

A woman in silhouette stands on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright reflection on the water. The sky is a warm, golden color. The woman is wearing a dark coat and has her hair down. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

The Unwanted Wife

Natasha Anders

The Unwanted Wife

By

Natasha Anders

All Alessandro de Lucci wants from his wife is a son but after a year and a half of unhappiness and disillusionment, all Theresa de Lucci wants from her ice cold husband is a divorce. Unfortunate timing, since Theresa is about to discover that she's finally pregnant and Alessandro is about to discover that he isn't willing to lose Theresa.

**Text Copyright 2012 © Natasha Anders
All Rights Reserved
Cover Art Copyright 2006 © Natasha Anders
All Rights Reserved**

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

Chapter One

Theresa fell back onto the mattress, her body slick with perspiration and limp with pleasure. Spasms of her powerful release still violently racked her slender frame. Alessandro had disentangled, detached and distanced himself from her within seconds of their mutual orgasm and lay on his back beside her, his breathing heavy and ragged.

Theresa turned on her side to lovingly trace his harsh profile with her eyes, yearning to touch and caress the smooth, silky and slightly tanned skin but knowing from experience that her touch would be rebuffed. His words, the ones that were always wrenched from him during his climax, still hovered in the air between them and they still, after all these months, hurt more than they should have.

“Give me a son, Theresa...”

With those five words, he inevitably killed the afterglow, destroyed the intimacy of the moment and relegated the act into nothing more than a biological imperative. After eighteen months of the same, Theresa had finally realized that it would never change. It wasn't an abrupt realization, rather it was one that had been growing steadily since the very first time he'd said the words.

But Theresa had her own five words! They were words that had been on the tip of her tongue for months and should have been spoken long before now. They were words that she could no longer swallow back; no matter how much it killed her to say them. She sat up, naked, her body still trembling and drew her knees to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs, pressed her cheek to her knees and watched as his breathing steadied, his own shaking was subsiding slightly. He lay spread-eagled, also magnificently nude, his eyes were shut but she knew he wasn't asleep. No, he would take a few moments to compose himself before heading for the shower, where she always imagined him frantically scrubbing her scent and touch from his bronzed skin.

She could no longer contain the words and they spilled from her lips with desperate earnestness.

“I want a divorce, Alessandro.”

He tensed, every single muscle in his body went as tight as a coiled

spring, before he turned his head to meet her watchful gaze. His eyes were hooded and his upper lip curled mockingly.

“But I thought you *loved* me, Theresa,” he taunted with exquisite cruelty and Theresa lowered her eyelids, trying to mask the shaft of pain at his words. When she was sure she had her emotions under control, she once again lifted her eyes to his dark gaze.

“Not anymore,” she managed, hoping the lie sounded convincing.

“Hmmm...” it sounded deceptively like the purr of a cat. “What happened to ‘I’ll love you forever, Sandro’?”

“Things change,” she whispered.

“What things?” He rolled onto his side and propped himself up onto his elbow, resting his head on his hand. He looked so much like a Roman gladiator in repose, that her throat went dry with desire. She swallowed painfully.

“F.feelings change...” she stuttered haltingly. Again that husky purr of agreement but Theresa wasn’t fooled by his relaxed posture; he was as tense as a coiled snake. “I.I’ve changed...”

“You look no different,” he said assessed, his voice still terrifyingly tender. “Still the same Theresa I married. The one who claimed to love me *so* much, she couldn’t live without me. The one whose daddy made sure she got exactly what she wanted...”

And that was when he struck, without moving, without so much as changing his voice.

“The same timid little Theresa, who can’t even give me the only thing I’ve ever wanted from this pathetic excuse for a marriage.” She flinched but she refused to divert her eyes.

“A.all the more reason for a divorce,” she tried for blasé but failed miserably.

“Maybe for you,” he shrugged elegantly. “But I told you from the very beginning, *cara*, there would be no easy way out of this marriage. Not until I got what I wanted from you and that day looks to be a long way off! Unfortunately, cliché though it may seem, you’ve made this bed and we *both* have to lie in it!”

“I can’t live like this anymore,” she buried her face in her knees and fought to keep the tears at bay.

“Neither of us has much choice...” he sat up and stretched languidly before getting up and walking, naked, to the en-suite bathroom. Theresa heard the shower start moments later and took a few seconds to compose herself, swiping the hot tears from her face with the backs of both hands before dragging on a gauzy peignoir and heading toward the kitchen to make herself a hot drink. While she was sitting on a bar stool, sipping her hot milk, she felt Sandro’s presence behind her and the hairs in the nape of her neck stood on end.

“You must be cold in only that skimpy little thing you’re wearing...” he observed idly heading to the fridge and dragging out a carton of orange juice. His short black hair was damp and standing up in tufts where he had carelessly towel-dried it after his shower and he wore nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts. He looked as gorgeous as always and Theresa hated him more than ever for that masculine perfection.

“I’m fine...” she got up abruptly and headed toward the sink to rinse her mug but he grabbed her elbow to halt her movement. She tensed, shocked by the touch... Alessandro *never* touched her outside of the bedroom. In the eighteen months they had been married, this was the first time that she could recall him touching her without it being a precursor to sex. He leaned closer to her and lowered his lips to her ear. She felt his hot breath on the side of her face before he spoke.

“There’ll be no more talk of divorce, Theresa... *ever*,” he told her with a sickening air of finality.

“You can’t stop me from divorcing you, Sandro,” she responded bravely.

“You really want a divorce, *cara*?” He asked tauntingly and she nodded stiffly. “If you get that divorce, your cousin loses her business and she can’t afford that now, not with a new baby on the way. She and her husband need all the capital they can get.” Somehow she hadn’t expected that. She *should* have but she hadn’t. Sandro had loaned her cousin, Lisa, the start-up capital for her bookshop. Theresa didn’t know what the specifics of that loan were but she had always assumed that it was something he had done out of generosity. Staring up at him now, she couldn’t believe her own naïveté.

Sandro did nothing out of sheer generosity and that loan was merely another weapon for him to use against her if he needed to!

“You wouldn’t,” she responded with nothing but bravado. “Lisa has done nothing to deserve this.”

“*Cara*, I will do whatever it takes to get what I want from you.”

“I have money too I can help her...” she began desperately.

“No, *you* have a rich father and he had the opportunity to help Lisa when she was looking for the start-up capital for her bookshop but he made his contempt of the idea more than obvious to everyone at the time and you know that he would *never* support you through a messy divorce, Theresa.”

“I still don’t believe you would do it! You have a reputation to uphold, you’re an honest businessman, you wouldn’t destroy a small business just to prove a point. What kind of message would that send?” she asked bravely.

“That I’m not to be trifled with,” he shrugged. “Do you honestly think I *care* what people think of me, Theresa? Do you think I care what *you* think of me? I never have and I never will. You’re weak and spoilt...”

“I’m *not*...” she tried to defend herself but he made a scoffing sound in the back of his throat before continuing on as if she hadn’t spoken.

“You’ll get your divorce eventually but there’s something I need to get from *you* first! You wanted this marriage, remember? You begged for it... So if you want a divorce right now, it’ll come with some heavy penalties attached to it, are you willing to gamble with your cousin’s future?”

He knew she wouldn’t do it! He knew he had her exactly where he wanted her. There would be no divorce. Not when so much hung in the balance. But there *would* be changes... Theresa Chloe Noble De Lucci was done with being a doormat! She said nothing, choosing to turn and walk away instead. He watched her go, she could feel his gaze burning into her slender back but he did not call her back. She did not return to the bedroom they had been sharing since the first day of their marriage, opting instead to head for the library, knowing that she could not sleep another wink. Not in that room, not anymore...

He came downstairs, hours later, for breakfast. It was a Saturday morning and he usually didn’t have any early morning meetings to rush off to

on a Saturday, instead he tended to linger over his newspaper and coffee and largely ignore Theresa. That morning was no different. It was as if their early morning argument hadn't happened at all. They usually ate their casual weekend meals in the kitchen and the homey setting lent a false sense of domesticity to the scene. But while Theresa was uncomfortable and tense in the intimate setting, Sandro always remained as cool as the proverbial cucumber.

Then again, that was nothing new, as he rarely showed emotion. In fact the "discussion" of that morning was the most heated she had ever seen him. He kept his feelings under wraps but had always made his contempt of her more than clear. It was in the way he refused to meet her eyes, the way he could make love to her without kissing her on the mouth, the way he could talk past her when he had something to tell her... while eternally optimistic, *stupid* Theresa, had never been good at hiding her feelings from him. Not from the very moment she'd met him, nearly two years ago. How hopelessly infatuated she had been! How quickly she had fallen in love... She shook herself, refusing to think about things she could not change and instead tried to focus on changing her present.

Breakfast passed with agonising slowness, the silence broken only by the sound of his newspaper as he carefully perused the business section. She barely ate and hated him for being so unaffected by the tension that he could finish a hearty meal. She picked up her dishes and headed to the sink.

"You have to eat more than one slice of toast," his voice suddenly growled unexpectedly. "You're getting much too thin." The fact that he had noticed what she'd eaten, despite having hardly glanced at her over his newspaper, startled her.

"I'm not that hungry..." she responded softly and placed her dishes in the sink.

"You barely eat enough to keep a sparrow alive," he lowered his paper and met her eyes for a few seconds before diverting his gaze back to the mug of coffee on the table in front of him. The direct eye contact was so unusual, that Theresa barely restrained a gasp.

"I eat enough," she responded half-heartedly, normally she would have let it go but she wanted to see if she could goad him into meeting her eyes again. No such luck, he merely shrugged, neatly folded his newspaper and

dropped it onto the table beside his empty plate. He gulped down the last sip of his coffee before getting up from the table.

She watched as he stretched; his black t-shirt lifting to reveal the toned and tanned band of flesh at his abdomen. Her mouth went dry at the sight of that dark flesh and once again she was disgusted by her reaction to his physical presence. She had spent the first year of her marriage believing that Sandro would come to love her. She had firmly believed that he would get over his anger at being forced to marry her and that he would go back to being the laughing, affectionate man she had known in the first few months after they had met. But after nearly a year she had been forced to face reality, he truly hated her. He hated her so much so that he couldn't bring himself to speak to her, kiss her, touch her outside of bed or even *look* at her. Theresa had finally realised that there would be no thaw; their marriage was a perpetual winter wasteland and if she ever wanted to feel the warmth of the sun on her face again, she had to get out of it. Unfortunately, she now knew that escaping would be trickier than she had thought. She would have to find a way out that did not include hurting her cousin. Lisa and Rick were expecting their first baby and while Lisa was having a fairly easy time of it, Theresa was concerned that anything that would upset her could be potentially harmful to her or the baby. Also, while Rick's advertising agency was fairly successful, Lisa had always prided herself on the fact that she held her own financially in their relationship. Taking her bookshop away could put too much strain their relationship and Theresa didn't want that on her conscience!

She sighed heavily and started to do the dishes. She liked to do little household tasks despite the fact that Sandro, who was the president of the bank his father owned, "had more money than God" as her father had once put it. Theresa had even enthusiastically insisted on doing some of the cooking herself. They employed a housecleaning staff, as was practical since they lived in a ten bedroom, five bathroom monster of a house but on Saturdays the staff had the day off and Theresa liked pick up after herself and Sandro instead of letting the staff get to it when they returned. Sandro didn't pretend to understand her need to have a hand in the every day running of the house and had mockingly accused her of playing house once, shortly after their wedding. He had never seemed to notice it again after that. She stared down at the dishes she had ready to be placed in the dishwasher and quite

abruptly abandoned the task halfway through before heading upstairs and leaving Sandro still in the kitchen.

She changed her clothes from sweat suit to jeans and t-shirt, dragging her pale, shoulder length Titian hair into a ponytail and tugging on a denim jacket to ward off the early autumn chill. She passed by the den where he had retreated with his laptop, probably to get some work done, on her way to the front door.

“I’m going out,” she casually called through the open door and his head jerked up while his eyes flared with some indefinable emotion.

“Where...” he began.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone,” she dashed out before he could utter another syllable, grabbing her shoulder bag and car keys on the way out. She had her reliable little silver Mini Cooper fired up by the time he eventually made it down to the front door. With a cheery little wave that she *knew* had to grate, she reversed out of the driveway and headed out. She had *no* clue where she was going and knew that there would be hell to pay when she got back but it felt good just to do something so defiantly out of character. Her cellular phone started ringing seconds later and when she stopped at a red light; she switched it off and tossed it aside.

It was still early, barely nine and because it was Saturday the roads were a bit congested. Still, she felt free and she headed from the relative tranquillity of Clifton, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Cape Town, towards the city. Usually she would go to Newlands and spend the day with Rick and Lisa... but she knew that it was the first place Sandro would look. He knew how limited her social life was. Instead, she thought of all the things she *could* do with this unexpected time and, deciding to stick with the trend of the day, opted for the most out of character thing she could think of... she went to the movies. It was the purest form of escapism she could think of and if there was anything that Theresa desperately wanted, it was to escape from her life. So she spent her day, going from one cinema to the next; laughing, crying, cringing or jumping, depending on the plot. It was the most unproductive day she had ever spent in her life and she *loved* it!

By the time the last show of the day finished it was after midnight and she had a throbbing headache from nothing but darkness and the flickering light of the projector and a slightly upset stomach from a diet of soda and

popcorn. It was as she was heading back to her car, that the sudden reality of her situation sank in and she started trembling. She didn't know what to expect from Sandro... she had never seen him display anything other than icy control, even in bed but it was the first time she had ever done anything like this and while she knew he would never physically hurt her, she also *knew* that emotionally, his potential to hurt her was unlimited. She cringed at the thought of his icy sarcasm and reluctantly made her way home. The house was ablaze with light when she got back and the dread made her stomach heave. She swallowed down her nausea and bravely parked her car and headed toward the front door. It was wrenched open before she even had the chance to get her keys out.

She gulped slightly at the huge form of her husband looming in the doorway and stifled a yelp when he grabbed her arm and yanked her inside. He slammed the door shut, gripping both shoulders in his huge hands and backed her up until she was leaning against the door. It took her a few seconds to get over her disorientation and realise that he wasn't hurting her, his gaze was feverishly raking up and down her trembling body, until apparently satisfied that everything was in relatively good condition he raised his eyes to meet hers full on.

His eyes, which she'd had so little opportunity to actually look into, were heartbreakingly beautiful. They were chocolate brown and set between incredibly thick, blue-black lashes and beneath sweeping brows and right now they were smouldering with something that, in any other man, might have been described as fury. His hands released her shoulders and crept up to her face... she flinched slightly at the contact but they remained gentle, moving to cup her jaw, his large thumbs brushing over her cheeks. Her breathing became ragged when he leaned toward her, dipping his head closer to hers... he was so near now she could feel his clean, warm breath on her face. He tilted her jaw slightly and she groaned, aching for his lips on hers, wanting it so desperately her legs had just about turned to jelly and the only thing that kept her from falling to a puddle at his feet was his own huge body braced against hers. She could feel his erection throbbing against her stomach and knew he wanted it as desperately as she did... His lush mouth was centimetres away from hers and when he finally spoke, his lips brushed against her mouth.

“You pull a stunt like this again *tesoro mia* and I swear to *God*, you'll

regret it!” She flinched away from him as reality brought her back down to earth with a thump. He let her go and she slid down the door to land at his feet. He raked a contemptuous gaze over her, the ice back and the fire gone...

“Where have you been?” He asked calmly. She staggered to her feet, humiliated that she had allowed him to affect her to such an extent that she would fall at his feet. She tilted her head back defiantly and refused to answer him. “Theresa... I’m warning you...”

“Warn away...” she taunted shakily. “You want to stay married? Fine. But I refuse to let you walk all over me anymore. It’s time you start showing me some respect!”

“How the hell am I supposed to respect someone who sold herself to the highest bidder?” He growled with tight control and she gasped, stung. “I have *no* respect for you, Theresa... not even as the potential mother of my child because, quite frankly, you can’t even do *that* right.”

She lost it, *completely*, and for the first time in her entire life Theresa resorted to violence. She launched herself at him, hissing, spitting and scratching like a cat! In that moment she hated him so much that it felt like a living thing trying to claw its way out of her to get at him. When she came back to herself, she realised that he had her in his arms, her back to his front, her wrists in his hands and her arms crossed over her chest. They were both out of breath and she realised that there were terrible mewling sounds coming from the back of her throat, the words of hate she had repeatedly hurled at him, having long ago faded into incoherent sobs. His lips were in her hair, just above her left ear and he was making soothing sounds, not hurting her, just restraining her with his superior strength. She went limp, hanging defeated from his arms.

“I’m sorry...” she froze; the words were so quiet she was not sure she’d heard him correctly. “That was... cruel and wrong of me.” More words? She didn’t know how to respond and so chose not to say anything. She felt him swallowing, before he gingerly released her wrists and stepped away from her. She made a show of rubbing them, even though he hadn’t hurt her at all... instead; *she* seemed to have inflicted most of the damage on both of them. A few of her nails were broken and her fists were bruised from when she had managed to land a few angry punches against his hard body. She turned around to face him and was shocked to realise that she had made him bleed. He had scratches on his hands and face, a deep, angry-looking one in

his neck... he also had bite marks on his muscled forearms and a darkening bruise on his jaw, where she'd managed to land a lucky punch. He saw her eyes land on the bruise and ruefully rubbed at it.

"You pack a mean punch," he said sheepishly, he looked idly down at her hands, before swearing softly. "You've hurt yourself." He lifted one and grimaced down at the bruises and broken nails. She snatched her hand from his; she was not sure what this weird act was about and definitely did *not* trust it. His eyes darkened at her mistrustful glare and he shoved his hands into his pockets. She pushed her way past him before heading toward the staircase

"Theresa..." she stopped with her back to him. "I really am sorry about what I said... It wasn't true." She knew his apology was insincere because while he hadn't ever said the words, she knew that he blamed her for the baby she had lost early on in their marriage. The fact that she hadn't conceived since had merely cemented his low opinion of her. So she had no idea why he felt the need to apologise for words he had definitely meant.

"I'm going to bed," she whispered, ignoring the apology and still not looking at him.

"Yes..." He moved out of her way and buried his hands in his trouser pockets. She was intensely aware of his eyes boring into her back as she walked away from him and held her head up as she ascended the stairs to the second floor.

She made her way to one of the luxurious guest rooms and tears welled in her eyes, Alessandro's cruel words had struck a nerve. Theresa had always felt guilty about the baby she had lost after just five months of marriage and three months of pregnancy, she had always felt that the miscarriage was her fault because when she had realised that she was pregnant she had wished the child away and worse, after she had lost the baby she had been ashamed to realise that relief was mingled in along with the heartbreak. She had hated herself for that, had felt that there was something wrong with her for wishing her own child out of existence. She had never shared what she had felt with Sandro and they had mourned the tiny life's passing separately, never talking about it. Now she suspected he had known all along and that had simply increased his contempt for her.

Despite her extreme depression after the miscarriage she had worked

through it on her own, Rick and Lisa hadn't even known about her pregnancy. She had felt so terrible about her reaction to the baby that she had never told them, feeling that her behaviour had been indefensible. But tonight, Sandro's cruel taunts had quite simply sent her over the edge and she was ashamed to recall how completely she had lost it.

She sighed, trying to shake herself out of her maudlin mood and after a quick shower; she fell into bed wearing only the t-shirt and panties which she had quickly grabbed from her chest on drawers in the master suite. Despite the drama of the day, she fell asleep almost immediately. She didn't know *how* long she had been asleep before she heard the quiet knock on the door. She immediately awoke and sat up, pushing her tangled hair out of her face.

"Theresa! Open the damned door!" He angrily thumped on the wood again and this time it was loud enough to make her jump up and hurriedly unlock and open the door, for fear that he would wake the live-in housekeeper. Despite the fact that his voice had been only a harsh whisper through the wood, she was in *no* doubt that he was absolutely livid. She stood staring up at him in the dim light and was surprised by the flash of hot fury on his face, which was so quickly masked beneath the more familiar mask of icy indifference, that she wasn't sure if she had imagined the unaccustomed emotion or not.

"What are you doing in here?" He asked stiffly.

"I've decided to move into this room," she informed quietly and his jaw clenched. She had anticipated having this conversation but not until morning. Sandro was full of surprises today... she had known that he would be upset about her moving out of their bedroom but it was completely out of character for him to actually come thumping on her bedroom door demanding an explanation in the dead of night! She had expected a cold and controlled conversation about it over the breakfast table. The light from the landing was just bright enough for her to see the stormy emotion brewing in his eyes and she swallowed a lump of disappointment when the emotion was doused in ice.

"I can see that," he gritted out. "I think the pertinent question is *why*?" And she could see that it just about *killed* him to ask it.

"I'd feel like a hypocrite if I stayed in the master bedroom with you," she shrugged again. "Just this morning I told you I wanted a divorce, so it

wouldn't feel right if I continued to share your bed as if we'd never had that conversation."

"You're being ridiculous," he dismissed.

"No... I think I'm actually making sense for the first time in nearly two years."

"My *wife*..." he placed a lot of sarcastic emphasis on the last word. "... sleeps with me. You *will* come back to our bedroom if I have to drag you there kicking and screaming!"

"I.I... m.may have to *sleep* with you, Sandro," she conceded, knowing that if he chose to do as he threatened, she would definitely lose to his superior size and strength. "But I won't be having sex with you anymore..."

"You would deny me, your *husband*, this basic marital right?" He sounded frankly astonished by that, as astonished as Theresa felt for even daring to say the words.

"Yes." His eyes narrowed and he took a threatening step toward her.

"What's to stop me from simply *taking* what belongs to me?" He asked speculatively, his eyes raking dismissively over her thin, shivering, t-shirt clad body and Theresa crossed her arms over her chest and hunched her shoulders defensively.

"I don't belong to you," she said softly.

"Well, I certainly forked out huge amounts of money for you... that feels like ownership to me."

"Look, I have no idea what you're talking about," she protested in frustration and he laughed softly.

"And you're still singing the same tired old tune," he mocked. "This is beside the point. I have no wish to rehash these details, it achieves nothing. Come on, we're going to bed!" He grabbed her hand and tugged her back toward their bedroom a few doors down the hall. She was so shocked by the abrupt gesture that she stumbled along behind him, before instinct kicked in and she dug in her heels, leaving him to practically drag her the last few feet.

Theresa was out of breath and furious when he finally released her hand. They were in the master bedroom, facing each other and she glared at him... refusing to be intimidated by his scowl.

“When did you become the Neanderthal Man, Sandro? I never thought you would resort to caveman tactics...” he didn’t like being called a barbarian, not her suave, sophisticated, rigid husband, she saw it in the way his mouth thinned and his eyes flared. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her up against him.

“You haven’t seen the Neanderthal in me yet, *cara*. I advise you *not* to push me on this, not unless you want things to get really ugly between us,” he was using his whole body to intimidate her, leaning over and into her, nose to nose with her.

“I don’t see how things can get any uglier...” she whispered.

“You really don’t want to find out how much worse it can get, trust me on that,” his eyes were boring into hers and her breath was coming in small, shallow gasps. She was suddenly aware of how closely she was pressed against him and felt a betraying flash of heat uncoiling in the pit of her stomach and radiating outward. Even though Sandro never really let himself go in bed, he was *still* an incredible lover and despite, or maybe *because* of, the clinical precision with which he conducted the act, he *always* made sure she climaxed. She would have traded any number of those orgasms for a kiss of course, or even a show of affection afterwards but she couldn’t help her reaction to him. He could always make her melt. Chemistry was a terrible thing, sometimes it simply sparked between the wrong people.

His eyes were still locked with hers and she felt the sudden change in his breathing and his heart rate... he leaned even closer, his mouth nearly touching hers, their breath mingled and came in jagged gasps. If she moved her head, just a fraction of an inch, their lips would be touching... she couldn’t resist and she tensed herself to do just that, when he suddenly swore and stepped away from her. Theresa blinked and felt like someone coming out of a trance.

“Just go to bed,” he put his hand in the small of her back and gave her a gentle push toward the bed.

“I’m not going to have...” she began to protest.

“I know. I’m not exactly in the right frame of mind for it either,” he prodded her again.

“You won’t touch me?”

“Not unless you want me to.” He shrugged as if he didn’t care either way.

“I don’t want you to.” She asserted firmly.

“Then you have nothing to worry about,” he turned away from her stripped off his casual shirt, leaving him abruptly naked from the chest up. As always, he stole her breath away and she had to force herself to turn away from the seductive sight of her half-naked husband and head to bed. She crept beneath the covers and kept her back to him but she was achingly aware of every sound he made as he headed toward the en-suite, discarding even more clothes along the way. For such a precise and controlled man in every other aspect of his life, Alessandro tended to be a bit messy in his own space; it was rather endearing the way he would casually drop a shirt here, a sock there... obviously expecting the magical cleaning fairies to pick up after him. That “magical cleaning fairy” was usually Theresa; she was a bit of a neat freak and would quite compulsively pick up and fold everything he dropped. Well not anymore, she suddenly thought fumingly, he could damned well pick up his own shirts.

She suddenly wryly acknowledged to herself that this resolution would only last as long as it took for the maid to come in and clean it up...the one thing about being fabulously wealthy was that you didn’t *have* to think about mundane things like picking up after yourself. And Alessandro had been spoiled into believing the universe revolved around him since birth. While Theresa’s family had been wealthy too, she had never taken anything for granted, not when she had an emotionally-detached father who quite relentlessly pointed out her every flaw.

She sighed softly and turned over to watch the door of the en-suite, he hadn’t shut it completely and a narrow sliver of light streamed out into the darkened bedroom. Steam was creeping out along the edges of the door and she could smell the spicy scent of his soap as he showered. The shower stopped abruptly and she heard the rustling sounds of him towel-drying. She smiled softly to herself as she heard the towel drop to the floor after he finished. She was achingly familiar with every detail of his nightly ablutions; he usually showered, shaved in the shower and brushed his teeth afterwards. Five minutes later the light in the en-suite went out and he stepped out into the dark bedroom. She could just make out his silhouette enough to realise that he was naked and panicked slightly when she realised that he had

absolutely every intention of getting into bed that way.

He usually slept naked but she had honestly believed that he would drag on a shorts or something after the events of that evening. No such luck, she felt him lifting the covers and sliding beneath them. He smelled divine and she had to fight the impulse to turn toward him. He didn't say a word and made no move toward her, staying on his side of the bed. No surprise there... he usually stayed on his side of the bed anyway, unless he felt the need to work on his long-term project to sire a son, only then would he move toward her, touch her, caress her... do everything but *love* her. Theresa *never* instigated their intimate encounters. She had learned early on that any move toward such intimacy was usually rebuffed and her fragile self-esteem didn't deal well with rejection, so she had stopped trying.

Ironically enough tonight, after her decree that he not touch her, was the first time in a long time that she was actually tempted to move toward him. She clenched her fists and curled into a ball, trying not to think of all that tempting naked, male flesh lying next to her. She knew he was awake, she could tell from the rhythm of his breathing and obviously he knew *she* was awake, she was way too tense to be asleep.

"Just go to sleep for God's sake," his impatient voice suddenly rang out in the darkness. "I said I wouldn't touch you and I *won't*... so you can relax!" She tensed even more at the sound of his voice and he swore softly.

"If you can't sleep, I have the perfect solution for your insomnia," he murmured suggestively, leaving her in no doubt as to his "solution".

"You're not helping matters," she gritted through clenched teeth and he laughed quietly.

"Well if neither of us can sleep..."

"We haven't been in bed long enough to fall asleep... just *hush!*" She hissed.

"You know you're being ridiculous, right?" He murmured in his most patronisingly logical voice. It was a voice that usually drove her absolutely crazy.

"I don't care *how* ridiculous you think I'm being," she flipped over to face him and could barely make out his profile in the dark. He was lying on his back, with one arm tucked beneath his head. When he felt her turn over he

turned his head to look at her. She could see only the whites of his eyes in the dark. “This is what I want, Sandro.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” he maintained, reaching out to touch her face with one gentle hand. “The sex has always been good between us, Theresa... that’s one thing that’s never been in doubt. It’s the one damned thing that’s working in this marriage.”

“It wasn’t working for me,” she muttered defiantly. That bruised his masculine ego; she sensed it in the way he tensed.

“You weren’t faking those responses,” he negated stiffly.

“No, I wasn’t. You’re really *very* good...” she agreed, realising too late that she didn’t sound very convincing at all. “It just isn’t enough for me anymore.”

“I’m not enough for you anymore?” He asked flatly and she knew she had to tread carefully here.

“That’s not *quite* what I meant...”

“Oh?”

“Sandro, you’re being deliberately dense.” Okay that wasn’t quite the right thing to say either. She could practically *feel* him bristling next to her.

“It’ll probably be best if you didn’t say anything else, Theresa...”

“Look you’re deliberately misunderstanding me here...” She began.

“*Not* another word...” He warned.

“But...” suddenly she was on the flat of her back with him straddling her hips. She gasped and writhed as she tried to dislodge him.

“I warned you,” he growled.

“Get *off* me,” she hissed angrily pushing futilely at his hot, naked chest.

“No.” He settled himself more firmly against her, moving his hips until her thighs reluctantly parted and he was lodged between them. Her t-shirt had ridden up to her waist, leaving only her small bikini panties as a barrier between them. She was achingly aware of his bare flesh rubbing against the tender skin of her inner thighs and felt herself responding, moving with him, wanting more contact. He groaned and buried his face in her neck, his lips nuzzling her neck, moving up over her jaw line, her chin, skirting past her mouth before finally brushing over her cheek and capturing one sensitive

earlobe between his teeth. It was the blatant avoidance of her mouth that quite effectively doused the flame that had started a slow burn in her gut.

“This is not what I want,” she said firmly, using all her strength to push him away but he wouldn’t budge.

“Yes it is,” he whispered into her ear.

“If you do this, it’ll be against my will,” she asserted desperately. “And you *know* what that’s called!” He froze abruptly, before moving off her and back to his side of the bed.

“You would accuse me of something so despicable?” He sounded mortally offended but Theresa wasn’t about to allow herself to be swayed.

“If the shoe fits...”

“What does *that* mean?” He growled. “Some damned ambiguous idiom that doesn’t apply to this situation at all! There was *no* force involved in what just happened.”

“You pinned me down and refused to get off me when I asked you to. That’s a pretty clear example of force...” he didn’t respond and merely lay there seething in outraged silence. She had once again succeeded in bruising his masculine pride and Theresa was human and petty enough to give herself a mental high five. They didn’t speak at all after that and Theresa eventually fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter Two

The air at breakfast the following morning was still thick with tension. The unobtrusive staff had set out the usual Sunday morning breakfast buffet on the sunny patio next to the pool before disappearing back into the woodwork. Sandro didn't like distractions on Sunday mornings, so he preferred not to see the staff and usually, even though he insisted Theresa have all meals with him for "appearances" sake, he ignored her in favour of his Sunday Times. That morning, despite the fact that he had the usual barrier of his newspaper up between him and the rest of the world, meaning her, she could all but *feel* his fury. Finally, after an unbearably tense half an hour, he balled the paper up between his fists and tossed it aside before glaring at her across the glass table.

"I want to know *exactly* where you were yesterday, Theresa," he demanded fiercely.

"Why do you even *care*?" She asked tiredly. "You've certainly disappeared without explanation enough times for the both of us."

"We're not talking about *me* here," he pointed out.

"No but I think it's time we *do* talk about you, about your outrageous behaviour, about the other women and the blatant disregard for the fact that you're married!"

"I don't *feel* married!" He sounded almost defensive.

"No?" She retorted recklessly. "Well maybe *I* don't feel married either! Maybe I'm ready to be outrageous. Maybe *I'm* ready for other men and extra marital affairs too!"

"This had better not be your way of telling me that you were with another man last night, Theresa," he warned ominously, his voice eerily calm. Theresa recklessly ignored the warning in his voice and plunged on regardless.

"So what if that's *exactly* what I'm telling you?" She asked daringly. "What will you do about it? Make my life hell? Well surprise surprise... it's already hell! Do your *worst*!"

"What's his name?" He insisted in a lethally calm voice that sent an involuntary shudder down her spine. She suddenly recognised that she had

pushed him too far but she knew that even if she backed down now, it wouldn't assuage his anger. "Theresa, who the *hell* is he?"

Even though Theresa knew that he would never physically harm her, she couldn't help but feel an instinctive frisson of fear. She knew that he had a tight leash on his temper but right now that leash seemed strained to breaking point.

"I... I was speaking hypothetically," she stuttered, abandoning all pretence of bravado and feeling unbelievably intimidated.

"I don't believe you," he bit out furiously.

"I wasn't *with* anybody, I just needed a break!"

"A break..." he repeated with flat contempt.

"Yes a *break!* A break from you and from this life... I don't want to be in this marriage anymore. I want out... I want away from *you!* Please.... I just want a divorce, Sandro. Please."

"You'll get your divorce when I get my son," he reminded ruthlessly.

"That's so sick," she protested. "Why would you even *want* a child with a woman you despise?" He didn't respond, instead he sent an odd probing little look over her strained face.

"You honestly *don't* know, do you?" he breathed in disbelief and she blinked in confusion.

"Know what?" She asked blankly, distracted by the rapt look on his face. Again he didn't reply. "Know *what?*"

"Why did you marry me?" He asked suddenly.

"You *know* why..." she was outraged by the way he was rubbing salt in the wound unable to believe, even after a year and a half of similar treatment, that he could be so cruel.

"Humour me," he prompted and she exhaled shakily, before getting up with as much dignity as she could muster. She felt shaky and nauseous and couldn't stomach being around him anymore. She took an unsteady step away from the table, swaying so badly that he jumped up and clasped one large hand around her slender arm to steady her.

"Theresa?" He sounded almost shaken.

"I'm fine," she shrugged off his hand. "I just got up too quickly. Now

please excuse me, I have things to do!”

“Wait...” he said urgently. “I asked you a question.”

“A stupid question that you already know the answer to,” she retorted.

“Maybe I’d like to hear the answer again,” he was being a total ass about this and not for the first time in her life, Theresa felt like hitting him.

“Oh, *God*, why do you insist on doing this?” She groaned.

“You really *loved* me, didn’t you?” He breathed in amazement and she shot him a haunted look before turning away.

“You may rest assured that whatever I felt for you a year ago is no longer an issue. I want a divorce, nothing you do or say can induce me to stay with you...” she insisted and he surprised her by nodding thoughtfully.

“Yes. I’m beginning to realise that,” he acknowledged softly. There was nothing more to be said and she left the room with her head held high and her dignity intact.

She was a mass of nerves when she finally got to the bedroom and sank down on the bed, feeling quivery and still vaguely nauseous. She felt like she had just gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxer but she also felt like he had actually listened to her and that she had made some headway. Feeling like she needed to speak to someone about what had just happened, she picked up the telephone receiver from its cradle on the nightstand but she was taken aback to hear ringing on the other end. Realising that Sandro was on the extension downstairs she was about to put the phone down when the ringing stopped abruptly.

“Jackson Noble,” her father’s voice snapped into her ear and her eyes widened in shock. Sandro and her father did *not* get along and she was surprised to realise that Sandro had actually willingly called the older man. More than a little curious, she hesitated before replacing the receiver but that brief hesitation proved to be enough to keep her riveted to the phone.

“Your daughter wants a divorce,” was his opening sally and Theresa’s fingers tightened around the phone.

“What are you talking about? Divorce is not an option and you *know* that!” Her father astounded her by responding.

“Yes,” Sandro’s voice was dryer than the desert in summer. “I know that but it appears that *she* does not. You didn’t tell her about our agreement?” *What agreement?*

“Of course not,” Jackson Noble III scoffed contemptuously. “She would never have married you if I had... the little twit fancied herself in *love* with you!” Her father laughed harshly and Theresa winced. Her free arm wrapped around her midriff as she tried to keep her nausea at bay. Sandro did not react to her father’s last statement.

“I thought she knew... that she’d gone into this marriage consenting to sell herself for the sake of your sadistic little contract. Daddy’s good little girl to the very end!” He finally said after a long pause.

“Would it have changed your mind if you’d known you were marrying a naïve little fool, who thought you epitomized her every dream come true?”

“And she has no idea what the terms of our agreement are?” Sandro finally asked slowly.

“Well I assumed she would discover them from you eventually...”

“Are you telling me that she married me believing that I was *in love with her*?” He sounded humiliatingly incredulous that Theresa would ever have believed him in love with her.

“Of course,” her father snorted, she could practically hear the careless shrug in her words.

“And you just went ahead and let her believe that?”

“I know it was a ridiculous assumption on her part but it played right into our hands. It was like watching a sleepy kitten fall in love with a roaring lion,” her father laughed, he actually *laughed*, after saying that. “But I doubt she would have married you otherwise.”

““Played into *our* hands’? There’s no *us* here, Jackson. I had nothing to do with your obscene little scheme.”

“Oh spare me your sanctimonious drivel, Sandro...” her father scoffed. “It smacks of hypocrisy when you gained a hell of a lot out of this deal. And even if you’d known about Theresa’s expectations it would have made no difference to the eventual outcome. You know that as well as I do.”

“She’s your *daughter*!” Sandro suddenly roared furiously. “That should have meant something to you.”

“Of course it meant something to me... it meant that she could at last be of some use to me! Her role in my life is now quite vital. So you’d better keep her happy, get her pregnant and stop her prattling on about divorce. You *know* what you stand to lose if your marriage dissolves before I get what I want.”

“I had a *life* before this ridiculous arrangement... and I would like to get back to it at some point,” Sandro finally intoned and Theresa bit her lip hard to stop herself from crying out at the knowledge that her husband had always considered their marriage to be something outside of his *real* life! She had never met his family, all of whom lived in Italy. He visited them every second month for at least two weeks and never bothered asking her to join him. Of course he had never wanted them to meet her, not when she was just his “temporary” and unwanted wife.

“Well you *know* what it would take to get out and I’m amazed that it’s taken you so long to accomplish that task.” Sandro remained silent.

“You know we had a setback, it’s been difficult to recover from that!” He finally responded. Theresa’s brow furrowed and her sweaty hand tightened around the receiver which was practically welded to her ear. She tried to figure out what they were talking about... what was this goal that would set her free? It had something to do with a mutual business interest if the conversation was anything to go by. She would do *anything* to help Sandro accomplish whatever he needed to if it meant she could get out sooner. And once she was free she would walk away from them both and never look back.

“Yes... that damned girl can’t do anything right, can she?” Her father suddenly grated and Theresa’s head came up when she realised that they were talking about her. What on earth did... “The one thing you’d expect the woman to be able to do and she botched even that.” *Oh God!* Theresa finally realised what they had been referring to in such dry, legal terms and she nearly doubled over in pain.

“No-one was to blame for what happened,” Sandro shocked her by saying. “It was just one of those things...”

“Regardless,” her father dismissed. “Sire a boy on the brat and be done with it. Surely the task shouldn’t be too difficult for a strapping young man like you? After that, you’re most welcome to obtain your divorce and live

happily ever after with that Francesca woman of yours. The Love of your Life that's what the Press once called her, right?"

Francesca? Theresa didn't know what to process first, the fact that this whole marriage had been about her being a broodmare for whatever sick goal they had in mind, or the fact that Sandro had been/*was*(?) in love with another woman. Both bits of information hurt so much that Theresa felt like she had been physically assaulted. She'd always assumed that Sandro's desire for a son was fuelled by his Italian male ego; the need to propagate his seed and all that. The thought that it was part of some kind of bargain that he had made with her father had never even crossed her mind! Even though she had hated the way he could never touch her without that ultimate goal in mind, she had always believed that it was something *he* wanted; a son to carry on his name and an heir to inherit his fortune. Instead the baby would only ever have been a way for him to gain his freedom and carry on his life with *Francesca*.

But what was supposed to happen to her and the baby once Sandro had fulfilled his end of the bargain? Would he simply leave and forget about them? The one thing she had *never* doubted was that if Sandro wanted a son, he would *love* the child. Now she wasn't even sure of that! Sandro seemed to despise her so much she now knew that even though any baby they had would carry his name, it would ultimately be neglected and unloved by its father just like she had been by hers. She couldn't allow that to happen... this made her even *more* determined not to have a child.

