



Vows of Betrayal

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Stefan

I promised myself.

I'd never touch her again.

A woman like her will never fit into my world.

No.

A woman like her will never—want—to fit into my world.

And something deep inside of me wants that for her.

Normal.

Nice.

Ordinary.

Because there is nothing normal, nice, or ordinary about my world.

Letting her go is the only thing I can do.

It may just be the one and only selfless thing I've ever done in my life.

But—when I see her about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder—I'm suddenly left with only one choice.

Whether she likes it or not.

Total Pages (Source): 56

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

1

Dear Reader:

This is a series unlike my usual contemporary books.

Stefan likes things—the way he likes them.

And he enjoys certain pursuits that not everyone is into.

If you know what I mean...

So, if you don't enjoy the darker, naughtier side of romance, Stefan might not be for you.

And that is totally okay. I have a ton of other books on the nicer side for you to pick up.

For those of you who do like the naughty—I hope you enjoy Stefan & Francesca's story. It's gonna be a bumpy ride.

XOXO Jessa York

The Auction

Stefan

Honest to Christ.

If I had to spend five more minutes holed up in this shithole, I was going to snap someone's neck.

The object of the game—this poker game to be exact—was to get closer to Raul and make a business alliance. A very beneficial one.

Nick and Carlo thought this was the best way forward for all of us.

I, however, wasn't wholly convinced about that.

Raul Ramiro was a mean, slippery asshole.

He'd done some pretty horrible shit.

Well, every guy in this place had.

But Raul had his own special brand of assholery.

One that made even me fucking cringe in his presence.

Which said a lot.

Sitting near the big bastard wasn't something I'd choose to do willingly. His body stench couldn't be masked by the gallon or so of cologne he'd bathed in before he came here.

Under normal circumstances, I could have arranged our business matters in about ten minutes. And then got the hell back home.

To my empty, dark home.

But it was still better than where I currently sat.

Raul had no desire to talk business tonight. He was joining in with the rest of the men as they discussed women.

And the way they did that wasn't the kindest.

None of that was my problem, though. Whoever they conned into fucking them was not a topic I cared to discuss.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Raul was a bad guy. I mean, yeah, we all were to some extent. But he took that shit to a whole other level. The stories I'd heard over the years about that guy turned my stomach.

Apparently, he had a penchant for virgins. And he liked to play with his prey.

Not my thing.

At all.

Even if I ordered a girl from Ilona's, I still made sure she had fun. Yes, she was there to please me. But no, I didn't have any desire for her to have a shitty time just because I was paying her.

Obvious that this evening was a bust—I ended up folding and setting my cards down. “Well, gentlemen.” I stood and looked around at the men surrounding the table. “I'm done for tonight. Thank you for the invitation.”

Raul's slimy hand grabbed onto my arm and yanked me back down. “Are you fuckin' crazy, man? The main event is about to begin. And trust me. You don't want to miss it.”

The men all laughed and agreed.

“Sovrano. Sit your ass down. You ain't goin' nowhere.” Raul slapped me on the arm and chuckled.

The lights on the stage started to flicker.

Christ.

Had they gotten strippers?

I was not in the mood for this.

Yes, I appreciated looking at a naked woman. But not in the company of a bunch of idiots.

“Gentleman, quiet down. The auction is about to start!” a man on the stage hollered into a microphone. Once again, the men all laughed.

An auction?

What kind of fuckin’ auction were they having in this dump?

Somehow, I didn’t think it was art.

“Help me welcome our first lady of the evening,” the man waved his arm out to the side. “Francesca. She’s a nice, tight, stacked virgin, my friends. One hundred percent verified by our very own Dr. McKay.”

Jesus.

Were these guys serious right now? They were auctioning off—women?

“Fuck, me. I’m outta here.” Right as I stood again—I saw—

Her.

Fuck.

No.

Our eyes met.

And so many unsaid things transpired between us at that moment—that it almost leveled me.

Christ.

What the fuck was she doing up on that stage?

My eyes traveled down her body—her barely covered body.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

A body that I'd been wanting for months now.

A body that had left me.

Taken off into the night without one fucking word.

