

The Billionaire's Prodigal Wife by Tatiene Richard Chapter 1

Chapter 1

"Mac, are you sure you want to do this?" Savannah Kirkland eyed her best friend carefully. "You know if you return to Milan to file this divorce, he'll come after you."

"It's time I moved on. I can't start dating someone when I'm still married to someone else. Derrick is a nice guy and I'd like to give him a chance, but I want to start with a clean slate." Mackenna lifted her slender shoulders into an elegant shrug. "Besides Alessandro didn't want me five years ago so I doubt very much he'll want me now. He made his choice."

Billionaire and mogul Alessandro Giordano was a world-renown fashion designer holding the position of CEO of the Giordano Fashion House of Milan, a company founded by his great-grandfather and was now one of the most influential fashion companies in the world.

Alessandro had selected a young model to be the face of his company barely a year into their marriage and a year before Mackenna had left him. Dulce never left his side, much to Mackenna's annoyance. Over the year, Mackenna had become convinced the couple were sleeping together, mostly because Dulce had said they were. When she'd asked him, he'd told her it was her overactive imagination putting a spin on Dulce's words. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

She'd learned over her brief marriage he was a controlling man and liked everything his way or not at all. It had never bothered her since initially she had lived only to please him anyway, but she had known intuitively he'd never let her leave him. Even though he was sleeping with someone else, he would expect her to remain his wife. He'd as much as said so to her and it had been the proverbial straw to break the camel's back.

Her self-respect in tatters, her dignity in shreds and her humiliation complete after the tabloids had spread the photo of Alessandro and Dulce dancing provocatively at a night club, she'd told him it was her or the other woman. He'd laughed at her and then seduced her telling her even if he slept with Dulce every day, she would still let him in her bed every night. She'd woken past midnight to find he'd gone back to the clubs with Dulce. She'd returned to their bedroom, smashed their wedding photo on the nightstand, left her wedding ring on it. She had picked up the few items which were hers when she'd met him and had walked out of the house in the dead of night.

She'd called her grandparents and told them she was leaving but she would not tell them where she was going because she knew Alessandro would somehow convince her to stay and she knew she could no longer continue in the marriage. Her grandfather, a devout Catholic who she had expected to argue with her over the matter, had agreed Alessandro was a scoundrel who obviously did not appreciate the young woman he'd taken for his wife. He'd told her no matter what, he would support her decision and he now regretted giving the suave smooth-talking man his blessing in the marriage to his only grandchild. He himself had seen in the tabloids the way his granddaughter was being treated.

"I think he proved he did want you considering he essentially has stalked your grandparents for the last five years to the point where you cannot even tell them which part of the United States you live in." Savannah touched her hand across the kitchen table they shared in their tiny apartment. "Isn't there some way to do this long distance?" (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

"No, I have to sign the divorce petition in front of a clerk." She rolled her eyes. "My grandfather said he'll accompany me. I've already contacted a lawyer and they have assured me discretion until it's filed." Mackenna's long light brown hair hung over her shoulder, and she reached behind her neck and twisted it into a knot behind the nape of her neck. The sound of a taxi honking outside the basement apartment made her cringe. "Okay, I'm off to the airport. I'll call you the minute I get there. Wish me luck."

"The only luck you need is to ensure Alessandro doesn't find you." Savannah grimaced.

"No, what I need is to find out Alessandro has had a heart transplant and he no longer is a cold-hearted insensitive bastard but is now sweet, kind and considerate and will grant me my divorce just so I can have peace." She walked up the stairs into the entryway and turned to hug Savannah squeezing her so tightly she worried her ribs would crack. "Don't miss me too much."

"I won't." Savannah grinned. "I'll be busy working double shifts for the next week. Buy me something hot."

"Will do." She gave a wave as she reluctantly walked away. She climbed into the taxi and gave him the instructions to take her to the airport.

"Going on a trip?" The cabbie was only trying to be friendly, but she was in no mood to talk.

"Yes."

"Anywhere fun?" He tried to keep the conversation flowing with nosy and unwanted questions.

Mackenna faced him head on. She decided to give him something to talk about for the rest of the night. "Caribbean. I'm going to one of those hedonistic resorts where anything goes. I'm hoping to meet a whole bunch of Mr.-Right-Nows."(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Her rude comment silenced him, and she watched wickedly as the man's mouth made fish movements, opening, and closing in rapid succession. She settled back into the seat and tried to quell her nervous stomach as she thought about returning to Milan.

It had been too long since she'd gone. As she sat in the back of the car, she let her mind wander to the past and the ugliness of how she'd gotten so far off track.

Her mother had met her American father when he was a college student on holiday in Milan. She'd fallen head over heels and had accompanied him back to America. They'd had little money while her dad finished college and then when they'd found out her mom had been pregnant, her mother stayed home instead of working. Although her parents had slowly began to make a life for them, travelling to Italy was not something they had done frequently.

Her parents had been killed in a car accident when she'd been sixteen and her only living relatives had been her grandparents. Her grandfather, an engineer for the subway and tram system in Milan and her grandmother, a librarian had flown to Pittsburgh to bury their only daughter and her husband and to bring Mackenna home with them.

She'd been lost for a long time, trying to cope with the loss of her parents she had adored and who had spoiled her. For months she would go to school in the day and then sit in her bedroom crying every night, missing them horribly.

Because she had only met her grandparents a handful of times growing up and without her parent's support, she'd felt lonely and sad in the foreign country. She knew minimal Italian and the language barrier was hard.

Eventually though, their persistence and love broke through the barriers she'd erected, and it wasn't long before she realized the reason her mother had been such a loving woman was because she'd had such loving parents.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Slowly her grades improved, and she made new friends and although she still missed her parents, she began to flourish in the Italian city. She enrolled in a college program for business management and in her first year as a naive nineteen-year-old girl her job placement was as a clerk in the accounting offices of the Giordano Fashion House. She'd spent the entire summer working her tail off, learning everything she could about accounting for big companies, and she'd earned the approval of her supervisors with her hard work ethic.

At the end of the summer, with only two weeks left before she was supposed to stop working and return to her classes she'd worked late and since she'd been supposed to meet some friends for drinks, she'd been rushing and as she crossed through the parking lot, she had walked right into the path of Alessandro's sports car. He'd almost run her over and the fury of his near miss had propelled him out of the car, and he'd torn a strip off her and before she could help herself, she'd dissolved into a drivelling mess of tears from his raving.

He'd gripped her arm and had given her a hard shake, swearing at her in rapid-fire Italian. He'd terrified her and with adrenaline pumping through her veins, she'd managed to yank her arm away and slap him hard on the cheek. He'd been startled by her action, and she'd taken advantage of his surprise and she'd run. She'd never run so fast in all her life. Terrified of the maniac who had been screaming at her, she'd hidden for an hour in a public bathroom of a local coffee shop worried he'd followed her and scared he would retaliate for striking him.

When she'd finally met up with her friends for drinks, she had constantly checked over her shoulder as if the crazy man in the sports car was going to pop up and kill her.

The next morning it had been a hundred-fold worse as when she'd gone to work all she could think of was the crazy man in the sports car was waiting for her in the parking lot to yell and shake her some more. She crossed the lot faster than she'd ever done before and finally when she made it to her desk unscathed, she let out her held breath. Only after she'd been working for several hours did she finally start to relax and almost forget about the entire ordeal, however as she was leaving the department with a couple of coworkers to go to lunch, she found herself face to face with the man who had nearly mowed her down as he spoke to the head of the department where she was working.

Instantly he'd demanded an introduction and when she'd realized she'd almost been killed by the Alessandro Giordano, she'd been even more mortified of her foolishness. Not only had she stepped into the path of his sports car, but she'd hit him. She had struck the gorgeous face of the CEO of Giordano Fashion House of Milan.

Remorse was not nearly a strong enough word for her actions. She had stood silently, waiting for him to fire her on the spot. So of course, she'd been taken aback when he offered his apologies for almost running her over and accepted the full responsibility for not having paid more attention to his surroundings as he'd assumed he had been the only person left in the building.

She had simply accepted his apology with a quiet whisper, the amber of his eyes making her long for a cold drink and an even colder shower. For the first time in her young adult life, she'd felt the tug of lust pulling at her from deep inside. He had more male magnetism than anyone she'd ever met before and even the boy she'd dated a few times had not even come close to eliciting the response her body had to his nearness. She remembered her mother telling her stories of Italian men and their machismo, but this was her first introduction and she felt like a lamb in the lion's den.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Terrified she would make an even bigger fool of herself than she had the night before she'd tried to make a quick exit, explaining she was holding her friends up for lunch. Instead, he waved her friends on and told her he was taking her to lunch as an act of restitution for his behavior the night before. Her girlfriends had made big eyes behind his back, and she'd been powerless to say no as he gripped her hand and tucked it through his elbow.

She'd spent the entire twenty-five-minute luncheon staring at her water glass, wishing she could drown herself in it, as he spoke into his cellular phone, unable to get away from the person on the other end. Finally, she'd managed to catch his eye, her salad untouched and she'd excused herself from the table and had left him sitting there. She found out later he had thought she'd gone to the ladies' room and had spent an additional fifteen minutes waiting for her to return before he'd realized she'd left. By the time she'd reached the office, she'd been angry he'd been so rude and inconsiderate.

She'd slammed her purse down on her desk and when her coworkers arrived just moments after and asked her how lunch was she'd fumed the man was nothing more than a big jerk who wouldn't know a good manner if it jumped up and kissed him.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Ten minutes later he'd stormed into the office setting, divided into several smaller cubicles, immediately seeking out her tiny partition. He began to give her a dressing down for walking out on him in the restaurant. Her own half Italian blood had boiled over and she'd completely lost her cool and had told him off, absolutely forgetting only the night before she'd been terrified of him. She'd jabbed him in his hard, solid chest with her index finger, called him an inconsiderate egocentric jerk and yelled the homeless vagrants on the streets had better manners than he did. When she'd caught sight of the stunned horror on her

supervisor's face, she simply picked up her purse, lifted her chin, and told her she knew she was fired and walked out.

He'd followed her out of the building, shoved her against the hard concrete walls and had kissed her until she couldn't think straight. Two weeks later he'd married her in a quiet ceremony not even the hardest working journalist on the planet had found out about. She could still feel the tenderness in their marital kiss as if it were still happening now and she pressed her fingers to her lips.

Mackenna sighed as she broke from her daydream to find they were pulling into the airport, and she took a long deep breath as she realized in taking this flight she was about to embark on a new and exciting chapter in her life. It was time for her to officially begin her life as a single woman, without the threat of Alessandro returning and usurping her peaceful existence. It started with this flight, and it would end when she finally received her divorce decree in her hand. Then she would be able to start dating again and eventually, someday, she would marry again, she'd have a family and she would be happy.

Chapter 2

Mackenna trembled when she passed the woman at the gate her ticket, admitting she was frightened. In ending the marriage to Alessandro, she was admitting she had failed. She hadn't been able to succeed at being a wife, hadn't been able to hold onto her husband and hadn't been able to make it work. She had given up on her marriage and was incapable of taking back her husband from a gorgeous Brazilian supermodel. Not like it was a competition and Alessandro was a prize; he was no prize. He was the antithesis of a prize. Her marriage to him was a cost, a penalty for which she had paid much too much.

She drew a shaky breath as she boarded the aircraft and when she took her seat she was quaking like a leaf. The flight would take her almost a full twenty hours from Phoenix to Milan. Twenty hours to panic and worry somehow Alessandro knew she was coming, and he was going to meet her flight. Terrified somehow, he would convince her she was the crazy one and she would wind up on her back, in his bed and still married to him. Even with the ocean between them, she felt his s****l pull on her. She resented him for it. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

She was exhausted when she arrived in Milan and more than annoyed with herself as every tall, lean, dark-haired man made her do a double take. Her heart fluttered nervously with

each confirmation it was not Alessandro and his amber eyes coming to make her pay for the insult she'd bestowed on his family by walking out on him. She simply needed to get in and out of the country and since she knew from the magazine, she had read the week before, it was fashion week in Paris. He was in France, not Italy, representing his company and his label. She had planned this trip at this time for this reason. Knowing he would receive the divorce petition when she was safely back in Phoenix was the only way she felt safe. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Mackenna paused in her daydreams as she caught sight of a man she recognized, and she raced to him and flung herself into his open arms. "Nonno!" She laughed as her grandfather swung her around, lifting her clear off the ground. She hugged him tight, tears streaming down her face. "Oh, my Nonno, how I've missed you. I didn't know you were meeting my plane."

He kissed her cheeks repeatedly as he hugged her tight. "Oh, my Mackenna, I couldn't let my only girl take the subway home."

She laughed at his words, knowing he was proud of the company he'd worked for more than thirty years. She swung her overnight bag over her shoulder and walked tucked under his strong arm in the direction of the taxi stand. He didn't own a car and relied on the public transportation system as did many of people who lived here.

"It is so good to see you," he spoke happily as he escorted her into the taxi.

"I shouldn't have stayed away so long," she realized it now as she rested her head against his thick shoulder. "I let my imagination get the better of me perhaps."

"Possibly," the older man nodded quietly but he didn't necessarily agree with the statement. He did not believe for one minute Alessandro Giordano would stop at anything to return his wife home. Even now, five years later, the man called him weekly, demanding an address he did not have. The man was obsessed with his granddaughter and although he wished it were because he loved her, he sincerely doubted it.

Alessandro had done everything in his power to ensure his marriage was kept quiet and hushed but his relationship with the model was displayed for the world to see. In his opinion he should have shown the world he was proud of his wife, not hidden her away like she was a dirty secret. As far as he was concerned, Mackenna was ten times the woman compared to Alessandro's constant companion. Alessandro did not deserve the love his granddaughter had offered. He believed the man was a fool.

"What time is your appointment tomorrow?" He asked his granddaughter quietly. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

"Nine in the morning," she answered just as quietly as the knowledge of what she was going to do struck her. She took a shaky breath as she felt her grandfather's hand tighten around hers. "I need to move on Nonno. It's time."

"I agree." He kissed the top of her head. "You deserve happiness Mackenna. Your life has known too much sorrow and it is time for you to get on with your life and to live it the way your parents would have wanted you to."

"I know," she wiped a tear off her cheek. "There's a doctor at the hospital where I work, and he asked me to dinner. I said no but he's asked me three times since. He's a very nice man but I want to clean up this messed-up relationship before I start on the next one."

"You are a very smart young woman." He commented quietly. "How do you like your job at the hospital?"

"It's great. I really enjoy the work. It's fun." She smiled up at him. "I suppose I can tell you now, I'm living in Phoenix, Arizona. It's nothing like Pittsburgh and not even close to anything like Milan but its good." She lifted her head and looked out the window of the city she'd once called home. It was beautiful and vibrant and everything she missed when she was in Phoenix.

"Are you worried about seeing Alessandro?" He asked quietly.

"No, because it's fashion week in Paris." She gave him a flash of her white smile, but it held no happiness to it. "Nothing short of a nuclear disaster could tear him from his precious Dulce walking down the red carpet in one of his luxurious creations. She is his muse. By the time his legal advisors notify him, I'll be long gone. I don't have to be here for it to be finalized, just for it to be started."

She leaned forward as they approached the apartment complex her grandparents lived in. "Since fashion week started yesterday though, I plan to stay here all week. I haven't gone shopping in so long and I could really use a wardrobe update." She shook her bag on the seat. "I only brought one bag with me but I'm hoping to leave with a lot more." (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Just thinking of the way Alessandro tended to the other woman made her want to scream in frustration. Even still it smarted the way he'd made her the number one priority in his life ahead of his wife.

When, not long after their first anniversary, Alessandro had returned home from a fashion show in Brazil with the lovely model who went only by the name Dulce on his arm as the new face of the company, she'd tried to be understanding to show him the support he'd given her. After all, hadn't he agreed with her to finish her second year of her two-year program? Hadn't he been supportive and loving and never balking at her working for another company during her job placement?

However, when Rosetta, her mother-in-law, had been unable to hold her gaze during the celebration dinner she knew something wasn't right. Rosetta had clearly not liked the other woman and had been glaring at her son with fury but each time she met Mackenna's eyes, she saw sadness. She had been confused at first. Then she herself had heard the story of how Alessandro had met the woman, straight from Alessandro's lips who had found the tale hilarious.

Dulce would do whatever it took to be Alessandro's top model and had gone to his hotel suite in Brazil wearing nothing at all. Striding through the corridors unashamed of her nudity, insisting to meet him and then notifying him she wanted the job she knew he'd been in Brazil promoting. He'd been impressed by her tenacity and spunk or so he claimed. Mackenna knew he'd more likely been impressed with her long slender body, flawless complexion, and dark exotic beauty.

Although her own waist had been tiny, Mackenna had the curves the women in her family had been blessed with, a healthy bra size and hips, her grandmother assured her, made for childbirth. She was averagely built, a normal five-foot-six woman. Her hair a dark dirty blonde coupled with gray-blue eyes which were nothing worth getting excited over. She knew she didn't come close to the perfection of Dulce and instantly upon meeting the woman she'd felt second-rate. The feeling had never dissipated, not in six years and she doubted it ever would. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

She pushed the thought of the Latin beauty from her mind and smiled as she saw her grandmother standing on the stairs of the complex waiting anxiously for her and as she got out of the cab, the woman raced to her. She had definitely been gone too long.

She let the two of them fawn and fuss over her. Her grandmother cooked her favourite meal for dinner and then they went for a long walk through the city streets, each of them holding her arm.

It was close to midnight before she finally convinced them they needed to go to bed. Her grandfather had reassured her he would be by her side with the lawyer in the morning so she had no reason to worry needlessly, and she too should get some rest.

But rest was hard coming for Mackenna as she tossed and turned, the image of Alessandro's eyes haunting her. His gaze had always been intense and heated and she shivered even now thinking of how with a simple glance he could cut her down.

As a child her parents had taken her to the zoo, and she'd seen a giant tiger and it had gotten awfully close to where she'd stood outside its enclosure. Its eyes had been a brownish yellow with a glint of gold to them and when she'd looked into Alessandro's eyes, she'd felt the same fear she'd had of the giant cat.

The way he'd stared at her had always made her feel as if she was his next meal. There had been a time she'd craved his gaze but as their marriage fell apart, she feared it and loathed it. It wasn't hunger for her she had realized but only hunger to possess her. She knew when he was around her, she was powerless against him.

Like a tiger he was lean, strong, cunning, and smart. He knew how to outwit her, and he'd always seemed one step ahead of her. Although her heart longed to see him just one more time before she ended their marriage, she knew it was the wrong thing to do. She had to be strong. She reminded herself of the potential dates she could have in Phoenix once this was cleaned up. She was going to get her life back. She was starting over.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

She could do this, she reassured herself. She'd find a good man. She'd get married and she'd have a family. Mackenna knew deep down she'd never love someone the way she had Alessandro, but she had to do what was best for her and he was not. He'd hurt her too deeply for her to ever forgive him and there was no way she could ever go back to the mindless adoration she'd once had for him. She knew the truth. She had to move on from his possession.

She needed someone who wanted her and her alone. Unlike the tiger she'd seen in the zoo, Alessandro was not capable of monogamy. When she finally fell asleep, her cheeks were damp, and her pillow was soaked, and her dreams were filled with the image of tawny seductive eyes.

Chapter 3

In the morning she made her way to the clerk's office after stopping to talk to a few of her grandparents' neighbors. Her grandfather never left her side and when it was time to sign the papers and her hands trembled so bad, she couldn't put the ink to paper, he'd held her in his arms while she sobbed uncontrollably.

"It should not be this hard," she cried against his shoulder.

"You love him still Mackenna," her grandfather whispered softly. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"He does not love me. He wants only to own me. He kept me hidden like he was ashamed of me, as if he were worried the world would find out he had married beneath him." She wiped her tears angrily as she begged for her anger to return so she could complete the task she had set out to do. "He would prance all over the place with that harlot on his arm and she would call me and tell me she watched him sleep because he was exhausted from her lovemaking." She grabbed the pen angrily ignoring the wide eyes of the clerk. "This ends today."

"Actually, it won't end today. This is just the beginning of this process." The clerk eyed at her with a frown.

Her lawyer Camille rolled her eyes and patted her shoulder. "It is the end for you Mackenna. Once I advise the judge of the way he's harassed your family, the judge will certainly side with you and your personal information, your whereabouts and your employer will remain confidential. I will speak with the judge today. You can begin to relax now. The rest of your life is ahead of you and the past is just the past."

To celebrate, she' decided to go shopping for new shoes and a matching suit for work. Her grandfather had declined to accompany her on the trip, but her grandmother was more than happy to tag along. They shopped all day and the next day they went out again to finish the rest of the list she'd made of required items to take back to Phoenix. She'd been in Milan for three days and already she could feel the weight of her grandmother's cooking resting on her hips.

She was exiting a shop on Corso Buenos Aires when the sight of a tall dark man made her heart stop and her footsteps falter. Her grandmother's eyes followed her gaze and then gripped Mackenna's hand. "He is in Paris, remember. He's just yet another tall dark Italian man are a dime a dozen in this city." Her voice trailed to a whisper as the man turned around and locked eyes with her granddaughter. Sofia made the sign of the cross over her body. "*Madre de Dio*, he looks angry"

"I'm starting to think he has a microchip embedded in me which turns on whenever I step on Italian soil," Mackenna whispered fearfully as Alessandro folded his telephone shut and made his way purposefully through the heavy traffic in her direction.

"It is unbelievable." Sofia agreed as she clutched Mackenna's arm. "I would encourage you to try to avoid him, but I don't think it is possible. There is nowhere to go."

From the way he gained ground on her, his strides easily two to her one, she knew even if she tried to throw herself under a nearby bus, he'd reach her before impact. She steeled herself for the flash of anger and the furious tirade of anger to come. She kept her face straight and tried to steady the thundering of her heart as she took in him. He hadn't changed an ounce in five years. Tall, dark, lean, and strong and the amber eyes drilling right to her core were all present, as if a checklist had been done in preparation of the assault on her senses. She waited for it as he approached. He had never been one to avoid give her a dressing down in public or anywhere for the matter and so as he drew closer, she felt her feet bracing against the asphalt for the impact it would make.

His fingers dug painfully as they squeezed her shoulders, ensuring she couldn't run, "and so, the prodigal wife returns."

"Alessandro, let me go." She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he was too strong. "You're hurting me."

"Do you know what pain is, Mackenna?" He asked coldly. "Do you really know what pain is?"

She ignored his sarcastic words. "You're supposed to be in Paris. It's fashion week."

"That's right and you are deliberately toying with my work and contractual obligations." He motioned to a security agent behind him. "Help Signora Giordano to the car with her bags please."

"We are not going with you Alessandro." Mackenna argued with him and stopped the man from taking the bags and ushering her grandmother to the car.

"Mackenna, I am not going to quarrel with you over this in the middle of a street." Alessandro glared furiously down at her, his toes touching hers.

"Good, then back off and let me go." She tugged her hands away from the firm grip he had on her, but he held her fast.

"Get it in the limo now." He spit through his clenched jaw.

"No." She hissed back. "Go back to Paris. I'm sure Dulce is unable to function without you at her side."

Her grandmother took her hand. "Mackenna, people are staring and there is a photographer coming down the street. Perhaps we should let Alessandro drive us back to the apartment and he can come in and speak to you there."

Mackenna could see how much her grandmother was mortified by their argument. She was a private person, quiet, shy, and reserved. Although their voices were hissed whispers, they were attracting attention on the busy street and Mackenna instantly felt badly for embarrassing her. "I'm sorry Nonna. Let's get you home."

Alessandro's grip didn't loosen a fraction on her shoulder as he turned her and marched her to the waiting limousine. She stood back while her grandmother was gently escorted into the vehicle. She ducked into the dark car with the tinted windows just as one of the security personnel grabbed a camera from a photographer and deleted the pictures he'd taken.

