

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 12: This Is All His Fault - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 12: This Is All His Fault

Chapter 12: This Is All His Fault

"I know," Vee said softly. "This is all his fault."

"You think things would be different if mum were still alive?" Valentina asked suddenly.

Vee stilled.

The question opened a door she rarely touched. "Do you remember her?" she asked gently.

Valentina frowned, thinking. "Not really. I remember her face. Just... not who she is."

"She was amazing," Vee said quietly. "She brought out the best in dad. He laughed more. He cared more. Now... now he's just sad, bitter, and pissed at the world."

"And drunk most of the time," Tina added.

Vee sighed. "Get some sleep. We leave early in the morning."

They climbed into the narrow motel bed together, bodies instinctively curling toward one another the way they had done since childhood storms and bad dreams. The sheets smelled faintly of detergent.

As Tina's breathing evened out beside her, Vee stared at the ceiling, watching the slow sweep of headlights pass through the thin curtains. Her thoughts betrayed her, drifting somewhere dangerous.

Marco.

The softness of his lips surprised her most. The intensity of his eyes followed. A mob boss's enforcer should have looked harder, uglier, carved from brutality. Instead, Luca looked like someone you could fall asleep next to.

She smiled faintly in the dark.

She was right, she decided. He was a good man. A conflicted one, maybe, but good. He had let them go. He had defied his boss for two terrified girls who had nothing to offer him. She hoped, sincerely, that he wouldn't get into trouble for it.

The thought followed her into sleep.

Only minutes later, the motel room exploded into violence.

The door burst inward with a splintering crack that tore through the night. Harsh light flooded the room. Boots thundered against cheap carpet. Commands were barked in low, brutal voices.

One second they were sleeping.

The next, hands were on them.

"No!" Veronica screamed as she was yanked upright, her body instinctively fighting even before her mind caught up. The covers were ripped away. Cold air slammed into her skin. A gun barrel pressed against her shoulder.

Tina screamed too, as she was dragged out of the bed by her arms. "Vee! Vee!"

"Don't touch her!" Vee cried, thrashing wildly, nails scratching at anyone within reach. Her heart pounded so violently she thought it might rupture. "Please! Please!"

One of the men shoved her back onto the mattress, the gun never leaving her line of sight. Another hauled Valentina toward the door, her bare feet slipping on the carpet as she kicked and sobbed.

"No! Let her go!" Vee screamed again. "Take me! Take me instead!"

Valentina reached for her, fingers stretching desperately. "Vee! Don't let them take me!"

"I'm here!" Vee cried, fighting against the man pinning her down. "I'm right here!"

"Vee! Vee!" Tina screamed.

Instinct took over. Veronica lunged forward just as one of the men clamped his palm over her mouth, his grip rough and careless, skin tasting of sweat and metal.

She bit down.

Hard.

The man howled, jerking his hand back with a curse as pain exploded through his fingers. "Bitch!!!"

That single second was all she needed.

Veronica bolted.

"Tina!" she screamed, legs pumping, lungs burning as she chased the men dragging her sister toward the waiting vehicle. The parking lot lights blurred into streaks. Gravel cut into her bare feet. Her heart felt too big for her chest, too frantic to survive what it was witnessing.

She almost reached them.

Almost.

The man recovered fast. Heavy footsteps thundered behind her and then a fist collided with her face. The impact was brutal and sudden, snapping her head sideways. White light burst behind her eyes. The ground rushed up to meet her as her body folded, useless now.

Everything went blurry.

The world tilted, sounds stretching and distorting. She heard Tina's screams growing distant, panicked, calling her name over and over again.

Then even that began to fade.

As darkness crept in, one thought echoed louder than the rest.

I'm sorry, Tina. I failed you.

Morning arrived at Commissioned, the club looked calm on the surface. Underground, however, the air hummed with quiet menace.

Luca arrived just after dawn. He shrugged out of his coat as he walked. He hadn't slept much.

"The girl is secured, Luca," Marco said as soon as he reached him.

"Good. On guard, right?"

"Yes, sir."

They descended deeper. Luca's office waited at the end of the corridor, shielded from the world above.

"And the sister?" Luca asked casually.

Marco glanced at him, surprised by the question. "She was taken back home."

Luca stopped walking.

"How is she?" he asked.

The question threw Marco off balance. He didn't understand it. Was Luca asking operationally or... personally? He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Uh... she is fine. She doesn't know where the girl is, so she won't be any trouble."

Luca resumed walking and soon they were in his office. He loosened his cuffs, eyes unfocused. "Keep an eye on her too," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't know why," he admitted. "She is not the type to give up. People like her do not fold."

"She might involve the cops," Marco offered.

"Yes," Luca said.

"I could put the fear of the devil into her."

Luca's gaze snapped up. "No. Not yet. Just have her watched for now."

Marco nodded. He had worked for Luca long enough to recognize when a job had crossed into personal territory. "Okay, boss."

"And Marco," Luca added, standing. "When you are done with that, let's work out the logistics for the use of the hall for Bastardi's sick auction."

Marco grimaced. "I still think you should not let him hold it here. Too many high-profile figures inside Commissioned underground at the same time?"

Luca smiled faintly. "Exactly why it stays. I need to identify them. Catalog them. I may need them someday. Everyone is useful when they think they are untouchable."

Marco exhaled. "Alright, boss."

"Of all the things! Of all the things you could do!" Vito roared. "You ran away?! Did you really think you could run from Luca?" he continued, pacing. "From Luca?"

Chapter 13: Where Does It Look Like?

Veronica stared at her reflection.

The black eye bloomed beneath her sunglasses. Her head throbbed.

She leaned closer, lifting the glasses just long enough to assess the damage.

She was wearing her Scalese Pizza Parlour T-shirt, the cotton thin from too many washes, the logo cracked and peeling. She jammed her hair under a baseball cap, tugged the sunglasses back into place, and squared her shoulders.

