

Mackenna stood staring in the bathroom mirror wishing Samuel hadn't done such a great job on her make-up because she really wanted to splash some water on her face. She was angry and irritated she'd let the woman get under her skin. She had done exactly what she had feared she would do and had ruined the evening and she didn't even have the excuse of mixing wine with her pain tablets.

The door to the bathroom opened with a creak and she looked up aware it was a public bathroom so any number of patrons could come into the room. She was surprised to see Alessandro there.

"I'm sorry Alessandro, I blew it for you. I am so sorry," she felt a tear sliding down her cheek.

He reached out and pulled her into his arms and kissed her temple rubbing her back. "You have nothing to apologize for. George and Whitney are tearing Tallulah a new one right now. I came here to hide with you." He chuckled lowly, the sound making her look up in surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes," he hugged her tight. "Thank you for all the kind things you said. You didn't need to."

"I did. She's mean and nosy," she protested, "but I could have held my temper better."

"You're half Italian, my love. You could no more hold your temper than I could." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Come, let's go sit down. We can have dinner. If Whitney and her family stay, we will have dinner together, if not, it will be the two of us. You look beautiful and I am enjoying having you with me."

"Even if I embarrass you?" she whispered pitifully.

"Never! You could never embarrass me. You are the best thing in my world Mackenna. Come now," he led her out of the bathroom.

She smiled as she saw Nuncio standing there. "I'm surprised you didn't follow me in as well."

"Into the girl's bathroom?" he wrinkled his nose. "Your life wasn't in danger so no. I am not going into the girls room."

He escorted them back to their table and Mackenna took a breath as everyone stood up as Alessandro pulled out her chair.

"I apologize for my outburst," Mackenna said quietly.

"No, you have nothing to apologize for," Whitney spoke sharply. "My mother was absolutely out of line and," she glared at her mother, "well?"

"I'm sorry for being so intrusive. It is none of my business and you were both very forthcoming and I took my questions too far. I apologize."

Alessandro nodded. "Apologies all around then," he rolled his shoulders out, "now the ugliness is out of the way," he waved to the server, "I'd very much like to get something to eat. I put Mackenna through the wringer this afternoon with a new wardrobe and we are both quite hungry now."

"Are you sure you want us to stay?" Whitney asked seriously. "I'd completely understand if you told us to get lost."

"No, please stay," Mackenna smiled warmly. "I'd like to hope the rest of the evening is salvageable."

"I have a confession," Tallulah remarked with a grin. "I thought you were a doormat, and he was a bully. You're a bit of a spitfire, aren't you? He has his hands full."

"Mom!" Whitney turned fully to face her. "Enough."

Alessandro chuckled, "the day I met Mackenna was the first time I had ever met anyone who didn't immediately fawn all over me and try to smooth my feathers when they were ruffled."

"You tried to kill me with your sports car," she repeated for what was likely the millionth time in their

"She slapped me and ran." Alessandro looked to George. "I spent the next day trying to find her. I wasn't sure if I wanted to slap her ass for being a child or take her home."

The man chuckled, "and you found her."

"Working at my company no less, she was interning there in our accounting department. I immediately believed God had put her in my path. I had been going through some things with my family pushing me and then this, spitfire, I think is the word you used Tallulah, was dropped in front of me like a gift from the heavens." He touched her cheek gently, "I married her as fast as I could. Her grandfather told me the day I met her she was special, and he would not tolerate me toying with his only grandchild so if I were going to be part of her life, I was either all in or I could get lost. I went all in."

"Sounds like your grandfather was protective," George said. "Tallulah's dad put a shotgun at me when he caught us in the back of my car."

"Dad!" Whitney's cheeks turned bright pink as she let her blonde hair cover her face in mortification.

Mackenna laughed at him, "it wasn't my grandfather Alessandro need fear. It was my grandmother. My mother and I inherited our tempers from her."

"Yes, Enzo demanded my intentions, and he was blustering and puffed up. Sofia was quiet and said nothing but then she was cooking us dinner in their home, and she made sure I was very aware of her knife skills as she used a cleaver to take a chicken apart." He mocks shuddered, "she would not say too much but she could reduce you to tears with a simple glance." He paused suddenly, his eyes filling with unshed tears, "I really miss them."

Mackenna squeezed his fingers, "me too." She looked to Whitney and her family, "Alessandro had weekly and sometimes more than weekly contact with my family even when we were separated. He saw them much more than I did since I was here, and they were there. My grandmother told me she had gotten so used to him showing up unexpectedly she kept his favorite drinks and snacks on hand."

"I would go to their apartment and sit there for hours in the hopes you would call, and I'd hear your voice," he admitted.

"You stole their phone bill to see if you could trace the number I was calling from," she rolled her eyes.

"I stole multiple phone bills," he grinned suddenly with no remorse. He looked back to his menu, "had I known Dulce breaking her leg would have brought me to you, I would have pushed her off the runway years ago."

The table gasped and Mackenna laughed. "Sorry, you'll get used to his odd sense of humour." She was hoping he was joking. The way his cheeks were pulled up told her he was smiling but his eyes were fixed on his menu. She slapped at his arm, and he looked up with a devilish grin.

"I am joking but in fairness, Dulce has said she would have definitely taken one for team Alessandro."

"I thought she hated you," Whitney looked to Mackenna confused.

"Again, as Mackenna has stated before, she has her own reasons for doing what she did and they are hers to disclose but when it was just us, Dulce was Mackenna's biggest supporter. I did not realize until we were here in Phoenix it was Dulce releasing all the lies to the press and the way she was treating Mackenna when I wasn't around to hear it. What she portrayed to me as my friend was a completely different side than what the rest of the world was getting. I feel I was played like a fiddle." Alessandro made a face as if he were tasting something bitter and then smiled suddenly and looked to Tallulah, "I should pay you the rate I pay my counsellor. I'm spilling more tonight than I have in three months of sessions."