This was one of the things she'd never cared for with Alessandro. It wasn't she cared people wanted to take his picture or hers since she was with him. It was the fact Alessandro made it the top item on his list of security nobody knew of their relationship. It made her furious to know if Dulce were on his arm, the paparazzi could have taken a thousand photos and he wouldn't have flinched, and his security would have simply pushed them into the car. But since he wasn't with Dulce and he was with her, the pictures were deleted as if they were tainted and humiliating.

She crawled beside her grandmother and sat stiffly with her bags on the seat beside her. She held her grandmother's hand. "Nona, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you embarrassment."

"Do not fret, Mackenna. It is not your fault. Alessandro attracts attention wherever he goes." She looked up as the man glided into the seat opposite them.

"Your grandmother is correct, Mackenna. It is why you should not be wandering the streets without security." He tugged his pant leg up as he crossed his ankle over his knee.

"No, it is why I shouldn't be wandering the streets without a court order barring you from being anywhere near me." She hissed back furiously.

He stared at her across the darkened interior of the vehicle and wondered what had happened to the childish pixie-like girl he'd married. Gone was the short blonde bob which had curved her cheeks making them rounded and full and in its place her hair now hung in a long straight waterfall of soft cinnamon with honeyed streaks throughout and cut in a fringe bang making her blue eyes seem rounded. The fringe framing the top of her face, making her chin seem narrower and her cheekbones higher. The young girl he'd spent the last five years searching for was replaced by a very business-like individual who scowled at him as if he were nothing to her. As beautiful as he considered her, he was not appreciative in the least of the way her attitude had changed. "When did you turn into such a b***h?"

She heard her grandmother's gasp and she glared at him. "Watch your mouth around my grandmother, please. It might be satisfactory with the regular company you keep talking like a sailor, but I find it disrespectful for you to speak in such a manner in front of my grandmother."

He looked to her grandmother, chastised and genuinely apologetic. "I apologize, Sofia. Mackenna is right. I disrespect you. Please accept my apology."

"Of course, Alessandro but I would just like to go home now please." Sofia swallowed the lump in her throat. The atmosphere in the car was charged and she folded her hands neatly to her lap as Alessandro tapped on the window for the car to begin the ride to the apartment where she lived with her husband.

He eyed Mackenna carefully. "You've changed."

"Did you expect I was going to stay the doormat you wiped your feet on forever?" She retorted nastily.

"I don't recall ever wiping my feet on you." He leaned into his seat and reached into his pocket for his cigarettes.

As he reached for the lighter, she felt a pain in her chest at the gold-plated item in his hand. She'd bought it for him for their first wedding anniversary. He had always been using matches and constantly running out. She'd had it engraved with his initial on the side and the bottom simply said '*love Mackenna.*' He'd told her he would always treasure it. That he still used it irked.

She looked out the window. All she wanted was to get away from him and breathe freely because the longer she sat in his proximity the more she doubted the filing of her divorce

papers. His amber eyes always had a way of making her feel desired and wanted and even in his anger she could see those emotions as he drew a long breath on his cigarette.

"Mackenna, perhaps you can tell me where you've been for the last four years and eleven months." He held his cigarette pinched between his fingers as he waited for her to speak.

"Working." She looked away from the dark hair escaping the hem of his pants and over his sock. It dawned on her she was still as sexually aware of him as she always was. They were like magnets and the tug between them was fierce. Or at least, she admitted to herself, the tug on her was fierce. She knew now he had simply enjoyed the power and control he had over and there was no love there.

He sighed loudly, a stream of smoke billowing through his nostrils at the sound and he looked to her grandmother impatiently. "Do you notice the change in your granddaughter or am I imagining she is belligerent and difficult?"

"Mackenna has become a strong confident young woman and I am proud of her," Sofia's chin jutted forward in an unusual display of defiance. "It takes a lot of courage to leave everyone you love and start over."

"So, you support her in this foolishness?" Alessandro admitted to being surprised. "You do not miss her?"

"I miss her deeply every day, but I only want her happiness. You forget my only child, her mother, also left to follow her heart. I support Mackenna just as I did my Madeline." Sofia held his gaze but then turned her face away suddenly as if she could no longer bear looking into his eyes.

"Well, you won't miss her any longer. She is finally home, and we are going to sit down and resolve this foolishness which has kept her away for too long. Mackenna is home to stay." The finality of his words punctuated with a plume of smoke as he exhaled into the tight interior. Alessandro finished his cigarette and crushed out the end with his fingers and stuffed it into an ashtray. His gaze dared Mackenna to argue.

Chapter 4

Sitting in the tight confines of the limousine, aware her grandmother had no choice but to hear everything, the urge to smack the arrogance off his face was breathtakingly incredible.

"And what if this is not what I want?" Mackenna interrupted his calculating cocky commentary.

His head pulled back, evidently surprised by her comment, "are you telling me you do not want to resolve this silly dispute?"

"Oh, I want it resolved." She was about to tell him exactly how she was going to resolve it when she felt her grandmother's warning squeeze and she drew a breath and looked away. Suddenly she realized although Alessandro had found out she was in the city; he had no idea she had filed for a divorce. In her anger she was about to spill it all, but her grandmother was protecting her from ruining her plan; thank heavens one of them had their wits today. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

He was assuming she had returned home to be with him. She felt her stomach drop like she'd swallowed an anvil. If he were being this pushy when he thought she wanted to come home, he would be unbearable once he found out she had filed a divorce. Her grandmother had sensed it before she had, and she was suddenly grateful for the woman's presence in a way she never had been before. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against her shoulder.

"It's settled then." Alessandro spoke as he watched her grandmother wrap a slender arm over his wife's shoulder and kiss her forehead. "We will go home after we drop your grandmother off."

"No." She sat up straight and swallowed deeply. If she went back to his estate, she wouldn't ever make it back to Phoenix unscathed. "Alessandro, you cannot expect I would just go straight back to your house after five years. I'm not ready. I need more time."

"We need to talk and doing this in the tiny bedroom in your grandparent's apartment you're staying in is not acceptable." He shook his head at her.

She could see in his eyes talking was the last thing on his mind and she wriggled in her seat and looked away from the burning heat of his gaze. "Alessandro," her voice was huskier than she'd intended. "I need time."

"We will have dinner then and," he paused as she seemed troubled. "Now what?"

"Alessandro. I didn't think you would be here today. You were supposed to be in Paris. I had hoped to spend a few days with my grandparents before you came home. I didn't tell you I was coming home because I knew you would want to whisk me away from them. I've missed them terribly. I don't mean to be angry with you, but you've ruined my plans and my surprise. Please can't I just stay with them until the end of fashion week?" She bit her lip nervously, knowing she was playing a dangerous game in letting him think she had come home for good.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

He took a long breath at her rushed words and crooked his finger at her. "Come over here."

She swallowed deeply and felt her grandmother squeeze her hand and she squeezed back reassuringly. She knew what she was doing, or at least she hoped she did. The only way to win with Alessandro was to let him think he was irresistible, and she was putty in his hands. She took his hand and let him pull her across the small space onto his lap. She played with his tie nervously unable to look him in the eye.

"Please Alessandro. I'm only asking for a few days with my grandparents. We'll have the rest of our lives." Well, she corrected mentally, she would have the rest of her life without him, and he would have his without her. All she needed was a few hours to find a flight and get on it.

"Let's compromise." He stroked her hair and decided he liked the length. "Have dinner with me tonight. We will talk a bit and I will bring you back to your grandparents for the evening. You can stay with them until I get back." He tilted her chin and held her eyes looking for any visible sign of distress or anxiety. "You will forgive me of course if I ensure you are not going to run off and I have security at the apartment to accompany you on any further shopping expeditions."

She stroked his tie and forced herself to hold his gaze. "Alessandro, you can put four security men on watch, and I will not be offended." She was certainly not offended. She had every intention of running off and in his shoes, she would most definitely do the same thing by not trusting a word coming from her lips. She slipped her finger under the navy tie and through the buttons and touched the hard flesh under his shirt. She saw his eyes darken to a deep golden brown as he felt her touch.

"When will you be home?" At least she had a tiny amount of control over him she considered, feeling victorious. Satisfaction burned deep in her belly.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

"Saturday." He pressed his lips to her forehead.

"That's five whole days," she gave a mock pout and had to remind herself not to overdo it. She looked to the window and noticed the car was outside of her grandmother's apartment complex. She slipped off his knee and along the interior of the car. "I'm going to walk Nona in."

He nodded and helped both women out of the car. She felt his hand on her low back as they entered the complex and the security agent carried the bags. She followed her grandmother to her bedroom; aware Alessandro blocked any exit from the space. She saw her grandfather look up in surprise from his desk in the corner.

"You are going with him?" Her grandmother asked quietly.

"I have no choice. It is obvious he does not know yet I filed my papers. I will have dinner with him and come back here. I'll figure out a way to get away from the security." She took a breath.

"Camille had told me he would be notified at his estate. It is obvious he wants to get back to Dulce. If he does not get served until after he brings me back here, then its fine." She opened her purse and felt tears begin to slide down her cheeks at the injustice of it all.

"If, however he finds out between now and the time dinner is over, he is going to do everything in his power to not let me leave. If this happens, I'll have to find a way to go straight to the airport and board whatever plane I can. I have my passport."

Her grandmother took her hands. "I can always ship your things to you. Do not worry if you have to leave tonight Mackenna." Sofia pressed a kiss to her cheeks.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Enzo stood with his jaw tight. "I am not happy he chases you away from us yet again."

She hugged him tight. "Do not worry, Nonno. It will not be long, and I will have my freedom and when the day comes, not even Alessandro Giordano will keep me from doing what I want. He can hardly chase me if I'm married to someone else, can he? I have every intention of finding a suitable husband and starting my life over."

"Well, I hope to see you again before you leave but know we love and support you no matter what." Her grandfather hugged her in his strong arms. "I love you."

"I love you too." She patted her purse. "I have my passport in case I need it. Otherwise, I'll be home tonight with a security agent on my hip."

She heard Alessandro call her name and she rolled her eyes. "I have to go. I love you."

She made her way back out. "You promise to let me come back tonight?"

"You have my word. I just got off the phone and my flight will leave in a few hours and so I will need to be at the airport in short time." He held his hand. "Let's not waste any more time. You will spend the rest of the week with your grandparents. However, on Saturday evening I will be home, and we will go home and anything we do not resolve this evening we will before bed on Saturday. Is this understood?"

She slipped her hand into his. "Of course, Alessandro."

She didn't ask him where they were dining and when the limousine pulled up beside the Gallia hotel she looked down at her pale pink blouse and faded denim jeans. "Alessandro. I am not dressed for this."

"We'll have room service."

His words sent a shiver down her spine, and she had the urge to run screaming down the street knowing full well food was the last thing on his mind. Panic-stricken, she was robot-like as he entered the hotel through the lobby and walked straight to the elevator. A concierge met them at the elevator and escorted them to the suite Alessandro had obviously arranged while she was with her grandparents in the bedroom.

She wrung her hands nervously in front of her as she took in the opulence of the room. She watched as he closed the door behind the concierge and then turned to face her. The lump in her throat grew epically and she considered she may suffocate. She prayed for it.

"Now," he undid the cufflinks at his wrists and tossed them carelessly onto a dresser after throwing his jacket over a chair. "When I first saw you on the street you were pissed off. Thirty minutes ago, I had the distinct impression I would have gotten a lap dance from you had your grandmother not been in the limo with us and now you are extremely nervous. What gives?"

"I'm scared." She wasn't lying. She was absolutely petrified. The more layers he removed the hotter she was getting, and it was unfair.

"Why now Mackenna?" The way he said her name had always made her smile and he saw her lips turn. "You are ready to mock me already?"

"Some habits die hard." She shifted from foot to foot.

"Answer the question." He said suddenly, his lips tight. "Tell me why you've returned now."

"I want to put this ugly mess all behind us." Mackenna realized dealing in half-truths was not as hard as she had thought it would be.

"You didn't feel this need a month ago, a year ago, the day after you ran away from me?"

She looked away then. "My mother was my age when I was born. She was twenty-five. I always thought I'd be like her with my first child by now." She wasn't lying.

"You are ready to have a family?" This surprised him. They had discussed children before, and she'd been hesitant.

"My parents died too young, and I worry if something were to happen to me, I don't want to have lived for nothing. I work very hard, and I want a child." It grew easier and easier to tell him the truth without revealing to him she had no plans to share any of this with him.

"Whatever the reason, I am glad you came home." He motioned to the bed. "Sit."

"Can't I sit in a chair?" She started toward the upholstered armchair, but he cut her off.

"Mackenna, I haven't made love to my wife in close to five years."

In his speech he missed the way the color drained from her face, and she gripped the wall for support.

"Now, I don't want to rush you or anything, but I have a flight leaving soon. The next three weeks I will be very busy, and I will only have a little bit of time to spend with you, however I am working on clearing my schedule so we can take a holiday together for a couple of weeks." His shirt followed his jacket.

How considerate of him to pencil her in when he was trying to save their marriage, she thought nastily. "Alessandro. Unlike you, I cannot just get naked and be ready to make love."

"You want romance? Some candles, soft music and wine?" He asked with rolled eyes. "I will give you all of those things in about thirty minutes. For now, I have needs." He swung her up into his arms and laughed at her outraged expression. He kissed her hard on the mouth.

"Needs?" She demanded as she tore her lips from his punishing kiss. "No Alessandro."

He lay her in the middle of the bed and trapped her there by straddling her hips and the feel of his heavy manhood resting against her pelvis was too real for her to ignore and she twisted her waist to manoeuvre away from him, but it only served to touch them more intimately and she caught her lip at the sensations curdling her abdomen.

She could feel her cervix clenching inside in anticipation and she almost screamed with a sudden very real and very intense s****l frustration. His hand slipped between them and rubbed the tender spot concealed by her denim. A low moan caught in her throat and when his other hand slipped under her blouse and plucked at the n****e hardening against his hand, the sound whooshed from her lungs. She closed her eyes against the feelings and fought against them. "Alessandro, please stop. You said we would talk, and I believed you. I don't want to have sex."

"Yes, you do." He lifted a pair of dark eyebrows high onto his forehead at her words. "Your hips are wiggling under me."

"Fine, my body wants to have s*x, but I don't. My mind is telling me this is not a good thing. We cannot just fall into bed after all this time."

He sighed loudly as if he was discussing matters of importance with an imbecile. "We are married, and we can most definitely fall into bed. You were the one who threw the temper tantrum and ran away from home like a spoiled teenager." He shook his head. "My grandfather said I gave you too much freedom."

Fury seared her like a branding iron, and she gave a hard shove toppling him off her. "You inconsiderate jerk! Your grandfather is an overbearing pompous ass who treats your grandmother like a second-class citizen. Your own father says it! And do you know what? You're just like him. You look like him and you act like him, and you may as well be his doppelganger because you are a pathetic excuse for a husband just like he is."

Chapter 5

"Pathetic excuse for a..." his voice trailed off as her words set in and when she tried to roll off the bed, he yanked her back hard and threw his leg up over her hip and held her captive. "Where do you think you're going? You are going to explain your statement right now."

"You want the reasons why I think you're a terrible husband?" She demanded, her eyes burning with rage as she glared at him. "Do you want the list in alphabetical or numerical, in English or Italian?"

"All of this because you are jealous of my friendship with Dulce." He grimaced at her. "It is time you grew up Mackenna and realized not all relationships between a man and woman have to be about sex."

"They do when they involve you." She shoved on his chest trying to get away from him. "It's all you know how to do. You don't know how to carry a conversation like a normal human being. It's just s*x. I should have known you had no intention of taking me to dinner. You were just looking to get laid."

Her comment stunned him. "Where the hell have you been living you've learned such a vocabulary?"

"A bordello." She returned smartly. "It's helped me come to grips with my inner sex-slave, considering it was all you thought of me anyway. The only difference between you and my clients is they pay me cash and you bought me baubles." (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

She'd pushed him too far and as soon as the words left her mouth, she knew it. His cheeks reddened with fury under the mocha complexion of his skin, his nostrils were wide and flared and his lips were pulled so tight his gritted teeth were exposed. She could see the fury as if it furred in smoky wisps from his scalp as he grabbed her hands and pinned them over her head.

"No, Alessandro." She whispered as he tore the buttons off her shirt in one furious movement. Her bra followed in the same tattered pattern as he broke the clasp on the front. "Please Alessandro. I didn't mean it."

"Oh, you meant it, Mackenna. It is very clear you think I've used you for s*x in the past so why should today be any different?" His knee moved between hers as he held her on her back, pushing her legs wide. "However, let's make things perfectly clear. You can try to say as you want but you enjoy the s*x as much as I do. Who used who Mackenna?"

She wanted to deny it but then his head lowered, and he sunk his teeth into the soft rounded flesh of her breast, tugging her n****e between his lips in a hard fluid motion that had her back arching off the bed. He suckled her with such ferocity when he moved his head to the other breast, he left behind a purplish love-bite from his efforts.

He had released her hands and they were buried in his hair as he repeated the same offense to the other side and then he trailed the kisses down her flat tummy, dipping his tongue into her navel as his fingers worked with dexterity on the button and zipper of her jeans and then they were tossed carelessly away. Any protests she might have had evaporated in the air around them as his lips found her s*x and his tongue drew up the middle of her.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Time was lost to her as he kissed and sucked and nibbled at the sensitive crux of her womanhood and when a second finger joined the first one he'd slipped inside of her she was sobbing his name into the pillow she yanked over her face as wave after wave of pleasure slammed her with considerable force into the mattress beneath her as the first orgasm, she'd had in almost five years tore through her body.

The pillow was ripped from her face and tossed away as he smashed his lips against hers and replaced his fingers with his thick shaft. There was nothing gentle in the harsh hurried movements he made as he slammed into her, pushing her body up the bed until her head touched the headboard. Her ankles locked around his middle, drawing him upward, deeper inside of her and the adjustment she made allowed for him to hit her g-spot with precision accuracy and his tempo didn't shift a beat as he brought her to a second rapid climax.

She was surprised when he joined her, releasing so suddenly, his guttural calling of her name as he buried his face in her hair sounding far unlike any noise, he'd ever made with her before, and she knew then he was still angry.

Her arms were over her head, gripping the pillow she had pushed behind her to protect her from the hard wood of the headboard. Her legs still hung over his hips. His elbows were on either side of her face and she kept her eyes closed and her face turned to one side as the sound of his heavy panting filled her ear from where his cheek rested just above hers. They lay not looking at each other for several minutes until their breath was caught.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

He rolled off her suddenly, the movement of his withdrawal from her body rough and uncaring and he stood up beside the bed. He grabbed his pants and slipped into them, and it dawned on her she didn't even recall him taking them off. Humiliation at her wanton behaviour filled her and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Get dressed," he barked at her. He started to walk away, and he turned at the sound behind him. "Tears? What did you expect from a man who pays you in baubles for s*x? Were you expecting for me to hold you, cuddle you, and whisper some pillow-talk for you? Consider yourself lucky I'm even buying your dinner considering what just happened was quite possibly the worst s****l experience I've ever had." He slammed into the bathroom and the entire room shook with the force of his rage.

Mackenna sat up in the bed and grabbed her jeans off the floor. Her blouse was useless and so she grabbed his dress shirt and pulled it on. Knowing full well a security agent would be outside the door she grabbed her purse and hooked it over her shoulder but under the shirt. She grabbed an ice bucket off a counter and headed to the door. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and paused. Her lips were full and bruised and her eyes were big and wild. Her hair was mussed and tousled and anyone looking at her would know she had just had s*x and her eyes filled with tears and she brushed them away angrily.

She took a deep breath as the sound of water running in the bathroom told her Alessandro was showering. There was a time when after making love he would have carried her to the shower with him. She felt dirty and soiled from what they'd done, and she wanted nothing more than to run a bar of soap over her entire body. If only she could be cleansed from this feeling, but she hadn't the time. She grabbed the handle and pulled it open. If she ever wanted to get away from him, it was right now, in this moment, while he was angry and in the shower.

She smiled a phoney smile in the direction of the two agents at the door before jerking her thumb in the direction of the closed bathroom door. "He wants me to get some ice."

One of the men's eyes rounded at the sight before him and she knew what he was seeing. She pushed her hand through her hair and adjusted her arm over her braless breasts as if trying to hide her n****s. Her husband was a fashion designer, she'd never been ashamed of n****s, but she'd play it up for the stunned guard.

He gave her a once over and then grumbled, "hurry up," before folding his arms over his chest in annoyance.

She gave a fake giggle. "That's what he said."

She moved to the ice machine in the tiny recess at the end of the hall and looked around for a path of escape. She leaned back to see the men weren't really looking at her, but she was definitely in their line of vision. The glass door just opposite the ice machine beckoned and yet she hesitated. She slowly allowed some ice to collect in the bottom of the container and then she stopped as a sob caught in her throat as she leaned against the wall as a sudden truth slammed her.

She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay with him. She wanted to be with him. Even after all this time, after all this space, only a little more than an hour in his presence and she wanted nothing more than to go to him in the shower and apologize and have him make love to her the way he had originally wanted to, the way she wanted him to. She was an idiot and a fool, and she stood there with her head against the wall, sobbing at the realization she still loved him as much today as she did the day she married him. He was going to be the death of her.

The sound of the slamming door opening at the far end of the hall caught her ear and she knew he'd stepped out into the hall. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest, aching with what she knew she had to do. Leaving was going to break her into a million pieces and she was unsure if she would survive. He was still now, as much as he was when she'd left him five years ago, a fire which consumed everything in his wake, and she was nothing more than dry brush. She loved him so much. She blinked rapidly at the tears still falling.

"Where the hell is she?" His voice was hoarse and dry.

"Getting ice." The man told him with a shrug. "She said you told her to get ice."

She turned to face him and saw him standing there, a white towel draped over his lean hips, his hair almost black with the dampness from the shower he'd jumped in and out of. His cell phone was in his hand at his side and the expression on his face almost had her dropping the ice bucket on the ground and running to comfort him. The stunned pain at the realization she was running again etched on his face broke her heart and she knew he knew. They stared at each other for several long seconds and then knowing she had to do the only thing best for her, she dropped the bucket to the floor, and she ran. Faster than she had ever run in her life, she shoved the glass door to her side open and she raced down the stairs knowing there was a very real possibility one of the three men at the end of the hall would catch her long before she reached the bottom. She prayed it wasn't him because she wasn't sure if he would kill her or if she would simply die from heartbreak. (Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

Her heart pounded as the sound of their heavy footsteps jumping down the stairs more than running echoed in the stairwell, but she didn't look back and she ran even harder. Even when she made it out the side entrance onto the street she kept running. Mackenna ran until her lungs ached and her sides were pierced with sharp stabbing pains. She ignored the stares from people she brushed past and just kept running. For twenty full minutes she'd run before ducking into a coffee shop and hid in a bathroom. As she stood staring into the mirror, her eyes wide, red-rimmed and swollen, she came to the realisation she'd come full circle. She was ending exactly where she had started the first time, she'd met Alessandro Giordano; hiding in a coffee shop bathroom. She wasn't hiding far enough.

It didn't take her as long this time to leave the bathroom as it had the first time. She quickly splashed a palmful of water on her face and then took a deep breath. She ignored the stares of the customers as she exited again and stepped cautiously into the street. She made her way to a taxi stand.(Daily Latest update www.noveljar.com)

"Can you take me to Bergamo?" thankfully her Italian was as strong as the day she left.

"Bergamo?" the man asked curiously. "It's a long way for a taxi ride." The man did not seem keen. "A bus would take you there at half my fare."

"I'll pay you four times the fare," she offered, hating how terrified she felt standing in the open street.

"Get it, get in," he waved her into the car.

