

Mackenna smiled as Alessandro entered her bedroom without knocking.

"You're still awake," he seemed surprised to find her sitting up.

"Yes, the drugs are wearing off so I'm not so groggy." Her stomach took the moment to grumble, "I'm also getting pretty hungry."

"How's your pain?" he asked as he lifted a small pill bottle in his hand and shook it. "I picked these up on my way back."

"So far, not so bad. It hurts, I won't lie but it's tolerable."

"Do you feel up to coming to eat at the table or would you like me to bring your dinner to you here?"

"Would I be a princess if I said in here? Nuncio walked me to the bathroom earlier and I was pretty damn dizzy and uncomfortable."

He bent and placed a kiss to her lips. "You are not a princess. You are my queen and I'd be happy to serve you dinner in bed." He turned on his heel and headed back to where he had come from. She heard him talking to Nuncio again and she closed her eyes as she listened to the sound of men laughing in her home. She could get used to the sound of happiness.

Romeo who had vacated his position at the end of her bed when Nuncio had sat down jumped back on the bed and moved to paw at her hands. "Aww, poor baby. Did nobody feed you yet?" She stroked his ears gently. She considered getting up to do it but as she started to rise from her prone position, she felt lightheaded and grimaced. "Sorry buddy," she accepted his head butt to the chin, "I'll see if Nuncio will do it." She called for him and heard him walk briskly in her direction.

"What's wrong?" he eyed her curiously.

"Nothing, other than my bodyguard is hungry and wants to be fed." She patted him as he crawled onto her chest and hissed at Nuncio.

"He is vying for my job," Nuncio pointed at the cat. "Come on Romeo, I'll feed you but you're not going to like it."

Alessandro stepped past him into the room balancing plates in his hands and almost tripped as Romeo jumped down and twisted himself through his legs. "Why does he hate me suddenly? Also, why does he love you so much?"

Mackenna and Nuncio exchanged a glance and Alessandro immediately noted it. "What happened?"

"I'll leave you to tell him," Nuncio pulled a face, "I'll feed the beast."

He rounded the bed and crawled up beside her. "Nice bed. I'm so happy to see you upgraded."

She grinned. "Look at the size of this room. I couldn't put my tiny little bed in here. It had to be king sized."

"You and Savannah picked a great place, I like it." He helped her position a plate on her lap and propped her up with some pillows behind her back. "Nuncio is grateful for the security building."

"Thanks. It's starting to feel like home but not quite yet," she looked at the plate on her lap. "Where did you find risotto?"

"The hotel, I called and asked them to prepare it and I grabbed it when I left Dulce's room. I thought it would be easiest since knife and fork might be an issue for a bit." He motioned to her arm.

"How is she?" Mackenna cast him a side glance as she used the spoon with her left hand to lift the food to her lips. Her hand was shaky and some of the risotto fell to her chest. "Damn," she set the spoon on the plate with a clang and used her fingers to pick the risotto off her chest.

He laughed as she ate the spilled rice off her chest. "Hungry?"

"We yelled," he stared at his plate, "I'm incredibly angry she didn't trust me enough to come to me sooner. She let him destroy so much because she wouldn't come to me. She says I am her best friend, but she tortured us both by not confiding in me."

"She was afraid for Yara," Mackenna recalled the child's name with ease.

"I could have protected them all," Alessandro puffed his chest angrily, "there is no excuse."

"I'm simply saying Alessandro, as far as excuses go, hers is pretty damn good."

"Not good enough, and enough talk of her for now otherwise we'll both be up all night with indigestion." He motioned at her spoon. "Eat or I'll feed you myself."

She picked up the spoon and took a mouthful, chewing thoughtfully.

"Why is my favorite cat in the world suffering from a personality change?"

She shifted against her pillows. "I've been having panic attacks."

He remembered her mentioning having a panic attack previously but wasn't quite sure what it meant or what it entailed. Somehow, he knew what she was about to say was not going to be good for his peace of mind.

"Since I left Milan the first time. I struck out on my own with no support. I met Savannah and she helped me a lot and eventually they went away. When I flew to Milan the first time to file the divorce," she noted his lips thin at her words, "I had a pretty bad one on the flight back home."

She knew he was waiting for her to finish the mouthful of food to continue her story. "I didn't have another one until we had the fight in the hospital when you said you would sign off on the papers."

"I regret my actions that day," he spoke softly.

"I know," she took a breath. "Since then, everything has been so chaotic and out of control. The medications my doctor gave helped, but I also work with a counsellor, and I had been doing really well until last weekend."

Mackenna pushed the food around her plate, "then the prosecutor called."

Alessandro exhaled slowly, as he suddenly realized why the cat was protecting Mackenna. "You had a panic attack as a result?"

"I had a bad one, a really bad one," she admitted quietly. "I've never had one so bad, not even when I was in the hospital in Milan after losing my grandparents and the baby. Derrick and Padma were here helping me move in otherwise poor Nuncio would have been in a mess." She took a breath, "I knew the investigator had caused the accident, but I still thought it was a careless accident. To learn he did it on purpose because someone hates me so much, he would want to make sure I don't have your baby, it was overwhelming." She gave a shaky breath as her heart thudded painfully against her chest, "I didn't even know who it was, all the prosecutor said was it was a senior member of the Giordano family. All I knew was someone in your family hated me so much they killed my grandparents and our baby."

