

Since she had suggested it initially, Savannah had been ruthless in trying to convince Mackenna to go out with her and the other doctors and nurses to the new dance club. Savannah wanted to show off her dance moves and everyone except Mackenna and Nuncio were on board.

Nuncio in no uncertain terms wanted nothing to do with the idea. He refused to even bring it up to Alessandro, very aware his employer would say no and Mackenna was secretly grateful.

The last thing she felt like doing was dancing provocatively when her heart was still feeling so bruised.

Instead, she encouraged them all to go on without her.

As Savannah stood in their tiny bathroom wearing a tiny sequined number making her legs appear miles long, she pouted in the mirror at Mackenna standing behind her. "Are you sure you don't want to come? I believe it would do you a world of good."

"Dancing the merengue and getting wasted isn't appealing to me right now Savannah. I'm just not ready."

"Okay," Savannah turned and gripped her hands. "Do you want me to cancel? I will stay in. We can order pizza and drink wine."

"No," Mackenna shook her head, squeezing Savannah's hands in response. "Please go, have a good time. I have a new book I want to start reading. I'm going to sit quietly and read. Besides, the last thing you all need is a bunch of paparazzi hounding you everywhere I go."

They had not gone away since Alessandro's return to Phoenix. News of his donation to the orthopedic wing had been a sensation. The revelation the orthopedic wing was at the same hospital his wife worked at was a whole other level. Alessandro was being dragged through the mud, not one single news outlet believed for a moment he had not known his wife worked at the hospital where his lover had been transported. They were calling him cruel and callous. Worse, they were hounding her at every turn asking her to comment on the allegations of his infidelity.

as she stepped into his view. There was a spark, but he was too professional to flirt around on the job and Savannah was giving him the cold shoulder for not responding to her advances.

Mackenna saw the way her bodyguard was letting his gaze go up and down Savannah's body and wondered how long before he said something. It took seconds.

"You're wearing that to a club?"

Savannah raised her eyebrows in his direction. "Yes, it's made exactly for this purpose."

"One wrong move and the entire club will see your bits," he tossed at her.

"They are my bits to show off, if I wish Nuncio." Savannah shot back. She looked to Mackenna, "I take it back, I don't like him."

"You should get changed." He glared at her. "The dress is too short."

Mackenna cleared her throat as the room filled with tension. "Yeah, um, I'm going to go to my bedroom now. You two sort out whatever," she waved her hand between them, "this is."

She retreated to her bedroom ignoring the hissed arguments carrying down the hall to her tiny room. She lay on the bed with her book propped on her knee and started to read the introduction to her book. It was another book on grief, supposed to help her process her feelings of sadness and shame. Her counselor was helping as well but there was only so much talking could do. Every book she read she desperately searched for some tiny bit of wisdom to dull the ache in her heart.

The sound of a slamming door rattled the entire apartment followed by Nuncio's yell of frustration and she gave a grin at the noise. She had a feeling her friend was going to have a security agent on her bad side for a while.

Her phone buzzed as a text message popped up. She lifted it from beside her and grinned at the long message Savannah had sent. A bang on her bedroom door had her putting her phone on her chest Nuncio opened her door, poking his head through. He looked positively murderous.

and he looked to the phone. His intention was clear as he strode into her room to take it from her. "No, you are not invading my privacy by reading my private messages."

He stood with his hands on his hips torn between ripping the phone from her and respecting her as his employer. He turned on his heel. "Alessandro is in the living room."

She sat up angrily. "You couldn't give me warning he was coming?"

"You couldn't warn me she was wearing a dress with her ass-cheeks hanging out?"

She looked at her phone and typed a hasty reply to her friend and stuck her tongue out on his departing back. Nuncio was becoming the brother she never knew she had needed, and she enjoyed winding him up. She started to settle back down but then remembered he said Alessandro was here.

She groaned and walked the few steps to the living room to see him standing in her living room, his back to her, his hands clasped behind him. His broad shoulders were tense, and she felt herself instantly responding in kind, her fingers tightening around the book she'd forgotten to put down on her bed. Nuncio walked out the front door leaving them alone.

"Why are you here?" her voice broke and she cleared her throat. "Alessandro?"

"What's with him? He's angrier than usual," Alessandro tossed his head in the direction of the door.

"Savannah pissed him off." She wasn't about to divulge his employee's love life to him. It was Nuncio's to discuss, not hers.

"She could piss off a cloister of nuns," Alessandro gave a half smile and noted the grin on his wife's face. How he missed her smile.

He studied her intently. "You look tired."

"I worked all week," she shrugged avoiding his gaze.

"You are not out with Savannah?"

"No," she swallowed deeply, aware there wasn't much place to put her gaze

“I wanted to ask you to dinner.”

“No,” she wanted to scream at him but took a slow breath. “I ate already.”

“Mackenna, we need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” Mackenna felt her chest tighten uncomfortably. She’d been having more frequent panic attacks since she’d gotten back from Milan and felt her breath catch.

“Why are you not out with Savannah?” he changed his tactics.

