

After the bathroom girls talk, Mackenna had more drinks, multiple more dances with Alessandro and as the evening was winding down realized she was likely going to be on the other side of a wall while Savannah and Nuncio got it on.

She signalled for another drink, but Alessandro held his finger up to the bartender. "What?"

"You're stumbling a bit," he said gently. "Maybe you've had enough."

"No," she refused to agree. "I think," she grabbed his shirt and leaned in, "Savannah and Nuncio are going to do the nasty and I need to be passed out because there is no way I want to listen to it."

Alessandro's laugh echoed around her swimming head, and she tried to slap it away as it were flies.

"Mackenna, you can stay in my suite tonight." As her head snapped up to look at him, he put his fingers to her lips. "Friends Mackenna. You can take the bed. I'll take the sofa."

"You would do that?"

"Yes, besides, I have a funny feeling you'll be out cold before we get back to the hotel anyway. I like you best when you participate."

She saw the bartender waiting for her and she shook her head. "I'm good. Thanks." She put her hand to her head. "I need to go soon."

She let Alessandro lead her towards Savannah who was standing at the edge of the dance floor finishing another drink. "Hey, I'm leaving now."

"You, okay?" She looked past her to Alessandro.

"Yeah, fine. He's a perfect gentleman," her speech slurred, and she gave a shake of her head. "He's going to let me sleep at his place, so I don't have to hear you have s*x with Nuncio."

Nuncio's head spun at Mackenna's words, and she giggled and covered her mouth. "Oops, I said it way too loudly." Savannah's face was bright red and Mackenna leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Go easy on him. He looks fragile. Don't break your bed and stay out of my room."

Savannah pushed her back to Alessandro, grinning wildly. "Your wife is drunk. Get her out of here before she gives poor Nuncio a stroke."

"Someone needs to stroke him, he's wound up pretty tight," Mackenna said loudly and laughed when Carlos who had just stepped up to them guffawed at her comment. "I'm not wrong," she patted Carlos' chest.

Mackenna waved goodbye to Padma and Derrick who were grinding provocatively on the dancefloor and then Maisy and Cassidy who were still dancing with the club dancers.

She was tucked against Alessandro's arm as they made their way into the cool early morning air. "I'm hungry. We should find a hot dog vendor." She started off in the direction of where she knew one would be, but Alessandro pulled her back.

"Or, I will have room service send up some food for you and you eat something not made out of leftover animal parts." Alessandro never understood the American fascination with hotdogs. He'd tried them once as a child and never again.

"No, Alessandro, I want a hot dog." She stomped her foot angrily and he raised an eyebrow at her. "Either come with me or wait here but I'm going for the dog."

Rio put his hand on Alessandro's shoulder. "What do you want on it Mackenna? You get in the car with Alessandro and Carlos, and I'll go get the dogs." He ran off after she mumbled something about mustard as Carlos yelled at him to grab him one too.

She licked her lips at the thought of her hotdog and then followed Carlos to the car. "I like him."

to him. Thankfully, Carlos blocked any potential photograph with his body, but Alessandro couldn't resist and slapped the bare flesh. "What are you wearing under the dress?"

"A thong," she looked over her shoulder rubbing where he's smacked her. "That hurt."

"One gust of wind and your ass would be all over front page of tabloids everywhere."

"Nope," she smirked. "Your men are too good. It would never happen."

He couldn't argue with her and watched her as she let her head fall back against the seat of the limo. A low snore left her mouth and he and Carlos shared a grin as they realized she was already asleep. Then the door opened again, and Rio slid in with three hotdogs in his hands and her head instantly popped up and she reached for the dogs.

"Yes!"

"I thought she was asleep," Carlos muttered.

"I could smell them," she grinned as she pulled the foil off the breaded delight and took a huge bite. "It's so good."

Alessandro watched in amazement as she devoured the snack food in three bites, lay her head back against the headrest and passed out.

"She is going to be so sick," Rio passed the other two hotdogs to Carlos.

"She's out cold," Carlos lifted her hand up and it fell with a slap against her knee where her dress had risen. "I've been with you for ten years and this is a first for me. You in a club dancing for pleasure and not publicity and getting a girl so drunk she agrees to go home with you."

Mackenna opened one eye. "You only go dancing for publicity? Shameful." Her eyes closed again, and she snored.

The rest of the ride was in silence as they all tried to figure out if she was really sleeping or pulling one over on them. When they reached the hotel there was a discussion about carrying her or waking her, but she sat up suddenly stretched and said she was good to walk.

When they got to Alessandro's room, Mackenna said goodnight to Carlos and Rio who were going to go to their suite and sleep. She stood facing Alessandro nervously. "You're sure about the sofa?"

"Positive," he was not positive, but she was drunk and under no circumstances was he going to be accused of anything the next morning considering how volatile their relationship was.

"You're too long to sleep on the sofa," she looked him up and down. "I can take the sofa."

"Go to bed Mackenna," he said, his own exhaustion from a transatlantic flight, a night of drinking and partying and dancing with her taking its toll. "I will be fine."

"What if,"

"Mackenna go to bed," he moved to her then and pushed her in the direction of the bedroom.

"I was just going to say, I trust you not to do anything. You can sleep on over there, and I'll sleep on this side. Friends. I've slept with Savannah before."

"Savannah doesn't want to be buried to the hilt in you."

"Oh," her eyes were wide at his comment.

"Right. Go to bed."

"I don't have anything to sleep in."

