



Seduced By the Enemy

Author: *Clare Connelly*

Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Emilia Valentino was raised to hate Salvatore Santoro. He's arrogant, infuriating—and off-limits in every possible way. So why do her knees go weak every time he walks into the room?

When one night of accidental passion turns into a month-long secret affair, they strike a deal: no strings, no emotions, and absolutely no one can know. It's supposed to be simple. It's supposed to be temporary.

But nothing about Salvatore is easy to forget.

Now, with family loyalties pulling them apart and desire drawing them dangerously close, Emilia and Salvatore are about to find out: the hotter the fire, the harder it is to walk away.

This isn't love. It's war. And they're about to be caught in the crosshairs.

Total Pages (Source): 72

PROLOGUE

EMILIA VALENTINO WAS STILL coming down from the euphoric high of one of the best orgasms of her life—scratch that, the all-time best—when the regrets kicked in. The mad, all-consuming certainty that she'd just had ill-thought out sex with the last man on earth she wanted to be in bed with—metaphorically or actually.

While Salvatore Santoro might have been hotter than the sun's corona and was evidently God's gift to women in the sack, he was also a Santoro. AKA: a member of the family that was her family's nemesis.

“That shouldnothave happened.” It felt like the last word in understatement, but at the same time, someone had to acknowledge the elephant in the room, and she wanted to be the first one to proclaim this to be an almighty mistake.

Salvatore pushed up onto his palms, so he could see her better, his obsidian eyes sweeping her face, his features giving nothing away. “You do realise I'm still inside you.”

Her temperature spiked a little at that. It was such a basic, yet somehow hot, observation that it felt like a fever had overcome her.

“Your point being?”

In response to that, he moved his hips, eyes lancing hers, the movement designed to provoke—and stir to a fever pitch. It took all of Emilia's willpower not to react, save for a swift quirk of one brow.

“It’s probably better etiquette to wait until we’re out of bed to start the whole ‘never again’ talk.”

“It sounds like you’re more of an expert than I am when it comes to sleeping with people who immediately regret it.”

If she’d been aiming to wound, she’d have been bitterly disappointed by the lifting of one corner of his lips in an undeniable smirk. “I didn’t hear any complaints.”

Warmth flushed her cheeks.

“In fact, I didn’t hear anything except for, ‘yes, Salvatore, yes, right there, don’t stop, please for the love of God, don’t stop’.” He mimicked her higher-pitched voice in a way that might have made her laugh if she hadn’t been so incensed.

She put her hands on his chest, intending to push him away. But for some reason, when it came to it, she found she couldn’t bring herself to do the actual pushing. So her palms pressed to his chest, fingers spread wide, and she found her eyes boring through his.

There was no point disputing his recollection. She had been wild with need for him, her screams probably echoing through the hallways of this ancient palace, in Moricosia, where the two rival families had been drawn together, each tasked with pitching for a major infrastructure development in the city centre.

“It will never happen again,” she said, ignoring the slight pang of regret in her belly. “And if you ever tell anyone about this, I’ll deny it.”

“You think I want to scream it from the rooftops that I had sex with a Valentino? Albeit the most beautiful of the Valentinos.”

She rolled her eyes, because she was one of three Valentinos within the ballpark of Salvatore's age—and the other two were her brothers, both of whom were happily married.

“Who knows? You're a Santoro, after all. I wouldn't put it past you to decide to ruin my life just for the fun of it.”

“Telling anyone I'd had sex with you wouldn't exactly do me any favours, believe me.”

“Good,” she murmured. “Then we're in agreement.”

“Not quite,” he said, moving his hips once more, so her pulse spiked.

“But you just said?—,”

“Oh, I won't tell anyone about what just happened,” he promised, dipping his head lower incrementally. “But as for it not happening again...” And he kissed her, in a way that made passion spark in the fibres of her DNA, in a way that set every part of her alight.

In the back of her mind, she suspected she should fight this. Push him away, as she'd originally intended. But this was their last night in Moricosia, their last night thrown together by circumstance. Having already committed the cardinal sin of tumbling into bed with a Santoro, was there so much wrong with throwing caution to the wind and making the most of their unexpected chemistry? Just once more. After that, never again.

Global Alliance Childhood Literacy Foundation Fundraiser, New York.

EMILIA HAD ONLY BEEN AT the ball for ten minutes before she saw him. And even though it had been six months, her skin lifted in a covering of goosebumps, and her breath turned into a fog of heat, as she remembered.

Everything.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

Every detail of his touch, his kiss, his reverent worship of her body—totally at odds with the fact they hated each other, and each other’s families. Totally at odds with the fact they’d both do whatever they could to bring the other one down, outside of the bedroom.

He was across the other side of the room, on a large table, that happened to include several of his family members. She did a quick stocktake of the Santoros who were in attendance—Dante and his wife, Georgia. Marco and Portia, Francesco. Without realising it, her lips twisted into a sneer as she regarded them with utter distaste.

“Yes, it’s less than ideal to spend a night having to breathe their air, isn’t it?” Her brother Max’s voice cut through her ruminations—or perhaps perfectly captured them. She slid her gaze sideways, and saw the same enmity in his features that she felt on her own.

Beside him, Max’s wife Andie grimaced. Their marriage had been born out of this feud. Andie had used the generations’ old war between their families to leverage Max into pretending to be her fiancé, in exchange for which she was able to negotiate a more favourable sale of her family’s business. But Emilia had always sensed that Andie felt a hint of compunction for what she’d done to the Santoros. She’d even heard Andie say, on one occasion, that she’d found Dante to be a very pleasant, decent guy to deal with.

A sentiment Emilia was incapable of sharing.

“Have you seen Leo yet?” Andie asked, clunkily trying to draw their focus away from the Santoros.

Emilia's last thought, as she gave her sister-in-law the full force of her attention, was one of gratitude, as she ran a hand over her silky dress. It was one of her favourites, always giving her a boost of confidence, and now that she saw who was in attendance, she was glad she'd chosen it. If she were going to be face to face with Salvatore Santoro, or any of them, for that matter, she'd prefer it to be when dressed like this: to kill.

"No, I only flew back in this afternoon," Emilia explained. Though she couldn't wait to catch up with Leo and his fiancé Skye, as well as their daughter—whom Leo had recently adopted. "I'm going to their place for brunch tomorrow. You guys should come."

"We wouldn't want to impose," Andie demurred, in that lovely way she had, of always thinking of others.

"Don't be silly. I'm imposing—I totally invited myself. I'll message Leo now," she said, pulling out her phone with the intention of typing a message, only to find a text was already showing on her Home Screen.

From Salvatore Santoro.

Her heart leaped into her throat and without her realising it, her eyes flew across the crowded ballroom, to the Santoro table, only to find him casually reclined in his chair, eyes locked to her, expression laced with unmistakable mockery. When their eyes connected, his brows raised infinitesimally, and she felt the heat in her veins turn to rampant lava.

She glanced down again quickly, mouth dry, holding her phone at an angle to make it impossible for her brother to catch an unwitting glimpse of the screen.

Nice dress.

She frowned a little at the banality of the message, contemplated sending something back, then quickly shoved her phone into her bag.

“Did you message?” Andie asked, smiling with curiosity.

“Oh, yes,” Emilia lied, making a mental note to do so later. “I’ll let you know when I hear back, but I’m sure it will be fine. I’m bringing pastries and fruit.”

“Great,” Andie nodded, putting a hand on Max’s knee. “Brunch tomorrow?”

A glance at her brother showed that he was still staring at the Santoros, with that same look of pure hatred.

Something flickered in Emilia’s belly. Guilt. Shame. Because she should never have let things get out of hand with Salvatore. She should never have let their chemistry explode into actually having sex. What a mistake.

Even worse was the fact she hadn’t been with anyone since Salvatore. It didn’t help matters that she felt like a tinderbox, ready to go up in flames at the slightest provocation. And seeing Salvatore again was definitely that.

“I’m going to go get a drink,” she mumbled, eschewing the sweet white wine provided on the tables.

“Want company?” Andie asked.

Emilia shook her head quickly. God, no. She needed a second to get a hold of her thoughts. “I won’t be long. Need anything?”

Max threw his sister a glance, as though finally realising she was there. “Brunch tomorrow sounds good.”

She laughed, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You’re about five minutes too late. But sure.”

As she walked away, she pulled her phone out once more, resolutely ignoring the top message on her screen, from Salvatore, she managed to indicate the change of plans to Leo and Skye, before reaching the bar and placing her elbows on it.

“Emilia Valentino?”

A man approached from her left. She vaguely recognised him, though she couldn’t say from where.

“Jock Jones. We met at that Homeless sleepout event last year.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

She smiled, nodding, as the memory came back to her of meeting him. “Of course. Nice to see you again.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“It’s an open bar,” she pointed out. “Besides which, I always buy my own drinks.”

“In that case, you can get me one,” he suggested. “I don’t have your scruples.”

His grin was wide, and a dimple dug into one stubbled cheek. Objectively speaking, he was quite handsome. Tall, with broad shoulders and a strong physique, he wore a suit that looked custom, and an expensive watch. That was par for the course at this sort of event. The ticket alone was six figures, and the fundraising auctions always raised a huge sum. They were also incredible networking opportunities, meaning they drew the top of the business community.

“What’ll it be?” The bartender arrived, saving her from a reply.

“A French martini,” she answered. “Jock?”

“I’ll have the same.”

She arched a single brow before turning back to the bartender and flashing him a megawatt smile. “Thanks.”

“So,” Jock began, in that time honoured conversation starter. “The literacy foundation, huh?”

Emilia's gaze slid to his. "That's right."

"Special cause for you?"

"Childhood literacy is an important foundation of overall education," she pointed out. "And also, a good indicator of lifelong success. Raising literacy levels globally is a worthwhile endeavour."

"Seriously?"

She blinked, a frown pulling at her lips. "You don't agree?"

"I mean, I guess. I hadn't really given it much thought."

She couldn't keep the disapproval from her features. "Seems like a very expensive way to spend the evening, if you don't care about the cause."

"Yeah, but you can't miss it," he shrugged.

Emilia's gaze narrowed. "Why not?"

"Because anyone who's anyone is here. As evidenced by the fact your family has shown up despite the fact the Santoros are one of the key sponsors."

She blinked, careful not to reveal a hint of surprise at that. She hadn't known, though, and she doubted Max had, either, or he would never have wanted to be there. There were plenty of ways to support a charity—another donation for the raffle, like the one they'd already made, or a luxury stay at one of their hotels, for example.

"Unlike you, the cause is dear to my heart," she said, grateful then that Jock had ordered the same cocktail as her, because it meant the bartender placed them both on

the bar at the same time. She curled her fingers around one.

“Why is that?”

“Oh, it’s a long, boring story, and I have to be getting back to my family now,” she murmured. “It was nice to see you again.”

“I’d love to talk some more later. I’ll swing by your table.”

She kept her expression neutral, as she tucked her clutch under one arm. “Bye, Jock.”

She was aware of the way his gaze drifted lower as she turned to leave, taking in the plunging neckline of her emerald green dress. The cut of the dress left very little to the imagination, and the spaghetti straps exposed her golden tan. The design made it impossible to wear a bra—not that she needed one. Emilia’s figure was athletic, and the breasts she’d always desperately wanted—generous and full—had decided not to oblige. Unlike her mother, who had the figure of a goddess, Emilia had always been slender. Scrawny as a child, lanky as a teen, and now that she was old enough to understand how to dress for her figure, she could pull off most outfits. But there were still times she found herself desperately wishing for soft curves.

Height was another area in which she’d struggled. She was under five and a half feet tall, but she could compensate for that with sky high heels—she rarely didn’t wear a pair, and tonight was no exception. She turned to leave the bar and head back to her table, only for her eyes to land on a very familiar gaze from a little way across the room.

Salvatore stood with his hip nonchalantly against the wall, a hand in his pocket, and his eyes on her as though he couldn’t look away. The charge of heat was unmistakable. It started at the base of her spine and exploded through her body like the first firework at a festival. Bright and glorious, she couldn’t fail to feel it.

She stopped walking. Or, rather, her feet stopped cooperating, stranding her in the middle of the crowded bar area. Slowly—achingly slowly—his eyes began to drop, as Jock's had a moment earlier. But where Jock's inspection had left her cold—and a little pissed off at his presumptuousness—the opposite could be said, now.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

Salvatore's gaze was white hot lava as it poured from her face to her throat, lingering there a moment before sweeping to her breasts, as though he could see through the fabric of her gown—as though they were the sort of breasts she'd always secretly envied, all rounded and full, the perfect size for a man's palm, even when they weren't. Lower, then, he scraped his gaze, over her flat stomach to the gentle swell of her hips, hovering there, before dropping to her feet. In reverse, he slowed down to admire the same parts he already had, but by the time his focus was back on her eyes, she was almost panting.

It took all of her willpower not to show how much his casually possessive gaze had burned through her.

His lips parted, and her eyes narrowed, as he mouthed the words, 'Follow me,' before jerking his head, once, away from the ballroom, then turned and strode through the crowd.

It was only a moment. Barely a minute, from when she'd left Jock and seen Salvatore, and yet she felt as though time and space had lost all meaning. She was somehow back in Moricosia, six months earlier, when they'd had to tour the construction site together, and share the same resources as they put together their competing bids, so locked gazes, brushed hands, shared air, had somehow turned into fire and flame.

But that had been then.

An anomaly of circumstance, borne of the fact that they were in a strange, almost mythical kingdom, full of beauty and history. Far from either of their homes and the

generational hatred that had defined their families.

That was definitely not the case, now. They were here, in New York, where they each had family members living, and business interests, where they both spent a considerable amount of time and were well known. There was no escaping the reality of who they were and what their family's connections meant.

So, following him would be really, really dumb. She took a sip of her drink, hoping it would bring sanity along with a hint of a buzz. Only, her damned feet still weren't cooperating. Rather than doing the far more sensible thing and carrying her back towards her table and the safety of her brother and sister-in-law, they went in the opposite direction. Towards Salvatore Santoro: AKA the man she knew she should never speak to again...

The second he'd seen her in that dress, he'd known it was only a matter of time. Except, even if she'd been in a nun's habit, he'd have probably felt the same, because unless she could somehow give him a very localised lobotomy and wipe his memories of that night, seeing Emilia Valentino again was always going to make him want more.

Even when they both knew it was wrong.

And stupid.

And disrespectful to their families, after all the time they'd put into hating each other.

Well, having sex with someone didn't have to mean you didn't hate them. In fact, it didn't have to mean anything. Salvatore had spent a lifetime believing that, and despite the fact his siblings and cousins were all lining up to be pierced by Cupid's bow, it did nothing to change his inclination.

Salvatore liked being a free agent. He liked playing the field. Sleeping with whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He liked women, sex, and walking away. Keeping things light and fun.

The one time he'd come close to getting serious with a woman had imploded in spectacular fashion, and he'd learned that lesson fast, and well. True, he'd only been nineteen, but the memory of the fallout from that experience had scored deep in his brain—he wasn't likely to forget it anytime soon.

So what difference did it make if he was having meaningless sex with a Valentino? As long as they both knew the deal, and kept it private, who cared?

He pushed the emergency exit door without looking backwards, stepping into the fire escape of the six-star hotel and moving down the stairs to the platform between floors. He assumed the same position as before—a shoulder resting on the wall, one ankle crossed carelessly over the other, affecting a look of a casual unconcern. Even when his insides were buzzing with anticipation, and his cock was starting to strain against his pants in a way that was almost painful.

He didn't have to wait long. Not even a full minute after he'd taken up his position, the door pushed inwards, and Emilia strode through, silky hair in a carefully shaped bun he couldn't wait to undo. She'd lightened it since Moricosia. Then, it had been almost jet black. Now, it shimmered like amber and gold at the ends—he ached to tease them out and fan her hair across her shoulders, to see it properly.

“Well, Salvatore? Did you want something from me?”

The question lit a fire in his blood. “Why don't you come down here and find out what I want for yourself?”

Her green eyes widened, the pupils flaring unmistakably. For a second, he thought

she might not do it. After all, this was stupidly reckless, and they both knew that. But then, with one of her hands poised on the railing, she began to walk slowly down the steps toward him, so his gut rolled with anticipated pleasure and his blood began to thrum in his ears. He couldn't wait to make her his again.

2

SHE WALKED SLOWLY, PERHAPS giving herself every possible opportunity to change her mind. Except, the opposite seemed to be happening. With each careful, deliberate step lower, anticipation was building inside of her, just as it had in Moricosia over the course of their time there. Every encounter, every brush of their hands or meeting of their eyes, had, bit by bit, built a fire of need in her belly that only being with Salvatore would put out.

Yet it still burned, even now. Six months later, despite the fact they hadn't seen each other.

"Well?" she asked, impressed that she managed to keep her voice light and carefree. "What can I do for you, Salvatore?"

"That's an interesting question."

"But is there an answer?"

"There are many answers." Once more, he raked his gaze over her body, and this time, her nipples tingled as though he were touching them, forming hard peaks against the soft fabric of her dress. She dug her fingernails into her palms to counter the moan that was forming in the base of her throat. No way would she so easily reveal how quickly he could affect her.

Then again, she didn't need to moan to confirm that he was doing something to her

pulse...his eyes hovered on her breasts, his smirk grew smirkier, and then, one of his hands was moving to her hip, fingers curving around her and drawing her closer.

“This dress should be illegal.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

“You don’t like it?” she murmured, perfectly aware he felt the opposite.

“I prefer what’s underneath.”

“Funny, I thought about coming to this thing naked, but I changed my mind at the last moment.”

He laughed at that, and a shot of warmth fired through her. She tamped down on the pleasure she got from knowing she’d been the one to make him laugh. That’s not what this was about. Slowly, she took a sip of her drink, but a second later, his hand reached down and curled around the glass, taking it from her and lifting it to his own lips. His eyes held hers as he tasted it, and her heart did a funny little tremble in response.

“You know, you were just at the bar,” she drawled, and in response, he took another taste, eyes still on hers. This time, unmistakably, there was a spirit of provocation in their depths, like he was looking at her as though he wanted to see her lose her temper.

“Why am I not surprised? A Valentino doesn’t know how to share.”

“And a Santoro takes what he wants regardless.”

“Touché. But if memory serves, you’re the one who picked up the contract in Moricosia.”

“And don’t you just hate that?”

His eyes flashed with something raw and real, briefly belying the flirtiness of their banter. “King Ares could not award it to us. Not after he and Sofia got together.”

“Tsk, tsk,” she murmured, swiping her drink back and finishing it, staring him down as the last drop of the astringent liquid hit her mouth. “That sounds an awful lot like sour grapes.”

“You’re calling me a poor loser?”

“If the shoe fits...”

“I don’t like to lose,” he agreed. “But I’ll tolerate it when it’s fair.”

“Now you’re crying foul?”

He shrugged laconically. “If you can be happy winning work just because we were essentially disqualified...”

“Would it kill you to tell me my design was better?”

“I’ve never been much of a liar.”

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she was torn between hate and lust. “You are such a piece of work. You can’t even bring yourself to congratulate me?”

He grinned then; a sexy, twisty smile that made her wonder if he was being so outrageous just to provoke her. If so, it had worked. Spectacularly. Anger fizzed in her veins, reminding her of the fact she’d spent a lifetime hating these people with every fibre of her being.

And this line of questioning was only making it worse, because the truth was, while

she believed their design was superior to the Santoro tender, ever since being awarded the project, they'd been beset by problem after problem. From an obstructive government to a major issue with one of their suppliers, Emilia had spent the last few months practically tearing her hair out over the details—and halfway wishing they hadn't been successful in winning the project after all.

But then, the alternative would have meant leaving it to the Santoros, and there was no way they'd ever have done that. When it came to beating this family, the Valentinos had a clear mission in life.

"I would never have come to this thing if I'd known your family was a major sponsor."

"Scared to see me?"

"Not interested in being in the same room as you."

"Says the woman who just followed me into the fire escape," he pointed out, and his hand on her hip pulled her closer, hard against his body, so she felt the jut of his cock and that same smothered groan made a bid for freedom. The most that emerged though was a quick burst of breath—an indignant sound of surprise.

"I was intrigued, what can I say?"

"And now?" His hand shifted from her hip to the small of her back, pressing her further forward. Her gaze dropped, helplessly, to his throat, locking to the stubble covered Adam's apple there.

"Now," she said, desperately trying to think of something pithy and condescending to say, but her mind drew a blank.

His finger beneath her chin angled her face, so her eyes were locked to his once more, held captive by his attention, and the way he stared through her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

“Yes?”

His hand began to ruche the silky fabric of her dress, pulling it into his fist, one inch at a time, until he'd caught it all and she felt the cold air of the stairwell against her exposed legs and backside. She wore a flimsy thong—really just a scrap of fine lace—to avoid visible lines beneath the dress, so it was easy for him to bring his other hand around and cup her naked butt.

She gasped again. “Salvatore!” His name was supposed to be a curse, a criticism, but she was very aware it came out as a plea. Just as it had the night they'd slept together, when he'd mimicked her desperate, hungry cries and she'd sworn she'd never forget how much she hated him. When she'd made them both swear that it would be the one and only night they shared.

“I'm not sleeping with you again,” she said, on a husk.

Another grin flickered on his lips—all sexy, confident. “Who said anything about sleep?” His mouth meshed with hers in a manner that was as demanding as it was fierce. It had been six long months since they'd been together—six months since she'd been with anyone, even just a kiss, a look or a touch—and her body seemed to be rejoicing in this sudden burst of intimacy, and the promise of what was to come.

A voice in the back of her mind—the sensible voice of Valentino reason—was shouting at her to knee him in the groin or pull away from him and shoot him down with a withering glare and a few choice words, but that voice was drowned out by the rampant, incessant hum of need pounding through her.

“I hate you, you know,” she said against his mouth, as her hands pulled his shirt from his pants, so her fingertips could trail over his naked flesh.

“You’re supposed to hate me,” he murmured, as he dragged his mouth from her lips along the side of her jaw, to the sensitive pulse point just beneath her ear and flicked her there. She arched her back in an uncontrollable physical response to the waves of desire he was so effortlessly evoking. “That’s what we do, remember?”

It was hard to remember anything when his hand was pushing her thong down her legs, until she’d stepped out of them and the underwear was on the cold concrete floor beneath them.

“Hate each other,” he promised, moving his hand to her sex. While he touched her there, he pulled his head away, so his eyes could spear her, watching her reaction.

And damn it, she wasn’t quick enough to conceal the pleasure he gave her. She wasn’t quick enough to hide the way his touch set her pulse racing, the flush in her cheeks, the way her lips parted on a giddy sigh of anticipation.

“Yes, hate each other,” she mumbled, not entirely cognizant of what she was saying.

“But that’s no reason we can’t still do this,” he said, as he drove a finger into her, and she bucked her hips hard.

“Actually,” the word came as a breathless plea. “I think it’s a damn good reason we shouldn’t do this, but I don’t care,” she moaned. “Fuck me, Salvatore, now.”

“Here?”

“Unless you can produce a bed out of thin air, then here will do fine.”

His response was to unfasten his trousers and pull himself from them, at the same time he reached into his jacket pocket and removed a condom, opening the packet and unfurling it over his length.

In the minuscule fragment of her brain that was still capable of thinking rationally, she couldn't help but register the fact he had the condom, like he knew he'd be using it tonight. If not with her, then with someone else. Because that's who Salvatore Santoro was. She'd known that even before they'd landed in Moricosia. Whereas she'd spent the last six months in the sexual wilderness, she had no doubt he'd been happily taking whomever he fancied to bed.

But before the realisation could lead to anything less pleasant, like a change of heart and mind, he was pulling her with him, further down the stairs, sitting then on the top step of the next landing, his hard cock protruding from his pants, his brows quirked expectantly.

Emilia wished she had it in her to walk away from him. Bastard deserved it. The thought of leaving him like this, high and dry and desperate for her, was infinitely appealing—except she had no doubt he'd just zip himself up and find someone else.

And then she'd be the one going home alone, a small point scored. She'd have won this battle, yet the war would be his. A hollow victory indeed.

So she caught her dress in her palms as she came to straddle him, the concrete cold beneath her palms as she braced herself above him.

“I really do hate you,” she promised once more, because it felt as though it somehow lessened the betrayal of her family, a little, if she only made love to him when she was reminding them both of the true state of affairs.

“That may be the case,cara,but you also love to fuck me, don't you?”

She sucked in a sharp breath at the confidence in his voice, and the brief spurt of indecision that fired through her—the worry that maybe this wasn't as mutual as she'd thought?

Except then, his hand was moving to the back of her head, his fingers toying with the neat, professionally styled bun, pulling her hair out over her shoulders. His eyes had an intensity that almost burned her alive when he said, "I like your hair like this."

It caught at something inside her chest, something she didn't want to feel or analyse, so she moved over him then and took his length deep inside her, hard and fast, smothering a curse at the feeling of fullness, the sheer size of him, his strength. And then, her hips were rocking to their own dance, moving in a desperate, hungry tattoo, until he was exactly where and what she needed. She arched her back as she came, her breasts pushed forward, and through the fabric of her dress, he took a nipple in his mouth, sucking it and pressing his teeth into her flesh until she was crying out, over and over, her whole body lighting up like a Christmas tree, as pleasure burst through every single part of her central nervous system.

She'd been wrong, in Moricosia. That orgasm had been great, but this...this was beyond description. Emilia was floating, and it was impossible to care that it was all because of Salvatore.

"You bastard," she said, staring at her reflection in a small compact mirror from her clutch purse. She looked...like a woman who'd just been ravaged in the cold, barren wilderness of the fire escape stairwell. She looked like a woman who'd sold herself to the devil. Her hair wasn't just in disarray, it was completely wild—made that way by the fast, furious tangle of his fingers, as he'd combed and pulled at the ends, in a dramatic mirroring of their making love. But her dress was a whole other level of bad. The soft silk was crumpled all over, a thousand tiny creases from the way it had been scrunched at her hips, and both breasts showed round circles of moisture, from where his mouth had hungrily sought her nipples, tormenting her in a way she hadn't

even registered would leave marks. Her lipstick was smudged, too—but she could fix that. The rest was a disaster.

“You look good,” he promised, but with that infuriating, irritating, overly-cocky smile, that made her wonder if just maybe he’d planned this. To embarrass her? She wouldn’t put it past him.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

“I can’t go in there like this, and you know it.”

“Why not?” His smirk made her itch to slap him.

“Oh—just—go to hell,” she muttered. Then, as an afterthought, “Actually, make yourself useful?—,”

“I thought I’d already done that. Three times, if I’m not mistaken?”

Heat bloomed over her face. “Hold this.” She shoved the mirror towards him. “And stop gloating. It’s not attractive.”

He shot her a look that was laced with skepticism but at least he did hold the mirror for her while she attempted to return order to her hair. It only took a few minutes, and it wasn’t quite the same effect, but at least the stylist had used enough of a setting spray that it seemed to want to be molded back into a bun shape.

“You should leave it out.” The husk in Salvatore’s voice was like a fresh breath of need, catching her by surprise. How could she possibly want him again? He was right—she’d been tipped over the edge of pleasure three times in under ten minutes. Her first assessment of him as ‘God’s gift’ was sticking. And, as with the first night they spent together, she knew it shouldn’t have happened, even when she easily accepted wild horses wouldn’t have stopped it.

“It would raise questions.”

“And your dress won’t?”

She threw him a frustrated look. “No, because you’re going to lend me your jacket.”

He laughed then, a sound of disbelief, but quickly sobered. “You don’t think that will raise even more? If I appear without a jacket and you’re wearing one all of a sudden?”

“I just need it to get to the ladies’ room. I’ll dry my dress there. Though next time, if you could show a modicum of restraint and not ruin my clothes, I’d be very grateful.”

“Next time, Emilia? Isn’t that a little presumptuous?”

Her lips parted in surprise at the stupid slip she’d made, and the way he’d easily capitalised on it. Embarrassment had her toes curling. “You’re right. Better to assume there won’t be a next time.”

“We’ll see.” His smile was all smug, and she could barely look at him, so she went back to fixing her face, pleased that she looked almost completely normal. “Jacket?” She held out her hand, not meeting his eyes.

He removed it, watching her the whole time—she could feel the heat of his gaze on her—before he handed it over. The second she pushed it on, she wished there’d been an alternative, because it was still warm from his body, and it had his citrusy masculine fragrance in it. She resisted the urge to breathe it in.

He turned and stalked up the stairs and she took a few moments to collect herself before following behind.

“I’ll leave your jacket here once I’m done,” she said, frowning as she looked around for her discarded underwear.

They were nowhere to be seen.

“Salvatore...” she looked at him helplessly, but his response was just a flicker of one brow. He walked back towards her, slowly, intent in his gaze.

“You have something of mine,” she said weakly—his proximity had made it hard to speak.

“And you can get it back from me...next time.” Then, he was kissing her once more, pulling her against his body, holding her there, all fire, flame and the same urgent need that had pulled them apart earlier, and six months ago. “You have my number, Emilia.” Another kiss. “Use it.”

Anger made her want to shout after him, “Never in a million years!” but it turned out, they had something in common after all: neither of them liked to lie.

3

SALVATORE SPENT THE REST OF THE night pretending he had no idea Emilia existed. Even when he wanted to sit there and stare at her, marveling at the way she looked so completely put together again, just like she had when she’d strolled into this thing ten minutes after it started, and his whole body had zinged with the force of a thousand electric shocks.

When he’d gone to get his jacket back, he’d found a ‘nice’ little surprise—she’d left a perfect lipstick kiss mark on the front lapel, so he’d had to spend a little time himself in the men’s room, seeing to that. But the whole time he’d wiped the lipstick off, he’d been laughing on the inside at her retaliatory mood.

He’d spent his whole life in a fight with the Valentinos, but actively fighting with Emilia Valentino was the most fun he’d had in a long time. Especially with the added advantage of getting to sleep with her.

Not that it would necessarily happen again. They both knew it shouldn't. It was stupid—and had the potential to be hugely harmful to both of their families if they were caught. Maybe that was part of the appeal, though? Perhaps for a man like Salvatore, who'd never had any trouble getting women—from when he was eighteen and shared a wild weekend with his first lover—the challenge just wasn't there. And that sometimes meant the fun, too. While he liked being free to be with and go wherever he wanted, he realised now that he was looking for something more.

Something that sparked and zinged. And if that just happened to be the animosity between him and Emilia, so be it.

“I hate them so much.” Beside him, Salvatore's cousin Raf's voice was little more than a dark grumble. It was the first time he'd been out with the family since his marriage breakdown—Salvatore couldn't say he blamed him. “Though in other circumstances, I wouldn't mind getting to know her better.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

Salvatore sat up a little straighter as he followed Raf's gaze, over to Emilia—and his pledge of not looking at her went right out the window. She was in conversation with the woman two seats over, talking a mile a minute, her hands moving animatedly as she explained something then laughed. Not only was he failing to pretend she didn't exist, he was finding it almost impossible to look away.

“Maybe she'd help me get over Marcia,” Raf said, so a prickle of distaste ran the length of Salvatore's spine.

Raf wasn't a one-night stand kind of guy. In fact, he was Salvatore's direct opposite. Where Salvatore had made a habit out of short, casual flings, Raf had been dating Marcia for years before they finally married. While their relationship had ended disastrously, thanks to her lying about being pregnant, then lying about miscarrying, all so Raf would propose, Salvatore had no doubt that deep down, Raf was still the 'happily ever after' kind of guy. Despite his messed up upbringing and all the issues that had undoubtedly left him with.

“You're not over Marcia?” Salvatore asked, unconsciously reaching into his pocket and twisting his fingers around Emilia's delicate lace thong, reminding himself that if she was going home with anyone that night, it would be him.

“You know what I mean,” Raf said. “Get her out of my mind. She'd hate the thought of me hooking up with her.”

“Because she's a Valentino?”

“Because she's a knockout. Marcia always had a wildly jealous streak—it didn't

matter that I never looked at another woman while we were together.”

At first it had been a throwaway remark, but something in Raf’s tone was grinding Salvatore’s gears. “Need I remind you they’re our sworn enemy?” He tried to keep his voice light, casual, like it was no big deal, but the whole conversation was flooding him with distaste.

He might hate the Valentino family but he wasn’t comfortable with Emilia being discussed like this. Not after what they’d just done. That protective instinct surprised him, and mostly, he wished he didn’t feel it, because it brought with it the hint of complications he didn’t want to navigate.

“So? Maybe I could kill two birds with one stone. Make her want me, break her heart, and hurt Marcia in the process.”

Salvatore looked sharply at Raf, appalled by the dark threat in his cousin’s tone. “Raf, come on, bro. That’s not like you.”

“No?” he turned to face Salvatore, a look in his eyes that was sheer anger. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think. Maybe no one does. Or maybe I’ve finally grown up.”

Salvatore frowned. Dante had convinced Raf to come to this thing, but it had quite possibly been a mistake. “Let’s go get a drink,” Salvatore suggested, only to break up the ease with which Raf could stare across the room at Emilia. He loved his cousin, but in that moment, he felt like shaking him just to loosen his interest.

“There’s wine on the table.”

“Something other than wine,” Salvatore suggested.

“Fine by me,” Raf conceded, standing in a way that was not quite steady, so Salvatore realised belatedly another drink was the last thing Raf needed. It might have been wishful thinking, but as they made their way to the bar, Salvatore was sure he felt the heat of Emilia’s gaze following him.

Salvatore and a man—she was pretty sure it was his brother or cousin, going by their shared features—left a short while after going to the bar. She tried not to track Salvatore’s progress, but her eyes seemed to have developed a mind of their own, and followed him even when she was desperately trying not to.

And even though she hadn’t known he was going to be at this thing, once he’d left, she lost interest in being there altogether. Never mind that it was a cause close to her heart. Never mind that she’d been looking forward to it, and had flown back to the States specifically for this fundraiser.

It was only when she herself left that Emilia checked her phone once more and saw the text from him. It was straight to the point: his address.

She read and re-read the message several times, before deleting it and putting her phone away. Randomly hooking up at some event was one thing, but going to his house, by pre-arrangement, quite another. That’s not what they were—and they never could be. There was way too much water under the bridge between their families, and she wasn’t about to pretend otherwise.

Two weeks later

The Fulham County Pediatric Hospital Fundraiser, New York.

“For you, ma’am,” a waiter said, as he buzzed close to Emilia. Midway through a conversation with a high school friend, Emilia paused, to study the cocktail held on a tray, a small frown tweaking her bright red lips.

“Is that—a French martini?”

“As the gentleman requested,” the waiter said. Emilia’s heart shifted up a notch, as she kept her focus on the cocktail for a beat, before saying, “I’m sorry, who ordered this for me?”

The waiter looked around, then turned back to Emilia. “He’s not there anymore,” he said, apologetically. “Tall guy, dark hair, wearing a grey suit.”

“That narrows it down,” she drawled, scanning the room and seeing at least ten men who fit that description, trying not to let her hopes get ahead of reality. Trying not to have any hopes at all. After all, hadn’t she agreed that whatever she’d been doing with Salvatore had to stop? The fact they’d slept together twice was bad enough, but she could put that down to stupidity and unpreparedness. Looking for him now was a bridge too far.

But as she took her first sip, that’s exactly what she did, and only drew her focus back to her friend when she’d convinced herself he wasn’t here, after all. Meaning the drink had been sent by someone else. And that could be any number of people. She almost always had the same drink at this sort of thing, so any of the people she’d socialized with in this setting would know her preference. Yet she couldn’t shift the feeling that Salvatore must be behind this.

