

Every Mafia's Favorite Girl – The Soul Known 7

7: “What A Pity”

The Hub’s private bar was, technically, still neutral ground.

It was a space of muted gold and deep shadows, designed for the kind of conversations that changed the map of Borgata without a shot being fired.

Chiara Leone arrived first and occupied the best seat in the lounge.

As the heiress to House Leone — specialists in human trafficking — she took it as her birthright to order for the table without asking.

Lucilla Bellini was the next to sweep in, draped in a dress that looked technically impossible to sew.

She wouldn’t allow herself to appear in anything less; her House specialized in the high-end black market, and she was its primary advertisement.

Lucilla slid into her seat with effortless grace, crossing her legs as she glanced at Chiara with mild amusement.

“You started without me,” she noted.

“I assumed you would want something appropriate,” Chiara replied, not bothering to look up.

Lucilla offered a sugary smile, filing the slight away for later.

Chiara Leone didn’t know how to take “no” for an answer — it was a trait everyone complained about behind closed doors, but never to her face.

Unless Lucilla wanted to find herself drugged, boxed in a wooden crate, and shipped overseas by morning, she knew she had better drink the unwanted cocktail, pretend it was liquid gold, and keep her expression flawlessly serene.

No matter how much it choked her.

Ylenia Ombra arrived without a sound, the way people from House Ombra tended to arrive.

As specialists in intelligence and cyber-espionage, her House had risen to power by harvesting every secret of every other House in Borgata. When Chiara and Lucilla noticed her presence, Ylenia had already sat where she could monitor all three exits.

Natalia Porto was the last: quieter than the others, carefully measured, her pleasant face showing nothing at all.

She knew by heart how to keep her mouth shut while moving the gears behind the scenes. The smuggling empire her family had operated behind Borgata’s ports for generations had taught her well.

They were women.

Heiresses.

They were not friends.

This was far from a social gathering.

Once the server withdrew, Chiara lifted her glass, more than pleased to open the conversation:

"The man with the detonator."

She kept her voice even, as though discussing a remote piece of gossip.

"Have your father's analysts confirmed the origin, Ylenia?"

Lucilla replied before Ylenia could open her mouth.

"How could Ylenia know anything? House Moretti handled the cleanup. Which means Moretti controlled the interrogation. Which means Moretti decided what the rest of us were allowed to know."

She looked up at Ylenia then, her eyes dancing with interest.

"Unless, of course, you were already *allowed* to know."

Ylenia raised her glass and took a small sip, making no attempt to deny it.

"Outside contractors. Not affiliated with any of the Ten Houses. At least, not directly."

She let the last two words sit in the air like a looming storm.

All four women fell quiet for a moment, not out of discomfort, but calculation. At last, Chiara brought up the true reason for the gathering:

"Ariana Lombardi."

The name redirected the entire conversation.

Even Natalia's neutral expression sharpened.

"She cut her hair," Lucilla said, and her flat tone suggested this was the least of the relevant facts.

Ylenia, like her father, was more than glad to speak on everyone's behalf.

"She cut her hair, appeared sober for the first time in eighteen months, arrived on time, brought cupcakes, neutralized armed men, and then apologized to them. All within approximately two hours, following three days during which she was, by every account, completely comatose in Caio Sartori's residence."

A cold silence followed.

"It's a performance," Chiara said, with the confidence of a woman who'd seen many.

"She wants my Caio back. She's done this kind of thing before. Grand gestures, dramatic transformations. It never lasts longer than a month."

"*Your* Caio?"

Lucilla toyed with the cherry in her drink, one brow lifting.

"You two haven't even dated."

Chiara shot her a sideways glance.

"Which means he's open to the option."

"Ariana broke a man's shoulder and then apologized to him," Lucilla countered. "That's not a performance designed to win over Caio Sartori. That's mental instability."

"Instability," Chiara echoed. "Which will make it far more satisfying when I dismantle it."

She smiled then, slow and sharp.

"And are you not irritated that *your* Jeremiah joined the bidding?"

Lucilla was suddenly no longer relaxed. She ate the cherry whole and spat the seed into a napkin with a sharp *snap*.

"Jeremiah likes quirky things," she claimed. "Quirky things, like shiny things, always lose their luster eventually."

"Unless," Ylenia added, very quietly. "It isn't a performance or a quirk."

The words fell differently coming from the heiress of House Ombra. Both Chiara and Lucilla turned toward Ylenia.

