

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 21: A Very Good Looking Creep - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 21: A Very Good Looking Creep

Chapter 21: A Very Good Looking Creep

"I'm not one of your office sluts, Luca," she shot at him, chin lifted in defiance.

"No," he said easily. "They don't cost anywhere close to what you've cost me. Including the groin pain." His mouth twitched, a grin he didn't bother hiding.

Her eyes stayed hard. "So you're not just the devil. You're a creep too?"

He leaned over her, one hand braced on the headboard above her shoulder. The mattress dipped under his weight, trapping her in a pocket of heat. "You must admit," he murmured, "a very good-looking creep."

She hated the split second where her brain stalled, where the world narrowed to the blue of his eyes. They were unfair eyes. They peeled back layers you hadn't agreed to surrender. She swallowed, anger scrambling to cover the flicker of awareness.

Luca's gaze dipped openly, just enough to acknowledge the curve of her breasts beneath the halter bra top. The smirk returned.

"Is this what you plan on doing with me?" Vee asked sharply, clinging to the thread of her fury.

"I'm still workshopping creative ideas," he said lightly. "But yes, Bambola. I plan on pimping you."

"What?"

"I plan on pimping you," he repeated calmly, straightening just enough to look her in the eye. "To me. Think of it as... an exclusive contract. Lifetime access. Prepaid."

"Lifetime?"

"Probably," he shrugged.

She shook her head. "So that's it? I'm your... what? Your toy?"

"That word implies I'd discard you when I get bored. I don't waste investments."

"So I'm going to be your slut," she said flatly, daring him to deny it.

"Yes." Luca moved closer. His lips hovered just inches from hers, close enough that she could feel his breath brushing her mouth.

His fingers drifted up her thighs. Measuring. Learning. Cataloguing every hitch in her breath, every tremor her body betrayed even as her eyes burned with defiance and her lips stayed stubbornly set. He didn't touch where she expected him to. He didn't cross the line. That was the cruelty of it.

Her nerves sang anyway.

Her pulse fluttered when his thumb paused, when his hand lingered just long enough to make her skin ache for contact. A part of her wanted to close the distance.

Her eyes lidded despite herself.

And that was when he smiled.

A knowing smirk curved his mouth. Then he pulled back, straightening, reclaiming every inch of space he'd stolen.

And just like that, he was gone.

"Asshole," she muttered, and hurled her pillow at the door with all the frustration bottled inside her. It hit with a dull thump and slid down uselessly. She groaned and fell back against the mattress, staring at the ceiling.

She looked down at herself, at the clothes she was still wearing from the auction. She hugged her arms around herself, shame creeping in where anger had been.

She really did feel like a slut.

Her thoughts drifted, uninvited, to Valentina. Fear settled deep in her chest.

Maybe, she thought, if she played along. Just a little. If she fed Luca's ego, his darkness, his sense of ownership, maybe he'd soften. Maybe he'd grow a heart. Maybe he'd let Tina go.

The idea tasted bitter.

One thing was certain though. There was no way. No way in hell she was going to let Luca be her first.

She grabbed her phone from the bed, the screen lighting up. Her thumb hovered for a second before she opened Cassidy's chat.

She typed quickly.

'Hi... will you be available tomorrow evening? Maybe we can Netflix and chill.'

She stared at the message, then hit send before doubt could creep in.

The phone buzzed softly as it left her hand, landing beside her on the bed.

Cassidy arrived the next evening just as the sun was sinking behind the Scalese home. He parked, and stepped out.

Vito answered the door himself.

The older man stood tall. His gaze swept over Cassidy.

"Hey, Cassidy..." Vito said.

"Mr. Scalese." Cassidy straightened instinctively. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. You here for Veronica?"

"Yes." Cassidy nodded, because of course he was.

"She's in her room."

"Thank you, Mr. Scalese."

Vito stepped aside, letting him pass. Cassidy walked down the hallway.

He stopped outside Veronica's door and knocked gently, knuckles brushing the wood.

"One minute!" she called.

The door opened a moment later, and whatever thoughts he'd been holding onto scattered.

"Hi!" Veronica said brightly.

"Hi." His eyes betrayed him immediately, sliding down her body and back up before he could stop them.

She wore a short bodycon dress, black. Bare legs. Simple heels. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders. There was no way she was dressed for just Netflix and chill.

"You ready?" she asked.

Hell no.

Give me a minute, woman.

His brain was shouting, scrambling for footing. She looked beautiful.

"Yeah, sure," he said instead, smiling.

She reached for his hand, and laced her fingers through his.

"See you later, Dad," she called casually as she led him down the hallway.

Outside, Cassidy helped her into the passenger seat of his car. He closed the door and circled to his side, the engine purring to life as they pulled away.

Only when the house disappeared from the rearview mirror did he breathe properly.

His place was only a few minutes away. A modest house tucked into a quiet street.

"So," he said after a moment. "How is Valentina?"

"Uh... she's... she's fine. Just away for a while," Vee stammered, the lie landing between them.

Cassidy glanced at her, hands steady on the steering wheel, eyes soft but sharp enough to see through smoke. "Vee," he said gently, "I know you're lying. But I won't push. When you're ready, you'll tell me."

Her throat tightened. She nodded, grateful and ashamed all at once. "How is work?" she asked quickly, grabbing the first safe rope she could find and clinging to it.

"Uh... fine actually," he replied. "Had some issues with a couple of students, but all is well."

She snorted. "That's normal. Don't tell me you didn't get into trouble or two when you were their age."

Chapter 22: I Wasn't Suicidal

Cassidy chuckled. "True that."

Her head snapped toward him. "You admitted to that way too easily. Okay, now I need details. What did you do? Get high? Glue your teacher's ass to a chair? Play hooky?"

He laughed harder now, shaking his head. "I didn't mess with my teachers. I wasn't suicidal. But yeah... I was what you'd call a party boy."

She stared at him. "You? No. I don't buy it."

"That was a long time ago," Cassidy continued. "It gets boring pretty fast. Same music, same drinks, same conversations that go nowhere. You wake up the next day feeling empty and smelling like regret."

"I wish I had partied," she said softly, the humor fading from her voice. "I spent my life being careful. Being responsible. Looking after everyone else."

"It's not too late," he said. "But I should tell you... Netflix and chill is not the party direction at all."

She laughed again. "Wow. So I planned this evening all wrong."

"Tragically," he agreed. "Just my couch and questionable taste in movies."

Vee laughed again. "I just wanted to spend some quality time with you."

Cassidy glanced at her, one brow lifting. "Does watching The Ranch count as quality time?"

"I've never seen it," she said, shrugging. "So maybe we binge it tonight."

He slowed at a stop sign, eyes flicking to her again. "You're staying all night?"

