

Mackenna was scrolling her phone when Nuncio looked in on her the next morning. "Why are you so red in the face?"

"I hate the press. I hate them. Why are they so horrible?"

"It's nine in the morning and you are already flustered. Why are you reading it?" Nuncio grimaced at her folding his arms across his thick chest and staring down at her in her bed. "This is the opposite of resting. You are all worked up and angry when you're supposed to be resting."

"It's all over the paper he raced to Milan to be with his lover. Like for the love of God, his grandfather had a bullet put in his head," as Nuncio opened his mouth, she held her hand up, "I'm not saying whether it's a good or bad thing, but either way, he has family who needed to be seen to. Did they even once consider his grandmother might be affected or his father? Instead, they make it even more sordid than it is, not that it isn't horribly sordid to start with."

She slammed her phone down. "And I'm so tired of the paper portraying me as some insipid airhead who can't keep her dog on a leash." She looked to Nuncio seriously. "I blame Alessandro."

"Why?"

"He has told me time and time again he kept me hidden from the world to protect me from this," she waved her hand at her phone carelessly, "in an effort to make sure I wasn't constantly dragged through the mud. Instead, he sensationalized our marriage, and everyone considers me the dirty secret." She could tell by the way Nuncio twisted his lips he didn't disagree. She held his gaze. "If we had just presented as the normal boring married couple we are, then people would piss off."

"You've had too much upheaval in the last few months to do that."

"Our first year of marriage was boring as far as tabloid fodder goes and I am very much looking forward to it again." She pursed her lips with annoyance. "What time does his flight get in again?"

He shrugged. "Twelve-forty is touchdown. He's flying commercial which Carlos hates because of the paparazzi stalking them but this was the fastest way to get him home as the family pilot needed rest."

She rolled her eyes, "rich people problems. Ooh my pilot is tired, so I need to fly first class. He needs to try to flying economy with two layovers from here to Milan. Takes almost twenty-four hours."

Nuncio pointed at her, "you are decidedly cranky this morning and you are not yourself. What gives?"

"I don't know. I think I'm just stir crazy with being stuck in bed and knowing Alessandro is being dragged through the mud yet again." She pouted, "what time are you and Savannah going for your walk?"

"She's in the shower. We are leaving soon which is why I came in here. Ari is in the living room. He has a back-up downstairs, and I would prefer you stay in the house until we get back." He smiled, "if all goes well, maybe we can all go for dinner later to celebrate."

"I'd like that," she grinned, "and it will go well. I know it."

"Then why does my chest feel like it's caving in?" he made a face as he gripped above his heart. "I've never been more nervous for anything in my life, and I have been to war."

"You worked in a telecommunications room," she rolled her eyes.

"There were bombs going off nearby."

"Mm-hmm," she mocked him. She looked at his outfit. "Is that what your wearing?"

"What is wrong with what I'm wearing?" He looked down at his tan khakis and black t shirt.

"You look like a security agent."

"I am a security agent," he grimaced. "I also can't let her know anything is up."

"She knows something is up," Mackenna rolled her eyes at her friend. "Good grief, you told her you

"You told me last night, but I can hardly reassure her now without telling her everything can I?" he argued with her, his dark eyes frustrated as he moved to look at himself in her floor-length mirror. "I look fine."

"Yeah, yeah," she teased.

They stared at each other before both breaking into laughter. Savannah poked her head in the room.

"What is going on in here?"

"Nothing," Nuncio shuttered his expressions quickly, "don't talk to her right now. She's cranky and has been reading tabloid trash."

Savannah wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Stay off the tabloid sites. It's disgusting. I read one article where they suggest now that Salvatore is out of the way, Dulce and Alessandro are going to get married because he's been waiting his turn with her. Supposedly Mackenna is drowning her sorrows by hiding in her apartment like a rejected pet. Like, where do they come up with this stuff?"

Mackenna pointed at Nuncio, "see, this is what I'm talking about."

"You both need to stop reading the trash they print." He pointed to Savannah, "go get your sneakers on so we can go."

"I wish I knew where we were going." She folded her arms defiantly.

"And I wish the women in my life were easygoing and did as they were told and yet here, we are." He gave them both pointed glances.

Savannah stomped off and Mackenna flung herself back into her pillows with a harrumph. Nuncio waved at her, and she grinned at him, knowing he wasn't lying about being nervous. Asking Savannah Kirkland to marry him was the craziest thing he likely had ever done. She was so excited for them and their next chapter.

She heard them bickering as they exited the apartment and she looked up as Ari poked his head in.

"Just saying hello." He said curtly, not used to being in the apartment. "Nuncio said to tell you they are gone but if you need anything to let me know."

"Okay," she grabbed her phone and made a face. "Ari, have you worked for Alessandro a long time?"

"I was assigned to his mother for awhile." He shrugged, "she's a nice lady but she likes to just up and leave without any consideration for the logistics of security. It makes for a headache."

She laughed at his comment. She knew Rosetta went through security agents like socks much to Alessandro and his father's annoyance. "I'm going to get up and get dressed."

"I think Nuncio wanted you to stay and rest."

"I can rest in the living room," she waved him to close the door behind him.

