

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 171: I Think You Broke Him - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 171: I Think You Broke Him

Chapter 171: I Think You Broke Him

"I think you broke him," Vee said.

Luca's lips curved slowly into a crooked smirk. "It is what I do."

The smugness in his tone was completely unapologetic.

Veronica narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, don't look so smug about that."

Luca's smirk deepened, the mischievous glint in his eyes returning. "Why not?" he said, one brow lifting with theatrical pride. "I broke your ex boyfriend? Tell me what other achievement beats that."

Veronica burst out laughing.

"God, I missed that," Luca exhaled heavily.

His teasing expression softened as he looked at her like she was the most extraordinary thing in the world.

And to him... she was.

"You have no idea what you do to me, Bambola," he said quietly. "You make me feel like I am carrying my heart in my hands."

Veronica's laughter faded slowly.

He looked dangerously sincere like she truly held some invisible power over him.

"Okay," she said after a moment, lifting a hand slightly in surrender. "I'm not breaking up with you anymore. You can stop."

Luca's mouth curved into a slow smile. "Never."

"Come here," Vee said quietly.

Luca moved closer and leaned over her, bracing one hand beside her shoulder.

Up close, she could see the tiredness around his eyes.

The faint shadow of stubble along his jaw.

"Kiss me," she instructed.

Luca's gaze flickered between her eyes and her lips. "Bambola," he murmured softly, "it's never enough."

"Just kiss me."

He leaned down slowly, careful not to jostle her, and their lips met.

The kiss deepened quickly as their mouths moved together. His hand slid gently into her hair.

When they finally pulled apart, the distance between their lips barely an inch, Luca lingered there like leaving her was physically difficult.

Veronica could see the way his breathing had slowed.

The way his eyes stayed locked on her.

"It's never enough," he whispered again.

Cassidy stepped inside the bar. He had been expecting the message.

The place was quiet enough that he could hear the low murmur of conversations in the private booths. He moved through the bar slowly.

He spotted Bianca immediately.

She sat alone in a shadowed booth, one long leg crossed over the other, her fingers loosely holding a glass of whiskey. Her makeup was flawless. Her dress elegant.

But her posture gave her away.

There was tension in the way her shoulders held themselves too straight.

Frustration in the slow way she sipped her drink.

Cassidy stopped beside the booth.

Then he slid into the seat beside her.

"Rough night?" he asked.

Bianca let out a soft breath through her nose, lifting the glass of whiskey to her lips before taking a slow sip. The alcohol burned pleasantly down her throat. "You could say so."

"What's going on?" he asked.

Bianca stared at the liquid in her glass as if it might answer for her. "Apparently nothing," she said flatly. "Nothing is going on in my life."

Cassidy gave a small amused huff. "That's kind of a depressing start."

Bianca chuckled quietly. "Yeah," she admitted. "I just called because I needed to talk to someone who isn't familia."

Cassidy raised a brow slowly.

"I mean Genovese familia or Vitale familia," she corrected quickly.

"Come on," Cassidy said, leaning forward slightly, resting his elbows on the table. "Hit me."

Bianca looked up at him then. "My husband hates me."

"Is that all?"

Bianca's brows pulled together slightly. "Isn't that enough?" she asked, lifting a brow.

Cassidy shrugged casually. "Honestly, no. I don't see any reason why you should be bothered."

Bianca stared at him like he had just insulted her intelligence.

Instead of elaborating, Cassidy pulled his phone from his pocket.

He unlocked it casually, lifted it up, and before she could react—

Click.

The camera captured her face.

Cassidy lowered the phone and turned the screen toward her. "There," he said.

On the screen was Bianca exactly as she sat now.

Elegant. Striking.

"Have you seen this woman lately?" he asked.

Bianca rolled her eyes immediately. "Oh stop it!"

"I'm serious." He tapped the screen lightly. "Why would a woman as gorgeous as this be having guy problems?"

He locked his phone and tossed it casually onto the table. "You know what to do to make yourself happy," he continued calmly. "you just don't want to do it."

"My brother in law is in love with me," she said suddenly.

"Okay," he said after a moment. "I will not advise going after your brother in law."

The corner of Bianca's mouth twitched.

Then she laughed.

"No, no of course not," she said, waving a dismissive hand through the air. "I love my husband."

Cassidy nodded once. "I know."

"Have you ever been in love, Cassidy?"

"Yes, actually."

The answer came easily.

The best way to keep track of lies was to tell the truth.

Not all of it.

Just enough.

"What happened?" Bianca asked, tilting her head with curiosity.

Cassidy leaned back into the leather booth, letting one arm rest casually along the backrest. His fingers tapped lightly against the leather. "I let her go," he said simply. "She was interested in someone else."

"Well that's easy for you to do," she said. "Maybe you never truly loved her."

"Maybe you are right," he said slowly. "Maybe I would have done things differently if she loved me even half as much as I did her."

"I leave tomorrow."

Cassidy's eyes snapped back to her. "Oh?"

One brow lifted in mild surprise.

"You don't live in New York?"

Bianca shook her head lightly. "Oh no... I and my father in law came in together from Vienna."

Cassidy filed the information away instantly. "Why are you leaving so soon?" he asked.

"I told you," Bianca said quietly, "my husband hates me."

"Well," he said, spreading his hands a little in resignation, "I guess this is it then, Mrs. Genovese. It's been quite nice to make your acquaintance. So you are leaving with your father in law?"

Bianca shook her head slowly. "No. He will be here for a bit."

Chapter 172: I Feel So Foolish

Cassidy's brow lifted slightly. "You will be home alone in Vienna."

Bianca shrugged one shoulder. "I'll just spend the time with my family and wait until Don comes back."

Waiting. That was the theme of her life lately, wasn't it?

Waiting for Luciano to forgive her.

Waiting for him to want her.

"Good," he said softly. "You shouldn't be alone right now. You need people to take care of you."

Something in his tone must have struck a chord because her gaze softened.

Then suddenly—

She leaned closer to him. Her fingers grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him toward her.

Cassidy barely had half a second to register what she was doing before she leaned forward, aiming to kiss him.

But Cassidy turned his face just enough.

Her lips brushed past his cheek instead.

Bianca pulled back slowly, her brows knitting together in confusion and embarrassment. "What... what is going on right now?" she asked.

"Bianca... I..." He shook his head slightly. "You're married."

Bianca's face flushed immediately. "Oh my God," she groaned softly, leaning back into the booth. "I feel so foolish."

Cassidy sat up straighter instantly, waving a hand quickly as if trying to erase the moment. "No... no... you shouldn't be. No! Think about it." His eyes locked onto hers. "You are married to Luciano Genovese. Do you have any idea the kind of man he is?"