"Hmmm hmm." Vee nodded, lips pressed together to keep the tremor out of her smile.

Cassidy swallowed. Veronica Scalese had never stayed the night. She always left before midnight, always with some excuse about her father or early work shifts or Valentina needing her. Tonight she was sitting there in a short bodycon dress telling him she planned to stay. His brain lit up while his heart beat a little too fast.

This was normal, Vee told herself. This was what normal girls did. They went to their boyfriend's house, watched stupid shows, laughed, kissed, have sex. They did not belong to men who bought people at auctions. They did not barter their bodies for their sister's freedom.

Luca was just stepping through the doors of his mansion when Nonnina tackled him with the enthusiasm of someone half his size and twice his authority, already helping him shrug out of his jacket. "Your brother is here," she whispered quickly, conspiratorial as always.

Luca closed his eyes for a beat and exhaled. Of course he was.

"Is Nonnina snitching on me again?" Julian's voice drifted down the hallway.

Luca opened his eyes and fixed his brother with a flat look. Julian leaned against the archway, dark hair perfectly styled.

Luca bent and pressed a kiss into Nonnina's silver hair. "What's for dinner?"

"Beef minestrone soup."

"Delish. I'll be right there."

She smiled, took the jacket and disappeared toward the kitchen, slippers whispering against marble. Luca watched her go. This house ran on her. Without Nonnina, it would be just a space of expensive stuff.

"Still a nanny's boy, uhn?" Julian asked, glancing toward the corridor where Nonnina had disappeared. "Who keeps a nanny at thirty?"

Luca walked past Julian without a glance and stopped at the imported bar. He poured himself a drink.

"What are you doing here, Julian?" Luca asked finally.

"Just checking in on my little brother."

"That's something that can be done over the phone," Luca replied, cutting the cigar tip. "Dad asked you to check in on me, didn't he?"

Julian scoffed. "Please. If Papà wanted to lecture you, he'd do it himself. No, actually..." He paused, enjoying this far too much. "Your wife asked me to check in on you."

"Oh," Luca said coolly. "So you're the errand-in-law now."

"That woman's pussy is going to shrivel and die waiting for you to come back to Italy."

Luca finally turned, glass in one hand, cigar in the other. His eyes were flat, blue steel. "Do you have a crush on my wife, Julian?"

Julian shrugged, lighting his cigar with Luca's lighter. "Luca, who doesn't? Dad married you to the most beautiful woman in Italy, and what do you do? You run back to America, play god, and leave her alone."

"That's not your concern."

"It's everyone's concern. You've always gotten the best. The best schools. The best life. You got to grow up American. Dad handed you the business like a crown. Why? Because your mother is American? That makes you special?"

Luca set his glass down. "Careful," he said quietly. "Your jealousy is showing."

Julian snorted. "Jealousy? No. Resentment? Maybe."

"I'm going to have dinner my nanny made me, want to join?" Luca drawled, lifting a brow with lazy arrogance sharpened to a blade. "On second thought, never mind. I've got the best nanny in Italy too, and I don't plan on sharing her. Now get the fuck out of my house."

Julian laughed. "See? Still sensitive." He ground his cigar deliberately into the polished wooden bar, leaving a dark scar behind like a petty act of vandalism. "I was just being a good brother. Apparently, your 'wife' has been misled into believing we're quite close." He glanced over his shoulder, eyes glittering. "Call your goddamned wife."

Then he strolled out, whistling softly.

Luca stood still for a moment, the cigar between his fingers forgotten, jaw tight enough to crack teeth.

Luca turned toward the dining room. He pulled out his chair and sat, taking a long drag from the cigar he had stubbornly kept lit, letting the smoke burn down his lungs.

Nonnina appeared.

She didn't say a word. She simply reached over, plucked the cigar from his fingers with surprising strength, and dropped it into a glass of water. The hiss was soft but final.

"You could at least let me finish that," Luca muttered, sounding far too much like a sulking boy for a man who ordered men buried.

"No smoking at the table," Nonnina said, eyes sharp despite her age. She placed a plate in front of him.

"Tell me again why there's a Genovese rule about not killing family. Because I would really like to cut off Julian's tongue and feed it to him."

Chapter 23: He Provokes Me On Purpose

Nonnina clicked her tongue and swatted the back of his head lightly. "Always with the dramatics. You kill family, you rot from the inside. That's the rule."

"He provokes me on purpose."

"Of course he does," she said, unfazed. "He's jealous and bored. Dangerous combination."

Luca stared at his plate without touching it. His appetite had vanished, replaced by the slow churn of thoughts he didn't like examining. His wife. Bianca. Julian's words hit too close to the bone, scraping at guilt Luca preferred to keep locked away. He had married out of duty, yes, but abandonment still left a stain.

And now there was another woman. One he'd bought. One he couldn't stop thinking about.

"You look distracted," Nonnina said gently, reading him like she always had.

"I'm fine." Luca picked up his fork at last, though his mind was far from the food. Veronica's fire flashed behind his eyes. The way she fought. The way she hated him.

Luca's phone pinged softly against the dining table. He glanced at the screen without much thought at first, fork still in hand.

Then he saw the image of Veronica as Cassidy opened the car door for her. Her body angled toward him in a way Luca did not like one bit.

He stared at the picture, the muscles in his face going rigid. The dress she wore was shorter than he liked.

He typed his response.

'Stay on her. Keep me updated. Let me know as soon as she gets back home.'

He locked the phone and placed it face down, forcing himself to pick up his fork again.

He chewed mechanically. He had told her to get her affairs in order. He meant it. He was not cruel enough to deny her closure. Or was he? Honestly, he had no idea the height of his cruelty anymore.

Nonnina hovered nearby, arranging dishes, watching him from the corner of her eye. She had raised Luca long enough to read the subtle signs. The stillness. The way his shoulders remained squared even while seated.

"You barely touched your food," she said at last, pouring him a glass of juice and setting it down in front of him.

"Not hungry."

"Liar," Nonnina replied calmly.

"Nonni," he started, then stopped. He exhaled slowly. "I'm going to be having a house guest for a few days while I prepare where she will be staying."

"She?" she echoed.

"Yes," Luca answered shortly, hoping the clipped tone would end it there. He took a sip of juice, eyes fixed forward, already bracing for impact.

"She," Nonnina repeated again.

Luca set the glass down with care. "It's temporary."

"Who is she to you?"

Luca exhaled slowly through his nose, already regretting the conversation. With Nonnina, there was no such thing as breezing past anything.

"A business sort of thing," Luca said.

"You never bring work home," she said simply, stating a fact carved from years of observation.

Luca shifted in his seat. "It's not work work," he clarified. "It's...personal business. Just for a few days. And she will be gone."

