

THIS THING OF OURS #1

SHATTERED

GLASS

THE STARLING

Sometimes it takes a deal
with the mafia to learn
who you really are.



NOELLE ALEXANDRIA
AND
LISA WALLS

Shattered Glass:
The Starling

By
Noelle Alexandria
And
Lisa Walls



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Other books in the *This Thing of Ours* series

In release order:

1. *Shattered Glass: The Starling* – October 2023
2. *Shattered Glass: The Gilded Cage* – Early 2024
3. *Treasured Wings: The Fledgling* – Spring 2024
4. *Shattered Glass: Gossamer Wings* – Summer 2024
5. *Kidding the Moon: Into the Dark* – Fall 2024
6. *Kidding the Moon: The Inferno* – release TBD
7. *Treasured Wings: The Fall* – release TBD
8. *Kidding the Moon: Leap of Faith* – release TBD
9. *Treasured Wings: The Phoenix* – release TBD

10. *Scattered Ash: Reformation* – release TBD

11. *The War Years: The Homefront* – release TBD

12. *Treasured Wings: The Warbird* – release TBD

13. *The War Years: Atonement* – release TBD

14. *Consecrated: The Vincenzo Parisi Story* – release TBD

***Shattered Glass: The Starling* contains themes of violence, abuse, sexual assault, abduction, human trafficking, discussion of child abuse, and graphic murder. Many outdated customs, conventions, and viewpoints of the 1930's often removed from stories to reflect contemporary views are presented intact in this piece.**

Reader discretion advised

Shattered Glass: The Starling is dedicated to Jennifer Long for her unwavering support from our earliest days and without whom this book and the *This Thing of Ours* series may not have come to fruition. She is the sort of friend and cheerleader everyone needs in their corner. We are lucky beyond words to have her in ours.



But the people of Gotham, wise souls ! are so much accustomed to see morality approach them, clothed in formidable wigs and sable garbs, “with leaden eye that loves the ground,” that they can never recognise her when, drest in gay attire, she comes tripping toward them with smiles and sunshine in her countenance.—Well, let the rogues remain in happy ignorance, for “ignorance is bliss,” as the poet says.

Washington Irving, “Salmagundi,” 1807

PROLOGUE

Monday, April 6, 1914

Along the sidewalks of the Upper East Side, well-dressed men escorted their blushing maidens—ladies of high society donning extravagant hats crafted by New York’s finest milliners. Exotic canines trod obediently before their masters—so perfectly groomed not a scratch of unkempt nails could be heard atop the rugged pavement. The pungent odor of soot and sewage juxtaposed the immaculate architecture and the ostentatious display of wealth that cluttered the streets and avenues. The city called out like a siren to those with hopes and dreams, allured by its magic and promise of riches.

Beyond the delicate laces, velvet and furs, there lay a darkness that feasted upon innocence. No soul who ventures towards her call expects to meet their death so suddenly, but to achieve one’s dreams, she requires sacrifices. Those unwilling to sacrifice tempt their fate. A game of roulette, if you will...

The petite, curly-pigtailed sprite had no fear upon her one-and-only trip to the big city. Indeed, it had been the most fun of her life! Seeing a moving picture show! Buildings that touched the sky! Eating her supper in a real restaurant with real menus! She didn’t know what any of the descriptions meant—Basil? Parmesan? Her mama settled on a simple spaghetti for her newly-minted five-year-old. Her papa hardly paid any mind. He kept a nervous eye on everything else. The

little girl thought maybe he was just nervous about being around so many people. There were never very many people back home on the farm.

The world felt so big here. The girl was intoxicated by the magic of the day's escapades, unable to muster a single worry in her little blonde head. Naive she was, and surreal it all was—especially when a man in the restaurant suddenly pulled out a pistol and with one slow exhale later, two people across the way lay dead. Confused and struggling to understand, she sat frozen in her boosted chair watching the chaos unfold, staring blankly while the air filled with piercing screams. Her wide, sapphire eyes suddenly fixed on the lanky teenage boy running to tackle the assailant. It was like something from her first picture show, only this one had sounds and colors. She hadn't seen such a tiny little gun before. It wasn't like her papa's big one that he used to kill the cows and pigs before slaughter. *Maybe it needed to be littler because people were littler than cows?*

She sat completely still, entranced by red sprinkles landing on the inky-haired teenage boy's cheeks while he kneeled on the floor, smashing his fists into the gunman's face. Her hypnosis was broken when another man yanked her from the small wooden highchair and threw her over his shoulder. Holding her tight, he ran toward the door. Her papa jumped from his chair, causing it to fly several feet behind him as he chased after the man. Her mama screamed her name and ran after them, but she quickly fell far behind. Over the big man's shoulder, she extended her small hand outward and watched on with wide-eyes, waiting for her rescue. Her papa caught up quickly and threw himself at the man, knocking him off his feet.

The little girl landed hard on the ground, but the new wool coat that she had stubbornly refused to take off at dinner had cushioned her fall. The man's hat fell from his head and landed beside her. She snatched the souvenir and crushed it into her chest before her sobbing mama caught up with her and yanked the little girl to her bosom. The strange man managed

to fight off her father and jumped to his feet, staring back at the little girl once more before fleeing into a busy crowd. Her papa rushed over to his family to check the little girl for injuries.

“That was fun!” The ignorant child grinned as if she’d just been on the adventure of a lifetime. “Why is mama crying?”

Her papa patted her head with a shaking hand and a furious glance over his shoulder. “I never should have brought you here, my daughter. This is no place for you. Let us go home, and never may you return to this terrible city.”

CHAPTER 1

Friday, July 28, 1933

Every morning when Grace-Anne Colby woke up, she had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Her move to the big city happened only a couple months before, and she wondered how long this euphoria could possibly last—even the most mundane activities filled her belly with glee. Everything in her life was exactly as she always hoped it would be. How could she be luckier? The picturesque scenery was just as she always imagined it from the books she read during her life on the farm. *The elegance! The sophistication! The electric lights!* No more outhouses, no more cocks crowing before dawn, no more greasy Bag Balm to rub on the cows' udders and her hands to keep them from getting too rough. There was a reason to wear lipstick and to let her hair down, and the ladies on the street...oh, how they wore the latest fashions that she only dreamed of when flipping through the old Sears catalogs. Here, there was a brand new Sears department store—one that she could step foot in to touch and admire all the pretty garments in the flesh, rather than simply drooling over advertisements. She even got a real paying job at the Sun Times right out of university!

Her first big assignment led her to the Gotham Sanitarium—a privately run facility that housed the mentally insane. Anonymous tips her editor had received made allegations of some unsavory living conditions within the hospital. What goes on inside those walls remained hidden behind locked doors and “staff-only” policies. Requests for a tour of the sanitarium were vehemently rejected, and when Grace informed her editor of this roadblock, she was simply instructed to “figure it out.” So she did. No one seemed to

notice the anxious reporter who was now disguised by a stolen nurse's uniform. There she stood in a grimy hallway, wide-eyed and fighting off nausea in a place that reeked of human waste and rotting dignity. Even after several days of studying the facility for eight-hour periods, she couldn't seem to acclimate to the stench. Grace's "borrowed" nursing uniform was the cleanest thing around despite being plucked from the back of a laundry truck already soiled and not yet washed. She did try to clean it as much as she could at home in her bathroom sink, at least.

Not a staff member around paid her any mind which surprised her. In fact, she noticed most of them hardly looked up from the ground while making their way through the corridors. The nurses seemed especially detached—stone faced and quiet, they only seemed to speak to one another out of necessity to give directives or ask for assistance. Did they even really know their coworkers? Or was this just a miserable job they accepted as a means to survive, with no interest in making friends along the way?

It was her final day at the sanitarium after a week-long excursion, she was more emotionally drained than she had ever been in her life. She was thrilled to be at the finish line, but she felt immensely guilty knowing that she had the ability to just up and leave, while the others did not.

"Excuse me, nurse? You're needed in the theater," a man in a long white coat snipped at her.

Grace felt the pit of her stomach fall to the floor. Just before she reached the doorway to the operating theater, a frightened woman approached her, barefoot and wearing nothing but a thin white nightgown. Grace's fingers curled into the patient's shoulder, as if the weary-faced woman's interruption could somehow protect her from that frightening room that she'd already entered once before to clean the mess left by a failed lobotomy just hours ago. The dull steel-pick stained with blood was the stuff of nightmares. She couldn't go back there. No, she simply wouldn't, especially with a live patient.

All of it was nothing like she'd expected when she'd proposed an article about the unusually low rate of patients surviving the sanitarium long enough to go home, and she was ready to leave and never return. It was just too much—this place was a dungeon, and its prisoners were neglected and tortured to death.

“It'll be all right,” Grace gently reassured the woman, staring into her haunted eyes with sympathy as she held her trembling hands.

“I'll be right back.” Grace decided it was time to look for an escape. She had more than enough for a story.

“Thank you, nurse. I'll take her back to her room,” a man spoke softly upon approach. “*Vieni, Gaia.*”

Grace turned her head just enough to see a finely-tailored suit hugging the cut figure of a man with broad shoulders. He was out of place here—surely he wasn't staff. Her curiosity dissipated quickly, however. There was far too much happening, and she could hardly think straight—not when this terrified woman was begging her for help, nor when she was expected to assist with that barbaric procedure on a human being. The suited man with jet-black hair steadily approached the frightened woman who abruptly pulled her trembling hand out from Grace's palm and instead reached for the mystery man's elbow, letting him lead her away to another ward. Alone once again before the theater's doorway, Grace's eyes darted around for an excuse not to go into that hellish room.

“*Have you seen my daughter? Have you seen my Amelia?*” another female patient cried out to each person she passed by. The woman was emaciated, with skin so translucent that Grace could see pale blue veins; her hair so thin that the scar lining her scalp was clearly visible from several feet away. Suddenly, a real nurse approached and offered to assist the operation in her place if Grace could return the crying woman named Louisa Carpenter to her bed, and she graciously obliged.

Grace calmly approached Miss Carpenter. “Where is your room, miss?” she asked softly. She hated the thought of

returning the woman to what was surely a prison cell of sorts. Though a prison cell might have been an improvement over the filthy disgrace of a hole that was Miss Carpenter's bedroom. Stained sheets on a thin, worn out mattress atop a creaky rusted frame—no less fit for the pigs back on the farm—and leather straps that hung from all four corners. At least it wasn't the lobotomy, she grimaced. Before Grace could back out of the room, the woman's bone-thin fingers gripped her wrist tightly.

“Please don't go,” the frightened patient rasped.

Her heart shattered. She couldn't leave this woman just yet, and she sure as hell wouldn't tie her to the bed laying helpless and alone. Choking back tears for the inmate—*the patient*—Grace chose to sit on the edge of the soiled mattress and let the woman talk. Chances were great that no one else had bothered listening to her for quite some time. Miss Carpenter proceeded to tell the story of the little girl she once lovingly held, and how one day she had just vanished without a trace...and how no one—not even the police—seemed to care. When she'd left the hospital that day for what she'd decided would be her last, while she was glad for it, she knew it meant Miss Carpenter wouldn't have anyone else to talk to about the daughter that no one believed even existed.

Years in university hadn't prepared Grace for the heartache of going undercover for a story, nor had anything else in her twenty-four years of life, for that matter. University had merely shown her how much she would still have to learn, and how to write an interesting article.

The following week while on a stroll through her neighborhood, she finally saw it. Her article! It was printed in bold letters across the cover of the Sun Times. She smoothed the crisp newspaper into her scrapbook full of treasures that

she couldn't wait to show her parents the next time she visited them. They hadn't thought New York City was a good idea at all. Truthfully, they didn't think going to university was a good idea, either—well, at least her father didn't. “*You're a farmer's girl, Gracie,*” he'd advised in a fading accent watered down from decades in the United States. Grace practically gave up hope until her mother had stepped in and threatened to become one of those new-fangled feminists and leave him if he didn't let their daughter go. Wasn't she right, after all, that woman should get to vote?

If it wasn't so expensive to call long distance, she'd find a telephone and call to let them know that their little Gracie had made the front page! She could brag that she had even received an invitation to a big fancy party happening that night—from the editor-in-chief himself, no less! The absence of spare change in her coin purse meant a telephone call was not an option, so she decided on just sending a letter.

They would have to be proud of her, surely. And maybe... maybe the article would help change the living conditions of the patients. Her story had been so well received, after all; it had sold a record number of copies by noon. That had to mean something, right? She always wanted to leave her mark on the world, hoping she could make a difference and help the less fortunate. All the jaded adults in her life back at home made it seem like making a lasting, positive change on the world was merely a pipe-dream for the naive. Oh, how she hoped dearly that this story had the power to prove them all wrong!

Oh, my! The time! Grace shook her head at the clock. Getting lost in thought was something that caught her up more than she cared to admit. If she didn't start getting ready for the party this instant, she'd have no choice but to show up in a knapsack.

Grace pulled out the two formal dresses she owned and held one up to herself, then the other, unsure which would be more appropriate. Neither could be half as decadent as the gowns the other ladies were sure to wear, but who would care anyway? No one knew her, and she figured her overall

appearance was so unassuming that she doubted anyone would pay her any attention, regardless of her attire. She allowed herself a moment for a little self-indulging fantasy—dreaming of walking into the gala wearing her home-made pink frock, a simple confection of silk charmeuse, and all the ladies in their sparkling jewels running to know where in heavens she got her hands on such a darling gown! Grace smiled at herself, swaying before the mirror with the hangered dress pressed against her front.

She turned her attention back toward her favorite light blue one that had a little beadwork at the bottom—the first store-bought dress she ever owned. Her sewing skills were decent enough, and her pink dress was serviceable, but the blue one... oh, how proud it made her! Flowing silk chiffon that twisted about her legs when she twirled, and the cut glass beads caught and reflected the light so beautifully. The thin straps and fluttering sleeve caps made her feel so grown up. No matter how much she loved the pink dress she'd made, she couldn't turn away from her store-bought treasure. She slipped it on and pulled a dressing robe over-top for protection while she fixed her hair.

Grace pulled her pins out of each pin curl and drew her brush through them. She brushed, and brushed, trying to coax her locks into place, but it didn't quite seem right for the dress she chose. She settled on wrapping it in two braids around her head like a halo, then secured them in a twist. She felt her cheeks burn red with sudden embarrassment, realizing maybe her hairdo might appear more out of fashion than any old dress possibly could. It was most certainly not a glamorous look, but it would have to do. Her lips pursed in a tight line. Getting her hair set properly every two weeks was a luxury she could not afford. *Maybe someday.*

Minutes before leaving the shabby apartment, she tucked her other clothing neatly back in the poplar chest, put away the stationary that cluttered the small kitchen table, slipped the letter for her parents into a small purse, and finally grabbed a pale gray mink-stole—a graduation gift from her mother

which was passed down from her mother, making Grace it's third-generation owner. Nervous excitement fluttered in her belly. She could scarcely believe it! Her first big New York City party! Not missing a single beat, she hurried down the stairs to the mailbox and hailed a cab. No matter what happened, she was ready for it!

Grace wasn't ready for it. How could she have fooled herself? Standing outside in the breezy summer air, she watched as ladies in fur hats and satin gowns stepped out of glossy black sedans and flitted to the door with dazzling gentlemen in tailcoats. Their diamonds! Oh, how they sparkled like stars! Her old beads were as glamorous as gravel by comparison. A sudden wave of insecurity froze her in place. If she didn't move, maybe they won't notice her, she hoped. What was she supposed to do now? Each couple handed the doorman something to be let in, but she couldn't see what it was. Money? She'd used most of what she had left on the taxi, and she had just enough left to get home. The chief said nothing about money. She moved casually to get a better view and realized it was something white. An invitation most likely, and the only invite she had was a verbal one from a man nowhere to be seen. The only thing she could do now was approach the stone-faced men and hope they would know she was an expected guest, despite knowing she looked nothing like one.

"Hello," she greeted to the doorman. "My name is Grace-Anne Colby, and I was invited by Mason Young, the chief of the—"

"May I see your invitation, Miss Colby?"

She blinked at the man. *Shoot*. "Well, no, I don't actually have...but he should be here. If you could let me find him—"

“She’s with me.” An older gentleman came up from behind and nodded at her. His cool, dark eyes were in stark contrast to the warm gaiety of the night. “Miss Colby is my guest,” he gestured, placing a hand suggestively against the small of her back.

The doorman nodded in recognition of the mysterious figure, swiftly moving aside and letting the two in. The slender man extended a gloved hand and led the confused woman into the foyer. She was bewildered over his assertion of familiarity while having no idea who he was, and she felt a bit uneasy for it. The fifty-something-year-old man was far from threatening, but she couldn’t help but feel a bit intimidated in his presence. Despite her best efforts, she just couldn’t bring herself to look up at him directly, opting instead to look down at her fiddling hands. “Thank you, sir, but do I know you?”

“No, but I know you, Miss Grace-Anne Colby.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Have a good night now.” His tone was snide and almost accusatory.

“Thank you again, sir.” Grace bowed her head with a slight curtsy and headed toward the ballroom, ignoring the nervous feeling flopping around in her belly from the man’s familiarity with her. Maybe he saw her article? Yes, surely that’s all it was. Her curiosity vanished the moment she took her first step into the ballroom and her jaw dropped.

Never in all her life could she have imagined such a glorious sight! All gilt gold and shiny glass and mirrors! The mosaic tiles beneath her feet were a work of art unto themselves upon which hundreds of people stepped without a care. The soaring glass dome overhead let the moonlight pour in past the elaborate crystal chandeliers, unnoticed by anyone but her. The jazz band in the corner caught her attention above everything else. She sauntered toward them, hypnotized and swaying her hips to the beat, oblivious to a tall, dark man eyeing her cautiously, or to the grimacing man eyeing that man, or any of the other strangers who glanced her way, somehow finding charm in the girl who was clearly not one of them.

“Grace!” a low voice chortled nearby.

She turned around and found the man she sought. “Oh! Hello, Chief! This party! It’s—it’s magnificent!”

Chief Mason plucked two glasses of champagne off of a server’s tray and handed one to Grace. “Congratulations, my girl.”

Grace sniffed her glass, then pulled it away from her nose. She’d never tasted alcohol before, in fact, she rarely ever saw it in person outside of the moonshine her old boyfriend’s father bootlegged back home. The crystal champagne flute caught a bit of the light from the glittering chandelier above. She momentarily lost herself in the colorful refractions before abruptly snapping her attention back to her slurring boss.

“Congratulations for what, sir?”

Her chief didn’t answer, and the slow smile creeping across his face made her gut twist into a knot. What was it one of her fellow staff reporters had said to her? About their pot-bellied chief “having eyes for her”? She thought her colleague had only been teasing, but now she wasn’t so sure. To cover for her dropped gaze, she lifted the glass to her lips and prepared to take her first sip of alcohol.

“Mason!” an unknown drunken voice cried out.

Grace didn’t know who called him away, but she sighed with relief the second her boss was gone, and then she took that coveted first sip. She didn’t know how to describe it, but it was warm, strong, and the bubbles tingled against her tongue. Hm. Unceremoniously as ever, she took a larger gulp this time until it was nearly gone. It was good stuff, and she thought she might enjoy a full bottle strictly to herself if prohibition wasn’t still going strong. She supposed it was simply a matter of having enough money to bypass such a law.

“Hors d’oeuvres, miss?”

She glanced at the small black tray resting skillfully atop the waiter’s white-gloved hands. It was half-full of small

crackers with a strange pink paste topped with tiny little spheres.

“What is it, sir?” her brows furrowed in confusion.

The server tried to hold back a bashful grin. No one ever called a man of his stature or station “*Sir*”.

“Caviar atop pâté on water crackers. Try it. You might like it, miss.”

“Well then, thank you. I suppose I’ll give it a try.” She gingerly picked up one of the morsels and stuck the whole thing into her mouth. It was quite salty, and the caviar burst delightfully each time she bit one between her teeth. She giggled at the sensation.

“Do you like it, miss? Have another.” he grinned.

“Just one more will be fine. Thank you!”

Grace finished her second piece, again enjoying each little pop of the caviar, and returned to perusing the ballroom. The couples were dancing across the floor in an unusual sort of way she’d never seen before. Only the younger ladies dared to dance along to the excitingly vulgar jazz music, and Grace marveled at their skill. She slightly envied them for their male partners. How romantic it would be to dance with a man in a place like this. How she’d dreamed of it! To be held in his arms and kissed while he whispered sweet nothings into her ear. Her cheeks burned at the mere thought of it.

Chief Mason found his way through the crowd back to Grace and tapped her elbow somewhat rudely. “Miss Colby, follow me.”

All of his kindness, smarmy as it had been, was gone. A stone dropped into the pit of her stomach, filling her with sudden dread. Grace followed him to a quieter corner of the venue like a disobedient child about to get the belt from an angry father.

“You’re fired.” he snapped.

“What?” she gasped at his unexpected declaration. “Fired? But I...”

“No ‘buts ’ about it, Miss Colby. Do you have any idea what trouble your article got me into?” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“You approved the article!” Grace hardly cared to be discreet. How could she be fired for what he approved? The article that had made the paper so much money!

“Keep your voice down, Miss Colby. You’re a liability. I made a mistake hiring you.” his face was red-hot from a concoction of alcohol and resentment.

“If you think it was a mistake, then give me a chance to write some stories you really do approve of. I need this job. Please!” Grace touched his arm and begged with tears prickling in her eyes as she did.

He flinched away, avoiding looking at her. “Don’t you dare touch me, and do not make a scene unless you want to be arrested. You’ll be the one that’s disgraced, not me. You may come to the office tomorrow to collect your things and your paycheck. Good night, Miss Colby.” He stormed off in a huff, leaving her alone in that dark corner, inches from sobbing and making a fool of herself.

Just like that, her dream life was gone. Grace bolted from the ballroom and ran into the foyer, unsure of what just happened. She prayed this was all just a nightmare she’d soon wake from, and everything would be as it was just a sunset before. From a budding star reporter—to fired and disgraced—all in the space of an hour...it was too much to take in so quickly. She could feel herself becoming hysterical. Not wanting to make a scene, she decided it was time to leave and her heart broke. She exited into the frigid nighttime air and threw herself against an outside wall to let out a small sob. Shivering from the cold, she wiped her cheeks and ordered herself to keep it together until she got home. She mentally counted the money she had left, including her last paycheck, and deducted rent—if she was lucky, she could make it a

month. A month to find a new job. Maybe her landlady would be lenient on the due date for rent. She'd been a good, quiet tenant so far. A month would be tight, though, and the money in her purse for a cab home that night...she needed to save it. Walking several miles home wouldn't be pleasant, but she simply couldn't afford the alternative.

The street was quieter than she'd expected for being so close to a large Gala, and there were so few cars. There was, however, plenty of garbage getting tossed about by the wind and falling into random cracks and crevices along with the odd rat scampering around on their search for scraps dropped by the day's passers-by. It was late, though, well after nine o'clock. Who stayed up so late when electricity costed so much? She stopped and stared up at the moon.

"Owwooo," she quietly howled to herself, mimicking the coyotes she feared so much as a child. They frightened the livestock, and they would eat small children if they disobeyed their parents and didn't stay by their side—at least that's what papa always said. It actually happened to little Peter from the neighboring farm when he wandered off at night to find his missing puppy. But there were no coyotes in New York City, only wolves and card sharks.

A sudden *pop!* jolted her back to attention. A bullet clanged into something metal nearby, then another. Grace froze at the unexpected sound of gunfire.

Unable to find her voice to scream for help, she darted up the street, shoving aside a trash can in her way trying to find somewhere, anywhere to go. Heavy, rapid footsteps pounded on the pavement behind her. The cold air burned her lungs, but she couldn't stop realizing now that the assailant was after *her*. Just up ahead she saw a man leaned up against a wall lighting a cigarette. Friend or foe, she had no way of knowing, but the one behind her would certainly kill her. She threw the last of her energy into the final yards toward the man she prayed was a safe haven, nearly tripping over her own feet as she approached.

“Please, sir!” she panted, grabbing at his lapels, “I need help! There’s a man, and he—”

“A man? What am I, miss?” he teased with a light Italian accent.

The unexpected levity in his question distracted Grace from the panic of the situation. She turned her eyes from the shadows down the street up to gawk at the face of the most handsome man she’d ever seen. Sharp cheekbones and jawline that could have been cut from marble, full lips that parted slightly as he stared back at her, dark eyes that almost imperceptibly warmed for her before returning cold...he could have been Adonis himself.

Something down the street fell over with a thud. She jumped and looked back. One man began to chase another, leading the assailant away from her and the handsome stranger.

“I’m not usually out this time of night,” he rasped in a voice that was like molten silk, “not with a party going on nearby, but it’s your lucky night.” He flicked away the cigarette and carefully removed her hands from his coat, taking a moment to glance at them. “Your fingers are like ice,” he mumbled disapprovingly.

“How can you tell through your gloves?” Grace finally managed to squeak.

“Your fingernails are turning blue.” He tugged his gloves off and pulled them onto each of her hands before pulling her stole up over her shoulders.

“*Questo non va bene,*” he muttered to himself. He slipped his coat off his arms and tucked it around her shoulders, being quite gentle as he did so. Grace thought of the way her father tenderly wrapped her up in her coat when she was just a little girl. This man must have had a child of his own...and a wife. The thought disappointed her and she hated the feeling, but she shoved it from her mind when he moved to open the

passenger side door of a brand new Duesenberg that was parked at the curb right in front of them.

“Get in, miss. I’ll take you home.” He gestured toward her. Grace couldn’t help but notice that even his hands were works of art. His long fingers were strong, yet capable of such tenderness.

Grace stood frozen, silently stirring with foreign sensations she didn’t quite understand yet, and feeling terribly self-conscious about being dressed in a strange man’s clothes. She stared down at the exquisite leather gloves and the fine wool fabric of his coat which she had guessed to be cashmere. Those things would cost at least a full year’s worth of her salary, and this stranger just stuck them on her without a care?

“Sir, you’ll freeze in the car without these, and how do I know you won’t do something to me in there? Are you one of those gangsters?”

He glanced around them with keen eyes. “Don’t worry, Nurse. I promise, I won’t hurt you, but that man will. Now get inside. You’ll get sick in this cold.”

Nurse? Grace squeezed her eyes shut and tried to recall everyone who’d seen her that day in that revolting hospital, until she remembered a man...no, it couldn’t have been him, could it? What would a man like him be doing in such a place?

“Miss?” he cocked his head in concern.

Grace swallowed hard, uneasy at the thought of getting into a car with a stranger, but knowing well that walking home now was certainly the riskier choice. Despite her better judgment, she took his hand and slipped into the car, looking up at the man as he closed the door behind her.

“I live in Brooklyn,” she stuttered as he climbed in the driver’s seat. “There’s a park on Halsey Street. That’ll be close enough, sir.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and started the engine. “You just evaded death. Are you sure you want to take the chance again? I’ll take you to your door.”

Grace shivered despite the warmth of his coat surrounding her. “I’ll be okay being dropped off by the park. Really.”

The man sighed and shook his head, but said nothing more. Grace battled between the question of whether to make small talk, or to just keep quiet. How rude she must seem to say nothing—but wasn’t it impolite to not respect his silence? She wanted to ask him so many questions. Who was he? Was he the man at the hospital? How could he afford such a fancy automobile? None of it seemed appropriate, though.

She stole glances at his profile, his heavy brow, his straight nose that could have been stolen from a Roman sculpture, his eyes fixed so intently on the road ahead except to occasionally glance

out the side windows. His statuesque beauty was truly something to behold—and it was all she could think about after the first couple minutes of awkward silence had subsided—that was, until he stopped the car right in front of the door to her apartment building. She couldn’t remember now if she’d told him her address, but as the adrenaline continued to wear off, she was just too tired to care. At least she made it home safe. He shut off the engine and hopped out of the car to open her door before Grace could pull the handle. She stepped out and began to take his coat off, but he just shook his head and pulled it back over her shoulders.

“Keep it.”

“But—”

“I said to keep it. You’ll need it more than I do.”

Grace’s instincts warned her not to refuse him, though why would she need a man’s coat and gloves? He couldn’t mean for her to sell them, right?

“Thank you. By the way, I’m Grace-Anne Colby. Pleasure to meet you, sir.” she smiled shyly.

“Vincenzo Parisi. Now we’ve met. Get yourself inside and lock the door.” He turned away from her, looking toward the park across the street.

“You saved my life,” Grace smiled at him, brightening some and trying to make a little of that small talk. “That mugger probably would have killed me if you weren’t there.”

“That was no mugger, Miss Colby.” His tone was stern. “Now go inside. Go to sleep. Don’t be outside alone at night again.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered with an awkward curtsy. Without a backward glance, Grace darted into her apartment building. She took the steps two at a time and hastily locked her door and switched on the light. Only then, in the comfort of her familiar little apartment did the reality of the night finally hit her. Someone shot at her! But more importantly, she didn’t have a job! She could deal with the gunman fiasco later, but she had rent to pay. Her head began to throb.

Grace pulled the gloves off and rubbed the leather. She’d never felt a hide that supple. It was nothing like the kind they used on the farm. Leather like this was soft, strong, and expensive. She searched the pockets of the coat for any information on how to contact Mr. Parisi to return his belongings to him. She found nothing but ten folded hundred-dollar-bills. She stared hard at them. They had to be play-money. Sure, the man seemed wealthy, but no one carried so much cold hard cash alone on the street. There was nothing to use it for at that time of night.

But if it was real, it would pay her rent for two years! For the brief moment, she was tempted to shove it into her own purse and let it solve her money issues. Just as quickly as the thought materialized, guilt came and bit at her. The money wasn’t hers, and her integrity had no price tag. It was probably real, but it wasn’t hers to take. So, she folded the bills and stuck them back in the pocket along with the gloves and hung it up in her wardrobe.

When she hung up her dress, she muttered a curse under her breath. Where did that tear near the hem come from? So much money could buy her a new dress and still pay her rent, but it just wouldn’t be right. After all, the man had saved her. She

couldn't repay that kindness by keeping his money. She'd return it sometime, somehow. He'd probably just forgotten the money was in there.

Exhausted and stress-sick, Grace didn't bother finding her nightgown. Her plain cotton undergarments will have to do. Just like that, she'd fallen asleep before her head hit the pillow, dreaming of deep brown eyes and darkened street corners.

Enzo sat in his car long after her light had gone out, chain smoking till the engraved silver case was nearly empty. He mulled over the past week of events. The girl's article about the hospital had been a long time coming—a sorely-needed expose in his opinion. It was well-written, too. Only the upper floor where his sister resided was ever clean and maintained, but that was only because he paid a small mint for her to be there, and he demanded high standards. There were circumstances that made frequent visits risky for him, but he went as often as he could anyway to check in...and he was not happy that someone took their eyes off Gaia and let her escape to the lower wards.

His battered heart ached. He wished with everything he had that it was safe for his younger sister to come home. But she couldn't, not until he was certain she wouldn't jump out of a window again. After that unspeakable day, just six years before when his entire world was taken from him, she was all he had left, and if he had to lock her away to stop her from another attempt at changing that, then he'd do it.

That little Nurse Colby...Reporter Colby...*Grace*. She had been so gentle with Gaia, so concerned for her. He was admittedly too preoccupied with suppressing his anger over the circumstances that led him to the decrepit lower wards, and too busy looking for someone to hold accountable for Gaia's wandering to notice his sister's distress initially, but Miss

Colby was there for her. Her only sin the day he'd first seen her had been that she cared so deeply for those traumatized patients, and she went on to share the story of an institutionalized mother mourning the loss of a child in that article. Enzo personally knew a thing or two about that kind of pain.

What was the name of the patient? Miss Colby had been so careful to not say her name in the story she wrote, but he was fairly certain that the woman she'd written about was Miss Louisa Carpenter and her missing daughter. Before Miss Carpenter's girl had gone missing, she'd turned quite a few heads. But now she was a husk of her former self, all from the loss of a child, a form of misery he understood too well.

No one did a damned thing about that woman's missing child—no cop, no city official, *nessuno*—and the man who was likely responsible for it, well, his dealings weren't exactly a secret. There are reasons justice is never served and certain missing children's cases get swept under the rug. There was only one man who dealt in the business of children, and if it was within his power to do something about it...well, it just wasn't that simple. No one with any sense of self-preservation would touch any of the five dons, not even himself, Vincenzo Parisi, don of the Constanza family. They were all above the law, but of the five, only Cesare Giordano dealt with hurting children. Enzo burned with pure hatred for the bastard. Giordano had taken so much from everyone, not just money, but life's most precious gifts. Then one of his men went after Miss Colby for her article. She'd have been six-feet-under by now had he not "stepped out for a smoke." She would've been just another flame in this world extinguished by *il diavolo*.

He checked his cigarette case. *Niente*. He haphazardly flicked his silver lighter on and clicked the top closed to extinguish the flame. Flick. Click. Light. Dark.

He chuckled to himself. She'd given him his first easy, genuine smile in so long that he thought he'd all but forgotten how. Miss Colby had been charming at the ball, staring about the place, all wide-eyed and green as the spring foliage. She'd

been nowhere near as finely-dressed as the other women there, but that endeared her to him more. The others took it all for granted while she found joy and excitement in the simple things no one else batted an eye for. He loved the way her bright blue eyes danced over every detail. Admittedly, he felt a bit inspired to take it in himself and see things from her perspective. The life of a Don tarnishes the beauty in things, and oftentimes one finds they no longer take in the scenery—everything is business, and nothing else matters. He allowed himself just a moment to break away from the night's objective and look around. Though feeling a bit foolish, he found himself admiring the gloss tiles beneath their feet, the shining gilt mirrors around them, and the lights dancing through the crystal above them. He never really noticed the fine details of the place before. Despite its beauty, the gold he appreciated the most, however, was her golden-strawberry hair.

He knew who she was, even before she gave him her name. Word spread fast once that article had gone out, and he just knew that Giordano would have a hit on her by the day's end. It was dumb luck that Enzo had been invited to that ball as the guest of an old friend, and Esme had understood exactly why he'd wanted to keep an eye on Miss Colby, so he made a point to show up. Large parties weren't something he enjoyed, but this was necessary. Having only seen her once, he stood carefully out of sight, but close enough in the foyer to inspect every face that entered. Picking her out from the crowd turned out to be much easier than he thought—lucky for him—terribly dangerous for her. It wasn't by pure luck that he'd been outside once she left, however. He saw the confrontation with that slime-bag of a boss and knew she wasn't long for that Gala, and outside was where he was needed most. No attempt at a hit would have happened inside the ballroom. But outside, in the dark, where no one would notice—that was just the place to do it. Her luck was that he recognized her as the “nurse” who looked so worried about his baby sister. If he hadn't run into her at the hospital, he wouldn't have known what she looked like, and she'd have been just another New

York City casualty, another random “Woman Found Dead In Alley” blurb somewhere near the back page. The thought of it made him feel uneasy.

As long as Miss Colby stayed inside for the night, then he'd have time to arrange for someone to watch her after the sun went down for however long it was necessary—someone to follow her and to watch out for any of Giordano's men. With nothing left to do there for the night and certain that no one had tailed them, he turned his car around and headed back to the Gala. He needed to find Esme and his men to get some protection set in place. Giordano wasn't going to take another innocent woman down—not on Enzo's watch. He'd stake his life on it.

CHAPTER 2

*Saturday, July 29 1933 to
Wednesday, August 2, 1933*

A sharp knock roused Grace out of a deep sleep and back into the reality of her situation. Yesterday morning had been so beautiful and full of so much promise. Had it really come to this? It could be a nightmare. Maybe she was still asleep. She pinched herself and winced. Nope. It was real. Someone knocked again.

“Miss Colby, I know you’re in there!”

Grace groaned. “Just a minute, Mrs. Duckworth!” She rolled out of bed with a low moan escaping her throat and her hair a mess. Still half-asleep, she pulled on her pink satin robe before opening the door.

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Rent’s due, girl.” The sour old woman glared at her. “Got my money?” she barked, holding out a wrinkled hand.

“I just lost my job. Can I please pay some of it next week so I can eat while looking for a new one?” Grace whined.

“No!”

Grace’s heart sank. The last thing she wanted to do was tell her parents she’d failed. Her father would never let her live it down, and her mother would be so disappointed.

“Please! Just a few more days?” Her voice cracked.

“I want my money right now, or you’re out!”

“Tonight? Or even this afternoon? I still have my last paycheck to pick up.” She nodded, hoping to will her stubborn landlady into an agreement on at least a few-hours raincheck.

Mrs. Duckworth pursed her dry lips, and glared at her petite tenant from head to toe.

“Well, you haven’t been late before. So, I’ll be back tonight, and you’ll either have my money or your bags will be packed!” the old lady snapped before turning to walk away faster than one would expect for such an old witch.

Thankful and able to breathe again, Grace rushed to dress and get down to the office to collect her pay. Her face burned as she walked into the office and all the chatter ceased. Every last person in the newsroom stared at her. Everyone knew that she had just been fired and made sure their retinas burnt the words “disgraced” into her virgin skin.

“Should have just given my uncle what he wanted,” one of the only other girls in the newsroom taunted.

“You’re not getting a job anywhere else,” the mean girl sneered.

“You watch, Mary. I will get a new job in no time—a better one!” Grace stormed over to her desk to toss her few personal things into her handbag—her anger rising as she thought about the many times the chief had hinted at her to do inappropriate things with him that she didn’t want. How foolish she’d been to overlook his attentions as anything but sinister. But times had gotten desperate, and when she tapped her knuckles against the chief’s door, it opened almost immediately. Chief Mason’s eyebrows raised at the sight of her, and for a moment, she considered offering what he wanted, but she quickly decided that she’d rather sleep on the street before giving him an inch of her dignity.

“I just cleared out my things, but I still need my pay.”

“You’re getting nothing, Miss Colby.” The chief glowered. “You’re lucky I’m not billing you for the headache you caused. Now get out.”

Panic in the form of bile rose in Grace's throat. "The paper sold out everywhere because of my article. You owe me for that!"

"Out!" He roughly shoved her out the door and slammed it behind her.

Angry tears stung her eyes. Her already-dire situation had just become worse, but she refused to give up.

"Chief Mason!" She pounded on the door. "Chief!"

He swung it open and snarled at her.

"If I have to tell you one more time, Miss Colby, you will get a vacation to the jailhouse."

She huffed. If anyone belonged in jail, it was him.

"Fine! But you'll regret this!" She spun about and marched out of the office and down the sidewalk, shoring up her options while fury still fueled her. She headed into the first newspaper office nearest to the Sun Times.

"We're not hiring."

She sighed and moved on.

"We don't hire women."

"My wife would kill me if I hired a sweet little thing like you."

"I've got a few other positions you can try."

"Oops. We forgot to take that advertisement down."

Office after office, Grace received nothing but excuses. Something in her knew that it wasn't coincidental that an industry unwilling to pay in advance for a finished and published report would have no interest in taking a chance on her. It wasn't fair and didn't make sense, but she knew why. The only thing that spread faster than poverty was the word of a woman's shame.

Her stomach rumbled after a long day of walking. Not sparing the money to eat, Grace trudged home and pulled her

two emergency twenty dollar bills out of the book where she'd hidden them, emptied her purse, and scrounged for every last penny until she scraped together just enough, leaving her with two pennies to spare. Grace sank onto the bed and dropped her head in her hands. When she gave Mrs. Duckworth her money, there'd be nothing left for her to feed herself, and not enough to call her parents if she decided to beg for their help.

Just before total despair threatened to envelope her, the dreaded knock came.

"Here's your money, ma'am." Grace struggled to paste a wobbly smile on her face.

"You need to pre-pay weekly now, girl. I'm not having an out-of-towner up and running out after a month."

"But I don't have anything else to give you! How can I pay you a week in advance when I just gave you all I have?" Grace stared at her in horror. "And now you want to kick me out after I just gave you all the money I had left? That's not fair!"

"Women ain't supposed to be working. It's not godly. A woman's place is in the home raising her husband's children."

"But I—"

"I have a friend, a bit of an older fella. His oldest is about your age, youngest about five. I think he'd take you as a wife."

"What!" Grace stared in horror at the notion. "I'm not about to marry some man I don't know to be his broodmare and caretaker of his children. How dare you!"

Mrs. Duckworth's nostrils flared with indignation.

"Have it your way, missy. I'll give you one week to come up with this week's rent, and the one after. Then it's a week in advance there going forward, or *you're out!*"

Dejected and hungry and needing a break from the stress of it all, Grace fell onto her bed and stared at the ceiling, begging for sleep to take her, but it refused. She lay on her bed, sipping the odd bit of water to sooth the emptiness in her stomach, and closed her stinging, watery eyes, willing herself not to cry, nor

to think about what life would soon be like if she couldn't find a job. She couldn't help thinking about how cold it would be in an alley somewhere, how terrifying it would be to dodge ruffians and thugs who might want their way with her. There won't always be a handsome, strong, yet aloof and secretive man around to help her escape an attacker.

At last, the sun crested the horizon for another morning, and Grace, bone-weary, got out of bed and cleaned herself up for another day of pounding the pavement. Her feet screamed at her from so many miles of walking the day before, but time off from the pain was a luxury she didn't have, nor did she have the money for taxis or even the ferry. She didn't have even a dime to call her father, and no one left even a penny on the street since the Depression. So, she had to take the long way and walk to the one bridge that led her across the river.

Her second day fared even worse with threats to call the police if she didn't leave the premises, one woman spitting on her for what she did to "that poor chief at the Sun Times," and a very explicit suggestion by some creep wanting to pull her into his private office. She was hungry enough to consider it, but if she wouldn't give Chief Mason what he wanted, then a man who whispered his lewd intentions to her stood even less of a chance. She left him with a not-so-whispered threat against his manhood for his audacity.

The third morning, she woke so tired and discouraged that she wanted to call her parents, but her two remaining pennies simply wouldn't be enough. Her stomach felt like it was trying to swallow itself. The last time she ate anything had been those two cracker bites at the ball, but she wasn't broken yet. Once more, she began the long walk to the newspaper offices, and the searing agony of her feet brought tears to her eyes.

Grace-Anne Colby wasn't a quitter, and she wouldn't let something as frivolous as newsroom controversy get the better of her. There were still plenty of smaller newspapers, and even some magazines. But the third day was the same as the previous two. No one would give her a chance. Just one more—she had to try one more place before the days end.

The blistering pain in her feet no longer allowed her to walk quite normally. She hoped no one would notice her limp, but that hope was dashed the second she reached for the door handle of the last place she had yet to try.

“Are you all right, miss?” a warm voice called out.

Grace squeezed her eyes tight and swallowed hard.

“Yes, sir,” she pouted to the man in a charming four-piece suit who smiled inquisitively at her.

“I've just been doing a lot of walking the last few days trying to find a new job.” Her patience was running thin and her tone was snippier than she meant it to be.

“Fired from your last one?” The smartly-dressed fellow held the door for her.

Grace side-eyed the man. The sun beating down on him tinted the light brown hair visible beneath his hat a bronze-gold, and his smile held just enough of a kind tease that his hazel eyes lit up with warmth.

“My name is Grace-Anne Colby. If you work for a paper, then you've probably heard of me just like everyone else seems to have.”

“Nathaniel Donovan.” He held his hand out until she finally shook it. “Yes, I've heard about you. Who hasn't?”

His words punctured holes into the remaining hope she had left. She stepped away and prepared herself to turn back the way she came.

“Please don’t tell me you work at the Gotham Post. Don’t tell me I’ve already lost my chance. I really need a job, sir.”

“I work there, and then some.” He grinned at her. “Come on up, Miss Colby. I think there’s a position for you.”

She gritted her teeth, unsure whether he meant a job, or something nefarious.

“Please don’t taunt me, Mr. Donovan, I’m in no mood for shenanigans.” She winced at the first step of stair.

“Do you need help?” His voice held sincere concern, and he offered her his hand.

“I can do it.” She took another step and bit the inside of her bottom lip to choke back the pain.

Mr. Donovan took her arm anyway and guided her up the stairs. “You remind me of my sister. She always said she could do everything on her own. But do you know what she eventually learned how to do?”

“How to slap the daylights out of you?” she hissed.

“How to ask for—and *accept* help.”

Grace stopped and stared into his sincere eyes, rather appreciating the genuine kindness they held for her. She shook her head.

“All right, all right. You’ve got a point. My feet do hurt quite badly.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I could carry you.”

“Try, and I *will* slap you.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, they both laughed. Grace loosened a bit, feeling more confident that he had no plans of taking advantage of her, and she had a feeling they might just become great friends if given the chance to get to know him. Just then, the loud rumbling of her belly caught them both off-guard.

“Oh, my. Please excuse me. I forgot to eat my breakfast.”

“Uh-huh.” Mr. Donovan’s brows furrowed. “There’ll be a position for you here.”

“Please, don’t joke with me like that. I’m short-tempered enough. Let’s see what the editor says.”

“I’m not teasing, Miss Colby.” He scratched the back of his neck and sighed, seemingly wanting to say more, but deciding not to.

“Go to the editor, a man named Garrett Drake, and tell him Donovan personally recommended you. His office is straight ahead.” He pulled the door open and waved her in.

“Thank you,” Grace muttered, not sure what to make of the man, unable to trust that there’d really be a job for her when her reputation was in the gutter, but trusting that he meant well. She followed his directions and went to the office that had “G. Drake, Editor” in peeling gold letters. She knocked softly, and waited.

In almost no time, a tall, silver fox of a man with salt and pepper hair and rather chiseled features sporting gold wire-framed glasses had opened the door. His dapper suit, as neat and well-tailored as Nathaniel’s, was out of place in the somewhat-dilapidated building.

“May I help you?”

“Hello, sir.” Grace hitched her thumb over her shoulder. “Mr. Donovan said I should talk to you about a job? He recommended me.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Drake looked past her shoulder, shooting a confused glance at the man with the *recommendation*, and Grace followed his lead. Mr. Donovan nodded at the editor-in-chief and returned his attention to a typewriter.

“Come in, Miss...?”

“Miss Grace-Anne Colby.”

“Miss...Colby. Yes.”

Grace bowed her head and walked inside, braced for another rejection. At least Mr. Donovan had tried.

“Gotham Post is my last hope, sir. I deduce by your hesitation with my name that you’re familiar with me and what happened.” her voice was weak with defeat.

Mr. Drake leaned against his desk and folded his arms. “Yes... What exactly happened, Miss Colby? From your perspective.”

“I followed a lead with the encouragement of Chief Mason, and the edition of that paper sold out. I was invited to a ball, and then he fired me and wouldn’t say why.”

Mr. Drake nodded. “Word did make its way around that you had caused some trouble.”

“It doesn’t make sense, sir. The paper sold out in record time, and the chief was happy with me when I got to the ball, then someone called him over to speak, and he fired me when he returned.”

With nothing left to lose, Grace spoke earnestly for the first time in days. “Perhaps my story hit on something that an individual in power didn’t want uncovered. But if you’re willing to give me a chance, I’ll give you a story that will turn the Sun Times into yesterday’s news.”

Mr. Drake narrowed his eyes. “If I don’t hire you, will you still pursue this story on that woman and her missing child?”

“Until I no longer can, sir. I haven’t eaten in three days, and I walked miles to get here today with blisters covering my feet before I even left my apartment because I’m stubborn. There’s no stopping me. Either you will have the scoop, or someone else will get it. I suggest that someone is you.” She nodded. “Sir.”

He regarded her with suspicion for a moment. Grace could only guess that he really wanted the story, but he feared the possibility of someone going after him for it. Why else would he consider turning her away if her tarnished reputation wasn’t a deciding factor?

“I will hire you on a trial basis. Pay is per article the day after publication. Come back in the morning, and I’ll have a desk assigned to you, Miss Colby. I’ll be sure to leave you with a couple of smaller assignments to start on.”

It wasn’t the news she expected, and it took a few moments for her planned disappointment to switch to elation.

She clasped her hand together and shot him a bright grin. “Oh thank you, sir! You won’t regret this!”

“I’d better not. If you can see yourself out now, I have some calls to make.”

If she could have, Grace would have danced herself out. If she could get a couple assignments that wouldn’t take long, maybe she could have a bit of cash flow within a few days. The thought of it made her hunger a bit easier to handle. There was an end in sight and maybe, just maybe, she could afford to keep a roof over her head.

Mr. Donovan opened the door for her and took her elbow to help her down the stairs. “Let me take you to lunch, Miss Colby.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Donovan, though your offer is kind. I’m not hungry.”

“I like to get to know my new staff reporters. Treating you would be my pleasure.” He grabbed the handle on the passenger side of his car and waited for a response.

“I know a great seafood joint—or there’s an incredible pizza place down the road if you’d like.”

Grace eyed the familiar-looking car with some suspicion, and her stomach betrayed her with its longest, loudest rumble to date. She scowled.

“Miss Colby, you’re not hungry. You’re starving. Let’s go to Mario’s. Their pepperoni pizza is the best around.”

“Fine.” Her burning face fell into a frown. “I haven’t eaten in a few days. Chief Mason refused to pay me for my last

article, and rent was due a couple days ago. That took all I had left. So, pizza, then?”

“It’s just a few doors up—don’t need to drive. Can you make it?” He offered her his arm for support.

Grace curled her fingers into the crook of his elbow and did her best to keep a straight face as she limped her way toward the pizza parlor.

“Your car is so fancy. Why is someone like you writing for a small New York City newspaper?”

“Someone like me, ’Miss Colby?” He kept his tone light and opened the door for her.

“That car would be ten years of my wages—probably more. The Gotham Post is small. It couldn’t pay a reporter enough for that.”

“Good afternoon, Nico! Large pie. Pepperoni, please,” he called to the boy behind the counter tossing some dough.

“Yes, Mr. Donovan!” The boy grinned.

Grace hobbled to a table, and sighed with relief to be off of her feet.

“You’re here a lot,” she teased.

“It’s great food and I appreciate the people here.” His eyes sparkled.

They fell into a comfortable silence as if they’d known each other for years. Grace lost herself in her own thoughts for a few minutes. It had been quite the turn-around from such a hopeless morning. Maybe things could look up after all. But it would be her last chance. She couldn’t mess this up, though she loathed leaving her own questions unanswered so she decided to address the elephant in the room.

“Did you read my article about the Gotham Sanitarium and the female patient?”

“I did. It easily could have been sensationalized, but wasn’t. It was crisp, factual, and I don’t remember the last time an article made me feel like I was there watching it unfold with my own eyes. I could read between the lines, though. That woman—her story weighed on you... probably still does, doesn’t it?”

Grace nodded.

“Mhm. Her name is Miss Louisa Carpenter. If I’m being honest, I didn’t think she was telling the truth, at first. But then she showed me a photo of her with her daughter right before I left on my last day. I also met a man there. He was dressed in the smartest suit you’ve ever seen, he was tending to another frail female patient. I presume she was family. I was so focused on Miss Carpenter, I almost forgot about them. He was clearly a wealthy man, but the woman he took back to her room was somehow stuck in that awful place, too. There’s so much to unravel... I just know there’s something more to this.”

One of the cooks arrived to set a sliced pie on the table with a jovial wave of his hand and a tip of his hat.

“We just got here. How did it get here so fast?”

“They keep some pre-made to sell by the slice. This one was probably already baking.” Mr. Donovan nudged the pan a little closer to her and gestured for her to help herself.

“Oh.” Grace carefully picked up a slice and set it on her plate. “Where’s the fork?”

Mr. Donovan laughed. “No forks. You eat it like this.” He folded a slice in half with his hands and stuck the pointed end into his mouth.

She covered her lips to smother a giggle.

“That’s almost as barbaric as a pork rib barbecue from back home.” She picked the slice up and took a bite just as he taught her.

“Tell me something about yourself, Miss Colby. Where are you from? I hear a little bit of country girl in that accent of yours,” he teased.

“I grew up on a small farm in West Virginia.” Grace’s ears reddened. “Nothing fancy. Not much to talk about but animal husbandry, milking cows, and making cheese.” Then she perked up. “And Billy and Milly’s baby. You see...” She glanced around and leaned forward, as if sharing a secret. “They were twin siblings, and so were their parents.” she winked with a devilish grin.

“Oh.” Nathaniel tried his best to humor her with a serious reply, but his face fell to his hand and his shoulders shook with laughter. “Sounds like plenty to talk about.”

“Well, I suppose, but what about you? And your car?”

“Writing,” Nathaniel said quickly. “Just writing. Can I help you with your article in any way?”

“Not really. I don’t even know what Mr. Drake will assign to me,” she shrugged. The conversation lapsed back into that comfortable silence she appreciated.

When they finished, Mr. Donovan asked for a box for the remaining pie and handed it to Grace. “Let me take you home. That all right with you, Miss Colby?”

She couldn’t even consider turning his offer down. Her feet hurt so bad that they might have felt better being chopped off at the ankle.

“If you insist! Thank you, Mr. Donovan. I live in an apartment building across the way from Irving Square Park in Brooklyn. I hope that’s not too far a drive for you.”

“Doesn’t matter if it’s far for me—it’s too far for you to walk.”

Though it was quiet as the ride with Vincenzo Parisi, Grace didn’t mind it. She no longer wanted to punch Nathaniel Donovan. After a couple hours in his presence, she thought of

him as a kindred spirit of sorts. When he parked his glossy yellow Duesenberg in front of the apartment building, he hopped out of the car to open her door.

“Please allow me to pick you up in the morning, Miss Colby. It’s only a few minutes to drive. You need to keep off your feet for a while.”

“I don’t want to be an inconvenience.” Her fingers tightened on the bottom of the pizza box. The offer was tempting, though.

“Then let me pay for a cab,” he implored. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me. I don’t want to be in anyone’s debt.” Grace’s eyes narrowed at him as a slow grin appeared on his face.

“What are you thinking, Mr. Donovan?”

“That you’re already in my debt for getting you a job, and how you can repay me by letting me pick you up tomorrow.”

“You’re wicked,” she laughed. “But slick. Okay. I appreciate it. Nine?”

“On the dot.”

“Thank you. Have a good night, Mr. Donovan.”

The climb upstairs was misery with salt lumped on. When she pulled her shoes off, she noticed that several of her large blisters had ruptured and bled through her stockings. Even worse, the fluid and blood had dried, gluing her stockings to raw flesh. She couldn’t have walked to work even if she wanted to, but she had to show up if she was to keep her new job. Suddenly her heart burst with gratitude for Mr. Donovan’s generous offer. She fell back on her bed still, fully clothed sans bloodied stockings and threw an arm over her eyes as she yawned.

My, what a life it is in New York City.

CHAPTER 3

Thursday, August 3, 1933 to

Friday, August 11, 1933

Grace woke bright and early, but upon remembering the generous offer from her new coworker that she was in no condition to refuse, she decided on going right back to bed and burying her face into the pillow for just a little while longer. The perks of not having to trek on foot to the office today meant a little more of the morning to rest. If only she could fall back asleep for the rest of the day without losing her last chance at a job. She allowed herself the luxury of a few more minutes cocooned in her warm bed before dragging her aching body over to get dressed, and bandaged her blistered feet with some scrap fabric as best she could. Breakfast of champs this morning was some leftover pizza—who knew how long the pie would need to last when she still had rent money to fork up. Feeling as prepared as she could given the circumstances, she waddled downstairs and sat eagerly on a bench to wait for Mr. Donovan. She didn't have to wait long. It was only a minute or two before the sunshine-colored automobile cruised right up.

“Good morning, Miss Colby.” Mr. Donovan tipped his hat at her and reached for the passenger door handle of the idling car. “I got you a donut from one of the best places in town.”

She sat down on the passenger seat and shyly accepted the small paper bag that he held out to her.

“Thank you. You didn't have to do that.”

He didn't answer her until he got in the driver's side, and shifted the gear. “No, I didn't have to, Miss Colby, but I

wanted to. I don't let my friends go hungry." He tilted his head at her, winking and flashing a playfully cocky, but genuine toothy smile.

A friend. He considered her a friend? Grace hadn't made any of those in the city yet. Being fired and all the ensuing pain that followed would be worth it for that one declaration of friendship, alone. Beaming with newfound pride, she cheerfully gobbled up the sugar-coated donut during their quick drive and when they finally arrived at the office, she almost didn't notice the fierce stinging in her feet as she went up the stairs to find her new desk. She liked that its location was right next to Mr. Donovan's, and what a pleasant surprise it was to see that it had already been neatly arranged, instead of her supplies thrown haphazardly in a box on the floor.

Grace was prepared to get right to work and eagerly picked up a sheet of yellow paper listing her first assignment: "Write a column on a building under construction that was to be the tallest in New York City—take photos."

That should be easy enough. Then she read a note scribbled on an envelope that had been placed on her desk and opened it. Her eyes widened. It was enough to cover her entire month's rent *and* buy food! But since she only needed to pay for two weeks just then, that meant she had room to breathe, and the pay from her next assignment would cover the rest of her rent. She had a sneaking suspicion her new friend was behind the arrangement of a pay advancement on her first finished report. Tears clouded her eyes until she managed to collect herself. She should have known he was the thoughtful kind of fellow.

After a brief check-in with one of the other reporters, Mr. Donovan stopped by Grace's desk, casually lifting one leg to half-sit on the corner of it, before snatching the yellow paper from her hands to read over her assignment. Dramatic as ever, he examined the paper with wide eyes and let out a comedic *gasp*, as if she'd been given the most unreasonable of tasks.

"What...What's the matter?" Grace eyed him with concern.

Mr. Donovan chuckled and patted her shoulder reassuringly. “Nothing, I’m only teasing. Do you need a ride to the construction site?”

“Actually, thanks to an unexpected advance, I can take a taxi. Thank you so much. I...” She was beaming, and when he winked at her, she giggled with delight.

“You’re really something, Mr. Donovan. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I’ve been called many things, Miss Colby, but please, call me Nathaniel, or just Nate. Friendlier that way.” He offered his hand.

She shook it firmly with a triumphant grin. “Then you can call me Grace. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must go as I have some work to do that is of paramount importance. Thanks to you, of course.” She winked back.

By the time she’d made it back to the sidewalk, she’d grown used to the blisters almost enough to ignore them, but she hailed a taxi anyway. On the way to the site, she marveled at the tall buildings she still wasn’t used to seeing. Outside of the big city, back home on the farm, it was all two-story small houses, smaller shanties, or barns. She used to have dreams that she’d seen it all before. But wishful thinking makes for false memories, and she was glad for that. The joy of experiencing the magnitude of such impossibly high structures for the first time hadn’t passed by when she was a child.

The taxi driver let her out where she instructed, but ignored her when she’d asked if he could wait there to take her back. *Pleasant man*, Grace snorted to herself. He couldn’t even be bothered to bid her a good day. She shrugged off the encounter with the ill-mannered driver and wandered around the piles of metal beams and cranes between two giant buildings, both in various stages of construction, intent on ignoring the catcalls.

Grace wondered who was in charge of the whole operation, and she didn't have to wait long to find out. With her strawberry blonde hair and blue figure-hugging skirt suit wandering along a man's playground, she wouldn't go unnoticed for too long by the person in charge.

"May I help you, miss?" A slim man in a suit far too clean to be perusing around in such a dusty pit had approached her with raised eyebrows. He lifted his cap. "This is no place for a lady."

"But it is," she nodded, more than used to being shuttled aside by men. "I'm Grace-Anne Colby, reporter with the Gotham Post. I'm here to interview Gino Rizzio about the tallest building in New York City. Are you Mr. Rizzio?"

The man nodded his head once.

"Didn't expect a woman."

Grace's friendly demeanor cooled. "Well, Mr. Rizzio, I'm perfectly capable of asking a few questions and punching out some paragraphs on a typewriter." When Mr. Rizzio gave no resistance, she began questioning him and jotted down his responses. Height. Inspiration. How long construction had been in progress. Expected date of completion...

"Hey, Gino, got yourself a little treat to snack on?" a gruff voice called out.

Grace closed her eyes to keep from rolling them. A muscle in her jaw twitched.

"I'm reporter Grace-Anne Colby from the Gotham Post. With whom do I owe the pleasure?" she hissed.

"Reporter, huh?" A larger man in his own expensive suit approached them, eyeing her head to toe and focusing a little too long on her chest. "Rizzio, what're you paying her to believe your little building will be taller than mine?" The sheer arrogance of this man astounded her.

“You haven’t submitted plans beyond a hundred fifty feet, Allegro,” Mr. Rizzio retorted, appearing almost bored with the man. “There are still some offices in this city your boss doesn’t control.”

“Don’t believe little Rizzio,” the unpleasant Allegro crooned as if wanting to sweet-talk Grace into his bed. “You see that?” he pointed, “I own Torre Tower right over there. When my clock tower is finished, it’ll be a hundred eighty feet. That’s what?—Three feet taller than the Cielo?”

Her irritation rising, Grace aggressively scribbled down their bickering exchange of words onto her notepad.

“I’m merely here to report the facts, sir.” A worker slipped past Grace, shamelessly pinching her bottom. She flinched, but remained focused.

“Allegro!” another man snapped. “Keep your men under control!”

Grace turned her head. Her jaw dropped, though she quickly snapped it closed in an attempt to maintain her composure. *It’s him!* She never thought she’d see him again. He’d saved her from that mugger. If he kept jumping to her rescue, the debt she’d owe him would persist for generations. She forced her eyes away from his handsome face, even more beautiful in daylight, if that was even possible. Mr. Parisi didn’t seem to recognize her. But why would he? He’d only seen her once in that dark alley not so long ago. Wait, hadn’t he seen her

in the hospital too? She thought she remembered him referring to her as “nurse” the night of that Gala. She could feel her heart suddenly beating erratically.

Mr. Allegro huffed. “She’s just a stupid little woman! Mixing up facts about things she doesn’t have the capacity to understand.”

“Allegro, your men had better keep their hands away, or I’ll do it for them. Giordano wouldn’t like that very much. Control your dogs.” His tone had become unsettlingly dark.

“Parisi,” Mr. Allegro huffed again, backing down only just a bit. “She’s just some dumb broad reporting on the wrong tower. Mine will be bigger.”

“Sir,” Grace cut in, “are you familiar with Sigmund Freud? His theory on men’s fixation with size is quite intriguing.” She nodded as Mr. Rizzio chuckled, though she noted Mr. Parisi’s unnerving silence. “I can write down some titles if you’re interested.”

“You little tart—” The man’s eyes narrowed and he seemed to grow another foot taller as he lunged towards Grace.

“Allegro,” Mr. Parisi growled.

“With all the respect due to a man of your stature,” Grace continued, “at least I’m not worried about being the biggest ‘tart ’in the state. I’m quite satisfied just as I am.”

Mr. Allegro’s nostrils flared as his eyes flicked quickly back to Mr. Parisi. He squashed his rage down just enough to swallow it, and he stormed off.

“That wasn’t wise, Miss Colby.” Mr. Parisi clenched his jaw and watched his rival exit the site. “Not wise at all.”

When he dropped his face to hers, Grace stared into his eyes and found recognition. He hadn’t forgotten her. No one had mentioned her name in front of him.

“Mr. Parisi, sir, we women may receive help *sometimes*, but we can never truly rely on anyone to watch out for us. Thank you for your assistance again, but this isn’t new. It’s life.”

Mr. Parisi’s eyes flicked to Mr. Rizzio’s for a split second. “You misunderstand the risks of angering men like him. Rizzio, get her a taxi back to her office. Good day, Miss Colby.”

“But...” She rolled her eyes at his back and fumbled for her camera to snap a few quick photographs of one of the buildings before running after Mr. Rizzio.

“Sir? How can I reach Mr. Parisi?”

“Boss doesn’t like us sharing his contact information. Most of the ladies in this city would love a chance to convince him of their *womanly skills*.”

“I have no ‘skills ’to boast about.” She huffed and scribbled down a few more notes about the planned architecture and held her notebook out to him. “See, I just have a few questions to ask him.”

“Anything you want to ask him, you can ask me.” He picked up his pace, forcing Grace to jog, reigniting the pain from her blisters.

She kept quiet as metaphorical knives stabbed away at her feet. The man didn’t understand. She didn’t want a chance with Mr. Parisi, she just hoped to return his coat, but how could she explain why she even had it in the first place? It was such an intimate thing to wear a man’s personal items. She stopped, deciding to just go to Mr. Parisi herself, but when she looked back over her shoulder, he was gone.

The familiar sounds of typewriter bells and the metallic scent of ink welcomed her back to the office. She handed the camera to the developer and took a seat to write. Time passed in a pleasant blur until only she, her new friend Nathaniel, and the editor-in-chief remained. When at last she finally finished, she handed her report to Mr. Drake and waited eagerly as he read it over.

“So, you ran into Vincenzo Parisi?” Mr. Drake cocked an eyebrow at her.

Her skin prickled. She hadn’t mentioned him in her report.

“Uh, yes actually. I heard him issue a threat about doing a job for someone called Giordano. There was no chance to get more information. So, I left that out. How—”

“Very good.” Mr. Drake interjected. “This’ll be in tomorrow’s edition. You’re fast. Mr. Donovan was correct about you. You may be interviewing Miss Josephine Harrison soon. A female interviewer would be a first for her, and I think she’d like that. She’s—”

“A pilot! Crossed the Atlantic solo!” Grace lit up like a schoolgirl. “She went to my university. I used to see her on campus, but...” Her shoulders slumped.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. It’s just that she’s so famous, elegant and accomplished, and I’m just a reporter. What kind of excitement could she possibly find in that?”

Mr. Drake flicked his eyes toward Nathaniel for just a moment, his eyebrows raised with a small shadow of doubt regarding her next assignment. “This article is a strong start, Miss Colby. Strong start. I have high expectations for an article on Miss Harrison.”

Words of praise from the standoffish-chief was better than she’d hoped for. Grace bowed her head and made her way out of his office. Perhaps her first assignment at the Gotham Post had been a test of her mettle as a woman in a man’s field. If it was, then it would appear she had passed. But she’d be lying to herself if the thought of interviewing Miss Harrison didn’t terrify her more than even the story about the Gotham Sanitarium. Admittedly, she was a huge fan of the woman, and the notion of speaking with the young pilot was an intimidating feat.

Grace’s first day at the office went by much too fast. The successful completion of her first article, despite the unexpected construction site confrontation, left her floating on cloud nine for the remainder of the day. By the time it ended, she was climbing into Nathaniel’s luxurious yellow

Duesenberg, already eager for the following morning's sun to greet her.

"How was it, really?" Nathaniel finally asked as the vehicle pulled away from the curb.

"Interesting...Do you know how I can contact Mr. Parisi?"

