

Undressed By The Mafia God #Chapter 91: It's Been So Busy Today - Read Undressed By The Mafia God Chapter 91: It's Been So Busy Today

Chapter 91: It's Been So Busy Today

When he saw her, his eyes lit up at first. It was automatic. Warmth flashing through the blues.

Then he saw the bruise.

The warmth died.

His gaze sharpened instantly, tracking from her cheek to her eye. His body went still in a way that was far more dangerous than shouting.

He sucked in a breath.

"Luca... you're here." She forced a smile that felt brittle. "Give me a minute. Let me just pack up."

"Come here." He commanded absolutely. Luca did not raise his voice to be obeyed. The command lived in his posture, in the way his shoulders squared, in the stillness that settled around him. The shop felt smaller when he spoke like that.

"I just want to..." she began, gesturing vaguely toward the counter, toward anything that would buy her a second.

"Come... here."

Vee swallowed and crossed the space between them quickly. "Its nothing," she said, forcing lightness into her voice. "It's been so busy today, I wasn't looking and a door hit me right in the face. Clumsy, haha." The laugh was wrong.

Up close, Luca studied her face carefully. He was tall enough that she had to tilt her chin slightly to meet his eyes. Those blues. God, one could drown in them.

Luca calmed at her explanation. Or at least, he allowed his features to soften.

"You should put ice on it," he said evenly.

"I didn't know it would be hard enough to bruise. I'll do that as soon as I get home."

"Come on. Pack up. Let's go."

She nodded quickly. She shot Rosa a pointed look. Do not speak. Do not breathe wrong.

Rosa nodded subtly, eyes wide.

Vee gathered her handbag from beneath the counter, fingers steady despite the tremor beneath her skin.

She joined him again.

He placed his hand at the small of her back as they walked toward the door.

His car waited at the curb. Luca guided her into the passenger seat.

The thing about Luca is, he sees everything. He reads silence. He had seen the way she rushed through her explanation. He had seen Rosa's expression too, tight with fear.

But he said nothing.

He slid into the driver's seat.

As he pulled away from the curb, his hand settled on her thigh.

His fingers spread slightly over the fabric of her jeans. A reminder that she was within his reach.

Her body reacted anyway. Heat blooming low despite the bruise throbbing on her cheek.

"You're quiet," he observed.

"So are you."

"I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking about?" she asked carefully.

"Whether I believe you." His gaze remained on the road, calm and focused.

"It was a door," she insisted softly. She turned her face toward the window, watching the city blur past. She felt trapped and safe in the same breath. Wanted and cornered. Loved and owned.

Vee was quiet all the way home. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers loosely intertwined, but her mind was working through possibilities.

Inferi would not stop.

She had to deal with it before it escalated.

The car glided through the gates of the building. Armed guards nodded subtly as they entered.

When they stepped out, Luca walked beside her without speaking. His stride was relaxed, but she knew that was surface only. He had not forgotten the bruise. He had not dismissed her explanation. He was cataloguing everything.

He walked her to the door.

"I'll like to be by myself tonight," she said carefully. "I just want to have a bath and sleep. It's been a long day."

It was a reasonable request. It should have been harmless.

He studied her. "Something's wrong," Luca said calmly, his hands sliding into his pockets.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"I'll let it be," he said finally. "But if I eventually find out you are lying to me, you know what I will do."

"Really, I'm just exhausted, Luca. That's all." She held his gaze steadily this time. If she faltered, he would push.

After a moment, he gave a slight nod.

He stepped closer and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Rest," he said quietly. Then he turned and walked toward the main building, coat draped over his arm.

Vee watched him until he disappeared around the corner.

Only then did she exhale.

Meanwhile, Luca pulled out his phone. "Hey," he said when the call connected. "Do you think you can find out from Valentina if anything weird happened at the pizza parlour today?"

Marco responded. "Yeah. I'll handle it."

Luca ended the call without another word.

Something had shifted. Between the time she called him that afternoon and when he picked her up, something had changed. The energy in her voice earlier had been lighter. Teasing. Now she was guarded.

He replayed every detail in his head. The faint tremor in her laugh. The way Rosa avoided eye contact.

He slid his phone back into his pocket. If someone had laid a hand on her, they better start making their bed in hell.

Vee spent the day with Valentina as promised.

She arrived just after sunrise, the sky still pale and undecided, a soft gray stretching over the quiet residential streets. Luca's driver pulled up in front of the house.

Veronica stepped out in a simple black dress that reached her knees, modest enough for church, elegant enough to remind her she was Luca's woman now. The diamond pendant rested at the hollow of her throat, catching the light.

"I'll call when I'm ready," she told the driver. He nodded and pulled away without question.

Valentina was already waiting at the door, her dark curls pulled back loosely, face bare, eyes bright despite the shadows of recent stress. Of course, she had to explain the bruise on her face to Valentina. She gave her the same lie as she did Luca.

They headed to church first.

The old cathedral stood at the end of the main street. Its bells rang low and steady as they entered, the scent of incense thick in the air. Sunlight filtered through stained glass windows, scattering color across the pews in fractured reds and blues.

Vee knelt beside her sister, bowed her head, and tried to pray.

But her prayers were simple.

Keep Valentina safe.

Keep Luca safe.

After mass, when they were heading back out, Valentina waved enthusiastically at someone near the courtyard steps and hurried forward.

Vee followed her sister's line of sight.

Her stomach dropped.

Cassidy.

He stood near the statue of Mary. His hair was longer than she remembered, falling just slightly over his forehead. He looked the same. And not the same at all.

"Oh shit. Oh shit."

Her hand instinctively went to the necklace at her throat.

And then she stepped toward Cassidy.

There was no retreating without making it obvious.

"It's nice to see you finally okay," Cassidy said to Valentina just as Vee reached them. He always had that softness when he spoke to her sister.

"Hey, Cas," Vee said.

His eyes shifted to her. Just for a second. Long enough to measure the bruise she had carefully covered with makeup. Long enough to take in the necklace and her outfit.

"Hey," he answered. "So, how has it been with you two?" Cassidy asked.

But he did not direct the question at Veronica.

He kept his gaze on Valentina.

"We've been fine. It's been a rough couple of weeks," Valentina replied, unaware of the undercurrent humming between the other two.

Cassidy chuckled softly. "I'll say. Take care."

He stepped back, already preparing to leave. Already choosing distance.

That should have been the end.

"Cas, wait!"

She knew she should have let him go. She knew that every second she stood in front of him was a risk. The church courtyard was not Luca's territory, but the city was.

She stepped closer anyway.

"How is work?" she asked.

It was a harmless question.

Cassidy's eyes flicked once more to the diamond at her throat, then back to her face.

"I quit," he said.

"Oh... why?"

"What do you want, Vee?" Cassidy snapped.

"I just wanted to say I am sorry."

"About what?" he shot back immediately. "About your maniac showing me a video where you were begging him to fuck you? About letting me put my life in danger when you clearly didn't need any saving? Or how about not having the decency to be straight with me and tell me to fuck off from your life but instead you wait until I get maimed?"