"Yes," Alessandro shrugged, "it's an American thing, isn't it? In Italy, you just get on with it. I realized my upbringing and my circumstances were keeping me from connecting with my wife on a level I needed to. One of her friends at the hospital suggested I needed help. I thought maybe it couldn't hurt."

"Which friend?" This was the first time Mackenna had heard of this.

"Derrick Portman," he shrugged, "the day Dulce was being released he pulled me aside, told me I was an i\*\*\*t. Said only an absolute fool would not see how I was being played by my friend and what it was costing me. He said I needed psychiatric help because only a crazy person would pick Dulce over Mac," he quoted and then looked at her. "I really do not like how they all call you Mac."

"You're changing the subject," she pursed her lips. "Portman said this to you?"

"Yes, he did. He said it, gave me the card of someone he recommended and told me I had better do right by you because you're too special to let get away."

"I'll have his balls for breakfast," she looked away and back to her menu.

"Why?" Whitney asked enjoying the openness of the couple in front of them.

"Back then, we were not together," she waved her hand between them, "thus my friend was cavorting with the enemy."

"Your friend was putting you ahead of his own wants and desires and I respect him for it." Alessandro corrected. "I have talked to him many times to get his perspective on how to approach things, not just with you but in general. He's a good person and he's become a good friend."

She contemplated it and shook her head. "It's a good thing he's my friend, otherwise he and I would be having words."

The waiter came back to take their orders and Mackenna made a face, "I don't even know what to order. I'm so far beyond hungry now."

"Get the linguine," Alessandro shrugged, "you love pasta, and it comes with a large side of cheese bread."

George dropped his menu on his plate in surprise. "You're telling your wife to get carbs?"

"I'm telling my wife to get what she loves." He took a breath, "George, I know this is a foreign concept in my business and I'm definitely throwing a match on gasoline with my counterparts in haute couture, but this industry has been toxic and shaming women for their bodies for far too long. I enjoy the curves of my wife but it's what is inside of her which makes me love and adore her. She has heart and passion. She is fiery, spunky, and determined. She makes me think and consider things in ways I never have before. She is my muse. How could I expect my muse to conform to something ninety-nine percent of the population of women could never reach without making themselves terribly ill?" He looked to Whitney his eyes profoundly serious, "I am not interested in having you walk my runway if you are hungry or ill or feeling you have to look a certain way to fit in. I want you because you throw your middle finger up to the world and do things the way you want. If you don't like something, tell me, and fight me on it. I promise to listen. If you want to gain weight and be four sizes heavier, I don't care. If you want to be smaller, then that's okay too. It's your body. All I ask is you take care of your body. Treat it well. I never want to hear the words diet or sample size in my presence. There is no room in my new line for such things. I want you to be you Whitney, just you."

Mackenna wiped a tear off her cheek at her husband's impassioned speech and saw Tallulah do the same. George was stumped and Whitney had leaned back in her chair and was watching him seriously.

"What if I gain five pounds the day before a show?"

“It’s why I hire the best in modistes, they will fix it. God, I remember Mackenna complaining she could gain five pounds once a month,” he looked at her suddenly, his eyes wide. “Did you know many models don’t have monthly cycles because of the abuse they put their bodies through? My mother told me this recently and I was horrified. She said she went several years on such a strict regimen of diet it almost destroyed her organs.” He shook his head. “No, moving forward the women I surround myself with will not be subjected to this kind of torture. I want vibrant healthy women living their best lives to represent this line.”

He seemed oblivious to the stunned gazes around the table as he went back to perusing the menu. “Or men,” he spoke suddenly, “I wouldn’t mind having men or trans men or women or even non-binary on the line. After talking to Samuel, he mentioned a friend of his who would be perfect for one of the dresses we vetoed off your collection today. He said they were struggling to get recognition. I told him to send them to me and we would see what we could do.”

George choked on his water and Mackenna patted his back.

This was the Alessandro she had fallen in love with years ago. The kind, compassionate man who respected people and enjoyed being thrown into situations which could be construed as difficult or embarrassing but leaning into it and learning from it. Supportive and kind. Somehow, along the way he’d lost some of this and she was so proud to be sitting there with him, at his side as he reminded her of all the good things she had once loved so much about him.

As they stepped into the condo Nuncio and Carlos immediately went through and made sure they were safe before they were permitted all the way inside and Mackenna wrinkled her nose at their actions. They were taking Salvatore's threat from earlier in the day very seriously even though he was an ocean away.

She started to walk towards her bedroom but stopped when she realized Alessandro was not following her. She turned to look at him. "What's wrong?"

"You are exhausted."

"I know," she didn't deny it. "My head is throbbing, my arm is aching and after going through the inquisition earlier tonight, I know my emotions are raw. I'm ready for bed."

"I will let you get some rest," he stepped forward and kissed her cheek.

"You're not staying?" she queried quietly

"I feel as if I've put you through the wringer today and perhaps you might sleep better on your own." He seemed unsure as he ruffled his hair with his fingers. "I am not ready for bed, and I have a lot I need to work on."

"You've worked here the last two nights. Is this something you need to do at your office?"

"No," he denied.

"Then why do you need to leave?" She felt tears welling in her eyes. "If you don't want to stay, then just say you don't want to stay. It's because I messed up tonight, right?"