"Grace...Do not get yourself involved with them. You *will* get hurt." The unfamiliarity of his serious tone all but sucked the air from her lungs.

Grace exhaled hard and clenched her hands together.

"You're mistaken about him. The night I was fired, I was shot at. I met Mr. Parisi that night. He protected me from my assailant."

"Why do you want to see him again?" he huffed.

"Because he put his coat on me to keep me warm, and I want to give it back to him. That's all." Her delivery was more defensive than she meant it to be, but she decided to double down and folded her arms across her chest.

Creases formed between Nathaniel's eyes. Strained silence filled the air for most of the drive until the car came to a stop outside her building, and Nathaniel let out a heavy sigh.

"Grace...As your boss, I can't order you to stay away from him, but as your friend, I'll ask you to keep some distance and to just toss the coat or keep it. Please take my word on this. People like him aren't safe to associate with. You don't know who they really are. People connected to them always end up dead."

"Have you lost your senses?" Gino glared at Enzo. "She's just another airheaded dame—no better than Leila, Cecelia, or Gord...Gert..."

“*Gertrude*,” Enzo’s second-in-command, Luca, corrected.

“*Yes, Gertrude.*” Gino continued his furious pacing. “*They all ended up dead, Enzo. I thought we gave up on trying to honey-pot the bastard. We already failed three times. Miss Colby’s got a smart mouth, but she’s not smart where it counts. She doesn’t know when to keep her mouth shut. I don’t think she’d last a day with that attitude of hers. You’re wasting your time on that one.*”

Enzo puffed on his cigarette and considered Gino’s words in silence for a moment. Luca knew when to keep quiet, but his consigliere was in a position to argue—pushing back was Gino’s job. Enzo found his rejections rather curious, however. Gino wasn’t the kind to concern himself with the safety of random women. No, Gino would sacrifice a woman without a second thought. If you weren’t in his circle, he was as callous as any other gangster.

Gino didn’t see the potential in her the way that Enzo did. Miss Colby was headstrong and determined, and she seemed more than capable of keeping her wits about her during times of danger. Their first recruit from years ago was Leila, a dancer from the Bronx. In hindsight, Leila was a terrible choice for the job. There was no way she would’ve gotten through to Giordano, but that damn woman’s insistence on trying to get Enzo to bed made him eager to get her out of his house as soon as possible—further undercover training be damned. She lasted two weeks before she pissed off Giordano and he dumped her body in an alleyway.

Enlisting Miss Colby for the job should have been a matter without question. After all, she possessed all the qualities they never had with the previous three women. She was intelligent, clever, and one of his men gave word that she had connections to the city prosecutor. Enzo didn’t associate himself with agents of the law, but having a woman go undercover with ties to the one person who’d happily lock Giordano up and throw away the key might prove extremely beneficial to the cause. Miss Colby was the most eligible candidate to give this plan

one final go-around. Offering her the job should have been easy....

But there was just something about her that his gut couldn't shake. Meeting her those first few times by way of happenstance seemed almost too providential. The sanitarium, the Gala for the Sun Times—well, his *attendance* that night was intentional. He'd heard rumors of the planned attack on her life—but he hadn't intended to be seen. He couldn't have predicted Miss Colby would find him on the sidewalk enjoying an evening smoke. And then her appearance at the construction site, *his* construction site? It began to feel like a kind of...divine intervention. Perhaps Miss Colby was sent as the solution to Giordano's never-ending reign of torment. Hell, she was already damn-near investigating the man. She just didn't know it yet.

Enzo sighed.

“Gino, she is a reporter with a connection to the prosecutor. We can use her. She gives us a way to involve the authorities without getting involved ourselves. You know what would happen if the other families found out what I've been doing.”

Gino didn't respond. He knew Enzo was right. Executing a plan that would send one of the dons to prison was essentially treason of the highest order. Enzo turned to Luca in search of his response.

“We might get what we've been needing from her, but what if she dies just like the others?”

Enzo exhaled slowly and cast his eyes to the floor, concealing his inner turmoil. The senseless death of a young woman brought him so much pain since... He squeezed his eyes shut to block out the memory. In business, there was no room for sentiment and regrets, and this was strictly business. So what if she dies?

No... She won't. He won't let that happen. But if she does...

“Then so be it.”

It was after midnight, and Enzo sat alone in his study stuck in a reverie. His display of indifference toward Miss Colby’s life just hours ago was merely a show of false bravado. He regretted it the instant those words escaped his lips. When making decisions in front of his men, it was imperative they not find any doubt or uncertainty churning within him. A leader should only display total certainty in his choices. Certainty keeps his men confident in his abilities to do the right thing.

He tapped out loose ashes into an engraved silver tray and pulled the cigarette back to his lips. He leaned pensively into his sturdy leather wingback chair. That little Miss Colby. A small grin formed defiantly in place of his usual scowl. At first, he almost hadn’t recognized her. She was a feisty one—witty and sharp, no doubt. She certainly defied expectations. Too bad she had to showcase those talents on one of Cesare Giordano’s right-hand men. That barbarian would be most displeased, especially when he heard of the disrespect committed by a woman he’d recently ordered killed. Of course, she’d be ignorant to how much trouble she may have just caused herself.

Miss Colby, albeit unwittingly, seemed to have a proclivity for tempting fate. Bad luck seemed to follow her every move. Bad luck that she had chosen to write an article about a child that Giordano had likely abducted. Bad luck that she had encountered that sadist Dante Allegro, but even more so that she happened to injure his overinflated ego. What form of luck it was that Vincenzo found himself so captivated by her innocence and courage remained to be seen. Whatever force it be that allured him so—it left him with a sense of duty to protect her from the depths in which he presided. Perhaps this

was a bit of good fortune she could count on. But for him? Well, this was truly an unfortunate set of circumstances.

Whatever happened, he had already determined that she couldn't be allowed to die. Whether he recruited her or not, her survival was part of his mission, even if Gino and Luca knew nothing of it, yet.

Still, the security he'd already installed around her may need to be doubled. Waltzing up to her to deliver strict boundaries on how to conduct herself in this city was not an option, and truthfully, he couldn't bear the thought of crushing her spirit with the weight of harsh realities about the world she so admired. If he was being honest with himself, it was best he kept as much distance from her as possible. It was easy to fall prey to the underworld, and once caught in the trap, almost no one ever escaped its clutches. Such darkness spread like a disease, and she was still wholly untouched. Miss Colby only saw the good in people. He had lost that ability the day that the purest thing he'd ever created was taken from him.

God, was he drawn to her... Those baby-blue eyes, that soft little country accent—unwelcome desire gnawed away at him with determination. But it wasn't for her delicate curves, though he admired them greatly. He had a dozen women available at any time. Though she wasn't particularly polished and well-mannered, she possessed such a gentleness that concealed a burning flame. She was not the type to play coy and bat eyelashes at a man hoping to tempt him—not like the women he encountered regularly at the nightclubs. She was a bit of an enigma to him, yet he felt as if he understood something about her despite limited interactions. Well, he knew for certain at least that she was the stubborn type to refuse help when offered—the kind of gal who was willing to throw herself to a pack of wolves just to prove a point. Even if he was foolish enough to approach her with the prospect of a personal security guard selected from his finest group of men, he was sure she'd readily decline.

Protecting her from the shadows was always the only option.

Within days, working at the Gotham Post took on a greater meaning than working at the Sun Times ever had. Thanks to her new team, Grace was an equal, not treated as the lesser reporter, and despite being a woman, her assignments were never relegated to just household cleaning tips or child-rearing.

“Is this what it’s like to be a man?” Grace pulled a sheet of paper out of her typewriter and handed it to her charming new friend.

“What do you mean?” Nathaniel casually scanned the list of questions she’d typed for her interview with that young pilot the following week.

She folded her hands and shrugged. “Not being called ‘doll-face ’when I walk by. Not having to smile through having my backside slapped or my cheeks pinched. Not being told that women belong in the kitchen or asking why I’m working a job instead of working on finding a husband to support me while I bear his children. I should be equal to a man, shouldn’t I?”

Nathaniel put the paper down and sat pensively for a moment. A sigh escaped his lips. All around him, workers of various colors and creeds, both men and women, doing the same work, and in that office, they were paid as if they were all the same. It was a fact that made him proud to be a part of the Gotham Post. But it didn’t reflect the reality of the world at large.

“I agree with you. There’s no good reason to pay women less when you can do what I can, and no one should harass you. But we’re a long way away from fixing that, I’m afraid. I’m sorry I can’t do more for you than I already am.”

“At least we are equal here, at the Post. Maybe one day it could be like this everywhere.” Nate handed her the questions back with a hopeful smile and Grace filed the page in her

folder, ready to take with her when she went to the Harrison estate. She dreaded the day of the interview. She was sure she'd make a fool of herself in front of her idol and be laughed right out of the city. Her anxiety was interrupted by a fleeting memory of a creased and faded photograph of a lost little girl. Grace frowned.

“When I'm finished with this interview, I'd like to start digging into Miss Carpenter's case again—the woman from the hospital? I hope that's all right.”

“That's fine. Just be careful. I'll help if you need me.”

“Thank you,” she said lightly, sidestepping the implication. She knew he was worried about her possible re-involvement with the faceless, seedy characters lurking in the shadows... and *him*. She sighed. “Would you care to see a picture this weekend?” she asked sweetly, diverting the subject.

“Are you asking me on a date?” He smirked.

She narrowed her eyes and placed a hand on her hip. “I didn't ask if you wanted to see one *with me*.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Just teasing. I'm sorry. But I should be the one asking you if you'd like to see one. Lillian Corbin is a childhood friend of mine.”

“The Lillian Corbin? The actress?!” Grace stood to her feet, eyes wide. “She has a new film being released, doesn't she?”

“That, she does. Would you like to go to the premiere?” Nathaniel held his hands up defensively, surrendering under her glare. “As my colleague, of course! It's tonight—short notice, I know. Maybe you could interview her?”

Mr. Drake came up behind Nathaniel. “Interview whom?”

Grace answered, “Lillian Corbin. She—”

Mr. Drake raised a hand to interrupt her. “We don't publish entertainment trash like that.”

“It's not trash. Film advancement gave us talkies only six years ago. Maybe we'll have color in another six. Every new

film that comes out is a part of a rich cultural history in the making and that history includes her.”

“Color talkies won’t happen that fast.” Mr. Drake refuted condescendingly.

“But, sir, it can! The Wright brothers flew such a short way in nineteen-oh-three, and in just twelve years, there were planes powerful enough to use in the war. Film technology—”

“No.” he snapped.

“Garrett,” Nathaniel prodded in a low tone, “she’s right.”

Steam nearly erupted from Mr. Drake’s ears. “Fine. If this is what you think your parents would want, have it your way.” He continued into his office and slammed the door.

Grace sank back into her seat. Sudden confusion drowned out the murmurs of other voices and chiming typewriters. She glanced curiously at him. “Nathaniel, what did he mean by that?”

“You impress me, Colby.” His cheeks flushed pink, though his eyes remained fixed on the chief’s door in frustration. A few moments of silence passed before he snapped his attention back to Grace.

“How do you know so much about planes?” he deflected.

“I read a lot. So...what did Mr. Drake mean about your parents?” Grace jumped to her feet and narrowed her eyes at him, refusing to back down from her inquisition.

Nathaniel eyed her up and said nothing, so she lifted her chin and threw her hands on her hips expectantly. If Nate wouldn’t fess up, well then she’d just have to find out her own way. Nathaniel finally yielded to her stubborn determination and hitched his head toward the hallway.

“Follow me.” He led her to an unmarked door she hadn’t noticed before and opened it, revealing a private office, neatly kept and lined with bookcases, boasting a handsome mahogany desk with a familiar name carved into a brass plate perched atop glossy lacquered wood.

“What is this?” She picked up the hefty nameplate and gawked at the inscription: *Nathaniel Donovan, Owner and Operator.*

“*Owner?! You own this paper?! Is that why I was hired—so you could make a pass at me? Is that your motive? I can’t even believe this!*” panicked words flew from her mouth like a machine gun.

“Grace, please take a seat and listen to me. I’ll explain.” His nervous hands pumped up and down, gesturing for her to relax.

She plunked into a nearby chair and crossed her arms, trying with might to be infuriated, but her heart was already hurting from betrayal.

Nathaniel kneeled before her and placed a hand on her shoulders, urging her to look at him and find sincerity. Her reddened eyes finally met his, and then he confessed. “The truth is that my parents actually started this paper. It was one of their many business ventures. Years ago, my little sister and both my parents died in a plane crash. There was no one else, so I inherited everything...all the businesses, money, and property. This newspaper is my passion. You see, Grace...” He paused, licking his lips in search of the right words to form his next thought.

Grace squirmed in her seat, expecting almost out of habit to be told she’d been hired solely for the purpose of fulfilling his personal needs. But when she looked him over, she couldn’t find any semblance of deviant intent or false sincerity. His vulnerability was genuine, and she longed to throw her arms around his neck and hug away his sadness. His parents and sister, dead? How awful that must have been for him. Guilt started to eat at her for pressing him so hard—for forcing him to reveal a part of himself that he may not have been comfortable sharing.

Nathaniel finally found his voice and broke the deafening silence. “Grace, you were hired because I believe in giving people chances, all right? There’s no risk for me when pay is

based on producing a finished article. You could have been anyone, and you'd still have been given a chance. Yes, I did order you an advance on your first article. But I did that for no reason other than that you were hungry and too stubborn to ask for help. I wasn't going to let you starve. I have no ulterior motives. It was just the right thing to do."

"My landlady would've let me starve." Her voice cracked. He couldn't have known just how much his kindness really pulled her out of a bad spot. "She decided I had to start paying early, giving me a week to come up with two weeks' worth of rent money. That advance kept me from becoming homeless."

"I'm not your landlady, Grace. I'm your friend, and you're not going to be without a place to stay as long as I'm around." He smiled warmly at her, and when Grace smiled back, he choked on a cough.

"I won't lie, though. You're a beautiful woman who any red-blooded man would happily take as arm candy, but I value your friendship too much to make an advance on you and ruin that. I made a bad joke about a date, and I'm really sorry about that."

Grace finally let out the breath she'd been holding. She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around his neck in a tight hug, and he responded in kind.

"I'm sorry about your family. Are you all right?" she looked up at him with watering eyes.

"They were good people. I miss them." For a solid minute, Nathaniel didn't pull away. He stood still, soaking up the comfort she so kindly offered before hesitantly letting go.

Their eyes met as they exited the private office, and Grace's worries from just moments before had all but melted away. He was still her friend, and it was clear to her now that he had no ill intentions. Though he had apologized—to her, there was nothing to forgive.

"So, about that picture show... It starts at eight and there's a premiere party right after. Would you care to accompany me?"

But as more than just a colleague—would you attend as my friend?” he smiled, charming as ever.

“A friend-date, perhaps?” She giggled shyly.

Nathaniel patted her arm. “The platonic kind, yes.”

“Well then, why don’t you take me home now and pick me up at seven.” She winked. “*We* ’ve got a date!”

CHAPTER 4

Friday, August 11, 1933

Grace rushed to make a few repairs to her favorite blue frock. It still had that tear on the hem from the night she was shot at, but nothing a few smartly placed stitches couldn't hide. She decided on strategically allocating some extra beads along the rougher spots, despite knowing it would eat up precious time to make herself presentable. With just moments to spare, she decided to run down the block to see if the florist's shop was still open. She wouldn't have jewels or feathers, but something pretty for her hair would be nice. She decided on small pink and white roses, though she didn't quite know what she'd do with them. Back at home, she hurriedly ripped the brush through her hair and twisted it a few different ways, but settled on a ribbon wrapped around her head while her strawberry tresses lay unbridled against her shoulders. Finally, she pinned the little flowers to the ribbon, framing her delicate features. Maybe it wasn't the most sophisticated look, but she did feel rather pretty.

At seven on the dot, a loud horn sounded from the street below. She peeked out the window and smiled at the sight of her sunny yellow chariot. Gathering her things off the kitchen table, she hurried down the stairs and slipped into the car to greet her charming valet.

"Couldn't you have just come upstairs instead of honking?" she teased.

"I didn't know which apartment was yours." Nathaniel smiled wistfully at her above the collar of his smart tuxedo. "You look even more beautiful than you did that night at the ball."

Grace gawked at him. “You were there?”

“Of course. It was a veritable who’s-who of the New York elite, the same as every late summer and fall gala. You stood out, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed like a baby who’d just learned to walk.”

She sank back into the seat, feeling flustered at the confirmation that others perceived her as much of an outlander as she felt.

“It was all new to me. Am I going to embarrass you? You can leave me here. I promise I won’t be offended.”

“You couldn’t possibly embarrass me. Your accompaniment is an honor and frankly, I don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks.”

A short while later, they arrived at the theater and Grace, while still fidgeting with anxiety, felt a bit more at ease about taking on her second-ever social event since her move to New York. Thanks to her reassuring date, she approached the swanky theater doors with more confidence and poise, braced with the comfort of knowing she had a friend she could talk to if she ever felt nervous. She couldn’t have asked for a better date than Mr. Nathaniel Donovan. Even better still, she had the pleasure of witnessing her former editor-in-chief and his reporter-niece glaring at her in horror and envy from behind red velvet ropes as she, the formerly disgraced, was ushered right through the doors while they stood to the side, still queued in line.

Grace had already attended a couple picture showings at the Paradise Theatre before, but tonight felt like the very first time. Everything from the plush maroon carpet to the geometrically patterned walls felt so new. Hundreds of isles were marked by glowing footlights, crystal chandeliers reflected the warm glow of the matinee, scattering the light like little stars guiding patrons to their seats. For the first time outside of the comfort of the Gotham Post, she didn’t feel out of place or in the way. The men still donned tuxedos and the ladies their diamonds, but it was different somehow. Perhaps a

comedy event was more relaxed than a ball, despite the lack of variation in dress code. There was certainly more laughter, more jovial banter, and through a break in the crowd—*oh my gosh, it's her!* Miss Josephine Harrison stood exquisitely on display next to a tall, handsome man who shot both her and Nathaniel an annoyed look.

“That’s Miss Harrison,” Nathaniel told her quietly, as if she didn’t already know, “and that’s Mr. Marc Gotti. Would you like to meet her?”

Grace reflexively shrunk herself and leaned toward Nathaniel, hoping to remove herself from Miss Harrison’s line of sight. She hadn’t seen Miss Harrison since their university days, and even then, she had never spoken to her. She’d always been too elegant for words, even in her daily attire. Miss Josephine Harrison as she appeared tonight with her silk gown the color of liquid gold that accentuated her dark chocolate curls and the glittering sapphires dripping from her ears—she may as well have been the goddess Venus herself.

“Nathaniel, I...I can’t. Look at her! She looks impeccable and she’s achieved so much and what if she doesn’t like me? If she doesn’t like me then I couldn’t interview her for the paper and then I’ll get fired and I don’t want to be fired. Oh, god, I can’t lose my job again.” Grace nearly failed to hold back any more hysterics.

A firm hand wrapped around her waist and gave a reassuring squeeze.

“You’ve got nothing to fear. I’m the one who gets to make that decision, and you’re not getting fired for anything.”

“But—”

“Well hello, Nate. Who’s your lovely lady-friend this evening?” A familiar face interrupted her nervous ramblings and held his hand out to Grace. Star-struck and acting not of her own accord, she lay her fingers in the man’s palm. The man she’d long admired on the screen kissed the back of her

hand. For a moment, she couldn't breathe, completely forgetting the cause of her panic just moments ago.

"Fancy seeing you here, Clark. This is Grace Colby. She's a friend and colleague." Nathaniel grinned at her. "Grace, this is —"

"Mr. Gable," she gasped. "I... you... You were wonderful in *Red Dust*."

"A lady like yourself shouldn't be watching such filth," he teased with a wink. "But if you enjoyed that, Jean's got a new film premiering next month that's quite the barrel of laughs."

"Say, Clark, uh..." Nate glanced at Miss Harrison, then back to the lady at his side, "Miss Colby here is scheduled to interview that pilot, Miss Josephine Harrison. She's a major celebrity to Miss Colby. Might the rising king of the silver screen have some words of wisdom to soothe this lovely young lady's nerves?"

"King?" The handsome actor scoffed at that. He ran a large hand over his slick hair and gestured towards the two of them. "'King'... If you'll excuse me for saying so, Miss, this 'king' stuff is pure bullshit. I eat and sleep and go to the bathroom just like everybody else. There's no special light that shines inside me and makes me a star. I'm just a lucky slob from Ohio. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and I had a lot of smart guys helping me. That's all."

Leaning against Nathaniel for support after the shock of his obscene words, Grace bit her lips together to hold in an embarrassed, yet amused, laugh. Clark Gable, of all people, was the furthest thing from an undignified slob!

"So, you see, Miss Colby," he continued, gesturing a hand toward the young pilot, "between you and me, she's just like you too, just better known by the masses, and for all you know, she could be more bashful than you—"

"Now, now, Clarky, you can flirt with my Natey later. He's mine now." A beautiful brunette woman patted Nathaniel's

arm and kissed his cheek as if Grace wasn't standing there right beside him. "Hello, darling." the woman purred.

Nathaniel flashed Grace an apologetic smile that was more grimace than grin, and gave his childhood friend a hug. "Congratulations on another picture."

"Congratulate me after the show," she flirted with a shimmy of her perky décolletage.

Grace took a few steps away and diverted her attention from the actress salivating all over Nathaniel. She thought she smelled a good deal of alcohol coming from the woman, but it could have come from how much of it flowed so freely around her. Envy was an awful drug, and Lillian Corbin's appearance gave her a hefty dose of it. There were so many people here for Miss Corbin to socialize with. Why did she have to snatch away the one person Grace was comfortable around?

"Just remember this, Miss Colby," Mr. Gable said quietly, sidling up to her, "we're all just people, and we've all got our problems. Miss Harrison is just another human being..."

Grace followed his eyes back to the stunning pilot and observed the tension in Miss Harrison's bare shoulders that she hadn't noticed before, even catching the way her fingers dug into her sparkling clutch before loosening them. The aloofness she originally observed on Miss Harrison's delicate features now seemed more like a practiced façade. In the spare moment when she wasn't speaking with someone, she appeared almost wistful.

"She's got her own skeletons no one knows about, and none of us have half as many friends as you think we do. Not real ones, anyway."

"Thank you, Mr. Gable. I'll remember that."

The handsome actor kissed the back of her hand once more before floating back into the crowd of celebrities and socialites.

Grace was nearly overwhelmed by it all. She was grateful for the kind words of a man she admired, but after a high-

pitched whine from Miss Corbin, she decided very quickly that she did not like that actress Lillian Corbin one single bit.

“But, Natey, I don’t like being interviewed by someone I don’t know. Couldn’t you interview me instead?” she crooned.

Grace inwardly sighed and pretended not to hear her. The woman had done little else than try to flirt with Nathaniel, entirely ignoring his attempts to rebuff her very forward advances. She’d known that the newspapers didn’t post anything considered “trash” as it was simply too obscene to print, but she had no idea that the entertainment industry could be like this.

“Come now, Lil, I already offered it to Grace and I’m not going back on that.”

“You’re such a goody-goody sometimes,” Miss Corbin whined.

Grace returned her attention to them and openly cringed at Nathaniel’s discomfort.

“Miss Corbin, if you really want him to interview you, he can. It’s okay.”

“See, Natey? Elena said it’s okay.”

“Her name is Grace,” he said through gritted teeth. “But fine. I’ll find you after the film is over.” He extricated himself from her arms, and when Mr. Gable approached the drunken actress, he distracted her long enough for Nathaniel to slip away, and he pulled Grace by her hand after him.

“I wish you hadn’t told her that I’d do it.”

“I’m sorry. I thought she would stop pushing you.” She frowned.

“If she can get me behind a closed door, I’m in trouble.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “She hasn’t been this bad before...you know, drinking this much. Thank you for being here. Can I repay you with a tour of the projector room and a meeting with the projectionist?”

“Are you trying to get me behind a closed door, Nathaniel Donovan?” Grace tried not to laugh, but as soon as he broke down, they burst into a fit of giggles.

Nathaniel dropped an arm around her and steered her down a hall to the staircase leading up to the projection room overlooking the theater. “You’re just too precious for words, kid.”

Enzo seethed with envy. What he would give to walk in Nathaniel Donovan’s shoes with his arm around the ever-enchanting Miss Colby. The way that pale blue dress hugged her every little curve made his heart skip a few beats. He couldn’t understand how it was possible that for each time he had the privilege of seeing her again, she always looked even more beautiful than before. He allowed himself a moment of indulgence, reveling in fantasies of running his fingertips across the soft skin of her shoulders and drinking in the airy, floral scent of her rose-golden hair. The seconds of nearness he’d had when she clung to him for help that night weighed heavy on him. When he wasn’t busy dealing with other matters and had a real moment to himself, images of her would appear in his mind, hopelessly clouding his thoughts. The little enchantress didn’t know the strength of her own powers over men. Her eyes as blue as the Mediterranean Sea were unabashedly bright and expressive, exuding such an innocence that one couldn’t help but admire, yet her sharp-witted tongue and refusal to back down in the face of intimidating men like Allegro made him wonder how much more of her there was to explore. Whether it was fearlessness, bravery, or sheer stupidity, she fascinated him.

His moment of reverie ended when Gino signaled to him that their target had taken his seat. Nothing could be done until after the show, and they needed to come up with a ruse to draw

the hitman away from the crowd and keep him there long enough for the premiere-goers to be well on their way out. If all went to plan, no one would think it was anything more than a random gunman, and one of Enzo's own men would be seen as the nameless heroic bystander who stopped him. Gino would handle it.

Until then, there was nothing to do except to take a seat himself and decide if the new Lillian Corbin picture was worth the celluloid it was filmed on.

Miss Corbin's actions toward Nathaniel discounted any appreciation Grace could have had for the film. On screen, the actress threw herself onto her poor, overwhelmed suitor, begging him to love her and take her to bed, and offscreen... well, she was very nearly the same way with Nathaniel, only Nathaniel was the furthest thing from a prospective lover. Though the star's behavior turned Grace off to the film, she enjoyed her friend's company and his whispered trivia about the actress and their childhood. She'd never have guessed that her father was the one-and-only Mr. Garrett Drake, chief of the Gotham Post, but his staunch opposition to an article being written about this picture suddenly made sense. He never wanted his daughter to become an actress.

As soon as they returned to the theater lobby, the cocktails flowed freely once more, and Miss Corbin made an unsteady beeline toward Nathaniel. She stumbled and knocked a camera from a reporter's hand, breaking the expensive equipment after stomping a pointed heel into the lens while failing to catch her balance from the drunken collision.

"Grace," Nathaniel groaned as a couple of men held steady his drunken childhood friend, "could you wait for me here? I need to find somewhere to lay Lillian down before she makes

enough of a fool of herself to overshadow any news about the film.”

Grade almost felt pity for the actress’s plight—at least until Miss Corbin wobbled to her toes to kiss Nathaniel. His expert way of handling the sloppy woman exemplified his ample experience in dealing with her intoxication. Once alone in the lobby, Grace mentally organized the information given to her by the projectionist earlier, recalling what he’d stated about the challenges of coordinating as many as fifteen silent film reels and fifteen separate reels of sound. She decided his information would make a much more interesting article than anything Miss Corbin might have had to say, and Mr. Drake would appreciate not having to publish an article about his infamous alcoholic daughter.

She waited patiently in a leather-bound chair, filling page after page of her notebook with doodles until several overhead lights in the theater lobby began to dim. Only a few dozen people still remained. It was nearly midnight by then, so she decided to try and locate her friendly chauffeur to see if he was all right. The last thing she wanted was to be ushered outside alone. Maybe Nathaniel needed help prying Miss Corbin’s arms from his neck. He didn’t seem attracted to her, so Grace didn’t think he’d be intimate with her. At least not tonight while she was in such a bad way. She crossed her fingers and hoped there was nothing she’d be interrupting between the two. She meandered down a dimly lit hallway in the direction Nathaniel headed almost an hour ago and—*bang!*

A shot rang out near the front entryway. She cupped a hand over her mouth and froze in shock. *Again?!* Her heart lurched into her throat and she ran like hell to look for a hiding place until a large man hooked an arm around her from behind and pulled her into a storage closet. She tried to wriggle her way out of his grasp and went to scream before one of his hands clamped firmly over her mouth. His other hand pressed into her stomach, pulling her back tightly against him. The more she fought, the tighter his hold became.

“Miss Colby, be quiet!” a familiar accented voice whispered. “Stop struggling! You’re safe.”

Her fighting ceased, though her body still trembled.

“I’m going to remove my hand from your mouth, but one peep and I’ll have to put it back. Do you understand?”

Grace nodded. That voice... She knew it well. The man’s hand moved from her mouth to reach for the pistol inside his coat. Anxious to confirm her suspicions, she craned her head to identify her captor.

“Mr. Parisi?” she gasped.

“Sh!” Mr. Parisi peered through the cracked door holding a gun aloft in his free hand. Another shot rang out in the halls, urging Mr. Parisi to pull her tighter to him.

Grace’s blood whooshed through her ears. She leaned back against the man’s chest and felt his heart pounding wildly against her head, practically beating in sync with her own. Unable to resist a confusing sense of desire, she tipped her head back enough to gawk at the angles of his jawline and the slight stubble that blanketed his tanned skin. The fullness of his lips and his thick, dark lashes made her belly clench. Even in the dark, he was just as heart-stoppingly handsome as the first time she really saw his face. And here he was again, holding her tightly and saving her from gunfire.

In spite of herself and the situation at hand, she didn’t want her time in the closet to come to an end. It was the first time she’d been so close to a man in *private* before, and it wasn’t just any man, but a man who’d defended her once and saved her life twice. He was the man of her wildest fantasies, and she’d been his unwitting damsel in distress, only there’d been no kiss for her noble rescuer... *Yet*. She shook her head at such wishful thinking, immediately embarrassed by her own audacity to believe a man like him would ever want a kiss from a girl like her.

She took a deep breath and inhaled the warm, spicy scent of rum and tobacco emanating from the heat of his body. A truly

intoxicating aroma that threatened to bring her to her knees. There was some sort of a struggle going on outside the shelter of their broom closet, but Grace had hardly noticed. She knew she was supposed to be scared, but in this moment, the world around her just disappeared and she felt...home. Her belly tingled, and her thoughts wandered to new places... she didn't understand any of it. It was all so foreign. How could she possibly want him like this? She didn't even know him, for Christ's sake! Her body seemed to act upon its own volition and her fingertips grazed the back of his wrist in defiance. The wool of his sleeve tickling against her palm was as soft as his skin.

For what felt like hours, though it had only been minutes, Grace remained still, silently admiring his every feature until, the screams and shuffling in the lobby slowly devolved into hushed voices and rushed footsteps. When at last Mr. Parisi lowered his gun, his eyes dropped to hers and Grace suddenly found herself peering into a warm abyss. She'd never been so close to a man in this way, let alone one who held the power to render her so helplessly flustered.

When their eyes locked, her desire laid bare before him. It was the first time in her life that she truly felt like a grown woman. For a moment, she thought she caught a glimpse of his own wanting for her. Her heart raced like a mustang. Basking in the glory of a fleeting moment and desperately wanting things she didn't normally think about, she nearly reached up to kiss him, but she caught herself before risking the humiliation of rejection.

“Are you my guardian angel?” she asked breathlessly.

“I cut deals with the devil and his demons, Miss Colby,” he proclaimed in a silky, accented tenor, “not with God and his angels.”

He released his hold of her to re-holster his pistol and cracked the door open to check the halls. The coast was clear.

“Come. I know where your boyfriend is. He needs to get you home.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s just a friend and colleague, that’s all.” She sighed, fraught with disappointment for the hunger she thought he held in his eyes for her only moments before had merely been a figment of her imagination.

Mr. Parisi paused to look at her with an amused smile on pulling at his cheeks. “You’re wrong, Miss Colby. He wants more than friendship. Any breathing man would.” His eyes dropped to her rosy lips.

“Do you?” she dared to ask, breathlessly.

His demeanor turned ice cold. He pressed a firm palm against her back, urging her to walk. “We need to go.”

Ouch. His deflection hit her like a blow to the gut, but she did as she was told and moved along. The death and blood she expected to see in the lobby was nonexistent somehow. Only eerie stillness filled the once-invigorated space. The few remaining loiterers acted as if the chaos that had ensued was just another part of a normal night. The bizarre atmosphere left her feeling terribly uneasy, so she kept close to Mr. Parisi and saved her many questions for a later time. If she wasn’t mistaken, the man smoking casually in the corner was Mr. Rizzio from the construction site. She supposed now that the remaining theater dwellers around weren’t exactly “regular” people. Before long, they approached an antiquated door labeled “Dressing Room” and a paper sign tacked to it with the name “*Miss Lillian Corbin*” in cursive lettering. Grace stood silently while Mr. Parisi knocked, interrupting the collage of voices chattering on the other side.

The door opened a couple inches and Nathaniel peeked his head out. His eyes narrowed a fraction at the unsavory man escorting his lady-friend. “I need to go, Lil,” he called out over his shoulder, “The doctor will take care of you from here.”

“But, Natey...” Miss Corbin slurred.

“I’ll check on you later.” He gently closed the door behind him and crossed his arms at Grace, notably irritated. If he intended to conceal his displeasure, he did a poor job of it.

“Vincenzo Parisi. What the hell is going on here, Grace?” he hissed.

“Nothing,” Grace choked. As panic quickly set in, she took his hand hoping to quell his worries. “Th-there was a shooting in the lobby.”

“What?!” Nathaniel hurriedly ran his hands down her arm to check her over for injuries. His sudden action startled Grace, and she jumped like a feral cat. Smiling apologetically, she stepped closer to let him continue his examination.

“Get her home,” Mr. Parisi barked, as if ordering around one of his own men. “Go out the back door. It’s not safe here right now.”

“Did you bring this here?” Nathaniel snarled, looking ready to tear the gangster to bits.

“I kept her safe from harm, and now I ask that you do the same and remove her from this theater.” Mr. Parisi’s demeanor was icy calm now. “Take her home.”

Nathaniel drew her into his arms possessively, and turned her body away from Mr. Parisi. “Stay away from her. She doesn’t need your kind in her life.”

“Gentlemen, please!” Grace pulled away from him just enough to face the two men having a pissing competition. “Don’t argue. Everything is all right—I’m all right. Nathaniel will be taking me home now. Thank you for your protection tonight, Mr. Parisi. We can take care of things from here. *Right, Nathaniel?*” She shot him a wide-eyed look, pleading for his compliance.

“Twice now you’ve nearly been killed, and on both occasions, he just happened to be there to save you.” Nathaniel flared his nostrils at Mr. Parisi. It was as if he understood something that she was still completely oblivious to.

“You stay away from her, Parisi. Wherever you go, the bullets always follow.”

Gino stood outside the theater leaning against his car with a cigarette in hand as his boss made his exit from the now-empty building. When he offered one to Enzo, he took it graciously.

“I’ve been thinking,” Gino exhaled a lungs-full of smoke.

“About?” Enzo flicked his lighter open and side-eyed him curiously.

“I’ve been thinking you’re right. She handled herself well enough tonight. I thought we agreed that we were done sending out lady-spies, but if you’re wanting to give it another shot, she might be the best option we got.”

“Mm,” Enzo paused for a long drag of his cigarette. *“That so?”*

“Well, I figured to hell with it—if we lose another one, it’s no skin off our backs. She’s nothing to me, and I don’t think she’s anything more than a redemption arc for you. Anyway, I’m heading back.” Gino climbed into his Cadillac and drove off.

Enzo hopped into his own vehicle and looked up through the windshield at the faint glittering of stars fighting to shine through the city smog. After a deep, calming breath, he fired up the engine and drove to his next destination.

Enzo parked under the oak tree across from Miss Colby’s apartment, deciding he’d take a turn standing guard that night. He held the small rose he pilfered from her hair up to his nose and drew its sweetness into his lungs. He’d never been so tempted to kiss a woman in the heat of an attack. Typically, it was the farthest thing from his mind. Survival first. Comforts and pleasure later. But the way she looked at him...there was a

different kind of fire in her eyes—one that beckoned him nearer, and dammit if his conviction didn't nearly falter. Whenever she was close, electricity flooded the air around them, and he knew she felt it too. She was so clueless to the power she possessed over him... How badly he wanted to taste her sweet lips, though if he had, he doubted he could control himself beyond just a kiss. No, he wanted to take more from her—he wanted to take her into his bed and ravish every inch of her tender heart and soul until the sun rose. But he knew better of it. She didn't deserve to be discarded after a night of pleasure, nor did she deserve to be introduced to a life of darkness in the name of love. He'd be damned if he were ever willing to risk her life of happiness for his own selfish interests.

In some ways, he was already damned the moment fate brought her to him, and in the same regard, fate had certainly damned her. She had no idea how deep the ocean was, or how many predators now had their sights set on her because of that damned article. She had made a powerful enemy who still remained hiding in the shadows.

Enzo could have left her to fend for herself. He supposed he should have. It would have made his life easier. But the fragments of his remaining conscience simply wouldn't allow him to abandon her like that. She was sweet and gentle with his ailing sister. Few people were so gracious towards Gaia anymore, and that was worth something. Luckily for Miss Colby, he always repaid acts of kindness granted upon his family, so in return, her safety would be guaranteed—no matter the cost.

Off in the distance, several pops of gunfire rang out. He sighed. Mr. Donovan was right about one thing—wherever the mob went, the bullets would surely follow. Not even Vincenzo Parisi was powerful enough to change that.

CHAPTER 5

Monday, August 14, 1933

A loud knock on a door somewhere down the hall roused Grace from another restless night. She pulled her pillow over her head and tried to steal a few more winks before the day ahead demanded her full attention. The events of Friday night took far more out of her than she initially realized.

Looking back, she had thought it rather exciting—maybe even a touch romantic. The rational part of her mind swiftly chastised her for holding such demented ideas of adventure. Grace’s heart simply refused to pretend the time she spent locked in a closet with Mr. Parisi *hadn’t* been the most intimate moment of her life. Butterflies filled her belly whenever she replayed that night in her head. Was it so wrong to feel the way she did? No one had died—*err*, at least, she hoped no one died. If the fight was gang-related, someone might have, but the police never made a statement about it.

Poor Nathaniel. He hadn’t stopped apologizing for the actions of his childhood friend. Truthfully, she really disliked Miss Corbin. Her uncouth behavior around others coupled with her relentlessness at pursuing men who told her “no” was terribly unbecoming. Of course, it was awful that her father had practically written her off and that she was motherless at a young age due to a fatal illness, but that didn’t excuse her ill behavior. Nathaniel had already forgiven her, and Grace understood his reasonings behind it. Lillian Corbin was an old childhood friend, and they had grown up close. So close in fact, Nathaniel’s own parents had been appointed as her godparents, as her father had been to him. Despite the distaste she felt for the sloppy actress, if she was important to Nathaniel, she would respect his sentiments and try not to hold

any grudges towards the woman. He was a good-hearted man, so he likely knew something of Lillian's character that Grace hadn't had the chance to discover.

Sigh. Grace tossed and turned. Her thoughts refused to shut off and let her get back to sleep. She glanced at her bedside clock. Not yet six.

“Ugh! Hellfire and damnation!” she grunted.

If her eyes remained red and tired for the day then so be it, but she'd hoped to look her absolute best for her interview with the pilot she had fawned over since their university days. Miss Harrison may have become a celebrity in her own right, but Mr. Gable had a point. Miss Harrison was still just a regular person, no matter how many accolades she held.

The time had come. Grace stood under the white-columned entryway of a stately, colonial style mansion with a gorgeous ochre-red brick facade and countless double-hung windows lining the perimeter. Despite the home's warm and welcoming exterior, she simply couldn't shake her nerves. Three times she lifted a reluctant hand to knock on the door, and three times her knuckles failed to make contact. Just to her right, the sudden movement of a silk curtain hanging on the inside of a large paned window had caught her eye. She raised a waving hand at the face peeking out behind the glass, and the curtain fluttered once more. She heard the muffled sound of heels marching along a wooden floor before an older woman with a tight bun and a flour-coated apron opened the door.

The stern woman pursed her lips at Grace. “May I help you?”

“I'm Grace-Anne Colby, reporter for the—”

“Follow me.” The woman sighed.

Grace furrowed her brow at the woman's abrasiveness towards her, but she obeyed her commands anyway and anxiously followed the lady into a stunning wood-paneled foyer. For such a large house, it was surprisingly quiet. Aside from the floor creaking beneath their feet, the only sounds in the home came from the ticking of an old grandfather-clock and the low voice of a man speaking behind closed doors. Grace wasn't sure exactly what she had expected, but she thought there might have been more people to fill up the empty spaces. Back at home, there had always been a farm hand or two grabbing a biscuit from the kitchen, or sometimes a neighbor girl learning needlepoint from her and her mother. If there was room for it, one should always fill the extra space with someone in need of company, nourishment or rest. At least that's what her mother always taught her.

Grace followed the housekeeper through the quiet halls to an open doorway that led into a brightly-lit study. Her heart nearly seized. Inside the sun-soaked room, Miss Josephine Harrison lounged on a leather sofa in front of a large bay window. Lost in thought, she sat gazing out the glass panes with a pen sitting idly in her hand and a diary resting in her lap. For a moment, she hadn't even noticed the two women enter before the housekeeper broke the silence and called out to her. Miss Harrison jumped in surprise and rose to her feet with a pearly smile. Even un-posed and caught off guard, she radiated elegance and beauty. Grace envied the accomplished pilot. To have been able to earn her wings at all as a woman—let alone use them to fly across the ocean—it was incredible! Oh, how people must admire her! Even those unaware of her achievements would be dazzled by her poise and that stunning peaches and cream complexion.

Having finally worked up the courage, Grace lifted her eyes to face her idol. Much to her surprise, Miss Harrison's bright chocolate eyes were dripping with kindness and warmth. Grace swallowed hard and shyly introduced herself.

"H-hello Miss Harrison. My name is Grace Anne Colby from the—"

“Oh my goodness, Miss Colby! When my father told me the Gotham Post was sending a woman to interview me, I couldn’t believe it!” Josephine clasped her hands behind her back grinning ear to ear.

The housekeeper uttered something to Miss Harrison and she nodded. “Yes, coffee, if you please, Hannah. That would be lovely. Miss Colby, please, have a seat!”

Grace’s head nearly spun. She’d expected a woman of poise and self-containment, not this bundle of gaiety, and she wasn’t the slightest bit disappointed by it. She sat herself on the velvet-clad chair that Miss Harrison had gestured toward and pulled a notepad from her bag.

“You were saying, Miss Harrison?”

The young pilot finally delivered on Grace’s expectation of high-class social etiquette. She perched herself on a neighboring chair with crossed ankles, politely folded hands placed primly atop her lap, and shoulders pulled back with her head held high.

“You see, Miss Colby, I have only ever had male interviewers. They enjoy patronizing me. They denigrate me as if I couldn’t possibly know the first thing about aviation.” Her voice was clipped and defensive.

“You’re the one who flew across the Atlantic, not them.” Grace shook her head in contempt. “Miss Harrison, if I may—some men will simply never understand the true capabilities of a woman, and I believe they fear the consequences of when the world finally accepts that men aren’t the only competent species.”

The tension in Miss Harrison’s shoulders melted away and she leaned toward Grace. “How long until the cosmetics guides in *Vanity Fair* are written by men? Just because of that ol’ Mr. Max Factor, it won’t be long before they’re telling us how to apply rouge.”

Grace giggled and nodded in agreement. “Oh, I know. They can tell us all about cosmetics and how to fashion ourselves

appealing in the eyes of men, but heaven help a woman who flies an airplane. One day, women will be seen as equals and the world will be a better place for it.”

“When that day comes,” an unknown voice chimed from the doorway, “the world will finally know peace.”

“That’s right, ma’am!” Miss Harrison beamed. “Please, come in. I’d like you to meet my guest.”

Grace jumped to her feet as a commanding black woman approached them in a neatly-pressed skirt suit with several large folders tucked under an arm. Grace never saw people of any color other than her own in a position of power where they were to be addressed so formally. This woman surely must have been of extraordinary caliber to accomplish such a feat.

“Mrs. Elaine Carter, I would like to introduce Miss Grace-Anne Colby, a reporter from the Gotham Post and the first woman to interview me.” Miss Harrison smiled gingerly at her guests.

“And Miss Colby, this here is Mrs. Carter. The assistant prosecutor to one Mr. Thomas Dewey.”

“Pleasure.” Mrs. Carter nodded and shook Grace’s hand firmly.

Grace was in awe at the presence of Mrs. Carter. What an unexpected privilege to meet a woman who not only defied odds by earning herself such an honorable place in society, but who also had the courage to fight against the worst kind of evil this city had to offer.

“Grace-Anne Colby?” The woman raised an eyebrow and set her folders on a table next to Miss Harrison, freeing her hands to pull a card out of her purse and handed it to Grace.

“Miss Colby, I would like to speak with you whenever you’re available... Oh, no, you aren’t in any trouble,” she rushed to reassure Grace’s concerned and wide-eyed expression. She continued in a whisper low enough for only Grace to hear. “It’s about your article in the Sun Times. I think you hit on something relevant to an investigation of mine.”

Grace eagerly took the card and contemplated for a moment what puzzle pieces she may have unlocked that had ties to such an investigation.

“I...I’ll call you this afternoon then,” she agreed, perplexed as ever. “Maybe you can be of some assistance to me as well. Thank you.”

Mrs. Carter nodded and shook both women’s hands, bidding them farewell before making her exit. The two young women were alone again, and Miss Harrison’s infectious energy resurfaced.

“The thirties will be our decade! With our rights to vote, and Eleanor Roosevelt as our First Lady—maybe our granddaughters could even run for president one day! Can you believe it?”

“I want to believe it.” Grace, still star-struck, shook her head in disbelief. “But I’m afraid we come from very different worlds. I grew up on a farm where I was told I could only be a farmer’s wife and I had to fight my father to even go to college at all. Oh, I also attended Imperial’s University for girls. I was two years behind you.”

Miss Harrison’s eyes widened. She reached for the silver tray her housekeeper had set out and poured two dainty cups of coffee.

“You did? Why didn’t I ever see you?”

“You were so popular and well, you see I majored in the art of invisibility and I was very committed to my craft.” Grace laughed. “But really, I admired you terribly. Even then, I knew you were going places no woman had gone before.”

“I wasn’t popular. A lot of them just wanted to associate with anyone who came from money or positions of power. They weren’t my friends. If I’m being honest, I haven’t any real friends.”

Mr. Gable’s insightful words reverberated back in Grace’s head. “...*none of us have half as many friends as you think we do. Not real ones, anyway.*”

Such a kind woman as Miss Harrison could hardly be lonely, could she? Perhaps the haughtiness she'd recognized on her face the night of the premier had been to conceal the loneliness of being famous, yet friendless in a crowded room full of familiar faces. She stirred a cube of sugar into her coffee, re-evaluating all the presumptions she'd once held about Miss Harrison. Just then, a lightbulb went off in her head and she decided to go for it.

"Um, Miss Harrison? Off the record," Grace said with a soft smile, "I think you and I could be great friends. I'm not as *refined* as you are, but if it's any consolation, I don't care about your status and presence in newspaper headlines. On the farm, we just tore the papers into strips and nailed them up in the outhouse for the farmhands to...clean...themselves with." Her face burned red at the accidental vulgarity she just displayed in front of a well-mannered socialite.

Miss Harrison burst into a fit of laughter and Grace eagerly joined in. She hadn't meant to invoke the image of filthy men wiping their rear ends with printed images of people's faces, but the words had already been spilled.

"I'm so sorry about that," Grace said through tears. "I—"

"I think you're a kindred spirit, Miss Colby," Miss Harrison gleefully interrupted before suddenly recoiling, seeming as if she was holding herself back from trudging through the raging fire of high-expectations imposed upon her daily, just to seek the salvation of a true friend.

"I need a kindred spirit in my life." Miss Harrison sighed heavily.

Grace reached for the woman's hand and squeezed it tightly. Despite having only just met, she felt compelled to remedy the hurt caused by a life of restrictions and fake personalities. If being her friend would take some of that weight off of her weary little shoulders, then Grace was more than willing to accept her with open arms if that's what she needed. A smile stretched across Grace's and her new friend reciprocated, in-kind.

“I suppose we’re not so different after all.” Grace winked and Miss Harrison let out a hearty giggle. “Let’s finish this interview, all right? Then we can gossip as much as you like. Let’s get back on the record. First question. How were you able to make it all happen? The Atlantic flight, I mean.”

Miss Harrison’s grin fell to a frown. Her shoulders slumped.

“My father is the city councilman, Benjamin Harrison. He used his power to convince MacCracken to let me make the solo flight.” Miss Harrison’s mouth tightened in a flat line.

“I beg your pardon, but who is that?” Grace rushed to open her notebook to a fresh sheet and began scribbling down her responses.

“William MacCracken? He’s the director of the aeronautics branch of the Department of Commerce. Flying is business, you know. Anyway, he thought it would be too dangerous to allow me with my measly lady-brain the complicated task of flying alone.”

The interview went on for the better part of an hour. They discussed the details of her big flight and the difficulties of not being respected as women in industries dominated by men. The allotted time had passed well before they realized it and the women continued their banter until the housekeeper entered the den with a plate of small pastries and some tea. Grace checked her watch.

“Oh no! I was supposed to be back at the office some time ago. I hope my editor won’t be too upset.” Grace whined and snapped her notebook shut.

Miss Harrison poured more hot water into each of the cups.

“If he does, I’ll run him over with my plane. Stay a little longer. Would you, please? I don’t get many opportunities for girl-time. Most of my days are spent on the airfield or at public events where the people I deal with are either posturing phonies, or disgusting and lewd.”

“Well, perhaps he wouldn’t mind just this once.” Grace glanced decidedly at her wristwatch.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m being selfish and trying to keep you from your work and...I’m sorry, you’re right. You should probably get going.” She set the teapot down and rose to her feet, smoothing her skirt down as she did. Miss Harrison held her head high once again, though she didn’t make eye contact. Grace could see straight through the façade of indifference. Beneath the surface of her cracking shell, the years of hurt and the longing for a connection were both painfully visible to anyone who cared enough to look.

“I’ll see you out.” Miss Harrison declared solemnly.

“No, no, it’s all right. Please allow me to stay a little longer.” Grace gently begged. The desire to keep her company wasn’t out of pity. In fact, Grace found herself desperately wanting the same as she did. Nathaniel was wonderful, but he could never be a girl-friend, though she knew he’d try for her sake if she expressed to him the need for one.

“Miss Harrison, I really do enjoy your company. Let’s chat off the record from now on, and maybe...maybe we can be friends? I also need a kindred spirit in my life.”

Miss Harrison’s melancholy cracked, allowing her charisma to peek through along with a bashful smile. “You’re really something, Miss Colby—”

“Grace,” she proudly announced.

The simple request seemed to strike right in the heart of the famous pilot. She tucked a stray lock of dark brown hair behind her ear, but when she nodded, it fell loose again.

“Grace,” she smiled, testing driving the new label. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep. I mean it. I’ll mow your editor down with my plane if he so much as shakes a finger at you! I will!”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Miss Queen Atlantic” Grace teased through stifled giggles.

“Well, if you need me, just say the word. Now, would you care to be my guest at the Imperial’s Alumni Gala Saturday next? It’s for the ‘distinguished alumni,’ and I don’t feel ready. Why should I be considered any more distinguished than a woman who uncovered the gross mistreatment of human beings and let the whole of New York City know about it? Sure, I flew a plane, but you might have saved lives.”

Grace’s feet never touched the ground on her way back to the office. She just floated with pride over the outcome of her day. She had her best interview to date, a personal request from the prosecutor herself to discuss the investigation into the sanitarium, *and* a date to go shopping with Miss Harrison that weekend for evening gowns! Above all, she had a new friend, and she was elated.

Happiness coursed through her veins, warm and comforting. She had a job she loved, an apartment she didn’t mind, more events to attend, and two new friends...She wasn’t sure how, but, everything in her world had fallen neatly back into place.

At the end of the work day, Nathaniel offered to drive Grace home, but feeling the need to walk off the day’s high, she politely declined. The hot and humid mid-summer heat didn’t bother Grace. For once, she welcomed it. The evening sun was smiling on her, and the fresh breeze kissed her forehead and cooled her dampened skin. The walk home from the office would be long as usual, but it gave her time to think.

Her mind wandered as she contemplated how to frame her interview with Miss Harrison, though her thoughts swiftly moved on to something more pressing. What about her article had piqued Mrs. Carter's interest so much that she wanted to speak privately with her? "...*your article in the Sun Times. I think you hit on something relevant to an investigation of mine.*" Something about the tone in the woman's voice led Grace to believe there was something even more sinister to uncover than just patient cruelty, and she hoped an alliance with Mrs. Carter could provide some much needed protection to continue her own investigation. The residents were owed the decency of a clean, livable facility, and that poor woman deserved to know what happened to her missing daughter. Miss Carpenter's story needed to be told, and Grace was determined to find her some closure.

The sun had almost set by the time she reached the park across the way from her apartment. Though nothing of the neighborhood seemed amiss, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck still prickled.

"Everything is fine," she whispered reassuringly to herself.

Whether it was from instinct, or from Mr. Parisi's warning to not be outside after dark, a cold panic shivered up her spine. Fear and loathing wasn't the way she wanted to end such a wonderful day. She lifted her head high in defiance of her intuition and marched her way into the park. After all, it wasn't the first time she had walked home alone since Mr. Parisi had cautioned her not to, and each time she had, nothing had gone awry. *Nothing to fear, here...*

Every noise sounded like a threat. The wind rustles in the trees. A shadow slithered through the foliage. Just then, a little black cat with white paws jumped out from the bushes and meowed ever so ferociously at her. She yelped before scoffing at herself for such a display of skittishness over a little bitty kitty. She almost bent over to pet the cat, but a vision of someone swooping in and stabbing her from behind had stopped her from touching it. The cat hissed at her approach. It

was a warning. *A sign.* She resumed walking, trodding faster and faster until rapid steps morphed into a frantic jog that continued until she found herself in the headlights of an oncoming car.

The tires squealed. The brakes screeched. A woman shrieked. The car managed to stop a mere three inches from her. Blinded by the headlights, Grace wasn't sure at first if she'd actually been hit and the lights were her greeting into the afterlife. How humiliating it would have been to be known as the girl who escaped assassination twice, only to be run down by an automobile while trying to escape a spooky shadow in the park. Although, dead people probably don't have the capacity to experience embarrassment, she supposed.

"Stay out of the road!" the man hollered out the window with a shaking fist, jolting her back to reality.

Grace stumbled speechless across the street and finally met the sidewalk to her apartment building. With a hand pressed firmly over her racing heart, she breathlessly threw her back against the door frame. *What a self-fulfilling prophecy, huh?* She chuckled to herself. Her outrageous expectations of something bad happening to her in the park had led her to almost causing her own demise.

She blew hard through her lips and vowed to only rely on rational thought moving forward, utterly denouncing her irrational gut instincts. She shoved the main door open and headed for the stairs. As she approached her unit, she peered down at the mysterious white box that sat leaning against the old, banged-up wooden door. The pretty parcel was tied with a pink ribbon that held a small card with her name written in sharp cursive. As she lifted it, the sweet fragrance of roses kissed her nose. Roses? Who would send her roses? The moment she got inside, she nearly tore the top off of the box, revealing the loveliest bunch of white and pink roses she'd ever laid eyes upon. Even their leaves were plump and strong, and their thorns removed so neatly. Not a pinch of wilt to be found in the bunch. These must have come from one of the city's more exclusive florists.

Tucked inside the box she found a small, sealed pearlescent envelope. She gently pried the flap open and pulled out a note written neatly in old-fashioned script on gorgeous stationery—perhaps the finest card stock she'd ever touched. She unfolded it, taking care not to bend it unnecessarily.

Miss Grace-Anne Colby,
I hope this finds you in good
health and happiness. The roses in your
hair were quite befitting for as tender a
bloom as you. It would be a shame if so
rare a flower should wilt before its time.
Twice now, we've met under
dangerous circumstances. This,
unfortunately, is not a coincidence. I'm
afraid you have made some powerful
enemies. I beg you to decline any invitations
for such events extending into the evening
hours until the danger has passed. I may
not always be nearby to pull you to safety.
Should you ever find yourself in need
of anything at all, call me at Murray Hill 5-9975.
This is my private telephone number. Please
keep it confidential.
Take care of yourself, Miss Colby.
Your servant,
Mr. Vincenzo Parisi

Grace read the note back several more times. A mess of questions filled her head. How did he know which apartment was hers? What does he mean their interactions hadn't been coincidence? Was someone really after her, still?! The park! Maybe there really was someone there watching her.

Of course she made enemies with her article. The sanitarium's administration didn't appreciate being put under a microscope, but what could they even do in retaliation? She had a job to do, and if they didn't care to do theirs, then it was Grace's job to report on their shortcomings for the sake of the abandoned and the damned.

Wait—who was *he* to tell *her* what to do? “*Be inside before dark. Accept no invitations.*” Pfft! Even her papa hadn't tried to impose a curfew on her before. If it would appease the bossy, handsome, mystery man, then she would gladly continue accepting rides home from Nathaniel or hail a taxi if need be. But he was positively *mad* if he expected her to abstain from any fun out on the town. She refused to live like a caged bird!

Sure, the two big events she'd attended since moving to New York had ended in violence and disaster, and *yes*, Mr. Parisi had to come to her rescue on both occasions, but it couldn't possibly continue like this forever. Surely future events could go on without a hitch. In a city where life moves so fast, her article on the sanitarium was published practically a lifetime ago. At some point, whoever had it out for her will certainly grow bored of chasing her around, right?

Hmph. Well, at least he gave her his telephone number. Now she could work on getting his things back to him. Grace slipped the note back into the envelope, opened her wardrobe and stuck it into his coat pocket. She'd contact him soon enough.

Staring vacantly at his wool coat hanging in her wardrobe, she absentmindedly grabbed hold of a sleeve and ran a thumb gently along the edge of the cuff. Just then, her curiosity drew her over to the window. She peeked out between the curtains

and swore the dark figure that she saw standing between two trees hadn't just been her imagination. The shadowy silhouette almost seemed to be that of a man...and a tall one too. She shook her head and pulled away from the window. *No*. It was simply her mind playing more cruel tricks.

If there was one request he'd made that she definitely intended to follow, it was *not* going outside alone anymore after dark.

Enzo could no longer differentiate the man he used to be from the hardened gangster he'd become. Who was Miss Colby to him, anyway? What was it about her that made him care so much? The woman was tearing holes into his stoic veneer, revealing glimpses of the softer version of himself that he beat into a cage six years ago. He wanted to feel angry for it—after all, so much blood and tears went into building that wall—but he couldn't muster the frustration. How could he? Through the holes she bore, a delicate breeze permeated deep into his soul, reminding him how to truly breathe. What was it about her that gave her so much power over him? She was only a woman—no different than any other—yet when he looked into her eyes, he found a mystery, begging to be solved. Well, she was a mystery to him, at least. Miss Colby seemed to be fully attuned to who she was. Alone in that closet, when her fingertips brushed against his wrist, the jolt to his chest landed with more force than even the jolt to his groin. He couldn't understand the overwhelming desire he felt to protect her with his own life. She was just...

God dammit. She was only a woman, but she was so much more too. A weekend of fighting to make sense of his feelings wasn't nearly enough time to bring himself to an understanding.

A light knock on the frame of his open bedroom door roused him from his thoughts. He glanced up.

“Enzo, got a moment?” Luca didn’t bother waiting to be invited into Enzo’s bedroom. Other than Esme, Luca might have been the only person alive who could enter such a private place unannounced and face no repercussions. Having known each other since they were just boys, Luca was the closest thing he ever had to a brother.

Enzo leaned against the davenport and waved him in, though Luca had already sat himself down on the armchair beside the bed.

“What’s been going on with you, Enz? And don’t tell me ‘it’s nothing. ‘You can’t fool me with that shit.”

Enzo chuckled and shook his head. No, he’d never been able to fool Luca. The bastard was the only one who always saw through his attempts.

“I saw you come out of that closet with Miss Colby...I’m thinking you’ve had a change of heart about the plan. Am I right on the money?” he taunted.

Luca may have been his *sottocapo*, but Enzo only ever saw him as an old friend—someone who knew the real him before life’s cruelties buried that person six-feet under. With Luca, he always had a brother he would let his guard down for.

“I don’t know,” Enzo admitted. *“I can’t get her off my mind. I don’t know what to do.”*

“I’m not sure if this is what you need to hear, but it’s okay to let in someone new, you know’ ...Lina never would have wanted you to wallow in misery for the rest of your life.” Luca’s tone was gentle, but firm.

“I’m not...I don’t...” Enzo shook his head, but Luca could see the truth. *“I’ve just got to try and keep her alive, Luca.”*

“How long are you going to keep trying to protect her from the shadows? I know that you’re starting to care for her more than you’ll ever admit, and it scares the shit out of you. You

know what I think? I think it would tear you apart if anything happened to her. She wouldn't have so much security around her if that wasn't the case. I also think you changed your mind on that proposition. If you're concerned that we'll look down on you for going back on your own word—don't. Don't let that shit keep you from doing what you think is right.” Luca stood up and placed a hand on his best friend's shoulder.

“My advice, Enzo? If you're still unsure what you want to do with her, just ask yourself this: Would you be able to live with yourself if she got hurt because you sought to use her for your own personal agenda? Could you live with yourself...if your plan got Miss Colby killed?”

No, Enzo thought, and that's a big problem.

CHAPTER 6

Wednesday, August 16, 1933 to

Thursday, August 24, 1933

Grace knocked on the door to prosecutor Elaine Carter's office with a notebook and pen in hand. Earlier that morning, she made sure to gather up the notes from her investigation on the sanitarium and tucked them away neatly into her knapsack.

"Come in," a voice called from behind the emerald glass window.

She'd barely crossed the threshold of the doorway before all her feelings of confidence morphed into a strange sense of foreboding. The office was dimmer than she expected. The air inside the small office was thick with dread, and for a moment, she doubted that even the iron bars of a prison cell could feel more suffocating. She felt the sudden urge to run, but she held strong. Grace knew that the confidential information locked away in all those beat-up file cabinets probably contained depravities beyond her wildest imaginations. Truthfully, she wasn't sure if she had the courage to face whatever grim realities Mrs. Carter may reveal to her during this meeting, but as always, her curiosity triumphed over fear, so she pressed on.

Mrs. Carter briefly glanced up in acknowledgement at Grace's arrival before returning her attention back to the documents laid out on her desk.

"Please, take a seat. Are you all right, Miss Colby?" she inquired, astutely noticing the discomfort written in Grace's demeanor.

“I’m fine. Thank you.” Grace sat on one of the armchairs and rifled through her bag for the leather-bound binder containing her notes. Once found, she set the binder in her lap and opened to pages of her own notes that suddenly read like gibberish. She paused for a moment, letting a passing thought slip out into a question.

“Do you ever get the feeling that the trajectory of your life has changed drastically...without any warning or say in the matter?”

“Every single day when I wake up.” The prosecutor finally pushed her paperwork aside and gave the reporter a concerned look-over. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Grace bit her bottom lip, considering how much she should let on. She flattened her hands against her leather binder in an attempt to hold back the brewing flood of confessions. Under the prosecutor’s commanding gaze, Grace cracked just a bit. “Oh, I’m just a little overwhelmed, you see. So much has happened in only a few short weeks, and I’m still trying to acclimate to the constant whiplash. That’s all.”

“Yes. Well. Change can happen fast, Miss Colby.” Mrs. Carter pursed her lips, and without wasting another moment, she dove right into business. “So, do you remember why I asked to meet with you?”

Grace held up a manilla folder. “To discuss the sanitarium. I’d like to gather more information, and I’m hoping you can provide some aid in improving the horrid conditions there.”

“Yes. You...” The older woman knotted her fingers in search of her next choice of words. “Miss Colby, you’ve come closer than you think to those in charge, and...before I say anything, I need you to understand that everything I tell you is confidential. You may use this information to direct your investigations, but you may not disclose it under any circumstances. Do you understand?”

“Do I understa—” Grace shook her head and huffed. “Of course. Any ethical reporter understands the importance of

protecting their sources. Now, if we may continue, what do you mean ‘I’ve come closer than I realize’?” Her patience was wearing thin.

Mrs. Carter glared hard, sizing up her young opponent. Grace accepted the challenge and boldly stared right back at her which seemed to satisfy the prosecutor enough to proceed.

“Miss Colby, do you know why I was at the councilman’s house that day?”

Grace shook her head. “Something to do with the next election?”

“No.” Mrs. Carter perched her folded hands atop the desk. “Well, at least, as far as he knows, I was there on election business. I was there to discuss his political contributions with him. He’s received great sums of money on which he has paid no taxes. I was there in hopes that he might slip-up and reveal the source of the donations, which of course, he did not. For now, he thoroughly believes that he’s convinced me of some kind of error in accounting, but I have reasons to suspect he’s been working with the Giordano crime family.”

Grace’s brows furrowed. “Do you think Josephine Harrison...”

“Not at all,” the prosecutor interjected. “I don’t believe she has the slightest idea of her father’s dealings. I’ve known her since she was quite young, and she’s as pure and ignorant as they come.”

“Thank goodness.” Grace breathed a sigh of relief. “So you think that this Giordano man is bribing the councilman? What gives you that idea?”

“Miss Colby,” Mrs. Carter voiced in a low tone, “you must keep this between you and me. The Gotham Sanitarium...” She huffed in frustration. “None of this is public. The sanitarium used to be run by the city. Four years ago, in the immediate aftermath of the market crash, Harrison quickly pushed through legislation in a late-night session that few people knew about, not including the people who *should* have

been in attendance. During that meeting, they voted to convert the hospital into a privately-owned facility. It was purchased by Cesare Giordano almost immediately. Every year more and more money is budgeted, but the quality of patient care continues to decline. On top of that, I have evidence that any public contributions are funneled directly to Giordano.”

Grace’s eyes widened. “And you think the anonymous donations toward Mr. Harrison’s campaign is connected with all of this?”

“I do. They align with withdrawals from some of Giordano’s accounts.”

The declaration of Mr. Harrison’s probable guilt hit Grace like a ton of bricks. “Do you think...do you think this is how Mr. Harrison convinced the aviation control man to let Josephine Harrison fly across the Atlantic?” She didn’t want to believe that her friend’s achievements were only made possible through dirty money and bribery.

