

RETURN^{to} MONTE CARLO



CATE C. WELLS

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For Lucy Monroe, with gratitude and appreciation.

DIANE, 1982

My husband is four hours late for our first anniversary dinner.

Every second that passes, my guts twist tighter, and it's harder and harder to breathe. I can't let it show on my face. The in-laws would be too pleased.

So instead, I examine a vase, an Etruscan reproduction from the seventeenth century. It's beautiful, and an heirloom, but I don't know which branch of my husband's venerable family bought it off the black market.

Before I married into old money, I thought folks like the de Noli family would never dirty their hands, but as it turns out, crime is rampant in Monte Carlo. It's just no one ever gets caught, and once you've gotten away with it, no one cares if you showcase your stolen goods on a Connemara marble pedestal in the east salon and rig up a special light to shine down on it twenty-four hours a day.

My mama would hatch an egg if she knew there were folks who left lights on all day and all night, even when no one's in the room.

The salon is full now. The whole household is here, except Marco and my father-in-law. They're stuck at the office again. Sienna, Marco's pitch-perfect PA, rang to let me know earlier, right before we sat down to dinner. Her tone conveyed nothing but polite regret, even though she would know that today is our anniversary. As I've been told a hundred times, Sienna is

indispensable to the operations of De Noli International. Nothing gets past her. She knows what today is.

Did she remind him, and he didn't care?

My guts twist tighter, and my lungs ache. I feel like I'm dangling over the side of the Grand Canyon by a yarn hair tie, the kind I wore as a girl that seemed made to unravel.

If I'd made a point of reminding Marco about our anniversary, he'd have made sure to make it home on time, even if he didn't want to. He's a standup guy. He always does the right thing.

I could have mentioned it this morning when he woke me by sitting on the edge of the bed and scratching the sculpted abs that never fail to mesmerize me, but I didn't.

I was limp and blissed out—still reeling from what he'd done to me the night before—but still, I had a working brain cell. I could have told him I'd planned something special.

The empty chair at the head of the table and the awkwardness tonight are my fault, as is the tension now thickening the air as the minutes tick past with no sign of my husband. I didn't have to make tonight a public test of whether my husband cares about me or not. I did this to myself.

And why? I don't know. It feels like how you can't help but stick your tongue in the empty socket after a tooth is removed, that kind of irresistible bad idea.

And I got what I was asking for, didn't I?

Confirmation.

I got an excruciating, second-by-second drubbing so obvious that I can no longer ignore the truth—the man I fell in love with a year ago doesn't want me anymore, at least not enough to come home from work, and I'm going to have to dangle here in the east salon with my smug in-laws, humiliated and miserable, until I can politely excuse myself to bed.

I shiver and cross my arms, pacing around the vase to pretend to admire it from a different angle. A chilly breeze is

coming off the Mediterranean tonight, wafting the scent of mimosa and cigar through the open French doors.

My brother-in-law, Ric, is out on the dark terrace, probably ogling my ass as he puffs on his cigar and regrets an evening wasted at home. His wife, Chiara, must have insisted that his presence was required at dinner tonight. I suppose it is a special occasion, although even among blue bloods like the de Nolis who live in each other's pockets, I doubt anniversary dinners with the in-laws are all the rage.

All week, I kept waiting for Marco to mention special plans—or rather, for Sienna to call me with the details of the reservations she made—but Monday turned to Tuesday turned to Wednesday, and my hopes shrank each day until I couldn't stand my own skin.

Yesterday morning, I threw some water on my face, vowed to stop moping, and decided I'd plan a celebration myself. I'd do something to remind Marco of when we first got together in Dallas, and if the entire de Noli clan would inevitably be along for the ride, well, I've learned that's par for the course when you marry into a family that has a half dozen homes, each with its own name.

You'd think they'd spread out some, but I don't think they'd know what to do without their noses up in each other's business.

"I think the beef would have been improved with a touch less vinegar," my mother-in-law declares from her seat on the white velvet settee, apropos of nothing. Sometimes I think that Mama would be most amazed at how the rich have white upholstered furniture. With six children, Mama never brought anything home that couldn't hide a multitude of sins.

Chiara jumps in like she's just been waiting for Vittoria to start the stampede. "I think the dinner would have been improved with a different entrée altogether. Asking a French chef de cuisine to do an American barbeque is just—" She waves her hand in vague distaste.

She's looking for the word *tacky*. That's what she wants to say. Chiara was an Italian starlet with a fast reputation before

she snared Ric de Noli, and that's not much of a pedigree around these parts, so she's always careful to imitate Vittoria's diction when we're all together, and my mother-in-law would never say *tacky*. At least not in English.

"Peu judicieux," Vittoria declares with fake regret.

"Mal avisé," Chiara agrees in the tone they always use with me. It's not blatantly critical. Marco would never countenance that, and they know it. Even though he's never around, they wouldn't dare disrespect him by putting his wife down, especially in front of staff, and Monty is always puttering around somewhere.

Monty is the man of all work who is more family than either Chiara or me. He's behind the bar now, unobtrusively wiping down the marble, the white hairs sprouting from his dish-sized ears tuned in for gossip like antennae.

"I would be more than happy to advise you on the menu next time you'd like to do a *taste of home* kind of thing for my son." Vittoria lifts her cigarette holder, and Monty scurries from behind the bar to offer her a light. She takes her time inhaling and exhaling.

Nonna Rosanella, who has settled herself into her usual seat beside the settee, clacks quicker with her knitting needles, stoically disregarding the moisture that gathers in her deep-set eyes as she's enveloped in a cloud of smoke. Rosanella is Grandfather de Noli's second wife, and since she never had any children, she has to play second fiddle to her stepdaughter Vittoria. She wouldn't say shit if she had a mouthful, as my mama would've put it.

"Perhaps if you decide to attempt such a thing again, a dish can be found that is more compatible with the European palate, eh?" Vittoria flicks her ash into the silver standing ashtray, and Chiara raises her empty glass up for Monty to collect on his way back to the bar.

I take another step so that the vase and pedestal fully block me from the rest of the salon. The night breeze gusts at my back, tousling the curls I spent the afternoon fussing with.

I left my hair down tonight. Marco likes it that way. He loves barbeque, too.

Back in Dallas, he couldn't get enough. On the weekends, he'd drive us out to little podunk towns in the middle of nowhere on the word of some associate who swore there was a place that had the best barbeque you'd ever tasted. We were never led astray, and every time, Marco swore the barbeque was, in fact, the best he'd ever had while he dabbed pretend sauce from the corner of my mouth with one of his linen handkerchiefs just as an excuse to touch me.

I was so foolishly impressed by linen handkerchiefs.

Maybe it's better that he failed the test. What if he'd actually made it home? The barbeque was awful, and I would have had to be agreeable and smile, and I don't think I can smile anymore. I experiment, focus on drawing my lips up and back, but all I manage is an eye twitch. Good thing I'm hidden by the vase. I probably look crazy.

"I wouldn't be too hard on myself if I were you," Chiara says to me. "I was out of my depth, too, when I became a *de Noli*." She laughs, a high-pitched brittle bray that sets Vittoria's teeth. "Of course, I had the advantage of being familiar with the lay of the land, as it were, but really, all it takes is effort. Vittoria is here to assist if you only ask."

Vittoria inclines her head in regal agreement. Rosanella's needles go clickety-clack even faster.

Over the past twelve months, that's become the story—I am the stubborn outsider, the American gold digger who refuses to acquire any polish at all. The family is ready and eager to help me adjust, but I won't let them. I won't even *try*.

It can't be that no one told me about the beach club soirée, it's that I declined to attend. It's not that between Vittoria and Chiara, everyone in Monte Carlo thinks I'm a money-hungry rube who tumbled off the turnip truck with her boobs falling out. I'm just a hopeless case, a typical blonde airhead, vain and self-absorbed, and when visitors come by, I'm always out shopping or at the beautician.

That's not untrue. I shop a lot. I discovered right quick that if I wanted to preserve even a scrap of my self-esteem, I couldn't spend my afternoons sipping Aperol spritzes while Vittoria and her cronies talked about me in Italian, or sometimes, for variety, French. I might not know what they're saying, but the tone is clear as day.

I've tried to explain to Marco, but every time I start, he holds up his hand like a traffic flagger, stopping me mid-sentence, and declares, "Family is family." I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that exactly, but for him, it means the conversation is over.

He used to coddle me a little after I tried to talk about his family, maybe have Sienna reserve us a table at the beach club for dinner or bring me a bracelet or flowers, but somewhere along the line he stopped bothering. He'd say *family is family*, and then he'd go have a nightcap alone in his study, and maybe fall asleep there so I'd be up all night worrying, cold and sorry with a stomachache.

I crept down to his study once, terrified to wake the staff, with half an idea to make him hear me out. He was passed out on his leather sofa, long legs dangling over an arm, snoring softly as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"So what are you ladies gabbing about in here?" Ric's mentholated voice booms behind me, and I startle, coming within a hairsbreadth of knocking the pedestal over. My heart jumps up my throat.

Ric chuckles. "I didn't frighten you, did I?"

He claps his heavy hands on my shoulders, squeezing a touch too hard. As he drops his arms, he makes sure to smooth his palms down my back and almost, but not quite, brush the top of my butt cheeks.

He's intimidated by Marco like everyone else, but he's also drunk, and when he gets drunk and big brother isn't home, he gets handsy. There is a line he won't cross, and as best I can tell, it's the tan line that crosses the top of my butt cheeks.

“We’re talking about dinner, love,” Chiara answers, accepting a refilled wine glass from Monty without even looking in his direction.

Ric shudders. “Let’s leave the barbeque to the longhorns from here on out, shall we, Diane? François is simply not up to the challenge. I’m going to have to go to the club later for a good steak. I need a palate cleanser.”

He’d be going to the club later regardless. He’s checking his watch now.

Chiara must notice the move because she scoots over and pats the cushion next to her. “Join me, darling.” She snaps her fingers. “Monty, freshen him up, would you?”

Monty shuffles out from behind the bar again, this time with a brandy decanter. Ric sighs but obliges, sinking down next to his wife and holding out his empty snifter in an idle hand.

I should be feeling something other than twisted up and suffocated, shouldn’t I?

It’s my anniversary. My husband didn’t even ring to tell me himself that he’d be late. My in-laws are taking turns sniping at me, and even a few months ago, I’d be racing out of the salon, covering my face with my hands, knowing that Vittoria would be mouthing to Chiara, “Was it something we said?” while Chiara rounded her eyes and shrugged her shoulders like it’s all a game of charades.

I should be furious. Devastated. Panicking. But it’s like something in my brain has shorted out, and I’m here, but this isn’t me.

Of course, it isn’t. There is a nineteenth-century crystal chandelier hanging over my head and a natural pink diamond on my ring finger. This can’t be real.

I want to go home. Gene Autry, Oklahoma isn’t much, but I was never lonely there. I wasn’t wrongfooted all the time. I could breathe, and my stomach didn’t hurt every waking moment.

My eyes focus on the tableau on the vase. Apollo is chasing Daphne, wings unfurling from his back. Daphne is fleeing, her mouth gaping in horror. She's almost to the river, reaching for her father, the river god. I pick the vase up and turn it so I can better see Daphne's arm where it becomes the branch of a laurel tree.

Across the salon, Chiara gasps.

A sewing needle clatters as it hits a marble tile.

"Diane, what *are* you doing?" Vittoria's mouth gapes in horror, too.

Monty freezes where he stands behind the bar. Ric raises a hand as if he's calming a horse, but he remains seated with an ankle crossed to the opposite knee, his white chinos raised enough to flash the bare, hairy ankle above his white leather loafer.

Why are they so upset? I've just picked up the vase to take a closer look. Unlike the rest of them, I haven't had a drink tonight. My hands are steady.

I blink up at the vase, and slowly, I realize that I'm holding it rather high, almost like I'm offering it up to the gods. It must look strange. I should put it back down carefully. Laugh it off.

I'm not really sure why I picked it up. I could have bent closer to see it better, but it's like my arms aren't attached to my body. Nothing is attached. I'm a brain, short-circuited and floating, tethered to a bloated, twisted, rock-filled stomach.

Marco doesn't love me anymore. Maybe he never did. He never said he did in so many words, and I always assumed he was just a man who didn't sweet talk, like my father, and Uncle Edgar, and every other man in my family. But maybe he never said it because he never felt it. Real love wouldn't die so quickly.

"Madame, if you would please set the vase back on the pedestal, it's only that it is a very valuable piece, and—" Monty's words trail off as if they've been strangled by his rising alarm.

He so rarely speaks to me that it takes a second for it to register that I'm the *madame* he's addressing, and during that pause, Vittoria snaps. For the first time since Marco brought me back here and dumped me on her front step like a flea-ridden stray, her mask completely falls away.

"Put that down now," she spits from between gritted teeth. "I know you think you're expensive, Diane, but that vase is priceless, and your name is going to be mud if it gets even the smallest thumbprint on it. Mark my words."

I don't drop it. I swear I don't, but somehow, it slips out of my fingers in slow motion anyway, so easily, without any friction at all.

I don't *do* anything, it's just that my hands stop holding on, and before my brain can scream *no*, the ceramic hits the marble, and it shatters. Slivers fly, catching in my nude stockings. A shard skids across the tiles. Exploded fragments of priceless vase lie in a blast radius around my toeless beige pumps.

Rosanella lets out an unholy wail.

My arms fly up like the police said to put 'em in the air.

Ric whistles low and drawls, "Holy shit."

"I didn't mean to do it," I whisper into the chaos breaking out in the east salon.

Monty stabs the button on the wall that rings for the maid on duty, and when she doesn't show immediately, he hollers, "Maria!" When she fails to appear, he switches to "Anna!" while huddling in the safety of his station behind the bar and gawking bug-eyed at the scene unfolding before him.

Rosanella hobbles over as quickly as she's able and falls to her knees in a crackling and creaking of joints, weeping as she sweeps shards into her gathered skirt. Tears stream down her ruddy cheeks, and a faint twinge pierces my numb heart. She's never done anything to me except pretend I'm not there, and I can't say she treats anyone except Marco any differently.

Vittoria rises to her feet and draws herself to her full height, straightening her spine and thrusting her pointy chin in

the air. “How dare you?” she booms.

For Chiara, the question is a starter pistol. She crosses the room in three long strides to hover over Rosanella, wrapping her arms around the older woman’s humped shoulders while she spits venom at me, her slender neck craned like a cobra’s. “You vindictive bitch! You absolute piece of work! Why would you do that?”

I don’t answer. I can’t.

My silence is fuel to her fire. “And you wonder why your husband can’t stand to be around you, why he stands you up on your own anniversary? Well, I’ll tell you since everyone else is too polite. It’s because the allure of cheap sex and big blonde hair and bouncy tits wears off quickly enough, and trash stinks no matter how nicely you dress it up. The bloom is off the rose for you, Miss Diane *Byers*—” She spits my maiden name like an insult. “But what does that bother you if you’ve got your credit cards and spa days? It doesn’t, does it? Your husband is *miserable*. He’s working himself into the ground, and what do you care?”

“Chiara, stop,” Vittoria interjects, majestic as she vibrates with rage, even her nostrils. “She is not worth your breath.”

My stomach heaves. What have I done? How did I make such a mess of everything?

Chiara rises above Rosanella like an avenging angel in an electric-blue wrap dress. “I cannot wait for Marco to throw you back on the heap of garbage where he found you, *puttana*.”

Her face is flushed and so close to mine that I can see the clumps of black mascara and the little lines where eyeliner bled into her foundation. Her breath is hot on my skin, reeking of cigarettes and gin, and my stomach pitches again, sloshing wildly back and forth, while my brain unspools her words one by one.

Can’t stand you. Miserable. The bloom is off the rose.

“It’ll be any day now,” Chiara says and draws her bright fuchsia lips back, her smile dripping with spite and certainty.

“And I can’t wait.”

I don’t know how it happens. My arm rises, it swings, and my palm cracks her cheek. Her head jerks to the left, twisting on her thin serpentine neck.

The entire room sucks in a stunned breath.

What did I do? I’ve never slapped anyone in my life. I grab my stinging hand and clutch it to my chest.

“What the hell is going on here?” a deep, resonant voice sounds from the door, and the room turns their heads as one.

Rosanella is on her knees at my feet, weeping, shards collected in her gathered black skirts. Chiara is beside her, cradling her red cheek. Ric holds the cigarette he just lit. Monty stands behind the bar, paused in the act of stabbing a call button with his index finger.

Vittoria is the centerpiece of the tableau, standing with her arms raised for some reason, the full sleeves of her emerald green caftan dangling so that she looks like Christ the Redeemer on his mountain above Rio.

“Diane has lost her mind!” she proclaims.

Marco strides into the salon and stops by the grand piano. Behind him, Anna and Maria, the maids, Grandfather de Noli, and Sienna, the perfect PA, file in and fan out, staring in shock at the scene.

And like it always does every single time I see Marco de Noli, my whole body speeds up—my pulse, my heartbeat, my breath.

In an instant, I become exquisitely aware of every inch of my skin—my stinging palm, my flaming cheeks, my tight throat, my fluttering belly. The friction between my nipples and the lace balconette bra that Marco loves to tug down to free my breasts and then leave bunched around my middle as he takes me whichever way he wants. The seam of pantyhose rubbing the gusset of my matching lace panties.

I don’t want my body to do this. I thought it’d ease over time and with familiarity, but it hasn’t. Every sight of Marco

hits me like the first. It makes me clumsy and jumpy. It makes me stupid.

Marco de Noli is just so much larger than life. He's tall and muscular, but not freakishly tall or obscenely ripped like the bodybuilders you'd see at Venice Beach. In a way, he looks like any good-looking Italian man—rectangular face, strong jaw, dark eyebrows, darker eyes. His chin is a touch clefted, and his deep brown hair is prone to tousle if he goes too light on the pomade.

He's definitely a striking man, but even so, I've been asked out by men who would be considered much handsomer. I'm not vain, but men have always liked my looks.

Marco de Noli, though, is more than the sum of his parts. He has an almost supernatural air of authority that makes people look to him, that makes people listen. It's not charisma—he's too taciturn to be a charmer—but people are drawn to it. They want to please him. Follow him. Keep him happy.

We were at the theater once, and in the second act, the fire alarm went off, and the house lights didn't come on. There was an awful stink of burnt wires coming from the vents, and everyone was panicking, but when he told people where to go, they went without question. Even before he started giving orders, people were looking to him. They just knew he'd get them out, and he did, even though he'd never been in the building before.

It turned out to be a small electrical fire that smelled worse than it was, but I'll never forget that feeling of security. I wasn't scared because Marco was there, and Marco de Noli is no ordinary man. The normal rules don't apply to him. I only have to think about last night. What he did. What I let him do.

Sometime during this last year, as I realized how much of a stranger he will always be, the thrill of being with a man like him, the pride that he picked me, it's lost its shine. His larger-than-life presence doesn't make me feel safe anymore. It makes me feel small. Sometimes, it scares me.

Like now. His face is like thunder. His voice, though, is careful and measured.

“Diane?” Dread trickles down my spine.

“She slapped me!” Chiara rushes to say when I don’t immediately reply. “She dared to put her hands on me!”

“See here, Marco.” Ric clears his throat, finally rising to his feet. “We can’t be having this. It’s not at all the thing.”

Ric goes to Chiara’s side, and they both turn to Marco, prevailing on the head of the household to do something about me.

I must be having a nervous breakdown. I raised my hand to Chiara, and I’m standing in the shards of a priceless family heirloom. I’ve made Rosanella weep, and she’s never done a thing to me.

This cannot be me. I’m a good girl. Unlike my oldest sisters, Heather and Melissa, I never caused my mother any grief.

Stiff-backed and grim-faced, as if this is just one more hassle in a long day, Grandfather de Noli shuffles to the bar. When Monty can’t drag his eyes from the unfolding scene, Grandfather de Noli leans over to pluck a bottle and glass from the counter, perches on a stool, and serves himself.

“Now you see what she’s like,” Vittoria declares, which is crazy because I’ve never done anything like this before in my life. Marco must know that.

Still, I can’t bear to meet his gaze. The shame claws, tearing stripes out of me. I huddle where I stand in my lilac cocktail dress with the matching belt and buttons that run down the front from the neckline to the bottom hem. Lilac and silk because they’re Marco’s favorites. A-line and tea length so Vittoria won’t make comments. Buttons because Marco loves to undo me. The belt for the things he likes to do once he’s stripped me naked.

I force myself to look him in the eye. I trust him, right?

Things haven’t been good, but I haven’t truly forced the issue with him either. He always says he’s swamped at work, and it can’t be easy running a multi-national private company, all that weight on your shoulders, and now your wife has gone

crazy and attacked your sister-in-law and destroyed a real-life, irreplaceable, historical artifact.

My vision blurs, but I don't hang my head. I let the love that's still inside me shine. Although it's battered and uncertain, it's no dimmer than when he proposed to me under the covers in my twin bed at my efficiency in Dallas. It's still bright enough that it feels like everything.

I search his gaze, but it's cold and hard and impenetrable. No hint of shine. There never is these days, except in bed, and with only the moon streaming in the window, I'm never quite sure if it's not a trick of the light. My heart sinks.

"Diane," Marco says. "Go to your room."

Your room. Not ours.

I haven't been sent to my room since grade school, and even then, it was because I was getting blamed for something Heather or Melissa did.

"*Now.*" Marco's tone brooks no argument. It's the one he uses with staff. No, it's the one he uses with Fidelio, Vittoria's greyhound.

I squeeze my hands into balls and firm my chin. I can't see well. Everything's hazy through the sheen of tears.

I step carefully over the shards and walk past Rosanella and Vittoria. Chiara shrinks back as I go by, even though I give her and Ric a wide berth.

Sienna stares at me boldly as I pass, but Maria and Anna avert their eyes. Monty and Grandfather blank their faces like I'm a mess that the staff has been alerted to, best ignored until it can be swept away.

My heels tap across the foyer until they're muffled by the carpet running up the marble stairs. Voices don't burst out in a cacophony until I'm on the second-floor landing. Marco probably kept them quiet that long with only the forbidding cast of his jaw. I hurry up the next two flights. I don't want to hear my crimes enumerated.

My stomach's doing something strange, wobbling like a Jell-O mold. As soon as I reach the master suite and the bedroom that Marco and I share—*our* room—I sink down on the edge of our four-poster bed. I fold my hands in my lap like I'm twelve again and have been sent upstairs to think about what I've done.

I've made a terrible mistake marrying Marco de Noli.

I thought I was a fairy princess, rescued from loneliness and drudgery by the most handsome of princes.

I believed that Cinderella was a fairy tale and not a tragedy, but think about it. She ended up with a man who searched the entire kingdom for a woman he danced with a few times, clutching a glass slipper like it was the holy grail. No way she wasn't going to disappoint him in the end.

I hope the vase was insured, although that won't make it up to Rosanella. I wish I could tell her that I honestly didn't do it on purpose.

Or did I?

I slapped Chiara on purpose, but was that a case of in for a penny, in for a pound?

Oh, Lord, I need an Alka-Seltzer. My stomach's wheeling around like I'm drunk, and I'm bloated, too, and it hurts. I unbuckle my belt and set it next to me, but my belly doesn't feel much better. It won't until I get these stockings off. The elastic has been digging into my waist since dinner.

I'm sitting there, fretting about inconsequential things like an idiot, when the door opens. Of course, Marco doesn't storm in. He never loses his cool. Still, every muscle in my body tenses so tight that my calves cramp.

He shuts the door and strides halfway across the room, stopping several feet from the bed to stand and rest his hands on his waist, tucking back his coal gray jacket. His suit is as unwrinkled as when he left this morning, the shirt crisp and white, the ironed creases perfect down the sides of the wool slacks. His tie is missing though, and he's undone his top

button, revealing a patch of the dark hair that whorls across his hard chest.

Like it always has with him, as soon as we're alone, a delicious fear turns my system on. Being in the presence of such effortless power and confidence and strength, being around Marco, makes me feel naked and vulnerable and alive like being next in line for the front car of the roller coaster or standing on the edge of the high dive.

He can do what he wants with me. And he does.

I don't have to make anything happen. All I have to do is hold on for the ride.

My gaze skitters to the belt on the brocade comforter next to me, and my mouth waters. I could arch my back, squeeze my thighs together, and cast my eyes down, peeking up at him from the corners as I let my quick breath lift my breasts and tighten the fabric across my chest. I could knead my dress nervously between my fingers, do my best imitation of a trembling bunny rabbit trapped in the sight lines of a big, bad wolf, until his coldness melts. I could put this off one more night like Scheherazade.

It'd be so easy. Let him fuck me harder and rougher than he should and then tell him I'm sorry. Be the woman I'm supposed to be. That I decided to be.

Instead, I straighten my shoulders.

"Care to explain yourself?" he asks, his voice icy but measured.

"It was an accident."

"You accidentally slapped Chiara's face?" There's an edge in his voice now, a sliver of irritation.

Strangely, it sparks a flare of hope in my chest. Irritation is a feeling. You don't get irritated at someone if you're done with them, right?

"No, I did that on purpose."

"Do you think this is funny?" There's more than a sliver of irritation now. He's on the verge of actually raising his voice. I

want him to. I want him to care enough about me to lose control when we're not in bed.

"Funny, no. I meant the vase was an accident. It slipped."

"Everyone in that room says you dropped it." He sounds like a hardboiled, world-weary police detective just trying to get to the truth. Am I really going to insist that everyone else is lying? Am I really going to embarrass us both like that?

"I did drop it, but I'm telling you I didn't do it intentionally." I'm not used to arguing my side. I was never the type who was sent to the principal's office, and Mama never allowed for argument. You took whatever licking she decided to dole out, and that was that.

"Why was it even in your hands, Diane? Can you tell me that?"

I can't. I'd sound too stupid saying that I wanted a closer look, and honestly, I don't even know if that's true. Maybe I wanted to worry them. Maybe I wanted to do something that would get them to shut their mouths.

"I think I deserve an answer." His tone is still amazingly even, despite the tension rolling off him in waves.

I can only shake my head.

"Damn it, Diane." His throat rumbles in aggravation, and he checks his watch. "It's past midnight. I haven't eaten. I've been up since five, and this is what I come home to?"

When he raises his wrist, my gaze is drawn to it. His right cufflink is missing. He's still got the left one. It's the sterling silver set made to look like a compass with a black diamond in the center. I bought them for him on one of my many trips to the Metropole.

"Where's your cufflink?" I ask.

His brow knits, and he jerks up his sleeve, exasperated. "I don't know. It must've fallen out. Is that what you want to talk about? My cufflink?"

"You never want to talk about anything."

“So this is my fault?” He spears his fingers through his hair, and now it’s tousled, and his impeccable air is getting mussed, and I’m *glad*.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You’re not saying anything. You’re just sitting there like a damn doll, like some Stepford wife with a malfunction. Is that what’s happened, Diane? Did your wires get crossed?”

“Don’t speak like that to me.” Marco doesn’t talk to me like this. He’s distant, but never scornful.

Not in what he says.

“I’ll speak how I want, and you’ll listen. You have it easy around here. All you have to do is shop and pamper yourself all day, and sometimes, God forbid, I ask you to put on a nice dress and go to a party where no one expects you to do anything but stand there and look pretty because Lord knows it would be too much for you to learn French. I actually didn’t intend to marry a trophy wife, Diane, but seeing as that’s what I’ve got, *do your job*.”

“Y-You—” *You’ve got it all mixed up*, is what I want to say, but now that he’s started, he isn’t stopping until he’s done.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I’m telling you what you’re going to do. Pull yourself together, and tomorrow, you will go beg Chiara and Rosanella for forgiveness, and think long and hard about where the money comes from for that new dress you’re wearing and those new shoes and that damn vase.”

My outfit is new. I bought them for tonight. I’m surprised he noticed.

I press my hands to my cheeks and try to breathe, to unknot the words in my mouth and drag my voice out from behind the lump in my throat. I want to tell him he’s got it all wrong, I love him, more than life, and I want to go back to the way it was in Dallas, when he was proud to have me on his arm, and I felt safe and treasured.

I want to undo this terrible mess I’ve made. I don’t want him to be this ugly man, and I don’t want to tear this down. I

want to go back on my pedestal. I open my mouth, but he's glaring at me, and the words won't come out.

"Nothing to say?" He lets out a bitter laugh. "And I'm the one who doesn't want to talk about anything?" He shakes his head and then exhales, closing his eyes. "This was a mistake."

His face is so tired and grim. My stupid heart screams at me to rush to him, hang from his neck like an anchor, and tell him I'm sorry, I'll do whatever I have to do, become whoever I have to be, if we can just go back to the way we were before he brought me to Monte Carlo.

Chiara can slap me back. I'll glue the vase back together, mend it like the Japanese do and fill the cracks with gold. I'll do anything to go back in time before I woke myself up to the truth.

But instead of saying that, I press my fist to my mouth, my teeth nicking my knuckles, and Marco's lip twists.

"I can't be here right now," he says. "Wash your face, get some sleep, and pull yourself together. You know what you have to do tomorrow. I expect you to make it right, Diane. You're a grown woman. Act like one."

He turns and leaves, shutting the door behind himself as calmly as he opened it, a boss done with a meeting that's going nowhere, not a husband. Not a man who loves a woman.

Finally, when he's gone, I feel like I can stand. I stare blankly around our suite, my gaze sliding across the Louis XVI sitting area clustered in front of the Calacatta marble fireplace with its ormolu clock and Old Master painting of a ship sailing into a serene Mediterranean harbor.

Why can I remember the name of the marble but not the Old Master? Maybe Vittoria is right. Maybe I didn't try hard enough.

I wander to the French doors that open to a Juliet balcony overlooking the front drive three stories below. The wind off the Mediterranean is strong this high up, and it whips my hair off of my face.

Marco's silver sports car with its bug-eyed headlights and big black wheels is parked below. He must've told Monty not to bother putting it in the garage. It's so late. Does he really intend to go back out tonight?

The distant murmur of voices answers my question.

A woman's low voice floats up, but I can't make out the words. Marco replies in sharp, staccato syllables.

It's Sienna. I didn't think my heart could sink lower, but it does, straight down to my wobbling knees.

They're arguing. They don't do that. Sienna is an automaton. She strides into the breakfast room in the morning, nods to the table, places papers beside Marco's plate, and sets a pen down beside his coffee with a click. Marco doesn't lift his eyes from the Financial Times as he scratches out his signature where she points.

At the business functions that masquerade as social events, Sienna stands at his elbow, a half step behind us, murmuring the backstories of the people who are savvy or connected enough to wrangle an introduction as they approach him. Marco doesn't acknowledge what he's heard, but he'll greet the man with the name Sienna provided and inquire after his wife or boat or horse that Sienna quickly listed.

She hardly ever talks *to* him, at least not in my presence. She talks *about* him. Monsieur de Noli is not available. Monsieur de Noli has five minutes, not a second more. Monsieur de Noli would like you to meet him at Pazo for dinner at nine.

Do you mean Marco, my husband?

Smooth laughter. *Apologies, Madame de Noli. Force of habit.*

I was so intimidated by her at first. She's what Mama would call a glamazon, dressed in the height of fashion with her geometric, permed bob and flashy earrings. My sisters would call her a maneater. Sienna could take anyone's man if she wanted. Somewhere along the line, I got used to her, but I'm still jealous. Marco listens to her.

She's giving him an earful now, and he's not happy. He opens the passenger door, and I can tell he's impatient, even from this high up, but Sienna's not finished. She goes on a bit longer, but when he doesn't respond, she tosses her bouncy, boxy hair and holds something out to him.

He doesn't move to take it.

She thrusts her arm out again and shakes it.

He holds out his open hand.

She drops something in his palm and then, after launching a parting shot over her elegant shoulder, folds herself into the tiny automobile, as graceful and slithery as suede, her violet pencil skirt riding up her taut, black stockinged thigh.

He closes his fist over whatever she gave him. It's small. Too small for me to make out.

Small like a missing cufflink.

Oh, Lord, was I wrong about Sienna and Marco, too? Should I have been afraid all this time?

He bends his arm to expose his dress shirt and deftly attaches the link. My heart plummets.

He tugs his jacket sleeve back down, crosses around the back of the car, and slides into the driver's seat. Seconds later, the powerful engine roars to life, and my husband speeds off down the curving drive into the city with another woman.

At least it's not our anniversary. The ormolu clock reads one in the morning.

What am I going to do?

Wash my face, get some sleep, and pull myself together? Wait up for my husband a few more hours, days, years? Wait for the man I met in Dallas to come back while I live on hot sex and his credit cards?

My daddy went for cigarettes one snowy winter day when I was five, and he never came back. He left Mama with six little ones, the youngest two still in diapers. She made do, and

if we were hungry, it wasn't for too many days in a row, and if we were cold, it wasn't for very many nights.

We never caught her crying, not until the hot summer day ten years later, several months into a terrible drought, when the county sheriff came by to say they'd found Daddy's Ford where he must've gone off the road and into the river. The cigarettes had long since disintegrated, but I overheard the sheriff telling Mama that the plastic bag with the gallon jug that would've held the milk she'd asked for was sitting beside him on the passenger seat.

She cried then, and afterwards, she scrubbed her face dry with a tea towel, fixed her hair, and said to us girls gathered in the kitchen like a Greek chorus waiting for our cue, "Well, gone is gone. Are we gonna cry all day, or shall we put supper on?"

We put supper on.

The whys and wherefores don't change facts. They don't tell you what to do next, what to do with your devastated feet and hands. All they do is trap you in the horror of the moment like quicksand.

So I wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my silk dress, snort back the fat tears still leaking down my face, and head for my closet. In the back, there's the wall safe where I keep the jewelry Marco bought me for Christmas and my birthday and the times that he got a little too carried away and left purple fingerprints on skin I couldn't hide with a scarf or long sleeves. My luggage is stacked on the shelf above.

When Marco bought the set for me in Dallas to move my earthly possessions over here, I thought I'd get a lot of use out of it, but except for the overnight bag, it's been stowed this whole time.

Before I get the bags down, I twist off my pink diamond and the matching gold band. I set them carefully on top of the case holding the pearls that Marco brought me after his first long trip abroad on business. I love my ring, but did it ever really feel like mine?

I use the step stool to haul the two biggest suitcases down and drag them to the bed. I take my time packing because I can't take everything I've bought. First, I pack the best of the clothes I bought for Mama, then the best I bought for Heather, Melissa, and Jenny. Donny and Frank aren't old enough to care much about clothes, and the sports equipment I've bought is too big, so I pack the suits I had made especially for them since they don't own any, and they cost the most of what I've got for them.

My plan was to take the presents with me when I visited for Christmas so I could see their faces when they opened them, but work came up and Marco said we couldn't get away, so I was waiting for this summer when he said he would be sure to make time for us to visit.

For myself, I pack whatever can pass as business wear since I'm going to need to get a job. I change into a pair of slacks, a silk blouse with a bow, and sensible pumps. A gear in my brain that hasn't worked in forever starts cranking.

I'm not helpless. I'm not a pretty decoration who sits there and lets people take potshots at her. I might have forgotten that about myself, but I've got muscle memory, and I've got feet. I remember how to walk away.

In the end, the suitcases are too heavy for me to lift, so I drag them across the carpet, through the high-ceilinged marble hall, and down the stairs, step by step. I couldn't be stealthy if I tried, so I don't worry about it. No one's going to stop me. I wouldn't be surprised if they cheer me on as I pass them on my way out.