He moved to the closet and pulled one of his shirts from it. "Here, wear this." He tossed it on the bed and walked back to the sofa.

"Goodnight Mackenna."

She slipped into the cool sheets and lay staring at the ceiling. The sound of him kicking off his clothes before settling on the sofa filling her ears and then darkness as he turned out the lamp, "Alessandro?"

She heard his exasperated breath.

"Yes Mackenna."

"I had fun tonight."

"Me too."

"I'm really glad you came home early. I missed you this week."

He didn't say anything to her comment, so she rolled onto her side. "Alessandro?"

"Yes Mackenna," there was an edge to his voice now.

"I know it wasn't your fault."

The sound of him tossing on the leather upholstery filled her ears.

"What wasn't my fault?"

"The accident. I know you told him to just find me. You didn't tell him to chase us. I just want you to know, I know it's not your fault."

He sighed deeply and it echoed in the silence of the hotel room. "Thank you for saying this, Mackenna."

He started to relax as he assumed she must have fallen asleep. He folded his hands flat on his chest and closed his eyes. He wasn't comfortable so he went to roll over and then yelled when he opened his eyes, and she was standing over him her face inches from his as if trying to see if he was awake.

"Damn it Mackenna," he grabbed his chest. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"I'm sad," she whispered, her eyes full of tears.

"Oh, my love," he opened his arms and she crawled onto the sofa with him, resting on his chest. "Tell me why you are sad." He stroked her back gently but then her next words broke his heart.

"I miss my little lima bean," she sobbed into his neck. "I never got to say goodbye. He was just gone."

He had no words and so he just held her while her sobs racked her body. "Shh," he rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head as she cried her heart out.

After long minutes of her crying in his arms, she sniffled and snuggled against him. "I'm sorry. You're probably so tired."

"I am never too tired to hold you while you cry," he kissed her forehead. "Are you okay?"

"No," she felt teary still and wiped her face with the back her hands. "I will be but right at this very moment, I don't think I am."

"How can I help?"

"Can you just hold me?"

"I can but not on this sofa because it was barely large enough for me, it's certainly not big enough for two. Up," he encouraged her into a seated position and then as he swung his legs off and stood, he simply swept her up into his arms and carried her into the room. He lay her on her side of the bed and then rounded to the other side, sliding in behind her and drawing her backwards against him. "Sleep now, my love. You're exhausted."

"Mm hm," she whispered as she snuggled her head into his bicep under her cheek.

An hour later she was thrashing in her sleep and Alessandro made out the faint cries of her calling for

new her, he cried his own tears his heart broken for the pain she was going through and for his own loss. She turned in his arms and pulled his head to her chest, this time offering him the comfort he too desperately needed. She ran her fingers in his hair and held him tightly.

Eventually his breathing evened out and she settled again falling into a deep sleep, but he lay awake the rest of night, holding her, wanting to be sure if she was upset again, he was there for her.

In the early morning hours, she suddenly sat up in the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom and he sat up and asked if she was all right. The sound of her being violently sick made him groan as he flung the blankets off him before standing up to follow her. He found her with her arms wrapped around the toilet and he chuckled.

“The hotdog is not sounding like such a good idea now, huh?”

His accent grated on her nerves as she contemplated murdering him for his good humour whilst she was hurting. “Get out,” she croaked, “I’m dying. I threw up in my hair.”

“You’re not dying. You’re hungover.”

“What time is it?”

“If I were to guess, about six-thirty, almost time for breakfast. Eggs?”

She immediately turned to be sick at his words, and with a low laugh, he stepped over her to run the shower. “Come,” he lifted her from the floor and then pulled the shirt she’d slept in over her head, gently removed her ponytail and pushed her into the stream of water. He left her standing in the shower to make a call down to the front desk for specific items to be sent up. Then he went in search of something for her to wear. He grabbed another one of his dress shirts and headed back to the bathroom.

He found her leaning against the shower stall wall, pale and half asleep. It was obvious she hadn’t moved since he had stood her in there. He stepped into the shower with her and grabbed the hotel shampoo and began to wash her hair and then with as much self-control as he could muster, he washed her down from head to toe. Turning off the taps he grabbed a towel and dried her off hastily before wrapping her back up in a clean shirt, folding up the sleeves. He then swung her up and carried her back to the bed, nestling her among the pillows.

A knock on the door told him the concierge was at the door, so he went to retrieve the items he’d called down for.

Mackenna gave him a sheepish smile as he came back carrying a bottle of water, headache tablets and make-up remover. “You’re taking very good care of me.”

“It’s what friends are for right?”

She pulled a face as she accepted the water and tablets. She closed her eyes as he cleaned her make-up off, enjoying the feeling he was taking care of her. Her heart was a conflicted mess, but she needed this moment.

He tossed the wipes away and smiled softly. “There’s my beautiful girl in her natural state.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead and moved to turn away to let her rest more.

“I’m sorry about last night,” she whispered suddenly. She had never been one to forget things when she was drinking, and she knew very well she’d spilled her heart out on him.

“I’m not,” he said seriously. “You’re hurting and I want to be the one you turn to.” He held her gaze, “I admit I wish it didn’t take eleven vodka and cranberries and a hotdog to get you to tell me how you’re feeling but I’m glad you let it out.”

“Thank you,” she didn’t break eye contact. “I think I needed last night more than I knew.”

Chapter 39

“If you say runny eggs, I’ll be sick.”