He shrugged and did as he was told, leaving her alone in her room

She got out of the bed and made her way to the bathroom and grimaced at her reflection in the mirror. The bruises on her face were fading now after four full days since she'd fallen. She'd always been clumsy but lately it was a bit much. She touched her fingertips to the yellowing bruise on her forehead and sighed.

She was feeling off and she didn't know why. Alessandro and she seemed to be on much better footing, Savannah and Nuncio were likely getting engaged in the next hour or so and with any luck things would start to settle down now that Salvatore was dead. He had been the cause of so much of the heartache she had gone through and with him gone, she felt hopeful she and Alessandro could move on to the next chapter in their lives.

Her phone ringing in her bedroom caught her ear and she groaned and made her way back to the bed.

naa missed her session. "Damn," she muttered and pushed her bangs out of her face and answered the phone.

"Mackenna, it's Farrah. Just checking in. It's not like you to miss a session."

"Ugh, I'm so sorry. I was up late last night and then overslept and then forgot all about the appointment. Even my security agent, who knows my calendar better than I do, forgot. I apologize Farrah."

"Well, are you open to having a telephone consult instead of in person?"

She sat on the edge of the bed and scratched her temple. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I'm feeling out of sorts this morning and maybe another perspective can help."

"So how have things been since we saw each other last week?"

"A lot has happened," she admitted. She gave a quick recap of the last ten days and then sighed. "And after all of this, even know Alessandro is coming home to me, I'm feeling," she paused, "I don't know what I'm feeling."

"Well, let's talk it through. It's a lot to unpack and I'm glad I called."

"Me too," she admitted quietly.

Mackenna spoke with her therapist for another forty minutes and when she was done, she admitted she felt better. She also felt she had a better plan and more in control.

She stepped into the living room after getting dressed and motioned to Ari. "I'm going to try to use Nuncio coffee maker."

He looked at her in confusion from his seat on the sofa.

She grinned, "I'm telling you just in case I blow the place up."

"It cannot be so hard," he made a face as he rose to follow her to the kitchen.

The pair of them stood there staring at the contraption. Mackenna turned a handle thing and looked at the buttons. "I'm sure we can figure this out."

"There is no we," Ari said backing up, "if you break it, Nuncio will kill you and I don't want to be part of this."

"Mac!" Savannah's voice shrieked outside the door as she struggled with the latch on the other side. She finally got through the door and lunged in her direction and only Ari stopping her from jumping into Mackenna's arms stopped her from toppling them both over. "Right, you're injured. Oh my god. He proposed. Mac, he proposed."

Mackenna grinned as she slunk under Ari's arm and wrapped her good arm around her friend and hugged her tight. "I'm so happy. You said yes, right?"

"Well, when I stopped crying, I said yes." She leaned back and her swollen bloodshot eyes revealed how much she'd been crying. She leaned her forehead against Mackenna's. "I never thought I was good enough," she half-sobbed.

"Pfft, it's whether he's good enough for you," Mackenna winked at him over Savannah's shoulder as she hugged her friend. He looked like he'd been crying a bit too. His hair was also really tousled, and she knew he'd been running his hands through it over and over with nerves.

"Mackenna is right, you are too good for me," Nuncio kissed Savannah's head as he walked past them to the coffee maker. He glared at Mackenna. "Did you touch my baby?"

"She touched the handle." Ari tattled and Mackenna glowered. "I warned her to touch nothing."

"You," she pointed at Nuncio, "make coffee." She dragged Savannah to the living room. "I want all the details. Show me the ring."

could see it and he said only after you saw it. He wanted you to be see it before anyone else.

Savannah turned surprised eyes to Mackenna. "You knew?"

"I guessed when he came back last night, and he confirmed. I'm so happy for you Savannah. I know how much you two love each other."

"He wants to take me to Milan to meet his family." She whispered fearfully. "What if they hate me?"

"Not possible, besides you will never outdo me in the bad in-law's department."

Savannah wrinkled her nose. "I can't argue there. I called my mom and told her. She's coming this weekend for a visit."

Mackenna squeezed her hands. "I can't stop smiling and staring at that ring. It's magnificent."

"I know. It was his grandmother's. She said it was a good luck ring because she and her husband were married sixty years." She grimaced, "with my emotional baggage, I'll need all the luck I can find."

"Savannah, with Nuncio, you don't need luck. He loves you with all the good and the bad and despite your potty mouth."

She wriggled her eyebrows, "he loves me for my potty mouth."

"True," Mackenna giggled.

"And what I can do with my potty mouth," she elaborated naughtily, and they both laughed when he commented from the kitchen, he could hear every word they were saying.

They sat in silence for a few moments enjoying the moment and then Savannah asked, "did you hear from Alessandro yet today?"

"No, but I know he was landing in New York in the early hours of the morning and then he had a layover before the flight here. I did have a good chat with my counsellor though."

"Damn," Nuncio dropped a cup. "I forgot your appointment."

"It's okay Nuncio, so did I. We did a call and it worked out well. I feel like I made a big breakthrough today. I just need to talk to Alessandro about it when he gets home."