"You want any arrangements made for her?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes. Get her a personal attendant. She should have access to whatever she needs. I'll give you a card to give to her. If and when she needs it." He paused briefly, then added, "She can choose whichever car she wants from the garage. Driver on standby if she prefers."

The list came out smoothly.

Nonnina's eyebrow lifted slowly. "You sound like a man setting up a kept woman," she said dryly. "Or a mistress."

"Nonni..." Luca groaned, dragging a hand down his face.

She waved him off immediately. "Va bene, va bene. I won't ask." She turned away, then stopped dead in her tracks and glanced back over her shoulder. "Except one thing."

Of course.

"What."

"Is she sleeping in your room?"

An image flashed uninvited through his mind. Veronica in his space. His bed. His sheets, moaning and yearning for him. He crushed the image immediately.

"No," he said firmly. "Situating her at the other end of the house. She gets her privacy."

Nonnina gave a small nod. "I'll make the arrangements."

"Thank you," Luca said, genuine.

"I'll run you a bath," she said, already turning away.

His phone pinged again.

Another update. Veronica and Cassidy just arrived at Cassidy's house.

He rose from the table and returned to the bar. Whiskey sloshed into the glass.

He took the glass to his bedroom, turned on the sound system.

Clothes came off without thought. He lit his cigar, and sank into the hot tub. For a while, the heat worked. The whiskey worked. His mind loosened its grip.

For a while.

Afterward, routine took over. He dried off, dressed, made transactions, issued instructions. Money moved. Midnight crept in quietly, and still there were no new updates.

He checked his phone again. Nothing.

He exhaled slowly and made the call.

"She's still there," the lookout said.

He ended the call, already moving. Jeans. T shirt. Jacket. He exited the house, anger finally choosing a direction.

The garage doors lifted. He got into one of the cars, the engine roaring to life, and pulled out of the compound, headlights slicing through the night.

Cassidy sat on the floor between her thighs, back resting against her knees, completely at ease.

On the screen, The Ranch played, laugh track floating through the room. Cassidy snorted at a joke, then tilted his head back to look at Veronica.

"There's no way a man who just returned from clearing cow shit still gets kissed. Does her nose work?"

Veronica laughed.

Cassidy's fingers traced lazy circles on Veronica's thighs, absent minded, affectionate. Veronica let her head fall back against the couch, eyes half closed, letting herself exist in this moment.

She rested her hand on Cassidy's shoulder, fingers curling slightly.

"You want another glass of wine?" Cas asked.

"Fuck yeah!" Vee exclaimed, grinning as she threw Colt's catchphrase into the air.

Cassidy laughed. He pushed himself to his feet and headed toward the kitchen, shaking his head. "You're enjoying this way too much."

Chapter 24: I Miss Valentina

He returned moments later with their glasses refilled, handing one to her before settling beside her on the couch.

"I still can't believe you're spending the night here," Cas said, sipping his wine, eyes flicking to her face.

Vee shrugged lightly. "I miss Valentina. And well... you're the next best thing."

He scoffed. "Ooh. I'm flattered. Second favorite. I'll take it."

She laughed. "That's not a fair measurement. It should be a male female thing. You're my favorite man."

"And you're my favorite girl."

He reached for her glass, fingers brushing hers as he took it from her hand and set it aside. The kiss that followed was meant to be light. A punctuation mark. A reminder of affection without complication.

But she grabbed his shirt.

She pulled him closer, and whatever careful boundary he'd been holding onto slipped through his fingers.

The couch suddenly felt too small.

Vee leaned back, drawing him with her, her hair spilling against the cushions as Cassidy braced himself over her. His lips found her neck. He kissed the place just below her jaw, then lower, to the edge of her collarbone, to the soft skin at the top of her chest.

The TV kept playing, laugh track rolling on.

He looked at her briefly, breathing uneven. "Vee," he murmured. "If we're going to stop, we should stop now."

"Don't stop, please. I want you," Vee moaned.

Cassidy's brain did a ridiculous, little dance. "Fuck yeah," he said, breathless, a crooked chuckle escaping him.

She laughed softly as she pulled her dress over her head, tossing it aside. The fabric landed somewhere near the coffee table, forgotten. She lay beneath him in just her underwear, hair fanned out, cheeks flushed, eyes dark with want.

"Fuck," Cas swore.

He pressed his cock against her, the contact stealing the air from his lungs. His hand cupped her breast instinctively, and he kissed her again.

Then he pulled back just long enough to peel his shirt over his head, tossing it aside with a careless flick. He was painfully hard, desire coiled tight in his body, sharp with how long it had been since he'd let himself want someone like this.

They shifted, tangled, laughter bubbling up as gravity betrayed them and they tumbled off the couch together. The impact was clumsy, ridiculous.

Vee pulled him closer.

She grabbed his hair, fingers threading through it, guiding him to her chest. Cassidy groaned. He tugged the material of her bra down just enough to free her breast, kissing and worshipping her skin. He took his time, his lips closing around a nipple.

Vee arched beneath him, pleasure rippling through her body, her breath turning uneven.

Cassidy shifted, his fingers sliding between her thighs, tracing her pussy back and forth slowly, teasingly.

His fingers slowed, pulling her underwear aside, then slipped his fingers inside her, learning her reactions the way a musician learns an instrument by ear. Every hitch of

her breath, every involuntary movement, he catalogued without thinking, his body responding faster than his mind could keep up.

"Cas," she breathed. Her hands slid up his arms, fingers digging in.

"I've got you," he murmured. He kissed her jaw, her cheek, her temple, her breasts as he pushed his fingers deeper inside her. "Just breathe. Stay with me."

Vee gave soft, broken sounds she didn't even seem aware she was making. Her body arched toward him instinctively, chasing sensation, trusting him completely.

He kept his movements unhurried. The tension built slowly, beautifully. Every second stretched.

Then she gasped, her body tightening, the sound of his name breaking apart on her lips. Her fingers clenched in his hair as the wave finally crested, pleasure rolling through her in a way that stole her breath entirely. She wasn't aware of anything but warmth and release.

"Wow," she whispered after a moment.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "You look divine."

He lifted himself and began to work on his shorts when a knock came at the door.

Cassidy's brows furrowed as he lifted his phone from the coffee table, the screen lighting his face in a pale blue glow. Past midnight.

"That's odd," he muttered.

He crossed the living room and leaned into the door to peer through the peephole. His shoulders tightened. He straightened slowly, then turned back to Vee with a look that sat somewhere between curiosity and caution.

"Something tells me he's here for you."

"What?" Vee gasped.

"I met him once. At the pizza parlour."

"What?" She scrambled upright. She grabbed Cassidy's abandoned shirt from the armrest and tugged it on. "What's he doing here?"

