

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 71: It Was Your Idea - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 71: It Was Your Idea

Chapter 71: It Was Your Idea

"It was your idea!" Luca yelled.

"I know!" Marco snapped back. He sat slumped, long legs stretched out. "Which tells me more about how much I have fallen than I have allowed myself to admit," Marco continued. "We get worse and worse, Luca. Crueler. It started with Paul Marino. The man was a good man. But you were fucking bored, And you had him killed."

Luca inhaled slowly. "You're right," he said. "But I wasn't bored. I was in a dark place."

He stepped closer, towering over Marco. "It's no excuse. I know that. Marco, we are not good men." A bitter smile flickered across his mouth. "You never lied to yourself. I never lied to myself either."

Luca turned away, hands braced on the edge of the table. "The moment you let guilt begin to control your conscience," he said quietly, "you are a dead man. You hesitate. You weaken."

"I am already dead," Marco said.

Luca straightened. "Not today, you are not," he said firmly. He crossed the room and grabbed Marco by the collar, hauling him upright. "Get up. Take care of yourself. Shower. Eat. Then get some rest."

"What are you doing?" Marco asked, searching Luca's face.

"What does it look like I am doing?" Luca replied, eyes dark, unreadable.

Marco shook his head slowly. "Luca... you have to kill me. You know you have to," Marco pressed on, stepping closer instead of backing away. "This undermines your authority. Julian will use this against you the second he smells blood. Your father will question your ability to rule the familia."

"And yet... I cannot kill you," Luca answered.

He said it calmly

"Why?"

Luca bit his lip.

He dragged his hand down his face, thumb brushing his mouth, eyes narrowing. He knew how this would sound.

"Because she begged me not to."

"Who? Miss Scalese?" Marco's mouth fell open.

"My hands are tied," Luca added flatly.

"What the fuck?!!!" Marco shouted. "What the... what?"

"I don't know what's with me," Luca said. "I just know that I'll move heaven and earth to give her what she wants. And if that includes letting you go, so be it."

Marco stopped pacing. Slowly turned. "She also begged you to save her sister."

"Yes she did." Luca shrugged.

"Why didn't you?"

"Ten minutes after Valentina got into Bastardi's car, she was delivered to the buyer. A sleazy senator." He paused. "His car was ambushed by Kane's bodyguard. Reese."

Marco frowned. "Reese?"

"Valentina was retrieved and is currently in Kane's custody."

"You eventually gave up your spot in Kane's designer mall," Marco said.

Luca nodded once. "Like I said. I'll do anything for her."

"Why?"

"She is the good to my bad," he said quietly. "The heaven to my hell. My obsession. I'd burn for her, and she doesn't even know it."

"You're fucked," he muttered.

Luca chuckled. "I know."

"Luca..." Marco sighed.

It wasn't defeat in his voice so much as surrender. He scrubbed a hand down his face, exhaustion carving deeper lines into his already sharp features. This wasn't a problem he could outthink. This was Luca breaking the spine of the world for a woman.

"Come on," Luca said, clapping his hands once. "Your punishment is to make sure Valentina makes it out of town and lays low until all this blows over."

Marco stared at him. "That's it? That's my punishment? A babysitting job? Again?"

"You prefer a bullet?" Luca asked.

Marco scoffed. "This is not a good look for the familia."

"We can always cook something up. Tell them I killed your sister."

"I don't have a sister."

"Do they know that?"

Marco shook his head. "I guess I owe Miss Scalese a thank you."

Luca's smile vanished. In its place was steel. He stepped closer. "But make no mistake, you betray me again... I will kill you."

"Understood," Marco said, nodding once. He believed him. Completely.

Luca turned away, already done with the matter. "Do you know of any good restaurants in town?"

"A lot."

"Pick one. Clear the venue." Luca paused at the door, glancing back over his shoulder. "I'm taking her on a date."

Luca left the cell without another word. Marco leaned back against the wall, staring at the ceiling.

"Mary, mother of God," he muttered. "Help us."

As usual, Nonnina stayed up waiting.

The clocks read 3 a.m. when Luca finally walked in.

"Nonnina," he said softly, frowning when he saw her in her armchair, shawl wrapped tight around her small frame. "I told you not to stay up late."

He bent and kissed her hair.

"Then come back home earlier," she said, taking his hand and getting to her feet.

"I have to work. Most of my work is done at night," Luca shot back.

"That's why I spend the night praying for you until you get back, Diavolino," Nonnina argued.

"There is no point praying for me," he muttered. "I'm sure God won't bother listening."

"Oh, He listens," Nonnina said briskly. "Even when He disapproves."

She peered at him, then tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "Zuccherino was with you tonight?" she asked.

"Yes," Luca answered immediately. "Why?"

Nonnina smacked him lightly on the face, her palm soft but the message sharp. "Why did you get the poor girl so drunk?"

Luca stared at her, scandalized. "I didn't do anything. She drank all by herself."

"Excuses," Nonnina sniffed.

"I didn't force alcohol down her throat," he protested. "She kept pouring...Is she alright?" he asked finally.

"Yes," Nonnina said. "She is in bed, last I checked."

Luca rubbed his jaw. "Thank you, Nonni. I'll crash at her place. Just bring me something to eat." He paused, glancing back at her. "Speaking of eating, I'll be eating out tomorrow."

"Oh," Nonnina raised a brow. "Why?"

"It's kind of hard to take a woman on a date and not eat anything," Luca said dryly.

Then Nonnina's face hardened. "You know the rules?"

"Yes. I know the rules, Nonni. Marco is handling everything. There will be security while the food is being cooked. There will be tasters. Only vetted employees will be allowed to serve."

Chapter 72: Don't Come In Here

"And the venue?"

"Will be cleared, locked down. Staff will be searched. Kitchen will be inspected twice."

"Good. Go. I'll bring your dinner and a change of clothes," Nonnina said.

"Thank you, Nonnina," Luca replied. He bent, kissed her silver hair once more, then straightened. He turned and left the main building, crossed the courtyard toward the smaller apartment behind the house.

He unlocked the door quietly, stepping inside just as her gagging sound hit him.

"Fuck," he muttered, already moving.

He followed the noise down the short hall and into the bedroom, then the bathroom, where he found her bent over the toilet, one hand gripping the porcelain. Her hair had fallen forward in a dark curtain, hiding her face, her shoulders shaking with each miserable heave.

"Vee?" he called softly.

"Don't come in here," she croaked.

He ignored her completely.

Luca dropped to his knees beside her, and gathered her hair in his hand, holding it back as she threw up again. He'd seen worse things come out of men who deserved it.

"Ughhh... why did you let me drink so much?" Vee whined when it passed, slumping weakly.

"I warned you," he said calmly. "You didn't listen to me. You make a sport of never listening to me."