Despite myself, my dick jumped inside my pants.

How could it not?

The white bustier she wore made her huge tits look even bigger. Practically offering themselves to me.

And the real goddamn problem was—that I really wanted them.

And her white stocking-covered legs.

Christ.

Those long legs that I'd envisioned more than once wrapping around my waist.

All those weeks she'd taken care of me. Nursing me back to health.

And all I wanted to do was fuck her into next week.

Why that woman had stuck around, I'd never know. It wasn't like I paid her anything.

Even so.

Francesca had stayed with me.

Looking after me.

Giving me whatever I needed to heal.

And the biggest thing she gave me was her heart.

And I gave her mine.

And in thanks, she'd trampled all over the goddamn thing.

"We are starting the bidding at fifty grand. Now, which one of you fine gentlemen will be the first to bid?"

Not one second after the last word had exited the guy's mouth, Raul put his hand up.

"All right! Raul is lookin' for a new girl to break in!" The guys in the room all hooted and whistled.

And my guts tightened.

Francesca's eyes—her gorgeous, frightened eyes—shot from Raul to me.

Fuck.

She was terrified.

I could feel it in my bones.

Just the thought of Raul's disgusting hands on her made me want to rip his head off.

"One hundred thousand," I said as I raised my hand.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

2

Six months earlier.

How it all started...

Francesca

“Incoming G.S.W. to the chest. Estimated time of arrival—” nurse Headly said. “Two minutes. Be ready, Russo. You’re helping on this one.” She stared right at me.

Great.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t assisted on a gunshot wound before. But these people rarely fared all that well. Guns were unforgiving.

Bullets—even less so.

More than likely, this guy would come in barely clinging to life. And nothing we’d do would help the poor sucker out.

But this was a part of my job. Or at least that was what they told me when I started.

Basically, I got shifted around to where they needed me. Mostly to clean up or do other crap the nurses and doctors didn’t want to.

Which was fair enough.

I didn't have years and years of extra education. All I'd done was some crappy eight-week course.

I nodded at nurse Headly and shut my mouth. I also found that was the best thing to do around my superiors.

Look down.

Shut up.

Don't ask questions.

Those were the mottos I lived by in the hospital.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I carefully pulled it out. My sister had sent a message. I opened it to see her in a gorgeous white dress.

A wedding dress.

She didn't even have a boyfriend. But that didn't matter to Felicia.

Nope.

Her favorite pastime was trying on wedding dresses.

And trying to rope rich guys into dating her.

Except what they typically wanted from Felicia wasn't a commitment.

But that didn't stop my sister from giving them whatever the heck they wanted.

My twin sister had much different dreams than I did.

She always had.

For two people who shared the exact same DNA—you couldn't find two completely different people. The fact that we were mirror images of each other meant absolutely nothing.

One of the residents gowned up and put on a mask and a face shield. Depending on where the patient had been hit, you never knew if he'd be spurting a geyser out of his chest when he arrived. I followed suit and protected myself, too.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I'd barely slipped on a gown when the ER doors burst open. A very bloody, very pale adult male was rolling in on a gurney.

Yeah.

If I had to take a guess, I'd say he already had one foot in the grave. Poor guy.

As they pushed him by me, his eyes landed on mine.

The patient's eyes—

Gosh.

He had the most beautiful, sparkling eyes I'd ever seen.

Even though it had only been for a fleeting moment—it felt like that had somehow changed my life forever.

I hurried behind the hubbub. The paramedics yelled out certain key numbers regarding the patient's vitals.

And none of them were good.

Gosh.

The poor guy didn't have a hope.

That made me even sadder than it originally had. Seeing the patients was different than just hearing about them.

But there was something about how this guy stared at me—that I couldn't explain.

Once he was in a room, the nurses cut his bloodied and stained clothes off. And gosh, the guy was hot. I mean, for an almost dead dude who had about five minutes of life left in him.

He was older. I'd say mid to late thirties. He was lean, but still very muscular.

It was just too bad that he wasn't going to be around much longer. I bet he was a force to be reckoned with—or was a force to be reckoned with.