"Really?" Savannah pulled her head back. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Great, actually." She shrugged, "Alessandro's always protected me, and it's always made me feel like he is hiding me. He lives in this big dramatic world and I'm in the shadows. I don't necessarily want to be in the limelight, but I need him to know he needs to stop protecting me. The tabloids aren't going to go away. It's time for us to step out together and not hide anymore. Everyone knows when he runs to Dulce, but nobody ever knows when he comes back home to me. It makes me feel like I'm the side chick. Just for once, I want a photo of me making out with my husband in a club." She made a face, "it sounds stupid doesn't it."

"No." Savannah disagreed. "It doesn't sound stupid. It sounds normal. You're not ashamed to be with him in private or in public. There's no logical reason to keep you hidden from the world."

She had an idea suddenly and she looked to Nuncio who was talking to Ari in the kitchen. "Nuncio, how much would it annoy you, if I completely hijacked the entire security team for the next couple of hours?"

Despite all of Nuncio and Ari's protests, she with the help of Savannah, had convinced them to help her with her plan.

For too long she had let Alessandro and his teams dictate to her what she could and couldn't do publicly and it was time for her to take the reigns of her own publicity. Alessandro Giordano was her husband, and she was going to claim him for all the world to see.

So now, as the limo approached the airport with the news the flight had just touched down, Mackenna was feeling a bit nervous as she noted there were a ton of paparazzi waiting outside the airport as he had been photographed in New York waiting for his connecting flight.

As she stepped out of the car following Nuncio, the sound of someone noticing her arrival caught her ear and she fought the nervous flutter in her stomach.

"Mackenna, are you going on a trip? Are you leaving the city? How do you feel about your husband rushing to your lover's bedside?"

Mackenna stopped and ignored the curse Nuncio spit out. She faced the photographers, grateful for her big sunglasses and the fact she was wearing one of the outfits Alessandro had designed. The pale pink blouse coupled with the high-waisted black bell bottoms and high heeled shoes were businesslike and demure, but she felt powerful and strong in it. She shook her head, "no comment." She spoke clearly and concisely and then walked away.

When they got inside, they made their way to arrivals and Mackenna stood waiting outside the long tunnel waiting for a glimpse of her husband.

"This is a stupid idea," Nuncio muttered for the hundredth time. "Those idiots out there are now multiplying like rabbits because you are here."

"Let them," she shrugged as she removed her sunglasses since they were inside. "I'm not living my life hiding from them anymore. If I want to welcome my husband home from a horrific situation he's had to deal with, then I'm going to and they," she waved her hands at the horde pressing against the glass outside, "can all kiss my ass."

"I couldn't even warn Carlos. His phone is shut off because of the flight," he growled.

"Not my problem and I told you I didn't want you to tell him anyway, because I didn't want Alessandro vetoing my plan."

She caught a glimpse of him in the distance. He was pulling his phone out and speaking to Carlos. Her phone rang in her hand, and she giggled.

"Mackenna," his voice was tired. "I just landed."

"Hi. Look up." She waved as he did what she instructed. At first, he seemed surprised and then annoyed and looked to Carlos who obviously was getting a text from his brother. Carlos whispered something to him as Alessandro made purposeful strides towards her. He held his arms out and she raced to him and flung herself into his arms just out of the way of the other passengers.

He wrapped her tight in his arms and spun her around holding her so close her face was mashed into his chest. "What are you doing here?" he whispered in her ear, "they are out in droves."

"I don't need protection from them, I just needed to see you. I missed you. Don't be angry." She whispered into his neck.

He set her down on her feet and looked down at her, his eyes smiling, "angry? To even consider you would want to be seen in public with me is a gift. I'm not angry." He looked over her shoulder, "Nuncio looks ready to throttle you and I'm sure Carlos will have words later but I," he tilted her chin with his long

"Then kiss me hello you oat," she grinned, "I didn't get all dressed up in an Alessandro creation to be ogled. I want to be touched." Her eyes danced merrily as he threw his head back and laughed and then pulled her to his chest again, hugging her close.

"Amore," his voice was thick with emotion, "I have missed your smile." He kissed her temple, her cheek and then her mouth, groaning when she wrapped her good arm around his neck and dug her fingers in her hair. He lifted his mouth a hair from hers, "keep it up and we'll be giving the press more of a show than they bargained for."

She shrugged and giggled, "I don't care Alessandro. I'm tired of them dictating our relationship. I love you and I don't care who knows it and," her words were cut off as he covered her mouth with his

His lips slid across hers as he deepened the kiss, his arm winding around her waist to pull her tight to his body as his finger delved deep into her hair. His tongue slid past her lips as he tasted the exquisite sweetness of the depths of her mouth, minty and sweet. He swallowed her sigh as she kissed him back with equal fervour, demanding more as he realized she was staking her claim on him. He revelled in the feeling of Mackenna taking control and making sure the world knew he was hers.

"God, I love you," she giggled when he finally broke their kiss, her voice mingling with his breath.

"I love you too," he rested his head on hers. "Shall we go home?"

"Yes please," she stepped back from him and grinned widely as he gripped her hand in his as if he weren't willing to let her go.

"How is your grandmother," she asked quietly as they walked towards the exit.

"Talking of taking a vacation somewhere hot and exotic with a boy toy," he chuckled quietly.

"Nonna!" Mackenna met his amused gaze and was happy to see how light and happy his golden gaze was, and he couldn't stop staring at her.