“Now that, I don’t know. Looking into the DOC’s director will have to wait for now.” The prosecutor pulled a copy of the Gotham Post from a drawer and set it in front of Grace. “The woman in this article—” she pointed.

“Louisa Carpenter. Her name is Miss Louisa Carpenter.”

“Miss Carpenter, yes. Were you able to confirm the existence of her daughter? You’re sure she wasn’t imagining the child?”

Grace leaned on her elbows on the table and studied the published photograph she had taken of Miss Carpenter that day. “Not yet—no confirmation beyond her word and an old photo she kept. She seemed so coherent despite her devastation. When she looked into my eyes and told me she needed help finding her daughter I just...something in my soul just knew that she was telling the honest-to-god truth.”

“How did you get in?”

Grace closed her eyes and returned to that day. “The evening before I snuck in, I borrowed a uniform from the back

of the laundry truck when the driver wasn't looking. I used that uniform to go undercover as one of their nursing staff. No one questioned me. When I got inside..." Her nose crinkled at the memory of the stench. "It smelled like human waste and I was horrified at the filth. Mr. Vincenzo Parisi was there and he was visiting one of the patients. I guess she escaped from an upper floor that's in better condition. I did see that the entryway divides in two, and one side goes right upstairs, but I never made it to that floor. Families of patients residing on the second floor would never step foot downstairs where I met Miss Carpenter. The second floor had all its own pathways to enter and exit the building." She peered up at the prosecutor and found her expression unreadable.

Mrs. Carter licked her lips and tapped her manicured fingernails against the hardwood desk. "I find it quite odd that a rival gang leader would frequent the facility if he knew his worst enemy owned it—even more so if the patient had been a loved-one or relative of his, though I suppose that would be unlikely. You see, Giordano has been tied to the disappearance of many young girls going back at least twenty-four years, maybe more."

Twenty years.

A man yanked her from the small wooden chair and threw her over his shoulder...

Grace sat paralyzed for a moment, but the flash of memory disintegrated before she could grasp it for more context. Her father always told her she imagined their trip to New York when she was young...now her mind was flooded with doubt.

"Miss Colby, I'm asking you to go back and speak with Miss Carpenter again." Mrs. Carter's sudden request jolted Grace back to attention.

"But how? I don't think I can pretend to be a nurse again. It's already a miracle I wasn't prosecuted for theft and impersonation before."

“Did you forget I’m the prosecutor?” She chuckled and opened a drawer for a couple pieces of candy and passed a gold-foiled butterscotch over to Grace.

“If anything happens, I have an inside line who can get you out of any relevant legal troubles. This could help bring down Cesare Giordano, which in-turn, would save the lives of many young girls and cut down on some of the daily bloodshed... and don’t you worry Miss Colby, you’ll have the exclusive on that.” The prosecutor winked.

Grace nodded her head. “All right, then. I’ll see what I can do about getting back in. If I can help you put an end to whatever depravity that man is committing, then I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure his fate is realized.”

Grace strutted down the sanitarium halls once more, this time clad in a new pink linen dress and a matching peplum coat cinched in with a waist belt. Her white leather heels clacked against the beige-speckled linoleum. Dirty ceiling lights above still buzzed and flickered, but she noted the ward’s tidier appearance, and she was overjoyed by the absence of a putrid stench.

“Excuse me,” she gestured to the first nurse she encountered. “If I may, I’d like to visit with Miss Louisa Carpenter.”

The nurse’s eyes narrowed at her and she shook her head. “No. You may not. You need to leave.”

“Why can’t I visit her?” Grace asked coolly.

“*Ugh.* Miss Walker will deal with you. Come with me.” She gripped Grace’s arm like a vise.

Grace wrenched herself free from the fingers digging into her wrist.

“Excuse me, I can follow without you hurting me!”

The nurse’s jaw twitched at her defiance, but she spun back on her heel and continued down another hall with Grace trailing behind. She stopped outside a door and paused before pushing it open. “Wait here. Miss Walker will be with you shortly” The nurse shot her a wicked grin before walking away.

The hair of Grace’s arms stood on end. What were the chances someone there would lock her up and claim she was insane? If they threw her in the bin, they could go on and claim that her article was the delusional work of a madwoman. Then all her trials would have been for nothing and Miss Carpenter will never get the truth... *Oh, no...* Grace could feel panic quickly setting in, and she knew if she didn’t start learning to keep her composure during times of stress, she could ruin everything. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath...

“Miss Colby,” a woman called out from behind her in a fake pseudo-saccharine tone. “You’ve caused enough problems for us here. What in God’s-name could you possibly want, now?”

Grace turned to face a tall woman who would have been quite pretty had it not been for the look of contempt chiseled into her expression.

“I caused *you* problems? *You* were neglecting patients, and no one would help Miss Carpenter with her missing daughter. Who even are *you*? What is your role here?” Grace spit.

“I’m Miss Walker,” the woman snapped back. “The director of this institution that you regard so highly. What do you want?”

“Well, bless your heart, Miss Walker,” Grace said with a tight, feigned grin. “I’m just here to visit with Miss Louisa Carpenter to get more information on her daughter. I was hoping I could help her—”

“Miss Carpenter is dead.”

The words pierced Grace's heart. She shook her head in denial. "You're lying."

Miss Walker raised an eyebrow and pulled over the first nurse who walked by. "Nurse Betty, would you please explain to Miss Colby what happened to Louisa Carpenter?"

The young nurse chewed nervously on her bottom lip. Grace doubted she was older than seventeen. "Ma'am, sh-she died. A little under a month ago." Miss Walker patted the girl's shoulder half-heartedly to dismiss her, and the young Nurse Betty fled like a mouse freed from a trap.

The confirmation sucked the air from Grace's lungs. So, she was too late. Miss Carpenter died without ever knowing what happened to her daughter. Grace's limbs grew heavy. "What happened?" She demanded through stinging eyes.

"She had a bilateral lobectomy and she didn't recover."

"Someone cut into her brain?!" Grace balked. "You people are monsters! So many patients die."

"Only imbeciles and morons." A corner of Miss Walker's mouth tightened. "Is that all you needed?"

"Imbeciles?! Where is she buried? I want to see her!" Grace choked back tears.

Miss Walker shook her head. "Not possible. She was cremated."

"*Why?*"

"She had no family listed to contact. In situations like this, we cremate them."

It couldn't be true. It just couldn't. Grace forced herself to take a slow, deep breath or else she feared she would suffocate from her own despair.

"Where are her ashes? Did she leave behind any possessions? I'd like to take care of them."

"You must be mad." Miss Walker rolled her eyes.

Anger swelled in Grace's heart and she shoved trembling fists into her waist.

"I'm certain the people of New York City would froth at the mouth for an article about how you routinely murder patients with lobectomies before incinerating their bodies like garbage!"

"Fine!" Miss Walker snapped. "Wait here."

Grace's nostrils flared as grief and anger collided to form a delirium-inducing cocktail. How could this be? It was too late...Miss Carpenter was dead, and her daughter...would anyone but Grace care, or even remember them? How terrible she felt to know their existences had been reduced to nothing but ash and embers.

Miss Walker returned and hitched her thumb over her shoulder. "I'll take you to the storage room. You may have a look at what's left, and then you are to leave *immediately*."

With her feet now heavy as lead Grace trudged behind Miss Walker to a metal Dutch door. Inside the musty room, a crotchety old caretaker sat in a chair reading a pulp paperback, not bothering for a moment to look up at the women entering his den.

"I'd like to see Miss Louisa Carpenter's things, please."

The man grumbled and got up from his chair, lumbering off as if she'd rudely interrupted his day. The old man returned with a dusty shoebox and set it on the table. Without a word, he crouched into his seat and pulled the book back to his face, seemingly to send a warning that he was not to be bothered again.

Grace slowly lifted the lid off the box and the contents inside made her heart sink. All that it contained was a small metal box of Miss Carpenter's ashes, a stuffed piglet with loose stitching, and a photograph of a younger, happier Miss Carpenter posed with a young girl Grace had presumed to be her daughter and an older man she presumed to be Miss Carpenter's father.

“Is this *all* she had?”

“Her father claimed the rest. This is what he didn’t want.” The caretaker still didn’t look up from his book.

“Her *father*?” The man’s assertion that Miss Carpenter supposedly had a living relative left her feeling a bit disoriented. She held the faded photograph up to him. “You mean this man?”

“I don’t know, lady. I don’t remember. It was a month ago.”

“May I take her things?”

The old man yanked the box away from her, thankfully overlooking the photograph she still held in her hand which she hurriedly slipped into her coat sleeve.

“I guess not. Thank you for your time.” Walking briskly, she exited the storage room headed in the direction of Miss Walker who was standing outside a patient’s door, bossing around one of the nurses. Grace, swimming in sorrow, decided on confronting the crude facility head.

“Why did you lie? The caretaker said her *father* had come to claim her things. You said she had no family on file.”

Miss Walker dismissed the reprimanded nurse and turned to face her enemy, flaring her nostrils like an enraged bull. Grace shrugged. “Fine. I’ll just write an article about this. Good day, Miss Walker.”

Grace turned on her heel to storm off, but Miss Walker snatched her arm, dragging her back down the hall and into the storage room from before. “Listen here, you little wench,” the woman spit, “if I get you her files, will you shut up and leave this facility alone?”

“You have my word. I just want to know the truth.” Grace raised her right hand to seal her promise. A caging numbness worked its way through Grace’s heart and it was then that she realized walls were beginning to form around it. So many terrible things have happened, and her heart refused to accept any more beatings. The desire to cry had all but vanished.

What was the point? Any more tears spent would be all for naught. This world wasn't just built on tears and cruelty—it thrived on it. Fear and sadness only served to strengthen evil's resolve.

Though the act of caring was granting her nothing but heartache, she refused to fall victim to cynicism. Grace swallowed away the newfound pessimism and took a deep, calming breath.

When Miss Walker returned, she carried a thin file and held it out to Grace.

Without a word of thanks, Grace opened it to find only a few sheets of paper. On top lay a registration form dated two years before. Her eyes darted around the paper. *One daughter. Mother and father deceased. Unmarried.* The next page was her visitor's log which was scant, at best.

“The caretaker said her father picked up her things,” Grace pointed out, “but it says right here that her father's dead—and here on this visitor sheet, it says she was visited by a man named Robert Williamson shortly before her death, and the last log shows it was him who received her belongings. Why is this man listed as her father on the visitor log when her registration states her father's name was Walter Carpenter with the request that care be transferred to Mr. Williamson upon his death?”

Miss Walker shrugged—a display of gross indifference to the alleged discrepancies.

Grace slapped the file shut. “How may I contact Mr. Williamson?”

“I don't know. That's all we have on her. ‘No contact information ’means we have no information.” her snarky tone was grating as ever.

Feeling confident there was nothing of substance left for her to squeeze out of Miss Walker, Grace marched out of the sanitarium without a word. Outside, the bright sun nearly blinded her. Light reflected sharply off the glass window of a

security booth located at the entrance of the complex, and she decided to pull out her last Hail Mary. Grace approached the open window and unleashed her request before even getting a look at the worker inside. “Miss Walker said you’re to show me the visitor log.”

The wrinkly woman inside hardly looked up from her knitting. She plopped a tattered notebook onto the counter and returned to her craft.

Grace flipped back to the dates between Robert Williamson’s final visit with Miss Louisa Carpenter, and the day he came to retrieve her things. After scanning through a few pages, she found his name. She took out her pocket notepad and jotted down the license plate number as well as the names of Robert Williamson and Walter Carpenter.

“Thank you.” Grace closed the logbook and handed it back to the woman to make what she hoped would be her final exit from that God-awful place.

The long walk home gave her too much space to think and Grace started to panic with guilt over Miss Carpenter’s passing. The circumstances felt terribly suspicious, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that Miss Carpenter’s death held some correlation to the article she published containing her story and the mention of her missing child. Grace frantically patted her purse for the family photograph she nabbed, feeling lucky that no one had noticed. She wouldn’t let their memory die in a filthy shoebox lost in a musty storage room.

Just a couple of blocks from the office, Grace heard a vehicle honk nearby. She ignored the noisy intrusion until another honk blared, and she turned to find Nathaniel cruising up the street in his yellow pride and joy. He pulled up to the curb beside her, reaching across the passenger seat to roll down a window. “Hey, gorgeous, you need a ride?”

When she turned to face him without a word, Nathaniel's cheesy grin immediately fell. He jumped out of the car and rushed to her side. "Grace, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

Her lip quivered. "Not really. Louisa Carpenter was given a lobectomy. They cut into her brain, Nate! They mutilated her and she died...and I think it's all my fault. I should have done more for her, but instead I got her killed." She let out a small shriek before breaking into an unrelenting sob.

Nathaniel pulled her into a tight hug and brushed a palm against her back, paying no mind to the odd passers-by who shot them disapproving glances.

"Grace, look at me. None of this is your fault. That procedure is barbaric and the doctors who perform it are the ones to blame, not you."

"But I don't even know who the doctor was, so I couldn't even try to pin this guilt on someone else if I wanted to." Grace lifted her head to look up at her friend. Her eyes now reddened with tears, she rubbed the back of her hand against her runny nose.

"I got all the information the hospital had, and it wasn't much. I got her father's name, and the name of the man who claimed guardianship over her after her father died. I have nothing more to go on, and I haven't the slightest clue how to contact the man."

Nathaniel patted her head and gave her a reassuring smile. "I will help you. I've got an informant on my personal payroll and I'll get him on it as soon as I can."

"Really?"

"Really, really." He nodded a promise at her, and despite the wet sniffing, Grace managed a genuine smile for the first time that day.

"Thank you, Nathaniel. We need to find her daughter too. She may be connected to the slew of young girls that have gone missing in the city for over two decades. The prosecutor mentioned a connection to some man named Giordano?"

The blood drained from Nate's face. "Your investigation involves Cesare Giordano? No, Grace. Absolutely not. I don't want you involved in anything to do with Giordano. Do you understand?"

"But—"

"No, no, *please*, listen to me, Grace. He kills people. If you get too close, he *will* kill you. That's not a threat—that's a guarantee." His eyes shouted at her in terror.

"I won't let him get to me. I'm doing this with or without you. But without you, it'll be harder. What if your little sister had been one of them? What if I had been?"

He shook his head and pulled her into a hug once more. Grace leaned against him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She hadn't the words to ease his concerns—all she knew was that she refused to be taken out by an evil man. She was determined to find a way to end a monster's reign of terror, and she intended on being there when the judge finally threw the book at him.

But Nathaniel had only ever known loss—his whole family...just gone in an instant. She understood her friend's apprehension, but it was then that she made a promise to herself that she wouldn't go down without a fight, and boy, was she ready.

Nathaniel pulled away to reach for the passenger door handle and avoided eye contact. After a moment of deliberation in his head, he let out a heavy sigh of defeat.

"All right. Fine. I've got a suite at the Waterford Hotel. We can go there to talk in private and I'll order us some supper. Tell me everything you know and we'll figure out... something." He shrugged. "Just...please, Grace, don't let me lose you, too."

CHAPTER 7

*Friday, August 25, 1933 to
Monday, September 4, 1933*

Thick velvet drapes obscured all but the thinnest slivers of daylight. The scent of cinnamon filled the air all around her, coaxing her out of a heavy slumber. Her fingertips brushed against a plush satin pillow. Half awake and groggy, Grace extended her limbs for a good stretch, and when her knuckles bumped against the leather and brass rivets of an unfamiliar headboard, her eyes startled open. She stared overhead at the lofted evergreen ceiling and panicked, unsure of where she was, though she soon recalled that she had spent the night at the hotel with Nathaniel. *Wait...I slept here...with Nate?!* Grace tugged a fistful of blanket to her chest, realizing only once she sat up that she had never actually undressed herself. She looked to her left and noticed she hadn't even slept under the comforter. The blanket she still clutched to herself had come from the sofa. *He must have tucked me in,* Grace breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed the covers on the other side of the bed were perfectly undisturbed.

"I slept on the couch, Grace." Nathaniel half smiled at her from an armchair where he sat reading a book under the warm glow of a lamp.

"You fell asleep so suddenly last night that I thought it best to let you sleep."

She swallowed nervously and her cheeks flushed hot. "I've never slept with a man before."

He chuckled and shook his head at her. "This isn't sleeping together in any sense. I was across the room. You're more

innocent than I thought. Didn't your mother ever teach you about the 'birds and the bees'?"

"Ugh. I'll have you know I've helped breed no less than thirty cows and eighteen sows..." When Nate began to laugh, she chucked a firm pillow at his head. "Not all of us work our way around town, you know."

"Ouch!" he teased with a hand pressed to his heart. "Why, Miss Colby, are you insulting my virtue?"

"Do you have any virtue left to insult?" Grace crossed her arms and scowled at him. "What time is it, anyway? Am I late for work?"

"Hm. I suppose you got me there, and..." Nathaniel reached for his pocket watch. "It's just after nine, but I told Drake you need a day for bereavement. You've been working too hard. Yesterday was the last thing you needed."

Grace huffed and threw herself back down on the bed and rolled over, pulling the soft wool blanket snugly over herself like a cocoon. Despite his playful arrogance, her heart warmed over the way he took care of her.

"Thank you. I've just...I've got to find that man who claimed Louisa's things."

"We'll find him." Nathaniel left the confines of the chair to sit beside her and patted her shoulder. "You know, you've been through a lot since we've met. You're so strong-willed and stubborn, just like my sister was. But if you're not careful, that strength of yours—it'll be..." He sighed, not wanting to finish that thought.

Grace rolled over to her back and looked up at him. His brow furrowed as he collected his thoughts. Suddenly, his eyes widened and the air around him shifted.

"Nate? What's wrong?" Grace sat up and searched his expression for an answer.

"The prosecutor said Giordano owns the hospital now?"

"Yes, and I think maybe h—"

“He’s probably behind the attempts on your life.” Nathaniel shook his head and took a deep breath.

“Grace, I’ve been thinking about this all night—I think we’re wading into some dangerous waters here. I really think you should reconsider any further pursuance into this investigation.”

Grace crossed her arms and thought hard for a moment. Mr. Parisi had told her to stay inside after dark...did he know it was Giordano who was after her? The prosecutor had mentioned during their meeting that Mr. Parisi was a rival mob boss.

“Twice now, we’ve met under dangerous circumstances. This, unfortunately, is not a coincidence.”

The words from his letter echoed in her mind.

She shook her head defiantly, “No. I will not give up on this, not if there’s a chance we could save missing children!”

“There’s a chance we could get murdered...that you could be murdered. Please, Grace, I am begging you to let it go.”

His hazel eyes ran dark with frustration, fueling her own anger. He had no right to tell her what to do. Why does he even care so much what she does? Who did he think he was to question her as if she hadn’t already weighed and considered the risks herself?

Grace took a deep breath and expelled some of the pressurized steam filling her head. Deep in her heart, she knew he was right. Who did he think he was? He was an orphaned friend who cared deeply for her, that’s who. Her anger abated some, but her resolve to uncover the truth was unshakable. She would never stop fighting for answers, even if it meant going it alone.

“Well,” she spoke calmly, preparing herself to lie, “how about I work on an article about Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, instead? They keep evading justice, and I think they’ll be big news before long.”

Nathaniel's tension noticeably eased and he nodded in agreement, running a hand through his sandy brown hair. "That's a good idea. I'll give you the telephone number for my informant in case you need help digging up information from so far away. When you contact him, tell the man to send the bill me."

Grace arrived home at noon with strict orders from her friend to take it easy for the day. As soon as she walked through the door, she sprinted to her kitchen table and worked out a tentative plan to continue her investigation into Louisa Carpenter's case—this time without any help from Nathaniel. Knowing full well that he would be back to work at the office, she slipped out of her building to fetch the payphone down the street. Looking cautiously over her shoulder, Grace slipped a dime into the slot and dialed the number for the informant. She bounced anxiously on her knees, waiting with baited breath as the phone continued to ring before someone finally answered.

"Jake Brown speaking."

Grace's mouth dried. Silence lingered on the line for a moment as she psyched herself up to go through with her plans. "Hello, sir. I'm Grace-Anne Colby of the—"

"—Gotham Post. I've heard of you. What can I do for you?"

There it is. She rolled her eyes.

"Okay, I need...I need you to get some information for me. Would you be available for a meeting sometime tomorrow?"

"How about half-past-three today? At Vesuvio Café in SoHo on, uh—"

“Yes! I think I know where that is.” She cringed at the eagerness in her voice.

“I mean, yes, today is swell. How will I know who you are?”

“I know who you are, Miss Colby. I’ll find you.” Without so much as a good-bye, the line went dead.

Grace stared blankly at the receiver. Her stomach churned. She was betraying the trust of her beloved friend, and trusting that this informant won’t snitch on her for it. Technically, she hadn’t told Nathaniel explicitly that she would quit the investigation, but she knew in her heart that it was still betrayal, no matter how it was framed.

“Too late to bail out now,” she murmured to herself. She headed back to her apartment to rest a little while longer before going to meet the shady Mr. Jake Brown at three-thirty.

Grace arrived at the shockingly lavish diner about a half hour too early. She found an empty booth and plopped her bottom on the seat facing the widow. Vesuvio Café was impressive—the seats were clean and comfortable, the lighting was warm and welcoming. She glanced at the menu and thought that either her eyesight was going, or she had a bad copy. The prices of the dishes here were far more reasonable than she expected—cheap even. Peculiar as it was, she figured the owner might just source ingredients locally to keep the prices low. Just then, a young and pretty waitress with a small notepad in hand strolled up to the table to greet her.

“What can I get for you, miss?” the waitress asked in a silky rasp.

“Coffee, please?” Grace replied.

“Would you like cream or sugar with that?” The waitress brushed away a stray auburn curl and pulled a pencil out from

behind her ear.

“No, thank you. Black is fine.”

The waitress smiled and wandered off to fetch Grace’s coffee. Alone once again, Grace watched every man who came through the front door wondering which one of them would be Mr. Brown, but they all walked to other areas of the diner.

Before long, the red-headed waitress returned with her coffee. Grace thanked her and tipped the woman thirty percent.

She was on her second refill, and still, no one had arrived.

Grace flicked her wrist to check her watch. *Three-forty-seven.* Hmph. It seemed that her steaming cup of joe would be her only form of company today. She took a couple more sips and began gathering her things to leave when a voice called out to her somewhere nearby.

“Miss Colby?” a man whispered.

She turned around to find a young man sitting in the booth next to hers wearing an ill-fitted tan suit and a matching fedora.

“Are...are you Mr. Brown?” She raised an eyebrow at the suspiciously young character.

“At your service.” Mr. Brown tipped his hat, slipped out of his booth and slid into the seat across from her. “What can I do for you, young lady?”

Grace glared at him. *Young lady?* She expected a man a little bit older, not this bubbly young whipper-snapper.

“How old are you?” She eyed him cautiously.

“Thirty-four, Miss Colby. I take after my old man. He didn’t age a day ‘til he hit forty, and then it all caught up with him.”

Grace reached for the coffee she was about to leave behind and sipped on it once more. There was no way this man wasn't a teenager, but if Nathaniel trusted him, then she supposed he was worth the shot.

"Mr. Brown, this meeting is strictly confidential. Absolutely no one—*not a soul*—can know about this. I need help finding a man, and I need to identify the owner of a vehicle."

Mr. Brown took a big gulp of his sugary coffee. "You mean you don't want Donovan to know?" He chuckled. "Miss, if I told all my clients 'who 'asked 'what, 'I'd be out of business, and frankly, I take a lot of pride in my work."

The man's seedy persona grated her nerves. She didn't like that he knew who she was, what she looked like, or that he knew of her connection with Nathaniel. The sooner she could wrap up this meeting, the better.

"The man's name is Robert Williamson." Her eyebrows shot up when Mr. Brown nearly spit out a sip of his coffee.

"Um...Are you all right?"

Mr. Brown waved her off. "Yes, yes, I'm fine. Continue." He coughed.

"Okay, well...So, Robert Williamson—he picked up the belongings of a woman whose story I covered in an article. I'd like to speak with him. The plate number of the car is twenty-ell-three-ten."

"Robert...Robert Williamson?"

"Yes."

"Two-zero-ell-three-one-zero?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "All right. That'll be a twenty-five dollar retainer." He held his palm out. "Then another twenty-five when I've got your information."

“Fifty dollars?” Her eyes widened. Not even her rent was that much.

“If that’s too steep for you, I can always add it to Donovan’s tab.” He winked.

“No! No, I’ll pay. But this stays between us, no matter what. Does Mr. Donovan know you charge this much?”

Mr. Brown snickered, still holding out an expectant hand, urging her to fork up the cash.

“He’s why I charge this much. I’ll call you at the Times when I have what you want.” He tossed a bit of money on the table to cover his bill, tipped his cap at her and strutted out the front door twenty-five dollars richer.

Grace sat still for a moment to recover from the robbery that had just taken place. At least she still had a job. It pained her to hand off such a large sum of money, but that’s what it took to get her closer to an answer, then it was a price she was willing to pay.

Word had reached Enzo that a reporter had been snooping around trying to find the owner of a certain vehicle. He pinched the bridge of his nose. She could hardly have been interested in a more dangerous person than the man she wanted to find. Over the weekend, she’d been spotted dress-shopping with the crooked councilman’s straight-and-narrow daughter. Of course, the dresses would be for *yet another evening gala*. The hospital. The car. The councilman. Miss Colby hit the trifecta that would lead right into another Giordano trap. Did she have a death wish? Her stubbornness and outright refusal to heed his warnings made him tense.

“Why am I doing this, Gino? Why am I so hell-bent on keeping this reckless woman alive?”

Gino responded in the same language, answering his boss in an open manner that few could get away with.

“You couldn’t save Cathalina. Maybe you’re trying to atone for your sins. Or maybe you’re just trying to protect the one dame who could finally dethrone the bastard who stole Cathalina from you. You know as well as I do that she could be our last chance at this.”

Last chance... Vincenzo felt sick.

“Gino—” he squeezed his temples. *“About that...I don’t think I can do it.”*

“Are you kidding me right now, Enzo? All this bullshit to get me on board with the idea, and for what?” Gino threw his hands up in exasperation.

Enzo stood from his chair and slowly approached his consigliere with seething anger burning in his eyes.

“My friend,” he took a puff from his cigarette and blew it in Gino’s face. *“I don’t know who you think you’re speaking to, but if I say the plan is off, then it’s off,”* he growled.

“So what? That’s it then?” Gino spit.

Enzo’s jaw clenched.

“I’ll think on it—but I don’t want to hear another fucking word out of your mouth about it. Understood?”

Grace held on to Josephine’s hands, forehead to forehead, and they tried their best not to trip over themselves when they threw their hands up and around while attempting, and failing, to dance the Carioca. No one at the ball could manage, no matter how easy Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers made it look.

“I’ve never really been one for dancing,” Josephine giggled, doing her best to untangle her hair caught in a pin at

the back of Grace's head without making a mess of their hairdos.

Grace waited patiently as her friend poked and prodded at the tangle of brown and gold curls. After a few minutes, she relegated herself to spending the rest of the night looking disheveled, but she didn't mind in the slightest. She was having a wonderful time with Josephine, and it appeared their night was to be free of gunfire and bloodshed...and she sighed. *That also meant...*

"No Vincenzo Parisi." She pressed her lips together, chastising herself for speaking her thoughts aloud.

"What's that?" Josephine asked. After finally having separated herself from her friend, she set about fixing the mess she made of Grace's hair.

Grace's cheeks burned and she fiddled nervously with her nails. She hadn't spoken of him like this to anyone before. On account of embarrassment, she decided to play coy.

"Oh, it's just a man I met a few times. He's—"

"Is he handsome?" Josephine spun Grace around and shot her a wide, eager grin. "Is he available? Does he have eyes for you? Tell me everything, Gracie."

"It's nothing." Grace looped her arm through Josephine's and led her back to their table, resigned to letting the wild lindy-hoppers have at it on the dance floor. They took their seats and sipped on chilled champagne.

"Well, now that we're seated, you can't run from me." Josephine winked. "I want to know all about him."

"Oh, Josie. He's just a man I've met a couple of times, but only whenever something bad happens."

"Bad? What do you mean?"

Grace shrugged and leaned forward on her elbows. "New York City's nothing like I thought it would be. It's so stressful and scary at times—but exciting, no doubt. I didn't have any hope of finding happiness on the farm because there just

wasn't anything there for me. But here..." She gestured toward the dance floor, where men and women flipped and shuffled. "This city is so alive...and as luck would have it, I found myself with...a 'guardian angel' of sorts who's kept me alive so that I could be here tonight with you, and so I can continue to enjoy my weekly pizza dates with another dear friend of mine. His name's Nathaniel Donovan."

"Mr. Donovan's awfully kind. He's not the man on your mind?"

"No." Grace smiled softly at Josephine. "Mr. Donovan views me like a sister, and I see him as a close friend. His sister and their parents—"

—"died when their airplane crashed. That was truly an awful time."

"You knew them?"

Josephine turned her gaze toward the dance floor and reflected for a moment. "Well, I didn't really *know* them, but we were members of the same country club. His sister Agnes and I would chat on occasion, and Nathaniel didn't rat me out that time he caught my girlfriend and I ki—" She stopped herself from finishing that confession. "I mean, when he..."

Grace, sensing her friend's panic, reached out and held Josephine's hand reassuringly.

"Josie, it's all right! So you've dated a woman? Who cares? I sure don't, and if that's something you'd like to keep private...well, it's not my place to tell the world your business. My mother used to read me a lot of Sappho's poetry, and frankly, I don't understand why it matters who people choose to love. I will always have respect for you and the way you choose to live your life, okay?"

Josephine's expression was wrought with guilt and she shrunk in her seat, ashamedly. "Grace," she murmured, looking dejected as ever, "I still have a girlfriend. My boyfriend doesn't know. No one knows that I...well, I'm attracted to both men and women. I believe in free love, but..."

I'm only with Marco because I have to maintain an image... Truthfully, I'm head-over-heels in love with Coral."

"I would never judge you for something like that, and I'm sorry that the laws punish unconventional love... While I consider myself a law-abiding citizen, you're my friend." Grace smiled. "And I stand by my friends."

"Really?" Josephine's eyes glittered with hope.

"Yes, really. You're like the sister I never had."

"Do you think you'll stay in New York forever?"

Forever? Grace hadn't really given much thought to the future, but after some consideration, she felt she already knew the answer.

"I think so. Despite the negatives, New York has so much to offer, and every day I wake up here, a new adventure calls to me. Having two lovely new friends, I feel that I'm finally starting to put my own roots down. I'm in too deep—I couldn't possibly just up and leave it all behind now!" Grace giggled and pulled at Josie's hands to stand her up. "Come on, let's go dance some more!"

Monday morning arrived painfully fast. Grace plopped in her swivel-chair, still exhausted from the bullet-free gala she attended with Josie on Saturday. Grace rested a weary head in her palm while attempting to draft up a template for her story on the Barrow gang. Her brain refused to fire on all cylinders, and she wasted page after page on failed outlines. By noon, her waste bin was full of crumpled sheets of paper. Growing ever frustrated with herself, she jammed a fresh sheet of paper into the typewriter and promised herself she would get it right this time. Just as she started to punch the first key, her telephone rang.

"Gotham Post, Grace-Anne Colby speaking."

“Miss Colby, hello. Brown here. Meet me at two o’clock this afternoon, same place.” Without waiting for a reply, the line went dead.

Grace huffed. He could have at least given her the chance to confirm the time. She peered over at Nathaniel who was too engrossed in his work to notice. He started to jot down some notes before eventually sensing the pair of eyes on him, and he turned to look at the culprit. He nodded at her, but quickly returned to his work.

Just then, one of the senior reporters stopped at her desk to deliver a message.

“Drake wants to see you in his office,”

The request gave her instantaneous anxiety. Mr. Drake never called her to the office. He wasn’t going to fire her, was he? Surely Nathaniel wouldn’t let him do that, right? With great trepidation, she knocked on the door and waited for a response.

“Come in.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Drake. Mr. Mullins said that you wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Donovan tells me you’ve abandoned the hospital case, is that right?” He leaned back in his chair tapping his fingertips together.

Grace twiddled her thumbs under the desk-top and pieced together a believable half-truth.

“Mr. Donovan suggested I give it up at the behest of major safety concerns, so....”

“Yes... Very good.” He eyed her cautiously, searching for hints of deceit and finding none.

Grace never considered herself a very talented liar, but that was the thing about half-truths—they were still technically true, making believability much more achievable for her. She never told Nate she would let it go, she had only insisted on writing a different story. And it was true that Nate wanted her

to quit because of safety concerns. Leaving out details wasn't lying—just a withholding of information.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Please bring me your notes as soon as possible so I can assure they're properly destroyed.”

The editor's strange request set off alarm bells. “My notes are at my apartment. I can bring them tomorrow.”

“Good. Don't copy them.”

She laughed dryly. “Why would I do that?”

Mr. Drake cocked an eyebrow and dismissed her.

She was most certainly going to make copies of those notes. On the way back to her desk, she stopped by Nathaniel's.

“Mr. Donovan,” she formally announced, “I need to go home early today to retrieve something for Mr. Drake.”

“Do you need a ride?” He hardly glanced up from his papers. “I can take you in ten.”

“Thank you, but it's a nice enough day today that I think I'll walk and enjoy the sunshine.” Even if she didn't have a secret meeting to attend in an hour, he was so preoccupied with work that she wouldn't have accepted the ride anyhow.

Grace bid him farewell and left down the stairs to head to Vesuvio Café. Mr. Drake's request...it was so unusual. She was growing tired of feeling like everyone around her knew something she didn't. Irritated, she decided she wouldn't copy her notes. No, she would falsify some new ones. Should Mr. Drake decide to read the notes, Grace wanted him to believe she was far off the trail.

She arrived at Vesuvio Café early, as usual. Most tables near the front had already been taken, so she chose a seat at the back and ordered salad with some fresh fruit juice. When her food came, she hardly touched it. So many things seemed to be connected, but she simply couldn't piece the puzzle

together. What was once an exciting feat had begun to feel oppressive. If she somehow managed to figure out the whole picture, what would she even do with it? Evidently, there were individuals who operated above the law, so running to the cops was likely to be a wasted endeavor.

“Miss Colby, good afternoon.” Mr. Brown slid into the booth and waved the waitress away. “Don’t have much time. The car you’re looking for has been spotted in the parking lot of Well Life Pharmaceuticals and Medical Supply. It’s registered to a man named Riccardo Rossetti.”

“Riccardo Rossetti,” she repeated. “Well Life... What do you know about Mr. Rossetti?”

Mr. Brown spread his hands and shook his head. “Married man, devoted member of his church, faithful about tithing. He’s also got ties to the Giordano family.”

“So, he’s a gangster?” Grace opened her notebook and wrote down the scant information he gave her. “And what about Robert Williamson?”

“Nothing to give you yet. When I get anything more, I’ll call you and collect the rest of my money.” Mr. Brown chuckled. “You know, I love you reporters. As long as you nosey blokes keep looking to dig up dirt, I’ll never be out of a job.”

“An incredibly *well-paying* job, I might add,” she chided.

“Hey, that’s no way to speak to the man getting his hands dirty for you. Not my fault you chose to be a reporter instead of the inside-guy,” he snapped. “Want me to double it?”

She gritted her teeth, angered by his lack of respect for her career. She swallowed her pride, unwilling to jeopardize the only lifeline that she had for restricted information.

“No, *sir*. Thank you for your help. Please, let me know when you find anything else. Anything at all. I can take it from there.”

“Not that you asked for my input, but I think you’re making a huge mistake, Miss Colby,” he interjected, adjusting the lapels of his coat jacket. “You don’t know what you’re stepping into. When it comes to the mafia, if you want to keep going... Well, let’s just say I hope you’re the praying type, because the only way you’ll survive this little investigation of yours is if you get on your knees and beg God for mercy.”

CHAPTER 8

*Thursday, September 7, 1933 and
Friday, September 8, 1933*

As the week pressed on, Grace slumped at her desk and struggled to focus on the Barrow story. It had been almost four days since she started the outline, and much to her dismay, she had made little progress. Grace had been so preoccupied drafting up a game plan to find Mr. Rossetti that she could think of little else. Obtaining his schedule at the factory had been one thing, but she still hadn't the faintest idea what she'd do once she found him...that is, if she found him. Grace hadn't quite worked out the logistics of tracking him down, yet. The Factory was heavily patrolled, so meandering about the facility posing as an employee was not going to be an option this time around—and for the life of her, she couldn't think of a reasonable excuse to give someone if they were to question her presence. Grace huffed in frustration at herself, swiftly realizing that forming a plan would likely be much less of a headache if she had an understanding of the factory's exterior layout. *That'd be a good start.*

Shortly before noon, Grace stood before a dilapidated concrete building. Remnants of white paint freckled the stained cinder block walls as ominous black clouds billowed from three sooty smokestacks. Her research into the factory showed that it mostly produced medications, though she also read that various other medical supplies were also part of the

production line. Grace shuddered over possibility that this factory could have produced some of the torture devices currently utilized at the Gotham Sanitarium.

Despite signs that the factory was currently in operation, there was a bizarre absence of human life. She waited at the gates for a while in hopes that anyone might exit the building, but she found no one. Impatient, Grace scurried to the diner across the street in search of answers.

“Excuse me,” she called to the man behind the bar, “is the factory over there still open? It’s so quiet.” She didn’t miss the way eerie stillness had seemed to follow her into the diner.

“Yeah. What’s it to you?” The man grumbled as he chopped vegetables.

Just as she moved to respond, a distraught young woman entered the diner with a small stack of fliers in hand.

“Still looking for your daughter?” the bartender softened.

“I can’t stop looking for her,” the woman sniffled. “I need to find her. Please, can I put up just one more?”

The man set his knife down and his sore-headed expression withered away.

“Mrs. Romanov...listen, if she ain’t back yet, she probably ain’t ever coming back.”

“Don’t you dare say that!” she snapped. “My Anya is out there somewhere, and I’ll find her if it’s the last thing I do!”

The man sighed. “All right. You can put up another flier. You should be working. It’ll take your mind off things for a while.”

“I can’t stop looking, Patrick. I just can’t.”

Grace glanced at the flier over the grieving mother’s shoulder while she tacked it to the cork board. Anya Romanov...missing for over a month. Aged twelve—about the same age Louisa’s daughter Amelia had been in that photograph Grace stole.

“Excuse me, Miss? May I have one of those?” The woman looked at Grace through swollen eyes and silently handed her a small “missing child” poster. Grace thanked her and tucked it into her purse.

“Have a good day, Sir.” Grace scurried out the glass doors and waited for Mrs. Romanov to appear. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Mrs. Romanov?” Grace grabbed her shoulder. “By chance, do you work there at the factory?”

“I did. Why?” she sniffled.

“I’m Grace-Anne Colby, a reporter for the Gotham Post. If you wouldn’t mind, could you tell me about your daughter?”

The broken woman wiped a tear from her cheek and let out a heavy, ragged breath. “My baby disappeared on the way home from school. She attended a charity school...Nobody gives a rat about impoverished children. They don’t care about my Anya, or any of the other missing school children for that matter.”

Other school children? “What’s the name of this school?”

“Gotham Charity Academy for the poor.” She sniffled again. “Why, miss?”

Grace glanced over at the factory across the street.

“Mrs. Romanov, I think an ad in the paper would be better than fliers.”

“But I don’t have that kind of money!” she scoffed.

“I know, but I have one of your posters with all the vital information needed. I can get an ad placed for you if you’d like—free of charge!”

Mrs. Romanov stepped back, visibly offended. “Why would you do that? What do you want from me?”

“Mrs. Romanov, I wrote an article some time ago about a woman from the sanitarium whose daughter went missing. The poor woman died without knowing what happened to her

child. I couldn't help her in time, but I might be able to help you."

"What do you want?" Mrs. Romanov frowned.

"Some information about the factory?" Grace pointed a finger at the old building.

The woman's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she was in no financial position to refuse such an offer.

"Reporter, you say? Well, what do you want to know?"

After sunset that day, Grace made her way back to the factory to investigate. She promised herself she wouldn't go out after dark anymore, but snooping around the place in daylight was far too risky. Thankfully, the late-night walk had been uneventful. No hitmen, no ruffians, just trash blowing in the cool breeze. Upon arrival at the factory gates, her stomach twisted and knotted. It was so dark, and she knew by now that evil always hid in the shadows. Her instincts begged her to turn back and run home to safety, but she refused. She'd already made it this far. So, Grace silently prayed that her luck tonight would continue.

The break in the chain-link fence was exactly where Mrs. Romanov said it would be. She cautiously slipped through the opening and entered into the factory's parking lot where the only noises around came from the frenzied beating of her own heart, and the crunching of gravel beneath her feet.

Grace kept her head low as she crept between the few remaining vehicles in the parking lot to check their plates. She thought it strange that cars were still there when the factory had closed hours ago. The lot should be deserted at this time...

Just then, she heard the sound of tires rolling through the gravel several yards away. A black laundry van sped across the yard, and one of the factory's docking doors rolled up, letting a pharmacy delivery van exit the building. Grace dropped and

rolled beneath a parked car and watched as the two vans pulled up next to one another. Three men popped out of the laundry van as four men emerged from the delivery truck. Two men approached one another to square up a deal, and the rest of the men stood guard behind their respective bosses.

“Here it is, Rizzio. Sixty Barrels. Just as Parisi ordered.”

Rizzio...Parisi? Grace clasped her hand over her mouth.

“Hm. Genuine Import? Or should we be expecting Giordano’s *‘finest’*?” Mr. Rizzio chastised.

“You kiddin’ me? I haven’t worked for Giordano in, what, five years now? I don’t peddle that stuff anymore. Only the best for my clientele. You’ve got my word.”

“Uh-huh, five years.” Mr. Rizzio sneered. “Fellas,” he whistled, snapping fingers at his men, “let’s go, pack it up. We’ll buy the goods, but we’re sure as hell not buying his story.”

Grace crept out from under the car and scrambled to the rear, hoping to catch a better view of the men and their dealings. She looked on as men shuffled side-by-side escorting heavy oak barrels into the laundry van and wondered what they contained. *Liquor, maybe?*

“Rossetti!” Mr. Rizzio whistled between two fingers. “Here’s your money. If this stuff is as good as you say, there’ll be plenty more for you.” He tossed a small briefcase over to Mr. Rossetti.

Mr. Rossetti took a few steps toward his van before suddenly catching wind of an unwelcome presence. He spun around in Grace’s direction and caught a small bit of her shadow before she had the chance to duck down. Slow footsteps crunched louder and louder as they approached her hiding spot. Grace curled up into a ball and squeezed her eyes shut, too terrified to move.

A rough hand suddenly gripped her arm and yanked her to her feet. “It’s a girl, boss! A real pretty one too.” The man licked his lips.

Her wide eyes darted around the small crowd of men coming nearer.

“I...” Finally her eyes landed on Mr. Rizzio’s familiar face. She found his eyes filled with horror.

“What are you doing here?” Mr. Rossetti growled. “Who are you?”

“I’m, um...” Her ability to think coherently had fled the scene. “I’m...I-I’m a worker and I fell asleep. I was trying to get out before the guard found me and I got fired. I need this job, sir.”

“Huh. That’s funny, because they clear the place out after eight. That’s, what? Four hours ago?”

Mr. Rizzio took a step forward, his body stiff with tension. “Rossetti...what are you going to do with the girl?”

Deafening silence pierced her ears as the group waited for his response. She could no longer make out their faces from the tears blurring her vision.

“She’s seen too much, Rizzio.”

“She’s just a girl. No one would believe a word she says.” His tone was deadly calm.

“Please,” Grace whispered. “Let me go.”

“Make it clean, boys.” Mr. Rossetti ordered as he turned to walk away.

“No! Please, don’t, please!” Grace let out a blood curdling scream as she fought to escape her captors. She twisted her arms in a way that broke the one man’s grip on her and she bolted to the other side of the car. She desperately wanted to run, but she was much too far from the fence to make it without getting shot. In one last effort, she stood up and held her hands high in surrender. Flashlights danced across her face, blinding her completely. “The truth is...I’m Grace-Anne Colby, a reporter with the Gotham Post. If you do anything to me, my editor will splash it on the front page of tomorrow’s

news. Everyone in New York City would know. My editor knows I'm here and he's waiting for my return."

"Bull," Mr. Rossetti accused.

"The prosecutor also knows. Elaine Carter." The lies poured from her lips easier than ever before. "Even if the police don't won't do anything, she *will*. Do you really think she'll just let you get away? She's already hell-bent on taking your boss down."

Mr. Rossetti's eyes narrowed. "What were you doing here?"

"I was trying to investigate a story."

"*What* story?" The man approached her once more, this time pulling a knife to her throat.

Grace blurted the first lie that came to mind. "I heard from a woman who previously had a job here that people were being forced to work sixteen hours a day. I was trying to find information that would corroborate her claims of employee abuse."

"Rossetti," Mr. Rizzio growled, "she isn't a threat."

Mr. Rossetti shook his head. "She's seen too much. She's just a stupid girl. No loss for me."

"Sir, please!" Her heart pounded. "You're a bootlegger, right? The ban's going to be repealed soon. Everyone drinks and no one seems to care anymore. There's nothing newsworthy in that, and I never managed to get anything on the working conditions here, I promise. Please, sir. I don't want to die. Not yet, not like this. Please, Mr. Rossetti." Grace choked on an escaping sob.

"Pathetic," Mr. Rossetti muttered.

The man who held onto her before she escaped had grabbed her arm once again. Out of fight and out of options, Grace finally gave in, stumbling over her feet as the man led her away. Mr. Rossetti approached her once more and yanked her

chin up with his fingers, forcing her to look him in the eyes. “Please,” she mouthed, her lip quivering uncontrollably.

“Miss Colby, this is your lucky day.” His calming tone veiled an unspoken threat. “Put her in my car,” he ordered. “I’m taking her home.”

The man holding onto her arm led her around the car and she caught a glimpse of the license plate. 20-L3-10... *Twenty-ell-three-ten*. The one she’d been looking for.

She waited in the passenger seat of Mr. Rossetti’s vehicle. Even through her layers of clothing, the leather was cold against her back. She rested her head against the window, watching passively as the men outside discussed something with lit cigarettes in hand, though she couldn’t hear one bit of the conversation. At last, Mr. Rossetti returned and jumped into the driver’s seat.

“I’ve got a girl named Grace. A very special girl...”

His voice was hardly a mumble. Grace wasn’t sure if he meant for her to hear him, but she knew better than to ask for clarification.

They drove in silence until he neared Grace’s apartment. The entire way home, her eyes remained fixed on his hands, waiting in fear that he might have a change of heart and opt to pull a gun on her, instead. Fortunately for her, nothing of the sort would occur. By the grace of God, Mr. Rossetti pulled up to her building with Grace still in one piece.

“Remember your promise to me, Miss Colby. I don’t give second chances. In fact, you just might be the first.”

She dared to look into his eyes.

“Then why did you?”

“Because I don’t like to kill women, especially when I believe they can keep their mouths shut, as promised. But if you go back on your word, I will find you, and I will make sure you suffer, slowly and painfully.”

He put the car in park and stepped out to open her door. Without looking back, she rushed out and bolted up the stairs to her apartment as fast as she could. Once inside, she locked the door and collapsed onto her bed, letting out a year's worth of tears and terror. It was only after she had finished crying herself dry that she realized she'd never given Mr. Rossetti her address.

Enzo shook with rage. Rage was easier to handle than fear. Fear was too heavy an emotion. *“God Dammit, Gino. I can't keep her alive if she keeps doing this. She's too stubborn for her own good.”*

Gino topped off their wine glasses, deciding to let his boss cool off a bit before responding. In Enzo's den beside a smoldering fire, the men sipped their fresh wine in silence. Rossetti was right. It was good stuff.

“Think about it—why would she stop pursuing the matter? Because you said so? She doesn't know you, and it's been weeks since anything happened. She probably assumed the heat was off her by now. Keeping her ignorant of the circumstances means the girl will remain defiant of whatever you say. Then again, if she knew everything, she could never go back to a normal life.”

Silence stretched between them. Enzo squeezed his temples in frustration.

“Listen to me, boss. You gotta let this girl go. It'll be easier for you that way. She won't stop, and you know that. If you can't give it up, the only way to protect her from herself is to lock her up for life, and I'm sure you don't want that.”

Locking her up had its appeal, Enzo had to admit. The things he's seen in this life almost made the idea seem almost merciful. But he knew in his heart he could never do that to her. Caging the lovely songbird would be worse than a violent

death. *Hm...locking her up in his bedroom, though?* He shook his head in disgust at the intrusive, wine-fueled thought. Enzo pulled a cigarette from his case and flicked his lighter.

He detested the way he languished for her—the way she came to him in his dreams at night after an exhausting day thinking of little else but her. If he were in a different position, he'd have courted her the first chance he got. But he wasn't a man with the freedom to act upon whims and fantasies. Each day, every choice he made was critical and consequential. Bringing her to his home would be the safest place for her now, but that notion bore down on his heart with the weight of a thousand stones. Bringing her here would be safest, but the cost would be immense. The chance was great that she could never return to a normal life once he took her in, and he couldn't bear the thought of falling in love again—something he felt would be unavoidable if she were ever so present in his life. He took a long drag of his cigarette to calm his nerves.

“Gino, double the watch on her. If she goes out at night again, pick her up and put the fear of god into her. She must be left to live her life away from ours.”

“You're obsessing over her. You know that?” Gino sipped a bit more wine.

“I'm too involved now. If I threw her to the wolves, I could never live with myself. I have the power to keep her safe, so her death would be my responsibility.” Enzo's head throbbed from the rising stress

“Have you thought about what we discussed the other day, boss?” Gino's tone was apprehensive.

Vincenzo's stomach twisted at the reminder. There was only one reason the law would ever touch a gangster. It would violate his vow of omertà, but murder and violence would never be reason enough to prosecute him. Too many heads paid to look the other way. Proof of tax evasion, embezzlement and laundering would get the law's attention, though.

“What did I say, Gino? I warned you not to bring it up with me again.” He slugged back his glass of whiskey.

“Matter of fact, I did think about it. The answer is no. We will get to the safe where he keeps his books without involving her. We can get him out of the way without causing a war, and without risking her life.”

“You know there’s no other way. All this nonsense for what? She’s just another girl.” Gino’s frustration spilled out in English as he rose to his feet.

Vincenzo stood up and pressed his chest to Gino’s, glaring down at him in intimidation.

“Enough! I will find another way,” he growled.

CHAPTER 9

*Monday, September 11, 1933 to
Monday, October 2, 1933*

It was only nine in the morning when he arrived at the office, and Nathaniel had noticed straight away that his friend seemed uncharacteristically gloomy for a day of such fine weather. He hurriedly set his things down at his desk and went to check on her.

“What’s the matter, Grace?”

She startled at the sound of Nate’s voice. She’d avoided him all weekend, bunkering down in her apartment despite having run out of food. She feared that Mr. Rossetti was watching her closely, and any trip outside of her place could be misconstrued as a violation of her promise to him, and she’d be killed for it.

“Grace?” He tilted his head at her lack of response.

Her telephone rang and she jumped in her seat, fumbling with both hands to pick up the receiver. “H-Hello, Gotham Post, Grace-A—”

“It’s Jake Brown. I’ve got information on Robert Williamson. Meet me today at four, same place.”

“How about tomor—?”

“No. Four, same place.”

The line went dead, but she hadn’t expected anything else. He never said good-bye.

“Robert Williamson?” Nathaniel raised a querying eyebrow at her. “I think you and I need to talk. Come on. Let’s go.”

Oh, no. Tears pricked in her eyes. The sound of Nathaniel's disappointment was worse than a punch to the gut. Ashamed, she dropped her head and followed him to the car without saying a word.

Once they entered Nathaniel's suite, she curled up on the bed and waited for a proper explanation to come to her. He deserved it, but her eyes grew heavy before she could think up a worthy apology. Just before she fell into a restless sleep, she felt a blanket cover her. She pulled it tightly around her before darkness drew her under.

Hours later, Grace woke from an unsettling dream. She rubbed her eyes and remembered the gravity of her situation. Tears fell suddenly, and sniffles turned into quivering sobs.

"I'm so, so sorry, Nathaniel," she cried. "I don't want to lose you. You're one of the best friends I think I've ever had, and I'm so terribly sorry that I lied to you!"

Nathaniel rushed to her side and pulled her into his arms. "Shhh, it's all right," he murmured as he stroked her hair. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

In that instant, Nathaniel's heart broke for her, and he finally understood his own feelings. He had fallen deeply in love with her. Though unrequited as it was, her sorrow made him hurt. Whatever had caused her such pain, he wanted to annihilate it. Even if he would never have her in love, he vowed to always protect her in life, regardless of the cost.

"Grace, you should know that it doesn't matter to me what you do. I will always be here for you."

"But you don't understand! You were right about everything!" She buried her face in her hands, concealing her shame. "I was so scared," she whispered. "But I can't stay any longer...I have to..."

"You have to do what?"

"I..." The truth lodged itself in Grace's throat. Speaking to Mr. Rossetti in the face of death had been easier than facing her dearest friend with the truth she'd been keeping from him.

“So you’ve kept some secrets from me, I see.” The warmth in his voice juxtaposed the harsh truth in his words.

Grace nodded, still unable to face him.

Nathaniel brushed his fingers through her hair and pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head. “I’m not happy you lied to me, Grace. But it’s never the end of the world. We all do things we’re not proud of. You’re only human, so that’s all I expect of you. I’m not going anywhere, okay? Would you tell me what happened that has you so upset?”

She took a few deep breaths and let herself melt against him, finding safety in his presence. “Do you really mean it—that you don’t hate me for what I did?”

“Cross my heart.”

The warmth in his voice provided her with enough strength to recount that night in the factory yard where she found Rossetti. She told Nate the story in vivid detail, sparing nothing. Well, nothing except one detail...the fact that Rossetti knew where she lived.

Nathaniel pulled the silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to her.

“So you’re telling me a gangster caught you snooping around his deal, and you weren’t killed where you stood?!”

She nodded. “And that call I received right before we left the office—it was Jake Brown. He found something on Robert Williamson, the man we thought picked up Miss Carpenter’s belongings. I’m meeting him at—”

“Four. I overheard. I’m going with you,” Nathaniel said firmly.

“You’re not going to stop me?”

He shook his head and laughed facetiously through his nose. “I tried once, but you’re so damn stubborn that you’ll just go and do whatever you want, anyway. If I can’t stop you, the only thing I can do to keep you safe is to help. We should

get going. It's a quarter after three, and I believe we have a meeting soon."

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Mr. Brown balked as he slid into the diner booth with Grace and Nathaniel. "To whom do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Donovan?"

"He's...helping me with this case now. The both of you were right. About the risks and danger, I mean. I came face to face with Mr. Rossetti."

Mr. Brown's eyes popped wide. "Riccardo...Riccardo Rossetti? And you're alive?"

Grace bowed her head. "I don't want to talk about it, but yes." Nathaniel grabbed her hand reassuringly and she smiled with gratitude for his support.

"Are you two, uh..."

Nathaniel laughed at the question.

"We're friends. That's all. But I'm not letting the mob get their hands on her again."

"What information do you have on Robert Williamson?" Grace interjected.

Mr. Brown pulled a crumpled bit of paper from his pocket and smoothed it on the table.

"Robert Williamson. Local cop at the downtown precinct. Had a partner, one Walter Carpenter. Childhood buddies and such. Carpenter was killed in the line of duty five years ago. His granddaughter, a little girl named Amelia, age five, went missing seven years ago. The girl's mother, an *unmarried* Louisa Carpenter—that lady went crazy and got herself thrown in the bin. Before Walter Carpenter died, he made arrangements for Williamson to take over responsibility for his daughter, Louisa. Robert Williamson has never been married,

and he has no known children.” He pushed the paper across the table toward Grace.

“Wow. That’s...” Grace refolded the paper. “Well, it’s something.” She opened her purse. “Thank you. I’ve got your other twenty-five.”

“*Other* twenty-five?” Nathaniel’s jaw twitched.

Mr. Brown snatched money from her hand. “I’ll call you when I have something.”

As Grace expected, Mr. Brown left without a good-bye.

“Well, that was more than I expected to get. Much of it I already knew, but at least I know how to find Williamson now.”

Nathaniel reached for his wallet.

“I’m paying you back for that. I referred you to him.”

“Don’t. He’ll be doing another job for me free of charge. He did find Mr. Rossetti’s car which proved to be quite valuable information. We’re square, him and I.”

“Grace—”

“Nathaniel Donovan, if you really want to pay for something, you can pay for lunch.”

Nathaniel shook his head and chuckled. “Grace-Anne Colby, you’re really stubborn sometimes.” He moved to the other side of the booth to sit across from her.

When Grace let out a hearty giggle, her eyes sparkled once again. “Only sometimes? You insult me, Mr. Donovan.”

“Seeing you smile again is wonderful, Grace.”

“Thank you for everything, Nathaniel.”

A couple weeks later, Grace flopped back on the red-checkered blanket to watch the clouds blow by overhead. Fluffy balls of cotton set against the purest blue Grace had ever laid eyes on. The fresh breeze and the rustling of trees could have lulled her to sleep if she had let them. “This is life,” she said with a contented sigh.

“Think she’ll be here soon?” Nathaniel peeked into the picnic basket. “Chicken’s not going to eat itself.”

“She said she’ll be here, so she’ll be here. Relax, antsy pants.”

Josephine was usually as punctual as Nathaniel, but today she was already fifteen minutes late. Grace worried slightly, but not enough to raise any alarm just yet. She pulled an arm over her eyes and decided to give Josephine a few more minutes to arrive while Grace allowed herself the briefest of catnaps.

“Hello, Gracie!”

Josephine’s sooner-than-expected arrival startled Grace awake. Nathaniel jumped to his feet and offered Grace a helping hand to stand her up. Grace kneeled to pick up her hat before she noticed the unexpected guest at Josephine’s side.

“Hello,” she smiled nervously at the woman.

“*Oops!* Where are my manners? Um, Coral, this is Grace and Mr. Donovan.” Josephine gestured cordially to the slim blonde woman standing beside her.

“Grace, Mr. Donovan, I’d like to introduce you to Miss Coral Alpenrose. She just moved back into town. Her father is my dad’s long-time assistant. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I didn’t think she’d be here ‘til next month.”

Grace excitedly shook Coral’s hand. “Miss Alpenrose! Welcome back to New York! I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Grace Colby—” She paused when she noticed the blonde woman glancing nervously at Josie.

“Don’t worry, darling. We don’t judge here. I’m glad you could join us. This is—”

“*Nathaniel Donovan.*” Miss Alpenrose interrupted without a smile. “We’re acquainted.”

“My apologies, Miss, but I’m afraid I don’t recall you.” He rubbed the back of his head, nervously.

“Of course you don’t,” the woman snapped.

Grace rushed over to the picnic basket in an effort to break the awkwardness settling between the two.

“Please, we can discuss this later. Right now, Nathaniel and I are famished. We brought some delicious rosemary chicken and there’s plenty to go around.”

Miss Alpenrose lowered herself primly onto a corner of the blanket and smoothed her gray skirt over her knees.

“So, Miss Colby, Josephine told me you’re quite the storyteller.”

“I said she’s a writer.” Josephine smiled apologetically.

“Every writer tells stories,” Coral sneered.

Grace found that logic hard to argue against, though the woman’s sourness left a bad taste in her mouth that the chicken and Waldorf salad couldn’t wash down. Despite Nathaniel’s politeness toward her, Miss Alpenrose insisted on maintaining a biting attitude with him. Josephine, looking as if she wanted the ground to swallow her up, apologized profusely in Grace’s ear, though Grace was adamant that she had nothing to be sorry for. How could she have known her girlfriend would behave so rudely?

Nathaniel finally had enough of her berating. “Miss Alpenrose, would you please explain to me what I have done to vex you? I can’t rectify my wrongdoings if I’m ignorant of them.”

His question hung in the air for a moment before the woman answered in exasperation.

“Coney Island, four years ago. My uncle Garrett set us up.”

Nathaniel blanched and quickly rose to his feet. “Could we talk over here for a moment, please?”

She pursed her lips and petulantly followed him away from Grace and Josephine toward a large tree that was out of earshot.

“Oh my God, Gracie, I’m really sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into her. She’s never been like this.”

Grace squeezed Josephine’s hand and set her food aside to glance over at Nathaniel and Miss Alpenrose arguing about... something.

“Please don’t apologize. I think it’s worse for you than it is for us. What do you think they’re talking about?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

When the pair returned to the picnic, some of the prior tension had dissolved. Coral returned to her patch of quilt and Nathaniel to his.

“Bit of a misunderstanding,” Coral declared with a grimace. “I’m sorry, Miss Colby. Sorry, Jo.”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing, Miss Alpenrose.” Nathaniel passed a plate to her. “I had no idea. Garrett told me differently.”

“May I ask what this is about?” Grace inquired.

Miss Alpenrose jumped at the chance to explain herself. “My uncle told me he had set me up on a date with the owner of the paper he worked for. In order to set up this date, he had informed Nathaniel here that I was in need of a tour guide for an evening.”

“So we met with...different expectations.” Nathaniel casually ripped a piece of chicken off the bone. “I’ll have a talk with him when I get back to the office.”

“Please don’t,” she pleaded. “I don’t want him to know. It’s all right. Really. Water under the bridge now.”

Just then, a lightbulb went off in Grace's head as the pieces came together. "Wait. Our Editor Garrett Drake is your uncle? So that makes you and Lillian Corbin—"

—"cousins. Yes, our mothers were the Corbin Twins with the Follies until Auntie Rosemary went to Broadway."

"My, those two were quite the scandalous duo! No wonder he doesn't want his daughter acting." Grace snorted.

"Hey, ladies," Nathaniel interrupted, "shall we play a game of twenty-one questions?"

Miss Alpenrose's first genuine laugh of the day allowed Josephine the pleasure of finally enjoying herself, and her tension eased considerably.

"Can Mr. Donovan go first?" Coral smiled meekly.

Josephine reached for her girlfriend's hand and flashed her an appreciative grin.

"You bet he can."

The last couple of weeks, Grace had decided to take it easy and regain her footing. She worked on a few low-risk stories and liaised with friends, soaking up every last ray of summer sun. As October approached, the air began to chill. Feeling rejuvenated, she decided it was time to step foot into the darkness once more and resume her work on the case. This time, she did so at the hotel with Nathaniel where she felt the most focused and safe away from harm.

Grace hated that Josie's father was seemingly involved in laundering money through the hospital on the mob's behalf, but she hated even more that she had to keep it a secret from her friend. She shook the guilt from her mind and pulled out the missing child poster she had stashed in her leather binder.

“I can’t help feeling that Amelia and Anya’s disappearances are somehow connected.” Deep in thought, she set her pencil down and stared blankly at the curtains.

“We can go check out Anya’s school,” Nate offered.

“Do you think they’d just let us in?”

“Sure. I’ll tell them we’re interested in making a donation, but I’ll say that we want a tour of the school first.”

Grace cocked her head in consideration. She’d heard of the way rich men routinely threw charitable donations out like candy at a parade, but those men were always millionaires. Sure, Nathaniel’s car was worth more than she’d ever make in a lifetime, and yes, he had an exclusive penthouse at a ritzy hotel...but she never really thought much about the extent of his wealth before now. As a salt-of-the-earth kind of gentleman who behaves the way of any ordinary citizen, it never really crossed her mind.

“How rich are you?” The question slipped out, but Grace wasn’t the slightest bit embarrassed for asking. She was comfortable around him.

Nathaniel fidgeted awkwardly with a cuff link. Despite his discomfort with the question, he responded earnestly.

“I inherited my parents’ newspaper. That was their passion—mine too, of course. In addition to inheriting an unprofitable passion project, I also inherited their lucrative steel and glass companies.”

“Steel?! Did you really just say you own *steel*? Half of New York is built on steel!” Grace couldn’t hide her amazement.

“Yes it is...including the Gotham Sanitarium. Come on. Let’s head over to the charity school.”

“*Now*? Am I even dressed appropriately for the whole charade?” Grace smoothed her department store skirt and dusted the lint off her blouse. As she passed by the large mirror in their hotel room, she caught a glimpse of her

appearance and felt a sudden rush of insecurity over her simple attire. Nathaniel was always clad in tailored suits.

“You don’t think I’m underdr—”

“Beautiful? Yes, you are.” Nathaniel shrugged on his coat and snatched his hat off the rack.

“Now that you know the truth, don’t go treating me any differently. Be my friend, not my worshiper. Better yet—pretend to be my wife, and they’ll let us right in.”

Nathaniel was right. Playing the part of a wealthy, merrily-wed young couple, the headmistress of the school eagerly led them into the building without a sliver of suspicion. The woman even offered to escort them herself. Whatever Nathaniel and Grace were selling, she was certainly buying in. The headmistress was friendlier than they expected. The children greeted her warmly as they passed by, referring to her affectionately as Miss Claudia. For a charity school that society seemed eager to ignore, it was clear that she genuinely cared for these children as best she could.

The undercover duo followed their tour guide closely and waited for something, anything suspicious to come about. Disappointedly, nothing seemed to be amiss. Growing ever impatient, Nathaniel decided on a more straightforward approach.

“Miss Claudia, what do you know about Anya Romanov? She’s a child who went missing recently, and she attended this school”

Sadness clouded the headmistress’s eyes. “I don’t know much, unfortunately. The only thing I know for certain is that all the girls who’ve gone missing...they all disappeared on their way home from school.”

Grace’s hand rose to her breast in shock. “You mean... There’s been more than just Anya?”

“Yes, Mrs. Donovan. Three or four girls a year. It pains me more than you know.”

Nathaniel wrapped his arm around Grace's shoulder. "How long has this been happening?"

The headmistress exhaled hard. "A little over twenty years. The police never take action. The school doesn't have the money to hire investigators. If the alternative for these children wasn't to work in factories until their little fingers bloodied, I'd push for this school's closure until someone with authority stepped up and finally did their job."

"Do you know of a girl named Amelia Carpenter? We were curious if she used to attend this school," Nathaniel prodded.

"Follow me. I'll check the records."

Grace stared blankly as she followed the woman to the registrar's office. *Twenty years*. Grace figured there must have been somewhere between sixty to eighty little girls who just vanished without a trace. Gone. Their stories untold, their futures never written. Their existences... simply erased.

The headmistress pulled an old ledger out of a cabinet and flipped it open to a page at the back. She ran a finger down the list of names.