She climbed into the back seat. She ducked her head as she noted Alessandro coming down the street in the direction of the coffee shop, as if he'd know it was where she'd wind up. Curse him and his intuition. She opened her purse and pushed all the money in her purse at him. "There's almost a thousand Euros there. You can have it all if we go right now." The tax driver gave a wide smile and agreed. He stepped on the gas and peeled away. Mackenna looked back through the window to see Alessandro stepping into the coffee shop. She felt safe for the first time since she'd seen him earlier in the day. Then as the car weaved through traffic and she knew she was leaving him behind she put her face in her hands and let the tears fall unchecked.

Chapter 6

Mackenna tried to focus on the work in front of her, but she was irritated. Her lawyer had called her this morning. Her soon-to-be ex-husband was being a pain in the backside.

Regardless of the fact she had not asked for one penny of alimony and not one dime towards her legal costs, Alessandro was contesting the divorce. Her lawyer had not only refused to divulge her current address, citing client-attorney confidence and she requested a petition from the court to keep it out of Alessandro's hands. She had advised her client was in the United States, she was employed and had provided her tax assessment information as the

evidence. (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

Since the night she'd run out of the hotel, he'd been a man possessed. After reading the signed testimonies of her grandparents, their neighbors, Mackenna's lawyer and her family and her law clerks, concerning his actions and his constant pestering for her location, the judge had signed the petition to keep her personal information confidential.

He had become enraged and had called the judge at home and demanded she recant the restriction. The judge had not only refused but had told him if he continued in the manner he

was, she would have him thrown in jail with charges, among other things of stalking.

Then on the day her lawyer had tried to have him sign the papers Alessandro had

apparently walked out the meeting after instructing her attorney to call her client back home

because they would be in court for a long time. He was not going down without a fight.

"Mac," Savannah poked her head into the office. "I need food. Do you want to come with me?" (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

Savannah was almost finished her internship at the trauma center of the clinic where they
against the door as if completely exhausted.

Mackenna looked at her with a sad smile. "Yeah, I could use some food." She glanced at her watch. "I can't believe you're still here."

"Oh well one of the other intern's kid brought home the flu bug from school. He's been puking for hours now. I stayed on to cover his shift." She pushed off the door as Mackenna moved to lock it behind them. "How come you look so upset?"

"How much do you think it would cost to hire a hit man?" Mackenna glowered as she was reminded again of Alessandro's foolishness. "Camille called. He's still contesting the divorce. He has requested a meeting with our lawyers present but Camille told him I'd returned to the States. Then my grandmother called to say he showed up and essentially threatened to make

friends from middle school here in the States who said he'd called her house at four in the morning to see if I'd been in contact with her. She flipped out at him because she has an infant she'd just settled down to sleep and told him even if it was a matter of life and death, she wouldn't tell him where I was because obviously, he's a nut calling

"Italy would be what, six hours ahead?" Savannah grimaced. "I think if someone called my house at four in the morning for something so asinine, I'd strangle him through the phone." She gave a sad smile. "And I don't think you can afford a hit man."

Mackenna rolled her eyes as they moved into the tiny eatery and took a place in line. She grabbed a tray and smiled at the hair-net sporting woman behind the food bar. "Just the vegetable soup please." She turned to Savannah. "What I really want is a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese and bottle of wine, to drown my bloody misery but I'll stick to my diet, and I'll eat the soup."

Savannah laughed at her, "tell you what, you have the soup now and tonight, we'll splurge and go out for dinner. I can't believe you put on seven pounds in three days in Italy." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"My Nonna made my favorites every blasted day." She groaned and rubbed her tummy appreciatively, her blue eyes glistening with the memory. "Homemade breads and fresh pastas. It was heaven but it's taken me the last three weeks to lose five of those seven pounds. It all went to my rear end too. Having an office job is not conducive to anything other

than a big bottom." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"Well, I can promise you, Derrick was seriously enjoying watching those extra pounds every time you climbed the stairs ahead of him." Savannah teased; her green eyes enhanced by

her green scrubs. She groaned as she twisted her long blonde hair up over her head in a knot so it wouldn't fall into her soup.

Mackenna laughed at her comment. "I might admit to putting a little extra wiggle in my step. He's a cutie." She was forcing herself to forget her horrible night with Alessandro. She had to focus on starting a new life. It was imperative to her mental wellbeing.

"That he is." Savannah grinned slyly. "I may have accidentally on purpose told him this morning you flew to Italy to start your divorce proceedings. He said he's going to ask you out."

"Really?" Mackenna blushed. "I wish you wouldn't do stuff like this. It makes me seem desperate. He probably thinks I told you to tell him or something."

"He knows you wouldn't do that. He knows you're a classy dame," Savannah kicked her feet up onto an empty chair and took a long drink of her scalding hot coffee before setting it on

Mackenna laughed at the stretched-out position Savannah had assumed, holding her soup bowl over her chest, and drinking right from the dish. "Yeah, classy. It's the company

keep." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

Savannah belched into her palm and then grinned. "I'm a doctor. I don't have to be classy. My lovers want me just because I have an M.D after my name."

Mackenna couldn't help it and laughed aloud at the words her friend spoke. "Yeah, and the fact you're a former beauty pageant winner doesn't hurt either."

"Hey, pageants helped me get tuition money and I'm still grateful for my foster mother for pushing me into it. I still say instead of dancing, I should have been allowed to belch the alphabet for my talent." Savannah's smile grew tenfold as she looked past Mackenna's

shoulder. "Here comes Doctor Derrick 'Sexy-ass' Portman now. Mm, mm," she licked her lips as the man got closer. "He is a sweet piece of cherry pie, isn't he?"

"Would you shut up?" Mackenna hissed as she sunk into her seat and covered her flaming cheeks with her hands. "If there is a God, he'll call me home now."

"I'm atheist," Savannah was laughing now, "but I do believe people can die of embarrassment if it helps."

"Doctor Kirkland, Mackenna," Derrick smiled down at them, his blue eyes lingering on Mackenna. "Is there enough room at this table for one more?"

"I don't know, Doc," Savannah grinned at him. "My feet are pretty comfy on this chair.

Derrick eyed Mackenna who was now a brilliant shade of red. "You don't like all

orthopedic surgeons or just one in particular." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"I never said I didn't like orthopedic surgeons." Mackenna glared furiously at her friend who was eating her Jell-o as if it were the last thing she'd ever be allowed to consume again. "Breathe when you eat, would you? You're the doctor. I cannot do the Heimlich on you!"

"So, then you do like me." Derrick played right into Savannah's direction with a cocky grin. Mackenna groaned and dropped her face into her palms. "I feel like I'm being tag-teamed.

"Nah," Derrick teased her. "I'm not into group things."

Savannah choked on her gelatin as Mackenna sat back in shock as the man chuckled at his joke and took a bite of his sandwich. "Nice one, doc." Savannah nodded her appreciation of

"Thanks," he flashed a big smile in her direction as he met her hand in a high-five.

"You two are horrible." Mackenna pushed her empty soup bowl away and scowled. "I'm still hungry." Derrick held up the half of his sandwich, but she shook her head. "No, I can't eat hospital bread after having my Nonna's. It's like going back to five-dollar wine when *you've* been drinking the hundred-dollar bottle. Not good at all."

"You like wine, Mac?" Derrick asked her with his blue eyes curious as he studied her.

She wondered how it was Savannah's shortening of her name had been picked up by every staff member of the hospital. Nobody called her by her full name anymore. "I am Italian, well half Italian." She pulled a face as she pushed her spoon around the empty bowl. "It's a requirement."

"Do you like pasta?" Derrick led her into the direction he wanted the conversation to go.

Mackenna missed the smug look on Savannah's face and assumed he was just making conversation. "Yes, I love pasta but so do my hips and the pasta loves them back." The pasta loved her so much she was currently starving to get it to leave.

"Well then pasta and I have something in common," he watched as her blush returned to her cheeks and then he laughed. "So tonight, I'm preparing for a surgery I'm doing tomorrow but how about on Thursday night, you have dinner with me, and I'll cook you an authentic pasta dish." (Daily latest update www.noveljar.com)

It was then she saw Savannah's wide smirk and almost groaned. "Derrick, I don't know." She'd played right into their hands.

"Savannah said you filed your divorce, so you have no excuse not to come with me." His blue eyes were daring.

"Did she mention he's contesting the divorce and I have to go back to Milan in two weeks to face him in court?" She asked with her eyebrows raised in his direction. "It'll be like facing the devil to ask for my soul back." She muttered angrily. "Stupid cheating swine. I can't believe he's fighting this."

"I'd fight it too." Derrick leaned into his chair. "You're a sweet, kind woman with a heart of gold and you're sexy to boot. He knows he's been a fool for letting you go."

"What do you know?" Mackenna glowered at him. "He's simply an Italian man who thinks the entire universe revolves around him and I must be out of my mind to have walked out on him. He actually told my lawyer to offer me cash to come home and provide an heir." She shivered with disgust. Even Camille had been surprised by the arrogance. "What an arrogant

"Provide an heir? What did you do, marry a billionaire or something?" Derrick asked eyeing her sideways.

"A billionaire and something," she muttered, "and the something is demon-spawn." It wasn't so far off; his grandfather was a cad.

Savannah grinned. "She married one of the wealthiest men in all of Italy and apparently he doesn't believe in divorce."

"But he believes in screwing his protégé." She mumbled now as she eyed the sandwich Derrick was eating.

"He cheated on you?" Derrick realized it was the second time she'd said it in minutes and wondered if the man had a brain in his head. Maybe he'd been born into the money. (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"Depends on who you ask," she looked up with an annoyed smile on her face. "If you ask him, it was my overactive jealous imagination reading too much into the tabloids. If you ask her, they've been sleeping together since the night they met. If you ask any of the people who work with them, he's a saint but she's the devil and she's simply impossible to resist so who

can blame him?" She took one of the two apples off Derrick's tray. "Can I have this?"

"Only if you don't believe the old adage it's going to keep me away." He grinned at her laugh. "So let me get this straight, everyone, including you, knew they were sleeping together but he denies it."

"No, he doesn't deny it." Mackenna saw his confused expression. "He refuses to address my insulting accusations because they don't deserve the effort to even think of a way to convince me I'm wrong." She said the words with her thickest Italian accent in a perfect mockery of her soon-to-be ex-husband. She bit the apple furiously. "And for the record, I was quoting there. He actually said those exact words to me."

"How long ago was this?" Derrick paused in his question as Savannah snored loudly in her chair. "She needs to get her septum repaired I think."

"Try sleeping the room next to her," Mackenna grinned at Savannah who had crashed out on the two chairs. "It's like sleeping next to a freight train." She knew he was waiting for an answer, so she shrugged. "It was five years yesterday. I can't even go back to Italy to visit my grandparents. I didn't even tell them where I moved, and they couldn't visit me. I gave them my

cell number and that was it. They didn't know if I lived in Florida, California, or Maine."

"Are you afraid of this guy?" He suddenly had visions of Italian mafia or something. "Mob?" Alessandro's wasn't one of them. He was far more dangerous because those families had rules and code of ethics. He had none.

Chapter 7

She knew Derrick was waiting for an answer. He was such a great guy. Smart, accomplished, and insightful.

"Mob?" She gave a little laugh. "No, there is no mob, mafioso or anything else." "But are you afraid of him?" He wasn't letting it go.

She took a big breath. How do you explain Alessandro and his crazy behavior to a rationale and sane person? "Let's just say he's not good at taking no for an answer. His whole life has been about doing what he wants when he wants and how he wants it done. When we got *married*, not one person other than our immediate family knew. This was a man that spends every waking minute in the public eye. He told me it was to protect me *from* the paparazzi. I realized later it's simply because I embarrassed him. He was ashamed of me. I'm the orphan of a middle-class accountant and a stay-at-home mom and the granddaughter of a subway engineer and a librarian. Not exactly the stuff someone in his situation would want the public to know he'd married. His protégé on the other hand has a father who is a politician and a mother who is an advocate for every damn charity on the planet and so it made more sense for him to be seen with her than with me." She realized that she was rambling and bit her apple to shut up and gave him the short answer. "I'm not afraid of him. He just won't let me go." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

Derrick studied her quietly not saying anything.

He wasn't saying anything, and she wondered if she had said too much. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to vent at you. You have more important things to worry about like a major surgery to do tomorrow."

"You seem very angry about all of this," he commented quietly.

Was she? She was and she knew it. Alessandro was affecting her even now. She nodded slowly, acknowledging his words. "Maybe I am. If I am though, it's only because it's fresh all over again. I flew to Milan to file the paperwork and I ran into him," understatement of the century, "and he's making a big deal out of it. Normally I function with nary a thought of him, and I live a happy peaceful existence." She knew she was not telling the full truth, but it was what she wanted to believe. She had almost convinced herself they hadn't had s*x either, unless she was sleeping, and her subconscious was absolutely and completely not letting it go.

"So, you've avoided your grandparents for five years because of this guy?" Derrick shook his head. "It seems to me you've spent too much time in hiding." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

show where he'd met Dulce in the beginning, "and I spent five incredible days with my folks three years ago but then I stupidly answered their phone, and it was him. He said he was on his way home and I caught the first flight out."

"But you're not afraid of him," Derrick's statement proved he wasn't convinced.

She needed to make him understand. "Derrick, I was nineteen when I met him, and he swept me off my feet. I would have believed he was God himself if he'd have said it. I bought everything he said, hook line and sinker. Then his protégé came along and he brought her into the mix." She gave an unhappy sigh. "Rumors flew they were sleeping together. I told him to choose between us and he laughed at me. Somehow I wound back in bed with him thinking it meant he loved me and chose me." The notion she'd been so naïve stung. "I believed

everything he said until the night when I realized the truth and how much of an i***t I was. I woke up at two in the morning, alone in our bed. When I went downstairs, one of his security members was still at the house. I asked him where he was. He had gotten up from our bed after having s*x with me to go take her dancing in the clubs." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"Are you kidding? Who does that?" Derrick was horrified on her behalf. "What did he offer as an explanation to his behavior?"

She shrugged. "I didn't ask for one. I knew when I'd been beat. I packed my stuff and bailed. I made one phone call to my grandparents from the house and left. I knew if I stayed and confronted him, I'd have listened to his lies until the next time and then the next time and then the next time."

"Are you still in love with him?" He asked quietly, his blue eyes holding hers and watching them change from slate to pale blue. Her ex was an i***t. (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"No," Mackenna hoped she sounded convincing, "but according to Doctor Savannah Kirkland, who really should have been a shrink instead of an emergency room doctor, I'm a naive woman with little self-esteem and deep down I want to believe he wouldn't have done such a thing to me. She says I want to believe I wasn't so stupid to marry such a man."

"And what do you think?"

"I was really stupid to believe the load of garbage he fed me for a whole year. I think the real reason I haven't gone back is simply because I'm ashamed I bought into his slick lies and suave innuendoes. My mother would have yelled at me for days for being so stupid and I know it. She was a very fierce woman." She smiled at Derrick.

"She was tough, was she?" he asked with a wide grin, enjoying she was open to sharing so

"The toughest. She knew what she wanted, and she took it. Maybe it's an Italian trait," she

grinned suddenly. "My parents met when my dad was travelling with some college buddies, and they fell in love instantly. She told him she was marrying him and going back to the States with him. The story goes, he told her he couldn't support her, she called him a coward and told him to decide in the moment and gave him an ultimatum. Marry her or she'd marry someone

else, and he would spend his life with the regret of never having her. He married her the next day and they lived in a dump of an apartment for four years until he found a better job. She then decided she wanted a baby and there was nothing he could say to change her mind. She got pregnant the first month they tried. She was strong and single-minded, and she'd kick my ass for being such a damn doormat." She chewed around the apple core and shook her head when Derrick held out the other apple, but she refused it. "Gosh, I've yakked your ear off. I'm sorry for monopolising your lunch.

"I would spend every lunch hour talking to you," his eyes were sincere as he held hers. "I still have more time."

"Actually, I've got to get back to my office." "Should we wake her?" Derrick stood up but Savannah opened her eyes after one last

short.

"I'm awake." She sat up, pushed the two chairs under the table and stood up as if she'd just slept for twelve hours. "I'm good for the rest of the day." She grinned at Mackenna. "Hey, don't leave without me. We can walk home together. I'm off at five."

"Fine," she smiled sheepishly at Derrick. "I'm sorry I bored you all through your lunch."

Derrick dropped his arm over her shoulder. "Well, you can make it up to me by letting me walk you to your office."

She laughed and pushed his hand off her shoulder. "Fine but keep your hands to yourself, there Doc Portman"

"What fun is that?" He asked with a wide smirk. "A man's gotta try."

He had dimples in both of his cheeks, and she wanted to kiss them both. It made her heart happy to feel the attraction she had for this man. Perhaps she could move on from Alessandro.

She smiled and touched his cheek, tapping it lightly. "Be careful. It's like reaching for a rose before checking for thorns. You could get hurt."

"You know, you have a thing for analogies, right?" He teased her as he dropped his hand back over her shoulder as Savannah dumped their trays.

pursued her. Her heart feeling happier and happier with every passing second. She could do this. She could forget Alessandro Giordano and move on. Someone like Dr. Derrick Portman who was strong and smart and very attractive.

"Ah, so you do like me," he hugged her to his side, laughing in her ear. "So, you'll have dinner with me on Thursday?"

A tingle went down her spine at the feel of his breath near her ear. "Nope," she laughed at his indignant expression.

He threw his hands up. "Why not? You like me. I like you. It's meant to be. Say yes."

"It's not so simple Derrick. I need to clean up my mess before I start dragging anyone else through it. I mean it." She gave a tight smile. "With luck, I'll be in front of a judge in two weeks and the divorce will be signed and I can be happy to pursue who and what I want." Her eyes

were staring directly at him, hoping he took the hint.

"Well, like you said, I'm pushy." He held the door to her office open for her. "I'm not giving up on you."

She turned to face him; her eyes soft as she stared up into his suddenly very serious eyes. "What if you find out that I'm not worth the wait?"

He stepped closer to her and tilted her chin. "Mac, I haven't even considered that

possibility. I know this guy has put you through the ringer. He didn't deserve you and you certainly didn't deserve what he's put you through. You are worth the wait. I will wait for as long as you ask me to."

She searched his eyes for any sign he was lying, curiously wondering if she was incapable of seeing when a man was lying.

"Mac, stop overthinking. I mean it. Sort out what you need to sort out but I'm not going

anywhere. Besides," he said with a wink, "I know where you work. I can hound you at your desk."

For a moment she thought he would try to kiss her but then his hand fell away, and he stepped backwards, respecting her request for space. "Now, I have to go focus on my next patient who is being flown in tonight. Stupid woman fell six feet wearing a pair of eight-inch heels and managed to fracture her leg in eight places because she bashed it three times on the way down and then landed on it. Who the hell wears eight-inch heels?"

"Fashion models and hookers," Mackenna answered with a grin earning her a hoot of laughter as he shook his head and walked away,

Chapter 8

Mackenna considered the gorgeous orthopedic doctor in front of her was purposefully antagonizing her. She wanted to throttle him and would have if he wasn't so damn cute. She forced herself to maintain her annoyance with him otherwise he was going to pull this crap all the time and she'd be stuck cleaning up his mistakes forever.

"Doctor Portman, you can't just randomly assign codes to your billing. You have to use the correct ones." Mackenna glared at him where he lounged carelessly against the doorframe. "I have sent you multiple emails with the codes. Read the emails."

"Ah, but my devious plan worked." He winked overtly, "You got angry, you called me to your office and we're having a conversation instead of me watching your retreating back every time I approach you." Derrick couldn't help but grin at her. She'd been hiding from him since he'd asked her out at lunch on Tuesday. It was Thursday now. Two days of her ducking into bathrooms to avoid him. He didn't know if he was flattered or insulted.

"I could have billed these people for an x-ray instead of the MRI they had. There's a difference of two hundred and fifty dollars for the billing." She tried not to smile at him, but his smile was sweet, his dimples were deep, his eyes were blue, and she was losing their battle. She hadn't heard anything more from Camille since Tuesday morning and slowly she was starting to relax and get back to the world where Alessandro was simply a memory.

"Yeah, but you called me to your office." He repeated the sentence as if it justified his behavior laughing outright as she cursed under her breath at him. "Did you know when you're annoyed, your eyes change from a blue-slate to a deep blue? They remind me of the mountains back home. Dare I also mention how pretty the pink lacy thing you have on under your suit

jacket is? Very sexy. Pink suits you. So does lace. You should wear it more. In fact, you could take the jacket off and give me a better view." He looked her up and down devilishly and

laughed again when she squirmed in her chair.

"Doctor Portman, you're bordering on s****l harassment." She looked down at her desk to keep from laughing at him. "Stop messing up my billing codes." She pointed her pen in his direction warningly.

"Have dinner with me tonight." He ignored her command. "I'll cook you a pasta dinner as promised."

"No," she looked up at him then, her smile wide on her face. "I don't date men who can't write numbers correctly on forms. It's a requirement I have. If you can't figure out the difference between a one and a seven, it's a problem for me. Such a turnoff." It was her turn to as if mortally wounded. She giggled at his theatrics.

"Well, it's like this; you shared my lunch the other day. I think you owe me dinner."
"Wow, you're really digging *deep*," she laughed at his words. "I ate your apple."

"I am but a guys gotta do what a guys gotta do. Besides, it was my lunch, and you know, got hungry later and I had no apple." His blue eyes danced, and he wondered what she was doing when she pulled her bottom drawer of her desk open. He reacted quickly to the green fruit she whipped in his direction, catching it with one hand. Without hesitation he bit the apple and gave her a toothy smile. "I feel like Adam. You're a temptress. Wanna be my Eve?"

"You're a nut." She leaned back in her chair no longer able to hide her smile from him. He was too charming for her own good. "Get out. I have work to do. I have to redo your billing."

"Ah, but you'll be thinking of me the entire time you're doing it." He was laughing as he exited her office leaving the door open at her request.

He smiled at the man coming down the hall. The man was the employer of his complicated surgery the day prior. "Is there a problem?"

"The young lady at the nurses' station told me I could come down and talk to someone named Mac to discuss billing my employee's accounts directly to my company."

"She doesn't have an insurance carrier?"

"I do but considering my employee fell while performing her work duties I feel it is my responsibility to cover the costs of her treatments."

Derrick pointed behind him. "Mac is right through the door at the end of the hall. Anything you want done; Mac can do it. She's the best in all thing's numbers. Though I'll warn you, I made her mad mucking up some codes so tread lightly." The men shared a knowing laugh as

"Thank you," he held the papers in his hand and moved toward the door. He knocked once on the partially closed door.

"Doctor Portman, if that's you, get lost." Mackenna was bent down in her desk digging for new forms so she could redo the billing.

"I am not Doctor Portman. I have an employee staying in the hospital and I need to set up billing. The nurse said you could set it up?" The man's voice was low and sounded slightly irritated.

Mackenna froze in her position, squatted behind her desk, and wondered what she had

when she was already struggling was just cruel. She spoke quietly. "Have a seat and I'll be right with you." She stood up and kept her back to the stranger while she dug through the filing cabinet for the forms to set up billing for non-insurance claims. She took the time to regroup and remind herself not all Italian accents belonged to her ex-husband.

"Mackenna?" Alessandro could not believe his eyes. She was here. In the hospital Dulce had been flown, where they had been told the best orthopedic surgeon to deal with her fractures had performed surgery on her the day before.

Mackenna slowly turned around and felt the blood drain from her face. "Alessandro?" She felt the cold permeate her bones as everything in her stopped, her heart no longer beat, her lungs no longer expelled air and her body no longer moved. She wondered if she was dying. Suddenly she remembered the conversations with Savannah and Derrick. "Dulce is Doctor Portman's patient?"

"Yes," he moved closer to her but stopped when she took a step backward, ramming her back against the open door of the filing cabinet. He stopped moving wondering if she was going to find a way to run from here as well.

