

Mackenna stood in awe of her surroundings. Alessandro had brought her to his office spaces, spaces she hadn't even known he'd had.

His administrative assistant Rosie, a large woman with mahogany skin, big luminous brown eyes, and a natural afro as wide as her shoulders was ordering two dressmakers around. Alessandro had retreated to his office to manage a matter with a supplier and from the tone of his voice, even though she couldn't hear the words, she knew someone on the other end was getting an earful.

"Mackenna," Rosie motioned to a curtained area, "there is a robe in there for you to change into. Please go get into it." The woman was all business and returned to looking at her tablet and tapping at it furiously.

"Okay," she swallowed unused to what was happening. She had never been in this situation before. She had never been treated like one of Alessandro's models. She had been backstage at his shows during the first year they were married and had watched the glitz and glamour but as five portable wardrobes were pushed into the area all with her name on the covered bags, she was flabbergasted. She felt herself wishing Savannah or Nuncio were with her, but the doctor was at work and Nuncio had left with Carlos when they had been dropped off to the office building.

She closed the curtain behind her and tried to figure out how to get out of the clothes she was wearing. Alessandro had saved her a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and he'd helped her get dressed but after banging her hand twice on the metal pole. She felt tears sliding down her face from the pain of it all and she wanted to fling herself down on the floor and give up on the endeavor. She knew Alessandro was excited to show her the clothes he'd created for her, but he was in his office.

The sound of a familiar voice caught her ear and ducked her head out between the curtains. "Samuel?"

"Mac?"

"What are you doing here?" they asked in unison before both laughing.

Samuel, wearing a see-through black shirt with embroidered flowers over it, paired with a long black skirt and platform white sneakers, rushed toward the curtain with a wide smile. "Oh my god girl, tell me my Mac is Alessandro's Mackenna. It's true isn't it!"

"Yes, what are you doing here?" She was aware she was only half in/out of her t-shirt, and she was trying to keep it pulled down over her braless self.

"This is my day job darling," he stepped into the dressing room with her and pulled the curtain behind them. "I was worried for a bit he was going to change his mind and pull up shop and leave. What a cluster-f of a mess," he shook his head. "How are you holding up my girl? Now I know it was you who has been through hell I'm feeling terrible for you."

"I'm surprisingly okay," Mackenna smiled grateful Samuel was with her.

"You don't look it," he swirled his fingers around her face. "Bruises and lumps and what happened to your arm?"

"Tripped over an area rug and fell into a glass and metal coffee table."

"No!" he clapped his hands over his mouth. "You must be hurting."

"Not as bad as I was hurting when I saw my husband had thrown out my entire wardrobe this morning," she grimaced. "He wants me to try on some things he designed but I don't know if I can with this. It really hurts."

"Well good thing I'm here, girl. I will be your fairy godmother," he winked, "emphasis on the fairy."

"Don't go anywhere," he poked his head out the curtain. "Esme, grab me the white lace strapless bra and the matching thong panties." He left his hand outside the curtain as he huffed at how long it took for his assistant to do as instructed.

He helped Mackenna into the bra and then slid the robe which had been hung in preparation for her. He got her into it and then told her to wriggle out of her shorts and then helped her into the underwear.

"It's so hard," she whimpered.

"Try having to tuck girl," he grinned at her as he spun her around. "There, now you have the basics," he tied the robe around her waist. The sound of Alessandro calling her name made his lips twitch. "Not a minute too soon."

"Ta-da," Samuel flung the curtains open and stepped out ahead of Mackenna. "Come my queen, let's do a fashion show."

"Samuel why were you in the closet with my wife?" he narrowed his eyes on his flamboyant design assistant. "I'm not sure how much I like you seeing her half-naked considering I know you swing in every direction possible."

"Because your wife is my friend," Samuel shook his head. "If I had known my Mac was your Mackenna, I would have been on time this morning."

Alessandro waved his fingers between the two, "you know each other."

"Yes!" Mackenna smiled genuinely at him for the first time since she'd arrived at his offices. "I've seen Samuel perform his routine so many times I probably could be his understudy." She paused, "in fact, I sent Nuncio and Savannah to watch Friday night." She looked to Samuel, "he knows right?"

"Yes, it's on my resume darling," he smirked. "I design all my own costumes and they are in my portfolio."

"Samantha Pantha," Mackenna made a claw with her hand and purred at him, and they both laughed.

Alessandro stared at his wife incredulously. Every time he thought he had caught up on all he'd missed with her, she was throwing something else his way. "You like drag?"

"I love drag," she admitted without embarrassment. "We should take in the next show. I'd love to watch it with you."

"Okay," he shrugged no longer fazed by the woman his wife had become. "We will go." As his assistant and his wife both hopped up and down like schoolgirls, he rolled his eyes. "Focus," he clapped his hands. "My wife needs to see her new wardrobe."

"I put her in the strapless lace bra and thong," Samuel was suddenly all business as he snapped for Esme to bring rack number one closer. "We'll start with work clothes, move to the casual clothes and then dinner, dancing, evening wear. Lingerie," he looked to Alessandro, "I've had packed up in boxes and will allow you to get your own fashion show at home. We don't need to be part of it." He turned to Mackenna, "I know you're hurting, so maybe a drink to take the edge off?"