Vee felt the blood drain from her face.

The memory burned through her without mercy. Luca's calculated cruelty.

Cassidy's chest rose and fell hard beneath his shirt. He had always been lean, athletic in an understated way, but now there was an edge to him. Harder lines around his mouth. Less softness in his eyes.

"You didn't need saving," he continued, quieter now but no less fierce. "You wanted him."

Vee swallowed.

She had.

She did.

And that truth made everything uglier.

Now that it was being said out loud, Vee felt like a complete cunt.

(Follow me on instagram for sneak peaks at next Chapters. Joyceortsen1)

Chapter 92: Go To Hell

"Yeah," she said, forcing herself not to look away. "I'm sorry about that and more."

It was inadequate. Pathetic, even. But it was all she had.

Cassidy's gaze flicked once more to the bruise near her eye. His jaw tightened.

"Go to hell, Veronica Scalese," he said. "And I hope he does a whole lot more than that to you."

He lifted his hand, pointing directly at the bruise on her face.

Then he turned and walked away, cutting through the courtyard crowd without looking back.

Vee stood frozen.

The church bells began to ring again, signaling the next service.

"Wow," Valentina muttered under her breath. "That was frosty."

"That's a word for it," Vee replied.

She reached for her sister's hand instinctively, fingers curling tight. Valentina squeezed back without question. They began to stroll away from the church building.

The sun had risen higher now, illuminating everything too clearly.

Cassidy's anger was justified. He had loved her in a way that did not cage. In a way that did not come with guards and surveillance.

And she had chosen the cage.

Not because she was forced.

Because she wanted the man who built it.

"What happened?" Valentina asked.

Vee kept walking for a few seconds before answering. "Too many things," she said finally. "But in summary, I was a real idiot."

"Marco came by last night," Valentina started carefully.

Vee stopped mid step and turned fully to her sister. "Jeez, Tina, you know I won't be mad if you like Marco. I don't like being kept in the dark. What's it with you two?"

If Marco was circling her sister, she needed to understand why.

Valentina blinked, then frowned. "Get your head out of the gutter. It's nothing like that. He is like the brother I never had."

Veronica rolled her eyes despite the knot in her chest. "You never wanted a brother."

"I thought I never wanted a brother," Valentina shot back, a hint of her old fire surfacing. "But that's not the point."

They resumed walking.

"Marco wanted to know if anything strange happened at the shop yesterday," Valentina continued. "Aside from the long line of customers and Rosa nearly losing her mind, I didn't see anything strange."

She paused, then looked directly at Vee. "So you want to fill me in on what really happened with your face when I was gone?"

Vee inhaled slowly.

"It's Inferi," she said.

"He came by the shop?"

"Yes. I cannot tell Luca. He would have been dead by morning."

"What does Inferi want?"

"I guess he thought now that we have a lot of customers, we will help him push his drugs. I don't know, but I am not going to do anything of the sort. I promise, Tina," Vee said.

"I am not touching that filth," Vee said, jaw tightening. "The shop stays clean. I will not let him stain it."

"You don't have to tell Luca. But that doesn't mean you can't still use Luca's influence. Threaten Inferi with the Genovese name. He will back off if he knows you are under his protection."

It was clever.

Veronica's eyes flickered with thought. "You, my dear, are a genius," she said slowly, a smile curving at the corner of her mouth.

"I know," Valentina laughed, bumping her shoulder lightly.

If Ineri believed she was fully protected, he would think twice before testing her again. But for that to work, it had to look real. Public enough to circulate.

Nonnina was just having the maids clear the dinner table when Veronica arrived wrapped in a silk robe the color of deep champagne. The fabric skimmed her body with intention, tied loosely at the waist, revealing just enough collarbone and the suggestion of bare skin beneath.

Her hair was styled softer, loose waves falling over one shoulder. Her lips were painted a darker red than usual.

She had come prepared.

Prepared to seduce.

Prepared to ignite.

Prepared to make sure that when Ineri heard whispers of how Luca looked at her, how Luca touched her, there would be no doubt that she was untouchable.

"Zuccherino!" Nonnina called the moment she spotted her, arms opening as she approached Vee and patted her cheek affectionately. "I barely see you these days."

Luca sat, his back to them, one glass of red wine in hand.

"Work has been quite busy, Nonni, but I promise I will be back early tomorrow to spend time with you. You can teach me how you make that delicious bread. I'd like to steal your recipe," Vee said.

Nonnina laughed. "You're welcome in my kitchen anytime," she said, patting Vee's arm. Then she leaned back slightly, eyes narrowing with suspicion as she looked Vee up and down, taking in the silk robe, the bare collarbone, the elegance.

Her brows wiggled. "Naughty you."

Vee smiled easily. Naughty. If only Nonni knew how calculated tonight was.

She watched Nonnina shuffle toward the hallway, giving them privacy. The maids cleared the last of the plates.

Then Vee turned her attention to Luca.

Vee walked up behind him. She reached out and ran her hand down his chest from behind, fingers tracing the firm plane of muscle beneath cotton.

"Hey, stranger."

His hand came up and covered hers, holding it firmly against his chest.

"Hey, you," he replied, turning his head slightly but not yet fully facing her. "Did you have a nice day?"

"Yeah," she said lightly. "Went to church with Valentina. We had lunch, took the dog to the park, and just lazied around the rest of the day."

"Sounds like fun," Luca said.

"It was," she answered. "Did you miss me?"

Luca let out a low chuckle. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," she said smoothly.

She slipped her hand from his grasp and straightened, walking to sit on the chair beside him. One leg crossed over the other, robe shifting just enough to reveal a line of bare thigh.

She leaned back slightly, chin tilted.

"Just wanted to see my favourite devil before heading to bed," she said.

(Here is to 200 power stones. Hopefully we can go even further this week.)

Chapter 93: Untie the Robe

Luca took in the robe she was wearing with the slow attention of a man who never missed detail. His gaze traveled from the hollow of her throat, to the bare slope of her legs beneath the silk. He lifted his wine glass and took a measured sip.

A smirk curved at the corner of his mouth. "Untie the robe."

"Here? Now?" she asked.

"Now."

She slipped her fingers to the belt and tugged slowly. She let the fabric loosen inch by inch, let it fall from her shoulders. The robe pooled at her elbows.

Beneath it, black floral lace hugged her breasts, sheer enough to hint, intricate enough to torment. Silky satin shorts skimmed her hips, clinging to the curve of her waist and the soft line of her thighs.

"Well," Luca drawled, setting his glass down, "someone clearly came dressed for a fuck."

His eyes were darker now.

"You're the one stalling," she shot back, lifting her chin slightly.

She refused to let him see how the heat between her legs had already begun to build, how her body responded to his voice before he even touched her.

"I don't see you begging," he replied coolly.

She leaned forward just enough to close some of the distance. "Pretty please..." she said with a small smile, hooking a finger beneath the lace at her chest and tugging it down just slightly. Just enough to show more skin. Just enough to test him.

