

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 81: No Need To Worry - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 81: No Need To Worry

Chapter 81: No Need To Worry

Nonnina stood at the entrance as Luca was wheeled in, her heart breaking. He looked smaller on the gurney, stripped of his armor, dark hair damp with sweat, skin sallow beneath the harsh lights. Her boy. Always her boy, no matter how much blood followed him home.

She reached out, brushed her fingers over his knuckles before the doctor and nurses closed in around him.

The room sealed itself off.

Authorized personnel only.

Vee stood just outside the threshold, the invisible line suddenly heavier than any locked door. She hadn't been told to leave. She hadn't been dismissed. She simply wasn't included. She swallowed hard, hands curling at her sides, and let out a slow breath. At least he was alive.

At least he was being cared for by people who knew exactly how to stitch him back together.

That would have to be enough.

She turned away before anyone could see her face crumble and walked back toward the smaller apartment tucked behind the mansion.

He was married.

Luciano Genovese was married.

God, she was a fool. A spectacular one. What had she been expecting exactly? That a man like Luca would orbit her forever, singular and obsessed, like she was some once-in-a-lifetime miracle?

She unlocked the door and stepped inside, the apartment greeting her with stillness.

What was she thinking would happen?

That she mattered?

Men like Luca didn't have room for mattering. They collected moments. Bodies. Women. They enjoyed the shine, the thrill, the way a woman looked at them before reality set in. Then they shelved them neatly, like trophies behind glass. Admired from time to time. Never touched again.

She dragged a hand down her face, anger bubbling up beneath the hurt. She had known better. Hadn't she? She'd seen his office. The women drifting in and out, polished and hungry, perfumed and disposable. She wasn't special. She wasn't different. She was just another distraction.

A fleeting thing.

That was all she was to him. A phase. A dangerous little indulgence during a turbulent time. And she had let herself believe otherwise because he looked at her like she was worth protecting. Because he asked who cared for her. Because he bled on her bed and held her hand while he did it.

Stupid. Stupid heart.

She sank onto the edge of the bed and stared at the floor, blinking rapidly as tears threatened but refused to fall. No. He hadn't lied exactly. He had just... not told her. And that felt worse somehow.

What made her think she would truly matter to a man whose life was built on secrets, blood, and chaos?

When Luca finally opened his eyes, the world came back in pieces. Light first. Then the dull, insistent ache stitched through his side. Then the quiet hum of machines. He blinked slowly, lashes heavy, and there Nonnina was.

She sat beside his bed. Every time this happened, and it had happened more times than Luca cared to count, she was there. Always. As dependable as pain. As loyal as blood. She used to joke that the grey threading her dark hair was entirely his fault, each silver strand born from a night she waited for a call of his death.

Her rosary slipped endlessly through her fingers, bead after bead worn smooth by decades of prayer and worry. Her lips moved silently, a private conversation with God.

"Nonni..." he croaked.

Her eyes flew open, red-rimmed and swollen from sleepless night spent bargaining with heaven. "Diavolino," she breathed, already on her feet, crossing the short distance to his bedside with surprising speed.

"Nonni, I'm fine," he rasped, attempting a smile that tugged painfully at his stitches. "I'm fine. Okay? No need to worry."

"Too late."

Luca chuckled weakly. He reached for her fingers. "Don't tell father."

Her grip tightened instantly. "Diavolino," she sighed. "You know what he will do if I don't tell him."

"He won't know if you don't," Luca said stubbornly.

"Luca..." Nonnina's shoulders slumped, exhaustion finally catching up with her.

"Please," he said. "Just this once. I... I do not want to draw attention to Veronica."

She nodded slowly. "Just this once."

"Thank you." He swallowed, throat dry. "Is Marco still here?"

"Yes," she replied, already turning toward the door. "I'll get him."

Moments later, Marco stepped in, closing the door behind him quietly.

"What's the situation?" Luca asked immediately, the haze gone, the calculating mind sliding back into place.

"Bastardi and his men are in holding," Marco said evenly. "Waiting for you."

"Vito?" Luca asked.

"At home," Marco replied.

"I want him in holding too."

Marco paused for half a breath. Just enough to register surprise. "Why?"

Luca's jaw tightened. "He led his own daughter into an ambush," he said. "Thank God I was there." His gaze flicked to the ceiling. "No one hurts her, Marco. No one."

It was a law.

Marco nodded immediately. "I will give instructions." Then, carefully, he added, "Also... your wife called. She wants to speak with you. Julian has arrived in Vienna, and I believe she heard about the issue with the exchange."

Luca let his head fall back against the pillow. "Great."

"Luciano..." Marco said.

"What?" Luca snapped, already irritated by the tone.

"Miss Scalese knows."

"She knows what?" Luca asked slowly.

"About Mrs. Genovese."

"Crap!" Luca barked, already ripping the IV from his arm and the wires attached to him. Blood welled instantly, dotting the sheets. He didn't even look at it. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, gritting his teeth as pain tore through his side.

"Where is she?" he demanded, breath tight.

"I believe she is still in her apartment," Marco said quickly. "No one has been allowed in or out since we arrived. Luca, I can bring her here. You need to stay in bed."

"Nonsense." He pushed himself upright, muscles screaming in protest, hospital gown hanging loosely off his broad shoulders. He had dragged himself out of worse.

"I need to see her," he said. "Get me some damn clothes."

Marco hesitated. "Luciano—"

Chapter 82: Don't Do This

Luca braced his hands on the edge of the bed, breathing through the pain.

He clenched his jaw. He would deal with Bastardi. He would deal with Vito.

But first, Veronica Scalese.

He straightened as much as his injured body would allow.

"I'll have clothes brought." Marco sighed knowing Luca wasn't going to listen.

By the time Luca eventually got to Vee's apartment, his body was staging a quiet rebellion. His lungs burned, each breath shallow. The medication still swam in his bloodstream, blurring the edges of the world, turning the hallway into a narrow tunnel that pulsed with light.

His left hand dragged along the wall for balance, fingers brushing cold plaster. Pain bloomed with every step, a reminder that he had no business being upright. Still, he moved forward.

Because he needed to get to her. Now. He needed to look Veronica in the face and tell her the truth. It did not matter.

When he reached her door, he pushed it open. His eyes found her immediately.

Vee was sitting by the window, knees drawn up slightly, her body turned toward the glass. Beyond it, the mansion loomed. She was watching it. Was she waiting for him?

She turned at the sound of the door, and shock cracked across her face. She shot to her feet. "Luca..."

He should move. He knew that. He should cross the room, close the distance, gather her into his arms and let his knees give out if they must. But if he moved now, even an inch, he knew his body would betray him. He would collapse. So he stayed where he was, standing in the doorway, jaw clenched to keep the pain from spilling out in sounds.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her feet rooted to the floor. She did not come closer. She did not step back. Instead, she built an invisible wall between them, brick by careful brick.