Cassidy shrugged. "You want me to open it, or tell him to get lost?"

Vee stood there, heart beating loud enough she was sure both men could hear it. There was no safe answer. She had known he kept eyes on her, shadows that reported back, but following her here, to Cassidy's apartment, crossed a line.

"Open it," she said finally.

Cassidy nodded once and pulled the door open. "Hi," he said.

Luca stood there, blue eyes sharp. Behind him hovered the man who had been watching Veronica.

Luca stepped inside without waiting for an invitation. His gaze found Vee instantly and lingered. He took in the shirt, the bare legs, the way her hair spilled messily over her shoulders, the dress abandoned on the floor.

Luca dipped his hands into his pockets, posture loose, voice deceptively calm. "Get over here."

"Excuse me," Cassidy began, instinctively stepping forward, righteous anger rising faster than common sense.

"I'll get to you in a minute." Luca's mouth curved into a lazy smirk as he flicked a glance at Cassidy, then his attention snapped back to Vee with frightening focus. "Come here."

"What are you doing here?" Vee asked, forcing the tremor out of her voice.

Luca stepped forward.

Cassidy reacted on instinct, grabbing Luca's arm. He barely had time to register the mistake. The man beside Luca moved brutally, catching Cassidy's wrist, twisting it behind his back in one smooth motion. Cassidy cried out as he was forced down to one knee, breath knocked from him, pride following shortly after.

Chapter 25: Let Him Go

"Stop!" Vee rushed toward them, panic flooding her veins. "I'm coming. I'm coming. Please, let him go."

"Vee, no!" Cassidy managed through clenched teeth.

"Please!" she shouted. "Let him go!"

"Are you asking me for another favour, Bambola?"

"What? No. I just..." She swallowed hard. "He has nothing to do with this. Let him go."

"Doesn't he?" Luca asked quietly, stepping closer. "You belong to me. And you let him touch you."

"I..." Her breath shook. "He's my boyfriend. You're my jailer."

Luca's eyes dragged slowly down her body, over the bare thighs, the way the shirt clung to her hips. He twisted the ring on his finger.

Then he turned.

The punch landed cleanly against Cassidy's jaw. The ring connecting with his jaw bone. Cassidy collapsed sideways, stunned, the man releasing him as he hit the floor.

"Luca!" Vee screamed. "What is wrong with you?"

She ran forward without thinking, instinct outrunning fear. Her fingers closed around Luca's arm, solid muscle beneath.

He turned again.

His hand locked around her neck, crushing, unyielding, knowing just how much force to exert. He drove her back against the closest wall. Luca's face was inches from hers now, eyes blazing, the calm finally gone.

"I told you," he thundered. "I warned you. Any man who looks at you like he wants to fuck you and I will pluck out their eyes. He has done more than look at you."

Panic clawed up her throat, but it wasn't for herself.

"Please," she sobbed, gripping his wrist with both hands. "Please, just let him go. I'll come with you. I swear. Please."

His grip loosened. "You will come with me, Bambola," he said quietly now. "Consider your three days over. But I'm not letting him go."

"Luca... please." Her strength gave out. She slid down the wall until she was on her knees, hands braced against the floor. She turned her head, eyes landing on Cassidy.

The other man's boot was pressed against Cassidy's throat, pinning him. Blood trickled from Cassidy's split lip. His chest struggled beneath the weight.

Her tears came hot and fast, blurring the room, blurring Luca, blurring everything.

"Is that another favour, Bambola?" Luca asked.

Vee lifted her head slowly. Her eyes met his, raw and blazing despite the tears. "You're a monster."

A muscle ticked in Luca's jaw. "That doesn't answer my question."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Vee!" Cassidy shouted hoarsely. "Don't go. Don't do this."

The boot pressed harder into his neck.

"Stop!" Vee cried, scrambling forward on her knees until Luca's shoes filled her vision. "Please, Luca. You win. I'm yours. Just don't kill him."

Luca crouched in front of her, forcing her to look at him. His thumb brushed a tear from her cheek, gentle enough to hurt.

"Good girl." He bent and lifted her into his arms, one arm under her knees, the other secure around her back. The violence of moments ago faded into a strange hush, his gaze never leaving her face, blue eyes searching.

"Let him go first," Vee said.

Luca paused, then inclined his head.

His man removed his boot from Cassidy's neck and stepped back. Cassidy coughed, dragging air into his lungs. He rolled onto his side, then pushed himself upright, fury and fear burning together in his eyes.

The other man moved through the apartment, gathering Vee's scattered belongings. Her dress. Her shoes. Her bag. Evidence that she had existed here only minutes ago.

"Vee!" Cassidy called, hoarse but stubborn. "Vee!"

She twisted in Luca's arms to look back at him. "Cas," she said quickly, forcing steadiness into her voice, "I'll be fine. I'll call you."

A small chuckle escaped Luca, vibrating through his chest beneath her ear.

"You're not going to let me call him, will you?" she asked, not bothering to hide the accusation.

"You're learning, Bambola," Luca replied.

He carried her outside.

Luca opened the passenger door and set her inside with surprising care, adjusting her legs so she was comfortable. Cassidy's T-shirt rode high on her thighs.

"Take that off," Luca said flatly.

"My dress is inside," she protested, gesturing weakly toward the building.

"Take the fucking shirt off, Vee," he said. "Don't let me ask again."

Her hands trembled as she obeyed. She lifted the shirt over her head, the cotton catching briefly in her hair before coming free. She folded it once, and handed it to him.

Luca took it, then dropped it onto the pavement. But not before his eyes lingered.

She sat there in her bra and panties, arms instinctively crossing over herself, vulnerability prickling across her skin. Luca's gaze was heavy, leering, intense.

"Did you do this to provoke me," he asked quietly. "There was no way you didn't know I wouldn't find out."

"I did this for me, to have something to remember who I am before you ruin me." she shot back, surprising herself with the bite in her voice.

He closed the door and moved around the car, sliding into the driver's seat. The engine purred to life. As he pulled away from the curb, Vee looked back once more at the building, at the faint light in Cassidy's window.

"Where are you taking me?" Vee asked.

The city slid past the windows, familiar streets giving way to quieter ones where the buildings stood taller and more discreet. Luca didn't answer. His jaw was locked tight, the muscle there ticking. Jealousy sat in his chest. He hated it. It made him feel reckless.

"Where the fuck are you taking me?" Vee asked again, sharper this time.

He exhaled through his nose, grip tightening on the steering wheel. "I'm done humouring you, Bambola. This shit is not going to happen again. And tonight," he added, "I'm going to show you exactly what I do to women who cross me."

Her heart slammed hard enough she felt it in her teeth. Fear finally cut through the haze of adrenaline. She hugged her arms around herself, the leather seat chilly against her bare thighs.