“Sleep,” he shook his head. “It’s too early to be up on a Sunday morning. Let’s get some rest.”

“Really?” She was surprised at his comment. Alessandro had always been an early riser, hitting the gym before most people were even awake. To hear him say he wanted to sleep told her he was not as unaffected by the early morning events as he was leading her to believe. She pushed over in the bed and patted it beside her.

“You sure?” he asked before moving to the bed.

“Yes,” she replied earnestly. “I’m very sure.”

Mackenna surfaced from a dreamless sleep and found herself wrapped tightly in Alessandro's arms and his very erect body pressed very tightly to her behind as she was spooned against him. She froze unsure of what to do, half of her wanted to race to the bathroom for a cold shower and the other half wanted to turn over and take full advantage of the situation.

"Stay still Mackenna," his husky voice was deeper than usual from sleepiness. "I need a moment otherwise my promise to wait and repair our emotional relationship before our physical one is going out the window."

She lay perfectly still but was incredibly aware his situation was not changing behind her and in fact, appeared to be worsening.

"Alessandro," her voice was a hush, throaty and pained.

"It's not working," he groaned as he rolled out of the bed and stomped towards the bathroom.

"Seemed to be working just fine from my perspective," she had spent too much time with Savannah as the taunt spilled out of her mouth. She watched his nearly naked body, wearing only the briefs she'd never known him to wear to bed. As he paused, he did a slow turn in her direction, and pointed a finger at her, his eyes deep with lust. His briefs were tented and moved of their own volition as she sat up in the bed, to watch him.

"You are a temptress bent on making me suffer but I gave my word," he took in the image of her mussed hair, rosy cheeks from sleep and eyes matching his desire and groaned with frustration. "Temptress," he repeated as he turned away and disappeared.

The sound of water running in the shower made her giggle as she flung herself back against the pillows. As much fun as she'd had dancing with Alessandro, she had needed the cathartic cry in his arms as well. This morning she felt for the first time she was beginning to heal and the ache in her heart seemed less intense.

The sound of his phone vibrating on the nightstand caught her ear but she ignored it, aware as a CEO his phone typically rang day and night. Then she heard her own phone ringing from her purse in the other room. She rolled out of the bed and made her way to the living space to retrieve her phone. She recognized Savannah's number.

"Hey Savannah, what's up?"

"Are you still with Alessandro?" She sounded out of breath.

"Yes, why?" She stopped talking when there was pounding on the door to the room. "Hold on, there's someone at the door." She could hear Savannah calling her name as she looked through the peephole and saw Carlos. She opened the door and let him in, and he instantly asked for Alessandro. She pointed to the bathroom.

"Mac!" Savannah was yelling now

"I'm here. What's wrong?" She looked at Carlos who had walked right in on Alessandro in the bathroom and was speaking in hushed tones.

"I'm at work Mac and as soon as I got here, one of the nurses ran up to me. There's a video all over the internet of Alessandro and Dulce having s*x in a hotel room. At least, she's saying it's Alessandro. You can't see who the man is, but it bears a good liking to him."

"I don't understand," Mackenna rubbed her hand across her eyes.

"She released the video herself. Said she was tired of everyone thinking she was a homewrecker. The video is bad. The man is insisting she sleep with him to keep her contract."

There's no way this is me. It never happened.

He was holding Carlos' phone in his hand and the video was playing.

"Savannah, I have to go. I'll call you in a bit." She ended her call, moved to the phone, pressed play, and watched.

"Why is she doing this?" She looked to Alessandro confused.

"Mackenna, I swear to you, this is not me in this video. I know the voice sounds like mine but," he trailed off as she stopped the video and restarted it. "Please Mackenna, listen to me."

She reached up and touched his cheek gently, "I believe you Alessandro."

Had she punched him in the face he would have been less surprised.

"You believe me."

"Yes," she shook her head. "One the voice is like yours but it's not your voice. Two there is a specific tattoo missing from the left scapula and three," she paused and held his gaze, "I just know in my heart you would never do anything like this to Dulce. She's your friend and you love her, as much as I despise the woman, she is your friend and it's against your nature to blackmail someone."

She hit play again and then shook her head. "She used a very good likeness though."

"I will investigate this matter," he said urgently but she pressed her fingers to his lips.

"No Alessandro, no. No more investigating, no more asking her why, no more getting an explanation for her. I'm tired of her and I know she's important to you," his curse made her pause as she realized perhaps, he and Dulce were no longer on good terms. "Alessandro, let me call Camille."

"Your viper?"

"She's not a viper. She's a damn good divorce attorney but her sister is a criminal prosecutor. It's my turn to address the tabloids."

"No, I don't want them attacking you." He vehemently denied her request. "I will find another way. I am not allowing her to drag you through the mud as well. You were able to discredit the video in about ten seconds of viewing, my lawyers will do more and further, I will start a lawsuit for slander and libel." He roughed up his hair with his fingers and grimaced. "I just don't understand why she is doing all of this. It makes no sense."

"She's obviously a very sick woman," Mackenna said gently, "but Alessandro you need to decide whether or not you will continue to play her game or wash your hands. Unfortunately, I've made up my mind and," she took a deep breath, "I will not continue a relationship with you if you continue one with her."

"Mackenna," he reached for her arms, but she stepped back.