He saw it. God help him, he saw it clearly.

"Bambola..." he whispered. "Don't do this."

"What?"

Luca winced. He took another step toward her anyway, pride dragging his injured body forward. His knee threatened to buckle. His vision flickered. He refused to acknowledge either.

Vee swore under her breath and rushed to him. "You shouldn't be here, you stubborn knucklehead. What is wrong with you?" Her hands were suddenly everywhere, one at his elbow, the other braced against his chest. "Why are you here?"

He let her guide him to the nearest sofa, his weight sinking into the cushions with a low, involuntary groan. He slumped back.

"I should have told you," he said finally.

"What?"

"I know what you're doing," Luca said, forcing himself upright a little, ignoring the way pain flared white-hot along his side. "And I will not let you do it. We were good this morning, Veronica. We were good. We were in a good place. Whatever you learned, it changes nothing. It shouldn't change anything."

"Marco told you," she sighed, exhaustion leaking through her anger. She turned away from him, pacing once, then stopping by the armchair she never actually sat in.

"Marco tells me everything," Luca said automatically, then paused. His mouth twisted. "Well... at least he used to."

Vee exhaled slowly, folding her arms around herself. "You're right," she said quietly. "It doesn't change anything." She looked at him then, eyes resolute. "It just reminds me of boundaries I should have. Whether you're married or not."

"Fuck boundaries," Luca snapped. Pain stabbed through him instantly and he hissed, one hand flying to his side. "I don't want boundaries," he went on anyway. "I want you. I want this."

"Then define it," Vee shot back. "Define what I am to you, Luca." She gestured at him, at the IV bruise blooming on his arm, at the pallor beneath his tan. "And I would really prefer to have this conversation when you're not wincing every two seconds like you're about to pass out."

"You're mine. That's all there is to it," Luca said.

"I'm yours to do what with?" she asked quietly.

Luca opened his mouth, then closed it. His brows pulled together, frustration in his expression. "I... you..." He exhaled sharply, annoyed at himself. "I don't know," he admitted, and the honesty tasted strange. "I just know I want you with me."

She shook her head slowly, almost sadly. "As what, Luca? Define it. What will you call me? How will you introduce me to people? How do I introduce you to people?"

"Do we have to put a label on this?" Luca asked, irritation flickering. Labels meant permanence. Permanence meant consequences. Consequences meant the Genovese family eyes would be on her.

"Hence why the boundaries do have to be there," Vee replied immediately. "So I don't start fantasising about things I cannot have." She stopped herself, jaw tightening, breath catching. Her eyes dropped to the floor. "So I don't want too much."

"Want whatever you want, Bambola," he said fiercely. "I'll get it to you. I'll give it to you. Tell me what you want."

"Okay," she said. "I walked straight into that one." She rubbed her palms together. "I don't know."

He sagged back slightly, breath shaking, exhaustion finally clawing its way past stubbornness. "So let's just be, Vee," Luca said. "Let's... just be."

"We can't just be. I'll do what I have to do to give you what I owe you. For saving my sister. For winning the auction on me." Her shoulders squared, spine straightening. "Just tell me what I have to do, and I will do it. It doesn't matter what it is. I'm ready."

Luca stared at her, realising that she was offering herself like payment, not choice.

He saw it then. The exact moment he lost her. This one hurt differently, because it came as resignation instead of anger. She wasn't fighting him anymore. She was retreating.

He had been so close. So fucking close.

Fuck it.

"Vee..." Her name left his mouth like a plea, stripped of authority, stripped of command.

"I'll go get Marco," she said quickly, already moving, already halfway gone.

Chapter 83: We Can Fix This

She needed air. Space. Distance. He could feel it the way one feels cold before the wind hits. She needed to escape the conversation.

He watched her go, watched the door close behind her. Luca leaned back against the sofa, eyes closing as he exhaled a long, tired breath that dragged pain through his ribs.

He should have waited.

If he had known he would meet a woman like Veronica Scalese, he would have waited. He would have endured his father's pressure longer. He would have been more stubborn. More defiant. He would have told the old man no and meant it. He would have delayed the marriage, delayed the convenient union.

But he hadn't known.

The timing mocked him.

Marco stayed busy when Luca was indisposed. Specifically, he worked on Bastardi's men.

Luca had been very clear.

Keep them alive but torture them till an inch of their life. He wants the satisfaction of killing them himself.

They had touched Luca's woman. That alone sealed their fate.

So Marco went above and beyond.

Marco was thorough. He was creative. He was patient.

Every scream echoed Luca's rage. Every drop of blood was interest accrued. Marco made sure they understood why this was happening.

So when Luca arrived in the cell and Marco caught the slight, lazy lift of his lips, he knew instantly that Luca approved. Bastardi's men were tied to chairs in a neat row, faces swollen, lips split, bodies already ruined by Marco's meticulous work. They looked up when Luca entered, eyes glassy, hope flaring for half a second before dying when they saw the gun in his hand.

Luca did not speak. He did not posture. He did not threaten. He simply raised the gun and shot the first man in the forehead, point blank. The second man screamed, a wet, animal sound, before Luca shot him too. The third tried to beg, words tumbling over each other, but Luca was already pulling the trigger again. Three shots.

Three bodies slumped forward, blood painting the floor in thick, dark arcs.

The fear in Bastardi's eyes was exquisite. Bastardi was chained to a steel chair bolted into the floor, his expensive suit torn and stained, his carefully groomed hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. Luca turned slowly toward him, breathing in deeply.

"Bastardi..." Luca said softly, almost fondly.

"Luciano, think about this," Bastardi blurted out. "We can fix this. We can make a deal."

"I am thinking about this," Luca replied. "I am. You put a gun on what's mine. You threatened what's mine. Tell me something, Bastardi. What do you do to the men who harm the girls you sell and pimp out?"

Bastardi swallowed hard. "I kill them."

Luca nodded slowly. "So answer me this. Do you deserve anything but death?"

Bastardi's bravado collapsed completely then. His shoulders sagged. His eyes darted to the bodies beside him, then back to Luca. "Luciano, I didn't know. I swear. I didn't know she mattered to you."

"You didn't know," he repeated. "People lied. Ignorance isn't bliss, Bastardi.." He leaned in closer, his breath warm against Bastardi's face. "It fucks you up. It brings you closer to death. And right before the end, the devil stares you straight in the eye."

"I'm sorry," Bastardi whispered.

"I should kill you. I want to kill you. I would kill you if your death would keep her safe." He stood in front of Bastardi. His gun hung loosely in his hand, barrel pointed toward the floor, but the threat of it filled the cell more completely than the stench of blood ever could. "But it won't," he continued, tilting his head slightly, studying Bastardi the way one studied a flaw in marble. "Your death would kick up dust I do not want. Eyes where I don't need them."