"Are you going to rape me?"

Luca slammed the brakes. The car screeched to a violent halt, her body lurching forward before the seatbelt snapped her back. The engine idled angrily, headlights flooding an empty street lined with closed boutiques and sleeping offices.

(Phew! Another batch of privilege done. I'm taking a 24 hour break. Lol)

Chapter 26: It's Not A Stupid Question

"What the fuck?!" Luca shouted, turning toward her fully now.

She swallowed, refusing to look away. "It's not a stupid question. You kill people. You maim them. Is it really so ridiculous that I would assume that?"

Shame crossed his face. He bit his lip, hard. The feeling made him scowl.

"I have never had to fuck any woman by force," he snapped. "Every single woman I've fucked has begged for it."

"Are you sure?" Vee shot back. "Or do you just pay them to fuck you? Because honestly, who in their right mind would want to fuck a monster like you?"

His pride took the hit and bled. He let out a slow breath.

He turned in his seat to face her fully. "How about this," he said calmly. "You point at any woman. Any woman at all. As long as she's not underage, not married, and not collecting social security."

"If she agrees to fuck me," he continued, "I will do whatever I want with you tonight."

"So you double win."

His smile widened. "You didn't let me finish."

She crossed her arms. "Go on, Casanova."

"If I lose," Luca said, "I'll let your sister go."

Everything else faded. The anger. The fear. There was only that sentence.

"You swear?" she asked, suddenly breathless.

Luca lifted a hand. "On my name."

Her heart leapt. She nodded quickly, excitement flaring so fast it startled her. "Deal."

"Wanna kiss on it?"

"What? No." She blinked. "We shake on it like normal people."

"Sweetie," he said patiently, "with a woman, a deal is only considered a deal when the mafia kiss on it."

She narrowed her eyes. "That sounds like bullshit."

"It's very traditional bullshit."

She knew he was lying. She could see it in the faint glint of amusement in his eyes. But her sister's freedom burned brighter than suspicion.

"Fine," she snapped. "One kiss."

She turned in her seat to face him. Luca's hand came up at her waist, drawing her closer until the console bit into her hip. He leaned in and brushed his mouth against hers, then deepened it with hunger.

Vee shoved at his chest, more flustered than she wanted to admit. "That should be enough kiss for a deal."

Luca cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. He glanced down at his lap, the very visible outline of his arousal staring back at him, then swore under his breath. "Fuck..." He put the car in gear and drove off, focus returning to the road.

Vee folded her arms and stared out the window. The city gave way to Luca's neighborhood, a pocket of wealth. Tree-lined streets. Low, tasteful lighting. Security cars parked subtly at corners. This was where money slept soundly.

That was when she saw an elegant woman stepping onto the sidewalk, framed by the soft glow of a streetlamp. She wore heels and a fitted coat that probably cost more than Vee's entire wardrobe. Her Porsche waited obediently at the curb, sleek and expensive and very much hers.

"There!" Vee all but shouted, pointing.

Luca startled. "What?"

"That woman," Vee said, already grinning. "Let's see if she wants to fuck you. And you cannot tell her this is a bet."

Luca arched a brow, amused. "You're very confident all of a sudden."

Vee leaned forward, eyes bright. "Women like that have standards. They don't need men. They definitely don't need you."

A slow smile spread across Luca's face. "Are you sure about this, Bambola?"

"Yes. Go."

He parked the car smoothly and stepped out. Vee watched from the passenger seat, heart thudding with excitement.

Luca approached the woman with the easy confidence of a man who had never doubted the ground would hold him. He said something. The woman turned, took him in, and smiled.

Vee's stomach dropped.

The woman laughed at something Luca said, a genuine sound, head tilting back slightly. She touched his arm. Luca leaned closer, his posture relaxed, charming.

Then the woman's fingers traced down Luca's chest.

Vee's jaw fell open.

"Oh, what a slut?!" she muttered.

Luca glanced back toward the car.

Their eyes met.

The woman said something else, drawing his attention back, and he nodded, pulling a phone from his pocket.

Vee's heart sank.

He was going to win.

She slumped back in her seat, crossing her arms again, this time defensively. "Idiot," she muttered. "Absolute idiot."

Luca smiled. He leaned in toward the woman, close enough that Vee could see the curve of his mouth move, hear nothing, and somehow understand everything.

Then he slid his card into the woman's bra.

His fingers lingered just long enough to be obscene without crossing into vulgarity, brushing the soft rise of her breast. If someone dropped a cardboard box over them, Vee thought darkly, they would absolutely fuck right there on the sidewalk.

The woman blushed, genuinely blushed, pink blooming across her cheeks. She laughed, breathless, then reached into her bag and handed Luca her own card.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Vee snapped from the car.

Luca thanked the woman softly, then turned and walked back toward the car with infuriating ease.

He slid into the driver's seat and handed Vee the card.

"CEO of Reinee Couture."

Vee swallowed hard. She had no idea what the hell that meant but judging from the woman's class, car and look in general, she deduced it was a big deal.

"I win," Luca said calmly, pulling back onto the road.

Vee stared at the card. "What did you say to her?"

"Exactly what she wanted to hear," he replied.

She scoffed, grasping at the last thread of her argument. "Well, you didn't win. She doesn't know who you are. Not exactly."

Luca reached into the glove box without looking and handed her another card.

"I gave her this."

Vee glanced down. "It just says Luciano Genovese," she said, rolling her eyes. "That could be anyone."

"Look at the back," he said.

Vee flipped the card over, irritation still buzzing in her chest. Her eyes skimmed once, then slowed.

Chapter 27: I Love What I Do

'CEO of Commissioned Club. Also known as the Devil.'

She let out a long, tired sigh and leaned back against the seat. Of course. Of course everyone knew the Devil.

"How..." She shook her head. "Why?"

Luca shrugged, turning the wheel with casual ease. "I think you underestimated how good-looking I am. Women tend not to look past that."

She studied him from the side. "You don't seem to care about the evil things you do."

"I love what I do, Bambola. I don't really care what anyone else thinks."

The car slowed as massive wrought-iron gates rose ahead of them. Two security men stepped forward, scanning the vehicle before waving them through. The gates opened soundlessly.

Vee's jaw dropped.

Inside was another world entirely. Long, sweeping driveways curved through manicured gardens lit by soft ground lights. Water features glimmered. The house itself loomed ahead, modern stone and glass.

"You're drooling," Luca said lightly.

She snapped her mouth shut. "I am not."

He parked and got out, moving around the car to her side. He opened the door and offered his hand. When she stepped out, he positioned himself subtly behind her, one arm hovering at her waist, shielding her half-dressed state from the guards and staff.

