Warning her so she wouldn't forget and let down her guard.

*If you fall asleep, he'll come for you...If you fall asleep, he'll...*

As the night crawled into dawn, her mind grew foggier and foggier as her lids drooped. The dream pulled her in, even as she tried to resist, taking her back to the hallway where she was trapped by him.

*Footsteps clicked behind her, stopping her in her tracks.*

*He was back again. Ana could sense him...following her.*

*In the months since their first encounter, she had watched out for the guard at every corner and in every shadow. Even in the distorted scenes of her nightmares. But he had vanished—just as swiftly as he had appeared, making her wonder if he was just a boogeyman. Something her mind had conjured up after what had happened to her fiancé’s family.*

*Fiancé. If Gio even was anymore.*

*It had been nearly a year since their betrothal and a few months since his parents’ murder. She had scarcely seen or heard from Gio since. She had contented herself with work and alone time. Her solitude, however, had left her vulnerable to him.*

*“We meet again, Ana.”*

*Sweat beaded along her spine.*

*The guard was watching her, smirking as she crossed her arms defensively. He was getting bolder. Their first encounter had been downstairs by the main rooms. Tonight, he had come upstairs to the bedrooms. All the other doors were shut, however, with the lights turned off. Everyone was asleep.*

*“You make it too easy, you know?” He stepped up to her.*

*Ana blanked her face, praying her disinterest would bore him. But she was terrified on the inside, painfully aware of his every movement. She tensed as he spoke close enough to rustle her hair. “Every night, you follow the same routine. Scarf through dinner and rush away to your room, always taking the*

*back stairs up to avoid any family conversations and nagging.”*

*God.*

*Horror washed over her as he recounted her activities to the tee.*

*How long had he been watching her? She had been so vigilant in searching out for him, but she had never spotted him.*

*“It’s my job, sweetheart,” the guard explained conceitedly. “That’s why I was highly recommended to your family...I observe and learn patterns. And where there is a pattern, there is an opening.”*

*An opening for what?*

*But he didn’t explain. “Just some free advice as your in-house security expert.” Stepping back, he watched her with an ominous challenge in his eyes. Smug and self-assured.*

*“You should try switching up your routine,” he advised. “Break your pattern.”*

*His eyes swept down her form.*

*“Then, we can see if I can still catch you.”*

*Hands clamped around her throat.*

*Jolting her awake.*

*A shrill scream pierced through the house, spreading from corner to corner.*

Ana gasped convulsively, scratching at her throat as the nightmare swallowed her whole. She kicked and pushed out with all her might.

Oh, God.

Help!

*Please, no.*

No...no...no.

Whimpers rose out of her like a wounded animal. Keening and moaning helplessly as the pain suffused her without end.

*'Ana.'*

Hands touched her.

No, no.

She lurched back, kicking.

“ANA!”

The light clicked on, illuminating him towering over her. She gasped, uncomprehending.

Until he came into sight.

Gio.

Pieces of reality started coming into focus as she noticed her tangled hair and the twisted sheets wound around her legs. As well as her husband, who stood over her, shirtless with his curly hair mussed up. He looked almost...scared.

*Fuck.*

Her shaking fingers moved to her hair. What the hell happened? And why was he still here? The clock read 6.17 a.m. By this time, he was always up and at his desk.

“Y-you don’t have work?”

His eyes narrowed as if questioning her sanity.

She was, too.

“I didn’t want to leave you alone after last night, so I thought I would start a bit later today. And for good reason.” Gio inspected her warily, as if he was seeing an alien creature. “What was *that*?”

Her fingers dug into the sheets. Terror choked her.

Gio carefully sat down next to her and wound his fingers through hers to calm her agitated movements. The silky mess of her hair shielded her from his gaze, but he tucked that aside too, revealing her pale face to him. At any other time, the gentle touch and heady scent of his musk, along with his half-naked state, would have riveted her. But right now, Ana wanted nothing more than for him to leave.

She had no answers for him. Nothing that wouldn’t raise his alarm further. The old nightmare had wrapped its putrid, vengeful arms so closely around her that it wouldn’t let go. All she wanted was some time alone to unravel it from her head and compose herself again.

“Ana,” Gio beseeched, cupping her cheek.

Tears pricked at her. Would he be as kind if he knew the truth?

It wasn't her fault. That's what she told herself time and time again. But the Family was a cold and unforgiving society, and Gio, as its leader, was just as harsh. He dealt out punishments for disloyalty and issued tests to unsuspecting staff.

Did he trust her? Or was she enduring one long test?

Shifting back until his hand was dislodged, Ana pretended not to notice him stiffening at her rejection. The air between them crackled with tension.

“Are you—” his hand fisted, “upset over the guard?”

Ana shook her head in denial, her teeth chattering. “J-just... startled. It must have caused a random nightmare. I-I don't remember any of it.”

He didn't comment. The lie was obvious.

“I'll postpone the introductory meeting with Reggie,” he said. “You should just take it easy today.”

Ana nodded, clenching her jaw to keep from chattering. She was too raw and tired for any meetings with guards. Gio seemed to sense it too, as he discontinued his line of questioning. He just sat there without touching her or talking. But he was a solid mass of support.

That familiar calm numbness gradually returned to her as they sat together in silence, his presence shielding her against the past.

When she blinked sleepily, he asked her if she needed anything.

“I just want to be alone,” she whispered, closing her eyes. Not wanting to see the hurt on his face, or worse, the indifference.



# Chapter 11

It felt unreal that the gala was here, mere hours away.

Ana adjusted the gold necklace, which, along with her long brown hair, reflected beautifully against the emerald silk dress. Her fingers adjusted the pleating at each shoulder, counting each fold carefully until all other thoughts faded away.

Everything felt right when she had a dress in her hands. And this one was a gorgeous, slinky creation. Not one of her own designs, but it made her feel like a different woman. Sultry and confident. There was a modest dip in the front where she'd nestled the necklace and a slit up her right leg, which was visible only when she walked. But it was the buttery silk fabric that was the most provocative part, molding to her body like a second skin.

She hoped her makeup did similar wonders for her face. The shadows under her eyes were heavy, her sleep routine only recently returning to normal.

For the last three weeks, she'd lied stiffly and anxiously beside Gio each night, unable to fully fall asleep until he rose at dawn. All in fear of another panic attack.

Her husband had let it go once, but he wouldn't again.

*Ping.*

Emma's name flashed on her phone.

'SOS.'

Scrambling to check, Ana groaned at the message.

**Emma:** Remember that a-hole client from Philly who wanted to talk to Antonio? He's *\*here\**. Coming to the gala.

**Ana:** How do you know??

**Emma:** Your cousin freaked & told me. He got a message from Russo asking to meet here tonight.

**Ana:** Shit. Did Russo arrive already?

**Emma:** Nope.

**Emma:** Why? Should I jump him?

**Ana:** Em...

**Emma:** *\*shrug\**

**Ana:** Let's just grab Tony before the gala to debrief.

Rubbing her forehead, she cursed her cousin under her breath as she searched through her other inbox for details on the account. Just what she needed before her first major event as Donna—work drama.

“Everything okay?”

Gio stood at the doorway, momentarily distracting her with his striking attire. The three-piece suit, with a blend of black and silvery gray tones, gave him the appearance of absolute power—and corruption. It threw his dark hair and eyes into sharper relief, especially as they narrowed on her.

“Uh,” Ana stared, flustered. “Yes, just Emma panicking over some work issues.”

“Sounds like she needs some time at the open bar tonight.” His lips lifted.

Ana laughed lightly as his eyes crinkled.

Their guests would be unwinding and enjoying the drinks and food. But for both of them and Emma, it would be all work. This was the first time in nearly a decade that all the factions were coming together. If they pulled off the event, it would showcase their leadership and position Gio as a great unifier. She didn't want to dwell on what would happen if they failed.

“You look beautiful.” The compliment was quiet.

“Thank you.” She smiled shyly, watching him approach in the mirror. “You look dashing as well.”

Gio stood flush against her back, hands in his pockets. His expression was restrained. As it had been ever since her nightmare. For a while, after he had come to fetch her in Pittsburgh, he had seemed to open up—sharing his affectionate smiles and tender conversations more readily. But he had

become so distant again since that night, infinitely more careful around her.

It had been a relief at first. She had felt like a live wire that could ignite at the slightest touch. But now, as his distance stretched on for weeks, she could feel the chasm widening between them. Whatever little intimacy they had built up—was gone.

Did he pity her after her panic attack? Worry for her...or perhaps was frustrated with her?

His eyes revealed nothing, black pools of obsidian.

Ana rose to her feet. She shifted her long brown hair until it cascaded over her shoulder and turned around, bumping straight into Gio's hard frame. He didn't budge at first, remaining fixed in position, watching her. But at her shiver, he stepped aside.

"Is the car ready?" she mumbled.

"Yes, all the checks are done. We should reach there an hour before it starts."

Gio came around to her vanity table, surveying its contents, and said, "Don't forget this."

*Oh.*

In his outstretched palm was her platinum-diamond wedding ring. Ana reached for it, but he took her hand in his and gently slid it up her ring finger.

Déjà vu struck her at the move, taking her back to the last time he had done this on their wedding day. There had been such turmoil within her even then. The rumors and unsolicited advice about her new husband, the expectations of a Don's wife, and the past she'd been so desperate to hide—had all paralyzed her.

But when they'd finally been alone in their hotel room, it had somehow all faded away.

Ana had slept with him without abandon, opening up to him in ways she never thought she could. It had felt like a freefall, exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

There had always been a heady connection tethering her to him, one she could never deny. Even when she feared it. So it was all the worse that they'd regressed after her nightmare. Reverting to the start, back to when they'd been awkward and proper, watching each other from afar.

Her fingers curled in his grip, and Gio's eyes came up to hers. Hooded, dark...and almost tender. Her chest cleaved at the flash of emotion there.

But it was gone.

Cold focus took over him again as he reminded her of the time.

*Sigh.*

Picking up her clutch, she followed him out, a heavy ache in her breast. She had a feeling that for their situation to be repaired, it would have to be by her move.



“Isn’t it perfect?”

Gio surveyed the large ballroom, with not one but ten chandeliers suspended from the ceilings and a ten-foot floral arch at the entrance, before turning back to her aunt. “Reminds me of our wedding.”

Ana hid her amusement. Auntie had one signature style of décor: over-the-top. The matriarch had somehow squeezed in ten times the number of flowers and crystals than were at their wedding. It was positively gaudy, but Auntie looked supremely pleased.

“There wasn’t much we could do with the church,” she sighed. “The nineteenth-century architecture couldn’t support some of the installations I wanted. But this hall is perfect. Everyone will be so impressed!”

“I’m sure they will,” Gio said diplomatically before nodding at a thin man who’d just arrived.

“Oh, please don’t let us keep you.” Her aunt ushered him on.

When he excused himself to greet the guest, Auntie fixed her beady gaze on Ana, the sickly-sweet tone vanishing into thin air.

Dread poured into her. *What now?*

“That dress is a bit revealing, isn’t it?” Auntie remarked, staring pointedly at the slit.

Ana glanced down, but nothing was showing. The older woman was frowning as if she were standing buck-naked in front of all and sundry.

“People should know he married a respectable woman. A Mancini.”

“And they do know,” Ana retorted, lips flat. “Besides...I’m a *Bernardi* now.”

If the shock on her aunt’s face grew any more pronounced, she could have doubled as a cartoon character. Ana felt a little shocked herself. She’d never been so outspoken with Auntie before. But all the frustration from the last two months of planning and the sleepless nights had loosened her tongue. She’d neglected her own business to help with this event, and this was all her aunt had to say?

“We’re still your family,” Auntie admonished, looking hurt. “I did all this for you,” she waved at the grand room, “so you would be a triumph tonight.”

A twinge of guilt punctured Ana’s ire. Her aunt was always a bit much, but it was always with the goal of elevating Ana and Antonio’s image in the Family. Even if that was the last thing they wanted.

“Everything is fine, isn’t it?” Auntie asked. “With you and Gio.”

A weight settled in her chest.

*No, it wasn’t.*

But Ana smiled placatingly. “Of course.”

“He trusts you?”

Ana frowned. “Why wouldn’t he?”

But her words were more confident than she actually felt. Near the entrance, she saw Gio deftly manage a growing group of guests, who were all flocking around him. His pose was confident but shrewd, never missing a thing as everyone else chatted unrestrained.

He was always alert, always suspicious.

With a knowing look, her aunt turned to observe him as well. “Gio doesn’t trust anyone. But you can help him trust you...if you put your mind to it.”

How the hell was she supposed to make a grown man, the *Boss*, do anything he didn’t want to do? She could barely trust herself at times. Ana remained silent, remembering how out of control she’d felt after the nightmare.

More guests were filtering in now, and she grew alert. It was almost showtime. She watched with nervous anticipation as the ushers at the door escorted them to coat check and to the open bar. Everyone was dressed to the nines. Ana smoothed the silk fabric of her gown self-consciously.

She wanted to be at home, in quiet peace. But this was her duty.

Gathering her courage, she quietly greeted a few guests and politely offered her hand to them, somehow recalling each of their names without error. Several of them had attended her wedding, but there were many others whom she could not



recognize. The reach of the Family spanned across the eastern corridor, including Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and parts of a few other bordering states.

It was overwhelming to know how far Gio's reign extended. Any wrong move tonight could jeopardize his authority.

Swallowing heavily, Ana searched for him again. Seeking out his presence like an anchor.

The crowd around him had ballooned even further, with several people lining up for a chance to speak with him. But, as if heeding her call, Gio glanced over at her.

A calm wave swept over her as he nodded encouragingly at her before prompting the men around him to greet her from across the room. She waved gracefully back at them.

"Hmm." Her aunt pursed her lips pensively, observing the exchange. "He does seem to be taken with you."

Ana frowned and grabbed a glass of champagne from a server. She took a heavy sip, suppressing the pop of pleasure from her aunt's comment. What was she supposed to say to that? Agree? Disagree? She didn't want to encourage any romantic fantasies, nor did she want Auntie to worry that something was wrong.

When her aunt thankfully became distracted with other guests, Ana slipped her phone from her purse.

There were no messages.

**Ana:** Is Tony here?

**Emma:** Nope. Been waiting by the entrance for 30 mins. He's not inside, is he?

**Ana:** No, and no reply to my texts either.

**Emma:** Ok. I'll keep checking.

**Ana:** Just forget it & come in. There are too many people now.

“...my niece, Ana.”

Hastily pocketing her phone, she turned with a ready smile as her aunt introduced a man. He looked vaguely familiar, bald, with a spectacularly dramatic mustache that curled halfway across his cheeks. Next to him, Grandfather stood scowling at the room. “Is *every* chandelier in New York stuck up there?” he grumbled.

The funny-looking man laughed as if it was a joke and said, “It looks marvelous, Marta.” He kissed his fingers approvingly.

Grandfather grunted loudly.

Before he could complain any further, Ana softly cut in and talked about the events lined up for the evening, not wanting Grandfather to blow up the gala already, with his temper. Thankfully, everyone, including Auntie, seemed to calm down as Ana described the musical performances and catering, all sourced from Family businesses. Another couple soon joined their circle, complimenting the hors d'oeuvres and drinks.

“It's a pity my wine wasn't included in the selection,” the mustached man said sullenly, slanting a look at her aunt.

Glancing at her as well, Ana waited for Auntie to explain. But she was mutinously silent.

Strange.

With no explanation forthcoming, Ana politely told him they had to select wines from New York businesses to reduce transportation costs to the venue. The others nodded in understanding.

“But if all goes well tonight, Gio and I are hoping to have rotating locations for future galas.”

“Oh, that would be great!” The couple perked up. “We should ask Francesca to host the Hartford one.”

They began excitedly discussing plans for a gala in their region. But the wine-guy was not mollified. His mustache twitched indignantly as he pouted.

“Maybe we can feature your wines next year?” Ana offered encouragingly. “You’re from Pennsylvania, right?”

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “An old friend of your family.”

“Ah.” Her eyes darted to Auntie, whose expression only grew more severe. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Claudio.”

He offered a hand.

“Claudio Vitello.”

Damp heat poured through her fingers as she shook his hand in shock. Quickly masking her expression, she fell silent as

one of the others asked him about his wineries. The ones that Gio had just shut down.

*Shit.*

How awkward.

Although each Family business was independent, many of them relied on central funds for subsidies and loans. If they didn't receive help, they could turn vengeful. Vitello, she feared, was one such man. He must have been *furious* when Gio shut down his business.

Ana shifted uncomfortably. All she had worried about before tonight was being well-mannered and social. It hadn't dawned on her until now that her new role would also invite the attention of business owners and others looking to gain the Don's ear.

But how could she speak on behalf of Gio? They had decided to split up during the welcome reception to cover more ground during the meet-and-greets. She couldn't pull him aside to ask for his opinion on every conversation.

Racking her brains to recall what else Gio had shared about Vitello, Ana asked, "Your vineyards in Napa are still thriving, I believe?"

"Yes," he sniffed delicately, "a popular brand with celebrities."

More like obscure social media stars, from what she'd heard. But the others looked mildly impressed.

“We’ve done remarkably well,” Vitello bragged. “Even *without* support.”

The barb hit its mark as Ana’s blood heated. Annoyed by his audacity, she found herself retorting before she could stop herself. “There is always support with the Family. I know Gio was truly appreciative of your time reviewing and providing him with the list of staff who needed employment. We’re so glad we could place so many of them and save their livelihoods.”

Vitello opened and closed his mouth.

“That’s so generous of you, Claudio,” the lady from Hartford praised.

“It truly is,” another echoed.

“We could’ve avoided all that if we kept the staff with us,” Vitello grumbled. “The wineries were their home.”

*Son of a—*

He just couldn’t drop it, could he? She knew she should let it go, but she could not let him malign her husband in front of all these other guests. Stifling her irritation, Ana said, “Businesses are a tricky thing,” as if explaining to a petulant child. “I launched a couture line—”

“Oh, I have one of your dresses!” a guest gushed.

“Thank you.” Ana smiled gratefully, momentarily distracted by the praise. “I’m really so glad you and so many others have been enjoying them. But...it involves many sacrifices. I’ve had to go without a salary since my launch, just so I can invest

in the business and keep the staff paid. It isn't easy." She shrugged. "But you have to do what's right, especially for the good of the Family. And I know my husband will do *whatever* it takes for the greater good, even if it requires difficult decisions."

Everyone in their circle began echoing the sentiment, lauding Gio for watching out for them and making hard calls as their Don.

Ana avoided Vitello's reaction, but his discontent was potent. His eyes narrowed on her, the surly anger there disturbing her.

Auntie laughed lightly to break the tension as he seethed.

Everyone's businesses were tainted with varying levels of corruption—illegal arrangements and backdoor deals, all designed to circumvent regulations and retain more profits. That's why leadership from the Don and his regional Capos was so crucial. Each of the leaders took a cut from each business, which they used to provide central oversight and security.

Usually to protect the businesses from the feds and rival mobs. But many times, it was to protect the businesses from *each other*.

Vitello's was a case in point. When his east coast wineries sank into losses, he'd taken massive subsidies from the Family's central reserves to keep his companies afloat. But the more he leached, the less was available to those in need.

Like his employees.

The bastard had done nothing to help place them, despite his other successful businesses. Ana had buttered up Vitello in front of the other guests to pacify him. But the truth was that he'd been utterly callous when it came to his former staff. He'd spurned Gio's efforts to help them find new jobs and had shared his payroll list only after Gio had threatened to sink his Napa wineries too.

Yet, somehow, everyone admired Vitello.

Old money, with an even older lineage.

As a woman in the Family, adopted into privilege, Ana had worked doubly-triply hard to prove herself. She couldn't fathom being so negligent. Neither could Gio. He lived and breathed for the Family.

*Bzzz.*

The vibration startled her before her gaze could stray compulsively back to her husband. Without disrupting the conversation, she opened her clutch.

**Emma:** The eagle has landed.

**Ana:** Tony?

**Emma:** Should I have said monkey?

**Ana:** *\*eye roll\** Coming over. At the entrance?

Upon confirmation, she excused herself from the guests, who had moved on to other topics, and waded through the

crowds toward the large doors. Five guards stood there formidably in their all-black uniforms.

Ana nodded brusquely when they greeted her and parted to let her out.

Would the sight of them ever become normal? Even now, it paralyzed her.

The guards seemed to watch her intently as she carefully pinched the skirt of her silk gown, folding it so it covered the slit. Among them was her new personal bodyguard, Reggie, who started to trail out after her. Ignoring his sharp focus, she walked down the steps and escaped into the crowds.

So many people were milling around outside, several of them waiting for security checks. Their curious eyes turned to her, and she smiled distractedly at them as she descended the stairs in search of her cousin. It was already an hour into the event. Very soon, they would begin seating for dinner.

“Ana!”

She spotted Emma’s blonde head on the ramp off to the right. Next to her was her cousin and another familiar face, parked in a wheelchair.

“Gabi?” Ana blurted in surprise.

The younger woman looked decidedly uncomfortable, her curls covering her eyes, which darted to the immense crowds every few seconds. She relaxed only when Antonio squeezed her shoulder.



Ana glanced curiously at her. “I thought Gio said you weren’t interested in these types of events?”

“Gabi, not *interested?*” Antonio scoffed. “She lives for a party. Just must’ve missed the memo, so I went to pick her up.” He wagged his brows.

Gabi bowed her head sheepishly.

“Ah.” Ana nodded in realization.

A bit of earlier annoyance with her cousin faded as she watched him joke around with her sister-in-law. His delay must have been due to Gabi and not his otherwise usual disorganization. Regardless, Ana was peeved that he hadn’t at least texted her back. Emma also looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“Listen,” Emma interrupted, “the client is going to be here tonight. He wants—”

“Ah, Mancini.”

*Shit.*

Ana’s eyes flared as the very client appeared a few steps away. She had never seen him in person before. He was a commanding presence. Not so tall next to Antonio’s lean frame, but he was broad-shouldered and shrewdly focused with keen gray eyes. They matched neatly with the silver hair on his head. On his arm was a young, stunning woman with midnight black hair and narrow green eyes.

“Russo,” Antonio greeted, shaking his hand.

“Glad we’ve finally met. Your secretary has been giving me the runaround,” Russo drawled.

Ana squirmed in her spot. He had no idea that the ‘secretary’ was standing right there.

“My daughter, Celia.” Russo gestured. The beautiful woman dipped her head.

Ah. Not his mistress, then.

“And you must be the new Mrs. Bernardi.” Russo’s gray eyes honed in on Ana. She cordially offered a hand. “An honor to meet our new Donna,” he murmured, kissing the back of her hand.

“A pleasure to meet you both.” Ana smiled, flustered. “Why don’t you join us inside? Dinner should be starting shortly.”

“Of course. Just after a brief chat, if you don’t mind.”

She faltered as he summarily rejected her suggestion. She peered anxiously at Tony, hoping he was prepared for this conversation.

“My partners have been raving about the profits from the gold line,” Russo told Antonio, who smiled charmingly. So charming that she wouldn’t have believed his earlier nerves if she hadn’t seen them firsthand. “They keep demanding additional supply, but your secretary said it wouldn’t be possible for another six months at least.” Russo frowned heavily.

Antonio drew the man closer in a move that was easy and friendly. “I’m so glad you want to order more. But, you know,

it's just a little bit *tricky*. There are a couple of other contracts we have to fulfill first. And there are—well, we have to be careful with security and feds catching wind and all that. So there are a bunch of checks in place that slow things down.”

Tony glanced over at Emma, who nodded discreetly.

Russo also turned to eye her curiously, but Emma gave him a bland smile in return. “You have a small staff, right?” he pressed, turning back to Tony.

“Yes, Gio—uh Boss is looking to increase that next year.”

“But, why wait?”

Russo leaned into Antonio, an almost menacing smile splitting his face. Ana watched him warily, having the oddest impression of a python that was attempting to coil around them slowly, so slowly that they wouldn't realize they were suffocating until it was too late.

“That's why I wanted to meet with you,” Russo coaxed silkily, “to see if I could invest directly, perhaps explore a partnership?”

Her cousin laughed noncommittally.

But Ana frowned, wary of the suggestion. It wasn't ideal. Russo's investment could be a huge financial boost to the homegrown gold import operation. A partnership, however, also meant a significant loss of control—especially if it involved a man like Russo. Not to mention a potential threat to Gio, who was already attempting to establish governance over the Family businesses.

“Let’s talk another time, hm?” Russo clapped Antonio on the back. “Maybe without the womenfolk around.”

Both men turned to climb up the stairs as Ana’s mouth pinched in disgust.

*Without the womenfolk around.*

Ugh.

She was at least assured, after seeing her cousin in action, that he could handle himself. Tony was terrible with numbers and contracts, the supply chain, and honestly, anything involving the finer details of the gold business. But he was talented at schmoozing clients.

Noticing Russo’s daughter’s gaze on her, Ana schooled her expression. They were the last ones on the ramp after Emma wheeled Gabriella up to the entrance.

“Celia, right?” she asked politely.

“And you’re Ana.”

“Yes, I—”

“You married G.”

*G?* The blatant familiarity stumped her. Ana frowned, trying to place her. She knew that Russo was a prominent financier and venture capitalist in the Philly region. He’d come to her attention through the gold business. But apart from that, he was an enigma. He held no leadership role in the Family, no title.

So how had Celia met Gio?

Ana's fingers smoothed over the silk of her gown uncomfortably. The fabric twisted in her grip when Celia queried, "How's it been adjusting to G's mad schedule?"

There it was again, subtle but pointed—a hint that Celia knew Gio's schedule well enough to comment on. Discomfort and annoyance flowed through her.

"It has been a whirlwind, but just taking it one day at a time," Ana said evasively, not rising to the bait.

Celia nodded, her eyes narrowing. "You adapted quite well to the Mancinis. I'm sure you'll be fine." At Ana's silence, she dug further. "Your father was one of their soldiers, I believe? He must have been an honorable one for the Mancinis to adopt you after he was killed in action." She pursed her bow-shaped lips in sympathy. "Do you miss them—your real parents?"

Ana's jaw ticked.

"*Oh*, sorry if I'm prying." Celia backed away, with that same insipid smile.

There was nothing she could say without deeply offending the woman, so Ana merely shrugged. Taking a deep breath, she eyed the security line ahead of them. There were dozens of people waiting to enter. Her bodyguard noticed her waiting and sprang to action, ready to escort her directly. But she quietly waved him away. For a moment, she had the insane urge to thrust herself into his arms and beg him to rescue her from Celia. But she restrained herself.

Just barely.

It would be incredibly impolite to abandon the woman out here, however tempting it may be.

“I wonder though...”

*Please, stop.*

Ana turned reluctantly to Celia, who pondered out loud. “You call Antonio ‘cousin’...but shouldn’t he be your brother? His parents are the ones who adopted you, after all.”

Everything in her shriveled at that insight. Ripping up a wound that had lodged deep inside her over many years.

“The Mancinis didn’t want to erase the memory of my father and mother,” Ana said stiffly. “So they told me to call them ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’.” Her voice was biting, frosted over with not an iota of warmth.

The other woman seemed to have finally gotten the hint because she fell silent until she spotted some of her friends waiting in line.

After Celia left to join them, Ana let out a breath and summoned the guard to let her in.



The champagne glass was refilled a third time.

Dangerous, seeing as she hardly ever drank.

Even Gio seemed concerned as an usher guided him to his seat at their dinner table, watching as she gulped the third glass down. Though Celia had long since disappeared into the gala, the sting of her words and her annoyingly perfect

appearance hadn't faded. That woman knew exactly what she was doing by needling at her background and age-old wounds.

Of course, she knew who Ana was.

*Merely the cousin—the niece.*

Not a pure Mancini.

Ana was only ever allowed to be so close to her adoptive family, despite having little memory of her life before them. All because of Grandfather's obsession with the Mancini bloodline. Ironically, everyone still referred to him as her 'grandfather,' despite his vehement objection to the title. It was too confusing for the Family. If Marta was her aunt and Antonio her cousin, how could he be unrelated?

But Grandfather didn't care for logic. He preferred to consort with people like Vitello. Not her.

She peered at the bubbles in her glass, wondering when their effect would kick in.

"Everything went okay earlier?" her husband murmured in her ear, his arm settling on her chair.

*No. It was awful.*

She nodded without looking up, not wanting to worry Gio, who was already suspicious after her panic attack.

His hand remained in place around her as he greeted each region's Capos and their wives. They were all seated at their table. The thought of all of them wondering about her past and

judging her made her more depressed. It hadn't even been a concern for her until the *she-devil* brought it up.

“You spoke to Russo?”

Ana blinked in surprise, glancing at Gio. A mistake because the dark pools of his eyes compelled her with their intensity. How in the world did he know...? Ah. Reggie. Their bodyguard had been watching over her when she'd stepped outside. But she hadn't expected him to report the encounter back to Gio.

“He mainly wanted to talk shop with Tony,” she said.

“And your cousin was able to—*talk shop*?” Gio's brow raised.

Psh. Largely because Emma had spoon-fed him all the details just before Russo arrived. Tony had covered up any gaps with his charm. But she couldn't say that to Gio. Tony didn't want anyone to know he was struggling with the business.

So she simply nodded.

Gio's fingers rubbed circles on her shoulder, causing the tips of her breasts to tighten unexpectedly. It was a move he was fond of every time they were close, tracing his fingers along her shoulders or hips. But it was rare these days after her nightmare.

“Russo's daughter was supposed to be in Paris. I made sure of it before I extended the invite.”

Ana stared at him, trying to parse his statement.



Before she could question him further, dinner was announced. Everyone had gotten seated, and the servers began to arrive with their plates. She picked up her napkin, disquieted. Gio's words were always measured. He never said anything just for the sake of it. He was making sure she knew that *he* had not invited Celia.

A relief.

And a curse.

Because there was a reason why he'd taken the pains to keep Celia away. There was something between the two of them.

Not now; before. Ana knew he wasn't unfaithful now. She had asked him about mistresses that first day, and he had shut it down point-blank. *'Mistresses are untrustworthy, and after betrothal, dishonorable.'* And if Gio was one thing, it was honorable.

But had there been something between them before he'd met Ana? Before he had to submit to duty?

Jealousy infiltrated her mind, seeping through her veins like the most insidious poison. Mafia women were meant to be pure and virginal, but there was no such requirement for men. Even though she'd never heard of any scandals or gossip about him, Ana knew Gio couldn't have been celibate before. He was attractive, well-mannered, and a leader in the Family.

Few women would resist him.

Ana had contemplated all this before their betrothal. She knew he likely had a past, and it hadn't bothered her terribly at

the time. Probably because she hadn't had to face it in its *beautiful, bitchy* form. Her nose wrinkled.

But, more than that, it was because she'd known Gio's character from the start. He was a loyal man, one who would abide by his wife and family no matter what. That's why she had agreed to marry him. That's why she had let down her guard and embraced him after their wedding. He had lived up to his virtues and treated her well. And so, she had been happy over the past few months.

Sure, they may never have a love marriage. But it would be respectful and caring. That's all she had hoped for.

*So why wasn't it enough anymore?*

Gio laughed easily with one of the Capos, the sharp cut of his jaw and the perfectly tailored suit making him devastatingly handsome. The itch to curl her hand over his thigh and feel him under her was so strong, it made her heady. But it wasn't appropriate.

Tonight was about decorum and duty.

Duty had brought them together, and it was duty that held them apart.

Just as with her adoptive family, Ana could only be so close to her husband. There was always an invisible line threading between them—the Family, their duty, her past, and his—all tangling together to hold them apart. The distance had protected her before, allowing her to hide from him. Now, it saddened her.

She wanted what Antonio had. The type of relationship that was so consuming that he'd shirked all responsibilities, letting Ana and Emma fend for themselves for the first hour of the gala while he rushed to Gabi's side.

What would it have been like if she and Gio had met that way? If he had chosen her despite his duty...not because his parents had suggested her to him. If her last name wasn't Mancini but that of a nameless soldier...If she wasn't the perfect hostess, spending hours sucking up to everyone in the Family.

Watching the last of the bubbles disappear from her glass, Ana sighed grimly.

She would never know.

There was no changing fate. An arranged marriage was what it was, and she was happy to have gotten a better deal than most other women. Once the memory of Celia's encounter faded, so would these odd emotions.

They had to.



“What a wonderful event.”

“Thank you.”

“So magnificent, truly.”

Ana hugged each of the wives at their table as the crowds began to disperse. It was past midnight, and many of them would be driving out either the same night or early the next

morning. Every performance and speech had been met with thunderous applause, lifting her spirits.

All the planning had paid off.

Even Gio looked much more relaxed as he shook hands with the families before they left.

“So nice to have all the factions together, Ana. Please tell Don Giovanni.”

“Thank you; I definitely will. It’s important to both of us that everyone feels united.”

“A credit to you both.”

She smiled at their praises, chatting amiably with the remaining guests before they exited the hall. She stood there on the steps, waving as they all safely entered their cars. Gio and the Capos would begin their meetings shortly. It was rare for them all to be in one location, so they would be tackling some pending business. But her work was done.

Hers and her aunt’s.

Where was *she*?

Ana scanned the driveway and the side ramps but did not spot Auntie among the families loitering there. She certainly wasn’t back in the hall. But she must be nearby. She had promised to wish Ana goodbye before heading back to Pittsburgh.

Tony had already said his goodbyes an hour ago. Gabriella had gotten tired and hadn’t wanted to wait for Gio to escort

her home. So her cousin had driven her back.

Ana searched the grounds.

Noticing the bodyguard standing a few steps behind her, she stiffened, wrapping her arms around herself. His eyes were kind, a sharp contrast to *his*. But it could not assuage her fears. The feeling of a guard watching her every move, however professional, made her so nauseous, she feared she would throw up the entire sumptuous dinner.

“Do you need anything, Ms. Ana?”

Her breaths came faster.

As suspicion rose...

*Why did he want to know?*

“If you need something, I can fetch it for you.” Reggie’s expression was open and supportive. It tamped down some of the panic lodged in her throat.

“I just—have you seen my aunt, by any chance?”

“Ms. Marta?”

She nodded.

“I think she and Mr. Mancini were out by the gardens. But that was over twenty minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Reggie.” A smile, or rather a half-grimace, crossed her lips. “I’ll find them. No need to accompany me.”

The alarm on his face revealed his discomfort with that order. Although Ana was also his boss, Reggie ultimately deferred to Gio, who would be furious if the guard abandoned

her out in the open. The hall was protected like a fortress. But out here, without walls, there were no guarantees.

“A few feet behind me should be okay,” she conceded, taking pity on him. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Tugging up her skirt until the hem was safely above her heels, Ana strode down the right ramp as it curved around the building to the back. One sole guard stood there by the garden gates. He readily stepped aside, recognizing her.

