



# Blood and Redemption

**Author:** *Nyla Lily*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** I was never meant to be this man.

Once, I believed in honor, in family. After my father was murdered, I became something else—something ruthless. I did what I had to do to keep our name from turning to dust. I bled for it. Killed for it. In the end, I still lost everything.

Now, I've got nothing left. No empire. No purpose. No family. Just regrets and a past littered with the people I've hurt.

I should walk away. Let it all burn.

But then he takes me in—my closest friend, the only man still willing to stand by me. And that's when I see her. His little sister, an angel in disguise. Innocent, sweet, untouched by the kind of darkness that poisons men like me.

She doesn't flinch when she looks at me. Doesn't turn away from the monster I've become. Instead, she patches me up, whispers kindness into the cracks of my soul, and makes me crave something I have no right to want.

Forgiveness.

I've spent years breaking things—people, trust, my own soul. Now, for the first time, I want to fix what I destroyed.

But redemption doesn't come easy, and neither does love. And if I'm not careful, I'll lose the one thing I never saw coming—her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 34

# Page 1

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1

Rocco

All around me, flashing lights flicker, surrounded by the most annoying sounds.

Fucking slot machines. All the way across the room, I can hear people betting away their earnings, throwing away their lives in hopes of winning something in return.

Every time I come here, I can't help but think how pathetic it is.

There's a reason a guy like me is drawn to this place. I fit right in.

Despite leaning against the bar like this, I've already had a few women approach. Those who recognize me probably think they'll win a point by getting in my pants. Usually, I'd cave for a little release, a distraction at best. Today, I'm not in the mood.

Jerking my finger toward the bartender to get another refill, I growl when they continue to refuse to leave the bottle. It's not like I'll drink away everything they have.

If Renato says I can drink to my heart's desire whenever I want to stop by, then I should be able to do so without waiting for another pour.

Speaking of the devil, I catch a glimpse of his sandy blond hair in the corner of my eye before his cologne hits me. I'd recognize that smell from anywhere. Rich and thick with each inhale.

He's always loved buying the most expensive things, and that includes the products he uses.

He doesn't think it stinks like I do.

My nose wrinkles as his hand clamps down on my shoulder.

"I heard you were down here." He gives me a sly smile as he takes me in. I can feel every lick of judgment as he scans my appearance.

I'll admit, I don't look my best. Haven't lately, but today sure takes the cake.

Trying not to care, I sniff and knock back the rest of the contents in the glass.

I've lost count of how much I've drunk already. Before I came here, I was already out of my mind.

Now the world is turning, and I'm feeling things I thought I could no longer feel, and everything I consume isn't numbing my senses. I need something stronger. Something to numb my nerves and all the pain they're feeling.

I snap my fingers, demanding another pour.

Eventually, these feelings that are overcoming me have to go away. Pesky feelings can be drowned away with everything else.

Ren swats the back of his hand at the bartender, officially cutting me off.

God damn it.

Can't drink in my own territory without worrying about someone trying to take me

out. I've already had those Bertelliassholes following me with their noses up my ass as they wait for my next move.

They're blind if they can't see the obvious answer.

I'm not doing shit. I don't care anymore.

"What is it this time?" Ren leans against the empty stool at my side, gazing at me with his good eye. The other has been lost, covered by an eyepatch adorned with silver trim. "Pleasetell me you aren't still sulking over your sisters."

Growling lowly, the closest thing I have to a best friend doesn't even flinch. In fact, the bastard's smile grows.

For being partially blind, he's good at reading me like a book.

Reaching behind me, I dig a hand into my back pocket and pull out a card I've already torn in half and crumpled.

Couldn't even find the strength to toss it in the trash.

## Page 2

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As he flattens the pieces and puts them together like a puzzle, I lean over the bar and grab the first bottle I can reach to pour myself something strong. By the burning smell, I'm willing to bet it's tequila.

The first gulp confirms it.

"Not many people would want to invite you to a wedding. Damn, what's it been, a few weeks? A couple of months at most."

"That bastard is using her," I hiss between my teeth. "He thinks a ring will be enough? Even if he ties her down, I'll get Camellia back. Eliza, too."

Santino fucking Bertelli. Kidnapped my youngest sister after I made a small misjudgment in an attempt to get the upper hand, and now one of his dogs dropped the invitation off.

He's rubbing his success in my face.

I tried to take something that was his, so he took something in return.

This is nothing but a power play here. He doesn't love my sister. He's just using her for revenge. I'm sure of it.

Ren doesn't stop me from downing my next glass, but he does steal the bottle, pushing it far within my reach.

"Listen, if you want to get all pissy and drunk, there are plenty of bars in this city to

pass out at. However, if you want to come here and drink, then you have to have even a sliver of class, man.”

Moving to push him away because I don’t want to hear it, the stool beneath me rocks.

“Woah there.” I feel Ren’s hands on me before I can fall off the chair. “This is why you came to drink all of my booze? You can’t even think about passing out here, man. I’m running a successful business.”

Trying to swat him away so he can leave me to suffer, his sigh does nothing but prove he isn’t going anywhere. He’s always been a pain in the ass when he wants to be. My best friend, somehow. One of the only people who hasn’t given up on me.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.” Clicking his tongue when my hand meets his jaw, he jerks me to my feet in return.

My head spins with the flashing lights, and I close my eyes tightly to block it all out before I toss the mix of liquid weighing heavily in my gut. With everything I’ve consumed, I’ve got plenty to give.

“He’s got people planted there, waiting for me to return. Not even to kill me, just to mock me,” I slur as we take our first few steps. “I don’t want to go home.”

After he thanks the poor worker who had to deal with me, he leads me toward the back. Probably doesn’t want people seeing me get carried out through the front entrance. Cares too much about what people think. Always has.

I’m far past that point.

Eliza hates me enough that she’d rather see me dead.

I've treated Camellia like an outcast for years, it's no wonder she'd choose an enemy over her family.

How much longer do I have before Renato gives up on me? The one last person who has my back. The one who was willing to marry Eliza to help take out those Bertelli assholes.

If I lose everyone, I won't have anyone left.

I should let someone take me out. At this rate, it won't take long before someone starts sniffing around and sees signs of weakness everywhere. They'll jump at the opportunity first thing to take everything I own right from underneath my nose.

"Well, unless you want to play at one of the tables, you can't stay here." Letting me lean against him, he curses when I groan. "If you think about ruining my suit, I'll kill you."

"Better hurry up, then." Groaning again, I can feel my stomach turning.

Ren takes my threat as a promise, dragging me now. He's shoving a door open before I'm stumbling out toward what looks like the back of the casino.

As cool air hits my flushed skin, the lack of light doesn't help my dizziness. Getting jerked about leads to my downfall, and it's no surprise that I toss up everything I've consumed tonight.

"Fuck, man. You've got to get your shit together." Ren turns away from me to avoid the awful sight before him. "Haven't seen you like this in years. You just need to get over this hump. Can't get them back if you're in this state."

It's almost ironic that he's the one at my side now. All those years ago, when I lost

my parents, he was the one to help me get through that hump, too.

Wiping the corner of my mouth, I groan as my head keeps swimming.



## Page 3

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If I stop drinking, then I'll start to feel things again. Emotions that make a man in my position come off as weak.

Do I tell him that I'm not sure I can keep going? Even if I've learned how to be strong and cold-hearted to keep things afloat, will he understand my inability to do so while alone?

Even if my relationship with my siblings is shaky, they kept me strong. With them gone, I have... nothing.

"Need a detox, or something." His hand finds my arm, and I feel him tugging me across the pavement. As he pulls out his phone to send an order for someone to clean this up, he keeps my feet moving.

"I don't want to go home," I tell him again, tugging on his hold.

"Chill. I'm taking you somewhere else. Somewhere you can't drink yourself to death." Face pinching, he digs out something, his keys by the looks of it.

He's always the type who enjoys having attention on him. Owning a handful of casinos is only a part of his flashy persona. He's also a fan of owning sports cars. Ones that hit record-breaking speeds.

Not a good combination for my current state.

"If you throw up in my car, I will kill you," he threatens all too seriously.

“I’ll hold you to it,” I groan, hoping the twisting in my gut stops.

If I keep thinking about that wedding invitation, I can’t promise an easy drive.

2

Aurora

This man stinks. Kind of like Ren when he comes home late after tending to his casinos. Like cigarette smoke and alcohol.

His clothes are wrinkled and dirty, too. The first two buttons are popped, and the buttons are missing entirely. My eyes linger on the golden skin beneath. Just the sliver of skin reveals a few faded lines of scars.

So close within my reach, I’m curious how he’d feel against my fingertips.

Rocco Parada.

I’ve heard his name spoken more in my home this week than my entire life. Ren has had plenty of complaints, especially last night when he dragged him into here. Lots of curses mixed in, too.

After dropping him off on our couch like a sack of potatoes, he abandoned him to get some rest as well.

My brother told me to stay away, not to bother our guest. However, I can’t help myself. I rarely get to see anyone. In fact, I haven’t seen another person since I was a kid.

Call me curious to see what kind of men my brother spends his time with. Now that

I've followed the order through the night, I can say it's a new day. Therefore, I feel like this should be okay.

No one is around to see what I'm doing, anyway.

Kneeling next to his head, I stare at him. He's got bags beneath his eyes, the telltale signs of rough nights. His dark hair is messy, like he spends his time shoving his fingers through the strands. I look at his mouth and trace the downward curve glued to his lips even while he's resting.

I'd hoped to find someone interesting. Someone who doesn't make my nose shrivel up and my mouth curl. Instead, I think my brother has kidnapped a homeless guy. Sometimes, he likes to pretend he's charitable. Secretly, I know just how greedy my brother is.

I don't know why he brought this man to our home.

He never brings people here.

If this guy is involved with his work, then he'd deal with him in the city. Not out here where it's quiet.

Something tells me this man is going to disrupt all the silence and peace.

Counting the dark patches on his throat, I can't help myself.

I've seen hickies before on Ren, but not up close like this. Only inches away, I can see that they look like little bruises.

## Page 4

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My nail grazes one mark, and I start to drag my finger toward the next like I'm connecting a constellation. However, before I can make it to the next dark patch, this man's eyes snap open.

Before I can breathe, thick fingers are suddenly wrapped around my wrist. Before I can blink, more fingers are wrapped around my throat.

For smelling like booze, this man reacts like an animal. Quick and deadly, he has this look in his eye that makes my heart flutter in my chest before picking up in speed.

My pulse races against his fingertips, but I don't dare swallow. Instead, I steady my breathing. He's not squeezing my throat tight enough to cut off the airflow, but getting in fresh air isn't easy.

Watching the fog clear away from his eyes, it doesn't take long for him to realize I'm not a threat. Jerking to look around, he releases me long enough to groan and pinch his brow.

From how badly his clothing smells, I can only imagine how much he indulged in.

"Where the fuck am I?" His voice is rough, deep enough that I can feel it tickle my bones. "How in the hell did I get here?"

He moves to stand up, quick to get on his feet, and I watch in amazement as he crumbles right back onto the crouch. When his skin pales, I quickly grab the trash can tucked in the corner. Offering it up, he doesn't think twice to snatch it from me before hurling whatever is weighing down his stomach.

Leaving momentarily, I abandon our living room to move to the kitchen. Grabbing a glass and filling it with water, I hunt down painkillers while I'm at it.

I've cared for Ren when he's had too much fun the night before.

Does this man have anyone to take care of him?

Returning, I realize my heart is still going at it. The thumps are so loud, I'd be surprised if he couldn't hear them.

As he's right back to the position I've found him in, his brows come together as his eyes pinch shut. He only opens them again when I nudge him with the glass. Opening his eyes, he stares at me.

His eyes are a dark brown. A little bloodshot, but the prettiest shade I've seen. Reminds me of an amber gemstone when the sun hits his face just right.

Even in such a state, I can see how handsome he is.

Lifting my hands, my fingers graze his face. While he stiffens under my touch, he allows me to trace the hairs on his face.

"You're the complete opposite of my brother," I murmur, my voice soft. "You must be important to him if he brought you here."

My thumb traces his frown, and I watch in amazement as it softens beneath my touch.

"Who are you?" He asks next, this question coming out more hoarse as he stares at me in bewilderment.

Unlike all of his previous questions, I'm willing to answer this one. I want to hear

that gravelly voice of his speak my name.

“Aurora.” Cupping his face, I smile. “Aurora Marino.”

Staring up at me, I watch as his pupils shrink. Must be the sunlight. Up this close, I can see the different colored specs dancing around the empty black circles.

Are all guys this handsome, or just this one?

I don't want to look away. Like he's got me in a trance, I'm stuck in place for the next few passing seconds. I think for a moment, we are both in the same state.

Hearing footsteps in the distance, I jerk and look behind me. Taking a step back, I'm surprised by the warmth on my arm.

Rocco reaches out in an attempt to stop me. Unlike his earlier touch, his fingers feel soft against my skin.

“He can't know I've been here,” I whisper before pulling back.

As confusion slips over his face, I snatch the pill bottle and dart away before Renato can join us.

I don't know why my brother brought a man here, but it's not something he's done before.

My brother is far too protective of me. Growing up, he's always been in my shadow, keeping me safe from any of the dangers of the world.

## Page 5

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When I was little and Ren had to take over after our father was killed, he'd moved us out in the middle of nowhere, promising to keep me safe.

