

Mackenna stepped off the airplane and immediately felt the sweltering heat of Milan envelop her. The flight back to her grandparents had been long and grueling, her pregnancy-related sickness airing its ugly head on the flight.

She turned her phone on and sent her lawyer Camille a text message letting her know she'd arrived. While at the airport booking her flight back, Camille had reassured her even if Alessandro with all his money and power tried to take the child from her, Italy's legal system rarely ruled against a woman. Camille was certain at the most Alessandro could get shared custody. Mackenna would provide a deposition to the courts and petition for child support.

She made her way through customs and fanned her face as nausea began to creep back up on her. The agent at the gate noted she was turning green and asked if she needed a wheelchair. She wanted to refuse but the last thing she wanted was to faint in the middle of the airport. So it was in a wheelchair, pushed through by security personnel when Camille first caught a glimpse of her exiting the arrivals doors of the airport.

She gave a half-hearted wave and sighed as the woman began to immediately fuss over her. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Baby just wasn't thrilled with boxed air in the airplane."

"Well, let's get you out of here before one of Alessandro's goons find you," Camille rolled her eyes.

"Are you kidding? He wanted me gone. He said so himself," Mackenna objected.

"Someone needs to remind him of this," Camille muttered as she helped her friend and client to the car.

Mackenna was confused as she waited for Camille to come round and get in the driver's seat. "What do you mean?"

"It means I've already filed a protective order on your behalf. Alessandro Giordano is a pain in the backside." She threw her fingers up in the air in a hiss of frustration. "I don't think you were even through American customs when he started blowing up my phone. We filed an injunction already with the courts and the judge

once I told him of the harassing and bullying behaviors. He isn't allowed to be within 100yards of you unless under the supervision of a court appointed guard."

"How did you get the judge to agree?" Mackenna was amazed. "Surely his lawyer objected because I know he's been a colossal jerk."

"I told him the stress caused by Mr. Giordano was a potential risk to your unborn baby. The judge has already made it clear she is tired of the stalling tactics. Alessandro's lawyer suggested the baby was proof that the marriage should not be terminated."

"Are you kidding me?" Mackenna felt her temper rising at this game. "Two days ago, he threw me out of the hotel because he thinks my friend sabotaged his precious Dulce and today, he changes his mind?" She threw her hands up in the air. "Unbelievable."

"It's okay Mackenna," Camille shot a worried glance as the woman in her passenger seat went from pale to flaming red. "You need to take it easy. I will handle Alessandro." She reached between them. "This is the court injunction prohibiting him from having contact with you without your solicitor present. He is also ordered to stay one hundred metres away at all times, unless during a legal setting."

"This won't be worth the paper it's printed on," she felt the emotion clogging her throat. "I'm never going to be rid of him and his high-handed control over my life. He does not care about court injunctions and the law. In his eyes, I belong to him like property, and he will stop at nothing to keep me chained to his side like a little dog."

"And this is why, I have already transported your grandparents to my husband's family home in Bergamo. I am taking you now to my office in the city where my husband's cousin will take you to them. It is a lovely little place, and you will be able to rest. I would suggest you keep your phone off as much as possible as it is entirely possible, he has tracking on your phone. Using one of those 'find my phone' apps would be easy enough for him."

"I told my friends back in America I would call once I was settled. I bought a pre-paid phone at the airport. There is no way he can trace this number. Camille, I

“Mackenna, it is my absolute pleasure, and I assure you, Alessandro will pay for every single minute of my time with you.” She shot her a wicked grin. “And I am very expensive.”

Mackenna chuckled, the first laugh she’d uttered in days. “Good, hit him where it hurts, in the wallet.”

“He is a madman where you are concerned Mackenna. Italian men and women as well” she spoke wryly, “can be very passionate and obstinate. Unfortunately for him, I have zero tolerance for the primitive ape-like behavior he’s displaying and so, I will fight for as long as you want Mackenna.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

Two hours later, after two clandestine switches involving two cars, a change of clothes, meeting one of Camille’s cousins who was remarkably close to Mackenna’s height and sneaking out the backdoor of Camille’s law office, Mackenna was settled nicely in the home of her lawyer’s family.

Her grandparents were fussing over her, and she was nestled between them on the sofa, explaining to them all the things to have happened since her last visit.

“I had hoped Mackenna this baby was because you were able to resolve your differences, but it seems it was more of Alessandro’s bullying tactics.” Her grandfather was distressed at her situation.

How did she explain to a man of a certain age with old-fashioned views of the world sometimes s\*x was just s\*x?

“Nonno, please, I know this is hard for you, but I have no regrets I am pregnant. For as much as Alessandro disrespects me and our marriage, I know this baby, on my part, was made with love. I may not like or respect Alessandro, but the heart is a very weird and complex thing and I do love him.”

“Then why are you here and not with him?” her grandfather shook his head in confusion.

“Because Nonno, he would much rather the world never know I exist like some dirty little secret, while he gallivants all over the world as Dulce’s lover.”

Why does he insist on continuing to hurt you over and over again?"

"And this is a question you will have to pose to him," Mackenna shrugged. "He is an overbearing spoiled man, and he is not used to the word no. He takes what he wants and disposes of it when he's done and not a moment sooner. At some point he will tire of me, like a small boy with a toy, and be done. He is angry now because I walked away from him and not the other way around."

"But now there is a child to consider," her grandfather shrugged incredulously. "How can he disrespect the mother of his child in such a way?"

"Again, Nonno, another question for Alessandro. I cannot answer." Mackenna leaned backwards as exhaustion from an overseas flight overwhelmed her.

"We should tell you Mackenna," her grandfather started, scratching his balding head with his index finger, a very telltale sign he was uncomfortable with what he needed to say, "Rosetta has reached out multiple times to us since Alessandro told her you were pregnant."

"He is her son, this will be her grandchild," Mackenna shrugged, "she is bound to be curious. It is not my intention to withhold the child from Alessandro's family. I simply refuse to give my child away. I will raise this child myself. Alessandro will not bully me otherwise and Camille is certain, because of his behavior in front of the judge I will get custody."

"And if you don't? There is a risk Mackenna he could take this child from you," her grandmother clutched her necklace and cross pendant tightly in her hands. "What then?"

"Then Camille will subpoena Dulce to the stand and all of our dirty laundry will be aired to the entire world. I also have multiple staff members at the hospital willing to testify she, even now, continues to insist she and Alessandro have been lovers since the day she strode naked to his hotel room." Her disgust was evident as she clenched her fists. "I would hope it doesn't come to this, but I'm prepared to drag Alessandro and Giordano House through the mud for the torture they have put me through in the last six years. Nobody is taking this child from me. Hell will freeze

“You are very brave Mackenna,” Enzo Deluca was angry his only grandchild was going through this, and his eyes flashed with the fury of an overprotective guardian. “We will be beside you no matter what happens.”

“What was Rosetta asking for when she called on you?” Mackenna asked suddenly.

“She had said she was ashamed of what Alessandro had done to you and to offer you any help necessary. She said she’d always liked you and hoped even with the issues of you and Alessandro, she would be welcome to be part of the child’s life.”

“Rosetta was always kind to me.” Mackenna gave a sad smile. “She will be a lovely grandmother to the child.”

“Mackenna, perhaps you should lie down and rest, you are looking a bit pale,” her grandmother urged suddenly.

“I think I’ll go outside to the garden and put my feet up. I promised Savannah, I’d call her.”

“Can I bring you something to eat? Some cheese and fruit perhaps?”

“Nonna, it sounds heavenly, yes please.”

Mackenna smiled as her grandmother instructed her grandfather to make sure Mackenna was escorted safely the few feet into the garden and then ordered him to grab the throw blanket off the sofa to keep her warm. Mackenna shook her head as she considered it was very warm and comfortable outside, but she needed this. She needed to be mollycoddled by her family.

