



# Head Over Heels

**Author:** *Cassidy Langue*

**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** It was supposed to be a business arrangement.

Florence Pietra doesn't make mistakes. As a high-powered hospital CEO, she's spent her life being sharper, smarter, and more composed than anyone else in the room. But when a male colleague refuses to take no for an answer, she instinctively blurts out her fallback excuse—she's already engaged. His retaliation? Spreading rumors online that they're a couple.

Dr. Josie Mueller never expected her estranged grandfather to leave her a fortune—or that it would come with a \$250,000 catch. If she wants to claim his penthouse and the billions tied to it, she has ten months to pay off the judgement against the estate.

When Josie stumbles across Florence's no-photo dating profile—a woman just looking for a friend—she takes a chance. They're a perfect match. Florence needs a fake fiancée. Josie needs fast cash. Neither has time for feelings—especially Josie, who's spent nearly two decades carrying a torch for her best friend.

But when they meet, their chemistry is instant. Undeniable. But while Florence tries to keep things strictly business, her heart has other ideas. Can Josie let go of seventeen years of longing for Mel—and open herself up to something real?

**Total Pages (Source):** 94

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

0

For sensitive readers, there is a very mild content warning at the bottom of the "A Gift" page in the back. Feel free to hop over there for a peek if you need to.

It may give mild spoilers.

1

Florence

"Is there anything else, ma'am?" Jason Bakker shifts in his seat, his fingers tightening around his pen. He looks nervous.

I tap a manicured nail against my desk. "In a hurry, Mr. Bakker?"

He squares his shoulders, but the flicker of unease in his eyes remains. "My daughter's first meet starts in half an hour. I was hoping to get there on time to watch."

For a moment, I let the silence stretch—just long enough for him to wonder if I'll say no. I give a slow, deliberate nod. "I have a few last-minute things to go over with Richard about the fundraiser, but we don't need you for that." I glance at Richard. "Do you need anything from him before he goes?"

"No, ma'am."

Another beat of silence. Jason shifts. I finally nod. "Go. If anything comes up, I'll email you."

He exhales, a hint of relief flickering across his face. "Thank you, ma'am." He's careful to keep it professional, but there's the faintest hint of a smile as he heads for the door.

Of my C-Suite, I like Jason the best. He has balls, and he's not afraid to speak up when he has something to say. He's a hard worker. He's smart.

A few months ago, he had the gall to bring me his resignation letter because he was missing too much time with his kids. We negotiated an arrangement where he still puts in the hours, but he can do some of them at home after the kids are in bed. I can't imagine his wife is happy with that, but that's not my concern.

I push the thought away and turn to Richard, pulling my auburn hair off my shoulders. "Where are we with the fundraising gala for the new research lab?"

He pulls his chair closer, angling his laptop toward me. "The team is almost finished nailing down the details. They're under budget, since the venue is offering the evening at a discounted rate."

"I don't want the discount." I fight the urge to sigh. "We pay them the full rate. If we don't, service will be subpar, and that's unacceptable for an event this high profile." He should know that.

"Yes, ma'am." He leans in, his leg brushing against mine.

I go still.

Not again.

Straightening, I shift away—just enough to make it clear. But no—he has to push it further. I should have known better than to be alone in a room with this pig. This isn't the first time he's tried to push it. "I think that's all for today. Do you have anything else for me?"

He closes his laptop and turns toward me, his expression smug. "You'll need a plus-one for this event. I don't have a date yet, if you'd care to join me?"

I exhale slowly, forcing myself not to overreact. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll pass."

He doesn't take the hint. He never does. "Do you already have a date?" he pushes.

"I do." It slips out before I can stop it. A defense against men who won't take no for an answer. My go-to shield.

I should be above using it by now.

He lifts an eyebrow, smirking. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

"Not that it's any of your business." I hold his gaze, my voice steady. "My fiancée is a rather private person. She doesn't like the spotlight."

The moment the word comes out of my mouth, I kick myself.

What the hell was that?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I don't play games. I don't lie. Yet here I am, inventing an entire fucking relationship just to shut a man up. I'm better than this.

I thought I was better than this.

Richard's lips curl. "She?" He scoffs. "I have a hard time believing that."

I study him for a long moment, forcing myself to remain calm. "Believe what you will, Mr. Woodhouse. My private life is private, and it'll stay that way."

"You're too uptight, Florence." He leans in again, just enough to set my teeth on edge, before stepping back with a chuckle the grinds on my nerves. "You need a man to take care of you."

I count to ten.

Slowly.

Then look him dead in the eye. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that. If I ever hear you speak like that again—to me or anyone else—you'll be looking for a new job."

His smirk falters.

Finally, he steps back. "Relax, Florence. I was just making conversation."

I don't respond.

Once the door shuts behind him, I let out a slow breath. I sink into my chair, fury and disappointment warring inside me. What the hell did I just do? I just invented a fictional partner because I couldn't handle one man who wouldn't take no for an answer. Not only a partner, but a fiancée.

I should have shut this down months ago. Documented every inappropriate comment. Built a case through proper channels. Instead, I just handed him an opening. A weakness.

Dammit.

My phone buzzes on the table.

Marin checking in.

I ignore it.

If this gets out—when this gets out—it could ruin my reputation. Everything I've built could crumble because of one moment of weakness.

Dammit.

I push through the last of my paperwork and head home. The moment I walk in the door, I pull Hettie's number up on my phone.

Do you have 10 minutes for a quick call?

A minute later, my phone rings.

"Hettie. Hey."

She laughs. "Ciao, bella. Why do you sound defeated?"

I exhale. "I need legal advice."

Her playful tone vanishes. "Did you do something illegal?"

This is one of the reasons I keep her close—she can flip from teasing sister to ruthless lawyer in a heartbeat.

"No. But I have a situation at work. I need to find a fiancée for next month's charity gala. Maybe for other events, too."

She chuckles. "There are lesbian dating apps, you know. Though getting a fiancée in a month might be a stretch."

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't want a real fiancée. Is there anything illegal about paying someone to accompany me and act the part?"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

She's quiet for a beat. "No... but why the sudden need? You go to these things without a date all the time."

I grab a beer from the fridge. "I lied to an employee. I told him I have a fiancée. He's been circling for weeks, and he wouldn't back off." I sigh. "It was reflex, Hettie. It just slipped out."

"You're the boss, Florence. Fire his ass."

I shake my head. "No. We were alone. It would turn into a he-said, she-said mess." I think about Jason, how we properly documented his schedule changes through HR to prevent any accusations of favoritism. I should have done the same with Woodhouse's inappropriate behavior from the start. "Everything with him just started out so innocuous and grew so slowly." I groan. "He also makes my job a lot easier. It would be difficult to replace him."

"I cannot believe that just came out of your mouth." She makes a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. "Scratch that. I can." She's silent for a moment. "You know if he's talking to you like that, he's probably talking to other women like that."

"I've mentioned my concerns in passing to the rest of the C-suite. He hasn't approached any of them." I let out a breath. "So where can I find a fake fiancée, Hettie?"

She sighs. "Have you talked to Marin?" she asks.

"No. I wanted to talk to you first. There's nothing illegal if I hire someone, right?"



"As long as you're not paying her for sex, no." She sounds hesitant. "Illegal or not, Flor, it's risky. If this leaks, it'll be a PR nightmare."

"We'll put an NDA in the contract."

Hettie grumbles something under her breath. "Yes, we can do that. But for the record, it's a terrible idea."

I smile despite myself. "This is all off the record, but your objection is noted. I'll have Marin start searching."

After hanging up, I stare at my untouched beer. I've spent my entire career building a reputation on competence and honesty. Now I need to clean up my own mess because my defense mechanism against pushy men is still to claim that I'm taken.

What's worse is that I'm dragging Hettie and Marin into it, too. And another woman—whoever she ends up being. All because I couldn't deal with him like an adult.

I sigh and pick up my phone. "Marin, I need your help with something confidential."

Twenty minutes later, she's in my home office with her tablet, already sorting through profiles.

"What exactly are we looking for?" she asks.

"Someone competent. Professional. No social media." I pace behind my desk. "Someone who can maintain appropriate boundaries and understand this is strictly business."

She raises an eyebrow. "The great Florence Pietra, who prides herself on never

playing games, is going to hire a fake fiancée? Never thought I'd see the day." The corner of her mouth twitches.

"Do you have a better solution?" I snap. I immediately regret it. "I'm sorry. I hate this. But I can't let this damage the hospital's reputation."

"You mean your reputation."

"Both." I stop pacing. "I've worked too hard to let someone like Woodhouse destroy what I've built. But letting someone into my life, even temporarily..." I trail off, the thought of losing control of my tightly contained world making my stomach clench.

"We'll find someone suitable," Marin assures me.

One small lie. A stupid lie.

One more complication I don't have time for.

2

Josie

I shove the door open, not bothering to knock. The kitchen floor softens my angry footsteps, but it doesn't hide them.

"Mom? Dad?" My voice echoes through the large house.

Dad appears in the doorway, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Honey? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"Where's Mom?" I demand.

"In the living room." His brow furrows. "What's wrong? You usually call before you come by."

I storm past him into the other room. Mom. I glare at her. "He's lived here for thirty years and you never let me see him," I say, my voice tight.

Mom looks up from her book. "Josie." She stands up to hug me. "What are you talking about? Who?"

"Opa." I shake the registered letter at her. "He lived here in town. Only a few miles away. And you never told me."

Her brows furrow deeper. "Hedid. I assumed he left after all the legal trouble." She nods at the envelope. "What is that?"

"A copy of his will." I pass it to her and sink into the couch.

Mom pulls the papers out of the official envelope and gives them a quick once-over, then hands them to Dad. Her mouth tightens. "So the world is finally free of him."

Dad glances at the will and back at me, whistling under his breath. "Do you have any idea how much that place is worth?"

I stare at them both in surprise. They don't even care that Grandpa's dead.

I sigh. "I looked it up," I mutter. "It's worth millions. Twenty-eight, to be exact. How the hell did he even have that kind of money?"

This doesn't make any sense. We've always had enough money—Dad works in finance, and mom was the Director of HR for the university until she retired a few years ago. But a penthouse suite in the middle of the city worth millions?

Dad puts a hand on mom's arm to settle her before turning back to me. "He was a real estate developer. One of the men who built Delmont up from a nothing town after the war."

Mom frowns at me. "I think you should sell it. Use the money to pay off your school loans. Put the rest away."

"It'll be worth a lot more by the time I retire if I hold on to it." I glance at my dad, and he nods reluctantly.

Mom's jaw tightens. "It shouldn't be in the family." She turns heel and disappears into her room. I move to follow her, but my dad catches my arm.

I turn to him. "What the hell was that about?"

"Don't swear,mieloji."His tone softens as he slips into his Lithuanian endearments for me. "You know they never got along. Let it be. No good comes of bringing up the past."

I groan in frustration. "I'm an adult. You don't need to protect me."

He squeezes my shoulder. "It's not about protecting you, Josephine. It's about protecting yourMutti."

I shake his hand off me. It's always about protecting Mom.

I leave them to their silence. I'll find my answers somewhere else.

"Ms. Murphy." I shake the lawyer's hand, trying to smile. My mom's harsh words about the penthouse still echo in my head.

She gestures to the chair. "Please sit, Dr. Mueller. We have a lot to discuss." She pauses. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

She pulls out a stack of papers and lays them on the desk in front of me. "Did you have a chance to review the will?"

I purse my lips. "It seems fairly straightforward."

Her nose twitches. "Yes, it is. But it's not as simple as it looks."

"Okay." I sit back, waiting.

"Your grandfather stipulated that all the assets are tied to each other. In order to claim the financial assets—the stocks and bonds, what's left of his retirement funds—you also have to accept the penthouse."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"I can sell it later, though?"

She hesitates. "The penthouse is... complicated." She clears her throat. "There's a decades-old lawsuit attached to the property."

That makes me sit up. "What does that mean? What kind of lawsuit?"

She removes her glasses, setting them carefully on the desk. She leans forward on her elbows, watching me. "A settlement was made thirty years ago. Upon your grandfather's death, the inheritor of the penthouse owes the current building owners a quarter million dollars. That must be paid before the property and financial assets are released to you."

I stare at her. "You're saying I have to come up with \$250,000 in order to inherit this, or I lose everything."

She nods, steepling her fingers. "Essentially, yes. But it's worth it. The other assets are valued at around \$250 million."

I let out a long breath. "Is there any way to fight it? What was the lawsuit about?"

She leans back with a sigh. "The court case was highly publicized. I can have my assistant pull some records, but you'll probably find more online." She frowns. "Legally you could fight it. I wouldn't recommend it."

"Reason being?"

"From my rudimentary understanding of the original court case, the Vanderveens went easy on your grandfather. There were allegations he was involved in some questionable dealings. Most experts at the time thought the penthouse should've stayed with the rest of the building." She gives me a pointed look. "There was talk your grandfather paid off the judge."

I frown. "If I fight it, what would I have to lose?"

She raises an eyebrow. "A lot. The most likely scenario is the penthouse would remain your inheritance. But any judge would award the Vanderveens an adjustment for inflation. That would probably triple what you'd need to come up with."

I inhale slowly, then nod. That's not a risk I'm willing to take. "How long do I have?"

"Legally, ten months after his death. That was ten days ago."

I run my hand through my hair. "And in the meantime, what about the upkeep of the place? Security, all that?" I ask.

She slides a set of keys across the desk. "I can release them to you now if you intend to accept it."

"What else do I need to know?" I ask, my mind racing.

I have to come up with that money.

I need to visit the penthouse and decide what to do about it. I wonder what I'll find inside it. The man was 101 years old, and didn't have anyone close to him.

She shakes her head. "That's everything. That settlement is the only thing standing in the way of you becoming a very wealthy woman, Doctor."

A multi-millionaire.

I stare at the keys.

Where am I going to find that kind of money?

3

Florence

"Morning, boss lady." Gwen, my Executive Assistant, sets a fresh cup of coffee on the desk in front of me.

I give her a grateful smile. "Thank you."

She sits down at her own desk,. This is my favorite part of the day. The rest of the hospital's still waking up, and these early hours are when I get the most done without interruption.

"Boss?" Gwen's voice cuts through the quiet.

"Hm?" I pull my eyes away from my screen. "What is it?"



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

She frowns as she scrolls through her tablet. "Did you decide to play for the other team?"

I blink. "What team?" "I don't play any team sports." "What are you talking about?"

She gives me a look. "You made the local hospital gossip on Instagram."

I hold back a snicker. Too many people in this city have too much time on their hands. "What did I do?"

She arches a brow. "Apparently, you've been sneaking around with Woodhouse."

I scoff. "In his dreams, maybe. Not in this reality."

Gwen shakes her head. "It's all over Insta. Rumor has it someone saw the two of you alone late last night."

I groan inwardly. "We were both working last night. That reminds me, though. Call Carole in HR and tell her to make room for me. Now would be a good time. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes." I need to get a handle on this fiasco.

A few minutes later, I knock firmly on the Head of the HR Department's office door.

Carole looks up from her desk. "Florence. Come in. What can I do for you today?"

I close the door and sit down across from her. "Thanks for seeing me on such short notice." Like I gave her much choice.

"What's going on?"

My brows furrow. "I have a situation to report, and I'd like guidance on how to proceed with it."

She nods, folding her hands in her lap and sitting back in her chair. "I'm listening."

"Woodhouse. Richard. He's been... testing boundaries off and on for weeks. Last night he asked me out. I shut it down. Quickly."

"But?"

"But he pushed. When I told him I have a partner—a woman—he told me I'm too uptight and I need a man to take care of me. We were alone in the conference room. Jason left about fifteen minutes before Woodhouse and I did so he could catch his daughter's meet."

Carole groans softly. "He told you that you need a man to take care of you." Her half-question is tinged with disbelief. "He actually said that?"

I nod.

"Do you want to file an official complaint? We can pull him in for harassment training, issue a formal warning—"

"I told him I'd forget he said it, but his ass would be looking for another job if I ever hear him talk to anyone in my hospital like that again."

She leans back, considering. "I'll note it in both your files. But... you don't want to file a formal complaint?"

I hesitate. "Has anyone else filed reports against him?"

"Legally, I can't tell you that."

"Off the record. If he's harassing other women, I'll file a complaint. But I get the impression that he's just after me."

That gets her attention. "Why do you think that?"

I bite my lip, thinking. "Honestly, I'm not sure. It feels calculated. Like it's not that he wants, but my power and position."

"I can't speak to his reasons, of course," she says, "but he hasn't bothered anyone else." She pauses. "He knows you're gay, doesn't he?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Legally, you can't ask me that."

She laughs. "Fair enough." Then she sobers. "You're aware of the rumor mill on social media?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I grimace. "Apparently, I'm having an affair with him."

"It's not a good look, Florence. Whether or not there's truth to it, people believe what they want to. I'd strongly advise being seen with this fiancée of yours. Take her out somewhere public—preferably near the hospital."

I nod. "She's a private person." "She's a non-existent person at the moment. "But I'll talk to her. Is there any way to get the rumors off the internet?"

Carole laughs. "It's social media, Florence."

I don't know how that shit works. I have Gwen and Marin to deal with that.

I stand, smoothing my skirt. "If he pushes the line again, I'll come straight to you. And if you hear anything—anything at all—about him bothering someone else, let me know. Off the record."

"Florence." Her tone stops me at the door.

"Yes?"

"Put these rumors to rest. It's not just your personal reputation at risk here."

4

Josie

By the time I get to Mel's, the weight of the news is pressing down on me. I look at my best friend.

She pulls me into a hug, tenderly brushing my hair behind my ear.

"Don't. Please." I push her away gently. I've been in love with her for almost as long as we've known each other, going on 17 years. Unrequited, because she was incapable of romantic attraction—until Renna unlocked something inside her. I've accepted that it was never meant to be, me and her, but sometimes it's hard to be so close to her.

"Sorry," she murmurs. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure? You want some wine?"

"Sure." I could use it after the day I've had. "I got some news today."

She stops at the serious tone in my voice.

"Good or bad?"

"Goodandbad, I think. My grandfather died recently."

She passes me a glass and sits beside me at the table. "Your grandfather? I didn't know you had any living grandparents."

"I didn't think I did." I shake my head. I pull the registered letter and the will from my pocket and hand it to her.

She puts her wine down and unfolds the papers. "What is it?" When I don't answer, she scans the page in her hands. Her eyes widen. "Is this real?"

"Apparently," I say drily. "I talked to the lawyer this morning."

"This penthouse is in the Vanderveen Tower."

"Yes. Apparently he's been living in town for my whole life. Mom cut him out of our lives thirty years ago, and that was that."

"Jos, do you have any idea how much that place must be worth?"

"It's valued around twenty-eight million." I pause. "His other assets are worth ten times that. At least."

She lets out a low whistle. "That's... Wow." She studies me for a long minute. "Why'd he leave it all to you?"

"That's the million dollar question. Mom shuts down whenever I ask anything about him. Dad just shrugs and tells me to leave the past alone."

"Your mom doesn't have any siblings, does she?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I shake my head. "Not that I know of. Her parents were older when she was born, but I've never heard of anyone else on her side of the family. I know her mom died young, but beyond that, I don't know anything about her side of the family."

"Except that your grandfather was living here all this time. And is a bazillionaire," she says.

"Was," I correct absently. "Dad said he was a real estate developer. He was a big part of building Delmont up after the war. It was a nothing-town in the fifties."

She nods. "So I'm assuming inheriting millions is the good news. What's the bad?" She hands the papers back to me.

"There's a legal hold against the penthouse."

"English?"

"I need to come up with two hundred fifty thousand dollars in order to claim the inheritance."

"Ouch." She winces. "Do you have that kind of cash?"

"Nope. Not yet. If I don't come up with it, the penthouse and everything else will go to the Vanderveens—the building's owners. It was part of a court judgment over a property dispute."

"So you have to come up with a quarter of a million dollars in order to claim a quarter

of a billion." A hint of question lingers in her tone.

"You know, you're a pretty smart cookie," I tease. "You should be a doctor or something."

She laughs. "So what's the plan?"

"I'll ask my parents first. They've got enough saved to lend it to me short-term."

Mel nods. "I don't have that much in savings yet—I've been focused on paying my student loans—but Renna has quite a bit saved up from her gymnastics sponsorships. If you can't find the money another way, I can talk to her."

I huff out a laugh. "No matter who I borrow it from, I'll pay double back." I take a sip of wine, then glance at her. "Would you come out there with me this weekend? I have no idea what to expect."

When I push open the door to the penthouse, an unnatural stillness stops me from entering.

"It's so quiet it's creepy," I murmur, my voice echoing through the vast space.

"Do you want me to go in first?" Mel rests her hand on my back, her warmth steady against me. I shake my head and step inside.

My gaze is immediately drawn to the east wall. The entire glass wall gives a breathtaking view of the lake, shimmering in the distance in the afternoon sun. Light spills into the room, casting shadows across the hardwood floors.

"Holy fuck," Renna murmurs behind us. "This place is all yours?"



She moves further into the room, her fingers trailing across the back of a buttery-soft leather sofa, heading straight for the grand fireplace. On the hand-carved marble mantel sits a collection of photos.

"I thought you didn't know him?"

I follow her to the fireplace. And freeze.

There, in a simple silver frame, is a photo of me at my hooding ceremony. It's a perfect shot of me, smiling proudly as I received my hood—when I officially became a doctor.

I swallow hard. That photo was never published. And after my parents' reaction, I know it didn't come from them. A chill slides down my spine.

"I haven't seen him since I was four," I whisper. "I didn't even know he was still alive."

Renna puts the picture back down carefully. "Well, he knew you." She turns to survey the room. "This place is incredible, Josie."

I wander into the kitchen, sleek stainless steel and marble countertops gleaming in the natural light, still shaken. "I didn't know what to expect. He was over a hundred years old. But this place..." I trail off, still trying to process everything. "It's spotless. He must've had help."

"There's a note here," Mel calls from the dining room. She's standing at a huge mahogany table that could easily seat a dozen people.

"A note?" Surprised, I cross the room to her. "What does it say?"

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"It's addressed to you." She hands me the note and a business card.

It is, indeed, a professional note addressed to me—by name—from a woman named Donna. She's been cleaning the place for years, and will continue to clean twice a week until she hears from me with further instructions. I pocket the note. I'll contact her later.

"Come here." Renna's voice echoes from down the hall. "You've got to see this."

Mel and I follow her into a sprawling library. Floor-to-ceiling shelves line three walls. My eyes are drawn to the view of the city through the wall of windows.

I head toward the view, but Mel catches my arm. "Jos. Look at his books."

I scan the shelves. The collection is staggering. Museum-quality special editions, rare first editions, classics, and shelves of carefully preserved literary fiction. And a full shelf of detective novels. "What a strange collection," I murmur under my breath.

Mel makes that weird throaty noise, the one she makes when she's worried. "Josie. Look."

I step closer. One entire shelf holds copies of almost every book I own. At eye level sits a row of candid photos of me—snapshots spanning the last thirty years.

I blink hard.

It's impossible that someone has the same reading tastes as I do. I read quite a bit, and

while I enjoy a good fiction book—and I read a lot of literature—I have a secret love of sapphic romance books. Which shouldn't be surprising, seeing as I've been in love with the woman in front of me for nearly two decades and haven't been able to act on it.

A lot of people live vicariously through books.

I look closer at the titles and a cold feeling runs down my spine.

This isn't coincidence. These aren't just similar books—they're exact matches. Down to the same editions. I pull out one of my favorites. Sunshine Falls. Same cover art. Same edition I bought last month

I flip through it. Untouched. "It doesn't look like any of these have been read," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "It wouldn't take a lot to find my Insta book club." I swallow hard, the words feeling hollow.

Renna comes up behind us. "Even the newest ones. That's creepy as fuck."

Mel gives her a sharp look. "It's... disconcerting," she says gently. "I'm sure there's a rational explanation."

I try to shrug off the uneasy feeling, but it makes my skin crawl. The careful arrangement of the books—in perfect chronological order, following my reading habits down to the book—it speaks of an attention to detail that goes way beyond casual interest.

I take a deep breath. Focus. "Do you think there's anything I could sell to help me come up with the money?"

I asked Mom and Dad last night at dinner if I could borrow the money, and Mom shut

the idea down without discussion. She told me to let it go. Get on with my life. It's dirty money. Whatever that means. When I asked Dad later, he shrugged and just said he'd support Mom's wishes.

I wish I could help," Renna says quietly. "Almost all of my money is tied up in property or long-term investments."

I force a smile. "I'll figure something out. Don't worry."

I have no idea how, but it's not her problem.

"If I were you," Mel says thoughtfully, "I'd get an expert in here. Some of the art on these walls could be worth six figures. The vases, the sculptures, even some of the books might sell for thousands. The room full of coins upstairs belongs in a museum. It looks like your grandfather knew what he was investing in."

I nod slowly. Another thing to add to my ever-growing list. I guess I have the time, now that Mel's is taken up with Renna.

Later, at home alone, I open Her, the lesbian dating app that Ruby suggested. She was always good for a physical release while I was hooked on Mel, but she's pushing me to look for something real, now that Mel isn't the center of my universe.

I scroll aimlessly, pausing on a profile with no picture. Somehow, that intrigues me. The bio is short, professional—almost clinical. Looking for companionship. Open to connection. Prefer privacy until trust is established.

She sounds right up my alley.

Not Neurotic: Why is the mystery woman looking for companionship?

IcyBoss: I need someone to spend time with. I'm tired of being a loner.

NotNeurotic: Why are you hiding then?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

IcyBoss: I don't want any coworkers seeing my face here.

NotNeurotic: Maybe I am a coworker.

IcyBoss: Unlikely, darling. Are you neurotic?

NotNeurotic: Not even a little. I'm about as normal as they come.

IcyBoss: You up for coffee?

Not Neurotic: Not this late. Wine or tea. Or coffee tomorrow?

IcyBoss: You busy right now?

5

Florence

I look around the nearly deserted Book Nook. I love my tiny bookstore and café. It should be easy to find myNotNeuroticdate here.

I don't want to meet in a very crowded place right now—there's enough drama on social media without adding an innocent woman into it.

The bell above the door rings, and a tall striking blonde woman with piercing blue eyes steps inside, glancing around before zeroing in on the coffee counter in the back. She's dressed impeccably in fitted jeans and a sapphire blouse that matches her eyes,

far too put-together for someone who's had less than an hour to get ready. Something feels vaguely familiar about her, but I can't place her.

I circle around a bookshelf and silently come up behind her. "Are you Not Neurotic?" I murmur in a husky voice close to her ear.

She jumps, her hand flying to her chest. "God, you scare me." For just a moment, there's a flash of recognition in her eyes. Then it's gone. "What kind of question is that? I'm not neurotic. Are you?"

I snicker. "I'm IcY Boss. I meant your Her handle."

She lets out a long breath. "Oh. Sorry." She hesitates. "I've never done this before. I didn't expect you to sneak up and scare the shit out of me. You can call me Josie."

"Can I buy you a drink, Josie?" The corner of my mouth curls up. I think I like this woman.

She might be a good fit for what I need. Her height is striking—she's got at least five or six inches on me—but it's her quiet confidence, even after I've rattled her, that draws me to her.

"If they have tea? Sure." Her gaze drifts along the bookshelves as we walk toward the back of the store. It's like she's trying not to look at something—or someone. Me.

"You like to read?" I ask, following her eyes as they linger on the literary fiction.

She blushes. "Some, although my typical taste is a little less refined than that." Her fingers absently brush along the line of her neck, drawing my attention to the curve of her throat.

Judging by her flushed face, I take a guess. "You like trashy romance novels," I tease. "Exclusively lesbian, or straight, too?" I don't have much time to read, but I indulge in the occasional romance once in a while.

"Only women for me." She frowns. "Oh, —sorry! You meant books, didn't you? Mostly sapphic romances, honestly. Living vicariously and all that." She shrugs. "What about you? Do you read?"

It's a fair question, seeing as I invited her to a bookstore. "Some," I say simply. I bite my lip as I study her. Despite her easy smile, she's trying very hard to look relaxed. Definitely nervous.

"Do you want some wine?" I offer. "Instead of tea, I mean?"

She glances around the store like she's checking for exits. "Is there a good bar nearby?"

I chuckle. "There's a wine bar next door."

"Nectar? They wouldn't let me in, not looking like this." She looks down at herself. "I didn't plan to go out tonight."

I wave at Matthew, one of our employees, to get his attention. His gaze flicks to Josie and lingers just a bit too long.

"Can we get two cups of tea, please?" I ask.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

He raises a brow, but nods. Josie gives him a tight smile and looks away.

"Now," I turn back to her, "it's my first time using the app, too. I don't usually meet women this way."

She lets out a soft laugh. "I imagine you meet women everywhere you go." Her eyes trace the curve of my neck before darting away.

"I'm not looking, honestly. I've been independent all my life. I never felt like I needed someone else to complete me."

"Doesn't that get lonely?" Her face softens, then falls. "Let me guess." She bites her lip. "You're the boss. Work always comes first, and now you're looking for someone who fits into your schedule."

I gape at her, caught off guard.

She laughs. "It doesn't take a brain surgeon, IceQueen. Your clothes, your posture—they give you away. So why now?"

I deflect. "Tell me about you first. Where do you normally meet women?"

She looks down at her hands, fidgeting. "I— I haven't dated much." She bites her lower lip. "I had a best friend. We spent every waking moment together."

I reach across the table, my hand covering hers. "What happened to her?"

She snorts. "She fell in love. With someone else." Her voice catches, but she distracts me, turning my hand over and tracing the inside of my palm. Her touch is soft. Familiar, almost. Surprisingly intimate for a stranger.

"She's still my best friend," she continues quietly, "and I still have feelings for her." She lets go of my hand, her fingers lingering just a hair too long. "I had a friend with benefits—someone else—but she said it wasn't healthy for me to keep that going." She exhales. "Sorry. I'm babbling. I'm not really looking for a relationship right now. That wouldn't be fair to you. But friendship... someone to spend time with..."

I tilt my head. "Why did you say that you couldn't get into Nectar next door?"

She rolls her eyes. "Have you ever been inside? I'm not dressed for it, and it's... Well, it's a little out of my price range."

"It would be my treat."

She raises an eyebrow, her grin sly. "You must have quite the kingdom, if you've got pull at a place like that."

I blink. "Kingdom?"

She lets out a genuine laugh. "Ice queen. Kingdom." She shrugs, still grinning. "Never mind. Am I allowed to ask what your real name is?"

"Back up a second. I'm not an ice queen. Where do you get that? You read too many steamy romance novels." I try to make it sound like teasing, but the edge in my voice betrays me.

Josie's sapphire eyes meet mine. She's quiet for a long beat, her brow furrowing. "Seriously?"

Yes, seriously. We barely know each other. Am I that transparent?

She takes my hand in hers, caressing it before turning it over. She spreads my fingers apart and slowly traces from the center of my palm to the tip of my index finger.

"First, your handle is Icy Boss." Her finger moves down my middle finger, lingering at the tip. Her focus stays on my hand, like she's studying the page of a book.

"You carry yourself like you own the world," she murmurs, almost absently. "You spoke to the waiter like you know him and respect him—but with an authority that most people wouldn't carry. Not just for tea."

She swallows, tracing my ring finger next. "You're observant. You pegged exactly what I like to read." She glances down briefly at her simple jeans and blouse. "And despite how I'm dressed, you have enough sway to get me into Nectar. Or think you do, at any rate."

Her fingertip glides along my pinkie, then she folds her hand over mine, her warmth sinking into my skin. "And you asked me to meet you in a nearly deserted place, where it's unlikely anyone would recognize you."

Her gaze lifts, locking onto mine.

I study her carefully, not reacting. "You've got me all figured out, do you?" She's spot on. It's unnerving.

She shakes her head, her eyes dancing. "No. Not even close. I don't even know your name." The side of her lips twitches. Amused.

I lick my bottom lip. "If you've pegged me right... am I someone you want to know?"

I look away when I catch sight of Matthew approaching with our tea.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"Ladies." He places the steaming mugs in front of us and steps back. He puts his hands behind his back, looking at me expectantly. "Ma'am?"

The corner of my mouth turns up in a smile. "Two glasses of your finest, please."

He dips his head in a slight bow before disappearing through the back door.

"The plot thickens," she teases. Her gaze lingers on the door for a moment before returning to me. "To answer your question—yes. I'm interested."

I hold her gaze steady. "I'm not looking for anything serious, Josie." I resist blinking first.

"Neither am I." She blinks first, almost flirty. "I'm not even looking for anything romantic." She swallows. "Not opposed to the idea, if it happens, but... not looking."

"Sex?" I ask lightly, surprising myself. I hadn't really thought about that until she walked into the bookstore, her soft dark-blonde bob pulled back, her piercing blue eyes and matching blouse already knocking me off-kilter.

She inhales sharply and blinks twice, caught off guard. "Not opposed," she says slowly, "but not looking for that either." She glances around the bookstore, then back at me. "Do you have a name, or should I just call you Boss?"

"You can call me Boss if you want to." I bite back a grin.

Her smile flickers, falters, before she fixes it back in place. Her gaze drops to her

hands, wrapped around her tea.

"I'm sorry." I sigh. "You were right—about me wanting to stay under the radar." I study her closely. "Can I trust you?"

Her smile softens, reaching her eyes this time. "I'm good at keeping secrets. Am I supposed to be a secret?"

I laugh, for real this time. "Josie." "She has a pretty name." "Will you trust me?"

"If you tell me your name, I will."

I stand and offer her my hand. "Follow me. Then yes—I will tell you."

6

Josie

I take her hand, and she pulls me to my feet. It doesn't feel like a date—we never called it that. Just a meetup. A drink to get to know each other a little, but...

I recognized her right away. The shock made me jump. But she doesn't want me to know yet, so I'll play along.

She tugs me to my feet, and I take a step closer than necessary, intentionally stumbling into her.

"Do you trust me? That I'm not neurotic?" I whisper near her ear, brushing my body against hers. I wasn't looking for anything, but just like the first time I saw her, this woman is oozing pheromones.

"Whoa, Josie." She puts some space between us, but not before I catch her sharp inhale. Her hand lingers on my back, warm and steady, steering me toward the door along the back wall—the same one the waiter disappeared through minutes ago.

I pause. "You're not planning to kill me, are you?"

She chuckles. "No." She opens the door, and when I hesitate, she steps through first. "You're safe. I promise," she says drily.

I follow her, stepping into the dimly lit, empty space. The door a few feet down probably leads to Nectar. A staircase winds upward, shrouded in darkness.

She flips a switch, and soft, warm light fills the space. She places a foot on the first step.

"Trust me?" She lifts a brow and starts up the stairs, not waiting to see if I'll follow.

I trail a few steps after her. "Nice view," I murmur appreciatively as I follow her up to the landing.

She glances over her shoulder, confused. "There's nothing down there."

She shrugs me off, distracted, opening the only door on the landing.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I follow her inside, my eyes darting around the room as I enter.

The waiter from downstairs steps out of the kitchen carrying two glasses of wine. "Everything's clear, ma'am. No one will disturb you this evening. He nods curtly and disappears through the door, closing it softly behind himself.

"I think you're moving a little fast,Boss."

She waves a hand dismissively. "It's not what you're thinking, Josie." She gestures to the table where the wine waits, and she sits, motioning for me to do the same. "Before I tell you who I am," she says quietly, "I need to tell you a story."

I sit down, my curiosity piqued.

When I bring the glass of wine to my nose, I'm pleasantly surprised.

She said the finest, and this is definitely that. I'm more of a whisky girl myself, but I know how to appreciate the finer things in life—and this definitely fits that category. I murmur a sound of approval.

I know she's got clout. But this? This is impressive, even for her.

"I'm listening."

"You were right on the money earlier, when you profiled me. What do you do?" she asks bluntly.



I shake my head. "You're going to tell me a story."

"Josie." The way she purrs my name—I'm not sure if it's a warning growl or something else.

"I get in people's heads. And under their skin." I raise both eyebrows in challenge.

She almost rolls her eyes. "I hope they pay you well. You do excellent work." She takes a deep breath and presses on.

"You were right, about me picking an out-of-the-way place where we could go unnoticed. I hold a position of authority, and quite a few people could recognize me."

"And you're not out yet?" I ask, feigning curiosity.

She shakes her head. "It's not that. I don't publicly make a point of it, but it's not something I've ever hidden."

"You've just been too busy with your career to foster any real relationships." It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that out.

"I never felt the need to have a serious partner. I'm happy with my work, I have a handful of people close to me that I trust. I don't need anyone to complete me."

The Ice Queen voice is back, bordering on defensive.

"Do you have any friends?" I ask softly. I understand people who keep their circle small, but it sounds like she doesn't even have anyone she can call a friend.

She holds my gaze for a long minute. "I have people in my life that serve any purpose I need." She groans. "Almost."

I bite my lip, thinking. "You're not looking for sex," I muse. "You acted surprised when that even came out of your mouth earlier. And for a woman of your means, I imagine you could pay for anything you need in that department."

She snickers. "I don't need to pay for sex when I want it."

Still.

"So what prompted setting up a profile onHersand trying to find a date? And what test did I pass to gain entrance to your fancy private apartment?"

"Stop mocking me." She frowns.

"Tell me your story, then. Your name, too," I prompt her.

She brings her wine to her nose, inhaling slowly and savoring its aroma.

"I had a male employee come on to me last week. He's been skirting around it, trying to ask me out multiple times over the past few months. It's a power grab."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"So fire his ass." No woman should put up with that kind of behavior from a coworker.