She felt his arm wrapped around her shoulder as he pulled her to him and kissed the top of her chest. They sat in silence for a moment.

She continued her story, "I had a panic attack and since then, Romeo is my shadow, and he doesn't leave me alone and he even sleeps at the foot of my bed. He has scratched Nuncio a few times and he swatted at Savannah just this morning." She giggled at the memory and remembered something she and Savannah discussed earlier. "Or we are giving him too much credit and he's not empathetic. Our alternate theory is he didn't like living in poverty and now we have him in this apartment he feels it better fits his station."

"He is," she agreed.

They sat eating in silence until Mackenna groaned and pushed her plate away. "I'm so full."

He lifted his arm from her and collected the plates. "I'll take these out and I'll be back. Don't go anywhere," he teased.

"Well, I was thinking of going to run a marathon but since you insist, I sit here, I'll just behave."

"There's a first," he smirked at her as he walked away from the bed, earning him a pointed finger in his direction.

He returned a few minutes later and went into her bathroom carrying a small paper bag and the sound of water running caught her ear. "What are you doing Alessandro?"

"Running you a bath," he called back to her. "I picked you up some bath salts."

"I can't get my arm wet," she said loud enough for him to hear, and he poked his head out of the room and grinned. "What are you grinning for?"

"I was going to say we can keep your arm dry while we get the rest of you wet but then I heard Savannah in my head being dirty."

She giggled at his words. Savannah absolutely would have found something dirty about his words. "Alessandro, I'm starting to think you've been hanging around her too much."

"I like her. I like how she has encouraged you to be a much stronger feistier woman, not afraid to stand up for herself. She's good for you." Alessandro smiled at her from across the room before disappearing back into the bathroom.

She would miss Savannah when they went back to Milan. She sat there thinking of her friend not noticing Alessandro had moved back to the door to observe her.

"Mackenna are you alright?" his voice was soft and curious.

"Yes, just getting tired I think," she met his gaze.

"Well, lets get you cleaned up, back into bed and you can get some sleep." He stepped into the room and scooped her up in his arms.

"I can walk," she protested weakly.

"But this makes me feel manly," he retorted with a smile.

"Nobody could ever accuse you of being anything but," she rolled her eyes but let her head rest on his chest as he carried her the few feet to the bathroom. She inhaled deeply. "It smells so good in here."

"Lavender," he kissed her head and gently set her on her feet. "You're okay if I help you undress?"

She eyed him in stunned silence. "Since when do you ask to undress me?"

"I'm trying to be respectful."

She snorted at his words. "You have no respect for boundaries ever, why are you starting now?"

"Your disposition has not improved with a crack to the head," he grimaced at her.

"Alessandro," she touched his arm gently, "I just need you to be you please. I need you in all your brash, pain in my backside glory. I need my husband." She thought she saw his eyes water at her words, but he turned away to turn the taps of the tub off.

He cleared his throat, "let's get you out of those clothes and in the tub. I'll put a towel down on the edge of the tub for you to rest your arm."

Tenderly he helped slip her out of the t-shirt, cursing under his breath with each wince and moan of

his mind wasn't on taking her to bed. Her torso was full of tiny slices and scrapes where she had been cut from the table. A large bruise ran up her ribcage and he traced it with a sad expression. "Mackenna, no wonder you are so sore and tender."

"I'll be fine," she whispered touching his cheek gently. "Help me get into the tub please."

Gently he held her as she sunk lowly into the free-standing tub, and she sighed blissfully as the heat enveloped her. "I'm so glad I have a tub now," she whispered.

She closed her eyes as he used a loofah and began meticulously washing her body being incredibly careful to keep her injured arm dry and protected. The smell of lavender encouraging her to relax. He rolled his sleeves up before pulling her foot up out of the water and washing her feet. He looked to her face, eyes closed, the lump on her forehead not as prominent in size now but was developing into quite bruise. "How are you doing my love?"

"I'm in heaven," she whispered as he massaged her foot gently. "Don't stop."

Alessandro continued rubbing her toes before moving to the other foot, cleaning it up with lots of suds before gently massaging her sole. He dropped a kiss to the top of her foot before sliding it back into the warm water. "I'll leave you to soak a minute. I'm going to get the bed ready for you. Do not get your arm wet." He warned her with a tap on the nose.

"Mm," she mumbled as he left the room. She heard the bed sheets being tussled and she wasn't sure what he was doing in her bedroom, but she was unbothered. All she cared was he was there, and he was taking care of her, and he had promised he wasn't going anywhere.

"Mackenna," he whispered in her ear, causing her to jump. She had started to doze off in the tub and hadn't heard him come back in. "Come, my love. Let's get you out of here and dried off and into bed."

He helped her rise from the tub, taking great care to protect her injuries, towelling her off gently, before scooping her naked body up in his arms and carrying her through to the bedroom. He lay her in the bed and pulled the blankets up to her chin. He kissed her mouth softly as she sighed and snuggled into the soft sheets. "I love you Mackenna." He whispered against her cheek.

"I love you too," a happy smile on her lips as she drifted off to sleep.

Mackenna shuffled her way slowly down the small corridor to the living area of the apartment the next morning. She knew Alessandro had spent the night, he'd given her pain meds around two in the morning and even then, he'd still been sitting up in the chair in her room. Eventually he must have come to bed as the pillow still indented from where he'd lay his head and the smell of his cologne on her sheets, but he was gone.