"It's ten-thirty in the morning," Mac laughed at him.

"Daria, make the lady a mimosa." Samuel ordered with a wide smile as he looked to Mac. "This is a celebration my darling."

Alessandro nodded his agreement. "Yes, this should be fun and exciting for you Mackenna." His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he reached for it lifting it to his ear. He pointed to Samuel, "start with the black pencil skirt and the champagne pink blouse, the black heels with the pink bow."

"You heard the man, let's go," Samuel clapped his hands.

Mackenna felt a champagne flute being pressed into her good hand and then someone was tugging her hair up into a messy bun behind her head, "oh," she said as her head was jerked back with vigor.

Alessandro turned to look at Mackenna at her yelp, "Daria, take it easy on her head please. She has a concussion and she's not used to rough treatment. She's fragile."

"I'm not fragile," Mackenna grimaced and looked over her shoulder, "do what you need to do Daria. I'm grateful for you."

"Sorry Mackenna," she whispered embarrassed, "I got on the stool and almost fell off and used your hair. I'm surprised he didn't fire me."

"Fire you?" Mackenna turned sideways to look at the woman who was probably close to her own age. "Does he fire people a lot?"

"I've only been with this team a month and I really like it, but I've messed up a couple of times."

"You can't grow if you don't fail," Alessandro eavesdropped openly as he ended his call. "You're going to screw up Daria. I expect it. If you came to me knowing everything you would be of no use to me."

Mackenna almost heard the woman's relief.

Alessandro continued, "Daria, we haven't worked much together as I've been back and forth so much from Milan, but you'll learn, while I do have a quick temper, I do not often fire people on a whim. I demand a lot, but I expect you'll learn a lot from me." He smiled softly at Mackenna, "go get into your new outfit. Esme will help you dress." He pointed at Samuel, "stay away from my naked wife."

"I've seen her naked before," Samuel shrugged.

At his words Alessandro turned slowly to look at his wife.

Mackenna's cheeks flushed as she silently cursed her friend. "They had a fan appreciation night and Savannah, and I were," she tried not to laugh at Alessandro's facial expression, "drag kings for a night. Samuel helped me prepare."

Samuel was pulling out his phone, "I have photos Alessandro, I'll show you."

Mackenna hooted with laughter and then disappeared behind the curtain with Esme. She looked to the girl, "I give him five seconds before he pulls you out of here and tells me off. Five, four, three,"

She didn't get to two, the curtain was pulled open, Samuel's phone was in her face and Esme was unceremoniously pulled from the tiny changing room. It was truly tight quarters with his towering frame.

"Don't be rude," she scolded him. "Esme did nothing wrong and neither did Samuel. If I were one of your models, she'd be walking all over the place in her underwear, and she wouldn't even have the robe. You're being prudish."

He held the photo Samuel had shown him up to her face. "This is you?"

"Ha, I hadn't seen this one. It's pretty good huh? Samuel did a great job with my make-up."

"You are naked from the waist up."

"It's a cabaret show and if you look closely, my breasts were covered," she used two fingers to zoom in on the photo, "see, no n\*\*\*\*\*s showing." She peered closer. "The contouring really made me almost flat-chested, it was pretty neat."

"You will not do this again," Alessandro ordered furiously.

"Pfft," she waved her good hand at him. "You were on some shoot in Asia with Dulce for a spread in a magazine and there were photos of her with only her fingertips on her nipples."

"And at the time this photo was taken, I considered myself very much legally separated from my husband. I did nothing wrong, I'm proud of being brave enough to step outside my comfort zone and I'd do it again if I felt so obliged, regardless of what you think you can dictate me to do."

"Mackenna," he spit her name as if he were trying desperately not to scream it from the top of his lungs.

"Alessandro," she mocked him with wide eyes, flashing brilliantly with laughter. "Look at the photo and tell me I didn't look amazing."

"You did look amazing, even for an attempt at being a man, but I don't like everyone else looking at what is mine."

"Welcome to the club," she retorted. "You think it's easy? Wherever we go you spin heads of men and women so hard they get whiplash. You flirt ruthlessly and you don't even have to speak, and they get aroused but throw in the damn Italian accent and women have instant orgasms and men walk around erect. Do not," she poked him in the chest with her index finger, "come at me telling me I don't need to attract attention when you do it just by breathing."

He ran his fingers in his dark hair, opened his mouth, and closed it, then growled with frustration before throwing the curtain wide and instructing Esme to get her into the first outfit.

Esme giggled as she closed the curtain, "I've never seen him at a loss for words."

Mackenna grinned back at her. "Take notes Esme, I'll show you who's really boss."

Mackenna was exhausted. Her head was pounding, and her arm was killing her. She had finally agreed to take one of her painkillers, but it wasn't working fast enough, and Alessandro was ruthless in his critique of how things fit, didn't fit and more than once she found herself on the verge of tears.

"No, no, no," he swore under his breath as she stepped out of the closet with a long evening dress, miles too long for her legs with a slit so high it may as well have been to her armpit. "I do not like this." He grabbed scissors out of Samuel's hands and got on his knees and instantly started cutting away at least a foot of fabric.

"Alessandro!" she gasped horrified. "It's silk."