She turned her head just enough to glare at him. "Go to hell."

He smirked faintly. "Already have property there."

She dry-heaved again, and he waited it out, hand steady, thumb brushing absently against her scalp.

When it was over, he helped her up, strong arm wrapping around her waist.

She shuffled to the sink, splashed water on her face, rinsed her mouth, then tried to straighten and immediately swayed.

Luca caught her before she face-planted. "Easy," he murmured.

She squinted up at him, eyes glassy, lashes clumped with moisture. "You're annoyingly solid."

"You're not exactly a challenge in weight."

"Show-off," she muttered.

He guided her back into the bedroom, where she promptly collapsed onto the mattress.

"Is Marco okay?" she asked, even with her eyes closed.

"Yes, he is," Luca answered immediately.

"Thank you, Luca," she murmured, already drifting, the tension leaving her face in a slow unravel. Her breathing evened out.

Luca clicked his tongue quietly. He shrugged out of his coat and tossed it over the chair.

He moved carefully and started with her dress, easing it over her head, mindful not to jostle her. The fabric slid free and landed on the floor in a careless heap. She stirred faintly but didn't wake, her brow creasing before smoothing again.

Luca exhaled slowly. Behave, Luca, behave.

He turned toward the closet, choosing clothes. He found a pair of soft shorts and a flimsy, airy top.

When he returned to the bed, he removed her bra, his expression set, jaw tight, eyes deliberately unfocused. He refused to look too long, refused to let admiration turn into hunger. This was not that moment.

He removed her underwear next, turning his attention inward to Vienna. Julian. His father. His wife.

He dressed her carefully, easing the shorts up, slipping the top over her arms.

Once she was settled, he pulled the sheet up around her, tucking it in so she wouldn't kick it away in her sleep.

Luca leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to her lips, barely there. A reward, he told himself.

He did not remember deciding to sleep. One moment there had been the hot bite of the shower against his skin, steam loosening his muscles. Then Nonnina bringing his dinner. He remembered sitting on the edge of the bed. He remembered pulling her into him, her warmth fitting against his chest.

After that, nothing. Oblivion.

Which was probably why the morning felt wrong before his eyes even opened.

Luca stirred, instincts snapping awake before consciousness fully followed. Something was off. His shoulders refused to roll the way they always did. His hands... his hands were not where they should be.

He jerked upward sharply, muscles coiling for violence. His hands slid instinctively under the pillow, searching for the familiar cold reassurance of steel. No gun.

Because this was not his room.

The fog burned off in a heartbeat.

His wrists were bound with a thin, treacherous little strip of fabric. It looked like one of those tiny strings women used instead of a belt.

"Tell me," Veronica's voice drawled lazily from his left, "how does one punish a mafia god?"

He turned his head slowly, eyes adjusting to the light. She sat at the dresser, legs crossed, hair a dark, untamed spill down her back.

"Excuse me?" he asked. The corner of his mouth betrayed him, the faintest smile surfacing.

"I'm serious," she said, inspecting her nails. "I have no experience."

"Uhm... depends," Luca said lazily, eyes flicking down to his wrists again. The binding was laughable. Soft fabric. A decorative knot. He could slip free in seconds if he angled his thumbs just right and flexed. He stayed still anyway. Chose indulgence over dominance. "What exactly has this mafia god done?"

"He made me a promise," she said evenly, "and he broke it."

"I don't break promises, Bambola."

"You did," she shot back.

"I did not."

"You did," she insisted, pushing off the dresser. "You said you were going to wake me up when you got back. You promised me."

Luca laughed. An incredulous sound that scraped out of his chest. "Oh, you remember last night now, do you?" he said dryly. "I was thinking the alcohol would mess with your memory. But apparently it did anyway, because when I got back, you were very much awake."

"I was not," she said immediately.

"You were," he replied calmly. "You were throwing up in the bathroom. I held your hair. I walked you to bed. I changed your clothes."

"You perv!"

Luca stared at her, genuinely stunned. "Okay?" he said slowly. "How am I the bad guy here?"

"You undressed me!"

"I prevented you from sleeping in vomit," he shot back. "You're welcome."

"You still broke your promise," she muttered.

"You fell asleep," he said. "I didn't wake you because you needed rest."

(8 Chapters to go. I knew I could do it! Haha)

Chapter 73: I'm Not God

"That's not what you said you'd do."

"No," he admitted. "But it's what you needed."

Vee shrugged, a careless little roll of her shoulders. "So according to Google, orgasm denial is a surefire way to punish a man who thinks he's God."

"I'm not God," he corrected. "I am the devil."

"In this context," she replied breezily, "same thing."

"Do not let Nonnina hear you say that," he warned. "She'll light a candle and set you on fire with it." Then his gaze dropped meaningfully to the flimsy tie on his wrist. "So what's your plan here, Vee? Deny me sex? You've been doing that since the day I met you. At this point, I've hit a year's quota of punishments. Untie me."

"I didn't say sex denial," she said. "I said orgasm denial."

"Vee," he said slowly, "don't you dare. Don't."

She climbed onto the mattress anyway, and placed her hands on his chest, pushing him back down. Luca fell against the pillows with a muted huff.

"Would you at least tell me what you're up to?" he asked.

"Where's the fun in that?" she smiled.

Her heart was pounding. She could feel it in her throat, in the way her palms tingled where they touched him. Truth was, she had no idea what she was doing. None. She was winging it on audacity and borrowed confidence, testing the waters of a power she wasn't sure she truly held.

But she needed to know.

Needed to know if Luciano Genovese looked at her like a passing indulgence. If this intensity was temporary. If one day he would get bored, finish whatever game this was, and set her aside.

She'd promised she would have sex with him if he saved her sister. A promise made when fear ruled her mouth and hope made her reckless. He had saved her sister.

And now she owed him.

Luca watched her carefully, eyes dark, assessing. He couldn't tell whether she was bluffing or brave.

She threw her leg over him. One second he was watching her, the next her weight settled squarely over his groin. Luca cleared his throat, a rough, useless sound meant to disguise the very obvious fact that his body had already betrayed him. He had been hard before she touched him. Before she climbed on the bed.

Before she decided to play god with the devil.

Pathetic.

Her thigh pressed down, testing, grinding just enough to make his jaw tighten. He stared at the ceiling, nostrils flaring, reminding himself that this was ridiculous. He could snap the bindings. He could flip her onto her back. He could end this in seconds.

He didn't.

She reached up and pulled his already bound arms higher over his head, stretching him, exposing him. The knot was sloppy. Childish. An insult to his experience. And still, he let it hold.

Then she bent.

Her mouth found his chest, lips soft and purposeful, not rushed, not shy. She kissed him. Her tongue followed, dragging heat across his skin before circling his nipple and flicking it.

