

# **Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 161: I Swallowed The Pain - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 161: I Swallowed The Pain**

## **Chapter 161: I Swallowed The Pain**

Luca paused. He turned slowly to look at his father. His chest rose and fell heavily, every breath dragging through clenched teeth. His hair had fallen slightly over his forehead, and his eyes...

His eyes were bloodshot angry.

Wild.

"Settle down! Now!"

Julian wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, his broken nose already swelling as crimson dripped onto the floor.

But no one moved.

Luca slowly turned his eyes back to Bianca. His fingers flexed slightly.

Still itching for blood.

"What is this madness?" Don shouted. "My rule in my familia is you cannot hurt your family!!!"

"Your rule, father?" Luca turned fully now, staring straight at the old man. "Do you have any idea how much Julian has hurt me. Do you even have any fucking idea how many times his mother hurt me before she died?"

Julian stiffened.

Don's jaw tightened slightly, but he remained silent.

Luca continued. "Have I for once run to you? No! I swallowed the pain. I pushed it down because you taught us never to be pussies! He had his mother to protect him." Luca jabbed a finger toward Julian. "I didnt! I didnt!"

Then he shook his head, his chest heaving as he tried to pull himself back from the edge he had been standing on since he landed in New York. "Father..." He gestured vaguely toward Bianca. "this... this, this I cannot allow."

"they have done nothing wrong, Luciano. Your wife has a right to be angry." Don said.

"She shot my woman!!!"

The roar ripped out of him.

Don Genovese simply rolled his eyes. "Stray bullet..."

The dismissal was so casual it almost felt insulting.

Luca stared at him like he had just heard something absurd.

A stray bullet.

That was what his father called the image burned into his mind — Veronica lying pale on a hospital bed, her skin drained of color, her voice weak as she tried to pretend she was fine.

"You say we cannot hurt family, yeah?"

Don said nothing.

Luca stepped forward slightly, his gaze shifting between Bianca and Julian. "Veronica Scalese is my family!" he declared. "From this moment on, she is a member of the familia." Luca's red eyes locked onto his brother and his wife. "one scratch on her head is treason!"

Don Genovese slowly smiled.

A knowing smile.

"So that's why you went to see your mother."

Luca's eyes flickered briefly.

"She told you to do this."

The old man looked amused.

Luca didn't deny it. "You did the same. I expect my claim on her to be respected." He paused, his gaze sweeping the room slowly before settling back on his father. "And I am saying this in front of you father. I don't care who it is, if any harms comes to her ever again, I will kill every single person responsible."

Don waved a hand dismissively. "Go, we will talk about this later. And Luca, you will still be punished."

"Really?" Luca smiled. He bent slightly and picked up the gun that had fallen to the ground earlier, brushing a shard of glass away from the grip before straightening again.

Everyone watched him.

For a moment it almost looked like the moment had passed.

Then Luca turned his head slowly toward Julian.

Their eyes met.

Luca gave one final smile to his father.

Then he fired.

The gunshot exploded through the suite.

Julian cried out as the bullet tore clean through his thigh, his leg buckling instantly beneath him as he collapsed to the floor with a sharp gasp of pain.

Blood spread quickly across the marble beneath him.

Luca lowered the gun calmly. His face was completely expressionless now.

"Fuck!!!" Julian yelled, falling to the ground.

The bullet had gone clean through the muscle of his thigh.

Julian clutched his leg, his fingers already slick with his own blood. His jaw clenched as he tried to control the groan threatening to escape him again.

"Now I earned the punishment." Luca said casually as if they had just finished some small family argument instead of destroying half the suite and putting a bullet in his brother.

As he passed Nonnina, he leaned down slightly and kissed her gently on the hair.

Then he walked out.

Don sighed.

The old man rubbed his forehead slowly before turning to Nonnina, who still stood near the door.

"get the doctor."

Then he threw his arms slightly into the air, shaking his head.

Like everyone in the family had gone mad.

Which, at the moment, didn't seem entirely inaccurate.

Bianca hurried to Julian's side, her composure returning quickly as she dropped to her knees beside him. She pulled the scarf from around her neck.

The expensive fabric tightened around Julian's leg as she wrapped it firmly above the wound, pulling hard to slow the bleeding.

Julian sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth.

"Hold still," she muttered under her breath, tightening the knot.

Don walked slowly across the room and stopped beside them. He looked down at his son lying on the floor. "I told you he would shoot you."

There was no sympathy in his tone. Just an irritating sense of I warned you.

Julian glared up at him through the pain. "You're just going to let him leave." he yelled.

Don sighed again. "He will be punished."

Julian let out a bitter laugh that quickly turned into a groan when the movement jarred his leg.

Don's attention shifted to Bianca.

She was still kneeling beside Julian, her hands stained red now as she kept pressure on the makeshift bandage.

"You want to get Luca's heart, you have to be wiser."

Bianca slowly lifted her eyes to meet his.

"This marriage benefits both families, yes," Don continued. "But I expected you to approach the matters of the heart with patience, tact. Now, all you have done is made matters worse."

Bianca said nothing. Her jaw tightened slightly.

"You drove him further into the arms of this woman." Don turned away from them both. "No matter," he said with a shrug. "lets hope this woman can be motivated to leave your marriage alone." Don finished speaking and walked out of the suite.

(Brought to you by Martina Kralj)

## **Chapter 162: I Heard She Was Shot**

Luca was sitting on the sofa in the hospital room, watching every slight movement of Veronica as she slept. He had asked Valentina to go home and take a break. The girl had looked at him like she wanted to argue, her eyes full of questions. Even Marco had looked like he was about to explode from the flurry of questions coming from her, but Luca had been in no mood to talk. Not to them. Not to anyone. His gaze fixed on Veronica's face. He was still angry that he hadn't killed someone that day.

The anger sat in him like poison. He had been so close. So fucking close.

He had promised Vee she would be safe. Promised her that anyone who harmed her would die. It had been a simple promise when he said it.

But he had never thought that promise would have him face off against his own family.

His gaze flickered to her hand resting on the blanket.

A sudden vibration cut through the silence of the room. Luca's head lifted immediately, his instincts snapping into place. He thought it was his phone. His hand moved toward his pocket automatically.

But the vibration continued.

His eyes shifted toward the bedside table.

Veronica's phone was lighting up against the wooden surface.

Luca stood slowly and reached for it. The moment he saw the name on the screen, his jaw tightened.

Cassidy.

He thought he handled this fucker already.

For a moment Luca simply stared at the name as the phone continued vibrating in his hand.