"It's too much silk," he barked back. He stood up waving for pins and he closed the open hip area and then took his scissors, put them down the front of the dress, and opened her cleavage another two inches. He stood back. "Something isn't right."

Samuel stood beside him; his head tilted in the same manner as Alessandro's with his fingers on his chin as they both studied her. "Her legs aren't right for the cut. The slit needs to be more to the front than the side."

Alessandro yanked on the skirt of the dress and turned it a fraction of an inch then stood back, "you're right, the legs were wrong for the cut."

"There is nothing wrong with my legs!" she shrieked at them both.

They both rolled their eyes as if she were being dramatic and she instantly started tugging the dress off in the middle of the open space. "You are both being jerks and I am not one of your silly," she was yanking her arm through an opening as she tried to unzip the back, "size triple zero models who disappear when they turn sideways. I have curves and short legs and boobs and I," she gasped for breath as she struggled to pull the dress over her throbbing head, "will not be condescended to any longer!" She threw the dress at their feet glaring at their amused faces.

"Someone is cranky. We should probably get her something to eat," Samuel looked around. "Daria, can you get Mackenna a sandwich from the café across the street?"

Mackenna screamed in frustration and then flopped into a wingback chair, bumping her arm, and then screaming again.

"Grab the black cocktail dress, Samuel, I want to see that one."

"No," she spoke up. "I'm done. My head hurts, my arm hurts, my pride, and ego are bruised and battered. I am done!"

"No, you're not done. You need a snack. Also, I have a favor to ask of you," Alessandro approached her and pulled her out of the chair, hugging her to his chest.

"No, I am not doing any favors for you. I'm angry."

"Samuel, can you give us a minute?" He waited until Samuel cleared the room, "oh and get her a coffee to go with the sandwich?"

She shoved against his chest angrily. "Coffee will not make this better."

"Yes, it will. Vanilla lattes are your kryptonite." He kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry you are not enjoying the process."

"I hate the process," she mumbled absently playing with the buttons on his shirt. "I'd rather just be naked than go through any more of this. I miss my thrift store clothes."

"You will love your wardrobe once we get it all home and it's properly fitted to you." His modistes were working full tilt fixing everything he'd changed.

He sat in the chair and pulled her, so she was sitting across his lap, wearing nothing but the bra and panties. "Remember the model I told you about? The amputee?"

"Yes, what about her?" His fingers traced circles on her thigh as if trying to distract her. She covered his hand with hers.

"Her parents are very overprotective and with all the things in the press right now, they are not keen on having their daughter working exclusively for someone the press is portraying as a cad."

She chuckled, "you are taking a kicking right now, aren't you?"

"And I deserve it." He shook his head. "I should have seen the things for my own eyes, I should have listened to my wife, and I should have realized how sick my grandfather was, but I cannot go back in time, I can only move forward," he tilted her chin, "with my wife at my side."

"So, what do you want from me?"

"They came to Phoenix on Saturday to check out where their daughter could potentially be based and then you fell, and it hit the news and they are having second thoughts."

"Ah, they think I tried to off myself," she rolled her eyes. "The press are idiots. I didn't survive through the hell of the last five plus years just to kill myself because Dulce showed up to my apartment. Dumbasses."

He didn't want to talk about his protégé or the hell she'd put Mackenna through. "The Whitlock family is requesting dinner tonight."

"Oh," she nodded, "okay. I understand you'll be home late. If she is who you want for the new collection, then you should meet with them."

"They've met me, several times. They want to meet you."

"Me?" She made a face, "what the hell for?"

"You live with the beast of me," he commented wryly. "They want to know from the horse's mouth whether or not I'm the devil."

"First you say my legs are wrong and now I'm a horse?" she stared at him teasingly. As he opened his mouth to protest, she laughed. "I'm joking Alessandro. Just joking. Fine. We can have dinner with them. Set it up but," she swung her arms behind her, "at least one of these dresses better damn fit."

"It's why I asked for the black cocktail dress next." He grinned unrepentantly, "I was hoping you'd agree. I did have Rosie already make the reservations."

"Arrogance," she rolled her eyes. "Is there anything I need to know about this family?"

"Whitney was in a farming accident at eight, she's eighteen now. She lost her leg. She has been an ambassador for amputees, and I found her on the pageant circuit. She's stunningly beautiful, blue eyes, blonde hair, cheekbones for days." He shook his head, "but she's spunky as hell and I know you're going to love her. I won't lie as beautiful as she is, it's her personality I adore. She's going to take New York by storm."

She nodded her head slowly. "What exactly do her parents want from me?"

"I will just say, Whitney gets her spunk from her mother. I do not think she will pull any punches with her questions tonight at dinner. I feel there will be nothing off the table. You do not have to answer anything you're not comfortable with and I will not be upset at anything you do feel you want to share with her."

"You're willing to discuss our personal life with this family?"

"No, but the press already has. I'd rather they hear truths from our lips than reading tabloid versions."

is no way I can hide this," she lifted her damaged arm.

"You forget I'm the best designer in the world," he knew no humility, "I'll sort you out and," he touched the bruise on her forehead, "we have Samantha Pantha to help." He mocked her earlier clawed hand gestures.

"I have to keep this thing going on now, don't I?" she waved to the other portable wardrobes.