Her head was throbbing, and her arm hurt even more than her head and she gripped the wall until there was no wall left to grip. "Hello?" she called out.

There was no answer and so she made her way to the kitchen. She glared at Romeo who was sitting atop the kitchen island. "Pretty sure you're not supposed to be up there," she chastised him, but he continued cleaning himself as if she hadn't spoken and she admittedly had zero energy to push him off.

She noted her uninjured hand was trembling as she pulled a container of fruit juice from the fridge and poured herself a glass. She leaned against the counter, staring at the cat. "Just you and I today, huh." The clock on the stove told her it was nearly nine and she sighed deeply. "All the things I wanted to do this weekend and I'm stuck here in the house with the cat." She set her glass down, reached out and stroked his ears, earning her a purr in response.

The sound of a key in the lock made both their ears perk up. Alessandro stepped into the condominium carrying brown bags in each arm and two paper cups she prayed contained coffee.

"Tell me that's coffee," she spoke causing him to jump in alarm, aware he hadn't seen her standing there. She giggled as he put the bags down and clutched his chest moving towards her.

"You should be in bed," he growled as he reached out and stroked her cheek. "You're very pale."

"I'm tired of being in bed, it's boring," she grumbled and looked at the bags. "What is that?"

"Breakfast apparently," he shook his head. "Nuncio met me in the hall with the bags. He and Carlos and Rio are dealing with a situation downstairs. Savannah may or may not have punched someone."

"Oh my god, we're going to get asked to leave this building," she rolled her eyes.

"If it happens, I'll just buy the building," he grinned at her wickedly.

"You would," she shook her head and then gasped as he picked her up and carried her to the sofa, grabbing one of the paper cups along the way. "What are you doing?"

"Rest," he ordered her and passed her the cup. "Decaf vanilla latte." He almost gagged saying it. "How do you drink something which is almost entirely sugar?"

"If Nuncio and Savannah went for food, where did you go?"

"Gym," he shrugged. "I missed my workout yesterday. I found a place open twenty-four hours, so I was there at five, worked out until seven, showered and then stopped to talk to Dulce." He held his hand up as she opened her mouth, "I've sent her back to Milan. She has physio in the morning, and she will damn well complete every single session."

"Is she okay?" Mackenna asked quietly.

"I believe an entire night all alone in a hotel with no mother, sister, friends, bodyguards, nurses or doctors coddling her has done her some good." He flung himself into the oversized armchair opposite her. "I don't want to talk about her though," he rubbed his face. "After breakfast you and I have much to discuss, and I don't need my head clouded by my fury with Dulce."

"Well, it sounds ominous," she wrinkled her nose, sipping her coffee and looking out the sliding doors to the balcony.

"It was not meant to," he reassured her, crossing his ankle over his knee, and taking a long drink of his

Mackenna grinned at him. "Nuncio hasn't hooked you up yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"The man should run his own coffee shop. His coffee is so good half the hospital is begging for him to make them cups. Savannah and I have to bring thermoses of it now."

The sound of them entering had them both turning their heads in the direction of the crew of five coming through the door. "Did you hit someone?" Mackenna instantly asked Savannah.

"No, I did not hit someone." She shrugged out of an oversized sweater. "I wanted to, I almost did but I refrained. I'm calling it personal growth."

"She did spit on him," Nuncio spoke behind her and saw the paper cup in Alessandro's hand. "I'm sure I suggested you throw it away."

"I was desperate." Alessandro took another swig of his coffee grimacing. "I find I am not so desperate," he looked around for a place to set the cup.

"I broke the table so," Mackenna grinned with no remorse.

The collective groans made her smile wider as Savannah sat beside her and kissed her cheek.

"I'm glad to see you look a bit better than yesterday. How is your headache?"

"Dull," she replied with a half shrug. She lifted her bandaged arm, "this however hurts like a son of a gun. I'm also really hungry." She gave a pointed glance at Nuncio. "Alessandro said you're making breakfast."

"Yes, but I needed more cinnamon because I used all I had already."

"What did you need cinnamon for?" She was now perched on the edge of sofa, her fingers held up crossed in the air and her eyes closed. "Please say cinnamon buns," she whispered and then she squealed with delight at his confirmation.

Alessandro chuckled at her childlike behaviour, "Nuncio, I believe the way you have kept Mackenna safe has been by bribing her with food."

Nuncio held a finger to his lips and frowned at Alessandro, "shh, she wasn't on to me until you opened your mouth."

"I don't care, just keep feeding me," Mackenna grinned widely. She noticed Savannah was unusually quiet. "What's going on? You, okay?"

"Yeah," she slapped her knees and stood up. "I just worked an overnight and didn't go to bed yet. I went with Nuncio for the walk to the market so just sleepy."

Mackenna saw Nuncio shake his head behind her friend as he made his way to the kitchen, and she knew something else was up. "Hey, Savannah, I really want to get dressed. Would you mind giving me a hand?"

"Of course," Savannah helped her to a standing position and helped her back to her bedroom straight to the walk-in closet. "Your clothes are still all in boxes," she laughed, "you may as well leave them there."