"No Alessandro," she shook her head sadly. "I gave you an ultimatum in the past and I know the outcome. At the risk of going through all the heartache I did in the past, I'm repeating it. I know she works for you and she's your employee and there's contracts and millions of dollars on the line so I won't ask you to sever your employment relationship, but I will not go back to being the woman I was. I won't ever let her intrude on my personal life again." She pointed to Carlos' phone still in Alessandro's hand. "She didn't do whatever this is, to hurt you. It's to hurt me. She did it expecting I would react and leave you."

"Mackenna, you don't understand."

"I do, it would be like you saying to me to give up Savannah. The difference is Savannah is my friend as much as I am hers and she loves me as much as I love her. She would never put you through this kind of thing because she loves me, and she knows it would hurt me. Dulce is willing to sacrifice your feelings and your heart to drive me away. The thing is Alessandro, only one person can drive me away."

Mackenna felt strangely cold and calm as she turned to grab her purse and shoved her phone in it. "I will give you time Alessandro. You gave me three months to get sorted out but I'm not so generous. You have a week to decide. I don't want to see you until you do."

He grabbed her then and pulled her into his arms and kissed, sliding his mouth over hers possessively and she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. As much as he took, she gave freely, kissing him with a hunger she hadn't known she possessed and when he deepened the kiss, his fingers delving into her scalp while his tongue slipped between her lips she moaned.

Him in his towel wrapped around his lean hips and her wearing nothing but his dress shirt, she felt his hunger for her and hers matched his. With as much strength as she could muster, she suddenly tore her mouth from his, breathing quickly and deeply.

She put her fingers to his lip and met his eyes, dark, ever the tiger ready to pounce and she shook her head. "One week Alessandro. I don't need three months to know if I want to be with you. I need you to sort out if you genuinely want to be with me. I won't have her as part of my life. I just won't."

She stumbled out of his arms and looked at Carlos who was standing by the door as if unsure of what he should do. "Can you get me home please?"

"Of course, Signora," he said formally.

As he held the door open, and she was ready to go through it, Alessandro's hoarse voice called her name and she looked back at him desperately wanting him to say he didn't need the week and he was done with the other woman.

Instead, he shook his head. "I'm sorry Mackenna. I'm sorry for all of this."

"I know," she forced herself not to cry in front of him and made her way through the door.

Only when she reached her tiny apartment, through the throngs of paparazzi and past Nuncio's concerned gaze, into her tiny bedroom where she collapsed onto her bed, did she release her tears. She cried until she had nothing left to cry and then stripped out of his dress shirt and wrapped in her robe and headed to the shower.

She heard Nuncio get off the sofa, but she moved quickly, not wanting to talk to anyone and stood under the heat of the spray until her usually endless supply of hot water turned cold and even then, she stayed until she was sure her lips were blue.

She returned to her bedroom and slipped into a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. Then needing a distraction from the intrusive thoughts, she began to slowly fill up some of the packing boxes she and Savannah had picked up the day prior when they had been out shopping.

She looked over her shoulder when Nuncio knocked on her door. "Hey."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, it wasn't him in the video." Nuncio seemed surprised and she shrugged. "Alessandro has my name tattooed on his left shoulder. He got it on a whim when we were in London. Most models don't usually get tattoos because they get photographed in the nude a lot," she laughed, "but we'd been married about six months. He's always taken good care to keep it covered. The video clearly shows the man from behind and while the builds are similar, there's no tattoo."

She paused and looked at Nuncio who smiled softly in her direction. "I told him to get rid of her or I'm done."

His smile vanished at her words. "Mac," he spoke quietly, "they've been friends for a long time. She helped him through a rough time."

He said nothing and she returned to packing her boxes. She had asked for a quick closing date. Funny how money made things move and she and Savannah were moving into their new place the following Saturday with her closing date on the Friday. They had so much to do in the short time.

Nuncio spoke again. "Want some tea and something to eat? You should eat."

"I should," she agreed with a half-smile. "I threw up my hotdog."

He made a face and then moved to her and offered her a hug, which she returned tightly. Suddenly she smiled and leaned back. "How did last night go with Savannah? You two a thing now?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, "we had a great night but then this morning I woke up in the tiny bed of hers and she was gone. No note, nothing. Just gone."

"Nuncio," Mackenna said softly, "I will tell you as skittish as she is, she's worth it." She patted her bed and made him sit with her. "She'll be mad I told you, but I love you both and I see how you are with her, so I'll risk it."

"She said she came from a bad home." Nuncio nodded. "It was worse than she suggested, wasn't it?"

"She never met her dad. He was gone before she was born. Her mom was a raging alcoholic who beat her every day until she was removed by social services at six when the school system realized what was happening and reported it. Her mom used to accuse her of trying to steal her boyfriends when she was only three or four because she was so beautiful, so she did a lot of damage, including beatings and starving her. She went from foster home to foster home until she was placed with the Kirklands when she was twelve. They were amazing people and helped get her back on track. She flourished with them but when your formative years were full of violence, chaos and days without food, trust is a hard thing to come by." She sighed deeply at his expression. "I'm not telling you all this, so you feel sorry for her Nuncio. She's who she is because of what she went through. She's tough and compassionate and observant as hell. When she falls in love, she's all in. She jumps in two feet first into the deep end and always with the wrong type. You're the first person I've ever seen her hesitate with."

"Because she doesn't like me? Is it because I'm a man? I know she dates women sometimes."

"No," she laughed. "You're missing my point, my friend. She's taking her time with you because she's scared, she won't survive the fall." She grinned. "Let's be real, this is her place and she left you in it and she took off. Usually, she makes them play the airplane game."