"No," he protested seriously and then grimaced, "you did not mess up. You were incredible. I just feel I put a lot on you today while you are supposed to be healing. You are pale and even Samuel's make-up is not hiding the bruises under your eyes. I am feeling guilty for forcing you to do too much. I just want you to have a good night's sleep without me intruding." He stared into her eyes and noted the dejection. "I feel I am always forcing my life onto yours and right now you do not look well Mackenna. I noticed you holding your head in the car and I'm feeling a complete jerk for putting you through the wardrobe today and then dinner tonight. I should have paced things better. If I stay, then I'm afraid I will keep you awake and you will get ill. I'm trying to be respectful."

"Alessandro," she stared up at him and let out a sigh, "I need to go to bed. You can work in the living room, or you can work in the chair in the bedroom, or you can sit in the bed propped up with pillows. I don't care. You're not leaving. I need you to stay because I don't feel well. I need my husband to stay and be with me." She watched as a hundred emotions crossed his face with relief as the last of them before he nodded and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"It's settled then, let's get you ready for bed." He let her lead him down the hall to her bedroom and he turned the light in the bathroom on. "Would you like a hot bath before bed? I can run it for you?"

"No, I just want my bed." She shook her head and grimaced at the action as it throbbed. She watched him disappear into the walk-in closet and reappear with a silk nightdress dangling from his fingertips. "Oo, pretty."

"It is and it's also going to be easier to get you into than anything else," he lay it at the foot of the bed and started to undress her by gingerly removing the bolero. He helped her step out of the dress and he tossed it over the back of a chair. At her huff, he chuckled, "I promise to hang it up. I know you don't like things hanging over your vanity chair."

She mumbled something incoherent, and he knew he'd guessed her irritation correctly. He helped her out of her undergarments and then into the silk creation. He pulled the sheets back and held her arm as



He walked out of the room and reappeared several minutes later with pain tablets and a glass of water. Making certain she took the medications he tucked the blankets up to her chin and kissed her cheek.

“You’re not leaving, right?” she fought the sleep pulling on her eyelids.

“No,” he touched her cheek softly, “I’m going to grab my laptop and sketchbook and I’ll be sitting right there,” he pointed to the other side of the bed.

His words seemed to have reassured her and she immediately fell into a deep sleep.

In the early morning hours Mackenna rolled over and reached for him and found he was not there, and she sat up in the bed in confusion.

“I’m here my love,” he spoke quietly as he stepped back into the bedroom. “I had a call from my father and didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Is everything alright?” she saw the concern etched on his face in the light from the hall.

“No,” he admitted and rounded the bed to sit beside her. “Salvatore is missing.”

Her hand immediately went to her mouth. “How?”

“I don’t know,” he shook his head in disbelief. “I have his house being watched and there’s been no activity in or out. My father cut his phone lines and took his cell phone. I do not know whether he had another phone or not.”

“Do you think he’s coming here?”

“He had to surrender his passport when he made bail. He is quite recognizable so it’s not likely. It’s unsettling. My father is furious, and he has my mother on edge.”

She remembered the man had threatened his mother. “Is Rosetta, okay? She must be terrified.”

“She is fine. She dared the man to approach her, and she’d show him what happens to someone who takes her family away from her. She is quite angry.”

Mackenna gave a surprised gasp and he chuckled. “My mother is your champion Mackenna. She’s been yelling at me for years. She was looking forward to being a Nonna and he stole it from her. She wants her pound of flesh.”

“Don’t we all,” she muttered dryly. “We will have our day in court I hope.”

“Mm,” he looked away and she tried not to consider what he was contemplating.

“So now what?”

“Now, we continue as we have been. Carlos’ team in Milan is working to find him. Because he was under house arrest, he’s broken the conditions of his bail, so the police are also looking for him. We will find him.” Alessandro spoke quietly. “I would like for you to stay home today and not venture anywhere. If nothing more than for mine and Nuncio’s peace of mind.”

“You’re going to the office?” she questioned

“Yes,” he nodded, “but not for a few hours. It’s just five. I was hoping to come hold you for a bit longer before I get showered and head over.”

“I would like very much for you to come hold me.” She waited for him to round the bed and then once he was in the sheets, she lay her head on his chest, draping her arm over his waist.

His arms moved to wrap around her, and she noted he was holding her more tightly than usual. “Are you okay Alessandro?”

He was quiet for a moment at her question and then he let out a long slow breath. “I would be lying if I

about my friends and my family over the last several months have me questioning my judgement. I am trying to take lessons from you, to surround myself with, as your friend Derrick said, good people but I'm finding myself questioning all the people I've had in my life and I'm regretful to have allowed them a place in my heart. I should have seen the truth of my grandfather by the way he treated my grandmother, but I turned a blind eye because he was my grandfather. In doing so, I've put the rest of my family at risk. I should have protected my grandmother better. I should have protected my mother and my wife and our unborn child. Now he's out enjoying whatever freedom he's just found, and I am sick for it."

She lay with her cheek pressed against his bare chest and listened to his heart thudding quietly beneath her ear.

"I have not been a good husband, a good son, a good grandson. I put my business and a friendship above you all and listened to the little lies the old man sputtered in my ears for so long I was turning into a version of him," he kissed the top of her head as his fingers trailed through her hair. "The day we met in Milan when you went to file your divorce papers, you told me I was no better than him and you were right. I wasn't."

He spoke sadly, "I danced with Dulce and kissed her in a nightclub for a laugh and while on my part, it was as innocent as a kiss you would share with Savannah, it was inappropriate, and I know it now. My actions hurt you. I am so sorry Mackenna for the hell we put you through. I wish I had been the son my mother raised me to be and to treat you better than I had. Maybe if I had, I would have seen what Salvatore was doing to Dulce and I could have helped her too. I just feel," he paused, "I feel responsible for all this mess. I am so sorry for all the hurt I've caused you. I am so sorry."