I get all the way to the front hall before I see anyone, though. Monty's futzing around behind the bar in the salon, and he notices me through the door as I leave the suitcases under the grand chandelier to use the telephone on the credenza. His thick white brows pinch together and his bulbous nose wrinkles. It's always been funny to me how a man with no waistcoat or pocket watch can still be a ringer for the white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*.

It's not until I have the receiver to my ear that I realize I don't know how to call for a taxi. I really have become helpless here.

I catch my reflection in the mirror above the credenza, and for a moment, I think I'm going to cry again, dissolve onto the floor in a puddle and wait there for however long it takes Marco to come home, mop me up, and put me back in my place.

But then Monty is there, taking the phone from the hand dangling limp at my side.

"Allow me, madame," he says. "I'll have Pietro bring a car around."

I nod, and our eyes meet in the mirror. To my surprise, there's no distaste in his. No glee or satisfaction or pity, either. Instead, there's a dignity to his masked expression, and it speaks to something in me. I lift my chin to match the angle of his, grapple the tears back down, and return to my suitcases.

Monty beats me to them by seconds, taking the handles in either hand. "Allow me," he says again.

He strains as much as he can without losing his poise, but he can't lift them for long either and ends up walking out like a bride, taking a step and then resting the bags on the floor.

I follow him, allowing him to open the door for me, and by the time we exit the villa and descend the front stairs, Pietro is there to take the luggage, effortlessly slinging them into the trunk of the town car.

Monty hovers as I settle myself in the back seat. Then, when Pietro turns the engine on and there's no more excuse to fuss, he straightens and says, almost with reluctance, "Well, then, madame."

"Well, then," I say and give him the best smile I can muster. I would have never expected it of him, and it's been a long time since I've felt it, but this feels like kindness, and I'm grateful for it. I nod to him, and he shuts my door.

"Where to, madame?" Pietro asks through the lowered screen.

“The airport.”

I hold it together through the winding streets of Monte Carlo until we hit the highway to Nice, and then the car accelerates. The awful feeling brewing in my stomach since dinner sloshes up and over me like a wave over the prow of a ship. I unbuckle, lurch forward, and bang on the screen.

“Pull over,” I cry, and to his credit, Pietro weaves across two lanes and screeches to a halt on the shoulder like he drives for Formula One.

I just manage to throw open the door and bend over before I cast up Francois’ barbecue on the side of the highway, the world’s most glamorous people zipping by in their Italian sports cars as the loveliest stars twinkle high overhead, and the girl folks say was the most beautiful to ever come out of Gene Autry, Oklahoma wipes her face with her sleeve and slumps back into a butter-soft leather seat, outmatched and outclassed with the sour taste of vinegar in her mouth.

DIANE, FIVE MONTHS LATER

Dread gathers in my stomach, but at least I'm not nauseous today. Since a few weeks ago, the morning sickness seems to be in the rearview mirror, but from my boss Susan's pinched face, I see my troubles are still far from over.

It's too much.

Everything's been too much—figuring out where to stay, finding this job, accepting that the missed periods weren't from stress.

Everything's too much, but it's never enough, and from Susan's shifty expression, my downward spiral is going to hit the skids.

After she makes a big deal about shutting her office door, Susan gestures for me to take the seat across from her desk, and I sink down, trying valiantly to suck in my stomach, but I can't anymore. It's a hard bump now, and my white belly winks between the buttons of my blue cotton blouse.

Susan's disapproving glance is momentarily drawn to the gap before it returns to my pink face. She sent her girl to fetch me from my station at the mall entrance by cosmetics, and my shift isn't even halfway over, so this is bad. I'm getting canned.

“Is there something you need to tell us, Diane? Something personal?” She allows her gaze to rest meaningfully on my belly again.

I sigh on the inside. I knew this job wasn't going to last, but Terri convinced me to go for it. She said none of the perfume girls last long anyway, and a paycheck is a paycheck. She's right about that. I just hope she doesn't get a black mark on her record for putting my name forward.

I take a deep breath. "Well, I suppose I should tell you that I'm expecting, Susan."

She leans back in her seat so she can look down her nose. "You did not say so when we first spoke, did you, Diane?"

"No, ma'am."

She directs another speaking glance at my bare ring finger. "And I suppose you understand that this is not the...*image* that the brands you were hired to represent would appreciate?"

"Yes, ma'am." I'm not going to argue. When we talked about this eventuality, Terri got all hot around the collar, spouting off about how they can't fire you for being pregnant anymore, not since '78, but I'm no Norma Rae. I'd rather die than speak out in public.

"Young girls look up to our fragrance demonstrators, and as a pillar of the Dallas community for over fifty years, we cannot turn a blind eye to this sort of thing."

"Yes, ma'am." My feet itch to leave. Like so often since I left Monte Carlo, panic wells in my chest, turning my breath into the faint gasps of a fish fading fast on a riverbank.

I have no idea what I'm doing, and I'm sad, and I'm lonely, and I want to give in and call Marco, but I can't. My fingers won't dial all the numbers, and my throat squeezes tighter and tighter until I drop the receiver. I don't think I can stand to hear indifference in his voice when he hears mine on the line. Or worse, politeness. He must be relieved that I left, but I don't think I could sleep if I knew that for sure.

"Diane?" Susan says sharply.

I startle. I drifted off. I've been doing that.

"I'm so sorry, Susan. I understand." I rise to my feet. "I'll just get my purse from my locker."

She's not done with me, though. She stands and comes around her desk to follow me out.

“A word to the wise, Diane. You're not going to be able to live off your looks much longer. Babies age you. I should know. And a man might ask a woman with your looks out for a date or two, but once he catches a whiff of what you're hiding at home, he's not going to be buying the cow, if you take my meaning.”

She raises her swooping brows expectantly. What am I supposed to say to advice like that? Listen up, girlie, you're about to lose all your market value, and that market is meat and dairy.

“Yes, right, thanks,” I mumble so she'll let me past her into the fluorescent-lit corridor.

I keep my cool as I stride past layaway and gift wrapping, fetch my purse from the employee lounge, and trek with my head held high all the way through Junior Misses to the street. As soon as I hit the sidewalk, the summer heat blasts me in the face, and somehow, it helps me hold myself together.

When everything falls apart, you keep going so you don't get crushed.

This is bad, but I've faced down worse.

I wipe away the strands of hair sticking to my sweaty forehead. The sun beats down on the top of my head.

It's unbearably hot, but Terri and Joyce will be at work until six, and I don't want to sit in an empty house.

I'll walk home. The exercise will do me good. A mean, shameful little fantasy voice mutters in the back of my mind that it would serve them all right if I keel over on the street from heat stroke, if Marco and Susan had to come identify me in the morgue, and the coroner who looks exactly like Quincy, M.E. would shake his head mournfully and declare that a lady in my delicate condition should never have been abandoned to fend for herself in such brutal heat.

But I'm not that dramatic. It's not that hot, and the walk isn't that far, and if Marco felt sorry, he'd have come for me or

called or mailed a damn letter.

I string my purse across my chest and my feet take over, leading me away from the store Terri and I call Needless Markups, down Elm Street to The Ampere, the nicest hotel in Dallas and the place I met Marco de Noli.

I learned afterwards that the architectural style of the building is called neo-Gothic, but when they hired me fresh off the Greyhound to be a shampoo girl at the spa, I thought the place looked like it belonged in New York City along Central Park. I was scared down to my toes, but Mama couldn't afford to keep us kids once we turned eighteen, and Melissa had found work in the city, so I figured I had as good a chance as her.

They saw me coming. If Gary, the most senior stylist, hadn't made it be known that I was under his wing, I'd have been eaten alive. As it was, my innocence was preserved until I fell into Marco de Noli's clutches like I slipped on a banana peel.

I take a minute and sit on the retaining wall across from the old hotel, shading my eyes with a hand so I can see if anyone's swimming in the pool on the outdoor area between the third and fourth floors. It's close enough to the street, and there is no privacy wall, so it's like an aquarium for the rich and beautiful.

Marco took me there once after he'd had me give up the job and move into his penthouse suite, but I didn't like being on display. He loved it, though. It's not that he liked showing me off; he really didn't. But he loved my jitters as businessmen ate their lunches on this wall where I'm now sitting, staring and munching away. He liked my vulnerability.

I guess when I wasn't the poor innocent who couldn't meet a man's eyes anymore, I lost my shine.

Oh, hell. What am I going to do?

If I showed up on her front step, Mama wouldn't slam the door in my face, but can I go back to Gene Autry and stare down the girls I went to high school with every time I go to

the grocery store, with a baby on my hip and no ring on my finger? I will if I have to, but damn, I wasn't going to end up like that. I was going to wait for love.

I guess I did, not like it did me any good.

I sigh, stand, and continue trudging home. It feels like I'm dragging my heavy heart along at the end of a chain. I can't bear to think about the future, so I let my mind wander to the past.

If Gary hadn't gotten an urgent call from his roommate Alan, I'd never have been allowed within twenty feet of a VIP like Marco. Alan said it was an emergency, though, and I could hear the tears in his voice. No one else was free, so Gary asked me if I could shave a man. I only said yes because back then, I was too terrified to tell anyone no.

I'd seen it done in the movies, so I had a vague idea of how to go about it, but my hands were shaking like crazy as I wrapped Marco's face in hot towels and whipped up the soap. I was so nervous that I didn't even notice how handsome he was, or that he was noticing me.

I got as far as placing the blade against his neck when his strong hand wrapped around mine, and he eased me away from his carotid.

"I want you to touch me, beautiful, but I don't want to die for the pleasure." His cool, deep voice zinged straight to my insides. My hand jumped, and I nicked his skin. A little bead of red appeared right next to his pulse point, and every pint of blood in my body sank to my feet.

He chuckled, and the sound was so rich, so strangely exciting. I got dizzy, but my attention was stuck on his mouth as his lips formed words, and on his eyes as they raked over me from head to toe.

I was scared that I was in trouble, and it made no sense, but I tingled between my legs.

He rumbled, "Go get a clean cloth and fix your mistake." His accent sounded like class and velvet ropes and fancy dinners and Hollywood stars.

When I finally managed to make my throat work, I whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He watched me while I dabbed the cut, searching my face until my cheeks were blazing and sweat beaded my upper lip.

I wanted to sink to the floor and sweep myself away with the hair clippings, but I also wanted to stay that close to him forever with the points of my breasts grazing his upper arm, the scent of his sandalwood shaving soap and clean skin teasing my nose.

He was so much crisper, so much of a better quality than an everyday type of person. I didn’t know men were made like that, not since Cary Grant and Gary Cooper were in the movies.

He was old enough to be someone’s father, but he didn’t seem old. He was just grown.

My hand accidentally brushes across my hard belly as I turn down South Ervay. Oh, Lord. He is going to be a father, and he deserves to know. Terri makes a point of reminding me all the time, but it’s never far from my mind.

The whole situation is like Pandora’s box, or that box with the cat who is neither dead nor alive as long as you don’t lift the lid. The not knowing how he’ll react is excruciating, but whatever he does do—it’ll be worse.

If he throws money at me and tells me to stay gone.

If he grits his teeth, holds his nose, and tells me I’d better come back. For the baby.

If he’s angry that I bothered him with it.

If he hides his disappointment that I’ve reared my ugly head and makes himself “do the right thing.”

It’s a roulette wheel of awfulness, but as Susan has made abundantly clear, I can’t hide from facts any longer. I had the idea that I’d go back to being a single girl in the city, and eventually, I wouldn’t feel awful every day as soon as I woke up, but that’s not going to happen.

By the time I get to Terri's house, my head is swimming. I stand at the kitchen sink for a good ten minutes, drinking glass after glass of ice water and splashing cold water on my face. It was foolish to walk so far in this weather. My upper chest and my forearms are sunburnt. When I wrinkle my forehead and nose, they feel crinkly, too.

When we started dating, Marco would've been very disapproving that I let myself burn. This past year, he wouldn't have noticed.

No, that's not fair. He would've frowned as if he meant to say something, but then his father would call him into the study or Sienna would ring from the office, and he'd forget.

I need to be fair. He's cold and distant, but he's not a cruel man, not until that last night. He deserves to know about this baby.

I need to be brave. I've already gotten fired today. I might as well rip this Band-Aid off as well and ruin the whole day. Then tonight, Terri, Joyce, and I can order a pizza and polish off the Viennetta in the freezer.

I take a few deep breaths as I go to the phone hanging on the wall next to the refrigerator. It's one o'clock here which means it's seven in the evening in Monte Carlo. Marco's definitely still at the office.

I pick up the receiver, and quickly, so there's no time for second thoughts, I pound out the private number that rings straight through to his desk. Then I hold my breath. It rings once. Twice. After the fourth ring, the call will forward to Donna, his secretary. During the past year, I got accustomed to hanging up on the third ring.

I make myself hold the line, though, when it rings three times, and just before it's forwarded, it's picked up.

"Marco de Noli's office." Except it's not Marco. It's Sienna, brisk and clear and totally assured because she knows that she belongs there with him.

My throat swells.

"Hello?"

I can hear a rustling as if she's flipping through files. I have to say something. Ask for Marco.

Ask her if she's sleeping with my husband.

Ask her how she keeps him happy because I sure couldn't.

My skin prickles, hot and crispy, and suddenly, I'm exhausted with myself. "H-Hello," I make myself say. "Is Marco there?"

"Diane?" The rustling stops.

"Yes, is Marco there?"

"No." She stretches the syllable out, like she needs time to think. Like she's flustered. I've never heard her hesitate. "Where are you, Diane?"

"Dallas."

I guess she wouldn't know since Marco never bothered to look for me. I spent the first day back at Mama's, weeping on the sofa as I watched game shows in the morning and soaps in the afternoon, occasionally racing for the bathroom to toss up my cookies. I was sure Marco would call. My heart prayed that he'd show up at the front door, but he didn't.

Then Aunt Doris got sick all of a sudden, and Mama had to go to Memphis. She dropped my miserable, wet carcass off at Cousin Edgar's farm, and after a week of that cold comfort, I pulled myself together enough to take Terri up on her offer of the third room in her bungalow. I suppose Marco might not know I'm back in Dallas, but he would if he'd called.

"Where in Dallas?"

Why is that her business? I clear my throat and try to speak as firmly as she does. "May I speak to Marco, please?"

"He's not available right now. Can I take a message, Diane? Or a number?"

She seems almost in a hurry, and I'm about to give it to her when I hear a familiar deep rumble in the background. Even though I can't make out the words, I'd know that voice

anywhere. Marco's not out. He's screening his calls. He's too busy to talk to the wife he hasn't seen in months.

Why hadn't I considered he might not be inclined to make time for me now, either? If I had, I'd be prepared for this awful crushing feeling. I'd be able to demand that she *put him on the phone* like Erika Kane.

"Never mind. I'll try again later." I hang up the receiver with a soft click and then press my back to the cool wall and try to catch my breath. Almost immediately, the phone rings, and my heart leaps to my throat. I snatch the receiver, hang up again, and unplug the cord from the wall. The old house is silent again.

Why did I do that? I'm just postponing the inevitable. I'm going to have to call again.

But not now. My nerves won't take it. I'm already strung as tight as a wild rabbit. I'll try again tomorrow, in the morning, after I've had a good night's sleep.

He doesn't want to talk to me? Well, same.

With that decided, I shower, and I only cry a little under the spray. I braid my hair wet, and as I moisturize, Susan's words echo in my head. *You're not going to be able to live off your looks much longer.*

Is that what I was doing with Marco? I thought we were in love, at least in the beginning, even though he never said the words. But what about once everything boiled down to sex and occasionally sitting across from one another at meals?

I wouldn't have been there if I wasn't pretty, or if I hadn't been a virgin when I let Marco do what he did in the supply closet at the Ampere's spa.

To distract myself from this lowering thought, I change into what Mama would have called play clothes and spend the rest of the afternoon weeding and watering Terri's garden, doing a load of linens, and hanging them up from the line on a pulley that runs from the upstairs hall window to the trunk of an elm at the back of the narrow yard.

Around six, I start dinner. Nothing fancy. Shake N' Bake pork chops, broccoli, and potatoes. I don't have much of an appetite, but since it looks like I might be late with the rent, it's the least I can do.

Per usual, Joyce beats Terri home. She slips her slingback pumps off before she steps across the threshold, sighs, and hangs her alligator bag from the hall tree kept by the door for that purpose. Before she does anything else, she takes a moment to stretch her neck and roll out her shoulders.

Joyce works in the shoe department, and there's not many Black saleswomen at Needless Markups. I've seen with my own eyes how she gets way more than her fair share of daily aggravation.

She sets her shoes on the rack, so I figure she's in for the evening. She dates a lineman—the kind who repairs electrical lines after the hurricanes, not the football player—but she's not sure if she wants to marry him. He travels too much and dresses too nice after work for her trust issues, she says.

I suppose he's out of town, because if he's around, he takes her out on Friday nights, and no matter what she says, she never turns him down.

“Something smells good,” she calls out on her way to her bedroom.

“Pork chops,” I call back. I've known Terri since grade school, but I hadn't met Joyce until I moved in here. We get along well, though. Joyce is an organizer like me, and between the two of us, we manage to keep after Hurricane Terri.

Terri comes home while Joyce is in the shower. She kicks off the sneakers she wears to walk home from work, drops her fringed bag on the floor, and heads straight for the kitchen.

As soon as she sees me scrubbing potatoes at the sink, her eyes narrow. “What happened?”

“I got fired.” She must've heard it from the grapevine as soon as Susan shut her office door.

“Besides that.”

“You’re telling me that’s not bad enough?”

“You’re telling me that I don’t see you at the breakfast table every morning pouring over the want ads, bitching about how the smell of perfume makes you want to barf now?”

I sigh and set a wet potato into the strainer. “I called Marco.”

She sucks in her breath and sinks into her chair at the table. “Get me a beer, dear?”

I grab her one, slap it in her open palm, and take a seat so that I can keep an eye on the oven.

“You’re not joining me?” she asks as she cracks the can open.

“The Surgeon General says I shouldn’t.” I give my bump the eye. In this loose, off-the-shoulder T-shirt, you can hardly tell it’s there, especially if I curve my shoulders forward. If I’d been willing to spend money on a few bigger blouses, I bet I could have gotten away without Susan noticing for a couple more weeks, at least.

Terri snorts. “I wouldn’t listen to anything C. Everett ‘Chicken’ Koop has to say.”

She doesn’t care for Reagan or anyone to do with him.

“All the same, I’d better not.” I haven’t been to the doctor yet. My mother never went until she was big enough that there was something worth measuring. I figure everything’s fine. Actually, I try not to think about it. Thinking about the future only makes me worry.

“So? Don’t leave me in suspense? What did Mr. Jet Set say?”

“He didn’t answer.”

“No.” Terri leans forward on her bony elbows. “Did you leave a message? Did he call back?”

Her gaze jumps to the phone, her eyes widening when she sees the cord unplugged. She lifts one of her thick Brooke

Shields eyebrows, and since she's Terri, it's got the effect of a Tyrannosaurus Rex peering into a cave to search out his prey.

"Couldn't say," I mumble. Her eyebrow arches even higher. I've never been able to withstand it. "His PA answered. She said he was out."

"So of course, you left a message with his secretary and then left the phone off the hook." Terri nods, teasing me. "Very logical, Spock."

"Not his secretary, his PA."

"There's a difference?"

"Yeah." His secretary Donna is a sweet sixty-year-old who hides bonbons in her desk. Sienna is a leggy bombshell who'd be on the cover of *Vogue* if she wasn't a corporate shark.

I hop up to put the potato water on to boil, plunking a pot on the stove and then taking a peeler to the potatoes I was scrubbing my frustrations out on earlier.

"His PA travels with him," I explain. "She knows everything about the business. She knows everything about *my* business." At least it feels that way.

"So you left the phone off the hook in a jealous rage?" Terri asks. Sometimes I want to smack her.

"I heard him in the background. She said he wasn't available."

Terri winces. "Ouch."

I focus on gouging the eyes out of a potato.

"Ouch?" Joyce flaps into the room in her pink slide slippers. She peeks over my shoulder to see how things are coming along. Joyce always likes to add a few more dashes of something or other to whatever I make, and she's never wrong.

"Our girl finally called Daddy Warbucks, and his secretary said he wasn't there, but then Little Orphan Annie over there heard him talking in the background."

"Ouch." Joyce grimaces. "Why did you marry the rat, anyway?" she asks as she goes to rummage in the fridge.

“He’s a smooth operator who looks like an old-time Hollywood movie star, and besides that, he’s richer than God,” Terri answers for me.

“Is he sleeping with his secretary?” Joyce emerges from the fridge with a stick of butter.

“No, with his personal assistant.” Terri finishes her beer and crushes it in her fist.

“There’s a difference?” Joyce asks.

“Apparently.” Terri shoots her can into the trash. “Get me another, would you, Joyce?”

Joyce obliges while I finish peeling potatoes. Their teasing doesn’t make me mad. Being with Joyce and Terri reminds me of being home with my sisters, and it feels so good not to have a bunch of rich folk sneering down their noses that I don’t much care if they rag on me.

The de Nolis were always polite, but damn, they were mean. I’d take Terri busting my chops any time. Speaking of, I check the oven, but they could do with a few more minutes to brown.

“I don’t know for sure if he’s sleeping with her. Or if he was.”

“But you have your suspicions?” Joyce’s expression says she’s been there.

I shrug. “Yes? He spent way more time with her than me.”

“I hear a *but*,” Joyce prompts, leaning a hip against the counter.

But I don’t know how he’d have the energy to make love to her after how we spent our nights. Or if a woman like her would let him do the kind of things that he likes. I flush under my sunburn.

“Spill it, Dee Dee,” Terri demands from the table.

I begin to cut up the potatoes, careful not to let my flusteration lead me to chop off a finger. “I told you what he was like.”

“A sex fiend.” Terri says it gleefully, and Joyce hoots.

I focus real hard on the knife. I could never tell Terri—or anyone—what Marco and I did, but I had to explain somehow. As distant as he was during the day, he was all over me at night. And what we did, I’m not sure if other people do it—if it’s normal—but I loved it. Maybe too much. It distracted me from the fact that he didn’t really care much about me.

Can I even be angry about it? He told me from the very first time I curled into his arms and babbled a blissed out *I love you* that he didn’t “do” the love stuff. It’s not his thing.

And what does it matter now? We’re over, the sex is over, and my libido is just going to have to catch up with current events.

“Anyway, even if he wasn’t cheating, the marriage wasn’t working.” I scrape the potatoes from the cutting board into the pot.

“Because he was a fiend for sex?” Joyce asks.

“Because of the in-laws from hell,” Terri says. She knows the whole story. I spilled it all out to her, at first over Brandy Alexanders, and then when we got tired of mixing drinks, over the rest of the cognac, straight from the bottle. I hope the Surgeon General is wrong. I hadn’t figured out I was expecting yet back then.

“Do tell.” Joyce snags a broccoli floret from the steamer where I’ve set them to drain.

“The way Dee Dee describes these folks, they sound like the cast of that boardgame *Clue*,” Terri interjects. “Except less campy and more evil.”

I can’t help but smile. The description isn’t far off.

“So who’s Miss Scarlett?” Joyce asks.

“Oh, definitely Chiara. My sister-in-law.”

“That’s the one you slapped, right?” Terri leans back to crack a window and fetches a Virginia Slim from her cigarette case.

I train my eyes on the linoleum, trying not to let embarrassment show on my face. “I shouldn’t have.”

“Did she have it coming?” Joyce slides up the window over the sink as well. She doesn’t like the smell of smoke in her hair.

If Chiara had been one of my real sisters, I would’ve popped her in the mouth months earlier. “Yes, she definitely did,” I say.

Terri and Joyce both laugh. I bet neither of them have ever lost their minds like I did that last night in Monte Carlo. No one would dare speak to them like people speak to me. They’re both the kind of women who have sharp elbows and smart mouths, the type my mother would call a handful or too much.

“So the disapproving mother-in-law is Mrs. Peacock?” Terri scoots her chair closer to the window so she can exhale her smoke out the screen.

“Was your father-in-law Colonel Mustard?” Joyce waves her hand through the air in front of her to disperse the smoke, but Terri is completely oblivious.

“Marco’s dad died in a speedboat accident when he was young. Colonel Mustard would be his grandfather, but he was more like the guy with the monocle and the top hat, but not cheerful. He was always so sour and distracted. I honestly don’t think he ever really noticed me.”

“You mean the peanut with the cane?” Terri leans to grab an ashtray from a low shelf, her half-inch long ash wobbling precariously as she sways.

“No, the guy from Monopoly,” Joyce answers for me. “Obviously.” She flashes me a grin.

“My brother-in-law, Ric, he’s a playboy type, and there’s a butler, only they didn’t call him a butler. I thought he was a snob, but maybe he was just trying to do his job. Oh, and there’s Marco’s step-grandmother, Rosanella. She was this specter in black, only she isn’t a widow because obviously her

husband's still alive. She never provided the family with any heirs, so she was kind of treated like furniture."

"And her husband is Colonel Mustard but with a monocle and a top hat?" Terri flicks her ash just before it crumbles.

"Right."

"You know, Diane," Terri says, sinking back in her chair. "I say this with all due respect, but how on earth did you take a relaxed shit the entire time you lived with these people?"

There's a beat of silence before Joyce bursts out cackling, and I can't stop my own laughter from burbling up and out. At the same time, the potatoes need to come off the heat, so I wrangle the pot to the sink with a tea towel for a pot holder as tears leak down my cheeks.

"I didn't." I shake the colander and sweep away sobering memories of holding it until I got to the mall and the ladies' room was empty.

Our laughter tapers off, and I return the steaming potatoes to the pot and add a splash of milk. When I reach for the oleo tub, Joyce darts out a hand, snatches it away, and slides me the stick of butter.

"A little butter isn't going to make us fat," she says.

"I use a lot, though."

"Even better." Joyce grins, her brown eyes twinkling.

I bump my hip against hers. "Go take a load off. I've got it from here."

She obliges, but only after flipping on the overhead fan. Terri finally takes the hint and grinds out her smoke.

It takes a few minutes to steam the broccoli and mash the potatoes, and then I plate and serve our meal, bringing Terri a third beer and Joyce a glass of chardonnay.

I sit and unfold a paper napkin to cover my lap although I'm not hungry at all. I don't think my knotted stomach will let me eat a bite even to be polite, but it still feels good to feed these ladies. To be useful again.

It's only been five months, but already, life with Marco feels like a fever dream, a mortal peril that I barely escaped from with my life, but at the same time, like paradise, and now I'm cast out and everything is dull and nefarious and too hard.

"Do you miss him? Daddy Warbucks?" Terri asks after she's torn through her first pork chop.

It's a harder question to answer than it should be, so I chew a piece of pork to buy time.

Yes, like an organ. A stomach or a lung or a liver. I shouldn't be able to walk around like this. I'm a zombie.

And also yes, in an everyday kind of way. I still expect to see him beside me when I wake up, and sitting at the breakfast table, hidden by his newspaper, when I come downstairs in the morning. I expect to hear his car prowl up the drive at night and his step to sound in the hall outside my bedroom when I've just fallen asleep. My brain will not adjust to the new reality. It insists on catching on the holes where he should be, even though he's never been in this house.

But then again, except for the bed and the breakfast table, he wasn't around much. Most days of the week, he was away on business in New York or Hong Kong or Zurich or Frankfurt. How do you miss a man who was hardly ever home?

But that's my body and my brain. As for my heart—it's been missing him almost since the moment we met, longing for him, wishing I understood how he thinks, aching for him to need me, too. Can you miss something if you're not sure you ever really had it?

But how do you say all that?

I shrug a shoulder and say, "Sometimes." Then I pop a bite of broccoli in my mouth so I don't have to say anything else.

"Do you still love him?" Joyce asks.

I chew the broccoli slowly. That's an impossible question, too. Yes, of course, nothing else could hurt this bad. But then again, how can you really love someone who you don't know? It's not possible.

Love is raw and ragged and *close*. Love is Mama staying up so late that first night after the tow truck brought Daddy's car back. She stared out the front window at the shell of that rusted out Ford until past midnight. We girls knew how long she'd waited for that car to roll up the drive, but we didn't know what was in her heart, how much of her—if any—had still believed he'd never have left us when the sheriff came by with his news.

Love is how we wrapped her in a crocheted blanket and made her tea, and how we never, ever asked her what difference it made that he didn't leave us after all.

Marco de Noli would never need anyone to tread lightly for him. He's industrially smooth, made of carbon steel. He doesn't need me to love him.

Still, I can't say that I don't love him because what else would you call what I felt? What I feel? Masochism? Obsession? Naivete?

I force the mashed potatoes down my throat and say, "I don't know."

Terri and Joyce exchange a glance.

"What do you think he's going to do when he finds out about the baby?" Joyce asks.

I draw in a deep breath, scrape the rest of my food into the center of my plate, and drop my napkin on top. "I guess I'm going to find out sooner rather than later." I look at the receiver sitting on the corner counter. "I hope Reg isn't trying to call you, Joyce."

She tosses a slender shoulder. "A little uncertainty will do him good."

"I thought you were nothing if not an unsure thing," Terri teases her.

Joyce pats her curls and bats her long lashes. "I like to keep a man on his toes."

"Sounds like work," Terri says, pushing away from the table. "I'm going to turn on the news."

Joyce helps me clean up, and thankfully, she keeps the conversation light and leaves the phone alone. She dries, and I stack the dishes in the cabinet, and then we join Terri in the living room. She lets us watch the Friday night movie until ten when she insists we flip to *Falcon Crest*. It's fine. I can't pay attention anyway, and Joyce is doing her nails.

Worries and memories buzz around my brain like bees, alternately stinging and numbing me until I close my eyes to get some relief. My long walk home in the blazing sun finally takes its toll, and sometime after Ed McMahon says, "From Hollywood, *The Tonight Show*, starring Johnny Carson," a heavy blackness overtakes me and drags me under into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I'm dead to the world until a sharp knocking on the front door jerks me awake. I spring up, fighting off the quilt someone covered me with. The living room is pitch black except for the light cast by the test pattern on the television. Joyce and Terri must've gone to bed. I'm alone.

Bang. Bang.

I stumble to my feet, untwisting the elastic waist of my lounge pants. My T-shirt has slipped past my shoulder, trapping my arm. In a sleep-muddled panic, I peel it off, leaving me in my white tank top. My head is thick and wooly, my skin is hot and clammy, and my eyes are bleary. I rub them as I bumble toward the front door.

Bang. Bang.

I fling the door open, scrubbing my face, and as I do, my brain wakes enough to shout *don't open the door!*

It's too late.

Marco doesn't hesitate. He strides into the house like he owns it, pivoting in the middle of the living room to stare me down, chest puffed, feet planted. His fingers are curled at his sides like he wants to make fists, but his dignity won't allow it.

The room shrinks in half. The ceiling lowers.

He's furious.

My heart punches my solar plexus and tears off, pounding in my ears like I've run a mile in headphones.

He's not wearing a jacket. His white dress shirt is tucked, but the sleeves are rolled to his elbows, revealing the dark hair on his hard, tan forearms with their tracery of veins.

Guess he lost his cufflinks again, a mean little voice inside me snipes.

He's got three whole buttons undone, and several black locks have sprung loose from his perfect hair. Any other man would look harried, but on Marco, the dishevelment only makes him seem more determined, more formidable.

He means business.

I take a step back.

He steps forward.

Something I read the other day in *Frank and Ernest* pops into my head out of nowhere—*Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did...backwards and in high heels.*

I plant my feet. This is my home, and this is not a dance. I cross my arms.

The motion draws his gaze downward, and I see the exact moment he notices my belly. The news breaks across his face like a video of a sunrise set to a swelling orchestral movement with lots of horns and crashing symbols. His black pupils blow wide, obliterating his brown irises. Every muscle in his face turns to stone. The tendons in his neck pop.

Whatever it is he wants to do or say, he's fighting it with everything he's got. He probably wants to ask if it's his.

I tuck my arms tighter and hike my chin—just let him ask—but before I can figure out what to say, there's a clatter on the stairs. Terri and Joyce burst onto the scene, Joyce skidding into the middle of the room on her stocking feet, wielding a curling iron in her right hand like a billy club.

“Back away, buddy,” she hollers.

Terri slides to cover her, baseball bat raised, front elbow high, knees bent, perfect stance. She's wearing grandpa pajama bottoms with a hot pink teddy for a top. Joyce's silk bonnet droops drunkenly over one eye as she furiously tries to hold together a short, hot pink robe. The belt trails on the floor behind her, the curling iron cord dangling, too. They look like two thirds of a raggedy, inebriated Charlie's Angels.

"This is Marco," I explain before Terri swings. He's entirely unfazed by the threat, his gaze fused to my bump.

Terri lowers the bat with grudging slowness. Joyce fixes her bonnet and begins to wind the cord around the curling iron. Her long nails click on the metal.

"How'd you get here so quick?" Terri asks.

"Concorde." It's the first word he's said.

I can't believe he flew commercial.

Heck, I can't believe he's *here*. And why did Terri know he was coming? I shift my eyes to her.

Terri raises her hands. "Don't look at me like that. We had to plug the phone back in, and it rang right away. He was talking crazy about Interpol and kidnapping and the FBI, and I didn't think it would hurt to tell him who I am and that you're fine, no crime has been committed, and you'd call him back in the morning. I didn't figure he'd hop a flight and be banging on our door at—" She squints at the clock on the wall. "Four in the morning."

"Kidnapping?" I squeak. Between my muddled brain and booming heart, I can't get things straight.

Marco lets out a frustrated growl, drives a hand through his hair, reshuffling the muss, and turns on his heel. My stupid heart drops, and I have to swallow a cry. *Don't leave.*

I'm such a sucker.

When he pokes his head out on the porch, I see he didn't come alone. There are three hulking men dressed all in black out there, arrayed in some kind of police formation. I recognize them as the hired muscle who trailed me when I

shopped or escorted us when we went out in public as a couple.

Marco barks something I don't quite catch, and as he turns back and shuts the door, muffled boots retreat down the front steps.

"I'm not kidnapped," I say, my voice gone high-pitched and breathy like it always does around him.

"I see that," Marco says, his visible shock disappearing under his mask of authority and impenetrable calm. "Ladies, forgive the intrusion." He nods gravely at Terri and Joyce.

Joyce cinches the belt of her robe tight as Terri scowls and dangles her bat.

"If you wouldn't mind allowing my wife and me some privacy?" He's framing it as a question, but no one would read it as anything but an order.

Terri's thick brows squinch together. "Diane? Are you okay with that?"

I nod. I don't want to make more trouble than I already have, and he's here now. He knows about the baby. The sooner he says what he wants to say, the sooner this will be over.

Terri scowls at him a few seconds longer because in her own way, she's almost as proud as he is, but then she takes Joyce's elbow, and they head back upstairs.

"If you need us, just call," she says to me over her shoulder, shooting Marco one last glare.

I wander over to the sofa, fish my shirt out of the tangled quilt, and tug it over my head. Marco doesn't move or speak; he just seethes in the middle of the living room, tense and looming and vibrating with bad energy.

"Do you want a coffee?" I finally ask since I've never been one who could take a heavy silence.

"No, Diane, I don't want a cup of coffee." His voice is blade sharp, but also rougher and raspier than usual, like he's getting over a sore throat.

I freeze in the middle of folding the quilt, my shoulders bunching up to my ears.

He sighs. “My apologies. Yes. Coffee would be fine.”

