

Mackenna sat in her office on Tuesday and groaned as her leg cramped under her desk. She leaned down and massaged her calf, cursing herself for showing off so much on Sunday during her hike. She was paying for it now two days later with muscles protesting every move she made. Her only consolation was the other four members of her hiking party were in far worse condition than she was.

Alessandro had called her the night before from his hotel room to call her a masochist and then to tell her he was resting in the jacuzzi tormenting her she had a stand-up shower and no place to soak. At no point did he make any s****l inuendo to share his tub and Mackenna admitted to herself she missed when he flirted outrageously with him. More than once, she told herself this was what she wanted to combat the sadness she was feeling.

Today he'd offered the use of his car so she and Savannah could go check out a couple of condominiums in the area. He had meetings he was attending remotely and wouldn't need the car. He was giving her space and respecting her boundaries.

Her cell phone rang in her purse, and she pursed her lips as she recognized his number. "Alessandro, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

He gave a laugh, "well it's a better greeting than some I've had as of late."

"I'm too sore to be argumentative today." She admitted with a laugh. "I keep getting a charley-horse in my calf. I'm so grateful for my ballet flats today."

"Your shoes are ugly," he said matter-of-factly before changing the subject. "I wanted to talk to you about something, but I'm concerned you will lose your temper. Do you have time to see me for a few minutes before you and Savannah go condo-hunting?"

She was still surprised he had not balked at her getting a new apartment with Savannah, entirely expecting he would tell her there was no use since he expected her to return to Milan. Instead, he had voiced his encouragement of the move and offered the use of his vehicle and his legal team for contract review if needed.

"Um, sure. How mad is this going to make me? I was in a pretty decent mood."

"I'm praying I'm overthinking, and you will be agreeable but I'm trying to aim low," his chuckle was teasing. "I am outside. I will be there in a few minutes."

She spent the next couple of minutes shuffling papers around her desk no longer able to concentrate on the work in front of her and gave up as she waited for his knock on the door. She stood up and opened the door and saw him striding down the corridor with an annoyed look on his face. "Another crowd out there?"

"It is fine, I know they will eventually tire of chasing us," he motioned for her to precede him into her office. He waited until she was seated and then he took a seat opposite her.

"You look like you could use a cigarette," she gave a wry smile, "what is wrong?"

"Who knew giving up smoking would be so hard?" he shook his head ruefully, "Nothing is wrong, but I have a proposal for you and while I very much want you to accept it, I fear you will yell at me and throw me out of your office."

"Oh dear," she folded her hands neatly atop her desk. "Just get to the point then. Rip the bandage off as it were."

"I want to pay you a monthly allowance." Instantly he noted she shook her head already refusing his offer, but he held up his hand. "Hear me out."

"I can take care of myself," she said trying to remain calm.

However, when we married you signed a prenuptial agreement. Do you remember?

"Yes," she nodded. His lawyers had insisted on it, and she hadn't been offended in the least by the suggestion.

"The agreement stated if the marriage failed, then you would be entitled to a monthly sum. There is no doubt in my mind the marriage failed, and I know you agree." He saw her bite her lip and look away uncomfortably. "You wouldn't have left the country and filed a divorce if it hadn't failed, correct?"

"Yes," she felt the bile rising in her throat. Hearing him admit the marriage was a flop hurt more than it should.

"Then by all accounts, you are entitled to the sum for each month we have been apart."

"Alessandro, I don't need your money."

"I know you don't. You have lived modestly for many years." He scratched his head as he tried to censor his words. "It is admirable. I understand why you have had to live as you have. I know you were trying to save the money to be able to say you did it all without any help from me. Mackenna, at the very least, you deserve every single penny outlined in our pre-nup. I beg you to allow me to instruct my accountant to transfer the money owed to you."

"Did the pre-nup not say if we divorced?"

"No," he gave a chuckle, "I read it myself. It clearly says if the marriage fails." He reached into his pocket, pulled an envelope, and passed it to her. "This is a copy. You can read it if you like."

"I don't need it though," she shook her head.

"Need it or not, you are entitled to it. Every penny of it." He shifted in his seat. "Any other woman would have contested the agreement considering the hell you've been through and asked for so much more. It is your money Mackenna. It is a legal and binding agreement, and I would very much like you to take advantage of it."

"Oh," she was dumbfounded, unable to come up with a single argument against his words.

"This would allow for you and Savannah to look at places a bit more secure than the ones you're looking at now," he saw her open her mouth, but he spoke quickly to cut her off, "and it would allow Nuncio to sleep better at night."

"Nice," she commented sarcastically, "bring my best friend and my brother from another mother into it."

He spread his hands open, "I am merely making a point your security guard is spending many a night with one eye on a thin door and he would rest better if you were in a more secure building. I know with your current budget you are likely to get a much better place than you have now but with the money owed to you," he made sure to use the word owed to convince her, "you could potentially find something a bit more becoming of a business professional and a doctor."

"Can I think about it?"

"What is there to think of?" he moved his shoulders in his jacket as if he were trying to stay calm and not provoke her. "It is in black and white in a legal and binding document."

"I just never," she rubbed her forehead in confusion, "I never cared about your money Alessandro. I don't feel I'm owed this."

His smile was easy as he nodded. "I know. You married me for my body, not my wallet."

"Oh you," she tossed a pen at him from her desk.

"I have one other request," he said suddenly once he realized she was truly contemplating what he

"This isn't enough?"