"What is the airplane game?"

"It's when she tells them to take off."

It took a minute before he understood the joke and then he roared with laughter. "Thank you Mackenna. You are the only person I know whose entire world could be imploding around them who would stop to help someone else. You are good person."

"Thanks Nuncio. Now, I need a distraction from my imploding world. Want to help me pack?"

It was Saturday morning and Mackenna was standing in the middle of her new kitchen and directing movers on where to put the handful of things they had kept. Nuncio had arranged additional security to keep the movers from talking to the reporters and Padma and Derrick, now officially a couple, were helping her unpack the kitchen items.

She held up a whisk. "I didn't even know we owned one of these."

"You didn't," Nuncio grumbled as he plucked it from her fingers and put it in a drawer. "I had to go buy one." As she opened her mouth he grinned, "it's yours now. I billed it to Alessandro."

She shook her head at the mention of his name. It had been six days since she'd left his hotel room after giving him an ultimatum. She had not heard anything from him in all the time, but she also noted there had not been one other story from Dulce since the video was release. There had been radio silence from her. He was cutting it close to her deadline and in her heart, she was fearing the worst.

If he had to choose between his protégé, his muse, millions of dollars, and his company, she would lose and she was certain of it. It hadn't helped when she opened her bank account this morning and noted another deposit had been made to her account and when she called the accountant to question it, he said since it was the beginning of another month, she was entitled to the deposits.

She was trying to stay distracted, trying to avoid any internet news and had removed all social media from her phone. Savannah had promised her every day she would let her know if any other stories broke and every day, she confirmed nothing new. She had at the very least expected to hear his lawyers had denounced the video but even this hadn't happened. It was still sensational, and Alessandro was being dragged through the mud.

Nuncio had told her Alessandro had flown back to Milan on Sunday night but beyond this she knew nothing more of what the man was up to.

"How come Savannah isn't here helping?" Padma asked curiously interrupting Mackenna's thoughts.

"Oh, she was only supposed to be in at six this evening, but they called her in at five thirty this morning. She's pulling a double. Another illness is hitting the staff again and two doctors are out."

Derrick grimaced. "The worst thing about trauma is you get exposed to everything."

"If she brings it home, I'll strangle her." Mackenna grimaced. "I told her to shower there before coming home." She pointed at Nuncio. "You're picking her up in the morning, right?"

"Yes," he nodded, "This morning she told she hated my guts and wished I would die so I relish meeting her when I drop you off." His smile was decidedly twisted.

"Gonna make her eat her words, are you?" Derrick grinned at the man.

"With the upmost pleasure," he shook his head. "She is by far the most contrary woman I've ever met, and I swear she takes perverse pleasure in baiting me."

"She does," Mackenna grinned at him, "she told me she likes when you get angry at her, your ears turn red. It makes her laugh. She said you look like a Christmas elf."

Nuncio glared at her as she and her friends laughed at his expense. "Keep it up Mac and I'll stop making your morning coffee."

"I'm sorry Nuncio, I promise to be a better friend," she batted her eyelashes.

Padma held up the box with the espresso machine in it. "Is this the contraption you make her coffee with because she shared hers with me on Thursday and it was divine. Do I need to buy one of these?"

Nuncio nodded. "Yes, I tried to teach them both how to use it and I may as well have been instructing them on how to speak Cantonese."

"Yes, and six other languages." He shrugged. "I was in the Italian army as a translator before I started working with my brother's security company. There are times when I'm dealing with a pampered princess and her whiney problems I miss being shipped to the middle of nowhere and being shot at." He made a pointed look in Mackenna's direction, "present company excluded."

"Thanks, I think?" Mackenna said as she lifted another box from the floor and pointed a mover to take a box to the bathroom. "I'm pretty sure it's all shampoos and stuff in there."

"Uh how much shampoo do you have?" Padma asked curiously, "you told the other guy it was shampoo and sent him with a box to the bathroom already."

"Really?" Mackenna made a face. "Damn."

"Where's your head Mac?" Padma asked curiously.

"Not here," she grimaced and waved her off. "I really don't want to talk about it. Keep me distracted please."

"Still no word?" Nuncio whispered taking the box from her.

"Nope," she shrugged, "I don't expect one either."

"Why not?" Nuncio took the box from her hands and set it on the counter.

"I don't compare Nuncio," she felt strangely calm, not having any tears left to shed. "I asked him to choose between me and a supermodel, one who makes him more money in a day than most do in a year. She's the face of Giordano and asking him to sever their friendship is pointless."

Her phone rang suddenly, and she noted the international call from Italy. Her heart pounded as she considered it might be Alessandro. She answered the phone and the man on the other end identified himself as the prosecutor in the case against the detective. She put her hand on the phone. "Hey, I'm going to take this on the balcony. Can you manage this?"

"Yeah," Derrick and Padma said in unison and then both started laughing.

She closed the balcony behind her. "Sorry Signor Marchetti, what can I do for you?"

"I wanted to let you know of a turn of events in the case of your grandparents' car accident." His voice was slick and Mackenna closed her eyes against what was coming next.

Her greatest fear was the man would get off because her grandfather was the one who had missed the turn. She waited for him to confirm just this.