Cassidy was selling the act perfectly now—concern, admiration, even a hint of fear carefully woven into his voice.

Meanwhile, beneath the performance, his mind worked quietly.

The fastest way to someone's heart...was to not be available when they think you should be.

"It's not like anyone is going to tell him," she said. "and besides, you think I would be here with you if he gave one crap about me." She was used to admiration. Used to power in the form of beauty, lineage, wealth.

Being ignored by Luciano Genovese must feel like standing invisible in a room where she had always been the sun.

"So," he said calmly, "I'm supposed to do what?" His eyes held hers steadily. "Fill the hole your husband left behind?" He paused just long enough for the words to sting. "Quite literally?"

Bianca's face flushed with wounded pride.

Then she slid out of the booth abruptly.

"I have to go!"

Cassidy didn't move to stop her. He didn't apologize. He didn't chase her. He simply watched as she grabbed her purse and walked quickly toward the exit.

Cassidy leaned back slowly.

A faint smile crept across his lips.

No woman wants to feel unwanted.

Especially not a woman like Bianca.

He had struck exactly where he intended to. Her pride.

She would come back.

Of that he had no doubt.

And when she returned...

She would give him everything he wanted.

Everything.

Ricardo's office creaked open slowly.

The paperwork spread across his desk required more patience than intelligence, and he had already decided he hated both tonight.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, expecting the usual interruption.

For the past few weeks, women from the club had developed a habit of wandering into his office uninvited, trying to seduce him.

Ricardo found the entire situation exhausting. He finally glanced up, already preparing the same polite rejection.

He had one woman.

And she was already quite enough.

Or rather...

Too much.

He certainly wasn't about to add more complications to an already blissful relationship.

But the moment he saw Bianca Genovese step fully into the room, closing the door behind her, cold dread settled in his stomach.

So this was not one of the dancers.

This was far worse.

"Mrs. Genovese." He chose the formality on purpose.

Distance was safer.

Bianca's lips curved immediately. "Mrs. Genovese, uhn?" she repeated, stepping further into the room. "So suddenly? No more Bianca, or Bee as you used to call me?"

"That was a long time ago."

It had been.

Back when she was just the beautiful, reckless girl betrothed to Luca.

Now she was Luciano Genovese's wife.

Nothing about that was harmless.

Bianca stopped a few feet from the desk, resting one manicured hand on the back of the chair opposite him.

"Thankfully," she said smoothly, "I am not here to rekindle the past." Her eyes lifted to his. "I am here to tell you what you will do for me while you are here and exactly how you will do them for me."

"I don't work for you."

Bianca's smile widened slightly. "Oh but you will. Because if you don't... I will make sure I ruin you."

Ricardo let out a quiet breath through his nose. "I am not afraid of you, Bianca."

That much was true.

"Maybe not," she admitted. "But you are afraid of Luca, aren't you?"

Bianca stepped closer to the desk now, her fingers brushing lightly across its surface. "And you have seen or heard exactly the lengths he will go to for his little slut."

Ricardo's eyes hardened immediately. "Whats your point?"

Bianca leaned slightly over the desk now, lowering her voice. "Tell me," she said quietly, "what will he do when he finds out you are the snitch in the first place."

Ricardo's stomach tightened.

Bianca's smile turned sweet. "The one who made me aware of what was happening in my house." She straightened slightly, folding her arms. "I have proof of the videos you sent me," she continued calmly. "The messages you sent me."

Ricardo could feel the slow, creeping weight of the trap closing around him.

Bianca watched his face carefully, savoring the silence. "And I just shot his bitch," she added casually. "He is still itching for blood. Maybe he will take it out on you," she mused lightly. Her gaze flicked around the office, taking in the expensive liquor on the shelf, the polished desk, the comfortable leather chair. "Or maybe he will take away this little slice of life he has given you." Her eyes returned to his.

Ricardo stayed very still in his chair. "Bianca, I cannot help you," he said carefully. "There is nothing more I can do."

(100 power stones in twenty four hours!!! Whoosh! Lets keep this going! I am ready and available to rock your world with the coming Chapters. 200 power stones baby!!!)

Chapter 173: Go Places I Cannot Reach

Not just because helping her was dangerous—but because every instinct he had told him this was a spiral he wanted no part of. Not to even mention the fact that he would be hurting Valentina.

"All I need from you, my darling," she said softly, "is to be my feet in New York. Go places I cannot reach," she continued. "Deliver messages I cannot give. That's all."

"You're a witch, Bianca."

If the insult bothered her, she didn't show it.

Instead she smiled.

"I grew up in the mafia," Bianca said slowly. "But I was mostly dismissed because I was a woman. I learnt everything. I learned how things get done. I learned how people disappear."

Ricardo felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Bianca pushed away from the desk and straightened her dress casually. "Luca has claimed the girl as a Genovese," she continued. Her lips pressed together slightly. "I can't touch her. But I can damage what they have. And I will damage it so badly," she added softly, glancing back at him, "she will be the one to be thrown off a balcony by Luca himself."

Bianca smiled one last time.

And she walked out of the office.

Ricardo sat there for several seconds without moving.

Because he knew two things with absolute certainty.

First—

Bianca Genovese was far more dangerous than most men in the room gave her credit for.

Second—

He had just been dragged into a war whether he liked it or not.

Don Genovese sat comfortably in one of the armchairs, a delicate porcelain cup balanced between his fingers. He took another slow sip and let out a satisfied breath. "Nonnina," he said warmly, "this tea is magnificent."

Nonnina stood nearby with her usual grace. "You say that every time."

"Because every time it is true."

She allowed herself a small smile.

Just then the front door opened.

Luciano stepped inside.

Nonnina was already moving. She hurried toward him. Her small hands reached for his jacket as he shrugged it off, and Luca leaned down automatically.

The routine was muscle memory.

He wrapped his arms around her briefly, hugging her close and pressing a kiss into her soft silver hair.

"Luciano!" Don Genovese boomed from his armchair. "Nonnina's brew is still the best I ever had," he declared, lifting his cup slightly like a toast. "When are you going to outgrow her. I need her back in Vienna."

Luca loosened the collar of his shirt. "You're not getting her."

Nonnina smiled quietly, clearly used to the tug-of-war between father and son. She patted Luca lightly on the chest before heading toward the staircase. "I'll get you a change of clothes."

Luciano gave a small nod of thanks. Bianca was still occupying his bedroom upstairs, which meant the annex wardrobe would have to do again.

As Nonnina disappeared up the stairs, Don Genovese sighed dramatically.

"You are so selfish."

Luca moved toward the bar as if the comment hadn't existed.

Crystal glasses clinked softly as he poured himself a drink.

"So I heard you were very busy today," Luca said casually.

