

## **Mafia God 200**

### Chapter 200: We Have To Talk

"Val..." he tried again, stepping closer.

Valentina raised a hand. "Don't," she said.

"Val, please... we have to talk. Just give me five minutes."

The usual ease in his voice—the charm, the effortless confidence he wore had been stripped down.

"I don't have five minutes," she snapped, not even looking at him as she shuffled a stack of receipts. "We are short-staffed. My sister isn't here, Rosa isn't here. I don't have time for your nonsense. Now, please leave."

"Not until you talk to me."

Valentina looked up at him then, her patience snapping. "Jesus Christ!" she burst out, throwing her hands up slightly before letting them fall back against the counter. "Are you listening to me? I'm busy."

"I understand that," Ricardo said quickly. "But I will wait until you have the time for me."

Her shoulders dropped. She turned away from him, exhaling under her breath as she pressed her fingers briefly against her temple, trying to physically push the situation away. "Tony," she called. "Would you please try to call Rosa once more?"

Tony, who had been pretending very hard not to listen, nodded quickly. "Yeah, yeah—on it," he said, already pulling out his phone grateful to be given a task that required zero emotional involvement.

Valentina pushed away from the counter, moving around it, her steps quick and decisive as she headed toward an empty table at the far end of the shop. She pulled out a chair and sat, crossing her arms immediately.

Ricardo followed. He placed the bouquet gently on the table in front of her, the bright colors looking absurd. "Val..." he started.

She didn't let him get far. "How about I cut this short for you?" she said. "It doesn't matter that my sister told you about the... baby." She didn't want to care.

That path led to feelings, and feelings were currently the least helpful thing in her life. "I will make whatever decision feels right to me," she continued. "It has absolutely nothing to do with you. I expect nothing from you," she added, her fingers curling lightly against her arms. "In fact, I demand that you offer me nothing."

If she expected nothing, then she couldn't be disappointed. "I am an asshole. I am an idiot. I have—"

"Ricardo," Valentina cut in, lifting a hand slightly, "skip the fluff. Get to it." There was no room for theatrics.

No patience for rehearsed guilt or carefully arranged apologies. She didn't want a performance.

Ricardo exhaled, the words he had lined up collapsing. "Please," he said finally. "I love you. That's all I can say," he added. "Let me be there for you."

"You have no right to ask me for anything," she said. "We are done, okay?"

Ricardo shook his head slowly, disagreeing with a reality he refused to accept. "I'm sorry, Val," he said. "I cannot accept that. Even when I said that," he continued, running a hand through his hair again, his frustration more inward than directed at her, "I didn't accept it. I couldn't accept it. I'm going to keep trying," he said, meeting her eyes fully.

"I will keep trying." He meant it.

The bell above the shop door chimed softly as a customer walked in. He leaned down then, slowly, giving her enough time to pull away if she wanted to.

She didn't. His lips brushed softly against her forehead, the contact brief, carrying more care than anything else he had managed to say.

"Take care of yourself," he whispered. Then he straightened, turning away. She just sat there, staring at the space he had occupied.

She swallowed hard. No. She couldn't do this again. Couldn't let him back in just because he showed up.

She wasn't a second chance waiting to happen. She wasn't something he could walk away from and then circle back to when his conscience kicked in.

She wasn't a ping pong ball. Something to be hit away when things got too difficult and pulled back when it felt right again.

No. Not again.

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"Ricardo!" Nonnina exclaimed, practically leaping to meet him. "Oh, my darling boy!" She wrapped him in a hug, holding on just long enough to make him feel simultaneously guilty and cherished. "Work keeps you so busy, you won't even come by to see your zia."

"I'm so sorry, zia. The club... it's demanding. More than I expected."

"Well, shouldn't you be there right now?" Her eyebrows rose.

"I... kind of have to talk to you."

"Of course," she said, waving him forward. "Come on. I'll make you some tea." She led him through the house. "And how is it going with the girl, Valentina?" Nonnina asked casually, humming as she moved.

"She... she's pregnant."

Nonnina spun around, her eyes locking onto him. "Ricardo! You've only been in New York for how long? And you're already getting girls pregnant?" The outrage in her voice was tempered with amusement, a storm that somehow still felt like home.

"Well..." he started, the sheepishness spreading across his face.

"You men of nowadays...I thought it would be Luca's baby I would be welcoming. The way he and Zuccherino go at it, you'd think they'd be popping one every week."

"It just happened..."

"Nothing just happens, you idiot. Are you going to marry her?"

"She has to forgive me first before I can do that," he muttered.

Nonnina stopped at the doorway to the kitchen. "Hmmm... you did something wrong."

"I ended things with her, but that was before I knew she was pregnant," Ricardo admitted, eyes flicking down at the patterned tile beneath his shoes.

Nonnina's eyes narrowed, a soft scolding, and she shook her head. "Why would you do that? She seems like a good girl."

"She is a good girl," he said quickly, defensively, the truth of it needed asserting. "She's... she's everything good I've ever wanted."

Nonnina tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Then what sort of worms are eating around in your brain?"

"I'm trying to make it right."

"You love this girl?" Nonnina asked.

"Yes!" He felt exposed, but it was the truth, as undeniable as the beating of his own heart.