I let out the breath I was holding. Good. I need to do something with my hands, or I’ll cry. Tears are threatening, tickling my nose. Marco has me cracked like a hard-boiled egg. I’ve been through too much with him to be splattered on the floor, but my shell is busted.

I walk to the kitchen, and he follows, leaving a good distance between us, but I still catch a faint whiff of his cologne, the expensive French stuff that I bought for him. All of a sudden, in my raw heart, it feels like it hasn’t been months, it’s been a decade, and I’m a child again, and this is the dream where my father comes home, stomping up the front steps hollering “Where are my girls?” with a crazy story that makes everything okay.

The man has come back.

But this isn’t that. I’m thrown, and I’m letting things get snarled in my brain. I need to pull it together and stop being so flighty and emotional and have a rational conversation like a grown woman.

We’re going to have a baby. We have business to discuss. That’s all. I can be a take-charge woman. I never have been before, but I watch TV and Mama has her moments.

I fetch a filter and the coffee and focus on the task at hand. Fill the carafe with water. Plug in the Mr. Coffee. Scoop out the Folgers.

I am still painfully aware of Marco’s every move. He checks the phone, lifting the receiver to his ear like he’s trying to figure out why he wasn’t getting through. I guess no one has ever dodged his calls before. The idea makes my lip twitch, easing the terrible constriction in my chest for a second, but then he comes to stand behind me, observing over my shoulder as I measure out the coffee.

Instantly, my belly contracts and my chest flushes hot. Blood rushes between my legs. My body has been trained

well. I ignore it and shake the coffee spoon to level it off.

He's not going to touch me. Not here, now, with how things are between us. Even he wouldn't dare.

I can't shrug him off since he's not touching me. I can't slip away without jostling him, though, and he knows it. He knows exactly how this makes me feel, if not how it swirls up my insides, then how it makes my breath hitch and my hands tremble.

I don't want to feel this way now. Or ever again. I square my shoulders, snap the canister into the machine, and flip the switch to brew.

"I've never seen you make coffee," he says, his gravelly voice sounding above my head. Shivers zip down my spine.

"Well, why would you?" I steel myself and squeeze out from between him and the counter, not stopping until the table is between us. I have to use my shoulder as a wedge to get past him since I can't suck my belly in anymore.

Again, it seems like he really wants to do something—throw the table out of the way and grab me, shake me until my bones rattle, shove me back in the box where he keeps me. But he's much too well-bred to let his civilized veneer slip, at least when we're not alone, and the occasional creak overhead is a reminder that Terri and Joyce haven't gone back to bed.

"You could have left a message," he starts in as the coffee maker begins to burble. "At the very least, you could have let your mother reassure me that you were alive and well."

"Mama knows I'm fine."

"That's not what she said."

"What are you talking about?"

"She said she hadn't seen you. That I should check with Melissa and Heather."

"She did?"

Pieces click together. Mama's fierce expression after I cried my heart out against her chest, soaking through her apron

smock like I did when I was little. The phone ringing off the hook and Mama telling me it was the church, it was one of my sisters, it was Aunt Doris. Her sudden trip to Memphis that necessitated my move to Uncle Edgar's farm.

She wasn't going to let this man hurt her baby again. It's exactly something she'd do.

"I didn't tell her not to tell you where I was. I didn't know you called."

"Of course I called. I was on her doorstep the next day. She said you were at your Uncle Edgar's."

Marco came by? Those first days were such a blur. Apparently, when I crashed and slept the day away, Mama was playing a shell game.

"Well, she knew I was done with you." I lift my nose in the air, desperately play-acting Alexis Carrington, the kind of woman who could say a thing like that to a man like Marco.

"Clearly, you're not." He levels a dark glance at my belly.

My nervous fingers pluck at my shirt as if they haven't gotten the message that we can't hide the bump any longer.

"Exactly when were you planning to tell me that I am going to be a father?" The cold condemnation in his voice makes my innards squirm.

"What makes you so sure that you are?" The taunt flies from my mouth so quickly, and it's so wildly out of character, that my own jaw drops.

Marco sighs, drives his hand through his hair again, and for a brief second, he closes his eyes and looks up to the heavens like he's praying for strength. "I understand that you're upset. Obviously, you've been under some stress. Hormones." He gestures in the direction of my stomach. "But don't ever lie to me, Diane."

He grabs my gaze, hard, captures it and lets everything that he is show, downplaying and soft-pedaling nothing. He's Marco de Noli. His name is renowned. His family has the kind

of history footnoted in books. He has three men outside my house, and that's a show of restraint. Discretion.

He controls the kind of money that lifts and sinks economies like the moon does the tides. He's the one in charge, of every place and person. Including here. Including me. Pietro would never have walked the boss's wife to the gate at the airport and left without a fuss unless the boss said it was okay.

"You let me go." The last puzzle piece snaps into place.

He inclines his head. "You needed to cool down."

"You didn't believe Mama when she said I wasn't there."

"I thought you needed more time to collect yourself."

My brain is slowly catching up. Distance and heartbreak made me forget who I was dealing with. "If you couldn't find me, you would have put detectives on me."

He nods in confirmation. "They were working through your known associates."

I guess they hadn't reached grade school yet. That's when I met Terri.

"I was going to tell you about the baby. That's why I called." I hate that I'm making excuses, that I feel so small and wormy.

"And you just discovered your condition?" He arches a mocking eyebrow.

My temper sparks, a weak flare in the damp of my anxious distress. I pad back to the counter, plunk two mugs down, and pour the coffee.

"You don't make it easy to tell you things," I mutter.

"Neither do you," he shoots at my back.

What does that mean? I'm too worked up to begin to figure it out, so I grab two spoons and shuttle the mugs, the sugar bowl, and the creamer to the table. I seat myself opposite from where I place his mug, a souvenir from the bicentennial with an eagle and the Spirit of '76 written on it in gold.

I wrap my hands around mine which advertises Shoney's Big Boy Restaurants. A little boy with a cowlick wearing checkered overalls skips with a hamburger.

It's surreal, warming my hands on the mug and watching the million-dollar man peel the lid off a Tupperware tub of Cremora. He side-eyes it before he works out what it's for, his lip curling as he finally deigns to stir a spoonful into his coffee. Marco takes his coffee with cream and sugar; he won't drink it otherwise. I'm sure he's never been served anything besides fresh cream before.

He takes a sip and grimaces.

"Don't drink it if you don't like it." I blow across my own cup.

"It's a different taste than I'm accustomed to." He takes another polite swallow before placing the cup down in front of himself with a note of finality.

"It's decaf." I set my cup down, too. I don't really want to add anything to my churning stomach. "Pregnant women aren't supposed to drink caffeine anymore. No tea. No soft drinks."

We fall quiet, considering each other across the table. I feel like a bird on a ledge, poised to fly away at any moment, any hint of danger, but I've got nowhere to go. I need to face this down. Face *him* down. Say the words before he has the chance.

I force a delicate cough to get my throat working. "In Texas, you can't divorce until the baby's born, but you can file the paperwork. The judge just won't sign off until after the baby's born."

Terri has a friend who's a paralegal. About a month ago, she came home from a happy hour with all kinds of information that made me sick to my stomach.

"Is that what you want?" Marco's accent thickens.

"You don't want to be married," I toss back.

He stares at me for a moment, and for the life of me, I can't read him. He's looking at me like an animal, a dangerous, calculating one, like a tiger or a puma.

He picks up his coffee, takes another sip, and grimaces.

"I am aware that I missed our anniversary and that upset you," he says once he's forced himself to swallow.

I cut him off. "Did Sienna tell you?"

Dark slashes appear above his cheekbones. "It was unintentional. There were...reasons."

"You can keep them. I don't care anymore." He's never lied to me that I know of. He's never had to. I don't ask questions or make demands. I don't think I could bear it if he did lie to my face, though. If he was that sort of weak underneath it all.

"There are things you don't know."

"And that's fine by me. Your business is your business. Not mine," I make myself say while my brain shouts *what things? Tell me, tell me.*

"Diane, you can't just stick your fingers in your ears." Aggravation brightens his dark eyes. I can't look away. "A child obviously changes things."

"Not for me it doesn't."

"You're being naïve." He stops himself, takes a beat, and starts again with a recalibrated, harder, colder tone. "That baby —" He directs a glance at the bump I'm hiding behind my crossed arms. "That baby is the de Noli heir. He stands to inherit one of the world's great fortunes. You understand that, don't you? A multinational conglomeration, properties on every habitable continent, interests in every kind of concern that you can imagine, a trust fund that alone is worth billions. And you're going to keep him safe with two women and a baseball bat?"

Of course, now that he knows about the baby, that's what matters to him. Nothing is more important than the de Noli empire. I refuse to let my heart sink.

“Leave your goons, then.”

“This house is not secure.”

“You don’t have to be here.”

“Diane, will you get serious?” His voice is rising again. Good.

“I am serious.” I push myself up from the table and dump my coffee in the sink. Decaf is nasty. “So you’ve got more money than God. Buy me a house with the kind of security you think *that baby* should have. I’ll go happily as long as you’re not there.”

He stands, too. There’s no way he can bear for me to have the advantage of height, even for a minute.

“I married a child,” he grits from clenched teeth.

“So you’ve said, but you knew I was nineteen when we met, and it didn’t stop you then, so I don’t see what grounds you have to keep complaining about it now.”

He hates it when I bring up our ages. Thirty-one and nineteen doesn’t seem like a big deal to me, but options and opportunity were slim in Gene Autry, and plenty of girls took what they could get to get out of their parents’ house. Half the girls in my class were married by the end of the summer after graduation. For Marco’s people, though, he robbed the cradle.

“You’ve only yourself to blame,” I add, just to score a point, even out the scales with me on the one side and the man with homes everywhere except Antarctica on the other. “If you’d left the poor little shampoo girl alone, you wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The point hits home.

Something happens to his face, a flush and strain that harshens all of his features. His lips become a cruel slash, his jaw a blade. A delicious fear begins to fizz in my veins.

I must’ve never spoken to him like this before because I’ve never seen this expression. It’s part disbelief, part rich man’s offended sensibility, but in the pulse at his temple and slight flare of his very Roman nostrils, there’s an excitement

flickering to life, the kind that shines in his darkened eyes when we play our games.

He's every inch the big boss, the quintessential VIP, and lord of all he surveys, but he's in Terri's pokey kitchen looming over a chrome diner chair with a cracked, mustard-yellow vinyl seat with the stuffing showing. And like that day at the Ampere when he followed me into the supply room, he's hooked.

He could never be the one flopping at the end of a line, though. Not Marco de Noli. He's the fisherman; he cannot be the catch.

He draws himself up and points toward the stairs. "Go. Pack your bags. The jet is on standby. We'll go home, and I'll call a shrink. That's what you need. Breaking vases and running away from home in the middle of the night like a teenager."

I plant my hands on my hips. "I have a better idea. You get on that jet and tell that shrink that I had to be crazy to marry you in the first place!"

"Diane, I'm warning you—" He grabs my elbow and pivots me toward the stairs. "Get your things now. We're done here. We're going home." He's a smoking volcano. His voice is raised, his accent so thick the consonants stick together while the vowels slide all over the place.

I've never seen him so discomposed, and I'm fascinated.

"Get your hands off me." I jerk my arm out of his grasp. That's my mistake.

He strikes without warning, seizing my upper arms and squeezing them to my sides, hauling me against him as his lips crash down on mine, hard and punishing. I taste copper. Instinctively, my back arches. I crush my breasts against his chest, and my firm belly bumps him, too. He hisses at the contact.

Is he going to stop?

Please, don't let him stop.

He's in my clutches again.

He tears his mouth away, spins me, bends me forward until my palms are flat on the counter, my elbows collapsed by my ears, my left cheek pressed to the cold Formica. The edge cuts into the swollen tops of my tender breasts. The undersides of my lips hurt where his kiss mashed them against my teeth.

I whimper. His large hand presses between my shoulder blades, pinning me down.

"You don't tell me what to do," he mutters thickly.

Sometimes I struggle. Kick. Bite. Throw my head back and crack it against his chin. But there's a baby now, and I'm not in that mood where I want to see how far I can push him, how far he'll go.

I'm so relieved that I want to cry.

I want to sink into this, our thing, let the sensations fall on me like rain and sweep me away, his jagged breath, his pinching grip, the grunted curses in a guttural Italian that I can't understand.

The clank of his belt buckle. The zip of his zipper.

The rush of adrenaline through my veins.

I can't help but test him, buck up against his splayed hand, but he allows no give. I'm soaking my cotton panties.

Is he going to rip them off this time?

I squirm, twist my hips, clench my thighs together, make it a fight to drag my pants down.

I whimper, "No. Please don't." But quietly. So Terri and Joyce won't hear.

He rumbles back at me in Italian, and I have to imagine what he's saying. *Spread your legs. Shut your mouth. Take it.*

He gets my pants around my right ankle and moves the hand on my back to hoist my left leg, holding it in the air, splitting me open. The air is cool on my pulsing pussy.

He doesn't hesitate. He never does. He slams into me to the hilt, but I'm so wet it hardly hurts.

I like it when it hurts.

His chin, rough with evening stubble, digs into my spine just below the base of my neck. His thrusts crush my breasts against the edge of the counter. I'm surrounded. Helpless. He can do whatever he wants to me, and he will.

All I can do is take it, let him pound into me and satisfy himself as my insides twist tighter and tighter, throbbing harder until my clit feels like a fat berry about to burst. I need to touch it. I'll die if I don't, but he's got me pinned, trapped.

I thrash. He slams his cock into me.

I shouldn't want this, not from him, not like this, not anymore. He doesn't care about me. I'm a body to him, a pussy for him to take whenever he wants, powerless to stop him from doing whatever perverted thing he wants. And that's my fantasy, and that's the reality that's broken my heart.

His unforgiving fingers dig into the flesh of my thigh, and my hip socket aches, and he doesn't care because I'm his to use however he wants. The thought is a knife in my heart, but it's also the hot air that carries me up and away into the clear blue skies where pure pleasure explodes in the aching, quivering place where he's driving his cock, over and over and over.

My pussy contracts and spasms, and it's enough to trigger my clit, and I'm shaking to my bones, my fingertips curling into the countertop like that'll let me hold on, but I'm flying.

"You like that, don't you," he growls into my ear. "You love it."

I observe him from a height of ten thousand feet. He jerks his hips several times in rapid succession, and his hot cum fills me, spilling past his shaft, dribbling out of me, tickling my stretched, raw pussy lips before it drips to the linoleum with a wet patter.

For a long second, we're frozen in place. He gasps for air. My upper chest is pinned flat by his dead weight. The single

leg holding me up shakes. My body softens into dough.

Next is my favorite part. He'll rearrange me, sit me up or ease me down depending on what he's done with me, put me back into a proper position so I look like a wife who was ravished, not a pussy that he used for his own pleasure.

He'll examine my thighs, my breasts, my wrists, and if he finds a mark, his lips will spear down and the corners of his eyes will crease, but he won't be able to look away. He'll be fascinated.

So will I.

He'll get me a glass of water and a warm washcloth, and then he'll hold me, play with my hair, dust soft kisses on my lips and cheeks and neck, his fingers lightly stroking the marks he made. And when I have to go to the bathroom, he'll follow me, brushing his teeth or combing his hair in the mirror like he has a reason to be there besides the fact that he can't leave my side afterwards, even for a minute. As if he worries that if he leaves me alone for a second to think, I'll decide that he's a monster.

And don't I love that, too, holding a man like him in my hand like that? So I'll let him fuss over me, and all the while, I'll soar. I'm the queen of the clouds. Everything is right with the world.

I'm waiting on that feeling with all my heart when he drops the leg he was holding up. Instantly, he backs away until the table is between us again. Like I'm poison.

I have to push myself upright and turn to face him on wobbling legs. When I realize my pants are bunched around my ankles, I have to squat awkwardly to pull them up and retie the drawstring with trembling fingers.

A wave of cold rushes through me. My cotton pants stick to the cum smeared on my thighs, and it doesn't feel like it usually does, like a game we play, a secret game with rules we make up as we go, that we don't ever, ever talk about.

By the time I look at him, his trousers are zipped and his belt is buckled. His expression strikes me with dread. He's

disgusted.

Frozen to the bone, I fold my arms over my chest and sink my chin into my crossed wrists. For the first time after we've done what we do, I feel ashamed.

“That shouldn't have happened,” he says.

His armor is clinking into place. He slams his helmet on, and the visor falls over his eyes. Once again, he's not my husband anymore. He's *their* Marco. Monsieur de Noli. Il signore.

“You're pregnant.” He spits it at me like an accusation and then swipes at his nose like he does when he's turning his mind back to business. He checks his watch. “The jet will be refueling now. It should be ready for takeoff in an hour. Pack now, or leave your things, it's all the same to me, but get your shoes on.”

I register the cold floor on my bare toes.

I slowly shake my head. “No. Nothing has changed. I'm not going back to Monte Carlo.” I hate that I sound so weak, like I'm appealing to him rather than telling him how it is.

I hate that the thing inside me that matches up perfectly to the thing inside him—that lets me fly so high and get closer to him than two people should be able to get—also makes me the kind of woman who gets stood up on her anniversary and ordered around like a junior employee.

He's not even listening. He's picked up the phone, and he's barking Italian into the receiver. It's a quick conversation, and when he hangs up, he's once again every inch the cold, ruthless tycoon.

He's the man who escorts me to state dinners. The public man who is all surface, no hint of heart.

“I'm not arguing with you, Diane.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you.”

He stares me down. I hold my breath.

Please don't let him say something so bad that I can't forgive him.

Like I'm a machine that's making a strange noise, he sizes me up for a long moment, and then, without a visible twinge of conscience, he does his worst.

"Let me make your situation crystal clear for you, Diane. I own your mother's house, the house *she* insisted on staying in rather than moving to more comfortable accommodations in Dallas or Monaco."

He pauses to see how his words land. I gawp at him with owl eyes. I can't do anything else. Part of me is still drifting dopily downward from the high of sex, and the rest is astonished he'd lower himself to threatening anyone.

"I own Heather and Melissa's condominium," he continues when I give him nothing. "I'm funding Jenny's gap year. I pay Donny and Frank's tuition. I own your Uncle Edgar's farm, and I pay for your Aunt Doris's convalescent home. Every one of your family members drives a car with my name on the title, and the bills for the insurance, and their gas and electric, and their telephone lines—they are all mailed to my accountants."

He stares me down from across the room, his gaze cold and pitiless. When he speaks, he spits his words.

"You will return to Monte Carlo with me for the child's sake, and you will do so gracefully, without a word of complaint or argument, or mark my words, you will find that I can also treat my commitments with as little regard as you do your own vows."

My cheeks heat at that last dig, but I am not going to feel guilty, not when this man who's supposed to be my husband is threatening to put my family out on the street.

"Mama would burn her own house down if I let any man hold it over my head," I hurl back. My hands shake, and I clutch at the neckline of my T-shirt like covering my collarbone will make me feel less exposed so I can be as tough as I'm trying to sound.

“And the others? Heather and Melissa will be happy to give up their penthouse? Donny and Frank won’t mind switching back to the public school?”

They’d love it. They hate wearing uniforms.

“Well, try it, and we’ll find out,” I say, lifting my chin.

He considers me for a second as if he’s counting me up, itemizing all the ways that I’m no match for him.

His eyes somehow flash and darken, but then he seems to lock himself down. His face goes hard as granite. “I don’t want to threaten you, Diane, but there are other considerations now. Believe that I will do whatever I have to do.”

Where before, his hard face would make me scared, make me rush to smooth things over, it just hurts my heart now, reminding me that he might want me to do what he says, but he doesn’t want *me*.

“I bet you would. You’re just like the rest of your family.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Empty and mean and selfish.”

His nostrils flare. “We’re not talking about my family.”

“Oh, I know. I know the rules.”

He has gravely miscalculated if he thinks my family would want me to consider his blackmail for a single second. He’s so accustomed to his people living off him that he doesn’t understand that my family’s not afraid of hard work. He can take it all away, and we’d survive. We have each other. I have no doubt that even Uncle Edgar, who’s said maybe a dozen words to me in my entire life, would rather start from scratch with nothing but the clothes on his back than have me eat dirt for his sake.

“Family is family.” He recites it on automatic, like he’s been brainwashed, and it’s his mantra to keep himself from thinking.

“Yeah, they’re the people you threaten to put out on the street if you don’t get your way.”

I glare straight into his ice-cold eyes, and God, I miss him, the man I thought he was when I met him.

I didn't think it'd be possible, but he squares himself even straighter and grinds out, "If you force me to, I will."

It's on my lips to tell him go on and do it. If this is how he wants it to be, let him do his worst. I'm not stupid. I left my ring behind at the villa and the pearls he got me after his first business trip and the other guilt gifts and the heirlooms. But I took the tennis bracelet he gave me after our first night together, and the earrings he bought me after the time on my period which I refuse to think about now because it still makes my whole face burn.

Anyway, the bracelet alone would buy Mama a new house, and if I pawned the lot, we'd all be fine.

I want to tell him that—he can shove his blackmail where the sun don't shine—but something makes me hold my tongue.

It takes me a long, silent, angry moment to figure it out, and maybe I wouldn't except for a fraction of a second, Marco's icy gaze darts to my belly, and almost imperceptibly, it softens.

And I remember. Just now, when he had me bent over the counter, and he was pounding into me, using me, taking what he wanted how he wanted, one of his hands was hoisting my leg up, holding me open for him.

The other one was cradled around my belly. Protecting it. Making sure it didn't bump the cabinet.

Because there's a baby in there. Our baby.

And maybe for the first time, I really consider it. Not the morning sickness, the worry, the money it'll cost, the weird metal taste in my mouth, all the stuff I'll need.

The baby.

Marco is its father, and he wants it. That has to count.

I've had an absent, disinterested husband, but I've also had a father who loved me. And I've lost one.

Will wanting the baby count for enough?

I don't know.

But shouldn't it count enough for me to try one more time?

If my mother could have saved me from that feeling of not mattering enough, of being disposable, wouldn't she have?

In a second. Without hesitation.

But he's not offering me anything. No *sorry, I'll do better, it'll be different*. No *please, Diane, tell me what it'll take to get you back*.

I release a sigh. I cannot imagine Marco de Noli groveling for a second. If I'm going to decide to give my baby the chance of a father in its life, the man I married isn't going to make it the slightest bit easier.

An awful weight settles over me. I don't have a choice. I'm going back to Monte Carlo. To Vittoria's house and the cast of *Clue*. Someone's going to whack me with a wrench in the salon. Probably Rosanella.

It doesn't have to be forever. If it becomes clear I've made another mistake, I can escape. I did it once. I can do it again.

"Make a decision, Diane," he says.

I refuse to give Marco the satisfaction of actual capitulation. I stick my nose in the air, and as I pass him to head up the stairs for my shoes, I toss over my shoulder, "Fine. Now that I know that this relationship is a straight transaction and I'm some kind of whore, I want to be paid in cash from here on out."

I don't bother to wait for his reaction. I leave him in my wake as I ascend the stairs, my own woman at least for another few minutes.

MARCO

When my father went missing, the family didn't notice until the next morning. He often went to the casino after an afternoon racing his powerboat against playboys and Hollywood stars and sheiks, any and all comers. If not the casino, he'd spend the evening with his mistress in Nice. Of course, I didn't know this at the time. I was a child. I was aware he'd roar up to the house in his Carrera Speedster in the wee hours, but no matter how his skin stunk of scotch and perfume, he'd appear at breakfast clean-shaven and pressed.

As long as he slid into his seat at the head of the table before the table was cleared, Mother took no note of his absence. They lived separate lives, much as Grandfather and Rosanella did. Like everyone's parents in our set did.

The morning when my father didn't appear at breakfast, Monty was the first to grow concerned. I remember him whispering in Mother's ear, and Mother waving him off. She was angry, but even as a child, I recognized the speculation in her fuming. There'd be sharp words and frosty silences, but then there'd be a new fur or a new necklace for Mother to show off to the ladies who came for tea.

Ric was so young; he was oblivious. Grandfather was hidden behind his newspaper, and Rosanella was keeping to herself as usual, but as Monty's gaze kept darting at the clock, a dread descended on me. Perhaps a premonition, although by then, Father's boat had long since flipped and floated out on the current.

I knew in my gut that something had gone terribly wrong, but what could I do? I was expected to sit straight and mind my manners. Be gracious, but take no undue note of the staff. Be silent unless spoken to, and speak clearly when called upon. Comport myself with the dignity expected of a de Noli at all times, even as the clock ticked closer to ten and then eleven, and Mother's face turned gray, and Grandfather began barking into the telephone.

Those three hours used to be the longest in my life, sitting like a stoic at the table and then at the desk in my room, waiting for the roar of an engine, or the ring of the telephone, or for my mother to remember that I'd been banished out of sight and call me down for my tea.

I can't recall how it ended that day. All that remains are blurred memories of my mother wailing and Grandfather cursing his son in Italian. *That goddamn boat. That goddamn fool.*

The past five months have been like living through that morning on repeat, over and over.

And Diane is sleeping blithely across from me on the airplane.

My body is a knot. My muscles are as tight as a drum. Impending doom swings above me like my own personal sword of Damocles.

The flight is twelve hours long, and it's early in the day in Monte Carlo. What are the odds that no disasters afflict De Noli International while we're mid-air? These days, not good.

I'd been forced to leave Ric in charge. He has orders to keep Grandfather busy, take him golfing, have a long lunch at the club. Sienna knows to slow walk anything Grandfather manages to approve while I'm gone.

I exhale and shrug off my jacket, snap it to smooth the wrinkles, and drape it on the empty seat next to me. My skin is clammy under my cotton shirt, and I've never been so ripe. Five months of drinking myself to sleep is seeping from my

pores, and I haven't washed Diane off my fingers so I can smell her when I touch my face.

When we boarded the plane, Diane waited for me to sit and then took the seat diagonal from me, as far from me as she could get without making the kind of statement that sitting in the rear of the plane with the staff would make. A man would have to be blind not to read her body language. She's here under duress.

Before we took off, she curled up, covered herself up to her nose with a thin plaid blanket, and passed out, blissfully unconcerned while I tried to gauge whether or not the tightness in my chest and the pain radiating from my strained back muscles is a heart attack.

Grandfather's doctor has been regaling him about the symptoms for the past ten years, and since Grandfather doesn't listen to anyone, I've been subjected to the lectures as well.

An ache in the neck and jaw, cold sweat, indigestion, and nausea. If it's a heart attack, I've been having it since she left.

It's probably not a serious problem. If it were, my cock wouldn't be hard, and I wouldn't be starving. When was the last time I ate?

I raise a hand.

"May I get you a drink, signore?" the leggy stewardess asks as she appears at my side. She's been hovering since we got to altitude.

"Scotch on the rocks, please." I'd like to ask for the bottle, but this isn't the end of the road. I need my wits about me. "Also, whatever you have in the back. A sandwich. Bring me two."

"Right away, signore."

As soon as Diane wakes up, she'll need to eat. She's expecting. Five months along at least. Shouldn't she be bigger? Her belly felt no larger than a small watermelon when I held it in the kitchen. I veer my brain away from the memory. That was a mistake.

How did this happen? She takes the pill. I'd agreed to wait a year before starting a family, and she never mentioned changing her mind.

During the months before she left, she didn't say much of anything at all. I didn't notice until she was gone.

The pressure in my chest tightens. It's not a heart attack. It doesn't feel like an elephant sitting on my chest. More like a large dog.

I crack my stiff neck and extend my legs. I can't relax, but it's fine. Diane is here. She's safe. She's angry, but I'm angry, too. As long as she's here and I can see her, it'll be fine.

She sighs in her sleep and nestles her head into the crook of her arm. She didn't cut her hair. I was afraid she might. Women do when they want to make a point, but she didn't.

I imagined her chopping it off, dying it brown or red, changing her name, and disappearing into the streets of New York or LA, but she went back to Dallas. She was living with an old friend under Diane de Noli. She wasn't even using her maiden name. I've been on the verge of a coronary for five months, and she was working just a few blocks away from where we first met.

I stare at long strands of hair the color of cornsilk clinging to the blanket from static. My hands twitch. I want to shake her awake, wrap her hair around my fist, snap her head back until she cries, until she blubbers, *I'm sorry Marco, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* with snot running down her face. I want her on her knees while I make her sorry.

I want her sobbing her release while her tears make a wet splotch on the carpet. Afterwards, I want her to watch me with solemn blue eyes as we lie side by side, as if we have a secret that only two people in the world know.

In her sleep, she shivers, as if she's reading my mind. I wouldn't be surprised. I might not understand her at all, but when it comes to fucking, we have ESP. At least, I believed we did.

It's not right what I do to her. I drove her away. It has to stop. It will. It already has.

The stewardess returns, a tumbler on her tray.

"The sandwiches will be just a minute," she says, lingering a moment when I don't respond and striking a subtle pose, a hip cocked and her shoulders back, a move that thrusts her impressive tits forward. Maybe the pose is not so subtle.

The purser comes by, encouraging her toward the back of the cabin. I grab his sleeve before he passes. "Another blanket for Signora de Noli, if you will."

He nods.

I can't remember when I last slept. Yesterday? The day before? And how many hours did I get? No more than three or four. My eyeballs feel like sandpaper, and my brain is thick and slow.

I shouldn't have fucked her over that counter. Not like that. It's wrong. Sick. You do that kind of thing with a mistress or a whore. Not your wife.

She left because I didn't control myself. Because of what I tried the night before that debacle with the vase. Is that why she broke it? To get her own back on her way out?

She looks like an angel sleeping there, her balled up hands shoved under her chin. Innocent and sweet. It's not an illusion. Somehow, no matter what I do to her, she wakes up wide-eyed and smiling, looking at me like I hung the moon.

I'm a sick, twisted fuck. I should have never gone after her that day at the Ampere.

She was shaving me, and she nicked me. The way her hands were trembling, it was a miracle she didn't slit my throat, and I saw it coming, but I sat there, willing it to happen. I wanted her on her back foot.

Afterward, I could have taken the towel from her and waved her away. She would've run off crying, maybe lost her job, but she'd have found another. She'd meet a red-blooded

American her own age and spend her evenings at the disco like her sisters until she married a man who could make her happy.

But I made her press the towel against my skin, and then, when she took it to the back room to toss it in the laundry—and to hide from me—I followed. And what happened, happened. I was never going to let her go after that. I never *will* let her go.

“Here you are, signore.” I’m so lost in thought, I almost startle when the stewardess rolls over a table set with a plate of ham salad sandwiches and a bottle of Perrier. “Is there anything else you want?” She slathers on the innuendo.

“That’s all.”

She reaches to pour the water, but I beat her to it, studiously dismissing her. The last thing Diane needs is to wake up to a woman bent over me, sticking her tits in my face.

Sienna says that Diane suspects we’re having an affair. Of course, Sienna didn’t share that insight soon enough to do any good. It wasn’t until I realized that my wife wasn’t hiding out at her mother’s, and that despite the efforts of the best investigators in the states, she was somehow in the wind that Sienna felt she ought to share that little piece of the puzzle.

I have no idea where Diane thinks I’d find the energy to play away from home when I’ve been working twelve- and fourteen-hour days since our marriage began, but she lives in her own world, and she’s never shown an interest in mine.

What was she doing for the past year in Monte Carlo? Mother and Chiara said she shopped ’til she dropped, as they say, all day, every day, and from the look of our closet, I had no reason to doubt them.

But when Diane left, the racks were still full, and almost every outfit I remember her wearing was accounted for, the shoes and purses and belts as well. There were empty spaces here and there. What did she take? And why did she leave so much behind?

Because she couldn’t bear the reminder of me? Because that last night, I went too far.

I was a fool to ignore the changes in her, to let my curiosity be satisfied with Mother and Chiara's assurances, and Diane's weak protestations that everything was fine.

But I was fighting for our lives, learning from experience for the very first time that I could go down in flames as easily as any other man.

All my life, I've gone from strength to strength. When I was twenty-one, after paying my dues, climbing my way from the mailroom to the docks to the office above the warehouse floor, Grandfather gave me the Alastor Line, our worst performing asset. By the time I took my place at de Noli headquarters at twenty-five, Alastor was the jewel of our shipping portfolio.

When Grandfather finally stepped aside from overseeing the day-to-day operations, I doubled profits in the first year. I'd never slipped, never failed to come out on top.

Not until Diane Byers nicked me with a razor, and I took my eye off the prize. By the time I resurfaced from my honeymoon, my grandfather, still the chairman of De Noli International, had entered a disastrous, under-the-table deal with the Russians that could have turned us into international pariahs.

We were an informant and an indictment away from having our assets frozen, everything we owned forfeited, blackballed from the world of finance. The de Noli name would have been destroyed under my watch.

While I'd been burning the midnight oil to prove myself, I hadn't noticed Grandfather's lapses of memory and moments of confusion, or I'd written them off as the quirks of aging. He still played a round of golf most afternoons, still kept a mistress in Cannes and another in Paris. I'd had no idea.

The day I brought my too-young bride home, I was immediately plunged into the battle of my life. We're in the clear now by the skin of our teeth, but it almost cost me the only thing I've ever taken for myself.

Curled into her seat, Diane snores softly.

My guts twist, and I rub my chest. The ham salad settles uneasily.

She's here now. I will fix this, too. No more treating her like a mistress. No more leaving her to her own devices. She's going to become a real wife. Learn Italian and take on her duties, no more excuses. If she can navigate the mall, she can act as my hostess and serve on a few charity boards.

She had too much time on her hands. That was the problem.

Maybe I'll fly her back to the island where we honeymooned. Take her shopping on Corfu. Sightseeing in Athens. There's going to be a baby. Things like what happened earlier in the kitchen cannot happen anymore. I won't allow it.

Diane shifts and sneezes in her sleep, then snuffles. She has the smallest sneezes. Like the kind of dog ladies carry in their purses.

Is it the cigarettes getting to her? The air in the cabin is getting thick. She hates it when we go out and smoke gets in her hair.

I raise my hand, and again, the stewardess instantly appears. "If you will, tell the fellows to put out the cigarettes."

"Right away, signore." I hear her murmur the instructions to the steward for him to pass along, but the men are too far back for me to hear them grumble under their breath, as no doubt they'll do.

I finish the last sandwich, watch my wife, and sip my scotch, my meal a rock in my stomach and my muscles stiffening as the minutes pass. Her head falls back, and her soft, pale lips part. In profile, she looks like a painting, a Renoir, a pink-cheeked girl who should be reading a book or combing her hair in a mirror.

On her knees or bent over a countertop, underneath me with her arms pinned over her head—she looks like Eve in the garden, bitten apple at her feet. Her blue eyes glitter, and her soft tits with the pale bikini triangles swing apart, her fat

brown nipples puckered tight while she moans and whines, struggling against me while she chases her pleasure.

My mouth waters.

She likes what we do. At least, she comes, hard, every time. She doesn't know better, though. I was her first. I ruined her.

Warmth suffuses my chest, a strange brew of shame and pride and lust, and at that moment, she fusses in her seat. Her eyelids flutter open, but her gaze is hazy and vague. Instinctively, she looks to me for reassurance.

“Hush,” I say. “Everything is fine. Go back to sleep.” In her muddled state, she believes me without qualm and drifts off again.

I watch her chest slowly rise and fall, and I let myself remember the day I met her at the Ampere spa.