“The salsa and merengue don’t appeal to me tonight,” she shrugged.

“Because you are sad,” he commented quietly.

“Understatement of the century,” she responded and realizing he wasn’t going away any time soon, stepped past him to the chair. She almost paused as she caught a whiff of his cologne. The man smelled divine. She grabbed a throw from the sofa and covered her legs, dropping her book on her lap.

“New book?” he caught sight of the title, different to the one she’d had last time. She had always been a devout reader, interested in learning whatever she could about the subject she was interested in. Right now, she was obviously consumed with grief.

“Yeah, counselor suggested it.” She closed her eyes for a minute wishing the small talk would end and he’d get to the point. She opened them again and found he was sitting on the sofa studying her closely. “Now what?”

“I know you tell me Nuncio is making you eat but you’re still very pale and I don’t think you’re sleeping well.”

“I didn’t take my sleeping tablet the last two nights as I’m trying to wean off them. It’s not working. I also started a new medication today for depression and it’s making me a bit groggy.”

“You are depressed.” It was a statement not a question, but it held a ring of surprise. It was not like her. She was a strong woman.

“Everyone feels sadness sometimes Alessandro, right now, I’m very deep in it and while I’m trying to keep doing what my grandparents would want me to do, it is

saw my doctor yesterday at the advice of my counsellor and discussed a medication to assist me getting through all of the loss I've been through." She held his gaze but then when his eyes watered with unshed tears she looked away.

"I too loved your grandparents Mackenna, I spoke to them both weekly. I miss them," his voice was soft as if he were afraid to say it to her.

"My grandfather wanted your head on a platter the last time I saw him, but as angry as he was, he still loved you. I know he did."

"He had every right to be angry with me," Alessandro admitted causing Mackenna's mouth to fall open.

"Can you say it again?" she was incredulous. "I think I heard incorrectly."

"No, you did not hear wrong. Your grandfather and your grandmother had every right to want my head on a platter. Camille too, Savannah as well. I put you through hell. I continue to put you through hell, though I'm wanting to repair this relationship. Mackenna, I know I made mistakes. I've made so many and I have much regret. I want to move forward but I can only do so once I have your forgiveness." He didn't try to hide the tears spilling down his cheeks.

Her heart ached at his words. She wanted so much to believe him but just yesterday in the doctor's office waiting room she read a new article where Dulce still proclaimed they were lovers. "Alessandro, I just don't believe you." She shrugged and wiped her own tears off her cheeks. "I want to, I won't lie, I really want to, but you have hurt me so much, so many times I don't trust you and I don't believe you."

"How do I fix this?" he pleaded with her. "I am not willing to lose you. I lost you for five years. I cannot go any longer without you as part of my life."

She sniffed, wishing he would go so she could go to bed and cry her heart out. She still loved him so much, but he would be the death of her if she returned to him. She couldn't trust he wouldn't destroy her in every single way possible. "I don't know it can be fixed Alessandro." She whispered quietly.

After several minutes of them both avoiding each other's gaze he whispered again, "Can I make a suggestion?"

as another ploy to make her move back to him.

“Can we start over? As friends?”

“What?” she stared at him. “Alessandro, you have put me through hell and back and you want us to be friends?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “You are not the only one who is attending counselling my love. The counsellor suggested to me everything about us was fast, furious, and whirlwind. He suggested I take the time to demonstrate I am genuine but also to be your friend first, your lover and husband second. He thought perhaps you needed a friend more than the latter, especially since your only experience with a husband has been a bit shoddy.” He shot her a remorseful look, his cheeks pink with color.

“Oh,” she didn’t know what to say.

“Give me three months,” he suggested. “Three months of friendship.”

“No s*x,” she looked up suddenly. “I can’t...” she trailed off.

“No s*x,” he agreed and chuckled as her eyes snapped to his in disbelief. “I told you, I’m willing to try. I just need to know you are as well.”

“Okay,” she said unexpectedly and saw the slow grin on his face. She waited for him to jump on her moment of weakness, but he didn’t. Instead, he just smiled and sat there staring at her.

After a few minutes she asked. “So now what?”

“The ball is in your court Mackenna. What do you normally do with friends on a Saturday evening?”

She laughed suddenly. “My best friend works so many hours a week because she’s got debt up to her eyeballs and I’ve been a spendthrift for so long I usually get my books from the library, stay home and read. We would sometimes go dancing but my heart just isn’t in it tonight.”

“You were really going to just sit home tonight and read?” he said quietly.

“Yeah,” she shrugged with a grimace.

“Would it be okay if I sat here with you for awhile?” He held up his phone. “I

here quietly reading with you if it's alright?"

She nodded her agreement in stunned silence. Had she not been stone-cold sober, she would have thought she was hallucinating. Alessandro Giordano was asking her to be friends, wanting to sit quietly and read a book, a book on grief and miscarriages of all things and he didn't want s*x.

His next words absolutely threw her. "Do you want me to make some tea?"

