

Undressed By The Mafia God

#Chapter 1: Someone Ordered Entertainment - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 1: Someone Ordered Entertainment

Chapter 1: Someone Ordered Entertainment

It's rare to find a gorgeous man. The kind of gorgeous that makes women forget what they were saying mid-sentence. The kind of man whose looks don't feel fair. Bluest eyes you've ever seen. Eyes that promise nothing good and somehow make you want them anyway. Just the right amount of stubble on his chin.

A man who is ridiculously good looking but is the devil. Quite literally. I've heard stories about how dead-drop gorgeous Lucifer actually is so maybe this comparison isn't even exaggeration. Maybe it's generous. Who knows? I have never seen the devil.

He has no moral guidelines whatsoever. None. Zero. Seeing people's pain excites him. He has lost count of his kills.

Now, pair this man with the purest of souls, Veronica Scalese. Funny, hard-working, loving Vero. She knows nothing beyond her father's pizza shop. Her world is small, warm, predictable. Safe. How on earth will these two mix? They shouldn't. They're oil and holy water.

Luca stepped out of the dark room, wiping his bloody hands on a towel. The screams had finally become silence behind the walls. He handed the towel to his lieutenant without looking at him. "Dump him," he said calmly. "And send a message to his partner."

"No one goes back on a deal with the devil," he added.

Then he walked up the stairs, past the false wall, shedding blood and brutality with every step, re-entering the world where music played, glasses clinked, and people laughed.

"Send a message to Scalese. His debt is due. Unless he wants his head hanging on a pike in front of that damned pizza parlour, he will offer payment." Luca said it casually.

"You haven't exactly told him what his payment should be."

Luca stopped walking. Slowly, he turned his head, one brow lifting. "Someone come up with something," he snapped, irritation flashing. "I can't think of everything!" The audacity of it—running an empire of blood and money and still being expected to micromanage the small stuff—honestly offended him. The devil had limits.

He waved the issue away with a flick of his hand and continued walking. By the time he reached his office and opened the door.

"Someone ordered entertainment?" The voice was sultry, slow, perfectly pitched. Luca's mouth went dry instantly. The woman was seated on his desk, legs crossed, body draped in a dangerously minimal number. Luca licked his lips before he could stop himself, his irritation evaporating.

He turned his head slightly. "Marco," he said, not taking his eyes off her. "Have them bring my lunch straight in. You go deal with that stuff."

"Of course, Luca." The door shut quietly behind him, sealing the room away from the rest of the world.

Luca turned back to the woman, unbuckling his pants. "Where in the world did Dante find you, you magnificent thing?" he smirked, stepping closer. Dante had a talent for sourcing things, but this? This was inspired.

Luca reached out, gripping her hips, roughly turning her to face the desk.

"Heaven." The lady replied sultrily. She tilted her head just enough to be provocative, lashes low, mouth soft and inviting.

"Ooooh... that's creative," he drawled. "Seeing as I am never going there." He flipped her back once more to face him, fingers digging into her breasts with a rough squeeze that drew a sharp gasp before he shoved her down to her knees.

Veronica bounced lightly as she stepped into Commissioned's administrative section, pizza box warm in her hands and the faint smell of garlic and cheese trailing behind her. It was her first time delivering here.

Normally, she only handled deliveries close to the Scalese pizza parlour. That was her comfort zone. Her streets. Her people. Plus, she had other things to do—like manage a pizza shop her father was running straight into the ground with his stubbornness and terrible accounting skills. If loving your family was a full-time job, Veronica was doing overtime without pay.

But today, Valentina was helping at the shop, the delivery drivers were all on other routes. Veronica had climbed onto one of the available bikes and decided to make a few deliveries herself. Just a few. In and out. No big deal.

Except Commissioned was very much a big deal.

She adjusted her grip on the box and headed toward the reception desk. "Delivery," she said brightly.

The secretary looked up slowly. "For who?"

Veronica glanced down at the details taped to the box, brow furrowing slightly. "Marco."

"He is not in. Hang on." The secretary lifted the phone. Veronica shifted the pizza box in her hands, the warmth seeping into her palms.

"There is pizza delivery for Marco?" the secretary said into the phone. She listened, lips thinning slightly. "Alright... I'll send her in then." Another pause. "You sure this is cleared?"

Veronica's brows knitted. Cleared? It was a fucking pizza, not a nuclear launch code.

"...Okay." The secretary hung up and finally looked at her again, eyes flat. "Take the back entrance."

Vee frowned instantly. The back? What the hell was wrong with the front? The front had light. People. Exit signs. "Are you sure you can't just take these off my hands and I'll be gone?" she asked, hopeful. In and out. Five minutes.

"No one touches the boss's food," the secretary replied coolly.

"I'm touching it," Vee shot back, glancing down at the box.

"And if something is wrong with it," the secretary continued, unfazed, "you get to die alone." She jabbed a perfectly manicured finger toward a dim corridor marked Authorised Personnel Only.

Vee stared at her. "Hang on. When you say something is wrong with it... do you mean like the wrong crust, or—"

The secretary lifted an irritated brow and turned away, already done with her existence.

"Why would I die alone over a box of pizza?" Vee muttered, rolling her eyes. She took a breath, squared her shoulders, and headed toward the back. The hallway swallowed her whole.

She turned a corner and nearly walked straight into a wall of muscle.

Chapter 2: Lunch Is Here

"Oh—shit," she blurted, stumbling back half a step.

The man was huge. Thick neck, broad shoulders, suit strained just enough to suggest it was holding on for dear life. His eyes flicked down to the pizza box, then back to her face.

And that's when it hit her.

This was the underground of Commissioned. The place people whispered about. The place run by the devil.

Eiish.

Her grip tightened on the box as she forced a polite smile. "Hi. Pizza." She held it out to him, because that was what she was here for. Deliver pizza. Survive. Go home.

The man didn't take it.

He glanced past her, then down the corridor, then back again. "You don't give it to me," he said slowly.

"Oh." She blinked. "Okay. So... who do I give it to?"

"You bring it in."

"In where?" she asked, even as a very bad feeling curled in her stomach.

He stepped aside, revealing a stairwell descending into shadows.

Vee swallowed. Every instinct screamed turn around, but her feet didn't move. "Alright then," she said, trying for casual and landing somewhere near brave stupidity. "Lead the way."

She followed him in, then down.

Veronica's sneakers sounded too loud against the steps. Her fingers tightened around the pizza box, suddenly acutely aware that this was the dumbest delivery route she had ever taken in her life.

At the bottom, the man stopped in front of a heavy door. He knocked.

"Lunch is here, boss."

There was a brief pause. Then a low grunt of approval drifted through the door. It was visceral. Satisfied.

The door opened slightly, just enough. The man gestured with his chin for her to go inside.