Time passed, though, with no sight of him, and an hour later, well after she’d finished her drink, Emilia had given up even looking for him. So when her eyes happened to shift sideways and land square on his face, it was impossible not to react. Not to let out a small gush of air, a sound of surprise, so the group she was in conversation with paused to regard her, to wait for her to explain.

“Sorry, I just remembered something I was meant to do today,” she fumbled out a fib, scrunching her nose.

“Nothing important, I hope?”

“No. What were you saying?”

But Emilia was almost incapable of listening now. There was a strange buzzing sound in her ears, like a persistent white noise, that crowded out almost everything else. And that was it. For the rest of the night, where he moved, she looked. Without intending to, she was aware of him in a way that drove her crazy.

This was a cocktail party format, so there was a lot of shifting around, groups moving and changing, and it was loud. So loud she might have made her escape before this, had it not been for the fact she was finding it hard to look away from Salvatore. Even when the sight of him made her blood boil from anger and rage, even when sheknewshe hated him, she still found herself looking after him as though he were her dying breath. As though he were the sum total of what she wanted. Not in life, just for tonight.

The last text message he’d sent her was burned into her retinas—his address. So even now, two weeks later and after she’d deleted it, she remembered it. But she suspected the invitation had held an expiry date. Hell, for all she knew, he’d taken someone else home that very night. Maybe she hadn’t been the only one to receive a text.

She knew enough of Salvatore to know he had about as many notches on his bedpost as he did dollars in the bank—somewhere in the billions. Way more notches on the bedpost than her, that was for sure. Despite the fact she seemed to have a dangerous habit of tumbling into bed—or stairways—with him, that was far from the norm for Emilia, who’d led a pretty sheltered and protected life, and always harbored hopes of

the fairytale happy ending, just like both her brothers had found.

Funny, she'd long thought she'd be first. True, she was the youngest, but she'd always been the most romantic—craving and wanting that sort of Hollywood happy ending. But for all she'd dated, she'd never really been with anyone she clicked with. Not on a soul deep level. Maybe that was a protective mechanism after her first disastrous relationship had proven such a flop. The first guy she'd been with, who'd pretty clearly been using her because of her money and connections, had made her understandably wary.

After that, she'd sworn that only the Right Guy (capital R, capital G) would get beyond a few dates with her. A few dates was fine. Fun. Easy. And in a few dates, she could work out if theywereright, and worth spending any more time with. So far, she hadn't had any luck.

Once upon a time, she might have thought she was living in a fantasy world to expect that level of connectivity, but then she'd seen Max and Andie together, and Leandro and Skye, and she'd known she was right to hold out for 'the one'.

But Andie and Skye were tough acts to follow. She couldn't imagine introducing someone into her family who would be as beloved as they both were. And she couldn't bear to get involved with anyone her parents and brothers wouldn't like. There was so much to take into account, and so the months had turned into years and Emilia stayed resolutely single, save for a few casual dates, here and there.

"Babe? You listening?"

She blinked quickly, as her friend Esther Campion gripped her forearm. "Sorry, no. What's up?"

"We're heading out. You want to come?"

Before she could stop herself, Emilia's gaze drifted across the room. Salvatore was locked in conversation with three men she'd never seen before. His expression was intent. As though he didn't even know she was there.

Pride piqued, she flashed her friends a bright smile, and nodded. "Yeah. I'll just get my coat."

"We'll wait out the front. I'm dying for one of these." Esther lifted her vintage Tiffany cigar holder aloft.

Emilia pulled a face—she wasn't a fan of smoking—but nodded once. "Okay, see you soon."

She put it down to the excellent quality of the food and wine that the cocktail party continued to be thronging with well-heeled guests. Quite often, people came to these things for the bare minimum time, simply to make an appearance, before getting on with their plans for the night. This was an event people were happily staying at.

But for Emilia, knowing he was here, and that she couldn't—wouldn't—speak to or see him at close range was doing something funny to her insides. She began to cut through the crowd, careful to avoid making eye contact with anyone, lest she be pulled into a long, boring conversation.

The cloak room was attended by two staff members. She handed over her ticket and waited for them to retrieve the leather jacket she'd worn. It was impossible to fight a sense of disappointment, though, when her jacket was returned and she'd shrugged it on, and still hadn't seen up close, nor spoken to, Salvatore.

A sense of pride prevented her from scanning the crowd on her way out. She kept her gaze focused squarely on the doors that led from the hotel ballroom into the elegant corridor beyond. As she approached, the doors were opened for her by another pair of

staff, and she stepped outside into the relative silence with a small breath of what she told herself was relief.

Beyond the corridor, on the wide boulevard street, she knew her friends would be smoking, waiting for her, but Emilia needed a minute to calm her fluttering nerves. Without speaking to Salvatore, he still had the ability to make her pulse rush.

She ground her teeth, annoyed at him, herself, and just about everyone, in that moment.

Assuming a mask of carefree contentment, she began to walk down the corridor, the soft fabric of her black cocktail dress running against her hips as she went. She was halfway down the hallway when she became aware of someone following her. Hardly unusual—she wouldn't be the only guest leaving the party. She didn't bother turning around. But a moment later, her hand was gripped, and then, it all happened so quickly, she didn't have time to think. Salvatore was pulling her sideways, away from the main corridor, down a separate access point, and then, around another corner. It was the work of a moment, and she was there, back pressed against the wall as he dropped his head and kissed her, claiming her mouth like he had every right, like he somehow knew that's what she'd been hoping he'd do all damned night.

And now that he was kissing her, she could finally admit that to herself. Yes, she'd been wanting this. Waiting for it. Aching for it, and the longing had driven her quite wild, in the end.

His tongue lashed hers, as though he felt the same anger she did—anger at the fact they'd just spent two and a half hours milling around in a huge, grand ballroom, without so much as making eye contact. One big, strong knee wedged between her legs and she moaned as, without even being aware of it, her hips rolled and her sex pressed to this thick, muscular thigh, craving everything he could possibly give her.

Voices, loud and laughing, drifted towards them, but his hands were moving to the hem of her dress now, lifting it, sliding into her thong, massaging the flesh of her butt cheek until she was almost coming, then and there. Another voice, this one masculine, loud, closer.

“Salvatore,” she cried, hungry for him, wild with desperation, bunching her hands in his shirt. “Someone will see us.” She hoped it wasn’t the case. She didn’t want to stop kissing, touching, feeling, but at the same time, being seen with him would be an absolute disaster. Sanity was just enough within reach to make her listen. But when she dragged her lower lip between her teeth and his eyes flared, and she felt his cock jerk in his pants, she had a sinking feeling that she would throw caution to the wind and keep kissing him anyway, keep doing anything with him, because of how much she wanted this.

“Stay here,” he muttered, pressing a finger to her lips, eyes holding hers, before he pulled away. “Do you promise?”

She massaged her lower lip then, knowing she should demur. That she should leave. “My friends are waiting...”

“Then let them wait. I’m going to get us a room. Okay?”

She stood on a tightrope—an immense fall in both directions. Walking away from him would just prolong the state of agony she’d been in since the last time they were together. Agreeing to stay was somehow worse. Or at least, a lot more complicated.

“I—,”

“Wait here,” he repeated again. And for good measure, he kissed her with all the pent up passion and need that was firing through them. “I will make it worth your while, cara.”

She shivered at that promise, and stayed where she was, back pressed to the wall, watching him disappear around the corner with the stride of a man who was intent on a mission. It only took a minute to text her friends, explaining she was going to stay a while longer and that they should go on without her. And a few minutes later, he had returned, this time, brandishing a plastic key card.

“Room seventy four. The elevators are in the foyer. You go first, I’ll follow.”

She still had time to back out of this. To tell him they were playing with fire and that sleeping together again was not a smart choice. But then, his lip lifted in a hint of a smirk and she felt as though he was daring her.

And if there was one thing Emilia knew for certain, it was that she’d never walk away from a Santoro dare.

“Fine,” she said, snatching the spare key card. “But I still hate you.”

His smirk turned into a full blown grin. “Until you don’t.”

She rolled her eyes. “Wishful thinking.”

“Perhaps.”

With the sense that they were locked in a verbal fight she wasn’t sure she could win, Emilia stalked away from him, questioning her decision the entire way to the bank of lifts and then up to the seventh floor of the elegant hotel—even when she knew she had no intention of backing out.

4

IT WAS PROBABLY THE longest ten minutes of Salvatore’s life. Which should have given him all the red flags he needed, the vital warning to do the smart thing and run a thousand yards from this intoxicating witch of a woman.

Because not being able to stop thinking about Emilia Valentino was not a phenomenon he was enjoying. Nor was having her possible social life dictate his plans, and his life. Case in point, coming to this event even though he generally cut a large check for this sort of charity rather than attending the fundraiser. But just the prospect of seeing her again, of being able to get under her skin—or her skirt, as the case may be—had seen him asking his assistant to secure a ticket.

And there she’d been. Beautiful, in that classy, untouchable way of hers. Always immaculate, as though she’d been coiffed and dressed to meet the Queen. It was one of the reasons he loved mussing her hair, smudging her lipstick, creasing her clothes. To see her outer visage more closely match the wildness he knew she had within her was both a pleasure and a privilege. It was something he intended to do as soon as he

could.

He'd promised himself that the moment he'd seen her walk in. The black cocktail dress was, if anything, demure. Just a simple dress, it hugged her slim figure like a second skin, but it fell to her knees and had a neckline that showed not even a hint of cleavage—he knew this for a fact, because he'd been looking. It was the heels that had really sunk him, though. They were impossibly high and thin, and yet she'd walked around on them all night, as though they were an extension of herself. And that hair, with its glossy, golden brown ends, was in a high ponytail, that he'd spent an infuriatingly large portion of the night imagining himself grabbing and holding it, maybe even while she was on her knees for him.

He bit back a groan as the lift drew him upwards, and finally, when the doors pinged, he took the briefest moment to scan the sign, indicating which way he should go, before walking quickly to the left. He swiped the keycard and when the door buzzed, he pushed it inwards, dark eyes once again scanning the room. The hotel had been almost fully booked, so it was not a suite, but rather, an ordinary room, with a large bed in the centre of it. The lights were off, except for a lamp in the corner, and her silhouette was outlined against the large glass window that had a view of Manhattan.

She didn't turn around when he walked in, and in the back of his mind, he wondered if that was because she was afraid. Not of him, but of what happened when they were together. Of the fact that neither of them wanted this, and yet they both seemed to understand it was as inevitable as it was satisfying.

What the hell had happened to them in Moricosia? While they'd been thrown together a fair bit, while Ares and Sofia were off hiking, he'd gone into each and every one of those encounters considering her very much the enemy. Salvatore might show an easy going, relaxed nature, outwardly, but his passions, feelings and loyalty all ran deep. And that loyalty was to the Santoros—who the Valentino family were intent on destroying. Twice in the last two years they'd won enormous victories

against the Santoros. First, with the acquisition of Acto Corp, which the Santoros had spent years attempting to buy. Secondly, with the development in Moricosia, spear-headed by the very same woman he was looking at now as though she were the last woman on earth.

Which really pissed him off, because he knew she wasn't. Salvatore could walk into any bar and pick up a woman. That he had the iPhone equivalent to a little black book the thickness of an encyclopedia. So why didn't he feel like calling any of those women? Why didn't he just go out and meet someone else? Why had he spent the night practically drooling into his drink at the sight of Emilia in the crowded room?

All that anger and frustration, though mostly levelled at himself, suddenly exploded into something else. Need, passion, and yes, irritation with Emilia, because why on earth should she be able to do this to him? He didn't waste any time, but rather pulled her into his arms, holding her against him as though they'd win some kind of prize if they could stand there without a single hint of space between their bodies. His leg between hers, his mouth meshed to hers, arms around her back, whole body holding hers, pulling her with him, drawing her to the bed. Her damned dress was too fitted to allow her to part her legs more than a little, and he so desperately needed to get it off her.

"Fuck this dress," he muttered, as his hands struggled to lift it up her thighs.

"Tsk, ts. What did the dress ever do to you?"

He pulled back and glared at her. The fact he felt like his temper was hanging on by a thread, and she was almost laughing at him? He ground his teeth and said, commandingly, "Turn around."

His tone had her smile slipping and her eyes flaring, but she did as he said, pulling her pony tail over one shoulder, to give him full access to the hidden zipper at the

back. Maybe in another lifetime, he might have taken it slowly, relishing the tease of easing it down her spine, letting his fingers glide and flirt, tempt and arouse, before turning her and tormenting her with slow, hungry kisses, until she was melting in his arms.

But his own needs were too great for that. He pulled the zip down as quickly as he could, over the small, sweet curve of her ass. And even as he reached that curve, his other hand was up at her shoulders, sliding the dress down, off her beautiful body.

She wore no bra, just like the other night. While he hadn't seen her breasts then, he'd sucked her nipples through the silk fabric, and he'd known there was only the finest barrier between himself and her flesh. Now, though, he ached to touch with nothing between them, and that was exactly what he did, reaching around and cupping her breasts, holding them as his mouth came down on the bare flesh of her shoulder and kissed her there. He squeezed her nipples until she was crying out, his touch demanding and insistent. Emilia pushed backwards, as though she too was seeking to remove any space from between them, as though she wanted—no, needed as he needed—more. So much more.

Putting aside the question of what the hell was happening to him, he resigned himself to the fact it was, and simply existed in the moment. He dropped his hands to her hips, so he could spin her around to face him and then his eyes devoured her. Already, he'd left red stubble marks on her throat and he loved the sight of that—the possession it indicated, the fact that she was, in that moment, his. As wild for him as he was for her.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

“This doesn’t seem fair,” she said, her voice breathy and light, as she gestured with shaking fingers towards his suit, still very much still in place.

“You’re welcome to do something about that,” he invited.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“Did you really think that, Emilia?” he asked, curious as to her answer. Her eyes lifted to his and her cheeks flushed pink, but whatever she was thinking, she didn’t say. “I’ve been called many things but with you, I don’t think subtle could be one of them.”

Her flush darkened and something ballooned inside his chest. Curiosity. Fascination.

A desperate, all-consuming hunger to know more about this woman. To understand her better. Outwardly, she was so composed and contained, the last word in untouchable sophistication. But when it was just the two of them, he could press her buttons, making her unspool in a way he could get hooked on.

Which was enough of a bright, glaring warning sign for Salvatore, because if he was ever going to get hooked on anyone, it sure as hell wouldn’t be Emilia Valentino.

But where he’d undressed her with lightning speed, desperate to see her naked, Emilia’s fingers worked slowly as they went through his buttons, one by one, and separated his shirt, so his breath hissed beneath his teeth with an impatience he couldn’t control. Then, before he knew it, his own hands were at his zipper, unfastening it and pushing his pants down. Her eyes flew to his, but there was an

amusement in their depths. A mockery, even, like she knew she had the power to bring him to his knees and was relishing that.

In any other circumstances, with any other woman, he would have had no issue ceding whatever power to her, but this was Emilia Valentino.

A muscle jerked in his jaw as he stepped fully out of his pants, using the same motion to swap positions with her, so Emilia was nearest the bed, then gently pushing her backwards, until she was sitting on the edge. That slicked back pony tail of hers just itching to be held, touched. His hand curved around the back of her head, his fingers tangling in the lengths, wrapping it around his fingers until it was all held in his fist. She stared up at him, eyes huge, lips parted, and then her fingers were drawing his boxers down, not slowly now, but impatient, like he'd felt earlier.

Naked in front of her, with Emilia's eyes still on his, she leaned forward and took him in her mouth, so he cursed loudly into the room. True, he'd fantasised about this on the way up, but it had been exactly that: a fantasy. He hadn't expected—or hoped—it to happen.

“Cristo, Emilia,” he muttered, loosening his grip on her hair, to make sure each movement was her own. For all he liked holding her there, this was her show; her ability to control herself paramount. It was his last conscious thought, though—after that, he surrendered to an almost dream-like state, as with her mouth, her tongue, she brought him close to the tip of sanity and humanity, almost spiraling him over the edge. He was so close. So close he could feel that heat building in his balls, feel it tingling all over his body, and he wasn't about to finish this so fast. Then he used his grip on her pony tail to hold her head back, away from him. She looked up at him straight away, something on her features that made his gut tighten.

“I want to feel you,” he said, as he brought his body down so he could kiss her, and push her further up the bed, skin to skin, naked to naked, every bit of him exalting in

the euphoric, delirious joy of this moment. He spread her legs with his knee, raised up onto his palms and looked down at her. Wide, green eyes stared back at him. Cheeks flushed. Lips dark red. He smudged his thumb over the lower, saw the way her pupils dilated and that heat in his balls was back.

“Who the hell are you?” he muttered, because surely she was in fact some kind of ancient goddess?

“Your worst enemy,” she reminded him, but laughed, and pulled on his shoulders so they were kissing once more, and it was the most natural thing to slide into her, all the way, hitching himself deep, so her muscles squeezed his length and before he could stop the thought from forming, he felt as though he’d come home.

“Oh my God,” Emilia, still out of breath from the hotter than flame sex they’d just shared, tilted her head to face him and then, sat bolt upright. “You didn’t use a condom.”

She saw the moment realization hit Salvatore, too. The moment his features went from relaxed, cat-that-got-the-cream, manly-man, to ‘holy shit, what have I done?’.

He cursed, the sound filling the small hotel room, but she reached out and put a hand on his chest. Half seeking reassurance, half giving it.

“It’s okay,” she murmured, staring at him, while her insides slicked with something like panic and surprise. “I’m on the pill. I have been for years. And I’m clean, obviously. I mean, I’ve never done that before,” she gestured in the general vicinity of his cock.

Salvatore’s expression assumed something more like what she was used to as he nodded once. “Then we’re fine. I’m clean, too.”

“You’re sure?”

He pulled a face. “Yes, cara.”

“It’s just—you’re waaaay more active in this department than I am.”

“Yes, and I always use a condom. Besides which, I have to do a physical each year, for life insurance purposes. Mine was two weeks ago and included a full blood screen.”

She expelled a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Okay.”

“So,” he murmured, reaching out and catching her wrist, tugging on it so she fell back onto the mattress, her head landing with a soft thud against the pillows. “You’re not that active, huh?”

She closed her eyes on a wave of irritation at what she’d just admitted, before admonishing herself for that reaction. After all, why should she be ashamed of her lack of experience? Being selective wasn’t a bad thing. Just because that wasn’t a lifestyle choice they shared.

“I wasn’t a virgin,” she said, a hint defiantly though.

“That’s true.”

And then, with a small shrug, “But I don’t make a habit of falling into bed with every guy I’m attracted to.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

“Even when it’s so fun?” he asked, eyes roaming her face with undisguised interest.

“There are other ways to have fun.”

He pulled a face. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“So the rumours about you are true?”

“What rumours would those be?”

She watched as he stepped out of bed then, moving towards the mini bar and removing a bottle of champagne. Mid-range, she suspected it was well below his usual standard. But as she watched, he unfurled the foil and popped the top, grabbing two glasses from the counter and pouring their drinks. He climbed onto the bed, holding them, straddling her, kneeling over her as he passed one to Emilia. She took it, without having a sip.

“The fact you’re constantly with a different woman.”

“And where are you reading these rumours about me?”

She rolled her eyes. “You come up in my newsfeed.”

“Ah, interesting.”

“Not really,” she assured him. “Up until Moricosia, it just made me doubly glad I’d never met you before.”

“Not your type?” he asked with an arrogantly smug grin.

“Definitely not.”

“All appearances to the contrary?”

“Appearances can be deceiving.” She drank half of her champagne in one go then placed it on the bedside table.

“Then how do you explain this?” he asked, gesturing from her, towards his chest.

She opened her mouth to say something then realized she didn’t really have an adequate answer. How could she explain what was happening between them? He was the last man on earth she would ever like, and yet the more she saw him, the more she wanted to see of him. Which made her think she should leave. No, knowshe should leave.

But then, he drank some of his champagne before bringing his mouth to hers, kissing it into her, so she drank and tasted and wanted all the more. Of him, of everything. Her legs wrapped around him, holding him close.

“I can’t,” she said against his lips. “But it really is a mistake.”

“You’ve said that already, yet here we are.”

Her eyes widened at the reality of that. At the implications. “It can’t keep happening.”

He pulled away from her, looking down intently. “I agree.”

She ignored the tightening of disappointment. “You do?”

His smile was etched with a hint of mockery. “Did you think I’d fight you? Insist we have to keep seeing each other?”

Heat flooded her face. “Of course not. Neither of us wants that.”

“No. But we do want this,” he said, shifting his hips a little, so she became aware of his erection, his renewed need for her.

“Which is stupid of us. If anyone found out?—,”

“Perhaps that’s part of the appeal,” he said, taking another drink of the champagne. This time, he dropped his mouth to one of her breasts, and took a nipple in his mouth, rolling his tongue over it, so ice cold champagne trickled over her skin at the same time his warm mouth and tongue flicked her into a state of near-oblivion.

“I—don’t—understand—,” she moaned, barely able to speak.

“You’re the perfect daughter, the perfect sister, the perfect woman,” he said, spearing her with something that didn’t feel quite right. Something that actually hurt. Because his words had a hint of disdain, a lick of judgement, that couldn’t help but make Emilia feel seen—and discounted. Like she didn’t matter. She glanced sideways, her hatred for him and the whole stupid Santoro family renewed. “This is probably the first bad thing you’ve ever done in your life. Most people go through a rebellious phase in their teens; you saved it up for me.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:56 am

More champagne, and now, the other breast. She tilted her head back, surrendering to the feeling, the bliss, the building need. Surrendering to the certainty that at this point, she would do whatever he wanted, go wherever he said, be anything, anyone, for him. It terrified her but, yes, it was also utterly exhilarating.

“That—explains—me—,” she managed to breathe out, when she could make her mouth cooperate. “But—what—about?—,”

“I’m sorry, are you trying to say something there, bella?”

She glared at him, even then, as he moved his mouth lower, the hint of a grin visible just before he connected with her stomach and flicked her with his tongue.

“This is—normal—for you?—,”

“No, it’s not,” he responded swiftly. “You are the first person I’ve ever slept with that I’ve been raised to hate everything about.”

She flinched, even when the same could be said of her.

“But I do like the need for secrecy. I do like the risks here.”

“You do?”

He tilted his face then, resting his chin against her belly. “Yes. It’s...exciting.”

“Exciting.” She bit into her lower lip, trying—and failing—to ignore the implication

that this had less to do with her and more to do with the fact that they had to be careful to keep this off anyone's radar.

"So it's not me you want, but the drama?"

"Actually, I don't like drama," he drawled, taking another sip of champagne, which he swallowed. "Excitement is not the same thing."

"And the sex on its own isn't exciting enough?"

He grinned then, moving his mouth lower, until his head was between her legs. "I wouldn't say that, either." He took another drink of champagne and this time, it was her most intimate skin that felt the thrilling contradiction of ice cold liquid and warm, desperate mouth.

5

HOW MANY TIMES COULD she think to herself, 'that shouldn't have happened', then fall back into bed with this guy? On how many levels could she keep wanting what she knew she shouldn't? And worse than wanting, actually reaching out and taking? It was like some kind of illicit drug addiction, a craving she couldn't control, and for Emilia, who had—as Salvatore so aptly pointed out—always been everyone's perfect 'good girl', it was hard to reconcile her actions now.

Why couldn't she just walk away from him? Why couldn't she resist?

She turned to look at him in the bed beside her, and told herself this absolutely had to be the last time. No matter what she wanted, this was a course of action lined with potential fall out that neither wanted. If her parents and brothers knew that she was literally in bed with the enemy, they'd be furious.

No, they'd be disappointed, and that was so much worse.

As if her gaze had a physical pull on him, Salvatore turned then, to look at her, and something shifted in her gut the moment their eyes connected, bringing with it a rolling of awareness. And appreciation, too, because he truly was the most incredibly beautiful man she'd ever seen in the real world. It wasn't even that his face was perfect, because there was a bump halfway down his nose, as though it had been broken at one point. But somehow that little defect only added to his overall appeal, making him different and special.

She swallowed quickly, as if that could erase the direction of her thoughts.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, and she almost laughed, because it was such a frivolous thing to ask after the sin of betrayal they'd just committed. Like he didn't care at all that they'd had sex—again.

"No," she said, though in fact, maybe she was? She'd had a crab puff at the party, but other than that, had been too busy to eat all day.

"But you'll eat something?"

Despite herself, she laughed a little. "Will I?"

"I'm going to. Keep me company."

"I—should go," she said, pushing the sheets back and moving to stand up. She ignored the sense of disappointment when he made no move to stop her.

"Or, you could stay, have some food, and then we can keep making the most of this room we have access to."

Temptation zipped through her, like lightning forking across the sky. “This is so wrong.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

His grin showed that Salvatore didn't have quite the same level of emotional conflict about this that Emilia did. "But what's the harm?"

She rolled her eyes, reaching for her underpants and pulling them on. He made a small tscking sound of disappointment, that didn't help her whole temptation situation. "The harm has the potential to be huge," she pointed out. "Our families hate each other."

"Yes," he shrugged his agreement.

"They'd hate this."

"Yes."

"How does that not bother you?"

"I'm not planning on telling my family. Are you?"

She pursed her lips. "Of course not."

"So, what's the problem?"

"I've already said, they'd hate this."

"And I've already said, they don't need to know."

"The only way to make sure they never find out is to never do this again," she

muttered. “We’ve already taken way too many stupid risks.”

He propped himself up on his elbows, eyes latched to hers in a way that stole her breath and made her momentarily forget she had been in the process of reaching for her dress. If anything, her body was silently encouraging her to move forward, to go back to bed, and reach for him, not her clothing.

“I thought we agreed that the risks are part of what we like.”

“No, you agreed that.”

“Are you saying it’s not fun?”

She shook her head. “Yes. No. I don’t know. I just...can’t even imagine how hurtful this would be to my parents if they found out.”

“You are a grown woman, aren’t you? Free to make your own choices in life.”

“Of course.”

“So if you do disappoint them with your decision, is it the end of the world?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. With regards to this, yes. One hundred per cent.”

“A simple ‘yes’ would suffice.”

“Sorry, but this is quite literally the worst thing I could do to them.”

“They hate us that much, huh?”

“Don’t act like it’s not mutual.”

He grinned. “Oh, it’s very, very mutual, especially after the last couple of years.”

She tilted her head to the side, waiting for him to continue.

“First Acto, then Moricosia? Whatever bad blood there was between us in the past, I think you could say it’s a hell of a lot worse now.”

She ignored the zing of triumph at her family’s recent victories. “Exactly!” she said, clicking her fingers. “And you can’t tell me it wouldn’t bother you if your family found out about us? You know they’d be pissed.”

“Yeah, they’d be pissed.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“My preference is for no one to find out.” He sat up straighter and pushed back so he was leaning against the plush bed head, his body half covered by a loosely draped sheet. “Stay and eat with me, and we can make a plan to ensure we keep this secret.”

Before she could answer, he was reaching for the phone and saying, ‘Room Service’. She stood there, frozen to the spot, as he began to reel off a large number of foods. She could still get dressed and go; the choice was hers. Yet, the decision seemed to have been made at some point, without her conscious decision, and then she was pushing towards the wardrobe and removing a fluffy white robe. She wrapped herself in it, ignoring the look of triumph on his features as she moved to sit in bed and reach for the champagne he’d poured much, much earlier. She couldn’t take a sip though without remembering the way he’d trickled the stuff all over her body, driving her quite wild with the different sensations, and her cheeks bloomed with heat as she quickly swallowed the bubbles.

“Good choice,” he said, and she tried not to let the praise, or the tone of his voice, get into her blood stream. Too late, though. Warmth flooded her and she blinked away quickly, to prevent him from seeing her smile.

“Okay.” And suddenly, despite the fact he was butt naked, Salvatore seemed to slip completely into a different persona. Now, he was all business like and authoritative, and it was easy to imagine him in a boardroom, commanding all and sundry. While she knew his family worked closely together—as did hers—she was also aware that Salvatore had differentiated himself by launching his own venture capital firm when he was in his early twenties, and become something of a titan of industry. Even

Emilia, who'd grown up with two brothers who loved to dictate terms to everyone they met, was impressed by his confident aura. "We both know this is a bad idea."

"I thought you didn't feel that way?"

His eyes were no longer sparking and flirtatious, but rather, completely serious. "Of course I feel it. You're a Valentino and I'm a Santoro. We might as well be Romeo and Juliet for how much sense this makes."

"Except without the love. And suicide."

"Definitely." He nodded his agreement. "At the same time, I'm a realist. As stupid as this is, correct me if I'm wrong, but neither of us seems able—or willing—to put an end to it."

"We have to," she groaned. "Seriously, Salvatore. The risk to both of us, to our families, and for what? This is never going to go anywhere. There's no future here. Why would we risk possibly harming everyone we love, just because the sex is?—,"

"Yes?" he prompted, teasing once more, before sobering.

"Fantastic," she offered, aware the word was totally insufficient.

"Absolutely," he agreed, and the warmth that was buzzing inside of her spread right to her fingertips. "Mind-blowing."

She flushed. "I'm glad I'm not alone there."

"Definitely not."

But the sense of warmth and relief were short-lived. "This is a disaster."

“It’s less than ideal,” he agreed. “But it doesn’t have to be.”

“I can’t see any way we can keep doing this...”

“We just need some firm rules,” he said, and once again, she could see that they’d moved firmly into his territory. He was confident and steely, results-oriented and determined. “As long as we’re on the same page, and do this carefully, I think it’s viable.”

“Viable?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll indulge you,” she said, slowly. “Talk to me about the rules.”

“First of all, we need to be realistic. This can only ever be a physical thing. I don’t want to like you, and I don’t want you to like me. Any problems with that?”

A smile tickled her lips. “Not only do I not have a problem with that, I think it would be physically impossible for either of us not to hate each other.”

“I don’t hate you,” he said, after a beat, frowning a little. “Your family, yes, but not you.”

“I’m a part of my family.”

He shrugged. “I probably wouldn’t hate either of your brothers, either, if I met them face to face. It’s more...the abstract concept of your family. The myth of the Valentinos...”

“For me, it’s actually your family,” she quipped, then nudged him with her shoulder.

“So not liking each other shouldn’t be a problem,” he said, with a confident nod.

“Definitely not. What else?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“We only do this in a hotel. I don’t want to see your house, I don’t want you in mine. The less we know about each other the better.”

She considered that, lips pulling to the side, and nodded. She liked the idea of making it as impersonal as possible. Apart from anything, it made it conceivable to have sex without letting herself like him. She didn’t want to know those little details, like what he had on his bedside table and what brand of cereal he preferred. It was too...humanising, and humanising him would lead to complexity.

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Anything else?” he prompted.

She sipped her champagne. “I think it’s a good idea to put a time limit on this,” she murmured, thinking aloud.

“Agreed. I don’t remember the last time I was with a woman for more than three dates anyway.”

“Then why bother having this conversation? By my count, we’re done after tonight.”

He raised both brows. “Touché. Turns out, the forbidden fruit is hard to resist.”

She pulled a face. “Tell me about it.”

“So, how long?” he prompted.

Emilia considered that. “Well, it’s my birthday in a month, and I always go home to spend the weekend with my parents. I’ll probably stay in Italy for a few weeks, catch up with friends. That seems like a natural end-point to me.”

“A month? Easy.”

“Or sooner, if we want.”

“Great.” And there was such confidence in his tone that it was easy for Emilia to let it seep into her body and push away any lingering reservations she held. She knew it wasn’t her best life decision, but at the same time, so long as she and Salvatore went into this with their eyes open, and took care to make sure no one ever found out, what possible harm could there be?

Absolutely none. They’d be careful, they’d be care-free, and when the time came, they’d both walk away without a backwards glance. It was a recipe for success, and suddenly, Emilia was relishing the prospect of throwing herself into a month of no-holds-barred sex with the hottest guy she’d ever known. Starting with right now...

“Cristo, I’m going to have to work on my stamina for the next month, if I want to keep up with you,” he teased, later, when their food had arrived and they were surrounded by the wreckage of their meals.

She stuffed a french fry into her mouth, then shook her head. “If you’re fishing for compliments, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“Oh?”

“You know there’s nothing wrong with your stamina.”

He grinned. “I’m pleased to hear you think so.”

She rolled her eyes. “Anyone would think so—and I can’t believe it’s not something you haven’t heard a million times.”

“A million? Slight exaggeration there.”

“You know what I mean.”

He took a drink of mineral water.

“Can I ask you something?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“Does it breach our rules?”

She considered that. “How about I ask, and if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to.”

“Fair enough.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Do you really sleep around as much as the internet would make it appear?”

“Yes.”

She wondered at the sudden drop in her gut.

“You look surprised.”

Damn it. She'd have to be more careful around Salvatore. For whatever reason, he seemed to possess the ability to read her like an open book.

“I suppose I thought it might be an exaggeration.”

“Why?”

“Because you're photographed with alotof different women.”

“Yes.”

“You're saying you sleep with all of them?”

“Not all.”

“But most?”

“I don't keep a tally.”

She frowned. That sounded like alot.

“What’s the problem? You don’t approve?”

“No, no, it’s not that.” Her brow furrowed as she sought for a way to explain. “It’s just—a point of difference between us.”

“You’ve already told me that you don’t make a habit of this.”

She nodded.

“But you’ve had some experience,” he prompted.

She nodded again.

“How much?”

“You don’t keep a tally, what makes you think I do?”

“That’s a clever way of side-stepping the question.”

She had to admire him for that, too. Yet another way in which he seemed to innately understand her.

“I could torture it out of you, you know.”

“Torture?”

“Pleasure.” He reached out and brushed a hand over her exposed thigh so she gave a husky little uneven breath as her body—so tired and pleased already—experienced the stirrings of need, all over again. Her eyes shifted to his and scannedhis face,

almost as though it was committing his appearance to memory.

She blinked away, reaching for another french fry.

“I’ve dated. But I’m generally careful before I let it get physical.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, this isn’t the norm for me.”

He nodded slowly, like he was going to accept that answer, but then, all of a sudden, he was moving, bringing his body over hers, uncaring for the food that was between them and the way the chips spilled out onto the sheets. And a second later, she was uncaring, too, because his mouth was at her throat, kissing her, sucking, tasting, and then flicking lower, to her breast, his breath warm against her skin. Her nipples, already sensitive from so much attention, sparked the second he touched them, and she whimpered. A plea. To stop, to never stop. She wasn’t sure.

“Ten men?” he asked, rolling her nipple with his tongue.

She groaned. “No.”

“Less? More?”

She arched her back in a silent invitation, her whole body stirring now and needing everything he could give her. Again.

“Emilia?” his tone was sharp as he lifted his head, eyes linked to hers, but then, his fingers were at her other nipple, rolling it, then squeezing, just hard enough to send arrows of need through her overwrought body.

“You’re making it hard to think straight.”

“Want me to stop?”

She shot him a fulminating glare. “No.”

“Good answer. Now, give me another one.”

“Another what.”

“Answer.” She bit into her lip as he moved his mouth to the breast he’d just been squeezing, and pressed the same pressure points, so she was practically exploding already.

“Fewer than ten.”

“Nine?” he asked, bringing his hand between her legs and separating them, hovering right at her sex so she was holding her breath without even realising it.

“Fewer,” she almost screamed, the need, pleasure, pressure, all too much.