"Fuck..." he muttered, more breath than word.

She smiled against his skin, clearly pleased.

She moved lower.

Inch by merciless inch, her hair brushing his stomach, her mouth tracing a path that made his hands curl uselessly above his head. Luca swallowed hard, chest rising and falling faster now.

When she reached his waistband, she paused.

He looked down.

She was staring at him with that look again. The one that said she knew exactly what she was doing.

Then she pulled him free.

There was no mistaking the evidence of his need.

Luca stared at her, incredulous, heart pounding. There was no way she would.

No way.

But when her lips brushed the head of his cock, when sensation exploded sharp and sudden, he cursed loud and unfiltered.

"What the fuck?!"

She chuckled and looked up at him, eyes bright, mouth dangerously close.

"You want to do that right now?" he asked. "While I'm tied up? Right now?"

"Punishment," she reminded him.

"Fuck my life," he swore, as she bent again and took him into her mouth.

Luca groaned, head pressing back into the pillow, every muscle in his body going tight. His hands strained against the bindings now.

"Vee," he warned.

Vee struggled a bit as she tried to fit him in her mouth. Lord knows she had no idea if she was even doing it right. No one had ever taught her this version of intimacy. If she failed, he would laugh. If she succeeded, he would never let her forget it.

Luca sensed her struggle immediately. He shifted his hips, breath roughening as he urged her on. "That's it, baby. Show me how deep you can go." He tugged uselessly against the flimsy bindings, more out of instinct than need, and grinned when they held.

She felt motivated then. Her jaw protested as she took him in deeper, eyes watering.

"God, you feel so good. Keep going. Don't stop." Luca's head fell back, dark hair brushing his forehead, teeth clenched as he fought the urge to snap the bindings and take what his body demanded. It took a lot of will not to rid himself of the restraints and shove his cock down her throat until she couldn't breathe, not because he wanted to hurt her, but because the instinct to dominate burned hot and reckless in him.

He swallowed it down, choosing restraint over ruin, choosing her over the darker thrill.

Vee held him firmly in her hands and worked up and down his length, trying to find a rhythm that felt right. Her movements were clumsy at first, then steadier, guided by the sounds he made and the way his muscles tensed beneath her palms. She wondered if he understood how much of herself she handed him in moments like this.

"Fuck! Good girl." Luca went on, praising her, urging her on. His hips buckled suddenly and she gagged, his cock hitting the back of her throat hard enough to steal her breath. "Shit! Vee! I'm going to cum."

(At this point, I'm beginning to think I need to put a notification in the synopsis that says 'LOTS OF SEX IN THIS BOOK'. I swear I didn't plan the book this way but these leads are just horny fuckers. Jeez.)

Chapter 74: That's Just Crap

The moment he said it, she pulled him free, gasping softly but still holding him in her hand, fingers firm. She leaned back, eyes bright with triumph.

"What? What? What are you doing?" Luca looked down at her, incredulous.

"Remember? Orgasm denial," Vee said, lifting a brow. The mischief in her tone was like a spark in a dark room.

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me," he muttered. Every inch of him responded to her, but more than that, his mind raced with conflicting thoughts—control versus surrender, desire versus discipline.

She bent over again, her mouth enveloping him once more. Luca's instincts took over; he moved faster, working through the bindings that held his wrists then grabbed her hair.

"What the hell? How?" Vee gasped, startled and exhilarated, eyes wide with disbelief. "That's cheating."

"I have to teach you how to tie someone up properly," he said. "That's just crap. Come here."

He guided her head over him again, steadying her with his hands, giving her small gestures of reassurance. "Just relax, babe. I got you."

He moved his hips gently, watching her closely as he felt the tightrope of his own restraint stretch thinner and thinner. "Yeah, love. Hmmm."

Vee responded instinctively, fingers gripping him, her energy bold, demanding his attention and teasing his self-control.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes," Luca murmured, the repetition rough in his throat. He increased the intensity slightly, mindful of her limits, aware of every shiver, every breath she took against him. Holding her steady became a game of surrender.

"Babe, fuck...I'm cumming," he warned, releasing at the exact moment he lifted her off him. She caught some of the aftermath in the face and he groaned in admiration.

Luca was breathing hard. "God, you give me the most amazing orgasms."

Vee chuckled, and let herself fall beside him on the bed.

"I wanna wake up this way every day," he laughed, turning his head to look at her. The laugh surprised him too. It was boyish.

"Was it good?" Vee asked. She turned onto her side, propping herself up on one elbow, studying his face.

"Do you even have to ask?" he said, scoffing softly, but his eyes didn't leave hers.

"I mean compared to..." She didn't finish the sentence, but it was there. Compared to the others. Compared to experience.

Luca reached out and placed a finger on her lips, stopping the thought before it could wound them both. "Don't do that," he said. "Don't ever do that."

She stilled.

"You do not compare," he continued. "You're not a measurement. You're not a replacement. You're amazing. You're special. You're remarkable. And I'll fuck up anyone who makes you think otherwise."

"Do you want to have sex with me now?"

Luca exhaled slowly, dragging a hand down his face. "More than anything," he admitted. "But I won't."

That made her frown. "Why?"

"Because you still think it's some kind of payment for saving your sister," he said, turning toward her fully now. "And I won't fuck you under those terms."

"I did promise," Vee said, defensive reflex rising.

"Fuck that shit," Luca snapped, then softened immediately. "I always wanted it to mean something, Bambola. Okay, maybe not at first. At first, all I wanted to do was bury myself so deep inside you you'd feel me everywhere." A crooked smile tugged at his mouth. "I'm not pretending I'm a saint."

"But now," he went on, turning back to her, "now I want you to want me as much as I want you. Not because you owe me. Not because you're afraid. Because you choose me. And like I said, you beg me to fuck you."

"We are back to that?" Vee rolled her eyes at him, flopping onto her side, hair splayed across the pillow.

"We never left it," Luca said. He shifted slightly, and his eyes flicked downward to his still erect cock. "Well damn... it's never enough," he muttered.

"Thank you, Luca," she said softly.

"You already thanked me," he said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"No, I... I really want you to know that I am grateful. You saved us when you didn't have to."

"How about this? Go on a date with me tonight."

"Okay?" She lifted her brows, eyes sparkling.

"Heads up. I'm going to follow your lead. The last time I was on a date, I was in High School." He admitted and Vee laughed softly.

"Wow... why?" she asked, tilting her head, curiosity edged with a playful smirk.

"I was being groomed to take over. I was training in various countries under various masters. I didn't have the time," he explained.

"And that's why you resort to quickies in your office?" Vee raised a brow.

"Kinda, yes. Besides, it's less complicated. No expectations," he said.