Apparently the idiot still hadn't learned.

Luca glanced at Veronica again. She hadn't moved. Her breathing remained slow and even. His thumb slid across the screen and he lifted the phone to his ear. "Hello, Cassidy." He drawled.

"Luciano Genovese. Picking her calls now? Did you finally have her killed?" Cassidy spat.

The venom in the man's voice came through the phone so clearly Luca could almost picture his expression.

"I see you still have some misplaced bravery left." Luca said lazily. "What do you want?"

On the other end of the line there was a short pause.

"Just checking in," Cassidy finally said. "I heard she was shot... by your wife. Imagine that."

Luca's eyes hardened slightly. "I don't have time for this."

"I called to see if she is okay. Nothing more."

The line went dead before Luca could respond.

Was Cassidy still waiting for her?

The thought was almost funny.

The man was going to wait forever.

Because Cassidy didn't understand something very simple.

Veronica wasn't something you waited for.

She was something you fought for.

Something you bled for.

He leaned back in the chair, exhaustion pressing into his bones now that the adrenaline of the last few hours had worn off.

The door opened quietly, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Boss, everything is done. Need anything else?" Marco asked.

Luca glanced over at him. Marco stood near the door. The man looked tired but he still carried himself with the same disciplined loyalty he always had. "No."

Marco nodded slightly. "Do you want me to stay with her while you go rest?" he asked after a moment. "You haven't taken a break since you got back."

Rest.

The idea felt foreign right now.

"I'm fine." Luca said calmly. "Just make sure everything is running smoothly at the club."

"Yes boss."

Marco turned toward the door, already reaching for the handle.

"Oh and Marco?"

Marco paused immediately. "Yes." He turned once more.

Luca's gaze was steady when it landed on him. "the next time you hurt her," he said quietly, "I will make sure you die in the most gruesomely painful way."

"Luca, I wouldn't if there was any other way. The bullet was still inside her." Marco tried to explain.

"I don't care," Luca said. "I don't care what happens to me. She will not go through that kind of pain again, ever. Is that understood Marco?"

He spoke calmly, but the anger under the surface was unmistakable.

"Luca, don't put me in this position."

Luca slowly turned his head then, dark eyes finally landing on him. The look was steady. "I asked you a simple question."

"You could go to jail if that bullet got into the wrong hands," Marco argued carefully. "You know that."

The idea of prison clearly meant nothing to him in that moment.

"You still haven't answered me."

Marco glanced briefly at Veronica, then back at Luca. He understood why Luca was like this. Hell, anyone with eyes could see it. The man looked like he had been hollowed out and filled with rage and exhaustion. "I'm sorry," Marco said after a moment. "I cannot. If I ever find myself in that situation again, I will make the choice to keep everyone safe."

"Goddamnit, Marco!" he snapped. "If it ever came down to her or me, you choose her, you choose her every goddamn time."

"Understood boss." Marco sighed under his breath and quietly walked out of the room.

Luca leaned back slightly in the chair, his body finally starting to feel the weight of everything that had happened. The adrenaline that had been burning through his veins.

For a moment his eyes closed.

Just for a second.

His eyes burned slightly.

Soon he was asleep, the adrenaline and the jetlag finally catching up with him.

The nurses came in then to clean her wound and he startled awake instantly.

His body reacted before his mind caught up, muscles tightening, senses sharpening, instincts screaming that strangers had entered the room.

It took half a second to recognize the pale blue uniforms and the rolling metal tray between them.

They moved through the room, waking Veronica up.

"Oh jeez, not again..." Veronica sighed. She shifted carefully against the pillows, wincing slightly as her body protested the movement. Her eyes blinked open slowly, adjusting to the light.

Then she spotted him.

Luca was sitting in the chair beside the bed, looking like he had been carved out of the same rigid stillness as the furniture. His shirt was creased, his hair slightly disheveled, but his eyes were already alert.

(Brought to you by Martina Kralj)

Going to have a shut eye now. Will continue in the morning. Whew!!!

### **Chapter 163: I Did Piss Her Off**

"Hey you," she said softly. "When did you get here?"

"Hours ago."

Then the nurses began unwrapping the bandage.

The sterile white gauze peeled away slowly, revealing the angry bruising beneath. The skin was swollen and discolored.

As Veronica glanced back toward Luca, her gaze caught on the bruise on his knuckles.

She wondered what he had done to Bianca. She knew Luca's temper. But Bianca was still his wife.

He wouldn't hit her.

Surely.

Or kill her, right?

When the cleaning began, the sharp sting of antiseptic hit the open wound and Veronica sucked in a painful breath. Her fingers tightened around the pillow beside her.

Luca was on his feet instantly. "Shouldn't she be on painkillers?"

"She is," the nurse said calmly. "But that doesn't mean she won't feel a thing."

Veronica noticed the way his jaw clenched, the way his hands flexed slightly at his sides. "It's okay Luca," she murmured through a strained breath. "I'm fine."

He moved closer to the bed and reached for her hand.

Her fingers slipped into his, gripping tightly as another wave of pain flared through her. Luca's hand closed around hers immediately.

Veronica squeezed his fingers harder as the nurses continued cleaning the wound, her breath coming slow and controlled as she rode the pain out.

His eyes stayed fixed on her face.

Ten minutes.

That's all it took.

But it felt longer.

Finally the nurses finished rewrapping the bandage, securing the fresh gauze carefully around her thigh.

"Alright," one of them said, already clearing the tray. "All done."

Veronica released a quiet breath of relief, her grip on Luca's hand loosening slightly now that the worst of it was over.

The nurses gathered their tools and wheeled the tray toward the door, their soft footsteps fading as they left the room again.

"I'm sorry." Luca whispered.

"It's fine. This would get me off my feet for a few weeks." She chuckled. Her laugh was a jagged thing, but Luca could tell it was meant to reassure him.

"Stop it, Vee. Yell at me, blame me, please. Don't make it sound like this isn't my fault."

"I wouldn't entirely give you all the blame," she said, a teasing smile flickering despite the pain. "I did piss her off."

His eyebrows knit together. "What happened?"

"I kind of gloated." Veronica said, wincing slightly, then chuckling at herself.

Luca's eyes widened. "My God, what did you say?" His lips twitched at the corners, the faintest shadow of a grin forming.

"I told her you fucked me for the first time on your bed." Her laugh burst out despite herself, the ridiculousness of it almost surreal. She shook her head, realizing the woman had a gun pressed against her skull, and yet she hadn't managed to keep her mouth shut. Her stupidity—or courage—was infuriating.