Mackenna waited until her grandfather moved back inside before pulling her prepaid phone out and dialing the only number, she had programmed into it.

“Hey Savannah, it’s me.”

“Hey, you,” the sound of Savannah groaning made Mackenna smile. “How was the flight?”

“It was long. Had some pretty awful air sickness but otherwise I’m well.” She closed her eyes and leaned in the chair. “How are things there? Did you work another

"I've worked the double and volunteered for another shift so just staying here in the staff lounge," Savannah gave a mirthless laugh, "Alessandro is banned from this section of the hospital and security has threatened to throw him out if he attempts again to accost me while I'm with a patient."

"Oh my god, tell me you're joking. He did not."

"Oh, he did." Savannah griped. "He went from you were getting your divorce to you're his wife and he will never let you go in about twelve hours."

"But he's still there though, right? Still in Phoenix?" She held her breath as she waited for the response. She knew deep down nothing would pull him from his precious Dulce, not even her and their child crossing the Atlantic.

"Yes, I saw him about an hour ago in the cafeteria. Also, Nuncio had the balls to yell at me when I went for a coffee break. He did not like we tricked him into thinking you needed to go to the hospital right away." Savannah actually laughed, "I think he thought I was going to be intimidated. He obviously never met anyone with an abusive, raging alcoholic for a parent."

Mackenna shook her head. "I'm sorry my friend. I've left you there with all my problems."

"They aren't bothering me. I'm working, minding my own business and I know you are safe away from the craziness of this three-ring circus. Also, the good doctor asked about you. He said he was worried when he saw Alessandro pretty much carry you out of a restaurant in a rage the other night. He asked if the man beats you."

She grumbled under her breath. "You know, he's such a good man. Why couldn't I have fallen in love with someone like him instead of the possessive macho jerk I married?"

"Well Doctor Fitzgerald, if you need anything else, I'll be taking my mandatory break in service with a sleep and then I'll be available for next shift. I'll set my alarm."

For a split-second Mackenna was confused until she realized Savannah was pretending to be with someone else on the phone. Which mean Alessandro was nearby. "He's there?" Mackenna squealed with fury, aware he was harassing her

she shut the phone off. She knew the phone display on Savannah's phone would show an unknown caller and Savannah had practiced erasing the calls faster than they came in. Yet, she turned the phone completely off. They had already agreed Savannah would not call her so if anyone called this phone, it had to be him.

She gave a half-hearted smile as her grandmother came out with a tray of food and drinks for her.

"You finished your call already?"

"Alessandro interrupted. He was in a section of the hospital he is not permitted to be in. I believe Savannah will have him thrown out."

Her grandmother cupped her cheek gently. "Well, Savannah sounds like she can manage him. Since he is still in America you can rest safely here. Take advantage of this time because I worry when he returns to Italy, he will bring hellfire with him."

As her grandmother headed back inside, Mackenna was afraid the woman was correct.

TRIGGER WARNING: 18+ CONTENT FOR SENSITIVE MATTERS IN UPCOMING CHAPTERS

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As Mackenna and her grandparents walked through the little shops in the neighborhood where they had been hiding out for the last week, she finally felt a moment of peace. There were no false sighting of Alessandro and if he had any clue where she was, he made no attempt to discover her.

It could be he was complying with a court order, but Mackenna doubted it. His lawyer had Camille in court every single day since she'd been back in Italy with one example or another of why the court order should be dismissed or why the divorce should be tossed out of the court. He was demonstrating for the court he was an overbearing bullying man, and the judge was tiring of his antics.

Earlier today, Camille had called her laughing saying the judge ordered unless Mr. Giordano was physically in his court room to address the issues, he was no longer entertaining the nonsense of the man. The court order remained in effect and the judge warned further arguments would encourage him to extend it for the duration of the pregnancy.

Mackenna however glad she was for Camille being an amazing lawyer and representing her so well, was exhausted with the proceedings. Her heart ached for the love she had for her husband aware he had spent their marriage lying to her. He would rather the entire world think he was Dulce's lover than to ever admit he had a wife at home.

Therein lay the crux of her problem, she admitted to herself. He was so embarrassed by her she was a dirty secret swept under the rug. Yet the tabloids flaunted Dulce and Alessandro on every damn cover page as a gorgeous couple and she was supposed to simply accept it. It didn't matter she now knew the truth; Dulce was gay. Alessandro was her handbag, per Savannah's description. Mackenna was alone, pregnant, and bitter about the whole thing.

Her grandmother haggled with a man over the price of fruit and her grandfather was eyeing a small gelato shop. They were relaxed and comfortable, even though



couldn't hide here forever, as lovely as the break was.

Mackenna felt a sudden frisson of awareness, as if she were being watched and she turned her head just in time to see a man take her photo and duck into an alley. She immediately pulled her phone out and called Camille.

"Someone just took my photo," she spoke quickly. "I don't want to alarm my grandparents. What should I do?"

"Go back to the house immediately, stay there until I send someone to check it out. Are you okay?"

"Yes, just unnerved." Mackenna scoured the busy area to see if she could see the man again but her first glimpse had been so fleeting, she would never have been able to identify him. She moved to her grandfather. "I'm starting to feel a bit tired. Can we head back?"

"Of course," he patted her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. He encouraged his wife to move along, and they slowly made their way back to the house. Mackenna frequently looked over her shoulder to see if she could see the man again but saw nothing of him.

Two hours later she was resting in the back garden, reading a book she had picked up in the city, but her mind kept going back to the photographer. She decided to ring Savannah.

"It's me. Safe to talk?"

"Yes," she grunted. "I'm actually home. Dulce was being discharged today and I didn't want to be anywhere near the craziness. One of the nurses texted me and said she gave a statement at the entrance of the hospital thanking all the doctors for their help and made big production about her next steps in healing."

"Have you talked to her since you two made-out?" Mackenna asked curiously.

"Nope, I'm far too selfish an individual to put myself through something like Dulce. She's so far in the closet there's cobwebs blocking her exit. Besides, she hurt you, purposefully. There was never any need for her to tell you she and Alexandro were lovers other than to bait you. There's not an excuse in the world to make her

She chuckled, “no he doesn’t. The cat hates me even at a distance.”

“Alessandro stopped here yesterday afternoon to question me and ask if I’d heard from you and Romeo tried to climb him to get him to hold him. The whole time he was here, he stroked the damn cat and the cat purred. I almost told him to take him with him. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Sadistic bastards unite?” Mackenna quipped dryly causing Savannah to roar with laughter.

“You know they’re heading back to Italy today, right? Also, I should have mentioned when Alessandro was here, he said it didn’t matter I wouldn’t tell him anything. He hired a private detective who would find you.”

“Well, that explains it.” Mackenna punched the cushion of her chair angrily. “Seems he found me because someone snapped my photo today in the market.”

“Isn’t there a court order telling him to stay away from you?”

“Does Alessandro Giordano strike you as the kind of guy who obeys court orders?” Mackenna scoffed. “I may as well just move back to my grandparents’ house now.”

“I miss you Mac,” Savannah whispered suddenly. “I wish you could come home.”

“Me too,” she admitted, “I love my grandparents, but I made my life in Phoenix. I feel like I’m a burden to them. They’re whole life is uprooted yet again by me. I just wish I were home. I love my baby, don’t get me wrong, but if I could go back in time, I would never have started the divorce proceedings. I would have just kept my head down and kept things the way they were.”

They chatted for several more minutes and then Mackenna ended the call when she saw her grandmother approaching to tell her she had a call on the house phone. Camille.

She went inside and answered the call.