"These are all the girls' names and the dates they went missing. Amelia Carpenter, yes, right here," she said as she pointed. "Thursday, the seventeen of March, nineteen twenty-seven."

"Do you mind if I make a copy?" Grace asked shyly.

The woman pushed the ledger toward Grace and handed her

a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen. Grace started with the oldest names. Her stomach twisted when she glanced at the first hand-written line.

April 6, '14

It was her own fifth birthday. The day she'd always thought she remembered visiting New York City with her parents, even though her father incessantly denied she had ever been there.

The

nauseating pit in her stomach returned, though she still couldn't understand why. The past several months, that supposed "false-memory" had been resurfacing with more frequency than it ever had before, and it casted a darker shadow each time it did. She swallowed hard to suppress the uneasiness and continued down the list.

This little girl, Abigail Ross, was just seven years old.

As she read out each name in her head, Grace burned with anger. How could the police do nothing about this?! Not a single one of these babies had been found, yet the pattern was so obvious. The authorities had to be aware of these disappearances. There were far too many to be a coincidence or a one-off crime. Too many people would notice, which meant they were purposefully choosing to look the other way. But why?

"Miss Claudia," Grace gestured toward the book, "if you had to speculate, what do you think happened to all of them?"

"I don't want to think about that." The headmistress bowed her head and hugged herself. "It's enough to know what happens to grown women who've disappeared...I wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning if I spent any time thinking about what people do to children. It just wouldn't do me any good. I need to be here for these kids."

Grace nodded. She found Miss Claudia's sense of duty toward her students to be admirable. She looked back at the list feeling dejected. There were so many more names after Amelia Carpenter. The list ended with Anya Romanov, aged twelve.

Nathaniel, visibly horrified, pulled a checkbook out of his pocket. "If we leave a donation, can we entrust it to you? I want to be sure I leave it in the right hands."

“If you can trust me to do so, then yes. I run this establishment and everything I do is for the betterment of my students. For many children, this school is the only place they know safety. I just wish I could do more.”

The drive home to Grace’s apartment was a quiet one. Neither Grace, nor Nate could find the words to describe their feelings regarding the revelation of that terrifying list. Anya Romanov had been the latest disappearance, and that was almost two months ago. Who would be next? How long would this continue?

“I think we need to publish this.” Nathaniel admitted, finally breaking the silence. He draped a protective arm across the back of the seat to reassure her.

“We don’t need to say anything about the hospital or the factory. They’re probably connected, but what’s happening at the school is a whole story in itself. We can put my name on it. I don’t want them coming after you. I really think the only way authorities will take action is if we create widespread public awareness.”

“You’re right.” Grace’s chin quivered. “I just didn’t expect there to be so many. Why doesn’t anybody care?”

“If it weren’t for the school, these kids would still be slaving away in factories and many would die. No one cared about them then, so why would anyone care about them now? People haven’t changed. Selfishness and greed is the plague of the modern world.”

Her sorrow boiled over into rage.

“Impoverished children are just as precious and innocent as any fortunate child. We have to make people care. Let’s go to the office. We need to get started on this right away.”

Their article, published in Nathaniel's name only, received little notice. As long as the white-collar children were safe and warm in their beds every night, it was clear that urging the masses to find their humanity was a wasted endeavor. Not their children—not their concern. The day after its release, Grace sat at her desk staring at her typewriter, failing to see the point in fighting anymore. She felt as if she was crying out for help from a mass of people from behind the confines of a sound-proof padded room. Perhaps they could hear the muffled sounds of her banging furiously against its walls, but it was simply easier for them to go about their business than it would be to investigate the source of the noise. She realized now that whether or not anyone could hear her pleas was inconsequential. Nothing mattered.

Then her phone rang.

“Gotham Post. Grace-Anne Colby speaking. How may I—”

“Miss Colby, what did I tell you about snooping around?” a familiar voice snarled.

Her heart lurched into her throat. “Mr. Rossetti?”

“How sweet it is to be remembered. My dear, it appears you didn't keep to your end of the deal.”

“What do you mean? I've done nothing about the hospital or Well Life. I'm telling you the truth!”

“You didn't keep your nose out of the school, and your little buddy—Jake Brown? Well, let's just say he had a different story to tell.”

Grace could feel the panic tightening its grip on her neck. “W-What about Mr. Brown?”

“He squealed like a hog when we trussed him up like one.”

She wanted to vomit. She'd watched her father truss many pigs growing up, so she knew exactly what he had done to Mr. Brown, and she realized how based on his reference to livestock that Mr. Rossetti knew about her parents and where to find them.

“Sir, that was before...”

“Don’t lie to me, Miss Colby. You get one final warning. The school—stay away from it and stay out of our business. Cross the line again, and your parents’ little farm in West Virginia just might go up in smoke. Oh, and don’t drag your little buddy Donovan into this unless you want him to be the down payment.”

“But I didn’t know you were connected with the school.” Her throat tightened such that speaking became painful. “How am I supposed to know what lines not to cross if you don’t tell me where they are?”

“You’ll know by the phone call you’ll receive about Donovan’s death and your family home being reduced to ashes with mommy and daddy included. This is your last warning, Miss Colby.”

The line went dead.

No! She wanted to scream. She wanted to run to Nathaniel and tell him to hide, but she couldn’t. Without a word, she trembled her way down the stairs to hail a cab, holding back an urge to cry out for help. It wouldn’t have done her any good. There was no one who could help her now. The call of death loomed heavy in the air. She bit her lips together to keep from crying, realizing now that only one option remained. She’d become a danger to those she loved dearly. The only way to protect them is to leave them all behind.

And worse, she couldn’t even tell them goodbye.

CHAPTER 10

Monday, October 2, 1933

Grace dropped to her bed and pressed a hand against her breaking heart. Risking herself was one thing. Risking those she cared about was another. Nathaniel, her parents...at least Mr. Rossetti said nothing about Josephine. If her councilman father was in cahoots with the mob, that might protect her.

She still felt sick at the thought that Mr. Brown had met such an end as her father's pigs. But if Riccardo Rossetti worked with the mob, and if even *half* of what she'd heard about the ways the mob handles problems were true...then the nature of Jake Brown's death probably was too.

She had to disappear, but she couldn't think of where to go. Her thoughts moved faster than she could comprehend them. Home? Mr. Rossetti could follow her to the farm. Ask Nathaniel—absolutely not! He couldn't know any of this or he could be targeted. Wherever the next train was headed when she arrived at the station, that's where she'd go. Yes. That's what she'd do... Not a great plan, but at least it was *a* plan.

Grace scurried to her bed and pulled a suitcase out from underneath it. Rushing herself would keep any second-thoughts at bay for now, so she made haste toward her wardrobe and haphazardly threw some clothing into her white trunk. While she absentmindedly yanked blouses off their hangers, something in the corner of her eye gave her pause. Her heart raced as she hovered a trembling hand over an item she had all but forgotten that she still possessed. Mr. Parisi's coat. Would he...could he?

Grace plunged her hand into the pocket with his note, and cautiously pulled it out.

*Should you ever find yourself in need
of anything at all, call me at Murray Hill 5-9975.*

But he was part of it all, wasn't he?

He couldn't be...he had protected her from harm twice now, hadn't he? Perhaps he could just...give her some guidance on how to shake Mr. Rossetti and how to keep her loved ones safe. If he couldn't be of any help, then she'd make a run for wherever the next train headed.

Her legs shook violently when she rushed down the stairs to the nearest pay phone outside her apartment. She dropped a dime into the slot and waited anxiously for the operator.

"Hello, I need Murray..." she nearly choked on her nerves. "Um, Murray Hill, five nine nine, seven five."

Each passing ring made her stomach drop.

"*Buon pomeriggio,*" he answered in a stringent tone.

"Mr. Parisi?" she breathed.

"Miss Colby?" His voice softened considerably.

"Yes." She drew in a shaky breath. "I...I need help... guidance...on how to get Riccardo Rossetti—"

"Rossetti? Where are you?" She was startled by the sudden urgency in his voice.

"I'm at a payphone near my apartment."

"Miss Colby," he instructed firmly, "go back into your apartment and lock the door now. I'll send a driver by the name of Luca Serra to pick you up. Don't open the door for anyone else. He'll slip a piece of paper under the door with the colors of the roses you wore in your hair when I last saw you. He will bring you here."

The line went dead.

Grace hurried back to her apartment and locked the door. She paced, chewing nervously at her thumbnail. The seriousness in his voice made her queasy. Had she angered him? Maybe she shouldn't meet with him. *Sigh*. He was the only one left who could help her at all.

Planted firmly against the wall near her front door, she glanced down at the petite silver-tone watch on her left wrist. *It's been twenty-five minutes already!* She bounced impatiently on her knees. For as long as she stayed in one place, she was basically a sitting duck for Mr. Rossetti and his men. She pulled Mr. Parisi's coat from her wardrobe and wrapped it tightly around her. It was the only thing she had left that might provide some sense of comfort and security. She paced to the window and stared out at the cars passing by—at the people happily going about their lives, blissfully ignorant of the dangers lurking in every corner. How lucky they were, smiling and laughing while she stood there fearing for the lives of her loved ones...and her own. She watched between her curtains until a glossy black Cadillac pulled up across the street. A man hopped out and jogged across to her building. She went to the door and waited, and within a minute, a piece of paper slid under the door.

Pink and white

She could tell it was his handwriting. It matched that of the note he left in her pocket. She took a deep breath and swung the door open. “You're L—”

The boyishly handsome man held a hand up. “Miss Colby, ask who I am instead. Yes, I am Luca Serra. I'm taking you to see Mr. Parisi.”

“Yes, okay.” She snatched her small purse from the table and followed him to the car, checking over her shoulder a few times as she crossed the street. Though Mr. Serra was quiet, the man's calm presence put her soul at ease.

“You’re not as rigid as I expected a mobster to be.”

He laughed through his nose. “Most of us aren’t, miss. Even Mr. Parisi is known to smile. It’s rare now, but it happens.”

Mr. Serra turned down a narrow alley and at the end of it, a large garage door opened up. Alarm bells sounded in her head and her heart sank as she realized she might’ve made a mistake. This couldn’t be Mr. Parisi’s place. She figured now that her driver is probably one of Rossetti’s men and she fell into a trap.

Mr. Serra seemed to sense her fear.

“It’s okay, Miss. Don’t judge a book by its cover. What’s modest on the outside can be grand on the inside.”

“But...why?”

“Less conspicuous. Not many people know this is where he lives in this city, and it needs to stay that way.”

She supposed he was right, but the newness of going to the home of a mobster kept her on edge. She thought she ought to be used to high stakes situations by now, but every encounter with the mob has only resulted in more danger. And Mr. Parisi worked with Mr. Rizzio whom she witnessed cutting an illegal deal with Mr. Rossetti, who works for Mr. Giordano. How was she supposed to trust any of this? Her head spun.

She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. What other choices did she have? She had to put her faith in Mr. Parisi. He wouldn’t have protected her before if he intended to harm her now.

When the garage door closed behind the car, the wall in front of them opened, and Mr. Serra continued onto a cobblestone driveway. Grace’s eyes widened at the secret second door. She took in the surprising sight of a large gray house in the center of an expansive courtyard, concealed by tall, windowless buildings on all sides. The house was practically a small stone castle, and the surrounding buildings were its fortress.

Grace waited for her driver to open the car door to get out. She admired the way the stones of the house fit together so neatly. It was just like she expected houses in Europe to be. The black wrought iron balconies and their brightly colored flowerpots were a touch of elegant whimsy against the beautifully harsh exterior. Never would she have expected such finery to be so hidden. It must have been the most gorgeous mansion in all of New York City, and few would ever lay eyes upon it.

Once they entered the foyer, her jaw dropped. From the intricate parquet floors to the gold gilt mirrors, everything screamed opulence and unimaginable wealth. She moved to admire a large renaissance-style painting on the wall, but Mr. Serra didn't allow her much time to study the details before he knocked on a set of large wooden doors. The man opened one of them just enough to allow Grace to slip through and quickly closed it behind her. "Oh, my," she startled and turned to find Mr. Serra hadn't followed her in.

Without announcement or preparation of any sort, Grace stood breathless and self-conscious in Mr. Parisi's den, a room as richly outfitted as the foyer, though much warmer for the decadent area rug and crackling fireplace. The man himself lounged statuesque on a suede couch with an ankle resting on one knee and a cigarette dangling from his lips. At the slightest crinkle of her nose, he tamped it out in an ashtray next to a plate of some fresh, steamy bread rolls. She remembered she still had his coat on and awkwardly shrugged it off. Her cheeks burned red as she took a few steps forward and held his coat out to him. "I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have worn this when it's yours. It just made me feel a little better."

Mr. Parisi set both feet flat on the floor and leaned forward, gesturing toward a chair near him. "Please, come sit. Tell me what's wrong."

Trembling with anxiety, Grace made her way to him and glanced around for where to set the coat, but finding nowhere she'd thought suitable, she perched herself on a tufted leather

chair and held it in her lap. “I’m...kind of afraid to. Please don’t hurt me.”

He blinked hard and cocked his head in confusion. “Why would I hurt you, Miss Colby?”

“Mr. Rizzio is a friend of yours, right?”

Mr. Parisi took a roll from the plate and leaned in to hand it to her.

“Focaccia?”

Grace accepted it, careful to not touch his hand. She stared down at warm bread in her palms as she waited for his answer.

Intent on choosing his words carefully, he grabbed another focaccia roll and bit off the corner, chewing it slowly.

“What do you think I am, Miss Colby?”

“A member of the...mob, right?”

“A member...” He locked eyes with Grace and shook his head. “No, Miss Colby. I am not...a member. That would be...beneath me. My men call me Don Parisi. I am the leader of the Constanza family. My word is above the law to my men. They do as I say, take care of the business I need, and kill for me without question.”

“Kill?” Her throat tightened. “Are you going to kill me?”

He let out a hearty laugh that caught her off guard.

“No. If I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t have installed protections around you...or have my men take care of any threats to your life. I’ll admit, you make their jobs a bit harder when you decide to go out late at night sneaking around medical facilities.”

Grace shrank. “You know about that?”

“You met Gino Rizzio at the construction of my skyscraper, and of course, at the factory that night. He is my consigliere, my second in command, what you might call the ‘vice president’ if you will. He told me everything from that night.

He was afraid you wouldn't make it, but there's something more to you if Rossetti didn't kill you. Rossetti is Cesare Giordano's consigliere. I don't know how you survived. Giordano ordered the assassination attempts on your life."

"No." Grace shook her head frantically. "That's absurd!"

"Rossetti has been toying with you," Mr. Parisi said. "If Giordano wanted you dead, you should be dead. As his consigliere, Rossetti would be expected to eliminate threats, and your articles have threatened to uncover things he wants to remain concealed. For reasons I don't understand yet, Rossetti disobeyed him. He is why you are here, yes?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Why are you doing this, Miss Colby? Your articles. Why are you not giving up?"

Passion flared in her belly at his question. She straightened her back and looked into his eyes as if accepting an unspoken challenge. There was nothing left for her to lose by telling him the whole truth. Fire burned in her eyes and she bared her soul, explaining every detail that led her to this point. Her hands curled into tight fists around the roll of bread, letting crumbs fall onto Mr. Parisi's coat.

"Then Rossetti threatened to kill my parents and my friend Nathaniel Donovan if I didn't stop investigating. He already killed my informant, and I don't want to give up on those children, but I don't want the people I love to die either. I don't know what to do, and that's why I need your help! I don't want to give up...I can't."

"Children?" Mr Parisi's jaw clenched. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I have their names and the dates they went missing."

Grace thought of some of the girl's names while collecting the loose breadcrumbs into her palm. Mr. Parisi rubbed his hands over his face and their eyes locked. The longer Grace bore into those deep umber eyes, the more she found herself wanting to leap into the safety of his arms as she'd been twice

before. That was, until she found sorrow in his expression that she hadn't expected. She fought the urge to pull him into her own arms and take away whatever pain he was feeling just then.

"Leave Rossetti to me, Miss Colby. Your parents and Mr. Donovan will be safe. When I send you home, please heed my warning to stay inside after dark. Take a taxi if you must leave. I will contact you when it is safe enough for you to ease up a bit on curfew. Understand?"

She couldn't speak. It was as if he'd cast a spell on her. Anything he could ask, she'd have agreed just then. She chewed on her bottom lip and nodded in agreement.

A grandfather clock across the room chimed seven times. Grace's stomach rumbled.

"You haven't eaten?" Mr. Parisi raised an eyebrow. "Neither have I. Join me."

Grace nodded, breathless and unable to speak. When he held his hand out for the crumbs, she dropped them into his palm and he dusted them onto the plate. Vincenzo took her small hand into his and helped her to stand. When her soft fingertips grazed against the calloused lines of his palm, her heart fluttered with intensity. She started to move closer to him as if drawn by some magnetic force, but she stopped herself, causing her to stumble over his foot.

"I don't bite, Miss Colby." He winked at her. "Not hard."

The unexpected tease cracked her shell wide-open and she erupted into a fit of giggles that made her eyes sparkle brighter than he had ever seen them. The delight in his smile awoke the butterflies previously hibernating in her belly. She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow and followed him to a small and intimate dining room with a roaring fire.

"*La signorina Colby sta cenando con me stasera, mamma. Grazie,*" he muttered to an older woman who had been bustling about the dining room. She nodded and hurried out of the room.

“I don’t mean to be an imposition, Mr. Parisi.”

“You’re no imposition. Italians cook for an army. Don’t you see the second place setting? She had already planned for you to join me this evening.” He pulled a chair out for Grace and pushed it in gently before settling himself in the seat across from her at a small mahogany table set with ivory and gold-rimmed dishes.

“Expect five or six separate courses tonight.” Mr. Parisi twisted a corkscrew into a bottle of wine. “This isn’t a restaurant with all courses served together on one plate. Mama Donata has run this home longer than I’ve been in America. She ran it for Constanza before me. If she wants to serve five or six courses, who are we to tell her no?”

“I thought you were the boss and your word is higher than the law.” Grace took a small sip of the wine he poured into her glass.

Mr. Parisi shook his head with a chuckle. He picked up a fork to begin eating the antipasti Mama Donata brought out to them on two small plates before he pinched a piece of bruschetta between his thumb and forefinger and took a bite.

“Tell me about yourself, Miss Colby. What was your life like growing up on a farm? What brought you to New York City? I find that gentle southern accent of yours to be quite endearing. You don’t hear that often in this part of the country.”

Grace took a bite of the tangy bruschetta and moaned with delight. Mama Donata’s gourmet food might just be the best she’d ever tasted.

“Well, my papa was some kind of European, and my mama was French—they immigrated to America before I was born. So you can thank my growing up with a load of southern townspeople for the small bit of drawl in my voice,” Grace blushed. “My mama also taught me some French, and anyway, there’s nothing terribly interesting about living on a farm, really. It’s nothing but waking early to milk the cows and feed

the chickens. It's a very routine life. We didn't even have electricity or indoor plumbing until just before I went to college. There's certainly nothing glamorous about it. Not like the city."

"Is that what brought you here? Glamour?"

She shook her head and took another bite. "Since I was very little, I'd always wanted to come here. I used to dream that I had come here for my fifth birthday, but the more I'm in New York City, the more vivid that dream becomes. I can hardly believe I really only dreamed it. The city just...it called to me, I suppose."

Mr. Parisi added a bit more wine to his glass. "Would you care to indulge me? Tell me about your dream."

"It was..." Grace stared off into the fire trying to decipher the blurry details of a faded dream. "My parents and I...we saw a picture show, but I don't remember which. We had dinner at a place called..." She squeezed her eyes closed in search of a name. "Antonio's. There wasn't a name on the door. It was a secret club my papa knew, and there was a password to get in, like it was something pulled right out of a mystery novel."

"Antonio's?"

"Yes. It was all such great fun. I think the picture we saw that day was about some bandits or something of the sort because in my dream, a couple people were shot...there was a teenage boy with dark hair who tackled the shooter and then someone grabbed me out of my chair and ran out of the restaurant. It was just like being in one of the pictures." She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Papa chased the man down, and the man dropped me and Mama picked me up. It's all so fuzzy. I'm not sure what part of the memory was the picture and which part of it was just the dinner. It all sort of blurs together. But my papa says it never happened, anyway... So it must have only been a vivid dream." Her tone dripped with uncertainty.

“When was this?” he murmured, giving her an odd look.

“I’ve had this dream since I was five...My, that would have been nineteen-fourteen, and my birthday is the sixth of April. Why do you ask?”

Mr. Parisi gave the food in his mouth one last chew and swallowed it hard, seeming to be at a loss for words. “Just curious about you.”

“What about you? When did you come from Italy? Why?”

Before he could reply, Mr. Rizzio strolled into the room. The man stopped in his tracks at the sight of Grace Colby sitting across from his boss, nearly forgetting to remove his hat in her presence.

Mr. Parisi raised a glass to his second in command. “*Gino, uccidi Rossetti. Fallo sembrare un incidente.*”

Mr. Rizzio’s eyes narrowed. “*Un consigliere?*”

“*Sì. Te lo spiego quando non ho compagnia.*”

Grace, unable to understand them but almost certain they were talking about her, started on the second course of risotto that Mama Donata brought to her.

“Mr. Rizzio? I’m terribly sorry for the trouble I caused,” Grace called out before he left the room.

Mr. Rizzio glanced at his boss, who nodded at him. He crushed the brim of his hat.

“Miss Colby, no one witnessing a deal ever walks away with their lives. Be more careful. You won’t get another chance like that.”

“I know, sir. Mr. Parisi explained.” Her appetite diminished to nothing by the time she and Mr. Parisi were alone again.

Mr. Parisi himself barely touched his own food. “Miss Colby,” he started with hesitation, “your dream...that wasn’t a dream. Antonio’s is an underground establishment only certain people know about. Your father...he knew. On April the sixth of nineteen-fourteen, a couple of Giordano’s men carried out a

hit on my parents. I fought one of them. In the mess of it, two little girls were stolen from their parents who were never found. You would have been the third had your father not caught up.”

Grace dropped her fork which clanked loudly against the plate below. She snapped her eyes up to his. “What?”

“We’d come from Italy the year before. My father owed an alliance to Giordano, and when I met him...” He shook his head. “I won’t get into that now. My parents were killed, and Constanza—do you know who he was?”

Breathless and stunned, Grace shook her head.

“He was the boss of this family before me. That’s why it’s called the Constanza family. He started it. He took me off the street and became my mentor. After that date, an agreement was struck between the five families that children were never to be the intended victims of any harm. That was a sacred oath. If what you’re saying now is correct, then you’ve confirmed that Giordano has been violating the oath since the beginning. Many of us had a major suspicion for years, but no one dared to try and verify the rumors. The families are too afraid of a war.”

Her thoughts swirled in an incoherent mess. It couldn’t be... Her dream had been real? She’d almost been abducted... by one of Giordano’s men, and she had been witness to the death of Mr. Parisi’s parents? The truth made her sick, but at least it made sense to her now—why she’d been so hell-bent on pursuing the truth about Amelia and Anya. She could have been one of them. Her disbelief turned to anger, and the impersonal became personal.

“How can we stop him?”

“*Noi?* No, Miss Colby, there is not a ‘we’ in this. No. No, no, no.” He leaned back in his chair. “Too dangerous for you.”

“Do you think I can sit back and do nothing? I could have been one of them!” She gestured frantically with her hands. “If he’s doing what we think he’s doing—”

“What’s that?”

“Trafficking!” Grace pressed her hands hard against the table. “What other use would he have for them? If he’s trafficking them, then I’ll stop him myself if you won’t help me.”

Mr. Parisi’s brow furrowed. He hadn’t expected such an outburst. “What about your parents? Mr. Donovan?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. Mr. Donovan knows there are risks. He knows what happened. I can talk to him and see what he says. Maybe I should have before coming here. I think my parents would agree with me that the risks are worth it. I escaped on my birthday, and they protected me, and I’ve already made it this far, even after what happened with Mr. Rossetti. Maybe this is why I’m still alive. Maybe I’m supposed to stop what’s happening.”

“Miss Colby—”

“I appreciate you trying to protect me, but children need protection first. I’ll get the evidence, and the police—”

“The police will do nothing, Miss Colby.” He drank back the rest of his glass of wine and hastily refilled it. “Let me assure you, they are well aware of this. The five of us—”

“Five?”

“Leaders of these families. The five of us, Giordano included, have enough separation between us and the men who carry out our orders that makes linking any crimes back to us—it simply does not happen. We have enough police on our payrolls to make sure of it. Al Capone himself could only be taken in on personal federal tax evasion. Do you think he’s an angel among made men?”

“Then how is justice supposed to be carried out?” Grace’s voice cracked.

Mr. Parisi reached into his jacket and withdrew a pistol, setting it on the table between them, taking care to aim the barrel away from her.

Wide-eyed and pale, Grace stared at it. “No. That can’t be the only way. If nothing else, then at least tax evasion, right? I’m sure he’s done plenty of that over the years. How do we prove it?” She pushed her plate away and dropped her head into her hands.

“My god, everything in my life...” She raised her head again. “This isn’t where I thought I would be when I woke up this morning. But this is so much bigger than myself. I am going to put an end to this, no matter what I have to do, or where I have to go.”

Mr. Parisi sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tax evasion or death. Those are the only avenues. I’ve wanted to take him down for it since Capone’s arrest had uncovered such a loophole, but I have taken a vow not to conspire with the authorities.” He paused, hating himself for what he was about to propose. He hoped it would never come to this, but her persistence made it impossible to protect her. If she would stop at nothing, this would be the only way she had a chance to make it out alive. He wanted to vomit.

”Let’s make a deal. Think about what you are willing to give up and how far you’re willing to go to put an end to this. But I must warn you, if we work together on this, you will become part of this life, and I can’t guarantee you’ll ever be able to walk away once Pandora’s box has been opened. It’s a hard life...one rife with pain and loss. I would give anything to have yours.” When she opened her mouth to interrupt, he held up a finger to stop her.

“Miss Colby, you need to understand what I am telling you. Joining me would mean leaving behind everything you know and going underground. I will deal with Rossetti, myself. I could get you close to Giordano, but if you can get closer, you may be able to learn the location of his safe. Once the safe is located, I can take it from there.”

“Closer...how?”

He clenched his jaw and glanced down at his hands. The idea of sending Grace into the arms of Giordano filled him

with utter disgust and regret. For a moment, he tried to think of any other way to get into Giordano's home to find the hidden safe, but he knew in his heart that he would never get to it himself.

“He has...only one weakness, Miss Colby. He has an affinity for beautiful women, and there's something magnetic about you that I don't think he'll be able to resist.”

Grace's hands fell into her lap. “Do you mean using s...” She swallowed hard. “I mean...seduce him?”

“Yes.” He grimaced. “This proposal is not to be taken lightly. You will be forced to make countless sacrifices, some of which you may find hard to live with. You also need to know that you don't *have* to do this...Nor do I expect it of you. In fact, I would much rather you *didn't*. But if you insist on pursuing the matter regardless of the cost, this is the only way I can protect you. Think long and hard about it when you get home. The choice is yours to make. Call me in three days with your answer.”

CHAPTER 11

Monday, October 2, 1933 to

Friday, October 6, 1933

“You can’t be serious, Boss.” Gino shook his head. “Look, I know I eventually came around to the idea of sending her in, and I know that I’ve been busting your balls for this—but I’ve been thinking hard on it since the night at the factory, and I was wrong. This is a shit plan, Enzo. What the fuck are we even thinking? I was right about her from the beginning. She’s too soft. She’ll get herself killed.”

Enzo rubbed his haggard face. “God dammit!” he slammed his fist. “It is a shit fucking plan! But what else can we do? I’m never getting near that safe, and she won’t let it go. If she does it her own way, she will get herself killed in an instant. He underestimates women, so she might have a chance. He needs to be stopped. He’s been trafficking girls, Gino. Children! Since the fucking beginning and none of the families will do shit about it! Do you really think I want to send her into his bed?”

“No. But I think we should try to find someone else.”

“Sure! Who did you have in mind? Another Leila? Cecelia? Another Gertrude? If we found someone else, we’ll still be right back where we started with Miss Colby going off and doing things her way. If you can think of any other measures of getting into his house and finding that safe, I’ll hand this family over to you right now.” Vincenzo waited expectantly as Gino attempted to conjure up another plan, but nothing ever came to him. “I gave her three days, Gino. Three days. If you can come up with anything even remotely possible before then,

we'll go with your plan. Now let's go. We need to set up a little going-away party for Rossetti."

It was near midnight before Grace finally removed Mr. Parisi's coat and hung it back in her wardrobe. He put the coat on her for warmth when he drove her back home, insisting that she keep it. It comforted her, but she couldn't sleep in it. At least it was nearby.

If she decided to work with him on handling Mr. Giordano... She scrunched her nose and curled up underneath her blankets. So much had been dumped on her tonight and she hadn't had the chance yet to digest any of it.

"My men call me Don Parisi. I am the leader of the Constanza family. My word is above the law to my men. They do as I say and take care of the business I need..."

She'd figured he was just some rank-and-file. No, he was the king of an empire...how could she possibly involve herself with someone so powerful?

"...and will kill for me without question."

She couldn't picture him as a murderer. His presence could be intimidating, sure, but he'd only ever used his authority to protect her. He always treated her with such gentleness, despite his stony façade. She could only hope that he wasn't the type of man to kill for the sake of thrilling entertainment.

The battered faces of her beloved parents and her dearest Nathaniel formed in her mind...all of them dead. For a moment, the urge to kill Mr. Rossetti herself took hold of her. Cynicism held her morality at gunpoint. How could someone threaten the lives of the ones you love without batting an eye? What drove someone to such cruelty?

It was time to face the night's biggest revelation. Her parents had lied her whole life about what happened on her

fifth birthday. There were times she thought she had gone mad, feeling so strongly that her memories were true despite regularly being told otherwise.

At least she understood now why her papa had argued profusely over the idea of her moving to the city, but why did he have to lie to her? If he hadn't wanted her to move, maybe the truth could've kept her from leaving. Her papa's lies pulled at her heart. Children are supposed to trust their parents. She prayed that his lies ended there. There's only so much betrayal someone can take, especially from those who are supposed to love and protect you.

Grace exhaled. Her head began to throb from the night's emotional strain, but there was so much left to consider. Mr. Parisi hadn't given her much detail about how he would get her close to Giordano. Whatever his plan was, she wasn't sure if she even possessed the fortitude to see it through to the end. Her stomach churned. It would be awful enough to be in that bastard's presence, but to seduce him? Her only experience with men had been a small kiss from an old boyfriend back home. She barely knew how to even kiss a man, much less seduce one. She always thought that her first time would happen naturally with a man she loved, but it seemed now that there was a real possibility it would be with a man she despised...and she'd have to *pretend to enjoy it*. Pretending to want it at all would be tough enough.

Maybe it would be easier if she tried it with Nathaniel first.

She snorted. No. Her love for him was brotherly. His arms provided a deep sense of comfort, and though they shared an emotional connection, she didn't feel the same in a physical sense. Maybe physical intimacy was just a chore women were expected to provide. Was desire really anything more than wanting to get something done—in the same way as washing dishes or beating the rug? Perhaps desire had less to do with *want* for the action itself, but more to do with the pursuit of an end result—a means to an end.

Her mama always told her that “marital relations,” as she’d called it, was for the purpose of procreation, rather than recreation. Maybe women weren’t supposed to find enjoyment in it. Desire for the purpose of procreation made sense, she supposed. After all, bearing children was considered to be a woman’s divine purpose in life, wasn’t it? Maybe so, but becoming a mother wasn’t something she wanted just yet... and the idea of becoming pregnant with Mr. Giordano’s child terrified her beyond recognition. What if she were to end up with his baby? She’d heard rumors of the ways women could change that, though she wasn’t particularly keen on the idea. If it ever came to that, maybe Mr. Parisi would know where she could go for help.

Her thoughts wandered to her own hypothetical baby reaching five or six years old, and Mr. Giordano ordering an abduction...

Just then, her decision became clear. If using her body could help save little children from harm, then she would do it, no matter how repulsed she was at the thought of bedding such an evil man. Nathaniel would probably understand...but she knew that she couldn’t tell him. Anything discussed with a mob boss behind closed doors must remain behind closed doors.

Her thoughts raced until the sun crested over the horizon. Early morning light flooded her room before exhaustion finally took over and she dozed off.

A frantic knocking on the door roused her awake. She reached her hand out for the bedside clock and shot up in panic. It was past noon! The person outside the door knocked again.

“Grace?”

“Nathaniel?” She flew to the door and cracked it open. She sighed heavily and opened it to let him in, never-minding the fact that she was still in her scanties. He quickly pulled her into a tight hug that she wanted to last forever.

“You left the office so suddenly yesterday, and when you didn’t show up this morning or call...” Nathaniel took her face into his hands. “I’ve been so worried. I thought Rossetti...” He shook his head and pulled her close once more. “Thank God, you’re all right.”

Grace bathed in his embrace. When she informed Mr. Parisi of her decision, who knew how long it would be before she could be held like this again—in her friend’s arms safe, warm, and loved? She had no idea how yet, but she was going to need to find a way to leave quietly without worrying him and her parents. Josephine deserved an explanation too, but she had to be careful with her words. She couldn’t tell her anything that might rouse her councilman father’s suspicions, but she had to conjure a reasonable explanation that could be given to Nathaniel as well, just in case they decided to compare notes.

“I’m sorry. I just haven’t been feeling well.”

Nathaniel ushered her back to bed. “Come on, let’s get you back down. Take a couple days off, okay? You need rest. I’ll bring you food and whatever else you need.”

She couldn’t protest. Staying home meant she didn’t have to be at the office feigning normalcy while her heart was in shambles. She nodded at him and laid back down onto her pillow as he tucked her in. When he sat down beside her and rubbed her shoulder, she fought the urge to cry.

“I’m worried about you, Gracie. Do you need a doctor? I can have one here right away.”

“No,” she whispered. “I’m just feeling a bit melancholy. That’s all. More sleep would do me some good, I think.”

He tilted his head down to get a good look at her. “Well, I’ll be here if you need anything. I’ll be back around five thirty with something for you to eat.”

The afternoon dragged on. After Nathaniel left, she tried going back to sleep, but the anxiety returned with a vengeance

and her mind refused to shut off. When she accepted Mr. Parisi's proposal, how long would she have before she would need to say her goodbyes? How in God's name was she even going to do that?

Her stomach was in knots, but her mind was made up. She would call Mr. Parisi that very night after Nathaniel had left for the evening. The sooner she could get started, the sooner she could get the hardest parts over with before she had the chance to change her mind.

She growled at herself, remembering that it would be dark by the time Nathaniel left, and she had promised to stay indoors after sundown. That telephone call would just have to wait until morning.

The morning weather seemed to sense her mood, though she felt somewhat comforted by the dreary rain—almost as much as the warmth of Nathaniel's hug when he surprised her with a bag of fresh pastries. He asked if she'd come to the hotel so he could keep an eye on her while he worked nearby at the office. She hadn't the heart to refuse him.

Curled up on his king-sized bed, buried in blankets with a book in hand and a hot cup of tea, Grace struggled to remember a moment more perfect and cozy than this one. Right now, she was safe from the world being cared for, respected, and spoiled. She could hardly wait for the chicken soup he'd ordered for her to arrive. The call to Mr. Parisi would have to wait for the third day, after all.

On the evening of the third day, she stood in the telephone booth struggling to drop her coin in the slot. Her body

trembled as she peered down the edge of an imaginary cliff, knowing once she jumped into the abyss, there was no going back. This would be the end of the only life she'd known. It was a goodbye to her career, to the apartment she called home, to everything she'd ever worked for. It was goodbye to her friends, and goodbye to her parents. She couldn't do it. She stepped out of the booth to let a waiting man use the telephone.

Feeling faint, she pressed her back into the cold brick of a building nearby. The reckless choices came so easy for her when sitting across from Mr. Parisi. His domineering presence made her

feel as if she could face down the devil himself and he would always protect her from the repercussions of her own actions. It was as if danger would bow before him, begging for mercy. But this time, she would have to go willingly into harm's way where Mr. Parisi couldn't follow. She would be alone... at the mercy of an evil man's whims, and she would go to hell as that bastard's spoiled goods. No man would ever want her again. She was sure of it. If she was to die, at least she'd go on her own terms. She stepped back into the booth, closed her eyes to slip the dime into the machine and dove into the abyss.

"Murray Hill five nine nine, seven five," she mumbled to the operator.

"Beg your pardon, miss?"

"Murray Hill five nine nine, seven five," she hissed.

The line only rang once.

"*Ciao?*"

"Mr. Parisi, it's Grace." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm in. What do I need to do?"

He sighed. "Pack up your things, Miss Colby. I'll send Mr. Serra around tomorrow morning to collect them. They can be kept here until afterward. Tomorrow at two, he will bring you here and I will explain everything."

“That soon?” she whimpered.

“The sooner we can begin, the sooner it will end. I’d like to have you in the Starling Room by Sunday.”

“What’s the Starling Room?”

“Miss Colby,” his voice strained, “are you available to meet with me in half an hour? We need to talk a bit more to make sure you understand.”

“*We need to talk*” rarely ended well. Grace sat at her kitchen table and chewed at her thumbnail, staring anxiously out the window at the street below. When her wristwatch revealed that only minutes had passed since their call, she hurriedly picked up a book to distract herself. She barely finished a full paragraph before she heard a knock on her door. She grabbed her coat and opened the door. In a rush, she tripped over her own feet and knocked into Mr. Parisi.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry, sir!”

Powerful hands helped to steady her.

“Come, Miss Colby.”

Grace followed him to his car, shaken by his somewhat callous demeanor. He held the door for her and she scooted in, waiting for him to start a conversation. Much to her frustration, they drove in silence to a park Grace had never seen. He parked under a few large oak trees and the silence lingered still. The longer he took to speak, the more certain she’d become that he was going to call it all off.

He raked a hand through his hair and exhaled hard. “The Starling Room...” He turned to face her with a pained expression. “It’s a club Giordano owns. The easiest way to get close to him will be to set you up as a dancer under a false identity. I have no doubt you will be able to grab his attention. He likes the wide-eyed innocent type, but he speaks poorly of his dancers. All of them. He won’t expect any intelligence from one.”

“Mr. Parisi,” her cheeks burned, “I will probably have to...” She couldn’t bring herself to speak the words aloud. Dancers got naked in front of men, and they did other things that she was still terrified of.

“You are not obligated to go through with this. If you change your mind, do not hesitate to tell me. It’s...a lot to ask of you.”

“I made up my mind a couple nights ago. I just...” Her fingers twisted together. “What happens if I get pregnant? I don’t want to have a baby yet, especially his.”

Mr. Parisi’s eyes cast down at her nervous hands. “Doctors can take care of it. If that comes to be, I will handle any bills, and I’ll be by your side through every step. You won’t need to go through it alone.”

Grace nodded, feeling somewhat reassured. “So I need to pack tonight, and Mr. Serra will pick up my things tomorrow, right? And then he’ll pick me up at two?”

The corners of Mr. Parisi’s lips twitched into a half-smile, though his eyes appeared to mourn.

“Yes. You’ll stay with me tomorrow night. The day after that, on Saturday, we will get you ready. On Sunday, Mr. Serra will take you to the Starling Room.”

Three nights... Three nights left of normalcy before she would walk into the shadows alone. None of it felt real. Each thing she tucked into her suitcase, each trinket, each book packed away, they all called for a goodbye that she couldn’t bring herself to say. Goodbyes are permanent.

Once her suitcase was packed. She uncapped her fountain pen and pulled a sheet of paper from her notebook

Dear Nathaniel,
I regret to inform you

She crumpled the paper up. Much too formal.

Dear Nathaniel,

She crunched another sheet into a ball and dropped her head into her hands. These words would be the hardest she'd ever written. The letter for her parents would be easier, so she started on theirs instead. She would tell them of an extended assignment in Europe. She hadn't had much of a chance to speak to them in a while, so there was no reason for them to become suspicious.

The prosecutor would also need to be informed that Grace would no longer be available to assist in her investigation. She would inform the woman of a permanent return to her family farm. City life had become too overwhelming.

Nathaniel and Josephine—who would they have left once she disappeared? A tear fell from her cheek and landed on a blank sheet of paper. Leaving them behind felt like such a betrayal. Would they ever wish to see her again once she returned?

If she returned.

She sighed, knowing it wouldn't do her any good to consider their angered reactions. Once her heart had been put to paper for Nathaniel's goodbye letter, Josephine's would be easier. so she grabbed her pen and began to write Nathaniel's.

My dear Nathaniel,
This is the hardest letter I've ever h
ad the displeasure of writing.

*I'm afraid my time in New York City
has come to an end for a while. My presence
here has posed a danger for the both of us.
I don't know when I'll be back, but I promise,
I will be. I will be telling Josie that I've gone
home to take care of my ailing parents. She
cannot know of her father's dealings with
Cesare Giordano. I am begging for your
continued discretion on this.
For your safety, please stop
investigating the girls. Your life is in danger
if you keep going forward. These burdens
are mine to bear. I hope you can understand.
Your friendship has meant more to
me than you could ever know, and I look
forward to the day I can hug you again and
tell you how dearly I love you.
Yours,
Grace*

Tears streamed down her cheeks by the time she finished.

She collapsed onto her bed as reality struck, knocking the breath right out of her lungs. Nathaniel's visit yesterday evening had been his last, and neither of them had known it. If she saw him at the office the next morning...she would surely crumble. She would find another way to send these letters.

Grace laid on her bed and stared at the plaster ceiling. Still fully clothed and fully drained, she tried desperately to fall asleep. Her life had fallen deeply out of control and the only

path forward was fraught with danger and uncertainty. Battling a racing mind, she tossed and turned before sleep finally showed her mercy, and she slipped into its dark embrace.

An early knock on the door startled her awake.

“Miss Colby?” a man spoke quietly through the wood. “It’s Gino Rizzio.”

“Mr. Rizzio?” She peeled her aching body off the bed and checked her clock. It was eight in the morning—past time to get up. She shuffled to the door and opened it, not noticing his look of surprise.

“Good morning, Sir. I...”

“I’ll take care of everything, Miss Colby. You should rest.” He walked past her into the kitchen and grabbed her suitcase in one hand and balanced the hat boxes in his other. “Mr. Serra will be here for you at two this afternoon.”

“Mr. Rizzio?” her voice was hoarse.

“Yes, Miss Colby?”

“Can I do this?”

His jaw clenched and he smiled weakly. “Boss thinks you can. He wouldn’t let you do this if he thought otherwise.”

Grace sat on the edge of her bed and clasped her hands between her knees. “Do you think I can?”

She stared up at him, her eyes sincere with desperation. He set the boxes on the table and folded his arms.

“Miss Colby...I’ve never seen someone get away with their lives when Rossetti had half a mind to kill ‘em. But you did. There must be something more to you. Seems to me that you can do whatever it is you set your mind to.”

Self-doubt kept his assuring words from sinking in. She laid on her bed for the better part of an hour wondering what was in store for her at the Starling Room and how she would catch the attention of Mr. Giordano. She didn’t even know

what the man looked like. If Mr. Giordano had ordered hits on her, wouldn't he recognize her face?

The sound of a car horn broke her reverie. Mere hours remained, and she still had things to do. She brushed her hair and fixed herself up as best she could with what remained in her apartment, and set out to tie up any loose ends. She mailed all the letters except for two and searched for Nathaniel's car. He and Josephine needed their letter sooner than later. She found his Duesenberg parked a few cars down from the office and slipped his and Josie's letter into the slightly open drivers-side window.

It was done. She couldn't go back. Her heart pounded in her chest.

"Miss, are you all right?" asked a gentleman passing by.

She nodded and walked away as fast as she could to her apartment without looking back. Once home, she locked the door and laid on her bed atop crumpled sheets, waiting in agony for two o'clock to arrive.

Just moments later, a frantic knock startled her awake. She tip-toed to the window to see who it might be, and saw the yellow Duesenberg parked across the street. Her hands clamped over her mouth to keep quiet.

Nathaniel knocked again, twisting against the doorknob as he did.

"Grace! Grace, open up! Please!"

She pressed her hands against the door and bit her lips together to hold back a sob. He was right there, just inches away. All she'd have to do was open the door and she could hug her dearest friend once more.

"Grace, if you're in there, please...let me help you."

Her forehead pressed against the jagged wood. She took a couple deep breaths and forced her fingers away from the lock. Her soul cried out in anguish, begging her to run into his sheltering arms. The pain was too much to bear.

“Grace, if you’re in there, if you can hear me...” His voice quivered. “I’m here for you. Whatever happens, wherever you’re going, I’m...I’m here. And I’ll be here for you when you get back. Just...please, promise me you’ll come back. I love you.”

Grace pressed her ear against the door and listened to the heavy sound of his footsteps disappearing down the stairs. She hurried to the window to peek out through the sheer curtains, bouncing on the balls of her feet to keep from running after him. He glanced up at the window as he wiped his cheek. Despite knowing he couldn’t see her through the curtain, their eyes still met, as if making a silent promise to always be there for each other. When his car pulled away, she screamed into her pillow and cried her heart out.

Doing the right thing had never been so hard until then. She felt as if she would die of heartbreak, and she sobbed until her eyes had run swollen and dry. Hiccuping and sniffing, she got up and pulled a brush through her snarled hair. She splashed some cool water onto her face to help take down the puffiness before fixing her makeup. When she checked the time, only four minutes remained until Mr. Serra was to pick her up. She thrust her arms into Mr. Parisi’s coat and watched out the window again.

When she saw that Mr. Serra had pulled up and stepped out of the vehicle, she grabbed her purse and left her apartment for the last time, ready to step into a new life. A new life, from which, there would be no return.

CHAPTER 12

Friday, October 6, 1933 to

Sunday, October 8, 1933

For the first time in her life, Grace had lost her sense of belonging. She had no job, no income, no home, and no friends. She had become listless. Mr. Parisi said she'd go to the Starling Room in two days... What would she do until then?

As she mounted the steps to the front door of Mr. Parisi's home, the weight of the world came crashing down upon her. Her fate now lay entirely in his hands, and she felt a bit deranged for entrusting her life to a man she hardly knew. Mr. Serra held the door open for her and as she walked up the steps, Grace startled at the unexpected, intimidating sight of Mr. Parisi standing in the foyer. His expression was unreadable as he murmured something to Mr. Serra before exiting through a side door without a word.

"This way, Miss Colby." Mr. Serra gestured for her to follow.

But instead of leading her to the study as Grace had expected, he led her up the stairs, richly carpeted with a deep red runner toward a second floor that was as grandly appointed as the floor below. No expense had been spared on the ornamented plaster walls painted white, or the pedestals with grand vases filled to the brim with autumn flowers. Mr. Serra came to a stop outside of a door and turned the handle.

"If you need anything, pull this cord here and someone will come for you."

The unexpected request made her uneasy. “What do you mean, *cord*? Am I being imprisoned?” She glanced back toward the stairs. There was no way she could outrun any of the suited men and get away.

“Oh, no, Miss Colby. Enzo said you looked very tired. He ordered the house that no one was to disturb you unless you were in need of anything. He wanted to be sure you could rest up before he begins.”

“Begins what?”

“Going over the details of the plan.”

“Mm.” Grace nodded and entered the sweetly appointed bedroom, all white and pink, with her suitcase and hat boxes set neatly against a wall, and a large bouquet of pink roses in a vase beside the bed.

“Has Mr. Parisi always kept a room like this in his house?”

“Not until two days ago.” A kind smile pulled at Mr. Serra’s cheeks. “Enzo wants you to be comfortable.”

“Are you the only one who calls him that?”

“Call him what, miss?”

“Just...Enzo?”

Mr. Serra chuckled. “Get some sleep. Here’s the pull-cord, the toilet is right through that door, and someone will come to wake you for dinner if you’re still asleep.”

Left alone in her room, Grace kicked her shoes off and bit her lips together to hold back tears. Despite the opulence of her room, she couldn’t help but feel imprisoned. She had no one to blame but herself, however. She signed up for this, after all. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours yet, and all she wanted was Nathaniel and Josephine. Her heart ached, draining her of what little energy she had left. She crawled into the unfamiliar bed and pulled her knees to her chest.

The moment she closed her burning eyes though, a sudden knock on her door startled her awake. Still aching exhausted,

she shuffled to the door and opened it.

“Dinner, Miss Colby.” Mr. Serra smiled.

“Already? But I had only just laid down.”

“It’s been more than four hours, Miss.”

“Oh.” She brushed her dress down, making sure she hadn’t wrinkled it too much. “Um…”

“You look fine, Miss Colby.” His attempt at reassurance did little to ease her nerves, but the clock was ticking. “I suggest we not keep Mr. Parisi and Mr. Rizzio waiting.”

“He’s ‘Mr. Parisi ’now? Not ‘Enzo’?”

Mr. Serra didn’t respond. He offered her his arm, and she gladly took it. He seemed to be a kindred spirit she could latch onto in such a foreign place filled with unknown faces. When they entered the same room she had dined in just days before, Mr. Parisi and Mr. Rizzio rose from their seats. Her eyes swept over the bottles of wine and crystal glasses. They splintered the light almost as much as the crystal chandelier hanging over the table. She followed Mr. Serra to the table and let him push in her seat for her.

“Thank you, sir,” she whispered.

The golden piece of chicken and pasta on her plate made her mouth water. She was tempted to damn all propriety and dig in immediately, but she maintained restraint. It wasn’t the multiple courses she’d been told to expect before, though she didn’t mind one bit. Her rumbling belly was grateful for the full meal delivered all at once. She waited until her host lifted his own fork before taking up her own. While she cut into her food, Mr. Parisi set his fork back down and steepled his fingers, seemingly deep in thought. Grace took a small bite of savory chicken and chewed it slowly, watching him with growing concern as he stared blankly at the flickering candle in the center of the table. He’d scarcely acknowledged her since she arrived.

“Mr. Parisi, sir, have I offended you?”

“No, Miss Colby,” he said in a soft tone, still seemingly entranced by the small flame. “I’ve been thinking of what we need to do. This is not what I want for you—sending you into the viper’s den.”

“Viper’s den?”

He nodded, and for the first time since her arrival, his eyes met with hers. “Giordano will not be the only man at the Starling Room selecting ladies for a good time.”

Grace pushed her food around with the fork, suddenly feeling a bit sick.

“About that—how will I get a job there?”

Mr. Parisi gestured to Mr. Serra. “He will act as your boyfriend going by the name of Tony Lanza. He’ll be selling your services to Madame Molly to make the money to pay off a debt. She runs the establishment. The money paid will be set aside for you.”

She had a sinking feeling about his choice of words. “By selling my services...you mean providing men with a ‘good time’?”

“Yes, Miss Colby.”

“How...”

“The girls at the Starling Room dance on stage to entertain men, but they also entice them to pursue further...” He tapped his fingers on the table in search of a word.

“Private entertainment?”

He pursed his lips. “You could put it that way. You can still back out. It’s not too late.”

“I’m not backing out. I’m just trying to understand more. That’s all.” Grace took a long sip from her glass of wine.

“But how do I get his attention?” Her cheeks burned with the embarrassment of discussing such matters in front of three men she hardly knew.

“I mean...how do I...seduce him? That’s not something they really teach us farm girls out in the country. We just get told to marry Bobby from the next farm over and pop out his babies, and that’s that.”

His deep brown eyes flickered to hers, his thick lashes concealing the endearment they held for her.

“A trusted friend of mine will come here tomorrow to show you the ropes. But if I may, Miss Colby, you’re captivating enough to get a man’s attention, just as you are.”

Grace couldn’t pull her eyes from his, no matter how intense the fluttering in her belly threatened to overwhelm her senses. There it was again—that pulling feeling that she didn’t fully understand. His eyes darkened and her pulse raced, leaving her breathless and faint.

“Boss,” Mr. Rizzio said, breaking the mounting tension.

Mr. Serra set down a piece of brioche. “These two always like this?” he mumbled to Gino.

“That’s enough,” Mr. Parisi growled. “We need to get our story straight. “Luca, you’re ‘selling ’her to Madame Molly to earn the money to pay off your gambling debt. Miss Colby, you were raised as a farm girl—that should be easy enough—named Anna Matthews. You and ‘Tony ’have been dating for two years, and you didn’t know what he intended to do until you arrived. Act upset when you find out. Then you work your way onto the stage. From there, it’s just a matter of getting Giordano’s eyes on you.”

Late into the night, wearing nothing but a brassiere and panties, Grace tried to dance in front of the mirror in her room. She thought she looked too much like a newborn calf taking its first wobbly steps. No matter how she moved, she couldn’t see what someone might find appealing about her. She didn’t

know how to dance. She wasn't some tall and leggy, flat-chested blonde with a fashionable haircut. She was certainly no Joan Crawford or Carole Lombard. Though she was petite, her curves had a bit more slope to them than the stars she admired. Her breasts always offered a bit more cleavage than she cared for, her wavy, strawberry-blonde locks had never been cut above her shoulders, and her lips were perhaps a bit more round than the ladies on the silver screen. As unfashionable as she was, how could she possibly attract the right kind of attention? Her shoulder slumped as she looked herself up-and-down in the mirror. Feeling self-conscious as ever, Grace shut off the lights and stormed off to bed.

“She will draw his eye,” Mrs. Esme Greco declared the following afternoon.

Grace crossed her arms. “But how? The other girls will probably look like film stars. What will I have to offer?”

Mrs. Greco twisted her fingers into Grace's curls and pulled them onto her shoulders to accentuate them.

“Something different. Unique. You will stand out for it. When he does notice you, you need to keep his attention. Watch me.” Mrs. Greco sauntered to the couch where Mr. Rizzio sat, and she perched herself up against his side, letting her knees touch to his. She trailed a finger up his sleeve, to his shoulder, up the side of his neck, to his cheek. She shifted closer to him and planted a kiss just beneath his jaw.

“Am I the kind of woman you like?” she purred.

Mr. Rizzio flushed and crossed his legs, unable to pull his eyes away from Esme's heaving chest.

She patted his face. “You don't have to answer. Of course I'm your type. I'm a warm-blooded woman.”

Grace snickered and sat down on the other side of Mr. Rizzio.

“So, I trace my hand up his...” She emulated Mrs. Greco’s actions, struggling to keep her laughter under control thanks in part to Mr. Rizzio’s own failed attempts at keeping serious. When she reached his neck, he hitched up his shoulder and snorted.

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to tickle you!”

“Lei è incantevole,” Mrs. Greco sung to Mr. Parisi. *“Sarà un cieco sciocco a non essere preso con lei.”*

Grace hoped that whatever the women said to him hadn’t been anything terrible. No one looked disappointed, though. On the contrary, in fact. Out of the corner of her eye, Grace had caught Mr. Parisi holding back a grin of his own.

Just then, Mrs. Greco flashed her a devilish smile.

“Miss Colby, go practice on Enzo.” She held a finger up when Grace’s eyes widened. “You’ll have more fun with a man who’s stripped you naked in his mind—”

“Esme!” Mr. Parisi snapped.

—“than with a man who is more like a brother than a lover.”

Grace felt the ground shatter beneath her. She couldn’t do it with Mr. Parisi even if she wanted to. Wait...didn’t she want to? No, no! Surely he’d never thought of her naked, either. That would be absurd! She was nothing to look at, and Mr. Rizzio once told her that Mr. Parisi had half the city’s women pining for him! She couldn’t believe Mrs. Greco would even suggest such a thing! How humiliating...

“Ho bisogno di parlarti un momento, in privato.” Mrs. Greco mumbled to Mr. Rizzio before taking his arm and leaving the room together.

Grace stared at the closed door behind them with the sudden urge to cry. Never had she felt more exposed and vulnerable in her life. She turned her head toward Mr. Parisi. His expression had become unreadable, leaving her unsure if

she should even approach him. She swallowed hard and held his gaze as she moved to sit beside him on the leather sofa. Her body trembled wildly with nerves, and shyness nearly got the better of her. She looked away and glanced down at his hand resting beside her. With parted lips, she traced a finger along his veins, emboldened by the way he seemed to respond to her touch. He inhaled sharply at the surge of electricity between them. They both felt it—she was certain. She pulled his hand into her lap and traced lines along the length of each finger, rubbing her thumb over every little scar and callous. The warmth of his palm and the steadiness of his breaths gave her comfort.

With her other hand, she grazed her fingers up the length of his arm and stroked the side of his neck before realizing what she was doing, and she pulled away suddenly. “I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do this.”

He swallowed and gently pulled her chin to face him, unable to conceal the longing in his eyes.

“Yes, you can. *You are*. Do it like this.”

He brushed the back of his fingers over her ear, tracing a line softly across the length of her jaw, down to her chin. His touch burned like fire against her porcelain skin. As he rubbed a thumb gently across her bottom lip, his dark eyes flickered down to her mouth, and her body ached with longing for the taste of his kiss.

“Speak softly,” he hummed, leaning in close enough that she could feel the heat of his breath tickling against her ear, “like this.”

On the edge of losing herself entirely, Grace’s head fell back and her lashes fluttered as the slightest moan escaped her lips. She turned to face him once more, feeling stubble prick at her skin as her cheek brushed against his. She would have kissed him right then, but he had already pulled away. She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck and plunged her fingertips into his soft, thick hair, relishing in the spicy scent of tobacco and whiskey on his breath. When she cupped

his jaw, he leaned into her touch, and her heart nearly burst. Perhaps in that moment, he needed her too, just as much as she needed him.

“Mr. Parisi...” she whispered, adjusting onto her knees beside him.

“Yes?” he breathed.

She could smell the bergamot and leather musk of his cologne. His closeness left her unable to think clearly, and the emptiness she felt without him was maddening.

“Am I the kind of girl...a sophisticated, handsome man like you could want? Just a plain little farm girl with nothing to offer you but a desire of my own?” She didn’t realize until she’d already spoken the words aloud just how personal she’d made it. The sudden terror at her own confession snapped her out of the trance. “I’m sorry, Mr. Parisi. I didn’t mean...”

Ashamed to have laid herself so bare before him, Grace rushed to get to her feet, but her heel caught the hem of her dress, throwing her off balance. He reached out to catch her and pulled her toward him, causing her to fall against his chest with trembling knees landing astride his hips. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she looked down at him with eyes wide as a deer caught in headlights. Grace lowered herself onto him for a moment to free her shoe from the hem of her skirt, but when she did, she felt something below his belt pressing against her, igniting an unfamiliar sensation deep within her belly. Out of some carnal instinct she didn’t understand, she considered pressing her hips against him and losing herself to whatever force was pulling at her. No, she couldn’t—not when she hadn’t the faintest idea what was even happening to her body. With shaking hands, Grace pushed herself away from his chest to stand.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Parisi.” She looked down at her feet too ashamed to face him.

He cleared his throat and adjusted his position on the sofa.

“Very good, Miss Colby,” he commended in an unusually light tone. “But, you are far from ‘plain,’ believe me. If Giordano has any sense left, he won’t be able to resist your charm.”

She nodded. “Thank you, sir.” The sudden intrusion of people clapping in the doorway threatened Grace with a heart attack.

“Brava, Miss Colby.” Mrs. Greco raised an eyebrow at the red-faced Mr. Parisi as she waltzed over to Grace. “If I may be so crude, Giordano is *fucked*.”

Grace shrank. “I’d rather not think about that part right now.”

Any remaining feelings of ecstasy had been replaced with anxiety and dread.

“Mrs. Greco,” she whispered, “can I speak with you privately for a moment?”

Mrs. Greco nodded and led the way to another room.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“I...” Grace wrung her hands together. “What do I do afterward?”

“Afterward?”

She nodded. “If I can get Giordano to want me and take me to bed. What should I do?”

“Well, you’ll need to get him to trust you enough to take to his home, and—”

“I mean the bed-part. I don’t know what to do.”

Mrs. Greco’s eyes widened as she began to understand what Grace was alluding to. “You mean you’ve never...” She shot a glance at the doorway. “Does Enzo know this?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, we haven’t talked about it. But I’ve got to see this through. You see, I was almost one of those

missing girls. The night Mr. Parisi's parents died—I was there. Mr. Parisi does know about that.”

“What?” The woman's face was drained of any color. “Miss Colby, I didn't know this. You saw what happened, and you were almost taken?”

“That's why we're doing this... Well, it's certainly why I'm doing it. Aside from just being the right thing to do, it's also personal for me. But please, I don't want Mr. Parisi to know that I've never... gone to bed with anyone before.”

“So if all goes to plan, then Cesare Giordano will be your first. *Mio dio.*” Mrs. Greco paced to the window overlooking the back courtyard. She pursed her lips.

“If you've come this far without knowing, then it would be best for Cesare to teach you what he thinks you should do. I will worry for you, Miss Colby, but you are a clever young woman. Whatever happens, I know you'll be all right.”

Knowing he was sending Miss Colby to that bastard's bed sickened Enzo to his core. Giordano wouldn't care about her. He wouldn't cherish every inch of her and love her with tenderness. Enzo knew that Miss Colby was unlikely to want Giordano...the same way that she seemed to want him on the sofa. The way *he* wanted *her*.

He fidgeted with his lighter as he stared into the smoldering fireplace. His own response to her touch...that much was genuine, and he chided himself for not concealing his longing—*and his arousal*—for her. He'd come so close to losing control and taking her right where they sat. But if he had...well, he couldn't forgive himself. She deserved better than him.

She certainly deserved better than Giordano, but Giordano would still get to take Miss *Anna Matthews* into his arms. Thinking of all the nights she may have spent alone with Mr.

Donovan had been a hard enough pill to swallow, but at least Donovan worshiped the ground she walked on, and he would always love and protect her which offered enough peace of mind to put Enzo's broken soul at ease. Truthfully, even if Miss Colby's feelings matched his own, Enzo knew she would be better off with Mr. Donovan. He made a promise to himself he wouldn't let her into his heart, and he was intent on keeping it—for both his sake, and her own.

Falling for a woman he could never have and sending her into the arms of another...it gutted him. For the first time since the loss of Cathalina and their son, his heart had begun to beat with purpose. *Grace* gave him purpose. The more he replayed that moment with her in his mind, the more he began to see the truth. The gentle desire in her eyes, the electricity in her touch...it was clear to him now. He remembered vividly the way Cathalina used to look at him...that look of a woman falling in love. There it was again, only this time, it was from Grace.... His heart sank.

As much as he dreamed of making her his, he was no good for her. He couldn't let her in. Though it tore Enzo's heart to pieces, he knew that keeping his distance was for *her* own good. He had to be more careful. He was accustomed to heartache and misery, and he would fight to the death to ensure she would never know such pain. He needed her to love another man.

Enzo lit up a cigarette to calm his nerves before another realization dawned on him. Miss Colby was so bashful around the subject of sex. When they were alone together, her nervousness and naivety was evident, but he hadn't thought much of it at the time. If she and that Donovan guy were together, had they never shared a bed? Perhaps Golden-boy was more honorable than he previously thought. He couldn't understand it. A few minutes alone with her and Enzo himself nearly lost all control. If Miss Colby wasn't sleeping with Donovan...

No...Could she be...? It suddenly all made sense. He chuckled to himself sarcastically. *She was untouched.*

He realized now that he was sending a virgin into the arms of Satan himself. Just then, Enzo couldn't see himself as anything but a monster. After a throat-burning sip of whiskey, he growled and chucked the crystal in his hand across the room, scattering jagged shards of glass all over the tiled floor.

Goddammit!

He didn't sleep. Enzo sat on the sofa the rest of the night with a new glass of whiskey and watched as the flames in the fireplace turned to ash and embers. Morning had come, and he couldn't say goodbye to Grace when she walked out the door with Luca. Instead, he just watched her through his darkened bedroom window as she got into the car that would take her away from him to the Starling Room. He hated himself.

Despite his anger, the responsibility for her safety ultimately lay in his hands. There'd be at least a week before she'd go on stage, but Rossetti needed to be terminated before then to eliminate any chance of her being recognized. Miserable as he was, Miss Colby had her job to do, and he had his. The time had come to set aside his emotions and take care of business. This job belonged to him.

CHAPTER 13

*Sunday, October 8, 1933 and
Monday, October 9, 1933*

Grace had never realized the old brick building that she'd passed by so many times before had concealed such a nefarious business. From the street front, it was just another structure, but down a private alleyway toward the rear, the true main entrance remained hidden from view. When Mr. Serra pulled up to the back door and put the car in park, Grace's stomach twisted in knots at the distinct lack of human activity outside the place. Evidently, The Starling Room was the kind of place only known about by those within certain circles. The activities taking place beyond those walls were on a strict "need-to-know" basis.

The drive from Mr. Parisi's home was far too short. Not enough time to mentally prepare herself, though she knew deep down that no amount of time could ever make her feel ready for what she had to do.

"Are you ready, Miss Colby?" Mr. Serra shut off the engine and shot Grace an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry in advance for anything bad that I say about you in there."

"Well, Mr. Serra, are you apologizing to me or to Anna Matthews?" She grinned back at him to conceal her mounting nerves.

"I'll be fine. Promise."

"For now, you and Anna are the same. Don't forget that. Now, if you and I are going to be working together for a while, please, call me 'Luca,' *capisci?*"

She nodded. “Only if you’ll call me ‘Grace.’”

She stepped out of the car and peered up at the unassuming building. Her heels sunk deep into the gravel beneath her—as if the property itself had been eager to swallow her up right where she stood. Such innocent blood was the kind of delicacy that the underground surely couldn’t wait to feast upon. She moved to the balls of her feet and drew in a deep and dying breath for the end of Grace-Anne Colby. Once she crossed the threshold, Miss Colby was dead. There would only be Anna Matthews. She hugged her coat around her for comfort and hurriedly followed Luca to the backdoor. Once inside, the unexpected scenery stole her breath away.

The ornate mosaic tile floor bested any she had ever seen, and a series of elaborate brass crystal chandeliers overhead promised the most gorgeous lighting after dark. The stained glass window set into the pitched ceiling was beyond anything she could have imagined. The sheer size of it alone was magnificent! Each piece of glass had been placed ever precisely to create a glowing rendition of the Birth of Venus. Grace spent a minute in awe to admire its craftsmanship. It was tastefully erotic, but in a manner befitting a museum, just like its famously painted-counterpart. Smaller stained glass windows were lined high up on the walls. Each one more suggestive than lewd, a few of them depicting scenes of love. The one that caught her eye most was that of a woman nursing a wilted rose back to life. The woman’s posturing seemed to suggest feelings of sorrow—a deep yearning within. It was incredible.