Mackenna grinned, "I said the same thing to Romeo yesterday morning when I was going through them. I need a wardrobe upgrade, so we need to go shopping." She wriggled her eyebrows at Savannah.

"No, well, yes you do need an upgrade, but I meant you may as well not unpack. You're leaving back to Milan, right?" Savannah didn't look at her as she rifled absently through a drawer for clean underwear. She dangled cotton panties off her finger, "you're back with your model husband, you shouldn't wear anything like these ever again."

"He's a brilliant businessman and there is more to him than a body and good looks," Mackenna tried

"It is but he's still damn fine looking," Savannah laughed and pulled out some lacy thong panties. "Here, these will do."

"I have a concussion and a wrecked arm. I'm fairly sure I'm not seducing anyone today. Give me the other ones," she held her free arm out for the underwear and got into them awkwardly. "You're going to have to help me with the bra," she watched as her friend dug through and tried to pick which of the three bras, she owned to give her. "Savannah, it's not so complicated."

"It is," she groaned, "it's all so complicated."

Mackenna reached out and tugged her friend's hand. "Hey, talk to me."

"I'm so stupid," she started to cry.

Mackenna could count on one hand the number of times she had seen Savannah cry. She had cried when her adopted father had passed away. Once when she had broken up with the girl who had misguided dreams of being a sommelier and then recently when she'd seen her student loan balance was zero. Other than a few tears here and there, crying was not something Savannah Kirkland did and Mackenna's heart broke.

"Oh Savannah," she pulled her to her and hugged her tight. "You are by far not stupid. What happened?"

"I love him," she cried unhappily.

"That's not a stupid thing," Mackenna hugged her tight. "It's a great thing. I'm happy for you."

"He has to go back to Milan with you right?" Savannah countered. "You're leaving me and he's leaving me, and I'll be all alone with a cat who hates me," she wailed causing Mackenna to start crying in response.

"I could fire him," Mackenna offered after several long minutes of combined sobbing in each other's arms. "He could stay and open a coffee shop and bakery."

"He told me once Alessandro pays him more a month than you get in alimony."

"No way," Mackenna's eyes grew round, knowing how big her alimony checks had been. "Why?"

"You are his most precious thing in the world, there isn't anything he wouldn't pay to keep you safe. He got a pay raise the day he yelled at Alessandro to leave you alone." Savannah wiped her nose on a ratty t-shirt she pulled from a box laughing at Mackenna's disgusted expression. "He does his job well and he's paid for it."

Mackenna whispered, "I don't want to go to Milan."

Savannah's eyes whipped to her friend, "what?"

"I don't want to go. All there is in Milan is heartache and bad memories. I wouldn't mind visiting to put flowers on my grandparents' graves but really, I know they aren't there in spirit, so it seems silly. Trying to find a job as great as the one I have will be near impossible. I don't want to leave you or our stupid mean-spirited cat. I know where my heart is and it's here. I know he needs to be in Milan for work and I know I can't be without him, but I just don't want to go. I have no choice, right?"

Savannah shook her head, "No, I don't think you do. You love him and you'll be so much more miserable here without him than there with him."

"I know," she wiped tears off her face, "any idea how to finish off your fellowship in Italy?"

Savannah groaned, "I'd like to say I hadn't thought of it, but I have." She made a face, "but he hasn't asked me to go with him."

"Did you tell him how you feel?"

them, let alone some Italian guy who probably doesn't feel the same and is leaving as soon as a doctor clears you to fly." She sniffed, "he probably has hundreds of women crying over him all over the world."

"Probably, he does make a mean cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun," Mackenna teased, "but he's never had someone like you and though I might be a bit biased, they don't come any better than you Doctor Kirkland."

"Thanks Mac. I'm really happy for you and I want you and Alessandro to be together. It's what is meant to be, but I won't lie and say I'm going to miss you like crazy when you leave." Savannah spoke sadly.

"Ahem," Alessandro cleared his throat interrupting their conversation, his eyes were furious. "Nuncio sent me in to tell you breakfast is ready." He glared at Mackenna who shifted on her feet. "Where are you going, she is going to miss you? Please tell me you are not thinking of running off on me again."

Before Mackenna could answer Savannah was defending her, "she's going wherever you go dumbass, which means back to Milan." She pointed his chest with her finger. "We're just sad because we're going to miss each other."

Alessandro let out a loud laugh before he brought a struggling Savannah into his arms to kiss her forehead. He slapped her on the bottom and pushed her back into the closet towards Mackenna, "help my wife get dressed and then come back to the kitchen and eat. Nuncio has ordered it." He pointed at Mackenna and Savannah, "you two need to stop worrying about silliness." He was still laughing as he walked back to the living room.

"He's acting really weird," Mackenna said seriously.

"Tell me about, he just kissed my forehead and slapped my ass," Savannah rubbed her buttock where it still stung. "His smack has some force."

"Really weird," they both stared at the door where he had just walked through chortling like a kid and shook their heads. The sound of Nuncio yelling at them to hurry up broke them out of their dazes and they immediately set to work getting Mackenna dressed.

Mackenna groaned as she reclined on the sofa, a pillow behind her back and her arm resting on her stomach. "I ate too much," she complained as Alessandro lifted her feet to sit under them, his sketchbook in his hands.