“Interesting.” He slid a finger inside of her wet core and she bucked against his hand, heat spreading through her body and to the roots of her hair.

“Eight?”

“Fewer,” she panted, as he began to move, and her cells trembled with the promise of what he was offering.

“Seven men?”

He placed his mouth over her other nipple, tormenting this one now, as his fingers pushed inside of her mercilessly, until she was whimpering and digging her fingernails into his shoulders, the word ‘please’ tumbling from her lips over and over.

“Salvatore,” she cried. “I—can’t—think?—,”

“Then don’t think,” he said, moving his mouth higher, to claim hers, his body over hers now, the weight its own kind of delicious, addicting pleasure. “Just float.”

She groaned, riding the wave he was building inside of her, with his skillful fingers, mouth, and proximity, so she was almost on fire with delirium, and then, the flames licking through her caught, sending fire through her entire body. She was in free fall and she didn’t care—she only cared that it wouldn’t stop.

“I—can’t—I?—,”

“I know, I know,” and then he was kissing her hard, absorbing her frantic cries, his mouth effortlessly dominating and delighting her, so she couldn’t think of a more sublime moment in her life. And then, she was coming, again, fast, recklessly and completely, at his mercy, in a way it didn’t even occur to her to mind.

“You’re leaving?”

It was still dark out. Well, as dark as Manhattan was capable of being, given the sparkly lights in each and every high-rise. “I thought you were asleep,” she murmured. Now fully dressed, she turned back to the bed.

“I think I was.”

She smiled without realising it. “We both were.”

He shifted his weight, propping up a little and resting his head on one palm.

“Let me rephrase. Why are you leaving?”

She hesitated at the foot of the bed, the conversation she'd been playing out in her mind for the last twenty minutes still going back and forth on repeat. But she knew she'd come to the right conclusion in the end. “New rule,” she said, keeping her tone light.

“I'm listening.”

“No sleeping over.”

He arched his brows. “No?”

She shook her head.

“What's wrong with sleeping in the same bed?”

She bit into her lower lip. “It's just too intimate.”

“Emilia, I have tasted you and been inside you. Yet sleeping in the same bed is where you draw the line?”

She flushed to the roots of her hair. “You know what I mean. It's different. Like being in each other's apartments.”

“I have no issue with sharing a bed,” he said, moving to sit properly now, then standing on the carpeted floor. “But if that’s a hard no for you, it’s fine by me.”

“It is,” she said, on a wave of relief. For some reason, it just felt more personal, somehow. Like there was more scope for getting to know each other. Liking each other. What Emilia wanted was to keep this—whatever it was—to a strictly ‘wham, bam, thank you, ma’am,’ kind of scenario. Because she wasn’t used to this. And for all they’d put guardrails in place, she suspected it was going to be harder for Emilia to keep the lines between them unblurred than it would be for Salvatore, who’d slept with so many women he’d lost count. In fact, the sooner she got out of there, the better.

“Okay,” she nodded. “I’ll go.” She moved to the door, holding her breath for no reason she could think of.

His raw laugh chased after her though, and a second later, his hand curled around her wrist. “Wait a second. What’s the rush?”

She glanced up at him, hit powerfully by their height difference. And his broad shoulders. And muscled torso. And incredibly hypnotic eyes. She swallowed past a constriction in her throat.

His hand lifted, curving around her cheek. “Is a kiss goodbye against the rules, too?”

Her lips parted, and something in her chest kerthunked. “I didn’t have you pegged as the sentimental type.”

His grin was almost her undoing. Sexy and slow, it made her insides turn to mush. “Believe me, there’s nothing sentimental about the way I kiss.” A second later, he was showing her why—with a kiss that was, instead, a promise of what was to come, next time. A kiss that was pure seduction and skill, desire and desperation. A kiss that

left her knees trembling and her pulse racing, so when he dropped his hand and stepped back from her, Emilia could only stare at him for several seconds before remembering where she was—and that she was in the process of leaving.

She stepped outside before she could do something stupid, and leap right back into bed again.

6

LATER THAT DAY, SALVATORE stared out at the view from their Manhattan office, listening as his cousin Rocco ran their family board meeting, detailing the latest progress on their Hamptons project. What had initially started as a takeover bid of a beachfront street filled with rundown old houses had turned into a full-scale rejuvenation. With the force of Rocco's unwavering attention, the houses in the street were being structurally restored and renovated, turning from places fit only for demolition, to the sort of luxurious homes that billionaires would soon be fighting to snap up.

Of course, there was no greater motivator than love, and Rocco Santoro had surprised them all by falling head over heels in love with Maddie, who happened to have grown up in one of the houses. Destroying the house would have devastated her, and so he worked hard at a solution that would enable the historic street to be saved, while the Santoro family still came out on top financially.

This update was important, and with the rest of the family headquartered between the UK and Italy, Salvatore was the only other Santoro in the boardroom with Rocco. As such, he knew he should be giving this more of his attention. But every time he moved, he was aware of the way his body responded, muscles pleasantly fatigued, aching in a way that spoke of great exertion. Of the way he'd treated last night like some kind of marathon workout, making love to Emilia until they were both completely destroyed. Exhausted, and wrecked, they'd collapsed onto the mattress

and fallen asleep, limbs entwined, bodies heavy from the weight of shared pleasure.

Then, she'd woken, and he'd teased her for attempting to run out on him, but the truth was, he'd been relieved as hell. Relieved that he didn't have to be the one to go, to do the whole 'this was great, but let's leave it at that', speech. The fact that he and Emilia had already agreed to the terms of their relationship, such as it was, helped him make peace with what had happened between them.

Because he wasn't an idiot.

For all he'd downplayed her concerns, and acted as though this was no big deal, the last thing he wanted to do was hurt his family. Even more so, he didn't want this to cause shit for Emilia. Where he might have once said that he'd have happily watched the Valentinos lose everything they held dear, his relationship with Emilia—even while only physical—had changed that viewpoint somewhat. He didn't want her to suffer because of this.

Hence the ground rules. It was funny to think that usually rules were associated with restrictions, and yet, in this case, they gave him cover. Cover to relax and enjoy this; cover not to overthink it.

"Bro, you here?" Rocco clicked his fingers right in front of Salvatore's face, so the latter refocused with a sense of impatience.

"What's up?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“The Moricosian development—just wondering if it’s completely dead in the water?”

Salvatore ignored the strange prickling at the base of his spine. This was no time to get a conscience. “Why do you ask?”

“I heard there have been some delays with suppliers. It’s not the Valentinos’ fault, necessarily, but the government is frustrated. The designs were meant to be finalized by now.”

“And they’re not?” he asked, again, ignoring the fact they were now speaking directly about Emilia Valentino, who was spearheading the Moricosian project for her family.

“Not according to my source,” Rocco said, with a nod.

Salvatore’s frown deepened. King Ares of Moricosia was one of his best friends, but they were all tight with him. The main reason they’d been rejected for the job was because Ares had fallen in love with Sofia. While not technically a Santoro, she’d been raised as one of them, and the appearance of nepotism would have been too obvious.

So the deal had gone to the Valentinos. To Emilia.

“As far as I know, Ares’s connection to Sofia rules us out.”

“Even if the Valentinos were shown to be inept?”

Something bristled at the back of his spine. “You just said the delays weren’t their

fault.”

He was aware of the way the entire family was staring at him, as if he’d just called the earth flat. He relaxed his features, wiping any hint of defensiveness away, trying to remember who he was and what was at stake here.

Seven months ago, he’d wanted the Moricosian development more than he could say; and he’d been prepared to play dirty to get it. Even using his close, long-standing friendship with the King to swing parliament. In the end, Ares had recused himself from the decision-making process, leaving it to the parliament, but Salvatore had known their family’s relationship was at issue.

Therefore, if the Valentinos hadn’t, in fact, won the design on merit, as Emilia had suggested, then what harm was there in righting that wrong? That was certainly one way to look at it, and he knew it was the right way, for his family, and for himself. But whenever he thought of making a call to Ares to check on the progress, of trying to get the wheels moving again, he pictured Emilia and knew he couldn’t—wouldn’t—be the one to pull the rug from under her feet.

“Listen, I have no interest in putting Ares in that position. Or Sofia, for that matter.”

Rocco grimaced.

“We will watch the situation. If it continues to unravel, then we can step in. But we cannot play on Ares’s sense of affection for our family, by pressuring him to drop a contract that his parliament signed off on.”

“We are a viable alternative,” Rocco pointed out.

“Yes.” He felt like iron was being ground into his chest. “And if he wants that alternative, we’ll be here, ready and waiting. Trust me,” he said, feeling like in that

moment, not a single person in his family should trust him with anything. Because he knew one thing for sure: while he might want the Valentino family to fail at anything and everything, Emilia was exempt from that, utterly and completely.

“What do you need?” Leandro asked, mouth full of piadina. Emilia pulled a face, shaking her head.

“How you got Skye to marry you is beyond me.”

He laughed at that, picked up his scrunched napkin and threw it at her. “My charms, obviously.”

She rolled her eyes. “Clearly she’s never seen you eat.”

“I don’t eat like this around her.”

“You just save it for me, your loving sister?”

He grinned like the cat who’d got the cream. And she supposed he had. Watching Leandro and Skye together was like watching some kind of incredible ballet. For all Skye was one of the strongest people Emilia had ever known, something about her brought out Leandro’s protective side. She couldn’t move without him being there, arm around her shoulders, or even just his presence, ready to catch her should she stumble. Ready to be whatever she needed.

For all Emilia delighted in teasing Leandro, she’d have been blind not to see that theirs was a match truly made in heaven. And Leandro wasn’t all bad. It was just that when he was hungry, he devoured his food as though it were his first and last meal.

She, on the other hand, took a petite bite of her own piadina and marveled at the flavours. Sometimes, she contemplated learning to cook. It would make it easier than

having to rely on take out or meal delivery services. Besides, what self-respecting Italian couldn't at least whip up some kind of pasta? Yet she was famous in their family for her inability to so much as boil an egg, and for that, she couldn't help but blame their mother. If she hadn't been such an exceptional cook, always stocking the fridge and freezer with delicious home cooked food, Emilia might have been forced to up-skill at some point.

Instead, she'd turned not cooking into an artform, and it was definitely not the biggest regret of her life.

“So, what's up?”

Right. She'd asked him to meet up for a reason. Thoughts of that morning's phone call were still fresh, not least because of the way it had fully and completely driven memories of last night from her mind, turning Salvatore's seduction into a distant memory. Whatever pleasure waves she'd still been riding had been replaced by stress and frustration.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Just about everything that could go wrong in Moricosia is going wrong.”

Leandro nodded sympathetically. “Tell me about it.”

“Okay, well, our principal design team has been sidelined owing to some in-house staff issues—allegations of bullying and unfair dismissal. You can imagine how that looks to the government. I’m scrambling to find someone else to take over, but the project is huge, and halfway through the formal design process, so getting a company to step in isn’t as easy as you might think, despite the prestige of the job.”

Leandro sat back in his seat, eyes latched to hers. “What else?”

And she let it all come tumbling out, every single issue, every broken deadline, every impatient phone call from the Moricosian Minister of Development. It had been one nightmare after the next, so half the time she seriously wondered if they were being sabotaged.

“Is there any possibility this isn’t all an accident?” Leandro asked, thoughtfully, when she’d finished talking.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just a lot to go wrong, as you say. This isn’t your first major development. I know you, Emme. You run things with the precision of a Swiss bank. You make careful decisions when it comes to hiring companies. For the wheels to all be coming off like this seems—unlikely.”

His praise nestled inside of her, acting as a sort of reassurance she hadn't realized she desperately needed.

"I can't see how anyone could pull these strings," she said, with a shake of her head.

"The Santoros could."

She thought of Salvatore and was surprised to find herself shaking her head, without realizing it. "No, impossible."

"How do you know?"

"It's too devious. They fight fair, even if it means losing."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Do you have any evidence to the contrary?"

He stared at her, clearly not convinced.

"We're the ones who stole Acto out from under them," she pointed out. It had been Andie's suggestion to have their older brother Max pose as her fiancé, to get her father to sell the company to the Valentinos instead of the Santoros. They'd worked for a long time on putting together an offer for the business, but it had been Max who'd swooped in and bought it at the last minute. Never mind that he and Andie had legitimately fallen in love in the process.

"All's fair in love and business," Leandro said with a shrug. "A philosophy I assure you they share. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that they're sabotaging us."

But she shook her head again. "I think this has just been incredibly unlucky," she

admitted. “I hate it, but I’d rather just address each issue without looking to villainize the Santoros. At least, not over this.”

“Have it your way, but I’m going to do some digging.” And she nodded, confident her brother wouldn’t find anything of note.

The day went from bad to worse on the work front, so by the time Emilia walked in the door of her SoHo apartment, she was drained. Mentally, physically and in every way, just utterly exhausted. Of course, the lack of sleep the night before didn’t help.

As if to reinforce that, she stifled a yawn as she placed her handbag on the hall stand, removing her phone before making her way into the kitchen. There was a text message from her mum, just checking in, and a few work emails that had come through on the drive home. She ignored the emails for now, and instead, poured herself a glass of Shiraz, which she carried through to the bathroom.

While the bath was running, Emilia slowly removed her work clothes, draping them over an ornate chair in the corner, before catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror and letting out a small gasp.

Either she’d been too pleasure-fogged that morning to properly look at herself, or these marks had grown darker through the day. Slowly, fascinated, she trailed her finger from the places on her breasts where Salvatore had lavished kisses and sucked until her skin had grown darker, then to the sensitive flesh that was roughened by his stubble. Her cheeks flushed at the reminders of how he had touched and worshipped her entire body. She wondered if he showed similar marks—nail scratches down his back, or crescent moon shapes across his shoulders from where she’d dug her fingers in as if to hold on for dear life. It was easy to believe he would. She remembered drawing her nails down his back over and over as he spent hours pushing all the buttons she’d needed pushed—and hadn’t even realised she possessed.

The bath was sumptuously warm around her body, and she sunk into it gratefully, lying there with her eyes shut for several long moments before reaching for the glass of wine and taking a sip. She'd just replaced it on the bath's edge when her phone buzzed. She yawned again as she reached out, blinking to clear her eyes before focusing on the text.

It was from Salvatore—just a photo of a bed. Or rather, half a bed. Crisp white sheets, white pillow, and in the distant background, a sparling view of Manhattan.

Wish you were here.

A smile tugged at her lips as she contemplated what to say, then flicked to the camera and took a picture of her red-painted toenails peeping above the surface of the water. She sent it back to him with the words:

I could say the same.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

He responded:

Seriously starting to regret that ‘no going to each other’s homes’ rule.

She reached for her wine, took a sip, and settled back into the bath, deeper, so the warm water lapped against her breasts.

She felt like a teenager, giddy with the excitement of messaging a crush. A crush! Salvatore Santoro was the enemy, not a crush. Even when he was also the man she was sleeping with.

Only, Emilia didn’t want to think about the conflict of her situation. They’d already addressed it. Besides, they’d gone too far to walk this thing back. They’d had sex. A lot. What difference did it make if it happened once or ten times? They’d done the very bad, very forbidden thing—the thing no one in either of their families would be able to forgive if they learned of it.

Hotel rooms have baths, you know. Beds, too, for that matter.

She closed her eyes, and instantly he was there, as he’d been the night before. Kissing her, touching her, making her whole body sing as though he were a maestro, capable of playing her to perfection.

Give me ten minutes and I’ll arrange it.

She sat up straighter, her pulse suddenly hammering in her body. She stared at her phone, in a state of surprise. As much as she was craving him, and what they’d done

last night, she hadn't thought for a second he'd want to see her so quickly. Or that she'd want that, too.

But the truth was, the idea of meeting up with him again answered something inside of her that had been thrumming in her body all day. A craving and need she'd done everything she could to blot out. Not hard, when the Moricosian project she was overseeing was turning to shit before her eyes.

She tapped a finger against the edge of the bathtub, wondering if she should say 'no'. Tell him another night would be better for her. She was exhausted, and hungry, and the bath was heaven for her over-used muscles. And yet, even as she wondered that, she knew she wouldn't. How could she? What he was offering was what she'd secretly been needing all day—and if anything, the rigors of her day only made her need that more.

The distraction.

The euphoria.

The feeling that no matter what went wrong, knowing there was someone on earth who could make her feel so sublimely satisfied was somehow the perfect antidote.

She was still prevaricating about her response—knowing what she wanted and somehow couldn't bring herself to admit—when another text buzzed in from him.

I've booked the Plaza. I'll leave a key at the front desk for you.

She bit into her lower lip, hiding a small grin of appreciation. Her family owned several high-end hotels, three of them in Manhattan, yet he hadn't booked into one of those.

Then again, even that made sense. Wasn't it more likely they'd be seen—or talked about—if they booked into a Valentino hotel? Besides, it was the last place a Santoro would ordinarily be seen. Of course he'd chosen neutral ground.

She placed her phone down and took her time. While she knew how much she wanted to be with him again, some deeply-held sense of self-preservation told her that she shouldn't let him see that. That she shouldn't be admitting it to herself, much less him.

Even when he'd messaged and organized everything, thus showing that he felt the same way. She felt somehow vulnerable, knowing how quickly he'd worked his way under her skin. And if she stopped to think about the fact he was the first man ever to make her want to the point of insanity, she might run a thousand miles from him. If she was even capable of that anymore...

7

HE'D GONE BACK AND FORTH on the wisdom of this. The whole thing. Though he'd pretty quickly discounted any thoughts of ending their arrangement prematurely. A month was just a month. No big deal. Particularly not with the rules they'd put in place to protect themselves.

But even within those rules, he'd wondered if they should limit how frequently they saw one another. Was it fool-hardy to have set up a date, for want of a better word, for the second night in a row? Or was it just a mark of one of Salvatore's defining characteristics: making the most of the time he had. He'd always been someone who'd pushed himself to the limits. Generally that applied most stringently to his business, but in some aspects of his personal life, he took the same, no holds barred approach.

Emilia was clearly going to be one of those instances.

They had agreed to a month together, and he had absolutely no reason to doubt he'd be able to walk away easily at that point. Not only because she was a Valentino, but also, because he was Salvatore—a man who didn't do commitment, entirely by choice. It probably wouldn't even last a month. Far more likely was that they'd get this out of their system and move on. To that end, seeing each other often was a great option. The faster this thing burned out and he could get back to his normal life, the better.

Whatever doubts he'd had about the wisdom of organizing this disappeared with each minute she kept him waiting. Ten minutes turned into twenty, turned into thirty, so his nerves were stretched so thin he'd started to pace the carpeted floor of the luxurious suite. Eventually, it occurred to him that she might not actually be planning to come. What if she was toying with him? Leaning into their family feud and having a laugh at the fact he'd been so eager to see her he'd barely been able to wait another night?

By the time he heard the handle turning, he'd gone from pleased and confident in how things were going, to convinced he'd made a monumental, uncharacteristic error and that he should leave before she arrived—if she was even going to arrive.

But then, the door pushed inwards and Emilia, with a small brown leather duffel bag thrown over one shoulder, and dressed in a black, fitted, woolen dress, hair tumbling down over one shoulder, strode into the room. Her lips were painted a deep red, and all he could think about was smudging it off.

No, that wasn't true. He was also thinking about how to curtail his immediate reaction—of intense, desperate longing. Because he did long for her, body and soul. He ached and yearned in a way that bordered on obsession.

“Did you walk here?” he asked, aware his voice sounded flatly disapproving, even as he moved to her and unhooked the bag from her shoulder and placed it on the ground.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

He caught a hint of her floral perfume and his gut twisted at remembered pleasures—from the first night they'd slept together, in Moricosia, when he'd been totally intoxicated by everything about her, including that delicate, feminine smell.

“Have I kept you waiting?”

He tamped down on his irritation. Not with her, but rather, himself, for showing that yes, he'd been waiting. On tenterhooks, in fact.

Then again, why hide it? This was just about sex, and wanting her with the power of a thousand suns wasn't a sin. Hell, it was why they were both here, wasn't it?

“Yes,” he said, with a shrug that imitated carelessness. “I've been thinking about this all day.”

He dragged her into his arms, dropping his head and kissing her in the same motion, so more powerful memories exploded in his brain—the way she tasted, the way she sounded as she groaned into his mouth, so he swallowed up her eagerness and made it a part of his soul.

He didn't need her to say anything. He didn't need to hear that she'd been thinking about him, too. It was obvious, from the way she clung to him, to the way she kissed him back, to the way she lifted one leg, wrapping it behind his calves, like she couldn't wait to feel him inside her, like she couldn't wait, full stop.

Curses flooded his body, angry, hot, desperate curses of the need he couldn't seem to get control of, and then he was lifting her, easily, carrying her to the bed and placing

her down, at the same time he pushed her dress higher, so his fingers could run over her soft, smooth skin, all the way to the lace of her thong. He kept kissing her as he brushed it aside, so his fingers could connect with her sex, then push inside her, and she groaned harder, louder, arching her back and pushing forwards, and he heard her desperation then.

He'd thought about organising dinner to be here, waiting when she arrived, but he was glad he hadn't now, because anything that delayed this would have been unbearable. And it would have sent the wrong message, anyway. They weren't really dating, and this wasn't about getting to know each other. When they ate, it would be a case of sharing a meal for the sake of sustaining their energy levels, so they could keep doing this—it wouldn't be anything more meaningful or significant.

As if to underscore his thoughts, she lifted her arms over her head, giving him access to remove her dress, which he did swiftly, letting out a guttural noise of his own when he saw that she wore no bra. Her beautiful breasts called to him, begging to be touched as he had last night. Her nipples were taut, sweet and demanding his attention, so as she fell back onto the bed he went with her, his mouth seeking first one breast, then the next, while his knee nudged her legs apart.

“Too many clothes,” she panted, when he pressed his teeth into her nipple with just enough force to make her yelp.

“I agree,” he said, and he moved to stand at the foot of the bed, bitterly resenting even that temporary separation. He undressed as quickly as he could, enjoying the fact she couldn't take her eyes off him, adoring the fact she made no attempt to disguise it. Case in point, as he watched, Emilia held her hands up, a pout on those beautiful, full lips.

“Fuck me, Salvatore,” she begged, and he grinned, for no reason other than in that moment he was sublimely, utterly happy.

“I think this is the best burger I’ve ever eaten,” she said, swallowing her third mouthful. “Or it could just be that I’m ravenously hungry.”

Across the table from her, Salvatore, wearing only a pair of cotton boxers, grinned. His bare chest really was a thing of great art. Perfectly sculpted, but in a way that somehow spoke of general fitness rather than a vain need to work out, with just the right covering of hair, and a deep, golden complexion, she was having to work extra hard to stop her gaze from dropping down, constantly.

“Well, it is after midnight.”

“And I haven’t eaten since lunch.”

“Then it makes sense you’re hungry.”

Heat flooded her cheeks as she dropped her gaze to the burger, aware that her state of starvation had more to do with how they’d spent the last few hours. Her whole body was singing with pleasure from what they’d shared. Whatever ambivalence she’d been feeling about the wisdom of coming to see him for a second night had flown right out the window the second he’d kissed her.

She’d been desperate for him, but it was mutual, which made it a lot easier to just relax into this scenario.

“How was your day?”

His question had her lifting her gaze to his, surprised to find her lips quirking. “Seriously?”

“What? Isn’t that a normal question?”

“Yeah,” she drew the word out, thoughtfully. “But what we’re doing isn’t really normal, is it?”

He dipped his head in something like a nod of agreement, an unspoken concession. “Would you prefer to eat in silence?”

She took another bite of burger, finished chewing, then took a large sip of her soda. His gaze stayed on her face the whole time, letting her know he was waiting for an answer. Finally, she relented, “No, but I don’t know how I feel about making small talk with you, either. You are the enemy, remember?”

His grin made her insides pop like fireworks. “How could I forget?”

She reached for a chip. “Actually, my day was kind of shitty.”

He arched one brow, his face impassive. “Oh?”

She nodded.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Want to talk about it?”

Emilia sipped her drink, to buy for time. Weirdly, she almost sort of did want to talk about it, but with Salvatore? Given they’d been at loggerheads over who’d get the project? It would be dangerous to let him know how off track they were in their first set of deliverables. Or would it? After all, they had a contract with the Moricosian government, and they weren’t quite at the point of breaching it. Nothing short of a breach would allow the government to cancel their deal, and even then, it would be a bad look.

She shook her head, though. “Just a few fires I had to put out.”

“And did you succeed?”

Even without having confided the details to him, there was something in the deep huskiness of his voice that was somehow soothing.

“It will take some time,” she prevaricated.

“Fires often do.”

“Oh, yeah? Something you have to deal with often?”

“You can’t be in business without having things go pear shaped from time to time.”

“I know,” she said, with a nod. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

His smile made her stomach twist. “No?”

She shook her head. “I like predictability. I like people to do what they say they’re going to do. I like things to go according to plan.”

His lips quirked in an expression of amusement.

“Don’t you?” she pushed.

He shrugged. “Of course.”

“Why am I not convinced?”

“Because there is something to be said for the fun of a challenge. The adrenaline rush of needing to think outside the box, to find a solution.”

She pulled a face. “I’ll take your word for it.”

His laugh was deep and throaty. “You must be used to this sort of thing?”

She expelled a breath. “Sure. I’m used to something going wrong, but not everything going wrong, all at once.” She sucked in a breath, aware she’d come dangerously close to saying too much.

“What difference does it make if it’s one thing or ten?”

She rolled her eyes. “Spoken like a man who never has to clean up his own mess.”

“Ouch. And presumptuous.”

“Am I wrong?”

“I tend not to make mess,” he said, winking at her, so her stomach did another unpredictable little roll.

“Sure you don’t.”

“But I’m responsible for fixing other people’s mistakes.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “We don’t need to go into specifics. And specifics don’t matter. At the end of the day, you just have to roll up your sleeves and dive right in.”

She sipped her drink. “And you enjoy that?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

It was Salvatore's turn to stall, as he took a bite of his own burger then placed it onto the plate as he finished chewing. "I enjoy the feeling of success that comes from having achieved my aim. I like results; I like knowing I'm responsible."

"So what exactly do you do, anyway?" she pushed, even when she knew it was getting close to breaking one of their rules. They weren't really supposed to be getting to know each other on a personal level. By the same token, there was no harm in it, so long as they both kept their focus on what they were doing. She was more than capable of having conversations like this and still walking away in a month's time.

"I'm in charge of group Business Development, and on the side, I run my own venture capital firm."

Her brows raised. "So basically, you've got your hands more than full."

"That's what I was thinking an hour ago," he teased, so her insides squelched with awareness and her heart thumped so hard it felt like a hammer throbbing against her ribs.

"I'm serious," she said, even as a smile tugged at her lips. "You're a busy boy."

"Cara, I left boyhood behind a long time ago."

She laughed. "You're hardly an old man."

He grinned.

“Which do you prefer?”

He frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Working with your family, or your own business?”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that.”

“Do you generally make a habit of sticking around long enough to be asked?”

“Touché.”

“But true?”

He laughed. “Possibly.”

His laugh turned her fast-thumping heart into a tremble, and her pulse into a gushing tsunami.

“So?” she prompted, after he hadn’t answered. “Which one?”

“Both, for different reasons.”

“Such a diplomatic answer. What’s the matter? Are you afraid I’m going to sell whatever you say to the papers? Out you for being disloyal to your family if you say you like your own work better?”

“You and I crossed the line of disloyalty back in Moricosia. There’s nothing you could say about me that I couldn’t say back to you.” It wasn’t a threat, so much as a statement of fact, and yet the hint of a shiver ran the length of her spine. Because he’d so easily invoked the visage of what was at stake for them—of how necessary it was

for them to keep this secret.

“I’m not interested because I want to sell your secrets. I’m interested because I’m interested.”

“In me?” he asked, teasing again, in that tongue in cheek way, so it was easy to roll her eyes and act like it was all some big joke. When the truth was, she was genuinely interested in him. By him.

“Could you think of any more elaborate ways to dodge the question?”

He finished his burger and wiped his hands on one of the napkins. “I like working with my family. Contrary to what you’ve been brainwashed into believing?—,”

“Brainwashed?” she said, brows arched.

He continued, but with a dip of his head to acknowledge her interjection. “They’re some of the best people I’ve ever known, and we’re a good team. You might think it would be hard, to have so many decision makers in the room, but there’s something about having grown up together, and the fact we’re working towards a common goal, that just makes it work.”

“I can understand that. It’s the same with us. I mean, sometimes my brothers drive me absolutely crazy, but at the same time, we spark off each other organically. I know what they’re thinking and I know that they’re the two people on earth who would literally drop everything and come help me out, if I needed it.”

His eyes narrowed, though, in a way that made her suspect he was far less comfortable hearing about her family than she was his.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“So why the venture capital firm then?”

“Why not?”

She rolled her eyes and he laughed in a way that made her warm all over.

“I had a sizeable trust fund I inherited when I turned twenty one, and an insane network of friends with money.”

“So you take from the rich and give to the poor?”

He grinned. “That’s me, a modern-day Robin Hood.”

“Except I’m guessing the companies you invest in aren’t actually poor.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes they’re startups.”

“Like what?”

“Some guy in a basement who has a world-changing idea.”

“You can get people to put money into that?”

“Ideas are the best thing to trade in. They’re easy to sell.” He reached for a fry from her plate so she batted his hand away jokingly. “And it doesn’t cost much to take an idea to a prototype, or into the market. At least, not initially.”

“Would I have heard of anything you’ve invested in?”

He shrugged. “Probably.”

“Are you being modest, Salvatore?”

“Me? Never.” His smile was the last word in sexy. She tried to swallow but her mouth felt all weird and non-cooperative.

“So? What kinds of things?”

He sipped his drink, then named a price comparison app for luxurious holidays.

“That was you?”

“Well, it wasn’t my idea, but the funding for it came from me, yes.”

She gaped. “That business must be worth a fortune.”

He nodded. “Seven other firms had passed on the idea before Shelton—that’s the founder—came to me.”

“Why did you invest, and they didn’t?”

“I liked the guy.”

“Seriously? That’s all it takes?”

“I liked his idea, I liked his work ethic, I liked the fact he believed in what he was pitching. And at the end of the day, his ask wasn’t huge. Low risk, potential high reward.”

“And in the end, you were right.”

“I’ve been wrong, sometimes, too.”

“Why do I suspect that’s not true?”

He laughed. “I have no idea.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to admit that.”

“My ego’s robust enough to face the truth.”

She glanced down at her burger, simply because she desperately, urgently needed a moment. Her initial impulse had been that they shouldn’t get to know one another. It had been a self-protective mechanism. But she’d never imagined that getting to know him would feel like this. She’d never imagined that he’d talk and she’d laugh, that he’d say something and she’d volley something back. He zigged, she zagged, and that was perilous.

He was a Santoro. The enemy. The devil.

“Your turn.”

She pressed a fingertip to the edge of the table, and forced herself to glance up. Their eyes met and her insides zipped. She should leave...

“For what?”

“You work with your brothers. You were in Moricosia, so I presume business development falls in your remit, too?”

“Actually, no,” she said with a shake of her head. “Not generally.”

“Oh?”

“Both of my brothers were a little preoccupied,” she said, smiling softly. “Recently married, or engaged, babies, pregnancies, you know. Life.”

“So it fell to you to go and win the tender.”

“We worked together on the proposal, but yes. It was easier for me to travel.”

“And you clearly impressed the King.”

“The proposal impressed him,” she amended.

“Then when you aren’t doing your brothers’ bidding, what do you do?”

She reached across and flicked his hand for the subtle dig at her brothers. “It’s not like that.”

His grin showed that he’d intended it as a joke, to get a reaction from her.

“I actually run our charity.”

He was quiet, giving her the space and time to continue, but she was strangely self-conscious suddenly.

“Go on,” he prompted, after a few moments of silence.

She pulled her lips to the side, thinking. “It’s pretty self-explanatory. We have a set amount to donate each year—though I do supplement it, from time to time. And like

you, I have friends I can bring along to fundraisers with me, or who are willing to make donations for the right cause. I guess you could say I do what you do, but instead of investing in businesses, I give the money away to worthy causes.”

“Which is why you’re always at those events.”

“I could say the same for you.”

His eyes roamed her face and something twisted in her belly. “Actually, I don’t usually attend those things.”

“What a coincidence then to have seen you at two fundraisers in such a short space of time.”

“Oh, yes, definitely a coincidence,” he said, winking a little so something soared in her chest at the implication—and she was sure she wasn’t imagining it—that he’d started showing up at charity fundraisers specifically hoping to see her. She didn’t want to feel warmth blossoming through her body. She didn’t want to feel lightness and joy at the idea of him wanting to see her badly enough that he’d go to parties on the off chance she might be there, too. But she felt it regardless. The best she could do was tell herself it didn’t mean anything, because there was no way she was going to let this thing—whatever it was—get out of hand.

To underscore that, and to prove to them both that this was not about conversation, emotion, or anything other than the physical, she stood up, eyes hooked to his, as she reached for the bottom of her shirt.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Well, Salvatore, that’s enough talking for one night, don’t you agree?”

His jaw shifted, and he stared back at her silently for a moment, so in the back of her mind she wondered if he was going to disagree, to ask her another question, or reveal something else about himself. But then, he was reaching for her, pulling her into his lap, and kissing her until all those silly concerns about finding him interesting as a man, not just someone she was sleeping with, fell right out of her head. This was just sex; everything was fine.

8

HE WASN’T SURPRISED WHEN, twenty minutes later, Emilia stepped out of bed and began to gather up her clothes, preparing to leave. If anything, he was relieved. There had been a part of him that wondered if she’d actually be able to stick to the rules they’d established. Not because she was a woman and he had some patriarchal idea about women always wanting more from men, or whatever. This was specifically about them.

Salvatore and Emilia.

Where Salvatore had spent his entire adult life having short-term, casual affairs that could easily be walked away from, Emilia was clearly less experienced in every way. And that lack of experience had the potential to cause...issues. If they let it.

So he’d been prepared to be the one to enforce the rules. To leave first. To shut down conversations. To remind her of what they were.

Instead, he'd been drawn out by her persistent questions, had asked his own in return, so if Emilia hadn't stood up and removed her shirt, practically begging him to make love to her again, he wondered if he might have been happy to sit at the dining table of this suite, just simply talking.

It was something he hadn't done a lot of in his relationships. Harmless flirtation, sure. A bit of back and forth, either side of sex, but nothing meaningful. Nothing deep or real, nothing about his life, his family, his work. Then again, he'd never had such clearly delineated relationship expectations before. They were incredibly freeing. Knowing that no matter what, they'd each set their end point, their objective, what they were willing to give in order to be able to take without concern.

"Here," she placed the keycard on the foot of the bed, now fully dressed and looking, once again, immaculate. So immaculate and untouched that he ached, as he had last night, to draw her back to bed and make her scream for him again.

"Keep it," he pushed to standing, reaching for his boxer shorts and dragging them on. He didn't miss the way her eyes fell to his chest and rested there.

"As a souvenir? I'm good."

He laughed at that. He loved how quickly she had a retort lined up. How much pleasure she seemed to take from sparing with him.

"As a key," he corrected. "I booked the room for the month."

Her eyes widened when they met his. "You did?"

"I thought it made sense."

"I—guess it does." She frowned. "So we can come here...whenever..."

“Yes, cara. We can come here whenever.” He prowled towards her, pressing a finger beneath her chin so her eyes met his. “Shall we say, soon?”

Her smile was slow, but addictive. “I like the sound of soon.”