The perfectly-timed clacking of heels against hollow wood pulled her attention away to a large room with several gorgeous dancers rehearsing a stage number. Grace found herself hypnotized by the fluid motion of long legs, bouncing curls and rolling curves. Not a single dancer fell offbeat. While the Ziegfeld Follies were the *crème de la crème* in the world of showgirls, the ladies on stage before her were certainly worthy of the Ziegfeld caliber, but they would never know such fame. Grace decided to think of them affectionately as

the Underground Follies. Their talent was unwavering. Entranced by such tantalizing sirens, she kept her eyes fixed upon the stage while Luca was...well, doing whatever it was that he was doing.

She wondered if she would ever be able to attain their level of talent and flexibility. Their lithe bodies bent and twisted in ways she hadn't realized a human could move. While the men would think of them as objects of desire, Grace thought they were absolutely lovely.

"That's what you'll be doing, Anna." Luca patted her back.

Anna. Showtime.

"Hm?" Grace spun around and feigned innocent surprise. "Why, Dear, whatever do you mean? I thought we were going to a hotel. I'm not a..."

"Well..."

"Who is this woman?" Grace gestured toward a tall gray-haired woman with a slick chignon. "And what do you mean, I'll be doing *that*?"

Luca winced as he put his arm around her and dragged her back into the stained-glass foyer. "You see, Kitten, I, uh, sorta got caught up in some gambling debt again."

"Again?!" Grace's eyes widened. She stepped back. "No... No! You can't be serious! A-are you saying that I'm going to be staying here?!"

He grabbed her arms to keep her from retreating.

"Anna. Baby! The debt's gotta get paid, and you're the most valuable thing I have."

All at once, reality finally set in and the sudden urge to run took hold of her. Like a pup kicked into a corner, she lashed out and slapped him hard across the face. Before she could make a run for it, the palm-shaped welt forming across his cheek gave her pause.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean that!” The guilt she felt just then was real, and so were the tears that sprang into her eyes. “But I don’t want to stay here. I-I-I want to stay with you!”

“That’s not possible now, *girl*,” the older woman spit. “I’ve already paid him for your services for the next six weeks.”

“Already paid...for my services?” Even if she wanted out, it was too late now. “Who are you?”

“Madame Molly, and I run this establishment. You will call me ‘ma’am’ or ‘Madame Molly.’ Do you understand, girl?”

Grace shook her head in genuine confusion. “No, I... What’s happening? I...”

“Baby, it’s okay. You’ll be all right, I promise!” Luca’s attempt at reassurance did little to soothe her, but the look of regret in his eyes seemed genuine.

Her chin quivered. This was no longer an act. Terror coursed through her veins.

“What am I doing here? I don’t know what to do.”

Luca pulled her into his arms. “Madame, can you give us a moment, please?”

“A moment, yes.” Madame Molly stepped away into the lounge to give them a small measure of privacy.

Grace gasped for air as unadulterated panic took over.

“Oh, God, what do I do? How do I do it? I’ve nev... never...”

Luca’s body tensed.

“Grace,” he whispered cautiously, “what do you mean, you’ve ‘never’?”

She clutched at the lapels of his jacket and sobbed softly. “Any of it.”

“*Fottilo!* I’m gonna kill Enzo,” he cursed to himself.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Grace leaned into Luca, wishing with all she had that they could walk out the door and

never come back.

“Then we’re leaving. Right now.” His tone grew stern with worry.

But the girls... Grace wiped her nose and took a deep breath. “No. No matter how badly I want to, I can’t leave. I need to do this. I’m just scared.”

Luca hugged her tightly. “If you change your mind, just say the word. I promise, I’ll be back on weekends to come get you. Boss will be here in the evenings when he can...that is, if I don’t kill him, myself. If you need anything, just call. Okay?”

“Okay.” Her voice hitched. “I’m terrified, Luca. I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re a smart girl. Just be yourself. You can do this.”

Grace nodded through wet sniffles. “I’ll try.”

He touched her cheek. “Take a breath. I’ve got to go now. I promise you’ll be okay.” He kissed her forehead and looked over at Madame Molly. “Please go easy on her. She’s only an inexperienced country girl, after all.”

Madame Molly pursed her lips.

“Well, then. Come, girl. I will show you to your room. Then you will change and join rehearsal to start learning the dances.”

“My name’s Anna...” Grace cowered under the woman’s glower. “...Ma’am.”

“You will get your name when you go on stage. Until then, you are ‘girl.’”

She bowed her head subserviently and listened to the sound of Luca’s disappearing footsteps. He was gone. Her last connection to the world outside had left. She would have to navigate this foreign world on her own, now. Grace picked up her bag and followed Madame Molly down a hallway and up a narrow set of stairs to a poorly-lit hall. The dim-lighting and disintegrating wallpaper was in stark contrast to the lounge

below. Madame Molly stopped outside a door with the number 4 painted on it, knocking only once before opening it abruptly.

Her heart sank at the state of her new “home.” Two sagging beds had been shoved against opposing walls with two small cabinets for personal belongings, and not a window in sight. The only lighting in the room came from the flickering bulb dangling from the ceiling which bolstered the room’s closet-like atmosphere.

“Is this one mine?” Grace pointed to the flimsy bed that was free of any personal belongings.

“Yes. Now, you don’t look like the type to own a playsuit or tennis shorts, so change into a plain frock if you’ve got one, then get downstairs to rehearse.” Madame Molly stormed out the room, leaving her new dancer frightened and alone.

Grace plopped herself down on the lumpy mattress and questioned what the hell she was doing. The gravity of the situation had only begun to sink in once Luca had left. Through her convictions, signing on for the job of a sex-spy had been easy, but agreeing to something, and actually doing it, were two different things. She hoped those convictions that brought her here would guide her through all the debauchery she was soon to commit.

“Okay,” she sighed, “One foot in front of the other. I can do this.” Grace opened her bag to search for her plainest cotton linen dress. The dancers were indeed rehearsing in playsuits or pleated shorts with cotton blouses. Some were even prancing around in wool bathing suits. She’d hoped to blend in, but with nothing appropriate for physical activity, her dress was sure to make her stand out.

Grace sighed as she pulled on a green cotton dress and twisted her hair into a low bun. If Madame Molly wanted her in anything plainer than this, she’d have to supply it. She had only brought two dresses along with her, and the other had a bit of lace and lacked the necessary breathability. Grace examined herself in the small hazy mirror by the door and pinched her cheeks to rosy them up with hopes that reddened

cheeks would detract from her still-puffy eyes. Confident that she'd cleaned up as best she could, she headed down the creaky stairs to the stage lounge with clasped hands hugged tightly to her chest. Feeling dreadfully shy, Grace tried to approach the group of dancing ladies as discreetly as possible. All the *heel-toe-kick-turns* were quite dizzying, though she couldn't deny that the dances did look a bit fun.

The choreographer suddenly backed into Grace as he shouted out eight-counts.

"Oh, my... Who are *you*?" His eyebrow raised.

The ladies all stopped their dancing to catch a glimpse of the newcomer.

Everything but the stage was mostly cloaked in darkness, and Grace was ever grateful for it as her face turned a bright cherry-red. *Please just look away!*

"I... My name is Anna Matthews. I'm new. Madame Molly wanted me to rehearse, but I don't know what to do."

He gave her a curt nod. "What room are you in?"

"Four."

"Who's in four?" he called.

A tall woman with a head full of springy amber curls stepped forward.

"I am, sir."

"Natasha," he ordered, "take this... *Anna*... out of the way and teach her the opening number for Saturday."

Natasha dropped into a curtsy and hurried off to the back of the room with Grace close behind her.

"You said your name was Anna, right? I'm Natasha! It's so nice to meet you! It'll be okay, you know. I'm so glad to have a roommate again."

"Thank you, Natasha. I'm sorry he pulled you away from rehearsal. I don't know what to do." Despite her anxiety,

Grace smiled back at the pretty woman with twinkling gray-green eyes.

“I didn’t know I was going to be doing any of this until my boyfriend left me here just a little while ago.”

“Men,” Natasha giggled. “Forget about him. You’ll be well-practiced in the art of men soon enough. Now let’s get you warmed up and teach you this dance.”

Grace followed the dancer’s instructions, and much to her surprise, she found her own flexibility and rhythm to be better than she expected. Anything Natasha threw at her, she did with ease. The moves weren’t complicated, but there were plenty to remember.

“Hm. You said you didn’t know what to do, but I’m starting to think you’ve been hustling me this whole time, Anna,” Natasha teased.

“Well, I suppose I had built up some strength growing up on the farm. I helped wrangle the cows and the pigs, and I did spend a lot of time balancing on the backs of unbroken horses. I guess I just hadn’t realized I was so flexible,” she explained shyly.

“In that case, you’ll do just fine. We’ve plenty of bucking stallions here for you to break,” Natasha giggled. Not wanting to be rude, Grace begrudgingly feigned amusement at the woman’s unsavory joke.

Just then, a bell rang and all the dancers filed off the stage and scurried down the hallway where Grace had been practicing. Without a word, Natasha tapped on Grace’s shoulder and motioned for her to follow, holding a silencing finger to her lips as she led Grace down a dark corridor into a modest dining hall. The room contained several round tables set simply, but neatly. In the middle of each table, there was a large platter with scarcely enough food to fill more than half the dinner plates set around it. Natasha grabbed her arm and dragged her over to a table placed near the back corner of the hall. Grace took the empty seat next to her new friend and

waited in silence as the rest of the girls took their seats around the table. The only sounds in the room came from chairs sliding atop the wooden floor, the clanking of silverware, and the hushed whispers of dancers. When Madame Molly entered, the room fell deafeningly quiet.

“Girls, we have a new dancer. Anna Matthews came to us this afternoon. Please do welcome her when you have the chance. Natasha, you may have the night off to work with Anna. Her training is your responsibility this week.”

Natasha nodded. “Yes, Madame Molly. Thank you.”

Without missing a beat, Madame Molly moved on and read out the stage notes. Grace listened carefully to the austere woman’s lecture and discovered that even though today was Sunday, there would be a show later that night. It didn’t take long to find out there were shows every night of the week. Once Madame Molly had finished her speech, she quickly exited the dining hall, and the girls finally began to converse with one another—albeit softly.

Grace turned to Natasha. “Are there *ever* nights off?”

“Why would there be nights off when there’s men in constant need of entertainment?” Natasha speared a couple sausages with her fork and dropped one onto Grace’s plate. “You should probably get some of those potatoes before they’re poached. Madame Molly likes us skinny. It stops our monthlies.”

“This is all the food?”

“Yeah. Let’s hurry up and get upstairs. We can talk more in our room.”

Grace hurriedly gobbled up her small portions and followed Natasha back to their depressingly dark room. The girls plopped onto their beds and Grace hugged a pillow into her lap.

“Okay. Hm...Where do I start?” Natasha paused for a moment to think. “Here. I’m sure you have questions, so let’s start there. Ask me anything.”

“Um...well, about the ‘services’... How does all of that work? It all sounds so...terrifying.”

“It gets easier, but it is hard at first.” Natasha stood up and opened the cabinet at the foot of Grace’s bed.

“I almost forgot. Here. These are the costumes Emily left behind when she was sent to the basement. Girls usually come back after a few weeks, but she never did.”

“The *basement*? What do you mean?”

Natasha’s expression fell. “I don’t really want to talk about it. It’s an awful place.” She shook her head and set the costumes on the bed beside Grace. “I hope you can sew because you’ll need to make these fit. I can help if you really need it, but I’ve gotta admit, I’m a terrible seamstress.” She pulled out a box of thread, needles and pins. “Come on. Let’s see how these fit.”

Grace stripped to her scanties and donned the first outfit—a little red two-piece with a frilly bandeau and a short, flouncy skirt to match. Natasha began pinning in the waist before moving to Grace’s chest and pursed her lips.

“Honey, with the way God blessed you, I think we’re going to need some extra fabric to let out this bra.” Grace’s cheeks flushed as Natasha fumbled with the fabric around her breasts, failing to fit them neatly into the ill-fitting bandeau cups.

“Getting back to your question—It gets less scary when you get used to it. I won’t lie to you, some of the men can be rough, but there are some who are really gentle and patient. There’s this one man I see who massages my back and doesn’t demand anything from me. But there’s also some who like to go for so long that it hurts after a while. Eventually, you just learn to shut your head off and get through it. Once you figure that part out, then it’s not so bad.”

“How do you pick the men?” Grace carefully slipped the costume off and sat down to start taking in the skirt’s waist.

Natasha laughed. “You, pick? No, no, Anna. *They* pick. The dancing is how we showcase the goods and the men pick from

who they like the most. Mr. Giordano owns the place, though, and no one gets a shot at the new girls before he does. He's all you need to think about for the first night."

Grace's ears pricked up. "Mr. Giordano? What does he look like?"

"He's not here on Sundays—not usually, anyway. I'll show you tomorrow. For now, let's just worry about practicing and getting these costumes done tonight. Tomorrow will be a very long day."

"How much worse do you want this to get?" Enzo growled.

Rossetti stayed silent. Enzo handed a hammer over to Gino who took a long drag of his cigarette before twisting Rossetti's hand and slamming the tool down onto it. Despite the crunching sound of shattering bones, Rossetti didn't scream. The bastard's resolve was admirable, but Enzo had no more patience for the interrogation that seemed to drag on. He was stressed enough knowing Miss Colby was spending her first night in a new place, likely scared out of her precious mind.

Rossetti grunted and spat as he pulled against the restraints that kept his wrists and ankles firmly attached to a large wooden chopping block in the back of the old butcher shop.

"Non los so—"

"Don't make me warn you again. English, so my Jewish friend here knows what you say." Enzo gestured toward one of the men behind him.

"I said I don't know that little bitch!"

This time Gino didn't bother to wait. He casually smashed the hammer three more times against Rossetti's knuckles turning the already broken bones to dust. Just then through gritted teeth, a high-pitched cry finally escaped him.

Enzo raised an eyebrow. “Will you stake your life on that lie? Are you going to keep lying to my man Rizzio’s face? That’s awfully bold of you considering you conducted business with him that night. Are you going to keep insisting that you don’t recall the woman you threatened to finish off?” He showed Rossetti a photograph of Miss Colby once more.

Rossetti spat at it.

Enzo’s nostrils flared at the desecration of Miss Colby’s picture. Without hesitation, he snatched up a large knife and drove it through the man’s hand into the carving block beneath.

“Rest assured, Rossetti, you will not live to see another day, but we can make it quick, or we can play all night. The choice is yours.”

Rossetti instinctively tried to pull his hand away and screamed against the blade slicing deeper into his flesh.

Enzo shrugged. “All right, then. Piece by piece. Hiram, what do you think?”

When Hiram swung up his meat cleaver, Rossetti squealed.

“All right! All right! Yes, I fucking know her!”

In a fleeting moment of mercy, Enzo yanked the blade out of his hand. “Why did you let her go? What was your plan?”

“It was a mistake. I should have killed your little bitch when she was in heat.”

Hiram swung the cleaver down, severing Rossetti’s hand above the wrist. Rossetti let out a blood-curdling shriek. With his arm no longer shackled down by the amputated hand, he pulled his forearm to his chest, letting warm blood pool onto his white dress shirt.

“Don’t call her that again.” Enzo aimed the blood-soaked knife at Rossetti’s eye. The slightest move and Enzo would have him blind. His disgust for the man grew by the minute.

“You see, Rossetti, I don’t find pleasure in torture, but I will see to it that Miss Colby is safe by any means necessary. So, tell me what I need to know. Why did you let her go?”

Rossetti spat in his face. Enzo growled and wiped his cheek as he stepped back and nodded once at the other men. Gino and Luca grabbed two sledgehammers and pulverized Rossetti’s knees, splattering sinew and muscle tissue around them until Rossetti’s voice had gone and his calves were no longer a part of his body. He pulled against the one restraint that still had a limb to hold him, edging himself toward the side of the table as if he could curl away from the pain. His face paled and his shivering grew violent as shock began setting in.

Before long, the man’s shrill cries turned into labored whimpers. Rossetti was losing too much blood. Enzo knew that if he didn’t get his answers soon, then Miss Colby could be a dead woman, and he’d have no other way of finding out if Giordano would recognize her. Enzo had one more card up his sleeve, an empty threat that he hated to use.

“My wife and son were killed in a crossfire. I would hate to see that happen the next time your children leave home with mama.”

Rossetti’s chin trembled and a tear slipped down the man’s temple.

There we go, that’s it. Enzo had Rossetti right where he wanted him.

“Tell me, Rossetti, why did you let her go?”

“She’s such a pretty...a pretty thing. Reminded me of my own Grace-Mary, so blonde and sweet. I...I couldn’t...I couldn’t hurt her. Please, don’t touch my children.” He pressed his lips together in a whimper.

Enzo squeezed his temples in a vain attempt at slowing a headache.

“Does Giordano know you had the chance to kill her?”

“Yeah, and he thinks I did it.”

“Tell me the truth. Does he know what she looks like?”

“No.” Rossetti’s voice became weaker as he bled out. “He didn’t care, he just said to get rid...get rid of her for snooping on the...hospital.”

“So he could see her, face to face, and he wouldn’t recognize her?”

“No...he wouldn’t know...”

“Then I’m going to let you in on a little secret, Rossetti.” Enzo leaned in and waited for the dying man to look him in the eyes. Enzo gave the Rossetti the courtesy of sincerity.

“I will never hurt children, not even yours, Rossetti. Real men protect children. Do you remember snatching a little girl the night my parents were killed? The little girl you dropped on the sidewalk?”

“Yeah...”

“Would she have ended up in the trade?” Enzo pulled out his gun and placed the barrel against the man’s forehead.

“Yeah...I-I re...r-remember.”

“That girl was celebrating her fifth birthday. That girl you would have put to work in a brothel at such a tender age...that girl was Grace-Anne Colby.” Enzo closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Unable to look at the aftermath but filled with relief that Giordano wouldn’t have any idea that Anna Matthews was the same Grace-Anne Colby who he already thought dead, Enzo took a few steps back, rolled his down sleeves and re-buttoned the cuffs.

“Clean this up. I’m going home.”

Though he rarely participated in the direct torture of anyone, Enzo couldn't help but feel like a monster any time he did. The reason for one's torture never mattered. There was no fun or joy, only a mourning for those the deceased had left behind. In his study back at home, he poured himself several glasses of spiced rum and slammed them back. He knew what it was like to lose a parent. Rossetti left behind eight children, and his wife was pregnant with another. Turning a woman into a widow and leaving children without a father always filled him with regret. It was always the innocent who paid for the sins of the father.

Aggrieved as he was, he had to ensure Miss Colby's safety, not only for her sake, but for the sake of all the children sold off or enslaved by that fucker, Giordano. Rossetti was too much of a liability. He couldn't be allowed to show up at the Starling Room and tell his boss who that strawberry-blond dancer on stage was. Long before Gino and Luca would arrive home to confirm the job had been finished, he lumbered wearily off to bed, wishing with all his heart that it were possible to leave this hellish life behind for a calm, domestic life with the woman he could only dream of one day calling Mrs. Vincenzo Parisi.

CHAPTER 14

Friday, October 13, 1933 and

Saturday, October 14, 1933

Her stomach rumbled with hunger and her body ached. Days' worth of rigorous dance practice left her sore in places she hadn't known possible. Grace couldn't recall a single time in her life where her body had ever hurt this much. She must've practiced each dance at least a thousand times over. At least she knew them by heart now. It was one less thing to worry about.

At the end of her fifth official rehearsal, Grace managed to scurry back to her room before the Friday evening's patrons would arrive. The floor vibrated and thumped from the jazz music roaring in the lounge below, but she didn't care. Time alone in this place was a luxury rarely afforded, and dreadfully exhausted as she was, Grace figured she could sleep through a gun fight if it came down to it. She didn't bother to change before crawling into bed. Sleep would provide some much needed respite from the dreaded hunger pangs. Natasha wasn't kidding when she'd said Madame Molly wanted them as skinny as possible. How did that woman expect her dancers to have the energy to rehearse, dance a full show, and entertain men every night if they didn't eat?

Grace managed about an hour's nap before Natasha came to wake her. Earlier in the day, the choreographer suggested to Madame Molly that Anna be allowed to attend Friday night's performance to prepare for her debut. Grace rubbed her eyes and got ready for the evening sporting a slinky, violet satin gown that Natasha let her borrow. Once she finished doing herself up, Grace floated cautiously down the stairwell trying

not to trip over the long hem, and found herself seated at a table with a couple men acting as her guardians for the night. No man was to touch her until Giordano had his chance. She didn't pay her "guardians" any mind—she was too drained to care. Instead, she simply fixed her eyes upon the stage and fawned over the glitzy dancers—some of whom she'd come to know as friends. The lights reflecting off their sequins nearly blinded her a time or two. She was still in disbelief that she would soon be one of them. If the job had only involved dancing like the Follies, she wouldn't be able to contain her glee. Unfortunately, the element of prostitution would leech all the joy from her soon-to-be dancer title.

After the final number, the girls filed off the stage to mingle with the rich and powerful men of the underworld. Grace couldn't figure out where the girls went off to when they left the lounge with their men. She was certain now that they didn't go to their small, shared rooms. The walls were paper-thin, she would've heard someone's ruckus this week if they did, and Natasha never once brought anyone back to their room. Grace made a mental note to ask Natasha about this when she saw her again.

Not long after the show ended, her guardians escorted her back to her room and when she finally laid down for bed, she cursed herself for not asking the men if Cesare Giordano had been there that night. Not knowing what the monster looked like was beginning to wear on her.

Around ten o'clock the next morning, many of the girls emerged from their rooms tired and disheveled from 'entertaining' late into the night. Grace watched as they hobbled to their seats for breakfast and felt second-hand exhaustion just from looking at them. It was Saturday, after all—the busiest night of the week according to Natasha. The minuscule rations Madame Molly provided was nowhere near

enough to give them the energy they would need for another busy late night. Grace picked at her grapefruit and listened in silence to the girls at her breakfast table gossiping all about their Friday night exploits.

“Eva, I’m telling you! He was hardly more than a little boy. He had the lasting power of a...well, let’s just say he peaked before his prick was even close to me!” A girl named Samantha covered her face and giggled.

“What? On your legs?” Eva asked.

“On my ass. At least he could manage his aim.” Samantha snickered.

Grace felt the need for a hot shower at the mere thought of that stuff being anywhere near her.

“At least you didn’t have to suck on it.”

Grace perked up...*sucking*? “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know what that is, Annie?” Natasha sipped some coffee and tried not to smile.

“No. I’ve never seen a...a prick before.”

The girls stopped their chattering and stared at her with mouths agape.

“Do you mean to say that you’ve *never* done it before?” Eva balked.

“My goodness, Mr. Giordano’s going to like her.” Samantha chuckled. “Too bad he can’t really get it up anymore though. But at least his prick’s small enough that it would be easy for your first time. That’s the best way, if you ask me.”

“Well I disagree, Sammi,” Natasha interrupted. “It might be small, but a better first time would be with Mr. Parisi.”

“No way He’s hung like a horse!”

“So? He’s really nice. When I had him a few weeks ago, he gave me a back rub because he saw that I was tired. He even

brought me some delicious pastries. A well-endowed gentleman is heaps better than a small, flaccid jerk.”

Natasha’s words hit Grace like a blow to the gut. Mr. Parisi... *Vincenzo Parisi*? He’d come here and sleep with these women? The unexpected jealousy had all but killed her appetite. She had to sleep with the man she wanted to strangle, while they got to have time alone with the man who made her heart flutter...the man who treated her so kindly. Her stomach twisted in knots.

Samantha nodded. “All right. You have a point. Maybe Anna can get lucky too, once Mr. Giordano’s had his fill, of course.”

“Will it hurt?” Grace tried to sound blasé, but her voice strained in defiance.

Eva burst into a fit of laughter. “Oh, goodness no, not with that one. He can hardly get it up anymore!”

“What does that mean?”

Natasha patted her arm. “Annie, I think you and I need to have a little talk later.”

“Anna Matthews!” Madame Molly suddenly shouted from the dining room entryway.

Grace scuttled to her feet and bowed her head. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Your boyfriend is here to take you for the morning. Do not stay long. You’re going on tonight.”

“Tonight? But I’ve only had five days of practice.”

Madame Molly pursed her lips. “Our most important guest will be here tonight. He needs to see his new dancer. Go now. I expect you back no later than half past one.”

Grace curtsied and walked steadily away until she was out of the matron’s sight. Once clear from view, she bolted up the stairs two at a time to grab a hat and coat from her room and nearly tripped rushing back down the stairs to leave. In the

main foyer, she stopped short at the sight of Luca flirting with a couple of the other dancers. *Jealous girlfriend*. She had to act jealous.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?!” she spat at him. “Isn’t it bad enough you left me here? And now you’re flirting with other girls in front of me? How dare you!”

Luca rolled his eyes. “Baby, I’m a hungry man.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Swine!”

Something in her feigned indignation made him genuinely laugh.

“You’re too cute.” He kissed each of the other dancers’ cheeks and waved them off. “Let’s go, babydoll.”

Too tired to keep her act going much longer, Grace scrunched her face at him and sped outside toward the car, yanking the door open before he could do it for her. Once she slammed the door closed, she dropped the act and leaned her head against the cool window to breathe a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry for slapping you last week,” she winced when he looked over at her.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, Grace. I deserved it. I felt so guilty leaving you like that. It killed me to see the terror in your eyes.”

“You believed my act?” She bit her bottom lip.

“I may not be the smartest man, but I’m no fool. That wasn’t an act.”

“What about if I told you I’m not nervous about going onstage tonight?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

Grace stared blankly out the window. Her whole body cried out for a soft place to sleep instead of that torture device Madame Molly called a bed. How did any of the girls get restful sleep? The nightly cast worked on a rotating system, so while the girls didn’t perform seven days a week, that didn’t

mean they had days off—far from it. If anything, the days a girl was off stage were busier than her days on. The off-days were spent entertaining several men in a single night.

Grace dozed off to the comforting sound of tires rolling atop the pavement. She hadn't noticed the car come to a complete stop until Mr. Rizzio knocked gently on the window and opened her door. She smiled weakly at his greeting.

Luca and Mr. Rizzio escorted her inside and she took a seat in the warmth of Mr. Parisi's study by the fireplace. She wasn't sure why she was there, or if she'd even be meeting with Mr. Parisi, but she was far too tired to care. She lay her head on the arm of the leather sofa and let her thoughts drift away to a blissful nothingness.

Enzo gently brushed a curl from her cheek before resting a warm hand against her shoulder. With her eyes still closed, Miss Colby reached up and curled her fingers around his. The heat of her palm melted the ice in his heart. He wanted so much to pick her up and hold her close in hopes of preserving whatever sweet innocence she had left, but he would continue to refuse himself such pleasures. He'd sworn off intimacy and romance for good after the loss of his family. In the years since, opportunities to court another woman had always presented themselves, and although there were many fine candidates, he never felt that pulling of desire. None of the ladies he'd encountered since could bring back that feeling of all-encompassing passion that he'd once shared with Cathalina...but this was different. *Grace was different.*

"She looks like an angel. If I go to the show tonight, I'm not sure if my presence will bring her a sense of security or if it'll only worsen her nerves," he whispered.

"Ask her," Luca replied matter-of-factly.

Enzo shook his head. *“No. I don’t want to wake her. Let her rest as much as she can before you have to take her back.”*

Just then, Miss Colby stirred awake. She rubbed her eyes and squinted at the clock behind Mr. Rizzio before jumping to her feet in a panic.

“Oh no! I was supposed to be back already! We need to go!”

“It’s only two—”

“I know, Mr. Parisi. But Madame Molly demanded that I be back by one-thirty. Oh...she’s going to kill me!” Miss Colby fumbled for her purse.

Holding an impassive expression, Enzo nodded.

“Miss Colby—”

“Hm?” She froze.

“Do you want me to be there tonight?”

“Yes? No? Oh, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I just need to get back. Luca, can we please go?”

Luca pulled on his hat. “Come on. I’ll tell her I kept you.”

Grace waved good-bye, and in an instant, she was gone.

Enzo leaned against his desk and stared down at the slight indent in the sofa where she had been laying just a moment before.

“What do you think? Should I go?”

“She needs you, Enzo.” Gino tapped out his cigarette. *“Go.”*

Grace frantically barged through the doors ahead of Luca.

“Girl!” Madame Molly’s nostrils flared. “What did I tell you?!”

“I know, but I—”

“It’s my fault, ma’am.” Luca draped an arm around Grace’s shoulder. “We had a picnic, and I didn’t want to leave. It isn’t her fault. She told me she needed to leave, but I don’t take orders from women.”

Grace glared at him and stomped on his foot when Madame Molly wasn’t looking.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she politely interjected, “I need to go get ready.”

“Don’t blame her, Moll. It really was my fault.”

Grace scurried away and detoured past the stairs to find her fellow dancers finishing their second, and last meal of the day. Madame Molly never let them eat too close to showtime. Grace plopped into her usual chair and found the communal platter had already been scraped clean. Natasha and Eva sat quietly beside her with crestfallen expressions.

“What happened? Where’s Sammi?” Grace asked, confused.

With her best friend gone, Eva seemed too distraught to speak and she buried her face in her hands.

Natasha chewed on her thumbnail. “Annie...she got sent to the basement for a week.”

“What? Will you please tell me what the basement is?” Grace sucked down a glass of water to fill her empty belly.

Natasha sighed. “It’s where Madame Molly sends us if we misbehave. If you get sent to the basement, you’re forced to pleasure less-distinguished men of this city like the drunks and the sailors. Many of them want such depraved things. Sammi won’t last the week.”

Grace paled in horror. “Why would she do such a thing? Is she going to send me there because I arrived late today?”

“If you’re sitting here right now with us, you’re not going there. The basement is her way of keeping us in-line. Besides,

it's no skin off her back. Good girls or not, Madame Molly will still make her money out of us.”

“None of us know where it is, either.” Eva wiped a tear from her cheek. “Anyone who gets sent there is blindfolded and thrown into a car to be taken away somewhere else. Last year, I snuck out one night to see my mother who was dreadfully ill with pneumonia, and Madame gave me a three day sentence. It was just *awful*.”

Grace made mental note of this new revelation. Her intuition screamed at her to gather more information while the iron was hot. She may have been posing as Anna Matthews, a dancer sold by her boyfriend to pay off his debts, but at heart, she was still Grace-Anne Colby, investigative reporter. This only gave her another reason to see things through to the end. Whatever the basement was, she hoped it might be something she could put a stop to with the fall of Cesare Giordano.

It was less than an hour before the show and the dressing room was bustling with girls fighting over mirrors and squeezing into tight costumes. Though there would only be ten dancers on that night, the cramped room only held five dressing tables and seven chairs—eight, if you count the rusted step stool.

Grace scrubbed a small mascara brush into a moistened black cake of Maybelline and combed it into her lashes as scores of topless women passed by. She had never seen such a casual, open display of nudity before, and it made her a bit uncomfortable—modesty was all she had ever known. Grace did her best to conceal her shock and pulled out her favorite tube of Houbigant lipstick in a vampy-maroon shade that Josephine helped pick out when they shopped for evening gowns. Eva, still visibly upset, sat quietly next to Grace and focused solely on the mirror they shared, applying little beads

of melted wax onto the tips of her lashes with a toothpick. Grace watched on and winced. One slip of that toothpick and one could easily lose an eye.

A bit of *crème rouge* was the finishing touch to her make-up, but now she needed to figure out what to do with her hair. She was the only girl with tresses falling unfashionably past her shoulders, so she spent a moment deciding if pinning it up would be best *Hm...down and loose, it is*, she concluded. Her long hair made her stand out, and Mr. Giordano was old enough that she doubted he even cared about whatever was fashionable for the time.

Grace smoothed her golden locks into shiny waves and topped it off with her costume's matching headpiece. She dabbed a bit of tissue between her lips and smiled in the mirror to check for lipstick-smudged teeth. Grace hardly recognized herself. Her makeup was bold, all in thanks to the *crème* eyeshadow Eva told her to apply, and her costume was skimpy. She had never shown so much skin before to anyone but herself and the occasional girlfriend while trying on clothes. Despite feeling awkward and exposed, she couldn't help but admire herself in the mirror at the smoothness of her skin and the angles of her curves—she could almost picture herself an actress in a Busby Berkeley film!

With five minutes left before showtime, Madame Molly—now donning a sophisticated green gown—called the girls backstage to inform them of where Mr. Giordano would be sitting and lined the dancers up to direct where their places would be in formation. Grace held her breath when the stony woman approached her.

“Front row. Center.”

Grace's jaw dropped. The most coveted stage position on her first show? She must have misheard! She couldn't possibly! Grace raised her hand and shrunk under Madame Molly's angered glower. “Did you say I'm front and center?”

“Yes, *girl*. You have two ears and I did not stammer. Oh, and I want those pierced tomorrow.”

She'd had them pierced once before. Grace rolled her lobes between her fingers, searching to see if the holes might still be there before she was suddenly pushed into one of three newly formed lines and led to the stage entrance.

Showtime.

The sudden roar of jazz music pulsed through her body and her heart raced. Grace plastered on a nervous smile and followed the leader of her line up a few steps and out into the blinding lights. Unlike during rehearsal, the lounge was lit up by the soft glow of chandeliers and candlelight at the center of each table. The lounge was still quite dim, but there was just enough light to make the gathering of male faces easier to see. She looked in the direction of where Mr. Giordano would supposedly be sitting, but there was little point when she still didn't know what he looked like.

The band shifted into playing the opening number. A strange and unexpected sense of liberation coursed through her veins in tune with the beat. If only everyone back in West Virginia could see her now—Grace-Anne Colby: liberated investigative reporter and vivaciously rebellious showgirl. She was sure they'd have run her out of town the minute they witnessed this. It would have been worth it to feel as free and confidently brazen as she did just then, sparkling and bright on a grand stage. Of all the mishaps Grace had expected, none of it came to pass. She never missed a step, and her costume held together.

When her first number finished, she and five of the others filed off the stage to grab sets of large feather fans. As much as she hated to admit it, she finally understood the allure of the stage that kept some of the girls here of their own free will. Not the basement, of course, or the meager meals, the sleeping with men and the terrible sleeping conditions...but the adrenaline and the freedom to defy society's expectations of a well-behaved woman. As confident as she felt just then, she only wished she could shake the gnawing jealousy over the girls who got to sneak away with Mr. Parisi. Even if she wasn't confined by the rules of Giordano staking his claim on

the new girls, Grace doubted she'd have the courage to get Mr. Parisi alone anyway.

Time seemed to race on, and before she knew it the show was over, which meant the part of the evening she'd been dreading grew nearer by the minute—the part where she would need to saunter around greeting rich men and eventually find that greasy bastard, Giordano. At least she didn't have to worry about any of the men hauling her off to wherever it was they went for privacy. Not yet, anyway Madame Molly gave strict orders that she was not to do anything but greet the men until Mr. Giordano decided if he wanted her.

Grace went back to the dressing room to join the girls in the final outfit change for the night which consisted of curve-hugging satin gowns with thin straps that accentuated the décolletage. Undergarments were strictly forbidden. Madame Molly was adamant that the men be given the pleasurable view of a slim silhouette, unimpeded by the barriers of excessive fabric. After finding a gown that fit, Grace touched up her lipstick and headed to the lounge toward the supposed location of her male target. As she meandered through the crowd, a man held his hand out to her. She looked up at the man wearing a mighty fine tuxedo and found a friendly face.

“Luca! I didn't know you were going to be here!”

“You mean ‘Tony’?” He winked. “Well, when I heard talks that the prettiest little dancer in the city was making her debut tonight, I just had to be there.”

“Thank you, *Tony*. That means a lot. Really.”

“I wouldn't miss it for the world. Care for a dance?” Luca smiled and extended his elbow.”

“Sure.” She giggled and gingerly took his arm as he led her toward the dance floor.

“Boss is worried about you,” he whispered.

Her brow furrowed. “Why would he worry? Nothing bad has happened—well, not yet, at least. As long as I don't get sent to the basement—”

“Basement?”

“Mm-hm. It’s where Madame Molly sends girls who misbehave. The other girls are scared to death of it and won’t tell me much about it. I’m hoping to find out more information soon, but I do know that it’s some kind of prostitution ring.”

“Have you told the boss yet?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t had a chance. Will you tell him?”

“Yes, later.” He peered over her shoulder. “Speaking of the boss, he’s here—”

Her eyes widened. “You mean he saw me up there?”

“Yes. Don’t look for him. We have to act like strangers so Giordano doesn’t figure out that we all know each other.”

“Do you know if Mr. Parisi...” She wanted to ask if he went off with one of the dancers, but she couldn’t bring herself to finish the question. The less she knew, the better—getting upset wasn’t going to accomplish anything

“Hm?” Luca eyed her curiously.

“Nothing, never mind.” Grace peered up at him, and quieted her voice to a whisper. “Luca, I still need to get Mr. Giordano’s attention. What should I do?”

“Introduce yourself. I believe he’s wearing a red tie tonight. You’ll find him somewhere near the stage smoking a cigar surrounded by his entourage. He’s hard to miss—man loves the attention.”

“Okay. I should probably—Oop!” Another dancer bumped into Grace, almost knocking her over.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Anna!” Natasha stopped to check on her friend.

“It’s all right, Tash.” Grace adjusted the straps of her dress and when she glanced up at Natasha’s partner, their eyes locked. *Mr. Parisi...* Grace dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Natasha, Gentleman,” she curtsied, “please excuse me, there’s someone I need to go see.” She hurried away feeling unreasonably hurt to see that Mr. Parisi was dancing with Natasha. Grace swallowed her pride and searched for a pretentious ass surrounded by his worshipers.

He wasn’t so hard to find. As the owner of the establishment, the men encircling him regarded him highly. Cesare Giordano was surprisingly attractive for an older fellow. Strong features, salt-and-pepper hair, sharp eyes, and a thin mustache that suited him well. She swallowed down her anxiety and approached the group of men.

“Excuse me, sir.” She smiled coyly. “Madame Molly wanted me to introduce myself. My name is Anna. This is my first show.”

Mr. Giordano eyed her in appraisal before casually returning to his conversation with another man.

His unexpected snub was a small blow to the ego. She had to find a way to pique his interest. She bowed her head and stepped aside to find a dancer for advice. When she spun around, Mr. Parisi stood in her way looking down at her as if he had no idea who she was.

“Oh, hello, sir,” she couldn’t look at him directly.

“Your friend called you ‘Anna’?” He raised an eyebrow and extended his hand to her.

“I...” She wasn’t sure what to do. Was she supposed to take his hand? His purpose became clear when the firm arm of another man suddenly wrapped around her waist. She turned her gaze at the intruder and winced.

“Ah, Parisi, meeting my new girl, I see?” A conniving grin spread across Mr. Giordano’s face. “Pretty little thing, isn’t she? Her name is Amelia—”

“Anna,” she corrected with indigence.

Mr. Giordano glared down at her. “Quite the sweet mouth she’s got on her too. As my new dancer I’ve got a couple other

jobs for her she's gonna love."

Mr. Parisi chuckled dryly and shook his head. "*Interessato solo perché lo sono?*"

"*Lei è un nuovo giocattolo. Puoi averla quando avrò finito.*" Mr. Giordano cocked his head as if daring for his rival's objection.

"*Perderò interesse prima di allora.*" Mr. Parisi smirked at Grace.

She didn't understand them, but their condescending tones made her uneasy. They sounded like two bratty children bickering over a toy. The attitude made sense coming from Mr. Giordano, but either Mr. Parisi was a great actor, or his air of superiority was genuine. Her spirit deflated. She'd never felt like such an object before.

"What's wrong, sweet cheeks? Don't let this Parisi character get you down."

"I just don't want there to be a fight," she murmured. "I've had such fun tonight and a fight would rain on my parade."

"Oh, don't you worry sweet cheeks, there won't be any fighting. Let's get you out of here so we can continue the fun!" He grabbed her bicep and squeezed tightly.

"Ow," she mouthed.

"This, here, is mine. You can bed one of the other whores tonight, Parisi." Mr. Giordano sneered.

Grace's face heated, though her blood ran cold. This was going to be it—the one thing she dreaded more than anything. She knew it was unavoidable. It was the price to pay for a grander purpose, but that didn't make it any easier. Giordano yanked her arm to take her away. She cast a glance back at Mr. Parisi and their eyes met. His expression impassive, he turned and walked the other way. His indifference hurt more than anything, but she forced a deep breath and continued her mission.

"So where would you like to go, Mr. Giordano?"

CHAPTER 15

*Saturday, October 14, 1933 to
Saturday, October 21, 1933*

Cesare Giordano led her outside to a black Cadillac and opened the passenger door without a word. Grace felt dizzy with nausea as she fought the instinct to run away as fast she could. This was it. It was the night she'd be forced to do the very thing she'd always hoped to save for marriage. She'd never seen a naked man before, nor had any man laid eyes upon her own nude body. Tonight, she'd be laid bare before a man who hardly cared enough to remember her fake name—a man whose touch had been nothing but aggressive. Clutching the small suitcase with a change of clothing that he'd ordered her to pack, she took a deep breath and climbed into the car. *This is for the children*, she reminded herself. Mr. Giordano didn't utter a word. Her anxiety festered in his continued silence.

When they reached his mansion, Mr. Giordano hopped out of the Cadillac without bothering to open her door or offering to carry her bag. Grace jogged unsteadily up the gravel driveway to keep up with his quickened pace. She followed him up a flight of stairs into a bedroom lavishly decorated in gold and black decor with a large mirror on the ceiling above the bed.

“One of my drivers will take you back when we're done.”

“Um, sir?” she murmured. “I've never done this before.”

“What's your point?” He sneered.

“I mean I’ve never been with a man before...i-in bed.”

“You mean you’re a virgin?”

She didn’t have a chance to reply before he lifted her skirt and pushed her legs apart to shove a hand up through the leg of her panties. When he forced a couple dry fingers inside of her, she winced at the sting, and Mr. Giordano nodded approvingly.

“Well, well.” He flashed a devilish grin and looked her over with newfound interest in his plaything. “Good. You won’t have bad habits to break. Get undressed and get in bed.”

Grace stood frozen for a moment. She didn’t know what to make of his forceful hand. If that stinging was what she could expect, then she supposed it could have been worse.

“Come on. Get to it!” He snapped his fingers at her.

Grace startled and hurried to comply, pulling her clothes off quickly while he was turned away removing his watch. She scurried to the bed and slipped between the cool cotton sheets, covering herself completely. Mr. Giordano took his time undressing himself. She watched him and wondered if all mob bosses kept themselves in such good physical shape. Just then, Samantha’s gossipy words played back in her head:

“Too bad he can’t really get it up anymore though. But at least his prick’s small enough that it would be easy for your first time. That’s the best way, if you ask me.”

What was she supposed to do with it? Natasha hadn’t had the chance yet to tell her! Grace squeezed her eyes shut when Mr. Giordano joined her between the sheets. He cupped a hand around her waist to pull her in closer and clumsily rubbed his hands over her breasts the way one might squeeze oranges at the market. When he rolled her nipples between his fingers, she found the gesture not entirely unpleasant. Her body had fallen out of sync with her mind and she was disgusted with herself for it.

“Put your hands on me, Anna.”

She placed a palm lightly atop his rib cage. When he laughed at her, her face heated.

“What? You told me to put them on you, and I did.”

He shook his head disapprovingly and yanked her hand down to his soft endowment. “Stroke it.”

“What do you mean?”

He wrapped her fingers around something warm and squishy and guided her hand up and down its minimal length. Grace continued the motion and observed him wearily, watching on as his eyes closed and his lips parted open in enjoyment. Hoping to end this night sooner, she hastened the pace. He squirmed under her grasp and abruptly threw her onto her back and crawled on top of her. When he grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head, Grace’s eyes widened at him in a panic.

“Don’t worry, Anna,” he mumbled. “I have bigger plans for you.”

He shoved her knees apart with his own and slipped himself between her thighs, running the tip of his prick over the little spot she only sometimes touched when she was alone in the bath. She wriggled in terror beneath him.

“What do you mean—” she gasped, “bigger plans?”

“It means I have other ways you can please me.” He yanked her hair back and smashed his mouth against hers.

Grace tried to send her mind away to somewhere peaceful, but the sharp taste of alcohol lingering on his tongue hindered the ability to focus. She opened and closed her mouth to his, suffocating in disgust, but Mr. Giordano didn’t seem bothered.

Half erect, he forced himself inside her and sped up the pace of his thrusts for what seemed like ages. Grace couldn’t bring herself to watch him. She held her eyes shut until he rolled to his back and pulled her over to straddle him. He positioned himself inside of her once more, and pushed her hips back and forth until she figured how to control the pace

herself. She let her mind wander and tried to envision Mr. Parisi beneath her, and when she did, her body ached to have him...*Mr. Parisi*...inside of her.

Eyes closed, she immersed herself in a fantasy, rhythmically losing herself in her own stimulation...using this fool as her toy to dream of someone else. She exhaled heavily, stopping only once he pushed her off of him to dangle his weak erection in her face.

Mr. Giordano knotted a hand into her hair and slapped his tip against her lips.

“Open.” He commanded.

Confused, she did as she was told, and he thrust himself into her mouth, using his grip on her hair to move her head against him. She squealed in shock. Figuring the idea was similar to the act of milking a cow, she mimicked the motions with her tongue. A deep moan escaped his throat. When she added a bit of sucking to the motions, his groans became louder. Grace sighed through her nose. How much longer could this go on?

Without warning, he pushed himself deeper into her mouth and held her head in place until she couldn't breathe. She felt a strange pulsing against her tongue before a salty bitterness filled her mouth. She gagged and swallowed hard to keep from throwing up until he became still and let her go. She snatched the glass of water from his nightstand and chugged it back to get the taste of him out of her mouth.

“What was that?” She coughed.

“A job well done, Anna. Now sit quietly and lay with me for a moment.”

She nodded and curled up on her side facing away from him. If only the arms snaking around her could have been Mr. Parisi's. Instead, she lay in the dark in the grips of a vile man, hopelessly trying to make sense of what just happened. Is this what sex is? What was he playing at, sticking that *thing* in her mouth? Her stomach churned. She would probably have to do

that several more times before she'd earn his trust enough to start trying to locate his safe. She felt like crying, but she refused to allow any tears until she was alone in her lumpy bed back at The Starling Room.

When she thought of Mr. Parisi, her heart sank. That last look he gave her...he'd looked at her as if she was nothing to him. An object to be traded. That wasn't the Mr. Parisi she'd come to know. Was that the real him on display in front of Mr. Giordano? Was all the kindness and gentleness he'd shown her in private just a game? Her stomach rumbled. Maybe the hunger in her belly was clouding her judgment.

"Ah, sweet cheeks," he smacked her behind, "time for you to leave."

Grace took great care not to dress herself too quickly. He couldn't know how eager she was to leave. She truly couldn't wait to return to her room and wallow in her newfound shame.

Enzo couldn't shut his racing mind off. Worried thoughts consumed him. His body was visibly tense, and the space behind his eyes throbbed from a raging headache. When he'd realized Miss Colby was a virgin, he pondered the idea of taking her to bed himself and showing her what it was to be loved with tenderness and care. He wanted her to know that whatever that fucker would do with her, it wouldn't epitomize the true nature of love-making. She should have been shown what it could be like before Giordano was allowed to tarnish whatever beliefs she previously held about intimacy. Miss Colby deserved to know what it was like to be respected and worshiped, but it was too late now. The joys and pleasures of sex would be tainted for her, and there was nothing he could do to change that. He could see in her eyes that she felt the same way for him that he did for her, but he was a fucking coward—a man too afraid to open the door to his heart, and

she would pay the price for his selfishness. Enzo rested his arm underneath his head and ran his fingernails absentmindedly down Natasha's naked back, trying in vain to clear his mind of the guilt he felt for whatever Miss Colby would be enduring tonight. Guilt, shame, anger, sadness...they all blurred together into a mess of painful emotions that he couldn't rein in.

"Are you okay, sir? You haven't been yourself tonight. You seem so...melancholy." Natasha propped herself up on her elbows and looked into his eyes.

He looked back at Natasha, his favorite dancer—that was, until Miss Colby came along. Natasha wouldn't know it, but she was one of few women who knew him better than most. Of course, not as much as Esme. That woman knew him better than anyone. Even more than Gino.

"I've got a lot on my mind tonight."

"Is it something to do with Anna?" she pressed. "I saw you and Mr. Giordano facing off for her earlier."

Facing off. He half chuckled. *Well, that's one way to put it.*

"No. Every conversation with that man looks like an argument. That's just how he is. So, that new dancer, Anna—you said she's inexperienced?" Enzo feigned ignorance.

"Mm-hmm. A postulate who read Songs of Solomon knows more about sex than she does. Pity her first time will be *him* instead of someone like you."

Like me. Enzo closed his eyes. Her words wounded him. He'd never touched a virgin Even when he lost his own virginity at the tender age of fourteen, well, Esme had already been taken. He *wouldn't* touch a virgin. First-times were sacred for most women, and understandably so. He never wanted to be the reason for the shunning of a woman who didn't save herself for marriage. Not that he agreed with such ostracization, but he knew life had rules, and women especially were expected to follow them. Despite his strict Catholic upbringing, a woman's pre-marital affairs never

bothered him. The ultimate hypocrisy is a man condemning a lady for actions he's committed himself. Regardless, if he didn't see himself wanting to marry the girl with her virginity intact, he preferred to let someone else carry out the inevitable

Then there was Miss Colby... *Grace*. To him, she was more than worthy of marriage, but he was not worthy of *her*. Every night in bed, Enzo imagined her smooth skin beneath his fingertips and the sweet taste of her lips. If he had only gathered the courage to ask her to bed before this nightmare, he'd have taken his time with her. He would've made sure she was comfortable and free from any pain or discomfort. He would've shown her that ecstasy was hers to behold, rather than something she was expected to give. Perhaps it was better that he didn't take her. If he had, he probably would've called the whole plan off. It was difficult enough sending her away as it was, and she would have been furious with him. Enzo could only pray that Giordano wasn't hurting her.

"Natasha," he turned to look at her, "I'm not the honorable man you think I am."

Natasha sat up on the bed and hugged the sheet to her chest. "Then what kind of man are you, sir?"

What kind of man? Enzo wasn't entirely sure anymore. After Cathalina, he was simply a man who did what was necessary. When Miss Colby snuck her way into his broken heart, everything changed. Business mattered less, and the concept of a normal life started to appeal to him more... though normalcy would forever be out of reach. Enzo took his time pulling his shirt on and buttoning it. He sighed. To hell with it.

"I'm a man who loves a woman I cannot have. I want a better life for her—a life that I cannot provide. Fortunately for her, she has a good man who can give her what she deserves. That man is not me."

"I'm so sorry," Natasha said. "I ended up here because I loved a man who wanted someone else, and I wanted to run away from the life that led me to him."

“You never told me about that.” Enzo fidgeted with his cufflinks. “Want me to take out a contract on him?”

“A contract?”

“A hit.”

“Oh! Would you?” Natasha laughed.

He paused. He would. If that’s what she wanted. But she didn’t need to know that. “He lost everything when he walked away from you. That’s punishment enough.”

“I wish he’d have walked away. I kicked him out. He was fooling around on me. The woman who has your heart is lucky, and I hope the man she’s got is worth it. She’s passing up on a really good man.”

Enzo shook his head. He hoped for Miss Colby’s sake that Mr. Donovan would be there for her when she got back. Enzo could always tell when a man was loyal, and Mr. Donovan seemed to fit the bill. Enzo knew she didn’t love Golden Boy in that way—he could see it in her eyes where her heart truly lay, but Enzo couldn’t give her what she needed.

“Thank you, Natasha, but the other man is better suited for her. He can give her a normal life away from all *this*,” he replied, gesturing to their surroundings.

Natasha picked at her thumb nail. “Wow. You really must love her if you can say that. You won’t fight for her?”

He peered into her gray-green eyes. “No. She’s not like me. She has an innocent soul. But I’ll fight for her to be happy, especially without me.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“No, it’s just reality,” he replied, shoving a leg into his trousers. “If you decide one day you want out of this life, I’ll help you. And maybe,” he smiled weakly, “maybe I will put a contract out on that philandering ex-boyfriend of yours.”

Grace shivered in her bed, fighting to make sense of the last twenty-four hours and unsure of how to feel. The dancing had been so much fun, but her time with Mr. Giordano made her sick. A bath in pure lye wouldn't be enough to remove the contaminant that he was from her body. She had nothing else to compare it to, but if Mr. Giordano was considered to be "small" in the pants, she hoped the soreness and the small bit of blood in her panties was the result of him being so rough with her. All the delicate places between her thighs throbbed as if she'd slid naked down carpeted steps. Is it supposed to feel like this every time?

A sliver of light brightened the room ever so slightly. Natasha closed the door behind her, and swore under her breath when she knocked into the coat rack.

"I'll get the light, Tash." Grace sat up and waved her hand in the air above her until she found the pull-cord.

"I thought you'd be asleep already," Natasha whispered.

"Mr. Giordano took me to his place tonight..."

Natasha hurriedly threw on her robe and rushed over to Grace's bed. "Anna, honey, are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?"

"I do. Thank you." Grace recounted her night's events. When she finished, she found some comfort in Natasha's unsurprised expression and the tight hug she gave to console her.

Natasha brushed a flattened curl from Grace's cheek.

"Darling, That's called a below-job. I started out here with Mr. Giordano too. I worried so much that it would always be like that. But really, it's not so bad with attractive men, especially the nice ones, and it can be fun making them lose control of themselves. At least below-jobs don't get you up the pole."

"Lose control?"

“Oh, Anna, you innocent thing, why are you here? We need to talk about a few things.”

Natasha sat with Grace until the sun began to rise outside of their windowless room. Hours worth of the comprehensive sex-talk made Grace’s head spin. There were so many things she hadn’t known about that both horrified and intrigued her. So many positions, so many things a woman could do to a man—so many things that he could do to her...she had no idea there was so much to learn.

Mr. Giordano had taken her back to his home again on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. Each night spent with him was used as practice for whatever man she found someday who’d be willing to lower himself enough to love the discarded whore from the Starling Room.

The following Saturday morning, Madame Molly pulled Grace aside at breakfast and handed her an envelope.

“Mr. Giordano wishes for you to accompany him as his personal guest tonight. You will not be going onstage. A driver will take you to Bloomingdales after breakfast. Ask for Madame Ashbury and give her this letter. She will help you select an ensemble.”

“Bloomingdale’s? But how will I pay?”

“That’s none of your concern. Just give her that letter.”

A luxury shopping trip should have excited her, but given the circumstances, it felt more like being shackled. This was more than simply claiming the first stake on a new dancer. According to Natasha, Mr. Giordano usually grew bored of new dancers relatively quickly, and she had never seen him do more than take women home for a couple hours at a time. He was up to something, but Grace couldn’t imagine what that could be. She sighed. Luca was supposed to pick her up that morning, but Madame Molly walked off before Grace could say anything about it.

Grace hurried to dress and meet the driver who would take her shopping. When she arrived at the classy department store

to ask for Madame Ashbury, her voice grew weak. The classy woman read the letter from Madame Molly before calling on a couple of shop girls to fetch three silk gowns and shoes to match.

Madame Ashbury took Grace to a private room and made her strip until she stood almost fully naked. The woman refused to acknowledge her, treating Grace as if she were nothing more than a display mannequin. The shop girls dressed Grace in several gowns for their matron to consider, and without asking for Grace's opinion, the Madame held up two fingers to one of the girls and selected a pair of silk heels encrusted with little gemstones on the buckle. After an hour of being decorated like a boudoir doll, Madame Ashbury ordered the girls to box up some accessories and allowed Grace to change back into her own clothes. Once dressed, Grace sauntered back to the car where her flashy new attire had already been stowed away in the trunk, and she left without a goodbye from the Bloomingdale's staff.

When she returned to the Starling Room, Madame Molly ordered Grace to move her belongings into a nicer room with an actual window, large mirrors, and a more desirable bed. The new room was more befitting for a woman of Madame Molly's status. Grace didn't understand the reason for the change in living quarters, and being forced to leave Natasha made her feel terrible. Her only solace came from the plush mattress that cradled her aching bones, and for the first time in weeks, sleep came easy.

As instructed, Natasha came to wake Grace at seven in the evening to help her get ready to accompany Mr. Giordano that night. Upon her friend's arrival, Grace began to panic.

"I don't want to go, Tash. Why does he want to do this?"

"I don't know, sweetie. But hey, it's a new adventure, right?" Natasha rubbed Grace's shoulder with reassurance.

"No." Grace trembled. "I'd rather be dancing."

Natasha opened the boxes of accessories and gawked at the glittering fractals of light peeking out through openings in the pink tissue paper.

“Good heavens! I sure hope your boyfriend comes back tonight to see you in all *this!*”

Grace pulled a stocking onto one of her legs, appearing nonchalant as she scrambled to remember Luca’s fake name.

“T-Tony? He was here?”

“Mhm. He stopped by looking for you, but you had already left.”

Fully adorned in sapphire diamond shackles disguised as jewelry, Natasha turned Grace toward the mirror to see herself. She bit her bottom lip to hold back a tear of sorrow. The ivory silk material skimmed her body the way a wedding gown might, though the high slit would never do for such an event. The low cowl-neck called attention to the dainty diamond filigree necklace resting delicately atop her collarbone. Natasha pinned the matching broach onto the belt hugging Grace’s waist and dabbed a few spicy vanilla drops of Jean Patou’s Divine Folie onto her wrists and a touch behind her ear. Her iron-red lipstick and piercing blue eyes offered the only pops of color in her ensemble aside from the sapphire bits in her jewelry. Grace studied herself in the mirror and thought her gown to be the most elegant straight-jacket she’d ever laid eyes upon.

The door burst open as Natasha pinned away a loosened curl, and Madame Molly nodded in approval.

“Natasha, you’re excused. Anna, Mr. Giordano is waiting in the parlor.”

Grace’s heart raced faster with each step she took toward the parlor—the place where the more *distinguished* guests

gathered before the night's usual festivities. When the concierge opened the parlor door for her, the room's two-dozen men turned to admire their female guest of honor. Despite the slew of faces, her eyes landed upon Mr. Parisi's darkened gaze. Her face burned, and she only hoped the floor could open up and swallow her whole where she stood.

Grace exhaled slowly and walked into the room, forcing a brave face as the chattering men paused their conversations to eye-fuck her. Never in her life had she quieted a room before, and she didn't enjoy it one bit. When the man began to mumble lewd comments to one another, she hated even more how much she yearned to run into Mr. Parisi's arms for safety and cover.

To these men, she was only merchandise—a product to fulfill their own desires. Grace knew for certain that this was how Mr. Giordano saw her...but after last weekend, maybe Mr. Parisi did too. The thought of it made her heart clench. If he, too, regarded her as such...well, at least he shared her goals of ending child trafficking. That kind of rationale was the only thing keeping her afloat in his presence, now.

“Ah, boys! This is my girl, Anna. Come here, sweet cheeks!” Mr. Giordano beamed at her with an odd mix of victory and pride. He swooped a couple glasses of red wine off a server's tray and handed one to her, but immediately resumed conversation with his followers.

Unsure what to do, Grace leaned against the chair that seated Mr. Giordano and watched their poker game unfold as she polished off two glasses of wine.

“My, it's been so long since I've played cards,” she chimed in louder than she meant to.

“You know how to play poker, sweet cheeks?” Mr. Giordano patted her bottom.

She leaned forward and took his glass of wine to finish off herself. The alcohol warmed her belly and began to lower her inhibitions. Feeling emboldened by several glasses of liquid

courage, Grace felt her stress melt away and she decided to play along.

“A little.” Grace winked.

Mr. Giordano chuckled. “Well, then...do you want to play a hand?”

She grinned and spun around throwing caution to the wind. “I want to play three rounds. You cover my losses, and I keep my winnings.”

Several men snickered, clearly entertained by her audacity.

Luckily for Grace, her audacity seemed to amuse Mr. Giordano. He raised an eyebrow and nodded.

“All right. Who do you want to play?”

“You,” she cooed, “and him,” she pointed to Gino Rizzio, who she hadn’t realized was in the room until then. “This man,” she gestured to someone she didn’t know. “And...”

Grace had known who her last opponent would be from the start.

“Dear, what did you say that man’s name was?” She pointed, “Mr. Par...Parisi? Yes, him.”

“You heard the girl, get up!” Mr. Giordano waved off the men still at his table. “Buy-in of a grand?”

One thousand. The number stabbed at Grace’s heart. That was the amount that had been left in Mr. Parisi’s coat pocket.

“*Two grand,*” she insisted firmly, not wanting to deal with that sentimental figure.

Grace took a seat between Mr. Giordano and Mr. Rizzio. The unknown fellow sat to Mr. Giordano’s other side, putting Mr. Parisi almost directly across from her. The dealer shuffled the cards and dealt five to each player. Grace peeked at her cards. As her luck had it, she received a full house, but it wasn’t what she wanted. She plucked out three of her cards to slide to the dealer when her turn came, leaving her with two useless cards of different numbers and suits. Satisfied with her

now-meaningless hand, she smiled as if she'd had a good hand and let Mr. Giordano start the betting. She met each raise, raising once herself.

Mr. Parisi and the nameless man folded, leaving her with two opponents. Mr. Giordano laid out two pairs, and Mr. Rizzio flashed a three-of-a-kind. Grace sighed and laid down her worthless hand.

Mr. Giordano raised an eyebrow at her and Grace shrugged innocently.

Grace let the second hand go almost the same way, though pouting over her single pair of threes.

“Miss Anna...you sure you want to go for a third hand?” Mr. Rizzio joked as he tapped the ashes from his cigarette.

“I do.” She raised her chin. “Because you're about to lose. Might want to keep your bets low...unless you want to buy me a house.” Grace winked.

Mr. Parisi snorted back a laugh.

“You think I'm funny? You should watch your chips, sir.” Grace spat.

Despite the attitude, she kept her cool as she allowed herself to be the night's laughing stock. She'd show them she wasn't just some dumb blonde. *Bastards*.

The dealer dealt out the final hand. She peeked at her cards and considered her options. If she tossed back two cards, she had the potential for a full house, or two pairs, or a three-of-a-kind. She waited until her turn, and slid three cards back instead of two, and hoped her risk would pay off. When the dealer tossed a few new cards her way, she moved slowly to hide her nerves, but when she got the cards she'd hoped for, she bit her lip to feign nervousness.

As the betting began, she took her time to meet each raise until she felt the perfect time had come. Her opponents had stayed in, fully expecting that she'd turn up last once again.

“Gentleman, I say we end this. I'm all in.” She pouted.

“Lady’s first,” Mr. Parisi remarked, seemingly wanting to put her out of her misery.

“Nope, lady’s *choice* and I’ll go last,” she countered, keeping her eyes down.

Mr. Rizzio laid down his hand of clubs, a flush. Mr. Giordano folded. The man on his other side folded.

Mr. Parisi glared at Mr. Giordano with an amused smirk and laid out a full house.

Grace giggled and played the part of an embarrassed loser.

“Well...” She tossed down three aces and glanced back at Mr. Giordano who had closed his eyes in anticipation of her losing so much of his money to his enemy.

Mr. Parisi reached forward to sweep the chips to himself. “My apologies, Miss Anna. This doesn’t please me any more than it pains Giordano.”

Grace jumped up and grabbed his hand to stop him. The warmth of his skin had awoken the sleeping butterflies in her belly.

“Wait, sir! You didn’t win!”

He stared into her eyes impassively. “I beg your pardon, Miss Anna, but a full house beats a three-of-a-kind.”

“I know!” She held up one of her two remaining cards. “But my fourth ace knocks your house down.” She tossed her last card down and collected all the chips for herself, holding firm onto his astonished gaze until the thrill of the victory made her burst into a fit of giggles.

“What was that, Anna?” Mr. Giordano couldn’t hide his shock. “Did you plan that?”

“I haven’t played in a while, but I didn’t forget. There wasn’t much for entertainment in the farm country. Partaking in animal husbandry is quite the bore after a while.” She leaned back and moaned into a stretch, allowing time for her reference to sex sink for the men at the table. Grace ignored

their praises on her win. The guilt for tricking Mr. Parisi out of his money had all but punctured holes into her sails.

The time had come to head into the lounge for more socializing and to watch the girls' performances. Despite wishing more than anything that she was on stage with them, Grace was excited to see how the new dances they'd just learned would look from the audience's perspective. Unlike her first viewing of a show, this time, she would watch on with a more critical eye to get an idea about what moves she could possibly improve upon.

Seemingly satisfied that his ownership over her had been firmly established that evening, Mr. Giordano asked that she saunter about to make the other men jealous of what they couldn't have, *especially* Mr. Parisi.

"Hey, sweet cheeks? Make sure you stop by Parisi. I want to rub his losses into that face of his. Go make him hate me even more for having you." Mr. Giordano smacked her bottom.

"Yes, dear." Her chest tightened with shame. At least it would give her the chance to apologize, and that was enough of a reason to go. Still slightly tipsy, Grace found him standing at the bar and touched his sleeve.

"Dance with me?" she whispered, flicking her eyes up to meet his.

"Will he allow you to do that?" Mr. Parisi looked over her shoulder in confusion.

"Yes. He sent me here. He wants me to make you jealous. So...will you?"

"Of course." The corner of his mouth twitched into a subtle smile.

Grace led him to the farthest corner away from Mr. Giordano's table and turned toward him. Mr. Parisi placed a firm hand on the small of her back urging her closer, and her palm came to rest in the warmth of his. She fixed her gaze

onto his blood-red tie to avoid the disapproval she expected to find in his eyes.

“I’m terribly sorry for what I did back there,” she whispered, “I was just so hurt by you last week, and I—”

Mr. Parisi quickly spun her around so that his back was facing the crowd and only she could see his face.

“Hurt? What did I do?” His brows furrowed with concern.

“The way you looked at me with such disdain...like you hated me.”

“I have to keep up a façade when I’m here. Remember this: I don’t hate you, Miss Colby. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

She peered up at him as he pulled her in the slightest bit closer. There was such tenderness in his eyes that she almost believed for a moment that he held a torch for her too, though she was terrified of entertaining the idea in fear that she might be wrong.

“What...what do you mean?”