Savannah had gone to have her sleep since she hadn't gone to bed following her shift change at seven and it was now near eleven. Nuncio went with her and Mackenna wondered if her friend would tell the man what she was feeling or if she was going to simply let things play out.

"What are you thinking with your brow all furrowed like this," he mocked her expression pushing his eyebrows together. "You will cause premature wrinkling with all this frowning."

She dug her heel into his thigh and was rewarded with a tap on the top of her foot. "I'm just worried for Savannah. I don't like thinking she'll be all alone going through heartbreak," she felt herself getting weepy. "I think she has it bad for him."

"Good, he's a good man. She's a good woman. They deserve each other." He propped his book against her feet and flipped through several pages.

"Yes, but he's already told her his job is to protect me."

"I don't see the problem."

"She can't just pick up in the middle of a residency and follow him," she slapped the sofa with irritation.

"Follow him where?" Alessandro was deliberately avoiding her gaze.

"Why do your lips move as if you're trying not to laugh at me?" Mackenna accused him suddenly.

"My love, would you like to see my latest line?" He held his book towards her. "This is a final compilation, I think," he rolled his eyes. "I've pulled multiple out and added a couple in. It's a completely new direction and I'll admit, I'm second guessing some of my choices."

She didn't like he was changing the topic, but she accepted the heavy book from him.

"I'm hoping to debut the look in New York during Fashion Week in February."

She looked up in surprise. "You've never done a debut of a brand-new line anywhere but Milan. You would forgo Milan for New York."

He waved her to look at the book. "I feel it's more New York than Milan, but I do also have another line debuting simultaneously. Dulce will be hitting the runway in Paris and Milan if she can get her stride right. She has already told me she refuses to limp down a runway."

"She has six months," Mackenna mused. "I didn't see her walk when she was here, but she did have a cane with her."

"She has just over five months and given how little therapy she's actually been doing; I'm not holding my breath. I told her to get her act together this morning or I'm going to start interviewing her replacement. She hasn't been taking her recuperation seriously. She needs to stop behaving as a spoiled brat and do her job." Alessandro waved at the book again, "are you going to look, or no?"

"Yes, stop being so pushy," she shrieked when he lifted her foot and bit a toe. "Alessandro!"

He watched her face as she opened to the beginning of the book, noting all the pages he had put special tabs on. She was very quiet, the surprise on her face at the drawings not unexpected. She flipped through every single page before finally looking up to meet his eyes. "These are stunning."

"But?"

"There is no but," she shook her head, "they are stunning." She realized there was a but. "Dulce can't model these things."

line if they agree.

"Three models?"

"Yes," he shrugged. "Women come in various shapes and sizes, and I want to celebrate all of them. The models I'm working with are three very distinct frames and heights. One is petite and curvy, five-two, wears a size ten American. Another is six feet in height and wears a size eighteen in American sizes. Finally, the third five feet eight inches in height, a size six and she's an amputee. I really like her spunkiness; I can't wait to watch her hit the runway in New York. She reminds me of someone I love very much. She has a way of fighting back all the horrible things to have happened to her and come out stronger and more resilient without losing sight of who she is." He made a pointed glance at her. "I believe you two will be fast friends. Ultimately, the line will range from a size zero to a size thirty. We will offer custom sizes for anyone larger than this should they need it."

She whispered as she flipped back through all the drawings of haute couture to regular daytime wear for women of various sizes. "Your grandfather would have an aneurysm."

"Excellent, an added bonus," he quipped dryly.

She ignored his macabre comment, "Alessandro, this is such a departure from the House of Giordano name."

"It will not run under House of Giordano," he shrugged as if it mattered not. "The Board vetoed the designs unanimously about a month ago."

"I don't understand," she scratched her temple. "You're creating a line, on your own, without House of Giordano as the label."

"Yes," he had no qualms about his decisions. "I have already made preparations to start under a new label." He saw her confusion, "Mackenna, I resigned from my position as CEO of House of Giordano. As of right now, I am self-employed. I am backing myself completely without any influence from the Giordano name, much to my father's chagrin. The line Dulce will model, I am working as freelancer to House of Giordano and I'm charging them a fortune," his grin was wicked.

"When did you do this? Resign I mean?" She was trying to keep her mouth from falling open in shock.

"It has been on my mind for some time, but do you remember when I said I had to go get my portfolios?"

"The week before we went dancing," she spoke softly, "you had sat with me and read books with me."

"A whole night without fighting, who would have thought it possible?" he teased her.

"Then we went hiking and then you gave me more money than I know what to do with," she wrinkled her nose, "you need to tell your accountant to stop putting money in my account too."

"Focus Mackenna," he snapped his fingers laughing at her rapidly moving thoughts. "When I went back to Milan, I already had my resignation prepared. I simply needed confirmation from the Board they were not willing to see the shift in my vision. They confirmed it, I left the company in the hands of the VP, and I resigned. My grandfather," he grimaced distastefully, "it burns my tongue to call him grandfather, but I digress, was furious. He said I was spending too much time with people beneath me, and we argued. I told him I would be where you were, and you came first. You and our family came first. Whether you wanted to try again for a child or not, you were my family, and I was done putting House of Giordano ahead of you."

She felt her heart thudding at his words but forced herself to remain focused on the conversation. "That's why he agreed with her to release the video," Mackenna squeezed the book in her fingers, suddenly

"Hm," he made a face at her name, evidently still irritated with her, "then the video was released. You knew immediately it wasn't me Mackenna. Never have I ever been so grateful for a tattoo in my life and to also have never revealed it to the old bastard."