She grabbed her keys and shoved past her father without slowing.

"Where the hell do you think you are going?" Vito shouted.

"Where does it look like?" she muttered. "Work. Like a normal human being. You know what work is, right?"

"I know you are mad at me," he said, the volume dialed down but the guilt turned up.

She stopped so abruptly her keys jingled in protest. Slowly, she turned to face him, sunglasses tilting just enough to reveal the bruised edge beneath. "You know?" she shouted. "You know? You cannot even begin to comprehend the heftiness of the emotions I am feeling right now, Dad. How can you?"

Vito spread his hands helplessly. "I made a mistake," he said. "I admit it."

"A mistake is forgetting milk," she snapped. "A mistake is burning dinner. You traded your daughter like she was spare change."

His face twisted. "It's the only way."

"Giving your daughter out to monsters," Veronica said.

"Vee," he said, "all we can do now is pray that she finds the best path out of all of these."

"Prayer?" she echoed. "You sold her with one hand and offered prayers with the other. Do you hear yourself?"

She stepped closer. "I was wrong," she continued, quieter but more dangerous now. "Luca isn't the monster."

Vito's head snapped up.

"You are," she said plainly. "Tell me, Dad. What in the world would make you desperate enough, foolish enough, monstrous enough to go to Luca for a favour? What?"

Vito's gaze drifted to the floor.

That silence answered her.

"I will find out," Veronica said, backing toward the door. "You know that, right? I will find out."

She grabbed her bag, slung it over her shoulder. "I'll see you later," she added flatly. "I'm going to work before I go mad."

The door shut behind her, leaving Vito alone with his secrets.

The Scalese Pizza Parlour was already alive when Veronica arrived.

The bell above the door jingled cheerfully. The ovens roared, radiating heat. Tony was arguing with the delivery guy. Rosa was wiping the counter.

Normal chaos. Safe chaos.

Rosa squinted at her sunglasses. "You sick?"

"Something like that," Veronica said. She was reaching for a stack of menus when the doorbell chimed again.

Cassidy walked in.

He was wearing a button-down shirt.

He scanned the room until his eyes found her, and his shoulders visibly relaxed.

Relief. Then concern.

When Veronica had come to say her goodbyes the previous day, she had left out almost everything. She told Cassidy that her sister was in trouble, and that was enough. She refused to go into details. Cassidy had accepted that at the time. He was genuinely relieved today, though, when she hadn't left town.

He liked Veronica more than he expected. Truth be told, it was more than just liking. She had a fire that drew people in, including him, and he wanted to protect it. But their relationship had only existed for a few weeks, just enough time for late-night texts, and shared coffee, not enough for confessions of the heart.

He had to tread lightly, to care without coming off desperate or overwhelming.

"Hey, Vee," he called gently.

"Hi, Cas. I'm a bit busy here," she said.

"I just need a few minutes, if that's okay," he said, approaching her side and leaning casually against the counter.

Veronica adjusted her sunglasses. She stepped out from behind the counter and led him to a lone chair by the window. She sank into it, and gestured for him to sit. Cassidy obeyed, careful not to crowd her space.

"So, what's going on? What happened?" he asked quietly. "And why are you wearing sunglasses indoors?"

"It's nothing," she said, shrugging. "I hit my face on a wall."

"Vee, see I know you are lying to me," Cassidy said softly. "Did your dad do this to you?" His hand reached for hers.

"No! God no! He wouldn't," she whispered.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She reached out, letting her fingers brush against his palm. "I'm fine. I just need a few days. I will call you as soon as I get my head on straight," she said.

"Two heads are better than one," Cassidy said, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Veronica allowed herself a small, private smile. "And I will let you know when I need one attached to mine," she said, the first moment of levity all day. The joke felt fragile, but it made the tension ease just a fraction.

"How is Valentina?" Cassidy asked, shifting his focus, his brows furrowed.

"She's...she's fine," Veronica said. "I really have to go. I have to make a delivery,"

"Of course. I'll come check on you later tonight,"

"Sure," Vee said, nodding, giving him a smile. They rose to their feet, and Cassidy leaned in, brushing his lips against hers in a soft kiss. Veronica leaned into him, needing the warmth and the reassurance, the quiet promise that someone cared, even if she couldn't admit fully that she needed it.

But then, behind them, the sharp sound of a throat clearing sliced through the calm.

"Hello, welcome to Scalese...Marco?" she stopped short just as she turned. Luca gave a slight tilt of his head. But his gaze wasn't on her. It lingered on Cassidy.

Vee's eyes darted to Cassidy. "I'll call you later, okay? Have a good day," she said softly, brushing her hand against his. Cassidy nodded, planting a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Once the door clicked shut behind him, Vee turned back to Luca, who had shifted his stance, his eyes cold, archiving details about Cassidy. The way he walked, the slight swagger, the quiet confidence. Was this the type of men she liked? The boring ones who seemed harmless?

Chapter 14: I Heard What Happened

"Marco?" Vee called again.

Luca's eyes snapped to hers. "I heard what happened. Told you not to get caught," he said.

"Well, luck wasn't on our side," Vee admitted, her hands twisting slightly in front of her. "I was going to come see you...well, with another box of pizza."

"Need another favor?" Luca raised a brow, stepping closer.

Vee hesitated, then plunged forward. "I want to see my sister. I would like to speak with Luca again," she said, the desperation bleeding into her words.

"You know that's not going to happen," Luca said.

"Please," She stepped closer. "I just want to ask him to let her come home. We never got to say our goodbyes properly. I promise I won't do anything anymore."

Luca was quiet. He simply watched her, the rise and fall of her chest, the slight tremor in her fingers, the way her lips parted as she held back a sob.

Vee held his gaze, determined, vulnerable, pleading.

"The auction is happening tomorrow night. There is nothing to be done."