Don's eyes narrowed slightly. "By busy you mean, going to see your mistress."

Luca took a slow sip of his drink. "And delivering threats I didn't ask you to deliver."

Don set his teacup down carefully. "Since you are bent on defying your family for this woman," he said calmly, "I needed to make sure she is worth it."

Luciano turned slightly, one eyebrow lifting. "How much?"

"A hundred million euros."

Luca pushed himself away from the bar and walked toward his father, drink still in hand.

"You don't know her," Luca said softly. "You don't. You know what she said the first time I fucked her?"

Don raised a brow.

Luciano's smile widened just slightly. "The only way out is death."

Luca took another sip of his drink. "I mean it," he said calmly. Then his eyes flicked down to his father's. "She means it."

"I hope so, Diavolino," Don said thoughtfully. "I do hope so."

"She isn't mom."

"We'll see." He lifted the cup again, inhaling the aroma. "But this tea," he muttered with genuine appreciation, shaking his head slightly. "God! I have to send our chef in Vienna over to learn from Nonnina."

"She brews it with love."

Don's eyes lifted slowly toward his son. "What," Don said slowly, "has she done to you?"

"Who?"

"God," he muttered, shaking his head with disappointment. "You've become a fucking pussy."

Luca shrugged one shoulder lazily.

The insult slid off him like rain off glass.

Maybe a month ago he would have snapped back.

Tonight he didn't bother.

"You should go see your brother," Don said after a moment.

Luca's brow furrowed slightly. "Why?"

Don's patience snapped instantly. "Luciano!"

"Dad, it's not happening. This was eventually going to happen," he continued. "The dam was going to burst one day. I get that he resents me because you trust me with the familia," Luca said. "but our issues started way before now. Way before you even started to notice something wrong. Or maybe you just turned a blind eye."

"Oh," Don said calmly, "I am going to carry out your punishment the day after tomorrow."

The punishment.

Of course.

Every broken rule demanded its price.

Don folded his hands loosely together. "And now," he added conversationally, "I would like your mistress to be present."

Luciano's gaze snapped back to his father. "What? Why?" Luca asked.

"She is the reason for this madness, isn't she?" Don explained evenly. "She needs to see exactly what happens when you cross family."

"Dad! Dad! No! I'm begging you!"

"She is in the mafia now, son," Don said simply. "You put her there."

The old man rose from his chair, handed the empty teacup to Luca.

Then he patted his son's shoulder.

And walked up the staircase.

Luciano woke the next morning to an incessant knock pounding against his door. "What the hell?" he groaned. He rolled onto his back, blinking against the pale morning light that slipped through the curtains. He swung his legs off the bed with a frustrated exhale. He was wearing nothing but his underpants.

Chapter 174: You May Leave

The knocking continued.

"Nonni...you can just come straight in," he called out, dragging a hand through his messy hair. "You have seen me naked all my life!"

Grumbling under his breath, he walked out of the bedroom, past the living room.

The knocking didn't stop.

"Alright, alright!" He reached the door and yanked it open in irritation.

But the irritation died instantly.

Because it wasn't Nonnina standing there.

It was his wife.

Her eyes scanned him quickly—taking in the bare chest, the low waistband of his underwear, the sleepy disarray of his hair.

Then his brain finally restarted.

"What do you want?" Luca stepped backward into the apartment, his gaze darting around the room.

Where the hell was his robe?

His mind was ringing with panic. Vee's going to kill me. Vee's going to kill me!

Bianca stood at the doorway. "I came to tell you I am leaving for the airport, for Vienna."

Luciano disappeared briefly into the apartment and returned moments later, now wrapped in a dark robe, the belt tied loosely around his waist. It did nothing to soften the perfection of his body. If anything, it made him look sexier. "You didn't have to make an announcement."

Bianca swallowed, her fingers tightening slightly around the strap of her bag. "I also want to apologise, for all the trouble I caused."

"Apology accepted. You may leave."

"Luc..." she started, taking a step toward him.

"Now!"

"Fine," she said, lifting her chin slightly. "Don will probably speak with you about this but you have to be in Vienna soon."

"For what?"

"Both families are hosting our one year anniversary," Bianca said. "They can't have a party for us if you are not there. My mum plans on going all out."

Luca exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. I will talk to Don about it."

Bianca nodded.

There was nothing left to say.

And yet—

She stepped forward again. Her arms shifted slightly, the instinct to hug him flickering through her body.

Luciano moved back instantly.

A clear, unmistakable boundary drawn in silence.

Bianca stilled. She nodded once.

A small, accepting gesture.

Then she turned and walked out.

Luciano stood there for a moment, staring at the closed door.

Then—he chuckled.

The fear of Veronica is the beginning of wisdom.

"Yeah," he muttered to himself.

Then a faint smirk tugged at his lips.

"I'm completely fucked."

He was doing exactly what he called other men simps for. Oh karma, you wicked bitch.

Airports had a way of making loneliness louder.

The constant hum of announcements, the rolling wheels of suitcases, the distant laughter of families reuniting—it all blurred into a cruel kind of background music. For Bianca, seated in the waiting area with her designer luggage lined neatly beside her, it only made the emptiness inside her echo harder.

She looked immaculate.

No one was sitting beside her.

Cassidy wasn't surprised when she called. He had been expecting it the moment she walked out of that bar the night before. He spotted her immediately.

Curled slightly into herself on the chair, shoulders trembling just enough to betray the quiet sobs she was trying—and failing—to contain.

"Bianca?" he called gently as he approached but kept his distance.

Her head snapped up at the sound of his voice.

Relief flooded her face so quickly it was almost painful to watch.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Bianca said. "I don't know why I called you. I just...I'm..."

Cassidy crouched slightly in front of her, lowering himself just enough to meet her eyes without drawing attention. "Hey...hey, it's alright," he said softly. "You can call me anytime."

Bianca let out a shaky breath, clutching onto the sound of his voice. "It's just I'm alone here waiting for my flight while my husband wouldn't even touch me with a five foot pole."

"When is your flight?" He glanced briefly at the departure board overhead.

"Its in three hours. But I couldn't stay one more minute in that house," Bianca cried.

Cassidy straightened slowly, his mind already moving ahead. "Come on, love. Let's get out of here!" He reached for her bags, lifting them effortlessly.

Then his free hand found hers.

"What?" Bianca blinked up at him, caught off guard.

"Come on," Cassidy said, already tugging her gently to her feet. "This is depressing and I will be damned if your last day in New York ends like this. Come on!"

Her fingers tightened slightly around his.

And that was all the answer Cassidy needed.

"I have a flight..." Bianca started to say.

"I'll get you back on time. I promise." His grip on her hand remained firm. He guided her out of the airport, away from the noise, the waiting, the humiliation she had been drowning in.