He stopped suddenly drawing her good hand to his chest. "I am so grateful you met my flight Mackenna. I cannot begin to tell you how worried I was on the flight home knowing all the stuff they are posting. I dreaded the notion you would be angry with me."

She smiled gently, "I admit, I don't like being portrayed as the other woman or the one you need to sneak to and from. You're *my* husband," she declared possessively, "and I am done being second fiddle to anyone or anything in your life. I am telling you Alessandro Demarco Benedict Giordano; I am your wife, and you are mine." Her eyes blazed into his daring him to dispute her.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed them, "yes ma'am." He winked overtly, "it's a turn-on by the way when you use my full name. We may need make our security ride in a separate car so we can catch up in the back seat."

Her laugh attracted the attention of others in the airport and Carlos stepped closer.

"If you two are done behaving like a couple of teenagers, we need to get you past the throng of paparazzi outside and into the car." He looked at Mackenna, "you will go with Nuncio."

"No," she stood her ground. "I am walking out there with my head held high, with my husband's hand in mine and to hell with anyone. You want to keep them away from me, then find a way to back them up but I am not hiding my face in Nuncio's shoulder. I am not. Also, this outfit is made to be photographed. It's an Alessandro creation." She heard Alessandro chuckle.

"You heard the boss," Alessandro waved at Carlos to precede them. "It's time Mackenna Giordano made the appearance she deserves."

They stepped into the sunshine and in the direction of the car. She kept her hand in Alessandro's and

looked at him and whispered, "screw them Alessandro. I love you. I ney don't matter."

His chuckle made her smile, and he shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day you were reassuring me about them instead of the opposite."

They reached the car and Nuncio almost pushed her and Alessandro into the car and she laughed at how rough he was being. "Bully." She stuck her tongue at him as he slipped into the car after Alessandro.

Carlos slid in after Nuncio and Rio after him. Ari was in the front seat with the driver and then they were away.

Mackenna snuggled up to Alessandro and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm so glad you're home."

"If you pull a stunt like this again, I'll have your head," Carlos warned her furiously. He looked to Nuncio, "what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking she is my boss and as much as I wish I would have had more time to plot out a better route and a safer plan, I agree with her." Nuncio challenged his older brother outright. "Her thought process isn't wrong. The tabloids are obsessed with her because they think she's a secret. Expose her. Put her out there and make sure everyone knows how dull and boring they are," he grinned, "sorry Mac but you spend more nights reading in bed than you do anything else."

"See," she waved at Nuncio, "we're sensational right now because nobody knew about me. I know you kept the press away from me because you thought you were protecting me Alessandro but at the end of the day, I'm like a dirty little secret to them."

"You were never a dirty little secret to me," he protested, "I only wanted you for myself and not dragged through the mud."

"I know it now. I believe you really did keep our marriage and our relationship private to protect me but that's long gone. It's time to start just living our lives like normal people again and eventually they will go away." She grimaced, "or at least the bulk of them will."

Alessandro took a breath. "Okay, we will try it your way." As Carlos opened his mouth he shook his head, "Carlos, we have tried it our way and look at the circus out there. It's been months and with every headline, they multiply. Let's just say screw them and do what we want." He looked at Mackenna seriously, "although moving forward, can you give Nuncio and Carlos more than an hour warning for such a stunt? I don't need the best security team I've ever had suddenly all quitting at once because you're behaving like my mother."

She put her head back on his shoulder and smiled as he kissed her hair again. She wove her fingers through his and smiled. "How were your parents?"

"My father is hurting," Alessandro admitted quietly. "He and his father were always at odds, and they never got along, especially when my father was running House of Giordano. Their relationship was always strained. He said he always knew he was not a good man but had never understood the lengths of his depravity. He said he is heartbroken for what he missed, and he's started an in-house investigation into any and all models my grandfather would have had any kind of influence over." He spoke quietly, "he is worried there are more than one who went through what Dulce has gone through over the years."

"I never even thought of such a thing," Mackenna spoke quietly, "but it's possible, isn't it?"

"It is." He sighed deeply. "My father asked me to come back to House of Giordano and help him sort out the mess."

Mackenna didn't say anything.

"I told him no," he reassured her. "I am very much looking forward to beginning the next chapter of our

Chapter 60

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“Alessandro, are you sure?”

“I have never been surer of anything in my life,” he replied seriously. He turned so they were facing each other, “Mackenna, I love the community you have immersed yourself in and I am so excited to be part of it and to merge my world with yours again. I feel I’ve been given a second chance and I don’t want to miss a moment of it.”

She reached up and kissed his lips softly, “I would follow you anywhere, but I am so relieved to know we are staying here.”

She snuggled against him again and then grinned when Nuncio spoke

“Are you two done being mushy now? It’s giving me indigestion.”

“Ha!” Mackenna sat up and pointed at him. “Alessandro, I forgot to tell you. She said yes!”

Alessandro reached over and clapped Nuncio on the shoulder, “Congratulations.”

Carlos hugged him and they were all laughing as they pulled into the apartment complex. Carlos smiled dropped off. “They raced us here.”

“So, what,” Mackenna said with a sneer and looked to Alessandro. “I’m not hiding.”

“I don’t want you to. I will follow your lead, my love.” Alessandro gave Carlos a pointed glance. “Let’s go.”