Vee hesitated then stepped in.

And then she saw him.

The most good-looking man she had ever laid eyes on.

He was seated behind a massive desk, his head thrown back against the chair, fingers clenched hard around the edge. His chest rose and fell slowly. His eyes were tightly shut, jaw clenched, lips parted.

She thought he was dying.

"Are... are you alright?" Vee asked before she could stop herself.

His head snapped forward.

Blue eyes locked onto hers.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

Vee's eyebrows shot up, but she straightened instinctively, defaulting to professionalism. She lifted the pizza box slightly. "Pizza."

"Pizz... pizza?" he echoed, incredulous. "I didn't order no fucking pizza."

"Well," she replied calmly, "someone ordered pizza from Scalese Pizza Parlour."

"What—Scalese trying to poison me so he won't pay his debt?... Ooh, that's good."

His hands slid under the table, out of sight.

He exhaled slowly.

Veronica was truly confused at this point. Confused, offended, and rapidly losing patience. Whatever the hell she had just walked into, it was not in the job description. So she cleared her throat loudly, pointedly.

"I have a pizza delivery for a Marco," she said, annoyance dripping from every word.

"And if you would show some respect and stop pleasuring yourself until I am gone, that would be really nice."

Luca didn't even look at her.

Instead, he leaned back slightly, jaw tightening, breath heavy as he concentrated on chasing the end rather than the unexpected little nuisance standing in his office with a cardboard box and entirely too much attitude.

His hand fisted in the woman's hair, holding her steady, commanding, as he pushed himself into her mouth one last time, finishing with a low groan that echoed obscenely in the room. The sound made Veronica stiffen where she stood, her face heating with discomfort and disbelief.

For fuck's sake.

"Seriously," Vee snapped, unable to help herself. "Can I get paid for this and let me leave, please?" She shifted her weight, eyes fixed firmly on the wall.

"Good job, love," Luca murmured absently.

The woman emerged from under the table, hair tousled, lips swollen, eyes glazed. Luca reached behind her and untied his belt from her wrists. He leaned forward, opened his wallet, and slipped a couple of hundred-dollar bills into her bra.

The woman straightened, smoothed her dress, and walked past Veronica.

Luca finally lifted his gaze back to Veronica.

She met his stare stubbornly, chin lifted. "So," she said, "do you want the pizza?"

"I didn't order pizza," Luca said flatly.

Veronica stared at him, incredulous, the absurdity finally tipping her over the edge. "You could have said so earlier," she snapped, "instead of making me stand here, watching that." She gestured vaguely toward the desk, the chair, the general aura of sex still hanging thick in the air.

"I didn't make you do anything," Luca replied calmly as he got to his feet. He adjusted his pants, buttoning his shirt. The movement drew her eye despite her best intentions—broad shoulders, lean waist, the easy grace of a man entirely at home in his body. Power rolled off him in waves. It pissed her off. It affected her anyway.

Veronica stood there, frozen, half drooling before she caught herself and mentally told her hormones to shut the fuck up. This was not the time. Or the place. Or the man.

"Why are you still here?" Luca asked, lifting a brow as he studied her.

"Well," she shot back, "who the hell is Marco in this building?"

He tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing in curiosity. A faint, dangerous amusement flickered there. "Do you know who I am?" he asked slowly. She was standing in his office, in the heart of Commissioned's underground. Surely she knew.

"Are you Marco?" she asked.

"No?"

"Then I don't care," Vee said, exasperation finally spilling over. "Who is Marco?" She hugged the pizza box tighter to her chest. "I have to get paid for this. It was quite the distance."

He reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet again. "You know what?" he said casually. "I am Marco."

Her jaw dropped.

"You're Marco."

"The one and only."

"So why the fuck didn't you say that in the first place?" she demanded.

He stepped closer, invading her space just enough to make her pulse jump. "Because," he said softly, eyes locking onto hers, "you didn't ask nicely."

Chapter 3: I've Heard Of This Place

She glared at him, cheeks warm.

"You want the money or not?" Luca held up a one-hundred-dollar bill between two fingers, the gesture careless, insulting in its ease. Money meant nothing here. It was paper. Leverage. A way to make problems disappear. He expected her to snatch it and bolt.

"It's five ninety-nine," she said flatly.

"I'm giving you a hundred dollars so you can get the fuck out of here already."

"I've heard of this place," Vee shot back. "Where the devil lives. Grants you favours and asks for souls in return." She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze squarely. "I don't want any favours. I just want my five ninety-nine."

"You work with Scalese, uhn?" Luca asked.

"Yes."

He hummed softly. He took the bill and slid it into the neckline of her polo shirt, deliberately letting his finger trail down her skin as he did.

Veronica stiffened.

"Like I said," Luca murmured, watching her closely, "I'm Marco. Not the devil." His eyes flicked briefly to where his finger had been. "You can have the money. Can I have the pizza?"

She huffed and dumped the pizza box into his hands with more force than necessary. "There," she said. Then she reached into her shirt, pulled the bill out, and held it up between them. "I'll put it on your tab. You don't have to pay when next you order."

"It's a tip," Luca said.

"And I said I don't want it," Vee insisted, clutching the bill between her fingers.

Luca shrugged dismissively. "Suit yourself," he said. "Addio"

The words followed her as she turned and walked out of the office, spine stiff, dignity held together with sheer stubbornness. She didn't look back. Didn't let herself think about the way his gaze burned into her retreating form. The door shut behind her, sealing that world away.

Moments later, Nonnina arrived with his lunch.

Everyone knew her. Everyone feared her. Guards stepped aside without being asked. She was terrifying in a maternal kind of way—the kind of woman who could bless you and curse you in the same breath and mean both.

She walked straight into Luca's office, the smell of home-cooked food following her. "Diavolino!" she called warmly, closing the door behind her. "Traffic was a nightmare. Madonna mia. But it's alright—I can put the food in the micro thing. Heat it up for you."

"Alright, Nonni. Go ahead."

She set the containers down, muttering softly to herself, then froze.

Her eyes locked onto the pizza box sitting innocently on the table.

She gasped, scandalised. "Diavolino!"

"What?" Luca snapped automatically, irritation flaring—until he followed her line of sight. His stomach dropped. "Shit. Nonni, no! No!" He moved quickly. "It's not mine. I swear, it's not mine."

She turned slowly, hands on her hips, unimpressed.

"You know me," he added hurriedly. "I will not eat out. I only eat what you make for me."

"If you wanted pizza, you should have told me. I will make you pizza." Nonnina cried, hands flying to her chest.

"Nonni, you are not listening to me!" Luca snapped. "It's Marco's. Marco ordered pizza."

The drama drained from her face in an instant. Her shoulders relaxed. Her lips pursed. "Ah," she said. "Then why didn't you say so?"