Bastardi whimpered, his bravado long gone. "So here is what is going to happen," Luca said patiently. "You will limp out of here. And if you come an inch near her or her sister, if I even hear a whisper of your shadow brushing against her existence, I will pay your brother a visit. I will tell him everything. I will hand your empire to the police wrapped in a neat little bow. Trust me," he added, "I have been itching to do that for a very long time."

"I promise," Bastardi sobbed, nodding frantically. "I will stay away from her. I swear on my life. On everything."

"Good," Luca said simply.

He straightened, lifted the gun one last time, and without warning shot Bastardi in the leg. The crack of the gunshot was followed by a scream. Bastardi collapsed sideways in the chair, veins bulging, blood pouring freely. Luca watched him writhe. "I did tell you you would limp out of here," he remarked dryly.

He turned on his heel and walked out of the cell. Marco fell into step behind him immediately, already calculating cleanup, logistics.

"Let him go," Luca said over his shoulder.

"Yes, boss," Marco replied without hesitation.

He had spared Bastardi not out of mercy, but strategy. Because keeping her safe mattered more than indulging his rage.

"You realise that by letting him go, you just announced to the world that you have a weakness."

"I dare anyone," Luca said evenly, fingers flexing once at his side, "to breathe heat around her. I would kill the devil himself for her and not lose a minute of sleep." He

glanced back, eyes sharp, mouth curving just enough to be dangerous. "My next guest?"

"He's being brought into your office," Marco answered.

"Good."

Luca entered his office and lowered himself into the chair behind the desk. The movement pulled at his side, a dull reminder of the knife wound, but it was healing.

Veronica had chosen distance. The pizza parlor had become her refuge, long hours, an easy excuse to avoid the mansion and him. She left before dawn, came back long after midnight, her world shrinking deliberately so she wouldn't have to look at his. Luca had given her space. But patience had limits.

Enough was enough.

He picked up his phone and typed quickly, decisively.

Dinner date tonight. Dress up.

The office door opened moments later. Marco shoved Vito inside. The older man stumbled, caught himself on the edge of the desk, then straightened, eyes darting everywhere except Luca's face. He looked smaller, shoulders slumped, skin greyed. This was not a man built for courage.

This was a man who survived by choosing himself every time.

Compared to Bastardi and his men, Vito had been treated kindly. Clean room. Food. Water. Luca needed his mind sharp, uncluttered by pain.

"Scalese," Luca said, folding his hands on the desk, "how is the detox going?"

His skin looked sallow under the office lights, sweat clinging to his hairline. He nodded too quickly. "Uh... uh... fine. Fine," he stammered, licking his lips. "Thank you for the accommodations."

"I don't know if anyone has told you," he said mildly, "but for a girl as pure as Veronica, you are a pretty shitty father."

Vito's shoulders sagged. "I know," he said hoarsely. "I know." He leaned forward, desperation leaking into his voice. "I made mistakes. I was weak..."

Luca lifted a single hand.

"Save it. I am not interested in the origin story of your failures." He leaned back in his chair. "It has become abundantly clear that you are the bane of her existence. You are not a father. You are a liability."

Vito swallowed hard, eyes darting to the door, to anywhere but Luca's face.

"If it were anyone else," Luca continued, "I would have you killed and move on with my day. But I will make you an offer." He leaned forward now, elbows on the desk, eyes boring into Vito's skull. "You will leave town. Immediately. You will not contact your daughters. You will have nothing to do with them."

Vito's mouth opened. "Luca—"

"You will leave the pizza parlor to Veronica and Valentina," Luca went on, cutting him off without raising his voice. "Lord knows she has worked there more than you ever have. You will sign everything over. You will disappear."

Vito's eyes filled, but Luca did not look away. He wanted him to feel it. The severing. The amputation of the only things that had ever mattered, even if Vito had never known how to hold them without crushing them.

"Luca..." Vito whispered again.

Luca's gaze sharpened. "One question," he said, tilting his head slightly. "It has been nagging me." His fingers tapped once on the desk, a quiet, lethal rhythm. "You clearly do not care about the pizza parlor. You ran it into the ground. You drank the profits. You gambled the rest. So tell me why you wanted your competitor, Paul Marino, dead."

"And don't lie to me, Vito," Luca added softly. "I will know."

"I do care about it," Vito said quickly. He stepped closer to the desk, hands fluttering. "He wanted to buy the shop. I... I was desperate. The shop wasn't doing too well. I collected half the money. Half. I thought I could fix it. I thought if I put the money back into the shop, give it a facelift, that I'd be able to replace what I took."

Chapter 84: Get Out Of Town

"But you didn't invest the money in the shop," Luca said calmly. "Of course you didn't. Well, like I said, get out of town. Tonight."

"Luca..." Vito stepped forward again, palms raised, fingers shaking now, the plea written all over his hunched frame. "Please. I made mistakes, yes, but—"

"I am not arguing this with you." Luca rose to his feet, pain flaring briefly through his side, his jaw tightening as he mastered it. "Veronica belongs to me now. Valentina deserves a better life than being on the run from your stupidity and your debts."

"I will send you the funds you will need. Enough to disappear. Enough to start over somewhere far away from here. But hear me clearly, Vito." He stepped closer. "You will disappear. You will not look back. You will not sniff around their lives. You will not get curious. You will get the fuck out."

Vito opened his mouth. The look on Luca's face shut him down instantly. It was the look of a man who had already decided how far mercy extended and where it ended.

"Of course," Vito whispered. He nodded stiffly, pride finally crushed under the weight of inevitability. He turned and left the room, shoulders sagging, his shadow shrinking as the door closed behind him.

Nonnina, despite knowing the romance was doomed, was far too excited to care. She had set up dinner in the garden. The vegetable beds stood proudly behind the long, low table, rows of tomatoes heavy and red, basil perfuming the evening air, zucchini leaves broad and unapologetic.

Luca had once insisted it was supposed to be a flower garden. Roses. Lilies. Anything ornamental.

She had ignored him completely.

The table glowed. LED lights were woven delicately along its edges, casting halos over porcelain plates and crystal flutes. A pathway of red roses trailed around the edges of the area, petals lush, leading to a patterned rug spread across the floor. The rug was thick, indulgent underfoot.

At its center, Nonnina had placed a body pillow, practical even in romance, angled just so Luca could hurt his side.

The maids moved, arranging the meal. Pasta still steaming, the sauce rich and slow-cooked. Champagne placed in an ice bucket. Chocolates sat glossy and dark, strawberries rinsed and blushing, their green tops still clinging. It was too much and somehow not enough. An offering. An apology. A plea.

When Luca arrived at the door to Vee's apartment, he looked every inch the gentleman he pretended not to be. Dark trousers, crisp blue shirt, open at the collar. His hair was combed back, jaw clean-shaven. He knocked once, then opened the door and stepped inside.