Luca laughed too. "You're a mad woman."

"I know," she said. "I mean, who does that? But in that moment, I realized I couldn't give you up. Not to her, not to anyone. I knew it was wrong..."

Luca tilted his head slightly, leaning closer. "It's not wrong..."

She shook her head firmly. "Hear me out, Luca." Her eyes locked onto his. "It is wrong. You married her. It doesn't matter that you don't love her. You did marry her. She is just as trapped as I am. But now, I am trapped because I choose to be. Because the only way out is death, right?"

Luca swallowed hard. His hand inched toward hers again.

"I would rather be trapped with you than free without you."

Luca bent forward, letting his lips brush against the top of her head. "Once again, you are a crazy woman," he muttered.

Vee let out a soft laugh. "I'm hoping you haven't brought the heavens down."

"A little," he admitted with a wry smile, letting his hand squeeze hers lightly.

Her eyes lifted to his. "Oh boy. Is your father mad?" she asked, a note of genuine curiosity mingled with the teasing.

"I can take him," Luca said.

Vee shivered slightly, the thought of it making her grip tighten around his hand. "I just hate the idea of him electrocuting you whenever you do something wrong," she said softly.

Luca laughed. "Oh trust me," he said, "it's going to be much, much worse this time."

Vee's eyebrows rose. "Tell me exactly what you did," she said.

"I shot my brother... in the thigh," Luca said casually.

Vee's jaw dropped, and her fingers tightened on his hand. "Are you crazy? Your brother didn't shoot me!" she yelled.

"He put all of this in motion," Luca explained. "He was supposed to tell me that my father and Bianca were coming into town for a relative's wedding. He didn't. He wanted this to happen. We got into a fist fight. My father said he would punish me. I thought then, I should do something deserving, shouldn't I?"

Vee blinked at him, stunned, the absurdity of it twisting with the horror of the situation. "Now who is the crazy one!" she exclaimed.

"Don't get all worked up, love," he said softly, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. "You have to heal."

"Crazy or not, you're mine. Always."

"I wonder how long it will take before I can walk normally again," Vee said. She shifted slightly in the hospital bed, testing the movement of her leg, wincing at the reminder that her body wasn't entirely hers right now.

"Typically three to four weeks," Luca said.

"Ughhhhh... I'm an invalid," Vee groaned, rolling her eyes.

"I'll take care of you," he said quietly, leaning closer.

"You have work," she pointed out.

"You will have staff for when I am not around," Luca replied.

Vee let out a small, playful sigh. "Great. I'm officially a sugar baby." She laughed lightly.

"Zuccherino..." Luca said.

Vee laughed again, shaking her head. "How is Nonnina dealing with all of this?"

"I haven't had time to even speak with her," Luca admitted.

"I'm glad you're back," she said softly.

(Here is to 100 golden tickets)

\*\*Today's actual Chapter will be posted when I wake up. I just have to edit it but I feel really sleepy\*\*

### **Chapter 164: It Was Nice**

"Me too," he said. "I actually went to see my mom."

"You did?" Vee's eyebrows rose in mild surprise.

"Yeah... it was nice," he said.

"She's well?" Vee asked carefully.

Luca chuckled. "Well is not actually a word I would use to classify my mother, but yeah, she is fine."

Vee smacked him lightly on the shoulder. "You're a terrible son," she teased.

"Trust me, I know," Luca said softly. "Get some rest, love. I'll be right here. I'll just go change and come back to you. There's a guard at your door for precaution. Nothing else. Nothing like this will ever happen again. I assure you."

She leaned back slightly into her pillow, relaxing. "Luca?"

"Hmmm..." He hummed in response.

"I'm obsessed with you," she whispered.

"Oh, how the tables have turned," Luca said, the corner of his mouth curling into a grin. He leaned down, pressing a careful kiss to her forehead. "I love you," he said quietly. "I love you ridiculously much."

She let her eyes close, a faint shiver of relief passing through her as she let herself sink into the fragile comfort of his presence.

Luca stayed where he was, watching her.

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Julian was heavily dosed from the painkillers in the private clinic in Luca's house.

His thigh was thickly bandaged, the wound beneath it throbbing in slow, pulsing waves. Even through the medication he could feel it—an angry reminder of the bullet his own brother had put there. His muscles ached.

He drifted in and out of a hazy sleep for what felt like hours before finally opening his eyes.

Bianca sat by his side, reading a book. She looked strangely peaceful there, curled slightly in the chair beside his bed, one leg crossed over the other as she turned a page.

The painkillers blurred the edges of reality, but not enough to hide how beautiful she looked. He had imagined this scene a thousand times before—Bianca close to him, Bianca staying beside him, Bianca choosing to be there.

But he had never imagined the circumstances being quite so... dramatic.

"Hey, you're here," Julian said.

Bianca looked up instantly. The book closed in her hands as she stood. "Are you alright? Do you need me to call the doctor?" Her eyes moved quickly over his face.

Julian managed a weak smile. "No... no... just stay with me."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly at that. "Alright, alright. I'm here. Do you need anything? Water? Are you still in pain?"

"The painkillers are so good," Julian said, letting out a slow breath.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

Julian blinked slowly. "Do what?"

"Fight your brother for me."

Julian looked at her like the answer should have been obvious. "I'd do anything for you, Bianca."

Bianca frowned slightly, confusion flickering across her face. "But why?"

Julian let out a quiet breath, the painkillers making the moment feel almost dreamlike. "Wh... why?" he murmured. "Can't you... don't you see it?"

"See what?" she asked, genuinely confused.

How could she not see it?

The hope he had buried deep in his chest while she belonged to someone else.

To his brother.

Julian reached for her wrist and yanked her down toward him. He held her face gently between his hands.

"Julian..." Bianca whispered.

And in that moment, finally, she understood.

He pulled her even closer and kissed her.

At first it was gentle, hesitant, as if he were savoring something fragile. Something he had imagined so many times he almost couldn't believe it was real.

Her lips were soft against his.

She tasted just as good as he had imagined... just as he had fantasised during countless sleepless nights where desire for her enveloped his mind.

For years he had buried those thoughts.

Because she was Luca's.

Because some lines were never meant to be crossed.

And now, lying there wounded, drugged, and dangerously honest, Julian found himself holding the one thing he had wanted for far too long.

Even if it destroyed everything.

Then he deepened the kiss, unable to resist.

The restraint he had started with cracked. Years of quiet longing surged through him at once, the painkillers dulling the part of his brain that might have warned him to stop. His fingers tightened slightly against her cheek as he pulled her closer, chasing the warmth of her mouth.