The gardens had been closed off for the event, with visitors allowed only by request since there was insufficient security to staff them. Not to mention the dismal lighting. There were just a handful of lamps around the vast gardens.

Shadows closed around them as they ventured in.

Maybe she should have waited until Auntie eventually returned. But Ana was tired and had already come this far. She just wanted to finish her goodbyes and go home.

Crickets chirped as if in warning.

Grass and mud squelched beneath her heels before a hand unexpectedly touched her elbow.

*“Shit!”*

“Sorry, uh—” Reggie held his hands up. “There is a walking path over there, ma’am.”

Grateful for the darkness as it hid her fright, Ana murmured an incoherent thanks as she veered in that direction. Her spine

relaxed fractionally as a distant light appeared.

There, voices also became audible. Her aunt and grandfather...yelling.

Ana groaned quietly.

No wonder they had escaped out here into this godforsaken garden. Their fights were infamous, one of the blights of her childhood. None of them had ever ended peacefully, not without a major upset that left the house in a tense standoff for weeks after.

“Please stay here,” she advised.

Reggie hesitated but agreed.

Ana trudged ahead, past two rows of hedges, her heart thumping when she lost sight of the guard behind her. As the thick greenery eventually cleared, an open courtyard of sorts emerged. Several lights were strung around its perimeter, illuminating the two angry forms.

Auntie and Grandfather stood at the very center of the opening, facing off in a heated match. Ana began to call out to them. But, at the sound of her name on Grandfather’s lips, she halted.

“—see how Ana spoke to him!”

“It was just small talk.”

“Small talk? If you want small talk, you ask about the weather or his grandkids. Not shame him over his failing business!”

Realization struck her sharply. They were arguing about Vitello.

“And whose fault is it that his business got shut down? That impulsive ass, Gio!”

Ana recoiled and glanced back, wondering if the guard could hear them. That type of language toward the Don was criminal. If word got back to Gio, it would mean complete war.

Auntie seemed to be shocked as well, urging her father to calm down.

“Why should I! I sank half my savings into Claudio’s business...promised my word as his friend that I’d try to save him. Instead, my so-called *granddaughter* disgraces him to his face!”

“Father—”

“This is all your doing.” He lifted a rickety finger at the thin woman, who stared appalled.

“How can you say that? After—”

“After what? Your false promises? That you’d make my grandson a Capo, but instead let him run amok. No responsibilities, no title.” He scoffed loudly. “And then you threaten his birthright by adopting that *wretch*, a soldier’s girl, into our bloodline. Training and teaching her as you should have taught Antonio.”

“I taught them both!” Auntie cried. “Tony has a great business now, and Ana is married to the Don. Having Gio on



our side, and soon Gabriella, is all promising. They will both achieve—”

Grandfather laughed mirthlessly.

“Gio on *our* side?”

Silence fell over them.

Dread coursed through Ana’s body, freezing her to the bone. The fury in his voice was molten, to the point where she feared it would not end here. Grandfather had already fought with her husband once before, the day after their wedding, and had received a warning for it. If he stormed out now and confronted Gio again, she didn’t know what she would do—what she could do—to prevent outright war between the two men. Auntie was the only one who had any sway over the Mancini patriarch, and even she was floundering.

“Gio has his own agenda.” Grandfather sneered. “Like all young men, he’s foolhardy and wants to rip out the establishment. Ana is following right in his footsteps. He hasn’t come to our side. She has gone to *his*.”

The old man turned away, shaking his head.

Her aunt also seemed defeated.

The vitriol lingering in the air deeply discomfited her, almost as much as the insinuation that Gio had brainwashed her. As spouses, they were expected to form a partnership. Gio shared his ideas with Ana, and so did she. The very reason they were even having a gala tonight was because she had persuaded Gio to become a uniter and abandon his quest for revenge.

Gio had heeded her advice and brought all the regions together, so why wouldn't she defend him? Especially to a scumbag like Vitello.

Ana rubbed her arms, shivering in the midnight air.

She had to leave. Their arguments and prideful obsession over their bloodline were nothing new. The last thing she needed was for them to deepen the fracture between her and her husband.

Almost as if he'd heard, Grandfather echoed her thoughts. "Ana won't betray her husband," he warned. "No Family wife would. So you better use your maternal influence and butter her up, Marta. I don't care what you do. I don't care what you say. Just convince Ana to take up Vitello's case with Gio."

Ana remained there for several minutes, even after they left. Shock and disappointment coated her in an icy haze, rooting her to the spot.

Until Reggie finally emerged, questioning what happened.

Quietly, she glided back onto the walking path as he trailed behind her, confused.

She couldn't tell him; he was a guard, one of many who had betrayed the Family before. Neither could she tell Gio, with his intolerance for disloyalty, nor Emma, who didn't give a whit about Family politics. Even Antonio was long gone, but he wouldn't understand; he was the prodigal son. The one who was born a Mancini, tied by *blood*.

There was no one for her to turn to.

There never was.

## Chapter 12

The low hum of the machine started up again the next morning, droning on and on until it reached a jerking halt.

“Dammit.”

The fabric snagged again for the third time.

Ana sighed, leaning back in her chair as she set the half-ruined dress aside. Thankfully, it was just a sample and not a client order. But it made her all the more agitated. She had been seeking calm this morning, a distraction from the intrusive thoughts that had woken her up after a mere four hours of sleep. Her mind, however, would not relent.

She was disturbed after overhearing that fight last night, and it had only worsened when she'd woken up to that text. Ana stared balefully at her phone.

Each word had left a jagged shard in her chest until it felt difficult to breathe.

It was too much. The expectations, pressure, and insecurities—all swarming her after Grandfather and Auntie's

exchange, after Celia's sly inquisition into her orphanhood. There had been so many praises from the guests, and yet they were overshadowed by Ana's doubts.

When would she be perfect enough for her family?

For the Family?

The floorboards creaked as Gio entered. Ana clutched the phone to her chest and frowned worriedly at her husband, who looked even more worn out than her. Shadows had formed under his eyes, and his cheeks appeared leaner with strain.

"Your meetings are done?"

He nodded tiredly. "The critical ones at least. A few men are staying behind this week, so I'll have more time to wrap up work with them."

"You must be exhausted. I don't think you slept much," she murmured in concern.

Tilting his head, Gio surmised, "Neither did you." His gaze was drawn to the scraps of fabric on her desk and her phone, which she held onto like a live bomb. To her relief, he didn't probe further. Instead, he turned to survey her office with casual interest.

The setup was fairly minimal, with a laptop and two sewing machines. The shelves were filled with boxes of fabrics and materials. Apart from that, there was little décor or personal artifacts.

Rather similar to his office, he'd once said.

In so many ways, they were alike: quiet, dutiful, and loyal. Fuss-free in their manner and their surroundings. But, in other ways, they were so different. Ana envied how confident he was, never falling prey to self-doubt, even when others confronted him.

Why did *she* have to be so sensitive?

The phone burned in her hand.

When Gio stopped in front of the dress form, which had a corset-style bodice pinned onto it, Ana held her breath. All she could see was his lean back, with his dress shirt half untucked. Whenever she saw him in such a relaxed state, it always made her flush. Like she was seeing a private version of him no one else could...ruffled and undone.

When his hand reached out to touch the corset, one long finger caressing the curves of its form, her flush deepened. If Gio wasn't so tired from the gala and work meetings, she would have almost thought he was deliberately seducing her. The caress was so blatant.

Ana glanced away, embarrassed.

She was losing her mind.

Their abstinence the past few weeks, combined with her heightened emotions, was making her delirious. And *delusional*.

“All went well with the guests yesterday?” he asked, turning back to her as she adopted a blank expression. “No issues?”

A dozen issues popped into her mind, but she didn't voice them. "I think it went fairly well," Ana said with surprising sincerity. And it was true. Despite her pity party, it *had* been a nice gathering. "Several guests came up to me and said they were grateful for us organizing the gala. They were full of praise for you." She smiled fondly.

His eyes dropped to her lips.

"And you?"

At his questioning look, she asked, "Did you find any issues, or was it...okay?"

Gio stared at her, his dark eyes seeing far more than she was comfortable with. Ana fidgeted, shuffling fabrics around. It was their first joint event. Unlike their wedding, the gala held far more significance as it showcased how they would lead the Family.

"It was *perfect*."

Her lashes lifted, her brown eyes wide.

"Many of the guests also gave me positive feedback," Gio said. "They were happy that we wanted to bring the factions closer together...all thanks to your idea."

Ana started to object, but he insisted, "It's true. I've been so focused on security audits and financial reviews that I neglected the leadership aspect of my job. I can't just be the Family's dictator; I have to be their confidante, their protector. Without you, I would have realized it too late."

Her throat was tight, emotion binding it closed. “The gala was your idea,” she murmured. “I just said we should unite everyone.”

Gio shrugged, pocketing his hands. Glancing down at his feet, with his short curls falling over his forehead, he hesitated for a long time—before facing her. His face was solemn and intent.

“Whatever parts we played in it, you have to know that it went very well. I know there were some minor issues, which are hard to avoid. Too many people have their own agendas...” Gio sighed, irritated. “The Connecticut Capo told me that Vitello was acting like a petty asshole yesterday, but that you handled it like a queen...just like the one I always knew you would be.”

Ana froze at his statement.

“I may not express it,” he said gruffly, “but I am proud to have you as mi donna. My wife.”

She stared.

Stunned.

Uncomprehending warmth spilled all over her as her mind went blank. She didn’t know how to register such praise or his open and tender expression.

But this is what she had wished for, throughout the night and through the first rays of dawn: some sort of sign or validation that her hard work and efforts had been enough. That *she* was enough—for someone, if not her family.



Ana had never expected that validation to come from her stoic and powerful husband, a man who expected nothing but the best from others.

*Proud to have you as mi donna.*

When the first tears started to fall, she did not know. They just emerged...one by one, then all at once. Her vision clouded over.

“Ana—”

A low sob burst out of her.

She covered her eyes, the phone cradled in one hand, as everything poured out of her. The stress, the insecurities, and heartache. They echoed in each ragged hitch of her breath. Had she ever heard this growing up? A kind word, affection. *No*. All she'd ever heard was distaste at her lowly background and accusations that she had somehow 'stolen' the privilege of being a Mancini.

Time and time again, Ana killed herself to be the dutiful adoptee. She had perfected her manners and her business operations. But their contempt had never faded. Not Grandfather's or vipers' like Celia.

But all those voices dimmed into an unintelligible hum as Gio's arms closed painfully around her. She dazedly realized that he had gathered her into his arms and carried her over to the settee. The scent of his cologne surrounded her as his palm cradled her head, pulling her closer. She burrowed deeper into his strong embrace until they were almost one.

“Shh, easy,” Gio urged when she choked on the sobs, her chest heaving convulsively.

“S-sorry.”

His hand rubbed along her back, soothing, before his lips dropped to the top of her head. “Don’t apologize...you should’ve told me something was wrong.”

Somehow, she had a feeling it wasn’t just last night he was referring to. Things had been off since her nightmares resurfaced weeks ago. But she couldn’t broach that topic; she didn’t have the strength for it just yet. Instead, she chose to open her clenched fist, revealing the phone hidden there.

His hand arrested on her body before reaching for it.

The notification was still on the screen.

9:47 AM

**Auntie:** After all that time preparing for this event, it was a total waste. Father is so upset. I can only imagine the embarrassment Gio feels. You couldn’t have just made nice with Vitello?? People will think I haven’t taught you anything with that type of vulgar backtalk.

The phone squeezed so hard in his grip that the glass crackled. Tension invaded every inch of his body, with the muscles in his wrist flexing.

She stiffened and started to retreat. With deliberate control, Gio relaxed and resumed tracing circles on her back, soothing her. But anger simmered beneath the control. “You know this is *bullshit*, right?” he spat.

Ana wiped the tears off her face and shrugged, ashamed that he had to read that. “It’s...j-just–Grandfather is unhappy about Vitello’s business going under, and...well, he’s trying, through Auntie...to get me to convince you.”

She prayed she’d done the right thing by telling him. The last thing she wanted was a war between their families. Her hand clutched his shirt, grasping for calm.

“Francisco is an ornery old-timer,” Gio said harshly.

Raising her teary gaze to his, Ana found him scowling into the distance. His expression was gentle when he turned back to her. His thumb wiped under her eyes. “I held my tongue because he’s your grandfather and, unfortunately, a powerful leader in Pittsburgh. But he’s always been a massive pain when it comes to any new ideas. Mine seem to be his least favorite.”

Gio huffed wryly, but Ana couldn’t find the humor in it. She had been so focused on her own hurt that she hadn’t realized Gio had also been affected by Grandfather’s vitriol. It sent a wave of anger through her. She could forgive the old man for insulting her, but she could not bear the thought of him insulting Gio. Did her family see their wedding as a license to flout the Don?

“At one point...I even suspected him of the attack,” Gio groused.

“*What?*”

Shock flashed across her features.

Gio nodded gravely, his eyes narrowed as if honing in on a distant threat. “Francisco constantly tried to sabotage me in the months after the attack. Every business I audited, every investigation I started, he tried to overrule me and make me look inexperienced.”

Ana’s heart raced.

Was it even possible?

Had Grandfather wanted control of the Family’s future badly enough to kill the old Boss? It seemed too horrible to comprehend—a crime far worse than any insult he could issue. But Gio’s parents were fairly conservative leaders, inoffensive to Grandfather’s way of thinking. What would Grandfather have gained by murdering them?

Gio seemed to think so as well. “Francisco got on well with my parents. They always catered to everyone’s opinions and valued their support, even if it meant stalling progress. So I can’t imagine him wanting to get rid of them, only to be saddled with me for a Boss.”

Ana silently agreed though she remained perturbed. Power games were different in the Family. Here, when people’s ambitions rose high, it could lead to explosive results. Even murder.

Her husband was no exception, even with his lofty ideals. She thought back to Gio’s lethal expression the night of Jon’s execution...and then glanced at the clean shirt he wore now.

What other punishments had Gio dealt out since that night? Had his meetings last night been purely about business, or something more gruesome?

Ana shuddered.

Gio was right, though. Grandfather had too much to lose by killing Gio's parents. They had promised Antonio the Capo title in Pittsburgh and Gabriella's hand in marriage. Grandfather would have risked losing all that with their death.

"I didn't say all this to worry you." Gio searched her reddened eyes. "Just to say that Francisco's words are worth *shit*. Don't let him or Marta fuck with you."

She took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. "T-thank you."

Morning light poured in through the windows, growing in intensity as time passed.

As her tears faded, she began to pull away, feeling like a sullen child cradled in his lap. But Gio roughly tightened his embrace. The pull of his soft, protective eyes, his warm, hard body, and that heady scent were too tempting to resist. If he wouldn't let go, then neither would she.



Morning came and went. If he had work to do or meetings to attend, she didn't ask.

Didn't care to ask.

All she wanted was for time to freeze in its steps as they sat here together.

Gio hesitated when her hands trailed low, perhaps worrying about taking advantage of her emotional state. But when she desperately whispered that she'd *missed him inside her*, all polite control vanished as he ripped down the zipper of her dress.

Kissing him hotly, she released his cock.

And sank down over him.

Shivering with the need coursing through her, gripping her in its madness, Ana's head fell back as she issued a low moan. The ends of her long hair grazed his thighs.

Every part of him was clothed while she sat half-naked, her dress bunched around her waist. But shyness was far from her mind, not with her body screaming in satisfaction as they finally came together. His steely arms flexed around her hips, and his strong legs tensed beneath her ass.

*"Fuck. That's it...want me,"* Gio growled, nipping her throat, the swells of her breasts.

Maybe she should feel shy now, she thought, as he intently watched the way her body undulated above him. Her hips rolling and grinding. But it only emboldened her, knowing she'd reduced such a controlled and dangerous man to his most base senses.

His face was carved out of stone...as if he were flying and being flayed alive all at once.

“Gio,” she cried.

And then he took over, done with her motions.

With sharp, punctuated thrusts, he hit so deeply inside her that it felt as though he’d meld into her body forever. Burning every part of her. The sensation and the knowledge of his possession tipped her under.

Until one thought remained.

*Mine.*



The possessive direction of her thoughts scared her.

Slumped over Gio with her hands clutching his shoulders, Ana had the insane urge to claw his lean back until her imprint was marked in blood.

What had come over her?

Tremors flecked along her skin, rippling in the aftermath of her climax. They hid the panic filtering back into her mind. Because she knew...*she loved him*. She had suspected it last night when the greed for his affection had intensified. When the thought of him being with her for duty’s sake alone had devastated her—despite already knowing that was why they had wed.

Her emotions had been in such turmoil throughout the night. She had tried to deny her feelings, desperate to remain practical and calm. But, even now, after all her tears had dried and her lust had been sated, they would not fade.

She loved him.

Gio was not a good man by conventional standards. He was unbendingly principled and ruthless with those who crossed him. He had killed many men, far more than the few she was privy to. But, to her, he was gentle and loyal...lending peace to her mind and fire to her body.

He was not just her Don, but her husband. A man she respected and desired. He had stayed by her side time and time again, even when she'd least expected it.

Memories rushed through her...of him chewing out Grandfather for insulting her...following her home to Pittsburgh, the city he'd loathed...holding her close after the nightmare.

Ana sighed dreamily, tucking her head into the curve of his neck as he cupped her ass.

When her hips began to protest her spread position, she reluctantly disengaged from him and began pulling down her dress. All while avoiding his gaze.

Gio, however, sensed her retreat and tilted her face up to his. His dark eyes searched her face closely. His lush hair was mussed, and his lips were swollen, making that coiling heat in her low belly inflame further.

*How handsome he was.*

How she loved him.

Chest tight, she held his stare, the words at her throat. But all she could whisper was, "I'm proud, too, you know...to have



you as my husband.”

It felt so inadequate after all that he'd said to her. But Ana couldn't manage to say anything more without emotion getting the best of her. As powerful as love was, fear was infinitely stronger. It corrupted every moment with a reminder of what she could lose.

If her aunt, the woman who raised her, could demean her the way she had in that text—would Gio do the same one day? Ana couldn't imagine it, not with the way he was looking at her now. But hope was a poisonous illusion. She had hoped for so many years that her family would love her...but they never did.

So why would Gio? He had married her for duty, for her impeccable pedigree. Even if he was growing to care for her now, there was no guarantee of how he would feel in the future. Not once he uncovered her past, and she became a liability to his reputation.

So Ana remained in this limbo, in his blissful embrace, trying not to want anymore. But her heart was growing greedier by the day.

At the sudden ache in her arms, Ana glanced up, startled, and realized Gio was squeezing her powerfully after her declaration. His dark eyes were hooded, brimming with layers of emotion.

“Proud to have a Don as your husband?” he asked roughly.

She shook her head quietly. “To have *you*.”

The smile that lit his face then completely transformed him, broad and exhilarated. It made him look so boyish, so much more like the man she'd first met.

She wouldn't have imagined a confident man like him fishing for compliments, but the sheer pleasure on his face made her glad she'd expressed herself. Even if it was a paltry version of the truth. Kissing him delicately, Ana touched his chest over his heart. Conveying what she could not say.

"I'm glad to hear it," Gio murmured, his eyes soft. "You're usually reserved with your praise."

"I am?"

"Hm, at our first meeting, you barely gave me the time of day."

"I—what?" she spluttered, jerking back.

Gio grinned wryly. "Hasn't anyone told you that? How intimidating you can be when you're quiet. I thought...I still..." He let out a breath, his hands squeezing her. "Well, it just seemed like you had no interest in me."

Her mind spun, confounded. Of course, others had mentioned it before—*Miss Perfect*, they'd called her. Because of her shyness and her poise and manners, she often appeared untouchable and regal. Disinterested.

Ana had tried very hard to overcome that at each event she attended, by infusing warmth into her expression. But she had no idea Gio had also felt that way.

She intimidated *him*?

He was the one who'd caught her attention from the start—  
and had never let go.

# Chapter 13

*Two Years Ago*

She was in the corner, as always.

Quietly observing everyone else conversing loudly.

Ana wasn't going to intrude. Auntie had said more than a few times how important today was and for everyone to be on their best behavior. It wasn't every day that your family got a betrothal offer from the Don's family.

Not that it was public yet. Gabriella was merely eighteen. But Auntie hadn't wanted to risk other suitors coming out of the woodwork now that the girl was of age.

Somehow, Ana suspected it wouldn't be an issue. Gabriella was focused solely on Antonio, even with all their family around. She giggled when he teased her, swatting his arm.

Don Bernardi and his wife seemed unfazed by their antics. They simply looked fondly at the couple—unusual for people in their position. Most of the Family, especially those of elite stature, guarded their daughters fiercely. But Gabriella seemed

freer than most. She had been able to maintain a friendship with Antonio throughout the years without much restriction or scandal.

A twinge of envy hit Ana. Here she was, afraid to even move for fear of disgracing the family and ruining the *most important day ever*.

“Any reason you’re laughing alone in a corner?”

Jolting in surprise, Ana whirled around...and found the most devastating man standing just behind her by the door.

He raised a brow at her.

When he’d entered, she did not know. Ana had been so engrossed in watching the others. But everyone else abruptly lost their allure as she stared at him, unblinking.

Taller than her, he was dressed simply in an all-black soldier’s outfit. But with lean, sharp features and perfectly coiffed black hair, he looked nothing like any soldier she had seen before. Every inch of him reeked of aristocracy.

“Giovanni?” she blurted in dazed recognition.

His black eyes gleamed as he regarded her curiously, giving the impression of a panther that had just uncovered its prey. “You have me at a disadvantage,” he drawled. “You are—?”

Ana’s chest grew heavy as his gaze slid down leisurely... from her neat silky braid and delicate elfin face, down to her slim frame adorned in a simple cotton dress.

“Ana Mancini.” She stuck out her hand, assuming her professional demeanor. “I’m Antonio’s cousin.”

“Ah.”

Amusement poured through him as he glanced down at her businesslike gesture before accepting the handshake. Before it could linger too long, she hastily retracted her hand with a tight smile.

The Don’s son.

*Shit.*

What luck for her to find a quiet corner only to run into him?

Ana hadn’t been alone with many men outside of her family and their guards. Her fashion designs, now a bona fide business, had occupied most of her thoughts for the past few years. So she felt entirely out of her depth in the company of a man like him.

With as much willpower as she could muster, she refocused on her cousin, despite the heat of his gaze searing her spine.

But he wouldn’t make it so easy. Murmuring at her ear, he corrected, “Gio.” At her blank face, he explained, “Most people call me Gio.”

There was no way in hell she could call him that. She was afraid to say *anything* at all to him for fear of what her aunt would say. That woman would skewer her alive if Ana made one misstep and jeopardized Tony’s betrothal.

Regardless, there was something about the intimate curl of his shortened name that felt...forbidden. They had only just met.

It was strange. Most other people were slow to warm up to Ana because of her quiet nature. When she had her 'game face' on, sure. But here, like this, just herself in a corner, hardly anyone would think to approach her. Least of all, the Don's son, who was offering nicknames like they were old friends.

Hands growing sweaty, she smoothed them over her dress, drawing his eyes there.

"Beautiful," he remarked.

"Oh...thank you. It's—" she hesitated, "one of the first pieces of my collection."

Gio blinked, the previous amusement on his face disappearing as he assessed the design more closely. Fashion wasn't most men's forte, at least not the men in the Family. But Ana found herself nervously awaiting his opinion. He seemed to intently evaluate every stitch and every hue in the floral embroidery she'd hand-sewn. It was a subtle, but intricate, elevation of a simple cotton dress.

"It's an evening wear piece," she explained quietly at his prolonged silence, "but I am hoping to scale up to bridalwear if I get any profits out of this line."

"You've gotten funds from Father for this startup?" He frowned.

Ana denied it softly. “Not yet. I want to prove myself first.”

Patting down the dress, she glanced up and inhaled.

The look Gio gave her then was so intense, she was surprised she was still standing. His dark eyes were the shade of a cloudless midnight sky, beautiful and commanding. There was no way to tell what he was thinking; his expressions were so carefully veiled. But it felt as if he could see into her very core.

With a low hum in his throat, Gio nodded, retreating into a polite façade. Slightly rebuffed, Ana wondered if he found her business silly. Or maybe he had hit his quota of small talk. She usually got tired of it easily too, yet she felt oddly disappointed.

“Your cousin is starting a business too, right? Gold imports, I heard.” Gio wasn’t looking at her, but instead at Antonio with a piercing focus.

Unlike his parents, he seemed wary of Antonio and Gabriella’s impending betrothal. Everyone knew that the Don and his wife were warmhearted and open, despite the harsh realities of the Family. They made it a point to build relationships and give others the benefit of the doubt.

Ana had a feeling that Gio was different. His earlier relaxed manner was gone as he surveyed the couple with cool detachment.

Unease settled over her.



*Which one was the real him?* The smiling, inquisitive man... or the ruthless one observing everyone now.

Clearing her throat, she feigned ignorance of her cousin's business. "I've heard bits and pieces of it, just whenever Tony mentions it. It seems promising."

"Hopefully he's getting pointers from you on setting it up."

She hesitated. "Not sure what pointers I could give him..."

"Plenty, by the looks of it." He regarded the soft sway of her dress.

"Oh... Well, thank you. I'm always there for Tony if he needs me."

"Hm."

Ana hoped her answer was satisfactory. She wasn't sure how much he knew about the businesses. By the looks of his uniform, Gio was currently out in the field as a soldier and likely far removed from administrative duties.

"Do you enjoy being a soldier?" she asked.

"I do, actually," he mused. "It's hard work, especially when everyone assumes you're just the Don's spoiled son slumming it."

A laugh choked out of her, drawing one from him as well. It thrilled her, eliciting such a response from the commanding man.

"But I want to help Father," Gio said more seriously. "Even as a soldier."

At the strange note in his voice, she observed him. So handsome and so serious. Just steps away from her, but so infinitely out of reach. “You don’t think you will be Don one day?”

“Only if I prove myself.”

His vow echoed her own.

“The Don title has not been in my family for long. At any time, someone else can always come and rally enough support to change the succession. Around your region, there are some good leaders—Marco, Luke, and even Antonio. They could easily surpass me.”

At her silence, he pressed. “Don’t you think?”

She tilted her head. “Are you looking for flattery?”

With a sharp laugh, Gio drew back, shaking his head. His neat curls fell over his forehead, lending an almost boyish look to his otherwise impassive face. He regarded her like she was a creature from another planet. “No,” he said simply. “Just the truth.”

For some reason, she believed him. He didn’t seem the type to require ego-stroking.

So, after ensuring the others were still distracted, Ana fell into deep contemplation over his question. Her fingers rubbed the edge of the fireplace by where she stood.

“Those men are all good candidates,” Ana admitted after some thought. “They’ve gathered a lot of support over the years, especially from those who want a change in lineage.

Plus, the Pennsylvania factions are much larger than New York's, guaranteeing them a larger base. But..." she said, "none of them are suited for the job."

Her hands folded together as she glanced away, intensely aware of him. She could sense his frame growing alert, attuned to her words.

"I feel that it takes more than brute force to become Don. Any man can seize power, but few know how to lead. To earn the command of the Family, you need something more than violence and threats."

"And you don't think I'm capable of threats?" His tone was cool and dangerous, sending tremors up her spine.

He was capable of it, could deliver it with deadly precision; she was sure. If she were to leave this conversation unscathed, it would be because he allowed it. Not because of any defense she could muster up against him.

"You are." Ana stood unwavering. "But you would do it thoughtfully and effectively. That's why the others cannot surpass you."

Gio stared at her for a long time after that, moving over her face in search of something she could not tell. As deeply as he unnerved her, he thrilled her just the same. Kindling a longing inside her that she'd never felt before.

Would they ever see each other again?

And talk like this—in a hidden corner—without restraint.

As his mother called out for him, glancing over at her curiously, Ana followed him out to join the others. She assumed her social mode, where she conversed and laughed with his family with perfect poise.

But she didn't dare seek him out again, focusing entirely on everyone else for the remainder of the gathering. What they had shared was a moment in time—a kind conversation he had patiently accommodated. And she was grateful for it, nothing more.

But when everyone began filtering out hours later, he caught her hand in his—black obsidian eyes landing on her. Heat brandished up her arm as she patiently waited.

“I will call on you next week,” he said.

Before he followed the rest out.

It felt like a promise.

*But also a threat.*

# Chapter 14

## *Present*

Ana shivered, a faint moan escaping her as his hand trailed lower.

## *Intimidating...*

It was mindboggling that he'd felt that way while she had been aflutter with nerves. Gio certainly didn't seem intimidated now as he parted her legs before filling her deeply in a way that nothing else could.

Her gasp was lost in the shower. The water and the loud smack of his hips against hers drowned the sound out.

The memory was all a blur. That entire time in her life had been a whirlwind. Gio had called on her the following week as he'd sworn to do, and after the subsequent meeting, he had called to forewarn her that his parents would offer a betrothal for her as well.

She'd often wondered if that had been their intention all along. Had his parents hoped to settle Gio down in the same

family as Gabriella and asked him to approach Ana that day? Or had his mother noticed them chatting and devised a matchmaking scheme?

Ana could never tell. After three meetings, Gio had diffidently asked for her hand in marriage over the phone and, when she was stunned into silence, assured her that she had the right to refuse. It was a small courtesy not afforded to many women in the Family. She was especially grateful that he had asked her privately before her aunt could catch wind of it. There would have been no question of refusal after that.

Not that there ever was.

That entire day after the call, Ana had debated and analyzed the decision, questioning the sanity of accepting a man whom she'd known for a mere four weeks. Until she had picked up the phone and heard his low, crisp voice, she hadn't even known she *would* accept. But it had spilled out of her unbidden.

Gio hadn't said much...perhaps just as stunned by her response.

Only as she'd begun to hang up, she had heard it. Solemn and gentle. "I won't let you regret it."

It had been insanity, like willingly plunging into freefall. But those six words from him had convinced her in a way none of her other logical analyses could—that if she had to marry, she could not fathom marrying anyone except him.

Heat crawled up to the tips of her breasts, where he pinched them in a sharp move, startling Ana out of her reverie. “Am I boring you?” he drawled.

The noise that came out of her then should have embarrassed her beyond belief. But she frankly could not care less. “*God.*”

The amusement in his voice deepened. “God, hm?”

“Gio, if you—”

Whatever plea or reprimand she’d been about to utter was lost as he doubled down, bracing one hand against the shower wall before hammering in one, two, three blows—before she was gone.



That smug smile made her pale brown eyes narrow thinly.

“What?”

“Stop it.”

But there was no anger in it. Ana felt deliciously sated, her mind perfectly blank. If she didn’t restrain herself, she was sure her expression in the bathroom mirror would be equally smug.

The past few weeks since the gala had felt like a dream, a beautiful healing after the distance that had grown between them. Not just healing, but a renewal. There was a peace and comfort that hadn’t quite existed between them before.

After crying in his arms and hearing of his pride in her, Ana felt so much more relaxed. Gio, too, seemed lighter. A smile

played on his lips as he towel-dried his hair.

Her fingers reached out and brushed the nape of his neck, playing with the wet curls there. “I love your hair,” she sighed before shyly averting her gaze at his hooded look.

I love *you*.

The confession was there, just on her lips, begging to be spilled. But she turned away, not ready yet. Maybe she would never be. Why spoil a good thing? Gio had made no indication that he wanted love. To a man like him, love could be a burden—a distraction from his duties.

“Did everyone arrive for the summit?”

“Hm, and Russo’s already stirring up trouble.” Gio scowled, striding over to the closet, where he brusquely rifled through his shirts, irritation evident in his form.

Ana watched him worriedly. “What kind of trouble?”

“Financial, what else? Russo hates that all our businesses roll up to the Don and is sticking his nose everywhere it doesn’t belong, dropping hints at partnerships with all of our most lucrative businesses. Antonio didn’t bite, thanks to you.” Gio glanced at her with a grim smile. “But I don’t know if the others will resist.”

“Why would they jump ship to Russo? He’ll take an even bigger cut of their profits.”

“Exactly,” Gio said. “But they don’t know that. All they hear is the promise of the Family tax getting abolished. Russo is



conveniently leaving out the taxes *he'll* levy in exchange for his investment.”

Ana rubbed her lips, wondering what they could do. Rumors were pesky little things. Once they gained traction, there was nothing—no logic—that could control them.

“Don’t worry.” Gio chucked her chin, breaking her out of her musings. “Hopefully the summit this weekend will make a dent in his campaign. Luke has been reaching out to the Pennsylvania factions to get some numbers and rally some support. That should help.”

“Did Grandfather agree to come?”

“No.” He gave her a rueful look, which made her feel worse.

One of the reasons they had married was to strengthen the alliance between Pennsylvania and New York. So many of the old, legacy families lived in Pennsylvania and held enough power to potentially split away from the Family. The Mancinis, as one of the most influential families in that region, could have been a huge support to Gio. But it seemed they wanted to use their marriage only to their advantage.

Though her aunt had surprisingly apologized for the text she’d sent—an uncharacteristic gesture.

Grandfather, however, was radio silent.

*Sigh.*

“It’s better this way,” Gio assured. At her skeptical gaze, he insisted, “Trust me. Francisco is a loose cannon. With my

luck, he'd go nuclear and throw me under the bus in front of the others."

Gio seemed unbothered by Grandfather's lack of support, but Ana wasn't. There were hundreds of conflicts ongoing at any given time, within each faction and from the outside. How could Gio handle them all alone? He was still so wary of taking on additional staff.

"You have to hire help," Ana urged, her delicate features straining with concern. "There are so many vacancies. You'll burn out if you don't fill them soon."

"I know...I'm interviewing a few more guards after the summit. Reggie has been doing well, hasn't he?" he asked.

Ana agreed reluctantly.

Reggie *was* good. But having a bodyguard hover around them 24/7, after her last experience, made her stomach revolt. No matter how professional and courteous Reggie had been, all Ana could feel was sheer terror every time he appeared. It had become easier as time passed. So she was reluctant to express her fear to Gio. It would invite too many questions and dissuade him from hiring more help.

"I'll have to set aside some time to hire other roles too. I need some accountants," Gio said distractedly, typing away on his phone before grabbing his coat.

The housekeeper knocked on the door, indicating it was time for him to leave.

Ana watched him for several long seconds and then hugged him tightly from behind, feeling him freeze in surprise. “Be safe,” she whispered, her voice thick. Her hands clenched around his blazer and then released.

She stepped back quickly and put on an easy smile.

He slowly turned around and stared at her for a long time. The question was clear on his face, but the housekeeper knocked again. Gio closed his eyes in visible irritation before controlling his expression again.

“Enjoy your time in Pittsburgh,” he said reluctantly, his voice gruff. “I’ll be there before you know it.”

