



# The Don's Proposal

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

**Description:** Breaking into Santino Bertelli's office was supposed to be my redemption—a chance to prove myself to a family that's never truly seen me as one of their own. My brother's ultimatum was simple: bring back dirt on Santino, or don't bother coming home.

The man himself catches me red-handed going through his office.

He's furious when he hears my last name, his dark eyes promising retribution. I brace for the worst, but instead of killing me, he does something I never saw coming.

He keeps me—for his own ultimatum. To kill my brother.

Now I'm trapped in the lion's den, held captive by a man as ruthless as he is magnetic. He says I belong to him now, and the terrifying part? A twisted, reckless part of me wants to believe him.

Once he starts offering a life I could only dream of, I fight between leaving those who share my last name, and joining the man who wants to give me his.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

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1

Camellia

Music plays from the speakers up ahead. Thanks to the subwoofers, the bass throbs deep enough that I can feel it in my bones, and the beats per minute matches my heart rate.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

My heart is pounding like a drum solo that only ends once my poor organ gives out. At nineteen years old, I have my entire life ahead of me. Well, maybe. That may change depending on how the end of this night is going to go.

As long as my identity remains undiscovered, I feel safe. However, if someone were to figure out who I truly am, it could lead to devastating consequences that might prematurely end my youth.

I have a single task with little choice in the matter. Sneak into the enemy's territory, and retrieve the information my brother needs. As straightforward as it sounds. In and out with no mistakes.

Only, I think Rocco sent the wrong person to get what he needs. That, or he picked the most disposable person at his fingers.

With a trembling glass of mixed liquor clutched tightly in my shaking fingers, I attempt to steady my quaking knees and keep them from wobbling uncontrollably.

Everyone around me is laughing and enjoying the festivities while I stand here, fighting the start of a cold sweat.

I need to move. Now is no time to act like a wallflower or a skittish animal. I need to act more confidently, as if I belong with these criminals.

No one attends a Santino Bertelli party unless they've got a taste for breaking laws. Drug trafficking discussions happen as casually as chatting about the weather. Men pass around women, willing ones, I hope. Who is to say? They giggle and laugh as hungry hands grope their body parts, so I can only assume.

The shadowy corners are safest, but I can't imagine what would happen if someone caught me alone. It's not worth the risk, not when I have a mission to take care of. The place I'm sneaking off to is the most dangerous place around here.

As a chill rolls up my spine at the thought of the inevitable, I try to find something to distract myself with. Something to reassure me I stand a chance at making it out alive.

Instead, I spot my target. Once I lock onto him, it's impossible to look away. My eyes are drawn to the host of this event, his captivating presence pulling me in like a magnet to metal.

There he is, the man of the hour. Santino Bertelli.

Dark eyes roam the room, his attention on those around him. Scanning and searching, they constantly move, never stopping on just one person. Someone has him deep in conversation, but he doesn't look interested. With each sip of his drink, I expect him to jerk his chin and look my way without warning. Maybe he senses something is wrong, and he's just waiting for me to slip. Waiting for me to give myself away in front of these people so he can make an example out of me.

Santino Bertelli is not a man to go against. Or so I've heard.

He wears black dress slacks, and a matching waistcoat, neatly fastened with jeweled buttons. It wouldn't surprise me if they were diamonds. As a man of business, not even a party can stop him from wearing a crimson red tie. Just a shade brighter than the blood he spills with the snap of his fingers, a shiver rolls up my spine at the reminder of just how dangerous this man really is.. Dazzled in jewelry, the rings on each finger matches the buttons on his waistcoat.

The only element of his appearance suggesting relaxation is his casually rolled-up dress shirt sleeves, revealing muscular arms with faint veins under smooth skin, conveying both strength and relaxed confidence.

He'd never expect someone brave enough to infiltrate his home to look for secrets. It's why he doesn't look bothered in the slightest by having these people in his home at this ungodly hour.

I avoid making eye contact with him, especially if I want to stay unnoticed. Instead of forgetting how to walk as I get lost in the view, I push forward.

My brother made one thing clear. If I am discovered, I am better off biting off my tongue or grabbing one of their guns to take myself out before they can get the chance to get any information out of me. Despite not really knowing much, it's a risk he's not willing to take.

In other words, he'd rather I take my life than allow his enemy to get the upper hand.

Rocco has never won the brother of the year award in the last five years he'd taken over the 'family business'. Given his callous disregard for others, I can't say I'm shocked by his cruelty. He could have sent anyone to do his dirty work, yet I'm the one here.

Squeezed in a dress that shows off more skin than I'm used to, I continuously have to fight off the urge to cover myself away from any wandering eyes.

My sister was nice enough to paint my face, murmuring soft promises that everything would be all right. Helped put in my contacts too, changing the one thing that stands out the most about my identity, and makes me feel unique.

Rocco would never risk sending Eliza here. She possesses an undeniable beauty, and is far too well-known. There's no chance she could pass by the sprawling iron bars that adorn the estate without being recognized.

Taking another sip of my drink, it feels heavy in my stomach as I drift across the room. When the glass becomes empty, I quickly swap it out with a refill when someone passes with a tray.

As someone who doesn't drink alcohol often, I know I can't go crazy. My skin is already flushed beneath my dress, but the nerves are still there. Right now, I'm in a pretty good spot.

I need to focus.

## Page 2

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I look for all the exits in the room. To my surprise, there isn't a guard with a gun at every door. With the reputation of the Bertelli family, I expected a bit more protection. Then again, I don't know what is on the other side of each closed door.

A door leads to the front of the home, promising a swift escape if I decide I want to leave empty-handed, and accept being a failure in my brother's eyes. He's called me worse. Though, I think he may truly abandon me if I mess this up.

Focus, Camellia.

A large grand staircase is further out, with a few partygoers sitting on the steps while enjoying each other's company. I sure hope my destination isn't up there. The heels I am wearing wouldn't make it to the top.

Two open hallways divot from the stairs, leading deeper into the home. Darkness swallows up each one, promising the unknown. I am sure it's helping keep any guests from wandering off, and it's working. My heart is sinking into my stomach from thinking about going down one of them.

No other doors are within my sight.

Okay. I'm either going to do this, or I'm not. With little choice in the matter, I throw back my drink, and hope it'll give me the confidence I need.

Abandoning the flute on a nearby table next to a worn potted plant, I head toward the staircase. With only one shot and three different paths to take, the chance of finding all the Bertelli secrets are slim without getting caught trying to go a second round.

Luck typically isn't on my side, but I have no choice but to put all of my faith in it. Between the three, I pick the right hallway. Glancing over my shoulder, I look around to see if I've caught any unwanted attention.

Everyone here is so deeply engrossed in their own lives that I doubt a random woman could ever shift their focus.

Seemingly in the clear, I move. Heading toward the unknown, the darkness swallows me up. The music fades with each step, and I reach out to use the wall to guide me. Fingertips gliding against the surface, I graze against door knobs. It's a hall full of them.

No surprise there. This is a mansion, after all. I can only hope that these rooms aren't occupied.

Before I try to turn any handle, I stop for five seconds and hold my breath while waiting for any signs of life. The handles that aren't locked, I slowly turn each knob and peek in.

It's almost laughable how many bathrooms I find. At least I have an excuse for why I'm here. Though, the deeper I roam, the less the lie will be believable.

Up ahead, there is a glow of light slipping past a set of double doors. Carefully approaching, I hear what sounds like the clash of metal pans. A kitchen, possibly? I don't dare peek in, even if my curiosities want to get the best of me.

There's no surprise if Santino Bertelli has hired help in his home. His own personal chef, or an entire team, for all I know. There are many men here who need to be taken care of.

Rocco pays these sweet older women to cook meals for our family. Gaile is generous

enough to sneak me a dessert whenever they have extra. She's got the biggest backbone, second compared to my sister. She'll click her tongue before huffing and puffing if he tries to stop her.

Moving on, I continue trying every door I can. Only once at the sudden approach of steps do I have to frantically slip inside another bathroom. There are a couple of guards. My guess is that most are outside patrolling. Maybe my luck is turning around.

Even more so when I open another room to finally find what I am looking for. Or what I hope to be.

Rocco said to look for an office, and I've never seen one without a desk. The moonlight seeping in from the large windows reveals more than just the outline of the desk.

If the office reflects the owner, I'm certain this is Santino's workplace. All dark and pristine. This is where I need to be. Entering quietly, I close the door behind me. Navigating through the shadows, I make my way to the windows and steal a glance at the view.

The sky stretches above me, a vast canvas of deep indigo, unblemished by clouds and free from the glow of city lights. Countless stars twinkle like scattered diamonds, their brilliance palpable in the quiet desolation of this remote place. While this view might seem ordinary to some, to me, it's nothing short of magical; it leaves me breathless, a reminder of the beauty that exists in solitude.

It's such a pity that I have to untie the curtain's knots and close them. I wish I didn't have to obscure something so beautiful just to turn on the lamp on the desk.

As the room fills with light, I don't waste any time standing around. Pushing the



leather seat out of my way, the wheels guild it a few feet away. Opening drawers, I dig out anything I can find. There are so many papers.

Most of them land on the desk, immediately growing disorganized. Some catch the slightest gust of air and fall behind me.

It doesn't matter if I leave evidence as long as they don't know who came inside here. That, or my brother wants him to know he's got the upper hand. I don't know.

Rocco wants pictures of everything that looks important. He didn't have the patience to sit me down and explain what could be what. Instead, he urged me to get whatever I can.

Pulling my phone out of my bra, my fingers tremble as I try to open up my camera app. Much to my dismay, the device slips from my grasp and hits a cup of pens. The thump is even louder when the pens scatter across the wood.

"Shoot." Blowing out a rapid breath, I try to grab the cup before it hits the ground. It rolls off and disappears with a soft thump. "Shoot."

Now is not the time to panic. Yet, it's exactly what is happening.

## Page 3

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Pictures. Even if it means filling up my storage, I need to snap as many as possible. I can't let my hands shake this badly unless I want blurry images.

Picking up my phone, I barely hit the correct app before the door to the office opens with no warning.

The noise wasn't that loud, I'm sure of it. Yet, I've been discovered.

Not by some guard with a gun, or a chef with a knife, but by the man who knows this office and all its secrets.

Santino Bertelli.

Of all the dangerous people in this building, it couldn't be anyone else but him.

And now, I'm going to die. Great.

2

Santino

Despite the night being one of the most boring and forgettable, I'd finally found a spark of excitement when I spotted this woman slipping off somewhere she shouldn't be.

I shouldn't have bothered myself by being the one to follow her, but the thought of someone else telling me about a new purchase, or an update on a family matter, or

whatever the fuck that Aloise bastard was going on and on about made my feet move on their own.

I could have stopped her at any point, but I kept my distance and stalked her silently.

Maybe it was the smell trailing behind her that mixed up my priorities. Something sweet that made my mouth water. Or, it was that quick glimpse of caramel-colored hair that caught the light at the right angle before she dipped into the darkness.

Normally, women don't call out to me. Not like this. However, my steps felt more fueled by desire than with worries of what she could be after.

Could she be trying to seek one of my men, lure them into the shadows to release pent up energy? It's happened before. Many times, actually. I've lost count of how many pairs of lace underwear I find littering my garden after these gatherings. Even now, if I stop and listen, I'm willing to bet I'll hear the distant sounds of moans.

However, all it took was her rushing to hide to reveal her true goal. Rather than someone, she's aftersomething.

Those little telltale frustrated sighs told an entire story. The closer and closer she came to my office, the more it made sense. Instead of going straight to me to get what she wants, she'd rather dig deep for information.

It's a good thing too, because the sweet scent up close may have truly dulled my senses.

I gave her a two-minute head start once she slipped inside my office. Enough time to catch her in the act to give me the answers to the questions building in my mind.

Now, this little intruder is looking at me like a deer caught in headlights. She

immediately lifts her hands and surrenders without warning. Her skin pales instantly, her chest heaving from what I guess is the start of a panic attack.

There's a muffled thump. Whatever item she held must've fallen from her grip and hit the carpet below. It could have been a paperweight, for all I know. Or it could've been a weapon that slipped from her grip.

No one wanders into this room unless they have a death wish. Even if one of my guests drinks too many glasses, my office is too deep into my home to mistake for something else accidentally. Off limits to all but myself and those I invite inside.

This little bird got herself caught in the lion's den. From the way her eyes dart around, she knows it too.

"Do you know who I am?" My question spills from my lips slowly, like a deep sigh after an exhausting day.

Very few outside of my world can say they do. Unlike many people at my party, she looks like she has never received an invitation. From her nervous swallow, I am left to wonder why I've never encountered her before. If she's familiar with my life, why does her face seem completely foreign?

I hate not having an answer to an unsolvable question. It makes me want to pick at my brain and dig until I can pull out something satisfying. With each second passing by like a lifetime, I'm sure I can find the time to pluck out some sort of memory. However, I'm confident I won't find anything.

I couldn't possibly mistake her for someone else. Her appearance is unforgettable. I've already burned her to memory.

Is there a point, though? Will I see her again after today, or will this be a one-time

meeting with a devastating goodbye?

If I want to get my hands on her, and that much I do, I could easily wrap my fingers around her slim throat, and squeeze hard enough to hear her chirp. I bet I would feel her racing pulse against my fingertips.

Would she beg me to let her live?

## Page 4

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Would I cave and look the other way?

She avoids answering my question, her body subtly shifting, as if she's trying to conceal something. Maybe she's got a pistol attached to her thigh. Hell, my life could be in danger. Yet, I don't feel the desperation to protect myself. Even more when her palms touch my desk.

No, this woman didn't come prepared. She's an amateur. I'm almost disappointed.

Can't she realize there's no use doing anything but giving up? I've exposed her, and now I hold the power over her punishment.

The options are vast. The more I think about it, the more ideas form in my head.

Fuck torturing her. I bet I can make her open up, and tell me everything I need to know in more enjoyable ways.

Her hands push off the desk, leaving only her fingertips barely grazing the surface. I know well enough what it looks like when someone is about to run.

I've had men stumble, and fall before begging me for their life. They all share the same look of fear. Even this woman has it, though she tries to hide it with each blink. The look of an approaching death swims beneath those long eyelashes.

A suffocating silence envelops the room, thick enough to choke on. Every delicate flutter of her breath reverberates in the stillness like a distant drumbeat, amplifying the tension. Suddenly, without warning, she bolts, shattering the quiet with a frantic

surge of energy.

I expect her to sprint, to show up a bit of a challenge here. Make me give a bit of a chase, even. Instead, she's slow. Like she's never had to run for her life before. Not even adrenaline is on her side.

It takes an instant to close the distance. With a swift motion, I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her tightly against me. Her warmth radiates into my chest, and I can feel the quickening of her breath, a desperate sign of her waning freedom—even if she never truly had a chance to escape this moment.

She has the enchanting scent of wildflowers. Up close, it's more effective than I could've imagined. Instead of wearing an expensive perfume, it smells as though she tumbled down a sunlit hill, with the delightful, natural fragrance lingering on every inch of her skin.

Her legs kick, and the heels of her bare feet crash against my knees. Weighing nothing, I have no issue holding her in the air. Not even the pain she brings from dragging her nails against the back of my neck can stop me from filling my lungs full enough to make my head spin.

For whatever reason, I don't immediately want to kill this little bird. Rather, I'd prefer to have a taste, and see if she's as delicious as she smells.

I'm willing to bet my entire fortune she does.

As much as I would love to stand around breathing her in, she continues to fight. Grunting as her foot slams right next to my hardening cock, I make the smart decision to move.

Taking her right back to the crime scene, I drop her onto my desk. Her dress is thin

and loose, giving no fight as I part her thighs wide enough to make enough room for my hips. Only touching her, and in an instant, the damage is done.

The dress needs to go. I can question her without it. I'm sure I can.

My fingers itch to move, but something about her wobbling bottom lip and large doe eyes helps sober me up a bit. She's got innocence written all over her. A part of her act, I'm sure. It helps remind me that this woman was just trying to steal things with my name on them.

She came to my party intending to hurt me. And now, she looks like a simple 'I'm sorry' can fix everything.

If she had snuck into my bedroom, things would be different. Now that's an invasion I wouldn't mind.

No, this is a personal attack I need to take seriously.

She flinches when I lean in, but I can't help but breathe in such an intoxicating scent. It's my new favorite. Fuck. Focus.

"You—" I nudge a little closer, eliminating the remaining space between us as I trap her with my hands on the desk. My cock aches as I grind it against the edge of the desk. "—do not belong here."

Lowering my gaze, I can count the number of goosebumps pimpling up against her throat. I can graze my mouth against her warm skin if I lean in close enough.

There are pens scattered across my desk; my cup is nowhere in sight. It must've been that thump I heard. She'd grab one if she had the sense and try to take my eye.



This woman looks soft to the touch, and more than breakable. She's not someone who should be here. Not in my office, and definitely not at this event. There's an absence of urgency about her, as if she doesn't know how to fight for her life. Those kicks and scratches hardly count, doing minor damage.

If any man caught a whiff of her, they'd want to devour her in one bite. Hell, it's taking all of my strength to hold back. Even now, my mouth is watering, my cock is weeping and my brain isn't functioning like it should.

Shifting through my belongings, hunting down my secrets, it's a crime I cannot forgive. No one has the balls to go behind my back like this. Not when they know what I'll do to them if I catch them.

I've sliced off a man's finger with a rusty blade for touching my desk without my permission. She's scattered papers against my carpet, leaving one hell of a mess. Who does she expect to clean this all up?