As for her father's role in all this, she certainly knew why *he* wanted a grandson, absolutely *no* mystery there! He had always bemoaned his lack of male progeny to carry on his line and his business. Theresa had never been good enough to inherit, he had always made that quite clear but she had never realised how far he would go to ensure a male heir. It was all so archaic... she was so wrapped up in her painful thoughts that it took her a while to register the low buzzing in her ear and realise that the two men had disconnected their call. She very carefully, as if it was the most fragile thing in the world, replaced the receiver in its cradle and sat quite still for a long time before suddenly exploding into action and dashing to the en-suite bathroom where she violently threw up the meagre portion she had had for breakfast.

After she was done she rinsed her mouth and headed back to the bedroom and crawled into the centre of the huge bed, where she sat with her

knees drawn up to her chest and her face buried in her hands. She was hurting too much to even cry and was shaking so badly that her teeth were chattering. She didn't know what to do or where to turn. She needed to get out of this situation, as far away from both of them as she possibly could. Possible solutions and scenarios kept marching their way through her traumatised mind but nothing viable presented itself. There was still Sandro's threat against Lisa's business to consider, she also had no real money of her own and she knew that with their considerable resources her father and husband would find her before she could get very far.

She was still mulling it over when a soft knock sounded on the bedroom door. It swung open before she could respond and her big, dark, *beautiful* husband stood framed in the doorway. His eyes swept over her small, dishevelled form as she sat in the middle of the bed, her knees still drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around her folded legs.

"You've been in here for nearly three hours, Theresa," he said in a quiet voice. It was the kind of voice one would use when talking to an unbroken, high-strung horse. *Three hours?* Theresa hadn't realised that it had been that long and when she moved, her muscles screamed in protest. She had actually been sitting in one position for nearly that long. She gingerly and with visible effort stretched her arms and legs, trying not to wince in agony as her blood started circulating more freely.

"I didn't realise," she murmured, pushing her long hair out of her eyes. "I was going to visit Lisa."

"Why?" He asked sharply and she shrugged.

"Something to do," was her casual response.

"I thought..." He hesitated and Theresa's eyes snapped up to his face in surprise, the hesitation was so unusual in her supremely confident husband. "I thought we could have lunch together... go out somewhere. We haven't done that in a while."

"Try never," she half-laughed incredulously and his brows beetled slightly.

"Of course we have..." he began.

"Once," she nodded. "About a month *before* we were married. I remember that once quite vividly because I felt like a heroine in my own

personal fairytale. The giddy, foolish, not-quite-so-fair maiden having a meal with her dark, broody, oh-so-handsome prince who couldn't be bothered to string together two sentences the entire time and checked his watch every five minutes like he had someplace much more important to be. But of course, I didn't care, that was just the way you were and I 'loved'..." she sneered the word. "...you anyway. We never went out again after that."

"Of course we did," despite his assertion, he looked remarkably uncomfortable; he shifted his shoulders restlessly and shoved his hands into his jean pockets.

"Those other times were official work-related dinners, the ones you *have* to take your wife to." He frowned even more but chose not to respond to her statement.

"Well, then I'd say it's about time we went out together don't you?" He asked in an artificially cheerful voice and Theresa slanted her head as she tried to read his expression. As usual he was giving nothing away. Her lips tilted slightly in a cynical and unamused smile.

"I don't think so, Sandro," she shook her head. "I think I'll go to my cousin's place like I'd originally planned." He nodded thoughtfully, swaying back and forth on his heels in an uncharacteristically restless manner.

"Suit yourself," he shrugged. "What time were you planning to leave?"

"Soon."

"Right," he shrugged again looking strangely awkward. "See you later then." She nodded and he turned away and left without saying another word.

Rick and Lisa were doing nothing more productive than watching DVD's when Theresa came around. Lisa, in her advanced state of pregnancy, couldn't do much else. They were both lounging in the den, Rick looking devastating in a snug, well-worn pair of jeans and a grey t-shirt that had definitely seen better days. Lisa, in the meantime, looked miserable in a huge blue and white striped football jersey that Theresa knew had once belonged to Rick, who was a capable Sunday afternoon player, and a pair of stretchy blue leggings. She was about the size of a baby whale. Therese simply melted when she caught sight of her cranky younger cousin and once again resolved not to do anything to jeopardise her happiness and health. She dropped a kiss

on Lisa's cheek and one on the top of Rick's head as she passed behind the sofa on which they were sitting. Rick grinned up at her.

"Nothing exciting planned for today, sweetie," he informed cheerfully as Theresa sank down onto the other sofa. "I'm afraid we're feeling a bit out of sorts today, a touch grumpy, if you will. So we're staying in, in the hopes that it will improve our temper... *ouch!*" The last as Lisa swatted him in the back on his head.

"Stop talking like that, you *know* it drives me crazy! I'm not a two year old throwing a tantrum, I'm the hormonal woman *you* knocked up! So *don't* push me..." Rick slanted a rueful gaze at his amused friend and mouthed a wisely silent "*see?*" Theresa grinned before kicking off her shoes and dragging her feet up under her. She was dressed casually too, wearing an old pair of jeans and a bright blue t-shirt with a large, stylized butterfly printed on the front of it.

"What are we watching?" Theresa asked, leaning forward to help herself to a handful of the popcorn which was in a glass bowl on the coffee table.

"Some romantic thing that has Lisa dissolving into tears every two minutes or so," Rick shrugged dismissively, ignoring the way his wife was glaring at him over the top of her round little glasses. "*God*, the sacrifices I make to keep this woman happy," he groaned and Lisa gasped in outrage.

"Well if *you* had your way, we'd be watching some macho jerk swear and punch his way through two of hours of relentless explosions, car chases and gunfire," she retorted and he grinned down at her.

"Your point being?"

"*Aaargh!*" She actually said "aaargh" and Theresa for the first time in a long time felt a giggle bubbling up in her throat. Rick suddenly grinned before dropping one arm around his wife's narrow shoulders to drag her closer. He placed his other hand protectively over her stomach and Lisa put up a token struggle before sighing contentedly and dropping her head onto his broad shoulder. Theresa watched them enviously for a few moments before trying to focus on the movie. She had thought Rick was exaggerating about her cousin's response to the overly-sappy film but it was true, Lisa sniffled on an average of every two minutes. Theresa was just managing to get somewhat absorbed in the plot when the doorbell went. Rick excused

himself and jumped up to answer it.

Lisa watched him go with a slight smile on her face. She was quiet for a while before shaking her head in exasperation.

“You know, if I didn’t love him so darned much, I would probably have killed him by now,” she admitted sourly and Theresa surprised herself by laughing out loud in response to her cousin’s disgruntled confession. She couldn’t believe that her sense of humour was still intact after the events of the last forty-eight hours. Rick made his way back into the room, looking uncharacteristically grim and all the laughter and light drained from Theresa’s face when she saw who was standing behind the tall blonde man.

“What are *you* doing here?” She finally managed to choke out after a moment of shocked silence.

“I thought I’d join you all for lunch,” he shrugged, nodding apologetically to a still gaping Lisa. “May I sit down?” He indicated toward the sofa Theresa was occupying.

“Yes, of course,” Lisa nodded graciously.

“*No!*” Both Rick and Theresa all-but yelled at the same time as Lisa. Sandro smiled humourlessly before choosing to ignore their vehement rejections and sitting down beside Theresa. She shied as far away from him as she could but Sandro chose to ignore that too. He leaned forward and placed his elbows on his spread thighs with his large, masculine hands dangling down between his legs. He focused intently on Lisa.

“How have you been, Elisa?” He asked gently. He was the only one who ever called Lisa by her full name and Theresa could sense Rick bristling.

“Fine thanks,” Lisa murmured, rubbing her hands over her stomach in an instinctively maternal gesture. “A little tired but I suppose that it’s to be expected when you’re lugging another human being around.” Sandro grinned, he actually *grinned*, at that and nodded.

“Indeed.”

“Rick, for God’s sake, stop hovering and sit down,” Lisa snapped up at her still-glowing husband. “I would like to finish watching this movie sometime in this year! We’re having lunch afterwards, Alessandro, I hope you don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” he said smoothly, leaning back and making Theresa

feel incredibly claustrophobic as he crowded her with his large body. “What are we watching?” Lisa told him and Sandro did an admirable job of concealing his grimace. Lisa barely contained her own grin before hitting the play button. Rick rejoined her on the sofa, sending periodic glares over at Sandro, who kept his eyes glued on the screen and looked unfairly relaxed.

Lisa dropped her head onto her husband’s broad shoulder and resumed her occasional sniffing and Rick, unable to remain furious for long with his wife draped across him dragged Lisa close again and snuggled her up against him. His fingers interlaced with the hand she had resting on her stomach and Theresa felt like she was the only sane person in the room. Sandro was sprawled out beside her, his shoulders and thighs brushed against her every time he breathed, the other couple was snuggled together like a couple of lovebirds and she, Theresa, felt like she was losing her *mind*!

She got up abruptly and left the room, heading blindly toward the kitchen, where she stood in the middle of the room taking in great gasps of air. She should have *known* that he would follow her even there because when she turned back toward the kitchen door, there he was, watching her and a looking splendid in his own version of casual wear; a pair of faded blue jeans and a black dress shirt with the top button open to reveal the strong, masculine column of his neck.

“*Why* did you come here?” She asked on a whisper.

“I thought that we should spend some time together,” he said with a gentleness that Theresa instinctively mistrusted.

“But I *told* you... I don’t want to spend time with you,” she said in a soft, bewildered voice. “I don’t want to be anywhere *near* you!”

“Theresa...” he said, still in that same gentle voice, taking a cautious step into the room and Theresa backed up until she hit the fridge.

“The one place I had... the one place I could come and be *myself*,” she shook her head, her eyes were wide and shimmering with tears. “And you had to take *that* from me too...” the tears overflowed and she desperately tried to blot them from her cheeks with the hem of her t-shirt. He made a soft almost dismayed sound in his throat before moving so quickly that she barely had time to register it. One second he was still close to the kitchen entrance and the next he was right in front of her, sandwiching her between his body and the fridge. His large hands reached up to cup her face and his thumbs

brushed roughly at the tears on her cheeks.

“*Don’t*,” his voice was low and gravelly and so thick that she could barely understand that one word. She raised her much smaller hands to his and tugged futilely at his hold, trying to get him to release her.

“I want to make things less difficult for us, Theresa...” he muttered uncomfortably, his face so close to hers that his breath washed over her skin and raised goose pimples all over her body.

“Why *now*?” She challenged the ludicrous statement angrily, trying to ignore the effect his closeness was having on her very receptive body. Her soft green eyes snapped up at his through her tears. “Is it because I’m threatening to leave this marriage without giving you your precious son, is that it?” She dropped her hands down to his hard, broad chest and tried to push him away. He wouldn’t budge.

“No,” was all he said. “That’s *not* it... because I *know* you won’t leave.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” She hissed and he was silent for a while before responding.

“The discussion we had yesterday,” he eventually, reluctantly, said and she went limp against him, all the fight leaving her abruptly.

“So, if you’re so sure I won’t leave, *what’s* this sudden need you have to spend your every waking moment with me?” She asked hollowly.

“We’re *married* for God’s sake... and we’re like strangers! I know *nothing* about you!”

“Of course you know nothing about me,” her voice was hoarse with the effort it took not to scream at him. “You’re the one who decided, even before we got married, that there was nothing *worth* knowing about me.”

“Well I’ve changed my mind,” he didn’t bother to deny her wild accusation, probably because it was true, instead dropping his hands down to her narrow shoulders to give her a little shake.

“Which once again begs the question of *why*... after eighteen months of marriage, why now?” His hands fell from her shoulders before he shrugged with an air of disinterest which belied his urgency of just seconds ago.

“Why *not* now? Now’s as good a time as any...” he was back to being remote and icy and Theresa shuddered involuntarily.

“It’s much too late, Sandro,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around her slender frame. “I may be trapped in this marriage but I want nothing to do with you! The very *sight* of you makes me sick to my stomach.”

“There’s a way out of this you know,” he finally murmured.

“I know,” his hooded gaze snapped back up to her face. “Have a baby, right? You want a son... and I’m the chosen incubator.” She watched his face carefully but he betrayed not one iota of emotion other than a slight tightening of his jaw. “So what happens after I have this precious baby of yours? Who gets him after the divorce? You expect me to be nothing but a surrogate mother. I’m to bear him and you’ll then take him away from me, right?”

She was aching to hear an affirmative from him, anything that would prove to her that *he* was the one who wanted the child and that she had misunderstood the conversation she had overheard between her husband and her father that morning.

“Of course I wouldn’t take him from you,” he shook his head, sending her heart plummeting. “I wouldn’t be that cruel. Naturally you’d maintain custody,” Theresa shut her eyes to shield her agony from him and she felt her scalding tears seep down her cheeks.

“How very... magnanimous of you,” she whispered. “To be so desperate for something only to give it up in the end... you’re so much more generous than I gave you credit for. How often would you want to see him?”

“I would naturally move back to Italy so I would probably see him two or three times a year. It is what you want, no? Less contact with me?” She inhaled deeply and her brow furrowed. Two or three times a year? That was all the time he would want to spend with a child who was half hers? She opened her eyes and met his gaze squarely.

“Like I said before, you’re being quite generous but it’s all moot anyway because I have no intention of having a baby with you!”

“You’re being very childish, Theresa,” he admonished quietly.

“No, I’m finally making my *own* decisions. Up to this point in my life, everything has been decided for me... this marriage would never have happened if my father hadn’t decided that you would make the perfect son-in-law. After that, the wedding date, the venue, the cake, where we would

live... it was all you or my father. I couldn't even choose my own *wedding dress*," the last emerged in a small, broken voice which quavered with remembered disbelief and outrage. Her father had simply had the dress delivered to her room with the direction that it was to be worn on her wedding day, no discussion and no choice.

"The only reason I got Lisa as a bridesmaid was because my father deemed it appropriate for my first cousin to be in the wedding party. If she'd been just a friend, I doubt she'd have fit the bill!"

"It turns my stomach to hear someone who's led such a privileged life whine on about how terrible her life is, you've been spoilt and you've had everything money could buy..."

"Except *love*, specifically my husband's love and my father's love... apparently I'm not quite worthy of that."

"You're feeling sorry for yourself and I'm getting sick of it."

"Yes, I'm feeling sorry for myself," she acknowledged bitterly. "And it's very liberating. In the past all I've done is *accept* everything you and my father have dished out... thinking it was my lot in life, even thinking I deserved it; if two such powerful men as you thought I wasn't worthy of love and respect, then who was I to differ? But I'm starting to realise that *I'm* not the one at fault here. I'm not the one with the personality defect... at least my motives for marrying you were honest; I stupidly believed I loved you. Yours were less than stellar, weren't they? They certainly had *nothing* to do with love."

"They had *everything* to do with love," he suddenly thundered, silencing her abruptly as she stared up at him in wide-eyed shock. "Just not love for *you*." She blinked up at him; her green eyes the only colour in her deathly pale face.

"What does that mean?" She asked through barely moving lips. "Love for *whom*?" Was he referring to Francesca? If he really loved the other woman so much, why on earth marry Theresa? It made no sense.

"None of your damned business," he grated furiously, a muscle working frantically in his jaw.

"It never *is*," she finally nodded bitterly. "It has nothing to do with me, yet it affects every aspect of my life. You want something from me but

you're unable to give me anything in return. Well, I've had enough of that, Sandro. You want a baby but this is *my* body and so it's my decision to make..."

"I'm your husband..."

"No. You are *not* my husband," she interrupted in a voice thickened with hatred and tears. "You have *never* been my husband. A husband loves, honours and cherishes! A husband is a lover and a champion... Look into the next room if you want to see what a *real* husband is, because you

are *no* such thing!" He reeled away from her, looking like a man who'd just been bitten by his favourite pet and she pushed herself away from the fridge to brush past him.

"Theresa, wait..." he grabbed one of her arms to prevent her from running off.

"I have to go, please tell Rick and Lisa that..."

"No," he interrupted gently. "You stay. This is your family, you are right this is your place and I should not have intruded. I'm sorry..." his eyes skirted away from hers as he made apology and Theresa's jaw dropped at his second apology in twenty-four hours. She felt certain that the world would grind to a halt at any moment. "I will leave now... it is how it should be." With that he dropped her arm and walked out, leaving her to stare after him in confusion.

Chapter Three

The house was dark and quiet when she got home, with no seething Sandro waiting at the front door this time, just echoing silence as she made her way upstairs and back into the spare bedroom. After a hot shower, she collapsed into bed and didn't stir until the following morning, when she woke to bright sunlight. She sat up in confusion as she tried to get her bearings and realised that she wasn't in the spare bedroom anymore. A quick glance around confirmed that she was back in the master suit and a glance down at the empty space beside her confirmed that Sandro had indeed slept beside her. She peeked down at herself and was relieved to note that she still had on the t-shirt she had worn to bed.

She checked the clock and groaned when she realised that she had slept to nearly ten in the morning. Pushing the tumbled mass of her hair out of her face, she got up and was alarmed when the room started spinning wildly around her. She stumbled a couple of steps before reaching for the headboard of the bed and steadying herself. She frowned slightly as she tried to recall the last time she had had a decent meal... definitely *not* the previous day's breakfast, which had come back up after that overheard phone call, or lunch which had been spoiled by Sandro's appearance at Rick and Lisa's place and dinner had been a non-event. Even though Rick and Lisa had urged her to eat the night before, Theresa just could not stomach the thought of food after the day she'd had! Saturday had been much of the same; all she'd had to eat was popcorn at the movies.

Now she was paying the price for all those missed meals. Heading for the shower she decided to treat herself to a decent brunch. Monday was the housekeeper's day off and they had no other live-in staff so Theresa had the house to herself. She was looking forward to just spending the day on her own, trying to figure out what her next move would be. She couldn't leave him and it seemed that *he* couldn't leave *her*. So what now? Sighing she decided to switch off her brain until after she'd eaten lest she lose her appetite again.

Less than an hour later she was dry-heaving over the commode in the downstairs guest bathroom. Just the smell of frying bacon and eggs had been enough to set her off. After her stomach stopped revolting, she stumbled out onto the patio, as far away from the nauseating smell of cooked food as she

could possibly get, and sank down onto a chaise longue overlooking the huge infinity swimming pool.

“No...” she whispered staring blindly at the edge of the pool, where the aquamarine water of the pool seemed to merge with the darker blue of the ocean and the cobalt blue of sky. “No no no no... *no*... please God! No...”

She buried her face in her hands and rocked back and forth slightly. Her system was just off-kilter because of the gut-wrenching events of the last forty-eight hours. Naturally she'd feel nauseous after not eating in so long. It was all perfectly logical... she was simply overreacting.

She couldn't *be* this unlucky, not after finally making some kind of progress in achieving independence from this marriage. She tried to remember when her last period had been but she had been under a lot of stress lately and her period had been affected so that was not the most reliable way to gauge anything. She got up gingerly and was relieved when the movement didn't upset her equilibrium, heading toward the kitchen, she braced herself for a fresh onslaught of nausea but thankfully her stomach stayed as steady as a rock. Breathing a sigh of relief, she headed toward the stove and picked up the pan, averting her eyes as she deposited the congealed mess that would have been her meal, into the waste disposal unit. She settled on black tea and dry toast instead determinedly putting her irrational fear of pregnancy out of her head.

After finishing the unappetizing meal, she headed for the bright, sunny attic which she had transformed into a workroom and put on some music while she immersed herself in her work. She so often lost herself up here, loving the serenity that usually came over her when she was working but today she just couldn't concentrate. She had an image in her mind, knew what she wanted but she just couldn't put it down on paper. She sat in front of her drawing board, staring at the fifth blank sheet of paper in half an hour, resting her elbow on the tilted board and her delicate chin in one hand as she stared at the paper and willed the image into existence. She raised her pencil, resting the nib on the paper, before sighing resignedly and shaking her head in frustration. She dropped the pencil and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes.

“Theresa,” the quiet voice coming from behind her sent her flying out of her seat in alarm, she half-turned, half-crouched in a defensive position before she realised that it was Sandro's voice. Of course that didn't make her

feel any safer than an unknown intruder would have done. He had both hands up, palms facing her, to keep her calm.

“Relax... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he soothed.

“Well, you *did*,” she retorted furiously. “Why on earth are you skulking around at home this time of day anyway? Usually you don’t get home until seven or eight.” He always left for work before seven in the morning and usually returned well after the time most “normal” husbands would come home.

“I thought that we could spend the afternoon together,” he muttered distractedly while his keen eyes absorbed every aspect of the room. He was walking around now, barely paying her any attention, lifting things, fiddling with her tools, until Theresa couldn’t take it anymore.

“Don’t *touch* that!” She snapped impatiently when he lifted a pair of cutters that had cost the earth to import.

“You design jewellery,” he whispered in astonishment, his eyes finally lifting to meet hers and Theresa’s own gaze fluttered away, while her cheeks fired with embarrassment.

“I know they’re no good,” she ventured nervously, waving at the large portfolio he had lifted from one of her other workstations: she had the drawing board for designing, a work table for actually making the jewellery, a small cutting table for cutting wire and shaping semi-precious stones and her desk which housed her laptop, for paperwork and correspondence. “And I know that I should not be wasting my time with it. But it’s just a hobby... so...” her voice petered off as he continued to flip through her portfolio with an absorbed frown, occasionally lingering on a page before moving on. She stood in front of him, fidgeting nervously, waiting for the scathing set down that would undoubtedly follow. He suddenly turned the open book toward her.

“This is your cousin’s engagement set,” he observed, tapping at the picture of the diamond and white gold earring, pendant and ring set she had made for Rick a few years before.

“Yes but they’re Rick’s design. I just made them.”

“I can tell they’re not your design. Your things are more...” he paused and Theresa braced herself. “Raw... elemental... why don’t you work with

real gemstones, instead of semi-precious stones?”

“Uncut precious stones are insanely expensive. Semi-precious stones are cheap and easy to find and if they’re damaged in any way while I’m setting them, it’s no big deal.” He grunted again, obviously barely hearing her as he went back to flipping through her portfolio.

“And this is what you do all day?” He looked back up at her for confirmation.

“Well I can hardly sit around and twiddle my thumbs all day, can I?” She challenged and his eyes flickered slightly. She snorted disdainfully as she realised that that was *exactly* what he’d thought she did all day. He probably thought she spent her days shopping and lounging around in beauty salons.

“Why did I not know this about you?” He asked quietly and she shrugged.

“Just one more thing you never bothered to learn about me,” she said dismissively.

“Just one more detail *you* didn’t offer about yourself,” he responded fiercely and her eyes snared his in challenge.

“Would you have been interested if I’d told you?” He was honest enough to avert his gaze at the question and remained silent in response to it.

“How many of these have you sold?” He changed the subject, indicating toward her portfolio.

“None,” she shrugged. “The only jewellery in that portfolio that I don’t still have is the set I made for Rick and even those were just a favour.”

“But why keep them hidden?”

“They’re not good enough. Just a silly hobby, a waste of my time, really, I couldn’t compete with the real designers out there anyway.”

“It’s uncanny, I hear *your* voice but it’s like listening to your father speak. He told you that you weren’t good enough didn’t he? And you *believed* him?” He seemed uncharacteristically furious about that.

“No... yes... *no*... Look, I *know* that I’m not good enough; I have received no formal training. I printed stuff off of the Internet, did a bit of reading and started experimenting. I’m the only one who ever wears these and then only around the house!”

“I think that you should have Bryce Palmer or Pierre de Coursey have a look at these,” she fidgeted slightly, not entirely sure what to make of his sudden interest and praise.

“I wouldn’t want to waste their time, they’re busy men.” The two men he had referred to co-owned one of the most exclusive jewellery companies on three continents.

“I hardly think you’d be wasting their...”

“Look Sandro... just drop it, please,” she interrupted harshly and his eyes snapped up to her strained face. His own expression remained impassive and he shrugged carelessly before slowly closing the portfolio and placing it back onto her desk.

“Suit yourself,” he muttered, before continuing his amble around the room. She watched as he picked things up, inspected and replaced them. She remained seated, swivelling her desk chair every so often to keep him within sight. He eventually stopped his restless pacing to come to a standstill directly in front of her. She lowered her eyes to his expensive size eleven Italian loafers and fidgeted with the pencil she had picked up again.

She nearly leaped out of her skin and dropped the pencil with a muffled yelp when he captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently tilted her face up until she raised her vulnerable gaze up to his unfathomable chocolate brown eyes. He let go of her chin to stroke the back of his hand down her soft cheek and she tried her best not to cringe from his touch but she wasn’t quite successful in masking her reaction because his eyes iced over and his hand dropped heavily back to his side.

“What other secrets are you keeping from me, I wonder?” He mused beneath his breath.

“I have no secrets,” she responded.

“What would you call this?” He indicated the room with a sweeping gesture and she laughed but there was absolutely *no* humour in the harsh and abrasive sound

“This was hardly a secret,” she shook her head bitterly. “If you’d come here at any time over the past year and a half, you would have known about this. I never lock the door... you were free to enter at any time.”

“Why would I have had any reason to come up here?” He asked in his

most maddeningly pragmatic voice. “It’s hardly the most logical place for a workshop.”

“It’s also the one place I spend most of my time so of *course* you’ve never bothered to come up here,” she responded sarcastically. “You’ve never willingly sought me out before, Sandro... and I believe that the only reason you’re doing so now is because things aren’t going according to whatever Master Plan you have devised for this so-called marriage of ours. Pretending an interest in me is your latest way of trying to keep me compliant, isn’t it?”

“Stop trying to second guess me, *cara*,” he admonished gently. “You have no idea what makes me tick or what’s going on in my head.”

“Oh, I think I could definitely say the same about you. In fact I think *I* know *you* a lot better than you do me!”

“I doubt that,” he dismissed, dropping his hands into the trouser pockets of his tailor-made, expensive suit, half-reclining against her work table and crossing one long leg over the other in a pose of sartorial, casual elegance.

“Fine...” she tilted her head as she ran a contemptuous gaze over him. “How do I take my coffee?” He frowned at the question before shrugging carelessly.

“Black...” he stated with the utmost authority.

“No, you take *yours* black, *I* don’t drink coffee.”

“This is pointless,” he dismissed. “And juvenile...”

“Everything about me, or to do with me, is pointless to you,” she observed bitterly.

“That’s hardly...” he began but she interrupted him again, barely able to credit her own daring. She had never *once* stood up to him this way before but she was done being a doormat and just because she was trapped in this marriage at the moment did not mean she would to allow them to walk all over her anymore.

“Everything except my *womb* of course...” she laughed half-hysterically. “You have a lot of use for that! That’s all I am to you, a womb on legs!”

“You’re being *ridiculous*,” he scoffed.

“What about my birthday?” She asked suddenly, still ignoring him. “When’s my birthday?” His jaw clenched and he remained mute, keeping his eyes glued to hers.

“I see no need to prove myself in this way...”

“You can’t answer it, can you?” She challenged. “Yours is on the twenty-fifth of February. You have four older sisters, Gabriella, Sofia, Isabella and Rosalie, and a large extended family, you dislike spinach and are allergic to bees, you like...”

“*Enough!*” He sliced an impatient hand through the air in front of his face, cutting her off abruptly. “This is bordering on stalkerish and it proves nothing other than you possess a creepy excess of information about me, which I must admit, I am more than a little uncomfortable with.”

“Hardly stalkerish,” she shook her head. “I have been living with you for more than eighteen months and I *loved* you when I married you, I was interested in knowing you. These are the kinds of mundane facts married couples know about each other. Everything I know about you, I had to learn for myself, none of it was ever volunteered. You didn’t know about my hobby, or how I take my coffee, or birthday, is *not* because I’ve been secretive... I mean those things are hardly secrets, it’s because you were just not interested enough in getting to know me. That’s how it’s been for the last eighteen months and that’s how it still *is*, despite your sudden feigned interest in me.” He started to say something but she raised her hand to quieten him and was amazed when he actually shut his mouth.

“I *know* now that I wasn’t the bride you would have chosen for yourself,” she managed to say it despite the huge lump in her throat but she couldn’t meet his eyes as she acknowledged that painful fact. “You made *that* pretty clear on our wedding night and every day since then. But I think that at the very *least*, I deserved to be treated with some show of respect...” She bit her lower lip to stop its trembling and wrapped her arms around herself. He said nothing in response, just kept staring at her thoughtfully.

“I don’t really know what you want me to say,” he finally admitted and she smiled sadly.

“I know,” she acknowledged with a dip of the head. “That’s a major part of the problem.”

He unexpectedly shoved himself away from the table and took the

couple of steps it required to bring him standing directly in front of her. He hovered threateningly above where she sat and Theresa tried her best not to cower beneath his brooding regard. He then surprised her even further by dropping to his haunches in front of her, placing his hands on the arms of her chair and trapping her in her seat.

“I may not know these things you asked of me, Theresa,” his sexy accent thickened as his voice dropped a few notches. “But I do know *you*...” She shook her head mutely; disconcerted by both his proximity and his direct stare. He was definitely not avoiding her eyes this time, his gaze just a frank and unflinching regard. She felt like a deer trapped in the headlights and she wanted to look away, she wanted to escape but she could barely breathe, much less avert her gaze.

He raised one hand and Theresa braced herself for his unwanted touch, desperate not to flinch. In the end, she still jumped slightly when his fingertips brushed across her lips.

“I know what makes you tremble with desire,” his voice had lowered even further, nothing more than a seductive rumble now and Lisa’s lips parted slightly. “I know where to touch, where to kiss, where to suck... I know how to make you moan, scream and cry out in ecstasy.

“That’s just sex,” she finally found her voice but hardly sounded convincing. He merely smiled, lifting his other hand until he had her face framed with his thumbs stroking across her cheekbones and his fingertips burrowing into the soft hair at her temples.

“It doesn’t solve anything,” she continued to protest, with the same lack of conviction as before.

“Maybe not,” he shrugged without concern. “But it *feels* fantastic...”

“But we don’t do it right,” she murmured, thinking about the fact that he’d never kissed her, not on the lips, not once... his fingers stilled and she realised, rather belatedly, that he may have misconstrued her comment, which was fine with her, if it meant that he would stop this blatant seduction of her senses.

“What do you mean?” She could tell how much it cost him to keep the affronted heat out of his voice.

“I always thought that one day I would make love with my husband,”

she confessed on a whisper. “But we don’t do that, do we? We have sex... we...” she used a word that she had *never* in her life uttered before and Sandro flinched slightly in response to it, the soothing stroke of his fingertips stopped abruptly.

“Don’t use language like that,” he growled. “It doesn’t suit you!”

“Well, it’s what *you* once called it,” she defended herself hotly.

“I would *never*...”

“You *did*...” she interrupted what she knew would be a denial. “On our wedding night, after the first time.... I tried to... to...” she blushed as she remembered her naivety back then. She had reached over to snuggle with him and he had moved all the way to the edge of the bed in an effort to get away from her. “Well, anyway, you told me not to mistake what we did with any act of love. That it was much more basic than that. Just sex, you said, just... well... you know...”

His hands had dropped from her face to her shoulders and his eyes narrowed on her painfully humiliated face. His grip tightened on her shoulders and she squirmed slightly before it let up and he kneaded her shoulders slightly.

“Theresa, I was pretty hammered on our wedding night,” she nodded her eyes bright with tears as she remembered how long he had made her wait for him. Her innocent, eager anticipation had been dashed when the dignified, distant husband who had left her all alone in their hotel suite had returned three hours later, so drunk that he could barely hold himself upright. He had fallen onto the bed and immediately passed out, leaving Theresa shattered. Two hours later, his skilful hands on her body had brought her out of a restless doze and he had strummed at and played with her body like it was a finely-tuned musical instrument, making her a willing slave to his every command.

Such had been her response that it had barely registered that his lips hadn’t once touched hers. He had kissed just about every other part of her body and afterwards, while she strove to maintain the closeness between them, he had all-but destroyed her fragile spirit by denigrating the act. She could tell that Sandro was recalling the events of that night too and his eyes dropped to where her hands were still restlessly fidgeting with the pencil which had fallen into her lap. He dropped one huge hand over hers to stop the

movement.

“I resented you very much,” he admitted. “Because I felt trapped...”

“Wrong tense, Sandro,” she whispered. “Your resentment is still very current.”

“Things change, Theresa.”

“Some things are inexcusable, Sandro,” she whispered painfully. “And unforgivable.”

“We’re not getting anywhere with this,” he growled in frustration and she dragged her hands out from under his.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you for the last three days,” she pointed out and he bit off a curse before getting up abruptly. Theresa jumped up too, to avoid being intimidated by his height. But she had miscalculated, he was still too close to her and when she got up, her breasts brushed up the length of his body from groin to torso. They both immediately went still as awareness simmered between them. Theresa made a soft sound and attempted to put some distance between them but Sandro’s arms came up to circle her loosely, his hands meeting in the small of her back and the tips of his fingers just brushing against the slight swell of her backside. Her own hands came up to firmly brace against his chest, she wanted to push him away but somehow her hands were idly stroking instead of exerting any force.

His large hands moved down to fully cup her backside and he lifted her slightly until she could feel his sudden arousal. He lazily pushed himself against her, dipping his head until his mouth was next to her ear.

“Despite everything, *cara*, you want me,” he whispered, his breath hot and moist against her ear. “And *God* knows I want you too...”

“Just sex,” she protested weakly.

“Maybe,” he nibbled her earlobe gently, before moving down to nuzzle the sensitive spot just below her ear, something he knew made her crazy. It didn’t fail this time, as she gasped and wound her arms around his neck to push herself closer to his hard body. His tongue gently circled the highly-sensitive erogenous zone and Theresa moaned wanting more. His wicked, hot mouth moved down to her throat, licking, sucking and nibbling the exposed skin along the way. Theresa buried her face in his short, soft hair and muffled a moan of pure sizzling lust.

His hands were busily yanking her blouse out of the waistband of her skirt and they both groaned when his hands finally made contact with the naked skin of her back. He muttered something in Italian, before he swept his hands up to the clasp of her bra, unhooked it expertly and brought his hands around and under the lacy little B-cups. She cried out and arched violently against him when his thumbs found her sensitive nipples and he half-laughed, half-groaned at her wild reaction to his touch.

“I *want* you,” he whispered, his breath feathering against the skin of her neck, where he was nibbling gently. “How I want you!” She sobbed wishing she was more adept at resisting him but desperately wanting him too, despite her bitterness, her anger and her frustration. She nodded slowly, tears seeping from between her closed eyes and trickling down her cheeks.

“Please...” she didn’t know if she was begging him to stop or to continue but Sandro took it as an assent. One of his hands dropped from her breasts and tugged at her skirt until it was bunched up around her hips, her brief, lacy panties were swiftly dealt with and his hot, urgent fingers found her melting core with unerring accuracy, stroking, plunging and preparing her. Her hands dropped to his belt buckle and she fumble with the opening of his trousers until she held him captive in her hands. She did her own stroking and caressing, loving the familiar satiny feel of him, loving the heat, the hardness, the substantial size...

He made an animalistic sound, swinging her around and backing her up until she was leaning against the workstation he had so casually been half-sitting on before. He lifted her up until her backside was firmly planted on the desk and moved between her spread thighs. Tilting her pelvis slightly, until he had the angle just right, he finally, with a groan of pure satisfaction, sank into her soft, welcoming heat. Theresa’s breath hitched as she was, once again, caught by surprise by his length, girth and incredible hardness.

She lifted her slender legs and clasped them around his hips as, after the first gently thorough thrust, he simply rested against her. With his hands braced on the desk on either side of her hips, he lifted his head to look down into her eyes. Theresa was undone by that, as he had *never* simply just looked at her before, not in bed nor out of it. His dark eyes continued to search hers and she wondered what it was he was looking for. She licked her lips nervously and his gaze dropped to her mouth and something completely unrecognizable suddenly flared in his eyes and his pupils dilated until his

eyes were virtually black.

Theresa's breath was starting to come in little gasps as she tried to control her own need to *move* against him. Her hips gave the slightest twitch and she felt herself spasm around him. He hissed at the movement, his face clenching as he finally withdrew slightly, only to plunge back into her as if he couldn't bear to leave. That was all it took for Theresa's head to fall back limply and her mouth to open on a soundless scream of ecstasy. The record speed of her orgasm seemed to take Sandro by surprise, as well as, trigger his own. With a shocked sound and another half-thrust, he buried himself as deep as he could go, arching backwards in the process and coming violently. It seemed to last forever but eventually his entire body went limp and he half-collapsed against her, burying his face in her damp neck.

So stunned was Theresa by the unprecedented swiftness of the act, it couldn't have lasted more than three minutes, that she nearly missed the words. In fact, she may have missed them entirely if she hadn't felt his tell-tale breath on the sensitive skin of her neck. But he said them. The words were muffled but she knew *exactly* what he was saying. His mantra, his prayer...

"Give me a son, Theresa..." and just like that, it was over for her. Her legs fell away from his waist and she pushed at his chest until he levered himself up to look down at her curiously. He made a soft sound of protest when he saw the tears on her cheeks and attempted to fold his arms around her. Yet *another* unprecedented move but she shoved him again until he stepped away from her.

"Why are you crying?" He asked hoarsely as he readjusted his clothing.

"I hate you," she despaired, dashing at the tears.

"What we just did didn't feel like hatred to me," he pointed out.

"Just another..." her mouth started to form the ugly word but he cut her off.

"Don't say it," he snapped. "Don't you *dare* say it!"

"Why *not*?" She protested. "It's the truth and don't you try to pretend otherwise at this stage of our so-called marriage, Sandro. Do you think *sex* makes things better? It makes everything worse, like adding petrol to an already raging fire. All *you've* proved is that I am humiliatingly unable to

resist you!”

“*That* is entirely mutual,” he responded dryly and she went still.

“Oh, please...” She choked. “Of *course* you can resist me. I’m just another woman to you. I’m of no particular consequence, so don’t try to play yet another game with me, Sandro! I’m sick of your lies and deceit.”

“*Dio*,” he hissed furiously. “You’re *not* just another woman, you’re my *wife*! You hold a position of great consequence in my life.”

“A wife you’re ashamed of? I don’t think so!”

“Whoever told you that I was ashamed of you?” He seemed outraged by the very notion.

“*You* did...”

“Theresa, everything else that you’ve accused me of so far has had some element of truth to it. But this is just plain ludicrous! I have *never*, not once, told you that I am ashamed of you...”

“You never *said* it; you didn’t have to...” she slid off the desk, making sure that her skirt was straight before looking up at him again. “You show me every day.”

“*What?*”

“I’ve never met your family, the large and extensive family that means the world to you, I know that you have two close friends, Rafael Dante and Gabriel Braddock, they’re university buddies if I’m not mistaken, you play football with them every week. You didn’t think I knew that, did you? I haven’t met any of those people of *consequence* in your life,” and there was Francesca, of course but Theresa wasn’t ready to confront him with that bit of knowledge yet. “They are the people who matter to you and if I’d been the wife you wanted, a wife you were *not* ashamed of, I would undoubtedly have met them by now!”

“It’s not like that,” he denied, almost stumbling in his haste to reach for her but she stepped away before he could touch her.

“Yes it is. Please don’t insult my intelligence by denying it...” she desperately looked around for her panties and finally saw them lying beside her drawing board. She very quickly swooped them up before turning back to face him.

“I need a shower,” she whispered bitterly. “*You* know what it’s like when you have an overwhelming urge to scrape the touch, the scent, the very *essence* of someone off of your skin, don’t you? After all, that’s what *you* usually do thirty seconds after your orgasm and I can finally relate to that” She turned and left the room before he had the opportunity to respond.

Chapter Four

They barely spoke over the next week or so, merely co-existing in the same house. Sandro still insisted that they take breakfast and dinner together and that they sleep together but he never touched her in bed, maintaining the distance that *she* had insisted on. Some part of Theresa was relieved while another, even larger part, bemoaned the loss of the one bond they had shared. Still, she kept telling herself that it was just sex and it had never meant anything.