Heart in her throat, Ana followed him out. They had hardly been apart the past few weeks, cocooned in their home, completely in bliss. Seeing him leave now, knowing he’d only join her in Pittsburgh after ten days, was harder than she’d expected.

I love you.

*I love you.*

The yearning to tell him was growing deeper as the days passed by, yet she remained silent. Fearful of her feelings not being reciprocated.

But what if she never got the opportunity to tell him? What if something—?

Flicking away the morbid thoughts, Ana waved her hand in goodbye. Lingering there long after his car disappeared around the bend.



Ana cataloged her luggage, cross-checking everything before the flight in a few hours. It was a pain packing up all her work items, toiletries, and clothes every time she had to head back home. But there was no way to avoid the trips.

Their distribution center was just outside Pittsburgh, and it would be too difficult to move it now. Although Emma handled many of the operations there well, Ana was the head of the company. It was her responsibility to review each month's shipments and ensure accountability.

There was also the complication of coordinating with Tony, as his gold shipments were often timed to go out with her dress shipments. Sighing, Ana flipped through her phone's calendar.

This coming Thursday, Tony would formally meet with Russo to discuss a possible partnership. Her cousin had no intention of accepting the deal, not with his loyalty to Ana—and, by extension, to Gio. But he'd agreed to the meeting to humor Russo. Hopefully, the other business leaders coming to the summit this weekend would also stand firm with Gio and resist Russo.

*Bzz.*

**Unknown:** Is this Ana?

She frowned, opening the new message.

**Ana:** Yes, who is this?

**Unknown:** Celia.

**Unknown:** Russo.

*Speak of the devil.*

Who the hell gave her this number?

**Unknown:** I know you're heading out of town soon. Can I grab a few minutes to chat? Looks like you're free now.

Ana spun on the spot, wondering if there were cameras in the room. How did she know Ana was traveling soon? Maybe her father had told her; he knew Ana would be in the meeting with Tony this Thursday. Nevertheless, it was a little terrifying and, more so, *annoying*, how much Celia knew.

Closing her eyes with a soft groan, Ana replied.

**Ana:** Yes, I'm free for a few minutes now.

At the instantaneous ring, she rolled her eyes.

"Hi, Celia. A pleasant surprise."

"*Is it?*"

Ana floundered for a moment at the sly retort. "Of course...I wasn't expecting this, but I am happy to chat." *Not.* "We didn't get to talk long last time. I hope you enjoyed the gala."

Celia hummed evasively. "It was nice to have all regions together. The décor was also lovely, but quite a number of chandeliers, wasn't it?"

Ana laughed awkwardly. "I think my aunt has a fondness for them."

“I could tell.”

Seconds ticked by as Ana waited for her to explain why she'd called, absently rubbing the back of a chair. After a painful silence, Celia eventually yielded, drawing in an audible breath. “The reason I called—”

Silence ensued again, and Ana's curiosity piqued. The woman didn't seem the type to hedge around. So why was she hesitating now?

“Yes?”

“...well, it's about the gala.”

“Oh. Was there an issue with it?”

“No.” A deep sigh, followed by muttering. “Well, I just wanted to, uh, apologize for that night. If my tone was off and I offended you, I'm sorry.”

Ana drew to a stop in the middle of her bedroom, completely thrown.

That was the last thing she expected to hear. If Celia had told her the sky was collapsing above her head, it would have been far more believable. Her tone was sullen and not wholly sincere, but the fact that she'd even uttered an apology was shocking.

“I-I wasn't expecting that,” Ana admitted honestly. “I appreciate it...but I wasn't offended.”

A complete lie.

Even Celia said skeptically, “Really?”

“Yes, really. None taken.”

“Interesting. Because the Don made it very clear that I behaved poorly.”

*What?*

Ana stood blankly as the words slowly registered. Celia’s apology—this phone call—all this was due to...Gio? Her pulse picked up, thundering over her ears.

She struggled to think back to any conversation she’d had with Gio on this. Apart from his vague statement at the gala about not inviting Celia, Ana had never raised the topic of the other woman with him. Her insecurities had largely been laid to rest after that night. It no longer mattered what women he’d dated in the past; she knew he was loyal to her.

But how did he know that Celia had offended her?

She hadn’t even said—

*Of course.*

Reggie. He’d been on the stairs near her when she and Celia had been chatting outside the gala. Ana had been visibly upset by the conversation, so Reggie must have noticed and conveyed it to Gio in his report. And that’s why Gio had assured her that he hadn’t invited Celia.

She wanted to laugh.

Or cry.

At the thought of Gio caring enough to watch out for her.

Knowing that it was her husband who had prompted this call, Ana savored every word of Celia's apology.

But there was something about the way Celia had phrased her apology that niggled her. Ana couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Lowering her phone, she quickly flipped over to her messages and scrolled through them until she found one from a few weeks ago, from the day after the gala.

**Auntie:** After all that time preparing for this event, it was a total waste. Father is so upset. I can only imagine the embarrassment Gio feels. You couldn't have just made nice with Vitello?? People will think I haven't taught you anything with that type of vulgar backtalk.

Three Days Later:

**Auntie:** I apologize for that last text, Ana. If my tone was off and I offended you, I'm sorry.

*Oh my God.*

The apology, the verbiage—it was exactly the same as Celia's.

At the time, it had seemed so uncharacteristic of Auntie to send the text. The older woman hardly ever apologized for anything she did and was stubborn in her convictions. But Ana had simply accepted it and moved on, relieved to be on the woman's good side again.

It all made so much more sense now.



There was only one person who could make both these headstrong women yield.

Gio.

A small grin curled in at the corners of her lips before it exploded into a wide smile that spanned from ear to ear. Her cheeks ached from the delicious burst of happiness bubbling through her. Gio must have fiercely threatened both women for them to apologize so meekly.

She really shouldn't condone such an aggressive move. But she couldn't help it. She was *thrilled*.

At Ana's prolonged silence, Celia sighed in annoyance. "Can you please tell G I called? And please, for God's sake, don't tattle on me anymore."

"I didn't—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Don't get me in trouble for saying that either. We all can't be Miss Perfect here, okay?" Before she could assure her, Celia continued ranting, her earlier apology already forgotten. "We've all heard what happened to that guard who stole from your aunt. And I want no part in that type of punishment."

The words were flippant, but, in an instant, they sucked up all the joy filling her.

"What are you talking about?" Ana's voice was hoarse as her fingers curled tightly around the phone.

"Come on." Celia huffed incredulously. "Don't tell me you don't know. It was *your* family guard. I'm sure you must've at

least guessed or wondered what happened to him.” Silence rang chillingly as Ana stopped breathing. “You didn’t know him well?”

*Too well.*

He haunted her every dream. Twisting them into the most macabre nightmares.

“He was just one of many,” Ana said flatly, dropping all pretenses of politeness as she abruptly excused herself from the call.

*God.*

That was close, closer than anyone had ever been before to the truth. And it terrified her. The past was a tenuous thread that could unravel at any time and take her down with it.

What had Celia heard? And from whom?

Worse, did Gio also know?

The two of them had been doing so well since the gala. She had been sleeping better, and Gio had become so tender and trusting with her. He’d even fiercely protected her from those who had hurt her, going as far as threatening her aunt and his ex into issuing apologies.

But he was powerless against the past. There was nothing he could do to change what had happened.

The stain had set too deep.

## Chapter 15

Gio was livid.

He fumed through the phone as she recounted the conversation later that night, after she'd landed and settled into the Mancini house.

“Celia did apologize...”

He scoffed.

“...probably only because you asked her to,” Ana mumbled. “Still, I appreciate it,” she said with quiet fervor, trying, however ineptly, to convey the depths of her gratitude. Not just for Celia's apology but for Auntie's too. “Thank you.”

“Not sure I want to take credit for that pathetic apology, but at least it was something. *Fuckin' Russos*,” he grumbled under his breath. There was a heavy sigh, and she could hear him settling into bed.

“Did he cause trouble at the summit?”

“Oh, he definitely tried to stir up some shit,” Gio said darkly. “But it didn’t result in the coup he wanted. I know he’s meeting Antonio soon, though, so who knows what stunt he’ll pull then.”

“Tony won’t give in,” she assured. “I’ll be there to help him.”

“I hope he’s thankful to have *so* much help.”

Ana paused, a hand stilling on her open suitcase. The remark was innocent, but his tone wasn’t. Just how closely had Gio been monitoring her cousin’s business? “Tony’s been great with clients,” she managed carefully. “He just needs support with the logistics.”

“Hm...I figured. The type of growth that business has seen—well, no offense, but there is no way Tony could have pulled that off alone. I always assumed he had some help.”

She said nothing.

Gio hummed pointedly at her silence. “Just be careful. If you’re in the meeting, Russo will gun for you to get back at me for stopping his coup. He’s been a thorn in my side for too long. Not just mine, my parents’ too.”

“Really?”

He confirmed irritably. “They had a tough time keeping him out of their business dealings too. I even—” A pronounced pause ensued before he admitted reluctantly, “I even suspected him at one point.”

“Suspected—?”

As soon as she'd uttered it, she realized.

*His parents' murder.*

"You had quite the long suspect list..." Ana said, stunned. Gio's thirst for revenge was notorious, but she hadn't thought it extended so far. Was there truly no one he trusted?

"I suspected everyone at the start," he admitted. "It was hard not to after the way my parents...passed." A crack, a sliver of grief seeped through, and Gio cleared his throat. "I was so angry and paranoid, not just for me but for Gabi. If the perpetrators roamed free, they could always attack again."

Perpetrators?

"You sound sure that there were multiple of them."

"Sure?" Gio laughed hollowly. "I haven't been sure about anything that happened that day, not even now. All I know is that multiple people failed us: the guard, Jon, and the security team." Anger lined his every word, vibrating through the phone with unbridled tension. "But I still have no answers on *why*. No way of preventing it from happening again. Gabi is fearful even now. She keeps saying she sees these *eyes* watching her, this sinister face laughing."

The visual slid eerily under Ana's skin, petrifying her. She knew how deeply trauma could affect the psyche, but what the young woman had gone through was beyond Ana's imagination. Flames engulfing her and her family...and in the smoky haze, a menacing face taunting her.

Guilt stung her as she struggled to remember the last time they'd hung out. "I can try inviting her out once I'm back in the city," Ana offered. But Gio was skeptical. He doubted Gabi would agree to anything public or exposed.

When he stifled a yawn, Ana urged him to go to sleep, knowing there was another long day of meetings ahead of him.

Guilt settled heavier in her chest. He had to be even wearier than she was, and he'd still stayed up listening to her troubles.

How lonely it must be at the top, lending support to the vast empire that was the Family...without receiving much in return. He had no one to trust, no one to support him—except perhaps a select few. She hoped he knew that she was on his side and that she would do anything for him.

"Gio..."

"Hm?"

Her breath exhaled, heavy with longing. "I miss you."

A pleased sound rumbled through him.

"So do I, regina mia."



This was terrible.

Embarrassingly terrible.

Ana wanted to cover her face and sink into the ground, watching Tony muddle through their quarterly financials. They had done *so* much prep. She and Emma had printed out all the

reports he needed and walked him through the talking points. But their effort was in vain. He'd mixed up revenues and expenses, jumbled the quarters together, and then completely skipped past the legal disclaimers written in bold on the cover sheet.

Maybe Russo would decide her cousin was too incompetent for a partnership. It would get Russo off their tail. But if he spread the word of Tony's mistakes to other investors, it would cause a mass exodus.

Russo's gray eyes narrowed as Ana jumped in to say that they would share additional details over email. That would allow Emma to write up all their talking points and hopefully salvage this disastrous meeting. But he pointedly ignored her suggestion and continued to ask Antonio more questions.

Ana sat back stiffly, her lips pursed.

What was his *problem*? Was it because she was the Don's wife...or because she was a woman?

His remark at the gala still galled her. *Let's talk without the womenfolk around.* Ugh. What a pig. It was a pity because he was unquestionably sharp, with solid business acumen. Even his body language exuded authority and confidence, his arms crossed as he listened to Antonio with keen focus.

In an alternate reality, he could have been a valuable partner. In this one, however, Ana wanted nothing to do with him. His smug superiority and rebellion against Gio thoroughly repulsed her.

And after meeting his daughter, she could safely assume his assholery was genetic.

“You know, you should come join me at the new Sixth Street Lounge opening tomorrow night,” Antonio offered suddenly, pushing aside the binder of reports. At Russo’s skeptical expression, he insisted, “Uberti has been having some success with his bars, right, Ana?”

She nodded, wondering where this was going.

“He’s been talking about launching a more high-brow version of the bars for a while, and he’s finally done it.” Her cousin leaned in enthusiastically, the most animated he’d been all morning. “If you get in on it early, you might be able to edge out other investors.”

Russo tapped his fingers contemplatively.

“Just come in for a drink, that’s all. We’ll leave the business talk behind.” Antonio winked at him before rising to his feet, prompting the other man to reluctantly follow suit.

They continued talking as they exited the room, moving on to small talk, discussing the newest cars on the market.

*Well*, then.

Ana had to hand it to Tony. He had covered almost none of the figures they’d prepared, but he’d somehow managed to distract Russo from discussing the partnership any further—and instead, deflected his attention to another business.

Knowing Russo, though, she highly doubted he would stay distracted for long. He was probably just humoring the idea for



now, since bars and strip clubs were doing well recently. Nothing compared to the gold profits, but enough to tempt him.

Holding onto the pile of folders, Ana stood to the side as the two men surveyed Russo's car, discussing its features in great detail. She checked her watch again. Luke would be arriving in less than an hour, and there was a lot of prep work pending for that meeting.

When the small talk seemed to dwindle, she plastered on a smile as the two men shook hands before Russo turned to her.

"Give my regards to the Don," he said without an ounce of sincerity.

Her smile stiffened.

An unsettling gleam entered his eyes. "You know, I remember Gio as a teenager," he mused. "So moody and quiet. And now, he is giving *me* advice." His derisive laugh set her on edge, sending an uncomfortable trickle down her spine. "Gio and Celia always got on well, though," he said. "I almost thought they both would—well, never mind that. It's all old history now."

Russo gave her a knowing look. Taunting.

The expression on her face felt like ice. Even Antonio seemed leery of the other man now, his earlier charm absent as he stepped back until he was at Ana's side.

Russo observed their united stance, his humor dissipating.

"Safe travels," she wished curtly.

The only response was the loud slam of his car door.

Antonio whistled low as his car tore out of the Mancini grounds, the guards closing the gates behind him. “Hopefully he doesn’t come sniffing around here again. What was that about Gio and Celia? They friends or something?”

*Or something.*

“Russo used to meet with Gio’s dad to discuss investments. So they must have introduced Gio and Celia in one of those meetings.”

“Hm.” Antonio nodded distractedly as he watched the gates and the sprawling greenery beyond.

“Come on,” she urged. “Emma must be waiting for us.”



Emma stared blankly when Antonio happily recapped the conversation minutes later, detailing every exchange.

Blonde hair in a severe bun, glasses on the tip of her nose, she regarded him ominously. “So you’re telling me you used *none* of the financials we prepared?”

Antonio seemed to finally register her deadly expression because he fell silent, his cheery smile vanishing.

“Well, they were nice reports.” He glanced between the two of them. Ana kept her head down, valiantly pretending to review her notes as he dug his grave deeper. “Really pretty diagrams—the charts and all.”

The look on Emma’s face was cold enough to freeze fire.

“It all worked out in the end,” Ana interjected before the blonde could implode, giving her a calming look. “Russo shouldn’t approach us again for a while. Maybe *never* if he got the hint. But we should move on to the next meeting,” she said, glancing at the time. “Luke will be here in thirty minutes.”

“He mainly wants our expenses and payroll, right?” Emma huffed and opened up her laptop, clicking through the files. Ana confirmed, leaning in to review what her aide had pulled up.

“Wait,” Antonio stiffened suddenly. “Was I supposed to prepare my own reports for this?” He searched around for his imaginary laptop.

Emma locked eyes with Ana, her lips thin.

“Uh, that’s okay.” Ana winced. “We’ve been prepping your reports, or Emma has mostly. So we can share those with Luke.”

Tony slumped, relieved. She cleared her throat and hurried on before the blonde could comment, feeling the heat of her stare at her side.

“Gio said Luke will focus more on our recordkeeping than our actual numbers. I think they want to get all the businesses on a better system.”

“Is this because of what happened with Vitello?” Emma asked.

“Most likely. I heard his system was a complete mess; everything was on paper and either outdated or redacted.”

“Redacted? To avoid the feds?”

Ana nodded. “Anything that’s documented is liable to be found by the feds. And if they do, it’s all over for us. I don’t trust any of our politician buddies to save us.”

A flash of unease crossed Emma’s face, which made Ana regret her rant.

Unlike Ana and Antonio, Emma wasn’t from the Family. She was an outsider, who had gotten sucked in through the Daily Couture. The fashion line was fairly above-ground and safe. But Emma’s role had expanded to other areas over the years. With that, so had her risk.

Ana tried to give her an encouraging smile but worried her lip when Emma didn’t react. There were many times when she’d feared her friend would abandon ship. That the risk of being in the Family would become too much to bear. But Emma hadn’t resigned—yet.

Emma shrugged off the flash of fear, asking, “That’s why our online ordering system got shut down?”

“Yeah, it would’ve been traceable by the feds,” Ana said begrudgingly. “If Gio and Luke find a better system, maybe we can revisit that option and start hiring for a web developer.”

“I hope so.” Emma perked up. “I did see some good web staff on that Vitello payroll list. But, as you said, Vitello’s

records are shit. He redacted everything except staff initials and numbers. I tried calling one employee, who had no idea what I was talking about. When I gave him the initials from the list, he got cagey and hung up.” Emma rolled her eyes.

“No one’s going to admit anything on the phone.” Ana sighed. It was too easy to record conversations these days.

“Why don’t you give it a try?” Emma tilted her head, tapping her fingers on the desk. “Most people in the Family don’t know me. They may trust the Boss’s wife more.”

Impressed, Ana agreed and jotted down a reminder for herself.

She noticed Tony was busy typing on his phone, totally checked out of their conversation. When the housekeeper appeared at their doorway, announcing Luke’s arrival exactly on the dot, he scrambled to his feet and helped them as they began organizing their laptops and files.



“Thank you for coming out here,” Ana said with a smile.

She gestured for Luke to be seated in the dining room at the Mancini house, which had been turned into a makeshift office for their meetings that morning.

They all settled around the gleaming mahogany dining table, with Luke sitting directly across from her. His looming figure set off a small set of tremors along her hands. Every inch of him was packed with muscle, honed over years as a soldier. But he was dressed in a more corporate manner today.

It was strange seeing the buff man squeezed into the stiff and regal suit. Like a wild animal in a costume.

What was most unusual, though, were his features. He was not remotely Italian, not with his dark coloring and wide-set face. But it was unclear where he came from. No one had ever heard of his origins.

Noticing her stare, Luke smiled—or rather, his best impression of a smile. The effect was positively scary. She curled her hands in her lap skittishly. Being around such an intimidating man, one who could easily annihilate everyone in the room within a blink of an eye, was nerve-wracking. No matter how polite Luke endeavored to be, all she could picture were his large hands wrapping around her throat.

“You have to share some tips, man.” Antonio gestured to his biceps admiringly.

Luke looked thrown. “Err...sure.” Clearly, without any intention of doing so. Then, as if remembering Antonio’s rank in their faction, Luke collected himself. Pasting on that same freaky smile.

Even Emma looked perturbed.

“Boss must’ve shared the reason for my visit.” He turned to Ana, who confirmed it. “I just wanna get a sense for what each business does now for keepin’ records and anything we can do to improve. Not to interfere in your operations.”

A well-rehearsed script. Gio must have advised him not to alarm the business owners with talks of an overhaul. Though

she suspected that was their end goal.

“Happy to help.” Ana smiled. “What do you need?”

As he rattled off a list of questions, she was able to answer most of them for the Daily Couture. Emma also chimed in every so often to provide the relevant details and turned around her laptop to share the various spreadsheets she was maintaining for the fashion line.

Both women answered a handful of the same questions for the gold business without stepping on Tony’s toes. Gio knew she was helping her cousin, but she wasn’t sure how much Luke or the other men knew. Hers and Emma’s involvement wasn’t something she wanted to broadcast. Thankfully, Tony held his own well enough.

Luke jotted down quick notes in a small pocketbook before stuffing it in his suit jacket.

“If we’re getting a new central system, it needs to have at least two-factor authentication,” Emma advised, sliding her glasses back on her nose. “Also, data encryption is key, especially for tax records and employee identifiers. I hope we’ll be getting a demo of whatever application you end up finalizing?”

Clicking his pen shut, Luke turned to give her a flat look. “We’ll look into it.”

“An IT professional, preferably a cybersecurity specialist, should look into it. Just for some subject matter expertise.”

Ana winced. It was a simple, matter-of-fact recommendation. But not one that many Family men would take well.

A vein throbbed between Luke's brows. His black eyes narrowed on the blonde with obvious annoyance. "You are Ms. Ana's aide?"

"Soon to be Assistant Director." She preened.

"How soon?"

Emma blinked, not expecting the question.

"By year-end, if we can fill all our vacancies and set up our full team," Ana jumped in to explain. He did not appear to hear her, too busy scowling at the other woman.

Surveying Emma like a bug he was tempted to swat, he said, "This meeting was supposed to be for *senior* execs." His displeasure was evident.

"Well, I thought this meeting was with a businessman. Not a grunti—"

"Alright!" Ana stood up, squeezing the woman's shoulder tightly as it heaved up and down, shaking with affront. Across from them, Tony looked highly amused as he leaned back in his chair and watched the ping pong match.

"I think you have all you need from us, Luke?" Ana asked.

He agreed, dragging his gaze back to Ana. "I'll reach out to you or Antonio if I need anything," he muttered.

The omission was pointed.



Snapping her laptop shut with a sharp smack, Emma huffed before standing up and marching out the door. Tony gleefully followed suit, waving the other man goodbye. Ana awkwardly remained behind, discomfited. She'd never seen Emma or Luke get so heated in any meeting before. They were usually so professional.

"I'd like to quickly get your thoughts on two things...if you have a moment?" Ana ventured, worried that his mood had soured.

Luke agreed readily, looking far more composed than he'd been a few minutes ago.

"We're looking to hire someone to set up our website," she explained. "We tried looking at Vitello's list, but it didn't take us far. Do you know if all his old staff got placed?"

Scratching his chin, Luke said, "Dunno if you should waste your time there. The man's angry with Don for shutting down his wineries. He won't help." Luke grimaced in regret.

"I get it." Ana let out a breath. "Have you heard of anyone else who has any web staff?"

"Not sure." He thought it over. "But I can put some feelers out."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Course. What's the second thing?"

Ana paused, fidgeting with her long silky braid before releasing it. She badly wanted to know how Gio was faring. If the Capos were respecting his authority or trying to supplant

him. More importantly, was he tired and worn out after the rigorous schedule? In good health?

All of them remained lodged in her throat.

They would be perceived as a lack of confidence in her husband, though that was the furthest thing from the truth. She had the utmost confidence in Gio. It was all the treacherous dissidents out there—bloodthirsty for his throne—who scared her. They had killed one Don before, in the most explosive way. What would stop them from trying again?

Hiding her disquiet, she cast her thoughts away and moved on to her second question. “Last year...” she began, dark memories choking her. “With the guard at this house.”

Luke turned to her, alert. “The one who got caught stealing?”

Ana nodded carefully. “Who else knew what happened to him?”

He stared intently, unknown thoughts churning behind his dark eyes. “I assume your house staff knew and your family, ‘course. But no one else ever brought it up to me directly, except for Ms. Marta...and Boss.”

“*Boss?*”

“Yes.”

Luke looked puzzled, likely wondering why she was so shocked that Gio had spoken to him about the incident. But she hadn’t expected him to care much at the time. Staff being fired for theft wasn’t entirely breaking news. It was entirely commonplace in many households.

“What did Gio say about it?”

“He was spittin’ mad.” Luke shook his head as if remembering it even now. “I thought he was gonna hang me by my balls—‘scuse my language. He ripped me a new one for not vetting the guards properly.”

She reeled at the discovery. Given their recent partnership, she couldn’t imagine that Luke and Gio had come to such blows last year.

“I tried to tell him the house staff was out of my control,” he explained. “I was a Captain and, yeah, interim Capo too. But that don’t mean shit when it comes to private home staff. All I can do is manage my soldiers and step in wherever we’re assigned.”

Ana murmured in understanding. “I guess he just let it go after that?” She prayed he had.

But Luke wasn’t sure. “Don’t really know. Before he hung up, Boss said he was going to have a talkin’ to with your family and see if you could get shifted out of their house.”

*Shifted out of the house?*

Ana stared at him, stunned. “It was just stealing...” she said hoarsely.

His burly shoulders shrugged. “You were his fiancée.”

## Chapter 16

Her question to Luke had been about Celia. To uncover what the woman knew about the guard and how she'd come to know it. But the answer had led her to the person she'd least expected.

Gio.

*He had wanted her to move out.*

Bitter regret poured through her, along with an unending sadness. How sweet it would have been to escape this house after that night and shed the ghosts haunting her. How much of a relief it would have been. But it had never come to pass. She'd remained trapped in the Mancini house until her wedding day.

What happened after that call?

She had never heard anything from Gio or Auntie about plans to move her out. Her aunt had simply swept the incident under the rug after making sure the guard was taken care of, while Gio had been inundated with his new Don duties. Ana

had avoided any calls with him for weeks after the run-in with the guard, faking an illness that her family had corroborated.

If only she had spoken to him then.

Covering her face with her hands, her long strands of light brown hair cascaded over her, cocooning her in her thoughts. That was the thought that plagued her incessantly after Luke revealed the truth—that perhaps it wasn't right to hide the incident anymore. Not from Gio.

He was on her side; he'd proven it over and over again. So she had to prove she trusted him in return. He wouldn't shame her over it or judge her unduly. She had to believe in that.

But what if it changed things between them?

Fear snaked through her, poisoning her conviction.

Ana leaned forward until her forehead pressed against the cool glass of the windowpane. The sun had barely risen, but the driveway was starting to become illuminated under the dawn sky, its cobblestones and the flowers between each crack coming into the light. She stared forlornly at the length of the driveway, out to the gates, as if Gio would appear there at any moment.

It lay empty.

Quiet, except for the birds chirping intermittently.

They had been apart for a week now. It would be yet another week before Gio joined her. He had begun the process of hiring additional staff, and she was reluctant for him to push

that off. So she'd encouraged him to stay behind a few more days and wrap that up.

It was for the best, even if loneliness coated her in frigid swaths. The distance would give her some time to gather her thoughts—and her courage.

Ana worked straight through to lunchtime, barely focused. The past weighed heavily on her mind.

How did she put that night into words? In a way that wouldn't result in blowback.

With her mind twisted up into knots, she left her room and wandered down for lunch, greeting the housekeeper, who was huffily shuttling meals out of the kitchen. She scanned the dining room and found that no one else had arrived yet.

“Ms. Marta is with sir,” the housekeeper explained. “Do you want to start without them?”

Ana politely declined.

Tapping her fingers on the back of a chair, she bit her lip. The rest of the day was packed with work meetings, and then Auntie would be busy the next two days with society luncheons. If Ana waited too long, she would lose the opportunity for a private discussion before Gio arrived. And she desperately needed some guidance.

Excusing herself, she murmured apologetically to the housekeeper, who watched her leave with a frown.

Ana marched out into the hall, a few doors down, past the second sitting room and the den, until she came to a halt in

front of Auntie's office.

“...personal affairs! He...just because...”

Grandfather was yelling loudly through the heavy oak doors, which muffled every other word.

What was he doing here? He was always holed up in his corner office at this time of day, on the south side of the house. Ana's edgily glanced down the hall toward it.

Uneasy, she drew her attention back to the door in front of her when her aunt's vexed tones came through.

As always, Auntie was pacifying the crusty old man about whatever had crawled up his butt today. “I'll...care of it.”

“Luke is just interim...*our household!*”

Ana's brow rose.

Their recordkeeping review with Luke must not have gone so well. Unsurprising. Families with old money, like theirs, would not appreciate anyone intruding into their finances. But Gio and Luke's plans to overhaul the businesses would not work if they started allowing exceptions. Not even for the Mancinis. Grandfather and Auntie held no businesses, but they had substantial wealth through real estate and investments. The size of their staff also rivaled that of low-ranking nobility. All of it required robust recordkeeping.

*Slam!*

At the thunderous opening of the door, Ana stood back as Grandfather emerged with a scowl.

“What are you loitering out here for?”

“Just—lunch. It’s ready.”

“Hmph.” He grabbed his cane and ambled down the hall to the dining room.

At her desk, Auntie sat, rubbing her forehead wearily. Her gaunt face was pinched, crow’s feet evident beneath her eyes. She stared at a sheaf of papers, defeated. “I’ll be right out,” she said without looking up.

*Not a good time, then.* Ana turned to leave.

“What is it, Ana?”

“Oh, nothing,” she mumbled. “It’s okay. We should head to lunch.”

But her aunt only grew more suspicious, setting aside the papers as she bore into Ana with that laser stare that always sent shivers down her spine. With a flick of her bony hand, Auntie beckoned her in.

Closing the door behind her nervously, Ana walked into what felt like a battlefield. She was painfully conscious of her posture and the prim placement of her legs as she sat down, ensuring it was in a manner that was ladylike but not stiff. Crossing her hands, she inhaled deeply.

Auntie’s gaze narrowed.

“Did you...have a good morning—?”

“Don’t stall. Spit it out.”

*Alrighty, then.*



Fighting the urge to abscond to the hallway, Ana raised her chin with false bravado. She had been in countless meetings with the most recalcitrant clients. Surely, this couldn't be worse...But every nerve in her body screamed otherwise; sweat dripped down her back.

“Gio will be here in a week,” Ana said hesitantly.

“Hm. Preparations are underway.”

“Oh, thank you. I'm sure he'll appreciate it.”

There was no sound, not even a breath, as her aunt sat unmoving. Her patience had clearly thinned. “He hasn't asked about this...” Ana rushed to say, “But it's been weighing on my mind...that as Don, he should know—what happened last year.”

“No.”

“I—”

Her argument was brusquely cut off as the older woman sliced a hand into the air, commanding her to stop. Auntie's expression radiated pure disbelief. “Have you lost your *mind*?” She slammed a hand down over the papers, scattering them. “After settling into your new role at long last, you want to dig up the past—for what? To ruin yourself?”

“Auntie—”

“No. Do you know what he could do?” She vibrated with fear, with anger. “Not just to you, but to all of us. Everything I have worked for to give you and Antonio the positions you deserve will all be wasted. He will ruin us all!”

Ana sat stunned, her heart thudding at the volatile anxiety emanating from her aunt in waves. “We won’t be ruined. Gio will understand,” she pleaded.

He had to.

Auntie regarded her incredulously. “You must still be in the honeymoon phase if you’ve forgotten who he is. This is *Giovanni* we’re talking about. Our Don. He slaughtered his parents’ head of security at their funeral and then their Consigliere—in your own home.”

The scent of blood slid down her throat.

His screams still ringing in her ears.

Ana swallowed, shaking her head. “That’s why we should tell him,” she beseeched in a thready whisper. “Before he finds out from someone else.”

“He won’t. I made sure of it.” Auntie nodded assuredly.

She wouldn’t budge, not even an inch.

Ana clenched her teeth. It was sorely tempting to knock down that confidence by telling her it was too late. Celia had already voiced her suspicions about the guard, and she didn’t seem the type to keep quiet. The gossip would spread soon enough.

But once her aunt devolved into this anxious mood, there was no going back. If she heard that others were discovering the incident, it would only inflame her anxiety further.

“I don’t know why you would do this now,” Auntie continued ranting, her hands shaking visibly. “You adopted all my other lessons so well. I groomed you to perfection and gave you the Mancini name. That’s why Gio accepted you as his wife. If you tell him this now, it will ruin that perfect image he has of you.”

Ana’s lips were thin slashes of frustration.

She wasn’t perfect.

She was trapped in an image, not of her own making.

But doubt crept into her mind. She remembered how proud Gio had been after the gala...*It was perfect*, he’d said. Would he have said that if Ana had been anything *less* than perfect?

Closing her mind to the destructive thoughts, Ana shook her head. “No one can maintain a perfect image for too long. Not in front of someone like him.”

Her aunt regarded her grimly, the lines of her face underscoring her exhaustion. Something seemed to retreat within her then, the anxiety and hysteria diminishing as a new resolve took hold.

“Maybe not,” Auntie admitted tiredly. “Maybe I should give up my pride and your image and reveal it for the greater good. Then, you will see for yourself his true colors...”

The afternoon sun shifted in the sky, casting the small office into half-shadow, half-light. A streak of jagged light cut across the room, dividing Ana on one side and her aunt on the other.

“...because I know, Ana,” her aunt said quietly, “no matter how *understanding* Gio is, he’ll never be able to see you the same way again after you tell him what happened. Even if he wants to. Even if it isn’t fair.”

A knock on the door echoed.

Breaking through the thick tension suffocating them.

The housekeeper reminded them of lunch, and her aunt strode over to the door. Anxiety stiffened every single muscle on her thin frame.

Within seconds, she was gone, leaving Ana only with doubts and dark memories.

## Chapter 17

*Blood was pooling all over the room...*

*Red rivers of death staining the floor.*

*So much of it had stained her body as well, but her mind was in shock, unable to comprehend it.*

*“Ana,” Auntie whispered, trembling ever so slightly.*

*Was that horror in her eyes...or fear?*

*“It wasn’t my fault,” Ana said.*

*Auntie merely blinked, letting the silence stretch out in the darkness before she reached out to grip her elbow in a painful hold. “Just come away now.”*

*But her feet did not want to comply. Flashes of the weapon glinted from across the room, taunting her, reminding her of what had passed.*

*A sharp yank at her arm finally wrested her eyes away from the scene, forcing her to turn around.*

*They began to edge out of the room with slow and careful steps, stumbling wildly when Ana's legs liquefied at the threshold. Her hand shot out to catch herself on the door as black dots swam across her vision, blinding her.*

*Oh, God.*

*Everything was spinning on its head. The only lifeline keeping her steady was her aunt, a steely force that propelled them forward.*

*She hadn't accepted her statement, though...Ana realized dully. "Do you not believe me?" She turned to her aunt.*

*"Ana. Now is not the time."*

*She swallowed heavily, hurt and dazed. It wasn't her fault. Not really. No normal person could do this—watch someone bleed out like a sadistic monster. Right?*

*And yet, here she was stained in that blood, a scarlet accusation. If her aunt wouldn't even defend her, how would anyone else?*

*How would Gio?*

*How could you...*

*How could you, Ana?*

*"Ana?"*

Her lashes fluttered as Emma's concerned face came into view. The blonde had set aside her glasses and was peering at her worriedly.