The doctor and nurses zoomed around, getting him fluids and trying like heck to stop the bleeding.

So, so, so much blood.

“Multiple casualties incoming. Huge crash on the Kennedy Expressway.” One of the nurses poked his head into our room. “They'll be here in five minutes.”

The resident peered up at the nurse and said, “We'll be done in here by then.” From the doctor's obvious tone, I knew he figured this guy's case was hopeless.

But those eyes—those dark eyes found mine. And I swore he was begging me to help him. But what could I do? If the doctor had already written him off, then there wasn't likely anything that I could possibly do.

His hand flexed at his side like he was—asking me to hold it.

Which was pretty stupid.

I mean, I didn't even know the guy. Why would he want me to hold his hand?

Whatever it was, though, I couldn't help it. He drew me to him without even saying a thing. I stepped up to the side of the bed and grabbed his wet, cold, clammy hand. It was sticky with blood. But for some reason, I didn't care.

For a dying guy, he had a really good grip.

I gazed down into his terrified face. And it felt like he'd reached inside and squeezed my heart.

I didn't know this man, but he had some kind of weird hold over me that I didn't understand.

"Everyone out of the way. We're going to take X-rays!" the resident yelled as someone rolled the portable machine into the room.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I tried to remove my hand from his—but he wouldn't let me. The man stared at me, his eyes open wide—and he slowly shook his head.

He wanted me to stay.

“Francesca, get out so we can take the X-rays!” one of the nurses yelled at me. But the man's grip increased tenfold on my hand.

I guess I wasn't going anywhere.

“Just take it. I'll stay with him.”

The nurse yelled at me some more, but I refused to leave. Then the resident walked up to me. “Let go of him. We need these X-rays now.”

I inhaled deeply. “It's fine. Take the damn pictures,” I said with no small bit of frustration. They needed to hurry up. If there was something they could do for this guy, they had to do it. And fast.

“Francesca, listen to me. You can't be in here. There'll be radiation. It'll take us too long to get another lead apron for you. He doesn't have that kind of time to waste. And think about how many X-rays you've had in your life. You don't need this repeated exposure. It can be dangerous,” he explained point blank.

And I laughed. I couldn't help it. I'd had exactly zero X-rays in my life. There wasn't one time that my dad would have taken me down and paid for one. Even when I broke my arm. All he did for that was find a couple of pieces of old baseboard and

wrap an elastic bandage around them and my arm.

“I’ll take the risk,” I told the resident.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. Then he lowered his voice. “What if you’re pregnant? It can hurt the baby.”

To that I laughed even louder. “I’m not pregnant.”

He closed his eyes briefly and opened them. “No birth control is one hundred percent, Francesca. You might be pregnant and not know it yet.”

I couldn’t help laughing again. “Unless it’s the immaculate conception, I’m okay. I’ve never had sex before.”

Realization hit him because he backed off. “Fine. But I’m writing you up to the disciplinary committee after this.”

I shrugged and played it off. Even though I was shaking inside. If he wrote me up—I might get canned. And I’d barely even started working here. I needed the money to keep afloat.

“Do what you need to do,” I said, hoping like heck he’d maybe forget all about this, or decide writing me up would be too much work.

After that, he gave up and took the stupid pictures.

The man still held onto my hand. To tell you the truth, it was starting to go a bit numb.

But, gosh.

He looked so freaking scared.

Like he knew exactly what his fate was.

I wondered if I'd know when the moment of my death would be upon me. I wondered if I'd be frightened, too. Or if I'd be grateful. And ready.

For some reason, I pulled my face shield off and tossed it onto the floor. And I took off my mask.

I didn't want the last thing he saw to be some human covered in P.P.E.

"Don't be scared. They'll look at the X-rays and get you up into surgery before you even know it."

His eyes bounced all over my face, and I was glad he could see me.

"Just hang on a little longer and they'll fix you right up."

His eyes burned into mine like—well, I didn't really know. All I did know was that he wasn't letting me go.

"What's your name?" I asked him in a gentle voice. "I'm Francesca. But you heard that already," I said, remembering that the resident had used my name several times.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

His hand moved shakily to his oxygen mask, and he attempted to pull it down.