“Let me get this straight?” Savannah was leaning on the kitchen island, half perched on the stool, half sitting, an icepack to her forehead with a giant glass of water in front of her staring in amazement at her friend. “He came here. Admitted he was an asshole. Said he was in counseling. Asked to be friends and not friends with benefits, just friends and then he made you tea and you sat in our living room barely speaking until midnight reading books about grief?”

“Yup,” Mackenna understood her friend’s incredulity because she was right there with her. It had been truly bizarre behaviour from her husband.

“I don’t get it,” Savannah grimaced as she sipped more of the water. “Is this for one day and then when he sucks you back into a feeling of comfort, he’ll kidnap you and drag you to Milan kicking and screaming?”

“He said three months,” she reached out with a laugh and closed Savannah’s gaping mouth. “Three months with s*x off the table,” she clarified and giggled at Savannah’s wide eyes.

“He must be desperate.” Savannah said suddenly. “Let’s face it Mac, you’re a catch. He knows he lost a great thing. He’s going to try whatever it takes. You agreed?”

“What do I have to lose?” She shrugged. “I can’t go any lower than I am now and he sure as hell can’t hurt me any more than he already has. He told me the ball is in my court.”

“Swing away,” Savannah said pretending she was slicing a ball with a tennis racket.

“I’m not sure,” Mackenna admitted quietly. “If it weren’t for him, my grandparent would still be alive. He hired that maniac.”

“I understand. I’d be torn as well. He certainly didn’t instruct the guy to act like a fiend though. I know how much you love him Mac but the things he’s done, I don’t know if I could forgive it either.” She pushed away from the counter and groaned. “I can’t believe I agreed to go in early. I need to go shower and try to wash some of this hangover down the drain.”

time?”

“Portman was making out with one of the new triage nurses. She’s a clinger. He’s never getting her off him. I’d bet my last dollar she already has the names of the two children and their dog and the street name of the house she wants with the white picket fence.”

Mackenna smiled sadly. “I hope she makes him happy.”

“You would have made him happier,” Savannah griped. “I bet you could go to him right now and he’d be all in.”

“Except Alessandro put enough money into the orthopedic wing Portman probably thinks he needs to bend over the operating table for him,” Mackenna grimaced. “It was an obscene amount of money.”

“It was the least he could do considering his BFF turned the entire ward in a three-ring circus.” Savannah griped.

The sound of scuffling in the hall made them both grimace. Mackenna looked at her. “I’ll look today online. I have enough money in my savings since I didn’t have to pay Camille to put a good down payment on a condo or even buy one outright.”

“I can probably almost double what I’m paying now in rent and utilities so between us, we should be solid.”

“I’ll set up some visits for our lunch hour tomorrow if we can.”

“Mac, I trust you, if you find a place for us out of the cave we are living in now, I’m happy with it.”

She laughed at Savannah’s words. “You say it but then when I take the bigger bedroom, you’ll throw a fit.”

“I will,” Savannah grinned, “I have a lot of scrubs I need to hang in my closet.” She heard Nuncio turning his key in the lock. “There’s my cue, I’m out.”

“Chicken,” Mackenna teased her, but Savannah simply lifted her middle finger behind her head and vanished into the bathroom.

Nuncio walked into the area and grimaced at Savannah’s retreating back. “What time did she get in?”

“You make worse coffee than you do food,” Nuncio refused. “There’s a huge congregation outside and I had to throw one of the paparazzi out of the hall. Your neighbor upstairs is furious.”

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t bring them here.”

“No, but they don’t care. If this keeps up, I’ll be protecting you against the photographers and irate people in your building.”

“Tell him to go back to Italy, they will follow him, they don’t care about me.” She shrugged as she sipped her coffee. He was right, she did make terrible coffee. She set the cup down on the counter hating the Italian men in her life were ruining her simple pleasures.

“They have a taste for you Mackenna, they are like piranha with blood. One taste is enough to start a frenzy. All it took was Alessandro leaving here in the early hours this morning and they are camped out with hopes of a reconciliation story.” He held her gaze seriously. “It isn’t safe for you to leave here unescorted at all.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” She saw him open his mouth, “and don’t say go to the hotel with Alessandro.”

“I’m just saying it would be much easier to keep you safe if you were in a safer building.” He pulled at his hair. “What if you took a room in the same hotel as Alessandro. I know he will pay for it, and I will have better access to the rest of the security team.”

“No, I’m not leaving my apartment to go live in a hotel, and I don’t care who pays for it.”

He pointed at her in frustration. “You are a very stubborn woman.”

“I know, I get it from my mother and grandmother. They were the same.” She smirked. “Any other suggestions?”

“Move? Preferably a high rise building with security doors and elevator access with only a key?” He knew he was dreaming large.

She gave a shrug. “Savannah and I actually talked about it this morning. We’re both doing a bit better financially. I was given a raise when I came back, and she’s

We're going to go look for a place out of the cellar."

The sound of Nuncio saying a prayer of gratitude made her flick a tea towel in his direction. "When?"

"I'll do some research and see what might be suitable. Then she and I will go look together. She has to work today so it won't be today so don't get too excited."

"She works too much," he muttered.