With a startled glance up at the clock, Ana realized it had been an hour since their last meeting had ended. They were supposed to be updating their order logs, but somewhere during that break, Ana had fallen into a trance. Back into the past.

Her laptop screen was dimmed from inactivity.

“Sorry. It’s been a long day,” she mumbled, blearily rubbing her eyes.

It had truly been grueling. Each monthly visit to Pittsburgh was packed full of Daily Couture client meetings, meetings to support Tony, and logistics reviews with the distribution teams. There was no avoiding these hectic month-end marathons.

But Ana was burnt out.

“You should push Gio on the new records system.” Emma frowned at her. “If we can move all our orders online, you won’t have to manually review them in person.”

“Then I wouldn’t get to see you every month.” A wistful smile touched Ana’s lips.

Emma’s face softened. “We still can...and maybe do something fun instead, like take a vacation. Remember those?”

Ana grinned, feeling the first breath of humor in days.

With another tired yawn, she turned back to her task list. “I’m going to call Vitello’s old IT staff tonight to see if any of them can help us with the website.” She logged into her laptop and searched for the employee list. It was just a scanned copy

of the paper log Vitello used to maintain, with employee initials, titles, and phone numbers—and not much else.

“If you don’t have any luck either, I can start the hiring from outside the Family,” Emma said.

“Let’s leave that as a last resort,” Ana cautioned. The NDA process with outsiders was painful. “I’ll try my hand at pulling the *Donna* card. If that doesn’t work either, I’ll ask the other factions for referrals.”

“Anything else I can do while you’re handling that?” Emma asked.

“No, please. You’ve already been taking on so much, not just for me but for Tony too.”

Emma waved it off. “I enjoy it. Even if your cousin is a little shit.”

“Em...”

“Don’t tell me he isn’t.” She regarded her narrowly.

Ana hedged, hesitant to throw him under the bus. “He’s been doing...okay.”

Emma rolled her eyes at the weak defense. “That whole gold business is a pain, not just because of him. There’s just too much testosterone pumping through there. That’s why I prefer Daily Couture. Not just because of you—though that is the best part.” She winked. “But there aren’t as many mafia henchmen lurking around.”



Ana's brow rose, bemused. "Don't tell me *you* get scared of them?" The blonde was one of the ballsiest women she knew.

"Listen, I'm not *scared*." She held up her hands. "But I'm not stupid either. One wrong move with those men, and you'll find my body in your living room." She chortled to herself, oblivious to Ana's disquiet.

Her face was pale as the wisps of the memory clouded her mind again, wrapping her in their noxious grip.

How strange, for Emma to describe in near-identical terms what had happened. It was uncanny. Despite being an outsider, she had discerned the dangers of this world much faster than Ana had.

The concepts of ethics and laws did not exist in this life. There was too much greed to allow for such rules. But this was all Ana had ever known. She had learned to turn a blind eye to every seedy, rotten part of their world. And that ignorance had cost her dearly.

*Red rivers of blood...flowing without end.*

It took so much control to keep the past at bay. Any other person would have long since crumbled.

For her, she feared, it was only a matter of time.



"Mm-hm...yes, not just the website design, but also setting up secure payments...Okay, please do ask him if he has experience with it." Ana pursed her lips as the Connecticut

business owner gave her vague assurances. “How have you been collecting payments for the gun shops, then? Cash? Ah ok...Oh, no—no need to apologize! I appreciate your time... yes, of course, I will let Don know you were of great help.”

Ending the call with a sigh, Ana updated the notes on her laptop. Another dud. It was the third call today that hadn't led anywhere. IT wasn't exactly an alluring profession within the Family. The staff who dabbled in it did so part-time, with rather rudimentary skills.

At least everyone had been eager to help, even if all they wanted was to suck up to the Don. Not like Ana was any different. She also wanted to remain in Gio's good books. That's why she was petrified of their impending conversation.

Did he deserve to know the past? Yes.

Would it alter their relationship for the worse? She did not know...

Auntie's hysterical panic had infected Ana as well, leaving her tossing and turning at night, in the throes of a nightmare that would not fade. Gio must have sensed her distance as well. They had talked nearly daily during her first week here. The past two days, however, she had dodged his every call with the excuse of back-to-back meetings.

*God.* Ana rubbed her face. It was so juvenile.

But how could she talk to him in this state? He would know in an instant that something was wrong. And she wasn't prepared to answer his questions over the phone.

Time was ticking, though. There were five days left until his arrival.

Paralyzed with indecision, she doggedly returned to work. There was much to do before Gio's visit. By then, she hoped she would gain some clarity.

Pulling up the call list, Ana studied her notes.

Some of the business owners in the other regions had offered some decent referrals. But Vitello's ex-employees were supposed to be better, at least according to his own bragging. Unfortunately, none of them had picked up. Maybe they'd already snapped up other jobs?

The cursor blinked insistently on their entries:

M.W.-Systems Analyst-484...

S.J.-Support Technician-412...

Tapping her finger, she stared blankly.

*Oh.*

Brightening, Ana began typing into the search bar and scanned through the results until she found a suitable phone directory site. Entering each employee's phone number into its search, she crossed her fingers as it began processing.

M.W.: No results found. Try narrowing your search by entering the full name or city.

S.J.: Are you looking for Stephen Johnson in Allentown, PA?

- Address: Not found.

- Professional History: Not found.
- Relatives: Potential match with Cinda Johnson at Reading, PA.

Well, the first one was a bust. But S.J. had yielded something. Clicking on Cinda's profile, Ana saw that it was just as sparse, with no phone number listed. But there was another relative listed on her page who did have a number: Sylvia Johnson.

Excited, Ana immediately dialed it.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

"Fourth Street Deli, how may I help you?"

Ana blinked and checked the number again.

"Hello...?"

"Yes, sorry. I-I thought this was the number for Sylvia Johnson."

"Sylvia? She's right here."

After a shuffle, an annoyed voice came through. "Can I help you?"

Ana hesitated. Johnson wasn't a common last name in any of their factions. Was she an outsider? Cautiously, she settled on a neutral introduction. "Hi Sylvia, this is Ana Bernardi. I was trying to reach a relative of yours—Stephen Johnson?"

There was a long pause.

“I am hiring for my company, and a friend referred me to him.”

“What friend?”

Ana’s brows pinched. “Uh Claudio Vitello.”

Silence ensued again and then a muffled sound, as if the phone’s microphone was being covered. Ana waited awkwardly. Her questions probably sounded vague, but she couldn’t reveal any more details to a potential outsider. Anyone in the Family would’ve instantly recognized Ana’s last name—and Vitello’s too.

“Sorry ma’am.” The lady resurfaced. “I don’t have anyone like that here.”

“Oh, do you know a Cinda Johnson then? I think she—”

“No. Sorry, we can’t help you.”

“It’s just for a job—”

“We don’t want any trouble, okay? Sorry.”

*Click.*

Staring at the blank phone screen, Ana sat back, abashed. After the previous calls, where people had been overly friendly, this one felt abrasive. Then, again, these people were outsiders. They had no idea who Ana or Gio were. They must have thought she was a scammer.

Nevertheless, it left an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach.



That uneasy feeling carried through to the next day.

Ana did not know why. All their meetings that morning had gone well; they'd even seen a spike in customer orders. Emma had connected with the web designer from Connecticut, who had been quite eager to take up the potential job opportunity and was willing to do whatever training was required to meet their needs. On top of it all, the house had been relatively quiet.

Auntie and Grandfather had been busy with their social commitments. So it had been peaceful.

And yet, there was a weight in her breast that would not lift.

Was it because of Gio?

Four days were left, and they still hadn't spoken.

As soon as work wrapped tonight, she would call. And upon his arrival, she would tell him—everything. Her mind was resolved to it. If she didn't tell him, there would always be this barrier between them, erected by all the truths that were left unsaid...keeping her in a state of anxiety and him in mistrust. Their relationship had come too far for her to sabotage it like this.

Ana gazed out the large bay window in the dining room at the overcast skies, dark and heavy with an impending storm. It intensified the loneliness and worries inside her as she finished her lunch alone.

When her plate was cleared, Ana thanked the housekeeper before getting up.

The woman could not seem to meet her eyes.

*Odd.*

Walking up to her room, she fought the eerie sensation dripping down her back. What was it about today? Everything seemed to grate at her, setting her nerves on fire.

Shaking it off, she unsilenced her phone and reviewed the calendar of meetings for the afternoon. In her messages, Emma had sent her updates on the next meeting's location.

There was another message from an unsaved contact. In it was a screenshot of a text conversation, with the names blacked out.

Zooming in, Ana felt a chill spread all over her, blanketing her in waves of ice.

**Unknown-1:** Can you believe it?

**Unknown-2:** Omg. Are you sure it's true?

**Unknown-1:** 100%. They got rid of him after her family found them in bed together. That's why it was so hush-hush.

**Unknown-2:** I would've never pictured it...Miss Perfect hooking up with a lowly guard right before her wedding night.

The phone slipped out of her grip as a loud ringing filled her ears, booming over all the other sounds in the room. Stumbling back, she stared sightlessly at the phone, her breaths coming in ragged bursts.

*No.*

She could feel the hands at her neck closing in, suppressing the screams until they echoed shrilly inside her mind.

*Please—help!*

The phone vibrated again, but she couldn't move. Her hands were trembling so hard. Another vibration came, and she could not ignore it any longer. With mounting dread, Ana inched forward until she stood over the discarded phone, picking it up with an unsteady grasp.

**Unknown:** This is what happens.

**Unknown:** When you stir up trouble.



## Chapter 18

Time was suspended, with her in its grip, floating somewhere between pain and bone-deep numbness. What hour it was, what day it was, she did not know. All she could see was the sun peeking through the windows, revealing the room in disarray.

Her laptop was still open on her desk, along with her work files. Her phone was flat on the floor.

After receiving nearly 200 texts last night, Ana had quickly turned it off. That screenshot had spread like wildfire. Everyone was reaching out, asking if she was okay, if Gio was investigating its source...and ever so slyly asking if it was true.

*Bloody leeches.*

Even Emma had messaged her, asking if something had happened. She was one of the few who hadn't received that screenshot, likely because she was an outsider. But when Ana had feigned illness and skipped the remainder of the meetings,

some of the customers had started peppering Emma with questions about it.

*God.*

Her business could be ruined.

Her privacy, her marriage...her sanity.

The past was so much easier to bear when it was veiled in silence, confined to a place only she could see. Now, with so many people nosing around, she couldn't suppress the memories so well anymore. They spilled out in all their sordid glory.

Ana brushed her matted hair aside, her movements limp. She still wore the same professional dress from yesterday. Her face and hair were sticky from dried sweat and tears. But she couldn't remember any of it. Almost a day had passed, and she had no recollection of anything since she'd seen that text.

Even the sharp knock on her door barely registered.

*Click.*

“Ana...?”

She said nothing, staring ahead at the sparrow on a tree branch. Its feathers fluttered and then smoothed as it settled into its spot, observing its surroundings contently.

“You didn't touch your dinner,” Auntie admonished.

Dully, Ana realized there was a covered tray atop her desk. When had that arrived?

“The housekeeper said you were asleep when she dropped it off. Did you just wake up?”

She had no idea. It felt like she’d been awake for days.

As Auntie approached the bed, Ana wondered if the older woman was also having déjà vu. She had discovered Ana in a similar state over a year ago, catatonic and dazed—in the very scene that had spurred this entire scandal.

Auntie’s reaction then had been stern and decisive. Today, however, there was an oddly gentle expression on her thin face. Almost...sad.

That couldn’t be right. Her aunt was never emotional. She should be lecturing Ana on decorum and image. But instead, she stood silent as she stared out the window.

“I’m sorry. This can’t be easy.”

Ana blinked, befuddled.

Auntie looked distinctly uncomfortable. “I wish this didn’t have to happen to you. You were...the daughter I always wanted...my last hope when IVF wasn’t working,” she murmured wistfully before jerking her shoulders back stiffly and raising her chin. “Father never agreed. When I conceived Antonio just a year after adopting you, he thought I ‘jumped the gun.’” Auntie’s lips thinned. “Still, I tried, in my way, to care for you...but the Mancini name carries a heavy weight.”

A strange emotion filled Ana, raw and bittersweet.

Why was she only saying this now? After all these years.

For so long, it felt like Ana had been reluctantly adopted into the family. A pity gesture by her late uncle. That's what Grandfather had always implied—or perhaps, what her aunt had made him believe. They had treated her like an outsider, making her constantly go through hoops to please them. She was forced to act like the perfect child, so they didn't send her away.

To think...Auntie had wanted Ana *all along*. All the training and strict regimens had been because she wanted Ana to succeed, so Grandfather would accept her as a Mancini. Not because she resented Ana's presence in their family.

Through the numbness, Ana felt a wave of affection stir within her as she regarded the thin, polished woman. She could have never imagined such softness beneath all those layers of steel.

*The daughter I always wanted...*

If there were any tears left to cry, they would have flowed now as Ana absorbed those words.

“It will all blow away soon, though. I'll make sure of it,” Auntie said fervently, her face drawn in grim focus. “But you should lay low, Ana. Keep out of society for some time...and don't say anything to *anyone*.” She glanced pointedly at the phone, which was still lying face down on the floor. “It will only fuel the fire.”

Blinking out of her stupor, Ana eyed the phone with similar disgust. She had no desire to speak to anyone. All she wanted was to sink into her bed until it swallowed her whole. All the

years of perfect manners, perfect speech, and a perfect smile—no matter how horrible she felt inside—were all in vain. It didn't matter how hard she'd worked to be a good Donna. All anyone cared about now was her 'romp' with the guard.

While she was engaged to Gio, no less.

Ana squeezed her eyes shut. The allegations were so horrible. Why wouldn't people judge her?

And that was the biggest problem. She could fight an enemy, but how could she fight a rumor? It felt so overwhelmingly insurmountable.

Fine tremors broke out all over her arms, causing her teeth to chatter.

Auntie's eyes narrowed at the sound. "Didn't the therapist's tips help you stop that?"

Since they'd been crammed into three jam-packed sessions—not really. Ana hadn't even been allowed to divulge all the details of the incident to the therapist. Still, she had tried her best to maximize those sessions, knowing how rare they were in the Family. They had given her much-needed calm, allowing her to center herself and heal before her wedding day.

And, for a while, it felt like she had healed. Things had seemed...normal in the initial months of her marriage. Safe and secure. Until their new bodyguard arrived. That had been the start of her carefully constructed façade fraying at the seams. And once this scandal hit, the façade had unraveled entirely.

“Gio will be here soon, so just try to pull yourself together before then. It will be unseemly to appear this way in front of the Don.”

Ana bit her chattering teeth, too exhausted to even respond.

“We’re both figuring out a solution,” Auntie assured.

“We? You s-spoke to him?”

“Just earlier today.”

“Did he...ask for me?”

Auntie regarded her for a long time, wavering between some unknown decision in her mind. With a dismissive flick, she waved. “Don’t worry about that. We’re sorting things out.” After lecturing Ana some more on regular meals and grooming, insisting she take a shower, Auntie eventually returned to her tasks.

Leaving Ana to absorb everything in silence.

Auntie and Gio were sorting things out, whatever that meant, while Emma covered client meetings. So there wasn’t much for Ana to do. There wasn’t much she *wanted* to do when she felt so grimy and sluggish...so mortified. Turning into the sheets, Ana buried her head there, hiding from the morning light.

Why hadn’t Gio spoken to her?

Her phone had been turned off for almost a full day, so he couldn’t reach her directly. But if he’d gotten in touch with her aunt, wouldn’t he have wanted to hear her voice?

As she desperately wanted to hear *his*?

With her teeth still chattering convulsively, Ana closed her eyes and fell into a fitful sleep.



After an entire morning and afternoon languishing in a pitiful state of despair, Ana finally rose to freshen up.

It took a monumental effort. Who was she even going to see or mingle with? She had no idea how long it would take to handle this scandal, if it could even be handled at all. It could be days, weeks, or even months before another scandal took hold and distracted everyone.

But the stain of this one would never fade.

Wearily combing back her long, wet hair, Ana sank into her desk. All the files there overwhelmed her, reminding her how much work she had missed in the last day. She pushed them aside listlessly.

She didn't have the mental strength to review anything now.

Instead, Ana bent down to pull a few fabric samples out of the lower drawer and laid them neatly on the desk, measuring each piece methodically until it lulled her into that familiar calm. That's what she loved about her work. Not the sales and profits or the accolades. It was the simple pleasure of developing a beautiful design. The peaceful solitude, where there was nothing but a beautiful gown and the rhythmic hum of the sewing machine filling her mind.

If all else failed, she could always establish a new business anonymously. There were many other clothing lines Ana had considered over the years, from casual wear to knitwear. Those ideas had remained on the back burner until she hired more staff.

The Family wouldn't immediately guess the new business was hers, especially if it contained casual wear. They thought she was too posh for such clothing.

*Miss Perfect.*

The reminder of that nickname from the screenshot nauseated her.

As if on cue, the phone buzzed.

Ana felt her pulse trip at the sound. Anxiety bubbled up within her. She had finally powered up the phone, after a 24-hour hiatus, but hadn't dared to check the hundreds of messages pouring in yet. She had deleted most without reading them, disinterested in people's fake sympathies and prying questions. Only to Emma and Tony, had she replied, assuring them she was okay.

As for Gio...well, that voicemail from him still blinked hauntingly. It was the one notification that terrified her the most and the one that most tempted her. Her fingers had danced between deleting it and playing it all evening, until she'd given up and left it as it was—unheard.

*Tomorrow.* Tomorrow, she would be brave and call him. Today was the day to hide.



Checking the latest alert, Ana groaned.

**Celia:** We need to talk.

**Celia:** ASAP.

What did the witch want now? Probably to gloat and rub the scandal in her face. With a deep scowl, Ana blocked her and muted the phone.

There were scores of two-faced monsters like Celia in the Family, secretly rooting for Ana to fall. They had all been so upset that an orphan, born to a lowly soldier, had risen so far—gaining the Mancini name and then the Bernardi's.

Well, they finally got what they wanted.

She was down on the ground with them.

Pedaling the machine, Ana arranged the fabric and let the low hum of its motor take her away.



Lights rippled across her eyes, tangling and twisting with the darkness in a dance that hypnotized her.

A deep hush covered her from all sides, muting every sound in the room. Not even the crickets could be heard chirping anymore.

What happened to her sewing machine?

Ana struggled to open her eyes, the lights and shadows keeping her suspended in a fugue state that left her tightrope-walking between consciousness and nightmare.

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Creak.*

The sound was low, as if from a distance. But it put her on high alert.

She knew, without turning...*he* was watching her.

His slick gaze caressed her form, obsessively following every dip, every curve, and each of her breaths and hitches. Leaving no part of her body untouched by his gleaming eyes. The guard never said a word, but his hungry breaths echoed across the room, luridly describing how much she'd captivated him.

His smile spread in the most perverse way.

Ana tried to cover herself up, scrambling around for anything—a blanket—a scarf. But there was nothing there. Only the hot puffs of his breath coated her body as he loomed over her. Reaching for her—

*Why so shy, sweetheart?*

No.

No.

No.

Please—

Help!

Gasping for breath, Ana jerked upright, her fingers clawing at the desk.

Oh, God.

Fuck.

Reality filtered back in pieces, with her chest expanding and contracting violently.

A nightmare. It was only a nightmare.

She brushed back her hair with unsteady hands before patting her breast, double-checking that she was fully clothed. One hand crept up to her cheek, where she could feel the imprint of the design on which she'd fallen asleep. Its checkered pattern had pressed into her skin, leaving behind soft grooves.

Everything in her felt raw and exposed. Spooked. The dream was nothing new, but the sensation of being watched was so visceral, she could not shake it off.

It was almost as if he was still here.

She shivered.

*Creak.*

A sound came from the bed, and she tensed. Everything in her quieted as her hand stretched over the fabric scissors on her desk. It wasn't just her nightmare. Someone was here, in the room. Watching her.

As the roaring in her ears grew, she heard him, quiet and firm.

“It’s me.”

Shocked, her fingers unfurled, dropping the scissors with a loud clang. Ana whirled around in her chair—and found him there.

Her husband.

He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward with his hands resting on his long, lean thighs. Shadows fell over his face, revealing black eyes that watched her with unnerving focus.

Pleasure and surprise bloomed within her as she gaped.

Gio.

*Gio.*

Her heart thumped as a riot of emotions filled her.

On any other occasion, the joy bubbling up inside her would have spilled over into her limbs until she was rushing over to hug him, reacquainting herself with his touch, his smell. Tonight, however, she could only sit rooted to her chair as words escaped her.

Gio did not try to break the silence either, letting it extend on and on until sweat poured down her neck. Was it already the day of his arrival, or had he landed early? The fact that he’d managed to enter the bedroom and sit there, for who knows how long, alarmed her. She hadn’t slept that deeply in months, so unaware of her surroundings.

Ana studied his hands flexing on his legs as he inspected her closely. “You didn’t listen to my message,” he murmured.

A statement, not a question.

She swallowed. “No.”

“And you’ve been avoiding me the last few days—very diligently, at that.”

Guilt trickled into her. There was no need to respond to that one either. He knew; he always knew.

With the casual pose of a lion lazily surveilling its prey, Gio leaned forward until more of his face fell into view. Black curls slicked back and sharp jaw taut. He almost appeared coolly controlled until she noticed the pulsing flex of his forearms and shoulders. As if he wanted to strangle something.

“I am handling this...*issue*,” he said, the word stained with distaste. “It will be taken care of by morning.”

Ana nodded faintly, her thanks lost in her throat. Her aunt had shared as much. Neither of them would let this scandal slide without full-scale damage control. Reputation and honor were everything to them. To *him*. Because of that, she’d often wondered what Gio would do if she ever became a liability... if his perfectly perfect wife, the one who had made him so proud after the gala, ever fell into disfavor.

She had tried so hard to avoid it.

And yet, the hour had come.

It was a fate that was inevitable. The house of cards, the perfect image she’d built, was only ever one gust away from tumbling down.

“Do you believe it?” she whispered.

“No.”

Eyes wide in disbelief, Ana sat back. “*No?*”

Gio swatted the notion aside authoritatively, like an unwanted fly. “The rumor sounded like absolute bullshit when I read it, the kind made up by a third-rate tabloid. So, *no*, I didn’t believe it. And if you’d picked up my calls, you’d have known that too.”

Her mouth opened and closed.

Regret washed over her.

What a coward she had been. She had wasted so much time in a spiral of depression the past few days, hiding away in her room and shutting out the world. If only she’d spoken to Gio sooner. She could have avoided this torment.

The relief at his assurance was slow in coming, though. She still couldn’t accept that Gio was fine after seeing that horrid text. Did he not doubt her at *all*? It seemed implausible. Especially when his body still radiated dark tension, vibrating with unnamed emotion.

Peering at him in concern, she frowned.

And then wilted, realizing why.

Gio might believe her, but the *Family* didn’t. Based on the few messages she’d read, people were intrigued by the rumors. There were some who were utterly convinced by them. They had always suspected that her perfect image was too good to

be true. That she had to be hiding something. And this seemed to prove it.

What could she even say to convince them otherwise? When rumors began to spread, no one could control them. Not even Gio.

As a new Don, his control over the Family was growing but still tenuous. He could command people's obedience and silence, but how could he command their thoughts? They would always wonder just how much of it was true.

But Gio was unequivocally confident. "The Family will stop believing it. They won't have a choice."

Ana looked uncertain.

"I have a plan," he assured. "But what I want, first," he tilted his head as he surveyed her, "is the truth."

"The truth...?" She froze.

The determined glint in his eyes allowed no escape. "You know what I mean."

*No.*

*He couldn't possibly—*

"If there's one thing I've learned," Gio said dangerously, hands spread wide, "is that there is no smoke without fire. The rumor may be made up. But it's not entirely false, is it?"

Her breaths came in a rush as he moved from the bed, prowling toward her as she remained pinned to her chair, paralyzed with dread.

His face was unreadable. So sharp and beautiful, yet intractable. “There was something that happened with your family’s guard last year.” Gio’s eyes held hers. “They told me he was caught stealing and then fired immediately. But when I demanded to speak to him, he was gone. ‘Taken care of,’ Marta said.”

Ana couldn’t move.

She couldn’t speak.

He was pulling the threads apart, inch by inch, as she watched, powerless.

“There was only one conclusion I could draw, but it didn’t make sense. Not for a case of petty theft.” Gio shook his head assuredly. “So I’m asking you now. Why did your family kill their guard?”

All her thoughts shut down; everything inside her became utterly calm. It was always meant to come to this, no matter how much she or her aunt tried to suppress it. In the end, all roads led to the same destination—the truth.

Resignation permeated through her.

Weighing her down.

As she said, “They didn’t kill him...I did.”



# Chapter 19

## *Last Year*

Snow was falling.

Beautiful, soft puffs that floated to the ground without a sound. The entire expanse of the grounds was blanketed in white. And even though the lights were turned off inside, the brilliance of the snow was enough to illuminate the entire room.

Ana pressed her head against the windowpane, gazing at the view. She loved these large floor-to-ceiling windows that existed in almost every room of the house. They made it easy to stay indoors for days on end, without feeling trapped. The large window seat in this room, in particular, made the experience even more sublime.

Her breath clouded the glass, and she absently drew her finger through it, forming a single letter: G.

The call with him an hour ago lingered in her mind. Their wedding had been pushed out for the second time, causing a

few more months of delay. Understandable. There was so much to be done in the aftermath of his parents' deaths and his coronation as Don. He wasn't in the right frame of mind for a celebratory event.

But still, it was disappointing.

Their interactions had become less and less frequent recently, especially with his newfound aversion to Pittsburgh. That was understandable too. This was the place where everything had gone awry for him; it would forevermore be a reminder of his parents' murder. But that aversion only made it harder for them to meet. She had taken the initiative to visit him in New York last month, but it had been obvious then that grief still weighed heavily on him.

*Gio—*

Her heart went out to him.

She didn't want to be needy and unduly demand his time and energy. As Don, he already had to contend with hundreds of people clamoring for his attention. What he needed now was someone he could rely on—someone he could trust.

Ana could be that for him.

But what power did she have? She couldn't even persuade her grandfather to lend his support. She had pleaded for him to, at the very least, stop maligning Gio in public, but the old man didn't care. He had never cared for *her*, and he certainly did not care for her fiancé.

Grandfather would be even more furious if he knew that Ana was lounging in his office right now. It was a secret pleasure she'd indulged in occasionally, sneaking down to his office in the southwest corner of the house, which had the most beautiful, private view of the backyard. Nothing but acres of land and trees stretched beyond the horizon, delicately coated in snow.

Ana sighed in pleasure.

It had been some time since she'd come here. With her new business and the betrothal, she hadn't had the time to breathe, let alone relax. Tonight, however, she had felt compelled to wander down here after spotting the first flakes of snow. Everyone else had retired to bed, so she would be alone.

Lifting the sweater she'd been knitting, Ana counted down to the last row she had completed and smoothed out the pattern.

Her evening gowns were gaining popularity in the Family, but the intricate embroidery and delicate materials in those pieces often exhausted her. It was a pleasurable exhaustion, no doubt. But sometimes, she just wanted something imperfect and casual. A cozy piece for a wintry night.

This sweater was perfect for that. Its pattern was simple and repetitive, something she could follow without paying too much attention.

Pattern...

Hm.

The word stuck out jarringly in her mind. Involuntarily, it brought her thoughts back to him—to the guard who had haunted her for the past few months.

*I observe and learn patterns. And where there is a pattern, there is an opening.*

A shudder ripped through her.

The challenge in his eyes had been chilling. And yet, in a way, she had given in to it. She rarely entered Grandfather's office, certainly not since the guard's arrival. Typically, by this time of night, Ana would be in her room, fast asleep or fiddling with a design.

Tonight, however, her pattern was broken.

*We can test it out...see if I can still catch you.*

Disturbed, she returned her focus to the sweater, only pausing at the end of every row to take in the scenery again. It was an enchanting night, peaceful and quiet. She wouldn't let him ruin it for her.

Her fingers flew over the wool in an almost unconscious melody, weaving and winding, until eventually, her eyes began to droop. It was hypnotic. The repetitive pattern allowed her mind to disconnect, lulling her lower and lower until—

*Creak.*

Blinking sleepily, Ana shifted on the seat.

Had she fallen asleep?

The sweater was lying on her lap, and her hands were still holding the knitting needles loosely. It was hard to tell how long she had been out. But it must have been past midnight if the housekeeper was making her rounds, closing up the kitchen before walking back to her room. The woman was yards away, but the sound had woken her up even from here.

Stifling a yawn, Ana curled up and contemplated just sleeping here. Hardly realizing that she was no longer alone.

“Look what I’ve found here...all alone in the corner.”

Her heart stopped, and all the blood rushed to her ears.

Praying that it was a figment of her imagination, Ana clutched her stomach and turned around—only to find the very person she’d feared most standing at the entrance of the office.

The door closed behind him, soft and ominous. With dawning horror, she watched as the guard engaged the locks. His thin, almond eyes settled on her lasciviously.

“You look beautiful in white, sweetheart.”

Her hands fluttered against her breasts, which were nearly visible through the pale nightgown that kept slipping off her shoulder. She wanted to grab the half-sweater off her lap and cover herself up, but she found she could not move.

Every inch of her was paralyzed.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

His feet stepped forward, powerful and intent.

Ana could only watch dizzily.

How had he found her? There had been no one around when she'd snuck down here; she had made sure of it. But this was a highly-trained man. Only the most experienced guards were hired by elite families like theirs, and he had demonstrated that prowess by deftly cornering her on many occasions before. The open hallways had saved her then. Here, however, she lay trapped.

“Your bedroom is right next to so many others,” he remarked offhandedly, confusing her. “All you did was go there or to the dining room. Every. Single. Time. The damn pattern never broke.” A frustrated huff puffed out of him. “I just needed you to change your routine and come away to a more secluded part of the house.”

Ana's mouth parted.

Realizing his plan fearfully.

He had been goading her by issuing that challenge, always cornering her near her bedroom—making her feel unsafe there, when that's where she should have remained. All that nonsense about needing to break her pattern...it was a *trap*.

Ana glanced frantically at the door behind him and then at the far-right window hatch, wondering which one she could reach first. Noticing her gaze, he smirked down at her as he stood patiently, nearly a foot away, waiting for her to act.

Neither option would work. She knew it, and he did too. He had positioned himself cleverly to intercept any escape.

What could she do?

She could scream, but she would be dead—long before anyone reached her.

There was only one other course of action, and the very thought of it made her queasy. But she had to do *something* to disarm him just long enough to give herself a fighting chance.

Without breaking eye contact, Ana carefully slid her hand behind her back, feeling around the window seat cushions. Her movements were agonizingly clumsy in the darkness, and the sheer panic on her face grew as every second passed. His smile emerged at the sight of her fear, malevolent and smug.

Until it abruptly faded.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

*Come on*, where is it? Come on, come on...

Adrenaline pumped through her with blinding force before it was replaced by unmitigated relief as the cool metal brushed under her fingertips. Just as her hand began to curl around it—

He leaped, trapping the scream in her throat.

“HEL—”

*Help!*

They went tumbling down in a flurry of clothes and limbs, tangling together as she kicked and punched with all her might. His eyes were menacing as he loomed over her, his hands clamping around her throat. *Fuck*. The raw strength in

his arms was unbearable, making it difficult for any screams to escape.

Ana frantically clawed at the chokehold.

Spots blinded her eyes.

No.

No.

*NO.*

*Please!*

*Help!*

Nothing escaped—no sound, no words. Only ragged gasps as she fought to breathe.

“I’ve waited long enough. You’ve taunted and teased me with your sly looks,” the guard growled into her reddening face, swatting her fragile hands with ease. “It took so long to get a good shot at you...I almost considered giving up. But then you had to go and tattle to your aunt that *I’m* the one behaving badly.”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

“Oh yes,” he sneered, “she questioned me about it.”

His square jaw clenched with pure rage, setting his features into a fiendish cast. “Didn’t I tell you what would happen if you tried to threaten me? I warned her too...I know each and everything about all of you, and I will never let any of you live in peace if you cross me. You should have known better than to stir up trouble.”



The guard's words were starting to fade.

Ana realized dully that she was losing consciousness. His grip had not slackened, not even for a second. Her throat, her arms, and her legs felt colder and colder as time passed.

No.

Please...

But her limbs wouldn't move. Sweat dotted her brow as she lay there immobile, sheer terror filling her when his other hand started to slide down.

"If you're going to put me through all this trouble, I should at least get a reward... We'll give poor Gio one more surprise before his wedding, hm?"

Ana cried out softly, the sound croaked, as her nightgown was shoved up to the tops of her thighs. *No!* Struggling up with a burst of energy, she kicked out again. It was weak and erratic. But she managed to jab his broad chest with her foot and then his jaw—until he reeled back. The effect was short-lived. He quickly lurched forward again to grab her chin with one hand before slamming her head back onto the ground.

*Fuck.*

Everything was spinning.

The impact, along with the earlier oxygen loss, knocked her out.

Nausea rose in her stomach, making her want to curl into herself against the unending pain. She didn't have the strength.

She couldn't do this. Her entire body was one big pulse, throbbing so violently that it amplified the existing pain a thousand times over.

*Please...*

Tears rolled down her temples, past her nape.

She couldn't hold him off anymore.

Her eyes fluttered close. In the hush, she dimly realized her neck was bare. His chokehold was gone. The guard seemed to have lost interest in holding her down once it was clear the fight had gone out of her. His hands instead began fiddling with the ties at the bust of her nightie.

Inhaling shallowly, Ana tried to focus. She swallowed more and more air discreetly and foggily scanned around the floor, through the clutter and chaos, for the object she'd had in her hand before.

Her eyes took several beats to focus in the dark.

*There.*

Just behind his left foot.

Trembling, she remained deathly still as her nightgown began to loosen. The fabric abraded her skin as he pulled it apart with rough jerks, his hot breath washing over her. When his hand greedily reached into the opening, touching her bare chest, she struck out—

Trapping his hand between hers.

Before the surprise could fully register on his face, Ana reared up sharply and twisted his arm until it bent back.

“Fuck!”

His hand frantically wrested out of her grip as the other one reached for the gun in his holster. In that fumbling moment, Ana grabbed her chance and dove headfirst behind him—clawing at the ground even as he body-slammed her from behind.

*Oomph.*

The wind got knocked out of her as his weight hit her, pinning her to the ground.

But he'd only managed to reach her legs. Her upper body was free. Realizing the miscalculation, the guard tried to lurch up and crawl over her until he could hold down her arms.

But he was too late.

The cool metal rolled under her palm.