## Page 5

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“Well, are you going to introduce yourself? You know who I am. I’d say it’s only fair.”

When this beauty doesn’t answer, I lift a brow. I can always part her lips with my thumb and see if she still has a tongue intact. While discovering her secrets with my tongue is the preferred option, I can’t risk losing myself to her lure.

She opens her mouth, and I’m happy to discover she does have the ability to speak. Her tongue swipes at her bottom lip, all wet and pink. “Everyone knows who you are.” A shiver rolls through her body when my chest rumbles with dissatisfaction. “I’m no one. A nobody looking for clout. That’s all.”

Though a little shaky, she doesn’t stutter. Her voice comes out like a sing-song tune. A little high-pitched, but that may be the nerves.

Closing my eyes for just a moment, I continue to pick and prod at my memory. My frown grows as the search comes up empty.

“Your name, little bird. Now.” Impatience seeps into my chest, and my brows furrow. “Or—” I click my tongue, “—do I need to search you for your identity?”

Her dress has no pockets, not that I can see. There’s only one place I can think of her hiding anything, and when my eyes meet her chest, she lets out this new sound. A breathless whimper.

As if my cock needed any more of an excuse to become harder than granite.

“I’m sorry.” Whispering her apology, I’m suddenly questioning if two words are enough to forgive such a crime.

Like something as little as a name can deserve to be locked away in a safe, I ache to know it even more as she clings to it with tight fists. Does she want me to fall to my knees and beg? Fuck, she could lie through her teeth, and I wouldn’t know the difference. I just need something.

Leaning in, her head naturally tilts as my lips brush the outer shell of her ear.

I should ask her who she works for. Someone must have hired her to help. Whatever poor bastard is paying this lousy burglar must really know how to pick them.

Before I can ask anything, her hands are on my vest. Like she’s caught onto her traitorous body, she pushes against my chest. It’s like trying to get a brick wall to move. I don’t budge.

Her frustration seeps in too quickly, her blood turning hot in a familiar fashion. Now this is something I finally recognize, more within myself.

“Parada.” She speaks the last name like it’s an insult. As she fucking should.

A hiss leaves my lips as I yank back away from her. The warmth I greedily sucked in moments ago quickly evaporates, leaving my front cool to the touch.

“Parada.” There is no mistaking that name. Rocco Parada has been a pain in my ass for months. From taking out many of my transportation vehicles, to buying out some of my biggest suppliers.

What in the hell did he hope this little stunt would pull him? Did he think I’d be foolish enough to leave valuable information on my business, on my livelihood, in my

top desk drawer?

Or maybe he sent this woman to lure the information straight from the source? A sheep in wolf's clothing. Purposely drawing me away from my men, playing the part of this poor, defenseless being who doesn't know any better.

Anger floods over my vision, and I curl and uncurl my fingers. I've never been known to have patience. A pretty little thing isn't going to change that.

I do not like being tricked or fooled. No, not one fucking bit.

Erasing the space between us once more, I flatten her palms against the desk, mine keeping them in place. "Who are you? Do not test my temper by making me repeat myself more than I already have."

She squeaks, her shoulders hunching. "C-Camellia." Her stutter extinguishes her earlier anger. She may have hot blood, but she's more of an impostor now that the haze has lifted.

I'm seeing clearly now.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Camellia?" Her name feels nice against my tongue, and it pisses me off even more. "Did you enjoy making a mockery of me?"

Did she enjoy making me want something I can't have? Like teasing an addict with a little baggie before destroying it right before their eyes.

Her mouth pinches shut, and she shakes her head. She doesn't apologize again, a smart decision.

"Were you hired? Was the pay worth it?" So many questions fill my head, enough to

make my headache worse. “Worth the cost of your life?”

“I’m not being paid.” Something about that wide look tells me she’s telling the truth. However, it’s such a ridiculous thought that I can’t help the coarse laugh that leaves my lips. “My brother made me—”

“Yourbrother?” As if this can’t possibly get any worse, this beauty really knows how to inflict damage. Even when she’s not trying to, she stabs this metaphoric knife deeper into my chest and twists it.

## Page 6

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Rocco has a sister, I'm sure of it. However, Eliza Parada is not this woman. Maybe they share a similar shape of nose, and the same dark hair, but there are too many differences to make such a mistake.

Does he have another sister? One tucked away, hidden from my knowledge?

I can't hear another word of this.

Camellia gasps when I leave her hands long enough to yank her from my desk. Without wasting my breath on another word, I toss her over my shoulder like a sack and move toward the door of my office.

"You can't do this!" She pummels my back, but the thumps do nothing as my steps echo in the bare hallway. "I didn't even see anything!"

Her words could be nothing but the truth for all I know. However, unfortunately for her, I don't give a fuck.

I'm agitated, aroused, and annoyed. A troublesome combo.

My right-hand man, and younger brother, Urzo, glances over casually as if seeing a beautiful woman draped over my shoulder is just another part of his daily routine. He's pressed against the wall, frowning at his hatred of how much life these gatherings bring.

I won't give him a hard time for letting this woman slip underneath his nose. Not now. Another time, when the back of my head isn't getting elbowed.

“Lights out. I want everyone gone within ten minutes.” Growling the order, I don’t miss his sigh of relief as he lifts away from the wall. “I expect some form of communication from Rocco Parada—” His name alone leaves a sour taste in my mouth, evoking my disgust. “—once he realizes his spy won’t be returning anytime soon. Tell him he can collect his own in person.”

Urzo grunts, nodding.

Her punches have stopped, her breath held. My hold on her thighs tightens as the pulse in my temple grows, and my headache throbs.

My muscles are tight, and my jaw is clenched, creating an overwhelming sense of tension throughout my body. I feel like a taut cord, stretched to its limit, ready to snap at any moment with no warning. This sensation of tightness is not just physical; it seeps into my mind, leaving me on edge, as if the slightest provocation could trigger a release of pent-up energy buried beneath the surface.

Usually, I find myself channeling my frustrations towards those who have upset me. Even something as seemingly trivial as the sight of blood can serve as a release, helping to ease the tension that feels so tightly wound within me.

That won’t do, not this time. I’ll need another method.

“When he comes, shoot his kneecaps. I don’t do trades with slippery bastards. I’ll do the final blow.” Letting out a much-needed sigh, I turn. “Until then, I don’t want any interruptions. Understand?”

Urzo nods, his hand instinctively drifting to the holster of his pistol, a gesture that feels all too natural in the tense atmosphere.

With that, I move with no intention of letting anyone get in my way.

Camellia

“When he comes, shoot his kneecaps. I don’t do trades with slippery bastards. I’ll do the final blow.”

Santino’s words run on repeat with every long-strided step.

I feel sick, and I can’t tell if it’s because of the promised violence, or that I’m still on his shoulder. He’s carried me up the grand stairs, not caring about the glances our way. By the time he’s going back down the same set, the room is empty.

He’s moving like he doesn’t have a destination in mind. That, or he can’t make up where he wants to take me. I assumed the Bertelli estate would have some sort of dungeon below the home. I’ve heard stories of the interrogations that take place here through the door of Rocco’s office.

Santino has yet to take me to his basement.

I’m already imagining where I will be left. I’ll be handcuffed to a rustic chair, stepping in puddles of blood from those who sat before me.

Santino stops without warning, and I wish I could see his face when he makes this noise of frustration. Hardly coming off as a patient man, I’m surprised this has gone on as long as it has.

He could have asked the man with the scar to take his gun and put a bullet between my eyes. But no, he’s chosen to inflict a sore shoulder on himself. The way his arm shifts, along with the fleeting brush of his thumb against the goosebumps that erupt on the tender skin of my thighs, tells me he must be very uncomfortable now.



He turns abruptly, and I have to cling to the belt loops of his slacks to stop myself from flailing. I'm getting motion-sick. This seems to be the beginning of the torment. He intends to make me weak before revealing what real suffering feels like.

While I'm clinging on for dear life, I discover the handle of what I'm sure is a gun. So close, I could easily grab it and use it against him. Shoot him in the leg or something.

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I've never shot a gun. Never thought about taking someone's life before. Just imagining trying to pull a fast one on this man makes my stomach clench and my mouth sour.

I may actually get sick. I want to get off this ride.

Despite my better judgment, I don't grab at the gun. Not because I don't want to, but because I can't. Not without my eyes filling with tears at the thought of killing another person.

I'm really not meant for this life.

Taking all but five more steps, he reaches a door and shoves it open. Stepping inside, darkness swallows us up as the door shuts with a thud. He flicks the light on, and I don't have enough time to look at where he's taken me.

A grunt leaves my lips as he tosses me on something with a slight bounce. A mattress. One with a lack of sheets, or blankets, or any signs of being owned.

Oh no.

This man touched me plenty when he had me trapped on his desk. I am still denying what I felt back then. The fear mixed with a sensation I've never felt before is one I am not keen on experiencing again.

"It's your lucky day, little bird." He sinks his knee into the mattress right next to my hip, and I watch as his thigh stretches out the fabric of his slacks. There's something

else there, the outline of something that makes my heart jump up into my throat. “I can’t decide what I want to do with you more.”

Ever so softly, I feel the warmth of his fingertips on my knee. How can such a terrible, coldhearted man be warm-blooded? My pulse races as he starts dragging the fabric of my dress up the length of my thigh. The bands around his fingers feel more cold and unwelcoming than he does himself.

Staring down at me, he tilts his head as his eyes squint. Looking at me like I’m an enigma, his mouth presses into a firm line.

“I promise I will break you, Camellia. I’ll have you beg me to put you out of your misery.” He runs his tongue along his bottom lip, showing off his canines as he offers a smile that contradicts his touch. “I won’t be quick with it, either. Who knows how long it will take until I am bored?”

From the sound of it, I won’t be leaving this place anytime soon, if at all.

He leans in, letting his mouth hover near my throat. Close enough to let me attack if I really want to try again. He’s already proved countless times how easy it is for him to overpower me.

“Or maybe we can make some sort of deal. You can willingly betray your own, and watch me destroy everyone you know and love. Then, out of the kindness of my own heart, I may let you leave.” His breath tickles my ear. “Possibly in one piece. Though I may be a little greedy and take a chunk or two.”

Is this his usual method of negotiating? Does he think painting a gory picture will help give him what he wants?

I won’t. I know this man is untrustworthy, and the absolute worst of mankind. I can’t.

Then he does something I don't expect. He bites me. Not like some wild animal looking to tear through skin, but a sharp, short-lived sting that is treated with the swipe of his tongue. The grind of his hips against my parted legs drowns out the shock of it all.

What is even more shocking is the noise that leaves my lips. One that I only hear during those rare late nights I find the courage to sneak my hand between my thighs whenever I don't think anyone is listening.

His hand has somehow made it to my hip, and I only realize it when I feel his fingertips dig into my flesh. Holding me in place, he grinds again. As if the wound on my neck isn't to his satisfaction, he sucks against the mark and makes the pain transform into a low-strumming throb.

I moan again, the noise breaking past my lips like an act of rebellion.

The pain should help clear the fog, but my body bends to his demand.

It's his cock digging into where I'm most sensitive, I know that. I'm not completely clueless.

What I don't understand is how a man who seemed to bristle up at the realization of my identity can react this way. How he can be aroused by causing pain.

Santino Bertelli is a true monster.

"Well? What do you say?" He licks at the aching throb pulsating against my throat, trailing his tongue to my ear. Even that spot feels more sensitive than usual. "Will you give me everything I want?"

I can't think, not when he's making my entire body cry for more of his interrogation

method.

Santino wants me to betray my brother, the man who sent me here without caring about what would happen to me. He didn't even send me with a way to defend myself.

He must lose his patience with my lack of answers, because his hand abandons my hip and drifts toward the source of the problems he's created. Grazing my underwear with his thumb, he applies the right amount of pleasure to make me gasp.

I move, reaching out to grip the thin fabric of his shirt. Instead of reaching for his wrist and demanding he stop, my thighs quiver as he draws controlled circles.

## Page 8

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He might want to come off like he's in complete control of this, but I can hear the way his breathing grows heavier. I can feel how hard his cock is digging into my thigh at this angle. His pupils are dilated, making his brown eyes look pitch black like a predator after the first taste of blood.

This is wrong, and we both know it. From two different families who are constantly at the other's throat, only blood is meant to be shared. Never pleasure.

My breath hitches, and his thumb moves faster. His breathing matches the tempo.

"Give yourself to me, little bird." His hips thrust forward against my defiant, willing body. "Otherwise, I have no choice but to ruin you."

The pulsing between my thighs becomes too much. His thumb doesn't stop, even after my body arches against his. He keeps me pinned to the bed, forcing my orgasm to wash over me in a destructive tidal wave that leaves my throat hoarse from crying out.

I can't think. My thoughts are overflowing my head, and I can't truly understand what he is asking of me. He wants secrets I don't have.

He doesn't know that my last name is nothing but letters written on a birth certificate.

I'm as useless as they come.

Yet, I nod. Only because agreeing means I'll be giving myself some time. Time that will offer a possible escape.

Satisfied by my nod, he grunts as he yanks himself away. His cheeks glow with a gentle flush, while his dark eyes burn with a haunting hunger. He looks like he wants to eat me whole. Lifting his hand, he ruins his hair by shoving his fingers through the strands.

I half-expect him to yank at his pants and take care of the thick outline of his erection. However, he's got more control than I gave him credit for.

"You will remain here for the time being. I have matters to take care of." He licks his lip and smirks. "When I return, I hope to bring you good news. After all, if I get the chance to get my hands on that brother of yours, I might not need you for information after all. Once I take out the one on top, the rest will crumble."

He sounds so proud of himself, almost excited by the possible outcome.

I won't spoil his fun by telling him that Rocco won't come. Not because he fears his own life, but because he simply doesn't care enough. My sister, however, might. She's always been the rebellious one. Rocco will be smart to keep a watchful eye over her. For Eliza's sake, I hope he does.

Her beauty matches no other. If Santino sees her, he'll happily focus on her and forget all about me. Such a thing can't happen. I love her too much.

Moving to sit up, my limbs feel like jello. I couldn't run if I tried. "You can't lock me away in here."

Much to my dismay, he turns around and walks toward the door. "I can, and I will. Until I am ready to move forward, you have little choice in the matter." He pauses and clicks his tongue. "I'll have to stick someone outside of the room, just in case. Though, you aren't much of a runner."

My face warms at his insult. How can he do what he has done, and then rub salt in the wound? It's not my fault that the most cardio I get is from pacing through my room to get through each hour of the day.

"If you try to leave, I'll have whoever is on the other side of the door take you straight to me, and I'll punish you how I see fit." Santino smiles at the thought. "Understand?"

I scowl at him, responding to his question with silence, aware of how much he dislikes it. I shouldn't test him, not when I'm still achy between my thighs. Who knows how far he'll take it next time?

Next time.

My neck feels hot, and the heat crawls up to my cheeks and ears. No, there won't be a next time.

Thankfully, he doesn't linger to demand an answer from my lips. Instead, he leaves the room and shuts the door behind him with more force than necessary. There's a lock on the handle, and I should quickly twist it so he can't return. It's only when I shift a little and feel the wetness spreading between my thighs that I stop.

I let him touch me as he pleased, let him rub himself all over my body. I should be ashamed, and I am. Just recalling the whole ordeal does almost as much damage as actual dry humping.

Covering my face, I'm hit with a wave of emotions. Ones that leave my lungs burning, and my eyes wet.

I can't break down now. I have to be strong. If I want to survive this, I can't sit back and watch my life pass by like I had back home. The only option is to play this game



of his and come out on top.

Otherwise, Santino's threats will ring true. He'll take whatever he wants and leave me as nothing but ruined.

The mess soaking the thin fabric of my underwear is nothing but proof of how easy an outcome this will become unless I put a stop to it.

4

Camellia

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:49 am*

I don't know how long I sit on the bed before I decide to move. Without a doubt, I'm sure there's someone on the other side of the door waiting to see if I will break the rules.

I'm not sure I want to deal with the consequences.

Very little is in the room, showing hardly any life. There is a dresser with four empty drawers. The room has an attached bathroom containing a few folded-up white towels, but the shower lacks shampoo or soap. One look at the knobs tempts me to clean up. I feel disgusting.

Catching a glimpse of my appearance in the mirror, my breath catches.

Eliza put so much effort into making me look good, but her hard work has gone to waste. My mascara stains my lower eyelids, and my eyeliner mixes well with the black specks.

My eyes lower, and I look at the dark mark left on my skin. As I graze my throat with my fingertips, I feel the heat emanating from the wound Santino inflicted. It's more than just a hickey; he has left a dark bruise just above my collarbone. My eyes linger longer than they should, and I apply a slight pressure and wince as the pain radiates against my skin.

Getting too distracted by taking in the mix of dark colors, I jump when there is a knock on the door.

Santino doesn't seem like a man who knocks and waits for permission to come

inside. Rather, I'm sure if he were the one on the other side, he'd barge right in without any warning.

Completely in the unknown, I drift toward the opening of the bathroom door and hover behind it, just in case whoever it is is someone I don't want to see. I stand a chance at locking myself into the bathroom before they can get to me.

However, with its flimsy appearance, I highly doubt that this flimsy door can withstand any force. Its lightweight structure and worn hinges make it far too vulnerable to provide any real resistance.

I don't tell them to come in, because I don't want them to. If I am forced to be here against my will, then I'd rather be alone.