"It would be..." She sighs. "It would make my job exponentially more difficult. He's good at what he does, and he'd be hard to replace."

"So you need a girlfriend to show him why you're not interested. Do you even like women?"

Apparently, that offends her. "Yes." She swallows. "Yes, I like women. Quite a bit, actually." The corner of her mouth quirks up. "He asked if I would go to an event with him, because most people will be bringing a plus-one."

"Let me guess," I laugh. "You told him you have a girlfriend, and now you need someone to go with you to the event."

A blush rises in her cheeks.

"Your lawyer is in the other room, and I need to sign a non-disclosure agreement before you'll tell me who you are."

"We don't have an NDA drawn up yet." She sighs. "Tonight was just supposed to be an informal vetting process."

"I need to pass a vetting process to go on a date with you?" I ask incredulously. I push my glass of wine away.

"Josie, wait." Her voice roots me to the spot. "Please."

"What did he say to you to throw you off your game?" I've seen her in action before. This seems so unlike her.

An inaudible sigh escapes her.

"Look, whatever you tell me is safe. I won't tell anyone anything. You have my word," I tell her, serious now.

She shakes her head. "How can you read me so well? You don't even know me." She takes another sip of her wine and squares her shoulders. "He directly asked if I would go with him. I told him I already had a plus-one. When he didn't believe me, I told him that my fiancée was a very private person."

That's the piece I was missing. "You're not looking for someone for a single date," I murmur. "You are looking for a long-term commitment. Hence the vetting."

"The loser had the gall to tell me I'm uptight and need a man," she seethes, "and when I turned him down, he decided to force my hand."

"How so?" I sit back in my chair, intrigued.

She bites her lip nervously and lets out a long breath. "Someone posted on social media that they'd seen us together, and it started trending."

I rack my brain for anything I've seen or heard lately. I don't keep up much with social media and the rumor mill, but Mel's fiancée Renna keeps an active presence. She was the top athlete for the university's winning gymnastics team—she still earns sponsorship money, maintaining a healthy presence online. She mentioned something over the weekend, but I hadn't connected the dots.

"You're..." I pause, pretending I've only just worked it out. I start to say the name people whisper. Cold Rock. Delmont's ice queen. Her last name means 'rock' in Italian. She's known for being cold and hard, for running a tight ship—but also for doing a damn good job at it. Even her critics respect her.

The only reason Renna mentioned it was because she had looked up to this CEO of our teaching hospital. Not many openly queer women make it into such positions.

"Icy boss," the woman at the table nods, finishing my sentence. HerHerhandle.

"My friend works at the hospital," I tell her. "She mentioned it the other day. She was disappointed to hear you were dating a man. She respected you immensely for your competence and what you'd accomplished."

"Respected?" Her brow furrows. "I've never been in the closet, but I've never made an issue of my queerness, either." Her shoulders drop. "So now I'm disappointing all the young queer kids, too." She lets out a frustrated breath. "I need to put a stop to this."

"Let me help." I reach over and squeeze her hand. "I'll be your fiancée."

"It's not that easy," she argues. "We need to talk over the details with Hettie. But what about you? What if you decide you're ready to start dating again?"

I scoff. "I'm still not over Mel." I don't know if my heart will ever let go of her, after being in love with her for the last seventeen years. I just always thought we'd be together.

Giving up sex for however long this farce lasts will be the most annoying part.

"What about your friend with benefits?" she asks.

"She's a friend without benefits now." I shrug.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"What do you want out of it, if we do this? You'd be giving up a lot. You wouldn't be able to see anyone, at least for a while."

"I don't know. I get to see this asshole publicly humiliated, and restore my friend's faith in you." And go out on dates with a beautiful woman.

I smile, tentative. "I'm in the middle of a court case right now anyways, so I don't have the mental or emotional desire to go looking for anything serious."

She pulls her hand away from mine. "What court case? I don't want to deal with any negative press."

I laugh. At least she has her priorities straight.

"It's some old legal issue about a property I inherited from my grandfather. Technically, my name's not even attached to the case. It's nothing to worry about," I promise her.

7

Florence

"Thanks, Hettie." I smile as I close the door behind her. Josie's coming over this evening to discuss the details of our arrangement. I have a list of items we should cover and a standard NDA for her to sign that will protect me if she chooses not to do it.

Walking back into the dining room, I look around. Donna cleaned earlier, and everything looks good.

Marin stands up at the table. "Do you need anything else from me before I disappear?"

I roll my eyes. "You don't think I can handle a date on my own? I remember how to treat a woman, Marin."

She laughs. "Seeing as this is more like a business meeting than a date..." She stops, studying me. "You're actually nervous about this."

It feels more like a date.

"There's something about her. She has this uncanny ability to see through me." I glance at her. "Like you do, only different."

She raises an eyebrow. "I think this woman is going to break through your defenses. She's already melting you around the edges."

"It's not like that," I argue. "She's been in love with her best friend for decades. Unrequited. Her heart's not open for business."

Marin tsks softly in the back of her throat. "Keep telling yourself that, Florence."

An hour later, Josie's at my door.

"Hey. Come on in," I tell her.

She follows me into the living room.



"Can I get you something to drink?" I ask.

She looks around my large living room—the white leather sofa, the electric fireplace, and the wall full of books.

"Wow. Nice place." She eyes the bookshelf.

I take her elbow, laughing, and lead her to the table. "Let's talk about the details first, then you can look at my books."

She raises an eyebrow, looking at me. It strikes me again how tall she is.

"Okay." She gives herself a little shake. "Sorry. I forgot for a minute—that this isn't real." Her voice softens, and she looks a little disappointed.

"You don't have to do this," I point out. I pull out a chair for her. "Sit down. Do you want something to drink?" I ask again.

"Do you have whisky?" she asks, looking at me hopefully.

"Not in the house, but Marin is out grabbing dinner, so she can pick some up. Do you have a favorite brand?"

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

She bites her lip. "Not really. Don't make your staff go out of their way for me."

My staff?

"I don't have a staff, Josie—not at home. I have a PA. Well, and a housekeeper that comes twice a week," I admit. "I'm not sure who you think I am, but I'm not all that."

Her eyes light up with amusement. "Then why do you act like it?" She pulls the pile of papers toward her and pats the chair next to her.

"Sit down, Florence. If we're going to do this, we go into it as equals."

I can't remember the last time someone talked to me that casually.

I nod. "Okay."

I turn away from her, pulling my phone out to send Marin a text to grab whisky and dessert when she picks up our dinner. I take a slow deep breath before turning back and sitting down next to her.

She pulls the top document off the pile.

"English? What am I signing here?" Her eyes skim the document.

"That just says that you won't discuss our conversation tonight with anyone. To protect me if you change your mind or if we can't come to an agreement on all points. My lawyer told me not to discuss particulars until you'd signed."

She nods thoughtfully, focused on the single page in front of her. After a minute, she holds out her hand. "Pen?"

I want to be offended by her flippant expectation, but a quick glance around the table tells me Marin and Hettie dropped the ball.

I grab one from my office and bring it to her.

She signs with a flourish, then pushes the paper toward me. "So how does this work? I've never done anything like this."

I glance down to double-check that it's signed and dated. The title in front of her name stops me.

"Wait. You're a doctor?" My stomach sinks. This could negate everything.

"Relax, Florence. I teach at the university. I'm not under you." The corner of her mouth quirks. "Not in the professional sense, at any rate."

I close my eyes and force myself to take a breath. She's flirting with me.

"Marin will be delivering dinner in half an hour. I asked her to get some whisky to pair with dessert."

Her eyes light up at that.

"Hettie left me a list of things we should cover for the contract," I add.

She bites the inside of her cheek. "For not telling anyone about this, that's a lot of people who know. If you really want this quiet, you realize fewer people should know, right?"

I wave her concern aside. "It's Marin and Hettie. Probably the two people I trust most in the world." Well, I don't trust Hettie with everything, but as far as legal issues go, she's a gold mine to help me understand what I can and can't do, and what I can get away with. Attorney-client privilege has its perks.

"What's the first thing on your list?" she asks curiously.

"Duration. How long do we plan to keep this up? I think a year would be enough, but if you think you'll be over your friend sooner and want to date, we can agree on nine months. We'll add a clause about early termination to be safe."

"That's fine," she says. "What else?"

"Public appearances." I meet her eyes. This is the most important part. "We have the charity gala in three weeks, and there are typically events every month or two. We should be seen in public together once or twice a month to make it look convincing."

"Who do you normally take to these events?"

"I normally go by myself," I say defensively. "I don't need anyone to complete me—or any of that shit."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

Reaching over, she puts a hand on my arm. "That's not what I was saying, Florence." Her voice is warm, soothing. "It just doesn't seem like you to cave to this man."

"It's not just him," I point out. "It's been less than a week since I said no to him, and now the whole of Delmont thinks he and I have something going on." I exhale sharply. "I detest social media."

She squeezes my arm before letting go.

"I'm not the biggest fan either," she admits, "but Mel's fiancée is good at it. She'll help us counter his BS. I'm sure she'd be willing to help." Her eyes widen. "Actually, that would be a good way for us to be noticed. She's fairly high-profile. If we go out with them, it would definitely create a buzz."

"Who's this?" I ask curiously.

"Do you follow college sports much? She was on our gymnastics team a few years ago that won the national championship. Renna Lee. Although," she adds thoughtfully, "that might be a conflict of interest, since she and Mel both work for the hospital."

I don't generally have time for sports, but I remember the hype. "I remember it. I don't recognize the name."

"Serenity. The Serene Beam Queen."

"I think I remember her. She's the one who was good on that skinny beam, right? Is

she a doctor now?"

She shakes her head. "That's her, but no. She's a surgical nurse."

Something about a case last year niggles at my memory.

"I don't think it would be a problem to be seen socializing with her, but I'll double-check with Hettie. We should be seen just the two of us a few times first though."

I pause. "I'll get you a credit card for clothes. For most of our 'dates' wear whatever you have, but for things like the charity gala, you can get a new dress."

"Or a pantsuit," she grins. "You can wear the dress; I'll wear the pants. Trust me, it'll give people something to talk about."

"How do you feel about public displays of affection?"

"Do I mind making out with you in public?" she teases. "Whatever you're comfortable with, I'm game."

"You have to say something if I make you uncomfortable. I don't want to push you into anything."

She laughs. "Florence."

Her eyes drop to my lips and linger.

"You're not going to make me uncomfortable. Although... I don't want the first time you kiss me to be in front of an audience," she says, her voice low.

I blink.

I'm not used to women being so forward. They're usually more intimidated. "I think we can arrange that." I force my eyes away from her full lips, licking my own. "We should talk about compensation as well."

"I don't want your money."

I study her. "I have to compensate you. I'm asking a lot of you."

She shakes her head. "I told you when we first met. I'm just interested in someone to spend time with. It can be as friends."

"So you want to hang out with me," I say dubiously. "I'm not exactly the epitome of fun times, Josephine." I call her by her full given name. I like the taste of it.

"How old are you?" she asks abruptly.

I blink. "It's rude to ask a woman her age."

Her laughter sends a rush of warmth through me. "If I'm your fiancée, I should know these things," she teases, her voice husky.

I bite my bottom lip. "Fake fiancée," I remind her drily. I brush off the heat in my belly. "I'm forty-two."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I release an inaudible sigh. Money would be easier. But I can try to make this work for both of us.

"Tell me what you mean by that—someone to spend time with. What does that look like to you?"

She shrugs, her eyes glazing over thoughtfully. "I don't know. A few times a week for a few hours. We could go out sometimes, or we could stay home. Your place—" She glances around the open floor plan, her eyes lingering on my books. "You can come to my place sometimes—if you want to, I mean. I don't live like this," she says with a sweeping look around.

Her shoulders slump forward. "Maybe this isn't a good idea," she says softly.

"You'd really rather spend time with me than get paid?" I ask incredulously. "Why? And why do you all of a sudden think this isn't a good idea?"

She picks up the pen, fiddling with it. "I should have gotten her a drink." "I don't want your money."

She's already made that pretty clear.

"I originally met you because I thought we were looking for the same thing. Companionship. Friendship, even. But without the expectation of anything more. Potential maybe, but not expectation."

She swallows thickly.



"We can do that." I nod. I'm still not following. "But?"

"Florence, you don't have friends." Her voice is gentle, but it cuts. "You don't let anyone see who you really are. You're completely closed off." She looks at me for a long minute. "Do you have anyone you trust or care for that you don't pay?"

That's not fair. "Don't judge me for putting my career first," I say, my voice low.

"I'm not judging you, Florence. I feel sorry for you."

I inhale sharply.

I force myself to stop, not to react. I need someone to be my fiancée, and I don't have time to find and vet other women.

"Don't feel sorry for me," I counter. "I like my life." At least I haven't been pining over my best friend for more than a decade.

I soften my tone. "I'm proud of the work I do, Josie. We have one of the best teaching hospitals in the nation. People come from all over the world to get their education here. Some of the best doctors in the world trained here. We're the best of the best." I take a deep breath. "I've built this hospital's reputation from mediocre to the best in the world." Not by myself, but by building a superior team on every level.

Josie smiles. "Yes, you have. And I'm proud to be part of the team that creates those world-class doctors."

She takes my hand, turning my palm up and tracing my life lines with her thumb. Her eyes follow the path from our joined hands to my face, and she intentionally holds my gaze.

"But there's more to life than that." Her voice is quiet, firm. "You need to let people in to take care of you. To hear you. To love you for who you are—outside of work. The people who work for you can only do that to a point."

I hear Marin at the door. I pull my hand away and avert my gaze.

"That's Marin. She's bringing dinner."

I stand quickly, eager to escape this conversation. She comes in before I even reach the door.

"Did you have any trouble?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "I've got it, ma'am. Give me five minutes, and I'll have dinner ready for you. I'll put dessert in the refrigerator. I can stay and serve if you'd like."

"Not necessary."

I pick up the contract documents from the table and set them on the china cabinet. I need something to do with my hands.

From the corner of my eye, I notice Marin's glances between us as she sets up dinner.

"Nice to finally meet you, Doctor," she says, placing the steaks on the table. "I've heard so much about you."

"Oh?" Josie's eyebrow goes up, and my shoulders tense. "Like what?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"I've got merlot or sauvignon blanc with dinner. We'll save the whisky for dessert, if that's amenable for you." Marin clasps her hands behind her back. Something about her posture feels off tonight.

"Merlot would be nice," Josie says. "I also want to know what Florence said about me." She's having a little too much fun with this.

My stomach clenches as Marin's eyes dart to me.

"It's not what she said, it's what she didn't say." She has the nerve to wink at Josie. "I've already seen signs of her icy exterior melting away when she mentions you."

"Stai attenta, Marin," I growl. Watch yourself.

"Don't threaten her." Josie's frown cuts straight through my defenses. "If this is how you treat your staff, I'm not interested in helping you cover your ass."

My chest tightens as she moves to stand, but Marin reaches her first, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"It's fine," Marin says softly to Josie, something silent passing between them. She squeezes Josie's shoulder before letting go.

I dismiss Marin as soon as she serves our drinks, desperate to end the silent conversation between them. I take a sip of wine and start eating, trying to regain some semblance of control.

The silence is heavy for a long minute before Josie finally breaks it. "Is that how you always treat your staff?"

I meet her gaze, straightening my spine. "My staff doesn't behave like that in public. She knows better."

"You're not in public, Florence."

She puts her fork down and stands.

"I hope you can find someone to put up with your high-and-mighty attitude—long enough to pretend to like you—for your charity gala. I'm not the right person for the job."

8

Josie

I knock on Professor Zimmer's door.

"If you're a student," she calls through the closed door, "my office is closed for the day."

I twist the doorknob. It's unlocked, and I push the door open a few inches. "It's Dr. Mueller. I talked with you on the phone yesterday about some art pieces."

She waves me in. "Come in, Dr. Mueller. Come in!" Her black curly hair is pulled back into a chaotic bun. She stands up and offers me a hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your grandfather."

"I didn't even know he was alive until his lawyers sent me the paperwork regarding

his estate." I sit down across from her. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I know you're a busy woman."

When I called the Delmont Auction House about getting some of Opa's collectibles appraised, I was surprised when they recommended an art specialist named Mary Zimmer. The same Mary Zimmer who teaches at Delmont University with me, just on the other side of campus.

Our specialties never overlap—neurology and art history are miles apart—both literally and figuratively—but she has a reputation among the wealthy for finding hidden treasures and for getting top dollar for them.

"You said you brought some photos of the items in question?" she asks, getting down to business.

I have a lot of pictures. A few hundred of them. Renna and Mel suggested taking pictures of everything of potential value.

"There are more than three dozen paintings of various sizes throughout the place."

"You have the legal right to sell these pieces?"

"There's a judgment against the property, but I have legal rights to everything as long as I pay that on time. That's about nine months from now. My lawyer told me I have rights up until that point, as long as it's my intention to claim my inheritance."

"Other people listed in the will can contest all of that," she points out.

I shake my head. "I'm the only person named in the will."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"How much do you need to come up with in nine months?" she asks curiously.

"A quarter of a million."

She whistles, shaking her head.

"Okay," she says. "Show me what you've got."

I pull up the pictures on my phone and cast them to her screen with the school's networking software.

She looks at the folder labeled Opa and glances at me. "There are four hundred and fifty-three pictures here."

"Some are paintings and artwork. There are some sculptures, coins, gems, and a number of books that might be valuable. I took pictures of everything I thought might be valuable. It's easier than having people ask questions and having to go back to take new photos."

"Fair point." She clicks through the first photos.

"I tried to keep things in order. Paintings together, sculptures, gems, coins. I went from room to room, so you'll find four or five groups of paintings."

She flips through the first fifty or so photos quickly.

"I don't know as much about the sculptures, but I can recommend someone at the

auction house for you. Same with the coins." She stops on a bronze coin that looks ancient to my untrained eyes. "I collect coins, but I'm not an expert. Do you mind if I send this photo to my numismatist?"

"Please. You think it's valuable?"

She lifts a shoulder. "I couldn't say, to be honest. It's different from anything I've seen before. I should probably send you to him for all the coinage. I'll write down some contact info when we're done."

She continues flipping through the photos, occasionally pausing to take notes or send one off to a colleague.

She lingers for a long time on a painting in Opa's upstairs personal library—somewhere only a few privileged friends would have been allowed.

"Well, fuck me," she says under her breath.

"What?" I ask, leaning forward.

"What do you know about your grandfather's collection? Are most of the pieces authentic?"

I frown. "I'd assume so. From the little I know of him, he prided himself on investing in the future and having valuable things."

I exhale slowly. "That's my impression of him, anyway. I didn't know him. I didn't even know he was living in Delmont until he died earlier this month. His estate lawyer—the one I've been working with—seems to have a high opinion of him."

"Dr. Mueller—"

"Josie, please," I insist.

"Josie." She fidgets in her seat. "That lawyer gets paid based on how much your grandfather's estate is worth. I would recommend getting a second opinion."

"I have no idea what his estate is worth, and I'm not particularly opposed to her getting a chunk of it through legal fees."

That might be naive, but none of this was mine a month ago, and while the idea of having millions of dollars in the bank has its appeal—it's not real. At least not yet.

"I understand that." She sighs softly. "But if there's half the value I think there is in that penthouse of yours, you need to pick your friends carefully. I'm going to give you the name of one of the best lawyers at the auction house. They deal with situations like this all the time—high-value estates inherited by people with no real concept of what they've just received."

"She said that in addition to the penthouse and its contents, his assets are worth about a quarter billion."

She raises an eyebrow. "I've looked at a quarter of your photos, Josie. I haven't even seen the paintings—that's where my expertise is. I wouldn't be surprised if the valuables inside the property itself are worth at least four times that."

"You're talking about a billion dollars." I shake my head.

I can't even fathom that kind of money.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"If the pieces are authentic, then potentially, yes." She continues flipping through the photos while she talks. "You can't even conceive of money like that." She glances up. "Did your lawyer give you any information on the insurance coverage your grandfather had?"

"I don't think so. I'll need to look through the paperwork more carefully."

"If I were you, I'd let your grandfather's estate lawyer help with the big picture, but I'd use the auction house lawyers for the valuables. You don't have to sell them, but you should know what you have."

"Okay." That makes sense. "I imagine he had paperwork somewhere that inventories most of it. Any suggestions on where to look for that?"

She bites her lip thoughtfully. "People with collections like this usually have appraisals and inventory lists in multiple places. At least one or two at home. Any insurance policies would have copies of official appraisals. I'd bet money there's a list in a safe deposit box as well. You might even find other valuables there."

She pauses. "Virtually everyone keeps records online now. How old was your grandfather?"

"One hundred and one. I don't think he had any presence online. From what I can tell, he didn't even own a computer."

She stops on another photo—a large painting.

"If this is authentic, you could live off the proceeds of its sale for the rest of your life." She keeps flipping, murmuring occasionally. "I can't speak for the other departments of the auction house, but we would definitely be interested in the paint—"

She breaks off mid-sentence, flipping back to the previous painting.

"This..."

She scratches her head.

It's a simple landscape—rolling hills, lines of cypress trees, and olive groves. The winding footpath through the hills disappears into the grove. There's a unique turn in it—almost like the artist changed their mind mid-brushstroke.

I almost didn't bother photographing it when I was going through the penthouse. It looks amateur. But I snapped a picture instead of thinking about it and moved on.

She frowns.

"I think I've seen something like this before. I don't recognize the artist or the style, but something about it feels familiar. I want to show this to the rest of my team. Someone will be able to place it."

"I can upload all of these to a shared folder if that makes it easier for your team. You think a lot of this stuff has value, then."

"Definitely." She nods. "Assuming it's authentic, we should have no problem finding enough for you to pay off that judgment on the penthouse."

Florence

I pull Marin up on my phone and hit the call button before pulling out of the parking lot. "This woman won't work," I tell her. "As soon as she saw I had money, she started digging about my finances, planning shopping trips. There's no way I can trust someone like that. She'd sell my secrets to the highest bidder."

This is the fourth woman I've met since Josie walked out on me last week, and I'm getting frustrated. I haven't even talked to any of the others about what I'm really looking for. I haven't felt safe divulging that information to any of them.

"Maybe you shouldn't have pissed off your doctor friend," she teases. "I saw sparks flying when you were talking to her. You should call her back."

"You embarrassed me." I grind my teeth. "I should let you go for that." There's no excuse for the way she behaved that night. She's never pushed the line like that before.

"Did it ever occur to you that I was happy you found a match?" Her voice softens. "You're going to end up an old, lonely spinster lady at this rate, Florence."

"I'm happy with my life the way it is, thank you very much. Except for this asshole who seems to think he can get away with the shit he's pulling at work."

"We'll find someone."

"We don't have time," I argue through clenched teeth.

The rumor mill online has been growing. It's just a matter of time before it all blows up in my face.

"Have you thought of calling her back? She seemed sympathetic to your situation, and I could feel the chemistry between the two of you."

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"I don't want to appear weak." I slow down for a red light and crack my window open. I need fresh air.

"Not everyone considers an apology to be a sign of weakness, tesoro." Treasure. That's what my grandmother Elena calls me.

"If you think she'd actually consider it, why don't you call her?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Marin says smugly. "I'll call her right now."

"Wait. It's eight at night. You can't call someone at eight on a Friday night about business."

"You can if it's business of the heart," she teases. "I'll get back with you as soon as I talk to her."

By the time I get home, she's gone for the evening, but she has the oven preheated and dinner ready to heat up. There's a note on the counter to call Josie if I'm willing to apologize for talking to my friend Marin the way I did, and if I'm willing to explain what she meant about melting my edges.

I groan.

I drop my briefcase on the table and sink into the couch. I do think that Josie is the best person to pull this off with.

But what happens when I start having feelings for her? She's made it clear that she's

still in love with her best friend.

I guess that makes the decision easy. I'm not going to make her forget the love of her life. She dislikes me enough to walk away and leave me stranded in this mess.

I can ignore my feelings.

My phone rings.

I'm too lazy to grab it off the table, but I have my earbuds in.

"Hello," I say flatly. I assume it's Marin, checking on dinner.

"I thought you'd be happier to hear from me," Josie's voice comes through. "Your friend Marin made it sound like an emergency."

I sit up straight. "Josie?"

"Sorry, I assumed you had caller ID and I was programmed into your phone. I guess that's presumptuous of me." There's bite in her voice.

"No, I do have you in my phone." I sigh, standing up. "My phone is in the other room. I thought it was going to be Marin calling again to harass me." I'm not used to people calling on my personal line. Almost everything goes to Marin if it's personal, and to Gwen if it's about work.

"What's she harassing you about?" she asks, obviously amused.

"You," I tell her flatly. "I was going to call you after I made dinner. It's been a long day."

"You make your own dinner?" Amusement again.

"Can you stop assuming the worst of me just because I work hard and I'm successful? Please?"

I don't understand why her digs get to me.

"I'm not assuming the worst of you because you're successful," she assures me. "I'm assuming the worst of you because that's the side you've shown me." She's quiet for a minute. "Except for that glimpse of the real you at the bookstore."

I roll my eyes. "Why do you think that was the real me?"

She doesn't answer right away. When she does, her voice is soft. "I see you, Florence. I felt the real you that night."

I swallow hard. "What do I need to do to get you back?" I ask quietly.

"You mean for appearances? Or because you want me?"

That's a good question.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I clear my throat. "For appearances, of course. I feel like this whole thing is going to blow up in my face any minute."

"Marin said you vetted a few other women, and none of them were right for you."

"Not after you."

Why is she so easy to talk to?

"Look, I need to make dinner and eat. I'm famished. Do you think we could meet for lunch tomorrow to iron things out? Would you be willing to work with me? You're still my top choice."

"Is that because you miss looking into my baby blues?" she teases.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall. "Your eyes aren't baby blue, Josie. They're the color of deep sapphires." I exhale slowly, trying to calm my racing heart.

She laughs softly. "I can't tomorrow. I normally work with Renna until noon on Saturdays. What about right now? I can meet you somewhere for dinner."

"It's Friday. Aren't most places busy right now?" I haven't been out for dinner in ages. Marin always picks things up for me.

"Not this late, Florence." Her laughter is warm, teasing. "The bars will start getting busy soon, but we can find someplace quiet for dinner. My treat. What are you in the mood for?"



"Food." I sigh. "I honestly don't care. But I just got home from work. I'm not dressed to go out," I argue.

"Change into something comfortable. I'm wearing jeans. I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

I open my mouth to protest, but she's already hung up on me. When did she take charge?

Twenty minutes later, I climb into her well-worn silver Mercedes.

"Sorry," she says, shifting into gear. "I forgot traffic this way is worse on Friday nights."

"How old is this baby?" I run my fingers over the worn leather seat, both impressed and amused. It's old, but it's in excellent condition.

"Sixteen years old," she says proudly. "I got her when I finished undergrad. Mom and Dad bought her as a graduation gift. That was almost fourteen years ago."

"You've taken good care of her." I glance at her, dressed casually in jeans and a simple lavender blouse. "Where are you taking me?"

She glances over, taking in my sundress and sandals. "What do you think of pizza? Please tell me you like pizza."

"Yes, I like pizza." It's a rare treat, especially since Marin does most of my meal prep and tries to keep it healthy. "As long as we skip the onions."

"Already in the plans, Boss." She grins.

I raise an eyebrow. "What else is in these plans of yours?"

"After we eat, we go back to your place and talk details." Her tone is casual. "Then I think I'll kiss you, just to get that out of the way. We should get comfortable with each other. It'll make acting in public easier. For some reason, I think you'd be pretty awkward about it if the first time you kiss me is in public."

She plans to kiss me.

My stomach growls. "You're not going to get up in the middle of dinner and walk away from me this time?" I ask her as she pulls into the parking lot of Trattoria's.

She shakes her head. "Not in public. But if you treat the staff here the way you treated Marin the other night, you'll have to answer to me."

"I would never treat service people like that."

She comes around to open my door, offering me a hand. She leans in close, her breath close against my ear. "You shouldn't treat her that way, either," she whispers, pulling back before I can respond.

I inhale slowly, trying to control my breathing. Even if I were interested in her, she's not available. She's hooked on her best friend.

What the hell am I thinking?

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

This is a business arrangement, not a bona fide date.

10

Florence

The place is busy tonight, and by the time we sit down fifteen minutes later, I'm past ready to eat.

"Can I get a salad while we wait for the pizza?" I ask the waitress.

She looks at Josie. "Salad for you, too?"

Josie shakes her head. "I ordered our pizza thirty minutes ago through the app. It should be ready for us. Pietra," she adds with a smile.

"It should be ready, then." The waitress looks at me. "Do you still want your salad if the pizza is ready, ma'am?"

I blink. "No. If the pizza is ready, I'll skip the salad."

"That'll just save room for dessert." Josie grins, taking my hand and lacing her fingers with mine. Her hand is soft and warm.

After the waitress leaves, she turns my hand over, tracing her thumb across the sensitive skin inside my wrist. "You said you were hungry," she says softly, her voice sultry. "I want to take care of your needs." Her eyes drop to my lips.

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you trying to impress me, Doctor?"

She grins mischievously. "Is it working?" She leans forward and presses a kiss to my palm—soft enough that I feel her breath against my skin.

"Ms. Pietra?" A woman in whitewashed jeans with a long blonde ponytail stands by our table.

"Yes? I'm Florence Pietra." I don't recognize her.

She breaks into a smile. "I'm Fiona. Bakker. My husband Jason works for you." She gestures with her chin toward a table on the other side of the room.

"Oh, sure." I glance over at him and smile. He's surrounded by their four kids—the oldest looks to be in middle school. "How did Finley's gymnastics meet go last week?"

Fiona laughs. "She fell off the beam—I think having her dad there for the first time made her nervous. But otherwise she did okay."

"She better get used to it." I chuckle. "He plans to be at every meet if we can manage it."

She nods. "I just want to say thank you, for being flexible with his schedule. He likes working with you. He loves his job."

"I'm glad we could work things out so he could be there. I can't promise every meet, but we'll do our best to try. I know how important family is to him."

Josie grins. "She is pretty awesome, isn't she?" she says to Fiona, bringing my palm up to her lips again. Not sensual this time, but an unmistakable sign that we're

together.

"I'll leave you two alone." Fiona smiles. "I just wanted to thank you for being a great boss."

After she returns to her table, Josie turns to look at me. "Somehow, I didn't expect to hear that tonight."

I meet her gaze. "What, that I can be nice sometimes?"

The side of her mouth quirks up. "There might be hope for you yet." She traces her tongue along her bottom lip. "You'd better be careful, or those ice queen walls will start melting."

I tear my eyes away from her, forcing my heart to stop racing.

I smirk. "I wasn't given much choice. Being flexible was the preferable option," I say honestly.

She breaks into a grin. "I knew there was at least one nice bone in your body." She glances up, scooting back a little. "Lifesaving pizza to the rescue." She nods toward the waitress coming with our pizza.

The smell of melted cheese and greasy pepperoni hits me. I haven't eaten since lunch, and I'm famished. "This is so sinful." I grin, pulling a piece onto my own plate.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

Josie rests a hand on my thigh and squeezes gently. "Don't look now, but we have an audience."

My eyes automatically scan the room. Jason's daughter Finley is watching us with wide-eyed curiosity. "It's just his daughter," I point out. "Why does it matter if we have an audience? We're eating dinner like everyone else."

Biting her lip, she sighs. "Florence, this whole thing is about people seeing us together."

Oh, right. "Only if you're going to agree to this," I remind her. It would definitely not do to be seen out with Josie and then show up engaged to someone else. That would make this entire mess worse.

"I'm in," she says softly, taking the slice of pizza off my plate and holding it up to my mouth. "Just play along with me. Pretend like you're infatuated with me." She raises an eyebrow.

I take a bite of the pizza, melted cheese trailing grease and crumbs across the corner of my mouth. I have to hold in a moan. It's the best pizza in Delmont, and it hits the spot.

She leans over, rubbing her thumb across the corner of my lips. "You need to learn some table manners." The grin on her face says she's having way too much fun with this.

"You're got grease on your fingers," I point out, licking her middle finger clean. I take

her thumb into my mouth.

Her eyes widen.

She pulls back from me, glancing around before leaning in close to my ear. "Save that for later," she whispers. "There are kids watching." She presses a soft kiss to my cheek before sitting back and grabbing a slice for herself.

"You've got good taste," I tell her, forcing a playful wink—trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in my belly. I haven't wanted anyone for a long time. I'm not going to let my libido complicate this arrangement.

"After all the time we've spent together, you're only now realizing that?" She laughs, nudging her leg against mine. "So tell me—how did the dad-of-the-year over there get the ice queen to be flexible?"

Is she mocking me?

"A few months ago, he brought me his resignation letter. When I asked him why, he told me he wanted to be home more for his kids—school and sports things like Finley's gymnastics meets. The younger kids aren't into competitive sports yet, but they will be." I glance across the restaurant. Even though their family looks chaotic, they look happy. All of them do.

I see Finley watching us. I meet her eyes and smile.

"I grew up in a loud family," I tell Josie. "Big and crazy and chaotic. I saw how hard my parents worked to be there for all of us." I bite the inside of my cheek and look back at her. "I choose to put my energy into making the world better in a different way. But Jason's a good man. I respect him for putting his family first."

"You surprise me," she says softly.

"Don't flatter me," I say drily. "He's by far the most qualified person for the job. Sometimes it's in the best interest of your business to give a little, knowing it'll be worth the compromise." I shrug. "Any competent CEO would have done the same thing."

She sits back and studies me for a long minute. "I honestly don't think most CEOs would. They demand full devotion and full dedication. No wiggle room."

"You're cute, thinking you know what most CEOs would do." She's right, though. "I said competent CEO. Most, arguably, are not."

"There's my ice queen," she teases.

We eat, falling into a comfortable silence. She's a keen observer—half her attention at our table, half scanning the room.

She nudges my leg under the table. "Do you know the guy sitting in that back booth? He's been watching us. The one with the baseball cap." She motions with her eyes, keeping her head still. When I start to turn, she puts her hand on mine. "Scoot closer to me. Don't be so obvious."

I slide closer, feeling the heat of her body against mine.

She leans in, her mouth brushing my ear. "I'm going to kiss your neck, right behind your ear." Her breath tickles, her whisper sending a spark of warmth to my core. "Turn your head and pretend like you enjoy it."

I don't need to pretend.



"Don't forget to glance at the corner booth before you close your eyes." Her voice is husky, taking my breath away. "Okay?"

I manage a soft sound of assent from the back of my throat.

My God, when's the last time a woman made me feel like this?

Her soft lips and hot breath are suddenly on my neck, every nerve in my body springs to life at the featherlight brush of her kiss.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"Josie," I murmur. I cup her cheeks, looking into the sapphire depths of her eyes.  
"Stop," I breathe.

Her eyes widen; she starts to pull back. "I'm sorry, I—"

I press a finger to her lips. "Don't be sorry. It's just... too much right now." I fight desperately to steady my breathing, to dampen the heat surging inside me. I flounder to grasp onto something. "We need to talk about this first," I whisper.

She nods, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Then can I take you home, Boss?"

11

Josie

Florence cuts me a piece of the chocolate mousse from the fridge and pours me some whisky before we sit down at the dining room table to get down to business. I glance around her home. It has a more lived-in feel to it than it did when I was here before.

"You don't want a drink?" I ask curiously as she passes me the whisky. I don't want to make her uncomfortable drinking if she isn't. I already overstepped a line at the pizza place an hour ago.

She grabs a Goose Island beer and pulls a chair up opposite me. "Let's continue with the list Hettie left for us. We agreed that the major events you attend with me don't count toward your companion time—they're too impersonal. Then, at least twice a month where we deliberately try to be seen."

"Right. That benefits both of us," I say. "And then one more time every week where we do something quiet. Stay in." I pause, feeling ridiculous. It's like negotiating a friendship. These things never last. "What about an exit strategy? Are we going to have a big public breakup or keep it quiet?" I know she'll need an out when the time comes. She needed one at dinner.

"You're already planning the exit?" she asks wryly.

"More of a priority for you," I say softly. "I got the feeling I made you uncomfortable at dinner. You need an out. And I need to know your boundaries. I already told you—I'm fine with whatever happens."

"I wasn't ready," she says, meeting my eyes. "The last time I saw you, you walked away from me. Remember?"

Like I could forget her cutting down her own assistant.

"I thought we'd eat dinner and talk about all this after. I didn't expect you to kiss me like that."

"You really—" I stop myself. "I'm sorry. I should have asked. Marin gave me the impression that you'd vetted a few other women, and I was the most suitable. I thought it was already decided." I push my whisky away. I don't drink and drive, and it's obvious she doesn't want to be with me right now. I pick up my fork instead.

"You are the most suitable." She sighs softly. "You did ask, and I gave permission. I just didn't expect—" She takes a long swig of her beer. "I didn't realize you'd be such a good actor."

I release an inaudible sigh. "Florence, you look good for a woman over forty." I try to hide my amusement, but I think she sees it. "How am I supposed to kiss the hot

woman that I'm planning to marry?" I wink at her.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

I roll my eyes. "You make it sound like I'm signing my life away. It's not a hardship to go out with a beautiful woman once in a while. I think I can handle it." When she frowns, I point out, "You don't need to do this either. Or we can agree to no kissing. Tell me your boundaries and we'll stick to them. Even then, you can always tell me no."