And with a swift strike, Ana lifted the knitting needle and plunged it down into his outstretched hand. His agonized scream roared all around her. But she couldn't hear, couldn't see anything except the frantic blows of her weapon striking him over and over again until his body gradually grew limp.

Collapsing next to her.

Silence flowed all around her, an eerie epilogue.

*God.*

Oh, God.

She crawled away from him, wheezing from the pain and adrenaline. Moving blindly on her hands and knees. Once she was far enough away from him, she grabbed onto her grandfather's desk chair and rose on shaky feet, tremors racking her entire body.

Ana turned around in a blind daze. Blood coated every inch of her...her face, her hands...and it was smeared all over the carpet.

*Red rivers flowing...*

He was motionless and had been for the last few minutes. But she couldn't leave, fearful that he would rise again.

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Creak.*

Footsteps came closer.

"Ana..." Her aunt studied the room and the body in the corner, horrified. It was clear she didn't know what exactly she was seeing, but she jumped straight into action, urgently ushering Ana back. "You shouldn't have come here."

Auntie reached out to firmly grasp Ana's elbow, even as she scanned the room, alert. When her sharp searching eyes landed on the knitting needle sticking out of the guard's back, she stopped in her tracks.

The truth hit her at last.

Face drawn in shock, Auntie turned slowly toward her.

“What have you *done*?”

# Chapter 20

## *Present*

They say when you speak the truth, it sets you free. But there was nothing but numbness inside Ana. No thoughts, no feelings penetrated. The past had wrung her dry and spit her out, leaving her fluttering in the wind.

*Seven times*, she'd told Gio. She had stabbed that monster seven times. Ana hadn't realized it at the time. Panic and fear had consumed her in a firestorm where her body had operated outside of itself, striking the guard over and over again until he'd finally let her go.

Only in the aftermath, when the cleanup crew had arrived, had she understood the enormity of what had happened. Of what she had done.

They had asked her if someone else had killed him.

Had she been attacked by an outsider?

Had the guard come in to defend her and fallen in the fight?

None of them had wanted to believe that it was *Ana* who had inflicted those wounds or that their guard had turned against them. But Auntie had deduced the truth and quickly covered it all up, painting a story of a robbery gone wrong. Ana's involvement in that night had been scrubbed thoroughly, keeping her image pristine and perfect for her wedding to the Don.

She never could figure out which part worried her family more: the fact that another man had managed to touch her or that she had killed him. The context was immaterial to them. They were convinced that Ana would be considered tainted in the eyes of society if the incident was ever found out. It had been whispered countless times, until she'd reluctantly started to believe it too.

Tiny cracks formed in the night, splintering quietly.

With a hazy start, she realized the noise was coming from Gio.

He was standing over her, locked in the same pose he'd been in since she'd begun to speak. But his eyes were now fixated on the far window, his jaw clenched so hard that she could almost hear it grinding harshly.

At the movement in his hand, she noticed in horror that his phone had cracked. The glass screen was starting to break away, caving under the brute force of his grip. And from his hand, spots of blood dripped out.

She gasped.

Small shards had lodged in his palm.

Her arm shot out to help him, but he stepped away tensely, running a bloody hand through his mussed curls. His chest inflated and deflated so rapidly that she feared he was about to explode.

“Gio...”

With a rough turn, he flung the phone across the plush, white bed. Sending glass flying everywhere.

Ana cupped her mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gio demanded hoarsely. The raw note in his voice tore through her. She couldn’t see his face from here, but his back was hunched and shaking all over. “*Why?*”

“I—” Her throat closed, choking on emotion. “I-I don’t know.” She stared at the shards strewn across the bedsheets as her thoughts spun wildly together. “I didn’t want to be a burden to you. You’d just lost your parents and become Don... and I thought I was just being s-sensitive when he first came around. By the time I complained about him, it was too late,” she whispered brokenly. “I just wanted to move on after that... I didn’t want it to stain me.”

After several sharp breaths, Gio said nothing. He remained stiff, staring at the bed.

When he faced her again, his eyes looked haunted.

“*Burden?*” he echoed, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. “You think being Don is such a priority? That it’s some golden



crown I crave—when its cost was everyone I loved?” Gio laughed bitterly.

His jaw worked as he glanced away, grief radiating through him. “If I had the tiniest hint back then that something was about to happen to my parents, to Gabi, I would have done *anything*—” His bloody hand sliced across the air. “Taken on any burden to prevent it. Even now, I am tortured with regret, wondering what I missed, what I could’ve done so that they’d be here now. Alive.”

A low sound followed, full of aching lament.

Its weight choked the air.

Gio’s lips curled before he regarded her fiercely. “So why do you think that if I had the opportunity to sacrifice it all and save someone else I *love*—that I wouldn’t grab it with all my might?”

Ana’s lips parted.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

Gio’s black eyes seared her with their dark intensity. He reached down to carefully cup her face, looking devastated. “How can you say you were a burden? A *stain*?”

Curling her hand over his, Ana bit her lip. “I...I told you before.” Her voice hitched raggedly. “I’m not suited to be a Don’s wife.”

Her wet brown eyes were forlorn, imploring him to understand. The pressures of her position—meeting everyone’s expectations, including her own—had gotten to her, warping

her confidence. It had often felt inevitable that he would realize her imperfections too.

But his gaze was only tender and steady as he thumbed away her tears.

“I never wanted you to be a Don’s wife. Just mine.”

The simple truth was easy to see.

With a choked breath, Ana covered her face as Gio dropped down to his knees in front of her, his strong arms dragging her into his embrace until he shielded her from all sides. “I’m s-sorry...sorry. I was so scared.” She should have told him long before.

“Shh.”

They sank onto the floor, intertwined so closely together that it felt like nothing, not even a sliver of air, could separate them. Everywhere, all around her, was the scent of him. Warming her from the inside out.

It felt like a deep exorcism. As if he could bleed the past right out of her bones.

“Do you know how brave you are to fight off such a skilled guard?” His severe tone contrasted the gentle strokes of his fingers through her hair, soothing her. “You think any other Donna, or even most Dons, could do that? Why do you sell yourself so short?”

Ana buried her face in the curve of his shoulder, tears soaking his crisp shirt. Her voice was muffled, weary. “I don’t feel so brave.”

Logically she knew she had done the right thing. She wouldn't be alive now if she hadn't killed the guard. But the shame wouldn't leave her, not when it had been reinforced time and time again by her family—by her nightmares. “I try so hard, but the past keeps dragging me down.”

An angry rumble came from Gio, as if he could fight the demons himself. “You think the past hasn't tried to drag *me* down? I was consumed by it and would have drowned myself in revenge if you hadn't snapped me out of it.”

Ana was silent, absorbing his words.

“You're right...I know you are.” He hummed at her faint admission, rubbing her back. “I don't know why I felt I was falling short, thinking you would've risen higher with someone stronger...like Celia.”

When his hand tensed on her, Ana regretted her admission. He had already consoled her so much tonight. Did she have to angle for more reassurance by bringing up that vile woman?

As embarrassing as it was, she also knew she had to say it. After years of idolizing perfection, she was starting to realize just how much it had damaged her. It was far better to voice the anxieties and spiraling thoughts inside her head than to hide them behind a calm façade.

And Celia had been a source of many anxieties. Her taunts and her insinuation that she was close to Gio...her cunningness and beauty...her political prowess. She seemed more fitting for the role of Donna than Ana, who was lying crumpled on the ground.

Lifting his head, Gio waited patiently until she abashedly met his gaze. “I—”

His finger hushed her as he said, “Being an *asshole* doesn’t make someone stronger.”

Ana’s eyes widened.

He smiled wryly at her stunned expression. “It’s true. She and her father have been a pain in my ass since day one, and if you knew the shit they’ve done, you would never compare yourself to those rats.”

Concern hit her. What else had they been up to?

Ana suddenly remembered the text Celia had sent her yesterday, asking if they could talk—no, demanding it. Had that been a ploy to instigate more drama?

“As for her being with me...you probably don’t want to hear this, but my parents tried very hard to set me up with her.”

“W-what?” Ana pushed at his chest, but he didn’t release her. Her head reeled with the news. “I thought they’d broken you two up because she wasn’t from an elite family.”

“We never even dated.” Gio’s brow quirked, bemused. “She was just one of the many contenders my parents floated. Russo was starting to take over businesses and becoming a big threat to my father. So they thought the marriage would control him.”

“Why did they decide on me, then?”

“They didn’t.”

Ana stared at him, a low buzzing in her ears.

The corner of his full lips tilted up. “Gabi was already promised to Antonio, so our alliance with the Mancinis was secured. My parents thought a second betrothal to the same family would be redundant. They *did* like you...” he assured. “But they thought I should seek out someone from another family.”

Stroking the curve of her hip and settling her more fully in his lap, Gio regarded her seriously. His obsidian eyes swallowed her whole. “Their plans were doomed from the moment I met you, though. I couldn’t help myself—I was hungry to talk to you, to look at you...to just have you by my side. You were so genuine and graceful, so hard-working. I *had* to have you as my wife.”

Ana was stupefied.

Gazing up at him in a daze.

Gio stroked her parted lips. He watched entranced as his fingers traced the delicate shape. “I was always hesitant to tell you,” he said, almost to himself. “You seemed so reserved at times—I thought sharing my feelings would pressure you into accepting my hand. So I stayed silent, waiting for you...to want me.”

He absorbed every feature, every flutter of her pulse, and murmured quietly against her skin, “I tried to be patient, to let you warm up to me, Ana. But there was never any other choice for me, not after that first day...Was there for you?”

An odd uncertainty lined his voice.

Resting a palm on his chest, over his heart, Ana denied it. The shock at his revelation persisted, but alongside it was a peace, unlike anything she'd felt before. Filling her with a lightness that was indescribable.

“I have only ever loved you,” she whispered.

A confession and a vow.

With a guttural groan, Gio sealed it with his lips.



A pleasurable hum rumbled through him as she combed through his hair, sifting through the curls that had gotten tangled in the night. Gio's face was shoved into the curve of her neck as his body lay almost entirely over her, pressing his weight in a way that made her feel anchored and safe. Keeping the memories at bay.

He'd hardly spent an inch away from her since she'd told him everything last night. Partly from protectiveness but also, she suspected, from fear of this peace vanishing. There was a sense of deep harmony between them now, so new and sweet. Free of all the doubts and distance that had plagued them before.

She wanted to cling to it. To him.

Gio turned from her neck to the curve of her jaw, kissing a hot path up to her ear, where he nipped the lobe. A zip of

electric shock pulsed through her, a sensation she didn't think possible with the guard's grimy touch still fresh in her mind.

But her husband's touch had always undone her, consuming her so wholly that it left room for nothing and no one else. Its intoxicating spell began to weave around her again as his hand closed around one breast. He rubbed maddening circles around it until her hips jerked up.

Feeling just how turned on he was, Ana moaned exultantly.

And, in an instant, it was gone.

"Don't stop," she cried, grabbing his arm, wanting him to reassure her that everything would remain the same between them. Free of the past.

But Gio reluctantly retreated until his weight shifted to her side, still lying flush against her. His dark eyes were slumberous but assessing. "I'm hurting you."

She shook her head, shivering when he fingered the long strands of her brown hair. His hands continued moving over her, absently trailing from her breasts to her hips before returning up to shape the contours of her face. He thumbed her lower lip, and it parted on a frustrated sigh. If he was trying to be gentlemanly and give her space, he was failing dismally.

"Did I hurt you?"

Ana frowned at his gruff question. "No, I told you—"

"Not now. Back then, on our wedding night." A troubled look passed over Gio's face, his expression pained. "I thought I would give you time and space after the wedding. But when

you approached me first...I lost my mind and *took* you. I never stopped taking you.” He huffed angrily.

Ana gingerly rose on an elbow, peering down at him worriedly. “You never hurt me,” she insisted. “I enjoyed it, more than I thought I could.”

Gio barely heard her though. He flopped onto his back, staring at the ceiling in deep reproof. “I still shouldn’t have pushed you. I could tell you were nervous.”

“Yes...” Her hand cupped his lean jaw, pulling his troubled gaze back to her. “But you didn’t push me. I did, remember?”

Recalling her outlandish suggestion to prepone their wedding night to the afternoon, Ana wanted to laugh. “I didn’t know how I would react to someone touching me intimately, so I just wanted to get it over with while there was daylight. It’s always nighttime when he haunts me.”

The creak of his footsteps in the dark still resounded in her mind.

“Even now, it’s hard to fall asleep,” she whispered. “I fear he will be waiting there when I open my eyes.”

Gio clenched his teeth, murder in his eyes.

Brushing the angry furrow between his brows, Ana smiled sadly before shaking her head. “I never thought of him when you touched me. I’d hate for you to ever think that. What he wanted wasn’t about desire or attraction; it was about intimidation...Maybe not in the beginning.” She shrugged



uncertainly. “But the moment I rebuffed him, he wanted to put me in my place.”

*I know each and everything about all of you, and I will never let any of you live in peace.*

She peered out at the clouded sun. More than a year had passed since she had found herself reflected in one of these immense windows, covered in that man’s blood. And it still felt like it happened yesterday.

“That’s what disgusts me most about those rumors,” she said hoarsely. “The idea that what happened was just some fun romp in the sheets, something consensual.”

*Miss Perfect hooking up with the lowly guard.*

At Gio’s soothing hush, she realized she was hugging herself, trembling lightly.

“I swear to you, those rumors will be gone by the end of today,” he said fiercely.

But how? She turned to him. The texts had spread only two days ago.

“I’ve been working around the clock to trace them,” Gio explained tersely. “Marta has been especially helpful, inquiring with all her friends to see who first started this chain. Everyone seems to have received that forward from dozens of other sources.”

“Then how are you sure it’ll be resolved today?”

“Because of this.” Unlocking his phone, Gio handed it to her.

Tamping down the rising hope, Ana carefully took the phone. The screen was shattered at the bottom, from his crushing grip last night, making it difficult to read. From the top of the screen, which was still intact, she could see a chat with her aunt. It looked like Auntie had forwarded some screenshots to Gio in the middle of the night.

9:44 PM

**Marta:** [Image]

**Gio:** Any others to back this up? I can't go off of one anecdote alone.

**Marta:** Of course. Sophia is supposed to be very reliable. But I will continue asking if anyone else also got these texts from her.

**Gio:** Appreciate it. I need this closed ASAP.

12:57 AM

**Marta:** Second confirmation. Claudia also said the text came from her. [Image]

3:25 AM

**Marta:** Third confirmation—from Cora. [Image]

8:00 AM

**Marta:** Shall I proceed? Is this enough proof?

**Gio:** TY. Good enough for now. Proceed.

*Proceed with what?* Ana tried to make sense of the thread. It was hard to believe so much conversation and investigation had already occurred in one day.

Downloading the images, she frowned through the cracked screen. These appeared to be the same screenshots everyone else had received. She began to close them out when Gio reached over to tap on the screen, zooming in until the sender's name was visible at the top.

Her hand flinched.

Three texts, sent to three separate women. All from the same person.

Celia Russo.

Disbelief and anger whipped through her. "I don't believe this..." Ana's stunned face sought him out. The anger she saw mirrored there confirmed it. Celia *fucking* Russo had been spreading the messages.

"Is she just forwarding gossip along? How do we know she started this?" Ana tempered her heated reaction, striving to understand it with a level head.

"Hers were the earliest texts," Gio said grimly. "The time stamps on her messages are three days old, while the texts everyone else got came a day later. One of these women, Sophia Cazzola, is also a good friend of Celia. She told Marta that Celia was complaining about us after the summit last week, saying we've ruined her father's standing in the faction."

"And Sophia tattled on her 'friend'?"

"She had no choice. I told Marta to convey my sentiments to anyone who resisted helping."

At her enquiring look, Gio smiled entirely without humor. “Saying that I would *rip* their entire existence into shreds if they withheld information from me.”

A shiver snaked through Ana at the coldness of his vow. “Will you punish Sophia?”

“No. But her delay in revealing this is something I won’t forget.”

His ominous tone made her grateful to be in his inner circle. His tenderness in the late hours of the night was a version of him only she, and perhaps Gabriella, ever witnessed. For everyone else, he was the unforgiving Don—watching them like hawks, ready to pounce on the smallest of mistakes.

“And Celia?”

“That’s what Marta is working on, to spread the word to the Family about what she did.”

“You think they will believe Auntie?” Ana bit her lip.

“Marta won’t say anything. The three ladies,” Gio nodded to the messages, “will be the ones to share the news. Marta said they’re all in good standing in their factions, and they’re not her personal friends. So people shouldn’t suspect her of influencing them.”

At her dubious silence, he said, “Trust me. Even if they don’t fully believe it, it will be enough to sow doubt. Everyone knows Russo was pissed after the summit. It makes perfect sense that he’d engineer this scandal in retaliation. As soon as

we get back to New York, I'm coming for him next," he swore.

"By 'coming for him,' you mean—?"

"Kill him?" Gio's lip lifted. "Would you like me to?"

Her eyes rounded.

He simply chuckled to himself, catching the ends of her long hair between his fingers. Staring at their silky ripples, he murmured, "I would do far worse for you."

Breath caught in her throat. Ana watched him smile irresistibly, as though he hadn't just promised murder—before he reluctantly released her hair.

"For now," Gio decided, "I am going to let your aunt's plan play out until Celia's reputation is torn to pieces. *Then* I will deal with her father. He's a sneaky bastard and won't go down so easily. I need to monitor these three women to make sure he doesn't get his claws on them."

"Do we need to head back home then?"

"Not yet. I have some urgent work here first." Before she could ask him what, he said, "I think this situation should be contained by today. Marta is taking care of the next steps. In the meantime, I'll call a meeting with the Capos to figure out what to do with Russo. That will take at least a week to organize, which I can start doing from here."

A loud vibration silenced her burgeoning questions. Both their phones began buzzing, on and on and on.

It was nonstop.

Text after text poured in.

**Text-1:** Omg. Ana, you won't believe this. Did you hear who sent those texts??

**Text-2:** I knew it. My husband said something was up when Russo left the summit early.

**Text-3:** Has Don seen this? He must be *\*furious\**. Celia should count her days.

**Text-4:** I called Celia but she isn't answering. Do you think she knows this leaked?

*Oh my God.*

Dozens of messages pinged together in synchronized cacophony.

It was unbelievable how quickly this was spreading. Hadn't Gio just given Auntie the go-ahead an hour ago? Her damage control campaign had already made an impact.

She almost felt bad for Celia, having been in her place just two days ago. A rumor was like a lit match in a haystack. It traveled from one end of the Family to the other in a flash.

Overwhelmed by the constant alerts, Ana quickly silenced her phone. An uneasy feeling settled over her. People were so fickle. Just hours before, they'd all believed Ana to be an adulterous slut. Now, she had suddenly become the victim—while Celia became the new villain. They didn't even stop to

wonder if Celia was deserving of the rumors, any more than they had with Ana.

But why was she even pitying that nasty woman? Celia *was* the villain here. She had wreaked havoc on Ana's life for 48 hours and maliciously slandered her, all in a reckless bid to support her father. Whatever loathing Ana had for the woman before intensified a thousand times over, burning in her gut.

Gio, on the other hand, looked far more content. He was busy replying to the volley of messages, clearly pleased with the turn of events.

That dispelled her unease, replacing it with a deep sense of gratitude. He had neglected so much other work to resolve this scandal. He must also have received a lot of judgment and speculation when the rumors had first spread. But he'd never let Ana feel it. He had only given her patience—and love.

Resting a hand on his shoulder, she reverently rubbed the flexing muscles there as he rapidly texted away. If the Russos hadn't instigated this scandal, he could have had a well-deserved vacation. That had been the initial reason why he'd joined her here in Pittsburgh.

*Sigh.*

Would people ever leave them alone? Or were betrayal and treachery so entrenched in the fabric of the Family that people would do anything, hurt anyone, for their selfish aims?

"I can't believe they started all this because of the summit." All because Gio had forestalled Russo's attempts to take over

financial control of the Family. “Don’t they have enough money?”

“They’re rolling in it,” Gio muttered bluntly. “But greed is an ever-hungry monster. Once it gets a taste for success, it always wants more.”

It was repulsive.

So many other families needed support for their businesses; there were people on the brink of bankruptcy. They were all infinitely more gracious than the *damn* Russos. “If it was all about business, why did they have to get so personal? Attacking my character, sending warnings.”

Gio stiffened, setting down his phone. “What warnings?”

At the foreboding tone, Ana glanced up warily. “Did you not get one?”

His face answered it for her.

Reaching for her phone, she scrolled down to the initial message from Celia and showed it to him.

**Unknown:** This is what happens.

**Unknown:** When you stir up trouble.

“What number is this from?” Gio clicked through to the contact card, but it revealed nothing. The number wasn’t even a normal one. It was an abbreviated set of six digits, similar to that of a spam caller. He forwarded the messages to his phone.

Uncomfortable with the realization that the warning was directed only at her, Ana sat back, dejected. “I guess they felt I



would be an easier target.”

“Not easier,” Gio insisted but continued to frown. “A more calculated one.”

Ana mulled over it before realizing what he meant. The Russos probably knew that Gio wouldn’t care about gossip targeted at him. But a threat to his family, his loved ones, would push him over the edge, spurring him into doing something reckless.

*If I had the opportunity to sacrifice it all—and save someone else I love...*

His vow sent shivers through her. They had managed to contain this rumor, but Ana wondered if the Russos were getting what they wanted after all. She feared that Gio’s love for her, his desperation to protect her, would make him vulnerable to attack. Placing him in danger, far worse than any scandal or rumor.

## Chapter 21

It was getting past noon. Gio had been on his phone continuously while Ana shut her eyes, closing out the world. The entire debacle had left a sour taste in her mouth. She knew she should be glad that it was resolved, but it was difficult to find any joy in it.

It felt as if someone had ransacked her house and then returned her belongings days later. Sure, things were back to 'normal.' But it did not erase the intense violation.

The lone silver lining in this scandal was the brutally honest conversation it spurred her and Gio to have. Without that, who knew how much longer it would have taken for them to fully lower their guard? And for her to realize just how much he cared.

Ana still could not believe how hard he'd worked to protect her and retaliate against those who sought to malign her. She didn't even know if he had slept at all given the midnight messages he'd been exchanging with Auntie, devising a plan.

Lying beside him, she examined the shadows beneath his eyes. He continued reading through the cracked phone, drawing her gaze to the hand she had bandaged last night. A heavy weight settled in her heart. He had done so much for her, with little care for himself.

“Thank you,” she murmured, staring at his injured hand.

“Nothing to thank,” he said distractedly.

Of course, there was. Her lashes fluttered closed, holding in the emotions brimming to the top. He didn’t know how rare it was for her to feel safe and protected. She’d always had to fend for herself and prove herself—first as Ana Mancini and then as Ana Bernardi.

With Gio, it started to feel like just *Ana* could be enough. Irrespective of whether she was weak or strong, perfect or broken. He wouldn’t leave her side.

“I love you.”

The muscles in his arm flexed, contracting and then releasing, while his flinty eyes softened on her. He didn’t return the words, but she didn’t need him to. He had expressed it all last night, with a vulnerability that was not easy for him. Even if he was never comfortable saying it again, she would cherish those words forever.

At his kiss on her temple, Ana blinked away the memory and glanced up at him.

*Her husband.*

A title that had once intimidated the hell out of her. Now, it lent her peace.

Could this man really be hers? So steady and powerful, devastatingly handsome. She traced the fullness of his lips with her eyes, the sharp cut of his jaw...down to his bare chest. The muscles in his stomach clenched, drawing her eyes there before she ventured even lower to his burgeoning arousal.

Her mouth went dry.

Things had been so emotional last night and this morning that she hadn't had the strength for anything more than tears. All the energy had been sucked out of her. But now, as her mind climbed out of the fog, a desperate ache hit her. She wanted him close—closer than they were now.

“I can't be gentle, Ana,” he rumbled, his voice heavy with need.

Her fingers spread across his chest, feeling him inhale deeply. He was like a caged animal, waiting with steely control. “I don't want you to be,” she whispered.

*Whoosh.*

Ana found herself flat on her back as Gio lowered himself over her, one hand above her head while the injured one went to her lips. They opened with a languid sigh before closing around his probing finger, licking it shyly.

*“Fuck.”*

Growling at the bold move, Gio ripped his finger away, replacing it with his mouth. Stealing her breath as he devoured her with a heated kiss.

Ana arched her back wantonly, pressing her breasts up against his chest. Her arms wrapped around his back, while her legs shifted restlessly beneath him. The restlessness magnified as he withdrew, drawing a muted whine from her. But he resisted her call, propping himself up on an elbow to take in the view.

Did she look as disheveled as she felt?

As needy?

She must have, by the way Gio's dark eyes dilated, clouding over slowly until she was staring into an endless abyss of black.

His dark eyes moved away from her face, dropping to the hem of her nightgown. With his lips thinned into a rough slash of hunger, Gio gathered the fabric and began to slide it up her leg, revealing silky smooth skin...and no panties.

Ana squeezed her thighs together at his discovery.

Breathing heavily, Gio paused, clenching the nightgown in his fist. He was entranced by the needy movement of her thighs, looking like he was ready to tear her gown off completely. But in a blink, he released it from his grip.

“Tell me to stop—and I’ll *stop*,” he said fiercely. “Got it?”

Ana was in a daze but nodded.

Satisfied, he left the bottom half of her nightie as it was, rucked up at her waist. Carefully, he moved up to the buttons on the bodice, undoing each one of them with precise control.

A shadow passed across her face.

The memory of another man's hands on her.

*No.*

Please.

Was it too soon?

The past was still lingering in the air, raw and exposed from last night. Provoking her. She had just assured Gio that his touch did not hurt her, that it could not compare to that monster's. But in all the times they had slept together before, she had never let the memories come so close. They had always been carefully suppressed. She had even suppressed all the details when describing the incident to Gio, for fear of him retreating and avoiding touching her.

Now...they were spilling over.

Nausea roiled through her.

A hand closed around her jaw—and her eyes flew open.

“Watch me,” Gio commanded, authority stamped across his features. Making it difficult for her to remember what she'd been ruminating over seconds ago.

All her anxieties sizzled out of her as he parted the gown, exposing her heated body to his gaze. Hesitantly, Ana tried to reach for his pants. But he nudged her hands back with ease.

Her mouth opened in protest when—

In a mind-numbing move, so hot and ravenous, Gio bent down to lick a path from the tips of her breasts down to the core of her. Where he brought her to a sharp and sudden climax.

She couldn't even breathe or react. He was so intent and focused that she'd split apart in seconds, breaking into a hundred fragments of pleasure.

*Free.*

She felt free...floating in the air as her body took over, blanking out all thoughts.

“What did I tell you?” A bite on her inner thigh made her gasp, and she peered down at him in a daze. He raised a brow. “Don't stop watching me.”

The sly rebuke made her dizzy.

*God.* She wouldn't last.

Not when Gio was looking at her like that, with his fingers still inside her.

Before she could even gather the strength to speak and plead for respite, he grabbed her by the waist and flipped her over until she was lying prone on the bed. The coolness of the fresh sheets contrasted with the heat of his body as he came down over her. His thighs bracketed hers.

For a moment, panic started to creep in.

But the feeling had hardly been born before it was crushed by Gio's powerful grip. He drew her face back until he came into view behind her. His lips caught hers wetly. "Do you feel me?"

She felt her legs part as he settled there in the opening, pushing up into her in a long slide.

*Fuck.*

The answer to his question was lost in a sultry moan.

He did not stop and give any reprieve, not even for a second, as he moved powerfully, jolting her forward on the bed with every thrust. Fear, thrill, and overwhelming need all blended together in an intoxicating mix. Forcing her to succumb to sensation.

It was too much.

Her face was buried in a pillow while her fingers curled around the top edge of the mattress, desperately holding herself in place. The pressure was too much. She could not withstand it rising inside her, choking her until it felt like she would pass out at any moment.

What had he demanded earlier? To watch him?

Impossible. Ana could not lift her head for the life of her. She did not need to. He was all around her—his husky voice, relentless movements, and that warm scent—closing in on her from all sides. So consuming that nothing else could even stand a chance at stealing her attention.

Pleasure flashed through her.



“Gio!”

Gio.

*Gio.*

They collapsed from the impact. Bodies moving together as one.

For several minutes, everything blacked out. She couldn't see or hear anything except the thumping beat of her heart as she fought to catch her breath.

Distantly, she felt Gio brush her sweaty hair back, tucking it behind her ear. Murmuring low as her chest squeezed, “You watched me?”

“Mm.”

“Felt me?”

She clenched around him.

“Good,” he groaned, running a possessive hand along her spine. “Now you know...nothing and no one else can touch you as long as I'm alive.”

Tears fell out in slow drips, mingling with the sweat on her face.

She'd wondered if Gio had noticed the fear snaking back through her in those brief seconds, the present and the past warring together. Her reaction had been fleeting, gone so quickly that she had almost forgotten. But he hadn't.

Even in the heat of the moment, he had pulled her back to the present.

Relentlessly.

Unyielding.

Ana had slayed the monster a long time ago until it had bled out on the floor. But Gio was determined to extinguish even its ghost from her mind—until there was nothing else but him.

## Chapter 22

“You doing okay?”

Ana blinked at Tony, who looked uncharacteristically concerned as he peered over at her. She could imagine why. This was the first time she had emerged from her bedroom in days. Soon after the scandal had broken, he'd burst in with a joke about the Family not knowing what *ugly-ass guards* they had here for hookups and abruptly sobered up when he'd found her staring out the window, insensible to any conversation.

He had awkwardly retreated then, mumbling that everything would turn out fine.

He seemed just as uncomfortable today.

Perhaps because Gio was observing him closely, a clear warning in his eyes.

Ana curled a hand around her husband's thigh. His protectiveness was still raging and unnecessarily directed at her poor cousin. Antonio hadn't even tried to crack a joke yet.

If he did, it would be a welcome distraction. Her cousin was very much a kid in many ways. He'd grown up as the pampered Mancini heir, after all. And though he remained humble, he was oblivious to many of life's harsh realities.

"I'm doing fine," she assured, folding the napkin on her lap.

Auntie was also inspecting her with a pinched frown. "Everyone seems to be moving on from you. They're already onto the Russos and their nasty scheming. Who knew they would try to dishonor you this way?" She glanced askance at Gio.

Chewing unhurriedly, he said nothing, even as tension crept into his jaw. "They will be taken care of."

A long pause ensued as his sinister vow hung in the air. Auntie shot him a concerned look. She had already taken care of Celia, per his instructions. What more was he planning?

"It seems like the rumors are dying down, so we don't have to worry about that right now." Ana smiled divertingly.

Thankfully, Gio took her cue and relaxed his expression. "All thanks to you, Marta," he said sincerely. "It would have taken my men days to interrogate everyone, and even then, there would've been no guarantees of getting useful information. Your connections with the families have proven invaluable."

"Oh, of course." Auntie tittered in pleasant surprise, a high tinkling note that was so unusual for the stern woman. Antonio's eyes widened comically at the sound.

*What was that?* He mouthed at Ana. She stifled a grin and politely returned her focus to her husband and aunt, who were both looking a lot brighter as they chatted over the success of their collaboration. “I’m so glad you trusted me with this task, Don,” Auntie cooed.

He waved off the formality. “Your focus on this has helped expedite things much faster than I was hoping. After that warning message, I was concerned there was a deeper plot at play.”

“Oh...yes, a shocking message to receive—just deplorable. But what else can you expect from the Russos?” Auntie tutted to herself as she bit into the salad.

Gio merely sipped his wine, his shoulders pulled tight.

Before he could work himself up into a bloodthirsty rage, Ana interjected graciously as well, “Thank you, Auntie. Truly. I wasn’t sure it would ever go away.” The last two days had felt interminable. “Please thank all your friends and staff too, anyone who helped.”

“Yes, a superb staff,” Gio eyed the housekeeper standing at attention by the doorway. “I am impressed by their quality of service and dedication to the family.”

Auntie perked up proudly.

“Ana and I have been struggling to fill the vacancies in our home. It’s hard to find people you trust.”

“Very true.” Auntie sighed in commiseration. “We went through a grueling process here to place all our current staff.

But it was worth it. Father always says the staff is the backbone of the house, the ones who do the hard work so the Mancini name can shine. That's why I only hire the best."

"Do you?" he asked silkily.

A thread of danger laced his words.

Ana coughed uncomfortably, wondering if she'd imagined it, but nothing in his expression gave him away. Equally unaware, her aunt nodded confidently. "Our staff have been working in the Family for generations and came to us highly recommended."

"Oh? We could use some of those recommendations," Gio said contemplatively. "Anyone in the New York area who could help us?"

"I'm not sure in New York," she mused, pulling out her phone to check. "But here, I always rely on Claudio."

Vitello?

*Oh, no.*

Ana internally groaned, knowing how thrilled Gio was to hear of him again. But Gio simply listened diplomatically while Auntie gushed, "He's been such a good friend of the family and has had hundreds of employees work at his company over the years, so he always has good referrals."

She was laying it on a bit thick, likely due to Grandfather's demands to salvage his friend's business. *I don't care what you say. Just convince Ana to take up Vitello's case with Gio.* Her aunt had no idea that Ana had overheard their argument the

night of the gala. Nor did she know that Ana had shared the gist of it with Gio as well.

Ana averted her eyes guiltily.

“I’ll talk with Vitello.” Gio thanked her coolly. “Our need is more for guards at the moment, not so much administrative staff. Not sure if he’ll know anyone for that—”

“Oh, he will!” Auntie insisted enthusiastically. “Almost all of our guards were referred to us by Claudio.”

Gio sat back, wiping his lips with the napkin. A satisfied look on his face. “Good to know.”

After their late lunch was cleared out, he excused himself to take some calls outside in the vast backyard.

The morning clouds had faded, revealing a beautiful summer afternoon. The weather, it seemed, was mirroring her mood. Sunlight filled the entire house with warmth and brightness, pouring through every window. It breathed fresh life into the day.

Ana was tempted to go out and join Gio. It had been so long since she’d felt the sun on her face.

“Isn’t this great?”

She turned questioningly to her aunt, who was still beaming.

“The Don seems happy with how everything turned out,” Auntie said, letting out a relieved sigh. “He’s usually stingy with his praise, but he was so generous today, even asking for

staff referrals.” She clasped her hands together happily as if she’d won the lottery.

“You pulled off a miracle,” Ana said sincerely. This type of scandal could ruin anyone’s life permanently, especially in a conservative and close-knit community like theirs. But her aunt had leveraged all her resources and connections to find the perpetrator and execute a solution.

Ana touched the older woman’s arm gratefully.

They walked out of the dining room and into the hall.

“This is what I always hoped for our family. To be of value to the Family and prove our leadership. When we’re given a chance, even if it’s challenging, we should grab it and use it to come out on top. That’s the Mancini power.”