Veronica stood in an A-line mini red dress. The fabric hugged her waist before flaring slightly. Her legs were bare. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders, her lips painted just enough to be dangerous.

"Hi," she said.

Luca smiled because anything else would have betrayed him. He stepped closer, heart misbehaving in his chest, pounding too fast, too loud. What was it about this woman that stripped him bare without touching him? He had faced guns with steadier hands. He had ordered men to die without blinking.

And yet here he was, unraveling because she existed in red.

"So," Vee said, forcing her gaze away from his face, reaching for her phone on the sofa. "Where are we going?"

There it was. The wall. Still standing. Carefully mortared with disappointment and self-preservation.

"Nowhere," he said.

She paused, fingers stalling around her phone, eyes flicking back to him, suspicious, guarded.

"But," Luca continued, "I owe you a dinner date. So I had something prepared. And well..." His mouth curved. "Nonnina might have gone a little insane."

"She didn't have to." Vee said. She kept her eyes forward.

Luca reached for her, fingers warm, sliding gently through her hair. "Can you pretend to forgive me tonight, Bambola?"

Vee swallowed. "I'm not mad at you."

"Tell that to your face."

"I'm not mad, I promise." Her eyes betrayed her.

"So why have you been avoiding me for the past few days?"

"Just busy at the shop. I have to keep things going." The excuse was thin, and they both knew it. The shop was her refuge.

Luca leaned in to kiss her. His mouth brushed hers. She didn't pull away, but she didn't meet him either. She stayed still. The frost between them did not crack. "Come on."

He laced his fingers through hers and tugged gently, leading her out of the apartment and through the mansion's courtyard. Vee walked beside him, heels clicking softly.

They stopped at the space Nonnina had set up for them. Flowers crowded the air with sweetness. Soft fabric draped over furniture. It was romance done right.

Vee stood there, stunned despite herself. No one had done anything like this for her. No one had ever looked at her and thought, she deserves effort. "It's beautiful," she murmured, and the sadness crept into her voice before she could stop it.

She turned to him, eyes shining for all the wrong reasons. "What... what is this, Luca? What's the point? You want to have sex with me, you don't have to try so hard. I will have sex with you. I told you that already. Don't... you're making this hard."

Sex was easy. Romance was dangerous.

"I'm guessing by all that rant, you are thoroughly impressed." Luca smiled.

It was an infuriating smile. Soft at the edges, crooked in a way that suggested he found her emotional unraveling both endearing and inevitable. "I didn't do this," he added lightly, gesturing around the space. "You have Nonnina to thank. And I'm sure she would faint on the spot if you offered her sex as payment."

"I'm not joking."

"Neither am I." The humor slipped from his face so quickly it felt like a door slamming shut. Luca stepped closer. "Don't you get it yet, Vee? It's you. It should be you."

"You once said you couldn't love me," he continued. "That no one could love me. I heard you."

Chapter 85: I Am Obsessed With You

He took her hand and pressed it flat against his chest. "It doesn't mean my heart stopped functioning," he said. "I am obsessed with you. And I would do anything to keep you. Anything for you to revolve around me."

Vee yanked her hand back. "You're married, Luca."

"It's only a formality," he said immediately. "I left Vienna two hours after the wedding. I haven't seen her in almost a year."

"It doesn't change the fact that you are married. And I am the one on the outside. I will be the woman people whisper about. The one they point at and call a home wrecker."

"And I will pluck out the tongue of anyone who dares even think it," Luca shot back instantly.

There was no hesitation in him. No pause where morality or optics might have crept in. He stepped closer, lowering his head so his gaze locked onto hers with brutal focus. "Come on," he added, softer now but no less dangerous. "Let's just be tonight, Bambola. Can we do that?"

Veronica didn't answer him. Words felt too fragile, too easy to break. Instead, she moved forward, slipped out of her shoes, and stepped onto the cushioned carpet Nonnina had laid out.

She turned back to him, eyes scanning his posture, the way he favored one side without admitting it. "Do you need help sitting?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Luca said, already bending. He eased himself down with care, jaw tightening for half a second as he guarded the muscles around his wound. Vee sat beside him a moment later, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

He poured the wine with steady hands, handed her a glass, their fingers grazing briefly.

"Something surprising happened today," Vee said, staring into her wine instead of at him.

"Oh?" Luca replied, lifting his glass and taking a measured sip.

"My dad came into the shop," she continued. "He said he was leaving town. Tonight. I'm guessing you had something to do with that."

"Good riddance," he said.

"Luca." She turned fully toward him now, hurt flaring hot. "He's my father."

"He should have acted like one," Luca shot back.

"You can't just..." She broke off, frustration tangling her words. "You can't just decide things like that. You can't bulldoze through people's lives because you think you know what's best."

"I can and I will," Luca snapped, the softness gone completely now. "Vito has always been a threat to you. Always. He is lucky I let him leave alive."

"You need to come to terms with this," he continued. "Whoever breathes wrong around you, I am going to fuck up."

"Luca! I am a grown woman! I can handle myself!" Vee shouted.

Luca turned those fiery eyes on her, the same eyes men feared. "Trust me when I say this," he said, "anyone, anyone who hurts you or is involved with hurting you will have a

standoff with the devil." His jaw flexed, a muscle jumping. "Hate it or like it, I don't care. I can't help it."

He meant it.

"And what if it's you hurting me?"

Luca froze in pain.

"I..." His breath hitched, just slightly. Enough that she noticed. Enough that it almost undid her. The idea clearly gutted him. "How... why would you even think that? I would never. I'd give my life to keep you safe."

"Like you did at my house?" she shot back. "Getting stabbed?"

She set her glass down. Then she climbed over him, knees pressing into the rug, her dress riding up her thighs. Luca sucked in a sharp breath as she straddled him.

Her fingers went to his shirt, yanking it open. Fabric fell away to reveal hard muscle, olive skin, and the faint shadow of bruising that still lingered beneath the surface. Her hand went straight to the wound, fingers pressing lightly where the knife had nearly ended him. The skin there was healing fast, but the memory of blood was still fresh.

"How many times," she demanded, "will you throw yourself in front of a knife?"

"As many as it takes," he said quietly. "As long as you're standing after."

His hands closed over her fingers, pressing them deeper into the tender heat of his wound. Luca's jaw locked so hard a vein jumped along his temple, his breath slowing. Pain flickered across his face, then vanished behind that iron discipline he wore.

Vee gasped, panic flaring instantly. "What are you doing?" Her instinct screamed at her to pull away, to stop this madness. She tried to snatch her hand back, but Luca tightened his grip, guiding her fingers, pressing deeper.

"Showing you," he said quietly, "that as long as it's you, I swallow the pain."

Her chest constricted. "And when you die," she demanded, fear cracking through her anger, "who will keep me safe then?"