No arranged marriages like our father planned. No trades to strengthen bonds. Just peaceful serenity.

Ten years later, there's suddenly a hiccup.

Rocco Parada.

If I'm not careful, Ren's going to take away the first anomaly he's allowed in our home.

And a man as interesting as this one? I want him to stay as long as possible.

3

Rocco

When I pried my eyes open, the world swam into focus like I was surfacing from deep water. My body was a wreck—every breath knifed through my ribs, my vision still streaked with static, and the metallic tang of blood coated my tongue.

I'd expected the Reaper.

I'd figured Death would come grinning, all shadow and teeth, to finally cash in the debt I'd been racking up for years.

Instead, I gother.

Sunlight fractured through the haze, haloing her face, golden hair, eyes like bourbon held up to the light. She leaned over me, lips parted, hands fluttering near my chest like she was afraid to touch. The prettiest goddamn thing I'd ever seen.

But now she's gone, replaced by her brother. Like a gust of wind blew her way, I've swapped my angel with an asshole.

"Slept like a baby, I bet." Ren clicks his tongue as he crosses his arms. His eyes flick over toward the glass of water in my hands. "Managed to help yourself to the kitchen. Did you find something to eat?"

I go to shake my head, and everything tilts. Another hangover is the result of my recklessness.

Shouldn't have drunk so much. Shouldn't have gotten upset by the invitation.

"Where in the hell are we?" I glance to the side, secretly hoping I'll catch Aurora trying to sneak a glance at me. "Safehouse?"

"Myhouse," he sighs heavily. "Can't have you getting killed because you're pulling stunts like you're suicidal. I care for you, I do. You're like a brother to me, Rocco. It's the same reason I'm not letting you leave until you get your shit together."

I stare at him for a few seconds while trying to process his words. Finally, I laugh. "You can't be serious."

He rolls his shoulder, the movement stiff with barely leashed irritation. His expression twists—lips thinning, brows slashing down—into something downright venomous.



“Honestly? I don’t think I know a single person more fucked up in the head than you.” A humorless laugh escapes him. “So yeah, you’ve got alotof work to do on yourself. Don’t expect anyone to stick around while you figure it out.”

I blink, my grip tightening around my glass. “Just us two, then?”

Was my angel a hallucination? Impossible. I felt the warmth of her palms against my cheeks.

“I have a business to run. So, unless you think you can survive a few miles’ worth of a walk through a forest, then I think I’m alright to leave you here to do some figuring out.” Ren pinches his brow and sighs. “I trust you with my life, you know that. It’s why I brought you here. I trust you’ll keep your distance from my baby sister.”

She’s no baby. She’s curvy and luscious. An angel. The kind they paint on church ceilings, all soft edges and quiet grace.

Just thinking about her is making my mouth water. Looking so pure, so untouched...

If I get my hands anywhere near her, I’ll ruin her.

My fingers itch to trace the blush on her cheeks, to learn the shape of her gasp when I drag her into the dark with me. One taste. That’s all it would take to taint her.

Ren knows this. That’s why his eyes have grown darker, more serious. Seeing as I’ve known the bastard for more than a decade, and I didn’t know Aurora existed, says a lot.

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He's keeping her away from anything filthy. From men likeme.

“Don't worry. She'll get one look at me, and she'll run. They always do.” Muttering the lie, I move to stand. Patting my pockets, I scowl when my lighter and cigarettes are gone. Invitation is too, not like it matters. I've got that shit burned into my brain.

“Detox,” Ren tells me as he watches me. “Not just from the booze. From everything. I'll keep an eye on your territory and make sure no one oversteps. In the meantime...” He sighs. “Take a shower and get cleaned up. You look terrible. I don't want you making her uncomfortable.”

If Ren weren't my best friend, I wouldn't put up with how much he's been insulting me as of late. For now, I'll put up with it.

I don't know how long he thinks I'll need to stay. As someone who has dirtied his hands in the same filth as I have, he should know there is no fixing men like us. We're already long past our redemption point.

Until he gives up, I'll humor him for a couple of days. By then, even Renato will be ready to throw me out.

\* \* \*

The shower's steam clings to the mirror like a coward, refusing to fully reveal me. But I don't need clarity—I know this face like a scar.

I lean closer, squinting to see the fine details.

The man in the glass is a grotesque parody of who I should be. Dark circles bruise my eyes like I've been fighting for weeks. No, months. My stubble grows in uneven patches, as if even my body can't commit to anything. And that mouth—twisted in permanent disgust, always on the verge of a snarl or a sob. Ready to bite any hand that tries to help.

Pathetic.

I slam my palm against the reflection, smearing the condensation. For a second, the face distorts—jaw melting, eyes bleeding into the steam—and I think, good. Let it dissolve. Let me disappear.

But then the water clears.

And I'm still here. Still alive, still breathing.

Cursing out a growl, I yank open the door containing the mirror to search for anything to help numb this pain.

Ren took me away from my one escape, so now I have to find another.

No medicine outside of cheap painkillers. Nothing stronger than Tylenol. Fuck.

Spotting the mouthwash tucked inside, I yank it out, knocking out other contents inside. Twisting off the cap, the smell of hash mint hits my nose in a heavy wave. Taking in one mouthful, I swallow.

Fire races down my throat, curls in my gut. My eyes water. My teeth ache. And for one glorious moment, the world goes soft at the edges—just how I like it.

If I drink this entire container, I won't have to worry about my appearance or my

thoughts bothering me.

Taking one more gulp, I sputter as the thought of my sisters crosses my mind. If I stay the way I am, how in the hell am I supposed to get them out of the situation I'm in?

Coughing, I drop the mouthwash and feel it splatter against my ankle.

I can't be mad, not when I'm keeling over the toilet, tossing up not just the mouthwash, but enough stomach acid to make my throat raw.

Once my stomach is empty, and I'm forced to face these torturous feelings, I work on cleaning up my mess before Ren gets any ideas of taking away anything sharp.

Avoiding looking at the mirror, I abandon the room as soon as I can, aching to put some distance between it.

Soon, I end up in the kitchen. Even though I don't have any cravings for food, I know I need something in my stomach. Some water would help with the hangover. Food will help bring some life back to my face.

My angel doesn't wait to return within my reach.

The moment Ren's shadow disappears beyond the home to go fix the disaster of the state of my territory, she's there—not approaching, not yet, but watching. Her gaze licks over me like a flame testing kindling.

Ren's shirt strains across my shoulders, the sleeves riding up my forearms. His sweatpants cling indecently to my thighs. I can already hear his bitching about me ruining his clothes.

But her? She doesn't laugh. Doesn't speak. Just studies me with those brown eyes.

## Page 7

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“Do you know who I am?” I ask as I search the cabinets in the large kitchen for anything edible. Turns out, Ren has this place stocked for the zombie apocalypse. There’s so much to choose from, there’s not a chance I’ll go a single day hungry.

“Rocco Parada.” My name rolls off her tongue and my cock thickens without much thought. “My brother has spoken about you before. Mostly complaints, but some compliments.”

As I click my tongue, she steps closer.

“I’m sure he’s only spoken of the truth.” Plucking out a box aimlessly, I stare at the directions without reading them.

All I can focus on is how much closer she plans on getting with each cautious step.

Ren wouldn’t want me getting close to her, even if she is something special.

I can’t touch her. Hell, even breathing in this sweet vanilla scent rolling off her is pushing my luck.

Out of all the men he could’ve brought here, he picked the worst one.

She’s cautious—I can see it in the way she holds herself, the slight hesitation before each step. Smart woman. Sheshouldbe wary.

But then she does something stupid.

She moves closer. Close enough that her hair brushes my arm, the scent of vanilla and something floral curling into my space. It's soft. Sweet. Everything I'm not.

"How long will you be staying?"

I tilt my head down, my gaze catching on her mouth before I can stop myself. Full lips, slightly parted. An invitation for trouble.

"Until further notice."

In short, until I do something to fuck up and get kicked out. If I have to guess, a few hours at best.

4

Aurora

My brother must really trust this man. It's a wonder I haven't met him yet.

To leave me alone with someone else is a miracle. At the same time, it's left me yearning for something new.

But beneath the unease, there's something else—a restless pull low in my stomach. The thrill of the unknown. The dangerous, foolish hope that maybe, just maybe, this man could give me what I want.

"You shouldn't get too close," he warns, his voice deep. No longer from sleep, there's a warning behind each word. "Ren says I need to keep my distance."

"Ren isn't here." I don't need to point out the obvious, I'm sure he's well aware.

It's why he's so tense, probably worried about crossing lines.

The island stools sit untouched—too far, too polite for what I want. So I aim for the counter instead, palms braced against the edge as I try to hoist myself up.

It should be easy. It used to be easy. But now my arms tremble, my cheeks flush, and it has nothing to do with the effort and everything to do with the weight of his gaze burning into me.

A clatter interrupts my struggle—the cardboard box hitting the counter. Then he's there, crowding into my space with a low murmur.

“Troublesome in every way.”

His hands sear through the thin fabric of my shirt as they grip my waist, lifting me like I weigh nothing. The world tilts, and suddenly I'm perched on the edge, his hips slotting between my knees like they belong there. He doesn't pull back. Just lingers, like he doesn't want to move either.

“Happy now?” His words rumble through me, teasing and rough.

This must be why Ren kept me hidden away. He didn't want me caving to the first man to cross my path. Look at me now, desperate for his attention.



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Catching my bottom lip between my teeth, I nod. My breath hitches as his hands glide down my sides—rough palms skimming the curves of my hips, fingers tracing the sensitive skin of my thighs like he’s memorizing every inch.

Heat pools low in my stomach, liquid and insistent, spreading lower until I’m throbbing with it. A shiver wracks through me when he squeezes my knees, his grip just shy of too much, and the sigh that escapes my lips is embarrassingly wanton.

Then he pulls away.

The sudden absence of his touch is a physical ache. Cold air rushes in where his body had been, and I have to bite back a whimper.

Rocco lets out a small grunt before returning to the preparation of his meal. It’s not some difficult recipe, but he curses nonetheless through the process.

“Can’t remember the last time I had to cook for myself,” he complains as he shoves a container into a microwave. “Ren can afford a chef. Instead, he buys prepackaged meals.”

“I like those.” Curling my fingers against my lap, I squirm when his gaze flicks over. “He gets them for me.”

“You’ve never had a proper meal then.” Clicking his tongue, he turns at the beep and curses again when he burns himself.

He curses a lot.

Bringing the steaming dish in my direction, I have to point out where our silverware is. Once he's gotten what he needs, he doesn't move to sit down. Instead, he lingers close enough for the aroma of food to fill my lungs.

"Tell me about yourself, angel." Sinking his fork into one of my favorite pasta dishes, he looks at it like the meal is a crime.

Angel. He already has a nickname for me. So innocent. Hardly fitting with the sorts of thoughts that have been crossing my mind as of late.

I watch, transfixed, as he lifts the bite to his mouth but doesn't eat. Just holds it there, sauce dripping onto the platter, his eyes locked on mine. Waiting.

My knees press together to contain the licks of heat he's causing. "What do you want to know?"

He smirks, finally taking the bite. "Everything."

He makes it sound like I might have something interesting to say. In truth, I'm rather boring. My hobbies are lacking. I enjoy the arts. Ren usually buys me whatever I want whenever I want to try something new.

I've taught myself how to play the piano, but who wants to hear about that? A few of the paintings on the wall are mine. I can tell him about the books I have, but the collection is small.

"My sister is big on reading," he mumbles more to himself, almost like an afterthought.

Like him, I want to know more. Not just about the ugly side of what he does, assuming he gets his hands dirty like Ren. I want to know about the good, too.

“What’s her name?” Nudging the cabinet door below with my heels, I watch the way his face twists.

Sensitive topic.

“Camellia.” Despite his expression, he answers.

“Pretty name.” My fingers skim his shoulder—a peace offering, a distraction. His muscles tense under my touch, heat radiating through the thin fabric of his shirt.

“I’m... pretty boring,” I confess, tilting my head. “Most days, I have to invent ways to keep myself entertained.”

His nostrils flare, the only tell that my touch affects him. “Am I your newest target?”

“No.” I bite the inside of my cheek, hard enough to taste copper. “I lose interest fast. But you?” My thumb brushes the pulse point at his throat. “You’re nothing like the others, Rocco. Not even close.”

His fork clatters onto the platter, abandoned.

Before I can react, his hand snaps out, capturing my wrist. His grip isn’t harsh, but it’s unshakable.

Slowly, deliberately, he brings my palm to his lips. When he speaks, his breath fans across my fingers.

“Angel,” he murmurs, “if it’s entertainment you want?” His teeth scrape my pulse point—not enough to hurt, just enough to make my breath hitch. “I’ll make sure you never get bored again.”

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The promise in his voice is concrete, causing my pulse to race.

I believe him. Even if my brother suddenly pops up, I don't think even Ren could pull us apart. Not while we're like this.

Then his hand moves back to my knee, his thumb sweeping over the sensitive skin behind it. My breath stutters. I'm already leaning into him, my pulse pounding where his fingers almost brush higher—

But he stops.

His nostrils flare, his jaw tightening like he's warring with himself. For one dizzying moment, his gaze flicks to the apex of my thighs, pressed tight against the counter's edge. I see the hunger there, dark and liquid.

Then he drags his palm away, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Later.” With promise in his voice, he leaves me dizzy.