Ana nodded. Her aunt had always been strong-willed and persistent, even in times of hardship. Instead of letting the scandal cow her, Auntie had used it as motivation to prove herself.

If only Ana had that strength.

*Stop it.* She quickly brushed off the disparaging thought. It had hardly been two days since the rumors started. Yes, she’d wallowed in her feelings and indulged in self-pity. But there was nothing wrong with that. Most people deserved a moment to be weak and recover from such a hit. Why didn’t she?

“Nothing to worry about now.” Auntie assessed her with a frown. “I told you I would take care of it, didn’t I?”

“Yes. Thank you—again. Really, I—”



A bony hand waved her off. “All in the past. It was unpleasant, but it had to be done. At least the Family grapevine has moved on now. But now you’ve seen how they are once they get a whiff of scandal?”

Like sharks with a fresh piece of meat.

“This is why I always urge you to take care of your image. It was easy to make everyone doubt the gossip because of your perfect decorum. If they’d detected the slightest flaw in you, they wouldn’t have dismissed the rumors so quickly—no matter how hard I tried.”

Weariness set in Ana’s bones.

She didn’t want to be perfect all the time. She was trying to break away from that mindset.

And yet, her aunt had a point. The Family rumor mill had moved past this scandal surprisingly quickly. If Ana hadn’t invested the time and effort to perfect her image, would they have let her off the hook so easily?

“That’s also why I asked you to be careful of what you share with Gio. See how this baseless rumor troubled him? Imagine how he would react if he knew what *really* happened.”

She winced. The judgment in Auntie’s voice made her want to curl into herself.

Of course, murder was so much worse than the rumored affair. But it was all in self-defense. Still, her aunt had always feared that the Family would ignore Ana’s motives and judge her for the deed alone. There were different standards for

women in the Family. They were supposed to be pure and virginal, while the men were cutthroat and ruthless.

But Gio knew about her past now, and he did not care. Well, he cared enough to get upset at what she'd been through, but he wasn't upset at *her*. He didn't view her any differently. If anything, it had brought them closer together.

It was tempting to give her aunt an '*I told you so*,' but Ana held her tongue. The matriarch was on a high from Gio's praises. She would collapse into a fit of shame if she knew that Gio had discovered the 'sordid' incident.

"Hopefully you take this as a learning lesson, Ana."

"Mm."

Satisfied that her niece had heeded her words, Auntie returned to her office.



Deciding to procrastinate her work a bit longer, Ana sat down on a bench at the far west end of the backyard, tilting her face up to the sun. On the other end, Gio was inaudibly carrying on with his calls, while he paced back and forth on the grass.

His crisp shirtsleeves were rolled up to his forearms, which tensed and flexed every few minutes. A flush crept up her neck, and she glanced away.

With the rumors taken care of and everyone else around her appearing more relaxed, Ana felt her spirits lift. It had taken some time to process, but relief came at long last.

Yes, there was considerable work piling up from this diversion—Gio had already returned to his—but Ana was enjoying being idle for once. She hadn't taken a day off work in years, always juggling administrative oversight and design work.

Thankfully, Emma was on top of it. They'd briefly spoken after lunch, and Ana had confessed everything, including the truth of her supposed illness. Emma had been more than understanding and volunteered to cover meetings for a few more days, brushing aside her apologies. She'd been furious on Ana's behalf, spitting out some choice words for Celia and *incestuous mob gossip*—whatever that meant.

“Couldn't stay away?”

Ana shaded her eyes from the sun and saw Gio striding over to her, one brow raised. A smile bubbled up to her lips.

“Maybe I'm becoming one of those clingy wives,” she teased.

“One can hope.” His lips quirked before he bent low to kiss her.

A sigh escaped her.

*Pure bliss.* She wished these moments could last forever, without any worries or duties.

Her hazy contentment eventually faded to concern, when he stood back up and cracked his neck, rotating his shoulders to loosen the muscles.

“Why don’t you use one of the home offices?” He had been on his feet for hours without any breaks.

“Just wanted to get out for some time.” Gio shrugged tiredly. “I know Marta means well, but her attentiveness can get a bit...heavy-handed.”

Ana stifled a snort.

*Welcome to my life.*

She gave him a sidelong glance. “You were getting a bit heavy-handed yourself with those questions.”

“Was I?” Gio’s black eyes gleamed, thoroughly unrepentant. “I got the answer I needed, though. Not that it’s much of a surprise. It seems all roads eventually lead to Vitello.” He let out an irritated huff, gazing back at the house and the guards circling its perimeter. “Should’ve known that if incompetent hiring was involved, he would be somewhere in the mix.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Well, I need some more details first on the guard.”

“But why? He’s...gone.” Her stomach clenched. She knew it better than most; she was the one responsible for making him disappear.

“I can’t just let it go with that, Ana.” He regarded her beseechingly. “Don’t ask me to.”

She stared up at him, torn. Her hands fiddled with the skirt of her cotton dress as the loose hairs from her braid fluttered in the wind. Gio looked determined, imploring her to agree. But

why? Any further investigation would be futile. It would only lead to the same end: a dead man. There was nothing else either of them could do to seek justice.

Gio didn't seem to agree. His supposed failure to protect her was festering inside him, and he wanted to do something to rectify it.

She was afraid, however, that once the door to the past reopened, it would drag them both under. She was barely staying afloat as it was.

“This will be the last time I bring it up. I swear to you,” he pressed when she fell silent, his voice low and coaxing. “I wouldn't put you through all that again if it wasn't absolutely necessary. And it is. As Don, I have to hold these guards accountable—that includes the people who hired them. Otherwise, there may be other families that go through this.”

The thought of some other poor girl fending off a monster like him made her sick. How many other predators were lying in wait? How many other families were cautioning their daughters to stay silent?

Closing her eyes, Ana conceded, “What details do you need?”

Relieved, Gio squeezed her hand gratefully. “Anything you know about him. I have Vitello's payroll records and also the Mancini ones, but you've seen those. They're useless.” Right. Except for the briefest of details, they had no value. “All I could tell was there were five guards who worked under both Vitello and your grandfather in the last five years. One is

retired and two are still active here.” He gestured at the house, making fear crawl up her throat.

Had any of the current guards been close to *him*? It was natural for staff to befriend each other, especially the ones working on a high-stakes security team.

“The other two are unknown,” Gio said.

“They couldn’t be reached over the phone?”

He denied it, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “I don’t know how else to find them. The records are complete shit,” he said irritably. “The only data that somewhat helped was their employment dates. It showed both of them were terminated roughly around the time of—”

Her attack.

She swallowed. “So it must be one of those two.”

Gio agreed, his dark eyes boring into her as if she could supply the missing clue. But she struggled to recall anything of note. “I barely knew him...” she admitted. “He was not part of the regular crew, so I rarely saw him. I don’t know if the other staff knew him well either. I never heard anyone mention him or approach him.”

Ana racked her mind, but it was so hard to remember. That man had haunted her sleep for so many nights that it was hard to decipher what was reality and what was nightmare. “He would just appear out of the blue every few weeks, always when I was alone.”

Shivers scattered across her arms, and she hugged herself, trying to pace her breathing. A painful ache radiated through her shoulder, and she realized Gio's hand was curled tightly around her as his brows pinched in concern.

Her small, delicate fingers reached up to cover his grip reassuringly until he released her with an apologetic grimace.

"Auntie is the best resource," she said hesitantly, and even Gio looked skeptical at the suggestion.

"You're sure she won't freak out if I question her?"

*Oh, she would.* It would be the biggest tantrum ever—and all directed at Ana for blabbing about the incident and shaming their family in front of the Don. Pride and image were everything to her aunt. She wouldn't take accusations of staff mismanagement lightly.

"I can't have Vitello catch wind of this investigation from Marta or anyone else," Gio said. "He'll do a runner and probably whine to the entire faction in the process."

"I know." Ana sighed. "But I don't know who else has the details you need."

"I'll start digging around. But don't worry; I will eventually talk to Marta," he said with quiet and deadly intent, an ominous expression crossing his face. "She will have to answer for her role in this too—her gross negligence in letting that guard stay even after you raised the alarm."

Ana opened and closed her mouth, ready to reflexively defend her aunt. But his forbidding look silenced her. She'd

complained about the guard's behavior merely two weeks before the attack, leaving little time for Auntie to act. But that excuse would not pacify Gio. If he'd had it his way, the guard would have been six feet under from the very first moment he'd tried to breathe near Ana.

A shudder worked through her, remembering Gio's cold, emotionless expression as he executed his father's advisor. Gio had no tolerance for mistakes. Very few had crossed him and lived to tell the tale.

At the morbid thought, Ana found her mind wandering until a thought suddenly struck her.

"There's something I do know," she breathed excitedly, wide brown eyes darting up to him. "I can tell you where he's buried."



When she'd shared the location, she hadn't expected Gio to act quite so swiftly. Ana glanced up at the towering steel gates uneasily as their car slowed at the entrance. Sunlight was shining through the expansive grounds ahead, which tempered the eeriness of the setting.

Still, it was a *cemetery*. Gray headstones and somber faces were everywhere, reminding her of one thing alone—death.

"Park by the other visitors," Gio directed Reggie. "I want us to blend in."

"Yes, Boss."



After settling on a spot next to four other cars, Reggie opened their doors and stood at attention as they exited and surveyed the area.

Ana smiled graciously at him, unable to squash the tiny fission of nerves even after all this time. Reggie had been utterly professional ever since he was hired. But it only made her wonder what she was missing. Was he simply better at hiding his intentions than the other guards?

Gio's hand settled on her lower back, calmly guiding her up the steps to the main grounds. Hundreds of rows of graves surrounded them on all sides. There was a family standing at the center of the grounds and two other people at the periphery, all paying their respects.

Trying not to draw too much attention, Ana gestured to the section in the center-left. Her heart began to beat faster the closer they approached it, memories crawling back to her.

"How did you even find this place? No way Marta would've told you," Gio muttered dubiously, scanning the grounds warily.

"She didn't. After they took his body away...she pretended like it never happened."

"Convenient."

Ana shot him a quelling look. Gio shrugged unapologetically.

"Tony was the one who told me about this plot," she said as they came to a halt in front of an unmarked grave. There was

nothing notable about it, except that it was sixth from the left in the sixth row. She had visited it so often, nearly daily at one point, that her feet carried her here on instinct.

Gio's hand moved soothingly as she gazed down at it, petrified. It felt like those arms were reaching out to her from beyond the grave, choking her, reminding her that he would never let g—

“Tony knew what happened?” Gio asked sharply, commanding her focus.

Breathing evenly, she dragged her eyes away and nodded. “Everyone in the house knew. It was impossible not to.” Not with the way her screams had echoed.

“After he found out, Tony used to sit in my bedroom, so I could feel safe enough to sleep.” Her lips twisted fondly in remembrance. Her cousin used to fiddle with his phone and pretend like he was there out of boredom, but she knew why he had stuck around.

“It was such a help. But whenever Tony had to leave, I would be terrified all over again. I needed something more permanent to calm me down, some type of assurance that the guard was not lurking in wait somewhere. So he somehow smooth-talked one of the guards into revealing where they'd buried him.”

Tony had known exactly what she'd needed. After weeks of restless nights, that grave had cemented it in her mind—that it was over. The guard's death had not been a figment of her imagination. He was truly *gone*.

It hadn't stopped her nightmares, but it allowed her to sleep until dawn.

"He's a good kid," Gio murmured.

She agreed affectionately, her eyes crinkling. "But I don't know how much this will help you." Ana searched the grave and its headstone. "There's no name or birth date."

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to have Luke and a few of his men dig it up."

Her lips parted in shock. "His *body*?" she whispered urgently, watching for the other visitors.

One of the women was observing them curiously. With Gio in a blazer and slacks and her in a premium cotton blend dress, they stuck out ostensibly, reeking of wealth. Ana smoothed her expression and issued her a courteous smile. The woman got flustered and turned away.

"Getting a DNA match is going to be the best bet, instead of wasting our time on those pathetic records," Gio scoffed. "I've already alerted Luke; he's on standby. If his men can extract the body tonight, they can get it to the Jersey lab by tomorrow."

"Jersey? Aren't there good labs here?" she queried, still trying to digest the thought of the body being unearthed.

"I don't trust anyone in Pittsburgh. This is Vitello's stronghold."

"And you trust Luke?"

“Better than I do Vitello,” Gio said dryly. “I’m not taking any chances, though. I asked Gabi to handle all communications with the Examiner.”

An unusual decision since he usually kept his sister away from Family business after her accident. But Gio was resolved to it. “At this point, you and my sister are the only ones I trust completely.”

Ana flushed at the honest admission as he regarded her with utmost faith. At the start of their marriage, she’d never imagined that he would ever trust her fully. He was so guarded, so jaded after his past. Now, there was not even a speckle of doubt in his dark eyes.

She reached up to softly peck the corner of his lips. Before she could retreat, Gio turned to kiss her thoroughly, his arm dragging her close.

“Mm, Gio.” She pressed his chest. “Not here.”

“Why? Not like he deserves any respect.” Gio sneered down at the grave, looking ready to spit on it. “I would’ve tossed him straight into the Hudson. Not given him a fucking headstone and a full plot...” he grouched, muttering under his breath.

Ana closed a hand on the lapel of his blazer, anchoring him as much as herself. “He won’t be here for long anyway.”

Staring down at the spot for the final time, Ana tugged at his hand until they returned to the parking lot. Reggie was standing rigidly by the car, vigilantly observing the area.

“When do you think the Examiner will give us an answer?” she asked Gio quietly.

“By Friday.”

“So soon?” That was incredibly fast. Whenever she heard about such investigations in the news, they lasted for weeks. Friday was merely five days away.

“He will get it done—unless he wants to find himself buried here,” Gio assured chillingly.

## Chapter 23

The wait that night was agonizing. How Gio was able to smile and converse through dinner, she had no idea. Her mind was on the body, wondering if Luke and his soldiers had exhumed it yet. There were so many things that could go wrong. Breaking and entering and digging up a grave were all bound to attract attention, especially in such a busy cemetery. The men were heading there after midnight to avoid witnesses.

Even if they succeeded, there was the matter of transporting the body across state lines without getting caught.

Was all this worth it just to avenge her past?

Long fingers caressed her cheek, pulling her worried face up to his.

“You should get some sleep.” Gio’s dark eyes were alert.

Ana felt like she was on pins and needles, sitting ramrod straight with her hands clasped tightly over the covers. Gio seemed just as concerned but was trying not to appear so as he discreetly checked his phone again.

“No updates yet?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning.” His tone was firm, urging her to rest.

Letting out a resigned breath, Ana adjusted the pillows behind her and slid down until she was flat on her back. But her attention remained on him as he paced back and forth by the window. Noticing her gaze, Gio frowned. “I can head to one of the offices.” His hand reached to shut off her bedside lamp.

But she stopped him, uneasy.

“Ana,” his tone was gentle but chiding. “There’s no need to worry. This is a simple mission. It’s much harder to transport someone alive and kicking.”

“I know.” Her hands smoothed over the covers restlessly. “It’s just—”

“Just?”

“It sounds silly. I *know* he’s dead. But somehow...him being removed from the grave makes it feel like...he’s free again—like we’re opening Pandora’s box.”

Gio’s face twisted, regret lining his sharp features. He curved his hand over her shoulder, massaging the tension out of there before sifting through her silky hair fanned out on the pillow. “He can’t hurt you anymore. You made sure of that.”

Closing her eyes, she murmured, “The memories aren’t so easy to kill, though.”

His touch was strong and soothing, lulling her almost into sleep. “Do you want to check into a hotel?”

Her eyes flew open, brows furrowed. “A hotel?”

Gio’s face was blank, almost carefully so. He scanned her tense form and her clasped hands before saying hesitantly, “I wonder if this house is making the memories hard to escape.”

It wasn’t a farfetched assumption. There was too much in the mansion that reminded her of that night, of all the nights after when Auntie and Grandfather had interrogated her and made her relive it for days on end—before they disposed of the body and pretended like it never happened.

Ana still couldn’t approach her grandfather’s office. Its layout, its blood-soaked carpet haunted her dreams. It was just one floor below her, steps away.

“Let’s just wait for the Examiner’s results,” she said with more courage than she felt. “Once that’s over, I’d rather just go straight home.” It had already been two weeks since she’d arrived in Pittsburgh. She missed their routine and their staff.

“Is that fine?” Ana asked him tentatively. Gio’s face was drawn, tired and concerned.

“Of course,” he obliged tenderly, bending to kiss her lips. “Whatever you are comfortable with.”



When morning broke, Ana realized with a start that she had slept deeply despite the apprehension plaguing her last night.



She groggily searched for Gio, but he was nowhere to be found.

What time was it? Reaching for her phone, she saw it was just past eight. Fairly early.

Tugging on a robe, she freshened up in the bathroom before venturing downstairs.

The housekeeper glanced at her in surprise, seemingly in a hurry, as she headed toward the kitchen. “Miss Ana? Did you— are you ready for breakfast already?”

“Oh no. I was just looking for the Don.”

Her eyes darted skittishly to the window. “He’s outside.”

“Thank you.” Ana smiled, but the woman was already scurrying away.

Strange.

She walked past her aunt’s office and saw the older woman there, her usual pinched frown appearing more severe than ever. Had she and the housekeeper argued?

When Auntie noticed Ana, her disapproval became even more pronounced. She hesitated at the look and then realized what a sight she made, clad in her nightgown with an old, tattered robe on.

“Where are you off to, dressed like that?”

“...just to see Gio.” Ana shrank under her reproofing look.

Auntie pursed her lips, her expression sour. “There are staff up and about, so please wear proper attire. And tell the Don

that Father's office is available. Our home may not be as lofty as your Hamptons one, but it is very spacious."

There was no way in hell Gio would ever use that office, not after learning what had occurred there. Auntie may have swept the murder under the rug, but it was still fresh in his mind.

"He just wanted some sun," she prevaricated.

Saying nothing, Auntie's attention returned to her work.

Not wanting to run afoul of her when she was in this mood, Ana hurried along to the front doors and murmured a cordial greeting to the guards there. Scanning the gardens, she found Gio in the same spot as yesterday, with a phone in hand. Had he slept at all?

She watched him worriedly. Since he was busy with work, she began to return to the house. But just then, Gio crooked a finger in her direction, beckoning her closer.

Padding barefoot on the grass, she went up to him until the other caller became audible. "Is that Ana?" an excited voice came through.

"Gabi?"

"Yeah! Are you doing okay?"

"Yes, so sorry—I didn't get to return your call before." The younger girl had been so sweet, leaving supportive messages when the scandal had broken out. Ana hadn't seen them until much later, since her phone had been shut off.

Gio must have relayed the reason for her delay since Gabriella brushed it off amicably. “I totally get it. I’m just glad everything worked out.”

Ana smiled, relieved.

“Gabi was just saying the package has arrived.” Gio gave her a meaningful look.

Package?

*Oh.* She perked up in understanding. *The body.*

“Luke and his two men are still hanging around here. Do you want me to tell them to head back?” Gabi asked.

“Not yet. I want them to stand guard at the lab until we get the results. The last thing we need is the ‘package’ mysteriously vanishing.”

“Got it.”

“Once the results are ready, one of our P.I.s will join you. Don’t let anyone else hear the results except the P.I., you, and the Examiner,” Gio cautioned strictly. His sister readily agreed and reviewed the plan once more before wishing them both a good day.

“Gabi—” Gio cut in before she could hang up. “Please be safe. If anything seems off, call me. *Immediately.*”

“Of course,” she said quietly, a somber note in her voice.

In the ensuing hush after the call, Ana reached out to gently squeeze Gio’s arm, moving closer to his side. His black eyes were miles away, somewhere deep in a past she could not

reach. There was so much responsibility on his shoulders, the burden of his sister's safety, his wife's, and the Family's.

"She will be fine," Ana assured, though she didn't quite believe it herself.

What guarantee was there with anything in their lives? For every hundred safety measures, there would always be one fatal loophole. Something they overlooked.

"I'm putting you both under a lot of stress." Gio's lips thinned, self-recrimination stiffening his expression. "Maybe it's all for nothing."

Ana pulled him into her arms, her robe fluttering around them like a cocoon as her cheek rested on his hard chest. After several long seconds, he relaxed minutely. His hands slid inside her robe, absently rubbing her back over her nightgown.

"You wouldn't do this unless it was essential," she said.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Of course." Ana gazed up at him without severing their embrace. His thick hair fell over his eyes, but it did not hide the unusual expression lingering there. Once he blinked it away, she belatedly realized what it was—

*Doubt.*

Strange, for a man who was often drenched in conviction.

"Even if you weren't my husband, I would support your leadership and decisions as Don," she said sincerely. "You are

careful and shrewd, and I see that in this investigation. I'm sure the men see it too and respect you for it."

Gio's chest inflated with a deep breath. He stared at her for a long time, some speech hovering on his lips, waiting to be expressed. She wondered if it was...that he *loved her*.

But the moment passed, and he simply kissed her powerfully before disentangling himself. "I should get back to my calls." An apology crossed his face.

"Me too," she admitted.

The number of tasks piled up on her plate almost gave her hives. At least she was meeting with Emma today to get up to speed. There were a few local orders that they needed to hand-deliver as recompense for shipment delays during her absence.

"Did you find a good web designer?"

Ana huffed in denial, frustrated. "Vitello's was a dead-end, as you can imagine, so we're going ahead with the referral we got from Connecticut. That employee doesn't have the most advanced web skills, but he's very eager to learn."

"Good...*fuckin'* Vitello," Gio growled, shaking his head. "I can't wait until we get the results, so I can rip him a new one. I already gave him a piece of my mind on his recordkeeping. Once I know where he hired this bastard of a guard, he'll know just how lenient I was being before."

Ana shivered at the half-smile on his lips. It was predatory. Lethal.

“I have no idea how his east coast wineries survived this long,” she said. “Some of the staff I called were there as recently as six months ago, and even their records are outdated.” Remembering her bizarre calls, she laughed. “You know, one of the numbers was so old, it led me down a goose chase to a *deli*. The owners were so confused.”

Gio’s eyes narrowed on her. “Which deli?” he asked, alert.

Humor slipping away, Ana blinked hesitantly. “Um, I have to check. It was somewhere in Allentown. Fifth Street or maybe Fourth Street Deli?”

He eased slightly but was still visibly perturbed.

“Why?” she pressed, worried.

“Nothing. It’s just...odd.” Gio frowned as he extracted his phone from his pocket. Thumbing through it, he landed on a screen before turning it to her.

It was a contact page. There was no name or details, just a phone number and a note he’d added at the bottom: *Guard 2. Outdated number-Lehigh Deli.*

“Is this—?”

“One of the two unknown guards. Yeah.”

Ana rubbed her mouth. “The person I was trying to reach was an IT guy. No one picked up his number, so I tried searching online for any relatives and landed at that deli.”

The deli owner’s caginess suddenly filtered back into her memory. At the time, she’d chalked it up to normal discomfort

from receiving a cold call. But now she wondered if it was something more.

Two staff, in completely unrelated roles, were both rerouting to delis in Eastern Pennsylvania. What were the chances?

“There’s no such thing as coincidence, not in the Family,” Gio echoed her thoughts. “This is the third ex-Vitello employee where something like this has happened.”

Flicking back through his phone, he pulled up another contact where he’d added a similar note: *Accountant. Outdated number-Easton Dry Cleaners.*

“Strange, isn’t it?” His eyes darkened as his gears turned. “As you said, most of his staff were still on his payroll a few months ago. Where did they all vanish to?”

Ana’s heart thudded as his face clouded over with growing displeasure. “Is it just these three?” she asked. “No other staff had their numbers rerouted?”

“Not that I know of. Vitello had around 300 employees here on the East Coast before I shut those operations down. He said they were able to place half of them in his Napa wineries and other Family businesses. The remaining half ended up on the list he gave us.”

“Why did you even shut down those wineries?”

Gio ran an agitated hand through his hair, mussing up his curls. “It was lousy management all around. Recordkeeping was shit; expense control was nonexistent. Vitello was paying staff double what other businesses were, even while profits

were shrinking. It got so bad that he came begging for subsidies to help cover salaries, right after I became Don.”

Seriously?

“Oh yeah,” Gio scoffed at her disbelief. “I was pissed as *hell*. I gave him partial funds, with the rest contingent on him turning things around within a year.”

“Which he didn’t.”

Gio nodded. “He tried lowering salaries and making some adjustments, but it barely made a dent. There were too many issues racking up, and after a while, no one wanted to buy his wines except friends and family. That’s when I pulled the plug.”

The accusation was hovering on the tip of her tongue, but Ana wavered.

It sounded outrageous. Unconscionable. But all the signs were pointing in that direction.

“Do you think...?” Her lips pursed, hesitant. Gio’s black eyes gleamed, goading her to utter what they both were thinking. “Do you think those outdated staff even *exist*?”

Sweat beaded on her neck.

Heat whipped between them furiously as the humid summer air thickened intolerably.

“No.” His voice was low, dangerous. “They’re all fake.” There was no doubt in his tone; he’d already reached the conclusion she had minutes before. “I thought Vitello was a



bumbling fool...a piss-poor businessman. But he isn't—far from it. He was never interested in running the wineries and making them profitable. It was all a front to steal funds from the Family.”



Treason.

What Vitello did—what they guessed he did—was a complete and utter betrayal.

To the Don and the Family.

She had never seen Gio so cold before. He'd said not a single word, simmering with barely hidden rage as his face looked carved out of stone. He had already been upset with Vitello's role in referring the rogue guard. But now he was downright livid.

Ana gazed out the window in concern, watching him pace back and forth outside.

“Still busy with calls?”

She jolted and saw Auntie regarding Gio critically. Her aunt had invited Gio repeatedly to join them for meals. But he had skipped both breakfast and lunch today, too wrapped up in his calls and the follow-up investigations into Vitello's records.

“Some urgent work came up,” she hedged.

“Any issues?” Auntie peered across the dining table.

Ana denied it with a weak smile. “Just some finance audits.”

She could tell her aunt was unhappy that Gio was too busy to spend time with them. Her aunt had gone to great lengths to prepare for his visit. Even Grandfather harrumphed from the head of the table in reproof.

Ana held her tongue. If Grandfather caught wind of Gio's investigation, he would immediately jump to Vitello's defense and potentially even forewarn him. The Mancinis held decades of generational wealth and abhorred social climbers like Russo, who stooped to desperate lengths for money. But they would readily excuse Vitello's greed. He was from old money, like them. They always stuck together.

"Did you arrange a car for my appointment on Friday?" Grandfather grouched, slicing through his salmon with loud strokes.

"Of course," Auntie assured evenly. "I already told you I did."

"Don't give me lip. I just need a yes or no."

Ana sipped at her juice, stifling a sigh at their brewing fight. It was like the full moon, always coming around at least once a fortnight.

"Yes, Father."

"Hmph. If you didn't stick me with this new driver last minute, I wouldn't have to double-check." His chair scraped across the floor as he dumped his napkin on the table and rose before ambling out of the dining room. Grumbling under his breath all the while.

Tension was clear on her aunt's face at his abrupt departure. At Ana's attention, she carefully blanked her face. "He doesn't like anything new," she said primly.

*Typical.*

"But we all have to get adjusted to things we don't like." Auntie's eyes drifted to Gio again.

Ana stiffened, praying she wouldn't inflate his absence into a bigger issue than it was. Gio was in no mood to chit-chat after the morning's discovery, and his foul mood would only raise more questions. Perhaps Ana could nudge him into joining them for dinner at least. Just to appease her aunt. After all the efforts she'd made to ensure lavish meals were ready during his visit, Auntie would be highly upset if he didn't partake in any.

"Can you accompany Father to his appointment?"

"Me?" Ana's eyes widened comically. She was the last person Grandfather would want escorting him.

"We'll be short-staffed on guards that day," Auntie fretted, "so his usual one can't drive him. If you're there to manage the new driver, it would be a big help."

Refusal was pressing at her throat, but her aunt's insistent stare made it difficult to voice.

"I don't even know where he's—"

"Up at the University Medical Center. His mobility is getting worse, so he's getting some brain scans done. You also need to hand-deliver some dresses in that area, right? For Bianca."

“On Wednesday, but—”

“That’s just two days after.” Auntie clapped as if it was a done deal. “You can wait until Friday, can’t you? I’m good friends with Bianca, so I can always explain the situation to her.”

Ana slumped in her seat as her aunt rebuffed all her excuses, knowing there was no escape. The hospital was over an hour away in the city. How would she endure such a long ride alone with Grandfather? But her aunt was right. It didn’t make sense for them to make separate trips to the same area.

“If you’re fine telling Bianca...”

“I will call her straight away!” Auntie smiled, satisfied.

Resigned, she finished up her lunch before rising to leave.

“Ana—”

She internally groaned, wondering what other tasks the woman would assign. But her aunt merely regarded her pityingly. An odd look that she’d witnessed only once before, right when the scandal had broken out.

“I know it’s not easy being married to a Family man, especially the Don. They have no care for their personal life, their families.” Her aunt’s eyes flickered with disdain. “If Gio is neglecting you, do not worry. Things will get better soon.”

A mixture of gratitude and incredulity filled her.

It was almost funny how badly her aunt had misconstrued the situation. Gio was not neglectful. He was almost *too*

hypervigilant when it came to her safety.

But her aunt's concern was touching, however misplaced. For the second time in a few days, she was attempting to console Ana.

Even with the scandal, she had comforted Ana and promised to resolve the whole drama. And she made it happen.

How was she going to fix Gio's 'neglect'?

Issuing her aunt a small smile, she exited the room.

She would have to warn her husband of the impending confrontation, on top of the deadly one already brewing with Vitello.

## Chapter 24

Friday morning arrived—and yet, no news.

Gio had said nothing about Vitello or the autopsy results, and she was afraid to bring it up knowing how stressed he was. He was positively drowning in work. From sunup to sundown, he was on calls. Auntie was growing more and more concerned every time he skipped a meal.

*Is something going on, Ana?*

What wasn't going on?

Ana nodded wearily as they went over the itinerary for Grandfather's medical appointments for the third time. "Make sure you talk to the driver directly." Auntie rattled off the list of instructions. "Father will lose his patience if he has to guide him. If your meeting with Bianca runs over, take Father with you. He won't be happy having to wait for you."

Stifling a yawn, Ana murmured in agreement as Auntie stacked together all the medical paperwork and then called the driver to check if he was on his way.

It was barely seven in the morning. Why the rush? The appointment wasn't until eleven.

Auntie was overly accommodating to Grandfather. She didn't mind inconveniencing everyone else, including Ana, to cater to his needs.

“Ah, Gio.”

Whirling around, Ana spotted her husband striding urgently into the dining room. He came to a halt as she and her aunt both turned to him in surprise.

“Marta,” he greeted distractedly before locking eyes with Ana.

His shadowed eyes regarded her seriously, and realization settled in.

*The results were here.*

Anticipation and dread bubbled inside her, and she stood up from her chair. Auntie frowned at her sudden move, then at Gio. “Aren't you staying for breakfast?” She looked ready to strangle him if he refused again.

But Gio was not intimidated in the slightest. “I'll just take some coffee, thanks.” He moved to check his phone, precluding any more conversation.

Ana tried to soften the blow of his rejection. “We just wanted to catch up on some staff hiring before I head out with Grandfather,” she explained.

Auntie merely glowered.

When the housekeeper filled a coffee cup for him, Gio downed it in a few gulps before issuing them a curt nod. Ana murmured another apology shiftily and trailed after him as he headed out to the backyard, which had become his pseudo-office for the past few days.

When they came to a stop several feet away from the house, he tapped his phone and initiated a video call. Ana nervously smoothed down her summer dress and huddled in close, laying a reassuring hand on his chest.

“Hey!” Gabi appeared on the screen, surprisingly energetic at this early hour. Her long, curly hair was twisted up on the top of her head. “We’re all here. You ready?”

They nodded jerkily.

Ready as they would ever be.

As Gabi tilted the camera, two other men came into view. One was the Examiner, an older man sporting a lab coat. The other was a thin, reedy man who had a laptop open in front of him. The private investigator.

The three of them were huddled together in a small office.

“Mr. Bernardi.” Ana blinked in surprise at hearing someone address him as such. It was rare for them to meet outsiders that she’d almost forgotten how differently they treated them.

But despite being an outsider, the Examiner didn’t appear any less scared or submissive. He folded and unfolded his arms fitfully as Gio’s piercing gaze lasered in on him.



“I was able to find matching dental records by last night. As promised.” He smiled nervously.

“Good. And you’re positive about the match?”

“Positive.”

The look on Gio’s face assured severe consequences if that turned out to be false. The Examiner swallowed visibly.

“We were able to identify the deceased as Robert Lilin.”

Gabi turned the camera to the P.I., who leaned in to explain that Robert was “from Allentown, aged 37 years at the time of death. No living relatives, never married, and no children. Our records show two residences under his name over the last ten years: one condo in Allentown from three years ago and another apartment in Cleveland seven years ago.”

How odd...hearing such mundane details about a man who had haunted her for so long.

He’d always seemed like a phantom, almost inhuman.

The P.I. started to continue, but Gio held up a finger. The man obediently lapsed into silence.

“Thank you for your time, Examiner.” Gio addressed the older man. “Your compensation will be wired shortly.”

“*Oh.*” The Examiner started. “Of course.” Realizing he was being effectively dismissed, the man fumbled before getting up and darting to the door.

When he moved to open it, one of Luke’s men came into view and escorted him away. They must have been waiting in

the hallway.

“Are they all gone, Gabi?” Gio asked.

The screen went blank as Gabi wheeled over to check. A few seconds later, she reappeared. “We’re good,” she said breathlessly, clearly rattled by the seriousness of the situation.

“Thanks.” Gio gestured for the P.I. to proceed. “How did Lillin come into the Family’s fold?”

“I’m not positive on the exact month.” He clicked through his laptop. “But somewhere around five years ago, he appeared on our radar in Western Pennsylvania. He was hired as a guard for the dispensary there.”

A low hiss came from Gio. “Vitello’s cousin’s business?”

Ana inhaled deeply when the P.I. nodded.

That confirmed it. It *was* the Vitellos who had hired the monster and exposed him to the Family.

“He’s listed on their payroll?”

“Their records are just as bad as the wineries’.” The P.I. grimaced. “But I was able to find Lillin’s initials and year of birth on there. Nothing else. So I tracked down a sales rep, who was also at the dispensaries around that time. She remembers a guard fitting Lillin’s profile working there.”

Scrolling through his laptop, the P.I. explained that “The same initials and title appeared on Vitello’s winery payroll three years ago. So I believe Lillin moved on to working for

wineries at that time before finally transferring to the Mancinis for his final five months.”

*Final five months.*

That was surprising. The guard must have barely started on the job when Ana had first run into him. She would have never guessed it. He’d been so cocky and bold, walking around the house as if he owned it.