The drive was smooth. Cassidy kept the conversation light, teasing, distracting—throwing small lifelines her way.

A joke here. A comment there.

And slowly—

A crack in her sadness. A small smile.

Then another.

And finally, a full laugh that surprised even her.

Progress.

By the time they arrived at his house, Bianca felt lighter... but also more unsteady.

Cassidy pushed the door open.

And the moment they crossed the threshold—

Bianca didn't give herself time to think. She turned, grabbed his collar, and pulled him toward her, her lips hovering precariously over his just waiting for him to close the distance. "Don't say no."

Cassidy blinked, caught slightly off guard. "Actually," he said lightly, "I was leaning more to watching TV, eating popcorn and getting you tipsy before getting on the plane."

"Fuck that." She pulled him closer. Her lips found his in a desperate, searching kiss—less about passion, more about escape. "I need this, Cas, please. It means nothing. I assure you."

Cassidy stilled for a fraction of a second. "That's the problem."

Her hands moved lower, snatching his dick in her hands.

Cassidy exhaled sharply under his breath. "Fuck..."

"you want me. Stop pretending." She said it like a fact.

He pulled her closer, yanking her top to expose her smooth bare cleavage. "Didn't want to make it too easy for you." He turned them, guiding her back until she met the wall. His lips trailed along her neck.

(Brought to you by Janelle Fox)

Chapter 175: Glad To Be Of Service

Her fingers curled into his hair, holding him there.

He lifted her thigh to his waist. His palm came down against her ass.

"God yes!" Bianca cried.

Cassidy smiled to himself, he'd found it. The way she liked it. Was this the way Luca fucked Veronica too? Or was he tender with her just as she used to like it with him?

He pushed Bianca further against the wall. His hands moved with growing confidence, sliding the rest of her shirt down, his touch slow enough to tease, quick enough to keep her breath unsteady. When he unclasped her bra, he leaned in.

His focus narrowed entirely to her as he consumed and kissed her breasts and nipples.

Bianca's fingers curled against his shoulders, then into him. His fingers slid into her skirt, past her underwear, fingers curved in search of her pleasure.

Time blurred after that.

The living room became the hallway, the hallway the bedroom, though neither of them could later say exactly when or how they got there.

An hour later, they were both gasping for breath on his bed.

The sheets were tangled around them.

"God that was good!" Bianca chuckled.

Cassidy let out a low breath, one arm resting behind his head as he turned slightly to look at her. "Glad to be of service."

"Oh...it was some service."

Cassidy shifted slightly. "I'm guessing this is it?" he said.

Bianca exhaled slowly. She sat up, reaching for her clothes scattered across the floor. "Yeah...I need to get my husband back. And I cant do that when I am sexually frustrated."

"And whats your plan? Tell him you fucked someone you just met?" Cassidy joked, but still prodding for information.

Bianca chuckled, shaking her head as she pulled on her clothes, regaining pieces of herself with each layer. "Don't be silly. I just need to get his nanny on my side."

"His nanny? He is a grown man."

"Yeah, she has been his nanny since he was born. She knows everything about him. You want to kill Luca, that's the woman to use."

"Really?" he asked.

She simply shrugged as she slipped back into her clothes.

"So you want to get her on your side," Cassidy continued, watching her carefully. "Don't you already have his father on your side?"

Bianca glanced at him through the mirror, her lips curving faintly. "Oh I do," she said smoothly. "But Nonnina is the maternal figure of my husband's life. If she likes me, I am golden."

She turned fully now, watching him as realization settled behind his eyes. You could almost hear the gears shifting in his mind, connecting pieces, mapping intentions.

"of course," Cassidy murmured. He pushed himself to his feet, closing the space between them again.

He reached for her shirt, helping her button it, his fingers brushing lightly against the fabric, occasionally grazing her skin.

A subtle intimacy.

"Will I see you again?" he asked.

"I'll call you when I need you."

"I'll dress up and drop you off."

Bianca nodded once, already turning back to the mirror. Her fingers moved through her hair, fixing, smoothing, perfecting. By the time she was done, there was no trace left of the woman who had been crying in the airport.

Only Bianca Genovese remained.

A satisfied grin crossed her lips as she admired her reflection.

One down.

Plenty to go.

It really was the easiest way to get rid of your enemies—never get your hands dirty. Let others do it for you. Especially the ones foolish enough to believe they were the ones in control.

Her gaze flickered briefly toward Cassidy. He was adjusting his shirt now. He was useful.

And, she admitted privately— he was enjoyable.

He was a good distraction.

But that was all he was.

Because no matter how much she tried to rewrite the narrative in her head, there was one truth she couldn't quite erase.

Cassidy was a good fuck. He had delivered.

But Luciano Genovese—he wasn't even trying when he fucked her and yet he was hitting places she didn't even know existed.

Bianca's fingers paused briefly in her hair. She measured other men against him.

And they kept falling short.

Luca was the ultimate man, the ultimate lover, the king of pleasure. No wanna be idiot could match his skills.

Julian barely felt the ground beneath him as they wheeled him out.

The medication dulled the edges of everything—pain, anger, even the bitter taste of humiliation that sat permanently at the back of his throat—but it didn't erase them. It just made them slower.

The handicapped exit creaked open, and sunlight spilled across his face, forcing his eyes to narrow. The doctor brought him to the backyard.

Julian's gaze lifted slowly and saw his brother already in position.

Shirtless and kneeling.

Wrists bound in front of him, the rope biting into his skin just enough to leave marks that would linger long after the punishment ended.

His back was exposed. He faced away from their father.

A man stood beside him, holding the whip. It was an ugly thing—long, worn, rough at the edges.

Julian's lips twitched faintly.

His father had waited for him to be well enough to watch.

How thoughtful.

His chair came to a stop.

From here, he had a perfect view.

Don Genovese stood a few feet away from him, hands clasped behind his back, posture relaxed.

And the look in his eyes was pure, unadulterated pride.

That was the part Julian couldn't understand.

His gaze flickered between them, confusion threading through the haze in his mind.

Everything Luca did seemed to be... right.

Even this.

Julian swallowed, his throat dry.

That wasn't what he was supposed to be feeling.

This was supposed to be satisfying.

Therapeutic.

Watching Luca suffer—watching him bleed, break, pay—

It should have filled the hollow feeling inside of him.

But it still wasn't enough. He still thought of Bianca.

He had opened himself up to her.

Stripped himself down.

And she—she had taken it.

Looked at it.

And crushed it beneath her heel.

For Luca. For him.

And then she left without any goodbye.

Not even the courtesy of pretending he mattered.

(Brought to you by Janelle Fox)

Chapter 176: I Am A Petty Man

Did he repulse her that much?