Besides she had other, more immediate, concerns. Like the fact that she had thrown up every day for the last week and the fact that she was still stricken by dizzy spells at the most unexpected times... like the fact that her period was now than it had ever been before. She was relieved that the intimacies between her and Sandro had ceased, because he was as familiar with her cycle as she was and she would really prefer absolute certainty before telling him anything. She also wanted time to figure out what her next move would be.

Yet *another* decision taken from her, she reflected bitterly but at least she could decide the time and place to tell him, if indeed she *was* pregnant, which she desperately hoped was not the case. She worried at her lower lip with her teeth, staring blindly at the design she had been working on for most of the week. It was supposed to be a necklace but it looked like no necklace she had ever seen before. She shook her head in disgust; she could not seem to get anything done. It was the equivalent of writer's block and it was extremely frustrating. Her cellphone buzzed discreetly and she snatched it up, welcoming the distraction. She had been exchanging text messages with Lisa all day and was expecting the message to be from her cousin. She was rather unpleasantly surprised to see Sandro's name in her inbox. He usually refrained from contacting her during the day. She frowned down at his name, not all that keen on reading the text. Finally she exhaled gustily and clicked on the message.

“Eating out tonight. Dress: casual. ‘Business thing’. Will be home by 6. Dinner @ 7:30”

She groaned, Sandro and his damned “appearances”! She was tempted to simply refuse but didn't have the energy for the argument that would ensue. At least he'd forewarned her this time, there had been a few incidences

in the past where he had simply come home and told her that they were going out in an hour. A couple of times the events had been formal, leaving Theresa to scramble for appropriate dresses and silently cursing the fact that she hadn't even had the opportunity to have her hair professionally done. Sighing softly, she gave up on work for the rest of the afternoon and instead decided to get her hair done. Looking good tonight would give her ego a boost if nothing else.

Sandro was home promptly at six. Theresa was curled up on the sofa, flipping through the coffee table book by an extremely popular photographer, which she had just purchased on her afternoon excursion. He was a wildlife photographer but his subject matter this time round was a lot closer to home. His latest anthology, entitled "Man's Best Friend" was all about dogs. Theresa, being a huge sucker for dogs, hadn't thought twice before buying the book. Sandro paused in the doorway and she looked up to see his arrested gaze on her hair. She lifted a self-conscious hand to her newly-cut hair, knowing that it was a big change. She had had her waist length fall of Titian hair cut to just below her jaw. The style was straight and sleek, with a feathery fringe and Theresa loved the way it made her look and feel like a new woman. Something she was so desperately striving to be.

Her hair had *always* been long, her father had absolutely forbade her to cut it and Theresa knew that the one thing Sandro absolutely adored about her, aside from her rather small breasts, was her hair. When he was having sex with her he was always touching, stroking or tugging at her hair. Now she waited with bated breath for his inevitable negative reaction to the cut which framed her face and emphasised her large, grey-green, eyes and high, delicate cheekbones. His hands clenched and he seemed to swallow with visible effort.

"You look..." his voice was hoarse and he cleared his throat before starting again. "You look *bellissima, cara.*" His quiet voice seemed to ring with sincerity and something which, in any other man, would be akin to reverence. "Absolutely stunning..."

She blinked.

"Oh," was all she could think of to say and he came further into the room, still so riveted on her hair and face that he very nearly tripped over a

small footstool placed beside an easy chair. He frowned down at the offending piece of furniture before sinking down into the leather easy chair opposite the matching sofa Theresa was curled up on.

“Uh...” he dragged his gaze down to the book in her lap and seemed strangely desperate to make conversation. “What are you reading?” His sharp eyes honed in on the title before he raised his gaze to hers in consternation. “*Dogs?*” He sounded so insultingly nonplussed that she hugged the book defensively to her chest.

“I happen to *like* dogs,” she said fiercely and his strangely gentle gaze swept over her tight features before coming to a rest on the book she had clutched to her chest. He leaned forward and extended his right hand palm up.

“May I?” He kept his gaze steady until she reluctantly let up on the death grip she had on the book and handed it over to him. “Thank you.” He leaned back and flipped through the glossy pages, pausing here and there before grinning almost boyishly up at her. He looked so breathtakingly handsome that for a long moment she didn’t realise that he was talking to her.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that,” she whispered and his grin widened as he flipped the book toward her, tapping his long index finger on the picture of a grinning black Labrador retriever.

“I had one just like this,” he informed and she frowned.

“One what?” She asked blankly and his grin widened into a fully-fledged, devastatingly appealing smile.

“Dog,” he informed patiently, turning the book back towards himself. His expression was gently reminiscent. “I like dogs too... the way I see it, anyone who *doesn't* like dogs is not to be trusted. My retriever was called Rocco. He died just before I started university. I’d had him for sixteen years. I suppose you could say that I grew up with him.” She smiled reluctantly at his obvious affection for what must have been a well-loved pet.

“You must have had a dog too, growing up?” He prompted and she nodded slowly. “What breed?”

“She was a bit of a mutt,” Theresa whispered, more than a little reluctant to continue.

“What was her name?” *Why* was he being so damned persistent?

“Sheba,” she supplied, her voice going even quieter and his smile faded as he leaned forward intently, his eyes fixed on her downcast face.

“Tell me more,” he invited quietly.

“Nothing much to tell,” she shrugged, clearing her throat. “My mother took me to the SPCA for my eleventh birthday and told me to choose any dog I wanted. I’d been going on and on about getting a dog for months before that, promising that I would take good care of it. It was getting to the point where, I guess, she would have done *anything* to shut me up. So I chose Sheba, with her soulful brown eyes, her scruffy black and white coat and her happy, wagging tail.” He smiled slightly at that and so did she. “She wasn’t much to look at but I adored her.” She sighed heavily before stopping and shrugging, finally lifting her eyes to meet his. “Time to get ready for that dinner now, isn’t it?” He frowned before shaking his head.

“How long did you have your dog?” He asked softly in a tone of voice that said he wouldn’t rest until he knew everything and Theresa tugged at her full lower lip with her teeth.

“About three weeks,” he smothered a soft curse at the whispered confession.

“What happened?”

“Mom and Daddy didn’t agree on most things and apparently my getting a dog was yet another excuse to fight. Getting Sheba was Mom’s way of scoring points against Daddy and getting *rid* of Sheba was Daddy’s way of scoring points against Mom,” she strove to sound flippant but the tremor in her voice made a liar out of her. Sandro said nothing but he seemed to be struggling with something, his jaw was so tightly clenched that she could see the little muscles knotting just below his ears and his knuckles showed white where his grip had tightened on the book.

“What did he do to the dog?” He finally gritted out, sounding like he was chewing nails.

“I never knew for sure,” she confessed. “Mom said Sheba went to a new family and was happy with them. But I don’t know... I always feared that he took her back to the pound.” Despite her best intentions, tears of long-remembered pain flooded her eyes and she averted her gaze and tilted her chin in an effort to appear casual. “I couldn’t sleep for the longest time afterwards, imagining how confused Sheba must have been and on the really

bad nights I pictured them taking her into the vet's surgery to be put down... because even though *I* loved her, she really wasn't cute, or clever or all that special. If she went back to the pound, I don't think she would have gone to another home."

"You mustn't think like that," he admonished.

"I *know*. Never mind, it's so far in the past that the wound has healed long ago. Not even a scar," his intent gaze told her that he didn't believe a word of it but fortunately he didn't challenge her on it. He handed her book back to her and she took it with a nod, making sure to avoid all contact with his large hands. He noticed the evasion and, while his eyes narrowed, he chose not to say anything about it.

"So how casual *is* this business thing?" She asked, getting up carefully, not wanting another revealing attack of dizziness in front of him.

"Extremely casual," he responded. "Jeans, t-shirt and jacket will do."

"You mean I had my hair done for nothing?" She frowned, rather disgruntled that she wouldn't be showing off her new look in the best possible setting.

"I hardly think it was for nothing," he protested with another one of those rare, breathtaking smiles of his. "I think the result was well worth the effort. I loved your long hair, *cara*, but this new chic, sleek little cut... words fail me... you look..." he shook his head and in a quintessentially Italian gesture, raised his fingertips to his lips and kissed them to signify his approval. For some reason that struck Theresa as funny and she stifled a giggle with her hand. Her eyes, above the hand she held over her mouth, were iridescent with laughter and he stood for a long moment, simply staring at her, before he cleared his throat.

"Go on, Theresa," he prompted gently. "Get ready. Meet me down here in half an hour?" She nodded at the question in his voice.

Sandro remained extremely closemouthed about where they were going, ignoring Theresa's increasingly desperate pleas for information. It was highly unusual for him not to tell her what to expect. He usually drilled information into her, what their hosts liked and what he wanted her to talk about. He always seemed afraid that she would mess it up somehow but he

was markedly different this time, he seemed unusually relaxed and every time Theresa asked him to tell her about their eventual destination he told her not to worry about it. She stole irate peeks at his handsome profile, hating his nonchalance in the face of her edginess. He was dressed even more casually than she was, wearing name brand sweatpants that had definitely seen better days, battered sneakers of the same brand and jacket to match the pants.

“Stop staring,” he growled, not even sparing her a glance, keeping his eyes glued to the road ahead. “You’re making me nervous.”

Yeah right! Mr Nerves of Steel, who handled the powerful Ferrari with grace and confidence, was nervous. She didn’t believe that for a second. She pursed her lips and diverted her gaze to the rapidly darkening horizon beyond her window. They had been driving for nearly forty minutes now and Theresa had no clue where they were. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes for a few moments, feeling like the past few weeks of uncertainty were finally catching up with her.

“We’re here...” Sandro’s voice jerked her out of her doze some time later and she stretched voluptuously before sitting up to take stock of their surroundings. The car was already parked in the driveway of a huge house. The place made their own, not immodest, house seem like a garden cottage. There were five other sleek and expensive sports cars parked in the driveway and every light, both inside and out of the house seemed to be on.

Theresa unbuckled her belt and was out of the car before Sandro could even move. She stood with her hands braced on the roof of the Ferrari and stared up the immense house in unabashed curiosity. She was aware of Sandro, rummaging about in the space behind the front seats before climbing out of the low-slung car with feral grace and rounding the bonnet to join her on the passenger side of the car.

“Theresa, I don’t want you to think that...” whatever he had about to say was cut off when another car, this one an expensive metallic-blue Lamborghini, slid to a stop behind theirs. Sandro glanced over and swore when he seemed to recognise the car.

The sole occupant emerged from the car in seconds and Theresa could see him quite clearly beneath the bright lights flooding the driveway. He was a tall, dark-haired, *gorgeous* man about Sandro’s age and he had a huge, friendly grin on his face as he strode over to join them. Theresa found herself

helplessly admiring his sexy, loose-limbed gait. He was dressed in similar fashion to her husband, just sporting a different name brand on his sweat suit.

“De Lucci!” He greeted her austere husband with a hearty slap on the back.

“Max,” Sandro nodded in return, not seeming to share the man’s exuberance at all. He turned to fully face the man and placed a peremptory hand in the small of Theresa’s back to turn her as well. He kept his hand there even after they were both facing the other man.

“Who’s this gorgeous babe?” Max turned that killer smile on her and Theresa found herself helplessly returning it. Sandro levelled a fulminating glare at the other man, who seemed to take his ill-humour in stride and grinned even wider.

“My *wife*, Theresa,” Sandro snapped curtly, the warning in his voice more than a little obvious.

“You’re *married* to this goddess?” Max kept his very appreciative gaze on Theresa’s blushing face and his grin became a smile of genuine warmth. “I always *knew* you were a man of impeccable taste, De Lucci but I have to admit, my opinion of you has just sky-rocketed!” he held out a hand towards Theresa, who took it after only the slightest of hesitations.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” his smile gentled and he lifted her hand to his mouth, dropping a reverent kiss on the back of it. “I’m Max Kinsley.”

“Uh... T. Theresa,” she stammered, choking back a giggle at the man’s theatrics. She suspected that he was just trying to wind Sandro up and it seemed to be working because her husband’s hand had curled into a fist in the small of her back. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Mr Kinsley.”

“There will be *none* of this formality between us” He admonished. “I’m Max and *you* are Terri! Or Tessa if you prefer. Now, please... allow me to escort you inside.” His grip on her hand tightened slightly as he tugged her towards him but Sandro’s hand shot up to the elbow of her free arm.

“Her name is *Theresa* and I will be escorting my own wife inside!” Sandro gritted out through his teeth, obviously holding onto his temper by the barest of threads.

“How remiss of me,” Max said with feigned regret, releasing her slender hand with exaggerated reluctance. “I’d *completely* forgotten that you

were there, De Lucci!” Sandro made a slight growling sound in the back of his throat and Theresa couldn’t stifle her giggle this time. Max looked delighted by the sound and stepped back with a jaunty little salute.

“We will continue our acquaintance inside, *Tessa* my darling” he promised before turning away and bounding up the stairs leading toward the front door of the house. He had a tog bag, which she hadn’t previously noticed, slung over one broad shoulder.

“I like him,” she smiled up at Sandro who was glowering at the front door that Max had just disappeared through.

“Don’t mistake his flirtation for anything more than it is, Theresa,” he muttered in warning. “He’s got a girlfriend.”

“I’m not a complete idiot, Sandro, he was needling *you*... quite successfully too, I might add.”

“*Dio*, this is not the best time to be arguing, Theresa,” he sounded weary. “Let’s try...”

“Are you coming in or what?” A voice interrupted whatever Sandro had been about to say and they looked up toward the house, where another tall, broad-shouldered man was silhouetted in the doorway.

“Come on,” Sandro muttered, taking her hand and picking up a tog bag similar to the one Max had been carrying. He led her to the front door, where the rugged man stepped aside to let them in.

“Hey, Sandro...” his casual greeting was followed by some more masculine back-thumping and this time the friendly overture was returned by Sandro.

“Gabe,” Sandro nodded, before tugging Theresa forward. “This is Theresa.”

“*Theresa?*” The man did a double take as he took a closer look at her, before he recovered from his astonishment with a warm smile. “I’m *very* happy to meet you. I’m Gabe Braddock.”

...And the penny *finally* dropped. Theresa stared up at the warmly smiling man and felt like a complete idiot for not connecting the dots sooner. It was Friday night, Sandro was dressed in his sports gear and he had brought her to his regular, bloody football game! How *typical*, the man certainly pulled out all the stops when faced with an obstacle but this was just

despicable and so unbelievably obvious! He had given her no warning whatsoever. No wonder he was such a successful businessman, he was a master at manipulating a situation to his advantage and *this* was a classic example. Give the woman what she wants and maybe her rebellion will subside and she will get down to the business of being a human incubator!

“I’m *so* happy to meet you, Mr Braddock,” she said softly, taking the man’s proffered hand and disguising her anger and confusion behind a sweet smile. “Why, just *recently* I expressed a wish to meet you!” She refused to look at Sandro but she sensed him uncomfortably shifting from one foot to the other. “And *here* we are...”

“Indeed,” the other man smiled even though it was obvious, in the way he glanced at Sandro, that he knew something was amiss. “I’m glad you overcame your aversion to football and decided to join us tonight. The guys will be delighted to meet Alessandro’s beautiful wife.” Her *aversion* to football? So that was how he’d explained away her conspicuous absences.

“And I’m looking forward to meeting them,” she said warmly. She was annoyed with Sandro and hurt by his transparent ploys to keep her appeased but this tall, broad-shouldered man with the warm smile seemed lovely and Theresa could not help but instinctively like him.

“Everybody’s around back, Sandro,” Gabe informed the silent man who stood at her back. “I’ll join you soon, I’m waiting for Bobbie.” He relinquished Theresa’s hand and grinned down at her. “Don’t let the guys flirt with you too much, Theresa. They’re an incorrigible lot and they’re suckers for a pretty girl!” He seemed to mean it, if his lingering glance over her blushing face was any indication.

“Enough with the flirting, Braddock,” Sandro suddenly growled, stepping forward to place a possessive hand on her elbow and Gabe’s grin took on a decidedly wicked slant.

“I can’t believe it...” he hooted his voice alive with discovery. “You’re *jealous... of me!*” The very idea was so ludicrous that Theresa laughed along with him but Sandro’s grip tightened on her elbow.

“I’m not jealous,” he retorted scathingly once their laughter had died down. “Just trying to protect my wife from your smarmy attentions, you smart ass.”

“No... I’m beginning to believe you kept her away from all of us for so

long because you can't handle the competition," the other man ribbed with the nerve that only a long-standing friend would possess.

"I am confident of my wife's excellent taste," Sandro dismissed before trying to steer Theresa away but she resisted.

"Now hold on a second, Sandro... I haven't exactly been spoiled for choice you know! I may find that my *taste* has changed..." Oh he did *not* like that, not one bit! He slanted a hard narrow-eyed glare at her that the other man, who was laughing in delight at her pithy comeback, did not see and Theresa tilted her chin stubbornly and met his glare with a defiant glare of her own.

"Ooh, I *like* her, Sandro," Gabe finally laughed, wiping at his eyes. "She's a feisty one."

"Yes..." Sandro's eyes warmed with reluctant amusement. "This I am beginning to realise." He tugged at her arm again and before Theresa could say or do anything more, he was leading her away. She followed docilely until she was certain that they were out of sight and earshot of the other man before she yanked her elbow from his grasp and turned on him furiously.

"You despicable, manipulative *bastard!*" She seethed, venting her frustration by punching him in the chest for good measure. He grimaced and rubbed at the spot she had hit before stepping out of the range of her swing.

"What the *hell* is your problem?" He growled angrily.

"My problem?" She managed to keep voice just under a screech. "My problem is *you!* You lied to me... *again*. You said that this was a business thing."

"Technically, it is... I am in business with at least five of the men here tonight!" He responded defensively.

"But this isn't really business is it? This is your precious little football game, the one I wasn't good enough to be invited to until *after* I threatened to leave you!"

"*You* said that you wanted to meet my friends," he seemed genuinely baffled. "Now when I give you that opportunity, you go crazy! I don't understand you at all..."

"The *only* reason you brought me here tonight was because you thought it would appease me. Throw the vicious dog a bone and it'll soon be eating

out of your hand!”

“More like vicious *bitch*,” he muttered beneath his breath and when he realised that she had heard him, he shrugged unrepentantly. “If you’re going to be using animal metaphors, you may as well get it *right*.”

“Fine, I’m a bitch... *whatever!*” She knew her response was childish but she was feeling more than a little put out by the situation.

“Look, I don’t understand why you’re so angry when *you* said you wanted to meet them.”

“A year ago... Eighteen months ago even but not *now!* Don’t you realise that this is too little too late?” She shook her head in frustration. “It’s like putting a band-aid on an amputation!”

“You’re being over-dramatic as usual,” he dismissed scathingly.

“Oh you *knew* what my reaction would be and the only reason you knew that was because you recognised how inadequate and pathetic this gesture really is.”

“And how do you figure that?” He asked defensively, crossing his arms over his broad chest and glaring down his beautiful nose at her.

“Why else would you be *so* sneaky about bringing me here?”

“Maybe that’s because you’ve been so ridiculous about going *anywhere* with me lately!” He snapped angrily. “I knew you’d refuse if I *asked* you to come here tonight, so I had to fabricate a business dinner. Recently you’ve done nothing but over-react to everything I say and do, as well as completely misread my intentions, so I couldn’t take the chance. I was hoping that for once I’d be wrong about you... but sure enough you had to go and be unreasonable about this too. You’re so determined to put a negative slant on everything I do these days, that you’re not willing to accept anything at face value. There are no ulterior motives here... I realised that you had a point about never meeting my friends, I realised that I have been... *unfair* and I wanted a chance to make it right,” she bit her lip, unwilling to trust him but unable to resist the earnestness in his eyes. He looked like he actually *meant* his words.

“Don’t you realise how *foolish* I feel?” She suddenly whispered, lowering her gaze to her feet. “Meeting them now... what must they think of me? I feel like I’m on display... your mystery wife who has shunned them

for more than a year.” He took a hesitant step toward her before wrapping his arms around her and dropping his forehead to hers. He brought his hands up to cup her face.

“They’ll know whose fault it was, Theresa... I’ll make sure of that,” he promised huskily.

“How?”

“I’ll get them to believe that I really *was* too possessive to share you with them. They’ll think that I wanted you all to myself.”

“But that would make you look...” she struggled to find the correct word. “... insecure.”

“Maybe...” he shrugged carelessly. “Or maybe they’ll take one look at you and understand why I’d react like that.”

“What do you...” his thumbs pressed to her soft lips, silencing the question.

“Silly little Theresa,” he chided softly. “I may not have said it much, or at all for that matter but you’re so beautiful I ache just looking at you sometimes.” She wasn’t beautiful; she *knew* she wasn’t but just this once she wanted to believe him, especially since he seemed to mean it. She had never seen such stark honesty in his eyes before and it warmed her down to her toes. He leaned even closer, his lips just millimetres away from hers when an amused voice had them leaping guiltily apart.

“Come on guys, your honeymoon ended a year and five months ago. Give it a rest!” It was Gabe, coming up behind them. Theresa went a fiery red, while Sandro merely frowned, hunching his shoulders and dropping his hands into his pockets. He slanted a quick and inscrutable look at Theresa, who immediately averted her eyes. She couldn’t think about that achingly sweet moment and she certainly couldn’t wonder about that near-kiss, not right then.

She was quiet on the drive home and still confusing reality with fantasy. Sandro’s friends had been lovely and she’d enjoyed cheering them on from the sidelines. She had been a bit uncomfortable around the other wives and girlfriends at first but they’d been so genuinely welcoming that Theresa had relaxed almost immediately. Sandro’s constant attention had

helped a lot. He would often trot over to where she was sitting to ask if she was okay, if she needed anything, if she was warm enough and it had become embarrassing after a while, especially when his friends had started ribbing him about it. Theresa had known, of course, that it was all an act but it had still been a heady sensation to have his entire focus on her like that. Theresa had found the actual football game surprisingly riveting, especially since she had been unable to tear her eyes off of her graceful, talented husband. Afterwards they'd had a barbecue and again, Sandro had been constantly attentive and almost affectionate, holding her hand or wrapping his arm around her shoulders. After the initial awkwardness, Theresa had found herself relaxing more and more.

Now in the confined space of the car, there was a shimmering tension between them and Theresa leaned forward to fill the silence with music but he caught her hand to prevent her from turning on the CD player.

"Don't..." she turned to look at the silhouette of his profile but he kept his eyes glued to the road.

"But..."

"Did you have a good time tonight?" He asked gruffly.

"Yes... they're all lovely people."

"I'm glad." Silence again. He still hadn't released her hand, keeping it pinned between his hard thigh and his large hand.

"Everybody really liked you," she could hear the warmth in his voice but didn't know if it was directed at his friends or at her. "I was... *proud*... to have you there." She blinked, not at all sure how to take that. "And I felt guilty for leaving it for so long. I never meant to make you feel like I was ashamed of you, Theresa... I didn't want to marry you, it's true, but not at any point did I ever feel that you would shame me."

"Thank you for saying that," she whispered. "It means a lot." His hand tightened on hers before he let her go and she reluctantly lifted her hand from his thigh. There was silence again but this time it didn't feel quite so unfriendly and unwelcome anymore.

Chapter Six

They got home after midnight and while Sandro proceeded to lock up, Theresa wearily headed for the shower in the upstairs guest bedroom that she was still determined to occupy, despite Sandro forcibly moving her back to the Master Suite every night. She was standing beneath the hot, relaxing spray of the multiple shower heads in the luxurious guest bathroom, her forehead pressed to the cool tiles, when a rush of cold air alerted her to the fact that the frosted glass door to the cubicle had slid open. She turned around with a resigned sigh and watched as Sandro turned to close the shower door behind him, offering her a tantalizing glimpse of the beautiful bottom that she had so admired earlier in the evening, while he'd been chasing a ball up and down Gabe's lawn. He turned back to her and shook his head with a weary sigh.

"You are, without a doubt, turning into one of the most stubborn people I know, Red," he groaned.

"I *want* that divorce, Sandro," she insisted, trying not to drop her eyes to his eager erection. He smiled slightly, taking a step towards her.

"I know," he admitted tiredly, reaching around her to grab the body wash and sponge dangling from the ornate faucets. His arms brushed against her naked flesh with every move he made and she tried desperately to shield her body's eager reaction from him and folded her arms over the burgeoning red tips of her breasts.

"A.and... I don't love you anymore," she continued desperately, watching as he applied the fragrant body wash to the soft sponge. He kept his gaze on the sponge in his hand.

"I know," his voice sounded a little strange but when he looked up again his expression was neutral. He raised his hand and gently started running the sponge over her folded arms.

"And I don't want to stay in the same room with you anymore," her voice quivered embarrassingly when he grasped one slender wrist with a big, gentle hand and lifted her arm away from her breasts to run the sponge down the underside of said arm and up towards her sensitive armpit. Her already hard nipples tightened to the point of pain. She swayed slightly, trying not to moan in pleasure, when he lifted the other arm and subjected it to the same

sensual treatment.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” he whispered in response to her former statement, his eyes fixed on her obviously aroused breasts. He stepped even closer, crowding her with his large body and backing her up against the smooth tiles. The sponge swept across first one tight bud, then the other, so lightly she wasn’t sure if she’d imagined the touch or not.

This time because he was so close, his every little move brought his hard, smooth chest in brushing contact with the painfully erect little tips, it was all she could do to maintain her train of thought. The sponge was sweeping down between her breasts now and down over her torso, her flat stomach and further down still, over her abdomen and between her...

She sucked in a harsh breath when he quite deliberately dropped the sponge to replace it with his fingers.

“And... I want a... a...” she panted, when his fingers continued to stroke insistently down where she was most sensitive and one of her hands latched onto his wrist to curb the movement. He remained undeterred, staring down into her upturned face raptly. “A divorce...”

“You said that already...” he pointed out, his chest starting to heave as he sought to control his reaction to her obvious arousal. His hungry gaze dropped from her face to her small breasts, where her hard, raspberry pink nipples were starting to peek through the rapidly disintegrating suds. With a desperate groan he removed his hand from between her thighs, dropped to his knees and palmed the small mounds, taking one sudsy bud into his hungry, hot mouth. Theresa arched back at the electrifying touch, her back bowing and her head hitting the tiles with a thud.

Her big, beautiful husband, who knelt like a supplicant at the temple of her body, licked and kissed his way across the shallow valley between her breasts to find the other aching peak while his large hands swept down her body to her narrow hips, which he determinedly anchored to the tiled wall in an effort to keep her still. Theresa shuddered wildly and her hands buried themselves in his wet hair before restlessly moving to his shoulders where her nails dug in.

He finally rose to his feet again, pinning her to the wall with his entire body, his erection throbbing urgently where it was trapped between his hard ridged stomach and her narrow torso. He had his hands braced against the

wall on either side of her head, while he thrust himself gently against her torso. He kept his hot, narrowed gaze on her nakedly vulnerable face, his own face was a mask of tight control while his eyes were ablaze with an emotion she did not recognise and could not read.

His eyes were restlessly darting from her own half-closed eyes, to the full, lower lip which she had caught between her small, white teeth. With a slightly muffled curse, he groaned and lowered his head until his mouth touched hers. Theresa's entire body went rigid as his lips gently nuzzled against hers, demanding nothing, just exploring the unfamiliar contours of her ripe, generous mouth. His strong hands moved from where they were braced against the wall to tenderly cup her face, fingertips meeting in the middle of her brow and palms resting on either side of her jaw. His mouth gradually demanded more, moving insistently against hers until she sighed and melted against him as her own mouth explored his. His tongue, tasting of mint, ran over her lips seeking entry into her mouth and she opened up for him, wanting this so much she ached.

Her hands fluttered up wonderingly, cupping his jaw in an effort to bring him even closer and he was happy to oblige, his kiss going even deeper than before. She felt as if she was being consumed by him, greedily eaten alive and absorbed into him. It was the most intense experience of her life and from the way he throbbed against her torso she guessed he felt pretty much the same. He reluctantly lifted his mouth from hers to look down into her face with a penetrating stare that seemed to see right into her soul and then he smiled. A completely open, unguarded and boyish smile, the like of which she had *never* seen from him before. She barely had time to catch her breath before his mouth was on hers again, thoroughly plundering it. She moaned hungrily and wrapped her arms around his neck, his hands were moving now, roaming all over her soft, naked flesh before gripping her tight backside and hoisting her up until she had her slender thighs wrapped around his waist.

He lifted his mouth from hers and dropped his face into her neck to lick the droplets of water that had pooled in the sensitive hollow there before moving back up to claim her lips again devouring her with his lips, teeth and tongue. Theresa was completely overwhelmed by his unexpected passion, he had never seemed this out of control before and she felt like she was simply being swept along with the tide. He tightened his grip on her behind before,

half-stumbling; he carried her out of the shower, through the bathroom and into the bedroom where he barely managed to get them both onto the bed. Theresa's feet touched the carpeted floor and her backside was half-off the bed but she didn't care one whit for the discomfort when, with barely a pause from his ravaging mouth, he surged into her... she managed to tear her mouth away to cry out; the sound harsh and raw in the silence of the room.

Her entire back arched, until only her head touched the bed, while she raised her legs to wrap them around his waist again, her ankles crossing over his taut, pistoning buttocks and her arms wrapped around his broad back, while her nails dug into his flesh and drew blood. Sandro was making sobbing, desperate sounds into her mouth but he still refused to relinquish her lips, coordinating the thrusts of his tongue with those of his driving hips and Theresa's muffled moans took on the same frenzied rhythm.

His hands moved up to wrap themselves in her wet hair, tilting her head back almost violently to get better access to her mouth. His wet body slid and rubbed over hers, his muscles bunched beneath the taut satin of his skin and Theresa's body burned at every point of contact. One of his hands swept back down to one of her thighs, lifting her hips even higher to allow him even deeper penetration.

More! More! More! She tried to say the words but she couldn't with his mouth on hers, so she moved hands to his behind to pull him closer, she wanted him closer, harder, deeper and he knew it... because he adjusted accordingly and she sobbed into his mouth, feeling like she was dying an exquisite death. She spiralled higher and higher and when she reached the pinnacle, she spun out of control, freefalling back down to earth with a scream that was swallowed into his mouth. Her entire body clenched around him and Sandro, feeling her climax, was unable to hold back... his breath laboured in and out of his lungs as he fought for control but he was as lost as she was and lifted his mouth from hers long enough to release a hoarse shout that she barely recognised as her name. His body arched violently and he lifted her from the bed and into his lap as he held her as close as he could, his strong arms wrapped around her narrow back as his body jerked within hers and his lips fell back onto hers, gentler this time as his body continued to thrust lazily. He hugged her even closer and while he knelt on the edge of the bed, her legs straddled his hard thighs, her chest pressed to his and her

arms were tightly wrapped around his neck as she fought to keep her balance while he nuzzled her mouth with his. He finally went completely boneless and collapsed down onto the soft bed, taking her with him and keeping her wrapped up in his arms with one of his hard thighs still pressed between hers. He was still kissing her, lifting his mouth from hers to nuzzle her neck and kiss her shoulders before coming back to her mouth over and over again as if he could not get enough of the taste of her. His hands were petting her all over and gradually their breathing slowed down and their mutual trembling abated slightly. He was a gentler, softer presence inside her now, only occasionally twitching as if to remind her that he was still there.

“God,” he finally whispered. “Oh my God, Theresa... that was *amazing*.” Theresa, who was only now coming back to herself tensed at his words but he seemed not to notice, still stroking her, kissing her, whispering little endearments and half-finished Italian sentences into her hair. In a year and a half, during which time they’d had sex on average four times a week and at least twice a night on each of those occasions, this was the *first* time... *ever* that Sandro hadn’t recited his standard mantra.

He shifted slightly, to arrange her more comfortably against him, one arm tucked beneath her head and the other resting heavily across her breasts. His fingers formed lazy circles on the overheated skin of her upper arm and he had his head on the same pillow as hers, so close she could feel his still-unsteady breath feathering through her hair. He occasionally dropped soft kisses onto the sensitive skin beneath her ear and along her delicate jawline.

Theresa was tensing more and more in his arms, not sure how to react to all of this. First the kisses, then the shattering sex, then the absence of those five words and now this unprecedented display of *affection*. It was as if, just when she’d found a way to protect her already battered, bruised and fragile heart from him, he found some other way around her defences, leaving her vulnerable to even more pain.

He was still whispering into her ear, half-broken Italian words that she didn’t understand at all, trying to pull her closer but Theresa resisted, finally snapping out of the half-trance that she had been in. She could not let him do this to her... not again! He had hurt her too many times in the past, with his careless disregard, his other women and his contempt for her. She would *not* allow him into her heart again. *Finally* clueing in to the fact that Theresa was not as into the cuddling as he was, Sandro lifted himself up onto his elbow,

resting his head on his hand and looking absolutely gorgeous in all his naked splendour.

“*Cara*, what’s wrong?” She nearly laughed out loud at the ridiculous question before struggling in earnest to escape from beneath his heavy arm. For a few seconds his hold tightened but he finally raised his arm and allowed her to scurry off the bed.

“The sheets are soaking wet,” she said breathlessly, refusing to meet his eyes. “I need to change them.”

“Leave it for the maid in the morning,” he grinned lazily.

“The cleaning service doesn’t come in on a Saturday and besides, I can’t sleep on a wet bed.”

“Don’t be silly, Red,” he admonished gently, sitting up gracefully. “You’re sleeping with *me* in our bed!”

“I’m not,” she shook her head adamantly and his grin widened indulgently.

“Stubborn cat,” he swung his legs off the edge of the bed and stood up with the lethal grace of a predator, stalking her languidly. “Of course you are.” Theresa backed away but he pounced before she could get very far, his hands on her shoulders, applying just enough pressure to keep her from fleeing.

“Look at me,” he demanded softly when she kept her eyes glued to his chest. When she refused he muttered something beneath his breath before lifting one hand from her shoulder to tilt up her jaw until her eyes met his. Whatever he saw in her defiant gaze made his eyebrows lower and his eyes darken.

“I’m trying to fix this, *cara*,” he finally whispered, the words almost torn from him.

“You can’t,” she shook her head sadly. “This... whatever it is... it’s irreparable.”

“Why?” He shook his head slightly in confused frustration.

“Because *everything* you do now feels insincere and forced!” She hissed in sudden fury. “Every touch, every apology, every endearment... it’s like you brushed up on the ‘Theresa Noble User Manual’ and learned what makes me tick!”

“Firstly, it’s Theresa *de Lucci* and secondly, I don’t know what the *hell* you’re talking about!” He practically shouted, shaking her slightly.

“The *kisses* for one,” she itemised.

“What?”

“A year and a half of marriage, Alessandro and tonight was the first time you’ve ever kissed me,” she pointed out. “You must have realised how much it hurt me to know that you despised me *so* much that you couldn’t even bring yourself to kiss me.”

“That’s not...”

“So of course tonight,” she interrupted him; not at all interested in whatever it was he had to say. “After making me feel *so* special by finally doing me the honour of introducing me to your friends, *this* is when you decide to sweeten the pot with a few of your kisses! It probably struck you as a pretty effective way to keep the bitch muzzled and content, right?”

“You’re misreading the entire situation, *cara*.”

“Don’t call me that! I am *not* your darling... I’ve never been your darling and I’m not going to be naïve enough to fall for your so-called charms again!”

“What do you *want* from me?” He suddenly demanded in frustration, releasing her shoulders so abruptly that she stumbled and fell. He froze in horror, staring down at her with a look of such abject misery, contrition and despair on his face that she almost felt sorry for him. She sat up and stared into his distressed face.

“I want a divorce,” she whispered and he sank down to his knees beside her, lifting a hand to caress the curve of her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” he groaned. “I’m so sorry for more things than you could possibly imagine... but that’s the one thing I can’t give you.”

“Then we have nothing more to talk about,” she pushed herself to her feet, ignoring the hand he offered to help her. She suddenly realised that they were both naked and sighed heavily.

“Please, just go back to your room, Alessandro,” she pleaded and he hesitated, his eyes lingering on her face for a few long moments, before he turned abruptly and left.

She woke up in the guest bedroom the following morning... alone. She was both saddened and relieved by that. A quick glance at the clock told her that it was well after ten in the morning and the gloom told her that it was probably raining. Theresa was shocked that she had slept so late and rushed through her morning ablutions, while trying to ignore the ever-present queasiness. She gingerly made her way downstairs, feeling like someone with a hangover as she headed for the kitchen.

Fortunately there were no food smells emanating from the room but when she walked in, it was to find Sandro sitting at the breakfast bar and staring thoughtfully down at his full coffee mug. He looked up when she stepped into the room his eyes sweeping over her figure, taking in the worn old jeans, faded sweatshirt and battered little trainers.

“How are you feeling, *ca...* Theresa?”

“Fine,” she mumbled, getting herself a glass of orange juice before turning toward the breakfast bar and taking the seat opposite his on one of the quaint wooden chairs.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” He asked softly and Theresa grimaced, the thought of food making her stomach churn queasily.

“I’m fine.” He swore softly.

“You’re obviously *not* fine,” he growled. “I don’t know what you think starving yourself will achieve.”

“Oh for God’s sake, I’m hardly starving myself, just skipping breakfast.”

“You look like you’ve skipped entirely too many meals recently,” he shook his head and sent a scathing glare up and down her thin frame.

“If it’ll get you off my back, I’ll have some toast,” she seethed before slamming her glass down. She used too much force and must have placed it right on the edge because the glass went tumbling down to the floor and shattered on impact, spilling the bright contents all over the pale blue tile of the floor. The jarring noise completely unravelled Theresa and frayed her nerves to breaking point.

“Oh,” her eyes flooded with tears as she realised whose fault it had been. “I’m sorry...”

“Theresa,” Sandro was beside her in seconds, his hands on her shoulders and his face peering down into hers in concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she whispered, shrugging out of his grip and he dropped his hands abruptly.

“Are you sure?” He demanded to know. “You’re as white as a sheet...”

“Just a bit of a shock,” she waved his concern aside. “It’s raining ,” she observed inanely, in a very weak attempt to change the subject and her eyes fixed on the dull greyness of the world outside.

“Yes,” he stepped further away from her and knelt down to pick up the shards of glass from the floor. “It is.” She started to get up but he looked up at her from where he was squatting at her feet and dropped a large hand on her thigh kept her from moving.

“The floor’s slippery and covered in glass; let me clear it up before you get off the chair.” She shrugged and silently watched as he efficiently went about cleaning up her mess.

“What are you doing today?” He asked casually, keeping his back to her as he discarded the glass and paper towels he had used to sop up the excess juice into the trash can.

“I need to do some shopping,” she answered distractedly. “I was thinking of heading to the city for some stuff...” she intended to buy about a dozen different home pregnancy kits, a task which she had delayed for much too long.

“I’m running low on some things too...” he responded carelessly, turning around to face her. “I’ll drive you.” Theresa came out of her daze with a wry smile.

“Wow. That was such a transparent lie that I’m almost embarrassed for you,” he chuckled wryly in response to her dry wit and shrugged slightly.

“I know it wasn’t up to scratch but give me a break, it’s been an eventful twenty-four hours and I’m not in top form,” he joked lightly even though his eyes were still sombrely engaged in running over her face and body in concern. “I don’t want you to drive, Theresa; you look a bit out of it. Do you think you’re coming down with something?”

Yes. Pregnancy.

“I’m fine but I do feel a bit out of sorts this morning, probably the whiskey in that Irish coffee I had with the ladies last night,” right, she’d barely made her way through a quarter of one mug before realising that, if she *was* pregnant, drinking would probably *not* be such a great idea. Still, Sandro didn’t know how much she’d had, so it was a perfectly acceptable excuse. He seemed to fall for it and nodded his acceptance of her explanation.

“When would you like to leave?” Theresa sighed softly; she really didn’t want him trailing after her while she tried to figure out a way to buy home pregnancy tests without him noticing. Sandro would *never* miss that.

“I really *do* have some stuff to take care of, Theresa,” he said seriously, seeming to read her mind. “I’ll leave you in relative peace.” She chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully, not missing how his eyes flared when her tongue darted out to soothe the sting of her teeth where she had accidentally bitten too hard.

“Okay... give me an hour to get ready,” to shower, get dressed, throw up and such... He nodded.