Unfortunately, the person turning the handle is not on the same page as I am. The door opens, and a woman appears. Her brows knit together, and her lips curve into a thin line, revealing the frustration etched into her weathered face. Rather than feeling bothered by me, she's pausing to say something to her right. Probably a guard. The sound of another voice, much deeper than her own all but confirms my suspicion.

"If Santino has a problem with this, he can tell me himself." She clicks her tongue before looking my way.

She tries to offer a warm smile, but even her best efforts at politeness can't mask the grimace that spreads across her face as she takes in my appearance more closely.

As the woman steps deeper into the room, the person she was talking to appears at the doorway. He is just another angry-looking grunt, this one with a gun in his hands. A full machine gun. As if she needs an audience, he watches me carefully, expecting me to do something dangerous here.

I wouldn't harm a butterfly, much less an elderly woman.

Unlike the man with the gun, she carries herself with no hint of fear. Her chin is held high, her shoulders squared. In her arms, she has clothes and a few things on top. I can't tell with the distance separating us.

For a moment, she glances at the mattress, and her nose scrunches. Can she tell what we'd done?

No, I don't want to know.

She continues to move, claiming a seat on the edge of the mattress. For a solid five seconds, we stare at each other in pure, uncomfortable silence. When I don't move, she pats the seat next to her.

"Let me see you, child." She hooks her finger in my direction, demanding feeling back into my legs.

I am hardly a kid, but I guess in comparison, there must be a good fifty or so years between us.

Emerging cautiously from the bathroom, I step forward. To my knowledge, no one here cares about my safety. For all I know, she might be hiding a blade under that heap of clothes, planning to use it against me.

"Sit," she orders once more when I'm within reach. As soon as I'm settled next to her, her hand is already on my face, tilting my jaw around as she examines me. From the squint of her eyes and the knit of her brow, I can't imagine what she is thinking about. "My son has never been known to play with his victims. The fact that you're here, moving with free will, is nothing shy of a miracle. Though, I know I raised him to be more gentle than this."

Her son? Miracle? Either I've gone mad, or this woman has.

I'm back on my feet, pulling away from her warm touch. Unlike Santino, she doesn't chase after me when I put distance between us. My heart thunders against my chest, and I jerk when she brings attention to the clothing in her grip.

"You two made quite the scene. I had to see for myself to see what is so special about you." She sets the clothes down next to her hip. "Why don't you get cleaned up, and we can get you fed, hm?"

Her offer is crazy enough to leave me bewildered and confused.

Is this some sort of test? Did Santino send his mother my way to lower my guard? Is this his first wave of trying to make me break?

I try to convince myself that to be the truth. However, the warmth behind her gaze, a look only a mother can give, makes me want to believe her.

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It doesn't help that the only thing I've consumed in the last two hours is that disgusting alcohol. Who knows when I'll get another chance to eat? I might as well take it before Santino makes everything worse.

"Go on, take these and clean up. You look like a mess." She's brutally honest, hardly holding back. Even if it's the truth, it doesn't feel good to hear it out loud. "I'll be right here, make sure no one will bother you. Not even my son."

Hesitantly, I grab the clothes and take in the small bottle of shampoo and bar of soap. I don't know who these belong to, or why she's going out of her way to make me feel a little more comfortable, but I don't linger long enough to ask.

Rushing to the bathroom, I lock the door behind me without question. Turning on the shower, steam fills the room quickly. Before it completely covers the mirror, I take in my reflection once more. Wetting my fingers, I reach toward my eyes and pinch the contacts that are agitating them. The color brown moves with my fingers, leaving a pale blue behind.

Rocco has always hated my eyes. Said they made looking at me even more painful.

Throwing the contacts into the toilet, I flush them down so I don't have a reason to hide something that makes me, me.

I'm also excited to peel the dress off my body. If I had a blade, I would shred it in strips so I would never have to wear it again. Everything about my appearance all feels wrong, and even if I'm in an awful situation, maybe if I can look a little more like myself, I'll feel better.

I want to cling to that feeling for as long as I can, even if it gets taken away in no time at all.

I waste little time in the shower. Once my skin is pink and scrubbed raw, I change into the clothes waiting for me: a pair of sweatpants that need to be tied into a tight knot and the legs rolled up to my ankles, and a matching top with enough room to leave me feeling comfy. Even better, a pair of socks slide nicely against my sore soles.

Walking in heels is one thing, but wearing a pair that hasn't been broken in inflicts nothing but excruciating pain and severe damage to my feet. They were left in his office, and I hope he tosses them. I never want to see them again.

When I leave the bathroom, I find the woman chatting with the man with the gun, calling him Tommy. No point in learning their names, not when there are so many of them.

“You never told me your name. I should thank you.” For showing me the first act of kindness sent my way in what feels like weeks.

She turns to look my way, her brows lifting up toward the wrinkles on her forehead.

“Well now, isn't this an interesting change?” Distracted by my appearance, she holds her hand up to pause their conversation. Going as far as stepping toward me to get a closer look, her eyes squint as if she's in disbelief. “Are you really the daughter of Elio?”

The mention of my father's name makes a knot the size of a fist form in my throat. I try not to show the look of surprise on my face, but I can't help but feel it.

Since the day I found my father on the day of his death, his body stiff from rigor

mortis with scratches at his throat and foam on his lips, I haven't heard his name spoken. Not once. Rocco never spoke of him, not really. Eliza tries to avoid bringing him up around me to save my feelings.

The muscles in my jaw tighten as I nod to her question.

If you ask others, they'll disagree. For me, my father was my true caregiver. Despite my mother's affair, resulting in my existence, he treated me like his own children, even though we're not related by blood.

Her smile returns, and she nods. "How can such a worn man create such beautiful daughters? You must've gotten your looks from your mother." Reaching out, she grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. "You can call me Bia, dear. Now, I believe I have had enough of this stuffy room. Are you hungry?"

I nod without thinking twice. The longer I go without food, the lower my guard becomes.

I should be wondering what my family is doing at this moment. Are they waiting around, expecting a call? Or could they be hunting down an alibi to help cover their tracks?

"Thank you for everything." Squeezing her hand, I hate to have to let it go.

She nods with a soft sigh. Lowering her voice, she leans in toward me. "Four children, and yet, all I have is one daughter who never visits. Shame, isn't it? Even now, all these men roam about without a single woman to talk about things that don't include death or injury. You, my dear, are going to be the breath of fresh air this place needs. I see it, and I think my son may have as well. That's the only explanation I have for why you're still breathing."



Her words are supposed to be a compliment, I'm sure of it. If only they didn't leave a heavy weight in the pit of my stomach.

"Now then, let's find something quickly. There's nothing better than a late-night snack." She leads me toward the door, and a chance of escaping appears before my eyes. As soon as I'm past the doorway, I'm sure I can prove Santino wrong, and run like my life depends on it.

Unfortunately for me, Tommy follows closely behind. I guess Santino didn't order him to guard the door. He gave the order to stop me from escaping.

While I can't slip away now, I'll simply have to wait a little longer until the next moment arises.

5

Santino

A frown grows deeper on my lips as I watch the timer count down on my little bird's cell phone screen. After repeatedly attempting different number combinations, I'm ready to return to her and demand the information to see what this frustrating device is hiding.

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She left her phone and heels behind in her attempt to run. If it weren't for the glint of the screen against the carpet, I would've missed it entirely.

Now I'm staring at a flower wallpaper. While I continue to wait, my knee bouncing, I can't help but wonder if she took the photo herself. Is there much point in thinking too deeply about this?

The timer finishes, and I'm given seven more attempts. My fingers move in a blur, and I slam it down against the desk when it returns back to another count down. How many attempts do I get before it locks me out completely and this device becomes useless?

I could save myself time and throw it against the wall. They don't make these things like bricks anymore. They're flimsy and easy to break.

If only I weren't hoping for a sudden ring from a message or possibly even a single phone call. Rocco hasn't tried contacting his sister once, not by her phone or by mine. Surely, he has my number; he has more information at his fingertips than I like. He can call me if he wants to.

There's the chance that he thinks Camellia is already dead. There's no point in coming all this way for a dead body. Except she's not dead. Hell, she's not even chained to a wall or tied up in a chair. I left her on a bed and gave her a room like she's staying at a fucking hotel!

Seething with anger, the phone made a loud cracking sound as it hit the wall as my anger fuels myself to release this pent up energy growing bigger and bigger. Standing

up, my chest heaves. I reach for something else to throw, something I can squeeze to help ease this tightness wrapped around my chest. Everything I do just makes it tighter.

For the first time in years, I feel like things aren't going the way they should be. I have a process, a method of getting what I want and disposing of the leftovers once I've wrung them dry. It's as simple as can be.

Yet, here I am, sitting in my office, twiddling my thumbs while waiting for something to shift to happen. I don't wait. I do.

There's a knock at my door, and the grip on my lungs squeezes.

"What?" I grab my pen cup, my thumb digs into the crack running down the side of it.

Urzo appears, much to my dismay, and he doesn't look happy to see me either. Then again, the bastard rarely ever smiles with that scar ruining his upper lip. He looks at the phone on the ground, unimpressed, before meeting my frown with a blank stare.

"Are you here to give me good news or tell me something that's just going to piss me off?"

"Our mother is being a nuisance again." He doesn't wait for me to react because of the insult. "She's running one of mine all over the estate and causing issues."

Releasing my cup, I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. With a long list of issues building, now I'm meant to worry about our mother? "If it's a problem, then tell him to leave, and put him on patrol at the front gate. She'll be fine if she can't talk off someone's ear for one night. She'll tucker herself out soon enough, anyway. It's past her bedtime."

Despite giving him the answer to his problem, he doesn't move. Hell, I'm pretty sure his frown grows.

I sigh through my nose and pinch my eyes shut. I can feel my pulse throbbing against my temple. "What?"

"You gave a direct order. Last time I checked, your word has more weight than mine." Lifting his hand, he scratches at the small hairs on his throat. "Unless you want me to let your mother steal that woman away."

My eyes snap open and I straighten up. Rather than wasting time asking questions, I'm moving without any thought. When I reach the doorway, I pause. "Where?"

Urzo sighs. "They were in the courtyard the last time I checked. She is really pushing—"

I don't linger long enough to hear him finish that sentence. Like a raging storm crashing in without any warning, I barrel down the hallway with fire burning hot at my lungs. Anyone who lingers quickly bolts out of the way.

The fucking courtyard.

I tell her to stay in the room, to wait until I can make up my mind what to do with her. What does Camellia do? She takes the first chance she gets to get some fresh air. Unless she was forcibly dragged by a woman triple her age, she should know better than to agree. If she were smart, she would've politely declined despite my mother's known demanding nature.

Turning a corner, I spot the large glass doors blackened with night. As the distance between me and the door grows less, I can see the outline of bodies against the lights planted in the ground.

Shoving the doors open, the fresh air does nothing to cool me down. My feet feel heavier with every step; my fingers clench tight enough to lose circulation.

My mother is the first to notice my arrival. She looks at me with a familiar set of black eyes, and she's smiling. Not with one of those tight forced curves, but a soft one that shows more genuine happiness. If she's done this to spite me, I'm struggling to believe it's the case.

Camellia picks up on my arrival soon after and she turns to see me. Her eyes widened and I'm sure her heart has stopped.

Hell, I think mine has too.

It's not the sandwich clutched in her grip, or the fact she's wearing my clothes that makes the rage burning inside of me cool down. No, it's her face. It's not the same one I burned to memory as she came against my fingers.

This woman has striking blue eyes, ones that leave a cold, unsettling feeling. Her once flawless skin is now scattered with what looks like freckles. Too many to count. Her once straight hair is now a mess of waves that look soft to the touch.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

The woman I met tonight was sexy.

This woman is angelic, and makes it hard to breathe.

Gorgeous, in short.

The fear dancing around those eyes are the same, however. Fear of what is to come for her going against my order. Despite looking different, I'm sure of it. This woman is my little bird.

Taking in a breath, I prepare my words. I try to unscramble the mess brewing in my head, but I only become more jumbled when the betrayal of nature goes against my better judgment and causes her hair to sweep against her cheeks and her trembling lips.

"Leave." The word comes out too soft for my liking. "Both of you. Escort my mother to her room."

Her smile slips away and she sighs. "Santino, we just wanted a pleasant view with a meal." My mother may be the woman who nurtured and raised me, but I am still the one who leads this family. Who shoulders everything that comes with the title of it all.

It's my job to make sure my family doesn't get comfortable with one who craves our downfall.

Camellia moves to stand, but freezes when I lift my hand.

“Not you. You need to finish your meal. You must’ve been starving to go out of your way.” I flick my wrist as Tommy quickly nods and urges my mother to follow him.

Once we’re left alone, I circle around the bench and take the seat next to her. Parting my knees, I sit back and fight the urge to look her way. If I do, I’ll slip and lose myself in staring.

I’ve lost myself enough times today when it comes to this woman. I can’t keep allowing her to affect me as much as she does.

Camellia doesn’t take another bite of her sandwich. Instead, she cradles it in her hands, hunching her shoulders like she’s a wild animal cornered.

Silence fills the air, and I can’t find the words I want to say. Anything that forms on my tongue makes me feel weak and even more unlike myself.

“Are you really going to use me as bait to get my brother here?” Her lips press together and she plucks at the crust before nibbling on a small piece. “He usually goes to bed early. He’s more of an arise-with-the-sun kind of guy.”

Tilting my head back, I can hear her limbs shifting. These are not the sorts of secrets I want her to spill. I don’t give a fuck about his sleeping schedule.

“He’s not going to come. Maybe he’d rather give me away to his greatest enemy than deal with me himself. He’s cruel enough to think that would be funny.” Murmuring the words, she finally takes a bite big enough to make speaking impossible.

Against my better judgment, my eyes drift in her direction. I see her frown and the pain behind those pale eyes. Once more, I don’t like the way I feel when I look at her. Like I’m weak.

Unable to help myself, I let her gasp fuel me as I get my hands on her. Grabbing her, I drag her onto my lap. The last of her sandwich slips from her fingers and bounces off my knee to feed some critter overnight.

As bad as this is for me, my body screams to make her pain disappear. To transform her sadness into something else. Be it agitation, or discomfort, or whatever the hell I can bring out of her. Anything is better than this pitiful view of abandonment.

“Santino!” She hisses my name and steadies herself with my arm. As if knowing there’s no point in struggling, she settles against my chest. For once, her limbs aren’t stiff like a corpse.

No, Camellia is too warm for all that. Soft, too. As I wrap an arm securely around her waist, I tuck my nose into the crook of her neck and take in a lungful. It’s hard to smell the wildflowers when my soap is clinging to her skin.

First my clothes, and now my shampoo. My mother is up to something, I’m not blind. One little change and now I’m imagining myself rubbing all over her so nothing but my scent lingers on her body. I don’t want to think about her plans to make my life hell. I’d rather enjoy this moment while it lasts. Give myself a minute to show even the slightest of weaknesses.

The rage burning in my chest smolders to nothing but hot embers. Instead of taking away the heat entirely, she leaves my limbs growing warm and my cock throbbing. Even now, with her ass pressed perfectly against my lap, I’m sure she’ll notice it sooner or later.

What has happened to me? I hardly recognize myself.

If Rocco Parada saw me right now, he’d be a smart man to try and take Camellia back. He’d spot the vulnerability a mile away and use it against me. That’s what I’d



do if I were in his shoes.

Instead, I'm in mine. My arm tightens against her, and I try to imagine letting her go. Not just from this bench, but from my home.

I don't want to let her go. As a matter of fact, I won't let someone take her away from me.

"Your brother is a dumb fuck." Her throat vibrates with a snort, and it's nothing shy of music to my ears. "That won't change. His downfall won't, either. Once I get my hands on him, I will make him hurt." Her body grows a little taut at the promise in my voice. My thumb strokes her stomach. "Not just because he's been a pain in my ass for years now, but because he's kept you away from the world."

The words in my head become less jumbled; my thoughts are clear now that I have a goal in mind.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

“Would you like that, Camellia?” I purr her name against her ear. “I can get rid of the warden who has kept you in your cage. Give me a reason to finally do what I should’ve done years ago.”

I’m starting to wonder if she’s truly scared of me. A woman full of fear shouldn’t be melting from my touch, but she lets out a soft sigh, anyway.

I want to touch her again, to slip my hand between her pretty thighs and make her give in to this thing that happens between us when we’re together. Even better, I want to drape her over this bench and thrust into her wet heat while having one hell of a view.

She can’t deny how her body responds, completely in tune with mine. It’s wrong, and it’s right.

How long will this last before I grow bored again or she grows tired of my antics? This is all new, and I don’t know what to expect. All I know is that I want things I shouldn’t.

“I can’t answer that. It’s wrong.” Whispering the words, she doesn’t give me the truth I want to hear. She must want him dead as much as I do. Has to. The betrayal against his actions is more than enough to wrong her to the point of deserving death.

“Eventually, you’ll understand that morality holds no value in this way of life.” Murmuring the words against her hair, I decide to test how long my patience can last. “He’s done you wrong if he’s kept you away from it.”

I don't plan on throwing a sheet over her or pretending she's not there. She was hidden away from the world, from every bastard like me. That won't do any longer.

"Sometimes, I'd try to listen in on his meetings when he wasn't aware." Whispering another truth, she shivers, and my arms tighten around her. "None of the conversations were exciting. I usually got bored and didn't linger for long."

She's lying. There's something in the tone of her voice, I'm sure of it.

"They spoke about me, I'm sure. Did you hear about me?" When she tilts her head back, I take advantage and place a light kiss against her skin. My mouth tingles and waters all the same.