Inside, the house was warm and quiet. Art lined the walls. Pieces that spoke of blood money and impeccable taste.

He walked her down a corridor and into a bedroom. Floor-to-ceiling windows, a massive bed dressed in neutral tones, a bathroom that glowed softly beyond a glass partition.

"Take a bath," Luca said gently. "Rest. I'll see you in the morning."

He turned to leave.

"You said you would do whatever you wanted with me tonight," Vee said.

Luca stopped.

Slowly, he turned back to her, one brow lifting with dangerous amusement. "Are you that excited for me to touch you," he asked calmly, "that you had to remind me?"

Her spine stiffened. "No. I want to show you that I'm a woman of my word. If I say I'll pay back a debt, I pay it back. You don't have to hold me or my sister hostage."

Luca stepped back into the room and closed the door behind him.

He moved closer. "It's amazing," Luca said quietly, "how one thing comes out of your lips, and I can see another written all over your eyes."

She folded her arms defensively, chin lifting. "You see what you want to see."

He stopped an arm's length away. "No, Bambola. I see exactly what's there."

Her pulse betrayed her, loud in her ears.

"You're just like every other woman," he continued with certainty. "You want me. You want me to fuck you. You just don't want to admit it."

Anger flared. "That's not true."

"I'm not going to fuck you," Luca went on, "until you admit you want me, until you ask me to."

"No," he corrected himself, a faint smile touching his lips. "Until you beg me to."

"And even then," Luca added, "I don't plan on doing anything with you tonight. Especially not when another man has been touching you all night."

"At first, yes," Vee said quietly, the fight draining out of her voice. "I had a tiny attraction to you. Besides, you seemed... nice. So yes, you're right. If you had asked me to drop my underwear willingly, at some point, I probably would have."

She lifted her chin, meeting his eyes.

"But now? Now I'll just do whatever you want to keep my sister safe. And that is the truth."

"I've been seeing Cassidy for weeks," she continued. "And today was the first time he would see me like this. The first time he would touch me." She gestured to her barely clothed body, the motion small but devastating. "Do you know why?"

"Because I wanted a good memory," Vee said softly. "With someone I care about. So when you eventually touch me, all I have to do is go to that memory. And not think about how disgusted I feel."

Luca's jaw ticked once. The muscle jumped.

He looked away first.

"I'll bring you one of my shirts to sleep in," he said, pivoting away from the subject. "Nonnina will take care of you in the morning."

Her brows knit together. "Nonnina?"

"She runs the house."

He moved toward the door, then paused. "In the night," he said, back to her now, "be ready to be punished for your insolence and your stubbornness."

And then he was gone.

Nonnina had been awake long before the sun dared peek over the hedges.

When one of the maids mentioned that Luca had brought someone home in the middle of the night, Nonnina's eyes lit up. She thought she would have a few more days at least to prepare but it gave her something to keep her busy.

Kitchen staff were firmly rearranged. Menus were revised. Nonnina dictated the day's meals, overseeing the preparation of Luca's meal.

She assigned a maid to the guest room immediately.

By the time Luca came down, breakfast was laid out perfectly in the sunlit room overlooking the gardens. Fresh bread. Fruit. Coffee strong enough to wake the dead. He appeared in his sleepwear, the shirt loose and open at the front, hair slightly disordered.

"Diavolino," Nonnina called warmly, "breakfast is ready."

Luca leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "Good morning, Nonnina."

"I hope I didn't give you too much trouble with the guest."

Nonnina waved him off. "No trouble at all. She is still asleep. The maid will attend to her."

He took his seat and settled into breakfast. The plate before him was simple. Poached eggs, bread still warm enough to steam when torn.

"When will you have her moved?" he asked casually, breaking the bread as Nonnina poured his coffee.

"Before the end of the day," she replied.

"I'm going to send a package meant for her later today. Make sure she gets it."

Nonnina sighed. She handed him the coffee, her eyes never leaving his face. "Diavolino, you need to be careful. This arrangement doesn't sound like business personal. I fear people will talk and your wife will find out."

Chapter 28: Sticky Is The New Sexy

He didn't look up. "Am I supposed to be afraid of her?"

"If your wife finds out," Nonnina said gently, "your father finds out."

That made him pause. He lifted the cup, sipped slowly, buying himself a moment. The coffee was bitter. He liked it that way. "It's nothing, Nonnina. Like I said, a temporary arrangement. Nothing to it."

She hummed, unconvinced.

Soft footsteps approached. The maid entered first, then stepped aside.

Vee followed.

She wore a satin pajama set clearly chosen in haste. Short sleeves. Shorts that skimmed her thighs. Her hair was loose, still holding the shape of sleep, and her eyes carried the cautious alertness of someone who knew she was being assessed.

"Morning," Vee said.

Nonnina looked delighted.

"Ay... Zuccherino!" she beamed, sweeping toward Vee. She looked her up and down.

Vee smiled. "You must be Nonnina."

Nonnina's eyes lit up. "Ah... Diavolino talks about me, uhn?"

Vee tilted her head. "Diavolino?"

"Sit," Luca cut in sharply, before the conversation could take a scenic detour through decades of family embarrassment.

Vee shot him a look, unimpressed, then deliberately chose the chair farthest from him. The space between them felt loud.

Nonnina noticed everything.

She moved beside Vee and began scooping food onto her plate. Eggs, bread, a little fruit. Then more eggs.

"That's... that's enough," Vee said quickly, lifting her hands in surrender.

Nonnina paused mid scoop. "Ah. You are one of those, uhn?"

"One of...?" Vee asked carefully.

"Those girls who barely eat," Nonnina said with a dramatic sigh. "Always trying to look like stick insects. Sticky is the new sexy."

Vee burst out laughing. "No, no. It's not that. I'm going to work today. I'll be on my feet all day, so just a little is okay."

"Hardworking," Nonnina said, nodding. "I like you."

"I like you too," Vee replied warmly, then added, without missing a beat, "Not so much the company you keep though."

Nonnina snorted and glanced toward Luca just as he scowled. "I could say the same about you," she said cheerfully.

Nonnina gave Vee a gentle pat on the shoulder, then shuffled back toward the kitchen.

"When did I decide you could go to work?" Luca asked calmly, lifting his coffee cup to his lips.

"Am I a prisoner here?"

"No." He said it easily. He set the cup down. "I'm sure you'll behave. And if I find the boyfriend sniffing around you, it will be the last thing he smells of you."

She stared at him. "You really know how to inspire loyalty."

"That wasn't meant to inspire anything," Luca replied. "It was meant to be understood."

Vee crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly aware again of the silk pajamas clinging to her skin, of how exposed she felt. "Can you at least let me talk to him? To tell him to stay away? You came to kidnap me from his house in the middle of the night. He's going to be worried."