I don't know what he has in mind, but later can't come soon enough.

5

Rocco

How in the hell am I supposed to be miserable if I've got Aurora on my heel, pushing buttons while trying her damndest to get under my skin?

There aren't any drugs or alcohol within my reach, but I can't think about that when she's far more addictive.

Hours pass, and I find myself growing more and more stir-crazy.

"Ren leaves you by yourself all day?" We're in the living room, the same place she found me.

While she's spread across two cushions, I'm sitting on the third. Her toes barely avoid my hip.

She nods, hardly looking bothered. "Work keeps him busy. I don't mind. Whenever he's here, he breathes down my neck. If he returns, it won't be until after the sun goes down."

If. Meaning there's a chance that he won't even come back.

"We're almost to that point." Looking over toward the large glass windows revealing all the forestry surrounding this place, I take in the darkening skies. "He won't be too happy if he sees you at my side."

She rolls her eyes like this is some casual debate and not the knife's edge we're balancing on. A hot spark of irritation flares in my chest. I should scold her. Should pin her against the cushions on this couch and remind her how easily trust can snap.

"He's not stupid," she says, all breezy confidence. "He knows we can't avoid bumping into each other. If Ren brought you here, he knows you won't hurt me."

I bark out a laugh. Her frown is instant, delicious.

"Hurting you isn't what he's worried about, angel." The words flow from my lips like

sweet syrup hiding a deadly poison.

That's when it hits me—the wide-eyed clarity in her gaze, the way she tilts her head like she's genuinely trying to understand. Christ, she's innocent. Not naive, not fragile, but untouched by the kind of filth I wear like a second skin.

My teeth sink into my cheek until I taste blood.

This is why I stopped, why I'll keep stopping. Because, for once in my miserable existence, I want something without ruining it.

The longer she stares at me with those wide eyes, the more my resolution cracks at its core.

Fine. I'll show her. Give her a reason to stay away. I'll make it easier for both of us.

Turning toward her, the cushion at her feet sinks as I lean into it. Slowly, my fingers drift toward her ankle. The moment our skin makes contact, I feel the way her skin prickles up.

“You want to know why Ren has tucked you away from the world, Aurora?” Purring her name, my other hand joins the first, and I slide my palms up her calves before pushing her knees apart.

Her breath hitches, and her lips part. For a moment, she looks like a doe caught in headlights. After a few seconds, she nods. One jerk, all I need.

## Page 10

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I climb up her body slowly, letting her feel every inch of me. My hands glide along her sides, possessive, memorizing the dip of her waist, the flare of her hips. She's trembling. Not from fear now. From anticipation.

My hips settle between her thighs, spreading them wider. She gasps, but she doesn't pull away.

"All they have to do is see you, and they'll want to touch you like this." Hovering over her, I wait for her to push me away. To tell me to stop. Anything.

Confidence and courage must run in the family because she doesn't do any of that. Instead, her cheeks flush a pretty pink as she lifts up against the couch. Her breath tickles the corner of my mouth as she erases the space between us.

"You're barely touching me at all, Rocco." Whispering the words, she arches against me.

My angel doesn't sound innocent at all. She sounds breathless, aching. Her thighs are quivering against my sides.

Rumbling in approval, I snake one of my hands toward the little loop of her shorts. Pinching the string, I tug it undone.

"I've wanted to do this the moment I found you hovering over me," I admit, my throat tightening. "I'm as bad as the rest of the men he's keeping you from."

Shaking her head, she catches her bottom lip between her teeth and frowns. One of

her hands brushes my wrist, guiding my hand where we both want it—inside her shorts, but letting her underwear block what I want to map out.

Her head tilts back, a silent surrender, as my fingers glide over damp fabric. The heat of her seeps through, branding my skin. My middle finger traces the slick seam of her, slow, deliberate, testing. A shudder ripples through her, and I feel it everywhere, the answering pressure of my cock thickening against her thigh.

If I'm as bad as they say...

A thought licks through me, dark and hungry. What's stopping me from sheathing myself in her wet heat, from ruining her in the best way? From claiming that innocence with the relentless push of my hips?

“Rocco...”

Her moan is a velvet stroke down my spine. Eyes fluttering shut, lips parted, a gasp leaves her lips as I shove her underwear to the side to explore her pussy without any barriers.

While my thumb finds her clit, one of my fingers prod her tight walls. Pushing in knuckle deep, I'm the one panting against her temple as I curl the digit inside of her.

Her walls aren't the only thing clamping down. I feel the sting of her nails digging into my wrist as her hips jerk.

So responsive, more than I could've ever imagined. It's like her body already knows pleasure.

“Have you touched yourself like this?” Prodding the tip of another finger, I groan as her walls twitch and flutter around the invasion.



Much to my surprise, she nods.

The hit is lethal. My cock swells, throbbing hard enough to ache, pulse hammering in time with the clench of her body around my fingers.

While she drenches my skin, my other hand moves to her hair. Such soft-looking blonde strands tickle my calloused skin as I bury my fingers inside. Pulling slightly and exposing her throat, I lick a strip across her racing pulse.

“Tell me about it,” I demand, pressing against her sweet spot.

Aurora gasps, melting into a hot moan. “I watch videos. It’s not hard to copy them.”

Fuck. My innocent angel watches porn during her downtime?

My mouth reaches her ear, and she shivers as my breath tickles. “Did it feel like this?”

Did she squirm this much when it was her hand tucked between her thighs? Was her pussy wet enough to hear the glide of my fingers?

She whimpers, shaking her head.

I need to watch her come undone. Otherwise, I’ll go mad.

With renewed rigor, my thumb draws rough circles while I bury my fingers deeper. I can’t add a third, not without hurting her.

As my eyes fall over her, watching the way she crumbles to my touch, I memorize her expressions, burning them in my brain.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

The way her moans hitch, trapped in her throat before escaping in broken gasps. The way her brows knit together, that delicate crease forming between them as pleasure winds her tighter, tighter... Then the tremors start. The flutter of her thighs. The desperate arch of her back.

I don't let up. Not when she's this close. I push harder, deeper, until her restraint shatters and her cry tears through the room, raw and unfiltered.

She's beautiful. Unreal. As undeserving as I am, I can't help but keep taking.

Pulling my hand from her shorts, I trail my wet fingers up her stomach. "Part your lips for me, angel."

In a daze, she does. Through the slow flutter of her lashes, she reveals the pinkest of tongues.

My fingers graze her lips, her release coating them like a gloss. Like she knows what to do, her tongue flicks out to taste herself.

"I'm starting to believe you're not as innocent as you led on to be." Muttering the words, my cock aches as I watch her suck on my fingers.

Groaning out a low string of curses, I don't have the strength to keep holding back.

I drag my hand back—fingers still slick with her—and cup her jaw, tilting her face to mine. No hesitation. No mercy. My mouth crashes down, claiming her in a searing kiss.

My tongue invades, dominates, swallowing every whimper, every shuddering breath. She tastes like surrender. Like mine.

Her lips are already swollen, already marked, and when I finally pull back, it's only far enough to watch her fall apart.

Eyes glazed. Chest heaving. That pretty mouth parted, all for me.

I drag my thumb across her bottom lip, considering making it swell from another nip of my teeth.

“Breathe,” I command.

She does—just barely.

Just like that, due to my greed, I've tainted her more than I ever should have.

Instead of feeling shame for it, all I want to do is claim her completely.

6

Aurora

The morning is hot today. Unlike the usual chilly dawns, the air feels sticky. Humid.

Yesterday felt like a dream, unreal. It's left my body on high alert, making sleeping in an impossible task.

Pulling my eyes from the ceiling, I look next to me at the empty spot on my bed. A part of me thought Rocco would sneak into my room in the middle of the night and claim the spot.

My heart flutters at first before feeling heavy.

My expectations are built on what I've watched in the past. Not just the adult films that make me aroused, but romantic films that end with happily ever afters.

I don't even know if a man like Rocco can experience a happy ending. Outside of that heated moment, every time I've looked his way, he's had this look in his eye.

A look of pain. One of hatred, for no one but himself.

My brother has the very same, but at least he tries to hide it from me.

A sigh slips from my lips as I push upright, the sheets pooling around my waist. Outside, dawn lingers in that fragile, half-born state—just a sliver of gold bleeding through the trees, too pale yet to burn away the remnants of night. Too early. Far too early.

I drag myself from bed, my bare feet hitting cool hardwood. The air nips at my sleep-warmed skin as I pad out of my room, desperate for something—anything—to douse this lingering heat. A glass of ice water. A cold shower.

As long as I avoid the place I know where Rocco is sleeping, I should succeed.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

Ending up in the kitchen, I smell coffee already brewed. The bitterness makes my nose wrinkle, but it's not the scent that makes me want to avoid the room.

Ren is leaning against the island, a tired expression on his face.

How am I supposed to meet his gaze after what I've done?

He won't let Rocco stay if he finds out.

I don't want him to leave. Not yet.

The floorboard creaks under my weight, and he turns slowly, like it takes effort.

His eyes are laid bare without his eyepatch: one dark brown, sharp even in exhaustion; the other milky white, adrift. Both find me anyway. Always find me.

His face is all hollows and shadows in the dim light. He looks wrecked. Then again, he always does.

"You're up early." His mouth quips up, his gaze softening.

"Couldn't sleep," I admit as I drift past him to get some juice. Grabbing a glass, I pause at the paper hanging on our fridge. A torn, crumpled sheet with fancy cursive.

A wedding invitation. Camellia Parada's name and a man's I don't recognize. Rocco's sister. This wasn't here the day before.

It looks like it belongs in the trash. Why did Ren hang it up?

He's scrolling through his phone, his finger flicking across the screen as he mindlessly sips at his drink.

Humming in the back of my throat, I fill my cup with juice and take the seat across from him.

The silence feels heavier than normal. It's the guilt of hiding a secret from him, I'm sure of it.

"He's not causing any issues for you, is he?" Despite asking the question, he doesn't lift his gaze. "I'm sure he's disrupted the peace you're used to."

The peace I hate, actually. But I can't possibly tell him that. Not while he works so hard to keep me safe from harm, ensuring that I'm comfortable.

"It's nice having someone around," I confess as I mumble against the glass. "How long will he be staying?"

I can't sound too hopeful. Ren is smart. He'll know why my voice wavers or why my eyes fall in disappointment. Once he puts the pieces together, Rocco will be gone.

"As long as he needs to, I guess." Sucking on his teeth, he sighs into his coffee. "I didn't mean to throw him here without warning. He just..."

My brother looks frustrated with himself.

I've been the only person Ren's gone out of his way for. It's amazing watching him get worked up because of another person.

“You’ve never mentioned him before.” Cradling my glass, I sneak in my curiosity. “How are you two so close? How did you meet?”

His mouth twitches with amusement. Okay, maybe I’m not as sneaky as I want to be.

“You were just a kid at the time. Doesn’t surprise me that you don’t remember him. Then again, he didn’t look like he had a stick up his ass during our teenage years.” He snorts at thememory, a good one for him. “Back then, our families wanted to create ties, bonds.”

Ren might keep me in the dark about how things are run now, but the past? That, I remember.

Too well.

Late nights with our mother hovering over our father’s slumped form. The rough ones—when the liquor burned hotter than his temper, and the walls shook with things I wasn’t supposed to hear.

Drifting my hands to my lap, I dig my nails into my thighs as I remember the painful nights, too. The ones where I bit the inside of my cheek until it bled. Before Ren knew that our mother wasn’t the only one in the path of those drunk rages.

But my smile never wavers. It’s practiced. Perfect. It keeps him talking, even when every word feels like a splinter under my fingernail. I want to listen. I do.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

Even if the past tastes like blood on my tongue.

“We didn’t get close until after I took over. Back then, he had a loving family. He didn’t need to dirty his hands, not yet. If it weren’t for him getting thrown in the position with poor preparation, if he didn’t come to me for help...” Ren sighs again, his smile melting away. “He wouldn’t have made it to where he is today.”

“What happened? Why did he—”

My brother scowls, his eye darkening as he stares blankly at his phone. “His father was murdered. He had no choice.”

Ren and Rocco are practically twins. Two sides of the same coin. Does that mean...

“Did he—”

“He didn’t,” he quickly answers. “Someone else took out his father. Elio was...”

I watch the way his face pinches up, and I can see the wall he’s suddenly building.

“Honestly, the details are grotesque. You don’t want to know, seriously.” He forces a laugh and brings his cup to his lips, drinking his coffee. I’m willing to bet it’s cold.

He’s always wanted to keep me in the dark about the fine details of the lives we grew up in. Ren can’t always be the one to protect me from the shadows. I’m an adult, not the tear-eyed little girl I used to be when it was just us against the world.



I can handle myself. When it involves Rocco, I want to know what I'm getting myself into. I don't think the damaged man is going to reveal the information himself.

"Renato, I want to know." My frown matches his, our stubbornness equal. Finally, my face softens. "Please."

"I don't want you to be scared of our guest," he shoots back, refusing.

Fear is the last emotion that man is going to draw from me, that's for sure.

"He can't be that bad if you left him here with me." Jutting my chin, I cross my arms across my chest.

Cursing under his breath, he sighs. "Fine. But don't even think about locking yourself in your room when I leave again."

Nodding in agreement, my brother continues.