"It's sad,"

"No, it's not," Luca countered immediately. "It's fun, but can we stop talking about that and concentrate on the date?"

"Yeah, what time tonight?" Vee asked.

"7pm."

She nodded. "I'll be ready." It meant she would show up open, exposed, willing to feel whatever he decided to give her.

"Of course, you'll be," he said. "Because you are going shopping. Get your glam on. Spoil yourself. I want to see charges on that damn card I gave you or I am going to smack your ass until it's all soft and red. You hear me?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, fuck me," he muttered, running a hand down his face. "You..." He laughed softly, shaking his head. "My sweet Bambola are going to annihilate me."

Vee smiled at him then, really smiled, her eyes bright, a little wicked. "I told you there was good in you."

"No, there isn't, Vee. There isn't. You think I am good because I got things done for you, because I protect what I want. But I'm not a good man, Bambola. I know exactly what I am and I'm okay with it. You should be too."

She leaned in and kissed him gently. Her lips were soft, but her intent was not. When her tongue slid against his, Luca sucked in a breath.

Chapter 75: It Might Be Nonnina

His hand went to her waist immediately, strong fingers biting just enough to remind her who he was. He pulled her closer, her body fitting against his.

This was what he wanted. Not submission alone, not obedience for its own sake. He wanted her giving herself to him like this, eyes open, aware of the darkness and still stepping forward. Giving him her trust, her desire. Pleasuring him until he lost control,

until the world narrowed to sensation and breath and the way she said his name when she was undone.

A knock came at the front door and Luca groaned. She pulled away but his hand came up, pressing her back against the mattress.

"Ignore it," he murmured. He didn't want to be interrupted—not now, not when she was here, molten and pliant in his arms.

"It might be Nonnina," she said.

"Yes, it is," he said, barely lifting his lips from hers, "Ignore her." His hands molded to her waist, pulling her impossibly closer.

"Luca..." she laughed softly, breathless but amused. With a playful push, she finally extricated herself from his grip, the heat between them still simmering, and padded barefoot to the front door. Her fingers trailed along the doorframe as she opened the door, revealing the small army that had come to disrupt their morning.

Nonnina stood there. She held a fresh, crisp suit and polished shoes, perfect for Luca's demanding day. Behind her, maids carried trolleys brimming with breakfast, the smell of fresh bread, eggs, and strong coffee wafted through.

"Breakfast," Nonnina said simply. The maids filed into the apartment, setting the small dining table.

Vee stepped aside, her lips curling into a polite smile. "Good morning, Nonnina," she said.

"Morning, Zuccherino," Nonnina replied, eyes twinkling. She nodded toward the bedroom, then with a smirk added, "Tell Luca he needs to get ready for work. If he can get out from between your legs."

Vee's face went crimson, heat climbing fast, burning her ears and neck. "I will," she managed.

Nonnina gave her a small, approving smile. "You make him happy, Zuccherino," she said gently. "For that, may the blessed Mary bless you. And you too! Get ready for work!"

"I won't be going in today," Vee said. "I have to go shopping."

"The date, uhn?" Nonnina asked.

Vee raised a brow. "You know about that?" she asked.

"I know everything." Her smile widened as she clapped her hands lightly, and motioned for the maids to leave the room. She handed Luca's freshly pressed suit and polished shoes to Vee. Then, with the confidence of a storm, she breezed out.

"That woman is crazy." Vee muttered under her breath and she carried Luca's clothes back into the bedroom. He was still lying there, sprawled across the bed.

"Nonnina commands you to get ready for work," Vee announced, mimicking the slight tilt of Nonnina's head.

Luca chuckled. "I think I'll take a day off today," he said lazily, those sharp blue eyes glinting with amusement. "Would you like a personal escort for shopping?"

Vee blinked, caught off guard by the suggestion. "You want to follow me around all day," she teased, "shopping for clothes, making my hair, doing girl stuff?" She laughed softly, placing his suit and shoes neatly in the closet. She turned back to him.

"Come here." His hand gestured. She obeyed, stepping into the space between them. He pulled her down onto the bed, onto him, their bodies colliding in a weightless, magnetic inevitability.

"I have nothing better to do," he murmured. "Might as well be your handbag for the day."

"Are you going to kill anyone or maim anyone?" Vee asked.

"Contrary to popular belief," Luca said, "I don't walk the streets of New York on a killing spree. I am not Joe Goldberg." His hand slid along her waist, fingers brushing teasingly over her hip. "Besides," he added, letting his mouth trail along the hollow of her neck, tasting, teasing, "what could go wrong while shopping?"

Vee giggled, her fingers gripping the sheets instinctively as his tongue brushed lightly over her skin, tickling, igniting heat she couldn't contain.

"Take off your shorts."

"Why?" she asked, raising a brow.

"I'm not going to fuck you, Bambola." He said it flatly.

"That's not what I meant..." she started, a flush climbing her neck.

"I still sense your fear," he said. "Take it off."

Her fingers trembled slightly as she shimmied out of her shorts, the fabric falling to the floor, leaving her exposed, vulnerable, yet utterly entranced by the dangerous calm radiating off him.

"Come here."

She obeyed, climbing back onto the bed, onto him, hips brushing over his lean, muscular frame. His body was a landscape she knew too well—the ridges of his abs, the hardness of his chest.

"Higher," he said, a growl threading through the single word.

She shuffled up, feeling the curve of his stomach under her thighs, the solid weight of him beneath her, heat radiating up and making her shiver.

"Higher, Bambola," he insisted again.

She continued, feeling her heart thrum, until she was gliding over his chest, eyes locking.

"Vee, higher." His eyes darkened, pupils sharp, commanding, leaving no space for hesitation.

Vee held his gaze, swallowed the fluttering anxiety and thrill rising in her chest, and let herself move until she was positioned right over his face.

He held her gaze, while his fingers drifted between her thighs, caressing her slit. A gasp escaped her as she bit her lip, bracing herself on the headboard, knees trembling from the tension and heat that pulsed through her body.

He slid one finger inside her slowly, testing the waters, measuring the heat, the tension, the way her muscles clenched around him without realizing. Luca's eyes gleamed as he leaned closer, tracing the curve of her hip with his free hand, feeling her shiver against him.

He had wanted this for so long—not just the touch, not just the taste, but the surrender, the vulnerability that Vee offered him. Then, without warning, his tongue reached out, brushing lightly, tasting her, exploring, claiming. His body shivered at the intimacy, the power, the sheer honesty of it.

(I wish I could say that this is the end, this is their happily ever after. But once again, I have to prepare you for everything to go off the rails. Just please know, I love you all and I never want to hurt you. But if I don't, who will?)

Who can guess what's going to happen?