Luca opened his mouth, then closed it again. Fuck.

Nonnina sighed. "You know I worry about you, Diavolino," she said softly now, all fire replaced with concern. "Your line of work... too many enemies. Too many people who want you dead." She reached out and touched his cheek. "You be careful."

"I know, Nonnina. I know. That's why you're the only woman I love." He pulled her into a hug.

"Stupid boy," she muttered into his shoulder, smacking his back lightly. "You have a wife. Love her too."

Luca pulled back, jaw tightening. "I didn't ask for one, Nonnina," he said. "I have too many distractions already."

He turned away and walked back to his seat.

Nonnina headed toward the corner of the office where a microwave and coffee maker sat. She bent slightly, reaching behind the machine.

She straightened, holding up a pair of red underwear between two fingers.

"Distractions like all the women you bring in here?" she asked.

"Just throw that in the bin, Nonni," he said tiredly. "Please."

Nonnina shook her head slowly and whispered, "Diavolino," under her breath.

"Have you been talking to her. The... wife?" Luca asked.

Nonnina slid the porcelain dish into the microwave and turned it on. "Do you want me to?" she asked, not looking at him.

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "Since when have you ever done what I tell you?"

She smiled then. "She is a good girl. Your father chose her. She knows what it means to be a Genovese. She has been groomed and trained for years, Diavolino."

"I don't know her," Luca said.

"Because you chose not to," Nonnina answered gently. "Invite her here. Let her give you everything you need in a woman."

"This is the first time you will really talk to me about it, Nonni. Why?" He paused, nostrils flaring as the smell of meat filled the room. His stomach growled traitorously. "Hmmm... that smells fucking good."

"I have looked after you since you were born," she said quietly. "You have had everything except someone who loves you softly."

Soft love. He knew hunger. Control. Heat. He knew bodies arching beneath his hands. He knew the dark thrill of desire, the rush of orgasms and the hollow quiet that followed. But soft love?

"You love me softly," Luca countered.

Nonni rolled her eyes and smacked his hand the moment his fingers reached for the microwave. "Wait. It's almost ready," she scolded, planting herself squarely between him and the food.

"I'm starving," he complained, exaggerated, dramatic, the same way he had when he was twelve and growing too fast for his own bones.

"You will not die in five minutes," she shot back. "Madonna mia, such theatrics."

There was a knock on the door and Marco entered. He glanced at Nonnina first, dipping his head slightly before turning to Luca. "Boss, Scalese says he has a proposition for you and would like to speak with you in person."

Chapter 4: What's Your Proposition?

"Interesting that you mention Scalese," Luca said calmly. He moved then, crossing the room. "You just recruited the underground guard?"

"Yes?" Marco answered, uncertainty flickering.

"I need to know," Luca continued, "what part of his training entails bringing uncleared guests into my office." One corner of his mouth lifted. A smile, if you didn't know him. A death sentence, if you did.

"None, Luca."

"Good." Luca turned slightly, gesturing to the desk. "Your pizza arrived." He paused, then added casually, "And kill the fool."

Marco nodded once and turned to leave.

Luca returned to his desk, settling back into his chair. The smell of Nonni's food finally hit him properly then.

Nonnina sighed heavily as she placed the plate in front of him. She knew better than to interfere in mafia business. She always had. But knowing didn't stop wishing.

She looked at the man who filled rooms with fear. And she saw the boy she had rocked to sleep.

This wasn't the life she had wanted for him.

But it was the life carved into his bones.

Every firstborn Genovese was raised for one purpose. To dominate. To become legend.

To be the Mafia God.

"Eat," she said softly.

Luca smirked faintly, picking up his fork. "See? That's soft love."

She shook her head, lips twitching. "Stupid boy."

As he ate, her gaze lingered on him with quiet worry—because somewhere between blood, power, and his dark desires, she feared he was still starving for the one thing the mafia couldn't give him. Soft love.

Marco and Luca arrived at the Scalese home the next morning unannounced. He enjoyed the way surprise unsettled people, how it stripped away rehearsed confidence and left only fear. Predictability was a courtesy he rarely extended.

Instead of summoning Vito Scalese to Commissioned, Luca had decided to go to him. To invade his space. His sanctuary. His illusions of safety.

Months ago, Vito had come crawling to him. To the devil. To ask for a favour.

Heritage Slice, he'd said, was stealing customers. New ovens, better prices, louder marketing. Luca remembered leaning back in his chair, bored, half-listening.

It wasn't a favour Luca usually granted. But boredom was dangerous, and at the time, Luca had been deeply, viciously bored. So he'd taken care of the problem. And now, like all deals with the devil, the bill had come due.

Marco pushed the door open. Luca stepped through without breaking stride. He scanned the space once and moved straight to the living room couch and sat, crossing one ankle over the other, settling in.

Marco disappeared down the hallway.

Moments later, Vito was dragged into the room half-naked, breathless, humiliated, his protests muffled by panic and the grip Marco had on him.

"Luciano!" Vito gasped, scrambling awkwardly as Marco released him to the floor. "You should have told me you were coming. I would have prepared for you."

Luca's gaze dragged lazily over Vito, assessing, unimpressed.

"Prepared how?" Luca asked mildly, his gaze dragging over Vito's exposed skin. "By putting on clothes?" He flicked two fingers in Marco's direction. "Get him a towel or something. No one wants to see that."

Marco disappeared immediately, boots thudding down the hall, and returned moments later with a towel, tossing it at Vito.

Vito scrambled to wrap himself, cheeks burning, dignity in tatters. Luca watched the entire process with bored detachment. When Vito finally stilled, clutching the towel to his chest, Luca leaned back.

"So," Luca said. "What's your proposition?"

Vito swallowed hard. "Well... the pizza shop has not been doing well."

"That's not my problem, Vito. You didn't ask me to improve your clientele. You asked me for something else entirely."

"Yes, yes, of course." Vito nodded too fast, sweat beading at his temples. "I didn't mean to imply—what I mean to say is..." He hesitated. "I do not have the money to pay you."

"You didn't do your research properly on me, did you?" he said softly. "I don't accept money in exchange for my favours."

"Oh—uh—my daughter." He rushed to the cabinet, hands shaking as he grabbed a framed photograph and turned back, thrusting it forward. "Beautiful. Most beautiful girl around. You can have her."

"You want me to take a fuck as payment," Luca said. "I have lots of women at my beck and call. Dante is quite useful with an endless supply of cunts. I have no use for her."

He dropped the photograph to the floor, letting it land face-down.

"But what you do have," he continued quietly, "is a debt. And debts to me don't disappear just because you ran out of imagination."

"Luciano, listen to me," Vito pleaded. He stepped forward, hands clasped. "She is beautiful. Young. Imagine her on your arm as your wife. You will be the envy of every mafia lord."