Then Bianca pulled back.

Her eyes were wide with shock, her breath uneven as she stared down at him. Her hand instinctively moved to her lips.

"No..." Julian argued, still caught halfway between desire and the haze of medication.

"I'm going to assume it's the painkillers messing with your head."

Julian let out a short breath, frustration flickering through him despite the dull warmth numbing his body. "I've always wanted you, Bianca," he said. "Always."

Bianca stared at him in disbelief. "I am your brother's wife!" she snapped.

"He just almost killed you because of another woman!" Julian shot back.

"Doesn't matter! I love him!"

"You don't even know him!" he snapped back.

"I have always loved him, Julian. I tried not to. I really tried." She began pacing slowly beside the bed, arms crossing tightly over her chest. "I tried to string other men along growing up, thinking they would get rid of the ache for Luciano. I thought eventually it would go away." She gave a quiet, humorless laugh. "It didn't work. It never worked."

All those years. All those dinners, holidays, family gatherings where she had looked at Luca like he was the sun itself.

And he had been standing right there, invisible.

"I thought you were a virgin when you married him," Julian said slowly.

Bianca stopped pacing. "Yes, I was. I never did anything with any of those men..." She sighed, rubbing her temple as the exhaustion of the last few days finally began to settle into her bones. "I will get him back, Julian," she said finally. "I just need to play my cards right. This... this woman has bewitched him."

The bitterness in her tone made it clear exactly who she meant.

(And done!!! Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for putting me to work. I hope I delivered and the quality of the writing didn't suffer"

PS: If you haven't, please drop a review. The book is getting a promotion in about five hours, and reviews do help a lot. Thank you.)

**Chapter 165: I Can't Give Up**

Bianca looked down at her hands, her fingers slowly curling together as determination replaced the earlier shock. "I can't give up, Julian."

She didn't want him.

Not even after everything.

And yet... as he watched her standing there, stubborn and beautiful and impossibly loyal to the wrong man, the feeling inside him refused to die.

If anything, it only burned hotter.

"You would rather love a man who doesn't give two shits about you," he said.

"He wasn't given the opportunity to know me either," she replied firmly. "He was always travelling from country to country to get trained and then he took over New York. There was basically no time at all for him to know me even after we got married."

There it was again—that unwavering defense of Luca.

"That was by his own design," Julian said quietly. "Bianca..."

She shook her head immediately, cutting him off before he could finish. "No... no... Julian. You cannot do this again. You cannot kiss me again. Don will handle the girl and my husband will be mine."

Julian laughed. "Father?" he said, shaking his head slightly against the pillow. "Trust me, if Luca wants this Scalese woman that badly, father will hand her over to him on a silver platter."

Bianca's brows pulled together in confusion.

Julian watched the reaction with a tired sort of amusement. It always amazed him how people could live so close to power and still miss the simplest truths behind it. "Everything he does," Julian continued, "even when it doesn't look like it is for Luca's happiness... it is. Luca is the son he always recognised," he added quietly. "The son he wanted. Because his mother was the one he always wanted," Julian finished.

Bianca stared at him, trying to follow the thread of what he was saying.

"Do you see where I am going with this?" Julian asked.

For as long as he could remember, Luca had been the center of everything.

Julian had learned to live in the shadow of that long ago.

But Bianca?

Bianca still believed she could step into Luca's life and become the center of it.

Julian almost envied that kind of hope.

"You think you can win him back," Julian said quietly after a moment. "You think this is just some... temporary distraction."

Bianca's chin lifted slightly. "I know it is. I will get my husband back, period. I hope you feel better, Julian." Then she turned and walked out of the room. She had barely taken a few steps when she saw the small, familiar figure coming down the corridor. "Nonni..." she called gently.

The older woman stopped. "Yes, Mrs Genovese."

"Please, call me Bianca."

Nonnina raised a suspicious brow.

Bianca let out a small breath, almost embarrassed. "I know... I know," she said quickly. "We got off on the wrong foot. I am sorry. I was blinded by rage and jealousy and I took it out on you. It just hurt me that you are on another woman's side instead of mine."

"I am on Luca's side."

Bianca she nodded slowly. "Yeah," she said. "I see that now." Her lips curved into a small smile that looked gentle. "I do hope you can learn to accept that I am a part of his life."

Nonnina gave a small nod.

Bianca smiled once more, then walked past her down the hallway, heels tapping softly against the floor as she disappeared around the corner.

Nonnina remained standing there for a moment. Her wrinkled hands folded neatly in front of her as she watched the empty corridor. She didn't believe her for one second.

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The club was alive that night.

Music pulsed through the building, bass vibrating through the floors and glass walls. Colored lights swept across the crowd on the dance floor, bodies moving in tight clusters of laughter.

But Ricardo's office upstairs felt like a completely different world.

Quiet except for the muffled music leaking through the walls.

And the sound of Valentina yelling.

"Val... come on," Ricardo groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "Why am I the one you are mad at?"

She had stormed into his office ten minutes ago, slamming the door.

Ricardo leaned back against his desk now, arms crossed, watching her pace the room.

Valentina looked furious. Her hair was slightly messy from the wind outside, her cheeks flushed, her eyes blazing.

"You know," she snapped, turning on him suddenly.

Ricardo sighed heavily. He was tired.

"Someone shot my sister," Val shouted. "Someone that you know and you won't tell me about it."

Ricardo closed his eyes briefly. He had known this moment was coming the second he heard about Veronica. "Val," he said carefully, forcing calm into his voice, "I can't. I... I cannot get involved. Can we please keep our relationship separate from your sister's and Luca?"

Valentina stared at him like he had just betrayed her personally. "You have no idea," she snapped. "You have no idea whatsoever what my sister has done for me." She took a step closer, her hands trembling as she gestured wildly. "You have no idea how much pain she has suffered for me. The whole reason she is with Luca is because of me! She took my place!"

"Hey, babe," he said softly, stepping forward. "I can assure you Luca didn't hurt her. He would never. He would rather hurt himself."

He reached for her hands, but she jerked away.

"But he is the reason she was hurt," Val shot back immediately.

Ricardo exhaled slowly. "I cannot comment on that."

The restraint in his voice only made things worse.

Valentina's eyes widened in fury. "Goddamnit! Ricardo!" she screamed, the anger finally boiling over. "You fucking son of a bitch!" Her arms started swinging wildly, fists hitting his chest over and over again. The blows weren't strong, but they carried every ounce of her panic.