Chapter 76: Breaking Fast Before Breakfast

Then his lips closed around her folds, letting the warmth and moisture envelop him. He licked, he sucked, and the sounds she made were like music. He felt her arch, felt the

tremors in her body, every subtle quiver a direct line to his own growing need. Each flick of his tongue, each careful suck, was a feast of sensation that tethered her to him completely.

Vee grunted, one hand tangling in his dark hair, tugging lightly. "Luca..." she gasped, breathless, shivering, needing more, giving more.

Luca could feel her shaking. He pulled his hands away and grabbed her thighs instead, offering solid support, giving her something to hold onto as he lapped at her.

Vee rode his tongue with abandon, unashamed, unreserved, chasing only release. Her hair tumbled down, spilling, her back arching in perfect surrender, and she grabbed onto the headboard with both hands.

"Please... please..." she moaned, breathless, using his face as a conduit for her pleasure, guiding him, giving him permission to claim her utterly. She arched backward, body trembling, giving him everything she had as her orgasm rolled through her, consuming her, leaving her raw.

Her body shook violently as Luca helped her settle back onto him, holding her with firm hands, letting her feel the strength of him. Then, he kissed her, tasting her, needing her to know how incredible she was, how intoxicating, how utterly his.

"Breaking fast before breakfast. Healthiest way to live," Luca teased.

Vee's cheeks flamed, a vivid blush spreading across her face as she tried to hide behind her hair.

"We should... uhm... have breakfast," Vee said as she shuffled off the bed. Her legs still felt unsteady. She bent to retrieve her shorts, the fabric wrinkled and abandoned and pulled them on slowly.

"Yeah, we should," Luca replied from behind her.

"I have to call my dad today," Vee added, forcing herself to keep her tone casual as she tied the drawstring. "Tell him Valentina is safe."

"Vee..."

"I know," she said quickly. "No details."

He let out a slow breath. "Why do you still care about him?"

She turned then, leaning against the dresser, folding her arms loosely over her stomach. Luca stood near the bed now, dark hair still tousled.

"He is my father," she said quietly. "He was never like this. Not before. He loves us. He has just been making poor choices."

"Why?" Luca pressed. His eyes never left her face.

"After my mother died, it broke him," Vee said. "She was... she was his anchor. She kept him together, you know. She was strong like that." Her mouth curved into a sad smile.

"So you are more like your mother," he said slowly. "The shepherdess of the family."

Vee let out a small laugh. "Yeah. Something like that." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "But Valentina is all I mostly care about now."

Luca's brow furrowed. "Who cares about you?"

"Well, I..." She stumbled, caught off guard. "I don't need to be cared for."

"Don't you?"

"I can take care of myself," she said, lifting her chin, reflexively defensive.

"I'm sure you can," Luca replied, stepping closer. "It doesn't mean someone shouldn't be taking care of you."

He reached for her then. His arms wrapped around her, and she felt the truth of his strength, the quiet promise in it. "I will," he said into her hair. "I will care for you. I will protect you even when you don't see it. You'll get the world, Bambola. All you have to do is ask."

Vee nodded against his chest, blinking fast as her eyes burned. It was absurd. Almost funny in a cruel way. The one person who had ever stopped to ask who cared for her was a man who ordered deaths with the same ease he ordered breakfast. A murderous psychopath, by every reasonable measure.

And yet, here he was, offering her protection as a certainty.

She made up her mind right there. Right then. Tonight, she would stop pretending she was only half in. Tonight, she would beg him to take her completely. Entirely.

Vito was halfway through a bottle of beer, when his front door burst open with a crack. Boots thundered in immediately after. These were angry feet, heavy with intent, scuffing against the worn tiles.

The little dog sprang to life instantly, barking furiously, a shrill, desperate sound that sliced through the room. Vito's heart slammed against his ribs. He lurched off the couch, beer sloshing over his hand, instinct screaming at him to run.

He barely had time to straighten before a hand clamped onto his shirt. The man was big, thick-armed, smelling of cigarettes. Vito was thrown back onto the couch, the breath knocked clean out of his lungs. The bottle shattered on the floor, beer foaming across the tiles.

Three other men spread through the house immediately.

"Vito Scalese?"

Vito swallowed, throat dry. "Who's asking?"

The man smiled thinly. "My name is Bastardi," he said. "And I am sure you have heard of me."

Vito's blood went cold. Of course he had heard of Bastardi, the bastard of the Bastione family.

"What do you want from me?" Vito asked, forcing the words out. "I have no business with you."

The men returned one by one, shaking their heads. No one spoke. The message was clear. Whatever Bastardi was looking for was not here.

The dog kept barking, frantic now, circling uselessly, nails scraping the floor.

"Shut the damned dog up!" Bastardi growled.

One of the men bent, grabbed the dog roughly by the collar, and dragged it toward the door. The animal yelped, legs scrambling, still barking as the door was yanked open and it was tossed outside. The door slammed shut, cutting the sound off abruptly. The sudden silence was worse.

Bastardi stepped closer to Vito, lowering himself slightly so they were eye level. "I have one question only," he said calmly. "Where is your daughter?"

"Which... which one?"

Bastardi's brows lifted mildly. "Oh, you have two?"

"Yes!" Vito blurted. Panic clawed up his spine. He had not meant to say it so fast.

Chapter 77: She's With Luciano Genovese

Bastardi nodded slowly. "The virgin," he said flatly. "Where is she?"

He licked his lips, eyes darting toward the door, toward the street where his dog's barking had faded into nothing. "I don't know," he said hoarsely. "I swear."

"Think carefully. Because if you lie to me, Vito, this ends badly for everyone you love."

"She's with Luciano Genovese. Both of them are," Vito said at last. His shoulders slumped. Years ago, he had been broader, louder, a man who still believed he had a say in how his life unfolded. Now he looked small on the couch, sweat beading along his hairline, hands clenched together.

Bastardi's smile vanished.

"No," he said. "Luciano traded the virgin with me. Except she escaped. And now my client wants his money back. I don't do returns." He tilted his head. "The girl?"

One of Bastardi's men raised his gun smoothly, the metal pressing against Vito's temple. Vito let out a broken sound that might have been a sob.

"I don't know," he babbled. "I don't know! I swear it. My other daughter called me this morning. She said she was safe. That's all she said. Nothing else."

Bastardi's eyes sharpened. "So your daughter knows where the virgin is."

Vito swallowed hard. "I... I guess so."

"And where is this other daughter?" Bastardi asked.

"She's also with Luciano."

That finally drew a reaction. "Why is she with him?"

"Because he bought her at your goddamned auction!" he shouted.

Bastardi's brain finally caught up, the pieces sliding together with a slow, ugly click. The auction night surfaced in his memory. The confusion. Luca's rage when he realized they had taken the wrong sister. Bastardi's jaw tightened, his lips curling back from his teeth.