Mackenna felt her heart swell as he took responsibility for the pain she'd gone through. She swallowed the lump in her throat clogged with tears and lifted her chin to face him. "I forgive you Alessandro."

"You shouldn't," he shook his head. "Tallulah was right. Any other woman would have dumped my sorry ass and moved on."

"Good thing I like your ass," she joked and saw the tiny edge of a smile pull on his lips.

"Mackenna, I never want to lose you again but if you said to me, you never wanted to see me again, if you told you felt it was truly over, I would let you go. Knowing my family had hurt you so deeply, I was ready to let you go and move on because you deserve only happiness in your life. I cannot live another day knowing I continue to hurt you. I cannot keep hurting you. I am trying to be a better man, to be the man I know you deserve but I find myself lacking. Even yesterday I got carried away and put you in danger by pushing you too hard."

Mackenna adjusted herself so she could look at him better. "Alessandro, you asked me if I wanted to go to dinner. You didn't order me to go. I chose to go. It was my choice. If we are being honest, if you hadn't been here yesterday morning, I would have gone to work. I would have worked a full day and would have come home just as exhausted."

He stroked the curve of her jaw with a cupped palm, his thumb stroking her cheekbone. "I adore you, mi amore. I have never loved anyone like I love you. I do not deserve you and I know it. I will keep trying to be the man you deserve if you let me."

"You are all the man I ever want and need Alessandro. Besides," she turned her cheek into his hand, "who else would be my dance partner? After dancing with you, nobody else would compare. It's like having s\*x with clothes on."

He leaned his head back and laughed at her comment, exposing his long neck to her and she lurched



forward and planted a hot kiss where his pulse throbbed. His hands found their way to her, one along her waist and the other in her hair as he groaned as she swirled her tongue and suckled gently.

“Mackenna,” his amber eyes were molten lava as she paused and lifted her eyes to meet his. “You are supposed to be resting.”

“I’m feeling much better after a night of sleep.” She wriggled her fingers in a demonstration of her recovery, “I even have movement in my fingers.” She shifted her body, so she sat atop him straddling him. She stared down at him from her perch and caressed his cheek. “I love you, Alessandro. I think we’ve done much too much talking so early in the morning.” She looked down at the pale pink silk nightgown skimming her thighs. “Besides, I’m wearing an Alessandro creation and it feels divine,” she lifted his hand and placed it on her breast and ran it over the swell of her mound. “Doesn’t the silk feel incredible?” Mackenna’s eyes glinted with desire as she felt the burgeoning of his body’s response beneath her bottom.

“It is not the silk that feels so incredible,” he lifted his other hand so he could palm both her breasts in his hands, his thumbs taunting her n\*\*\*\*s into hard peaks through the soft material. “As beautiful as this gown is, your body needs no adornment. It is perfection without it. I much prefer your skin to silk.” He groaned as she wiggled her hips to pull the dress over her head and tossed it away.

“Like this?”

“Yes, absolutely like this,” he closed his eyes as she ground her hips against him.

She made a face. “Why must you wear briefs now? They need to go.”

He chuckled, “you have a roommate, and I wasn’t going to the living room to talk to my father stark naked. The last thing I need is Nuncio trying to kill me because his woman is jealous of what you have, and she doesn’t.” his eyes were teasing and happy as she threw her head back and laughed. He watched with a wide smile as she tried valiantly to remove his briefs with one hand. Her hair falling in her face, her cheeks flushed with excitement and her breathing uneven as she tugged until he was free of the encumbrance of clothing. “You are so beautiful,” his voice hoarse with emotion.

“I’m also ravenous for my husband,” she eyed him and licked her lips. When he went to protest her actions, she put her finger on his lips. “Hush, don’t you know the saying, happy wife, happy life? Let me have what I want.”

As she lowered her head to his now exposed body he groaned loudly and dug his fingers into her hair. Happy life indeed.



“Well don’t you look like the cat who found the canary,” Savannah quipped as she came out of her bedroom just after noon.

Mackenna was lying on the sofa, a throw rug over her legs, Romeo curled up in her lap and a book in her hand. She had a plate of snacks on a small side table Nuncio had put near her and one of his exquisite cups of coffee within reach.

“I feel like it,” she grinned at her friend, “except for the headache, the sore hand.”

“What are you reading?” Savannah’s eyes widened as she tilted her head to take in the title of the book her friend was holding.

“It was in your collection of books.” Mackenna held up the cover with a grin. “I’m trying to be more adventurous.”

“Did Nuncio see you with that?” she yelped and leaped onto the sofa at Mackenna’s feet. “He can’t know I have it.”

“Why?”

“Because he will want me to do the things in it and I’m really happy doing things the way he’s been doing them. He does this one thing,” Savannah’s blue eyes danced excitedly

Mackenna covered her ears and closed her eyes, “nah, nah, nah, I’m not hearing this. I don’t need to hear this.” She opened one eye to see Savannah grinning widely at her. “You done?”

“Yes, I was just going to say he does this one thing I really like and if he knows I can do anything in this book, he’s going to make me trade off.”

“I did not need to know,” Mackenna grumbled but at the sound of Nuncio entering the apartment she quickly tucked the book between her legs and the blanket.

“Ah, you’re up,” he kissed Savannah’s upturned face and touched her cheek, staring into her eyes.

“Oh my god you two are so cute,” Mackenna gritted through teeth and a wide grin. “It makes my heart feel all fuzzy and warm.”

Nuncio laughed at her and swiped a piece of the cheese off her plate. “Get used to it Mac. I’m not going anywhere.” He dropped into the chair opposite the sofa and smiled. “What were you two discussing before I came in?”

“s\*x,” Mackenna watched as he choked on the mouthful of cheese and his cheeks reddened considerably.