Ricardo didn't even try to dodge them. He grabbed her wrists gently but firmly, pulling her closer before she could push him away. "Val—"

But she was already breaking.

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

### **Chapter 166: Don't Do This**

The fight drained out of her body all at once. Her shoulders shook as the first sob escaped her throat.

Ricardo's grip softened instantly. He pulled her into his arms without thinking, holding her tight against his chest as she collapsed into him.

Her forehead pressed into his shirt, her hands clutching the fabric. "My sister is going to die!" Valentina wailed.

Ricardo wrapped his arms around her tighter, his hand sliding up to cradle the back of her head as she cried into him. He could feel the heat of her tears soaking through his shirt. "No... no... no... Babe, come on... Don't do this, please. Hey..." Ricardo soothed as she bawled.

He held her tighter. He wasn't used to seeing her like this. Valentina was fire. She laughed loudly, argued harder. "Listen to me, Val," he murmured. "Listen... this was just sheer bad luck. The gun wasn't even aimed at her. It was a stray." He lifted a hand to gently tilt her face upward so she would look at him.

Her eyes were swollen and glossy with tears.

"No one," he continued firmly, "I repeat no one in their right mind would want to go against Luca. Hell, your sister is safest with him." He brushed a strand of hair away from her damp cheek.

"And you are safe with me, Val."

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead slowly. "Absolutely sure... my love."

Then he kissed the tip of her nose.

"Your sister has an army protecting her," he continued quietly. "This is an isolated incident, I promise."

Her breathing was beginning to slow now.

He kissed her again.

This time on the mouth.

Gentle enough to pull her back from the edge of her thoughts. His lips lingered against hers, coaxing.

Then she melted into him.

Her fingers slid up into his hair.

Ricardo pulled back just long enough to lift her easily off the floor as he carried her the short distance to the desk. He set her down carefully. Ricardo rested his hands on either side of her, looking at her with that crooked half-smile. "Can we concentrate on us, sweetie?" he murmured softly. "Please... Val."

She reached for him again, pulling him closer until the space between them disappeared.

"You want to do this here? Now?" he asked quietly.

"I need this," she whispered.

Ricardo huffed a soft breath of amused disbelief.

Well... when she put it like that, who was he not to obey?

His hands slid gently to her waist as he leaned in again, kissing her with a little more urgency this time.

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The house was quiet. The lights in the grand hallway were dimmed. Luca arrived from the hospital. His body still throbbed from adrenaline, jetlag, and lingering anger, and he could feel the dull burn of exhaustion pressing down on him.

Don Genovese was already there, sitting in the living room. The Don's eyes tracked Luca as he stepped into the room.

"Good evening, father," Luca said as he made to stroll past him toward the stairs. Conversation was the last thing on his mind.

"Luciano!" Don called.

"Dad, I am tired. I am exhausted. I just need to go to bed," Luca said, trying to deflect. His words carried more frustration than respect this time—he didn't have the energy for diplomacy.

"Tired from shooting your brother or almost throwing your wife off two stories?"

Luca went quiet.

"Come here," Don said simply.

Luca hesitated, then walked and stood directly in front of his father. His posture was tense, alert, a subtle readiness for whatever reprimand—or lecture—was coming next.

"You claimed a stranger to be part of the familia without talking to me about it first," Don Genovese said.

"I would have. But circumstances prompted me to make the announcement," Luca replied steadily. It was true; sometimes choices had to be made in the moment, without waiting for approval, even from a father.

"How is your mother?" Don asked suddenly, a shift in tone that suggested curiosity rather than anger.

"She is doing well. Still cunning but okay," Luca said, a trace of humor flickering across his face. A small, private smile at the thought of his mother's relentless cleverness.

A small smile crossed Don's lips too. "Are you sure this woman even wants to be familia? You do not quit familia," he said.

"Mother did," Luca replied quietly.

"Because you pledged your life to me, Luca. She would have been long dead since the moment she suggested it," Don said, the edge of threat hidden beneath a veneer of authority.

"Is that it? Is that truly it?" Luca said. "You took the promise of a ten-year-old to heart. Or was it that you couldn't bring yourself to kill her?"

Don's gaze didn't waver, not even for a second. "However it may be, the only way out of the familia is death," Don replied evenly.

"She knows that. She understands that," Luca said defensively, his jaw tightening.

"Promises made in the throes of passion cannot be taken seriously either, Luca," Don said firmly.

"Father, I have made my claim. That's it. End of story," Luca shot back.

"Fine. Let's hope this woman is deserving of this level of commitment. Your wife, on the other hand, she is a Vitale. She is not going to sit back and take this."

"Then it's simple, Father. We can always get a divorce."

"Did you hear the part where I said the only way out is death? Luca. She has been part of the familia for almost a year now. She knows things, she has seen things. We cannot just throw her back out." Don continued. "And also, don't forget the benefits of your marriage—for both sides, our family and hers. This is not something you get out of. Not easily. Not without consequences."

Luca exhaled. "We are married in name only. That's it, Father. I have done my duty. Now it's time for my happiness."

"So who carries the heir? Your wife or this woman?"

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

## **Chapter 167: I Love You**

Luca shook his head slightly. "That's another conversation for a farther future. I am talking about now."

"Luca..." Don rose slowly from his chair. "I love you. You know that. But I will always be a Don first. Every time—every single time—I have to punish you for breaking the rules, it hurts me even more than it hurts you. But I cannot seem weak."

Luca could see the conflict etched in his father's eyes—the tug-of-war between love and duty, between sentiment and tradition. Don had raised him to command, to calculate, to survive in a world that didn't forgive mistakes. And yet, even now, he showed the faintest cracks of human frailty.

"And you have made me proud your entire life," Don continued. "You... if I could make things easier for you, I would."

Luca felt a twinge of warmth in his chest, a rare flicker of vulnerability in a man who had always seemed invincible. "I can take my punishment, Father. You don't have to romance me into accepting it." There was a subtle humor in his tone.

Don's lips curved into a small, approving smile. He reached out and patted Luca on the back. "I accept your claim. But you will still do right by Bianca. You will be seen in public as the perfect couple. You both will attend this wedding together tomorrow."

"No!" Luca snapped. His hand rose slightly in reflex, as if to gesture at the impossible demands of duty colliding with the stubborn pull of his heart.

"It's an order," Don Genovese said. "We cannot have people lose faith in the familia. At least people have to know that marrying into our family is not fraught with disaster. You want to keep this mistress..."

Luca bristled immediately, his eyes flashing. "Don't... don't call her that," he argued. The label reduced her to something disposable, something fleeting—and she was neither.