"I'm married, Vito," Luca cut in smoothly. "To the most beautiful woman in Italy. Stop your grovelling and hear my own proposition."

Vito nodded quickly and fell silent, spine bent, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Your pizza parlour," Luca continued, "sits on a very busy strip. And I just learned yesterday that you do deliveries. I'm going to be in charge of recruiting your delivery team. They'll deliver your pizza..." A pause. "...and my other business."

Luca didn't need to say more.

Vito's head snapped up. Fear overtook decorum. "Luciano, impossible," he said quickly. "If I agree to this, I am a dead man." His hands shook now. "Inferi runs my block. He approached me already. But my daughter manages the shop—she refused. If I drop for you, and Inferi hears of it..." He dragged a finger across his throat.

"Who would you prefer to kill you, Vito?" he asked softly. "Me or Inferi?"

Vito dropped to his knees with a sharp breath. "Luciano, I beg you," he cried. "Listen to me! Valentina—"

"Stop."

"She is untouched," he blurted. "Eighteen and a virgin—"

Marco moved closer to Luca. He leaned in just enough for his words to brush Luca's ear, a murmur meant for him alone.

Chapter 5: Are These Your Daughters?

Luca hummed softly in response. His eyes remained on Vito, watching the man unravel in real time. "Well," he said at last, straightening, "looks like your daughter's virginity just created another opportunity for me."

Luca rose to his feet, adjusting his jacket. "I'll get back to you on that," he added lightly.

He crossed the room once more. As he passed the cabinet, a framed photograph caught his attention. Luca stopped. Reached out. Picked it up.

Two girls smiled up at him from behind the glass. One of them he recognised immediately. The pizza girl from yesterday with the sharp mouth.

Interesting.

"Are these your daughters?" Luca asked casually, still studying the photo.

"Yes... yes!" Vito answered too quickly, scrambling to his feet now, hope clawing its way back into his voice.

"Both of them?" Luca pressed.

"Yes!" Vito exaggerated, nodding hard, sweat dripping down his temples.

Luca tilted his head. "Hmm." His gaze lingered on the girls' faces, thoughtful. "I guess they look like their mother."

He lowered the photo slightly, eyes flicking to Vito with open contempt. "You," he added flatly, "are just a fat pig."

He placed the photograph back carefully. Then he turned and walked out of the house.

Vito sagged in relief, breath shuddering out of him.

Outside, Luca paused and breathed in deeply. The morning air was crisp, clean. It always amused him how the world kept turning, never stopping.

"I'm going to take a small stroll," he said calmly, adjusting his cuffs. "Feel the air."

Marco nodded.

"You take the car," Luca continued. "Go see Bastardi about the virgin girl. Get him to accept the deal. If he does, tell Scalese to prepare his girl."

A beat.

"If Bastardi refuses," Luca added, eyes darkening just a fraction, "then Scalese better accept my offer. Or I will have his head."

"Do you have your registered gun for protection?" Marco asked.

"This is a safe neighbourhood, Marco. What could possibly go wrong?"

"You can never be too safe," Marco replied.

"You're becoming more paranoid than I am," Luca said lightly, adjusting his jacket. "And yes, I have my registered gun."

Marco nodded once, satisfied. He turned and headed for the car, leaving Luca alone on the sidewalk. Luca strolled, hands loose at his sides, breathing in the normalcy of the morning. Birds. Footsteps. The distant sound of traffic. He let himself exist as just a man walking through a city.

Vero walked their small dog through the park. The leash rested comfortably in her hand, the dog trotting ahead, tail wagging. The park was alive with parents pushing strollers, joggers, ducks quacking greedily by the pond.

And then she saw him.

He sat on a bench near the water, feeding the ducks, shoulders relaxed, posture open. He looked... free. So different from the man she had encountered yesterday.

She knew she should keep walking. She absolutely knew it. But her feet slowed anyway.

She pulled the dog closer and stopped behind the bench. He hadn't noticed her. He was focused on the ducks, on the simple act of tossing crumbs into the water, a faint smile touching his mouth.

She leaned down slowly, carefully, her lips close to his ear, mischief bubbling up before she could stop it. "Marco!" she shouted.

What she didn't expect was instinct.

Luca reacted without thought, without hesitation. His body moved before his mind caught up, years of survival and violence snapping into place. He rose to his feet in one smooth motion, his hand already swinging the gun out, turning, aiming—precision honed by countless moments where being a second too slow meant death.

Vero's breath caught as she found herself staring straight down the barrel, her pulse roaring in her ears. The playful moment shattered instantly, replaced by raw adrenaline, shock rippling through her body. The dog yelped softly at her feet, tension snapping through the leash.

Luca's eyes locked onto hers. The pizza girl.

Vee's eyes widened in shock, the careless tease dying in her throat. "I'm sorry," she blurted. "I was just kidding... I saw—I saw you and I...Please don't kill me." Beside her, the little dog sensed the shift immediately, its body stiffening as it started barking sharply, a frantic, protective sound that cut through the stillness of the park.

Luca's features shifted, the hard edge in his eyes easing as quickly as it had appeared. He exhaled slowly, then slid the gun back behind his jacket. "Who the hell screams into a stranger's ears?" he demanded. "Do you have a death wish?"

"What idiot goes to the park with a gun?" she shot back, fear quickly mutating into anger as adrenaline flooded her system. Her heart was still racing, her chest tight, but she straightened instinctively, spine stiffening as defiance replaced panic. "Are you crazy?!" Her hands trembled slightly around the leash.

Luca clicked his tongue, shaking his head slowly. The dog continued barking, its sharp yaps bouncing off his already frayed nerves. "I'm the crazy one?!" he snapped, incredulous. "What are you? Five?!" His eyes narrowed slightly, studying her flushed face, the way her lips parted as if ready to fire back again.

"Says the man who thinks a gun is a toy!" she fired back. "You could have killed me! The least you could do is apologise, not scream at me like a mumbling banshee!"

"You want me... me... to apologise?" Luca echoed, incredulity heavy in his tone. One dark brow lifted as he looked at her, disbelief written plainly across his face. The dog was still barking, the sound drilling into his skull, each sharp yap testing his patience further. He drew in a slow breath, jaw tightening, shoulders tense beneath his jacket.

"Oh, excuse me?" she scoffed, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. "Mr. One Hundred Dollars has never apologised." She knew she was poking at him, pushing deliberately, and yet she couldn't seem to stop.

The grating pitch of her voice, combined with the relentless barking, finally snapped the thin thread of Luca's restraint. With a sharp sigh, he bent down, bringing himself level with the dog. He fixed the animal with a steady, commanding stare. "Sssshhh..." he murmured. "It's alright, boy. Stuck with the crazy lady, huh? Yeah, I'd ask for help too."