“You asked,” Savannah giggled at his reaction.

“She was telling me about this thing you do,” Mackenna tried to keep a straight face but burst into a fit of giggles as he jumped up from the chair.

“Enough of this talk,” he pointed at Savannah, “you and I will have words later.”

“I’ll be having more than words,” she wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and he moved to the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of water, mumbling something about needing to cool off.

“Nuncio, any word on Salvatore?” Mackenna asked him as he leaned against the island and watched them.

“Nothing. He’s disappeared.”

“How is it possible?” Savannah asked seriously, “he’s one of the most recognizable men in the world. The tabloids have had his face splashed all over the newspapers for weeks. It’s not like he’s been able to change his face.”

“It’s why we feel strongly he’s still somewhere in Milan. He couldn’t have gotten far with no

Before they get nired. Nuncio shrugged, "we will find him. Do not worry."

"Nuncio," Mackenna asked quietly, "Alessandro is really angry with him."

"Alessandro is showing significantly more restraint than my family would," Nuncio said seriously. "My grandfather is Sicilian, and I promise you, Salvatore wouldn't have made it to the courthouse for a hearing let alone be allowed to leave his jail cell to go home."

"Isn't it a tad barbaric," Savannah questioned him.

"No, the old man is a disgrace, and he killed his own great-grandchild and family." Nuncio's face was hard set and his eyes cold. "He should be dead, buried in a shallow unmarked grave or tossed into the sea for the fish to eat."

"Jesus," Savannah blinked rapidly. "No mercy?"

"Mercy is given to those who are sorry Savannah," he quipped furiously.

Mackenna spoke quietly. "I'm only concerned Alessandro's hands get dirty. I'm worried about how angry he is. His father called him again just before he left, and he was on a tear."

"Mackenna," Nuncio held her gaze seriously, "You let Alessandro take care of his family. It is not for you to worry about or to question. Is this understood?"

Savannah bristled at his tone. "You can't expect Mackenna to not worry."

"I can and I do," Nuncio argued with her. "There are things it is better to never ask about. This is one of them. If Alessandro makes a decision as the current head of his family, then it is his decision to make. It is our way."

"This is insane," Savannah griped as she folded her arms over her chest defiantly.

Mackenna watched the interplay between her two friends and took a deep breath realizing she needed to change the topic. "Hey Savannah, did you know Samuel is Alessandro's design assistant?"

Her head snapped back to Mackenna quickly. "Our Samuel, as in Samantha Pantha?"

She giggled, "the one and only. I almost had a fit when I found him there. I guess he's been working for Alessandro for a couple of months now. He looks good."

"I'm so happy for him," she clapped her hands together happily. "He deserves a break like this. His creations are divine. The way he puts his costumes together is amazing."

"Alessandro agreed to go to a show. Also, he was not happy we dressed in drag, or specifically I dressed in drag."

"You dressed in drag?" Nuncio marched back into the living room. "When?"

"About a year ago," Savannah shrugged. "I have photos on my phone."

"I want to see," he wriggled his fingers at her impatiently as she scowled. "Where is your phone?"

"On my nightstand," she shook her head as he turned on his foot and made his way to her bedroom. In seconds he was back demanding she unlock the phone. She grabbed it from him with a grumble about annoying Italian men and found the photos she'd put into a folder on her phone and passed the phone to him.

He perched on the edge of the chair and went through them, he lifted his eyes at Mackenna, "you look good." He grinned, "though I get why Alessandro was a bit irritated, you don't have a shirt on."

"Her nips were covered," Savannah said and then grinned broadly when he choked as he obviously came across the photos of her. "My nips were covered too!"

He turned the phone sideways and used his fingers to zoom in. "I want to be mad but its hot. Did you



"We did," Savannah smirked as he rubbed his finger around his collar as if overheated. "Does it bother you?"

"No," he shook his head, evidently lying. "No, but if you ever do this again, I want front row seats." He looked at her seriously, "and a lap dance."

Savannah threw her head back and laughed at his comment and Mackenna roared. They laughed so hard, Mackenna's sides ached as Nuncio grinned at them both and stood up, putting Savannah's phone on the sofa next to her. He made his way to the kitchen to make tea.

As their laughter wound down, Mackenna was wheezing for air. "God, I don't remember the last time I laughed so hard."

"It felt good," Savannah agreed with a grin. "I love hearing you laugh Mac and I'm glad you're laughing again."

"Me too. I think we're finally ahead of the curve," she smiled at her friend.

"How was dinner last night?"

"Well, I almost ruined everything when I yelled at the model's mom. She basically called Alessandro an asshole and told me I should leave him."

"Seriously?" Savannah's eyebrows were high in her forehead. "No way."

"I lost my temper with her for being rude. Thankfully, Whitney and her father felt the same and told the woman off while I was trying to cool off in the bathroom. Alessandro wasn't upset with me at all. I was annoyed I let her get under my skin."

She grinned suddenly, "you should see my new wardrobe. Alessandro had some items sent over yesterday and the rest are coming this week. Savannah, he even designed my jeans. Jeans!"

"Really?"

"Yes, I can't wait for it all to be here and to show you." She looked curiously at her phone as it started to ring. She saw the unfamiliar international number and grimaced.

She hit the answer button and put it on speaker. "Hello?"

"Mackenna?" Dulce's voice carried into the sudden silence of the room and immediately Nuncio walked in, his face serious.

"Yes, Dulce are you okay?"

"Yes, no, um," she sniffed.

"Dulce, are you crying?"

"I think I killed him," she whispered into the phone. "He had me tied up and I got free and there was a heavy vase and I think I killed him."

Nuncio spoke quickly. "Dulce, where are you?"