She nodded at him and then sat at her desk. She had to keep professional and not lose her cool. She would not lose her job for the second time in life because of him. She ignored the way he towered over her desk, staring down at her, his amber eyes not leaving her. She waved to the chair. "Please, sit down and we can do up the billing. Do you have her insurance papers?"

"Mackenna, look at me." He commanded furiously, stunned she barely acknowledged him.

He was her husband, and she was treating him like she was a stranger!

"Alessandro, I am working, and I don't have time to play your games. I have several things I must have completed before five o'clock and the insurance sites shut down. I really don't want to work late this evening or need to be here too early in the morning. If you want to set up billing then let's do this, otherwise you are wasting my time and yours."

"I don't remember you being so cold. Damn you Mackenna Giordano, look at me!" Alessandro slammed his hand on the desk. "Is this where you've been hiding from me all this time?"

She looked up then, her eyes cold and controlled. "Alessandro, I repeat, I am here to work. " When she had seen him the month before in Italy, she had done her best to keep from staring but now he was in her office, and it was difficult. She tried to ignore his hair was still jet black,

of golden honey. She attempted to ignore the fact his skin was bronzed, or his teeth were perfect and white, and his suit was tailored to fit his lean frame to perfection. She tried to forget the way his hands felt when he touched her and the way he used to whisper her name when he loved her, long before that horrendous night a month before. Instead, she forced herself to remember he was here because his precious Dulce was lying in a bed upstairs healing from surgery.

"Do you want to do this or not?" She held up the forms.

He could barely control his rage as she spoke so condescendingly to him, and he repeated a question he'd asked her once before. "When did you become such a b***h?"

"Thankfully, this time when you call me a b***h, my poor grandmother is not within earshot." Her eyes barely flicked a glance in his direction. "I'm not a b***h Alessandro, I simply have a job to do and you're intruding in my workspace" she dropped the forms onto her desk and as his mouth opened, she held her hand up just as her office phone rang. She picked it up. "Mac Keebler."

"Mac, its Savannah, okay, don't freak out but I just got wind of..."

"Save it Doctor Kirkland, I already know." She took a breath and spoke into the phone. "I

do handle billing for the entire hospital. I'm sorting through it now. Are you coming home tonight?"

"I was supposed to double-shift, but I can try to switch it." Savannah's voice was concerned. "You okay Mac?"

"Fine, fine. Um, Great, that would be great if you can get it switched. I think it would be helpful for sure. I'll see you when I get home then. Bye." She hung up the phone, leaving her hand on the receiver for a moment as if she wished she could touch the woman on the other end. She could use the support in this moment. Her heart was racing much to quickly for her to be still breathing but she forced herself to inhale and exhale as she looked back to the papers

on her desk.

"You have a lover?" Alessandro hissed angrily.

She ignored the irritating sound and began correcting the forms Derrick had messed up. "It's none of your business, Alessandro." She wondered what Savannah would think of someone thinking they were lovers. She smiled at the thought. Savannah would ham it up and play the part, she was sure.

Her smirk infuriated him, and Alessandro moved around the desk and hauled her from

behind it and shook her into his arms. "You are my wife and therefore it is most certainly my business."

"Not for long, Alessandro. The divorce will be final soon enough." She wished she were stronger because his grip on her biceps was painful, but she wouldn't admit to him, but she wanted to pull free and couldn't. "Let me go Alessandro. Take your hands off me!"

"There will be no divorce. I will never let you go again, Mackenna. You have managed to stay hidden for a long time, but not any longer. You will come back to Milan, and you will resume your role as my wife, and we will carry out your plan to have a family. This divorce nonsense is simply that; nonsense."

She held his gaze with as much bravado as she could muster, her body, even after all this time, strangely responding to his strength and machismo. "I would rather spend the rest of my life alone, childless and penniless, than ever go back to Milan with you. I don't care if God himself spoke to me and said I had to go back. I will choose my own self-respect and dignity a thousand times over playing second-fiddle to your mistress."

She saw the stunned surprise in his eyes, and she realized in the moment he had believed deep-down she would capitulate to his demands as she had on every other occasion when they were together and do as he bid. She used his surprise to her advantage and pushed his hands off her arms. She flung herself back into her seat and wheeled her chair to tuck her neatly under the desk.

"Now, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, I have a job to do. Where am I setting up Dulce's billing to be sent?"

Chapter 9

Alessandro looked at his wife's bent head of glossy hair as she ignored him and filled out a form on her desk. While he wasn't in the least happy by her behavior, he admitted he was intrigued by this new side to Mackenna. She'd always been feisty and strong-willed, but he had always been able to coerce her to do as he wanted.

He enjoyed the challenge she was presenting to him and as he watched her tuck a tendril of hair behind her ear before turning over the papers and moving to enter information into a computer on her desk, he admitted her pull on him was still extraordinarily strong. He was going to enjoy bringing his wife back home.

"Fine, we'll discuss it later over dinner. For now, I will let you do your job." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

She almost snorted at his words considering the last dinner he'd promised her. "I'm not having dinner with you. Sit down and fill in the information on all three of those pages," she didn't look at him as she finished entering Derrick's information and then scowled as she realized she'd missed another purposefully placed miscoded number. She needed to call him again and get it sorted.

"Damn it, Derrick." She lifted the receiver and dialed the number to his desk. "Hey gorgeous, missing me already?" "No, I don't miss you at all. I'm going to wring that thick neck of yours." "So, you noticed I work out?" Derrick teased. "It's not only my neck that's thick though."

She was no longer even remotely in the mood considering the devil himself sat across from her desk eavesdropping. "Doctor Portman, I swear to God if you don't quit it, I'm going to come down there and murder you and splay you out on your own damn operating table as an example to the damn team. You did the surgery on Mr. Meyer Sunday in the early morning correct?"

He sensed she was really upset and instantly stopped teasing. "Yes, Mac, are you okay?"

"I'm fine Derrick; just stop screwing with my billing, okay?" She tried to keep her cool. "Unless you want to get paid at the basic rate instead of the weekend morning rate, you'll quit it. I have enough to do without double-checking your work."

"I'm sorry Mac. Do you need me to come down there?" He asked as he'd never heard the tone she was using before. "I can redo it myself."

"No, it's fine." She took a deep breath. "Just tell me now if you did any others like this?"
(Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"No, it was just the MRI code and the Sunday morning one." He spoke quietly. "Are you really angry with me over this?"

was absolutely furious with but not him. "No Derrick, I'm not really angry. We'll talk later, okay?" She smiled into the phone unable to stay mad at him as she fixed the codes on the screen.

"Over dinner?" he asked hopefully and was rewarded with a quiet laugh.

"No, not over dinner, you oaf." She hung up the phone before he could ask anything else. She turned back to Alessandro. "I'll need your insurance cards."

"The company is paying one-hundred percent of the bills directly." He shook his head and didn't miss Mackenna's scowl at his words. He ignored it. "Are you having an affair with Doctor Portman?"

"No," she held his gaze without shame, "much to his chagrin." She extended her hand for the first of the papers and then rolled her eyes. "Alessandro, you haven't even filled this out."

"Forgive me for being distracted by you. You're lovely." He took her hand in his instead of taking his papers back. "I like your hair long. It is very becoming."

"I didn't grow it out for you," she yanked her hand back, dropped the papers on the desk and pushed a pen across the desk. "Please fill them out so I can get this started."

She looked up when her assistant knocked on the door.

"Mac, the insurance rep from the claim last week is on the phone and he is arguing with me over the bills we submitted." Tabitha's words trailed off as she took in the sight of the man sitting in the seats in Mac's office. Her mouth hung open as she stared blatantly.

Mackenna scowled as Alessandro chuckled at the girl's reaction and then he gave another laugh as Mackenna swore under her breath at it. "Tabitha, pick your jaw up off the floor. He's just a man. He puts his pants on the same way you do, one leg after the other." She saw the woman blink rapidly and turn to look at her as if she hadn't heard a syllable she'd uttered. Good grief. "Just transfer the call to me. I assume it's Sigmund?"

"How'd you guess?" Tabitha blushed as the man winked at her. She slowly backed out of the office

"Nice," Mackenna griped, "Flirting with my admin assistant. Now I'll have to spend a week listening to her detail her wet dreams." The man knew how attractive he was. He was tormenting her assistant and she didn't have time for it.

She ignored the choking sound Alessandro made at her rude comment and picked up the buzzing phone line. "Sigmund, why must you torment me so?"

She waved at Alessandro to finish filling out the papers as she dealt with the man on the meet for dinner to discuss the billing. "Sigmund, I don't think we need to have a meal together to get this sorted out. I tell you what, how about get your supervisor Myriam on the line and I'll deal with her directly." She listened for a moment and then smiled smugly as she adjusted papers on her desk. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Talk to you soon, I'm sure." She hung up the phone and grimaced.

"Does every man you deal with invite you out dinner?" There was no denying the irritation in his voice.

"Only the ones who want to sleep with me." She retorted smugly, instantly rewarded with another angry hiss of irritation from the bane of her existence.

Before he could comment though, Savannah poked her head into the office and stared at her from behind Alessandro. "Uh, hi."

Mackenna shot her a warning glance. "What?"

"I have to work," Savannah hadn't been able to get out of it. "Half the trauma team is out with the flu so nobody can cover for me."

Mackenna pointed her pen at her. "If you bring it home with you, Doctor Kirkland, I'll kill you in your sleep."

"Hey, you haven't died yet from my infectious diseases." Savannah grinned

unapologetically.

"No, I simply spent a week in quarantine from measles and ten days in intensive care from meningitis. I don't want influenza. Knowing you, it's probably some seventeenth century strand of flu and I'll end up losing my spleen or something." She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair aware Alessandro was listening to every word. She stuck her tongue out at his bent head and earned a grin from Savannah. "What time are you off then?"

"Midnight at the earliest." Savannah copied her and stuck her tongue at him and then made a rude gesture with her finger too and Mackenna grinned at her. Sometimes being childish felt good.

"I was thinking maybe you should go home with Derrick tonight." She grinned as the man's pen stopped moving on the paper and he turned around to face her. She instantly stopped smiling. It was no wonder Mackenna had taken five years to get over the man. She'd seen photos but in person he was breathtakingly beautiful with high cheekbones, golden eyes, and jet-black hair. She looked to Mackenna with serious eyes. "You should call Derrick. I think I'd feel better knowing he was making you pasta than you home alone unguarded. I don't know

Mackenna saw the way Alessandro's shoulders moved impatiently under his jacket and she shook her head at Savannah. "Savannah, don't you have a patient you have to save or a butt-plug to remove?" Alessandro's head spun to look between them.

"No," Savannah glared at Alessandro who opted to glare back at her rather than question Mackenna's last comment.

"Savannah, go back to the trauma center. I'll see you later." She stood up and moved to the door and pushed her best friend out. "Call me at home later."

Savannah pointed at her. "You'd better be there, or I'll kick your butt." "Where else would I go?" Mackenna returned her stare. "Don't go anywhere with him." She jerked her chin in Alessandro's direction.

"I have no intention of going anywhere with him. I'd rather pour gasoline over my naked body and light a match." She heard his furious breath as Mackenna had to pry her friend's fingers from the door. "Go back to work, Savannah."

She closed the door and moved back to her desk and took the completed papers from where Alessandro had set them down. She quietly began entering the information into the computer.

"You live with that woman?" Alessandro asked.

Of all the things he'd heard, this was his line of questioning? Mackenna almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. "That woman," she used the same intonation he did mockingly, "is a trauma unit doctor and a damn good one. She is also my best friend. Don't be so condescending."

"She's rude." Alessandro retorted. "Is this where all the crude language I've been hearing has come from? She's very rude," he repeated.

"I can't argue with you, she is rude, but so are you," Mackenna hated the way her stomach curdled just typing Dulce's name into her system. She took a breath and then when she had everything entered, she printed documents on her printer and stood up to get them. "Did Doctor Portman tell you how long Dulce will be staying?"

"A minimum of two weeks before she can be moved." Alessandro commented as he watched her mark an 'x' on multiple lines. "She fractured her tibia, her fibula and her femur. She fell off the catwalk."

Mackenna grimaced distastefully, finding no pleasure in the thought of such a horrific fall.

"Doctor Portman said it was too early to tell but said she'll require months of therapy before he could even begin to form a solid opinion. He had to put a pin in her thigh." Alessandro shook his head sadly. "The poor girl is devastated."

"Mm," Mackenna kept her gaze averted. She didn't wish the woman ill, but she found she had no sympathy for her either. The sound of the woman's hauntingly lyrical voice telling her how much she'd enjoyed making love to Alessandro still echoed in her head. She pointed to

the lines. "Sign everywhere I marked an 'x' when you're done reading the forms."

"I trust you Mackenna. I don't need to read them." He simply signed them and then passed them back to her. "What is your relationship with Doctor Porter?"

"He's a friend." She folded his copies of the forms and slipped them into an envelope after she signed them.

Her phone rang again, and she reached out and picked it up. "Mac Keebler." She listened for a moment and then answered the inquiry of the caller before hanging up.

"When did you shorten your name to Mac?" Alessandro didn't like it. It sounded too masculine in comparison to the woman she was. She was soft and curvy and delectable and not hard and cold as her nickname sounded.

"Savannah started it and it stuck."

"And did she encourage you to revert back to your maiden-name?" He wished she would look up at him as he spoke to her, but she merely took the credit card she'd asked him for without even glancing at him.

"No, I did it by myself." She knew she was at the end of her rope. Thirty minutes with Alessandro in her office was obviously her limit as her body suddenly felt like it was sleep-deprived and aching and her head began to pound from the unshed tears she'd managed to keep at bay.

"Why?" He picked up the card she clicked back to the desk.

She looked at him then, the hate she'd allowed to build up over the last five years finally spilling out at him. "Because when you chose to leave our bed to go to your lover, I realized our wedding vows meant nothing to you, so I stopped considering myself your wife."

"What are you talking about?" Alessandro asked quietly.

"I got up that night Alessandro. I got up and you were gone. At first, I didn't believe you would leave after making love to me to go to her. I was such a fool. I went to the club. I saw

You made your choice. I told you to choose and you chose. There is nothing you can say to me to ever convince me I was wrong."

It was the first time they had had a real conversation on the matter of Dulce wherein he didn't mock her, and the words poured out of her like an eruption. She wished it felt more cathartic than it did.

As he studied her angry glare he swallowed deeply. "Because we were dancing?" A memory floated in his head a suddenly he knew why she'd left, and he was, for the first time in his life unsure of her. When she didn't answer and simply continued packing up for the day he spoke again. "You saw Dulce kiss me."

Chapter 10

Mackenna wanted to scream with frustration at his comment. Of course, it was all Dulce's fault, she grimaced angrily to herself. Heaven forbid the man take any responsibility for his own actions.

She folded her arms over her chest defensively, tightly closing her fists under her armpits lest he see how much she wanted to throw the right hook she had learned in the class she took

with Savannah,

She took a breath and spoke as eloquently as she possibly could through a jaw which wanted to remain clenched tightly shut. "I saw you with your arms around her waist and dancing provocatively, grinding on each other. I thought I would be sick, and I had to look away. It was like watching a car accident and I couldn't not look again. I looked back and she was kissing you and not a sweet peck on the cheek, but her tongue was in your mouth. I saw you pull away and thought this was where my husband, my husband," she exaggerated the last words, "would put a stop to it. Where I would see once and for all she was nothing to you. I was such a fool."

Mackenna continued furiously. "You didn't stop her. You didn't correct her. You didn't pull away in some romantic gesture and show her your wedding ring." She felt the same pain in her chest rising as if she had just lived the experience in the current moment. "Do you remember what you did?" She could see from his flushed cheeks he did. "You laughed Alessandro and then you kissed her again. You put your lips on her and kissed her right on the mouth and it wasn't a little friendly kiss. You put your arms around her waist, and you pulled her to your body, and you kissed her. I couldn't look away until the flash of a camera went off. Like waking

from a bad dream."

She felt her breath shake as her lungs ached with the memory. "I left then. I went home, grabbed my passport, my purse and left." She wiped a tear off her cheek angry at herself for being so weak in front of him.

"I told my grandparents what I saw. My grandfather, oh my poor grandfather. The man who lived only for me was crushed. He thought he let me down giving you permission to marry me. He saw how hurt I was. All he wanted in the moment was to make his granddaughter stop hurting." She wiped furiously at her face remembering her grandfather crying at the airport. "My grandfather paid for my plane ticket to the States and when I landed in New York, I simply boarded the first plane anywhere."

She lied on the last part. She didn't want to tell him the how desperate she'd been to cover friends and we moved in together."

"You should have come to me in the club." He would have explained things to her then, he could have stopped her from leaving. "Had you simply come to me and talked to me instead of

running away, I would have explained."

Unbridled rage coiled from deep in her stomach at his words. She would not allow him to gaslight her into believing she had done anything wrong. She wasn't the one who was making out with another person after leaving their bed.

"No," she looked at him then, hoping he could see the anger there. "You should never have gone to the club Alessandro." She pointed at him accusingly. "You wanted to have your cake and eat it too. Just like your grandfather. Well, it doesn't work like that, I don't work like that. My parents and my grandparents raised me better."

"You are wrong Mackenna, you should have come to me."

"No!" She slammed her fist on the desktop and noted he jumped at her action. She was tired of being a docile little pet. "You should have stayed in your bed with your wife instead of traipsing off with your lover. I told you to choose, you made the choice. You would rather have your tongue down her throat than be with me."

She was beyond angry now and she felt the heat rising in her cheeks. "You can contest the divorce all you want but the truth is, in the end, I'll still get it. I would have filed it before I even left if I would have had the money to do it. You asked me last month in Milan why now?"

Why did I go back then? Well Alessandro it's taken me five years of watching every penny and

scraping by just to make ends meet so I could do this on my own. I don't care if it drains my savings to the last nickel, I will have my freedom from you and your mistress."

"Dulce and I were never lovers, Mackenna." He spoke quietly, refuting her accusation completely for the first time. "I know the tabloids."

"Screw the tabloids. Even if I never saw it with my own eyes, I heard it from the horse's mouth!" She yelled at him then, her patience long past snapping. "Dulce was in our home on so many different occasions telling me you were sleeping together. I tried to listen to your mother when she told me she was just jealous I wore the gold ring, and she didn't. I cannot count the number of times you would be in another country, and she would call me from your room and tell me you were showering after having s*x with her. How many times she would come into our home, uncaring of the staff being present or not just to approach me and tell me you'd

loved her so well she could barely walk the catwalk the next day."

"You call me a liar?" She threw her hands in the air. "The last time I saw her before the club was at the house. She came in ahead of you, dressed in a dress fit for a doll with her hair all over the place. You had just come back from London. She came in told me you'd shared the hotel room and you'd made love all night and you were both simply too tired to work any longer and it was why you'd come home. You walked into the living room, dropped a kiss on my head and then went straight to bed and slept from noon until dinner. When you got up, I wanted you to deny it, to tell me the truth. Instead, we had the stupid fight and then we ended up in bed, per usual. I woke up to learn you left to go be with her. You left our

bed to go to her. You tell me which of the two of you I'm supposed to believe!" Alessandro was furious with her allegation. "Are you suggesting Dulce told you we were

lovers?" She let her mouth drop open at his question. Hadn't she said this straightforward in as blunt a language she could this was exactly what the woman had said.

"Are you being deliberately obtuse?" She flung her hands in the air furiously wishing she could wrap her fingers around his neck and shake him until his head rattled off his superb shoulders. She let out a gurgled scream of frustration.

"Suggesting? No, I'm not suggesting it. I'm straight out saying it. She said it, multiple times with vigor and graphic description and she didn't care who heard her. The poor housekeeper knows the size of your manhood because of Dulce's vivid descriptions. For the record, her illustrative depictions were perfectly accurate. I believed her then as much as I believe her today."

"It is not true." He refused to believe her. He was unsure of why Mackenna was making these allegations. It made no sense.

"You know what? I don't give a crap," she saw his face flinch as if she slapped him. "I don't care what you think, how you feel or whether you think I'm telling the truth or lying. Your opinion of me no longer matters to me. I don't give a damn."

She sighed and pushed her hair over her ears impatiently. "I want my divorce. I'm getting my divorce. God, if I wind up penniless and homeless in the process, I will be rid of you and the malicious, cruel, calculating b***h of a model you call your friend at some point before I die."

"There will be no divorce."

She ignored him. "Enough, I'm done with this conversation. I was done long before it started. If you don't mind," she walked to the door and held it open, grateful she didn't see her assistant at her desk. "My workday is finished and so I'll ask you to leave so I can lock up my "I am going to look into this matter," Alessandro said as he rose from his chair, deeply troubled with the information she was giving him. "I will investigate your allegations thoroughly."

"I don't care what you do with this information." She spit at him as he stood in front of

her. "You can take the information and shove it up your posterior for all I care. Hell, you can take the information, climb into her hospital bed, and laugh over it. I don't care!" She slapped her fist into her palm. "All I want is for you to go far, far away from me. Just stay the hell away from me. Any future billing questions or concerns can be managed by one of the clerks or my

assistant."

"We will discuss this after I look into it further," Alessandro lifted her chin and before she could stop him, he placed a kiss to her lips. "Regardless of what you are saying, the divorce proceedings will halt, and you will come home."

She wished her lips didn't burn as if she'd eaten a handful of habanero peppers from a simple peck to the lips. The desire to stomp her feet, throw herself on the floor and throw a tantrum worthy of a toddler was strangely overwhelming. He was infuriatingly frustratingly obstinate. She shrieked in frustration, grabbed the stapler off her desk and threw it across the

room.

"There is no need for temper tantrums," he admonished quietly. "You will come home to Milan. You will fly back with me when Dulce is discharged."

"Not in this or any lifetime." She caught him leaning down for another kiss and she felt her stomach clench nervously. She stepped backwards and turned her face away from him, but his lips still brushed her cheek. "Get out Alessandro."

"I'll be back for you Mackenna. I promise you. This is not over." He pointed his finger. "I am not sure how things became so confused but I'm certain there is a simple explanation. Then we will put this all behind us and you will come home and be where you belong, with your husband." His voice was assured and controlled as he stroked her cheek before leaving her office.

As she watched him walk away, his shoulders set back, strong, and proud, his swagger and posture demonstrating his satisfaction at himself, she had to grip the doorknob to keep from running after him and flinging her arms around his neck and beg him to deny it again. To

repeat he'd never been lovers with his protégé.

Why was his insistence he'd never taken Dulce as his lover resounding in her head like

"Because, you're a stupid fool," she reminded herself bitterly. It had been the first time he'd ever actually outright denied it and she knew, deep in her soul, she wanted nothing more than to believe him. In her heart of hearts, she knew whether it be five years or fifty years, she still loved him desperately and wanted nothing more than for him to love her in return.

With tears in her eyes, she locked her office door and strode down the hall once she was certain he was no longer in her view. She needed to go home, get a grip, and have a long and serious conversation with her heart about this masochist behavior it and her libido were holding onto. If she didn't, then there was a very real possibility, with Alessandro hounding her, she would wind up back in his arms, back in his bed and back in Milan, right beside Dulce.

Chapter 11

The hard plastic soles of her shoes clicked angrily on the tile flooring of the corridor leading to her office and she tried to tell herself although today was already Tuesday and she hadn't seen or heard from Alessandro since last Thursday, she wasn't upset at all. It was not

the reason when Derrick had met her with a cup of coffee at the doors of the hospital this

morning, she'd had to force herself to smile at the man when a week before she would have

been thrilled with his attentions.

It didn't make sense to her. She'd spent the last five days knowing he was in and out of the hospital visiting Dulce and the last five nights dreaming of him. She had thought the weekend away from the hospital would have helped her but just seeing him again on Thursday had made her miss him as much as she'd had when she'd left him initially. With Savannah working all night both Saturday and Sunday, she'd sobbed into her pillow until the early hours of the morning uninterrupted. How could it feel, after all this time, she was a child seeking his approval, needing his love, wanting him to choose her? He was spending time with Dulce and hadn't even come to see her once.