“Where was he hired from?” Gio pressed. “Was he vetted through one of our security firms?”

The P.I. shook his head. “I couldn’t find him listed in any of our internal or partner firms. He looked to be a lone agent.”

Gio relaxed slightly. If their firms had been the ones to vet him, a major overhaul would have been required—and hell to pay. But if he came from the outside, circumventing the traditional recruiting pathways, there was less risk of drawing in other guards like him.

“His last employment was with the Cleveland PD.”

They were both startled by that. Even Gabi made a sound of surprise behind the camera. It wasn’t unheard of to have corrupt officers switch allegiances and come work for the Family. They often found better money here, walking on the other side of the law. But it wasn’t common.

“Seems like it was a dishonorable discharge, but no other notes that I could find.”

Gio leaned in with urgency. “Find out if any other former officer from there is working with us now,” he advised.

When the P.I. agreed and finished typing up notes for his follow-ups, he closed his laptop.

“Wait—” Gio cut in before he could leave. “Do you have a photo or ID of Lillin?”

“I think so.” He frowned. “There should be something in his police file.”

“Good. I want to make sure there was no mix-up with the body before the men leave. If you have a photo, Ana can confirm we have the right guy.”

She grew alert, fear licking through her.

When Gabi flipped the camera to focus on the laptop, Ana’s breath caught as a familiar image loaded. Those thin eyes, wide jaw...watching her even through the screen. Her teeth began chattering as she felt cold all over. Blood and nightfall clouded her vision.

Gio wrapped a protective arm around her, murmuring something she could not decipher.

*Clack.*

Before she could confirm it was him, the phone suddenly spun into the air and clattered out of view, audibly hitting the ground with a loud bang.

“Ma’am!”

“Gabi?” Gio froze.

“Ma’am, are you okay?”

“What the *fuck* is going on?”

Ana watched helplessly as her husband released her and growled into the phone, demanding answers.

Her anxiety escalated painfully when no response came from the girl. Only the P.I. and Gio's voices could be heard ringing in concern, repeatedly calling out her name.

After the longest, drawn-out minute, Gabi's faint sobs petered through. Almost inaudible.

"Gabi, talk to me."

Her husband's frame was tense, ready to attack.

"G-Gio." Gabriella's ashen face came into view as the screen shook violently. "It's h-him."

Somehow, even before she could gather enough breath to explain, Ana realized in slow dread what the girl was trying to say.

It made all too much sense.

*There was no such thing as coincidence in the Family.*

That's what Gio had always believed. That's what was true even now.

It had seemed like a sad twist of fate at the time—both of them experiencing such violence and pain, so much betrayal, from their own guards.

Except there were never two different guards.

Only one.

"He's t-the man from that day!" Gabriella cried, heaving convulsively. "I saw him smiling down at me when Mom and

Dad died.”

## Chapter 25

*I lost my mind and just ran—straight to their car...*

*I keep seeing it even now, the flames...and this sinister face coming for me.*

Gabriella's whispers drifted back from the past, suffused with terror.

The memory twisted until the girl's face disappeared, giving way for the monster to rise again, smiling just as sinisterly as the younger girl had described.

Mocking, taunting.

Just as he had with Ana that night.

*If you're going to put me through all this trouble, I should at least get a reward...We'll give poor Gio one more surprise before his wedding, hm?*

She hadn't realized then what the guard had meant, but it was all clicking into place now.

One *more* surprise, he'd said—the prior being Gio's parents' murder.

Merely weeks after their tragic deaths, the guard had suddenly appeared in the Mancini household. Ana hadn't suspected anything at the time. There had been so much staff turnover across the Family, with everyone fearful of their staff betraying them.

Now, she wondered if Vitello had been trying to get rid of the guard—and, along with him, his involvement in the murder.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

Grandfather stomped his cane on the floor of the car, barking at the driver to follow the speed limit. He grumbled under his breath about inept staff.

The sound jolted her out of her thoughts.

And anger swamped her in a flash.

Where was his concern about inept staff when the guard was hired? When his so-called friend was plotting an assassination of the old Boss and his wife?

Just because the Vitellos and Mancinis had been connected for decades and both came from old money, Grandfather turned a blind eye to all their faults. All while he reviled those without blue blood.



“What are you scowling over there for? I told Marta I didn’t need you stuck to my behind.”

Ana smoothed her expression, even as her hands clenched around her purse.

*Asshole.*

She adopted diplomatic silence. Grandfather’s long-held biases were the least of her concerns. Her mind remained stuck on Gio.

In all the challenges they’d faced thus far, his cool confidence had never wavered. She had become accustomed to his strength, his ability to anchor them amidst any storm. But this morning, he’d been lost.

The moment Gabriella had collapsed, he had gone completely numb. He hadn’t moved or said anything as his sister cried over and over again that it was the same man.

Ana had been the one to step in and take over the call, calming Gabi down until she’d been able to recompose herself nearly a half hour later. Ana had directed the P.I. to summon Luke and then asked his men to escort the girl home before they returned to Pittsburgh.

All while Gio had stood paralyzed.

By the time they’d disconnected, he had slumped down onto the ground with his head in his hands. Completely unresponsive. Flummoxed by the sight of such a strong man coming undone, Ana had rushed to his side, kneeling next to

his hunched form. She'd touched his shaking back carefully as he'd shuddered all over, fury and grief battling for control.

*It was all for money, Ana.*

Her chest wrenched with a terrible, bottomless ache, remembering the raw pain in his voice. Gio had curled in on himself, tearing at his hair, until she'd wrapped her arms tightly around him. Restraining him.

*It was all for money...* That was the only thing he'd uttered before lapsing into silence for hours.

There was nothing she had been able to say. How could anyone accept something so terrible? So treacherous?

Gio had always suspected there was a larger plot behind his parents' deaths. Perhaps a deal gone wrong or a power grab by a Capo. But neither of them could have ever imagined that it was merely a coverup for Vitello's financial mismanagement.

It was hard to determine how far back his payroll fraud dated. But Gio's parents must have discovered it when they'd met with him—on their last and fatal visit to Pittsburgh.

“If you go any closer to that truck, we'll be flattened before you can get your head out of your ass!” Grandfather barked sharply as the poor driver apologized profusely.

Ana stifled a sigh.

Why was she here? She should be home with her husband instead of on this wretched hour-long car journey with this detestable man.

But Gio had insisted on her going and maintaining appearances. Her last-minute cancellation would draw too much notice, and he wanted to catch Vitello off-guard.

*“All the pieces are in place...the fraud, the murders, the guard. Destroying my parents, my sister—and you.” Gio’s eyes teemed with molten fury, piercing through the numb veil he’d fallen into.*

*“Each one of those offenses would have warranted death all by themselves. But all together?” He laughed cruelly. “For that, I’ll skin Vitello alive and hang him out in his yard. Then everyone will see what happens to traitors.”*

The deadly promise sent fear down her spine even now. Vitello deserved what he had coming. But she was scared of the danger awaiting her husband.

*“I have a man stationed outside his house, keeping surveillance. As soon as Luke’s men return from Jersey, we’ll strike.”*

*“We?” she whispered fearfully. “You’ll join them?”*

*Gio would accept nothing less. “I have been waiting for this moment for over a year, Ana. To get my revenge. I am going to gut that spineless man until he burns in hell.”*

Terror laced through her.

She glanced nervously over at Reggie, who sat up front with the driver. If their appointments ended early enough, he could also join the men in the attack. Gio would need all the manpower he could get. He was away from home and had to

rely on Luke's team for support. But she was still apprehensive.

Was Luke reliable? Were any of the men?

At every turn, she searched for traitors.

Largely because of the many questions still left unanswered. Had the guard, Robert Lilin, acted alone in orchestrating the car bombings? Or had he been in cahoots with other staff? Everyone had blamed the Bernardi guard on duty that day, the one driving their car. But it was unclear whether the driver was an accomplice or an innocent bystander.

And why had Robert set his sights on Ana after the murder? Was that also under Vitello's direction? Or had he gone rogue?

*I saw him smiling down at me when Mom and Dad died.*

Ana shuddered. That vile image matched the monster she knew all too well. The guard had taken sick pleasure in taunting both her and Gabi, relishing in their fear. The old Don's assassination may have been logical and planned, part of Robert's assigned task. But the harassment of both women, she suspected, was spontaneous. Born from his twisted mind.

*Bzz.*

*Bzz.*

Hoping it was Gio calling, she saw, deflated, that it was an unknown number.

Silencing it, she flipped to her last text.

**Ana:** On our way. Will let you know once I reach.

It was sent just fifteen minutes ago, but she couldn't resist following up.

**Ana:** Are you ok?

Another agonizing ten minutes passed. Grandfather continued muttering under his breath every time the driver made the slightest wrong move.

**Gio:** Don't worry about me. We'll catch up once you're back.

That didn't give her much reassurance, with either his mental state or the plans he was devising. But he clearly wouldn't share anything more over text.

Rubbing a finger over her throbbing temple, Ana let out a breath. She switched over to her email and began replying to all the unread items there in an effort to calm her mind.



“What do you *mean*? I have the appointment confirmation!”

“Sir, like I said—”

“Where is the manager?”

“Sir—”

“Listen here.” *Rap, rap, rap.* The cane smacked the desk as the nurse jumped back in alarm. “We came from an hour away. We are getting what we paid for!”

She was fairly sure that wasn't how hospitals worked, but Ana held her tongue as her grandfather launched into a lengthy

rant on the healthcare system. His frail arms quivered as he waved his cane about.

What a mess.

Ana couldn't understand how the mix-up had happened. Her aunt had printed out the appointment confirmation and reviewed the details thoroughly. But the nurse was refusing to take him in, saying it had been canceled.

She didn't know what to do now. Her client meeting was in an hour, and she couldn't push it off any longer. Grandfather also had a follow-up with the Neurologist next week and needed the MRI results before then.

Ana interceded with an apologetic smile. "Could you just check your records again? We didn't get any cancellation notice."

The nurse eyed her beadily, vexed. "That's because the cancellation wasn't from our end, ma'am. Our notes show that Mr. Francisco Mancini called to cancel two weeks ago."

"Lies! I never—"

"*Grandfather.*" Ana gripped his arm firmly, imploring him to stay quiet. But he wrenched his arm free.

"Why the hell would I cancel and then show up here, Ana?" he demanded.

She was quiet, unsure of what to say. The nurse gave her a pointed look from behind the desk. They both knew the reason for Grandfather's scans: early signs of dementia. Whether he remembered it was another story.

“I guess there was a misunderstanding...” Ana finally said with a pacifying smile, ignoring Grandfather’s disgruntled protest. “Is there any way you could squeeze us in today? We can wait.”

“Let me check,” the nurse grouched.

After a few minutes, they were given a new appointment time in two hours.

“*Two* hours?” Ana repeated, aghast.

“It’s the best we could do, ma’am. Otherwise, it will have to be on Monday.”

“No, we’ll take it.” She wasn’t doing this all over again then. “Thank you.”

They left the reception desk and wandered over to the waiting area, where she sank into a seat tiredly. Grandfather and Reggie were judiciously silent as she rubbed her forehead.

*Two hours.* What were they supposed to do here for that long? She had to meet Bianca in an hour, but she couldn’t leave Grandfather alone. Not if he was becoming forgetful.

His symptoms had mostly been muscular so far, having to rely on a cane as his gait weakened. Until this appointment cancellation, however, he hadn’t exhibited any memory issues.

But what did she know? Her aunt had always managed him and his tantrums in private and kept up appearances in public.

Pulling up her phone, she sent a message to Bianca.

**Ana:** Would you possibly be free to meet around now? I'm in the area and have some time.

Crossing her fingers, she waited.

**Bianca:** Hi! I'm so sorry—I'm just wrapping up at the salon. Not sure if I'll make it back so quickly. You still free at our original time?

**Ana:** No problem. Yes, I'll be there in an hour.

Ugh.

Just great.

Maybe she could leave Reggie behind with Grandfather?

Ana instantly squashed the thought. Gio would be livid if he knew she was unprotected, especially since they didn't know what Vitello was planning next. Reggie wouldn't agree to leave her anyway.

But the driver was available...just sitting idle in the car.

Grandfather would undoubtedly rip him apart by the time she returned from her meeting, but she didn't have any other choice. She didn't want to be unprofessional and risk losing a VIP client like Bianca. She couldn't bring Grandfather along to her meeting either. It would cut too close to his new appointment time.

Before she could call the driver, her phone buzzed again.

**Unknown Caller.**

Silencing it, she scrolled through her contacts to find the driver.



*Bzz.*

*Bzz.*

For God's sake.

She picked up, irked. "Hello?"

"Ana! Thank fuck. Don't hang up."

*You have got to be kidding me.*

The familiar, feminine drawl had her back stiffening in pure outrage. Annoyance and black anger filled her in waves. "Celia."

Her hand curled into a tight fist. The woman had some *nerve* contacting her, clearly through an alternate number since her original number had been blocked.

"I have nothing to say to you." Ana moved to end the call.

"I didn't do it! Please—listen to me."

A long pause stretched out.

Celia seized the opportunity, coaxing lowly, "Just give me five minutes. I will make it worth your while."

Manipulative little witch.

Ana didn't have time for this—or the patience—after everything that had happened today and over the past week. After uncovering wide-scale financial fraud and assassinations, Celia's petty rumor-mongering seemed trivial. Oh, she would get her comeuppance for it, no doubt. But only after the Vitello issue was handled.

“I am in the middle of—”

“Just five minutes. Don’t you want answers?” she asked.

Closing her eyes, Ana cursed her a thousand times over. Of course, she did.

It wasn’t the most pressing issue right now, but she wanted to know why this woman, who barely knew her, had chosen to spread such vicious lies.

With her voice as cold as ice, she said, “Tell me, then—what explanation do you have for those texts?”

“Well...none, because I didn’t send those.”

Ana scoffed. “Everyone says you did.”

“Just like everyone says you fucked your guard?”

Silence fell over them as Celia’s mocking words hung in the air. Ana shifted uncomfortably, the jibe making its mark. Noticing Grandfather’s close attention, she frowned and rose out of her seat before wandering out to the adjacent hallway, where it was quieter.

“Who are you claiming sent those texts, then?” she asked skeptically.

“I wish I knew. I’ve tried asking around, and everyone is tight-lipped. They don’t want to even accidentally be associated with me,” Celia griped. “All I know is that those texts had to have been spoofed because it was *not* me. Gio gave me such hell last time, just for looking at you the wrong way. You think I’d cross him again by pulling this stunt?”

“This ‘stunt’ benefits your father,” Ana accused.

“*Please*. He’s even more pissed at me than you and Gio are. His deals have been falling through ever since the second set of texts came out.”

That was the whole point of those texts. To counterattack the malicious gossip the Russos had been spreading and to sever the Family’s ties with them. It was only because they’d been outed as the villains that they were now slinking back with their tails between their legs.

Before that, they hadn’t said a word. Not in apology or sympathy.

They hadn’t cared.

Why should they have? They’d successfully knocked Ana, and therefore the Don, off their pedestal. Making business dealings more difficult for Gio...and much easier for Russo.

“There are people offering statements against you, Celia.” Ana shrugged. “It’s your word against theirs.”

“Oh, I know...and I bet the first one to speak up was Sophia Cazzola.”

Ana paused. Sophia was in fact the first person to name Celia as the villain, but she couldn’t betray that.

“The loudmouth has been bragging about it ever since it came out,” Celia huffed. “How she got her revenge on me.”

“I thought she was your friend—?”

“*Friend?* Is that what she told you?” Celia choked at the absurdity. “That sneaky little bitch. She would never step foot in the same room as me, let alone befriend me. Not after I supposedly slept with her husband.”

Ana’s brows shot up.

A dozen questions popped into her mind, but now wasn’t the time to delve into them. She had to get back to figuring out what to do with Grandfather and Bianca.

“It doesn’t matter, Celia. There were multiple sources.” She hoped it would put the matter to rest. But Celia was like a bloodhound, pouncing on her statement.

“What other sources? Wait—don’t tell me they’re all Sophia’s friends.”

“I don’t know.” Ana pinched her nose. “Celia, listen, I can’t tell you. All I can say is they’re not related to each other in any way.”

Auntie had made sure of that, largely based on Gio’s insistence. He hadn’t wanted to falsely implicate the Russos based on one anecdote alone. So Auntie had stayed up all night until she’d found two other sources to corroborate Sophia’s story.

All three of them attested to Celia’s betrayal.

But the other woman could not accept it. “Ana, come on, you have to tell me who they were. I *swear* I will not go after them. If you see any news or rumors leaking their names, you can have Gio behead me or whatever, okay? Just—you have to

give me a chance to defend myself.” Celia drew in a long breath before regaining her composure.

Her voice dropped back down to that easy, disarming tone. “If you just tell me who they are, I can confirm if they have bad blood with me. If they don’t, then I’ll accept I’m guilty and take whatever punishment you dole out.”

Was there anyone who didn’t have bad blood with her?

But Ana bit her tongue.

Resting her head back against the wall, she stared blankly ahead, debating what to do. She knew Celia was manipulating her, sowing doubts in her mind. But it was highly effective. It had been so easy for the Family to believe the rumors about Ana, even though they were grossly untrue.

Wouldn’t it be just as easy for someone to start false rumors about Celia? Especially if it involved people who hated Celia, like Sophia.

Ana hadn’t known about their history. Auntie and Gio also seemed unaware. What if the other sources were also somehow targeting Celia?

A nurse passed by her in the hall, eyeing her strangely.

Knowing she didn’t have time to waste, Ana inhaled and decided to take a wild leap of faith. “Fine...I’ll tell you.”

“Oh, *thank God*. Thank you, Ana.” The relief in her voice was palpable.

Lowering the phone, Ana scrolled through her messages until she found the screenshots Gio had forwarded from Auntie.

There were three sources in total: Sophia Cazzola, Claudia Monti, and Cora Longo. Sophia and Cora were from Philly, while Claudia was from Jersey. Auntie had implied that they all came from reputable families and were trustworthy. But, apart from that, there was no obvious connection between them.

It seemed to have stumped Celia as well because she was quiet for several minutes after Ana rattled off their names. “They’re not in Sophia’s circle...” Celia murmured, frustrated. Her voice grew muffled. It seemed like she had set aside the phone and was moving around. The sound of papers shuffling became apparent.

Several minutes passed.

Time was ticking away.

“Celia...”

What was she doing? Ana prayed that she’d done the right thing by disclosing the names and, hopefully, hadn’t just handed them to the villain herself.

“Celia, I need to—”

“I got it!”

“You *did*?” Ana was incredulous.

“I just knew there had to be something,” Celia said triumphantly. “The Monti name sounded awfully familiar. It’s because I met him—Claudia’s dad that is—when he was in Philly for some business meetings around two years ago. In that meeting, they kept mentioning Sophia’s husband and Cora as well.”

“Mentioning what about them?”

“Just that they were already investors in the business and had been seeing great returns. The owners were trying so hard to woo Monti and my dad into becoming investors as well. But Dad thought it was all a big Ponzi scheme.” She snorted.

“But Monti went ahead with it?”

“Mm-hm. All three of their families became investors in the same business. *That’s* their connection. Not sure why they decided to band together and start these rumors now...” Celia muttered. “But I’m guessing it had something to do with Dad pulling out of the deal.”

“Sorry, which business is this again?” Ana’s brows furrowed.

“Oh, the wineries. You know—Vitello’s company.”

Static filled her ears.

Echoing shrilly around her.

“Vitello,” she repeated hollowly.

“Yes.” Celia laughed. “He was laying it on so thick that day, name-dropping everyone who’d invested in him—as if that

would convince us.”

She continued chattering away, but Ana’s thoughts raced wildly ahead.

The three sources who’d named Celia as the culprit for the texts were all tied to Vitello. How could it be?

*There is no such thing as coincidence...*

Gio’s words floated back to her.

Had Vitello engineered these rumors as an additional attack on the Don? She rubbed her mouth, utterly overwhelmed by the discovery. How many ways had this monster screwed them over?

“Vitello must’ve been pissed that we’d backed out of the deal, especially now that his business has hit rock bottom,” Celia continued, oblivious to Ana’s shock. “I can’t figure out why he targeted you in these rumors, though...”

Oh, she knew exactly why.

Vitello had become increasingly desperate as his fraud and machinations began to come undone, and he’d done everything in his power to cripple the Don from taking action. Including dismantling his reputation and image.

But the extent of his treachery was mind-boggling. Only someone who was utterly unhinged and greedy could stoop so low.

“...I always assumed you were close to Vitello.”

“Why?” Ana blurted, startled.



“Well, he *is* friendly with the Mancinis.”

“Him and about a hundred others.”

“True,” Celia ceded. “But his biggest investment comes from your family.”

Ana stilled.

“You knew that, right...?” Celia asked. “I mean, that was part of Vitello’s whole sales pitch that day, bragging about all the elite investors he’d acquired. He told us all that the top investor in his business was Francisco Mancini.”



Ana trudged back to the waiting area on leaden feet, weighted by the pit in her stomach. The old man came into view around the corner, where he was grumpily watching the news on TV. Reggie was sitting a few seats away.

When she emerged, he relaxed.

Ana nodded distractedly at the guard, clutching the phone in her hand.

What Celia had shared was nothing new. Grandfather was friends with Vitello, and because of that friendship, he had invested in the wineries.

But Vitello was just one of many such friends. Grandfather was well-connected and schmoozed with all the elite families. He’d invested in many of their ventures as well. Until Ana had started her fashion line, and Antonio had become involved in

the gold business, the Mancinis had survived purely on those investments.

So Grandfather having a stake in Vitello's business meant nothing. But his being the *largest* stake completely changed things.

With that much money at risk, there was no way that Grandfather would have remained a passive investor.

Did he know about the payroll fraud? The assassinations?

Her chest felt tight.

"What?" Grandfather griped when she stood staring at him.

Ana shook her head, taking a seat.

They watched the TV in silence as her mind whirred. After her marriage to Gio and Tony's betrothal to Gabi, the Mancinis and Bernardis had become inextricably linked. It was considered an honor to form such a bond with the Don's family. She'd never imagined Grandfather doing anything to jeopardize it. The Mancinis had too much to lose by severing the bond.

But they hadn't lost that bond, had they?

The old Don and his wife had died, but Ana's marriage and Tony's betrothal had persisted. The Mancinis still thrived politically. They remained publicly aligned with the Don. But financially, they must have lost so much when Vitello's business was shut down.

Had Grandfather overlooked the murders out of greed?

Bile rose up her throat.

The old man had despised her for so long. He'd not been too pleased with Gio's interference in Vitello's business either. She remembered his argument with Auntie the night of the gala and how furious he'd been at the prospect of losing his investment. He'd had no compunctions about her aunt emotionally manipulating Ana, so long as his wealth was secure.

*How far had he gone?*

"You know..." she murmured to him, "Gio is considering reviving the Vitello wineries."

His wrinkled eyes lit up.

Ana's lips thinned. "Vitello is an important friend of the family, so he's willing to help him."

The lie choked her, but Grandfather didn't notice. He smiled victoriously, regarding her with the most pride he'd ever shown in her entire life.

"*Finally.*" He rapped his cane excitedly. "I'm glad the Don came to his senses. I was starting to think he was one of those new-age cuckoos who'd forgotten all about the old families. He should remember how much the Vitellos have supported the Family for centuries."

She smiled dimly. "You've helped Vitello a lot over the years too, right?"

"Of course." Grandfather puffed up with pride. "I was the first person to invest in his winery idea, and it paid off. We've

been getting great returns for years.”

“And after his bankruptcy...are you doing okay?” she probed tentatively. “I mean, you have investments with other friends, so that must have compensated for the loss, right?”

“The Mancinis always do well. Look at our house, our staff,” he said haughtily. “It doesn’t matter what happens with any random person’s business. We will always survive.”

Ana sank in relief. They weren’t overly dependent on Vitello’s business, then.

The tension in her released before Grandfather added that “Marta’s the one who manages all the investments these days. After my retirement and her idiot husband kicking the bucket,” he sniffed, “she’s taken over and done a much better job than he ever did.”

“She has?”

Ana had always assumed that Grandfather still retained control over the investments.

He nodded assuredly. “She knows the standards we live up to. I have reminded her time and time again that the Mancinis have no choice but to succeed. To remain at the top. And she’s been diligent about making that happen.”

Grandfather lifted his wrinkly chin proudly. “That’s why I knew she’d succeed in convincing you and Gio to help Vitello. She and Claudio have been thick as thieves these past few years, making sure that we maintain a profit.”

*Thick as thieves.*

She stared at him in dread.

“Auntie and Vitello...?”

“Of course.” Grandfather eyed her narrowly.

Ana sat back in her seat.

Her aunt’s pinched expression from this morning flashed across her eyes. Her unusual panic.

She’d been so insistent on Ana accompanying Grandfather to his appointment, even though it had never been part of her duty before. She’d even made Ana reschedule her meeting with Bianca to fit in the appointment.

On top of that, all the sources who had named Celia as the gossip had come from Auntie.

She had claimed that she didn’t know any of them. That those women, Sophia, Cora, and Claudia, were all unrelated and had helped them out of their goodwill. But they were not unrelated. All of them, including her aunt, were investors in Vitello’s business.

Ana covered her mouth.

Tremors started creeping up her arms.

*I tried my best, in my way, to care for you—but the Mancini name carries a heavy weight.*

Grabbing her purse, she pulled out her phone and quickly dialed Gio’s number.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

“You have reached the voicemail of—”

God, please.

She hung up and redialed.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

“You have reached the voicemail of—”

She hung up and switched over to text.

**Ana:** Gio, are you on a call?

**Ana:** Please call me. ASAP.

Ignoring Grandfather’s questions, she jumped out of her seat and rushed toward Reggie, who instantly stood up, alarmed by her expression.

“Have you heard from the Don?” she asked him breathlessly.

“No.” His eyes widened. Picking up his phone, he tried calling Gio as well.

*Please, please, please...*

After several consecutive attempts, Reggie glanced back at her somberly.

Ana’s head pounded, blood rushing to her brain. With clammy hands, she pushed back her long, braided hair, which was starting to come apart at the seams.

He must just be busy. That's all. Gio was inundated with calls every single day, so he must be tied up with those, especially to plan out the attack on Vitello.

Reggie searched through his phone and began calling again. At the sound of the voicemail greeting, he frowned, his brows strained. "Weird."

"What?" she whispered anxiously.

"I tried calling the guard who's stationed by Vitello's house. His number is also dead—went straight to voicemail."

Ana regarded him blankly. "What does that mean? Is...did the Don tell you they are attacking Vitello already?"

She half-hoped, half-feared.

But his face twisted in denial. "It's too soon. Boss said he would wait for me to return and for Luke's men too. The earliest we'd planned to go over there was by six this evening. There's no way he would attack this early, with just one guard."

Gio was defenseless.

Alone with her aunt.

Cold sweat dripped down her back. Feeling as though her mind was splintering apart, she clutched her throat. "We have to go home."

## Chapter 26

Flames licked along her vision. Revealing the image of an exploding car, one that emitted plumes and plumes of smoke...which swallowed its occupants in an instant.

How far could someone go out of greed?

They had killed one Don before. What would stop them from killing another?

Ana found it difficult to speak as the driver arrived at their floor and eyed Grandfather nervously. “Ma’am?” He quietly looked to her for direction.

At her silence, Reggie stepped in to explain the instructions before gently grasping her by the elbow and propelling her forward.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” Grandfather shouted behind her.

“Sir—”



“My appointment is in half an hour! You can’t tell your dress lady to wait?”

“Bianca is getting impatient,” Ana murmured, her words coming from a distance. She glanced helplessly at the bodyguard.

Reggie turned to him, promising, “We’ll be back before you’re done, sir.”

“But I—”

At Reggie’s pressing shove, Ana stumbled into the elevator, Grandfather’s continued rant fading behind them. She began trembling like a leaf as soon as the doors closed.

“Boss will be fine,” Reggie muttered quietly.

There was no way he could know that. Gio hadn’t returned either of their calls, and she had called him fifteen times. *Fifteen* times in five minutes.

Something was grossly wrong. Her husband would never ignore that many calls from her, regardless of how busy he was. The phone was still ringing too, which meant that it wasn’t turned off.

Her body felt cold all over as the road stretched out ahead of them.

What could she do?

They were an hour away. All the other people in the house were in her aunt’s employ. If she called them, they would know she and Reggie were heading back early.

“Do you have Luke’s number?”

“Yes, of course.” Reggie unlocked his phone and handed it to her as he drove down the interstate at breakneck speed, skirting the speed limit.

Scrolling quickly down to his name, she dialed his number. Rubbing a hand along the base of her throat, she breathed unevenly until his deep voice came through.

“Yeah?”

“Luke, this is Ana.”

His gruff tone disappeared. “Ma’am.”

“Ana, please.”

“Ana,” he murmured. “Reggie told me about Boss. We’ll be there in hour and a half, two hours, tops.”

Closing her eyes, she cursed internally. That would be too late. “Do you have any other men in Pittsburgh who can go and check immediately?”

“I do...” he wavered. “But Boss didn’t trust them to come with us to Jersey. They’ve worked for many other families in Pittsburgh.”

Most likely for Vitello and/or the Mancinis.

*Shit.*

“You want me to ask them?”

It was tempting, so tempting. She was so anxious to hear any news about Gio that she didn’t care who went to the house as long as they could reach him immediately. But Luke’s tone

was highly discouraging. He was offering the option just to pacify her, but he knew—as she did—that it would probably do more damage than good.

If Gio was truly in danger, then it would be better if they arrived unnoticed.

“It’s fine,” she said, defeated. “Just—please hurry.”

“Course. Don’t worry; we’ll reach soon. I’m also trying to call some other folks from outside the Family who might help.”

“Thank you,” she whispered tremulously. “I appreciate it.”

*Click.*

Ana stared out the window blindly.

The miles passed by at a glacial speed.

What other options did she have? The police were a no-go. As were the house staff. Luke and his men were hours away. All the other guards they trusted were back in New York. At this point, she and Reggie were the closest ones to the house.

An idea popped into her mind.

She dismissed it just as quickly.

How could she ask him? He was her *son*. There could be a possibility that he would side with her aunt and harm Gio too. She couldn’t quite believe it, though. He didn’t have a malicious bone in his body. Even if he did, he would never do that to Gabi.

Before she could overthink it, her fingers hit the call button.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

“Yo.”

“Tony.” She exhaled sharply.

“Grandfather getting on your nerves already?” he chortled.

“Uh, yeah—I,” she stuttered, flustered by his jovial tone. “Are you at home?”

“No. Why?”

Ignoring his question, she pressed, “Where are you?”

“Ugh, don’t get me started. Mom sent me out on some errands to freakin’ Morgantown. She said she’s short-staffed today, so she wanted me to drop off some cash with one of her friends after my supplier meeting.”

“When did she ask you to go?”

“Oh, hm...three days ago? I was supposed to meet my supplier on Tuesday, but she asked if I could do it today.”

Just like she’d asked Ana to shift her client meeting.

It didn’t make sense. Neither task, Grandfather’s medical appointment or Tony’s cash drop, seemed urgent. Then, why did her aunt make them reschedule their business meetings around these errands?

“Do you know why there’s a staff shortage today?”

“No idea. Mom takes care of all that.” His voice grew distant as he talked to someone else on the other side. “Sorry, they’re

waiting on me. Did you need anything, Ana?”

She hesitated, watching the clock. It was just past one. They had half an hour more to go until they reached home. Even though Tony was slightly further away, he was the next closest person who could help.

Reggie was eyeing her warily, seemingly warning her against involving her cousin.

And it made sense. If Auntie was up to anything, Antonio would logically support her.

But something in her gut disagreed.

Grandfather and Auntie were usually reserved with her. But Tony had been different from the very beginning. He goofed off and often acted carelessly, but he always protected her when she needed him. She thought back to him sitting in her bedroom after her attack, giving her company so she could fall asleep.

He'd pretended he was there out of boredom. But she knew better. He did it out of love.

Ana took a deep breath and asked lowly, “Is there any way you can head home now?”

A long pause stretched out.

“What’s going on?” Tension crept into his voice.

“I...don’t know. Gio hasn’t picked up any of my calls, and I’ve called him fifteen times. He might be busy—”

“No way. Not with you,” he said firmly. “Even if the roof was falling, he’d never ignore you, Ana.”

Her throat closed. The validation comforted her and scared her all at once. “That’s what I thought, but I don’t know what to do. I just need someone to check up on him.”

“Did you try calling Mom?”

Her silence was pronounced.

“No Mom, then,” he mumbled.

Ana didn’t deny it, unsure of what to even offer as an explanation. She had no answers herself.

To her relief, Tony did not pry any further. After chatting again with the person to the side, he turned back to the call. “I’ll start now. Might take me an hour.”

“Thank you, Tony,” she choked out.

“Don’t worry, okay? I’ll be there.”

Tears dotted the corners of her eyes as he hung up.

*Please be okay, Gio. Please.*



The house was deathly quiet.

Not even the tree leaves moved in the hot summer afternoon.

There was nothing else wrong, at least outwardly, just by surveilling the mansion. Everything seemed bright and cheerful, with sunlight pouring in and fresh flowers blooming in the garden. It looked idyllic. But the Mancini home was

nothing but idyllic. At any hour, it was teeming with staff: yard workers, guards, and maids.

Now, there was no one.

And the unnerving part was that all the curtains were closed.

Reggie parked the car around the corner at a spot where the hedges were taller. “I think we should be out of sight of the cameras,” he murmured, peering out her passenger-side window.

Ana shakily reached for the door handle. But he stopped her.

Startled, she watched as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small gun. He gently offered it to her before taking out a second gun for himself. She gripped the weapon with nimble hands, unsure of what to do. She’d never handled a gun before.

After giving her a quick rundown of the instructions, Reggie surveyed their surroundings again. “I’ll go check it out.”

“But—”

“If you stay inside, I’ll give you the all-clear once it’s safe.”

Ana stared at him fearfully.

“Trust me, ma’am. I’ll be back in five minutes.” Reggie smiled reassuringly, but the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes were pulled taut. Stress lined his features.

Realizing he wouldn’t budge, Ana sat helplessly as he prepared himself. His fingers clenched around his gun as he unlocked the door.

“Please stay inside,” he repeated gravely. “Whatever you do, don’t open the door.”

She swallowed but did not object. The moment he stepped out of the car, he quickly locked the doors again to protect her and swept his gaze around the street, checking for any lurkers. With a final glance at her, Reggie crept cautiously around the corner toward the back of the house, until he was eventually out of sight.

Panic filled her.

She was alone.

Fitfully rubbing her hand on her dress, she held the gun tightly in the other. It shook violently in her grip, tremors seizing her.

She felt like a sitting duck.