She shakes her head. "You're fine. We were talking about an exit strategy," she says, returning to the task at hand. "I expect the chatter online to die down quickly. Woodhouse would make more of an ass of himself if he pushes the issue. He'll let it go. Let's play it by ear. I'd prefer no drama, but as long as we keep our story straight, it'll be fine. We'll make it amicable. Quiet. No ruining each other's reputations."

"Sounds fair. What if you want to terminate early? I can't see myself interested in anyone that soon—even kissing you tonight, I was thinking of Mel. But if you find someone, we'll keep options open. I don't want to get in the way of you finding the right woman."

She scoffs. "I don't have time for anyone, anyway. But we can write a clause for early dismissal, just to be thorough."

I nod.

"Boundaries," I bring up again. "I need to know what you're comfortable with." I won't initiate anything physical again.

She studies me for a long minute. "Will you stay for a little while? Just to relax and get to know each other."

"Boundaries," I repeat. "I'll stay for an hour if you tell me where your boundaries are."

She bites the inside of her cheek. "Whatever would be appropriate in the setting we're in. Touches, kisses—that's all fine. There might be settings that more is expected. We'll handle those as they come." She takes a bite of the mousse, closing her eyes briefly in pleasure, then chases it with a long swig of her beer. "What you did tonight was fine. I just wasn't prepared for it. We just got our wires crossed."

"Okay. But if I cross a line, tell me."

"I did, Josie." She gives me a pointed look. "And I will." She sobers. "One more thing. Feelings. What happens if someone develops them?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

I raise an eyebrow. "Talk about it?" "That seems obvious." "No offense, but I don't see myself falling for you. For anyone," I add quickly, "because my heart's been taken for a long time. If you develop feelings, just talk to me about it. We'll deal with it."

"Fair enough. What else before I have Hettie draw up the contract?"

I bite my lip. "That's all, I think."

She sits back in her chair, crossing her arms. "You want to say something. Tell me."

I shake my head. "I don't think it belongs in the contract, but we should talk about sex."

She laughs. "I forgot you had to give up your orgasm partner."

"My orgasm partner?" I arch a brow.

"It sounds less crass than fuck buddy."

She's not wrong. "I don't expect anything from you," I preface, "but if I'm publicly engaged to you, I won't go elsewhere."

"If you need to, be discreet. I'm not opposed to the idea, but you have to understand..." She sighs. "I have a hard time being physically intimate without an emotional connection."

"And you don't make emotional connections," I finish for her. "Forget I brought it

up." The way she balked at me kissing her, I don't even want her to consider it.

She meets my eyes. "I don't mind giving, Josie. That's not what I meant."

"No." I wave it off. "The rest of this, we can fake. Not that."

"If we develop an emotional connection, we'll revisit the issue. Fair?"

"Sure." I wave the thought away. I've seen how she acts around people. Florence Pietra doesn't do emotions.

She makes a few notes on Hettie's list, then pushes it aside and drains her beer.

"Come sit by me on the couch. We'll put something on for a while?"

I want to argue, suggest we talk and get to know each—but every pivot of the conversation seems to backfire.

She sits on the couch and turns on the TV.

She has cable?

She flips it to the game show channel. *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?* is on.

"This is my guilty pleasure," she admits softly, motioning for me to sit down. "Relax, Josie."

I sit down opposite her. "So, are you smarter than a fifth grader?"

She smirks, a dirty glint of amusement in her eye. "In many, many ways." She pats the couch next to her. "Not when it comes to science, but the rest I do okay. Come sit by me. Let's get comfortable." She rests her arm on the back of the couch, and I move closer. "Don't worry, I don't bite," she whispers in my ear.

"Good. Although nibbling is acceptable, depending on where you're nibbling." I nudge her with my shoulder.

She laughs, leaning into me. But it feels forced—like she's not used to sharing space with another person. I force myself to make it through two episodes—I promised I'd stay for an hour.

"I should get going," I say, standing. "I've got to be up early for work."

"On a Saturday? You have weekend classes?"

I shake my head. "No, they're private lessons. One of my students can't make labs during the week. I meet with her every Saturday for a few hours. It's been like that for almost two years."

"Why allow her to take your classes if she can't attend the scheduled times?"

I raise an eyebrow. "She works sixty hours a week—she's a surgical nurse in ortho and neuro. She's working on her neuro cert. She's talented and she wants to learn, so I teach her." I don't mention that she's Mel's nurse. I bring up Mel too much as it is.

"Well," she says, searching for words. "Why can't she just take Thursdays off?"



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"She's the only one that Dr. Harris and Mel will work with." I groan. "She has a full schedule supporting both of them. In fact, Dr. Harris even changed his surgery schedule to work around her schedule with Mel."

"You talk about her a lot. You know that?" she asks softly.

I shake my head. "This is about Renna. I was doing all this before she and Mel got together."

She looks at me for a long moment. "It just seems like there'd be better ways to spend your time. I hope she compensates you well."

I sigh, standing. "That's the difference between you and me. You're a business woman. I'm a people person. You make a difference from the top down. I help build them from the bottom up." Working with individuals and small groups is as important as the work she does, whether she sees it or not.

I reach for the door, but she stops me, her hand on my shoulder. "Can I kiss you goodnight? To get our first kiss out of the way?"

"If you want to." After the disaster at Trattoria's, I wasn't expecting it. We still have a few weeks before the charity gala to get comfortable with each other.

She cups my cheek, trapping my gaze. "I want to," she says, her voice low and throaty.

"Then kiss me," I whisper, teasing. I lean in, close enough to feel her breath on my

lips.

Her lips are soft, gentle. At first, it's just the brush of her lips against mine, but then she breathes me in, deepening the kiss. Her breath quickens.

I slide my palm to her clavicle, up to the curve of her neck. This is always how I imagined it would feel with Mel, how I wanted our friendship to evolve.

I groan softly. How long is she going to dominate my thoughts? It was never like this with Ruby. She took care of a physical need. She never came close to my heart.

Florence moans, her tongue seeking permission.

I pull back. "Florence." I have to remind myself where I am—who I'm with.

"Sorry." She exhales shakily.

"You're going to get me going, and we just said no to that." I bite back a groan. That was an emotionally charged kiss on her end if I've ever felt one.

12

Florence

"Boss." Gwen's serious tone pulls me out of the work in front of me. She knows better to interrupt me without cause. Normally she sticks her head in and waits to be acknowledged.

"What is it, Gwen?" I look at the time on my laptop. "We still have half an hour before our meeting."

"I need five minutes. It's important." She steps inside and closes the door. She waits patiently for me to finish the task I'm working on.

I nod. "What is it?" I ask her again, this time giving her my full attention.

"You're aware of the rumors on social media about you and Woodhouse."

"They have no merit, but yes—I'm aware," I tell her.

She presses her lips together, shifting nervously. "I overheard a conversation earlier today that concerns you. That situation."

I lean back in my chair; she has my complete attention. Gwen does not get nervous approaching me about anything, not after being my right hand for nearly fifteen years.

"Sit." I motion toward the chair opposite my desk.

She shakes her head. "I overheard Woodhouse talking to Bakker. He made a comment about Bakker getting special treatment... and asked if he was sleeping with you, too."

"Too?" I repeat, confused.

She rolls her eyes. "He was implying that he's sleeping with you, Boss, and that Bakker must be getting the same perks."

"That's ridiculous." I raise an eyebrow at her. "Do you believe that?" If she does, I need to find a new assistant.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

She snorts. "Of course not. I don't think any sane woman would touch Woodhouse with a ten-foot pole. And you have too much integrity to cross that line. The point is—he's trying to undermine you. With what end in mind, I don't know. Before today, I'd have guessed he wanted in your pants. Now I wonder if he wants your job."

"He would run this place into the ground," I dismiss out loud. "He's not even remotely capable." Still, it is cause for concern. "Did Bakker say anything?"

"Only that you'd worked with him to prioritize some family issues."

I nod. "He handed in his resignation. I convinced him to stay—he's by far the best person for the job."

"I know, boss. I was there, remember?" She shifts again. "I'd like your permission to go to HR with what I heard."

I blink. "You don't need my permission to speak to HR, Gwen. You know that."

She straightens her stance. "I know. I just—" She takes a deep breath. "I wanted to be one hundred percent sure it wasn't true."

I stare at her, eyes wide. "You know I'm engaged, right?"

Her eyebrows nearly dance off her forehead. "No?! You don't wear a ring..."

"Because I'm engaged to a woman," I say drily. "And rather than deal with all the drama, my fiancée and I prefer to keep things private."

"Oh." She's quiet for a long minute.

"What would you have done if it were true?" I ask, genuinely curious.

She blinks. "I don't know, Boss. I never considered it."

A knock sounds on the door.

I lower my voice. "Please report it to HR, Gwen. I've already spoken to Carole about issues with Woodhouse, but talk to whomever you're most comfortable with."

There's another knock on the door, louder this time.

"One minute," I call. I turn back to Gwen. "I've tried to keep my relationship with Josie private—mostly because it's no one's business. But she'll be coming to the charity gala with me next month. I'd like to introduce you."

"That would be my pleasure, Boss."

I motion toward the door, and she opens it. "Mr. Bakker. Come in. I was just leaving."

He hesitates, glancing nervously at me. He clears his throat. "I'd prefer she stay. I need to speak with Ms. Pietra, but I'd appreciate a witness."

I nod to her. Her presence will remove any speculation. "Come in, Jason. What can I do for you?"

Gwen closes the door behind him and takes a stance near it, silent.

Jason sits down, visibly uncomfortable. "I— Um." He glances back at Gwen then

back at me. "I'm going to talk to HR, but I wanted you to hear it first."

I arch an eyebrow. "Are you planning to quit on me again?"

"No, ma'am." He takes a deep breath. "Woodhouse approached me earlier and accused me of gaining special favors from you because I left early for Finley's meet."

"To be fair," I manage to keep a straight face, "you did gain special favors. By threatening to quit on me."

He shakes his head. "He implied he was sleeping with you... and that I am too."

"He's wrong on both accounts," I say drily.

"I know that, and you know that." He opens his mouth again but closes it.

"Gwen knows about my fiancée, Jason. It's not a secret, but my love life isn't workplace conversation."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"Of course." He's quiet a moment. "I'm going to report the conversation to HR, but—I wanted you to know. There are rumors online that you're sneaking around with him."

It catches me off guard, that he's aware of that. "Again, not true." I reiterate. "You don't strike me as the type to believe everything you see on the internet."

"I don't, trust me." He chuckles. "My daughter saw it, actually. She follows Delmont PRIDE on Instagram. She showed me some of the chatter."

I frown. "Why?" "Why do a bunch of kids care who I'm dating?"

"Are you kidding? You're a huge role model to those kids. Everything you've accomplished—they notice."

"Why? I worked hard. I've earned everything I've accomplished."

I walk in the door two hours later, looking for Marin. She's in the kitchen making me a salad. "You're a sight for sore eyes," I mutter, grabbing a beer out of the fridge and sinking into a chair.

She raises an eyebrow, apparently amused. "Glad to be of service." She sprinkles some parmesan-romano cheese and some sunflower seeds over my salad and sets it in front of me.

"You can sit down and eat with me, you know." After Josie's fuss about her, it occurred to me that I do treat her more like staff than I should. This woman knows me inside and out and waits on me hand and foot.

She shakes her head. "I ate before I got here."

"In the future, plan enough for both of us, and sit down and eat with me," I tell her.

"Of course." She starts cleaning up the kitchen while I eat.

"Did you get a hold of Josie? We need a plan."

"Besides firing Woodhouse?" she asks. "With Gwen and Jason making separate statements to HR, you shouldn't have to deal with him for much longer."

"Apparently a lot of the chatter on social media is coming from Delmont PRIDE. I was their champion one minute, traitor the next. I don't get it."

She finally sits down across from me with a glass of ice water. "Don't downplay your accomplishments, Florence. You're the first woman in charge of an academic medical center in the country. And the only openly queer person in your position. You worked your ass off. You didn't take shit from anyone. "

"I didn't know that was public knowledge." I chew on that. "I've never hidden it... but it's not like I run around with rainbows in my hair. Why does it matter?"

"Florence." She sighs. "When you set your sights on this position, did you think about the fact that no woman had ever done it?"

I shake my head. "Why should it matter? I'm capable. Hell, I'm more capable than anyone else for this job. You don't need a penis to run a hospital. Brains, yes." I roll my eyes when she snickers. "Hell, half these old CEOs have a penis that doesn't even work. As long as their brain still functions, nobody cares if they can get it up."

"I cannot believe you just said that." She stifles her laughter.



"Simple truth." I shrug.

"It matters," she says, serious again, "because you have kids everywhere looking up to you. You give them hope. Representation matters. Even if you don't think about it, they do. The possibility of a brighter future."

I sigh. "Josie said her friend was disappointed in me. Jason said the same thing about his daughter." I pause. "Speaking of Josie—did you talk to her? We need a plan."

"She's your girlfriend."

"Fiancée," I correct.

"Fake fiancée," she reminds me, "who is making you soft."

"Don't start with that," I warn her.

"Fine." She smiles. "I called her and let her know we have a situation." She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. "You have a situation. When I summarized said situation, she said she'd be happy to discuss it with you." She hesitates. "But her relationship with you does not include me."

"Wait. What?" I frown. "Did she actually say that?"

"Yes, ma'am." Marin stands, reaching for my empty plate. "You should call her. She's making you dinner at her place. This is just to tide you over."

13

Florence

I knock on Josie's door, unsure of myself for the first time in a long time. When's the last time I felt anxious about seeing someone? When's the last time I cared what someone else thought?

The door opens.

"Hey, come on in," Josie says, heading back into the kitchen. "I hope you like eggplant lasagna." She sprinkles a layer of cheese on top and slides it into the oven. "About half an hour. Sit." She motions toward the table. "Marin fed you enough to tide you over, right?"

"Not for long. It was mostly rabbit food." I wait for her to sit down, but she turns back to the fridge and pulls out a bunch of asparagus.

"You could have just come over to my place. We could have ordered something." She doesn't need to go to this much trouble.

She looks up. "Mel, Renna, and Tilly are coming over for dinner. I suppose Marin didn't tell you that part, did she?"

"We need to discuss our situation. We need to do something public—as soon as possible."

"What did he do now?" She turns back to wash and chop the asparagus.

"Remember Jason? The one I'm flexible with for his family?"

"We saw them at Trattoría's on Friday. Of course."

"Woodhouse—the one who started all this—made a comment to him implying that he—Jason—is sleeping with me to curry favors." I bite my lip. "He implied that he—Woodhouse—was sleeping with me, too."

"Everyone's getting laid except me." She rolls her eyes. "Sorry. Not to make light of it." She sighs. "Obviously, none of that's true."

"My EA overheard the conversation. Both she and Jason reported it to HR, but even whispers like that can damage my reputation."

"And the hospital's." She nods. "It's too late for tonight, but we can do something tomorrow. I have labs until eight, but after. Do you have any ideas for something high-profile enough?"

I shake my head. "Not really. Late evening on a weeknight? Nothing comes to mind."

"We'll ask the others when they get here."

"We can't tell them." I frown. "The more people who know, the more likely—"

"Florence, stop." She straightens and looks at me. "I'm not lying to my friends." Her sigh is loud, frustrated. "They'll keep their mouths shut. I have to explain you anyway, and they'll be one hundred percent behind you once they know."

"I don't want—"

"Stop, Florence," she cuts me off. "These are my friends. I trust them. If they don't know, they'll ask too many questions and undermine everything. Stop being so Type A and get over yourself."

She shakes her head and turns back to the prep on the counter. "Renna and Tilly are younger. They'll probably have better ideas with the social media stuff than we would, anyway."

"Knock, knock." A tall redhead sticks her head inside. "Jos? It's just me." She closes the door behind her. "I brought some st—" She stops mid-sentence, frowning at me. Her eyes flick toward the kitchen, and she whistles in relief when she sees Josie. "Shit. I thought I was in the wrong place for a minute." She presses her free hand to her chest. "You scared the fuck out of me. Who are you?"

Josie bursts into laughter. "Tilly, meet Florence. Florence, Tilly. Doctor Gorden."

She shakes her head. "Just Tilly. I'm only a doctor at work. Here, it's just Tilly." She glances at Josie. "Who the hell is she? I didn't know we were having a party."

I stand. "I'm Florence Pietra, Dr. Gorden." I extend my hand.

She frowns, glances at Josie, shifts a six-pack to her other hand, and gives me a quick handshake. "Florence. Nice to meet you...?" There's a confused annoyance to her tone.

Josie takes the six-pack and sticks it in the fridge. "She's here for dinner. She's a friend of mine. I invited her, so be nice."

I raise an eyebrow at Josie. This woman does not fit the picture I had in my mind of her friends. I thought they would be less... mouthy.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

"How was work?" Josie asks Tilly.

"Same shit, different day." The redhead shrugs. "I don't get these sports types. Why push your body past what the good Lord created it for?"

"They're called athletes. They push themselves to the limit just like you do. You just do it in a different way."

Tilly grins. "Yeah, I use my head." She taps her temple with her index finger. She eyeballs me for a split second before winking.

"That's debatable," Josie says.

"What's debatable?" asks one of the two women coming through the door.

"That Tilly uses her brain." Josie laughs. She dries her hands and comes to greet them, pulling the shorter woman into a hug before turning to the taller one. "You look tired. You okay?" Her voice softens, almost tender. She pulls her into a long hug, lingering, until the first woman tugs on her partner's arm.

Oh. That must be Mel—the one Josie's in love with. The ease between them makes me wonder if Mel has lingering feelings for Josie, too.

"She uses her brains on a selective basis," the younger one teases, winking at Tilly. This must be Renna. She turns to me. "And you are..."

She freezes. Squints at me, then looks back at Josie. "What the hell is Florence Pietra

doing here?"

Josie sighs. "Be nice. I'll explain." She pulls the asparagus off the stove. "Mel, sit down. Get off your feet. Renna, Tilly—set the table. For five, obviously." She glances at me. "You—keep your mouth shut for now. Please."

I stand. "I didn't realize you had company coming. I can call you later to discuss things."

"Discuss what things?" Renna blocks my path.

Tilly steps in behind her, placing her hands on Renna's hips and resting her chin on her shoulder. "Josie said to be nice," she says softly. "Let Ms. Pietra sit, darling. We'll set the table, and once the food is ready, I'm sure Dr. Mueller will let us know why she's invited a traitor to our table." She uses her grip on Renna's waist to get her moving again.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Josie steps in front of me and puts her hand on my chest. "Sit down, Florence." She leaves no room for argument. "You trust me. Remember?"

I meet her eyes for a long moment then sit, glancing around at these four women. I get the impression that the dynamics between them are... complicated. But I trust Josie.

A few minutes later, dinner's on the table. Everyone looks expectantly at Josie.

Mel's the first one to break the silence. She looks at Josie. "Explain."

She takes a deep breath and releases it. "First of all, the rumors you've seen aren't

true." She looks at Renna. "Not that it should be anyone's business if they were."

"That's not true, and you know it," Mel counters. "It's the reputation of the whole med school if she's sleeping with top management."

"She's sitting right here," I say icily, "and as Josephine said, it's not true."

Josie cuts me off. "He came on to her. When she let him down gently, he decided to start spreading lies."

The other three women at the table go silent.

I cover her hand with mine. "It's my story." I take a deep breath. "When he pushed, I told him I had a fiancée—that she was a private person." I stare down at my plate. "I shouldn't have lied. It just came out. It's always the easiest way to get men to back off when they won't take no for an answer."

"Ain't that the truth," Tilly mutters under her breath.

"I don't know how it became public knowledge—I've never come out publicly, and I rarely date. But it's never been something I've hidden, either. He had the gall to tell me I needed a man to take care of me," I say quietly. "I told him I'd have his balls on a silver platter if he ever talked to a woman like that again at Delmont University Hospital. I reported it. Then I thought it was over until my EA saw the rumors circulating on social media."

"Men can be assholes," Renna mutters.

"People can be assholes," Tilly points out.

Mel looks at Josie. "How did she end up here?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm*

Josie looks down at her hands. "I was on a dating app. Just looking for friends."

Renna's face falls. "We're still your friends, Josie," she says quietly. She glances at Mel.

"Renna, leave her be." Tilly gets defensive. "We're both thrilled for you that you've found each other, but it's hard." She looks at Josie. "Go on, darling."

Josie shakes her head. "I wasn't really looking for anything—more just flipping through to see if anyone caught my eye. Her profile didn't have a picture; it just said she was looking for companionship."

"I was vetting women to act as my fiancée at high-profile events, but it had to be someone I would enjoy being with. Josie and I hit it off."

"I'll say." Josie's face twists. "I walked out on you because you were rude to your assistant. I couldn't believe it when she called me back a few days later. She said I was living in your head rent-free," she directs a look at me, "and if anyone could realistically pull this off, it would be me."

I would laugh if it weren't true.

"Wait. Is this about the money?" Mel asks Josie. "Don't sell yourself to get the money, Jos. We'll figure something out."

"What money?" I ask, confused.



"There's no money involved," Josie says quickly. "I don't want her money." She gives the other three women a warning look.

What money?

Renna puts her hand on Mel's arm to stop her from saying something. "If what you said is true about the rumors, then you need to stop them." She looks at Josie. "You really want to get involved in this mess? It's your reputation, too."

Josie raises an eyebrow. "You think that coming out as a lesbian and being engaged to Ms. High-and-Mighty is going to ruin my reputation? How did that go for you last year when you came out to all your adoring fans?"

Tilly slams her beer on the table just loud enough for everyone to stop and look at her. She looks at me first. "This is not how things usually are with us. Well—me and my mouth, but not the rest of it." She looks at Mel, her voice gentle. "It's hard to let go when you've held onto someone so tightly for so long, isn't it? You're not going to lose her friendship when she finds someone. Whether it's this crackpot," she motions toward me, "or someone else—be happy for her that she's able to start moving forward."

She turns to Renna. "There's room enough for you and for Josie in Mel's life. Don't be that jealous person. I've known you for almost a decade, darling. That's not who you are. Just like there's room for both me and Mel in your life."

Renna's eyes drop to her plate.

Tilly turns to Josie angrily. "You." She takes a long swig of her beer and slams it down on the table again. "You do not disrespect Serenity Lee and her fanbase like that."

Josie raises an eyebrow at Tilly. "Are you done?" I can see the amusement dancing in her sparkling blue eyes.

Tilly leans back in her chair, her arms across her chest. "For now." She turns her gaze back to me. "Is there a specific reason why you're here tonight? Josie didn't mention you before, which means she didn't realize you'd be here. Did something else happen with this dipshit of yours?"

I glance at Josie. I'm still not convinced that I can trust these women. I'm less convinced now than I was an hour ago.

Tilly rolls her eyes. "You can trust us. If you're going to be faking things with Josie, you're going to have to trust the three of us anyway. Just spill it."

Josie jumps in. "Her CFO handed in his resignation earlier this year because he wanted to prioritize his family. His oldest daughter is in gymnastics," she glances at Renna, "and his other three are still young, but they're also in sports. Flor decided it was better for business to work with him and be a little flexible with his hours to keep him on board."

"You're calling her Flor now?" Mel raises an eyebrow.

"He's not getting out of work," I point out. "When he leaves early, he puts in the hours later from home."

Josie rolls her eyes. "Like I said. You're being flexible. Anyway." She sighs loudly. "Woodhouse, the one who's spreading rumors online, approached him and asked if he was getting special treatment from her, too."

Three pairs of eyes turn to me. "None of them are getting special treatment. I suppose you could argue that Jason's getting special treatment with the flexible hours, but I

went through HR to approve that, and it's the best thing for the business. Besides, I would never tread on someone else's partner—married or not, and I wouldn't touch Woodhouse with a ten-foot pole. He's slimy."

"Would you touch him if he weren't slimy?" Tilly asks suggestively.

I'm taken aback by the comment. "He's not exactly my type," I say wryly, "but even if he were, he's my employee. That would be unethical, illegal, and immoral. So no." The thought is offensive. "Is that what you think of me?"

Mel and Renna wisely keep their mouths shut. Tilly doesn't. "You're paying someone to be your fake fiancée. Are you going to fire me if I disagree with that?"

"Whether you disagree with me or not, as long as you do your job, you have nothing to worry about." I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Does that go the same for dipshit? As long as he does his job, he can disrespect you and your reputation?" she asks.

I count to ten, slowly, then count backwards to zero. "You can disagree with me as long as you do it in a respectful way." I happen to agree with her. I don't like the situation I put myself in, either. It was a knee-jerk reaction when I felt cornered. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did, but... "What Mr. Woodhouse did is against federal and state sexual harassment laws, in addition to being against company policy. I could sue him for libel. I may well do that in the future, but my immediate concern is putting a stop to the rumors circulating online."

"Good luck with that, sister." Tilly grimaces. "Once something is out on the internet, it's there for perpetuity."

"My assistant Marin said you can't take things down. I don't know how any of that stuff works."

Renna's eyes pop out of her head. "How old are you?"

Josie catches my eye. She bites her lip to stop from laughing. "She's ancient. Don't you know it's rude to ask a woman her age?"

"I'm busy, and I have better things to do with my time than waste it on social media," I counter. "Wait." I look at Josie. "Is Renna the one you said might be able to help with that?" I turn to her. "You know how social media works?"

"Yes, I know how social media works." Renna laughs.

"We need to do something in public. The sooner the better—hopefully where people on social media will see us."

"Nobody would even recognize you," Mel says, looking at me. "For goodness sake, you're the head of my company and I wouldn't have recognized you." She turns to Renna. "How did you recognize her?"

"She's been the talk of Delmont PRIDE's Insta for more than a week. There are a lot of people who were disappointed to see you with a man," she tells me.

"I'm not with him. Although I don't know why it matters to people who don't even know me."

Renna scoffs. "Are you kidding? Gay kids everywhere look up to you. You're a symbol of hope and possibility for a group of people who have always felt unseen and unrepresented. You being in the position you're in—it's a win for women everywhere, and for queer kids."

I shake my head. "I worked my ass off."

Josie puts a hand on my arm. "Florence, people look up to you for what you've accomplished. Own it. Be proud of it. You did it despite being a lesbian."

"What does being a lesbian have to do with running a hospital? Lesbians can do anything a straight man can do," I argue.

"Most of us can do it better." Tilly laughs, loudly smacking her beer bottle on the table again. "So what's the plan," she asks, "to shut down this dipshit's BS online?"

Everyone looks at Renna. "Do you have a big social media following?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know what that means. I only follow things relevant to my job, and Gwen usually sorts through that for me."

Mel snorts. "The four of us should go out for dinner tomorrow and have Serenity post it an hour before we go. Plenty of people will be there with their cameras out."

Renna's brow furrows. "I'll need to talk to the AD and see if we can get some muscle if we're going to do something so public."

"The AD?" I ask.

"The Athletic Director. Since I'm not officially part of the team, it's not technically their responsibility anymore, but I still do photo shoots and media for the department on a regular basis. After a stalker situation my senior year, my agent convinced me to insist on a protection clause. It's standard in all the work I do with the University Athletic Department now."

"I don't want to put you in danger." I frown. How was this going on here without my knowledge?

"It's unlikely anything would happen, but it's worth the department coughing up fifty bucks on the rare occasion I post my whereabouts publicly. I have five million followers. Plus, there's half a million followers of Delmont PRIDE, and I'll tag them. That's mostly where you're being talked about."

"Can we be specific in who we target to know about it beforehand?" Mel asks.

Renna grins. "Friday. I have a plan."

Josie

Renna and Mel are super excited about the outdoor fundraiser this evening, but I'm not convinced this is going to work. The Delmont Cultural Center has a big event every spring to bring in new donors and volunteers. I know Mel and Tilly have both volunteered with different programs there since it opened two years ago.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Renna visited the local gymnastics club earlier this afternoon to scope out talent for the university—one of her friends owns the place. She let the kids there know she'll be at the fundraiser event tonight. She says that'll be enough.

I'm picking Florence up from her house at seven.

But when she answers the door, I step back in shock.

She's dressed to the nines in a gorgeous crimson evening gown.

"You like it?" she asks, slowly turning around for me to see the low cut in the back.

I raise an eyebrow. "It's stunning," I say drily, "but it's not exactly appropriate for the evening. I look down at my own gray slacks and blue blouse, then back at her. "Let's see what you've got in your closet. We've got to get you out of this."

She chuckles. "I didn't expect to hear that from you until we got home later." She shakes her head and leads me to her room. Her walk-in closet is huge—it must be half the size of my bedroom. "I still need to look the part of consummate professional," she reminds me.

"You're not there in an official capacity. Remember, this is supposed to be a casual outing for us to support the local community. We don't want everyone's attention on us."

She turns around and stares into my eyes. "The whole purpose of this," she steps toward me, backing me against the wall, "is for people to notice us."



I rest my hands on her hips to keep her from crashing into me. "Yes, Florence. But the way you dress for an event like this isn't the same way you dress for an event like your charity gala. You can dress up and stand out in a good way without going over the top. This—" My hands slide up her back, fingernails lightly grazing her bare skin. "This will make you stand out in the wrong way."

She steps closer, leaning her body against mine. Her fingers are warm as she caresses my cheek. "You shouldn't touch me like that if you're not going to do something about it," she whispers.

"You like that, do you?" I look into her hungry eyes. I could fall for those eyes if I let myself. I drop my hands to her ass and yank her body hard against mine. "What do you want me to do?" I ask, sliding my thigh between her legs and pressing into her. I rake my nails up her thigh.

"Josie," she growls, her breath coming faster. She rolls her hips against me hard, desperate.

My nails trace along her panty line. "Tell me what you want, Florence." I lick my bottom lip, wondering for the first time what she tastes like.

Her mouth is suddenly on mine, hungry and bruising. "You," she growls against my mouth. "Please."

I pause just long enough to meet her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She pulls the dress over her head, standing in front of me in nothing but a black lace bra and panties.

God.

She's stunning.

The lace is delicate and beautiful, and I take her round breasts in my hands. They're a perfect fit. I lean over, biting roughly through the thin fabric.

"Josie, I want you." She grabs my head, fingers tangling in my hair. "Fuck," she moans as my mouth wraps around her nipple.

"Florence, are you still home?" Marin's voice rings through the open bedroom door. "I thought Josie was picking you up half an hour ago."

Florence closes her eyes. "I'm going to kill her," she mutters.

"We're in the closet," I call. "Florence needed to change, and we're... deciding... on what she's going to wear."

The door swings open. Marin glances at us—Florence half naked, her dress on the floor, my mussed hair—and shakes her head with a chuckle. "I'm glad you answered, or I might've had a heart attack." She hands me three business suits, skirts and all, hanging in their dry cleaner bags. "Be a dear and hang those up for me. I'll leave you to finish."

"Oh. My. Fucking. God." Florence bends down to pick her dress up off the ground and turns away from me. Her hands shake as she fumbles with the hanger.

"Hey." I squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. "Do you want to wear a dress or pants?"

"Dress," she answers, taking a shaky breath.

I scan her closet, honing in on the more casual dresses. This woman has a lot of clothes. "This." I spot a velvet burgundy dress. "Casual, chic—and it'll complement

me perfectly." I pull it off the hanger and hold it up against her flushed skin.

"You mean you'll complement me," she teases, finding herself again.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I unzip the back of the dress and pass it to her. "Either way, we'll look good together."

"That we will," she says, slipping it over her head. "Now zip me up so we can get out of here."

She's quiet in the car on the way to the fundraiser—unusually so.

When I pull into the parking area, I turn to look at her. "Are you okay?"

She blinks rapidly. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

I raise an eyebrow in surprise. "Because I almost fucked you up against the wall of your closet, and you've been acting like a teenager who got caught in the backset of the car."

She blushes. It's an adorable look on her. "I don't normally lose control of myself like that. That's all. I'm sorry."

I fight back a laugh. "You didn't hear me complaining." I study her for a second. "Florence. It's okay. Don't get awkward about this." I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb softly against it. "When we get out of this car, we're a couple. When we get home later, we can talk about your feelings. I promise. But I also promise that we're okay." I trace her bottom lip with my thumb. "Now will you kiss me?"

"Do you want me to?" she whispers.

"I do." I want her to do more than that. It's been so long since I've touched someone

who made me feel this alive. I was actually disappointed the other day when she said she needs an emotional attachment.

She cups my face and kisses me gently. "Let's go find Renna and make this thing public."

I text Mel to let her know we've arrived. She responds right away; she and Renna are on the north side of the grounds, where Renna's signing autographs for the fundraiser. She has a stack of photos and books from her championship season.

"How did she organize this so fast?" Florence asks me, tentatively taking my hand as we head that way.

"She keeps boxes of photos and books at home. She always pushes for free copies when she signs new contracts. Or rather, her agent does."

As we round the corner, a big bulky guy steps in front of us. "Ladies. You'll have to get in line with everyone else."

I blink. "Oh, we're not here for autographs. We're here with Renna and Dr. Hardy—Mel."

He frowns, but before he can respond, Florence lights up. "Fabio!" She turns to me. "He's on my security detail when I go to public events."

"Ma'am?" He still looks uncertain.

"Florence. Pietra." She straightens her posture.

"Oh. Of course, ma'am. I didn't recognize you in street clothes."

"This is my fiancée, Fabio. Josie Mueller. She teaches brain surgeons at the medical school."

"Neurology," I correct her.

"Which is what brain surgeons study," she says pointedly, taking me by the elbow. "Renna and Mel are expecting us. Go verify. We'll wait here."

Before he has a chance to, though, Mel is already coming over. "It's fine, Fredrick. They're with us." She gives him an exasperated look. "I am not calling you Fabio."

He grunts in amusement. "Doctor." He motions for us to pass.

Renna jumps up to give us quick hugs before turning to the line of about twenty girls, most with a friend and a parent or two in tow. "You've met my soon-to-be wife, Mel. These are our friends Josie—Dr. Mueller—and Florence Pietra. Ms. Pietra runs the University Hospital. If any of you are interested in business, you should talk to her. If you're interested in neurology or becoming a doctor, talk to Dr. Mueller."

A little girl near the front frowns. "What's nurlogy?"

Renna grins and taps her temple. "Do you know what's inside your head?"

"Her head is empty," calls the girl next to her, a few years older than her.

"Is not! My brain is in there. That's what helps me think. It helps me remember my times tables, too. Too bad yours doesn't work as well as mine." She sticks her tongue out at her sister.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Renna laughs. "You're right. Your brain is in there. That's Dr. Mueller's specialty—the brain. That's called neurology."

A teenage girl, maybe fourteen, approaches us after getting her autograph. She looks shyly at Florence. "Are you really the boss of the whole hospital? My moms were talking about you at dinner the other night."

She nods. "I am. What did your moms say about me?"

The girl beams. "That you're really smart. And if you can be the boss of all the smartest people in Delmont, I can do anything I want, too."

Florence softens. "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

The girl drops her gaze to the ground.

"Hey." Florence gently places a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Tell me your biggest, wildest dreams."

The girl takes a breath. "I want to go to the Olympics. And I want to be like Serenity and compete as a Delmont Demon, and I want to be a cancer doctor for kids."

Florence nods. "If you work hard every day, I bet you'll be a Demon. Being a doctor is hard work, but if you decide to do it, nothing will stop you."

I crouch to her level. "Going to the Olympics is a really big dream. What's your name?"

"Denisse Hernandez."

"Well, Denisse... the Olympics might be the hardest part, but never stop trying," I tell her. "Even if you don't make it, you'll have incredible experiences along the way."

"Mom says it depends on if the GoAT retires. But even if I don't make the team, we can still go and watch it." She suddenly frowns at me. "If you teach doctors, does that mean you're a doctor, too?"

"Yes, I am a doctor."

"Are you a lesbian, too?" she asks.

I glance up at her mom, who just shrugs, amused.

"Yes, I am. And you know what? Lesbians can be doctors or gymnasts or business women. We can do whatever we want to. You can, too."

Mel leans in. "Renna's almost done with autographs. A bunch of the girls want photos. We're going to do group shots with all four of us."

15

Josie

"You have pretty amazing friends," Florence tells me as I pull into her driveway. Renna single-handedly raised ten thousand dollars for the Cultural Center in less than an hour.

"She's a pretty big deal in some circles." I put the car in park. "Two hours, and voilà. Your social reputation has been upheld."



She turns to me. "Are you coming in?" She bites her lip.

"I can." She clearly wants me to. I pull the keys out of the ignition. "We should probably talk about earlier."

"Talk. And eat, too. I didn't have time to eat before we left, and I'm famished."

"I thought you ate before I picked you up." I follow her up the steps. "Why didn't you say something? We could have stopped to get something to eat."

Marin opens the door before Florence has a chance to get her keys out. "I made you grilled cheese and some butternut squash soup with apples. There's enough for both of you." She ushers us in. "I figured you might stay for a late dinner," she tells me.

If she's teasing Florence about this afternoon, I don't detect it.

"Thank you, Marin. You know how much I appreciate you, right?" Florence says, suddenly looking exhausted.

She raises an eyebrow. "It largely goes unsaid, but you know I'm here to serve, ma'am." She puts a hand on Florence's back and guides her to the table. "Sit." She turns to me. "You, too. Is there anything else I can get for you right now?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"No, thanks." I move toward the kitchen to get some water, but she gently grabs my arm.

"Let me get it."

I shake her hand off my arm. "Do you remember what I told you on the phone Wednesday? If I'm doing this thing with Florence, that's between me and her. You don't work for me. I won't let you wait on me like that."

"Suit yourself, Doctor." She follows me into the kitchen, expertly moving around me. When I start opening cabinets to look for the water glasses, she opens the one behind me and quietly sets two glasses down.