"The man accused of running you off the roads has pled guilty this morning. New evidence became known indicating he was instructed by a member of the Giordano family to run you off the road. We presented this evidence to him and his lawyer this morning and he broke down and admitted everything. He was being blackmailed by a member of the family to cause an accident." He spoke quietly, "Signora, the goal was not to kill you or your grandparents. The goal was to cause an accident significant enough you would lose your child. He has been charged with murder and will face the judge for sentencing. We are currently looking at implementing charges against," the rest of his words were unheard.

Mackenna leaned over the balcony as vomit violently spewed from her lips. Gasping for air, dizzy and faint she stepped back and fell backwards against the glass doors with force. She slid down and heard the man asking if she was still there and she let the phone fall through her fingers to the balcony floor.

The sound of Romeo scratching the glass behind her caught her ear, but she was helpless to respond. Then her friends were pulling the doors open and sliding her back into the house surrounded her. Derrick and Padma talking to her, someone was taking her pulse, but she heard nothing other than the words of the prosecutor. Someone in the Giordano family had ordered a hit on her baby.

She clutched her chest tightly, unable to get a breath.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Derrick looked to Nuncio and Padma.

Nuncio grabbed the phone from the balcony and hit redial. He spoke harshly into the phone in Italian and then he grew pale as the man recounted what he’d said to Mackenna. He asked the man for further details and was told as much as he could share at this time. He had only wanted to warn Mackenna because the story had already broken in Italy and was going to likely internationally in hours.

Nuncio grabbed his own phone and called his brother while the doctors tended to Mackenna, his eyes never leaving his charge’s face. She was his responsibility but also his friend and he was pissed off.

Padma was pressing a cool cloth to Mackenna’s forehead and neck, and Derrick was encouraging her to breathe and telling her to focus on the sound of his voice. In her head, all she could hear was Signor Marchetti telling her someone in Alessandro’s family had hired someone to cause her to lose her baby.

She looked unseeingly at Derrick, staring into his blue eyes, and trying to focus on the words he was speaking but she felt as if she was no longer in her own body. The pressure of Padma’s hands stroking her temples and tapping her face were evident, but she felt as if she couldn’t respond.

“Can’t breathe,” she wheezed suddenly, “hurts to breathe.”

“It’s okay,” Derrick held her hands tightly. “You can breathe Mackenna. You’re having a panic attack. You had one before, remember? At the hospital. I need you to focus on my voice. Count with me Mac, Ten,”

“Ten,” she rasped the word, “nine, eight, seven,” she continued focusing on Derrick’s voice and counting backwards with him and when they reached one, she was breathing more evenly but her chest still hurt. Romeo curled on her lap nudging her hand, meowing loudly as if wanting her attention. She stroked his ears absently.

She heard Nuncio speaking Italian instead of English and she watched him, trying to absorb the rapid-fire conversation as his hands flew through the air punctuating every sentence. She made out “you should have told me so I could warn her” before he hung up his phone and threw it with such force against the wall it shattered.

He raced to her and wrapped his arms around her, “Mac, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

She touched his face as if checking to see if he was real. “Who hates me so much they would do this?”

“They’re investigating Mac. All they know is the order came from a senior Giordano. The only one they ruled out was Alessandro.”

“What is going on?” Padma asked as she brushed Mackenna’s hair off her cheeks, scared at how pale her friend was.

“Someone in Alessandro’s family forced the private investigator to cause an accident. The goal,” Nuncio felt the bile rising in his throat, “was to terminate Mac’s pregnancy. They apparently had dirt on the investigator they were going to release to the public. Alessandro’s security team is investigating but it’s not looking good.”

“Oh my god,” Padma put her hand to her mouth in horror.

Derrick sat back on his heels in stunned silence. “Mac, you told me they weren’t the mob.”

“They’re not,” she puffed the words, her breath still short, “in the mob there are rules, a code of conduct. In the House of Giordano, there is only one rule, Giordano first and screw anything else. Alessandro’s grandfather on his mother’s side told me this once and said they were ruthless and to be careful. I never dreamed,” she coughed against the pain in her chest, “someone would do this.”

She sniverea as she tried to think of which one of them hated her so much.

“Mac don’t go there,” Nuncio urged her. “Let the investigators do their job and sort it out.”

“Am I in danger?” she asked him suddenly.

Nuncio looked away and she felt nausea welling in her stomach.

“Just the baby was,” she wiped her face. “They just wanted to make sure the heir to Giordano was not mine.” She gasped for air. “I’m going to be sick again.”

Derrick swiftly moved an empty box to her lap and Padma held her hair back while she emptied her stomach.

“I need to lay down,” she said quietly.

“Mac, we will oversee the movers and get everything in.” Derrick reassured her. “They already have your bed all set up. Go lay down on it and if you need anything you let us know. We’re not going anywhere.”

Nuncio swung her up in his arms as if she were a ragdoll and she let the tears fall as he lay her down on the bed. He dug through a box, found her pillow, and tucked it under her head and covered her with a throw she always kept around her. He sat beside her on the bed and pushed her hair off her cheek.

“He will get to the bottom of it,” Nuncio said quietly.

“I don’t care,” she rasped, her throat raw from crying and being ill. “I don’t care what the bottom of it is. They killed my grandparents and my baby just to keep me from producing the Giordano heir. I hope they all rot in hell.”

He sat there and held her hand for several minutes until she closed her eyes.

“Nuncio, I just want to be alone now.”

“I’ll be right out there if you need anything. Say my name and I’ll come running. I consider you, my sister. You know this.”

“Yes.”

“Then Mac, if you need anything,” he tilted her chin to look at him, “I mean anything, you just need to say it.”