"Says the man who pretty much sleeps on my lumpy sofa and never leaves my side." If she were being honest, she was grateful for his constant company. He was quiet, rarely bothered her and didn't push her to do things she didn't want to. For one of her husband's thugs, he was turning out to be decent.

"The sofa is a treat compared to some places I've slept," he gave a half-smile.

"Talking about your past lovers again?" Savannah tossed as she stepped out of the bathroom wearing her scrubs.

"You look like hell," Nuncio commented to her and if Mackenna was to guess, he sounded damn happy at her friend's appearance. "Rough night?"

Savannah grinned widely, "no, had a great night. Drank so much I puked in the cab on the way home. Didn't pay for a drink either." The inuendo wasn't lost on him and she relished his scowl. She bent down and put her runners on, making sure her butt was on full display. "I got home so late there wasn't even a single cameraman outside."

"You're disgraceful," Nuncio said bitterly.

"I'll take it as a compliment from someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Yeah, someone like you. You know, the kind who has a stick shoved so far up his arse bending is a problem."

"Whoa!" Mackenna moved to stand between them putting her hands on both of their chests. "Doctor Kirkland, go to work. Nuncio, go do something else." She grinned when Savannah kissed her cheek and looked at Nuncio.

"Make sure you tell your boss I had my lips on her again," she said wickedly

"I may lose my job for killing your best friend," he growled angrily as he absentmindedly grabbed her coffee cup and took a swig. He spit it into the sink in disgust wiping his mouth furiously.

Mackenna grimaced at him, the coffee hadn't been so bad he needed to spit. She pointed to the door and the noise in the hall. "If there's a crowd out there, you should go walk her to work. Make sure nobody gets in her face or she'll be front page news for punching a reporter."

"Do not leave or unlock the doors until I get back." Nuncio moved quickly to the door to try to catch up to Savannah.

She agreed and slid the deadbolt behind him. Leaning against the door she breathed deeply waiting for silence. Instead, she could hear her cell phone ringing in her bedroom, and she moved to her nightstand and lifted it up. An international unknown number on her display. She answered tentatively, "Hello?"

"Hello Mackenna."

The woman's voice seemed familiar to her, and she took a minute to try to place it and then closed her eyes as her mind caught up. "Dulce, what do you want?"

"I need to talk to Alessandro." Her voice was silky and smooth.

"Then call him." Mackenna ground out. "Why are you calling me?"

"Oh, right, I knew he wasn't there with you," the laugh made Mackenna's chest hurt "it's because he's in his hotel room. I just hung up with him not long ago. I thought it might be interesting to tell you all the things he and I just discussed."

"I really don't care," Mackenna flexed her fingers around the phone surprised she hadn't cracked the screen with her tight grip.

"We were reminiscing of all the nights we've had together. Even distance cannot dull our desire for each other Mackenna. Did you know we had a video chat last night, long into the morning? We got naked and had long-distance s*x. He was naked in front of the camera, and I touched myself for him so he could see me bring myself to pleasure at the sound of his voice. I know it was late in the evening there for him, but it was early morning for me here. It felt as if we were in bed together."

transpire before or after he left my apartment in the early hours of this morning.” She was met with radio silence. “Just as I thought. I don’t care if you have s*x with him in person, virtually or through other people. Just stop calling me.” She hung up the phone angrily.

Instantly the phone rang again, and she ignored it. It continued to ring incessantly, going to her voice mail, and hanging up before Dulce would redial and call her back.

Finally, she grabbed the phone. “What do you want?”

“I will never let him go,” the woman spoke coldly. “You can say all you like he was with you last night but we both know you cannot give him what I can give him. Let’s be real, you’re nothing like the woman a man such as Alessandro deserves. You are short and fat and you have an ugly little nose.”

Mackenna wiped a tear off her face, hating herself for letting this woman get under her skin. “Funny, Dulce, for someone with all the confidence she is keeping her lover, Alessandro is here in Phoenix, instead of with you in Italy.”

“He has an obligation to you,” she answered simply. “Men own little women like you. You’re a pet.”

“I’m not a pet,” she tried valiantly not to lose her cool, but she wanted to scream, “if I’m nothing to him Dulce why is you keep calling me? I’m not calling you. I’m not chasing you. It’s all you who are hounding me. I beg of you, leave me alone.”

“I will never leave you alone Mackenna,” Dulce threatened. “Get used to my voice. Perhaps when he convinces you to move to Milan, you will see how much I mean to him. Maybe he’ll finally let me move into the house with you both.”

At her words, Mackenna screamed as she punched the end call icon on her phone. Why had she even answered the second time. This was all his fault, Alessandro had brought this psychopath into their lives and because of it, even now, she was still suffering. At what point in her life would they finally let her be?

She stood breathing angrily in the middle of her bedroom and then took her phone to the living room and sat on the edge of the sofa. She immediately called the number Alessandro had programmed into her phone months ago.

He answered on the first ring, sounding breathless. "Mackenna, what's wrong?"

"How did Dulce get my number?" she couldn't be bothered with pleasantries.