"That son of a bitch double-crossed me," he spat.

Vito seized the opening, desperate. "Please," he begged. "I have nothing to do with it. I swear. I didn't plan any of this."

"Oh, you have plenty to do with it," Bastardi said.

He straightened. "Call your daughter. The one who called you this morning. Tell her to come here. Tell her it's an emergency."

Vito stared at him, horror flooding his face. "I can't—"

The gun pressed harder into his temple.

"You can," Bastardi said softly. "And you will."

Hands shaking violently, Vito scrambled for his phone. His fingers fumbled, missing the screen twice before he finally unlocked it. Bastardi took a seat across from him, relaxed now, one ankle resting over his knee.

As Vito dialed, Bastardi turned his head toward his men. "Move the cars away from the street," he said casually. "We are going to have some fun today, boys."

When Luca had offered to go shopping with Veronica, he had imagined something quick and transactional. Pick a few dresses. Swipe a card. Leave. Instead, he found himself slouched in a chair, planted in the middle of a high-end boutique. He had been there for hours. Literal hours. Watching Vee disappear into the changing room and reappear again and again, a revolving door of fabric, color, and attitude.

At some point, time had stopped meaning anything.

Luca's patience had thinned to a fragile thread. He nodded automatically now, like a dashboard ornament with a pulse. Yes. Beautiful. Perfect. Take it. Burn it. Whatever got them out of here faster. If buying the entire store would collapse the space-time continuum and release him from this upholstered purgatory, he would have done it without blinking.

His long legs were stretched out, one ankle crossed over the other, expensive loafers tapping lazily against marble floors. His jacket lay discarded beside him, dark hair pushed back, eyes half-lidded. A man feared across boroughs, bored to death by chiffon.

He was already drifting, head tilting back slightly, when a hand landed on his shoulder and shook him.

"Luca?" Vee called.

He blinked. Once. Twice. His eyes struggled to focus, pupils adjusting. "Yeah," he murmured automatically, gaze sweeping over her without registering anything. "It's gorgeous."

Vee burst out laughing. "This is what I wore from home, silly." She gestured down at herself, amused. "But we do have to go."

"My dad needs me," she added, quieter now. "Says he fell."

Luca straightened immediately, boredom evaporating.

"Okay," he said, already standing.

Anything was better than this place. Even seeing Vito Scalese's stupid, sweating face again was preferable to another hour of nodding at mirrors.

Luca shrugged back into his jacket, rolling his shoulders. He watched Vee hurry over to the attendant. The saleswoman smiled brightly, professional to her bones, promising everything would be delivered to the Genovese mansion by evening.

Luca led her out to the car, his hand resting lightly at the small of her back. He drove them to Vee's house. Luca parked the car.

"I'll wait for you," he said, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Go help your dad."

She turned to him. "You're not coming in?"

He shook his head once. "This is family. I'll be right here."

"Thank you," she said softly and hurried out of the car.

Luca stepped out onto the sidewalk. He watched her cross the yard, watched the way she slowed when she saw the little dog, crouching to pet it, murmuring something gentle. The animal leaned into her, tail flicking uncertainly. She gave it one last pat and went inside.

He exhaled slowly and looked down at the dog.

He had always had a thing for animals. People complicated everything. Animals did not. Their lives were simple, honest. Food. Water. Shelter. Sometimes a little love. No lies. No betrayals. Freedom lived in their eyes, even when they were chained.

He crouched and extended a hand. "Hey," he said quietly. "I never got your name last time we met."

The dog did not bark. It did not wag its tail. It leaned back slightly, body low, ears pinned. Luca frowned. He bent lower and patted the dog gently, fingers brushing through coarse fur. The animal trembled under his touch.

This was not excitement.

This was fear.

Luca straightened slowly, every nerve lighting up. He scanned the house. Curtains drawn. He turned his head and looked down the street. A couple of parked cars. No neighbors outside. No kids. No noise. Normal, if you ignored the way his gut twisted.

Chapter 78: You Feel It Too

He looked back at the dog. Its eyes were fixed on the front door now, body tense.

"Yeah," Luca muttered under his breath. "You feel it too, don't you."

His hand slipped under his jacket, resting where his weapon was. He had learned a long time ago to trust his instincts, especially when they came uninvited. Fear did not appear without reason. Dogs knew things. They smelled danger long before humans did. They heard what others ignored.

Luca took a step toward the house, then another. The dog whined softly, pacing, glancing between him and the door.

He put his hand on his gun and walked toward the front door. He knocked lightly. "Vee?"

He opened the door slowly, the hinges groaning in protest, and drew his gun. "Veronica?" Still nothing.

"Vito?" No answer. The familiar unease that had been gnawing at him coiled tighter in his chest. He moved inside cautiously, scanning every corner, every shadow.

Then he felt it before he saw it. The attack came from behind, a heavy weight, a rush of movement that his instincts screamed at him to counter. He jerked his elbow back instinctively, connecting with the intruder's jaw with a sickening crack. The man stumbled backward, a grunt of surprise and pain ripping from his throat.

Luca didn't want to fire his gun. Guns were loud, messy, and drew attention he did not want.

The next attacker came faster. Luca crouched low, the spring in his legs ready, and drew his pocket knife. A quick movement, stabbing both men in the thighs. They collapsed with curses and curses-turned-groans, weapons clattering uselessly to the floor. He kicked their guns far away from them.

He didn't waste a second, moving with the lethal grace of someone who had spent years making danger routine.

Before him now lay the living room. And there, standing like a shadow carved from ice, was Bastardi. Gun pressed against Vee's temple, another man standing beside him. Vito sat on the couch, frozen, sweat beading along his balding forehead.

Of course. Bastardi.

Luca's gaze flicked to Vee. She was shaking visibly, lips parted, hair falling in loose strands across her face.

Luca's jaw tightened. Every muscle in his body. He knew Bastardi had expected this to be easy, expected compliance. He had miscalculated.

And Luca would make him pay for that mistake, with every ounce of force he could summon.

Vee's eyes met his for a brief second. She trembled, yes, but she trusted him, entirely. He would not let her fall. Not now, not ever.

"Luciano. Surprised to see you here." Bastardi said. The gun was steady against Vee's temple, metal kissing skin, his finger relaxed on the trigger. "Are you the girl's personal escort now?"

Luca stepped fully into the room, shoulders squared.

"Bastardi," Luca said finally. "Think about what you are doing. Think deeply. Consider the consequences and take that gun off her."

Bastardi chuckled. "Imagine my surprise when I came looking for my escaped cargo and I find out you are playing house with this one here. The sister of my cargo." He leaned closer to Vee. "And then I realised you double crossed me. For a pussy."