His gaze drifted back to Luca.

Kneeling like this, about to be torn apart by their father—

Luciano Genovese still looked like the man everyone chose.

Julian's eyes flicked back to Don. He watched the older man.

Tried to understand what he had spent years pretending not to notice.

That quiet, unwavering approval.

It didn't make sense.

How could punishment—how could pain—earn pride?

Unless...

Unless it wasn't the suffering that mattered.

It was how Luca wore it.

Luca was owning this and it wasn't even fun for Julian to watch.

Julian shifted in his chair, irritation gnawing through the fog of medication. "What are we waiting for?" he asked impatiently.

Don simply stood, hands still clasped behind his back, gaze fixed on Luca's exposed back. "A guest," Don answered calmly. "Don't worry. You'll get your pound of flesh."

Luca looked... composed. His head was slightly bowed, dark hair falling just enough to shadow his expression, but there was no tension in his shoulders. No visible fear.

Just that quiet, infuriating stillness.

The sound of wheels approaching reached them.

Veronica was being wheeled into the yard, confusion written plainly across her face, her eyes darting around as she tried to make sense of the scene unfolding before her.

She looked out of place.

Don stepped forward. "Welcome, Zuccherino!" he said warmly.

"That's not for you to call me," Veronica spat. "What am I doing here?"

Don smiled. "Your boyfriend is about to be punished for shooting his brother and hurting his wife," he said. "And you... are going to watch."

Veronica blinked, the meaning catching up with her all at once. "What? What? Is this because of what I said to you?"

Don tilted his head slightly, amused. "I am a petty man." Don turned then, his attention shifting to the man holding the whip. "You may begin."

Vee's jaw clenched. Her fingers dug into the arms of the wheelchair as the first lash struck Luca's back, the whip's coarse leather biting into his skin, leaving a fresh, angry red mark that spread across his taut muscles. Watching Luca—her Luca—take such punishment, kneeling in the dirt made her blood run cold.

The second lash fell, slashing across the other side of his back, and then the third, faster, harder. Each strike made her flinch. She tried to rise from the chair, tried to move closer, to do something, anything to stop the punishment, but her body betrayed her. The bandages on her thigh tightened, a reminder that she was helpless here, pinned by her own weakness, by circumstances outside her control.

"How many?!" Vee shouted.

"Fifty!" Don answered.

Vee's chest heaved violently. "God fucking dammit!" she yelled, swinging her legs weakly. The wheelchair wobbled beneath her as she fell to the ground. Her hands scraped against the cold stone beneath her as she attempted to crawl forward, trying to reach him.

"Marco, please stop this!" she cried.

Marco was about to move to help her up but Don held a hand, rooting him to the spot.

Another lash came down, deeper this time, tearing a stripe of blood across Luca's skin. He collapsed forward slightly under the intensity of the blows.

"Luca!" Vee screamed, her hands clawing at the ground as she tried to propel herself forward. Pain radiated from her legs, but she ignored it, crawling toward him with every ounce of energy she could muster. She had to reach him.

"Please...please...please...stop this!" Vee sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

Luca's panic flared as he heard her voice grow closer. He twisted his head, trying to catch sight of her. "Stay there!" he snapped.

Veronica's tears streamed freely as she reached Luca, her trembling hands cupping his face, feeling the heat radiating from the welts across his back. Each breath she took was ragged. She shook her head violently, whispering his name: "Luca... Luca..."

The whipping paused as she shielded him with her body. Her hands pressed against his cheeks, as if she could erase the pain.

"I'm fine," Luca said through clenched teeth. "I've done this a hundred times." He tried to speak lightly, to diffuse her panic. He felt her shaking against him, felt the desperation in her hands and the trembling of her body as it pressed to his own.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." She pressed her forehead against his. "I shouldn't have walked into your office that day. I shouldn't have... I should have just dropped the pizza and—"

"Hey, hey, love," Luca murmured, trying to soothe her.

"No! No! Look what I'm doing to you..." Her fingers trembled against the wet, darkening skin, and tears fell freely onto his shoulders, sizzling with the heat of his injuries.

"It's not you... It's never you," Luca insisted. "Vee... it's never your fault." He reached with his bound hands, trying to capture her wrist in a gentle grip.

"Just... just apologize!" she begged, shaking her head.

"Not happening."

Tears blurred her vision as she faced Julian, her body trembling from exertion and panic. "Please! Please! You win! I'm sorry! He's sorry! I'll do anything you want, just... just make it stop, please..."

Julian's eyes glinted with cold satisfaction.

And Luca, despite the burning agony across his back, the ropes biting into his wrists, the sting of each lash, could feel her heart beating against his own. He leaned into her, and in that moment, he realised there was no love greater than what he felt for her. Each sob, each apology, each quivering plea reinforced the inescapable truth of what they were: two souls bound together, in love and in darkness, standing on the precipice of pain and obsession, watching and surviving it together.

Julian's face remained an impassive mask.

Don gave a small nod to Marco. "Take her away," he ordered. The flogging must continue.

Then Don turned, eyes narrowing as he regarded Julian. "I wonder...would you have asked me to stop if it were Bianca kneeling there, begging?"

Julian held his father's gaze. "Do you...want to stop?"

(Brought to you by Janelle Fox)

(Apologies that everything took too long today. Had a meeting with Pocketfm. They are considering signing me on as one of their authors for audio and visual stories It took a while cause I had to understand a lot of things. I haven't made a decision yet. I still have to speak with other authors who have worked with them.

And guess which book caught their attention? Just guess)

Chapter 177: It Was An Accident

Don's lips lifted in a slow, lazy smile. He turned back to the view.

Meanwhile, Veronica clutched Luca's face again, hands trembling as she pressed her lips to his. "Luca...please, please beg him to stop..." she whispered.

Luca tried to steady her as Marco reached them.

"Careful," he instructed.

"Always." Marco whispered.

Marco's hands gripped her gently to remove her from the scene, but Vee was unstoppable. With a sudden, panicked strength, she yanked herself free, the disability in her leg causing her to collapse backward onto the ground. Luca lunged instinctively, arms outstretched, to break her fall as the whip—blind and cruel—sliced through the air again.

The leather wrapped around both of them, striking Vee across the chest. Pain shot through her and she let out a scream. Her body convulsed, shock and pain twisting her movements, but even through it, she clung to him with a feral determination.

"No!!!" Luca yelled.

Marco reacted immediately, scooping Vee up from him.

In one fluid, violent motion, Luca twisted, planting his feet into the ground. His bound wrists didn't slow him. He lunged. His hands found the man's throat. His fingers flexed. His muscles tightened. He had one sole purpose, to kill him right then and there.

The man barely had time to react.