"That's not begging."

He adjusted in his seat and reached forward without warning, grasping her calves and lifting her legs effortlessly onto his thighs. He removed her flip flops one by one, letting them drop carelessly to the floor.

His fingers wrapped around her ankle.

"I am a very patient man," he said.

He began pulling gently at her toes, pressing into the arches of her feet with slow pressure. The massage was intimate, tender.

"I'm going to wait," he continued, eyes locked on hers as his thumbs moved in circles, "until you desperately want my cock inside you. You will beg like your life depends on it."

Her breath caught at the promise. At the way he spoke.

He lifted one of her feet to his mouth.

He pressed his lips to the arch slowly, lingering, inhaling the scent of her skin. His stubble brushed against her, rough enough to send a tremor up her spine. He kissed along the curve of her foot.

Vee's fingers curled against the edge of the chair. The control she had planned to maintain began to unravel thread by thread.

This was supposed to be strategy.

But when his tongue traced lightly along her heel, when his hands tightened around her calves, when his gaze flickered upward and met hers with lust, the lines blurred.

Because Luca was hunger, violence. He was the kind of man who could ruin her slowly and make her thank him for it.

Her thighs pressed together instinctively, the satin catching against heated skin.

His lips brushed her ankle again.

"And I must warn you," Luca said quietly. "I don't care that you have never been fucked before. I don't do that vanilla shit. I don't do careful. The longer you test me, the harder I will take you apart, Bambola. There will be nothing gentle about it. The sheets will be filled with your blood and cum and even then, I will keep fucking you until you are seconds away from drawing your final breath."

The words were brutal in their clarity. They were a declaration of the kind of man he was.

Vee's legs trembled in his hands.

"Isn't that just exaggeration?" she asked, forcing a smirk she did not fully feel.

"Beg," he replied, a slow smile touching his mouth. "And we'll see."

His fingers tightened slightly around her ankle.

Of course she wanted him to take her.

Of course she did.

Her body betrayed her long before her pride ever would. The heat in her stomach, the pulse between her thighs, the way her breath thinned when he looked at her like that. Even his voice alone was dangerous. He had a way of speaking that made words feel physical.

It should have been studied. Dissected. Preached against in churches.

Instead, she sat there offering herself to it.

But pride was stitched into her spine. Begging was surrender. Begging meant admitting he had the upper hand.

And she would not give him that easily.

"I do think I should inform you of something," Vee said suddenly.

Luca did not immediately look up. His mouth brushed slowly along the curve of her ankle again, his breath warm against her skin.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I met Cassidy today. At church. Valentina said hello to him. We had a brief exchange."

Luca lifted his head then.

"It was obvious he's angry," she added. "Very angry."

Luca's hands slid slowly down from her calf to her ankle, still holding her foot in his grasp.

"Did he touch you?" he asked.

"No."

"Thank you for telling me," Luca said quietly.

He lifted her foot again, pressing a slow kiss to her big toe.

"Luca?"

"Hmmm..." His attention had drifted back to her legs, his hands moving up along her calves.

"Good night?" she asked lightly.

"Tease..." he muttered, not looking up.

She chuckled. "I have an early morning. You can drop me off at the shop if you want."

"Anything for you, Bambola."

"Luca?"

He exhaled dramatically and finally looked up at her, one brow arching. "Oh boy... Can I get some peace?" he snapped playfully.

"I'd like to start driving myself."

His hands stilled on her legs. "Why?" he asked, slowly lowering her leg to his lap. "The driver is not just there to drive," he continued evenly. "He is also there for your security."

"My security?" she repeated. "Or my leash. I need to know you trust me, Luca."

"I remember the last time you asked me to trust you," he said slowly, "you went kissing Cassidy."

"Things have changed," Vee said.

"Have they?"

Chapter 94: Just Trust Me

She frowned. "Haven't they? You were mean to me in the beginning."

He tilted his head slightly. "Was I?"

Frustration flared. "Will you stop with the two word questions? Just trust me, please. I can handle myself."

"Fine. Is that all?" he asked, reclaiming her ankle.

"No."

"Godfucking damnit," he muttered under his breath. "What is it this time?"

The irritation was theatrical, but the undercurrent was real. She had been steering him all night. Pulling him toward heat, then shifting the subject. Asking for trust. Mentioning Cassidy. Wanting freedom.

"Goodnight," she said lightly.

Before he could respond, she slipped her legs from his hands and stood. The flip flops he had abandoned earlier still lay on the floor. She stepped around him slowly, her fingers trailing up the back of his neck, brushing the short hair at his nape, grazing the sensitive place just below his ear.

He exhaled sharply as she slipped her shoes on and walked away, her hips swaying just enough to remind him of what he was not getting.

"Fucking tease..." Luca murmured.

Her laughter followed her.

He leaned back in his chair and scrubbed a hand down his face.

And then, against his will, he smiled.

Stupidly.

"What the fuck is this woman doing to me?" he muttered to himself.

The next morning, Vee sat in the passenger seat wearing high waisted jeans and her Scalese pizza tshirt tucked neatly at her waist. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail. The bruise on her cheek had faded further.

They moved through the early morning traffic.

"Can you stop in front of that bodega?"

He glanced at her briefly before signaling and pulling over. The storefront was small, paint peeling slightly around the edges, crates of fruit stacked out front. A faded awning flapped in the mild breeze.

"You want something?" he asked.

"Yeah. The shop owner supplies me some ingredients. I just need to confirm when the next delivery will arrive. I'll only be a minute."

He put the car in park and watched her step out. She adjusted the strap of her bag over her shoulder and walked toward the entrance.

Luca's gaze lingered. Then he scanned the street automatically. Two men arguing near a bus stop. An elderly woman carrying groceries. A teenager on a bike.

His phone rang just then, vibrating against the dashboard where it was mounted.

He glanced down.

His wife's name flashed across the screen.

Video call request.

"Shit," he muttered.

The timing could not have been worse.

He hesitated for half a second before answering. The screen lit up, reflecting his face back at him before shifting to hers.

He adjusted the camera angle subtly.

"Buongiorno," he said smoothly.

He kept one eye on the call.

One eye on the door.

"Hey, love." Bianca's face filled the screen. Her dark hair fell in glossy waves over one shoulder, her lips painted a precise shade of crimson that matched the silk robe draped carelessly around her. Behind her, Luca caught the edge of a marble fireplace, a gilded mirror, the luxury of the home his father had in Italy.

"Bianca. How are you doing?" he replied automatically. But his eyes were not on her.

"I'm good," Bianca said. "I just needed to see if you are okay."

Concern. Or surveillance.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Luca asked.

Across the road, five men stood clustered near a lamppost. One leaned against a parked car, arms folded, eyes fixed on the storefront Vee had just entered.

Another man gestured subtly in that direction.

"Well," Bianca continued, her fingers brushing her hair back, "Julian came for a visit. He said all these things about Marco. And some girl." Her gaze sharpened through the screen. "He said you almost stabbed him over her."