"A car," he held up his hands against his chest as she furrowed her brow at him. "I need to fly back to Milan and I do not like the idea of leaving you and Savannah without a car. I know you won't use a car service. With the press around all the time, if you're exiting a secured parking garage to arrive here at the hospital's secure parking garage, it would simply be much safer. If you're not keen on driving, Nuncio is staying behind and he can drive the car to and from. If you're moving from your current neighborhood to a more affluent one, it will be a bit away from here. It means you either walk a longer distance or you can drive."

He was making sense and it irked. "Why are you going back to Milan?"

"I have been able to work remotely but there are some things I need to do firsthand in my actual office. I also want to grab my older portfolios. I have a new project I'm working on and there was a specific creation I'd done some time ago and of course it's in a sketchbook I don't have."

"You're flying to Milan for a sketchbook?"

He chuckled at her question. "No Mackenna, I'm flying to do work at my own office. It is great to come up with ideas, to sketch them out but I also need to touch the fabric, see things up close. I also run a multi-billion-dollar company and I have stakeholders and members of a board I need to meet with in person. I have my calendar set with meetings for twelve hours a day for the next four days. I'll leave in the morning and be back by Sunday."

He studied her intently and then spoke quietly. "Ask the question Mackenna."

She despised he saw through her so easily but couldn't stop herself. "Will you go to her?"

"No," he shook his head, not surprised by the look of shock on her face. "I am terribly angry with Dulce right now. The last thing I need to do is fire her in the heat of the moment. She is a valuable asset to the company. She is being managed by lawyers and my VP, but I am maintaining my distance."

"I'm sorry, it's really none of my business, I just can't help myself where she's concerned." Mackenna's voice was clogged with emotion.

"Hey," he commanded her to look across the desk at her, "it is absolutely your business. Our relationship, we both agree is a mess right now, and she is at the heart of the mess. I promise you to be open and honest. If you have a question, then ask it of me. We cannot repair anything without trust."

"Thank you," she felt tears welling. "I'm feeling really overwhelmed."

He stood up then. "Well, all I need is you to agree to a car and a deposit to your account and I will leave you to work."

"Okay," she nodded absently, aware he was leaving in the morning to fly back to Milan.

"Excellent," he took her word as affirmation she agreed to his offers and before she could correct him, he was making his way out of her office. "My accountant will call you shortly. I've given him your number already. He'll need your banking information."

With that he was strolling out of her office, and she was staring at his retreating back. Watching him leave, knowing she wouldn't see him again for at least four days made her heart ache in the most maddening way. She wasn't supposed to care about what he was doing or where he was going.

Yet, since the night he'd simply sat, drank tea, and read books with her, she was acutely aware he was trying. While she knew he was taking baby steps, part of her missed the throw-her-over-the-shoulder caveman antics he was known for.

She wanted to refuse his offers but everything Alessandro had said was logical and rational and she

gone and insisted she comply and to deal with the consequences. Today he had been respectful, considerate and spoke his thoughts without losing his cool.

She was certain he couldn't have even been to his car yet when her phone rang, and his accountant was calling with the request for her banking information.

An hour later, she was still staring incredulously at her bank balance when Savannah poked her head into her office to collect her for their apartment hunting.

"What's wrong?" Immediately she stepped into the office and closed the door.

Mackenna threw her phone at her, open to her banking app.

"Um, it's an awful lot of zeroes," Savannah gripped the back of the chair. "Did the bank make a huge mistake?"

"Turns out the pre-nup I signed wasn't just to protect Alessandro but also to protect me," she shook her head again. "His accountant has deposited the money for every month we have been apart, plus interest."

"Shut the front door," Savannah eyed her seriously. "You're kidding me." Her eyes were round. "There's over two million dollars in your bank account."

"Yeah," Mackenna rubbed her chest uncomfortably. "I never read the pre-nup back then. I was so naïve I thought it was about protecting him from me. Never dawned on me it worked both ways. I've never given it another thought until he showed up here today."

"But doesn't it usually only work if you get divorced?"

"Ha," she made the sound, but it scarcely resembled a laugh, "I asked the very same question and was told the wording is "if the marriage failed" and he gave me a copy, so I went through it. It's in Italian and my reading of the language isn't great but it seems to be correct."

"Now what?" Savannah asked curiously. "I feel like you should talk to a lawyer or an accountant or something about investments."

"Right," she nodded, still shell-shocked. "I should." She looked at her friend suddenly. "I'm paying off your student loans."

"No way," Savannah put her hands up defensively. "This is your money."

"I bloody well won the lottery and if the roles were reversed you would do it."

"Mac, I have over a hundred thousand dollars in student debt."

"Tomorrow you won't. Not up for discussion. I will never spend this much money in a lifetime, and you are my sister and the only family I have left. I am sharing this with you, and you have no choice in the matter." It was Savannah's turn to sit down in shocked silence. "Alessandro told me you and I should get a place a business professional, and a doctor would be expected to live in."

Savannah looked at her. "He didn't try to tell you we shouldn't get a place together because he wants you back in Milan?"

"Weird right?" She was reeling but she was glad to see her friend was as stunned as she was. "So, let's look at places befitting a doctor and a business professional."

"Okay," Savannah said quietly.

"Okay," she responded. Neither of them moved.

In an unprecedented turn of events, Savannah had two Saturday night's off in a row and tonight she had convinced Mackenna to join them for dinner and drinks, insisting they needed to celebrate. Where last week she had felt raw, somehow this week she felt as if she was healing and ready to face her friends and her life.