Chapter 6: Sorry I Bothered You

The dog whined, ears flattening, then—surprisingly—fell silent.

Vee pulled the dog closer to her, fingers tightening around the leash. Her body angled away from Luca instinctively, chin lifted in stubborn pride. "I'm just going to walk away from you now," she said. The dog leaned into her leg.

"Good idea," Luca replied coolly, straightening to his full height. "It's not like I called you over here in the first place."

"Sorry I bothered you," she muttered.

"You should be," Luca shot back. "You might have gotten your head blown off."

Vee stopped, spun around, and stuck out her tongue at him in a childish, exaggerated gesture. "You need help," she snapped.

"You really are five," Luca muttered, shaking his head as he turned away from her. He dropped back onto the bench, stretching his legs out in front of him. Only then did he notice the empty space around him. The ducks he'd been feeding moments earlier had scattered. "Great. Just great."

Three days later, when Veronica returned home from the pizza parlour, the familiar comfort of routine was shattered the moment she stepped through the door. The house was in chaos. Valentina's shrill screams cut through the air. Her father's voice boomed back, words tumbling over each other too fast to understand. The dog barked wildly.

Before she could even set her bag down, Valentina came running toward her. The girl threw herself into Vee's arms, clinging tightly. "Vee! Vee!" she cried, eyes wide and frantic. "Dad wants to sell me!"

"What?" Vee raised a brow, instinctively steadying Valentina with both hands. Despite the tension in the air, a tired chuckle escaped her lips. She brushed hair from the girl's face, convinced this was just another dramatic outburst. "Come on," she sighed softly. "I'm tired."

"Vee!" Valentina insisted, pulling back just enough to look at her properly. Her grip tightened again. "Listen to me!"

Knowing she wasn't going to catch a break tonight, Vee drew in a slow breath and forced her feet to move. She walked into the living room. Her father sat slouched on the couch, bottle dangling loosely from his fingers. "Dad?" she said carefully. "What's this nonsense about selling Tina?"

"I don't have a choice," Vito replied. He lifted the bottle and took another swig. "I made a deal with the devil."

"Is this some kind of joke?" she snapped. "Quit it, Dad." She searched his face for the familiar signs of drunken exaggeration, the dramatic nonsense she had grown up deflecting, but what she saw instead made her stomach tighten.

"I'm not kidding," Vito said, finally looking at her. "I owe the devil a debt, and he has come to collect." His hand trembled as he lowered the bottle. "I either give him Tina, or we are all dead!"

Vee felt suddenly unmoored. None of it made sense. "What do you mean," she finally whispered, "by you made a deal with the devil?"

"The devil," Vito repeated quietly. His gaze dropped to the floor. "Luciano Genovese."

Vee recoiled as if he had struck her. "Are you... are you crazy?" she demanded, stepping back, disbelief colliding violently with rage. "Dad, what are you doing?" She ran a hand through her hair, panic threading through her movements. "Has years of alcohol abuse finally melted your brain?" Her eyes burned as she looked at him.

"You want to sacrifice your daughter to the devil. Your daughter? What debt? What did you take from him?"

"That's not the point," Vito snapped weakly, frustration flashing as he slammed the bottle down on the table. "The point is they are coming to collect her."

"Over my dead body!" Valentina screamed. Her face buried itself against Vee's chest. Vee wrapped her arms around her instantly, pulling her close with fierce urgency. She could feel Tina's heart racing, feel the tremors of terror rippling through her slight frame.

"Dad, think about this," Vee said, lifting her head slowly to look at him. She stroked Valentina's hair in long, steady motions, a soothing contrast to the chaos spiraling inside her. Her eyes pleaded even as they hardened. She needed him to pause, to hear himself, to understand what he was saying before the damage became irreversible.

"Would you rather he kill three of us, then?" Vito snapped back, desperation sharpening his words. His face was drawn now.

"Then take me," Vee said. "Give me to him." If someone had to be the offering, it would not be the child trembling in her arms.

"I need you to run the pizza parlour," Vito replied flatly, avoiding her gaze. "And besides, you are too old."

"Dad!" Vee cried. Tears burned her eyes now. "Am I dreaming? I must be dreaming." She shook her head slowly. "Truly, that must be it. I'm asleep and I am dreaming."

Valentina sobbed harder, her small body collapsing fully into Vee's embrace. Her cries were muffled now. Vee pressed her cheek to the top of her sister's head, breathing her in, memorizing the warmth, the softness, the very proof of her existence. She would not let this be taken. She could not.

"What are they going to do to her?" Vee asked quietly.

"I don't know," Vito answered. "Luca can decide that."

"Jesus Christ!" Vee snapped, panic flaring anew. She pulled back slightly, eyes wild. "I'm calling the police."

"Will you use your head?" Vito barked. "What will they do?" He gestured helplessly. "Do you really want to take on the devil?"

"Dad... Dad... please." Tears slipped free now. "You cannot do this." She stepped toward him, still holding Valentina, still shielding her with her body. "How much is the debt? I can pay it." She meant it. Every ounce of her. There was nothing she wouldn't give.

"It's not money, Vee," Vito said quietly. "Just drop it." He rose to his feet, the decision already carved into his spine, and without another word, he turned and walked out of the room.

"I'm not doing it, Vee. I'll run away!" Valentina cried. Her hands clutched at Vee's shirt, fingers shaking, eyes wide. Her body trembled, thin shoulders hitching with each breath, and Vee felt the fragile heat of her fear seep straight into her own chest.

"Don't worry," Vee murmured immediately, pulling her closer, wrapping herself around her sister. "I'll... I'll fix this." She pressed a kiss into Valentina's hair. "It's alright, love," she continued, stroking her hair slowly. "Come. I'll make you some tea. It will calm your nerves. Come on," she coaxed softly. "You know I got you."

Chapter 7: There's A Girl At Reception

The next day, Luca sat in his office with Marco. They were deep into discussion, dissecting their deal with Bastardi.

The door opened, and the new underground bodyguard stepped inside, posture stiff, eyes alert. "There's a woman at reception," he said carefully. "She's asking to see Marco. She has a box of pizza with her."

Marco frowned and straightened in his chair, confusion flickering across his features. "I didn't order pizza," he said, suspicion immediately replacing surprise. His gaze flicked to Luca, who had already gone still.

Without a word, Luca rose and walked toward the adjoining section of the office that housed the security room. Inside, the tech team sat surrounded by glowing screens, the hum of electronics filling the air. "Pull up reception for me," Luca ordered calmly.

A few quick clicks later, the center screen lit up. The image resolved into the reception area of the club, and there she was—the pizza girl. She stood at the desk, box balanced in her hands.

He turned away from the screen and walked back into his office. He stopped in front of the guard. "Bring her in here," he said.