“Me too.” It was flexible, but promised they wouldn’t be waiting long for more of this. And he really liked this.

His gut was telling him to kiss her. To drop his head and mesh their lips as he pulled her into his arms and held her against his body, but he didn’t. Because it felt too personal? Or because it would lead to something else?

“Well, Emilia Valentino, I can’t say I’m sorry I met you.”

She grinned. “Me neither.” And she turned and walked away from him, her hips swinging in a way he just knew wasn’t intentional, but nonetheless turned his pulse into a raging torrent of need and lust. At the door, she spun and blew a kiss in his direction, but Salvatore didn’t see: he was already making for the bathroom and an ice-cold shower.

They’d promised to see one another ‘soon’ but it was pretty clear by the middle of the next day that ‘soon’ would have to wait. The situation in Moricosia was devolving before Emilia’s eyes; there was nothing for it but to fly over and sort it out herself.

This was the first project of quite this magnitude that she’d spearheaded of her own. And even though she knew her brothers valued her and her contributions, there was a part of Emilia that knew how important it was to her to prove—not just to her family, but to the entire world—that she was every bit as capable of achieving this as they were.

Unfortunately, sexism was alive and well in the corporate world. It didn’t matter that

Emilia was every bit a Valentino, as much as her brothers, or that she had the same skillset, and was every bit as smart and determined. She'd come up against the assumption, time and time again, that it was Leandro and Max who made the decisions in their family. That she wasn't empowered to have a final say in negotiations.

It was the main reason Emilia had taken over their family's charitable initiatives. Her brothers weren't overly interested, meaning she wasn't in competition with them. She didn't have to prove that she was as good, if not better, than them. But just as Salvatore had leveraged his network of well-heeled contacts, she'd done the same thing, convincing her altruistic friends to streamline their philanthropy by making a single donation to her foundation. From there, Emilia oversaw the dispersal of funds. But giving money wasn't enough for Emilia. She had grand plans to join the two branches of her family together, taking their foundation and working hand in hand with their business projects to practically improve the world. Though she hadn't spoken to her brothers about it yet, there was an urban construction project they were working on, on the outskirts of London, and Emilia had already earmarked a section that would be perfect for low-income housing. She could use the charity to fund tenants into the properties, and partner with local initiatives to create employment or employment training opportunities nearby, thus creating a closed-loop system of support.

When Emilia thought of the good she could do, the sky really was the limit. But for now, her focus had to be on Moricosia, and in the short-term, that meant trying to contain the damage before the parliament lost all faith in them to be able to deliver what they'd promised.

It was hard.

Trying to keep the government onside and convince them the project would still be delivered as planned and on schedule, when she had no idea how she was going to

make that happen, meant using every negotiating tactic at her disposal, but after five days in the capital having high level meetings, she left Moricosia with a feeling of hope. So long as she kept a close eye on the development, she could do this. And she would. There was no way she'd lose this job having worked so hard to win the tender.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

When her textmessage came through, Salvatore was surprised by the strength of his reaction. If not a little alarmed by it. Because it had been almost a week since he'd seen Emilia and to say he was craving her would be an understatement. She'd been on a work trip. That was all he knew. He'd texted to try to see her again, two nights after they'd parted ways, and she'd texted back that she'd had to leave the country. Impatience had burned through him ever since.

So the fact she texted him a photo of her lying on her side, smiling at the camera, with the hotel suite he'd booked clearly visible in the background, stirred his pulse enough to have Salvatore standing and stalking towards the door of his office and offering a hasty explanation to his assistant before calling the elevator and getting the hell out of there.

It was a short cab ride to The Plaza, yet it felt like an interminable wait as the elevator ascended to their room. An even longer wait as he strode down the corridor, then swiped his key in the door. She was standing when he entered, her back to the door, but she turned at the sound of his arrival, a smile spreading over those full, luscious lips. "That was fast."

"Not fast enough," he growled, stalking through the carpeted room until she was within reach, and pulling her towards him. "Not fast enough," he said, again, staring down at her before he kissed her, as he'd been longing to do for almost a week.

She tasted so sweet, like raspberries and chocolate, or maybe it was just her? He held her tight against his body but it still wasn't enough. The feeling of her softness crushed to him, the fact there were so many clothes between them. Salvatore had always considered himself to be a patient man but he had an overwhelming sense that

being with her now was basically a life or death consideration. Like he might stop breathing altogether if he couldn't strip her naked and take her here.

"I want you," he said, as his hands pushed at her clothes, and she groaned, arching her back, nodding. The sun outside was bright, slanting through the tinted windows, and as he dispensed with her clothes with superman strength, her skin almost seemed to glow like gold.

His own clothes followed even faster, even as he kissed her, his mouth unwilling to part with hers, until they were naked and he could touch her all over, his hands roaming without hesitation, reacquainting themselves with a body he somehow knew better almost than he did his own.

He had become an expert in Emilia, an expert in her pleasure, her taste, her sweet smell, her everything, and it didn't occur to him to worry about that, nor to care, because it was only a temporary form of insanity, a short-term giving away of himself, to a woman he should have known better than to get tied up with.

The table behind her somehow edged closer, or maybe that was him, pushing her backwards, until her butt connected with it, and he was standing between her legs, kissing her, touching her, so close to her sex, that all he had to do was lift her a little, and wrap her legs around him. And he did, driving into her in the same movement, so they both cried out at the sheer euphoric fulfillment of their shared needs, at the ecstasy delivered in that moment, and the promise of what was to come, as he held her hard to his body and drove into her again and again, until they were exploding together, voices mingled, breaths hewn from their bodies, brows covered in perspiration.

"Well, fuck," he groaned, when he could trust himself to speak again, looking at Emilia as if through a smattering of stars. "You are exquisite."

Her smile was slow to spread and possibly the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "I'm really not. Right now I'm jet lagged and covered in airplane."

He eased her back to the ground, hating the feeling of leaving her body, wanting to stay buried inside of her for so much longer. "You just got back?"

She nodded.

"Where from?"

She hesitated and for the briefest moment, something like suspicion curdled in his gut. An unwelcome emotion that seemed strangely adjacent to jealousy. He kept his expression neutral, wondering at the cogs that were turning in her brain, because she seemed unwilling to answer his simple question.

And then, after a beat too long, she said, "Moricosia."

Ah. That explained it. "I know you got the job," he pointed out. "You can talk about it in front of me."

Heat flushed her cheeks pink, so he couldn't resist lifting his hand and cupping one.

"Thanks, but I don't feel like talking about it with anyone, let alone you."

He grinned at that. "Your choice." His eyes roamed her face and he realised, belatedly, that she did look tired. Exhausted, in fact. "Stay here."

He walked through the apartment to the palatial en-suite, and placed the plug in the bath then began running the water, checking the temperature before adding a generous amount of body wash so bubbles instantly began to form on the water's surface.

“What are you doing?” He glanced back towards the door to find her standing there, still gloriously naked, so his veins thrummed with all the things he wanted to do with her.

“You didn’t stay.”

“I’m not a puppy.”

His lips quirked. He liked how quick she was. He liked how sassy she was. In some ways, it felt like he’d known her longer than this. It felt like he’d known her all his life. They were so comfortable together, even when they were sparking off each other. He never felt as though she were trying to impress him, as though she was preening for his attention. Maybe that was a virtue of their agreement, too? The fact that neither of them was looking at ways to convert this to a real relationship, or hoping for it to turn into something longer term or more serious, meant they could just be completely real together.

It was probably something he needed to consider rolling out into any future relationship. Limits. Rules. The promise of no mess.

“Hop in,” he nodded towards the bath. “Are you hungry?”

She looked beyond him to the tub, as she jabbed her big toe against the grout of a tile, like she was lost in thought. “I’m—my stomach is still on Moricosian time, so yes. Starving.”

“I’ll get food brought up.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again, nodding. Then, slowly, as she walked towards him, “This is actually really sweet.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“You sound like you don’t think I’m capable of sweet.”

Her eyes laughed even when her face was deadpan. “Well, you are a Santoro...”

He pulled her against him then and kissed her hard. “What do you feel like?”

She expelled a soft breath. “Surprise me.”

“I intend to.” And he kissed her one more time, for good measure, before leaving the steam-filled bathroom with a very sexy Emilia Valentino in the centre of it.

Emilia hadn’t known how good a bath could feel until she sunk into the one Salvatore had drawn for her, staring at the tiled walls, letting her mind go as blank as possible. The water was the perfect temperature and she left it running until it covered her whole body. The bubbles smelled like rose-water and he’d slipped a phone into the room a few minutes after she’d hopped into the tub, with soft jazz music playing.

It was the most relaxed she’d felt in days. Weeks?

But maybe that had something to do with the way they’d come together out there. Frantically. Desperately. As though they were each completely starving for one another. She’d spent the last few days—scratch that, the whole time she was in Moricosia—feeling as though a spring inside of her was being wound tighter and tighter. It was the stress of the job, but also, it was wanting this. Him. To be right here, in this suite he’d rented, making love to a man who, despite being someone she was supposed to hate, was someone she really, really loved sleeping with.

It was a duality she couldn't quite face. The certainty that if anyone in her family ever found out she was doing this, she'd cause some kind of permanent damage. And right now, they'd been through enough drama to have earned a break. Learning that Leandro was adopted had put a fissure between them for the first time in Emilia's life, as Leandro pulled away from the family, disappearing to lick his wounds, and hurting their parents like hell in the process. Though he'd come around, and accepted that whether he was adopted or not it made no difference to how much they all loved him, her parents had aged years in the past twelve months.

Emilia getting tangled up with a Santoro would be so much worse.

And just like that, the lovely, buzzy sense of relaxation evaporated as a tightness formed in her belly, like sawdust had been funnelled down her throat and filled her right up. She sat up a little, at the same moment Salvatore knocked at the door.

"Room for one more?"

Despite the sawdust situation, she found herself smiling at the thought of that. "It is a mighty big bath. But what about lunch?"

"It's four o'clock in the afternoon," he pointed out.

"What's the afternoon equivalent of brunch?"

"Drunch? Linner?"

"Either or," she nodded approvingly.

"Drunch is served," he said with a flourish, as he turned away then returned a second later, wheeling a room service trolley through the en-suite doors. He pushed it right to the edge of the bath, where she could easily reach whatever was inside, and began to

remove the stainless steel lids.

He'd clearly noticed her predilection for hot chips, because he'd made sure to include a generous bowl, but there was also sushi, some delicate sandwiches, and a bottle of champagne.

“Are we celebrating?”

“You tell me. How was your trip?”

Her eyes lifted to his and for the second time that afternoon, she forced herself not to say the first thing that came to her mind. Not to tell him the truth. Because this was a Santoro and the whole situation with the Moricosian tender had the potential to be a bone of contention between them. It was probably a subject they had to consider ‘off limits’. And yet, she didn't feel the same about him as she had when they were in Moricosia. Or afterwards, at the charity events.

She massaged her lip with her teeth, wondering when and how that had happened? Was it just familiarity? Wasn't that supposed to breed contempt, rather than compatibility?

“Hello, earth to Emilia? It's not a hard question to answer.” The water shifted as he moved into the bath, discarding the towel he'd had slung low on his hips, so he was right at her eye height. She tore her gaze upwards.

“No, I know.” She reached for a chip, distractedly. “It was...” she searched for the right word. “Stressful.”

More water shifted as he sat at the foot of the large bath. She moved her feet slightly to give him more room, but to her surprise, he reached for them, dragging them back to his lap, so he could work his fingers over the balls of her feet. It felt so good, she

couldn't hold back a small groan.

“Why stressful?”

She reached for another chip. “Are you asking me as a Santoro, or as the man I'm sleeping with?”

He flexed his brows. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, but we're one and the same.”

“You know what I mean,” she said, flicking a little water at his chest. “One of you is out to destroy me and everyone I hold dear. The other one is apparently intent on giving me a thousand orgasms in the space of a month.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Now that’s a goal I could get on board with.”

She laughed softly. “Seriously, though...”

“Right now? What do you think?” He gestured towards her feet, and she understood. He was her lover. The whole family feud thing was outside of this bubble they’d created.

“Then what I’m about to tell you stays between us. You have to promise not to use this against me.”

His brows narrowed. “Don’t tell me anything you’re not comfortable sharing.”

“Is that your way of saying I can’t trust you?”

Now it was Salvatore’s turn to consider that. “You can trust me.” His voice gruff, raw. Like he was betraying a part of himself to admit that.

How strange, though, that his answer didn’t come as a surprise to her. Even without his reassurance, she felt that she could trust him. And him, a Santoro! “It’s falling apart.” And suddenly, with that one admission, she felt the floodgates open, as she poured the entire debacle out to him, from the very beginning of the problems to the latest batch. “It’s like it’s cursed,” she said, finally. “I can’t get to my desk without there being a stack of messages for me about one problem or another, and it’s all so random. I’ve never had so many things go wrong on anything.”

The whole time she spoke, he sat there, face impassive but eyes intelligent and

assessing, as though he was listening with every single part of himself. “None of that sounds insurmountable,” he said, finally.

“Easy for you to say.” She sighed heavily. “We’re hamstrung by having to hire at least eighty percent of the staff for the project from within Moricosia. It’s not a huge country, there aren’t that many companies with the skills and staff numbers to do what we need within the time frame.”

“Then talk to Ares. Explain.”

“I’ve been in meetings with his government all week.”

“Not his government. Him.”

She shook her head. “He’s taking a hands-off approach.”

Salvatore’s jaw tightened.

“I guess because of you guys,” she said, a little awkwardly, reminding him of something he no doubt had front and centre of his mind: that King Ares of Moricosia was a long-term familyfriend of the Santoros, and was in fact now married to Sofia—a Santoro in all but name.

“He’s a reasonable man. If you can get a meeting with him, explain your hold up, he’ll get approval for you to hire externally. The main thing is finishing on time and on budget.”

“I just wanted it to be perfect.”

“Nothing is ever perfect.”

She sighed again.

“I presume you’ve spoken to your family about this.”

She nodded once. “To Leandro.”

“What does he advise?”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t need him to clean up my mess.”

“It is not your mess,” Salvatore reminded her. “And you work in a family business. The whole point of that is to lean on each other. At least, that’s how it is for us.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not a competition. We all love each other too.”

He flicked her a quick glance. “Drink?”

She eyed the bottle of expensive French champagne, and nodded slowly. “Sure. I mean, I really should get back to work...”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You can work here.”

That was true. She’d come straight from the airport and so had her laptop with her, and suddenly, the temptation to stay in their little bubble was strong.

“Yeah, I guess so. Okay, thanks.”

He let her feet go and she retracted them to give him more space, so he could lean forward and remove the bottle, opening it with a pop before pouring her a flute and handing it over, then doing the same for himself.

“Why are you helping me?”

“What do you mean?”

“With the Moricosia thing.”

“Did I help you?”

She felt heat bloom in her face.

“I mean, your suggestion to insist on a meeting with King Ares himself isn’t totally awful...”

He grinned. “I’m flattered.”

“And I’m serious. Why would you give me advice?”

“Because you’re stuck.”

She pulled her lips to the side. “But surely in this, we’re enemies? I mean, don’t tell me a part of you wouldn’t love me to fail.”

“I don’t want you to fail,” he contradicted, but so quickly she knew it was sincere. “Though I can’t say the same for anyone else in my family.”

There it was again. The sawdust. The reminder that what they were doing would make everyone in their respective families furious. The certainty that this had to remain absolutely and utterly their secret. That for all he might not hate her, his family did, and they were the most important people in his life. As her family was to Emilia.

“You don’t think...”

He sipped his drink, eyes locked to hers. “What?”

“That they could have anything to do with this?” She forced herself to finish the sentence, even when it was unpalatable.

“No, cara. They might dance on your grave if you fail, but they wouldn’t dig it.”

She nodded, feeling no sense of relief. Feeling nothing but confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

She smiled at that. “Am I that easy to read?”

“I’ve learned to read you.”

A shiver ran down her spine, because she didn’t doubt that to be true. She felt the same way about him.

“I don’t like what we’re doing.”

“Oh?” He placed his glass down and reached for her feet. “I haven’t heard you complaining.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mean that. That...I like very much.”

His grin showed that had never been in doubt.

“I mean to our families.”

“Are our families involved in this?”

“Peripherally, yes.”

“No, not even peripherally.”

“So you really think we can separate this from them?”

“Yes, thank Christ. I don’t make a habit of consulting my family when it comes to the women I sleep with.”

That left a strange taste in her mouth. “And you make a habit of sleeping with a lot of women.”

“We’ve already dealt with that.”

“It’s not something we have to deal with,” she said with a lift of her shoulders. “It doesn’t matter.”

“So why bring it up?”

“Forget I did.”

Silence stretched between them. “It bothers you.”

She finished her champagne, letting the liquid fizz and pop in her mouth before swallowing. “Why would it bother me?”

“It’s normal to be jealous when you’re in a relationship.”

“But we’re not in a relationship.”

“Two people regularly having sex is a relationship, even when there’s no expectation of it becoming more.”

She’d gone from feeling sublimely relaxed to something else—a tightening in her chest and tummy that she didn’t like at all. “We’re talking about women you’ve slept with in the past. You’re not still sleeping with anyone else, right?”

He shook his head once.

“So why would I be jealous?”

“I don’t know, but you sound it.”

“Well, I’m not.” Except, they both knew she was lying, and she hated that. She hated that the thought of his past, littered with beautiful, sophisticated, stunning women, a procession of women who’d graced his bed before her, marveled at his beauty and skills, hated imagining him being driven as wild by anyone else as he was by her. Hated the thought of him wanting in a way that lessened what they were doing.

“It’s just...I don’t have the same experience as you. For me, this is new.”

“How so?”

“I’ve never been with someone that’s made me feel...” she clamped her lips together, aware of what she was confessing, and that it was somehow contrary to the rules they’d agreed to. And yet, she’d come this far. Besides, it was the truth. So she barrelled on, uncaring of the consequences of her admission. “I’ve never been with someone who’s made me feel as though my whole body has been flooded with light. When you touch me, I feel like I’m glowing from the inside out, and when I’m not with you, I crave you in a way that is, honestly, kind of frightening. I’ve never felt this before, but I know for you, this is just what you do. It’s just who you are. I

don't...love that, if I'm honest."

9

THE SECOND SHE SAID it, he felt the danger wrapping around him, like a boa constrictor, making it hard to breathe. Because she was wrong about him, and in realising that, he realised the very real danger of what they were doing here.

He'd been so confident, even an hour earlier, that their agreed upon rules made this easy to contain. That they could sleep together for four weeks and then walk away, no harm, no foul. But the problem was, what Emilia had just described was exactly how Salvatore felt. And despite what she might think, that wasn't normal for him. He couldn't remember ever having craved a woman to the point of desperation. He couldn't remembereverhaving been with a woman in the staircase of a six star hotel simply because he couldn't bear the thought of letting her go without knowing her again.

But he just sat there, silent, because in admitting how she felt to him, how different this was to what she'd expected, she'd already pushed them out onto a ledge. If he admitted the same thing to her, it would be like dragging them over, into free-fall, with no parachute and no promise. Their rules would only protect them so far.

And so he took the coward's way out, and half-way hated himself for it when he saw the self-conscious expression that crossed her face.

"Why is it that you have been with so few men?"

She glanced down at the bubbles, shielding her eyes from him, in an attempt to hide how she felt. But he saw it anyway, and he hated having been the cause.

"I guess I've been holding out for something special."

He felt as though a hole had just formed in his chest, expansive and dark, protective and jealous, because that could never be him. “What does that look like?” He reached for the champagne bottle and topped up their glasses, simply because he felt like he needed to act as if everything was normal and fine, even when it wasn’t.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Like my parents’ marriage,” she said, and the hole seemed to twist. His own parents’ marriage was pretty special, too. He knew what it looked like to have met your perfect other half, even though he’d never sought that for himself. “Even as a little girl, I just always knew I wanted that for myself.” She sighed softly. “And then, when I was eighteen, I met Jesse, and I thought I loved him. I thought I’d spend the rest of my life with him.” As if to forestall whatever comment he might be going to make, she added, “I was eighteen, remember, and allowed to be unrealistic.”

He ignored the temptation to reassure her that it wasn’t necessarily unrealistic to meet the love of your life at eighteen. It just wasn’t for him.

“What happened?”

He generally loved the way she blushed. It was so sweet and innocent. But seeing her blush now, knowing it was a sense of shame because of something that happened in her relationship with this guy she’d thought she loved had the opposite effect. His gut seemed to be tightening and something fired inside his chest.

“He was just using me.”

“Using you?”

“For money. Connections. Exposure. At first I thought it was that he was ambitious and wanted us to open doors for him, but now I think he was kind of lazy and just saw my trust fund as an easy way to have a good life. It wasn’t ever about me, though.”

“How do you know?”

Her blush darkened.

“Emilia?” He hadn’t meant for his voice to come out so sharp, to hold such a warning, but she flinched a little, so he cursed softly and reached for her foot, squeezing it in lieu of an apology.

“I heard him talking to his best friend about me.” Her voice was almost unrecognisable, it was so bitter. “About how boring I was, and how even given the amount of money I had access to, it was hard work spending time with me, let alone making love to me.” Her voice wobbled a little, as though she were about to cry.

“You must have been devastated.”

“Furious,” she corrected. “And then, once I’d had time to process it all, yes, devastated. I’d grown up with money all my life. I know it sounds stupid but I never really thought about how appealing that would be to someone who didn’t have any. But to hear your boyfriend—the first guy I ever slept with—talk like that...it broke something inside me. Not my heart...but my confidence, I guess. Or maybe it was that he broke everything I’d ever believed in. Love, marriage, happily ever after. Suddenly it all seemed so stupid to put your hopes of happiness, and all your trust, in someone else. How can you ever really know a person, anyway? I mean, I thought I knew Jesse. We were going out for months before we had sex. And not once did I ever think he was faking it.”

Salvatore swore. “He sounds like an idiot.”

She laughed, but it was a hollow sound, as if this jerk of a guy still had the power to hurt her. Damn it if that didn’t make Salvatore want to find him and teach him a lesson he wouldn’t forget.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“And then after Jesse?”

“I was single for a long time,” she admitted. “I threw myself into my friendships, my family, the charity. I cultivated an image as a carefree socialite, when the truth is, I care a lot. About everything. Especially protecting myself.”

Her vulnerability was so real and raw that he ached to pull her towards him and hold her until she was all fixed up, but he wasn’t the man to do that. Salvatore was a temporary fixture, not a fixer. He was the man who seduced and pleased, took pleasure and gave it without hesitation, without reserve, and then walked away. Nothing mattered to him. At least, not when it came to the women he dated. So he stayed where he was, allowing the foot rub he was giving her to be the only outward sign of the compassion that was running thick and fast through his veins.

“So what happened in Moricosia?”

Her eyes widened as she looked at him, and that tightness in his gut intensified. “What do you mean?”

“By your own admission, this isn’t something you just do. So why sleep with me?”

She sipped her drink, her throat shifting delicately as she swallowed. “I thought about that, afterwards, and I think there are two reasons I found it easy to sleep with you.”

“Go on.”

“Well, firstly, there’s a spark. Isn’t there?”

That question at the end hurt him almost physically. Her insecurity and uncertainty,

the sense that maybe she was wrong about Salvatore, as she'd been about Jesse.

"Yes, there's a spark," he agreed, having no issues reassuring her on that score.

Relief was palpable on her features. "But there's no hope here."

He waited for her to continue with the appearance of patience.

"I mean, I was never going to have sex with you and decide that maybe you were going to be The One, you know? You could never be The One."

He nodded slowly.

“Your family, my family, it makes it impossible. So there’s no way I can be hurt by anything that happens between us, because no matter how good things are,” and now it was Emilia who reached for him, lacing their fingers together and squeezing them, to physically underscore her words. “We both know it can never, ever be more than this.”

Her smile was slow, and somehow kind of sad, even when her expression didn’t mirror that. He resented how well he could interpret her features, how easily he could read her and spot when she was masking the complexity of her feelings.

“Then it’s a good thing ‘this’ is enough.”

“More than enough,” she agreed, and now her smile was more relaxed. He ignored the gaping hole in his chest, the tightening in his gut, and focused instead on the fact he was spending the afternoon with a woman he couldn’t get enough of. She was right, anyway. They both knew there was no future for them, but they could make the most of the here and now. With that very much in the forefront of his mind, Salvatore placed his champagne flute on the trolley first, and then hers, before leaning forward so he could kiss Emilia, his naked body pressed to hers, so the sensations running through him were almost overwhelming.

And utterly, incomprehensibly perfect.

One week later

Global Hunger Eradication Initiative Gala, New York.

Emilia's eyesscanned the room even before she realised she was doing it. Despite the fact she and Salvatore had spent the past week making the most of the privacy their suite afforded, and seeing him was no longer a luxury, there was something about seeing him here, in this environment, that made her insides tremble with anticipation.

At least her brothers weren't here. For this event, Emilia was the sole Valentino in attendance, which took the pressure off her, to some extent. There was no need to spend the entire time disguising the way she was looking for Salvatore. Nor to be afraid one of her sisters in law would notice the way she couldn't stop looking at him.

The event was being hosted in the foyer of what had once been an enormous, private home—long ago converted to a library by the owners, for the benefit of the city. Emilia had been here before, for a different event, and had been just as awed then by the stunning architecture as she was now. Enormous marble pillars created a classical effect that was only enhanced by the soft mood lighting and dramatic floral arrangements. At the top of the central, sweeping staircase, a string quartet had been set up, and the gentle strains of their music added an elegance to the hum of the room. Finely dressed guests milled—a mix of wealthy philanthropists, politicians and celebrities, talking and laughing.

Emilia was in one such group, nodding and half-listening to the conversation, all the while allowing her gaze to flit across the crowd every few minutes, waiting, anticipating, knowing he was somewhere and almost giddy with the excitement of seeing him again.

Which was ridiculous.

They were seeing each other often enough that it shouldn't have been a source of such excitement to contemplate this, and yet... she sucked in a sharp breath of air as

finally her eyes landed on him. Well, on the back of his head, at least. Strange how easily she picked him out of the crowd, despite it only being a glimpse of him, but she instantly recognised the set of his broad shoulders, the bearing, so much so she could practically see his face even when it was angled away.

She tried not to stare, but she couldn't help it. Excitement fizzed in her belly as she imagined how she could extricate herself from this conversation and get closer to him. Closer than this, at least. Out of the corner of her eye, a flash of red caught her attention, and she shifted her attention to a striking woman with light blonde hair and a stunning figure, as she cut through the crowd.

Emilia couldn't say how she knew Salvatore was her destination. But if Emilia's eyes were locked on Salvatore, then the same could be said for this woman, who seemed to have the precision of a homing pigeon. As Emilia watched, the woman tapped Salvatore on the shoulder, so he glanced at her first, and Emilia caught enough of his expression to see that he was, at first, reserved. Then, however, he turned more fully, and his entire demeanor changed, his expression breaking out into a look of pure, unadulterated pleasure, as he wrapped his arms around the woman and pulled her tight to his body, holding her there as though seeing her was the highlight of his night.

Holding her there as though he couldn't let go.

Emilia stared, the air leaving her lungs in a rush, so her eyes filled with stars and she felt lightheaded. She dug her fingernails into the palm of one hand, knowing she needed to look away, but not quite able to.

Salvatore lifted his head, still smiling, and the woman's hands gripped his upper arms, her bright red nails, matching the dress, digging into the material of his tuxedo jacket. Emilia's stomach twisted into knots, and her throat felt all thick and dry.

The woman said something, and Salvatore nodded. Something else, another nod, and then they were turning, Salvatore's hand in the small of her back, just above the swell of her bottom, as they moved away from his group, and disappeared completely from view.

The anticipation Emilia had been feeling – so pleasant a moment ago – was now like ice in her veins. She no longer saw the dramatic beauty of the foyer, nor heard the perfection of the music. All she could hear, and feel, was the throbbing of her heart, as it fast-pumped blood through her body, so it washed through her ears with a frantic, nauseating regularity.

“Are you aware of the innovations, Emilia?”

She'd completely missed the conversation, and made an effort to focus, even when her brain was still trying to process what she'd just witnessed.

She'd never seen the other woman before, so she wasn't a regular at these things. But that didn't mean anything. She was clearly familiar to Salvatore, and it didn't take the mental acuity of a brain surgeon to put two and two together and get 'ex girlfriend'.

Why should that surprise her? She knew about Salvatore's past. She'd known that going into this. It was probably inevitable that she should come face to face with some figment of his life before Emilia. How foolish of her not to have contemplated that. Nor to have thought about what the future looked like, beyond this relationship. This would be over, soon enough, and then they'd have to go back to pretending each other didn't exist, ignoring one another at these events. Seeing one another talk to other people. Go home with them.

Her heart rate kicked up a notch.

“Emilia? Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, pressing her fingertips to her temple. “I just need a moment.”

“Do you need company?” One of the women in the group asked. Emilia couldn’t remember her name, but the woman’s concern was obvious.

Emilia shook her head. Company was the last thing she wanted. “I’m fine. Thank you. Excuse me,” she added, as she took a few steps away and then turned, looking around for the quickest route to reprieve—she needed time. Just a little time, to process this.

Even when ‘this’ was nothing.

Nothing unexpected, anyway.

More fool her for thinking that what they were doing was somehow different to anything he’d done before. Salvatore Santoro was, and always would be, an out and out bachelor. Someone who lived and breathed to seduce, pleasure and enjoy. There was nothing about what they were doing that was unique or special. Nothing about her that was either of those things.

In some ways, this situation was no different to Jesse. Yet again, she’d let herself want something she couldn’t have. Even when she’d been telling herself, all along, that there were boundaries and rules in place around what they were doing, it hadn’t stopped her from starting to enjoy—more than she should have—the time they spent together. Maybe even to hope for more.

How stupid.

How dangerous.

Even when she’d told herself she’d never be reckless with her feelings again, she had been. She’d let Salvatore dig into her, and seeing him with the other woman had underscored for her what a liability that was. Because this man would always play the field. He’d never commit, he’d never really care for a woman. It just wasn’t his way.

Frustration zipped through her, right alongside confusion. Instead of making her way to the ladies’ room, she kept her head down and weaved through the guests, towards

the door, needing fresh air, and some time to think.

It felt different coming back to her apartment, having spent so much time at their shared hotel room in recent times. She went from room to room, flicking on the lights, looking at the luxurious space with a sense of disconnect.

This was her home. Here, she was surrounded with her trinkets and things, the physical manifestations of her life. Photographs of her friends, her family, artwork that was both beautiful and meaningful. This was her safe space, and yet tonight, it just felt void. Empty.

As though something was missing.

She groaned as she made her way to the kitchen, flicking on the coffee machine and making a short black. Her eyes stayed trained on the view beyond – a sparkling Manhattan – and she tried not to pick out the general direction of the party she'd just left.

Run away from.

Because the sight of Salvatore with that beautiful other woman had turned her into some kind of wildling, driven by sheer impulse. And those impulses weren't good.

Jealousy had flooded her veins to the point she'd wanted to scratch the other woman's eyes out. What the hell was happening to her? A week ago, she'd reckoned with this, when they shared a bath. He'd accused her of jealousy and she'd acted like it was impossible. But he'd been right. She was jealous. Not just of the women he'd been with in the past, but of the certainty that he would move on from her quickly and easily. That before she'd had time to adjust to life post-Salvatore, he'd already have someone else in his life, and bed.

But why did that flood her with vile envy?

Salvatore was her enemy. Or, if not her enemy, someone she'd been sworn to hate, her whole life. He was the last person on earth she should be jealous of. Using him for sex was one thing—letting him use her another. But actually caring that he was flirting with other women? Possibly even sleeping with them?

How could she let herself be that stupid?

She threw back her coffee then paced into the living room, sitting on the sofa for a moment before becoming restless, and reaching for a book. She flicked through the first chapter then let out a long breath, before tossing it onto the sofa cushions. She was about to turn on the television and surf Netflix until a show grabbed her attention when her phone buzzed from the coffee table to her right.

She reached for it on autopilot, and was aware of the second her heart shunted to her throat. Salvatore's name flashed onto the screen. She clicked into the text message, pulse firing wildly.

You're not here.

Not a question, just a statement of fact, and she didn't have to be a genius to work out where 'here' was. Suddenly, the emptiness of her apartment was taunting her. Laughing at her for running here, instead of going to the room he'd hired at the Plaza. With him. To hell with her jealousy. To hell with the fact she'd just had a very visible reminder of her place in his life – temporary and meaningless.

None of that seemed to matter now, when she was here, alone, wanting him, needing him, and he was there – where she could have gone and taken exactly what she craved.

She hovered her finger over the reply button, wondering what she could say to that?

Because she had two clear choices. Go to the hotel and spend the night with him – and pretend she hadn't seen what she'd seen, and that she didn't know what it meant. Or stay here and lick her wounds – which meant admitting she had wounds.

As tempted as she was to throw caution to the wind and lose herself in the pleasures Salvatore could offer, pride, and common sense, won out. She flicked off her phone and resolutely focused on Netflix, choosing a series to devour rather than letting herself think about what she could have been doing instead, if she'd been willing to admit to herself that she would put up with just about anything to be with Salvatore.

And how much that scared her.

10

AFTER THREE DAYS OF clearly getting the brush off, Salvatore was beyond annoyed. He was irritated, frustrated, confused and worried. Yes, worried. Because Emilia's silence was as uncharacteristic as it was clear.

What was less clear for Salvatore was the reasoning behind it.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

Not particularly prone to giving much thought to a woman's feelings—he'd never had the need—he'd found himself thinking back on the last time he'd seen Emilia and trying to work out if he'd said or done something wrong. Or if she'd said or done something to indicate that she was annoyed with him. Sick of him, them, and what they were doing?

His gut twisted at that and his chest rolled with something new – a sense of dented pride. Was it possible he'd become more wrapped up in what they were doing than she was? Possible she was over it. Before him?

The thought left him cold, because in truth, this thing with Emilia was still a raging fire in his bloodstream. He fully accepted the necessity of walking away at the end of their agreed upon month, but that was still a couple of weeks away. They had time left. Time to enjoy this, to get it out of their systems.

So why the hell was she wasting it? Why wasn't she answering his calls?

He had no option but to accept Emilia's decision—and he would—but first, he wanted to understand it. Which was how, one evening, Salvatore came to find himself breaking one of their agreed upon rules and pressing the buzzer for her apartment, staring resolutely ahead as he waited for her to answer. His jaw was clenched tight and, in the back of his mind, he knew there was risk here. Risk in coming to her place, risk in doing so without a discussion first. Risk that he'd be seen, that she might not be alone.

Yet in that moment, he didn't give a flying fuck.

He had to see her, to understand what the hell was going on.

“Hello?”

Her voice—just that single word—breathed something inside his chest that made everything better, and worse.

“It’s me.”

Silence.

He imagined her then, frowning, almost as if she’d forgotten who he was. He pressed his finger to the intercom. “I swear to God, Emilia, if you don’t let me up, I will start ringing every other buzzer until someone opens this door.”

Her response was to press the buzzer. He kept his shoulders squared and his jaw clenched as he rode the elevator to her apartment, ignoring the slight misgivings he felt at having pushed a trusted mutual acquaintance into giving him Emilia’s address. He was pretty sure that had broken one of their rules, too, but hell. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and if she was going to blank him, then he was going to fight for answers. He deserved that much.