We eat in silence for a few minutes. "Marin," Florence says, "you can go for the night. We'll clean up."

"No, you won't, Florence." She's firm, but gentle. "You're exhausted. You haven't been sleeping well for the past two weeks, and you need a long hot soak in the tub."

Florence shakes her head. "We took care of all of that tonight. HR is taking care of Woodhouse. I'll have to prioritize his replacement, but I have people who can work on that."

"Good. One problem down, one more to go." Marin looks directly at me.

Florence sighs loudly. "Don't, Marin. It's none of your business. I told you to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

The woman nods. "Of course. Call me if you need me."

Then she's gone.

I wait until Florence is finished with her soup. "Do you want to talk about it?" I ask quietly, leaning back against my seat.

"Talk about what, Josie?" She lets out a long breath, shaking her head. "The fact that I wanted to fuck you this afternoon? That I almost lost control of myself?"

I suppress a grin. "If I'm going to fuck you, damn straight you're going to lose control of yourself." I wink, trying to lighten her sour mood. "Although maybe we should talk about it first. You're stuck with me for the next year—you might as well get some satisfaction out of the deal."

She leans back, studying me.

When she doesn't say anything, I frown. "Talk to me. What's going through your head?"

"This is too stressful. I don't know if I can do this."

I don't follow. "You mean the social media thing? Trust me. Renna's idea was brilliant. All of Delmont knows you're with me. Between this and the charity event next week, we won't need to make any other public appearances for a while."

She shakes her head. "You. And me." Her words are so disjointed. "This afternoon. That wasn't like me."

"Which part? I'm still not following." When she doesn't answer, I push. "Is it me?" Marin certainly seems to think so.

Her eyes drop to her empty bowl. "It's... no."

I stand up. Right. "I'll clean up and get out of your hair." I grab her dishes and head into the kitchen.

When I come back to wipe the table down, she's still sitting there.

"Why does Marin think I'm a problem?" I ask.

"She's wrong." Florence takes a long breath. "I'm the problem—or rather, my feelings are. You're only a 'problem' because of my feelings—in her mind, I mean."

"Go on. I'm listening." I sit down.

"I don't do feelings." She swallows hard. "I don't get attached. I never have, not even with Katie. I swore I never would. I've worked too hard to get where I'm at to let emotions get in the way."

"Except you have feelings for me."

"Since the night I met you. You have to admit there's chemistry between us."

My gaze drops to her neckline, then slides down her body, heat pooling in my belly. "Yes, there was. You're a gorgeous woman, Florence. I wasn't opposed to the idea of going home with you for a few hours." Not to mention she was the object of many a fantasy over the years. I can't help the smile that tugs at my mouth. "You seemed pretty open to it, too."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Except I was focused on finding something else." Her voice drops. "A business transaction. Until my heart betrayed me."

"So you actually like me. How exactly is that a bad thing?"

"I don't want to put you in a compromising position." She stares at her hands.

My cheek twitches. "I thought we left sex out of the agreement for that exact reason. So you could put me in a compromising position if you wanted to." I raise an eyebrow suggestively.

She laughs. "Hettie said that our contract isn't against the law as long as no money is exchanged for sex."

"Then we're fine. Wait." I tilt my head, studying her for a long moment. "Are you a virgin?"

Her sudden laugh catches me off guard. "Would that matter?" She raises an eyebrow in challenge.

I bite my lip, considering. "Maybe. We'd have to talk about it. Your reasons, I mean." I rub a hand across my face. "God, I'm glad Marin interrupted us, then. You should be properly worshiped your first time."

"Do you make a habit of deflowering middle-aged women?" Her eyes sparkle with humor.

"Don't say it like that." I reach for her hand. "You wanted me this afternoon."

"I've wanted you since the moment I met you."

I suck in a breath. "But you need an emotional connection." The words slip out before I can stop them.

"Not necessarily." She shrugs. "It hasn't stopped me before."

"So... not a virgin."

She shakes her head, laughing. "No. You looked so disturbed by the notion—I just wondered what you would say."

"I would have hated myself if fucking you against your closet wall was your first time."

"I started it," she reminds me.

"Still. Everyone deserves their first time to be special." I stand up. "I'm going to head out. I've got to work in the morning, and Marin's right—you need some rest."

"Thanks for taking care of the dishes. I could have taken care of them, you know."

"I know." I grin. "Do you want me to draw you a bath before I go?"

"Josie, I can handle it." She laughs. "Marin's helpful, but I can take care of myself."

"Then what do you need me for?" I tease, grabbing my purse. She follows me to the door.

"That's not what I meant." Her cheeks flush. "I didn't hire a personal assistant at home until I could pay her well."

"I'll see you Tuesday? Call me after work."

"Of course." She steps closer, making my pulse race. "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

"For practice?" I arch a brow, amused.

She shakes her head. "Because I want to."

The vulnerability in her voice makes me smile. I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb along her skin. "Then kiss me already."

She does, slowly this time. I part my lips, her breath mingling with mine. My fingers slide to the back of her neck, pulling her closer.

Her soft moan nearly undoes me. It takes all my willpower to pull away.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

When I do, my voice is rough. "Next time you want to kiss me like that, do it before I'm walking out the door."

16

Josie

"I'm sorry. What did you say your name was?" I pull the phone away from my ear and put the man on speakerphone.

"My name is Dieter Engelmann. I work with the Delmont Auction house," he says. "Your colleague Dr. Mary Zimmer sent me some pictures from your collection. I'm a numismatist—a coin specialist."

"Oh, right!" I remember she seemed fascinated by one coin in particular. "I only took pictures of the ones that looked important," I say. "I mean, the ones in special cases and the like. There are quite a few more at the penthouse."

"I'm very eager to see the rest of your collection. Could I meet you there at your earliest convenience?" He sounds very eager.

"I have an hour or two this afternoon, but not until after five. Or I could meet you Thursday early afternoon. I'd need to be back at the university by four, though. I teach labs in the evening."

"I would be able to meet you this afternoon. Would five-thirty work for you? I'll bring a professional photographer along, and we'll take some pictures. I might be able



to give you an idea of the value of your collection—or at least pieces of it."

"I have dinner plans at seven. Can we be done by then?" It wouldn't be the end of the world to miss my evening with Florence, but we agreed on Tuesdays and Fridays at a minimum. I'm sure she'd be fine to get off the hook for the evening, but that was part of our deal. Plus, I enjoy spending time with her.

"We'll do our best. If we're not finished by then, we can come back another time to finish. It'll give us a place to start, at any rate."

Good. The sooner I can sell some of the pieces, the better. I'd like to get the judgment against the place settled as soon as possible. "I'll see you at five-thirty then," I tell him.

When I arrive five minutes early, he and the photographer are already waiting for me. "Come in," I tell them, unlocking the door. It's still strange walking into this place that is—will be—mine. "I'm afraid I don't have refreshments to offer."

"Never mind that," he says, following behind me. Once inside the foyer, he stops dead in his tracks. He looks around at the first floor—the paintings, the sculptures, walls of books.

"Wow."

"The coins, stamps, sports cards, and gems are upstairs in a special room. Let me show you."

When we get to the landing of the second floor, he stops again. "This place is incredible." His eyes are stuck on the east-facing window. The entire wall is glass, and the view of the sunset over Lake Michigan is stunning. After a long moment, he motions to the photographer toward the sunset.

"Of course," the man replies. He glances at me. "Any profit from the photographs we take on your property will be split fifty-fifty with you, ma'am."

That's an interesting thought. I turn back to Mr. Engelmann, motioning for him to follow me down the wide hallway to the first door, and flip the light on.

He digs a pair of gloves out of his bag and pulls them on. "If you have valuable coins here, they need to be handled with the utmost care." He glances at the five coins encased on the wall with an impressed whistle before focusing on the fifteen laid out on the top shelf.

"Jeeves," he says loudly, "five minutes! I'll need you soon." He lowers his voice, his eyes still on the coins before him. "You have quite the collection here, madam."

"You'll find hundreds more in the drawers." I hope their value will be enough to cover the judgment against the property.

He pulls the drawers open carefully, taking a cursory glance at the contents. His brow furrows at what he sees in the second drawer before he closes it. Reaching for the gold coin on the wall, encased in its own glass frame, his hand stops short—almost reverently. He pulls a magnifying glass out of his bag before he turns to me. "May I?" he asks.

"Please." This isn't the one that Dr. Zimmer was fascinated with, but Engelmann appears almost afraid to touch this one, even though it's in a glass case.

"What is it?" Besides the obvious \$20 gold eagle coin, it's fairly innocuous.

He gingerly takes it down from its perch and studies it, turning it over and looking at the back. He sets it down on the top shelf. "Jeeves!"

The photographer comes running. "I'm here, Mr. Engelmann."

"I want close-ups of this from all angles. Tell me when you're ready for the back side."

Mr. Engelmann steps back to let the photographer work. "Who is your grandfather, Ms. Mueller?" he asks stiffly.

"Was," I correct him. "His name was Karl Schneider. He passed away recently."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Was he always a collector of rare coins?" he asks, curiosity getting the better of him.

I chuckle under my breath. "I didn't know him well. It appears so," I add drily.

He turns the coin over when Jeeves motions him. "Do you have any previous appraisals for the individual items in his collection?"

"I'm sure I do, but I haven't found them yet." Not that I've been trying very hard.

"What are your initial impressions?"

17

Josie

I pull into Florence's driveway with a sigh. I haven't had a chance to go home and change. I haven't had anything to eat since late morning, and my mind is flying a mile-a-minute.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I tell her when she opens the door.

"It's fine, really," she assures me. "Marin said dinner is just about ready." She stops in front of me and turns around, blocking my way in the narrow hallway. "Can I kiss you?"

"If you want to," I press my lips together to keep from laughing, "but not like you did when I was leaving on Friday."

"Oh." Her face drops. "Never mind, then. I thought we were on the same page." Her shoulders drop.

"Hey." Cupping her cheek, I turn her face to meet my gaze. "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten all day—that's all." I lean in and brush my lips across hers. "So let me eat first, okay?"

"After I feed you?" She presses her body against mine, her heat radiating into me. She searches my eyes before nipping at my bottom lip. She closes her eyes, lost for a moment. "Then can I have more of you?" she asks, her mouth against mine. I feel her smile.

"I'm not opposed," I tell her, putting a hand on her chest to put some space between us. "After I eat something. Whatever she's making smells divine."

"Chicken fajitas, no onions. Marin says it's simple. She hopes it won't offend you that she made it."

What does that woman have against me?"It's fine. I'm going to die of starvation if someone doesn't feed me soon," I joke.

Marin pokes her head around the corner. "Dinner's ready when you are." She glances toward me. "What would you like to drink, ma'am? I can make you a margarita, or we have Modelo Reserva."

I look at Florence as we sit down. She already has a Modelo open. I debate for a minute before I sigh. "I'll have a Modelo."

Florence watches me closely and turns to Marin. "Can you make me a margarita?"

"So how was your day?" I ask her after a few hearty bites of food have taken the edge

off my hunger.

She lets out a long sigh. "Woodhouse is getting on my last nerve."

"You haven't fired him yet?"

"He's the main person in charge of the charity gala this weekend. I talked to Carole in HR. We agreed it would be better to wait until after the gala to try to avoid the negative publicity. It could have a huge impact on how much we raise."

"That..." I frown. "That somehow seems wrong."

"It's a business decision." She shrugs. "As long as he leaves me alone and there aren't any new complaints against him."

Marin sets the margarita in front of her.

"Thanks, Marin." Florence turns back to me. "For better or for worse, he's good at what he does. Have you gone shopping for a dress?"

I raise an eyebrow in amusement. "I told you. I wear the pants in our relationship."

"Oh?" She pushes the margarita toward me. "This is for you. Don't argue." When I open my mouth to do just that, she adds, "You can wear the pants, but I'm still the boss. I knew you wouldn't ask, so I asked for you." Marin chuckles in the kitchen.

I pick up the margarita and take a sip. "I asked Marin two weeks ago for the name of your couturier. He made me a lovely charcoal tux that will complement your dress beautifully." I put the margarita down and slide the Modelo toward her. "I had them charge it to your account."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

A grin spreads across her face. "I didn't give you enough credit. I'm impressed."

"Don't be," I say, taking another bite of my dinner. "I'm not rich enough to hire a personal assistant, but my dad was an investment banker before he retired. Mom was Director of HR at the med school before she retired a few years ago. I attended one of your silly galas in my mom's stead a few years ago. Right before COVID."

Her eyes widen. "That was my first fundraiser as CEO."

"I remember," I say simply. She was drop-dead gorgeous in a modest—but brilliant—red dress. It was definitely not the right tone for her to set as a young, female CEO, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her hair was done up, and the curve of her neck made my mouth water. She's been the only person since Mel to make me feel like that. I felt like I was cheating on Mel for months after that.

Her eyes narrow. "What does that mean?"

"That you were memorable," I tease her, taking another sip of my margarita.

"Good or bad, memorable?"

"Considering I can still see the slope of your bare neck when I close my eyes, I wouldn't say bad."

She shakes her head, laughing. "I was so naive when I started this job. I thought I should be celebrating the power of strong women. Turns out the job is hard no matter who you are."

"More so because of dicks like Woodhouse," I point out.

She laughs. "Did you know, outside of work, he goes by Dick?"

"Sounds appropriate. Will he be gone after the gala is pulled off?"

She nods firmly. "Without a doubt. It's already been arranged." She takes a quick swig of her beer. "How was your day? What did you do after work?"

I put the image of her bare neck out of my mind. "Nothing exciting. The coin guy seemed pretty impressed with my grandfather's collection, though. Hopefully that'll pan out."

"You have a coin guy?" she asks, her interest piqued.

"Remember I told you about my grandfather's penthouse? There's a judgment against it I need to pay off before I can inherit the place."

"Please tell me this isn't turning into a legal scandal. I can't afford that kind of publicity."

"Of course not," I tell her. I sit back in my chair, sipping my margarita. "This hits the spot. Anyway, my grandfather has quite the collection of valuables, including some high-value coins. Art, gems, some rare books, even a few sculptures."

"How high-value are you talking? My brother collects rare coins," she muses. "If you decide you want another opinion, I can ask him for a recommendation."

"Engelmann wouldn't give me any numbers, so I don't know. I have a colleague who works with the Delmont Auction House, so I have a few contacts there I'm working with to determine some of its worth."



"Doesn't he have appraisals for his inventory? If it's valuable, he should have the paperwork somewhere."

"Possibly." I shrug lightly. "The lawyer didn't have a current inventory list. I haven't checked the safe deposit box downtown yet. To be honest, I haven't even gone through the place. I poked around a little, realized that a lot of stuff was expensive, and decided to take pictures and let the experts deal with it."

Marin comes in quietly to take our empty plates and slips me another margarita without a word.

"Come in the living room. We can relax there."

I sit down on the couch opposite her, putting my drink on the walnut table beside me. "Did you grow up with money like this?" I ask her curiously, looking around at her expensive furniture.

She shakes her head. "My parents were immigrants after the Second World War. Well, dad's family came at the beginning of the war. Nonna—my grandma—came here with my mom when Mom was a baby."

"Land of opportunity," I murmur with a smile.

She shakes her head. "Hard work. Our parents worked their asses off so we could get a good education. And taught us that we could do anything we chose to."

"Still, hard work isn't always enough."

"Fair enough. Anyway, I worked my ass off to get where I'm at. Never slept with a man to move ahead—just good old-fashioned hard work."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I laugh softly. "Slept with any women to get ahead?"

She shakes her head. "I try to stay away from the morally gray. This—" She motions between us. "I didn't like the idea of this contract at first. It feels like I'm hiring you as an escort and an actor."

"We can pull it off," I say, taking a sip of my margarita.

"I'm not worried about that," she says off-handedly. "I like you enough to spend time with you, even if I am contractually obligated."

"You know how to make a woman feel good," I deadpan.

She takes the margarita out of my hand and puts it on the table. "If I kiss you, can you say that again a little more convincingly?"

The corner of my mouth twitches in amusement. "You'll never know if you don't try," I tease.

She leans in, stopping close enough that I can feel her breath on my face. "Is this okay? I know it's not part of the deal." Her gaze lingers on mine. "You don't have to—"

I brush my lips across hers, cutting off her words. She tastes like spicy fajitas and Modelo Reserva. Her mouth opens, soft and hungry, as my fingers trace the soft skin of her neck. I remember the curve of her neck, the sinuous line that led to her—

She pulls away from me, her tongue tracing her bottom lip. "Tell me again."

I blink. Tell her what?

"That I know how to make a woman feel good," she prompts, her voice sultry.

"Does your ego need the boost?" I reach for her again. You don't make Josephine Mueller hungry unless you're going to feed her.

She stops, closing her eyes and inhaling slowly. "What is it, Marin?" For a moment, she doesn't turn around. Her posture deflates as she controls a frustrated sigh.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Gwen called. It's important."

18

Josie

Florence stands up, walking deliberately toward Marin. "What did she say?" She turns to me briefly. "My executive assistant at work. She wouldn't call unless it's urgent."

"Woodhouse's EA, Aimee, called her after work."

"Get to the point, Marin."

"Of course, ma'am." She glances at me before continuing. "Stefanie is assistant to the Chief of HR." She turns back to Florence. "Chloe and three others have talked to her this week. Woodhouse approached all four of them to dig around to see if you were sleeping with any of them." She frowns. "Gwen's words, not theirs—but that's what it boils down to."

"Which other three?" Florence demands.

"Valerie, Katherine, and Peter."

"What, he thinks I'm sleeping with the whole C-suite?" She grimaces.

"Gwen thinks he's putting out feelers to see if you've—" She glances at me.

"If I'm fucking the women, too?" Florence spits out disgustedly.

"I wasn't going to put it that way," Marin says softly.

Florence rolls her eyes. "Of course not. You're a professional—even if you do cross the line sometimes." She bites her lip thoughtfully. "Did Stefanie talk to Cristine or Carole about it?"

Marin shakes her head. "Not yet. I told Gwen to reprimand Stefanie. She should have followed proper protocol and gone to Carole or Cristine."

Wait. Marin is telling off Florence's EA?

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Florence nods. "Good. Thank you." She turns to me. "Can you give me a few minutes? I need to make a phone call."

My phone rings in my back pocket, and she laughs. "You get that while I try to contain some fires."

I glance at the screen before answering. It's the coin expert, less than two hours after he left my grandfather's penthouse. "This is Dr. Mueller." I step into the other room.

"Doctor. It's Dieter Engelmann. I—" He clears his throat. "I wanted to give you an update on one of your coins."

"Already?" "That was fast."

"Your grandfather had many valuable pieces. You have many valuable pieces," he emphasizes. "What was your grandfather's name again, if I may ask?"

I frown. "Karl Schneider," I tell him. "Is that important?"

"How old was he?" Dieter asks.

"Is this relevant?" I ask. I glance around, realizing I'm in a huge library, before returning my attention to the call.

"Bear with me, Doctor."

"Okay. He turned one hundred last year. He was born in 1923 in Germany. He

immigrated after the war."

He makes a noise of affirmation. "With the coins I saw today, you have at least half a million dollars." He hesitates. "However, there's a problem with one of the coins."

"A problem?" I repeat.

"The coin on the wall—the one front and center—"

"The one you saw first," I supply. He acted almost nervous with it.

"Yes. It's stolen property. There will be legal implications along with it."

I sit down in one of the reading chairs and sigh. "What does that mean?"

"I cannot give you legal counsel. I haven't contacted our legal team. Yet," he adds after a pause.

"Whatcanyou tell me then, Mr. Engelmann?" I'm not in the mood for games.

He clears his throat. "You have a twenty-dollar Saint-Gaudens gold double eagle from 1933." He drops the information like a nuke—one that doesn't land.

"Care to elaborate on what that means?" I ask drily.

"Yes, ma'am." He takes an audibly deep breath. "When these were minted, they were never released into circulation. They were minted before President Roosevelt ordered gold coins to be melted down in 1933. All but a handful were destroyed by the mint."

That's interesting. "So if it's rare, it should be worth something then, right?"

"Because they were never released into circulation, they legally belong to the federal government."

"Oh." I scratch my head. "How did my grandfather get it, then?"

"He was an upstanding member of the local numismatic and philatelic communities," he says. "You knew him better than I did. I've heard of him, but never dealt with him directly."

Thewhatcommunities?I stand up.

"I haven't seen him since I was four years old. I didn't even know he was still alive." I start pacing. "If it belongs to the federal government, then I can give it back to them."

"Ultimately, it will end up in their possession," he affirms. "There's one other case similar to yours. Let me tell you a story."

Ten minutes later, Florence sticks her head into the library. "Josie? Is everything okay?"

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Surprised out of my stupor, I shake my head to clear it. "No. Not really." I'm still trying to wrap my head around what Engelmann told me.

She sits down in the chair next to me. "Who was that?" She nods toward the phone in my hand.

"The coin guy."

"The one you met tonight? He works fast." Her forehead creases. "Does he think you can sell enough to pay off the judgment on the property?"

I shake my head, still trying to process everything. "Yes, but he won't work with me until I talk to a property rights attorney with expertise in rare coin law."

She chews on that for a minute. "He thinks one of the coins was stolen."

I snap my head to look at her. "How do you figure?" How did she make that jump so quickly?

She shrugs apologetically. "My family's been working with one for decades. My parents have put tens of thousands of dollars into finding stolen property over the past thirty or forty years."

"What was stolen?" I ask curiously.

"Mostly mundane things. Some engraved silverware, my nonna's first wedding ring, a painting of the hills where she met my grandpa. Things that will never be found,



because they're not remarkable to anyone but Nonna—but my parents will continue to look as long as she lives." She sighs, pressing a hand briefly to her heart before she reaches for mine with her other.

"Did you get things under control for work?"

She smiles weakly. "I talked to Cristine. She's the chief HR officer. She'll talk with Carole tomorrow. He won't be back."

"What about the gala next week?"

She shrugs dismissively. "Everything's already in place. Aimee can take care of any last minute issues." She chews on her cheek, her gaze distant. "I might consider promoting her—or at least recommending her to the board."

"Florence?" Marin sticks her head in the door.

Florence glances at the clock before she answers. "Marin," she says drily, a hint of amusement in her voice. "The Woodhouse situation is being dealt with. Can you do one more thing for me before you leave? Write down the contact number for the family property rights lawyer and my brother's numismatist for Dr. Meuller, please."

"Of course. Is there anything else I can—"

"Marin." Florence's voice is soft as she stands up. She crosses the room, placing her hands on the woman's shoulders and meeting her eyes. "You're worth your weight in gold to me. You know that."

Marin's eyes drop, but a smile tugs at her lips. "Yes, ma'am."

Florence lifts her chin, forcing her to meet her gaze. "You earn your keep here. Don't

feel guilty when I give you a few free hours." When Marin opens her mouth to respond, Florence puts a finger over her lips. "Don't argue."

Marin's eyes flick to me before she nods, stepping back from Florence. "I'll get that contact information and leave it on the counter by Dr. Mueller's purse. You'll call me if you need anything."

Florence frowns. "Do we have fresh batteries?"

Marin's eyes widen. "Bottom drawer," she answers before retreating down the hallway.

"What do you need batteries for?" I ask curiously.

She blushes a deep pink. "Nothing." She waves off my question. "So your numismatist won't work with you. How long do you have to come up with the money for the judgment?"

"About seven months now."

"This problem, will it include all dealings with the auction house?"

I shake my head. "At the moment, no. He unofficially suggested that I put that coin away and work with someone who doesn't know about it, at least until the judgment is settled."

She frowns. "That's a little dishonest, don't you think?"

I raise an eyebrow at her. Not that I disagree, but— "Like this isn't?" I motion between us.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"That's different. I like you."

I don't see how that matters. "Most likely, when it becomes public that I have this coin, the entire estate will be tied up in legal battles for years. If I keep it quiet until I pay off the judgment, the estate will be rightfully mine, and I can settle the legal issue on my own terms."

She thinks for a long moment. "How much do you need?"

"I'm not taking your money."

"Why not? You were going to borrow it from your friends and pay them back double. Pay me back double, and we both win." She pulls her hair into a messy bun, leaning back and crossing her arms.

"You're doing that on purpose. Stop it," I tell her.

"Doing what?"

I swallow. "Tempting me with that damn neck of yours." I close my eyes before taking a deep breath. "It would feel like money for sex."

"So don't have sex with me," she teases, seductively dragging her fingertips across said neckline.

"It wouldn't matter." I shake my head. "We're publicly engaged, it would be logically assumed that I'm sleeping with you, and as far as public perception goes..."

"Then let me see what you have," she says matter-of-factly. "Between my brother knowing coins and my sister Catalina knowing art, we can raise enough. I don't think it would be that hard."

I bite my lip thoughtfully. "Let me think about it." I need to look at the big picture. I also need to talk to Mom and Dad to find out what they know about Grandpa Karl's history. I don't think Mom will talk, but Dad might.

19

Florence

"Nonna." I reach over and give my grandmother a gentle hug. "How're you doing?" I sit down on the couch next to her. With everyone at my parents' house for our weekly family dinner, it gets a little chaotic for her.

"La vita è bella, carino." Life is beautiful. "Tell me what's new in your life. How are things at the hospital?"

I groan. "Mostly good." I glance over at my brother and his kids. His youngest, Lena, is within earshot. "We had a little porcellino at work who was trying to take me out on a date."

"Doesn't he know that he's not exactly what you're looking for in that regard?" She hides a smile, but she can't hide the glint of amusement in her eye.

Lena comes over and gives Nonna a big hug.

"Sit down, carino," Nonna tells her. She settles on the floor between us. She's done this since she was three, after Joe told her you get smart by listening to Nonna. She does it to Mom, too, when Mom is sitting still—which isn't very often. Nonna switches to

Italian. "Is he bothering you? You should report him."

I laugh. "I'm the top boss. Everyone reports to me."

"Why do you have a pig working in your office, Auntie Florence?" Lena asks, curious.

"Well," I tap her nose, "he was wearing the mask of a man until he showed his true colors. Now that we know what he really is, he can't work there anymore."

"Is he like il porcellino that he brings luck? Nonna told me that story, once."

"A little like that," I say. "But instead of bringing good luck to anyone who touches him, he brings bad luck to anyone he talks to."

"You should use duct tape to shut his mouth then," she declares. "Dad says duct tape can fix anything."

Joe bends over to greet Nonna before answering his daughter. "I said almost anything. Duct tape can't fix people, sweetie. We use our words to fix things with people." He winks at me. "Or you get your auntie to send them away."

Nonna laughs. "Giovanni. Don't teach your daughter to rely on others. She can stand up for herself." She turns back to me, her tone shifting. "Is he a real problem?"

I take her thin hands in mine. "He hasn't hurt anyone," I tell her. "We're taking care of the problem. I'm the boss, remember? No one acts like that on my watch." I squeeze her hands. I learned from the strong Italian women in my life not to take shit from anyone.

"Sometimes you've gotta muck the stalls," Lena says at our feet.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

It looks like the next generation is learning that lesson, too. I ruffle Lena's auburn hair.  
"Sit on the couch, sweetie. I'm going to help with dinner."

I give Joe's wife Rosie a hug before looking around to see what still needs to get done. Mom has the food under control, so I help Rosie set the table. Joe and Dad are in the library with his older two kids.

"What's this I hear about a pig at work?" Mom asks sternly. "Do I need to come and kick some ass?"

"Mamma mia, don't talk like that in front of the kids," Rosie scolds.

Mom barks out a laugh. "You can't shelter them from the world, Rosella. It's better to prepare them for it."

Rosie looks at me and rolls her eyes. You'd think she hasn't spent the last fifteen years married to my brother and dealing with Mom and her attitude every single week.  
"Still," she mutters.

"It's fine, mom. The situation is handled. I have very talented people mucking out the stalls."

"Who needs to be mucked out of where?" Hettie asks, waltzing in the door with tiramisu in her hands.

"Just someone at work," I shrug off her question.

"Woodhouse?" she asks, glancing at me.

I glance over at Nonna and Lena on the couch before nodding to her. "The situation escalated. He's gone as of this morning."

She sticks the tiramisu in the fridge and pulls me aside, lowering her voice. "Did something happen?"

"He was digging around the whole C-suite, trying to figure out who I'm sleeping with. Stefanie told Gwen he's asked at least four of the EAs."

"So he believes you like women." She raises an eyebrow.

"I don't give a flying fuck what he believes. Carole and Cristine showed him the door this morning, and if he tries to make it an issue, he'll have lawyers on his ass. He already should, but it's better for the hospital if he goes quietly." I take a deep breath.

"You know some of the best lawyers in Delmont," she teases me. "You have my number if you need it."

"Dinner's ready," Rosie tells us. "Florence, can you help Nonna?"

Once everyone is seated and served, Mom checks in on everyone's week. This is one of my favorite things about being part of a big family. Every week, we get together with Nonna, Mom and Dad, and us kids. Grown-up kids. Catalina is in Italy, but the rest of us never miss the chance to be here and catch up with each other. Even though we've all grown a little too big for our britches, we keep each other grounded. Everyone except Hettie's husband, anyway—who's noticeably absent. Again.

Mom turns to Lena. "How's school, carino?"

"School is okay. Horseback lessons are more fun, though." She takes a bite of her spaghetti. "They started a chess club at school. I think I want to join it."

"You'd be better off playing against me every day," her eleven-year-old brother tells her. "You'd get bored playing other third graders."

"If you like it, we could find a teacher to work with you," Joe says, smiling at his youngest. "Did you know Aunt Florence used to be on the chess team when she was in college?"

"I think you should join the club at school, and if you like it you can explore more options," I tell her. She's eight, for heaven's sake. Let her be a kid.

"Tell your parents about Karl," Rosie encourages Joe.

"Who's Karl?" I ask, curious.

"One of the biggest numismatists in the Midwest. He had one of the biggest collections in the country—he passed away recently. There's a lot of speculation about what will happen to his collection, since he didn't have any family."

"I think I've heard of him," Dad adds. "Some of my old colleagues knew of him. He collected art, too, right?"

Joe nods enthusiastically. "Anything of value. The guy was loaded. He was also more than a hundred years old." He glances at Nonna. "Older than you, even."

She gives him a wistful smile. "Your Nonno would've been a century next year." Her first husband—Mom's biological father who died in the war, leaving a very pregnant Elena heartbroken and alone. He'd been stationed in North Africa, in Tunisia, working against the Axis powers from the inside. His heroism cost him his life.



"He was a good man, Mamma." My mom grew up with stories regaling her first daddy's bravery and heroism. The sacrifice he made to defend freedom, and the sacrifices Nonna endured as well. Nonno Roberto, who married Nonna when she was eight months pregnant, and supported her until he passed twenty years ago, settled for a lukewarm marriage to support his childhood best friend's widow. He was an amazing man, and—according to Mom—an amazing father.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I want to know," Hettie says, pausing dramatically, "about Florence's new girlfriend."

Way to lighten the mood, little sister.

All eyes turn toward me.

"I have a date for the charity gala on Friday. It's not a big deal." I glare at Hettie.

"Insta says you're engaged to her," my oldest niece Paola says.

"Who is this Insta?" asks Nonna, absently rubbing her thumb against the inside of her ring finger, "and why does she know about this before I do?"

Paola laughs. "It's the internet, Grandma. Someone saw them together at a restaurant last week, and then at the fundraiser for the Cultural Center."

"Why does my granddaughter get to be on the internet just by going out to dinner?"

"She's famous around here." Paola rolls her eyes. "She's a very successful lesbian. That's important."

"That's pretty damn sexist," Mom mutters. "A man can love a woman and be successful, and no one thinks twice about it. Why can't a woman do the same thing? I thought women could do anything a man can do these days." She huffs. "It's a brand new century. Hell, it's a new millennium."

"Actually, I can do it better than a man." I purse my lips together to keep from laughing. "My job, I mean."

Hettie kicks me under the table.

"Grandma, it's not a new millennium anymore. It's been the two-thousands for almost twenty-five years," Paola says, deadpan.

Rosie looks at Paola. "Close your mouth and eat."

Lena looks at her mom. "That doesn't make sense. How is she supposed to eat if her mouth is closed?"

Hettie gives me a dangerously dirty look. "Tell us about Dr. Mueller, Florence."

"Her name is Josie." I give her a death glare. "She's a neurologist at the medical school. I like her." I shrug my shoulders.

Rosie looks at me. "I don't think I've heard you say that about anyone—not since Katie."

Katie was a casualty of my ambition. She needed more than I could give her. "Josie can handle me. She accepts me for who I am, and respects me for the position I hold."

"Marin says she's melting your edges," Hettie says, grinning. "I've seen how you are in a professional setting. You're the ice queen incarnate."

"What's an ice queen?" Lena pipes in.

"It's a boss lady who acts like no one is ever good enough for her, but then a pretty lady comes along and melts her ice coldheart so she can fall in love." This comes

from Paola, and leaves everyone in a stunned silence for a long minute.

I see Joe reach over and put a hand over Rosie's. He used to do the same to me when we were kids. It was a warning not to overreact.

"That's exactly what an ice queen is." I wink at Paola and see Joe let out a long breath. "Only I'm not an ice queen. I have lots of people who work for me who are very good at their jobs. I only keep people who are good at their jobs and respectful of other people."

"When do I get to meet this woman of yours?" Nonna asks.

20

Florence

I glance up at the Vanderveen Lux Hotel as the valet opens Josie's door. He helps her out, then she waves him away, insisting on helping me out herself. She looks stunning in her custom tux, and I'm tickled at the idea of my fiancée announcing herself to the public like this.

Photographers snap photos left and right. I'd forgotten the multitude of celebrities attending tonight. Frany Lopez, one of the biggest Latina singers in the world, is here to support us. Her youngest sister suffers from childhood muscular dystrophy, a cluster of diseases the new research lab will study. There are other big names as well. I have to hand it to Woodhouse and his EA Aimee. I'm proud she gets the opportunity to be here in his stead.

Josie takes my hand and helps me from the car. "Stop thinking," she whispers into my ear, "and smile for the cameras. You look beautiful." She puts her hands on my waist and twirls me around, her face still against mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I lean into her. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I linger longer than I need to, feeling the heat of her skin against my cheek. "Lead me, she who wears the pants in our relationship."

She laughs, her eyes meeting mine. Putting an arm out for me, she walks us into the opulent grandeur of The Lux like she owns the place. Once inside, she lets out a long breath. "Is this always how you party? This place is incredible."

We head left toward the ballroom. "Have you never been here?"

"I came once, with Mel—that year before COVID. My mom didn't want to go again, and she thought I'd enjoy the experience. It was the fundraiser for the orthopedic unit. Mel's an orthopedic surgeon. She's also a—"

I groan softly. "Can we gooneevening without you mentioning your ex?" I clamp my mouth shut.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry. Please—God, please forget I said that."

Josie gives me a wide smile. "Done." She squeezes my hand on her arm reassuringly. "Now, introduce me to everyone you know. They'll be talking about us for the rest of the year."

So I do. I introduce her to the team heading up the new research lab, the journalists who are here to write a piece about our efforts, and many of the investors who've

supported the hospital for years. A handful of our most renowned surgeons hover near the open bar.

"Dr. Mueller." A tall man approaches us. "I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"Doctor." Josie smiles warmly. "I'm here with Florence." She squeezes my hand where it rests in the crook of her arm.

"Of course. I'd heard the rumors." His eyes drift appreciatively over her tuxedo. "They didn't do you justice."

My arm tightens imperceptibly around Josie's, and I step closer to her. "James. I don't believe we've had the pleasure yet this evening." My voice carries a subtle edge of authority over him. "Dr. Harrison is one of our leading cardiovascular surgeons," I tell Josie.

I see a glint of amusement in her eyes. She already knows him. "James and I have collaborated on research before." She puts a hand over mine, before turning back to Harrison. "Florence mentioned you're working with minimally invasive valve replacements. Fascinating stuff." "I did?"

After he leaves, she turns to me. "You're jealous." She seems more amused by that than bothered.

I don't respond, instead making our way through the crowd, and introducing her to more board members and donors. She seems more interested in watching me in my element rather than meeting everyone, but she's gracious and gives them each a moment of her attention.

"I don't think I've ever seen Florence so relaxed at one of these things," an older woman confides in Josie as I'm deep in conversation with a potential donor. "Usually

she's all business, but tonight she's actually smiling."

"Is she?" Josie glances at me, catching me watching her, even as I nod along with what the donor is saying. The corner of her mouth curls up when our eyes meet.

"Oh, yes," the older woman continues. "Quite transformed. You must be good for her."

I bid the donor a good night, and quickly settle back at Josie's side, my hand settling naturally on the small of her back. "I see you've met Margaret. She's been on our board longer than I've been alive, I think."

"Not quite," Margaret laughs, "though sometimes it feels that way. I was just telling your lovely fiancée how different you seem tonight."

I feel my cheeks flush. "Different how?"

"Happy, dear." She pats my arm. "Simply happy."

Josie smiles, and my arm tightens around her back as we meander toward our table.

I'm pleased to see Aimee here representing Chief Development, which took the lead organizing the event. With Woodhouse gone on such short notice, she rightly deserves his seat at the table.

It thrills me to bits to see Gwen as her plus-one. I know they're friends outside of work, but I don't think I've ever seen Gwen in anything other than office attire. I give her an air kiss before introducing her to Josie. "Josie, this is my Executive Assistant, Gwen Fernandez. Gwen, my fiancée, Dr. Josephine Mueller. Josie."

"Doctor." She grins widely. "You've been a myth for so long. Nice to see that you're

real."