Luca's jaw tightened. But right now, rage was a luxury he could not afford. He needed Bastardi sloppy, arrogant, distracted by his own sense of victory.

"I'm going to count to ten," Luca said. "Take that gun off her and point it at me. Because when I get to ten, you will have a knife in your hand and there will be a bullet hole in his forehead." He gestured casually toward the man beside Bastardi, a nervous soldier whose eyes were already betraying him.

He glanced at Vee again. Just a second. Long enough for her to see him. His eyes softened for her alone, a promise burning there. I see you. I've got you.

"I want the girl," Bastardi said, his grin widening, confidence swelling. "And maybe your slut here gets to keep breathing."

"You're not getting the girl. It is quite amazing that because you trade in women, you think you can stand up to me. Luciano Genovese." He took a step forward, daring him. "You, the Bastione bastard. To think I even considered transacting with you. If not for the fact that you are worth nothing but betrayal to your own blood, I would not touch you with a five foot pole, you cock sucking son of a bitch."

In the blink of an eye, Luca's hand moved. The knife left his fingers like it had been waiting for this moment all its life. Steel sang through the air and buried itself cleanly into Bastardi's wrist. The gun clattered to the floor as Bastardi screamed, pain finally reminding him he was mortal.

Everything exploded into motion.

Vee ducked instinctively.

Still refusing to fire his gun, Luca seized the sliver of opportunity, moving fast, shoulder slamming into the other man before the idiot could focus again. Bone met bone. The impact drove them both into the wall, a framed family photo shattering as Luca followed through, fist connecting with jaw, then temple.

The man went down hard, breath leaving him in a wet gasp, skull bouncing once against the floor before going mercifully still. Luca barely registered it. His focus had already snapped back to Bastardi.

That was the mistake.

Bastardi was bleeding, furious, unhinged. Pain had stripped him of strategy. He ripped the knife from his own wrist with a hoarse snarl, blood spraying across the couch, the rug. Before Luca could pivot fully, Bastardi lunged and drove the blade into Luca's side, just beneath the ribs, twisting as if he wanted to leave a signature.

Luca sucked in a sharp breath. Pain bloomed white-hot, stealing the air from his lungs. He staggered back, hand flying instinctively to the wound, warm blood already soaking through his shirt, slick against his palm. His vision tunneled, but he stayed upright. Stubborn bastard that he was.

"Luca!" Vee screamed.

She grabbed the heavy lamp from the side table, porcelain base cool and solid in her hands. She brought it down on Bastardi's head with a desperate cry. The lamp shattered on impact, ceramic and bulb exploding outward as Bastardi dropped, his body crumpling to the floor in a heap of blood and broken glass.

Chapter 79: You've Been Stabbed

"Luca!" she shouted again as she saw the dark red spreading beneath his shirt, blooming fast and merciless.

Vito, pale and shaking, finally moved. He scrambled to the floor, frantically kicking guns away from limp hands, dragging them out of reach. His breathing was loud, panicked, guilt dripping off him thicker than sweat.

Vee rushed to Luca's side, catching him as his knees threatened to give. She guided him into a chair, her hands trembling but firm, her mouth moving faster than her thoughts. Blood stained her fingers.

"No, no, no," she whispered, already digging through her bag, panic clawing up her throat. She yanked out her phone, fingers fumbling.

"What are you doing?" Luca asked.

"Calling 911," she snapped, tears streaking down her face now.

Luca let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh, though it hurt like hell. "Wrong number, darling."

He pulled out his phone with a shaking hand, unlocked it with his thumb, and pressed it into her palm. His blood smeared the screen. "Send two-one-two to Marco. Don't call. Just text it."

She stared at him, horrified. "You've been stabbed!"

"Yeah," he groaned, shifting slightly before immediately regretting it. His hand closed around the knife still buried in his side, fingers slick, jaw tightening as another wave of pain hit.

He turned his head toward Vito, eyes hard despite the pain. "I'm sure you have some vodka in this house, seeing as you are a fucking piece of shit!"

Vito nodded rapidly, bolting toward the kitchen.

Vee dropped to her knees in front of Luca, clutching his phone, her hands shaking so badly she nearly missed the keys. She sent the text. Two-one-two. Nothing else. A silent scream into the dark machinery of Luca's world.

She looked up at him then. His dark hair was damp with sweat, his face drawn tight, but his eyes were still on her, still sharp, still there.

A moment later Vito rushed back in, clutching a half-full bottle of vodka.

Luca snatched it from him, holding it out with a sharp tilt of his chin. "Open it," he ordered. Vito fumbled with the cap, twisting until it finally gave way. Luca lifted it, and drank deeply. The alcohol burned its way down his throat. He coughed once, then swallowed again, jaw flexing, before setting the bottle beside the chair.

Luca turned his head and found Vee staring at him. Her skin had gone pale, her lips parted like she was afraid to breathe too deeply. Panic sat in her eyes. She looked small in that moment, not weak, just terrified. Terrified of losing him.

"I didn't know you cared," he said softly, a crooked smile tugging at his mouth despite the pain.

"Stop kidding," she snapped. Tears clung to her lashes, threatening to spill.

"I'm not," he murmured, then sobered. He glanced down at the knife still embedded in his side, the handle slick with blood. "Listen to me. I need to pull this out. And when I do, it's going to bleed. A lot."

Her breath hitched.

"So you have to put on those bad ass pants I know you have," he continued, eyes locking on hers. "And you have to hold pressure. Hard. Don't let go. Just stall it until Marco gets here."

She nodded too fast, panic warring with determination. "Okay. Okay. I can do that."

She scrambled to her feet and grabbed the nearest towel from the hallway closet. She dropped back down beside him, knees hitting the floor.

Luca flexed his fingers around the knife. His teeth clenched.

He yanked the knife out.

Blood surged instantly, spilling over his fingers and soaking his shirt. Vee cried out, a broken sound torn from her chest, horror flashing across her face as she watched it happen. Her hands trembled violently.

"Now, Bambola," Luca said sharply. "Now."

She pressed the towel to his side with both hands, hard, just like he said. The fabric soaked through almost immediately, red blooming beneath her palms. She swallowed a sob and leaned in closer.

"I've got you," she whispered. "I've got you."

"Is that all you got?" Luca said through clenched teeth.

Vee sucked in a shaky breath and pushed harder against the wound, her arms trembling. The towel was already soaked through, blood warm and slick beneath her palms. Her jaw locked as she prayed silently. Marco. Hurry. Please hurry. The living room still held threats, unconscious men scattered.

"If this doesn't kill me," Luca continued, "Nonnina definitely will."

"What?" Vee snapped, eyes never leaving his wound.

"She hates it when I get stabbed or shot," he added.