"We're almost done. Two more evening dresses and a couple dresses I designed for dancing as soon as I learned how much I love dancing with my wife, and then ones to wear dining." She grimaced and he chuckled hugging her to him. "I love you Mackenna. It will be over soon."

"Fine, but when we get home, I want a massage," she held his gaze, "with oils."

"Deal," he wriggled his eyebrows at her, "I'll give you a hot bath, massage and," he grinned wickedly, "if you want to just lay there again," he trailed off his eyes dancing as she squirmed on his lap.

"How do I say no to such an offer?" she leaned forward and kissed him lingeringly breaking off only at the sound of Samuel and his team coming back. "Please make this go quickly."

"You can eat your sandwich and drink your coffee and relax for a few minutes. I'll go chat with Samuel over the changes we've already made and the two new designs we did today on the fly," he kissed her cheek as he urged her to stand up.

Samuel approached, "you could have given her a robe Alessandro," he pinched a robe off the back of a chair and draped it over her shoulders.

Esme pressed a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. "Roast beef and loads of veggies," she smiled, "and a vanilla latte"

"I love you," Mackenna told the woman sweetly before taking a long drink and closing her eyes blissfully.

Alessandro was already across the far end of the room talking to the team sewing and repairing his creations and Mackenna folded herself back into the chair and motioned for Esme to join her. "Sit with me and tell me about how you started with all this craziness Esme. How did you find yourself working for Alessandro Giordano?"

Esme was rail thin, easily five feet nine tall and she knew she had the face Alessandro genuinely used for his models, big eyes, high cheekbones, and luscious lips. Yet, she was working behind the scenes and Mackenna was curious as to why.

She made a face as she sat down. "I walked for Alessandro last year in Paris and Milan and then I fainted backstage."

Mackenna knew the modelling world was fraught with such stories, so she didn't quite understand how this was extraordinary and Esme knew.

"I have an eating disorder," she whispered, "and Alessandro immediately had me pulled from the line when the doctors reported my kidneys were failing."

"Oh Esme," she covered her mouth in horror. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Alessandro covered all my medical bills and a treatment program. He even came to a counselling session with me to make it clear he has no expectations of me to be a certain size to wear his clothes. He also told me if I decided I never wanted to walk a runway again, he would find a job for me within House of Giordano to would remove the pressures of looking a certain way."

Mackenna smiled as she realized this was more in keeping with the kind of man, she'd known her husband to be in the first year they were married. Kind, compassionate and responsible.

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pays me the same he did when I modelled so I can still take care of my family back home in Bergamo. He set me up as Samuel's assistant and I won't lie, I don't know which of them is worse," she rolled her eyes, "the super model or the drag queen. But I'm genuinely happy for the first time in a long time. I know women under other contracts who would have been dropped and left to fend for themselves. Alessandro didn't. He even managed to get me into a local group counselling for eating disorders and makes sure I have a ride there and back."

"He's a good man but can I just say, how brave I think you are?" Mackenna patted the girl's knee. "It's hard to get up and leave your entire family behind to start out for yourself in another country and while you're still healing and getting better. If you need anything, anything at all, you call me." She motioned for the girl to pass her cell phone over and she plugged her number into it. "Anytime. Got it?"

"Yes, thanks Mackenna." She chuckled then, "and it wasn't too hard to leave my parents behind. They've been trading off my looks since I was a preteen and I love them but really, my mother is part of my problem with food so it's actually a lot easier than you would guess."

Esme got up and walked away leaving Mackenna to finish her lunch and Mackenna's gaze turned to where her husband was leaned over Samuel's shoulder at a desk pointing out a change he wanted, and she noticed the clasp on the younger man's shoulder and Samuel's ease with him. Alessandro had simply accepted this man as he was, flamboyant, drag queen by night and felt no threat to his machismo by him at all. As she looked around the room, she realized for the first time, without Dulce in the room, the entire atmosphere around Alessandro was relaxed, vibrant and accepting.

As she chewed her food, she was thoughtful as she wondered if Dulce's behaviour without the influence of Salvatore would be as relaxed or if she would continue to display the diva-like behaviour for which she was known. Only time would tell but for now, Mackenna admitted, she was glad to have her husband away from the woman so she could experience him as his own person.



Mackenna couldn't lie, she was loving the dress Alessandro had insisted she wear tonight for dinner. It was a black cocktail dress but to call it a little black dress was an understatement. The dress fit her body tightly, contouring her every curve as if a glove but the material expanded with her. Mackenna was convinced the dress was magical because she felt tucked in yet able to breathe all at once and kept turning to look at herself sideways in the mirror. She didn't know what kind of soft luxurious material the dress was made of so, she told them all, it was made of angel wings and pixie dust.

The dress came up in a mock neck but just under the collar, which she had jokingly said reminded her of a priest's collar, the material was cut away almost in a diamond shape to her navel and was held together with black lace, her skin peeking through, revealing the swell of her breasts without being overtly s\*\*\*\*l. It was sexy but not s\*x, she had tried to explain as she continued to stare at herself.

Samuel had expertly covered all her bruises on her face and even any on her torso which had threatened to show out the side of her dress. Her make-up was minimal apart from the dark red lipstick he insisted she wear.