"Gwen." I shoot her a warning glance.

Josie squeezes my arm. "Don't get mad at her, Florence. She's right. We need our privacy, but not at the expense of the hospital's reputation." She motions to my seat.

"That debacle never should have happened." I sit down, and she pushes my chair in.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

She puts a hand on my bare shoulder and waits for me to look up at her. "You're right, but it's over now. Let it go." Her open palm slides up the side of my neck, and she cups my cheek, staring into my eyes, before she lets her hand fall. She sits down next to me.

For a minute, I'm lost in her gaze, in her electric touch. The smell of her skin lingers. I want more of her.

"Florence, are you going to introduce us, or are you going to sit there and swoon over your girlfriend?" Cristine laughs.

I blink.

"Fiancée," my date corrects her. "Josie. I teach neurology at the medical school."

I shake my head, pulling myself away from the memory of her touch. "Josie, this is Cristine Lopez, head of HR. Anthony Jones, marketing. And Dr. Larissa Harris—she's the Chief Medical Officer."

Gwen clears her throat. "This is Aimee Deyoung. She's interim Head of Development. I'm her partner in crime."

"Nice to meet you all." Josie smiles to everyone before turning to Larissa on the other side of her. "I'd love to hear more about what you do. What was your speciality before you moved into your current position?"

During dinner, a live orchestra plays from across the room and as we finish eating, it

transitions into slower songs. I turn to Josie. "Dance with me?"

She leads me onto the dance floor, and we're both hyperaware of the eyes following us. I step into her arms.

"Everyone's watching us," she murmurs, her lips close to my ear.

"Let them." Her thumb traces small circles where her hand rests against my back. "You're stunning tonight. I'd be watching, too."

I laugh softly. "Careful. Someone might think you actually like me."

She pulls back to meet my eyes. "Would that be so terrible?"

Before I can answer, she spins me out and back in. When I'm back in her arms, she's closer than before, one hand sliding up to rest against my neck. Her skin is warm against mine.

"You're good at this," she murmurs, her other hand trailing up my spine.

"I'm starting to think coming tonight might have been dangerous," I whisper, pressing closer as we sway to the music.

"Oh?" She raises an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Because," I breathe against her ear, "I'm finding it very hard to remember this is supposed to be pretend."

The music fades to something faster, but for a moment, neither of us moves. Finally, I step back, my hand lingering on her arm. "Let's get some air?"

The night air is cool on my flushed skin as we step out onto the balcony. I squeeze Josie's hand in the darkness.

"Better?" she asks. The breeze plays with a loose strand of my hair, and she brushes it tenderly behind my ear.

I nod, leaning against the railing. "I needed a moment. You're very distracting tonight."

"Says the woman in that dress." She steps closer, and my breath catches. "Do you have any idea what you've been doing to me all evening?"

I turn to look into her eyes. "Tell me."

She swallows hard. "Every time you touch me. Every time you look at me like that..." Her free hand finds my waist.

"Like what?" My voice is barely a whisper.

"Like you want to kiss me." Her words make my heart race.

I lean closer, my breath mingling with hers. "I do want to kiss you."

"Florence..." Her voice trembles. I can feel her heart pounding against me.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

A burst of laughter from the doorway makes us both jump. A couple stumbles onto the balcony, after clearly too much champagne. They stop short when they see us.

"Oh! Ms. Pietra, we didn't realize..." They back away awkwardly.

I let out a shaky breath, but I can't bring myself to move away from her. "We should probably head back inside."

"Probably," she agrees—but neither of us moves.

"Josie." Her name is raw on my lips. "When we get home..."

She pulls me closer, and I stop caring who might see us.

The door opens again. "There you are!" Aimee's voice breaks the spell. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but the Mayor would like a word before he leaves."

I close my eyes, forcing myself to remember where we are. Business function. Right. When I open them, I slip back into my professional role.

"Of course." I straighten my shoulders. "Shall we?"

Josie follows me back inside, but something's shifted between us. We still have another hour before we can leave—but every glance, every touch, builds in anticipation of later.

Florence

It's nearly midnight by the time the limo drops us off at my house. I pull Josie up the steps by the hand, too much alcohol loosening my inhibitions. "You should stay. It's late." Marin opens the door, and I pull Josie in behind me. "Do you know how sexy you look in that tux?" I pop the button on her jacket just below her breast.

"I was just an accessory on your arm tonight." She winks, taking my hand and pulling it to her chest. She leans into me, softly brushing her lips across mine. "We accomplished what we needed to tonight. I don't think you need to worry about the rumors anymore." She pulls back, turning around and heading for the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" I ask, trailing behind her.

"Putting something in my stomach to soak up the alcohol. Getting some water. I need to be up in the morning for work." She unbuttons her jacket and drapes it over a dining room chair.

"You could stay." The emerald green vest under her jacket hugs her curves in all the right places, making me want her even more.

She whirls around to look at me, her hands on her hips. "Will you stop already!"

I stumble backwards, frowning.

"I'm not spending the night." She takes a step closer to me. "You know that Mel's not my ex, right? She and I are friends. We've never been more than friends."

"You wish it was more," I state flatly, swallowing hard. "If it were up to you, it would be more."

She shakes her head. "I wouldn't change anything. I love Mel. She's my best friend. She has been for seventeen years. I wouldn't change what we have for anything."

"You still want her." I know I sound jealous. I am jealous.

Her shoulders sink. "No. I'm genuinely happy for her and Renna. They're amazing for each other." She picks up her phone, typing a message. "I'd never take that happiness away from her. From either of them." She straightens her shoulders. "I need to put something in my stomach."

I step in front of her, blocking her way. "Stay," I breathe. "Please."

She closes her eyes. "Don't ask me to stay, Florence," she whispers. "I've been staring at the curve of your neck all evening. Do you know how long I fantasized about you after that first time I saw you?"

"What?" I cup her face. "What are you talking about? Open your eyes, Josie. Look at me."

"You have feelings, Florence. I want you so badly, but I don't want to hurt you." Her gaze flickers to my mouth before looking into my soul again.

"How long did you fantasize about me?" I ask roughly. "Tell me."

"Every night for months." Her words rocket heat to my core. "Every night."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"What about Mel?" I choke on her name.

Josie shakes her head. "You replaced her face when I..." Her palm is on my neck, a languid caress. "When I went to sleep at night." She swallows. "I shouldn't drink around you anymore."

She tries to turn away from me, but I hold her face. "Are you telling me you touched yourself thinking of me—for months?"

"It's only physical, Florence. I don't—"

"I don't care," I rasp, crashing my lips against hers.

She pulls away, looking at me with a ravenous hunger. "Up." Her voice is raw as she backs me up against the table and puts her hands on my waist.

She presses herself between my legs, her body suddenly hot against me. Her soft lips brush against mine. The taste of Josie and sweet wine overwhelms me.

She puts a finger under my chin, pressing up as her mouth finds the contour of my neck. Then she nuzzles the delicate skin, inhaling deeply and releasing an almost agonized sigh before she licks my skin. The heat of her tongue tickles, her hot breath sending waves of intense desire to my core.

My legs instinctively wrap around her hips, and my moans tangle with hers as she trails open-mouth kisses along my jawline, to the hollow of my neck.

I reach for her breast through too many layers of fabric, but she grabs my wrists, pinning them to the table behind me. "You don't touch. Not yet." Her voice is low, possessive. Her hand moves to cup the side of my head, holding my neck firmly against her mouth. The other hikes my dress up, fingernails raking up the inside of my thigh, making me shiver.

I open, desperate for her. Her palm grinds against me, setting me on fire as her fingers rake over my soaking panties.

"Josie, please. Fuck me. I need you inside me."

Her breath is already short and erratic. She nips lightly at my neck as she slides her hand inside the silk. "You're dripping."

She sounds wrecked.

Her fingers slip through my folds, coating her in my juices before she slides a finger inside me.

I buck against her hand. "More, Josie. Please."

Panting as she slides a second, then a third finger to fill me, I race toward the edge. She slows down, deeper, harder, pulling me back from the edge, teasing me closer, then pulling back again.

"Josie, please," I beg.

"Please what?" she asks, hot breath in my ear.

"Look at me." I need to see inside her soul. "Kiss me."



The depths of her eyes push me over the edge.

22

Josie

The phone rings, and I pull the pillow over my head. The sun's not even up. Who would be calling so early?

Beside me, Florence groans. She reaches for the phone. "Ciao, bella." She yawns loudly. "It's early. You okay?"

I hear rapidfire Italian on the other end of the line as she relaxes against me. Nothing wrong, then.

"No, it's fine. It was just a late night. The charity dinner was last night." She reaches over and gives me a quick kiss. "My sister," she whispers before going back to her conversation in a hushed voice. "It's complicated," she says into the phone in Italian. "She's my girlfriend, but publicly she's my fiancée." She explains the situation with Woodhouse and the social media mess. "Yes, I like her a lot." My Italian may be rusty, but the time I spent in Venice my junior year in high school wasn't that long ago.

I pull away from her and get out of bed. I was in no shape to drive last night, and after I postponed class with Renna, I'd planned to sleep in the guest room. Until Florence begged, and I gave in to my insatiable need to trace my fingertips along her neckline, to taste her skin. I spent months after that night five years ago, thinking about her in that red dress, her luscious bare neck on display for everyone to see. Thinking about her—fantasizing about her—while I brought myself to climax, or while Ruby got me off. She was the reason I stopped fantasizing about Mel.

But Florence's feelings for me grow every time we see each other—I can see it in the

way she looks at me. It's probably because she doesn't have any friends or anyone close to her—but it's not healthy to encourage that, especially since we're stuck together for the next year. I only agreed to sleep in her bed with her once we both had a T-shirt and shorts on—mine borrowed, obviously. She was grumpy about not getting me off, but I was sated enough by worshiping her body and feeling her come around my fingers.

"Come back to bed," she says quietly. "I'll be off the phone soon. Promise."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I'm going to make some coffee." It's almost eight, and I need to get up and get moving anyway. A few hours with Renna in the lab, then we're going to lunch with Mel. It's been a week since I've seen her. Seeing Florence twice a week and dealing with the penthouse has me too busy. I miss her.

Florence comes up behind me a few minutes later, wrapping her arms around my waist. She rests her cheek against my back. "Sorry. That was my sister Catalina. She's in Italy—sometimes she forgets about the time difference."

I shrug out of her embrace. "It's fine. I needed to get up anyway."

She reaches up on her toes and kisses my temple. "Talk to me," she says quietly, letting go of me and leaning against the counter.

"Last night shouldn't have happened." Pouring a cup of coffee, I wonder if she drinks it. She must, right? Otherwise why would she have the machine? I offer her the cup and pour a second for myself.

She wraps her fingers around the mug, her eyes on the dark liquid. She bites her lip. "Why do you say that?"

"You don't get physical unless you're emotionally attached." I take a sip of my coffee. "I don't equate sex and emotions. Do the math." That might be too harsh. Harsh—but realistic. "We're becoming friends, Florence. I don't want to hurt you." My feelings for Mel would have been so much more devastating if she'd let me have her the way I wanted her for so long.

"I know," she murmurs gently. "I don't expect anything from you. I know how it is for you."

I shake my head. "Every second I touch you, every time I kiss you, will make it harder for you when this is over." I swallow. "Trust me."

"Let me enjoy it while it lasts. Maybe it doesn't have to end."

Putting my coffee down, I turn away from her. "I need to meet Renna for class, then we're meeting Mel for lunch."

The bank calls just as Renna and I finish up with labs. All the papers are in order, and I can open my grandfather's safe deposit box now. Renna and I postpone lunch for an hour, and I head to the bank downtown.

"I'll stay inside the vault with you, ma'am." The bank officer says as we exit the elevator on the basement floor. "It's standard procedure. You can stay as long as you need to. If there's anything you wish to remove, we have procedures to allow that."

"I'm looking for an inventory of appraisals—plus, I'm just curious as to what else is here."

"Of course ma'am," he says, unlocking the vault door.

The box is much bigger than I expect, a full five by ten inches and two feet long. We open it with both keys, and he pulls the box out. "We can take it to the private examination room next door." He gestures toward a glass door on my left leading to a small, secure room. I follow him into it. He places the box on the table and steps back with a polite nod.

Inside, I finally find an inventory of appraisals. Without knowing exactly what's in

the penthouse or understanding details, it looks fairly extensive. There are nearly a thousand items on the list. I notice the gold coin Engelmann is worried about isn't on here. At the top, it states that it's a full inventory of all valuables in his possession worth more than \$10,000, as of six months ago. I imagine he kept it updated as he sold or acquired things. There's insurance information for each item listed, as well. My eyes widen as I flip to the last page. Approximate value: one and a half billion dollars.

I let out a long breath. Holy shit. All the items are listed along with their current locations. Authentication records, including Provenance reports, Certificates of Authenticity, and individual Appraisal reports are in a safe hidden in the penthouse behind the painting of the Italian hills. I remember that painting. It felt out of place, a slice of ordinary surrounded by all things extraordinary. If someone wanted to steal something from the place, that would be the last thing taken.

Under the inventory list are three puzzling things. In the context of my grandfather's other valuables, these don't appear to hold much value. There's a set of engraved, carefully-wrapped silverware. There's also an heirloom gold ring and matching locket, both intricately carved with vines and flowers. The locket and the silverware are engraved with V&E 1943. The ring looks like a wedding ring. Vittorio ed Elena, 16.10.1943.

Buried under the set of silverware is a sealed envelope. Meine liebe Josephine is written on the front. My dear Josie. On the back is a short note. This envelope has been documented in bank records to be released to my granddaughter Josephine Mueller upon my death without stipulation, to be read in private.

I look up at the bank officer. "Am I allowed to take this with me?" I lay it on the table, the note of permission facing up.

He takes a step forward, glancing at it. "Yes, it's already documented as such. You'll

need to sign some paperwork on your way out."

I glance across the table at Mel and Renna. Even postponing lunch for an hour, I still came rushing in five minutes late. "I'm almost afraid to open it," I tell them. After the way mom reacted when I showed her Grandpa's will, the mysterious stolen gold coin, and the strange items in the bank box, I really have no idea what to think.

"What are you afraid of finding?" Mel asks softly, placing her hand on mine. "You want us to come home with you after we eat? For moral support?"

I reluctantly pull my hand away. I can't deal with my feelings for her right now, not after gorging myself on Florence last night.

Renna suddenly laughs. "You got laid last night. Good for you!"

Mel glances from me to Renna and back again, her brow furrowing. "How do you—" She shakes her head with the hint of a smile. "No wonder you canceled on Renna this morning."

I groan loudly. "I postponed on her this morning because we were out late for the charity gala. I was too drunk to drive home safely. I planned to stay in the guestroom."

Mel grins. "Best made plans..." She winks at me. "So, was it as good as you imagined it would be?"

I scrunch my nose. "She's falling for me. I shouldn't have given in to it."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"That doesn't answer the question," Renna teases.

"Yes, it was nice. It's not going to happen again, though." "I won't be responsible for hurting her." "As for coming over later, I think I'd rather read it alone, to be honest."

"Tilly's probably coming over after dinner," Renna says. "You could come, too."

"Or you could see what your fiancée is doing," Mel teases. "You could eat her for dinner."

I shake my head. "After last night, I'm not even sure if I could eat dinner over there again. Not at the table, anyway."

Renna snorts. "You couldn't even wait for the bedroom?"

"It wasn't supposed to happen. It shouldn't have."

"Why not?" she asks. "You're not seeing Ruby anymore, are you?"

Mel leans into Renna, putting a warning hand on her thigh. "She used to do that to me." "Leave it, Serenity."

I wonder if I'll ever find a woman that I'm as comfortable with as I am with Mel. Years of being the one-and-only to someone. Tilly and Renna have it, too. I know they were 'orgasm partners' as Florence would say, but it's obvious their relationship isn't romantic. They're physical, like Mel and I are, but there's something different in the way that Renna and Mel look at each other that I've never experienced. It's the

same way that Florence has started looking at me the last few times we've been together.

"Besides the letter," Mel says, pulling me out of my thoughts, "what else was in the bank box?"

"An inventory list of appraisals for all the things he owned worth more than ten grand. That doesn't include a gold coin that is probably worth at least twenty million." I sigh deeply. "Let's just say that I have no idea what I will ever do with that much money, assuming I get all this straightened out."

"Why wouldn't you get it all straightened out?" Renna leans her elbow on the table, chin resting in her hand.

"The first coin guy that looked at everything told me it's uncirculated and stolen property. He advised me to hide the piece and have another expert look at my collection. If he represents me, he has to report it to the Auction House Legal Department. If it becomes known before the estate is settled, the whole estate could be locked up in the courts for years."

"How can he be sure it's stolen?" Mel asks. "Even if it was, wouldn't a thief of that caliber create a fake document trail?"

"You'd think," I chuckle. "Because it was never circulated, it belongs to the government. I'll be happy to return it to them, but if I try to deal with that before the estate is settled, the Vanderveens could try to make a play. They're the ones who'd get everything if I don't come up with the judgment."

I see the wheels turning in Mel's head. "Did you ever find out more about the court case behind the judgment?"



"No," I admit. "Between seeing Florence twice a week, class Thursday nights, and trying to figure out how to come up with a quarter million dollars, it's not really a priority."

"Could you fight it in court?" Renna asks.

I shake my head. "I asked the lawyer about that. Most likely outcome is that I'd have to pay the value adjusted for inflation. It would be about triple then."

Renna winces. "Maybe Tilly would look into it for you," she muses, more to herself than to me. "She has more time on her hands. She and Minnie seem to be going their separate ways." For a few months, it looked like Mel's sister was interested in Tilly.

"Well, even without the coins, you should be able to come up with the money," Mel points out. "If the Auction House works with you with some of the art and the sculptures. If not, maybe you could ask your new girlfriend," she teases.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I glance down at it. Speak of the devil. "Hello?"

"Hey," Florence says softly. "What are you doing this afternoon?" She swallows audibly. "I don't want to leave things the way we left them this morning."

I close my eyes in frustration. "I'm at lunch with Mel. I'm going over there tonight after dinner."

"Can I have you for dinner?" she asks.

Renna makes a choking sound, trying not to laugh.

"I've got to deal with the penthouse stuff. I'll see you Friday after work, okay?"

"Can't I see you on Tuesday?"

"I'll see you Friday, Florence."

23

Josie

Meine liebe Josephine,

I hope news of my death doesn't affect you greatly, outside the obvious inheritance. I trust from watching you over the years that you can handle what's to come.

Your mother did right by you when she cut me out of your life. Letting her cut ties with me, no matter how much it hurt me to lose you, was the right move to protect you. I'm a flawed man, meine Liebe, and your mother knows it well.

I should regret the things I've done, but I don't have the heart. Besides losing you to my unrepentant soul, I only truly regret one thing in the waning years of my century on this wretched earth. The gold ring you find with this letter belonged to a young woman near Naples during the War. It was a curse, both for the original owner and for me.

Your grandmother Greta found it in my coat pocket the night she died. She wanted to know who it belonged to, and why I was carrying her wedding ring on the 50th anniversary. I never loved your grandmother. I wanted to track this woman down, if she was still alive, and return her ring to her.

Of all the crimes I've committed in my cumbersome life, for this one alone I feel remorse. One winter evening in December 1943, I ransacked a home near Naples.

I ripped the ring from her finger. I'll never forget her anguished cry as she collapsed into a heap of despair, her bare hand resting on her swollen belly.

Her cries haunt me to this day.

I tried to find her after the war. She was—by then—an orphan and a young widow. I learned that she fled to the land of opportunity in desperate search of escape from the horror of her memories. I never stopped looking for her.

I never stopped watching you, either. From the time you were little, I've had eyes on you. I have a bookshelf with all your favorite books. Behind the Picasso on the second floor is a secret library. It holds all your favorites throughout the years, going back to your childhood. Maybe you'll find some solace in revisiting some of them.

If you have trouble with the judgment against the penthouse, look in the secret library for the book you soothed yourself with when your best friend fell in love with someone else the way you could never have her. There, you will find answers.

I hope you find happiness, meine Leibe, with a woman who will love you the way you deserve. The idea of happiness has eluded our clan since the day I ripped it from that young Italian girl eighty years ago. I hope you will break that curse.

Your reprehensible Opa

24

Florence

I look up from my desk with a sigh. "What is it, Gwen?"

"Ma'am." She closes the door behind her and straightens her shoulders.

"You have my attention, Gwendolyn." I cross my arms over my chest. "Whatever it is, speak already."

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "You need to quit acting like a lovesick fool. Whatever problems you have with your fiancé need to stay out of the office."

"Excuse me?" I say drily, raising an eyebrow—more in surprise than disagreement.

She releases an exasperated sigh. "Look. I don't care about your love life. Whatever spat you and your—" Clearing her throat, she rolls her eyes. "Whatever is happening between you and this woman is compromising your judgment and your behavior. It needs to stop. Marin says—"

I stand up. "Marin says what?" I ask dangerously.

She takes a step toward me, but her tone softens. "That Josie's been giving you the runaround all week. I'm not here to pick a fight with you, Florence."

"What then?" I step toward her.

"What's the first line in my job description?" she asks, surprising me.

"To assist and support me in any way necessary for me to do my job." I don't understand.

"Yes," she nods. "In order for you to do your job to your standards," her lip curls up, "you need to get your head out of your ass. I don't say that to be unfeeling or unempathetic. I say that because you have a job to do, and you aren't seeing clearly."

I sigh in resignation. She's not wrong. "What exactly do you propose I do about it?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

She nods, pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket. "She teaches labs from six to nine on Thursday evenings at the university campus. Ballentine building. The lab is in room 204 on the second floor. There's a small parking lot just north of the building, off Noble. That part of campus is well-lit at night."

"You're suggesting I ambush her. With her students around."

She studies me for a moment. "I'm suggesting you talk to her. You obviously have something to work out," she says. "Whatever it is, work it out."

"Or what?" I ask, the corner of my mouth curling in amusement. "Are you going to fire me?"

"No," she laughs, "but I'm sure I can set something up where you'd have to talk to her in public, and I figure you'd both rather do that in private."

I nod reluctantly. "I'll try to talk to her tonight. It's not just that, though." I sigh. "My nonna is under the weather, and at her age, that worries me."

She nods. "I know. But we can't do anything about that. This is something you have some control over. A wise woman often tells me to take control. Take control, Pietra." She rests her hand on my arm. "Do you need anything before I leave for the afternoon? You have a meeting with Jason and Aimee, but otherwise your evening is clear."

"Go." I nod toward the door.

I stop her as she turns to leave. "Gwen?"

"Boss?"

"Thank you."

I knock on the lab door five minutes before Josie's class is scheduled to be finished, silently poking my head in. I'm surprised to find nearly all the students gone. Three are still here, but they've already packed up their bags.

I see the momentary surprise in her eyes when she sees me, but she covers it quickly. "Come on in," she tells me, meeting me near the door. She puts a hand on my back, leading me to the front corner of the lab near her desk. She waves to the three students as they head out the door.

"You weren't answering my calls."

"I've been busy," she defends herself. "I'm coming up against some unexpected challenges with the penthouse property." She frowns. "Marin said your grandmother is sick?" She sticks her files and her laptop into her bag. "Where are you parked?"

"I'm parked next to you. Yes, Nonna's sick. It's just a cold, but any time she gets sick is dangerous. She's ninety-eight, so I always worry about her."

She locks the lab door and wiggles the handle to make sure it's locked.

"What's going on with the property?" I ask as we exit the building.

She's quiet for a minute. "At least some of the items are stolen—besides that coin we were talking about, I mean. I found a letter in the safe, and—" She shakes her head. "I'm starting to wonder if I should just walk away from all of it."

I tangle my fingers with hers and squeeze her hand. I think she's going to pull away for a minute before her hand relaxes in mine. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Her shoulders drop. "I don't know. I haven't even told Mel and Renna about it."

I bite my tongue. I don't want to hear about Mel. "Why not?"

She bites her lip. "I need to talk to my dad and see what he knows—without my mom knowing about it."

That sounds ominous. "Your grandfather, he was your mom's dad, right?" She told Josie to walk away from all of this, if I remember correctly.

She nods. "I still don't understand why. But I have a lot more questions now."

We arrive at the parking lot. "Can I take you out for a drink? I can listen."

She shakes her head. "I appreciate it, Florence, but I'm tired. It's been a long day. I'm already stressed, and I don't want to lead you on. I haven't told anyone about this. My head is exploding with everything."

I squeeze her hand before I let go. "I could come to your house. No expectations," I promise. "I can listen. Just be a friend," I offer.

She raises an eyebrow. "I didn't know Florence Pietra knew how to do that," she teases.

I don't know why, but that hits me like a punch in the gut. Maybe it's because she's been ghosting me all week. I turn away from her, pulling out my keys. "Never mind." I swallow thickly.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Hey." She reaches out, grabbing my arm. "I'm sorry."

I freeze. I nod mutely without looking back at her. I pull away from her.

"Come over. I'll meet you back at my place."

"Do you want a drink?" she asks, letting me into her apartment.

I shake my head. "Some water or tea, maybe. I won't drink around you right now." I slowly breathe in her scent. I glance around the place. Weird. There's a step ladder against the wall. "Tell me what's going on with your grandfather's stuff."

She puts on some water for tea then sits down at the table. "I don't know much. He was a Nazi and a thief."

"What do you mean? It was common for soldiers to loot—on all sides, not just the Nazis." Nonna has let bits and pieces of her story slip out over the years. We learned a little about the war during school, but not much. I was in college before it occurred to me that Nonna had lived through it, and that was why she came to this country with Mom.

She chews on her cheek for a long minute, lost in thought. "My grandmother died when I was four. I don't know exactly what happened to her. She was only in her sixties. I always thought she died from a heart attack, but I'm not sure if anyone actually ever said that."

I nod, silent. I'm guessing she didn't die of a heart attack.

"I got into the safe deposit box on Saturday, after I met Renna at school for a few hours."

The tea kettle whistles, and I get up, motioning for her to continue. "What was inside?"

"An inventory of everything. The appraisals and all the paperwork for authenticity are in a safe at the property." She waves that away. "There was also a letter to me."

I pour two cups of tea and set one in front of her.

"It was creepy, Florence. I can't even talk to Mel about it."

"Creepy, how?"

"He's been watching me from his tower perch for thirty years." She nods toward the step stool. "He had a fucking camera on my living room. Tilly helped me find it and disable it. There's one at my parents house and Mel's house, too."

I frown. "To what end? Any idea?" Besides being scary, that's illegal. I wonder how long he was watching her.

"He was obsessed with me. I think because I'm his only living relative, besides mom. She shut him out as soon as my grandma died—about thirty years ago."

"That's why he left everything to you." It makes sense.

"He has a picture of me at my hooding ceremony—when I officially became a doctor. Either he was there, or he had someone else there to take the picture. Next to the picture, he has a shelf full of my favorite books."

"How did he know what you liked to read?" I frown at the thought.

"Besides the cameras? He hacked into my phone, my online shopping, email, everything. Mel's, too, I think." She sighs. "There's also a hidden room with all my favorite books since I was a kid, going back to kindergarten and first grade."

She's been dealing with this all by herself?

"Why don't you want to tell Mel?" I ask her gently. I'm sure she wouldn't blame her. Any camera at Mel's place was obviously about Josie.

"Tilly and I deactivated the cameras—at my parents, and Mel's, too. I think he killed my grandmother."

She's not making sense. "I don't follow."

"He was also obsessed with finding someone he met during the war. Only he didn't know her name or where she went after the war. He spent eighty years trying to find a ghost."

"Come sit on the couch." I pick up her tea and bring it to the coffee table. "Sit by me."

She curls up against my side.

"How much of this does Tilly know about?" It sounds like she trusts her, at least.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

She purses her lips. "The cameras. And the books." She shrugs. "It's stalker behavior, Florence." She rests an exhausted head against my shoulder.

"Yes, it is." I'm not leaving her alone tonight. "It's too late to call Mel and Renna tonight, but we'll talk to them tomorrow. When are they out of work?"

She shakes her head. "Mel is usually done about five, Renna about an hour later. She works with Dr. Harris on Fridays. We don't need to tell them, though."

I cup her cheek and turn her gaze to my face. "Mel is your best friend. You know she would want to be here for you." I press my lips to her forehead. "Let me take care of you tonight."

She stiffens.

"No," I say softly. "Not like that, Josie. I just want you to feel safe. Until you have your friends and your family around you, let me be your safe space."

I look at Tilly across the table in the hospital cafeteria. She glances between Renna and Mel, raising an eyebrow.

"Dr. Gorden. Ms. Pietra." Mel stares hard at me. "What is this about? Is this about Josie?"

Tilly puts her hand over Renna's. "Will you settle your woman down already?" She motions toward Mel. "It's not about Josie—not really. It's about the things she found at the bank. And the penthouse."

"Where is she?" Mel asks, glancing around.

"She's not here," I say wryly. "She doesn't even know that I'm here. I'd appreciate if you'd give me a chance to talk to you."

"That means you need to shut your mouth for a minute." Tilly smirks at Mel.

"Stop it, both of you." Renna sighs. "Florence," she says my name distastefully, "say what you've got to say. The rest of us have work to do."

"Josie doesn't want to worry you, but she found out that her grandfather has been watching her. For years, probably. He had cameras in her living room. Tilly helped her disable and remove them."

Renna looks at Tilly, her eyes growing wide. "Is that true?"

Tilly nods. At least she has the grace to look sheepish.

Mel growls at Tilly. "You found out he was stalking her and didn't fucking say anything to me?" She turns to me. "Where is she now?"

I put my hand on Mel's. It's warm. For some reason, I expected her to be cold. "She's at work, safe, surrounded by students and professors," I say gently. "She's safe. I'll remind you that he's dead." I purse my lips. "It looks like he'd been watching her, in some capacity, since she was a little kid."

Mel whistles, frowning. "How? Why?"

"I don't know, honestly. There's another thing." I hold my hand up to stave off comment. "She already disabled them, but he had cameras at her parents house and at your house. They're already disabled," I repeat. "We need to get the cameras out of

your place, though. It's not likely, but as long as they're hidden, they could theoretically be hacked." The words send a chill down my spine.

Renna turns to Tilly angrily. "Did you know about that, too?"

Tilly shakes her head. "I knew about her parents. She's planning to talk to her dad this weekend to get some answers, anyways, but she doesn't want to talk to him with her mom around."

Mel lets out a long breath. "It's probably better that way. There's history, with her mom and grandparents, that Josie never understood. They don't talk about it." She looks hard at me. "Why did she talk to you about all this and not come to us?"

I look down at my hands and swallow. "I tracked her down at school last night. She was ignoring me all week. My EA told me to get my head out of my ass and talk to her."

Tilly snorts. "Florence." My name sounds sour on her lips. "You need to understand. Josie has only ever loved one woman. No judgment, Doctor." She glances at Mel, before returning her gaze to me. "For her, love and sex are completely unrelated. Just because you let her fuck you on the kitchen table in the heat of the moment does not mean she has feelings."

I open my mouth to respond, but I can't find words.

"Tilly," Renna warns, "don't be like that."

She raises an eyebrow in challenge. "I'm not being like that," she says. "It's just the truth. It's like saying water is wet." Breaking into a cocky grin, she winks at me. "Take what you can get, girl. Both of you need it."

I'm not sure how my love life—or my sex life—is any of their business. I swallow. "I don't know why she's reticent to tell you about this," I tell Mel, "but it's important that she has her friends supporting her. It sounds like she may have trouble coming up with the money she needs, too."

"I thought she could just sell some of the shit in the penthouse," Tilly quips. "Even if she doesn't get top dollar for it, who cares?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I shake my head. "She told me the auction house won't work with her, which limits her options and causes a whole lot more work. They've essentially blacklisted her in the local numismatic community because some of the items are stolen."

"Do you have the money to help her, if it comes down to that?" Mel asks. "All of my money is tied up in the condo and paying off student loans."

"Mine is tied up in investments," Renna adds. "I might be able to pull money from it, but it would cost a ton."

Tilly sighs. "Residents don't make that much." Renna reaches over and squeezes her hand.

I bite my lip thoughtfully. "I have the money, but..." I clear my throat. "My lawyer cautioned me against any money exchanging hands. Legal issues." I raise an eyebrow at the three women around the table. I don't want to mention the contract in public.

Tilly perks up. "But you have it."

"I do. I'm not sure how that helps Josie, though—under the circumstances."

"Maybe you could buy something from the penthouse. Or maybe you know someone who would."

That's a thought. That would get around the legal aspect of money for sex, at least on a technicality. "My brother is a numismatist. He might be interested in some things, too." I wonder if Joe would take the risk if he knew the origin of some of Mr.



Schneider's collection.

"First thing," Tilly breaks into my thoughts, "is to get those cameras out of your place, and out of the Mueller's house. Then we can consider what options we have for coming up with the money."

25

Josie

"Hey, Dad. Come on in." I pull him into a tight hug. "A bunch of my friends are here. I hope you don't mind."

Following me in, he glances around the open space. "I know Mel, of course."

"Mr. Mueller." She stands up from the couch, pulling him into a hug. "Nice to see you again. This is my fiancée, Serenity. Renna."

I see his brow furrow, and jump in to stop an unnecessary comment. "They're perfect for each other, Dad. I'm happy for them." I turn him toward Tilly and Florence. "Tilly. She's Renna's BFF. And this is Florence." I'm not sure how to introduce her, so I leave it at that.

"Florence is Josie's girlfriend," Tilly winks at my dad. "We're helping her deal with all this shit that her grandpa left for her. Did you know he was spying on her?"

Dad's mouth opens in surprise, and he looks at me. "What's she talking about,mieloji?"

I give Tilly a hard look before guiding my dad to the table. "Sit down, Dad. I'm going to fill you in on what we've found."

"Okay. I'm listening."

I hand him the three-page letter from the safe deposit box and disappear into the kitchen to make him a cup of coffee. I watch him from the kitchen. He's on his third read-through by the time I return with his mug.

"This is..." He trails off, at a loss for words.

"Scary? Stupid? Creepy? Fucked up?" Tilly supplies him.

He looks up at me in surprise. "Do you and your friends talk like that all the time?"

I roll my eyes in exasperation. "No. Sometimes, but not around our elders. Tilly's different." I don't really mind her crassness, but I wish she would filter it around my dad. "She's also right. Between the letter and some of the things at the penthouse, it is scary."

"And fucked up," she adds.

I study my dad. He seems disturbed by the letter, too. "Opa also had cameras in my house. He was spying on me, Dad. For many, many years."

"What do you mean?"

"Cameras, Dad. He was watching me—literally. He has a picture of me at my hooding ceremony. He was there, or at least someone was there in his stead. He has a shelf of all my favorite books next to the picture. About two dozen of them, including a new one from less than a month before he died. And he has a secret room with all my favorites going back to fucking kindergarten." "The more I think about it, the more it freaks me out." "He's been watching me, in some capacity, since mom cut him out of our lives."

"Bastard," he growls softly. He pushes his coffee away and gets up, reaching for me. "My mieloji. Baby." His arms are around me, and for the first time in a week, I'm safe.

I'm safe.

I bury my head in his chest and dissolve into silent sobs—of fear and panic, but equally the relief of finally feeling safe in Dad's arms. He tightens his arms around me, patting me softly, soothing me, hushing me. Another arm wraps around me, and I instinctively know it's Florence. Then Mel is on my other side, and I'm surrounded by the most important people in my life. The smell of my dad's musky cologne mixes with the age-oldeau de Mel—the two people who've been my home for as long as I can remember.

Florence tenderly pulls my face to look at her. "We've got you, Josie." She leans her forehead against mine. "You're going to be okay. We've got you."

Dad and Mel loosen their arms, and Tilly steps into my periphery. She softly pushes Florence's shoulder, breaking us apart. "We've got you," she repeats, "but we have things that need to be taken care of before we let our guards down." She squeezes my arm gently and turns to my dad. "He had cameras at Mel's place, too. We've taken down the ones here and at Mel's. We need to get the ones from your house down."

"It's aimed at the couch in the living room," I tell Dad. "It's been disabled, but it could still be hacked into. I want to get it out of the house. If you could take Mom out for dinner, even just to the store for half an hour—I don't think she needs to know about it."

He sits down at the table again, hard. "I never thought he would stoop that low," he whispers, shaking his head. "I'll get her out of the house for a little while. Tomorrow." He looks at me, and I nod. "I don't want to keep it a secret from her, but

she doesn't need to know until it's gone."

"Dad." I sit down next to him at the table. "Tell me what you know of him. I want to understand why Mom is so angry at him. I want to know what he did. Part of me is ready to walk away from all of this and let it all go."

"What you know already isn't enough?" he asks, his tone serious.

"I don't really know much. He was a creep. He was a thief—not only in his younger days, but judging by some of the things in the penthouse, he never outgrew that." Florence's warm hands are on my shoulders, and I lean back into her.

"Your mother thinks he killed your Grandma Greta."

The way he words that makes me think. "You don't."

Behind me, Florence squeezes my shoulder. "In the letter, it sounded like an admission."

Dad's eyes glance up to Florence and he nods. "I didn't before, but your girlfriend is right, *mieloji*." A deep sadness crosses his eyes. "There were two kinds of people who lived through the war—those who did horrible things and were at peace with that, and those who weren't."

I feel Florence take a breath behind me to say something, and my dad's eyes look up at her again.