Mackenna was nestled between Savannah and Nuncio. Around the table their group consisted of Derrick Portman, a new orthopedic intern working with him, Padma Kaur and two nurses who had accompanied them all out the weekend before, Maisy and Cassidy. Tonight, they were celebrating Mackenna and Savannah finding a new condo in a nicer part of town with security doors.

Interestingly, the clingy nurse Savannah had mentioned the weekend before was nowhere to be seen and Derrick wasn't talking about her. According to the rumor mill, the nurse got angry when he cancelled a dinner date last minute because he'd been called in for an emergency surgery. Allegedly she'd thrown a fit in the middle of the hospital lobby. The hospital gossip mill was running rampant about how Derrick very coolly looked at her and said "get over yourself" walked away and didn't look back. The nurse had to be escorted off the premises sobbing hysterically, and her manager had to be called to review her behaviour. The hospital was gossiping like mad over the exchange, but Derrick's lips were sealed.

Mackenna looked down at her dress. She had splurged today for the first time in many years. She had spent nearly seventy dollars on the dress, but she wanted something pretty to wear. It was a classic little black dress, but a wraparound, tying at her waist. The cut of the dress amplified her curves, cutting just enough cleavage to tease but not showing too much skin, the hem of the dress sitting mid-thigh. She was wearing a pair of Savannah's old pageant shoes, unwilling to fork over the amount of cash the shoes she liked demanded, regardless of how many zeroes her bank account was showing. She had her hair in a high ponytail at the top of her head wrapped with a thick streak of her own hair Savannah had temporarily dyed a bright fiery red. The one streak around the base of her ponytail trailed playfully through the to the end. While she would never permanently color her hair such a vibrant color, it was fun for a night on the town.

Her make-up was flawless only because Savannah had done it, using her pageantry skills. Her eyeliner cat like, her lids smoky and her lips painted a glossy red. Savannah had contoured and highlighted her skin, so her cheekbones were defined, and she felt good. She had caught Derrick staring more than once and it was doing good things for her ego.

She forced herself to admit she would have loved for Alessandro to see her like this as she wasn't sure he had ever seen her done up like this. Usually, he had her dressed elegant and he'd never taken her to a dance club. She felt young and vibrant and for the first time in a few months, alive.

"That's a hell of a dress," Padma complimented her.

"I splurged today," she admitted to Padma. "I saw it in a window when I was downtown, and I decided I really wanted it, so I bought it."

"You deserve it Mac," Derrick commented from across the table. "You look gorgeous as always."

"Thank you, kind sir," she gave a mock bow and blushed when he winked at her. Nuncio grunted and she elbowed him. "So, what is everyone ordering? Should we just do a bunch of shared plates?"

They were at one of her and Savannah's favorite Greek restaurants where the food was amazing, and the service was stellar. Savannah had given the owner's daughter several stitches once and her manner with the child had impressed the parents so much they made her an honorary daughter in their family, and they promised her whenever she wanted, she could call them personally and they would ensure she had a table for her and all her friends. She waved the server over and they all placed orders of appetizers and

"Derrick, where's Erica?" Cassidy asked the question nobody had dared, causing Savannah to choke on her beer and Mackenna to look away and pretend to take a long sip of her vodka and cranberry.

Derrick glared at her, "didn't work out. Next question."

"Are you going to take someone else home tonight? Padma lives with her entire family, like a hundred of them, she could probably use the break from them."

"Oh my god," Padma's complexion reddened as she looked at Savannah for help.

"Don't look at me," Savannah grinned, "the whole reason we love Cassidy is she isn't afraid to address the elephant in the room. You are fresh meat, and the good doctor is mighty fine, if you like blue eyes and lots of dimples."

"Yeah Derrick," Maisy jumped on board, "you usually date anyone not on your floor. Now we all know who Mac's ex is, we all know not even you can compare. Sorry Mac, just pointing out the obvious. Why you even entertained the notion of dating Derrick Portman when Alessandro Giordano is your ex is beyond me. We like Padma, we like Derrick. You should date." She pointed back to Mackenna, "you should convince your ex to stay in Phoenix so we can all admire him when he comes to join you in the cafeteria."

"Can we change the subject?" Mackenna's cheeks were as red as Padma's at the conversation. "Let's talk about something more fun. Savannah, got any more stories from trauma? Preferably something less gory than this current range of topics."

"Please," Padma begged unable to meet Derrick's eyes.

Mackenna noted for the first time Derrick was looking at his new intern differently and she grinned. Maybe everyone else had seen something he had missed. She looked between the two and looked to Savannah curiously who gave her a nod of acknowledgement. Considering all she'd put the good doctor through, she decided to help things along.

"Padma, do you really live with your entire family?" Mackenna asked her.

"God, yes. It's horrible," she wrinkled her nose. "My parents paid for my schooling. All of it. In return they refused to let me move out of the house until I either complete my fellowship and have my own practice as a surgeon or I get married. It's customary for everyone to live together but I'm not going to lie, I'm very much over it. They are always in my business. My mother is forever introducing me to men she feels are suitable, my grandmother criticizes everything I wear and this morning my grandfather thought it was perfectly acceptable to use the toilet while I was in the shower."

"No!" Mackenna was horrified. "That's not right."

"He's eighty-six years old. Do you know the intestinal problems of an old man? I begged him to leave, and he said I was a doctor, and I should be used to bodily functions," she gave a shudder.

The table erupted with laughter at her story while she took a very long drink of her wine.