Vee exhaled a choked sob that she tried to swallow, but it came out anyway. She had planned every step meticulously, calculated every angle, and yet here she was, caught. She should have stuck to the plan, she thought bitterly. She should have trusted her instincts instead of letting hope sneak its way in. Now there were no do-overs.

Luca stepped closer. He raised a handkerchief to her face, brushing it over her trembling lips. Almost as if he was wiping off the taste of Cassidy on her.

Then he reached for her sunglasses, and a flicker of panic shot through her. "No—" she started, but her protest was cut off as his hand landed over hers. With one hand, he

pinned her wrists, and with the other, he lifted the sunglasses from her face. The bright purple of her bruise, the swelling around her eye, made her wince.

Luca's jaw tightened. His eyes darkened, and Vee could have sworn she saw a storm raging behind them. Then, he spoke: "Give me a box of pizza to go. No one else touches it, just you."

Luca's hands twitched slightly.

"Oh okay. Do you want me to come with you?" Vee asked. She was going out of her mind standing still while Valentina's fate ticked closer.

"No. I'll talk to Luca myself. See what he can do."

"Thank you," Vee said quickly. "Thank you so much." She reached for the sunglasses and slid them back onto her face, grateful for the shield they offered.

She turned away and busied herself with packing his pizza.

Luca stood by the counter, silent. Waiting. Watching.

He followed every motion of her hands as she worked. The way she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, then forgot and did it again thirty seconds later. The way her fingers trembled only when she thought no one was looking.

If he did not know better, Luca might have believed he was a better man than Scalese.

But Luca knew better than to lie to himself.

Vee slid the pizza into the box and closed it. She added napkins, extra sauce.

When he took the box from her, their fingers brushed. Luca stilled, then stepped back as if he had touched fire.

"On the house," she said quietly.

Luca nodded once and left without another word.

"Boss, you called for me?" Marco said as he entered into Luca's office.

"The girl," Luca said. "What's her name again?"

"Valentina."

"Yes. Her. Send her home. Immediately. Keep her under armed guard. I want eyes on her every second. She doesn't make a single move without me knowing about it. Inform Bastardi to pick her up tomorrow at nine p.m."

Marco frowned, concern knitting his brows. "Home, boss? That's risky. They already tried to run once. Sending her back gives them the same opportunity to pull the same stunt."

"If she escapes," he said evenly, "it will be your head. And again," he added, "the pizza girl still doesn't know you are not me. I want it to stay that way."

Marco straightened at once. "Of course, boss."

"One last thing," Luca said, turning back to the desk. "The men you sent to retrieve them last night."

"Yes?"

"I want them in the interrogation room."

Marco stiffened. "Did something go wrong?"

Luca reached for the pizza box, flipping the lid open. He pulled out a slice, the cheese stretching in long, defiant strands.

"You will find out," Luca said simply.

He took a bite.

Marco raised a brow before he could stop himself.

This was the second time Luca had eaten Scalese pizza. He only ever ate Nonnina's cooking.

Marco said nothing. But worry crept in anyway.

Luca chewed slowly, barely tasting it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

A few moments later, Marco returned, his knock brisk. "They're ready for you."

Luca reached into the drawer instead, his fingers closing around cold steel. He checked the chamber without looking, muscle memory doing the work for him.

He rose and walked out, Marco trailing behind him at a respectful distance. The corridors of Commissioned swallowed them whole.

They stopped at a section of wall that looked no different from the rest. Luca pressed his palm against a hidden panel. The wall shifted silently, parting.

The interrogation room breathed cold.

Four men stood inside, lined up, shoulders stiff, hands clasped in front of them. Sweat darkened the collars of their shirts. These men had been witnesses to what happened here. They had held others down. They had cleaned blood off the drains.

"I gave you a simple mission," Luca said calmly, as the wall slid shut behind him. "Get the girl. Get out." His eyes moved across their faces, cataloguing flinches, shallow breaths, darting glances. "And then," he continued, "you improvised."

"What gives you the fucking right?" Luca roared suddenly. His eyes were wild now. "What gives you the fucking right?!"

The men exchanged looks, confusion rippling through them. One of them cleared his throat. "We got the girl, Luca."

Chapter 15: That Was The Task

"Yes," Luca snapped, stepping closer. "That was the task, wasn't it?" He raised the gun slightly, not pointing it yet, just enough to remind them of its existence. "So tell me, at what point did I say you could hurt the sister?"

"Boss—" one of them began.

"Stop," Luca cut in, holding up a hand. "Do not insult me by pretending you don't understand the question."

Marco stood off to the side, watching Luca carefully.

He stepped back, gesturing toward the exit with the gun. "Walk out of here if you had nothing to do with it."

"If everyone walks out," Luca added softly, "everyone dies."

The men did not need to be told twice.

Their eyes slid in unison, toward the one at the far end of the line. He was trembling now, knees knocking faintly, a thin sheen of sweat turning his face slick and pale. If fear had a smell, it would have been sharp and acidic, and the room was saturated with it.

Luca watched the shift.

He pulled off his jacket slowly, the fabric whispering as it slid from his shoulders. He tossed it onto the lone chair in the corner. Then he adjusted the ring on his finger, rotating it once, twice.

"I'm going to count till two," Luca said calmly.

Before the word two could even form in the air, the men bolted. Shoes scraped against the floor. The false wall slid open and swallowed them whole, leaving behind only the culprit and the echo of panic.

The man dropped to his knees with a wet sound, hands shaking as he reached toward Luca, then thought better of it. "Luca, I'm sorry," he babbled. "She bit me. I just... I reacted."

Luca stared at him.

Bit him. Yeah, like the world would end from a bite.

"The first rule I have," Luca said quietly, "is don't hit women." He stopped directly in front of the man. Looked down at him. "Unless they are savages."

The man sobbed. " I swear—"

Marco stepped forward instinctively. "Luca," he said carefully, reading the tension in Luca's shoulders, the coiled violence. "Let me handle this."