Alessandro had specifically requested she wear her hair in a high ponytail the way she had the night they'd gone dancing, and Samuel had trimmed her fringe delicately framing her face. Alessandro had asked Samuel to put a clip of a bright purple hair around the base of the ponytail and then trail it through and when his eyes met hers in the mirror as Samuel worked on her, she knew he was enjoying how glamorous she was.

As Samuel walked away muttering something about shoes, Alessandro leaned over her. "I am regretting agreeing to dinner. I want to go home and have my dessert first."

She pursed her lips and accepted the kiss he gave her, laughing as Samuel screeched about ruining his perfect lipstick.

"Kiss her after," Samuel pushed him away from Mackenna and draped a material over his shoulder before kneeling to help her step into a pair of shoes. "Mac, walk in these please so I can see whether I need to adjust them."

"How do you adjust a shoe?" Mackenna scowled at him but did as he instructed.

He held up a tiny piece of fabric, "I'll have the girls stitch this in the back to keep the heel from slipping." He made her step out of the shoes again and then passed them to Esme who hightailed it back to the girls. Mackenna heard one of them mumble something about not being cobblers and she chuckled at the words. They were all tired. It was now gone six.

Mackenna looked at Alessandro, "so I'm all gussied up, what are you wearing?"

"My suit is in my office," he shrugged, "it will take me ten minutes to change and shave."

"Don't," she and Samuel both spoke at the same time and then she giggled. "I'm learning this but I'm pretty sure Samuel and I have different reasons for not wanting you to shave."

Samuel smirked, "girl, I'm sure you're right but it gives a less refined look and if you're trying to make things appear less intense than the media is portraying, having Mackenna dolled up and you looking a bit rough round the edges is better from a PR perspective."

"I just want to feel the stubble on my,"

"Mackenna," Alessandro spun her to face him, pulling her to his chest, "enough of such talk in front of my staff."

"Staff," Samuel grinned, "Mac and Savannah once spent an entire night in my apartment while I cried brokenheartedly into a bucket of Ben and Jerry's. I might be your staff, but I'm her friend." He winked, "you

Mackenna giggled as Alessandro vehemently protested such a conversation and turned back to look in the floor length mirror. The only thing throwing off her entire look was the white bandage running from her wrist to the middle of her bicep. She made a face at it and then looked to see Alessandro and Samuel both laughing at her in the mirror. "What?"

Samuel pulled the material he'd flung over his shoulder. "Well, we had the option of Breakfast at Tiffany's gloves or this," he reached out and very gingerly lifted her arm. It was the same lace covering her cleavage but thicker somehow, "bolero," he gently pulled it over her arm and then adjusted it up over her shoulder before helping her with her other arm. He fit the cover to almost be tucked into the collar so it appeared a seamless transition.

"Damn," Esme said as she reappeared with the shoes. "Alessandro, you're a bloody genius."

"Thank you but my muse gets all the credit, she makes the dress," Alessandro was eyeing Mackenna the way she expected a child eyed sweets in a candy shop.

Mackenna shivered under the intensity of his golden gaze in the mirror and swallowed deeply as he simply turned on his heel and walked away in the direction of his office.

"One of us is getting lucky tonight and it's not me," Samuel whispered in a sing-song voice while Esme got her into the shoes.

Daria approached, "Alessandro reminded me to put her in earrings. Just earrings and no other jewelry." She held up a tiny black box. "Also, he pulled this out of thin air so I'm not sure where it came from."

Mackenna laughed as she opened the box and found a pair of pristine diamond stud earrings.

"There's a reason he's the best of the best," Samuel whistled lowly as he watched Mackenna put them in her ears. "You look youthful yet elegant, sexy yet demure, dangerous and safe. You Mackenna Giordano are every straight man's fantasy right now."

Mackenna blushed at Samuel's words. "Thank you."

Esme pushed a small black clutch in her good hand. "This should fit your cell phone, the lipstick and a credit card but that's about it."

Mackenna shrugged, "I'm not paying for dinner so won't need a credit card."

The sound of the office doors opening made them all turn and Mackenna grinned widely as her bodyguard stepped onto the floor. "Nuncio!"

"Wow, you clean up good Signora," Nuncio grinned at her as he approached. His footsteps faltered as he took in Samuel. "I know you from somewhere."

Samuel started singing his rendition of Papa Loves Mambo and Nuncio froze before erupting into a wide grin.

"You are my man crush!" he immediately clapped Samuel on the shoulder and brought him in for a hug. "Your performance was incredible Friday night. Loved it."

"Do I even want to know?" Carlos who was coming in behind him asked. "Why is my baby brother hugging Alessandro's gay assistant?"

Nuncio grinned at his brother and then back to Mackenna and Samuel as he made introductions. Carlos looked less than enthused. "We have to bring them."

"We do," she agreed, "I already told Alessandro we're going."

"Excellent, next time Savannah gets a night off, we'll all go." Nuncio was all teeth with his smile.

"She messaged me earlier, she's working another double?" Mackenna made a face.

"Where were you two all day?" Mackenna asked them. The brothers exchanged a look, and she rolled her eyes. "Seriously, you're not going to tell me?"

"Signora, there are things you need not worry your pretty head about," Carlos met her gaze head on, and she had an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

"Is everything okay? I haven't been online or anything," she suddenly worried the entire world had collapsed while Alessandro had monopolized her day.