Outside, the man by the lamppost shifted his weight and pointed again toward the shop window.

Luca's grip on the steering wheel tightened.

"Your father is angry," Bianca went on. "And then I tried to call you about two weeks ago. Marco picked up the phone." Her brow arched delicately. "Shouldn't he be dead for betraying you?"

"Julian is an idiot," Luca said flatly.

His eyes flicked back to the men.

"And however I choose to handle my people and my business is not your concern. Or Father's."

"Actually, Luca it is. I am your wife. I worry about you. You know how your father can be. Are you even listening to me, Luca?"

Luca dragged his gaze from the bodega door back to the phone. "You know what? Hang on a minute."

He did not wait for her response.

He stepped out, slamming the door harder than necessary. His shoes struck the pavement with purpose as he crossed the short distance to the shop, his hand on the gun on his waistband.

The bell above the bodega door rang as he pushed it open.

Inside, the space was narrow, shelves stacked high with imported sauces, sacks of rice, spices in clear containers. A small radio behind the counter murmured in Mandarin.

Vee stood at the register, her back partially turned to him.

"I'm sorry," she said when she noticed him. "One second."

She turned back to the man behind the counter.

"I just need a couple more boxes. The last one is almost finished. We had a busy day yesterday."

"Yeah, I heard. Good for you," Mr. Lee replied in his thick accent, nodding as he scribbled into a ledger book.

Luca's eyes swept the interior, he couldn't help it. Front windows. Back exit. Two customers.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee. I'll see you later."

Vee moved toward him.

Her plan was unfolding exactly as she had intended. She had needed Luca visible. Attached to her. And with Ineri watching from across the street, every second Luca stood beside her carved a message into stone.

When they stepped back outside, Ineri was still there, openly watching them now. His eyes locked onto Luca immediately in recognition.

Vee slid her hand into Luca's.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she said gently.

Chapter 95: I Guess I Am Paranoid

"It's okay," he said quietly. "I just..." His gaze lingered on the men.

"...Never mind," Luca finished. "I guess I am paranoid."

Vee looked up at him, sunlight warming her skin, the faintest smile curving her mouth.

"Awww... such a sweet baby." She reached for his tie, and tugged him down toward her. She kissed him right there on the street.

Her lips pressed against his. The city continued around them. Cars passed.

And across the street, Ineri watched.

Luca's hand instinctively slid to her waist, gripping her firmly.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes were bright.

"You're confusing me," Luca said. "There was a time you would fight me for being too overprotective."

She had once pushed against every boundary he set. Argued. Demanded space. Challenged him at every turn. That fire had drawn him in as much as it had irritated him.

"Not today, Diavolino."

"That nickname is reserved only for Nonnina. It sounds weird coming from you," Luca replied.

He opened the passenger door for her and helped her into the car, one hand steady at her back. He closed the door and walked around to the driver's side.

A voice cut through the interior.

"Hello!"

Vee blinked, scanning for the source until her eyes landed on the phone. "Oh. Sorry."

On the screen, Bianca's expression sharpened immediately. Her gaze assessed Vee with open scrutiny, moving from her loose ponytail to the faint bruise still ghosting her cheek.

"Who are you?" Bianca asked.

Vee swallowed. "I..."

The car door shut as Luca climbed in.

"Luca? Who is this?" Bianca asked again, this time the question directed squarely at her husband.

"Shit," Luca muttered under his breath, realization hitting him. He had forgotten the call was still active.

"A friend," he said simply. "I'll talk to you later."

On the screen, Bianca's lips pressed together, but she did not argue.

"Okay," she said after a beat. "Love you, Luciano."

He ended the call without replying.

Silence flooded the car.

He started the engine, the low growl of it filling the space between them. As he pulled away from the curb, his gaze shifted instinctively toward the opposite side of the street.

Inferi was still there.

As Luca drove past, their eyes locked.

Luca held his stare a moment before turning his attention back to the road.

Beside him, Vee stared straight ahead, her hands resting quietly in her lap now.

She had kissed him to send a message.

But hearing another woman say I love you to the man sitting inches from her had sliced deeper than she expected.

Vee shrank into the seat as the car merged back into traffic. She kept her eyes forward, watching the blur of storefronts and passing pedestrians, but her reflection in the window betrayed her. The bold woman who had just kissed him in the street seemed to have dissolved.

He was on a call with his wife.

Vee swallowed hard. She was not supposed to feel anything. She had allowed herself to forget what she was.

The other woman.

The disruption.

The home wrecker.

"I can hear you thinking, Vee," Luca said suddenly.

She blinked, startled. "What? No, it's nothing."

He exhaled lightly, eyes still on the road. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Shutting down. You want to say something, you say it. Like I said, fight with me if you want."

She let out a small breath. "I don't want to fight."

Luca chuckled. "That's a first."

"Your wife..." she began carefully. "She is beautiful."

He glanced at her briefly, one brow lifting. "I thought you said you didn't want to fight."

"I'm not fighting," she replied. "Just complimenting your taste."

There was a pause. "More like my father's taste," he said finally. "It was an arranged marriage."

"Well," she said quietly, leaning her head back against the seat, "extend my compliment to him then."

Luca let out a short laugh. "I'll note that down in the list of things I am never going to tell him."

Vee turned her head and rested it against the cool window. The glass pressed gently against her temple. She watched the world slide by in muted reflection. She did not want to ask what she meant to him. She did not want to hear the answer.

Luca's gaze shifted to her again. He saw the quiet in her. The way her shoulders had folded inward. The teasing spark dimmed. He reached over without thinking. His hand settled on her thigh. "Hey," he said softly.

She did not look at him immediately.

His thumb traced a slow, absent circle against the denim of her jeans.

"I'm obsessed with you."

Her head turned slowly toward him. "What's that?" she asked, one brow lifting. "Your version of 'I love you'?"

"You could say that."

Vee rolled her eyes, turning her gaze back to the windshield.

He wasn't entirely hers.

He would never be.

She was a Chapter written in the margins.

The car slowed as they approached her shop.

It sat on a modest but busy corner, brick façade slightly weathered, the sign above the door elegant but understated.

She studied the exterior critically. The paint near the frame was beginning to chip. The window display was tasteful but not inviting enough. She needed something warmer. Something that pulled people in. A bench outside, maybe. Fresh flowers. A chalkboard sign with handwritten specials.

"I'll see you later," she said. She reached for the handle and stepped out. She adjusted her bag on her shoulder. Whatever turmoil lived inside her chest would not walk through that door with her.

Customers needed confidence.

She did not look back at the car as she entered the shop.

But Luca watched her.

He watched the way she pushed the door open, the small bell chiming above her head. Watched her smile shift into place.

His hand remained on the steering wheel long after she disappeared fully inside.

Then his gaze shifted outward.

He scanned the block slowly.

The uneasy sensation returned.

He exhaled slowly and shifted the car into gear.

As he pulled back into traffic, he checked his mirrors more than usual.

Still, the feeling persisted.

He drove toward Commissioned.