When the elevator doors pinged open, Emilia was standing just inside her apartment, with the door held open, and just the sight of her made his whole body catch fire.

She hadn’t had time to change, so she was just wearing a pair of bike shorts and an over-sized t-shirt. Her feet were bare, so too her face of make up, and her long hair was out and loose, dragged over one shoulder. Her expression was pinched, her eyes wary, as though he was the last person she wanted to see.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she hissed, contradicting herself by gesturing for

him to step inside. But for some reason, he hovered on the threshold. Perhaps because he knew the rules they'd crafted were important, and that breaking them was somehow doing something they couldn't easily undo.

"You gave me little choice."

Her eyes flashed to his, anger unmistakable in their depths. "I beg your pardon?"

His nostrils flared. "So you should."

"Are you actually annoyed at me?"

He felt the ground slipping a little beneath him. She seemed so surprised that he'd be annoyed – like she didn't think he had any right. Which left him with only one conclusion. She really didn't care if she saw him again. To hell with what they'd agreed. To hell with the fact he felt like she'd become the breath he needed to survive.

"Would you get in here?" she demanded, clearly exasperated, as she reached out and grabbed his arm. He was way bigger than her, so when she tugged on him, he didn't move. "Someone will see you," she said, looking furtively down the deserted corridor.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her he didn't give a shit, but that wasn't strictly true. Besides, he'd come here for answers, and that wasn't a conversation he particularly wanted to have in a public space. So he stepped forward, brushing past her as he entered the foyer of her apartment, ignoring the way his body immediately took that as a promise of something more.

His cock strained in his pants, so hungry for her, his whole body felt as though it were experiencing a form of torture, because this wasn't the time for sex. And

Salvatore was someone who always had time for sex.

“What the hell is going on?” he growled, at liberty to give voice to his frustrations now they were behind the closed door of her home.

Hanging on the wall just behind Emilia was a family portrait, taken when she was perhaps eleven or twelve, and featuring her two brothers and parents. His gut rolled at the visible reminder of her Valentino-ness, and the very stark reasons they should both have been smart enough to walk away from this.

“What do you mean?” her voice was arctic. Arctic in a way he’d never heard it. Cold like ice. Resolutely distant.

His skin itched with impatience, and that need to understand grew.

“Have you lost your phone?”

She just stared at him, lips compressed, chin jutting defiantly.

It only made him angrier.

“Changed your number?”

Her eyes fluttered shut briefly.

“Had a stroke and forgotten how to text, or return a call?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, which made his cock—which clearly couldn’t read the room—jump optimistically. Her breasts, sweetly rounded, were clearly visible beneath the soft cotton of her shirt. He forced himself to hold her gaze, even when he really, really wanted to look elsewhere.

“I needed a break.”

He frowned, momentarily perplexed. “From me?” He heard the arrogance of the question the second he’d asked it, but he couldn’t exactly call the words back. Besides, it was true. He’d never once been walked out on. He’d never once had a woman end things with him.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Is it seriously so hard for you to fathom that I might just want some space?”

Memories of their time together filtered through his mind at lightning speed. Every

touch, look, laugh, and heated glance. Every spark, every bliss. He had enough experience to know he hadn't imagined any of that. Then, there was her admission, that being with him filled her with light.

"Yes."

She laughed, but the sound was completely lacking humour.

"I know I'm not imagining this."

Something shifted on her expression then, so for a second he saw beneath the veneer she was projecting to a real emotion. Uncertainty. Confusion.

"Imagining what?"

Now it was Salvatore who hesitated, choosing his words with care. Even without thinking this through, he was aware something was changing. The easy arrangement they'd formed two weeks ago no longer seemed totally without danger.

Did he face that head on, or act as though nothing had changed for him?

"I can't get enough of you, okay? There. I said it. I can't get enough of you. And I know you feel the same way about me—you've said as much. So why the hell have you spent the last three days icing me out, Emilia?"

She flinched then, skin paling beneath her tan, and again he saw that uncertainty cross her features. He was glad he'd come here. Glad he'd decided to confront her on this. He wasn't sure why she'd run away from him, but there was no way he could leave this stone unturned.

"I saw you, the other night." She didn't meet his eyes, so wouldn't have seen the

confusion on his features.

“What? What other night?”

She twisted her fingers in front of her. “At the gala. In the library.”

He frowned, twisting that night over in his mind, trying to work out why having seen him would be a problem. “You knew I was going. Why is it a problem that you saw me there?”

“I saw who you were with,” she muttered, cheeks flushing with pink.

He shook his head, totally at a loss, until he remembered. “Becca.”

Emilia shrugged. “I don’t know her name.”

“Becca,” he repeated, something unfamiliar churning inside of his gut. Guilt. Regret. Because while he knew that nothing had happened, on reflection, their friendship and intimacy would have seemed...obvious, to anyone caring to look. “She’s a family friend.”

Emilia tilted her chin. “Just a friend?”

He clamped his lips together, that same unfamiliar emotion churning in his belly. “Now, yes.”

“But you’ve slept with her.”

“We did, yes.”

Emilia’s throat shifted visibly as she swallowed and for a second, she looked so vulnerable, another new emotion surged through him. A strong, protective instinct, that made him want to wrap her up in a huge hug and hold her tight, tell her everything was okay. That it would always be okay, because he’d make sure of it.

The whole idea of that was singularly terrifying, so instead, he held his ground. But when he spoke, his voice was softer, more placating. “I can’t change my past, Emilia.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“I saw an old friend, and I spoke to her. I did not kiss her, I did not sleep with her. It was just two people catching up, that’s all.”

“I saw the way you looked at her. The way she looked at you.”

“And it bothered you.”

Emilia’s gaze sparked like fire when it met his. “What the hell do you think?” Her hands were trembling as she stalked back to the door. “I can’t do this. I need you to go.”

He fought that with every fibre of his being. “Not yet.”

She closed her eyes, chest shifting with the force of her breathing. But he was no longer throbbing with need for her. Something more essential and basic had taken over, something that required him to think, and fix.

“That was thoughtless of me,” he said, admitting, for possibly the first time in his life, that his actions had the potential to hurt someone. Without his meaning to, he’d flaunted an ex-lover in the face of Emilia, and she was clearly unimpressed.

“It was just you,” she corrected. “You’re a playboy. You always will be. You fuck around like most people eat out. You must have hundreds of women in your past, and seeing them is inevitable. And I hate that it bothers me. I hate that I hate it. I hate that I care.” Her voice wobbled a little on the last word, so he closed his eyes and sucked that in. Really heard what she was saying.

What she wasn’t saying.

The admission neither of them wanted to make.

Until now.

“This is getting out of hand,” he admitted. “You’re not the only one who sees that.”

She took a couple of steps away from the door, towards him. “What does that mean?”

“I’m in your apartment,” he said, gesturing with his palm to the space beyond them. “I’m breaking the rules. Maybe the rules were always going to be impossible to hold, I don’t know. But what started off as something fun and light is just...different now.”

“You’re not having fun?”

“That’s not what I said. I want you more than I like. I think about you all the time. I

have never been with a woman who's gotten under my skin like this. And I kept telling myself it was because of who you are, and the fact this is totally off-limits. But the thing is, it's not. It's you. You are under my skin. Not because you're a Valentino, but because you make me feel things I didn't know I was capable of. I've had sex with a lot of women, and I can't change that. Up until this moment, I didn't think I'd ever want to. But, when you see me with someone like Becca, please remember, you are literally the only woman who has driven me to despair by disappearing from my life. You are the only woman I have ever begged for a second chance. You are different, Emilia. And that scares the shit out of me."

He closed the distance between them, needing to drag her into his arms then, to feel her against his body, holding her there like he could hug her into understanding. To his relief, she let him. She let him pull her against his chest, and keep her there. To press a kiss to her forehead, and breathe in her sweet, vanilla scent. And after a moment, her hands reached out and wrapped around his back, keeping him just where he was.

"Well, that I didn't expect," she said, on a small, husky laugh.

"No? Did you think I'd just let you block me out?"

"I didn't think you'd care," she admitted.

"Didn't you? Come on, Emilia. Surely even without me saying it, you've seen how much this thing has grown and changed? You're not what I thought you were, and this...this isn't what I thought it would be."

She nodded slowly, so her hair tickled his jaw. But he didn't move away, because he didn't want to put any distance between them. Not when it felt so good to have her right here, like this.

“What does that mean?”

It was the kind of question he usually would have run a mile from. Nothing meant anything. That was his *modus operandi*. Ever since he'd broken a girl's heart and learned nothing felt worse than that. Especially when she'd gone on to try to commit suicide, and left a note blaming him. He'd run a thousand miles from anything like commitment ever since, making sure he kept things safe and light, rather than risk inflicting that hurt on someone again.

“This has no future,” he said, voice gruff. But he needed to state that fact. They both needed to remember the truth of who they were. “You're a Valentino,” he reminded her—and himself. “And I'm a Santoro. We know this has to end.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

Strangely, though, he found himself half holding his breath, as if waiting to hear her argue that point. Almost as though he wanted her to. “I know,” she agreed, softly, then tilted her face to his. “I hate you.” But she was smiling at him, showing that she didn’t feel that way, and his gut rolled with something sharp and intense. “Don’t you forget it.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “The feeling’s mutual.”

“So what?” she said, after a few more moments of silence.

Salvatore was uncharacteristically hesitant. But the longer he thought about it, the longer he knew that the only option was to stick with their original plan. They had to end this when they’d agreed. “We give this thing two more weeks,” he said, quietly. “But we stop pretending it’s just sex.” Panic slipped a little inside of his chest. Because he’d spent ten years of his life backing away from anything approaching emotion, but here he was, opening himself up to the possibility of hurting Emilia. The one person he couldn’t bear to wound. Or maybe they’d already crossed that line? She’d looked hurt tonight. Hurt and upset, because she’d seen him talking to another woman. “What if we go away for a while?” He suggested, the idea forming rapidly, but taking complete hold.

She glanced up at him. “Go away where?”

“I have a yacht in a port just north of Athens. Let’s go there and just float around for a few days.”

“God, that sounds good,” she admitted, but slowly, shaking her head. “But the whole

Moricosian thing...”

“The Med is closer to Moricosia than America, you’ll be on the same time zone. And you can work from the yacht.” Vitally, there’d be no outside influences. No other women, no reminders of their families. Just them, and the time and space to explore each other fully.

“But my team is here?—,”

“Remember Covid?” He reminded her. “You can work with your team remotely for a few days, surely?”

She massaged her lower lip with her teeth, so his insides fired to life. He wanted to drag that lip into his mouth, to kiss her until neither of them could think straight. He caught her face with both hands and held her steady for his inspection. “We have two weeks, Emilia. Come away with me a while. Let’s make the most of this.”

Her eyes were awash with emotions he didn’t comprehend. He could practically hear the gears of her brain turning as she thought about that. “Two nights,” she murmured. “And then I have to get back to reality.”

“Deal.”

11

FIVE DAYS LATER, EMILIA had vague recollections of them having agreed to spend two days on this boat. But that agreement felt like something that had happened a long time ago, to two totally different people.

Everything about New York was a thousand miles away now. Her family, her life, her work. They’d spent almost a week bobbing around the waters off the coast of

Greece. Salvatore had a skeleton crew on board, who'd seen to their essential needs like food, but had otherwise stayed completely out of sight, so Emilia had almost begun to feel as though she and Salvatore were the only two people on earth.

And against the backdrop of that fantasy, it was easy to pretend this could actually go on forever. Because the thing Emilia had started to grapple with was just how much she liked being around this man. How much she enjoyed talking to him, hearing his thoughts on just about any subject. And how much she enjoyed being drawn to talk about her thoughts. Emilia had never been backwards in coming forwards, but with two strong, dominant—and sometimes arrogant—Valentino brothers to contend with, there had been times when her opinions had been overshadowed by theirs. When she'd found it hard to stand up and say what she was thinking. Salvatore, despite his own alpha traits, seemed to want to dig into every part of her, to understand her opinions on just about everything.

It was flattering, and completely intoxicating, so she'd spent the past five days in a buzzy fog that had nothing to do with alcohol, and everything to do with the man at her side.

“You coming?” He called, from down below, only his head visible in the water. She looked around, as if half expecting someone to be there watching, seeing her perform what would most definitely be an ungraceful dive into the sparkling sea.

“You promise it's warm?”

He gestured above them, to the sun, high in the sky. “As a bath.”

She threw one last, longing glance at the spa just behind her, on the expansive deck of his yacht—which was more like a five star hotel on water—then refocused on Salvatore. The last thought she had before pushing herself off the edge of the boat and pointing her arms above her head to form a dive posture was that she would

follow him just about anywhere he asked her to.

The water was cold, at first, hitting her like a shockwave when she broke the surface. But even before she could break through, his hands were around her waist, warm and strong, pulling her against him, lifting her out. Like he couldn't wait a second longer to touch her. Despite the fact she was underwater to her shoulders, Emilia could have sworn little fires had been lit beneath her skin.

She could have sworn her whole body was aflame.

One of his hands moved to brush her hair back from her brow, and then, treading water for both of them, he kissed her, so she tasted the salty Mediterranean and felt an explosion of euphoria, another hit of that drugging, intoxicating sensation. Bliss. Surrender. Acceptance. This was just exactly where she wanted to be—and who she wanted to be with.

That same feeling wrapped around her later that night, after they'd shared a seafood platter on the deck as the sun set, then a spa, and finally, as they lay on a daybed beneath the stars, the gently lapping water rocking them in a way Emilia might have found soporific if it weren't for the fact that being in close proximity to Salvatore made her whole body alert with need.

Two days had stretched so easily into three, then four, and now on the fifth day, Emilia had no inclination or interest in returning to Manhattan. They hadn't talked about that. They hadn't talked about the fact they'd need to go back, at some point. By Emilia's reckoning, they had another week before their agreed upon end point.

It was like a black hole in her mind, a thing she didn't like to think of, because of how it unsettled the breezy, intoxicating feeling she'd been relishing all week.

She didn't think about his past, either. Nor even allow herself to wonder, more than a

few times, if he'd brought other women here. It mattered, but at the same time, it didn't. Because this was different, just like he'd said. She knew Salvatore hadn't ever pursued a woman like he'd pursued her. Whatever else this was, she knew that to be fact.

"It's so peaceful out here," she murmured, head on his chest, as his fingers drew invisible patterns along her back. "It reminds me a little of home."

His fingers stilled. “New York?”

“My parents’ home,” she corrected, eyes chasing the silhouetted line of the landmass in the distance. Pretty little lights seemed forever away.

“In Italy?”

She nodded. “It’s a villa in the countryside, very beautiful, and very peaceful. There are these ruins on our land, ancient and falling down, now. When I was a child, my brothers and I would play all sorts of games amongst them.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, pirates, marauders, anything. They were wonderful to hide in.”

“And be crushed by, if they fell down around you?”

“Yes, a distinct possibility,” she agreed with a soft laugh.

“I’m surprised your parents allowed this.”

“They probably didn’t know,” she said, lifting one shoulder. “We were very good at grabbing the horses and just riding out for the day.”

“They must have wondered what you were doing.”

She glanced up at him. “Were you so closely monitored in your childhood?”

His laugh was something she felt rather than heard. His whole chest shifted with the force of his amusement. “Cristo, no. We were also given a lot of freedom.”

“And what did you do with that freedom?”

“It feels like a thousand years ago.”

“Are you such an old man?” She teased.

His hand stroked lower, to the base of her spine, then back up to between her shoulder blades and she let out a sigh that bordered on a purr.

“How much do you know about my family?”

“You mean besides the fact you are the very spirit of the devil in human form?”

Another laugh. “Besides that.”

“I know that you grew up outside of Rome. That’s about it.”

“With my cousins, as well as my brothers, and Sofia.”

“Who’s not related to you, right?”

“She is my parents’ goddaughter, but was very much raised as part of our family. I think of her as a sister.”

Emilia thought then of her own brother Leandro, who they’d all recently learned had been adopted by their parents.

“And King Ares your brother?”

His smile was reflective. “We’ve known Ares a long time, as you know.”

“Yes,” she murmured. Before arriving in Moricosia, she’d presumed it would give the Santoro bid an advantage, but once she’d spent time in the city, her confidence with her own proposal had grown. She didn’t push that point now. “Why did your cousins grow up with you?”

She felt him tense, and wondered if she’d asked something he wasn’t willing to discuss. But then, he breathed out, and said, “After my aunt died, my uncle couldn’t cope. He began drinking, heavily. Womanising. It wasn’t the best environment for children, so my parents stepped in.”

She compressed her lips thoughtfully. It was strange how the Santoros had become, in her mind, villains of the highest order. She’d never really looked beyond that visage, the reputation they held within her family, to contemplate them as people. Yet there was something humanising about this story — about a family that pulled together with love, when needed, to protect the younger generation.

“What was that like?”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “You went from a family of five to one that included Sofia, and your cousins. Did you resent that at all?”

“What part?”

“Sharing your parents?”

He laughed softly. “My parents are easy to share.”

“You’re not close?”

He stroked her hair. “On the contrary, we’re very close. I respect them immensely. It’s more...my parents occupy an enormous space. They love fiercely, they’re loud, joyous, there’s just so much of them to go around. They have an indefatigable energy. I never felt that I was missing out, by having our cousins spend so much time in our home. Instead, I gained. More family, more texture, more interest. There was always someone to do something with. Raf and I would drive to the beach each morning in the summer and swim for miles. Marco and I would build things?—,”

“What kinds of things?”

“Elaborate structures,” he said, with a rueful grin. “We would forage timber from the woods around the house and cut them to shape, sculpting them into whatever we

wanted. There's a sense of security that comes from having so many people on your team."

"Yes," she admitted with a nod, completely agreeing with him.

"You know the feeling?"

She nodded again. "I only have two brothers, but they love me in the way you've described. Fiercely, loyally, and with all of themselves."

He grunted, and she glanced up at him.

"Is it weird to talk about our families?"

His eyes flicked to hers, a frown etching across his face. "Surprisingly, it's not. I like hearing about your life. That includes your family."

Something shifted in her chest. A burst of warm, ebullient happiness. With a chaser of worry, because this was all becoming so...normal. And nice. The thought of walking away from Salvatore in a little over a week seemed impossible to contemplate. Even when she knew it was sensible and essential. After all, what was the alternative?

"I feel the same way," she said, slowly, but the lick of concern had taken the shine off her happiness, and it came across in her voice.

"What is it?"

She bit into her lower lip. "Do you think it's strange that our families are like this?"

"Supportive?"

She shook her head. “No, the whole hating each other thing. I mean, why should you or I hate each other? Why should my brothers hate yours? The thing is, the more you talk about your family, the more I get the sense that they’re all so similar. I feel like if our families spent time together, they’d probably realise they have a lot in common.”

He let out a snort of derision, so her lips tugged down in a deep frown.

“Don’t do that,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry, it’s just impossible to imagine us all in the same room, much less getting along.”

“But why?” She pushed. “Why should something that happened forever ago shape our lives now?”

The hand that had been stroking her spine stilled and his eyes seemed to bore into hers. “What are you saying?”

She shifted one shoulder, not entirely sure how to answer that. Not entirely sure what she was thinking, what she wanted. “I’m just saying, it’s so abstract?—”

“No, it’s not.”

“You really care what happened to our grandparents?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“If it had stopped there, no. But this has affected our parents, and us. Look at the deal in Moricosia. Look at Acto. Our families have spent decades actively trying to destroy one another. The fact you and I can put that aside is one thing. I don’t see anyone else in my family doing the same thing.”

She was quiet, his pronouncement hitting her harder than she’d expected.

“Do you disagree?” His voice was gentle. As though he understood how much she hated that.

She didn’t answer, and he expelled a heavy breath. “Tell me if you can actually imagine your brothers giving anyone in my family the time of day.”

“Not at first. But maybe in time?—,”

“No, Emilia. No. It’s never going to happen.”

She shifted her face, so she was looking directly at him. “Do you wish things were different?”

His lips twisted to the side as his eyes pierced hers. “What’s the point of wishing for the impossible? I’m a realist. I prefer to stick to the facts.”

“And the facts are, our families hate each other, and always will?”

“Deep down, you know it’s true.”

“Yes,” she admitted, that chaser of worry growing to become a tidal wave inside of her. Because the more time they spent on the boat, the more convinced she became of one thing, and one thing only: she never wanted this to end. To hell with their families, to hell with anyone.

Three nights later, back in New York at a private fundraiser, Salvatore existed with a constant background hum of awareness when it came to the date. And the fact that they had less than a week together, before their agreed upon parting of ways.

Sure, they could move that arbitrary date. But what was the point in kicking the can down the road? Not wanting to end things with Emilia, if anything, convinced Salvatore that it was the right thing to do. The necessary thing.

He’d already decided to leave Manhattan at the end of the week. He’d been looking to buy some land in Singapore, and the deal was going to be complex and layered. Being on the ground made sense. But more importantly, it removed the very real temptation of weakening and reaching out for Emilia even when he knew he shouldn’t. Far better to get on with his life where seeing her wasn’t an option.

It seemed impossible to contemplate now, but he knew this would get easier. Day by day, night by night, the power she held over him would lessen. It would just take time, and distance.

But for now, she was here, and he intended to make the most of that fact.

As if on cue, she moved into his field of vision, looking stunning in a fitted emerald green dress. In the midst of a crowd filled with tuxedos and evening gowns, Emilia was a knockout. There was something in the way she held herself, her poise, grace, beauty all beyond compare. His whole body fired to life in recognition of that.

She leaned closer to a woman to her left, said something, smiled and tapped the side

of her nose, so his own lips twitched in ready response to that impish, silly gesture. The other woman nodded, then gestured across the room. Salvatore's pulse throbbed as her eyes skated over him then jerked back, for the briefest moment, as her lips quirked into a half-smile, before she continued letting her gaze roam. Salvatore did the same, looking beyond Emilia, and noticing her brother Leandro a small distance away, making a beeline for Emilia.

The question she'd asked on the boat had been running through his mind ever since. Was it impossible to think they could put their families' war aside and try to get on? People came to truces all the time. Why couldn't they?

As if to contradict that very idea, though, Leandro looked in Salvatore's direction and stopped walking, his expression tightening as his dark eyes narrowed, so Salvatore felt a surge of dislike form in the pit of his gut. Dislike, hatred, disgust.

Feelings he'd never felt for Emilia. Strange, when she was part of the same family, cursed with the same backlog of generational sins.

But Emilia was Emilia. He shifted his gaze towards her once more, at the moment Leandro reached her and put his hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him and her face broke into a broad smile as she leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek. She looked so beautiful. Every movement was graceful, like a ballet of some kind.

His gut tightened with a now familiar sensation. Anticipation.

The certainty that within a few hours, they'd be back in bed, limbs entwined, moving as one. He couldn't fucking wait.

Hell.

He couldn't wait. That was the problem.

Even before the idea was fully formed, Salvatore was on his way to the bar, where he ordered two drinks—her own drink of choice now burned into his mind. From then, it was just a matter of catching her eyes again.

He reclined with one elbow on the bar, knowing it wouldn't be long before her eyes gaze him out, as he had her. It was just the way they were together. Like magnets.

For a few days more, anyway.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“WE SHOULDN’T BE DOING this,” she groaned against his throat, tasting him, fingers pulling his shirt from his waistband and connecting with bare flesh as though it had been months, not hours, since they’d seen one another. “Not here.”

His response was to push her skirt up higher, his hand cupping her naked rear, pushing her forward. “So you want to stop?”

Damn it, he knew she didn’t. He knew she was driven as mad by this as ever. Never mind that they were at a charity event. Never mind that they’d sought out yet another emergency stairwell, just like that first night. Except then, she’d been so angry with him, and that dark anger had permeated her feelings. Now?

Now she felt a tangle of things that were as confusing and overwhelming as anything she’d ever known. Why, of all the men she’d known since Jesse, was Salvatore the one who could turn her blood to fire and flame? Why was it Salvatore that made her pulse throb and twist, and her heart yearn.

Yes, her heart.

And him, a Santoro!

“Emilia?” His voice was sharp, and she realised she hadn’t answered him. Did she want this to stop? Not now. Not ever.

She shook her head quickly, then turned her attention to his belt, unfastening it and working on separating his pants.

“Don’t stop,” she implored, groaning as his erection was freed from the confines of his pants.

“Good choice,” he murmured. “I want to fuck you.”

She shivered, reveling in the raw honesty of that. In the animalistic urges that drove them. Telling herself that a chemistry like this – pure, raw physical – wasn’t actually love. It was just lust and dependence. She’d get over him sooner or later. Of course she would.

As intoxicating as this was, it was an addiction she could conquer.

“God, but you’re perfect,” he swore, pulling her closer to him, so she could feel his naked cock against her sex and she trembled at the promise of what was to come.

“Enough talking,” she begged, as she pulled him deeper down the stairs, kissing him as he sat on the landing, enabling her to straddle him and take him deep inside, to feel his power and perfection as she shifted her body over his length until the sensations were almost too much to handle.

His hands cupped her breasts, his mouth sought hers, and with his kiss, she felt herself tumbling over the abyss, into a space where time had no meaning, and nothing else existed. She found herself cordoned off from reality, in an oasis of pleasure—where it was easy to imagine, just for a moment, that this was never going to end. How could something so good, so right, be doomed to fail?

“Jesus fucking Christ.” The voice was familiar to Emilia, but also, jarringly hard to comprehend, because it was the last thing she’d expected to hear at the top of the stairwell, as she and Salvatore prepared to return to the party.

Panic surged through her and she clung to a futile, stupid hope that her ears had

deceived her. Even as she was turning and confirming with her eyes that Leandro had just burst through the door and was glaring down at them with a look of absolute fury.

Her lips parted, yet no words came out. She could only stare at her brother as he began to stalk down the stairs, to the landing on which they stood. Mercifully, they were dressed again, but that wasn't to say there was no sign of what they'd just been doing.

Emilia had no doubt her hair was untidy, and one side of Salvatore's shirt was untucked. She squeezed her eyes closed on a wave of something awful, like nausea, and panic, and anger, too, because she didn't want Leandro here, now. What right did he have?

"I cannot believe it," he ground out. "Just what the hell is going on?"

But it was Salvatore she was conscious of, moving to stand in front of her, his big, broad frame protective and familiar.

Emilia tried to think. To work out what to say. Leandro was someone she knew better than just about anyone on earth. She could fix this. She could make him understand. She just had to concentrate on finding the right words.

Except her brain just wouldn't work. It wouldn't connect the dots. This thing with Salvatore was secret. Their secret. It was a bubble out of time. It was not supposed to include her brother. It wasn't supposed to include anyone.

"What the fuck, Emme?"

He'd gone from angry to shocked, to possibly hurt, so she fidgeted her fingers in front of her before putting a hand on Salvatore's back.

“Hey, listen,” Salvatore’s voice emerged calm and level, as though this sort of thing happened to him every day.

“I’m not talking to you, Santoro,” Leandro ground out, eyes flicking to Salvatore’s with obvious disdain. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Emilia’s temperature spiked. She ran her fingers over Salvatore’s broad, warm back. How many times had she done that in this past month? Touched him like this, intimately and in a familiar way, as though they were designed for this, and each other. Touched him like she had every right. Like this wasn’t a loaded gun they were casually playing with.

“Salvatore, you should go,” she whispered. In contrast to his even, level tone, her own voice was tremulous and soft.

He turned to face her, his eyes roaming her features. He was so familiar to her. Without really meaning to, she’d committed every single part of him to memory, from the fine freckles that ran across his cheeks, to the specks of gold in his otherwise dark eyes, to the bump midway down his nose. She’d never asked him what had happened to cause it and it was all she could think of in that moment. Not just his nose, but all the other little things about him she didn’t know and didn’t have a lifetime to find out.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

She'd known it was going to end, but she still wasn't really prepared for that. And she wasn't prepared for this. How could she be? They'd taken such care to avoid being seen. Except, they hadn't. Not really. Using this stairwell had been reckless—and impossible to resist.

“What are you doing here?” She asked Leandro.

“Looking for you,” he ground out. “Carey Mossa said you came in here. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Why wouldn't I be okay?”

“That hardly seems to matter now.” Leandro's voice rang with barely concealed anger. “Do you know who this is?”

She met his question with an unblinking stare.

“Is this a one-off thing?” Leandro demanded, when she didn't answer.

“With respect, that's none of your business,” Salvatore cut in. “Emilia's life, and my life, for that matter, are our business. No one else's.”

“With all due respect,” Leandro volleyed back, making it clear respect was the last thing he felt for this man, “my sister's life is very much my business.”

Emilia bristled at that.

“She is a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions.”

“Evidently not,” Leandro disputed. “Not if you’re one of them.”

She felt Salvatore tense a little, but Leandro continued before Salvatore could speak. “What the hell is this all about, Santoro? Some kind of game? A way to hurt us?”

“Leo – that’s not –,”

“I’m not talking to you, Emme.”

“But you are speaking about her,” Salvatore interjected. “And she has a right to reply.”

And then, Salvatore’s hand was coming around to his back, his fingers catching hers and lacing them together, squeezing.

“Don’t tell me?—,”

“Leo, please,” Emilia groaned. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do this? You’re saying that to me? Have you been fucking this—this—piece of shit, Emme? Have you actually been?—,”

Salvatore squeezed her hand. “Careful,” he warned Leandro.

But Leandro’s temper flared up and then he was shoving Salvatore, so he almost fell backwards. Emilia gasped at the uncharacteristic show of violence from her brother, as she instinctively stood aside, out of danger. “Stop,” she said, shaking her head, but Leandro was pushing again, harder this time, so Salvatore took a step backwards.

“Touch me again, and you’ll regret it.”

Salvatore’s words rang through the concrete stairwell.

“Is that a threat?”

“What do you think?”

“You want to know what I think? I think you’re using my sister. I think you’re using her to get back at us, and Emme just doesn’t see it. Damn it, Emme,” he rounded on her. “You are too fucking trusting. This bastard is using you. How can you not see that?”

“He’s not like that,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s not like you think.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious, Leo. Salvatore is?—,”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

But she drew a blank, because where could she start? What could she say that wouldn't be completely insufficient?

Handsome? Kind? Generous? Sincere? Wonderful? Perfect? Her other half?

She almost groaned out loud as the words floating through her mind jostled for space in her mouth. Yet none formed. She couldn't admit it. She couldn't say to Leandro what she hadn't even been brave enough to tell Salvatore: how much he meant to her. How much she needed him in her life.

She'd thought it. She'd shown it. But she'd never said the words.

"Fuuuuck, Emme, this is absolute crap. You are—you should have known better. Where's your bag?"

She blinked at him, confused. "What?"

"Get your goddamn bag. We're leaving."

"Hey," Salvatore's voice cut through Leandro's tirade like a whip. "You cannot order her around. She's a grown woman, not a child."

"Stay the hell out of this, Santoro. It's a family matter."

"No, it's an Emilia matter. What does she want to do? Stay here, with me? Or go, with you?"

Both men looked at her and Emilia felt the whole world slipping. She looked from her beloved brother who had supported her through thick and through thin, with whom she had a billion wonderful memories and shared experiences. And then, she looked at Salvatore, who she now knew held the keys to her heart, and always would.

She wanted to stay with Salvatore. She wanted to get away from this fundraiser, and escape to the privacy of one of their apartments, or the hotel room at the Plaza. She wanted to climb back into the little bubble they'd made, exist there, inside, safe from the outside world, far away from anyone or anything that would tear them down. Travel to the ends of the earth, so long as Salvatore was with her. Maybe go back to the yacht? But would it be the same, now Leo knew?

She closed her eyes on a wave of desolation. How had they thought they could do this? How had they thought it was realistic to create a world that didn't include their families—and violate everything those families would want for them.

“Get your bag, Emme.”

“Let her speak.” Salvatore's voice was level enough, but Emilia heard something beneath it—an emotion she hated, because it sounded a lot like uncertainty. As though he didn't know for sure that she'd choose him, a thousand times over, always.

“Don't you dare tell me what to do,” Leandro returned harshly.

In the very back of her mind, the parts of her that were capable of any kind of thought, she knew that Salvatore was muting his first response. The part of him that would have run into this no holds barred was indeed holding back, respecting Emilia in that one simple choice by acknowledging that this was her family, and her fight. Even when he might have wanted to protect her, to shield her and absorb any blows Leandro would throw—metaphorically—he knew that she had to be a part of that response.

“Leo, listen,” she said, hating that her voice was so unsteady. Salvatore squeezed her hand, and she felt it in her core—the courage he was giving her, the unspoken, unwavering support. And even in that moment of sheer survival and panic, she was aware of the way her heart was tripping over, and stretching, to accommodate Salvatore’s presence in a way she wanted to keep forever. For always. “This isn’t the time or place?—,”

“Something you should have thought about before you came in here with him and did—Jesus Christ, Emilia. What the hell are you thinking? This is a Santoro. A goddamn Santoro.”

“I’m aware of that,” she murmured, at the same time Salvatore said, soft and low, “Watch it.”

Leandro turned to face Salvatore. “I told you: stop telling me what to do.”

“Then stop acting like such a jackass,” he growled. “Your sister’s right. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Did you seduce her to get back at us? Is that what this is?”

“Leandro,” Emilia’s voice was sharp. “This has nothing to do with you. And he didn’t seduce me.” She glanced at Salvatore, his face harsh, all angles and ruthless disgust. “It was mutual.”

“You don’t know what he’s like.”

“No, you don’t know what he’s like.”

“These people are—the worst of the worst.”

“I said, watch it,” Salvatore said, still measured and contained. But Leo was looking at Emilia with all the love and concern of an older brother—the older brother who would have run into a burning building if it would have saved her. The brother who had loved and adored her from birth, who had been at her back in every difficulty she’d faced in life. He was protecting her—or thought he was. And he was right. She did need protecting. But not from Salvatore, so much as the pain of loving someone she could never have.

“Am I wrong?” Leandro’s nostrils flared. “Or are you using my sister for sex?”

“How dare you!” Emilia shouted, drawn back to the present by his totally unreasonable accusation.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“That’s none of your damned business,” Salvatore rebutted, and Emilia pursed her lips in exasperation. Why couldn’t he say what he felt? What they shared?

“She is my sister. My little sister,” Leandro roared, so Emilia flinched, and was distantly aware of the party happening beyond them, wondering if the guests had become aware of the screaming match taking place in the stairwell.

“She is a grown woman?—,”

Her bond with Leandro had been forged over a series of years, and it was unbreakable. If anything, the recent discovery of Leandro’s adoption had taken something strong and made it impossible to break. She felt that. She felt it in his look, in his eyes, in the way he held his shoulders, braced to take any weight from hers and carry it himself.

So she wasn’t even really surprised when he lifted his fist and struck Salvatore’s face. Without warning, without apology. Just a single blow that had Salvatore stagger one step backwards before lifting his own hand. Not to return the action but to press to his red cheek.

“Leandro!” Emilia cried out. “Don’t!” But Leandro was already lifting his hand again, and now Salvatore had no choice but to lift his hands and block Leandro’s attack. In doing so, their arms braced, and they were moving as one. Emilia lifted her shaking hands to her mouth and pressed them there, breath held. Her eyes flew to the top of the stairs and the door that led to the party and she contemplated running up to shout for help, but it was all happening so fast—too fast—for her to do anything but cry their names over and over. Another arm flew: this time, Salvatore was punching

Leandro so she was pushing forward and wrenching at their tuxedo-clad arms, trying to separate them, panic surging through her veins.

It all happened so fast. So fast.