"Hey, Derrick, didn't you buy a huge house in the burbs?" Mackenna asked suddenly. "Derrick told me knows how to make his own pasta."

Derrick turned his eyes back to her and pursed his lips. "I change my mind, we aren't friends."

She laughed merrily at his comment and shrugged. "You took a massive donation from my ex-husband and from the rumor mill, you've had lunch with him on multiple occasions. I'd rather you sleep with her than him you traitor."

"He's a genuinely nice guy and he adores you," Derrick shrugged unapologetically. "There's actually an ongoing pool of how long before you take him back, quit again and move back to Milan."

"Nope," she shook her head. "Not happening. I have no desire to move back. Too many bad

"Note, she didn't say she wasn't taking him back though," Padma jumped on the bandwagon.

"Do you know what the problem is with having friends who are all doctor's and nurses," Mackenna asked Nuncio who was slowly relaxing and chuckling beside her. "They all think they are the smartest in the room and they miss absolutely nothing. It's like working with a bunch of arrogant detectives."

"She didn't deny it though," Savannah quipped as she lifted her glass to her lips.

"Shut up Kirkland," Mackenna took her straw into her mouth and drained her glass. She lifted it in the direction of the server who immediately went to the bar for her.

"So, you're still in love with your ex?" Cassidy asked curiously.

"Change the topic now," Mackenna urged desperately. "I am not nearly drunk enough to go down this path of introspection."

"Fine," Cassidy looked at Nuncio. "Did you know Savannah's been calling you the hot bodyguard from hell? We have an ongoing pool about how long," she tried to get away from Savannah who was trying to cover her mouth with her hand.

Mackenna felt Nuncio tense beside her and wondered how he'd react.

"You talk about me at work Savannah? Interesting, she told me she never thinks of me at all when I'm not in her immediate view." Nuncio folded his arms over his chest enjoying how Savannah's cheeks flamed. "And to think she told me it was all one-sided."

"Shut up," she gurgled at him from the other side of Mackenna.

Mackenna's grin was wide as she sat between them and she turned to Nuncio, "want to change seats?"

"No," Savannah hissed as Nuncio agreed immediately.

Suddenly Savannah chortled with glee. "Oh, this is perfect."

"What?" Mackenna asked as she looked in the direction where her friend was staring, and her breath caught. In all his beautiful glory was Alessandro cutting through the restaurant in their direction. "He's not supposed to be home until Sunday night." She glared at Nuncio, "you told him last night we were going out tonight didn't you."

"It is my job. He is my employer." He flopped down in the seat she'd just vacated and rubbed his ankle she kicked.

"Rat," she hissed under her breath.

"Brat," he hissed back as he dropped his arm over the back of Savannah's chair. "So, let's talk more about how Savannah calls me the hot bodyguard."

"From hell," Savannah finished her cheeks burning.

Mackenna heard nothing as she saw Alessandro walking towards them, looking around the table as if he didn't notice her. Then his eyes landed on her, and his eyebrows shot upwards at her appearance.

"Mackenna,"

"Oh god," Maisy said with a squeal, "he sounds just like he looks."

Cassidy motioned to Derrick. "Get him a chair. Join us Alessandro. We're all friends here."

"It's a trap, run," Derrick warned him but did as he was instructed by the nurse and pushed the chair in between where he and Mackenna sat.

Mackenna grinned at him when it moved his seat closer to Padma's. She waggled her finger between them. "Talk amongst yourselves."

dangerously close to not being my friend either.

"I'm just saying when it's obvious, it's obvious."

The entire table turned to look at her pointedly and she groaned. "Shut up." She looked to Alessandro who was still standing. "Are you joining us or not?"

He had been in the mind to drag her out of the restaurant as soon as he saw the hair and make-up, but curiosity got the better of him and sat down between her and the doctor. He crossed his ankles under the table, his thigh brushing against hers as he invaded her space as he shrugged out of his jacket to hang over the back of his seat.

Mackenna's senses were operating on overdrive with him sitting so closely. While he gave his drink order to the server, she took a minute to surreptitiously take in the appearance. He was dressed casually but with precision the way only someone who had modelled for most of his life. His dark pants hugged his long legs deliciously and as he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, Mackenna's eyes were drawn to his long fingers and bared forearms. She allowed her gaze to travel up his muscular arms toward his chest, and almost sighed as he unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, exposing a smattering of hair and bronze skin. A four-letter word echoed in her head as she turned her eyes back to the table and noted everyone except Nuncio was watching him relax. The man was s*x on legs and even Derrick was probably turned on.

"Is there something on my face?" he asked suddenly breaking the sudden silence of the table.

"No," Mackenna swallowed hard and then grabbed her drink the server had just set in front of her and moved the straw away and chugged the drink shaking the glass in her direction.

"What are you drinking?"

He took the glass from her hands and Mackenna fought the zing travelling up her fingers from the simple connection.

"Vodka and cranberry."

"I didn't know you liked spirits."

"Ghosts?" Cassidy interrupted causing a giggle to leave Mackenna's throat as the alcohol hit her.

"Hard liquor in Europe is referred to as spirits," Mackenna explained and the woman nodded in understanding, "and yes, I do like spirits in some forms. This," she shook her empty glass, "is going down very well tonight. Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"Not at all, I'm interested to see how Mackenna drunk on hard liquor," he corrected winking at Cassidy, "behaves in public."

Cassidy was clearly under his spell and Mackenna wanted to slap her cheeks to bring her back to the land of the living. "Cassidy," she snapped her fingers in the woman's face, "he's just a man. Get it together. He's pretty, I know but just a man nonetheless."