"It is what she is. You want to keep her? You will maintain the social façade of your marriage for as long as you have it. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir!"

"Good. Get some rest. Prepare for the ceremony," Don said before he turned and ascended the stairs.

Luca walked to the phone hanging on the wall. His fingers hovered for a moment before dialing Nonnina's room. "Nonni... I'm home. Could you come down please?" He hung up and moved toward the bar. He poured himself a drink.

The sound of soft footsteps made him turn, just as Nonnina appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

She walked straight into his arms, wrapping herself around him. "Diavolino..." she murmured, her cheek pressing against his chest.

"Nonni..." Luca breathed, running a hand down her hair, feeling the familiar softness of her silver strands slip through his fingers. He kissed her forehead gently. "You good?" he asked.

She lifted her face slightly, eyes meeting his with a softness that belied the unyielding strength she always carried. "I'm always good when you come home," she replied.

Luca's grip tightened slightly around her.

He held her a little longer.

"I am so sorry, Luciano," she said. "If I knew they were coming, I would have relocated Zuccherino."

Luca shook his head lightly. "It's okay."

"How is she?" Nonnina asked.

"Still mouthy," he replied with a smirk.

"Oh, I thought that would be cured already," Nonnina said, the corners of her mouth tugging upward slightly.

Luca laughed. "Where is Bianca?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"In your bedroom," she said.

"Thought so," he muttered, turning to his drink. "Could you get me a change of clothes? I'll take a shower in the annex and head back to the hospital. I have a wedding to go to tomorrow also. But whatever you do, keep me as far away from her as possible."

"Of course," Nonnina said immediately, nodding.

"You want some dinner?" she asked.

"Please..." Luca said, relief threading through his voice.

Nonnina smiled at him. "I'll heat up something for you, and you can take some for Zuccherino too."

"Thank you, Nonni. Oh, uh... Mum says hi."

A beautiful, fragile smile spread across her face in joy. Her eyes glistened just enough that tears seemed poised to fall, but she blinked them back.

"She is fine?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," Luca assured her.

"Good. I'm glad," she said, turning away before he could see the sting of tears threatening to break free. There was pride, there was relief, and there was memory in that glance.

Carol had always been the best thing that ever happened to Don Genovese, and Nonnina carried that memory.

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The morning light filtered softly through the blinds of the hospital room. Veronica picked at the breakfast tray in front of her, poking at the eggs with the tip of her fork, her nose

turned slightly upward as though the meal offended her just by existing. The taste was bland, hospital-issue bland, and she could almost hear Nonnina's voice in her head, reminding her that proper meals were meant to be savored, not tolerated.

The meal Nonnina had sent the night before had been heavenly in comparison. Freshly cooked, aromatic, filled with flavors that spoke of care, of home, of someone thinking of her. Veronica had eaten it greedily, the simple act of nourishment feeling like an indulgence she hadn't realized she craved.

She would have asked for another portion now, but Luca had already told her he was attending a family event. He had explained it in painstaking detail—the who, the why, the what. She hadn't liked it but she had accepted it. She trusted him.

He had promised to come directly to her after the event. She wanted to be there with him, but she also knew she couldn't and not just because she was trapped in a hospital bed. She wanted to be by his side, everywhere, everyday, to be seen with him, to be envied because she belonged to him.

Her thigh throbbed softly, a dull reminder of the recent trauma. She could feel the heavy bandages around it, restricting movement and adding weight, but she tried anyway, lifting it slightly to see if the pain would let her forget for a moment. A small, proud smile tugged at her lips. Progress, she told herself.

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

## **Chapter 168: That's Quite Comforting**

She was lost in this fragile sense of accomplishment when the door opened. A man stepped inside. Her eyes flicked up. The resemblance was uncanny, impossible to miss. His features were angular, commanding—almost as if he had opened his mouth and spat out Luca.

There was the same intensity in his eyes, the same movements, the same predatory grace. He was Don Genovese, the patriarch, the one who had shaped the world Luca now moved through with both ease and peril.

"Hospital meals have always been yuck. I thought it was only in Vienna; seems the same applies here too," Don said.

"Hello," Veronica said cautiously.

"I'm guessing you know who I am," he said, his gaze sweeping over her assessing.

"It's hard not to if you know Luciano Genovese," she replied, lifting her chin slightly.

"And yet you look at me like you would want to aim a gun at me," Don said, a small tilt to his lips, amusement threading his deep, commanding voice.

"Because you aren't my favorite person at the moment," Veronica shot back, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Really?" Don said. "And what have I done to earn your animosity, Miss Scalese?"

Veronica inhaled sharply, the words started pouring out of her before she could second-guess them. "What kind of man punishes his sons with such brutality? How can you even live with yourself? It doesn't matter what he could have done. Are you so wrapped up in this god-like fantasy you have built for yourself that you do not recognize that what you do to your son is barbaric? Do you even care about him, or is he just a child you had for your ambitions, someone you decided to brutally shape into the man you want him to be?" Her words tumbled out in a rush that left her breathless.

Don's eyes darkened slightly, the faintest flicker of surprise crossing his features. "Damn, Bianca should have shot you in the mouth," he said.

"Gee... Thank you. That's quite comforting," Veronica replied, sarcasm lacing her tone.

"You will learn the ways of the familia now that Luca has claimed you as one," he said, his eyes locking onto hers.

"What?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

"I'm sure he will have that conversation with you," Don said, his gaze steady, unwavering.

"Why are you here?" Veronica asked cautiously, the fire in her eyes not fully extinguished.

"To give you an out," he replied.

"Excuse me?!" she barked, incredulous.

"As soon as you say the word, I will offer you a hundred million euros, to relocate anywhere in the world. I will change your identity, I will change your life, I will change even your look if you want," Don said.

Veronica's lips curled into a wry, mocking smile. "Ain't you generous? And what will I have to do for you?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. All you have to do is leave Luca to enjoy his marriage, connect with his wife, produce a legitimate heir," Don said.

Vee leaned back, pretending to consider the offer, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Finally, she lifted her gaze to Don's. "Fuck you!"

Don's composed expression flickered. She knew the risks, the consequences, and yet it felt impossibly intoxicating to be telling him off.

Don Genovese stared at her.

The look on his face was priceless.

"Excuse me?" he said slowly.

She could feel the ache in her leg, the tightness of the bandages, the vulnerability of sitting half-propped in a hospital bed while facing one of the most powerful men in the world Luca belonged to.

