

SURRENDER TO THE DON'S EMBRACE (GIO AND MILLIE)

Chapter 3

3 MILLIE

Mother pulled at the dress Father had picked out for the occasion, which Harper called the 'meat show'. No matter how much she tugged, the dress remained stubbornly short. I stared at myself in the mirror, feeling uncertain. I had never worn anything so revealing before. The black dress clung to my body, accentuating my curves, and ended way above my knees. The top was a glittery golden bustier with black tulle straps. "I can't wear this. Mother," I protested.

As we looked at each other in the mirror, I noticed her elegant floor-length dress and felt envious of her modest attire. "You look like a woman," she said in a hushed tone.

My discomfort grew, and I cringed. "I look like a hooker."

Mother dismissed my concern, pointing out that the dress was expensive and that I looked stunning in it. She believed Gio, whoever he was, would appreciate my appearance. I looked down at my cleavage, feeling self-conscious about my small breasts. I was only fifteen, and I felt like I was dressed way beyond my years.

She handed me towering five-inch black heels, hoping to boost my height. I reluctantly put them on, realizing they were meant to impress someone named Gio. Mother smiled, encouraging me to hold my head high and showcase my beauty, supposedly surpassing all other women in New York. She seemed well-informed about Gio's reputation and conquests, making me wonder if Father had confided in her.

I hesitated, wanting to ask her to accompany me, but she insisted I should enter the room alone, where the men, including Gio and his entourage, were waiting. I had to be presented to Gio by my father before we all joined for dinner. This instruction had been repeated to me countless times.

Feeling a mix of fear and vulnerability, I stepped out of my room, thankful for the recent weeks of heel training. As I stood before the door to the fireplace lounge on the first floor, my heart raced in my chest. I wished Harper could be by my side, but Mother was probably keeping her in check. I had to face this on my own, without anyone stealing the spotlight from the bride-to-be.

Staring at the intimidating wooden door, I contemplated fleeing. Laughter emanated from behind it, belonging to my father and the Boss. It was a room filled with powerful and dangerous men, and I, like a lamb, was supposed to enter alone. I had to shake off such thoughts and remind myself that I had made them wait long enough

With determination, I gripped the handle and pushed the door open. As I entered, the conversations ceased, and all eyes turned to me. Did I have to say something? Nerves took over, and I trembled, hoping no one could see my fear. My father wore a satisfied grin, while Gio's intense gaze fixed on me, leaving me frozen in place, breath held. He set down a glass with a clink, and the room fell silent. If no one spoke soon, I might consider bolting from the room. I quickly scanned the faces of the gathered men, recognizing some from New York and others from the Chicago Outfit. Among them was Tanner, whom I could see wanted to offer comfort. but he refrained, knowing my father's disapproval

Father finally approached me, placing a hand on my back, and guided me toward the assembled men like a lamb being led to slaughter. Among the gathered group, Mathias Ruberti appeared completely disinterested; his focus was solely on his Scotch. It had been only two months since we attended the funeral of his wife, leaving him as a widower in his thirties. I might have felt sympathy for him if he didn't scare me as much as Gio did.

My father, of course, steered me directly toward my future husband, wearing a challenging expression as if he expected Gio to be in awe. However, Gio's expression was stoic, as if he were staring at an unremarkable rock. His cold, gray eyes remained fixed on my father.

"This is my daughter, Millie," my father announced. Evidently, Gio hadn't mentioned our awkward encounter. Vernon Ruberti spoke up, "I didn't promise too much, did I?"

Embarrassment washed over me, and I wished the ground would swallow me whole. The attention I was receiving was overwhelming. Spencer, who had recently been initiated and turned eighteen, was particularly obnoxious since then. His gaze made my skin crawl.

"You didn't," Gio replied simply.

My father seemed put off by Gio's nonchalant response. Unnoticed by others. Karsen had sneaked up behind me and held my hand. Gio noticed though, and his gaze lingered on my brother, dangerously close to my bare thighs. I shifted nervously, and Gio looked away.

"Maybe the future bride and husband want to be alone for a few minutes?" suggested by Agatone Merante. Startled, I looked at him, failing to hide my shock quickly enough. Gio noticed but didn't seem to care.

My father smiled and left. much to my disbelief. "Should I stay?" Enrique asked, and I managed a quick smile, but my father shook his head. "Give them a few minutes alone," he said. Agatone Merante even winked at Gio. They all left the room, and it was only Gio, Karsen and me left.

"Karsen," my father's voice was sharp, "get out of there now."

Reluctantly, Karsen let go of my hand and left, sending Gio a death glare that only a five-year-old could manage. Gio's lips quirked in response. Once the door closed, we were alone. What did Gio's father's wink mean?

I glanced up at Gio. As I suspected, with my high# heels on, the top of my head only reached his chin. He was staring out the window, not sparing me a single glance. Dressing up like a hooker didn't make Gio any more interested in me. Why would he be? I had seen the women he dated in

New York. They would have filled out the bustier much better.

"Did you choose the dress?" he suddenly asked, making me jump from surprise. His voice was deep and calm, as usual "No," I admitted. "My father did."

Gio's jaw twitched, and his inscrutable demeanor made me increasingly nervous. He reached into the inside of his jacket, and for a ridiculous moment, I thought he might be pulling out a gun. Instead, he held a black box in his hand. Turning toward me, I focused intently on his black shirt. Everything about him seemed black, like his soul

This was a moment countless women dreamt of, but I felt cold when Gio opened the box. Inside rested a white gold ring with a large diamond at the center, flanked by two slightly smaller ones. I didn't move.

Gio held out his hand when the awkwardness between us peaked. Blushing, I extended my hand, and my skin flinched when it brushed against his. He slipped the engagement ring onto my finger and then released me

"Thank you," I felt compelled to say the words and even looked up into his face, which remained impassive, though his eyes showed a hint of anger. Had I done something wrong?—P Me held out his arm, and I inched mine through it, allowing him to lead me out of the lounge and toward the dining

room. We walked in silence. Perhaps Gio was disappointed enough with me that he might cancel the arrangement? But then, he wouldn't have put the ring on my finger if that were the case.

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As we entered the dining room, the men were already present, and finally, the women from my family joined them. Strangely, the Merantes chose not to bring any female companions with them. Perhaps they doubted my Father and the Rubertis, fearing the consequences of exposing women to our house.

Their caution was understandable; I wouldn't trust my father or the Boss either. I quickly went to stand with my mother and sisters, pretending to admire the ring on my finger to avoid drawing attention. Harper, however, shot me a meaningful look. I was unsure of what my mother had used to silence her, but I could sense that Harper had a sharp remark ready to be unleashed. I silently signaled her to hold back, and she begrudgingly complied, rolling her eyes in frustration.

The dinner passed in a hazy blur. The men delved into their business discussions while we women maintained our silence. Throughout the evening, my gaze kept returning to the weighty, constricting ring on my finger. It felt suffocating, an overwhelming symbol of possession bestowed upon me by Gio.