He was as good as his word and mostly left her alone to listlessly browse around the upmarket boutiques in the very high end shopping mall that he had driven her to. She had the first ten minutes away from him to buy the pregnancy kits, six of them, all different brands (who knew there were so many choices available?), just in case he changed his mind about leaving her alone but surprisingly he did nothing but constantly call or text her to be sure she was okay and didn’t need him but that got rather tedious after the tenth text message in forty minutes and the fifth call in an hour and a half. In the end, she simply told him she was done shopping and he suggested they meet up and head to a restaurant for lunch.

The upscale restaurant was obviously one Sandro often patronised so, even though it was lunch time on a Saturday afternoon and the place was exceedingly popular, they were seated immediately. Theresa watched the staff fawn all over him and bitterly wondered if he had brought any other women here. The suspicion was confirmed, when the waiter turned to her with a slight smirk.

“And what will the lady be ordering today?” He asked in that

supercilious manner that servers in upmarket restaurants often had.

“Your Caesar salad, no dressing, toast and water,” she ordered brusquely.

“And have you decided on a main course yet?” He asked with that annoying smirk.

“That would be it,” she responded shortly, his smug attitude was *really* grating on her nerves.

“Theresa,” Sandro leaned forward in concern. “You didn’t have breakfast; you need to eat something more substantial than just salad.”

“I’m really not that hungry,” she shrugged dismissively, handing the thick leather-bound menu back to the waiter. “Please just let it go.”

“If you’re on some crazy diet...”

“I’m *not* on a diet!” She snapped. “Just, please, stop trying to manipulate every single aspect of my life!” His jaw clenched and his lips thinned in obvious anger but surprisingly enough he let it go before proceeding to order a staggering amount of food from the waiter. Once they were alone, he leaned back in his chair and stared at her thoughtfully.

“Seriously,” he began after a long silence, which she had stubbornly refused to break. “What’s going on with you?” She gaped at him, unable to believe the stupidity of that question and he lowered his eyes, apparently realising that himself.

“Aside from the obvious,” he qualified. “And try to keep the sarcasm down to a minimum.”

“Well *aside* from the obvious fact that I’m unhappy with my life as it is right now,” she shrugged. “I can’t say that there’s much going on with me.”

“You’re lying to me,” he sounded so incredulous at that fact that she actually laughed in genuine amusement. “Are you having an affair?”

“Back to that are we?” She was laughing even harder now. “Sandro, not everybody stoops to infidelity when things aren’t going right in their lives.”

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” He sounded outrageously offended and leaned toward her, all affronted, bristling male.

“Oh come on, Sandro, you *know* what it means!”

“No I don’t, do enlighten me,” he invited sarcastically.

“It means,” she spoke with exaggerated and offensive slowness. “That *I’m* not the one who has been having the affairs. It means that *I* had the misguided notion that the sacred marriage vows we took were just that, sacred vows. It means that *I’m* not the one who deliberately set out to hurt and humiliate my spouse as publicly and as painfully as possible.”

“I admit that I did some things to deliberately hurt you... in a misguided attempt to punish you for a situation that wasn’t your fault,” he began carefully.

“How magnanimous of you to admit that,” she interrupted sarcastically.

“You were misled into believing that I... loved you,” he ignored her interruption. “I was misled into believing you were...”

“Your drinks,” the waiter’s smooth voice interrupted the first really meaningful exchange they’d had on the subject and Sandro slanted him an annoyed look before gritting his teeth and waiting in fulminating silence for the man to finish. When the waiter finally left, Sandro turned his gaze back on her.

“I thought you knew about your father’s scheme, I thought you were fully on board with it,” he admitted softly.

“What exactly *is* my father’s ‘scheme’?” She asked carefully, wary of being shot down again.

“He owned something that I desperately wanted and the only way he would let me have it was if I paid a huge amount of money for it and then married you.”

“I see,” she dropped her gaze to the intricately folded napkin on the table in front of her and traced her fingers lightly over the folds. “So, in essence, you paid an exorbitant sum for this mysterious something you so desperately wanted, with me tossed in as your unwanted free gift?”

“I had no choice, to get what I wanted; I had to accept you as part of the deal... I thought...” his voice tapered off and he shrugged miserably.

“You flattered yourself into thinking that I was fully cognisant of this scheme and that I was *so* desperate to have you, I would have my daddy

blackmail you into marrying me?” He nodded reluctantly. “Well you got what you wanted and since it’s obvious that we’re both miserable in this sham of a marriage why won’t you give me that divorce?” She continued to probe, desperately hoping that he couldn’t tell how much actually *hearing* this confession hurt her.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. I think your father knew that we would both eventually want out of this ‘sham’,” he spat out the word almost distastefully. “So he added a little clause into the contract.”

This was it... Theresa braced herself for what she knew was coming.

“*Clause?*” She repeated the word faintly and Sandro cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Your father...” the waiter swooped in with great flair and began to offload a tray of food onto their table. Sandro muffled a curse beneath his breath, while he waited with barely concealed impatience for the younger man to finish.

“Will there be anything else?”

“*No!*” he barked, keeping his voice low and menacing. The poor man gulped and beat a hasty retreat. Theresa barely registered the interaction between the two men, her horrified gaze pinned onto the gastronomical feast Sandro had ordered. Pastas, pies, fish, meat, vegetables all laid out in front of her revolting senses.

“Theresa?” Sandro’s voice seemed to come from miles away. “What’s wrong?”

“So much food,” she said sickly, feeling in danger of losing the precious little she already had in her stomach.

“I thought we could share,” he admitted.

“I *told* you I wasn’t hungry,” she flared weakly, angry that he expected her to fall victim to yet another one of his manipulations.

“It doesn’t tempt you? Not even a little?” he lifted his fork and stuck it into the closest dish, some kind of cheese bake and lifted it toward her lips. Theresa could feel her gorge rise and jerked her head back abruptly.

“*No!*” He lowered the fork and glared at her in outraged bewilderment.

“What the hell is going on with you? Are you on some insane hunger

strike?” She laughed unsteadily.

“That’s what prisoners do, isn’t it? When they want to make a statement about the unjustness of their imprisonment, they go on a hunger strike,” she laughed again, immediately aware of the edge of hysteria in her voice.

“You’re not serious?” He seemed to think she was though and for some reason that both saddened and amused her.

“I’m not hungry,” she maintained wearily. “It’s *really* as simple as that... please finish what you were saying about that clause.” He looked frustrated but seemed to recognise that she would not budge on the issue.

“Basically, we have an out...” he began slowly. “We give him a grandson and we can divorce without any repercussions.” She’d thought she was ready for it but hearing him put it so bluntly took the wind clear out of her sails and it took her a couple of moments to recover from it.

“*An out,*” she repeated hoarsely. “Every single time you touched me, *every time* that’s all you ever thought about, wasn’t it? Getting out?” She laughed bitterly. “And how diligently you worked towards your goal... so often and *so* very thoroughly.”

“Theresa,” he whispered his voice alive with misery. Nothing more, just that, just her name. It was as if he recognised that nothing he could possibly say at that moment would make any difference to the pain she was feeling.

“My God,” she swiped at a few errant tears, furious with herself for allowing him to see them. “Every time you came you practically *prayed* for me to give you a son. That was the only thought in your mind, *every single time*... escape! At a time when most people can’t even remember their own names, you were begging me to give you a son because life with me was so incredibly unbearable for you.”

“It wasn’t *you,*” he interrupted lamely. “It was the situation.”

“So this son you so desperately wanted,” tried to keep her voice level, even while it cracked with strain. “You don’t *really* want him, I take it? He’s just a means to an end?”

“I’ve never thought about it,” he admitted uncomfortably.

“I mean, *surely* you wouldn’t want anything to do with a child

spawned with a woman you despise and carrying the blood of a man you consider your enemy?"

"The child has never seemed real to me," he murmured with brutal honesty. "I had some vague idea that you would have him and I'd move back to Italy afterwards. I never thought beyond that."

"With a father who felt nothing for him, a mother who didn't want to get pregnant and a megalomaniacal grandfather waiting in the wings, it's probably best that the last one didn't make it," she concluded heartbrokenly.

"Don't you *ever* say that," Sandro suddenly snapped, one of his hands reaching out to enfold her tightly furled fists on the tabletop. "He would have been loved."

"What makes you so sure of that? When you *admit* that you don't know how you would have felt about him?"

"I know *you*," he murmured huskily. "And you have a capacity for love that boggles the mind. Of *course* you would have loved that baby; it's the only way you know how to be."

"How am I supposed to keep living with you now, Sandro?" She asked him helplessly. "It was bad enough before but the thought of going home with you now is almost completely unbearable." His hand loosened its grip around hers and he reached up to stroke the side of her cheek tenderly.

"We'll get through this," he whispered and she flinched away from his touch. His eyes flickered with some strange emotion before his hand dropped back down to the table.

"I'm tired," she said quietly. "Take me back to the house." He nodded and summoned the waiter over to ask for the check. Theresa's eyes dropped to the full table regretfully.

"Such a waste," she whispered half to herself but she was surprised when Sandro overheard her and asked the waiter to deliver the food to the nearest homeless shelter.

Nothing much else was said between them until they got home, where Theresa excused herself under the pretext of being tired and closeted herself in her room for the rest of the afternoon.

"Sandro," Theresa cautiously breached the sanctity of his study later

that night. In all the time they had been living in the house, it was the first time Theresa had ever set foot in the study while he was in it. He looked up to see her hovering uncertainly in the doorway and stood up abruptly, nearly sending his chair toppling. She jumped backward at the sudden violent movement but he was around his desk in an instant and approaching her with one hand outstretched.

“Theresa,” he intoned huskily. “Please come in.” He seemed almost eager to have her there. Not exactly the reception she was expecting. He steered her towards the huge, leather easy chair in one corner of the large study, seating her before taking the chair opposite hers, leaning towards her, with his hands loosely clasped together and hanging down between his spread thighs.

“I want to know why,” she finally whispered, after a lengthy silence. “I want to know what commodity you so casually traded my happiness for. What meant so *much* to you that you were willing to give up your precious freedom for it?” He was quiet for so long that she wondered if he would bother to respond.

“My father is old and sick,” he finally said in a low voice, keeping his head down and his eyes fixed on his hands. “He grew up on a wine farm. Not a very profitable vineyard but it had been in our family for generations and it meant a lot to him. It was the land he was born on, the land he imagined retiring to and eventually dying on... but before he made his fortune; he ran into some bad luck and made some terrible financial decisions that resulted in the loss of that vineyard. He soon found his footing and got stinking rich but that vineyard had been purchased by your father who quite stubbornly, despite anything my father offered him, refused to sell it. The place is pretty worthless to a man of his fortune, so I can only conclude that he enjoyed having that kind of leverage over my father,” he shrugged helplessly. “All of my life I remember my father waxing lyrical about that place. He always regretted the fact that none of his children had been born on that land, the guilt at losing a huge chunk of family history ate at him and in the last few years, his quest to get it back became an obsession.

“His health started to deteriorate really badly. He was diagnosed with cancer and the doctors aren’t optimistic. Naturally his impending death has made the loss of that land even more unbearable for him and it was killing us to watch him suffer emotionally, physically and mentally. I *wanted* to give

him his pride and dignity back. I want him to find peace and die happy. So I approached your father, who, having seen your reaction to me after our first meeting, finally relented and came up with the terms of sale as you now know them.” Theresa flushed miserably when she remembered how obviously infatuated she had been the first time she had seen Sandro and recognised her own, unwitting role, in this façade.

“How’s your father?” She asked tightly and he nodded slightly, his face betraying the first hint of emotion since he had started telling the sorry tale.

“Content, now that he’s home,” his voice was absolutely racked with the pain he was trying so desperately to disguise.

“And your family knows about this ‘deal’ you made for the land?” She asked her own voice high with tension.

“Yes.”

“No wonder they never expressed any desire to meet me, or made any overtures of friendship towards me,” she said, half to herself and he made a muffled sound and moved a hand towards her face. She flinched away from his reach and his hand dropped halfway between them.

“I’m sorry about your father,” she said tonelessly. “I see now how impossible your situation must have been.”

“Even so... I could have treated you less...” he began, his voice bitter with something very close to self-loathing.

“Never mind,” she cut him off, not really in the mood to hear his moans of regret and self-recrimination. “Thank you for telling me.” She got up slowly, always mindful of the dizziness and he jumped up along with her.

“Theresa, wait... please...” he began.

“I don’t think there’s much more to say...” she turned toward the door.

“What about us? Our marriage?”

“I suppose we go on as we always have,” she shrugged listlessly. “Only, without the intimacy Sandro, I really couldn’t handle that anymore. We lead separate lives...”

“I don’t want that,” he said hoarsely, sounding almost horrified by the prospect.

“It won’t have to be for too much longer,” she murmured faintly, wondering why the door seemed to be getting further away with every faltering step.

“What do you mean?” He asked in alarm. “*Theresa?*” This last when she swayed slightly, he put a steadying arm around her narrow shoulders and led her back to the chair she had just vacated.

“That’s it,” he snapped, crouching in front of her, while his hands went up to frame her pale face. “I’m calling the doctor! This is...”

“I’m pregnant,” she cut across his words in an appallingly weak voice but quiet and shaky though her statement was, it was enough to stop him in his tracks. He went pale and sank back onto his heels as he absorbed the words.

“Are you sure?” He asked quietly, one trembling hand reaching up to brush her soft hair from her face.

“I just took four home pregnancy tests in the space of two hours,” she confessed. “End result: four pink strips all telling me that I’m going to be a mommy in a few months’ time! I could take the remaining two tests that I have stashed away upstairs but I couldn’t force myself to drink any more water,” she joked weakly. He didn’t say anything, keeping his eyes glued to her face.

“So you see, Sandro? You’re just a few short months away from getting rid of your unwanted wife, child and life. No more need for pretence, no need to humour your sham-wife with Friday night football games, or introductions to your friends,” her voice trembled with the effort it took to sound casual but Sandro looked anything but fooled by her attempt to appear cavalier. His hands dropped down to the arms of her chair and he seemed to be holding on for dear life, not touching her at all but still uncomfortably close.

“You still need to see a doctor,” he said softly, sounding strained and she nodded.

“I’ve already made an appointment with Lisa’s doctor.” He sighed softly, before agilely getting up and moving away from her chair and back to his own.

“They would like you,” he suddenly said, his eyes intent on her face.

“What?” She asked distractedly.

“My family,” he elaborated and she frowned, not sure why he’d felt the need to say that.

“I doubt that, Sandro... I don’t think I’d feel any kind of charity towards someone who deliberately set out to trap my brother or son in a marriage he did not want.”

“But you didn’t...”

“They *think* I did and once you’ve made up your mind about someone, it’s pretty hard to change it again.”

“It’s not as hard as you think,” he said half-under his breath.

“I don’t know why you think you have to say stuff like this,” she shrugged dismissively. “Soon we’ll both be getting what we want: freedom from this awful situation.”

“What about the baby?”

“If I have a boy you would have fulfilled the terms of your contract with my father. You’ll be free... the baby won’t be any of your concern but you can be *quite* certain that my father won’t be getting his paws on my child! I ask only that you leave us this house and support us while I study jewellery designing. I don’t think we’ll need your support for much longer than two years... after that, I think I’ll be able to manage on my own.”

“You seem to have given this some thought,” he said tonelessly, his face back to that familiar icy mask she despised so much. She nodded nervously.

“I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon. Please Sandro, after two years, I’ll be completely out of your life and while you’re supporting us, I won’t bother you for anything, you won’t have to talk to me or hear from us and it doesn’t have to be too much.”

“You think I give a damn about the *money*?” He suddenly exploded, losing his icy reserve in spectacular fashion. “Do you think I would nitpick over pennies when it came to my wife and child’s welfare?”

“Ex-wife,” she reminded tentatively, fascinated by the incandescent fury she could see in his eyes, it flared even hotter after her timid correction.

“Nothing’s set in stone,” he gritted. “It could be a girl.” She went

dramatically pale at that, oddly enough she hadn't even considered *that* possibility.

"No," she whispered. "It's a *boy*, it's got to be!" He swore shakily beneath his breath.

"I'm sorry," he murmured quietly. "I know that this has got to be stressful for you. Theresa... whatever the future holds, you can rest assured that I'll support you in every way possible for as long as you need me."

"It won't be for long," she assured earnestly. "I know you want to move on with your real life. Probably get married and have children."

"This *is* my life," he growled. "I *am* married and having a child."

"But it's not the life you wanted," she reminded. "Not the wife and child you wanted. This is certainly not the life *I* wanted."

"So what the hell are you saying? That *you're* looking forward to getting married to someone else and having his kid?" he suddenly snarled and she jumped, wondering at his unpredictable mood.

"Why are you being like this?" She asked in confusion. "I thought you'd be happy. It's what you've been asking me for since the day we married. Every time we had sex, without fail you'd ask me..."

"I *know*," he interrupted savagely. "You don't have to remind me of it again."

"Well," she got up yet again and he jumped to his feet, braced to catch her if she fell. She sent him an amused sidelong glance. "I'm off to bed..."

"Have you eaten?" He asked in concern.

"Some toast," she shrugged.

"I don't like the way you're managing your meals, Theresa," he growled. "If you're serious about getting through this pregnancy healthy, you should eat better than you have been."

"I know that... but I think my body might be adjusting to the pregnancy so things are probably going to be a bit out of synch for a while. I'm sure my appetite will come back, with a vengeance. Don't worry about it, Sandro. The baby will be fine."

"Yes babies are resilient," he nodded. "I have no doubt he will be fine but what about *you*? You won't be able to enjoy your newfound freedom if

you damage yourself irreparably during this pregnancy.”

“I’ll be fine,” she dismissed with a flick of the hand.

“How the hell can you be so god damn cavalier about your health?” He snapped and Theresa quite suddenly lost all patience with him.

“I really don’t see how any of this is *your* business, Sandro. My pregnancy, my body and the rest of my *life* are no longer issues you need to concern yourself with. To all intents and purposes, you’re free to go off and have a blast. In fact why don’t you go out with a couple of the floozies you so enjoy dangling from your arm every time there’s a photographer nearby? Go out, get wasted, bang a bimbo. Celebrate your impending freedom in the time honoured tradition.”

“What time is your doctor’s appointment tomorrow?” He asked calmly, simply ignoring her rant as if it had never happened. She glared at him, before turning away and heading toward the door. She had her hand on the doorknob when he spoke again. “I *never*, not once, was unfaithful to you during this marriage, Theresa.”

She halted at the door, her back stiffening as his words sank in and she found herself caught between wanting to open the door and wanting to turn around to meet his eyes. In the end she simply stood there, with her hand on the doorknob and her head bowed. He came up behind her and she flinched when his hands dropped down onto her shoulders and his large body brushed against her narrow back.

“What makes you think I believe you or even *care* anymore? She asked quietly, fighting to keep the anguish she was feeling from her voice.

“I don’t blame you for not caring,” his lips were practically brushing against her ear as he whispered. “But I wanted you to know. I know how it looked but I wasn’t thinking about the consequences. I wanted to show your father how little his damned contract was affecting my life and very selfishly, didn’t spare much thought to what it was doing to you. I want you to know that it wasn’t *you* I was trying to hurt.”

“So you keep saying,” a betraying quaver crept into her voice. “But guess who always wound up getting hurt anyway?”

“I know...” his lips were doing more than just accidentally brushing up against her ear now, they seemed to be nuzzling the sensitive flesh

beneath her ear and they were *definitely* moving down her neck. “It was stupid and I realised it was a bad move from the first but once the papers sank their teeth into the juicy story of recently-wed Alessandro De Lucci playing away from home, *everything* I did came under scrutiny and any woman I had even a passing conversation with became my latest ‘mistress’. It got completely out of control.”

“Let me go,” she demanded weakly, when his lips trailed down to her collarbone.

“*Cara,*” he groaned. “I honestly don’t think that I can.” For a moment she was tempted to let him keep going, especially when one of his hands circled her waist to rest on her ribcage just below the upward curve of her breast. Her entire body tensed as her mind rebelled against what she about to do but she lifted her foot and stepped down on his instep, *hard*. He swore and leapt back, leaving her feeling momentarily bereft, before she came to her senses and fled.

Chapter Five

“What are you doing here?” Theresa paused on the threshold to the kitchen and stared at the big man who stood in front of the open refrigerator wearing only baggy sweatpants, without shoes or a shirt. He turned around slowly to meet her eyes and she swallowed past the huge lump in her suddenly dry throat, God he was so much more beautiful than she remembered. She, however, felt unattractive and sloppy in the Sylvester the Cat silk shortie pyjamas she was wearing. She knew that she had a sleep crease down the side of her face and her hair looked like a bird’s nest.

“I live here,” he replied casually, one hand grasping a carton of orange juice and the other lazily rubbing back and forth over the rippled contours of his abdomen. Her fascinated gaze fell to that hand and she imagined her own hand replacing his. She shook herself slightly to rid herself of the erotic image and focused on her outrage at seeing him so casually standing in the kitchen.

“You’re usually at work by this time,” she pointed out.

“Yes, I am,” he agreed. “But since you go to great pains to *not* be around when I head out in the mornings or come home at night, I figured the only way I’d know what the hell was going on with you was to stay at home today.”

“You can’t simply stay at home,” she was appalled by that notion. “You’re the boss.”

“Exactly and if the *boss* can’t take the occasional day off then there’s really no point in being the boss,” his voice was casual, light even but his eyes roamed over her small figure almost hungrily, taking in every single detail of her fuller face and rounder figure. They had been living past each other for nearly three months, with Theresa deliberately evading him when he was in the house. She tended to ignore his text messages and let the machine take his calls. He left little notes for her, sometimes asking her to dinner, sometimes asking after her health, he had recently stuck a Post-it on the fridge reminding her to buy new prenatal vitamins because he’d noticed that she was running out! When she’d forgotten to buy the vitamins despite his reminder, she’d found a new bottle on the kitchen table and a Post-it, with a half-dozen exclamation marks drawn on it, stuck to the lid.

He never entered her bedroom uninvited and she never did any inviting. They still shared the bathroom that connected the two bedrooms which was how he had known that her vitamins were running low but Theresa took great care to shower after he left in the morning or before he returned in the evenings. Now, after successfully avoiding him for nearly three months, finding him so casually standing in the kitchen, half naked and gorgeous, was a bit traumatic to say the least.

“Why are you even interested in what’s going on with me?” She finally asked.

“We live in the same house, you’re pregnant with my baby and I have no idea how you are. The situation is a bit abnormal to say the least, don’t you think?”

“It works for me,” she dismissed, casually turning away from him and toward a cabinet to fetch a cereal bowl.

“So it would seem,” she heard the fridge door closing and tensed as she sensed him padding towards her, he came to a standstill directly behind her and reached up for another bowl. He was standing so close to her that she could feel the heat coming off of his naked chest and his warm, musky scent enveloped her. She shut her eyes and tried to regain her equilibrium in the face of such overwhelming sexuality. He lingered behind her for much longer than he should have before abruptly moving away and leaving her feeling bereft. When she turned back to face him, he was sitting at the wooden table in the sunny breakfast nook and shaking a huge amount of corn flakes into his bowl and when he realised that she was watching him, he lifted the box enquiringly. She sighed before carrying her bowl to the table where she sat down opposite him and watched as he sprinkled the flakes into her bowl, topping the dry cereal with strawberry halves and banana slices that he must have cut before she came downstairs.

It was the housekeeper’s day off so Theresa hadn’t planned on anything fancier than cereal anyway but the company was unwelcome and unexpected. She watched as Sandro poured a generous amount of milk over her cereal and filled a glass with orange juice, which he nudged over to her. She nodded her thanks before lifting her spoon and awkwardly starting her meal. Sandro tucked in enthusiastically and was done before she was halfway through. He leaped up and over to the fridge, digging around in there before triumphantly producing a grapefruit which he halved, put into

bowls and carried back over to where Theresa was sitting. He placed one half in front of her before he sat down, grimaced to himself and proceeded on his own half.

“I thought you didn’t like grapefruit,” she suddenly broke the silence between them and he grinned over at her while his hair, which was in serious need of cutting, flopped over his forehead endearingly.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But I thought I’d give it a try anyway.”

“Why?” She asked curiously. He merely shrugged and she decided that she really didn’t want to know and didn’t push for a response.

“So has the morning sickness completely finished?” He asked after another short silence and she made a noncommittal sound which he could interpret any way he wanted to. He lifted his eyes to hers and something in his expression made her sigh and shake her head.

“Not completely, no...” she admitted. “But it’s a lot better than it was before.”

“What are your plans for today?” He asked keeping his eyes glued to hers.

“I was going to spend the morning with Lisa and the baby,” her cousin had given birth to her beautiful son, Rhys, just a couple of days after Theresa had had her own pregnancy confirmed.

“Mind if I tag along?” He asked casually and she frowned slightly, disturbed by the notion of her husband “tagging along” with her all morning.

“Well...” she began reluctantly.

“I wanted to discuss some business with Elisa,” he added.

“What business?” She asked flatly.

“It’s about her loan,” he elaborated.

“*What* about her loan?” Her voice rose in alarm but his face remained impassive. “I won’t have you upsetting her, Sandro.”

“Well, I either tell her today, while you’re there as moral support... or I tell her sometime when she’s alone and vulnerable,” he shrugged disinterestedly.

“What are you going to tell her?” She asked in a panic.

“I don’t believe that’s any of your business, Theresa,” he dismissed in an annoying casual voice. “Now why don’t you hop into the shower while I clean up down here? I’ll use one of the guest bathrooms this morning.”

She shook her head desperately.

“Sandro, you can’t do this...”

“Well, I have no aversion to doing a bit of housecleaning,” he said, deliberately misunderstanding.

“You *know* that’s not what I meant,” she hissed angrily and he cultivated a baffled frown which completely infuriated her.

“Well if you have a problem with me using a guest bathroom, then I have to tell you, I certainly don’t mind sharing a shower with you,” he grinned lasciviously and she made an angry sound in the back of her throat, before turning on her heel and stalking off with her head held high.

She refused to talk to him for the duration of the drive to Rick and Lisa’s home. It was only as he slid the car through their security gates, that she turned toward him desperately.

“Sandro, please don’t do this...” she begged, her beautiful eyes appealing for mercy. The stony expression on his face went even grimmer and he reached out a blunt forefinger to gently trace the delicate line of her jaw before turning away from her and getting out of the car. She was devastated by his lack of response and climbed out numbly when he came round to open the door for her. He took her hand but she tensed and tried to drag her hand out of his grip. For a moment, when his hand tightened around hers, she didn’t think he would allow it but he reluctantly released her and instead placed one large hand in the small of her rigid back, steering her towards the front steps, which led up to the house.

Lisa had been expecting her and was waiting in the doorway with a huge smile on her face. She still retained the few kilograms that she had picked up during her pregnancy but she fairly radiated happiness and good health. She greeted Theresa effusively, enveloping her in a warm hug and spared a slight smile for Sandro who loomed above both of them.

“Alessandro, what a surprise,” she nodded politely. “I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“I took the day off,” he responded easily. “And when I heard Theresa was coming for a visit I thought I’d come along with her and see that baby of yours again.” *Again?* Theresa wasn’t aware that Sandro had bothered seeing Rhys before now and she frowned in confusion, wondering why Lisa hadn’t mentioned it to her before. “Also, I had some business I needed to discuss with you.” Theresa tensed at the last bit but Lisa simply smiled and nodded, making Theresa wish that she had called ahead to warn her cousin of the impending disaster.

Why would Sandro do this now? When he was getting everything he could possibly want? What merit was there in destroying Lisa’s business? She looked up into his relaxed face and wondered if she could possibly have misread the situation but what other business could he possibly have to discuss with her cousin?

Lisa led them into the house and Sandro immediately gravitated toward the three-month old baby who was seated in a blue baby seat which was placed on the coffee table in the living room. His entire face seemed to light up at the sight of the infant and Theresa watched in fascination as he sank to his haunches until his face was level with the baby’s head.

“He’s grown a fair bit since I saw him last,” Sandro observed in delight, reaching out to grab one of the infant’s flailing hands.

“Well, I should hope so since he never stops eating,” Lisa grimaced and Sandro laughed. Theresa took a step back, feeling like she’d just stepped into some alternate universe. Sandro was crooning down at Rhys in Italian and the baby was staring up at him raptly, his green eyes unblinking. “Would either of you like something to drink?” Lisa asked politely and Theresa shook her head numbly, watching while Sandro nimbly undid the straps of the baby seat and lifted the infant into his arms.

“Coffee would be nice,” he nodded, rocking the baby soothingly. Rhys made an uncoordinated grab for Sandro’s hair and managed to latch on to a tiny fistful of it. Sandro grimaced good-naturedly and said something admonishing to the baby in Italian, while he reached up to loosen the baby’s grip. Lisa excused herself to go to the kitchen but Theresa barely heard her, she was too busy dumbly watching her husband with the baby.

“I didn’t know you liked children,” she whispered, one of her hands absently dropping to her still-flat belly in a protective gesture that he

couldn't miss.

"I like babies well enough," he murmured casually. "I am quite fond of them actually." She tried to disguise the stab of pain at his words.

"Any baby except mine, of course" she murmured half-under her breath and he inhaled impatiently, his eyes flaring with fury that he kept contained because of the baby in his arms.

"If you're going to be making asinine comments like that please make them when I have both hands free to throttle the life out of you," he said in the most personable, baby-friendly voice he could manage. He sat down on the sofa still holding Rhys in his arms and feeling a flare of possessive resentment; Theresa made her way over to him and held her arms out for the baby.

"I would like to hold my nephew, if you don't mind," she informed coldly and he raised one arrogant brow, before standing up and gently depositing the serene baby into her arms. She sat down gingerly in the chair opposite the sofa and cooed at the sweet baby she held in her arms. Sandro stood up and stretched lazily.

"While you're busy in here, I think I'll go and have that chat with Elisa," she looked up in alarm but he was smiling gently down at her, his eyes warm with some emotion she had a hard time defining.

"Sandro," she began quietly.

"You stay in here with Rhys," he murmured softly. "I don't want you getting upset by anything Lisa and I may have to say to each other." Before she could utter another word of protest he was gone. Theresa got up nervously, holding the baby to her chest. Much as she strained and strained she could not hear a single sound from the direction of the kitchen and she slowly began to move toward the kitchen as well. She was just outside the slightly ajar door when the sounds of their quiet voices finally reached her.

"But I don't understand why?" Lisa was asking, sounding baffled but, strangely enough, not too upset. "I still have at least a year within which to finish the loan, it's a substantial amount of money, so I don't see why you would do this?" Theresa bit her lip, wanting to intervene but not sure how anything she could do or say would persuade Sandro to change his mind. She felt helpless and furious and strangely hurt that he would carry out his threat anyway.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Sandro’s deep voice rumbled quietly in response to Lisa’s question. “I gave you the loan for all the wrong reasons. Reasons which I now... regret... I can’t in good conscience allow it to continue.”

“So let me *pay* it and we can put it behind us,” Lisa implored and Sandro said something which Theresa didn’t quite catch.

“Sandro, this is crazy,” Lisa was starting to sound upset and Theresa braced herself, prepared to enter the fray come hell or high water. Sandro’s next words cut her short though.

“Elisa, please, you have to let me do this...” he sounded... *desperate*.

“It doesn’t feel right,” Lisa was saying and Theresa frowned in confusion. What on earth was going on here?

“I’ve drawn up the papers, it’s practically a done deal,” he was saying urgently.

“I have to think about it and discuss it with Rick, of course,” Lisa was saying softly.

“Of course,” Sandro agreed amicably and realising that their conversation was at an end, Theresa very quickly made her way back to the living room. She was back in the chair and gently rocking a contentedly gurgling Rhys when the other two appeared. She sat up abruptly, her wide eyes flying from one face to the other. They both looked annoyingly relaxed and neither face revealed much. Sandro placed the tray that he was holding onto the coffee table and sat down on the same sofa he’d occupied earlier. Lisa sat down next to him and busied herself with the tray, placing a tall glass of orange juice on the coffee table in front of Theresa.

“Don’t argue,” Sandro intervened when she opened her mouth to protest. “It’s good for you.” He helped himself to the coffee while he and Lisa proceeded to chat like old friends. Theresa sat there seething, hating to be so thoroughly excluded.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t join you yesterday, Theresa,” Lisa suddenly said. “How did your check up go?” Theresa glared at her cousin for bringing up the topic in front of Sandro, who sat up and watched her like a hawk as he waited for her to respond.

“It was okay,” she murmured awkwardly.

“What did he say about the dizzy spells?” Lisa asked and Theresa was aware of Sandro tensing up like a coiled spring at the question.

“Nothing important,” she responded evasively, keeping her eyes on the baby in her arms.

“*What* dizzy spells?” Sandro suddenly asked in a dangerous voice.

“She’s been feeling faint for most of the last two months,” Lisa helpfully informed and Theresa gritted her teeth.

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Sandro suddenly snapped furiously.

“I didn’t think you’d care,” Theresa muttered miserably and Sandro swore venomously beneath his breath.

“She didn’t think I’d *care*,” he repeated incredulously. “Oh my *God*, woman... you assumed that I would not care about something that directly impacts your health and the baby’s well-being?”

“Of course, I *know* you’d care if anything happens to the baby but I didn’t want to worry you about something that I know is not a big deal.”

“And how do you know that? Did you obtain a degree in medicine sometime over the last three months? Of course I’ve seen you so rarely lately that you could have gotten a degree in quantum physics and I wouldn’t have known!” Lisa choked back an entirely irreverent giggle at that and both Theresa and Sandro glared at her.

“Sandro, I told you... I’ll take care of the baby and myself. You needn’t worry about it. Your responsibility toward me, *us*, is at an end,” she reminded logically.

“We’re still married,” he pointed out. “And I think *I’ll* decide when and where my responsibility toward you and the baby will end. From now on, you will keep me fully apprised of what’s going on with your and the baby’s health.”

“No,” she maintained stubbornly. “It’s none of your business. You made it clear that the only reason you ever wanted me to get pregnant was to escape from this marriage, so why don’t you leave me alone while I attempt, *once again*, to do everything in my power to make you happy?”

“The *only* thing that would make me happy right now, you stubborn red-headed little cat, is if you would simply do as you’re told for a change!”

“I’m *sick* of doing what I’m told, I’m sick of being your obedient little lapdog... I was happy without your interference in my life these last few months, so I refuse to go back to the way it was before.”

“I don’t want to go back to that either,” he unexpectedly conceded. “We didn’t have a real marriage before...”

“You can’t possibly be telling me that you want a *real* marriage now?” She scoffed.

“What if I am?” He warily asked and she laughed in his face.

“I’d think you were insane to think that I’d want anything to do with it. How can a marriage with a life span of just six more months possibly be beneficial to either of us?”

“It wouldn’t... but that’s not what I want...”

“Oh it’s *always* about what *you* want isn’t it? Well, I have news for you, Sandro...” she was still holding the now-sleeping baby to her chest and glowering furiously at the tall man seated opposite her, oblivious to her cousin who sat watching the scene unfold in absolute fascination. “I don’t give one damn about what you want. *I* don’t want to stay married to you... *I* want my life back and *I* want you gone as soon as your contract with my father has been fulfilled.” The silence was absolutely deafening. Finally, after what seemed like ages, he leaned back in his chair and shook himself slightly.

“We’ll still be together until the baby is born,” he finally acknowledged wearily. “Up until then, I want daily updates on your health. I don’t want to be excluded from any bit of news no matter how trivial you think it may be.”

“I don’t understand what you’d hope to gain from such an arrangement,” she said miserably confused and frustrated by how adamant he was being on this point.

“Absolutely nothing,” he murmured. “But what do *you* stand to gain by keeping me out of the loop?”

Absolutely nothing... And he knew it; she had no reason other than pure bitchiness to refuse his request.

“Fine,” she said begrudgingly. “I’ll keep you updated but I want your word that you won’t interfere in any part of my pregnancy and that you’ll

remain a casual observer.”

“How can you expect me to make a promise like that?” He asked hoarsely. “I am *not* a casual observer, Theresa! I have a vested interest in both you and the baby.”

“You signed away your rights to us before you ever *had* us,” she reminded bitterly and he flinched slightly at her words. “And you seem to expect me to not only forget that little fact but forgive it too? Sandro... I will *never* forgive you.”

“I thought you understood what an untenable situation I was in,” he shook his head angrily.

“I understand and I sympathise but that does not change the fact that the person I thought I loved, the man I married in good faith, *never* existed and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get past that, Sandro.” He sighed heavily.

“Fair enough,” he finally conceded. “But we need to make the best of this situation in the meantime and living like strangers in the same house isn’t the best solution.”

“Fine,” she whispered reluctantly. “What do you suggest?”

“I would like to be present at your doctors’ appointments,” he said after a long pause and she hesitated, slanting a helpless gaze at her cousin who shrugged slightly.

“*Why?*”

“Peace of mind,” he responded succinctly and she frowned, trying to think about it from all angles before sighing quietly.

“Fine... but your opinions and input are not encouraged or desired. So you’ll be there as just an observer... A *silent* observer. I will manage my own health and pregnancy,” his jaw clenched in displeasure but he kept his mouth shut and nodded reluctantly.

“I also think...” his voice was slightly hoarse and he paused to clear his throat before continuing. “I also think that living in the same house and never seeing each other is... well... ridiculous actually. Please stop disappearing when you know I’m home. It makes me feel like a monster knowing that you’re cowering away in some corner of the house because you’d rather not face me.” He couldn’t have chosen better words to get her

back up and she bristled furiously.

“I do *not* cower,” she seethed, barely aware of the amused look he exchanged with her cousin.

“It certainly feels that way to me,” he responded. “I know that you find it difficult to be around me because of the *feelings* you once had for me...” another outraged gasp from her. “And I also know that with the attraction between us you’re probably afraid the chemistry will flare up and we’ll wind up in bed again, I mean it’s fairly obvious how much you want me... but...”

“I... you...” she was absolutely furious with him for bringing up their *sex* life in front of her cousin and appalled to realise that he thought she was *hiding* from him. Like some timid little rabbit. Okay, so maybe she *had* been hiding but she had been doing it to keep both of them comfortable with the awkwardness of the situation. “The colossal *ego* on you... I’m *not* cowering or hiding or anything like that! I just can’t stand to be around you.”

“Of course you’d say that now,” he shrugged dismissively and she gasped again, furiously rocking little Rhys back and forth as she desperately tried to find a suitably scathing response to his words.

“Anyway,” Sandro murmured. “I was going to suggest we start having breakfast and dinner together again, no point in having separate meals.”

“Fine,” she snapped grudgingly.

“And can we try to be civil?” He asked pseudo-meekly. “Have a decent conversation while we’re having our meals?” Her eyes snapped but she simply nodded, silently telling herself that it would be for just six more months.

“Anything else?” She asked sarcastically, her tone of voice definitely not inviting any more of his “suggestions” but he chose to take her question at face value.

“Yes...” he nodded. “The Friday night gang was wondering where you’d disappeared to. The ladies were disappointed when you didn’t come again.” She said nothing, she couldn’t do it... she quite simply *wouldn’t* do it.

“I. I can’t,” she finally admitted softly. “They’re *your* friends and when we divorce... well, they’ll still be *your* friends. I don’t want to form ties with people when I know exactly how temporary the relationships will

be. I can't keep saying goodbye to people I care about." The last emerged on a whisper and he swallowed before nodding slightly.

"Then one last request," he murmured, leaning toward her intently.

"What?"

"Two hours..." His voice had dropped to a husky whisper.

"What does that..."

"In the evenings..."

"Two hours for what?"

"Just to..." His face clenched in frustration and he shrugged helplessly. "Spend together. Talk, watch a movie, read, sit... anything, as long as we spend it together."

"But that's... I don't understand why you'd want that?"

"Please." The word, soft and pleading, stayed the rejection hovering at the tip of her tongue.

"Two hours... three times a week," she found herself stipulating against her better judgement. Still, enforcing some kind of restriction on his request made her feel like she had some measure of control over the way things were going. He nodded eagerly.

"Name the days," he invited and she nibbled at the lower lip, giving it some serious thought.

"Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays," she deliberately chose his busiest office days, the days he often trudged home much later than usual, hoping that it would force him to cancel a lot of the time. His sharp gaze told her he knew exactly why she had chosen those days but he grinned suddenly and nodded.