"Boss?" Marco lifted a brow. He glanced between Luca and the door.

"As of this moment, I'm Marco. You are Luca. Okay. I've met her before. She delivered your pizza the other day."

Marco nodded slowly, catching on immediately. "Got it," he said, already turning toward the door. Whatever this was, it promised entertainment. He stepped out, leaving Luca alone.

Moments later, Veronica was escorted into the office. Luca turned around in his seat. Vee stood there with a pizza box in her hands, shoulders squared, chin lifted in stubborn resolve that only half-masked her nerves.

"Hi, Marco," she said, offering a polite smile.

"Do you have a thing for me, pizza girl?" Luca drawled, one corner of his lips lifting in a lazy, provocative smirk.

"What?" She blinked, momentarily thrown off balance. "Uhm... no." She stepped forward, the pizza box held out. "Here. I brought you pizza. It's on me. I won't charge it to your account with us."

"It was a tip," he reminded her smoothly, eyes dropping briefly to the box before returning to her face.

"I don't want it," she said firmly, lifting her chin. "Now more than ever." Her fingers tightened on the box before she set it down.

"What do you want, pizza girl?" he asked.

She placed the pizza carefully on the desk and cleared her throat, buying herself a moment. "I would like you to schedule a meeting between me and Luciano." She met his gaze head-on.

"Luciano, huh?" Luca repeated. "Why?"

"He is going to take my sister," Veronica said. The bravado she had carried in moments ago cracked, revealing raw panic beneath. Her fingers curled tightly at her sides. "I'm begging you. I just need five minutes with him."

Luca studied her for a long moment before answering. "Luciano wouldn't take your sister for no reason," he said calmly.

"Please," she rushed on, stepping closer. "He can have anything. Anything else. Not her." She swallowed hard, her chest rising sharply. "She is my baby sister. He can have me."

Luca pushed back his chair and rose to his full height. He crossed the space between them until he stood directly in front of her. "I thought you said you didn't want a favor from me," he said softly. "This is a favor."

"I can pay you," she said quickly.

"I don't want your money," he replied.

"Free pizza for a year," she blurted, the offer tumbling out with nervous enthusiasm that didn't quite match the gravity of the moment.

A corner of Luca's mouth twitched. "I can afford my own pizza." He stepped closer, towering now, his gaze locking onto hers with unnerving intensity. She had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes, and the proximity made her painfully aware of herself—her breath, her pulse, the way her body reacted despite fear. "What do you want?" she asked quietly.

"For a meeting with Luca," he said slowly, "how about I fuck you?"

Veronica stepped back instantly. "I..." Her words failed her, shock flashing across her face as she stared at him.

"What?" Luca followed her retreat with a step of his own, invading her space again. "You seem to have the hots for me." His gaze dipped briefly down her body, then returned to her eyes, unapologetic. "Don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"No!" she shot back, shaking her head hard. "No. That's not—" She exhaled sharply, anger flaring through the shock. "Sex for a meeting? I saw you hand over thousands of dollars just so some whore could suck your cock." Her eyes burned as she looked at him, courage fueled by outrage. "And now you want to pretend this is a fair trade?"

"She was exquisite," he said lazily. His mouth curved with indulgent satisfaction. "Her mouth was skilled, attentive. And the way she worked my dick, Lord..." He sighed theatrically, eyes half-lidded, clearly enjoying himself far too much. It was crude, calculated, and meant to provoke.

"Enough!" Vee snapped. Her cheeks burned. "All I want is a meeting." She swallowed and looked at him directly, eyes shining, unguarded. "If you have any humanity in you, Marco. Please."

He stepped closer and bent down, bringing his mouth near her ear. "Begging suits you, pizza girl," he murmured. He straightened immediately. "Did you make the pizza yourself?"

Vee blinked, thrown completely off balance. Her brows knit together as she tried to follow the abrupt shift. "I... I oversee the process, yes," she said slowly. "But I mostly do the managerial work."

"So it's not poisoned?" he asked casually.

"What?" Her eyes widened. "Why would I—what?" She stared at him in disbelief, caught between offense and absurdity. "Do I look like someone who poisons people with pepperoni?"

"You get five minutes with Luca," he said. "Use it wisely."

"Oh—thank you," Vee breathed, relief crashing over her so suddenly her knees nearly gave out. "Thank you so much." Without thinking, without stopping herself, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. The hug was tight, instinctive, full-bodied gratitude. Her cheek pressed briefly against his chest, her warmth immediate and real.

Chapter 8: Come With Me

Luca froze. Completely. His arms stayed rigid at his sides, muscles locking. The sensation was unfamiliar. He couldn't remember the last time someone had hugged him like this. Well, except for Nonnina.

He cleared his throat awkwardly and Vee pulled back instantly, mortified. "Sorry," she murmured, stepping away, suddenly self-conscious.

"Come with me," he said quickly, already turning toward the door to hide the disruption she had caused. He opened it and gestured for her to follow. He led her down the corridor toward Marco's office.

"Boss." Luca said quickly as he opened the door. "She needs five minutes with you." He stepped aside just enough to usher Vee forward, his hand gesturing.

"Oh..." Marco drawled, lifting his head slowly. "Come in."

Vee stepped into the office, her spine straight, her fear carefully leashed. She looked at the frightening man in front of her, taking in the expensive suit, the cold eyes, the stillness that suggested violence didn't need to be loud to be effective. "Good morning," she said.

"Get to it," Marco said flatly. He was imitating Luca now, down to the cadence, the faint curl of disdain.

"Uh okay." Vee swallowed and launched forward before her courage could evaporate. "My name is Veronica Scalese. My friends call me Vee. I am Vito Scalese's daughter. I run the pizza parlour." Her hands were clasped in front of her. "See, it's just me and my sister. She is all I have...My dad spends all his time lazying around. He loves us, but the alcohol clouds his mind, he... he makes wrong decisions."

Behind her, Luca yawned deliberately, an exaggerated show of boredom. He rolled his shoulders and gave Marco a subtle signal with his eyes, a silent instruction to speed things along. The performance was flawless.

"I said get to it," Marco asserted.

"You cannot take my sister. Please." Vee's breath caught, but she forced the words out anyway. She lifted her chin, meeting Marco's stare head-on. "Take me instead." It was a sacrifice offered plainly. Behind her, Luca shook his head slowly.

Marco cleared his throat. "A deal is a deal, Miss Scalese. Your sister it will be. End of story."

"No! No!" Vee rushed forward frantically. "You cannot do this!" Her hands reached out.

Luca reacted instantly. He caught her by the waist as she screamed again. "No!" she cried. His grip was firm, his arm banding around her middle. The contact was intimate and shocking all at once, her back pressed against his chest as she fought him with every ounce of desperation she had left.