He shakes his head at her. "It's the same with victims. You had people on both sides who did horrible things." He leans back in his chair and squeezes his eyes shut. "My dad fled the war in 1944. The Nazis had taken control, and when the Soviets took back our country, he fled to safety. While that gave him—and me—a much better

life, he always felt like a chicken. He hid under the bed when he was twelve, when the Nazis came and took his parents away."

Florence opens her mouth to say something, but he sits up straighter. "Don't you dare tell me that what he did wasn't horrible. It haunted him every day of his life." He sighs. "Every single person lived through their own version of hell."

Florence starts to pull away from me, but I put my hand over hers to stop her. "Don't you dare pull away from me when I need you."

"I'm just saying," he continues, "I've seen pieces of what the war did to people. I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Your grandfather was on the wrong side of things, but I chose to believe that he had humanity—that maybe what he did during the war haunted him, too."

"Sorry, Mr. Mueller," Tilly jumps in, "but you're wrong on this one." She leans against the wall and casually puts her foot up behind her. "Back to Grandma. Was there actually a reason your wife thought he killed her?"

He shakes his head. "Other than she was a healthy woman in her sixties, and it was unusual that she just died in her sleep like that, no."

"It's not all that unusual, actually," Mel points out. "A lot of seemingly healthy people die of heart attacks or aneurysms in their sleep. If you figure a quarter to a third of our day is spent in bed—"

"Mel." Florence's voice behind me stops her.

"Why does Mom despise him so much?" I ask, letting out a long breath. I've wondered this for so long.

"One of her friends died in an accident when she was a teenager, about the same time your grandpa and his business partner were having differences. It was the business partner's daughter."

Mel reaches for Renna's hand and squeezes it. "You don't ever get over that."

Enough reliving everyone's trauma. This isn't helping. "Do you know anything about the ring that he talks about, Dad? It feels important."

He shakes his head. "No. Your grandfather was a womanizer, though. Your mom has always wondered if she has any half-siblings out there. I never heard anything about a woman from the war. But that—what your grandfather describes in his letter—that kind of thing happened everywhere."

"I assure you it was more traumatic for the woman than it was for him," Tilly says sourly. "Can you imagine if he had managed to track the poor soul down? I'm sure the woman went through enough trauma." Everyone murmurs their agreement.

"Did you ever talk to him after Mom cut him out of our lives?"

He avoids my eyes. "I gave him updates on you the first few years, but I didn't like misleading your mom."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Besides the cameras, he also hacked into my phone and computer to track my purchases. It looks like he just tracked what books I bought, but it's still enough to freak me out."

"I'm with your mom. I'm glad the world is free of him,mieloji."He stands up. "I don't think she needs to know any of this, but I understand if you choose to tell her."

I shake my head. "Maybe I'll change my mind once this is all settled, but I agree with you."

"I'll take Mom out for lunch tomorrow so you can get into the house. I'll text you when we're getting ready."

"What if she doesn't want to go out?" I ask. Mom can get crabby and contradictory sometimes.

"Then I'll tell her we're meeting you and your new girlfriend. Then your mouthy friend can get in the house with Mel." He glances at Tilly, then turns to Mel. "The spare key is in the same place as always."

I walk him out.

When I turn around, Florence is by my side. "Are you okay?" she asks, talking my hand in hers and lacing her fingers with mine.

I nod mutely. I don't know if I am, actually—but I'm not going to lose it with everyone around.



Then Mel is by my side, pulling me into a tight hug. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

I close my eyes and breathe her in. "I'm fine," I say stiffly, pulling away from her. She knows that too much physical contact is hard for me. I reach for Florence's hand again.

"Do you want us to stay?" she asks gently.

"No," I say firmly. "You don't need to. I need to go to the property and go through the things in the safe there. See what's in there, try to make sense of the appraisals and supposed authenticity paperwork. You should go. Enjoy your evening together. You both work too much." It's one of the things Mel complains about all the time. She never has enough time with Renna outside of work.

"Are you sure? We could help."

I look at Renna for help. "I'm serious. It's not something you can help with. Go love on each other."

My smile must be convincing, because she nods. "Call us if you need anything. I don't like the idea of you being alone."

"The threat is gone, Renna. I'm fine."

"Go already, you lovesick fools." Tilly pulls Renna into a long hug. "I'll stay and make sure she's okay," she whispers.

After they've left, Florence stares Tilly down. "You can stay or go, but I'm not leaving her."

She raises an eyebrow. "I doubt it's in your contract to stay, darling. I'm her friend."

Florence releases a long breath. "I'm her friend, too," she says softly. "The contract be damned."

Tilly whistles. "Renna and Mel went out on a limb to save your sorry ass because of that contract."

I glance up at Tilly. "Don't blame her. She didn't ask for that shit." I sink into the couch.

Tilly bites her lip. "You're right. I'm sorry." She plops down on the couch next to me. "I'm worried about you, that's all." She leans against me and puts her head on my shoulder. "I'm allowed that, aren't I?"

I turn and brush her short red bangs out of her eyes. "Yes, you're allowed that. But you're not allowed to be mean to Florence because of it."

"I'm worried about you, too," Florence says, sitting on the other side of me. "Regardless of our relationship status—I'm worried about you, too," she repeats, squeezing my fingers.

Tilly leans forward and looks at her. "You don't have a relationship status."

"Yes, she does." I lean against the back of the couch, sighing in defeat. "It's complicated, but there's something." I elbow Tilly. "Are you jealous?"

I'm surprised when she lets out a long breath. "Not like that, no. But I lost Renna, and now I feel like I'm losing you, too."

"Nope." I shake my head. "Renna has room for you and Mel. I have room for both of you, too. For all of you."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Good." She jumps up from the couch. "Are we going to the penthouse to see what's in the safe?"

"It's just some papers." I laugh. "You're welcome to come, but you might have more fun doing something else."

"I have a fun night at home planned with my vibrator, Josie. It won't mind if I'm late."

"Did you get the new one last week?" I ask. She was telling me how excited she was to try a new one she'd ordered.

She grins. "You have no idea. Maybe I'll get you your own as a celebration gift when this nightmare is over." Winking, she glances over at Florence. "We'll talk about it again when Miss Prim-and-Proper isn't around."

"Miss Prim-and-Proper has been single most of her adult life," Florence says wryly. "I'll bet you a quarter million that my collection is better than yours."

"Who gets to be the judge of this contest of yours?" she teases. "Josie hasn't seen my collection, but she's heard enough about it." She sighs softly. "I don't have money for a high-stakes gamble like that. Besides, if you're bragging about it, you probably have all the expensive stuff. You've got the cash for it."

I give Tilly a hard look. "You've got one more year. You're almost there."

"You're missing the point," she laughs. "I'm satisfied, trust me. I just can't compete with what she has. I'm not trying to compete with her."

Florence

I climb into Tilly's old beat-up Toyota. She and Josie decided I would ride with Tilly to the penthouse, although I haven't exactly puzzled out why.

"Don't judge my twenty-year-old Camry. Some of us don't come from money," she says, shifting into reverse and peeling out of the parking lot before I have the chance to put my seatbelt on.

"Maybe don't judge me, either," I snap. We had enough when I was growing up, but we certainly didn't have everything handed to us. "I've worked hard for what I have." My brothers and sisters and I all have. Well, Hettie married money, but she's successful in her own right.

"Yeah," she mutters.

I realize it must be hard for her, being in her final year of residency and barely making ends meet. Fifteen years of education is a long time. "You'll be official in less than a year, right?"

"In August." She's quiet, her eyes focused on the road.

"You know," I muse, "if this is about toys, I could probably spot you enough to improve your collection." I'm not sure what makes me offer, but I get the feeling that Tilly is lonely—and hypersexual.

She snorts. "I keep myself satisfied, Florence, trust me. But it's nice of you to offer." She chuckles low in her throat. "I'd say you should offer that to Josie, but she's not that into toys."

"Oh?" I'm curious how she knows this. "You know this from experience?"

She pulls into the parking lot behind Vanderveen Tower and turns to me, grinning. "Are you jealous?"

Her phone buzzes, and her eyes light up in amusement at whatever she sees. "Josie's here, too. Over there." She nods toward Josie, a few cars down.

"The penthouse is in the Tower?" I ask in surprise.

"Apparently, there was beef between Josie's grandpa and the Vanderveens, way back. They're the ones who get his fortune if Josie doesn't come up with the money."

I frown. I don't remember Hettie ever mentioning anything about this. Her father-in-law and her husband own the place. I'll have to ask her about it one of these days.

Josie joins us as we head into a door on the side of the building. "There's a separate entrance for the penthouse. You can get to it from the fifty-fourth floor from the main entrance, but almost no one ever goes that way. I think the Vanderveens have forgotten the penthouse even exists."

I raise an eyebrow. Maybe I shouldn't ask Hettie about it, then. "Maybe then you won't need to come up with the money."

She hits the elevator button before she shakes her head. "No. The lawyer said that doesn't matter. If I don't settle the estate before the ten months is up, their lawyer will be notified. But until then, they might not even know."

"But if they're watching for it, they would see his obituary," I point out.

Tilly rolls her eyes. "I think after thirty years, they've probably given up on the guy."

Not to mention, his name isn't that uncommon. Even if they had a search alert set, they'd have to sort through too much to make sense of it."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"It's not a secret, though. My brother mentioned it Wednesday at dinner." I hadn't realized at the time Joe was talking about Josie's grandfather.

Josie looks at me. "I forgot you had a brother. What did he hear?"

"A brother and two sisters. We all get together for dinner at Mom and Dad's on Wednesdays—everyone but Catalina, anyway. She's the one who called the other morning—she's in Italy. You should come sometime. They want to meet you."

The elevator stops, and Josie motions for me and Tilly to exit first. "I'm not going to ask how your parents know about me. What did your brother hear?" she repeats.

I shrug my shoulders. "I told you he's a coin collector, right?" I sigh. "Apparently, your grandfather was well-known in numismatic circles. He's shown some of his private collection to some of the more exclusive members of the community. They're all very interested in finding out what will happen to his coins."

She unlocks the door and pushes it open. Tilly waltzes right in, and I follow her.

I look around in amazement. The place is like a museum. Paintings, sculptures, a wall full of books. But beyond all the priceless stuff in here is an entire wall of glass—a window looking out over the shimmering lake. I've always had an affinity for the water.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Josie says softly. I walk toward the window. She follows me, circling her arms around my waist from behind, and puts her chin on my shoulder. "I think I could stay here and stare out at the water all day."

I turn my head to meet her eyes. "We could, you know."

She closes her eyes, her cheek nuzzling my neck. "Florence, don't tempt me right now," she breathes into my skin. She brushes her lips against the soft skin at the nape of my neck before letting go of me.

"All right, break up the love fest." Tilly clears her throat loudly. "You can do that when you get home later." More quietly, she adds, "God knows you both need it."

"Tilly..." Josie warns.

"The safe is upstairs, right?" she interrupts, turning around and heading up the stairs.

Somehow the view of the lake is even more mesmerizing from the landing on the second floor.

"It's in the little room at the end of the corridor." Josie says, following Tilly into the last room.

I peek into the doors as I pass by them. A small room has coins mounted on the wall and drawers upon glass drawers of trays full of coins. There must be hundreds in here, maybe thousands.

I peek into the next room and it's the same with sports cards and stamps. In the last room, Tilly and Josie already have a painting taken down off the wall and the safe opened. Around them are shelves of books, many of them enclosed in glass, and piles and piles of papers.

"Absolutely not. No way," Tilly says vehemently.

Josie looks up as I come into the room. "Pretty cool, isn't it?" She glares at Tilly.



"This conversation isn't over." She takes out another pile of papers and puts it on a small desk in the corner of the room. "I think I've figured out some of his rhyme and reason, at least behind the books. He'd pick up fifty or a hundred new releases every year—going back to the late forties. Then he'd sell them ten or twenty years later if they didn't pan out."

"How do you know that?" I ask curiously.

She shrugs. "He has receipts, filed by decade. He kept meticulous records."

"That's a good thing, right?" I ask. If he was good at keeping records, that should erase doubt about a lot of his valuables.

"In theory," she says. "In reality, I've found receipts and records for most of the books, stamps, and baseball cards. Some of the coins have Certificates of Authenticity, but a lot of them don't. That doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it opens up the possibility that they're stolen property."

"That doesn't mean that he's the one who stole them," Tilly says. "He could have bought them from someone else who did."

"Even if that were the case," I argue, "it would still be stolen property. There was so much looted during the war." Even Nonna's place was looted when she was a kid. I guess seventeen wasn't a kid back then, but to me—

"It's impossible to track all of that down," Josie murmurs. "My grandfather spent eight decades trying to track someone down to no avail."

"Whoever it was is gone by now." Tilly sighs. "In theory, we might be able to find the families of some of them, but that would be a lot of work."

I come up behind Josie. "You said the Auction House won't work with you?"

She leans back into me, settling against my body. "For the coins. They still don't know about that one coin, but there are a bunch of others that are raising red flags."

"What would you think about my brother coming to look at some of the collection? If he came with one or two of his buddies, they might be willing to make you an offer and buy directly from you. It might get you closer to your goal."

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"It's an idea."

"Josie?" Tilly's voice pulls me out of my Josie-bubble. "You realize what's happening, right?"

Josie shakes her head. "What are you talking about? What's happening?"

Tilly snorts. "She's wheedling her way into your heart."

Josie shakes her head. "No, it's not like that. She's just a friend, Till. The rest is for show."

Tilly smirks. "A friend you want to touch constantly."

Josie shakes her head. "We're all touchy-feely, Till. You are, too."

She raises an eyebrow. "But you don't fuckmeon the kitchen table."

I step away from Josie, stung. "It was the dining room table," I tell Tilly hotly. I look at Josie, who looks as surprised as I am at Tilly's snide comment. I need to get out of here.

I can't breathe.

"I'll be downstairs when you're ready to go."

I spend a long time staring out the window, watching the sun sparkling on the water. I

don't understand how all my thoughts revolve around this woman I met less than two months ago. Yes, I need her for appearances, and I agreed to spend time with her because that's what she wanted. But I never thought she would find her way into my heart.

I was with Katie almost four years before she decided to look for greener pastures. It took me less than a week to get over her—to realize I was happier without her constant need for more of me.

Is that what I'm doing to Josie? She doesn't even want to spend the time with me that she's entitled to. I slump against the window. Maybe I need to stop spending time with her. The rumors about Woodhouse have stopped, so there's not much need for us to be seen together in public—at least not for a while. It hurts to think about giving up our time together.

"She's all yours, darling." Tilly's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. "I'm going to get out of here."

I can feel her eyes on my back. I don't turn around.

Her breath is suddenly against my neck, in my ear. "Try the bed next time."

I yank my head away from her. "There won't be a next time."

"Well, don't be like that. A beautiful woman, warm and pliable under those long fingers of yours..."

At least she has the decency to step out of my personal space.

I wipe the tear from my cheek before I twirl around. "Don't talk about her like that." I take a step into her space. "She's a person who deserves your respect. She's not a

piece of meat."

Tilly raises an eyebrow. "You can respect a woman and still worship her body."

I turn back to the window, hiding my face. "Be safe on your way home." I try to swallow back the lump in my throat.

Yes, you can still worship her body.

She's quiet for a minute. "Hey. I didn't mean to upset you."

I half shrug. I noticed Josie pulling away from me before Tilly started joking about it. "She doesn't do feelings. I get it." I wish Tilly would go already.

"Florence." When I don't answer, she puts a hand on my back, stepping next to me. "She's going through enough shit with all this stuff, with her grandpa being a creepy pervert, all of it. She needs all of us right now, especially you."

"Well," Josie's voice comes from the stairs, "I certainly didn't expect to come down and find the two of you in a compromising position."

"I think," Tilly quips, looking up at her friend without missing a beat, "that your idea of a compromising position is different from mine." She leans closer to me to whisper in my ear. "Keep working that CEO charm on her, Boss. It's working." Laughing, she kisses my cheek before turning to Josie. "Jealous?"

I hear murmured conversation behind me, but I keep my eyes on the water in the distance. Tilly leaves quietly, and Josie comes up behind me.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

She puts a hand on my back. "Can I hold you?"

I shake her hand off me. "Did you find what you were looking for?" I ask through the knot in my throat.

She steps next to me, her eyes on the distant view. "Appraisals for most of the art, all of the gems, sports cards, books. For some of the coins, but nowhere near what you'd expect, given the size of his collection upstairs. By my estimate, he's got nearly a thousand coins up there. You saw—there are drawers and drawers of them upstairs."

"Maybe they aren't that valuable," I offer. "If they're not worth much—not to say they aren't worth much, but relative to the other things he has—it's possible he never bothered with getting them appraised."

"Most of them are from Europe, and everything that I've looked at is really old, medieval or older. There's quite a few from before the war, too—early 1900s. It's more likely that they were looted. It's pretty obvious he did that a lot."

"How do you figure?"

"His letter felt almost like a confession to me, more than anything. His search for that girl feels like his way of trying to make things right."

"You can never make things right, not the pain and suffering men like him caused," I say sourly. I've heard some of Nonna's stories, things that have haunted her for the last eighty years—things that will haunt her until the day she dies.

She leans into me, her shoulder warm against mine. "I didn't mean it that way, Florence. I wonder if it was his attempt at atonement, though." She sighs. "We all do things we regret. We can't undo or unsay things, but we can try to mitigate the damage."

"It's not the same."

"No, it's not," she says quietly. "But if we can take a tiny fraction of pain away from someone by atoning for our sins..."

"It's self-serving."

She nods, silent for a long minute. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask." That doesn't mean I'll answer.

"What did Tilly say that upset you?"

I stiffen. "She's rude. And crass."

"Underneath that, she's a sweetheart when you get to know her," she says, defending her friend.

I simply nod. I've seen signs of it, even in the few times I've met her.

She steps away from me and studies me. "Are you jealous of her? You know I'm not sleeping with her."

Am I? "No, I'm not jealous of her," I scoff lightly. "And I told you at the beginning that if you hook up with anyone, it's fine—as long as you're discreet about it."

"Florence, look at me." She waits for me to comply. "I love Tilly as a friend. I'm not fucking her. I only want you."

But she's not interested in a relationship.

"But I know how hard it is to have feelings for someone who doesn't feel the same way. I should refrain from even touching you." She sighs. "It's still hard when Mel touches me. When I hug her, I have to stop myself from inhaling her."

Of course. Everything is about Mel.

"I don't want to hurt you. I care about you." When I don't respond, she releases a long breath. "Tell me what you want me to do."

The corner of my mouth tugs up. "I want you to take me to bed and kiss me all over, all night long." I could go on, but I don't think that's what she's asking for. "I'm afraid you'll get bored with me—or worse, that you'll do something you don't want to, just to appease me. Do what you're comfortable with."

"I promise I won't do anything I don't want to." She cups my face. "So can I kiss you?"

I lean into her, brushing my lips against hers. "You can do whatever you want," I murmur against hers.

She pulls back, closing her eyes with a sigh. "Not here."



Florence

"Are you going to stay?" she asks as we pull into the parking lot.

"I told Tilly I would, at least for tonight." I still can't believe she didn't tell Mel about the cameras. "I'll go if you want me to. I'll sleep in the guest room if you want. But I don't think you should be alone."

"Then come in," she grins, hopping out of the car. "You said your brother works with coins, right?"

"Collects them," I correct her. "But he's serious about it. He knows most of the big collectors in the area. He's not an expert, per se, but he's not far from it. You're thinking of having him look at your grandfather's collection."

"Seeing as the Auction House doesn't want to touch any of the coins, I have limited options with them. It sounds like he's already interested. Maybe he or some other local collectors would be interested," she says thoughtfully, dropping her purse on the counter. "You want a drink?"

"A Modelo, if you don't mind," I tell her. "I can understand the Auction House having reservations about that one coin—the one that belongs to the government, but the others? Even the older coins are common enough that it would be impossible to trace them back to their original owners."

She sticks her head in the fridge and passes me a beer. "On an individual basis, that's true." She sits down on the couch and motions for me to join her. "But when the coin

guy—numismatist, is that the right word?—he said that the sheer volume of coins, the different collections he has, it's obvious they were stolen. He even told me outright that all of them would be worth a lot more if they came from another collector. My grandfather was apparently well-known for his sins."

"So, in theory, if you try to sell one of them to the auction house, or through the auction house, you would fetch far less for it than if, for example, my brother or one of his friends were selling it." That's interesting. It could be a quick way to turn around some money. I know Joe has some investments in place for the kids' college funds, but this could be an excellent opportunity for him to grow those nest eggs.

Nodding, she stretches across the couch and puts her feet in my lap. "I don't know how many of your brother's friends have money for their collecting, but it could be a good investment."

I wonder what she wants me to do with her feet in my lap. I idly take her foot in my hand, sliding my hand up the inside of her pant leg. Her skin is soft and warm.

She inhales sharply. "Florence, you're making me wet." Her breath quickens. She doesn't pull away from me, though.

"Do you want me to stop?" I meet her gaze innocently. Pushing up her pant leg, I brush my lips across her bare skin.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. "I shouldn't. We shouldn't," she says softly.

I kiss her leg one more time before I put her foot back in my lap. I'll respect her wishes, if that's what she chooses. "Tell me why, Josie." She obviously wants me as much as I want her.

"I don't want to hurt you. We've been through this."

I inhale slowly. "Did it ever occur to you," I say firmly, "that me and you—we aren't you and Mel. This isn't the same thing." I swear under my breath. "Sometimes I wish you would forget about her."

"That's not fair." She frowns, pulling her feet off my lap.

"I know," I admit guiltily. "But it's me being honest. Being jealous, I guess." I take a swig of my beer and stand up.

"Jealous why? You have me." She swallows thickly. "I never had her—not like that."

I shake my head. "I'm borrowing you for the term of our contract. In exchange, I spend platonic time with you so you aren't as lonely without her."

She opens her mouth, but no words come out.

Wasn't I the fool, thinking she might fall in love with me, thinking she'd be the lucky one if I let her into my bed. And the whole damn time, here I am falling for her.

"Florence," she implores me. "You're more than that now. You know that."

I sigh, resigned. "Right. I'm your ticket to selling your grandpa's stuff. I'll talk to my brother about the coins." I grab my jacket. "I'll let you know when a good time would be." "I know her schedule well enough." "If he and his friends don't net enough for you, I'll cover the difference."

She opens her mouth to protest.

"Don't argue with me, Josie. We'll find something in the right price range and I'll buy

it. Legit and aboveboard."

"I'll figure something else out." Watching me, she bites her lip. "Are you really leaving? I thought you were going to stay with me again tonight."

"Do you need me to?" I ask.

Her shoulders drop, and she shakes her head. "No. It's okay. You've been here the last two nights. You probably want to go home. Marin is probably bored without you."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I don't mind being here for you, you know," I say, softening my tone. "Marin's not at my place. I gave her the weekend off."

Her eyebrows pop up in surprise. "You can't do that, Florence. She needs her paycheck as much as the rest of us do!"

I chuckle. "She's getting paid, Josie. I expect her to stay sober during the times she normally works, on the off-chance I really need her for something. I used to feel guilty calling her after I gave her an evening off, but now I do it every great once in a while. It makes her feel more like she's earning her paycheck."

She steps into my personal space. "I'm sorry I talk about her all the time. I wish I could stop thinking about her."

"I know." I pull her into a hug. "It's just too much for me right now," I whisper into her ear. I pull away from her. "I'll let you know when my brother can come look at the coins."

28

Josie

"No, I haven't decided what to do about it yet," I tell Tilly.

"Knock knock," Florence pokes her head in the door. "I brought Mr. Money Bags and two of his friends."

"Don't promise her anything, Florence," her brother says. The resemblance is remarkable. "We need to see what he has."

"Whatshehas," she corrects her brother. "The coins don't belong to him anymore. He's dead."

I greet her brother. "I'm Josie. You must be Joe."

"Delighted." He gives me a huge grin. "So you're the mystery woman Florence has been hiding."

I laugh. "I'm not sure she was hiding me, but yes. That would be me."

"My kids told me it's all over the internet that you're getting married." He eyes me with curiosity.

"Not yet, bro." Florence puts a stop to that. "I explained all that to you. Leave it alone. Introduce your friends. I haven't met them yet."

"Cole Robbins." Joe motions toward the taller blonde man in the nice suit, then motions toward the younger Hispanic man. "Keenan Acevedo. My sister Florence, and her girlfriend Josie. Josie is Karl Schneider's granddaughter. She inherited his coin collection."

"I'm sure Joe already mentioned this already, but I want to be upfront with you." I reach out to give each of the gentlemen a firm handshake. "A portion of my grandfather's coin collection—we think—was looted during the war. None of it is traceable, to my understanding. The Auction House is working with me on some other items, but they're not interested in dealing with the coins. Not with me, at any rate."

Joe nods. "I already explained that. They're aware of the situation."

Cole butts in. "That, and we all knew your grandfather. The man was a right old bastard. He would swindle anyone out of a quarter if he could." He frowns. "No offense, Miss. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." I laugh, strangely glad to hear him confirm my suspicions. "But I hadn't seen him for thirty years. I didn't even know he was still alive until the lawyer sent me his will."

"That's a pleasant windfall to drop into your lap," the other man—Keenan—chuckles.

"Nah." I shake my head. "It's been a huge pain. There's a judgment against the property and I need to come up with a quarter million to claim the rest of it."

Joe looks at Florence. "You didn't tell me that part, sis."

"She doesn't want my money to bail her out." We don't need to add the potential complications of our contract. "She'd rather legit sell some of it."

He nods. "While I understand the Auction House not wanting to touch his coins—his looting and history was not a secret—that stain won't follow the items once they're in someone else's hands."

"Even assuming we give you twice what the Auction House would have, as soon as we sign the sale," Keenan adds, "the value will be twice again as much."

"Win-win for all of us, then." I smile. "He has a special room for the coins. Follow me."

Upstairs, I usher them into the coin room. Cole steps behind me, studying the five

coins on the wall encased in their own frames."Holy fuckeroni.That's a real NGC-rated 1943-D Lincoln Copper Penny."

I nod. "He has the papers for this one. It was appraised a few years ago for a million and a half."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I don't have anywhere near that kind of cash." He laughs. "They won't work with you at all with his collection? They could make so much handling all this for you. Even if they only worked with the pieces that have a paper trail."

I shake my head. "Not with the coins. The other things, yes. But their process is slow, and I've only got about seven months left to come up with the cash or I lose the whole estate."

Joe comes up on my other side. "He had such an incredible collection," he says reverently. He sounds like a kid in a candy store. "What's in the drawers? Can we see?"

Florence comes up behind us, putting one arm around each of our shoulders. "Gloves, Joe. Same for your friends. Don't forget your manners, Guiseppe." She smacks him on the back of his head.

"Leave your feisty side for your girlfriend—when the rest of us are gone," he teases, pulling a pair of gloves out of his pocket.

I raise an eyebrow at Florence before I turn back to Joe. "Each drawer has separate collections, I think. From what I can tell, many are Greek and Roman. The Greek ones look older than the rest." I motion to Joe to open a drawer.

The other two men gather next to him, and I step back. "I don't care where these came from," Cole breathes, "this is incredible. Look! He has three gold Constantine Solidi. Basil the Second. Justinian the Second." He looks up at me. "This is only one drawer."

"A fraction," Keenan corrects him. "There has to be a hundred grand sitting right here."

"Two, at least," Cole says authoritatively.

The corner of my mouth curls up. "I'll sell it to you. The whole drawer for a hundred."

"Let me see what else you have before I agree to anything, Miss."

There are three shallow glass drawers across the span of the built-in system, and ten deep. They open each drawer, telling each other what they know of the contents. A set of Greek coins from before the Roman Empire when the Greeks were in southern Italy. Gold and silver from the Roman Empire itself. Medieval coins from France and Italy. There's no way anyone could track any of this stuff, whether it was stolen property or not.

"You've got quite the collection here, Miss Mueller," Joe says, his voice full of awe.

"It's Doctor to you," Florence tells him.

"Doctor." He nods thoughtfully. "I'd like to bring in Laurie Trujillo to look at the medieval coins, and Jed Webb is an expert in the older Greek and Roman coins."

"Anyone you think might be interested." I smile. I don't really care about getting their real value, as long as I get enough to cover the judgment. I need to think about what to do with all his money, because the more I find out about him, the less I want it. But I don't know the Vanderveens—they may be as bad or worse than my grandfather.

"I know a few people who might be interested in some of the Lincoln pennies—the ones struck on nickel and dime planchets. Not locally, but nationally. Maybe not

inside your timeframe, but in the future." Cole clears his throat. "I'd like to make an offer on the Byzantine collection."

Florence puts her arm around my waist supportively.

"I'm listening," I say seriously, holding back a smile.

"The collection as it stands—this drawer," he points to the first one we opened, nearly an hour ago. "I'll give you a hundred grand. It's probably worth twice that, if you know the numismatic community and are willing to wait for the right buyer." He pauses for me to digest that. "I'd also be happy to work with you to get the best value for your collection in the future—once the judgment is finished and you aren't on a rushed timeframe."

Joe raises an eyebrow at Cole. "You'd be happy to do that, would you?" He turns to Florence. "It's a crap deal. You could get twice that with the right buyer." He looks at me. "He's trying to take advantage of your situation."

Cole laughs. "Chill, Joe. She scratches my back, I'll scratch hers. We both win. I'll take less than the Auction House or another big company would." He turns back to me. "We can talk about that once you get the estate settled. I'd be happy to help you out, though."

"I'll take the offer for the drawer. We can talk about the other after things are settled with the estate."

Keenan clears his throat. "This drawer," he points to the third on the left, "the medieval Italian coins—I'll give you a hundred grand for it. Like Cole said, it's probably worth about twice that if you take the time and resources to find the right buyers—"

"Without getting a grade on each of them, I'd put it closer to one-fifty," Cole jumps in.

"Offer stands," Keenan says. "That will get you close to what you need."

"I accept that as well." I nod happily.

"I'll have Hettie draw up the legal purchase agreements," Florence jumps in. Thank goodness, because I have no idea how this would all work. "Can you make a list of the coins in each of those collections, please?" She looks at her brother.

He nods, his eye still on a gold coin on the wall.

"What are you going to buy?" she asks him.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

He throws his hands up in the air and chuckles. "I'm not committing to anything without talking to the wife."

"You're smarter than I give you credit for." She winks at him. "Although if I were married to your wife, I'd probably feel the same way."

He looks up at one of the gold coins on the wall. It's marked as "Gold Aureus of Julius Caesar (44 BCE)." I remember seeing the appraisal for this one. It's worth over a million dollars.

"Joe, that is so far out of your price range. Feet back on the ground, buddy." This comes from Cole.

He nods. "I know. Still, it's amazing to think of the history this piece of metal has witnessed."

Florence puts her hand on her brother's arm. "It doesn't have eyes. It's probably been in pockets and hidden in trunks for the last two thousand years. It hasn't seen anything."

29

Josie

I hand Florence a beer as soon as we get home. "Sit. Relax." I park myself next to her. "Would you rather be at your house with Marin?"

She squints at me. "No? Why do you ask that?"

I pull my leg up under me and turn toward her. "I don't know. I imagine it's nice to have someone around to do everything for you."

She shrugs. "I'm busy enough with work that she makes my life easier. Mostly she alleviates the stress of doing all the little things."

"Like making you dinner and doing your laundry?" I tease.

She elbows me. "Yes—and picking up the dry cleaning, going shopping, making phone calls and appointments, keeping track of things like my lawyers, specialists like my brother's numismatist, my nieces' school things, all that stuff."

"I wouldn't trust anyone to do all that for me."

"You have to find someone you trust, but it's well worth it—for me, at least. I could do all of it—but it really takes the stress off me." Her eyes light up and a smile spreads across her face. "Hell, she walked in on us making out in the closet, turned around, and never mentioned it again. She's walked in on me getting myself off, too." She laughs.

"I would die of mortification." I feel my face heat up in embarrassment.

"You know, assuming you get everything figured out with the estate on time, you'll probably need to hire someone to deal with all this stuff. Have you thought about what you're going to do with all of it?"

"A little." I groan softly. "I want to figure out a way to donate it to the types of people—well, their families—that he stole from. It's impossible to trace individual pieces, but there has to be something..." I trail off, thinking. "I want to get rid of it

all, except maybe a few pieces." I haven't ruled out the idea of having kids, and planning for the future—with or without kids—is my main priority.

"Why don't you just let it all go, then? Just let the time pass and pretend like none of this happened."

I raise an eyebrow and look at her incredulously. "A quarter billion in other assets, the penthouse is worth almost thirty million, and the other stuff is worth—" I shake my head in amazement. "A billion, on the low end." I look down at my hands. "I feel like I owe it to the world to try to balance the horrible things he did and use his money for good."

"You can never counter the horrible things that happened, Josie. Don't put that on yourself." She scoots next to me and leans against me, her body soft and warm.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. "I don't. But I'm also being given the resources to make a difference. I have to think about it, though. I need to focus on getting that money so his dirty fortune doesn't go to the Vanderveens. I don't know them at all, but I'd guess they're money-hungry and would grab at the opportunity if they knew about it."

"The Vanderveens aren't bad people. They're obsessed with money in an unhealthy way, but they aren't evil or anything."

"Do you know them?"

"Father and son own the Tower. I assume that's who the estate would revert to, if you don't claim it. Landon Senior and Landon Junior. I've met Senior once. Junior a few times."

"How do you know them?" It seems unlikely that they grew up in the same circles.

I've gotten the impression her family was lower-middle class when she was growing up. She and all her siblings have worked hard to get to where they are now.

"My sister Hettie married Junior. She's also my personal lawyer. She'll take care of the contracts for the coin purchases."

"Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest for her?" I frown.

"Not if she doesn't know. Honestly, even if she did know, it wouldn't be. They have a prenup, so she doesn't have any rights to his properties. I don't think she's ever heard about the penthouse in the Tower."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Why do you say that?"

Florence shrugs. "Last week at dinner, Joe brought up that Karl Schneider died, and everyone was wondering what would happen to his coins. She didn't blink."

That's interesting. "Aren't you going to tell her, though?"

"I don't know why it would be relevant. Even if she knew, she doesn't care that much about his assets. She rarely sees him unless he needs a pretty woman on his arm."

I raise an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like a healthy marriage."

She laughs. "It works for them. They're both bi, and they have a very open marriage. As long as they're discreet about otherpartners and it stays off the internet," she raises an eyebrow at me knowingly, "they're both happy."

That's such a weird concept to me. I can't imagine sharing my partner with others—not if we've made a commitment to each other.

Although, to be fair, I guess I was sharing Ruby with her husband and with Nora.

"About him being bi, that's not public knowledge," Florence says, interrupting my thoughts.

"His secret's safe with me." I wave a dismissive hand through the air and sigh. "Does this change things?"

"Nah." She shakes her head. "Hettie wouldn't see it as a problem. Don't worry about it." She laces her fingers with mine. "It's been a rough week. How are you doing?"

I purse my lips together and sigh. "I'm exhausted. I think the shock of what he did is wearing off. Now I'm just fucking mad about it." I lean my head against her shoulder. "Can I just sleep on you for the night? You're comfortable." I sigh contentedly.

"I can stay the night if you want me to hold you while you sleep."

I look up into her eyes. "You'd have to get up early to go home and get dressed."

She chuckles, a rumble against me. "I have a locker with work clothes at the hospital. If I shower here, I can change there."

"So that means you'll stay?" I murmur against her.

"For you," she whispers, pressing her lips to my temple. "It's too early to go to bed. Do you want to take a bath and I'll make dinner?"

I bite my lip, sleepily gazing into her face. "You know how to cook?" I ask, surprised.

"I grew up in a big Italian family. Of course I know how to cook. Italian, anyway."

That makes me smile. "I don't even know what's in the fridge. I haven't had time to go shopping at all this week, with everything happening with the penthouse. It would probably be easier to order out."

"See, you need Marin, too. You should get an assistant once the estate is settled. You'll be able to afford someone. I can make some recommendations."

I snort. "No, Florence. I'm not going to get an assistant. I might get someone to help

deal with Opa's things, but no—not for me." I wouldn't even consider it.

She stands up, leaving my left side cold. "I'm going to draw you a hot bath. What are you in the mood for, for dinner?"

"You," I deadpan.

"You should eat something with calories first," she replies without missing a beat.

"Surprise me." Standing up, I pull her close to me, searching her eyes. I want to kiss her. "Do you know how much I want you right now?" I whisper, my lips a hair from hers.

She erases the distance between us, her lips soft on mine. Her hands grip my head, tangled in my hair, as she inhales my quickening breath. "Stop me, Josie," she says softly against my lips.

I close my eyes and put the smallest space between our lips, leaning my forehead against hers. "Talk to me." I pull back and rub my thumb across her cheek.

She raises an eyebrow. "You need to eat first. We can order, I can go out and pick something up, or I can have Marin get it. She would probably be happy to do something for me this weekend."

"Maybe she's on a date and she's getting laid right now. You don't want to interrupt that." I fight back tired laughter.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"She's not seeing anyone right now. She broke up with the person she was seeing a few weeks ago, and she's taking a break for now."

"She tells you all this?" I ask curiously.

"Enough of it, yes. I'd say we're sort of friends. We talk to each other about things." She shrugs.

"What does she say about me?"

Florence's face drops. "She doesn't."

"What does she think about me?" I press.

She shakes her head. "She thinks you're out to get my money, and I'm going to get hurt."

"I'm not out for your money. You know that," I argue. Is that what all of Marin's hostility toward me has been about?

"No, but I am going to get hurt," she says softly.

"Maybe. But maybe you won't. That's how life works, sweetie."