Despite herself, a broken laugh escaped Vee's throat. "You're joking. You have to be joking."

"I wish," he murmured, eyelids fluttering for a fraction of a second before he forced them open again.

Vee swallowed hard, her throat tight. "I'm guessing," she said quietly, "this isn't your first time."

"No," Luca replied simply. "But it's the first time I'm bleeding out in your father's living room."

Before she could respond, the front door burst open. Heavy footsteps followed. Marco appeared in the doorway, expression grim, eyes scanning the scene in seconds. Relief hit Vee so hard her knees nearly gave out.

"Oh thank God," she breathed.

Marco moved aside immediately as a man stepped forward. He was at Luca's side instantly, gloving his hands, tools appearing by his side.

The doctor took over from Vee, assessing, fingers probing.

A few men followed Marco inside, already lifting bodies, collecting weapons, erasing evidence. This was Luca's world.

"I need to move him," the doctor said. "Somewhere flat. Clean. Now."

"My bedroom," Vee said immediately, not even thinking, already shifting her weight to help.

Together, they moved Luca, his arm slung loosely over Vee's shoulder. He was heavy, solid muscle and blood and will, his breath warm against her neck. She felt his weight, felt the vulnerability he would never show anyone else. His hand tightened briefly in her shirt, a silent acknowledgment.

They laid him gently on her bed. The doctor went to work immediately, cutting Luca's blood-soaked shirt away, exposing the wound. Vee turned her face slightly.

Luca caught her hand before she could step away. "Watch," he murmured, lips pale.

Chapter 80: You Know His Blood Type

"I...I can't, Luca."

"This is not the first time," he said, "and this will not be the last time." His gaze locked on hers. "You have to learn what being in my world means." He tightened his grip on her hand and lifted it slightly. "Watch."

Vee's eyes dropped. Blood smeared her fingers, darker now, tacky as it dried. Her stomach churned. She followed the line of her own hand to where the doctor worked. The doctor didn't look at them. He didn't care about the emotions cracking open in the room. This was routine to him.

Luca felt her shaking. He shifted his hand, threading his fingers through hers. "Hey," he murmured. "I'm fine."

It was a lie and they both knew it. He was bleeding. He was weak. He was human. But Vee nodded anyway. She held on to his hand.

Why does this hurt so much?

Why did her chest feel like it was splitting open? Why did her heart shatter at the first flicker of pain crossing his face, at the tight inhale he tried to hide? Why did the thought of him dying terrify her?

Her gaze drifted, unfocused, to the IV stand as the doctor prepared a blood transfusion.

When did he get inside me?

"You...you know his blood type?" Vee blurted suddenly. She looked at the doctor, then back at Luca.

Luca exhaled slowly, a faint, strained chuckle ghosting past his lips. "He is my doctor, Vee. The code you sent told Marco everything he needed to know." He squeezed her hand again. "He knows exactly what he's doing."

That should have reassured her. It didn't. Because what terrified her wasn't the competence in the room. It was the certainty settling in her bones.

This was his life.

Blood. Violence. And if she stayed, this would not be the last time she'd stand over him wondering if he would live.

Vee nodded then. Her shoulders sagged.

"Actually," Luca said, "I thought you would be relieved if I die."

Vee's head snapped up. She looked at him. "I once said that prayer," she admitted quietly.

The honesty startled even her. She didn't decorate it. There had been a time when Luca represented everything terrifying. A world that devoured girls like her sister and called it commerce. Back then, wishing him dead had felt right.

"And now?" Luca asked. He winced as the doctor pulled a stitch tight, jaw tightening reflexively, but his eyes never left hers.

"I don't want you hurt," she said.

That was it. Simple.

Luca smiled then. Progress, he thought dimly. Good progress. Worth bleeding for.

Time blurred after that. The doctor finished his work, murmuring instructions to Marco and the men stationed outside. Luca's breathing evened out as the medication took hold, his body finally surrendering to sleep. He looked younger. Beautiful.

It would be a while before he could be moved.

Vee rose quietly and stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She turned on the faucet and stared as water rushed over her hands, pink at first, then clear. Blood swirled down the drain in thin ribbons, stubborn where it clung beneath her nails. She scrubbed harder than necessary.

When she stepped back out, men stood guard at every angle, dressed in dark clothes, faces impassive. Bastardi and his men were gone, erased as efficiently as they had arrived. Somewhere, in some black hole, Bastardi would learn exactly how expensive his mistake had been.

Her father sat on the couch where Luca had left him, shoulders hunched, hands trembling faintly in his lap. He looked small. Older. Afraid.

She didn't blame him for calling her. Not truly. He had a gun to his head. He had panicked. He had chosen himself. The thought didn't shock her anymore. It settled into place with grim acceptance. But the certainty that followed was colder.

If it had been her.

If a gun had been pressed to her skull and someone had demanded Valentina in exchange, she would have died there. That was the difference between them. Strength.

But that was her burden to carry, not his.

Vee turned back toward the bedroom where Luca slept.

Then his phone began to vibrate.

She crossed the space quickly and picked it up from the bedside table. It was a video call from a Bianca.

Luca was unconscious. Marco was outside. Decisions, once again, were landing in her hands.

She hurried out of the room, the phone buzzing insistently in her grip, and found Marco in the hallway speaking quietly to one of the men. "I... I didn't know if it was important," Vee said, holding the phone out.

Marco took it instantly. His jaw tightened the moment he saw the name. He swiped to answer just as Vee turned to head back toward the bedroom.

"Marco?" The voice burst from the screen. "Where is my husband? What the hell are you doing with his phone?" The woman's face filled the screen. Beautiful. Dark hair sleek, makeup flawless, eyes burning with suspicion. "Julian told us you betrayed my husband. Where is he?"

My husband.

My husband.

The words echoed, again and again, bouncing violently inside her skull. Her feet stopped moving. The hallway seemed to tilt, the walls narrowing. She turned slowly, eyes wide, staring at Marco.

Husband.

"Mrs. Genovese," Marco said smoothly. "I'll have Luca call you as soon as he can. Have a good day, ma'am."

The screen went dark.

Marco lowered the phone slowly and finally looked up. That was when he saw Vee's face. The color had drained from it entirely, leaving her pale, eyes glassy, lips parted. Shock clung to her features.

Marco swore under his breath.

Luca didn't tell her?

She turned back toward the bedroom slowly. Luca slept on, unaware, breathing evenly, stitched together.

Nonnina, despite the tightness around her eyes and the way her hands trembled just slightly as she clasped her rosary, had prepared the recovery room long before Luca's car even turned into the gates. Marco had called her ahead of time. She did not need details. Nonnina felt danger in her bones before words ever arrived.

(I did it! I did it. Okay, yeah. i thought i would do it in two days but hey, i still beat the time.)