"I know you're not a good man." Like she needs to hear the reminder, she tries to pull away but doesn't get too far.

"We all have blood on our hands. It's one of those things you can't help." Hoping she'll understand, I frown when her body stiffens beneath my touch.

I can't stop killing just to please her. I'm not some weak bastard who bends over backward for a woman. The best I can do is not slit someone's throat in front of her. Sounds easy enough.

"How long until you spill mine?" Her voice wobbles with the question. "How much longer until this game of yours is over?"

I pause, her words catching me off guard. They shouldn't, but they do. I promised to torture her, didn't I? My hands are meant to be wrapped around her throat in the near future, I'm sure of it.

Yet, I don't want to kill her. I want her in every other way.

It's a revelation my mind is not ready for.

Camellia can think this is some fucked up way of getting her to lower her guard, but it's not the case. I can only hope she doesn't realize just how safe she is now that I've created a craving for her.

"It's no fun if I tell you the answer." For now, I'll keep the act up so she doesn't get too comfortable. "Why not enjoy yourself? Isn't that the point of a game, to have fun?"

She squeaks when I slide my hands down to her thighs. Squeezing the inner flesh, I can feel the heat radiating against my fingertips.

At this rate, this woman is going to ruin me before I can even think of returning the favor.

6

Camellia

At what point do I put a stop to this? He's already touched me where I'm most sensitive once. I can't let him do it again.

Turning to look at him, I shift against his lap and feel his cock digging into my backside. He's pushing my boundaries, testing just how much he can get away with. A quiet voice in the back of my head encourages me to let him go on and on until he's satisfied.

How can I possibly enjoy myself? I've heard plenty of stories about this man, and the nightmare fuel that comes with him. I can't let the single day I'm left alone with him cover up everything I know.

“I want to go back inside. Take me back to my prison.” My voice shakes as I try to be a little demanding. He won’t take me seriously if I keep shaking like a leaf.

He doesn’t pick up the demand, swooping in instead. His breath tickles my lips, and I can see how much of a master he is at making his own demands without speaking a single word.

Thankfully, I’m right in the mind long enough to lift my hand and push his face away.

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

I've never kissed anyone before. Maybe I tried with my hand once, purely out of curiosity. Santino will not steal this first. He's already done plenty enough. I won't let him keep making me lose myself.

"No thanks." I keep my hand in place despite his lips tickling my skin.

"Why?" Instead of pulling at my wrist, I feel the wetness of his tongue press between my fingers. "This isn't how you play."

This really is a game to him. A game of suffering. A game of confusion and matching feelings with it.

I try not to focus on how it feels to have him lick my skin, or reveal the pink color of his tongue peeking out between the gaps.

"I don't want to play." My voice hitches, and his eyes crinkle with amusement.

He lifts his hand, lightly wrapping his fingers around my wrist. Pulling my hand away, he presses his mouth against my racing pulse. "Really?"

My heart flutters in my chest as I watch him trace a vein with his tongue. "Y-Yes."

I don't. I can't. I won't.

Yet, I'm not pulling away. I'm letting him dirty my skin with his mouth. It's mesmerizing. The last place he had his mouth on left a dark bruise. Who knows what he'd do to my mouth if I let him near?

“I want to.” His breath tickles my wet skin. “I want to kiss you and see how plump those lips are.”

Biting my bottom lip without thinking, I shiver. He moves my hand and touches my chin. When I don’t immediately shove him away, he tries to lean in again.

Why can’t I do what is good for me?

“How about a small peck?” He grazes my lip with his thumb. “Just a simple brush?”

“You don’t seem like the kind of man to ask for something.” Muttering my thoughts out loud, I shiver when he grins.

“Is that what you want, Camellia? Do you want me to take whatever I want without asking? There is a long list of things I want from you.” He leans in, his mouth nearly brushing mine. “Tell the truth. If you don’t, I’ll know.”

I don’t want to answer his question. If I’m that easy to read, then anything I say will be wrong.

I can’t even convince myself that I don’t want this. My body is going against everything I know, rubbing up against him, and seeking more of his attention.

This is the outcome of never receiving attention before. One man’s complete focus on me has now disrupted everything.

“I’m going to take your silence as an admittance.” Giving me a couple seconds to say no, my tongue doesn’t work. Just like that, he eliminates the space between us.

I expect a simple brush of our mouths to satisfy him. Instead, he slants our mouths together and slides his tongue past my lips.

My hands find his shoulders, and I grip him for dear life as he teases my tongue to follow the same movement. Like a silent lesson, he shows me what to do, hoping to help me keep up.

I don't stand a chance. As generous as he wants to be, he's swallowing my breaths, and creating a familiar heat that is burning me up from the inside out.

"Fucking hell, Camellia. You have the slightest clue of what you're doing to me?" His growl meets my groan as I grind closer to him. There's this silent need to be pressed flush up against his chest. To run my hands along his chest, through his hair and everywhere else on his body."

Catching my bottom lip with his teeth, a little sting of pain is all it takes to pull a whimper from my lips.

"You are not good for me." Licking where my lip aches, his hands squeeze my hips hard enough to make them ache. "Why can't I stop? Why can't I get enough of you?"

He acts like this is a first for him, and I highly doubt that. A man as good-looking as him must've had many women entertain him. He's got experience I can only dream of having.

I'm nothing special. If anything, I'm quite the opposite.

Aching to know what makes me so different that he can't seem to control himself, I can't find the time to ask the questions to get my answers. Not when he's plunging his tongue back into my mouth for another taste.

He must realize how crazy this is. We've already done too much in a short period. All of this feels unreal. Like a dream I'm not sure I want to wake up from.



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*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

I imagine myself back at home, having this rough fantasy tearing through me just to wake up to my empty space of a room. Back to a silent life of being invisible to those I once called family.

For just a minute, I'll enjoy this. Enjoy all the attention he's giving me.

When the minute is up, I'm pulling back. My breathing is uneven, and my lips feel swollen.

Santino's eyes are bright, just like his grin. He's so pleased with himself. Pleased with getting his way while taking another piece of myself to feed his greedy self.

"I'm ready to go to bed." I want to sleep this night away and move past it all. Even if I have to face the music in the morning, I'd rather not let myself slip up again because he wants something else. There's only so much I have to give before I lose myself entirely.

"You're sure? I don't mind the view. The temperature feels perfect." Looking like he wouldn't mind staying out here for hours, he frowns when I start to wiggle. "Want me to carry you?"

"I can walk, thank you." Stumbling to my feet, I don't give him another chance to pick me up. I've been off my feet too many times around him.

Surprisingly, he keeps his hands to himself. Going as far as stuffing them into his pockets, he lets me lead. Even though I don't know where I'm going, he keeps his eyes on me at all times.

The little hairs on the back of my neck are prickling. I fight the urge to tremble beneath his watch.

Once we're back inside, he tells me which directions to move. When we come to an eventual stop, I'm sure this door isn't the same one he took me to the first time. He proves my suspicions correct when he pushes open the door and places his hand on my back to guide me inside.

"I can't trust even my own blood to keep you contained. For now, you'll stay in here." Shutting the door, he audibly locks it and leaves me standing at the entrance of the room as he moves deeper into the room.

This is his bedroom. The alarms are ringing loud in my head. There must be some kind of delay since they weren't ringing like this when I was lost in the kisses he was planting on my lips only minutes ago.

"I can't stay here." Sputtering on the words, I watch him undo his belt. My heart shoots up into my throat, and I want to turn away, but my body doesn't move.

Like a freaking magnet, I watch the leather snap against his wrist as he pulls it loose from his slacks. Only a few inches below, I can see the curve of his arousal pressing against his fly.

While I'm swallowing thickly, my eyes burn as I forget to blink.

Rolling the belt around his knuckles, his mouth twitches in what I can only guess is amusement. "Keep staring at me like that, and I'm going to want to put on a show for you. Might as well take a seat on the bed. It's far more comfortable." He looks at me and sets down the belt against a dresser. He moves to hook his finger beneath the knot of his tie.

My knees feel too wobbly to carry me over to his bed. “I’m not staring.”

It’s a lie, and we both know it.

Santino doesn’t deserve to be as attractive as he is. Aren’t monsters supposed to be scary-looking? With sharp teeth and glowing eyes? I suppose being fatally attractive is a thing. He fits the bill well enough.

“What is going on in that head of yours?” His fingers move down the row of buttons running down his vest, unhooking each jewel. Once he’s shrugged that piece off, he moves his fingers to his shirt. Slowly unbuttoning them each to reveal more tanned, flawless skin, I forget how to breathe.

My cheeks feel even more hot when I realize I’m trailing every single movement of his. “That’s none of your concern.”

That, and I don’t think I like the answer enough to tell him.

Realizing that he is fully intending to change in front of me, I find the strength to turn away.

If I wait long enough for him to get naked, could I attempt to run again? What is the chance he’d come after me wearing nothing but his birthday suit? He’s crazy enough to do it, I’m sure. No point in seeing what’ll happen to me if I go against him twice in one night.

However, this room upgrade feels less like a punishment, and more like a reward.

Santino has strange methods, I’ll give him that. He really knows how to keep someone up on their toes.

Heading over to the bed, I keep my eyes pinned to the midnight blue silk sheets covering the mattress. The fabric feels cool to the touch as I glide against it. Grabbing the blanket, I throw it over my head to block out any tempting whispers begging me to look his way.

There are plenty of things I haven't done before, including looking at a man without clothes on or seeing his cock. Santino can't steal all of my firsts. Some of these things, I plan on keeping for myself in a tight grip against my chest.

I listen to him move around the room. More clothes hit the ground before there's the drag of a drawer opening. More shuffling. He's creating so many noise, it's near impossible to focus on anything else. Clenching my eyes shut, I scooch a little more forward toward the edge of the bed. It's a decent-sized mattress, much bigger than my twin-sized one. Plenty of room for two adults.

Soon, the bed dips with the shift of additional weight. There's a little movement as Santino gets comfortable.

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What kind of sleeper is he? Does he roll over on his stomach, or does he like to hug his pillow to his chest? Does he snore? I imagine he's a light sleeper, ready to jump into action the moment something shifts. How will he feel when he finds out that I'm a bit of a snorer? Will he kick me out of his room and regret taking me here in the first place? What about—

He flings an arm over me, tugging me against a wall of heat without a warning. Pulling the blanket off of my head, he tucks it beneath my chin and settles behind me. I can feel his erection immediately, but he doesn't try to do anything with it. Unhappy with my distance, he pulls me right toward the middle of the bed.

There is no way a man like him snuggles women. I refuse to believe it. Even if he wanted to put me in some sort of chokehold, his arm isn't anywhere near my throat.

He can't keep his hands off of me for longer than five minutes. Has he realized it, or am I the only one going mad?

"Is this necessary?" Barely finding the words, my toes curl in my socks as I try not to enjoy the heat.

"Would you rather I tie you up?" He digs his cock further into the curve of my backside. "I'm sure I have rope somewhere. Maybe an old set of handcuffs. Somehow, I have to make sure you don't try to slip out while I'm sleeping."

I shiver at the very thought, and he misunderstands, bundling more blankets toward my chest.

“I could try to smother you with a pillow.” As tempting as it is, I may do so at this rate.

He hums against my hair as he thinks about it. “You could. How though? Help me paint a picture. Would you wrap your thighs around my hips and attempt to hold me down with your weight?”

I imagine the scene unfolding, following his description.

“When you’re pressing a pillow over my face, there’s something you can do to help make it even more enjoyable.” He nuzzles his nose against the back of my neck and takes in a deep inhale. “You could get yourself off while you take your first life. I’m going to be hard until the sun rises. Might as well use it to your advantage. Grind your pussy against me until you’re tingling all over.”

My breathing quickens, and my thighs rub together. I don’t like how he’s got my body wrapped around his finger. Even when he’s already done so much, Santino knows how to amplify these pesky feelings.

“Even if it sacrifices my last few breaths, I’d give them to you, little bird.”

“You’re insane.” Whispering the words, I catch myself panting. How can only a few words make me so hot and achy? “Just keep your hands to yourself, above the blankets at all times.”

His chest vibrates as he grunts. He nudges my legs apart with his knee to make himself more comfortable. At the same time, he grazes against my sensitive sex. I can feel my pulse where his thigh presses up against me. He curses under his breath when I wiggle and try to get more comfortable without purposely trying to seek a little relief.

“I’ll only keep my word for as long as you don’t push me.” Giving me more than enough of a warning, he reaches over to turn off the lamp on the stand next to him. “Time to sleep. We’ll figure out what to do with you in the morning.”

It’s an impossible task. Even more when he insists on leaving no inch of our bodies untouched.

Still, I close my eyes and try. If I don’t get rest now, tomorrow is going to be nothing shy of impossible.

If I’m lucky, my dreams will be a blank slate, and will have nothing to do with tending to my currently building list of problems to take care of.

7

Santino

I’m tempted to believe I’ve actually died, and someone mixed my records up by giving me something I can only describe as pure bliss. I don’t deserve this.

To have a woman fit so perfectly against my frame, smelling absolutely intoxicating.

For the first time in a while, I slept hard enough to be dead to the world. Now I don’t want to leave my bed and disrupt this peace.

Camellia is out, her face relaxed. She’s got a strand of hair caught on her lip, and I can’t help but move it. Her skin is so warm against my fingertips. She’s so soft, and squishy. Turning her head with my thumb, I find myself leaning in without thinking.

She has this pull on me, one I can’t fight against or explain to someone sane. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

I'm thinking of doing corny shit like waking her up with a light kiss. Would she melt against me like before, or would she shove me away?

For some reason, I want to chase after this woman until she's melting against the palm of my hand. I don't think I'm asking for much here.

It's frustrating, not getting what I want. Any other woman would have happily sat on my cock without asking. Yet, with Camellia, I'm on the verge of begging her to let me in.

Grazing her skin, I lower my hand and carefully move to sit up. Moving the blankets, I curse under my breath as she stirs. The longer I look at her, the more my mouth waters. Whenever I get my mouth near her, she gives me something else to crave. As my eyes settle on the knot she'd tied on my sweatpants she stole, I'm practically drooling.



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Unable to help myself, I reach forward and pull at one of the strings. It easily comes undone.

I'm going to wake her up in one of the best ways possible. She just doesn't have a clue. When she stirs as I part her thighs hoping to make enough room for me, I'm too focused on sinking my fingers in the band of the sweats. Far too big for her, the knot was the only thing keeping them secure.

"What are you doing?" She blinks slowly, her lids heavy from sleep. She lifts her hips for me, helpful without realizing it. Once I'm leaving nothing but bare skin, her eyes are snapping open. "Wait!"

Spreading her thighs, I'm too focused on the damp spot on her underwear. "Hm?"

"What are you doing?" Repeating the question, she shivers when I tease the fabric with my thumb. My finger is already wet, she's soaked. She must've had one hell of a dream.

"I'm trying to make my way toward tasting your pussy." The truth rolls out of me with no hesitation. "Right now, I'm considering whether I want to keep these panties or ruin them because they're in my way." Leaning in, I take a deep inhale and groan inwardly. "Spoil me, Camellia. Tell me how wet you are beneath these damn things."

The way her skin instantly flushes, I'm confident she'll try to lie to me and insist she's as dry as the Sahara desert. Instead, she chews on her bottom lip and squirms.

She wants to give in. I can see the fight behind her eyes. She has to give in. If she

doesn't, it'll be the death of me.

Leaning in, I encourage her by pressing my tongue against the thin strip separating me from my next meal. Just the taste of her essence is enough to make me grow impatient.

"I-I'm..." Her voice wobbles and her hips betray her by jerking toward my chin. "It's your fault. I can't get away from you even when I sleep."

She's dreamed of me, in a way that's left her in this state. Fuck me.

I opt to tear the panties. I can buy her as many pairs as she wants. Anything to see the most glistening, perfect pink pussy lips I've seen in my life.

"Part your thighs. Make me feel bad for the damage done." I don't recognize my voice as the words leave my lips. There's this desperation to taste her, to make her come against my sheets. I need it, need her to want it as badly as I do. This isn't a punishment I can suffer alone. "Let me properly apologize for bothering you."

God, her cheeks can turn so pink. I'm starting to wonder if making this woman blush will become my new goal in life. I want to see how the rest of her body looks when she gets flushed as well.

"We don't have to tell anyone. You can keep pretending you're dreaming." Shifting backward to make enough room to settle on my stomach, my eyes settle on these glistening folds. Can't help but lick my lips. Every time I think Camellia can't get any better, she does.

Her knees shake, but she parts them. Her thighs flex beneath my touch as I squeeze her plumpness.

“Just like that.” Humming my approval, I graze her clit with my thumb and she jerks. “Have you always been this sensitive, or am I one lucky bastard?”

“I haven’t—” She stops, and her brows knit together. “I can’t help it, that’s all.”

“Don’t change.” Leaning in, I kiss her thigh and make it quiver. “Stay just the way you are.”

Her stomach flexes, and she takes in a sharp breath. Her eyes grow wide and for a moment, I forget what I’m doing.

With the darkness gone, I can truly appreciate their brilliant blue hue, reminiscent of a sparkling ocean I’d swim laps in. They’re unique, and I love them. How many times will I get lost in them?

I’ll have to keep some distance from her during the day. Otherwise, not just those eyes will be a distraction. I won’t be able to get any work done. We can make up whatever time we lose together during times like these.

Look at me, planning around her and dreading the in between.