Chapter 96: 911 at the Shop

The late afternoon sun slanted through the dusty windows of the pizza shop. Valentina stood behind the counter with Tony, sleeves rolled up, hair twisted into a careless bun. She was reading off delivery addresses while Tony scribbled them down in his notebook. The ovens hummed in the kitchen.

The bell above the door chimed.

Inferi walked in. His eyes were wrong. Behind him, three men followed, hands tucked into jackets.

"Everybody out!" Inferi shouted.

His men moved instantly. Tables scraped violently across the floor. One was kicked over, plates shattering. A chair cracked against the wall. People screamed. Pizza slices flew in the air. The OPEN sign was flipped to CLOSED.

Customers fled. The door banged repeatedly as bodies pushed through it. Within seconds, the warmth of the shop was replaced by fear.

Veronica turned, grabbed Valentina by the arm, and shoved her down beneath the counter. "Stay there!" Veronica hissed.

Valentina's heart hammered. From beneath the counter she could see only shoes.

Veronica stepped out from behind the counter, chin lifted.

"Vee!" Valentina whisper shouted, panic clawing up her throat. "Vee! No!" Her fingers trembled as she pulled out her phone. Marco. She typed fast, thumbs slipping.

She did not know if he would see it in time.

"What do you think you are doing, Inferi?" Veronica demanded.

"I brought a package. Make sure it's sold." He gestured lazily. One of his men stepped forward holding a small, tightly wrapped packet of meth.

"And for that you had to chase away my customers?" Veronica asked, fury threading through her composure.

"Needed to drive my point home," Inferi replied.

Veronica met his gaze. Her hair framed a face carved from defiance. She was not as tall as him, but she held herself like a queen defending a small, crumbling kingdom. "Inferi, I have tried my best to be civil with you," she said. "To handle this situation like a sensible business woman."

"Oh you mean the way you threw yourself at the devil this morning. Yeah, I saw you and I know you wanted me to see you. What did you give the devil in exchange for that act? Your soul?"

She had hoped to intimidate him. To make him think she had protection.

Now she understood she had miscalculated.

It was then she realised the plan didn't work.

She had gambled with fire and expected smoke.

"Inferi," she said, keeping her voice steady though her pulse thundered at her temples, "believe it or not but I was trying to save your life."

His nostrils flared.

"We went to school together," she continued. "Whatever path you chose to follow after High School, is none of my business. But we were friends once. I urge you to leave my shop right now and take your hooligans with you."

He moved faster than she expected. He pulled a knife from inside his jacket.

Gasps erupted from behind the counter. Rosa's hand flew to her mouth. Tony swore under his breath, frozen in terror.

Inferi stepped closer until there was no space left between them. His hand gripped her jaw, tilting her face upward as the blade rested just beneath her chin, close to her necklace.

Cold.

"You always thought you were better than everyone even back in school," he said quietly.

Veronica's breath slowed. She refused to give him the satisfaction of panic.

The blade pressed harder. A thin sting bloomed against her skin.

"Well," Ineri murmured, his lips inches from her ear, "I run this block now. You will do exactly as I say."

"James." She had not called him that in years. "You cannot be this stupid," she said. "I cannot push your poison now even if I wanted to. You just announced to my customers in the most childish way possible that Scalese Pizza Parlour isn't safe, you stupid dimwit."

"Don't worry about customers," he said coldly. "You just do as I say."

"James, I am begging you," she said. "You do not want this to be your exit out of life."

She was not bluffing.

Ineri's hand moved.

The crack of his palm against her face split the air.

Her head snapped to the side. The impact exploded against the same cheek that had only just begun to heal from the last encounter. Pain burst behind her eyes. She screamed.

"Take the goddamned meth!" Ineri shouted.

"I'll take it!" Tony stepped forward. He was shaking but he stepped forward anyway. He extended his hand toward the packet. His eyes darted to Veronica.

"Tony, don't!" Vee snapped.

Ineri's patience snapped.

He lunged and fisted his hand into her hair, tangling in the strands at the base of her skull. He yanked hard, forcing her head back until her throat was fully exposed.

The knife returned to its place beneath her skin.

This time he pushed harder.

The blade pierced to break the surface. A thin bead of blood welled up and slid down.

"You got fire, uhn," he breathed against her ear, his grip tightening. "I'm going to fuck you the hell up. You think I'm playing with you?"

"Ineri!" Tony stepped closer despite the tremor in his legs. "I'll take it. Just let her go. Come on." His hand was still outstretched, palm open, offering himself up as the compromise.

Inferi's mouth curled. "This one here has some sense."

He shoved Veronica away from him. She hit the floor hard, her shoulder striking tile slick with spilled sauce. Pain flared through her ribs, stealing the air from her lungs. Before she could gather herself, one of Inferi's men stepped forward and placed the packet of meth into Tony's shaking hand.

Veronica forced herself up on unsteady legs. Her cheek burned. Her throat throbbed where the blade had tasted her skin. Her hair hung loose and tangled from where he had yanked it. She lunged forward, snatched the packet from his grip and ripped it open. The pills spilled across the floor.

"I am not pushing your goddamned poison," she spat. "You fucking asshole."

"Crazy bitch!" Inferi roared. His hand cracked against her face again. Harder. Her head snapped sideways and she tasted blood. Before she could steady herself, his boot slammed into her side. The impact drove her back to the floor. Pain radiated through her ribs.

"Do you know how much that costs?" he shouted.

Veronica curled slightly on the tile, breath ragged.

The door of the diner opened.

The bell above it chimed.

"Can't you see the fucking sign?" Inferi snapped, whipping around, fury still coiled in his shoulders.

Then he froze.

Luciano stood in the doorway.

His presence altered the air in the room.

Behind him, just inside the threshold, Marco stood with his hands clasped calmly in front of him.

Inferi's anger drained from his face so quickly it was almost grotesque.

"Luciano...."

Veronica's head snapped up at the sound.

Through the haze of pain, she saw him. For a second she thought she was hallucinating. A mirage conjured by desperation.

But he was real.

His eyes found her immediately.

They darkened with fury so contained it became lethal.

He took in everything in a single sweep. The overturned tables. The spilled pills on the floor. Tony's pale face. The smear of blood at her throat. The swelling bruise blooming again on her cheek.

His jaw flexed once.

Inferi attempted a smile. It failed halfway.

"You know who I am?" Luca asked. He stood there with his shoulders relaxed, one hand resting casually near his belt, dark eyes fixed on Inferi.

Inferi swallowed. "Of course... of course..."

Luca's lips curved into a faint smile. He reached into the inner pocket of his tailored jacket and pulled out his wallet.

"How much is your meth worth?"

"No, no... we'll just pick them up." He gestured quickly to his men, who immediately crouched to scrape up what they could from the filthy tile.

"Its no problem," Luca said mildly. "How much?" He stepped closer.

Inferi hesitated. He could feel the trap but he did not know where it was.

"About one thousand dollars."

Luca nodded once. He opened his wallet and removed stacks of bills. Two thousand dollars. He held them out between his fingers with a polite smile.