Luca's fingers drummed once on the table. "In a public place."

She sighed. "Can I have my phone back?"

"You'll get it back tonight."

Vee rolled her eyes. "Very generous of you. And Valentina?" she asked.

"In a safe house. Until Bastardi comes for her."

Vee swallowed. "You cannot really be serious about still auctioning her. How much do I have to beg?" she pressed. "You have me, Luca. I'm here. I'll do anything you want."

"You still don't get it."

"No," Vee agreed.

"Even if I wanted to, Veronica, I cannot. The deal has been sealed. I made an agreement with Bastardi when your father offered his virgin daughter as repayment for his debt. Bastardi is in the market for rare girls. I need something from him. The deal was made. It's done."

"You should have let me take her place," Vee said. "Anything is better than holding my breath, waiting for what is going to happen to her."

"Eat your food. I hate discussing work at home. This place is supposed to be my peace. Not an additional headache. If you want to be angry at someone, be angry at your father."

"Oh, I am," she said quickly. "I truly am. But you're the one who can still stop this." She lifted her gaze to him. "Is there really nothing I can do to make you let Valentina go?"

"Nothing," Luca replied. "What I need from Bastardi is important."

Veronica stared down at her plate. The eggs had gone cold. The bread looked suddenly offensive in its innocence. Her appetite vanished, replaced by a tight, aching knot in her throat. Tears burned behind her eyes.

Luca watched her. He had sat across from men who begged for their lives. He had listened to sobbing apologies and desperate promises. None of it had lodged under his skin the way this did.

"Don't do that," Luca said, already on his feet.

"What?" Vee asked.

"Cry."

"That's what people do when they're sad."

He stepped closer, the space between them shrinking until the air itself seemed to tense. "No," he said quietly. "That's what people do when they are weak. You're not spineless. Don't pretend to be."

"Pretend?" She straightened, anger snapping through her. "Pretend?" She rose to her feet. "You think I am pretending to worry about my sister? That my heart breaks knowing she's somewhere under your control, where I can't protect her? Where I don't know what kind of horror you've already subjected her to?"

When she turned to walk away, he caught her arm.

"Let go of me." She spun into him instead, momentum carrying her straight into his chest. Her fingers spread instinctively against the open front of his robe, heat and muscle beneath her palm, solid and infuriatingly real. Neither of them moved.

"Eat," he ordered.

"I lost my appetite." She pushed lightly against him, trying to step back again.

His hand slid from her arm to her waist. "Nonnina made that meal. You will sit and you will eat, or you will not move an inch from that chair."

Chapter 29: This House Runs On Respect

She stared at him in disbelief. "You threaten people for a living and somehow this is the hill you're dying on? Eggs and bread?"

"This house runs on respect. You may hate me, Veronica, but you will not disrespect her."

"Sit," he repeated.

"I'm not a child you can just ground," Vee shot back.

"Then don't act like one," Luca replied.

"If I don't obey?" She tilted her chin, daring him, that stubborn spark flaring even through fear.

"You will not move from that seat."

"And if I do?" she pushed. "It's not like you can watch me all day."

His gaze darkened with warning. "Then you give me reason to exert myself further tonight." He leaned in just enough for his words to settle against her ear. "Every time you disobey me. Every time you're insolent. Every time you provoke me. I will make you pay."

Her breath hitched, but she refused to step back. "You did say you weren't going to force me into doing anything. Or did you forget?"

"I said I wasn't going to fuck you forcefully," Luca answered coolly. "I didn't say anything about everything else."

"What does that mean?" Vee asked, softer now.

"Defy me and find out."

Before she could react, he guided her back into the chair, firm hands settling her where he wanted her. He stood behind her then, close enough that she could feel his presence. His fingers slid into her hair. Hands then hovering near her neck, the ghost of a grip that never came, before settling on her shoulders instead.

She stiffened instantly.

Luca felt it.

He said nothing.

She hated him. He knew that.

What unsettled him was how much he cared.

"Relax," he murmured. "I'm not hurting you."

"Not yet," she replied bitterly.

His hands tightened just enough to be felt. "You think everything I do is about cruelty."

"Isn't it?"

"No." He leaned closer.

His fingers drifted lower, skimming the upper curve of her breasts, the soft mound visible beneath the satin nightwear. Enough contact to remind her that he could. That he was aware of every rise and fall of her breath.

Vee's fork hovered uselessly over her plate.

"Diavolino..." Nonnina's voice floated into the breakfast room.

Vee startled, her shoulders jumping, but Luca's fingers did not move an inch. They remained exactly where they were, a quiet act of defiance that sent heat and panic spiraling together in her chest.

"Yes, Nonni," Luca answered calmly, not even bothering to look up.

Vee's heart hammered. She stared at the tablecloth.

"What time do you want me to bring your lunch?" Nonnina asked, already walking in, her slippers whispering over marble.

"Don't worry, Nonni," Luca replied smoothly. "I'll be home early today."

"Oh?" Nonnina hummed. Her sharp old eyes flicked from his open robe, to Vee's rigid posture, to the suspiciously abandoned fork. "Zuccherino, you don't like the food?"

Vee swallowed hard. "No... I love it," she said quickly. "My mind is just busy."

"Ah," Nonnina said knowingly. Her gaze slid upward, landing squarely on Luca. "Leave the girl alone to eat. You go get ready for work."

Luca's jaw tightened.

His grip shifted, fingers pressing more firmly at Vee's collarbone, possessive enough that her breath hitched despite herself.

"Don't make me get my spatula," Nonnina added.

Luca smiled and leaned down, close enough that his breath warmed the shell of Vee's ear.

"She won't save you tonight," he murmured so softly only she could hear.

Her pulse spiked violently.

Then he straightened, releasing her completely.

The absence of his touch was obvious.

He stepped back, adjusting his robe, all business again. "I'll see you later, Nonni."

Nonnina waved him off dismissively. "Go."

Luca chuckled and left the room, his footsteps fading down the hall, taking his gravity with him.

Vee slumped slightly in her chair, her hands trembling just enough that she had to curl them into her lap.

"Thank you, Nonnina," Vee said softly.

Nonnina smiled at her. "You too. Eat, then go get dressed for work. Your driver is on standby."

"Driver?" Vee blinked. "I'll just take an Uber."

Nonnina waved a hand as if swatting a fly. "Luca gave instructions."

"I see." Vee sighed and returned to her plate. He wasn't giving her a driver out of courtesy. This was surveillance. A leash.

Marco hated being the babysitter.

He sat on the edge of the bed in one of Luca's lesser-used properties, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. He had more important things to do. Like making sure Luca didn't run the Genovese family into the ground chasing whatever obsession this woman had sparked.