"Her posture changed," Ylenia continued. "Her speech patterns show different hesitation markers. Even the way she scanned the room when she walked in... drug recovery alone doesn't bring such changes."

She set her glass down, voice firm with conviction.

"Whatever she is, this is not a mere transformation. She might be a replacement."

Another silence followed, longer and colder than the first.

"That doesn't make any sense," Lucilla said.

"No," Ylenia agreed. "It doesn't. I intend to make sense of it."

Chiara watched Ylenia with narrowed eyes, then waved a hand dismissively.

"Regardless of the cause, the effect is what concerns me. Three of the most powerful men in this city just spent twenty minutes bidding for that bitch in an open Summit. Caio hasn't looked at me since she walked in."

She leaned forward, voice lowering to a menacing tone.

"I intend to address *this*, before it becomes a problem."

"You talk like you already have a plan," Lucilla commented nonchalantly.

Chiara smiled, the kind of smile she used when she was most dangerous.

"I'll arrange something warm. Welcoming. A proper social reintroduction. Something that lets us evaluate our old friend directly, and reminds the room who we are."

Lucilla raised a brow.

"You mean the women's luncheon?"

Chiara tilted her head, neither confirming nor denying.

"Or maybe even dinner. I haven't decided yet. But Ariana Lombardi, whatever she might have become, she cannot possibly escape the wretched self we've come to know so well."

Lucilla said nothing. She was already building her own plan. Chiara's luncheon was

someone else's stage; Lucilla preferred her own.

"Will you participate?" Chiara asked. "Your media companies could do wonders."

"I might consider it," Lucilla said lightly. She had already decided she wouldn't.

Ylenia looked toward the window.

"I won't be joining."

Chiara held her smile, though her jaw tightened.

"Oh, why not? Your presence is the most anticipated."

"I prefer to observe before acting. Ariana Lombardi may be more dangerous than you assume."

A soft, precise *click* interrupted them.

Natalia Porto set her glass down.

"I will not attend either. This is not my concern. Jordan Marchetti did not participate in the bidding."

The other three turned to Natalia.

Chiara let out a quiet, mocking breath.

"Are you so certain our young Jordan wasn't interested, Natalia darling?"

Natalia's face remained perfectly calm.

"He's not the type to be interested in such affairs. I've known him since he was ten."

She rose then, smoothing her dress with practiced ease.

"I will excuse myself."

She left without waiting for a response.

At the table, the remaining three watched her go.

"What a pity," Chiara clicked her tongue, more amused than disappointed. "And here I thought we might cooperate for once."

Despite her earlier words, Chiara reached for her phone without hesitation.

The call connected quickly.

"Lady Chiara?" her assistant answered immediately.

Chiara's tone was suddenly warm.

"Darling. It has been a while since we hosted the women's luncheon, hasn't it?"

"...The luncheon?" he repeated carefully. "All of a sudden? You said the last one was painfully boring."

"It was."

Chiara swirled the wine in her glass lazily.

"But this one won't be. There's an old friend attending this time. That should improve the entertainment value considerably."

The assistant hesitated.

"...Who?"

Chiara smiled.

"Ariana Lombardi."

"Ariana Lombardi?!" he echoed, clearly startled. "You want her invited personally?"

"Yes." Chiara's smile sharpened. "Make sure the invitation is impossible to ignore."

"...Understood."

"Oh, and one more thing."

Chiara leaned back deeper into her seat, satisfaction already settling across her expression.

"Get me a dinner with Don Caio."

Lucilla glanced sideways at her, already amused. Even Ylenia quietly looked over.

The assistant sounded far more cautious this time.

"A... a private dinner?"

"Mm-hm."

Chiara checked her nails casually.

"Tell him I'm interested in placing an order. A very large one. And let him know I'll only discuss the details if he comes in person."

The assistant went quiet for a beat too long.

"...Understood, my lady. I'll contact House Sartori immediately."

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8: "Please State Your Requirements"

The night after the Summit, Aren stayed in the Lombardi Hotel suite. The space was still too large to her liking, but tonight, it felt less lonely.

Biscuit had helped with that.

Despite his thin frame, Biscuit ate like he had not seen food in days. He had also, without hesitation, claimed one of the silk pillows from the bed, dragged it across the floor with stubborn determination, until he was satisfied with its position near the closet.

