

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

Chapter 5

5 MILLIE

Father's lips tightened. "You are right. But as long as Millie remains under my roof until the wedding, and I'm unable to raise a hand against her, I'll find another way to make her obey." He directed his anger at Harper and struck her once more. "For every one of your wrongdoings, Millie, your sister will accept the punishment in your stead."

Suppressing my tears, I didn't look at either Gio or Father, masking my hatred from them until I could find a safer time to vent.

"Enrique, take Harper and Millie to their rooms and ensure they stay there," Father commanded. I resisted, not wanting Harper to be alone tonight. but Enrique insisted, reminding me of my father's authority.

As we made our way through the corridor and up the stairs, Harper revealed her hatred for them all, but I urged her to be cautious with her words in front of Enrique, as he remained loyal to our father despite his care for us.

In my room, I turned to Enrique, intending to ask him to let me comfort Harper, but he cautioned against it, reminding me not to provoke our father further.

"I need to help Harper with her lip," I argued.

Enrique shook his head gently. "It's nothing. You two together in a room always leads to trouble. Do you think it's wise to provoke your father any further tonight?" He closed Harper's door and nudged me towards my own room.

As I reluctantly entered, I turned to him once more. "Will you be guarding my door all night to ensure I don't sneak out again?" I challenged. He smiled, patting my head affectionately. "Better get used to it. Now that Gio's put a ring on your finger, he'll make sure you're always guarded."

I shut the door, feeling trapped. Even from afar, Gio would control my life. I had hoped to continue as usual until the wedding, but now everyone knew what the ring symbolized. Spencer's severed finger was a warning, a signal of Gio's claim on me, and he would enforce it ruthlessly.

That night, I left the lights on, afraid that darkness would bring back haunting images of blood and severed limbs. The nightmares came anyway.

My breath formed clouds as it escaped my lips, a testament to the bitter cold of Chicago's winter. Despite my thick coat, the chill still pierced through. Along the pavement, I followed my mother toward the brick building housing the most luxurious wedding store in the Midwest. Enrique trailed closely behind, a constant shadow in my life. Another of my father's soldiers followed behind my sisters.

As we stepped through the revolving brass doors, the brightly lit interior welcomed us, and the owner, accompanied by her two assistants, greeted us warmly. "Happy birthday. Ms. Pearce," she said with a lilting voice.

Forcing a smile, I acknowledged her well wishes. Today was my eighteenth birthday, a day that should be filled with celebration. Instead, it only brought me closer to the inevitable marriage with Gio. It had been thirty months since I last saw him, the night he severed Spencer's finger. Since then, he had showered me with extravagant gifts, but our interactions were limited to those gestures. I had seen pictures of him with other women on the internet, but today, our engagement would be leaked to the press, and at least publicly, he wouldn't flaunt his affairs anymore.

I had no illusions about him being faithful; I knew he continued to sleep with other women. Strangely, I didn't care. As long as he had distractions, he might not think about me in that way.

The shop owner chimed in, breaking my thoughts. "Only six months until your wedding, if I'm not mistaken?" Her excitement was evident. Knowing she stood to make a substantial profit from our union—the final union between the Chicago and New York mafia families. Money was of little concern

I nodded, knowing that in 166 days. I would be exchanging one golden cage for another. My younger sister, Harper, shot me a disapproving look, but she wisely held her tongue. At sixteen and a half, she had learned to control her outbursts, mostly.

We were led into the fitting room, with Enrique and the other man waiting outside the drawn curtains. Sienna and Harper settled on the plush white couch, while my mother began browsing the wedding gowns on display. I stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by all the white tulle, silk, gossamer, and brocade, each piece symbolizing a life I wasn't sure I wanted. I would soon be a married woman, but the quotes about love adorning the walls felt like taunts, given the harsh reality of my life. What was love but a foolish dream?

I felt the scrutinizing gazes of the shop owner and her assistants, so I squared my shoulders and joined my mother. I couldn't allow anyone to see the truth—I wasn't a happy bride-to-be but a pawn in a dangerous game of power.

The shop owner, eager to assist, presented us with her most expensive gowns. "What kind of gown would your future husband prefer?" she inquired cheerfully.

"The naked kind." Harper blurted out, earning a stern look from our mother. I blushed, but the shop owner found it amusing. "There's time for that on the wedding night. don't you think?" she winked, lightening the mood

Feeling pressured, I reached for the most expensive dress in the collection—a brocade dream with a bustier adorned with pearls and silvery threads in the shape of delicate flowers.

"Those are platinum threads." the shop owner revealed, explaining the steep price. "I'm sure your groom will be delighted with your choice."

Little did she know Gio as well as I did. He remained as much a stranger to me today as he had been almost three years ago.

The wedding preparations were in full swing, set to take place in the sprawling gardens of the Merante mansion in the Hamptons. Though I hadn't yet stepped foot on the premises, my mother kept me informed about everything, even when I hadn't asked for updates.

Upon our arrival in New York a few hours ago, my sisters and I gathered in our suite at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Manhattan. Agatone erante. Rad suggested that we stay in one of the mansion's rooms until the wedding in five days, but my father declined the offer. The past three years had seen a fragile truce between him and Agatoré, but trust was still lacking. Personally, I was relieved. The thought of entering the mansion before I absolutely had to made me uneasy. to

Fortunately, my father agreed to let me share a suite with my sisters, Sienna and Harper, while he and mother had their own. As expected, each door of our suite had a vigilant bodyguard stationed in front of it.

Sienna, lounging on the sofa with her bare legs draped over the backrest, questioned the necessity of attending the bridal shower the following day. Mother often likened her to Nabokov's *Lolita*—provocative and alluring. At fourteen, she already knew how to use her developing

curves to elicit reactions from those

around her. It worried me, knowing that while Father's men saw it as harmless, others might misinterpret her actions.

Harper retorted, reminding Sienna that I, the bride-to-be, deserved their presence at the bridal shower. But Sienna scoffed, seemingly uninterested. Suddenly, she sat up with determination. "I'm bored. Let's go shopping."

Enrique, one of my father's bodyguards assigned to us, was hesitant about the idea. Despite having another guard by his side, he always found it challenging to keep us under control. However, he eventually relented, as he often did.

We were browsing through a store filled with alluring rocker-chick-style outfits that Sienna had her heart set on trying when a message from Gio popped up on my phone. It was the first direct contact from him in a long time, and for a moment, I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. Harper, who was with me in the dressing room, leaned over my shoulder to read the message too. It read, 'Meet me at your hotel at six. Gio.'

"How considerate of him to ask." Harper said sarcastically. "What could he possibly want now?" I whispered anxiously. I had hoped to avoid seeing him until August 10th, our wedding day.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Harper replied, glancing at her reflection in the mirror.