Carlos and Rio were the first ones out of the car, Alessandro followed, and he stopped and turned and extended his hand to help Mackenna out of the car. He met her eyes just before she popped her sunglasses back on her face and he smiled. He pulled her towards him, and Nuncio followed out.

The paparazzi were going crazy tossing question after question at them, but Mackenna took her time, holding Alessandro’s hand as he escorted her to the entrance of the building.

He looked down at her at his side and grinned wickedly. “Are you sure you’re ready to be on the cover of every trash tabloid?”

She grinned up at him, noting the devil dancing in his eyes. “Yes, what are you going to – “

Her words were cut off as without warning, in full view of every camera, he pulled her abruptly into his arms and kissed her full on the mouth, deeply and without any reservation. What was likely only a few seconds long of a kiss, felt like an eternity as Mackenna kissed him back with equal fervour. He then grinned and ignoring the hisses of annoyance from their security team they made their way into the secure building, Mackenna’s cheeks flaming red at the very brazen display they had just put on.

Mackenna sat on the sofa, her feet on Alessandro's lap as he sketched furiously in his notepad. They hadn't been in the condo ten minutes when he'd suddenly felt inspired to sketch something and he'd been instantly drawn to his pad. Now it had been an hour and he was sitting with a pencil between his teeth and another in his hand and he was sketching and cursing with equal ferocity.

"Why are you so annoyed?" Mackenna giggled as she watched him erase something with another scowl.

"Because what is in my head," he tapped his pencil against his temple, "and what is here," he slapped the pad with his hand, "are not matching."

He looked back to his pad, "Mackenna, there is something I've been wanting to ask. I'm trying to not look a gift horse in the mouth and please do not get irritated with me, but I've been thinking about this so much since our dinner with the Whitlocks." He looked sideways at her as if afraid to meet her gaze head on.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No," he shook his head. "Not at all."

She was quiet for a minute and then looked at him as he appeared to be weighing his words, "Alessandro, out with it," she growled impatiently.

"Okay," he put his pencil down and then looked to her very seriously. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"I screwed up. I shouldn't have gone to Milan to deal with the release of the video. I shouldn't have stayed there trying to sort it out. I should have let my father manage it. I had already resigned from the company and was already to take on a new life here. It was a misguided sense of responsibility. When I was there, I learned the very first day I was there it was my grandfather," he rubbed his face. "I couldn't call you Mackenna. You gave me a week to sort things out, but I couldn't call. I was a coward and all I could think of was my blood, *my family*, set out to destroy you and damn near did. The notion my grandfather caused you such harm made me sick, and I had to stay there to make sure he went to jail. I couldn't let him get away with it. Then when he was arrested, well all I could think of," Alessandro stared at her seriously, "Mackenna, all I could think of was the best thing for me to do was walk away and let you move on with your life. I couldn't imagine how you would even be able to look at me knowing I share his blood. My family murdered your family Mackenna."

She nodded quietly as a single tear drop edged down her cheek.

"You gave me a week and I bypassed the timeline, and I did it purposefully because I love you so much and I needed to let you go," his voice was hoarse with emotion. "I couldn't hurt you anymore. I couldn't let my family hurt you ever again."

He watched as another tear slid down her cheek. "So why Mackenna? I know you said you talked to Savannah but why did you call me? Since I arrived Saturday, you've been asking me to stay with you and, I promise, I'm so grateful and there is nowhere else I'd rather be, but I'd be lying if I said I understood how you could even want me to be here, let alone ask me to be here."

Mackenna swallowed the lump in her throat. "You're asking why or how I still love you after all we've been through." She wasn't asking, merely summing up his drawn-out speech.

"Yes, I guess I am." His golden eyes were fearful, as if terrified she was about to tell him it was all a lie and payback for hurting her for so long.

She sighed, "the day I called you and left you the message, I did get into a fight with Savannah, and

and took a breath, "Savannah and Nuncio know but it's about work and it's not about work and it's confidential, but it's impacted me."

"Okay," he set his sketch pad and pencils down and stared at her. "What happened?"

"Well, I have a habit, we'll call it a habit, of going the extra mile for the people who come through my door at the hospital. Sometimes people need to hear more than the words of a bookkeeper telling them where to send their money. Sometimes," she rolled her eyes, "a lot of times, I end up spending a lot of time with the families."

"Like Ray," he mentioned the bouncer. "Derrick told me how you sat with him when his mom was ill."

She smiled, surprised he remembered Ray. "Yes, just like Ray."

She paused, "there's a woman, and her son is on the pediatric oncology ward. I call him Niblet because he can eat popcorn more than anyone I know."

"He has cancer," Alessandro said quietly.

"The day I called you, another little boy, only six was admitted to the floor so I went up with the family and said hello and then stopped to talk to Niblet and his mom. He was talking about how he was going to bust out of there and go home." She wiped her cheeks, "Dr. Luke was going into his room as I was leaving. His cancer has metastasized. He's not going home. He's never going to go home." She sucked in a breath, "his mom is a single mom, and he is all she has, and she likely only has a few weeks left with him."

"I'm so sorry Mackenna," Alessandro wiped his own tears off his cheeks.