"Elio was not a cruel man. He loved his kids. Hell, he took me in a few nights when Rocco and I were still befriending each other. Maybe he had selfish intentions, or maybe he had a good heart. Either way, he cared about his family. Loved them in a way many would call a weakness. Like how I love you."

Meaning, Rocco's father was overly protective, stopping at nothing for their happiness.

He tells me about Rocco's mother. About her affair with another man behind his father's back during his youthful years. He mentions Camellia's name again, his half-sister, a bastard child.

But to Elio, she was his. His princess. An anomaly in what typically happens when

such betrayal takes place.

“She looked identical to their mother,” he explains, his eyes going off in a daze. “Down to those same cold blue eyes. Appearance-wise, they could’ve been twins. Personality-wise, opposites. His sister was sweet. His mother?”

He doesn’t finish. Doesn’t need to.

The silence says it all.

“Camellia found Elio dead, poisoned. Rocco discovered their mother had been the one behind it. Rumours spread like wildfire before that Camellia’s real father went missing after her birth, and more whispers came out that she had been planning his demise since.”

I hold my breath. “And what did Rocco do?”

Ren squints, his lips parting.

“I killed her.” Behind us, a tired voice speaks out. “Then staged her disappearance as a runaway case. The bitch got off easy for what she did to us.”

We both jerk, taking him in. Hovering in the archway of the kitchen, it’s unknown how long Rocco’s been listening.

“She admitted what she’d done, claiming that my family had ruined her happiness.” Lifting away from the arch, he approaches us.

## Page 14

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“Rocco,” Ren starts, warning in his voice.

He doesn’t care. He’s got that darkness in his eyes as he stares only at me.

“I snapped. Strangled her until she stopped begging me for her life.” Reaching the island, he leans against it and jerks his head toward Ren. “At the time, I’d never dealt with a dead body before. Didn’t know what to do with her. So I went to someone whohas. Someone who is all familiar with dealing with killing his own.”

My breath catches in my throat as his upper lip curls, the memory not a good one for anyone involved.

Ren killed our father for good reason.

Our mother had already run away long before. He didn’t have anyone to direct his anger at, and I was right there. Like mother, like daughter.

I don’t like the memory. It’s one I’ve purposely blocked out. Moving out here made it easier, and now I understand why Ren’s tried so hard to keep me away from it all.

The past was terrifying. Haunting.

The fight that broke out. The yelling. Ren lost his eye, but the loss of our father was greater.

I barely hear the sound of my brother’s chair scraping back before I see him on the move.

“Aurora, leave.” My brother isn’t polite, the order is a demand.

He doesn’t want me to see him get violent. Not after last time.

“She’s not a fucking child,” Rocco barks out a laugh, finally tearing his eyes away from me. “She’s a full-grown woman, trust me—”

I gasp as I hear the sound of bone against flesh. I can’t even blink before my brother swings his fist, hitting our guest.

“What did you do?” The words come seething, and in this moment, there isn’t any exhaustion on his face. It’s something darker. As he watches Rocco stumble and hit the ground, his fingers curl and uncurl like he’s debating how he wants to do a final blow.

I knew this was going to happen.

The last man who’d put his hands on me ended up bloodied.

“You want to die that badly? When in the fuck did you become such a coward?”

Rocco doesn’t deny his claims as he sits on the floor, and my chest hurts.

My legs shake as I move. I don’t think as I put myself between both of them before my brother can do more damage.

Between them, my breath comes out shaky. “Please stop. Ren, please.”

When I look over my shoulder, Rocco doesn’t meet my gaze. He looks frustrated. Angry. But at whom?

He stays on the ground, cradling his cheek. Already, the skin is swelling. “Don’t go telling people stories that aren’t yours to tell.”

Ren’s nostrils flare, and his knuckles grow pale from how tight his fists are. “You’re a grown man. The past is in the past. Get the hell over it.”

He wants to do more, I can see it on his face.

I’ve seen him angry before. When he doesn’t think I’m looking, I am.

Even if I don’t understand these bonds and ties, I know Ren wouldn’t forgive himself if he shattered this relationship because of the heat of the moment.

A shaky breath rattles through me before I pivot, my knees hitting the ground hard enough to bruise. Rocco flinches when I reach for him, but I don’t stop. My fingers brush his swollen cheek, feather-light.

“It’s not his fault.” The words scrape my throat raw. “I asked. I wanted to know.”

I can see the emotions in his eyes. Not just pain and anger, but something deeper. Buried under everything, pushed to the surface. Vulnerability.

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While Ren chokes out my name, I turn toward him.

“If you hurt him any more, I won’t forgive you.” Keeping my voice steady and firm, I turn back and ignore anything Ren has to say. “The next time I want to know something, I’ll come to you.”

With my promise settling in the still air, I can already tell I’m going to have to push to keep him around until he can forgive himself for his past.

Even if my brother is on edge now, there’s no better person to get him there.

7

Rocco

Renato Marino has a sister complex. An all-consuming need to keep her happy. It’s why his jaw clenches every time Aurora drifts toward me to check my bruised cheek. Why he cancels meetings and takes calls from home rather than leave us alone together.

I shouldn’t have implied something happened between us. In that heated moment, clarity escaped me. Waking to the sound of my darkest secrets being recounted was never how I imagined this would go.

Ren telling Aurora the truth about me... even if she deserved to know, I couldn’t bear the thought of her eyes changing when they met mine. The whole world knows what I am. Everyone except her.

Yet she still let me touch her. Opened herself to me without flinching.

And like always, I ruined it. Confessed everything with my own tongue.

Now here she sits, pushing food my way when I forget to eat. Staying glued to my side as if Ren might drag me away the moment she blinks. As if I'm something worth protecting.

I don't deserve it.

But I eat because it makes her eyes light up. I let her touch me because it reassures her that I'm fine on the outside.

Sometimes, she's not satisfied with looking at what's outside. She wants to see what I'm hiding on the inside.

Like now, as she's giving me the same wide-eyed look that has made my resolve crumble many times before.

"Your sister is getting married soon." Referring to that invitation Ren refuses to toss, she purses her lips together. "She invited you. That must mean she doesn't hate you."

I sigh heavily, the weight of this topic pushing down against my shoulders. "Camellia didn't send it. Her future husband did."

She tilts her head. "Did he hand it to you?"

I squint. "Of course not."

Sighing, she rolls her eyes. "She invited you. That means she wants you to go."

She didn't send it. She wouldn't have. After the way I treated her, like she was an outcast, she has no reason to want to see me again.

Closing my eyes, I feel the brush of her fingers against my arm.

"The last time I saw her, she was with him." Picking out the memory, it's fuzzy. At the time, I was hammered. Drank too much as a result of losing my sisters. "She stopped them from taking me out."

I had only gone to see them because the bastard brought her to my territory on purpose. Santino was drawing me out to kill me, and I knew. I went in hopes he'd do it.

Seems I haven't changed a bit. Always looking for someone else to pull the trigger instead of taking myself out.

"Let's go to the wedding. Fix the broken bridges," she enthuses, too innocent for her own good.

"No."

Ren and I say the word at the same time, both agreeing as he stares at us from across the room.

"The Bertelli family isn't a fan of ours," Ren explains, "and we didn't get an invitation. They'll take my appearance as a threat."



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

Aurora looks between us, frowning. “Maybe that’s the problem. If everyone’s fighting, why don’t you just put down your weapons? It’s a wedding.”

“I don’t want to go.” Shaking my head, I tear my eyes away. “Even after all these years, I can’t look at Camellia.”

Not without seeing my mother’s face. My hands remember what my mind tries to forget—the feel of my mother’s throat beneath my fingers. The way her skin flushed pink then deepened to violet. The awful, gasping silence that followed.

It hurts to look at her without the memory resurfacing.

“I want a chance to get out of here.” Moving to stand, Aurora puts her hands on her hips. “I’ll stay by one of you. It’ll give me the chance to meet other people my age, I bet. Where do they live, in the city?”

Watching the way her eyes twinkle, the tension in my chest loosens.

She’s too beautiful.

“Middle of nowhere. A boring estate.” Ren clicks his tongue. “You’d hate it.”

Her gaze doesn’t waver from mine—won’t waver. These past days have sharpened her defiance to a blade’s edge. “We’ll go together,” she says, voice steady as a vow. “The moment it’s too much, we walk out.”

Then she’s crossing the space between us, hands lifting with that same unbearable

gentleness from the first time she touched me. Her palms graze my cheeks, thumbs tracing the hollows beneath my eyes.

When she whispers my name, it's honey and steel—sweet enough to dissolve the last of my resistance, strong enough to hold the pieces together.

This woman isn't salvation.

She's a storm wearing skin. And she's learned exactly how to make ruin feel like mercy.

\* \* \*

Days bleed together. Every accidental brush of her fingers, every stolen glance—it all fans a hunger that won't fucking burn out.

I've lost count of how many times I've fisted my cock to the ghost of her. I'm shameless, fisting my frustrations in the dead of night, the safest hours of the day.

My imagination strains to recreate her moans, but the memory is pale compared to the real thing.

No woman has ever carved herself this deep under my skin.

No craving has ever been this relentless.

I take a page from Ren's book. Without alcohol clouding my judgment, I make phone calls to catch up and follow up with my family, proving that I'm well and alive.

While he's willing to let me leave and follow up in person, Aurora's the one who's clinging to my fingers, silently pleading with me not to leave her side.

I can't take her with me. Not yet. Not with the worry of another man trying to get his hands on her.

I need to get my shit together before then. Manage my business and stabilize my empire as best as I can with these background distractions.

As much as it makes my stomach clench up, I look into the wedding, digging into its authenticity. If Aurora wants to attend, she'll be my partner. However, I won't lead her to her death.

So, I do what I do best. I manage, orchestrating the men at my disposal. The ones that haven't given up on me, or their devotion hasn't wavered.

Some go undercover, watching where each Bertelli member moves. Some carefully spy from a distance. Some tap into their phone lines, listening to every word.

Santino Bertelli despised me for a reason. With a clear head, I got under his skin by stealing what was his.

If I can sneak my way into his sources undetected in the past, I can do it again.

While I work, I know Aurora is itching for my attention. Ever since that stunt on the couch, I've been craving to give it to her.

Like a siren making its call, I feel each time she brushes my skin. I catch her biting her bottom lip, hoping I'll cave to what I'm guessing is an attempt to make me repeat what I've already done.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

Despite how badly I'd love to cave, I can't.

Wanting her isn't simple. I can't just scratch an itch and want her for her body.

I need to keep her safe.

Once all is said and done, I'll be able to make her mine.

8

Aurora

Call me spoiled, but I've grown used to always getting whatever I wanted. When it comes to Rocco, I get this craving when I'm near him, one that I have no strength to control.

Ren doesn't make getting near him very easy. Like a pest, he lingers in the shadows, knowingly present and watching.

I get it. Rocco's around twice my age. He's the first guy I've been around, and wanting what I want could be because of the separation from the rest of the world.

But it's not. I've scrolled through photos of men before, thumb hovering over pixels of sharp jawlines and practiced smiles. Stolen chats in dimly lit rooms when Ren wasn't looking. Clinical. Curious.

None of them has made me feel like this. Made me want to go against what is normal.

Rebel against Ren.

Rocco is not an image to linger on. Not a fantasy to tuck away.

He's heat and havoc, turning my stomach into a battlefield of fluttering wings every time he steps too close. His fingers sometimes graze a limb attached to my body, and my toes curl against the floorboards.

And the worst part?

He knows.

Smirks when I stiffen at his touch. Leans in just to watch my breath hitch. Plays with fire while Ren's growls rumble from the shadows like distant thunder whenever he isn't occupied.

The problem is, Rocco won't finish what he starts. He'll get me squirming before he's pulling out his phone, claiming it's because he has to deal with issues relating to work.

I must be spoiled. His leaving me so achy makes me want to throw a fit, demanding his attention. Not just a portion of it, or for a limited time. I want all of it.

Somehow, I survive waiting for the right opportunity to come my way to do something about my frustration.

Ren can't avoid his job forever. Unlike our father, who got his hands dirty in anything addictive, Ren wanted authenticity. Sure, gambling can have its own addictions, but no one is dying from it.

I don't think so, anyway.

When someone calls him with bad news, about missing revenue, he has to leave. He's not willing to drag me out of our home to keep me away from temptations, and Rocco is too busy with his own work to tag along.

I've never lied to Ren in my life, but when I tell him I'll be on my best behavior, I know I'm not being completely honest. He'd never think that I'd make the first move. And with Rocco being as busy as he's been, I'm sure my brother still trusts him one way or another.

When he finally leaves, I wait until I hear the tires of his car catch all the loose gravel. In the clear, I'm on the move without any hesitation.

I'm a partial believer in fate. My belief has only grown since his arrival.

How else can I explain the perfect alignment of it all—Ren called away on business, the house silent but for the drip-drip-drip of Rocco's shower down the hall?

Coincidence?

Please.

The universe doesn't make mistakes like this—doesn't leave a woman alone with a man who looks at her like she's both sacrament and sin unless it's intentional.

I move fast, my bare feet padding across our home as I head from one end of our home to the other.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

Steam curls under the bathroom door like an invitation.

I press my palm to the fogged wood. The shower's hiss is continuous, giving no hint that it will end anytime soon.

On the inside, I know what I want to do. However, just because I want it doesn't make it very easy to have the courage to go through with satisfying my needs.

After telling myself that I'm only going to have one chance with this, to do anything without having an audience, I push open the door.