She disappeared behind a curtain with the towel. I untied the black cape and followed her into the supply closet. She was in the back between two heavy-duty, floor-to-ceiling metal shelves stacked with towels and bottles. The room was windowless, dimly lit by a flickering fluorescent light with a burnt-out tube.

When she heard me, she whirled around, startled. Her blonde braid swung. I stalked forward. She backed herself up against a shelf. She was breathing quickly, her eyes so round, her black pupils so wide.

I didn't do this kind of thing. Women pursued me. They always had. Grandfather had been warning me since I was sent off to school at nine that I must never be alone with a woman unless she'd been vetted.

I didn't fully understand the danger until I was older, but Grandfather was successful at putting the fear of God into me. As a boy, I was convinced that women saw me as a fat goose, ripe for the plucking. As a man, I discovered that wasn't too far off the mark.

I couldn't understand what I was doing in that back room, why I was drawn closer and closer. I couldn't tear my eyes

away from hers. I was like Narcissus, except I wasn't captivated by my own reflection, but by the nymph underneath the water. Her trepidation. Her anticipation.

She was afraid, but she was also fascinated—and that fascinated me.

I'm a rich and powerful man. I walk into a room, and people bow and scrape. If I turn my attention on a woman, and she's experienced and interested, she'll preen, flirt, flash skin. If she's innocent, she'll blush, act demure, play the long game.

Diane did neither, but she wanted me. Her pulse fluttered in her neck, and her breasts rose and fell while her eyes ate me up. She was desperate for me to touch her, and she didn't know how to make it happen.

My conscience, my upbringing, my common sense—they all told me to turn around and walk away.

My instinct whispered to take what I wanted. Why shouldn't I? She wanted me. I wanted her. Why not, just this once? Where was the harm? She'd let me do it. I had no doubt.

I closed the final distance between us and seized the neat, shiny braid, wound it tight around my hand, and jerked her head back. She gasped. I bent and took her mouth. We caught fire. Her nails bit into my forearms, her teeth nicked my tongue.

I captured her wrists, pinned them against the shelf above her head with one hand, used the other to rip her pantyhose and drag her panties to the side, swallowing her whimpers, her little whines of distress. She squeezed her thighs together, trapping my hand. I pried them apart with my knee, all the while kissing her, tasting her, as her bucking and twisting drove me crazy.

I split her pussy lips and plunged a finger into her wet heat. She was tight. Too tight. She cried out into my mouth, her body tensing with pain.

I stopped, realization slowly dawning on me. My mind was gone, fractured, descended into some primal state where I could do whatever my strength allowed. I'd never lost control

before, not once, but here I was in a storeroom about to fuck a virgin against some shelves.

I let go of her wrists, my arms dropping to my sides, and we stared at each other, panting, the moment stretching, details emerging from the red haze in my brain. Her chin was chafed pink from my stubble, her lips swollen, her big eyes bright and shining. But not only with fear. Not only with pain.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I said.

She blinked, not moving, her breasts heaving.

“I had no right.”

She lowered her eyes, her thick lashes brushing her flushed cheeks.

“I should leave.”

I remember so vividly, like it was yesterday, how we were silent and motionless for a long moment, and then, how she glanced back up. She tilted her head ever so slightly to the left. And then, she slowly lifted her trembling arms and grabbed the shelf above her head.

She met my eyes, and there wasn’t a challenge there or an invitation. Just need. Desire. She was holding her breath.

“You can go. I won’t tell anyone. You won’t get into trouble,” I told her.

Her fingers curled tighter around the edge of the shelf, not letting go.

And so help me God, I did it. I took her, rough and quick. It hurt her. She bled. She also came so hard she strangled my cock, milking me in a tight fist that spasmed on and on.

I took her back to my suite and did it again until her pussy was swollen and red, her eyes glazed, and her brain scrambled. I fed her and held her in a hot bath and did it again and again. She fought me until she was too tired, and then she let me fuck her like a ragdoll, and when we were done, she curled up against me like a kitten and passed out.

The next morning, when I woke, she'd ordered breakfast, and she was sitting cross-legged on a pillow in the bed, watching *The Price is Right* as she peeled an orange. She'd offered me a slice, smiling shyly. I never let her go.

I won't ever let her go.

Across from me in the dim jet cabin, she shifts again. Her blanket falls half to the floor, and since she's facing away from me, I can see the graceful curve of her spine, but her new belly is hidden.

She's carrying my son or daughter. I can't treat my child's mother like a whore. This is the end of it.

Things will be different now. I'll make sure I'm home at night in time for dinner. I'll settle the tension in the house. Maybe a renovation project will help Diane feel more at home. She can redo the third floor, turn a guest room into a nursery. That should keep her busy until the baby comes.

She'll be happy and forget about this whole misadventure. Considering her condition, hormones are more than likely to blame for most of this mess. I'll call Doctor Wiederman and get a referral for a head shrink, or have him prescribe Diane the pills that Mother and Chiara swear by.

I cross my stretched legs at the ankle and force myself to relax. Diane is here. She's mad, but she's not breaking vases and shouting. Nothing has gone too wrong that it can't be fixed.

The stewardess passes, and she leans across the aisle to pick up Diane's blanket and tuck it back around her, bending at the waist so I get a nice view of her ass. I lean my head back and close my eyes. I'm getting a pounding headache.

Everything is going to be fine. I was a negligent husband. I can own that while acknowledging it was an unfortunate necessity. I've never failed at a challenge, though, and marriage is no different. The formula for success isn't a mystery. High standards, no excuses, and a refusal to compromise.

The jet engines hum, and for the first time in months, sleep rolls over me easily, and I sink into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I wake hours later with Diane's wary eyes on me. She's turned in her seat so her back is to the window, and she's facing me. The sunrise fills the cabin with gray light. Despite the purple bruises under her eyes, she's beautiful.

"Good morning," I say, my voice gruff from sleep.

"Good morning," she says softly back.

"Did you sleep well?" I ask.

She shrugs, her nervous glance dancing from my face to her lap to the empty seat across from her. "Are you taking me back to the villa?" she asks.

I nod carefully. "Yes. We're going home."

"*Your* home." She sniffs, maneuvering herself so she's upright, her back straight and her arms folded. She tries to cross her legs, but her stomach makes it awkward, so she gives it up. "Your family's home," she grumbles under her breath.

My temper flares, but even though I'm still waking, I don't let it get away from me. This is her constant complaint—my family. It would have been easier if I moved her to another property, but the de Noli headquarters are in Monaco, and this past year, I would have never seen her if she lived in the house in Nice or the apartment in Paris. I was unwilling to go without her, but perhaps it would have been wiser.

"Family is family." I know it infuriates her, but what else can I say?

She glares at me for a moment, her nose flaring as her temper sparks. "That doesn't make a damn bit of sense," she says, firming her chin and staring out the cabin window.

"If you tried to get along, it would go easier for you." I raise my hand in the air and snap, and when I catch movement from the corner of my eyes, I call, "Coffee, please. And hot towels."

For a second, I think she won't respond. She has that scrunched expression she gets when she's swallowing her

words. It's the same face she makes before she jumps in the pool except she isn't pinching her nose closed.

But then she blows a puff of air and launches at me, "Go along with what, Marco? Laugh along with the other ladies when your mother makes fun of me in Italian right in front of my face?"

"She couldn't do that if you spoke the language."

"She couldn't do that if I were in Dallas with people who *like* me and *care* about me, who wouldn't let *anyone* say *anything* about me in Italian or English or *any* language."

An uncomfortable twinge digs under my ribs. "I'll speak to her. If she's doing something that could be construed as *making fun*, she won't anymore."

Dots of color appear on Diane's pale cheeks. Her whole body somehow bristles. "Don't put yourself out," she says and turns away to scowl out the window again.

What does she want?

"Everything is on my back." The words fly from my mouth toward the back of her head.

Literally tens of thousands of workers rely on me for their livelihoods. Entire towns depend on De Noli International for their very existence. I make million-dollar decisions at all hours with incomplete information and often very little time for consideration. Our family, our name, our legacy—all of it hinges on my ability not to fuck up beyond redemption, every minute of every day.

"You expect me to deal with the bickering of women on top of everything else?" I ask.

"I don't expect anything from you," she says and folds herself away in front of my eyes. She slumps in her seat, draws the blanket over her chest, gives me her back, and closes her eyes.

The sharp pain under my rib throbs. I want to haul her out of her seat, drag her into the sleeping quarters in the back, and make her open her eyes. Make her look at me.

She doesn't get to be everything I care about and then just take it away.

We're interrupted with the shush of the rolling cart. The smiling stewardess appears with coffee and hot water, steaming towels, and a bowl of fruit. She makes to pour, but I wave her off.

I make a cup of tea for Diane, set it on a saucer, and stand. Even in this top-of-the-line Boeing, I can't straighten to my full height. I bend over my wife and hold the cup out.

"Drink this. We're landing soon."

She gazes up at me with narrowed eyes. "You shouldn't have put yourself out," she says primly. The corners of her mouth are drawn down with petulance. She makes no move to take the tea.

"Diane—" I toss the blanket and grab her hand, intending to—I don't know—*make* her take it. I'm frustrated. She's acting as if she doesn't understand how to behave, as if her wires did cross, and she's a childish, volatile version of the woman I thought I knew.

She balls her hand into a fist.

I jerk up that arm by her wrist, but what am I going to do? Pry her fingers open?

I don't get the chance to find out. She bares her teeth, and with her free hand, she smashes the cup and saucer toward me with her open palm. Hot water splashes my chest, the burn stealing my breath. The cup clatters against the saucer as they both hit the ground.

Diane gasps.

The stewardess appears over the back of the seats, her eyes on stalks.

"Go," I snap. "Everything is under control."

For a second, I think Diane will shrink, mortified, back into her seat. I'll grab a linen napkin and dab uselessly at my shirt, and we'll go on to sulk in civil silence in our opposite corners until the plane lands, until the baby's born, until he

turns eighteen, until something finally comes along to put us out of our misery.

I'll never figure out the right thing to do or say, but I'll hold on, crushing her in my clumsy hands until I drive her all the way crazy.

But Diane doesn't shrink and cower. She rises from her seat, her face blooming red, and she slams her palm into my chest exactly where the tea splashed me. I trip backward a step, not from the force, but from surprise. Her eyes pop as if she's shocked by herself.

I shift so no one passing down the aisle can see us.

She slams my chest again. And again. It doesn't hurt much even though she's nailing the skin scalded by the hot water. She doesn't have the strength to cause real damage.

I let her land a few more blows, and then I catch her wrists mid-air, my cock swelling. She tries to twist them free as she lets her body go limp, using her dead weight to get loose. Her usual tricks. I hold her while she fights. She kicks my shins with her bare feet and whimpers.

I pull her close, tucking her forearms between us, bowing so my forehead presses against hers. We're both struggling for breath, our chests rising and falling against each other's. She calms. My racing heart slows.

"Why won't you ever fight in my corner?" Her quiet voice is hollow. Lonely. "At least *sometimes*."

I married her against my family's wishes, despite Grandfather's threat to disinherit me and the barely concealed censure of my friends and associates. I made a cliché of myself, the rich fool who falls for the blonde American bombshell barely out of school.

I've never regretted it, and I'd do it again, but she doesn't know any of it. If I can help it, she never will.

I defied everyone so that I could make her miserable. I press my lips to her temple and taste salt. "All I've ever wanted to do was make you happy, Diane."

“Well, when do you plan to start?” she asks, sniffing.

I can't answer, so I smile into her mussed hair and inhale. The scent of her shampoo loosens the knot inside me.

I help her back to her seat, retrieve the blanket that fell to the floor, and cover her lap. She lets me.

I don my jacket to hide the brown stain drying down my front, pour her another cup of tea and myself a coffee, and I sit beside her. When the stewardess comes by to roll away the cart before we begin our descent, there's nothing for her to see. My wife is resting her eyes. I'm flipping through the *Times*.

No one knows how close my heart has come to giving out a hundred times during the past five months, or how hard it's slamming now. I comport myself with the dignity expected of a de Noli.

We land without incident. As we disembark, I take the purser aside to tell him not to book the leggy stewardess on my flights moving forward. She'll have better luck with Ric or Grandfather, and I'm a fool for the woman behind me, dragging her feet, her huge sunglasses covering most of her face except for her long-suffering scowl.

She's finally realized what a monster I am, and she hates me.

She's going to have my baby, and she's trapped, and I'm her jailor, but what could I do?

She is the only thing I've ever wanted for myself.

And she's never going to forgive me.

DIANE

Marco is on the car phone all the way back to Monte Carlo. He barks out orders in Italian and French, interrupts the person on the other line, and launches into a litany of what sounds like dangerously patient rhetorical questions. He clicks the handset into the cradle in the middle console of the town car, and I think he's finally done, but he picks it up again and punches another number.

The man who whispered in my ear that he wants to make me happy is gone, and my bloodless tycoon husband is back. I don't even feel like hitting him anymore. I shrivel in the leather seat like a cold balloon.

We fly down the highway, and soon enough, we're winding through the narrow palm-lined streets of Monte Carlo, Mont Agel rising above the skyline. The sky is a painful blue.

As they did the first time I came here, the buildings strike me as so neat and tidy, packed in together like sardines. Pietro guides the car smoothly through mid-afternoon traffic. I guess I shouldn't have worried that he'd get canned. Obviously, he had Marco's okay to drive me to the airport that night.

I should be furious. Marco thinks he's blackmailing me. He thinks he's got me where he wants me, and doesn't he? I should be seething, but instead, I'm nauseous. I'd do anything not to be dragged in front of my in-laws again, dropped on their doorstep like a dead mouse.

I stiffen my spine and put on my game face as Pietro pulls up in front of the villa. A sigh escapes when we roll to a stop

in front of the grand entrance with the pink marble stairs. Marco hangs up on his last call just in time to hear. His mouth flattens.

He looks stressed although it'd be hard for someone else to tell. On the surface, he's so suave. He strides like a movie star, his expression always perfectly tuned, always room temperature, never too serious, too interested, too irritated. He makes me feel ruffled and gauche and obvious.

Or, I guess, maybe I let myself feel that way. How do you stop yourself, though?

Pietro opens my car door. I get out with minimal fuss. My stomach muscles don't really work like I'm used to, and I have to give myself a little shove to get out of the low seat, but my belly isn't so big that it's awkward.

I wish I'd changed into something nice before we left Terri's house. I was being recalcitrant, and I'm paying for it now, standing at the bottom of the grand stairs to the villa in a pair of Mama's powder blue work slacks with an elastic waistband and a sweater with a V-shaped rainbow stripe across the chest. I look like my grandma dressed for bingo.

I stare up at the balconies and the French doors that serve as windows, glittering with the reflection of the Mediterranean and the white sails of the boats docked acres below us. My neck aches, and I feel very small. Like I could slip through a crack.

Marco comes to stand beside me. He clasps my hand and holds tight. "You can drive around to the garage," he says to Pietro over his shoulder. "We're in for the evening."

Well, I guess he's not going to head off with Sienna my first night back. That's something.

I blink away the tickle in my nose. I'm not going to cry. Not when I have to beard the lions in their den.

Marco clears his throat. "I called before the jet took off to let the family know our flight plan. They know to expect us."

My chest tightens.

He goes on in a low, confidential voice. “They know that what happened was my fault. Our marriage is our business. No one will bring up anything unpleasant.”

Everything he says somehow makes this worse, but he’s still holding my hand, and he hasn’t done that since the early days in Dallas.

Well. I’ve always been one to rip the Band-Aid off. I start for the stairs, and after a second of surprised hesitation, Marco recovers to lead the way, ushering me through the front door that opens for us as if by magic.

When he brought me here after our honeymoon, my eyes must’ve been the size of saucers. I couldn’t take it all in—the glittering chandelier, the view of the sea from every window, the ceilings so high it felt like church. Now the place is as familiar as Archie Bunker’s living room or Mary Tyler Moore’s newsroom, and just as staged. It’s a set, not a home.

As we cross the foyer, I’m hoping against hope that we can disappear up to our suite without running into anyone. I should have known better. As we pass the doorway to the east salon, Vittoria calls out, “Marco?”

The corner of his left eye twitches, he squeezes my hand, and with an almost inaudible exhalation, he diverts us into the room. The whole family is gathered as if they’ve been waiting. *Clue* pops immediately into my head. The good detective has wrangled the suspects together in the aftermath of a murder, and everyone is hiding a secret badly, and the secret is that they hate me.

Grandfather de Noli is in the center of the tableau, reclining in his overstuffed leather chair by the fireplace. His dove gray coat hangs over the arm, his legs are folded like a banker’s or a professor’s, and a cigar dangles from his fingers over the standing ashtray that Monty only sets out when Mr. de Noli is at home.

Rosanella is in her usual seat, respooling a ball of yarn, occasionally batting at the air in front of her face to disperse the cloud of smoke from her husband’s cigar.

Ric leans a tanned forearm against the mantle with a white sweater thrown across his shoulders and a tumbler in his hand.

Chiara sits on the sofa with her legs angrily crossed, one arm wrapped protectively around her middle, her long fingernails drumming a furious beat on the arm of the sofa. Vittoria stands in front of her by the coffee table, hands on her hips, red flared sleeves draping like a matador's cape, as if she's protecting her baby chick. Lucky Chiara. I guess the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

"Good afternoon," Marco intones into the simmering silence with a wry curve of his lip.

For a moment, it seems like no one will reply, but then Vittoria wrestles up a grim smile. "Welcome home, Diane. You look well."

Her glance lowers to my belly. I swear her expression is an exact replica of the saleslady at the Leggett's back in Gene Autry when Mama would bring a dress back on the fifty-ninth day of the sixty-day window, and the lady just knew Mama had worn the dress with the tag tucked in, but she had no proof so she had to do the return.

I rest my hand on the bump, just to rub it in, just a little. I wish I felt something about the baby—a wave of protectiveness, smug satisfaction, dread, anything. So far, I feel like I ate a big lunch that didn't settle right, and now it's sitting in my stomach like a rock.

"Thank you," I murmur. My quiet voice is back. The same thing happened in school when I was called on in class. My breath would disappear.

"Good flight?" Ric asks, turning from the mantle, a wide, plastic smile tacked on his face.

"Yes," Marco answers. "And things here?"

"All good." Ric drains his drink with a grimace. There's an undercurrent to the exchange, but I can't read it.

Ric and Marco don't usually have much to do with each other. As far as I've gathered, after their father died in a tragic speedboat accident, nine-year-old Marco was sent away to

boarding school to be groomed as the heir, and seven-year-old Ric was kept at home as a comfort to his grieving mother and grandfather. They don't seem like brothers to me, more like a store manager and an employee who's related to the owner so he can get away with murder.

"We need to discuss Lorenzo Chemical," Grandfather de Noli declares, stubbing out his cigar and rising carefully from his seat. "This trip was really quite ill-timed, Marco."

My cheeks flame. Grandfather de Noli has never pretended to like me, and in the months before I left, he'd even stopped acknowledging my presence.

"I disagree," Marco says, drawing our clasped hands against his thigh. "My wife is my top priority."

The lie makes my teeth ache.

Grandfather de Noli's thin lips part as if he means to argue. His gaze darts to Ric as if Marco's spoken gibberish and he needs some kind of explanation.

"We're all relieved to have dear Diane back in the family fold." Vittoria visibly sets aside her distaste to smooth the moment over. "Especially since we find ourselves in expectation of a happy event. A new beginning, if you will." She casts a pained smile in the direction of my belly.

Grandfather de Noli looks confused. Did no one tell him about the baby? I thought it was obvious, but my sweater is loose, and I suppose the rainbow is distracting.

So far, Chiara and Rosanella haven't even deigned to look up at me. Rosanella rolls her yarn, and Chiara glares out the window with her pert nose in the air. I start to sweat.

I've always had the horror that a teacher's pet has of being in the wrong, and it stings like hell that I need to apologize to people who've been awful to me. I should get it over with now, but my throat is stuck shut.

My gaze wanders, and I suppose I was subconsciously avoiding it, because my heart startles when it reaches the pedestal where the vase stood. It's been replaced with an arrangement of white roses, chrysanthemums, and lilies

accented with dusty miller and baby's breath. It's a funeral bouquet.

I want to get out of here.

I never wanted to come back.

Why didn't I fight? I could have told Marco to do his worst, that he can be a part of the baby's life in Dallas.

What is wrong with me that I *like* to give in, like I'm creased paper and all anyone has to do is apply the slightest pressure, and I fold myself right up?

My palm is sweating. I slip it out of Marco's hand and shove it in the pocket of Mama's slacks. Marco looks down at me with a frown.

There's a soft knock on the doorframe.

"I am so sorry to interrupt," Sienna says as she glides into the room.

She's sleek from tip to tail, black stockings, black jacket nipped in at her narrow waist, her permed, geometric bob bouncing efficiently as she strides over to Marco.

"Signore de Noli," she says. "I made those inquiries you requested, and unfortunately, there are some matters that need your immediate attention."

Marco's jaw clenches.

Sienna has the good manners not to look at me.

"Lorenzo Chemical," she supplies in answer to his silent question.

Grandfather de Noli grunts and reaches for his jacket. Monty, who I hadn't noticed skulking near the connecting door to the conservatory, rushes to help him with it.

"I told you, boy," Grandfather says as he struggles into the jacket sleeves. "I have Lorenzo on the ropes. We need to strike now while the iron's hot."

Marco's face hardens and his eyes go ice cold. He's angry. For a second, I think that maybe this time, he'll tell them that

they'll have to manage without him, and for once, I won't be left waiting for a man who is supposed to care for me.

Marco clears his throat and looks down at me. I stare at the parquet floor.

"Diane, I need to attend to this," he says, his voice low. My stupid heart sinks. How does it still have room to go lower?

I shrug.

"You should rest," he murmurs. "I'll come to you as soon as I've dealt with it."

"Don't rush."

I can hear Vittoria smother an offended gasp.

"Diane—" His irritation is crystal clear. He wants me to look at him, to understand, to just go along to get along. Why can't I do that? Business comes first. Family comes first. Duty comes first. How do I not *understand* that?

All the time we were married, I felt like I was slipping down a greased ladder, rung by rung, and there was no bottom, no point at which something wouldn't be more important than me.

It's hard to believe that in only five months, I'd forgotten how it felt.

"Diane, I'll be done as soon as I can."

I can't look at him, but I can catch Sienna's smoky eyes. "It's good to see you again," I say.

She's a cool customer. Her immaculate eyebrows only rise a fraction of an inch. "You as well, Signora de Noli."

"Keep him as long as you want," I tell her, and then I turn and see myself out, a mean little spark in my chest.

I'm glad that for once in my life, I got the last word, and that as I sailed out of the room, from the corner of my eye, I caught Marco covering up the dark look that flashed across his face when I said it.



THE GLADNESS WEARS off by the time I huff and puff my way to the third floor. I didn't think my belly was slowing me down that much, but I suppose I haven't been climbing so many steep stairs either.

I've got myself swaddled tight in a wet blanket of sad sorriness by the time I decide on a guest bedroom to hole up in. There's no way I'm making myself at home in the master suite. I can't even bring myself to see if my things are still hanging in the closet, or if Marco had me boxed up.

He wouldn't have though, would he? He was looking for me, or so he claims. Because he wanted me back? Or to draw a line under the whole marriage debacle? So he'd know where to have his lawyers serve the papers?

When he saw my belly, that must've changed his plans. Does he feel like he's stuck with me now?

That hurts too bad to think about, so I distract myself by poking around the room I've chosen. It's mountain-facing, the furthest down the hall from the master suite, and it's obviously been through Chiara's hands.

When I arrived on the scene, she'd been making a hobby of redecorating the villa, room by room. Somehow, she'd secured Grandfather de Noli's approval before Vittoria knew what she was up to, which stuck in Vittoria's craw like nobody's business.

The second thing Vittoria did after giving my boobs a sneer that said "so *that's* how you trapped my son" was to declare that as the new de Noli bride, I must be allowed to decorate to my taste so that I'd feel at home.

It was a gamble, but Vittoria spends a lot of time at the casino. She pegged me as a pushover, and it didn't take much sly criticism from her and Chiara for me to abandon the project. They were left in a stalemate, half the villa done in Chiara's favored Art Deco luxe with heavy satin, mirrors, and glass, and the rest still done in Louis XVI.

This room is powder pink and gold, with a big bed and a mirrored wall for a headboard. There are lights on the ceiling in the outline of the bed so it's like staring up at a theater marquee. There's a mirror up there, too, but it's tasteful.

Well, there's no way a mirror over a bed isn't trashy, but it's trashy in an artsy way.

With pillow rolls on the carpeted steps surrounding the bed and pink tassels on the drawbacks of the pink curtains pulled open to reveal light pink sheers, the whole thing feels like one part *I Dream of Jeannie's* bottle and one part well-funded porno set.

Not that I've seen many pornos. Late one Saturday night, I walked in on Terri and Joyce polishing off a bottle of chardonnay and laughing their heads off at a videotape Joyce had nicked from Reg's sock drawer. A lady was on her hands and knees, looking over her shoulder at a man who was pumping into her like it was his job, which I suppose it was. The lady was making the strangest squeals, like a squeak toy.

Marco likes to take me like that, but I don't stay still. As soon as he throws me on the bed, I scramble away. He'll grab me by the ankle or hook me around the waist, whatever he can do to get ahold of me, and then he'll drag me into place while I kick. I wouldn't want to just kneel there and squeak, but I guess that's normal.

I sigh, kick off my shoes, flop back on the pink silk sheets, and stare at myself in the ceiling mirror. I'm tired, but I slept the entire flight. I'm hungry, but there's no way I'm going down to dinner. I'm restless, and if I wasn't so mad and hurt and scared and sad, I'd think I was horny.

Marco has always made me feel this way—fidgety, wired, and wriggly in my own skin.

He's also always made me feel alone and clueless and out of place.

I fold my arms beneath my head and will myself to relax, but I end up staring at the swell under my sweater. As I

breathe, it goes up and down like I'm balancing half of a watermelon on my real stomach.

I didn't plan to get pregnant, and as far as I can remember, I never skipped a pill. Terri says that even if you're perfect, three out of a thousand women get knocked up anyway. She thinks those are good odds of not getting yourself into trouble. If I had a three out of a thousand chance of winning the lottery, I'd be spending all my money on tickets.

I guess that means the baby is meant to be. I suppose I should feel an immediate love for him despite my mess of a marriage. That's how women feel in books, an instant and overwhelming love.

I poke the bump. Nothing happens.

I exhale, pointing my toes to stretch my legs, and try to let myself drift off. The French doors must be open behind the drapes because they sway slightly with the breeze coming down from the mountains. It's quiet, and the room is warm, but not too warm, and with my eyes closed, I can ignore the mirrors and gold trim and cacophony of pink and breathe in the delicate traces of sea mallow that waft through the curtains.

Thud.

My eyes fly open. It wasn't a slam, but someone shut a door hard enough that I heard it through the open window and my closed door. It came from the direction of the master suite.

My muscles tense.

Thud.

The sound is louder, closer. Someone is making their way down the hall. I swing my legs over the side of the bed.

Thud.

My pulse surges. It's Marco, coming for me.

Thud.

Did I lock the door? I can't remember. Is it better if I did or didn't? Would he break it down?

I squeeze my thighs together, my nipples harden, and I clutch the silk sheets in my fist. I stare at the crystal knob. It slowly turns.

The door glides open anticlimactically and Marco steps inside, closing it quietly behind himself and pressing down the push pin lock.

My excitement disappears into thin air. This is Business Marco. He looks at me like the balance sheets Sienna gives him each morning that are nothing but lists and lists of numbers, not like he wants to sink his teeth into me, bury himself in me so deep that I can never escape.

I am work, not pleasure.

I hate Business Marco.

“You weren’t in our suite,” he says, serving me an easy one over the net.

“*Your* suite.” I stand and circle the bed so that it’s between us, flipping on the lamp on the nightstand even though it’s broad daylight.

He steps forward. He doesn’t like it when I put distance between us. Or maybe it’s the opposite. He does like it. He loves to catch me, to dispatch whatever’s in his way. My adrenaline revs again.

“You’re being childish.” He doesn’t come any further.

I stick my tongue out at him.

He loves when I do that. He’ll say, “I’ll give you something to do with that,” and then he’ll grapple me to my knees, pry my jaw open, and gag me until I agree to lick him like a good girl, but I don’t ever give in right away, not until tears are streaming down my face, and I’m flying, and he couldn’t stop himself if he tried.

My pussy throbs.

“Where are your shoes?” He glances around the floor. “Get them on. I’ll have dinner brought up to our suite.”

Disappointment courses through me. He really doesn't want me anymore, I guess, not unless he's angry and wants to get it out. My heart tangles like a vacuum cord retracting too fast, too far.

He doesn't get to turn it off, not when I can't.

My Candie's are a few feet away by the side of the bed where I kicked them off.

Get my shoes? Oh, I will.

I duck, grab one by the strap, draw it back, and pitch it at Marco's head as hard as I can. It cartwheels, and I can't wait for it to smack him in the face, make him so angry that he can't help but let it out on me, but I'll be a statue this time, ice cold. I'll be stone, above it all like him. I'll walk away again, but this time, I'll leave every bit of what I ever felt for him behind.

Marco's hand moves so quickly I can't track it. He catches the shoe by the heel. We gape at each other, panting. I lunge for the other one, and a split second later, he comes for me. My insides leap.

He wrestles the shoe from my grip, tosses it away, and spins me, pinning me against the wall. His strong hands wrap around my wrists, and as he raises them above my head, his mouth descends on mine, crushing my lips, and it feels like my fumbling fingers have finally found a lifebuoy, and I'm safe.

He presses forward, and my belly bumps against his hard stomach. He bounds backwards as if I scalded him.

"No," he bites out, stalking away to the other side of the bed. To the door, to leave? A whimper gets trapped in my throat.

No, he's pacing to the window, driving his fingers through his hair, his cock tenting his slacks. If his mind is disgusted by my belly, his body isn't. It's not much consolation. I'm aching and confused and mad, and he's scowling at me like I did something wrong.

"We're not doing that anymore," he spits.

“You started it.” I’m not the one who kissed him.

“I’m serious. It’s over. You’re pregnant, and it’s different now. We’re finished.” He blows out a breath. “I should have never let it happen in the first place.”

My brain can’t make sense of the words all at once. It doles them out one at a time—*over, finished, never let it happen in the first place*. My hand covers my mouth in horror.

He’s finally said what I ran away so I would never have to hear, and it feels like I’ve been shoved off a skyscraper. I’m mid-air, and acceleration has stolen my breath. Reality rushes at me at a hundred miles per hour.

He’s admitting it. Our marriage is over. It was a mistake. I can’t run and hide from it. The worst is here, now, a collision of fear and reality. No more waiting day after day, night after night, for confirmation that the worst is real, and what you feared was gone is truly and forever and irretrievably gone.

And I knew it, *I knew it*, so how can the words shatter me? Wasn’t I already in pieces? But I’ve lost all my blood. I’m an empty skin, and I’m going to slump to the floor, nothing, worth nothing.

He’s staring at me, at my face, like he’s confused.

“Well, that’s it then,” I say to fill the silence. I’m crying, my shoulders shaking, but I keep my arms stiff at my sides. If I wipe the tears away, it’ll only come off as dramatic. I am a grown woman. I can handle this. I’ve been left before, but I was young then, and I didn’t know how to protect myself, but I do now. I blink blearily around at the pinkness. “I guess this can be my room.”

Marco digs his fingertips into his temples, takes a deep breath, and then steeples his fingers in front of his mouth. His gaze bores into me, his brown eyes scanning my expression, cold and bright like when he’s doing some kind of business calculation at the breakfast table, and he’s silent for a moment before he raps out directions, and Sienna sails off to do his bidding.

Finally, after what feels like minutes, he lowers his hands and blows out another breath. “Diane, I mean the rough stuff is over. Not our marriage.”

He waits. What am I supposed to say? Our marriage never started. We only ever had the ‘rough stuff.’

When I don’t say anything, he goes on. “You don’t really like it. It’s just all you know.” His face hardens. “I corrupted you. You were innocent. You don’t know how it’s supposed to be.” He squares his shoulders as if he’s steeling himself to take his licks. “It’s not supposed to be that way.”

I have never seen him more serious. Part of my brain is still recovering from its plunge over the side, still trying to control my hammering heart. *He didn’t say that we’re finished, he didn’t mean that we should have never happened in the first place.* And the part of me that’s always waiting for someone to leave and never come back screws its eyes shut and braces for the worst. *Didn’t he, though? Didn’t he?*

There’s another part of me, though. I might be a wreck, mentally. I might be hopelessly out of my depth in Monte Carlo, and Marco might be impossibly out of my league. I might have been an indifferent student without much in terms of brains or ambition, and nothing but my looks to get by on, but whatever else can be said about me, I have always known myself.

And Marco is wrong.

“I do like it,” I correct him quietly.

He’s not listening. He’s holding my shoes by the straps in one hand and opening the bedroom door to usher me out, to make it so that he’s the big man calling the shots, and I’m the little wife doing what she’s told again.

I don’t move. “You know, lots of boys liked me back in Gene Autry. They were after me ever since I developed.” If I’m being honest, before I developed, too. In grade school, boys were always yanking my hair or stealing my pencils. “Plenty of guys asked me out.”

He's listening now. He's turned back toward the room, and there's a glint in his eye.

"I went out with them, too." We didn't have any money, so if I wanted to go roller skating or out for pizza, I'd say yes to one of the boys who seemed nice. "I let them kiss me."

"Diane," he growls a warning.

"I let some of them feel me up." I let two or three of them slip their hands in my panties, too, but I don't think I need to rub his face in it. He already looks like he just took a blow to the stomach, and he's trying not to let on.

"I didn't like it until you touched me." With the other guys, it tickled, and it was embarrassing. Until Marco.

He stares, and just to look at him, he's every inch the master of the universe. He can't ever shake the image, not with his physique, the expensive haircut and tailored clothes, the inborn arrogance and patina of old money. But almost hidden in his bold, stern, confident gaze, there's a glimmer. A flicker. There's a flesh and blood person in there.

And maybe he doesn't understand me any better than I understand him.

I take a step forward. "I like what we do. I want to be touched the way you touch me." I don't know how to lay it out more clearly, and I feel in my guts that I need to speak plainly now. "Except for afterwards, I don't like being touched gently. It gives me the heebie-jeebies."

He pauses a second, stares over my shoulder, and mutters, "I take it too far."

"I don't think so." I round the foot of the bed.

"You don't know any better."

"I'm telling you that I do."

"I took advantage of you." He's not listening.

I stop a few feet from him. In my bare feet, sinking into the plush pink carpet, our height difference is even more

pronounced. “Is that why you married me? You felt bad because you think you took advantage of me?”

It hurts. Scalds. But somehow, in this moment, I’m strong enough to ask, to face the truth.

The corner of his left eye twitches. I can see the fight play out on his face—the need to demand again that I put my shoes on, go to the master suite, do what I’m told, because he knows what’s best for me, because he’s in charge, he’s in control, over everything and everyone at all times.

All of that versus his brain, which knows damn well that isn’t going to work now.

“No, that’s not why I married you,” he says.

“Then why?” I ask when he tries to leave it at that. He’s not going to say it was because he was in love with me, and I can’t be hurt about that. I accepted his terms when I agreed to marry him after he’d told me a dozen times that he “didn’t do love and all that sweet talk.”

For a moment, I think he won’t answer, but then he waves in the direction of the villa beyond the bedroom door. “Everything is for everyone else. I wanted something for myself. I wanted you for myself.”