"I have no idea. Are you suggesting she called you?"

"Suggesting? No, I'm telling you. Why do you always ask me if I'm suggesting something when I'm telling you something!" she screamed at him through the tiny device.

"I'm sorry Mackenna, it's only a turn of phrase, please take a breath and tell me what happened. Why are you so upset?" his voice was soft and soothing.

The desire to run to him and have him tell her everything would be fine was overwhelming and she wanted to cry with the frustration of her life. "She just called me to inform me you both stayed up all night having long-distance sex."

"Mackenna, I was with you,"

As he started to explain, she cut him off. "I know Alessandro, I know you didn't have virtual s*x with her because you were here. I'm not so stupid I can't tell time."

"I would never suggest you to be stupid," he replied gently.

She put her hand over her eyes. "Alessandro, why the hell is she calling me?"

"I don't know. I am unsure of her end game here," he tried to reassure her.

"You know what I don't care of the why or the what-for. Call your little b***h off. If she calls me again, I'm going to start a lawsuit for harassment. I will call Camille and have her do her worst to the b***h and your damn company for putting her in my life!" She furiously hung up the phone before he could say another word. She threw the phone and it bounced off the sofa onto the floor. She stood up picked it up and threw it again at the sofa and it stayed put. She stomped her foot for good measure.

She was still steaming angry, furiously pacing in her living room trying to calm down when she heard Nuncio come back to the apartment twenty minutes later and he wasn't alone. She glowered at the man on his heels. She held her finger up at

Alessandro walked across to where she paced in her living room. "Mackenna, I would like for you to do a favor for me. Call her back but do not tell her I am here."

"What? Why?" She was confused. Every other time she had told him of this crazy behaviour he had not believed her. Today he was standing in front of her asking her to call her back.

"She thinks I am in the gym at the hotel. In fact, I told her I was going to a very long run on the treadmill not an hour ago. I was on the treadmill when you called me. She was irritated I didn't want to sit and listen to her complain about her sister, her mother, and her physiotherapist. I presume since she figured I was indisposed it would be a good time to call and torment you. She didn't count on you calling me or me answering whenever you call. I always leave her calls unanswered when I work out," he said quietly.

She wasn't sure. It wasn't something she wanted to do. It felt very much like asking an assailant for one more punch.

"I would very much like to hear this with my own ears. Can you please humor me? Call her back. Ask her why she is doing this. I want to hear what she's up to for myself. You've told me previously she always called when I was out of the room. I want to know."

"I've never called her back before. She'll know something is up."

He nodded reassuringly, "tell her you need to know why she's doing this to you. Tell her you've filed the divorce and you want to know why she keeps up this charade even when you've done it."

"I don't know if I can," she wiped a tear off her cheek. "She's so cruel."

"I am right here. Nuncio is right here. Neither of us will let her hurt you." Alessandro used his thumb to wipe a tear off her cheek. "Please Mackenna."

Mackenna looked at him, aware Nuncio was hovering as an overprotective big brother. He nodded once at her, so she lifted her phone from the sofa where she'd thrown it in anger and showed him the last number to call in.

He nodded confirming the display. "It is her personal cell number. Call her back."

It rang only once when Dulce picked up. “Mackenna, what a lovely surprise. Did you want to hear more of how Alessandro and I will be together forever, or did you want some weight loss tips or maybe the name of a good plastic surgeon to fix your love handles or your nose?”

She saw Alessandro’s fists clench at the words. “Why are you doing this Dulce? You know you won. I filed my divorce. I don’t understand why you must continue this game you like to play.”

“You’re right, I did win. You were never enough for him you know,” Dulce’s voice as smooth as silk cut sharp. “It’s why every time we were alone, he wanted me naked and under him. Nobody wants to sleep next to a whale when they can have perfection like my body next to theirs.”

Alessandro’s eyebrows lifted but he put his fingers to his lips and motioned for Mackenna to keep the conversation going.

“I get it, you had s*x every chance you got with Alessandro. I just don’t know why you feel you need to keep telling me about it. Telling me about it when I lived in his home back in Milan, fine, you were putting me in my place. Now, we are nothing. We are getting divorced. Why do you keep tormenting me?”

“Do you believe he’ll divorce you?” Dulce scoffed. “You’re mistaken. Men like Alessandro don’t let their wives just walk away. I’m making sure you know, no matter what, I will always be with him. I will sleep with him every chance I get. Once you have a taste of a man like him, well, nothing else compares does it Mackenna? The rumour mill at the hospital was my orthopedic surgeon wanted you, but you couldn’t go there could you. You had Alessandro and even a good-looking doctor doesn’t compare. You’ll be back in Milan, but I will still be in his bed, as much as I possibly can.”

“I don’t care,” she tried to keep her temper under control, but the woman had a way of getting under her skin. “Just stop calling me. I don’t need to know.”

“But you do need to know,” Dulce said condescendingly. “You need to know when he touches me, where he touches me, how he touches me. You need to know

particularly amorous, he'll simply tear his creations off my body? He'll love me for hours and hours. You need to know it Mackenna so you know, you must know, he is not yours. He will never be yours."