Luca clicked his tongue. "No," he said. "I want to."

Luca drew his fist back and drove it into the man's jaw. Bone cracked. The man screamed once before Luca hit him again. And again.

Each punch landed.

He thought of the bruise beneath Vee's sunglasses.

His knuckles burned. Blood splattered the floor, the walls, Luca's shirt. Still he did not stop.

Finally, when his hands began to tremble and the man beneath him was no longer a man so much as a cautionary tale, Luca stepped back.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, pristine white, absurdly elegant against the gore. He wiped his hands carefully. Then he folded the cloth and handed it to Marco.

"Dispose of that," he said mildly.

Marco took it without comment. "Yes, boss."

Luca retrieved his jacket, slipping it on. He glanced once more at the broken figure on the floor and sighed.

"Call the cleaners. Have this place cleaned. And get this piece of shit into lock up until he gets some sense."

When Veronica pulled into the narrow street, the first thing she noticed was that the night felt wrong. The streetlights cast long shadows on the parked cars in front of the house. Then she saw the bulky men with thick necks. Dark jackets that screamed menace. They stood outside her house, hands folded in front of them.

Her stomach dropped so hard she thought she might throw up right there in the driver's seat.

Her mind sprinted ahead of her. Had they killed her father? Had they brought her sister back in a box she was not ready to open?

Veronica's hands shook as she killed the engine.

Then she got out of the car.

The guards nodded at her.

She pushed through her front door.

Valentina was standing in the kitchen, barefoot, hair loose. She was calmly making a cup of coffee, spoon clinking softly against ceramic.

"Tina!" Veronica crossed the room and grabbed her sister, hands roaming over her shoulders, her arms, her face. "How? Are you hurt? Did they—"

"I'm fine," Valentina said quickly. "He just came and let me go."

Veronica pulled back, scanning her sister more critically now. No bruises she could see. No blood. Still breathing. Still warm. Relief flooded her so hard her knees nearly buckled.

Veronica glanced toward the window, where the silhouettes of the guards loomed. "It doesn't seem like they let you go," she said dryly.

Valentina's shoulders slumped. "No," she admitted. "I think a different set of people are coming for me tomorrow night. I heard them talking."

Veronica pulled her sister into a tight hug, pressing her cheek against Valentina's hair, breathing her in. "I'm so sorry," she whispered fiercely. "I'm so sorry our plan didn't work."

"What am I going to do, Vee?"

Veronica closed her eyes. "Stick to the original plan," she said.

Valentina stiffened. Pulled back just enough to search her face. "Taking my place?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have to do this."

"I know." Veronica brushed her sister's hair back, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "But I will."

"I don't know what to say," Tina whispered.

"You don't have to say anything," she said. "Just listen to me for a minute."

She cupped Tina's face, thumbs warm against her cheeks. "As soon as this house is empty and free of watchers, I need you to go to Cassidy's place. Tell him I asked you to stay there. You'll be safe."

"And you?" Tina asked.

Veronica's throat tightened, but she kept her voice steady. "I promise I will find a way to contact you as soon as I can."

Tina hugged her again, tighter this time, arms locking around her sister. "I'm sorry this is happening to us."

Veronica closed her eyes, pressing her cheek into Tina's hair. "Me too. Me too, love." She pulled back slightly and forced brightness into her tone. "Come on. Let's spend what little time we have together, uhn. We're not doing sad monologues all night."

"I'm probably just going to hug you all night," Tina said miserably.

"Okay. Just this once."

Chapter 16: They Took The Wrong One

Commissioned grounds glowed. Floodlights illuminated the long driveway leading into the estate, where black cars rolled in. Money arrived quietly. Power arrived louder.

Marco stood at the entrance, overseeing the arrival of VIP guests.

His phone buzzed.

Scalese.

Marco stared at the screen. He had half a mind not to answer. Maybe the bastard had changed his mind.

Marco sighed and picked up anyway. "Yes?"

"Marco!" Vito's voice boomed through the phone, so loud Marco instinctively pulled it away from his ear.

"What do you want?" Marco muttered.

"They took the wrong one! Oh my God," Vito continued, spiraling, "Luciano is going to kill me!"

Marco pinched the bridge of his nose. "What are you talking about?" he snapped, already dreading the answer.

"The men that came to the house," Vito babbled. "They took the wrong girl. I just found Valentina sneaking out of the house right now!"

Marco simply stared at nothing.

"Shit," he growled. He ended the call and broke into a run.

Commissioned blurred as he tore through it. His shoes pounded through the underground entrance as he burst into Luca's office without knocking.

Luca was seated across from Bastardi, a glass of whiskey untouched at Luca's elbow.

"Have you gone mad?!" Luca thundered the instant he saw Marco.

"Boss," Marco said, breathless, "we have a problem."

Luca's eyes flicked to Bastardi, then back to Marco. "What is it?"

"Bastardi's men," Marco said. "They took the wrong Scalese daughter."

Luca turned slowly toward Bastardi. "What have you done?"

"What the fuck do you mean what have I done?" he snapped. "I sent my men over there exactly as you instructed. The girl was waiting. All dressed up. Heels, thongs, everything. Little thing over her face like a goddamn costume party."

Luca swore under his breath.

Veronica.

"You fool," Luca growled. "She left with them willingly?"

Bastardi nodded. "Of course."

Luca stared at him, disbelief flashing hot and bright. "How many girls," he asked slowly, "have you ever sold that went with you willingly?"

Bastardi opened his mouth, then paused. He shifted in his chair, irritation blooming. "Well," he said, shrugging, "I wasn't there."

"Shit. Stop the auction."

"I cannot. It has begun."

Luca stepped forward, fury radiating off him in waves. "Bastardi, stop the auction or I swear to God I will kill you right here, right now."

Bastardi rose slowly to his feet, meeting Luca's glare. "Bring it on," he said. "I cannot. And whatever you decide right now, it better be wise or our deal is off the table."