“Promise me you’re not just saying what I want to hear.” Her lips press together in a flat line, but the demand for the truth is there. I’m not known as a man who can be trusted enough to keep a promise, but there’s something there, something I don’t understand that makes her need to hear the words.

For once, there’s weight behind her words. Her eyes search mine, and I know I couldn’t lie to her even if I wanted to hide my upcoming weaknesses.

“I mean it, Camellia. From the pit of my ruined soul. I want you, just like this. Spread open like an offering. Bashful and willing. I promise.” Tired of talking, I keep my

eyes on hers as I part her lips and lean in. With high expectations, I flatten my tongue against her clit and suck the small nub between my lips.

The moan that leaves her lips vibrates through me. I feel it seeping deep into my bones. My chest rumbles with satisfaction, and I think I've discovered my new favorite flavor.

She tastes exactly as I expect her to. Much like honey, my tongue savors the sweetness before delving deep to experience her essence at the source.

Her thighs clamp against my ears, and the next moan that leaves her lips is muffled and hoarse. When her fingers dig through my hair, I expect her to try and pull me away. Instead, she tugs me closer and lifts her hips. She's a natural.

Soon enough, I can feel the tightness of her walls as I delve deeper with my tongue. I'm tempted to ask, but I'm confident that I know the answer.

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*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

She's a virgin. An untouched, pure soul who fell into the worst pair of hands. Ones that can't stop touching her.

Will her body enjoy my fingers more than my tongue? With only one way to find out, I make room for my hand.

"Does this feel good?" Aching for any confirmation, I groan when she nods. "Do you accept my apology?"

She blinks slowly, her pupils blown. Like she's forgotten the whole excuse I gave her to let me cross these lines, her brows come together before her chin tilts back. Taking in a slow inhale, her head shakes. "Not yet."

Yeah, I'm sure of it. This woman was made for me. She took too long to enter my life, but there's no way in hell I'm going to let another minute go by without making her mine.

I want her, both body and soul. If anyone tries to take her away, I'll kill them. Simple as that.

Her mouth makes a beautiful O as I work a finger inside. Her pussy clenches around the intrusion, but sucks me right back in every time I move my wrist. Even better, adding a second finger is as easy as the first.

"You take me so well, you know that?" Curling and spreading them, I discover which spots make her squirm the most. If there's an all of the above option, she'd fit the bill. "You have to see it too, don't you? You were made for me."

“You’re crazy.” Her voice catches and a shudder rolls through her as I hook her walls.

“Crazy for you, for this.” I have no problem admitting the truth. My breath catches as she lifts her hips on her own.

I don’t care if she tries to take over. I can’t think of something sexier than this woman rubbing against me to find her pleasures. Even if she doesn’t realize what she’s doing, I don’t stop her. Instead, I let her body lead.

Her body gives the telltale signs of reaching the peak of her limit. Be it her twitching legs or her clenching walls. Too lost in her sweet taste, I chase after her orgasm until she’s arching against the mattress, and deafening my ears with a cry.

Leaving her as nothing but a panting mess, I lick my fingers before enjoying my reward. Even when she tries to swat me from her overly sensitive nerves, I can’t stop until I’ve had my fill.

Flattening her thighs on the bed, I lift long enough to reveal my slick chin. I look at her dazed expression. Pupils blow, she grips at my sweatshirt covering her top half. Must feel hot and uncomfortable.

I place a wet kiss against her stomach as I push the fabric up. Revealing more skin than I ever imagined seeing in the first place, she moans when my teeth catch certain parts of her stomach. Just as I finally reach her chest, she surprises us both by lifting her arms.

“Good girl.” Murmuring the praise, I throw the sweatshirt, and leave her body bare for no one but my eyes. Her skin is glistening and covered in more freckles. I run my tongue along the dots and trace the goosebumps with the tip of my tongue. “You like that, little bird? You want to be my good girl instead?”

She can leave her cage behind and get comfortable on my lap from now on. Perched on my thigh, she'd be free to do whatever she pleased. Be it in my office, or while I'm eating every meal, I don't give a fuck. Even if she wants to torture me by grinding her innocent pussy across my leg enough to soak the fabric, I'm more than willing to make the changes needed to make this happen.

Distractions be damned, I'd let her do it just to make me suffer.

First things first, I'd make her get rid of that cursed last name. I can easily turn her into a Bertelli by slipping a ring onto her finger.

My cock swells, digging roughly into the mattress at such a crazed thought.

Marriage? Maybe I'm in worse shape than I originally thought. But now that the thought has crossed my mind, it will be all I can think about until I make it a reality.

Dragging my mouth higher, I discover her perfectly perky her tits are. Her nipples are already hardened points, lifting to welcome my greedy mouth. However, I don't give her what she wants.

"Do you want my mouth all over you, Camellia?" Crawling higher, I grind my hips against hers and draw a moan from her lips. "You're going to have to put in a little work, too. I can't be the only one."

She bites her lip and closes her eyes. She wants to pretend she doesn't want this by letting me do everything. Well, I'm not letting her be a coward. Not this time. Finally, she opens her eyes.

"I want you to kiss them." Her eyes settle on my lips and she squirms when I don't move just yet. "Please."

Swooping down, I swirl my tongue around one nipple before sucking it into my mouth. Her hand returns to my head, her fingers buried. Using my teeth, she groans as I pull back and release her nipple with a pop. Moving to her other breast, I do the same. Back and forth, left and right, I get them nice and red before moving my kisses up higher and higher.

Reaching her mouth, I don't waste a second before I'm pressing my lips to hers. Sucking on her tongue, I swallow down her whines as I continue seeking any friction I can get. At this rate, I'm going to explode and ruin my pants. Right now, I don't give a fuck.

However, I'd rather not waste my release. Instead, I'd rather plant it deep inside.

"I want to stuff my cock inside of you." Bringing my mouth to her temple, I kiss her glistening skin. "You'd squeeze me so tight, wouldn't you?"

"Won't it hurt?" Her innocence only makes me ache worse.



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“Just for a moment. But I’m sure you’ve endured worse. You’re strong, I know you can take it.” Pulling back, her eyes follow as I move to settle on my heels. Shoving the waistline of my pants down, I free my cock and give myself a squeeze. “A good girl wouldn’t have any issue taking this.”

Her breath catches, and her stomach flexes. Her tongue swipes across her lip as I stroke myself. So wide, those ocean blues take in my glistening tip. She doesn’t look scared, not one bit.

If this is how Camellia acts when she gives in to this force pushing us together, then there’s no way in hell I’ll ever want to leave this bed again. I’ll do all my work and make all my decisions right here.

When she nods, I thank whatever higher power has sent this woman in my direction.

Sliding the tip along her slit, I choke as I start pressing forward. She opens up for me, and it’s beautiful. So wet and ready, I’m blinded by short shallow thrusts. At this rate, I might get off before I can fully bury myself inside.

I’ll never want to leave this pussy again.

Sinking deep, I experience nothing but paradise. As her pussy swallows up every inch, I’m left resting on my elbows. Trying to fight the urge to start thrusting wildly and chase this need to seek the release I’ve held onto since she stepped into my life, her groan helps keep me grounded.

I’ll wait as long as she needs me to, even if it fucking kills me.

Seconds pass by and sweat rolls down my temple. Just as I part my lips to ask her if she's ready, there's a sudden loud banging against my door. One that makes her jerk and instantly reach out for the blankets. Like a splash of cold water, she's stiffening against me more and more by the second.

"We're fucking busy!" Turning, I seethe the words out through gritted teeth.

The door opens anyway and Camellia gasps, tucking herself against me like I can hide away every inch of her body.

Snatching the blanket to help in her aid, I curse as her grip tightens around my cock in a vice grip. Just as I throw it around us, I turn to see who has the deathwish to interrupt my bliss.

Fucking Urzo.

He doesn't look at us, smart enough to know better than to look at my woman when she's in this state. "This couldn't wait."

Unless the estate is under fire and Camellia's life is in danger, it can fucking wait.

"Well? Say what you have to say so you can leave." I'm trying not to completely lose myself to rage, not when I don't want to scare her off and take steps back.

He clears his throat and shifts where he stands. "You wanted to know when they came for her. Well, one of them did. Not Rocco. The other one." His brow furrows deep and a flicker of something crosses his face. Something he wastes no time in squashing down. "She's very loud. Disrupting the peace. Should I take her down below?"

Every word that leaves his lips is nothing but trouble. It's all Camellia needs to start

wiggling beneath me. She huffs and puffs and shows the first signs of caring about someone with the same last name.

Moment fucking ruined.

Great.

8

Camellia

“Camellia!” My sister’s voice is warped with worry as she cries out my name. Not even Santino can keep his grip on me when she throws herself at me in a hug that makes breathing impossible. “I thought they killed you. They wouldn’t let me see you, wouldn’t tell me where you were.”

My heart thunders in my chest, proving my state of life.

Eliza shouldn’t be here. Out of everyone, she’s the one I didn’t want to come here the most.

She’s worth more to this family than I am. Worth more to the man who has easily broken down my walls. Who has stolen my heart.

Despite knowing that, she still came here. Even if she thought I was dead and meant stepping into her own doom, she still came.

My eyes feel wet, and the jealousy I felt in the pit of my stomach about her taking Santino’s attention leaves me feeling terrible. I should know better.

“Rocco—”

“Fuck him.” She growls the words and squeezes me tighter. Her words grow muffled against my hair. “Don’t even think about him.”

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When she releases me from her grip, she steps back to make sure I'm not missing a single hair on my head. As her eyes lower, her relieved smile morphs into a scowl at discovering the mark on my neck. She looks at Santino without even a hint of fear. Funny enough, her rage matches his.

"Youmotherfucker. What did you do to my baby sister?" She doesn't even ask to confirm it washim, she balls up her hands and swings.

A gasp flies past my lips when she hits him.

There's a flash of anger that passes his expression when her fist makes contact with his jaw. He's quick to grab her wrists, stopping her attempt at punching him again. Despite the swell of his chest and the scowl on his face, he does nothing more than hold her in place.

"Little bird, tell your sister to fucking relax before I lose my patience and snap her wrist." He gives me the warning through grit teeth, growling when she kicks him.

She technically is the reason our moment in the bedroom was interrupted. My body still aches to finish what we started. He literally popped my cherry, and that was as far as we got. He's been in a foul mood since.

"You didntgive her a pet name." She curses at him when he doesn't release his grip. "What in the hell did you do to her?"

Funny enough, I don't mind the name. He's never used it to mock me or my situation, not with malice. If anything, it's a reminder of what I'd have to go back to if I ever

left this place. My home is nothing but a cage. Locked away in my room without permission to leave unless my sister begs my brother to allow me to eat meals at the table with them. The only time I get fresh air is when I'm enjoying the view from my window.

Sure, I don't want to imagine Santino rescuing me from that life, but he's not hurting me by keeping me to himself.

I step toward them, reaching out. "Eliza, I'm fine, really. This—" I graze my throat and feel the heat grow on my cheeks. "—is nothing to fret about."

I mean it. I'm not going to tell her that I like it or anything, but it's really not as big of a deal as she's making it. She's had plenty of secret boyfriends before, she has to have somewhat of an idea of what could be happening.

Or, is the thought of Santino showing attraction toward me that much of a ludicrous idea?

Santino, not on the same page as I am, smiles at her. "That's the only mark you can see. Just imagine what is beneath those clothes. I've made sure she's marked appropriately."

He can not ask me to calm her down and then rile her up again. Is he looking for an excuse to fight?

He releases her wrists and shoves Eliza backwards, right into the chest of the guy with the scar across his lip. Urzo. The same man who walked in on us. Hands free, he drifts toward me and wastes no time returning his touch. "If you think you came to take her back, then I'm happy to tell you that it will not happen."

Goosebumps rise against my skin as he pulls me against his chest. There's promise

behind his words, his eyes glaring with a reassuring look of deadly intent lurking beneath.

“She’s mine.” Announcing it loud enough for Eliza to hear, even a few of the grunts in the room do a double take. He’s not shy when it comes to making the claim, either.

My cheeks warm, and I fight the urge to cover my face. My poor heart is jumping in happiness, but dread fills my stomach. I can’t allow myself to get too comfortable. Not when my sister is trying to send an elbow in Urzo’s stomach to free herself. He’s as much of a wall as Santino is.

“Send her back the way she came.” He gives the order against my hair. “I want her gone.”

Urzo grunts, already tugging her toward the front entrance. He huffs when she stomps the heel of her shoe into his boot.

“I can’t.” Eliza looks at me, her eyes doubling in size. “Rocco will kill me if he finds out I came here and left empty-handed.”

She means that literally. I can hear it in the waiver of her voice. As much as I didn’t want her to come, I want to watch her leave even less.

Turning to look at Santino, I can see his jaw already flexing, like he can read my mind.

“One Parada is just enough.” He takes in a slow breath. “Two is too many. Especially when one is more dangerous than the other. I won’t have her trying to kill my men while I’m distracted.” He looks down at me, meets my gaze, and curses beneath his breath. “No.”

“She’s my sister, Santino. The only one who has treated me like a person. I don’t want to lose her.” Biting my lip, I can see the argument happening behind those stormy dark eyes. “Please.”

Sighing through his nose, he frowns at Urzo. “Put her somewhere. Find a room with a lock on the outside without windows. Make sure she isn’t a threat. I’ll deal with her later.”

Eliza doesn’t get the chance to argue, not when she’s getting dragged toward the grand set of stairs.

“Don’t make me regret this.” Muttering the words, he looks at the handful of his men lingering about, watching with confusion and curiosity. “Return to your posts. The show is over.”

My stomach clenches as I crave a conversation with Eliza. Happy to have her close, I know this place is a danger to her. Surprised that he wanted to kick her out instead of keeping her for questioning, the weight of my curiosity doubles against my tongue. Before I can ask, Santino is leading me toward the hall I snuck down last night.

“Where are we going?” I picture him taking me to his office to begin his work day, or whatever he does in there. Instead, we stop far too shy of that door.



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Delicious smells radiate through the swinging kitchen doors, even more when Santino pushes them open and leads me inside. When I sigh in content, a chuckle rumbles from him.

“You haven’t eaten much.” He turns and looks at the three women working together to prepare meals for many. They’re mixing bowls, throwing in ingredients I don’t recognize. He clears his throat and immediately captures their attention. “Take a break. I want privacy.”

My stomach flips at his words. Every time we’re caught alone, bad things happen. But we’re only here for food. What is the worst he can do? Try to feed me?

As the three women scurry past us with passing goodbyes and nods of respect, silence fills the room. Enough to hear a pin drop.

“What are you hungry for?” Palm pressed against my middle back, he leads me closer to the pans of delicious-smelling food. At this rate, I’m happy to take whatever I can get my hands on the quickest. “If none of this is appetizing, I’ll make you something else. I’m not known as being a master in the kitchen, but I do have some secrets that aren’t known.”

This man is offering to cook for me. “Really? How do I know you aren’t trying to look for a way to poison me?”

I’m starting to think this isn’t really a game between us. He’s not just trying to swoon me over by speaking the right words. He called me his, and I’ve been walking on air since.

Santino really wants me. He wants me.

I'm struggling to comprehend it all. He picks up on it with ease as his arms move to trap me against the nearest counter once he leads me right to it.

"I don't think you and I are on the same page here." He presses his front against my back and grinds forward, trapping me between his body and the counter. "When I say I don't plan on letting you leave here, that includes leaving in the grace of death."

My toes curl when he taps my foot with his, urging my legs to split.

In such a rush to see my sister, I had yanked up these pants and barely managed to tie them in a knot. I hadn't bothered to look for a replacement for my underwear since he ruined my only pair.

"Santino, people get food here." Face blazing, I can see the familiar look in his eyes. Even more when he kisses the sore spot on my throat.

"They interrupted us. They can fucking starve for all I care." He's still sore about that.

I guess a tiny part of me is a little upset too. My body is still wet, still aching. Now that the shock of Eliza's arrival is starting to simmer, I only have this man to focus on.

"I'll say it as many times as you need me to. You're mine, understand? I'm keeping you here because I want you. I'd be a fool for trying to think otherwise." His hands glide to my hips, and he squeezes them roughly.

"You don't even know me." What if he starts thinking the same things as my brother?  
"I don't want to be locked away again."

The truth comes out in a hoarse whisper as I stare down at the marble design printed across the counter.

His chest vibrates, and I bet he's frowning. "I won't tuck you away in some room. I'll let you roam wherever you want on the estate." He reaches around me and teases the sloppy knot with his fingers. "If that isn't enough, I'll let you leave."

My breath catches in my throat. "Really?"

"I will be at your side. If not me, I'll send four men to keep you safe." Nuzzling my throat, he growls softly. "I've seen this pussy, Camellia. If I let you be alone, every man within five feet of you is going to want to have a taste. You understand? I don't want to kill innocent civilians because they can't keep their fucking eyes to themselves."

A shiver rolls down my spine and moves into a liquid pool of heat in the pit of my stomach.

"That's the best I can do, the most I'm willing to negotiate on this matter." He tugs one of the strings and it gives way too easily.

Anyone can walk in on us, I'm sure. One person was already far too much to my liking. Yet, I don't tell him to keep his hands to himself like I should.

"Part your legs for me, sweetness. I bet you're still soaked, aren't you?" His foot taps mine once more and I do as I'm told. "Such a good girl."

I'm starting to think this man is becoming my weakness. A little praise should not be what makes my knees wobble and my limbs turn into noodles. Would my body betray me like this if it were another man muttering such things into my ear?

I shiver as my pants hit my ankles and gasp when he wastes no time in discovering that I am still very much wet.