Now, he slept on it like a king. His soft snoring echoed faintly against the walls.

Aren didn't sleep much.

She spent the night cross-referencing everything she had gathered about her new "clients."

By 4:00 AM, she had a rough profile of each of them in her notebook:

Caio Sartori, 32

- High authority, low emotional display.
- Likely carries heavy responsibility.
- Might need emotional support.

Jeremiah Castellano, 26

- High visibility.
- Attends public events frequently.
- Smiles often.
- Beautiful, like an angel.

Isidore Accardi, 28

- Very rich.

Aren closed the notebook, feeling a quiet sense of accomplishment.

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The next morning, a black Lombardi sedan glided through the wrought-iron gates of the Sartori estate.

The household staff stood in rigid formation along the grand entrance, heads carefully lowered.

To them, the name Ariana Lombardi was synonymous with chaos: a whirlwind of shrill demands, expensive perfume, and the occasional thrown vase.

Her last visit had been the most scandalous of all — she had emerged from the master suite with hacked-off hair and fled the estate in nothing but a man's bathrobe.

Mrs. Pecora had volunteered to receive her.

As the Head of Staff, Mrs. Pecora had survived fifteen years of service to House Sartori by becoming a human glacier. Most importantly, she had handled the tantrums of Ariana Lombardi more than anyone else in the house.

She approached the car with icy resolve. However, when the door opened, the girl who stepped out was not the one Mrs. Pecora recognized.

Aren was wearing a simple sweater over long jeans, with a dog tucked securely under her arm. She thanked the driver with a respectful bow and apologized for the "slight golden fluff" Biscuit had left on the leather seats.

Then, she turned to the grand foyer, gazing at the vaulted ceilings with quiet appreciation.

Mrs. Pecora stood frozen.

When Aren stepped forward, her gaze dropped to Mrs. Pecora's name tag. She noted how the woman's uniform was different from the others — a sharp black suit with golden cuffs.

'This must be the Operative Head of the estate.'

Aren's head instantly dipped in a formal bow.

"Good morning, Mrs. Pecora. The house is very beautiful."

Mrs. Pecora stared at her.

She took in the sensible jeans, the scruffy dog, the utter lack of dilated pupils, and the way Ariana Lombardi had just acknowledged her name.

With a respectful title.

For the first time in a decade, the Head of Staff found herself at a loss for words.

"The Don is in the study," Mrs. Pecora managed at last, her voice thinner than usual.

Aren replied with a nod, standing still and waiting for Mrs. Pecora to lead the way.

Mrs. Pecora's confusion only deepened.

Normally, Ariana would have barged past her toward the bar and demanded three bottles. Now she stood still, waiting to be guided.

"...This way," Mrs. Pecora said, turning toward the staircase.

Aren followed at a respectful distance, each step sending a fresh trickle of sweat down Mrs. Pecora's spine.

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They stopped in front of a set of large oak doors.

From inside, Caio's voice cut through the wood — fast, clipped, and edged with an anger sharp enough to cut.

He was on the phone with an associate.

Mrs. Pecora knocked anyway.

"Sir, Lady Ariana has arrived."

The sharp conversation died a sudden death.

Footsteps clicked rapidly toward the door. The handle turned, the door swinging open within seconds.

Caio's eyes, narrowed into thin blue slits, peered through the gap.

He looked at Mrs. Pecora's face first, searching for a sign of a disaster. Finding none, his gaze shifted to Aren.

He stared at her wide, unblinking eyes, then the sweater, the jeans, and finally — the dog tucked under her arm.

Something flickered behind his eyes that he immediately killed.

"Send her in," he said, swinging the door wide.

Aren stepped inside, her eyes calmly moving across the room as she took in the grand surroundings — the towering bookcases, the golden pen holder, the soft velvet covering every chair and chaise.

A pleasant thrill instantly hummed through her.

'This feels like a proper briefing room.'

"Sit wherever you want," Caio said.

He gestured vaguely at the velvet couches and chairs that filled the room, then went back to sit at the only desk in the study.

Aren chose the couch opposite his desk, then placed Biscuit on the floor. The little dog immediately began a thorough investigation of the thousand-dollar rug.

As Caio's attention dipped back to the paperwork on his desk, she quietly observed him.

His shirt had two buttons undone, and he wore no cravat. His hair, black and soft, was not styled, falling loosely down the sides of his face.

He looked less formal today.