She slammed her purse onto her desk angrily. She flung herself into her chair and turned the power of her computer tower on. She grabbed a stack of forms and began sorting through them. When she came across Dulce's file, she had the urge to throw them across the room and scatter them like confetti in a windstorm but instead she opened the folder and began sorting through the different documents detailing the procedures and daily billed items. She grimaced at one particular item. The woman had refused to have the water the hospital provided and so

had demanded some obscure water company from Europe send her water and bill the hospital

directly. She entered her password onto the screen and then pushed her palms into her eyes and gave an annoyed shriek. She hated the woman.

"I would think if you were this frustrated at the beginning of your day then perhaps you should go back home and pull the blankets over your head." Alessandro's voice carried over the quiet of the office.

She glared at him, despising how her heart lurched at just a glance of him leaning in her doorway. "Your protégé is a pain in the backside. I've had to set up twelve new companies in our system to deal with her insane demands."

"Dulce is used to having the world cater to her." Alessandro shrugged and moved into the office uninvited.

"She's in a teaching hospital not a five-star hotel." Mackenna grimaced at her screen and

"You are not sleeping." Alessandro commented quietly as he took in the dark circles under her eyes.

"It's none of your concern," she retorted. He said nothing as he sat into the uncomfortable chair in her utilitarian office. A lesser man would have shriveled up at the way she looked up at

him in irritation. Unfortunately for her, he was made of stronger stuff than most, "What *are you*

doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." From what he'd gotten out of Dulce in the last twenty-four hours, he was lucky Mackenna hadn't already married someone else. When he'd left Mackenna's office on Thursday he'd simply left the hospital and returned to his hotel to think. However, when he'd returned to see Dulce on Friday and had asked her to tell him what she had said to Mackenna. She had denied saying anything. It was only Sunday morning when he'd finally gotten her alone without her mother and sister hovering around and the nurse's completing paperwork and he'd made it clear he was done messing around she confessed she'd told Mackenna they'd slept together but she'd told him she'd said it jokingly and Mackenna had laughed with her. Then yesterday she'd spilled the truth. She'd not only told Mackenna they'd slept together but she had elaborated on the stories with such flair it was near impossible to

believe Mackenna hadn't left him long before she'd had. If he'd been in her shoes, he'd have burned the world down for his apparent infidelities, especially since he'd always mocked her for her accusations thinking her merely jealous. He'd left Dulce's room so incensed at her betrayal of their friendship he knew he had to leave before he did something which would have cost his company millions.

"Well have you seen enough, or shall I strike a pose for you?" She asked sarcastically.

He knew now the cold hard way she was dealing with him was simply the way she was reacting to the pain of his infidelity. "Mackenna, I'd like for us to have dinner."

"No." She didn't even bother to glance in his direction as she began entering the information for the new billing. She groaned and lifted the receiver on the first ring of her telephone. "Mac Keebler." She answered the question from an insurance company about another patient and she noticed Alessandro simply waited patiently for her to finish her call.

"I truly do not like your name shortened." Alessandro pushed his fingers into his hair. "Mackenna is a lovely name."

"I agree. I was named after my paternal grandfather who was a lovely man, and I love my name. However, nobody here knows who is on the telephone if I introduce myself as

"No, actually you do not. You could come home and everything you need would be provided for you and you could stay home and take care of our children."

"Or you could get it through your thick skull hell will freeze over before *I return* to living as your dirty hidden secret when you flaunt your bimbo all over the world."

"A dirty secret?" He asked incredulously. "Is this what you think?"

"Alessandro, I gave up years ago trying to figure out what you think and now I no longer care." She paused, "unless you finally are thinking I'm right and the best thing for *me* is for you to sign my divorce papers and give me my freedom." She saw his look of disgust and shrugged. "Can't blame a girl for dreaming." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"Well at least you have dreams," he said smartly and saw her lips tugging as she tried not to smile at his words. "I too have dreams."

"Do you?" She asked trying not to respond to his easy attitude. "I'm sure I don't want to hear them."

"Yes, for example, I have dreams of you not wearing those ugly shoes you have on ever again."

"What's wrong with my shoes?" She looked down to her flat black ballet slipper type shoe. They were comfortable and easy on her feet.

"They're flats," he looked at the blazer she wore, "and at least a size too big for you. You need heels to show off your shapely calves. Also, you've dropped too much weight. You should be showing off your curves, not hiding them behind a bulky jacket and a straight skirt."

She looked down at her outfit and grimaced, knowing he was right but hating him for pointing it out. "I had bought new clothes but they're in my room at Nonno's. Someone chased me out of the country and all my prizes were left behind."

He ignored the taunt, "how old is the jacket? It looks as if you purchased it in the clearance bin of a thrift shop specializing in eighties throw-backs."

"Ouch." She made a face at him. "Not all of us have designers at our beck and call."

"Come home and you will." He grinned and linked his fingers behind his head and stretched his elbows wide. "I will personally design and entire collection for you."

"No, you'll be at Dulce's beck and call and I'll be sitting in the middle of a lonely bed waiting my turn. No thanks. I'll take my eighties throw-back thrift store special over that any day." She saw his smile disappear and she turned her head back to the screen. "Don't get too minutes to set up billing." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

He wasn't giving up. "I'll go when you agree to dinner." "You don't eat dinner," she flicked her eyes in his direction. They both knew what she

meant.

"No, you're right. I don't eat. I feast." His eyes were big and golden as he teased her and when a true smile pulled on her lips, he almost crowed with victory, but he kept his cool. "Do you want to feast with me?"

There was nothing she wanted more, she realized as she shook her head and lied. "No. I don't. Your version of dinner and mine differ greatly."

"Oh, I'm not sure. I think we're both thinking the same things." Her eyes met his for a half-second and he knew he was right. He leaned onto her desk. "Coward."

"Damn right." She straightened her spine and kept her eyes averted. "There are some things I know I am not strong enough to handle and dinner with you is one of them."

"Challenge yourself." He dared her. He reached out and pulled her pencil from where she had just put it between her teeth while she typed on her keyboard. "If you want something to slide between your teeth, I can give you something better than a pencil to put there." He saw her head slowly turn and he dug into his pocket and pulled her hand forward and slid a stick of gum in her palm. "Now what was that filthy mind of yours thinking?" (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

She couldn't help it. She laughed aloud at his antics as he flirted outrageously, and his wide smile and chuckle made her laugh harder. "Alessandro Demarco Benedict Giordano, get out of my office before I have to physically remove you."

He reached out and tugged a tendril of her hair. "I love when you call me by all of my names."

"You're incorrigible."

"Agree to have dinner with me and I'll leave you in peace." He walked around her desk and rubbed her shoulders. "Mackenna, your shoulders are so tense. I can help you relax."

"I'll relax when you get out." She tried to push his hands off her shoulders, but he lowered his head and kissed her hand. "Alessandro. Quit it."

"Dinner." He whispered in her ear..

"Fine! I'll have dinner with you." Her thighs squeezed tightly as his breath blew over her neck. She tried to push him away, but he was laughing, and his laughter coated her skin and

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "Okay. I am going but I will see you this evening for dinner. I'll be at this door right here to pick you up at five sharp." (Daily latest upade www.noveljar.com)

"I'd like to go home and shower first." She furrowed her brow. "Working in a hospital, I never know what I'm coming into contact with."

"Forgive me if I don't trust you won't hop a plane to Alaska if I don't come and get you. I'll take you home so you can get cleaned up." He smiled as she looked up sharply at him and he pressed a hard kiss to her mouth. "Five o'clock."

"Okay." She spoke quietly as his tongue ran over her lips. He tasted of nicotine and coffee, and she had a sudden craving for more. She pulled her head back and looked into his eyes. "It is just dinner, right?"

"Just dinner. We will talk just as you asked." He stroked her cheek gently his eyes serious and intent on hers.

"Okay." She repeated the only word which seemed to make sense in her head, intoxicated by his presence. "Five o'clock."

He paused for a moment and then kissed her lips quickly before rising and walking away from her. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he turned at the door and winked at her. Once again, he had woven his spell around her, and she was powerless to resist him. His easy-going relaxed manner had always won her over. When he flirted with her his hold on her was immeasurable in comparison to when they fought or argued. He had done everything he could in the few minutes he'd been with her to ensure they

didn't argue. The more she considered it, the deeper the line between her brows grew. It was clear he was playing a different game and she had fallen right into his plans.

Chapter 12

By noontime Mackenna was more confused than she'd ever been by him. Usually, he was heavy handed and demanding and this morning he had been flirty and funny. It had reminded her so much of how he'd been the first year they'd been married she was torn. She swirled her vegetables in the broth of her soup in the cafeteria and tried to figure out what the hell she'd agreed to. Alessandro had charmed her, and she had not only let him, but she'd liked it. She could still smell his cologne from where he'd nuzzled her and the way he'd turned at the door to wink at her had her mind mush.

"Wow you look like you're in a world of your own." Savannah grunted as she flung herself into a chair across from her. "Does the expression on your face have anything to do with the gorgeous man you've been crying over all weekend or the hot doctor who wants to bed you?"

"The first," she admitted angrily. "I agreed to have dinner with him. He wants to talk." She hadn't told Savannah about sleeping with Alessandro the last time she'd been in Milan. She'd simply told her they'd fought, and she'd run off when he went to the bathroom. If Savannah had noticed the shirt she'd kept tucked under her pillow, then she hadn't said anything.

"Why is he fighting so hard?" Savannah asked suddenly and when Mackenna lifted her eyes to her she held her hands up defensively. "It's not I don't think you're worth fighting for or anything, but you left him five years ago. Surely he knew this is what it was coming to."

"He's a proud Italian man and I kicked him in the ego. He's very possessive and he doesn't like it when someone takes what he thinks is rightfully his."

"You're a woman not a pet." Savannah grimaced as she took a mouthful of coffee.

Mackenna agreed but she couldn't help but admit she'd missed the way Alessandro fussed over her. There was something about Alessandro's personality which made her long for

him and she couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was but the more involvement she had with him, the more she wanted him. It was why she had known five years ago the only way to save herself was to go cold turkey where he was concerned. She lifted her spoon to her lips

and then dropped it back in the bowl without it making it to her mouth. "I'm a bloody fool. I can't do this. I'm trying and I can't."

"Cancel." Savannah shrugged as if it were so simple.

Mackenna laughed humourlessly at her instruction. "I'd like to remind you I spent five years protecting my location just so he couldn't convince me to go back to his bed. I had to leave the freaking country to keep myself from throwing myself at his feet and begging his forgiveness when I know I'm not the one who did anything wrong. You tell him I'm not having

"Fine, he's coming this way right now. I'll tell him." Savannah glowered at the man. "Men shouldn't be allowed to look like him by the way."

"Genetics," she mumbled bitterly, "His grandfather is still drop-dead gorgeous even in his seventies. His mother is a Brazilian supermodel who makes Dulce look ugly. His father has more charisma in his pinky finger than the entire staff here at Saint Christopher's and to top it all off, Alessandro can actually be a nice guy when he wants to be." She sighed as she looked over her shoulder and saw him weaving through the tables in her direction. Maybe he had to cancel dinner because he was going to sit with his precious Dulce. She was torn between

wanting it and fearing it.

Alessandro looked at Savannah as if he knew the blonde doctor sitting with his wife didn't

like him and if Mackenna had told her anything of the things Dulce had admitted to saying to

her, he didn't blame her. He decided to just ignore the way the woman glared at him, and he grew closer to Mackenna who seemed distraught. He pointed at her with a long finger. "You're trying to think of excuses to get out of dinner."

She wanted to hit him for knowing her so well, even after all this time. "I don't like you Alessandro and I don't want to have dinner with you." Her heart hurt simply saying it out loud. She did want to have dinner with him and moreover, she wanted the feast he alluded to earlier.

He looked at her bowl of uneaten soup. "Someone has to feed you because it's clear you're not eating." He pulled a chair from a nearby table and sat down next to her, "And I know you don't like me, but you do love me and it's a start." His grin was disarming, and he winked at Savannah who had gasped at his bold comment. "She'll come around. You'll see."

"She is going to divorce you." Savannah tried not to be taken in by his wide smile.

"No, she's not. She's going to come home and have fat babies with me with big blue-grey eyes and dark black hair." He teased Mackenna. "We've never had an argument I haven't won."

"Because you cheat but I'm onto you. And I want blue-eyed, blond-haired babies so it leaves you out of the running." Mackenna glared at him furious he was so cocky.

"If it's what you really want, we'll adopt one just as you described." His grin turned to a scowl as she pushed the spoon through the bowl and sloshed it over the side onto the tray. He pushed his chair back and stood up and walked away.

Savannah whistled as he walked away. "Okay, I admit it. He's good." "At everything," Mackenna grumbled wishing she'd taken something other than soup for

of it. She rested her chin in her palm and sighed. "Adopt one." She shook her head at his comment. She looked up in surprise when his hand pushed the bowl away from her and he dropped a plastic wrapped item in front of her.

"It's a turkey wrap not the Bubonic plague." He saw her facial expression. "You don't like soup. Why do you order something you don't like?"

"She's trying to lose the seven pounds she put on in three days with her grandmother." Savannah interjected.

Mackenna glared as her best friend suddenly without warning seemed to switch sides. "I only have two pounds left to lose."

Alessandro rolled his eyes. "You should be putting weight on, not taking it off. You have a beautiful body Mackenna. Women pay large sums of money to get the curves you were naturally blessed with."

When Savannah opened her mouth Mackenna lifted her hand. "Doctor Kirkland, before you decide to jump on the bandwagon of making my life miserable, I'll remind you I live where you sleep."

Alessandro chuckled at her defiant attitude. "Mackenna, you always were edgy when you were hungry. Eat your lunch."

"I hate you." She mumbled as she removed the wrap of her sandwich.

"Can't say I blame you for, but we can fix this too." He leaned back and stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles under the table by her feet.

She put the wrap down slowly and turned her head, her eyes reflecting her stunned surprise. "What did you say?"

"I admit I have made some mistakes, but I am ready to take responsibility for them and to do whatever it takes to make things better between us." He pointed to her sandwich. "Eat or I'm calling Sofia and flying her out to stand over you with cheese and bread."

She bit her sandwich and kept a careful eye on him unsure of what kind of game he was playing.

He looked to Savannah. "So, you're an emergency room doctor. What made you decide to do trauma instead of a private practice?"

"In a private practice, the whiners keep coming back. Most of my patients I see a couple of times in their lifetime. I prefer it this way."

saw her head snap back. "Don't deny it. It has nothing to do with the whiners coming back," he

mocked her terminology.

"What the hell do you know?" Savannah asked angrily.

Mackenna chuckled at the sudden raising of her friend's hackles. "Told you he could get under anyone's skin."

"I am a good observer of people," his tone was boastful, and he knew no shame," Savannah, I've seen you with Mackenna and the few times I've seen you here in the hospital you have a good bedside manner, but you keep professional distance which is important." He lifted his finger to her, "but I can see how defensive you are about Mackenna, and I know you would fight any of her battles for her to the death and not think twice. If you had a young patient for example, you would get attached and you would have a hard time if the person were terribly ill."

"You're right Mackenna, he is a know-it-all. I heartily support your decision to divorce him." Savannah grumbled as she sipped her coffee cup, hating her cheeks were bright red.

Alessandro chuckled and leaned conspiratorially in Mackenna's direction. "We'll have to let her be the godmother to our first child. She'd make a good protective mother should something happen to us."

Savannah choked on her coffee and Mackenna laughed at her. She leaned away from him and shook her head. "Alessandro, you're being very pushy when you admit I have every right to be angry with you. You cheated on me." She whispered the last words. "You still have your mistress right here in this hospital."

He shook his head and stood up. "No, I said I made mistakes and I admit to those.

Cheating? That I don't admit to. I haven't slept with anyone but my wife since the day she tried to end her life by jumping in front of my car." He tilted her chin and pressed a kiss to her surprised lips. "Five o'clock and don't be late."

Mackenna watched him walk away with her eyes filling with tears at the sudden rush of emotion she was feeling. She wanted to believe him so desperately, but she knew she was a fool for even considering the possibility.

Savannah put her coffee cup down gently. "Mackenna, I just want to say I'm so sorry."

Mackenna looked to her in surprise. "What?" She was confused. "Why?"

"Because I know you've told me a thousand times you were overwhelmed by him and I admit there were times," she grimaced at herself, "okay, most of the time, I thought you were

make yourself feel better for running away like a teenager."

"You thought I was making it up?" Mackenna's mouth hung open at her friend's revelation.

"I thought you were being a drama queen." Savannah admitted with a wry twist of her lips. "However, I stand corrected. The man is quite possibly the biggest contradiction in humanity I've ever met. When you look at him you automatically think snooty rich guy with the whole world at his feet yet he's friendly and easy-going but then he looks at you," she pointed to Mackenna so there was no denying she was talking about the way Alessandro stared at her, "and he is intense and single-minded. I admit if I hadn't known everything you've told me before, I would think you're a fool for not believing the man loves you desperately because he certainly has a way of making it seem he does." Savannah gulped her coffee as if trying to burn her throat out. "And those eyes should be declared an illegal and lethal weapon because they are like molten gold all hot and fiery and sexy as hell. No wonder you ran for the hills. He's beautiful and cunning."

Mackenna wanted to scream at her for her words. Instead, she wiped a tear off her cheek.

"You're not making it any easier, Savannah."

"If you need my visa to run away and hide in Antarctica, let me know and I'll get it for you. It's all I'm saying. I don't know how, if I were in your shoes, I would be able to resist him." Savannah looked at her hands clutching the now mangled turkey wrap. "Oh, and if I were you, I'd eat that just because he said so. He's watching you from the door."

"You are definitely not helping." Mackenna shivered as she looked up and saw he'd

stopped to talk to Derrick at the entrance of the cafeteria. At his raised eyebrow and pointed

finger she rolled her eyes and bit her wrap. Antarctica was starting to sound better and better.

Chapter 13

Mackenna was locking her office door when a pair of strong arms circled her waist, and a hot kiss was pressed to her neck. She slapped his hand. "Alessandro. You said dinner." She didn't even need to turn to know who had his hands and mouth on her.

"I want dessert first." He nuzzled her even though she struggled. "What are you hungry

for?"

"A shower," she answered angrily as she tried to get out of his grip, but he simply drew her, so she was tucked under his arm. "Would you let me go?" She wriggled away from him, but

he held fast.

"I think we've discussed this a thousand times before. The answer is no, I will never let you go. I love you."

"Ug!" She threw her arms up and spun and faced him. "Stop it. Stop saying stuff like that Alessandro. I don't want to do this with you. I can't do this all over again. It's the definition of insanity."

"Okay," he put his hands up in front of his chest in defeat. "Okay. Lower your voice and we'll go have a quiet dinner and we will just talk. I'll behave."

"You don't know how to behave." She grumbled as she walked past him in the direction of the hospital lobby.

"No, I don't know how to behave *well* but I can behave badly." He grinned at her and saw the smile twisting to force itself on her lips. When she exited the building and started walking down the street, he reached for her. "My rental is parked in the parking area."

"My apartment is six minutes away on foot. It would take longer to walk to your car, start it and then find parking on my street." She returned smartly. "We walk."

"You don't have a car?" He asked curiously, signaling for his security agent to follow at a discreet distance.

"No," she tried not to overreact when his hand dropped over her shoulder again and she pushed it off, but he put it back. She looked to him and saw he was grinning widely. She shook her head. "Incorrigible."

"You're sexy as hell when you're angry." She spun on her heel. "Alessandro. You promised me dinner and talking. No sex."

He laughed and pulled her to his chest and pressed a hard kiss to her lips. "I will feed your appetite. Perhaps later you will feed mine?"

"No." She glared at him but was unable to stop her lips from pouting to accept another

"Not right now, we're on the street." He looked around and then looked back to her, "unless of course you're now into public things. I don't mind trying new things." His eyes danced wickedly at her hot blush.

"Alessandro!" Her lips were pursed as she prepared to scold him and then couldn't help it and she burst into laughter at his words and the light in his eyes. "What am I going to do with you?" She whispered as he hugged her tight.

"I have a list of things written down. We'll go over them later. I'll add the s*x on a public sidewalk to it." He teased her and kissed her temple as they strode down the street.

She tried to reinforce in her mind, this man was her future ex-husband, and his lover was a patient in the hospital where she worked but he was charming, funny, and teasing, and she had no ability to refuse him. She knew he would not like her apartment. It was utilitarian at best, but it was where she laid her head every night and it had been her sanctuary for five years and somehow it felt like she was bringing the devil into church because she knew once he stepped into her tiny safety-net, it would never be the same for her.

"There is no security door?" He asked suddenly as they pushed into the small apartment complex without so much as a key.

She gave a carefree shrug, "No, but our door inside has two deadbolts though."

"A deadbolt isn't going to stop someone from trying to break in through a wooden door." He grimaced as he struggled to hold onto the light mood, he was trying to keep with her. When he followed her down to the basement and the musty smell hit him, he almost groaned aloud.

The sound of a rotating thump caught his ear. "What is the drumming noise?"

"Shared laundry," she pointed to a lit closet. "My neighbors on the third floor have twin infants. They wash a lot of clothes."

His wife was living in a bloody hovel, and she was doing so just to avoid being with him." Well, I'll give you that. I would never have thought to search for you in a cave."

She turned and held her finger up angrily. "Alessandro, if you don't like it, the exit is that way. I won't stop you going."

He took her finger and put it in his mouth and sucked it then watched her mouth open and close and he chuckled at her reaction. "Stop being so cranky. You must be hungry again. I'm only saying this is not what I expected."

She turned away from him, hating her stomach was doing flip flops at the way his tongue had felt on her finger. She opened the doors and stepped inside. "Come in." She kicked her

ear and she hissed back at Savannah's cat. "Get lost Romeo or I'll skin you and make a pillow

out of you."

"You have a cat?" Alessandro paused in the doorway. He'd never known she liked cats.

*No, Doctor Kirkland has a rabid beast she rescued from the streets and it's evil and mean

and demented so keep your eyes on him if he comes into the room. He scratched me once and I had to have three shots in the posterior just to deal with the infection." The beast had the

nerve to sit and lick his paw as if he were proud of his actions. "Romeo, you're lucky I love your

mother, or you'd be a rug."

She moved into the kitchen and knew the cat was following her for its dinner. She opened

the refrigerator and tossed a can on the counter. Grabbing a spoon, she scooped out a glob of

the meat-like substance from the tin can and dumped it in the dish. She smiled wickedly at

Alessandro. "My only consolation is he truly hates this food but he's on a special diet and it gives me pleasure to feed him this crap." She eyed the cat with disdain. "You fat bugger. Don't choke on it."

Alessandro chuckled and bent down to stroke the large grey tabby and it purred loudly as he ran his hand along his back.

"He's purring?" Mackenna stared in disbelief. "You have this monster purring?"

"He knows I feel his pain. I too am hated by you. It's a terrible feeling to only want to be loved by the most beautiful woman in the world."

His voice baby-talking to the cat mocked her and she groaned and opened the fridge and put the container of food back in. "Alessandro, keep it up and I'm going to feed you the same thing Romeo got."

"Who named him Romeo?" Alessandro asked with a grin as the cat rolled onto its back and exposed his belly to be rubbed and his purring turned into full-fledged rumbling as

Alessandro obliged him.

Mackenna was stunned at the beast's behaviour. "The animal shelter we turned him into when he first wound up on our doorstep. In the week he was there he managed to mount six different females." She grinned at the animal. "I personally paid to have him neutered. It was

the best fifty bucks I ever spent."