"Dr. Luke had called me right after my fight with Savannah in my office to let me know. I was late leaving from work because of it. I didn't get out of there until well past six. I just couldn't stop thinking of how fleeting life is, how unfair it is, how cruel it can be." She swallowed the lump in her throat, "his mom stopped by my office while he was getting another CT scan. She told me to never be sad to have been given the opportunity to love someone. She said all love is a blessing and to hold tight to love because it can be ripped away from you too fast."

"I love you Alessandro and I didn't want to waste any more time. I knew Savannah was right when she said you must have been reeling in learning what you learned about your family and hadn't been sure how to approach me, so I called you. You didn't call me back. On the Friday when you and Dulce released your statement, I believed you had made your choice and I hated it, but I knew I had to move on with my life."

He nodded unable to speak.

"I told myself, you had made the decision for us and so I had to live with it, and I was going to live with it. I made Savannah and Nuncio go to the Cabaret," she smiled with the memory, "I stayed in and watched movies and made nice with Romeo and refused to let myself dwell on the rejection. I fully intended to just move forward but it hurt so much. My heart hurt and all I wanted was you being your bullying self driving me nuts and demanding I take you back."

"My love, it was not meant to be rejection. I believed in my heart I was doing right by you."

"I know," she smiled tightly, "and when Dulce came here and she argued I should go to you and talk to you because you were hurting so much, I was angry and I told her, you had made your choice and didn't call me back, so I was going to respect it and just leave things as they were."

She sniffed, "but when I came to in the recovery room and you were there," she felt her heart thundering, "I could hear Gina in my head saying love is a blessing. I know we are like chalk and cheese, and we fight and argue but when we're good together, we are so good, and I live for those moments. I love the man you are. I love your passion and your heart and the way you immediately jump to help someone in

tears at his scowl, "But do I know you love me more than anything else in the world? I know it deep in my soul. I'm glad you came home to me on Saturday Alessandro. I love you and I just want to be with you."

She sighed, "as for being a bit of a clinger lately," he shook his head to protest her description, "I haven't been feeling myself and I had a good talk with my counsellor this morning about it."

"And?"

"I'm still feeling insecure," she spoke quietly, "and Farrah thinks I'm projecting the impending knowledge I will be losing my friend in your direction. She suggested the mind is a weirdly wired organ and it is confusing emotions from two separate events and merging them in my psyche and so I'm being a bit of a baby about it. I'm not at work right now so I'm out of sorts and bored and have no distractions from the feeling of being in control. She suggested I take charge of the things I can take charge of and work to accept, as difficult as it will be, the things I cannot control."

"Ah," he smiled as he understood, "taking charge of the publicity of our relationship, makes you feel more in control."

"Yes," she nodded. "I was furious reading the things posted today about me being a side chick and I thought, hell no, I'm not a secret. I'm not playing second fiddle to anyone, let alone Dulce. I'm not doing it, so I told Nuncio either he cooperated and took me to the airport, or I was going to invite one of the journalists downstairs up for a tell-all interview."

At his surprised look she laughed, "I knew he would take me to the airport. Thank heavens he didn't call my bluff."

He chuckled quietly, "I want you to know something Mackenna."

"What?"

"I know you told me yesterday to go to Milan to see Dulce but," he groaned, "maybe I'm a bad person for it but I truly didn't have any intention of going to see her. My entire reason for going to Milan was to make sure he was dead. I do not think you understand the depths of my hatred for Salvatore. My orders to my team were to shoot him the minute he stepped out of line. The only reason he was allowed to leave the jail cell alive was because my grandmother begged me to make sure he answered to his crimes first. She said once he was found guilty, I could do what I wanted to him, but she wanted him to go to court. My desire was to make him pay slowly for what he'd done." He held her gaze meaningfully, "I mean very slowly."

She swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth, "Nuncio offered," she couldn't finish her statement.

He nodded, "I will tell you this one time only," he held her eyes seriously, "the individual responsible for sneaking Salvatore out of the house no longer exists on this earth. Anyone ever associated with Salvatore and his nefarious schemes no longer exist on this earth. The man who was in the photo holding a gun to Yara, he no longer exists on this earth." His voice was cold and hard as he held Mackenna's eyes unblinking. "You never have to worry about him ever again."

She nodded slowly and felt the nervous feeling in her stomach. "Can you get into trouble?"

His laugh was low and dark, "no, you never have to worry of such things."

She wiped her face and then took a deep breath. "I love you Alessandro. I want to spend as much time as we have in our lives, whether it's five more minutes or fifty more years, I just want us to not waste a moment of the love we have."

He pushed his books to the floor and climbed up the sofa to lay over her and cupped her cheeks with his hands. "I love you too and I look forward to spending the rest of our lives loving each other." He kissed

Chapter 61

“Oh my god, they’re doing it in the living room,” Savannah’s voice carried from edge of the hall. Alessandro laughed and looked to Mackenna, “we need to find a house of our own and soon.” Mackenna giggled as he ignored Savannah’s gagging noises and kissed her thoroughly.

Alessandro had led Mackenna through the house he was wanting to purchase and waited her approval, his impatience showing as she hemmed and hawed over every tiny detail of the home, even though he had repeatedly indicated he was going to have many of the cosmetic details renovated.

"Let me get this straight," she stood looking out a set of patio doors exiting the master bathroom directly onto a patio overlooking the backyard. "This," she waved her arms around, "palace is where you want us to live?"