“Mackenna, I wanted to tell you, Alessandro is expected to land here late this evening.”

The slew of profanities Camille uttered would have made a sailor blush, but Mackenna had lived for years with Savannah. She'd heard it all. "What do I do Camille? I don't want him descending on your family home. My grandparents are anxious to go home. Should we just bite the bullet and head back?"

"It is your decision of course, Mackenna. I thought I could keep you protected but it seems this man has no boundaries."

"Billionaires, eh?" Mackenna tried to joke.

"The man has more money than brains or compassion." Camille groaned. "If the investigator gets in your way or bothers you in any way, let me know. I'll be notifying the judge in the morning."

"Thanks Camille. I think I'll head back to Milan as soon as I arrange transport. I'd rather fight the devil on territory I'm familiar with."

Camille's chuckle made her feel better about her decision. "Stay safe Mackenna. We'll chat tomorrow."

She went to the kitchen and found her grandparents sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. "How would you both like to go home?"

"We don't want to leave you alone," her grandfather protested.

Mackenna held up her hand. "No, I'm coming too. Alessandro hired a private detective to find me. It's pointless for me to be hiding here when he knows exactly where I am."

For the first time in her entire life, Mackenna heard her grandfather curse and her eyes widened incredulously at the sound. "Nonno!"

"I am tired of this man and his antics. If you told me, you loved him, forgave him, and wanted to make it work with him, I would support you, but you have repeatedly said you do not want to be with someone who treats you like this. The Pope himself would have a hard time forgiving this man."

She reached down and hugged the man in his chair. "Come now, let's go home. I'll arrange the transport. You can go pack up your belongings."

Her grandfather continued her angry murmuring as they made their way to the

An hour later, Mackenna had secured a rental car delivered the car to the house, and she was helping her grandfather loading it up. Her grandmother came out and announced she had locked up and left the key in the spot Camille had instructed.

Her grandfather took the car keys from Mackenna mumbling he wasn't too old to drive back home, and he certainly wasn't going to be a passenger while Mackenna drove. She was notoriously slow and adhered to all the traffic signals, never disobeying any law and it drove the man mad.

She buckled herself into the backseat and felt her anxiety start to rise as they began the journey back home. Tomorrow she would have to face Alessandro yet again and she wasn't sure how she would survive. He was ruthless in his pursuit of her. When she was younger, she would have been thrilled with the chase, but she was no longer a young girl with stars in her eyes. She knew the price and penalty from falling in love with a man like him.

Her grandparents chatted amicably in the front seat about the things they would need to do once they got back to Milan, airing out the apartment, getting in milk and eggs and the mundane things made Mackenna miss them. All she had wanted was someone she could be mundane with. To love, raise a family and grow old with. Instead, she had fallen in love with an egomaniacal domineering man who treated her like a wayward pet.

Mackenna started to doze off, relaxing a bit, the sound of the peaceful conversations soothing her heart. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep when she heard her grandfather swear again, the second time in the same day and she was startled out of her sleep.

"What's wrong, Nonno?" she asked curiously when she noted the deep crease of a frown furrowing his brow.

"We are being followed," he gesticulated out the window wildly and Mackenna gasped.

"It is fine," Mackenna tried to reassure him. "We know Alessandro hired an investigator. He's probably just following to make sure we get home. Do not fret."

grandfather swerved violently taking a side street suddenly, causing the rental car to jerk around.

“Nonno, please slow down,” Mackenna looked over her shoulder to see a dark black car following quite closely behind them, obviously the detective was more accustomed to driving erratically than her grandfather and showed no intention of backing off.

Her grandfather continued driving in a manner which had Mackenna clutching her seat belt tightly and begging him to slow down.

“I should never have given my blessing to the man,” he yelled furiously. “This is all my fault. I should have nixed everything years ago. I will have words with him when I see him next.”

Mackenna tried to reassure him it was not his fault, and nobody could have predicted how badly the marriage would go but even with her grandmother’s pleading the man continued to try to evade the car following closely behind.

Mackenna looked behind her again and tried to signal to the man to pass them or go away but he either didn’t understand her signs or simply cared not at the situation and remained behind them.

Then suddenly the car behind them tapped their bumper, causing their car to swerve, and her grandfather gave a short gasp of surprise, he righted the vehicle quickly but then overcorrected. The car began to slide off the road and then Mackenna gave a scream of terror as the car began to roll down the embankment, slamming her head against the side of the door. She counted the three times her head struck the door, three times the car rolled before she lost consciousness.

Her eyes fluttered opened at the sound of the tires squealing above them and she heard a man’s voice. “Signora, signora. Signora Giordano!”

She closed her eyes against the pain in her head and then remembered her grandparents. She forced herself to open her eyes again and look in the front seat. “Nonna,” she whispered trying to get the older woman’s attention, but she was facing away from her. “Nonna,” she started to cry. She reached up and touched her

Chapter 26

realized she was leaning backwards. The car must be perched backwards down the embankment. “Nonno, please. Talk to me.”

As she undid her seatbelt to move forward and check on her grandparents a searing pain cut through her abdomen, and she screamed as the realization of what was happening. “No, no, no,” she whispered. The pain assaulted her again and her eyes closed against the enormity of it before she succumbed to the blackness enveloping her.

The sound of the beeping of a heart monitor was the first sound Mackenna recognized when she regained consciousness. The time she'd spent working in the hospital plus the time she'd spent in one when she'd had meningitis, she knew the sound well. She wanted to open her eyes, but her head throbbed, even blinking made her want to cry.

As she lay there listening to the sounds of the equipment in the room, she felt her heart lurch as she heard Alessandro's deep voice in the near vicinity. She fought against the pain in her head to open her eyes and found a pretty nurse standing over her.

"Ah Signora, you wake," the sympathy on the nurse's face made Mackenna's heart ache. She knew deep down her baby was gone and this woman's soft gentle voice telling her the doctor would be right in to talk with her confirmed her worst fears.

She grabbed the woman's wrists. "Don't let him near me."

"Who?" The nurse seemed perplexed.

"Alessandro, I don't want to see him." Her voice was raspy and raw.

The nurse nodded, obviously not understanding the request but agreeing to it. She closed her eyes again and heard his voice raise as the nurse obviously relayed the information, she didn't want him in the room. The sound of another man telling Alessandro to vacate immediately, or he'd have the police down to remove him, made her breath catch in her throat.

The doctor closed the door behind him as he stepped into her room. "Signora Giordano," he wheeled closer to the bed on a stool and urged her to open her eyes.

"Call me Mackenna," she whispered. "My baby is gone, isn't he?"

The man's eyes were sad as he nodded. "I'm afraid so, *cara*," he patted her hand gently.

She closed her eyes again and then a thought popped in her head. Why were her grandparents not at her bedside? Were they also hospitalized? She looked back to the doctor aware he was staring at her intently. "My grandparents, they were in the

"I'm so sorry, *cara*," he whispered softly. "Neither of them survived the crash. The rescue team found them both deceased," he paused pondering his next words, "They were holding hands, I thought you should know. If it helps."

Mackenna's wail was heard through the entire floor as grief consumed her. She was all alone in the world, no family left, no grandparents, no baby. She was inconsolable as the doctor tried to get her to calm down, but she was beyond reason. She heard the doctor give an order to the nurse and within seconds she felt the darkness of sleep pulling her downward.

When next she surfaced it was to find Camille sitting at her bedside. The lights were dim in the room and when she looked to the window, she knew it was nighttime.

"Hello Mackenna," she said gently moving closer to her to hold her hand. "How are you feeling?"

She felt the tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know," she whispered quietly. "I'm so confused."

"Can you tell me what happened? Do you remember?"