He lifted her easily off the ground as she kicked, sneakers scraping uselessly against the floor as she tried to propel herself back toward the office door. "Let me in there!" she shouted, tears spilling freely now. They streaked down her face unchecked, blurring her vision, soaking her lashes. "She's all I have! Please!" The plea ripped through her. She clawed at his arm, fighting a man who barely had to exert himself to restrain her.

The guard at his station stiffened, eyes snapping to the scene unfolding. His hand hovered at his gun, fingers twitching as instinct screamed threat. But even he hesitated. Luca had the situation handled—or rather, contained. With one arm, Luca held Vee against him, turning smoothly and crossing back into his office without breaking stride.

"Calm yourself!" Luca snapped as he set her down, releasing her just enough for her feet to touch the floor. "There is nothing you can do about this." He stood in front of her now.

Without thinking, without planning to, he reached up. His thumb brushed the tears streaming down her face, tracing their path slowly. Her skin was warm beneath his touch, and the contact sent an unwanted jolt through him. He itched to lean forward, to follow that trail with his tongue, to taste the saltiness, to taste her skin, to understand why her desperation had lodged so deeply under his own.

The thought disturbed him enough to make his jaw tighten.

"This is business, pizza girl," he said. "Best you do not get involved."

She stared at him through blurred vision, chest heaving, hands clenched into fists at her sides. "How can you work for such a monster?" she demanded. "Do you have any idea what he is going to do to her? She is eighteen years old!"

"Well, Luca is not going to do anything to her. Bastardi will. Bastardi will auction her to the highest bidder." Luca explained. He knew exactly how brutal the words were. He also knew there was no soft way to deliver them.

"What?" Vee whispered, then louder, panic clawing its way back up her throat. "What do you mean?" Her hands trembled as she took a step closer, refusing to let the meaning fully settle. "Who is Bastardi? I can talk to him too." The hope in her voice was fragile, born from the belief that there had to be another door somewhere.

Another man to beg. Another deal to strike.

"Well, have fun finding him," he said lightly. "Your father made his choice." He paused, letting that sink in. "His battles are not yours to fight."

"It is my battle," Vee snapped back. "She is my sister. She is a child."

Luca shrugged, the gesture deceptively casual. "Like I said, nothing you or I can do about it. You just have to hope and pray that she meets with a man who would treat her reasonably...well." He turned away from her then, and moved toward the desk. He opened the box of pizza.

Reaching in, he grabbed a slice and walked back toward her, holding it out. "Pizza?"

Veronica stared at him. Was he really offering her pizza right now? In the middle of this?

"If you don't eat it," Luca said mildly, "I will have to believe it is poisoned." One brow lifted. He watched her closely, waiting.

She opened her mouth to argue, then stopped. Fine. If this was his test, she would pass it. She leaned forward and took a bite. The crust crunched softly between her teeth. Luca's eyes followed every movement without shame. The way her lips parted. The brief, accidental glimpse of her tongue.

The white of her teeth as she bit down, the slow, unconscious roll of her jaw as she chewed.

Chapter 9: Are You Crazy?

Jesus.

He told himself it was nothing. Just proximity.

He bit into the pizza, deliberately choosing the same place she had just taken a bite out of. The gesture was slow, his teeth tearing through the crust where her mouth had been moments earlier. It was entirely intentional. "Nice," he said after a moment, chewing, eyes narrowing slightly. "Very nice." He swallowed and glanced down at the slice again. "Scalese should be making a lot out of this. If you need more visibility for this, I can put in a word with Luca."

"And owe him a favour too?" Veronica shot back immediately, disbelief flashing across her face. "Are you crazy? I have to go." Staying any longer felt dangerous. Not just for her sister. For herself.

"Have a good day, pizza girl," he said lightly. "And thanks for the pizza."

Veve didn't trust herself to respond. She turned and slipped out of the office, the door closing softly behind her. The hallway felt longer on the way out, the lights harsher, the air heavier. Every step carried the weight of what she hadn't managed to change.

As soon as she was gone, Luca reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. The room still smelled faintly of her perfume. It irritated him. It stayed with him. He scrolled, then tapped a contact.

"Dante," he said when the call connected. It was time for another distraction. Some kind of fire had been lit inside him, and it had nothing to do with hunger, at least not food hunger. He found himself wired, unsettled, his body responding to tension he did not want to examine too closely. Desire was familiar territory. Emotion was not.

He needed a pussy he could fuck. Immediately. He made his instructions known to Dante and ended the call.

Marco entered the office again, stopping short when he noticed the slice in Luca's hand. His brows shot up in genuine surprise. "You're eating the pizza?" he asked.

Luca glanced at the slice. "It's good," he said simply.

Marco shook his head, a grin tugging at his mouth. "We better not let Nonnina find out about this," he said.

"It was a gift," Luca responded with a shrug that looked casual. His shoulders rolled as if dismissing the subject.

"I don't think she will understand," Marco said dryly, folding his arms as he leaned against the doorframe. His eyes flicked to the half-empty pizza box, then back to Luca's face.

Luca hummed in agreement. He turned his gaze toward the wall. "Keep a tail on the Scalese daughters," he said finally. "With today's events, I think she might try to take her sister into hiding. Tell them to notify me immediately if something feels off."

"Yes, sir," Marco nodded.

Valentina was already halfway packed by the time Veronica got home.

Clothes lay scattered across the bed. A duffel bag sat open, gaping, half-filled with dresses, jeans, and a single worn hoodie she slept in. Tina's movements were frantic, hands shaking as she shoved things inside without folding them, without care. She was ready to run.

She had already decided there was no universe where she stayed and became someone's property.

"What are you doing?" Vee asked quietly, closing the door behind her and settling down on the edge of the bed.

"Preparing to escape this madness," Valentina snapped, not turning around. "I haven't lived at all!" She spun suddenly, eyes bright and wet. "I don't even have a boyfriend, Vee. I've never even been kissed properly. And who knows what kind of man they are going to sell me to!" Her hands clenched at her sides, panic spilling out unchecked. "What if he's old? What if he's cruel? What if—"

Veronica stood slowly. She crossed the room and gently pushed the bag aside, forcing Tina to stop moving. "Tina," she said softly. "You don't have to run." She reached for her sister's hands, squeezing them tightly. "If you run, they will just find you and kill us."

Tina's lip trembled. "You don't know that."

"I do," Vee said quietly. She exhaled, rubbing her temples as exhaustion finally caught up with her. "I saw Luca today. He didn't even blink while I begged him."

"So what do I do? Just sit here and wait for them to come and take me away?" Tina asked.

She sat on the edge of the bed now, the fight draining out of her limbs, hands clenched in the fabric of her jeans. The walls felt closer than they had an hour ago. Even the old ceiling fan, wobbling as it turned, seemed to whisper countdowns instead of comfort.