She couldn't even have said how, in the end. All she knew was that she lost her footing and was then tumbling backwards, thrown completely off balance, unable to grab hold of anything.

Distantly, she heard her name from Salvatore's lips. Torn with passion, just as she'd heard it so many times, and yet not, because this passion had a dark edge. A derangement. It was a passion mingled with the absolute worst kind of all-consuming panic. And then, everything went black.

Salvatore had spent his entire adult life wanting to avoid hurting anyone else. He'd learned his lesson as a teenager. Over and over, and then, finally, with that disastrous break up. He'd learned his lesson.

He wanted to never hurt anyone, and yet, despite that, he now stared down the stairwell, chest heaving, at Emilia. On the landing beneath them, where only minutes earlier they'd been together in the most pleasurable of ways, he stared at her. Unconscious. Pale.

"What have you done?" Leandro screamed, rushing down the stairs towards his sister. Nausea rose inside Salvatore, a horrible, consuming feeling.

"Is she alive?" The words were mangled in his throat. He could barely utter them. He couldn't speak of a reality that would destroy him. He needed to know. "Damn it, Leandro," he was moving now, towards her.

But Leandro whirled around. "Don't. Don't you dare."

Emilia lay there, lifeless. But not lifeless. In many ways, she looked exactly as she did in sleep, so it was easy to imagine stroking her cheek, kissing her lips, having her stir in his arms as she had every morning that followed a night shared.

“Call an ambulance,” Leandro said, his cheek darkening into what would no doubt show a bruise.

Salvatore was already removing his phone from his pocket and pressing in the emergency numbers. And then, she moved. Just a little, turning her head, before blinking her eyes and parting her lips.

Then, her hand. Reaching not for him, but Leandro. “Leo.” Her voice was soft.

Salvatore’s whole chest felt like it was splitting in two, but he stood where he was, staring at her, feeling like his whole world was imploding. This beautiful precious woman. He prayed then, to God, to everyone and everything who held any kind of power. He prayed that she would be okay. God, but he needed to know that.

“Don’t move, Emme. Don’t move. Help is on the way,” Leandro replied, stroking her hand.

Salvatore pressed the phone tighter to his ear, and started to move swiftly down the stairs, coming to crouch at her other side, ignoring the way Leandro was shooting daggers at him. Neither of them would be stupid enough to fight now. Not with Emilia in this condition.

“It’s okay,” she said, pressing her fingers to her temple as she went to sit up.

Salvatore moved in quickly, grabbing her behind the shoulders and steadying her. “Don’t move, cara. Don’t move.”

“I’m fine,” she said, flicking her gaze to him, and frowning slightly. Fear curdled in his gut. The fear that he’d hurt her; that she’d hate him.

“Damn it,” he cursed into the phone, at how long it was taking to connect. “There’s no reception in here.”

Leandro looked around. “I’ll drive her.”

“I’m okay,” she insisted.

“You’re going to hospital, Emme,” Leandro’s voice was curt.

Salvatore, crouching beside her, reached for Emilia’s hand, holding it in his. “He’s right, cara mia. You have to see a doctor.”

“No, I just need to go,” she muttered. “Would you get me out of here?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

In his gut, Salvatore felt a burst of relief that she'd asked him. Relief that she'd turned to him rather than Leandro.

"I would prefer not to move you," he said, though, reluctantly. Torn between his need to give her what she'd asked for, and what he thought to be right.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "Please just take me home."

He could feel Leandro's response. There was something in the tension of the other man, the way his whole body was radiating an ice like rejection. Rather than risk Leandro saying or doing anything to upset Emilia, Salvatore nodded once. "I'll take you away," he promised. "On one condition."

She glanced at him mutinously, but he barely noticed. All he could see was the pale colour of her skin, and he knew in that moment he would do whatever was necessary to fix this.

"We are going to hospital, before I take you home."

"Salvatore, please?—,"

"No, Emilia." He glanced across at Leandro, whose face was stone-like. "This is non-negotiable." And then, with a look back at Emilia, "I need to know you're okay."

She expelled a breath slowly. "But I am. I don't need a doctor."

"Then do it because I need it. I need to know."

She opened her mouth to fight him, to argue, but after a moment, she simply nodded. “Okay. But it’s a fuss about nothing.”

13

THE LAST THING EMILIA had any intention of admitting in front of Leandro was that she didn’t actually feel fine. Her head was aching and her body was trembling. She didn’t think she’d broken any bones, but her whole body felt as though she’d been put into a sack and tossed about a little. In short, she was sore all over. Mostly, though, she was in shock. Shock at Leandro having discovered their relationship, shock at the fact he was now walking like some kind of bridesmaid behind Salvatore, as he carried Emilia down the emergency stairs like she weighed nothing.

“You can’t carry me to the lobby, Salvatore. We’re on the twenty ninth floor.”

He flicked his gaze at her. “You think I wouldn’t carry you a thousand times further, if you needed it?”

Her heart turned over. She lifted her hand and pressed it to his cheek. “I’m okay.”

A muscle throbbed low in his jaw, and instead of saying anything to show that he was mollified by her statement, he kept walking, one step after the other, so she tucked her head against his chest and closed her eyes, just breathing him in.

“Are you okay?”

She blinked up at him when he didn’t answer, to find he was staring at her intently.

“Don’t pass out.”

“I won’t.”

“You closed your eyes.”

“Yes.” She wasn’t about to admit that she simply wanted to breathe him in. Even with a raging headache, and she suspected a concussion, she hadn’t totally lost control of her brain.

They turned the corner to another landing and this time, Salvatore moved towards the doors.

Leandro moved quickly though, anticipating Salvatore, stepping past him to hold open the doors.

As they brushed past her brother, Emilia looked at him over Salvatore’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

The look in his eyes made her gut roll. The hurt and confusion there, the worry. They were all things she would never willingly subject her brother to. Or anyone in her family. She stifled a yawn, and let her eyes close again. She felt Salvatore’s step quicken and then, heard the swooshing of the elevator doors.

Her eyes drifted shut, as he stepped inside, and then, she heard a soft curse fall from his lips, as the elevator began to speed to the ground. Emilia was asleep before it reached its destination.

“Don’t do this,” Salvatore ground out.

“You heard the doctor,” Leandro replied. “Family only.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Yes,” the doctor chimed in. “And going by the state you’re both in, you should be seen next.”

Salvatore frowned at the doctor. “She wouldn’t want this.”

The doctor nodded with apparent sympathy. “And when she’s able to tell me that, you can see her. But for now, it’s hospital protocol.” She turned to Leandro. “Come with me, sir.”

Leandro threw Salvatore a triumphant look as he followed the doctor through the overly-bright hospital corridor, leaving Salvatore fuming in the waiting area.

From the moment they’d gotten into Leandro’s car, so Salvatore could sit in the back with Emilia, and driven through the streets of Manhattan to the nearest hospital, Salvatore had felt almost as though he and Leandro were a team. At least, a pair of men engaged in the same mission, determined to help Emilia however they could. Both equally desperate to be assured that she was okay.

But the second they’d crossed through the hospital doors and handed her over to a team of doctors and nurses, the battle lines had been redrawn, with Leandro edging Salvatore out at every opportunity. And unfortunately, given that Salvatore was not a family member, it was an easy thing for Leandro to do.

He swallowed a curse as he strode across the foyer, looking for someone—anyone—to sort this mess out. But how? What would happen? He could make a fuss, but would it work? Undoubtedly not. He’d come up against bureaucratic policy 101. There was nothing for it but to wait.

“You have to go and get him,” Emilia said, anger with Leandro impossible to fight. After being put through a thousand scans and checks, to be told she had suffered a mild concussion and sprained wrist but was otherwise fine, she came to understand that Leo had used the hospital’s policies to keep Salvatore away from her.

“I’m serious, Leo. Go and get him. Now.”

“Why, Emme? Why do you want him so badly?”

“For one thing, because I know he’ll be worried about me.”

“So what? He worries. Who gives a shit?”

“I do.”

“Why?” Leandro dragged a hand through his hair. “What the hell is going on with you, Emilia?”

“Nothing.”

“So what are you doing?”

“I—nothing.”

“You are messing around with Salvatore Santoro. Do you have any idea what it would do to our parents if they discovered this?”

“I—know it’s not what they would want.”

“Precisely. So why put them through the pain?”

“I’m not putting anyone through the pain of anything. We’ve taken great care to keep this off the radar—the fact you found out was an accident, but it can be the end of it.”

Leandro stood across the room, staring at her as though she’d sprouted two heads. “How long has this been going on?”

It was the first time it occurred to Emilia that she possibly wasn’t in the best place for this sort of conversation. Her brain, usually sharp and quick, wasn’t keeping up.

“Answer the damned question, Emilia.”

She flinched a little. “It’s been—a while.”

“A while? A night, two, three? A week?”

She shook her head then stopped immediately when pain radiated through her whole body. “A month,” she said, finally.

“A month?Cristo.”

“It’s fine,” she reiterated. “No one needs to know. You can forget about it. It’s not a big deal.”

“You honestly think the fact you’ve been sleeping with a Santoro for a month isn’t a big deal? Do you think our parents will take the same view?”

“I’m not telling them, and you’re not either.”

“You think?”

Her jaw dropped. “You have to be kidding me.”

“Nothing about this is a laughing matter.”

“You’re telling me.”

“I genuinely cannot understand how and why this happened. You could be with any man on earth, besides a Santoro, yet you choose Salvatore? Honestly, what’s gotten into you?”

She flinched again. “Go and get him, Leo. Please.”

He stared at her long and hard. “Fine. Stay here.”

“Like I have so many other options,” she muttered. Because if she had, she’d have been up and out of the hospital in a minute flat. But she wore an open backed hospital gown, her clothes neatly folded and stored somewhere out of sight.

She had no choice then, but to wait.

“She’s asked you to leave.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Leandro shrugged. “Then you’re welcome to stay. She said she needed space.”

It was like being hit with an anvil. Every single cell in his body reverberated in surprise, revolting against that. He couldn’t leave without at least seeing her. Without knowing that she was okay. He couldn’t just walk out on her.

“This thing you’ve been doing, it was fine when it was just the two of you. But seeing my reaction, I guess it gave her second thoughts. She wants time to think.”

Salvatore’s gut dropped. It made sense. All the sense in the world. But in his heart, he knew that his own reaction had been the absolute opposite. “How is she?” His voice was gruff, strained to his own ears.

“She’s fine.” And then, with a heavy sigh. “She has a concussion and a sprained wrist. They’ll let her go soon.”

Salvatore opened his mouth to say something, to insist that she should come to his home, where he could look after her, but that sounded like the exact opposite of what Emilia wanted.

Space; space to think.

Wasn’t that wise?

Their month was almost up. They’d both known that. But having Leandro discover them in the stairwell had thrown every carefully laid plan into absolute disarray.

The certainty Salvatore had felt for this entire month—that they were on a clear path with an obvious direction—was now an absolute jumble of twists and turns. A future he hadn’t known he wanted hovered now, he feared, out of reach. And even then, he could barely acknowledge to himself that he did in fact want that future. Everything

was wrong.

“You should go,” Leandro said, and when Salvatore turned to look at the Valentino man, he saw him as if for the first time—including the bruise on his cheek. His gut twisted harder, at the knowledge that he’d done that to Emilia’s brother. Whatever else this man was to him, he was her brother, and she loved him.

No wonder she needed space. She’d seen into the heart of him—had seen what he was capable of. Hurting people. Hurting her.

Ice spread through his veins, but he moved to the nurse’s station anyway. “May I have a pen and paper?”

A pretty young woman with blonde hair and pink lips handed him a notepad with the hospital’s branding across the top. He took it with a curt nod and began to write:

E—I’mso sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen. S.

It wasn’t enough. It was far from it. But these were words he had to say. Words he needed her to hear. At least, to start with.

He strode back to Leandro and handed the note to him. “Give this to her.” There was no question. It was a statement, sucked from the very depths of his soul. “Please.”

Leandro looked as though he wanted to argue, but for whatever reason, he didn’t. He simply took the paper and nodded once. “Fine.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Okay.” Still he hesitated. He didn’t know what he could say to fix this. “None of this was her fault.”

Leandro laughed then, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “You think I don’t know that?”

Salvatore held his ground, but inside, his organs were in freefall.

“My sister is as innocent as the day is long. She is sweet and kind; she’s no match for someone like you, for Christ’s sake. You must have realized that.”

He’d been punched by this man, multiple times, yet it was these words that landed like a total body blow against him. Because he had realized it. In fact, she’d all but said it. She’d admitted her inexperience, told him why his own history with women bothered her. He should have walked away from this then. He should have walked away so hard and fast.

“If you care about her at all, you will leave here now, and forget about her.”

Salvatore fought that idea internally—there was no way he could forget her.

“She could never be happy with you. Not knowing what the price of that happiness would be.”

“And what price is that?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Salvatore waited, body tense, staring at the other man.

“There is absolutely no reality in which Emilia and you can be together, in which she is also a part of our family. It would destroy my parents, but that would be their line. So if you care about her, walk away. Do it for her.”

Salvatore’s entire body was in a state of paralysis. He shook his head, once, rejecting that assertion, wanting to tell the other man not to be so ridiculous. But then, every flash of conversation with Emilia cleared into his mind. Every small reference she’d made to her family, making it clear how close they were, how much she valued them.

“Give her the note,” he said, quietly, taking a step backwards. Maybe space was the best idea—for both of them.

He turned and stalked away from Leandro, towards the hospital doors, so didn’t see the moment the other man pulled the note from his pocket and discarded it in a nearby bin, without so much as reading the contents.

14

TWENTY FOUR HOURS LATER, finally back in her own apartment, Emilia figured she deserved some kind of award for her acting abilities. Leandro had refused to allow her to go home any sooner. Instead, he’d brought her back to the house he shared with his wife Skye and their daughter Harper, so she’d been subjected to Skye’s loving, well-intentioned fussing, and had been completely unable to contact Salvatore. Her bag had been left at the function the night before, and while Leandro had said he’d retrieve it, she couldn’t help but wonder if he was intentionally keeping her separate from her device, to stop her from reaching out to Salvatore.

It was obvious that his misgivings were enormous—and not likely to shift any time soon.

So she played along with their caring and compassionate looking after her, downplaying any physical symptoms even when her whole body ached and her wrist in particular was agonizingly sore. But the worst of all was her heart.

She needed to see Salvatore more than she could say.

Finally, back in her own apartment, she waited ten minutes—not convinced her brother wouldn't have sat downstairs with the car idling to be sure she followed his direction of going 'straight to bed', and instead hailed a cab, giving the driver Salvatore's address a little breathlessly.

The doorman, thankfully, recognized her, and let her straight in and up to his level, so moments later, she was pressing the buzzer for his apartment and then waiting, heart in her throat, with no idea what she could say to him. She knew only that it was right—and important—to be here with him.

Everything with Leandro had been a disaster, but it wasn't the end. It wasn't the end, by a long shot. Strangely, that arbitrary date they'd set now seemed ludicrous. The thought of walking away from Salvatore was impossible to contemplate. Not when she felt like this.

If there was any possibility he felt the same, then she had to tell him. She had to grab this with both hands. True, it was an almost impossible situation to navigate, but if they faced it together, she knew they could do it.

But the second the door opened to reveal Salvatore on the other side, his face bruised all over, whatever else Emilia had been about to say flew out of her mind. "Oh my God," she cried, rushing forward and lifting her hands to his cheeks, staring at him as tears filled her eyes then ravaged her cheeks. "Oh my God, oh my God," she repeated. "I can't believe it." Where her brother was sporting a single dark bruise on one cheek, Salvatore looked as though he'd been thumped several times over.

“It all happened so fast, I didn’t see, I didn’t realise. Oh my God,” she cried then, her voice wobbling. “I’m so sorry.”

He stood perfectly still, absorbing her words, just staring down at her, his dark eyes latched to hers, somehow bringing stillness, so after a moment, she shook her head in an attempt to clear the tears. “I’m going to kill him,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“Don’t,” Salvatore said, angling his face away a little. “Believe me, if that had been Sofia, I would have done the same thing.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she sobbed. “I know you.” She ran her fingers over his cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stop saying that. This isn’t your fault.”

“He’s my brother.”

“Yes.” His eyes shifted back to hers. “What are you doing here?”

She bit into her lip, her heart thumping. That was an excellent question. “I think we need to talk.”

His eyes roamed her features and then he nodded once. “Yes.” He stepped back, away from her, so her hands dropped to her side. “Come in.”

There was a formality to his tone she chose not to register. Or perhaps a caution. Either way, her own thoughts and feelings were crowding her mind, making it hard to hear his hesitation.

“I’m so sorry about my brother,” she said, when they were deeper in his apartment, hands ringing in her front. “He had no right?—,”

“I’ve told you, it doesn’t matter. I understand it.”

“There is no excuse for violence.”

“No.”

“And he should know that. He of all people?—,”

“Why?”

She opened her mouth to explain. To tell him about Skye's ex, who had been abusive and violent and made Skye live in fear. But it was a deeply private part of Skye's life, and she wasn't sure if it was her place to share it.

"He just—abhors violence."

"We can all do things we wouldn't expect, in certain circumstances."

"Did you get it checked out?"

"No."

"Does it hurt?"

He looked at her with an expression that was bordering on mocking, so she rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you're too tough to feel pain."

"It's uncomfortable to sleep," he admitted, as if to mollify her. "But I'm pretty sure I'll live."

A shudder ran down her spine at the possibility that he might not. That anything could ever happen to him, to take him away from her. And in that moment, she knew. She really absolutely knew the truth of her heart. It was like being struck with lightning, clear and instant, so she stood up straighter and stared at him, her whole body fizzing with warmth at the brand new clarity.

"I love you," she said, the words almost hurled at him. "Oh my God, Salvatore. I'm in love with you. I knew—I knew I didn't want this to end, but I didn't realise—I didn't know—I'm completely in love with you."

Salvatore stood perfectly still, except for his eyes, which seemed to twist and turn in

an attempt to make sense of her admission. It made her realise how stupid she'd been to ever think she'd loved Jesse. True, she'd been young, but she'd truly believed he'd made his way into her heart.

What a joke.

He'd barely scratched the surface.

Whereas Salvatore's very essence was deep inside her, writhing, twisting, taking over every cell and organ, becoming more and more a part of her, almost more than she could bear. But what option did she have? She couldn't walk away from this.

"I love you," she said again, and this time, there was a huge swelling of relief. That she'd recognised her feelings, and was saying them aloud.

"Emilia—," his exhalation was a sigh. Definitely less joyous than she was feeling. It was almost enough to put a dampener on her mood, but not quite.

"I know, I know. I know a lot's happened in the last twenty four hours. I get it. But none of that matters. None of that changes anything?—,"

"It changes everything." His voice was quiet but his words had the strength of steel. "You must see that."

"Why?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

He stood as still as a sentinel for what felt like the longest time, but was in fact probably only a minute—or barely a minute—and then, put his hand on the small of her back, guiding her across the lounge room, towards a sofa. “Sit.”

There was a command in his voice and she naturally bristled against it. Yet his concern was obvious, and when she looked at his beautiful face and saw what her brother had done to it, how could she argue? How could she argue with the way he was looking at her, like she was made of the most fragile of glass, and wanted to keep her permanently safe? What was that if not an admission of love?

When she was perched on the edge of the sofa, he crouched at her feet, between her legs, his eyes latched to hers, hands resting on her knees. “We have to end this.”

Not only was it the last thing she expected him to say, it was the last thing she could bear to hear. She shook her head slowly in an instantaneous rejection of that. “Absolutely not.”

“Listen to me.” His voice though, with that quiet, natural authority, rode over the top of hers. “Your brother made it very clear that in choosing me—this—you will lose your family. Do you think there is any way on earth I would allow that to happen?”

“It won’t happen,” she said, firmly.

“You didn’t see him at the hospital.”

She frowned. “He was angry.”

“And he will continue to be angry,” he insisted.

“I get that. It’s not going to be easy, but as he gets to know you, he’ll see?—,”

“He won’t. None of them will. If you don’t end this, and tell your brother it’s over, he is going to make sure you’re pushed out of your family.”

“You don’t know Leo.”

“I know men like him. Hell, I am a man like him. I saw the determination in his eyes, and I understood it. He meant every word he said to me, Emilia.”

He was probably right. But as she looked at the man she loved, she felt a swelling in her chest, as their whole future unfurled inside of her. The future she’d wanted all her life, and hadn’t known she’d ever be blessed enough to receive. “I’m willing to take that risk.”

He pulled back a little, his expression impossible to read, but it was clear those words were filtering through his brain, that he was thinking about them, trying to make sense of them. “I won’t let you.”

“You won’t let me?”

He shook his head once. “This isn’t worth it.”

The words were hard to comprehend at first. She knew they landed with a thud, that she didn’t like them, but it took her a few moments of letting them replay over and over in her mind before she really understood what he was saying.

“You mean we’re not worth it. You mean this isn’t worth fighting for?”

He glanced beyond her. “We both know there’s no future here.”

“Do we?”

“We’ve agreed that all along.”

“Yeah, but?—,”

He pressed his finger to her lips. “There is no ‘but’. Nothing’s changed. Your family is?—,”

“Everything’s changed,” she contradicted ferociously. “Once upon a time you were just Salvatore Santoro. I mean, we obviously had a connection, but I genuinely thought it was just sex, at first.”

His eyes bore through hers with the intensity of his gaze.

“But it’s so much more,” she finished softly, almost in a whisper. “Don’t deny that you feel it, too.”

He was quiet for such a long time that her heart began to splinter in the most painful of ways. She leaned forward, running her fingers over his bruised cheek. “Salvatore?”

His Adam’s apple shifted as he swallowed. Ice flooded her veins.

“Obviously it’s more than sex,” he said, finally. “I’ve told you—you’re so different. So—special,cara.The other night, seeing you at the bottom of the stairs, I couldn’t?—,”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“I’m fine,” she said, wriggling even further forward, until she was close enough to press a kiss to his brow. Gently, softly, because the moment seemed to call for that.

“But you could just as easily have not been. And I did that to you.”

“You didn’t. It was an accident. As much Leo’s fault, and my own, as it was yours.”

“I should have protected you.”

“It all happened too fast.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, with one quick jerk of his head, pulling away from her a little before standing and pacing across the room. In the luxurious, open-plan kitchen, he braced his palms on the counter, staring across at her with an expression that she could best describe as haunted.

“Make me understand, then,” she implored. Because as sure as day followed night, she knew he was holding something back from her. That maybe he’d always been holding it back.

She wanted to be close to him. To reach for him and hold him, but something—a preservation instinct?—held her still, bracing on the sofa for whatever would follow.

“I’ve never wanted this,” he said, quietly, but with determination. “I’ve never wanted a relationship with a woman. Casual, easy sex has literally been the sum total of my aspirations for as long as I can remember.”

“I know that,” she said. But they were different, she wanted to argue. They were so much more than what he’d just described. Was there any point, though, in telling him that? If he didn’t see it and feel it, would she ever be able to convince him?

“But what you don’t know is why.”

His whole body was rigid, as though steel had been poured through his spine. He was such a big man—strong and muscular, confident and authoritative—but there was something about him in that moment that made her ache for his vulnerability. She stayed where she was, half afraid to move in case it stopped him from saying whatever was on his mind.

“I was with a girl once—a long time ago. I let it go too far. I let her think it was serious. That I wanted more. Back then, I didn’t know I didn’t want more, I just knew I didn’t love her. In some ways, I was no different to Jesse.”

She stifled a snort. There was no way Salvatore would ever treat a woman the way Jesse had her.

“I used her,” Salvatore contradicted the words she hadn’t said. “Looking back, all the signs were there that she was more into me than I was her, but I liked her company, I liked sleeping with her, and on balance, I just didn’t think about what was best for her.”

“How old were you?” Emilia pushed, gently.

“Nineteen.”

“Still just learning, Salvatore.”

“It doesn’t change the effect my choices had on her. Melania was devastated when I

ended it, yet I walked away without a backwards glance. I'd moved on. Easy enough to do when your feelings aren't involved."

Sympathy twisted inside Emilia for the unknown Melania. She understood completely how hard it would be to get over Salvatore. A huge part of her hoped she'd never have to, but her inner-realist was starting to understand that there was a reason Salvatore had been such a playboy. It was entirely possible he'd never commit to a woman.

"You were so young," she reminded him. "I'm sure it hurt, at the time, but that's part of growing up. Getting your heart broken, learning from the experience?—,"

"She tried to kill herself, Emilia." His voice was hollowed out, so she knew that he still felt the trauma of that, deep in his soul.

She gasped, no longer able to stay on the sofa. She pushed up and crossed the room quickly, wrapping her arms around him from behind and pressing her cheek to his back. "That's not your fault."

His laugh was a short sound, totally devoid of any mirth. "She left a note blaming me."

Emilia closed her eyes, as sympathy turned to something else—anger. "You had every right to break up with her."

"I handled it badly. I was in the wrong, and if it hadn't been for a family member going to her house unexpectedly and finding the pill bottle beside the bed, she would have succeeded. I almost killed her."

"I'm so sorry you went through that. I'm sorry she wanted more than you could give. But you cannot carry that guilt around your whole life."

“It’s not guilt,cara.Not anymore. It’s determination. I made many stupid mistakes in my relationship with Melania—mistakes I have never—and will never—repeat.”

Something stitched inside Emilia as a hint of comprehension began to form. “That’s why you sleep around.”

“It’s why I don’t get involved,” he amended slightly, spinning then in the circle of her arms to face her properly. His bruised face was so earnest, so full of concentration. Like it was the most important thing in his life to get her to understand. “I will never risk hurting a woman like that again. I cannot live my life knowing that I’m the cause of that sort of pain.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“But Salvatore—pain is part of life. We all hurt each other, in one way or another.”

“I can’t hurt you.”

She closed her eyes, frustration butting heads with futility. “You won’t.”

“Of course I will. I’m only angry I didn’t comprehend that from the beginning. What possible good outcome is there, here, Emilia? If we stay together, you will lose your family—I cannot permit that to happen. It is not a choice you should have to make.”

“If I lose my family, it will be because of their choices, not yours.”

“And I will always know that you are unhappy.”

“I would?—,”

He shook his head, lifting a finger to her lips. “You say that now. But, in time, you would miss them in an unbearable way. I have heard you speak about them, I have seen the love and respect you feel for them. Every time you mention your brothers or your parents, your whole face lights up. I will never be the reason you do not have them in your life.”

“You wouldn’t be,” she insisted. “In choosing to love you, I’m doing what’s best for me. If my family can’t understand that, then that’s their decision. I wouldn’t blame you.”

“And what next?” He pushed, like a dog with a bone, evidently determined to have

her understand his concerns. “How long does this last? Another month? Six? A year? Can you honestly say that the longer we’re together will make it easier to separate?”

She frowned, truly confused by how much he wasn’t following her. “Who says we have to separate at all?”

He expelled a rough breath. “My past history.”

“You’ve just explained why you made those choices—but this is different. I’m different.”

“Yes.”

“So why isn’t it reasonable to assume the outcome will be, too?”

He cupped her face then, holding her steady. “I can’t hurt you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I don’t trust myself not to hurt you,” he amended.

“That’s stupid.” Anger made the words erupt harshly. “You’re a great person, Salvatore. A wonderful man. And I’m a grown woman, just like you said. If you hurt me, I’ll tell you, and you’ll fix it. If I hurt you, you’ll tell me, and I’ll fix it. That’s the way relationships work.” She lifted up onto the tips of her toes to kiss his lips. “It’s a leap of faith for both of us. But can you really think of someone else you’d want to take that leap with? Can you really imagine a world where we don’t?” His eyes stayed locked to hers, so the hope that had started as a small flicker in her heart exploded into a proper fire. “Do you actually want me to leave here, now, and never come back?”

She could see the fight in his mind. She could see in the way his eyes shadowed and his jaw tightened that he was literally at war with himself. It was a knife's edge moment—an almost out of body experience, because Emilia was aware she was standing on the precipice of something. Either way, she'd tumble over and into the rest of her life. It was just a question of whether Salvatore would be there or not.

“I don't want you to go,” he said, finally, slowly, closing his eyes on a wave of surrender. Not happily, though. She could tell how angry he was with himself for admitting that. “But I can't make you any promises beyond that. Just...stay tonight, Emilia. Stay tonight because we both want that. We'll talk more in the morning.”

15

SALVATORE WOULD HAVE LOVED to be able to say that clarity came with the dawn, but if anything, waking up with Emilia in his arms only served to further muddy the waters. Because holding her like this, seeing her sleeping face and remembering those awful seconds when she'd been at the bottom of the stairs, flat on the landing, and he'd had no idea if she would live or die, had been one of the worst moments of his life.

That had brought with it clarity. In that moment, he'd understood what he'd been wilfully ignoring almost the whole time he'd known her—that this was more than sex, more than a fling, more even than a relationship. It was love, just like she'd said. The kind of love that breathed its way into a person and took them over completely.

The kind of love that became your reason for being, your absolute everything. The kind of love that required of a person any kind of sacrifice. Because love wasn't selfish and it wasn't just about feeling good.

While staying here in his apartment and ignoring the realities of their families did indeed feel good, it wasn't the path forward. Nor was running around hiding this from

the people they loved most.

The only way through this—with any hope of success—was to face the music. And see what happened. Even then, Salvatore couldn't ignore the risks. Hurting Emilia was a possibility, but not an inevitability. God knew he'd do anything he could to avoid hurting her. And that meant being brave enough to give this a try. If he walked away without giving her that, he'd be hurting her regardless. Perhaps if he'd done the smart thing and left it at that one incredible night in Moricosia. If he'd walked away from temptation, knowing that nothing good could come from this, then maybe none of this would have happened.

But neither of them walked away. They dove in, feet first, and fell in love.

“Good morning.”

He had been so enveloped by his thoughts that he'd missed the moment she'd woken and blinked at him, all sweet and sleepy. If he'd had any doubts about how he felt, then the way his heart exploded at that sight would have convinced him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“I love you,” he said, because he realised then that he hadn’t actually spoken those words. That there might be some doubt inside of her, that they were on the same page.

Her smile was like the sun breaking out from behind the clouds. It was beautiful and perfect. So he spoke quickly, also needing to temper her response with the reality of this situation.

“But this isn’t going to be easy.”

Predictably, her smile slipped. “Why not?”

“Because our families are going to fucking hate the idea of what we’re doing.”

She grimaced. “Yeah...I know. Can’t we just...hide out a while longer?”

“Leandro knows. There’s no going back.”

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“Besides, I don’t want to keep running around, lying to everyone. The thing is, I love you. I really love you. In a way I’ve never known before. In a way that makes me want to take out a full-page ad in every newspaper in the world and shout I LOVE EMILIA VALENTINO! I’m done with hiding.”

Her lips parted in genuine surprise at his admission. But so what? He knew how he felt, and he wanted her to know it, too.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” he said, moving a hand to her hip.

“Yeah?”

“What if we were to go to Italy today.”

Her eyes roamed his face, her expression impossible to read. “Why would we do that?”

“Because it’s where our families live, and it’s time for us to tell them about this. Besides, you wanted to go for your birthday, didn’t you?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Do we have to?”

“Yes.” He didn’t want to expand on that. He didn’t want to tell her that this path she was choosing might seem less appealing, when they’d been through the ringer. Partly, because he didn’t want to admit that, even to himself. “Let’s go to Italy, my darling. Maybe our families will surprise us.”

Their families did not surprise them. Every single fear of Salvatore’s was confirmed, and every hope of Emilia’s dashed. There was no mistaking the genuinely vitriolic response they received. Nor the intractable outcome of both meetings.

Emilia’s parents had told her the same thing Leandro had Salvatore: if you’re in a relationship with a Santoro, you are no longer welcome in the family. He watched the woman he loved sit there and absorb those verbal blows, shrinking into herself with each tongue lashing until he barely recognised her. The moment they were out of the house, he pulled her into his arms and held her close, while she sobbed and cried, and his gut rolled with a sense of absolute devastation.

He was someone who worked to achieve whatever goal he held, but as he’d

suspected, this was a lose, lose situation.

He was braced for his parents' reaction, even when he hoped—because of how loving they were as a rule—for something better, and different. He'd even felt a flare of pride when they'd arrived at his family home—to be bringing Emilia here, like his brothers and cousins had with the women they loved. He understood now what a joy it was to show your partner the place you grew up, to share the memories that were so much a part of you. But that pleasure was short lived. His parents' reactions were almost identical to the Valentinos. While they didn't threaten to all but remove Salvatore from the family, they did promise him that Emilia would never be welcomed into their home, their lives, their business. They swore that she would never be mentioned, never be accepted, so Salvatore had had no choice but to stand up, take her hand and tell them that if she wasn't welcome, he wouldn't come either.

Even then, he'd thought perhaps that might inspire a change of heart from his mother. His mother, who had wrapped her arms around every stray, loved fiercely and proactively his whole life. Surely his threatened absence would make her wake up and see that Emilia deserved a chance.

It didn't.

When he reminded them of his father's favourite saying, 'famiglia e tutto'—family is everything—Gianni had simply nodded. "Exactly. And you are choosing the opposite of family. We can never forgive this, my son." It had been one of the worst moments of Salvatore's life.

They walked away from his family's house, and yet, in his heart, Salvatore was devastated. Not just for himself, and his parents, but for Emilia. It was impossible to feel anything but shell shocked as they left Italy behind—along with a wake of awful, devastating conversations.

For as long as he could remember, Salvatore's life had been interwoven with his brothers and cousins. They spoke daily, texted, video called, and worked together. It became evident very quickly that they had sided with his parents—something he would never have expected. But the anger and rage towards the Valentinos was so fierce, particularly given the recent corporate disasters the Santoros had experienced because of Emilia's family. But how could their families fail to put that aside?

It hit Emilia just as hard. Three days after leaving Italy, she received an email from her company's legal team—not even one of her brothers—telling her that she'd been removed as a director of her charitable foundation, and that the Moricosian deal had been taken over by another department.

Salvatore was outraged. He wanted to fight on her behalf, to bring his own lawyers into it, but she'd simply shaken her head and stared out of the window as a single tear slid down her cheek. Impotence had grown like a snake in his belly, twisting and spitting so for the first time in a long time, he felt his emotions burst through him in an uncontrollable way that he hated. Because what was the good of anger? They'd known they'd have to go through this. They'd prepared for it, as best they could. And it was worth it.

It had to be.

They left for Singapore the next day, to look at the land Salvatore wanted to buy, and in the back of his mind was the hope that with a change of scenery, the problems with their families would fade. That their original anger would mute in time, as they came to see that Salvatore and Emilia weren't going to be dissuaded by their disapproval.

It didn't work.

They spent Emilia's birthday celebrating as though nothing was wrong. Salvatore went into overdrive to compensate for the fact that the only messages Emilia received on the day were from her sisters in law, Andie and Skye. Both wrote lovely things, but neither of her brothers messaged, and her parents didn't call.

Weeks passed. They missed things. Other birthdays. Successes. Events. Dinners.

Each one, Salvatore felt like a stitch in his soul—not of pain, but of certainty. His fury at his family, for cutting him out like this, because he dared, for the first time in a long time, to reach out with both hands for what would make him happy, just made him love Emilia more, appreciating her for the faith she'd put in him by choosing to blend their lives. For choosing to love him, even when it meant this amount of estrangement from both of their families.