Buying a girl for ten million dollars.

Ten. Million.

Marco rubbed a hand over his face. Who did that? Luca with his rules about order, suddenly rewriting his own code for a woman.

This Scalese business should never have been touched.

And yet, here they were.

Luca had assigned Marco personally to oversee Valentina.

He stood and crossed the room, checking the camera feed on the tablet by the door. Valentina sat on the couch downstairs, knees tucked up, reading a book.

Marco swore under his breath.

A knock sounded at his bedroom door.

He straightened instantly and opened it. One of the guards stood there, posture stiff.

"She asked for you," the guard said. "The girl."

Marco closed his eyes briefly. Of course she did.

"What does she need?"

The guard shrugged. "She said she'll only talk to Marco."

Marco frowned. "How does she know my name?"

The guard lifted a shoulder. "No idea."

Marco sighed. Of course. Nothing in this mess stayed neatly contained. "Fine. I'll be right down."

He shut the door harder than necessary and headed downstairs, irritation rolling through him. This was exactly why he hated assignments like this. People became people instead of variables. Needs replaced numbers. Faces replaced figures on a balance sheet.

He found her where the camera feed had shown her earlier, sitting on the edge of the sofa. She looked up the moment he entered, eyes sharp despite the nervous energy humming around her.

Chapter 30: I Need A Pad

He stopped directly in front of her. "You asked for me," he said simply.

"Are you Marco?" Valentina asked.

"Yes."

"My sister told me about you," she said quickly. "She said you were helping her."

He knew exactly which Marco Veronica had meant, and it certainly wasn't him. Still, he nodded noncommittally. "Really?"

"Well," Valentina continued, hopeful now, "I thought you might help me too."

"I am not helping you escape," Marco said flatly, already turning away. He didn't need this.

Valentina shot up from the sofa and grabbed his arm with surprising strength. "No, please. Just listen."

Slowly, he looked down at her hand on his sleeve. She released him immediately.

"What is it?" he asked. "Make it quick."

She hesitated, color creeping up her cheeks. "It's... it's embarrassing."

"You have one second."

"I need a pad."

"What the fuck is that?"

Valentina stared at him. Then she burst out laughing. "You're kidding, right?"

He merely raised a brow in irritation.

"Well, I... my... I... I use it for my monthlies..." Valentina stammered.

Marco's face flushed a furious red, starting at his collarbone and marching up. "Oh. Oh. Right. That." He cleared his throat, then cleared it again. "Okay. Uh. Right now. Like immediately?"

"Yes." Valentina nodded, watching him with wide, innocent eyes. She found the transformation fascinating. One second he was all sharp edges and commands, the next he looked like a man who had just been handed a live grenade labeled womanhood.

"You need anything else?" he asked.

Valentina hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Yes."

Marco braced himself. "Can you make a list? I'll rush to the store."

She smiled then, soft and grateful and just a little mischievous. "Thank you."

By the time Marco changed into jeans and a jacket, Valentina had finished writing. He scanned the page, his eyebrows inching higher with every item. Pain killers. Tampons. Pads. Heating pads. Chocolate. Ice.

Ice cream.

"What the fuck?" he muttered under his breath and looked up at her. Valentina sat primly on the sofa, hands folded, wearing the most unapologetically cheesy smile he had ever seen.

"Fine!" Marco snapped. He stalked out of the house, keys jangling, muttering curses at Luca.

Vito Scalese was crawling out of bed when the banging started. It was aggressive, impatient.

"What the fuck?!" Vito swore, dragging a hand down his face as he stumbled toward the door. "I'm coming, goddamnit!"

He yanked it open and found Cassidy standing there. One eye was swollen shut, purple and ugly. The imprint of a ring was still faintly visible on his skin. Vito did not need a crystal ball to know who had delivered that message.

"Jesus Christ," Vito muttered, stepping aside.

Cassidy pushed past him, limping slightly.

"Where is Vee?" Cassidy growled.

"What do you mean where is Vee? She went with you last night."

"An insane man came to my house last night and took her. And I know, in my bones, this has something to do with you."

Vito straightened, puffing himself up. "Why the hell would that have to do with me?" he shouted, the volume doing most of the work his confidence could not.

Cassidy stepped closer. "I know something has been going on," he said. "Do not even try to deny it. Where are both your daughters, Mr Scalese?"

"I do not know what you are talking about."

"Me coming here? This is courtesy," he said. "A gift. As soon as I leave here, I am going to the police. If you do not care about them, I do."

"You do not want to do that, son," Vito warned.

Cassidy met his gaze, eyes burning. "Watch me."

Vito's shoulders sagged. "Listen," he said, rubbing his face. "They are with a man named Luciano Genovese. I owe him a debt and he took them."

Cassidy stared at him. His eyebrows climbed high. "You owe a debt," he repeated slowly, "and he took both your daughters."

"It was not supposed to be like this," Vito snapped, defensive again.

"You traded your daughters. I always knew you were a bastard."

Vito's jaw clenched. "You have no idea who you are dealing with."

Cassidy turned toward the door, his hand already on the handle. "I am getting her back."

"Look, it is complicated," Vito said, dragging a hand down his face. "He is a mafia boss. He is not the kind of man you want to get entangled with."

Cassidy did not even slow. "Again, watch me. Let us see if he can handle the NYPD."

Vito inhaled deeply. "Son..."

But Cassidy was gone.

Vito stood there for a long moment, staring at the wood. "That boy is going to get himself killed," he muttered, and turned back into the house.

Veronica was driven back to the Genovese house after sunset. She sat stiffly in the back seat. All day she had tried to reach Cassidy with the phone at the pizza parlour. Straight to voicemail.

Luca had promised. He had looked her in the eyes and promised Cassidy would not be harmed.

The gates opened to let the car through. The driver pulled to a stop, opened her door, and Veronica stepped out, smoothing the worn fabric of her pizza parlour T shirt with a sigh.

She barely had time to brace herself before she saw Nonnina approaching. "Nonnina..."

"Zuccherino," Nonnina said warmly. "Welcome back. How was work?"

Vee managed a small smile. "Busy. Loud."

Nonnina looked her over carefully. She noted the T shirt, the tired slump of Veronica's shoulders.

"You work in a pizza shop," Nonnina pointed out.

"Uh... yes," Vee said. "My dad owns the place. I run it."

"Good girl," Nonnina said approvingly. "It is good to help out in the family. Work keeps the soul from becoming lazy."

"Is everything alright? Why are you standing out here?"

"Come. I wanted to show you your quarters. Luca says you will be staying here for a while. He sent a package for you."

That phrase lodged itself in Vee's chest. Staying here. A while. Did that mean Luca was some day going to let her go?