He met her gaze without blinking. "Then I better make sure I don't die."

She pulled free at last, scrambling away from him. Her hands trembled as she turned to the table, lifting lids, focusing on steam and plates and food.

"Just fuck me and set me free, Luca," she said bluntly. "This is not healthy."

She shimmied farther away, kneeling by the table, forcing herself to care about pasta and sauce and forks instead of the man who had just proven he would bleed quietly for her. She busied herself serving food.

"That's not going to happen," Luca replied evenly.

She didn't look at him. "You're like a dog with a bone," she muttered, scooping pasta onto both plates with more force than necessary.

He huffed a soft laugh. "Like I said, obsessed."

She finally glanced at him then, expecting smugness. Instead, he was watching her. His shirt still hung open.

"I never did say," he continued, "or ever tell you just how beautiful you are, Vee. And I think you know it."

Her hand stilled mid-motion. She scoffed.

"I've seen a lot of women. Power dresses. Perfect faces. Empty eyes. You walk into a room and it changes temperature. You don't even notice."

Chapter 86: I Don't Marry Married Men

"Wouldn't that make me arrogant?" she asked, arching a brow at him. Veronica had never looked at herself the way men looked at her. She had grown up behind flour-dusted counters and hot ovens.

"No," Luca said, leaning back on one hand. "You hide your beauty deliberately under that stupid pizza T shirt and those tragic jeans."

"Tragic?" she laughed, genuinely this time. "They are practical."

"They are criminal," he corrected smoothly. "It's like you are trying so hard to dim yourself. When you should shine."

She placed his plate in front of him. "Eat. And stop trying so damned hard to be romantic."

"I'm not trying," he muttered. "It's involuntary around you."

She rolled her eyes but sat beside him, folding her legs neatly beneath her on the plush rug. The LED lights cast a warm glow over her red dress, turning her skin honeyed and luminous. The vegetable garden behind them, stubbornly green and fragrant, felt like a rebellion against the violence that clung to his world. Basil leaves and rosemary swayed gently in the night breeze.

They ate.

She talked.

About the pizza parlour. The way customers had started drifting to newer chains. About how the oven needed repairs and how her father had left unpaid debts.

Luca didn't interrupt. He watched the way her hands moved when she spoke, the way her eyes lit up despite exhaustion. She loved that shop. Not because it was profitable. But because it was theirs. Flour on her cheek. Childhood memories in the brick walls.

After they finished, he wiped his hands and reached into his pocket.

"Come here," he said quietly, spreading his thighs slightly to make space between them.

She eyed him suspiciously. "What's that?"

He held up a small velvet jewelry box.

"You are not about to propose, are you? Because I will have to remind you, I don't marry married men."

"I'm never going to hear the end of that, will I?" Luca laughed. It carried relief in it. Relief that she was here. Relief that she was breathing. Relief that he could still touch her.

"Nope," Vee replied easily. "I'm a glorified side chick." She shifted and settled between his legs, her back pressed to his chest.

Luca's smile faded just slightly. He hated that word on her tongue. Hated the idea that she saw herself reduced to something disposable. Something temporary. Something shameful.

He opened the velvet box carefully.

The necklace caught the soft LED glow instantly, scattering violet and rose light. The diamond was bold. A purplish pink stone cut in a teardrop shape, suspended in delicate white gold.

Vee's breath caught. "What's this for?" she asked quietly.

Luca unclasped it, letting the chain slide through his fingers before lifting it behind her neck.

"Don't worry," he murmured. "It's not bribery. It's more for your safety."

The clasp clicked shut against her skin.

"Do not ever take this off," he added. "There's a tracking chip in it."

She went still in his arms. "So you want to know where I am at all times?"

He rested his chin lightly near her shoulder. "I promise I will only try to locate you if you're in danger."

That was the truth.

Vee reached up, fingers brushing the pendant. It was cool against her collarbone. Heavy enough to remind her it was there. Beautiful enough to distract from the meaning behind it.

"It's beautiful," she said softly. "Thank you."

He tightened his arms around her waist slightly. "When I saw Bastardi hold that gun to your head...I had only one prayer. And I am not a praying man."

She listened.

"Let me get to her in time."

His fingers traced slowly down her arms, then back up again.

"I felt fear I never felt before," he admitted.

"You have to promise me to be more careful, Vee," he continued, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck. "If that is the only gift you ever give me, I'll take it. Be aware of your surroundings. Be alert. Always."

She leaned back into him slightly, absorbing the weight of his fear.

She covered his hands with hers where they rested at her waist.

"Luca?" Vee whispered.

"Hmmm...." He answered, as his lips traced her shoulder in slow kisses. Each press of his mouth made her shiver, and a small sigh escaped her. His touch was fire and ice all at once.

"Do you love me?"

"I don't know what love is." He continued to trail kisses along her back.

"Fair enough." Vee's laugh was soft, shaky but it carried a flicker of amusement.

His hands rose, cupping her breasts. She placed her hands over his, pushing lightly. But his hands stayed firm, immovable as stone.

"Why do you keep fighting me?"

"I'm not fighting you. I just want you to take it easy, you are still injured, remember?" She didn't want him reckless, didn't want him reopening his stitches while she held her tongue because she'd fallen for the impossible man who never knew how to love safely.

"I'll pleasure you, Bambola, even if I was bleeding out on the street, with one leg severed."

"Jesus Christ, you paint the most graphic detail." Her voice snapped even as his fingers toyed with her nipples through the thin fabric of her dress. The sensation was electric, torturous in its intimacy, and she could feel her resolve slipping. He continued his slow, merciless ritual of kissing her back, nuzzling her neck, and grazing his lips over her ears, each touch igniting a storm behind her ribs.

"Pass me one ice cube in the bucket," he instructed. Vee stretched slightly and handed him the ice.

Luca took it, rolling it between his fingers before pressing it to her heated skin. It was cruel, and yet intimate, a reminder of how he inhabited the world in extremes and pulled her in with him.

Vee was done fighting him. Every nerve, every piece of her resistance had been worn down by the relentless heat of his touch and the dangerous magnetism he radiated. With a soft, shuddering sigh, she finally let herself relax, sinking against him. Her head rested on the left side of his chest, right over the steady thrum of his heartbeat, she let herself just be in this chaotic intimacy.

Chapter 87: Pull Your Underwear Down

Luca's fingers traced the edge of the ice across her skin, the cold shocking against her warmth in delicious contradiction. He ran it slowly up and down her neck, across her collarbones, over the length of her arms. Then, with the same teasing calculation, he slid the cube over the soft curves of her thighs, positioning her so that her feet were planted firmly on the ground, rooting her in the moment while he dominated the space around her.

Every inch of her skin that felt the ice was suddenly alive, vibrating with heat and a raw, urgent need she couldn't contain.