Bastardi wasn't afraid of Luca. Not yet at least. He believed the machine was already moving, too big to stop, and that belief made him reckless.

"Fucking pig," Luca snapped. He spun and took off down the corridor.

"Boss!" Marco shouted, chasing him, fingers closing around Luca's arm. "Let this play out. It's just a girl."

In the blink of an eye, Luca had Marco by the throat, slamming him back against the wall. Marco's breath punched out of him, eyes widening in shock. Luca's grip was iron, fingers digging in.

Luca stared at him. He had no eloquent speech. No philosophy to justify the rage ripping through him. He didn't understand it himself.

"Know your place," Luca growled instead.

He released Marco abruptly, stepping back. Marco slid down the wall slightly, coughing, but nodded. He knew better than to argue now.

Luca dragged a hand through his hair, thoughts colliding violently.

"Get the girl from Scalese," Luca said. "Take her to a safe house. She's never going to see daylight again."

Luca ran.

The underground den of Commissioned swallowed sound and conscience alike. The doors burst open under his hands and heat rushed at him, thick with cigar smoke and cologne. His eyes took a second to adjust to the dim amber lighting, but his ears adjusted instantly.

Shouting. Laughing. Numbers being barked.

A girl stood on display at the center of the room, elevated on a circular platform, lights trained on her. Men crowded the lower levels in tiers, some seated, some leaning forward eagerly, paddles raised.

Please, he thought. He prayed. Please don't let her be first. Please don't let someone already own her.

What was Veronica thinking?

Was she that self destructive? Would she really offer herself up for her sister without even a pause?

He leaned toward the man seated beside him, lowering his voice. "How many girls have they had up there?"

The man eyed him suspiciously. Luca did not look like what he was. No tattoos creeping up his neck. No gold chains. No theatrical menace. He looked like someone who belonged in a lecture hall or a hospital corridor.

Still, the man answered. Commissioned security was legendary. That was the comfort people paid for. "Just one so far," he said. "They got her up there not long ago."

Luca exhaled slowly.

He took a seat in the shadows, forcing his body still while his mind ran feral. Women were brought out one after the other. Some young, some older. Some trembling, some eerily calm. Each introduction came with rehearsed words meant to sanitize horror. Education. Temperament. Background. Desirability.

Luca's stomach twisted.

He had ordered men dead for less than what was happening openly in front of him.

Then the announcer's voice changed. Smoothed. Lowered.

"And now," the man purred, "a rare offering. Eighteen years old. Untouched. A virgin."

Luca sat up .

The crowd stirred. Interest sharpened.

She walked out slowly.

Veronica.

Her wrists were cuffed together. Her head was bowed, hair cascading forward, but Luca would have known her anywhere. He knew the way she carried herself. Spine straight. Shoulders back. Even now. Especially now.

The crowd erupted at the mention of her virginity, a collective frenzy. Men shouted numbers, paddles waving, voices straining over one another, each trying to outbid the other.

Luca's brain short-circuited. He had only ever seen Veronica in a pizza polo shirt, her jeans rolled up at the ankle, hair messy, and yet here she was—breathtaking, standing center stage, a defiance in her stance that made him feel furious.

Chapter 17: Ten Million Dollars

Her outfit—a scanty blue sequined two-piece—caught the dim amber lights and refracted them into shards that danced across the walls.

She lifted her chin, eyes scanning the crowd. Her lips were pressed tight.

Numbers flew from a million upwards, the bids climbing faster than his pulse. "Well, fuck!" Luca muttered under his breath. His hands itched. Every instinct he had told him to walk away, to calculate, to leave this absurd display for someone else.

This girl was supposed to be nothing to him. Someone with nothing to offer him. And yet...

His lips moved before his brain could even process the insanity. "Ten million dollars!" he growled the amount out.

The room fell silent for a heartbeat. Then came the groans of disappointment from the other men, their pride stung, their hands lowering in reluctant resignation.

"Ten million dollars! Going once!" the auctioneer barked.

"Going twice!" he added.

"Sold," the auctioneer finally cried, "to the gentleman at the back!"

The clink of the gavel reverberated through the room. Cheers, curses, and murmurs collided.

Luca stayed seated, hands clenched around the chair arms. The money he had just spent could have bought a shipment of drugs, a few more men, a small army but he hadn't cared. He had bought her because he couldn't let anyone else have her. Because leaving her there, even for a second, had been unbearable.

And yet, as he watched her standing tall, cuffed wrists gleaming under the stage lights, there was another war raging inside him. Anger. Awe. Desire.

She caught his gaze, a flash of recognition in her eyes, and he could have sworn he saw her smile in relief? He should have felt victory, triumph, control—but instead, he felt fear. Fear that by owning her, even in this twisted way, he had crossed a line he would never be able to uncross.

Luca sat behind his desk, unmoving, unbreathing, while inside him everything clawed and collided. The transfer to Bastardi had gone through cleanly. Money had changed hands the way it always did in his world, numbers sliding from one empire to another without conscience or ceremony.

Marco had confirmed Valentina was safe. That part of the problem was solved.

And yet Luca felt no relief.

Because now there was this other problem. This girl problem. This Veronica problem. Sitting heavy in his chest.

What was he going to do with her?

A knock interrupted the spiral. Bastardi's man escorted her in and Luca had to grip the arm of his chair to keep his expression neutral.

She stood there. Still dressed in that infuriating scrap of blue, sequins catching the low office light. Bare legs. Bare shoulders. Wrists no longer cuffed but held close to her body. Her earlier defiance had melted away, replaced with a fragile tension.

She would not look at him.

Good. If she did, he might lose the thin thread of control holding him upright.

"How stupid can you be?" Luca said.

"Excuse me?" Her head snapped up, eyes flashing on instinct alone. There she was. That spark. Even scared, she still bit.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" he asked, still not rising, still not moving toward her. Distance was safer.