“If anyone comes through that door, I’ll slit their throats, I swear to God.” Groaning the threat, he presses his fingers through my slickness. “I didn’t hurt you before, did I? Does this feel alright? You handled the hard part and didn’t even get the reward. It’s such a shame, isn’t it?”

Reaching forward, I clutch the edge of the counter. A moan escapes my lips as he spreads my juices toward my clit. At this rate, little circles are going to be what makes me meet my downfall.

“Y–Yes.” Knowing he’ll tease and torture me until I answer his question, a whine slips past my lips as he pulls away. I didn’t want him to leave altogether.

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Turning to look behind me, I watch him shove his waistband down and free his cock. Looking so hard like he can burst at even a single brush, his brows knit together when he catches my stare.

“You enjoy seeing me like this? My balls are so fucking tight because I keep getting stopped before I can come.” He squeezes himself at his base and groans deeply. “Show me where you want my load, Camellia. Part those lips and let me see.”

I can feel my thighs getting wet off of nothing but his words. I don’t know how he does it, but everything that comes out of those lips makes me feel like I’m not in control of my body.

Reaching behind me, my fingers glide down my slit. Radiating heat, we both groan in unison as I push my lips apart. I’ve never been so tingly before from my touch. Maybe it’s because I have an audience now that everything feels so intense.

“Fucking hell.” He chokes on another groan. “Fuck four men. I’m going to have to get an entire party of them, aren’t I? At least ten men should be enough to keep anyone with a cock away. None of them will dare touch you, not when you belong to me.”

I shiver at his words and bite my lip when he erases the distance between us. Brushing my fingers with his cock, he doesn’t waste another second before pushing himself inside with one deep thrust.

Unlike the first time, there isn’t a rough stretch or a pinch of pain. Instead, we both moan together as he pushes against spots I’ve never had touched before.

“I’m going to come so deep, you’re going to feel me for days.” He sucks another spot against my throat, probably leaving another spot. I’m going to be decorated in them at this rate.

He continues to thrust, and I can’t stop the noises from coming out. Between my moans and the sound of our bodies meeting, I don’t think anyone would mistakenly step inside.

Unable to help myself, I look behind me to see Santino, with his flushed cheeks and furrowed brow. What was such a pristine man yesterday now looks so disheveled. His hair is clinging to his forehead, and his muscles are taut.

“Touch yourself for me. Rub that clit so we can come together. I want you squeezing me tight.” His frown is gone, and the light is back behind his gaze. He’s happy.

I’m pretty sure only this man can make my heart bend at his will. Molten hot butterflies swarm my stomach, and thrash against my ribs as I move my hand to the front of my body. My clit is already so sensitive as it is, and even a simple graze is enough to make my hips jerk forward.

Santino easily uses his grip on my hips to put me back in place. He has to do it more than once as I lose myself with every circular motion of my fingertips.

Feeling the knot in my stomach growing tighter and tighter, I know I won’t last much longer. He doesn’t slow down, welcoming the fluttering of my walls.

“That’s it, Camellia. Squeeze around me, suffocate me. Drain me fucking dry for every drop I have to give.” His grunts match his thrusts, but they grow less even. More wild, more frantic.

My back arches as he crashes against a sweet spot and pushes me over the edge. I try

to contain my cry, but nothing can stop the way my chest seizes up.

He curses behind me before hardly lasting more than a couple more thrusts. Keeping his word, he buries himself deep before a burning heat washes over me. I feel each pulse, each spurt of his release.

“All of this is just for you.” He hums his approval as he pulls out and slides right back in. “I’m going to give you my last name. Going to fill your belly too while I’m at it.”

Even after he grows still, my head is spinning from his words. Santino has this all figured out, and I’m still dizzy from the night before.

I knew people knew him for his craziness, but this takes the cake. I don’t think he can do anything else to top this.

Even if it’s wrong, or crazy or what, I can’t help but never want this to end.

I might be as gone as he is.

9

Santino

My knee bounces as I sit at my desk. Brows pinched between my fingers, I focus on how empty the room is when I’m completely alone.

There’s a leather couch against the wall with three cushions, plenty of space for Camellia to spread out on if she wanted to keep me company.

Half of my desk is bare thanks to her stunt of knocking plenty off, so she could sit

there as well. It's probably why I've yet to straighten up the room, the evidence of yesterday constantly surrounding me.

If cool leather or hardwood isn't enough to satisfy her, I'm happy to lend her my thigh. So many options, yet none are used.

I'm in here suffering from my loneliness. How in the fuck have I survived this last decade without having her in my life?

My knee continues to bounce and the highlighter in my grip creaks beneath my grip as I look over a transcript of a phone call placed between the men at the docks and an unknown number.



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I need to focus. How can I protect my own if I'm dealing with tunnel vision? The power Camellia has over me is unknown to her, but she'll find out soon enough. I'm fucking putty in the palm of her hand. All she has to do is flutter those ocean eyes at me and I'd stop at nothing to give her what she wants.

That includes keeping my word on letting her roam freely. I won't lock her up, even if I want to keep her far away from that damn sibling of hers.

Right now, I bet she's trying to convince my future wife to run away with her.

If she can't go back home, she'd try to take her anywhere else but here. If only they both understood my home is the safest place for them to be.

All of my problems would dissolve if I just went and killed Rocco Parada. He's the reason for most of my headaches. The only thing stopping me is the fear eating at my chest. The fear that Camellia won't forgive me for spilling the blood of one of her family members.

She looked like she wanted to cry when I tried to kick her sister out.

Capping the highlighter, I set it down and sigh into my hands. Everything has suddenly become complicated because I can't solve things in the only way I know how.

Using my hands to solve all my problems has always been my go-to. What in the hell am I supposed to do now? My hands might as well be tied at my back until I can figure out some kind of work around.

There's a knock at my door, and I don't want any company. Not when I feel like I'm spiraling.

Knowing I already ordered not to be disturbed, there's only one person I know who would happily go against my words without batting an eyelash.

"Now is not the time." Sighing into my hands, I hear my mother enter. "What could you possibly want?"

She's not here to find out about my plans for dealing with this attempt at infiltration. No, she's here to push my buttons. I can already hear her words before she says them.

Luckily for her, I have a soft spot for family. Even if I don't like their behaviors, I'm not going to dispose of my own blood to save myself a headache.

She settles comfortably on the couch, easing back and looking so smug.

"I don't know what you're up to." Leaning back in my chair, my eyes narrow on her. "I do not enjoy you intervening. You're trying to push and make things happen. I have everything under control."

"Word is getting around, Santino. You know how much everyone loves to gossip around here." Her mouth curves and those matching dark eyes grow a little lighter. "Is it true? Should I start planning a wedding? Will I finally have a daughter-in-law?"

I'm sure she'd love to take on a project, an excuse to keep her hands busy. Yesterday was more than enough proof to see that she plans on involving herself until she gets what she wants.

"I haven't decided yet," I lie as I avert my gaze. I may have declared that Camellia is mine, but that is a broad statement.

Mine to play with. Mine to fuck. Mine to use whenever I feed a hunger nothing else can sate.

In truth, she's mine to love. Mine to need. However, those are weaknesses. I'm not the first to want to jump up and expose the best spots to inflict damage.

All my mother wants is to see one of her kids successfully submit to the same feelings she experienced with my father before he passed.

My brother, Lazaro, married his wife with hardly much of a warning. Between his desperation to give her our last name, and wanting to keep her from this side of his life, he did everything right under our noses.

My mother is still a little sore she's yet to meet the woman who took him from us.

My sister, Valeria, slipped away from the family the moment she turned eighteen. Disappeared off the planet. Could be dead for all I know.

Then there's Urzo. She and I both know he isn't going ever to give up his job for a woman. He's too serious for his own good. He's a good asset, the same as what Lazaro once was.

"You all are made up of sharp edges, you know that?" She scoffs under her breath and huffs. "Your father knew how to keep an image for those who looked his way, but he was the sweetest when he didn't have any attention his way. Such a softie."

"I guess we must've got our personalities from you then." Muttering the words, I couldn't dare imagine myself as soft. Soft is a weakness.

There's a reason she's kept at the estate. She's an important factor to this family. I can think of many names who wouldn't mind killing her to hurt me. Hell, they'd chop

pieces off one at a time and ship bloody parcels straight to my door to send a message once they've wrung her dry of information.

Now, I have another person on that list. If word is getting around, then more than just my inner family will know of Camellia. The guests of my party had seen her thrown over my shoulder, showing behaviors I normally don't exhibit.

"I was stubborn during my youthful years; I'll give you that." She sighs and shakes her head. "I even denied my love at first as well, but I recognize it well enough, Santino. Marry her. Anything could happen, you know that as much as I do."

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She's giving me her motherly advice, just like she always does. I don't like how broadanythingreally is.

"They're going to come for her one way or another. Especially now that the other woman is here. You can't just hide them behind a closed door and pretend everything will be alright. If you bring her into the family, there isn't much they can do."

I'm happy to look for any excuse to tie the knot. My men will think I'm doing it to piss off Rocco. However, that's not the issue here. "That doesn't solve all of my problems.

"Eliza Parada." My frown grows as I remember her right hook she landed earlier. "I can't get rid of her. Marriage is off the table if I do."

I would like Camellia to be a willing bride, and my mother must understand because she nods.

"I've heard she caused quite the commotion this morning." Her mouth quips like she's remembering something in the past. Soon, her shoulders square before a look of seriousness takes over. She looks like the woman who helped keep this family afloat while my father was still alive. "And the chance of her marrying one of our own?"

"Slim to none. She'll get killed out of frustration before she can even get a ring on her finger." My knee bounces. "Could fake her death and keep her as a prisoner. It doesn't stop retaliation from occurring. She's too loud to pretend to be dead, anyway."

We sit in silence, and I roll my highlighter between my fingers.

No matter what suggestions she can send my way, I know most will end up with Camellia wanting nothing to do with me. Can't be inhumane or cruel. Can't beme.

"Something needs to happen. While I know our family is strong, I don't want to see any fighting brought directly to our home. You understand, don't you?"

I nod. "You've got nothing to worry about. I'll get it figured out."

I'll have to kill Rocco. I had already made my decision, but this truly solidifies my plan. He's been an issue I should've dealt with when he started trying to expand his area by merging into mine. If I can't be the one to pull the trigger, then I need to find someone else. Or, better yet, I need an excuse that will allow me to be the one.

I really want to be the one to take his life.

"I hope you do. I like this woman." Moving to stand, she sighs as her body cracks and hints at her old age. "The sweet and innocent type is not what I thought you'd go for. Nonetheless, I approve. Try not to scare her off, please. I'd like to have at least one grandchild before I wither to dust."

Rolling my eyes at her dramatics, I flick my wrist, silently telling her to leave.

I don't need any more distractions. What I need is to find someone who can track down the location of Rocco.

Something tells me his sisters won't give me the information I need. Therefore, I'm going to have to track him down myself.

In the meantime, I'm going to have to figure out how not to lose my little bird while

taking care of this problem.

10

Camellia

“We could slip away at night.” My sister squeezes my hands as she tries to talk sense into me. “Bus tickets aren’t too expensive. Let’s just go somewhere far away and make something of ourselves. We can steal something here and sell it. I bet asshole burns a hole in his wallet buying stupid stuff.”

“Uh, I don’t think I want to steal from these guys.” I tried stealing information and look at what happened.

Urzo sighs, rolling his eyes. He might as well be a part of the wall as he watches over us, but he has no issue wearing his thoughts on his face. He thinks the plan is stupid as well.

Probably shouldn’t plot out an escape plan in front of a Bertelli family member, but my sister seems desperate.

“I can’t leave,” I tell her softly. “Santino has promised me something no one ever has.”

She squeezes my hands tighter. “You can’t trust him. They’re all the same, Camellia. All they care about is power and money. Rocco is the same way. He refused to send anyone for you. He wouldn’t even offer up money in hopes of getting you back.” Her brows come together. “Wouldn’t even see if you were still alive.”

I can hear the waiver of her voice. She’s still clearly upset. There’s a layer of exhaustion weighing down on her eyes, thanks to a promised night of tossing and

turning.

“Now that I’m here, I’m sure he’s killing those who let me slip out.” She grimaces and shakes her head. Leaning closer, she purposely lowers her voice. “He’s got big plans, Cam. I just fucked him over by leaving the way I did. He wanted to use both of us.”

There’s a little tremble to her fingers and I move my hands so I’m the one giving her a reassuring squeeze. “You didn’t leave to just get me, did you?”

As much as I love my sister, I’d be terrified to go to an enemy’s base to rescue someone else. I’d have to be desperate to run away from the life she has.



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She's hesitant at first before her eyes lower. Soon, she shakes her head.

"He's been hinting at it for weeks now, nagging me about my responsibilities. Throw in how often he's had meetings with a neighboring family, I think... No, I'm sure of it. He plans on marrying me off. Like I'm a piece of currency to help him with this stupid fight of his, he's going to use me to get another family on his side. Just last night, he spent hours on the phone trying to push this marriage along. He should've been trying to rescue you, but no. He's too good for that. Barking orders to get a marriage certificate and everything..."

I try to imagine what she's trying to tell me. My brows come together as I work out who could've been the potential suitor. I might've rarely left in my room, but my window gave me more than enough of a view.

"Marino?" I whisper as I pick at my brain for names. "Someone from that family has been visiting a lot. I can't remember his first name, though. It's the guy with the eye patch, right?"

Her brows lift high before she nods. "Yeah, that guy. Sure, he's not bad looking and all, but Rocco hasn't even introduced us. He thinks I'd want to marry a complete stranger? Something tells me if I wouldn't have left today, I'd be picking out a ring by the end of the day." She scoffs and rolls her eyes before pausing. "Wait, how did you know that? I didn't even know which family he was from."

Before I can tell her about how much time I've spent sneaking around, there's movement.

She jumps as a hand clamps down on her shoulder. We both look up to see Urzo staring down at her. His nostrils are flared, his stare heavy. For once, there's a hint of emotion on his face. Unfortunately for us, it's rage.

I guess he can hear rather well. That, or we stopped whispering halfway through the secret.

"Santino needs to hear about this immediately." He easily plucks her up by the arm as if she's nothing more than a rag doll. Like whiplash, her body jerks with his.

Eliza growls at him, digging her nails into his hand to try to loosen his iron grip. "That hurts, you asshole!"

He curses under his breath and releases his hold. "You need a fucking mute button."

"Excuse me?" Already balling up her fists, I can see the heat filling her gaze, and I sigh softly.

Pressing a palm against her back, he pauses before looking over his shoulder. He squints at me like he can't decide if I need to come as well. We were just discussing escape plans, after all. Finally, he makes up his mind.

"Be good." Turning, he shoves my sister towards the door, ignoring any insults she sends his way as she stumbles forward.

I hope he doesn't get frustrated with her. She never knows when to cool down, even when it's good for her.

Left to my devices, I groan and sigh.

I don't want to leave this place. I don't want Eliza to give up on me and try to make it

on her own. I don't want Rocco to come hunt her down.

There's so much I don't want.

For just a moment, I got a taste of happiness. Now, I'm right back to stressing.

God, when did everything turn upside down?

There was a time when everything was easy. Back when our father was alive. My siblings were loving. Rocco was a completely different person. He was soft, caring and... he had a heart. He spoke to me like I was a person. Protected me like a big brother would.

Our father was poisoned, our mother disappeared, and everything burned to the ground. Rocco was thrown into the position with hardly much preparation, and many ties were cut.

The moment our mother disappeared, Rocco looked at me differently. Like an entirely different person. He looked like he wanted me dead, yet he never has tried to hurt me. Rather than physically cause me pain, he pretended I wasn't part of the family. From that point forward, I stayed in my room. He didn't kill me, but he didn't let me live. Kept me like a secret never to get let out.

Eliza's as clueless as I am about the matter. We've had this conversation a thousand times over.

Shaking my head at the reminder, I move to stand up.

I don't want to be alone right now. Santino is busy from the sounds of it, and I'm sure I'd get in the way if I tried to follow the other two to figure out what was going on.

What I need is some fresh air. A place to clear my head.

While I am not anywhere close to having this place memorized, I can figure my way around. For the most part, I keep to myself. Clinging to the wall, I can feel the eyes pointed in my direction anytime I pass any men patrolling the estate.

I get it, I do. I am an enigma that no one understands. After getting caught, I shouldn't still be breathing. What is so special about me that Santino has decided to let me live? It's the same question I continue to ask myself every time I remind myself that I'm still alive.

Once someone has the answer, I would love to know.

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Roaming the halls until I find what I came looking for, I eventually land at the same glass set of doors Bia took me to.

Stepping out to the courtyard, I move past the benches and keep walking toward the greenery. The grass tickles the soles of my feet with each step, and I take in a lungful of fresh air. It smells like a mixture of pine and floral, and a part of me wants to stay out here for the entire day. Roaming this garden sounds like a dream.

My feet carry me through the rose bushes, and I take in the different colors of flowers, a sight I've never seen before. So breathtaking, it distracts me from the warnings blaring in my head as I continue to walk.

Reaching the edge of the garden, I take in the stretch of untouched land that leads to heavy iron bars. There's a gate wrapping around the entire state, barbed wire spiraling around top to make getting in or out impossible not to get injured.

As I stare at the bars, a grim realization starts to set in. I'm quick to realize that I'm not immediately thinking about finding another way to leave. Really, I'm not thinking about escaping at all.

If Eliza were the one who was standing here, she'd be searching for another way out.