I sink to sit on the edge of the bed. All of a sudden, I feel too heavy for my legs. Am I supposed to feel special? He said he didn’t want a trophy wife, but what am I then, if he wanted me for himself, but he doesn’t love me?

“Why *me*?” I ask. “What was it about *me*?” I don’t expect an answer. I don’t expect that he *can* answer.

He takes a long moment before he speaks, and when he does, he’s cold. Clinical. “As the de Noli heir, it was always impressed upon me that I had to marry a virgin, and you hadn’t been with a man before me, so that opened the door, so to speak. But I was also expected to marry a nice Genoese girl with impeccable breeding who would give me sons without complaint and turn a blind eye to my mistresses.”

I know all this, but it still stings. “You really shot wide of the mark, didn’t you?”

He doesn't react to the remark. Instead, after another long pause, he says, "You know, I had a flight booked back to Nice for the day after the negotiation in Dallas was finished."

I blink, confused. We'd been dating a few weeks then, but he never hinted that he was going home. "You said you'd planned to do some sightseeing after the deal was done."

"At the last minute, I changed my plans and canceled the flight."

"Why?"

"To stay with you."

"Why? The sex?"

He shakes his head, grim and somber. "When I woke you up that morning, I had my bags packed. The taxi was waiting downstairs. You smiled at me. You threw a pillow at me for waking you up."

I remember. He'd batted it aside and punished me for it until we both passed out.

"You remember the first time, in the salon? In the backroom?" he asks.

Of course. I'll never forget.

"You remember afterwards? I had blood on my cock. You saw I was staring at it, and so you looked down, and your face—it was already pink—but it went tomato red. And then you looked up at me, and we locked eyes. Remember?"

I don't. I remember the blood, the rush of embarrassment, but it's all filtered through the haze of adrenaline and orgasms.

He stares past me out a window. "It was like I'd been navigating a foreign country my whole life," he says. "And all of a sudden, when I thought it was impossible, here was another person who somehow speaks my language. So, yes, the sex. But also, what happened afterwards. I couldn't walk away. I didn't want to. I can't explain it any better."

"So if you couldn't walk away, how come you left me alone so much? And don't say business. Business doesn't

explain it all.”

His face hardens, and I figure I’m in for a lecture on the real world and fiduciary responsibility, but instead, he flips the script on me. “Why did you agree to marry me?” he asks.

“I don’t know.” I’m surprised the question even occurred to him. Both he and his brother have the attitude that all women are after them, and to be honest, they have reason to think so.

His shoulders tense when I don’t elaborate. I don’t know how to explain. I felt so lucky. It’s not a decision when you’re confronted with your heart’s desire. You grab it on instinct. That’s what I did with him.

He keeps looking at me, though, waiting, so finally, I exhale and try to find a way to explain.

“Well, I could put it this way—there’s this children’s book my sisters and I had growing up. It’s about this girl whose family goes west, and there’s a scene where the girl rides a wild pony bareback.” I pause, my cheeks heating, but he’s listening intently. “I don’t know if I remember it exactly right, but in my imagination, the pony bolts, and all the girl can do is grab its mane and hold on tight while it runs off into the prairie. She’s terrified, but she doesn’t want to stop. She feels alive. Free. Being with you felt like as close as I could ever get to something like that.”

He comes and sits beside me on the bed. The mattress dips under his weight. “You wouldn’t have felt that way if you’d had any experience.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I shoot right back. “If I’d been around the block, I would’ve never bothered with you.”

Brackets appear at the corners of his mouth. “You’re different now.”

I murmur in agreement. “Living with Terri has been a good influence.”

“Did you let her kiss you?”

“Don’t be nasty.”

“I’m not. I’m asking.”

I glance over. His expression is carefully blank. It’s a serious question.

Oh.

Terri’s not— My jaw drops. A dozen memories snap into place. Joyce wearing Terri’s robe. Late night chardonnay. The look on Terri’s face when Joyce left with Reg for an evening out.

“She never said.”

“You never noticed,” he says gently. “You live in your own head.”

“She could have told me.” I know it’s a selfish way to feel, and I wouldn’t ever say it to her, but Marco and I are alone here, and it’s quiet, and maybe after all we’ve just said to each other, I can say what I’m thinking.

“You’re not an easy woman to tell things to.”

My chin goes up. “I’m not fragile, Marco.”

Didn’t my father disappear? Didn’t my mother become a shell of herself? Wasn’t I left to take care of Donny and Frank while Heather and Melissa hung out at the mall until they turned the lights out? Didn’t I buy my own bus ticket to Dallas for the day after I graduated and find myself a job and a place of my own?

Didn’t I walk out on him before he could finish with me?

“No, not fragile,” he says. “Hard to read.”

“She should know we’d still be friends, no matter what,” I say even though we aren’t talking about Terri and me anymore.

Hard to read. Men always think that about women. We’re so mysterious. Maybe they’d just rather not be able to read the consequences of their actions.

I lose track of what we’re talking about, my attention wandering around the room, to the fluttering drapes and the

slight mellowing of light as the sun sinks behind the mountains.

I can smell Marco's sharp aftershave, the Manhattan he must've polished off before he came looking for me, and the faint whiff of his grandfather's cigar still clinging to his jacket.

All of a sudden, I've got no fight left. I'm too distracted for this marriage-in-trouble stuff; my well of bitterness isn't deep enough. I drop back to lie flat on the bed, my knees bent over the edge, my lower legs dangling. My feet don't touch the floor.

Marco glances down at me, frowning. I sigh.

He lowers himself beside me. We stare at ourselves in the mirror on the ceiling. He looks like a banker just home from work. I look like a girl dressed up in her mother's clothes with a pillow stuffed up the front of her sweater.

Our eyes find each other. There's a shadow of wariness in his.

My shirt has ridden up, and my pale belly shows a little. Marco's never seen my stomach without a tan, but even before I got too big to wear a bathing suit this summer, I still wasn't wearing a two piece.

I fiddle with the hem of my sweater, and Marco's gaze follows my hands. He stares intently at the bump. It is weird. A stomach is supposed to dip in when you lie flat, and you're supposed to be able to suck it in, but I can't do that now.

I'm carrying a package under my skin that's somehow gelatinous and hard at the same time on the outside. On the inside, it's invading my innards in the dark, shoving my organs out of the way, sprawling into the hard limits of my ribs and spine. Like *The Blob*.

I lift my sweater up to my bra band and tug my pants lower so the whole bump shows. There are angry red stripes from my elastic waistband.

This isn't how I let Marco see me. I'm always poised, or I'm out of my mind, pinned, or held, or crushed, my face shoved into a mattress, my body folded over the arm of a sofa,

the vanity, a railing. Then afterwards, I'm tucked to his chest, enveloped by his arms.

We're never just two bodies at rest beside each other.

He raises a hand, slowly, and traces a finger gently along an elastic mark. "Does it hurt?"

"No. It just looks bad."

Watching for my reaction, he lets his whole palm rest on my belly, and he's quiet. I track him in the mirror. His hand is warm. It's tan and rough against my fish belly bump, weathered from the hours sailing, golfing, and playing polo.

"Is the baby moving yet?" he asks.

"No, but I think maybe soon."

"What does the doctor say?"

My face heats, and I readjust my butt so that I can prop my heels on the edge of the mattress. "I haven't seen one yet."

A flash of displeasure crosses his face, but he doesn't make a remark. Instead, he turns onto his side and props his head in his hand. He's still resting a palm on my belly. Now I'm watching his profile in the mirror.

"I'll arrange for Dr. Roche to visit," he says.

A trickle of dread that doesn't make any sense sends shivers through me.

"Everything is fine. Don't worry," Marco says. It's an order.

"I hate Business Marco," I mutter.

"Business Marco?"

"Don't worry," I mimic. "Buy low. Sell high. Get me the McMasters' file. Quick, quick." I snap my fingers.

The corners of his mouth curve in a wry smile. "There's another Marco then? Besides Business Marco?"

I don't need to reply. It was a statement. Maybe something of an admission. But I nod. "Husband Marco."

“What’s he like?” Marco begins to stroke my belly with his thumb. My nipples tighten.

“I can hardly remember.”

“Five months isn’t that long.”

“It’s been a lot longer than five months.”

Marco’s mouth hardens, but he doesn’t stop with his thumb. “Tell me?” It’s a quiet ask.

I raise my gaze so I’m staring at the reflection of the room instead of him. “I was the center of his world,” I whisper.

“You still are,” he says. I can feel his breath on my cheek. “You always have been.”

I shake my head.

He coughs. “Diane, this past year—there are things you don’t know. About De Noli International, about the business —” He’s collecting himself to tell me something, something he doesn’t want to say, that’ll explain the past year to me. I can see it coming like the twist at forty-five minutes of an hour-long TV show, right before commercial.

I turn my head away to stare at the wall. I don’t want to clear the air and find out that all along, when he said he had to work, it was the God’s honest truth. I don’t want to be the bad wife with her head stuck in the sand, the upstart who couldn’t hack it, too young and gauche and immature, out of her depth and too proud to ask for help. I can’t bear to be all the things they said about me.

For a second, I think he’s going to tell me anyway, but instead, he splays his fingers wider. His thumb brushes the rim of my belly button.

“Do you think this is going to pop out?” he asks.

The vise in my chest loosens a hair, and I exhale. “It might. Who knows?”

For a few moments, we both watch his hand on my belly rise and fall as I breathe, and then he takes my hand and places

it on the warm spot where his had been, sandwiching it, and we cradle my belly together.

Eventually, the room darkens, and I drift off. I don't fuss when he eases my pants down, urges me under the covers, and then strips and joins me. I let him wrap himself around me, and when his hard cock pokes my bottom and he growls, "Ignore it," I do.

Nothing is resolved. We didn't finish a single thread of conversation, but in a way, it feels like the first time we've ever spoken.

And I'm not angry anymore.

I'm terrified.

Because if he is the ruthless, arrogant tycoon, incapable of love, who lives at work and carries on an affair with his PA under his wife's nose, then I've got nothing to lose. I never had anything in the first place.

But if he's not—

If I'm as responsible for this mess of a marriage as he is—

We're in deep trouble.

Because we're going to bring another human into this mess, and neither of us knows what we're doing.

DIANE

I wake up alone in the master suite with the vague memory of Marco carrying me here in the middle of the night, grumbling about the springs in the mattress. From the light filtering through the shades, it's still early, but not as early as he gets up. I've never known him not to beat his alarm clock.

I pad to the bathroom, pee, wash my hands, and then without thinking, I reach for my toothbrush. It's still there. While I scrub, I swing the medicine cabinet open. All the free samples and almost-finished bottles and tubes that I didn't bother taking with me are still there, too. I use them to do an ad hoc version of my morning routine, and I make my face up with the travel cosmetics I keep in my purse.

Yet again, as I rummage through my drawers, I regret not packing a bag. None of my old underwear fit. I pick the stretchiest pair I can find, but I have to wear them scrunched under my bump.

I find a beige, cotton drawstring skirt that works, but none of the tops left in the closet are quite big enough. I have to settle for a pale blue blouse with short, puffed sleeves that has enough give that I can button it over my belly. Barely. If I hunch my shoulders, it's fine, but there's a gap if I don't.

I can arrange to have my clothes shipped over, but I was outgrowing them, too. I'll have to go shopping. The prospect makes me feel gross and sad.

Spending money was fun at first. Monte Carlo is not Gene Autry, Oklahoma, and it's not Dallas, either. The mall has

crystal chandeliers and skylights and grand, curving stairs with wrought iron banisters. Everything is perfectly displayed, candies arranged by color like crayons in a box and dresses hanging off armless, headless glass mannequins like modern art. The salespeople got to know me, and they greeted me by name, Madame de Noli, and I felt like Charlie when the chocolate factory gates creaked open for him.

After a few months, though, I wasn't shopping anymore so much as hiding out. Doing time. Having something to show for my days. Shopping only really felt good when Marco would wear something I got him.

But that's the past. I've got the future to worry about now. I'm stuck here again for the present, and I have to figure out a way to move forward. For the baby. I let my hand rest where Marco's did yesterday. Still no movement. There's a faint burble, but I'm pretty sure that's my stomach rumbling.

I have to deal with facts. I'm here, and I've committed to this for the time being, so I need to make peace with the in-laws. They don't have to like me, but we're going to have to find a way to coexist. Five months haven't given me any epiphanies or wisdom—or charm and polish, for that matter—but they do say if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Maybe I can exhaust them into liking me.

With that idea to bolster me, I strap on my Candies, blot my lipstick with a tissue and my forehead with rice paper, and head downstairs. When the weather's nice—which it almost always is—breakfast is served buffet style on the second-floor veranda above the terraced garden.

At first, when I step outside, all I can see is Marco at the head of the table, lowering his newspaper. He's clean shaven, and his hair is perfect. Butterflies take flight in my growling stomach.

His rich brown eyes light up and lock on me as he says, "Good morning, Diane."

My cheeks heat as the clatter of silverware to my left lets me know we're not alone. Vittoria and Chiara are serving themselves from the sideboard, and as I collect myself, Ric

steps through the French doors, rolling his shoulders and yawning, followed by Monty with a steaming carafe of coffee.

Ric slides groggily into the seat at Marco's left that was always mine. Marco cuts him a look, but Ric is oblivious, holding up a cup for Monty to fill. I slip into the empty seat to Marco's right that Vittoria sits in. I'd rather not, but I'd feel even more awkward sitting halfway down the table from my husband.

Monty ignores Ric's cup, rounds the table, and flips mine. Without blinking, Marco reaches out and covers it with his hand. "Madame de Noli will have tea this morning," he says.

After an almost imperceptible pause, Monty nods and disappears inside, reemerging with hot water and a velvet-lined, wooden box with a selection of Twinings. I pick an Earl Grey and flash Monty a smile. He waits behind my shoulder as the bag steeps, still ignoring Ric's raised cup.

I don't think Ric even notices the slight. He's rubbing his red eyes, sniffing and swiping at his nose while he tries to interest Marco in a story about a game of golf he played the day before. He continues to hold his cup in the air the entire time, waiting for it to be filled, like Monty is a machine that operates on his own time, and there's no sense in speaking to him or making eye contact.

I sink back in the rattan chair, laying the napkin across my lap to hide where my stomach peeps through between the buttons. My nerves are still jangling like crazy, but I'm grateful for Monty's show of support. When I first arrived here, I wouldn't have seen his hovering that way, but I guess I'm catching on.

Just like I pick up on the slight hesitation as Vittoria seats herself next to me. Her glaringly fake smile of welcome is designed to take the wind out of my sails, but I saw her blink when she realized her seat was taken. I saw that split second when she was unsure of her place.

Chiara seats herself next to her husband, and I see the mean little flash of satisfaction in her eyes as she takes in Vittoria's demotion toward the foot of the table.

I hate it here. It's so lovely. The sky is deep blue, the morning breeze is mild, the garden below us is lush and green. The sun baking mellowness into everything—the villa's white façade, the black wrought iron of the veranda railing, the pale-pink marble stairs leading to the terraces that step down all the way to the sea. But I hate it.

I'd rather be stumbling around Terri's cramped kitchen in Dallas, tripping over a barely awake Joyce as she makes a beeline for the Mr. Coffee while I juggle scrambling eggs, buttering toast, and packing my lunch for the day.

How am I going to do this again tomorrow, let alone for the next eighteen years? Or is Marco going to pack our child off to boarding school, too?

I wrap my arms around my belly. I won't let him. Marco might be wickedly smart, and he might go way back with everybody who's anybody in this town, but I still don't think being sent away did him any favors. Ric—whatever else you might say about him—knows how to enjoy himself. I've seen him happy.

I can't say that about Marco.

And how come I never realized that before now?

I've seen him sexually satisfied. Pleased. I've seen him relatively relaxed, although rarely, and not since the beginning of our marriage. But genuinely happy? I don't know what that would look like on him.

A chill worms itself around my heart, and I hug myself tighter.

Shouldn't I know what my husband looks like happy?

Marco glances over at me and frowns. "Monty, will you fix Madame de Noli a plate? Fruit and a croissant, please. And a few slices of ham."

"Oh, no, I can get it." I make to stand. I didn't mean to sit here and make someone wait on me.

Marco stops me with a hand on my forearm. "Are you cold?"

I shake my head. It's a balmy eighty degrees out.

He stares at my arms still wrapped around my bump. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I make myself relax and take a sip of tea.

Vittoria and Chiara are watching the interaction with eagle eyes, flashing each other speaking glances. I can read what they think like they've got comic book thought bubbles floating above their teased hair.

Spoiled brat. Leech. Good for nothing. Head case.

I'm not. I know I'm not. Mama raised me right. Besides, I shouldn't care what people like them think—Mama didn't raise me to do that, either—but still, I can feel their low opinions snake around my ankles and drag me down.

What makes it worse is that I know I owe Chiara an apology, but it's stuck in my throat, so I sit silently as Vittoria and Chiara launch into a spirited conversation in Italian. I recognize a few words. *Cena*. Dinner. *Invito*. Invitation.

Monty slides a plate in front of me. There's a whole orange, a bowl of fruit salad, two croissants, and a heaped pile of shaved ham.

I spear a piece of pineapple and pop it in my mouth. Ric drones on about a bunker and a bet that he lost. He laughs about losing, and Marco listens grim-faced, and I chew until the pineapple is pulp and string.

Vittoria and Chiara continue their conversation in Italian, bits and pieces pricking my ears despite my attempts to ignore them.

La prima portata. The first course. *Anullare*. Cancel. *Che è tornata*. Since *she* returned.

Marco clears his throat, and I startle. "English, please," he snaps, interrupting Ric mid-sentence.

Everyone pauses for a second, mid-chew, forks halfway to mouths, cups to lips.

Vittoria recovers first. “Of course. Forgive us. We’ve gotten out of the habit of switching to English at the table.”

She offers me a watery smile that neatly tacks on *which we shouldn’t have to be bothered to do* and *since you went crazy and abandoned your husband* and *we wish you’d stayed gone*, all without saying a word.

I nod, and since I’m feeling kicked in the stomach already, I plunge in. “I have to say that I’m sorry, Chiara, for slapping you. I was raised better. And I’m sorry for the scene.” I look around, realizing Rosanella’s missing. “And for the vase.”

It’s a terrible apology, and anyone listening would know I don’t mean it. If I were a kid, Mama would’ve made me do it again, but it’s all I’ve got in me.

Chiara and Vittoria draw themselves up, putting on their best shows of offended dignity. Ric leans back in his chair and taps his silver spoon on the rim of his porcelain coffee cup.

“You had no right to lay your hands on me,” Chiara sniffs.

I incline my head. I suppose that’s true enough.

“It was really a most shocking display,” Vittoria adds.

To this point, Marco had lowered the *Times*, but he’d still been holding it. Vittoria glances at him to see if he’s going to intervene, and when he doesn’t, she plows ahead. He methodically folds the paper.

“We have only ever tried to help you, Diane. You have to admit that. We offered our assistance so many times, only to be ignored.” Vittoria slips a dainty forkful of scrambled egg into her prim mouth, chews, swallows, and keeps going. “I don’t think we can be faulted when we did our very best to welcome you into this family. What you did that night was totally uncalled for. Shocking is the word for it.” She nods in hearty agreement with herself.

Marco follows the exchange like a ping-pong game, although I guess it’s not exactly much of a match. Vittoria aims at me, and I sit in my wicker chair, frozen and blinking and wishing I could make people’s heads explode with telekinesis.

“It’s true that you were something of a surprise to us, considering that my son hadn’t even apprised us of his engagement, but I think it’s only fair to say that we opened our arms to you, and I can’t say that you did the same.”

Vittoria stops for air, and Marco catches my eye. “Do you have anything to say?” he asks.

I stare at Vittoria and roll the orange in my palm, digging my nails into the skin. I wish I could throw it at her head or make myself scream or somehow break this sleep paralysis that comes over me whenever a person with authority lights into me.

There has to be a middle ground between muteness and smashing vases.

“Well, I do.” Marco carefully places his paper next to his plate. “I believe I owe the people at this table an apology, as well.”

My stomach drops.

“I was obviously negligent. I might have had reason—” He glances to where Grandfather de Noli is rummaging around at the buffet. He joined us less than a minute ago, and he’s peeking under the covered dishes, apparently oblivious to the drama at the table. “But I don’t have an excuse.”

Vittoria settles herself in her chair, primly dotting the corner of her lips with her napkin, pleased as a cat who got the cream.

“I led you to believe that I did not care how my wife was treated or spoken to.”

Vittoria’s napkin slips from her fingers, falling to her lap.

“I apologize for suggesting—by what I did or failed to do—that my wife was due anything but your utmost respect.” He spears Vittoria with his glare, holding her gaze until she drops it.

I’ve never seen her blink.

For that matter, I’ve never seen Marco speak to her with anything except distant politeness.

I was raised to respect my elders, and inside, I can't help but wince to see her taken down a peg. Chiara gapes at her while Ric busies himself with cutting up the ham on his plate. Despite it all, I'm almost sorry for her—almost—but then color gathers in her cheeks and her bosom rises, and I know I'm in for it.

“Far be it from me not to give Diane all the respect she is due as your wife. She has been so very doting, after all. Such a rock during difficult times.” She turns to me, smiling daggers. “I suppose now that she's back, she'll take over the annual Director's dinner. Chiara and I were just discussing the plans, but of course, *your wife* will want to be your hostess.” She lifts an impeccably penciled eyebrow. “I wouldn't want to step on *your wife's* toes.”

Your wife is a taunt, and I'm not sure whether it's directed at Marco or me, but it lands. The back of my neck heats, and Marco turns to stone in his chair.

In a snap, I see how this is supposed to go. She expects me to balk. I can't speak the language. I don't know the people or what's expected. I'm supposed to weasel out of it, admitting in front of everyone that I'm useless, and then Marco will be sorry he spoke up.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Marco about to make an excuse for me.

“Yes, I will,” I jump to say. “I'll do the dinner. No problem.”

Marco frowns at me. I ignore him.

Vittoria's lips curl like the Grinch's. “Excellent. You have two weeks, more than enough time if you dedicate yourself to the project. We've already contracted a string quartet for the evening, all you must do is confirm, and Chef Francois always outdoes himself. And of course, if you need any assistance at all, Chiara and I are at your service. You only have to ask.” If she could shove me off a cliff at that very moment, there is no doubt in my mind that she would.

What am I doing?

I don't want to plan a fancy dinner. I'm pregnant, feuding with my husband, and here under duress.

Vittoria and Chiara watch me with narrowed eyes, waiting for me to backpedal. Marco is, too, although he's more subtle.

"I'm sure it'll be no trouble," I say, peeling a strip off the orange.

"But in your condition—" Marco starts, but I don't let him get any further.

"My mama planned dinner every night in my condition." I know it's not the same, but I said I'd do it, and I'm not about to back down with those jackals blinking their big ol' glue-on lashes at me like they just know I'm about to provide them with some grade A entertainment. It can't be that hard to plan a dinner.

There's a spark of awareness in Marco's eye that I've never seen before around his family, like he's finally noticing that there's a whole bunch of shenanigans going on under the surface.

"Diane," he says. "It's just—"

I shove an orange slice in his hand to cut him off. I didn't really think it'd stop him in his tracks, but it works like a record scratch.

He stares at it like he's never seen fruit before, and then he looks at me. Shivers zip down my spine. His dark eyes are lit all the way up. They're gleaming.

He doesn't eat it. He holds the slice between his thumb and forefinger and locks his eyes on mine, and I know he's remembering that first morning at the Ampere. I'd woken up before him and ordered room service. I was giddy with the new world I'd discovered, the crazy things my body could do, the way this superman held me afterwards, like I was precious and if he didn't hold on with all his might, I might escape.

If I'd been brave enough to speak my mind to him then, I would have told him that I'd never leave him in a million years. But I guess I did. And it was the right thing, wasn't it? He gave me no reason to stay.

And I didn't go looking for one that hard, did I?

He straightens his shoulders, remembers to breathe, and slips the orange slice in his mouth. He chews slowly, refocusing his blazing gaze on the middle distance past the foot of the table. I look down at my plate, peel another slice, and slide it onto his plate. If everyone is staring, I wouldn't know. For a moment, there's silence on the veranda, but then a chair scratches across the tile, and Grandfather busily lowers himself into it.

"I won't be long, Marco," he announces, clearly oblivious to the undercurrents swirling around the table. "By the time the car is brought around, I'll be ready to leave."

My shoulders bunch. I guess we're back to business as usual.

But then Marco replies, "I won't be heading into the office today."

I sneak a peek at him. He's studying me and the orange in my hand. He wants it. He wants me to give it to him, but he'd never ask. I don't think he understands that he can.

I split the remaining sections into equal parts and hold out half. His fingertips brush mine as he takes it.

This isn't how we are. I keep myself looking nice. He pulls out my chair, opens doors, escorts me with his hand on my elbow or offers me his arm. It's a performance, and his role is to be a big deal, and mine is to be arm candy.

We don't *share* things. Except for my body, I'm not the one with things that he wants.

Right?

He slides an orange slice past the slash of his lips with the same seriousness he did when we kneeled together at the communion rail on our wedding day.

My cheeks heat, and I want to squirm, but the bump is too unwieldy for me to do anything but shift to lean on the opposite armrest.

“I have important business to attend to at the house,” he adds in a low voice meant for me. I pop an orange slice into my own mouth so my stupid bottom lip doesn’t wobble. For a second, my heart takes flight. That’s me. The *important business*.

The French doors shush open, high heels rap on the tile, and my heart dive-bombs toward the ground.

Enter Sienna.

I pluck my napkin from my lap and toss it beside my plate. She strolls toward us without the least bit of deference, dressed to the nines as always. She’s doing a horses and hounds theme today with a tailored houndstooth jacket, white jodhpur pants, and black high-heeled boots. Her white blouse is tucked into her tight pants, and there’s no bulge at all, not even from the fabric.

I clasp my hands over the place where my belly stretches my shirt so there’s a gap between the buttons.

She nods in our general direction, but she only has eyes for my husband. “Marco, I apologize for the lateness. I was waiting for the fax from Lorenzo Chemical.” She draws a manila folder from her sleek patent leather purse.

Marco rests his uneaten orange down on his plate. I fix my face so my dumb, delayed teenage feelings don’t show.

This is how we are. He is an important man, and my job is to sit next to him and hide how I’m falling apart. He puts me last, and I stay there like a good girl.

Well, to hell with that.

I scrape my chair back on the tiles, and Grandfather squints up the table at me as if he’s surprised to find me there, making a racket. Of course, I’m not anyone of consequence. Just the American gold digger that Marco dragged home.

“Diane—” Marco warns me, but I’m already crossing the veranda. “Diane.” Marco says again. He doesn’t shout. He’d never be so bad mannered.

I jog down the marble stairs to the garden, forcing myself to slow when I teeter on the edge of a step. My center of balance is changing.

“Diane, where the hell are you going?” His voice follows me from a distance. I can’t hear the family’s scandalized gasps, but I can imagine.

I don’t care. He can go ahead and preside at the head of the table and read his faxes and his pretty PA can lean over his shoulder and press her boobs into his back all she wants. My feelings aren’t hurt. I wasn’t stupid enough to expect anything.

I rush along the pergola to the next set of stairs and dash down them, deep into the green flowering vines studded with purple and orange blooms that cascade over the stone retaining walls built taller than my head. The greenery muffles the sound from the villa, and if I look up, I can only see the third-floor balconies and the steep, terracotta-shingled roof.

I don’t know where I’m planning to go. The terraces descend all the way to a seawall, and there’s no way out, only a long hike back uphill, level after level.

I stop in my tracks and swipe the sweat from my forehead before it drips in my eyes. A footstep sounds at the far end of the terrace. I twirl, stumbling as I scramble to find my center of gravity. Marco emerges from the stairs hidden behind thick vines. His jacket’s missing. He must have left it hanging on the back of his chair.

He’s breathing fast. The breeze has ruffled his hair, and with his shiny black wingtips and his pressed gray wool slacks, he looks like a million-dollar man, but he also looks like his iron control has broken, and I’m the one who did it.

An unholy glee thrums in my veins. I pivot, ready to race, arms ready to pump.

“Diane, don’t!”

As I lunge, I know I’m not getting anywhere.

He grunts, launching himself towards me. I throw an elbow back, and it slams into his chest. I cry out, and he grunts deeper. Then he’s grappling with me, trying to get a handhold

without touching my bump. I have the advantage, and I play it. The back of my hand cracks against his jaw. My heel drives into his shin.

“Diane,” he rasps, panting. “I’m not playing with you.”

I’m not playing either. I want to hurt him.

“It’s not safe for the baby.”

“Then stop. Go away. Go read a damn *fax*. Sign your damn *papers*.”

His careful hands can’t get a good grip on me, but I’m all over him. I kick and scratch, my heart pumping pure oxygen to my brain as I shed my skin and become the thing I am only with him.

I’m a body, but not in the usual way—worth ogling, pretty enough to pin up on a wall, tits for gawking at, an ass to accidentally graze, good for showing off and bragging about to the guys in the locker room, and hawking perfume to husbands with wandering eyes. Worth that and not an ounce more.

I’m a body in the way it must’ve been in prehistoric times before TV and magazines and Miss America and Miss Manners made the rules for how we’re supposed to stand there, be pretty, and take it.

He wants me to do what he wants, but I don’t have to make it easy. I’m young and strong, and I don’t *have* to do what I’m supposed to.

I can’t fight in the real world, but I can fight him. He’s strong enough.

I throw my head back and clip his jaw. He hisses and tries harder to wrestle me into submission, but he’s hampered by his care of my belly, his unwillingness to really, truly hurt me.

He could walk away, but he won’t. He wants to be this person, too, strong and powerful for no reason other than his muscle and his will.

He manages to catch a wrist. My pussy spasms with anticipation, and before he can wrangle the other, I slap him in the face, just like I did Chiara, and just like then, I’m not sorry.

He leans down as he pins my arms behind my back, and I spit. It splatters on his cheek. His pupils explode, turning his eyes pitch black, and I shoot straight into the stratosphere.

He's mine.

I don't fight at all as he shoves me down onto my knees, driving his fingers into my hair and jerking my head back while he rips his zipper down. I sidle my knees wider, squatting lower, and shove my hand up my skirt, contorting my shoulder and spine so I can reach past my belly to my pussy while he holds me in place and thrusts his hard cock into my mouth.

My teeth scrape him, but it's his fault. My jaw is as wide as it goes.

Grunting, he fucks my face, relentless, hitting the back of my throat, and I gag, but he doesn't ease up. If I puke, he'll pull me off until I'm finished, and then he'll shove himself back in. He's done it before.

Between grunts, he mutters in Italian, his eyes screwed closed. I fuck myself with my middle finger, flicking my clit with the side of my thumb, and I float in the air like a ghost or one of those movie cameras on a crane. I watch the rich, powerful, handsome man who is my husband buck into my mouth and mash my nose into his hard belly.

There's no one else in the world but us.

I try to jerk my head away, but he won't be dislodged. He's got me by the hair and the skull. There's no give. The sticky, earthy smell of the curls at the root of his cock fills my lungs. It's dirty, nasty, filthy, and my neck hurts from craning, and it's driving me wild. I picture it in my mind and finger myself harder, grinding against my own hand.

I'm a nice girl with a swollen pregnant belly on her knees on a terrace exposed to the wide blue sea, defenseless, trapped, and used. I don't know why I am this way, but I love it, and I want him to do worse, to race with me into this place where every feeling and sensation is excruciating and brilliant and wrong and exquisite.

“You will never do that again, will you, Diane? Will you?” he mutters, dragging my mouth off his cock, yanking back so my face is turned up to him. His eyes are open, and they’re wild, too, like mine must be.

“No,” I gasp as I suck down air. I have no idea what he’s talking about.

He takes a hand and wipes his cheek where my spit hit him. Then he shoves the finger of that hand as far as he can down my throat until it convulses. Tears stream down my face. I try to dig my nails into his thighs, but they’re flexed too hard.

When he takes his hand out, strings of saliva trail from my lips to his fingertips.

“Open your mouth,” he growls.

I grind my teeth together.

He grabs my jaw and squeezes, his grip bruising my cheeks. “Keep it open,” he orders.

I clutch his wrist and try to wrest my head away, but he’s too strong. He leans over and spits into my mouth. A warm drop hits my bottom lip and dribbles down my chin. Our eyes lock.

He’s not angry.

Neither am I.

He does it again and uses his palm to clamp my mouth shut. “Swallow it,” he says.

I do. I can’t taste it. It’s just like swallowing my own, but my brain is already playing it over and over as my orgasm rises, crests, and crashes through me, even though both my arms are now hanging loose at my sides.

“Open,” he demands.

I do. He takes his thick, ruddy cock in hand and jerks it pitilessly, his breath ragged, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Tongue out,” he grunts.

I stick it out, flat, as far as I can. We’ve done this before.

“Don’t move.” He strokes even harder until, with a deep guttural groan, he spurts hot, salty cum across my tongue, my lips, my cheeks, my chin.

My pussy spasms on nothing, my raw clit pulsing a few last times.

The collar of my blouse is soaked in cum and drool. My hair must be a mess. So are my panties.

Marco tucks himself into his silk boxers, zips his pants, and except for a few brown locks blown out of place by the sea breeze, he’s perfectly presentable. His face is already shuttered, his breath even.

He seizes me by the elbows and hauls me to my feet. My legs are Jell-O. He braces me upright for a few seconds until I must seem steady enough for him to let go.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. Not with my hands or my eyes or my thoughts.

Out of habit, Marco reaches for the handkerchief in the inner pocket of his jacket, but he’s left it back on the veranda. It throws him for a second, but then he starts to unbutton his dress shirt.

I stand in front of him, still and quiet, cum cooling on my face. I’m not flying like usual. I’m too present. Blades of grass are stuck to my knees, and I’ve torn the pinky nail on my left hand.

Marco shakes off his shirt, hangs it from a branch on a nearby potted lemon tree, and peels off his undershirt.

“Stay still,” he says even though I haven’t moved an inch.

He carefully wipes my cheeks, my neck, the creases beside my nose, the corners of my mouth. The cotton smells like sweat and his soap. When he’s finished, he balls it up and tosses it behind a row of sculpted bushes.

He combs my hair with his fingers, fussing and smoothing it, arranging it evenly over my shoulders, rubbing the ends between his fingertips while he examines me, my stained shirt,

my stained knees, intent and somber but otherwise cold as stone.

He's going to say he shouldn't have done that, and it's going to feel like Sienna flouncing in with a briefcase overflowing with very important manila folders. Like being told *I'll be late, don't wait up*. Like standing in the doorway of his study at four o'clock in the morning, watching his chest rise and fall peacefully as he sleeps with his legs dangling over the arm of the overstuffed leather sofa.

He notices the gap between my buttons and frowns.

He's going to say it.

"I've got grass stuck on me," I rush to say before he can.

His gaze drops, and then, frowning deeper, he lowers himself to one knee. He's level with where my boobs are pushed up by my bump. It distracts him for a moment, but then he brushes my knees. There's some dirt ground into the reddened skin like when I was a kid. He licks his thumb and rubs as much off as he can. I have to really crane my neck to see past my belly.

He raises his fathomless brown eyes.

Maybe he's sorry. Or ashamed.

Maybe he's not, but he thinks I want to hear an apology.

I don't.

How would he know that?

"Don't you dare say sorry," I say under my breath even though we're alone.