"Luca..." Vee gasped. Her body was betraying her, craving him even as her mind screamed caution.

"Pull your underwear down, sweetie," he murmured, a command that was velvet-soft, slicing through the fog of sensation he had conjured. She obeyed immediately, shimmying out of the lace material.

He pressed the ice to her core, sliding it between her folds with a meticulous rhythm, teasing her up and down. Vee's shivers became tremors as his fingers traced her most sensitive places, her hands gripping his thighs to remind herself she wasn't dissolving entirely into him.

Her back arched instinctively, chasing the pleasure he offered and yet trying to resist the complete surrender he demanded.

Letting go of the ice cube, one finger entered her, then two, then three, each a silent assertion of his dominance and knowledge of her body. She writhed against him, caught between ecstasy and the pang of emotional vulnerability he provoked. He whispered in a low, dark murmur that brushed against her ear, "I like it when you get wet before I've even started. Tells me how much your body craves my touch."

"Keep going, Luca..." she breathed out.

He teased her without pause, drawing her closer with each subtle stroke, back arching away from him in a dance of submission and defiance. She was running away from him in every arch and curve, chasing the pleasure he wielded, and yet there was no escape from the storm he had ignited in her body.

Every inch of her skin remembered his hands, every nerve hummed with the ache of desire, every breath was a silent acknowledgment that Luca was both her torment and her sanctuary, the one who could make her surrender so completely that she almost forgot the world outside.

Even as his fingers worked with the precision of someone who knew exactly how to bend her, a flicker of her mind—the part that still feared losing herself—remained sharp, and she realized how dangerously addictive this was.

"Make me cum, Luca. Please."

"Do you trust me?" His hand drifted to her neck.

If he had asked her to walk into the fire with him right then, to tumble willingly into chaos, she would have said yes without hesitation. Her entire body shivered as she nodded, heart hammering, her pulse a wild drum against her ribs. She trusted him, all of him, even as every rational thought screamed that she was about to give herself over completely.

"Always use your words, Bambola. Do you trust me?" he asked again.

"Yes...yes..." Her back arched against him instinctively, skin flushed and glistening, every nerve screaming, every muscle taut and alive. Her hair clung to her shoulders, small curls sticking to her jawline as her body wrung itself out beneath his hands.

Luca's other hand tightened at her neck, squeezing until she gasped for breath. The sensation was exquisite and terrifying, every nerve ending alight as he manipulated the fine line between restriction and pleasure. Her breath caught, her lungs a battlefield of need and surrender.

The combination of his grip, his touch, and the way he had her pressed to him made her body tremble violently, riding the edge he held her at.

Vee squeezed her eyes shut, nails digging into his arm as she clung to him, her breath rattling in her chest. The heat pooling low in her belly twisted, knotted, and stretched taut under the pressure of his fingers. Stars seemed to explode behind her eyelids, each gasp a raw chord of sensation, her mind scrambling to process pleasure, panic, and the intoxicating domination that held her so completely.

He sensed her reaching the edge and drove her closer, the hand at her neck tightening harder. "Luc..." she choked out, a fragmented plea that shattered as her body convulsed, releasing a hot, desperate wave against his fingers and the rug beneath them.

Her chest heaved, limbs trembling, and she held onto him, the mixture of suffocation and sensation creating a storm that left her trembling and weak in his arms.

Luca's grip eased at the very last second, releasing the pressure, but his hands remained on her as she rode the aftershocks, every shiver of pleasure still rippling through her body. The rug beneath them was damp.

Every breath she drew was shallow and unsteady, her pulse pounding in her ears. She had given herself over entirely, and he had held the line between danger and ecstasy perfectly, leaving her both undone and tethered, trembling in the eye of the storm they had created together.

"Good girl..." he murmured. His hand lingered at her waist, holding her close, and the other rubbed small, possessive circles along her back. "Such a good girl, Bambola."

Vee's chest rose and fell rapidly, trying to catch her breath, but the waves of sensation still pulsed through her, leaving her feeling exposed, raw, and undeniably alive. She looked down at herself, mortified at the slick proof of her surrender pooling between them. "What the fuck was that?"

"Pleasuring you, the devil's way," he said, the corner of his lips lifting in a dark smirk that made the hairs on her arms stand on end. "That's the prettiest orgasm I have ever seen." He leaned slightly, brushing a shadowed kiss along her temple. "But it's nice to know just how much you trust me."

He shifted, adjusting the cushions behind him, and lay back, pulling her against him. His strong arms cradling her in a cocoon that made her feel weightless and tethered all at once.

(This is to 100 power stones. Not there yet but already going to bed. Let's move to 200 people. We can do it)

Chapter 88: You Are A Sadist

"So you're really not going to fuck me, Luca?" she asked, tilting her head to meet his gaze.

"I am going to," he said slowly, "but not for the wrong reasons. Not until you go on your knees and beg me to."

"So you want to humiliate me," she whispered. Her fingers traced the outline of his biceps.

"Is what you just felt humiliation?" he asked, tilting his head, the smirk dark and knowing, his eyes glinting with amusement and challenge.

"No." She had been undone, and yet she hadn't felt humiliated; she had felt seen, exposed in a way that left her trembling and terrified and completely addicted.

"Then no," he said. "I'm going to take us both places we've never been before. I'm going to make it beautiful, inspired—but you will beg for that level of pleasure, my sweet. I love it when you beg."

There was fear and anticipation swirling in her, but beneath it all was an intoxicating pulse of surrender, of trust, of desire so sharp it left her dizzy.

Her body still trembled with the memory of the orgasm he had drawn from her, and yet the promise in his words ignited a deeper, darker flame. She wanted him. She feared him. She craved him. And every instinct in her body screamed that she would do whatever it took to feel that storm again, to trust him fully, to surrender entirely, even when it scared her to the bone.

"You are a sadist," Vee sighed. She shifted closer, curling into him. Her cheek rested over his heart again, listening to that steady, arrogant rhythm.

Luca's chest vibrated with a low chuckle. "Don't worry. You'll get more creative with the names as time goes on." His fingers dragged lazily up and down her spine. "And I will keep punishing you. It's what makes us so explosive together."

She closed her eyes and let herself drift, imagining a different version of this world. A version where there were no walls between them, no blood staining Luca's knuckles, no enemies lurking in the dark corners of his life. Just Luca and Vee. Maybe arguments about groceries instead of life and death.

In that dream, his hands weren't weapons. They were just hands.

In that dream, he didn't sleep with a gun under his pillow.

The next morning, Vee pushed open the door of the pizza shop and froze.

There was a line.

Not the usual trickle of neighborhood regulars. Not the two or three delivery drivers lingering near the counter. No. There was an actual line, stretching to the door, people checking their phones, murmuring, impatient.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked as she rushed behind the counter, tying her apron with fumbling fingers.