Running a hand through my hair, I sigh softly and shake my head. One man alone has messed me up entirely.

A tiny voice in the back of my head is whispering that this is all too good to be true. There's no way I'm being handed the life I've always wanted because I ran into a

man who wants me.

Santino acts like he needs me.

All I can do is wait for the other shoe to drop. Wait until I'm completely made a fool of because I fell for the enemy's tactics.

Just thinking about him that way makes my stomach tighten, and my lungs seize.

If this is all one big game for him, then I think my heart won't be able to survive the outcome. Not after everything we've done. After everything I've given him.

Standing outside for what feels like an eternity, I hug myself as the air blows straight through me. With another gust of wind picking up, and a sky full of clouds that grow darker by the minute, promising a shower or two in the future, I turn and make my way back.

As soon as I'm inside, I hear the familiar sound of my sister shrieking. Immediately, my heart pounds as I can only imagine what is happening to her to make her sound like that. She sounds like she's being tortured.

Santino is right, I'm not much of a runner. However, that doesn't stop me from sprinting toward the sound of Eliza. It doesn't take long before I'm out of breath and panting, flushed, and tired as I reach the grand staircase.

There she is, thrown over the shoulder of Urzo. Kicking and punching, the brick wall of the man doesn't even flinch as he climbs each stair.

Eliza notices me rather quickly, reaching out as if I have enough to stop whatever this is from happening.

Before I can even think to ask any questions or try to follow them, a hand slides against my back and Santino is there.

“She’s fine,” he promises with an annoyed sigh. “She just doesn’t like what’s happening.”

My fingers tangle together as I look at him before taking in the betrayed expression on her face as I don’t rush in her aid.

I don’t even truly understand what is going on. Everything seems chaotic, too much for my liking.

“And what exactly is happening?” I ask him carefully, partially afraid to hear the answer.

“Rocco is trying to marry off your sister to strengthen his forces and attempt to take mine out.” He clicks his tongue in distaste. “My brother has volunteered to make the task impossible by giving her our last name.”

My brows come together as I try to comprehend what he is telling me fully.

“Bonds fuel us to fight. Another family won’t side with him unless they have something to protect. Something as easily as a friendship is not strong enough to risk losing members of your own. A matrimonial bond comes with the promise of protection. Soon, your brother won’t have that.” He puts pressure on his hand, trying to move me to wherever he wants to go next.

Unfortunately for him, I don’t budge. I stare at him, brows knitted together. “You can’t force her to marry your brother. You can’t just use her like that. Listen to her, she doesn’t want to be tied down.” I chew on my lip. “Rocco might try to arrange something, but she wouldn’t agree. She’d rather be kicked out than get married to a

man she doesn't love."

"I'm sorry to say, but marrying her off is far easier than simply needing her consent. With the desperation that man has, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd force her to sign a marriage certificate with a barrel pressed against the back of her head." He shakes his head. "This is the better option. As much as I don't want her here, she needs to be for you to stay."

Turning to look at my troubled expression, his eyes soften and his hands move to cup my jaw. Leaning in, he kisses me to make my thoughts sizzle.

"Urzo will not hurt her. Out of all of my men, he's the one I know can put up with her without the use of violence. He wants this as much as she does. However, he is willing, simply because we need to do this to avoid any future problems with our family." He kisses my forehead next before pulling away. "You trust me, don't you?"

I shouldn't. Yet, I do. I want to believe every word he says. All because I don't know any better. My heart is in the same boat as my brain.



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When I nod, he tilts my chin back, kisses me one last time, and then pulls me away from wherever Eliza has been taken.

11

Santino

Rocco has yet to make a move, and I can't say I'm entirely surprised. I've stolen what little blood he has, leaving him by his lonesome.

All I'm waiting for now is for him to make an appearance. Completely alone, I'm sure he wouldn't have the balls to face me here and try to take his sisters back. Even if he just wants Eliza, the risk is too high.

So, the next thing to do is to try and draw him out. Neither sister wants to tell me where he sleeps, so I'm taking this into my own hands.

I'll risk my safety. If I give Rocco a reason to try to take my life, my future wife can't despise me for protecting myself. Even better, if he tries to kill her, I could come out of this looking like the hero by spilling his blood. Sure, he won't have the chance to point his gun at her before I'll put a bullet between his eyes, but she won't know any better.

"We could have just ordered something." Camellia squirms in the back seat of our car as we drive through the city. "I'm sure you can get packages even while being on the outskirts of town."

Settling next to her, my hand tucked deliciously between her thighs, I give one a squeeze. “As much as I love seeing you wearing my clothing, I want you to find something you feel more comfortable in.”

“What about my sister? She needs clothes, too.” Her fingers wrap around my wrist to avoid letting me touch any higher. She’s embarrassed because of the person driving only a couple of feet away from us. She has nothing to worry about, he wouldn’t dare look our way.

“Urzo will get what she needs.” I promise her, pausing for only a hitch when I realize I may be lying to her.

The last couple days may have been rougher than I planned. His patience is getting tested, I can tell by the grit of his jaw. He looks like he hasn’t been getting much sleep, probably too busy making sure his soon to be bride doesn’t try to smother him. Even worse, instead of managing the family guarding our home, he’s too busy making sure Eliza isn’t trying to escape.

He acts like he wants nothing to do with her. I hope he gets her something as simple as a wardrobe. I really don’t want to take care of her as well.

Seeing how unsettled Camellia is, I rub her thigh with my thumb. “Everything will work out, I promise. I have a feeling by the end of today, everything will be exactly as it should be.” Murmuring the words against the top of her head as my lips brush her soft hair, I pull away entirely and settle on my side of the car.

I try not to smile when she looks up at the lack of my touch. Lately, I haven’t been able to stop. At this rate, just like my brother, I’m not getting any work done. Everything about this woman is sucking up all of my time.

I don’t know how my father did it. While I don’t want to imagine him being

affectionate with my mother, I know well enough that my parents had a healthy relationship. He loved her dearly. Somehow, he found a way to manage our family, all while managing his marriage.

Finding the line between will be my next goal. But first, to take care of this pesky nuisance.

“Do you think we could grab a bite after?” Hesitant, she asks as she bites that plump lip of hers. “I can’t remember the last time I had fast food.”

A smile comes as naturally to my lips as possible at the hint of excitement behind her words.

“Anything for you. Just tell me what you are craving, and it is yours.” Be it food, or something else, I’m happy to please.

We eventually reach a clothing outlet. Pulling into a parking lot, two other vehicles park on the surrounding sides of our car. Always needing a wall of protection, a handful of men flood out of the other cars. Most are ordered to hang out on the outside of the building, while two others come inside with us.

“Pick out anything you want. Don’t worry about the price tags and make sure to grab enough for a few outfits. I can’t wait to see what kind of taste you have.” Rubbing my fingers against the middle of her back, I give her a little push to get her out of this hesitant state.

I want to spoil her. I don’t care about money, it’s just a number, anyway. As long as she’s swelling with happiness, that’s the only thing I care about.

Once she drifts off to lightly finger different fabrics, I turn toward Tommy and lower my voice. “Where we followed?”

He shakes his head, much to my dismay. “So far, no. I did as you ordered, and called over the schedule with the others. If they’re listening, or worse, there is a leak, then they know exactly what we’re doing.”

I grunt, nodding to his words. Crossing my arms over my chest, I drift over toward the windows of the store and gaze out.

Camellia doesn’t know any better, but I’ve purposely taken her into Parada territory.

I don’t enjoy using my future bride as a lure, but I don’t know what else to do. I’m hoping if he learns that I’m out and about, with possibly both sisters, he’ll send someone our way. Someone who will give me the information I need. Or, even better, he’ll come visit himself so I can finish the job with ease.

Looking over my shoulder, I see Camellia pressing a white summer dress against her front with a look of debate. Already picturing her wearing it, knowing how easy access it’ll be, I drift away from the view to help convince her to pick out more clothing like this.

This shop is only our first. Once she’s picked out enough clothes to fill one bag, I drag her to another. The deeper we enter the territory, the higher success I’ll have.

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Making each stop, I deal with awkward shop owners who easily melt with each swipe of my card.

We come across another shop at another strip, one not on our itinerary. However, the way my little bird's cheeks immediately grow flushed, I'm tempted to urge her to take the jump.

"Would you like to go inside?" I ask, noticing her gaze fixed on the mannequin's white dress.

Is she thinking about her sister now, or is she imagining herself in place of the mannequin?

Soon, she'll need one of these dresses. Having the full intention of marrying her and giving her my last name, I'm sure I'll have someone stop by and take her measurements. She'll describe the sort of dress she'd dream of being married in.

Unlike Eliza, I want to give Camellia the choice. I want her to want me as who I am. I want to give her the wedding she deserves.

If she rejects me, I'm not entirely sure what I'll do. It has to be her as my future wife. Before Camellia, I wanted to die alone. Now, I don't think I can live without her. Love truly is a weakness.

"No, I don't think so." Turning away, she gives me a gentle smile and shakes her head. "I think you have me tuckered out when it comes to looking at clothes. I think I'm ready for lunch." As we resume walking, she reaches out and wraps a hand

around my arm. “But do you think we could ditch the bodyguards? Everyone keeps staring if you haven’t noticed.”

Cracking a laugh, I shake my head. “Sorry, but they have to go where I go. You’ll get used to them, I promise.” We continue to walk and I slow down purposely to extend this moment. She’s touched me on her own, and I don’t want to ruin it by running us to our last location. “Tell me, what greasy foods are you craving? I’m not entirely sure what our options are, but I’ll make it happen.”

Leaning toward her, my mouth brushes her ear as I offer her a different sort of meal that makes her pink cheeks flush even darker. I’d describe it as more of an appetizer, anyway. However, I’ve yet to get a taste of her today, and I am growing peckish.

Turning the corner of the outlet, I’m so distracted by the beauty’s giggle, that I miss the sound happening behind me. The sound of weapons drawn with a rush of curses. It’s not until Camellia is gasping that I realize that I’ve lowered my guard. For the first time in my life, I’ve slipped up.

Rocco Parada, in the flesh. Waiting like a predator would.

However, he’s not in the state I’m expecting.

He’s alone, weaponless, and quite pathetic looking, if I have to be honest. From the bags under his eyes, I have to say, for a man who has been a pain in my ass for all this time, I can’t say I’m too impressed.

If he’s here to wave a white flag, then he’s got another thing coming. I’m not the type to forgive. He’s done my little bird wrong, and I plan on getting the revenge she deserves.

However, how can I implement my plan if he doesn’t try to kill either of us? Do I

hope one of my men has a trigger finger?

No. I have to be the one.

Camellia may have softened me in some places, but I'm still sharp in others.

She'll forgive me. It may take weeks, possibly months, but she'll forgive me. She'll see it my way. So bashful and skittish, she won't have the stomach to watch. No, she won't even see her brother die.

Everything will be fine.

Before he can even move, I'm dropping the shopping bags in my hand and reaching behind me to grab the pistol tucked safely behind my belt. At the same time, Camellia is releasing my arm. She doesn't think twice about moving. Unfortunately, she's not turning away.

No, she's leaving me. Running toward her brother.

Before I can pull her back, I remember the men behind me, pistols in hand.

Reeling back, my lip curls at the thought of them aiming at the love of my life. "Lower your fucking weapons."

God, this is not the way this was meant to go. Every time I think I can see the way things will go, anything that involves this woman, it doesn't.

Camellia shouldn't be impeding my plans. Should not be getting in the way of danger. Just like the guns pointed at her, the man she's moving toward her doesn't care if she breathes or not. He abandoned her, for fuck's sake.

Why can't she see that?

What if he's here to kill her and take himself out all in one go?

Blood rushes my ears at the very thought. I can't lose her. I can't, and I won't.



Camellia

“Rocco?”

The last person I expected to see today was my brother. In truth, I never thought I’d see him again.

Yet, here he is. Looking rougher than I’ve ever seen in my life, with the scent of alcohol staining his clothes. No, I’ve seen him this way once before. Back when our father died. For a week, he was so torn and ruined, he looked like this.

Like a man whose life is falling apart. Despite his sisters and mother being there to mourn with him, he shut everyone out. Once our mother ran away, giving up on the chaos that comes with her husband dying, he sobered up.

“You’re alive?” He says the words with an eerily calmness as his eyes stare at the bags in my hand. “Looking more comfortable than I was expecting.” He sniffs and tears his eyes away from my direction to stare at something else more interesting. “And Eliza?”

“She’s okay.” My voice wavers, and I grimace at how this all must look in his eyes. However, I notice the way his shoulders relax. “They haven’t done anything to us.”

What they have done isn’t really something I want to tell my older brother, anyway. I probably shouldn’t tell him that our sister is now married, either. He looks like he’s already standing on a ledge here, and I’m not going to be the one to shove him over.

Santino might, though. The way he grabs my arm and tugs me back so I'm pressed to his chest makes my brother's eyes narrow on him.

I recognize the heat of anger behind his stare, and the way he clenches up like he wants to fight the man who is gripping me hard enough to leave a mark.

It's like Santino thinks I'll catch the next gust of wind and fly away from him.

When I wince, he curses under his breath and loosens his grip on me, but his fingers remain locked around my limb.

"You two seem to get along well enough." There's this tone to his voice that I don't recognize. There's no way that he's feeling betrayed. Not him, not with me. He wanted me gone.

Heat prickles up my neck at what he's implying. Of course, he's not wrong. I can't help my feelings. They formed all on their own.

"I can explain," I start, hoping I can reason with him. Remembering that there are plenty of Bertelli men willing to shoot what little family I have, I don't want him to do something crazy.

Plus, there have been some skittish pedestrians. I'm sure someone has called the cops by now.

"You don't have to explain anything," Santino snarls behind me, offended by the very thought. All I have to do is look at him, and he's gritting his teeth.

That makes Rocco snort and show the first sign of emotion I've seen today that isn't pain. Unfortunately, it's a sarcastic laugh.

“Look at me, Rocco.” Pleading softly, his brows knit together, and his frown grows. “Please.”

His jaw works, and his fingers curl and uncurl at his sides. Finally, he shakes his head. “I can’t.”

My heart aches in my chest as he refuses even to glance my way. He’s always been that way, never able to hold eye contact for long.

It’s my eyes, I know it is. He’s always hated my eyes. I don’t think that will ever change. Even when I had those pesky eye contacts in, it wasn’t enough. It’s like looking at me physically leaves him in pain.

“Let’s put an end to this fighting.” Putting the offer out there, I know Santino wouldn’t agree to such a thing. He’s got a grudge against my family. I could see it in the way he reacted to me, revealing who I was when he’d first caught me.

He’d be happy to wipe the Parada name off the face of the earth.

“Please. We don’t have to keep clashing like this. I know... I know I understand little about this whole thing, but I don’t want anyone else to die.” I swallow thickly. “I don’t want you to die.”

Even though he’s treated me like I’m not a person, kept me locked away and everything else that has made me into the person I am today, I don’t hate him.

He’s still my brother. Somewhere deep inside, he’s still the guy who was loving and caring. My brother who wouldn’t dare let anything happen to me.

Slowly, he looks at me. His face pains up like it hurts him to even look my way. He doesn’t last long, he never does. His eyes lower to look at Santino’s shirt I’m

wearing, and he blinks.

“Do you want to come back home?” He asks the question low enough that I’m not sure if I’ve misheard him or not. I must’ve.

“Why in the fuck would she want to return?” Santino is one step away from grabbing him, and my nails dig into his arm hard enough to ground him. To ground me as well.

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Rocco ignores him, waiting for my answer.

He hasn't called it our home in a long time. I'm starting to think I'm not seeing the bigger picture here.

Why is Rocco here? He's come without a weapon in hand, so I doubt he came to fight. He showed up where we were, so he knew one of us would be here. Did he know it was me?

Did Santino warn him to draw him out? My stomach clenches at the thought, and I make a note to question him later about it.

Either way, Rocco showed up for a reason I'm struggling to understand. The concept of him caring is so foreign to me, I struggle to believe it's true.

"Were you going to rescue me?" I ask him instead. "You didn't plan on abandoning me."

He blinks, returning my silence with his own.

Communication was never a strong suit in our family.

Finally, he grunts. "I made a mistake sending you there."

Why? Because he knew I'd get caught? Because he regrets sending his sibling on her own? Because his enemy stole my heart?

I want to ask, but I don't. There's this tightness gripping at my heart and my lungs as I just wish I could understand what Rocco's deal is.

If I let him, Santino would be happy to torture the information out of him.

"Rocco—"

Shoving the heel of his hand into his eye, he sighs as he turns his attention to the men behind us. "Are you going to kill me or not? If not, then get the hell out of my territory. You don't look like you're going to give her back, and I don't have anyone for support, so just do what you're going to do. Put me out of my misery or leave me to suffer. Just get it over with."

I look at Santino and frown when he considers the question. There's conflict behind his gaze, one that shouldn't be there.

"If you do, I will never forgive you, Santino Bertelli." Whispering the promise, I don't miss the way both men look at me in surprise.

Rocco's surprise lasts as long as I can blink before he's turning around. Giving us his back, he shakes his head. "I'm leaving first, then. Just needed to see if she was still breathing, that's all."

I watch my brother disappear inside of a SUV, the tightness in my chest growing even tighter.

If I had told him I wanted to go back home, would he have put up more of a fight?

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," I murmur as my stomach clenches. "Can we please just go back?"

Santino's glare on my brother's unmarked vehicle could cut through glass. He doesn't move, not at first. The conflict is there, I know. I've put him between a rock and a hard place.