Alessandro was mortified as he consoled the beautiful animal. "My poor friend. She takes your manhood, and she feeds you tasteless globs of horse meat and she's not even friendly with you. I will see what I can do about finding you a better-quality food."

"From lack of s*x," Alessandro quipped.

"No, because he's overweight and so the vet put him on a special diet. He played us, the little bastard," she shook her finger at the cat as he turned his nose up at his food. "I would feed him and then Savannah would come in and he'd act like he was starving so then she would feed him. He's immense. One day I come home, and he was not looking right so I rushed him to the vet, and they told us he had a heart condition because he's fat. This is the least expensive of the specialty foods and so this is what he gets." She pointed to the cat. "You should be grateful to have a warm bed and a roof over your head and a full belly."

She looked to Alessandro. "You can sit and talk to him. I need to shower and change."

"Do you need some help?" He looked around the cramped kitchen which didn't even have a table and chairs. There was a counter which doubled as an island with two barstools pushed up to it. He wiggled his eyebrows in her direction.

"Showering?" She looked at him, her eyebrows knitted together. "The bathroom is half the size of this kitchen. It's a stand-up shower and it barely fits me and a bottle of shampoo."

"Your funds are truly so tight you cannot afford a proper apartment?" Alessandro asked quietly, ashamed she was reduced to living like this and ultimately it was his fault.

"Alessandro, I know you don't understand but I like my apartment. Savannah and I have made it our home. Savannah grew up in foster care and she defied the odds in becoming a doctor by working her butt off, but it cost a lot. She has a ton of student loans to pay off." She

held his eyes. "My parents had nothing for the first part of my life and so I'm used to having very little. I won't lie and say there were luxuries when I lived with you, I don't miss. The Jacuzzi and my shoe collection to name just two but the truth is, they're just things and I can live just fine without them."

"Savannah has loans. What have you been saving for?" He knew the answer before she even opened her mouth, but he wanted to hear it.

"My freedom from you." She felt the familiar resentment coming into her chest as she spoke. "When I first called for a lawyer, and they told me how much it would cost for a divorce I almost cried. When I found out how much it would cost and to also have a special request the documents be sealed so the tabloids didn't get wind of it, well I did cry. I cried for a month. All I wanted was to move on and I was unable to. It took me three and a half years to get the money

together and when I had it, I called Camille and wired her the first payment."

"You could have requested in the filing I foot the bill." He felt sick to his stomach she had thoughts returned to the conversation he'd had with his protégé, and he closed his eyes for a

moment.

"No, I wanted to do this on my own." She stepped back from him. "Alessandro, I don't think you really get it and I know you think you can make me change my mind, but I've banked close to a hundred thousand dollars to do this and if it means I spend every cent and end up in debt because of it, then I'll do it. I won't stay married to someone who thinks I'm a joke."

He pursed his lips as he struggled with his thoughts and his words. Guilt slammed his midsection as if she had swung a mace in his direction and he took a long breath. "Why don't you go take a shower and get changed and we'll go for dinner? We can talk more over dinner."

"Okay but be forewarned you won't change my mind." She held his gaze and dared him to prove her right

"You can be forewarned I'm going to do everything in my power to try." He didn't back away from her.

Chapter 14

Mackenna rolled her eyes and gave a shake of her head as she walked down the hall and

slammed into the bathroom. She turned the hot spray on and stripped her clothing off. The one thing they did have in this apartment was hot water and plenty of it and it scalded her skin turning her a bright pink as she scrubbed a gauzy puff over her body, sudsy with a grapefruit scented gel.

She quickly washed her hair and then eyed her legs with a grimace. They definitely needed to be shaved but she was trying to hurry. The thought of being near her husband who had modeled himself and surrounded himself with models made her groan. She quickly pulled her lotion and disposable razor. She admitted suddenly having a monthly session at the spa where she was waxed and massaged was also a luxury she had missed. Shaving her legs and armpits was a horrendous chore. Finally, she emerged from the steamy bathroom in a cloud of mist, snuggled in a thick robe Savannah had bought for her the Christmas before and her hair

wound in a thin towel.

She

She crossed the hall and paused as she noticed Alessandro in her bedroom looking at the

various items on her dresser. She decided to play it cool and moved to her hairdryer which had been tossed on her bed by Savannah, likely after she'd borrowed it. She sat on the edge of the bed and towelled her hair off and then turned the hairdryer to its highest, hottest setting and flipped her head upside down between her knees and began the process of drying the long thick mass of hair. She didn't look up as she felt Alessandro sit beside her on the bed but when his fingers curled around hers on the base of the hairdryer, she turned her head and he simply smiled and took the blower from her hand and pushed her head back so he could work his fingers through her hair.

He'd never played with her hair before. She'd always had it cut quite short, to her chin when she'd been with him. It was at its current length purely for economical reasons, often opting to put the money she would have used for a hair cut into her savings account. Savannah trimmed her bangs and ends with a pair of surgical scissors monthly or so and her hair color was now her own except for the few blonde highlights Savannah put in her hair. The highlights were remnants of the boxed color Savannah put in her own hair.

Now however as his long thin fingers massaged her scalp and then trailed through the silky tendrils of her hair her eyes closed and she sighed deeply. It was relaxing and stimulating

at the same time and the hot heat of her hairdryer was welcoming. She didn't protest when he

pulled her into a sitting position and got her to sit on her knees on the carpeted floor between

setting. Her eyes were heavy, and her body was lethargic as even after the humming of the machine stopped, he continued brushing the long tresses.

He smiled to himself when she stifled a yawn, and he tilted her head backwards and stole a kiss from her placid expression. "You are exhausted." His eyes were serious as they regarded her lazy expression.

"I'll be fine. I just need to get my second wind." She started to get up, but he put his fingers on her lips. She scowled. "You don't want me to get dressed up?"

He had planned to take her to an expensive dinner, woo her and remind her of all the good things they'd once shared but as he stared at her, all he wanted was for her to rest and relax. He shook his head. "No. I don't want you to." He got up and pulled her to a standing position. He wrapped his arms around her middle and hugged her tight, pressing a long soft kiss to her forehead before he stepped away from her. He moved to her dresser, and she wrinkled her nose as he yanked out a tattered pair of sweatpants she'd cut off at the knees and a tank top

and threw them on the bed. "I think this is more your speed for tonight."

"You don't want to go out to dinner?" She suddenly felt her heart aching in a way she knew it shouldn't be.

"I don't think, in good conscience, I could drag you anywhere when it is obvious you haven't slept in some time." He moved back to her and pressed yet another tender kiss, this time to her surprised lips and then stepped away.

She moved to the bed and picked up the clothing he'd tossed for her and then to the door he'd just disappeared through. She slipped her robe off and then pulled her sweats and the tank on, opting not to wear a bra on even though she knew probably should. Suddenly she heard the clicking of the front door and she raced to her window in time to see his feet passing

on the sidewalk in front of her bedroom window and she flung down on the side of the bed in

disbelief.

That was it? He was gone. No good-bye? Was he coming back? She felt tears welling up in her eyes and wondered why she was crying, "Because he left you dolt," she berated herself

and flipped onto her back and pulled his shirt out from under her pillow and hugged it to her face. She lay there for a long time on the bed just holding his shirt and inhaling the tiny remaining scent of him. Then she sat up and saw Romeo eyeing her pitifully from the door of

her room.

"Don't judge me, cat. I already know how pathetic I am but damn it, I'm trying." She lost

the direction of the kitchen. She'd have to find something to eat since she wasn't going out now and she felt tears threatening again. It was exhaustion she told herself because she hadn't cried this much since she had first left Alessandro. She opened and closed the refrigerator four times before she decided there was nothing there, she wanted. She flung herself on a barstool and grimaced. Romeo howled at her for being annoying and she growled back.

She looked at the clock grimacing at the time. Her tummy was rumbling, and she was too tired to cook anything, not as if she could cook anything other than toast anyway. The sound of a key in the lock made her look up in surprise because it was just after six and Savannah was

working until midnight. She walked cautiously to the door and then stared in surprise as Alessandro stepped into the space with his arms full. She instantly gravitated to the pizza boxes he carried, and he laughed at her.

"I didn't think you were coming back." She was annoyed with herself for the pout in her voice.

"Well, I knew you were hungry, and I did promise you dinner." He smiled at her as he held her key out. "I hope you don't mind but I took these from the counter there, I didn't want to leave the door unlocked and I wanted to make sure I could get back in. I wasn't certain you

wouldn't be asleep when I got back." He lifted his attaché case over his shoulder and motioned for her to move ahead of him.

"It's probably more comfortable in the living room." She led the way there. She saw the brown paper bag under his arm. "Wine?"

"Yes. Tell me you at least have wine glasses." He hadn't thought of it.

She giggled at his words. "I'm sure I can find something adequate." She lifted the top of one of the boxes and inhaled deeply. "Pesto, feta and peppers. You remembered."

"I did." He set his other parcels on a tattered armchair, "And guess what's in the other box."

She smiled softly. "Sausage, tomatoes and portabella mushrooms." She didn't need to look in the box to know the toppings on his pizza. It was his favorite.

"Good girl," he returned her gentle smile, happy to know she remembered, "Go find some glasses and I'll pop the cork on the Cabernet."

"Okay." She was deliriously happy, and she didn't know why. Just because he'd come back, she supposed, but she knew she shouldn't feel this way. She was humming to herself as

lost in her thoughts, she didn't hear Alessandro come in and he wrapped his arms around her waist and hummed the same song in her ear. He twirled her in his arms and danced her around

the tiny kitchen, singing softly to her and she was entranced by the melody. She'd always loved when he sang to her and as he serenaded her, she felt her eyes watering again. He twirled her around and then pulled her into his arms. He held her close, one hand gripping hers to his chest and the other on his low back, pushing her hips to his as they waltzed around the room, slower now as his tune changed and his words became more impassioned as he sang to her of love and longing and she stared into his eyes.

When finally, his song came to a close they were barely moving and her free hand rested on his waist, under his jacket. She lifted her lips to his and he kissed her long and slowly and she sighed as he slipped his tongue along hers. She could taste the cigarette she knew he'd

had while he'd been gone, and it tasted familiar and strong like home. He tasted like her home,

where she wanted to be and where she wanted to stay. His kiss grew deeper and more demanding, and she moaned with pleasure and then he was pulling away and smiling down at

her.

"I thought we were feeding your appetite first." He breathed against her lips.

"The pizza is probably getting cold," she agreed but she didn't let him go. He just felt so good in her arms.

He reached past her and grabbed the wineglasses from the sink. "Let's go have dinner."

She nodded and let him lead her back to the living room. She sunk onto the sofa and lifted a box of pizza onto her lap. When she took a bite of a slice of her pizza, she gave a long happy sigh. "This is so good."

Alessandro stared at her. "Mackenna, when is the last time you had pizza, good pizza?"

"We don't eat out much." She admitted.

He kicked his feet up on an ottoman and pulled a slice of thin crust pizza to his lips. "It's not a bad thing to not eat out much. I admit I miss being able to eat at home. I used to love when we had dinner at home."

She laughed at him. "Do you forget I can't cook? Good thing you had staff."

"I'd eat a thousand pieces of burnt toast and hundreds of undercooked runny eggs if it meant I had you home watching me gag on it." He dropped his pizza slice on a napkin on the top of the box and poured their wine. He leaned forward and passed her a glass. He smiled as she took a long sip. "Easy, Mackenna. You don't handle liquor well on a full belly let alone

She smiled at him and set the glass down. "How do you know I haven't spent the

last five years getting drunk every weekend?"

"Because you live here and so I'm guessing drinking and partying on the weekends

didn't happen much."

"Well, you're wrong." She leaned back and took a nibble of her pizza. "Savannah dated this woman for awhile who made her own wine as a hobby. She still sends us bottles all the time and its nasty stuff, but it works wonders when you've had a horrid week and need to unwind. We work in a hospital, and it can be crazy, so we go out quite a bit to unwind." She saw his jaw hanging open and she frowned. "I don't do it all the time Alessandro but a few drinks, a night or two a month..."

"No, I don't care if you drink. Did you just say Savannah dated a woman?"

"Oh, yeah, she's bisexual. No big deal." She grimaced as she took another bite of her pizza. Why did people make such a big thing out of sexuality?

"Savannah, the doctor you live with is gay?" Alessandro left his wine glass on the table and his pizza sat on a napkin beside it. "I asked you before if you had a lover.." gales of laughter erupting from Mackenna had him pausing and his anger growing. "You think this is

funny?"

"Savannah is not my lover. I'm not her type and she's not mine." She was still laughing at his words. "Although admit we often play it up as a couple when someone hits on us, and we are not interested. One time this guy kept hitting on me and so to make him go away, she told him we were lovers, and we did a full-on kiss on the mouth to make him leave. It

almost worked until he asked if he could join. Then we just had the bouncer toss him."

"She's not your lover?" he needed the confirmation.

"Nope." She reached for a second slice of pizza. "She has parts I don't want and is missing the parts I do." At his raised eyebrows she laughed. "Breasts and a penis." She laughed harder as he choked on the bite of pizza he'd just taken.

"When did you start talking so bluntly," he asked curiously.

"I've been living with a doctor for five years; she was in med school for a while, and I helped her study a lot. Now she's entering her fellowship, so it's been a ride. I'm no longer embarrassed by anatomical wordings. I'm not a twenty-year-old innocent any more Alessandro." She knew he was remembering their wedding night when she'd blushed furiously every time, he even mentioned getting naked.

refrigerator. She saw him pass by the door to the living room in the direction of her bedroom and when he came back, he was carrying a blanket and the pillow off her bed.

Chapter 15

Mackenna was confused as Alessandro motioned for her to lie down on the sofa. "I think you should get some sleep. You look like you're ready to drop."

"I don't think I can sleep. It's only seven-thirty." she whispered as he pushed her into the sofa and lifted her legs to stretch out. He took the blanket and tucked it around her legs and then adjusted the pillow under her cheek. "I can't sleep with you standing there watching me."

"Nap then, even a few minutes," he watched her for a minute and then sighed. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) He moved to the armchair where he'd dropped his attaché case and flung it on the table at the end of the sofa. He flipped it open and then before she could say anything, he lifted her legs and sat down under them, holding her feet on his lap. Before she could stop him, he began rubbing her feet.

"Alessandro, stop," she tried to pull her feet from him, but he held her left foot firmly in his grasp.

"No, this always put you to sleep in the past. Close your eyes and I'll rub your feet until you sleep. Once you're asleep, I can get to work but I won't be able to work until I know you are resting." Alessandro lifted and pressed a kiss to the top of her foot before he continued massaging the arch of her foot. He chuckled as her eyes involuntarily closed at his actions.

"Sleep, Mackenna." He whispered as he made long sweeping movements along her sole with his strong hands. After several minutes he switched to her right foot and smiled as this time she didn't argue with him and the tiny sigh bubbling from her lips told him she was close to being asleep.

He knew when she'd finally fallen asleep when her leg felt heavy on his lap and he nestled her foot against him, tucking the blankets around her. When she'd been in school, he'd often helped her to relax before exams by doing just this for her and she would sleep easy for hours. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) He lifted his sketchpad and pencils from his case and adjusted himself, using her legs as an easel to work against. He'd always intended to design something for her, but he'd never had the time. He corrected the thought; he'd never taken the time. He looked at her while she slept, her face turned on the pillow, her profile pale, and blue marks under her eyes. It was obvious

she hadn't been sleeping and he intuitively knew he was to blame.

He'd made too many mistakes in the past and he would do things different this time if she would give him the chance. He stared at her hungrily, knowing for her, in her heart of hearts she believed she had every right to hate him, and, in his heart, he knew she was right. He'd done the unforgivable where she was concerned and four hours of talking to his parents via

conference last night had confirmed what he'd suspected. He was a first-class fool for putting

cheek and tucked it behind her shoulder,

He put his pencil to paper and sketched her while she slept. Five years hadn't dimmed her beauty or her appeal to him. Her eyelashes fanned across her cheeks, long and curled at the tips, her mascara she hadn't properly taken off in her shower, now dark against her peach complexion. Her lips, no longer sporting any of the gloss she would have worn this morning, chewed off from her nervous biting, were pursed as she slept and they were made for kissing, heart-shaped and full. Her cheekbones were high, and her skin was shiny from the scrubbing it had taken in the shower. Her chin was pointed, dimpled and her nose was almost too small for her face, turned slightly at the end.

Her hair was still silky soft, but it was longer, much longer than the chin length bob she'd worn it in for the time they were together. She'd always had it dyed a blonde color, but he admitted he preferred the darker shade she now wore with the streaks of blonde through it. He smiled as she fidgeted in her sleep and his smile grew wider when she whispered his name and buried her face into the pillow as if it were him holding her. He'd give anything to be her

pillow, but he knew he didn't deserve her, but he would earn her back and he would have to be

patient.

He returned to his sketching and when he finished drawing her face, he flipped the page and began a rough sketch of her body. It was an exercise in self-control, he realized as he drew her curves and valleys, his mind returning to the image of her innocence on their wedding

night. She'd been so intimidated of getting undressed in front of him she'd come from the bathroom wearing a pair of boxer shorts and a t-shirt and he'd laughed at her. By the end of their honeymoon, she easily walked around him naked, knowing when she did, he was

powerless to keep his hands to himself.

As he thought about this, he realized at some point in their marriage, she'd gone back to hiding from him, wearing night clothes to bed, and wrapping constantly in a robe. At the time he hadn't thought anything of it, too focused on making his family's company first in the fashion world to notice she'd started hanging in the background instead of standing at his side. (This novel will be daily updaed at www.noveljar.com)He watched her sleep as the knowledge hit him. She'd shown him in so many ways she was preparing to leave him, and he'd been ignorant of the warnings.

She'd pick fights with him over silly things like the way he lined her shoes up in the closet

or the way he dropped his wet towel over the back of a wooden chair at her vanity. She would pin her hair into ugly little clips he hated or wear a pair of jeans which had more holes in them

the trash, and he'd find her wearing them again.

Once she'd refused to come down to dinner when he'd had guests in and had spent the entire evening in her room, with earphones jammed into her ears, music blaring and staring at the ceiling. He'd called her a child. She'd called him an insufferable ass and told him he could use Dulce to play hostess since she was better at it. He'd done it because he'd thought she would give up her game and come down and take over. When it had been close to midnight and he'd gone to climb into their bed, she'd locked him out. It was the first time when he was home, they'd slept apart. He'd made sure it was the last. He'd removed the lock off the door.

Then were the times she would go stay with her grandparents for days on end until he would go get her and bring her home. He'd believed it had been what she'd done the last

time she'd left. When he'd come in before dawn the next morning, she'd already been gone, and he'd assumed she'd gotten annoyed he'd gone out and had gone to her grandparents. He'd never been one to sleep in their bedroom alone and so he'd gone to the guest room. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) He'd given her a few days to cool off but on the third day he'd gone to the bedroom to find a specific tie clip he'd left on the bedside table and had noticed the picture frame holding their wedding photo had been smashed and her gold ring sitting in the middle of the glass. He'd gone directly to her grandparents, but she hadn't been there, and it was then he'd begun to panic. When he found out she'd refused to give her grandparents any information on her whereabouts he'd hired an investigator, but she'd disappeared off the face of the earth. Once she'd landed in New York she'd disappeared. There was no sign of her.

He was sketching furiously now, and he looked up and saw she'd awoken and was watching him.

He needed to know. "Where did you go from New York? I know you told me you bought a plane ticket, but I know you didn't. You also didn't buy a bus ticket or a train ticket. Where did

you go?"

If his question surprised her, she didn't reveal it in her expression. "Does it matter?"

"It does." He replied matter-of-factly. "I looked all over for you. I'd like to know how you wound up in, of all places, Phoenix Arizona."

She gave an impatient sigh. "I was in this diner and this woman trucker named Bertha. I told her I was leaving my overbearing husband and she offered me a ride to Tucson. I went with her." She watched as he bent his head and continued his drawing. "You can't be comfortable." She watched as he picked a rubber off the table and erased something.

She stuck her tongue out at him and closed her eyes again. It felt too comfortable and

watching him work was making her want him in ways she shouldn't. She folded her arms. "Some things don't change. You're still bossy as hell."

"And you're still sexy as hell and you still call my name when you sleep." He teased her as he stroked his pencil to paper. He held up the book and turned it so she could see his drawing. "What do you think?"

"Alessandro," she reached for it and was awestruck. He'd designed a simple business suit, the skirt flared just above the knee and the cut of the jacket was amazing, one button holding it closed at the collar. She held it in front of her face and shook her head. "I'd forgotten

how talented you are. It's amazing."

"Flip the page back and tell me what you think of the pantsuit on the page before. You work in a hospital but there is no need to dress like the doctors in scrubs." He watched as she turned the page and he smiled as her stunning blue eyes opened widely, and her mouth fell open in surprise

"Alessandro, it's exquisite." She wrinkled her nose. "I think though you have the wrong body in the suit. I don't look like this."

"Really?" He smiled at her gently. "When's the last time you looked in a floor length mirror? I admit I may have embellished your chest just a bit but not by much. I figure a few of your Nonna's meals and you'll be right back to where you should be."

She made a face. "It took me three months to lose the weight from my visit three years ago, let alone I'm still struggling from the most recent one."

"I should have been notified of your visit at the time and you shouldn't be dieting." He scowled down his aristocratic nose at her. "There is nothing wrong with your body. It's perfect as it is."

"This from the man who designs clothes for women who wear size double-zeros, and they still need to be taken in." She scoffed refusing to acknowledge his first comment.

"I design clothes for actresses and heiresses who want to be noticed and who all live in a world that is unrealistic and shallow. I prefer when I can design clothes for someone with a

shape instead of draping fabric over a stick-figure." He took the book from her again and flipped to a clean page. "What do you do for fun now?(This novel will be daily updaed at www.noveljar.com)" He changed the topic as he tried to keep the conversation neutral.

"Savannah and I do a lot of hiking. I got her into it." She smiled at him, knowing he was the though," she watched as he began sketching again. "Savannah is a big baby, and she whines when she gets too hot and if she sees snakes, she gets all nutty."

"Remember the time we went to Lake Como?" He asked not looking up.

"I thought I was going to die," she wriggled her toes as her legs grew tired from being in one position. "We hiked for almost fourteen hours. I was sore in places I didn't know I had."

"I kissed them better," he mocked her, still sliding his pencil across the paper, not looking

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"Until we got interrupted," she made a face at the top of his dark head.

"Yes, that was rather unfortunate."

"It was premeditated," she shrugged. "I'm not a fool. She wouldn't have come if you hadn't of told her where we were."

He looked at her in surprise, his tawny eyes narrowing on her. "You don't actually believe invited Dulce to come on our getaway?"

She didn't answer immediately, contemplating her response. Before she could formulate the words, the telephone rang on the table again. When she heard the woman's voice on the other end, she found herself wondering if the woman knew she was being discussed.(This novel will be daily updaed at www.noveljar.com) It was as if the other woman instinctively knew when to call. She swung her legs off his lap and walked away from him and retreated to the bathroom. For a moment, she had considered they might be able to have a real conversation for the first time on the issue and sort it out. However,

Dulce being Dulce called and he'd answered just as the other woman knew he would. Just like

he always would.

Chapter 16

Mackenna was in her office working furiously and trying to get over the anger she had felt this morning. It wasn't right. She had fallen asleep in Alessandro's arms on the sofa, and she had felt safe, content, and happy. She'd had dreams of making love with him and of sleeping with him, in his warm embrace exhausted from lovemaking.

— Her heart was acting as if it was the most natural thing in the world to be back in his arms, but her head was telling her she was a bigger idiot today than she'd been five years ago. Her anger was self-directed, because when she'd woken alone in her tiny twin bed, tucked into it, she'd instantly reached for him, and he wasn't there. Finding herself alone, she'd begun sobbing like a fool. She was crying at the drop of a hat over Alessandro Giordano. It was silly and asinine, and she was ashamed of herself. Her emotions were out of control.