"There was black car following us. My grandfather was upset." She wiped a tear with the back of her hand. "He was angry before we'd even set out. He felt he should have protected me better from Alessandro. He was never a great driver, my grandfather. The car kept getting closer and closer, so he started driving trying to get away from him."

Camille was quiet as she absorbed what Mackenna was saying. "My grandfather kept saying he was going to have words with Alessandro when he saw him and putting a detective on his wife was a violation. He was going off about the sanctity of marriage and how Alessandro violated every beautiful thing about marriage."

"Do you know who was driving the car?"

"No, I've never seen him before. Dark hair, blue eyes, thin lips, very long nose." Mackenna grimaced, surprised she'd recalled it so easily. "I kept trying to wave him



so close.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then the car got closer, too close. It tapped our bumper, not hard but enough to make Nonno need to adjust his driving. My grandfather lost control,” she whimpered, “there was the sound of tires, metal, gravel, and then nothing. It was eerily silent. Then I heard someone call me. Signora.”

“So, he called you signora?”

“Unless he was calling to my grandmother?” Mackenna shook her head, “but, no, I heard him, say Signora Giordano.” She closed her eyes.

“There are only a handful of people in all of Italy who know you are Signora Giordano,” Camille’s lips were pressed tight together.

“It was the private investigator, wasn’t it?”

“I believe so.” Camille’s eyes were sad as she squeezed Mackenna’s hands. “Tomorrow the police will want a statement. Do you think you’ll be able to?”

“My grandparents are dead, and my baby is gone,” she felt the sob choking her, “Camille, I want the man’s head on a pike.”

“Mackenna, you should know Alessandro hasn’t left the hospital. He is just outside the door. The doctor has stationed security at your door to keep him out per your request. Do you want to see him?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I don’t ever want to see him again. There’s a court order, right? Can you make him go away?”

“I can. I’ll have the police here within the hour to remove him from the premises. I just wanted to make sure it was what you want considering he is listed as your next of kin on hospital records.” Camille shrugged. “You were here at the beginning of your marriage for a cut needing stitches and he’s listed as your next of kin.”

“I’ll fix it before I leave.” She closed her eyes against the pain she felt all over her body. “Everything hurts.”

“The car rolled multiple times down the embankment. You have bruises over your entire body, broken ribs and some of your internal organs also have some

"When can I leave?"

Camille was surprised by the question. "Mackenna, did you not hear me? You have multiple injuries. Your spleen is battered."

"I need to bury my grandparents," she said quietly. "I can't give them the burial they deserve while I'm here."

"I will help you with all of those things." Camille patted her hands gently. "For now, you rest. I will be back in the morning."

Mackenna's eyes fluttered closed at the woman's urging and she fell into a deep sleep full of nightmares involving the car chase and her grandparents.

"Hey Mac," she heard Savannah's voice and the feel of her best friend brushing her hair off her forehead. She had to be dreaming because Savannah was in Phoenix and she was here in Milan, all alone. "Hey sleepyhead, the doctor told me you've been sleeping for almost thirty-six hours. You need to wake up sometime."

"Savannah?" Mackenna's eyes opened in surprise. "Are you really here? I'm not dreaming?"

"In the flesh Mac," her normal smiling eyes were cautious and sad. "I'm so sorry Mac. I flew over as soon as I heard."

"They're gone, Savannah, they're all gone." She felt the tears welling up. "I lost them all in one day."

Savannah leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I know Mac. There's nothing I can say to make it better but I'm here and I'll do whatever you need me to do."

"Camille said she'd help with the funeral arrangements, but I think I would very much like to have you with me. Can you stay so long?"

Savannah gave a wave of her hand. "I'm not going anywhere until I know you are safe."

A knock on the door made them both look towards it and Savannah didn't miss the terror on Mackenna's face before she masked it. Savannah was going to kill Alessandro for putting her through this.

"Signora Giordano, I am with the local police department. Camille said you had

"My friend can stay?" she asked tearfully.

"Yes, of course."

Savannah held her hands as she recounted the story to the police officer and when the police officer finished taking her statement, she read and then signed the document with a shaky hand.

"Do you know who the man chasing us was?"

"Your husband had hired a private investigator to locate you. It seems the investigator took it upon himself to tail you. Mr. Giordano had explicitly given him instructions to simply locate you and then leave you be. The man was quite overzealous in completing his task."

"You can prove Alessandro didn't tell him to chase us?" Mackenna asked, needing to be reassured.

"Yes, there are multiple text messages and email exchanges where he explicitly advised him to find you, confirm you were well and safe and then to report back to him only on those matters. He simply wanted to ensure you were well after your transatlantic flight. The investigator saw you were leaving Bergamo and decided of his own accord to follow you."

She nodded quietly, a sense of relief Alessandro was not directly responsible for her grandparent's death and her miscarriage.

"The man has been arrested and is in jail. He will face a trial for the deaths of your grandparents and the accident causing your injuries." The police nodded professionally. "If you wish to participate in the trial, it would be acceptable, however we also know you may want to put it behind you. It will be your choice. We are still gathering evidence and it could be months before we go to trial, so you have time to decide. For now, Signora, I encourage you to rest and heal." The police offered his sympathies again and then left the room.

"Well, at least you know Alessandro didn't tell him to chase you," Savannah offered gently.

"No, but he hired someone who obviously lacked any kind of moral compass,

off the hook yet. "He had no right."

"Agreed," Savannah said quietly. "There's something else you should know Mac."

"There isn't anything you can say to me worse than hearing the doctor tell me my baby and my grandparents are dead," she said coldly, and Savannah's head snapped back in surprise. "I'm sorry Savannah, I don't know where that came from."

"It came from being hurt and sad and angry," Savannah tucked her hair around her ear. "The car crash got some news coverage. It's all over the news, everywhere, Alessandro has had a hidden wife for years. It's a sensation. Dulce is being called a homewrecker and Alessandro is the nations scoundrel." Mackenna's jaw was hanging open. "The hospital has paparazzi staking the place out. Even when you're ready to go, we will have to come up with a diversion to get you out because they're everywhere."

"Seems like his dirty little secret got exposed," Mackenna grimaced, hating the bitter taste in her mouth.

"Hopefully, it dies down quickly because it's foolish out there," Camille spoke as she strode into the room confidently. "Alessandro couldn't get into this hospital right now if he dropped in via helicopter. At the moment he is not Italy's sweetheart. Someone at the courthouse spilled the news to the press he's refused to concede the divorce and he'd been harassing you." Camille shook her head. "I would hate to see what happens to the poor soul who thought it would be worth a few euros to spill confidential court documents. I already went through my team, and it wasn't any of them, so it had to be either someone working in the courthouse or someone from Alessandro's own team. Heads will roll, it is for certain."

"This is a nightmare," Mackenna groaned and pinched her eyes.

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Camille perched on the edge of the bed. "The judge has warned Alessandro's lawyer without clear evidence the marriage is viable, he will grant divorce in thirty days. He is giving you time to be released from hospital, bury your grandparents and grieve a bit but then he wants us all in front of him."

playing with the blankets on the bed. "I want to go back and just forget all of this. I don't care anymore. Camille, I have enough money in my savings to pay you for all your work up until now, but I'm done. I can't do this. If I end up with my divorce, it will be because Alessandro chooses to get it done. I no longer have the fight in me."

Camille patted her hands gently on the table. "I understand Mackenna. I really do. You have been through so much. If there is anything else you need, ever, you call me."

"I will," Mackenna nodded wiping the tears off her cheeks with the back of her hands.

Once the woman left the room, Savannah sat on the bed and pulled Mackenna's hands into hers. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Alessandro can't do anything which could hurt me more than I feel right now."