She looks up at the ceiling. "I know." She wraps her arms around my waist and pulls me closer. "But I also know I've never felt like this with anyone else before. Not even when I was with Katie. She never made my heart pound like you do."

"So how do I deal with your shadow who dislikes me so much?" I ask seriously. I don't like being on someone's bad side, especially when I didn't do anything to earn it.

"She's coming around. I think she needs to get used to the idea of sharing me again, too. It's been almost five years since Katie left, and Marin's been there for me through all of it."

Pausing, I frown. "Does she take care of your other needs for you, too?" It never occurred to me that she might—

Florence cups my face in her hands. "No." She sighs. "She offered, after Katie left, but no. Never mind the legality of that, I would never put her in that position."

I nod, satisfied. "I wondered for a minute if she was jealous."

She frowns at that thoughtfully. "I don't think so. I doubt it." She chews on her lip for a moment. "She's never shown an interest in women, at least not to me."

"Let's address food right now," I tease her, "because I really want to go to bed."

30

Josie

"You spoil me," I tell Florence as she cleans up the table an hour later.

"No." She looks at me with a long sigh. "I'm taking care of you because you've had a hard day. A hard week. It's what people who—" She stops herself. "—people who care about each other do."

It's been a long time since someone took care of me when I needed it. It's been a long

time since I've needed anyone.

I close my eyes, swallowing hard. It's hard for me to wrap my head around all these feelings. I never felt like this for Mel.

I stand up, coming up behind her at the sink. I lean my chin over her shoulder, wrapping my arms around her and nuzzling the side of her neck. "Will you sleep by me tonight?"

She stiffens in my arms.

Oh.

I let go of her, stepping back and letting out a long breath.

"I— I'm sorry." I swallow back the burning in my throat. "I'm sorry." I thought she wanted...

She turns around and looks at me for a long minute. "Josie." My name on her lips is just a soft breath. "I don't want..." She purses her lips together and sighs. "I don't want you to be thinking of her while you're with me."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Did you hear me earlier? I want you."

She shakes her head, her breath shallow. "You want her, and you're using me as a substitute. And my heart is getting in too deep."

"I want you, Florence." I realize how true the words are as soon as they're out of my mouth. I want her—not Mel. "I don't know where that leaves us. I can't make promises. But I want you." I take a step toward her. She closes the gap between us, taking my face in her hands.

"Are you sure?" she asks. I lean into her, my lips an inch away from hers.

"One hundred percent."

Just being this close to her takes my breath away.

"You need to rest." She presses her lips against mine.

"I can rest later," I murmur against her lips. "Please." My voice is raw.

"Okay," she laughs softly, pushing me toward the bedroom. "Will you let me touch you?"

The idea of her hands and her mouth on my body makes my pulse race. "Yes, but I'm going to come undone the moment you do," I breathe softly, pushing her onto the bed. I tug at the hem of her shirt. "Can I..."

As she pulls her top off, I realize I haven't really seen her yet. When I fucked her on the dining room table, all I had was her neck.

I want all of her tonight.

"Naked." I tug at her slacks.

She slips out of them, leaving her on my bed in all her beautiful glory. "You, too." She pulls my shirt over my head, then pulls my bottoms off. She stops, her eyes raking across my bare skin. "Can I touch you?"

I swallow, my heart in my throat, as I trace a fingertip across her collarbone. "I want to make love to you first." I push her down on the bed, straddling her. I can feel the heat of her between my legs. "I—" I close my eyes, trying to catch my breath. "I'll fuck you again later, but..."

I lean forward, my bare breasts against hers, and kiss her. Just her breath, her lips on mine, sends heat to my core.

She wraps her legs around me, pulling me down on top of her. Her breath speeds up, and I close my eyes.

"I'm too big to be on you," I whisper against her mouth.

Wrapping her arms around me, her fingernails rake up my spine, and I feel myself tighten. "God, I'm going to come if you do that." I pull her hands off me, holding her wrists down on the bed. "Just wait, okay?"

She chuckles. "I thought that was the point, but okay. You just want me to lay here then?"



"Yes," I breathe.

She gives me an amused look. "Okay. Tell me when I can participate."

"Not until you come for me first." I tilt her chin up, my lips finding the pulse point at the hollow of her throat.

She swallows.

I move to taste her Adam's apple.

"There are other parts of my body that are more sensitive," she says, her voice throaty.

"I'll get to them. I promise." My mouth finds her neckline first, and I inhale the scent of her soft skin. Familiar territory, but I don't know if I'll ever tire of it.

My teeth find her collarbone, and I nip gently across her chest. Her skin is so soft. She's so beautiful she takes my breath away.

She moans softly under my kisses. She tries to wrap her legs around me again, but I shake my head, straddling her leg. Grinding into her.

"Josie." She's desperate, grabbing fistfuls of the sheets beneath her. "Please."

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I look into her eyes, bringing my lips to hers. "I promise," I tell her softly, "I will get you there. Try to enjoy the journey, okay?"

She groans. "I'm not used to this."

I cup her cheek. "Have you ever felt like this about anyone before?"

She shakes her head.

"For once in your life, quit worrying about efficiency," I tease her. "Turn over."

She looks at me curiously before rolling onto her stomach.

I straddle her lower back, leaning over and brushing my lips over the back of her neck. Her shoulders. Down her spine. Every inch of her.

I lose myself in the taste of her skin, in the scent of her, the feel of her against my lips.

I lose control, coming hard against her.

Fuck.

I kiss her back, lower, down to her perfect ass. I nip at the fleshy part of her cheeks. Her squirming turns to moans. Louder now.

"Josie. Please." Desperation. "I don't know how much more I can..."

"Turn over," I say hoarsely. When she does, her hand comes up to cup her own breast, rolling her nipple as she lets out a needy moan.

I pull her hand away. "Mine." I climb up to kiss her. Her eyes are glazed over. "Not yet," I tell her. I take both her breasts in my hands, their weight perfect. "You're beautiful, Florence." So beautiful. My lips wrap around her nipple.

Her hands tangle in my hair, holding me to her as she moans, pressing her body into me.

I could stay here all day.

I circle her nipple with my tongue, scrape it with my teeth, suck her. Her entire body comes off the bed as she cries out. She's so close already.

I want to see her eyes when she comes for me. I lick my lips, my eyes meeting hers as I reach for her heat.

"Florence," I breathe, sinking a finger into her. Closing her eyes, she gasps.

"No," I whisper, "I want you to look at me." She opens her eyes as I slip another finger into her. She gasps—opens her soul to me the moment her body clenches around me.

"Josie! Fuck," she groans through her orgasm. Her head falls back, eyes closed, as she catches her breath.

While she's laying there, I trace my fingertip around her erect nipple. I bring my lips to the soft skin of her breasts, the valley between them. I avoid her most sensitive spots, at least for now, so I can explore this side of her. Her soft skin pebbles at my hot breath, under my lips, my fingertips.

Her fingers slide into my hair—not to control me, but to hold me.

I'm somewhere between the curve of her breasts and her belly button when she starts begging. "Josie." Her voice is like warm honey, soft and sweet and slow.

I lift my eyes to meet hers, my tongue and my teeth nipping gently at her skin.

"Florence." I grin against her skin, kiss her, run my fingertips along her sides.

"You're killing me," she whimpers.

"I'm almost there," I promise her, pressing a knee between her legs to make room. I kiss along the crease at her hips, slow and torturous. Judging by the noises she's making and the way she's twitching at my every touch, she's not going to last much longer.

I move my kisses to her knees, slowly moving my way up her thighs, and she opens for me, beautiful and swollen and wanting. Waiting for me. I inhale the scent of her, licking my lips, and glance up at her. She's watching me, holding her breath.

"Josie." It's almost a growl this time. Her fingers are in my hair, pulling me into her.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

I kiss her swollen lips, still skirting around her most sensitive parts. I want to savor this—every inch of her, but she's too desperate, too aroused for me to make her wait any longer. I lick up her folds, lapping up her nectar. My eyes find hers again, and her short, shaky breaths freeze for a heartbeat.

Wrapping my lips around her clit, I watch her as she loses control of herself, of her breathing. My name is a desperate feral noise from her lips. Through it all, her eyes are locked with mine, even as her quaking slows.

"Josie." It's a whisper this time, a question and a prayer and a plea.

I take her clit in my mouth again, relishing in the taste of her, the feel of her softest parts. Her hands tighten around my head as she comes again, harder and longer. Her body shakes under my mouth, and I lightly scrape my teeth across her nerves, teasing and cajoling her through until she can't breathe anymore.

She gently pulls me up to her, softly brushing her lips against mine, as her body relaxes. "We have to stop," she whispers, her hand cupping my cheek.

"I'm sorry," I say softly, a hand cupping one of her breasts. Her skin is so soft and warm, her flesh so perfect.

She puts a hand over mine, stilling it. "We have to stop," she whispers again. "I need to go to work, Jos."

"You need to sleep first," I say gently, glancing up at the clock.

I blink.

What the fuck?

"How is it six o'clock in the morning?!"

The corner of her mouth curls up. "You've been busy kissing me for the past nine hours."

"No wonder you came so hard." "Nine hours?" "Can you call your person and tell them you won't be in today?"

"My person?" She laughs softly against me. "You mean Gwen? I probably could. I've never called in before, but there's nothing pressing today that she can't handle. She'll know why I'm calling off."

"Stay with me," I whisper into her neck. I wonder if I'll ever be able to get enough of her.

"This is the one and only time," she warns, sitting up and reaching for her phone. She types out a message and sends it off.

She leans over me, taking my nipple in her mouth.

"Okay," I gasp, taking her head in my hands. "I won't keep you up all night again. I promise."

Her teeth scrape against my nerves, and my already-charged body jumps.

Fuck. Sex with Ruby never felt like this.

Her eyes meet mine as she reaches between my legs.

I stiffen.

She freezes for a minute before cupping my face and looking into my eyes.

"Talk to me."

I purse my lips together. I thought I could deal with this.

"Josie," she says softly. "Breathe." When I do, she bites her lip. "Do you want me to stop?"

My eyes drop to her lips, and I sigh. It's never been this hard to tell new partners. "No." I let out a long breath. "I don't like penetration. At least I never have in the past. We could try it—everything with you is different, but..."

She closes her eyes and releases an exhale. "God, I thought I did something wrong." She chews the inside of her cheek, frowning. "What else? I don't want to do anything..."

I shake my head, forcing out an awkward chuckle. "It's not you, it's me." I shake my head to clear it. "Just no fingers. No toys. Not inside me."

She grins. "I have toys at home you might like, then." She leans into me, brushing her lips against mine. Softly. Tentatively.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I just want you right now."

"No tongue either?" She pulls back to look at me.

"Tongue is okay," I whisper, pulling her back for a kiss, my pulse racing at the thought.

She moans loudly in her throat. "You've been torturing me," she says against my lips, "all fucking night. Please tell me I can eat you out already."

"No foreplay?" I tease her.

"You've had nine hours of foreplay. You've literally been dripping on me all night. Even when you came earlier, straddling my back and kissing my neck." She reaches between my legs, making a shushing noise. "I know, Jos. You're safe," she whispers as she rakes her fingers through my folds. I close my eyes as the sensations overwhelm me—her soft, gentle touch. I swallow a curse as her finger circles my clit.

"I'm going to come if you—"

"Josie, look at me." Her breath is nearly as ragged as mine. As I open my eyes, look deep into hers, the emotion in her eyes pushes me over the edge.

A mischievous grin spreads across her face. "Good. Now you can enjoy it and quit fighting already." She knees my thighs apart, her fingernails raking up the inside of my thighs. Every brush of her mouth, every touch of her fingertips, every breath she exhales, fans the flames higher.



She looks up at me, holding my gaze, as she brushes soft kisses everywhere but where I want them. "I could do this for the next nine hours," she teases.

"Another night, Florence. Please." My voice is raw. I take her head in my hands, tucking a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead.

God. She looks wrecked.

She grins, her mouth against my wet flesh, her eyes on mine. She wraps her arms around my thighs, pulling me onto her face, and all of a sudden, her soft warm tongue is inside me. I lose myself in the sensation of her, the intensity of her eyes, her soul.

An earthquake ruptures through me, my body convulsing in a way it never has before. Fuck. Fuck.

Fucking—

"That's another thing you should warn me about," she says, her chuckle vibrating against me. Before I can catch my breath, she wraps her lips around my clit, sending another tremor through me.

She waits until I catch my breath before she crawls on top of me, her bare breasts on mine. She brushes her lips against mine. "Is this okay?" she whispers softly.

"I—" I inhale deeply, biting my lip. She starts to move off me, but I wrap my arms around her. "Stay. Please?"

"Are you okay?" She lifts herself up on her elbows, one hand wiping a sweaty strand of hair from my face. "Josie, talk to me."

"I've—" I shake my head. What was that?

She rolls off me. "Are you thinking of Mel?" she asks, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

"What?" I sit up, reaching for her. "No. Why would you think—"

"You're always thinking of her."

"No." I shake my head. "Not like that. Not anymore." I bite my lip, trying to think. "What I used to feel for Mel was a little flutter. What I felt for Ruby—" I put my hand on her arm. "Don't walk away from me, Florence. What I felt for Ruby was like someone turned a light on, took care of business, then turned the light off again. But you..."

She looks at me.

"You rock my foundations. I don't understand what I feel for you." I gently pull her back to me. "All I know is that I want you here." My throat tightens. "I don't even know what that was, that orgasm. It felt like I was ripping apart at the seams."

She laughs softly. "You squirted. Is that your first time?"

"I thought that was a myth."

She shakes her head. "Not a myth." She lays back down next to me, brushing the back of her hand across my cheek. "You should let future partners know... so you don't squirt them in the eye or something." She grins playfully.

I don't want any other partners. I only want you. Something suddenly hits me in the gut. "I should probably tell you something." I sit up, pulling the cover around me.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"You know I've seen all of that, right?" she says, gesturing to the cover.

"The other day..." I swallow, looking at her. "I asked Tilly if she would get me off. I was confused about my feelings, and I know she used to do it for Renna."

She blinks. "Mel's fiancée?"

I nod. "She told me she wouldn't fuck me just so I could avoid my feelings for you—I should go fuck you instead, but..." I look down at my hands. "I'm sorry."

She laughs. "I don't know her that well, but that sounds exactly like something she would say."

31

Florence

When Josie opens her door, she's dressed to the nines in a dark charcoal suit, her blonde hair pulled back from her face. She's wearing a simple, elegant silver chain around her neck.

It takes me a minute to find my voice.

"Wow."

She raises an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth twitching up. "Is that a good wow—or a bad wow?"

Before Josie, I never thought about how a woman would look in a tux custom-made for her body. "You look..." I search for the right word. "Ravishing."

She breaks into a grin. "Perfect. Then maybe I'll be able to keep up with you for one night." Her eyes find the curve of my neck, and she licks her lip. "You look stunning." She doesn't even look at my champagne-colored dress with the slit clear up the thigh.

She takes my arm and pulls me down the hall. "Let's go. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can come home and I can eat you."

Once we're in the elevator, thankfully alone, I turn to her. "This place is important to me, Josie," I say quietly. She has no idea how much Nook and Nectar mean to me.

Her brow furrows in surprise. "Okay. Show me this special place of yours." She takes my face in her hands and steps closer to me. "Can I kiss you?"

I brush my lips against hers, inhaling her. "Don't get me started," I say, smiling against her hungry mouth. I reluctantly pull away from her as we reach the ground floor.

This woman makes me want to share even the most intimate parts of my life with her. I've never shared the Nook and Nectar with anyone.

She slides her fingers between mine as we head for my car. "Will you tell me why this place is so special to you?"

"I will," I say mysteriously. "Don't tell anyone about it, though. Marin and Hettie don't even know."

We climb into the car. "Are you serious?" she asks after a few minutes. "No one else

knows?" She places her hand on my thigh, teasing my bare skin under the hem of my dress.

"No one else knows." I take her hand off my bare thigh. "Don't get me started," I repeat, my center tightening at her touch. I don't know how much of what she feels is just physical and how much of it is more than that, but the way she made love to me Sunday night was not just physical. You don't worship at an altar that means nothing to you. Not for nine hours.

We pull into the parking lot, and I take her hand, leading her to the Book Nook.

"Why are we going to the bookstore?" she asks, laughing at my eagerness.

I squeeze her hand and my heart flutters. I'm really doing this. I'm really sharing this part of my life with her. "You'll see," I tease. I open the door and motion her in.

At the counter, Shelby nods to me with a knowing smile, and I have to fight back my own grin.

As we wind our way to the back of the stacks, she clasps my hand. "Are you nervous about this?" she asks gently.

Yes. "A little. Like I said, this is a special place to me." No one can understand how important this place has been to me during hard times. Matthew is standing near the door to the back room, his hands clasped behind his back. "Through here," I tell Josie, opening the door.

Once in the back room, I pull open the back door to Nectar, clutching her hand. The rush of the familiar, the subtle aroma of aged wines, embraces me. The weight of what I'm about to do presses on me as I breathe it in. I'm actually doing this, sharing my private space with her. "This way." I manage, my throat tight.

Becca Guzman, one of the establishment's three sommeliers, approaches us, and she greets me with a familiar smile. "This way, Florence," she motions toward the private room near the back, a space normally reserved only for the wealthiest of our patrons. Stepping through the doorway, the atmosphere shifts immediately. The lighting softens, and the faint notes of classical music float through the air. "You brought company this evening," she notes, meeting my gaze.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I did," I reply simply.

"Would you like your wine now, or would you like to wait and have it with dinner?"  
She glances at Josie with a hint of curiosity.

I guide Josie to the leather couch. "We're ready for it now," I tell Becca.

Josie sinks into the couch, looking around the room. The walls are decorated with simple, black-and-white photos of vineyards at sunset, simple yet sophisticated.

Nodding, Becca disappears through the door with a soft click. She's back within moments carrying a tray with a bottle of wine nestled in a silver ice bucket.

"The best we have in the house," she states with pride. "Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, 1996. You'll taste notes of ripe black cherries, earthy truffle, and a hint of crushed violets." She pours, ruby red goodness swirling in the glasses.

I breathe deeply as the aroma overtakes me. "To new beginnings," I say, meeting Josie's eyes.

Becca lingers, waiting for our dinner order.

"This is exquisite," I tell her. "We'll have the chef's pairing menu. Surprise us," I say, putting my wine glass down. With a nod, she disappears through the door.

Josie shifts beside me. "This place is incredible," she murmurs.

Leaning back, I let the plush sofa envelop me. "It's my retreat. My hiding place," I admit softly, the words slipping out before I can stop them. "I've never brought anyone here. You're the first."

"Then I'm honored." She's quiet for a moment, but when I don't speak, she encourages me to continue. "Tell me about it," she says gently.

I nod, my throat tight. "When Katie and I started having issues," I start, "this place became my refuge. I'd come to the Nook for hours, and when they closed, Nectar would let me in the back. It became my safe haven."

Josie takes my hand, lacing her fingers with mine.

"It wasn't that bad, but things had gotten uncomfortable at home. Before she left, I came here almost every night for over a year." I swallow the lump in my throat. "Then after she left, it was natural for me to come here when being at home felt empty."

She squeezes my hand gently. "Everyone here became a sort of family for you."

"Something like that." I nod. "So when they had to close their doors a few years ago, I had to do something." I take another sip of my wine, hesitant to go on.

"They didn't close, though. You had a hand in that."

"They had bad management and were making bad business decisions," I defend myself. "I made a small investment in the company and brought in an experienced business strategist to get them on the right track."

"How much is a small investment?"



"Just the cost of the space upstairs. Technically, it's mine. In practice, it's often rented out for business meetings and the like. It generates revenue that way."

"Ever the business woman." Josie smiles at me, her eyes soft. "So you saved two businesses and helped them turn around. You saved jobs."

"It was selfish." My cheeks flush. "I didn't want to lose my safe haven."

"Those two things aren't mutually exclusive," she points out, the corner of her mouth curling up in a smile. "Is that why everyone here treats you like a queen?" she teases.

That pulls a smile out of me. "They treat me like a paying customer, that's all."

"Mm-hmm." She leans over and kisses me. "You're an amazing person. You know that, Florence Pietra?"

I shake my head. "The business strategist and I decided to get the businesses involved with the community. The Nook started a reading program for kids from the shelter downtown," I say quietly. "And Nectar holds monthly fundraisers for different local charities." I like to keep my involvement quiet. Both businesses do good work without my name being attached.

"You really care about our community, don't you?" She sounds surprised.

"Of course. I did a lot of work with community groups when I was young. Now we work with Delmont's Cultural Center. The bookstore has become a safe haven for queer kids—a place to be without judgment, to see characters like themselves in books, to feel represented." I squeeze her fingers. "And let's just say there's a reason certain community groups regularly book the private rooms for their meetings."

She laughs, the wine loosening her up.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

My phone buzzes, interrupting her laughter.

"It's Nonna." My heart drops. "Mom says she's not doing well."

32

Josie

I knock on the door to the Pietra home, suddenly nervous. After Florence rushed out last night to check on her grandmother, I spent hours thinking about the way she opened up to me, how she shared a private part of herself that she keeps hidden from the rest of the world. When did I stop pretending to care for her and actually start having real feelings?

"Vieni qui!" A tiny, silver-haired woman waves me in. This must be Nonna. "You're just in time, tesoro. Everyone else is in the kitchen."

The aroma of garlic and herbs fills the house. Nonna points me in the direction of the chaotic kitchen, laughter and rapid-fire Italian mixed with English filling the air. Florence is at the stove with her mom, arguing about something in Italian.

Florence notices me first. "Bella, ciao!" Her face lights up. She's wearing jeans and a soft sweater, completely relaxed. It strikes me again how beautiful she is.

"Josie!" A small blur launches itself at me. "Did you know Auntie Flor used to be on the chess team?"

I look at the young auburn-haired girl with her arms wrapped around my waist. This must be one of her nieces. "No, I didn't know that." I glance at Florence with an amused smile. "Are you good at chess, too?" I ask the girl.

"Not yet," she scrunches her face up, "but Daddy says Auntie Florence will teach me." She tugs me toward the table. "Can I sit by you!?"

"Lena." Joe, the brother I met at the penthouse, comes over, ruffling the girl's hair. "Let Dr. Mueller breathe. Nice to see you again, Doctor. The loud one over in the kitchen is my wife, Rosie." He gestures to the brunette woman arranging bread on a platter.

"Call me Josie." I notice how his eyes crinkle at the corner the way Florence's do when she smiles.

"Mamma mia, Florence. Are you going to let your fidanzata just stand there?" Florence's mom swoops in, pulling me into a rough hug. "I'm Lucia."

"Thanks for having me." I catch Florence's eye over her mother's shoulder. She looks amused.

"Sit, sit!" Lucia waves me toward the table. "Florence, get your Josie some wine. The good stuff, non quella merda scadente that your fratello drinks."

I sink into a chair, and Lena immediately claims the spot next to me. Florence appears on my other side with a glass of wine, leaning over and giving me a chaste kiss.

"How's Nonna feeling?" I ask quietly.

"Better, mostly." She squeezes my shoulder before sitting down. "It's just a cold—but

at her age, we worry."

"Speaking of worry," Rosie pipes up from across the table, "Paola's teacher called today." She gives her older daughter a pointed look.

The teenager slumps in her chair. "Mom, it wasn't a big deal."

"What wasn't a big deal?" Florence asks the girl.

"She got caught reading inappropriate material in class." Rosie sighs.

On the other side of her, Joe snorts. "She was reading lesbian romance novels."

I nearly choke on my wine. Florence's hand finds my knee under the table.

"They're not inappropriate," Paola argues. "Sarah Waters has won literary awards!" She's not wrong.

"Tipping the Velvet might be a bit mature for fourteen," Joe says diplomatically, pressing his lips together to keep from laughing.

"It's Charles Dickens with lesbians." Paola shrugs. "We read Dickens. There's nothing wrong with it."

"You were reading worse at her age," Hettie cuts in, arriving with a bowl of salad and setting it in the middle of the table. She winks at me. "Nice to meet you, Doc."

Lucia appears in the doorway. "Dinner's ready." The next few minutes are chaos—the rest of the family finding their seats and passing dishes, with rapid-fire Italian I can only half follow.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Lucia fixes me with an intense look once everyone's been served. "So, Josie." She pauses for effect. "Florence tells us you teach neurology?"

"At the medical school, yes." I twirl spaghetti onto my fork. "Yes, ma'am."

"What's your specialty?" Joe asks.

"Neuroplasticity and traumatic brain injury. If and how the brain rewires itself after a head injury." I start to explain further, then catch myself. "Sorry. I can get kind of carried away."

"Keep going!" Lena says next to me. "I want to learn about brains!"

"Save the technical stuff for later, tesoro." Florence chuckles.

"You sound like mom when she gets excited about work," Paola says.

Lucia beams proudly. "It's good to be passionate about your work. That's why Auntie Florence is so successful. She puts her heart and soul into everything she does."

I glance at Florence, catching a faint blush on her cheeks. "Yes, she does," I agree softly, squeezing her knee under the table.

Conversation flows easily after that, switching between English and Italian. Besides a little ribbing from Hettie directed at Florence, everyone is more than welcoming. I could see myself becoming part of this family.

My throat tightens.

Where in the world did that thought come from?

I excuse myself to the bathroom, my face flush from shock.

Across from the bathroom door, right next to Nonna's open bedroom door, is an old photograph on the wall. A young Nonna between two men in military uniforms. One is undoubtedly her husband. Florence said she married young because he was going off to war.

It's what's hanging on the wall in the background that makes my heart stop.

It's the picture in the penthouse—the one covering the safe.

The hall suddenly feels too warm.

I lean against the wall, trying to process what this means.

"Josie?" Florence is at my side. "What's wrong?"

I look at her, this woman I'm developing real feelings for. I have to tell her. Not now though—not with her whole family watching us.

"Just a little warm," I manage. "Can we get some fresh air?"

She leads me to the back deck, her hand steady on my back. The cool evening air helps clear my head.

But it doesn't erase what I just found.

I turn to her, taking in her concerned expression. How can I tell her that the man whose fortune I'm inheriting looted her family's treasures during the war? That when her Nonna was a teenager, young and hopeful for a better future for her unborn child, that my grandfather was the one who stole that hope?

"Your family is wonderful," I say, my throat tight. "They're just a lot."

She laughs. "They are, aren't they? It's the Italian in us." She tangles her fingers with mine. "Let me know if you need to leave and we'll go."

"I'm okay," I say, shaking my head. "I just needed a minute." I let her lead me back into the house, where Lena is already setting up the chess board and chatting excitedly about learning chess from her Auntie Florence.

I watch Florence with her family—the way she patiently explains chess moves to Lena, how she teases her brother, how gentle she is with her nonna. How Nonna unconsciously fiddles with her phantom wedding ring, lost all those years ago.

My heart aches.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of coffee, dessert, and family stories. I try to stay present, to appreciate this glimpse into Florence's private world, but my mind keeps returning to that painting.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

When we finally say our goodnights, Lucia hugs me tightly. "You'll come again next week."

I hug her back, not trusting myself to answer. I hope so. Florence's hand finds the small of my back as we walk out to her car. As we drive through the darkened streets, all I can think about is how quickly things can change.

\*\*\*

I can't sleep, my mind racing with thoughts of Florence's family. Of the painting. Of realizing that my own flesh and blood stole from hers.

It's three in the morning when I decide to go to the penthouse and look through his files of notes and records. I wasn't looking for it before. Maybe there's something that I overlooked about the painting there. I have to look. I can't talk to Florence and her family without looking for answers first.

The place feels different at night. The moonlight streams through the window, casting shadows across the space. I head upstairs, straight for the wall safe in the last room, covered by the unique painting of the Italian hills. The same one I saw in that old photograph.

My hands shake as I twirl the dial and enter the combination. Inside, I flip through half a dozen meticulously labeled folders before I find what I'm looking for.

A carefully typed inventory card reads: "Olive Grove at Sunset- acquired December 1943, Naples region. Original owner: Elena and Vittorio (now deceased). Surname



unknown." I want to be sick. Florence's grandmother's name is Elena.

There's more. A handwritten note describes "additional items of interest" taken from the same location—a gold wedding ring, and a matching locket engraved with "V&E 1943" and a similarly marked silver service set. These are the items I found in the bank safe deposit box—and the ring mentioned in my grandfather's letter to me. I suspect its discovery led my grandmother to her death. The very things that haunted him.

"Shit." I sink into the leather chair behind the desk. I watched Florence's Nonna tonight. She unconsciously touched the phantom ring on her finger, missing now for more than eighty years. Opa stole it from her when she was just a teenager while her husband, her first love, was fighting—and dying—in the war.

Forcing myself to keep reading, I pull out another folder labeled "Acquisitions - Coins (Southern Italy)." Inside is a long list detailing collections he looted during the war. My blood runs cold when I see the label "V&E 1943" next to more than a hundred of them.

The coins didn't just belong to Florence's nonna. They must have been part of a family collection. Opa—

No.

I won't claim him as family. Karl had not only stolen their personal momentos, but robbed them of their family heritage as well.

How in the world am I supposed to tell her this?" I whisper into the empty room. She just let me into her family's world, showed me their warmth and their love. And now I have to tell them that my grandfather robbed them of their history?

I pull out the next folder, hoping there are no more revelations about the woman I'm growing to care about. Unlike the other folders, this one looks worn, like it's been handled frequently. Inside, I find nearly fifty years of correspondence and financial records. At first glance, most of it appears to revolve around a maid named Maria who worked for the Vanderveen household in the 1970s.

At first, I don't understand why. Are the Vanderveen's connected to Florence's family? I know Hettie married one of them, but these records go back a lot further than that. I know Karl did business with them before they went their separate ways in the 90s. Maybe this Maria cleaned for him?

Then I see a letter from Maria to Karl, dated 1971. "Our daughter Donna deserves better than to be your dirty little secret. Either acknowledge her properly or leave us alone."

Donna. His housekeeper Donna. She's also Florence's housekeeper whom she met through Hettie. Through the Vanderveens.

My hands tremble as I skim through more letters. Apparently, Karl had maintained contact with Maria and Donna for years while respecting their wishes to keep the relationship private. He paid for Donna's education and helped her start her housekeeping business without revealing their connection to the outside world.

The most recent letter is from Karl to Donna herself, written only weeks before he died.

My dearest Donna,

You were right about Josephine. She deserves the chance to do something good with my fortune—to make amends for wrongs I've committed. Maybe, through her, both our families can find healing.

I regret many things, but never you. I wish I'd had the courage to acknowledge you properly when you were younger—to be the father you deserved. Instead, I watched from a distance as you grew into someone far better than I could ever hope to be.

Your suggestion I leave everything to Josephine was inspired. I hope that, somehow, the inheritance might help heal the rift between you and Monika—your half-sister, though she doesn't know it.

Take care of them both.

Your father, Karl

I read the letter over and over again, my mind struggling to process this new reality. Donna isn't just my grandfather's housekeeper—she's my aunt. And she's been quietly watching over me my entire life.

The implications hit me in waves. She's been taking care of me—us, now—in her own quiet way.

A photo slips from between the pages of another letter. It's a photo of a young woman who looks remarkably like my mother—the same high cheekbones, the same determined set to her jaw. On the back, in neat handwriting, it says "Donna, age 25."

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

My mother has a sister she doesn't know about.

I gather the most important documents with shaking hands. I need to tell Florence about the things Karl stole from her family and return them.

Downstairs, the sound of a key in the door echoes through the empty space. Someone's here—someone with access to the penthouse. As footprints approach the room, I already know who it must be.

"I wondered when you'd find those letters," Donna's familiar voice says from the doorway.

"I need to show you something." I lead Florence into the penthouse. My heart is pounding so loud I'm surprised she doesn't hear it.

"You're shaking," she says, turning to face me. "What's wrong?"

"I—" My throat tightens. "I need to show you something," I repeat, my voice unsteady. "Come upstairs with me."

She leads me up the stairs, her touch both supporting me and making me more apprehensive. Is she going to hate me for this?

We head to the final door in the hallway, the one Karl undoubtedly kept most guests far away from. "Go in," I tell her softly. "Look at the painting on the wall."

Her eyes find the Italian landscape immediately. "It's beautiful," she says softly. "The

cypress trees remind me of the stories Nonna used to tell when we were kids. Catalina loved them so much she went back."

"Florence." I wait for an interminable minute for her to look at me. "You know the photograph your grandmother has on the wall by her room? The one across the bathroom?"

"The one of her with both my grandfathers. Her first husband who died in the war, and his best friend, who took her to America and created a life with her. A last promise to his childhood friend." She looks at the painting, then back at me. "I don't follow."

"When I saw it last night—" I close my eyes and let out a long breath. "In that picture, on the wall behind the three of them— It's the same painting."

She blinks. "That's not possible. That painting was lost during..." Her voice trails off.

"During the war. December, 1943." I carefully remove the painting from the wall and place it along the window. My fingers shake as I spin the dial, opening the safe. I sigh heavily. "My— I won't claim him as my grandfather anymore. Karl. Karl kept meticulous records."

Florence stands perfectly still as I lay the documentation for the painting across the desk, her face more blank with each page she reads.

"There's more," I say quietly. "The items in the bank deposit box—a gold ring engraved with 'Vittorio and Elena, 16.10.1943.' There's a locket and a set of silverware, too. They belong to Nonna. To your family."

Florence brings her hand to her chest. "He stole everything from her." She swallows thickly. "Did you know? When you came over last night, did you know while you

spent the evening enjoying time with my family?"

"I recognized the painting in the photograph last night." I shake my head. "If you hadn't been there to check on me when I saw it, I think I would've fainted from the shock."

"You spent the rest of the evening with my family," she accuses. "You didn't say a word."

"I had to check. I wasn't one hundred percent certain." I bite my lip thoughtfully. "Even if I had been sure, it wouldn't have been the right time. You know your Nonna and your family better than I do." I reach for her hand, my voice softening. "I want to give them back to her. The painting. The ring. All of it."

33

Florence

I can't breathe. The painting has been here, only a few miles away, all these years. He took—stole—everything from her. While her husband was fighting and dying for the Allies. While she was still carrying my mother, growing and nurturing new life and grieving her lost love, this despicable human was cataloging her stolen treasures.

"The coins." My voice sounds hollow. "Are there records of the coins?" The legendary family wealth.

"There's a list, Florence. Your family will get every piece of it back. I swear it." Her eyes are filled with tears.

"How many?" I ask.

"Over a hundred pieces." She pulls another folder out of the safe on the wall. "They're all listed, and they're all yours."

I sit down hard on the leather chair, countless family dinner conversations suddenly making horrible sense. How Nonna would get quiet when Joe talked about his coin collecting. It was always Nonno Roberto, her second husband, who was obsessed with coins. I wonder if he thought he had any chance of recovering them—a needle in a haystack the size of the universe. And they were hiding in our own backyard.

"Florence." Josie kneels beside my chair. "I'll return everything. I need your help to do that the best way possible. I want you to give your grandma back her wedding ring yourself. Did you notice how she unconsciously fiddles with it, even though it's not there?"

## Page 82

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

She notices more than I give her credit for.

I stand up abruptly, needing space. "I don't understand. If he knew we lived in Delmont, why didn't he return them? He said in his letter that he wanted to find her, right?"

"I don't think he knew." Her eyes are troubled. "I got the impression from the letter that he looked for her. Extensively." She purses her lips together, pulling up an image on her phone. The letter.

"He had to know who she was," I argue. "Her name is on the ring. He knew she came to the United States."

She zooms into the letter on her phone screen while I look over her shoulder. "Maybe he went back to the town after the war and asked after her. I don't think he knew her last name."

"It would have changed, anyway. She and Nonno Roberto got married before they left Italy. All their paperwork would've had her new name on it."

She glances up at me. "What happened to her parents?"

I shake my head. I don't know the whole story. "They both died during the war. Not that night, though."

She releases a long breath. "Thank God. I don't think I could live with myself if—"



I cover her lips with my index finger. "You didn't do any of this." I shake my head, looking at the painting against the window. "This is insane. You know that, right?"

She closes her eyes as I turn away from her. I need space.

"If you want me to walk away," she says, "from the contract, from us, from all of it—I will. But I care about you, Florence. That part isn't pretend. Not anymore."

Something in her voice makes me turn around. She looks devastated.

"The ring," I say finally. "It was her last connection to him—to Vittorio. She never even got to bury him." My voice cracks. "She couldn't even keep his ring."

Josie takes a tentative step toward me. "I want you to give it back to her. I want to make this one small thing right."

I close my eyes, remembering how happy Nonna looks at dinner every Wednesday night, surrounded by her family—how she's managed to build a beautiful life despite everything that was taken from her. Will giving it back to her just bring back all the memories of the past? Or will it give her the closure she so desperately needs?

"I need time," I tell her. "I need to think about how this will affect her—how much she can handle."

34

Florence

"What's going on with you tonight?" I ask Marin as she sets a salad in front of me. She's been oddly quiet since I came home.

"Your shadow," she says. "Is she dealing with her grandfather's estate tonight?" She sets a fork next to my plate.

"She's not my shadow," I argue. Josie's been over a lot lately, but it's not all the time. "Don't deflect. What's going on with you?" I repeat.

She straightens, folding her hands behind her back. "Have you considered that I might be concerned with how quickly she's planted herself in your life?"

"Planted herself?" I put the fork down. "You make it sound like she's rooted herself here."

"She's certainly attached herself firmly enough."

I frown. "Sit down, Marin." When she hesitates, I soften my tone. "Please? We need to talk about this."