A choked gasp escaped him as Luca's grip crushed inward, cutting off air, cutting off thought, cutting off everything.

"Luca...Luca please...stop!"

Luca didn't hear her.

Don watched the scene unfold without moving.

"Luca, it was an accident!" Vee tried again. "Somebody stop him!"

But no one moved.

The man's eyes bulged, veins straining against the pressure, lips parting in a silent, suffocating plea. The whip slipped from his fingers, hitting the ground.

Still—Luca squeezed.

Vee screamed, demanding to be heard and that was what finally reached him.

He let go.

The man collapsed to the ground, gasping for air, hovering dangerously close to death.

Luca bent and picked up the whip before turning to Vee. "Are you okay?"

"Yes! Yes..." Vee nodded quickly. "please, Luca make it stop. Beg if you have to. Apologise, just do it for me. Please..."

He turned his head to Marco. "Take her to the annex. Have Nonnina look her over before taking her back to the hospital."

"No, I'll wait for you," Vee argued immediately, panic flaring again.

Marco carefully helped her get settled into the wheelchair. Luca waited until she was wheeled away.

Only when she disappeared from view did Luca move.

He walked back toward his father.

Every step leaving faint traces of blood behind him.

He stopped in front of Don. Then extended the whip.

"You can finish the job," Luca said, "but not when she is here."

"She cannot handle this life, Luca," Don said. "She is soft. She will break."

Luca's body throbbed with every heartbeat, pain radiating across his back in hot, pulsing waves. "Is that all you see?" he asked. "Is all you see her weakness?"

Don said nothing.

"Did you not see how much that woman loves me?"

"Love is never enough," Don said. "Men like us... we don't deserve love. It is the payment for all our sins."

He understood exactly what his father meant. Luca shook his head slowly, dismissively. "I think you should get off my back for a minute," he muttered, tone laced with dry irritation, "and ride on Julian's, father." He gestured lazily toward his brother with his still-bound wrists.

Luca turned to walk away.

But Don's voice stopped him. "I have one question, Luca."

Luca paused, his back still to his father.

"If," Don continued, "and I know it is definitely going to happen... if one day she decides she has had enough of this life—of you—and cannot stay with you anymore..." He let the words breathe. Let them sink in. "Will you be able to carry out her sentence?"

Luca exhaled slowly, then finally turned his head just enough for his voice to carry back. "Maybe I will have a ten-year-old son to beg for her life too."

He walked off, blood still marking his path.

Marco appeared just then.

Luca stopped in front of him and extended his wrists.

Marco worked quickly, untying the bindings.

Luca flexed his hands once the rope fell away.

"I think somewhere inside you..." Julian's voice pulled his father's attention back from Luca, "you wish he were your only son."

Don's gaze shifted slowly to Julian. "Okay," Don said, "we are doing this again."

"It's always been him," he continued. "You love him more because you love his mother more."

"You are such a whiny little bitch. What do you want from me?" Don demanded. "Hmm? I gave both of you the same opportunities." He took a step closer. "You are fucking

older than him," he continued, each word hitting harder than the last, "and he excelled at everything. Everything."

Julian's fingers curled slightly on the armrest of his wheelchair, the only outward sign that the words were getting through.

"Did you think this was some kind of monarchy?" Don went on. "That everything would be handed over just because you got lucky enough to slide out of your mother's birth canal first? I tolerated your failure," Don said. "I pitied your inadequacy because I felt guilt toward your mother."

Julian's jaw tightened, his composure fracturing just enough to let the crack show.

"Luca," Don continued, "had to work twice as hard. Who the fuck do you think I would hand my life over to?" Don snapped, the calm shattering completely. "You? You have failed at everything," he said, "including fucking your brother's wife." "Fucking bitch," he muttered under his breath as he turned, already done with the conversation, already dismissing Julian.

Then he walked away, leaving behind the wreckage.

Julian sat there in his wheelchair, the world around him suddenly too large, too quiet. The doctor lingered at a cautious distance, unsure whether to approach, while the man Luca had nearly strangled coughed weakly on the ground, dragging in air.

Don's words settled.

He looked up at his doctor. "Get me away from here," Julian snapped. "Away from this house. Get me back to my own house, goddamnit!"

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

Chapter 178: You Fucking Wanker

The man nodded quickly, hands fumbling only slightly as he turned the wheelchair and began to push.

His house.

He almost laughed at the thought because no matter where he went, there was no space untouched by Luca.

Renato Bastione sat in his office, leaning back in his chair, fingers steepled beneath his chin, staring at Cassidy. "You?" he repeated in disbelief. "Cassidy? Former high school teacher... fucked Luciano's wife?"

"Yes."

Renato burst into laughter. "Pardon me," he managed between breaths, waving a dismissive hand, "if I don't believe you."

"It doesn't matter if you believe me or not," he said evenly. "I came to give you information on what I know."

Renato leaned back again, still grinning. "Please," Renato gestured lazily, still smirking. "Carry on."

"Don Genovese is still in town," he said. "I have no idea when he will be leaving. But Bianca mentioned something... about a nanny."

Renato's amusement faltered. "Get the fuck out of here!" Renato snapped suddenly, the humor dropping from his face. "This was an absolute waste of time, you fucking wanker!"

"She says if you want to kill Luca," Cassidy continued, "the fastest way is through his nanny."

Renato's eyes narrowed, the laughter gone now.

Cassidy held his ground, meeting Renato's gaze.

"Luciano has a nanny?" He let out a harsh, disbelieving laugh, leaning back in his chair. "What is he, two?" His lips curled in distaste. "You know what? Get out. Get out."

"The least you can do," Cassidy said calmly, "is check out the information."

Renato's gaze flickered. "What exactly," he drawled, "am I supposed to do with his nanny?"

"Oh, I'm sure a man of your... creativity will think of something."

Renato laughed again. "You're a fucking bastard, you know that?" He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, eyes gleaming with malicious curiosity. "Maybe I shouldn't go after this... nanny theory." He paused deliberately, watching Cassidy. "Maybe I should go after the girl Luca stole from you."

"You would rather go after a woman," Cassidy said, "who means absolutely nothing to Luca?"

Renato's smile widened. "No," he said softly. "I would go after a woman who might mean something to you." He leaned back again, satisfied. "Let's see where your loyalties truly lie."

Cassidy exhaled slowly. "Luca didn't just take my girl. He humiliated me. That's why I came to you. That's why I endured your initiation, your tests, your games. The girl?" Cassidy continued, shrugging slightly. "She means nothing to me now." A lie. A necessary one. "But Luciano Genovese? I want to see him suffer. And you," Cassidy added quietly, "are the key to that."

"We'll see," Renato murmured. "Now get the fuck out of my office."