"It wasn't just the tattoo," she shook her head. "I would know your body anywhere, fuzzy pixels or not, but it was the words he spoke to her. As much as I know how much of a bully you can be," he opened his mouth to protest and she pointed at him, "you are!"

They held each other's gaze for several seconds before he gave a hapless shrug, "I admit, I like things my way."

"Thank you," she threw her hands up in a silent hallelujah, "what I was going to say is, you can be pushy and domineering but you would never in a million years hurt someone the way the person in the video was trying to hurt Dulce."

"And yet you believed for five years, I had an affair with her," he countered, holding her gaze seriously.

"I did," she admitted truthfully, "which is why it hurt so much. I know in my heart, Alessandro, you aren't a cruel person so it simply made no sense you would purposefully hurt me in such a way."

"I meant what I said, since the day you stepped in front of my car, I have never been with any other woman, nor have I ever wanted to." He rubbed her calf. "You are all I want. You have always been all I want Mackenna. Dulce has never appealed to me in a s****l way, not ever. You are nearly the same age, but you are so much more woman than she was even six years go. I've always known she was gay Mackenna and when we danced in a club or went out, it was always just as friends. We are not now, nor have we ever been attracted to each other. Since the day I met you, you are in my blood, and I cannot let you go."

They stared at each other from their seats until he rubbed his face suddenly. "Wow, off track."

She giggled. "About right for us."

"Where was I?"

"Resigned, unemployed," she grinned suddenly, "are you broke now?"

He gave a bark of laughter at the comment. "As I said, I'm charging the company a small fortune for my collection. However, even if I weren't, I could start and fail multiple businesses and still have more money than most people, Mackenna. I have made very shrewd investments over the years outside of House of Giordano and let's be honest, I was born wealthy. I cannot say I am one of those self-made men, but I will always argue I work harder than most. If something happened tomorrow, you would be one of the wealthiest women in the world. As of right now, you are my sole heir."

Her eyes were huge as she swallowed deeply at his words, "Are you kidding me? You need to change this."

"I will, someday when we have a child. I will make sure they are well provided for."

"Alessandro, I don't want your money," she hissed.

"Which is why I am leaving it all to you," he grinned widely, "you are the least likely to kill me for it."

"Oh you," she threw his book back at him. "Not funny."

They sat in silence for several minutes as she reclined back in the sofa and tried to absorb all he'd told her.

He reached beside him and pulled his phone off the side table. "I would like your opinion on something else, if you're not feeling too overwhelmed with all we've discussed so far."

"Yeah of course," she waited for him to scroll through his phone and then accepted the device in her

"I've put my estate in Milan on the market." He ignored her gasp, "so I'm looking at a new place, but I don't want to rush it. I can always bunk with my wife at her place. Then I was talking to Derrick and Padma when you were in surgery yesterday, I really like her by the way." He smiled at Mackenna, "you have a way of surrounding yourself with good people."

"Thank you, I like my people very much." She blushed at his words.

"Anyway, Derrick mentioned he lives in a gated community and said this place was on the market. Bitter divorce so the husband is selling it for a steal. Wife did some damage so it will need some remodeling, but I wondered your thoughts?" He waited for her to catch up to what he was saying.

She scrolled through the pictures and then suddenly she snapped her head up. "Wait, you're buying a house here in Phoenix?"

"I don't want to live in this tiny apartment forever. I am an artist after all and I do need my creative space," he grinned at her rolled eyes.

"We're not going back to Milan?" She spoke over the thickness of tears in her throat.

"Not unless you have an intense desire to move back to Milan. Here in Phoenix, we are close enough to California so I can dress any of the starlets who want to be dressed and Vegas is close for fun. It's a bit of a jaunt to New York but I can make it work and Miami isn't too far either. We're also a hop skip and a jump from the Gulf of Mexico so I can dock the boat." He watched the emotions going over her face and smiled gently, "Mackenna, I have no intention of uprooting you from the life you've built here. You are important to your community and the hospital, and they are important to you."

"How does it work though? Don't you need a work visa?"

"I'm rich and Americans like people with money coming to their country," he flexed his shoulders and winked at her, "and I've already started the paperwork. It helps when I'm already married to a US citizen. Also, when I said I would be creating at least twenty to thirty jobs, the government was willing to push some paperwork around a bit faster."

"Oh," she was still staring at the phone. "You're really going to buy a house here?"

"I'm hoping to buy a place we can make a home here," he smiled softly.

"What about this place?"

"You own it," he said, "it's a good investment for you. It also would make a great place for your bodyguard and his wife to live."

"His wife?" Mackenna squinted. "What are you talking about?"

"Nuncio told his mother he met the woman he's marrying about a week after he met Savannah."

"Shut up!" she covered her mouth in excitement.

"You can't tell her." He shook his finger at her warningly, "but he already has his grandmother's engagement ring being fitted."

She giggled, "and she was so terrified to tell him she loved him in case she was just one of hundreds around the world."

"It that why all the tears in the closet this morning?" he questioned

"Well, that and I thought we would be moving back to Milan as soon as the doctor cleared me to fly," she met his surprised look. "I really didn't want to move away from my friends."