She sinks into the chair across from me. "I apologize if I overstepped." There's a ghost of a smile following the flat apology.

"You did, but that's not—" I take a deep breath. "You've been against Josie since the beginning. I want to understand why."

"I'm paid to look out for your interests."

"No," I say firmly, shaking my head. "You're paid to manage my household and my schedule. You look out for my interests because we're friends." I study her for a long moment. "So as my friend, tell me what's bothering you about her."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Her shoulders drop. "You don't see how she looks at you, Florence."

"What do you mean?"

"Like she's afraid of wanting you." Marin's voice is barely above a whisper. "The same way Katie looked at you in the beginning."

"Josie is nothing like Katie."

"No?" Marin looks at me angrily. "A successful woman in her own right, drawn to you—but afraid of your intensity? Someone who makes you smile without trying, who gets you to lower your guard?" She shakes her head. "Someone who'll eventually decide your dedication to your job is too much?"

"That's not fair."

"What's not fair is watching you fall for someone who's still in love with someone else." She stands up abruptly, moving to clear the dishes I've barely touched. "At least Katie was only in love with your money."

I catch her wrist. "Stop, Marin. Set the dishes down and stop. Talk to me."

She puts the plates down, but she doesn't sit. "I watched what happened after Katie left, Florence. Do you remember that night?"

"Of course I remember," I snap. I'd found out Katie was cheating on me with some artist who had time for her needs. Even during our rocky times, I never thought she'd

cheat on me. I spent the night in my office, burying myself in work.

"No," Marin says softly. "You remember the work part. You don't remember me finding you at three in the morning. Still in yesterday's clothes, staring blankly at nothing."

I blink.

I don't remember that. At all.

"You didn't cry. You didn't rage. You just retreated. Further and further into yourself until the Florence I knew almost disappeared." Wrapping her arms around herself, she swallows. "I helped you rebuild, watched you close yourself off from anyone who might hurt you like that again. But now..."

"Now what?"

"Now I see you falling harder for Josie than you ever did for Katie. It terrifies me." Her voice cracks. "Because this time when she breaks your heart, I don't know if you'll come back."

"Marin." I stand up, reaching for her. She steps back.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything." She turns toward the kitchen. "I'll get your dinner."

"No. You can't drop something like that on me and walk away. Look at me," I say, my voice softening.

She reluctantly meets my eyes.

"First of all, you're right. I am falling for her. Probably already have." Hopelessly. Saying it out loud makes my chest tighten. "But Josie's not Katie. She doesn't want my money or my position. She keeps refusing both." Stubborn woman.

"She wants your heart," Marin argues. "That's more dangerous."

"Maybe." I take a deep breath. "But you're wrong about her breaking it," I say firmly, trying to convince myself as much as her. "Josie is the most honest person I know. Even when it hurts." I sigh. "Even when the truth might cost her everything, she chooses honesty."

"She's honest about still being in love with her best friend."

"Yes, she is. Just like she's honest about her growing feelings for me." I smile, remembering her comment during our conversation last night.

Marin's eyes widen. "I didn't know that."

"No, because you decided to protect me instead of getting to know her." I squeeze her shoulder gently. "I appreciate that you want to guard my heart, Marin. But you need to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Not entirely," I admit. "But I know that whatever happens with her, it'll be real. No games." I meet her eyes. "And I want my friend's support while I figure it out."

She studies me for a long moment before nodding. "I'll try."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Thank you." I pull her into a quick hug before stepping back. "Now, about the way you're been treating her..."

"I'll apologize." She manages a small smile. "Even though she probably won't trust it."

"She will." I sit back down. "Josie's good at reading people. It's part of why I—" I catch myself.

"Part of why you're falling in love with her?" she asks gently, raising an eyebrow.

"Shut up and get my dinner."

She squeezes my shoulder. "For what it's worth, I hope I'm wrong about her. You deserve someone who sees you the way she does."

I reach up and cover her hand with mine. "Thank you."

As she disappears into the kitchen, I pull out my phone to text her. Do you want to come over when you're done with the estate stuff? I miss you.

There. After the last few days of uncertainty with everything about her grandfather's estate, my mixed feelings and unsettled emotions settle.

Josie's response is almost immediate. Give me an hour. I miss you, too.

I stare at those four words. Marin's not wrong. This thing with Josie—it terrifies me.

But for the first time since Katie, I think the risk might be worth it.

35

Florence

I sink into the couch, my legs suddenly weak, the infamous ring in my hand. I look up at Josie. "Nonna's wedding ring," I murmur, reading the inscription. The one she unconsciously reaches for, even now, eighty years after it was taken. "It's real. You helped it to find its way home."

"I want to return everything," she says softly. "But I need your help to do it right. I don't want to cause her any more pain."

Overwhelmed by her gentle heart, I pick up the matching locket. I don't remember Nonna ever mentioning this, or the silverware. "Let me call Joe and Hettie. We should talk to Catalina, too. She knows more of the old family stories than any of us."

Within an hour, Joe and Hettie are here. We set up the big screen for a video call with Catalina so everyone can see her. When we finally connect, she's sipping vino rosso from a crystal glass.

"I always forget you're seven hours ahead of us," Hettie laughs. "Come stai?"

"Bene. Tutto bene." Her forehead crinkles. "Is this your new woman, Florence?"

"Josie," I say. "Josie, meet my other sister, Catalina."

"Nice to meet you, Josie." Catalina singsongs, smirking. "I'm glad to see my sister is living again." She looks at everyone. "Why are we having a family meeting? Is Nonna okay?"

"She's fine, Cat." I see the tension drop out of her shoulders. "I need to show you something. All of you. And I need your advice."

Catalina's eyes light up. "Is it a wedding ring? Are you getting married?"

Josie snorts.

I glance at her, hiding my amusement. "No. Well, yes, it is a wedding right. But not mine." I take a deep breath. I have no idea how they're going to react to this. "You know Josie's been going through her grandfather's estate."

"Karl," Josie interrupts me. "I won't claim him as my grandfather after what we found."

I nod.

"What did we find?" Catalina and Hettie say, echoing each other across thousands of miles.

"You remember Nonna telling us about the night the Germans came and looted their home? Back during the war?"

"It was December 1943," Catalina says. "They took her wedding ring. It was less than a week after she found out that Nonno Vittorio had died."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"My grandfather—" She stops herself. "Karl. Karl was one of the Nazis there. He took your grandmother's wedding ring. The painting on the wall. You know that one in the picture she has of her with Vittorio and Roberto?"

Hettie gasps.

"Dio mio," Catalina breathes. "Are you saying you found them? They've been lost for more than eighty years."

"Stolen," Josie corrects her. "They weren't lost. They were stolen."

"What matters now is that they've been found," I remind them. I take Nonna's ring out of the box and hand it to Hettie.

"I always wondered what it looked like," Hettie murmurs in awe, inspecting the ring in her hand. She looks more closely. "It's engraved. Vittorio and Elena."

"I want to see," Catalina says, disappointed. "She hasn't talked about it in years," she sighs quietly, "but she cries out in her sleep for it. She still dreams of it."

I upload the close-up pictures of the ring Josie and I took earlier and send them to her.

Hettie hands the ring to Joe, who murmurs in amazement.

"Josie found this?" Catalina asks. "How did she know it was Nonna's?"

"It's a complicated story," I say, looking at Josie. "Do you want to tell it?"

She sighs. "My grandfather. I didn't even know he was still alive. My mom cut off ties with him when I was four. Thirty years ago. When I got a letter from the lawyer about my inheritance—everything he owned—I was dumbfounded. With everything, it's worth more than a billion dollars."

"I'd pee myself if someone told me they were giving me a billion dollars," Catalina laughs.

"That's the one thing I didn't do." Josie chuckles. "I stormed into my parents house and demanded to know how he could have been living only a few miles away for my entire life and I didn't know about it." She sighs. "Mom just told me to leave it alone. Then I found a letter in the bank deposit box, describing his one regret. Taking that ring from a young, pregnant woman. I think he spent eighty years trying to find her."

"Irony, since she lived in the same city as him for three-quarters of a damn century," Hettie points out.

"I didn't have any idea it was your grandmother that he'd been looking for, but when I was at your parents house the other night for dinner—"

"You got invited to a family dinner?" Catalina squeals. "Then it's official. Wait—" She frowns. "Who takes whose name when lesbians get married?"

"We're not getting married," I interject strongly, before adding more quietly, "at least not yet."

Josie gives me a look I can't decipher.

"When I was at your parents," she continues, ignoring Cat's question, "I saw your grandma's picture. The painting on the wall behind them in that picture—it's the same painting that covers Karl's wall safe at the penthouse. I've been going through a lot of

the documents there, and I recognized it immediately."

"She almost fainted," I remember out loud. "She might have, if I hadn't followed her because she was overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed with what?" This time it's Joe. He's been quiet today.

Josie raises an eyebrow at him. "Your family is wonderful, but they're a lot."

Hettie laughs. "Stick around. You'll get used to us."

Joe clears his throat. "That's why you got quiet. You were unsure of yourself with us at first, but you were starting to warm up. After dinner, you seemed more introspective."

Hmm. I never thought of my brother as the observant type.

Josie nods. "It's a lot. All of this." She glances at me. "I wasn't sure how you'd all take it. If it would change things."

"Why would it change anything?" Catalina asks. "It's not like you did it. You can't change what he did."

"Josie?" It's Joe. "Did you find other things of hers, besides the ring and the painting?"

Hettie elbows him. "It's enough, Joe. Nonna will be tickled to see them again. To put her wedding ring back on her finger."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"We found her wedding silverware—Josie did, I mean. It's engraved. I remember her talking about it when we were kids." I look at Catalina on the screen. She's the one who's most connected with the past, with Italy. "Do you remember a locket? It's gold. It matches the design on the wedding ring. It's engraved, too." I send her a close-up of it.

"She hasn't talked about that in a long time." Catalina looks closely at the picture before looking back up at me. "If memory serves, Vittorio got the locket when he ordered the wedding ring. He gave it to her as an engagement gift."

Josie clears her throat. "We also found documentation of coins he took from your family's home." She passes Joe a list of the items. "The bastard was meticulous, if nothing else."

Joe studies the document, seeming to understand it better than I did. He looks up at her. "I always thought Nonno Roberto was exaggerating what we had. "The coins your grandfather took that night—they weren't just currency. They were part of a collection passed down through generations of Pietras. Some were from medieval times. Many were from the time before the Black Death when Italy was full of prosperous city-states and kingdoms."

"I'll return everything," Josie says firmly. "All of it belongs to your family."

Hettie, practical as always, leans forward. "We need to be careful how we handle this. Nonna's not as young as she used to be."

"She's stronger than you think," Catalina argues through the screen. "She survived

losing Vittorio, losing her home, building a new life there. She deserves to choose whether she wants the pieces of her past back.

"I vote we talk to Mom and Dad first," Joe says. "They've spent decades protecting her from these memories."

Two hours later, we're all gathered around my living room, Catalina back on the screen. Mom paces while Dad sits quietly on the couch watching her. I've never seen her this agitated.

"Show me again," she demands, reaching for the ring. Her hands shake. "All these years... He was right here in Delmont."

"Lucia." Dad's voice is gentle. "Siediti, tesoro. Sit."

She sinks into the couch beside him. "Do you know what that night did to her? She was eight months pregnant with me, and he took everything she had left of Vittorio."

"I want to make it right," Josie says quietly. "I can't undo what he did, but I can return what he took."

Mom studies her for a long moment. "You're nothing like him."

"She's really not," I say, taking Josie's hand.

"The ring isn't just about Vittorio," Catalina adds from the screen on the wall. "It's about everything she lost—her home, her history. Her sense of safety."

"Which is why we need to be careful," Dad argues. "She's lived without these things for eighty years. Why open old wounds?"

"Because they never healed," Joe counters. "You've seen how she still reaches for that ring. How she talks about the painting in her sleep."

"What do you think, Florence?" Mom asks suddenly.

I think about how Nonna's eyes still light up when she talks about Vittorio, how she insisted I learn to make his favorite dishes even though he died long before I was born. "I think... I think she'd want to know. Not just about the ring, but about all of it. She's spent her whole life wondering what happened to those pieces of her history."

"But it needs to be her choice," Josie adds softly. "We can tell her we found these things. Let her decide if she wants to know more."

Mom wipes tears from her cheeks. "You know she'll ask how we found them."

"Then we tell her the truth," I say firmly. "About Karl, about Josie inheriting everything, about her choosing to return it all." I look at Josie. "Love can heal broken wounds."

Josie's eyes shimmer with tears as she squeezes my hand.

We spend the next hour planning how to approach Nonna. Catalina suggests Sunday dinner. She'll fly in to be here. Mom insists on cooking all Nonna's favorite dishes.

"What about the coins? Hettie asks practically. "There are over a hundred pieces that were stolen that night."

"I'd like them," Joe admits quietly. "At least some of them."

"They're rightly ours, and they would be in your hands right now if they weren't stolen," Dad says.

"I could sell a few if anyone in the family needs money."

"Guiseppe," Catalina chides, "I think we all have enough to take care of ourselves. You should have them."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"I want to set up a foundation," Josie says, "with money from the assets. I don't want any of it. I'm going to sell everything and use the money to fund research into other families' lost treasures—to help more people recover their heritage."

"Perfetto," Catalina declares. "Turn something ugly into something beautiful."

As everyone starts gathering their things to leave, Mom pulls Josie into a fierce hug. "Thank you," she whispers. "Grazie mille, for giving her back these pieces of her heart."

After everyone's gone, I glance at Josie. "Are you okay?"

She nods, her eyes distant. "I keep thinking about how much pain he caused—not just your family, but how many others?"

I cup her cheek. "You're nothing like him," I repeat my mother's words. "You're bringing together what he tore apart."

"We are," she corrects me, bringing my hand to her lips. "Together."

I lean into her, brushing my lips against hers. When we break apart, she leans her forehead against mine.

"Stay tonight?" I whisper.

"Always," she promises.



I send up a silent prayer that dinner goes well.

36

Josie

I stare at the folder in my lap. All these documents about mom's half-sister... They feel heavy in my hands. Across from me, Dad watches patiently.

"I don't know how to tell her," I finally say.

He reaches across the café table and squeezes my hand. "Start at the beginning,mieloji.What did you find?"

I show him the first letter, dated 1971. "It's from someone named Maria to Karl. She worked as a maid for the Vanderveens." My hands shake as I read."Our daughter Donna deserves better than to be your dirty little secret. Either acknowledge her properly or leave us alone."

Dad's eyebrows shoot up. "Donna? Your grandfather's housekeeper?"

"And Florence's." I let out a long breath. "She's been watching over me all this time."

"Has your mom ever mentioned her to you before?"

"No." I shake my head. "That's why I wanted to talk to you first. Have you ever heard anything about it? After how she reacted to everything with Karl and the inheritance..." I trail off, remembering her visceral response to learning he'd been in Delmont all along.

"Let me call her," Dad says gently. "We'll do this together."

Twenty minutes later, Mom walks into the coffee shop. Her eyes narrow when she sees the folder on the table. "What's he done now?"

"Sit down,Mutti."I haven't called her that since I was little. "Please."

She sinks into the chair next to Dad, who immediately takes her hand. I push the letter across the table.

"What's this?" she asks. Her tone suggests she already knows it's something that will hurt.

"Read it," I say softly.

Her hands tremble as she picks up the letter. I watch her face as she reads—the initial confusion, then shock. Then something deeper and more painful.

"There's more." I slide the letters between Karl and Maria, spanning nearly twenty years. "He maintained contact with them, helped them financially. But he respected Maria's wish to keep their relationship private."

Mom's voice is barely audible. "I have a sister?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Half-sister, yes. And she's lived in Delmont her entire life." I pull out a photograph—young Donna at twenty-five. The resemblance to my mother is unmistakable.

Mom's breath catches. Her fingers trace the edge of the photo. "I know her," she whispers. "From the Vanderveen social functions. She was always... kind." She looks up at me sharply. "The housekeeper? Your grandfather's housekeeper is my sister?"

I nod. "And my aunt. She's been taking care of the penthouse all these years. She's Florence's housekeeper, too."

"Of course she is." Mom's laugh is bordering hysteria. "Of course he would arrange to have her watch over you. Even after—" She stops abruptly.

"After what, Mutti?"

She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter now."

"It does," Dad says quietly. "Tell her."

Mom takes a shaky breath. "When you were four, I found a letter from your grandfather. He'd been... monitoring you. Having someone watch you at daycare, at the park. When I confronted him about it, he said he just wanted to know his granddaughter. But it felt..." She shivers. "It felt wrong. That's when I cut ties."

"He never stopped watching," I tell her. "He had cameras in our house. In my apartment. Even Mel's place." I swallow, my throat tight. "He collected copies of

every book I've ever loved."

Mom starts to stand, but Dad's hand on hers keeps her seated. "How did we not know?" Her voice breaks.

"Because Donna protected us," I say softly. "She made sure his surveillance never crossed lines, never put us in real danger. And in the end..." I pull out Karl's final letter to Donna. "In the end, she convinced him to leave everything to me. She hoped it might help heal the rift between you."

Mom reads the letter slowly, tears falling onto the paper. When she looks up, her eyes are full of questions. "Why didn't she ever tell me?"

"I think," Dad says gently, "she was trying to protect both of you. From Karl, from the past, from the pain."

"She's been watching over all of us," I add. "Making sure we were okay, even if we didn't know she was family."

Mom's quiet for a long minute. "Does she know that you know?"

"Yes. We talked the other night. She's been waiting—hoping we'd find out eventually. But she wanted it to be our choice—to accept her as family or not."

"Like he never gave her the choice," Mom whispers. She stands up abruptly. "I need... I need to think."

Dad starts to rise, but she waves him to sit down. "Stay with Josie. I just need a minute."

She walks outside, her shoulders rigid with tension.

"Should we go after her?" I ask Dad.

He shakes his head. "Give her time. This is... it's a lot to process."

"I shouldn't have told her about the surveillance stuff," I say. "Not with everything else."

"No,mieloji.She needs to understand why Donna kept her distance, why she chose to protect us in silence." He squeezes my hand. "Your mother is stronger than you think."

Through the window, I watch her pace the sidewalk, one hand pressed to her heart. It feels like forever before she comes back inside.

"I want to meet her," she says finally. "Properly meet her, I mean. As my sister."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "We can take time—"

"No." She shakes her head. "I've lost enough time with her already." She sinks back into her chair. "You know, all those times I saw her at Vanderveen events, I felt drawn to her. Like there was something familiar about her smile, her laugh." She picks up the photograph again. "I can't believe I never saw it before."

"Sometimes we don't see what's right in front of us." Dad squeezes her hand.

"All these years, I thought I was alone." Mom's eyes fill with tears again. "When can I see her?" She asks suddenly. "Would she... Do you think she'd want to meet?"

"She's hoping you'll want to," I tell her. "She wanted it to be your choice."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Mom nods decisively. "Tomorrow. I don't want to waste any more time."

37

Josie

The usual Sunday dinner at the Pietras is in full swing when I arrive—voices and laughter spilling out onto the porch, the aroma of garlic and herbs filling the air. But today feels different.

Joe meets us at the door. Today is the day we're bringing Nonna's lost treasures back to her.

"Come in," he says softly. "Mom and Dad sent Rosie and the kids out to the garden."

The small box in my pocket feels heavy as we follow him to the living room. Nonna sits in her usual spot on the couch, Florence's parents next to her. Catalina perches on the arm of the sofa, having flown in from Italy to be here for this. Hettie and Joe stand back, leaving room for Florence.

"What's all this about?" Nonna asks, taking in the unusual gathering. "Why do you all look so serious?"

Florence kneels beside her grandmother's chair. "Nonna, we found something. Something that was taken from you a long time ago." She glances at me. "Show her."

My hands tremble as I take out the small box. I open it, revealing the gold ring

nestled inside.

Nonna's breath catches, her hand flying to her heart. "No," she whispers. "It can't be."

"It is." Florence's voice cracks. "Josie inherited it from her grandfather. He—he was one of the soldiers that night. In Naples."

Nonna's eyes close, decades-old pain washing across her face. "I remember his face," she says softly. "He was so young. He couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. His eyes were so cold."

I step forward, holding out the box. "I'm so sorry for what he did. I want to return everything. The ring. The locket. The painting from your family home. All of it."

Nonna's hand shakes as she reaches for the ring. "I never thought I'd see it again." She traces the inscription inside. Vittorio ed Elena 16.10.1943. "I was eight months pregnant with Lucia," she says softly, glancing at her daughter. "Vittorio had been dead less than a week when they came. This ring—it was all I had left of him."

The room is silent except for muffled sobs. Lucia has her face pressed into her husband's shoulder.

"I don't know if you want it back," I say gently. "I know it might bring up painful memories. But it's yours to choose what to do with now."

Nonna looks up at me—really looks at me. "You're nothing like him," she says firmly. "You have a great heart, tesoro. Life takes strange turns, no? Sometimes pain leads to healing, if we're brave enough to face it." Her fingers close around the ring. "I want it back," she decides. "Not to wear—that chapter is done. But to keep safe. For the future."

"The painting," I manage, my throat tight. "Would you like to see it?"

Nonna nods. "Yes, but not today. Today is for family." She looks around the room—Lucia in Mario's arms, Florence holding my hand. Joe, Hettie, Catalina. "All of you, come closer."

We gather around her as she slips the ring onto the chain around her neck. Florence and I settle on the loveseat as Nonna begins to tell a tale—the story of her first love, of Vittorio.

"I was fourteen when we met—just a girl, really." Nonna's fingers trace the inscription on the ring, her eyes taking on that faraway look she gets when she talks about her youth. "He was Roberto's best friend, always coming by our house after working in his father's vineyard." She smiles, lost in the memory.

"He was so handsome, my Vittorio. Tall and strong from working the vines, but gentle, too. He had eyes that crinkled at the corners when he laughed, like rays of sunshine." She sighs at the memory.

"The first time he spoke to me, I was hanging laundry in the garden. He asked if I needed help reaching the line—I was still quite short then." She chuckles softly to herself. "I told him I'd been managing just fine without him, grazie mille. But every week after that, he'd find some reason to pass by while I was doing laundry."

Her voice warms with the memories. "We'd talk about everything and nothing. He loved poetry. Can you imagine? This strong young man who spent his days tending vines—he could recite Petrarch from memory. He said the Italian sonnets reminded him of me. I told him he was full of nonsense." There's a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Roberto would tease him about it, but Vittorio just smiled—said some things were worth looking foolish for." She pauses, touching the ring again. "He proposed to me



in that same garden, kneeling right there between the sheets drying in the sun. Said he'd been practicing his speech for weeks, but when the moment came, all he could say was Elena, marry me. Just like that."

The smile falters. "We had ten months together as husband and wife. Ten perfect months. He was so excited about you," she looks tenderly at Lucia. "Our baby. He would talk to my belly every night, telling you stories about the vineyard, about our future together."

Her voice grows quiet. "When the war came closer, he and Roberto joined the resistance. They thought they could help from inside, being local boys who knew the area. Vittorio said it was his duty—to make sure our baby would grow up in a free Italy."

Tears glisten in her eyes, but she blinks them back. "The last time I saw him, he kissed me goodbye like any other morning. Said he'd be home for dinner." She's silent for a long moment. "Roberto came instead, three days later. To tell me Vittorio wasn't coming home."

Her fingers still absently caress the ring. "A week later, the Nazis came to the house. They took everything—the painting Vittorio's mother had given us as a wedding gift, the silver that had been in my family for generations. But this ring..." Her voice catches. "This was the last piece of him I had. When they ripped it from my finger, it felt like losing him all over again."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

Lucia reaches over and squeezes Nonna's hand. "You have me, mamma. I'm a part of him. I'll always be a part of him."

Nonna squeezes back, nodding absently. She squares her shoulders, familiar strength returning to her voice. She looks at me. "But you see, tesoro, love doesn't die. Not really. Vittorio lives in Lucia's smile. In Florence's strength. Now in this ring—it's a symbol of how love comes back to us."

She nods, almost to herself. "Vittorio would have liked that, I think. He always said poetry was about finding beauty in pain." She touches the ring one last time before letting her hand fall to her lap. "And isn't that what we're doing here? Finding beauty in all this old pain?" Beginnings and endings finding each other. Coming full circle.

"Now," she says briskly, wiping her eyes. "Someone needs to make coffee and bring dessert. We can't let good cannoli go to waste."

A wave of watery laughter breaks the tension. As everyone starts moving toward the kitchen, Nonna catches my hand.

"Thank you," she says softly. "For giving me back more than just a ring. You've given me hope for the future."

I feel Florence's arm slip around my waist. "Thank you for sharing your family with me," I say softly.

Nonna's eyes sparkle. "Ah, tesoro. Family is what we make of it, no? Some of the best families start with healing old wounds."

Later, we'll deal with the painting and the other treasures. We'll figure out how to move forward with the rest of it. But for now, there's family and cannoli and coffee.

38

Josie

Even after months, it strikes me how different the penthouse feels in the twilight.

Much of Karl's collection has been packed away, leaving the space emptier but somehow freer. I look out at the lake, the water shimmering with the setting sun.

I feel Florence's warmth as she steps up behind me. Her arms slip around my waist, and I lean back into her.

"Are you okay?" she asks softly. "Today was... a lot."

I cover her hands with mine, holding them against my stomach. "I keep thinking about Nonna's story." I turn my head to catch her profile in the fading light. "About how love doesn't really die."

She presses a kiss to my temple. "She's right, you know. What happened with Vittorio was tragic, but look what grew from it. Roberto bringing her to America. My mom meeting my dad. We wouldn't be here now if it weren't for those choices—choices made in grief."

"And love," I add. "It's kind of like what Karl did," I say quietly. "Watching over me... trying to protect Donna in his own way... It doesn't excuse what he did..." My stomach still twists at the thought.

"But you can understand trying to make something right, even if you go about it

wrong." Her arms tighten around me. "Like pretending to need a fake fiancée instead of just firing an asshole employee?"

I laugh despite myself. "That worked out pretty well, though."

"Did it?" she asks softly. "Sometimes I wonder if you're going to wake up one morning and realize this isn't what you want."

"Florence." I turn in her arms, needing to see her face. "Do you know what I was thinking about at dinner? Watching you with your family?" I cup her cheek, feeling her lean into my touch.

She shakes her head.

"I was thinking how, for fifteen years, I thought being in love with Mel was the biggest thing I'd ever feel. How I convinced myself that loving someone who couldn't love me back was somehow noble or pure." I brush my thumb across her cheekbone. "But being with you... It's so different. It's real. It's messy. Sometimes it's terrifying. But it's also the most alive I've ever felt."

She kisses me then, softly, before pulling back to look at the city twinkling below us. "What are you going to do with this place?"

"Sell it," I say without hesitation. "Use the money for the foundation. I was thinking we could focus on helping families trace and recover lost and stolen artifacts—not just from World War Two, but from any conflict where people were forced to leave their treasures behind."

Florence nods thoughtfully. "A way to honor both our families' histories."

"I thought maybe your brother could help evaluate coins that come through. And

Catalina's contacts in Italy could be invaluable with the art." I turn back to the view.  
"I want something good to come from all this."

"Something already has," Florence says quietly. "Look at our families. Nonna getting her ring back. Your mom and Donna finding each other. Even Marin finally accepting that I can take care of my own heart."

I have to smile at that. "She still watches me like a hawk."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"She loves you, you know. She's just too stubborn to admit it." Florence's cheek rests against my back. "Speaking of love..."

My heart skips. "Yes?"

"Move in with me?"

I turn to look at her, surprised. "What happened to needing your space?"

"I do need space sometimes," she admits. "But I've realized I need you more. We can figure out the details—maybe keep your place, too, for when either of us needs alone time. But..." She bites her lip. "I want to come home to you every night. I want to wake up with you every morning. I want to build a life with you, Josie."

The last rays of sunlight catch her hair, and I reach up to tuck a strand behind her ear. "You know what your Nonna said about love healing old wounds?"

She nods.

"Sometimes, to be stronger, we need to let go of the things we hold on tightest to. Like you letting your icy fortresses melt. Me letting go of my unrequited love for Mel." I lean my forehead against hers. "We both had to let those things go to find each other."

"Is that a yes?" she whispers.

"It's a yes." I kiss her softly. "But I'm keeping my place for now. You get grumpy

when you work late, and sometimes I need somewhere to hide from Hurricane Florence."

She laughs, the sound echoing off the empty walls of the penthouse. "Fair enough. Though I seem to remember you enjoying Hurricane Florence quite a bit last night," she teases.

39

Josie

The sun sets over the lake as Florence and I arrive at Nectar. Instead of going through the main entrance, she leads me through the Book Nook and up to our private space. The place where everything started.

"You're being suspiciously romantic," I tease her as she pulls out my chair.

"Maybe I just want to celebrate you making the world a little better today." She signals Matthew, who appears with a bottle of wine I recognize from our first real date here.

"Or maybe I have ulterior motives."

"Do tell." I watch her settle into her chair, still struck by how beautiful she is.

She takes a sip of wine before meeting my eyes. "Do you remember what you said to me that first night? About reading me so easily?"

"I remember you being annoyed about it." The corner of my mouth curls up. "The great Florence Pietra, transparent to a stranger."

"Not annoyed." She shakes her head. "Terrified. No one had ever seen through my walls like that before. Not even Katie."

I reach across the table and take her hand. "Are you still scared of being seen?"

"I'm not." Her thumb traces patterns on my palm. "That's what I wanted to tell you. These past few months..."

"Florence—"

"Let me finish," she says softly, squeezing my hand. "I thought love was a weakness, that letting someone in meant giving up control. But you've shown me it can be a strength." She bites her lip. "The way you love is brave, Josie. Even when you were in love with Mel, you never let it make you bitter. You just kept your heart open, waiting for the right person to love you back."

My throat tightens. "I wasn't brave. I was hiding. Using my feelings for Mel as an excuse not to risk my heart again."

"Maybe." She smiles softly. "But when you found me, you were brave enough to try. Even knowing I might break your heart."

"You were worth the risk." I bring her hand to my lips. "You still are."

She stands up abruptly, tugging me to my feet. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"You'll see." She leads me up a flight of stairs in the back room. We emerge onto a small rooftop garden. Lights twinkle around the edges, and a pair of chairs sit facing the lake.

"How long have you been planning this?" I ask, taking in the romantic setup.

"Since the day you walked out on me at dinner," she says sheepishly. She guides me to sit down. "I knew that if I ever got you back, I was never letting you go again."

"But I wasn't really yours," I point out. "It was just a contract."

"Josie." She kneels in front of my chair, taking both my hands in hers. "It was never just a contract. Not for me. From that first night when you saw right through me, I was yours. I just didn't know how to admit it."

"Florence," I murmur, my heart racing.

"The thing is," she continues, "I've been thinking about what Nonna said. About how love doesn't die, it just transforms—changes. Makes us better." She reaches into her pocket. "She gave me something the other day. Said it was time for it to transform again."

She opens her hand, revealing a delicate gold ring. Nonna's ring. The one we returned to her.

"Florence," I breathe, "is that—"

"Vittorio's blessing," she says softly, "and Nonna's, for when I'm ready to make my own promises of forever." Her hands shake as she holds up the ring. "I know neither of us expected things to turn out this way... but maybe that's the point. The most beautiful things can come from the most unexpected places."

Tears blur my vision as she squeezes my hands to her heart.

"I love how brilliant you are, how compassionate. I love that you see through my walls, but respect why I built them. I love that you make me want to open my heart. To really live." She takes a shaky breath. "I love—"

"Yes." I slide out of my chair to kneel with her. "Yes!"

She blinks in surprise. "I haven't asked yet. You don't know what I'm going to ask."

"Ask me, then." I cup her face in my hands, my thumb caressing her cheek. "I want to hear you ask me."

"Marry me?" She holds up the ring. "For real this time. No contract, no pretense. Just us, me and you, for the rest of our lives?"

"Yes." I pull her into a kiss. "A thousand times, yes."

Her hands tremble as she slides the ring onto my finger. "It fits."

"Of course it does." I laugh through my tears. "Donna probably gave you my ring size months ago."

Florence brushes her lips against mine. "I love you."

"I love you, too. I can't believe Nonna gave you her ring," I whisper, watching it

catch the light.

"She said some love is meant to live on." Florence helps me back into my chair before settling beside me. "That Vittorio would want his ring to be part of a new love story."

I lean my head against her shoulder, our fingers intertwined. "Tell me when you knew. When this stopped being pretend for you."

"That first night at the Book Nook." She presses a kiss to my temple. "When you called me out on being an ice queen and made it sound like understanding instead of criticism. You saw me—really saw me—and instead of running away, you wanted to know more." She chuckles softly. "Though I didn't admit it to myself until you walked out on me for being rude to Marin."

"Really?" I lift my head to look at her. "That's what did it?"

"That's when I knew I was in trouble," she corrects. "Because instead of being angry, all I could think about was how right you were. How much I wanted to be worthy of someone who would stand up for others like that." Her fingers play with mine. "When did you know?"

"I think I started falling for you the first time I saw you, at the gala five years ago." I smile at her surprise. "But I didn't know it then. I just knew you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and watching you command that room with such grace made my heart stop."

"Five years..." She shakes her head in wonder. "That's a long time."

"Worth the wait." I kiss her softly. "I didn't really admit my feelings to myself until that night at dinner when you shared this place with me—showed me this private part

of yourself that no one else got to see."

"And now you get to see all of me." She pulls me closer. "No more walls. No more pretending."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"No more ice queen?" I tease.

"Never with you."

We sit there watching the city lights, curled up against each other. The ring on my finger feels right, like it was always meant to find its way to this moment.

She turns serious. "Are you okay wearing it? Given its history?"

"More than okay." I look at the ring, thinking of Elena and Vittorio. "It's like Nonna said—sometimes the greatest love stories aren't just about two people. They're about families. About healing. Love coming full circle."

### Epilogue

Josie

"Pass the garlic bread, tesoro." Nonna motions to me from across the crowded table. Sunday dinner has gotten considerably louder since our families started sharing it. My mom sits next to Nonna while Mario and Dad argue good-naturedly about wine.

Florence squeezes my knee under the table before reaching for the bread basket. "Tell them about the coin," she murmurs.

I clear my throat. "We have some news."

The table gradually quiets, though Tilly keeps trying to steal food from Renna's plate.

"The government agreed to terms about the 1933 Double Eagle," I announce. "They're going to auction it and split the proceeds with the foundation."

"How much?" Joe asks, obviously trying to contain his excitement. As our authenticity expert, he's been following the coin case closely.

"Early estimates suggest between twenty and twenty-five million." I can't help grinning at his stunned expression. "Which means ten to twelve million more for helping families recover their lost treasures."

"Speaking of treasures," Catalina pipes up, "when are you two finally setting a date?"

Florence groans. "We've been engaged for three weeks, Cat. Let us enjoy it."

"You've been enjoying it for six months already," Tilly points out. "The fake engagement counts."

"No, it doesn't," Florence and I say in unison, making everyone laugh.

"The foundation dedication is next month," Mom says thoughtfully. "You could do it then—"

"Absolutely not." Florence shakes her head firmly. "Our wedding will not be a publicity event for the foundation."

We talked about it last night. We're thinking spring, something small and private. Just family and close friends. But we're keeping that to ourselves for now.

"How's the foundation coming along?" Dad asks, deftly changing the subject.

"We've already helped three families recover artwork," I tell him. "And we're

working with museums in France and Italy to digitize their records of lost artifacts."

"The university partnership is official, too," Florence adds. "They're creating a research center focused on art repatriation and cultural preservation."

"And they're naming it after Elena," I say softly.

Nonna's hand flies to the chain on her neck. "After me?"

"The Elena Vitale Center for Cultural Restoration," Florence confirms. "It seemed fitting."

Nonna mutters something in Italian that makes Lucia gasp and Catalina snicker.

"What did she say?" I whisper to Florence.

"That we're all impossible, and she's too old for such nonsense." Florence's eyes sparkle. "But she's pleased."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:58 pm*

"Will you tell the students my story?" Nonna asks suddenly. "About Vittorio?"

"Only if you want us to," I assure her.

She nods firmly. "They should know. About love and loss, and finding beauty in pain." Her eyes find the ring on my finger. "About how some treasures are meant to be lost, so they can be found again."

"Like us?" Florence murmurs in my ear.

"Like all of us," I say, looking around the table. At my mom and Donna, finally together. At Mel and Renna, so in love it warms my heart.

"To found treasures," Joe proposes, raising his wine glass.

"To found family," Mom adds.

"To found love," Florence says softly, just for me.

I lean over and kiss her, ignoring Tilly's exaggerated gagging noises. "To choosing each other," I whisper against her lips. "Every day."

Later, as we're cleaning up, Florence pulls me into a quiet corner. "I have something for you."

"Another ring?" I tease.



"Better." She hands me a small box. Inside is a key on a silver chain.

"What's this for?"

"I bought the penthouse," she says quietly. "Or I will, once the sale goes through."

I stare at her. "But I thought—"

"Not to live in," she explains quickly. "But I thought maybe for the foundation. It seems right, somehow. Transforming a place that held so many secrets for so long into a place that will help bring them to light."

I pull her close. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Mm, not in the last hour." She grins. "I'm starting to feel neglected."

"Well, we can't have that."

"Ready to go home?" Florence asks softly.

I look at the key in my hand, at the ring on my finger, and at the woman in front of me—the woman who started as a contract and became my everything.

"I am home," I tell her.