"Yes," Veronica said, chin lifting. "I saved my sister."

"So you sacrifice yourself," Luca continued, "subjecting yourself to be bought by perverts who will break you, torture you, assault you, trade you, monetize you, pimp you."

"And you call that saving her?" he finished.

Veronica swallowed. "I know what could have happened to me?" she whispered. "I picture it? Every single awful thing? But she's my sister. She's all I have. And I would do it all over again."

"Are you fucking insane?!" Luca thundered, his fist slamming into the desk hard enough to rattle everything on it. Marco insisted made the office look legitimate.

Vee flinched. Her shoulders jumped, her breath hitching, but her spine stayed straight. Fear lived in her eyes, yes, but so did defiance. That same stubborn spark that had walked her onto a stage full of predators and dared them to try.

"What did you think I was going to do?!" she fired back. "If you think those men are monsters, why do you work with one of them?"

Luca rose slowly. "I am a monster of my own," he said quietly, dangerously. "But I have always... always respected women. I only touch what is offered. I only take what is given freely. I give choices."

He stopped in front of her, eyes burning. "Until now."

"I didn't even get to say thank you," she said softly, the fight leaking out of her voice despite her best efforts. "Because in a way... you saved me." Her fingers twisted together. "I'm glad it was you who... you know."

He stepped closer. Luca tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing.

"Say it," he ordered.

"What?" Vee's eyes flew to his face, wide and searching.

"I'm glad you were the one who what?" Luca pressed.

"Who... uh." Her lips quivered. The courage that had carried her through the auction, through the stage lights and the chanting men, faltered here, in this quiet room.

Luca stepped closer. He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing the edge of her jaw before his grip tightened just enough to remind her who was standing in front of her. His touch was cruel.

"You chose this," he said. "You walked into hell with your eyes open. This is what you chose. Accept it." His thumb pressed slightly harder. "Say it."

Her breath shook. Vee straightened her shoulders.

"I'm glad you were the one who bought me," she said clearly, holding his gaze even as her heart threatened to shatter. "Thank you."

He dropped his hand abruptly.

"Don't thank me yet," he said, turning away to put distance between them and failing miserably.

She swallowed. "I owe you."

He let out a short laugh. "For someone who hates making deals with the devil so much, you somehow ask for an impressive number of favors."

(Check the comment for Veronica's outfit.)

Chapter 18: I'll Pay You Back

"I'll pay you back," she said quickly. "Every penny. I promise. I'll work ten jobs if I have to."

He arched a brow.

"I mean it."

"Oh, I know you do. You will pay me back."

His gaze dropped briefly to her mouth. When he spoke again, his voice was a blade.

"I intend to collect," he said softly. "I intend to collect your very soul, Bambola."

"I own your breathing," he continued. "Your living. I own your air, your body. I own your existence."

"Because as of this moment," he finished, his voice dropping to a whisper meant only for her, "pizza girl... you belong to the devil."

"The devil?"

Luca's lips twitched, the barest ghost of a smirk forming. He had been waiting for this moment since she had stumbled into his office with that ridiculous pizza box in her hands, eyes bright and naive, unaware of the chaos swirling around her.

"Yes, Bambola," he said finally. "I am the devil."

Vee's head tilted, brow furrowing. "What are you saying? The devil is... Luciano Genovese. I met him the other day. He—"

She trailed off, staring at him. The smug smile on his face didn't falter, and that infuriated her more than anything.

"You are Marco," she blurted. "You helped me. You have been helping me... You said you were Marco!"

He simply waited, letting her unravel a little more, letting her desperation paint the room with tension.

Her hands shook, fingers clenching into fists. Then, finally, her eyes found his—dark, unyielding, and merciless—and everything clicked. Rage, betrayal, disbelief, and fear collided, swirling in her chest. "You lied to me," she whispered.

"It is what the devil does," he said softly. "That's the least of my sins, honey."

Vee's vision blurred for a moment with anger. Anger at him, at herself, at the world that had placed her in this hell. He had played her, let them escape, orchestrated every move—and she had walked willingly into it, trusting him.

She stepped toward him, every nerve screaming. Every ounce of fear coiled and snapped into rage. She drew her hand back, and punched him square in the face.

Luca's head jerked, and yet he looked impressed. He pressed a hand to his jaw.

"You son of a bitch!" Her chest heaved, a storm of anger and disbelief. She could not believe she had ever thought him a good man. Could not believe she had let herself feel—dare she admit it—anything resembling a crush, a flicker of attraction, even a dangerous, fleeting swoon. She had been played, manipulated.

Luca's eyes glimmered as he reached for her hand. Her fingers—the very ones that had punched him—quivered under his touch. She jerked back instinctively, but he was faster, stronger, and he pulled her back with a grip that was firm. Her body tensed against him, every muscle screaming to flee, yet trapped in the proximity of his presence.

He inspected each finger carefully, stretching them one after another with a gentle precision that contrasted violently with the raw dominance in his gaze. "Do you know what makes the dance between the prey and the predator even more fulfilling?" he murmured.

Vee didn't dignify the question with an answer. She didn't want to engage in this game.

In a single, fluid motion, he spun her into his chest. And before she could react, he had her bent over his desk, her face pressed against the cool surface, her pulse hammering.

Vee struggled, twisting slightly, testing her strength against his, and he only smiled. That small, predatory curl of lips that spoke of control and challenge alike.

"When the prey fights back," he whispered, leaning close, his chest brushing against her back. His hands slid along the curve of her spine, traveling to her bare ass. He caressed her lightly at first, teasing, testing, and then his palm came down hard on her cheek. The sharp sting made her gasp.

"Bambola," he murmured, his lips brushing near her ear. "Do you feel it? That fighting me only makes the victory sweeter for me?"

"What are you going to do to me?" she whispered.