"My love, you should know by now, I'll do anything to keep you with me, including moving to America from Europe," he smiled gently, "especially now I know Nuncio can make coffee to rival the stuff from home." He watched as she grinned slowly, and another expression crossed her face. "What now?"

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could do Juice times three. As he threw his head back and laughed, she felt for the first time in a long time she was content.

She was furious. She was going to strangle him using her own two hands and then revive him just to yell at him. "Alessandro!" she screeched from her closet.

"What?" as if conjured out of thin air he appeared, eying her naked body hungrily.

"Where are all my clothes? My closet is empty. I have to go to work!" She scrambled looking for her towel which had fallen while she was pulling on all the drawers.

"You are not going to work, Doctor Wright gave explicit instructions of no work for a week," his golden eyes glared back at her as if daring her to argue with him "and your clothes were thrown into boxes and sent to goodwill," he grimaced, "and I'm certain they will throw it all out."

"I had some nice things," she argued struggling to wrap herself up in the towel with one hand.

"If you did, I never came across them," he countered. "I even found a skirt which Savannah told me you bought in Milan, and it must have been from a clearance rack or a thrift store in Milan and I didn't even know Milan had a thrift store."

"You threw out my skirt because another designer's name was on it," she accused. "I bought things to mix and match."

"You bought all mixes, no match," he countered, and he grinned saucily, "and my wife is not wearing anything with that bastard's name on it." He reached out with two fingers and tugged her towel. "I like this look better."

"I cannot go around naked all the time Alessandro," she flushed brightly under his intense scrutiny.

"I did save the dress we went dancing in," he motioned to the solitary item he left hanging, "and your wounds need to air out," he let his gaze travel over her breasts.

"I'll take you shopping if you stop sulking."

His eyes were not anywhere near her face, so she had no idea how he knew she was sulking. "My eyes are up here buddy," she tugged back at her towel.

She shuffled uncomfortably. Just his gaze was turning her on and it had been too long since they'd been intimate. She looked at him curiously, knowing her words were going to affect him, "I'm curious if the three month no-sex offer is now off the table?"

He sucked in a breath and finally allowed his gaze to travel above her collarbone to meet her languid eyes. "No, it is still on the table. I gave you, my word."

"Is it negotiable?"

"Yes, if you need more time, just say so," he ruefully wrapped her back up in the towel, "Do not think because I'm ogling you, I am forgetting I gave my word. Besides, you're hurting, and it would be all one sided, I think."

"I'd be happy to just lay there," she mumbled as he started to walk away from her.

"Come again?" he turned back on his heel and looked at her, his eyes deepening in color.

"I wish," she grumbled and then met his gaze as he exhaled slowly at the double entendre of her words. She burned under the smolder, "I mean, you could do all the work. I'd be okay with it."

"Is that so?" he dared her to repeat herself.

"If I'm not allowed to go to work and I have no clothes, I may as well take advantage of the situation. I'm all naked and everything," she purposefully looked down at her chest. "It's cold in here, isn't it?"

"Get on the bed now," he ordered and slapped her naked behind playfully as she raced past him.

She crawled onto the bed, careful of her arm, grateful her dizziness was already gone after only two days.

pants were kicked off with ferocity. Her eyes devoured his golden skin and she licked her lips unconsciously. Her eyes flicked to wear he was pulling his boxer briefs away from his body.

"I'm so glad I'm not the only one anxious," she eyed the way his body was standing proudly just from contemplating her words.

"My love, I would wait a thousand days for you, but I would prefer not to," he held no remorse as he peeled his socks off and threw them carelessly across the room. He eyed her carefully. "We may need to make a plan in case I hurt you. Do you need a safe word?"

"I don't want to know how my husband knows what a safe word is," she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at his expression. "I mean I know what it is because, well, Savannah, but you?"

"I have watched a lot of television shows," his eyes danced wickedly.

"Internet shows you mean," she retorted and yelped as he tugged her down the bed, so she was laying flat. "Hey careful mister, I'm supposed to just lay here. You have one job, make me feel incredible." She bossed him for the first time.

"Care to give me instructions? It's been a long time and I'm not sure I remember what I'm supposed to do," he was grinning wickedly as his hands roved up her calves along her thighs, before massaging back down to her calves.

She fought the blush she knew was staining her cheeks as she tried to be daring, "I have lots of bruises and scratches. Maybe you could start by kissing them all better?" She pointed to the large bruise running from her ribcage to the underside of her breast from where she'd landed on the metal frame of her table. "This one is especially tender. You should take your time."

"Mackenna," he paused as he nudged her knees apart and knelt between them, his excitement on full display between them. "Know at any time, you tell me to stop, and I will. I do not want any regrets, especially given some of our more recent," he groped for the right word, "escapades, left you upset after."

"Alessandro, I'm all in," she met his eyes feverishly, "and if you aren't soon, I'm probably going to spontaneously combust." She reached out and rubbed his forearm above where his hands gripped her hips. "I've really missed you."

The sigh of relief escaping his mouth made her pause, "Hey," she reached forward with her hand and cupped his cheek, "I'm done running Alessandro. I'm not going to disappear tomorrow. I love you. I mean, I know *I can* live without you. I simply don't want to."

His eyes misted at her reassurances, "point out all the places needing some TLC and I'll do my very best to ease some of your pain."