He also looked more tired.

"Did you sleep well last night?" Aren asked.

The question came naturally to her. It had always been the first thing she asked her squad at the start of every meeting.

Caio froze at once.

Slowly, he looked up from his paperwork.

Not even his staff asked him such a question. Not even his most trusted advisors. They only waited for his instructions, or endured his temper.

"I slept fine," he muttered, curt and low.

"I'm glad," Aren said, offering a small, genuine smile.

Caio looked away first.

Aren didn't notice. She opened her notebook, pen poised and ready.

"Don Caio, I'm ready whenever you are."

"Caio," he corrected.

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

He set the papers aside and leaned back slowly in his chair, his gaze sharpening upon her face.

"You've always called me Caio. What's with the change?"

"Ah, about that..." Aren hesitated. "Since we are about to enter a formal contract, I figured proper decorum was more appropriate."

Caio found himself unexpectedly without a response.

The logic itself was sound. Yet the distance it created suddenly felt... wrong.

He exhaled quietly through his nose and forced the conversation back toward business before he could dwell on it further.

"Your father told me you want all three contracts."

"Ah, yes," Aren nodded earnestly. "Our House requires more than debt relief to recover

stability.”

Caio said nothing aloud. Internally, however, surprise stirred again.

He still could not reconcile this composed, analytical woman with the Ariana Lombardi he had known for years.

“I don’t care what arrangements you make with Castellano or Accardi,” he said, business manner sliding back into place. “What concerns me are my own terms. Those are non-negotiable.”

Aren smiled, relieved to finally reach the core of the meeting.

“Please state your requirements.”

“I will settle five hundred million of House Lombardi’s debt,” he said evenly. “In exchange, you will relocate to this estate permanently.”

Aren made no visible reaction. Her pen kept moving smoothly across the notebook page.

“Additionally,” he continued, “you will accompany me to selected social functions where my standard security presence would be... politically inconvenient.”

Aren paused mid-writing.

Her head lifted slowly from the notebook.

“You mean...” Her eyes widened slightly. “You would like me to serve as your bodyguard?”

One of Caio’s brows rose, already bracing himself for the inevitable complaints.

“Essentially.”

His tone sharpened.

“Is that a problem?”

“No problem at all!”

The answer came so quickly and enthusiastically that even Biscuit looked up from sniffing the rug.

Caio went completely still, not expecting such a response. Aren, meanwhile, had already lowered her attention back to the notebook.

“Ah, so... five hundred million,” she murmured while writing. “Permanent residence. Protective detail duties... I can do that. I’m very good at protecting people.”

She paused, looking up.

“May I know why you need protection specifically? I mean... I understand lots of people might want to harm you. But if I understand the nature of the danger, I can perform more effectively.”

Caio didn’t answer immediately.

He was still staring at her.

He had expected complaints, demands, maybe even mockery about playing bodyguard.

Instead, she was asking for details like a professional evaluating a mission.

"You remember my father was assassinated last year?" he asked at last. "The previous Don."

Aren blinked, eyes wide.

That information had not appeared in any material she had reviewed, but she couldn't simply nod through something so serious. She sat perfectly still, waiting for him to continue.

Caio noticed immediately.

A bitter edge entered his tone.

"Of course you wouldn't remember. You were probably too high to even notice the funeral."

He continued before she could respond, his voice deliberately emotionless.

"Since then, there have been multiple attempts on my life. Some serious. Some amateur. The methods change every time. My people investigated. Nothing traces cleanly."

Aren nodded slowly.

In her past life, she had known loss countless times. She knew what it must have felt like. Her expression softened with genuine sympathy.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

The sincerity in her voice unsettled him more than any insult could have.

Caio's jaw tightened.

"It's fine," he rasped.

For one agonizing second, he forced his gaze away from her, before dragging the conversation back under control.

"Just know I need the skills you showed at the Summit. Whatever their source. Beyond that, I have my own security. You don't need to concern yourself with the rest."

Aren absorbed each word carefully.

In her notebook, she wrote: *Client under active threat. Internal compromise possible.*

She looked up again.

"Understood. Are there any additional terms?"

"There is one more."

Something shifted subtly in Caio's tone.

It became slower now.

More deliberate.

Each word fell somewhere between bone-deep weariness and an expectation he himself couldn't explain.

“Are you still open to our old agreement, or am I supposed to include that formally in the contract as well?”