It was a conviction though that faded with time. As weeks turned into a month and then another, and Christmas approached, and Emilia began to make throw away comments about her family's traditions, her memories, and he saw the absences in their lives with more clarity, more feeling than indignation, he knew he couldn't leave it as it was. Not without attempting, once more, to resolve this.

For Emilia, he had to try. And that meant starting with Leandro.

After more than a week of leaving messages and making calls to Leandro, Salvatore arrived at the Valentino man's office, recognizing he had no other choice. While he'd happily go the rest of his life without seeing Leandro again, this wasn't about him. It

was about Emilia, and what he would do to give her everything she deserved. He needed to know he'd tried everything—even this.

“I’m sorry, sir, but Mr. Valentino is busy.”

Salvatore ground his teeth, reminding himself that the diminutive receptionist wasn’t to blame. “I’m sure he can make time.”

“I’m sorry, sir?—,”

“Let me put it this way,” he interrupted. “I’m going into his office. If that’s a problem, call security.”

He strode across the marbled floor without pausing to see her reaction, and then, at the double timber doors that led to Leandro’s office, he simply barged in.

And bam. Double whammy. Not only was Leandro in situ, but his brother Maximillian as well, the bastard who’d taken Acto from under their noses. He stared at both of them, rage and hatred bubbling beneath his belly. But amazingly, it wasn’t rage about Acto. Nor was it anger about the Moricosia deal. Every single shred of fury he felt towards them was on behalf of Emilia, the love of his life. The only love in his life. The woman he would run through the fires of hell for, if she required it of him. Hell, even if she didn’t.

And so, there he stood, staring down these two men who undeniably hated him, knowing he was just about to go through the most important moments of his life.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Max had been sitting, reclined, in a chair by the window, but he jack-knifed out of it as Salvatore burst through the doors, staring the other man down as Leandro strode towards him.

“I’m not here for round two,” Salvatore said, holding up his hands towards Leandro.

“Then what the hell are you doing here?” Max was now striding towards him, repeating his question with more outrage. “Haven’t we made it clear? You’re not welcome.”

“Oh, you’ve made it patently clear,” Salvatore said, dropping his hands and putting them on his hips, holding their gazes as though his blood wasn’t boiling with anger. He didn’t give a shit that these men hated him. It was mutual. But the fact they could so easily cut Emilia out of their lives, as though she meant nothing, made him question their sanity, intelligence and loyalty. It made him want to turn around and storm the hell out of there. But he’d come for Emilia, and he’d see it through. He’d do whatever it took, if there was even the slightest chance that he could make this better. Even just a little.

Because as certain as he was that he loved her, he knew that their happiness would never be complete like this. His first instinct had been right.

While they loved each other, and he didn’t doubt it, he couldn’t keep doing this to her. He wouldn’t be the reason she lost her family.

“I came to talk,” he said, his voice deep and gruff. “I came to talk about the woman we all love—who you’re destroying with this stupid estrangement.”

Max flinched and Leandro had the decency to look close to ashamed.

“Don’t you dare,” Leandro recovered quickly though. “Don’t you dare come here and act as though you have any right to even speak her name. What gives you the goddamn right?”

“I love her,” he growled. “Don’t you get that? I love her, and she loves me. We’re in

love. She is everything I've ever wanted in my life."

"You are the one destroying her, not us," Max said.

"How do you figure?"

"Youknew," Leandro spat. "I told you what would happen. I knew how they'd react. Family means the world to us, and you are destroying that. Do you have any idea what this is doing to our parents?"

"So help me fix it," Salvatore said.

"There is no fixing it. Not for as long as you are in her life."

"Jesus," Salvatore groaned. "Do you hear yourselves? You are pushing away your sister, allowing your parents to do the same to their daughter, over a vendetta from generations ago. Yes, things happened in the past. Yes, our families have always hated one another. But we can change that. We have to."

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“You’re a fantasist. That hatred doesn’t exist in a void,” Max growled. “To us, you may as well be the devil incarnate. We cannot have you in our lives. If that means cutting out Emilia, then it is as it has to be.”

“Do you hear yourself?”

“You think you’re the only one living with this? The only one suffering through it? You think we don’t miss her? She is our best friend. We loved her first, and we will love her always. When all this bullshit is over and she comes home, inevitably ruined by you and your family, we will be there to pick up the pieces. How can you possibly ask us for more than that?”

The reality they painted was so bleak, so unbearably bleak, that Salvatore stumbled back a step. “That’s not going to happen.”

“No? Then what is? What’s the end result of this? Do you think you’re going to end up living happily ever after?”

A whole future formed in his mind in the blink of an eye. He saw his life, long and expansive before him, and he saw his life without Emilia in it. He couldn’t imagine it. He couldn’t bear it.

“Yes. I think she and I have made it abundantly clear that’s what we want.”

“And is that what you’ve got?” Max demanded. “Are either of you truly happy, knowing what you’ve done to us? And presumably to your family?”

Salvatore absorbed that like a body blow, because it was so very accurate. Of course their happiness was marred by the awful truth of this betrayal. “I love her,” he said, simply. “I cannot end it.”

“Even when you know what we do?”

“And what’s that?”

“Emilia could be happy with any number of men. In staying with her, you’re making it impossible for us to be in her life. Are you okay with that?”

His gut churned. How often had he thought that? How often had he grappled with the reality of what their relationship was doing to their loved ones.

“If you love her, you have to walk away. It’s that simple.”

Salvatore shook his head. “Why can you not give this—us—a chance? You don’t know me. You don’t know what we’re like as a couple. Spend time with us—see that you’re wrong. I’m begging you.”

And if either Max or Leandro knew what it took for a man like Salvatore to arrive, cap in hand, and beg, they would have understood that it was absolutely everything they needed to know about his devotion to their sister. For he was not a man to debase himself and beg; he was not a man to plead. But for Emilia, there was no end to what he’d do.

“It’s impossible,” Max said, but his eyes showed, briefly sympathy.

“You have to understand,” Leandro said, with the same expression on his features—a look, for a moment, of compassion. “This is never going to happen. You can stay with her, but one day, she’s going to wake up and resent you for it. She’s going to

wake up and want to come home; and you'll never be able to give her that."

Salvatore's gut churned with a nauseating sense of loss—and the certainty that they were right. The worst thing was, he'd known it all along. He hadn't been ready to walk away from Emilia—he probably never would be. But that didn't negate the necessity of it.

"I love her," he said, because he needed them to understand that. To know what they were asking of him. And then, staring into their eyes as if his life depended on their comprehension—which, in a way it did, "Please, promise me you'll take care of her. Don't punish her for any of this. She doesn't deserve it."

Max closed his eyes.

But panic gripped Salvatore. "I need to know she'll be okay. If I'm not in her life, I need to know she's safe, that no harm will come to her."

"We would never hurt our sister," Leandro contradicted.

But that wasn't what Salvatore meant. The deep, dark fear that had dogged him for so long clawed its way around him, now. If he was going to break up with Emilia, he couldn't worry that her life would fall apart. Because of him. Panic surged through his chest, even when he accepted that putting her through this temporary pain would ultimately be right for her. Because she'd meet someone else, they were right. And then, she'd be happier, and have her family.

"Swear on your lives," he growled, "that she'll be okay. That you'll take care of her."

They stared at each other, all three of them, for several beats, and Max nodded once, before extending his hand. Salvatore regarded it, long and hard, knowing that to take it was to make a deal with the devil. Worse, it was to sign the death warrant on his

relationship with Emilia. He could hardly bear it.

Only the deepest love in the world would demand it of him.

He held out his hand, to take Max's, and he shook, firmly, with determination. It was a promise—and he felt it, deep in his gut. For her sake, he had to set Emilia free. He just wished he'd had the courage to do it sooner, before she'd gone through all this hardship. Before he'd lost his heart and soul to her.

16

THE CERTAINTY THAT HE had to end it evaporated completely when he walked into his apartment—which he now thought of as theirs—and saw Emilia. Wearing dark jeans and a black sweater, she had a camera strap looped around her neck, and the camera held to her face, as she peered through the lens. Her hair was pulled over one shoulder, and she was concentrating so deeply, she didn't turn when he entered. He stared at her, his heart shifting in his chest and thumping hard, so that every fibre of his being rejected this—what he was about to do. Every part of him wanted to cling to every part of her, forever.

“We need to talk.”

It wasn't how he'd planned to preface this. He'd intended to lead into it gently, giving her time to absorb it. But now that he was here, and he'd decided to do it, he wanted to get it over with. He needed to, or he'd back out.

She turned to face him, camera lowered, her lips quirking in a half-smile. “Sounds ominous,” she said, teasingly, as she lifted the camera back up, twisted the zoom slightly then clicked a photo of him. He didn't smile—he didn't have it in him. This was an utter mess, and he knew he was about to do the one thing he'd spent his whole life trying to avoid. He was going to hurt her. He was already hurting her.

A myriad of options ran through his mind. Ways to do this. What he could say. But each and every one had her fighting with him, fighting for this. Telling him she would choose him over her family a thousand times over. And what could he say to that? Knowing she felt that now was no insurance policy against the rest of their lives. This was the sort of rift that would become a ticking time bomb in their relationship. He could never know when it would explode—whether that be with a significant event that she was forced to miss, or if and when they were to have their own children, and she faced the reality of doing that without her own mother and father. He loved her too much to have her sacrifice that.

And suddenly, he knew the only way he could do this was to lie. Rather than telling her he was ending it for her sake, he would tell her he was doing it for his. That he didn't want to be with her anymore. It sickened him even as he knew it was the only way, even as he opened his mouth and said, “I made a mistake, Emilia. This is all a mistake.”

She waited for the other shoe to drop. For the punch line to land. She waited for those beautiful lips she adored kissing to twist into a smile and tell her he'd ordered Thai instead of Indian—her favourite. But the longer she looked at him and silence held, the more she realised he was serious.

Deadly serious.

“What was a mistake?” she said, carefully, trying to keep her voice level.

He took two steps further into the apartment, then shrugged out of his suit jacket. He wore a business shirt beneath it, and as she watched he unbuttoned the sleeves and pushed them up a little, to reveal his tanned forearms. It was such a familiar sight; a simple act he did every time they came home from something and he wanted to unwind. Her gut kicked in recognition of that. She loved his arms.

“Us, doing this.”

Her heart stammered. For two months, they'd ignored the elephant in the room, and barely spoken of their families. She hadn't told him when it had been her mother's birthday, and not seeing her to celebrate had felt like a knife in her chest all day. She hadn't told him that she'd been buying Christmas gifts for her family, even though she had no idea if she could possibly gift them or not. But he hadn't spoken of his pain, either. Yet she knew he must feel it, because he'd been as ostracized from his family as she had hers.

“Has something happened?”

His whole body was rigid. She traced the outlines with her eyes, knowing it was as committed to memory as any photograph ever could be to paper. “I haven't been in a relationship for a long time. I thought this was what I wanted, but I've started to realise: I don't.”

Her heart went from stammering to shrieking. She lifted a hand and pressed it to her breast, as though that would stop the pain. She hadn't regretted her decision for even a moment. Her family had cut her out, but Salvatore was more than enough. For her. Was he saying he didn't feel the same way? "You don't want this?"

His eyes held hers for a long moment and she could have sworn she saw anguish in them. She could have sworn he was looking at her as though this was the last thing he wanted to be doing. But then, "I'm not cut out for monogamy. I'm just not wired this way."

Her heart went from shrieking to exploding, coating her insides with sticky goo, making it hard to breathe, and impossible to stand. She took several steps back, until her calves connected with the sofa and she sank into it, needing the support.

"You are wonderful, Emilia. This isn't about you."

She laughed then. A horrible, hollowed out sound. "It's not you, it's me? That's what you're telling me?"

Again she caught a fleeting glimpse of something in his expression, before he dragged a hand over his face as if to erase it. "Trite, but accurate."

Every single moment they'd shared seemed to filter through her mind, like a thousand frames of a movie all jumbling on top of each other. Their meeting in Moricosia, the moment they'd succumbed to their chemistry, the way his hands had revered her body, and driven her wild, the charity balls, the hotel rooms...the way she'd wanted him and he'd wanted her. The moment he'd told her he loved her, with the morning sunlight filtering into this very apartment, casting his face half in golden light.

"But...you love me."

His chest moved swiftly at that, almost like she'd hit him. "I thought I did," he said, after an infinitesimal beat. She didn't notice the hesitation, only the words.

"You thought you did?"

"I wanted to. I tried. But I just can't do this." She opened her mouth to argue, but he spoke first. "I feel suffocated, Emilia."

"Suffocated," she repeated, trying to comprehend. Because the truth was, regardless of the awful situation with their families, she felt the exact opposite. With Salvatore in her life, she felt more free than she'd ever known. She felt almost like she could fly.

"I should never have said I love you. I should never have let it get this far. Believe me when I tell you, I will regret this forever."

Not only had the bottom fallen out of her world, she no longer recognised a single atom of it. She looked around and felt like the entire universe was out of focus. Salvatore's love had so quickly become the constant in her world, something she relied on and woke up smiling about. Everything else had become a complete mess, but knowing he loved her made it okay.

Suddenly, it wasn't their memories that formed a clog of images in her mind, but all the future memories she'd imagined them making. The house, somewhere, filled with light and laughter, and children of their own, that they would love and hold close no matter what—no matter who they chose to love, nor how they lived their lives. The future that had Salvatore at her side, no matter what.

"I trusted you," she whispered, wanting to stand up and meet his gaze more at his level, but not trusting her legs to hold her. "I believed in you."

“I’m sorry.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“You’re sorry?” she repeated, furious and disgusted all at once. And now, those emotions put fire in her belly and strength in her veins, so she pushed up to standing, looking around with a sort of wild eyed fury. “You’re sorry? I tore my whole life apart for this—for you—and you’re sorry?”

He stared at her blankly.

“Sorry is what you say when you swipe someone’s car or accidentally close the door in someone’s face. It is not enough to say when you ruin a person’s life.”

He flinched, but she barely noticed.

“Well, I’m sorry, too,” she said, finally locating her handbag and stalking to it, pulling it over one shoulder. “I’m so goddamn sorry I ever met you. I’m so sorry I ever believed—anything you said. I’m sorry I believed in you—and us. God, Salvatore, you are such a bastard.”

She was almost at the door when his voice forestalled her. “Emilia, wait.”

She almost didn’t turn to face him.

“Will you go back to your family?”

She flinched, the question so horrible to contemplate. “That’s none of your business.”

“I need to know,” he muttered. “I need to know you’ll be okay.”

And she understood that, because she loved him, and knew him. She knew his deepest fear was that she'd be like his ex, that she'd spiral and blame him. And for a brief second, she wanted to twist that knife, because she was so devastated. But her love for him wouldn't allow it, so she nodded bleakly. "Of course I'll be okay. Goodbye, Salvatore."

She woke up the next morning with the strangest sense of confusion. She remembered their fight but almost in that way that it might be a nightmare—a terrible dream she was now free from. But as she sleepily glanced around their room, she realised it was actually her room, in her apartment, and that she was alone.

Grogginess evaporated, to be replaced by screeching adrenaline. She reached for her phone, pressing a button and checking for messages. Nothing. No call from Salvatore, no text to say he'd made a mistake and could he come and see her.

Nothing.

Nothing that whole day, or the next. Nothing for the next week. Emilia existed in the strangest void, absent from everyone she knew and loved. Until, seven days after Salvatore had calmly told her he didn't actually love her, Skye messaged, asking if she was free for dinner with them that night.

The last thing Emilia wanted to do was see them. Her family, who'd caused her so much grief. Who'd betrayed her. Who'd ignored her wishes and cut her from their life. How could she possibly go and see them? It didn't matter that she adored Skye and Harper, nor that family had always been her guiding light, she didn't feel she had the wherewithal to make it through a night with them. Not now. Not after everything she'd been through.

Worst of all would be to see their gloating faces. To see their smugness, at having been right. At knowing that Salvatore was just like they'd accused him of being. To

hear her brother say, “I told you so.”

Emilia made up an excuse and went back to wallowing in her shockwaves of grief, determined to push everyone away, for now at least.

It was a strategy that lasted all of three days. Skye was nothing if not determined, and having got the bit between her teeth, she finally convinced Emilia to come over, using the most powerful tool at her disposal: her daughter Harper. Though Harper had been a toddler when Skye and Leandro had met, the entire Valentino family had wrapped Skye into their world, adoring her as though she’d been born to them, as though loving her was part of their reason for living. A simple text from Skye, saying how much Harper was ‘missing her auntie Emme’ had Emilia pulling herself out of bed and showering for the first time in heavens knew how long, finding something halfway decent to wear, and dragging a brush through her hair.

The whole way there, she was numb, but as her driver pulled up at the base of the apartment building in which they lived, her nerves went into overdrive. She’d been perfectly prepared to walk away from her family. That had been their choice, but alive with Salvatore had made it worth it. Or rather, it had been better than the alternative—leaving him, and keeping her family. Because Salvatore would never make her choose. Salvatore had tried to make it work, to have both her and their families in their lives. At least, he had in the beginning. What a waste of everyone’s time and energy, given how easily he fell back out of love with her.

Was she surprised?

She thought back to the man she’d first met, with all those preconceptions. The man who slept around like it was a world champion sport, as though women were interchangeable and disposable. After their first night together, she’d known how meaningless the sex had been, and she’d been okay with it. That was who he was. It was her own stupid fault for seeing more to him than was there. For hoping against

hope that he was actually a decent guy, who could be with a woman, love her, and even spend the rest of his life with her.

She'd seen what she desperately wanted to see. More fool her. Now she had to live with the consequences. Out of nowhere, tears flooded her eyes and she blinked quickly, with a guttural sound of frustration. She'd dressed like herself, because she wanted the world to see that. Why couldn't she hold it together, for even an hour?

She wiped beneath her eyes quickly and chewed the inside of her cheek. A moment later, the doors to the elevator swooshed open, right into the foyer of Leandro and Skye's apartment. She barely had three seconds before Harper was hurtling herself across the floor to wrap her arms around Emilia's legs. "Emmeeeeeee!" She cried, then, still hugging her, "Auntie Emme's here!"

Emme crouched down and wrapped the little girl against her body, burying her face in the curve of her neck, and her sweetsmelling hair, no longer trying to fight the tears. God, but she'd missed this. Family. Her darling niece.

"Emme," Skye approached them, a dazzling smile on her face, and tears sparkling on her own eyes. Emilia carefully detached herself from Harper before sticking her hand down for the little girl to hold. "I've missed you. We both have," she added, with no clarity about whether she referred to Leo or Harper.

Emilia's smile was slightly more reserved, but when Skye wrapped her in another huge hug, the tears were real. "I've missed you, too," she admitted.

"I'm so sorry about everything," Skye said, gently. "Believe me, Andie and I tried to talk some sense into your brothers, but you know what they can be like."

Emilia didn't get a chance to respond, because a moment later, Leandro strode into the room, wearing jeans and a sweater and looking considerably less bruised in the

face than the last time she'd seen him. A bubble of affection formed in her chest, but it was held tightly in place by the hurt of his rejection. It took seeing him, in that moment, to understand that his betrayal was not something she could easily forgive. For the sake of her sister in law and niece she'd try, but Leandro had crossed a line she wasn't sure he'd ever be able to walk back.

“Emme.” As if sensing her ambivalence, he hovered a little way away from them.
“How are you?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Fine,” she lied, tone clipped, before transferring her attention back to Harper. “What’s new with you, principessa? Got anything you want to show me in your room?”

“Great idea,” Skye enthused, clearly seeing Emilia needed a moment. “Why don’t you two go have a chat while I finish dinner.”

“I hope you didn’t go to too much trouble,” Emme said. “I really won’t stay long.”

Skye held her hand out and squeezed Emme’s. “There’s no such thing as too much trouble for you. Is there, darling?” The question was aimed at Leandro.

Emilia flicked a glance at him as he said, “We’re glad to have you.”

She ground her teeth, anger with her brother growing. It wasn’t his fault that Salvatore had fallen out of love with her. It wasn’t his fault that he’d been right. But she should never have had to navigate that alone. She should have been able to turn to her family in the midst of her heartbreak and lean on them. Rather than feeling herself to be utterly and completely alone in the world.

Thanks to Harper, she managed to make it through the dinner. It was easy to make conversation with a little person at the table, and they all seemed to employ the same tactic. At Harper’s bedtime, Skye stood to take the little girl to her room, which Emilia took to be her cue to leave. She’d gotten through dinner, but she wasn’t going to stay and be alone with her brother. She couldn’t bear it.

Every time she looked at him, she remembered the way he was with Salvatore, and

wanted to explode with rage. That he could hurt the man she loved...it all felt so wrong.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said, stiffly.

“Our parents send their love,” he said, as she walked towards the door.

Her heart trembled, and she whirled around. “Please, don’t.”

He frowned reflexively. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t pass on messages for them. They have my number.”

“Emme, you know why they aren’t using it.”

She sniffed and looked sideways. “Yes, I noticed none of you contacted me for my birthday. Thank you so much for that.”

His jaw tightened as he ground his teeth. “What did you expect?”

“A little support. Unconditional love. How foolish I was.”

“All love has conditions—you know the Santoros are a hard line for us. They always have been.”

She jerked her face away, sucking in a sharp breath at hearing even Salvatore’s last name. Her whole stomach contracted as though she’d been winded. “So, what? You beat him up? Kick me out of the family? Take my charities away, for God’s sake? My project in Moricosia, when you know I worked damn hard for that.”

He closed his eyes, and she thought she saw regret in his features. But none of that

mattered, anymore. The personal betrayals were the hardest of all to accept.

“He’s the only man I’ve ever loved,” she whispered. “Did you even think, for one second, what you would have done in my situation?”

He stared at her blankly.

“If Skye and Harper had been Santoros, would you have walked away from them?”

He took a step forward. “Yes. I would have walked away before it got out of hand.”

“I don’t believe you. I know how you and Skye met. I know how instantly you fell for her. I think even from that first night, you would have put your life on the line for her. That’s how love works.”

“And how did that work out for you? Salvatore turned out to be everything we said—that’s not love. You think it is, but you’re wrong. One day, you’ll meet someone who loves you back, and you’ll know we were right. Trust me, Emme. This is for the best.”

Her heart splintered apart, the grief so sudden and deep that she couldn’t think of a single thing to say. She simply shook her head and stepped into the waiting elevator. She stared out at Leandro wordlessly, with no idea if she’d ever be able to see him again. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“Emme,” he groaned, moving forward, but she held up a hand to still him.

“Just don’t,” she whispered. “I don’t need this.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I don’t need you.”

It didn’t even occur to her to wonder how he’d known about her breakup. She was

too busy being swaddled back up in the desolation that had become a part and parcel of her very soul.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

His entire family had spent more than a year watching Raf go off the rails, after the breakdown of his marriage and long term relationship. Salvatore's cousin had been to hell and back, and he'd gone from the mild-mannered, confident guy they all knew to a train wreck.

At least, that's what Salvatore had thought, until his own life exploded and he found himself on the same path as Raf—except, with a vengeance. As soon as Emilia had left after that god awful fight, he'd texted Leandro with the news that they'd broken up. It had felt important to put it into writing and have at least someone know the truth, but even more so, he'd needed to believe Emilia wouldn't be alone. He'd needed to think someone in her family would reach out to her, look after her when Salvatore couldn't.

As soon as the text was sent, he started to drink. And drink. And drink. He stayed in his apartment, until all the good liquor was gone, and then he simply ordered more in. He didn't work. He didn't look at his phone. He simply wandered around, then slept, then drank. On repeat, for days. After about a week, he started to pull her stuff out of their room. At first, he'd thrown it all onto the sofa and stared at it. A messy pile of Emilia, to be dealt with. He'd drunk then, too, and put on some metal music at full volume, so the whole penthouse seemed to reverberate.

When he was drunk, he thought about calling her. Texting her. It was only through an amazing act of willpower that he didn't. Sometimes, he'd wake up and reach for his phone, heart racing, because he'd dreamed that he'd weakened and sent her a message. And he knew that would be a mistake. It would just set them back. Even when the thing he wanted most was to tell her he still loved her. It was a particularly unfair byproduct of their circumstance that he couldn't at least give her that.

But it just would have made it harder to have the clean break they needed.

After three weeks, he text messaged Leandro again, in one of those drunk, weak moments: How is she?

He didn't hear back until the next day. She's great. Happy to be home.

Salvatore's gut had rolled with that. Had there been a part of him that had hoped she'd shun her family, as he continued to shun his? How stupid, when the whole reason he'd broken up with her had been to see her reunite with her parents and brothers.

After receiving Leandro's text though, Salvatore messaged his assistant and had the jet prepared. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him sooner, but there was no need to stay here, in Manhattan, where memories of Emilia were everywhere.

17

IF HE HADN'T BEEN SO drunk, he wouldn't have answered Dante's call. But his thought process was lagging a fair way behind his brain, so he swiped the call to answer without thinking, so his brother's voice came down the line before Salvatore could remember that he'd sworn he would have nothing to do with the family that had refused to see the value in Emilia.

His Emilia. His perfect, beautiful, kind Emilia. Just because she was a Valentino.

"Salvatore." Dante's voice was as familiar as his own.

Salvatore reached for his scotch, cradling it in his hand. He'd bought a mansion in Singapore, deep in the rainforest, and his view from the floor to ceiling windows was of a densely rainforest covered mountain with a dark storm cloud brewing overhead.

“What?”

Dante sighed. “I’d ask how you are but that one word tells me everything I want to know.”

He grunted.

“I thought you’d want to know that Marco and Portia have had a baby.”

He took a step back, shocked by how much that hurt. By how much he missed them in that moment—despite his anger. This was not an event he would usually have missed.

“I know they’d like you to be here.”

He grunted again, closing his eyes. ‘Here’ was London, where Marco and Portia spent most of their time. If Emilia wasn’t welcome, then he wouldn’t go. Never mind that she was no longer a part of his life. That she was doing ‘great’, while he felt utterly torn to shreds.

“Tell them congratulations from me.”

“You’re not coming?”

“No.”

“Salvatore, listen?—,”

He waited, eyes closed, so he saw Emilia and his whole body reacted as though a storm was incoming. He threw back the rest of his scotch then walked unsteadily towards the kitchen.

He wasn't an idiot. He was aware he was being seriously stupid to drink the way he was. To be ignoring the concept of food. But he couldn't bring himself to care. He was anesthetizing himself however he could.

"Yes?" he heard the slur in his voice and ignored it.

"Mum and dad never wanted this. You're a part of our family, and you know what that means to them. Surely Emilia Valentino will understand and let you see your family."

He bristled at that. "Emilia would never ask me not to see you."

"Then why are you staying away?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“Because,” he snapped. “If she’s not welcome, then how can I? She is the woman I love, Dante. Would you play happy families if we all cut Georgia out? Look at how we all put up with Marcia, even when we loathed her. For Raf’s sake. This was never about Emilia, though God knows she deserved better.”

His voice was thick now. He had no idea if he was even making sense.

“Emilia is a part of your life,” Dante said, quietly, calmly. “But she will never be a part of ours. I cannot believe you would choose to ignore the fact we exist...”

“Shut up, Dante,” he ground out, the grief like a wave, absorbing him. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“I know how we feel. I know?—,”

“Emilia is not a part of my life. We’re over.”

Silence was like static down the phone line. “Since when?”

Salvatore closed his eyes. “What’s the matter? Did you think I’d call my loyal, loving family for a heart to heart?”

“Salvatore—,”

“It doesn’t change anything,” Salvatore said. “I’m not coming home. As far as I’m concerned, you’re all dead to me. Lose my goddamned number, and tell the rest of them to do the same.” He disconnected the call with a jab of his finger then turned his

phone off for good measure.

Emilia was actually having a halfway decent day when she saw the headline and her whole world came crashing down anew. Sitting at the dining table of her apartment, a coffee and bagel in front of her, she was scrolling the online edition of her favourite newspaper when she flicked the page and saw: ITALIAN BILLIONAIRE HOSPITALISED. Even before she read the subheading, her stomach had sunk to her toes. Salvatore Santoro is in a critical but stable condition in Singapore after a high speed collision late last week. Little is known of the accident itself, though it's believed speed and alcohol were a factor. His family has asked for privacy at this time. Nausea rose in her throat as she scraped her chair back and ran to her room.

He didn't love her anymore, but she sure as hell loved him, and the thought of not seeing him, not knowing that he was going to be okay, was unbearable. Without giving it a modicum of rational thought, she threw some random clothes in a bag, grabbed her passport and made her way to the private airfield where their family jet was kept.

The flight from New York to Singapore took almost a full day. Emilia had practically dug a hole in the front of her phone screen with the number of times she'd refreshed it, looking for any kind of news about Salvatore. Her feeling of sickness didn't alleviate. She felt utterly at the end of her patience and sanity.

She practically sprinted from the private jet through the private customs terminal and into the waiting car. She gave the name of the hospital the article had referred to and then closed her eyes, focused on her breathing, trying to pull herself together enough for what lay ahead, even when her insides were throbbing with panic, terror and the fear that he might die.

It didn't even occur to Emilia until she arrived at the hospital that she might not be able to get in to see him. Being told that it was 'family only' felt like a kick in the

guts. She looked around, bewildered, wondering who she could call or plead with to get past the front desk staff. She paced the foyer, with no concept of how wild she looked, how utterly consumed by stress and grief. Her hair was long and loose, tangled because she'd hadn't thought to brush it since before reading about Salvatore's accident. She was still wearing the yoga pants and sweater she'd had on in New York, and her handbag was a bright red because it was the first thing she could lay her hands on.

It was little wonder that she drew attention. Particularly the attention of an immaculately presented blonde woman who, followed by two men in black suits, was click clacking her way across the foyer. Emilia didn't notice the way the other woman threw her a second glance then stopped walking, hesitating a moment before changing direction and approaching Emilia. In fact, it was only when Her Royal Highness Sofia of Moricosia put her hand on Emilia's arm that she stopped pacing and spun around, expression like that of a feral animal. Sheer terror and frustration were evident in her eyes, and her lower lip was dark and swollen from where she'd been gnawing on it.

"I can't get into see him," she said, quickly, without so much as a greeting.

Sofia, though, did not seem to mind. "Does the rest of the family know you're here?"

Emilia blanched visibly. "No. I didn't—no one called me. I just—I saw the article. I came as quickly as I could."

Sofia's brow furrowed. "I'm so sorry no one called you. They can all be so stubborn."

Emilia's eyes flooded with tears and her hands wrung in front of her. "How is he? Please, please, how is he?"

Sofia shook her head softly. "Come and see for yourself, Emilia. But I should warn

you, he's not out of the woods. You will find the sight...confronting."

Emilia sobbed then, pressing her hands to her mouth, and wondering why on earth she'd let him end it. Why hadn't she said it was fine that he didn't love her? That she'd take whatever crumbs he threw her way? Why hadn't she said and done anything to keep him in her life? What a waste of time they could have spent together.

"I don't care," she said. "Please, please, take me to him."

"Of course," Sofia said, and she curled her hand through the crook of Emilia's arm, perhaps because she could see how desperately Emilia needed the support.

"I found Emilia in the foyer," Sofia spoke, the moment they entered the room. Though Emilia's eyes instantly fell to the bed in the centre of it, she was aware, in the background, of various members of the Santoros. She dropped Sofia's hand, then, though, and ran to the bedside, a guttural sob wrenched from her at the sight of Salvatore. His eyes were shut, his face bruised, one arm and one leg in a plaster cast, with all sorts of wires connected to his chest, and a tube jammed down his throat. It was so much worse than she'd anticipated.

"Oh my god," she cried, reaching for his hand that was bandaged and touching it gently, careful not to dislodge the monitor clipped to his finger. "Oh, my darling," she sobbed heavily now, uncaring that there was an audience, uncaring about anything other than this. Her tears fell freely, her chest moving with the force of her grief. She didn't see the way the various Santoros looked at each other. The shame and guilt on their faces. And yes, regret, too. She didn't recognise the way they looked as though they would do anything to go back in time and fix what they'd done.

Because Salvatore wasn't just banged up by the accident. He'd lost so much weight even before that, he was a shadow of his former self. One look at him, and they'd all

understood: they'd chosen a path that would kill him. They'd forced him into a life he had no interest in living. And Emilia's arrival only added to the proof they shouldn't have needed—that they'd been wrong to separate two people who clearly loved and needed one another.

“He was hit by a drunk driver,” Dante Santoro spoke first, coming to stand beside Emilia, putting a hand lightly on her back. As with Sofia, Emilia suspected it was because he could see how close she was to passing out. As if to reinforce that, a moment later, Marco Santoro had brought a chair into the room and put it beside the bed, for her to sit down at. She collapsed into it and stared at Salvatore, willing him to wake up and look at her. Willing him to be himself again. To become the man she loved with all her heart. “It was early in the morning, Salvatore was driving towards the sun. It was a quiet road, perhaps he didn't expect to encounter another car. Whatever the reason, he didn't get a chance to swerve to avoid it, and this is the result.”

“Is he—is he going to be okay?” It took all her courage to ask the question. Silence fell. She looked around the room properly for the first time, her eyes sweeping across the various brothers and sisters in laws, cousins and cousins' wives, and finally on Salvatore's parents, who looked to have aged about a decade in the months since she'd last seen them, that awful weekend in Italy.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“The doctors are optimistic,” Dante said. But he was so like Salvatore that she understood what he was doing: speaking with a confidence he didn’t feel.

“Is he asleep?”

“He’s in an induced coma,” Marco said, from across the bed now, his eyes meeting and holding Emilia’s.

She sobbed, pressing a hand to her mouth, eyes falling back to Salvatore’s bruised face. Uncaring for her audience, she leaned forward and ran her fingers over his stubbled cheek and jaw, feeling his warmth, knowing it intimately.

Marco continued, “He had a moderate cerebral contusion and some mild intracranial pressure elevation. Basically, he hit his head really hard. His brain got swollen and bruised, and the coma is giving him time to recover.”

Dante took over, “The hope is that once the swelling is under control, he’ll fully recover.”

Her heart lifted at those words. “How long will he be like this?”

This time, the sobbing sound came from Maria Santoro, across the room. Emilia flicked a glance at her then returned her attention to Salvatore.

“They thought around a week,” Dante admitted. “So it should be any time now.”

“But he’s still in a coma.”

“His brain continues to show signs of swelling.”

“Oh, God,” she groaned.

When she started to cry properly, heavily, Dante looked around the room. “Let’s give them some time alone.”

She didn’t even register as the entire Santoro family filed out, one by one, leaving her devastated and crestfallen beside the broken body of the love of her life.

To Emilia’s surprise, the Santoro family continued to tolerate her presence. In fact, they were more than civil to her. The brothers and cousins brought her coffees, and food—though she couldn’t possibly think of eating—and made sure she was updated on the medical condition. After the initial shock had worn off, Emilia found she could be in the same room with Salvatore without bursting into tears, though she sat rigidly still at the side of the bed and stared at him the entire time, looking for any sign of life. Willing him to get well. To be well.

It wouldn’t change anything. They’d broken up and they’d broken up for a reason, but she just needed to know he would be well again. She needed to know he was okay.

On the third day after her arrival, they got the news they’d been waiting for. A scan confirmed that his brain swelling was down; they were going to bring him out of the coma. The entire family erupted at the news—tears, laughs of relief, and Emilia stood to the sidelines, staring at Salvatore and now, saying a final, quiet goodbye. It was what she’d been waiting for. She knew that with the swelling going down, his prognosis was the best it could be.