"And you think he's yours?" Mackenna scoffed. "You know what, I'm done with this. Let me make myself clear. You are not to call me again. If you do, I will ask for a court order protection from you and I will tell the courts you are sexually harassing me. I will make it public, and I will not ask the court to keep my application private. The entire world will be told the reason I'm divorcing my husband is because his lover is sexually harassing me."

Nuncio's grin behind Alessandro's back encouraged her. "Imagine how it would look Dulce if the real reason I was getting a divorce was because I refused your s****l advances and so you made my life a living hell."

"It's a lie." Dulce's normally calm voice raised furiously. "It's not true."

"Isn't it? You called me almost daily when we first met to speak in sexually explicit detail to me. For what other reason than you were trying to get me turned on?" Nuncio was holding his sides laughing silently now as Alessandro shook his head at him warningly. "Did you hope I'd leave him for you once I knew how voracious your s****l appetite is?"

"You b***h!" Dulce screamed into the phone.

"Leave me alone Dulce or so help me god I will paint a picture to the courts and the tabloids of a sexually perverse woman who cannot help herself around me."

She didn't wait to hear the end of the profanities Dulce had started to scream into the phone before hitting the end button on the call.

"I feel sick," Mackenna said suddenly as she moved to sit in the chair.

Her phone started ringing again and Alessandro took it from her hands and answered it leaving it on speaker but said nothing.

"You b***h. I know you're there. You better keep your mouth shut or I will,"

"You will what Dulce?" Alessandro's voice was calm and cool as he spoke softly into the phone. "What exactly will you do to my wife if she happens to talk to a judge

“Alessandro,” the woman’s voice was pained. “I, I thought you were at your hotel,” she stammered through her words.

“I was, now I’m not. Now I’m standing in the middle of Mackenna’s living room with her security agent listening to you threaten her.” He took a breath, barely in control of his temper. “If you call her again, if you so much as whisper her name or breathe in her direction, there will be hell to pay from me. Am I clear?”

“Yes,” she whispered into the phone.

“We will speak when I am back in Milan. Do not call either of us until I am back.” He hung up the phone and passed it back to Mackenna, but she refused to take it as if it were contaminated, so he left it on the table.

She sat rocking on the sofa with her arms wrapped around her middle. “She’s insane. What did I ever do to make her hate me so much? Your mother used to say it was because she was jealous of my wedding band, but I’m not convinced.”

Alessandro squatted in front of her. “I will get to the bottom of it. I do not understand myself. I wish there were an answer I could give you Mackenna. Something doesn’t feel right. I know you don’t believe me but the Dulce I know and the woman who just spoke with such hatred to you are completely different people to me. She has been encouraging me for years to not give up on you. This makes no sense to me at all.”

“What? Why would she encourage you to get me back if she hates me so much, she can’t wait to torture me?”

“I cannot begin to guess her reasons at this time. I need to find out more. For now,” he lifted her chin, “please know I will take care of this matter. I will have the company lawyers have a conversation with her.”

She nodded slowly and then met his gaze. “Who gave her my number?”

His face clearly demonstrated he was as confused by this as she was. “I’m not sure but I promise you it was not me. Let me do my investigation and we will sort it out.”

“Okay,” she agreed, suddenly feeling as if she had someone in her corner versus

Dulce for the first time in her life.

“Have you had breakfast yet?” He pulled her upright then released her hands, dropping his to his side.

“No,” she hugged herself as she stepped past him. “I’m not hungry.”

“Well, you do need to eat.” He looked to Nuncio to confirm

Nuncio nodded. “You should definitely get something to eat Mac.”

Alessandro glared at the man for shortening her name. He shrugged. “It’s catching.”

Alessandro shook his head with irritation and looked back to Mackenna who was pale and her eyes red-rimmed. “Why don’t you go shower and get dressed and we will go have breakfast,” he smiled gently as she opened her mouth. “Friends Mackenna, just as friends. I’m truly talking about food. It is not a euphemism for anything sinister. After such a call, you need to get out of here and clear your head. If Savannah were here, she wouldn’t let you mope in the apartment, would she?”

She knew he was right. Savannah would have pulled her out of the house.

“Maybe you and I can go on a hike? You can show me the trail poor Savannah could barely endure. Can we do this? No more talk today of Dulce. Agreed?” his voice was light and comforting.

“Agreed,” she nodded quietly and made her way to the bathroom, feeling for the first time since they’d met, he had truly heard her side and not sure what to make of it.

Mackenna came out of her room sporting a pair of shorts, a t-shirt and her hiking sneakers and her hair in a ponytail. She had a backpack dangling off her fingertips and threw it on the counter. She kicked her foot up, "it's the only splurge I allowed myself for so long." She gave a look to Romeo who jumped up on the counter only to be gently lifted by Alessandro. "He peed in them the first week I had them."

"It's definitely because you took his manhood," Alessandro stroked the cat in his arms as the beast purred wildly.