"You heard me," she said coolly. "I said fuck you! You don't know me! You don't know what I want! Does money really solve all of your problems? Because if that's what you are used to then you are in for a shock, Luca's father." She paused, tilting her head slightly with insolence. "Can I call you Luca's father?"

Don's brows climbed higher and higher with every word.

A dangerous smile ghosted across his lips.

"I'm itching to shoot you in the mouth myself," he said.

Veronica shrugged faintly. "Then I guess we can put to test how far Luca is willing to go for me."

Suddenly it clicked.

The defiance. The reckless courage. The way she spoke without calculating consequences. The way her eyes burned with conviction. Carol.

Lord have mercy.

This girl was exactly like Carol.

The same fire.

The same stubborn will.

The same dangerous refusal to bend.

Did Luca even realize this? Did his son understand that he had fallen for a woman who carried the same wild spirit that had once driven Don Genovese completely mad with love?

The irony was poetic.

Of course Luca would fall for a woman like this.

The boy had inherited his worst instincts from both parents.

Don exhaled slowly, recovering his composure. "The offer is open for whenever you want it," he said calmly. "I do hope it will be soon."

"Or what?"

"Or this life will weigh you down just like it weighed his mother. And if he sacrifices everything for you and it turns out that you are a fluke," Don continued, "I will kill you. Is that understood, Miss Scalese?"

"Are you threatening me?" Vee demanded.

"No," he said evenly. "Maybe you do not understand what he has done for you already. First, he saved your sister. He thinks I don't know but be rest assured, I know everything."

Her jaw tightened.

"Second," Don continued, "he is giving up a life with a woman that has dedicated her life to him, a woman he almost killed because of you, a woman who loves him just as much as you claim to do. He is willing to suffer just to keep you," Don said. "Tell me what have you given up for him?"

Veronica's throat tightened, but she refused to answer. Refused to let him see the flicker of uncertainty that his words had ignited somewhere deep inside her.

Don stepped a little closer. "Miss Scalese," he said slowly. "Read my lips. I am not threatening you. I am spitting facts. You break him, you die. Are we clear, Miss Scalese?"

(This is to 400 power stones. Congratulations people. Our first 400!!! Yay!!!)

## **Chapter 169: Get The Fuck Out**

"Get out!" she said simply. "Get out now!"

Don smiled faintly, as if her reaction had been exactly what he expected. "Be well."

"Get the fuck out!"

Don Genovese turned and walked out of the room.

For a moment Veronica sat perfectly still, staring at the door.

His words echoed in her mind.

What have you given up for him?

The question gnawed at her.

Before she could stop herself, she grabbed the small rolling table across her lap and hurled it off the bed.

It crashed loudly against the floor.

Plates shattered.

Juice spilled across the tiles.

Cutlery scattered.

Her breathing turned ragged. "Fuck!" she muttered under her breath.

The anger drained out of her almost instantly, leaving doubt behind.

Veronica brought both hands to her face, pressing her palms into her eyes as tears spilled through her fingers.

Luca had sacrificed so much already.

And she...

She had walked straight into his life and turned everything upside down.

Her shoulders shook as the tears came harder now.

What if Don Genovese was right?

What if loving her really did destroy him?

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The reception hall glittered with chandeliers and gold-trimmed mirrors. Crystal glasses chimed, laughter floated through the air, and the orchestra played a soft waltz. It was a beautiful wedding by every standard.

Luca felt absolutely none of it. His hand rested firmly on Bianca's waist as they joined the newlyweds on the dance floor. The room watched them. Luciano Genovese and his wife were a spectacle. Power always attracted eyes.

He moved with perfect rhythm.

But there was no warmth in it.

No connection.

Just a mechanical execution of obligation.

Bianca tilted her face up toward him, her hair falling softly over her shoulders. She had clearly gone to great lengths tonight. The dress clung to her body in a way that demanded attention—cut low enough to reveal generous cleavage, slit high enough to flash her thighs every time she moved.

And the room had noticed.

Men noticed.

Half the men in the room were watching her.

Luca caught the groom staring once, quickly looking away when their eyes met. Married men, single men, even a few women were glancing in Bianca's direction.

He felt nothing.

Because every second he stood here was another second he was not at the hospital.

Not with Veronica.

The music carried them slowly across the floor.

"Are you still mad at me?" Bianca asked quietly, looking up at him.

Luca's jaw tightened. "I don't want to talk right now, Bianca. Let's just get this over with and you can go home."

Bianca swallowed slightly, her fingers tightening on his shoulder as they turned with the music.

"Can you fault me for reacting the way I did?" she asked. "You are my husband. Shouldn't I at least feel something?"

Luca said nothing. He simply guided her through another turn, his eyes drifting briefly across the ballroom. His fingers flexed slightly against Bianca's waist.

If Bianca knew exactly how tightly he wanted to squeeze her neck right then, she would wisely stop talking.

She shifted closer as they moved.

Once, he might have noticed.

Bianca's dress shifted again with the movement of the dance, revealing the smooth line of her thigh through the slit. Another man across the room looked a little too long.

Luca noticed.

And still, he felt nothing.

No jealousy.

No desire.

Just a growing impatience crawling under his skin.

The music ended with a final sweep of violins, and the applause around the dance floor rose politely.

The moment the last note died, he released Bianca's waist, though he still held her hand long enough to guide her across the floor toward the newlyweds. His smile appeared exactly when it was expected—smooth, charming, convincing.

He congratulated them.

Shook hands.

Said the appropriate words.

Then he left.

The music and laughter from inside faded behind the heavy doors as Luca stepped onto the stone driveway.

The moment they cleared the entrance, he let go of Bianca's hand.

Marco stood near the curb, still chewing on a piece of wedding cake he had apparently smuggled out of the reception. He swallowed and quickly hurried to get the car.

"Luciano, please talk to me," Bianca said, following Luca down the steps.

"You will leave for Vienna first thing in the morning."

"Luca!"

"Enough!" Luca snapped. "Your apologies are not accepted."

The car rolled up then.

Luca opened the back door.

"You'll take her home," he told Marco.

Marco nodded immediately.

"I'll Uber back to the hospital."

Bianca's eyes widened.

"What? Luca—"

But Marco had already started the car.

The door closed.

And the vehicle pulled away before she could protest any further.

Through the window, Luca saw Bianca still talking, her lips moving rapidly as Marco drove her away.

Ten minutes later he was sitting in the back of a rideshare car.

When he reached the hospital, he moved quickly down the hallway toward Veronica's room.

Veronica was awake.

The nurses had her standing beside the bed, one on each side supporting her carefully.