"Fine with me," he acquiesced and she sat back feeling like she'd been manipulated somehow. Rhys had fallen asleep and Lisa reached out to take him from Theresa.

"I'll just put this little one to bed," the other woman said quietly and Theresa nodded numbly. She felt completely drained and looked it too. Sandro sat down on the sofa and leaned toward her, very gently nudging the glass of orange juice in her direction again. She shot him a warning glance and he grinned slightly.

“I’m not trying to bully you into drinking a glass of orange juice, Theresa,” he said softly. “I just thought you looked a bit parched.” She gritted her teeth and sheer perversity kept her from picking up the glass and quenching her thirst. He said nothing further, merely leaned back in his chair with a soft sigh.

“So what did the doctor *really* say yesterday?” He asked after a pause.

“I’m slightly anaemic, that’s what’s causing the dizziness, he adjusted my diet to include more iron,” she responded quietly and he nodded.

“Everything else is normal?” He asked after another short pause.

“Yes.”

“You’d tell me if it wasn’t?”

“Yes,” he seemed satisfied with her answer and smiled slightly.

“Thank you,” she sighed and nodded an acknowledgement before finally conceding that her childishness would achieve nothing. She leaned over to pick up the glass of orange juice and take a sip. Fortunately he made no comment and his expression remained neutral. Again there was silence and this time it lasted until Lisa returned. Things were surprisingly amicable after that and Theresa and Sandro left about forty minutes later.

On the way home, she asked him about his private talk with Lisa but he refused to be drawn into conversation on the subject and Theresa eventually gave up in frustration.

The following month sped by, Theresa and Sandro’s new arrangement worked well, their meals together were civil, even pleasant and her doctors’ appointments were less of an ordeal with Sandro’s silent support. He kept his end of the bargain, merely observing and never interfering but just *having* him there made such a difference to Theresa’s sense of well-being. What surprised Theresa the most was how much she was enjoying the time together that he had requested. Contrary to her expectations, he hadn’t cancelled once, even coming home earlier than usual on the appointed nights. Sometimes they simply sat side by side in the den, sharing a bowl of popcorn and watching a movie, rarely saying much. Sometimes they would play Scrabble and Theresa usually enjoyed those nights very much, it wasn’t often she got to beat Sandro at anything and to his profound horror he was

appalling at Scrabble. He blamed his lack of prowess on the fact that English wasn't his native language but he approached every rematch with a never-say-die determination. Unfortunately said determination hadn't yet resulted in a victory for him and Theresa was *delighted* by the fact that she was a better player than he was.

Despite his lack of skill, he played hard and often had her in stitches with his creative spelling and made up words. They also had an ongoing chess rivalry and were a lot more evenly matched at that game. Theresa soon realised that she was starting to look forward to those two hours and hated the fact that he was insidiously creeping beneath her defences again. Unfortunately, much like a car accident, she could see it coming but couldn't seem to find a way to prevent the inevitable disaster from occurring. She was always very strict about the time, trying hard to maintain some kind of control over the situation and whatever they were doing, unfinished or not, had to stop exactly two hours after it had started. They usually picked up where they had left off the next time anyway.

"No," Theresa insisted adamantly one night, during one of their aggressive Scrabble games, they were sitting on the floor with the board placed on the low coffee table between them. "I totally challenge that word! *Lexiquon* is *not* a word, Sandro and you *know* it."

"Of course it is," he nodded blithely. "You're challenging it because you don't want me to have the bonus points and the two triple word scores!"

"Of course I don't," she agreed scathingly. "Two hundred and seventy-five points for a made up word? *Never* going to happen! I'm not running a charity here..." he grinned boyishly at that and she averted her eyes, trying very hard not to be charmed by him. Finally he grumbled good-naturedly and removed his tiles from the board.

"Maybe it's a *French* word," he muttered defensively and she rolled her eyes.

"Well, feel free to use it the next time you play a Frenchman!" He laughed outright at that and she caught her breath at the carefree sound. Every day he relaxed more and more around her and she often sensed that he wanted to extend their time together. He contemplated the board again, stroking his slightly stubbled jaw thoughtfully as he considered his next move. Eventually he settled on "eel" which was so badly placed it that was

worth only three points and she snorted disdainfully, while taking down his points. She smiled sweetly up at him, before pointing out the free “t” which he could have used for the word “exit” before gleefully using that “t” for her own word, making use of the conveniently situated triple word score in the process and amassing a handy thirty-nine points for her “smithy”.

“What *is* this word?” He growled. “Names aren’t allowed!” She couldn’t help but giggle at his outrage before whipping out a definition of the word for him. He glared down at the dictionary before grumbling to himself in Italian again and going back to studying the board. Theresa smiled slightly to herself, noting the way his hair had slid forward over his forehead and just dying to brush it back, she hid her hands beneath the table and clenched her fists to quell the unreasonable impulse.

“I know that it’s early days yet but I’ve been thinking about decorating the nursery,” she said just to get her mind off of her crazy desire to touch him. Her words caught his attention and he looked up with an unguarded smile.

“That’s a terrific idea,” he nodded eagerly. “We could go shopping for furniture and toys, I saw this *huge* panda bear at a toy shop a week ago that would be perfect for a baby.” His enthusiastic response completely threw her and she stared at him blankly for a few moments.

“A *toy* shop?” She finally asked and he went slightly red.

“There’s one... close to the office and I’ve been to it a couple of times during my lunch hour,” he finally, *very* reluctantly, admitted. “Just to see what kind of toys and things babies need these days.”

Theresa had no clue how she was supposed to respond to that. Should she be concerned that he seemed to be taking more than a casual interest in the baby or should she be pleased? And how on earth was she supposed to react to his assumption that they would be decorating the nursery *together*? Her emotions were in such turmoil that in the end, she simply said nothing... shoving it aside to be processed later. Sandro, sensing the shift in her mood and seeming to realise that he’d said too much lapsed into an uncomfortable silence and toyed with one of his tiles.

“I’m feeling a little tired. I may just head up to bed,” she suddenly said and he looked up in resentment.

“I still have an hour left,” he pointed out bitterly and she bit her lip

nervously.

“Yes, you do,” she finally said and gestured toward the board. “It’s your move.” His eyes glimmered with some indefinable emotion before he shook his head and got up.

“You’re not my prisoner, Theresa, if you’re tired go to bed,” he said wearily, shoving his hands into the pockets of his tailored business suit trousers and totally ruining the cut of the expensive garment.

“Far be it from me to renege on a bargain,” she maintained, remaining stubbornly seated, even though she would have liked nothing better than to flee.

“You’re being so goddamned childish,” he seethed and turned to leave the room before she had a chance to retaliate. She sat there for a few minutes before she realised that he really wasn’t coming back. It was the first time in more than a month that they’d had any kind of serious dispute and Theresa regretted that, knowing that she *had* been childish, because she hadn’t known of any other way to deal with her emotions. She sighed, acknowledging that she needed to apologise to him and pushed herself up off of the plush heated carpet, thinking that it was best to get it over with as soon as possible.

She headed toward his study and as she approached the slightly ajar door, she realised that he was speaking to someone in a low voice. Not wanting to intrude on his telephone call, her steps slowed slightly and she turned around to head toward the kitchen for a small snack. She was just about to walk away when she heard him groan huskily, before saying, “Francesca...” in the most agonised voice she had ever heard from him. The single word was filled with so much yearning and pain that it froze Theresa in her tracks. Sandro was still talking in that low voice, his words, which were in Italian, sounding more urgent now. Theresa took a step back towards the study and the open door and his voice became slightly clearer, even though he was murmuring intimately.

“Francesca, *cara*...” were two of the incriminating words she could understand amidst the torrent of Italian and she bit her lip uncertainly, not sure if he was talking *to* Francesca or about Francesca. God, why hadn’t she learned more Italian? Right now she understood just enough to make her miserable with jealousy and pain. After hearing the woman’s name, for the

first time so many months ago, Theresa had tried to put her out of her mind... knowing nothing about her, it had seemed wisest not to speculate for fear of having her imagination run wild. Now, she wished she had done some research on this Francesca, even though having only one name to go on would have made it difficult and Theresa hadn't been *about* to ask her father or Sandro for details about the mystery woman.

Sandro was obviously oblivious to her presence outside his study door as he continued his low-voiced conversation and Theresa understood only a few random words that meant little to her. He kept using endearments though; *those* she knew very well because he'd frequently resorted to them while having sex with her. She had often wondered if that had been his way of de-personalising the act even further since he had rarely used her name during their most intimate moments. She hovered outside her husband's study door, much like she had been hovering on the outskirts of his life for nearly two years, before turning away and heading back upstairs. She had showered, changed for bed and had long since turned off her bedroom lights when she finally heard his heavy tread on the staircase. She held her breath when he paused, as he *always* did, outside her door but instead of feeling the usual relief when he moved on a few moments later, this time Theresa turned her face into her pillow and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Seven

“I won’t be able to go to the doctor with you today, Theresa,” Sandro informed Theresa while they were breakfasting in the dining room the following morning. She would *never* have admitted it but she had really been relying on having him there that day. She was in her sixteenth week of pregnancy and had been scheduled for a precautionary amniocentesis that day. Because of her previous miscarriage, her doctor wanted to take no chances. She was a nervous wreck about the procedure and even though she knew the risks of complications were very low, they were still there. Also even though her logical mind told her that her baby would be fine she was still dreading the possible outcome of the test. Sandro had been a rock during her first ultrasound the month before, holding her hand while he listened to the *whooshing* sound of their baby’s heartbeat for the first time and squeezing it tightly when they had caught sight of the fragile fluttering on the black and white monitor. It had been too early to tell the baby’s sex but Theresa was confident that it was a boy and had said so. Sandro had remained quiet during the entire procedure but he had been a comfort to her.

“Why not?” She asked casually.

“I have to go to Italy next week and I have a lot to finish at the office before I leave,” he informed her tightly and she lowered her eyes back to her plate.

“Is your father okay?” She asked softly and he hesitated before responding.

“Yes. My visit is unrelated to any family business,” she shut her eyes in pain, suddenly *knowing* that he was going because of that phone call last night.

“Okay,” she nodded, battling to sound nonchalant about it. “It’s just... I’m getting the amniocentesis today.” He swore quietly beneath his breath.

“I’m sorry, Theresa,” he murmured, seeming almost stricken by the news. “I completely forgot.”

And *that*, of course, brought the major problem with their marriage into sharp relief. While *she* had been worrying about the procedure, stressing about possible complications, terrified of the slight risk of miscarriage it presented and suffering through sleepless nights thinking about the birth or

genetic defects the results could reveal, her *husband* had simply forgotten about the test. And this just when she had started to rely on him to *be* there for her. Of course, she would never reveal just how much she had depended on having his solid, stoically silent presence there so she shrugged carelessly.

“I’m sure Lisa will go with me,” she nodded firmly and his eyes shone with naked relief.

“That’s a great idea...” he nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll be at your next appointment. I’ll only be gone for a week or so. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she dismissed airily, digging into her scrambled eggs like someone who didn’t have a care in the world. There was an awkward silence, while he watched her eat but Theresa very determinedly kept her head down while she scooped the eggs into her mouth with as much gusto as she could manage without choking.

“I don’t want you to be alone while I’m gone,” he suddenly breached the uncomfortable silence and Theresa frowned at his words, looking up at him with her laden fork lifted halfway to her mouth.

“I won’t be alone, Rick and Lisa are always around and the staff are ever present,” as if to prove her words, the smiling housekeeper entered the room with a pile of pancakes which she placed in front of Theresa with a speaking look. Phumsile, who was in charge of all the domestic staff, made no secret of the fact that she thought Theresa was way too skinny for a pregnant woman and had taken it upon herself to ensure that Theresa ate healthily. Theresa secretly suspected the older woman of being in cahoots with Sandro and had even accused Sandro of such. He’d merely laughed and refused to comment. Phumsile disappeared back into the kitchen and Sandro sighed impatiently.

“That’s not enough,” he muttered. “I want you to stay with your cousin.”

“No.” She simply went back to her eggs, helping herself to a pancake, not wanting to incur Phumsile’s wrath. The silence seethed from the other end of the table.

“I insist.”

“No.” She didn’t even bother meeting his eyes this time.

“Theresa, you’re being very difficult,” he kept his voice level and patient.

“And *you’re* being unreasonable,” she suddenly snapped, glaring at him furiously. “Rick and Lisa have a new baby. I will visit them regularly and I have no doubt they will come around here but for me to *stay* there? That’s just ridiculous. I won’t intrude and I don’t need a minder; I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“What if something goes wrong? What if you need help in the middle of the night and no-one’s around?”

“Why don’t you just *stay* home if you’re so concerned?” She retorted furiously and immediately wished the words back when his gaze turned speculative.

“Would you like me to stay home?” He asked quietly.

“It makes no difference what I want,” came her mutinous response.

“Of course it does,” he placated gently. “I’d stay if you wanted me to.”

“What about your *important* business?” She asked sarcastically.

“You’re more important,” he said softly.

“You mean the *baby* I’m carrying is more important?” she corrected and his jaw clenched.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he maintained patiently and she blinked before shaking her head.

“You’re trying to confuse me,” she complained frowning at him and he grinned.

“Not at all, sweetheart,” he murmured. “I’m just trying to be honest with you.”

“Well, stop it, I don’t believe anything you say anymore,” she hissed, pushing herself away from the table and he sighed getting up as well.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he had the nerve to prompt and her glare deepened until she looked like a bad-tempered child.

“No, I want you to go off and take care of whatever *business* you have in Italy. I would hate to keep you from something important, only to have it

thrown back into my face at a later date.” His jaw clenched at her vitriolic words but he didn’t respond. She got up abruptly, sick of the conversation and the company.

“Excuse me, I have to get ready for my appointment,” she snapped, turning to leave the room.

“I still want you to stay with your cousin while I’m gone,” he insisted, directing his words to her narrow back as she retreated from the room.

“And I still say no to that,” she threw over her shoulder.

“This subject is far from closed, Theresa,” he raised his voice slightly as she moved further away from him but she waved a dismissive hand as she turned a corner that she knew would take her out of his sight. Once she got to her bedroom, she sank down onto the bed and inhaled shakily, feeling drained.

Lisa was unable to join her for the amniocentesis, Rhys had a medical check up and naturally that took priority. So Theresa found herself waiting alone, a nervous wreck even though she knew that the odds of anything going wrong were slim. She fidgeted, flipped through magazines, chatted with other women in various stages of pregnancy but through it all she just wished that Sandro was there with her. The other women were all accompanied by their partners or friends and Theresa had never felt so achingly alone before. She was so deeply buried in her thoughts that she didn’t even notice the person sitting down next to her until her husband’s deep voice rumbled in her ear.

“Why is your cell phone off? I’ve been trying to reach you all morning,” she jumped in fright before blinking up at him stupidly, not quite sure how he came to be there. He grinned down into her confused face and Theresa found herself responding helplessly to the open warmth of that smile, rewarding him with a blinding one of her own.

“What are you doing here?” She asked breathlessly and he shrugged.

“When I couldn’t reach you, I tried Lisa and when she told me that she was at the clinic with Rhys, I realised that you were probably here all alone and thought you might need some moral support,” he explained casually.

“B.but what about your work?”

“It’ll keep...”

“You didn’t have to come, I was okay on my own,” she felt obligated to protest.

“Theresa, you visibly paled every time the mention of this appointment came up. It’s obvious that you find the thought of this procedure daunting. I couldn’t let you face it on your own,” so much for thinking she had kept her fear and reservations well hidden from him. He seemed able to read her like an open book.

“I’m not *really* scared,” she said with more bravado than conviction and he determinedly bit back the smile that was curling up the sides of his mouth.

“*You* might not be but I am terrified, *cara*,” he shuddered slightly. “Needles... *big* needles especially, are not my thing.” She could tell by the way he paled at the thought that he was entirely sincere. She stared into his eyes for the longest time, getting lost in the melting chocolate depths before shaking herself slightly.

“Thank you for coming, Sandro,” she finally whispered. “I *was* a bit intimidated by the thought of this procedure.” The confession cost a lot but she was rewarded by the warm, intimate smile he directed at her.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured quietly, unexpectedly linking his fingers with hers. “You’ll see.” Even though there was no logical reason for it, her reservations melted like ice under the hot sun and she smiled gratefully.

In the end, Theresa sailed through the procedure, after some initial discomfort she was fine, it was Sandro who had difficulty with proceedings. Apparently he hadn’t been lying when he said he didn’t like big needles and when he saw the 7.5 centimetre needle he swayed enough for a nurse to hurriedly bring a stool over for him to sit on; he had thanked her but manfully chose to stand instead. That macho display of coolness lasted only long enough for them to insert the needle into her abdomen when he paled dramatically and practically collapsed onto the provided stool, keeping his eyes determinedly away from the needle and on Theresa’s amused face.

“Once, when I was ten,” she started talking to distract him. “I fell out of a tree...” that certainly caught his attention.

“What were you doing up a tree?” He sounded unflatteringly sceptical.

“You don’t strike me as the tomboy type.”

“I wasn’t... but there was this poor little kitten stuck up there and I was a complete sucker for animals,” she shrugged, wincing slightly when the needle pinched more, his hand tightened around hers, while the doctor cheerfully informed them that it was “nearly over”.

“So what happened?” He asked softly.

“Well, Lisa was with me and she was desperately trying to reason with me but I wouldn’t listen,” she shook her head. “Sometimes I can be a bit stubborn.” He snorted at that.

“*No!* Really?” She tilted her chin up and chose to ignore his sarcasm.

“Just as I was leaning out and reaching for that stupid cat, he hissed at me, scratched my hand and *climbed* back down,” she felt the pinching sensation gradually decrease as the needle was withdrawn from her abdomen. “But the cat had scared me and I lost my balance before tumbling out of the tree.”

“What happened after that?” He seemed riveted even though the doctor was stepping away from the table.

“I broke my arm and I’ve disliked cats since that day,” she confessed sheepishly. He chuckled before unexpectedly leaning over her and dropping a quick kiss on her forehead. “I don’t know why I just told you that story... you just looked in need of distraction.”

“And how,” he acknowledged shakily. “I’m still feeling a little queasy after seeing that needle...” he swallowed and paled again. “I don’t know how you could do that without anaesthetic?”

The doctor had offered her a shot to numb the area but one huge needle was bad enough, Theresa hadn’t been enamoured with the thought of having to deal with two.

“It was a little uncomfortable,” she admitted as the nurse helped her sit up. “But not too bad.”

After dressing she and Sandro anxiously faced her obstetrician across the wide expanse of his desk.

“Right... that went very well, Mr and Mrs De Lucci...” Doctor Shelbourne beamed over his desk at them. “Both you and your baby came through it with flying colours. Right... so no heavy lifting, no sex and no

flying for the next couple of days. Try to relax and not overtax yourself. You may experience some cramping for a day or two, that's normal... but if the cramping carries on for too long or is too severe, if it's accompanied by spotting or bleeding, come in immediately." Both Sandro and Theresa paled at that dire warning and Theresa blindly and unthinkingly sought out his hand with hers.

"We should have your results in a couple of weeks," the older man continued cheerfully. "We'll contact you when they arrive."

"Do you think I'm at risk for another miscarriage?" Theresa suddenly asked and the doctor looked surprised by her question.

"Not at all..." he shook his head vehemently.

"But the last time..." she began shakily.

"...was just one of those tragic things that sometimes happen in life. You're healthy, your baby looks healthy, there's no reason you shouldn't carry to term and deliver a perfect baby. Now onto happier topics; would you like to know your baby's sex?"

"You could tell?" Theresa asked with a smile.

"The image was as clear as a bell today," he nodded indulgently.

"No," Sandro suddenly shook his head. "I'd rather not know."

"But Sandro..." she turned to him in surprise but he refused to meet her eyes. "Why don't you want to know?"

"It makes no difference..." *nothing* he could have said would have hurt her more and she immediately retreated back behind her shell, withdrawing her hand from his. Of course it didn't make a difference, if it was a boy he would leave without getting to know the child and if it was a girl he would be stuck in his unwanted marriage for even longer. He groaned when he saw her expression and immediately grabbed up her hand again. "I *really* didn't mean it the way you obviously think I did, Theresa."

"It's okay," she informed the doctor, who looked heartily uncomfortable to be witnessing their dispute. "I don't have to know." Not when she was one hundred per cent certain that it was a boy anyway. The doctor nodded and cleared his throat.

"Very well then, my lips are sealed," he nodded, trying to maintain his jovial manner, even though he was still uncomfortable. Sandro said nothing,

keeping his eyes on Theresa's determinedly averted face. The doctor added a few more of his usual cautions that she not overtax herself before he dismissed them with a hearty goodbye.

"Just let me explain," Sandro said the moment they were outside the clinic. It was raining and Theresa hurriedly raised the hood of her coat over her head before scurrying for her car. He followed her even though she was still quite obviously ignoring him and keeping her back to him. She fumbled for her car keys in her large bag and he groaned in frustration before dropping his hands onto her narrow shoulders to turn her around. Her face was wet and he sighed deeply as he wiped at the moisture, which could have been tears or rain.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, lowering his head so that she could hear him over the clamour of cars driving by and the freezing rain. "Theresa, that didn't come out right. It didn't mean what you thought it did."

"What does it matter what I think?" She finally asked bitterly.

"It matters," his large hands cupped her face and his forehead lowered to hers. "It matters very much, Theresa."

"No," she shook her head slightly. "It doesn't." She put her hands to his broad chest wanting to push him away but the rain had soaked through his white shirt plastering it to his skin and turning it so transparent that he may as well have been naked, so instead of pushing her hands stroked and petted and he moaned hungrily before touching his lips to hers. Theresa didn't even pretend to fight, she simply melted into him and wrapped her arms around him, digging her fingers into his back as she arched up against him and opened her mouth to his hot, demanding tongue. His hands were wrapped in the wet hair and he tugged her head back to gain better access to her mouth as his tongue hungrily probed at hers, leaving not one inch of her mouth unexplored. The sound of a car horn close by brought them to their senses and they jumped apart guiltily both flushed and breathing rapidly, both shaking uncontrollably. Theresa stared up into Sandro's dazed eyes and blinked at the vulnerability that she thought she saw there.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," he suddenly murmured hoarsely and she stared back at him uncomprehendingly.

"You were just being honest," she finally whispered and his brows slammed together in a formidable frown.

“No! I mean... yes I was but... you misunderstood me,” he sounded completely muddled and Theresa stared up into his harsh face in wonder, not entirely sure what to make of this overly-emotional man in front of her.

“So make me understand,” she finally invited, after a long and uncomfortable pause. He seemed shocked by the invitation and for a moment looked unable to respond.

“I meant that the baby’s sex made no difference to me either way because I would love it regardless of what it was,” he said in a rush and she gaped up at him incredulously for a moment before placing both hands on his chest and pushing him away violently. He was taken by surprise and staggered back, nearly sprawling to the wet tarmac before catching himself and finding his balance.

“*Why* would you say that? Why would you lie like that? I don’t deserve it, Sandro... I haven’t done anything to deserve any of this but you keep finding new and creative ways to hurt me.” She went back to fumbling in her bag and finally found her keys.

“Don’t try to pretend that you care,” she hissed at him. “I know you don’t. Five more months of this and you’ll be free to go back to your *Francesca* and start your real life with a real wife and babies that you will *really* love!” He seemed stunned by her attack but her mention of Francesca brought his eyes sharply up to hers.

“What? Did you think I didn’t know about your precious Francesca? The woman you love, the woman you wanted to marry before my father forced you into this sham? I know you see her every time you go back to Italy, just like I know you’ll be going to her when you go back this week!” She was practically screaming now, frustrated by the way he simply stood there. Like someone who’d been caught in a bomb blast, he looked dazed and shocked.

She was starting to feel strange, light-headed and nauseous. She braced her hands on the roof of her car and tried to steady herself, aware that Sandro was moving toward her. His hands reached for her and she weakly tried to evade his grasp but the movement made her even dizzier and she swayed slightly. Sandro’s arms wrapped around her and she was too faint to really care.

“Theresa, *cara*. I’m here. You’re okay...” were the last desperate

words she heard from her husband before everything went black.

“When I said she shouldn’t overtax herself, I meant both physically and emotionally Mr de Lucci,” Theresa heard the sharp admonishment in the slightly familiar voice and frowned as she tried to hear over the weird buzzing sound in her head. “What on earth were you thinking, upsetting her like this less than half an hour after the procedure she’d just been through?”

“Will she be okay?” Theresa heard Sandro’s unusually subdued voice over the rapidly subsiding buzz and she wondered at the strange panicky edge in it.

“She bled a little, which is never a good sign and I’m not willing to take any chances, not after this, I want her to remain in bed for at *least* a week. Complete bed rest.”

“I can’t stay in bed all week,” Theresa suddenly protested, opening her eyes and Sandro surged forward to grab up one of her limp hands.

“*Theresa*, thank God! How are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a bus,” she admitted shakily, lifting her eyes to the doctor who stood on the other side of the cot. “My baby? Is he alright?”

“Your baby’s just fine. In fact the baby is doing a hell of a lot better than you are right now, Mrs de Lucci. I want you to stay in bed for a week, you are to do *nothing*, is that understood?”

“I take it that I am allowed bathroom breaks?” She asked sarcastically.

“You can get as snippy as you like with me, young lady but if you want a healthy, full-term baby, you will do what I say! Or I will be *forced* to hospitalize you to ensure that you get the prescribed bed rest.”

“She’ll do what you’ve ordered, doctor,” Sandro assured grimly and Theresa bit her lip and nodded. She wouldn’t risk her baby’s life out of sheer perversity.

“Right,” the doctor seemed satisfied. “I’d like to keep her here for tonight. Tomorrow, you may take her home... and try to get beyond the parking lot this time.” With that final admonishment, he turned and left the room, grumbling under his breath as he did so. Theresa and Sandro watched as the door swung shut behind him before turning to face each other awkwardly.

“I’m sorry,” they both blurted out simultaneously after a long pause.

“Why are *you* sorry?” Sandro asked in confusion, dragging up a chair and sitting down beside the bed, still clutching her hand like it was a life preserver and he a drowning man.

“I shouldn’t have brought up your private life like that. What you do after we split up is none of my business and after... after everything my father has done to you, I honestly believe that you deserve the happiness you’ll find with the woman you love. So I’m sorry for overreacting like a hysterical fishwife, I just... I got so *angry* after what you said. I don’t need empty platitudes... you don’t have to say anything to make me feel better about our situation. You really don’t have to pretend to care about me or about the baby.” He swore shakily, lifting her hand and resting his forehead on the back of it.

“What an unholy mess I’ve made of things,” he half-laughed, his voice sounding strained. “Nothing I say now will ever make a difference to how you feel, will it? Everything I try to say or do will come across as desperate and insincere.”

“What I don’t get is why you’re still trying?” She whispered in confusion, watching his bowed head intently. “You’ve won. You have everything you want within your grasp, the vineyard, freedom and yet you keep trying, coming to me with all of these demands to be involved in my life. Why?”

“Why don’t we just let it go for now?” He lifted his head to meet her eyes, his own brown gaze liquid with regret. She nodded slightly and he smiled half-heartedly.

“I’ve called Elisa and ask her to bring you a change of clothes. Are you thirsty?” She nodded shyly and he smiled. “I’ll go and get you something to drink, okay?” He stood up and brushed a gentle, slightly shaky, hand over her hair. “You scared the hell out of me, Theresa... so from now on you are to remain calm and not let your idiot of a husband upset you again. Okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled up into his gentle gaze.

“Good,” he leaned over to brush his lips over her forehead. “That’s good, Theresa.” She watched him leave and sighed softly; wishing that her life could be different and that they were a normal couple, excited about

having their first baby. She ran a hand over the slight bump of her stomach, gently communing with her baby, apologizing for the recklessness that could have cost his life. She was lost in thought, humming a gentle lullaby while she continued to stroke the small baby bump when she gradually became aware of a presence in the open door. She gasped in surprise, not sure how long he'd been standing there. He stepped forward almost reluctantly, his harsh face more grim than usual. For a man who usually had his emotions sealed up tight he looked like someone who was struggling mightily to keep his expression absolutely neutral, even though the muscles were jumping in his jaw, cords tightening in his neck and his lips were thinned almost to the point of non-existence. Wondering at the incredibly *bad* job he was doing of pretending to appear completely detached, she was still absently running a hand over her stomach when she gasped and jumped for a completely different reason.

All pretence of detachment tossed aside, Sandro's face paled and his eyes darkened in alarm as he surged toward the cot in the luxurious private room, thumping the bottle of fresh juice down on the cabinet beside the bed.

"What's wrong, Theresa? Are you in pain?" She shook her head, before lifting her beaming face up to his. He stopped short, inhaling sharply at her radiant expression. Her eyes were alight with tears and absolute joy while her lips were parted in the most serene, stunning smile he had ever seen.

"He *moved*," she breathed in awe. "I just felt him move, Sandro! For the first time..."

"You... he... The *baby*?" He asked incoherently, moving even closer to the bed and leaning over her small figure.

"*Yes*... Oh my God! There he goes again..." She laughed in delight and without thinking grabbed up his large hand and placed it over the gentle flutter, low in her abdomen. His hand was so big; it covered nearly the entire little mound of her stomach. He sucked in a ragged breath when the baby fluttered again as if on cue and uttered a harsh, disbelieving laugh.

"*Dio*..." he breathed, sounding as awed as she had, keeping his eyes glued on their hands, his on her stomach and her smaller, paler hand resting over his. "Does that hurt, *bella mia*?"

"No," she giggled. "It kind of tickles..."

“Yes, well, give it a couple of months and it’s going to be hellishly uncomfortable,” a dry voice interjected from the doorway. Theresa squeaked in surprise, lifting her hand from Sandro’s while he, keeping his warm hand on her stomach, turned leisurely to face her cousin, Rick and Rhys who were all framed in the doorway, the portrait of a perfect family.

“That was fast,” he observed neutrally before, reluctantly, moving aside and removing his hand from her belly. Theresa felt the loss keenly and tried to hide it by smiling brightly at her cousin.

“Thank you for coming,” Theresa murmured, her eyes filling up and her cousin moved further into the room, leaning over the bed to hug Theresa warmly.

“Oh darling, I’m always here for you,” Lisa whispered into her ear and Theresa, without any warning whatsoever, surprising even herself, burst into tears. “No... oh no, sweetheart, don’t...” her cousin was crooning. “Don’t upset yourself like this; it’s not good for you or the baby.”

Theresa made a concerted effort to pull herself together, embarrassed by her mini breakdown. Rick was on the other side of the bed; he had Rhys cradled to his chest in a baby sling and was holding one of her hands with both of his, adding his silent support to her obvious distress.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that,” she choked out slightly and Rick grinned down into her distraught face.

“Hormones. You know what *you-know-who* was like. The cost of tissues was bankrupting me,” he said in a stage-whisper, jerking his jaw in Lisa’s direction and Theresa half-giggled, half-sobbed in reaction before looking around the room in confusion.

“Where’s Sandro?” She asked warily.

“Never thought I’d ever feel sorry for the guy,” Rick told her half-seriously. “But when you turned on the waterworks, the poor dude looked like someone who’d just been told that both his best friend and *dog* had died in the same freak accident. He hovered for a few seconds before hot-footing it out of here like the hounds of hell were on his tail.”

“Well...” Theresa shrugged bravely. “This is more than he signed up for.”

“Oh please,” Lisa rolled her eyes disdainfully. “This is *exactly* what he

signed up for. He *wanted* you pregnant, remember?”

“I remember,” Theresa nodded forlornly.

“Look, far be it from me to defend the guy...” Rick intervened reasonably. “I mean you know I can’t stand him after the way he treated you and I would have cleaned his clock ages ago if you hadn’t called me off, Terri... but quite honestly the man looked downright pitiful just now. Not your typical ruthless Sandro.”

“I’ve been seeing a change in him lately, too, Theresa,” Lisa said.

“Please,” Theresa shook her head. “He’s the same as he’s always been. He wants out of this marriage and so do I.”

“Theresa...” Lisa murmured in her most reasonable voice.

“Lisa, don’t defend him... you don’t know what he’s done...” and suddenly it all came out, how he’d blackmailed her to prevent her from divorcing him, using Lisa’s loan as his leverage. “He probably gave you that loan so that he would have some kind of future hold over me if I ever stepped out of line!” Rick and Lisa exchanged a meaningful look before Rick shrugged, seeming to answer some unspoken question from Lisa.

“Theresa,” her cousin still clasped one of her hands tightly. “I know about that.”

“You do?” She was shocked by that. “*How?* How long have you known?”

“Sandro confessed all the last time you two came by. Remember? He wanted to talk to me alone?” Theresa nodded dazedly. “For whatever reasons, he doesn’t want or *need* that leverage anymore, he offered to write off my debt entirely. I refused... but I get the feeling that he’s going to do it anyway.”

“*That’s* what he wanted to talk about that day?” Theresa gasped incredulously.

“Yes and he made me swear not to tell you about it... but I suppose these are extenuating circumstances,” Lisa nodded and Theresa frowned in concentration.

“But I don’t understand any of this... why would he do that?” She asked in confusion before her face cleared up and she laughed at her own stupidity. “Well, he doesn’t *really* need the leverage anymore, does he? Not

when I'm doing exactly what he wants? But to clear the debt before the baby's born still doesn't make sense... unless..."

"Is this a private conversation or can *anyone* join in?" Rick interrupted her musing drily and she blinked up at him. "I think you're over-analyzing. From what Lisa tells me he was desperate to cancel that debt. She thinks, and I'm inclined to agree after what I just saw, that he wants a clean slate with you but doesn't really know how to go about it."

"Well, I live with him and I know you're both wrong," she maintained stubbornly, shoving all those Scrabble and chess nights to the back of her mind, determinedly trying not to think about the companionable meals and the silent support he lent her at every doctor's appointment. "He's in love with someone else! I'd say *another* woman, only in this case, I think I'm probably the *other* woman."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Rick asked furiously.

"He was in love with her before my father forced him into this marriage. She's the woman he wants to have a family with. I'm the one who screwed up *his* life, Rick... not vice versa. Once I have this baby we'll go our separate ways and both be happier for it."

"This is so messed up," Rick shook his head in disgust. "What about you and the baby? Don't you count for anything?"

"I would *hate* it if he stayed out of some outdated sense of duty... I'm worth more than that, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," Lisa whispered, squeezing Theresa's narrow shoulders reassuringly before sitting down on the chair beside the bed and leaning toward Theresa. "So you felt the baby move?"

Theresa's eyes lit up with remembered joy.

"It was amazing," she nodded and both Rick and Lisa went misty as they verbally recalled Rhys's first movements. "After the fright I got, it was such a relief to feel him moving around in there."

"Is he doing any wriggling now? His Auntie Lisa wants to meet him," Theresa shook her head with a slight laugh.

"He's all quiet right now," she rested her hand on her stomach. "I can't believe I have to stay in *bed* for a week."

"Yeah that's a bit crap," Lisa nodded sympathetically. "So glad I

wasn't confined to bed at any time during my pregnancy."

"God, if only... she was like a little dynamo, I had to force her to slow down," Rick recalled with a shudder.

"Do you think I could stay with you for the next week or so?" Theresa asked hesitantly and Rick and Lisa both frowned before nodding.

"Of course," Lisa said. "But *why*?"

"Sandro's going to Italy for a week and before this happened I had every intention of staying in my own home but..."

"If you think I'm going to Italy with you confined to bed, you can damned well think again," Sandro's gruff voice suddenly interrupted from the doorway and three heads swiveled towards him. He looked... strange. His hair was disheveled, his suit wrinkled and his tie loosened. He was also clutching a wilted bunch of flowers in one hand and gaily wrapped square box in the other. Added to that he had an incongruous bunch of foil helium balloons trailing behind him and it was the latter that caught and held everybody's attention. They were colourful, some were downright garish and most of them either read Happy Birthday or Happy Anniversary and one woefully out of place dolphin had the legend "Yippee for SUMMER" emblazoned across its side, a very optimistic sentiment considering it was July and the middle of winter.

"Sandro, bro..." Rick managed in a voice that *barely* trembled with laughter. "Did you go raiding all the wards in the hospital for those?"

"These were all the seriously under-stocked gift shop had," Sandro grumbled, obviously sensitive to Rick's mockery, which raised Theresa's brows because she had *never* heard her self-assured husband sound so defensive before.

"Thank you, Sandro," she said before Rick could come back with anything else. "I love helium balloons."

"I *know* you do," he said fiercely... surging forward until he elbowed Rick aside and stood staring down at her intently. "I know that you like helium balloons and pink gerbera daisies. I know that you like truffles," he shoved the gift-wrapped box, which probably contained truffles, and wilted pink daisies into her arms. "I do *know* things about you, Theresa. I've been learning."

“Uhm...” *okay?* Right, so he remembered the conversation they’d had months ago when she’d accused him of knowing nothing about her and he’d obviously been paying attention during their evenings together but what on earth was he trying to prove with this? “Thank you.”

It was all she could think of to say and she saw both Rick and Lisa wince and watched Sandro’s shoulders droop slightly before he nodded.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered in a devastatingly unemotional voice, as he took a step back from the bed. “I’ve postponed my trip to Italy. I want to make sure that you get the rest you’re supposed to.”

“Okay,” she nodded.

“Good...” he seemed to be at a loss for a moment looking unsure of his next move, before he reached out to stroke one soft cheek. “Are you feeling better?”

“Fine,” she whispered. “A little tired.”

“Righty-o...” Rick sing-songed. “That’s our cue to vamoose...”

“Oh but I didn’t mean...” Theresa was appalled that they thought she was hinting that she wanted them to leave.

“No, you didn’t,” Lisa smiled don’t at her. “But you are tired and you do need your rest. I’ll leave the clothes right here,” she dropped a small canvas bag onto the visitor’s chair. “Call if you need anything.”

After a flurry of hugs and kisses they were gone, leaving her grim-faced silent husband behind. Theresa sneaked a glance up at said grim-faced, silent husband and was suddenly attacked by a fit of irreverent giggles. Now that nobody was around to witness it she felt free to laugh at the image he presented. He looked like an underdressed, forlorn clown with those balloons clutched in his hand.

“What?” He asked, the grim façade melting away in the face of her amusement.

“It’s just... those *balloons*, Sandro...” she snorted, trying to control the giggles and his own, devastating grin lit up his face.

“I know, right?” He shook his head sadly as he tied the balloons to her bedpost. “A hospital without a single ‘get-well-soon’ balloon in sight. Crazy.”

“Thank you for them anyway. They always brighten up a room.”

“I remember you saying that when you talked about a friend’s tenth birthday party. You wanted some for your own...” but she hadn’t even had a party that year, much less balloons. She didn’t even *know* why she’d confessed that sorry tale to him. There was an awkward silence while he stood hovering at her bedside.

“You don’t have to stay, Sandro...” she whispered. “Why don’t you go into the office and get some work done? I am sure you have better things to do than hang around here.”

“I’m exactly where I want to be,” he gritted implacably. He reached over and took the truffles and flowers from her arms. Dumping the box on her bedside table and sticking the flowers into the half full plastic water canister that a nurse had left on the over bed table. He dragged up the chair that Lisa had recently abandoned, moving the bag to the floor and sitting down almost defiantly.

“Okay,” she was too tired to argue and truth be told, rather relieved to have him there. For a long time neither of them said anything, he leaned back in the uncomfortable looking chair and stared off into space, while Theresa lowered her lashes and watched him surreptitiously, marveling at his absolute stillness. He was usually filled with so much restless energy, always on the move, typing away at his laptop or fiddling with his BlackBerry or barking orders into the telephone and when he wasn’t doing anything work-related, he would swim endless laps or work out in their home gym. She had never seen him simply sitting down and staring off into the distance and it disturbed her in a way that she could not quite define.

“Do you think my father will come to see me?” Theresa broke the silence nearly half an hour later, having half-dozed in the interim. Sandro’s eyes met hers and he shook his head grimly.

“Highly unlikely, since he doesn’t know you’re here,” he shrugged and she gasped, struggling to sit up.