The glass belonging to the shower is foggy, giving away only the outline of Rocco's body. He's got his arms lifted above his head as he washes his hair.

"Care for company?" My voice wobbles as the steam fills my lungs with my next slow inhale.

Even though he's using the same product that we all do, something about it smells different. He's always made everything that way.

Rocco pauses his movement before flattening his palm against the glass. Swiping his hand across, he clears the film and reveals the same dark gaze that haunts my dreams.

"Angel, I don't think you're supposed to be in here." He rumbles with a chuckle, and I see the smile on his lips.

He's stating the obvious, playing it safe.

“Ren left.” Stepping away from the door, I don’t let the lack of strength in my legs hold me back. Instead, I sink my thumbs into the band of my shorts and shove them down my hips. With my shorts, my underwear goes down with them.

His smile dips away, but his stare remains. Humming my nickname again, there’s a little warning behind it.

Once I cross this line laid between us, there’s no going back.

Little does he know, the moment he entered this house, we became entangled in the other. There is no going back.

My skin prickles as I pull off my shirt next, leaving my skin bare and exposed. Once the fabric hits my feet, I’m left to be devoured by his gaze.

My nipples harden, and the heat in my stomach drips lower as he takes in every inch.

“Can I join you?” I ask once more, my voice growing softer.

I don’t expect him to reject me despite how much attention he’s been giving his phone lately, but the chance is still there. The doubt is always hiding in the corners of my mind.

Instead of giving me an answer straight away, he’s shoving the door open, not minding the droplets of water escaping through the gap.

Then I see him too,allof him.

The steam curls around him, clinging to his olive skin, glistening under the water. He’s muscled, broad-shouldered, his body wet and slick with a few stubborn suds trailing down his chest.



The heat of the shower flushes his skin, and his gaze—dark, hungry—locks onto me as he steps back, making space without a single word.

Water trails down the hard planes of his stomach, over the defined V leading lower, and my breath catches. He's fully hard, the proof of his desire unmistakable. A slow smirk plays on his lips, daring, inviting.

“Well?” His voice is rough, thick with want. “Are you coming or am I going to have to make you?”

Breath hitching, I nod and step toward the shower. Once I'm inside, he's pushing the door shut and giving me room to stand beneath the heat of the stream.

Rocco isn't shy when it comes to enjoying the view. In fact, he makes this low growling sound that goes straight toward my pussy.

“Aurora, you're making it harder and harder to believe you're innocent.” His eyes follow my hands as I move to wash my hair. “You're fully aware of what you're doing, aren't you?”

I never said I was innocent. Nor am I ignorant. I've spent plenty of my life wanting things, down to the point of doing my own research while using my imagination to its fullest.

“I may have an idea,” I murmur as I move to wash the suds away. Once my hair is clean, I move to wash my body.

Rocco is happy to intervene.

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“Let me.” Stepping forward, he scoops the dark blue liquid from my palm before rubbing his hands together, creating more suds. “Come here. I want to make sure you’re washed thoroughly.”

I move toward him without thinking, his voice all the demand I need.

He doesn’t touch where I’m throbbing the most, not at first. Instead, he takes one of my arms. Dragging his fingers along the length of my limb, he makes every inch tingle as he does the very same to the other arm.

Stepping closer, I close my eyes and feel his hands move to my back.

“You’re soft everywhere,” he murmurs, more to himself. “A complete opposite of me.”

I enjoy feeling his hard chest brushing against mine. His bobbing erection isn’t unnoticed either, brushing against my thighs as he drags his hands lower.

A soft gasp leaves my lips as he moves to cup my ass. Kneading the muscles, his fingers inch closer to my pussy.

Can he feel how hot I am? He must. I feel each throb of his cock as he continues to touch.

Just when I think he’ll finally give me some relief, his hands move back toward my hips. “Turn around for me.”

I'm dizzy as I follow his order. As my back presses against his chest, he's spreading suds against my chest.

His front vibrates in approval as I press against his cock, my body not hiding how badly I want him.

Rocco has more patience than I do. He's cleaning my body, just as he said he would.

If he's not quicker with it, I might have to figure out a way to move this along on my own.

9

Rocco

She's starved for touch, for me.

I hear it in every shaky exhale, feel it in the way her body arches into my hands like a flower tilting toward the sun. Too long apart. Too many nights spent pretending we're not drowning in this hunger.

From the way it looks, I'm the one who is better at hiding the struggle of keeping a distance.

My palms slide up her ribs, claiming the weight of her breasts. A possessive squeeze—just this side of rough—and she rewards me with a moan so soft.

Washing her body was nothing more than a flimsy excuse to map every dip and curve of her with soap-slick hands.

Every shift of her hips against mine is torture—the sweet, slow kind that has my cock

dripping like a leaky faucet, catching just enough friction to make my teeth ache.

I've never been a man ruled by lust. Never chased pleasure like some starving dog.

But her?

She rewires my instincts with every gasp.

When my palms slide down her waist, she's already arching, thighs falling open to give me the room I need without any hesitation, like she's been waiting for this moment.

Petting won't cut it. Not with how her breath hitches when my fingers glide over her swollen lips. Not with how her back arches, a silent plea written in every trembling muscle.

Fuck gentle.

She doesn't want gentle. She wants release.

Stepping her toward the stream to wash away the suds, my fingers remained tucked between her thighs. As the water hits her breasts and nipples, my other hand slides toward her throat. Giving it a light squeeze, she arches against me.

"You're soaked, angel." My fingertips graze her swollen clit and the next moan that leaves her lips pushes me to stroke her sensitive nerves. "Fuck, will my fingers be enough?"

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She shakes her head and my cock jumps in joy at the thought of taking something so precious away from her.

Aurora wants me—even now, after all these days together, after seeing the darkest corners of who I am. She still chooses me to be the one to touch her like this.

She's not the first, but she's the only one who matters. I've played games before, never letting anything last, never risking feelings. But then she appeared, and everything changed. Now, the thought of another man touching her, claiming her, twists something vicious inside me.

Aurora is mine. I crave her just as fiercely as she craves me.

All I have to do is prove it to her—then there'll be no turning back.

She makes this low groan when I pull away from her, not touching her as thoroughly as I'd like.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” I murmur, tracing a thumb along her flushed skin. “Then I'll give you a reason to need another shower.”

Dazed, she nods, fingers gliding through the suds between her thighs—slow, distracted. I watch, jaw tight, until the water runs clear. Only then do I reach past her to shut off the shower.

The moment my hands are free, I'm on her again, making her gasp as I scoop her up.

“Rocco!” Flushed so pretty and pink, she clings to me like I’d let her fall. Not a chance.

“I’ve been dying to see your room,” I confess to her as I leave the bathroom, not caring about the watery trail we’re leaving behind. “I knew if I ever stepped inside, I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands to myself. Look how right I was.”

Reaching the door separating us from her personal space, I push it open with my foot.

Her bedroom is a blur of soft lilac walls, bedsheets, all fading into the periphery as I move through the room.

The plush white rug beneath my feet is a fleeting distraction, its fibers teasing my skin with each step. For a heartbeat, I consider laying her across it instead of the bed—pinning her right there, where the contrast of her body against the pale fabric would be obscenely perfect.

But no. The bed will mold to her body, making it more comfortable for her. I’ll only have her feel pleasure today.

The moment we reach the bed, I’m already guiding her down, my hands sliding beneath her thighs before she can even catch her breath. Her scent—clean, intoxicating—hits me like a punch to the gut, and I have to swallow hard as my mouth waters in anticipation.

Spreading her thighs apart, I’m mesmerized by her pink folds. Glistening with anticipation, I see she’s as ready for this as I am.

Last time, I only teased her with my fingers. But tonight? Tonight, I’m going to savor her properly—tongue, teeth, and lips worshiping her until she’s trembling. Only then will I let her ease the ache she’s left me with.

“Rocco—”

My name—a weapon in her mouth, a plea and a provocation all at once. She arches, fingers already working between her thighs, pressing, spreading, as if she can’t stand another second without touch.

A low, broken whimper spills from her lips—the sound alone has me hardening to the point of pain.

Fuck. She’s rubbing herself now, slow, teasing circles over her clit, like she’s mocking my restraint. Like she wants me to snap.

She knows exactly who she’s dealing with, knows what I’m capable of if I’m pushed too hard.

When I grab her wrist, she whines, even more when I drag my tongue along her fingers. “Greedy little thing, trying to keep this all to yourself.”

Aurora doesn’t argue, only jerking her hips when I release her to lick her inner thigh. So close to her pussy, I can easily breathe in her arousal.

“You keep squirming like that, angel, and these sheets won’t survive.” My voice is rough, fingers digging into her hips to still her. “Wait for me. If you don’t, I can’t give you what you really need.”

To drive the point home, I wrench her thighs apart—wide, unyielding—until she’s spread bare before me. “And don’t even think about touching yourself,” I growl, dragging a thumb over her heat just to feel her shudder. “Not when I’m the only one who gets to.”

Her breathy nod is all the permission I need. With a dark chuckle, I lean in and taste

her, slow and deliberate, savoring the way her back arches off the bed at the first flick of my tongue.

So sensitive, I'm not surprised by the way she gasps at every point of contact. Doesn't make me enjoy myself any less as she allows a continuous amount of moans to continue to spill from her lips.

I drag my tongue up her slit in one slow, filthy stroke, groaning at the taste. Mine. Her thighs tremble when I circle her clit, teasing just enough to hear that broken little whine she tries to swallow. "None of that," I growl against her. "Let me hear you."



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Then I suck—hard—and her back arches off the bed, a gasp tearing from her throat. Fuck, the way she grinds down on my tongue like she’s starving for it... I pin her hips to the mattress, forcing her to take what I give her.

“You taste like fucking heaven,” I growl, driving two fingers inside her while my tongue flicks ruthlessly. She’s so tight, clenching around me, her walls already fluttering like she’s ready to come undone.

I curl my fingers, finding that sweet spot, and her moans turn desperate. “That’s it, Aurora. Let your body fall apart and come. Right on my tongue.”

And when she does, I don’t let up. Not until she’s shaking, letting her cries bounce off all four walls.

Lost in a feverish haze, I shift onto my hands and knees, looming over her trembling body. My mouth descends to her chest, worshiping every inch of skin as she rides out the aftershocks of her climax. I can’t stop tasting her—don’t want to—not when she’s this responsive, this perfect beneath me.

Her breath hitches as my teeth graze a peaked nipple while my fingers claim her other breast, kneading possessively.

Every shudder, every whimper feeds the hunger burning through me. A guttural groan rumbles from my chest as I grind against her, coating myself in her arousal, marking myself with her essence.

Fuck, I want inside. I can’t think about anything else.

Her body trembles beneath me as I slide my hand between us, guiding the aching pressure of my cock to her entrance. Even now—twitching, breathless—she’s so fucking warm, so soft, that the first slow press inside has me gritting my teeth.

Tight. For just a moment, I forgot the whole reason behind taking this slow.

A ragged curse tears from my throat as I fight the urge to sheath myself in one brutal thrust. Instead, I force my hips to still, my control fraying with every shallow inch she takes.

Fuck.Fuck.

Her flushed face drags me back—lips parted, eyes hazy with want. I close the distance between us, brushing my mouth over hers in a teasing graze. Hesitant, she mirrors me, her inexperience igniting something possessive in my chest.

When I slip my tongue past her lips, she sucks on it like she’s starving.

“This won’t feel good at first,” I murmur against her jaw, my voice rough with restraint. “But I’d rather die than hurt you.”

Her laugh is brittle, her fingers tightening in my hair as she pulls back just enough to meet my gaze. “You don’t get to say things like that. Not now.”

The words hit like a bullet. She’s right—before her, I didn’t care if I lived or burned. Now? Look at me, clinging to the threads she’s created by existing.

And I’ll be damned if I let go. I’ll live—for her.

“I’m strong,” she continues, lifting her hips to take in another inch, proving her point. “I’m even more forgiving.”

Chuckling against her throat, I kiss her fluttering pulse. “I’ll be slow.”

I’m as slow as I can be. Each drag of my cock feels like suffocation through my shallow thrusts.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur against her lips, swallowing her sharp gasp as I sink deeper. Every inch is torture—her tight heat strangling me, my own restraint fraying with each ragged breath she takes.

Her nails score down my back as she gets a good grip on me, but I don’t hurry. Can’t. Not when her eyes gleam in the dim light, not when her thighs tremble around my hips like she’s afraid I’ll disappear.

“Look at me.” My thumb brushes away the tears collecting against her lashes. “Only me. Just this.”

When her body finally yields, when her whimper melts into a sigh against my mouth, it’s worth every second of agony. Worth the streaks on my back from her grip, worth the way my own vision whites out from holding back.

When I sink in the rest of the way and her body accepts everything I have to give, I’m left sighing in pure relief to see that I’ve finally found something I can touch without breaking it.

Finally.

10

Aurora

All my life, I was certain I’d die untouched—not just my body left unbroken, but my

heart locked away where no one would ever find it.

Now? Not so much.

The man above me isn't just splitting me open—he's carving his name into my ribs with every inch he has to give. Rocco. He doesn't just hold my heart; he crushes it in his fist, owns the ragged pulse of it, until all my stupid fears shatter like glass beneath his hips.

One brutal stroke was all it took. My innocence, claimed. The future no longer scares me.