He parts his lips to speak.

I cut him off. "Don't you dare say we shouldn't do that."

"You're my wife. You're carrying my child. It's wrong." He's lecturing me, but he's also kneeling at my feet, and it makes me bold. I ask what I've never had the nerve to before.

"Do you do this with anyone else?"

He answers without hesitation. "No. Hell no."

“I’m your wife.” It’s a question.

“Yes.” He’s angry now. Because it’s a question? Because he’s remembering that I left him?

“Have you ever done this with anyone else?” I keep going.

“No.” He glares up at me, but he doesn’t stand.

“Are you ashamed of me?”

He closes his eyes as if he’s in pain. His lashes are dark and thick, feathered against his tan cheek.

“Never,” he says.

He won’t ask me the question back, even if he’s thinking it. He doesn’t show weakness. Not even a fleeting glimpse.

I decide to tell him anyway. “Well, I’m not ashamed of what we do, either.”

He averts his gaze from mine and tugs gently at the hem of my shirt, trying to get rid of the gap and cover the flash of skin. It’s useless. As soon as he lets the hem go, my white belly winks at him again.

“You need a new wardrobe.” The arrogance is back in his voice. This is firmer ground.

“I guess.”

He skims his hands up my calves, peering under my skirt. He’s checking for bruises. I stand still and let him.

Finally, he stands and inspects my arms, turning them so he can see the insides, then the outsides. He handles me like porcelain.

“Sometimes, I’m so angry, I want to claw my own skin off.” I don’t know why I say it. It’s out of my mouth before I realize it.

He stops his examination. He’s holding my wrists, each circled by his strong fingers, gently.

“Is that why you left?” he asks.

“No, I’m not talking about before. I mean now. Since I’ve been pregnant. This rage just comes over me in waves

sometimes. It feels like it did when I was a teenager, before we found out what happened to my dad. I guess it's hormones."

"We'll consult the doctor."

I shrug. I don't think there's anything that can be done, and it's not so bad that I can't live with it. I just think it's strange.

"I've never really been this angry before." I really don't know why I'm telling him this except we're alone, and he followed me down here, and if there's no one in the world who understands me, not even myself, then maybe we're two of a kind.

"You were angry with me when you left," he says.

"You forgot our anniversary." His lips begin to part again, and I quickly reach up to press my fingers against them. "Don't say sorry."

He gently takes my hand from his mouth and folds it in his own. "Why not?"

"What if I don't believe you?"

"It's the truth." He takes my other hand so he's holding both of them. "I remembered on the drive home."

"Sienna reminded you."

He shakes his head. "No."

"Why were you even bringing her to the house so late?"

He exhales. "I'd left papers in my study that I needed to sign. She needed the originals for an early meeting." He leans over and rests his forehead against mine. "I was exhausted, Diane."

"Because of the things I don't know about De Noli International."

"Yes."

"That you never told me about."

"You didn't want to know about it."

"That's not true."

His eye twitches. From him, it's as good as a scoff.

"I always asked you about your day. When you bothered to come home for dinner." I try to back away, and to my surprise, he lets my hands go. There's nothing to stop me from putting space between us, but my foot freezes mid-step.

His chest rises. "Taking care of the business is my responsibility. This family's well-being and our workers and our name—it's all on my shoulders." It's not a complaint, but he's frustrated. He thinks I don't understand.

"I could help."

"How, Diane?" He takes a step back. "How?" He straightens his spine and his shoulders, making himself a presence again. The big man.

"I could listen." That's what good wives are supposed to do, isn't it?

"What good would that accomplish?"

It would be so easy to read the question as mean, unforgivably contemptuous. I'd have every excuse to run. I want to. Badly. The little girl who had to stay put and be left behind screams at me to get gone. Read him in the worst possible way. Give up. Protect yourself.

I said *listen* like it's easy, but it's not. It takes everything to make myself as he goes on, his accent thickening.

"It's the man's role to handle business. The wife's place is to keep the home."

"Like I did?"

He draws in a sharp breath. "Like you should have been doing."

"And then you would've come home for dinner and talked to me? If I'd redecorated the rest of the third-floor bedrooms?"

"I explained this to you, Diane. There was trouble at the company. It was for me, *me*, to fix it. You do not need to concern yourself with these matters."

"Because you're the man."

“Yes, Diane, because I’m the man.” He growls and grabs my upper arms, dragging me against his chest.

He’s going to slam his mouth down on mine and kiss me compliant because he likes the odds that I’ll take the out. I’ll pretend my body betrayed me, and we’ll never have to find a way to finish this argument. It would be easier.

I shift my hips forward and arch my spine so my hard belly rises between us, pressing into him. He relaxes his hold.

“You didn’t come home or confide in me because you didn’t want to.”

“You think I didn’t want to be home?” He grabs my hand and shoves it against the hardness tenting his pants.

I focus on his eyes and leave my hand where he’s put it. “I think you were avoiding me.”

“And why would I do that, Diane?”

“I think you’re afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Us.” I glance down at my red knees. “This. You’re afraid.”

For a second, I think he’ll deny it. He has to, a man like him. It must be on the tip of his tongue to say *no, of course not, absurd*. But then he somehow straightens himself even taller, and he says, “Aren’t you?”

I stare at him. He stares back. The breeze rustles the vines. In the distance, the sea laps the walled shore and a car with a powerful engine accelerates up a hill.

And for maybe the first time, he’s not rich, and I’m not poor. He’s not worldly-wise, and I’m not young. He’s not important, and I’m not interchangeable with ten thousand other pretty blonde girls with a nice figure.

He’s Marco, and I’m Diane, and neither of us know what we’re doing.

Stalemate.

I brush my skirt even though it somehow survived the action with no wrinkles to show for it.

He takes that as a cue to retrieve his shirt from the lemon tree. He buttons it up, tucks it in, and then he digs into his pockets. Oh. I must've missed it when he took the cufflinks off. He's deftly reaffixing them now. He's obviously used to doing it without help. He's wearing the compasses with the black diamonds.

"Are those your favorite pair?" I ask as he finishes.

"You bought them."

"Yeah."

"They were the last thing you bought me."

That can't be right. I hadn't been here long when I bought them. We'd just had a weekend on the yacht, and they'd reminded me of it. Cruises on the yacht stopped early on. He hadn't wanted to be away from the fax machine.

Anyway, he's not right. "I bought you presents for Christmas. And your birthday."

Slashes of color appear below his cheekbones, and he gestures me toward the stairs with a nod. "I mean the last..." He searches for words. "Without obligation."

Well, yeah, I guess that might be true. He was always buying me things, and it was always to make up to me for canceling a date or leaving a bruise or being away on business. At some point, they started to feel more like fines than gifts. Buying him things began to feel like pathetic bids for attention, and besides, Vittoria never let me forget that the money I spent wasn't mine. Like when I'd leave for the mall, she'd be sure to remind me to see Monty if I needed cash for tips.

Could I tell him that? We walk quietly side-by-side toward the stairs, and it feels different between us. Like maybe I could.

I don't want to break the peace, though. In a way, it's like the drowsy bliss after sex. There's the same warm glow in my

chest, but it's different, too. For one, we're dressed and upright. Marco is his collected and impeccably mannered self, gesturing for me to go ahead of him up the steps. I'm not surrounded by him, his body crushing me into the mattress and blocking me from sight as if I'm a treasure he's hiding from the world.

But he's walking closer to my side than usual, and as we cross the terrace with violet clematis spilling from the latticework, his hand brushes mine. And then he grabs it. And holds it.

Something unfurls in my heart.

And yes, I am afraid.

I'm terrified.

DIANE

I was right to be.

I float up three terrace levels as Marco holds my hand. As if he senses my nerves, he leads the way up the last set of stairs. I pray that everyone has finished and gone their separate ways, but I know that's not how sharks are once they've scented blood in the water.

The instant I emerge onto the veranda, I'm center stage. The whole family turns in their chairs to gawk, but everyone's decided on vastly different expressions. Vittoria settles on concern. Chiara's not bothering to hide her contempt as she makes a point of noticing the drying spots on my shirt collar and the fading rash on my knees. Ric clocks my knees, too, but he tries to hide his smirk behind a puff on his cigar. Grandfather de Noli glares at me like I'm a disheveled stranger who interrupted a private affair.

Monty quivers with alarm, as if our reappearance somehow calls for his intervention, but he's not sure what assistance he should render. He reaches for the sideboard, his hand hovering with indecision. If he offers me a napkin, I'm going to dissolve like the Wicked Witch with embarrassment.

Sienna has the most unexpected reaction. She notes my shirt and knees, too, and a small smirk lifts her lips, but it's not lascivious like Ric's. It's almost condescending. I don't understand her. She's so territorial with Marco, I'd think she'd be mad to see evidence that she hasn't been able to split us up.

She transfers her attention quickly to Marco, though, and plunges into the scandalized silence with brash confidence.

“I’m afraid I’m going to need to borrow you, Marco. It’s urgent. It can’t wait.” She raises the manila folder.

He’s still holding my hand. He’s going to tell her that it’ll have to wait, or Grandfather de Noli can handle it. We have a new understanding. I don’t come second to work anymore. He didn’t say so, but he told his grandfather he wasn’t going into the office, and he followed me down to the terrace. Things are different now.

“It’s Lorenzo Chemical,” she says.

Marco’s grip on my hand tightens. My heart swells.

“It’s a letter of intent,” she adds. “A *signed* letter of intent.” She flashes a glance at Grandfather de Noli.

In a split second, Marco drops my hand, and my stomach plummets. “My study,” he says to her. “Now.”

She nods, and it’s like she grows taller as I watch, smug satisfaction playing at the corner of her lips no matter how hard she tries to keep her expression all business. She can’t help but dart a delighted, pitying glance at me before she marches off, the pointy heels of her boots going click, click, click.

Marco grimaces at his watch. “I don’t know how long this will take.”

I don’t know what to say or where to look. Everyone is still staring. My collar is still damp. He’s going to walk away, and I’m going to be left alone with them, rumpled and discarded. Again.

“I have to handle this now,” he says, lowering his voice for all the good it’ll do. The veranda’s not that big. “It’s urgent.”

Does he want me to tell him it’s okay? It’s not. It feels like a kick to the ribs.

“I should be in on this,” Grandfather de Noli declares as he pushes himself up from the table, apparently the only de Noli utterly disinterested in our little domestic drama. “I can get

you up to speed. I've got Lorenzo right where we want him. He thinks he's the fox in the henhouse, but little does he know!" He cackles to himself.

Marco's face hardens, and I know in my gut that I'm dismissed.

"I'll find you when I'm finished," he says without looking back down at me. He pivots like a good general, and marches off after his PA.

The second the French door shuts behind him, the scene on the veranda turns into Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*. Vittoria's head swivels on her neck as her glinting green eyes narrow on me. Chiara's hot pink lips peel back from her shining teeth. Ric plucks a flask from his inner pocket and splashes a shot into his coffee.

I rest my hands protectively on my bump. I don't know why. Instinct.

Monty clears his throat. "You have a phone call, Madame," he announces from his station by the buffet.

Vittoria frowns. "Really, Monty, you know I don't take calls before ten."

"My apologies, Madame, but the call is for the *other* Madame de Noli," Monty says. "Madame Diane."

He strides with purpose toward the door and slides it open. I can recognize an out when it falls in my lap. I hustle my butt past the jackals and hurry back into the house, hardly slowing to say to Monty, "I didn't hear the phone ring."

"Neither did I, Madame," he murmurs back and winks.

By the time what he says really registers, he's returned to the veranda, his white rabbit nose in the air and his white ear whiskers bristling in the breeze.

I waste no time in fleeing the scene. First, I drop by our suite to change. I find a plum jumpsuit that happens to have an elastic waistband under the matching belt. I cut the belt loops off. I don't quite have the girth to play Violet Beauregarde

when the Oompa Loompas rolled her off, but it definitely looks like I'm heading in that direction.

After I dress, I make myself scarce. I don't want to risk venturing down to the main floor to find someone to call a car for me, and I don't want to go anywhere near Marco's study, the common areas, or the various family suites. That leaves the spare rooms at the back of the villa. Sometimes extended family or guests stay in them, but mostly, Vittoria and Chiara stage their interior designer tug-of-war there.

I take the back stairs down to the second floor and wander into the one room I managed to finish before I was convinced to give up on being a decorator. Seeing it again, so many months later, it's obvious that I had no clue what I was doing.

It's like I dug up versions of all the fancy things I'd seen on *Dynasty* and *Falcon Crest* and packed them into one room. There's a chandelier much too big for the space, a chintz chaise lounge with a ruffled skirt, and an excessive number of crystal decanters on silver trays. I'm not sure who the room would be suited for—maybe a very elegant and fluffy poodle.

It'd been fun, though, before Vittoria ruined it.

I cross the room to the petite grand piano I'd had placed right in front of the balcony. There's an enormous black marble urn with gold trim on top of it. I remember instructing the staff that it be filled with blooms from the garden. Vittoria had taken me aside to tell me that the head gardener threatened to quit over the request. Apparently, keeping an urn that size in fresh blooms would destroy his work.

Gauging the size of the urn now, he had a point.

I trail my fingers across the keys. I don't know how to play, except for hot cross buns. I plunk middle C. D. E.

A toilet flushes, and a faucet runs.

I blink at the door to the en suite, and while I'm trying to decide what to do, it creaks open. I can't run without bolting straight past whoever is coming out of that bathroom.

Rosanella steps into the room. She doesn't seem surprised to see me. She must've heard the piano.

“Diane,” she says. She doesn’t seem bothered to see me, either. She’s dressed like Nancy Reagan in a patterned blouse with a flounce around the collar, a mid-calf skirt, and sensible, beige, thick-soled shoes that tie. Her cheeks are flushed as if she’s been working out.

She walks with deliberate slowness to the chaise and sits, bending to fetch her knitting from a basket hiding under the ruffled skirt.

“I-I’m sorry to interrupt. I didn’t know the room was occupied.”

She lifts a curved shoulder and begins to clack with her needles.

I need to apologize. That broken vase is the only thing I felt ashamed of when I left. Well, as Mama always says, there’s no time like the present.

I draw a deep breath. “I am very sorry that I broke your vase. I didn’t know it was yours, or that it was important to you. Not that it makes a difference, but I don’t want you to think I did it out of spite against you. It was—”

She looks at me with glassy eyes, clearly listening, but she’s not giving me anything except the click-click-clack of her needles. “Well, I don’t know why I did it, and I guess in hindsight, no one would believe it was an accident, but I didn’t intend anything against you by it.” I rush to a finish. “I’m just so very sorry, truly, I am. It’s the one thing I feel guilty about.”

She drops a stitch, and for a second, she blinks at it in surprise. Then she lays the needles down neatly in her lap.

“You’d better sit,” she says, nodding to the armless side chair with lion’s paws for feet that I’d bought as an accent. I’m not sure what it’s supposed to accent. There are no other animal prints or parts in the room. “Have your feet been swelling yet?”

For a second, I’m thrown. The question suggests a familiarity with pregnancy, and Rosanella never had children. “Not yet. My mama says hers swelled up like boats, but not until the very end.”

Rosanella nods. “I remember that with Vittoria. She had to wear those pink terrycloth plastic shoes—” She screws up her face, searching her memory. “Slide slippers, she called them.”

“Yeah, Mama wore them, too.”

Her lips curve wistfully. “It wasn’t in God’s plan for me to have my own bambini.” She pauses, and I’m about to say I’m sorry, but then she finishes her thought. “Thank the Lord.” She smiles as she crosses herself.

My eyes must bug because she chuckles. “Can you imagine Vittoria if I’d presented her father with a son to replace Marco as his heir? She would’ve put the poor thing in a basket like Moses, taken him down to Port Hercules, and floated him off into the sea.”

She shakes her head, bemused. “To tell the truth, I never had an interest in bottles and nappies.” She seems to recall herself. “But you must be very happy.”

I kind of hum and nod, but I guess it doesn’t come off believable. A spark of understanding flares in her gray eyes. “It’s an added complication,” she says.

“I am happy.” I feel the need to protest. It’s not the baby’s fault that my marriage is a mess. It’d be fine if I could just accept the way things are. Pick up a hobby like knitting. Find a place to hide where no one will look for me.

I glance around the room more carefully and notice a few touches that aren’t mine. A decanter meant to be solely for decorative purposes is filled with what appears to be Irish cream. There’s also a TV in the middle of a credenza where I believe I’d placed a pair of gold lamps with green glass globes.

“I am sorry about the vase,” I say again. “It must have meant a lot to you.”

She picks out her dropped stitch and begins clacking again. “It was bequeathed to me by my great aunt Olimpia. She bought it on her Grand Tour.” She smiles again. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Rosanella so relaxed. “She wasn’t supposed to have one, of course. She was a woman. She was supposed to

marry young and stay home and have bambini and wear black once her husband shuffled off this mortal coil.”

Her eyes warm. “She did marry young. And well. But her husband died before there were any bambini, and it’s a bit of a mystery to this day how she managed it, but she retained control of his estate until she passed at the grand old age of ninety-two back in...well, I suppose it was ’45? Or ’46?”

“She never remarried?”

Rosanella sniffs. “She wasn’t a fool. She was her own woman. An adventuress. A citizen of the world.”

“You wish you’d been able to travel more?” For the entire year I lived here, I can’t remember her ever leaving the villa except for church.

She switches both needles to one hand and reaches for a cut glass brandy snifter that had been hidden on a low table behind the head of the chaise. It’s filled nearly to the brim. She takes a long, prim sip and returns the glass to its hidey-hole.

“If you’d care for refreshment, please help yourself,” she says, nodding toward the decanter as she picks up her stitch. “To answer your question, I am much too fond of my creature comforts to seek out that kind of vagabond life.”

“But you admired her.”

She seems to consider this. “I was very fond of her. And yes, I suppose, I admired her after a fashion.”

“May I ask why?” It’s a strange conversation, one I’d never expected I’d be having with Rosanella. It’s an unkind thought, but she always seemed more of a fixture than a family member. I suppose I bought the company line without question—that hers was a tragic tale, the second wife brought aboard to bear more de Noli heirs and who failed at the task, and because she was too well-connected to be gotten rid of, she was doomed to take up space in a family where she didn’t belong and no one wanted her.

I’m ashamed that I somehow absorbed the story without question, knowing how the de Nolis paint me.

Rosanella has taken her time answering, seeming to really consider the question. “She did as she pleased. As I have, in many ways.”

I must look incredulous.

“I’m not a globe-trotter. I’m a house cat.” She click-clacks. “I’ve heard that our boy found you living with two women in Dallas.”

I nod, a little thrown by the change in direction of the conversation.

“Did you have your own apartment?” she asks.

“No. I was living in my friend Terri’s house.”

“Did you have a garden?”

“Yes, a small one.”

“That must have been lovely.” Rosanella begins another row. “I always wanted to live with a friend in a cozy home with a garden.” She sighs. “You might not understand—that kind of freedom was not afforded to the women in my family. Or the women of my generation. I suppose it still isn’t.”

It’s hard at first to think of making your own way as freedom, but then I remember those days in Dallas before I met Marco. I was terrified and broke, and I didn’t know how to do anything—budget for utilities, fix a clogged toilet, nothing. It sure wasn’t a lark. I had to do for myself because my mother couldn’t afford to keep me. It was the rubber hitting the road.

Remembering, though, it was a rush to be on my own. No one to tell me what to do. All the possibilities.

I guess, in some ways, I feel like I never got started. I arrived in Dallas, I met Marco, and that was it. But if I’m honest with myself, at the time, I wouldn’t have given him up for anything. You couldn’t have pried him from my cold, dead hands. I’d never seen anything as fantastic as him, and I wasn’t stupid.

But somehow, as he drifted away, month after month, I let him.

Maybe I was too young.

Of course, I was. I still am. I don't have a passion or a dream or anything like that. I bet when Sienna was a teenager, she had a corkboard covered with ads from all the companies she wanted to run one day, and the killer outfits she'd wear to do it, just like my sister Heather taped clippings from *Tiger Beat* over half of her mirror. I never wanted to be a working woman, and I didn't care much about being a wife and mother, either.

I never had to figure it out; I only had to make rent. And then I met Marco, and all those everyday worries disappeared, and I was floating in an ocean of time, and my job was to take crap from my in-laws and wait for my husband.

No wonder I went crazy.

I pull my legs up to cross them. My bump makes it a little awkward, but it ends up nestling nicely. "Living with Terri and Joyce was lovely."

Rosanella nods as if she can imagine. She doesn't seem fazed by my long silence. She's clacking away.

"If you leave again, you should take our boy with you," she says.

My nose wrinkles. I can't think of Marco as a boy.

She glances up from her work and looks me direct in the eye. "You know, my husband sent Marco away when he was nine. It nearly tore my heart out. He fought. His father was hardly cold in the ground, and he didn't want to leave his mama. They tried to catch him, but he darted around that front drive like a wild animal, throwing punches at anyone who got close. Blackened poor Monty's eye." She shakes her head. "They didn't let him come home for a few years. Sent him off to spend semester breaks with the family back in Genoa. They didn't want a repeat of that scene. It was unseemly, that display of emotion."

Marco never told me anything about this, only that he was sent to boarding school after his father passed. I wrap my arms around my belly. My heart hurts.

“My husband finally let him come home for the holidays when he was in the upper school. Vito was so pleased. He’d never managed to turn Marco’s father into the perfect scion of the de Noli empire, but he figured out the recipe with Marco. Separate the child from his mother and have duty drilled into him day and night until he’s more machine than man.”

“That’s horrible.”

Her needles fall silent. “I can’t imagine that you would understand how many rules he broke when he married you or how many expectations he crushed.”

“I know the family was disappointed.” And I realize that’s putting it lightly.

“I’m sure you also don’t know that when you left, he drank himself to sleep every night down in that study.”

My throat swells, and my eyes burn. “I didn’t.”

Rosanella sighs and reaches for her snifter again. “I suppose I owe you an apology for that night, as well. I was really quite dramatic. To be honest, I was three sheets to the wind.”

She was? I don’t remember ever seeing her drink except for wine with dinner, but then again, she was quiet, and I never made an effort to get to know her.

She sighs, sagging back in her seat. “There are so many rules, so many things you ought to do. Be a wife, be a mother, or if not that, be an iconoclast, break the mold, travel the world. Or nowadays, be a liberated woman, I suppose, and work in the city.”

I’m not entirely following her point, and her voice is veering into a bit of a drunken ramble, but I find myself nodding along. I’m not sure what exactly I’m supposed to do and be, but I’m definitely supposed to know. And I don’t.

“Do you know why I’m so fond of this room?” Rosanella asks.

I have no idea.

“It feels like you sat down with a stack of catalogs and chose whatever you liked with utter disregard for fashion or the principles of design.”

My cheeks heat. “More or less, I suppose that’s what I did.”

“It’s chaotic,” she says, smiling. “You’re a bit chaotic, too, aren’t you, Diane de Noli?”

My cheeks warm even more. “I never thought of myself that way.”

“You also hold Marco de Noli in the palm of your hand, and you’ve got no idea what to do with him. That PA of his wishes she had that power.” She cackles. “I hope I live long enough to see this era through, all of you beautiful young women running wild, choosing whatever you like, tweaking the noses of the matrons and the old guard.”

“A friend in a cozy house with a garden isn’t so wild a choice.”

Her smile turns wistful. “It doesn’t seem so, does it?”

There’s something she’s not saying, or else something I don’t quite understand, but I know better than to pry. She’s listing a bit toward starboard, and when she takes another sip from her brandy, it sloshes onto the scarf or sweater piling in her lap.

We’re having a moment of companionable silence when I hear the thud of a door from down the hallway.

“Diane.” Marco isn’t shouting, but his voice carries.

“You’d better go before you give away my hiding spot,” Rosanella whispers.

I oblige, quickly ducking into the hall, hoping that I might get lucky enough to slip away while his head is poked into another room.

No such luck.

“Diane, we have an appointment.” His expression and tone are distant again, and even though my disappointment from

earlier has faded, I gather my accustomed hurt around myself like a cloak.

In this moment, it occurs to me just how simple and lovely a friend and a cozy house with a garden would be—no pretending, no tender feelings that I have to hide, no power struggle that I'm destined to lose and can't seem to stop fighting.

It would be so simple and lovely, and I'd never choose it. Never in a million years.

As he leads the way toward our suite, I follow in his confident steps, feeling small in the shadow of his broad shoulders. I imagine that little grief-stricken boy, fighting his heart out so that the people who are supposed to love him won't send him away.

I think about how impossible that fight is to win, when you're left alone in your room, and your daddy's gone, and you scream and cry in silence, and you throw your fists and hit nothing but air.

You can't choose simple when you've had your tether cut like that, when the world has flipped upside down under your feet.

And I marvel, following in his footsteps, that as alone as he is in his stiff pride, and as lonely as I am in my aimlessness, we found each other, and somehow, although we're warped and chewed up, in our way, we fit.

MARCO

I swallow until my heart is no longer lodged in my throat.

She's here, and she's wearing a plum-colored jumpsuit like she's a Formula One pit crewman. Her little belly tugs the fabric tight between her legs, outlining her pussy lips.

I ignore the twitch in my dick. She's the mother of my child, and it is my responsibility to ensure her health and well-being. I just have to muscle down the...discomfort...I felt when I couldn't find her. I can't throw her against the wall and fuck her until she's sorry for every second that my gut churned as I searched the villa.

She was hiding in the room she redecorated before she lost interest in her domestic duties. At the time, when she abandoned the project, Mother spoke up for her. She said it was understandable; Diane knew she was out of her depth and too proud to take advice. When it became apparent to all that she did not have a natural talent for design, she turned her back and walked away. Mother said I oughtn't fault her.

Diane did the same with me. She walked away, but I robbed the cradle and married far outside my circle, so it is hardly fair to fault her for that, either. I made this bed we're lying in.

I've visited the room a few times. I can't say it looks considerably worse than any other, although there does always seem to be a faint eau de Irish whiskey in the air.

Diane was more content at the very beginning when she kept herself occupied. It's good that she offered to organize the Director's dinner. Unexpected, but good.

Earlier, after I finished with Sienna, Mother waylaid me outside the study and offered to assist Diane with the dinner. I was tempted to take her up on the offer—Diane does need her rest, and I can hear her huffing and puffing behind me now as we climb the stairs to our suite—but I am not a complete fool despite the fact that I behaved like one this morning.

My mind veers, tempted as it always is to relive the depravity that I allow myself to indulge in with her, but I refuse to let it revisit the terrace. I have no excuse for myself. She's a mother, not a whore, and I am a man, not an animal.

When we get to the third floor, I step to the side, gesture for Diane to proceed down the hall to our suite, and watch her walk. She doesn't seem to be in any discomfort. She was kneeling in hard dirt this morning, but her gait is normal.

From the rear, she doesn't even appear pregnant, but she is, and apparently, I need the fact beaten into my head. A wife and mother doesn't have grass stains on her knees.

My cock jerks against my trousers. I command it to still.

I don't understand myself. I'm like the Roman god with two faces. Janus. One side of myself would rather die than see Diane hurt or degraded, and the other side revels in it. But only by me. Only with her. Only when her eyes beg me.

It has to stop. From this moment on. I can control myself, but in the moment, she can't. She's never been able to. She left a bruise on my shin where she kicked me. She could have broken a toe.

I square my shoulders as I open the door to our suite. Dr. Roche leaps to his feet, the tea cup Monty brought clattering in its saucer. The old doctor's black medical bag sits beside him on the settee.

“Bonjour, Monsieur de Noli.” He offers me a tight bow.

The good doctor is an old-fashioned sort, a firm believer that daily calisthenics and cod liver oil will prevent all manner

of ills. He's treated the family since before I was born, and his father before him. Grandfather has a harrowing story of the elder Dr. Roche administering a smallpox inoculation with a needle that he claimed had multiple points as wicked as a viper's fangs.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Roche," I greet him.

I sense more than hear Diane shuffle closer to me. It makes her uneasy when we're in company that doesn't speak in English, but she made no effort to learn Italian or French. When I broached the subject, she usually cut the conversation short, but once, when she was expecting her monthly, she burst into tears and said, "Why learn? So they can poke fun of me for talking like a baby and making mistakes?"

She wouldn't say who *they* were, and I was relieved to accept her refusal. Work was pressing, there were too many demands on my time, and she always regained her good temper when her courses arrived.

And then she ran away and disappeared, and if not for the baby, there's no reason to believe she would have ever willingly spoken to me again.

My chest tightens. Everything is balanced on the edge of a knife. I want to gather her up and lock her away, chain her up, tie her down, but the urge is counterproductive. I need to ensure that she's well. Then my body will return to normal. I won't feel like I'm on the verge of a coronary every waking moment.

"You look well, Diane." Dr. Roche smiles at her benevolently. "Very robust. Très ronde!"

I hide a wince. It's a blessing Diane doesn't know that she's been called quite rotund. She might not take it as the compliment it's intended to be.

She is uneasy, resting her hand protectively on her purple belly as she eyes the doctor's bag. Her nerves ratchet my own tighter.

"I requested that Dr. Roche visit to examine you," I explain. In fact, I called him first thing, from the car driving

home from the airport. I didn't like Diane's color. The shade was off.

"You *and* the baby, of course. Congratulations, Diane, my dear. You must be delighted. The de Noli heir! How exciting!" Dr. Roche beams at my wife. She inches back a step. I'd forgotten how shy she is around strangers.

"I feel fine," she says.

"Well, that is excellent! Let's see if your vitals concur, shall we? Why don't you sit down, my dear?" He directs a wide smile in the direction of an armless side chair.

His teeth always reminded me of wooden blocks as a boy, and his mustache brought to mind an organ grinder. He has the looks of a man who ought to be jolly, but he can be sharp with his words when called for, and blunt. His admonishment to "wrap your pecker if you don't want it to fall off" made quite the impression on me as a young man. I took him literally for years.

"I don't bite," he says, patting the upholstered seat. Diane hasn't budged. She's casting me a veiled look. She's unhappy. Well, that is rather par for the course.

I take her elbow and guide her to sit. She is five months into her first pregnancy and hasn't sought medical care. She is obviously in some kind of denial about her condition. The way she fought me this morning—

Whatever is wrong, I will fix it. She can look askance at me all she likes.

Thankfully, she allows Dr. Roche to go about his business with a polite nod. He takes her pulse and listens to her lungs. She holds her breath and exhales as he instructs. When he rummages in his bag for his instruments, he cheerfully delivers a litany of advice.

"She should not be traveling, of course, now that she's returned home, and if she visits the club, she should be seated in the shade only, please." He peers into her ears with his otoscope. "Many mothers-to-be experience irregularity as the

pregnancy progresses, and for that, I recommend one cigarette a day at a regular time. After breakfast perhaps.”

Diane’s eyes narrow. Dr. Roche flashes a light blithely into her pupils.

“As for weight, I don’t want to see a gain of more than twenty pounds, and I am sure you don’t either.” He winks at me as he chuckles.

Diane’s fingers curl into fists in her lap.

Dr. Roche pats her knee. “Now, if the little mother will retire to the bedroom and don a dressing gown. Panties and brassiere off, if you please. We’ll see if we can determine a delivery date.” He returns the otoscope and flashlights to his bag and fishes out a measuring tape, triumphantly holding it aloft.

Diane is bright pink. It’s quite a contrast with her purple ensemble. She has always been bashful with other men, but instead of staring at the floor as she is wont to do, she’s glaring at me as if I’ve offended her.

“It will be good,” I say to her in a low voice. “Reassurance that the baby is growing well.”

She rises as if she’s being sent to the gallows. It could not be clearer that she resents carrying my child. The taste of it is bitter in my mouth.

She drags her feet to our bedroom, and Dr. Roche calls after her, “Stockings off, too, if you will, my dear!”

The door shuts behind her with a solid thump. Dr. Roche claps his hands together. “Well, I suppose you must have questions for me, as the father-to-be. The gentlemen always do!”

His enthusiasm is jarring in the quiet of our sitting room. I would rather pluck out my own eyes than have this conversation with him, or any man, but it is my responsibility. *She* is my responsibility, and she is hale and hearty, but it doesn’t take much imagination to see that it won’t take long for her belly to overtake the rest of her.

I straighten myself. Dr. Roche is a medical man. A professional. His loyalty to this family is unquestioned.

His smile widens encouragingly, revealing two rows of perfect, somewhat yellowed, squares.

I take a deep breath through my nose.

He raises a brow in expectation.

There is no help for it. Squeamishness be damned. If I have done some damage, it must be dealt with. “In regards to...er...the bedroom...and...the...uh...vigor of...”

Fuck. I can't spit the words out.

I roll my shoulders out, puff out another breath, and plunge forward. “What I am asking is whether she can be hurt by lovemaking? Should it be avoided? The...er...more vigorous...er...acts?”

His face shows no judgment. In fact, he claps me on the back, chuckling. The familiarity is unexpected, and it grates.

“Not at all. I always say the female of the species is like a Land Rover. Made to take a beating and be taken off road.”

I step to the side so that his hand falls away.

I've heard similar sentiments expressed before, frequently, as one does in locker rooms. And boardrooms as well, for that matter. The vulgarity is unappealing, but it's never made me want to punch an old man in the jaw before.

Diane is in *our* bedroom. In our bed. Naked under a gown.

This bastard isn't going anywhere near her.

I go straight to the door and open it wide. “I think we are finished with your services, sir.”

It takes a long moment for his leering face to register the change of plans. For a second, incensed pride flares in his eye, but it's quickly extinguished. I haven't been the boy he admonished to wrap his pecker in many years. He knows who he is dealing with now.

“Monsieur de Noli, my sincerest apologies. My choice of words was perhaps...too colloquial. I assure you that while your concerns are commendable, and quite common, the female is a sturdy animal, designed by nature to withstand a great deal of punishment—indeed you will find—much more than the average man.” He attempts a conciliatory smile.

I want to knock his words back down his throat along with his block teeth. Again, he’s saying nothing I haven’t heard expressed a hundred times, but he’s saying it about Diane. And I might be driven by this sick compulsion to hurt her, but I’ll be damned if anyone else even thinks of it.

I’m aware that I’m a hypocrite, but I don’t care, and if this man does not take the invitation to leave, I’m not sure what I’m going to do. I glare at him and hold the door wide.

He points his nose in the air and sniffs, summoning his dignity.

A foot falls softly on the carpet by the bedroom. We both glance over. Diane has reemerged in an emerald green silk gown. It was purchased before she left, so she has it closed, but the fabric strains across the belly, and the matching belt doesn’t have the length for much of a bow.

“Madame de Noli, perhaps you can reassure your husband that you are fit and in fine condition for an examination. Fears are, of course, quite natural for expectant parents. Nothing to be ashamed of at all.”

“Diane,” she says.

Dr. Roche’s brow furrows.

“You call me Diane, not Madame de Noli.” Diane lifts her delicate chin. “You call my mother-in-law Madame de Noli.”

She’s right. He does. I hadn’t noticed.

“Ah, habit, you know.”

She turns to me, effectively dismissing him. “I don’t want an examination today, and I want to choose my own doctor, which you would know if you’d spoken to me about it. You

can do what you want, Marco, but you'd better ask if it has to do with me. From here on out, that's the rule."

Her voice contains the slightest trace of nerves, but she hides it well. She's as serious as I've ever seen her.

I know she's angry, but still, a warmth suffuses my chest. *From here on out.*

She floats forward. "You will please excuse us, Dr. Roche. My husband and I must have a private discussion."