Was she truly safe here? Or should she have insisted on going with Reggie? She had no idea what the guard was walking into, and Gio was still non-responsive.

*Please, be okay.*

Ana desperately wanted to call him again, but she was afraid to even move or make a sound in the pin-drop silence. Even the short breaths she took felt like they were deafening her ears. Her eyes darted all around, watching and waiting for the guard to reappear.

One minute.

Two.



And then five.

But no sign of Reggie.

What the hell was happening?

The property was massive. Of course, he would need some time to enter it stealthily and get a good lay of the land. But the wait felt interminable.

She curled forward slightly as her stomach roiled, never letting her gaze waver.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen.

*Come on, Reggie.*

Maybe she should call Tony. It wouldn't be much longer before he arrived. There was a chance that Luke and his men had also gained speed.

With shaking hands, she reached into her purse and dug around its contents without dropping her line of sight. Just as her fingers closed around the phone, the piercing sound came. Booming through the gates.

*BANG!*

Fuck.

She ripped open the door.

## Chapter 27

*Whatever you do, don't open the door.*

The eerie silence of the street besieged her as soon as she stepped down, the guard's warning ringing in her ears. There was not a soul in sight. No sign of where the bang had come from. But the scent of danger lingered heavily in the air.

It made her want to crawl back into the car.

She couldn't, though. There was no way she could stay inside after hearing that. She may not have ever fired one, but the sound of a gunshot was unmistakable.

If everything was fine, Reggie would have texted her by now. He had parked just behind the house. It wouldn't take him this long to get the all-clear unless things were, in fact, *not* all clear.

What if they'd shot him?

Or Gio?

Her legs moved unsteadily in the direction Reggie had veered off in, throwing an uncertain glance back at the car. There was a chance she wouldn't be able to do much. She had no combat training or muscle power. But there was a chance, however minuscule, that she could do something—distract or stall—until help arrived.

Either way, she couldn't just hide here. If something happened to Gio, she wouldn't be able to live with it.

That certainty drove her forward, inching slowly, slowly until one of the rear gates came into view. Her large eyes darted around the steel frame and the surrounding hedges. Reggie had said there were no cameras by their parking spot. But surely, there would be some here by the gates? She couldn't detect them, though.

Craning her neck slightly forward, Ana peered into the grounds. There was no one. The gates were locked, but no guards were stationed there. All the windows on this side of the house also appeared to be shut.

Just then, one of the drapes fluttered.

On high alert, she tensed.

Had someone spotted her?

With her gaze fixed on the window, she almost missed the movement in her periphery. A shadow shifted ever so slightly forward, toward her. By the time she noticed it, however, it was too late.

She froze in place. Eyes flared in terror as a large man came into view behind the gates.

“Did you want to come in, Miss Ana?” he asked coolly.

One of her aunt’s guards. She’d seen him a few times before, patrolling the gates with a somber look on his face. Even today, he regarded her impassively, without a hint of strain.

Ana wavered. He was acting like it was any other day at the house. Her eyes dropped to the large gun in his holster. “I was just waiting for my bodyguard to wrap up safety checks. Did he finish them already?” She smiled unsteadily.

“Yes.” He didn’t miss a beat. “You can come in, and we’ll let him know you’re here.”

No way was Reggie just waiting inside.

Not without giving her the all-clear.

“Oh, um Grandfather is in the car...I should go let him know it’s alright to enter.” Her heart thundered as she began to retreat. “He was getting antsy.”

“We’ll call the driver and ask him to pull in,” he said, sliding the gates open. “It isn’t safe for you to be wandering the streets alone, Miss.”

Ana gripped her purse.

“Please, come in.”

There was no escape.

Not that she’d even want to, with her husband and guard trapped somewhere inside.

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the threshold. The metal gates clanged loudly, screeching discordantly as he shut them both inside.



*Click.*

*Clack.*

*Click.*

*Clack.*

Her heels tapped loudly on the hardwood floor as the housekeeper ushered her inside and prodded her toward the dining room.

Ana pressed the purse tightly to her side as she nervously scanned around the house. It was quiet, too quiet. Except for the housekeeper, none of the other staff were in sight. And with the curtains drawn in every room, it felt cloyingly dark.

Her pulse raced.

Like the guard, the housekeeper also behaved with complete nonchalance, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. It completely unnerved her.

“Miss Marta is having coffee. I’ll prepare a fresh brew for you,” the woman murmured, gesturing to the dining room entrance.

“And the Don? Did he finish his lunch already?” Ana asked with an affected calm.

“I—yes, of course.”

The way her eyes shifted away made the hairs on Ana’s neck rise, warning bells ringing through her bones.

“Ana?”

The cool tone of her aunt’s voice put her further on edge, that roiling sensation in her stomach intensifying as the doors parted. Revealing the older woman watching her. There was no coffee on the table, nor was she sipping anything else. Instead, Auntie sat staring straight at her. As if she’d been waiting for her.

“Where’s Gio?” Ana blurted in a fearful whisper.

“He stepped out for a meeting.” Auntie tilted her head. “Where is Father?”

“His appointment was uh getting delayed. I thought he would be fine with the driver.”

“Even after I explicitly told you *not* to leave him alone?”

Fear crawled through her as a flash of rage crossed Auntie’s face, the first hint of an upset in the eerily calm house. But it disappeared just as quickly, leaving behind that same placid expression.

Ana folded her hands together as she stood rigidly in front of her aunt.

“I was worried about Gio...he hasn’t picked up my calls.”

“The Don is a busy man,” Auntie said coldly. “He has been on nonstop calls ever since he arrived here. I warned you when

I noticed it, didn't I? His priorities don't include you—or this family.”

“He does prioritize me. A lot.” Emotion colored her voice as she gazed at her aunt desperately. “He wouldn't ignore so many of my calls.”

But the woman was unmoved, with her arms crossed and her mouth pinched. She regarded Ana as though she were the biggest fool.

And maybe she was, for coming in here without any defense or a plan. With a singular goal: to find her husband.

“Where is Gio?” she repeated.

“I told you,” Auntie reminded her impatiently. “He rushed out to a meeting.”

“With whom?”

“Don't you know already? He's meeting Claudio.”

A frisson of alarm singed her as Auntie sat there with that calm, unconcerned expression.

Her pulse stuttered into an uneven rhythm as her mind screamed at her. *Lies...it was a lie.*

Gio had been planning an attack on Vitello, but he would have never disclosed that to anyone in this household. He had been so careful the last few days, painstakingly avoiding taking any of his calls inside the house for fear of eavesdroppers.

He'd even suggested moving out to a hotel—

*God.*

It had seemed like such a passing comment at the time. But now she realized that Gio had started to sense something was off in the house. He'd prioritized attacking Vitello, though... not realizing that the more imminent threat was closer to home.

A chilling shadow fell over her aunt's face the longer Ana stood processing her lie.

Uncrossing her arms, Auntie leaned forward until her face shifted into the light. Flinty eyes assessed her shrewdly. "You think I don't know...? That you told him about the guard."

"W-what?" Ana stepped back.

Auntie sneered. "Don't give me that innocent look. I've known you since you were four, and you were always a poor liar," she spat. "I *told* you. I warned you of what would happen to your reputation, to all our reputations, and you foolishly blurted everything to Gio!"

"I didn't—"

"Please." Auntie held up a hand. "The deli owners tipped us off. They got several anonymous calls asking about the bodyguard registered under their phone number. I was so confused and worried until you told me Gio was doing audits. That's when I knew...I just *knew* it was him calling. And if he was digging so hard into that guard, out of all guards, it must have been because you told him what happened."

Ana swallowed, unable to deny it.



The woman exploded, shooting to her feet as she slammed a hand down on the table.

*“Disobedient girl! After all the warnings I gave you, even after we disposed of that useless guard, you just had to pour your heart out.”*

“I—”

“I kept trying to stop you! I had to stoop to vulgar rumors just to warn you and show you the repercussions of spilling the truth.”

A haze covered her eyes as Ana staggered back.

Staring at her aunt in shock.

“Why...?” Ana croaked, jagged shards of betrayal piercing her breast.

Celia had been telling the truth; she hadn’t been the one to start the rumors. The real culprit was standing in front of her.

Ana felt her stomach sink, unable to comprehend it. “You saw how those texts affected me.”

A sliver of guilt passed through her aunt’s eyes before she shrugged it off. “I had no choice. I was running out of options. You were determined to confess the past, and I knew—as soon as Gio heard it, he would connect the dots.”

The guard.

The payroll fraud.

The assassinations.

They had all been interconnected. And all of them had come unveiled, just as her aunt had predicted, once Ana told Gio about the guard's attack. Gio had been determined to seek out justice for her, and through that investigation, he had stumbled upon Vitello's operations.

Not just Vitello's.

Her aunt's too.

Ana watched her as though she were a stranger. "Did Vitello force you...? Or blackmail you?" Searching for some logic or reason for all this.

But Auntie scoffed derisively. "No. I was just naïve," she said bitterly, gazing unseeingly out the shut windows. "After your uncle passed and Father retired, the burden of this house fell on me. I had no clue about investments, so I ran to Father's closest friend for help."

Her lips twisted. "Claudio told me how he'd been getting these returns...and that he would set up dummy payrolls for me too. So I jumped in headfirst. And things were great at first...We were thriving; we expanded our staff...got *two* betrothal offers from the Boss's family."

Neither Gio nor Gabi's interest had anything to do with the Mancini wealth, but Ana kept her mouth shut as Auntie beamed with pride.

"Then it all came crashing down two years ago." Her thin face contorted into regret. "When the old Don extended the betrothals, I had no idea that he was secretly investigating us."

Ana blinked. “Gio’s dad found out—?”

“Everything. He found out *everything*. All because Claudio got scared and spilled his guts when the Don confronted him,” she seethed.

“Is that—is that why he killed them?” Ana whispered.

“Claudio?” Auntie’s voice dripped with scorn. “He has no backbone. He wanted to flee the country and sneak out to Sicily. Leaving *me* to deal with the shame and ruin. So I did what I had to do.”

She didn’t realize she was shaking her head in denial until her aunt nodded vehemently.

*No.*

Vitello was the one who had masterminded the murders. Her aunt had merely been swept up in the tide; she had to have been.

But the matriarch regarded her with unwavering conviction. “I had to protect our legacy, Ana, and I found the right guard to do the job.” Robert Lilin. The monster. “Vitello went along with it after I convinced him. But he didn’t know that he was being set up...just like he set *me* up for failure.”

Her aunt smiled. A cold, cunning smile that cast her face into the shadows. “When everything is done today, it will be him who takes the fall for it all. And I will finally be at peace.”

There was nothing but the sound of harsh breaths in the dining hall as the two women faced each other. One triumphant and the other terrified.

Floored by the magnitude of her aunt's ambitions.

Just how far did her aunt's plan extend? She thought back to an hour ago, when Reggie had failed to reach the guard stationed by Vitello's home.

Had her aunt already trapped Vitello?

Was he even alive?

Ana gripped the straps of her purse. "What have you done?"

Her aunt observed her pitifully. "I could not leave any loose ends, Ana. Not when Vitello knows. And now Gio does too."

"No," she denied breathlessly.

"I'm sorry," Auntie said simply. "He would not let go of his parents' deaths. I thought for some time that he would be content with you and distracted enough to move on. But that was just my naivety again."

Bile rose in Ana, along with panic.

"Gio was always careful to stay away from Pittsburgh, though. But you made the impossible happen. He finally planned a long enough visit here—for you."

No.

*No.*

Her chest caved.

"What did you do?" Ana cried. "What did you *do!*" She didn't realize that she'd grabbed her aunt's crisp linen dress until it twisted in her hold.

With infuriating calm, the older woman merely patted her hand, ignoring Ana's question yet again until it felt like she would lose her mind.

"It's for the best, you'll see. I had hoped Tony would be Underboss, but now—"

"No."

"—he has a shot at becoming Boss."

"No!" She pulled at her aunt's sleeve, frantic.

"It's for the best," Auntie repeated robotically.

"And *me*? Don't you care what's best for me?" It was always Grandfather, Tony, or the family name that mattered, while Ana was just the orphan who had to be grateful for receiving scraps—for being elevated into luxury.

"You'll be fine," Auntie assured sternly. "You have your dress business...and it won't be hard to find someone new. Being a Don's widow will guarantee you get the best proposals."

*Don's widow...*

Gio.

Gio.

No.

## Chapter 28

Ana had felt this out-of-body experience once before, in the days after the attack. As though it were happening to someone else. She had dissociated entirely and rejected reality.

That same sensation swamped her now, muting all sights and sounds until she felt like she was floating. Free and untethered.

But she wasn't. She was drowning in a nightmare from which she could not awaken.

“Come now.”

Ana felt herself being moved.

Nudged along through the tide.

The doors opened as they exited the room and walked down the hall, further and further into the recesses, until she noticed, with a slow blink, where they were headed.

To the one room Ana had avoided for over a year.

“Don't you want to say goodbye?” Auntie's voice was coaxing and firm when Ana came to a halt. Her aunt's face

was stoic, belying her disturbing intent.

*Goodbye?*

Nothing made sense anymore.

All she could feel was utter numbness as they approached the room. The memory of the guard lying in wait for her...the carpet stained with his blood...all of it assaulted her senses. But her mind was dulled by shock.

It was happening all over again...but this time it was worse. Far worse. There was not just one guard, but three waiting for her.

One stationed by the door.

Another inside by the left corner.

And the third at the front of the room.

All three of them faced the large glass windows that she'd loved so much in Grandfather's office. The view was obstructed by heavy drapery today, blocking all sunlight.

None of the guards paid the windows or her much attention, though. Their grim faces were keenly monitoring something else on the ground.

As she followed their gaze, her knees buckled. Her hand grabbed the edge of the doorframe.

Slumped on the carpet was Gio.

*Drenched* in blood.

A low whimper escaped from her.

His inky black curls were matted and frayed; an angry scar was visible on his chin. Below that...everything was *red*. His shirt, his pants—everything was painted with his blood. Two patches were stained the deepest: one near his stomach and one by his shoulder.

Gunshot wounds.

Shivering all over, Ana stepped gingerly toward him. The guards were all pointing their guns at Gio and could easily fell her in one blow. But her legs did not stop.

She had to get to him.

As Ana hobbled forward, other bodies began to come into view by the right corner. Propped up on the floor behind the couch.

God.

*Reggie.*

She pressed her fingers to her lips tremulously. He had been smiling reassuringly at her just twenty minutes ago. Now, he was dead. There was no question about it, not with the bullet hole gaping from his head.

Her stomach clenched, sick.

She had been so terrified of Reggie in the beginning, paranoid after her previous encounters with guards. But he had been so kind, so loyal. He had tried to protect them to the very end.

Tears leaked out of her eyes.



The two bodies next to him were unfamiliar. But they wore the same uniform as the other Mancini guards. Maybe Gio or Reggie had managed to kill them?

*Good.*

Perverse satisfaction hit her. She wanted them all to pay.

Dragging her eyes away from them, she focused back on the body propped up by the window seat. The most important one of all.

When she finally reached her husband's side, Ana sank to her knees. Unable to comprehend the sight of her powerful man in this state. How he must have suffered...all alone...defenseless in a house full of traitors.

Trembling, she gently touched his arm, afraid to hurt him anymore.

But his skin was so cold.

Just a few days ago, his warm, strong hands had run along her body—possessive and tender.

*Nothing and no one else can touch you as long as I'm alive.*

How many times had Gio held her and made her feel safe? How much had he overworked himself trying to find ways to avenge her? And she had left him alone here in his hour of need.

Had he wondered if he would ever see her again?

Tears continued to roll out of the corner of her eyes, heaving breaths racking her chest.

“G-Gio.” Her voice cracked. *Please—no.*

He wasn't gone. Not entirely. There was a low pulse at his wrist, even though the rest of him was eerily still. “Gio, it's me.”

He didn't respond.

He didn't move.

Instead, it was Auntie's voice that came from behind. “Don't tell me I don't know what's best for you, Ana. I knew you'd want to say goodbye.”

Anger, unlike anything she'd felt before, swallowed her in its fiery lips. Filling her with unmitigated rage. Her aunt thought she should be grateful—for *this*? For tearing apart so many lives, all to preserve her pride and wealth?

Ready to spin around and slap the self-centered bitch in the face, Ana jerked back from Gio. But just as she did, a small movement halted her.

A feather-soft brush against her palm.

Befuddled, she glanced down at Gio's bloody arm that was flopped next to hers. And when she glanced up, she saw him watching her through slitted eyes.

Ana inhaled sharply.

A cry bubbled up to her throat, but she suppressed it when he quickly shut his eyes again. Appearing dead to the world.

With a neutral expression, Ana peeked at the guards around them. But there was no change in their posture. Even her aunt,

who was standing next to the guard at the front of the room, was staring at the clock impatiently. Oblivious to the fact that Gio was conscious.

Her heart raced.

A flicker of hope innervated her, along with dread.

Even if Gio was awake, he was in bad shape. He wouldn't be able to muscle past three guards, and she couldn't do it either—not singlehandedly.

Carefully, as if cuddling closer to him, she bent over Gio until her silky hair fell over her face. Veiling her intent. And in one small shift, she knocked her purse askew, scattering its contents.

One second.

Two.

Her breath held.

When no one moved, she slid her gaze toward her toppled purse. A few items had spilled out—a water bottle, a notebook...and the butt of her gun.

Her dress was fanned out on the ground, with its hem touching the purse. Without lingering too long, she pretended to move her purse aside. But not without first closing her hand around the gun, using the voluminous skirt of her dress as cover.

It was dangerous.

Anyone standing just above her could easily see the outline of the gun under her thin cotton dress. But from the guards' vantage point, she prayed that it just appeared like she was rearranging her dress.

Noticing the closest guard frowning at her, she quickly moved her hand up to wipe her tear-filled cheeks. Making herself look as pitiful and innocent as possible.

Mumbling an audible goodbye, Ana stretched up to kiss Gio on the cheek and slid the gun around to his back.

A tension came into his body.

But he did not move.

*Come on.*

"That's enough, Ana," her aunt called out.

She slowly pulled back.

She could have chanced firing the gun herself, but there was no predicting where it would land under her untrained hands. Her only hope was for Gio to have enough strength.

"Ana, leave him!"

Come on.

*Come on.*

In the blink of an eye, Gio whipped the gun from out behind his back and fired two quick shots straight through the closest guard's head.

Noises exploded all at once, a screeching cacophony that deafened her. Gunshots struck the window behind them,

sending glass shards flying through the air. Bracing for their impact, she lunged toward Gio, who grabbed her weakly while he fired two more shots. Aiming for the other guards, who had begun returning fire.

Flames licked at her shoulder.

“Ana!”

At Gio’s thunderous expression, she noticed a bullet had caught her arm.

A mere graze given the minimal amount of bleeding. But it burned like hell, leaving her feeling like her skin had been flayed to the bone.

I’m okay.

She didn’t know if she’d managed to say the words out loud when another bullet whizzed past her ear.

“Ana!”

Gio’s voice seemed louder than ever, even though he had to be losing strength. He had lost so much blood already. His whole body was swaying with the effort of holding up the gun. She didn’t know how much longer he had before he bled to death.

“Ana! Stop!”

*“Stop!”*

When silence blanketed them in a rush, Ana realized it wasn’t just Gio, but also her aunt who had been shouting. The

older woman looked pale, suddenly frightened by the situation.

The two remaining guards were huddled next to her, alert and ready to strike, but she hesitated.

Gio must have noticed it as well because he commanded in a thready whisper, “Let h-her go.”

What?

Ana turned to her husband, but his eyes were fixed on her aunt. Blood dripped down his forearms, splattering onto the floor.

“You wanted me. You h-have me. Now, let her *go*.”

“No.”

Both of them ignored her.

With a terse nod, Auntie agreed.

Sitting there on the ground dumbly, Ana felt Gio push her, shoving at her to get up. She resisted and reached for him. But he swatted her hand away.

The effort was costing him. A painful grimace crossed his face, but he was determined. “Go!”

Ana backed away.

Scared, helpless.

Her heart breaking.

His eyes were so tired, the once gleaming black eyes now dulled. Defeated.

She had done this. She had summoned him here to Pittsburgh, unwittingly luring him to his death, and then left him alone. It was all her fault.

And yet, he looked at her now, despite all that had transpired, as if she was *everything* to him.

Memorizing her features.

As if it were a goodbye.

Ana clutched her throat, feeling his gaze choke her.

He had always regarded her that way, from the very start—though she hadn't realized it then.

Back when he'd discovered her hiding in a corner during Gabi and Tony's betrothal, he hadn't seen her as a poor cousin or a castoff. He'd seen her...as his queen.

*Go.*

His lips moved.

“No!” Ana wrenched out of his grip and crawled forward until she was in front of him, covering him.

She felt him try to shove her aside, but his muscles had lost all power. His breaths came in angry, wheezing puffs from behind her.

Meeting her aunt's eyes, Ana raised her chin. “I'm not leaving. If you want him, you'll have to kill me first.”

One of the guards raised his gun.

Auntie's hand flung out wildly as she stared down at her, incredulous. “Don't throw away your life for him, Ana,” she

warned sharply. “I will give you a fresh start. A happier one. I guarantee it.”

She couldn't.

Anything else would always pale in comparison to the precious few months she'd shared with Gio. It would be an unending nightmare without respite.

Feeling his hands twist in the back of her dress—pleading with her or holding her, she didn't know. But there was nowhere else she would rather be than here in his embrace.

Closing her eyes, Ana held her breath, waiting for the gunshot. Praying that it would be painless.

*Crackle.*

*Hiss.*

“Someone's here.”

A disembodied voice echoed through the room.

Chills ran up her spine.

When Ana's eyes blinked open, she saw a guard picking up a walkie-talkie. He began to mumble orders to the person on the other end, whose voice was distorted by static.

No response came.

As he repeated the order to resounding silence, footsteps began rushing toward them from somewhere in the hallway. Approaching closer and closer until they stopped just outside the room.

The guards braced themselves.



She froze in place.

The door swung open with a bang.



“Tony...”

His name oozed out of her in a whisper, her body slumping in relief.

It felt like a fever dream watching the lean, young man march in. His wide eyes latched onto her disheveled form cowering on the floor—and then Gio’s.

At the sight of his bloody Boss, he paled before taking a jerking step back, scanning around the room. The once beautiful office now looked positively gruesome, littered with bodies and broken glass.

Tony turned a questioning glance at his mother, who looked similarly shocked by his appearance.

“What the hell did you do...” Auntie fixated not on him but beyond—on the housekeeper, who was hovering at the doorway uncertainly.

“I didn’t know...Master Tony asked to—”

“And you *agreed?*” Auntie barked in outrage. “You had strict orders not to let anyone else in.”

“But he’s—”

“Get out!”

The woman scampered out, slamming the door shut behind her.

Auntie immediately turned to her son in consternation, her face crumpling in distress. “You shouldn’t have come here, Tony. You were not supposed to come back until evening.”

“So you could do *what?*” His voice rose, bordering on hysteria. He gazed wildly around the room before meeting Ana’s eyes again.

She smiled reassuringly, anchoring him as best she could in this storm, even as terror thrummed through her veins.

The normal boyish grin on his face was gone as he inhaled sharply before eyeing the two guards. “Both of you—leave.”

They frowned in confusion.

“*Leave,*” he said with more confidence and authority. “Now!”

“Antonio.” Auntie frantically pulled at his arm. “What are you doing? The plan isn’t done yet.”

He stared at her, clearly not understanding. “This is *Ana and Gio*, Mom. They’re on the fuckin’ floor bleeding. What the hell are you talking about,” he pleaded, fear and anger lacing his tone. “Just tell the guards to move back and call an ambulance!”

But she shook her head.

“It’s too late.”

“Mom—”

“We’ve come too far.”

“Too far with what?” he demanded sharply.

When the older woman stood defiantly mute, Tony turned back to Ana questioningly. She swallowed heavily, her voice quivering. “The guard,” she whispered, “the one who attacked me...” He didn’t move, but recognition bloomed in his eyes. “...he’s the one who rigged the car bomb.”

Silence.

His face went blank.

“Auntie ordered him to.”

The wind whistled through the broken windows, bringing with it the suffocating summer heat. Behind her, Gio continued to breathe shallowly, clutching her protectively.

“W-what?” Antonio’s voice broke. Devastation on his face. He turned desperately to Ana, begging her to restate it or correct it, but when she could not, he ran an agitated hand through his hair. Shell-shocked. “Gabi’s accident...”

His words trailed off.

But the truth would not ebb.

Every ruinous thing that had happened to Gabriella and Gio’s family had been at his mother’s hands, because of her unquenching need to rise to the top and secure the Mancini family’s position.

Tony wiped his face, which was sweating under the sweltering heat, as Auntie tried to protest. She tried to defend

herself, but he didn't seem to hear any of it.

“How—I don't—” His eyes flared, looking so lost. “Are you actually going to kill them?” he said hoarsely, watching the guards with their guns drawn.

There was no denial.

Maybe her aunt would save Ana, but even that seemed unlikely now with Ana crouched in front of Gio, shielding him from their fire.

“Tell them to leave.”

Silence.

“Mom, tell the guards to leave!”

When her aunt refused, he yanked out a gun from his back pocket and pointed it at one of the guards, his arms shaking violently.

“Tony!”

“Both of you leave!”

“Tony, stop that—”

*Bang!*

One of the guards who had started to aim at Gio's head instantly dropped to the floor with a loud grunt, a bullet ripping through his right hand. His gun clattered onto the carpet.

Ana covered her mouth, shocked. Her cousin had actually done it. He'd fired at one of his mom's guards. She hadn't even realized that he'd been carrying a gun when he'd entered,

or that he knew how to operate one. But he must have prepared himself after Ana's cryptic call.

Her dazed eyes slid over to the fallen body.

If he'd fired one second later, the guard's bullet would have ripped straight through Gio.

The second guard scrambled away, rushing to the door when Tony swung his gun over to him. "I'm leaving. I—"

*Bang!*

He frantically ripped open the door and fled out into the hall.

Tony breathed heavily, his chest pumping with adrenaline.

Everything was eerily quiet and vacant in the aftermath of the guard's flight. The housekeeper was also nowhere in sight. Only Auntie remained, appalled by the staff deserting her.

She lifted her gaze to her son, stunned.

Tony seemed in a daze himself, almost unnerved by his own actions. Sweat continued pouring down his face.

Not wanting to lose this opportunity, Ana quickly scrambled to her feet, tugging Gio up. "Tony—please, help."

Her husband's eyelids were fluttering close. His pulse was growing fainter. But he couldn't look away from the older woman in front of them. "D-don't let...her...go."

"We have to get you to the hospital," Ana urged.

"D-don't." Gio's black eyes were dilated, urging Tony to stay behind when he stumbled toward them.

Her cousin looked torn.

“Luke and the other men should be here any minute,” Ana assured him. “They’ll—” She didn’t know what exactly they would do with her aunt. The Family had publicly executed others for far milder infractions. But this type of treason would demand something so much worse.

Ana glanced helplessly at her aunt, who regarded them somberly with an oddly calm expression on her face. “They’ll take care of her.”

Despair filled Tony’s face. When he saw Ana sadly watching his expression, he hung his head and busied himself with helping Gio stand up.

They held him up from either side, steadying him until he faced the door where her aunt lingered.

Auntie watched them grimly.

Gio’s arms twitched under their grip. “Y-you destroyed my family...” he hissed at her. “You b-burned them alive,” he spat, vibrating with fury.

Auntie said nothing, no apologies, no defense—even as he lurched forward to grab her by the throat. Ana and Tony frantically grabbed him, struggling to keep him upright.

Ana desperately shushed him, begging him to save his breath. But agony and delirium had wrapped their grip around him. “I-I would have given you anything,” Gio whispered plaintively. “Anything y-you asked me. My mother...my father...*gone*.”

Moisture filled his eyes.

Auntie looked away as Ana blinked back her tears too.

They soldiered on, dragging Gio forward even when he seemed determined to stay back and fight. Just as they reached the edge of the doorway, they heard the loud thud of the front doors flying open and someone shouting their names.

*Luke.* Her heart leaped, recognizing his deep voice. Thank God.

It was over. It was finally over.

When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw her aunt looking down at the floor. Resignation and defiance intermingled in her stiff frame.

She bent down to pick up something.

Ana faltered.

A gun. One of the guard's.

“I know what the punishment is,” Auntie muttered, her wrinkled eyes hooded with sadness and defeat. “I won't let my family suffer that shame.”

The words didn't quite register. Not at first. When her aunt lifted the weapon, Ana cried out.

Everything came to a halt.

And in the hush came the final blow.

# Epilogue

The wind whistled through the open windows, sending a shiver rippling through her arms even on the warm autumn night. Her violet dress fluttered in its wake, its silky folds rising and falling again.

“What a lovely design.”

She jumped, noticing one of the Capo’s wives—Marco’s wife—smiling kindly at her.

Ana murmured a thank you, edging back from the window to greet her. Laughter and music boomed all around them, a strange sound to behold after all this time. Even the woman beside her seemed to appreciate its significance. “It’s nice to have a celebration after a while.”

Her eyes were gentle, understanding.

Ana swallowed.

“Marta had planned the last gala so well.”

“Yes.”



This time around, Ana had left it all up to professional event planners. The memories were still too sore, and she had many other priorities to attend to this year. “My business partner, Emma, handled more of the planning this year, along with a local company.”

“Ah.” The woman glanced over at the blonde, who was circling the tables like a hawk, scanning around for any issues. She hummed meaningfully.

Ana followed her gaze to find her friend now arguing with a tall, hulking man. Luke.

Oh, dear.

“Probably just some coordination issues.” Ana grimaced.

They made small talk for several more minutes before parting ways, and Ana exhaled in relief. She felt fatigued, and the volley of curious questions from the Family had been too much to bear. Though not as bad as the sympathies and pitiful looks they threw her way.

Rubbing her churning stomach, she wandered out the front doors until cool, fresh air filled her lungs. She swallowed it up gratefully.

People kept filtering into the hall, but she remained out of sight, away from their prying eyes.

Had it only been a year?

It felt, at times, like a nightmare that would not pass. So much worse than the dreams she’d experienced after the guard’s attack.

*Sigh.*

“Not that bad of a party, I hope.”

A small smile crept up her face as she felt his arms close around her. Cradling her belly gently.

Gio’s warm and solid body curved to her back, surrounding her with his protective embrace.

He hadn’t wanted to host a gala this year, especially not when she was merely four months along. Ana thought he’d been guarded before, but it had worsened exponentially once she’d become pregnant.

He vetted and vetted every step and every person, cycling through staff every few months. Intractably paranoid.

They had barely stepped out since that fateful day, disengaging from all social events until today. Grief was the excuse they gave everyone...which was not far from the truth. It felt like sharp pieces of glass were perpetually lodged in her heart.

But she knew they couldn’t hide any longer. There were duties and responsibilities they could not escape, just like the memories. As Don and Donna, they had to lift the Family and unite them, even when scars were dividing them on the inside.

“Antonio called.”

She jerked.

“He’s free now. I have him on hold.”

Happiness and disappointment filled her. “He refused to come?”

Gio’s black eyes searched her face; his fingers rubbed her downturned lips. With a regretful look, he nodded.

Exhaling, she put on a happy smile and laid out her palm for his phone. Gio unmuted the call and handed it to her, running a soothing hand up and down her back.

“Ana’s here.”

Clearing her throat, she asked, “Tony?”

“Hey, pretty lady. Are you cooking my niece well?” He chuckled softly. She giggled, tears lining her lids at hearing him laugh after so long.

“Why don’t you come and inspect for yourself?”

“I’m sure the Don’s doing enough inspections over there.”

Ana glanced fondly at her husband, who was gazing back at her with a tender expression. “It’s been a nice turnout tonight, Tony. I wish you were here,” she said wistfully.

He only hummed, noncommittal.

“Gabi didn’t show up either...”

The phone was silent for so long that Ana wondered if the call had dropped. When she double-checked that it was still connected, she fiddled with her dress, emotion heavy in her chest. In her periphery, she saw that Gio had stepped slightly away, still within earshot.

Touching the silky fabric, she asked tentatively, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I–”

She waited.

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I do worry.” Ana frowned sadly. “You’ve moved away, left the Family.”

A long pause before he whispered, “I had to...How could I stay after–” The wind bellowed in his silence. Howling, almost in mourning.

“No one knows, Tony,” she said quietly. “They all think... well, you know what they think.”

Everyone in the Family had only heard one story: that Vitello was the one who had masterminded everything. He had been found guilty of multiple levels of treason. Payroll fraud. Hiring duplicitous staff. And worst of all, plotting and executing the assassination of the old Don and his wife.

As the rumors went, his last and final betrayal had been an attempt to kill Gio. It had spectacularly failed, resulting in multiple fatalities, including his own.

Marta Mancini’s involvement in it all had been erased, wiped away with her death. She was deemed a victim, an unfortunate and unintended casualty of Vitello’s attack.

The truth was hidden only in their memories.

“You still have a place here. Gio made sure to keep everything hushed up to protect your reputation.”

Tony snorted low. “Do you really believe that?”

“What?”

“Come on, Ana. You can’t be that oblivious. We both know there’s only one person Gio’s protecting—and it’s not me.” Her cheeks flushed at his meaning. “Gio had revenge right there in his hands; he could’ve told everyone about M-Mom, hung her out to dry. That’s what he wanted for so long, right?”

It was.

He had vowed it from the moment he’d discovered his parents’ deaths: to eviscerate their murderer and hang them from their doorstep, as a warning to all and sundry about crossing him and his family ever again.

“Gio gave it all up to protect *you* from the scandal.”

The tears that had been brimming rolled down her face. Hormones, grief, and worry mixed together. But most of all... love.

She had never had someone in her corner, so fully on her side as she had now.

After a few more trivial exchanges, Ana hung up. Her hand rubbed her stomach absently as she watched the stars above. Wondering if Tony could see the same view.

“He’s right, you know?” The warm embrace returned as Gio murmured in her ear, “I would give up everything for you.”

Revenge, power...my life.”

“*Gio.*” Her arms clenched around him reflexively. The muscles in her chest grew painfully tight, unable to bear the weight of his simple declaration.

She closed her eyes as she melted back into his chest. He rested his chin on her head.

As the wind billowed through her dress, her soft hair... carrying away all the pain in one simple sweep, she heard him whisper the words he so rarely uttered.

But the ones she felt in every breath with him.

# Afterword

Thank you for reading *Blue Blood*. If you enjoyed this book, your review would be much appreciated on [Goodreads](#) and [Amazon](#).

Stay tuned for my future releases! Coming up next are books 2 and 3 in *The Family* trilogy. You can follow updates on [lilyragley.com](http://lilyragley.com) and [@lilyragley](https://twitter.com/lilyragley).