"Pretty?" he tugged her ponytail. "Hardly a compliment to appease my rugged machismo," he grinned broadly. "What conversation did I interrupt?"

"We were talking about how Savannah has the hots for Mackenna's bodyguard Nuncio," Maisy piped up and offered her hand to Alessandro. "Maisy Duke, and if you make one joke about my name, I swear I will hurt you. My parents thought it would be funny, it was not."

He laughed and shook her hand, "it is nice to meet you Maisy." He turned his gaze to Savannah. "So, you want Nuncio?"

"Oh my god, you are all jerks," she threw her napkin on the table and moved to stand up, but Nuncio

Chapter 36

make her sit still in her chair, holding her hands to her mouth and her eyes wide.

“Well,” Mackenna gave a wide-eyed glance around the table, “if I’d known a simple kiss would shut her up.”

“Pfft, you’ve kissed her hundreds of times Mac,” Derrick grinned across the table. He saw Alessandro’s curious tilt of the head and he laughed. “Savannah has used Mac multiple times as a shield against unwanted advances. Mac just plays along. There was a rumor for a long time at the hospital they were lovers.”

"Hey, she's used me to," Savannah defended her actions. "Remember when we went line dancing at the country bar? You almost took me on the pool table."

Alessandro choked on his drink at Savannah's words and Mackenna patted his back hard. "Explain."

"No," Mackenna answered back. "I don't have to." She held his glare. "Fine, I'll tell the story but tit for tat. Admit first you came back from Milan because Nuncio told you we were going out tonight and you were going to make me leave when you first came in."

"I admit it," he knew no shame at his admission. "Look at you."

"What's wrong with how I look?" She looked down at her dress which minutes before Padma had complimented.

"Nothing is wrong with it," he corrected her, "you are stunning, and I don't want to share."

"I'm not yours to share."

"Which is why you're still seated and not over my shoulder caveman style," he tapped her nose. "Stop being argumentative. You look lovely."

"Pfft," she waved at him.

"When did you almost have s*x on a pool table with Savannah?"

"You two are the cutest thing I've ever seen," Cassidy interrupted the argument. "Have you always been this fiery or is this just since the whole tabloid kerfuffle?"

"Always," Mackenna answered seriously. "Since the day he tried to run me over with his sports car."

"I thought she was suicidal because she jumped in front of my car," he corrected resting his elbows on the table leaning into the conversation, aware he was enjoying himself. "Then she slapped me and ran like a little coward."

"Look at him," Mackenna said to Cassidy, "if you slapped him?"

"I'd run to hills and never come back." At his surprise she shrugged. "Sorry man but you're intimidating as hell. You're not the kind of person girls like us go slapping."

"Girls like you?"

"Me, Maisy, Mac, Savanna and Padma," she waved at the table around them, "normal girls who grew up normally. You're not normal."

Alessandro laughed at her words. "I assure you, as Mackenna said earlier, just a man."

"In a god's body," Maisy looked him up and down. "You must work out for days and eat nothing but spinach."

"Speaking of food," Mackenna changed the subject, not keen on how her friends were undressing him with their eyes. They were supposed to just be friends, but she was feeling suddenly possessive. "It's coming and I need something to sop up this booze floating in my tummy." She motioned to Alessandro, "we ordered enough to feed an army, no need to order anything else."

He studied her as she piled a bunch of food on a plate for them both. Whether she realized it or not, she was still treating him as her husband, and he draped his arm over the back of her chair. He took a skewer of meat and eyed it curiously.

"Lamb," she grabbed his hand and took a bite off his kebab.

"Careful," Derrick warned him, "she has a habit of stealing everyone's food when she's drunk."

"Do you get drunk often?"

While nobody else would have noticed the edge of his question, Mackenna heard it instantly and

a handful of drinks but it's not something I do a bunch. Derrick is just making fun of me because he walked us home one night and I stole his hotdog we got from a street vendor." She shrugged. "I dropped mine down a grate in the road."

"Good thing it went in the grate because if it had landed on the road, I'm sure she would have eaten it," Derrick told Padma with a smirk. "Also, she ate my hotdog in two bites. It was horrifying." He c****d his head suddenly. "I'm starting to wonder what the hell I was attracted to."

She threw her head back and laughed uproariously at his comment. She took grape leaves stuffed with meat in her fingers and took a bite and offered the rest of Savannah who had reached for it. She popped it in her mouth.

"And there's why everyone thought they were lovers," Maisy pointed out the intimate movement. "Then we all realized they're more like twins. They're both damaged souls who needed each other to heal." The table was quiet as everyone turned to look at her. "It's true. Mac always gives off vibes to make you want to protect her, take care of her, and kill anyone who would dare screw with her. Savannah is tough as nails but so damn vulnerable and soft inside. It's no wonder they gravitate to each other."

It was Savannah's turn to say she needed another drink.

The rest of dinner passed with lots of laughter and teasing and Mackenna relaxed against Alessandro's arm against her chair and noted Nuncio's hand was possessively on Savannah's thigh and she was holding onto it, her fingers laced between them.

She looked to Alessandro. "We're going dancing at the new Latin club I didn't go to last weekend. Are you coming?"

"Am I invited?"

"Yes," she held his gaze.

"I don't know if I can watch you dance the samba with someone else." The meaning in his gaze was clear.

"Then don't," she replied simply. "You can keep me occupied."