Her stomach was in knots, she felt queasy and never had she been so exhausted. This last month was proving to be the most difficult of her life and she felt like there was no end in sight, no light at the end of her tunnel. She knew the time between now and until her divorce finalized would be a battle with Alessandro. Worse, she feared the time after her divorce was likely going to be the most excruciating of her life. How had she thought she would be able to just move on after him when it was clear she had never gotten over him? Distance would help, she knew it but moving to Antarctica was not an option; no matter how much the

solitude beckoned her.

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She pushed her paperwork across her desk and reached for her coffee cup to find it empty and she scowled. She needed a caffeine fix. She stood up and moved to the door of her office and as she tore it open, she came face-to-face with the man of last night's lustful fantasies, poised to knock on the door. She shoved past him. "I'm working."

"I know." He felt his defenses rise instantly at her cold expression. "I came to ask if you're feeling any better after a night of rest. I thought we could do dinner tonight." He followed her as she marched down the hall away from her office, clutching a metal thermal cup in her hand.

There is no reason for us to see each other again." She stopped and faced him. "You might want to check in with your lawyer by the way because mine is petitioning the court today to try to push the court date ahead to the end of this month instead of next."

He was stunned by her words and her change in disposition. She had switched from the clinging vine she'd been last night when he'd carried her and tucked her into her tiny single bed to a catty, cold woman before him. His feet stopped moving as he stared at her back as she swung on her heel and continued walking away from

him.

"Mackenna." He whispered her name as his throat clogged off and he cleared it and spoke her name again, louder, and firmly. "Mackenna. We are going to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about Alessandro. I thought about it, and I've figured out what you're doing. You think you can feed me pizza and watch fuzzy dog movies

and I'll forget all the terrible things you put me through. Well, you're wrong." She faced him then and poked him in the chest.

"I still remember. I still remember wherever we went, your mistress came too. I remember you left me home alone all the time and you took her with you. I remember when you laughed at me and said you would sleep with her every day, and I would still take you in my bed every night." She saw her words affect him as if she'd struck him a physical blow. She continued her verbal assault, "well you were wrong Alessandro. I wouldn't do it then and I won't now. If it weren't for the fact Dulce is in a bed upstairs in the orthopedic wing, you and I wouldn't be having this discussion. This, again, reminds me you would follow her to the ends of the Earth if she demanded it! Tell me Alessandro, has there ever been a phone call from her you didn't answer?" When he opened his mouth, she cut him off, "don't bother. I already know the answer. You're as obsessed with her as you are with me. The only difference, she likes it. I just want my freedom, so back off and leave me alone." She started to walk away but he grabbed her arm and spun her back and he glared

"Mackenna, I have done my best to try to be patient with you, but it seems instead of maturing you regress to a child. It's like trying to reason with a rabid dog. You have preconceived notions of injustice in your head, and you cannot accept maybe you were the one who made mistakes. You refuse to acknowledge any of the responsibility for this situation. You never wanted to talk in the past. You never asked me if I was sleeping with Dulce. You accused me. You always accused and you already had your mind made up as to the answer, so why would I bother to deny something you had already decided as fact? You

would trust the word of another woman over your husband! You took her word and believed it for the God's-honest truth. You didn't ask me Mackenna. You told me to choose between my wife and my lover and there was no choice to make because to me, they were one and the same. You were the one who walked out on me. You left me!"

She saw his eyes were cold and furious and she wanted to say something, but he wasn't done.

"Do you think I enjoy this? There have been plenty of mornings where I've woken alone in our bed and decided it was the day I was going to file for the divorce." He saw her shocked expression and his lips tightened. "You actually believe having an immature shrew for a wife who accused, whined and complained about everything! did before she decided to run away from home like a spoiled brat was a treat? I told myself you were young and losing your parents so young was why you were so damn insecure but I loved you and so I tried to be patient. If there is anything my family has taught me is marriage is something you work on and damn it, I don't mind working hard at anything." He threw his hand in the air exasperated with her, "and there were days I would gladly have thrown in the towel, but I kept at it. Do you know what? Let's just get on with it because I'm tired of it Mackenna. I'm tired of this constant game of cat and mouse you like to play. You want a divorce? Fine. The minute I'm back in Milan, I'll sign the papers. You can marry your bloody orthopedic surgeon and have your little blue-eyed, blonde haired babies. I'm done." He threw his hands in the air and pushed past her, striding straight down the hall and out into the bright sunshine. Her heart thundering with such ferocity she couldn't breathe. She clutched her chest tightly as pain seared her just as one of the doctors who had treated her two years past when she'd contracted bacterial meningitis took her by the hands.

"Mac, are you okay."

"Hurts," she gasped as her heart felt like it was exploding inside of her chest. Alessandro had never walked away from her before and the searing pain of it was excruciating. "Hurts so much."

"Mac, I'm going to take you to the trauma unit just to look you over, okay?"

She was aware Doctor Ingram was escorting her through a side door through a long corridor and she saw Savannah looking in her direction as the doctor helped her into a chair and grabbed a cuff from a wall and took her blood pressure. She was

aware of her surroundings, yet, everything seemed so hazy and cloudy, and she fought to keep her eyes opened.

"Hey Mac, you, okay?" Savannah knelt in front of her.

"Getting divorced," she managed to get the words out as the doctor took her readings. "I told Alessandro I called Camille and he said he'd sign the papers." She saw the surprise on Savannah's face. "He's very angry."

"He'd have to be to say he'd sign the papers. Mac, what happened? Last night you were all cuddled on the sofa with him and today you're calling Camille." Savannah looked to Doctor Ingram as the man said her blood pressure was high but not dangerously so. "Mac, Brody needs to listen to your chest, okay?" She reached up and unbuttoned the first three buttons of her shirt and squeezed her hands. "Mac, what's going on?"

"I can't do it, Savannah. I can't do it." She felt her breath growing short and Doctor Ingram reached for oxygen and in seconds she had a mask on her face, and she was laying on her back on a cot and staring at the ceiling tiles as they checked her out thoroughly. She heard words like 'panic attack' and 'stress' and 'weakened heart muscles' and for each tear Savannah wiped away from her face, ten more fell. She sobbed as she looked at her best friend. "Why does it hurt so much? It's what

"No, honey. It isn't what you wanted." Savannah corrected her the way only a best friend could. "Maybe a month ago it was but not now, not that you've found each other again. You got scared this morning and you called Camille and now it's

backfired,"

Her head felt fuzzy and light and then as she opened her mouth to say

something she heard the doctor beside her call her name and then she was lost to a

black void which felt good in comparison to the pain she was feeling.

She was dreaming she realized as she smiled to herself. She was with Alessandro in Milan, in their big bedroom in the Giordano family estate and they were snuggled in the middle of the big bed, and he was cuddling her and telling her how much he'd missed her when he'd been gone. He never slept in their bed when he wasn't with her. It felt too strange to lie in a bed knowing she was in another bed so far away from him.

"You should come with me, Mackenna."

The way he'd said her name always made her smile, the accent heavy on the end of her name and 'ken' in her name more of a 'kane' and she mocked him until he tickled her ribs and she had to beg him to stop. "Well, Alessandro, I'd go with you if I didn't have midterms on Monday. It won't be long, and I'll be done school and you will have my undivided attention."

"Until you have your job placement." He stroked her brow with his thumbs, smoothing out the furrows studying had put there.

"It's only six weeks and then I'll have my diploma and then we can be together more. I can't wait to be with you when you travel."

"You should come with me to Rio." He threw his long leg over her hip and pulled her close. "We're interviewing for some new models to represent our line. You can help me survive the monotony. It will be in August."

"I'd like that." She ran her hand over his rippled abdomen. "While you're looking at gorgeous supermodels all day, what am I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to look at me, of course." He laughed at her pout. "Rio has

"I think I'd rather just sit and watch you," she said quietly as she lifted her eyes to his. Spending his money shopping felt weird to her and lying on a beach alone held no appeal to her. "Can I come with you and just be with you?"

"Yes. I'll keep you at my side all the time." He grinned as he rolled her onto her back. "For now, though, I'd like you under instead of beside me if it's okay with you. I've missed my little wife."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. "I've missed you too. Alessandro." His name was a sigh as he began making love to her.

Chapter 17

Mackenna noted the taste of his kiss was strange, it was thick and metallic, and

she struggled against the strange flavour of it. He evaporated out of her arms and out of her dreams. She cried for him to come back. She could hear Savannah and

she was confused.

Savannah shouldn't be in her bedroom in Milan. Savannah was in Phoenix. She was in Phoenix. She was in Phoenix, and she had filed for divorce because she hadn't gone with Alessandro to Brazil. Her work term had extended to four months because the employer had been short-staffed, and she'd enjoyed the work so much and Alessandro had encouraged her to work if it were what she really wanted to do.

He'd gone to Brazil, and he'd met Dulce and she'd been naked and beautiful, and he'd come home with her on his arm. Now he would probably marry her once their divorce was complete.

"Mac," Savannah's hand was cool on her brow. "Mac, can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered and she struggled to focus.

"You fainted, Mac. You're okay but we're just going to run a few tests to make sure there's no infection or anything." Savannah pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Mac, take your time in opening your eyes. Do you want me to go get Alessandro?"

"No," she shook her head slowly and it felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds. She lifted her hand to it and cringed. "My head hurts."

"I'm sure it does. Your blood pressure dropped quite a bit but it's coming back up fairly good. There are some tests they're going to run. We have to take some blood." Savannah asked her again. "Do you want Alessandro here Mac?"

"No. He left." She struggled to get into a sitting position. A nurse was tying a rubber band around her bicep. "He yelled at me and then he left."

"He yelled at you?" Savannah's head snapped back. She'd only met him a couple of times and she couldn't imagine him yelling. He was too cool for such a thing. "Why?"

"He said I was immature, and he didn't want to be married to me anymore." She was sure there was more to it, but it was the gist of the conversation she could

"But why Mac? What did you say to make him so angry?" "I told him I asked Camille to move the court date closer if she could."

Savannah was quiet as she considered her best friend might just be the biggest fool on the planet. She took a breath and squeezed her fingers. "Mac, you know I love you right."

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"Yeah," Mackenna sniffed and then jumped as the needle pricked her skin.

"Okay, so now I'm saying this with all the love in the world." Savannah stepped away from her and with her arm extended she tilted Mackenna's face to hers."

You're an i***t. I've known the man for a week and even I know he loves you and

wouldn't cheat on you and I know the woman said what she said but I believe him."

Mackenna yanked her face away from Savannah. "Doctor Kirkland, don't you have something better to do with your time?" She glared at her angrily. "I'm sure Doctor Ingram and Chrissie will be done with me soon and I'll go back to work."

Savannah was horrified at the sudden change in her best friend. "Mac don't be angry with me. I just..."

"I know what you were just doing Savannah. You're just like every other person he's ever charmed and sweet-talked. You think he hung the moon and the stars and everything in between. Well, if you like him so much, you marry him. You can say what you want about how much he loves me and how much he adores me, but you forget he left my bed to take her dancing. I don't care how platonic their relationship was, is or is going to be. He was wrong. He was wrong to leave me all the times he did. He took the fact I adored him, loved him, and worshipped him and he used it against me. He used it as the insurance he could do what he wanted, when he wanted and how he wanted, and I would sit there like a good little girl and do what he

wanted. Well, he was wrong!" She hissed at Savannah now. "I could go back to him. I would love to go back to him and live with him and be his wife, but do you know what would happen, Savannah? He would leave me alone all over again to be with her and I'd be an even bigger fool than I am already. He will never end his relationship with Dulce, and I will never trust him with her."

the pain she'd been through. She had believed everything to come from Alessandro's mouth, and she found herself torn between what she had seen her best friend go through and the way the man was treating her now.

"Whatever," Mackenna waved her hand at her. She started to get off the bed, but she was incredibly dizzy and both Savannah and the doctor pushed her backwards

onto the bed.

"Mac, I'm going to insist you stay on the oxygen for at least another fifteen

minutes" Doctor Ingram said quietly as he held it over her mouth and nose. "You were hyperventilating, and you did have syncope. Its most likely stress but I've run a battery of tests and we'll be certain by tomorrow. For now, I want you to just lay there and relax. Once the lightheaded feeling has completely passed then we'll try to sit up again and if after a bit you feel okay, I'll discharge you home."

"I have to get back to work." She struggled against their hands to sit up.

"You are definitely not working any more today." Doctor Ingram insisted and gave an exasperated sigh. "I swear Mac, I'll call down and get some straps and tie you to this bed if you so much as move an inch, do you understand me?"

She balked at his tone, and she pouted her lips and turned her face away from him, hating she felt so silly in the bed. She pulled the oxygen off and looked to Savannah, forgetting for a moment she was annoyed with her, and begged her to help. "This is just foolish. I fainted. No big deal."

"You fainted for no good reason." He corrected and pushed the mask back on and motioned to Savannah. "You go away because you're making her more distressed than she already is."

Savannah bent and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry Mac."

"It's fine. Can you just get me out of here?" She grimaced when Savannah shook her head and walked away from her. She glowered at the attending doctor and nurse. Finally, she stopped struggling and stared at the ceiling and breathed in the oxygen as commanded.

It was an hour later before Doctor Ingram decided she was able to sit up and

already called her boss and advised she was going home for the day. He'd also told her to lay off the caffeinated drinks until he got his test results back.

Alessandro was walking into the hospital after he'd taken a long drive to try to get his emotions under control when he caught sight of a very pale Mackenna holding onto a counter at the lobby while a doctor in a long white lab coat seemed to be giving her a dressing down. He heard a nurse speaking into a phone at the counter beside him. "Just make sure we get the blood work stat. Since she had the

bacterial meningitis two years ago, we need to make sure she's not having anything residual from it. Doctor Ingram wants it before the end of the day so make it a priority, please."

Alessandro's footsteps faltered as he looked between the nurse and his wife. He suddenly remembered the first day he'd found Mackenna working in her office. He hadn't been paying much attention to the conversation taking place because he'd been so overwhelmed with finding her that day but somewhere in the back of his

head, he remembered hearing meningitis. He stared at her and as if sensing she was being watched she slowly turned her head and looked at him. He instantly switched directions and moved right to her. He looked to the doctor. "What is going on?"

"Nothing Alessandro. I'm fine." She looked with annoyance to the doctor who was insisting she was off work for the remainder of the week. "I want to go back to my office."

"And I want you checked into a room upstairs, but I don't get what I want either." Doctor Ingram folded his arms over his thick chest. "I don't even like the thought of you going home alone. I wish Savannah weren't pulling a double. Why don't you let me admit you so I can keep an eye on you and when Savannah is off in the morning,

she can take you home with her?"

"Because I'm fine," she argued. "I fainted. No big deal." "We don't know why you fainted and..."

"You fainted?" Alessandro interrupted the conversation flowing back and forth so fast he could barely keep up. "When did you faint?"

"No." Both men spoke simultaneously. Doctor Ingram looked to him. "Who are you?"

Alessandro extended his hand and introduced himself. "What's wrong with my wife?"

"Patient privilege prohibits me from telling you anything unless she agrees."

"There's nothing to tell." She argued with both men. "Alessandro. This is Doctor Brody Ingram. He treated me a couple of years ago. We had a patient here Savannah had treated for meningitis. Since we were all exposed, we were all tested, and I ended up testing positive, but it was two years ago! I'm fine."

"You had chest pain and you fainted," Brody cut her off. "I don't want you going home alone. If you faint in the tiny hole of an apartment, you and Savannah share, there will be no way to avoid smacking your head on something."

"You will come with me back to the hotel." Alessandro shook his head. "I will make sure you get some rest."

"No, I am not going with you. We're getting a divorce." Just saying it aloud made the chest pain come back and she clutched her blouse tightly.

He lifted his eyebrows. "Well, you've obviously been away from your phone otherwise you would have heard from your lawyer who will tell you when she gets hold of you not only is our date not being pushed closer, but I've petitioned to push it

back further."

"Alessandro, you said you would sign the papers." She clutched his forearm.

"I lied." He said simply. "Now," he looked to the doctor, "give me a list of instructions and I'll make sure we follow them to the letter."

"It's not an exhaustive list. She needs rest, no caffeine, and more rest. Tomorrow she can go for a short walk or two. No working the rest of this week Mac! I mean it." He shook his finger at her.

"If she shows her face, I'll fire her." Her director came down the hall. More introductions were made and then before she could offer any additional protests, she was pushed out of the hospital and when she blinked at the bright light of the

"I'm being bullied," she sulked as she sat in the passenger side of the car with a seatbelt over her shoulders and a grim-faced Alessandro next to her. "Just take me to my apartment and I'll go to bed. You don't need to waste your time with me."

"I am not wasting my time. I'm taking care of my wife." "Soon to be ex-wife." She said smartly.

"Over my dead body." He quipped back as he gunned the engine and tore through the parking lot.

"I looked into it but it's too expensive." She saw his lips twist and turned to face him. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Let's just say even ill, you're feisty and it makes me love you all the more." "You don't love me Alessandro. You think you own me."

"You are mine, Mackenna. Make no mistake, I will not sit idly by and watch you throw our marriage away. We made the vow until death do us part."

"Then kill me now because I want out." She fumed.

"Mackenna," he took a long slow breath, "someday you are going to have to be held accountable for all of the cold cruel things you say."

"This from you," she scoffed angrily.

"I admit I have said some things in the past which were inappropriate, but I am working on fixing them. You on the other hand are constantly throwing around insults, rude comments and now death threats as if you could care less of the impact they make."

"Oh," she mocked him, "does it hurt your feelings Alessandro?" "As a matter of fact, Mackenna, it does."

His quiet words shut her up and although she wished she could come back with a pithy response, she could only fold her arms over her chest and pout and worry maybe, just maybe, he was right.

Chapter 18

Mackenna sobbed as she clutched the pillow to her chest. She had woken from her nap with the knowledge of why she was so ill, and she had sat up in the bed in a panic. Her first reaction had been to call for Alessandro. All she'd found was his note on the pillow beside her he'd had to go to the hospital to relieve Dulce's mother and sister for a bit and he'd be back for dinner. The pain was immeasurable, and she knew her cries were barely muffled by the pillow, and she was mortified she couldn't stop them.

He'd brought her to his suite, and he'd put her to bed. He had left the large wide doors to the bedroom open so he could keep an eye on her, working at a table on his laptop for a long time. She'd pretended not to watch him but he'd made her tell him why the doctor was concerned and so she revealed when she'd had meningitis, she had been quite ill, and it was why Doctor Ingram was worried. He'd sworn at her for almost dying when they were apart.

Then he had kissed her until she was breathless. So of course, her eyes had flitted back and forth watching him as he worked, flexing, and stretching his muscles occasionally from working at the uncomfortable spot. At some point she'd fallen asleep, but she'd dreamt of him loving her, holding her and her dreams had gotten out of control. When she'd awoken reality had been temporarily intertwined with dreams but as the mist of her dreams ebbed, the reality had struck her in the center of the chest.

As her sobs began to subside, she pushed the blankets and pillows away and moved into the bathroom. She was still lightheaded, but she knew she hadn't had a

good breakfast and no lunch and since it was approaching dinner, she was ravenous, and it would account for the dizzy feelings.

As she considered why she was dizzyingly nauseated she moved to the living area and flung herself onto a sofa and wiped tears off her cheeks and reached for the room service menu. She flipped through it multiple times and couldn't figure out what she wanted and, in the end, ordered the fish, steak and chicken. She then added salad, rice, potatoes, and pasta. She had it all charged to Alessandro's room." It's your fault anyway," she griped angrily. "I wouldn't be so sick and hungry if you

She knew she was talking to herself, but she didn't care. She rubbed her tummy anxiously. She kicked her foot impatiently and then decided she wanted a shower. She moved to the bathroom, ran the water, and then turned back out and moved back to the living space. She grabbed the phone and made another phone call to Doctor Ingram. She left a message on his answering service and asked him to call her back as soon as he had the test results. She already knew what he'd find. Then she turned back to the bathroom and stripped down to nothing and stood in the huge enclosure letting the hot pulsating streams pound the back

of her neck. She was certain she'd stayed there for close to thirty minutes when the sound of Alessandro calling her name made her scowl.

She grimaced as he slid the enclosure open and looked at her. "I'm showering. Do you mind?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. You're supposed to be in bed."

"You were supposed to watch me but that didn't happen either." She answered smartly turning her back to him. "How's your precious Dulce doing?"

"She is complaining of pain. She keeps asking for more and more medication."

"Well of course she's in pain. She broke her damn leg in eight places. I hope they're giving her what she's asking for but if I know Derrick, he's giving her only what he thinks she needs. He doesn't believe in creating addicts. Hopefully, it's

enough to take the edge off for her."

"It's not like you to be sympathetic to Dulce's needs." He said as he reached for a fluffy towel and draped it over his arm. "What gives?"

"Just because I don't like her doesn't mean I wish her ill. I certainly don't like the thoughts of anyone in pain, not even Dulce." She looked at him over her shoulder. "Can you leave me to my shower?"

"You're still very pale." He waved the towel at her. "Come out of there and I'll order you some dinner."

"I already did. If there would have been horse on the menu, I would have ordered it too." Saying the words made her remember his comment from the night before

"Savannah said she would scoot over on her lunch break and feed him so you wouldn't worry." He watched as she turned the shower unit off and walked towards him. He could see from the pink on her cheeks she was feeling shy but forcing herself to remain cool with him. He held the towel out and wrapped her in it. She stood still as he dried her gently and then he draped a thick robe around her shoulders. "I stopped off and picked you up some new pyjamas. I laid them on the bed. Get into them and then come out and sit with me in the living room. I do have to work for a bit after dinner."

"Fine." She shrugged. "I asked Doctor Ingram to call me here. I asked him to do an extra test if he could with all the blood, they siphoned out of me."

He watched her as she bent and patted her legs dry. When she reached for the counter, he swore softly. "You're still dizzy. Why the hell didn't you say something?"

"Alessandro, stop yelling at me. I'll be fine. I just need to eat something." She held onto the counter, but he swung her up into his arms. He settled her onto the bed

and reached for bag holding the pyjamas he'd bought but a knock on the door interrupted him. "I can dress myself Alessandro. It's probably room service."

While he spoke to the person making the delivery of the food she'd ordered, she slipped into a pair of luxurious silk pyjamas. They felt cool and soft against her skin, and she ran her hand along them. She walked back into the living space just as he was closing the door. "When I go back to my apartment, I'm keeping these. I like them a lot."

"Most women would say thank you," he rolled his eyes at her rudeness. "Thank you." She responded dryly.

"How hungry are you?" He lifted lid after lid on the wheeled cart in disbelief. "You ordered enough to feed the entire floor."

"I wasn't hungry at breakfast, and I essentially slept through lunch and then I was so hungry I couldn't decide what I wanted." She grabbed a cherry tomato from a

salad and popped it in her mouth.

Alessandro shook his head. "Sit down at the table and you can eat until your

"My heart isn't ever going to be content," she mumbled.

He pretended not to hear the strange comment unwilling to get into an argument with her. He put the plates of food in front of her and she waved at him to sit down.

"You have to eat too Alessandro, or did you have dinner with Dulce in her room? * She looked at him and waited for him to say he had.

"No, I did not eat with Dulce. I left you a note which said I'd be back for dinner. Her poor mother is having a hell of a time not tearing her hair out. I simply gave her some time to go shower and clean up so she could stay with Dulce tonight. She refuses to sleep alone in the hospital room, so they've been rotating who has to sleep on the cot."

"I hope I'm not keeping you from your turn." She said smartly as he sat down opposite her.

"I don't take a turn. She is my friend and I care for her but not enough to put up with her bad temper and sour grapes. I have enough with one cranky woman thank you." He shook his head as she lifted a chunk of salmon with her fingers and shoved

it into her mouth. "You can use a fork."