He was too weak, though, so I helped.

“Stefan,” he said with what looked like a huge amount of effort.

I smiled and put the oxygen mask back on.

“Hi, Stefan,” I said like an idiot.

Stefan didn’t seem to mind, though. Because right at that moment, he smiled and whispered, “Hi, Francesca.”

Something made me want to dive right into his eyes. And then I became even sadder. For him.

For what might have been.

For what should have been.

“Excuse us, Miss. We have some questions to ask the patient.” I looked up to see two police officers walk into the room.

I gazed down at Stefan and he very, very slowly shook his head.

I took the hint and immediately said, “Not a great time right now, guys. Come back later, okay?”

The taller officer stepped forward. “From what we’re told, he doesn’t have a later. We need to ask him some questions about his shooting before—”

I cut him off. Stefan didn’t need to hear any of this.

Even if it was true.

“I said it’s not a good time. I’m in charge of this patient and I’m asking you to leave his room. You’re upsetting him. And that’s not good right before he goes into surgery.”

The officer’s eyebrows rose. “We were told there was nothing more they could do for him.”

Dammit.

That was probably why nobody came back after his X-rays. I’d bet they were all waiting for the new incoming patients.

“Well, you heard wrong, officer. He’s going to be fine. Now, if you’ll get out, that’d be great.” I gave him a nasty scowl.

He and his partner continued to fight with me. But I didn’t care.

Stefan didn’t want to talk to them.

So, I wasn’t going to allow it.

Finally, they gave up and left.

“Francesca.” I heard my name.

I looked down and Stefan had his mask off. And he was—grinning like a fool.

“What? And keep your mask on.” I reached over to set it back over his nose and mouth.

Stefan shook his head. “Come here.”

I leaned down to listen.

“Francesca,” he said, gasping for air, “I think I’m in love with you.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I laughed and turned my head.

Gosh.

Even covered in buckets of blood, he was still a great-looking guy.

My free hand traveled to the side of his face. I touched him there and whispered, “I think I love you, too, Stefan.” And the really, really weird thing about that was—it didn’t feel like a lie. Which was insane. Because I didn’t even know this man.

And I certainly didn’t love him.

Right?

“What the fuck’s going on in here?” a loud voice shouted into the room.

I bolted up and saw an older man there. He was a doctor. Probably the surgeon on call.

“He’s waiting for surgery. They asked me to stay with him until you came,” I lied my face off. He didn’t have to know that, though.

The doctor huffed and looked at the X-rays in his hands. He held them up and whistled. “Christ. What a fuckin’ mess. A guy would have to be crazy to try to fix that.”

My heart sank, and I immediately started in on him. “You have to. He has five kids at

home,” I lied again. “Some random shooter got him in a mall. Didn’t you hear about it in the news? People will go crazy if it gets out that nobody even bothered to try to help him.” Something else came to me. “Especially since he saved hundreds of people’s lives by disarming the gunman.”

Gosh.

If lightning suddenly struck me because of all the lies I’d just told the doctor, I wouldn’t be surprised.

The surgeon’s head snapped to me. “All right. Let’s see if we can save this hero’s life, shall we?”

3

Stefan

Jesus-mother-fucking-Christ.

I tried to roll over onto my side. But for some unknown reason—I couldn’t.

I opened my eyes—or I tried to. Instead, I was met with a dark, heavy void.

What the fuck was going on?

“Oh, geez Louise, hold on. Don’t pull that out yourself or we’re going to have a whack of problems. Hang on,” a voice that sounded like an angel’s said. A warm hand landed on my cheek. And this time—I actually was able to open my eyes.

The most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my fucking life greeted me.

Fuck.

Was I in Heaven? Did I die?

From the pain in my goddamn chest right now, I'd guess that was what happened.

The angel smiled down at me. "Shh, you're fine, Stefan. Don't move, okay? You'll only make this harder." Her thumb swiped back and forth over my cheek. For some reason, it calmed me immediately. I trusted my angel. I laid my head back down on the pillow and calmed the fuck down. That was when I noticed some kind of tube was stuck down my throat. I couldn't close my mouth. "Get this out of me," I said as my fingers desperately grasped onto the tube.