"What if he doesn't give up though Mac? What if he chases you to America and tries to drag you back?"

"I let myself be bullied by him for the last time." Mackenna was quiet for a few minutes before she asked quietly. "Do you think it's my fault I lost the baby?"

"What? Savannah was incredulous. "Where on earth is this coming from?"

"Because in our last call, I said if I could go back in time," Mackenna started sobbing as she recalled the conversation.

"No, no, no, no," Savannah didn't think she could say the word enough. "This is not your fault. This is not something you dredged into reality. You wanted this baby. I was with you remember. I saw the joy in your face. Please Mackenna, never think any of this was your fault." Savannah crawled right into the bed and pulled her into her arms. "Oh, my dear friend, I'm so sorry you're feeling this way."

Mackenna continued crying, her heart broken with despair while her friend held her. Eventually, she stopped crying and allowed herself to again fall into another dream-filled sleep.

Six weeks later, Mackenna was sitting in her old office going through the motions of doing her job and very much aware she was neglecting one file on her desk. Dulce's billing had yet to be rectified but she was avoiding it. She'd been avoiding it for almost three and a half weeks.

She had flown back to Phoenix almost as soon as the doctor had cleared her to fly. Her employer hadn't yet filled her position and the office had been a mess from temporary replacements who couldn't do the job to her standards. The hospital was thrilled to have her back and had even given her a raise as they'd learned how valuable she was to them in the short time she was gone.

She had given her grandparents a quiet send off and during the entire process, she continued to remind herself of the doctor's words to her. They had been found holding hands. They had been married for over sixty years and as horrible as their death was, Mackenna felt peace in knowing one had not needed to live without the other.

Alessandro had arranged for security to be present at the ceremony to ensure paparazzi didn't disrupt Mackenna. When he'd reached out to offer this, Savannah had overseen all the details. She had not spoken a single word to him since she had left him in Phoenix seven weeks before. Even when he arrived to pay his respects to her grandparents, accompanied by his mother, she had excused herself. The funeral director had allowed her to sit undisturbed in his office until Savannah confirmed Alessandro and his family were gone.

She had spent another week going through her grandparent's home, sorting through their belongings. She had gone over their will with their legal advisor and arranged for the items she wanted to keep being shipped to her later. She had them moved to a storage container, supervising the process herself. Everything else the lawyer would arrange to sell on her behalf, including their apartment. She had no need to keep her grandparents' home, no matter how sad it made her to be done with it.

Once she'd arrived in Phoenix, the first two weeks comprised of the paparazzi chasing her and screaming questions at her to try and get a reaction or sound bite.

eventually gotten bored with her coming and going to and from work once they realized how dull she truly was.

She hadn't heard from Alessandro at all since the funeral. Camille had told her he had paid the entirety of her bills and Mackenna had simply shrugged and thanked her for letting her know. She knew the woman was concerned for her and while Mackenna was grateful for the woman's friendship and guidance over the last several months, she needed to move on with her life.

With a deep sigh she picked up Dulce's medical billing file and opened it. Instantly she noted discrepancies in the entered codes. She lifted her phone and faced her computer. "Portman, are you out of your mind? What are with the codes you put on the billing for Dulce?"

"Mac, I missed your voice hounding me. Can I just say the woman they hired when you were gone had the most obnoxious of voices and yours is so much better?"

"Portman, not in the mood," she snapped back, "I had corrected the original billing for Dulce but there are additional bills after her discharge. Can you please elaborate on these?"

"I did multiple telephone consults with her physician in Italy."

"But you billed as an in-person rate?"

"I used the wrong codes, sorry Mac." His tone was apologetic. "Do you want me to come adjust the paperwork?"

"No, I'll do it here. Thank heavens it hasn't been sent out yet for processing." She closed her eyes as the sound of a knock on her door interrupted the conversation. "Someone's at my door."

"Mac, before you go," he spoke softly, "I just wanted to say I'm glad you're back and if you need a friend, just a friend, I'm not pushing you for anything more but if you need a friend, I'm here for you."

She wiped a tear off her cheek. "Thanks Derrick. I appreciate your kindness. I'm grateful for your friendship." She hung up the phone and looked up to see who it was

She uttered an expletive causing dark eyebrows to lurch high above amber eyes with surprise. She didn't even hesitate and picked up her phone. "Security, there is a man in my office I need removed. Now." She didn't even wait for the response from the security team and cradled the handset. "Get out."

"We need to talk," Alessandro sat down in the chair as if oblivious to her directive.

She ignored him and took a deep breath and focused on the file in front of her and started plugging in the correct codes for the billing. The file was nearly an inch thick considering the length of time the woman had been admitted to the ortho ward.

"Mackenna," he started but stopped when her phone rang, and she instantly picked it up cutting him off.

"Mac Keebler," she spoke into the receiver, ignoring the hiss of irritation from the man sitting opposite her. "Hey Doctor Ferguson. Yes, I do have the file for your pediatric ortho consult, it was next on my list." She listened to what he said and then nodded. "No problem, Doc, I got you covered. Thanks for letting me know." She pulled the file and made the notes the pediatric orthopedic surgeon had asked her to change and she slipped it back under Dulce's file.

"Your name is not Keebler."

"It is most assuredly Keebler," she retorted not looking back up at him, hating even after all she had been through, her body still reacted to his nearness. There was a fine line between love and hate and he was tiptoeing all over it.

"You have lost too much weight," he commented suddenly.

"Not sure if you were aware, but a maniac hired an investigator to track me, and the man he hired ended up chasing me and my grandparents causing us to crash and killing them and my unborn child. Losing a few pounds is the least of my worries," acid dripped from her tongue as she took perverse pleasure in lashing out.

Staring at her computer screen she missed the combined horror and sadness at her cold words.

A knock on her door had her calling out to enter and security stepped in. "Get



“Sir, will you come with us please?”

“Why are you doing this Mackenna?” Alessandro questioned quietly ignoring the men at the door.

“Because I loathe you,” she finally looked up and met his gaze head on, hoping the words she spoke were reflected in her eyes. “You are a spoiled selfish man who cares nothing about anything unless it is what you want. I am done pandering to your whims. Get out and don’t come back.”

He shook his head. “This is not who you are.”

She tilted her head with incredulity. “Do you know what my last conversation with my grandfather was, Alessandro? It was me hearing him curse for the first time in my life because he felt guilty for not protecting me better from you. My last conversation with the gentlest man in the universe was filled with anger and guilt because he felt he did me a disservice. For the rest of my days, I have to live with the fact he died trying to protect me from you. Get out now.” She was standing now, her hands clenched into fists on her desktop. “If you come near me again, I swear on my grandparent’s lives, I will do a tell-all interview with the biggest tabloid I can find.”

“You truly hate me,” he said quietly, “I am sorry Mackenna, but it is important we talk. I will leave you for now but know I will be back.”

She was done speaking with him and turned back to the files on her desk. From the corner of her eye, she watched as he left the office followed by the two security officers. Once he was out of her range of vision, she dropped her head onto her desk and allowed the tears she’d been holding back to spill unchecked.

Just seeing him had brought all her emotions to the forefront and it was more than she could bear. She didn’t even look up when she heard Savannah knock once and step into the room, closing it behind her.

“Why is he here?” she wailed as Savannah rocked her gently in her arms.

“I don’t know but hopefully you said what you needed to say, and he stays away.” Savannah whispered. “Do you need to go home? I can take a break and walk you home.”

It hurts but if I give into the pain, I'll be stuck in this moment forever. I remember when my parents died, my grandfather told me they will always be a part of me, and I believe this to be true. They are all here," she pointed to her chest, "and I need to honor them by continuing to put one foot in front of the other."