"No...no sis. When they get here, they won't be taking you. They will be taking me." Veronica said it steadily, but her chest burned.

"I don't understand." Valentina turned to her.

Her eyes searched Vee's face desperately. She had always trusted her sister to have answers. This time, the answer scared her more than the problem.

"Look, you are my sister, my little sister," Veronica said. "And I would do anything to protect you. I don't have a plan yet but according to what I gathered, the person coming to get you is called Bastardi. He doesn't know what you look like." She inhaled slowly. "We just have to find a way to keep dad distracted so I can take your place."

"Its easy to get him distracted," she said flatly, rolling her eyes. "Just give him strong alcohol. But seriously, you don't even know whats going to happen."

"I am older," Veronica said quickly, before doubt could crawl into the space. "I am stronger." She straightened a little. "I will figure it out and when the time is right, I can escape."

"I don't like it." Tina stood abruptly. "I don't like this plan. I don't like any plan where you get hurt."

"What will you have me do? Tina! I cannot watch this happen." Vee cried.

She paced the small bedroom, fingers dragging through her hair, breath coming too fast. The cracked mirror above the dresser reflected a woman who looked older than she had that morning. Fear did that. Responsibility did that.

Chapter 10: I Can Take It

"I know. But I cannot watch it happen to you either!" Tina's response came sharp and fast, her own panic cutting through the air. She had always been softer than Vee, quicker to laugh, quicker to cry. "You think I can just sit here knowing they'll hurt you instead? That I'll breathe while you suffer?"

"I can take it," Vee said immediately, desperation edging her words. She stepped closer, gripping Tina's arms. "It will all work out, sweetie. I promise."

She did not know if that promise was a lie or a prayer. Probably both.

Tina sank into her sister's arms. They clung to each other, shoulders shaking, both girls crying now. "How can he do this?" Tina sobbed. "Why would he do this?"

Vee closed her eyes. "Who knows why dad does whatever he does," she said quietly.

Tina pulled back suddenly, eyes red. "How about if we run away together?"

"And leave dad alone?" Vee asked instinctively, the reflexive loyalty still clinging to her ribs.

"Vee!" Tina snapped, incredulous. "He is trying to sell me! His own daughter. I don't think he cares much what happens to us."

Vee stared at her sister, realization dawning slowly, painfully.

"You think we should give it a shot?" Vee asked.

"Yes!" Tina answered enthusiastically.

"What if we get caught?"

"We wont." Tina said it with the blind confidence of youth. Vee envied her for it.

"Alright," Veronica said after a beat, exhaling slowly. "I don't know exactly when they are coming for you but maybe we can try tonight."

Tina's eyes widened.

"We cannot leave together," Vee continued, slipping into problem-solving mode, the manager in her rising to the surface. "Dad will get suspicious." She gestured around the room. "We have to get a few of our things and maybe hide it in the dumpster down the road this evening. Then I tell dad I am going for a stroll and you will sneak out the window."

Tina squeezed her hand. "We're really doing this."

Vee squeezed back, harder. "Yes. We are."

"Okay. Lets do this!" Vee chuckled. "I'll go make some withdrawals from the bank, okay? And I will stop by Cassidy's to inform him I wont be checking in with him for a while."

Vee grabbed her jacket, fingers trembling just slightly as she slid her arms into the sleeves.

"Alright. Hurry. I'll have your things packed in the meantime. Say hi to Cassidy for me. I'm so sorry this is happening. I know you like him a lot."

"Not as much as I like you." Veronica said, kissed her sister and hurried out of the house.

Outside, the afternoon sun felt obscene in its brightness. People passed on the sidewalk laughing, living. Vee walked fast, head down, counting steps. At the bank, her hands shook as she filled out withdrawal slips. At Cassidy's place, she lied through her teeth with a smile that nearly broke her face.

That night, the plan was in place.

Darkness wrapped the neighborhood in a false sense of calm. Streetlights buzzed faintly, moths circling them. Veronica had their bags hidden in the dumpster, tucked beneath flattened cardboard and old pizza boxes that evening.

She walked into the living room where her dad was sitting in his chair watching a soap opera on TV. The screen flickered dramatically, lovers arguing in exaggerated tones. Vito stared at it glassy-eyed, beer bottle loose in his grip.

"Dad, I'm stepping out for a bit."

Vito merely grunted in response.

She shook her head and walked out the front door, the hinges sighing softly behind her.

Her heart pounded as she stepped onto the porch, counting seconds. One. Two. Three.

Moments later, she heard her sister jogging towards her, breathless.

Tina burst into view, hair loose, eyes wide, chest heaving.

"Are you okay?" Vee asked.

"Yes," Valentina answered. Her eyes darted left and right, every shadow a potential threat, every sound magnified by fear.

"Tell me," Vee said softly, "just how many times have you been using the window as an escape?"

Valentina shrugged, an exaggerated roll of her shoulders that did little to hide her nerves. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Vee smiled despite everything. They walked down the road hand in hand, their footsteps syncing naturally. The street was quiet. Shops were shuttered. Porch lights glowed faintly behind drawn curtains.

The dumpster sat exactly where Vee remembered it, squatting at the corner. Relief fluttered in her chest. She stepped forward quickly, heart hammering, and flipped the lid open.

The sound the metal lid made echoed far too loudly.

Her stomach dropped so fast she felt dizzy.

"Where is it?" she asked herself.

Valentina leaned forward, peering inside. "Maybe this is the wrong one?"

"No," Vee said immediately, panic creeping into her voice. "I placed it in here. On this corner."

"Maybe the dumpster was switched?" Tina offered, grasping for logic the way one reaches for a railing in the dark.

Vee turned to her slowly. "Why would anyone switch a dumpster?"

Valentina opened her mouth, closed it, then snapped her fingers. "Maybe some homeless person took it. I know a homeless guy. He sleeps on the corner over there." She pointed vaguely down the street. "I'll ask if he saw anyone fishing in the dumpster."

Before Vee could argue, Tina was already moving, sneakers slapping softly against the pavement as she ran.

"Hurry," Vee whispered after her. "I'll wait here."

She stood there alone, the night suddenly too big, too exposed. Every instinct screamed that this was wrong. That she had miscalculated. That escape had never really been an option.

Then a voice cut through the darkness behind her.

"Looking for this?"

Vee spun around.

He stepped out from the shadows. In his hand was the bag. Her bag. The one she had packed with shaking hands, with hope folded between clothes. The streetlight caught his face just enough for recognition to slam into her chest.

Her heart dropped straight to her stomach.

"Marco!" she blurted, shock stealing the air from her lungs. "What—" Her eyes flicked instantly toward the direction Tina had run, fear sharp and vicious. "What are you doing here?"