Or at least that was what I'd tried to say. Instead, it came out as a series of grunts.

"Hey, hey, honey," my angel said in an almost lyrical voice. "Don't panic." Her hand landed on mine near my mouth. "You're going to be just fine. The nurses are busy, but I know how to do this. Just relax." The sound of her voice—it was like a goddamn song. Every word she said floated over me and through me. I swear to Christ I could—feel—her words.

Against my better judgment, I let go of the tube and waited for my angel to deal with this fuckin' thing.

And then—she smiled at me again.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

And fuck me if I didn't feel that all over my body, too.

What kind of drugs had they given me?

“Do me a favor, Stefan? Can you cough for me? Please?”

Cough?

I could do that.

I coughed—and then gagged as she pulled out whatever the hell was down my throat.

“Crap, here,” she said, handing me a few tissues. I coughed and choked as I tried to catch my breath.

But it felt like I couldn't breathe.

Panic began to overtake me.

Again.

“Shh, Stefan. Look at me, honey. Stop. You can do this. Calm down and focus on me. Now, take a slow breath in. Like this.” Then my angel inhaled, her hands on my arms holding them down. My eyes wandered down to her chest.

And to her very large breasts. Holy fuck.

I quickly looked back into her sparkling green eyes.

“Stefan, please? Breathe with me. Slowly.”

A beeping noise pierced the silence between us. “Sheesh, hold on. Take this freaking thing off.” She ripped something off my finger and the beeping noise stopped. “Okay.” My angel looked at my lips. And I suddenly felt that right in my cock. “Inhale.” She took in a deep breath and held it. And then started to breathe out. “And exhale.” With every breath, her huge goddamn breasts moved delightfully up and down. In the position we were in right now, I could imagine her naked, riding me. Those big tits swaying in front of my face as she took her time finding her release.

“Good, Stefan. That’s so good,” she whispered to me and my cock jumped.

It fucking—jumped.

I imagined her riding me, saying, “Yes, Stefan. That’s so good,” while she moaned my name over and over again.

Fuck.

I was a fucking bastard.

Here was my angel trying to help me breathe, and all I could think about was fucking her.

“Oh, I like that, honey. Keep going,” she said—and I groaned. She needed to stop saying shit like that. I closed my eyes and willed my cock to go back down.

“Oh, no. Are you in pain? We can up your meds,” she asked, letting go of my arms. I felt the loss of her touch severely.

“No, stay,” I croaked out, not even recognizing my own crackly voice. My hand shot out and grasped her arm.

She smiled down at me again and slid her hand over mine.

“Okay. I’ll stay.”

As she stared into my eyes, there was something familiar there. Something all-knowing.

I wracked my clouded, aching head for answers. But I didn’t come up with anything.

“Do you want some water? Your voice sounds rough.”

I tried to swallow, and it felt like knives in my throat. “Yeah, please,” I rasped out and let her arm go.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

She reached over to the small bedside table and poured a glass of ice water. Incidentally, I caught a glimpse of her ass. I adjusted myself before she turned around.

“Here, I just freshened it up a few minutes before you woke up. You’ve got good timing.” She smiled and held the glass up. I touched my lips to the plastic rim, and it was awkward as hell. My head felt too heavy. Keeping it up was just too exhausting.

“Fuck,” I said, letting my head fall back onto the pillow. What the hell was wrong with me that I couldn’t even drink from a cup anymore?

“Let me help you out,” my angel said. She picked up a plastic spoon and dug into the cup. “Try one little ice chip.”

I opened my mouth, and she spooned it in. “Just let it melt on its own.”

Havingher around was like covering myself up with one of Giselle’s soft as fuck homemade blankets.

My angel slowly fed me ice chips until my mouth felt almost normal. My throat was still sore as fuck, though.

“Do you want to try drinking again?” she asked. My eyes focused on her lips.

Christ, they were plump. I’d really like to taste them.

“Yeah,” I said and pushed up. She held the shitty plastic cup while I took a few big

sips.