"Okay," Savannah stood up. "Well, the reason I came up here was to tell you it's lunch time and to invite you to dine with me in high fashion in the cafeteria. I hear it's a beef noodle casserole today."

"Actually, if you don't mind, I really want to get this done. The sooner I have this particular file off my desk, the more sound of mind I'll be." She smiled her gratitude as Savannah promised to bring her something back and sadly backed out of the office.

It took nearly the rest of the afternoon to finish correcting the information Derrick had put it but also the errors her temporary replacement had created in the folder. By the time she was done with the file, the bills prepared and ready for mailing, it was near time to go home for the day.

Savannah was working a double shift again, so she was heading home alone for the night. She was glad as all she wanted to do was take a hot bath, drink a good glass of wine, and take one of the sleeping pills her doctor had prescribed for her.

She made her way through the hospital and scowled as Nuncio came into view. "Are you kidding me?"

"Signora," he nodded to her with a sad smile. "The press is aware Alessandro is back in the United States. He asked I ensure you make it home safely."

"Then perhaps he should have stayed away as they had all but dissipated," she snapped at him. "Your boss is an asshole."

Nuncio had the good graces to look away as if he agreed with her assessment.

"You're not going to go away, are you?"

"No," he shook his head, "not until Alessandro gives me the instruction to do so."

"Fine, but try to keep up, I just want to go home and go to bed." She gave an

irritated wave of her hand as she shrugged into her jacket. She gave a wave to the security officer now on duty at the desk who gave her a warning glance about the crowd outside. "God, I hate that man," she muttered under her breath.

Nuncio uttered a string of Italian expletives which nearly made Mackenna toss a grin in his direction, before she reminded herself, he worked for the enemy. Instantly the group tried to circle throwing questions about Alessandro and Dulce and her grandparents at her but, she kept her head down, ignored the pain in her chest and just pushed through, grateful Nuncio had his arm around her protectively.

By the time she reached her apartment, Nuncio was murderously angry and when she bolted the door behind them, he was tearing his phone out of his pocket to call his employer.

Mackenna would have been thrilled someone else was furious with him, but she was too exhausted to enjoy the moment. As Nuncio spewed a stream of Italian speaking so quickly even her practiced ear had a hard time keeping up, she made her way to the kitchen and poured two large glasses of red wine. Since she'd been back from Italy, she'd forgone the cheap stuff she usually had stocked. She walked to Nuncio and pressed one into his hand.

She saw him hesitate for a moment before he grabbed it with a thankful smile. "Just this one time."

"I'm going to take a hot shower. The rest of the bottle is that way if you need it." She motioned to the kitchen. "Also, Romeo is around here somewhere. He's been cranky since I've been home so watch yourself. He bites."

She moved to the bathroom and wondered how Savannah would feel if they moved to an apartment with a bath. She wanted a long hot soak. Instead, she took her glass of wine into the shower with her and as she stood under the burning heat, she cried her heart out while sipping the cabernet.

The sound of Romeo scratching at the bathroom door roused her daydreams. She had leaned against the shower wall, her glass now more water than wine, her throat raw and her eyes bloodshot.

A knock on her door followed by Nuncio asking if she was still alive made her realize she'd been in too long.

"I'm fine. Why are you still here?" She yelled through the door.

"Because I am worried one of those crazy reporters will break into your apartment. Deadbolt or not, this building is not secure, and I am concerned for your safety."

"Tell your boss to go back to Italy and take them with him," she offered unhelpfully as she wrapped up in her robe, shivering as the cool air hit her skin. She pulled her book up into her arms and opened the door to find him standing there with his arms folded. "I fell asleep in the shower, I didn't drown. I'm fine." She walked past him toward her bedroom.

"Mackenna, you did not eat." Nuncio called out to her.

"I'm not hungry," she responded frustrated at the invasion of her privacy. "Can you please just go back to wherever it is you're staying."

"I don't think you understand, I am here because it is unsafe for you to remain here alone. You have your choice of me or another security agent but one of us is staying in this apartment with you until the throng of reporters outside is gone. The alternative is to move to a more secure location."

She grimaced as she realized his meaning, "I'm not going to the hotel. They won't leave until your employer vacates the country. He needs to go away."

"Well according to him, he's not going anywhere." Nuncio informed her.

Mackenna cursed under her breath and slammed her bedroom door behind her, flinging herself dramatically on her bed. She noted Nuncio had closed the blinds of their basement apartment. It would be too easy for someone to get a photo of her in here. She rolled onto her belly and pulled her pillow into her face and screamed into it. She grabbed her phone and sent a text message to Savannah warning her of their

in the early hours of the morning.

She could hear Nuncio talking on his phone again and she rolled her eyes as she heard him say something about the fact she had gone to bed without food. “Tattle-tale,” she rolled her eyes as she pushed herself off the bed. Slipping into a pair of shorts and a tank top before throwing her robe back over it to keep the chill off, she decided she was tired of bossy men in her life. Grabbing her empty wine glass, her book and the last of her dignity, she marched back to the kitchen. She ignored Nuncio’s surprised stare as she poured another glass of wine before plunking a slice of bread into the toaster.

Keeping her back to him, she stared out the tiny kitchen window into the backyard before noting someone sat in the darkness in the alley. A flash of a camera caught her eye. She gave them a wave before drawing the curtains to a close. “Hey Nuncio, someone with a camera is in the alley.”

“I will notify my team outside. They will take care of this. Just keep the curtains closed.” He stepped into the kitchen. “You need to eat more than toast,” he chastised.

“Nuncio, I can accept you’re not leaving but you need to stop telling me what to do. If I wanted an overbearing jerk telling me what to do, I’d invite my husband over.” She didn’t meet his gaze as she took her book and strode past him toward the oversized chair in the living room, “and he is the very last person I want to see.”

Her phone buzzed as Savannah responded to her message with a series of emojis clearly demonstrating her displeasure. She gave a wicked grin at the subsequent message where Savannah mentioned where Nuncio should put the vegetable emojis she had shared and replied quickly before looking up to see Nuncio watching her intently. “Now what?”

“You are pale, thin and you do not eat.”

“I’m in mourning,” she held his gaze.

He gave a rueful glance and rifled his fingers through his hair. “Mackenna, I’m sorry I let you go that day. If I had done my job...”

guilty for losing track of her. "Nuncio, none of this is your fault. There is only one person to blame and he's sitting in a jail cell in Italy right now."

"Perhaps but," he started to speak again.

"We're not talking about this again because if I have to start assigning blame, I'm going to have an exceedingly difficult time looking in the mirror and I'm not prepared to do that. Please just stop with the pity and the misguided sense of concern. I am fine. I will be fine."

A knock on the door made her jump.

"It is fine. I ordered food. I asked my security to bring it down. You need to eat something more than a slice of toast and a lot of wine." Nuncio offered gently. "I ordered pasta carbonara for you with some garlic cheesy bread."

"Sounds like you asked someone for food recommendations," she wanted to be angry but had nothing left to give.

She sat with her book on her lap staring into the light of her lamp. She heard Nuncio arguing with whoever from his team was bringing the food down to the basement apartment and considered for a moment perhaps the press had intercepted the delivery person because he sounded furious.

Then she heard the other man's voice and felt her stomach drop to her feet. The man was relentless, and she was too tired. She remained in her seat as Nuncio gave his employer an earful, telling him Mackenna needed rest and care and did not need to be disrupted by an impatient man. She suddenly liked Nuncio very much. He was taking the job of protecting her very seriously.

"Just let me see her for myself and ensure she eats and then I will leave," Alessandro spoke brusquely pushing himself past his security.

She turned her head back toward the lamp, seeing his reflection stepping into her tiny living room in a small, framed photo of her grandparents on the side table. She turned the photo. Nuncio stayed close to him, obviously irritated with his boss. Carlos was also standing beside Nuncio, and he also looked irritated.