She sighed as he lay her back against the pillows and pressed a kiss to her forehead where the bruise was. He trailed butterfly kisses along her cheek, down her jawbone and onto the sensitive spot on her neck. His tongue lathed while his lips sucked where her pulse beat furiously at the base of her throat, and he reveled in the moan he elicited.

Her uninjured hand roamed over his bare back as he moved his body beside her to move his lips along her collar bone and then trailed over the tiny nicks and scratches still resting on her torso. He paid meticulous attention to every spot she pointed out and he made sure no inch of her bare skin was left untouched.

"Alessandro," she begged as his tongue licked down her low belly and towards her middle. As his tongue teased and tormented the most sensitive spot on her body and she arched toward him on the bed, his laugh was hot against her inflamed flesh. "Alessandro, stop teasing and get up here."

He captive while he coaxed the response from her body he was wanting. As she arched her back under his stroke, he added his fingers to where his mouth thrilled her body. Instantly the added pressure of his touch had her spiraling out of control, and she bucked wildly under his mastery of her.

She panted as she felt him slink his body up along hers, resting his elbows on either side of her head and she opened her eyes.

"Need to say your safe word yet?" he teased her stroking her shoulder just above her bandage. "We can stop now if you want."

"No, we absolutely can't," she tried to catch her breath and accepted his lingering kiss. "I need more Alessandro." Her blue eyes begged for him to join them.

He was inside her before she had even finished saying his name and she whimpered as he pushed upward and deep. "Okay?" He asked quietly in her ear. "Not hurting you?"

"Only in every single best way possible," she wrapped her feet around his calves and then sobbed when he started to pull away. "Where are you going?"

He did a press-up off her pillow and stared seriously at her face. "I don't have protection with me Mackenna. It didn't dawn on me until right now. My love, you're not protected." He held her gaze seriously. "We were careless once before and you got hurt because of it."

Her breath caught at the raw emotion on his face. "I wasn't the only one hurt Alessandro. You got hurt too." As he started to pull away from her, she dug her heels into his legs. "I don't want to stop."

"What if," he couldn't bring himself to ask and closed his eyes.

"Then it does, and if it doesn't, then it doesn't. I'm happy either way. I love you. I want your baby Alessandro. If you're not ready, I understand and we can stop until you can run to a drug store but I," she wiped a tear off her cheek. "I've been thinking of nothing else but trying again since the morning I woke up with you after we went dancing."

His tears dripped unchecked from his cheek to land on hers. "You're certain Mackenna. I don't want you to feel it's the heat of the moment and you don't want to upset me."

"I'll only be upset if you're doing something you don't want to do," she promised him, not breaking eye contact with him, aware his body was unmoving over hers.

"There is no pressure from me," he reassured her, "but Mackenna, I want nothing more in this world than to see you with my baby in your belly."

She wriggled under him then and grinned, "then get to work. We're talking way too much for two people stark naked in a bed literally joined at the hips."

"Some things need to be discussed," he groaned as she tilted her hips, drawing him in deeper. "Damn Mackenna keep doing what you're doing, and we'll be done before we even start."

She whispered mischievously in his ear, "then we'll just have to do it all again a second time."

He pressed his mouth against hers urgently, silencing her and stealing her breath. He kissed her passionately, drawing her breath from her lungs as he plundered the sweet moist heat of her mouth. He began a slow rhythmic pattern of movement where they were joined while he kissed her. Her fingers dug into his hair, as he loved her long and slow, taking his time to bring her to a tempestuous climax.

When she tore her mouth from his to bury her face in his neck as she felt his back stiffen above her, she clenched her body tight around him, drawing him deep to her body, wrapping her arm around him and her legs adjusted around his hips.

They lay breathless, Alessandro collapsed atop her, and he nuzzled her neck. "Tell me again," he

"Tell you what?" they had shared so much she was confused by his request.

"You're done running and when we get out of this bed, you're not going to hate me for what we just did."

She turned her eyes to meet his face resting on her pillow. His eyes were closed, and she tapped his cheek. "Alessandro, look at me please."

He opened his eyes and she saw a vulnerability which made her heart ache. "My love, I love you and I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise," he begged her suddenly.

"Well," she teased lightly, "I'm sure you'll infuriate me at some point, but I'll tell you the names of all my favorite coffee shops in the area. You'll know where to come find me."

"Deal," he rolled on his back and pulled her, so she was laying completely on top of him, her head resting on his chest. He kissed the top of her head. "Are you sure you're okay with the fact we may have just made a baby?"

"I hope we did," she lifted her chin and rested it on a closed fist upon his hard pectoral muscles. "I'm ready. I'm still sad about all I lost but I'm ready to start moving forward too." She grinned with a hint of devilry, "though, if we didn't, I look forward to trying again and again and again." She wriggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"I love you," he whispered as he held her gaze stroking her hair. "I have missed holding you like this for so long."

"I love you too," she squirmed up his body to kiss his mouth lingeringly.

Later as she lay with her head pressed to his chest, she remembered she had no clothes. "Alessandro, what am I going to do about clothes? I can't go anywhere with only a little black dress and no underwear."

"My darling, do you really think I'd let you parade all over the place with no clothes, especially with both of our security teams in and out of the apartment?" He hugged her tight. "I saved you an outfit. Go get dressed. I have a surprise for you."