Nuncio laughed at Mackenna's scowl. "I take it you are good at this hiking?"

"Try to keep up," she grinned as she took her canteen and filled it with tap water and then grabbed a couple more from the closet. She rinsed them out and filled them as well and shoved them in her backpack. She turned to see Alessandro eyeing her curiously. "I don't see either of you with a canteen and I can't imagine Carlos has one and I'm pretty sure they're going to have to follow us on the trail."

He smiled. "I haven't seen you so excited for something in a long time."

She didn't want to ruin it by telling him he usually was the one raining on her parade, so she just clapped her hands at him, "let's go, let's go. There's a little coffee shop on the way and we can get croissants and coffee. I'd rather be working my way back when the sun is high than trying to hike in the noonday sun."

"I'll need to stop at the hotel and get changed," at her expression he continued, "you can wait in the car if you like. There's no need to come up. I can't hike in these," he looked down at his dress shoes and pants.

"Of course," she hoped her smile hid the trepidation of going back to his hotel. The last time she had been there they'd had a huge fight and she had fled the country.

"It won't take me five minutes." He promised as he set the cat down gently on the floor and promised to bring him treats next time. He heard Mackenna mumble about the fat cat being on a diet, "he has certainly lost at least two pounds since in the last month."

Nuncio held his hand up as they approached the door, he took her bags and put them against her chest. "They are relentless and will be more so since Alessandro is here. Keep your hand on my shoulder, bury your face in your bag if you must and ignore anything they say to you. It is their job to try to get you to look at them and make a comment. Just stay focused on me. Understand?"

She realized how serious he was and gave a nod, "I understand."

"Alessandro and Carlos will be right behind you. Carlos is in the hall keeping them out of the building."

Nuncio tossed the keys to the apartment at Carlos as soon as they stepped into the hall, instantly the sound of a reporter shouting "here they come" echoed into the hall and she felt an involuntary shudder ripple down her back.

"Head down Signora," Nuncio instructed, his game face on and all business.

Mackenna put her hand on his shoulder as he instructed, mounted the stairs right behind him and tried her best to ignore the questions being peppered at her. As they reached the car waiting at the curb, the door pulled open, and she was shoved unceremoniously inside.

She scooted over as far as she could, aware Alessandro's team were pushing back against the throng of reporters. Alessandro slid in beside her followed by Nuncio, Carlos, and another man she didn't recognize. The sound of another security agent getting into the passenger seat before the driver started to pull slowly away from the car to avoid striking the reporters blocking the road.

She made the mistake of looking at Alessandro and his face was white with rage. She had never seen him so furious. Her heart thudded fearfully. "Did I do something wrong?"

Nuncio patted her knee reassuringly from across the seat. "You did very well Mackenna. You did exactly as I instructed."

Alessandro bit out a word in Italian she had never heard him utter, almost always the consummate gentleman and she gasped. "Alessandro!"

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose and held his hand up as if

She whispered to Nuncio, “it will be like this at the hotel too, won’t it? Maybe we shouldn’t go hiking.”

Alessandro exhaled slowly and looked to her. “Mackenna, we are most assuredly going for our hike. This is my mess, and I will wade through it. You are simply an innocent bystander in all of this. When we get to the hotel, you and Nuncio are to stay behind in the car. If you don’t mind however, I’ll call the hotel and ask them to pack us a breakfast to bring with us instead of going to your coffee shop.”

“It would be fine,” she swallowed the lump in her throat. “I’m sorry, Alessandro,” she whispered as she turned her head to look out the window.

“Mackenna, it is not for you to be sorry. You have done nothing wrong. Nuncio is correct, you did exactly as you were instructed.” His smile was tight at best.

Mackenna felt the morning was ruined before it had even begun, and she sat quietly with her hands wrapped around her backpack on her lap. Everyone in the car was silent as she stared out the window and she felt a tear slide down her cheek. She felt Nuncio reach across again and pat her knee and she reached out and took his hand and squeezed it. “Thank you,” she mouthed to him.

Once they reached the hotel, Alessandro and his team exited the vehicle leaving only Nuncio and the driver. Alessandro had instructed the driver to circle the block a few times and so as soon as they stepped into the cacophony of the reporters outside the hotel, the car pulled away from the curb.

“He seems so angry,” Mackenna whispered suddenly as they paused at a traffic light before taking a turn around the block.

“He is angry,” Nuncio agreed, “but not at you. He is angry at himself Mackenna. He has put you in danger by not taking you seriously five years ago. This whole situation with the private investigator and Dulce has put you at risk more than once. He has already lost people very important to him, to lose you as well to this dangerous situation would be his undoing.”

She didn’t quite know what to say to Nuncio’s quiet words and so she nodded and looked out the window. Suddenly she spoke, “when I first returned from Milan,

have been more than five or ten of them. There had to be fifty of them out there this morning. I don't understand people's fascination."

"It would help if Dulce would shut her mouth and stop talking to the press," Nuncio made a face. "The woman is a menace."

"Menace isn't the word I'd use," she mimicked the face he pulled, and they shared a bitter laugh.