"Everything is fine, Mac," Nuncio reassured her. "We had some security things we needed to sort out because Salvatore is home on house arrest." As Carlos growled Nuncio turned to him. "It is her safety I am concerned about and hiding things from her is not going to keep her safe. Alessandro would tell her anyway."

"It's fine," she smiled at Carlos, "I already knew he was released." She saw Carlos' eyes widen in surprise. "Alessandro told me Saturday when I was in the hospital. Salvatore has friends in low places, but I know you will all keep me safe. I am not afraid of him."

"Where is Alessandro," Carlos asked and then moved in the direction Mackenna pointed.

"Why is he so uptight?" Mackenna wrinkled her nose at Carlos as she linked arms with Nuncio, walking away from where Samuel and his team were cleaning up from their day. All her new clothes had been boxed and a delivery company was due in minutes to pick it all up. They were making sure everything was accounted for.

"Salvatore made a threat today."

"Oh, how do you know this?"

"Because we have his house bugged but he also said it straight to Alessandro's father," Nuncio explained.

"Am I in danger?" she asked earnestly

"No, he is though," Nuncio grimaced quietly, "the Giordano family is tired of the old man being a loose cannon. I believe Rosetta threatened to expose a bunch of dirty secrets if he didn't reign himself in. He threatened to have her killed."

"What is his problem?"

"Who knows the mind of a sociopath," Nuncio patted her hand. "Tonight, you have fun with your husband, enjoy the food at this fancy restaurant you are going to and relax. I do have a favor though."

"Of course, Nuncio, anything."

"Please do not run off from Alessandro tonight." He held her gaze seriously and tilted her chin. "We will keep you safe but if you start ducking in and out of alleys and coffee shops it will make our job so much harder and so I beg of you to please, reign your bad temper in for one night."

She nodded slowly, "I promise Nuncio, I'll be on my best behaviour."

"If you need to leave, if he pisses you off or you can't take the people you are dining with tonight, then you give me a hand signal and I will take you out of the restaurant and home. Understood? No drama, no hysterics and no running."

"Hand signal?" She grinned suddenly as she held up her middle finger, "like this?"

He pinched her cheek, "sassy. Just motion for me. I will know."

"Okay," she took a breath. "How sad is it we are considering he will make me so angry I will bolt from a dinner?"

"You are both short-tempered passionate people. I am hoping for both of your sakes you can behave

“Do I even want to know what you two are discussing?” Alessandro had quietly approached them, and he almost smiled at Mackenna’s jump but they appeared to be plotting.

“Nuncio was telling me he can’t protect me if I bolt from the restaurant in the event, you make me angry.” She felt no need to hide anything from him.

“There is always a distinct possibility isn’t there?” he smirked suddenly and drew her to his side, kissing her temple. “I will be on my best behaviour. No need for Nuncio to worry.”

Carlos approached, “the car is waiting downstairs. Let’s go. You have twenty minutes before your reservations. Rio is in the car with the driver. We have a team already stationed at the restaurant and I paid the owner a stupid amount of money to allow us to sit at a table near you.”

Mackenna realized the man was revealing this information for her benefit and she looked at Alessandro in surprise as they walked towards the elevators.

He shrugged at her unasked questions, “it is of no use for me to hide anything from you, my love. It simply gets me in trouble and upsets you. Salvatore threatened your life and my mother’s life today. He told my father he said it only in anger and frustration, but he’d never truly carry out such a thing, but we don’t trust him. He’s a fool if he thinks we believe anything coming from his mouth.” They entered the elevator. “He spent many years manipulating us and I won’t allow him to do it any longer. We will live our lives as we are meant to and if it means we have Carlos and Nuncio providing extra protection for a short while, then this is what will happen.”

She stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he looked down at her in surprise.

“For talking to me like your wife and not your child,” she smiled up at him. “I appreciate you treating me as your equal.”

He gave a throaty laugh, “we are not equals.” As she swung her clutch at him, he laughed, “you are by far superior to me in every way. I am simply learning my place.”

“Damn right,” she grinned as she hugged him tight. “But I mean it Alessandro. There was a time you would dictate and order and not talk to me. It makes my heart happy when you talk with me.”

“Just proves it then, doesn’t it?” he asked with a half-smile.

“What?”

He winked at her, “you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Mackenna was nervous and as Alessandro escorted her to the table the host was leading them towards, she felt her stomach doing flips and flops in every direction. This was the first time she was being presented as Alessandro's wife in a work situation and she knew how important this was to him and she was scared she would mess it up.

She was emotional and raw from all the events of the last several months and if she were honest, she was terrified she would blurt out something inappropriate and cost him a lucrative contract with a model he really wanted for his new line.

She was glad to see they had arrived ahead of the family they were meeting as they took their seats and when Alessandro ordered her a glass of wine, she refused it asking for sparkling water instead.

"No wine?" he asked curiously, suddenly noting how pale she was. "Mackenna, you look very pale. I will cancel this, and we will go home right now. I pushed you too hard today I think."

"No," she shook her head. "I am simply nervous and combining a glass of wine with the pain tablet I took earlier, well, I'm worried my mouth might get ahead of my brain. I don't want to say the wrong thing which forces you to miss an opportunity."