Luciano Genovese sat on the sofa, back bare, skin marked in violent strokes of red and purple. The sting had dulled into a deep, throbbing ache. Pain, to him, had long since become a language—one he spoke fluently, one he sometimes welcomed.

Nonnina's hands, though aged, were steady as she finished dressing the last of the wounds on his back.

"Thank you, Nonni," he said quietly.

She gathered her supplies. She had already attended to Veronica, treating the red welt that had formed across her chest.

Nonnina's eyes were glassy, rimmed with red. "Do you need anything else?" she asked.

"No. Nonni..."

"Yes," she replied.

"Look at me."

She shook her head immediately, a small, stubborn motion.

"Come on, Nonni," he coaxed gently. "Please."

Reluctantly, she lifted her gaze to his.

Luciano gave her a boyish smile. "I'm going to be okay."

Nonnina's lips trembled. "I know," she whispered. "I know, but I told you...I told you this love is doomed, Diavolino." Tears slipped free despite her efforts. "There has been no calm for days now. No peace. Only this... this storm."

Luciano reached for her, pulling her into his arms. He held her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head. "Sssshhhh..." he murmured against her hair. "It's fine."

Nonnina nodded against his chest. "I'll go make you some soup," she said after a moment, clinging to the mundane.

Luciano pulled back and nodded. "Yeah... yeah, okay."

She left the annex slowly.

Luciano stood there for a moment after the door closed. Then he reached for a shirt, dragging it over his head with a sharp inhale as the fabric brushed against his wounds.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He moved toward the bedroom, refusing to let the pain dictate his pace.

When he entered, Veronica was still there, still trembling, still quietly breaking.

Luciano paused at the doorway, watching her.

Then he exhaled, before stepping inside.

"Well," he said dryly. "At least one of us is allowed to cry." Luciano stood at the edge of the bed for a moment. She turned away from the door, from him. "Oh boy," Luca muttered under his breath, running a hand through his hair before easing himself onto the bed beside her. "I just consoled Nonnina. Do I have to console you too?"

Veronica shifted slightly, turning even further away, presenting him nothing but her back and the quiet defiance of her silence.

"Bambola..." he coaxed softly, reaching out. "Come on. You can't be giving me the silent treatment." His lips curved faintly. "I just got flogged. You should be fussing. Maybe crying a little harder for dramatic effect, and kissing me and making me feel better."

"You're not a baby," she said.

Luca's smile deepened. "I'm your baby," he teased. He reached for her again, turning her carefully until she faced him. His fingers lingered at her jaw. "I love you, Bambola," he murmured. "I love you so much."

"You shouldn't," she whispered. "You really shouldn't..."

Luca let out a quiet breath, his thumb brushing against her cheek.

"And yet..." he said simply, a faint shrug in his tone.

Veronica swallowed, her gaze drifting past him, unfocused. "Is this how our life is going to go?" she asked. "Pain, punishment... blood every other day?"

Luca huffed softly, leaning back just enough to look at her properly. "Well," he said, with a dry sort of humor that didn't quite reach his eyes, "as long as I don't try to kill any member of my family again in the nearest future, I think I'm golden."

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

Chapter 179: I Don't Understand This

"I don't understand this..." she admitted.

"You will," Luca replied. "You'll learn. You have to." He shifted slightly, ignoring the protest of his body. "Marco will get you back to the hospital."

"No... no..."

"Bambola... You're recovering from a gunshot wound. You need to be in the hospital. I would suggest using my clinic in the main building, but I want you far away from my father. He has made it his mission to test your resilience."

Luca leaned closer. "And I'd rather you didn't break," he murmured.

Because if she did... he wasn't entirely sure what would be left of him either.

"I hate him. I'm sorry. I do. I hate him."

Luciano reached out, brushing her hair from her face. "I know," he said quietly. "You will learn to love him. Vee... he is a Don. He cannot afford to show weakness, not even to his own kids."

Veronica shook her head, her lips trembling. "I don't want to love him. I can't."

Luca's lips curved into a slow smile. "Fine. I'll love him for you," he said pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Her body shivered under his touch.

"I got you a house," he murmured against her temple. "In your name. You'll move in there as soon as you feel better. It's much bigger than this annex. More space. More...freedom."

"Right... a kept woman," she muttered, bitterness dripping from each word.

"Hey!" Luca snapped. "Don't... don't ever cheapen what we have, Bambola. Ever!" His hand pressed lightly against her cheek.

"Marry me instead, Luca. Why not just marry me? Would this end if you married me?"

He exhaled sharply, a breath laden with unspoken regrets. "I would... God, I wish I could." His hand tightened slightly around hers. "But it's...good to know that if I proposed, you would say yes."

Her reaction was a smack to his chest. He winced in pain.

"Shit!" Her eyes widened, panic flashing across her features. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I..."

"I know," he murmured, his fingers brushing hers where they rested on his chest. "I know, Bambola. You're allowed to hit me. You're allowed to yell. You're allowed to hate me. But don't you dare...ever doubt that I will always be just yours. Always."

"I...Luca..."

To shut her up, he lifted her chin, tilting her face to his. Their lips met, tongues tangling, lips pressing. God, he'd missed this—her warmth pressed against him, her body soft and pliant, her surrender. In his arms, in his bed, she belonged entirely to him, and he to her, in a dangerous, irrevocable way that no one else could touch.

"Luca..." she whispered, a tremor in her voice. "You're injured."

He let out a soft, wry laugh, dragging his lips along the line of her jaw and down to the curve of her neck. "I once told you," he murmured, "I could be bleeding out on a sidewalk somewhere, and I would still make you cum."

His fingers found her body next. One hand cupped her breast briefly, before sliding lower, tracing the plane of her hips down to her thighs. Veronica's muscles tensed in anticipation, the smallest shiver betraying her readiness.

His fingers disappeared into her underwear, and she gasped softly, head tilting back, breath catching. The ache inside her deepened, matched only by the thrum of her pulse against his hand.

"Don't stress, love," he murmured, his blue eyes locking onto hers. "Don't flex. Relax. I'll get you there."

Veronica fought the tremor that threatened to betray her, letting herself sink into his gaze. It was dangerous, consuming, intoxicating. Her hands twitched, wanting, aching, but she held them still.

He began circling her clit with his fingers, teasing and testing.

Vee tried to inch closer, to bridge the distance with her body, but her muscles wouldn't obey her, stiff with the ache of wanting, of anticipation, of the delicious torment of restraint.

"I said, stay," he warned. She met his gaze, understanding the command, surrendering to it even as her body quaked with desire.

Her lips parted, breath hitching with every circle of his fingers, every ghost of a kiss trailing down her neck. Dark, heady, intoxicating—this was the dangerous, twisted love she had fallen into, and she would not, could not, walk away from it.