Several minutes later they pulled back up to the hotel and Alessandro, Carlos, and the other man she didn't recognize got back into the car and again someone got into the passenger seat. He had four men with him for protection plus his driver. It was a small army. Carlos tossed a paper bag at her which she assumed was breakfast and she folded it into her backpack, but she was no longer hungry at all.

She took in Alessandro, dressed now in khaki shorts, a pair of hiking boots and perfectly fitted t-shirt, showing off his muscular arms. He caught her checking out his biceps and he curled them for her in a flex.

"Like what you see? I work out a lot."

"Fool," she giggled at his comment, grateful to see his smile back on his face. "Nice boots."

"Thanks, I've been walking a few times." He winked. "I forgot to ask you where we are going. Poor Ignacio is probably going to start circling the hotel again until we tell him where you want to go hiking."

"I was thinking Camelback Mountain and the Echo trail. It's a bit of a hike but if the paparazzi follow us, they'll drop like flies after the first twenty minutes." She grinned mischievously. "Might be a way to thin their numbers."

His loud laugh at her comment made her smile spread wide.

"You are devious, and I like how you think," he tapped the window and told Ignacio where to take them.

Three hours later Alessandro and Mackenna were preparing to scale the rocks to reach the next level. Nuncio and Carlos and the man named Rio had easily kept up. One guard had stayed back with the driver to keep him safe in the event

“You’re expecting me to climb the rocks? There is a handrail,” Alessandro looked at her in amazement as she reached up and started her ascent.

“People get in the way on the handrail,” she tossed over her shoulder, brushing her forearm across her forehead to wipe sweat.

He shook his head as Nuncio joined her and began clambering up behind her. Alessandro gave a look to Carlos as Nuncio gave a shove to Mackenna and they both laughed at something he said at her.

“Should I be worried?” he asked Carlos suddenly.

Carlos laughed lowly. “No, my younger brother is very much enamoured with her roommate. He has however developed a very brotherly affection for your wife. I feel if he were pressed to know which of you to protect, you would die.”

“Good,” he said suddenly, “she needs a champion in her corner. God knows I have failed her.”

“Hey,” Mackenna called down to them. “You ladies gonna chirp all day down there or are you actually going to do this?”

“Did she just call us ladies?” Rio asked incredulously as he moved past his bosses.

Mackenna turned from where she was resting to turn back up the hill to continue her ascent. The park ranger had warned them it would be an arduous climb. She had done it multiple times in the last five years and while it got easier, it never got easy. This was her first time doing anything remotely strenuous since the car accident and her body was tired, but she refused to divulge the information to the group. She was panting hard when she reached the top, grateful Nuncio had passed her to take her hand and pull her to the top. They jumped and clapped hands in a high-five before pulling their canteens for a long drink.

“It’s so beautiful up here,” she said as she turned to take in the view.

“You can see,” Carlos asked groaning as he reached the top and crawling on all fours behind them. “I feel I may be blinded by pain and blisters on my hands.”

Mackenna laughed as Nuncio pulled the man to his feet.

Carlos. There was a time you would have raced the pair of them to the top.”

“You came in fourth out of fifth,” Carlos quipped back, “I am not the only one showing his age-old man.”

“I’m glad I gave up the cigarettes. I think you would have found my body at the last plateau if not.”

Rio reached the top and flipped onto his back and said a loud prayer. “Leave my body here for the vultures.”

Mackenna chortled with glee at their reactions. “It was not that bad.” The look on her face was pure devilry as she reminded them, “the hike back won’t be near as bad going back.”

As the collective groan of the three men echoed around them, she and Nuncio rolled their eyes and turned back to the view. “Come on, it’s worth it. Look at this view.”

“It is a lovely view,” Alessandro dropped his arm over her shoulder, smelling entirely too masculine and feeling wet against her.

“Ugh, Alessandro, you’re all sweaty.” She pushed away laughing as he reached for her as she pulled away, rubbing his face all over her arm. He took the canteen she tossed at him and drank deeply. She watched as he tilted his head back, sweat streaming down his forehead, his Adam’s apple bobbing with each gulp of the water. He truly was a beautiful man, she thought to herself as she studied him.

“What?” he felt her staring, “do I have dirt on my face?”

“No,” she gave a laugh. “Even sweaty and gross you look good. You damn supermodels are annoying as hell. I know I’m red-faced and look like the after picture of a marathon. You look like you’re being photographed for some mountain climber’s monthly magazine.”

He gave a chuckle and an exaggerated toss of his hair before striking a pose. “Don’t hate on me because I am stunning to look at it.”

Their entire group groaned as Mackenna made a gagging sound. The atmosphere was lighthearted and teasing as Rio threw a rock at Alessandro’s feet

and Carlos mentioned tossing his body off the cliff and they slowly began their descent back down the trail.

Mackenna took Alessandro's hand as she stepped down off one of the last plateaus towards the final leg of the trail and when he held onto it, she didn't pull away. The easy feeling in her chest and the exhaustion from the hike encouraging her to enjoy the moment. Who knew how long it would last?