It felt glorious. The cool water rushed down my throat. The first few swallows hurt. Bad. But after that, it was more of an annoyance.

“What are you doing? Why didn’t you tell us he was awake?” a nurse—who was not even close to as beautiful as my angel—strode in with a huge stick up her ass.

My angel helped me back down and said, “He just woke up. I was on my way to tell you.”

The nurse huffed and puffed. “I’m writing you up for this, Francesca.” Her tone angry and disgusted. “And did you—” her eyes went wide when she saw my face. “Did you extubate him? You’re not trained for that.” She shook her head and glared at my angel.

Francesca.

Fuck, that was a great goddamn name.

A really fuckin’ great Italian name. From the glow of her skin, I’d guess she definitely had Italian blood flowing through those veins.

Something about that pleased me.

A whole fucking lot.

“I’ll be back to assess him. Hopefully, we don’t have to re-intubate.” She left in a fluster.

“Fuck,” I said and shut my eyes. Frustration was getting the better of me when a soft,

warm hand landed on my upper arm.

“She’s a total bitch. Don’t worry, they’re not going to stick another tube down your throat.”

A faint floral smell wafted over me. I inhaled deeply to suck in as much of that smell as I could into my nose.

Fuck.

My cock moved again.

Jesus.

Her hair fell over me, and I swear to Christ I nearly came right here in the hospital bed.

Silky strands of dark brown hair covered me. I sniffed it. Was it lavender?

No.

Roses.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Yes.

Definitely roses.

“Oh, sorry.” Francesca moved back, giving me a clear view of her generous cleavage.

I had to stop my greedy hands from touching her. And my greedy eyes from staring at her like some kind of leech.

She grasped my hand tenderly. Then she tenderly rubbed her thumb over the back of it. Everything about that felt heavenly. “You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

A stabbing pain shot through my chest, and I groaned, “Fuck.” I brought my hand up, but there were layers and layers of bandages there. I frowned. “What happened? Why does my chest hurt so bad?” Once again, confusion wracked my brain. I couldn’t remember shit.

“Oh, honey.” Her hand gently squeezed mine. “You were shot.”

4

Stefan

Shot?

What the fuck?

How in Christ's name did that happen?

"Shot? Are you sure?" I asked just as the bitchy nurse with the stick up her ass stormed back in. She immediately ordered Francesca to leave. Which she did hesitantly.

But before she took off, she grinned and mouthed, "I'll be back." And then my angel was gone.

Two other nurses came in and poked and prodded and asked a shitload of questions. Their hands were bony and sharp. And they hurt everywhere they touched me. Then a few more people walked in, and started quizzing me, too.

Finally, I'd fuckin' had it.

"Stop!" I yelled at them.

All of them.

My entire room was filled with assholes. Each one of them tried to take something from me.

My temperature.

My blood pressure.

My fuckin' sanity.

"Get out of here. All of you. Leave me the fuck alone," I snapped and shoved the last of their hands off me. "Go away!" I screamed, their shocked faces looked me over—and then they all left.

Thank fuck.

I didn't want to deal with their bullshit tests. What were they going to say?
Besides—you're dying?

Because that was the only explanation for how I felt. No one could feel this horrible
and survive. There was no way in hell I was walking out of this hospital alive.

No.

They'd be carrying me in a body bag.

My chest hurt like fuck, and I wanted to—

Fuck.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I just wanted to die.

Get it over with.

The suffering I'd felt in the last half hour was out of this world.

I wanted it to end.

What felt like hours later, my angel came floating back into my room. "Hi," she said breathily. Once at the side of my bed, she pulled up a chair and sat. "You look so much better than you did an hour ago." Her gaze glided over my face. "So much better. How do you feel?"

Christ.

Her voice and her touch were like a goddamn balm to my soul. When she was around, I hardly noticed how fucking shitty I felt.

"Oh, honey. No, don't." Her thumb reached up and she swiped something away. It was then I realized I was crying.

Fuck me.

I was crying.

Not only that, but I was doing it in front of my angel. "You're fine. Trust me. I wouldn't lie to you. I know you probably feel like complete crap. But that will

change. You'll get better every day, Stefan. You believe me. Don't you?" She looked at me with hopeful eyes. And I didn't want to disappoint her. Why didn't I want to disappoint her? Why did I care?