As they stepped outside, she saw Carlos' and Rio waiting patiently lounging against a pole. She eyed him curiously. "How did you get here without the hoards of paparazzi? They've pissed off since you left for Milan. Only a handful of stragglers have been around."

He smirked, "I took a page out of your book."

"What's that?"

"My flight leaving tomorrow still has my name on the manifest. A friend of mine was flying to Los Angeles. He did a pitstop for me along the way. I chartered a private plane from Miami to here. I came right here from the airstrip." He dropped his arm over her shoulder as they walked toward the dance club a few streets over, tucking her against him. "As far as the reporters camped outside my house and the office in Milan, I'm still in Italy. I ran away."

"You're devious."

"Learned from the best," he dropped a kiss to the top of her head unable to resist. "Is the red hair thing permanent?"

"No," she laughed at his question. "Don't like it?"

"I actually really like it. The lipstick too. I've never seen you in glam make-up before." He twirled her ponytail around his fist, "but this is something else. I've never seen you in a high pony before and it's making me want to do all kinds of bad things."

"Such as taking my three-month friendship off the damn table, throwing you in the darkness of the next alley and having you right there," he bent his head to whisper in her ear. He laughed when she stopped dead in her tracks. "But I'm a man of my word so keep walking Mackenna and take me dancing."

She was silent under his arm, feeling strangely disappointed in his comments. This was what she wanted. She had wanted to end things with him and while she had agreed to give him three months of friendship, she had ultimately believed at the end of it she could walk away. Now, tucked under his arm, getting ready to enter a dance club with him, she was fighting the desire to throw him into an alley way.

"Savannah!" the bouncer at the door hollered in their direction and then saw Mackenna behind her. "Mac!" he threw his arms wide.

"Ray?" Mackenna looked at the man before racing out of Alessandro's arms to lunge at the man and wrap her legs around his waist and be twirled in a big bear hug. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in Tucson."

"I was but then my mom got all sulky I was so far away, so I moved back. When Emilio opened this place, he asked me to head up his security team. Let's face it, I'm the biggest guy he knows." He slowly set her on her feet. He motioned to the group and pointed to the person stamping hands. "No cover for these folks. They're my family."

Mackenna kissed his cheek. "You come find me in there. You owe me a dance." She pulled Alessandro closer. "Alessandro, this is Ray. Ray is a very good friend of mine. Ray this is Alessandro."

Ray pointed to Mackenna. "Hey, you take good care of her. She's special."

Before Alessandro could ask any questions though, Mackenna was pulling him into the club and her friends, and his guards close on their heels. Mackenna beelined for the bathroom with the girls in tow.

Derrick clapped him on the back. "You want the details?"

Alessandro eyed Derrick thoughtfully before answering. "Yes, every sordid one."

"There isn't anything sordid." He laughed. "Here's the thing about Mac, why our hospital loves her and why nobody can replace her. The guy out there is only one of hundreds of people she has helped. She doesn't just sort out the billing. Three years ago, his mom got shot in a drive-by shooting. It was touch and go. Mac managed the insurance billing and there was none. His mom had no insurance. In America it's different than in Europe. No insurance means no health care or going into such debt you never recover. Mac was able to work with a couple of different organizations to find ways to cover every single one of her bills and then made sure her need for in-home care was covered too."

Alessandro was stunned. "She did?"

"It's not why Ray loves her though. She also sat with him while his mom was in surgery. She sat with him, brought him coffee, made him smile while she was in ICU. She held his hand when his mom woke up and didn't recognize him at first. His mom is the only family he had and so Mac stepped up and functioned as his family until his momma was okay." Derrick made sure Alessandro understood. "The thing is Alessandro, Mac has done it hundreds of times. Of all the members of our staff, she has more people going to talk to our Chief of Staff about her than anyone else and it's always about how kind she is. Nobody expects the person overseeing their hospital bills to be sweet, kind, and compassionate. There are easily hundreds of people who have written the hospital, just about Mac."

Derrick watched as the girls all came from the bathroom and headed for the bar. "Mac is what we call here in Phoenix, good people. She's simply good, down to her core. She has more brothers and sisters in this city because of her kindness, if anything ever happened to her, it would be a catastrophe. When news got out of her car accident, the hospital was flooded with calls of people asking if she was okay. I know

Chapter 37

and eventually she'll find her way back to you, but Phoenix will be a lesser city without her in it."

He walked away then and headed in the direction of the bar.

Nuncio looked at him. "It explains why we can't walk down the street without people saying hi."

"It sure does," he was stunned at what the doctor had just told him. Mackenna had made her life here, had made a family where she had none. She had left the tiny bubble he'd kept her in and spread her wings and had become an invaluable asset to her employer and her community.

"Alessandro," Carlos' interrupted his thoughts, "unless you want us beating the hell out of every man in this bar, your girl looks good tonight and you've left her unattended. Go take her dancing." He then pointed at Nuncio, "you're now off the clock. Rio will cover Mackenna until Stephano gets here."

"I'm here to do a job," Nuncio protested.

"Yeah, and Mom ripped me a new one when I saw her yesterday about your bad attitude. Get laid man. Go." He motioned to the doctor. "She's good for you. We all like her."

Alessandro gripped Nuncio's shoulder. "She's a good person Nuncio. If you hurt her though, Mackenna will probably boil your balls for breakfast."

"Heh," he shrugged, "she's a terrible cook. She wouldn't be able to get the water to temp."