“I mean that—”

“Well, well, Parisi,” Mr. Giordano’s voice boomed, “I see you’re quite taken with my girl. That’s too bad. You see, I already deflowered this little one. She’s mine.” He pulled at Grace’s waist and yanked her hard enough that she fell against him. “Do you understand me? *Mine.*”

CHAPTER 16

Sunday, October 22, 1933 to

Sunday, December 17, 1933

It was the first night he kept her until morning. By the time the sun rose, every part of her body ached. Grace had grown bored of him long before Mr. Giordano had decided he was finished last night, but she dutifully exerted herself for over an hour, anyway. At least she didn't have to taste his mess. All the alcohol he consumed at the Starling Room made his climax an impossible feat.

She awoke to a knock at the door and his hot breath on the back of her neck. Grace shuddered. *Please, God, not again. Not this morning*, she silently pleaded.

“Wake up, Anna. Time for breakfast,” he taunted.

She took a deep breath and massaged her aching jaw. When she rolled over, he got out of bed and grabbed a couple of robes. She cocked her head in confusion.

“The cook made biscottate. Have you had that before?”

“No. What is it?”

“A type of bread.” He shrugged, offering no further explanation. Mr. Giordano tugged the sheet away from her to expose her naked frame and wagged a disapproving finger at her when she tried to grab a blanket for cover.

“No, no, sweet cheeks. I want to see you. Your body is mine to admire.”

Grace flushed and folded her arms in a weak attempt to cover her breasts, cursing under her breath for the rumbling in

her belly. He picked up a tray and set it on the bed next to her, the sweet scent wafting under her nose exacerbated the hunger she felt. She glanced at the tray unsure if she had permission to dig in. Much to her dismay, Mr. Giordano climbed back onto the bed, crossed his legs, and pulled her onto his lap to straddle him.

“Hungry, baby?” He took a biscottate and held it to her mouth.

Grace knew better than to antagonize him when he was in a good mood and treating her like a small child. She took a small bite and immediately went back for another. The buttery sweetness was divine.

“It’s delicious, dear, but I can feed myself.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Not this time. If you’re hungry, you’ll eat what I give you.” He bucked his hips beneath her.

She ignored his innuendo and rolled her eyes in defiance.

“I could probably eat everything on that tray myself.” She’d grown so accustomed to the constant state of near-starvation that she had become numb to the hunger pangs. That was, until the opportunity of a full belly presented itself.

When he grabbed at her visible rib cage, his mouth tightened in a flat line. “Are you getting enough to eat?”

“We get enough to make it from day to day. But Madame Molly says that men pay to see us wiggle our breasts, not our fat bellies.” Grace leaned in to take another large bite and nearly chomped on his finger.

“You’re not the other girls, Anna. You’re my girl. I’ll make sure you get enough.”

“I couldn’t, sir. It wouldn’t be right to get more when the others are still hungry.”

He glared hard at her with irritation. Grace froze mid-chew and shrank under his withering gaze.

“You will get more because *I say* you’ll get more. My girl needs her energy to be at my beck and call.”

Grace swallowed and nodded, making a mental note to never deny him for fear of what he’d do if she angered him. After all, he couldn’t be there to make her eat it. She could always share the extras.

“Yes, sir. But could you possibly make sure the others get more to eat too? Please? I promise you, no one will get fat, but we will have more energy after shows, and more energy means more satisfied patrons, right?”

“Do you know what I like about you?” He bit off a chunk of bread and held up the rest for her. “You’re smart. What you did last night knocked the socks off everyone, and you humiliated Parisi. Tell you what—I’ll have a talk with Madame Molly about the food issue.”

“Oh, thank you, sir.” Her smile was genuine. “May I ask something without you getting mad?”

“I’ll only know if I’ll get mad when you ask. So, ask.”

The tone of his response was so jovial and almost teasing that she decided it was safe enough to continue.

“Why is there such animosity between you and Mr. Parisi? It’s so much worse than with anyone else.”

His nostrils flared and his jaw twitched. Sensing a line crossed, Grace backed down and dropped her gaze to her naked lap. “I’m sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have as—”

“His father owed me money.” He spit with indignation.

She looked at him, stunned.

“Money? Why?”

“To bring his wife and older kid here from Italy. Parisi’s bastard father was one of my men.”

His father worked for Mr. Giordano? If his father owed allegiance to the Giordano family, how did Mr. Parisi become the leader of another?

“That’s...” Her voice trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“That’s why I had them killed. Parisi escaped, but at the time, he wasn’t worth going after. That was my mistake. I ordered a hit on him when he was one of Constanza’s associates after he killed one of my right-hand men. The old man’s blood repaid me, and then his brood betrayed me.”

“Brood...you mean Vincenzo Parisi betrayed you?” The conversation had ventured into dangerous territory. She had to be careful not to reveal her past. He couldn’t know that she’d been there when Vincenzo Parisi’s parents had been killed.

“I’m sorry for asking, I’m just trying to understand you better is all.”

Mr. Giordano held another piece of bread to her mouth and waited for her to take another bite before continuing.

“He worked with one of my rivals. Constanza mentored him and left the family to Parisi when he died. Parisi wouldn’t be in this country without me, that ungrateful son-of-a-bitch. I had to work my way up the ladder from the streets. That wop had it handed to him.”

“Does he know about this? His father’s debt, I mean?”

Mr. Giordano shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, sweet cheeks. His father’s debt would have been settled if Parisi hadn’t run to another family and married my father’s bastard child—my whoring half-sister. I got my revenge for that when I whacked her and his kid. Vincenzo Parisi’s boy paid for the sins of his father.”

Grace desperately fought the urge to vomit. “He had a wife and child? And...and she was your sister?” In an attempt to conceal the horror and disgust she felt, she took another obedient bite of bread.

“Mm-hm. Now we’re even. It’s a shame that such a sweet little boy had to die. He was my nephew, after all. Parisi has no one to blame but himself.” He took another bite and chuckled at himself as if recalling a funny joke. “You know, his wife Cathalina was just collateral.”

His remorseless, cavalier attitude about the killing of a child made her positively sick.

“But, sir...children...babies...they’re all so innocent. They should be protected, not hurt.”

“Age is just a number.”

Her eyes watered. “Why are you telling me this?”

Without any warning, Mr. Giordano pinned her onto her back and planted a hand firmly around her neck. “I know you won’t say a word,” he growled. “You’re too smart for that. You know what would happen. You think he’s an honorable, trustworthy man? I’ve got news for you, sweet cheeks. Parisi’s no better than me.”

She shook her head as tears rolled down her face. “I wouldn’t say anything to anyone, or to him. He’s not my friend. The way he looked at me the first night I met him at the club—it was like I was nothing.” When he loosened his grasp on her arms, she pulled a hand free and wiped the streams of tears from her temples. “I was just a stupid nothing. To anyone, really.”

Mr. Giordano let go of her and nonchalantly walked toward his wardrobe to get dressed. “That’s because you are nothing to him, or anyone else. No one means anything to him. He learned what happens when you give a damn about a woman. It weakens you. Makes you vulnerable. Makes you *soft*. He won’t make that mistake again.”

His words cut like daggers. It couldn’t be true. She thought about what he said to her last night as they danced.

“Remember this: I don’t hate you, Miss Colby. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Her heart wanted so badly to believe that he cared, but her rational mind told her it all made sense if he didn’t. You can’t get hurt if you don’t let anyone into your heart.

“Sir? What about you?” She sniffled.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever care about people?” she asked softly.

Mr. Giordano sat down beside her and patted her foot like some kind of deranged fatherly figure looking to soothe a frightened child.

“Anna,” his tone was deadly serious, “no one would dare mess with me. I care about people in my own way, and I do have family that I care about. But they know—and you need to know—that I won’t hesitate to remove anyone who betrays me or stands in my way. They respect me and what I do for them. Just do what I tell you to do, and you won’t get hurt.”

His words hung in the air between them. A blatant threat of danger if she were ever to disobey him.

Grace wrapped her arms around herself for comfort until he finally gave her permission to get dressed. Before he sent her back, Mr. Giordano showed her to a smaller bedroom adjacent to his own that had its own little bathroom. The only way in or out of the spare bedroom was through a door inside of his room, which meant Mr. Giordano had total control over who entered...and who could exit. Her cages were getting progressively smaller and more suffocating by the day. From a free-flying bird...to the Devil’s little pet.

“This will be yours whenever you’re here,” he beamed. “Tonight, I’d like you to pack a few things you think you’d need here. Change of clothing. Vanishing cream...rouge. I don’t know. Whatever the hell it is you ladies use these days. I’ll send someone to pick them up tomorrow.”

His level of commitment made her skin crawl. But this was the direction she needed it to go. It was one step closer to finding his safe.

“When would I be staying here?”

“Whenever I tell you.” He put an arm around her hip and pulled her to his side. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call me ‘Cesare.’”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, I meant yes, Cesare.”

The weeks dragged on with the same little monotonous routine: Staying with Cesare on random nights, dancing most evenings, and never having time on the weekends anymore to see Luca and Mr. Parisi. That was, until she found out that Cesare had some business out of town and he'd be leaving a week before Christmas. He granted her permission to visit with “Tony” as long as she promised they remained chaste. After all, she was still under contract payable to her “boyfriend” for a little while longer, and the one thing Cesare respected was contracts. And money. It was all the same to him.

On a cold, rainy morning, Grace took some change and went out to the nearest payphone to make a call, but this time, she didn't ask for Mr. Parisi's residence.

“Gotham Post, Nathaniel Donovan speaking.”

It had been over two months since she'd heard the sound of his voice, though it felt like a lifetime ago. Her heart leapt into her throat and she couldn't breathe.

“Hello? Is anyone there? Hello?” Nathaniel called out on the other end of the line.

She cupped a hand over her mouth and almost hung up the receiver.

“Is that you, Grace? Please say something if you're there to let me know you're okay.”

She squeezed her eyes tightly and screamed internally. Her sanity was beginning to fracture at the seams.

“Gracie, listen—wherever you are, Josephine and I are still here. We miss you terribly, and we love you. We'll be here

waiting when you come home. Please come home to us soon...okay?"

It was too much. She hung up.

"Okay," she whispered to herself. Grace leaned her head against the telephone and sobbed her heart out. It was as if there was no hope of ever being happy again. She missed them. She missed the comfort and trust she shared with Nathaniel, and the joy and laughter she shared with Josephine. She missed her work, her shabby apartment, and the freedom to come and go as she pleased. She missed just being Grace instead of Anna, though the lines between the two were beginning to blur. Her sense of self was fading into obscurity, and she missed the version of herself she no longer recognized...the person she could never return to being. Whoever she was now, she was drowning.

Grace leaned back against the cool glass window pane inside the telephone booth. She was grateful for the absence of people on the street. No one was waiting on her to collect herself and get out of the way. She allowed herself a few more minutes of grieving before wiping her cheeks and making her next call.

She dropped a nickel into the machine.

"Murray Hill five-nine-nine, seven-five, please."

"Hello?" The warmth in his voice grounded her.

"Mr. Parisi," she murmured. "Hi."

"Miss Colby. How are you?"

She forced a laugh. "I'm getting by. Cesare's gone this week—"

"You call him 'Cesare' now?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes. I have a room at his house now, too, but he'll be gone until after Christmas."

"After Christmas," he repeated. "If you're all right with it, I'll send Luca to come get you tomorrow. I would like to speak

with you privately.”

“Yes, that would be good. What time?”

“Does ten sound all right?” He asked softly.

“Mhm. I’ll see you then. Goodbye Mr. Parisi.” Grace hung up the receiver.

The following morning, Grace sat at the breakfast table with Natasha, Eva, and a surprisingly-resilient Samantha. Grace turned down any food, giving her rations instead to the others. If Cesare had spoken to Madame Molly, nothing ever came of it, but she knew Mr. Parisi would have something to eat, and she wanted her friends to have a bit more for once. As expected, the breakfast table conversation quickly moved onto the subject of men.

“With how technical Mr. Morello is, you’d have thought my body was some kind of motor engine he was intent on fixing!” Samantha giggled. “I miss when Mr. Rizzio was coming in. That man’s a beast in bed.”

Grace’s ears perked up. “Gino Rizzio? He seems so quiet and shy around women. I wouldn’t have thought he’d ever touched one.”

Eva dropped her face to her hands and her shoulders heaved with laughter.

“Oh god, Anna! He’s *anything* but shy. He’ll have me and Sammi together and wear us both down! Some of the things he likes...” She fanned herself. “Whew!”

“Don’t just leave me hanging now! Do tell!” Eva’s allegations had Grace tickled pink! Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that Mr. Rizzo was some sort of wild stallion. She had to know more.

“How long has it been since he’s come here? I thought I saw him last week.”

“He watches the shows, but lately he’s been leaving immediately after them,” Eva replied. “He hasn’t stayed in... what? About two months?”

“That’s about the time when Mr. Parisi stopped sticking around, as well,” Natasha chimed. “The last time I saw him, he told me he’d fallen in love with someone, and I’m...well, I’m as happy as I can be for him. Though he seemed pretty miserable if I’m being honest.”

“He’s fallen in love?” The blood drained from Grace’s face.

“Are you okay?” Natasha patted her back with concern. “Anna?”

“I’m all right,” she cleared her throat. “That just explains why he hasn’t been here. Mr. Giordano has wanted me to make Mr. Parisi jealous, but he keeps leaving before the shows are over. What kind of lover is he, Tash?”

Grace choked back the hurt as Natasha described a kind man who took great care to ensure she was getting her own pleasure out of the experience—a gentleman who was the absolute antithesis to Mr. Giordano. Mr. *Fucking* Giordano, the man who ruthlessly penetrated her with rough fingers and a flimsy erection and expected her to please him unconditionally by any means necessary. Jealousy turned into anger. Grace squeezed her hands into fists under the table, digging her nails painfully into the flesh of her palms. She wanted to scream.

“Anna!” Madame Molly called out from the doorway, snapping Grace from her bubbling rage. “Mr. Lanza is here for you.”

Grace exhaled to calm herself and waved her friends goodbye. Madame Molly grabbed her by the arm and led her into the hallway.

“Mr. Giordano wanted me to remind you that you are to be chaste. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She bit her lip to hold back a condescending laugh. “Tony and I have never even slept together. Don’t worry, that’s not about to change now.”

“Keep it that way,” Madame Molly hissed.

“Yes, ma’am.” Grace saluted and trotted away.

When Grace got to the foyer, her face lit up with glee. “Tony! Hi!”

She ran into his arms and melted in his familiar embrace.

“Woah,” Luca chuckled, “I missed you too, Anna.”

“You’ve no idea how happy I am to see you.” Her smile quivered, threatened by tears. “Come on. Let’s go.”

It had been far too long since she’d been anywhere other than the Starling Room or Mr. Giordano’s home. Luca made a slow drive of it, letting her enjoy all the Christmas decorations, boughs of evergreens, and the glowing lights. If only it had been nighttime. The city would have looked magical! Mr. Giordano’s driver always drove much too fast for her to admire all the holiday cheer. Luca took a small detour to show her some of the larger Christmas displays and Santa Claus visiting with a line of children in one of the city parks.

Once they reached Mr. Parisi’s house, her stomach twisted with nerves. It had been so long since she’d seen him. The last time they spoke, Giordano revealed to Mr. Parisi that she was a virgin...and that he’d been the one to take it away. Grace had never been more humiliated—and to top it all off, she’d just learned less than two hours ago that he’d fallen in love with someone else. Thank goodness she chose not to eat this morning, or else she might’ve thrown up her breakfast all over his doorstep.

“It’s all right, Grace.” Luca reassured her. “He wants to see you. Come. Let’s go inside.”

She clenched his arm and nodded. His words failed to ease her discomfort.

The decorations inside his home did bring a smile to her face, however. The warmth and holly soothed her aching heart. The decorative crystal trinkets, the nativity scene atop the console table, the magnificent Christmas tree dripping with gold tinsel and ornaments—it was like something out of a dream! The sound of Christmas melodies called her attention to Mr. Parisi’s den.

She peeked inside and found a smaller tree as elegantly decorated as the other that was topped with a porcelain cherub. The glass ornaments glistened with the amber glow from a crackling fire. She left Luca’s side to take a few steps toward the open door. She caught a glimpse of Mr. Parisi lounging on one of the leather sofas inside. He sat motionless, staring blankly at the fireplace, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

“Ah, Miss Colby,” Mr. Rizzio set down his newspaper, “what a pleasure to see you again.”

She waved shyly. “Hello, Mr. Rizzio. Some of the girls told me that they really miss you.”

She turned her attention toward Mr. Parisi, who quickly rose to greet her.

“Hello, Mr. Parisi. Natasha misses you, as well. She told me why you don’t visit her anymore. I’m happy for you,” her voice strained.

“She told you why I don’t visit anymore?” Mr. Parisi cocked an eyebrow and shot her a puzzled look.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“What did she tell you, Miss Colby?”

Sensing that she might have just revealed something that was supposed to be kept a secret, Grace looked down at her gloved hands and tried to think of a way to change the topic.

“Um...”

“Miss Colby, what did she say about me?” He grabbed her chin and gently pulled her face to look at him.

“She...she told me that you found love. I’m terribly happy for you, sir.” The lie nearly caught in her throat.

“Natasha shouldn’t have told you that.” He sighed.

A wave of guilt washed over her for spilling someone else’s secret. It was Mr. Parisi’s personal life after all, and she had no business involving herself in it. She backed up to the wall behind her and leaned against it wishing she could disappear. Grace knotted her fingers and refused to look at him.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Parisi. I shouldn’t have opened my mouth. I promise I won’t bring it up ever again.” She hadn’t noticed that Mr. Rizzio and Luca had left the room, leaving her alone with the man she realized now that she’d fallen hopelessly in love with.

Mr. Parisi approached her slowly and extended his hand out to her. “May I, Miss Colby?”

Grace shook her head in shame and pulled away.

“Please,” he asked softly. Unable to resist the calling of desire, she placed her hand in his. He gently slipped off her glove and pulled her fingers to his lips, placing soft kisses on her knuckles as he did so.

Her eyes fluttered in tandem with the butterflies filling her belly.

“I...I don’t want to stand in anyone’s way.”

“What do you mean? Please stop talking in riddles, Miss Colby. I don’t understand. Stand in the way of what?”

Her eyes fell to his hand that cradled hers. His fingers stroked the lines of her palm, sending jolts of electricity throughout her body. She trembled from the slurry of emotions and unwelcome desire pulling from within.

“Sir...I don’t want to get in the way of the woman who has your heart. I couldn’t.”

“Come.” Mr. Parisi guided her toward the gramophone and removed her other glove. He tucked both of them in one of his

pockets and reached for the player to set the needle on the record.

“Will you tell me about her? What’s she like?” She looked up at him shyly.

Grace took his hand and he pulled her in close, leading her slowly in dance to a yule-tide carol.

“Do you really want to know?” he teased.

“I do. I imagine she must be lovely.” Grace laid her ear onto his chest and listened to the rhythmic sounds of his heartbeat.

“Well, if you must know, she’s gentle and kind, intelligent—quick-witted and stubborn as a mule...a bit clumsy too. Yes, she’s lovely in every way,” he murmured, resting a cheek against the top of her head.

“She’s a very lucky woman to have you.” She squeezed her eyes to hold back tears.

“Mm. I disagree. She has someone in her life far better suited to give her the love she deserves.”

Grace couldn’t respond. She couldn’t let him hear the hurt in her voice. She just nestled against him as he rocked her to the slow pace of the music. As he hummed along to the song, she let the low vibrations in his chest comfort her. Time always seemed to stop when they were alone. However long he had been holding her, she needed every second of it. In the warm embrace of his sheltering arms, she’d never felt safer. With him, the world just disappeared. When the record came to an end, the sound of her sniffles could no longer be hidden.

“Grace,” he whispered.

“Hm?” She tipped her head back and looked deep into his eyes. Hearing him say her name for the first time made her heart skip.

He brushed a lock of golden strawberry hair from her cheek and reached around to cradle her neck. His dark lashes flickered as his eyes danced over her red lips.

She wanted the longing in his eyes to be for her. She yearned for him in ways she had never craved anything before. She wanted all of him, forever. He pulled her in closer and she pressed herself harder against him. The spicy scent of his skin, the heat of his body—it made her head spin. She was floating.

He leaned in closer and she could feel his breath tickling against her lips. When their eyes met again, she was certain he could see the raw desire and fear in her gaze. *Pull away!* her mind shouted at her, but her heart wouldn't listen.

And then he kissed her. Softly at first, but then their lips reunited with explosive passion... a kiss that demanded all that could be claimed from one another. It wasn't the small peck from her old farm town boyfriend, or the unskilled attempts of an old man who believed himself God. It was possessive... intoxicating.

His tongue dancing with hers. The taste of him... it consumed her with an insatiable desire. She clutched at his lapels and lifted herself onto her toes to greedily take all that he could give. When he trailed kisses down her jaw and nipped on her neck, her knees gave way under her. He tightened his arms around her to keep her from falling.

"Please..." she whimpered in desperation for more.

A soft moan escaped her lips before a loud pop from the fireplace brought her back to her senses. She pushed herself away and stared at him in horror over what she'd just done.

"I-I'm so sorry!" she gasped. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me."

He stepped toward her and stroked under her jaw, pressing his thumb to her lips to stop her apology.

"Shh. I stepped out of line, not you," he cooed, breathlessly.

She kissed his thumb and took his hand away to clasp it between her palms.

"I..." Grace could hardly breathe. "I know you have someone now, and I don't want to ruin that for you. I just..."

She tore away from him and walked to the fireplace. She wiped a tear from her cheek and took a deep breath.

“Mr. Parisi, I called you because I needed to tell you a few things, and I don’t know how much of it you’re aware of.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned on the arm of the sofa.

“What do you have?” He glanced up at her, nervously.

“Giordano, he...” Grace turned away. “He killed your family. He told me you betrayed him, so he killed your son as revenge, and your wife...she was just in the way.”

She walked up to him with tears in her eyes and took his hand.

“I am so, so sorry, sir.” Grace rubbed her thumb over his knuckles in hopes of providing him even a shred of comfort.

“I thought my wife and son were caught in a crossfire.” His throat strained. “But it was *him*...”

Mr. Parisi coolly rose from the couch and paced. Just then, His face contorted with rage.

“*Figlio di puttana!*” His voice boomed as he punched his fist through the solid wood paneling on the wall. Grace gasped, and he slugged his arm three more times, making three more gaping holes.

Terror coursed through her, but it wasn’t for herself. She knew he would never hurt her. He was hurting himself, and it broke her heart to see it. Grace raced over to him and yanked his hand away before he could make another hole. She pulled him back to the couch and stole the handkerchief from his breast pocket to press it against the gash on the back of his hand.

The commotion urged Mr. Rizzio and Luca into the room. Both men stopped short at the sight of Grace nursing Mr. Parisi’s wounds.

“*Enzo, quelle che è successo?*” Mr. Rizzio gestured for Luca to leave, and he nodded. “What happened?” he asked once more.

Grace answered for him. “He put his fist through a wall, that’s what happened.”

“Why?” Mr. Rizzio interrogated.

Mr. Parisi closed his eyes and shook his head, unable to utter the words. His trembling fingers tightened around Grace’s.

“His wife and son...” She glanced back at Mr. Parisi’s pained expression. “Giordano targeted them, Mr. Rizzio. It was revenge, not an accident.”

“Revenge?”

“Yes.” Her voice shook. “Because Cesare thinks that Mr. Parisi betrayed him by joining the Constanza family and killing one of his men.”

Mr. Parisi took another shot at the wall beside the couch with his other fist.

“No, no, no! No, darling. Please don’t do that.” She cupped his face in her hands. “Hey, look at me. It’s going be okay. We’re going to get him, I promise. It’s okay, it’s okay.” Grace pulled his head to her chest and hugged him tightly. When he finally pulled away, he tried to appear cold and impassive, but she could see the truth. His veneer was breaking.

She knelt down on the floor before him to examine both his hands as gently as she could and tied the handkerchief around one of them.

She turned to Mr. Rizzio with a request. “Will you make sure a doctor comes today to treat his injuries?”

“Miss Colby, I’m fine,” Mr. Parisi interjected.

“*Please,*” she pleaded, “do this for me?”

He regarded her for a moment, then nodded. “All right.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at him reassuringly. “Please excuse me. I...I need to go find Luca.”

Grace shuffled to her feet and hurried from the room, hoping to make it through the doors before losing her own composure.

“I swear to God...” she hissed under her breath, “Cesare’s a fucking dead man.”

Enzo couldn’t sleep. He didn’t want to be awake, but his mind wouldn’t let him rest. He sat in his pajamas on a chair near the fireplace, taking in the last of the heat from the smoldering embers. The faces of his wife and son stared back at him in the photograph he clutched in his battered hands. It was the only photo ever taken of the three of them together. His little boy...how well can you really know a baby? He recalled the way Cristofano liked his knees being tickled, and the way he held tightly onto his mama’s fingers when he toddled around on unsteady feet. He’d be six years old now. What kind of child would he have been? Timid, like his father had been when he was young? Outgoing and curious like his mother? Enzo would never have the pleasure of knowing the man he would’ve grown up to be.

Cathalina was tough, yet caring. Bold. Decisive. Willing and able to firmly knock him in his place if he ever stepped out of line. He liked to push. She liked to pull, and she rose to every challenge he presented her. Their love was fiery—a constant battle between two hard-headed individuals. Cathalina was impulsive, and he could be bossy. Despite their challenges, they made it work. She was everything he needed at the time.

He set the photograph in his lap and closed his eyes. But Miss Colby...Grace.... She couldn’t be more different than Cathalina. She was tender, yet strong when she needed to be.

Gentle, yet determined. She had her moments of being a little spitfire, too, but she was far more deliberate and thoughtful before making decisions—well, *usually*. He had a sneaking suspicion that she might have a latent temper that could appear under the right circumstances.

Grace wore her heart on her sleeve. She seemed to possess an innate ability to ease him gently into the right place, never by force. Unlike Cathalina, he found himself wanting to follow her path, rather than push her onto another. She brought out the innocent side of him that hadn't seen since he lost his parents. He needed her. He needed to kiss her again, to hold her, to feel her skin against his, to love her...

Enzo began to see his life as a comedy...a cruel, sick joke. The man who murdered his entire family—his mother and father, his wife and his son—that man had his murderous hands yet on another soul in which he cherished. It was as if the universe was laughing at him...dangling happiness before him, and snatching it away when he got within its reach.

Enzo couldn't shake the feeling that Giordano was looking to take more from Grace than they bargained for. Enzo had never seen him so taken with a woman. While this would aid in their mission to find his safe, it added a layer of risk that he hadn't anticipated. He realized now that he was in far more danger of losing her than he could've ever imagined.

CHAPTER 17

Sunday, December 24, 1933 and

Monday, December 25, 1933

Christmas Eve. What should have been a joyous day filled with love, family and laughter was nothing but a painful reminder of the life she'd given up. Grace struggled to keep focused on her mission as she slipped farther away from being Grace-Anne Colby, and fell deeper into the tumultuous life of Anna Matthews.

Nathaniel and Josephine began to feel like relics of a life that had never really happened—distant figures from a dream, perhaps. *Two months.* Two months was all the time she had with her new friends before she walked away from them. By now, she'd nearly been absent for three months. She'd now been gone longer than the brief duration of their friendship. How could they possibly still be there for her after all of this? Grace only had the pleasure of their company for such a short time, but her mission had no end in sight. Maybe it was better for everyone that they forget they ever knew her. She wouldn't be the same person upon her eventual return, anyway. Nothing could ever return to the way it was before. Nothing would ever be the same.

It had been nearly six months since she'd met Miss Louisa Carpenter. That woman and the mystery of her missing daughter was the catalyst that sparked this whole endeavor, but even the memory of Miss Carpenter's voice was beginning to fade. The name of the bastard who fired her for that article was no longer of any importance, and thus her mind erased it. Her old life was a photograph, fading to obscurity.

The Starling Room's 'Christmas Eve Spectacular' brought in far more men than she anticipated. *How shameful*, she thought. Didn't these men have families to spend time with? Children to tuck into bed with a goodnight story? Wives to love and appreciate? Was gawking at topless women and taking random girls to bed more important to them? She despised every patron in attendance that night with a living family who'd be waiting for him to come home this Holiday's eve.

At least Cesare wouldn't be there that night. Though she hadn't expected Mr. Parisi to be there either. Grace would understand the reason for his attendance, however, and she'd spare him of the same judgment she inflicted upon the others. Aside from his institutionalized sister, he had no other family. She suspected this time of year to be filled with nothing but heartache for him. She desperately wanted to run to him and bid him a happy Christmas, but after their last interaction, he hadn't tried to contact her.

Their shared kiss had left her feeling dreadfully ashamed. To have thrown herself at him the way she did—a man who was currently spoken for—and shattering the illusion about his wife and son's murders being an accident... If he never wanted to spend time with her again, she'd understand. Luca could pass along any messages she needed to deliver him.

The show passed in a monotonous blur. Afterwards, Grace stood off to the side of the lounge and watched as Natasha floated over to Mr. Parisi in an attempt to take him to bed. She would have to get used to the hurt of seeing him with someone else. When their mission against Cesare was over, she wouldn't see Mr. Parisi again, but Natasha would.

A hand brushed against her elbow. Grace looked up at Luca and exhaustedly threw her arms around his neck for a warm

hug. He was the only friend she had anymore who knew the truth about her identity. In a way, his friendship was the only thing keeping her grounded.

“I saw you watching him,” he whispered.

“I was not,” she pouted. Her attempt at seeming unbothered failed when her voice cracked.

“I know you were,” Luca chuckled. “It’s okay, kid. I’m glad he has someone who cares about him for *who* he is, not *what* he is.”

“What do you mean?” Her face heated.

Luca rubbed her arm and planted a firm kiss on her cheek. He quickly scanned their surroundings before walking her slowly towards the foyer. “Most broads,” he paused, “they think there’s a romance to this life. They’re always looking through rose-colored lenses. But it ain’t romantic, is it? It’s bloody, and there’s a lot of pain.”

“There’s nothing romantic about any of this.” Grace looked down at the floor.

“There isn’t. You know that, and I can see it in your eyes that you see *him*—not his power, or his money. Most of these women are allured by the glamor and riches the life of a Moll provides...and they always think they can domesticate him. Enzo and I—we go all the way back to the motherland, and I’ve seen him get hurt by a woman who thought she could save him.”

“Who?”

“Some school teacher. This was years before he married Cathalina. But you? You know you can’t change him. I don’t believe you’d want to, either.”

Grace shot a look back over her shoulder, but Mr. Parisi was nowhere to be found. “Of course not. I wouldn’t even try.”

“I know that you’re in love with him,” he whispered.

Hearing the truth spoken aloud made her knees grow weak. Was it really so obvious to everyone around her? Determined not to admit her true feelings, Grace shook her head and hastened her steps toward the foyer until Luca grabbed her arm.

“Love is a fool’s errand.” Grace turned to him.

“No, it’s not. You know he—”

“Is his hand healing all right?” she cut in, avoiding Luca’s gaze.

“He’s doing just fine.” He shot her an amused smirk. “He’ll be okay, and so will you.”

Grace pulled him in for another hug, desperately needing all the friendly comfort she could find.

“I’m scared,” she proclaimed in a hush. “I’m losing touch with who I was, and I’m so tired. I’m tired of being here, and I’m tired of having my emotions pulled in every direction from the moment I wake up.”

“I know, love. Come.” He gestured a hand toward the stairs leading up to the dancers’ rooms. “Go pack your things. I’ll talk to Madame Molly and get you some time off so you can just be Grace for a couple days.” He whispered cautiously.

“But tomorrow’s Christmas—don’t you have things to do?” Grace knotted her fingers, nervously.

“I do.” His eyes lit up in a smile “My plan is making sure you have as good a Christmas as possible.”

“But where will I go?”

“My place, Enzo’s, or Gino’s. You’re welcome to stay wherever you’re most comfortable.”

She nodded. “All right. If she’ll let me go, can I stay at yours? I don’t think Vincenzo likes me very much right now, and I don’t want to impose on his home. I feel so terrible for hurting him.”

“‘Vincenzo’?” Luca teased. “We’re on a first name basis now?”

Grace’s face flushed. “No,” she shook her head, “I’m sorry—slip of the tongue. I meant to say ‘Mr. Parisi.’ How foolish of me.”

The following morning, Grace woke up rested and relaxed in Luca’s large bed. For a moment, she felt like Sara Crewe from her favorite childhood novel *A Little Princess*, waking up in a warm and welcoming home after years of starvation and servitude. A thousand troublesome thoughts materialized like a tumor in her mind, but she simply couldn’t find it in herself to care about any of them just yet. Instead, she closed her eyes once more to relish in the solitude of her temporary escape.

When her eyelids fluttered open an hour later, she remembered that Luca had slept on the couch in his living room, and she felt a bit guilty for continually occupying his room late into the morning. Truthfully, she knew he didn’t mind. If she remembered correctly, he encouraged her last night to rest for as long as she needed.

She opened her suitcase and took her time getting ready and brushing her hair. Grace poured a little water from a pitcher into a small dish to dampen her cake of mascara and applied just a thin layer to her upper lashes. If she got emotional today, she didn’t want to make a gory mess of herself. She applied a touch of rouge and some lipstick before deciding she looked presentable enough to head downstairs in search of Luca. When she rounded the base of the stairs, she found him setting three department store boxes down onto his velvet sofa.

“Good morning, Grace,” he greeted in a chipper tone. “These were just delivered for you.”

“What? From whom?” She sat down next to the boxes and eyed them curiously. Luca placed the largest one in her lap,

and she untied the ribbon.

“Oh, my...” she gasped.

Luca lifted the elegant coat out of the wrapping to let her open the two remaining boxes containing a matching set of hat and gloves.

“Merino wool, sable trim...you never leave that place with anything very warm, and Enzo doesn't want you freezing to death. He wants to take care of you. Stand up, let's try it on.”

Grace rose to her feet and hesitantly turned around to let Luca place the coat on her. Her fingers stroked the silky white sable fur and admired the buttery soft powder blue merino. It was the finest thing she'd ever worn.

When Luca held out the matching hat, Grace shied away.

“No, Luca, this is too much!” She shimmied the coat off and placed it in his hands. “I-I didn't get him anything. I can't accept this. It wouldn't be right!”

“Grace. It's a gift, not a business transaction. You don't understand...” Luca glanced around as if the words he was searching for might be found hiding in his living room. “You mean an awful lot to him. He's been through hell since he lost his family. You are...somewhat of a light, guiding him through unforgiving seas, if you catch my drift.” Luca strained not to reveal too much.

Grace sat back down, feeling ever unsteady on her feet. “Did you know them? His family, I mean?”

He folded his arms and leaned up against the archway connecting the living room to the dining area.

“I did. Cathalina and I knew each other before either of us knew Enzo. I, uh...got her into a bit of a scrape back home when we were kids. The four of us—me, Cathalina, Enzo and Esme—we were inseparable for a while. When Lina and Cristofano died, a part of Enzo died along with them. He pushed everyone out. Me, Gino and Esme—we know him best. He cares deeply for the people he loves, but he doesn't

show it much anymore—except when it comes to you. You’ve rekindled the fire in his soul. A fire that none of us have seen in years.”

“Right,” Grace scoffed. “You’re absolutely mad! What could he possibly see in me? For God’s sake—all I am is just a plain little farm girl with a dead virtue. I’m a bastard’s whore now, Luca. Let’s not forget that!” Her eyes burned from the tears that threatened to flow.

“Grace, please don’t diminish yourself like that. Put that pretty new coat on and walk with me to the park. I’ll tell you what I think.” He held the hat and gloves out to her. “Please, come with me?”

She stared at him for a moment and decided to hell with it. Grace petulantly snatched the coat from his hands and perched the hat on her head. She eyed her reflection in one of the large mirrors in the hallway and frowned.

“I dare say...this ensemble is far too beautiful for the person wearing it.”

“I beg to differ. It’s beautiful because of the lovely woman wearing it.” Luca extended his arm to her. “You ready?”

Grace nodded and followed her faux-boyfriend out the door and gasped at the realization that his home was so near to Central Park. “Oh, my! You live this close to...”

“That’s what you asked last night,” Luca chuckled.

“I suppose I was pretty tired, huh?” she laughed dryly as they approached the entrance of the park.

“Now, are you going to tell me why a man who could have his pick of the city would give half a damn about me?”

Luca raised an eyebrow. “Language from you, Miss Colby?”

She lifted her nose, feigning haughtiness. “Damn right, Mr. Serra. You should have heard me with the goats back on the farm when Mama and Papa weren’t around. I practically cursed like a seasoned sailor,” she teased.

“That. That’s it right there,” he interrupted. “That’s one of the things he admires about you. You’re not exactly the ‘predictable’ kind. You’re an...enigma? I think that’s the word. A mystery. A riddle.”

She snorted. “I’m not an enigma, I’m just me.”

“Grace...” Luca sighed as he pulled a cigarette case from his pocket. “He never stopped blaming himself for what happened to his family. From that day forward, he’d considered himself the worst kind of failure for not protecting them. When the word got around that Giordano was going to take out a woman who was sticking her nose in muddy waters, and Enzo discovered that same woman was the ‘nurse’ who comforted his ailing sister, he got this sudden urge to protect that reporter from suffering the same fate as his family. It’s rare that women are ever targeted by a boss. Maybe Enzo thought he could redeem himself by saving you, maybe he thought he could use you to exact his revenge on Giordano. Whatever his reasons were at the start...”

Luca shook his head and pinched the space between his brows. “Look, it doesn’t matter—what I’m getting at is when he found out that Rossetti had you in the palm of his hands and he *still* let you go—completely defying Giordano’s order to kill...I think that was when he realized there was something special about you, and his intrigue only grew from there. You’re not exactly the damsel in distress we all had expected you to be.”

Falling snowflakes melted upon Grace’s burning cheeks.

“Yeah, well...I’m not exactly bulletproof, either. I’ve been nothing but an emotional wreck since the start, Luca. I’m not strong. Every day is a battle for whatever strength I can muster to push forward.”

“Right.” He patted her hand. “A lack of strength isn’t weakness, Grace. What you lack in strength, you make up for with courage and determination. You’ve chosen to walk a dangerous path for a cause greater than yourself—all at the expense of your own comfort and joy. The only men who can

claim that level of bravery are soldiers. You are a soldier, Grace—fighting with honor at the highest risk to yourself. To tie it all together, your heart is still bursting with kindness and love. This world is severely lacking in people like you, and the fact that you have to do any of this bullshit is proof of that.”

Grace’s face heated. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“Ah. Okay, since I don’t know anything, tell me how long you’ve been in love with him.”

“Ugh! You’re insufferable, do you know that?!” Grace yanked herself from his arm and stopped in her tracks to bury her face in her hands.

“Oh, God, Luca...fine. Fine! I admit it. Are you happy now?” Grace threw her hands up with indignation. “How did you know? Is it *that* obvious?”

“Well, first off, you didn’t deny it when I asked you last night.”

“Look, I just need to get to Cesare’s safe so we can finish this, and then I’ll be out of Mr. Parisi’s way. He has enough to deal with without worrying about my feelings for him. I know he’s already in love with someone else and I don’t want to interfere. Who is she, anyway?”

Luca kept his eyes straight and pursed his lips. “I’m not telling him your business, and I’m not telling you his. But let me just say, you both are being ridiculously stupid.”

“Well,” she huffed, “like I said, I’ll be out of the way soon enough.”

“God dammit, Grace. Knock it off.” Luca turned her down a wider path around a pond, revealing two white horses connected to a black and green stagecoach and led her toward it.

“Listen to me carefully: Give yourself the credit you deserve. You’re worthy of any man you desire. And please, stop thinking about this ‘other woman.’ Just be his friend, and let the chips fall where they may.”

She nodded, and Luca pulled the carriage door open.

Grace nearly fell backward upon seeing a surprised Mr. Parisi and Mr. Rizzio seated inside. Mr. Parisi collected himself and extended his palm down to her. Grace’s lungs deflated.

“Mer-m-merry Christmas, sir,” she stuttered.

“*Buon natale, belle ragazza.*”

When Luca nudged her with his elbow, she bit her lip and nervously accepted Mr. Parisi’s hand.

“Those are some beautiful stallions. They remind me of the first one that I trained. It bucked me off and dislocated my shoulder,” Grace offered, hoping the small-talk would conceal her nerves. Without thinking about it, she took the spare seat next to Mr. Parisi. Luca jumped in, taking the remaining seat across from her and closed the door. Mr. Rizzio whistled to the coachman who responded inaudibly before the horses began clapping away.

“I can’t imagine you training horses, Miss Colby,” Mr. Rizzio chuckled.

“Believe it or not, I was actually quite good at it. I’ve yet to meet a stallion I couldn’t tame, and...what? What’s so funny?” She glanced back and forth between Luca and Mr. Rizzio, both men holding back childish giggles. Just then, she realized the double-entendre and decided to play along.

“Yes, well, unfortunately for me, I only deal with geldings these days. I have no stallions willing to let me ride them.”

“What’s a gelding?” Luca snickered.

Grace leaned over and condescendingly patted his knee. “It’s a male horse that has been castrated, honey. Renders them impotent.” Both men seated across from her winced. She

laughed softly through her nose and leaned back in her seat with a heavy sigh.

“My apologies, gentleman. I don’t suppose we’re here to discuss horses, are we? No, I imagine we’re here to discuss the progress that Cesare’s little whore is making at infiltrating his life, correct?” As soon as the sour words escaped her lips, she wished she could take them back, but the resentment was beginning to spew uncontrollably.

“Please don’t talk about yourself like that,” Mr. Parisi murmured beside her.

“But I am, sir, and it doesn’t do us any good to deny the truth.” The corners of her eyes creased with stress. “So here’s the status report: I stay with him many nights during the week, and when he’s finished having his way with me, he locks me inside a small room that’s only accessible through his bedroom. It’s probably to keep me from snooping around, so I don’t know what to do yet, but don’t you boys worry. I’ll figure it out, soon enough.”

Mr. Parisi sighed heavily and shook his head. Silence filled the carriage for another block before Luca pulled a string that rang a bell outside the coach. When it came to a stop, Luca opened the door and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Remember what I said, Grace. You’ve got nothing at all to worry about.”

“Luca, wait—where are you...”

Mr. Rizzio followed Luca out and the door closed behind him. The carriage began to move once more.

“Where are they going?” Her voice filled with panic. The last time she’d been alone with Mr. Parisi in an enclosed space, she lost all self-control.

“I believe they’re going for a walk to give us some privacy.”

“Oh...o-okay.” Her hands trembled.

“Miss Colby, would you please tell me how you are doing? That’s all that matters to me right now.”

“Oh, I’m quite all right. Just tired.” She shrugged. “I like dancing though. It really is a lot of fun. Going on stage is terribly exciting.”

“I mean...” He shifted toward her and gently placed his hand above her heart. “How are you doing...in here?”

“Oh...” She drew in a long, shaky breath. “Well, it’s been hard. I’m defiled goods now. What kind of man is going to want me after this? Where will I go from here when all is said and done? There are some days where I forget who I am and what I’m doing this for.”

Her hands formed into tight fists and her knee bounced with anxiety. Grace stared out the window to shield him from the pain creeping its way on her face.

“Sometimes...sometimes I think I really am just Anna Matthews now, a worthless harlot in the eyes of a society that values chastity—a woman who beds an impotent man because that’s all I’m really good for. But you see, the problem with that logic is that Anna Matthews is Grace-Anne Colby, so even when Anna is gone, it’s Grace who bears the burden of her sins. Anna...Grace...no matter who I am, the shame is still mine. I will stop at nothing to get Cesare Giordano if it’s the last thing I do. I’ve already come this far. I’ve lost everything that made me worth anything, and it all happened well before I was ready. Fortunately, the worst has already been done. I’m ruined now. So, I’ve got nothing left to lose. I’ll see this through, even if it kills me.”

“Grace,” he breathed, taking her hand in his. “You could never be ruined in the eyes of a man who loves you.”

A man...loving her. *That’s rich*, she thought. She finally looked into his dark eyes and found that same sweet tenderness that deepened the hole in her heart.

“Mr. Parisi, you could have any woman you wanted and no one would hold it against you. Society just expects that a man

has needs. But what of the woman who takes care of those needs? Or even a woman who has sex before marriage. You can't understand, sir. To this world, the only thing I am now is a whore. I didn't really understand the gravity of such an implication until it was too late."

Mr. Parisi wiped a tear from her cheek and pulled her to his chest. His strong arms held her tightly. The sandalwood and tobacco scent of his body filled her lungs. In that moment, she felt so cared for...maybe even *loved*. She nuzzled her temple against the soft wool coat blanketing his solid chest.

"Thank you, sir," she said, "for this coat and everything else. It's all so beautiful, but I feel awful accepting it when I couldn't possibly do anything for you of this magnitude in return."

"All I ask is that you'll share a dance with me sometime." He rested a cheek atop her golden curls.

"Of course. It would be my pleasure." Grace snuggled in closer, drinking in the warmth and romanticism of being in a horse-drawn carriage on Christmas day, so close to a man as handsome and self-assured as Vincenzo Parisi. The steady sound of his heartbeat made her chest ache for all she could never have with him until a soft cry escaped from her throat.

Mr. Parisi's arms tightened around her and his fingers brushed strokes through her thick locks. His chest hummed as he crooned a song in Italian. Though she couldn't understand the words, the warm timbre of his voice soothed her.

"Where do you think I come from, Miss Colby?"

The unexpected question took her by surprise and she glanced up at him, noticing the way his gaze remained fixed out the window, as if lost in thought.

"Italy?" she replied, confused.

A corner of his mouth lifted into a weak grin. "I was a poor, hungry *ragazzo* running around the dirt streets of Cefalù. My *papà* led with an iron fist. He held a lot of pride for his obedient family, but not a lot of love. I knew the strap better

than I ever knew him. I came from nothing. I had nothing. I was nothing.”

Grace didn't know what to say. She couldn't picture him as anything but the elegant, strapping man she knew him to be.

“Grace,” he murmured, “all my life I've done things I'm not proud of—morally incomprehensible things that far surpass in severity *any* of your perceived ‘misdeeds.’” He glanced down at her.

“Do you think I deserve love?” he questioned.

“I believe everyone deserves to be loved, sir...”

“Yes. I know you worry that no man could ever fall in love with you for the choices you've had to make, but I fear that no man could ever deserve you for the reason you've made those choices,” Mr. Parisi murmured. “You're doing what you can to save innocent children. I couldn't even protect my own son.”

“I know you did the best you could to protect them, but Cesare's a monster. You know he would've found a way.”

“I know...evil always gets what it wants.” His brow furrowed. “My sister, Gaia, she told me my son was shot first. Cathalina just held him, screaming his name. She probably knew her fate by then. Gaia said Cathalina didn't even try to run. They found her lying dead on the ground, still clutching our son to her chest. For years, I've tried to put it all behind me. I thought I did...but...”

Grace could see the hurt in his eyes. A lifetime of heartache written in the lines on his face. If she could have taken his pain and made it her own, she would've.

“I'm so sorry, Vin...” She cleared her throat, “I'm so sorry, Mr. Parisi—”

“Please, call me by my name,” he whispered.

“Vincenzo,” she spoke shyly, “what brought it all back? The pain, I mean...”

He rested his forehead against hers and took a deep breath.

“Falling in love again.”

Stung again by jealousy, Grace sat up and placed a hand on his face. Looking sorrowfully into his eyes, she gave him one soft kiss of good-bye.

“Please, Vincenzo, just tell her you love her. Give yourself that much of a chance. Promise me you will?”

“Grace. She deserves so much more than what I can give her.” He placed a kiss on her knuckles. “Do you understand?”

“You have so much love to give, and that’s what matters most. I don’t know what any woman could possibly want that you couldn’t provide. I envy the woman who has you so stricken.” Just then, the stagecoach came to a stop.

Mr. Parisi peeked out the window and took Grace’s hand. “We’re back where we started. Would you come to my home this evening? Esme will be there. She’s looking forward to seeing you again.”

Grace frowned. “She’s a kind woman, and I can see how much she cares about you. Is she the one you love? She’s hauntingly beautiful.”

Mr. Parisi sighed and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Esme? No, no. She is like a sister to me. Nothing more. Will you join me this evening? I’m hoping we can have that dance.”

For the first time in God-knows-when, Grace hadn’t a care in the world. She laughed openly, and she felt truly at home. Tonight, she would exist as Grace without Anna, Anna without Cesare. No, tonight, she was a regular girl living a normal life, enjoying the gaiety of Christmas with good company all around.

Thanks to the wine and the barrage of embarrassing stories, her night was filled with unadulterated joy. Mrs. Greco regaled her with a slew of tales from their younger years, some of which went back as far as their toddler days in Sicily. For every cheeky story Esme recounted with a younger Mr. Parisi, Grace's jealousy melted away. The two of them may as well have been siblings, just as Enzo had explained.

"Esme, please, no. She doesn't need to hear that story." Red-faced from holding back his laughter, Mr. Parisi poured another glass of wine and made his way to the gramophone for a record swap.

"Oh, yes I do!" Grace melted at the sight of a smiling and carefree Mr. Parisi. "Don't listen to him. You've been teasing this one all night! I'm absolutely dying to hear it!" Grace couldn't contain her giggles as she sipped on her third glass of wine.

"Oh, please, Mrs. Greco, please?" Like a child begging for a cookie, Grace batted her long lashes and flashed a cheesy grin at the charming woman.

"Oh, all right! But only if you'll call me 'Esme.' I think you and I have more than established ourselves as friends," Esme winked. "Especially once I tell you about how Enzo and the mayor's daughter were caught in the confession booth at the Catholic chu—"

"No. It was the Protestant minister's daughter," he corrected, "though it was at the cathedral, yes." Enzo waved her off to continue.

Without missing a beat, Esme told the story of how a teenaged Enzo got caught with a girl in the middle of some light petting by the priest himself...and that priest later chased the two young lovers out of the church, both in varying degrees of undress. The room boomed with belly-aching laughter. Grace blotted her tears away through unrelenting giggles.

“Was that Annabelle Franzese? You never told me about this!” Luca draped an arm around Grace’s shoulders, eagerly awaiting an explanation.

“Oh, Luca,” Esme sipped the rest of her wine and set the glass down with a shimmy. “You never asked, darling.” She jumped to her feet and clumsily danced over to give Luca a peck on the cheek.

“Oh, dance with me, Esme!” Grace grabbed her wrist and both women trotted loosely to the music.

“There you go! You’ve got it, Esme. You too, Mr. Rizzio, come on, I’ve seen you dancing at the club!” Grace looked over at Mr. Parisi who was manning the gramophone and decided this wasn’t the kind of dance she wanted with him just yet. “Luca!” she grabbed both his arms. “Luca, get over here and dance with me!”

Grace’s head swirled with intoxication from copious amounts of wine. It felt delightful, really. She didn’t have a care in the world. All her troubles were gone. Mr. Parisi kept his distance, staying near the record player. She caught onto his wandering eye a few times and giggled.

Mr. Rizzio and Luca proved themselves to be more than exceptional dance partners. Dancing with men who weren’t going to try to sleep with her and throw her away was the breath of fresh air she needed, and she adored them for their wonderful gifts of wholesome fun. For the first time in ages, she was in the company of people who made sure that she was enjoying herself as much as they were.

As the night wound down, Esme, Luca, and Mr. Rizzio gathered around a small table across the room to smoke and play cards. Grace found herself by the fireplace in Mr. Parisi’s arms for the dance she’d promised him. She hardly noticed the bickering and banter happening nearby as she swayed along

with him to the slow music...fighting the urge to taste his kisses again. Despite her tipsiness, she managed to keep some of her wits about her. Once she sobered up, she'd have to live with whatever reckless choices she made.

Well, a little self-indulgence never hurt anybody, right? Grace looked into his eyes and lost herself in the fantasy of what it would be like to relinquish her heart and soul to him... Oh, what she wouldn't give to feel his lips caressing her...to feel the hardness in his trousers filling her... Without thinking, she pressed herself harder against him, getting drunk off the carnal desire coursing through her body. The dark hunger in his eyes nearly pushed her over the edge.

"Grace," he said, with his lips brushed against her ear, "you are so beautiful."

She bit her bottom lip and tried to steady her breaths. "Sir, I ___"

"Please," he murmured, "'Vincenzo. 'I love the way you say it."

"Vincenzo." She'd all but forgotten what she wanted to say just a moment before. His fingers brushing through her hair quickly pulled her back into the fantasy.

"Vincenzo...I...I want you to kiss me again, I..." Her unintentional admission suddenly broke the spell. She gasped and shook her head with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean...I shouldn't have said that." Grace pulled away from his embrace and tried to run away before he grabbed her hand and pulled her to him once more. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. "Sir, I'm so sorry. I really should get some sleep. Cesare will be back soon and I need to be back at the club before then." She dropped her face in her hands and broke down in tears.

"I don't want to go back, I can't..." Mr. Parisi held her tightly and kissed her head.

Months of emotional whiplash were tearing her apart. Every moment spent with Mr. Parisi compounded her feelings

for him, which made every night spent with Cesare more and more unbearable. She craved to be loved, but Mr. Parisi wasn't hers to yearn for. She felt unbelievably selfish for dreaming of romance when their mission was so much more important, but she couldn't help the way she felt. She wanted love, and she wanted to share that love with Vincenzo...

"Grace," he whispered. "Come sit with me."

In her sudden exhaustion, she couldn't find the energy to deny him. He led her to the sofa and grabbed a book from the bookcase nearby. She sat down next to him and curled up into a ball against his side. When he pulled a blanket over her and wrapped an arm around her petite frame, he began to quietly read out the lines from a bookmarked page. Grace closed her eyes, and for a moment, she drifted into a half-sleep.

"'Thus much and more, and yet thou lov'st me not'," he recited, speaking the truth of his heart to her through Lord Byron's words, "'And never wilt, love dwells not in our will... nor can I blame thee, though it be my lot...to strongly, wrongly, vainly love thee still'..."

"Mm..." Grace yawned, "It's not in vain, sir," she peered up at him through heavy lashes. "Love is pure when it's given freely, like yours, and that could never be in vain. I think that woman already loves you, but she's too scared to tell you, just like you're too afraid to tell her."

"I'm not afraid, Grace. Do you know what I want to do with her?" His voice turned husky and low.

"Hm. What's that?" She should have been jealous, but no one else was in his arms tonight. Here on this couch, safe in his embrace, he was hers...if only for a night.

He swallowed hard and brushed a thumb against her chin, allowing himself a moment to choose the words carefully.

"I want to take her into my bed." His eyes flickered down to hers,

"...and I want to cherish her, exploring every inch of her body with kisses until she trembles. I want to make love to her

until the morning comes, letting everything but the two of us fall away. I want to tell her..." His brow lowered in thought.

"Tell her what?" she prodded through bated breath.

He looked down at her and traced his thumb over her bottom lip. The corner of his mouth pulled into an affectionate half-grin.

"I love you."

"You should tell her."

"I have, but I don't think she truly heard me, Mrs. Parisi—" Vincenzo pinched the bridge of his nose, "Miss Colby... *Grace*," he corrected himself. "Sorry about that. I must be getting tired, myself."

Grace laughed and slid a hand behind his neck. "Grace Parisi'... It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" The warmth in his smile filled her belly with butterflies.

"Oh, what a silly dream that would be," she giggled. "I think she heard you. If you had told *me* that you loved me, there's no way I would've missed it. I'd be on cloud nine for weeks. Please, promise me you'll give her a chance."

"Grace..."

"Hm?" her eyelids were growing heavy again.

He lowered his mouth to her ear and spoke in a strained whisper. "Please listen to me. You are better than this life. You're still innocent and good. You are not ruined—not like I am. When all of this is over, I want you to run far away from me. Promise me you will."

His request shattered her heart. He didn't love her. She was sure of it now. There was no greater pain than a love, unrequited. Especially from a man who wanted her gone when he no longer had any use for her. Tears sprang in her eyes, but she wouldn't fall apart just then, for a part of her soul had all but given up. She had become well and truly numb.

“All right,” she sniffled. “I promise. When we are finished, I will leave your life, for good. But for now, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to lay here by your side for just a little while longer.”

Gino flicked open his silver case and pulled out a cigarette. He glanced over at Enzo and Miss Colby cuddled up on the sofa. From the angle they sat, he couldn’t tell if Miss Colby had fallen asleep, but he could see his boss clear enough. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Enzo so...at peace. There was a time Gino despised the man. Enzo was Constanza’s favorite. Constanza made it clear who was next in line—Gino never stood a chance against his then-rival. Enzo transitioned from a hot-headed young street-fighter, to *caporegime* in just a handful of years. Eventually the animosity died off, and Gino began to see him as a brother. Enzo would risk his life for him, and he knew it. Gino would do the same. And he has. Many times.

Gino never held his Isotta the way Enzo did, Miss Colby. In all the years he and Isotta were together, he couldn’t remember if he even hugged her. Losing her was his biggest regret. Gino never loved her like he should’ve.

He could tell that Miss Colby was a good woman. She’d be perfect for Enzo in another life, another reality. But they both existed here—in the realm of crime and tragedy. She had no business getting involved in their world. Their world was going to destroy her, and she and Enzo were going to destroy each other from heartache.

“He couldn’t have fallen for a worse match. They’re not right for each other. She’s not built for this lifestyle.” Gino dealt out another round of cards.

“I think you’re wrong, my friend.” Luca took a pensive drag off his cigarette.

“Give her a chance, Gino,” Esme rolled her eyes. “They both deserve some damn happiness, for Christ’s sake.”

“She’s too soft. The girl’s a fucking country-born cupcake, for crying out loud...” Gino cracked his knuckles in irritation. “Look, I’ve got nothing personal against her. Quite the opposite, actually. I’m fond of her, but I hate to see another innocent woman get herself chewed up and spit out like the rest of them. She’s gonna break his heart. I can see it happening already.”

“Bullshit. Enzo’s breaking his own damn heart. He won’t let himself have the girl. Just because she’s sweet, it doesn’t mean she’s fragile.” Esme dropped a spoonful of sugar into her fresh cup of coffee and glared at Gino. “I see nothing wrong in any of this. No one forced her to do this but herself, and I admire her for it. And you can’t tell me that girl doesn’t worship the ground beneath Enzo’s feet.”

“Yeah, Gino, I think you underestimate her,” Luca continued. “She gave up everything to get Giordano off the streets. She’s gone through hell already and she’s still fighting her way through. She might seem weak, but every time she falls, she picks herself back up. Yes, she’s soft, but she’s strong too. Just get to know her and you’ll see it.”

“He smiles again, Gino, like he used to.” Esme blew on her coffee. “Look at them together...those two are mad for each other.”

“This isn’t the life for her, Esme, and you know it.” Gino tapped out his cigarette.

Luca flicked the cap of his lighter and shook his head.
“Even if you’re right, Gino—it’s already too late for her to leave. Giordano will follow her wherever she goes. The safest thing for her now is to keep her close, keep the blood off her hands, and pray.”

CHAPTER 18

Tuesday, December 26, 1933

Upon her return to the Starling Room, Grace's beautiful new coat stirred up all envy amongst her dancing sisters. The girls oohed and ahed over the expensive material, and they teased her with inquiries of who the giver might be, but Grace simply brushed them off. It wasn't safe to reveal his identity, so she let them believe it was from Cesare. If she could give it all away in exchange for a never-ending repeat of Christmas evening, she'd have done it in a heartbeat. Cesare would be returning home any day now, and she'd be thrust back into the life and routine she despised more than anything.

Grace raised her fans above her head, cringing internally for the beratement she would surely receive for missing yet another step. Much to her surprise, the choreographer said nothing, instead giving the girls generalized, half-hearted praise before abruptly dismissing them well before rehearsal typically ended. Confused murmurs echoed through the group of dancers, but Grace didn't give a damn. All she cared about was going to sleep and escaping her return back to a monotonous reality. At least she wasn't scheduled to go on stage tonight, and she'd been given permission to attend the performances as a regular guest by the order of one, Mr. Cesare Giordano. No man in attendance would dare try their luck with her, so allowing her to sit amongst the crowd was a harmless gesture. If there was *one* perk to being "Giordano's girl," it was the freedom to dress nicely and meander about without the pestering of uncouth men.

Later that evening, the girls gathered around their shared dressing tables to get ready for the show. Though she'd already done herself up with an evening gown in preparation for a night of sitting and looking pretty, Grace joined Natasha, Samantha, and Eva in the dressing room to watch and enjoy some girly conversation.

"I'm thinking about leaving," Natasha confided as she placed several pins into her thick curls. "Mr. Parisi said he'd get me out of here if I wanted. I've been thinking of taking him up on his offer, but I don't know where I'd go."

Eva smudged blue grease paint onto her eyelids. "You're so lucky to have him as a regular. You think if I sucked his prick just right, he would—"

"No, Eva. It's not like that. He hasn't done anything with me in months." Natasha placed a hand on her chest and shook her head. "Oh, God, I wish he would, though. I miss how he felt inside me. He was the best lover I've ever known! At least I get to catch up on sleep when I see him. That man *always* lets me sleep."

Grace's stomach churned—the raging jealousy burned her cheeks a vicious red. She wanted to scream as she recalled his words acknowledging the things he wanted to do with another woman. Perhaps that woman was Natasha. It made sense, after all. He'd become so adamant about keeping his distance from this person around the same time he stopped being intimate with Natasha. It had to be her! Who else could it be?

"Natasha...does he ever kiss you, or fall asleep with you?" Grace vied for more pieces to the puzzle.

"Well, he never kisses me, but he does fall asleep with me sometimes. Oh, I really do like him, Anna! He's always been so good to me." Her eyes lit up. "Do you...do you think maybe he could like me?"

"Of course he does." Samantha chimed, tossing Natasha her headpiece. "Why else would he offer to get you out of here?"

You said he'd fallen in love with someone. Maybe that someone is you. Clearly, he likes you for more than just sex —”

“Excuse me, ladies. I need to...” Grace cleared her throat, “I-I’ll be right back.” She jumped from her chair and sped out of the room to breathe. Her feet aimlessly carried her away until she found an empty hallway and pressed her back against the icy wall. She squeezed her eyes shut to fight back the tears. It was Natasha. It just *had* to be her—it was the only thing that made sense. Putting a name and face to a previously ambiguous figure made his rejection even more painful than she ever thought possible. Without a name, Grace could pretend she was the one on his mind. With a name, the fantasy was shattered. Grace slid down from the wall and sat on the floor. She was too distraught to notice the set of heavy footsteps approaching.

“Anna, baby! What’s the matter? Did you miss me that much?”

Her eyes popped open. Cesare was back a day early. Grace rose to her feet to greet him. His unexpected presence should have upset her, but her battered heart welcomed any form of embrace—even Cesare’s. She just wanted to be held, and it didn’t matter by whom. He guided her into his private room, but instead of ripping off her clothes and expecting her to pleasure him, Cesare surprised her by sitting down on the couch and pulling her into his lap with a hug.

“I didn’t know you cared so much, sweet cheeks,” he crooned. “I thought you just liked this old man for his prestige.”

Grace pulled her arms tightly against her chest. The dichotomy between the same couch-cradling gesture given by two different men less than twenty-four hours apart made her want to throw up. Cesare tightened his arms around her and let her cry her heart out. She was beyond tired. She wished she could go to bed that night and never wake up. She had nothing but the despicable man currently holding on to her. She

thought about running away and starting a new life somewhere, leaving everyone behind. A new name would be easy. She'd already grown used to an alias.

Broken as she was, her conscience wouldn't allow such cowardice. She had already hit the bottom of the trenches. It couldn't possibly get any worse from here. Her sacrifices can't have been for naught. Her fingernails clawed at the side of his neck. If only she could kill him herself....

Cesare yanked her hand from his neck. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, girl, that's gotta wait until tonight." He chuckled.

Her head pounded from the pressure of her stress, so she took a deep breath and leaned against his shoulder to rest her tired eyes for a moment. After a while, the walls began to thud with the jazzy bass from the band's opening number. Cesare sat alone with her for a while longer, letting her have a much-needed break.

Racing thoughts prevented her from falling asleep, but at least her body would have a bit to relax. She wanted to hate Natasha, and for a flickering moment, she did. Grace couldn't bring herself to fester in the hate for too long, however. It wasn't right, nor was it fair. The heart does what it wants, she knew as well as anybody that there was no controlling who you fell in love with. Really, it wasn't as if Natasha willed Mr. Parisi into a romance out of spite for Grace. Natasha didn't even know of her affections for him. She couldn't bring herself to hold any ill-will against her dear friend. Natasha was such a sweet soul—she didn't deserve such crude sentiments. She couldn't bring herself to despise Mr. Parisi, either... although she did feel a sudden bit of anger for the way he dangled another woman in her face. How could he be so cruel? Couldn't he tell how she felt about him? Luca saw it, so it must have been evident, surely.

Grace sighed dejectedly. Where would she go when this was over? Could she go back to Nathaniel? Could he forgive her abandonment and still respect her after the terrible choices she's made? Maybe she could go back to West Virginia,

though she suspected that her recent experiences would make the return to farm-life a miserable existence. She would never be able to confide in anyone back at home. Everyone in town was loyal to a church she no longer believed in—a faith that preached about women like her burning in hell for eternity. Perhaps Josephine would understand. Grace figured that Josephine was unlikely to hold any judgment for the things she'd done, and she was likely to be keen on rekindling their friendship...that is, unless her councilman father went down with Giordano. If she loses her father because of the things Grace uncovered, Josephine might never forgive her.

Her future held so many unknowns, and there were numerous reasons that her hopes of returning home to any welcoming arms would be unlikely, at best. Grace felt unbearably lonely. Perhaps the cat-hoarding spinster life would be her destiny after all of this. Who was she to deny fate's calling?

“Come now, Anna, we should make an appearance tonight. I want to show them your Christmas present to me.”

“What do you mean, sir? What present?” She glanced up at him with wide eyes.

Cesare pulled at her left hand. “Now that I know how you really feel, I believe it's about time I make you my wife. It's all so clear to me now. Don't you worry, sweet cheeks—your waiting is over.” He slipped a large, gaudy diamond ring onto her finger.

Grace clenched her jaw so tightly, she thought she might crack a few teeth.

“Oh... When's the wedding?” her voice strained.

“Next year sometime,” he shrugged before standing up and pulling Grace to her feet. “You won't be here much longer, Mrs. Giordano. Oh, and you better get used to hearing that.” His smug grin didn't reach his eyes.

Shit.