He's exactly where I need him—my nails carving half-moons into his back as his hips roll against mine, each slow, deliberate thrust pulling a fresh wave of sensation from my oversensitive nerves.

Even after the aftershocks of my climax still tremble through me, heat licks up my spine again, relentless. My body arches, hips stuttering against his, while unfamiliar sounds tear from my throat—raw, pleading things I don't recognize as my own.

It isn't until I lock my legs around him, clinging like a vice, that he finally understands: I'm not just alright—I'm starving.

One moment, his thrusts are measured, restrained. The next, his rhythm shatters. His hips snap forward, driving into me with a roughness that steals my breath. A groan tears from his throat, raw and guttural, as his fingers dig bruises into my thighs.

“Look at me,” he grits out, but his own gaze is already hazy, unfocused.

I obey, watching him through my lashes.

Every thrust curls my toes as pleasure pools hotter, darker, coiling low in my belly. The stretch burns just enough to make me whimper, but the second he pauses—just to watch me squirm—I’m sobbing, hips jerking up, desperate for more.

“Are you always this greedy?” he asks in a growl against my throat, but he rewards me anyway, snapping his hips harder, knocking a broken moan from my lips. The rhythm turns ruthless, each snap of his pelvis hitting that sweet, swollen spot inside me until my vision blurs. I’m shaking, clinging, unraveling—

And still, he doesn’t stop. He won’t. Not until I’m sobbing his name, not until I’m split open and remade by the only man who knows how to ruin me this perfectly.

Finally, the loss of his rhythm gives me the chance to watch him come undone.

His release hits like a brand, molten heat spilling deep as his body locks against mine. But even as he pulses inside me, he doesn’t stop. His hips grind forward, deeper, like he’s trying to fuse us together. Like if he pushes hard enough, he can claim more than just my body—my bones, my breath, the space behind my ribs where my heart hammers against his.

“Fuck—” His voice is wrecked, his forehead dropping to my shoulder as he shudders. But his hands are still moving, dragging up my waist, palming my breasts, like he’s memorizing me. Like he’s afraid I’ll vanish if he stops touching me.

And then—

His fingers find my clit, rough and demanding.

“Come again,” he murmurs, lips against my sweat-slick skin. “I want to feel you milk

every last drop.”

The command sends a shockwave through me. I’m already oversensitive, trembling, but the pressure of his touch is relentless. It builds too fast, too much—until my vision whites out and my back arches off the bed, a broken cry tearing from my lips as another orgasm rips through me.

Rocco growls, low and satisfied, as my body clenches around him. He’s still buried inside me, still rocking faintly, as if he can’t bear to pull away. As if even now, spent and breathless, he’s trying to plant himself deeper.

When he finally stills, his breath hot against my neck as we both fight to collect ourselves.

I lose count of the seconds as they turn to minutes before he slowly pulls out, refusing to go far as he collapses next to me.

Feeling like a wet noodle, I don’t have the strength to move anywhere but curl up at his side. He must be the same way as he lazily throws an arm around me.

I don’t feel like taking another shower, not now. Not while he’s so warm, and I’m exhausted. Just keeping my eyes open is a fight in itself.

“Tell me you’re not going to leave after all that,” I murmur against his chest as I snuggle closer.

Rocco laughs, his own exhaustion seeping through. “After that, angel, I’m not going anywhere. In fact, I’m going to start thinking about what kind of ring I’ll be getting for you. If you’re worried about Renato, don’t. I’ll get his blessing by the end of tomorrow.”

While he kisses my forehead, I try to register what he's just said.

Rings are for marriages. Marriages are permanent.

Moving to sit up, I take in the curve of his smile. It feels like the first one I've ever seen on his face, and he's so handsome, it's not funny.

This guy could be my husband?



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As much as I don't want to make his smile disappear, I can't help but lean in and kiss him. Something soft and sweet to show him just how happy he's made me.

"Worst case, we could run away," I suggest half-jokingly.

Rocco sighs before shaking his head. "I've already got the biggest family in the state trying to ruin me. No offense, but your brother might actually kill me without hesitation if I think about stealing you away. Trust me, I have thought about it."

His smile returns, and he hardly looks bothered.

"We can deal with him tomorrow, together." Pecking the corner of his mouth, I sigh as I rest my head against his shoulder.

The weight of exhaustion is too great, and I can't help but succumb to the lure of rest.

\* \* \*

Telling Ren goes smoother than I expected—probably because Rocco hasn't bothered pretending to sleep on the couch.

One look at us the following morning, and Ren didn't need to ask. By the time I admitted what we'd done—thanks to Rocco's lack of hiding what happened with the spots all over my body—his anger didn't simmer, it ignited.

But Ren's always been pragmatic. Strangling Rocco wouldn't return my innocence. So he settled on the next best thing.

Marriage. A way to secure Rocco to my side, to tie him down.

Maybe he thought Rocco would get scared and try to leave. I don't know, maybe that was the kind of man he was in the past.

However, the subject of marriage drew him closer, leading to a kiss right in front of my brother.

Like he enjoys testing his luck with Ren, the green light has done nothing but make him braver.

I don't mind all the attention. In fact, I love it.

While Ren can figure out how to rush us along, there's a wedding much bigger to face than the union between Rocco and me.

His sister's. Thankfully, it's just in time to help distract both men.

So now, it's time to face that ruined invitation hanging on the fridge.

It's time to go to the wedding.

11

Rocco

Aurora in that dress is fucking lethal.

Her hair's braided back, exposing the flutter of her pulse at her throat, the pink heat creeping up her neck. Every glance at her feels like a punch to the gut—how the hell am I supposed to think straight when she looks like that? Any man with half a

heartbeat would drop to his knees for her.

And me? I'm already gone.

"She shouldn't have come." Ren's voice grates from the driver's seat, the same useless mantra for the tenth time. If he had his way, she'd be locked up somewhere safe, untouched.

Fuck that.

"I'll keep her safe," I murmur, but my fingers trace the hem of her dress instead, skirting higher. Her thighs press together instinctively—one flick of my wrist, and I could have them parting for me right here.

Aurora's smarter than both of us. Her hand clamps around my wrist, her blush deepening to crimson.

"Are you doing all right? With everything we're about to walk into..." Keeping her voice low enough for only me to hear, she's got concern written all over her face.

I haven't tried to come off as nervous. In fact, I've used this woman as a pleasant distraction.

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She normally can't find the time to ask me about my mental being when I have my face tucked between her thighs.

Right now, she's giving me those big doe eyes, watching me carefully.

Squeezing her knee, I sigh and sit back. "I have to be. We're attending a real wedding between one person who hates my guts, and another who should."

In the pit of my chest, I feel the flicker of pain prickling up. Every time I think about my family, I feel it.

"She must not hate you if she wants you to come." Repeating the words she'd said weeks ago, I grunt.

"You don't understand what I've done, angel." Sighing again, I feel Ren's eyes against the rearview mirror. "I tucked my sister away in the corner of our home, treated her like an outcast. Then I gave her false hope, sending her to the Bertelli estate for my gain. She was supposed to be invisible, unnoticed."

She was supposed to get information on the bastard. If she failed, she'd get taken out, taking care of the problem of her face haunting me.

It was supposed to be a win-win.

Except, it turns out, I'm a monster for sending my baby sister to get eaten by the wolves.

“I made it worse by convincing your brother to marry my other sister. If our families were tied together, it made sense for both families to attack the Bertelli family. Then she went and ran away, getting captured herself.” I sigh again, grimacing at the memory.

Camellia, being the kind soul she is, may have forgiven me for all of my actions. Eliza, on the other hand, has never been shy about her hatred for the man I’d become.

Little did she know that I became the man I am to keep my family alive. Just because she doesn’t agree with it doesn’t mean I’m completely wrong.

Ren groans at the memory of it all. He’s a trooper, willing to stick his neck out for me. Both of us know he wouldn’t have survived a marriage with my hot-headed sister anyway.

He’s more of a lone wolf type, anyway.

Aurora is amazed by the new information, having no idea about the decisions that could’ve happened beneath her nose.

“I guess we would’ve met each other one way or another.” Humming her thoughts, she gives my hand a squeeze. “I wonder how things would’ve worked out then.”

“With a ring wrapped around your finger,” I promise her softly, letting the pad of my thumb graze her knuckle.

Even in a crowded room of a reception, she would’ve stood out amongst plenty of bodies. Like a light in the shadows.

“This is it,” Ren calls out to us, breaking our short-lived concentration. “Stay focused.”

The Bertelli estate is made up of one long winding road and plenty of trees. Close to what Ren has for himself. However, unlike his cabin, Santino hosts his family in a mansion big enough to host at least twenty rooms. Hell, probably double.

I've tried getting into their security, but he's got it locked up tightly.

We're all in awe as we reach open gates. Like an invitation to enter as we please, we pass a security box with someone inside, a radio to his lips.

"Well, they'll know we're here." Dread weighs behind Ren's words. He's got a unique face, no chance of not being recognized.

"We'll be fine," I promise him, doubt covering mine.

All these weeks, I used this sweet girl to keep me distracted from reality. I should've tried to prepare myself better for this day.

Then again, I hardly believed I'd attend this wedding.

As gravel crunches beneath the tires, we see plenty of cars already lined up. Behind us, more cars follow. Those belonging to my men, my family.

While I may have treated Camellia wrongly, there were plenty of people who took care of her behind my back. Treated her kindly while they thought I didn't know.

Of course, I knew. Just because she haunted me without her control didn't mean she deserved to be hated.

Today, she deserves to have support. Even more, I need the very same in case this is a set up.

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Ren probably wishes some of his men could've come as well, but they didn't receive invites. His being here is already pushing the line.

Getting out first, I hold out my hand to help Aurora. While she's looking at the home in amazement, I'm taking in our surroundings.

The front of the home is quiet, too quiet. In the back, the sounds of voices carry.

Taking in a breath, my stomach tightens. Aurora gives my hand a much-needed squeeze before tugging me toward the home.

Of course, there's a brute waiting for us inside—the same hulking bastard who delivered Santino's invitation all those weeks ago. And just like before, his lip curls when he looks at me, disgust simmering in his beady eyes.

“Weapons.” He jerks his chin toward the men already piling pistols and knives into a steel lockbox. “Nothing passes this point.”

I don't move. “That rule for us, or everyone?”

Ren answers for me. With a confident smile, he pulls his pistol from the small of his back and drops it into the box with a clank. “Relax,” he says, all teeth. “If Santino wanted you dead, he wouldn't waste a bullet. He'd make it personal.”

Ren is good at acting, I'm not. I've always worn my emotions on my sleeve.

The brute's growl rattles deep in his chest in agreement—but it's the way his gaze

flicks to Aurora that sets my blood on fire. She steps closer, her shoulder brushing mine, and I don't bother hiding my scowl.

"She has nothing on her." Unclipping my own weapon, I drop it next to Ren's. "Can we go now?"

The brute looks past us, taking in my family. "Don't cause trouble. Not to us, or your siblings. Shemay have wanted you here, but no one else does."

As his words simmer, the Marino siblings drag me into their home.

Entering a grand room with a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, the grand staircase is blocked off, and the same is true for one half of the home. Instead, there is a path that leads straight down a long hallway toward large glass doors that seem to lead to the back of the house.

Past me would've loved to try to sneak away, to pull what information I could. The same job I gave to Camellia before sending her off on her own. Now I've got heavy feet carrying me along. I can't think about anything but getting from one end of the home to the other.

"Breathe." Aurora's voice is low, her fingers tightening around mine. "You look like you're about to pass out."

I am breathing—too fast, too shallow. The air tastes like gunmetal and old blood in this godforsaken house, but that's not why my pulse is racing in my throat.

It's them. My sisters.

Are they still whole? Still them? Or has this family carved out everything soft and left hollowed-out dolls in their place? The not-knowing is worse than any blade. It's a



living thing, gnawing at my ribs, dragging me under with every step deeper into this hell.

Clearing my throat, we reach the back of the home, entering what looks like luscious gardens. Past the bushes, the life of the party.

So many people relax in chairs, sitting amongst themselves, all on the groom's side. The bride's side is scarce, laid out with the hope that someone would show.

There are two people sitting in the front row, one of whom is a familiar face.

“Rocco?” Ren's voice is cautious as I move toward the crowd without thinking.

I don't give a damn about the guns or the glares or the way half these men would love an excuse to put a bullet in me.

All that matters is her.

My sister.

But of course, fate's a bitch. The man looming at Eliza's side spots me first. Urzo Bertelli—Santino's brother, with that same cruel twist to his scarred mouth. His frown isn't just a warning; it's a promise.

Pathetic. Did they really think posting a guard would stop me? That I'd let some overgrown watchdog keep me from my own blood?

Then Eliza turns her head.

For one heartbeat, shock flickers across her face—before it's swallowed whole by something else. Something familiar.

Rage.

Urzo isn't the one who threatens me before I can settle. Instead, she's the one standing up. She doesn't wait for him to join her; instead, she cuts the distance between us.

"Eliza—"

I can't even tell her I'm sorry before she's swinging her fist at me.

All used to her violent nature, I'm smart to move out of the way.

Ren's smart to drag Aurora away from my side to avoid getting caught in this little family reunion.

"Eliza," Urzo growls behind us, not tearing his eyes away from her. "You promised Camellia you'd be good."