He tilted her chin, so she met his eyes, "my love, you come first. I am not concerned about you speaking the truth, any of your feelings or what you've been through."

"You're not?" she was incredulous.

"Mackenna, I don't know how many more ways to tell you, I should have listened better, and I didn't. What you went through was because I did not do my job as a good husband should have. I will never discount your feelings again and so if you feel compelled to share anything tonight, know, with all my heart, I will not be upset or angry with you. If I do react or get upset, it will be at myself, at Dulce, at Salvatore but never at you." His words were earnest and thoughtful, and he leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. "I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered holding his gaze steady before reaching up to touch his cheek. "I'll be okay, I promise."

Movements crossing the restaurant caught both their eyes and they turned to watch the confident young woman and her parents striding towards them. Mackenna's breath caught, "wow, she's stunning. Those eyes." The woman, walked with purpose and poise, her confidence exuding off her in waves.

Alessandro chuckled as he moved to stand, "wait for the mouth. It's something else."

"Alessandro," Whitney extended her hand in his direction and offered her cheek to him for a kiss. "I was hoping to be on time but one of us is a model and one of us is a mother of a model and yet it was my father who couldn't figure out what to wear." She rolled her eyes at her father.

Mackenna knew intuitively the man was uncomfortable and as she stood, she reached out to clasp his hand. "Hi, I'm Mackenna. You can sit by me, and we can hide behind menus together and try to blend into the background."

"George, he replied, "thank God," the man said as he moved near her, "she's American and appears to be normal." He ignored the way his wife slapped at him.

Mackenna shook Whitney's hand and then her mother's, Tallulah. "It's so nice to meet you."

"I love your dress," Whitney said with a smile. "An Alessandro creation I expect?"

"Yes, and I won't lie, I feel incredible in it. There's something about having someone fit the dress to you instead of trying to fit to the dress," Mackenna smoothed her clammy hands along the fabric as she took her seat again.

Mackenna grinned broadly at the woman's brashness, knowing immediately how the evening was going to go. "I was really worried about it to be honest," she lifted her arm up, "if you look closely, you can see the white bandages peeking through."

"Are you okay?" Whitney asked curiously.

"Yes," she shrugged, "I just moved into a new place two weekends ago," she realized she may as well just get it out there and over with, "and I was sitting on the sofa. My roommate Savannah insisted we get this bright white area rug and I picked out a glass table. When I went to move away from the sofa, I tripped on the damn rug and right into the glass table." She wrinkled her nose, "thank god my best friend is a trauma doctor."

"Why do you have a roommate if you're married," Tallulah asked her eyes narrowing as she flicked her glance between Mackenna and Alessandro.

"Mom," Whitney hissed at her, her cheeks going pink.

"No, it's okay." Mackenna shook her head. "It's why we are here right? You want to know what's up and whether Whitney is going to be well cared for under Alessandro's label." Mackenna took a breath. "I'll answer your questions, but I need your assurances what is said stays between us."

"Of course, what is said at this table stays at this table," George eyed the two women of his family seriously and they both nodded.

"What do you want to know?"

"I want your story. I want to know why you've been apart and back together after so long." She looked Alessandro up and down. "The tabloids are saying he's blackmailing you and you tried to kill yourself just to get away."

Mackenna was surprised at her candor. "Nothing is further from the truth. I fell into a table after tripping over an area rug. It was purely accidental."

"And being blackmailed? I know the press is now saying it was his grandfather in the video Dulce released but does the apple fall far from the tree?"

"Mom!" Whitney glared at her mother.

"I am not being blackmailed," Mackenna negated the allegation. "Alessandro and I are married, but we are working through things. When we met, I was young, and I didn't communicate very well. Alessandro thought I was just being jealous of his friend. Had we actually had conversations instead of arguments, perhaps things would be different today."

Alessandro shifted uncomfortably in his seat, aware Mackenna was taking too much of the blame on her own shoulders. "No, not all true my love. You're sugar-coating things." He took her fingers in his and placed them on his lap.

Alessandro took a breath, "The truth is Tallulah, I was so bent on making House of Giordano even bigger than it already was, I was single-mindedly focused on doing whatever it took to make it happen and it included being at Dulce's beck and call. I know how much I love my wife. I know how much she loves me. I took for granted because we loved each other, she would simply understand the lengths I went to, to ensure my company's success. Including dancing in nightclubs for publicity's sake or attending parties with Dulce to get her face plastered everywhere. I was arrogant and bullheaded in thinking Mackenna should have supported my desire to get to the top the way I supported her getting her college degree. They were not even close to the same thing. I should have seen she was trying to tell me what was happening,

Mackenna squeezed his fingers and met his gaze with a sigh. "We both messed up."

"One of us clearly more than the other," he shook his head.

"Agreed," she smirked suddenly and was rewarded when he hooked his arm around her neck and rubbed his face in her hair.

"Were you sleeping with Dulce?" Tallulah asked and when her daughter groaned in embarrassment and George gave a snort in his wife's direction she shrugged. "This is my only child and I want to make sure some lothario isn't going to seduce her and drag her through the mud like Dulce is going through right now."