"I'm in my bathroom in my apartment in Milan. I came in yesterday from physio and Salvatore was here. He had a gun. I don't know where he hid the gun in my apartment, but I know he has one. I wanted to run out the front door, but he has a guard at the door. I'm scared. I hit him with the heavy vase and took his phone. I tried Alessandro's phone but there was no answer. Salvatore had me memorize Mackenna's number before, so I called her hoping someone was there. I need help."

"Is the door locked?"

"Yes," she hiccupped. "He crumpled to the floor and there's a lot of blood. Do you think I killed him?"

Nuncio was texting furiously to his brother. "Listen Dulce, my cousin Lucius is coming into your

for you to come out of the bathroom, he's going to say my girlfriend's name. Do you know my girlfriend's name?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I hear noises out there."

"You stay where you are, and you do not come out of the room until you hear the safe word." Nuncio said. "Lay down in the bathtub just in case someone tries to fire the gun through the door, okay?"

"I don't think I killed him," she wailed as the sound of furious pounding on the door in the bathroom came from the phone. "He's awake and he's really mad."

"Keep your head down."

"He's kicking in the door," she was sobbing earnestly now.

Mackenna's hands were over her mouth and tears were streaming down her face. "Your cousin needs to hurry. Four minutes is too long," she hissed at Nuncio.

The sound of a gunshot echoed over the line and Mackenna gasped. "Dulce are you okay?"

"He's shooting through the door. I'm laying in the tub like Nuncio said but I'm so scared." She was crying hard into the phone and with every gun shot she screamed into the device.

Savannah was rocking at the end of the sofa and Mackenna was bawling as the woman's screams filled their living room. The sound of the door splintering was followed by silence.

"Dulce?" Nuncio leaned over the phone. "What's happening?"

"There's someone else out there," she whispered suddenly. "They're speaking Italian but it's so fast. I think it's his own guard telling him to stop firing the gun in case the police officers come. He's kicking the door again." She sobbed. "What do I do?"

"Stay put," he looked at his phone. "Dulce, stay put, Alessandro's team with my cousin is there. They are entering your apartment. Stay down. Keep your head down."

The sound of rapid gunfire could be heard and Mackenna gasped as Dulce shrieked at the sounds and then there was a noise as if she'd dropped the phone.

"This is insane," Savannah wiped tears off her cheeks.

"I feel so helpless," Mackenna whispered. "Dulce, what is going on?"

Dulce didn't answer and Mackenna looked to Nuncio. "What is happening?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." He got closer to the phone. "Dulce, are you still there?"

She didn't answer for several seconds and then the sound of her speaking again made them all sigh with relief, Nuncio gripping his chest.

"I dropped the phone outside the tub, and I was scared to get it," she said into the phone. "I don't hear anything out there at all. Should I go out?"

"No, you stay until you hear my girlfriend's name. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she cried into the phone. "Oh, someone is saying Savannah. Can I go out now?"

Nuncio looked at his phone. "Yes, Dulce, run to the door, Lucius is going to get you out of there. Do what he says."

She didn't hang up the phone and the sound of Nuncio's cousin telling her to keep her face buried in his shoulder and not look around. The sound of multiple people bustling around her and then someone instructing someone else to carry her out of the apartment to the car below.

A man's voice came over the phone, speaking Italian. Nuncio grabbed the phone, took it off speaker and began speaking quickly.



Mackenna looked to Savannah to explain what he was saying, “they’re taking Dulce to the hospital. She’s been savagely beaten, and it maybe sexually assaulted,” she translated for her. She kept eavesdropping, “Salvatore and three other men are dead. They shot him in the head.”

She turned her head away and closed her eyes, trying to tune out the rest of the conversation. Salvatore had gone after Dulce and had hurt her for exposing him. The sound of footsteps coming into their apartment made her look up in surprise and Alessandro halted in front of Nuncio.

Nuncio told him, “She’s safe. Lucius has her out.”

Mackenna spoke, “he hurt her Alessandro. I think he hurt her bad.”

He was pale as he looked to Mackenna and then moved to her and tilted her chin. “Are you okay?” “I’m fine. We’re fine.” She whispered holding his face in her hands. “She said he’d had her tied up since yesterday.” She felt the tears streaming down her face. “He’s had her twenty-four hours Alessandro. I can’t begin to think what he’s done to her in all the time he had her.”

She wiped her face. “You need to go to her and make sure she’s okay.” She pushed him. “Go Alessandro. Go take care of your friend. She needs you.”

“You need me.”

Mackenna watched as the tears streamed down his face, obviously torn about whether he stayed with her or went to his friend’s side. “Alessandro, I’m not going anywhere. I will be here when you come home. Come home to me but go help your friend. She needs you.”

He kissed her mouth lingeringly and stood away from her. He pointed to Nuncio, “do not let her out of your sight. She is my world.” He turned back to Mackenna when he reached the door. “I will come home.”

“You better or I’m coming to Milan to drag your ass home,” she whispered, her blue eyes watery and sad. “Alessandro,” she called as he put his hand on the doorknob. He looked at her. “I love you.”

He rushed back to her and kissed her again, “I love you too. I’ll call as soon as I touch down.”

It was nearly midnight when Mackenna's phone rang.

"Mackenna," Alessandro's voice sounded tired as he spoke into her ear.

"How is she? Have you seen her?"

"I just left her room. They have her sedated."

"What happened Alessandro? How did he get to her?"

"Salvatore paid three million dollars to one of Carlos' team to let him and his guards slip by. The man escorted him to Dulce's, made it look like he was there to protect her and then let him into her apartment. He was the one who reported nobody had been in or out. Carlos is dealing with him." He was quiet for a moment as if gathering his thoughts, "he beat her badly Mackenna. She has broken ribs and a broken wrist, likely some internal bleeding. He sexually assaulted her repeatedly."