She leads him toward the door, and he has no choice but to follow, sputtering, "But—uh—er," as he goes.

When he's gone, she turns to me. She's furious.

Before she left, I hated her moods. I'd leave for the office, make a phone call, fall asleep in my study, anything to give her time to collect herself. Her complaints made me feel weak and incapable.

Her anger doesn't bother me now. She's here, and that absent look isn't in her eyes. As long as I can reach her, she can rage at me to her heart's content.

I am weak when she's gone.

"Do you have a question about me, Marco?" she starts, stepping right up to me and poking her index finger into my chest. "Because if you have a question about me and our love life, you need to ask me."

I shift forward so her nail bites my skin through the cotton of my shirt. "You are not a doctor. You wouldn't know the medical advice," I calmly reply.

"Well, I do now. I'm an animal. A horse, I bet. Ride me hard and put me away wet. No worries."

I frown. "Do not speak of yourself that way."

"Why? Because it's disrespectful?" She snorts. "But it's fine for a doctor to speak about women that way?"

"Clearly not. I sent him away."

“There’s no difference between the two of you. He thinks I’m a car or a horse, and you think I’m a child who can’t take care of herself, or decide what’s okay with her own body, or make her own doctor’s appointments.”

“I don’t think you’re a child.” I drop my gaze to where her breasts heave against her gown, splitting the gaping neckline.

She clutches the fabric together and rolls her eyes. “Don’t think you can get out of this conversation by making it sexual.”

“I’m not trying to get out of it.”

“Well, that will be a first!”

We stare at each other for a moment, catching our breath. I want to drag her into my arms with every fiber in my body, and I know if I kiss her now, I can light her on fire. It would be better than talking.

“You can’t just have your way all the time,” she says.

To tear my gaze away from the creamy cleft between her tits, I focus on her mouth. “You love it when I have my way with you.”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“Well, what’s fun in bed isn’t always fun in day-to-day life. Obviously.”

“What we do in bed is fun to you?”

“Well, yeah.” The question seems to slow her down.

“So what we did the night before you left? It was fun?”

A red tinge surges from her breast, up her neck, to her cheeks. “You shouldn’t bring that up,” she hisses.

“Because you’re ashamed.” I knew it, but the knowledge still lodges in my chest like a rock. I don’t want her to feel dirty. Or rather, I do, in the moment, and so does she, but afterwards, the idea that the feeling is actually *real*—it kills me.

“No.” She folds her arms and wanders to stand at a window. “I’m not ashamed. It’s just—” She glances at me over her shoulder and lowers her voice. “—*embarrassing*.”

I cross the room to stand beside her, though I’m careful not to crowd her. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I *know* that. I told you. I’m *not*. It’s just embarrassing. I mean—” Somehow, she drops her voice even lower. “There was *stuff*. On your *thing*. When you took it out.” She squeezes her eyes closed. “And it made that *noise*.”

I’m instantly hard. I’d never fucked a woman in her ass before, and perhaps there are techniques that I lack. We did make a mess. I’d hoped that I’d hidden the worst of it from her, but I put her on all fours facing the mirror on the wall, and she watched bug-eyed the whole time that she whimpered and pleaded for me to come.

“I’m a man,” I say because I have no idea how to console her. “We aren’t concerned about these trifles.”

“Trifles?” Her voice slides up an octave.

“It was of no consequence.”

She lets out an indignant squeak and focuses with militant intensity on the view from the window. “You can stop talking about it now.”

“Not when it caused you to abandon our marriage.”

Her head swivels on her neck, and she blinks up at me in disbelief. “You think I left because you took my ass?”

Ass comes out as a mouthed whisper of air, and now my cock is throbbing. I glare out the window at a cormorant patrolling close to the shoreline.

“You forgot our first anniversary,” she says.

“I understand that must have contributed as well.”

“You thought I weighted those two things the same? That they were somehow equivalent?” Her voice is rising even higher, and Dr. Roche didn’t shut the door behind himself when he left.

She's shaking her head. "I *let* you take my ass."

"You begged me to stop," I remind her.

"I always beg you to stop."

"Which is exactly why we should stop all this...business. It's wrong. I should not treat you the way that I do. I should be careful with you." I speak low, and my breath fogs the window.

"Well, you shouldn't have forgotten our anniversary. You should have been careful about that." Her chin dimples as it wobbles, and there's a sharp pang in my chest.

She angrily dashes at her eyes. Her wet lashes stick to her cheeks. It's torture, not knowing how to protect her or be the man she needs. I sidle closer until my arm brushes hers. She sniffles.

"I remember the day we were married."

She rubs her nose with the cuff of her gown.

"That night, you said your cheeks hurt from smiling."

"Well, they did." She darts me a wary glance from the corner of her eye.

"I swore to myself I'd make you feel that way every day for the rest of our lives." Outside, the cormorant wings toward the horizon, fading into a smudge and then a dot and then, from one blink to the next, he disappears into nothing. "I don't know how to do that."

She is silent for a moment. "I could tell you," she says in a small and quiet voice. "But you need to listen to me."

"I don't listen to anyone." I flash her a wry smile.

She's looking up at me now, her lips curving in response. "I know," she says. "I—"

A sharp rap sounds from the doorway, and my mother trills, "Everyone decent?"

Diane shrinks. She tugs the edges of her robes together, slumps her shoulders, and ducks her head so that her hair falls

in her face.

A memory pops into my mind—my father and I playing water polo, splashing like mad, flooding the deck. Mother’s heels on the tiles, her arms folded, smiling thinly down at us while the water sloshed over the pool’s edges. My father’s grin ebbing, an invisible mantle of formality settling on him when a moment before he was spitting in an arc, crowing, “Guarda Marco, sono la Fontana di Trevi!”

I miss him. It’s an ache buried under all my muscle and bone. I never think of it, but it’s always there, a pain so old that it is part of my body, part of its function.

Mother sails into the room unbidden. I step forward to greet her, putting myself between her and Diane.

When did I become so accustomed to acting as a buffer? It’s not a recent development. I might have been oblivious, but at some point during the last year, the move became habit.

“I’ve just had the most extraordinary conversation with Charles in the front hall.” Mother rounds her eyes and purses her lips. “I can hardly credit what he had to say.”

When did Dr. Roche becomes Charles?

“Gossiping, Mother?”

She sucks in a breath. Now the rounded eyes are genuine. She presses a hand to her bosom. “Certainly not. I would *never*.”

Behind me, there is the faintest snort.

“But Charles is a dear family friend—he delivered you and Ric, for heaven’s sake—and I demand to know why *she* would see fit to throw him out on his ear. Delicate sensibilities when one is expecting is one thing, but incivility is quite another.”

She’s working herself up, and suddenly, I’ve had enough. The walls are too close. The air is too thick.

“Diane, go dress. We’re leaving.”

This time, I hear a faint gasp.

“Really, Marco,” Mother chides. “Are these dramatics necessary?”

I don’t deign to reply. I fold my arms and gaze down at her. I do not need to don a mantle of formality. Except for when I’m alone with Diane, I cannot escape it.

She sniffs. “Well, you needn’t leave on my account. I’m sure I know when I’m not wanted.”

I always thought Diane and Mother were simply a case of oil and water. It’s rare that a man’s mother and wife get along. And I suppose I also thought that the least Diane could do while I rescued De Noli International from imminent destruction was hold her tongue and keep the peace at home.

Like I’ve always done, no matter how miserable it made me.

Diane reappears in her purple jumpsuit. She’s never readied herself so quickly before.

“Ready to go,” she says, flashing me a shy smile. Mother seethes, but Diane pays her no attention. She seems genuinely excited to leave with me. I grab my wife’s hand and lead her out to the hall. “Where are we going?” she asks.

Her eyes are bright.

For the first time in so very long, I can breathe.

I tell her the truth. “I don’t know.”

She giggles. “All right then,” she says. “We’ll go together.”

As I lead her down the stairs, I wonder.

How did I not know that all this time, all my life, that is all I’ve wanted?

DIANE

Marco takes us to the yacht, and before we leave, he tells Monty to have our bags packed and sent down to the marina.

For the whole short drive, my heart thumps in my chest. The tinted window is raised between Pietro and the back seat, but Marco and I don't talk or touch. It feels like a fragile truce, and neither of us wants to break it, but I have so many questions.

I'm ready now to know what was happening that kept him so busy during the past year and if he'll admit that there was more to it than business. I want to tell him how to make me smile, and I want to know what it feels like to talk while he listens to me like I'm as important as a business call or meeting of the board.

I'm ready for the truth. Everything is different. Things feel *possible*.

He picked me. Twice in one afternoon.

Marco is always the consummate gentleman, but as soon as we board the *Genoese*, his manners become impeccable. He orders that dinner be served at eight on the upper deck and escorts me to the luxuriously appointed captain's cabin with its king-sized waterbed. All the while, he's assisting me up the ramp and down the stairs and through the narrow corridors. I feel precious, and cherished, and a little like a known flight risk.

After dropping a chaste kiss on my forehead, he asks, “Shall I draw you a bath?”

Before I can answer, he’s already on his way to the ensuite. The sound of water would have drowned out my response.

I watch him undo his cufflinks—still the compasses with the black diamonds—and roll up his sleeves. I love his forearms. I love the veins that track along his smooth inner arm and how the hard muscles play as he adjusts the temperature knob and swirls the water, mixing the hot with the cold.

A woman on a soap opera would drop her dress to the floor to get his attention. The camera would stay just above her breasts, and she’d smile fetchingly. Maybe they’d cut to a shot of her bare feet stepping out of her heaped skirt. Whatever, it’d do the trick.

But I don’t want to take my clothes off. I want Marco to rip them off. I want him to come after me like he can’t help himself. I crave that closeness.

My pussy begins to throb.

Marco sends me a reserved smile from his perch on the side of the tub, and he gestures for me to come and join him.

I sigh. I slip into the walk-in closet, change into a short, terrycloth robe, and pin my hair up. I don’t like to wash it in the tub.

I join him in the bathroom, putting a little strut in my step and sway in my hips. He keeps his eyes on my face.

I drop the robe.

He reaches for my hand and guides me into the tub. My belly bumps him.

“Careful,” he says and helps me lower myself. I try to sit gracefully, but you try plopping yourself down in a slippery tub with a watermelon in your midsection playing hell with your balance. I grip his hand hard, steady myself on the ledge,

and I'm relieved when my bare butt hits the porcelain and slips a few inches.

He swishes a washcloth in the water.

"You don't have to do that," I say.

He ignores me and soaps up the rag.

He's bathed me before, but only after we've made love, and my brain is a bowl of mush, and my body's limp as a sack of flour. I'm too aware for this now. I'm tense.

He's being gentle, and I don't like it.

"Relax," he murmurs.

I can't.

He finishes with my back and he moves to my belly, swirling the warm cloth in circles over the taut skin. Part of me wants to squirm away, pop my stomach off like Legos, set it on a ledge, and come back when I'm ready. It doesn't feel like me, it feels like someone said, "Here, hold this," and walked away.

It's covered in white lather, and the wet skin below is shiny like white rubber. Like a dolphin. I poke it.

Marco rests back on his haunches, his elbows resting on the edge of the tub. "What are you thinking?" he asks. His face is very serious.

I slide my feet up the far end of the tub so my pink toes stick out of the water. "I'm thinking it will be horrible, if you don't love me, and I don't love him."

Before I say it, I didn't even know it was buzzing in my head. I brace myself. I didn't mean to start a fight naked and more or less stuck in a bathtub.

Marco clasps his hands like a boy saying his prayers on his knees beside his bed, and rests his forehead against his knuckles. He looks tired.

For a moment, he does nothing, but then he draws in a deep breath and raises his head, leveling me with a stare so intent, so *raw*, that my heart trips a beat.

“I would *die* for you. Or him.” His accent is thickening.

“It is *never* going to come to that.” My brain is electric with the risk I’m taking, pushing him like this, and it’s like the past senses an opening, and it tosses up Daddy’s favorite green Hess trucker hat hanging on its peg by the back door and the rusted hull of his car sitting on blocks in the driveway.

Tears collect along the lower rim of my eyes. Marco swears softly under his breath.

This is when he has to make a call. When there’s something he has to look at out a window. When the subject has to change.

He frowns, rinses the cloth, and wipes the suds off the mound between us. Then he leans forward, drops a kiss on my darkened brown nipple with its new freckles, and rests his scratchy cheek on the top of my belly. There’s pressure, but not much. He’s not allowing his whole weight to press down. His face is turned toward me.

“I want you,” he says, low and deep and soft. “You and your mama. I am going to keep you both with me. I do not care if you are furious with me or disappointed or angry at the world. There is nothing you can do or say that would make me give you up.”

He doesn’t break eye contact for a second as he says it.

“You are both mine. Forever.” He reaches up and smooths a strand of hair stuck to my damp jaw behind my ear.

His cheek rests on the baby’s bump, and the baby rests inside me, between my ribs and the spine pressing against the hard bottom of the porcelain tub. The loneliness inside me screams like the Wicked Witch doused with a bucket of water. It hurts. Exorcisms do.

I can’t take it.

I sit up. I know he’ll lift his head. His face is stormy. The humidity has curled the black locks along his temples.

He rises on his knees beside the tub.

“You should have remembered that before I left.” I don’t want to punish him anymore, but he’s too close. He’s supposed to be impossibly distant, impenetrably cold. Untouchable. Invincible.

“I made mistakes,” he says.

I want to plug my fingers in my ears. “You don’t love me. You don’t *do* the love stuff. It’s not your *thing*.”

“What are you doing, Diane?” His voice is calm. Conciliatory.

I stand, using the tub’s edges to haul myself up, water sluicing off my swollen breasts and hulking belly. Marco grips my hips to help, and his fingers bite into my flesh, and that’s what I want.

I shove him, slamming my palms into his chest. He doesn’t budge an inch, but he lets my hips go.

“Diane, stop.”

I step out of the bath, and he has to back up. His eyes are lighting up. I stalk forward. He seizes my upper arms. Yes. This is what I need.

“I’m not doing this with you, Diane,” he growls.

Yes, he will. He thinks he makes me, but that’s not the way it works. I get it now. I make *him*.

I wrench my arms free, and he has to allow it because I’m delicate and precious in the state I’m in, and I haven’t tipped him over the edge, not quite yet.

I grasp the collar of his shirt, and I rip. Buttons fly. His shoulders rise, his abs contract. His nostrils flare.

I’ve got him. My anticipation skyrockets.

He snatches my chin. “Is this how you want it to be?” I can’t nod. He’s got my jaw too hard. “Is this what you need, dirty girl?”

Yes. Oh, fuck yes.

He grabs my hair and drags me toward the water bed, but not so quickly that I can't easily keep up, even though my neck is at an angle and my back's curved forward. It's a dance, and I know the steps, and the safety of familiarity melds with the anesthesia that floods my system from the pain prickling my scalp.

Usually, he'd throw me to the mattress, but he won't tonight.

"Get up," he demands, tugging my hair like a leash. I cry out at the sharp twinge and begin to crawl onto the bed. Even though the mattress is full, it dips and sways as I crawl, and coupled with my hanging belly, I begin to topple sideways. Immediately, he covers my back, wrapping an arm around my waist to steady me.

"On your back," he says, easing me down. "Lift your knees. Spread them."

I do, but he slaps the insides of my thighs to speed me up. My skin is still wet, so it stings. I whimper.

"Keep them like that, or you're not going to like what happens. Understand?" He grapples with his belt, the leather whipping through the loops.

Fear bubbles in my veins. "Please don't hit me," I whine.

He winds the belt around his palm until only a short, looped length is left, and then with a crack, he snaps it against the pink thigh he just smacked. I scream.

"You can't keep quiet?" He's panting, pupils blown, his hands almost shaking with excitement. "You want to let everyone on this boat know that you're bad?"

"Yes, I can be quiet. I promise. I will."

He cracks my other thigh, but he's being so careful, he can't get enough momentum to make the blow do more than smart. I scream anyway.

"That's it." He grabs my left wrist and tugs it down beside my left ankle. He quickly winds the belt in a figure eight so

my wrist and ankle are tied. He makes no effort to buckle or knot it. I could slip my arm free no problem.

He reaches for my right wrist. I know what he's up to now. I swing at him, but not as hard as I can. He catches me, shrugs off his shirt, and uses it to bind my other wrist and ankle with a kind of slip knot. I could press my knees together if I wanted, but I leave them spread, and I can't see my pussy at all with my bump in the way, but I can feel it throb and weep as he stares.

"What are you going to do to me?" I whisper. My voice shakes with anticipation.

"Wait here. Don't move. If you move, it's going to go worse for you," he rumbles.

A shiver zips up my spine. He stalks out of the cabin, sliding the door shut behind him, and then I'm alone, staring at a modest crystal chandelier hanging from the low, white-tiled ceiling. If I shift, the water bed sways, and I can hear a faint slosh. Marco's belt begins to loosen on its own.

My pussy is wet and throbbing, but I'm also getting cold as my skin dries. I feel silly and anxious and terrified that my thinking brain will kick back on. I don't want to come back to earth.

He's gone too long. Goosebumps pucker my skin and my nipples contract into painful points. I slip my wrists from their restraints to wrap my arms around myself. I'm considering rolling to my side and covering myself with the navy comforter when the door slides back open.

"I told you not to move," he says.

Instantly, my body reheats. "You left me," I whine.

"I had to, and all you had to do was wait here for me like a good girl, but you couldn't do that, could you?"

"I'm so sorry." I work myself up on my elbows so I can see what he's doing. He is shucking his pants, and he has a jar in his hand. Oh, no.

“You’re going to be,” he says. “Spread those knees again. Now.”

I do, wrapping my still-pruned fingers around my ankles. “What are you going to do?”

“You know,” he growls. He moves to the head of the bed and returns with a pillow. “Lift,” he orders.

I try, but I can’t raise my hips much, not with my abdominal muscles out of service.

He bends and uses his shoulders as a wedge to gently hike my thighs and tuck a pillow under my ass.

“I don’t want to. I don’t like it. It hurts.” Wetness trickles down the crease of my pussy.

“I didn’t ask you if you wanted to or not,” he says, coming to kneel between my legs. He lifts the jar and spins the lid open. It’s filled with white cream and smells like coconut. “You’re going to take it, and if you scream, I won’t make it short. I’ll go as long as I can.”

“No,” I gasp. I really don’t want that. I didn’t like it the first time although I came so hard, I got a charley horse.

He dips two fingers in the jar, and before I can even clench my cheeks, he shoves them past the ring of muscle. A guttural moan is torn from my throat. The stretch feels so good, like scratching an itch, but I remember from last time that his fingers are a whole different ballgame than his cock. There’s also that delicious chant in the back of my head—*you dirty slut, you filthy whore, you love it, don’t you, you bad, bad girl.*

He plunges his fingers in and out, working the oil in, while he strokes more up and down his flushed, veiny shaft until it glistens.

It’s so wrong, and for whatever reason, that’s what makes it so incredibly good.

“Touch yourself, Diane. You’re going to come with my cock in your ass.”

“I can’t,” I argue, but my hand has already found the plump nub above my slick slit. It’s not easy. I have to hike a

knee way high to reach past my stomach. It opens my bottom up, his fingers slip out, and I feel a prod at my asshole.

I squeeze my cheeks tight. “Please don’t, Marco,” I beg. “I’ll do anything you want. I’ll let you put it in my mouth. I’ll lick you. Wherever you want. Anything but this.”

If he doesn’t do it now, I’ll cry. I can see his thoughts whirring. This is dirty, and I’m his wife, Madame de Noli, the mother of his child. This is wrong. He should be the better man and decide that I don’t know what I want. He can be the reformed pervert, and I can be the innocent led astray, and he doesn’t have to ever admit to himself that when we play this way, we’re in it together, both as naked as two people can get.

“Don’t do it, Marco.” A drop of water from my wet hair dribbles down my cheek, and in my head, I pretend it’s a tear.

He growls, surging forward, forcing his cock into my tight back hole. I press my palms to his hairy thighs to slow him down. He bats them away.

“You’re gonna take this, Diane. You asked for it, dirty girl. Take it.”

I scream. He slams his hand over my mouth, which stops him from pushing further because he’s bracing himself well above me so as not to put any pressure on my belly. I jerk my head away and scream again.

“Diane,” he hisses in my ear. “Someone will come.”

I scramble at my side until my fingers find the belt, and I shove it into his hand. When he realizes what I’ve given him, he grins, a beautiful smile, white against his tan skin. It creases the corners of his sparkling brown eyes and magically conjures that slight suggestion of a cleft in his chin. He’s a stunning, beautiful man, and he is mine, all mine.

He’s inside me, but he’s not moving. It burns, and it’s triggering that full, urgent feeling, but it’s bearable. I scream again anyway.

He grabs my jaw, pries it open, and winds the belt around my head, forcing it between my teeth like a bit, catching my hair in the tines when he buckles it.

I could still scream almost as loud. The sound comes from the throat. I don't, though. I beg him to stop, my words hopelessly muffled by the leather. Spit begins to dribble from my mouth.

He moves again, deeper and faster, and I moan and whine as I stretch wider and become accustomed to the invasion. I find my clit again, but the sensation can't compete with the white-hot pain. I can't take it. It's too much.

"Take it out," I blubber, but even I can't understand myself through the belt.

Marco knocks my hand aside and begins to play with my nub himself, tight circles, exactly what I need. He strokes his cock in and out, and I can hear it, the sucking and slipping, so I whine louder, slapping at him, careful not to move my hips because I don't want him deeper, I couldn't bear it, and then he thrusts forward, grunts, and stills.

"Come now," he demands, grinding my clit with the base of his palm. "Come on my cock with my cum in your asshole."

I didn't know I was close, but that word out of his proper, upstanding, million-dollar mouth tips me over, and I go sailing, soaring, flying like a kite. I've slipped my mooring. Everything inside me is pulsing and clenching, and Marco is on top of me, braced on his arms, watching my face as if I'm the prettiest picture he's ever seen, the most amazing thing.

He loosens the belt and eases it out of my mouth.

I push at his thighs again, and this time, he slides out, and I squeeze my eyes shut and ignore the sounds. Warm cum drips out of my bottom.

I stay exactly where I am, spaced-out and shaking like a wet puppy, while he pads to the bathroom. The toilet flushes. The faucet runs.

He comes back, and I feel a warm towel swipe between my legs.

"Is the mess bad?" I whisper. I don't look.

“No mess,” he says.

“You’re lying.”

He makes a noncommittal hum. “Hold on.”

He gathers me in his arms, lifts me like a bride, and moves me over. He’s stripping the comforter off the bed.

I peek up. He’s stuffing it, along with the towel, into the wicker hamper, and then he goes into a chest and fetches a fresh quilt.

The mattress rocks as he rejoins me on the bed. I could not have handled this during my first trimester. I would’ve been seasick.

He covers me with the quilt, lies down on his back naked beside me, and folds his arms behind his head, staring up at the low ceiling.

I roll onto my side. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. I’m dopey and languid. He’s supposed to gather me close until I float back to earth and get my strength back. I’m not as out of it as I can get, though, and he isn’t being as weird and distant as he was in Terri’s kitchen.

I watch his chest rise and fall, and I wait. For the first time in our marriage, I get the sense that he wants to talk.

“Were you serious when you said you’d organize the Director’s dinner?” he finally asks.

I blink. “That’s what you want to talk about?”

He glances over at me. His gaze is guarded. “Maybe.”

“Yeah, I was serious. I said I’d do it. You think I’m going to skip out on you and leave you holding the bag?” That was Vittoria’s favorite story. I’m the ditzy, absentee wife.

“No. If you say you will do it, I believe you will.”

“Well, thanks for that.” I want to huff and flip onto my back, but I’m too cumbersome, and the bed is too soft and wobbly, so I end up kind of lolling over. The quilt gets stuck under my hip.

Marco turns onto his side, propping his head in a hand. “Is that what you’d like to do now? Be my hostess? Be a society wife?”

“So you’re asking me now? Not just expecting me to?” I fold an arm under my head, mimicking his favorite nonchalant, post-coital pose. The bliss is wearing off, and my bottom is really beginning to throb.

“I didn’t have expectations,” he says.

I snort. “You all had nothing *but* expectations. You said that night, when I left, that you didn’t want a trophy wife, but what else was there to be?”

“Did you want something different?”

“I wanted to be your *wife*, but by the end, I think I spoke to Sienna more than I spoke to you.” And she was so careful to hide the pity in her voice, she might as well have been hollering *you poor, pathetic, neglected thing* into a megaphone.

“There was an emergency,” he says.

“So you’ve said.”

“You didn’t seem to want to hear about it then.”

“I’m listening now.”

He gives his head a slight shake and the corners of his lips soften. “Grandfather...he isn’t well. He’s gotten older, but it’s more than that. His judgment is impaired. Sometimes, he calls me by my father’s name. I noticed the other day that he can’t read his watch anymore.”

“Oh, Marco.” I reach for his hand, and he lets me take it. “I’m so sorry.”

“It must have started well before any of us took notice. Shortly after we returned from the honeymoon, Sienna took me aside and showed me some documents. Grandfather had entered De Noli International into certain agreements with a Russian company. It was clearly a front for the Kremlin.”

“Oh, no.” I don’t know much about politics, but I watch the nightly news. Even I know that you can’t be associated with the reds, not if you don’t want big trouble.

“It took a lot of delicate negotiations, and *a lot* of greased palms, as they say, to extricate ourselves from the agreements without courting publicity. A dozen times, it all threatened to blow up in my face.”

I don’t know international law or business, but I can read Marco de Noli, even when he’s giving nothing away. “The company—would you have lost it all?”

“You need not worry. There are contingency plans in place to care for you, and now the baby. No matter what happens, you’ll never want for anything.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. What about you?” He carries everything on his shoulders. If the company had gone under on his watch—it would’ve destroyed him. And I didn’t know. He didn’t tell me.

For a second, I’m angry. He doesn’t trust me. He thinks I can’t handle difficult things. A few months ago, that accusation would’ve flown out of my mouth—or at least lodged in my brain—but there’s a hitch in my thinking now, a picture in my head of a little boy fighting with all his heart against being torn from his family and everything he knows.

Marco doesn’t trust anyone. He thinks he’s the only one who can handle difficult things. The only one who should have to.

“I know you’d take care of me,” I say. “Us.” I nestle our intertwined hands against my bump.

Some of the tension seems to leave him. “This problem is resolved now. Well, the Russian issue is resolved. Grandfather has managed to get us into another unfavorable entanglement with a suspect Italian chemical company, but it will only cost us money to disassociate ourselves. I won’t be hauled in front of an international tribunal.”

I frown.

“I’m joking.” He strokes my hand with his thumb. “Or, at least, exaggerating.”

That’s not why I’m bothered. “Your grandfather managed to get you into trouble again because you were distracted. By me.”

He tosses a shoulder. “Until I convince him to step down from the board, it’s a risk we run. Even if I thought forcing him out was the best course of action, I couldn’t. It would undermine confidence in the company.”

“So you just try to keep an eye on him.”

“I do. Sienna and Ric do, as well.”

They’re not doing a very good job of it. I can believe that Ric’s incompetent, but Sienna is the woman with her finger in every pie, the model of efficiency and competence. And she conveniently didn’t discover this problem with the Italian chemical company until Marco came home with me?

“I don’t trust Sienna.” It’s out of my mouth before I can think better of it. Instantly, I regret it.

In this moment, I feel closer to Marco than I ever have before, and the last thing I want to do is to ruin it. A woman shouldn’t question a man’s faithfulness unless she has solid evidence, and even then, she should have a hard think about the cost.

It’s not fair, but it’s the way things are. I’ve watched Heather and Melissa drive enough men away. I don’t want to be a shrew or a paranoid, jealous female.

Or a wife whose husband blows off her intuition and defends another woman in their own bed. I haven’t given him the opportunity to do it before. My heart is in my throat. If he speaks up for Sienna now, it’ll kill me.

“Grandfather wasn’t particularly circumspect about this deal. He toured the Lorenzo factory in Rome. He even met with them in our offices.” His voice is musing.

My heart soars. “I am going to give the best Director’s dinner ever. You don’t have to worry about that at all,” I say

on a rush of joy and relief, clutching his hand to my belly, and directly on the heels of the outburst, I hear myself. Juvenile. Rose-colored glasses. Gauche.

My cheeks light on fire, and while I'm fumbling for something to say to redeem myself, I'm distracted by a fizzle in my belly. I startle, gasp, and drop Marco's hand, cupping my palm over the mound where I felt it.

He sits straight up. "What's wrong?" he demands.

I'm trying to focus. It's still bubbling, just above my pubic bone, too low to be my stomach gurgling, too high to be any weird post-sex spasms. It feels like 7 Up fizz.

"Diane, tell me now," Marco raises his voice. "What's wrong?"

I grab his hand and press it against the place where the bubbles are. "Can you feel that?"

"No. Are you in pain? Is it the baby?"

I can see the wheels cranking in his head, and before he can start castigating himself again, I brush his hand away and replace it with my own. I still feel the fizzling on the inside, but I can't from the outside, which makes sense since the sensation is so light and wispy. I can't help but smile.

"It's just the baby moving, I think."

"You can feel him?" His face immediately morphs from high alert to dopedily bemused.

"Yeah, I think so." I stick his hand back on my belly. The fizzles are coming and going now. I wonder what she's doing in there? What would make such a tiny flutter? Is she kicking her feet and her itty-bitty toes are drumming the wall of my belly?

"I don't feel anything," he says, his brow furrowed. "What does it feel like?"

I smile at him until his lips curve, too. "It tickles. It feels like soda pop on your nose."

I see the comparison doesn't quite land. He's had pop with me when we went for barbeque, but not often, I'd imagine.

"Like Pellegrino."

"Right." He grins. He moves his hand an inch higher, an inch lower. "Is he still doing it?"

"Yeah." I close my eyes so I can focus better. Marco's hand is warm and gentle. "I think it's a girl."

"You do?"

"Well, maybe. I guess. You should probably get yourself used to the idea, so you won't be disappointed."

Since I first stepped into the villa, everyone has waxed rhapsodic about what a great day it will be when the family is blessed with the next heir.

"I won't be."

"Your family will."

I brace myself again for him to put me in my place, to deny it even though we both know it's true. *Family is family*. They can treat you however they want, and you take it. That's what that means. To Marco.

Mama might be disappointed, but not with the baby. She loves kids with her whole heart, even Frank who everyone knows was an *oops*. She's never been sure about Marco, though, and I bet she won't be too happy to hear that I'm stuck with him.

He's not replying to my remark about his family. He must figure silence is better than lying. He's making slow circles on my belly, his gaze rising lazily from the bump to my face. He locks eyes with mine, and I shiver. There's a storm raging there.

He's watching me like he's starving and terrified, and I could feed him or kill him with a single word, and he is such a self-contained man, so impervious and above it all, that it feels like I can see the clockwork inside him, and it's busted, spinning in the air.

I'd think he was on the verge of a breakdown except his touch is so gentle, so reverent.

"When I told you that I'd ruin your family if you didn't come home, I lied," he says, calm and even.

I believe him. He is the kind of man who's never stooped to anything truly low in his life.

"If you refused to come, I would have dragged you home, though, and if you ever leave me again, I'll chase you down and lock you up for the rest of your life." With that, he draws the quilt over the both of us, rolling me so that he can spoon me in his arms. "Sleep," he says. "We'll have dinner after we rest."

I want to know why.

I want to know why, if that's the truth, he can't seem to pick me first.

But for some reason, maybe the heaviness of his arms, maybe the softness of his breath as he falls straight to sleep, I believe him.

DIANE

Marco is obsessed with the Director's dinner. For the past two weeks, that's all he wants to talk about when we're alone—what flowers did I pick for the arrangements, what's on the menu, what wine did I select for the aperitif, what for the digestif, what pieces are the string quartet going to play.

I didn't know I needed to select wines. I figured Monty or Francois would handle the food and drink. After a few surprises like that, I realized that I didn't know what planning a de Noli dinner entailed. I wanted to do it on my own, though, and hell would freeze over before I asked Vittoria for help. It was Mama who suggested I ask Rosanella.

The first time I hunted her down in her hideaway, she was lost to the world, snoring on the chaise lounge, but I managed to catch her earlier the next day, and she agreed to assist me. She told me that I needed to make sure the staff did a steam clean of the carpets two days beforehand so they have time to dry, and that I should remind Pietro to move the family's vehicles for the evening so he'll have a place to park the guests' cars.

Rosanella said the staff knows to do all this, and Monty would be sure to give them instructions, but if anything was left undone, Vittoria would be giving me the look of blame, so better to cross my Ts and dot my Is. It sounded like she spoke from personal experience.

I can't say that Rosanella was excited to help out, but it put Vittoria's nose out of joint, and that seemed to make Rosanella click-clack more gaily in the salon after dinner.

Marco was also obsessed with finding a woman doctor to examine me. He decided on his own that a female obstetrician was preferable, and he had to go all the way to Paris to find one who made house calls. Dr. Lambert was lovely. She said the baby's doing fine, and when I asked her point blank if it's okay that our lovemaking is a little active, Marco choked on his own spit, and she very calmly explained that if I was okay, it was okay. She said since I felt comfortable enough with my husband to ask, she wasn't worried about it.

A few months ago, I would have never dared mention such a thing, especially not in front of Marco. Things are different now. His family is still as nasty as they can be when he's not around, but he's also around a lot more.

I want to ask him if we can move into our own place when the baby's born, but I guess I'm still a coward. I don't want to hear him say no, family is family, and go tumbling back to the bottom of the heap where I was before.

I woke up this morning, the day of the Director's dinner, wired and nauseous. Marco had to go into the office on Lorenzo Chemical business, but he promised he'd be back well before eight o'clock. He hasn't missed dinner once, so I believe him. I dragged Rosanella away from her knitting, game shows, and Irish coffee to do the last checks with me. We decide to start in the kitchen.

Francois did not give me a warm welcome when I came by to review the menu last week, but I'm hoping since I've stayed entirely out of his hair since then, he'll be a little friendlier today.

When we enter his domain, it's immediately clear that I have no such luck. He's chopping scallions, and as soon as he sees me, he switches out his knife for a bigger one and chops harder.

Rosanella harrumphs. She is unimpressed by him. She says everything he cooks tastes like whatever sauce he's drowned it

in, and he should visit Italy where they know how to respect the individual ingredient. She has a lot to say about his “sauciness,” but not to his face.

“Puis-je vous aider, mesdames?” he asks when he decides we’ve been watching him chop onions for long enough to be insulted.

I’m lost, so Rosanella answers. “Madame de Noli has come to assure herself that the preparations for this evening are coming on apace.”

I offer the man a smile to try to sweeten Rosanella’s saltiness. “I just wanted to see if you have everything you need.”

“Comme vous pouvez le voir—” He waves an arrogant hand toward his two assistants scrubbing and dicing at their stations behind him. “Les préparatifs avancent.”

Even I understand that he’s being rude, and that he thinks I’m acting too big for my britches, and I’m underfoot besides.

Underfoot in my own kitchen.

Because it *is* mine, even though it doesn’t feel like it, because Marco is mine, and no one would doubt that it’s his.

I take a deep breath. “Translate this for me, will you, Rosanella?”

She nods. Francois does me the favor of actually looking at me. He’s a handsome man built along delicate lines with a swarthy complexion and shiny black hair tied back in a ponytail. His white coat hangs off him. Mama always says you can’t trust a skinny cook.