Rosa looked like she'd just come back from battle. Her dark curls were frizzing out of their bun. "I don't know!" she snapped. "They just started coming. We don't just have walk-ins, the delivery orders are insane too. Tony is buried in dispatch orders."

Tony, red-faced and sweating behind the computer, shot Vee a desperate look. Vee hurried into the kitchen to find the ovens roaring and the pizza chef dabbing at sweat.

This didn't make sense.

This was viral-video, influencer-shoutout, miracle-on-Elm-Street level traffic.

Then it hit her.

Last night, she had talked about the shop's struggles.

Vee stared at the growing crowd.

What did he do this time?

Did he buy advertising? Did he threaten someone? Did he make a call that bent the algorithm of the city to his will? With Luca, it could be anything. He operated in shadows she only half understood. He moved pieces on boards she didn't even know existed.

And that terrified her.

Because part of her thrilled at the idea that he had done this for her. That he had woken up and decided her small, struggling shop would not struggle anymore.

But another part of her hated the implication.

If he could flood her business overnight, what else could he control?

She grabbed an order pad, forcing herself into motion. "Okay, okay. We ride the wave. Rosa, I'll take counter. Tony, keep dispatching."

Vee moved fast, smiling at customers, taking orders, hands flying over the register.

She forced herself to concentrate on work. Questions could wait. Luca could wait. Whatever storm he had unleashed on her tiny corner of the world could wait.

By the time lunch rolled around, the line had doubled. The bell above the door jingled so often it became background noise, a metallic heartbeat to match the frenzy inside.

Vee had been on her feet for three hours straight. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun that had long since surrendered, loose strands clinging to her damp temples. Her calves burned. Her back ached. Her fingers were red from handling hot boxes and scribbling orders too fast.

And it didn't look like there would be an end in sight.

She wasn't complaining.

She needed the money.

"Two margheritas, one pepperoni, one no onions!" she called, sliding a receipt toward Rosa.

Tony was still drowning in dispatch orders. "We need more drivers!" he shouted.

"We need a miracle!" Rosa shot back.

Vee almost laughed at that.

Miracles.

As if summoned by the word, the front door swung open and a familiar voice cut through the chaos.

"Hey sis! I heard you may need a hand."

"Tina!" She rushed around the counter and threw her arms around Valentina. "How are you?" Vee demanded, holding her at arm's length, scanning her face.

"I'm fine," Tina said firmly, already rolling up her sleeves. "Let's get to work. We can catch up later."

Over Tina's shoulder, Vee caught a glimpse of Marco walking back to his car through the glass doors.

"Marco bring you?" she asked quickly.

Tina nodded once.

Then there was no more time for conversation.

They worked.

And worked.

And worked.

Boxes stacked. Orders flew out the door. The credit card machine barely cooled down between swipes.

At some point Vee stopped feeling her feet entirely.

Time blurred. The rush hour wave crested and finally began to fall. Walk-ins thinned out, replaced by the steady hum of delivery orders. The sky outside darkened from bright afternoon glare to bruised evening blue.

(Brought to you by Jennifer Willard)

The Chapter for 100 golden tickets will be posted in a few along with today's Chapter.

Chapter 89: Tell Me What You Did

When the last immediate line disappeared, Vee finally exhaled.

She walked behind the counter, kicked her shoes off with a groan, and dropped into a chair. Her toes flexed against the cool tile floor.

Tina leaned against the counter beside her, handing her a bottle of water.

"Thank you," Vee muttered, taking a long drink.

Her eyes scanned the shop. Full register. Stacks of receipts.

What did you do?

She picked up her phone, thumb hovering over his name.

Part of her wanted to be furious. To accuse him of interfering. Of controlling. Another part of her felt something softer. He believed in her enough to move mountains. Or at least customer traffic.

She hit call, leaned back in the chair.

"Alright, devil," she murmured under her breath, a tired smile ghosting across her lips. "Tell me what you did."

"Bambola..." his voice drifted from the phone as soon as he picked up.

He said it the way he always did, the end of the word curling. She could almost see him, leaning back in his chair, one ankle resting on his knee, eyes half lidded.

"I guess you are my knight in shining armour, uhn." She smiled.

"Always."

"Tell me how you managed this. I have sold more pizzas in one day than I have in a year." She turned slightly, watching one of her staff slide another pie into a box.

"I had nothing to do with it. Maybe people just realise just how much work you put into the recipe," Luca said.

"I know you're lying." She could hear the faint clink of glass on his end.

"You can know what you know. And I can also know what I didn't do."

"That is the most evasive sentence you've ever spoken," she replied, narrowing her eyes. "You expect me to believe this was spontaneous? That half the city just woke up craving my pizza?"

"Your pizza is exceptional," he said lightly.

"Thank you, Luca," she said anyway. "Even if you won't confess."

"I have nothing to confess."

"Mm. I can find ways to make you." She let that hang. "How is work going?" she asked, shifting gears abruptly. "Have any cock suckers stroll in today?"

Luca laughed. "That's a Tuesday afternoon thing. I should probably ask Dante to cancel my weekly delivery."

She rolled her eyes. "You do that. Or the next time I walk in your office and I find your cock inside some whore, we will be having words."

"Oh..." he said slowly. "Someone wants to be exclusive."

"I thought that was what you wanted." Vee said.

They were still circling the same conversation, the same invisible fire neither of them wanted to step into first.

"I never said so." Luca replied.

"You basically threatened anyone who looks at me wrong."

"Does that mean exclusive?" Luca asked.

"You're an idiot."

"You can do better than that, Bambola surely. Put some effort so you can earn your punishments."

She rolled her eyes even though he could not see it. "Will you be home early tonight?" Vee asked.

"I can pick you up tonight and we leave together."

"Okay then, I'll wait for you. I'll ask the driver to take Valentina home."

"I'll see you soon." She ended the call.

Valentina dropped into the chair beside her. "Luca?" Tina asked.

"Yeah."

"You seem happy?"

"I... you know what... I am happy. You're home. You're safe." Vee said.

That was true. Valentina was back. Alive. Whole.

"Yes, I am. But you are not."

Vee frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The only reason you got trapped with him in the first place is because of me." Valentina said.

"What? No. No! Don't blame yourself for anything. Dad did this. Put the blame where it needs to be, don't take any of it. Besides I chose to walk into that auction."

Valentina's voice softened. "He hurts you."

"Luca?" Vee let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Luca doesn't hurt me."

"He controls you."

Vee looked at her sister fully then. "I let him."

Valentina studied her. "And if you wanted to leave?"

Vee hesitated. She had no answer.

"You are living with an evil man who has you chained to him." Valentina finished.

"Tina, I am happy. Yes, the circumstances may not be the usual one but I am. And I know it will get better." Vee explained.