“But how could you not tell him?” She asked, rather offended on her father’s behalf. The man was a bully and a tyrant but he *was* her father.

“The doctor said you shouldn’t be upset and I can’t *quite* envision a visit from your father being anything other than stressful for you,” he said sarcastically. He was right, her father would antagonize Sandro, which

would upset her and they would all wind up arguing. It was always the same. She sank back feeling depressed and sad and Sandro's gaze gentled.

"I'll call him if you want me to, Theresa," he offered quietly and she shook her head, suddenly feeling an overwhelming urge to quite simply burst into tears again.

"You're right, a visit from him wouldn't be very pleasant," she said in an alarmingly wobbly voice. "But I keep hoping..." She left the rest unspoken but he seemed to understand.

"I know," he hesitantly reached for one of the limp hands resting on her stomach, engulfing it in both of his.

"I don't know why he's like that," she kept her eyes averted. "All of my life, I tried so hard to make him love me but he never could. For a short while I thought I found what I was looking for, someone who could love me..." she was barely aware of what she was saying, her blurred gaze remained fixed on their joined hands. There was a long silence, while they both contemplated their entwined fingers and Sandro finally sighed heavily.

"Why don't you take a little nap?" He suggested gently. "I'll be here to keep an eye on things." What things he thought he had to keep an eye on, she had no idea but just having him there made her feel better and she lay back with a contented sigh and was asleep almost immediately.

Chapter Eight

“You are an extremely difficult patient, *cara*,” Sandro gritted out from between his teeth three days later. It was mid-afternoon and he had walked into her workroom, only to find her guiltily standing in the middle of the room. She was clutching the sketchbook that she had crept upstairs to retrieve, to her chest.

“I was bored,” she whined. “So I thought if I had my sketchbook handy, I could work on some designs.”

“Why didn’t you call me or Phumsile to get it for you?”

“You were catching up on some work,” and he had missed enough of it already, taking the week off to stay with her. “And Phumsile has dashed out to do some shopping.”

“This is ridiculous,” he growled, reaching her in one stride and swinging her up into his strong arms as if she were a featherweight. “You’re being impossible. Why didn’t you watch some TV, or read a book or take a nap, or *anything* until Phumsile got back?”

“Because I’m bored *now*,” she complained sulkily and he muttered something in Italian beneath his breath.

“What does that mean?” She demanded to know and he slanted a wry sidelong glance at her before snorting softly.

“I said, ‘God save me from stubborn women’,” he obligingly translated and she scowled.

“I am not stubborn,” she insisted stubbornly and his gorgeous lips twitched in amusement.

“Of course not,” he shook his dark head in a most condescending manner, that Theresa immediately took exception to.

“And you don’t have to patronize me,” she seethed. “I’m not made of glass...”

“You’re just *spoiling* for a fight aren’t you?” He mused, his lips curling up slightly and she simply folded her arms over her chest and kept her gaze mutinously fixed on his strong jaw. He sighed dramatically and hoisted her further up against his chest before making his way downstairs. When they got back to her room he deposited her gently onto the side of her bed and stood

staring down at her implacably with his hands shoved into the pockets of his navy blue cargo pants. She *loved* him in cargo pants, they rode low on his lean hips and certainly did wonderful things for his already gorgeous backside. Now, while he brooded above her, her mouth went dry at the picture of masculine perfection he presented in those pants and his favourite old t-shirt, a torn, stretched grey thing with a Batman emblem on the front. His hair was a mess and he was in serious need of a shave but he looked absolutely gorgeous and she was suddenly breathless with desire for him.

His eyes narrowed speculatively on her suddenly flushed face and he seemed to clue in to what was happening immediately, the corners of his lips tugged upward as he stretched suddenly, adding a jaw-popping yawn to the movement. His t-shirt rode up over his toned, ridged abdomen, revealing his smooth bronze skin and Theresa nearly groaned out loud as she squelched the urge to reach out and stroke the satiny skin on display just inches from her face. The elaborate stretch finally ended and he groaned as he rolled his head on his shoulders, working the kinks out of his neck.

“I’m exhausted,” he informed her huskily, sinking down beside her and she hurriedly scooted closer to the headboard. He ignored the evasive movement and threw himself backward, lying down with his knees over the side of the bed and his feet braced on the floor. Once again his shirt had ridden up and Theresa stared at the tempting skin of his ripped torso mutely. He lifted his hands to cover his face, hitching the shirt up even further, and he sighed again. “Just let me rest here for a couple of minutes, *cara*. I need to recover my strength after hauling you down those stairs. You have put on a lot of weight over these last few months...” she was so captivated by the delectable picture he made, laid out like a buffet in front of a starving woman, that it took a moment for the words to sink in. When they did, she yelped in outrage and thumped his hard bicep in response. His mouth, the only part of his face that she could see beneath his hands, shifted into a lazy smile.

“You hit like a girl,” he smirked, keeping his eyes covered and she attempted to hit him again, only he was ready for her this time and grabbed her clenched fist to tug her towards him until she was awkwardly sprawled on top of him. She tried to shift off him but his arm tightened like an iron band around her waist, keeping her in place with the barest of efforts.

“Let me go,” she demanded between clenched teeth, wriggling urgently as she tried to get away from him. To her frustration she could barely move

and eventually she wore herself out and stopped moving. Her hands were braced on his hard broad chest as she tried to keep her upper body away from his, one of her feet was dangling over the side of the bed and the other was trapped between his legs. She glared down into his face but his eyes were closed and he looked so relaxed that for an implausible moment she actually believed that he might have fallen asleep. His eyelids lazily drifted up when she stopped moving.

“Just *relax* will you?” He implored wearily.

“I can’t relax like this,” she whispered and he groaned before, with seemingly *great* effort, he shifted until they were both lying in the middle of the large bed. He was on his back, his sock-clad feet, he had somehow managed to kick off his sneaker in the process, crossed at the ankles, with her stretched out beside him, one hard arm was wrapped around her waist and the other was curled up beneath his head. How he had managed to change their positions without once releasing her remained a mystery to her.

“You’re still not relaxed,” he observed after a few minutes of silence and she lifted her head from where it was resting just beneath his armpit and frowned grumpily up into his face.

“Of course I’m not,” she snapped. “How am I supposed to relax when you’re exactly where I *don’t* want you to be?”

“You brought this upon yourself,” he shrugged in unconcern.

“How on earth did I do *that*?”

“By not following the doctor’s orders,” he mumbled, sounding half-asleep. “This is the only way I can be sure that you’ll bloody well stay in bed.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you,” she finally said and he sighed, the sound so long-suffering that Theresa’s hackles rose.

“No. But you *are* going to sleep with me,” he informed her, his voice filled with grim purpose. “So you might as well relax.” She said nothing, merely remaining tensed up like a coiled spring beside him. The hand he had resting at her waist began sweeping lazily up and down her side, while he brought his other arm around to lay his large hand low on her abdomen, where the baby rested. She tensed even further at his actions but he did nothing more threatening than pet and stroke her gently. Gradually she began

to relax, allowing her thoughts to drift slightly.

“Have you thought of names for the baby yet?” He asked after nearly half an hour of increasingly comfortable silence and Theresa was so relaxed by that time that she couldn’t even summon up any outrage at what she considered a forbidden topic.

“Hmmm...” she moaned, inhaling his warm, clean scent with visible pleasure. “I like the names Kieran and Ethan. Liam maybe but I’m leaning toward Alex...” her voice trailed off awkwardly as she realized what she had revealed and hoped that he wouldn’t notice. But this was Sandro and he was sharper than the proverbial tack.

“Alex?” He observed casually. “Alexander?”

Stupid, stupid fool! She berated herself angrily. How could she have revealed that she was leaning towards naming her son after him? He said nothing further on the subject and she relaxed after a few tense minutes.

“What about girl names?” He finally asked. “You haven’t thought of any?” Of course she hadn’t thought of any! She was having a *boy*. She refused to answer his question.

“I like the name Lily,” he murmured, his voice almost dreamy as he continued to gently stroke the slight mound of her abdomen. “Or Sofia... Lily would have black hair like mine but beautiful green eyes like yours... but I think a Sofia should have red hair and brown eyes, don’t you?” He didn’t wait for her response, merely continued on in that same dreamy voice. “Lily would be a sweet child... but Sofia... she’s temperamental. She likes to throw things...”

“*Stop it,*” she finally hissed angrily. “There will be *no* Lily or Sofia! There will be a Liam or an Ethan, maybe a Kieran or an Alex... and he will have red hair and green eyes. He will be a sweet and lovable child.” He didn’t comment, merely kept up the soothing, non-threatening movements of his large, strong hands. A while afterwards, the lazy stroking slowed down, before stopping completely and his hands became heavy on her body, his large frame slumping heavily against hers. A soft snore confirmed that he had fallen asleep and Theresa sighed quietly before allowing herself to drift off as well.

The natural light in the room had a warm orange glow to it when she woke up later and she realized it was just after dusk, meaning that she had slept for nearly five hours. She sighed lazily, feeling remarkably warm and comfortable with her head cushioned on Sandro's warm, hard chest, her neck supported by his upper arm, which was curled around her shoulders; his big hand snuggled just under her right breast. One of her hands was tucked under her cheek and the other was... she tensed abruptly when she realized where her audacious hand had come to rest. It was cupped over the firm bulge of his crotch, a bulge that was rapidly swelling and hardening beneath her palm.

"Don't panic...." Sandro's sleep-roughened voice growled the deep tenor of his voice rumbling through the chest beneath her head. "*Don't...* it's nothing."

"It doesn't *feel* like nothing to me," her own voice was husky with sleep and she amazed herself when, instead of following her first instinct and snatching her hand away from his crotch, she gently and almost tentatively, curled her hand around the thickening shaft of flesh.

"*Madre de Dio, cara...*" he choked out on a strangled voice. "What the hell are you doing?"

"*Nothing*," she murmured, her small hand petting and stroking him in much the same way he had done earlier, only a lot less innocent.

"Theresa," his voice was strained. "Sweetheart, please... if you keep doing that I don't know... I don't think..."

"Don't think'..." she purred, lifting her head from his chest to meet his pleading brown eyes. "That's a good idea."

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Theresa didn't really know the answer to that, only she had missed having him in her bed, in her arms... in her *body* the last few months and while, logically, she knew that her raging hormones had a great deal to do with her unwanted urges, she also knew that a large part of it could be attributed to her annoyingly undying love and desire for him.

"Theresa, I don't think this is what the doctor had in mind when he recommended bed rest and... you don't really want this..." he muttered, reaching down to drag her hand away from his straining, fully erect length.

"I *do*," she protested, trying to pull her hand free of his strong grip.

“No... you’re... I don’t know... your hormones are out of control because of the pregnancy, that’s why you feel like this,” his voice trailed off when one of her slender thighs moved up to where her hand had just been, he moaned helplessly when she applied slight pressure and relaxed his hold on her. That was all she needed and she was straddling him before either of them realized her intention. Suddenly her warm feminine mound was grinding up against him and both of them were groaning. Theresa watched as his head tilted back on the pillow and smiled in catlike satisfaction when his hands dropped to her thighs to drag her even closer. She braced her hands on his broad chest in order to maintain her balance and continued to sensuously rub herself against him.

“I think you may be right,” she eventually gasped. “About the hormones... I want you but I don’t *want* to want you.” Her frustration with herself and the situation were clouding her clear green eyes and *his* eyes went stormy with some kind of ruthlessly repressed emotion.

“Sssh... sweetheart... I read that pregnant women sometimes... well *most* times, get really...” his voice trailed off as he struggled to find the right word, his mind obviously not on what he was saying as sweat started to bead his brow and his eyes took on a glazed, faraway look.

“Horny?” She supplied and she sensed the utter shock in his absolute stillness. She had never said the word before, even though he had on numerous occasions.

“Yes...” he finally said, after clearing his throat awkwardly.

“Because I *am*,” she reiterated, enjoying his discomfiture immensely as she continued to move sensuously against him. His hips were starting to strain upward slightly with each lazy movement she made and she relished the absolute power she had over him.

“You said there would be no sex,” he reminded desperately, his breathing becoming more laboured. “And I don’t think we *can* have sex while you’re on bed rest...”

“But maybe we can fool around a bit?” She smiled down into her husband’s shocked face, feeling like the cat that had stolen the cream. He lifted one of his arms and covered his eyes, biting back a cry of pleased anguish as she exerted more pressure right where it counted. He lifted his arm from his face and his fevered gaze bored into hers, his face was taut with the

control he was exerting over himself, the harsh planes standing out in sharp relief beneath his tanned skin. He reached up and tangled his large hands in her tousled red hair, tugging her towards him until their lips were a breath apart but Theresa smiled serenely down into his strained face and pushed her hands down onto his heaving chest to force some distance between them. He reluctantly let her go, relinquishing the opportunity to use his larger size and superior strength against her, obviously content, for now, to let her control events.

“Theresa, *please*,” he finally begged. “Give me your mouth. I need to taste you... *per favore*”

“No lips,” she shook her head. “This isn’t...” she hesitated and his eyes flared and his body went still beneath her, taut with tension.

“Isn’t what?” He demanded and she blinked down into his suddenly furious eyes. “Isn’t *what*, Theresa?”

“Personal...” she completed on a whisper and was shocked and dismayed when she surprised a flash of hurt in his usually unreadable gaze.

“This feels pretty damned personal to *me, cara*,” he hissed.

“I just... *need* you,” she half-sobbed and he shook his head, grabbing her narrow hips between his large hands.

“Not *me*,” he shook his head, keeping her hips steady as he ground himself against her. She shuddered in involuntary pleasure. “*This!*”

“Yes,” she cried out, pushing herself against him. “*Please...*”

“I won’t let you use me like that, Theresa,” his voice was so brittle it cracked.

“Why *not?*” She keened, tears of frustration, anger and heartbreak sliding down her cheeks. “You *used* me in exactly the same way... and you kept it impersonal too. No kissing, no cuddling, no intimacy, no talking, no warmth... *nothing!* You stripped the act of everything but the bare essentials and right now, that’s all I want from you.”

“What is this? Some kind of *payback*? You want me to see what it feels like to be used? Well you’re doing a pretty damned good job of it, Theresa. Consider it a lesson well-learned...” he finally used his superior strength and lifted her off of him as if she weighed nothing and she curled up into a humiliated ball, tears finally slipping down her cheeks as her entire body

clenched with sexual and emotional frustration.

“I wasn’t trying to prove anything,” she protested thickly. “I just didn’t want to get emotionally involved again! I didn’t want to start thinking there was anything other than physical attraction between us. I can’t afford to make that mistake again...”

“*Mi dispiace, cara,*” he said regretfully as he got up and shoved his hands into his pockets to stare down at her. “I can’t give you what you want. Not the way you want it...”

“You’ve done it *before,*” she pointed out, sitting up and swiping at her hot, wet cheeks. “We can just go back to that...”

“There’s *no* going back to that,” he negated harshly. “Never again...”

“I know I’m not your type,” she strove to sound casual about that painful fact and ignored the slight sound of dismay that seemed to rumble out from deep within his broad chest. “Compared to all those supermodels and actresses, I know I’ve always been Miss Dull and Dowdy... but you overlooked that once. I thought maybe...”

“Are you fishing for compliments?” He asked in an insultingly suspicious voice, his face creased into an incredulous glare. “Because I *know* that you cannot be serious with this load of tripe!” She blinked up into his outraged face and he barked out a disbelieving laugh at the confusion in her eyes.

“Well... how do explain the fact that you can barely stand to *look* at me?” she finally found her voice again and he winced at the painful embarrassment and anguish that she couldn’t manage to disguise. “I know how much you hated touching me and I may have been a virgin when we married, Alessandro, but I knew enough to realize that a man who has to drink himself into a stupor before touching a woman, a man who can barely exchange a civil word with her and has to scrub her scent and touch from his skin as soon as he’s capable of getting up after sex... a man like that *has* to be repulsed by the woman in his bed.” Another harsh sound was torn from his chest and he lifted both hands to scrub them over his face and eyes and up into his hair, leaving it in messy peaks. Finally he simply stood there, staring down at her with his fingers linked in the nape of his neck, seemingly unable to respond to her pained words.

He sat down next to her and dragged her back into his lap with a

helpless groan, arranged her until she was straddling him again. This time he dragged his knees up to support her back and wrapped his arms around her slender frame, building a fortified human cage around her trembling body.

“Theresa...” he groaned, burying his face into her soft, fragrant hair. “I *do* want you, *cara*. I’ve *always* wanted you...” He cupped the back of her head in the palms of his large hands and stared intently down into her eyes, trying to convey his earnestness through sheer force of will. Theresa’s tear-drenched gaze swept over his deadly serious face and she couldn’t read it. Once again he had his emotions under tight control and even though he was saying the words she couldn’t tell if he was being sincere or not.

“You don’t have to lie,” she finally whispered, dropping her head to one of his broad shoulders and closing her arms around his broad back, feeling safe, warm and protected. “I’m sorry I brought this up again, Sandro. I didn’t mean to. I don’t mean to keep throwing the past back into your face like this. I do recognize how difficult the situation must have been for you and...”

“Stop it,” he finally interrupted the burble of words that she couldn’t seem to control. “Just stop it... yes the situation was beyond my control. It was, and still is, incredibly difficult but this does *not* mean you deserved the treatment you got from me and it certainly doesn’t mean that I *never* wanted you. Theresa, most nights I could barely keep my greedy hands off of you.”

“You couldn’t?” She lifted her head from his shoulder to stare up into his grim face.

“Why do you think I insisted that we share a bed?” He pointed out. “That way, I didn’t have to go and find you when my need for you overrode all else.”

“Oh...” she responded stupidly.

“Yes... ‘oh’,” he nodded. “And despite all of my idiotic stratagems to keep intimacy between us to a minimum, remember I blamed you for this marriage as much as I did your father, I could never get enough of you.”

“Oh...” she muttered redundantly and his lips twitched into a little smile.

“That’s why I never slept with those women the tabloids kept pairing me up with,” he whispered, his long thumbs stroking back and forth across

the satiny skin stretched over her high cheekbones.

“You really didn’t sleep with any of them?” She asked in a small, uncertain voice and he nodded, never shifting his eyes from hers, as if he could make her believe him through sheer force of will.

“Why would I? When I had *you* waiting for me at home,” he growled and she blinked back her tears, which threatened to overflow.

“Why should I believe you?” she finally asked.

“Why would I lie to you? I have nothing to gain from it, we’re getting divorced, going our separate ways in a few months’ time... right?” The last emerged a bit uncertainly and Theresa blinked at the unwelcome reminder.

“Right. Of course...” she nodded.

“So lying about this now would achieve nothing...” he shrugged.

“Thank you,” she wasn’t sure what she was thanking him for... telling the truth? Not sleeping with those women? All she knew was that she felt incredibly relieved because the public humiliation hurt so much less now that she knew the rumours of his many infidelities had been unfounded. She shut out the painful, lingering memory of the omnipresent Francesca and dropped her head back onto his shoulder. He stroked her narrow back gently, there was nothing sexual in their embrace anymore, just comfort and support which Theresa needed a lot more than the physical release she had been craving before.

“You must be starving,” he finally murmured into her hair, lifting his head to smile down into her eyes. “I’ll get us something to eat. We can have dinner and watch a movie in bed, okay?” She nodded and reluctantly allowed him to lift her from his lap. He dropped a sweet kiss on her head and left the bedroom with a gentle smile.

Chapter Nine

That day signaled a turning point in their rocky relationship, the peace remained and along with it a mutual, ever-deepening respect blossomed between them. Sandro consulted her on some of his business decisions, seeming to value her opinions and take her advice and, taking her cue from him, Theresa started asking for his opinions on some of her designs and developed a keen admiration for the eye he seemed to have for quality jewelry. With his encouragement she started attempting more difficult pieces using new mediums and she was pleasantly surprised with the results.

Life was better but by no means perfect, they still slept apart at Theresa's insistence, and even though he still accompanied her to all of her doctor's appointments and was even her coach at the natural childbirth classes she had started attending, Theresa hardly ever talked to him about the baby and did her utmost to discourage any discussion he may want to have about it. Lisa was meant to be her coach but her cousin had her hands full with Rhys and promised to be there for the birth but could not put in the time commitment at the classes. That, of course, meant that Sandro was nothing more than a temporary replacement which she knew grated on his ego. Francesca still loomed large between them and even though Theresa was careful never to mention the other woman's name; she was never far from Theresa's mind.

Sandro had gone to Italy a couple of times during the past three months and after compulsively checking the Internet for any news about him while he was away, she had finally found pictures of the two of them together, attending some glamorous function in Milan. She couldn't read the Italian article but it had been an extensive four page spread on the event and Sandro and Francesca Delvecchio, as the captions had identified her, had been two of the most beautiful people there, so there had been at least a dozen pictures of them smiling, dancing and drinking. Sandro had looked so relaxed and happy with the statuesque, gorgeous brunette on his arm, that Theresa had been unable to stop staring at the pictures. That was how he should have looked on their wedding day, carefree and in love. Instead his face had looked like it would crack wide open if he so much as tilted his lips at the corners. It had physically hurt her to see those pictures but the one that had torn her apart had been of him, bending down to drop a kiss onto his Francesca's full,

pouting red lips. Never had she seen two more evenly matched people.

Theresa sighed and shook herself slightly, as she found herself thinking of that picture again. It had been more than a month since she'd seen it and she hadn't mentioned it to Sandro, knowing that it would achieve little, especially with their separation looming less than three months away. She ran a gentle hand over the football sized mound of her stomach, trying to ease the restlessly moving baby beneath her touch. She had no right to be jealous... even though they had a much better relationship *now* than they'd had during the first year and a half of marriage, they were married in name only and would separate as soon as the baby was born.

She had started decorating the nursery and Sandro, who had thrown a fit one day when he'd returned from the office early to find her perched on a ladder attempting to paint the walls, had done the painting. She spent a great deal of time in the nursery, adding little touches here and there, often going out and shopping for furniture and toys. There really was very little left to do but she still kept adding little stuffed toys and tiny infant sized clothes. The colour scheme was cream and pale lilac. She had started out with blue but had come home from visiting Lisa one day to find that Sandro had changed to colour to something more "gender neutral" as he'd put it. She hadn't protested it too much because she had found the new colour scheme soothing and prettier than the blue on white she'd had planned. She also found Sandro's touches elsewhere in the nursery... he bought toys, girls' toys. Stuffed dolls, teddy bears, toy ponies, anything a little girl's heart could possibly desire. Theresa chose not to acknowledge them in any way and every time she came across one, usually insidiously hidden amongst the toys she had bought, she would relegate it to the corner furthest from the beautiful crib that they had selected together. There was a quite a collection forming in the area which she had dubbed Toy Siberia. She did not know *why* he kept buying those things and she refused to ask. He never mentioned the heap of toys that she had stowed in the corner, just kept doggedly adding more and more to the nursery.

Their two hours three times a week had branched out into a few hours every day. There was no longer a time limit on the amount of time they spent together because Theresa had stopped enforcing it once it became clear that Sandro was going to sneak a little time every day and it just became easier to pretend not to notice it. Theresa's health continued to fluctuate, her

pregnancy being a lot more difficult than she, Sandro or the doctor had ever anticipated. She had been diagnosed with pre-eclampsia the month before, Sandro had turned into a paranoid old woman about what she could and could not do. He had even stopped going into the office, working from home and hovering twenty-four/seven. She didn't know how she would get through the final two months of her pregnancy without resorting to some form of violence because the man was driving her completely crazy.

Now she sat with her feet up, staring gloomily out at the rain pouring down outside. It was an unusually wet and miserable spring afternoon in October and Theresa had long ago abandoned her book in favour of her roiling thoughts. So absorbed was she in those thoughts that she didn't hear Sandro come in and nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt a large hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he murmured, bending down to drop a quick kiss onto the soft, exposed skin where her shoulder and neck met. "I called your name at least twice but you were totally wrapped up in your own little world."

"I was just thinking..." she shrugged, her voice trailing off.

"About?"

"Everything... nothing," another listless shrug.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, coming down on his haunches in front of her.

"I'm fine. A little tired..." He lifted a hand and gently traced one of her delicate cheekbones with his thumb before nimbly jumping to his feet and sitting down on the sofa next to her. Neither of them said anything for a while, they just listened to the rain and watched it cascading down the window like a waterfall.

"I want you to meet my father," he suddenly announced unexpectedly and she froze before turning her head slowly to meet his brooding gaze.

"What?"

"My father..." he repeated and she bit her lip before clearing her throat uncertainly.

"I don't know if that's..." she began but he interrupted her before she could finish.

“His condition is deteriorating very quickly,” he said abruptly, his voice broke slightly as he said the words and his jaw clenched.

“Oh Sandro, I’m so sorry...” she whispered, her eyes going liquid with sympathy for him. “When’s your flight?”

“I’m not leaving,” he told her grimly and her eyes shadowed in confusion, before flaring as she realized *why* he refused to go and be with his father.

“Sandro,” her voice was so low it barely carried to the man who sat inches away from her. “You *can’t* stay because of me. You have to go and be with your family. Your place is with them right now.”

“*You’re* my family too, Theresa,” he suddenly snapped, a maelstrom of frustration and pain welling up in his eyes. “And I refuse to leave you here alone.”

“Hardly alone, Sandro...” she dismissed airily. “The staff, Lisa and Rick and even my *father* are here for me. Go home to your family...”

“This is where I have to be, this is where I’m staying. Stop arguing with me for God’s sake!” he growled.

“You are *not* going to blame me for this too, Sandro...” she fumed impotently, recognizing the stubborn tilt of his jaw and the steely resolution in his eyes and knowing that his mind was made up and he wouldn’t budge on the issue unless something drastic happened to change his mind. “The only reason you’re here now is because of my father and his corrupt little blackmailing scheme! My father and I have messed up your life and your family enough; don’t make it worse by staying here with *me* of all people, when the family you sacrificed your freedom for needs you the most.”

“Don’t you *ever*,” he suddenly seethed, grabbing and gripping her hand so tightly he cut off the circulation. “Lump yourself into the same category as your father again, Theresa, none of this is *your* fault and right now you need me too.”

“I do *not* need you,” she enunciated clearly. “I refuse to let you martyr yourself like this. Duty above all else... is that it? Long-suffering Sandro, always doing the right thing, always putting everybody else’s needs before his own. Always sacrificing his own happiness at the altar of familial obligation. I am not going to be your obligation, Sandro. I refuse... go be

with your family!”

“You *are* my family, damn it! You, you, *you!*” He suddenly shouted in frustration and she jumped in fright, her jaw going slack as he leapt from the sofa to loom over her furiously. So rarely did Sandro lose his cool like this that Theresa simply stared up into his frustrated, wretched face in shocked silence. All the air suddenly seemed to leave his sails and his shoulders sagged as he dropped to his knees in front of her, bringing his eyes down to the same level as hers. “I want to be here with *you*... why is that so hard for you to understand?” His voice had dropped down to a whisper. His eyes suddenly, *shockingly*, filled with moisture which he made no attempt to hide from her and he muttered something in Italian, his voice thick with emotion. She bit her lip and shook her head.

“I don’t understand...” she whispered regretfully and he reached out a large hand to cup her cheek.

“My father is *dying, cara,*” he repeated in English, his voice absolutely wracked with emotion. “Please... I need you to just *not* fight with me right now.” She nodded and reached out with both hands to stroke his hair back from his broad, proud forehead. The gesture seemed to undo him and his face crumpled before he wrapped his strong arms around her thickened waist and buried his face in the mound of her stomach and Theresa curled her upper body protectively over his head as she whispered soothing little snippets of nothing into his hair.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to make this more difficult; I just thought that you were staying out of some misguided sense of honour and obligation. I would hate that, Sandro. I would hate for you to stay and then if the... the worst happened... you would blame *me* because you couldn’t be there at his side.”

“I know,” he murmured, finally lifting his head to look up at her, his face grim and carefully neutral, despite the roiling emotion she could see in his eyes. “And I can see why you would think that... I have blamed you for way too much in the past and treated you terribly but you *have* to believe me when I tell you that the last thing in the world I want to do anymore, is hurt you, Theresa.” She said nothing... knowing that even though it would not be intentional, he would still hurt her when he eventually left, when they divorced, when he married Francesca. All of those things were as inevitable as the sunset, they would happen and they would *devastate* her.

“So what did you want to ask me?” She finally asked, without acknowledging his fervent words. The omission did not go unnoticed and Sandro flinched slightly before taking a deep breath and levering himself up off his knees to sit down on the sofa beside her, angling his body so that he could face her.

“I want you to meet my father,” he repeated and her eyes showed her confusion.

“I’m not sure I understand... you know that doctor Shelbourne has prohibited any flying during my third trimester,” he smiled slightly before shaking his head.

“Theresa, *cara*, you really need to catch up to the twenty-first century,” he teased half-heartedly, it had become a standing joke between him and *Rick*, of all people, that Theresa was so technologically-backward. She could barely operate her mobile phone, so e-mailing, instant messaging and every other form of electronic *-ing*, left her completely baffled. She had wiped out the hard drives on three laptops in as many years and now kept her records strictly on paper in a filing cabinet in her office.

“So then, what do you have in mind?” She asked curiously.

“Certainly *nothing* that involves either you or my father flying anywhere... have you never heard of video-conferencing?” He asked, brushing back a strand of hair that had slipped from its anchor behind her ear, to swing into her face. He always did little things like that lately, he was always touching her, petting her and after her initial discomfort with all the contact, Theresa now barely even noticed it, simply enjoying the pampering.

“That thing where you have a meeting and you can see people on the other side of the world on a monitor in the room?” She asked vaguely and he grinned slightly.

“Yes... I often speak to my family in Italy by those means,” he revealed.

“Okay,” she nodded slowly. “So when do you want to do it?”

“I was thinking about tonight?” He half-asked and her stomach did a slow, nervous roll before she nodded again.

“Okay,” she said again, actually physically incapable of saying much else.

“They’re going to love you,” he reassured, squeezing her hand reassuringly.

“They?” She asked queasily, suddenly filled with doubts. “I thought it would be only your father.”

“My mother and grandmother will probably be there... maybe a couple of my sisters. With my father so sick, they’re probably all there.”

“Your father’s at home?” He nodded, his eyes darkening again.

“He refuses to be hospitalized, he says that if he’s going to die, he wants to do it at home... he has the best medical care and facilities money has to offer to him at home.”

“That’s understandable,” she nodded sympathetically. “He’s waited so long to go back home.” There was a moment’s awkward silence.

“I’m really glad you could get it back for him, Sandro,” she blurted impulsively. “Even if it cost you more than it should have.” Again the silence, before he nodded tautly, his grim face looking hewn from rock.

“Uhm... when do you want to do it?” She broke the uncomfortable silence a few moments later and he cleared his throat. “Do they know I’ll be... are they expecting to meet me?”

“I’ve been making noises about wanting them to meet you for a while now,” he informed. “So they won’t be too surprised by it.”

“Always thinking ahead aren’t you?” She asked caustically.

“If you mean that I’d anticipated having to introduce you to my dying father by these less than ideal means, then *no*, I wasn’t really preparing for this eventuality!” He snapped irritably.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she whispered defensively.

“Of course you didn’t,” he agreed sarcastically and stung, she managed to lever her bulky form up from the sofa, ignoring him when he jumped up lithely to offer assistance.

“I’m tired, I think I’ll take a nap before dinner,” she said wearily. “I’ll see you later...” She left him behind without a single backward look, just plain sick and tired of the constant tension that they both had to live with.

“Are you ready?” He asked her quietly a few hours later. They

were both in his huge study where he had set up the computer and camera for the video conference. No simple webcam and computer screen for Sandro, he had proper video camera with a large screen television screen set up. He explained that it would enable to allow his family to see both of them at the same time, further explaining that his parents had a similar setup at their home.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose,” she nodded nervously and he led her to a large, comfortable sofa that was facing the camera. He made sure she was sitting comfortably before kneeling in front of her unexpectedly.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he said softly, his dark eyes piercing as they stared intently into hers. “Being around you is a curiously humbling experience... I do not believe I have ever apologized this much to one person in my entire life before. I always seem to be getting it wrong with you.”

“You’re under a lot of emotional strain at the moment, Sandro... and I know that I probably wasn’t making it any easier on you. Please just forget about it.” He sighed deeply before nodding and sitting down next to her. He picked up a small remote control from the coffee table in front of them and started up the camera, indicating towards the blinking red light that he had told her would mean that the camera was on. An image of an elderly couple suddenly filled the previously blank screen of the big television to the left of the camera. Broad smiles suddenly lit up their faces and they both started chattering at the same time. Theresa knew that they were his parents from the pictures she had seen in Sandro’s study. His father looked a lot frailer and more tired than the robust man in the photographs though and Theresa could see from the sallow skin and sunken eyes, how very ill the older man was.

Sandro was smiling warmly as his parents continued to chatter, before he finally raised a hand and they reluctantly fell silent. He said something to them in Italian, before indicating towards Theresa, who sat with a frozen smile on her face. She wasn’t sure what to do, or what to say, she wasn’t even sure if they spoke English.

“Mama, papa... I know this has been a long time in coming,” he said, in heavily accented English. “But this is Theresa... *la mia moglie*, my wife.”

“*Piacevole per incontrarli*,” she murmured haltingly, not sure if she had said it right or if they even understood her but the smile Sandro directed down at her was filled with so much overwhelming pride and tenderness that

Theresa felt bathed in its warmth. He entwined the long, lean fingers of one hand with hers but she didn't understand why he felt the need to make the gesture when their hands were out of the camera's sight.

"I'm pleased to meet you," she repeated in English, in case the couple hadn't understood her, which seemed likely if their baffled expressions were anything to go by. His mother's lips pursed in what looked like disapproval but his father's smile broadened and he said something in rapidfire Italian that Theresa didn't stand a chance of understanding.

"My father says that you are truly beautiful," Sandro translated for her. "And that he is very happy to finally meet you." Her eyes flooded with tears and she nodded slightly.

"Thank you... *grazie*," she smiled warmly at the fragile looking old man and he looked delighted by it. He once again said something in high speed Italian and Sandro chuckled before responding in an amused voice. It was obvious that they were talking about her and she turned to Sandro waiting for the translation, when it didn't look like it was forthcoming, she prodded him with a nudge from her shoulder and he grinned before saying something in a wry voice to his mother and father before turning to her with that same warm humour in his eyes.

"My father says that while you look as sweet and docile as an angel he does not imagine that a woman with your red hair can be easy to live with. He believes that the angelic exterior must hide a fiery temper..."

"Oh?" She asked in a deceptively calm voice, even while she narrowed her eyes at him. "and what did *you* say?"

"I told him that he definitely knows women a lot better than I do because when I married you I thought that the angel was all there was, until I provoked the fiery demoness into showing herself, to my detriment."

"Demoness?" She asked in a highly offended voice and both his father and he chuckled simultaneously.

"Easy *cara*," he lifted his free hand in a gesture of surrender and his father burst into warm, genuine laughter, the sound so happy and carefree that for an instant everyone, including his wife simply stared at him with huge smiles. The older man finally brought his laughter under control and said something in Italian, which seemed to be aimed at Theresa. She looked at Sandro for a translation and he hesitated for a millisecond before clearing

his throat and turning back toward Theresa.

“My father says that it’s good to see me with a woman who isn’t intimidated by me, who can give as good as she gets. He thinks we will have strong sons and daughters...” he cleared his throat slightly before continuing, even though the huskiness persisted. “He is honoured to call you daughter and is proud that his son’s children will come from a worthy woman like you.”

“Oh...” Theresa whispered, her hand going up to cover her mouth and her eyes flooding with tears. “Oh God.”

“*Cara*,” his soft voice in her ear pleaded with her to keep it together and she nodded, closing her eyes briefly to keep her surging emotions under control, before bracing herself and opening her eyes to meet the wise, old eyes of a man who was halfway across the world.

“Thank you,” she told him again. “You are so very kind to say that. I am equally proud to know that my child comes from a strong family such as yours. I look forward to the day I can present my son to you, sir.”

“Or daughter,” Sandro inserted smoothly, before translating what she had said to the beaming older man.

“You are... lovely girl. I sorry for all trouble,” the man suddenly said in broken but understandable English and Theresa’s lips trembled with emotion. “You make my boy happy. I see this... *grazie*. I so worry... but I see now, he very happy with you. Very much love here. I see.”

She couldn’t respond to that with much more than a nod and another emotional *grazie*, overwhelmed by the perception that had allowed the sick old man to see how much she loved his son. He and Sandro were now having a solemn conversation and the older man started pausing more and more frequently, seeming to lose track of his thoughts more and more until his wife stepped in and called a halt to the conversation.

“Mama says he is tired and needs to take his medication and rest,” he whispered to Theresa, as they watched the older man protest half-heartedly before allowing himself to be wheeled, for he was in a wheelchair, out of the room with a few last farewells to Sandro and Theresa. Sandro’s hand was squeezing hers so hard that it stopped the blood flow into her fingers but Theresa didn’t protest, knowing that Sandro was probably wondering if it would be the last time he would ever see or speak to his father. They watched

in silence as the door closed behind his mother's ample form before they both suddenly became aware of the fact that another person was in the room on screen. A wizened old woman suddenly plonked herself into the seat, Sandro's mother had just vacated and Sandro's entire face lit up.

"*Nonna!*" He greeted with warm enthusiasm and turned to Theresa, who had already gleaned who the little, old lady was. She was tentatively starting to smile, when the woman suddenly launched into speech, her voice low and furious. Whatever she was saying wiped the smile off Sandro's face in seconds and she watched as his eyes darkened in fury and his lips tightened in an expression she was more than a little familiar with. He released Theresa's hand and hissed something equally dire sounding back at his grandmother, who gasped in horror before launching into an even angrier seeming tirade. By this time two younger women, whom she recognised as Sandro's sisters had stepped into the room and upon hearing whatever it was their grandmother had said added their own two cents' worth until there was nothing but unintelligible squawks coming from the speakers. Suddenly the old woman's words turned to English and her eyes were seemed trained on Theresa.

"*You* make my family miserable! You take my grandson and keep him away from his family, keep him away from his dying father... you nothing but selfish. Why you want a man who no love you? No pride... you no pride. He love a good woman, he no love *you!*"

Theresa gasped in horror and raised her hands to her mouth, defenceless against the hatred she saw burning in the old woman's eyes. Her eyes flooded with anguished tears and Sandro swore shakily before saying something soft and dangerous sounding to the three women on the other end of the camera but Theresa had blocked them all out and was struggling to her feet, ignoring Sandro's desperate protest.

She was out the door and halfway up the stairs before he caught up with her.

"She's old, *cara*," he said desperately, holding onto her arm as she tried to wrest herself away from him. "She's old and stubborn. What she said was *not* true."

"I *didn't* make your family miserable?" She asked brokenly. "Of course I did, Sandro. You know that's true... I didn't keep you away from them? Or

away from your dying father? I did that too. You don't love me? No news there. You're in love with someone else? Again. Old news... and she was right. I have absolutely *no* pride. None whatsoever... if I did I would never have stood for this sham of a marriage. But everything she said was true. So she was just being honest... and that's *my* shame to deal with."

"Theresa, please..." she didn't know what he wanted from her. She yanked her arm from his grip and found herself teetering desperately on the edge of the step... nearly falling until he yanked her back towards his strong body and braced himself to absorb her weight.

"You foolish woman, stop fighting me and just *listen*, damn it!" He hissed into her ear... and shocked by her close call she could do nothing but stand trembling in his arms. "She didn't get it all right; you have more stubborn pride than any person I have ever met. You did not keep me away from my father, I chose to stay."

"Because of *me*," she inserted despondently.

"Because I *chose* to be with you," he emphasised but not really seeing the difference, Theresa simply remained quiet. "Don't you *see*, Theresa? I wanted to be with *you*!"

"I'm tired, Sandro," she finally whispered after a long pause, sending a pointed glance down at the restraining hand he had on her elbow. His grip tightened slightly before he reluctantly released her and stepped back to allow her to proceed up the stairs.