He’s also looking at me like a certain type of man always has—like don’t I know that I’m just for looking at.

I clear my throat. “Chef, I am pleased that preparations are advancing, but can you assure me that the dinner we are serving our guests tonight will be edible? Unlike the last meal I requested.”

“I told you that was too much vinegar!” he fairly explodes. The thwap of cutting halts and silence rings out among the

white tile and stainless steel.

“You told me no such thing.”

He draws in a very long breath, his nostrils flaring as wide as a horse’s. “Not *you*. The other Madame de Noli. Madame Vittoria. She says that you order ‘more vinegar.’ That it is the way it’s done in Texas. That is the way it must be done for Monsieur de Noli’s anniversary dinner!” His face contorts like he’s going to spit, but I suppose he’s too well trained. Instead, he lets out a disgusted huff. “And no one ate it, did they? It all came back on the plates, picked over like carrion. A disaster.” He shakes his head, contempt twisting his lips.

“I didn’t say more vinegar.”

He tosses a thin shoulder. “A disaster, nonetheless.”

He glares as if challenging me to deny it. I can’t. I don’t doubt for a moment that Vittoria would sabotage me, and she had a clear field. I’d abandoned anything to do with the villa for months at that point. A wave of queasiness unsettles my stomach. Marco is so worried about tonight, and Vittoria has a nose for opportunity.

“Well, there’s no question of vinegar in tonight’s menu, correct?”

“Escargots de Bourgogne, salade au chevre chaud, confit de canard, camembert de Normandie, Tarte Tartin? No.” He sniffs so I’m sure to understand that he’s calling me stupid.

The queasiness intensifies. I am not a fan of snails.

“Well, good. Carry on, then.” I take Rosanella by the elbow and keep my head high as I stride out of the kitchen and straight out a back hall to the side courtyard where Pietro washes the cars.

When we’re outside, I bend over with my hands on my knees and suck down the fresh air.

“Still with the morning sickness?” Rosanella awkwardly pats my back.

“I think it’s nerves.”

“It’s a small dinner, really. Twenty guests and all of them friends of the family. Nothing to fret about.”

I straighten and focus on deep breaths through my nose. “Marco wants it to be perfect.”

One of Rosanella’s beetle brows lifts. “Marco has never concerned himself with these sorts of affairs before.”

That makes it even worse. The whole thing feels like a test, but I’m not sure of what. That I have what it takes to be a de Noli wife after all? That I have the commitment? I don’t. If Vittoria pulls another vinegar barbeque stunt in front of an audience, I’m bailing. I’m going to excuse myself to the powder room, steal the keys to the Mercedes from the hook in the servant’s hall, drive myself to the yacht, and set sail. Marco can swim for me if he wants a wife.

“Feeling better?” Rosanella peers up at me. “You have some color back in your face.”

I exhale one last time. “I can only worry about what’s in my control.”

Rosanella nods. “Vittoria has always tried to control everyone, and everyone has always humored her, but it’s never made her happy. Control always fails, and if control is the tactic you’ve honed, you haven’t got any others. It’s her tragedy.”

“It’s hard to feel sorry for her.” The bitterness from the vinegar is too fresh.

“Yes, but it is easy to understand her. She’s a child at the slopes shoving her pockets full of snowballs, desperate to keep something that’s already melting away.”

“That’s very poetic, Rosanella.” I don’t understand how it is that she’s so wise in her way, but she’s content with a husband that doesn’t notice her and a life that revolves around a few rooms and a familiar routine. Maybe there’s more life going on in her head than what you can see from the outside. Mama is kind of like that. She didn’t get far, so she went deep.

The deep slashes that run down from the corners of Rosanella’s mouth lift for an instant, but don’t quite curve into

a smile before her face settles back to her usual deadpan expression. “Shall we go find Monty?”

“Let’s.”

Monty assures us that the villa is ready, and as the day progresses, Anna and Maria do seem to be everywhere, polishing perfectly clean tabletops and dusting immaculate fixtures and shelves. I don’t have to check with Pietro. I can hear him roar off down the drive in car after car.

The first hitch in the plan comes after I wake up from an afternoon nap and Monty tells me that Marco phoned. Marco had intended to be home around three, but his urgent meeting is running over, so now, he’ll be back by six, still in plenty of time since the guests aren’t expected until eight.

I try not to let the change in plans worry me. This evening isn’t just important to me. It’s important to Marco, too.

My hairdresser and manicurist arrive at four, as scheduled, and I’m pleased with my sleek chignon and French tips. I’m flat out relieved that I fit in the pleated, empire waisted gold lame cocktail dress that I purchased last week. I feel like I’m starting to expand by the day now.

By five thirty, I’m dressed with nowhere to go. I venture downstairs to triple-check the preparations. None of the family is anywhere to be found, but Monty is busying himself with making subtle adjustments to the flower arrangements, so I figure everything is well in hand. He’d be steaming from the ears like a cartoon character if anything was amiss.

I wander into the dining room which has been set with the Wedgwood china rimmed with intricate gold Florentine dragons. The crystal sparkles and the silverware shines. With the sun beginning to set over the Mediterranean, perfectly framed by the Palladian window behind the head of the table, it could be a spread in a magazine.

I inspect the east salon, and it’s all ready, too. The bar is stocked, and there’s a fresh box of Cohibas for the gentlemen. Ric hasn’t managed to nick any yet.

The house is still eerily silent. The grandfather clock ticks, and a terrible sense of déjà vu sends goosebumps down my arms. My gaze is drawn to the Etruscan vase's marble pedestal. The funereal bouquet has been replaced with a statuette of Aphrodite rising from the sea. There was an identical one in a guest bathroom. Monty must have repurposed it.

A phone rings in the hall, and my heart jolts. I hurry out in time to hear Monty say, "Of course, Mademoiselle Bernard. I shall inform Madame de Noli."

Bernard—that's Sienna. When Monty turns to me with a furrowed brow and his whiskers bristling, I know that I am the Madame de Noli.

"He's been detained." I break the news for him.

"Only momentarily. Monsieur de Noli will most certainly arrive before the first of his guests." Monty offers me a weak smile, but he doesn't bother to make his eyes lie, too. We exchange a look, reading each other clearly. We are both disappointed. We have both worked hard.

The moment is thankfully ended when Maria leads a troupe of men in black tie noisily up the back stair. By silent accord, Monty and I join forces to greet the musicians and lead them to the alcove where they'll be performing. The quartet is quickly followed by the additional staff hired for the evening, and Monty and I both show the bartender to the salon and tour the waiters around the dining room before we escort them to the kitchen.

Francois is considerably the worse for wear. The pits of his white jacket are soaked, and a vein is popping on his forehead. His red-faced assistants both seem on the verge of tears or fainting, and everything smells like sheer heaven. Even the snails.

Francois catches me breathing it in and beams at me in triumph. "Pas de vinaigre ce soir, madame," he declares.

"Thank you, Chef Francois," I say because even if he just told me to take a long jump off a short pier, there is no way

that dinner is not going to be amazing. I might not have a sophisticated palate, but you don't need one when food smells that good.

Monty shoots him a scowl and escorts me upstairs. We busy ourselves by checking in with the bartender and making sure Pietro is at his station and wearing his jacket. We make sure that the towels in the guest bathrooms are still dry and the toilet paper is still fully stocked. I'm not sure whether my nerves are wearing off on Monty or vice versa.

We manage to keep ourselves occupied until a quarter to eight, and I stay away from our suite and the front drive. I don't look to see if Marco came home when he said he would. He said he'd be here in time. If he's not, I'm no worse off than I was before. It'll break my heart, but it's my own dumb fault for thinking things have changed when really, he promised me nothing except he'd hunt me down if I run again.

I'm the fool for falling for this man time after time, imagining we have some kind of soul deep connection when he can't even bring himself to say *I love you*.

Finally, when it can no longer be avoided, Monty escorts me back to the main hall. When I didn't see my in-laws all afternoon, a tiny part of me was afraid they'd decided to boycott the evening—and another part was hoping against hope that they would—but they're all there, dressed to the nines.

In his white tux, Ric looks as much the movie star as Chiara who is stunning in a silver sequined frock with a plunging neckline. Vittoria is regal in flowing emerald silk and a matching turban accented with a coaster-sized diamond brooch.

Rosanella is wearing black silk instead of her usual black cotton, and for once, her knitting needles are nowhere to be seen. She's standing at Grandfather de Noli's side. He's holding forth on some subject, gesticulating with both hands. Her bleary eyes are a million miles away.

Marco's not here.

Grandfather grows quiet as I join them, and everyone turns their avid gazes on me. They're waiting for me to ask about my husband. I paste a bland smile on my face instead.

"Good evening," I say, forcing my fingers not to fidget and my toes not to squirm in my pantyhose.

In the alcove past the grand stairs, the violinists are tuning their instruments. As Mama would say, it sounds like a bag of cats.

The grandfather clock shows ten minutes to eight.

Maybe Marco is rushing into his black tie up in our suite, and any second, he's going to trip down the stairs, fastening his cufflinks.

Maybe pigs will fly. I see that Sienna isn't here either.

The quartet launches into their first piece, the music a touch too loud with only a few of us clustered in the hall. They stop and start again, a bit quieter.

The clock ticks.

Grandfather begins his lecture again. It seems that he's retelling the 1971 Italian Grand Prix, lap by lap. At least he's enjoying himself. Vittoria and Chiara are, too, by the looks of it. Every so often, they glance out the windows bracketing the front doors and exchange poorly hidden smirks.

"Chris Amon dropped from first to eighth in one lap, and that was against all expectations, you know, except Ronnie Peterson's. He knew what he was doing, that boy, until the very end when he snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, so to speak." Grandfather crows with delight as he recalls the race as if it were yesterday.

The sun has almost set. There should be headlights shining into the hall as folks arrive. There aren't.

Dread settles on my shoulders like a wet fur coat.

The last strains of the quartet's first piece fades to silence, and they begin the next.

“My money was on Cevert, and for a moment, I thought we had it, and then—” Grandfather snaps his fingers. “Gethin stole the win out from under all their noses! Six tenths of a second! Imagine!” His laugh booms. “Monty! A bourbon, my good man!”

Seconds continue to tick past. Grandfather reminisces about a guy in the '50s whose engine died on the final lap. He had to push his Maserati over the finish line. Grandfather's having a grand old time. He lapses into Italian, and starts punctuating his story with engine noises.

Rosanella is frowning, her gaze traveling back and forth from the clock to the doors.

Fifteen minutes pass. Twenty. Thirty. We are well past fashionably late to a dinner held at a private home. No one has come. No one has called.

I can't breathe. I don't dare move. If I move, I fall apart. My face is only staying like this because I'm wax. I'm not here. This isn't my home, my life, my heart. I'm a doll. A stupid doll.

What am I doing?

I don't belong with these people. I don't speak their language, not in any sense. I'm not one of them, and I never will be. I'm the dumb blonde trophy, the brood mare, and one day, I'll be standing next to Marco, invisible for all intents and purposes, while he talks to people who actually count about things I don't understand and couldn't care less about.

Sisyphus rolls a rock up a hill, Wile E. Coyote falls off a cliff, and I wait for a man who never shows up.

The quartet plays, Grandfather reenacts Formula One races in boisterous Italian, and Vittoria and Chiara inch closer and closer together until they can bend their heads together and whisper.

My stomach aches, but I can't wrap my arms around myself for comfort. If I move, I break character, and if I do that, I run, and it's over, forever, because Marco won't come after me. He won't even come home.

He's the statue on the square, high on his pedestal, and I'm a tourist. No matter what I do, I'll never be worth as much as him, and no matter how I delude myself that we're the same kind of thing, we're not. On the molecular level, we're made of different materials. He's important. I'm not.

All the poison that leeches into my brain during those hours when I was a little girl and I stood by the living room window squinting down the road for a sign of my father's car, my ears straining for the sound of its engine, desperate to be struck by lightning or bit by a radioactive spider so that I'd have the power to bring him home and make everyone happy again, but old enough to know those were just stories, and I was powerless, and there was nothing I could do but take it—all that garbage rears up like a shadow monster I can never, ever escape.

My hands shake. I ignore it. Maybe if I don't look down, no one will notice.

How do I get out of this loop?

A door creaks open at the far end of the hall. In the narrow crack, I can just make out Francois, peering out in confusion at the absence of guests.

And then, as climactically as the bat signal, a headlight shines in the window. Everyone except Grandfather and the quartet falls silent.

An engine cuts off.

A car door slams.

Feet pound up the steps, the door is flung open, and Marco storms into the hall, wild-eyed, his black hair falling in his face, his black evening jacket unbuttoned. He's wearing a black cummerbund. He's not coming from work.

He skids to a halt under the chandelier. Vittoria lets out a small shocked gasp.

“Hai lasciato il gatto sul fuoco, Marco?” Grandfather asks.

Marco takes in the six of us. He looks past us to the string quartet. He looks left into the empty dining room. Finally, he

looks at my face.

I watch as understanding unfolds on his face. He *sees*. One more time, I tried. One more time, I've been left hanging.

I draw in breath like the sea sucks the water from the shore in advance of a tsunami.

“Where were you?” I scream. “Where have you been? I will not stand here and wait for you. I will *not*. I am done waiting. I will not do it anymore, hear me?” I ball my fists, my elbows jammed into my sides, and my arms are shaking now from the contraction of muscles and the flow of fury. My voice echoes off the vaulted ceiling. It rings out, shrill and hysterical and bitter and shrewish, and I mean it, every word. I *mean* it that way.

The string quartet stops playing, instrument by instrument, until there's only one violin trailing off into embarrassed silence.

Everyone stares in breathless anticipation for Marco to put me back in my place. I'd lift my chin, but my teeth are ground together now, and my neck is corded in knots. Somehow, even though I'm taut as a bowstring, I brace myself.

Marco drops to his knees. They thud against the marble.

“Don't leave me,” he says, his voice ragged and breathless.

Vittoria gasps again, louder.

“I know what you're thinking, but do not think it, it's a mistake, all a mistake, you must not leave,” Marco declares in a rush, his accent slurring so badly that I almost can't make out what he's saying, but his eyes are locked onto mine, and I understand the feeling in them perfectly. He's terrified.

I can't help but take a step toward him.

“What is Alessandro doing?” Grandfather asks Rosanella. “Who is the blonde? Did he bring one of his American whores here to the villa? Unacceptable! What is he thinking?”

This time, Chiara is the one to let out a feigned gasp of shock.

Alessandro was Marco's father. A flash of pain crosses Marco's face, but his attention remains one hundred percent on me. "We were at the yacht. Everyone is there. All the directors and their wives. When I realized what must have happened, I came as fast as I could." He hasn't caught his breath. His chest is heaving.

I take another step closer. He's a magnet. To me, he always has been.

Behind him, high heels tap up the stairs, and as if she was dressed by central casting, Sienna glides into the villa in a skintight, sparkly red dress with a slit all the way from the floor to the part of the thigh that would be covered with cotton if she were wearing anything like my new pregnant lady panties.

The sight of Marco on his knees puts a temporary hitch in her giddy up, but she recovers quickly, swanning to a stop at his side. I want to bowl her over like a wrecking ball and keep at it until she rolls out of the door and down the stairs. *On top of spaghetti all covered with cheese, I lost my poor meatball when somebody sneezed. It rolled off the table, it rolled on the floor, and then my poor meatball rolled out the door.*

I'm losing it. I tuck my clenched fists to my chest. Whatever I do, I can't slap anyone.

"Sienna, what is the meaning of this?" Vittoria stalks forward to stand at my elbow. I'd like to drive it back, into her ribs, make her fold in half and deflate into a puddle at my feet. "Why is everyone at the yacht? We changed the location months ago. Remember? Monsieur Cloutier's new wife suffers terribly from seasickness. You were to have Donna send updated invitations."

Sienna's face shows nothing—not recognition, not regret, not confusion. Nothing. "Of course, I am familiar with Madame Cloutier's issue, but you're mistaken. I was not tasked with asking Donna to reissue the invitations."

"I am certain that we had that conversation. It was right after—" Vittoria slides me a look, on its surface reluctant, even somewhat apologetic, and that's how I know she's about

to lie. “Well, right after Diane left. You remember that everything was so hectic. Everyone’s nerves were frayed. I suppose it must have slipped through the cracks.”

“Unfortunately, that must be what happened,” Sienna agrees. “I, myself, believed that the dinner was still being held on the yacht. That is where Marco took us when we were finished with our meeting, after all.”

She says *us* and *our* so possessively that even Ric casts a speculative glance at Marco, still kneeling on the floor, his eyes so bright and his cheeks so flushed that anyone walking in would think he’s drunk or off his rocker or both.

I don’t understand how everyone is carrying on as if the grandest statue on the highest pedestal in the city hasn’t crashed down in front of us and become human for the first time. Vittoria and Sienna are so dedicated to whatever farce this is that they’re acting out that they don’t see they’ve turned into background noise.

We are Diane and Marco, now. He’s on my level. I inch forward, closing the distance between us until if we reached out, we could touch each other.

I am fascinated. He’s on his knees, but he hasn’t lost an iota of his presence, his self-assurance, his air of importance.

“Well, it’s not the end of the world. The situation is easily remedied,” Vittoria says placatingly to Marco. “We shall simply apologize profusely and ask our guests to join us here. No harm done.” The smile she casts me is so smug, so self-satisfied that I don’t know how anyone can *not* see that without a doubt, she masterminded this.

But family is family, and to them, there’s no harm done. Not to anyone who counts.

“Come back to me, Diane. Tell me you’re okay.” Marco speaks softly, his attention unwavering. He’s not listening to Vittoria and Sienna. He’s waiting for me.

“I’m n-not.” Hot tears burst from my eyes. I tried so hard, and it all fell apart. “D-Dinner is *ruined*.”

He holds out both of his hands for me to take. “I’ll fix it.”

“You were *l-late*.”

From behind me, Grandfather sniffs. “A man’s duty is to his business.”

There’s a furious whispering, and then Rosanella sort of harrumphs in victory, Grandfather grumbles an unintelligible last word, and there are no further comments from that quarter.

Marco is still waiting for me to take his hands, palms open, patient and stoic, and underneath the surface, desperate. “The months you were gone nearly killed me. It was the end of the world. What did I have to look forward to? *Nothing*.”

I can’t leave him reaching out like this. I take a breath and will my muscles to unclench, and then I rest my hands in his, but lightly. His fingers wrap around mine in a vise grip.

“I did everything wrong,” he rushes on, as if there’s a ticking clock, and he needs to beat the buzzer. “I thought if I kept my distance, I wouldn’t make any unfixable mistakes, but in the end, I drove you away. I was so afraid of losing you, I made it happen, so I wouldn’t have to dread it anymore.”

When I was a girl, I dreamed that one day, I’d catch sight of my father at the mall or the supermarket, holding a new little girl’s hand, his new wife beside him, pushing a new baby carriage, laughing and happy. Because it might rip out my heart and hurt like hell, but then, eventually, the hurt might be over.

When you spend years of your life holding yourself together, opening your arms to someone else feels like stepping on hot coals barefoot. I understand that.

I understand this man on his knees at my feet. I know him in my bones. What made him, made me, too.

“I did it wrong, too,” I say. “I did the exact same thing.”

He smiles. He draws my hands to tuck them against his chest, and his jacket cuffs ride up so that I can see his cufflinks. Compasses with black diamonds. I squeeze his hands tight, and his smile widens.

“I love you,” he says in a low voice, just for me.

“You don’t do the love stuff. It’s not your thing.”

“Loving you is my thing.”

“You can change your mind just like that?” My cheeks are wet, but the terrible tension is gone, and I’m teasing him, and everyone around us is staring, jaws dropped.

For some reason, at that moment, one of the musicians decides to pluck the strings of his violin. Plink, plink, plink.

Another musician joins him, and then the others. It takes me a minute to recognize the tune from the radio. It’s “Let My Love Open the Door.” I smile. Vittoria and Grandfather scowl over their shoulders toward the alcove, but the quartet plays on.

“I can admit when I’ve been wrong,” Marco says, rising to his feet.

I can see in his eyes how badly he needs to hear me say his words back to him. He’s not used to being left to hang. I don’t make him wait. “I love you, too.”

“I won’t make you wait ever again,” he says to me, and then he turns, drawing his shoulders back, and faces his family.

“Sienna,” he says, suddenly brisk and all business. Sienna steps forward, ready for orders, like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

“Your services are no longer required,” Marco says, dismissing her with a glance. “You may speak to human resources on Monday about severance. Do leave your key to the villa on the table on your way out.”

Vittoria and Chiara gasp in unison. Sienna’s red mouth drops open. “Monsieur de Noli, I assure you, I had nothing to do with tonight’s events. We arrived at the yacht together. I was as confused as you.”

“But *should* you have been?” Marco asks, his voice dry.

“I don’t understand.”

“There have been quite a few things that have escaped you these past several months. Lorenzo Chemical, for example.” Marco’s eyes harden. “If I hadn’t walked into the office when I did, would it have escaped you that my wife called from the States?”

I expect her to wilt under the heat of his accusations, for her eyes to fill with tears at being confronted by the man she wants but can never have, but somehow, Sienna draws herself up straighter than I’ve ever seen her.

“Perhaps the question you should be asking yourself is why so many of your responsibilities have been escaping *you*. I have as soft a heart for true love as the next woman, but I joined De Noli International to learn from a titan of industry, not to direct *The Young and the Restless*. I am sorry if you do not appreciate my efforts to focus you on *your* business, but I guarantee that the company’s bottom line thanks me!” She tucks her clutch firmly under her arm and strides toward the door. “And perhaps in the future, you might consider making it clear that mailing invitations is the purview of your secretary or your mother or your wife, or any other woman except the one with the degree in Business and Management from the London School of Economics!”

She tosses her bob and strides for the door. Monty barely opens it in time, but he manages, and she sails out of the villa like a ship squeaking through the lowering halves of a drawbridge.

For a second, we all watch her sparkly red ass swish and twinkle until it disappears into the dark.

“Well, good riddance,” Vittoria finally says. “Perhaps now we can enjoy our morning coffee without feeling like we’re impeding the flow of profit.”

Marco rounds on his mother. She tries to draw herself up like Sienna, but she doesn’t have the height or the brass balls. She shrinks under Marco’s level gaze until she ends up looking sulky, frail, and guilty as hell.

“Perhaps I am mistaken, Mother, but I thought all these years, there has been nothing more important to you than the

flow of profit.” His eyes narrow. “You certainly said something to that effect when Father died. Something about how he put his pleasures over his duty, and that is why he came to a bad end, and why I had to apply myself twice as hard at Eton so that I became a credit to my family instead of a feckless fool stupid enough to tip himself over on a sunny day and drown. Do you remember, Mother? I do. Word for word.”

There is a gasp, but this time, it is gruff and sharp, like the puff of air once someone’s been punched in the gut. We all turn to Grandfather. His eyes, for once, are piercingly clear, and there is horror there, and disillusionment, and a well of grief so deep that it’s only decent to look away.

“Marco, enough of this,” Vittoria says, but the wind is out of her sails. “The invitations were an oversight. A simple mistake.”

No one believes her, and she knows, and an hour ago it wouldn’t have bothered her in the least, but things have changed, and her face seems to age in an instant as she realizes that she’s at the bottom of the ladder now.

Despite her best efforts, Chiara’s lips begin to curve into a smirk. Even though she’s an actress, she has never been able to help herself. Marco cuts her a glance, and in a second, the expression is wiped from her face. He doesn’t need to say anything. Ric shifts so that there’s space between him and his wife.

“It will never happen again.” Marco gives Vittoria and Chiara a last look, and then he takes my hand and leads me into the east salon, directly to the bar.

“Whiskey neat,” he orders, his gaze darting to my belly. “And a pure orange.”

He turns to me, running his hands down my arms like he’s checking me for injury. “I’m sorry my family ruined your dinner,” he says. “I know how important this evening was to you.”

“I wanted to prove that I can be a wife to you,” I say.

“I know. It gave me hope that you were willing to give me a second chance.”

“It’s been more than two chances at this point.”

He chuckles softly. “Very true.” He leans over and drops a long, slow kiss to my lips. “Let’s run away. We’ll tell everyone on the yacht to come here, and we’ll steal away on the boat. What do you say?”

“Yes, I’ll run away with you,” I say through my breaking smile.

“We’ll go back to the island in Greece, and when you’re tired of honeymooning, we’ll find a new home for just us and the baby. Do you want that?”

“Do you?”

“Do you need me to get back on my knees?” he asks while he draws me into his arms, careful to make room for my belly.

“I don’t,” I whisper softly in his ear. “I need you and us just the way we are.”

And for a moment, before we break free from the villa, hand in hand, he holds me and rocks us to the music filtering in from the other room—him, me, and this tiny, fragile thing we’ve made. We aren’t alone in the world, and we’re not waiting anymore. We’ve got each other.

It’s a beginning.

A new one.

Another one.

And it’s beautiful.

EPILOGUE

DIANE, ONE YEAR AND FOUR MONTHS LATER

I'm not a vindictive woman. I invited Vittoria to the twins' first birthday party, and I put her at the family table, but she's down at the far end. I did seat a half dozen women between us.

Marco and I flew Terri and Joyce out again. They came about a month before Alessandro and Antonia were born, and then again, after the birth. For the first two visits, I gave them two generic guest rooms with a communicating door, but for this visit, I had a surprise.

I decorated a bedroom in our new villa in Nice just for them. It has a bow window filled with plants, and a ridiculously huge Louis XVI vanity with a mirror that takes up almost an entire wall. They love it.

I've also decorated rooms especially for Mama and my sisters. This afternoon, they're also seated between Vittoria and me, and there's a chair for Rosanella, too, but it's empty. She's bustling around the party, making sure the punch bowl is filled and all the little cousins from Genoa have been sufficiently admonished not to fall into the koi pond or mess with the fish.

The first room I decorated in our new villa was for Rosanella. I did a bow window with plants for her, too, and I repurposed a cabinet with a wine rack for her yarn. I also found one of those globes that hides a bar. She loved it. Before the babies were born, she visited most weekends, and then at some point during the first month postpartum, when I was

close to hallucinating from sleep deprivation, she just didn't go back home.

Marco is standing with Monty, Francois, and Ric at the smoker which Uncle Edgar sent over a while ago as a belated wedding gift. From my seat at the table, it seems like they're arguing, and it looks like Francois is winning. At least, he's placed his wiry body in such a way that no one is taking the meat out without having to heave him to the side.

Good thing I planned for a full spread just in case there was another barbeque disaster. Things are so much better now, but in my experience, life never changes one hundred and eighty degrees. It just kind of veers in a new direction.

Not long after the night of the Director's dinner, Ric made a remark about how a lady at the club was looking good these days, and Chiara stood up and said if he thought so, he was welcome to see if she'd put up with his garbage, and she left him. The next time we saw her was in the tabloids when she was dumped by her next rich playboy. He threw her over for the older actress who played her best friend in the movie that made her famous.

Ric did, in fact, try to see if the lady in question would put up with his garbage, and she did not, not for very long. Ric spent some time in California after that, and he came back with long hair wearing a striped hooded pullover that smelled like straw. He's a lot more tolerable now.

After several long conversations that left Marco exhausted, Grandfather decided to resign from his position at De Noli International to focus on the Formula One Team that the company now sponsors. He and Ric spend more time together these days, going to races and scouting drivers. When we see them for the occasional get together or company event, they both seem happy in a way that they didn't before.

My theory is that Ric has never been needed for anything but his money, and Grandfather has never been liked for himself, so it's a novel experience for the both of them. I keep the theory to myself. Marco is much more open to conversation about his family, but he always thinks that I want

him to fix things instead of listen, so I don't get into it unless I have to.

I sometimes wish that we'd veered a little further away from Vittoria, but frankly, I didn't think much about her while Marco and I were on our second honeymoon. Then we were house hunting, and then the babies were born, and since she keeps a low profile now that she's on Grandfather's shit list, it's been out of sight, out of mind for the most part.

At least I don't have to contend with Sienna the glamazon anymore. She's in New York now, trying to climb a ladder over there. Now that I don't have to see her impeccably dressed hard body every morning, I wish her the best.

I snuggle Antonia closer to my chest. She's conked out from the afternoon sun, a bottle clutched in her dangling hand and her head thrown back on my breasts, her mouth pouting like one of the koi's.

I haven't gotten my figure back yet, not entirely. I've got padding on my lower belly and a roll around my middle that won't go away no matter how long I Jazzercise. Even in control top hose, I'm self-conscious, but Marco doesn't seem to notice. At least it doesn't turn him off.

Right now, he's eyeing me from the smoker. I've been on my period, and I'm still not a big fan of that kind of mess, so it's been a few nights. I'm good to go now, though, and I've been looking forward to tonight after we put the twins to bed.

Tonight is so far away, though. We have to do cake and ice cream and presents, and knowing the Genoese branch of the family, we'll be up talking and drinking until the wee hours.

Marco lifts a subtle eyebrow.

I know exactly what he's thinking.

I jostle Antonia's dangling arm just a little until the nipple of her bottle presses against my linen skirt. I wait until I've got a big old milk stain before I exclaim, "Oh, no!"

Marco quickly hides a wicked smile.

Mama turns from where she was chatting with Heather. “Oh, no, your pretty skirt.” She holds out her arms for her grandbaby. “I’ve got this one. You go change.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I pass over a sleepy baby, straighten my wrinkled blouse, and head as sedately as possible toward the house.

I don’t check to see if Marco is following. I know he is.

I enter the house through a French door and follow the corridor toward the family wing. Inside, it’s cool and peaceful. Laughter and the murmurs of conversation filter through open windows.

I hear Marco’s foot on the tile behind me. I speed up. I love this part, the delicious anticipation, the way my whole body comes alive. I don’t want it to be over too soon.

I break into a jog, dashing up the narrow staff stairs. Marco’s shoe squeaks as he mounts the first step.

“You know if you run, it’s going to be worse for you,” he growls.

I whimper and burst into a hallway, breaking into a sprint. I don’t even make it ten feet. His strong arms wrap around me from behind, and he lifts me, my legs flailing. I shriek. “Let me go!”

“Never,” he grunts, throwing open a guest room.

I haven’t had a chance to decorate this one yet, so there is no furniture, no carpet, nothing except a deep window seat. He drags me over to it. I dig my heels into the hardwood floor, making it as hard for him as I can.

He bends me over, using his upper body to trap my writhing body in place while he pulls off his belt. I love the sound it makes sliding through the loops. I’m already sopping wet.

He throws my skirt up and cracks the belt against my ass once, twice, three times. I scream.

“Shut your mouth if you don’t want my cock shoved down your throat.”

Part of me takes it as a dare, but I want him inside me too bad. “I’ll be quiet. I’ll be good,” I gasp, still struggling and bucking.

And then I feel him prodding at my entrance, and he yanks up my knee, pinning it in place, while he slams up, all the way to the hilt.

I scream again. He smashes his hand over my mouth.

He pounds into me, muttering filthy threats and obscene praise in my ear as I fight him with my arms and legs and fuck him harder with my hips. It takes less than a minute for me to come the first time, and not much longer to come again.

He pulls out, flips me onto my back, and comes all over my pussy. I struggle onto my elbows so I can see the white drops splattered on the tight curls. While he catches his breath, he spreads it through the hair, shoving his coated fingers into my still spasming core. His eyes are gleaming. He loves to see what he does to me.

What I love most is that there’s no longer a moment when the adrenaline ebbs, and he thinks he should feel bad about what we do. It wasn’t easy to get him to give up the guilt, but one night about four months post-partum when my emotions were out of control, he pulled the “I shouldn’t be treating the mother of my child like a whore” crap after an earthshaking orgasm.

I was just too tired to handle it. I grabbed his clothes off the floor, threw them into the hallway, and held our bedroom door open, pointing toward his study. I told him that if I was a whore, then I was clocking out, and he could go beat himself up somewhere I didn’t have to listen to it. He threw me back on the bed and that was the last of that.

In the here and now, he picks up my limp body and sits against the inner wall of the window seat, plopping me in his lap and snuggling me against his chest.

This.

This is what I love more than anything else, except maybe the twins’ bedtime when we get soaked giving them their

baths and then we each rock one while we take turns telling them stories about the good memories. Marco's dad teaching him to sail around their island in Greece. Mama baking my daddy his favorite Dutch apple pie and hiding it before he got home from work so he had to sniff it out.

Sometimes it feels like we're falling in love backwards, but I don't mind.

We know we can't disappear for too long from our guests, so after a few minutes, Marco asks, "Ready?" I'm already climbing to my feet on wobbly legs. I still need to get changed, even more urgently now.

"Will you be fine if I go back?" he asks.

"Of course. I'll only be a minute."

It takes longer for him to let go of my hand and finish his kisses, but eventually, he turns himself back into million-dollar Marco and strides down the hall with all the confidence in the world.

I head in the opposite direction, toward our suite in the west wing. I change into a fresh-pressed linen dress and drag a brush through my hair. Then, without changing my panties, I return to the party via the main staircase.

As I approach the foyer, I hear murmured voices, and I arrive just in time to see Terri give Rosanella a shoulder squeeze as she heads toward the powder room. Rosanella stays behind, standing by a credenza, smoothing her steel gray hair in the mirror behind it.

She looks different. Thoughtful. I join her, making an effort to smooth my own rushed 'do. "Terri's great, isn't she?"

Rosanella turns to face me and gestures for me to lean down so that she can try her hand at fixing me 'til I'm perfect.

"She's invited me to visit her and Joyce in America. Take a vacation." Terri and Rosanella took to each other right away. They started talking gardens, Rosanella offered Terri a drink, and it went on from there.

“What do you think about that?” I ask carefully. Rosanella wasn’t lying when she said she’s a homebody through and through. I cannot imagine her on an airplane.

“Maybe when the twins are a little older. Certainly not before they’re sleeping through the night.”

“You know the nanny can handle it. Or I can.” During the first few weeks, my pride insisted that I be the one to get up every time one of the twins hollered. Marco was not happy, but I told him that he can’t boss me around when it comes to my own children. I draw the line there. Then Rosanella moved in, and that night, the baby monitor never woke me up. It was heaven. Rosanella took over the night feedings after that, and I bless her for it every day.

“I know,” Rosanella says. “Maybe after they’re talking. I wouldn’t care to miss that.” She pats my head. “There. That’s as good as you’re going to get without a wash and style.”

“Thanks, Nana Nella.” She flushes. She’s still getting used to the nickname.

For a minute, we both consider our reflections in the mirror. We look like we belong here—Rosanella in her tailored jacket and discreet pearl studs, me in my designer dress and subtle diamonds. We look like we know what we’re doing and who we are.

She gives me a smile, and I flash one back.

We don’t.

We’re figuring it out, and that’s okay, because as long as we’re here, we’ve got time, and as long as we’ve got each other, we’re not doing it alone.

As I rejoin my family in the sunny courtyard, I catch Marco’s gaze. He’s chatting with Joyce, holding Alessandro on his hip, readjusting him like a pro as Alessandro tries to grab whatever piece of Marco’s face he can reach.

Somehow, Marco’s eyes twinkle and burn at the same time, and I think, although I cannot possibly be sure, that mine do, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cate C. Wells writes everything from paranormal to motorcycle club to mafia to small town romance. Whatever the category, readers can expect character-driven stories that are raw, real, and emotionally satisfying.

Along with stories, Cate has collected a husband, children, and a cat who is a biter along the way. She lives in Baltimore when she's not exploring the world.

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