They all laughed as the group of men headed in Mackenna's direction. True to Carlos' prediction, guys were already hitting up on Mackenna and she was laughing and refusing to dance with a young guy, probably closer to her age. He reached out and spun her around and drew her into his arms. She gripped her drink tightly between them, wrapping her tongue around the straw and her eyes shining brightly.

"We did a shot of tequila."

"Dance with me," he commanded her taking her drink from her hand and noticing she had drunk it to the bottom already. He put the empty glass on the bar top and led her to the floor.

As they stepped to the floor the music changed and the DJ called all the salsa dancers to the floor. Alessandro paused, "you up for this?"

She giggled at him and tapped him on the nose. "Oh, my sweet naïve little man," she was definitely drunk she thought wickedly, "you have no idea."

As the music kicked up, Mackenna caught sight of Savannah approaching the floor with Nuncio and she grinned. The boys were either in for a treat or a meltdown. Even on nights when they hadn't been able to afford a night on the town, she and Savannah had danced in their tiny apartment, mastering the steps to the merengue, the salsa, the samba, the mambo, and the rumba. There were nights they had danced until the morning when they both had to work.

The music was cathartic and the energy in learning to move masterfully to the rhythm often pushed them into a frenzy, sometimes until they fell laughing to the floor like a pair of fools. But the salsa was Mackenna's favorite, and she knew Maisey had run straight to the DJ as soon as Alessandro had headed in her direction to insist, he play music for her.

This was her scene and for the first time ever, it was Alessandro coming into her world and being a part of it and not the other way around. All the past hurts, the pain, the heartache, she forced away as he took her hand and as the tempo of the music increased overhead, she grinned widely at him before dropping his hand and spinning away from him, whisking her hips, and beckoning with his finger for him to chase. When he laughed and gripped her hand and pulled her back towards him, her hands at chest she let her feet move to the rhythm of the music, quickly and effortlessly, her steps in sync with the drumbeat.

For a moment she laughed as he paused, knowing Alessandro had underestimated her ability to dance. This was not him dancing her around a kitchen while he serenaded her. This was her, owning her sexuality and being seductive and remaining completely in control of the situation.

He c****d his head to the side as he watched her spin her hips as she twirled around in front of him allowing a good view of her ass shaking to the beat. As she playfully leaned into him, he reached his hand out only to spin away from him, letting her fingers trail over his shoulder as she twirled under his arm.

Savannah had dated a man, the man who had turned them onto this kind of dancing, who had said the best way for a woman to dance was to imagine herself a minx. A seductress who in her mind was not going home with her partner at the end of the night but wanted to leave him dreaming of her all night. Savannah had joked she'd already screwed up by bringing him home and they had laughed but it was advice Mackenna had taken to heart. It was how she channelled the dance. Now for the first time in her life, she had a partner she genuinely wanted to chase her, and she spun around him.

She laughed merrily as he caught her game and danced with her, his hips and feet moving with hers in rhythmic harmony and she was breathless by the time the song ended and she spun into his arms and rested her head on his chest.

"You little vixen," he whispered in her ear. "You've been holding out."

She giggled as the music changed again into a merengue and she allowed him to catch her hands to his chest in the typical pose of the dance and they danced seductively, their hips never touching but moving as if bound by magnetism.

After several dances she was parched, and she pulled him towards the bar. She kept hold of his hand over her shoulder, casually and happily as she ordered another vodka and cranberry and kept swaying to the music.

"Some lothario taught you to move like that?" Alessandro asked as they took their drinks to the end of the bar away from the noise.

She fanned her face with her hand, aware she was a bit overheated. "A guy Savannah dated for a short time got us hooked on it. We even took free classes at the community center because we had so much fun. It's a good way to release some energy."

He gave her a look. "This is building up energy, not releasing it."

around her middle and pulled her closer. He sat on a barstool and had her standing between his thighs.

"I do not know if I like the notion you've danced like this with other men."

"Ah, but I've never gone home with them." She batted her eyelashes. "Nothing wrong with harmless flirting and usually," she touched his chest, "I dance with the paid dancers."

"The what?" he appeared confused by her comment.

"Look around Alessandro." She pointed to the dance floor. "Do you not notice there is an abundance of women here who are probably single and yet they all dance?" She watched as his eyes travelled the room and even noted Maisy and Cassidy were dancing up a storm. "Instead of servers, these clubs have dancers to dance with the girls, female dancers too but mostly male. Now," she taunted him, "some of the guys have a reputation but for the most part, they are here to do their job."

"What if they want to do more than dance?" he asked curiously.

She patted his chest reassuringly. "They're working. I'm sure some of them supplement their income with a little more than just dancing but it's never been for me to pay for such a thing."

"I would hope not," he grimaced at her taking a sip of his drink.

"What is this?" She leaned over and sniffed the tumbler.

"Negroni," he grinned and held it up for her to taste. He laughed outright when she sipped it then choked.

"It's pure alcohol," she shivered as it burned down her throat.

"My love, I do not drink juice with a spritz of vodka," he teased.

"How are you still standing?" When they had been together, they often shared bottles of wine or a cocktail such as vermouth or amaretto, but rarely did she see him drinking hard liquor. This was foreign to her, and she was intrigued.

"The secret is to not drink twenty of them," he rested his free hand on her hip continuing to sway to the music. "You really love to dance."

"I do," she smiled at his question. "You're an exceptionally good dancer. I knew you would be. You've danced me around the living room often enough."

"Had I known you could move like this, I'd have done much more than waltz you through the salon," he patted her hip.