When Theresa woke from a restless sleep a few hours before dawn it didn't take her long to realise that Sandro was lying in bed with her. His big, hard body was curved around hers, his knees spooning in behind hers. He had one arm curled in under her neck and the other slung heavily across her waist, his large hand cupped protectively over her swollen abdomen. She could feel his deep breath against the nape of her neck, indicating that he was asleep and it had been so long since she'd found herself in bed with him that she allowed herself to simply enjoy his relaxed warmth and closeness without the tension that was usually between them when he was awake. Even before they'd started sleeping apart, he'd never simply held her in his sleep... so this was a novel and overwhelmingly enjoyable experience that she couldn't deprive herself of. She was just about dozing off again, when the telephone buzzed

quietly from the nightstand beside her bed. She jerked slightly and the movement woke Sandro, who was instantly on alert behind her.

“You okay?” he asked groggily and she nodded just as the phone buzzed again.

“Hmmm... who could be calling at...” she squinted at the digital clock beside the phone. “Four in the morning?” She realised who it could be the instant the question escaped her lips and from the sudden tension in Sandro’s body, she knew that he realised it too. He sat up abruptly and she immediately felt cold, as he leaned over her to yank up the receiver.

“De Lucci,” he barked once he had it up to his ear. “*Si... si...*” she sat up and pushed her hair out of her eyes as she tried to see his expression in the dim light of the LCD display of the clock. His face closed up tighter than a fist and he bowed his head slightly. Biting her lip, as she fought back the tears, Theresa lay a comforting hand on one tense, naked shoulder.

“*Quando?*” He asked tersely, his voice hoarse. He said a few more things but Theresa tuned his words out, hearing only the pain he was ruthlessly keeping at bay behind the harshly controlled voice. She lowered her head to his broad shoulder, wanting only to comfort and kept stroking his back as he spoke. He was silent for a long time, before she realised that he was done speaking and that he had lowered the receiver to the bed beside him. She turned her head to look up into his face and realised that he was staring off into the distance. It was still too dark to see much of his face but from the grim set of his jaw it was obvious what the news was.

“When?” she asked gently, reaching for the receiver and placing it gently back into its cradle. He shook himself slightly before turning his head to face her.

“About ten minutes ago,” he whispered and she nodded, lifting a small hand to cup his tense jaw.

“You go and grab a shower, I’ll pack a bag for you...” she clicked on the bedside lamp before awkwardly heaving herself up and off of the bed. He remained where she had left him and she sighed softly, before leaning down to kiss the top of his head gently.

“Come on, Sandro,” she murmured firmly. “You grab that shower and I’ll take care of everything else.” Something about the tone of her voice got through to him and he nodded and got up like someone in a trance before

heading to the bathroom. Theresa stood there for a while until she heard the shower going before she waddled out to his room down the hall and packed a bag for him.

Twenty minutes later, when she returned to her guest room, it was to find the shower still running. Concerned she stepped into the bathroom and could barely make out his shape behind the frosted glass of the shower door but she could see enough to tell that he was still in there and not really moving. She sighed and bit her lip before, decision made, she stripped down to her skin and stepped into the cubicle with him. He was standing with his back to the cubicle door, his head bowed beneath the strong spray and his hands braced against the tiled wall, long arms outstretched in front of him and muscles tensed. He didn't seem to realise she was there until her small hands touched the bunched muscles of his shoulders. She could feel his instinctive jerk of surprise beneath her touch and very gently moved her hands until they crept down under his arms and around to his broad chest. She could feel his bone deep tremors and with gentle insistence tugged him back towards her until she was able to rest her cheek against the warm, wet skin of his back. Her hands were splayed across his chest and she could feel the strong beat of his heart beneath her touch.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, dropping warm kisses across the skin of his back. "I'm so sorry, Sandro." He shuddered violently before turning with a groan and gathering her into his arms, hunching his body around hers and burying his face in her still-dry hair. They stood that way for a long time before he lifted his ravaged face and looked down at her. His eyes were wet with tears and he reached up to cup her face before lowering his lips to hers and kissing her hungrily. He did nothing more than that just kissed her like he would never get the chance to do so again. He kissed like a man who knew that he would have to go without sustenance for an unknown amount of time. Finally, chest heaving, he lifted his head and stared intently down into her dazed face.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered gently. "The most beautiful thing in my life. I don't want to leave you here. Not now."

"I'll be fine," she reassured, this time she was the one to reach up and stroke his worried face. "The baby will be fine. I have Lisa and Rick... You have to take care of your family now, Sandro."

"You're my family too," he repeated his words of the previous

afternoon. "I have to take care of you too."

"No," she reached around him to shut off the water and met his eyes squarely. "I can take care of myself. And to be honest, having you here when you should be with your family, will simply add to my stress." He said nothing for a few moments before shutting his eyes and nodding abruptly.

"Okay," he inhaled deeply. "Okay, I'll arrange my flight immediately." She opened the door and reached for a couple of the heated towels hanging from the railing beside the shower cubicle, handing one over to him before wrapping one around herself, happy to be covering up her huge frame again.

An hour later she and Sandro were standing on the doorstep. The chauffeur of the driving service they sometimes used when they were going out to parties, stood waiting patiently beneath an umbrella next to the shiny black sedan parked out front.

"Promise me that you'll eat well," Sandro urged and she nodded sombrely, knowing that he would need to have his head clear for what was to come. "And you'll contact Elisa and Richard if you feel unwell." Another nod. "And you will remember to take your vitamins?"

His voice was starting to get hoarse with emotion and she gave him a wavering smile before nodding again.

"I promise..."

"You say this... but you forget... I know you," he shook his head in frustration. "It is important for your health, *cara* and you no remember to take. It drive me crazy. I worry..." it was a sign of his anxiety and stress that his normally impeccable, lightly-accented English had failed him so completely and she stepped toward him and went on tip-toe to drop a kiss onto one of his lean cheeks.

"Why don't you call Phumsile and Lisa once you land?" She suggested gently. "And if you're worried about me forgetting you can have them remind me."

"Yes," he nodded, appeased. "I will. Please, Theresa, call me. Anytime... if you need anything, if you want to talk... call me. I'll call *you* everyday..."

"That's good..." she said quietly, not sure if he'd have the time to talk

with her everyday but knowing that he needed to make the promise. “Now you’d better go before you miss your flight,” he nodded and dragged her into his arms for a passionate, desperate kiss before letting her go abruptly and striding down the steps toward the car. He paused when he reached the car and turned around for one last, lingering look at her before he climbed in and was gone.

Theresa turned blindly toward the house and once she was inside she felt completely lost. Not sure where to turn or who to turn to she found herself walking towards Sandro’s study. She’d been in the room very few times before and those times had always been in Sandro’s company, now she felt like she was intruding into his domain but it was the one place she felt closest to him. Everything bore his stamp... it was the only room he had insisted on decorating himself. He’d largely left the rest of the house up to Theresa and she now knew it had been because he hadn’t much cared what their home together would look like since he’d never had any intention of it being permanent.

Now, as she looked at the masculine room with its dark, heavy furniture and minimalist, almost Asian decor, she realised how completely different it was from the rest of the house and her heart broke at this additional sign of how doomed their relationship had been from the start. She sank down onto the plush, black leather sofa, curled up into a ball and cried for the life she could have had if she’d just been the woman Sandro had wanted to start off with. Once the bout of self-pity had passed, she sat up and wiped at her eyes before gently running her hands over her distended abdomen.

“You and I will make our own lives, darling,” she promised. “And we’ll be so happy. Just you wait and see.”

Chapter Ten

Sandro had made good on his promise and had enlisted both Lisa and Phumsile's aid in ensuring that she took her vitamins and rested enough... but that was the only promise he kept. A month passed with barely any word from him, his phonecalls, the few that came, were rushed and impersonal and barely lasted three minutes each time. When Theresa tried to contact him, he was never available, or so the cold female voices on the other end of the line told her. She had no choice but to take them at their word.

She kept track of Sandro's movements through the news; online, televised and printed, his father's death and Sandro's subsequent taking over of an empire were pretty hot news items and barely a day went by that it wasn't mentioned in some form of news. There had been paparazzi coverage of the funeral, despite the media ban the family had put on proceedings, some intrepid photographer had managed to get a picture of Sandro standing over his father's open grave, his face closed up tighter than a fist, flanked by his mother and by Francesca who had stood with her hand woven through his arm, offering the support of a lover, the support a wife would offer. A lot had been written about that photograph, a lot of cynical criticism had been aimed at his cold, absent wife and a lot of praise for the stoic Francesca who stood by him through thick and thin.

No word about her difficult pregnancy which made travel nearly impossible for her. A few local reporters had contacted her, wanting her "side of the story" and her refusal to be interviewed or offer any comment had merely added fuel to the fodder that she was unfeeling and cold. The media, when given free rein, were ruthless. For the most part they left her alone, content to write what they wanted and in every article the beautiful, vivacious Francesca was lauded for her unwavering and loving support, while the "plain and anti-social" Theresa was criticised for her seeming neglect of her husband in his time of need.

She sighed quietly, as she stared out at the heavy downpour, missing Sandro so much it hurt and wishing that she could just talk with him. The baby moved restlessly and she winced slightly as a tiny foot caught her just beneath the ribs. She sang a quiet lullaby and ran her hands over the mound of her stomach. She was feeling her burden more and more with each passing day and it was getting increasingly difficult just to make it through the day.

“Theresa?” The quiet voice coming from behind her made her jump nearly out of her skin and she yelped before turning to face Lisa and Rick both of whom stood framed in the doorway of the den.

“God, you startled me,” she gasped as they stepped into the room, neither cracking a smile, both looking relentlessly grim. “What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“Terri... we have to get you out of here,” Lisa said urgently, rounding the sofa to stand in front of her.

“What? Why?”

“We’ll explain once we’re out of here...”

“No,” she shook her head stubbornly. “Tell me now. Is it Sandro? Was he hurt?”

“He *will* be once I get done with him,” Rick suddenly threatened furiously.

“Rick, not now,” Lisa groaned and Theresa’s eyes settled on the grim-faced man in confusion.

“I don’t understand...” her confused gaze went from Lisa’s frantic expression to Rick’s furious one. “What’s going on?”

“A story just broke in the European newspapers...”

“What story?” She asked in bewilderment and Rick swore softly.

“Sweetheart we can discuss it later, for now we have to leave before the vultures descend.”

“No, Rick,” she maintained stubbornly. “I’m not leaving my home without good reason.” Rick’s jaw clenched and his expression clearly gave away his frustration with her.

“Terri they’re saying that Sandro was blackmailed into marrying you. That he did so for his father. They’re also saying that a *source* close to the family claims that since Sandro has no reason to be with you anymore he’ll be filing for a divorce as soon as he gets back.”

“I never thought of that,” Theresa half-whispered to herself. “Of course he’s free now. That’s probably why I never heard from him, he’s been busy planning this... I should have realised that he would want that. I should have seen this coming.”

“Theresa, don’t you dare beat yourself up about it. If the divorce rumours are true then he’s a bastard for abandoning his pregnant wife when she needs him most,” Rick fumed.

“No, I’m happy for him. He was trapped...” she was so dazed, she barely realised what she was saying and Rick swore in disbelief.

“My God, it’s like you have battered wife syndrome. Stop making excuses for him, he’s an ass who hurt you time and again.” When it looked like she was about to protest, Lisa stepped forward.

“Come on, darling, let’s get you packed up and out of here,” her cousin took charge, grabbing hold of Theresa’s arm and jerking her out of her stupor. Lisa steered her out of the room, tossing a warning look over her shoulder when it looked like Rick wanted to say something more.

After getting settled at Rick and Lisa’s, Theresa decided to give the couple, who were walking on eggshells around her, a break from her presence by taking a nap. She was just slipping into a troubled doze when she heard the unmistakable voice of her husband coming from a distance. She frowned and sat upright, pushing her tangled hair out of her face. She tilted her head, not sure if her imagination was playing tricks on her, until she heard it again. It was Sandro, without a doubt, and he sounded agitated.

She got out of bed with some difficulty before padding to the door on bare feet and opening it slightly. This time she could clearly make out his voice.

“I had nothing to do with that story,” he was protesting. “And I’ll be damned if you keep me away from my family like this.”

“She doesn’t want to see you, Sandro,” Rick informed with obvious relish and there was a moment’s charged silence.

“Maybe not,” Sandro finally conceded quietly. “But that’s because she doesn’t know everything. I just need to explain things to her. I need to talk with her...”

“Explain what? How you’ve been cheating on her with that woman since nearly the day of your wedding? How you’ve spent every available moment with her since you returned to Italy for the funeral, while your heavily pregnant wife waited in vain for you to call her every day?”

“I haven’t cheated on her,” Sandro growled after a moment’s silence. “Not in deed and not in thought. Not once. She knows that.”

“All she knows is that her husband left nearly two weeks ago, supposedly to attend his father’s funeral but then hooked up with his mistress and started divorce proceedings once he realised that nothing was tying him to his wife anymore.”

“There’s a hell of a lot tying me to my wife, Palmer,” Sandro gritted. “Our baby for one.”

“Oh please, we know how little you actually *want* that baby, De Lucci.”

“I want him,” Sandro said quietly, so quietly she nearly missed it. “I want them both...”

“Stop it,” Theresa could stand it no more, she waddled into the living room where Rick and Lisa stood on one side of the room and Sandro on the other. The atmosphere was so charged that Theresa was sure her hair was standing on end. Sandro’s face tightened at the sight of her.

“Theresa,” he whispered. “This was not meant for you to hear.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she shrugged listlessly. “I’m tired... I’m so tired of all this, Sandro.”

“I know, *cara* but it will get better. I promise you that.”

“I don’t see how it can...” she shook her head bitterly and he groaned, closing the distance between them in four strides, before gathering her into his arms and hugging her tenderly.

“It can. It *will*. I didn’t file for a divorce, Theresa. I have no reason to divorce you...”

“Sandro please just... *shut up!*” She interrupted furiously, pushing him away forcefully and his face went ruddy but his mouth slammed shut. “If you won’t divorce me then I’ll be the one divorcing you. I don’t want a husband who feels obligated to be with me. You have no reason to stay with me anymore. I can take care of myself and I can take care of this baby. I don’t need you or your guilt anymore. You’re free to leave. In fact, I want you to go.” He said nothing, merely stared down at her, with one hand squeezing the nape of his neck. His face was inscrutable, his eyes dark with an emotion that she could not read. He looked stunned, incapable of movement and Theresa realised that he needed a harder push.

“For God’s sake, go back to the woman you love! Go back to Francesca.” She turned away from him, dismissing him contemptuously but froze when he swore shakily.

“God, you are the most contrary little bitch!” He hissed. “I don’t *love* Francesca. I don’t think I’ve ever loved her. Maybe when I married you, for about five seconds, I believed that I did. But I was disabused of that notion pretty damned early on in our marriage. I don’t love her... and I have no idea why the hell you’re so fixated on her.” She turned on him furiously, ignoring Rick and Lisa who were watching the exchange in morbid fascination.

“Maybe I’m fixated on her because every time you go to Italy, the papers and Internet are full of pictures of you two attending the same functions, touching, kissing, dancing or hugging! Don’t you *dare* insult my intelligence by saying that it meant nothing. I believe you when you say that you’ve never slept other women while we were married. But I’m willing to bet you came pretty close with her. I mean, how the hell could *she* be the other woman? *I* was the other woman. Your entire family knew it, my father knew it... I know it.”

“We’re in the same social circle, Theresa. She was always at the same functions as I am. She’s an old friend, naturally I hugged her or touched her occasion. Yes I danced with her, dropped a few casual kisses on her cheek or mouth... it meant nothing. I treated her as I would one of my sisters. I don’t desire her, I don’t love her and I don’t *want* her! Those are feelings reserved for you... only for you,” his voice deepened and his face softened at the admission, his eyes were gentle as he registered the confusion on her face. Was he saying he *loved* her? And if he was... did she believe him? She wasn’t sure of the answer to either question and a second later she didn’t really care when she suddenly doubled over in pain.

Sandro, Rick and Lisa all surged forward in concern but her husband got to her first, he had an arm around her thickened waist before she could blink.

“What’s wrong?” He demanded hoarsely. Theresa grabbed his free hand in both of hers and squeezed it urgently as her entire body quivered in excruciating pain. After an eternal moment, the pain lessened and faded and she pushed her way upright, meeting Sandro’s frantic gaze with a panicky one of her own.

“It’s the baby...” she whispered in fear. “I think the baby’s coming...”

“No, no, no,” the naked panic and fear in his eyes did nothing to alleviate Theresa’s own terror. “He can’t be coming now. He’s nearly a month early! Are you sure?”

“I’ve been cramping all day but I thought it was due to stress,” Theresa moaned after the pain had subsided. “But now I think I’m having contractions.”

“Okay, it’s okay,” he soothed, automatically gathering her trembling body into a hug. “We’ll be fine. We have to get you to the hospital.”

Theresa had argued, begged, cajoled, attempted to reason but Sandro had refused point blank to defer his position as her coach to Lisa. In the end, Lisa had simply declined to go in to hospital with her, saying that it was best for Theresa to have her original coaching partner with her. Shocked and hurt by what she felt was an unforgivable betrayal, Theresa had refused to look, or even *talk*, to her cousin while Sandro shepherded her out to his car. Lisa had seemed to be cheerfully and deliberately oblivious to Theresa’s pointed and rather childish, silent treatment, promising that she and Rick would be at the hospital soon.

“She did what she thought was best, *cara*,” Sandro tried to placate en-route to the hospital. She simply turned her head and stared out at the passing scenery, scared and angry and not really in the mood to be comforted by him. “She knew that I would have insisted and we’d have just wasted time arguing futilely about it.”

“I wanted somebody I trusted in there with me,” she suddenly said, keeping her eyes glued on the road ahead. He didn’t respond to that but from the corner of her eye she saw his hands tighten on the steering wheel and knew that she’d scored a direct hit. The rest of the journey went by quickly and before she knew it she was being admitted into the elite private maternity clinic that Sandro had arranged for months ago. She’d had only one contraction en-route but it had nearly sent Sandro off the road in a panic.

Still it was hours before anything more interesting than that happened. The doctor confirmed that she was indeed in labour but reassured them that it was perfectly normal for women to go into labour a few weeks early. They were taking extra precautions because of her health issues during the

pregnancy but for someone whose pregnancy had been fraught with drama, Theresa's labour was pretty boring aside from the intense periods of pain. Her obstetrician monitored her condition carefully and weathered Sandro's demanding, panicked questions with admirable calm. Her contractions seemed to leave Sandro more wrung out than they did her and he wasn't dealing with it very well.

About five hours after her admission Theresa found herself glaring up at her hovering husband in frustration.

"For God's sake, go and get yourself some coffee or something, you're driving me up the wall!"

"I won't leave you. What if you have another contraction? What if your water breaks and they rush you into the delivery room? What if there are complications?" He asked hoarsely, his eyes dilating more with each anxious question. And Theresa rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"I doubt any of those things will happen in the two minutes it would take you to leave the room and get a cup of coffee, Sandro," she sighed impatiently.

"They could," he insisted stubbornly.

"Unlikely." He didn't respond, merely continued to sit by her bedside. They were both silent for a few minutes.

"Why are you here?" Theresa suddenly asked tiredly.

"Because this is where I want to be," he responded promptly and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Why do you want to be here?" She persisted.

"You're my wife, *cara*. You're having my baby," he reached out and covered one of her hands with his. "I belong here."

"You don't belong here," she whispered hoarsely.

"I do."

"You have another life, a family that wants you to come home, a woman you love and who loves you. You don't have to be here, Sandro," she shook her head tiredly, tears seeping from beneath her eyelids.

"I have this life, with you. It's the only one that matters to me," he insisted. "I have a wife who loved me once, and who maybe... someday,

would dare to love and trust me again? I don't *have* to be here... but I *want* to be here."

"Too many things have happened between us. More than two years of pain," she whispered rawly and his hand contracted around hers. "I can't go back to being the naive girl who loved you with all her heart."

"But maybe... the *woman* who replaced the girl could find a way to love the flawed man she'd once placed on a pedestal he had no business being on?"

"You've hurt me so many times," she confessed. Opening her eyes and meeting his gaze full on. He flinched slightly beneath the accusatory glare.

"I know."

"In so many ways."

"I know."

"Why should I forgive you and love you again? Why should I open up my heart to a man who would probably crush it in the palms of his hands?"

"You probably shouldn't," he smiled bitterly. "But I wish you would."

"I can't," she whispered, tears drenching her pale cheeks and he nodded slightly, reaching out to wipe at the tears.

"I know," he finally said again, before lapsing into silence.

Her water finally broke four hours later and she was moved to the delivery room. She and Sandro hadn't exchanged any further meaningful conversation, he'd just continued to soothe her and coach her through the ever-increasing pain. She didn't ever say it but she was pretty grateful to have him there. Even though he was as nervous and edgy as a cat in a barrel between contractions, he was a solid rock during them.

Four intensely nerve-wracking, sweaty and pain-riddled hours later, during which time Sandro supported her, swore at her doctors, threatened the nurses and seemed to come close to breaking down into tears on several occasions, Theresa finally gave one last painful push. There was a rush of activity at the foot of the bed as Theresa felt an overwhelming flood of relief. Sandro's eyes remained glued to her face, bright and feverish above the surgical mask they had forced him to wear. He dragged down the mask and

leaned down toward her, until his mouth was so close to her ear she could feel his hot and moist breath fanning over her overheated skin.

“You’re amazing, *cara mia*. So incredible...” she jerked her head away from his mouth and turned her face to stare at him in bewilderment, rocked by the emotion she heard in his voice. But his attention was now on the doctor and the squalling, naked and tiny bundle the man held cradled in his gentle and capable hands.

“Here’s the little lady who’s been causing all that fuss and bother,” the man was saying jovially. “Congratulations Mr and Mrs De Lucci you have a beautiful and perfectly healthy baby girl.”

Theresa’s breath hitched in her chest at the man’s words and her eyes remained glued to Sandro’s face. But instead of the rapidly concealed disappointment she would have expected to see, she witnessed something she would never have believed if she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes... she watched her husband fall hopelessly and helplessly head over heels in love with the outraged bundle of femininity the doctor placed onto Theresa’s chest.

Theresa was overwhelmed as she stared down at the tiny, wailing infant her chest and not entirely sure what to do with this baby girl who should have been a boy.

“She’s beautiful,” the smitten Sandro crooned, dropping a large hand to the baby’s tiny head and stroking the soft skin and tufts of still-wet hair, gently. “She’s so very beautiful, Theresa.”

“Yes,” she muttered automatically. “I suppose she is.” He frowned down at her, puzzled by her response or lack thereof.

“Theresa... what’s wrong?”

“Your wife is exhausted Mr De Lucci,” the doctor said brusquely. “Give her time to recover and I’m sure she’ll be fawning all over this little beauty in no time at all.”

“Yes. I’m tired,” Theresa said remotely and Sandro’s brow furrowed. He watched as Theresa absently stroked the baby’s down-soft back, without once looking down at the infant and knew that something was terribly wrong.

Chapter Eleven

“She’s gorgeous, Terri,” Lisa gushed and Theresa smiled tiredly, nodding her appreciation of the comment. Lisa seemed not to notice her lack of enthusiasm, or if she did, probably dismissed it as exhaustion. Rick had been in earlier but was at work at the moment. Sandro, was leaning against a wall, arms crossed over his broad chest and legs crossed at the ankles. He said nothing but Theresa was aware of him watching her every move with brooding intensity.

It was just over a day since the baby had been born and Sandro had gone home only to shower and change and to bring her a change of clothes too. He’d also packed a bag for the baby, filling it with the tiny little pink and white things he’d bought months ago while Theresa had been industriously buying toys and clothes for a baby boy.

“Have you thought of names yet?” Lisa was asking and Theresa winced slightly at the memory of a conversation she’d once had with Sandro. He must’ve have remembered too because he made a caustic sound.

“Last time we talked about it,” he spoke for the first time since Lisa had arrived ten minutes before. “She had her heart set on Kieran, Liam, Ethan or Alexander.” Lisa frowned at that.

“Only boys’ names?” She asked in confusion.

“You forget, your cousin was obsessed with having a son,” he taunted. “What a pity for her that she failed so dismally at achieving her goal.” Theresa’s soft mouth quivered at the slight and his eyes darkened at the sight but he kept pressing. “She’s so torn up by this inability of hers to do anything right, that she hasn’t even bothered to *look* at our daughter. Or hold her. Or even attempt to feed her. Why hassle with a mere girl child when it won’t get her out of her miserable marriage with me? When it won’t win her the affection of her thrice-damned father?”

“Theresa?” Lisa prompted gently, watching as tears spilled onto Theresa’s pale cheeks. Sandro cursed rawly, before levering himself from the wall and sitting down on the bed to wrap her in his strong arms.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered. “I’m a bastard. Just don’t cry.”

“You’re not a bastard,” she sobbed. “You’re right. I can’t look at her. I can’t hold her. I hate myself for being this way but she’s not what I was

expecting. I wanted to make this all right. I wanted to have that son and release you from your obligation to me. I wanted to finally do something right in my father's eyes... everything would have been perfect."

"Do you hate our baby?" He asked painfully, keeping his face buried in her hair.

"Of course not... I love her so much it hurts. But I feel like such a failure..."

"Oh God, sweetheart, just let all it go," he groaned. "Let yourself love her. Allow yourself to be happy."

"But what about *you*? I promised you..."

"For God's sake just stop it," he shook her slightly. "I told you before, I don't *want* out of this marriage. And if you give me nothing but daughters for the next twenty years, I would consider myself blessed."

She made a muffled sound as she buried her face in his neck and wept. She so desperately wanted to believe him. He rocked her soothingly and after a long while, he released her and gently lowered her until her head rested on the pillow.

"Why don't you rest, *cara* and when you wake up, I think it's time you met your daughter and gave her a proper welcome into this world." Theresa stared up into his dark, handsome face, barely noticing when her cousin got up and left, squeezing Sandro's taut shoulder on her way out. Her vision started to blur after a while and she fell asleep still trustingly clutching one of her husband's large, capable hands in both of hers.

She awoke to the sound of angry, hushed voices and blinked groggily as she tried to get her bearings.

"I don't want you anywhere near her," she heard Sandro hiss furiously and tried to concentrate on the drama unfolding in her doorway where she could see two large men silhouetted. One was unmistakably Sandro and the other; she narrowed her eyes slightly, trying to focus a bit better. It looked like her father.

"She's my daughter and I'll damned well see her when I want to," the other man blustered, confirming that he was, indeed, Jackson Noble III.

"So that you can damage her more than you already have?" Sandro

asked, almost shaking with rage. “I won’t let you get close enough to hurt her like that again. And you can forget about getting that grandson you want anytime soon. I refuse to give you the pleasure.”

“Well then stay married to her until you do, or give up the vineyard,” her father sneered.

“The vineyard never meant as much to me as it did my father. You can have the damned place back. I want your grasping paws out of my business and the taint of your presence away from my marriage. You won’t be getting your hooks into Theresa again and you most certainly will not be any kind of presence in our children’s lives.”

“Sandro...” Theresa sat up slightly. “It’s okay. I want to speak with him.”

“Theresa...” his voice shook with anger as he stepped into her slightly darkened room. “No.”

“It’s okay,” she smiled, her lips trembling. “He doesn’t have the power to hurt me anymore. I want to see him.”

“Theresa...”

“Sandro.” Her voice was firm and brooked no argument and he sighed, before stepping aside to let her father in.

“Father,” she nodded warily as she watched the large, handsome man whose affection and approval she had craved her entire life enter the room.

“Theresa, you look none the worse for wear,” he observed in the cold, distant voice he always used on her and she immediately went back to that insecure little girl who had never understood why her daddy didn’t hug her and didn’t want to spend time with her.

“Have you seen my daughter yet?” She asked, her voice strong and sure. Not betraying the little girl who still lurked somewhere inside.

“Not yet, no...” he seemed uncertain. Seeing the new strength in her and not sure what to make of it.

“It’s funny...” she suddenly observed. “What having a baby does to you, you would go out of your way to protect that new life from anybody who would threaten its happiness. I won’t allow you to hurt my baby the way you hurt me. I don’t want you in her life... not unless you’re prepared to love her in the way you were unable to love me: wholeheartedly and

unconditionally.” As if on cue a nurse brought a fretting, pink-wrapped bundle into the room. She paused for a moment, sensing the tension in the room... before pasting a bright smile onto her lips and bringing the baby over to Theresa.

“I think that it’s past time this little one meets her mother properly,” Theresa’s entire face lit up and her heart filled with overwhelming love as the nurse placed the beautiful infant into her arms. She finally took inventory... counting fingers and toes, stroking downy black hair, and velvety skin. She even enjoyed it when the little one opened her rosebud of a mouth and started to wail angrily.

“Hello there sweetheart,” she whispered. “You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” The nurse brusquely proceeded to give her a crash course in breast-feeding, ignoring the way Theresa’s face flamed when the older woman started talking about breast pumps and let-down reflexes. Her father shifted uncomfortably while Sandro sat down at her bedside, a mixture of smug amusement, overwhelming pride and bewildered love on his face. She had never seen him look more vulnerable, or more protective... he sent a glare of warning her father’s way, before his unsettling gaze shifted back to her. Theresa, in the meantime, was struggling to conceal her milk-swollen breast from them after the nurse unceremoniously yanked the bodice of her nightgown down. The woman obviously thought that Theresa had nothing to be embarrassed about in front of husband and father. She fumbled with a towel but it was Sandro who reached across and draped it over her shoulder to cover her breast and the baby’s head. The baby finally found her nipple and latched on with enough force to make her wince. He concealed her from her father but kept the towel up on his side so that he could watch, ignoring her flustered glare.

“She’s got a pretty healthy appetite, doesn’t she?” He muttered in fascination, his voice alive with adoration. “Does that hurt?” Theresa shook her head slightly in response and snuck a glance up at her father who was unused to being so completely ignored and clearly did not it.

“Jackson, we’ll discuss the details of the broken contract at a later date. You can have back the vineyard and you’re more than welcome to keep the damned money but your daughter’s mine, as is the beautiful baby she’s given me. Sue me for breach of contract if you must.”

“I don’t want that useless piece of land back, we could renegotiate the

terms...” her father sounded almost desperate and Theresa suddenly lost patience with both men.

“Stop talking about me like I’m an expensive piece of meat,” she seethed. “Take your sordid business elsewhere. I want it nowhere near my baby. Father, I’ve given you my conditions.”

“You’re so brave now, aren’t you?” Her father sneered. “But if push came to shove, I wonder how strong you’d be?”

“I’m stronger than you’ll ever know, father,” she smiled serenely. “Years of constant rejection from the people you love can leave you with pretty tough skin. You can’t hurt me anymore. I don’t want nor need your version love. I find that I no longer want nor need you in my life...”

“Yes, *so* brave now that you have your loving husband’s support,” The man’s words were laced with bitterness. “But while he may love your baby, Theresa, he’ll never love *you*. He has Francesca Delvecchio and, yes, he’s Italian enough to want that baby of yours so it’s just a matter of time before he finds a way to get her away from you...” Theresa blinked, her sudden fear showing, as her father presented a scenario she had never once considered. She couldn’t prevent herself from glancing over at Sandro, whose face was dark with fury and his entire body coiled with tension, he looked like he was about to tear her father’s throat out.

“I think it’s time you left, father,” she whispered painfully and her father sneered one last time before he pivoted on his heel and strode from the room.

“Don’t you *dare* believe what he just said, Theresa,” Sandro whispered rawly, focusing his glare on her. “Don’t you bloody dare!”

“I know you love her, Sandro...” she whispered. Not sure if she meant the baby or Francesca and she could tell by the look of uncertainty on his face that he wasn’t sure who she meant either and so was at a loss as to how to respond. “Would you try to take her from me?”

“*No!*” He practically shouted and the baby started. Theresa soothed her with slight rocking motions until she started suckling again. He reined in his temper and gentled his voice with visible effort. “I wouldn’t do that to you. I’d *never* hurt you like that.”

“But you want her...” again the ambiguity and his frown deepened.

“If you mean *the baby*, then yes of course I want her. But it’s a package deal for me, I want *both* of you. You’re my family. I don’t want a life separate from yours. I want *our* life. The one we’ve been building together these last few months.”

“What do you mean? All we ever talked about was divorcing...” she asked in confusion.

“I’m referring to all those nights together... the movies, the games, the conversations... what the hell was that if not relationship-building? We *know* we’re great in bed together. But we’d never really tried all the other stuff that couples do. The last few of months, we *did* do those things. We may have done things a little backward, *cara* but that doesn’t mean that we can’t have a solid marriage like Rick and Lisa’s. The only one of us who’d ever mentioned divorce was *you*. I don’t bloody want a divorce. I want *us*. Together.”

“I think...” she whispered so softly he could barely hear her and had to lean in closer to make out her words. “I think that you’re a wonderful man, Sandro. A decent man and because of that... I know that you’d do anything to make things right. You’d make any sacrifice to give Lily and me a normal life. But I can’t let you do that. I can’t let you keep forfeiting the things you want just because you think it’s the right thing to do.”

“This again,” he muttered impatiently. “I went from demon to saint in pretty short order, didn’t I? I want you to listen to me very, *very* carefully Theresa because I won’t be saying this again. I’m not a saint. I’m being very selfish when I say that I want you and our baby with me and when I say that I want us to be a family. I have duties back in Italy, people I love and need to take care of but right now I don’t give a *damn* about any of that right now because I want to spend my every waking moment with you and this baby. This life I’ve built with you, it’s the only one that matters to me anymore. So please stop *telling* me what I really want and try listening to me for a change.” Theresa stared up at him uncertainly. Dare she believe that he meant this? That it wasn’t just a really good act? She cleared her throat, trying to formulate a response but he leaned over and kissed her gently, stilling the words.

“Don’t say anything, *cara*. Just give me a chance...” He looked like a man perched on a ledge with her as his last chance of redemption. How did she resist that? How *could* she? “I know I’m asking you to make yourself

vulnerable again and I'm so sorry for that. But I want you to trust me. Just one more time... allow yourself to trust me." She bit her lip, before taking a deep breath and stepping out onto that ledge with him.

"We need to name this little one before we take her home," she said lightly, ignoring the way he released the breath that he'd been holding for countless moments. She felt the tension drain out of him and his relief was so overwhelming it was an almost tangible thing.

"Any ideas?" He asked huskily, reaching over to stroke the top of the baby's soft head with his thumb, somehow managing to brush the sensitive skin of her breast too and she shivered at the contact. "Well, since she has all this fuzzy black hair, we should probably stick with Lily," his face lit up with pleasure and he dropped a quick kiss on her smiling mouth. "I only hope she has the temperament of a Lily and not that of a Sofia."

"If she takes after you, we're in for a bumpy ride," he joked and she rolled her eyes.

"Please, you're no angel yourself," she retorted without any heat. "Let's just name her Lily and hope for the best."

"Hmm, if she *does* have your stubbornness and fiery temper, I'll adore her even more," he admitted. "It'll certainly make life interesting."

"Why did you keep buying girl's toys and clothes, Sandro?" She asked after a short silence and his thumb paused its stroking for an infinitesimal second, before continuing on. "I mean, I'm grateful for them now, of course. But *why*?"

"Why?" he shook his head and hesitated again before raising his eyes to meet hers. "I was just... *hoping* for a girl," Her jaw dropped as she simply gaped at him for a few moments. That thought had never once crossed her mind.

"You were *hoping* for a girl?"

"Yes. Very much," he staggered her by confirming, his eyes remaining steady so she was in no doubt as to his sincerity.

"I don't understand..." she shook her head slightly. "Why?" He didn't respond, dropping his eyes to the suckling infant at her breast.

"Sandro?" She prompted and he raised his eyes to hers once more. He smiled cryptically before shrugging.

“This is neither the time nor place to be having that particular conversation, Theresa,” he frustrated her by saying.

“But...”

“We’ll discuss it soon but right now I think Lily is ready to be burped,” he pointed to the infant whose tiny mouth had slackened. She awkwardly dragged her bodice back up and then clumsily repositioned Lily until the baby was draped over her shoulder.

“Could you get the nurse?” She asked Sandro, putting his previous comment from her mind for now. “I’m not sure how to do this.”

“Rub your hand on her back in a circular motion,” he noted the surprise in her eyes before shrugging. “The nurse showed me how to do it last night after I’d bottle-fed her while you were asleep.”

Theresa complied with his instruction and was soon rewarded with a tiny burp. The sound was adorable in a way that only a new parent could appreciate and they grinned at each other when they heard it. In that one glorious moment of solidarity, Theresa started to believe in the possibility of a happily every after again... and it frightened her to death.

The thin sound of a distressed infant’s wail jerked Theresa from a restless sleep. She sat up and fought her way out of bed before groggily trudging to the nursery. When she got there she blinked up at the already-present Sandro who was cradling his crying daughter tenderly in his strong arms. He was wearing only a pair of boxers and held the tiny baby up against his strong, naked chest. He was crooning gently to her and Theresa was transfixed by the sweet picture they presented.

He looked up suddenly and saw her standing in the doorway. His hair was messy and standing up in spikes.

“Hey,” he smiled over at her. “I was hoping you’d sleep through this. You looked exhausted earlier. I don’t think she’s hungry. Just cranky, I think her wet nappy woke her up. I changed her and she’s all dry and comfy now but she hasn’t worked the bad mood out of her system yet,” Theresa walked over to them and peered over one bulging bicep into Lily’s scrunched up little face and smiled in amusement.

“*Very* cranky,” she leaned over to drop a kiss on the baby’s damp

forehead and felt Sandro tense when her cheek brushed against his chest in the process. They both paused awkwardly before Theresa cleared her throat and stepped back. She dropped into the padded rocking chair and tucked her feet up beneath her and watched as Sandro continued to pace and gently talking to the crying baby.

He eventually sank down into the second rocking chair beside Theresa's, while continuing to soothe the baby. Lily's wailing eventually decreased down to a few sad sniffles before she dropped back to sleep. Theresa looked over and smiled when she realised that Sandro had fallen asleep too. Lily was firmly anchored to his chest and held in place with a broad hand on her tiny back.

She looked from the man to the infant and smiled at the similarities between them. Lily had his mouth and something about the set of her brow was one hundred per cent Sandro. Theresa got up quietly and went over to pick the baby up. Sandro's brow furrowed when she tried to move his hand and instead tightened his grip slightly.

"Sandro," she whispered. "Let me put her to bed." His eyes fluttered open and he smiled when he saw her leaning over him.

"Theresa," he murmured and in that unguarded moment, Theresa saw a depth of emotion in his liquid brown eyes that she couldn't quite fathom. She blinked and in that split second he came fully awake and his eyes shifted back to neutral and slightly distant. Theresa wasn't sure if she'd imagined the intensity of the emotion or not. He relinquished his hold on Lily and ducked his head to drop a loving kiss on top of her downy soft black hair.

Theresa was aware of him getting up and following her to the crib. He stood directly behind her and watched over her shoulder as she put the infant to bed. Theresa was intensely aware of him and of the fact that all that stood between them and total nudity was her nightgown and his boxers.

"She has your nose," he whispered into her ear and she jumped, surprised and disturbed to feel his hot breath on her skin.

"Do you think so?" She asked casually. "I can't tell."

"It's an unmistakable nose..." his hand came to rest on her shoulder and she tensed at the feeling of his warm hand on her bare skin. Her breathing went shallow. His hand swept down her shoulder in a gesture that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a caress and shackled her upper

arm loosely, he brought his other hand up to grip her free arm in a similar fashion. He gently dragged her back until she was leaning against his hot, hard chest and he released his grip with a rumble of satisfaction. His strong arms encircled her waist and he simply held her as they both watched their sleeping baby.

The tension eventually left her body as she allowed herself to relax against him and tilt her head back to rest against his shoulder.

“Look at what we did,” he murmured into her ear, his low voice brimming with love and pride. “She’s perfect.” Theresa smiled at the awe she heard in his voice.

“It’s been said that any fool can make a baby,” she teased and he snorted.

“Yeah but have any of them made a baby as absolutely perfect as this one?” Theresa looked down at the sleeping baby, with her wrinkled face and the slight milk rash that pinkened her cheeks and her patches of soft spiky hair. She looked like a wrinkly, grumpy little old lady... but she was *their* wrinkly, grumpy little old lady and she was adorable.