"Why would he do this?" she fought the bile rising to her throat.

"Because of the video. He told her she knew what she was doing when she released it and he was going to make her pay. The video ultimately was his undoing, and he knew it. Dulce knew between you and I we would figure out immediately who was in the video, and we did."

"Is she going to be alright?"

"Only time will tell. She was most concerned to know if he was dead. I can't same I blame her."

"And is he?"

"I personally verified it. I checked every damn birthmark on his body to make sure it was him. My grandmother told me of a specific one I verified. There can be no mistaking the bullet in his head ended his life. I only wish we had been able to draw his death out much longer than a quick bullet," his voice was cold and hard.

Mackenna said nothing to his comment. She knew he was beyond rational where his grandfather is concerned. His next words surprised her.

"I'll be on the next flight home. I should be arriving by noon tomorrow."

"What? Why? You couldn't have landed there three hours ago. What about Dulce?" Mackenna asked seriously.

"Mackenna, my first stop here was to verify my grandfather was dead. I have checked on my grandmother and made sure she was safe. I then stopped here at the hospital, made sure Dulce has the best care in the world personally paid for by House of Giordano. My responsibility ends there. She has her family here and frankly the last thing I would think she needs is any member of Giordano hanging over her right now. While I am sorry for what my grandfather has done, it doesn't erase all she has done. My place is with my wife who is recovering from a nasty fall and a head injury and so I am coming home."

She was quiet for a moment as another question popped into her head she had been meaning to ask, "How did you get here so fast this morning?"

"I was coming home for a lunch break and was almost there when Dulce called. I had declined the call not knowing what she wanted. She then called you, Nuncio sent a text message to me, Carlos and Rio and the rest moved fast."

"Oh," she was quiet. "You were coming home for lunch?"

His chuckle echoed in the silence of her bedroom, "well, not exactly for lunch."

"Oh," her voice paused as his meaning suddenly struck her, "oh. You were coming home to have *me* for lunch."

"It is the best thing about your apartment being thirty minutes from the office." He muffled the receiver



"Of course," she paused, "I love you Alessandro."

"I love you too, *amore*, I miss you and I'll call you soon."

Savannah knocked on her bedroom door. "Hey just heading in for another overnight shift, they just called as they're short staffed. Was that Alessandro? How's Dulce?"

"Bad," she shook her head sadly. "He beat her up and sexually assaulted her."

"I suppose Alessandro is now going to be gone for a while then."

"No, he's coming home tomorrow. He said his place is with me and he'll be here by noon."

"Seriously? Good for him putting you first."

"I feel guilty. I know she probably wants him at her side."

Savannah shook her head. "I'm with him. His place is with you. She had her reasons for doing what she did, and I don't wish the hell she is going through on anyone, but she certainly shouldn't be expecting either of you to automatically forgive her for what she's done."

"He blackmailed her." Mackenna still felt the need to defend her, "he threatened to kill her daughter."

"At least she has a child. Because she kept her mouth shut, you and Alessandro don't." Savannah folded her arms furiously over her chest. "I'm with Alessandro on this one Mac. She screwed up in the worst of ways."

"You all talked about this haven't you?"

"Yes," she made a face as if it wasn't even a real question. "You've been napping for days, and we've talked a lot he, Nuncio and I. Mac, he knows his place is with you and not with her. I'm glad he's listening to the things we are all telling him." She sat on the edge of the bed and changed the subject. "Did you tell him you had a panic attack this evening and fell and popped a couple stitches in your arm?"

"No and like I said to both of you earlier, he can find out when he's home. He has enough on his plate with his grandfather being shot in the head and his friend being raped and beaten."

Savannah eyed her critically, but Mackenna didn't back down.

"I will tell him tomorrow when I see him."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise." She sighed, "I know it's stupid and I'm trying to forgive her and to be the better person, but she was in my head for over five years. Knowing he was there with her made me antsy and so had a panic attack thinking the worst."

"It would make anyone upset Mackenna. I agree he needed to go, not for her but for his own family and to lend support to his grandmother and father but after all Salvatore and Dulce put you through, it is not unexpected you still have issues with her. I personally think your heart is way too big for your mind to process."

She chuckled at her friend's description. "Perhaps. I have a counselling session in the morning I had rescheduled from Monday. I'll explore this with her a bit."

"Good. For now, you are on bed rest until the appointment tomorrow, understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Also, Nuncio made dinner. He's bringing yours in."

"What did he make?" she smiled widely. "I've been smelling it for hours."

"Pizza."

"Yes," they high fived. "Your boyfriend is the best."

He said Nuncio is going to cover you tomorrow so we can chat. I think he's going to end things.

She paused for a minute and then Mackenna grinned broadly, "nope."

"What do you mean nope?"

"I mean nope," she couldn't stop smiling at her friend. "I think I know what's going on. Alessandro mentioned before he went to the office early this morning he set up for us to go see the house in the gated community where Derrick lives. I think he wants us to buy it but he's going to want a ton of renovations. Once he buys it and it's done, I'm probably moving in with him."

"What about this place?"

She shrugged with a smirk, "Alessandro mentioned to me the other day my bodyguard needs a place to live too."

"Oh, you think he's going to ask to move in with me here?" Savannah blushed. "Really?"

"It's not that far of a stretch. I mean he's here all the time anyway and it makes sense." She stared at Savannah, "would this be a good thing for you? I mean you fell hard for him, didn't you?"

"Like a brick in a puddle," she rolled her eyes. "Do you really think it's what he wants to talk about?"

"It sure as hell isn't about breaking up. The guy talked not ten hours ago about having you perform lap dances on him. You two are definitely not breaking up."