"You need to eat."

plate. "There I ate, go away."

He dropped the bag of food on her lap. "Eat the pasta."

"If I eat the pasta, will you leave?" She was trying not to cry now, willing to do anything to encourage him to leave her in her misery.

"Yes," he promised taking a seat on the sofa across from her, his hands folded between his knees and staring intently at her.

She ignored his gaze, rifled through the bag, and pulled the folded foam container out. The smell of the garlic and bacon wafting towards her nose and her stomach turned in protest. She took a plastic fork wrapped in a napkin and unrolled it. She reached for the wine glass and chugged the last of her wine as if it were a cheap beer. Nuncio looked displeased as he took her wine glass from her. She hoped he took it to the kitchen for a refill.

She wound the linguine around the fork and forced the bite into her mouth, chewing rapidly, keeping her eyes averted. She broke a piece of the cheesy bread off and shoved it into her mouth.

"Slow down and chew your food Mackenna, unless you're anxious for me to do give you the kiss of life when you choke," he taunted quietly.

She immediately slowed her movements and shuffled in her chair, hating even with all to have happened, his words caused her body to react to him. Damn him and damn her body for wanting him even now.

She took a breath and looked back out the window before wiping another tear off her face.

"Mackenna, why do you cry?" he whispered quietly, "I only want to know you are healthy and eating."

She didn't answer him, instead twirling the fork through the pasta and forcing herself to take another bite. The sooner she finished the dish, the sooner he would go, and she could go to bed, and she could say she had gotten through one more day.

He reached out to put his hand on her knee and she jumped away. She gripped

landed on the floor. Looking back at the photo on the table she avoided his face while he read the cover. The book was one recommended to her by a grief counsellor at the hospital, about the loss of a pregnancy. She was nearly three quarters through the book. It wasn't helping much.

She could see from the corner of her eyes he was holding the book in his hands tightly but not moving and she simply stuffed more pasta into her mouth. She owed him no explanation for what she read, and she certainly wasn't up to discussing the issue with him at present.

Nuncio came back into the room with a glass of water and set it on the coffee table. "You've eaten more than I thought you would."

"Am I done?" she knew she behaved as a petulant child, but she couldn't stop.

"I am satisfied, Alessandro are you satisfied?" he questioned his boss with a frosty edge to his tone.

Alessandro nodded before setting the book down on the table. Wordlessly he walked to the door and let himself out, Carlo quick on his heels.

"Can I go to bed now?" she felt the tears she had been struggling to keep at bay spilling over as she avoided Nuncio's sympathetic gaze.

"Mackenna, I promise you; I did not know he was coming here. I would have warned you. My job is to protect you and right now, he is not behaving rationally where you are concerned." Nuncio's voice was apologetic.

"*Right now*, he's not behaving rationally?" she questioned the turn of phrase. "The man has never behaved rationally where I'm concerned. Not ever. He's a raving lunatic who has disrupted my life from the minute he nearly ran me over with his damn car seven ago." She wiped furious tears off her cheeks. "What is it with me and cars anyway? My parents died in a car crash, my life got flipped upside down by him with his stupid car way back then and now my grandparents and my baby were stolen from me in another damn car accident. I swear to God I must have a curse involving motor vehicles on me. Somewhere there is someone playing with a voodoo doll and toy cars manipulating my life for the worst, I'm certain of it." She was



moving to the trash can in the kitchen with the remnants of the food she had picked at.

Tears streaming, she furiously tried to put the food in the bin, and it spilled all over the side and onto the floor. She gave up then, sliding onto the floor in a crumpled heap, sobbing uncontrollably. Seeing Alessandro again, having him invade her space and act like all he cared about was her when she knew damn well all Dulce needed to do was snap her fingers and he'd be back to her, was too much. She felt the sobs rack her ribs as she struggled to breathe against the pain she was feeling.

She felt Nuncio sit down on the floor beside her wrapping his arm over her shoulder and allowing her to use his thick chest as a beating drum while she flailed against the pain she felt. Eventually, when the tears started to subside and she was barely sniffing, numb from the pain, she felt him lift her and carry to her room. He laid her on her bed and put a blanket over her before leaving her in her room, closing the door gently behind him.

Three days passed with Nuncio acting as her shadow, disappearing only when she was delivered safely to her workplace with the promise of being there when she was done work for the day. The press was not going away as they had last time, most likely because Alessandro Giordano was in Phoenix Arizona, and it was causing the world to tilt on its axis.

Not to say there were not insanely rich celebrities in Phoenix. There were plenty of wealthy people in her city. There just weren't very many obscenely rich, drop-dead gorgeous Italian men who descended on the city where his wife had made a new life for herself to escape the affairs her husband had. They were a tabloid sensation and she wanted to throttle him for it. She had gone from being his dirty secret to the victim in a horribly sordid story and she wanted his head on a platter.

She took a bite of an apple imagining shoving it in his mouth if she really did have his head on a platter in front of her. She was grateful she hadn't seen him since the night he had come bearing food to her apartment. She was frightened she might lose her cool and murder him where he stood. Nuncio had taken it upon himself to bring food to the apartment and stock her fridge. The man could cook and slowly, with his prompting she was starting to eat more. He'd even packed her a lunch the last two days, telling her the cafeteria food was not meant for human consumption.

Savannah for her part was enthralled with the man. Everything from his accent, how he kept them both safe to and from work, and now keeping their kitchen smelling like a five-star restaurant, the man was pushing all the right buttons for the doctor. She kept threatening Mackenna she was going to seduce her bodyguard. Mackenna told her not to get too attached because she was sending him on his merry way once Alessandro pissed back off to Italy.

Now as she sat opposite her best friend, eating her bagged lunch, aware Savannah had the same bagged lunch, she considered Nuncio would be a much more suitable mate for her friend than Dulce. She waved her apple at her. "Fine, you can do what you like with him but do it when I'm not there. I don't want to hear the headboard rattling against the walls."

Savannah squealed with delight. "You serious? I know he's been looking."

head while you cry real tears when he goes back to Italy.” She pointed a finger, “and he’s going back because there is no way in hell they are staying here forever.”

Savannah pulled another chair closer and propped her feet up on it. “Do you know what would be amazing?”

“If you say double date, I’ll brain you right here with a cafeteria food tray,” Mackenna warned her.

Savannah grimaced at her. “One, you’ve been really violent since you got back. Talk to the counsellor about it. Two, I was going to say a night on the town. A couple of the nurses and the new doctor on Portman’s team were talking about hitting the new salsa club downtown on Saturday night. We should go.”

“Nuncio would have a fit,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m also not ready to go partying.”

“You know who else would have a fit?” Savannah grinned devilishly.

“Alessandro,” they said in unison, and both laughed.

“It’s like we conjured him,” Savannah grimaced distastefully looking beyond Mackenna’s shoulder.

“Are you kidding?” Mackenna turned to see him making long strides in her direction weaving around the round tables in the dining area. She looked back to Savannah, “Security has one job, do not let the man in the building.”

“He made a huge donation to the orthopedic wing,” Savannah hissed at her. “He’s made Portman his b\*\*\*h. He can come and go as he pleases.”

“Are you kidding me? How did I not know this?” she whispered back frantically. Damn Derrick Portman.

“I found out this morning and forgot about it until right this moment.” She looked up with an angry glare as the shadow fell over their table. “Hey asshole, you’re on the wrong floor. Urology is on the tenth floor.”

He stared back at Savannah, confused. “What?”