She hadn't accounted for the possibility of a proposal. Bedding the old man, yes. Possibly getting pregnant, sure. But marriage? That smarmy bastard! This can't be right—something must have gone terribly wrong... Grace didn't know yet what that “something” could be, but the alarm bells were deafening.

When he wrapped her diamond-adorned hand around his arm, Grace understood what was coming. This “engagement” wasn't a secret he intended to keep. He wanted to make a show of it. Everyone in attendance at the club tonight was to be made aware of his newly championed broodmare.

“What... what about my make-up?”

“Tears of happiness, sweet cheeks! Let them see!”

Her body trembled as she rubbed the back of her free hand over the black streaks of mascara painting her cheeks. Grace followed him dutifully through the foyer and into the lounge where the dancers had already cleared the stage. As if led by command, her eyes immediately found Mr. Parisi sitting at a table conversing with Natasha and Mr. Rizzio. The table was surrounded by Mr. Parisi's usual cadre of female admirers, but Luca was nowhere to be found.

“Parisi!” Cesare shouted, dragging his new, reluctant fiancée over to gloat.

“How noble of you to accept my invitation.” Cesare made sure to put on a show of her ringed-hand so that everyone could revel in his catch. Natasha pecked her lover on the cheek and swiftly ran off to escape the tension.

Whatever Mr. Parisi was thinking just then, he firmly upheld that mask of stoic indifference he always wore in public spaces.

“Mm. So, Anna is soon to become *Anna Giordano*, now? Congratulations.” For a moment, his eyes met hers, but his expression remained icy and impassive.

“Mrs. Cesare Giordano,” he corrected. “Come—have a seat with us, Parisi. Let us toast to a *most-glorious* union!”

Cesare's insidious grin grew wider with each step he took toward a reserved table set for three. Mr. Parisi calmly slid into one side of the booth as Cesare fervently pulled Grace into his lap.

"Hey Parisi, do us a favor and pour out some glasses, will you?" he sneered, pushing the bottle of wine across the table.

Riddled with shame, Grace focused her gaze to the floor and kept quiet until Giordano pulled her chin up and smashed his mouth onto hers. Impulsively, she pushed against him and looked on at him in horror.

"Please, dear, not here," she mouthed, terrified for the beating she might receive for denying him in public.

"Oh, Anna," he growled into her ear, "do you want to get the belt? I'll make sure you can't walk for a month. Don't you dare resist me."

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Mr. Parisi looking away toward the dance floor. When Cesare mashed his mouth on her once more, Grace shut off her mind and fled to the secret place in her heart where she was safe and cared for in Mr. Parisi's arms. Cesare pulled the strap of her dress down below her shoulder to reveal one of her naked breasts before groping her for all to see. Fighting back tears at the humiliation of his public assault, Grace squeezed her eyes shut and tried to make herself numb, but when he pulled his hand from her still-exposed breast and pushed her knees apart to force two dry, calloused fingers into her flesh, she could think of nothing but the stinging inside her most delicate of places. Grace whimpered softly from the pain of his forceful hand-thrusting, and she tried desperately to cover her chest in hopes of saving whatever dignity she had left. She couldn't even try to fantasize about Mr. Parisi to get herself through the attack. She couldn't imagine him ever hurting her like this.

Just then, the sound of a glass shattering on the marble floor beside their table brought Giordano's assault to a sudden end.

“What is the meaning of this, Parisi?! What’s the matter with you, huh? You got a problem with me fondling my trophy?”

“Oh, honey buns, it...it was me!” Grace forced a smile to her face and nodded with reassurance. “I got carried away, you see? And—and my hip bumped the table. I-I’m terribly sorry, dear.” She couldn’t force herself to look at Mr. Parisi—not after what he’d just witnessed. For the first time in her life, she contemplated making a run for it and throwing herself before an oncoming vehicle. She truly wanted to die.

“Honey buns?” Cesare’s lips curled into a wicked grin that sent chills down her spine. “Go pack your things. You’re coming home with me tonight.”

Grace hung her head and scampered away. Still violently trembling, she hurried down the hall and up the stairs, trying her damndest to keep from sobbing uncontrollably until she reached the privacy of her room. Grace yanked the cord to turn on the light and stared blankly at the string still in her palm. The loss of autonomy over her own life, her body, her heart... She was powerless to stop it. She wanted to take back control, but how?

Just then, a wicked thought materialized in her head...

“This nightmare...” a sinister voice reverberated inside her head. *“It could all be over if you found a rope to tie around your neck. All this pain—”*

“I could leave it all behind me...” Grace responded to the voice, *“On my own terms...”*

Enzo leaned back and stretched an arm across the backrest of the booth, waiting in silence as the busboy finished sweeping up the glass from the floor.

“It was my fault, you know.” Enzo reached for Grace’s wine glass and sipped it slowly, looking Giordano directly in the eyes. *“When your hand went between her legs, my thoughts went...”*

...to the many ways I want to fucking destroy you, Enzo continued in his head.

“Well, that’s too bad. I’m the only man who’s been there, and it’s gonna stay that way.” Giordano winked and made a show of inhaling the scent of her from his fingers.

“Ah, now that’s a fresh fucking peach, right there! You wouldn’t know anything about that, now, would you?”

Enzo clenched his fist beneath the table to keep from breaking Giordano’s teeth.

“No,” Giordano chuckled, *“I didn’t think so. I’m telling you, Parisi, she’s as clean and pure as a summer rain. Even that boyfriend of hers hasn’t touched her.”*

Her boyfriend...*Luca.* Giordano had never brought him up before. Enzo’s gut sank. *Cazzo!*

“Her boyfriend?”

Giordano topped off the two remaining glasses with a fine merlot. He sat back into his seat and tipped his glass to Enzo, looking him dead in the eye.

“Well, Parisi, Serra is your man. You tell me.”

Enzo’s blood boiled, but his composure never faltered. He sipped his wine and pulled his cigarette case from his breast pocket. A smoke always helped him maintain focus.

“What game are you playing, Parisi? He brought her here claiming he had debts to pay. A man of his rank shouldn’t have debts.”

Enzo’s stomach twisted. Had a sinking feeling that his best friend was dead in a ditch somewhere, and Miss Colby was in serious danger if he wasn’t careful with his words.

“She was a virgin—I don’t touch virgins. Whatever my man was doing, I had no knowledge of it. I stay out of my men’s personal lives. As long as it doesn’t interfere with business, what they gamble away, and who they go-steady with is none of my concern. He should have known better than to remain involved with her after you took over. Where is he?”

Giordano lit a cigar. *“Why does it matter?”*

“I want to deal with him. He’s my sottocapo.” Enzo raised his glass and held his enemy’s glare. *“I want an explanation from him—who he’s indebted to, why he brought Anna here...”*

Giordano leaned back in his seat. *“Don’t worry, Parisi. You’ll have him back by New Year’s Day. He will answer to me first. You can have what’s left.”*

“What’s left.” Enzo slugged the rest of his wine and got up from the table. *“If you’ll excuse me, I need to have a sit-down with Rizzio to see what he knows. Thank you for your hospitality, and I apologize on Serra’s behalf. Oh, and congratulations on the engagement. I look forward to the wedding. Anna is quite the woman.”*

Enzo strode over to Gino and signaled him outside. Gino nodded and left the bar to meet his boss by the car.

“Figlio di puttana!” Enzo pounded his fists against the steering wheel. Luca was a dead man, and he knew it. There was nothing he could do to stop it. *Nothing.* All the years of friendship, loyalty, dependability, and brotherhood...gone. He could only pray that Luca wouldn’t receive the same treatment they gave to Rossetti, but he knew Giordano. Mercy didn’t fit into his Modus Operandi.

Just a moment later, Gino hopped into the passenger seat and slammed the door behind him.

“Enzo, what the hell happened?”

“Giordano has Luca. His cover is blown.”

Grace's blood ran cold to the change in Cesare's demeanor. He barely said a word to her on the drive to his home, but she could sense his boiling anger.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to reject you. I was just unbearably shy with all those people around. The only one who's ever seen me like that is you, and I..."

He responded with stony silence.

Cesare continued on their course until the city lights and buildings gave way to thick forestry, narrow roads, and total darkness. He sped through multiple unexpected sharp turns, each one throwing her against the passenger-side door. The hair on the back of Grace's neck prickled. If he were to do something to her out here, chances were good that no one would ever find her. Maybe acting the part of a delicate, hysterical woman would soften a man who took pleasure in his own sense of superiority and dominance.

She would have to get herself worked up to make this work, so Grace let her thoughts drift through the sea of heartache that consumed her every waking day. It wasn't long before she found the tears she needed to act out hysteria, but it wasn't enough just yet. She replayed the memory of Mr. Parisi ordering her to stay away from him, and the dam had burst.

"Please, sir," she pleaded through sobs, "I'm sorry! I'm tired and overwhelmed, and I—I'm so terribly frightened! Will you please talk to me? Your silence is scaring me to bits." When she lifted her face to look at him, his expression softened just a touch.

"Anna, do you know why I came back a day early?"

"No, but I'm so glad you did. I missed you." She rubbed the backs of her hands over her cheeks. "When you found me in the hallways and gave me a hug—Oh, you haven't the faintest idea how much I needed that. I really did. I've been so lonely. I miss my parents, I miss my friends..."

He said nothing more for the rest of the drive. Grace cried herself into exhaustion and scooted in closer to lay her head on Cesare's shoulder. She had resigned herself to accepting whatever horrors lay ahead, so long as she could rest for a while.

After what felt like hours, Cesare turned off the road and drove through the woods along a gravel path, hardly wide enough to allow the passage of his Cadillac. After several minutes of nothing but the cracking and popping sounds of tires rolling through gravel, they pulled up to a gargantuan mansion. Their headlights scarcely made visible the white stucco siding and ochre colored roof that she presumed to be some kind of Spanish clay tile. Cesare made haste to shut the car off, leaving one of the only sources of light to come from two windows illuminated by soft yellow light. The rest of the house appeared dark and vacant, and she grew nauseated by the eerie sense of foreboding it gave her. Grace opened the passenger door, but before she could get out, Cesare rushed around the car to take her bag.

In the bluish glow of the gibbous moon, Cesare studied her for a moment. When she glanced back at him, he appeared at odds with himself—confused, even. Grace stepped to him and pressed her palm to his cheek.

“Cesare, dear, if there's something you want to tell me, please...whatever it is, I can handle it...”

His expression turned to ice as he turned away from her. Cesare marched up the steps and shoved the front door open. Grace rushed in after him, stopping just long enough to close the door behind her. She jogged on the balls of her feet to catch up and followed him up the stairs into a large bedroom. Once inside, Cesare motioned for her to continue following him.

She inched her way through his room. It was a lot less pretentious than she expected it to be. The deteriorating patterned quilt on his bed looked like it could've come right out of her home on the farm. There were no intricately-

patterned oriental carpets, no decadent marble tiles imported from India, just simple cherrywood floors. Perhaps this wasn't his room. It wasn't fit for a man who tended towards ostentatious displays of wealth.

Cesare set her bag down on a bed located through another door inside of his own room. She guessed it would be just like his mansion in the city—a room accessible only to him where he could keep his little pet locked up and secure. He returned from the hidden bedroom and plopped down on a settee with a troubled expression stealing at the lines upon his face.

Grace stepped cautiously toward him. When he didn't react, she decided it was safe to close the distance between them. She stopped at his feet and took his face into her hands, gently urging him to look up at her. Something in the way that such unfounded helplessness seeped from his gaze—it pulled at the strings of her heart. For the first time, Grace began to see the truth. Once upon a time, there was some good in him. An innocent boy begging for love, but never receiving it. Somewhere down the line, too many wrong choices led him down a darkened path, and inside that little boy's heart, there grew a monster who wanted to take vengeance on the world that failed him. New tears threatened to fall for the death of the sweet, innocent child he used to be.

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Cesare, I know there've been a lot of ups and downs today. Why don't you tell me why you came back early? Let's get it off your mind, whatever it is, and then we'll go to bed and get some sleep, all right?”

Cesare placed shaking hands around her hips. Fear shadowed his face.

“Anna, I've never known a woman like you.”

“Like me?”

“Gentle, soft, and I can believe you love me. But I can't...I just can't trust you.”

Unwelcome sympathy flowed for him. He wasn't wrong. He absolutely *shouldn't* trust her, but she needed him to. And

what about *love*? Is that what all this fuss is about?

“Have you never been loved before, Cesare?”

He laughed through his nose. “Look at me. I’m an old gangster getting on in years. Not everyone is like you. You’re a nice woman—even with men throwing themselves at your feet.”

“No,” she mumbled, settling herself on his knee. “I was a pariah back home in West Virginia. I wanted a life in the big city. I had only one boyfriend because no one wanted the girl who read books and wanted more than being a lonely housewife tending to the chickens. I was teased—not loved. I never really felt like I belonged anywhere.” Her eyes closed tight to fight back the memories. “Sometimes I don’t know if even my own papa ever loved me. He fought to keep me from chasing my dreams, and he lied to me about some pretty egregious things. He tried to tear me down, just like everyone else.” Grace sighed. “I couldn’t never seem to make any real friends growing up. I was so lonely, and I’m absolutely certain that no one but my mama ever truly loved me.” The truth of it crushed her heart.

“Well,” Cesare murmured, “maybe you haven’t realized it yet, but that’s no longer the case. My enemy and I both are in love with you.”

“Enemy?”

“Parisi.”

Grace burst into a fit of laughter and stood up from Cesare’s knee, breaking their contact. Fighting back giggles, she turned around to face him and placed her hand on her hip.

“Forgive me, sir, but have you lost your mind? Mr. Parisi? Goodness, no! He doesn’t love me. The very thought of it!”

Grace sat down on the floor beside him and rested her temple against Cesare’s knee to catch her breath.

“Maybe he finds me attractive, but I know he’s in love with *someone*, and it’s definitely not me.”

“Oh?” Cesare cocked his head. His one word concealed a hearty threat. Grace looked up at him and shrank under his frigid glower.

“You must be awfully familiar with him to know such a thing. Please, humor me. Who is she?”

Grace shrugged. “I honestly haven’t a clue, sir,” Grace lied through her teeth. If she told him it was Natasha, Cesare would probably kill her for sport.

“You see, us girls—we just talk sometimes...about clients and what they like. Besides, why shouldn’t he find me attractive? You have good taste in women, don’t you?” She giggled shyly.

That stroke of his ego relaxed him for a moment and he laughed. “Yes, of course I do. Whatever I have, that bastard always wants.”

Her smile fell. “Did you only want me because you thought he might? Or does he only find me attractive because he can’t have me?”

“Why this interrogation, sweet cheeks? Why all the care?”

She’d just sent herself right back into dangerous waters. If Cesare suspected she had any romantic interest in his enemy...

Grace rose to her feet and paced. Her sudden insecurity was real. “I just wanted to know if a man’s interest in me has more to do with competition than it does with who I really am. What would any of you see in me? I’m not tall and sophisticated, I’ve got more inches on my breasts and hips than Norma Shearer and Bette Davis combined and—”

“Speak English, Anna. I have no idea who you’re talking about,” Cesare groaned.

“Oh, never mind that—my point is, I’m an average woman with no redeeming qualities that should warrant a fight over me. So, why the care, you ask? Well, firstly, I don’t give a damn what Mr. Parisi thinks. I want to know what you think of me. Do you really care about me, or was it all because of a

silly little male-to-male competition? Why would you want me when there are so many other sophisticated and beautiful women out there?”

The light from a nearby lamp refracted into her new diamond ring, sending sparkles up like fire. She held her hand out and studied the glittering gem in a daze. It was a symbol for all that she ever wanted, but it was from the man she wanted no part of. It was a sign that she was on the path leading her closer to taking the bastard down, but it still made her want to scream. It symbolized everything she'd given up to get where she was, and all she'd never have.

“I'm spoiled goods now. You'll only want me until no one else does, and then you'll throw me away. What will become of me then? Where will I go? What will I do?”

Cesare pinched the bridge of his nose. “Woah, woah, woah. Take a breath, Anna. You just threw a lot at me. Give me the chance to respond, at least...” He trailed off, considering which of her concerns to address first. “Well, you should already know I enjoy full breasts and tight asses, and sophistication can be trained. Come here.”

The danger she'd expected came to pass, so she went to him. He pulled her down to his lap and massaged her breasts more gently than he ever had before, though Mr. Parisi's hands would've actually made it enjoyable.

“You see, Anna—I got you as an untouched little angel. To everyone else, you're spoiled goods now, but to me, well, I've staked my claim in you. I don't know how else to say this, but right now, you're my little ray of light in a dark world. As far as I'm concerned, you're not going anywhere.”

Despite his praises, he had just confirmed her worst fear—she was ruined and worthless to anyone but him. Perhaps marrying him was her only option, now... *No*, she reprimanded herself, *an uncertain and lonely future was better than a guaranteed future spent with him!* She made a silent promise to herself that no matter what it took to escape—even

if it meant certain death—she would never spend the rest of her life shackled to him.

“Yes, sir.” She swallowed and closed her eyes.

“Remember, Anna, I was interested well before Parisi came along.”

She nearly opened her mouth to argue before thinking better of it. She remembered vividly the way he’d ignored her that first night until Mr. Parisi feigned interest.

“Thank you, sir,” she whispered.

“Well, now that we have that settled,” he hissed, tightening a hand around her bicep in a way that would certainly leave bruises, “you and I have something we need to talk about. I found out your little boyfriend is one of Parisi’s street bosses.”

His revelation sucked the air right out of Grace’s lungs, and she could feel the color drain from her cheeks.

“No. You must be mistaken. Tony’s not...he...”

“His name is *Luca Serra*, sweet cheeks.”

Grace’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “No...” Her voice dripped with panic. “No! Tony’s a good man. He took care of me!”

“He sold you!” Cesare barked.

“He only had some debts to pay! It was only supposed to be temporary...” Her head spun. Luca’s cover was blown! *Shit!* Shit, shit, shit!

“How...where is he?! What’s going to happen to him?” The bitter taste of bile rose to the back of her throat.

“That doesn’t concern you, my dear wife-to-be.”

Wife-to-be. She glanced down at her ring finger. In pursuit of her mission, she’d gotten her informant Mr. Brown killed, she’d lost her dearest friends, she’d lost her innocence... She’d lost *herself*. And now, she would lose Luca, too, along with the last of her freedom.

“Yes,” she mumbled, fighting back the urge to vomit. “Your ‘wife-to-be.’ Congratulations to us.”

“On your knees,” Cesare ordered.

Grace’s legs trembled. What was happening to her life? What was happening to her friends? She got down to her knees and stared off into space as she pleased him like an obedient little wife. Racing thoughts overwhelmed her.

But Cesare’s mind was in a calm place. It was business as usual to him. He leaned back and forced himself into her throat.

“Let’s end this night on a high note,” he grunted. “It’s time for you to drink a toast in our honor.”

CHAPTER 19

*Saturday, December 30, 1933 to
Sunday, December 31, 1933*

Enzo sat frozen in his tufted leather chair with a fist pressed anxiously to his lips. It had been days, and all the reports on Giordano's whereabouts were coming back empty. If Luca was still alive somehow, he certainly didn't have long. Giordano said he'd have Luca back by New Year's Day, but Enzo knew that son-of-a-bitch didn't mean he'd return his best friend with a pulse... He'll be lucky if Luca's body comes back in one-fucking-piece. Enzo lit up a smoke to distract himself from the tears threatening to fall. He may not have been blood, but he was still a brother. Luca's death will be harder to face than the death of Enzo's own father.

He blew hard through his lips and forced the pain from his mind. Now was not the time to mourn. He still had Grace to think about, and he prayed that her odds of survival fared much better than his beloved friend. She hadn't been seen in days. Wherever she was, he suspected Luca was nearby. Knowing Giordano, he could never resist the temptation of a violent confrontation, so whatever Giordano's plans were for Luca, Enzo was fairly confident that Grace would be made witness to it. God willing—if she came back to him, Enzo promised himself he would do whatever it took to soothe the pain she will undoubtedly feel as a result of bearing witness to such horrors. Enzo just wanted her to be okay, but Luca's death might truly break her. His grasp on this nightmarish situation was tenuous at best, but he refused to give up hope.

As insane as it was, Giordano's obsession with Grace made him feel a little more optimistic that she'd make it out alive.

Enzo had never seen that bastard more infatuated with a woman than he was with her. If his strong, stubborn, sweet Miss Colby could keep her wits about her, then she had a chance.

Once she returns—*if she returns*—Enzo would be calling the whole thing off. He had to get her out of this and find some other way to stop that fucker. He hated telling her what to do, but she wouldn't have a choice in the matter. Enzo could no longer stand to watch her getting dangled on a string by a man with a sharpened pair of shears in his hands. He didn't give a damn how much it might anger her to pull the plug—he'd find another way...they could find a way *together*.

The clock chimed eight times. Unable to handle the deafening silence any longer, Enzo clenched his fists and peeled himself from the chair. He had to find something to occupy his time before he lost his damn mind. Giordano and Grace would not be at the Starling tonight, but Natasha would be. For now, she was the closest thing to Grace. Gino might be there too, drowning his sorrows in the company of two or three of the ladies he favored most.

By the time he arrived, the show had reached its halfway point. He headed into the lounge and hung around the bartop towards the back in search of Gino. After a quick shot of whiskey, he found his consigliere sitting glum-faced at a table nearby in the company of a few of his own men. Enzo made long strides over to the group and sat down in one of the empty seats.

“Good to see you, boss.” Gino shot back the last of his drink. “Doin’ all right?”

“*No, non son—*” Enzo paused before snapping his fingers at Gino's men and waited for them to leave before continuing.

“*No, I'm not,*” he sighed. “*Have you seen Natasha?*”

Gino glanced uneasily at the stage. He rubbed the back of his neck and tamped out his cigarette.

“Yeah. She was onstage before you got here. She didn’t look so good.”

“What do you mean?” In his exhaustion, Enzo struggled to find the energy to worry for Natasha, but he still did. He knew she’d do the same for him.

Gino held a few fingers up to a passing server and ordered more drinks. *“I don’t know, boss. She looked... disheveled.”*

Enzo slipped the lighter from his pocket and lit one up. So often he wished his mentor were still alive. Constanza always seemed to know what to do. Enzo wondered if perhaps everyone thought the same of himself—outwardly stoic and composed to his peers, but secretly rife with inner turmoil.

He didn’t care about the show anymore—not after Miss Colby had been up there. Most nights, he’d make an appearance just to watch her. Seeing the way she emerged from her shell and bloomed like a magnolia made his heart swell. The way she moved on stage with brazen confidence and prowess—one could never imagine that she was so helplessly demure. Truthfully, he had no idea how deeply she’d been struggling until Christmas. She’d always shone so brightly when she danced.

When he finally caught a good look at Natasha, he was definitely concerned. She was visibly ashen with dark circles under her eyes. He hadn’t seen her in a few days, but she looked completely fine at the time. Enzo had no intention of bedding her that night, but her company would be a much needed distraction, and she looked like she could use the distraction herself. When the show ended, he found her hiding away in a darkened corner of the lounge. When he requested her company, she smiled weakly but genuinely, and Natasha eagerly pulled him to their usual room.

Though the last thing he’d wanted was sex, Enzo stood motionless, letting a hungry Natasha unbutton his vest and dress shirt. Once Natasha had him undressed, she pulled him to the bed and coaxed him onto his back. Her hands rubbed up and down the length of his shaft, encouraging his faint erection

to grow. His mind was miles away, making his arousal almost a hopeless endeavor... That was, until he closed his eyes and let the face of the woman he loved come into clear view. When imagined the rosy glow of her silken curls, the softness of her baby-blues, and the scarlet red of her painted lips...that was all he needed. So strong was his desire to become one with Grace. *His Grace.*

Natasha picked up the condom box and slid the top off to pluck one from the container. She unrolled the rubber down his impressive length, more than eager with anticipation for their first time together in months. When Natasha climbed on top of him and found her rhythm, Enzo tried to keep the fantasy of Grace going long enough for him to finish, but he couldn't maintain it. His mind was far too consumed with worry. No matter how much Natasha rode him and did all the things she knew he liked, he couldn't enjoy any of it. Through his stress, he could hardly feel her at all.

What was Luca going through? Where was Grace? Why did it suddenly feel so wrong to be with Natasha?

He opened his eyes and found Natasha eying him with concern.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Parisi?”

He couldn't answer right away. Instead, he stared back at her for a moment, trying to piece together his thoughts.

“Anna is your roommate, right?” he rasped.

Her brows furrowed. She quickly got off of him and sat on the edge of the bed with her knees pulled to her chest.

“She is, yeah. She’s gone right now, though, and I don’t know when she’ll be back.”

Enzo pulled her down for a cuddle to avoid having to see her upset.

“Why do you seem so concerned?” he asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “She’ll be back, won’t she?” *Please*, he begged any deity that would listen, *let this woman say ‘Yes.’*

“I don’t know.”

Shit.

“Mr. Giordano took such a liking to her, and of course she can’t refuse him. I think something happened when he found out something about her boyfriend.”

“Giordano informed me that her boyfriend was one of my men,” he disclosed.

“*What?*” Natasha scrambled away to the corner of the room. “Does Mr. Giordano know about this? Are you—” Natasha’s eyes widened with panic. “Did you set me up?!”

“Set you up?” He cocked his brow in confusion.

“You’ve been my regular for so long, and then I get a roommate who’s dating one of your men? Mr. Giordano hates you and everyone associated with you! Did you plan this?”

“You really believe I’d spent the past two years seeing you, just for a set-up?” He pulled Natasha back to bed, ignoring her fearful protesting.

“No. Natasha, I did not set you up. It was all just an unfortunate coincidence. I didn’t know. Giordano told me the night after Christmas when he announced their engagement.”

Enzo held her gently by the shoulders.

“Natasha, please look at me. I swear on the graves of my family that I had no ill intentions against you. Do you remember what I told you? If you don’t feel safe, I’ll buy out your contract and get you far away from here. I can send you anywhere you’d like with the money to start a new life.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

“It’s your choice to make, Tash. I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Natasha folded her arms. “Well...I’ve thought a lot about it...but this is my home, and I can’t leave my sisters.”

“I understand your decision. If you ever change your mind, just say the word.”

“Thank you, sir.” Natasha scooted herself closer to him. “So, I’ve been meaning to ask—is everything all right? You aren’t the same these days. You seem so troubled every time I see you, and you don’t come around anymore.”

Enzo sat hunched over on the edge of the bed and sighed.

“These are trying times, Natasha. I’ve got the weight of the world on my shoulders. A good many things are troubling me, lately. I have a lot to think about, but—” he glanced over his shoulder at her, “I need your help.”

“Yes, sir. Anything. What do you need?”

“I need you to tell me everything you know about the basement, and everything you know about Anna’s relationship with Cesare Giordano. Her life could be in danger.”

Locked inside the gilded cage Cesare had prepared for her, Grace curled herself into a ball underneath the blankets. Tomorrow would be New Year’s Eve. Cesare promised her they’d return to New York City to watch the ball drop. If she was being honest, she couldn’t care less about the event—she just wanted to get back to the city where she felt safer.

Since she’d arrived there, a slew of people came and went from Cesare’s country estate. All day long, Grace was kept in his room. All her meals besides supper were consumed in his bedroom, and that’s where she stayed when Cesare introduced her to several members of his family. She was a glorified prisoner.

Grace watched tirelessly through the windows as delivery trucks made their rounds of dropping off large boxes. She supposed the New Year must’ve been an even bigger deal to

Italians than it was to Americans. Why else would Cesare have decided to throw such a massive party?

In her time alone, Grace kept her ears open for anyone walking toward his bedroom door and searched around his room for anything even remotely useful or incriminating, but she came up with nothing.

To pass the dragging of time, Grace tried to sleep, but all her pent-up energy refused to allow it. In her mind, she replayed the way one of his sisters rolled her eyes at her, and how Cesare's mother had squished her in a tight, uncomfortable hug. She hadn't seen Cesare since the previous afternoon and truthfully, she'd have just preferred the time alone with him—naked and with his flaccid manhood in her mouth—than at the supper table being treated like a petulant child by his family who spoke in a language she couldn't understand.

As the sun began to rise for New Year's Eve morn', Grace finally lulled herself into a restless sleep, only to be awoken soon after by Cesare's mother. No one told her how she was expected to address the woman, but whatever she was called, she shook Grace by her shoulders to wake her, and gestured for her to get out of bed without even giving her the chance to fully come to her senses.

"Hey!" Grace clutched her nightgown as his mother tried to strip her out of it. One of the woman's daughters, the kinder one, stepped into Grace's room and chirped something in Italian. The more abrasive daughter pushed past her sister and carried in a cream silk dress on a hanger. Grace's heart sank. Couldn't the celebrations of her forced engagement come at a later time? It wasn't even "next year" yet like Cesare told her the wedding would be.

Grace sighed. Cesare would be most displeased if she fought against his party plans, though, so she merrily played along. Grace shrugged her arms through the sleeves and allowed the kind-sister to button up the back of the dress. She had to admit—the bias-cut satin had skimmed her curves in all the right places. It *was* a gorgeous gown. The rude-sister pinned her curls up in a way that made her hair fall just above her shoulders, taking care to stab the pins into her scalp whenever possible. When the kind-sister draped a delicate lace veil over her head, a lump formed in Grace’s throat. This veil made it all too real for her. She didn’t want this. Not with him. She felt sick.

The older woman tugged at Grace’s hand and led her toward the door. Grace followed the small group of women down the stairs toward a rumble of voices. Grace kept her gaze fixed on the terracotta tiles until they entered into a room filled with dozens of people she guessed were various friends and relatives of Cesare’s. They all turned to look at her as she walked in. At the far end of a petal-coated aisle, Cesare stood proudly in a black suit and a wicked grin pulled across his face. Beside him stood a minister with a bible in hand. Her heart fell to the floor.

This was no celebration.

It was their wedding.

Grace thought she might faint. Marrying Cesare would give him ownership rights over her as her husband, but if she turned him down, he’d surely kill her at the altar. The humiliation of rejection in front of his own family would be too much for such a proud man. His mother pushed her into the aisle, and Grace forced herself on unsteady feet to take the walk that would put an end to whatever chance for a future she might’ve had.

As soon as she reached the altar, the minister began the ceremony. Through tear-clouded vision, Grace watched the minister’s blurring hands wave in the air as he recited holy

scripture in Italian. When the man went quiet, Cesare nudged her with his elbow, and she startled.

“I...I...do.” She peered up at her husband-to-be and found annoyance on his face over her hesitance. Thinking quickly to smooth it over, Grace smiled at him. “I was trying to think if I could figure it out in Italian. I’m sorry, dear,” she crooned in a whisper.

The lie appeased him. He nodded and gave his response as well...in English.

“I do.” Cesare slipped a wedding band onto her finger and bowed his head as the minister led them in a final prayer.

Grace bowed her head in kind, wondering what kind of God would allow this union to happen. Either God was a sadist, or he didn’t exist. She may not always have the highest opinion of herself, but Grace knew she didn’t deserve this. If there were a higher power at play, she felt utterly abandoned.

Before she knew it, the ceremony had concluded. She closed her eyes and bit her lips together, but it couldn’t stop the tears from falling, and her heart from breaking. She could no longer remember what she was doing any of this for. Her fake smile and tear-soaked cheeks fooled the ignorant strangers around her. They all clapped their hands for the blessed *Mrs. Cesare Giordano*.

One small act of mercy came after the most nauseating luncheon of her life. Cesare sent his newly wedded Mrs. Giordano to go pack her things for their return to New York.

She flung herself on her bed and bit the inside of her bottom lip until she tasted blood. Moments later, Cesare came in and threw her onto her back, pinning her to the bed. Her hands balled into fists beside her head as he glared at her through blackened eyes.

“What’s the meaning of all your crying? *Huh?! Why aren’t you happy, Mrs. Giordano?!*” he growled.

Grace trembled in terror, but she managed to think up another lie that might appease him.

“I just wanted my mama and papa to see me get married. I miss them so much, and they weren’t here. You have your mama, right? I’m only crying because I didn’t get to have mine by my side.”

He huffed, but at least his fury mellowed into annoyance. He quickly stripped himself naked and grabbed at the front of her wedding gown, taking his pocket knife to the material and ripping it open down the middle.

Grace lay before him in her scanties, terrified into numbness. It was such a beautiful dress—he could have told her to take it off and she would have. It wasn’t right. None of this was right.

Cesare yanked the dress off her and threw the knife to the floor before tearing off her bra and panties. When Grace tried to scream, he clamped his hand hard around her mouth to smother her terrified shrieks. He pushed her head deeper into the mattress and shoved her legs apart before forcing himself inside of her and thrusting against her with a violent determination.

“Oh yeah, you like that, Wife?!” His voice sounded deep and guttural, as if he were possessed by some demonic force.

As the painful assault continued, she realized he wasn’t going to pull out of her this time. His hand muffled her screaming sobs, and her struggle against him only angered him more.

“Shut up!” Cesare clamped his other hand around her throat “You are mine! Do you understand me?! Mine! My wife!” he roared into her ear.

His wife. As she’d always been told, this was a wife’s duty...*her* duty now. It was worse than she ever could have imagined it. Her husband hoisted her knee up to give himself deeper access to her womb, and she gave up the fight.

When her struggling stopped, Cesare removed his hand from her mouth. Tears fell down her temples, but she didn’t make a sound. Instead, with his fingers coiled around her

throat, she lost herself in the little details on the textured ceiling, drawing pretty little pictures in her mind. She felt as if her soul had left her body, and she loved it. Here, up above the terror below, she felt no fear or pain. She felt blissfully... listless.

After what felt like hours he slammed himself hard against her once more, depositing his vile seed deep inside of her.

“You will give me a son,” he growled, finally removing his hand from her neck.

“Yes, sir,” she coughed.

He patted her cheek. “Good wife.”

Cesare pulled out of her and opened the door back to his room. “Finish getting ready. We’re leaving in an hour.”

He slammed the door behind him and clicked the lock from the other side.

As soon as she was alone Grace frantically ran to her bathtub and turned the water on. Angling herself under the faucet, she let the water flow into her, desperate to rinse herself out. She laid there for a moment and tried to process what had just happened. The forced marriage, her new husband’s violent attempt at impregnating her...it took everything she had left not to throw up.

Murderous rage filled her belly like an inferno. Cesare’s pocket knife was still on the floor by her bed. Maybe she could castrate him and let him bleed out a slow, agonizing death. Oh, how she would love to flay him. She’d watched her father slaughter enough livestock in her lifetime, she could probably do it with ease.

No... If I kill him here, his posse will have my head on a spike. I will not die for him...

Her rage soon gave way to defeat. Why couldn’t she claim ownership of herself? Why did a man get to? She wished she could have been born a boy. Boys became men, and men had rights and autonomy over their lives. She had always been

raised on the understanding that women were to become wives and bear the husband's children. If this kind of morbid torture is what that God-given right entailed, then being a woman was worse than hell.

If she could have even the slightest control over anything, it would be giving that devil a baby. She would do whatever was necessary to keep him from such a gift. If she had to jam a knitting needle into her womb, she would do it.

Once she felt there was nothing left to rinse out, Grace dried herself off and shoved the corner of a towel inside her, wincing from the burning pain of already traumatized flesh. It was the best she could do without getting her hands on some of that Lysol. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and soaked the corner of the towel in Hydrox before rinsing it in cold water to remove the small stains of blood from the brilliant white cloth. With the now stain-free towel, Grace winced as she sat herself gently on the bed to slip on clean stockings. Whatever lay ahead couldn't be any worse than she'd just endured.

Surely not.

CHAPTER 20

*Sunday, December 31, 1933 to
Tuesday, January 2, 1934*

On their way back to New York City, Grace had hardly said a word, but fortunately, she didn't need to—the long drive's worth of conversation was filled with Cesare's excited ramblings over baby names for the son he demanded she give him. Of course, he ultimately insisted that his son bear his own name. He also made it clear that if she were to give him a daughter, she'd be failing him, and he'd try again and again until she got it right. Should she actually fall pregnant with his child, Grace decided she'd beg Mr. Parisi for whatever assistance he could offer to rid herself of that potential nightmare. Surely he wouldn't go back on his promise to help her on account of the new ring on her finger, right?

Darkness fell before they arrived at Cesare's mansion in the city. It was such a soulless, garish place in contrast to the warm, welcoming wood of Mr. Parisi's home. Something sinister hung in the frigid winter air, sending a chill down her spine. For a moment, she thought she might've heard the sounds of a struggle coming from inside the home, but she chalked it up to paranoia and exhaustion.

Over supper that evening, Grace sat across from Cesare at the dining table, withering in uncomfortable silence.

“Will I still be able to work at the Starling Room?” she asked, hoping to break the tension. “I really do enjoy dancing with the girls.” *And it’ll give me a small reprieve from you...*

“Yes, Mrs. Giordano. For a while, at least.” A slow smile crept across his face. “I still have business to attend to without you in my way, and you’ll have...your *own* business I’ll be expecting you to take care of.”

Business? Grace’s mouth dried. Hadn’t he already put her through enough, already? Was he expecting her to do his dirty work for him? All manners of possibilities raced through her mind, each one more sinister than the last. She smiled and nodded at him across the long table as a dutiful wife ought to, though she was hell-bent on defying him if it meant bringing harm to another person. She tried to get him to explain what he had planned for her, but he didn’t respond, allowing ample time for the tension to build instead. The clock ticking on the wall cut through the eerie silence. Each noisy sway of the pendulum grated at her nerves.

Tick.

Tock.

TICK.

TOCK.

TICK.

TOCK.

The unending ‘ticking’ felt like nails being driven into her eardrums. Grace clenched her fork until her knuckles had gone white, feeling rising blood pressure pounding against the inside of her skull. When the clock finally chimed on the hour, she startled and dropped the silver utensil from her grip.

“Oh, my. It’s six in the evening, dear. Shall I go back to the Starling Room, tonight?”

“No. Not on New Year’s Eve, Mrs. Giordano.”

For every time he used that name, Grace dug her fingernails deep into the flesh of her palms. The condescending pet-name “sweet cheeks” was far less agonizing, but he couldn’t resist reminding her of his newfound ownership.

“When will I be able to return?”

“If you’re a good girl tonight, maybe I’ll let you go back tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She slumped in her chair. “So, what do you have planned for us ton—”

“Anna!” He slammed his fist down on the table. “Do you think you could keep your trap shut for *five minutes*?! You open that mouth one more time—I’ll fill it with something that’ll keep you nice and quiet.”

She cowered under his snarl. What little appetite she had before had all but vanished. None of the four servants standing against the walls could even look at her anymore.

Well, if he wanted to play that game, then she’d play it right back.

Grace lifted her head to meet his eyes, fluttering her lashes at him and biting her lip. “*My*, I’m not quite sure what you mean, dear. Maybe you could show me?”

His back stiffened at her unexpected challenge.

Perhaps dangling sexual favors was something she could count on to disarm him. If Cesare hadn’t minded assaulting her in front of Mr. Parisi, surely a little oral copulation in front of his servants wouldn’t be of any concern. If she could get him to want it in her mouth instead of her cunny, tonight, maybe it could delay his attempts at impregnating her for another day while she tried to come up with a better plan to avoid conceiving his child.

Grace rose from her chair and took a few long, sensual strides toward him. He eyed her curiously before she pulled his chin up and smashed her mouth against his, just the way he

liked it—aggressive and sloppy. When she pulled away, his eyes widened in surprise at her audacity.

“That’s right. You like that, *husband?*” she whispered. Grace knelt down on her knees and pulled at the buttons on his trousers before Cesare interrupted her mission and grabbed at her arms to pull her into his lap. Just then, a couple of Cesare’s men barged in, and the servants quietly filed out of the room.

“Ready?” Cesare inquired.

One of the men nodded.

“Right, then. Get up, Mrs. Giordano.” He smacked her on the ass. “I have a surprise for you that I think you’re going to love.”

Disappointed that her plan had been foiled by their interruption, Grace did as he ordered. She placed her palm in the crook of his arm and followed him out of the room toward a hefty metal door that she suspected would lead to the basement, and his men followed closely behind. Wherever they were going, it certainly wouldn’t involve sex. For that, she was relieved, but such relief would be short-lived. When Cesare opened the vault-like door, the pungent iron-sweet scent of blood invaded her sinuses. Dizzied by the sudden rush of nausea, she grasped at the railing leading down a set of carpeted stairs to steady herself. Once they had reached the landing at the bottom, Cesare led her toward a tucked-away space at the back edge of the basement, revealing another steel door which he swung open with sadistic glee.

Inside that hidden room, there was no floor—only dirt... and inside that dirt foundation, two rectangle holes had been dug—each one with a large pile of fresh soil perched beside them.

Two men knelt side by side at the foot of each respective hole, both with their hands rope-tied behind their backs and burlap sacks over their heads.

“What...” Her knees nearly gave way.

““*What?*” No, no, no. I think you mean ‘*Who?*’ Well, my dear wife, these are what I like to call *traitors*, and I do believe you may know one of them,” he informed with delight.

“What?” Her mouth dried. “I-I don’t know what you mean —”

Cesare tugged the hood off the first man. “One of Parisi’s men,” he gestured toward the battered victim. “Do you know him?”

Grace shook her head. Even if she had known the man, she doubted she’d have been able to recognize him through the blood obscuring his swollen face. Despite the swelling deforming his features, it was painfully obvious the man’s jaw was severely broken. The man trembled through staggered breaths.

“I don’t.... What is this? Cesare, please, you’re scaring me.”

One Cesare’s men stepped forward to hand him a revolver.

“Cesare, no!” Grace reached for his gun-toting hand and pulled it down to his side. Desperate to prevent the bloodshed, Grace stared up at him with pleading eyes.

“Please, Cesare! I swear on my life that I don’t know him. I wouldn’t have a clue if he works for Mr. Parisi, but even if he did, you don’t have to do this. Please, I’m begging you, don’t do it! Look at him! I think you’ve made your point, enough!”

““*I don’t have to do this?*”” Cesare’s blackened eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared.

“Mrs. Giordano,” he growled, “I think you’re right. *I* don’t have to do this. *You* do.”

“What?!” Grace backed away in horror. “No, no, no, no, no, I can’t, sir, please, no!” Her eyes filled with tears.

Cesare wrenched her arm and slapped the gun into her hand, using her finger to pull the trigger. Before she even had the chance to scream, brain matter sprayed out against the wall.

The poor fellow went limp, and his body fell backward into the hole, taking with him a piece of her spirit. Frozen still, Cesare removed the gun from her hands in preparation for his next reveal.

“So you didn’t know that fool? Fine. I’ll accept that.” Cesare pulled the hood off the other hostage and glanced at her with a jubilated smile.

“Maybe you know this one?”

“No!” Grace shrieked before hurling herself at Luca, cradling his bloodied body tightly against her new wool dress.

“Cesare, he isn’t...he’s not! Please believe me!” Grace sobbed uncontrollably.

Cesare marched over and dragged her through the dirt away from his captive, taking care not to touch the man’s blood she’d become drenched in. When he held the revolver out to her, she coiled away.

“I can’t do it! He’s my friend and he’s done nothing wrong! Please don’t make me do this, please, please, please!” Her voice droned through desperate cries.

“Look at him, Anna!” he snarled. “Luca Serra is one of my enemy’s top-ranking men! How in the fuck did you not know this?!”

“How did I not know? How *could* I?!” She pulled herself up from the dirt and stood fiercely before him.

“Did you forget that I’m just a stupid woman?! How often do you men ever explain anything to us?! For God’s sake, I didn’t know I was getting married until it was already happening! How did I not know that, you ask? Because you—a *MAN*—didn’t tell me! You didn’t tell me you were going to try and get me pregnant until after the deed was done! You didn’t tell me you were going to force me to kill people, but here we are! You don’t tell me *anything*! So why the hell would he? Women live in the shadows of a man’s dealings! You know as well as I do that it’s not our role to be informed!”

Cesare whipped the back of his hand across her face with a loud crack. Grace grabbed at her stinging cheek and looked toward Luca for guidance.

“Anna...he’s right.” Luca spit the blood from his mouth. “I’m with Parisi.”

“No! Don’t you dare say that!” Her shoulders heaved through anguished tears. “You’re lying!”

Luca lifted his chin and stared boldly at the man behind her.

“Giordano,” he rasped. “Don’t make her do your dirty work. She’s innocent. She didn’t even know my real name ‘til now. I never involved her in my business.”

Cesare scowled and grabbed a fistful of Grace’s hair, wrenching her head back. “Listen to me you little bitch! If you don’t kill that viper, that means you’re a traitor, too, and you will both die tonight. *Do you understand me?!*”

The thunderous roar of his voice sent an excruciating ringing through her eardrums.

“What? But...but I...”

“Anna,” Luca breathed, “you have so much life left to experience. There’s no way to save me. Please, don’t die in a hole with me. I need you to live.”

“No...” Grace began to feel the familiar sensation of her soul escaping its earthly body. The horrors of Giordano’s world became easier to face when she just turned it all off...

Once more, Cesare placed the gun in her trembling hand. Numb and expressionless, Grace knelt down and set the gun on the ground. Gently as she could, she took Luca’s battered face into her palms for a kiss goodbye, and rested her forehead against his, letting her tears fall onto his bloodied cheeks.

“Please forgive me, darling” she wept in a hush. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Promise me you’ll survive.” He sniffed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep you safe...Grace,” he murmured so softly that

only she could hear.

“I don’t want to do this. I don’t want you to die... I need you to stay with me.”

Through the pouring tears, her vision of him was little more than a blurred silhouette.

“Listen to me, if you don’t do this, I will never forgive you. You have too much to live for. Please.” He looked deep into her eyes, imploring her to carry out the inevitable.

“I promise you, this will be mercy compared to what he will do to me if you don’t—I will suffer, and he will kill you without hesitation. *Do it.*”

“What if I mess up and cause you so much pain? How am I supposed to do it?”

The sound of a metallic click echoed into her ear. “Like this.” Cesare pushed the cold barrel of a gun against her temple. She squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of a quick demise...

Click.

Silence filled the air for a moment before she realized she was still alive. Grace prodded at her right temple expecting to find a bullet wound, but there was nothing.

“It was empty, Mrs. Giordano. I’m losing my patience. You have until the count of ten.”

“Wait! Please!”

“Do it, Anna!” Luca yelled.

“Wait, no, what do I do? Oh God, where do I aim?!” Grace cried.

In a panic, she felt around for the gun she’d set down in the dirt, wasting three precious seconds before finding it.

“Listen to me, Anna,” Luca called out to her. “Put the barrel in my mouth and aim it up toward the back of my head, then close your eyes, count to three, and pull the trigger. It’ll be

quick. I won't even feel it, I promise. You can do this. Remember what I said—*you have nothing to worry about*. I love you, Anna.”

She wiped the tears from Luca's cheeks, and nodded. “I love you too, and I'm so sorry I couldn't save you the way you've saved me.”

Luca leaned his head back and opened his mouth to her. Her hands trembled, but she followed his instruction and put as much space between her body and the gun as she could manage.

“I love you, and I'm so sorry, *Tony*.” Grace whispered.

She closed her eyes and counted silently to three...

Bang!

As soon as the gun went off, Grace threw it to the floor and pushed past Cesare to escape his labyrinth of death, taking the stairs two and a time and somehow finding the way to her bedroom through blurred vision. She collapsed before the toilet and wretched until there was nothing left in her stomach but the disgust for the murder she'd just been forced to commit.

Her stomach emptied, Grace sat blankly on the tile floor for what felt like hours. She hadn't the faintest idea what time it was. Was it New Year's Day, now? Did it even matter anymore? When her mind finally went quiet, she pulled herself up off the bathroom floor and used the remainder of her strength to remove her soiled clothing before slipping into bed. Under the covers, she lay numb, staring blankly at a darkened ceiling before Cesare entered the room and sat quietly beside her.

“I'm proud of you, Anna.”

“Proud?” she spat. “You made me kill a friend!”

“He was not a friend. He—”

“He took care of me and protected me!”

“He sold you!” Cesare growled.

Grace sat up on her elbows and glared at him. “Tony picked me up on Saturdays so I could catch my breath away from the club. He comforted me whenever I was scared. If it weren’t for him, I would’ve run away on the first day and you never would’ve met me.”

“He was a dangerous man—a traitor to you!” When his wife flinched, he took a calming breath and lowered his voice.

“Anna, he knew you were with me while he was working for Parisi. One day, you will understand just how much he risked your safety. Now let’s get you cleaned up. We need to get that filthy blood off of you—it’s all over your damn hands.” Cesare grimaced.

She lacked the will to protest, so she let him drag her into his bathroom, where he’d already filled a tub with steaming water. Once she sank below the suds, Cesare dipped a cup into the bath and poured it over her head, washing her as gently as a newborn. Had it been anyone but him, the gesture might have been soothing, but his “caring” hands only made her skin crawl.

The following morning, sunlight bathed the room in a glowing warmth—blissful and serene—the ultimate antithesis to the web of darkness encroaching upon her soul. Grace sat herself up against the headboard and swaddled herself in blankets, fighting to convince herself that last night had been nothing but a terrible nightmare, but she couldn’t do it. Her dreams had been riddled with the most realistic flashes of death and gore. Only a person who’d witnessed such atrocities could ever conjure up such vivid and violent nightmares. She used to hear stories of the ways men would relive their experiences during the Great War. For some, the images of violence were so deeply scarred into their subconscious, a

peculiar sound, or the faint wafting of a particular scent would throw them head-first into the memory without warning or cause, leaving prideful men in shambles on the ground. Pure, unadulterated violence was the sort of thing the mind simply couldn't erase. It becomes a part of you—a tumor that can never be removed. How did those men get by? Perhaps the only thing anyone can do is learn to live with it, and pray the tumor doesn't grow to the point that it devours any remaining essence of the person you once were before witnessing such horrors.

But ignorance and innocence are finite resources. Once truth is known, it can never be unknown. Innocence is innate within us from the moment we breach our mother's womb. Throughout the course of our lives, experience chips away innocence to make room for wisdom—once it is gone, it may nevermore be acquired. But when left unchecked—anger, distrust, and cynicism will fester and grow, for those qualities are *always* in surplus.

Weighted down by the blossoming of her own rage and cynicism, Grace sluggishly dressed herself for the day and found her monstrous husband sitting in his bedroom with a newspaper in-hand. He couldn't have looked more at peace with himself if he tried.

“Happy New Year, Mrs. Giordano.” His tone was much too cheerful for the occasion, but she knew that torture and murder didn't phase him, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise.

“Happy New Year,” she rasped. “About yesterday...I—”

“Nothing happened yesterday.”

“But—”

“I said *nothing...happened*,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

“Yes, sir.”

Her face fell. She didn't know what she should have expected. Why would he care that she was struggling with guilt and self-hatred? He only cared about himself and what he stood to gain from any form of interaction—and discussing

someone else's inner turmoil for the sake of selflessness simply wasn't profitable for him.

Grace sat in the chair beside him and picked at her fingernails. Just then, Cesare lowered the newspaper into his lap and obnoxiously cleared his throat to gain her attention.

"Yes, dear?" Grace didn't look up.

"You're going to do something for me."

Anxiety brewed in her belly. "What is it?"

"You're going back to the Starling Room this afternoon. I have a job for you. You're going to earn Parisi's trust. You're going to get him to spend some time with you—you know, get him to take you home and all that jazz."

No... This had to be some kind of sick and twisted joke. Her stomach fell. She'd just murdered his best friend. How could she even look at him after what she'd done? How could he ever forgive her? She couldn't even forgive her damned self!

"Forgive me, sir, but might I ask why?"

"You don't need to understand my motivations. Just do what I ask of you."

"How...how do you want me to do it?"

"By any means necessary that won't make me question if you've got his bastard child growing inside your gut."

Grace's cheeks flushed at the mere implication of sex with Mr. Parisi, despite his words containing a stern warning not to engage in such behaviors.

"Mr. Parisi wouldn't—"

"Goddammit, Anna!" Cesare slammed his paper onto the table.

Grace startled and sank deeper into her chair.

"Stop being so damned stupid! Any man alive would fuck you silly! Parisi's already got eyes for you, so make him trust

you!”

“Okay,” she muttered. “So, should I dance with him and things like that? What if he tries to kiss me or he wants to...”

“Use your damned mouth for all I care. But remember this, wife—your *fica* is *mine*.”

Grace didn’t know what the word meant, but there was enough context to infer its translation.

She wasn’t sure what his intentions were, but she knew it wouldn’t be good. Even if Mr. Parisi no longer wished to speak to her, she would protect him from that monster at all costs. She refused to let Cesare steal anything else away from the man she loved, even if Mr. Parisi no longer had it in his heart to care for her.

“So what explanation shall I give for coming back? Won’t anyone become suspicious of my return now that we’ve married?”

“Just tell them some business came up,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Tell them I’ll be gone for a few days and I insisted my wife spend some time in the company of her *lady friends* while I’m away.”

“Okay... Sir?”

“Yes, Anna?” he replied with annoyance.

“Um...what’s going to happen to Tony’s body?”

Cesare sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose “I told Parisi he’d have *Luca Serra* back today, and as a man of my word, he’ll go back today. Now, I don’t want to hear another peep from you about this, do you understand me?”

Grace nodded.

“Great. I’m glad we could come to an agreement, Mrs. Giordano. So, whenever you’re ready, I’ll drop you off at the Starling Room. The sooner we take care of a few things, the sooner I can get back to my beautiful wife and knock you up with my son.”

Of course. Enzo fucking knew it. In the name of holiday spirit, he hoped Giordano would spare Luca from a brutal dismemberment, but that was just ignorant, wishful thinking. Giordano's idea of holiday spirit was instead making sure pieces of his best friend were to arrive in a variety of colorfully wrapped parcels delivered directly to Luca's doorstep like belated Christmas gifts. Luca deserved so much better than this.

It was times like these when Enzo found himself pouring with gratitude for Gino. Gino had taken it upon himself to keep a watchful eye on Luca's residence to intercept any potential deliveries of desecrated remains, and then he handled all the arrangements for an elegant silver casket and Luca's final transport to Enzo's country villa for a proper burial. Enzo hadn't needed to lift a finger, nor did he have to bear witness to the gruesome mess that was made of his sacrificial brother. He could never thank Gino enough for his efforts which spared him from further emotional pain.

Though he felt cowardly for declining to view the body, for the first time in his life, Enzo had the chance to preserve the memory of a loved one—free from the horrific imagery of a bloodied corpse. He'd seen the bullet holes in his parent's bodies, just as he had with his wife and son, and that was more than enough. There was no reason to subject himself to that again for any reason beyond self-torment. His final memory of Luca would be that of a living, breathing, smiling friend who always stood tall by his side in the face of devastation.

Alone in his den soaking up the radiant heat from the fireplace, Enzo pulled out his watch and checked the time. The

silence filling his home was maddening. A distraction was most certainly in order, and there was more than enough time to catch a few poker games at the Starling Room. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but if he stayed put any longer, it wouldn't be long before he started breaking shit.

The drive to the club lightened his mood just enough to keep his head about him. Enzo figured it was unlikely Grace would be there, but in some pathetic way, simply being inside those walls made him feel nearer to her, even when she wasn't present.

Stone-face and alone, Enzo strode casually inside before Madame Molly spotted him and flagged him down. Something in his stomach twisted. When he approached, he noticed the unusual lack of color in her complexion, and the absence of her typically abrasive demeanor. Whatever she wanted to tell him, it couldn't be good. As long as Grace was all right...

"Mr. Parisi, I..." She swallowed. "I think you should know that Anna is to be referred to as Mrs. Giordano, now."

No... His face paled.

"They wedded just a couple of days ago. She will continue working here for a little while longer. Now that she's a married woman, I am obliged to ask that all of our patrons mind their manners and their hands." Her tone was suggestive of something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"Is she here?"

"Yes." In a leading manner, Madame Molly flicked her eyes upstairs toward Grace's bedroom. Enzo quickly caught onto her intentions—the woman was directing him to where he could find Miss Colby... but why?

"Just remember to refer to Mrs. Giordano as such. She is such a gentle girl..." She shook her head, her expression tight and distraught.

"Well, if you'll excuse me Mr. Parisi, I have other matters to attend to."

Madame Molly sped away.

Mrs. Giordano. It couldn't be...

Enzo raced up the stairs two at a time and knocked on the door with a painted number four on it. His heart overflowed with relief when the door opened, revealing the pale face of the woman he loved, still alive in one piece. Though the hallway was empty, Enzo shoved his way in, closing and locking the door behind him before anyone else had the chance to see him. When creeping around the lion's den, one can never be too cautious.

Miss Colby pressed her back to the wall and hung her head in shame.

"I need to tell you a few things." Her voice cracked.

He caught a brief glimpse of the purple discoloration on her right cheekbone and moved in closer to examine it.

"Miss Colby," he rasped, "what happened?" Enzo didn't bother to hide his concern for her.

"I'm...I'm not Miss Colby anymore, sir," her lip quivered. "I'm Anna Giordano, now."

"No, no, no," he cooed, "you're still Grace Colby. Anna Giordano isn't real. I only see you, *Miss Colby*."

"You're wrong," she strained in a hiss. "I *am* Mrs. Giordano, and I'm a murderer now, too! Cesare he... He made me pull the trigger on..." Her knees gave way.

Enzo hurriedly wrapped her in his arms to keep her from falling. Her frailty sent daggers into his heart.

"It was me, sir. I did it. I..." Grace buried her face into his chest and began to sob. "I killed Luca. Cesare said he'd kill me if I didn't, and Luca begged me to, and I hate myself for it! I-I should have died with him, sir... I should have died with him..."

He expected that she'd have witnessed Luca's death, but he didn't think she'd be forced to do it herself. If it had been

anyone else delivering this confession, it would've been an eye for an eye. He would've killed in a heartbeat for revenge. Giordano knew how much this would tear at him. It would've been easy to hunger for vengeance if Luca was murdered by Giordano, or any one of his other men, but if it was carried out by a helpless woman faced with an impossible choice, that would muddy the waters of his morality. Surely Giordano was testing him. The bastard wanted to see if he'd stoop to his level—would Enzo kill an innocent woman for taking the life of a friend? Without question, the answer would be: *No*.

Miss Colby was no exception. He could feel it in his bones how much this had broken her, and it crushed him to see her in such a darkened state of mind. She didn't deserve this, and he never anticipated she would leave this mission with blood on her hands. He never wanted this for her. As Enzo tightened his arms around her, tears pricked his eyes as much for the loss of her innocence as it was for the loss of brotherhood.

He carefully scooped her up and climbed onto the narrow bed, leaning his back against the wall with her cuddled into his lap. Enzo never wanted to let go of her again. For once, the rage he held for Giordano couldn't subjugate the love he felt for her. Despite his boiling anger, his only care in the world right now was for the broken woman in his arms.

“Tell me what happened,” he asked softly.

Miss Colby curled up tighter against him.

“Cesare took me downstairs to the basement of his home.... There were these two holes dug into the dirt, and...there were two tied-up men with hoods over their heads, and one of the men...it was...it was Luca. He was badly hurt. Cesare knew he was with you, and he told me I had to shoot him, or we'd both die, and...and Luca begged me to do it. He said it would be an act of mercy...so I...I...” Her tears overwhelmed her ability to speak.

A familiar, calming numbness seeped into Enzo's body. Cesare wouldn't stop until he destroyed her too. He tightened his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

Perhaps this was Giordano's plan to destroy Enzo from the inside out—through the destruction of another innocent woman. If that was his mission, then Giordano was winning.

Enzo traced his fingers up and down the length of Miss Colby's back, mulling over why Giordano would've returned her to the Starling Room after finding out who Luca was. Whatever the reason was, he knew there would be a sinister motive behind it, but Enzo decided she would no longer be used as his pawn. Giordano wasn't going to win this fight, especially at the cost of Miss Colby's soul. This shit was ending *today*.

"I know what I am now," she whispered. "I'm a ruined whore, the Devil's wife, and now I'm a murderer. I killed your best friend and I can never tell you how sorry I am. I will never forgive myself, and I understand if you hate me and want nothing more to do with me. I... You should also know that I'm supposed to get you to—"

"You're wrong," he said. "I could never, ever hate you. You were given an impossible choice—the hardest anyone could ever be forced to make. Luca was already gone—" The words caught in his throat. "—before the gun was even in your hands. If you hadn't done it, Giordano would have made him suffer, and I would have lost you, too."

"But I wish he would've killed me because now I have to get you to trust me and take me to your house, and I haven't the faintest idea what he wants! Maybe Cesare wants me to kill you, but I wouldn't dare! He's trying to use me to hurt you somehow, and I don't want to—I don't want to hurt anyone ever again."

"Shh," he said, rocking her gently, "It's going to be okay. I swear to you, I will not let him use you to do his bidding ever again. No more."

"How? I'm stuck with him now, and even if I could leave him, who would want a divorced woman?" She lifted her blonde head to peer into his dark-chocolate eyes.

“Cesare, he...” Her face heated with shame. “He came into my bedroom after the wedding and forced himself on me...and it hurt...it hurt so much. He...” She swallowed hard, “This time he finished himself off...inside of me. What if I get pregnant? I’m so scared. I don’t want to have his baby.”

“Oh, sweet Grace...” Enzo’s jaw clenched with fury at the news of Giordano’s assault on her. The bags under her eyes and the pain on her face broke his heart.

“Should it ever come down to that—I will hire the best doctors for you if that’s what you want.” He stroked his thumb over the tear falling down her bruised cheek. “I promised you that I would keep by your side, and I meant that.”

“It wouldn’t matter. He’ll just do it again” She fell limp against him. All the fight left in her seemed to have vanished.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be pitying myself. For all that I’ve done and all that I’ve taken from you, I deserve to suffer. I deserve to be alone.”

“You didn’t take anything from me. Giordano has taken from me...almost everyone that I have ever loved. He used you as an extension of himself to take my best friend, but that wasn’t your fault,” he sighed. “I won’t let him take you from me, too.”

She looked up at him defeatedly. “What does it matter? He’s going to kill me one way or another. I can assure you he will. I don’t think I’m going to make it out of this alive, sir... and I’m not too sure that I care anymore. I’m not worthy of a life full of happiness and love. I no longer see the point in fighting so hard to live.”

Enzo kissed her forehead and looked into her pale blue eyes. The light they once held had dimmed. It pained him terribly to see her become so crestfallen. He refused to watch that fire burning within her be reduced to ashes. She had to know that there are men out there who’d still love her the way he did.

“The woman I love...” he started before her gaze suddenly fell to her lap.

“No, no, Grace, please look at me...” He pulled her chin up before continuing. “Do you remember when I told you I didn’t think she knew of my affections for her?”

She stared blankly at him, clearly not understanding what he was trying to say. He had to pick his words carefully. He wanted to let her know the truth, but he needed to tell that truth without giving her hope of the relationship he could never provide. By God, if he didn’t want to give her everything her tender heart could ever want... He gazed into her baby-blues, so devoid of any hope for herself. Enzo took her hand and brought her thin fingers to his lips.

“You wanted me to tell her how I feel, right?” he spoke softly.

She nodded.

“Well, I told you once before, but you didn’t hear me. Please, listen to me, now, Grace—the woman who ran off with my heart is *you*.”

“No, that’s impossible. I...” She shook her head and bit her lips together. “I refuse to believe that! If I believe that you love me, then I couldn’t leave you like I promised I would once this was all over.”

“You don’t have to believe me for it to be true. I want you more than you could ever know, but can’t condemn you to this life. I see the way my world is already breaking your spirit, and I couldn’t bear to subject you to a lifetime of this weight. You deserve—”

“Is that what this is about? Whether or not either of us is ‘deserving’ of the other? That’s a load of horse-shit!” she snapped. “I deserve nothing, Mr. Parisi, and *you* deserve a hell of a lot better than a stupid whore who murdered—”

He pressed his thumb over her lips. “Miss Colby, you are worthy of love. Believe me. You work your charms on any man you come across. As much as I dream of a life where I

have you all to myself, I cannot in good-faith condemn you to the life of a mob moll, but I can assure you that you are *not* condemned to a life alone.”

She pulled his hand to her chest, leaving it to rest over her heart.

“What if I wanted to be a mob moll because that would mean spending my life with you? Are you telling me that you suddenly possess the authority to tell me what I can and cannot have?”

There it was—that fire that he adored. He wanted a life with her more than anything, but a life with him meant hiding herself away for the rest of her days. The heart was always so impulsive. He was never interested in telling her what to do, but she couldn’t possibly know what was best for her.

“I can’t let this happen, Miss Colby. It’s not what’s best for you. I never meant to fall as hard as I have, but it was far too easy to lose myself in the idea of you. Believe me, you’ll never be lacking in men fighting for your heart.”

“How would you know what’s best for—”

A sudden knock on the door interrupted them. Miss Colby jumped to her feet and scattered frantically about the room. Just as he had done as a young man sneaking around with the Protestant minister’s daughter, Enzo dropped to the floor and scooted underneath the bed to hide, and Miss Colby dropped the blanket down to conceal him.

Miss Colby tiptoed to the door and opened it. Madame Molly stepped inside and folded her arms.

“Please, be careful. Mr. Parisi is here tonight. So, you’re going onstage tonight, after all. Grab your things and come to the dressing room to get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Miss Colby sniffled. “I’ll be right down.”

“Dear, I... Will you have tea with me soon?” Madame Molly’s tone was unexpectedly somber—maternal, even.

“This turn of events...it’s—”

“It’s been a lot to swallow all at once. I didn’t know it was going to happen.”

“I know. We’ll discuss it later.” Just then, the many years of strife seemed to have caught up with Madame Molly, and she may as well have aged a decade in a matter of seconds. Madame sighed. “Well, then. Be downstairs within ten minutes, all right?”

Miss Colby closed the door after her and listened to the sound of retreating footsteps.

“Madame’s gone,” she whispered.

Enzo crawled out from under her bed looking disheveled after some of his hair caught on the mattress springs. He sat on the edge of the bed and hunched over, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Sir,” she choked out, “I’m so sorry for everything. I don’t know what to do anymore, and I’m so scared.”

Enzo glanced up and found her hugging herself for comfort. “Grace...” he murmured, holding a hand out for her.

She hurried over to him and hugged his head into her chest. Enzo wrapped his arms around her waist and listened to the quickened beating of her heart. If he could freeze this moment, he would. Letting her go felt as if the air was being sucked from his lungs, but unfortunately, duty was calling, and the time he had left to drink in her warmth was fleeting. When he rose to his feet and placed a soft kiss on her forehead, a sudden jolt of fear coursed through his body.