"I feel like shit." I closed my eyes for a moment and got control of myself. "I don't think I'm coming out of this, Francesca. I really fuckin' don't." My eyes opened to see her standing beside my bed.

And then—I started fuckin' crying.

Again.

Jesus Christ.

"Honey, don't. Please, don't. Can you try to get some sleep?" Her hand gently stroked the side of my face while I bawled like a baby.

"Here," she said, letting go of my hand to unlatch the bed rail? When it was down, she slipped in beside me, curling her body around me in that tiny space. "Close your eyes."

I sniffled and wiped my wet cheeks with my hand. "You're going to get in trouble again." I didn't see how she wouldn't. I mean, if they yelled at her for helping me, what the fuck were they going to do when they saw her in bed with a patient?

"Nah, you scared the crap out of them." She giggled. Her breasts jiggled as she did so. "They sent me in to deal with you." She laughed some more, and it—soothed me.

Having her close—touching her—smelling her—it all helped.

For some reason.

It helped.

And before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

5

Francesca

“No, but what you can do—” I heard Stefan’s voice down the hall, “is fuck right off. I already told you I don’t want to see you. Didn’t want to see you before this bullshit happened. And I sure as fuck don’t want to see you now.”

There were two women standing outside Stefan’s door. They were giving each other concerned looks. The blonde one said something to the brunette. And they both nodded.

I hurried to his room. I was the only one on the floor who could deal with Stefan. He seemed to hate everyone else with a fiery passion. And I had to admit—that made me happy. Which was warped and weird. And totally illogical.

I glanced at the women as I got closer to the door.

Cripes.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

They weren't just pretty. They were gorgeous. I gave them a small smile before I rushed through the door and—

Whoa.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Holy crap.

It was hot guy central in here.

A dark-haired man—wearing a suit that probably cost more than an entire year's worth of rent—looked right at me. He was standing to the left of Stefan's bed.

On his right—double holy crap. An even taller guy stood, peering down angrily at Stefan. He gave off lumberjack vibes if I was completely honest. Those arms could chop dozens of trees a day without breaking a sweat.

I'd bet on it.

“Why are you yelling? You know you're not supposed to get upset like that.” I tossed my lunch bag onto one of the chairs.

Stefan's eyes found mine immediately. And in an instant—the anger in his expression melted right off.

I looked at the man in the suit, first. “You and your friend need to leave. Now. Stefan

can't get riled up like this. It's not good for his recovery. Kindly leave before I call security." My hands held onto my hips as all three men stared at me. A sudden all-over-body shiver traveled from my head to my toes.

I had to admit that it wasn't exactly a bad thing.

The two men at Stefan's sides looked at each other.

And grinned.

Then their eyes landed back on Stefan.

"Looks like visiting hours are up," the bigger, lumberjack guy said with a smile on his face.

"Yeah, we didn't mean to rile you up," the guy in the suit said, then glanced over at me again. His eyes took a long slow descent down my body. One that I didn't mind him doing at all. For some reason.

When his eyes finished looking me over, he said, "Take care of him for us, will you?"

I gave him a frown. "Uh, that's what I've been doing. And you guys are doing the exact opposite. I'd suggest you don't come back again until Stefan says it's okay."

The two men looked at each other again.

And grinned.

Why were they smiling?

"Was I not clear enough? You need to go. Now." I could practically hear the blood

coursing through my veins.

“I guess we’re being thrown out,” the guy in the suit said to the lumberjack guy.

Then the lumberjack guy said, “Apparently.”

Stefan pushed himself up. “Would you two assholes get the fuck out of here already?” A look of pain shot across his face that made me gasp.

“Sheesh,” I said, heading to Stefan. I squeezed between the lumberjack and the bed and helped Stefan lay back down. “You know you’re not supposed to sit up by yourself yet. Why didn’t you ask me for help.”

Stefan grunted. “You were way over there,” he said, sounding more than a little ticked off.