"Struggle some more, Bambola," Luca said. "The more you struggle, the more you fight, the more I get from my fucking money."

His palm came down on her again. A punishment measured to make a point, not to end the conversation.

"When the prey fights," he continued, "it tastes even more delicious."

Her breath tore out of her. "It?" Vee snapped, twisting her head to glare at him despite the way he held her pinned. "I'm an it now?"

"The moment you walked into those cuffs willingly," Luca said, "standing under those lights, letting perverts imagine ownership, yes." He leaned closer, his shadow swallowing her. "You became it. You became the prey."

"I cannot believe I thought there was good in you," she said. "There is nothing but darkness."

"I never fought who I am," Luca said finally. "I never pretended I was clean. People who lie to themselves fall faster." His hand moved again, slower, fingers skimming the inside of her thighs without quite touching, a deliberate denial that made the contact heavier than if he had claimed it. "I embraced the dark. I shaped it. I mastered it."

His palm came down again on her ass, harder, final.

"You," he continued, "walked into this madness calling it sacrifice. That's the lie. You call it saving your sister," he said. "but you want the fire to consume you."

"You wanted the darkness all to yourself," Luca finished softly. "And now you have it."

Vee struggled harder against him, fury lending her strength she did not know she still had. Her wrists burned, her muscles screamed, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of stillness. Rage tasted metallic at the back of her tongue. "Get the fuck off me, you son of a bitch!"

Luca released her instantly, stepping back. The problem was not her resistance. The problem was his body betraying him.

Chapter 19: She Is Safe From You

Vee shoved herself upright, breath ragged, eyes blazing. "I'm glad," she said. "I'm so fucking glad I took my sister's place. Because letting her anywhere near a psychotic person like you?" She laughed once. "That would never happen. Over my dead body. She is safe from you. From your madness."

"Is she?" he asked calmly.

"See, your little sacrifice was a total waste of resources." His gaze dragged over her, assessing. "And by resources, I mean yours." His hands gestured in the direction of her body.

"Your stunt cost me everything tonight," he continued. "It's not too late. There will be another auction. And your sister will be on it."

"No!"

"You merely delayed it and compounded the problem. Your father owes me. His debts didn't evaporate because you played martyr."

"And now," Luca continued softly, "you owe me."

"You will stay away from my sister!" Vee screamed.

"I want nothing to do with her," Luca said flatly. "But she will still be auctioned off. And I have her where you will never see her or hear from her. So there's no chance of you pulling another one of your magical abracadabra shit again."

"Have you no heart?" she asked quietly, the anger thinning.

"You keep going back and forth," he said. "You curse me. You call me the devil. And yet you are surprised when I act exactly liked that."

"But I refuse to believe that's all you are," she shot back.

That made him smile.

"God," he murmured. "You are good." He walked back to his chair. He lifted his jacket. "What did you major in? Psychology?"

He draped it around her shoulders.

Vee shrugged it off immediately. It slid down her arms and pooled at her feet. "I don't want any more favors from you."

His mouth twitched. "I'm beginning to believe you like being punished."

Luca bent down, picked the jacket up, and put it back on her, his fingers brushing her collarbone. "Before you shrug it off again," he said calmly, "please note that I will pluck out the eyes of any man who sees you and looks at you like he wishes he could fuck you."

"And their blood," Luca added softly, "would be on your hands."

Vee pulled the jacket tighter around herself despite her pride.

"You will not get away with this," she spat.

"What?" he asked lightly. "No begging this time? Or is that perk only reserved for Marco and the bitch reserved Luca?"

"I liked Marco," Vee snapped. "This version of you? Luca? You're an asshole."

He lifted a hand and moved her hair aside, tucking it behind her ear.

"I'm going to enjoy breaking you," he said quietly.

He stepped back then, reclaiming space. "Marco will take you home. You have three days to get your affairs in order."

"Oh," he added casually, turning as if the conversation bored him now. "I need you to remember something. Your sister is still with me. For now. You can leave."

Vee turned. Her hand was on the door when she stopped.

She turned back.

"You didn't have to bid on me," she said. "You had no reason to. You could've let someone else buy me and still gotten what you wanted. Why make me indebted to you?"

"It is what I do, Bambola," he said at last. "It is my signature. I enjoy collecting debts."

Her throat tightened. "And what will you do with me?"

"Everything."

When Veronica got home escorted by the man she now knew as the real Marco, her father sat in his favorite chair, a half-empty bottle dangling from his fingers. The TV murmured some late-night sports recap, the volume low.

A man who had lost both daughters in one day had apparently decided the appropriate response was alcohol and inertia.

"Marco!" Vito exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "You brought her back!"

Marco didn't return the enthusiasm. His eyes were cold, assessing, already halfway out of the room.

He turned to Veronica instead. "You have three days," he said flatly. "There is someone watching the house. Don't go anywhere."

"Wouldn't dream of it," she replied, rolling her eyes with sarcasm.

Marco nodded once and left.

"A beer?" Veronica said, staring at her father. "Dad? Really?"

"What did Marco mean by you have three days?"

"Oh, didn't you hear? Luca bought me."

"What?" he demanded. "He cannot do that. He has Valentina already. What am I supposed to do without you?"

"What are you supposed to do?" she repeated softly.

She shrugged out of Luca's jacket, letting it slide to the floor. She walked into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of water, and twisted the cap off.

"I don't know," she said over her shoulder. "Work?"

"So he gets both of you?" Vito said. "He cannot do that."

She looked at him then. The man who had taught her how to ride a bike and then forgotten how to be a father somewhere along the way.

"Why don't you try and stop him? Huh, Dad? Why don't you offer yourself up instead? In exchange for your daughters. Why is it always us paying for your mistakes?"

Vito stiffened, his shoulders squaring.

"Since I was old enough to reach the counter," she went on, "I've been paying for your mistakes. I worked my ass off in your goddamn pizza parlour. I missed birthdays, parties, life. I put food on the table and beer in your hand while my mates were out there actually living."