"Thank god because I'd have to move in with you and Alessandro so you could hold me every night while I cry," Savannah gave her a rueful smile. "My mom keeps asking to meet him."

"Your dad would have had a field day with him." Savannah's foster parents who had adopted her as a teenager had loved her like she had been with them all her life. While her father had passed away, her mom still called her almost daily. How Savannah had been able to keep them apart so long was a testament to Savannah's fear of being rejected.

"Well, if we aren't breaking up tomorrow, maybe I'll invite her to town soon."

"Fun!" Mackenna squealed.

They both looked up as Nuncio walked into the room. "Why do you both look guilty?"

"We don't. We were just talking." Savannah stood up from the bed. "Alessandro called and gave Mac the rundown. He's coming home tomorrow."

"Yes, so I heard from Carlos," he shook his head. "I was talking to my mother earlier and she said she's never seen my older brother so angry."

"Why were you talking to your mother," Mackenna looked to Nuncio.

"I talk to her every day. She is my mama, and I am a good son," he looked at her quizzically. "What are you digging for?"

"Nothing," she smirked and started to move her blankets to get out of bed. She had just remembered Alessandro mentioning his grandmother's ring.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Dinner, Savannah said dinner was almost ready."

He pointed at her, "you stay there. I will bring you dinner in a bit. I have a movie we can watch on my laptop, and we can share the pizza after I run Savannah to work. Paparazzi is outside in full force as the word of Salvatore's death has hit the news."

"I should feel sad."

"Why?" Both Savannah and Nuncio asked the question in unison.



Drain. It was unfortunate they were trying to save Dulce's life because he went much too quickly for my liking."

Savannah wrinkled her nose, "Hippocratic oath and all prohibits me from the desire to see someone get murdered so I'm going to go to work. I'll see you tomorrow." She waved at Mackenna

Nuncio pointed at her, "stay put until I get back."

She saluted him and nestled into her bed. "Yes sir."

Her phone rang again, and she answered it again, "Alessandro."

"Mackenna," his voice was quiet over the line.

"What is wrong?" she asked seriously.

"Other than I am here and you are so far away from me, absolutely nothing. I am just missing you. My parents are in with Dulce's family. I am in the limo heading to the airport. I just ended our call earlier abruptly and I'm missing you."

"Oh," she settled into her pillows.

"Why are you still awake?"

"I napped from about six until eleven and I'm wide awake. I missed dinner. Nuncio is running Savannah over to the hospital because she was called in but then he's coming to sit up and feed me pizza and watch movies until I'm tired again."

"Why did you nap so long in the evening?"

She took a breath, "It's been a long day."

"Mackenna, what aren't you telling me?" Alessandro demanded with annoyance.

"I was going to tell you tomorrow."

"What?" his voice was concerned.

"I got into my head and was overthinking things and was thinking of you being there with Dulce and even though I know there is nothing going on, I still have anxiety about her. I'm trying Alessandro. I'm really trying but with you there with her my head didn't like it."

"You had a panic attack." Alessandro's voice was matter of fact.

"I did and I went to grab the kitchen island and I missed it and I fell, and I hit my arm and a couple stitches broke and it was bleeding."

His curse echoed over the line.

"Alessandro, I'm okay."

"You are most assuredly not okay. Mackenna, the damage caused by her actions, and mine if I'm honest, are still affecting you. Regardless of her reasonings, she bullied and harassed you for years in the most cruel and callous ways and I turned a blind eye to it. I understand you are trying to be the bigger person but my love you do not need to. You owe her nothing. You owe me nothing. I understand why you have fears where she and I are concerned and all I can say is I promise I will spend the rest of my days making sure you know she is not a threat to you or to us. I am glad I made the decision to come home. It reaffirms my belief where I should be is with you."

"I don't want to be a clingy wife," she protested.

"Mackenna," he groaned into the phone. "You are a strong and independent woman who has no need for a husband. You said it yourself earlier. You have clearly demonstrated you can live and thrive without me in your life. Look at the world you have created for yourself. You have an amazing life rich with love

and friendship, a job you love and a community which you are immersed in. I am privileged you have agreed to let me part of this. As far as the anxiety and panic, it makes sense for you to be affected when I must interact with your tormentor. It is my intention to maintain my distance from her and have a professional relationship only. I am hopeful in time, without her involved in our lives, your anxiety will improve.”

“She was your friend,” she whispered. “I won’t ask you to give up your friends.”

“She has many friends and family. Friends come and go Mackenna. I am sure there are people in your life who were friends at one stage in your life who are no longer friends with you now. Our friendship, in retrospect, was toxic to those around us and I do not wish to be involved in such a thing again. I will maintain a professional relationship as much as I am contractually required as a freelance designer for House of Giordano, but it is the end of my personal relationship with Dulce.” He suddenly sighed, “I knew I had to go to Milan to deal with my grandfather and my family, but I did not want to make the stop to Dulce’s hospital. My family insisted I make the appearance and I did. All I want now is to come home to my wife.”

She was quiet on the other end of the phone and then he spoke, “Mackenna, are you still there?”

“I am,” she wiped a tear off her cheek. “I’m just processing everything. I love you.”

“I adore you,” he spoke gently.

She heard a key in the lock. “Nuncio is back.”

“Enjoy your dinner and movies my love. Get some sleep and I will see you tomorrow. I’m flying commercial and there is a layover. It was the quickest flight home I should be there around twelve-thirty.”

“I’ll see you then.” She hung up the phone and admitted to herself her heart was feeling better after hearing Alessandro speak.

She looked up and smiled at Nuncio as he appeared in the door of her room. She ended her call and looked at her friend. “I want to see the ring.”