"Consider it covered."

Inferi stared at the money for half a second too long before greed won. He took it. "Thank you, Luca," he laughed.

Veronica watched the exchange from where Valentina knelt beside her. Her cheek throbbed. Her ribs screamed every time she inhaled.

She watched Luca hand over the money.

This was the same man who had nearly stabbed his own brother for daring to call her a slut. The same man who had promised hell and brimstone if anyone so much as thought of touching her. She had seen the violence in him then.

And now he was smiling. Paying off the man who had just humiliated her.

The contradiction hollowed her out.

Luca maintained that faint, courteous smile.

"Go," he said gently. "This is a business place."

Chapter 97: No Hard Feelings

"Of course, of course." Ineri tucked the money away quickly. He turned toward Veronica, forcing a smirk back onto his face now that he felt safe. "No hard feelings, uhn Scalese. Its just business."

Luca stepped forward and patted Ineri lightly on the shoulder.

Ineri stiffened under the touch. He nodded once, then motioned to his men. They filed out quickly.

The bell above the door chimed again as it closed.

Silence flooded the shop.

For a long moment, Luca did not move as he watched Ineri as his men through the glass doors.

Then his smile vanished.

The warmth drained from his face. His eyes shifted from the door to Veronica.

Valentina instinctively moved aside.

Luca crouched in front of Veronica. Up close, she could see the tightness in his jaw, the muscle ticking near his temple.

When his fingers finally brushed her cheek, they were impossibly gentle.

His thumb traced the swelling bruise. Then the cut at her throat. His breathing changed. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket again for a pristine white handkerchief. He unfolded it and leaned closer, his fingers steady as he pressed the fabric gently to the

thin line of blood sliding down Veronica's neck. He dabbed slowly, absorbing the red before it could travel further.

"You didn't walk into a door last week, did you?" he asked.

Anyone standing across the room would have believed he was making polite conversation. But Veronica was close enough to see the truth. His blue eyes had gone distant. Like a man standing at the edge of a cliff, calculating how far he was willing to fall.

"I asked you a question," he said quietly. "You didn't walk into a door, did you?"

Veronica swallowed. "No," she admitted.

Luca held her gaze. The handkerchief remained at her neck, his fingers brushing the hollow of her throat.

"All that act this morning was for him, wasn't it?"

She knew exactly what he meant. The way she had pressed herself close to him outside the bodega. The kiss under Inferi's watchful eye. She had wanted to send a message. To make Inferi believe she was protected by someone bigger.

Vee nodded.

"Use your words, Bambola," Luca said.

"Yes." She had used him.

He removed the handkerchief from her neck and folded it carefully, now stained red.

Then he stood.

The shift in height changed the entire dynamic. He seemed larger now, broader. The softness that had existed only for her vanished.

He turned to Marco.

"Take her home. Have Nonnina take care of her. I'll take an Uber back."

Marco nodded once, already stepping forward. "Of course, Luca."

"And Marco?" Luca added.

Marco paused.

"Do I need to explain to you what to do next?"

"No."

Veronica's stomach dropped.

Luca adjusted his cuffs, then finally let his gaze settle on her one last time.

He walked toward the door with the same controlled stride he had entered with.

Luca pulled his phone from his pocket as he stepped onto the sidewalk. Anyone passing by would see a well dressed man blending into city life.

They would not see the storm coiling beneath his calm.

Valentina slid her arm carefully around Veronica's waist and helped her to her feet. Pain shot through her ribs, forcing a low hiss past her lips. Her legs felt unreliable. The shop around her looked distant, blurred at the edges.

She reached for Marco. Her fingers clutched the sleeve of his coat. "What is he going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said.

The lie was smooth.

"Marco!" Vee snapped.

The effort of raising her voice sent another stab through her side. She winced, swallowing back the sound.

"I have to take you home," he replied evenly.

"Marco, you have to tell him, he cannot do anything," she insisted, her fingers tightening on his arm. "It will most definitely cause a riot."

She knew this neighborhood.

Marco's jaw flexed. "Don't worry yourself about anything," he said quietly. "Come." It was already in motion. Whatever Luca intended had been decided the moment he saw blood on her skin.

Veronica shifted her weight and nearly collapsed again. Her ribs protested viciously. Each breath felt shallow. The kick had landed harder than she first realized.

"Come on, hold on to me," Marco instructed. He slid his arm securely around her shoulders, careful not to press too hard against her side.

Vee turned her head toward Valentina, who stood pale and shaken, clutching her own trembling hands.

"Go get your things," Vee ordered through clenched teeth. "Marco will drop you off on the way. Hurry. Get my bag too!"

Valentina nodded quickly and disappeared toward the back, returning moments later with their bags, her eyes glossy but determined.

Veronica looked toward Tony and Rosa. They stood amid the wreckage of overturned chairs, already beginning to gather what could be salvaged.

"Go," Rosa said firmly. "We will take care of everything here."

Tony nodded. "We've got it."

"Thank you," Vee said softly.

Outside, Marco helped her into the back seat, one hand steady at her elbow. Valentina slid into the front passenger seat.

The car pulled away from the curb.

"Marco," Vee tried again once they were moving. "Whatever he plans, it isn't worth it."

Marco's eyes remained fixed on the road.

Soon, the car turned onto the street where the Scalese home stood.

The car stopped.

Valentina exhaled shakily and stepped out first. Marco followed immediately, scanning the street before walking her up the short path to the door.

He escorted her to the front door and waited while she unlocked it.

When Marco was satisfied it was safe, he turned toward the waiting car.

"Marco?" Valentina's voice stopped him mid step.

He turned back to her.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Do you think you could come by later? I would like to talk to you." She stepped closer to the doorway as she spoke.

"Of course," Marco replied. "Are you alright? Did Inperi touch you?"

"No," she said quickly. "I was hiding the whole time."

"Good," Marco said.

Chapter 98: That's Who She Is

She shook her head. "No, not good. Veronica... she... the first thing she does is protect me. She stood up to Inperi without thinking about herself just as she stood up to Luca to save me. That's who she is," Valentina continued, her hands twisting together. "Nothing else matters when it comes to me." She swallowed. "I need to speak with you about her."

Marco understood what she was not saying. "Fine," he said at last. "I'll come by tonight. It might be midnight cause I'm sure we will have a busy night planned."

Valentina did not ask what that meant. She already knew. "Thank you, Marco," she said softly. "And thank you for responding so quickly." When she had sent that desperate message earlier, she had not known if anyone would make it in time.

Marco gave a small nod. "Take care, Valentina. Be safe."

She nodded. "I will."

He descended the porch steps and crossed the short path back to the car.

Nonnina had set Luca's first broken finger when he was seven years old. She had stitched him when he was twelve and already learning the ways of the familia. By sixteen, she had extracted bullets. Bruises, cuts, scrapes, gunshot wounds, stab wounds, fractured ribs, dislocated shoulders, concussions that left him silent for days.

She had treated them all. She had been contracted before he ever opened his eyes. She had watched him grow from infant into a man carved from violence. She knew the map of his body.