I won't ask him to get along with Rocco, even I know that's pushing too much.

"What do you want us to do?" One of the guys behind us asks, seeking guidance. "We can catch up and follow him."

His grip on my arm dissolves, and he wraps an arm around me. "Follow him. Make sure he doesn't drive off of a bridge and get himself killed. Track his location." I hear his teeth grind. "You do not have my permission to do the job either."

Hearing the shuffle of feet, I smile at Santino. "Thank you."

His frown doesn't lessen. No, he still looks pissed. He's just trying his hardest not to aim it at me.

"Let's go. If you're still hungry, I'll send someone to grab food later."

Grimacing at the thought of eating something now, I nod my head and let him lead us back to the cars.

Sirens ring in the background. We don't stick around long enough to see any cruisers.

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The drive gives me plenty of time to think. Santino doesn't touch me like he had the drive to town.

We're both lost in our heads.

"Leave the bags. We'll return to them later." Giving the order to his men, he flattens a hand on my back and leads me into the home.

Bia is sitting with my sister, chatting her ear off on the steps. For once, Urzo isn't breathing down her neck. I can't even stop to say hello with the way he's guiding me straight for the room I've adjusted to. His bedroom.

Once we're inside, he shuts the door and starts tearing at the buttons of his shirt. He's like a coiled spring ready to snap at the slightest push.

If he's waiting for me to apologize, I won't.

When I don't move, and go as far as crossing my arms over my chest, his frown grows.

Snapping a button, he growls out of frustration and stomps back toward me. My arms loosen and I step back, trapped by the wall behind me.

"You do not put yourself in front of a line of fire, do you understand?" He's trying his hardest to keep his feelings inside, but I can see the rush happening behind his gaze.

Well, I'm a little angry too. This man is too trigger happy for his own good.



“You can’t just shoot my brother. Even though our relationship is complicated, you can’t just kill him. My voice wavers as my fingers curl at my sides. “There shouldn’t have been a line of fire to begin with. He didn’t come to fight. he—”

“He came to take you away from me!” Roaring out his frustrations, he flattens his hand against the wall. “He’ll try again, I know he will.”

“He won’t,” I whisper. “I don’t want to leave, Santino. I would have tried going with him if I did.”

I want to stay with the man who has been torn up by the thought of me leaving his side. I’m not going to be cared about in this way by anyone else.

Reaching up, I cradle his face. “Tell me you didn’t purposely draw him out to try to kill him.”

His eyes close and he sighs. “You know that’s exactly what I did, little bird. I didn’t want to risk him taking you away from me. From him threatening my family and everything I love.”

My stomach tightens and my eyes grow wide. “You love me?”

His nose scrunches. “You need to ask that?”

I suppose it may be a bit of a silly question, but the thought is a crazy one to me.

“I want you to have my last name, Camellia. I’ve wanted it the moment I had you pressed against my desk. Wanted it even more once I had my cock inside you.” He brushes the front of my stomach with his thumb. “You’ve made me into someone I can’t even recognize anymore. Desperate and weak. Soon, my men will be whispering behind my back to try to figure out what you’ve done to thaw out my

heart.”

When his eyes open, I get lost in that pit of darkness.

“I’ll marry you, Santino. I’ll become a Bertelli.” Seeing the light start to seep into his gaze, I frown. “On one condition.”

Sure, I’m pretty brave to ask him of anything. Especially when I saw how easy it is to marry someone off. Still, it can’t hurt to try.

“Save Rocco. I... I don’t know what his deal is. He’s not a bad guy, I swear. I haven’t forgiven him, not even close. But, I can’t do that if he’s dead.” I grimace at what I’m asking of him. “Please. These bonds you were talking about, they’re meant to draw families together. You said it yourself. Save the Parada name.”

He grimaces at my words. They make him look sick. Finally, he sighs. “I’ll send him a wedding invitation, then. Maybe I’ll even hand deliver it to see his face.” Murmuring the words, he shakes his head. “I suppose he’s already my in-law thanks to that sister of yours.”

Hope starts to grow in my chest, but his frown diminishes it.

‘I’ll try, Camellia. However, if he isn’t on board, and he tries to take advantage of my kindness by attempting to take my life, I will not hesitate to put a bullet between his eyes. Sorry-looking bastard looked like he came hoping I’d do the job today.”

Murmuring the last part, I can’t help but agree. He did seem surprised to see that I was still alive, and probably happy as well.

“Alright then. I’ll become Mrs. Bertelli. Don’t make me regret—”

I don't get to finish my sentence. He's too busy swooping down to capture my lips with his own. Like he's been starved for contact, he doesn't pull away.

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No, I'm sure of it. This man intends on eating me entirely.

13

Santino

I must've become one hell of a weak bastard to agree to the terms she's set.

Yet, once I've got her on our bed, all sprawled out, I know I've made the right choice.

Having Camellia willing is not something I could trade for the world. To have her want me, a bastard not deserving of love, is more than I could ever ask for.

I can't stop kissing her. Can't stop consuming all of her sighs and her moans as my hands freely roam her body. I groan lowly each time she arches against my mouth, needing the contact as much as I do.

Every lick, every taste is a sweetness I've grown addicted to.

I need it. I need her. In my bed, my life and every option that goes with it.

I want to completely drown in everything that is this woman.

"Say you're mine, Camellia." Kissing her throat, my body rumbles in approval as she arches against the sheets.

“I’m yours.” The words come out with no hesitation. She knows it as much as I do, that we’re meant for each other.

No other person brings this sort of desperation out of us.

Needing to touch her, to claim her, my hands are on her body without missing a beat. Needing to feel her warmth against my fingertips, I trace the goosebumps against her arm as I move lower and lower.

Reaching the end of her hand, I move to her stomach and brush my thumb against her belly button.

For all I know, there could be a baby inside right now, and neither of us know. Today, I can make sure it happens.

“That tickles.” Legs squirming against the bed, she drifts her fingertips against my knuckles and I catch myself in the stroking motion of her stomach.

“You’re sensitive everywhere,” I remind her as my hand moves lower.

Scraping my knuckles against the waistband of her pants, I mourn the last day she’ll go without panties. My sadness doesn’t last long when I discover how quick it is for her to get wet. Rubbing my fingers over her folds, it doesn’t take much to set her body off.

“This pussy is mine.” Parting her lips with my middle finger, I plunge it inside and hook her with a single curl. “Do you get this wet just by thinking about me?”

Desperate for her answer, I stroke her heat and listen to her breath catch when another one of my fingers joins the first.

“Yes.” Whining, she tilts her chin back to expose more skin for my mouth to kiss. I’ve already left her skin red, and I have to control myself if I want to avoid leaving marks everywhere. I have complete control, I know I do. It simply unravels whenever Camellia is involved.

Even now, I can feel my restraint slipping. With every moan, every sigh of relief from her lips, I grow hungrier. Even more when she starts rubbing up against me.

I need inside before I go completely mad. Right fucking now.

Needing to get her pants out of the way, I slide them off her hips and toss them so far, she wouldn’t dare try to put them back on. Now that her pinkness is welcoming my hungry gaze, I don’t think I’ll let her put pants back on today.

As much as I love her wearing my clothes, her shirt has to go as well. I want to see her entirely.

She picks up on my thoughts with ease, her fingers trembling as she undoes each button. Like I haven’t already seen what’s beneath, she reveals more and more flushed skin.

God, I just want to lick her all over and see how far that flush can spread.

“You’ve got the body of a goddess.” Muttering my thoughts, I groan as she lifts her hands and squeezes her breasts. Her nipples are peeking out between her fingers, teasing me even further.

She’s letting her body lead, showing off what needs attention the most. From the way she pinches them for me, she bites her lip when I’m the one to groan.

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

My dick is pressing against the front of my slacks, a painful reminder of what Camellia does to me. Seeking relief, I don't chase after it.

Instead, I finish taking off my shirt. It's already ruined, one button missing, maybe two. Saying fuck it, I just pop open the rest to hurriedly get it off.

I hear her whimper, and I lift my gaze. "You like that? You like me ruining my shirts because of how desperate I am for you?"

She lets out a shaky sigh. "It makes you look really strong," she admits softly. Her thighs try to come together to contain the heat forming, but my hips make it impossible.

I'm going to have to put more money into shirts then. Panties, too, because I can only imagine how wet she'll become if I'm tearing off every pair for hiding her pussy from me.

"We're going to entertain that thought in the future." Grinning, I toss the ruined shirt and force myself to blink. I have to, or else my damn eyes will dry out from staring at her for too long.

My fingers move in a blur as I pull back to free my straining erection. At this point, being hard is a pain I need to be accustomed to. I don't think there's going to be a time where I'm not wanting this woman's touch. Her body. Her existence.

"Where do you want me to put this?" I ask, my words thick as I wrap my fingers tightly around my cock. "Show me."

It's an order that makes her cheeks go the reddest I've ever seen.

Biting her plump lip, she reaches out and replaces my fingers with hers. Sucking in a shaky breath, she groans as she glides my tip against her clit, and finally, her opening. "Right here."

"That's it." With a smile curling onto my lips, I lean forward and listen to her suck in a breath as I start to bury myself into her wet heat. It's a sensation I'm never going to get tired of.

Once she no longer has to touch me, I'm plucking her hand and cradling it against mine. Kissing her fingertips, I don't miss the way her eyes watch ever so carefully.

I want her to look at me, and never to look away.

Leaning forward, I capture her lips once more before finally moving.

Plunging my hips forward, I spread her walls apart with the invasion of my cock.

I have to choke back a groan. The sound comes immediately. No matter how many times I'm inside her, this pussy is going to risk being the reason behind my downfall.

Sex has never been something I sought for. Pleasure was nothing but a way to unwind whenever I truly felt like I was reaching my limit of snapping.

Now, I'm craving this for an entire reason. Just to hear the breathy moans that leave her lips every time I pull back and tug on her sensitive nerves when I slide right back in. I'm addicted to the little things.

To her little squeaks when I lift her hips and thrust at a different angle. To the way her skin flushes pink as she gets all embarrassed by my staring. Fuck, to the way she



whispers my name when I do something she really likes.

This woman. My soon-to-be wife. She's a drug I can't get enough of.

I love her. The thought is foreign, but I know it's true. There's no mistaking the fear I felt when she ran out in front of my men with their guns. The fear of losing her.

I love Camellia. I won't be able to love another. It's either her or a lonely existence now. I'll tell her every day. Even if it makes me look weak, even if she gets annoyed by hearing it, I'll express my love for her in any way how.

She moans against my tongue as I kiss her again. Cupping the back of my neck, she clings to me like she never wants to separate for air.

Bucking her hips, her cries of pleasure fill the room as I set a steady pace with my hips. I'm going to have to soundproof this room to keep these noises all to myself.

For now, everyone can be fucking jealous that these are all for me.

Pulling away once I've kissed her swollen lips for the thousandth, she stares into my eyes and nothing could prepare me for the words that leave her lips.

"I love you, Santino." Using the words against me, her pussy suffocates my cock with a tight squeeze.

"Say it again for me," I all but beg, hardly recognize my voice. This desperation.

Her free hand moves to cup my chin. "I love you."

My cock jumps, and three words risk my entire downfall. Thankfully, I don't spill my release then and there. Instead, I hold off as long as I can.

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

Pressing her into the mattress, both of her arms circle around my body instead of my neck. Pulling me flush against her front, I can't tell which of our hearts is pounding harder.

Hips rocking, her nails dig into my back as she clings on. Chasing after her orgasm with my own, I can feel the twisting in my gut as I grow closer and closer to my limit.

Grunting and growling against her ear, my thrusts grow frantic and desperate. As the need to come hits me harder than bare knuckles against bone, I fist the sheets beneath us and slam home.

Coming undone hard enough to make a man go blind, my hips rock until her pussy drinks up my entire release.

As her walls spasm around my continuous thrusts, I lift her hips higher, feeding her release with every ounce of my own.

She'll become pregnant in no time, I'm sure of it. A wife and the mother of my children. Fuck, I hope I'm lucky enough for twins or triplets. All with beautiful blue eyes and freckles like their mother.

"Can we just tie the knot tomorrow?" I groan into her throat and smile like a fool when she laughs.

"I've always dreamed of having a big wedding." Working on catching her breath, her fingers leave a trail of tingles up and down my bare back. "Those usually take time to plan."

Cursing softly, I nod and pull back to take in her flushed state. Unable to help myself, I kiss her breasts and draw one of her nipples into my mouth.

The hunger I feel for this woman is endless.

“I’ll start referring to you as my beautiful wife, then.” If all I’m waiting on is a signed document, then telling everyone who has the ability to hear about my fortunes shouldn’t be too much of an issue. They won’t know any better.

I just need everyone to know that I found the woman of my dreams. Maybe rub their faces in my happiness and be the smug bastard I want to be.

She nods, the curve of her lips gentle. “I think I’d like that.”

Easing my way out, we’re left staring at each other. Pushing the strands clinging to her forehead to the side, I lean in and press my lips to her skin.

I don’t know how to be gentle, or to be soft, but I can learn. When she sighs with content, I know she likes it. Yeah, I’ll learn, for her.

“We will be spending the rest of our day in here.” Nuzzling her throat, I sigh. “We can shower and clean up if you’d like, but I don’t want to deal with anyone else today. I’ll put in an order for food, and we can just relax.”

Today has been terrible for my blood pressure. The only remedy is shared time with this woman.

“I’ll deal with our problems tomorrow.” Kissing her temple next, then her nose and finally her lips, relief fills me when she nods. “Very good.”

My jaw aches with how much I’ve been smiling lately. This woman really knows

how to draw them out. The poor muscles in my face are going to ache by the end of the day, I can bet on it. It's a pain I'm willing to welcome with open arms.

14

Camellia

Epilogue

The weather is warm, and the sky is clear. At my side, Santino enjoys a glass of wine. Across from us, Bia sits with our daughter Alle in her lap. She's braiding her hair while the three-year-old miraculously sits still.

We wanted to do a little picnic, as much as one can do in a vast backyard.

Urzo and Eliza are too good to enjoy a little family outing. I don't hold it against them, I guess.

More little sandwiches for us, that's all that means.

He finishes his glass and sets it to the side. He has no shame, leaning in to press a chaste kiss against my cheek and my throat.

"I am starving," he murmurs against my ear.

I know what he's hungry for, but it's not an option. Not while his mother is sitting three feet away from us. Not even a little wine can be enough to ignore that fact.

Instead of giving him what he wants, I reach into the wooden woven basket and pull out a finger sandwich. Pressing it to his mouth, it stops him from kissing anything that may waver my strength.

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:50 am*

Later. I swear, we'll entertain this thought. For now, this is a time meant for relaxing and spending time with those I love.

However, I can't help but tease him. Giving him all but a ghost of a kiss, I leave him groaning in the back of his throat as I pull away and lean toward the sandwiches, capturing one for myself.

Without warning, I hear a cry in the distance that breaks the peace in the air.

There's a slight commotion, and the three of us turn to look to see Tommy all but dragging a woman across the estate grounds. Her face is not one I recognize, but that pinched expression is pretty familiar. She's kicking up gravel, attempting to put up a fight.

Every day, it feels like there's always something exciting happening around here. I suppose today is just another random event.

Maybe not too random with the way these two stiffen up.

Bia straightens up, her face sobering up as her braiding motions slow to a stop. She looks startled, and I know she's not the sort of woman who shakes easily.

"Who is that?" I ask, looking over to see Santino not looking too pleased either.

"My sister." The answer comes instant and clipped.

His sister?

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. Leaning toward me, he presses his mouth to my cheek before taking another sandwich for the road. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to deal with this.”

He’s using his boss tone, the one he uses to deal with work.

Nodding my head, I squeeze his arm before he drifts off from our blanket to take care of business.

Once he’s out of earshot, I turn toward Bia. “He doesn’t talk about his sister. I barely know much about his other brother, Lazaro.”

“It’s been years since Valeria left us.” Bia remembers she’s in the middle of doing hair, and she forces her eyes down. Once Alle’s braid was finished, she smooths down her brown locks. She releases the girl and smiles softly when she wiggles free to dart around in the grass. “Once someone leaves this life, they’re smart not to return. Many of us assumed she was dead, as terrible as it sounds.”

I can only imagine the reason she came back then.

“Did you?” Unable to hold back my curiosities, I notice the pinch of her lips as she shakes her head.

“Never. I hoped she’d return one day.” Smoothing down the front of her shirt, she blinks a few times to keep her cheeks dry. “I can only hope she’ll want to stay.”

With an unsettling feeling growing in my gut, I suggest wrapping things up so we can head inside to find out what all of the fuss is about.

The sooner Santino is free from his work, the sooner I can get my hands on him. Bia’s always happy to watch her granddaughter for us. Even more if it means we can give her a second grand kid.

However, Bia doesn't move, basking in the sunlight instead. "Dear, I think we best sit this out. You'll learn, there's plenty you can learn without putting any effort in. Don't let those sandwiches go to waste. These men can't help themselves. They love to chat. I give it an hour before one of them will want to spread whatever news."

Humming with doubt, I try to settle as comfortably as I can. Knowing she's right, I grab a sandwich and nibble on it.

She is willing to bet an hour will pass before we get our information.

I'm willing to bet Santino will last twenty minutes away before he's returning to my side. These other members will play telephone for their gossip. Marrying the boss has its perks.

He'll tell me the entire story.

Biting back my smile, I mimic her motion and enjoy the heat from above. Filling my lungs with fresh air, I countdown the seconds before I'm proven right.