There was no point in her staying. No point seeing him, and risking that her presence might upset him in some way. She grabbed her bag while the family was busy talking

and making plans about who would stay and who would sit in the room for when he woke up. By the time they'd agreed Emilia should be there, she was already out the front of the hospital.

"Emilia, wait!" It was Sofia's voice that reached her across the carpark. She was tempted to keep moving to the waiting cab in the rank. But this woman had taken pity on Emilia in the biggest moment of need in her life. "Where are you going? Didn't you hear the news?"

She turned around, not bothering to check the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. These people were so familiar with the sight of her crying, they probably thought it was normal for her.

"I heard," she said, trying to smile despite the heaviness of her thoughts.

"Then...where are you going?"

"Home," she whispered, glancing over at the cabs. "I only came to make sure he was okay. I just needed to know."

"But...surely you want to be there when he wakes up?"

Her stomach lurched and grief bubbled through her. "I don't think he'd want that," she whispered, unable to keep the forlorn hurt from her voice. "We're not together, Sofia. He's just...someone I once loved." She shrugged her shoulders. "It's probably best if he doesn't even know I was here."

Sofia's brows knitted together. "Oh, Emilia," she sighed. "Be careful."

Emilia blinked at the other woman. "Of what?"

“Of not fighting for what you want. Of letting something special go, just because it’s scary.”

Her heart splintered. “Thank you, your highness,” she said, glancing back towards the cabs. “But that’s really not what’s happening here.” She felt a sob growing in her chest. “I have to go. Thank you for letting me be here with him. I – needed to see him. I really did.”

She turned and walked away, slipping into the backseat of the cab and giving the address for the hotel she’d had her suitcase stashed at. She wanted to get home, away from this, but first? She needed to sleep for a week.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

Every part of him hurt, his throat most of all. That was the tube, the nurses had told him. It was to be expected. Confusion dogged his thoughts, as he stared around the room at his family, wondering, firstly, what they were all doing. Then, where he was? And finally, why? The questions that pounded around and around in the back of his mind though was: Emilia. Where was she? Was she okay? Those questions he was familiar with. They were his first waking thoughts, each day, and his final thoughts at night.

He had no choice but to lay there as Dante explained everything to him. The car accident, the driver, and as his brother spoke, flashes of memory came back to him. It had been wet, and he'd been tired. Not drunk, thank god—he would never get behind the wheel of the car after drinking. Even he, in his recent state, wouldn't be that stupid. But he had been exhausted after more than a month of barely sleeping, not eating, and imbibing scotch like water, so his reflexes had undoubtedly suffered.

“The other driver,” Salvatore managed to croak out. “Is he?—,”

“She,” Marco corrected. “Is fine. She broke one arm, was in hospital for a night, before being taken to the prison and charged.”

“Thank god,” he said, hating the thought of having killed a person.

“It was her fault,” Dante stressed. “She was beyond drunk and driving like a maniac. You had no chance to avoid her.”

Salvatore's head hurt too much to answer. He lifted his fingers and pressed them there, wincing a little as they connected with a bruise.

“So, what’s the prognosis?” he asked, looking down at his body, seeing the wires, the casts.

“You were lucky,” Raf said, so Maria scoffed, tears running down her cheeks at the sight of her boy like this. “You have a broken arm, and leg, but both will recover quickly enough.”

“And you all came to Singapore?” he said, shaking his head.

Maria sobbed, and Gianni wrapped his arm around her. “We’ve missed you,” she said. But it was the wrong sentiment.

It reminded Salvatore instantly of everything that had come before. Of the way his family had pushed him into the worst decision of his life. If only they’d loved and welcomed Emilia as part of the family, he could have made his peace with her family’s rejection. But to have her left with no family beyond him, all because he loved her?

He closed his eyes on a wave of bitterness. Grief quickly usurped every other feeling of pain in his body.

“Let’s give him some time,” Dante suggested, gesturing towards the door. Salvatore didn’t open his eyes as they walked from the room.

“We’ll come back in a couple of hours,” Maria promised.

Salvatore didn’t acknowledge that.

He expelled a breath—it hurt. His chest felt as though it had been cracked open, too.

“You should know something,” Dante said, so Salvatore opened his eyes, frowning,

to look at his brother.

“How lucky I am?” because he sure as hell didn’t feel it.

Dante’s lips twisted to the side, showing he understood.

“Emilia came to see you.”

Salvatore moved to sit up, his entire body fighting that. But damn it, he didn’t want to be in such a recline as his brother told him this.

“What? When?”

“A few days ago. Salvatore—,” Dante’s voice trailed off and his lips formed a deep frown. “You are aware of the grief I’ve faced. The wrenching pain I’ve had to grapple with, and recover from.”

Salvatore nodded gingerly.

“I cannot say that I’ve ever seen someone so completely destroyed as Emilia was by the sight of you. It was...heartbreaking.”

Salvatore’s brain felt like it was swelling all over again. He angled his face away to stare out of the windows, looking at the view from the Singaporean hospital, without seeing it. How could he hear that without responding? How could he hear it without aching to wrap her in his arms and hold her against his chest? But what had changed? What difference did it make?

“It was good of her to come,” he said, finally.

“I don’t think she felt she had a choice. She looked ruined, bro.”

Exasperation fired through him. “What are you doing, bro?” he layered the word with sarcasm. “You trying to play matchmaker now? We both know why that can’t happen.” He closed his eyes. “And in case you’re wondering, this doesn’t change anything. I appreciate the concern, but as far as I’m concerned, we stopped being family the minute you all decided not to support my choices.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“I know.” Dante’s voice was thick with anguish. “We messed up, Salvatore. I don’t know how we can ever, ever fix that. I don’t know how you could ever bring yourself to forgive us. Let alone Emilia. From the moment she got here, we saw...saw what you were to each other. I’m so sorry.”

Salvatore hadn’t cried in his entire life, that he could remember. Perhaps as a child, when he’d fallen and hurt himself badly. But damn it if he didn’t feel his eyes stinging then. The futility of it all, the ruination that had been wrought, because they’d held to their ancient prejudice. And yet, through all of that bitterness and anger, he clung to the apology—and the meaning beyond it.

“I don’t know if you can fix it either, but if you’re willing to try, I can tell you one thing you can do.”

“Name it. Anything.”

Salvatore fixed his brother with a direct stare. “Bring her back to me. Bring her here just as soon as you can. My God, I need to see her, more than I can ever come close to explaining.”

18

IT WAS BOTH A WEAKNESS and inevitability that Emilia relented and allowed Dante and Georgia to take her back to the hospital. At least she’d had a chance to sleep and shower, and dressed in a fresh outfit—a pale linen dress that fell to her ankles. She’d swept her hair into a loose bun, and even applied a layer of lip gloss. But all that had been in preparation for her flight home. Not this.

And yet, when Dante and Georgia had shown up at her hotel and begged her to come and see Salvatore before she'd left, she heard herself agreeing. In truth, she wanted to see him awake and conscious, to convince herself, once and for all, that he really was going to be okay.

The car trip to the hospital was silent, besides a few polite enquiries the Australian Georgia made, in an effort to ease any awkwardness. Emilia found she couldn't bring herself to answer more than a single word. Not because she bore the other woman any ill will, but because she was far too much 'in her head' about what she was about to see and do.

Once at the hospital, they walked through the familiar corridors, towards his private room, and Emilia caught a glimpse of the other Santoro family members, in one of the lounge rooms. She didn't say anything, beyond a small nod of acknowledgement.

It was only at the door to Salvatore's room that she hesitated, turning to Dante and Georgia, who hovered a few feet back. "You're not coming?"

Dante shook his head. "You're the one he wants to see."

Her stomach fluttered with butterflies, but she forced herself to be brave, twisting the doorknob and pushing it inwards. The image he made was chalk and cheese to how he'd been the other day. For one thing, the ghastly tubes had been removed, and he was now dressed, sitting up in the bed. But he was still far, far too slim, his face gaunt, his jaw covered in too much stubble. While she was worried about him, and the way he looked, she couldn't help but recognize that if anything, it only made the beauty of his features more obvious—the depth of his eyes, the strength of his brows. She fidgeted her hands as she crossed the room slowly towards him, but hovered a little distance from the bed. Out of touching range, so she wouldn't accidentally forget that he no longer loved her, or belonged to her in any way, and reach for him.

“Thank you for coming.” His voice was raspy and a little slow. Uncertain? She swallowed past a lump in her throat, hating how emotional she felt. Then again, it was only a matter of days ago that she’d thought he might not survive—or if he did, know what condition he’d be in.

“I needed to know,” she finally managed to say, unable to look away from his face. She saw the way his throat shifted as he swallowed, as though it physically pained him. She understood; her throat hurt too, but from the acid of tears rather than the grazing of a tube.

“To know what?”

She hesitated. “That you were okay.”

He nodded slowly. “The thing is, I don’t think I am.”

She glanced from him to the monitors, then started moving towards the doors. “I’ll get a doctor.”

“No, Emilia, that’s not what I meant.” His voice was firmer now, more like normal. So much so that she stopped walking and turned to face him. Her heart almost leaped out of her chest.

“Salvatore,” she whispered his name, but it was a plea. A desperate plea to let her go, because being here with him under these circumstances was an agony. She felt herself withering inside; it was excruciating. “Please...I can’t...”

He closed his eyes then, those thick, dark lashes fluttering down over his cheek bones so everything ached.

“Just tell me this.” His words rasped once more. “Are you okay?”

She bit into her lip. “How do you expect me to answer that?”

He opened his eyes and stared at her. No, stared through her, deep inside her soul, to every twisty, turning pain and hurt. “With a yes, or a no.” Again, his throat shifted visibly as he swallowed. “If you’re really okay—if you’re fine—then just tell me. As much as I miss you—miss you so much I truly cannot bear it—I’ll be okay. Just knowing you’re okay. But either way, please tell me. Please, I have to know.”

The desperation in his voice was what sold her, yet she stayed standing where she was for a long time, her mind and heart in conflict, her brain torn between what she wanted to say and what she knew was right to tell him. In the end, the truth won out. They’d been through too much to lie. Besides, for all he’d fallen out of love with her, having been through this trauma in the last few days, she couldn’t bear the fact of anything happening to him and his not knowing how deeply she still loved him—and always would. If ever there was a moment for absolutely honesty, this was it.

“No.”

Silence crackled between them, static and powerful.

“No?” he finally responded.

She held one hand out, palm up to the ceiling. “I mean, what do you think?” She tried to keep her voice calm. He’d been through so much. She didn’t want to stress him, or do anything that might put him at risk. But how the hell could she respond? How could she adequately explain? “You broke my heart, Salvatore.” Her voice cracked, despite her best efforts to keep a level head. “You broke my fucking heart. You tore it right out of my chest, you know? I loved you. I chose you. I chose you over everyone else I knew and loved. I chose you, our future, the life I thought we would live together. And you just...you just ended it. You actually told me monogamy wasn’t for you, so I’ve had to live, for the last however many weeks, with the idea of you

sleeping with god knows how many other women, just like you used to.” She wasn’t even aware of the tears that were slipping down her cheeks. “You promised me the world, and then changed your mind. I mean...how do you think I am?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

The second she finished her tirade, she regretted it. His face was paler than it had been, his eyes more haunted.

“I’m sorry,” she said, spinning around, fumbling for the door. “I have to go.”

“Damn it, no, Emilia, please, don’t go,” he called after her, but she couldn’t stay. She wrenched the door handle inwards. “Please,” he called after her, and then cursed loudly. “I hate this goddamned cast. I can’t come after you, please, just?—,”

But she slipped out of the room, purely so she could press her back against the wall and slowly drop down to the floor, to rest her tear-stained face against her knees. She could hardly draw breath, she was so utterly spent, so emotionally drained. So devastated and agonizingly bereft. In that moment, it felt almost impossible to contemplate pulling herself to her feet again, let alone walking out of the hospital, so she just stayed where she was a moment, not caring who saw her collapsed like that, so long as it wasn’t Salvatore.

There wasn’t a lot Salvatore was grateful for in that moment. Except, he supposed, that the opposite arm and leg were broken, meaning with a monumental effort and a fair amount of discomfort, he was able to leverage himself out of bed and steady his frame against the edge of the bed. In the back of his mind, he recognized that it was probably a futile effort. Emilia was likely in the parking lot by now. But how could he not try?

You broke my fucking heart.

You promised me the world, then changed your mind.

No, he should have shouted. I didn't. He should have found a way to make her understand, but he'd been so moved by her obvious devastation, by how much he'd hurt the only woman he'd ever loved—loved so much he'd done what he thought was right for her, to absolutely his own detriment, he'd lost the ability to speak at all.

Inwardly, he cursed everything and everyone as he hobbled across the hospital room, towards the door. His body hurt, all over. He didn't care. At the doorframe, he had to rest a moment. He pressed his unbroken hand against the timber and stood, catching his breath, glancing down.

And he saw her. So vulnerable and perfect, so broken, because of him. So completely and utterly his other half. "Emilia."

Her head moved so fast, turning to glance up at him. Their eyes met and every cell in his body exploded.

"Oh my God," she moved with the speed of lightning, standing and putting her hands on his forearm. The second they touched, he felt it. What had once been a lightning bolt of awareness, and had morphed into a certainty of 'forever'. It was part of them. This chemistry, this love, this everything. "You need to get back in bed. What are you even thinking?" And then, her hands moved higher to his shoulders, and her eyes dropped to his chest. "Salvatore, what's happened? You've lost so much weight. Are you sick?"

His laugh was a hollow, thin sound.

"Come back to bed."

"On one condition."

"No," she shook her head, but he held his ground, and she didn't force him. Though it

would have been easy enough for her to push him to bed in his current state.

“On one condition,” he repeated, moving his good hand now to curve around her elbow. “Stay five more minutes, please.”

Her lips parted, gaping, as though she could barely fathom what he was asking of her.

“Five minutes,” he pleaded, betting everything he cared about on the fact she’d flown halfway across the world to see him, and that had to mean something.

“You’ll get back in bed and stay there until a doctor tells you that you can move?”

He dipped his head once, though inwardly, he suspected he’d keep chasing after her, for just as long as it took to make her understand why he’d done what he had. It might not change her mind, and that he’d have to accept, but he at least needed to explain, until she knew the truth.

“Let me help you,” she murmured.

He wanted to refuse. His pride almost had him saying ‘no’. But Emilia’s idea of help was to sidle up against him, lift his good arm around her shoulders, and attempt to take his weight as they made their way back to the bed. He could manage—with difficulty—on his own, but it was so good to be close to her like this, that he leaned into and held her right where she was. When they reached the bed, she helped him sit on the edge of it. Instead of laying back, he stayed right where he was, so she could stand right in front of him, at his eye height. It wasn’t how he wanted to have this conversation, but it was better than being basically prone on the damned bed.

“Five minutes,” she reminded him, so he had no choice but to quickly gather his thoughts.

What he wanted to say, immediately, was that he loved her. But he suspected she'd turn around and walk away, so he took a slightly more subtle approach.

“All I want is for you to be happy.”

She took a step back, wrapping her arms around her torso as though she needed the comfort, but at least she was staying where she was.

He knew the truth was best, but he suspected that in telling her about Leandro and Max's insistence that he end things, he'd be throwing them under a bus. If there was a way to get what he wanted without burning all the bridges to her family, he wanted to secure that.

“I came to think you would never be happy without your family in your life. I know what we said. But with each day that passed, and the absence from your life, I felt it. I felt your pain. I just...wanted to make it better.”

The sound she made was barely human. “By leaving me? By telling me you didn't love me anymore? By implying you were itching to go back to fucking anything in a skirt?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

The pain was instant, right in the side of his head. He felt as though he'd been thumped. It was just a response to her hurt, a physical reaction to the way her words cut through him.

“If that’s what it took, yes.”

She stared at him with a look of absolute shock, then held her hand up, palm outwards, in the universal gesture of stop. Silence fell. He sat still, and he waited.

“Are you trying to tell me you were lying? That you did that out of a misguided belief it was best for me?”

He tightened his jaw. Hearing it from her, he recognized how stupid it sounded. Of course, she was missing a vital piece of information. He'd gone to her brothers to win them over, and had gone away with only one possible path to win Emilia her family back. To fix what he'd ruined, by falling in love with the wrong person.

“I just wanted to fix it,” he muttered, lifting his undamaged hand to drag through his hair.

“But you didn’t,” she said, with disbelief. “You broke it. You broke me. You broke us.”

That was so final. So devastatingly absolute. “I didn’t want you to wake up one day and resent me. To realise you’d made a mistake.”

“Bullshit,” she said, tearing her hand through the air. “You just panicked. You’re so

scared of hurting someone that you go through life acting like some big, alpha male protector, and you took away all my agency. I chose you. I chose you, and that was my right. I knew what I was doing. I knew what I was losing. And I accepted that, because I got to live my life with you. The man I loved. The man I chose to be with. How dare you take that away? How dare you override my decision?"

"I know. I know. I fucking know. Don't you think I see that? Don't you think I've regretted that every minute since I left? But I thought you were okay. I thought you were okay. Better than okay, I thought you were fine. I thought...I really thought it was only me that was suffering."

She turned her face away then, sucking in a deep breath. In profile, she looked so utterly wounded. So disbelieving.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't," she whispered. "Please don't apologise." She turned back to look at him, her jaw shifting as she glared him down. "Why did you think I was 'okay, better than fine'?"

Damn these pain killers. He would never have usually made such a stupid mistake. Not with someone as intelligent as Emilia.

"Because I wasn't okay, but you sounded so confident..."

"I just presumed..."

"If you lie to me," she said, holding up a finger in the universal gesture of warning. "I will walk out that door so fucking fast you will never catch me."

The world tilted. He felt desperate—more desperate than he'd known he was capable

of feeling.

“I asked about you,” he said, a little hesitantly. He was still trying to work out how he could get through to Emilia without sabotaging her relationship with her family.

“You asked who?”

“Your brother.”

“Max?”

“Leandro.” To hell with it. He had to be honest. Emilia was right. It was her life, her family, and she had agency. She could do what she wanted with all the information. He wasn’t going to hold anything back. “I went to see him, that day,” he muttered, holding his hand out, wanting her to take it. But she didn’t. She stayed where she was, resolute, and his whole body throbbed with a soul deep need to fix everything. Not with her family, but with them. At one point, they’d been a team, unified against their problems. He’d split them up, and it had been completely wrong. He would never make that mistake again, if he could be lucky enough to get her back. That felt like an incredibly long way away, but he didn’t care. If it took years, he’d keep trying.

“I went to him, that afternoon,” he said, slowly. His throat hurt like the devil, but he wouldn’t stop talking.

“Which afternoon?”

He didn’t need to answer. He saw the moment she realized.

“The day you came home and said you didn’t love me?”

Shame curdled in his gut. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“To try to explain. To convince them to give us a try.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

She closed her eyes a little and swayed. Despite his leg cast, he moved so fast, standing and putting a hand around her waist. It jolted her back to the present. “I’m fine,” she said, but instead of stepping away, she put her hands on his hips, as though to steady him. “You went to Leandro?”

“They were both there—Max and Leandro. At the time, I thought it would mean I could win them both over at once. But they very quickly convinced me that there was no way you’d ever be happy without your family in your life. The thing is, at the time, I really did think I was doing the right thing. I thought about coming home and being honest, but I knew you’d just insist you wanted me, above anyone else. I didn’t think I should let that happen. So I told you I was leaving.”

She shook her head slowly. “I can’t believe it.”

“Can’t you?”

“You’re right. I can believe it. I’m just so angry. This was my choice. It’s my life.”

“But could you really bear living it without them?”

“If I had you? Yes. If I had you, I could bear anything.”

He dropped his head a moment, so their foreheads were impossibly close, but Emilia bristled, pulling back. She was naturally, understandably wary.

“I wanted you to be happy,” he said. “I didn’t trust that I was enough for you.”

“How can you say that?” she demanded. Not softly, either. She was angry. Furious.
“At any point, did I give you a reason to doubt how I felt?”

“No.”

“You were my everything, Salvatore. My absolute all. And then, you were just...gone.”

“When my car was hit, and I was out of control, skidding across the road, presuming I was about to die, all I could think of was you. I made every deal with God I could think of, if he would give me one last chance to see you. To tell you that I love you. That I’d lied to you, when I said I didn’t want to be with you. My God, Emilia, if you had any idea how much I love you...you think I destroyed you, by leaving? I destroyed myself. I haven’t known how to function, without you. And still, I stayed away, because Leo said you were fine, and I thought I had done the right thing.”

“I wasn’t fine,” she said, but now, the anger was gone, and the words simply throbbed with feeling. The hands that been holding him steady slipped, moving around behind his back and holding him there. “I wasn’t fine.” They stared at each other a long time, and then, she blinked away, her eyes moist. “You need to sit down.”

This time, when he sat on the bed, he pulled his broken leg up, and laid back down. But when his eyes held hers, he said, “Come here.”

He lifted his good arm, to create a space for her. It was more than an olive branch: it was everything. In that simple request, he was asking her to forgive him, to be with him, to move forward with him, no matter what.

“You are my everything,” he said, and then, she was moving, climbing up on the bed gently, careful not to hurt his broken leg, and curling herself against his side.

“What’s happened to you?” she asked, running her hand over his chest, where the bumps of each ridge were tangible.

“Well, let’s see,” he drawled, feeling more like himself than he had in months. “I don’t think I’ve eaten more than a handful of chips in about a month, so…”

She laughed, but it was a devastatingly sad sound. “Salvatore…”

“I was so stupid. So incredibly stupid and weak. What I should have said, that day, is this: our families will always be that—our families. They are a part of us, a part of our past, and they made us who we are. But the only person I need in my life, the only person I want to spend my life with, is you. If you feel that, then we need to accept this reality. And one day, if we are blessed with children of our own, it would be the sum total of my life’s wishes—to create tiny little baby Emilias for us to dote upon and adore. You are my family, and if you agree to let me be yours, then I will be the happiest man on earth. What I should have said, that afternoon, is that I want us to marry, just as soon as we can arrange the paperwork.”

He felt her body shudder on a deep sob.

“I should have said that.”

She shifted so he could see her face. “You just did.”

Something tripped in his chest, as though his heart had just short circuited. “Yes.”

“Did you mean it?”

“What do you think?”

She bit into her lower lip.

“Emilia, I want to marry you and never let go. I want you, with all of my heart and soul. I cannot care, any longer, about the families that would not care enough about us.”

And then, she was smiling, and it was the most beautiful, incredible sight he’d ever seen.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:57 am

“I love you,” he added, for good measure, so she was nodding, and wriggling up the bed a little, to press a chaste kiss against his lips. But how could he leave it at that? He held her there, moving his good hand to her cheek, tangling his fingers in her hair as his mouth claimed hers properly and all the sparks in the world exploded between them. As though fate and destiny had lit their own fireworks for Emilia and Salvatore, and the fact they’d finally recognized that they were in love.

“I love you, too,” she said against his mouth. “I was not fine without you, and never would have been. How could you think that, even for one second?”

He groaned as he pulled back, because despite his physical incapacity, he wanted her with the force of a thousand suns. That, though, would have to wait.

“What happens now?” she asked, gently.

“We get married.” There was no indecision, no doubt. Just a desperate need to cement this legally. To tell the world that while the Santoros and Valentinos might have been determined to carry on their ludicrous feud, Emilia and Salvatore were not.

“Yes,” she said, smiling that beautiful smile again. “And then what?”

“We live happily ever after.”

She rolled her eyes, but on a laugh. “Yes, but where?”

“Wherever you want, my darling.”

She bit her lip. “Anywhere you are.”

“Good answer,” he growled. “I did buy an amazing place here, in the middle of the rainforest. Private, secluded, and just about as far from our families as you can get...”

“Sounds like heaven,” she admitted, reaching down and lacing their fingers together. “But there’s something you should know.”

He could hardly think. The sensation of having her here was beyond perfection.

“Your family has actually been very good, these past few days.”

He shook his head. “Let’s not talk about them,” he said. “Whatever happens with the Santoros, or the Valentinos, should have no bearing on us. With or without them, we are our own family—you and me. And I couldn’t be happier.”

She sighed with obvious, blissful contentment. “Me neither.”

And she placed her head on his chest, snuggled to his side, as all the pain for their separation ebbed from his body, and hers, and finally, they were just as they were meant to be. Blissfully contented, and certain in the knowledge of having each found their perfect other half.

EPILOGUE

AND SO IT WAS, that three months later, Emilia Valentino married Salvatore Santoro. It was a quiet ceremony, at town hall, with their only witnesses being the couple scheduled to marry right after them. They returned the favour of then witnessing their ceremony, before going to—where else?—The Plaza for a private celebration lunch. Their honeymoon took them all over the world, and finished in Singapore, at the home Salvatore had bought whilst in the depths of depression and

pain, at a time when he could never have imagined living this kind of happy future.

Having seen the absolute hell Salvatore had fallen into, without his beloved Emilia, the Santoros quickly realized there was nothing for it but to support their son in his decision. Of course, it wasn't enough simply to support Salvatore: they had to build a bridge with Emilia, to hope and pray that they could eventually show their regret so that she would understand how wrong they'd been.

Suffice it to say, once the Santoros put their collective mind to something, it was almost impossible to resist. Each sibling and cousin was pushed into service, turning up unexpectedly with food, or gifts, asking for advice, or just wanting to spend time with the couple. Invitations for the family pizza nights came thick and fast, though Salvatore approached the situation with hesitation. He appreciated their apologies, and their obvious desire to include Emilia and get to know her, but he found it impossible to forget the pain their initial rejection had caused.

It was Emilia who ended up being the more receptive of the peace overtures. She was as unwilling for Salvatore to lose his family as he had been in reverse. Besides, decades of conditioning towards her family made it easier to accept their love—family really was everything. What mattered most, in Emilia's opinion, was their willingness to correct things.

Because of the closeness she'd once felt for her brothers and parents, Emilia found it hard to forgive them, even when they also tried to make amends. Once she and Salvatore were married, there was no escaping the permanence of this relationship. The Valentinos were faced with the reality of accepting Emilia's decision, or losing her forever. They couldn't bear the latter, and so they began trying.

Emilia, though, was wary. At the happiest point of her life, she couldn't bear to be reminded of the worst. She didn't want the bubble she and Salvatore shared to be burst by proximity to her family, who wouldn't love him like she did. She kept them

at bay for a long time, refusing to visit, to see even her parents. It broke her, in new and different ways, even when she was, at the same time, the happiest and most complete she'd ever been.

Strangely, it was Dante Santoro who broke through her barriers, once and for all. "I've been talking with Andie," he said, one afternoon, on the terrace of the Santoro family property. Once upon a time, Emilia might have thought of this as 'deep in enemy territory', but only months after Salvatore's hospitalisation, her view had completely changed.

"Andie?" she prompted, naturally confused.

"Your sister-in-law."

She almost dropped her soda glass. "What?" She leaned closer. "Why?"

"She says your mother has been calling. That you don't answer."

She glanced away, her cheeks flushing pink. "I'm not ready."

Page 71

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:58 am

He was quiet for so long, she presumed he'd dropped it. "I know a fair bit about second chances," he said, after a while. "About pushing people who love you away, because that's easier than accepting how complicated and messy love can be."

"Love?" she closed her eyes on a familiar shard of pain. "What they did wasn't love."

"Wasn't it?" he asked, but with sympathy in his tones. "You don't think they were protecting you from a future they thought was wrong? Isn't that a parents' natural instinct?"

She shook her head. "They closed me out. They pushed us away."

"Yes. According to Andie, that's something they have come to regret. They're desperate to fix this, Emilia."

"Did she ask you to talk to me?"

"Yes."

Emilia sighed. She wasn't surprised. Her sister-in-law was incredibly proactive with whatever she wanted in life.

"I don't need to remind you what she lost. She is seeing your mother suffer, while knowing she would do and give anything for more time with her own mother."

Emilia made a sound. "That's a low blow."

“I’m just the messenger.”

Emilia bit into her lower lip, returning her gaze to the view.

“You’re in Italy for the next week, right?”

She sighed softly. Dante knew she was—it was the launch of the charity she and Salvatore had created. This time, no one would remove her from the work she loved. She was embedded into the foundation, and always would be. “Yes.”

“You could go see them.”

She closed her eyes on a wave of yearning. To walk in the front door of her home and hug her parents, like she always had. To be home. But home with Salvatore at her side...it was the only way she’d ever consider going.

“I wouldn’t do that. Not without my husband.”

“So take him,” Dante pushed. “And see what happens.”

She’d already done that, though, and their reaction had broken her. “I’ll think about it,” she lied.

She’d thought the conversation was over, but evidently, he’d had the same exchange with Salvatore, because two days later, after much arm twisting, they were pulling up outside her family home. Emilia’s insides were a jittery mess, but all it took was one touch from Salvatore, a glance at his face, and his reassuring words, “Whatever happens, we’ve got this,” as he lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss there.

Butterflies overtook the tension in her stomach and she nodded, finding her smile natural. “You’re all that I want.”

“Then think of this as the cherry on top. Ready?”

She wasn't. She hated the thought that they might be rude to him, or reject him outright. There was only one way to know for sure, though.

This time, her parents, thankfully, did surprise her. From the moment they opened the door, it was clear that their estrangement from Emilia had completely changed their thoughts about the situation. Her mother's apology was the first words she spoke—and she repeated it often, tearfully, throughout the afternoon. Her father was like his usual self, talking to Salvatore as though he was any man off the street, rather than a Santoro. Starting fresh. Giving him a chance, just as Emilia had begged them to.

“Darling,” her mother found Emilia in the garden to the side of the house, after lunch.

Emilia startled, then turned slowly. “I was just remembering how much I used to love sitting out here, on a sunny morning.”

“Always picking flowers and making them into chains,” her mother said, a tear sliding down one of her creased cheeks. She came to stand directly in front of Emilia, her lips moving as though she was trying to speak, and not able to.

Emilia waited, her heart hurting for her mother, for their past, for what both the Santoros and Valentinos had put them through.

“When you are a mother, you'll see,” she said. “It's not easy. Parenting is a constant chain reaction of decisions. We've tried. We've always tried. With Leo...not telling him he was adopted...it came from here,” she pressed her fingers to her chest. “Because we loved him, and we just wanted him to be happy. With you...you are my daughter. You have been my best friend from as soon as you could talk. You have followed me around, my little shadow, and I have always been so proud of you.”

Emilia closed her eyes against what was coming. The disappointment her mother had felt, when she'd fallen for a Santoro.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:58 am

“That afternoon, when you brought him here, all I could think was that I’d lost you. And to the Santoros. I couldn’t see any future where you and he could be happy—I saw him only as one of them.” She shook her head. “I wanted to protect you. To force you to choose us. I didn’t realise...I didn’t trust...that you were capable of making the decision that was right for you. It was the worst mistake of my life. I thought you would come to your senses, that you would miss me as much as I was missing you, and it would force you to wake up and realise you didn’t want to lose us, for him.”

She sobbed then. “I didn’t want to lose anybody.”

“You shouldn’t have had to. I was blind that afternoon. Blinded by surprise and concern, by my fears and what I thought your life should be. The day Leo and Max told me he’d gone to them, to beg them to give him a chance, that he loved you as much as we could ever have hoped your partner to.”

Emilia nodded. “Yes.”

“I tried to reach out to you, but you wouldn’t take my calls. You wouldn’t see me.”

“I was dying inside. I couldn’t bear to see anyone, let alone...”

“The people who’d caused your misery,” her mother murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

Emilia blinked quickly. She didn’t want to fight with her mother. She didn’t want to fight with anyone. And strangely, it was Gianni Santoro who came to her in that moment, Salvatore’s father, with his *Famiglia é tuttoidiom*, that he said so often.

“We were wrong about him. He might be a Santoro, but he is still one of the best men I’ve ever met. And he worships you. I could not have asked for a better husband for my beautiful daughter. The same could not be said for her mother,” she finished, bowing her head then on a sob.

“Oh, mama,” Emilia cried, shaking her head and reaching out, wrapping her crying mother into her arms and drawing her to her chest. “Stop, stop. It’s done. It’s in the past. I hate what you all did, I hated being apart from our family, but it’s over. Seeing you and dad with Salvatore today—it’s meant a lot to me. Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t have to thank us for this. We should have?—,”

“No,” Emilia interrupted, pulling back so she could look sternly into her mother’s face. “No more apologies, no more regrets. We’re here. We’re family.” And then, in a split second decision, she told her mother something she hadn’t even told Salvatore yet. Something she’d been saving for after the opening of their foundation. “And in about eight months, you’re going to be a nonna again...”

The launch of their foundation was monumental for many reasons, not least because for the first time in generations, every single Santoro and Valentino were in the same location, and no threats were issued, no blood was spilled. Even Raf was there, though he had a scotch glass in hand and a brooding expression on his face. He was still there, and that was more than they’d come to be able to rely on, lately.

Everyone was on their very best behaviour.

It helped that both families had faced the reality of what their meddling had caused. They’d seen the damage their reaction had done to two people they adored, and would never risk causing harm to either Emilia or Salvatore again. Leandro was particularly contrite, when he and Max found a moment to speak to Salvatore, away from anyone else.

“You don’t know me,” he said, eyes glinting as they met Salvatore’s. “My world has been shaken, in the past couple of years. I’m sure Emme’s told you about my adoption.”

Salvatore tipped his head once in silent confirmation of that.

“And then, I met Andie. Has Emme mentioned what happened with her and Harps?”

Salvatore frowned, shaking his head slightly.

Leandro looked at Max, then back to Salvatore. “She’d come out of a bad relationship. It was dangerous. I thought I’d lose her, and Harper.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I guess it made me hyper-vigilant. Overnight, my sole purpose in life became protecting the people I loved, and I wastoo stupid to see that Emilia really didn’t need protecting from you.”

Salvatore didn’t visibly react, even as inside something was thawing.

“The way you were, in the stairwell. Looking back, it was so obvious. You didn’t just protect her, you encouraged her to speak for herself, to be her own advocate. You had her back, but only if she needed it.” He shook his head once. “You understood my own sister far better than I ever did.” Leo closed his eyes then, on a wave of obvious regret. “But you’re a Santoro, so I’ll never really like you, obviously,” he finished, with a flick of a grin.

Salvatore arched a brow as he held out his hand. Leandro put his own in it immediately and said, “I’m sorry. I was a dick.”

“Yeah,” Salvatore nodded once. “But as I said to Emilia at the time, I would have reacted in the same way, if it was my sister.”

Max cleared his throat. “This is all very touching, but she’s about to start speaking.”

Salvatore dropped Leo's hand and turned to Max as the oldest Valentino extended his own. "Don't hurt her," he said, simply.

Salvatore's eyes narrowed as he extended his hand to Max. "I could say the same to you." Then, he was cutting through the crowd, to the side of the stage, where his beautiful wife was standing and addressing the crowd, all sparkly eyes and enthusiasm for the first charitable initiatives their foundation would be working on.

He listened in awe, captivated by her enthusiasm, intelligence and passion. Captivated utterly and completely, by her.

He was not alone. It was as if Emilia, in speaking, was casting a spell. The entire room was transfixed by her. When Salvatore could bring himself to tear his eyes away, and look out over the crowd, he easily picked his own family, staring back at her with proud smiles, and then, her own family, equally puffed up and beaming.

His heart clanked heavily in his chest. Never, in a million years, had he thought this was possible, but she had. She'd fought for this all along. And even without their families, she'd always said: he was enough. She'd been right. Together, they were unstoppable, and always would be.

THE END