So when Veronica was carried into the house, it was not shock that struck Nonnina.

It was fury. "Idioti, testardi, sempre così, sempre sangue."

Veronica lay still while Nonnina worked. The knife had not pierced deeply enough to require a surgeon, but it had cut through skin.

Nonnina's hands were steady despite her temper. She cleaned the wound thoroughly, the sting of antiseptic making Veronica's vision blur.

Marco tried to explain what had happened. But Nonnina kept interrupting, firing questions.

Nonnina finally sat down beside her.

Veronica's dark hair spilled across the pillow beneath her head.

"Why didn't you let Luca handle this before it got to this?"

"Because Luca's way of handling things will leave blood on my conscience," she said quietly.

Nonnina's lips curved faintly. "You want to make him good," she said, a low chuckle rumbling from her chest.

"Is that so hard to imagine?" Veronica raised an eyebrow despite the exhaustion settling into her bones. "That he can become good?"

"He never told you about his family, did he?" Nonnina asked.

"He never talks about himself," Vee sighed.

The drugs were beginning to blur the sharpness of her pain. The stabbing throb in her ribs softened into a dull pressure. Her limbs felt heavier, her thoughts slower.

Nonnina folded her hands in her lap, her fingers still faintly stained with iodine.

"Until you understand where he comes from," she said, "you will not understand that he cannot be changed."

"Changing the man," Nonnina continued, "means he has to go to war with his entire family. No one makes it out alive." She paused, eyes narrowing slightly as old memories surfaced. "Well, almost no one. And that is because she was American."

"Who?"

Nonnina held her gaze. "Luca's mother."

"He never talks about her either," Veronica murmured.

"For good reason," Nonnina replied. "His ways may be extreme, but you let him take care of you, Zuccherino."

"You know about his wife?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes. She was raised to be a Genovese," Nonnina continued. "She had been picked out by Luca's father since she was nothing but a baby."

"So it was always arranged."

"Yes."

"Is she a good woman?" Vee asked.

"Why do you ask?" Nonnina said.

"I want to know how much guilt I need to carry for messing with another woman's marriage."

"You make him happy, Zuccherino. That's all that matters."

"It doesn't bother you?" Vee pressed. "That he has an affair?"

"Genovese men keep mistresses all the time," Nonnina said evenly. "Wives learn to deal with it. You get some sleep."

Mistresses.

Was that what she would be?

Was that what he considered her?

It would not be enough. She wanted everything. And that wanting made her sick. Ashamed.

She had always believed she was good, fundamentally decent.

Luca was bad. The world said so. The law said so.

And she seemed to care that she wasn't everything to him.

At some point tonight, when Ineri's hand had fisted in her hair and the knife had pressed against her skin, she had been furious.

She had wanted Ineri dead. She had wanted to watch him bleed. To see his arrogance drain from his face. To hear him beg. The image had flashed in her mind with disturbing clarity.

The desire had not repulsed her in the moment.

It had satisfied her.

Her stomach turned now at the memory.

Maybe Luca's world was not just around her.

Maybe it was seeping into her.

Luca did not need to drag her into darkness. It would invite her.

Luca did not go to her immediately he got back home. He waited until after dinner, after a cold shower. He was still angry. He had not gotten his hands on Ineri. Marco was still working on it. Luca trusted Marco's efficiency. But it did not cool the fury burning in his chest.

What gnawed at him most was not just that Ineri had touched her.

It was that it could have been avoided.

He could have ended it the first time the man stepped out of line.

If Vee had told him.

He had sensed something was off. He had given her the benefit of the doubt.

That was his mistake.

She asked him to trust her with one cheek and did something reckless with the other.

When he arrived at her apartment, the bedroom door was half open. He pushed it open and found her standing in front of the mirror.

Her neck was plastered carefully where the blade had grazed her. Her face was a wreck.

(Brought to you by: Jennifer Willard)

Chapter 99: It's Worse Than It Looks

A bruise bloomed along her cheekbone, darkening into deep violet. Her lower lip was split slightly, swelling faintly.

His hands curled at his sides.

It would have been worse without Nonnina. He knew that.

And there were injuries he had not even seen yet.

She was studying herself in the mirror, tilting her chin slightly. She saw him in the reflection before she heard him fully step inside. She turned immediately. "Luca," she stood there, facing him fully. Guilt was etched plainly across her features.

She knew.

Of course she knew she had f'ed the hell up.

He took in the sight of her slowly.

Luca's anger did not cool when he saw her up close. Instead, it intensified.

The image replayed in his mind with merciless clarity.

Inferi would have been dead already. The second Luca saw him hitting her, he had imagined driving a blade straight through his throat.

But there had been witnesses. A place of business tied to Veronica's name.

Killing a man in that space would have splattered more than blood.

So Luca had done what he rarely did.

He had swallowed his rage.

"Luca, I'm fine, really. It's worse than it looks. Nonnina did a fine job. I don't even feel any pain." She spoke quickly.

He stepped closer. His eyes moved slowly, methodically, cataloguing every injury. He memorized them. He was going to stab Inferi in exactly those places. He would mark him with the same map. "I told you what would happen if you lied to me," he said.

She lifted her chin. "I had to."

"You had to lie to me."

"Yes, Luca," she shot back, a flash of heat in her eyes. "Because I knew what you would do."

She did not intend to shoulder all of the blame. Not entirely.

"So you decided to what? Take matters into your own hands?"

"I thought I could handle it!" Veronica snapped back. "I had a plan!"

"You should have told me! God fucking dammit!"

"I would if your default setting wasn't to kill," she shot back. She planted her hands on her hips, standing defiant. She wanted him to see she was a storm in her own right.

"And what did your little stunt achieve?!" Luca snarled, stepping closer. "He is still going to die—in the most gruesome way possible!"

"See what I mean!" she yelled, frustration cracking into desperation. She shook her head, hair tumbling across her bruised cheek.

"Are you seriously sitting on your stupid high horse right now?!" he demanded. "If you hate who I am so much, why did you try to leverage my reputation? You used me!"

"No less than you are using me!" she shot back. Her eyes narrowed, the intensity of her gaze burning into his.

"I fucking bought you, for fuck's sakes!" he shouted. "It's what you do with things you buy!"

The fight drained out of Veronica's eyes instantly. The color fled from her face. The truth slammed into her: of course. She was just a property he owned. A possession purchased—ten million dollars' worth. Her stomach twisted, a bitter taste of reality she could neither swallow nor spit out.

"Don't look at me like that!" Luca snapped. "You don't want to hear the truth. Don't poke the bear."

"I'm sorry. I really am. I thought...I allowed myself... I can't believe that I..." Her eyes, wide and luminous shimmered with unshed tears. Her hands fidgeted at her sides.

"That you what?"

"Never mind..." she murmured, biting back the words, trying to retreat into the safety of silence. She wanted the moment to vanish.

"That you what?"

"Luca..." she tried, but he was relentless.