“No... I don’t think any of them has,” she concurred smugly.

“Theresa...” his voice took on a serious tone and she tensed again. “I just... I wanted...” he seemed at a loss for words and Theresa frowned wondering if they would finally have that promised conversation. It had been more than a month since Lily’s birth and they hadn’t yet discussed his claim that he’d hoped for a girl.

“*Thank you,*” he finally said and she turned slightly to look up into his face, visibly surprised by his words.

“For what?” She asked in confusion.

“For giving me everything I never knew I wanted,” he said after a long pause. His voice was thick with emotion and he met her eyes directly. His own gaze was burning with intensity as he willed her to believe him.

“What have I given you, Sandro?” She asked turning fully in his arms.

“A life,” the two words frustrated her because they told her nothing. She was about to ask him to elaborate, when more words came tumbling out. “Happiness, contentment and a beautiful daughter...”

“And are happiness and contentment all you ever wanted from life?”

She asked after giving his words some thought. He smiled slightly.

“No... I want more than that. But it’s a good start.”

“What else do you want?” She asked curiously.

“You.” No hesitation.

“You have me.”

“No, I don’t. Not the way you were before, when we first married... before I stupidly proceeded to trample your heart and ego into ground.”

“I’ve changed since then, grown up. I won’t ever be the same woman I was back then.”

“Yes, you haven’t changed in fantastic ways but you’ve just become more guarded. And I don’t blame you, I really don’t. But I want you to trust me again.”

“I do,” she whispered.

“No, I want you to trust me with your heart, Theresa. I want you to allow yourself to love me again. I won’t hurt you.”

“Why should I trust you that way again, Sandro?” She asked on a whisper and he smiled, before cupping her face and staring levelly into her eyes.

“Because I love you, Theresa.” The words staggered her. She should have expected them, should have known he would say them... but for some reason she hadn’t and now had no idea how to deal with them or how to process them or worse, how to believe them.

He smiled bitter sweetly.

“I know you don’t believe me yet,” he whispered. “But I’ll make it my life’s work to convince you.” He bent his head and kissed her gently, his lips moist, gentle and sweet on hers. He raised his head much too quickly and Theresa went up on her toes to prolong the contact.

“Sandro...” she didn’t know what to say but he shook his head and smiled gently.

“It’s okay. I just wanted you to know.” He kissed her again, a little bit more urgently this time and she could feel his erection straining against her stomach. It startled her because she hadn’t really felt him in so long and she suddenly realised how many months it had been since she’d last felt him

moving inside of her. Her dormant hormones sprang to life in an instant and she pushed closer to him, deliberately rubbing herself against his hard penis. He deepened the kiss, his tongue plunging into her mouth in clumsy desperation and his lack of finesse made her even hungrier for him.

“The doctor gave me the all-clear for sex last week,” she reminded and he groaned harshly at her urgent words.

“I didn’t tell you how I felt because I was trying to get you into bed, Theresa,” his voice was thick with desire and she smiled up into his flushed face.

“I know that, Sandro. Now hurry up and take me to bed, will you?” He shuddered and lifted her into his arms before carrying her out of the baby’s room into hers next door.

He gently deposited her onto the bed and watched as she dragged the nightgown over her head and tossed it aside, his dark eyes going slumberous with desire. Suddenly self-conscious, Theresa remembered that she’d gained weight and acquired some stretch marks during her pregnancy. She wasn’t the same slender, smooth-skinned woman he’d had sex with last. She lifted her hands to cover herself but when Sandro swore reverently, she paused and looked at him. He couldn’t take his hot eyes off of her; he looked like a starving man staring at a feast while wondering which dish to start with.

She watched in fascination, her shyness forgotten, as he fumbled with his boxers and kicked them aside. He was so hard it looked painful and she could see how his heart was racing with every throb of his gorgeous penis.

“God,” he groaned slightly, his voice awed and a little disbelieving. “Oh God, oh God, oh God... you’re more beautiful than I remembered.” He stumbled to the bed and gathered her into his arms, kissing her hungrily. His usual finesse was gone; the hungry kiss was almost adolescently awkward with bumping noses and clashing teeth. But neither of them cared as they went at each other with a ferociousness that bordered on animalistic.

Theresa had one brief moment of lucidity, when she asked him to wear a condom. In the past, Sandro would have been infuriated by the request, this time he stumbled from the bed in a daze and made his way to the en-suite where they stocked a new box of condoms every six months, in case their guests needed any. He was back in seconds, box in hand but was shaking so badly that the packaging defeated him.

“I can’t...” he growled in frustration and she took the box from him with slightly steadier hands. She managed to extract a condom, tossed the box aside and ripped open the foil package. She held up the little rubber circle with a questioning glance and his pupils dilated even further.

“You do it,” he urged huskily and she smiled before, with agonising slowness, rolling the condom down his length. She gave him one more stroke for good measure but he arched himself away from her touch.

“Don’t... baby... I’m going to come.” She lifted her hand to the nape of his neck and dragged him down for another urgent kiss. Without breaking the kiss, Sandro flipped her onto her back and parted her thighs with his own. Despite his obvious desperation he entered her slowly and with infinite gentleness.

“Am I hurting you?” He asked against her mouth and she murmured a negative, pushing back up into him, to make it clear that she wanted more of him inside of her. It was all the invitation Sandro needed before he sheathed himself completely. They both groaned and he tilted his head back, his eyes closed in ecstasy.

“Oh God... Theresa... so long! It’s been so long,” He whispered. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed *you*.” He began to move and she gasped at the feeling of fullness inside of her. He knew her body very well and shifted his position slightly until every stroke hit her in exactly the right spot. It didn’t last long... barely two minutes and for the first time in their marriage Sandro lost all control and came before she did. Theresa watched his face contort, as his body clenched and his back arched. A desperate sound was ripped from his throat as he tried to hold back and couldn’t. Theresa followed seconds later, his orgasm triggering hers. She clenched around him, squeezing him tightly and prolonging his pleasure as she took her own.

For a few moments they both hung suspended in stasis after their powerful mutual orgasms and time seemed to freeze until Sandro collapsed onto the bed beside her moments later, breathing heavily as he gathered her into his arms.

“Theresa, love of my life,” he whispered into her hair, as they fought to catch their breath and Theresa smiled before snuggling into his chest with a contented moan and falling asleep in his strong arms.

Chapter Twelve

Theresa headed down to the kitchen for breakfast three weeks later and found her husband already seated at the table, newspaper in hand. He'd already dressed Lily and had her little baby carrier placed on the table in front of him. Lily was asleep and Sandro was so absorbed in his paper that he didn't notice her at first. It was Phumsile's usual day off, so he'd fixed himself a bowl of cereal, toast and some coffee. She smiled at the sight of them, her heart overflowing with love for both of them.

"Good morning," she greeted cheerily, as she headed over to the breakfast nook. She dropped a kiss on the baby's cheek and then, after the briefest of hesitations, one on her husband's lean cheek. While Sandro was a lot more affectionate these days, she still felt a certain reserve around him, not sure if she could touch and kiss him as freely as he did her. She knew she was being silly but she seemed unable to overcome her emotional barriers. He told her he loved her every day but she still couldn't quite bring herself to believe him. She often cynically caught herself wondering if he meant the words or merely said them because he thought they were what she wanted. She didn't understand herself, on the surface it looked like she had everything she'd ever wanted but she still didn't quite believe it was real.

"Good morning," he smiled up at her and put his newspaper aside as she got herself some cereal and sat down opposite him. He did that all the time now. She seemed to have his undivided attention: the business section was set aside, the television switched off, phone calls terminated and stock reports carelessly tossed away whenever she walked into a room. He wanted to know how she was feeling, how her day was going, what her plans were... they talked all the time, they spent companionable evenings together and he was a hands-on father. They'd had a quiet family Christmas and had both delighted in buying hugely impractical toys for Lily, things that she wouldn't be able to play with for years. Sandro had surprised her with an emerald pendant and earrings and she'd given him a silver *Montblanc* pen with Lily's and her names engraved on. Their New Year had been equally quiet as they'd invited only Rick, Lisa and Rick's brother over for a poolside barbecue. They made love every night and he worshipped her body during those long, dark hours. They had a great life... so why couldn't she trust him?

She knew that her reserve was frustrating Sandro... hell, it was frustrating her but she needed something more. She just didn't know what.

“I thought I’d let you have a bit of a lie in,” he was saying, as he sipped his coffee. “Between Lily’s and *my* demands last night, you didn’t get much sleep.” She blushed and averted her eyes to her cereal.

“Thank you,” she mumbled. Her cellphone rang and she retrieved it from the kitchen counter where she had left it to charge the night before. A quick glance at the screen told her it was Lisa.

“Hey,” she greeted.

“Hey yourself Birthday Girl,” her cousin greeted and Theresa started. It was her birthday. She’d completely forgotten. “Rhys and I are taking you and Lily out to lunch. Our treat. But we’re doing some serious birthday shopping first.”

“I’m not sure...”

“No arguments, cuz. I’m sure Sandro will understand. He won’t expect you to spend your birthday by yourself while he swans off to work... and he can have you this evening.” Theresa glanced over at Sandro, who was playing peekaboo with a slightly groggy Lily. A helpless smile tugged at her lips as she watched him earnestly play with his daughter. Lily looked confused but at least she hadn’t started wailing yet.

She refocused on her conversation with Lisa, certain that Sandro had no clue that it was her birthday and she wasn’t about to inform him, not when she knew how angry this new Sandro would be with himself for never bothering to discover that information.

“Uhm... okay, what time do you want to meet?” She and her cousin quickly worked out the logistics of their meeting and she hung up shortly after they’d finalised their plans.

“You are meeting Elisa?” It was a question more than a statement, Sandro had lifted Lily from her carrier and was cuddling her to his chest, while she suckled on one of his knuckles.

“Yes, some shopping and lunch.”

“Do you want me to take Lily to the office while you enjoy your girls’ day out?” She smiled at the inherently selfish offer, knowing that he would *love* showing his daughter off at work.

“I appreciate the offer, Sandro... but until you start lactating, I don’t think having her away from me for hours at a time is a good idea.” He grimaced at that logic. She knew he missed Lily while he was at work. After a month of paternity leave, he had very begrudgingly gone back to work but he called every day, claiming to miss “his girls”. It was sweet.

She watched him go back to muttering sweet nothings to his daughter between sips of coffee.

“Sandro, do you know who leaked that story about our marriage to the press?” She surprised herself by asking and she could tell by the way he jerked that the question had thrown him. He lifted his eyes to her, absently rocking Lily as he tried to gauge her mood.

“My oldest sister, Gabriella, had indiscreet conversations about our private family business with one of her friends. When my father died, the family was in the news for weeks and this ‘friend’ saw a golden opportunity to make some money. Our marriage wasn’t the only thing that was dragged out for public scrutiny, my sister Rosalie’s teenage abortion hit the news, my other sister Isabella’s cheating husband...” he shook his head in disgust. “Ours was just the *biggest* news because of your father’s involvement. It made a bad time for the family even worse. I was so busy doing damage control after the news of Rosalie’s pregnancy and subsequent abortion that when the story of our marriage first hit, I wasn’t even aware of it, until my mother brought it to my attention. I dropped everything and flew home to you. I couldn’t stand the thought that you’d think it was true... that you’d think I valued our marriage so little that I would file for a divorce without even talking to you about it.”

“What happened to the friend?”

“She sold our secrets for a pittance but the status she had in our society has diminished to nothing. She is no longer welcome in the circles she once ruled. Trust me, there’s no greater punishment for someone like her. Gabriella has learned a valuable lesson in discretion... and a few Italian publications are currently being sued for libel when they completely fabricated a lot of the so-called ‘facts’ to back up the already juicy story they’d been handed. Like the ‘fact’ that I was filing for a divorce.”

“Also...” she paused.

“Also?” He prompted.

“Why didn’t you call? You promised you’d call every day,” she whispered.

“*Cara*, my father had just died, my sisters, mother and *nonna* were emotional wrecks... I had so much to take care of but, every time I spoke with you, all I wanted to do was get the hell out of there and come home,” that was the second time in as many minutes he’d referred to their house as ‘home’ and the word warmed her down to her soul. “Trust me when I tell

you, the urge to come back was so strong that I actually ordered a car to take me to the airport after one of our awkward little conversations. I was torn between following my heart and honouring my responsibilities. But if I hadn't strictly rationed our phonecalls, I *would* have abandoned those responsibilities."

"You wouldn't have," she said with a half-laugh.

"Don't underestimate your allure, sweetheart. I would have... in a heartbeat. I know it was selfish of me not to call but it was the only way I could think of to control the impulse to simply hand the whole mess over to my sisters and come back to you. At the same time, our very stilted conversations weren't helping matters. I was frustrated and hated how emotionally distant you sounded. I was also afraid of saying the wrong thing and alienating you even further. It was driving me into the wall."

She laughed slightly.

"Up the wall," she corrected.

"What?" He looked baffled.

"It was driving you 'up the wall'... not into it."

"Into the wall, up the wall, over the wall, whatever," he flicked a dismissive hand. "It was driving me crazy." Charmed by his failure to grasp the English idiom, Theresa laughed again and decided to let the matter go. His explanations had gone a long way toward dispelling some of her lingering uneasiness with their relationship. Lily started to fuss and Theresa reached for her before quickly and efficiently bared a breast, she winced slightly when Lily latched on hungrily. Sandro dropped his jaw into the palm of one hand and watched them possessively. He enjoyed watching her feed Lily. In fact he was so completely fascinated with the new shape and size of her breasts recently that he handled them with gentleness and a bit of reverence whenever they made love.

"Thank you for answering my questions," she said after a few moments of silence, broken only by the snuffling sound of the hungrily feeding infant.

"I'm happy to answer any others," his voice trailed off in invitation and she nodded.

"Good to know.," she needed to ask him about Francesca, about their future... but she was meeting Lisa. *Later*, she promised herself. She would ask him later. She ignored the tiny voice in the back of her head that called her a coward.

“So what are the plans for tonight?” Lisa asked curiously as Theresa enjoyed the decadent slice of chocolate mousse cake she was having for dessert.

“We’ll probably have a quiet evening,” she shrugged. “Sandro doesn’t know it’s my birthday.”

“Oh,” Lisa glanced away for a long moment before turning back to Theresa. “Do you want me to tell him?”

“No he’d feel awful if he realises,” Lisa’s lips tilted at the sides.

“Well, at least he wouldn’t be indifferent,” Lisa said. “Which is probably what he would have been a year ago.” Theresa nodded.

“I know...” she paused. “He told me he loved me... about a month ago. And he’s said it every day since. But, I can’t *quite* seem to bring myself to believe him.”

“Theresa, it’s been pretty obvious to me for a while now that he’s in love with you,” her cousin startled her by saying.

“It has?”

“Yes... I think I started to see it when he tried to forgive my debt for no good reason and then when you fainted after your amniocentesis and started crying when I got there, Rick was right, the man looked devastated when you burst into tears. I think you should start believing in him. I know that he hurt you badly in the past but it’s time for you to decide if you can forgive him or not. Because if you can’t then there’s no point in staying in this marriage but if you *can* then I think this man is going to do his damndest to make sure that you’re happy for the rest of your life.”

Lisa went home with Theresa that evening deciding that they should have an impromptu birthday dinner for her. But when they got back to the house and Theresa got a phone call from Sandro telling her that he had to work late, Lisa grimly bullied Theresa into a pretty dress, called Rick and said that they were taking Theresa and Lily out to what she called a “fancy” restaurant.

Theresa was in no real mood to celebrate and when they got to the restaurant, she dragged her feet to the entrance, where Rick stood waiting. He looked quite dashing in a tuxedo and well-matched with Lisa, who was wearing one of the pretty evening gowns she had bought on their shopping expedition that afternoon.

“Look guys, this is too much fuss...” Theresa protested. “Why don’t we just head back to my house and have a nice dinner or something?”

“Too late now, Sunshine, we’re here, so you’re going to have to deal with it.” Rick grinned, before dropping a kiss on her cheek and then reaching over to taking Lily’s carrier from her. “Happy birthday, Theresa, you look ravishing.”

Right, the knee-length silk slip dress was a little too low and made her swollen breasts look slightly too voluptuous for her liking. She felt a little uncomfortable in it but Lisa had chosen it, saying that the ice green colour did wonderful things for her hair and eyes.

“I mean, did you guys even think to make reservations?”

“Theresa, with your dad and husband being who they are, do you really think getting into any restaurant you want is ever going to be a problem?” Lisa scoffed and Theresa wrinkled her nose, conceding the point. Lisa flounced through the door and Rick stood aside to let Theresa in.

The maître’d smiled and led her through without question. Surprised, she followed him with a little frown on her face. He led her through double glass doors. The place was packed with people and for some reason no-one was sitting down. She squirmed uncomfortably when everyone turned to stare at her, not quite sure what on earth was going on.

“*Surprise!*” She nearly jumped out of her skin at the collective shout and then finally realised that she recognised most of the faces in the room. Rick, who had stood outside of the room until after surprise, in case it scared Lily, moved to stand beside her.

“What’s going on?” She whispered in panicked confusion.

“It’s a surprise birthday party, you ditz,” he teased, dropping another fond kiss on her cheek before heading off to find his wife in the throng. People were milling around her, kissing her and shaking her hand. She recognised Gabe Braddock and all of Sandro’s Friday night buddies along with their significant others, Rick’s brother Bryce came up and gave her an unceremonious pat on her back and a gruff “happy birthday” before disappearing back into the woodwork. The man hated crowds, she could imagine this scene wasn’t really to his taste but he was here and she was so utterly confused by that. Why was he here, why were any of them here? How did Lisa even *know* to invite Gabe Braddock and that lot?

“Happy birthday, my love,” a familiar pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist and she was tugged back against a broad chest. Sandro

dropped a kiss in her neck. She turned in his arms and stared up at him in bemusement.

“*You did this?*” She asked in disbelief. “But I thought you didn’t...”

“*Cara,*” he interrupted with infinite patience. “I’m not a stupid man, I wasn’t about to repeat my past mistakes. I love you and I wanted to show you how much.”

“How long have you been planning this?” She asked.

“God, since before my father died... the plans were put on hold until after I returned and then with Lily’s birth they stalled a bit but I wanted to do something special to make up for all the times your birthday was neglected or forgotten over the years.” She knew he meant by her father as well as himself and was helplessly touched by the gesture.

“Thank you,” she smiled and stood up on her toes kiss him. He cupped her face and kissed her hungrily.

“You look beautiful,” he told her.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” she said, stepping back to take in his tailor-made tuxedo.

“Hey, break it up you two,” a brash male voice intruded into their intimate little cocoon and they both turned to see Gabriel Braddock’s smiling face. “Sandro, it’s like every time I see you with this gorgeous thing, you have your hands all over her. Share the wealth, bro.” He stepped forward to envelope Theresa in a warm hug.

“Happy birthday, gorgeous. We’ve missed you...” considering how they’d met her only once, months ago, Theresa initially doubted the veracity of that statement but the sincerity in his face, led her to believe that he actually meant his words.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I’m sorry I never came to any of your other soccer nights.”

“You had a difficult pregnancy, perfectly understandable,” he dismissed with a careless flick of the hand. “And congratulations on your beautiful daughter, by the way. Sandro’s been flashing pictures of her at us for weeks. It’ll be nice to see her in the flesh. Where is the little darling?”

“My cousin’s husband has her,” she glanced around for Rick and saw him showing Lily off to his brother, Bryce and Bryce’s business partner Pierre de Coursey. The little group was soon joined by Rick’s business partner, Vuyo and by Pierre’s wife. Everybody was cooing over the still-sleeping baby.

“Looks like she’s not wanting for attention, so I’ll take her beautiful mother out for a spin on the dance floor in the meantime,” he whisked a laughing Theresa away from Sandro before the other man could protest and twirled her around to some upbeat music.

He’d had her for barely two minutes before someone cut in, after that she was passed from partner to partner for the next half an hour before Sandro finally claimed her.

“Think you can spare some time to flirt with your husband, *cara*?” He asked grumpily and she blinked up at him uncertainly until she realised that he was a little jealous. The fact boosted her confidence and brought a delighted smile to her face.

“I have a few minutes to spare between dances,” she nodded after a considering pause and he growled before dragging her closer and tucking her head onto his shoulder. They swayed together slowly and he started nuzzling her neck. She sighed and melted into his hard body, enjoying the warm, spicy scent of him. They were so wrapped up in each other that they didn’t notice anybody standing beside them until a voice penetrated the fog of desire.

“Sandro?” He made a protesting sound before raising his head and blinking at someone standing behind Theresa. She watched his face light up and a smile grace his lips before he launched into rapid Italian. Baffled, she turned in his arms and froze...

“*Cara*, this is my mother and two of my sisters... they flew over to meet you and the latest edition to our family. Mama, Isabella, Rosalie, this is my wife, Theresa.” The four women eyed one another warily, none of them quite certain what to expect. Finally, the youngest of the trio of gorgeous brunettes stepped forward with a smile. Theresa guessed that she had to be Rosalie.

“I’m very pleased to finally meet you, Theresa,” she said in lightly accented English and to Theresa’s utter shock gave her a warm hug. “I’m Rosalie.”

“I... nice to meet you,” Theresa muttered helplessly in response, her eyes desperately seeking Sandro’s. He looked anxious but smiled reassuringly when he met her gaze.

“I was expecting them to arrive next week but they flew in late last night, just in time for your birthday,” she could see the apology in his eyes, as if he feared their presence would diminish her pleasure in the birthday party. She shook her head, the gesture so slight that only he caught it and smiled at

him.

“Well, what a doubly wonderful surprise then,” she shook off her shock and bestowed a genuinely warm smile on the small group of Italian beauties. Sandro’s sisters were receiving a lot of speculative male looks already.

“My daughter Gabriella couldn’t make it, she’s having some trouble with her oldest child,” Sandro’s mother finally said keeping her voice determinedly neutral. “And of course, my mother-in-law is too old to travel. But they both send their best.” Therese very much doubted that, remembering how particularly hostile those two women had been to her during the video call.

“Mrs de Lucci,” Theresa reached out to grip the other woman’s hands in both of hers. “I’m so sorry for your loss and I’m sorry that I was unable to attend the funeral.”

“Don’t be silly, Theresa,” she older woman scoffed, determinedly blinking away her sudden tears. “You were heavily pregnant. Travelling in that condition would have been foolish. You did the right thing. Now, where is this granddaughter of mine? I’ve seen photographs of course but I’m ready to meet her.” The imperiousness in her tone brooked no disobedience and Theresa grinned when Sandro practically saluted before abandoning them in search of his daughter.

She tensed, when she realised that he’d left her alone with his intimidating family and braced herself for whatever would come next. She was under no illusions that they liked her or accepted her, knowing that they would all pretend to get along just find for Sandro’s sake... but that what went on behind his back would be another story entirely.

“I owe you an apology,” Sandro’s mother finally shocked her by saying and she dared a glance into the elegant older woman’s face. The woman no longer looked intimidating, in fact her face had softened completely and Theresa blinked up at her in surprise. “I was less than... gracious, when you called to speak with my husband. After the funeral, Sandro told us the truth about your marriage, about the way both he and your father had treated you, so I now know that you would have been completely justified in not wanting to speak with my husband. But you showed a greater depth of character than the rest of us combined when you agreed to meet him... you made a dying man very happy in his last few hours. He was so worried about Sandro and what he’d sacrificed for our family but talking to

you eased his mind considerably and he was at peace when he passed away that night. I have you to thank for that.”

“I was happy to meet him,” Theresa responded, a little blown away by this turn of events.

“Well, this is nearly two years too late but I am *very* happy to meet you too, Theresa,” her mother-in-law engulfed her in a totally unexpected and very awkward hug. Theresa returned it in bemusement before both women stepped back a few seconds later, looking equally flustered. Rosalie and Isabella were both grinning. Rosalie introduced Theresa to Isabella, explaining that the other woman spoke little English

“But she wanted to meet you,” Rosalie confided cheerfully. Theresa could see that she and Rosalie were going to get along just fine. The other woman was an irreverent bundle of laughs and they were both giggling conspiratorially over the way Sandro had practically jumped earlier to do his mother’s bidding, when he finally returned carrying Lily. The baby was awake and wailing, not happy with the crowd of unfamiliar people surrounding her. Her little face was wet and scrunched up but her aunties and grandmother immediately started fussing all over her.

Sandro handed her over to his mother for a moment before turning to Theresa.

“You okay?” He asked in a low voice that only she could hear. She nodded, smiling reassuringly up at him.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t expect them to show up so soon, I hope they haven’t spoiled the party for you? I wanted this night to be perfect.”

“And it has been pretty near perfect so far,” she assured him. “They’ve been lovely, Sandro. All of them.”

“Good, because I would have bounced them the hell back to Italy if they’d said anything at all to upset you” he told her firmly.

“Don’t be silly. They’re your family...”

“Wife trumps all,” he retorted and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m going to rescue Lily from the Kissing Brigade over there. She’s probably hungry,” she went over to do just that, practically floating on air as she felt Sandro’s gaze still on her. *Wife trumps all?* She very definitely liked the sound of that.

In the end, Theresa got her dream birthday party, complete with singing, a huge cake and dozens of floating balloons. The evening couldn’t

have been more perfect. After making sure his family was loaded into a taxi that would take them to their hotel, he called their driver to come and pick them up. Lily had been put to bed in a quiet room equipped with a professional nanny that the staff had provided for her and Rhys. She stirred restlessly when her parents collected her and they both tensed, knowing that was close to her regular feeding time.

“I’m knackered,” Theresa yawned once they were all snugly ensconced in the back seat of the car. He had his arm draped around her slender shoulders and she had her head tucked against his chest. Lily was contentedly suckling at her breast and both of them were in danger of falling asleep on Sandro.

“I had a wonderful evening Sandro,” she muttered sleepily.

“I’m happy to hear it, *cara*,” he whispered into her hair.

“All those balloons,” her voice faded and the last thing she heard before dozing off was the sound of his indulgent chuckling.

Theresa woke up some time during the early hours of the morning when she felt Sandro leave the bed. She blinked in confusion, not sure how she’d gotten to bed. She was stark naked and she didn’t remember getting undressed, or even coming upstairs for that matter. She could hear Lily fretting through the baby monitor and was about to get out of bed when she heard Sandro’s gentle voice crooning to the baby. Lily calmed down a little and Theresa smiled as she listened to him sing to the baby, his sleep-roughened voice slightly off-key. His voice faded and she sat up, switching on the bedside lamp and adjusting the pillows behind her back when she realised that Sandro was probably bringing Lily into the bedroom for her feed. He appeared moments later, looking completely rumpled and wearing nothing but white boxer shorts. He smiled when he saw her sitting up in bed.

“Your daughter’s hungry,” he nodded down at the fussing baby and Theresa reached up for her and he transferred the wriggling bundle gently, before rounding the bed to climb in next to Theresa. He watched raptly as Theresa fed the baby.

“I don’t remember getting home,” Theresa whispered after a few minutes.

“Yeah, you were wiped out. I brought Lily upstairs and then went back down for you.”

“You *carried* me? Sandro, I weigh a ton...”

“Hardly,” he scoffed.

“Well, that explains why I’m totally naked.”

“I felt I deserved a reward after all that hard work,” he grinned wickedly and she rolled her eyes.

“Sandro, I’m moving back into our bedroom tomorrow,” she told him quietly. He said nothing at first and instead reached over to toy with one of Lily’s closed fists. It was something she’d been thinking about since Lily’s birth. He spent every night in the spare bedroom with her anyway, so insisting on separate bedrooms was a bit of a moot point. The master bedroom was a lot more comfortable and close to the nursery.

“That’s good,” he finally said, keeping his eyes on the suckling baby. “I’m happy to hear that, Theresa.”

An awkward silence descended and Theresa wasn’t sure what had caused it. His response to her news had been lukewarm at best.

“You do *want* me to move back, right?” She asked after another long silence and was surprised by the flash of fury she saw in his eyes when he looked up at her.

“Of course I *want* you to move back, Theresa. I also want you to trust me, to forgive me... to *love* me,” he seethed, sitting up abruptly and leaving the bed to pace the room like a menacing cat, all feral grace and power. Theresa watched him in helpless fascination.

“I don’t know what to say or do anymore, Theresa,” he said quietly, running agitated hands through his hair. “Then again it doesn’t seem to *matter* what I say or do... you’re determined to keep an emotional distance between us. Do you think I haven’t noticed? How much longer are you going to punish me for my stupidity?”

“I’m not trying to punish you,” she was appalled that he would think that. “I’m really not. I just...” she didn’t know what to say, because now that she thought about it, she wondered if she hadn’t been subconsciously punishing him after all.

“I have something for you,” he finally muttered grimly. “It’s your birthday present. I was going to give it to you in the morning but since you’re up...” he left the room abruptly and returned a couple of minutes later with a thick envelope in his hand. He reached over to take the sleeping baby from her and dropped the envelope into her lap. She stared at it uncertainly for a long time, while Sandro continued to pace with Lily cradled in his arms. Finally, hesitantly, she reached for it and turned it over in her hands. But the

plain brown exterior of the A4 sized envelope gave no clue as to its contents. She glanced up at Sandro but he was now standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows, presumably staring out at the stormy predawn sky.

“It won’t bite you,” his deep voice startled her and she realised that, because of the glow from the lamp, he could see her reflection in the window. She ran a finger under the flap of the envelope to open it and reached inside to extract a thick sheaf of legal looking papers. Her stomach plummeted at first when she saw their names printed on the top sheet and for a brief awful moment, she thought he was serving her divorce papers. Then she looked closer and frowned.

“Sandro... what did you do?” She whispered in shock. “You can’t do this.”

“I can... I have,” he shrugged, still watching her reflection in the glass. “It’s yours.”

He had given her the vineyard. His *father’s* vineyard.

“But it’s your father’s.”

“And when he died, it became mine. I suppose technically your father could snatch it back at any moment but it’s a gesture, Theresa.”

“Why?” She asked helplessly.

“I didn’t want you doubt my reasons for wanting to be with you... I didn’t want it hanging between us anymore.”

“But your mother and sisters...”

“They know about it and for the most part approve of my decision. Not that it would have mattered if they didn’t. This isn’t about them, this is about us. It’s about fixing what I broke.” He finally turned around to face her and stalked back to the bed. “The vineyard is *yours*, Theresa and if you don’t want it, you can burn it to the ground or transfer the deed to Lily. You can hand it back to your father on a platter. It doesn’t matter to me. The only thing that matters to me is you. You’re the sun I revolve around and without you...” he shook his head as his voice broke.

“I think it’s time you told me about Francesca,” Theresa finally said and he inhaled deeply, before sitting down next to her. Theresa reached over and took Lily from him. Thankfully the baby continued to sleep peacefully.

“Francesca...” he shut his eyes as he tried to gather his thoughts. “She’s the kind of woman I always pictured myself marrying. Poised, sophisticated, beautiful... she keeps all her emotions locked up tight, which suited me fine because I never appreciated messy emotional scenes. We dated

and got along pretty well. I fancied myself in love with her. It was a very neat, clinical and uncomplicated version of love. I thought that we were perfectly suited..." Theresa tried to keep her expression neutral but it hurt so much listening to him talk about the other woman in such terms. "Then I came here to meet your father and saw you for the first time. Your quiet beauty drew me immediately. I don't think I ever told you that. I couldn't keep my eyes off of you that first time and I wanted you with a violence that shocked the ever-loving hell out of me. If your stupid father had left things alone, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands off of you. But when he forced the issue, he did the one thing that guaranteed I would keep my distance from you. I don't *like* being told what to do, *cara*. And even though you were exactly what I'd wanted, I very perversely kept you at a distance.

"I resented you and I resented your father for messing up my life and my future plans. I went into our marriage, determined to grab that damned divorce with both hands as soon as you had a son. But things got messy... and emotional. I tried so hard to keep you at a distance, I refused to kiss you, I pretended to want other women and all the time I couldn't stay away from you. I could see how much I was hurting you and..." she watched him struggle to find the right words before he shook his head and dropped his gaze. "At first I didn't care. I rationalised that it was nothing more than you deserved. But the more distant and closed off you became more frustrated I became with you. I told myself that it was because I wanted to *see* you suffer but when I gave it any serious thought I knew it went deeper than that. I hated not having your attention. When we first married you showered me with attention, you knew something was wrong but you were always so determinedly affectionate and loving. Seeing that affection and that *trust* fade from your eyes... it was so much harder than I'd ever anticipated."

He got up and started to pace again. Theresa watched him prowl aggressively around the room and felt the ice around her heart melting with every word he uttered. He was being so brutally honest with her, some of his words were ugly and hurtful, while others sent her heart soaring.

"Every time I returned to Italy I spent time with Francesca..." he confessed roughly, stopping his pacing abruptly to pin her with his fierce gaze. "I *never* touched her. I want you to know that. Not in any sexual way. I never wanted to. My mother and sisters kept arranging these little get-togethers with her family and ours; they tried to push us together more often

than not. I very rarely sought out her company. I saw her at parties and family gatherings but never felt the need to contact her at any other time. You were never far from my thoughts while I was out of the country. I found myself wondering what you were doing, who you were with, if you were happy... if you missed me,” he cleared his throat self-consciously. “I *really* wanted you to miss me, Theresa. I told myself it was because you would suffer more, wondering what I was up to... what a joke! I wanted you to miss me because I missed you. The few times I called home you were so distant and it drove me out of my mind. All I could think of when I was in Francesca’s company was getting back to you. I fantasized about the things I would do to you when I had you naked beneath me again. Why else do you think I was always so damned horny when I got home after those trips?” Theresa blushed as she recalled a particularly memorable homecoming; Sandro had returned on a Friday and hadn’t let her out of bed until the Monday morning. The man had been insatiable.

“That morning when you said you wanted a divorce,” he shook his head. “You shocked the hell out of me. Up until that point you’d been so passive and accepting of the situation.”

“The quintessential doormat you mean?” She inserted drily.

“I don’t think you were ever a doormat, Theresa. I think you were trying to make the best of a bad situation and in the end when you no longer could, you showed me who you truly were. I was fascinated with you before but once I started seeing the real you, I fell hard and fast. I was appalled when I realised that you knew nothing about your father’s sick arrangement. I hated what I’d done to you, how I’d made you suffer for his mistakes. I tried to make it up to you but by then you clearly despised me and with good reason. I wanted get to know you, I wanted us to have a real marriage but you insisted that you wanted nothing to do with me... and Theresa, if you ever wanted revenge for the way I’d treated you, you got it in spades when it felt like nothing I was doing or saying was making any difference to the way you felt about me.

“And then when you told me you were pregnant,” he knelt on the bed and stared down into their sleeping baby’s face, before raising his eyes to hers. “Suddenly it felt like there was a ticking time bomb in the house. I didn’t have all the time in the world to make you love me again; I had only a few short months. The one thing I’d wanted above all else in the beginning was now a noose around my throat, tightening with every passing day. I

loved the baby with everything in me but I feared it too because I was terrified that it would eventually take you away from me. I didn't want you to exclude me from the pregnancy, I wanted to show you what we could like if we operated as a solid family unit but you were so depressingly obsessed with having a son that it felt like a constant uphill battle. I started praying for a girl because I knew a girl would buy me more time. A girl would keep you with me longer; it would also prove to you, once and for all that your father's ridiculous contract meant nothing to me anymore. That I wanted our marriage to last forever." He finally seemed to run out of words, taking in a deep breath of air and exhaling it shakily. His eyes searched hers desperately but she kept her expression neutral, despite the joy bubbling up inside of her. This vulnerable and naked passion was what she'd been waiting for. He'd finally bared his soul for her and it was almost blindingly beautiful.

"So you want our marriage to last forever?" She finally asked after a long silence.

"Yes."

"And you love our baby?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you love me?" Her voice shook a bit at the enormity of that realisation.

"God, *yes!*"

"Good."

"Just good?" He asked in disbelief.

"Well, what else do you want from me?" She asked innocently and he growled. She laughed at the feral sound, before reaching up her free hand to cup his tense jaw. "Sandro, you gorgeous idiot... I *never* stopped loving you. I just got much better at hiding it from you. I was too afraid of being hurt again."

"I'll never hurt you again," he promised vehemently.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Alessandro" she warned direly.

"Okay, I'll try my *best* not to inadvertently hurt you again," he rephrased carefully and she smiled, the old affectionate smile that she used to shower him with in the beginning of their marriage. She heard Sandro's breath catch at the sight.

"Much better," she approved and he growled again, this time the sound was more a sexy purr than a warning. He swept both her and Lily up in a fierce hug but when Lily made a high-pitched sound of protest, he let them

go reluctantly.

“I love you with all my heart, Theresa and I want to marry you,” he said huskily and she started.

“I love you too, Sandro but the last time I checked we were already married.”

“I want to give you the wedding you should have had, *cara*. I want to make my vows again and mean them with all my heart.”

“You don’t have to do that, Sandro,” she shook her head. “I know you love me. You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I don’t have to do it, Theresa... but I *want* to do it. I want my family there to see me marry the woman who holds my heart in her hands. Please marry me again, Theresa, and make me the happiest man in the world.”

She wound an arm around his neck and dragged his head down for a long kiss.

“Yes. With all my heart yes, Sandro.”

Epilogue

The weather on the late spring day in September was perfect. The sun was shining and the sky was a gorgeous shade of blue with not a single cloud marring its perfection. The string quartet struck up the bridal march and the small gathering of people who were seated on the wrought iron chairs in the beautiful garden all turned in unison, craning their necks to see the bride.

Theresa clung to the arm of her maid of honour as she regally made her way down the flower-strewn red carpet. Her eyes were fixed on the tall man standing beneath the rose bower, his hands were solemnly folded, one over the other, in front of him and his eyes were devouring her as she walked towards him. He looked gorgeous in his simple black suit, his hair had been cut close to his scalp and as she got even closer, she could see the nick on his jaw where he'd cut himself shaving that morning. She could see the appreciation in his gaze as he took in her simple ivory chiffon slip dress, with its lightly beaded sweetheart neckline, to its dropped waistline and the ankle length flowing skirt. Her gleaming hair was topped with a simple coronet of white roses and in her hands she held an equally simple bouquet of creamy white roses.

She stepped up beside him and Lisa, her maid of honour, offered Sandro his bride's slender right hand. He smiled down at his wife's cousin and dropped an appreciative kiss on her smooth cheek before focusing his attention on his beautiful bride. Theresa handed her bouquet over to Lisa, who stepped back to stand beside Gabriel Braddock, Sandro's best man. Theresa had eyes only for her husband, who looked absolutely stunned at the sight of her.

"You look..." he shook his head. "There are no words, *cara*. Beautiful doesn't begin to describe you."

She lifted her free hand to his jaw and stroked his slightly stubbled skin tenderly, with all the love in the world reflected in her eyes. The pastor cleared his throat and they stepped apart. Theresa sent a quick glance over to where her ten month old daughter was sitting on her elegant grandmother's lap. Theresa smiled at her mother-in-law and Sandro's sisters, all three of whom were present. A smiling Rick sat beside Isabella de Lucci with a sleeping Rhys cradled in his arms. Her father had made an appearance and sat in the row behind the de Luccis. Things were still very strained between him and Sandro but he had begrudgingly released Sandro from their contract and

hadn't tried to take the vineyard back, saying that he wouldn't contest Theresa's ownership. Theresa still hadn't decided what to do with the contentious plot of land but was leaning towards deeding it over to Lily. Theresa often took Lily to visit Jackson and while he was still cold towards his daughter, he seemed to love Lily in his own gruff way and spoiled her rotten. Theresa had invited him to the wedding, never expecting him to show up and now sent a small appreciative smile in his direction and he nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

She turned her attention back to her groom, this strong, beautiful man was her whole world and she loved him with all that was in her, secure in the knowledge that he felt exactly the same way about her. In that moment her life could not be any more perfect. The pastor smiled and began to speak:

“Alessandro and Theresa have both opted to write their own vows. Alessandro, would you like to begin?” Sandro smiled down at his beautiful wife and, in a voice that shook with emotion, began with the five words that had become his new mantra.

“Theresa, love of my life...”

The End