She spoke carefully. Happiness for her was not flowers and white picket fences. It was waking up beside a man who could ruin entire districts with a phone call and knowing he would not ruin her. It was choosing to kneel when she wanted to, not because she had to.

"Come on, you go home. I'll see you tomorrow. We will spend the day together."

Valentina searched her face as if looking for cracks. For a plea. For a signal that said save me. Vee held her gaze steady.

Valentina sighed and got to her feet.

She was tall, willowy. Too young to carry the weight she did.

"Pick up dinner," Vee reminded her.

Valentina nodded and headed out of the shop, pushing through the glass door.

The bell above the door chimed shut.

Veronica's mind reeled. What if she wanted to leave Luca? Would he let her? Did she even want to leave? Her pulse betrayed her at the thought. The memory of his hand at her neck. The way his voice dropped when he wanted obedience. The way he listened when she pushed back. Happiness did not always look holy.

The shop doors opened once more.

The bell chimed again.

Rosa leaned in from the prep counter. "Inferi."

Vee turned slowly.

He stood just inside the doorway. A jagged scar carved through his eyebrow, disappearing into his hairline. Tattoos crept up his neck, disappearing beneath his collar.

Inferi ran this block. Protection fees. Drug routes. Street enforcement.

Vee straightened her spine, smoothing her hands down her apron as she approached the counter. Her face shifted effortlessly into professional neutrality.

"What can I get for you?" Vee asked.

"Don't be like that with me. We basically grew up together, Scalese." Inferi said.

(This is to 100 golden tickets. We did it guys. Shawnnie, Jess Yurko, Mrs B? Whaaat? Y'all are spoiling me. Thank you. on to 200 golden tickets. We have enough time to do it. I'm sure we can do it.)

Chapter 90: You Little Cunt

Back then, he had been James. Skinny. Angry. Now he was Inferi. Violence had reshaped him.

"What do you want?"

"Shop has been quite busy today. I always knew you would do amazing things with the shop." Inferi smiled.

His gaze drifted over the walls. The light fixtures.

"Comes and goes," she replied.

She refused to let him see pride. Pride could be taxed. Pride could be taken.

"Well, I and your dad had a little deal on the side."

"My dad had no deal whatsoever with you, Ineri. I am absolutely sure of it." Vee asserted.

Ineri's eyes darkened slightly. "You'd be surprised what your father was willing to do when money got tight."

A flicker of doubt crept in. She crushed it immediately.

"Since you are not ordering anything, please leave."

Everything happened quickly after that.

One second he was leaning lazily against the counter. The next, his hand shot out, fingers tangling brutally in her hair at the base of her skull. He yanked.

Her cheekbone slammed into the marble edge with a sickening crack. Pain exploded behind her eyes.

Gasps erupted from behind the counter.

Rosa screamed. Tony vaulted forward, rage lighting his face.

Vee lifted her hand sharply, palm out to stop them from coming any closer.

Her vision swam, but her arm did not tremble.

Ineri's grip tightened, forcing her face sideways against the cold stone. His breath was hot and sour near her ear.

"Now listen to me, you little cunt!" Ineri leaned over her. "I will bring my package over here and you and your little minions there will have them sold. You hear me?"

Her heartbeat slowed instead of racing. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a colder instinct took over.

Vee said nothing. She stayed calm. A dangerous, dark part of her knew exactly what she should do. She only had to call Luca. One call. One sentence. He would not ask for proof. He would not ask for context. Ineri would be erased so efficiently that the block would pretend he had never existed.

And that dark part of her liked that.

It liked the idea of Ineri's smirk wiped off his face permanently. It liked the thought of blood answering blood.

But she also knew what it would cause.

Mob war.

Ineri ran this strip. Luca owned districts. If one swallowed the other openly, the ripple would not stay contained. Innocent staff would be dragged into power struggles they never signed up for.

And she would become the reason.

Valentina would not be safe again.

So Vee swallowed that sick part of her that wanted a man dead just by breathing so close to her. She swallowed it like bile. Like poison she chose not to spit.

Ineri's fingers drifted upward, brushing against the diamond pendant at her throat.

The necklace Luca had clasped around her neck just last night.

"That is a pretty necklace," he murmured. "Looks like this place has been doing alright for a while."

He chuckled.

The diamond rested against the hollow of her throat. Luca had told her it was for protection. At the time she had rolled her eyes.

Now she understood.

Ineri released her abruptly. The absence of his grip was almost jarring.

Then he spun the cash register toward him, the metal scraping loudly against the counter. He popped it open and scooped out the money.

He walked leisurely out of the shop, money folded in his fist, shoulders relaxed.

The bell chimed politely behind him.

Rosa rushed to her immediately, hands hovering over Vee's face.

Tony stood, breathing hard, fury vibrating through him.

Vee straightened slowly.

Her cheek throbbed.

"It's fine. I'm fine. Don't make a fuss, please." Vee said.

Rosa looked unconvinced. "He could have broken your jaw."

"But he didn't."

"I'll get you some ice."

"Rosa, no! I said don't make a fuss." The sharpness in her tone sliced through the air. Because fuss meant attention. Attention meant word spreading. Word spreading meant Luca hearing about it.

She moved toward Tony, who was still trembling with anger.

"Delivery orders," she said calmly.

Tony didn't say anything.

They worked side by side without speaking, boxing pizzas, stapling receipts, stacking delivery bags.

Vee's cheek throbbed in time with her pulse. Every movement tugged at the swelling beneath her skin. She kept her head angled slightly.

Tony was preparing to leave when he stopped short to look at her.

"What?" Vee asked, sharper than she intended.

"You have a bruise." Tony pointed to her face.

"What?" She lifted a hand to her cheek and felt it properly for the first time. Tender. Puffy. The skin hot beneath her fingertips.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!" She rushed into the small bathroom at the back of the shop, the door slamming shut behind her. The fluorescent light flickered overhead.

She looked in the mirror.

The damage was undeniable.

A dark bruise was blooming from her cheekbone up toward the outer corner of her eye, violet and angry against her pale olive skin.

It looked worse than it felt.

She gripped the edges of the sink.

She couldn't let Luca see it.

If he saw it, there would be no containing him. Ineri would be dead before midnight and the block would drown in the aftermath.

She inhaled sharply.

Cancel. She had to cancel.

Tell him she would be spending the night with Valentina at their house. It would not even be a lie. She could say her sister needed her.

Surely he would understand why she needed to be with her sister.

Surely he would not push.

But she knew Luca.

He did not accept distance easily.

She splashed cold water on her face. The shock stung. She pressed a paper towel against her cheek.

"Think," she whispered to her reflection.

Could she cover it with makeup?

Her phone buzzed in her apron pocket.

Her heart dropped.

She did not check it.

She hurried out of the bathroom, mind already forming sentences.

Luca stood at the counter.

He had taken off his coat. It was draped over one arm. His other hand rested lightly on the counter, long fingers tapping.