"Answer me!" The punch to the mirror behind her shattered the fragile calm of the room with a deafening crash.

"That I fucking love you!" she shouted. Luca froze, the impact of her words hitting him, his eyes widening slightly. He shook his head slowly. "And I am ashamed that I do," she whispered. Her gaze dropped to the floor, the intensity of the moment bending her shoulders forward.

"Okay..." he said slowly. "You're... you're ashamed?"

"Yes," she admitted. "How can I love you? For starters, you are married. Second, you kill people like it's your first instinct. You are not a good man. And I am ashamed that if I can love you, it means that maybe, just maybe, I am... just like you."

Luca stepped back, giving space yet unable to tear his gaze from her.

"Luca..." she whispered again, trembling, reaching for him with hands that shook. Her fingers stretched out.

"I understand, Veronica. You should get some more rest. Heal..." That was all he gave her.

Just distance.

He did not look at her again when he finished the sentence. He turned and left the apartment.

She stood there for a long moment, staring at the space he had occupied seconds ago.

"Fuck!" She dragged her hand through her hair. That was the most twisted love confession in the history of confessions. "'I'm ashamed'? What the fuck!"

She sank onto the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees, staring at the floor. Of all the things she could have said, she chose shame.

Because it was true.

And because she wanted to hurt him back.

When Marco gave Veronica the details of Luca's usual Tuesday guests, he had not expected her to show up.

Marco spotted her the moment she stepped through the entrance.

She wore black. A fishnet bodycon dress that clung to her curves. The mesh revealed skin strategically. Matching arm warmers extended from wrist to mid bicep. Her hair fell loose down her back.

Even Marco nodded appreciatively before he caught himself.

He knew Luca would probably kill him for even looking.

Veronica did not acknowledge the attention she drew as she walked through. She passed Marco without slowing. She reached Luca's office door. She had messed up last night.

Okay. They both had.

They had cut deep. Said things meant to wound.

But someone had to move first.

(Brought to you by: Jennifer Willard)

Chapter 100: Did Someone Order Entertainment?

And she had decided she would be the bigger woman.

Or at least the braver one.

She opened the door with a smile.

Luca was at his desk. He was going through the club's accounts, flipping through printed sheets. He was not technically in charge of the finances. The club was just a front. A laundering machine.

But he needed something to occupy his hands.

To distract him from the storm that was Veronica Scalese.

He glanced halfway up from the spreadsheets. His eyes barely registered the woman standing in the doorway.

"I told Dante to cancel my weeklies," he said flatly. "You can leave."

"Did someone order entertainment?" Vee drawled. She pushed the door open wider. Her eyes sparkled with amusement, the faintest smirk playing on her lips.

Luca's head snapped back up at the sound of her voice, the shock of her presence catching him entirely off guard. The anger that had been coiling in his chest, the frustration from last night's confessions, the gnawing impatience with her—it all evaporated instantly.

She was exquisite. Dangerous, untamed, and entirely, incomprehensibly captivating.

"I most certainly did not," he said. "But I'm not complaining."

Vee sauntered into the office, heels clicking softly against the floor, every sway a flirtation with gravity, with authority, with him. "Well, here I am," she said. "What are you going to do with me?" It was a challenge. A dare. A hand thrown down between them.

"If this is you apologizing," he said, leaning back slightly, trying to reclaim some of the control that slipped through his fingers, "you should mess up more often." His eyes narrowed, cataloguing every detail. She had tried to mask the bruises with makeup, but the subtle purple and red traces on her neck, the faint line of where Inferi's knife had grazed her skin, were still visible.

She walked up to him, the hem of her black fishnet dress grazing her thighs. He could see the outline of black underwear beneath the mesh. He sucked in a breath, letting his eyes trace the curve of her hips, the tilt of her shoulders, the mound of her cleavage.

"I said some things I shouldn't have said," she whispered. "And I would like to make up for them."

"Like being ashamed of me?" Luca's brow rose, a subtle taunt, a challenge hidden behind the calm exterior.

"That came out wrong," she said quickly.

"So...you are."

"I'm afraid of who I am turning into," she admitted.

"Nothing has changed about me since last night, Vee," he said. "I am still the devil. I am still a killer. Hell, it's part of my job description."

"I know," she whispered.

"Do you, really, Vee?" The predator in him, the devil she feared, had softened for a fraction of a moment as he pulled her into his arms, settling her carefully onto his lap. Her body fit against his, warmth pressed to warmth. He was solid, and he let her lean into him. His mouth tracing the mark on her neck.

"Yes. I do," she murmured, her hands pressing lightly against his chest. "I should appreciate that you want to protect me."

"And is that what you are doing?"

"Actually..." she began, eyes glinting with mischief, fingers running down the broad plane of his chest. "...I came to see if I could entice you into fucking me."

"You mean beg me to fuck you." His blue eyes narrowed, the edges of his lips tilting into a dangerous smirk, a predator finally finding its prey fully willing.

"I will," she whispered. Her fingers trailed down his torso again, testing his restraint, knowing full well he could engulf her in his storm in a heartbeat.

"Before you begin begging, there is someone I would like you to see," he said suddenly. His hands lifted, helping her to her feet. He reached behind his chair, pulling his jacket free and draping it over her shoulders. "Wear this, or my men will have a coronary."

The jacket engulfed her slightly, hiding just enough of the revealing dress to shield her. She looked up at him, the corners of her lips lifting into a sly smile.

Vee chuckled nervously. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." Then, casually, he pulled open a drawer, and pulled out his gun. The sight made Vee stiffen instantly.

"Luca?" she called. Her pulse spiked. "What are you doing?"

"You need to see all of me and then decide if you still think you want to pursue this with me," he said, the gun now holstered. His hand brushed hers lightly. "Come on."

He led her out of the office, down a narrow corridor. At the end of the hall, he reached the familiar false wall. He pushed it open, revealing the steel door behind it.

He urged her forward. Vee's breath hitched immediately as she crossed the threshold, instincts screaming at her to run, to escape before she saw what she was about to witness. But before she could move, his hand was on her arm. He held her in place, closing the steel door behind them, sealing them in together.

It was a bloody, violent tableau that made her stomach churn and her pulse spike. Two bodies lay crumpled on the floor, motionless, eyes staring blankly into nothingness—Inferi's men. And hanging in the center of the room, suspended by his wrists tied to the ceiling, was Inferi himself. His feet hovered just inches above the ground.

His body was battered, swollen and bleeding, the red of his injuries stark against the pale skin. A gag stuffed in his mouth muffled any protest, turning him from a man of arrogance to a silent, vulnerable creature.

The smell of blood was strong, metallic, permeating the room. Her hands went to her mouth, but Luca's steadying grip pressed her against him, rooting her to the moment with a dangerous intimacy.

"Luca, please..." she cried.

"You need to see who the devil really is. And decide if you want me that way," he said. His gaze locked onto hers, icy blue eyes glittering with a dangerous clarity that left no room for misunderstanding. "Because this is who I am. You either accept it or reject it."

(brought to you by Jennifer Willard)