"It's smaller than the place in Milan," he shrugged.

"It's huge," she looked at him with her eyebrows furrowed deeply, "Portman's house is a street over and it's not half the size of this." She pointed to an outbuilding. "It has a guest house."

"Carlos can have the guest house so he can have his own privacy but will be close enough he can come barreling in if he needs. It has an extra bedroom if he has company."

"This house has six bedrooms."

"A guest room for my parents when they come," he shrugged, "and if we have parties then there will be lots of place for people to sleep it off instead of driving home."

"Two living rooms?"

"One to play music and dance to," he winked at her, "we'll treat it like our own salsa club."

"There's a theatre in this house Alessandro, complete with projector and screen."

"Yes, so when you're angry at me, I can play movies of sad dogs and make you cry on my shoulder."

"Emotional manipulation." He shrugged and she shook her head, "at least you're aware you'll piss me off."

"It is guaranteed, we are both highly passionate people, and you have tongue to rival your viper's," he held her gaze seriously.

"Camilla is protecting my interests."

"She called me to warn me if you ever left me again, she would handle your divorce pro bono."

"She's still mad about the baptism."

"Mm," he rolled his eyes and leaned against the rail of the balcony. "What about the view?"

She looked him up and down with a smirk, "fishing for compliments? Ego feeling fragile today?"

"I meant the mountains," he pointed at her. "Your head injury is well and truly resolved the way you're carrying on today."

"Yes, and my hand feels a lot better too. I'm going to work on Monday."

"How will you work with one hand?"

"The same way you would with one hand," she glared at him daring him to tell her she couldn't go to work.

"Fine, go to work but if the doctor gives you hell, I'm not defending you," he paused, "in fact if either doctor, Wright or Kirkland, give you hell, I'm going to just sit and enjoy the show." He pointed at her arm, "you still can't even shower yet."

"Then you can continue to make yourself useful and wash my hair and help me bathe," she grinned saucily, "you didn't seem to mind this morning."

"This morning I wasn't aware you were going to try to conquer the world by noon." He met her gaze full on. "So far you've arranged your entire walk-in closet in the condo, went for a walk and told multiple journalists to go screw themselves, though if I recall you used a stronger word with one of them," he folded

deliberately antagonizing me. Also, NUNCIO sent a text the word you used at the journalist is trending.

"He deserved it."

"He did but now the entire world knows my wife has a mouth to rival a sailor's." Amusement etched his face. "My grandmother was horrified."

"She'll have to get used to it," Mackenna made a half shrug as she walked to the balcony, stood beside him, and took in the breathtaking view of the mountains. "I'm not changing for anyone."

"I don't want you to," he lifted a hand to touch her cheek. "With all we have been through, I appreciate the woman you are, and I look forward to the next chapters in our lives."

She smiled and curved her cheek into his palm, "even with my sailor's tongue?"

"I especially like the tongue," he chuckled as she kissed his hand. He stood watching her take in the view from what he hoped would be their master suite. "So, what do you think of the house?"

"Truthfully?"

"Yes, if you do not like it, I'll continue my search," he paused, "I could even commission an architect and design my own house and just build from the ground up, but this seems a quicker option and I'm anxious to start living together on our own again."

"Alessandro, I actually really like it," she smiled. "I've been teasing you a bit, but I love the proximity to work, to the condo and Savannah, to the mountains and hiking trails. There are definitely some cosmetic things, such as the flamingo pink tub in the shape of a heart in the master bathroom," she wrinkled her nose.

"You don't want to keep it?" he deadpanned then laughed as she playfully punched his arm. "If you are in agreement, I'll talk to a contractor and set out a timeline for renovations. We will stay at the condo until they are done but I'm quite sure Savannah and Nuncio are ready to start their lives on their own as soon as possible."

"Thank you by the way for offering to design her wedding dress," Mackenna grinned, "she's beside herself."

"I made her cry," he grinned wickedly.

"I swear everyday you two are more siblings than she and I ever were," Mackenna chastised him, "you torment the hell out of each other one minute and then are plotting thick as thieves the next."

"What can I say? She's grown on me. She's incredibly smart behind the mess of blonde hair and blue eyes and I really respect how hard she has worked and everything she has gone through to come out on top like she has. She works hard and she never gives up. I feel she is becoming one of my closest friends and I value her. She is gift to us both. If there is anything I am grateful for Mackenna is to know she was put in your path and has been your companion and best friend, the last number of years."

"Me too," she smiled.

"She told me you paid off her debts," he met her gaze quietly without any censure in his words.

"She would have done the same," Mackenna shrugged as she fought the blush on her cheeks, "you two have talked way too much while I've been sleeping."

"We have," his smile was wide, "she is very honest and forthcoming. She likes to argue, and she'd fight me to the death on some things I'm certain of it, but there is one thing we are both very much in agreement on, and it is how much we love you."

"Just both very differently," she giggled, "I remember when you first met her you thought she was in love with me."

She turned and moved into his embrace and rested her head on his shoulder. "Well, I only have romantic eyes for one man."

"It better be me," his smirk unrepentant, "I don't share well."

"If I hadn't met your sister, I'd suspect on your spoiled behaviours, you were an only child. Brat."