“What Nuncio? You going to go kill some Giordano’s for me?”

“If you asked I would. I may do it even if you don’t ask.”

“Go,” she gave a humorless laugh. “Make sure Derrick and Padma aren’t too overwhelmed and can you talk to Savannah? I don’t want this hitting her while she’s in trauma and I didn’t warn her.”

When he left, she rolled her face into the pillow and waited for tears to fall but there were none. She felt Romeo jump up on her bed and curl up beside her, occasionally releasing a mew sound until she began stroking his fur. The longer she lay there, the angrier she got, and Nuncio’s offer echoed in her head

Mackenna sat at her desk on Monday morning and practiced the grounding exercises her counsellor had taught her. She needed to refocus her mind from the anger she was feeling.

It was beyond Alessandro's deadline and even with the news hitting every news syndicate, tabloid, and glossy magazine, he had not called her. He made no effort to call, contact her or even attempt an apology. Though as Savannah stated this morning, how do you apologize to someone for their family trying to murder you?

The paparazzi were in full force but thankfully her new building had great security in place. All she had to do was walk from the locked doors to the waiting car and Nuncio escorted her in and out of her home and her work without a qualm.

A knock on her door brought her out of her failed attempt at meditating and she looked at her admin assistant, Tabitha curiously.

"Hey Mac, there's a couple here to set up billing for their son. He was admitted last night." She stepped into the room. "He's been admitted to pediatrics under Doctor Luke." Doctor Luke was the head of the cancer ward, and she felt her heart drop.

"Send them in please."

For the next two hours, she helped the couple navigate the insurance system providing them phone numbers for support services to help with any billing which may not be covered under their insurance. Then she walked them back to their six-year-old son, who was sitting with his grandmother in the bed reading a book.

"Mac, thank you," his mother said clutching her hands.

"Of course," she said squeezing her hands in response before reaching up and patting the father on the shoulder. "If you need anything, any questions at all, whether related to the insurance, the billing, where you can support services or anything else, you call me right away and if I don't know the answer, I'll find it for you. Okay?"

She left them then and ran into another mother on the floor. "Hey Gina, how are things? When is he going to break out of this place?"

"According to him, today." The woman grinned and motioned to the couple who stepped into the room. "I know you can't divulge anything patient confidentiality and all but are they someone I should talk to?"

"I think it would be a very kind thing to do," she poked her head into the room. "Hey, Niblet," she moved to sit in the seat next to the bed.

"Mac, what are you doing up here with all us sickos?" Gregory smiled at her rubbing his bald head subconsciously. "Thanks for the popcorn by the way. It's awesome."

Gregory hadn't had much of an appetite but craved popcorn and so Mackenna had made sure he had a never-ending supply. She had nicknamed him Niblet because he was a corn fanatic.

"Not sick of it yet? You tell me when you get tired of it, and we'll bring in your next favorite treat."

"Ha, I'm busting out of here," he grinned as he looked at his mother. "Right mom?"

"Yup," she laughed. "We just need four doctors and a team of nurses to sign off."

"Good luck with that," Mackenna reached out and tweaked his nose. "You have Doctor Luke and he's the slowest at filling out paperwork."

"I heard that Mac," Doctor Luke stepped into the room, "are you disparaging my good name?"

"Me?" she put her hand to her chest innocently. "No, but I'm still waiting on some billing from you

your paperwork in! she scolded him and then gave a wave. "It let you do your rounds, starting with this young fella." She looked at Gina, "call me if you need anything."

She made her way back to her office, stopping for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, hating she was being stared at. The whispers going on behind her back were annoying, but she forced herself to keep things as normal as possible and smiled at everyone as she normally would. She was not letting Giordano House take her work away from her too.

As she got back to her desk another man was sitting in the reception area and she stopped. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, my sister is staying in the hospital. She broke her leg." He looked uncomfortable. "The ambulance brought her here, but we don't have any insurance. I need to set up a payment plan or something."

She reached out and offered her his hand. "My name is Mac Keebler. Come with me. I'll help you."

She got all the man's details and did what she did best and found a local charity who would assist with the bills and then helped him set up a payment plan for what was left. "Now, if for any reason you can't make these payments, do not avoid my calls. You call me. I've set this up based on what you've told me you can afford and because you have a job. If you lose your job, if you find it too tough, if you are having to choose between eating and paying this bill," she shook the paper she held out to him, "you call me. I will find a way to help you. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am." He wiped the tears off his face. "I am grateful for your help."

"Now, your sister is probably out of surgery, and she'll want to see your ugly mug," she winked at him repeating back to him the joke he had said his sister told him just before they took her to the operating room.

As soon as the guy was out of her office Savannah was poking her head in.

"How long were you out there?"

"Long enough for me to know you spend way too much time with these folks."

"It keeps you paid, doesn't it?"

Savannah nodded, "Lunch?"

Mackenna made a face. "I was in the cafeteria for a coffee, and it was brutal. I'm the focus of the hospital gossip."

"All the more reason to go. Shut it down."

"Fine," she grumbled and pulled her purse from her desk.

The cafeteria, it had more people in it than when she'd been in earlier and as soon as she walked in, it went quiet. "Oh, for crying out loud people, carry on. I promise I'm not so damn interesting," she growled loudly as she grabbed a tray. "Don't you all have better things to do?"

Savannah told them all what to do using four letter words and suddenly everyone's eyes rounded, and they turned away while Mackenna chuckled.

