

## Mafia God 284

### Chapter 284: Just This Once

"Vee." He found his shirt — she didn't even remember him picking it up — and he held it in one hand. "You fail to understand one fundamental fact about me. I don't want disloyal people around me. You better be willing to give your blood when you work for me — because goddamnit, I will take it." He pulled the shirt on. "This rule does not excuse Ricardo just because he is engaged to your sister."

Veronica dropped. She went down to her knees. She had run out of words that worked standing up and her body had made its own decision about what came next.

"Luca." She was a woman who loved him asking him for the one thing she needed most in this moment. "Please. Just this once." Her hands found his legs, holding on with desperation. "Just this once, please."

He looked down at her.

"Think of Nonnina." She pressed. "Please. She is his Zia. Think how much you will hurt her." "Luca. Luca. I beg you." Her head dropped to his feet.

Luca stood there for a moment. She could feel the tension in his legs. "Get up."

"No." She pressed closer to his feet. "No. No. No." She had nothing else. This was everything she had.

A long exhale came from above her. Then he bent. His hands found under her arms, lifting her with care. He brought her up from the floor.

She came up off the floor and found his face close to hers. The cold was still there in his eyes.

"I'll do this for you," he said quietly. "But have this at the back of your mind. If someone has stabbed you once before — they will do it again."

"Everyone deserves a second chance," she said softly.

"Tell me what happened," he said instead. "All of it."

She took a breath. And then she told him. Ricardo, she explained, had not handed over operational details or anything that suggested betrayal in the professional sense. What he had given Bianca was smaller than that — and in some ways, she knew, that would make it worse to Luca rather than better because it was about her.

She explained that they were just ordinary details handed to the wrong woman because the wrong woman had known which pressure points to apply. She told him how she had come to Italy not for any of the reasons she had initially offered. She had come specifically to find Bianca.

To look her in the eye. To deliver, in terms she intended to make unmistakable, a warning about what continued interest in Veronica Scalese's life would cost her.

"The bastard has a woman fighting his battles for him."

Vee's head turned. "What's that supposed to mean?" She had been contrite approximately ten minutes ago and she had apparently used up her supply of deference for the evening.

He held up a hand, staking out the boundaries of this particular conversation before it went somewhere that would cost them both more than they had left to spend tonight. "No. No. You don't get to be mad for any reason."

"Luca—"

"Not right now." He met her eyes steadily. "You don't get to be mad right now. Not tonight. Not in this conversation." He had bent considerably already this evening and had located his limit. "At this point, I hold the reins. I say whatever I want to say and feel however I want to feel."

Vee pressed her lips together. The expression on her face suggested she had several responses queued up and was exercising considerable restraint in not deploying them.

"But you have a problem," he continued. "A big one."

She waited.

"I'm going to tell Marco."

"Luca—"

"And he will definitely be tuning Ricardo up."

"Why can't you just listen?"

"I am listening." He had listened. He had absorbed everything she'd told him. Listening and concluding were not the same thing, and the conclusion had been reached. "I listened to everything you said."

"Then—"

"I need Marco to have this information. Not because of you and me. Not because of Ricardo and your sister." He turned back to face her. "This isn't about any of that anymore, Vee. It's bigger than that."

She watched him.

"Julian. The suspicions Marco and I have about him. We've been building a theory and right now we have gaps in it. Is Julian helping Bianca simply because he wants to fuck my wife? Because he has a personal interest that happens to align with her agenda? I like to stay ahead of my enemies," he said. "I think ten steps ahead of them. Always. The moment I stop doing that is the moment someone puts a bullet in me that I didn't see coming."

He held her gaze. "Marco needs all of that information. Every piece of it. Because every piece either confirms a theory or they don't, and right now we need to know which one it is before Bianca lands in New York and whatever she and Julian are building arrives on our doorstep fully constructed. I want to believe he is using her by aligning with her own desires of wanting to keep her marriage."

A pause.

"And maybe," he added, "your sister needs it too. It will give her a wake up call on the pussy she is marrying. I cannot believe even with what you knew you still want him married to your sister."

"Leave Val out of this, please. She doesn't need any stress. Not now. Not with the baby and the wedding and—" She stopped herself, reordered. "Just leave her out of it. And you can give Marco the order not to make any move. Please, Luca."

He looked down at her with an expression she couldn't entirely decode, which was unusual because she had become reasonably fluent in him. "Fine," he said. "But."

She waited.

"The next person that betrays me—" He held her eyes. "And it involves you. I will hand you the gun. And you will kill whoever it is yourself."