

Mafia God 356

Chapter 356: Stay With Me

"I have never had any doubt," she said softly, "as to how much you love me, Massimo. But I was never meant for you," she said. "Never."

Massimo gave a derisive snort, low and bitter and aching all at once. "Never?" He refused to accept even now, after all the years and all the damage and all the proof life had handed them. He caught hold of her and pulled her close.

The kiss was hard at first. It carried grief and anger and love worn down. When Massimo felt no resistance, the force of it changed. Softened.

When he finally pulled back, it was only far enough to look at her, his hand still holding her close.

"Never?" he asked again.

That was all. Then he kissed her once more. Carol had always known this could happen. That was the real reason she kept her guard up around him, every moment alone with Massimo treated like a risk that needed managing. He had always been dangerous to her, not just because of the life he lived, but because no amount of distance had ever fully killed what lay between them.

And God help her, she had loved the man even across oceans. Loved him from a foreign city where she had tried very hard to build a life untouched by him. Loved him through anger, through silence, through the long ache of knowing exactly why she had left and still missing him anyway.

So when he kissed her now—grieving, broken, smelling of whiskey—she could not pretend surprise. Only weakness.

Massimo shifted off the sofa and onto the floor in front of her, closing whatever little space remained between them. "Stay with me," he murmured against her lips after a moment. "Stay, Carol," he whispered. "Please, stay."

The plea hit somewhere deep inside her. Carol closed her eyes, fighting for breath, for reason, for the version of herself that had learned how to walk away.

"I can't, Massi," she said. "But if you ever want to come to Singapore for a booty call..."

Massimo laughed, a tired, disbelieving sound, dragged out of him. "We are too old for booty calls, Carol."

She lifted a brow. "We are too old for this life you live, and yet you live it."

That wiped the laugh right back off his face.

"I can't leave just yet," he said. "Luca is busy with New York. There is no one to leave Italy to."

The same old chains...

"I can't stay either," she said. "I cannot do it. I'm not strong enough."

That was the truth of it. Not that she didn't want to. Not that the pull between them had faded. But that staying meant being swallowed whole by a life she had already bled to escape once.

Massimo seemed to understand enough to stop arguing for a moment. He kissed her forehead first. Then one cheek. Then the other. Then the corner of her eye.

When he kissed her lips again, it felt like one last kindness. He drew back once more, his hand still resting against her face.

"You don't have anywhere to be, do you?"

"I have to—"

"Fuck it," Massimo muttered. He pulled her down with him onto the carpet, and to Carol's absolute horror—a laugh burst out of her. A bright, helpless giggle, ridiculous and girlish and completely unsuited to a woman with grown sons and decades of emotional damage.

"Massimo!" she hissed scandalously.

He was already fumbling with the buttons of her blouse.

"You are drunk," she informed him.

"my taste remains excellent." His mouth found her again. For a few stolen moments, they were just Massimo and Carol.

And the rest of the world slipped blessedly out of focus.

"Is your mum still coming?" Veronica asked. She stood with Luca in the courtyard. Lanterns had already been lit along the low walls, and the fountain in the center sang quietly to itself. Somewhere beyond the archway, staff moved back and forth with trays, flowers, glasses, and the frantic energy of people trying to prepare a Genovese family gathering.

Luca glanced toward the entrance, then back at her. "Yeah, I think so." He slid one hand into his pocket and gave a small shrug. "She wouldn't miss a chance to welcome Marco. She loves him more than she does me, you know. Always has."

Veronica turned to look at him, one brow rising. Luca paused. Then his expression changed.

"Oh my God," he said, horrified. "I sound like Julian."

That made Veronica laugh instantly.

"Naah," she said, stepping closer. "You don't."

"No?"

"No." She tilted her head. "You don't sound jealous when you say it. You sound..." She smiled softly. "Proud."

He pulled her into him and kissed her hair. "You read me too well, fiancée."

Veronica lifted her left hand then, admiring the ring again. "Val is going to flip at the sight of this," she said, and raised her fingers higher to flaunt the ring properly.

"I'm not riding back with Val," Luca stated at once, with immediate conviction.

"What? Why?"

Luca stared at her as if the answer should have been obvious to anyone who had spent more than ten minutes in Valentina's vicinity. "Your sister wears me out," he said. "She's—" He broke off, searching for language dramatic enough to match his suffering. "It's like she is the weapon fashioned against me."

Veronica laughed immediately. "Oh, stop being so dramatic."

"I am being restrained. There are thoughts in my head right now that would concern a priest."

Veronica's smile only widened.

"I dream of squeezing her neck, you know," he added darkly.

That earned him another laugh.

Vee shook her head. "You love her."

"I do not."

"You do."

"I tolerate her because you came with her."

"You are absolutely obsessed with pretending you don't have feelings."

Luca gave a faint scoff. "I have feelings. Most of them are homicidal."

That one nearly made her snort.

She leaned into him a little more, still smiling. "Are you sure your mum is coming with us?"