Scowling at him for his words, I don't dodge the next swing. Despite the pain flooding my face, I'm mindful to grab her wrist.

My sister has every right to be angry, and I deserve a punch to the face from her. Hell, I deserve more. But seeing him wrap his fingers around her arm has my own anger flaring up.

She huffs as she shakes the pain from her fingers. Glaring at me, she scoffs. "She really wanted you to come. Shedid. Don't think I've come close to forgiving you."

I work my jaw, tasting blood. Behind me, Ren watches with detached amusement, while Aurora's fingers twitch like she wants to reach for me—but stops herself.

“You know Ren,” I mutter, nodding toward them. “And this is Aurora. My fiancée.”

Eliza's spine snaps straight. For a second, pure fury burns behind her eyes—then it hardens into something colder. “Tell me you're not marrying her just to spite us, Rocco.”

Us.

The word sears through me. She just said “us.” Like she's one of them now. Like the Bertellis didn't tear our family apart.

“No, I'm not.” Gritting the words out, I don't even imagine a world where I'd use Aurora for my benefit. “My sister, Eliza.”

She doesn't smile at them. Hell, I can't even remember the last time she smiled. Maybe she's forgotten how to.

Instead, she turns toward Urzo, and I see it, cracks in her hardening gaze. Her fingers brush against his chest. “My husband, Urzo.”

Husband.

I wanted to marry her off to Ren, a man who would've taken care of her to help us. Just to spite me, she married one of them.

No. Not in spite. The way she looks at him...

It's how I look at Aurora.

She loves him. If I tried to pull her back to our family, I'd be tearing her away from someone she cares about. Someone who can keep up with her.

Eliza wouldn't put up with someone who treated her wrong.

If I needed any more proof that Camellia is the same, this is it.

I instinctively offer my hand to him. My eyes meet his, and I take in his scowl. "Thank you for taking care of her."

He looks at my hand like it's a test, but it's not. He's bigger than me, a brute like the rest of them. I'm willing to believe he's killed a handful of my men with his bare hands.

Finally, he shakes it, grunting in reply.

From how Eliza watches us, she's still cautious.

She won't forgive me for everything I've done today. Hell, it might take months before she fully forgives me, but I'll work my way toward being a better man.

The man I used to be.

12

Rocco

“Rocco Parada.” Behind me, a familiar voice makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I don’t have to turn and look to see who has joined our chat.

Curling my fingers into fists, I try not to grit my teeth.

“I’m truly surprised to see you here. Even more so that you brought friends with you.” Santino appears, donning a vest and slacks that make him stand out. “Renato.”

Ren pulls Aurora closer to his side, not bothering to hide his protective side.

Turning toward her, I fight to keep my voice steady. Expecting to be mocked, teased, or threatened, Santino does none.

Instead, he moves his hands to his hips and sighs as he takes me in. “You look far better than the last time we spoke. Camellia will be relieved.”

Helooks relieved by the thought.

“I want to speak with her,” I tell him calmly.

I don’t want to make a fight out of this. For once, I’m tired of being the bad guy.

“If you think you can talk her out of this—” Santino begins, his smile growing tight.

“I won’t.” Looking away from him, I jerk when fingers slide around my arm in a grip.

Eliza nods at Santino, already tugging me away. “I’ll make sure he’s good. As badly as I am sure you’re looking for a reason to see her early, I’ve got this.”

Looking at Ren and Aurora, I think of asking to bring them with me, but I know that might be a bit much.

“We’ll be fine,” Ren calls behind me, using that false confidence again.

As my sister guides us back to the house, going as far as leaving Urzo behind to entertain Ren, she gives me a side glance. “Why did you come? I know you got an invite, but why did you come?”

Squinting ahead, my fingers twitch at my sides as I struggle to do something with my hands. “I wanted to talk to her. Make sure she—you both—weren’t being harmed.”

Eliza scoffs, her laugh humorless. “And if we were? Fewer problems for you to deal with. You could move on without us.”

I think back to the state I was in. All those nights, Ren pulled me from bars. The mornings I woke up in alleyways when he was busy.

“No—” I clear my throat because it feels like I’ve got an entire fist shoved into my throat, “—I couldn’t.”

For the first time, her mask cracks—just a sliver. Something fragile flickers in her gaze before she steels herself again. But it’s enough.

Enough to hope.

I could make this easier for myself by telling them the truth. Tell them about our mother, and what I had to do. Maybe they'd pity me over giving me their hatred. At the same time, some secrets are made to stay that way.

I'd never want my sisters to hurt the way I have. The betrayal to that extreme is enough to break someone.

Steadying my breathing, Eliza leads me up the blocked stairs. Tugging me along, I realize my steps have started to slow.

Dread fills my stomach, and sweat collects against my brow. Reaching the door, Eliza doesn't let me enter. Not straight away.

"She's been wanting to see you. For whatever reason, she still loves you, Rocco. When you go in there, you can't crush her like you did before. She's our sister, and you can't pretend she isn't. For once in your life, you need to look at her. Acknowledge her. After today, she won't be a Parada, she'll be a Bertelli. It's not enough for her. She wants to keep ties with you. Wants peace. So for once, don't fuck this up."

Most of her words are hardened over, some wavering. Even when she tries to be strong, there are always cracks in her armor.

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Despite the throb of my cheek from her earlier hit, I don't fear getting close to her. Even if she's not happy about contact, I tug her into my arms and hug her.

"I know you'll never forgive me, Eliza. And I know it's hard to believe, but I do love both of you." Sighing in her hair, I grunt when her fingers dig into my chest.

Just when I think she's trying to get away, I realize she's clinging to my shirt. It's almost like she can't decide what she wants to do.

"Thank you for taking care of her in all the ways I failed." Pulling away, I give her the best smile I can. A small curve, but enough to make her brows lift. "I'll be a better man. Whatever it takes."

If it means becoming best fucking friends with Santino Bertelli, I'll do it. Or treating Camellia the way Eliza wants me to.

Turning away from her, I push open the door. Feeling the heavy thump of my heart, I can't remember the last time I felt so nervous.

Two steps in and I see her.

Sitting on a bench, her back is to me. While an older woman picks and pokes at her hair, she uses her finger to spread something along her lips.

All at once, her eyes lift in her reflection, and those blue eyes meet mine. Just like the cloudless sky outside, they part wide in surprise before she jerks to look over her shoulder.



“Rocco!” Her voice is so soft, so melodic as she moves to her feet. “You came!”

It feels like I have claws sinking deep into my lungs, making it impossible to breathe. As much as my body demands I look away from her, my eyes remain.

The memory hits like a backhand. Our mother’s face, flushed crimson, her lips purpled with rage as she spat curses at our own blood in her fleeting last moments. Her hatred was a living thing—twisting her features, poisoning the air between us.

Then, Camellia steps forward, pushing past the images forming before me like a hallucination.

Alive.

Not just breathing, but vibrant. Her smile is soft, her eyes bright with warmth—no trace of the pallor or stillness I’d feared. The relief is so sharp it nearly doubles me over. Here, now, she’s nothing like the ghost of our mother’s fury or her death.

Standing in a wedding gown whiter than snow, I can see that my sister looks...beautiful.

Once more, I can’t help but think I don’t deserve this. To be forgiven by those I’ve wronged. Camellia is at the top of the list. If she can forgive me, then others can as well.

“You look...” My words shake as I take her in.

“Like a freaking bombshell,” Eliza finishes off for me, her lips forming into a smirk. “Santino is going to drop to his knees at the altar.”

The older woman in the background chuckles at her comment. When she looks my

way, I don't recognize her, but she seems to recognize me. She moves toward me, and I don't need an introduction.

The curve of her brow, the sharp cut of her jaw—it's all Urzo, all Santino. Their mother.

"You're Elio's son, alright." She drags my father's name over her tongue like a relic, her eyes crinkling at the edges. "I always wondered who inherited his face. You're nearly his mirror."

My throat tightens, but Camellia's fingers suddenly wrap around mine, pulling me back.

"You look... healthy," she says, scanning me with palpable relief. "I expected a ghost. Instead, here you stand."

Eliza snorts. "Probably has everything to do with his fiancée."

Camellia's breath catches—sharp, audible.

She doesn't jerk at the thought of my happiness. Rather, she beams.

I'm blinded so much that I grow dizzy. It hurts to look at her for a whole new reason.

"You'll get to meet her soon enough," I promise. "Hell, you might like her. You both have some things in common."

Locked away because their brother has an ulterior motive. Fell for the first man to save them. Ecetera ecetera.

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I'll let them discover the similarities themselves.

Camellia's hands grasp my arms, her grip warm and anchoring. "Thank you for coming," she says, and there's something fragile in her voice—like hope held too tightly might shatter it. "I hope you'll be the one to introduce me to her."

It's almost jarring, this shift.

I remember her in fragments—shoulders hunched under the weight of our name, eyes shadowed with the same bitterness that twisted our mother's face into something unrecognizable. Back then, the resemblance had been unbearable.

But now?

Now she stands tall, her smile unguarded, her joy so present it rewrites her entirely. This isn't the ghost of our mother's rage. This is just Camellia.

Something thick lodges in my throat. All I can do is nod.

This isn't how I expected to see her, but now that I have, there's no other way I want her to be.

13

Aurora

I'm nervous, but not for the reasons most people would expect.

Sure, I've already had a bunch of glances thrown my way, but I think for the most part, they're looking at Ren. We're two people who weren't invited, and by the bounce of my brother's knee, I can't help but wonder if some of these people aren't very fond of him.

Truthfully, I'm not worried about them. I'm worried about Rocco. I wish I could have joined him and helped him get through this challenging moment. Instead, I got stuck with Ren—another nervous wreck.

"I told him it was a bad idea to bring you," he mutters, reading my thoughts with ease. "Even when I want to kill Rocco, I don't have the strength to let him go somewhere that might lead to his death."

Turning my attention toward the altar created with an arch made up of pretty flowers, I see the groom chatting up the officiant. He's been plucking at his wrist cuffs for a while now. He seems nervous despite the smirk on his face.

Would Rocco be the same if he were the one waiting for me? I try to imagine it, a big wedding and all.

I don't think we'd have this many people here to celebrate, but that's okay. I think I'd want something smaller, quieter. There are only so many people I'd want to see me in a wedding dress.

I feel like a freaking kid, dreaming about the future while getting all worked up. It makes my cheeks warm and my heart flutter in my chest.

"About time," Ren grumbles under his breath.

Rocco returns with Eliza. While she goes to steal her husband away, he slides in next to me. Without much thought, his palm finds my thigh. One squeeze is all it takes for

him to show that he's alright.

My fingers drift across his knuckles, lingering over the scars and calluses before giving an answering press. "How did it go?"

"They're good." His voice is rougher than usual, throat working around the words. "Both of them. I think... they're in good hands." His brows knit together, that quiet protectiveness surfacing. "Camellia looked strong. She'll be out soon—wants to meet you."

"She's not as terrifying as Eliza, I hope?" I tease, nudging his shoulder.

The chuckle that rumbles through him is warm as whiskey. "Opposite. You'll adore her."

Then his hand shifts, fingers threading through mine with a certainty that steals my breath. His thumb sweeps across my pulse point once—a promise, an anchor—and just like that, the waiting doesn't feel so endless.

It's hardly another ten minutes before the groom is straightening himself up and the flow of piano music swarms us.

Rocco's grip tightens around mine as the bride appears—his sister—and for the first time since I've known him, the mafia don's armor cracks.

A thousand emotions flood his eyes—pride, grief, wonder, all swirling together as she steps into view.

She's breathtaking.

Sunlight glows in the chestnut ropes of her braided hair. The white silk runner parts

beneath her feet like clouds before an angel, but her gaze never wavers, locked onto her groom with a devotion so fierce, it steals the air from my lungs.

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“Look at her...” Rocco murmurs, voice thick. From here, it’s like he’s watching her get sent off.

I don’t tell him she’s beautiful. He already knows.

Having only ever seen this kind of scene in romantic movies, I’ve never felt such sweltering emotions fill my stomach at seeing another person experience such happiness. Knowing that Rocco will be able to move past what is haunting him, more happiness floods through me.

The vows wash over me like distant music.

I should be watching the bride—should be memorizing the way her hands tremble as she slides the ring onto her groom’s finger—but my gaze keeps snagging on Rocco.

I’m staring at the way his throat moves when she laughs.

At the quiet, devastating pride in his eyes as she promises forever to a man he knows will take good care of her.

My stomach swoops, butterflies taking frantic flight.

I don’t know the full weight of their history—don’t understand the fractures behind his muttered “complicated”—but this? This is unmistakable:

The way his jaw softens when his sister hiccups through her vows.

The way his thumb absently strokes my wrist, as if my skin is the only thing tethering him here.

He loves his family.

By the time the reception rolls around, I'm ready to replace these butterflies with a full hearty meal.

"When Santino plans a wedding, he makes sure to do it right," Ren mutters as he watches hired help prepare the grand entrance of the home into an eating space. "I've attended a few of his parties in the past, so I'm not too surprised."

"What kind of parties?" I ask as a man with a tray of glass flutes drifts past us.

Rocco frowns at Ren as he clears his throat. "Business-related parties."

"I hope he doesn't allow Camellia to get too involved in those." Rocco sighs as he rubs the back of his neck. "I suppose we should find somewhere to sit."

There's a table dedicated to the groom and bride's family, and I watch him glance toward it. He doesn't consider moving in that direction.