"Savannah and I tried belly dancing too." The alcohol was really kicking in now as she felt her words slur. She put her hands over her mouth as if she had revealed a deep secret.

"I would very much like to watch." He watched with narrowed eyes as she shook her head no. "No?"

"No," she whispered, "my belly jiggles too much. It was horrifying. Savannah and I did the six weeks and never went back."

He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms completely around her. "Your belly is perfect."

"Dulce said I'm fat."

The words came out of nowhere and hung between them and she saw the shock register on his face, and she was mortified. Damn the vodka and her insecurities.

"She is wrong, you are perfect. I could wring her neck for making you feel anything other than perfect." He tilted her chin with his finger. "Never forget this, there is nothing I would change about you."

"Not even my jiggle bits?"

His hand brazenly palmed her breast, in full view of anyone who dared to watch them in their own

She slapped his hand away and saw the big smirk on his face. "We're in public."

"I'm aware, I've had to remind myself four hundred times on the dance floor we are in public. I almost popped the button on my trousers."

"Alessandro!" She put her hand on her cheek as her face flamed at his words. Her cheeks burned as he pulled her hand down and rested it along his thigh and she realized it was not his thigh. "Oh god," her eyes moved from her hand to his face before she yanked her hand back. "What are you doing?"

"Being friendly," he let her stand back a bit as she collected herself. "Mackenna, I missed you this week. I just wanted to come home to you. I am trying to be your friend and be respectful, but it is hard."

"So are you," she tossed back and was rewarded when he threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Touché," he finished his drink and set it on the bar behind him. "Shall we go back to the dance floor and cause me more discomfort?"

"Yes please." She reached past him and set her drink on the bar, deliberately brushing her breasts against his arm.

"Tease," he tapped her bottom with an open palm.

When they got to the dance floor, Mackenna noted Derrick and Padma were dancing a storm, neither of them knowing what they were doing but having fun all the same.

"Jealous?" Alessandro asked curiously while they observed the couple.

"Yeah, I mean look at her, I want to dance with her too. She's gorgeous." Her words had him laughing again and she turned into his arms. "Alessandro, you've ruined me for men."

"Good."

Eventually Savannah was dragging her back to the bathroom and Padma followed close behind.

"Are you having fun?" Savannah asked her curiously. "You and Alessandro dance well together."

"We do, don't we." She met her friend's eyes in the mirror as she reapplied her lipstick.

Padma called out from the stall, "you two are burning up the place. If I opened the dictionary to the word s*x your faces would be right, there."

"They're just friends," Savannah quipped with a grin, "right Mac? He's giving you three months of friendship with no s*x on the table."

"So don't do it on the table," Padma retorted causing all three of them to erupt into gales of laughter.

"I'm so confused and so very drunk," Mackenna stared at herself in the mirror. "He actually came back from Milan just because Nuncio told him we were going out."

"He's jealous and possessive. It's not new Mac," Savannah pulled a face. "I'm not saying it's healthy behavior but at least he's owning it. He admitted it at dinner in front of all of us."

Padma came out of the stall and squeezed between them to wash her hands. "What I want to know is what is the real story with Derrick and you," she looked at Mackenna. "Am I getting leftovers?"

Mackenna made a face. "No. Derrick asked me out a couple of times, but I wouldn't because I was still married. I didn't want to date anyone until I got divorced. We've flirted but nothing more. I think he's a great guy and he's been a great friend but as much as I hate to admit it, God if my shrink were here, she'd high-five me, I'm still in love with the jealous, possessive overbearing oaf in the club."

Padma wasn't surprised by this "So you'll get back with him?"

"I don't know, I can't see how."

"But why?" Padma was confused. "It's clear he loves you and you just said you love him."

Chapter 38

talks and new friends," she made a face as Padma laughed. "Short story is, Duice is his protege. She's been telling me for years they sleep together. He thought I was making it up out of jealousy. I left. She got hurt and ended up on Portman's table. We collided. She finally admitted she'd been the one telling me they were lovers. He wanted me back and then he didn't," she didn't elaborate on Savannah's make-out session with the model. "I went back to Milan, had the car accident, lost our baby and my grandparents. She still works for him. I came back home and here we are."

"Wait, you were pregnant."

"Yup."

"Oh Mac, I'm so sorry. From the outside it made no sense but no wonder you're so screwed up in the head over this guy."

"The guy who caused the car accident was a private investigator Alessandro hired to find Mackenna," Savannah added in. "He went far beyond what he was instructed to do, and Alessandro had clearly said to just locate her and leave her but at the end of the day, he hired him."

Padma gripped her arms. "I'm so sorry for all your losses. I promise to never tell anyone what you shared. If you ever need an extra shoulder to cry on, I'm here."

"I appreciate it," she hugged the woman tightly. "However, we have now all just killed my buzz in the worst way. Savannah, what's happening with you and Nuncio?"

"He scares the hell out of me. He's so bloody intense."

"She'll be at work walking crooked Monday morning," Padma's eyebrows wiggled suggestively.

"No, I don't do intense. I do fun and carefree and," at Mackenna's smirk she stopped. "I really want to do the intense thing don't I?"

"Yeah, you do." Mackenna laughed. "You like him Savannah and he's a really good guy."

"Not the kind to stay in Phoenix, his home is in Milan," she reminded her of the conversation they had.

"I'm not going back to Milan," Mackenna said. "There is nothing but heartache for me there. Maybe Alessandro will assign him to me here forever."

"Fingers crossed," Savannah held her hands up with her digits intertwined.