He lifted her up and sat her on the rail, holding her protectively in his arms, "I may be a brat but at least I know it." He held her eyes seriously, "I love you Mackenna and I will never apologize for it."

She wound her arms around his neck, "I would never want you to."

"Good," he smiled as he lowered his head and kissed her mouth, sliding his lips possessively across her supple ones. Her legs wound around his legs pulling him closer to her body, her fingers digging into his hair, holding his head close to hers.

When he finally released her from his kiss, she was breathless and heavy-lidded, "Alessandro, keep it up and we'll be christening a house we don't own yet."

His laugh was low and throaty, "considering the real estate agent is somewhere on the grounds we should reign ourselves in I expect." He lifted her down off the rail and took her hands in his. "Well, my love, are we buying a house?"

"Yes," she said unequivocal in her confidence. "We are buying a house but we're going to turn it into our home."

He spun her around in his arms and laughed happily, "I'm so glad to hear this. Come, I want to show you something else on the grounds."

He led her back through the house and then out the sliding doors into the backyard, he paused, "I think I would like to have this whole wall made of glass so we can see out from the kitchen, dining and main living area right through the back yard to the mountains."

"Until one paparazzi sets up a camera on a trail in the distance with a very good lens," she retorted.

"If they can climb that trail," he pointed to the massive peak in the distance, "all the power to them."

"If we have children, I'm not having them being photographed in the house they live in from a mountain," she argued.

"We will look into whether there exists a mirrored type of glass for such a thing, we can see out, nobody can see it." He offered the compromise.

"I'll agree so long as it doesn't look tacky. Imagine the jokes to be made if my model husband needs a wall of mirrors on his house." She smirked at him daring him to disagree.

He rolled his eyes as he dragged her through the back gardens, past a pool and a tennis court.

She waved at this, "who the hell lived here?"

"It seems the missus in this relationship really enjoyed spending the mister's money and there was something to do with the young man who maintained the beautiful pool which was their undoing."

"Oh dear," Mackenna giggled as she followed Alessandro down a trail through a hedge and then into a widened space where a gazebo was housed. "Oh, this is very pretty out here." She patted his shoulder, "you should have started here, I'd have set yes right away."

"You are trying my patience," he grumbled as he pulled her to the gazebo. He stood watching her as she looked all around from where she stood in the middle of the area. He pulled a folded paper from his coat and waited patiently for her to look back to him.

"It's stunning out here Alessandro, the views of the house and the mountains are incredible, the gardens are pristine and it's simply so peaceful. I can see myself sitting here with a book and a cup of tea

"Could you see yourself getting married here?" he asked quietly

"What?" She turned to face him seriously. "It makes no sense, we're already married."

"Our marriage failed badly Mackenna because of all the things I did wrong. I hid you from day one, I rushed you, I bullied you and I disrespected you." He passed her the paper and watched as she opened it up and stared at it.

"This is what you were sketching when you came home on Wednesday?" she lifted watery eyes to meet his.

"Yes, I want us to renew our vows. I want it to be a celebration of the promises we made six years ago and for me to make it truly clear to you and to the entire world, you are my everything Mackenna. There is nothing I want more in this world than your happiness."

"You want to marry me again?" she sniffed and wiped a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand as she stared at the wedding dress he'd designed.

"Yes, more than anything in the world." He smiled, "I'd like to do it right here, with all of our friends and family in attendance. We can hire a photographer," he winked, "I may know of a few, to do a spread for a magazine."

"I'm not magazine worthy." She shook her head.

"I disagree, and if we allow a photographer exclusive access, and we donate the proceeds of the sale of the photos to a specific magazine, then we are controlling the narrative of what happens with our publicity. I get to declare to the world I am your husband, and you get control over the publicity." He paused, "we could donate the proceeds to the oncology ward at the hospital."

She sobbed outright now at his suggestion. "Alessandro, I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," he grinned as he pulled her into his arms and held her tight. "I love you Mackenna and I want to rebuild our lives together, the way we should have done it. I want to do it right, with respect, love, and friendship. I want to have no regrets. Say you'll marry me again, amore."

"Yes," she smiled as she flung her arms around his neck, and he hugged her tight to his chest.

"Also, there is one other thing," he pulled from his pocket, "I know we are going to renew our vows and I've already commissioned the ring," his grin was arrogant as she shook her head at him, "but I would very much like if you put this one back on your hand."

He held up a thin gold band and smiled as she sobbed hard. "It's not so sad you should cry this much."

"You kept my ring all these years?"

"Yes," he felt his own tears sliding down his cheeks as he slid the ring back on her shaky fingers. "I had prayed for so long I would be able to put this back on your hand and now," his breath shook, "I can hardly believe it's real."

She stared at her ring and felt her heart thundering. "I can't believe you kept it." She met his eyes as touched his dampened cheeks, "I love you so much Alessandro."

"I love you too Mackenna. I believe we will be incredibly happy here in Phoenix, in the home we will build with our friends and family around us."

Mackenna knew he was right and in her heart, she knew she was exactly where she belonged and with whom she belonged. No matter what the future held for them, there was nothing she could not get through. From the ashes of all the hellfire she had been through, she had risen above it all to claim her own future and destiny. As her husband leaned in for a kiss, she smiled as her lips met his. She was