Reaching out to grab his hand, I give his fingers a squeeze. "We can always ask. I feel like your sister would have asked for an extra chair for you."

He squints at the table and shrugs a shoulder. "They didn't know I'd be coming here with company. It's fine. We'll have plenty of time to catch up."

Sounding more confident, he leads me over to a table, and we relax for all but a few minutes before men slide up next to Ren to chat in his ear about work. It's easy to drown them out.



With Rocco's attention still on that table, we take in Camellia and Santino as they smile at each other.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask him softly, struggling to read his face.

"Honestly? I'm thinking I need to stop being a pain in the ass to that guy, or Eliza won't be the only one to hate me. Camellia loves him enough to make her feelings shift. She's a Bertelli now, both of them are, and I can't make enemies with my siblings. It's already been that way for far too long," he explains, sighing as he shoves his fingers through his hair. "Now I just have to figure out what I'm going to do with the Parada line."

I squirm in my seat at the uncertainty in his voice. "Well, once we marry, I'll be a Parada, won't I?"

His eyes flick toward me, his mouth curving. "Yes, you will. Means I can't let it die out, not just yet. Giving up on taking the Bertelli territory means I'll have to make new enemies."

Ren sputters on his flute, half-listening to our conversation. He flicks his hand at the men trying to keep his attention.

"No more picking fights," he interrupts with narrowed eyes. "You're moving to the city. Bring your men, too. If you're not making friends with these guys, you're going to help me expand."

I watch them go back and forth, not fully understanding the lingo they're talking about. All I know is that by the end of it, both men are grinning.

"The city..." I murmur, thinking about it. Ren's talking about buying out a whole building with a penthouse. I hope he doesn't think all three of us will live up there,

though. I'll need my space with Rocco so we can have our own little fun without worrying about having an audience.

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No more surrounded by nothing but trees. I'll be able to see people again like this, surrounded by the excitement of life.

Beneath the table, I feel a warm palm against my knee. Rocco's smile has grown softer, like he can see the thoughts spinning around my head.

Or, maybe he's painting a similar future in his head, too.

No more suffering, no more feeling miserable.

Having seen Rocco at his worst, I'm setting a personal goal to see him at his best.

Tucked at his side, I'll have the best seat in the house.

14

Rocco

The food we're served is great and all, but nothing comes close to getting the opportunity to twirl Aurora around in her summer dress.

I know Camellia's supposed to be the prettiest in the lineup of women here, but my angel is taking that title.

Her smile is so warm, her laugh helps me regain a few years of my life each time she tilts her head back, letting out the sweetest of giggles.

Somehow, I haven't spun us into a wall from losing focus. Once my eyes are on her, there's no tearing her away. Even when Ren wants to take a turn.

"Please don't let him move in with us," she whispers, her eyes drifting toward him as he impatiently waits.

Even if most of the women here avoid his one-eyed stare, some have asked for a dance or two. I'm hoping one of them will catch his eye and he can stop watching us so carefully.

"He'll want to visit every day if he doesn't," I remind her, grinning at the thought.

Now that he's not trying to kill me for touching her, I don't mind his presence too much.

"As long as he doesn't stay the night, then I'll live," she murmurs, her cheeks dusted with a pretty pink.

Oh, whatever she's thinking about is not an innocent thought, I'm sure of it.

Grinning, I dip down and kiss her. Despite it making her sputter, the second kiss is far smoother than the first.

Like she doesn't know how to multitask, she stops dancing and slips her hand from mine, moving her fingers to my cheek.

Damn. Just a few kisses are all it takes to make me want to whisk her away from here and see if this estate has any empty rooms we could borrow for a few minutes.

There's a clearing of a throat next to us, and Aurora sputters at the sight of Camellia. All pretty and pink, she tries to smile.

“I was hoping to borrow Rocco, if that’s alright.” Her smile is gentle as she takes in Aurora. “I may have to borrow you after.”

Looking toward Ren, I give him a knowing nod, and he’s happy to come swoop my fiancée away.

“She’s excited to meet you,” I tell Camellia as I watch the siblings drift away.

Camellia moves to grab my hands, pulling my attention back to her. The music is soft and slow, thank goodness. Putting my attention on her, I can’t think about the movement of my feet.

“You know, Bia has a point. You really do look like Dad.” Her smile remains as I spin her around. “I wish he could’ve been here to see this. He loved big gatherings.”

Feeling a lump grow in my throat, I nod. “He would’ve given a whole speech. One that would have made Santino’s seem short.”

We both chuckle at the thought, but even with the lighthearted surroundings, the weight of the past is still against us.

“Mom—” She starts, her voice wavering. If I have to guess, it’s from my refusal to talk about her in the past. “—Do you think she’d be happy?”

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“I think...” Sighing, my brows come together. “I think she’d beg you to marry a normal man. She didn’t like marrying into this life, and she’d get gray hairs if she knew all three of her kids did the very same.”

We slow as one song melts into another.

“You know Rocco...” Ruining the gloss on her lips by chewing on her bottom lip, she looks hesitant. “Santino’s mother, Bia? She’s a really good mom. Thanks to her, I’ve gotten to see what our mom wasn’t. If she were here, I don’t think she’d be happy at all.”

“She’d be miserable,” I agree, my voice softer. “It’s a good thing she isn’t here. She’d ruin the party.”

Camellia nods, her eyes softening. “It’s a good thing she isn’t.”

The more we chat about our mother, the more my thoughts feel heavier.

“Rocco? Can I ask you something?” Her hand squeezes mine tightly, more than I’d expect from a small thing like her. “With complete honesty?”

Fuck. I’m never prepared to be honest when it comes to her. I’ve always lied to myself, and my sisters.

After a few passing seconds, I remember to nod.

“I’m happy to put the past in the past, seriously. But, I have to know, what happened?”

The man who came to my wedding... seeing you smile and laugh... It's like you were my brother from back then. I can see who is making you happy; that's obvious. But, what I want to know is, what made you so miserable?"

She looks at me so innocently, so caring.

"Camellia, there's a time and place for this kind of conversation. If you haven't been able to tell, I made the last few years hell for you. Do you really want me to spoil your happiest day?"

We stop dancing, and she nods.

"I'm not a kid anymore, Rocco. All I want to know is the truth. Please." She inhales sharply, like she's preparing for a blow.

Okay. Fine. I can tell her the truth. But not here. Not in front of all these people.

"Will Santino shoot me if I try to take you to the back? I wouldn't mind seeing those flowers again."

Her smile grows. "As long as you promise this won't be an attempt to kidnap me."

Glancing at the ring on her finger, I scoff. "A little late for that, I believe."

So, she lets me lead her down the hall toward the garden area. She's happy to take a seat on the bench to rub her sore feet.

While I take in the flowers, my heart races. "You know how Dad died. You found him. I never told you who did it. Both of you, I tried to keep you away from the information."

Behind me, silence. Just this once, I excuse my inability to look at her.

“Our mother didn’t run away,” I continue, my voice wavering. “She took him away from us due to her misery and greed, and... I...”

I hate getting emotional. Even when I saw her earlier, I didn’t shed a single tear. Our father taught me how to stay strong, and most of the time, I’m good at it.

I’ve learned how to shut down.

“You did what you had to do,” Camellia finishes for me, her voice soft.

“I did. After that, nothing was the same. I looked at you and only saw her.” Eyes growing misty, I stare at some wilting petals. “Every time I looked at you, I was reminded of what she’d done. Instead of helping you get over the loss...”

If the topic isn’t what makes my voice crack, it’s her arms wrapping around me that makes me break. Makes me wish I had accepted the alcohol I’d been offered throughout our meal. It would’ve made this easier.

Instead, I wanted to make Aurora proud.

As Camellia hugs me, I’m the one who gets emotional. She hardly even snuffles. Maybe a couple of times at most.

“Dad would’ve been proud of you, Rocco. Sure, we can both say some things didn’t go too right, but you kept us afloat. I can see that. Perks of marrying a Don, I have to deal with Santino slipping away a lot. He has a whole support network. You had... not a lot.”



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Sniffing, I blink away what's left in my eyes and turn around to return her hug.

"I did it to myself. If I didn't push you away, Eliza wouldn't hate me as much as she does. If I had just been honest with you both from the beginning, we could've healed together." Sighing, I hug her tighter. "I'll make it up to you one of these days. Whatever you need, Camellia. I'll make it happen."

Laughing against my neck, she pulls back. "You'll make Santino jealous. He insists on doing the same thing. You'll make amends with him, I hope?"

Lifting my gaze, I sigh into her hair when I see who is watching us from the glass doors. "I think you'll have to worry more about him than you will me. But sure, I'll stop picking fights. We'll stay in our own lanes."

Turning to follow my gaze, she scoffs with annoyance. "You may be right. I need to work on his trust issues with you. Hereallydoesn't like you."

Pressing a smile to my lips, I give Santino a wave.

Jealous and possessive. Is Urzo the same way with Eliza?

"Eliza..." I pull my attention back toward her. "I'll tell her about Mom. She'll want to hit me again, I'm sure."

"I'll do it." Camellia sighs and squeezes my hand. "Even if I don't know all the details, I can ease her into it. She'll think you're telling her what she needs to hear to forgive you. Let's give her time to absorb it. Plus, Urzo knows how to deal with her

when she gets worked up. He'll be happy to help her get through it."

Thanking her, I pull her in the direction of the glass door. Ignoring Santino, I decide to take her around the estate just to piss him off.

"Aurora may be exhausted from dancing by the time we make our way back in. Why don't we just eat some more cake, and you can meet each other properly? She doesn't have many friends. It would be nice for her to make a few here."

Her eyes light up, and she nods. "We'll get an invite to your wedding, I hope?"

Heat rushes my ears, and I nod. "Won't be as grand as this one, I'm afraid."

"Oh," she swats her hand, "that's fine. I tricked Santino into throwing this to help get you here. I figured if we dragged it out, there'd be more of a chance of you coming."

She really did want me to come.

Even if Aurora pounded the idea in my head, it still hits hard.

Pausing our walk back, she sputters a laugh when I pull her to my chest.

"It worked. If you had given up on me like everyone else, I wouldn't have made it here."

Squeezing her tighter, I try to make her understand just how much her care means to me.

If I hadn't gotten that invitation, I wouldn't have gotten to meet Aurora. I would have ended up dead one way or another. Camellia might never understand how much her meddling had changed my future, but I'll owe her for it for the rest of my life.

Already feeling better by her sneaky nature, I let out a laugh. “Sounds like you’re going to be giving him a run for his money. Please, keep it up. If I can’t make him want to pull out his hair, then at least keep him on his toes.”

Pulling away, she nods all too seriously. “Don’t tell him, but it’s fun getting him worked up.”

“My lips are sealed.” Promising to keep her secret, I lead her back to the party, happy to pull her toward Aurora so I can tell her all about the fun I had during my time spent locked away in a cabin in the middle of the woods.

15

Aurora

Epilogue

The cool air nips at my skin as we walk along the busy sidewalks. With the way the sky is turning a mixture of dark purples and oranges, I can almost see the stars forming in the sky.

One thing I miss is the stars. I’d spent so much time looking at them in the past that I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed them

Rocco sees me shiver, and despite his phone pressed to his ear, he’s eager to give me his coat. Instead of reminding me that I turned down the offer to bring my own coat for this stroll, he’s helping me put my arms in.

Even though it swallows my body up, I’m happy to hug it to my chest. He only wore his to give it to me, I swear.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:50 am*

He sighs when he ends his call, groaning in the back of his throat.

“Your sister again?” Nudging closer to him, I soak up his heat my preferred way.

“Camellia is wonderful, she is. She’s always worried about people.” He sighs again before wrapping his arm around me. “She wants me to ask Ren to look into someone, as if Santino isn’t already hounding him about it. Next thing you know, she’s going to callyou.”

My nose scrunches at the thought. As much as I love my sister in-law, unlike her, I don’t try to get involved with their work. I’d rather stay far away from it.

“I hope no one is in trouble...”

We reach our home, and Rocco leads us out of the cold and toward a row of elevators, nodding at the man behind the desk.

“I guess Urzo isn’t Santino’s only sibling. He’s got a sister, too. She’s as troublesome as the other two.” He scoffs when I slap his chest. “Well, I’ll sayonething to him. After that, I’m enjoying the rest of my day off with you.”

I like that idea very much.

Rocco’s been too busy running around the city to give me any attention. He must see how much I enjoy the thought by the way I perk up. He all but drags me into the elevator, shoving his key into the slot right below the top button.

As soon as the doors slide closed, he crowds me against the wall. Trapping me where I stand, he stares down at me.

He wants to comment on the Bertelli siblings being troublesome, but he's the definition of a troublemaker.

"How do you think we should spend the rest of the night?" Tilting his head, he gently touches my face.

Like this, I want the elevator to take its time climbing the twenty-eight floors.

"I picked the stroll," I remind him as his thumb tickles my bottom lip. "Why don't you pick what we do next?"

The grin that forms on his face fills my stomach with butterflies.

"Deal. You tell Ren to deal with this Bertelli issue, then we'll do an activity of my choosing."

Knowing that whatever Rocco has in mind can only happen without my brother spread across our couch, I am more than happy to nod my head, agreeing to his stipulation.

He takes my agreement with a chuckle before he swoops down to steal a kiss, fanning the fire that is starting to grow between us.