Mackenna spoke quietly, "Dulce has her own reasons for all she's done, and they are not my reasons to divulge. I will say she and I have made our peace. I know with certainty my husband has never slept with her and I trust him implicitly. Dulce's in the mess she's in now because of her own actions. The only reason she is being dragged through the mud are choices she elected to make. I do not harbour any ill-will towards her because I know her side of the story. If or when she decides to speak about her reasons for the things she's done, it will be her decision."

Alessandro spoke, "Dulce displayed an incredible lack of judgement. Mackenna is more forgiving than I."

They were interrupted as the server brought them menus and took their drink orders.

"You sound bitter about Dulce," Tallulah spoke not looking up from her menu. "Why?"

"She alleges her reason for being duplicitous was because my grandfather blackmailed her. Dulce was supposed to be my friend and I was supposed to be hers. I looked upon her as a little sister, closer really than my own sister. Had she come to me with the information my grandfather was blackmailing her, I could have protected her. Her refusal to trust me with the information and instead to comply with the directives she was given by a madman cost me my wife, my marriage and people I love very dearly."

"Your grandparents," Whitney said quietly. "They were killed in the car accident, and it was him who hired the guy to run you off the road."

"And our child," Mackenna spoke as softly, and pursed her lips tightly. "The reason Salvatore hired him was because I was pregnant. He did not want my child to be the heir to House of Giordano."

Tallulah gasped and covered her mouth, "no!"

"Yes," Alessandro pulled Mackenna tighter to his side. "Had Dulce come to me sooner, all of this would have been avoided. I could have managed things years ago but for her own reasons, she felt she was unable to talk to me. So yes, I am bitter with her." He kissed Mackenna's knuckles, "my wife is trying to teach me how to be forgiving. It is not a lesson I am learning quickly."

"How could you forgive someone who allowed such atrocities to happen to the people you love?" George asked curiously, no judgement apparent in his voice.

"I am finding it most difficult," Alessandro admitted.

"As I said," Mackenna repeated, "her reasons are not ours to disclose. I am uncertain in her position how I would have reacted."

"Can I ask one other question," Tallulah queried quietly as she absorbed the information.

"Of course." Mackenna nodded, dreading the fierce look in the woman's eyes.

"His best friend and his grandfather set out to ruin your life. Why are you here? In your shoes, I'd be long gone." She looked to her husband, "I love you George, but this is some messed up crap."

Mackenna took a breath. "I did leave. I was gone for five years. I was in Milan to file our divorce when

DOCTOR PORTMAN is a world-renowned orthopedic surgeon, and he was recommended by the surgeon in Paris. It was purely coincidental. It put us into each other's lives again and it's allowing us to try to work through our issues. It isn't easy. I have a bad temper and his is worse," she grinned at him suddenly, "but we're trying."

"But you still live apart," Tallulah pushed.

"Mackenna has been through too much as a result of the actions of me and my family for me to simply demand we live together," Alessandro spoke quietly. "We have been apart for more than five years and to wait to have her with me for the rest of our lives is something I am more than willing to do."

"What if she said she couldn't ever live with you and couldn't be your wife again?"

In Mackenna's opinion this woman was far beyond nosy, and Alessandro must really like her daughter to put up with it. Questioning things in the past was one thing, projecting into the future was an entirely different matter. She waited impatiently for his response.

"It's not an option for me to consider."

"Consider it," Tallulah pushed. "She's her own woman, with a new life and she seems pretty damn smart. You've dragged her through hell. You're uprooting everything to move her for the possibility she might take you back. What if she doesn't? I sure as hell wouldn't."

The woman's voice held an accusatory tone and Mackenna bristled under it.

"Enough," Mackenna spoke sharply. "Tallulah, I understand you're trying to protect your daughter and I told Alessandro I would support him tonight and be here and answer whatever questions you had because of the damn tabloids but I will not have you attack him just because you think you have the right to know what goes on in our personal relationship. I'm done." Alessandro gave her hand a warning squeeze, but she shook her head.

"No, Alessandro, it's not right. You want to know what kind of man your daughter will be working for, let me tell you. Today I listened to a model tell me when he discovered she had an eating disorder, he pulled her from the runway, paid her medical bills, got her to counselling, and helped her get healthy with lots of love and support. His design assistant is a beloved treasure here in Phoenix as a young drag queen and I watched today as Alessandro treated him as a peer and an equal, took him seriously and treated him with respect. He donated a ton of his own money to the hospital ward where his protégé was being treated because he was amazed at the good work they do. He paid all of Dulce's medical bills out of his own pocket because it was the right thing to do. He is patient and kind and loving. He has a strong good heart and, despite the things happening in our marriage, I love him. Yes, we are living apart right now but we are both healing after many losses and upheavals. I am grateful I am blessed with a husband who will wait for me to recover without pressuring me or giving me deadlines. He wants to collaborate with your daughter because he respects her drive, determination, and her spunk. Do you know how many models would be thrilled to work under Alessandro Giordano, scandal, or no scandal? You have been nothing but disrespectful, insinuating he's going to seduce her or treat her poorly because you're basing your opinions on garbage you read in a tabloid and then you sit here and try to goad us both into revealing things which are none of your damn business. You're worse than the tabloids. Shame on you!" She pushed her water glass away, "I need a minute."

She stood up and walked in the direction of the bathroom, feeling the surprised and stunned expressions of four pair of eyes following her as she stomped away.