“Miss Colby, I need to get you out of here tonight. I’m calling this plan off. We’ll find another way to get the job done.”

“All right,” she nodded weakly. “Meet me back here when I leave the stage. I’ll have my things packed and ready to go. We won’t have much time, so we’ll have to move quickly.”

Grace floated absentmindedly through each of the night's dances. By now, she could've landed each shimmy and step in her sleep, and she was grateful for the muscle memory—with her troubled thoughts swirling in a muddled haze, there was no way she could've performed, otherwise. Despite the painted-on smile she donned under the blinding stage lights, she felt pitiful...brittle, hopeless, and defeated. She'd given up everything for this mission, and she failed miserably. It had all been for nothing, and there was no truth more excruciating than this one. Grace had never known a feeling so low, and it frightened her knowing she could only slip further away if she just surrendered herself entirely to the depths of this hellscape.

What would come next? She felt as if she were staring down a dark and narrow crossroad in which both directions were equally shrouded in uncertainties—each one utterly bereft of identifiable signs that would indicate which path led to a satisfactory conclusion. In the far-off distance, she saw the broad figure of the man she so cherished. He stood in the shadows, cloaked in a heavy mist, but neither of the two roads guided her toward him. This man had just told her that he loved her, but she didn't deserve him...and even if she was worthy of his heart, he begged for her to run the other way—far away from him. What a cruel and twisted comedy life truly was...forever dangling our deepest desires just out of our reach.

Midway through the show, Grace's eyes landed upon the man she loved. In spite of herself, she couldn't help but smile...that was, until life decided upon another torturous joke.

Seated beside the man with the key to her heart was the man whose presence alone made her sick with revulsion.

Cesare Giordano hadn't gone anywhere. No, he was sitting right next to an icy and inscrutable Mr. Parisi.

CHAPTER 21

Tuesday, January 2, 1934 to

Saturday, January 6, 1934

Enzo tapped the ashes of his cigar into the crystal ashtray and swirled the whiskey in his glass absentmindedly. The notes of toasted oak and vanilla with a hint of cherry were divine. It was the best money could buy—as was the stick of Cuban tobacco between his fingers, but he took little pleasure from any of it. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone other than Giordano had been watching him, and the simple fact alone of Giordano's unexpected appearance had all but set his nerves ablaze.

The only good thing about that bastard's arrival was his insistence that Enzo be seated at his special table closest to the stage. That table was only ever reserved for Giordano, and it really was the best view in the house—the stage was less than fifteen feet away, and Enzo didn't pull his eyes off her for a second. The lights bounced off Miss Colby's silky golden curls, giving the effect of a glowing halo around her head. No matter the circumstances, he couldn't help but find himself hypnotized by her beauty.

For the final act of the night, she galloped on stage wrapped in a slinky ostrich feather boa. The fullness of those feathers were the only thing standing in the way of the crowd's view of her naked breasts. A nude silk skirt waterfalled from her hips, offering up the mouthwatering illusion of bare skin. She was the total embodiment of the birth of Venus, rising from her shell, dazzling each and every onlooker in her wake. He'd seen the act before, but he never tired of it. In just a moment, that ostrich boa would fall to the floor, and in one suave

motion, the other dancers would extend out their arms to mimic the gentle rolling of ocean waves—deliberately placing their hands in a way that just barely obscured the view of her nipples. She was the divine centerpiece, and the other dancers were there to act as her muses. Every man in attendance would have died just to have a piece of her, but she would leave them all thirsty and dry, just as she did every night.

His eyes danced along with her graceful movements across the stage—only getting ripped from the trance she'd lulled him into when disaster struck, providing all of the Starling's patrons with an unexpected show.

One of the dancers made a wrong step, and the heel of her shoe caught the hem of Miss Colby's floor-length skirt, ripping the delicate material to the floor and exposing her fully-nude figure to the biggest and baddest of New York City's underworld. Enzo's gaze remained fixed upon her terrified face, refusing to violate her the way he knew everyone else surely would. He clenched his jaw at the commotion unfolding around him. Men whistled and shouted as they gawked at the space between her thighs. They didn't care to notice the mortified look on her heated face. When she knelt down to pick up the remains of her skirt, their eyes met. He could sense the fear and humiliation burning within her, so he nodded ever slightly, encouraging her to pick herself up and continue.

He could tell by the way her shoulders relaxed a bit upon exhale that she'd received his silent reassurance.

She carefully picked up her boa and pulled it to her body in the shape of a large "V" that covered each of her private areas before finishing out the last few breaths of the dance.

He couldn't have been more proud of her just then for fighting so courageously through her fears. *She's got more sauce than a seasoned gangster*, he thought to himself.

"That Goddamned whore," Giordano muttered. *"Did you put her up to that, Parisi?!"*

Vincenzo glared at his nemesis. *“Tell me—when would I have had a chance to talk to your wife alone? And if I had managed to find a moment, how do you think I could have convinced a girl too shy to kiss you in front of me that she ought to show her body to a club full of men? Hm?”*

“That’s not an answer, Parisi!” Giordano growled. Several of his men drew their guns and aimed them at Enzo. Enzo’s men returned the favor.

“No. I did not put her up to this.” He shot an irritated glance at the man Miss Colby would be going home with if Enzo couldn’t get to her in time. He prayed with all his heart that she wouldn’t be on the receiving end of his wrath once the bastard had her alone.

“That’s my answer. Take it easy on her. What happened up there was an accident—nothing more.”

Enzo had no choice but to stay seated until after Giordano had taken Miss Colby and left, robbing him of any chance to talk with her and make a run for it. One of the hardest things he’d ever had to do was sit back and watch impassively as Giordano shouted at a frightened Miss Colby that they were going home, knowing full well that she was likely to get the beating of a lifetime later on. There was no feeling worse than the helplessness of being unable to protect the ones you love, but he simply couldn’t interfere without putting her life at risk. A man was supposed to stand beside his woman with unwavering honor and respect, wholly committed to protecting her by any means necessary—not doing so was the ultimate failure of his God-given duties.

As he walked out into the street toward his car, Enzo sucked the frigid January air deep into his lungs. The cold never bothered him. The overwhelming sensation of discomfort as the body communicated its need for survival

was grounding. The cold always pulled his mind from the depths of thought, back into the here-and-now.

Enzo climbed into his car and slipped the key into the slot behind the steering wheel. The sudden *click* of a gun cocking near his ear gave him pause.

“Move and I’ll blow your brains out.”

Enzo chuckled through his nose. He’d only heard that voice a couple of times before, but he remembered it well.

“You know I could kill you before you even had the chance to pull the trigger, right? Do you wish to speak like a couple of level-headed gentlemen, or would you rather your parents be forced to plan a funeral?”

“My parents are dead.”

“So are mine.” Enzo turned his head just enough to catch out of the corner of his eye the angered face of the man seated behind him—an ally who was convinced they were enemies. Nathaniel Donovan didn’t lower his gun, but Enzo could see there was more than enough hesitation in his eyes that he wasn’t in any real danger just yet.

“Walk up the street to the Waterford,” Mr. Donovan instructed. “I have a suite there. We’ll talk then.”

Enzo was in no mood to argue. Golden Boy surely had more than a few grievances to air out, and for good reasons, too. He certainly couldn’t blame him for his frustrations, though Enzo never quite took too kindly to threats and aimed weapons, but if he did anything to Mr. Donovan, Miss Colby would be devastated. Besides, he needed Golden Boy alive—he was a fine choice for Miss Colby once she was able to return to her life.

Enzo stepped out of the car and headed toward the Waterford Hotel, keeping his hands out of his pockets and by his side so that Donovan could see that he had no intent on pulling a gun on him. Donovan followed closely behind, and Enzo only hoped the man wasn’t stupid enough to keep his own gun aimed out in the open.

As the front entry of the hotel came into view, Enzo breathed a sigh of relief. The icy wind gusted through the spaces between each skyscraper, biting at the skin of his ears. When they marched into the hotel lobby, Enzo nodded at the attendant manning the front desk.

“Which room?” he called out to Mr. Donovan from over his shoulder.

“Pass the elevator. Keep heading towards the stairwell.”

The men climbed the five flights of stairs to the top floor in silence. Donovan couldn't see his reaction, but Enzo was impressed that the man held a penthouse suite in the grand Waterford hotel that he co-owned with a few of the dons from the other families.

“Stop—turn around.”

Enzo caught the room key Donovan tossed, surmising the idea was for him to open the door so Mr. Donovan could keep his gun properly aimed.

“Did you have that thing out when we were walking through the lobby?” Enzo chuckled.

“Just open the door,” the man huffed.

Enzo turned the handle and led the way in, slipping his coat off and slowly removing the gun from the holster on his chest to set it on the table. When they both took a seat in opposing leather chairs, Enzo gestured at the gun still in Mr. Donovan's hand.

“You can put that away now. I'm not looking for a fight. Miss Colby can't handle losing either of us right now.”

“No, I don't think I will.” Donovan thumbed-back the hammer of the revolver and aimed it point-blank at Enzo's head.

“You're the reason she's in that vile place, aren't you?” Donovan spit.

A strange feeling welled up within him. He'd stared down countless barrels throughout his life, but criminals and mob men always stood on the other end. Donovan, on the other hand, was an upstanding citizen—the police would probably declare the man a hero for his murderous deeds, maybe even present him as the guest of honor for the ticker-tape parade they would surely throw. No one would mourn the slaying of a mob boss. The city would rejoice.

When Donovan didn't lower the gun, Enzo realized that strange feeling was fear. Fear struck him often, but it was rarely a fear for his own life. Donovan had the capacity, the motive, and the world on his side...but had he nothing to lose? That was the defining question—good men are only driven to kill when nothing of importance was at stake.

Enzo took a deep breath and decided to address the burning question hanging between them.

“Mr. Donovan, you know her as well as I do that—”

“Do I?” he snarled. “She's in the Starling Room. You probably 'know 'her better than I ever will. Were you the one who did it?”

“Did what?”

“Ruined her. Ruined her life.”

Enzo's jaw twitched. “Ruined *her*? If you should think so lowly of her—”

“I could never think poorly of her, but I'm not the rest of this world. You know how society will look at her because of this.”

“Then we make sure she's surrounded by people who will love her and honor her, regardless of her past.” Enzo hunched over and propped his elbows onto his knees. He sincerely appreciated the man's dedication to protecting her.

“If you could put the gun down and speak with me man-to-man, I will tell you everything you wish to know.”

Mr. Donovan glared at him with hesitation before setting the gun down on the table beside him.

“Fine. Get the rum off the shelf over there and grab a couple of glasses,” he barked.

Unaccustomed to taking orders, Enzo didn't move at first. When Donovan looked at him expectantly, Enzo came to his senses and fetched the liquor. He poured out a couple glasses and handed one to his boyishly blond captor.

“Mr. Donovan, it seems to me that you were in attendance at the club tonight with the rest of us...I don't know how a man of such high moral integrity as yourself got past the front door, but I doubt you were there to admire the material of the dancers' garments, were you?” Enzo chuckled through his nose. “No. You're a man with needs, just as I am. Whatever your reason was for coming tonight, if you told me you didn't sneak a few glances at the scantily clad women, I wouldn't believe a word of it. Tell me something—does admiring the nude form of a brazen woman make you a 'ruined' man? Would you consider yourself 'ruined' for enjoying the pleasures of unwedded flesh?”

Mr. Donovan scowled and took a swig from his glass. “I had a lead that Grace might be there, so I went.”

“A lead?” Enzo shot him a look of feigned surprise. “So you've been looking for her then?”

“She was troubled in the days leading up to her running away. Was I supposed to let a friend disappear without a care? That's not how I operate.”

“Mm. I admire your loyalty. I live by the same principles, myself. Are you sure your interests didn't extend beyond the realm of 'friendly'?”

Mr. Donovan rolled his eyes. “I have a girlfriend.”

Enzo could sense the man's rising irritation, so he cut the jealousy-fueled interrogation short.

“Who is she?” Enzo cocked an eyebrow. He took Golden Boy as more the playboy type.

“Josephine Harrison,” Mr. Donovan replied. “She was Grace’s best friend.”

“*Was?*” Enzo prodded.

“A lot changed after Grace left, but Josephine still misses her.”

Enzo sipped his glass. “Mm. You know, for a time, I thought you and Miss Colby were closer than friends...”

Mr. Donovan laughed and shook his head. “No. I mean, I would have romanced her in a heartbeat, but she didn’t want that, and I was perfectly content with her kinship. Unfortunately for her, she seems to have poor taste in men.”

Enzo smirked at his back-handed comment. “I’d have to agree with you, there. She deserves far better than a man like myself.”

“Yes, she does.” Mr. Donovan shook his head in disapproval. “So, we’ve established why I was at the club tonight. What were *you* doing there?”

Enzo took another sip of spiced rum. “Mm. This is good stuff.”

“The best.”

Enzo nodded, momentarily losing himself in thought. There wasn’t much he could disclose without compromising their work.

“She’s got a mind of her own, Donovan.”

“I know. I miss that.” Mr. Donovan mumbled, appearing suddenly downtrodden.

“Then you know her well enough to know that she’s headstrong and impossibly persistent?”

Mr. Donovan chuckled. “I do. She’s impossible to reason with once she’s set her mind to something.”

“She is. Mr. Donovan, I’m not sure how involved you were, but the charity school and the Gotham Sanitarium are connected—so is your girlfriend’s father. Harrison is involved in all of this.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he sneered.

“Do you know about the missing children?”

“Only that they’re never found, and that Cesare Giordano has something to do with it. Grace and I never made it that far in our investigation before she took off.” Mr. Donovan leaned back in his seat.

“*Go on...*” the man gestured for him to continue.

Enzo hunched forward and looked him dead in the eye. “Did you know Miss Colby was almost one of them?”

Enzo noticed the concern in Donovan’s brow, so he rushed on.

“*Almost.* Do you understand now why she wants to stop Giordano? She was going to do it with or without my help. With it, I could keep an eye on her and keep her a little safer. Without it, she’d have been dead long ago and you’d have nothing to bury.”

“Why did she go to you instead of coming to me?”

“Because of a man named Riccardo Rossetti. She knew what she was dealing with. Between you and I, which one of us had the resources to handle someone working outside the boundaries of the law? The both of you were well outside of your element.”

Mr. Donovan pursed his lips. “Where is Rossetti now?”

“He threatened Miss Colby. So, I took care of him.” Enzo swirled the ice in his drink.

“I hope the bastard suffered.”

“There’s no pleasure in torturing a man.”

Mr. Donovan snorted. “I disagree.”

“How many men have you killed, Mr. Donovan? How many tortured? How many times have you had to drink yourself into oblivion just to keep their agonizing screams from haunting you at night? How many women have you made into widows—children left fatherless?” Enzo shook his head with guilt.

“There is no pleasure in it. Never. Even those who deserve their gruesome fate leave behind innocents who will mourn for them. Every man whose blood you shed is another family torn apart. You reap what you sow, Donovan. Don’t disagree with me so easily.”

Mr. Donovan sat in silence for a moment, soaking in the weight of his words.

“So what’s become of Grace?” Donovan finally asked.

Enzo chose his words carefully. One misstep and Miss Colby would pay the price, but she seemed to trust Mr. Donovan with her life, and Enzo trusted her judgment, so he took it on faith that whatever information he divulged in this room would remain confidential.

“She’s been working undercover in the Starling Room getting close to Giordano. She’s been searching for information on his dealings with human trafficking to see who she might find alive. But here’s the problem: White collar crime is the only thing the law will pop him for, so she is looking for any incriminating financial papers he’s got stashed. That’ll be how she gets him off the streets. Money talks,” Enzo shrugged. “If you want to help her, the best thing you can do is stay out of her way. If you try to stop her, she’ll go off and do what she wants behind our backs and without our protection. You tried stopping her from staking out at the WellLife Pharmaceutical factory, and look what happened—she did it anyway and nearly got herself killed. The only thing that saved her was the soft-hearted sentiments of a foolish man. All we have within our power to do is work with her and protect her.”

“Josephine knows that her father’s involved in some way,” Mr. Donovan added. “We’ve been investigating him—”

“Keep her out of it,” Enzo cut in. “Giordano and his men won’t hurt the daughter of an ally unless they see her as a threat. The less she knows, the safer she is. You saw how quickly this became dangerous for Miss Colby.”

Donovan bit the knuckle of his thumb and bounced his knee with rising frustration.

“Why?” he lifted his palms in the air. “Why don’t you just kill Giordano like you did Rossetti?”

“The first chance I have, I will.”

“My new informant took some photographs for me. I know what Giordano looks like, and you were sitting right next to him, tonight.” Mr. Donovan snarled. “Why didn’t you do it then? I’m not convinced you’re not involved. I think our articles were bringing too much heat, and you and your buddies needed to make sure this all got pinned on one man.”

Enzo pinched the bridge of his nose.

“*Maledizione...*” he mumbled. “An enclosed room surrounded by armed men is not the ‘chance’ you think it is. If I took a shot at him, the place would’ve erupted into a gun fight with over a hundred men. Do you understand how many innocent people would have died, including the girls on stage? Miss Colby? You can believe what you want about me, but I will tell you this—I’m no Saint Francis, but I would never, ever involve myself with *anything* that brought harm to innocent women and children. You have my word on that. I leave it up to you whether or not you choose to accept it.”

“What reasons do you have for wanting to take Giordano down? I understand her motivations, but as far as I’m concerned, you and him are cut from the same cloth, so why do you give a damn?” Mr. Donovan scowled.

“My motivations? He’s a goddamn menace. He killed my parents when I was a young man...” he trailed off, turning his gaze toward the window overlooking the city.

“Let me put it to you this way—among each of the five families, there had been rumors for years that Giordano had been committing heinous crimes against God...preying upon the most vulnerable and innocent the city has to offer. That bastard is a cancer to this world. Miss Colby recently discovered that he was also behind the murders of my wife and son, and less than forty-eight hours ago, he dismembered my best friend. So, why do I give a damn? Because that piece of shit has taken everything from me that I have ever loved, and I’m not the only one. You could say Miss Colby and I both share somewhat of a...*personal* vendetta.”

Mr. Donovan stared down at the glass in his hand. “I...”

Enzo set his glass down and lit up a cigarette.

“Mr. Donovan, I am not your enemy. When I met you at the Paradise Theatre, I knew we shared a common goal, and I trusted that you’d do your best to keep Miss Colby safe. I never wanted to involve her...” Enzo shifted uncomfortably in his seat from the semi-falsification of truth. “But she came to me so determined, I just couldn’t stop her. I’d like for you to work with me on this. I want to get her out of there, and your skills might come of good use.”

“Where is she now? I want to see her.”

Enzo shook his head. “Even if you could see her, I wouldn’t let you—not now, at least. She’s in such a fragile state at the moment, and anything that could throw off her focus is a serious risk to her life. I don’t think she could keep it together if she saw you again. She’s struggling enough as it is to keep up the façade, and she has to make it until I can get her out, which I need to do as soon as possible. Will you help me?”

“Help *you*?” Mr. Donovan hissed.

“One of my men was helping her, and his cover was blown. He’s dead now.” Enzo’s throat tightened. “Miss Colby’s a smart girl so she pulled through, but we still haven’t found any of his financial papers, and if you saw what happened to her on stage tonight... Giordano was furious. It’s too dangerous

for her to go on with this any longer. She's been walking through a minefield, and the bombs are beginning to blow off with more frequency for every day that passes by. I'm not asking for me. As a man of my pride, I prefer to rely on myself, but for this, I need all the trustworthy hands I can rally around. Help me, for her sake."

Mr. Donovan frowned. "All right, all right. I'll do it for her."

Enzo held out his hand in a truce and waited expectantly for his newfound ally to reciprocate. "She will get through this. She's strong."

"If she doesn't, I'll kill you—don't you forget it." A corner of Donovan's mouth twitched up at his own joke, only Enzo was too solemn to find the humor in it.

"Don't worry, Donovan. If she doesn't make it, I'll put the gun to my own head."

Grace would have rather been forced to relive that moment of humiliation on stage a thousand times over than fall prey again to Cesare's drunken rage the way she did that night. As soon as they got upstairs, he demanded she strip nude before ripping the black tie from his neck and bending her over the mattress and tying her wrists to the bedpost. He wanted to be sure she couldn't coil away when his leather belt landed upon her delicate skin with an excruciating bite and a blistering crack. She'd never been hit or beaten before until she met him. He didn't believe what happened was an accident, and every time he demanded an answer, her sincerest explanation would fall upon deaf ears, and he'd strike her again. Maybe if she'd told him what he wanted to hear, the yelling and the lashings could've ended sooner, but she refused to admit to such falsehoods. Once the skin on her bottom and the back of her

thighs were both bleeding raw, Cesare decided he'd had enough, and he proceeded on with his next round of torture.

Through frightened tears, Grace let her mind slip away to a sheltering, empty space, devoid of any pain, or inhumanity. Still bound to the bedpost, Cesare threw the rest of her trembling body onto the mattress and violated her in every way a drunk and impotent man could manage. She needed to be brutally reminded of her status as his property...*as if she could ever forget.*

Every inch of her pale, thin frame smarted and ached. When he finally passed out, Grace burrowed under the sheets to escape the foul scent of his fermented sweat. She had become so numbly accustomed to his abuse that she couldn't bring herself to cry anymore tears. She was desperate for sleep, but the pain kept her awake, so she just laid there, buried in darkness with her palms pressed over her ears, trying desperately to drown out the sound of his miserable snoring.

Some time later in the night, she heard Cesare stumble out of bed. Her journalist ears perked up and she listened for the direction of his sluggish footsteps leading across the room toward a squeaking cabinet hinge. In his drunken stupor, Cesare muttered a series of numbers to himself of which she took mental note. Each number from his mouth was accompanied by a faint, spinning, ticking noise. She heard the sound of him trying to pull at a stuck metal door, and he cursed under his breath.

Grace dug her fingernails into her palm as Cesare grumbled a different series of numbers.

Just then, the distinct sound of a latch clicking open cut through the air. *The safe!* She was certain she had just learned the combination and its location! Her heart pounded through her chest. Grace summoned every ounce of willpower not to leap out of bed and jump for joy.

When Cesare slumped back into bed, his offensive snoring resumed. Grace poked at his arm a few times, testing his lucidity. He didn't move a damn muscle...

It was now or never—who knew the next time she'd have the chance to snoop about without him noticing?

Grace slipped cautiously out of bed, taking care not to apply any pressure to her injured bottom, and tip-toed across the room. The two paintings that hung on the wall seemed the most likely choice, so she pulled at the bottom corner of each frame to check if they concealed any openings behind them, and one of them did. She glanced at the bed behind her—he hadn't moved. Grace returned her focus to the wall and pulled harder at the renaissance painting that was perched on secret hinges. Behind it, she found her holy grail. A few trial runs with the numbers and it opened...

My God, it actually opened! she squealed to herself in silence, bouncing lightly on her toes. The timing wasn't right just yet to go through it and remove anything, so Grace shut the door and set the dial back to the exact position it had been at before for good measure—just in case he knowingly kept it pointed at that specific number. She replaced the painting and tip-toed into her own room to be alone. Grace slipped beneath a fluffy blanket and pressed her face into the pillow, allowing herself the time to finally cry her wary heart out.

Since Christmas, every damn day had been nothing but a living nightmare.

The wedding...

Cesare's violent assault...

His attempts to get her pregnant...

Luca's death by her own hands....

The terrible beating she'd just received, followed by the most violent assault to date...

And the utter humiliation of a club-full of men seeing her naked body, including Mr. Parisi... *Oh, God!*

Her face burned red-hot with shame.

Mr. Parisi had even confessed his love to her, but she could never have him. The painful result of Cesare's flogging was

far more bearable than the aching in her chest. It was all too much to take for one person. At the very least, getting that combination to the safe warmed her with the relief that this would all be over soon. She didn't bother to think about what she would do when she was set free—continuing to ruminate over all the depressing possibilities wasn't doing her any good. As long as she wasn't in the company of a man who took pleasure from the pain he inflicted upon her—that was all she could ask for.

Grace rolled into her back and stared up at the blank ceiling, still sniffing and longing for a comforting hug, or at least someone to talk to. The loneliness she felt was pervasive.

Grace thought of Mr. Parisi's dark-chocolate eyes... As the rest of the club-goers soaked up the view of things she never wanted to share, Mr. Parisi's eyes never pulled away from hers. He had every opportunity to take advantage of the situation, but he didn't. Aside from Nathaniel, Mr. Parisi was the only other man she'd encountered who respected her the way he did. She almost wished it wasn't the case. She needed the reasons to talk herself out of loving him, but she could never find them. His entire being simply couldn't be picked apart by pros and cons. She was in love with the sum of the man—mind, body and soul.

All the oily pan-cake makeup in the world couldn't cover the bruised reminder on her cheek of Cesare's loaded back-hand. The drive back to the Starling Room was a miserable one. Her bottom was viciously sore, and there was only so far she could comfortably lean sideways, seated on her hip. When she looked herself over in the mirror that morning before a bath, she was mortified at the gruesome swirling of black and blue extending down to the back of her thighs.

Madame Molly had come up to her room to discuss the plans for tonight's show, but when she saw the battered state Cesare had put her in, she sentenced Grace to a full day's bedrest. There was no way she could send her out looking like a poor drunkard's wife. Grace was beyond grateful for the opportunity to relax, but she couldn't help but wonder for the solemn look on Madame Molly's face.

The following morning, Grace crawled out of bed in hopes of finding something to occupy all the extra free-time Madame had given her. She'd slept for over ten hours, and despite the aches and pains, she was feeling much too antsy to lay around in bed all day.

When she sat on the edge of the bed to roll on her stockings, a jolt of pain seared through her flesh. Grace reached out to steady herself and knocked a hairbrush to the floor.

"Shit," she hissed. Grace hunched over to pick it up. When she lifted her head, Madame Molly was standing in the bedroom doorway. Grace startled.

"Good grief, Madame! You nearly scared me half to death!" Grace held a hand to her chest.

"Charlie's here to take you out for the day." Madame Molly walked up and gripped at Grace's chin to check the state of her bruises.

"Oh," she clicked her tongue, "you're a mess, Anna."

"Yes, I'm quite aware, thank you." Grace rolled her eyes. "Who's Charlie?"

"Just finished getting dressed and get down to the foyer, all right?"

"Yes, Ma'am," she nodded.

Madame Molly smiled thinly and left the room. Grace shifted through a few hangers in looking for her favorite tailored cream silk frock, and the blue cloche hat Mr. Parisi had gifted her for Christmas. She placed a few pins in her hair

and plopped her hat on her head. She couldn't hide all the evidence of the abuse she endured, but she looked presentable enough, so she grabbed her beautiful powder-blue wool coat, riddled with memories of Luca, and headed downstairs.

Grace found the somewhat vaguely-familiar man flirting with a few of the dancers and cleared her throat to get his attention. "Excuse me? Ch—Charlie?" she squeaked.

The man did a double-take when he noticed the marks on her cheek.

"Hey! Let's go, Mrs. Giordano. Boss wants me to get you a haircut." He ignored her look of annoyance and shot one of the dancers a teasing wink before escorting Grace to his car.

During the drive, Grace stared down at the clasped hands in her lap. She kept replaying the scene from the other night in her mind. Some of the things Cesare had done to defile her... Once the adrenaline had kicked in, the pain was tolerable enough, she supposed. The worst part had been laying there and just letting it happen while her instincts were screaming for her to fight back, but she would've been dead if she had tried.

Charlie stopped the car at the end of the narrow alley leading to Mr. Parisi's home.

"Are you doing all right, miss?"

Grace's heart raced. Was this some kind of set-up Cesare had planned to see if she recognized the location?

"Um, yes, I-I'm all right. Just a bit tired, is all. Where are we?" Grace played the role of confused damsel.

Charlie drove through the secret passage and parked the car in front of the stunning brick building with snow-drenched ivy clinging to its façade. Mr. Parisi's home had come to feel like a safe haven to her. Charlie opened her door, and she followed him up the steps to the front door of Mr. Parish's home. It swung open before Charlie had a chance to grasp the lion-

headed knocker. Once inside, a sense of calmness enveloped her soul.

“Who are you?” She eyed him with suspicion.

“Tino De Luca. One of Parisi’s men,” he smiled warmly.

“Mr. De L...” Grace’s face fell. “Mr....”

“You don’t need to say his name. Just call me Tino.”

“Thank you, Tino.”

Just then, Mr. Gino Rizzio stepped from the den and into the hallway with a small grin on his face.

“Hey, kid. Thank god you’re okay.” Gino kissed the back of her hand and gestured for her to enter into the warmth of Mr. Parisi’s study. “He’s waiting for you, Miss Colby. Welcome home.”

With a deep exhale, Grace nodded and stepped inside. The tall, broad-shouldered form of the man she loved was perched on the edge of a desk, waiting patiently for her to get comfortable. She could have wept with relief for the safety and repose of his presence. Mr. Parisi rose to his feet and approached her slowly.

She didn’t miss the way his eyes danced over the discolorations painting her features, and the guilt they seemed to hold for whatever she’d just endured. Tears welled in her eyes as she forced a smile.

“I’m okay, sir. I promise.” She rested her palm on his cheek and sniffled.

Mr. Parisi moved in closer and gently lifted her chin to him. His pained expression softened slightly.

“Grace...” he breathed.

“I did it, sir,” she giggled through tears of relief. “I found where he keeps his safe... I have the combination for it, too.”

This story continues in *Shattered Glass: The Gilded Cage*.



The following bonus content is a combination of pieces deleted from the final editions, experimental scenes used to explore, and scenes that enabled us to learn more about the people in the series. These pieces were chosen to be presented due to the additional information and insight they offered into the minds of various characters that don't necessarily fit into the final editions.

Saving Grace:

Riccardo Rossetti

Sunday, October 7, 1933

Butterfly on the Wall:

Unknown

August 1933 to November 1933

Years in the Making:

Gino Rizzio

Thursday, January 18, 1934

SAVING GRACE

Friday, October 6, 1933 to

Sunday, October 8, 1933

Riccardo Rossetti rubbed a hand over his haggard face. He hated working Saturdays. Friday had been such a long night, but today was already running him ragged, and it was only noon. He stared down at his plate on the bar top at the only place in town where he could order a burger just the way he liked it. Little bit of onion mixed in, kraut on top, a handful of pickles, fresh mozzarella cheese... anyone else would call it an abomination, and he supposed they were right. But dammit if it wasn't a tasty abomination, and he loved every artery-clogging bite of it. No matter how rough the day, this monstrosity of a burger with some fresh fried-chips always perked him up.

So did the backside of that cute red-headed waitress—what he'd like to do with her, oh, boy... if his wife only knew of the things he'd fantasized about with that woman, she'd have his balls in a vice grip.

Even more fine than the waitress was that spicy little blonde reporter. That little ditty was a walking test of a man's willpower, but she was a pain in the ass, too. Always snooping around in places she shouldn't be. When Riccardo had her alone in the car, he should've tried to...no. *No*.

He shook his head. He'd burn in hell for a lot of things, but stepping out on his wife wasn't one of them, even if she had become a bit difficult in recent years. She never wanted to be intimate with him anymore—hell, she barely let him touch her at all, these days.

He supposed he couldn't blame her... If he breathed the wrong way in her direction, she fell up the pole. Such a fertile woman, she is. Aside from his first born from a previous wife, she'd given birth to seven of his children, and there was another one on the way. Riccardo understood her reasons, but a man's got needs—needs he usually just took care of himself, but he would've appreciated a bit more help from her now and again.

Riccardo tossed some money on the table—enough to cover the meal with a nice tip included, and stepped out into the crisp autumn air.

That damned reporter, he grumbled down the sidewalk. Why didn't she uphold her end of their deal? Though her name wasn't on it, he knew she had a hand in that article on the missing girls from the charity school. She must take him for a fool if she thought he wouldn't see right through that God-damned story.

Thank God Giordano had no idea Riccardo had let her get away once before. If he had found out, his boss would've had his head on an iron spike, and she'd eventually join him on display. Giordano liked to make an example of those who crossed him.

That flighty little reporter just didn't get it. It was as if she lacked any sense of self preservation. Riccardo really didn't want to hurt her, but she wasn't going to quit if he didn't send her a stronger warning.

Her informant had been harder to track down than he'd thought. Not impossible, but it certainly required more effort to find him than he cared to admit. Fortunately for him, that young and green policeman got a bit too cocky and slipped himself up—gave himself away. It ain't easy being green. When you don't know the ropes, you've got no room to be sloppy—sloppy gets ya killed.

Jake Brown should've known how the game was played. All of his sworn-brothers were on the mob's payrolls. Someone should've told Brown from day-one which side the

coppers were on. For him to be a man on the inside, you don't provide confidential information to anyone on the outside.

'Officer' Jake Brown... Riccardo shook his head. *Disgraceful*. The way he saw it, he did the police department a favor by exterminating the rat for them. Those bastards didn't need to lift a finger.

Now back in his office, Riccardo decided that the reporter was due for a telephone call.

"Gotham Post. Grace-Anne Colby speaking.. How may I--"

"Miss Colby, what did I tell you about snooping around?" he growled at the sweet voice on the other line. He tapped a pen on his desk impatiently, but gave her time to figure out who she was speaking with.

"Mr. Rossetti?" Her voice quivered just enough for him to detect her fear.

"How sweet it is to be remembered." He laughed through his nose. "My dear, it appears you didn't keep to your end of the deal."

"What do you mean? I've done nothing about the hospital or WellLife. I'm telling you the truth!"

"You didn't keep your nose out of the school, and your little buddy--Jake Brown? Well, let's just say he had a different story to tell."

"W-What about Mr. Brown?"

"He squealed like a hog when we trussed him up like one." He thought better of telling her more. If she knew a bit of him ended up as fried pork rinds, she'd start investigating that too. She wasn't stupid, and neither was he.

"Sir, that was before..."

"Don't lie to me, Miss Colby. You get one final warning. The school--stay away from it and stay out of our business. Cross the line again, and your parents' little farm in West Virginia just might go up in smoke."

He snorted at her ignorance of the truth. He knew her father very, very well. Hell, he probably saw him more often than she did. Her father had never told her a thing about his secret life... She was clueless.

“Oh, and don’t drag your little buddy Donovan into this unless you want him to be the down payment.”

“But I didn’t know you were connected with the school.” He could hear the way she began to choke up. She was panicking. *Good.*

“How am I supposed to know what lines not to cross if you don’t tell me where they are?” the reporter whined.

“You’ll know by the phone call you’ll receive about Donovan’s death and your family home being reduced to ashes with mommy and daddy included. This is your final warning, Miss Colby.”

He placed the receiver back on the cradle and prayed that his threats would get through to her. He really didn’t want to hurt her, but if she forced his hand, he’d have no choice.

He rubbed his eyes and continued on some paperwork before checking on the ongoing experiments taking place in a secured location inside the WellLife laboratory. He could never shake the guilt over each round of experimentation that included an unwitting mother and child... But if this could lead to a cure for his beloved child and many others, maybe it could be worth it. What was that philosophical scenario about the train switch, again?

He fucking hated his boss, but Giordano made Riccardo second in the chain of command. Maybe Allegro had it easier as consigliere. Maybe Riccardo had it better as the underboss. Maybe it was better to keep his head bowed to Giordano and see what came of things, since Giordano’s money funded this research. No one ever said the boss and his subordinate had to like each other.

Besides, if Riccardo was next in line to run the family, he had the opportunity to put an end to the child abductions and

trafficking. Especially the taking of little blonde girls—it was too close to home. He never felt right taking part in any of it, but what could he do? Disagreeing with his boss was a death sentence. Nearly twenty years of this bullshit was more than he could handle. Riccardo always wished he would've left when the trafficking started, when he was just a lowly soldier in Giordano's platoon. It would've been easier to pull out back then. The only regret in his life was sticking around until his role only became more involved.

The rest of the day dragged on. He had a contract to order on someone who'd violated the wives of one of his men. Another man's wife was never fair game—even if she was willing to spread her legs. After he made the orders for the hit, he had a laundry list of calls to make for the collection of debts. Riccardo hated collection day. Pathetic men with pitiful excuses for their inability to square-up. There was never a shortage of men to rough up or toss into the chipper on collection day.

Finally the siren wailed, signaling the end of the work day. The workers would stream out and head back to their hovels, and he would go back to his eight perfect children and his perfect wife residing in the comforts of a stately home that perfectly concealed an imperfect life.

Just as he did every day when arriving home for dinner, Riccardo shook the front door knob to his home a bit harder than he needed to as a little warning to his sons and daughters that he would soon be entering. He hated to have to punish them for anything, so the signaling gesture gave them a chance to rush into place before he walked in, and sure enough, once he entered the foyer, one of his girls was scooping the last of her wooden blocks into a bucket. She knew better than to play with them on the hard floor where they might scatter easily and give her mother a headache. While he turned a blind eye to the toys she wasn't supposed to have out in the family room, he glared at her sternly until she scrambled to her feet and dropped into a clumsy curtsy.

“Welcome home, papa.”

“Carmen.” He nodded at the five-year-old, handing her his hat and coat to put away before continuing to his den where he knew he’d find his oldest from his first wife with his head buried in a “Popular Mechanics” magazine. Riccardo chuckled to himself as he unstrapped his holster to stick in the safe behind his desk and away from the little ones.

Agostino didn’t look up from his reading until Riccardo cleared his throat.

“Hello, Pop. Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. I was reading a piece on some of the new advancements in aviation technology. I’d love to fly one of these, someday,” the fifteen-year-old boy grinned. “Oh, Bruno and Dino snitched at school again today.”

His second and third children sure loved to tattle. They always ratted on each other, their siblings, their classmates.... He’d yet to whip that misbehavior out of them. He could only pray his youngest son would take after Agostino and pledge his allegiance to his family when he grew older.

Truthfully, only his studious, loyal, and whip-smart Agostino might have what it takes to follow in his prestigious footsteps. The boy was the only one who pieced together the truth about his father’s “job.” Not even his wife knew she was married to a gangster. Yes, his boy was clever and intuitive, but when he thought deeply on it, the mob life wasn’t something he really wanted for him. He was built for it, sure, but he’d rather see the boy grow up to do something beneficial for the world. Someday, Riccardo suspected he’d have to convince the boy to follow a different path than his old man. To see his boy grow into a man who might become an engineer, taking part in the advancement of science and technology—now that would truly be Riccardo’s proudest achievement as a father. Agostino was destined for greater things than his father ever was.

Riccardo smirked to himself and shuffled toward his desk to open the day’s mail. When he pulled out the chair, a little

cooing voice called out from below, and he smiled warmly. He glanced under the desk and found his other pride and joy.

No matter what anyone said about his beautiful little blonde girl of seven years, she was his world, and little Grace Mary adored her father. At least, she did when she was aware of his presence. So often she curled up to play with a doll, lost in her own little fantasy world that she permanently resided in. She babbled like a baby, and her complexion was fair enough that he knew she wasn't his. He wasn't stupid. He wasn't even in New York during the months she'd have been conceived, but he didn't know for sure until his wife gave birth to an awfully large "pre-term" baby.

He hadn't wanted to hold the little girl when the nurse first held her out to him. No, he was too close to storming into the hospital room and wringing his wife's neck, instead. But when the nurse shoved the baby into his arms, his heart latched onto her with a fierce protectiveness he hadn't experienced for Agostino or Bruno, Carmen or Dino, Eufrazio or Franco, or even Giovanni after her. She wasn't his, but when he looked into her hazy blue eyes, he'd decided then that he'd never let go of her. Blood be damned—she was his.

He slid open a drawer and picked a piece of toffee from a bowl he kept hidden and crouched down to the ground, holding the candy to her. As he expected, she didn't notice him at first. She just stared off into space, absently twisting the yarn braids of her Raggedy Ann doll. She couldn't have the fine porcelain dolls that Carmen had. If she had a violent fit of temper, such a doll would be shattered in a heartbeat, but she loved her cloth dolly just as much, anyway. When her father unwrapped the toffee and touched it to her lips so she could taste it, she opened her mouth and smiled with a squeal, turning her partially-blind blue eyes toward her beloved daddy.

Riccardo stroked the side of his girl's blonde head. He loved her more than anything in the world, more than his wife, more than Agostino, or any of the rest of his children. Of course, he loved them all dearly, but his Grace Mary was so precious to him. She was so innocent and in such need of

protection from the big, bad world. He hoped more than anything that the experiments at WellLife would give her the chance at the full life she deserved.

When it had become clear she was different, the doctor had offered to send her away to an asylum, and at first, his wife agreed. He had never been so furious with her. How could Maria just send their child away like that? Riccardo never gave it a second thought. His Grace would be right here where she belonged: with her family.

He brushed back a bit of her pale, pinkish-blond hair. That reporter had reminded him too much of his daughter, and boy was Miss Colby lucky for it. She'd have ended up savagely beaten—used and abused by his men for most of the night before finally getting dumped at the bottom of a canal...but she shared his cherished daughter's name and her beautiful golden locks.

In a way, that reporter was a symbol of hope for what his daughter could have if they only remedied her illness—she was a symbol of what his daughter could grow up to be. The reporter's snooping could have brought serious trouble to WellLife—bringing unwanted attention upon the illicit experimentation going on in their secret laboratory, and Riccardo simply wouldn't allow it. His Grace Mary needed a cure. Giordano wanted the reporter dead anyway, but Riccardo just couldn't do it. So he left her with a stern warning. If she didn't listen, he would have to set aside his sentiments and get Miss Colby out of the way. Nothing was going to get in the way at the chance to give his Grace Mary a better life.

“Supper's ready, Pop.”

Riccardo turned his head to flare up at Bruno, his second-born, and raised an eyebrow at him.

“I heard you and Dino snitched, again?”

The boy straightened his back and looked away, not even bothering to make excuses.

“I’ll deal with you and Dino after we eat.” Riccardo returned his attention to Grace Mary and held his hand out to her, delighting in the way her small hand clutched his own. He pulled his little cherub out from under the desk, and smiled with joy for the innocent laughter she brought to his life, giving thanks to whoever knocked up his wife and left him with such a precious gift as his sweet Grace Mary.

His pride and joy carried him through church the next day, reminding him to take a breath when Maria groused non-stop about how she ached so much more during this pregnancy than she did the last. Even he had to stop and admit that something might really be wrong. It was like her hips were falling apart, but she still had a couple more months to go before this baby arrived. There was no more spark in his wife’s hazel eyes.

He never forgot the smile on her face when they first met. Agostino was in nappies and Riccardo, a single father, contemplated putting his son in an orphanage to be raised by someone else. His boss had found good homes for all the children he didn’t put to work...Some were raised by rich and powerful families. He vaguely remembered one of the girls who was put in a lawman’s home, and she never wanted for anything.

His Maria never smiled anymore. Her pains were too great for her to sit at the dining table with the rest of the family. She needed constant rest in the recliner, so Riccardo served her dinner and tried to take care of her as best he could. It was his way of apologizing for leaving so soon on another “business” trip. It was strictly business, just not the kind she knew about. Her sad pleas for him to stay caused a twisting ache in his heart every time he had to leave.

He helped Maria up the stairs and into bed, promising her to be back soon. The children were heading to bed, and he always helped the nanny get them tucked in, but he insisted on taking care of his precious Grace Mary, himself. He didn’t want Carmen to think he favored her little sister. He loved all of his children, just differently. So he tucked his girls into their beds and dropped kisses on their foreheads. Carmen was

nearly asleep. Grace Mary giggled and babbled, but for the first time, Riccardo could clearly make out two words in her gibberish:

“Wub dada.” Grace Mary continued her cooing, entirely unaware of what her babbled words meant to her father.

“Dada loves you,” he whispered, hugging her tightly and planting a hard kiss in her hair.

Riccardo turned out her light and softly closed her door with the stinging of tears pricking at his eyes. He never thought she’d be able to communicate in a language that anyone but she could understand.

Today, the seventh of October, nineteen thirty-three, would be a day he’d remember for the rest of his life. He stepped quietly into his wife’s room to tell her what had just happened, only to find her already mercifully asleep.

For several minutes, he sat by her side and held her limp hand. She was his angel. It had been such a rough handful of months that were only made worse by his sudden departures for weeks at a time. He kissed her blissfully ignorant head, wishing he could ease away the tension knotted in her brow, and tucked her in. She murmured something unintelligible, but he knew what she meant.

“I love you too, Maria,” he murmured into her ear, rubbing a thumb over her forehead until he got up to leave.

Riccardo needed a walk to clear his head, so he grabbed his hat and coat and headed out to let his thoughts flow freely where they may. His double life was a lot less happy than he would ever admit to anyone. His family life—he loved it, even if a couple of his sons were little snitches. His family life was the most important thing to him, but it always came second to his criminal life, and he hated it.

A lot of what he did never sat easy with him. He despised stealing children from their loving parents and sending them off to be purchased by another family, or sold into the most despicable trades on God’s green earth. He also didn’t like to

murder or rough up little old ladies for their pocket money. He liked the financial benefits of his life, however. It kept his family in more luxury than he could've ever dreamed of growing up in Sicily. Precious Grace Mary didn't have to go to an asylum. His boys and his other daughter got to attend private schools, and his dearest wife could frequent the best salons and upper crust events the city had to offer. Riccardo himself got to enjoy the fruits of his labors with luxurious automobiles, hand-tailored suits, and gold watches.

Though he detested all the destruction he brought upon families, the one thing that made it all worthwhile was being able to provide the best care for his sweet Grace Mary, and it gave him the means to hunt for a cure. He was blessed with the beautiful family he had *because* he'd stayed the course. If he left, he would lose all he'd ever worked for, and that simply wasn't an opt—

Whack!

Stars scattered in his eyes, bright sparks of yellow, before his vision went dark. His hands were bound behind his back before he was stowed away in the trunk of a vehicle. The gag tied around his mouth over the hood on his head prevented him from shouting the first word that came to mind:

Fuck!!!

As long as the hood was on, there was a chance to escape. But if it came off and he was able to identify his attackers, there was no way out of this alive. With tied wrists, he tried to reach the holster on his right calf. *Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!* He always disarmed himself at home around his children, and he'd forgotten to strap up before going out on his walk.

The vehicle came to a stop, and when the door to the trunk opened, bright lights shone through the weaves of the fabric hood. Several arms tore him from the car and carried him into a freezing cold space. He tried to move, but his arms and legs had been strapped to a wooden table.

Someone pulled the hood off and untied the gag. His shaking breath froze in puffs above him. When his vision adjusted to the bright lights overhead, Riccardo realized he'd been strapped up in a meat locker... The locker would be soundproof. *Shit.*

He looked around and found Vincenzo Parisi standing with three men—his consigliere, Gino Rizzio, an associate Riccardo had only seen in passing, and a man with curly black hair wearing a butcher's apron. Panic couldn't even begin to describe the sheer terror coursing through his veins. Riccardo had no clue what they wanted, or what he'd done to piss them off, but there was only one man aside from Giordano that he never wanted to cross, and that was Parisi. Riccardo spoke out against the assassination of Parisi's wife and infant son... But he'd failed to stop it. There was a lot of morally corrupt shit Riccardo would do, but killing kids wasn't one of them. There was nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing to lose, and Parisi fit the description.

When there was nothing left to care for, all that remained was attacking with impunity.

The look of burning hatred in Parisi's eyes sent paralyzing fear to the very core of Riccardo's being, as did the hammer Rizzio smashed down onto his hand. When he heard the piercing sounds of a knife being sharpened, he knew that he was never to see his wife and beloved children again.

Riccardo began mouthing a silent prayer to himself. "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

He knew that trying to appeal to Parisi's sense of fatherhood would backfire. Any gangster would give their lives for their children, and Riccardo's boss, Giordano, had taken that chance away from Parisi. No father should ever have to bury their babies. If any harm ever came to his own children...

Riccardo was overcome with fear for what his family would become without him, and for the hurt his children would endure when he didn't come home—especially his

precious Grace Mary. She would never be able to understand his absence, and just an hour ago, she'd finally told him she loved him. Try as he might, he couldn't keep his chin from quivering with heartbreak. Tears fell down his temples.

His children...his wife...would they even know? He couldn't tell Parisi anything, so his family would likely have nothing to bury.

"Riccardo Rossetti," Parisi acknowledged him coldly. "How nice of you to join us on such a lovely evening. I have a few questions for you that I expect you to answer truthfully. First: What do you know about Grace Colby?"

The reporter? What the fuck does she have to do with Vincenzo Parisi? If she belonged to any family, it was Giordano's, thanks to her father. He wanted to ask if Parisi knew about that, but he had to deny knowing the girl.

His brow furrowed. "*Non los so—*"

"Don't make me warn you again. English, so my Jewish friend here knows what you say," Parisi growled.

"I said I don't know that little bitch!" he spat out through clenched teeth.

Rizzio landed another blow with the hammer.

"Will you stake your life on that lie? Are you going to keep lying to my man Rizzio's face? That's awfully bold of you considering you conducted business with him that night at the factory. Are you going to keep insisting that you don't recall the woman you threatened to finish off?" Parisi hung a photograph of Miss Colby in Riccardo's face.

Riccardo spat at the photo.

When Parisi drove a knife through his hand into the cutting block below, Riccardo shouted out in pain.

"Rest assured, Rossetti, you will not live to see another day, but we can make it quick, or we can play all night. The choice is yours."

He tried to hold his bladder to keep from soiling himself, though he realized now that he already had. The only warmth left in his body was trickled between his thighs.

When Parisi threatened his children, he finally gave up the truth. There was no point in denying it anymore. He was a dead man no matter what. Once Parisi was satisfied, Riccardo knew the end was near.

He closed his eyes, and let the faces of his beloved come into view. A tear streamed down his temple as he mouthed his final goodbye...

Then it all faded to black.

BUTTERFLY ON THE WALL

August 1933 to November 1933

For a small restaurant on the edge of Lower Manhattan, Vesuvio Cafe was a busy place, and the staff list was even smaller, with just a chef or two, one manager who's always a second away from the owner's phone call, a handful of waitresses and just a couple busboys.

A blond busboy, known for his speed, worked weekdays only. He knew his way around the restaurant so well, he could've run the place with his eyes closed. Most mornings, there was also a blonde waitress in her mid-thirties trying to scrape together whatever money she could to keep her family going before her husband gambled it all away.

And then there was her, an expedient young waitress with her auburn curls pulled back in a loose auburn knot, flitting about the place most hours of the day. She'd mastered the art of only being seen or heard when necessary, never truly needing to be called upon, for she had the gift of anticipating the customer's needs before they even realized the need, themselves. Though she was relatively new, it wasn't surprising that she had quickly gained a steady list of regulars to her tables and a satisfactory stack of bills inside her tip jar, each night.

She knew most of their faces by the end of the first month, sometimes even sketching them for drawing practice when she had the time. She knew most of their names and personal backgrounds by the end of the third month, taking care to check in on their families and jobs whenever they sat down at her tables.

Then there was that grumpy businessman who watched her closer than she liked, but he was still a paying customer, nonetheless.

Recently, a stunning strawberry-blonde had come in a couple of times...despite her beauty, she always looked like a doe in headlights. Each time, the wide-eyed southern belle ate her meals with a suspicious man donning a young boy's face.

But there was one particular customer that always caught her eye—a gentleman in a pressed suit, always dressed more appropriately for a five-star restaurant than a quaint little diner. The man came and dined at her table frequently, oftentimes accompanied by a man in an equally-spiffy suit who seemed to dwarf the other in size. The larger man had an energy about him that unsettled her. His broad shoulders and stoically reserved demeanor was more than intimidating. The smaller man was just as reserved, but his eyes seemed to warm in her presence. Through the many occasions of having served him, she'd gathered through the men's conversations that the smaller man's name was Gino Rizzio.

Someone had warned her once that the two men were management, and that the larger of the two men was the owner, no less, and she was to behave herself as if they were royalty. She'd bumped them up in priority from then on, saving a private spot in the back corner of the diner for them, warning the kitchens whenever they made an appearance.

For each time the man, possibly named Mr. Rizzio, came to eat by himself, he'd always strike up a bit of small talk with her. His eyes were sharp, even when he didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular, and there was an air of confidence to the way he moved that she found attractive, even for a man seemingly somewhere in his fifties. After a while, she found herself specially catering to him out of habit alone, always bundling the daily newspaper with his coffee, keeping tabs on his "usuals," and spending a bit more time chatting with the man just to hear the sound of his voice.

Then one day, he asked her for her name, shooting her a toothy grin as he exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke from his teeth, gesturing toward her missing name-tag. For the first time in a handful of visits, he looked into her eyes and the world around them seemed to disappear, if only for a moment.

He'd asked her something, though she'd only remember the way his eyebrows lifted in question, and how his head had cocked just slightly to the side. She'd been distracted, a state of being she rarely found herself in. Only after he called out to her "Miss?" did she come back to her senses. He didn't seem to mind. In fact, he seemed rather amused by her sudden bout of empty headedness. When he asked what the special was for the day, she rambled on, informing him of every main dish, side, and delicacy on the menu, just so she didn't appear a fool.

She prepared topics of conversation after that incident. She wanted to be ready for when "the slender, dark-haired man from management with the sharpest cheekbones you'd ever seen" graced her with his presence again.

It wasn't until a few weeks later that she realized there was no need for the topics she'd prepared. The man came back with his own list of questions and conversation...

It was near the end of her shift, and he'd asked for a slice of cherry pie before she headed out. When she brought it out to his table, he handed her an extra fork with an invitation to sit and share the sweet treat with him.

The slice of pie she'd cut was much too large for him to eat alone.

YEARS IN THE MAKING

Thursday, January 18, 1934

Gino Rizzio hung his hat and draped his coat over the chair. What a long night it had been, and it felt great to be home.

He didn't necessarily agree with the pairing of her and his boss, but the past few weeks made him think a bit differently about Miss Colby... He still couldn't believe the news Enzo had shared with him. In Gino's eyes, she couldn't have been more of an outsider—but she wasn't... Her father was part of a *famiglia*. Enzo had his suspicions months ago when she revealed her father had taken the family to dinner at Antonio's when she was just a girl, but it took some time to confirm it. Her surname was different.

Gino let out a heavy sigh. The tension in the air between Miss Colby and Enzo was irritatingly palpable. Despite his hesitance, he was glad Esme had urged Enzo into giving that girl a reason to stay. If she hadn't, it would've only been a matter of days before Giordano's wolves caught her scent. But if Esme's plan worked, those two lovebirds could be nice and warm with each other by the night's end.

Gino envied them. He wanted the same with that snazzy little waitress. She was such a shy little thing with auburn hair. He liked that.

Enzo typically went for the brunettes and the redheads, too—but this time, he got himself swept up by a little Pineapple Upside-Down Cake—a southern belle with golden pineapple tresses that had a pinch of maraschino cherry mixed in. Miss Colby was the total opposite of the sultry little minxes that his boss usually admired. She was delicate and soft—too much so, in Gino's opinion. If he was being honest with himself, the

woman downright confused him. She bore the essence of a golden retriever pup, yet she had the steeled backbone of a doberman. On many occasions, Gino wondered if her bravery was really just the result of ignorance and stupidity, but even if that was the case in the beginning, she would've learned the truth real fast... And she kept going, anyway. She'd more than earned his respect for *that*.

Gino poured himself a glass of wine and sat himself down on the sofa to rest his aching feet.

He shook his head at himself. The way his boss looked at her—it was like he'd found buried treasure, and if he didn't pay strict reverence, she'd slip right through his fingers.

The last time he'd seen his boss look at anyone that way was the day Enzo married Cathalina. Gaia was still of sound mind at the time. She was the only blood relative Enzo had left after their parents were murdered. No one uttered a word about the fact that Cathalina's older half-brother wasn't in attendance. Some things were better left unsaid. They knew the risks involved with their decision to tie the knot, and no one could talk them out of it—not even their old boss, Constanza.

Enzo always placed love and family on a pedestal—so much so, that the man has fought every step of the way against his feelings for Miss Colby. Gino understood why. Enzo must've felt like everything he ever cared for was guaranteed to be taken and destroyed. He felt sorry for him. Enzo used to wear his heart on his sleeve, always loving wholly and unconditionally, unlike Gino. The way Enzo cherished the women in his life had taught Gino a thing or two about love that he wished he'd learned earlier on in life.

Back home in Sicily, he'd fallen head over heels for a woman named Isotta. She was the only woman he'd ever truly fallen for. With her long, narrow nose, sun-kissed golden skin and willowy limbs, he thought she looked like a goddess from the sea, but he was nothing more than a selfish and foolish lover. He never worshiped her like the goddess he thought her

to be. No, he always expected her to bow to him. Gino had forced her to leave her family to travel with him to New York, and despite her sacrifices, he never treated her the way she deserved. He expected that his supper would be ready every night at six in the evening, and if he didn't make it home until nine... Well, that food better still be piping hot when he got there—that was, if he came home at all.

Constanza didn't appreciate the way Gino treated his girl, but Gino always reassured her that everything was fine and dandy. After all, he loved her, and she loved him, and that was all that mattered. Gino grimaced at the memory of his own arrogance.

Of course, Gino figured it out eventually by way of examining his Boss' relationships that love alone was not enough. Mutual respect, communication, and understanding were essential, and there was never a point where making an effort was no longer required. If you love someone, they deserve to be reminded and appreciated.

Isotta deserved so much more than what Gino had put her through. He never deserved her, and when she'd finally had enough and cried to Constanza asking for help to send her back home on the night of Enzo's wedding, well, Gino deserved every bit of that heartbreak.

Constanza demoted him after that, and Gino eventually realized that he'd more than earned it.

A man who takes care of his woman is a man worthy of honor and respect from his men, Constanza had scolded him. Gino blamed Enzo, at first. If he hadn't had that little fairytale event of a wedding, maybe Isotta wouldn't have gotten it in her head that she deserved the same. For years, he held so much resentment toward Isotta for choosing to leave. How dare she injure his pride and deprive him of the affections he was promised in the beginning of their romance?

But Isotta was right to leave him. Despite how much he thought he loved her, he was never willing to commit himself to her, back then. Though Gino's priorities were far from

straight, he was still a God-fearing man who would've held himself to the responsibilities bestowed upon him through marriage. He always believed a marriage in holy matrimony was sacred, which was exactly why he never put a ring on Isotta's finger. He enjoyed bedding showgirls far too much to give up on those freedoms.

Gino stopped at the portrait on the wall—the only one he had of Isotta. It was a token reminder of what happened when you took love for granted. The sorrow and pain for his own loss eventually subsided, but as time passed by, a new form of pain took hold—pain for all the heartache he'd caused her—pain for all that he'd taken from her, while giving nothing in return. Her virginity, her family, her opportunity to teach the school children in their hometown back in Sicily... She was his biggest regret.

The day that Cathalina gave birth to her and Enzo's son had struck a chord in Gino's soul. That could have been him and Isotta, and it didn't hit him just how much he missed her until Enzo presented his son to him and Constanza. Gino could see himself and Isotta so plainly—the happiness he foolishly believed they shared, followed by a whole lot of nothing. Isotta was gone.

Even the way Enzo treated Cathalina on his worst days was still so much better than the way Gino treated Isotta on his best. Enzo deserved every bit of the family he'd cultivated, and the *famiglia* he led.

Just as he did every night, Gino pressed calloused fingers against her portrait, making a silent promise to Isotta that if anyone ever loved him again, he'd fight for it, never taking that person for granted ever again. Every night after he finished delivering his promise, Gino always wished her well.

If things went as he'd expected for Enzo and Miss Colby, then they'd be spending the night soaking in the love they shared for one another. The envy—it cut deep, but this was recompense for the years of pain he'd inflicted upon his beautiful Isotta.

Gino continued past Isotta's portrait toward the bathroom to draw himself a bath. His tired body ached something fierce. Thank god his shoes were ready to be picked up from the cobbler. New York City concrete wore the leather soles out fast, and once they did, he knew to expect unrelenting foot pain until he got them repaired.

Gino often wondered what this *famiglia* would look like if he had become don like he'd always planned. When Constanza informed him that he was passing the torch to Enzo, Gino fought the decision like hell. Gino truly felt that he had earned it, and Enzo was too damned soft. Sure, Enzo could beat the living hell out of any man who crossed him, but he was too closely in-tune with his heart to be objective in his decisions. Gino didn't think Enzo had the salt to make difficult choices...though if he was being honest with himself, Gino knew he didn't always make the best choices, either. Gino had a proclivity for making hasty, rage-fueled decisions at times, but age had calmed him down a bit. Still, Enzo hadn't even wanted the position, but Constanza wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. Constanza was sick, and he'd said it was his dying wish. From that point on, Gino knew that Enzo didn't have the ability to refuse the old man, but Gino still fought it to the bitter end. He refused to pledge fealty to the son of a man from a rival *famiglia*. It didn't matter how valid Constanza's reasons were for choosing Enzo—it was a violation of the family order.

He sighed...Enzo never had the lust for blood and power like so many others did, including Gino, himself.... Maybe it was better that Constanza had chosen him.

It was only on the day of the murders of Enzo's wife and child that Gino had finally stepped up. That day, Gino witnessed a broken man lead on with valiance and honor, despite his shattered heart. After that, Gino felt differently for his younger boss—finding an unwavering resolve to work with the man and guide him in the way an elder brother just might. From that day forward, he'd lay down his life for Enzo, defending him at any cost.

Gino dried himself off and slipped into his pajamas before pouring himself a nightcap.

His mind wandered back to the waitress at Vesuvio's.

The day that he'd asked her to share a slice of pie with him, he thought about asking her out. Gino wasn't the type to chicken out of much, but truthfully, he was scared of dragging her into his routine of old habits. The way he treated Isotta—that was how his father treated his mother. It's what Gino grew up seeing as normal behavior until he saw Enzo doing things differently.

Maybe it was better that he just admired the waitress from afar. What would a sweet young thing like her want with a fifty-four year old joker like him, anyway?

Maybe it would be easier if they just got together for some fun—no strings attached. He may have been a terrible partner, but he was more than a generous lover. There was a reason so many of the ladies at the Starling Room fell over themselves for a night with him. Despite his selfishness—when it came to sex, making ladies writhe and moan with pleasure was all part of the turn-on for him. They always got their releases before he did, and that's how he liked it.

That damned waitress though... he wanted to give her more than that. He wanted to get to know her for who she really was, not just the way her body felt. Of course he wanted to show her a good time, but even more than that, he wanted to prove that he could do it right this time—that he could treat a woman the way a gentleman ought to treat a lady. He wanted to love again...the right way.

The only problem was that she didn't deserve to be his test subject.

In a way, Miss Colby was Enzo's test subject, wasn't she? Enzo had been shut off from the world for years, and he expected to keep it that way. That man knew how to love a woman, so he had that going for him, but the trauma of such a tragic loss would've permanently altered the way he dealt with

any future endeavors of the heart. Learning to open up to someone again couldn't be any less taxing than learning to do it right in the first place.

That damned country-born cupcake, Gino chuckled to himself. He was warming up to Miss Colby in his own way. Gino was never particularly keen on letting outsiders into his private circle, but as much as he hated to admit it, she was earning her keep. He certainly enjoyed dancing with her at Christmas. He could see what Enzo saw in her. Miss Colby had this way of lightening the air around her—she could make you feel as if everything was going to be okay, even when she, herself, was far from it. She was still too soft for a life such as theirs, but Gino started to understand Luca's point of view...

"She gave up everything to get Giordano off the streets. She's gone through hell already and she's still fighting her way through. She might seem weak, but every time she falls, she picks herself back up. Yes, she's soft, but she's strong, too. Just get to know her and you'll see it."

Gino's expression turned sullen. Luca... *God rest his soul*. He still hadn't found a peaceful night's rest since he received the packages containing bits and pieces of Luca. Gino had killed and tortured countless men in his time, but it didn't matter how numb you were to the sight of death, finding a close friend in that desecrated condition was always horrific. Luca was a good man, and an even better friend and confidante. The aching in his heart over Luca's death was still so fresh, but it killed him even more to see utter devastation on Esme's face, every damn day. She loved her husband, but she'd cried more for Luca than she ever did for him when he passed. Her drinking was toeing the line of falling out of control, and it broke his heart.

Gino needed to lay down and get some sleep. He had to be up early to make his daily hour-long drive back to Enzo's, and he'd be lying if he wasn't a bit curious to find out if his boss finally bedded the girl. Gino had ever seen a man deny himself for so long. It was almost painful to watch.

He turned the lamp off and slipped beneath the covers, tucking an arm beneath his head.

When he closed his eyes, he wondered if that waitress knew just how much her hips swayed when she walked past him....

Thinking about her brought a smile to his face.

Sure, she deserved a better man than him, but what was it he'd told Miss Colby earlier today about letting Enzo decide for himself if he considered her worthy? Maybe that beautiful little lady with the auburn hair and those dark lashes should get to decide for herself if Gino was worthy of her time, too. She was probably clueless to the way his heart warmed whenever she paid him extra attention at the diner. She made him feel seen in a way few ever could. Enzo was a hulk of a man, and Gino had resigned himself to lingering in his shadow whenever they were together in public. That was more a strategic move, of course—it was easier to serve as the man's back up when no one knew you were there—but the point remained.

He wanted to repay her kindness with more than just big-money tips.

As his eyelids grew heavy, Gino decided he would make a move on the lovely lady before it was too late. He wouldn't repeat his old mistakes. That wasn't him anymore—he wouldn't allow it. Maybe there was still a chance for him to share his love with someone, again...

He smiled to himself....

...Maybe he could share it with *her*.



Noëlle Alexandria has been writing since early childhood, first spinning stories about mermaids and fairy-princesses, and now about mobsters and showgirls. When not writing, Noëlle can be found flying planes and traveling...with a laptop to write, of course. It is more than a passion to her. It is a way of life that will continue as long as there are stories to tell, and there will always, *always* be more stories to tell. Originally from California, she and her family now call Vancouver, Washington home.



Engineer by day and writer by night, Lisa Walls has always been a writer at heart with an unparalleled knack for bringing characters to life. Whether writing historical fiction or fantasy, her heart goes into every piece, as does a lot of research. Other interests include musicals—especially *Hadestown*, historical fashion, soccer, and kitties. She resides with her husband and their ball of cat-fluff near Boston, Massachusetts.

All artwork is modified by Aria Clements. The original, photos, shown below, were taken of actress Joan Crawford in 1932 as publicity stills for the MGM film Letty Lynton, by Walter Hurrell, and are not subject to copyright.

In 1936, MGM lost rights to distribute the film as part of an infringement case in *Sheldon v. Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corporation*. MGM was barred from releasing the film again.

Bootlegs occasionally surface online.