"I could but it wouldn't get in fast enough," she licked her fingers as the fish melted in her mouth. "God, it's so good!"

He considered he'd love to be her fingers as she sucked on them. He pulled a plate of chicken and risotto in his direction and sliced the meat. He held a piece out to her, and she leaned forward and plucked it off his fork. "You're a child."

"That's twice today you've called me immature. Wait until you see the temper tantrum I throw if you make it three times." She grumbled at him as she swirled a linguine noodle smothered in a rich creamy sauce around her fork and lifted it to her

lips.

He was quiet for several minutes and then he spoke softly. "I'm sorry for my earlier words Mackenna. I didn't mean to lash out at you as I did. Your change in

She looked up slowly and met his golden eyes and a corner of her mouth pulled down as she struggled not to cry. "Alessandro," she wanted to speak but somehow the noodles and the sauce congealed in her throat with the tears, and she couldn't get the words out.

He squeezed her hand on the table. "Eat your dinner Mackenna before it gets

cold."

She nodded once and took a long breath. "You didn't order wine with your dinner?" He looked in surprise at the table."

Just water?"

She shook her head. "No. I had wine last night and I really shouldn't have. I'll have to be more careful with what I'm doing now."

"Because you're ill?"

"Yeah," she rested her hand on her tummy and had the strangest urge to cry and laugh at the same time.

"You should have told me about the meningitis Mackenna. You were lucky you didn't die."

"You have no idea." She shook her head slowly as she used a spoon and scooped risotto off his plate, oblivious to the smile appearing on his lips at her actions.

She elaborated on the story she told him earlier. "Savannah had this kid come into the trauma unit just over two years ago. His grandfather had sat in my office doing up the billing while the rest of the family were in the waiting room. He died while she was putting a shunt in his spinal column." She heard his intake of breath, and she shook her head. "It wasn't her fault. He had bacterial meningitis and he was already dying. The family had taken him to a free clinic instead of the hospital because of insurance. By the time he reached her, he was already going to die. There was really nothing she could have done but she had to try. She was making a last-ditch effort to save him, but it was too late. Everyone on the trauma team and those in contact with him were tested and treated of course, except me. Everyone

signed everything with my pen and I'm terrible for putting things in my mouth. It took twenty-four hours for me to get sick. Savannah knew instantly what was wrong and had me admitted. Doctor Ingram worked on me day and night. I was pretty sick, but I made a full recovery. I was back to work in a month."

He pushed his plate away. "You could have died."

"Yes, I could have but I didn't." She popped a piece of a seasoned potato in her mouth. "I'm alive and well."

"You are still sick."

"Not from meningitis. Doctor Ingram knows it's not the meningitis. The disease affects the brain and the spinal column, and it can affect the heart. Since I was complaining my chest hurt, he automatically assumed my heart, but it wasn't at all. He suspects it's simply stress. I've been going through a lot the last little while and it's simply catching up to me."

"He thinks you are ill, fainting and having chest pain is stress."

"Yes." She gave a shrug, "panic attacks. I've had them in the past when I first arrived in Phoenix. I haven't had one for a long time and I've never had one like this. He thinks it's what it is."

"But you don't." He watched as her fingers paused as she reached for her water glass and then she moved again. "What do you think it is if it's not some long-term effects of the illness and not stress?"

"I'm not sure. I have to wait for Doctor Ingram to call me." She avoided his gaze.

"You're lying." Alessandro leaned forward and stared at her; his eyes narrow like a tiger who prepared to pounce.

"Alessandro, you can't bully me with this. I'm not saying anything until he calls me and confirms my thoughts." She made a face.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to order dessert. I want a bowl of ice cream with mounds of whipping cream."

Chapter 19

Alessandro eyed her with irritation as she evaded his questions. "You're changing the subject."

"Yup." She nodded as she took more of the risotto off his plate. "You should try this, it's really good."

"Tell me something Mackenna." He ignored her instructions. "When you almost died, did it not occur to you to come home to me?"

She held his serious gaze with one equally serious. "Yes, Alessandro it did. Then one of the nurses thought she was doing me a good deed by bringing me reading material. You were on the front page of a glossy magazine with Dulce, and I remembered why it was I had left in the first place. *You* were doing a show with her in Japan, and I knew she would come ahead of me. There was no way I was going to set myself up for you to tell me you were too busy to come for me."

"I would have come." He argued.

"I was better then. It would have been no different than today. You would have said I was resting comfortably and left me to tend to her every want and desire. I come second to Dulce. Always have and always will."

She saw his fingers clench around the butter knife in his hand and she glared at him. "Don't deny it Alessandro. You couldn't last a full twenty-four hours without contact from her and she couldn't last without contact from you. She's the priority in your life and there is nothing you can say to make me change my mind."

He was about to argue with her and then he stopped. He took a breath and looked away from her. "You're right. I put too much of my time and effort into making Dulce the perfect representative for my company and in doing so, I alienated the one person who meant more to me than anything else. If I could go back in time to fix it, Mackenna, I would but I cannot. I can only ask you to reconsider the divorce and give me a chance to be a better husband."

His words struck her as if he'd used his open hand to deliver a blow and she grappled with the knowledge he was admitting he'd put the other woman ahead of her. She felt the bitter taste of bile rising in her throat. "I don't think I can Alessandro.

you can be a good husband is not something I'm able to do."

"What does that mean?" He was torn between hope and despair at her words.

"It means I don't believe you when you say you love me. I don't believe you when you say you didn't cheat on me, and it means I don't believe you when you say you want to try again." The phone rang interrupting the moment, and she knew who it was, and she rose to answer it. She picked up the telephone and sat down on the edge of the sofa as she spoke into the receiver. "Hello."

She listened to Doctor Ingram confirm her suspicions and then she thanked him replacing the receiver before curling her legs up against her chest and tucked her chin to her knees. She stared blankly at the glossy cover of a magazine on the low table and felt the tears welling in her eyes, blurring her sight but she didn't try to wipe them and didn't try to hide them.

A small sob escaped her chest and she admitted she was torn between crying and hysterical laughter, and she whimpered as the pain in her chest grew.

Alessandro moved to sit beside her, worried by her reaction. "Are you okay?" "I'm fine." She sniffed as she pushed her hair off her face.

"The doctor?" He asked quietly as he rubbed her shoulder. "Were you correct in your thoughts?"

"Yeah." She couldn't look at him. The desire to throw her arms around his neck was mixed with wanting to bludgeon him with a blunt instrument. He had won. He had won the war because she knew she could not do the impossible and win the divorce now. It would destroy her. She was going to have to live with the knowledge for the rest of her life she was stuck married to a man who neither loved nor respected her enough to make his mistress go away.

She knew he was waiting, and she took a shaky breath. "When I got sick, I was in the hospital for almost a month. Intensive care for ten days and then quarantined for four more and then I was still sick, and I spent two more weeks at home." She was openly admitting she had downplayed her illness and lied about being back to her desk within a month. "At the time, the only medications I was on was a birth

multi-vitamin. My period didn't change at all when I was in the hospital. It seems! outgrew the terrible stuff of my adolescence, and my hormones were normal. Since I didn't have anyone in my life, I opted not to bother taking them again."

She gave a loud sniff as she reached for a tissue from the side table and blew her nose. "I hadn't even realized until today I had skipped my period altogether." She

felt his hand go still on her shoulder where he'd been rubbing sympathetically." Actually, I only realized it when I woke up from my nap. I had a dream," she choked on a sob, "and in my dream you missed the birth of our first child to be with Dulce. I realized it wasn't so far of a stretch because it's probably what will happen but as soon as I woke up, I knew."

Her voice was hoarse now as she tried to talk through the tears falling in a steady stream. "All I wanted was to get my life back. I just wanted my self-respect back. Now, I'll never know what it will be like to look at myself in the mirror and not see the pathetic excuse for a woman my mother would be ashamed of looking back at her." She turned to face him then. "You won't let me go now, will you?"

"No," he said as he wondered if when her chest had hurt earlier if it felt anything remotely like the agony he now felt. "If you are truly pregnant with my child, there will absolutely be no divorce."

"I thought not." Her lips twisted sadly. "I have so many regrets in my life. I only hope this child is a boy because I do not want a daughter who would try to emulate me. I am a disgrace."

"You do not want our child?" Searing pain pushed his lungs into his ribs.

"Of course, I do. It's why I won't pursue the divorce. I'm not stupid Alessandro. There's not a judge in the universe who wouldn't take a child away from a woman who lives in a tiny two-bedroom apartment to place him with his billionaire father. I don't have a leg to stand on or the funds to fight you. I'll cut my losses and go home. It's all I can do."

He nodded at her words. "You are right of course. You would not win against me in a courtroom battle." He didn't tell her he would never take their child from her.

will stay here with me until Dulce is fit enough to be discharged from the hospital and then we'll return home."

"Fine." She didn't argue. How could she? She studied the swirls of his paisley tie. "Do you mind if I go lie down for a bit? I'm suddenly feeling a little shell-shocked."

"I think it is a good idea." He extended his hand to help her to her feet, but she ignored it and walked the long way around the sofa. "You will call your grandparents in the morning and advise them. You can also call the viper of a lawyer you have and have her halt your divorce proceedings. Tell her to send me the bill."

"Sure," she whispered as she moved in a trance-like state and left the room. She was pregnant. She was pregnant with Alessandro's baby. She stopped and looked at him suddenly. "I hope how he was conceived is not a precursor to his disposition or he will be one incredibly angry and bad-tempered child. There was not a lot of love when he was

made." She furrowed her brow as she walked away again, completely oblivious to the stricken expression on Alessandro's face at her words.

She climbed onto the bed and pulled a pillow to her chest and rolled to her side. She was having a baby. Ever since she had been ill, her mind had been focused on this moment. Now it was here it felt surreal. She heard Alessandro get off the sofa

and the soft sound of his footsteps as he crossed the living room and then the sliding glass of the patio doors filtered to her. She'd half-expected him to follow her into the bedroom but he hadn't. He was outside likely celebrating his victory with a cigarette and a drink. He got what he wanted. She would go home and go back to being his wife while he kept his mistress with him instead of her. At least now, she wouldn't be so lonely. She'd have a baby to keep her occupied, to keep her from feeling so alone.

His parents, Rosetta and Charles would be thrilled. Her grandparents would be as well. They only wanted her happiness. Alessandro's grandfather would potentially be glad of an heir but maybe not, he'd never liked her if she were honest.

She wiped her tears off her cheeks and hiccupped. At some point she drifted off

She lifted on one elbow and watched him sleep. Would their child have blue-grey eyes or golden ones? Would his hair be black or brown? Would he have her pale skin or Alessandro's mocha complexion? She traced her finger over his long straight nose and then his high cheekbones. It was not likely they would make a child as beautiful as his parents had done. Even his sister was a stunning woman. No, their child would not have a supermodel for a mother and so for his sake, she prayed he looked more like his father than his mother. It would be most difficult to be plain and homely when your father was Alessandro Giordano. She wondered if their child would hate her because she was not as beautiful as his father's mistress. She looked up from her musings to see Alessandro watching her, his tiger eyes sharp and bright in the darkened room.

"What are you thinking Mackenna?" he asked quietly exquisitely aware she was examining him in detail.

"What if our child looks more like me than you?" She asked as pain stabbed her heart. "He will hate me."

Alessandro's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "At two in the morning this is what you think of?" He rolled onto his side and stared at her. "Silly girl." He tilted her chin and kissed her

lips softly. "I want nothing more than for our baby to look just like you with big blue-grey eyes and a tiny button nose."

"What if.." his fingers on her lips stopped her from speaking and she frowned.

His hand was gentle as it curved her cheek, his thumb brushing against her jaw as he moved in to kiss her again. Her lips parted and he deepened the kiss, twirling his tongue around hers as he tucked her under his torso and dropping his leg over her hip. He felt her responding to him and he demanded more from her, sucking gently on her lower lip.

Mackenna wasn't sure how long Alessandro kissed her but when his lips left hers, she felt empty until his lips trailed down her chin, to the long column of her throat and to the exposed skin where he unbuttoned the pyjama top. He kissed the

"Yes," she whispered just as he took her n****e into his mouth.

"Then I should get my fair share now." He chuckled as she moaned loudly as he drew her deeper into the hot recess of his mouth. His hands squeezed and massaged her as his tongue lathered her in sweltering kisses. He moved downward, trailing kisses through the deep valley of her breasts and pausing at her navel, swirling his tongue inside and her back arched. She hugged his head to her belly as he peppered it with tiny kisses, his long fingers splayed possessively over the flat expanse of it. Then his hands moved lower still, sliding under the silk bottoms and deep into her moist middle.

"Alessandro," she moaned his name as he dipped his fingers in and out of her body and he edged back up the bed, his fingers stroking her deeply and firmly while his lips claimed hers again.

Her hands caressed him, and she noticed now he'd come to bed naked, just as he'd always done. She ran her fingers over his lean physique, down the hollow of his spine to his back and around the hard curve of his buttocks before rounding to the front and grasping the hard shaft resting between them. His groan as she slid her fingers up and down him made her feel sexy and powerful and she kept a slow steady rhythm, rubbing him against the silk of her pajamas. He tore his lips from hers.

"*Cara mia*," he whispered violently as his eyes bore into hers, "continue and I will have no self-control left."

"It is only fair since I have none left either." She wriggled out of her bottoms and kicked them to the floor and parted her legs as he moved between them. He filled her in one fluid

movement, slick and hot and she moaned against his lips which had met hers in the same moment they were joined.

Unlike their last union which had been rushed and furious, Alessandro loved her with long, steady strokes bringing her to a shattering climax as he drank in her cries. He whispered words of adoration in her ears, his hands never stopping their caresses. It was only when he brought her to a second orgasm, he allowed himself

to do as she begged, and he let go filling her to capacity as he held himself tight and deep to the very hilt of his manhood inside of her.

She was certain she imagined his tears mingling with hers as he rubbed his cheek against hers, her legs wound tightly around his thighs, unwilling to let him go. He seemed in no hurry to leave her though and he kept his face next to hers, cheek to cheek on the pillow, his breath heavy and hurried as he tried to catch it.

She felt her eyes growing heavy as exhaustion overwhelmed her. She only protested lightly when he moved from her, dragging her to his side, keeping her pinned tight to him. Sleep was not long in coming.

Neither was the agony of loneliness when she woke in the quiet of the morning to find once again, he had left her alone.

Chapter 20

Alessandro considered of all the times he'd been angry at Mackenna, this might be the most volatile he had ever felt. He'd returned to the hotel suite thirty minutes ago and she was nowhere to be found. As he considered she had taken off yet again but this time with their child, his rage was growing epically by the millisecond. He slammed his fist against the tabletop as he called his head of security with another demand to find her. Since it was almost noon, he had no idea how long she'd been gone or how far she'd gotten.

He looked up in surprise as the door of the suite opened and she stepped into the room, her eyes narrowed on his reddened cheeks. (This novel will be daily updaed at www.noveljar.com) "Where the hell have you been?"

She dropped her hand from the door and felt her own temper flaring. "I had a doctor appointment Alessandro."

Her words made him pause and his fist unclenched. "You should have told me."

"I woke up and you were gone. I don't have a phone number for you and chasing you in Dulce's room is not something I'm ever going to do, thank you. If you want the consideration of knowing my whereabouts, leave a number." She threw her purse on the side table.

He took a breath as his panic slowly eased. "I apologize Mackenna. I should have left a note."

"You didn't need to leave a note Alessandro. I knew where you were and who you were with. Considering your girlfriend is laying in a bed with her leg in a cast to her hip, it's not hard to know where you were. If you want to leave a phone number in

case of an emergency, it would be great. It might come in handy, say if I go into labour or something but since I don't expect it for another eight months or so, I don't think you need to hurry on it."

He was getting tired of the nasty comments on his relationship with Dulce so he ignored it. He grabbed her purse and dug her cell phone from it. He programmed his phone number in it and then he programmed hers into his. "How did you make out at the doctor?"

him and moved to the bedroom. "I want to go to my apartment and pick up some of my clothes."

"No." He shook his head as he followed her into the room. "I've seen your clothes and they're garbage. I'll take you shopping."

"Whatever," she grimaced as she kicked her shoes off and climbed onto the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Napping." She pulled a pillow under her cheek and closed her eyes. (This novel will be daily updaed at www.noveljar.com) Just looking at him made her want him and it was easier to sleep through the desire than it was to dwell in it. "Don't you have something, or rather someone, to do?"

He felt his anger slowly coming back. "Mackenna we cannot make our marriage work if you're going to be throwing jabs all the time."

"Alessandro," she mocked him, "I have no interest in making this marriage work. I'm here because I'm having your baby and I don't want to lose him or her. If this means I must tolerate your face, your lovemaking, and your lover, then I'll do it but don't expect me to be the same pathetic wimpy little fool I was five years ago."

He staggered backwards at the cold derisive tone to her words. "Mackenna, it amazes me at how you can go from a loving and passionate woman through the night to the cold-hearted b***h you are right now."

She sat up and glared at him. "It amazes you. Why would it amaze *you*? Did you think I would be all warm and fuzzy knowing you left our bed yet again to go to her?" She pushed off the bed. There was no way she could sleep with him glaring and itching for a fight. "I changed my mind. I'm going for a walk."

"Not without security detail you're not." He shook his head and put his hand up to stop her from bending down to slip back into her shoes.

"Alessandro, I've existed without your bloody security for the last five years. I'll survive now." She yanked her shoulder away from his grasp and spun away from him. "See, the good thing about being your dirty little secret is paparazzi don't follow me. They don't even know I exist and it's fine with me."

relationship private because it is nobody's business but my own what happens in it.

"Really? You should let Dulce know because this morning while I waited to see

the doctor, a pair of nurses were going on at great length how she's telling everyone and anyone who will listen you're lovers. She was apparently on the phone with a tabloid of some sort telling them how you flew to be right at her side and the worst thing about being stuck in a cast is the inability to make love." She saw his surprised expression. "So much for privacy, if you really expect me to believe you're not screwing her, maybe you might want to let her know you're denying it."

"I will investigate this matter and..."

"Why?" She looked at him in surprise. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) "Don't do it for me, Alessandro. Like I said earlier, I'm only here for the baby. Which reminds me; I'd like to have separate bedrooms if you don't mind. I admit I find you sexually attractive, but I find looking in the mirror in the morning becomes increasingly

difficult each time I give in to the particular physical need. I'd rather just not if you don't mind."

"I suggest you stop looking in the mirror then because I have no intention of sleeping anywhere but in your bed." He felt his fingers itching to shake her senseless. Never had he felt so inclined to physical violence as he did in this moment. She was not the same woman he'd married.

"Whatever," she refused to fight with him and rolled her eyes as she walked around him to the living space.

"I grow weary of that word, Mackenna." He called after her. "I told you, you are not walking alone." He followed her out and folded his arms as she lifted her purse. He motioned to the table. "I have to work this afternoon. You'll have to stay in for a

bit."

"Like hell." She was closer to the door than he was, and she was out of it before he could reach her. She hit the lock knowing he'd fumble with it. The elevator was still on the floor from when she'd gotten off and she pushed the button and it opened. The doors were closing just before he reached it and the sound of his palm

"You do not get to tell me what to do Alessandro Giordano." She marched out of the hotel and began walking down the street, her head held high. She wasn't running this time. She had every intention of going back to him. She simply needed him to know she was not playing by his rules any longer. She had already called Camille and told her to halt the proceedings. When she'd told her she was pregnant thanks to the foolish escapade the month before, Camille had agreed with her she could not guarantee her a victory in a custody battle with Alessandro. She could get her joint custody at best, and she did not want to be separated from her child.

She'd called her grandparents and lied. She told them she and Alessandro had patched their differences and were having a baby. She would not let them know she was sacrificing her happiness for her child. They would be disappointed in her and she bear the thought. Her grandfather had sounded happy for her and was excited she was moving back to Milan.

She let the sun beat down on her face as she walked through the city, and she admitted today in comparison to yesterday was a much better day. She was starting to feel excitement at the thought of having a baby. Her one close encounter with her own mortality had told her she wanted to have her family now and she was getting her wish.

She smiled to herself as she imagined her baby was growing even as she thought of him. Her eye caught a bookstore, and she had the sudden urge to go and get as much reading material as she could.

As she left the bookstore, she was alarmed she had spent close to a hundred dollars on books. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) She had everything from what she should expect in being pregnant to how to deal with expectant fathers and even books on naming the baby. At first, she'd almost put a couple of the books back but then forced herself to buy them. She no longer needed her savings for her divorce, and she knew Alessandro would pay the bulk of her needs now.

She sat on a nearby bench and looked through one of the books, intrigued to learn her baby was six weeks old and was the size of a lima bean. She giggled as occurring even as she sat there not feeling any different than she had a week before. She sat there reading for hours, content to learn all she could learn and only the rumbling of her tummy told her it was close to dinner time.

She made her way back to the hotel resenting she couldn't just go back to her apartment. She would have been alone though. She'd seen Savannah at the hospital and her friend had apologized to her for the argument the day before. They'd hugged and although Savannah had stated she was upset Mackenna hadn't told her about everything on her last trip to Milan, she said she understood and would support her no matter what. Then Savannah had gone back to work. She'd worked until midnight the night before and she was working again at noon. Savannah worked harder than anyone else she knew but she loved it.

She stepped into the hotel lobby and immediately recognized Alessandro's head of security, Carlos, talking to another man and intuitively knew this man would be assigned to follow her everywhere she went. She nodded to Carlos whose eyes narrowed on her and he motioned to the man beside her, and she gave a grimace in his direction. She saw Carlos motioned to her to approach him and she rolled her eyes and shook her head.

She smiled to herself as he almost tripped over his feet racing across the lobby at her refusal to do as he instructed, and she made her way to the elevators and pushed the button to open the doors.

"Signora Giordano, if you could excuse us for just a moment?" Carlos's accent was thick as he reached for her arm.

"Carlos, I'm tired and I'm hungry. I'll be going to my husband's room." She had never spoken to him with this tone before and saw his head snap back in disbelief. She had never

been one to be rude to anyone, but she wasn't going to make life easy for anyone who wanted to make hers difficult.

"I wanted to introduce you to your new bodyguard." Carlos held the elevator doors open and followed her inside. "Signora Giordano, this is Nuncio Mancini, my brother. He'll be taking care of your security."

"I don't need anyone taking care of my security, Carlos." She grimaced but shook the other man's hand politely. (This novel will be daily updated at www.noveljar.com) "You forget I am Alessandro's best kept secret, so nobody even knows I exist. Nuncio, you'd be better off serving Dulce."

She didn't miss the annoyed twist of the man's lips and she felt badly. "Look, I'm not trying to be difficult. I just don't see the need."

– Nuncio held his hand up. "You are carrying the heir to the Giordano family. It is no longer about just protecting you but the child in your womb."

"Can I think about it?" She asked grimly.

"No." Nuncio's smile was wide at her startled gaze. "It is not up for debate Signora. Whether you like it or not, I will be following you around for the rest of your God-given life or until Alessandro fires me or I quit."

"This rots," she smacked her hand against her thigh as she stepped out of the elevator. "I don't need a shadow. I could make you insane, so you quit. I really don't

need this."

"Whether you feel you do or not is irrelevant," Carlos commented quietly. "Alessandro wants you taken care of."

"Alessandro wants to make sure I don't disappear on him again." She could see from Carlos's surprised expression she wasn't wrong. "Wouldn't it be easier if he just put a GPS or microchip or something in me? He could arrange a dental visit and have it put in my filling." She heard Nuncio chuckling and she fought her own twisting lips. She opened the door to the hotel room and preceded them into the space. She grimaced at Alessandro hunched over his laptop.

Working as he stole her privacy. Damn him.