Her hospital gown hung loosely around her shoulders, and her hair was slightly messy. The thick bandages around her thigh made her leg look heavier, awkward.

"Slowly," one nurse instructed.

Veronica tried to put weight on the injured leg. She winced immediately.

"Jesus..." she muttered under her breath.

But she tried again.

Her limp was obvious, but she managed to stand straighter this time, carefully shifting her balance to avoid placing too much weight on the wound.

Luca leaned silently against the doorframe, watching her.

This was the only place he wanted to be.

The only person he cared about seeing.

Veronica lifted her head slightly as she concentrated on balancing herself, and that was when she noticed him.

"That's enough for today. I'm a bit tired. Thank you," she told the nurses, trying to sound stronger than she felt.

They helped her back into bed gently and then filed out, leaving her alone with Luca.

"You're doing good," Luca said softly, stepping closer. He leaned down and kissed her forehead, his hand brushing lightly against her hair.

### **Chapter 170: Weddings Are A Tedious Affair**

But the moment stretched awkwardly.

Because Veronica didn't relax into him the way she usually did.

He felt the tension in her shoulders.

The stiffness in the way she held herself.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, uh... I'm fine."

He pulled a chair closer to the bed, sitting down so their faces were level. "I tried to hurry back," he said, attempting a lighter tone. "Weddings are a tedious affair."

Normally she would have rolled her eyes. Or made a sarcastic comment.

Instead, she stared at him for a long moment.

"You have to let me go, Luca."

His brows furrowed immediately. "Let you go where?"

"We have to end this," Vee said quietly. "Now."

For a moment Luca simply blinked at her.

Completely thrown.

"What are you talking about?"

Veronica pushed herself up slightly against the pillows, frustration flashing across her face. "What am I talking about?" she said incredulously. "How can you even ask me that? I... we are a disaster!"

Luca stared at her like she had suddenly started speaking another language. "Says who?" he asked flatly. "Did they up your morphine or something? Are you delusional right now?"

"I can't let you keep doing this," she said.

"I still don't understand," Luca replied. "Keep doing what?"

Veronica looked at him like the answer should have been obvious. "The things you do for me."

"I don't get it," he said slowly. "What do I do for you?"

Her chest tightened.

Because suddenly the words Don Genovese had spoken earlier echoed loudly in her head.

He saved your sister.

He is giving up a life with a woman who dedicated herself to him.

He is willing to suffer just to keep you.

Her throat felt tight.

"You saved my sister," she said quietly.

Luca shrugged slightly. "So?"

"You destroyed your marriage."

"That marriage was dead before you existed."

"You almost killed your wife because of me."

"That was her fault."

"You're fighting your father!"

"Been doing that since I was twelve."

"You shot your brother."

"I didn't even do that for you. I did that for me."

Each answer came faster than the last.

"You don't see it, do you?" Veronica whispered.

"See what?"

"You're burning your whole life down for me."

"Veronica," he said slowly.

"Yes?"

"I am not sacrificing anything."

Her brows pulled together. "Yes you are!"

"No, I'm not."

"Luca!" Vee snapped.

Luca straightened in the chair, eyes fixed on her face with an intensity that was unnerving. "If you want me to understand your logic, you will speak in clear terms," he said firmly. "but don't get me wrong," he continued, leaning closer, his hand sliding across the bed to catch hers. "it doesn't matter what you say, I am not letting you go. I can't. I... I cannot, Vee. The thought itself is unbearable."

The honesty in his voice was painful.

"Luca..." she murmured, shaking her head. Her eyes moved slowly across his face, taking in the exhaustion he clearly hadn't bothered to hide. "Look at us," she said quietly. "Look at me." She gestured weakly toward her bandaged leg. "When will this end?"

He followed her gaze to the thick white bandages wrapped around her thigh. His jaw tightened. "Its not happening again, Vee," he said quickly, desperately. "I promise you." His thumb rubbed gently across the back of her hand. "I... Vee, please." He was begging. Actually begging.

But Veronica closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the conversation from earlier.

"Your father thinks you are giving up too much for me," she said slowly, opening her eyes again. "sacrificing too much for me and he thinks I may not be worth it."

Luca's head dropped slightly as a curse slipped through his teeth. "Fucking old man."

Of course. Of course his father had come.

And of course he had poisoned her mind.

"Listen to me," he said urgently. "You love me, right?"

"You know I do."

"Good," he said immediately. "I love you. That is never going to change." He shook his head, disbelief flashing across his face. "Why wouldn't you be worth it? And I hate the fact that the word worth even factors into anything here." He stood abruptly, pacing two short steps beside the bed before running his hands down his face in agitation. "I just want to love you," he said and turned back toward her. "That's not too much to ask. I can't be without you. Do we have to care what people think?" His voice broke into a frustrated breath as he threw his hands up slightly. "Fucking hell!" He dragged in a deep breath looking desperate, frustrated, terrified.

Because to Luca, the problem seemed painfully simple.

He loved her.

She loved him.

And yet somehow they were still standing here talking about walking away.

And he couldn't understand why.

"What if your obsession moves to someone else?" Vee asked quietly.

"What if you fall in love with someone else?" Luca redirected the question immediately. "Or someone you already were in love with? Like Cassidy. He called. Checking up on you."

Veronica's brows lifted slightly. "Speaking of Cassidy!" Vee began.

Luca nearly exhaled in relief.

The shift in subject felt like someone opening a window in a suffocating room.

He would talk about Cassidy for the rest of his life if it kept her from circling back to the idea of leaving him. "Yeah," he said quickly, eagerly. "what's up with him?"

"He is a Bastione now."

Luca's brain took a second to process the sentence.

Then his head tilted slowly.

"Excuse me?"

Veronica adjusted slightly against the pillows, wincing faintly at the movement of her injured leg before continuing. "Yeah... Val said he came into the shop the other day to order pizza," she explained. "Ricardo saw him. Saw the tattoo on his neck."

Luca's eyes narrowed slightly. "Hmmm...."

Cassidy joining the Bastione family was strategically odd.

The Bastiones were not exactly known for welcoming outsiders easily.

And Cassidy... well, Cassidy had never exactly struck Luca as the mafia type.

"I don't know what to make of that," Luca admitted finally, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "but I will have Marco look into it."

(I would just like to say 'thank you'. Thank you to you all. I dont know how I did it but I got the most amazing readers ever. This book was supposed to be for WSA 2026, but seriously, I don't even care about that anymore. I just want to write. You guys make me so, so very happy. Your comments, like every single time, i have a stupid smile on my face. Thank you so much.)