"We're in this mess because I tried to help out!" Vito shouted. "I did what I could!"

"We?" Vee arched a brow. "We?" She stepped closer. "There is no we. You put me and Tina in this mess. You. Alone. There is no 'us' in that equation. You are the most selfish father in the world."

Vito's face twisted. Before she could step back, his hand came out of nowhere.

The slap cracked through the room.

"Ah!" Vee screamed, her head snapping to the side, pain blooming hot across her cheek.

Her hand flew to her face.

Chapter 20: That's Why We're In Trouble

Vito's chest heaved. "It may not look like it right now," he barked, "but I was doing what I could to help us! That's why we're in trouble!"

She stared at him slowly, her eyes glossy but burning.

The front door flew open, slamming into the wall. One of Luca's men burst into the living room, hand already hovering near his waistband, eyes sharp and alert.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "I heard a scream."

"Nothing," Vito said quickly. "Just an argument with my daughter."

The man's gaze slid past him. He took in Veronica's rigid posture, the way one hand trembled at her side, the red mark blooming on her cheek. He catalogued it all.

His eyes met hers briefly. Then he stepped back.

"Call if you need me," he said flatly, already retreating. The door closed with a softer click this time.

Vito turned toward Veronica, the bravado gone. His shoulders slumped, apology swimming clumsily in his eyes. "Vee..."

She didn't wait to hear it. She brushed past him, crossed the room, and snatched Luca's jacket from where it lay discarded on the floor.

She climbed the narrow stairs to the roof, the city opening up around her.

She wrapped the jacket around herself, and stared at the sky until the tears burned out.

Vito fell asleep with the television still murmuring in the background, the bottle half-empty on the nightstand. His dreams were thick and shapeless, guilt blurring into old memories, until suddenly he couldn't breathe.

He woke choking, lungs screaming. He thrashed, hands clawing desperately at the pillow smothering him, his heart hammering.

He tried to shout. Nothing came out.

Panic exploded. His body bucked beneath the weight pinning him down. His fingers scraped against knuckles that didn't budge. Stars burst behind his eyes. His life flashed in jagged pieces.

Just as darkness began to creep in, the pressure vanished.

The pillow was yanked away.

Vito sucked in air greedily, dragging oxygen into his lungs. Tears streamed down his face. He rolled onto his side, wheezing.

When his vision finally cleared, he froze.

Luca stood over him, calm as a man checking the time. He still held the pillow in one hand, fingers relaxed. His blue eyes were cool.

"Good evening," Luca said mildly. "You snore."

Vito scrambled back against the headboard, terror crashing through him. "Y-you—"

"I know," Luca cut in gently. "Rude of me not to knock. Didn't want to wake you. But I find conversations like this work better when people are fully awake."

"Luciano!" Vito gasped, eyes stretched wide. His chest still burned from the lack of air. "What are you doing? What have I done?"

"Do you have any idea what ten million dollars is worth, Scalese?" Luca asked quietly. "Its more money than you will ever be worth, more money than you will ever make."

Vito swallowed hard. His tongue felt thick, useless. "I... I don't—"

"That's how much I paid tonight for your daughter," Luca continued. "Ten million dollars for a girl you couldn't even protect from your own hands."

"I never meant—"

"If you lift a finger on her again," Luca cut in, leaning down until his face was level with Vito's, blue eyes glacial, "you will lose it. Then hands. Then whatever else you seem to think gives you authority in this house. Are we clear, Scalese?"

"Yes," Vito whispered hoarsely. "Yes."

"Say it like you mean it."

"Yes," he said again, louder this time, desperation bleeding through. "We're clear."

"Good." Luca straightened, smoothing the front of his jacket. "Now go back to sleep like a good little boy."

Luca turned and walked out, leaving behind a man shaking in his sheets, staring at the ceiling.

His footsteps carried him down the hallway. He stopped outside Veronica's room, hesitated for a fraction of a second, then pushed the door open quietly.

Moonlight spilled across the bed. Veronica lay on her side, curled slightly inward, her phone loose in her hand. Luca's eyes flicked to the screen without meaning to.

Goodnight babe. The last text from Cassidy read.

He frowned faintly.

Carefully, Luca picked up the blanket that had slid halfway off the bed and pulled it up over her, tucking it around her shoulders. His fingers brushed her jaw, just briefly. Barely there.

The contact was enough.

Veronica jolted awake on pure instinct. Her eyes flew open, and before her mind caught up, her body reacted. She twisted sharply and drove her elbow back with everything she had.

The impact landed squarely on his groin.

"Fuck—!" Luca hissed.

He sucked in air, and dropped to one knee beside the bed. His fingers fisted into the sheet, knuckles whitening as he rode out the pain.

Veronica lunged for the lamp on her nightstand and flicked it on, light flooding the room in a harsh, unflattering glare. Luca was there on the floor, broad shoulders hunched, jaw clenched, breathing through his teeth.

"Mar—Luca?" she corrected herself sharply. "What the fuck are you doing in my bedroom?"

He lifted one finger without looking at her, a silent command for patience, then let out a low, strangled groan. "That's quite the jab," he muttered. "You should consider professional violence."

She stared at him, unimpressed. "What. Are. You. Doing. Here."

"Checking in on my ten million," he said between breaths. "Although I think that just cost me my most prized possession instead." His hands instinctively cupped his aching groin, his face twisted in a way she would have found satisfying if she wasn't still vibrating with anger.

"You gave me three days," she said flatly. "Are you going to let me breathe during those three, or do you plan on haunting every room I step into like a very annoying ghost?"

He glanced up at her, one eyebrow lifting despite the pain. "No and yes."

"Get the fuck out."

He exhaled slowly and shifted, pushing himself up inch by inch, clearly fighting his body. "You're going to have to kiss it better," he said dryly. "Because fuck, that hurt."