“I thought maybe you were here to try to get those oversized balls of brass you have fixed. There can’t be any other reason why a total knob head would harass a

balls of brass?" As he shifted his feet, she put her hand to her ear. "Hear the clanging sound, it's not healthy. You should definitely get it checked."

"Been saving that one awhile Doctor Kirkland?" He shook his finger at her as he swung into a seat opposite them, "you're a very crass woman."

"Too bad for you. Your wife likes it when I talk dirty," Savannah leaned over to him. "I've been in her bed more in the last two months than you have in the last five years."

Mackenna saw the flush rising under Alessandro's collar and chuckled at how easily Savannah got under his skin. She wasn't lying, she'd held her more nights while she cried than she cared to count.

Alessandro eyed Savannah with a smirk, "can't get a partner of your own so you're trying to steal mine? You're out of luck Kirkland, she's straight so you're missing the one thing she needs from a lover."

Savannah shrugged her shoulders, his insults rolling off her back like water from a duck, "I have the one thing you don't have, a heart. My heart full of love will beat your puny d\*\*k any day of the week. Sometimes a woman needs a gentle hand Giordano. Also, I have a strap-on."

A guffaw, the first real laugh she'd emitted in a long time erupted from her chest at Savannah's smart comebacks and the high red color on Alessandro's cheeks at Savannah's sass. She could watch Savannah rip him a new one all day.

A page over the loudspeaker paged Savannah back to the trauma unit and Mackenna giggled as Savannah stood up and planted a big noisy kiss to her cheek. With a wink and a rustle of her boobs in what was supposed to be a provocative move she whispered loudly at Mackenna, "see you at home darlin'"

"You better hope a reporter doesn't hear her speak in this manner," Alessandro glared at Mackenna.

She held his gaze, as the last of her mirth melted away, realizing she was alone with the devil himself. "I hope they do. Imagine the headlines now, Alessandro Giordano loses two lovers to the same woman." She spread her hands in front of her

print. I'm sure Savannah wouldn't mind being the lead story in a tabloid."

"You are not funny Mackenna," his palms were flat on the table as if trying to restrain himself. "You would do well to remember you are being scrutinized. The world is desperate to know."

Mackenna cut him off abruptly, "wrong! Nobody is desperate to know anything about me. It's you Alessandro. It's all you and your precious Dulce. I'm just a fly in the ointment. Where is she by the way? She must be losing her mind you're not at her beck and call. I saw the article where she said you were her best friend in the whole world. How special."

"So, you have been keeping tabs," he leaned back as if he'd just earned a victory.

She twisted her lips with a sneer, "you know what they say Alessandro, keep your friends close but your enemies closer. Frankly, I expected to hear from your lawyer before I saw you again. Thought for sure I'd see an NDA on my desk about the whole Savannah-Dulce thing."

"There was no thing," Alessandro retorted angrily.

"Says the man who wasn't there," she wrinkled her nose at him, "does it bother you to know your lover had Savannah's tongue down her throat?" She couldn't resist the taunt.

"If you're referring to yourself, then yes, it would bother me," he admitted with a shrug.

"I'm not talking about me," she glared at him.

"You're the only lover I've had since I put this on my hand," he pointed to his wedding band.

"Let me guess, you slip it off when you get into bed with her and then put it on in the morning?" Mackenna suddenly was grateful for all the verbal sparring she did with her friends because it was coming in quite useful now as she had him at a loss for words.

She reached into her lunch bag and pulled out the homemade granola bar her

took a bite before wrapping it back up.

"A bite of a bar is not much of a lunch," Alessandro spoke quietly. "You need to eat more"

"Alessandro, I ate a bowl of soup, a slice of bread and an apple. I took a bite of this because I knew it was there and I really want to eat the entire thing but I'm full."

He leaned backward linking his hands behind his head and crossing his long legs under the table. When they touched hers, she jerked them backwards wrapping them around the cold steel of the hospital chairs. She cursed herself for responding so dramatically to the simplest of his touches.

"I'm glad you are eating."

"I'd be glad if you went away," she eyed him critically, "it'd be so nice if we were both happy, wouldn't it?"

"Why are you being so difficult?"

"You didn't answer my question, where's your precious Dulce."

"Italy, learning how to walk again."

"Pity," she wished she felt compassion for the woman, "she must be lonely without her BFF."

"Her mother and sister are with her."

"How nice for her, she has family. Mine are all dead." His gasp as he sat up quickly made her eyebrows raise. "What? Too soon?" she queried coldly.

"You are not yourself, so I will forgive the bad attitude." He rested his elbows on the table, his chin on the top of his hand as he eyed her critically. "How are you really, Mackenna?"

She gave a loud laugh at the question, drawing the gazes of several people in the hall. "Oh my God." She snorted with derision, "you're joking, right?"

"No, I am genuinely concerned for your wellbeing. There was a photo of you in a paper back home and my mother brought it to my attention. You looked unwell. You still do."

"I always liked your mother. Your father is okay, I mean he never bothered with

grandparents before they died to tell them how excited she was to be a grandmother?" She saw from the expression on his face he hadn't known. "She's a lovely woman. I'm not sure how the acorn fell so far from the oak."

"Mackenna," he spoke gently, "I'm- "

She cut him off with an angry finger pointing at his face, "don't you dare. Don't you dare apologize to me when we both know the only thing you are sorry for is the world finally seeing you for the philandering asshole you are."

"She was not, nor will she ever be my lover. How many times do I have to tell you I was never romantically involved with Dulce?"

"I thought about it and maybe until you're blue in the face and can't breathe any more?" she offered with a sneer. "I think I'd like to see the blue look." She waved her fingers in a circle around his face.

"You are hateful," he spit back.

She waved her hands over her frame, "you made this, all of it. Enjoy the responsibility of knowing you are single-handedly responsible for all the bitter horribleness I am. I had believed once I got my divorce, I'd be able to move on with my life. Now, I don't care if I'm ever divorced. I will forever live with the guilt I brought you into my grandparents' life and they died as a result."

"I want to go to counselling with you," he threw out of left field leaving her momentarily reeling.

Her eyes wide as she stared in disbelief, she spoke slowly, "come again?"

"Counseling. I want us to go to couples counseling."

She scratched her finger to her temple. "Let me see if I understand what you're suggesting. You," she pointed at him, "a year into our marriage brought a woman into our lives who felt for some sick sadistic terrible reason thought it a good idea to tell me repeatedly, whenever she could, she was f\*\*\*\*\*g you." He flinched at the vulgar word, but she continued ignoring his discomfort. "She would call me from your hotel room to tell me you were showering after having s\*x with her. Then, when I would ask you about it you would say things like 'Ah Mackenna, you are mistaken,

but we both know even if it were true, you would never leave me” She mocked his accent with a flourish and a wave of her hand. “It continued for months until finally I grew the cojones to leave you. You knew all along she was playing it up for the cameras and you played along with her.”

She took a breath and shook her head. “Alessandro, I don’t care if you screwed her seven days a week three hundred and sixty-five days a year or if you’ve never put your d\*\*k in her.”

“Mackenna!” he slapped the table at her language. “That’s enough”

“Is it Alessandro? I don’t care if you were truly her lover or not. The truth is you let me believe it. You let the world believe it. You let everyone in the universe believe it, all the while knowing how much it hurt me, how much I suffered, and you didn’t make it stop.” She stood then, scraping her chair noisily back on the floor, “it’s not me who needs to go to counseling Alessandro. I’m not the sadistic misogynistic son of a bastard who dragged his poor pathetic wife through hell and back just to protect a stranger’s not so dirty secret yet still expects his wife to capitulate to his every whim. It was all you. You made your bed. Lie in it.”

With her back ramrod straight, she swiped her lunch bag off the table and walked away, her head held high as for the first time in her life, she felt truly in control, and it felt good.