

Mafia God 353

Chapter 353: All My Life

"All my life," Julian spat, "it was the same thing. Luca this. Luca that. Luca is stronger. Luca is sharper. Luca can handle pressure. Luca can lead." He laughed bitterly. "And I was what? The practice son?"

A whole life built around being measured against someone he could never quite beat, because the game had been rigged before either of them were old enough to understand they were playing it.

"So what if you wanted to show Don you could do it better?"

Julian's breathing was heavier now, his jaw set tight. "Yes. Yes. I wanted him to see me," he said after a beat. "Just once. Not as the spare. Not as the liability. Not as the son he tolerated because blood is blood. I wanted him to look at me the way he looked at Luca."

He looked tired, tired enough to finally tell the truth. "And I did do better," Julian asserted.

A second ago he had been wounded pride and old resentment. But now? Now there was smugness, he had been waiting his whole life for someone to finally hand him the stage.

Veronica saw it and, inwardly smiled. Good. There you are. "It was magnificent, really," she said, laying the flattery on thick. "How can they think you couldn't have done it all by yourself?"

His pride took the bait. "It was Bianca's plan," he said, and then, as if he could not bear for even a second to leave the glory sitting with anyone else, added with sharp emphasis, "but I—I executed it."

There it was. For one suspended beat, Veronica just looked at him. Then she smiled. A bright, delighted, dangerous little smile.

"Wow," she said. "I didn't think it was going to be that easy."

Julian blinked. The smugness fell off his face in pieces. "What... what was easy?"

"Getting you to talk," she said.

Understanding hit him all at once.

"You really are quite easy to manipulate," Veronica continued, tilting her head as she looked at him with open, fascinated disdain. "You really have some massive Luca issues."

Julian stared at her. Then he let out a short, bitter breath. "You are not here to sympathise with me. You tricked me."

Veronica's smile widened just a fraction. "Brilliant, aren't I?"

Julian's face twisted. "You're a witch!"

The insult chased after her as she turned and strode toward the door, but at this point Veronica was enjoying herself too much to care.

She stopped with her hand on the handle and looked back over her shoulder. "And you," she shot back without missing a beat, "are a pussy-sniffing son of a bitch!"

Julian looked genuinely offended. Which made it better.

"Whew," Veronica said, pressing a hand dramatically to her chest. "I've been dying to cuss you out since the day I met you." She gave him a bright, wicked grin. "Feels good."

And then she laughed. After all the fear, all the chaos, all the rage this man had dragged through their lives—she had gotten what she came for.

She pulled the door open. And there, exactly where she knew he would be, stood Luca. Massimo was beside him, grave and unreadable as ever, but Luca—

Luca was wearing the kind of grin that said he was equal parts impressed, in love, and deeply turned on by her ability to verbally eviscerate people on his behalf.

Veronica planted one hand on her hip and lifted her brows like, Well? Luca's smile only widened.

"Enough?" Veronica asked. She had done what she came to do. She had pulled the truth out of Julian and handed it over.

Now the rest belonged to the men of this family. Luca looked at her with undisguised pride, his hand already reaching for hers as if contact with her had become as necessary to him as breath.

"Halfway there," he said.

Massimo stepped into the room. The Don moved with dreadful calm, one hand slipping inside his jacket before coming back out with a gun.

Julian's face, already pale, went strange and still. At the end, all the fury and resentment and rivalry in the world meant very little when your father was the one standing in front of you.

Massimo raised the weapon. His fingers shook as he cocked it.

"Dad..." Julian whispered.

Massimo inhaled sharply. And then he pulled the trigger. Luca's arm came around Veronica at once, pulling her slightly into him. He had already decided he would shield her from whatever came next. He had expected her to flinch, perhaps to turn away, to hide her face against him.

She didn't. She only stood very still, a small sadness moving across her expression as she looked not at Julian, but at Massimo.

Don looked old. Old and burdened. Veronica exhaled slowly. Massimo lowered the gun. For a second he remained exactly where he was, his body had not yet caught up to what his hand had done. Then he turned away, his face schooled back into control.

"You okay?" Veronica asked him.

"I will be," he said. Then he walked away.

Veronica watched him go, her heart tight with a sorrow that did not erase what Julian had done, but sat beside it anyway. Some endings were necessary. That did not make them clean.

Luca's hand closed around hers more tightly. When he looked at her again, there was still pride in his face—pride, affection, wonder.

"I knew you'd be an amazing Donna," he said.

Veronica gave a small shake of her head, her gaze dropping briefly before lifting again. "It is sad," she said quietly, "especially for Massimo. But Julian has done too much. It's unforgivable."

Bianca stood with her spine perfectly straight in Don Genovese's home office. Dark wood. Floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with books. Heavy curtains half-drawn. A wide desk.

And seated behind that desk was Luca. A laptop sat open in front of him. Beside it rested a gun.

"Why am I here?" Bianca asked.

Luca smiled. She still had her pride, then. He found himself thinking back to their wedding day.