"Classy," she commented as she took a chocolate milk and a ham and cheese sandwich from the display. "We need to get the kitchen sorted so Nuncio can make my lunches again."

"Yes," Savannah grinned. "I really miss his turkey wraps."

"You mean his sausage," Mackenna teased.

"Nope, had it for breakfast," she smirked. "I showed him where the doctor's sleep when we're on call."

Mackenna pretended to gag and made a face at her friend. "I did not need to know."

whispered conspiratorially in her ear.

“Doctor Kirkland,” Mackenna scolded her as she dropped her food tray on an empty table and groaned. “I am scarred for life.”

“Have you heard from you-know-who?”

“No.” Mackenna unwrapped her sandwich and pulled it apart to look at the insides before smashing it back together. “Remember the time I got the sandwich with the bad meat?”

“Yes, stop changing the subject,” Savannah argued. “Why don’t you call him?”

“Because I gave him a week to make a decision, the week passed, I haven’t heard from him.”

“Uh, in his defense, family crap hit the fan in a massive way. Imagine finding out someone in your family is a psychopath? Cut the guy some slack.”

“No,” Mackenna shook her head. “I don’t have to cut anyone slack ever again. I’m considering calling Camille again.”

“Mac don’t do it. You love him. He loves you.” Savannah spoke quietly. “You’re angry and you have every right to be, but can you imagine what he’s going through right now? Someone in his family basically put a hit on his child. It was his child too Mac. You show more compassion for strangers who come to your office than you do your own husband.”

“Why are you suddenly so in his corner?” Mackenna glared at her. “You’re in love now so you think you know it all?”

“No,” Savannah leaned back in her chair, “and there’s no need to be nasty.”

“Stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. I told you I’m done with Giordano House and all it comes with.”

“You’d cut your own nose off to spite your face,” Savannah flushed with anger.

“And you’d sell your best friend to the devil just because your boyfriend is employed by him. Guess I know where your loyalties lie.”

Savannah’s head snapped back like Mackenna had slapped her. She rose from the table and threw her uneaten food in the garbage bin and walked away, ignoring Savannah calling her name asking her to come back. She lifted a finger and shot in her direction and kept walking until she got to her office and slammed the door hard.

She groaned as she pushed her palms into her eyes already regretting her argument with Savannah. She knew her friend was trying to help but she just wanted everyone to leave her alone. She pulled papers out of her drawer and started working on some of the work she was behind on because she’d had two impromptu and long meetings in the morning.

By the time she finished her work for the day it was well past six and she was late leaving. She didn’t care. She was in no hurry to go home to her new place. It held no memories, no safety for her. All her things were still in boxes in her room, and they barely had enough furniture to furnish the apartment. It wasn’t a home yet. She could go to an impersonal hotel room and get the same comfort.

As she opened her office door and stepped out, she saw Nuncio sitting in a chair in the waiting area scrolling on his new cell phone. She didn’t say anything to him as he stood up and followed her to the front entrance of the hospital. The photographers were waiting with a vengeance, and she kept her head down, making her way to the waiting car, wordlessly.

Once inside the car, she kept her face averted and stared out the window. Nuncio to his credit sensed her mood was not conducive to conversation and said nothing to her. When they reached the apartment

Stepping into the apartment she looked around and put her keys on the little table by the door and kicked her flats off into the little closet. She sighed deeply and walked straight to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

She moved to her en-suite bathroom and ran a bath throwing bath salts into the water. She took her clothes off and stepped into the tub, sliding so she was completely submerged in the water. As she lay under the water, she heard Savannah's voice echo in her head from lunch. It was his child too. It also meant the child was also part of whoever it was who forced the investigator to act rashly.

As she surfaced from the water, she kept wondering who would want not just to hurt her, stop her from giving Alessandro a child but who would want to hurt Alessandro. Savannah was right, he was probably hurting too. His world was probably turned upside down and she was so self-absorbed all she was thinking of was her own pain and her own heartache.

She sat in the tub a long time, considering her behavior, and thinking of Savannah insisting she had more compassion for strangers and accusing her of cutting off her own nose to spite her face. Was this what she was doing? Was she cutting Alessandro off from her life even though she knew without a doubt he was all she ever wanted? Could she deal with a life involving Dulce? Would he still want her after what she'd done?

She sat up and drained the plug, rising from the tub, she wrapped in a thick towel and sighed deeply. Mackenna exited her bathroom and moved to where she'd dropped her purse when she'd gotten home on the bed and pulled her cell phone out.

She scrolled through the phone and before she could stop herself dialed his number. It went straight to voice mail.

"Alessandro, it's me. Um, Mackenna. I just wanted to know you were okay. I can't imagine what you're going through so if you need to talk or anything, um, you can call. I really miss you and need to hear your voice and know you are okay. Oh, and I love you. Please call me."

She ended the call and then moved from the bed and got dressed into a t-shirt and a pair of jeans and a sweater. She left her room and found Nuncio sitting in the living room quietly.

"I'm sorry." She said to him. "I've been a bitch."

"You're hurting Mackenna. Anyone in their right mind wouldn't call you a bitch."

He hadn't seen the argument with Savannah, obviously, she thought sadly. "I need to go back to the hospital."

"Right now?"

"Yes please."

"Okay," he said, "I'll get the car to come back."

She hoped her friend accepted her apology. As it stood right now, she was alienating everyone, and she needed to start making it right.