He slipped two fingers inside her, moving in and out, drawing out her moans. Savouring her wetness around his fingers, before curving them and hitting her sweet spot, coaxing her into a tension that had her lips parting instinctively, breath hitching. She trembled beneath him, every nerve taut, every heartbeat a drum in her chest.

"Easy, babe... easy," he murmured. "I got you. I got you, love. You don't have to rush."

Her body ached with want, and her gaze flickered up to meet his. "I want to suck your dick, Luca..." she whispered.

"Whatever you want," he said, lips brushing against her temple. "I'm yours. Whatever you need."

"I want you to cum in my mouth, I want you all over me. I want..." she faltered, the rest of her confession trapped as her orgasm began to build.

"I'll give you anything you want," Luca said softly. "You want all of me, take it."

The shiver that had been building finally broke free.

She came all over his fingers, swearing and cursing like a sailor. Her breath came in quick, ragged gasps. He laughed quietly.

Vee slid down gently, making sure not to jostle her injured thigh. She pulled his pants down just enough for his cock to be set free. Her gaze met his, need flickering in her eyes. Then she let her tongue slide along his length, tracing him with a teasing little dance over the tip.

Luca's fingers tangled in her hair, holding her. The anticipation of her mouth around his cock was unbearable, an ache coiling through him. She took her time, teasing him with soft licks and kisses, savoring every moment as if drawing it out deliberately. Precum glistened on her lips, a testament to the control he had over her and her over him. Her fingers joined in pleasuring him.

(This is to 200 power stones and also quite a refreshing Chapter after all the heartache today. Jeez! On to 400 power stones, people.)

Chapter 180: Jesus Fucking Christ

He groaned torturously. "Bambola..." he murmured, pushing her head gently, urging her to just take him already before he embarrassed himself and spilled too soon.

Her lips closed around him, sliding down, hitting the back of her throat.

"Fuck!!!" he grunted, his cock pulsing, swelling even harder with every inch she took. Vee continued her teasing torture, her head bobbing with rhythm and purpose, as if she wanted to swallow all of him, making the tension between them unbearable and intoxicating.

"Jesus fucking Christ!!!" he gasped, his body taut with the tension of impending release. "Damn, girl!"

Her tongue lay flat against him as she pulled back with a satisfying pop, teasing him, making him ache for more.

"God, no!" he growled, pushing her head back down, a shiver of reckless joy running through him as she took him in again. The heat of anticipation coiled tight in his stomach, threatening to shatter restraint, and he felt his balls squeeze with every movement.

His fingers fisted her hair, holding her head steady, his grip demanding, guiding her. "I'm cumming, love," he warned. With one final, guttural grunt, he drove himself deep, spilling inside her just as she had requested.

Vee gagged against him, his cum spilling from the corner of her lips, her breath uneven as she tried to steady herself. "God! Fuck! God! Shit! Fucking Christ!" he cursed, throwing his head back, his entire body shuddering from the force of it. His cock slipped from her mouth, spent but still semi-hard, twitching faintly as the aftershocks rolled through him.

He let out a breathless, disbelieving chuckle, shaking his head slightly. "You just get better and better," he murmured.

He shifted down slowly until he was eye level with her, his gaze locking onto hers with a dark, lingering intensity. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her mouth, his thumb brushing her lip afterward.

Vee shifted slightly in his arms, careful despite her weakness, curling further against his chest. She felt pride in that moment with him. Pride in herself, pride in him, pride in them. In whatever twisted, dangerous thing they were becoming together.

"God, I cannot wait to fuck you," Luca said.

She let out a soft breath. "Me neither," she admitted. "I missed you."

Luca adjusted his hold on her. "Come, love," he murmured. "I'll get you to the car. Marco will drive you."

He shuffled off the bed, pulling his pants up. He carried her through the courtyard, his steps betraying none of the agony clawing at his back with every movement.

"Doesn't it still hurt?" Vee asked. She couldn't unsee it—the lashes, the blood, the way his body had been broken earlier.

Luca glanced down at her, a faint smirk tugging at his lips despite the strain in his eyes. "It does," he admitted. "But it still won't keep me from my duties, love."

She rolled her eyes faintly. "You're so cheesy."

"I suppose I am," he chuckled softly.

Above them, the Don stood on the balcony of his suite.

He watched in silence. Watched the way Luca carried her. Watched the way the girl leaned into him.

And it terrified him.

The Don's jaw tightened, his grip firm against the balcony railing as a memory surfaced uninvited—himself, years ago, looking at a woman the same way. Loving her the same reckless, consuming way. Believing, foolishly, that love could exist in a world built on power and fear.

It had cost him everything.

And now... Luca stood at the edge of that same ruin, smiling, not yet in full understanding of the price.

"This is how it begins," the Don murmured to himself.

Love like that was never gentle when it left.

It did not fade quietly or loosen its grip with mercy. It tore. It clawed. It hollowed a man out until all that remained was the echo of who he used to be. And when it was gone, truly gone, it left behind a wound so deep it felt sacred—untouchable, unhealable by anything mortal.

It took something divine, something unnatural, to stitch a soul back together after that kind of ruin.

The Don knew this. He had lived it.

And that was what terrified him.

He stood still on the balcony long after Luca disappeared, his gaze fixed on nothing and everything all at once.

When this world broke Veronica... because it would... just as it had broken Luca's mother, what then?

How mad would Luca go when she left too?

Because they always left.

"Why," he murmured, "does love always come at the wrong time?"

The bell above the door gave a soft, tired jingle as Valentina flipped the sign to closed.

She had planned to stop by the hospital—to see Veronica one last time before she was discharged. She was healing well. She reached for her bag when headlights cut through the glass window.

Ricardo stepped out of the car like nothing had happened, like two weeks of silence meant nothing, like she hadn't spent nights staring at her phone wondering if she had somehow imagined the entire relationship.

Valentina crossed her arms, leaning against the counter as he walked in.

The bell chimed again.

"Look who finally remembered I exist," she said dryly.

"I told you, I've been busy—"

"Ah yes," she cut in smoothly, holding up a hand. "Work. The magical mistress that keeps you too occupied to send a single text but somehow still allows you to breathe, eat, and sleep."

"Val..." Ricardo started.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked.

Ricardo shook his head quickly. "No... no, it's not that." He exhaled, dragging a hand down his face. "It's just... look... work has been incredibly crazy. I... I don't have the time for a relationship."

Valentina blinked, her brows knitting together. "Excuse me?! I'm sorry, I must have misheard you, because it sounded like you just said you don't have time for me."

"Val—"

"No," she cut in sharply, stepping out from behind the counter now. "Say it properly."