“Nurse Maureen said you did that earlier, too. And your stitches bled. There are plenty of other people around here to help you,” I reprimanded him. Though, over the last few days, the nurses had all ordered me to look after him. Nobody else wanted to deal with his awful attitude.

“I don’t want any of them to help me. I want you,” he muttered while I fixed his blankets.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“I don’t live here, Stefan. You need to let someone else do some crap for you, too.”

Someone behind me cleared their throat.

My head twisted to see the lumberjack still standing behind me.

He looked at me and then at Stefan. “Bye, Stefan. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Stefan’s eyes shot to him. “I won’t fuckin’ answer.”

After that, the guy in the suit said, “Take care, Stefan. Look after yourself.”

Then they both retreated and left.

“Sheesh, what the heck was that all about?” I asked Stefan. Then I wandered over to his supper tray that was still on the table. I opened the cover to see an entire untouched plate. “And you didn’t eat again?” I looked over my shoulder at him. “How do you expect to gain your strength back if you don’t eat?”

Stefan glared at me. “The food here is awful. I can’t eat that slop.” He pointed at his meal. I mean, he was right. It wasn’t great, but it was edible.

I sighed and put the cover back on the plate. “I tell you what. Why don’t you eat my supper, and I’ll eat yours? We’ll trade. Okay?” I’d actually made a wonderful supper for myself today. I’d spent hours and hours preparing it. I was lucky to get the meat on such a sale, it wasn’t even funny. Bernie texted to let me know he’d kept a stash for me. He had a butcher shop below my apartment.

Stefan gave me a disgusted look that almost made me laugh. The way he screwed up his face and tilted it slightly to the left—I had to hold in a giggle. How someone could be so angry over supper, I’d never understand.

Yes, hospital food kind of sucked.

Yes, I could make food that was way, way, way better than anything they served here.

But, like my Nona used to say, beggars can’t be choosers. So, if I was hungry, I’d eat whatever the heck was put in front of me. And I’d be just fine with it.

“I’m not eating your fuckin’ supper, Francesca,” he said incredulously. Like me offering to trade meals with him was the most inconceivable thing he’d ever heard. Stefan shook his head and laid back. Not all the way, though.

Over the last few days, we’d been able to move the head of the bed up more and more. At first, he couldn’t sit up for more than a few minutes before asking to be let back down again.

But now, he could easily stay up for a good hour or more at a time.

I grabbed my lunch bag from the chair and set it down on the narrow table. The smell of meat sauce already hit my nose, making my mouth water. I opened up the plastic margarine container full of pasta and smiled. Stefan was going to love this.

Then I proceeded to move his supper onto the ledge by the window and set up my food on the table. After that, I pushed the patient table over to the bed, directly in front of Stefan.

“I just told you that I’m not eating your supper,” he said less convincingly that time.

Again, I wanted to giggle. But I didn't.

"Too bad. I'm eating yours, so there's no other choice. If you don't eat it, I'll just have to chuck it in the garbage," I lied. If he didn't eat it, I was going to put it in the staff fridge and eat it tomorrow.

I sat down in the chair and started eating a very bland, very sad, piece of chicken. It wasn't horrible. It just could have been so much better with the proper seasoning. A good homemade gravy. And my stuffing.

The mashed potatoes were lumpy as heck. But I'd had worse. Like when Nona's arthritis was really bad, and she just couldn't cook like she used to.

"Are you seriously going to eat that?" Stefan's voice pulled me out of memory lane.

"It's fine. There's nothing wrong with it. You're just picky." I waved my hand at the food on his table. "You need to eat something. At least take a bite." I rolled my eyes and pretended like I didn't care how much he ate. When in reality, if he didn't lose his mind over how freaking wonderful it tasted—I might have my own temper tantrum over here.

"This is fucking ridiculous," he muttered to himself. But when I looked up a few moments later, he was taking his first bite.

Yay.

It gave me more joy than it should to know that he was eating food that I'd painstakingly prepared.

"Holy fuck," he said over top of a mouthful of pasta. "Did you make this?" he asked while he chewed. Watching him eat my food gave me an indescribable feeling inside.

One that I'd never felt before. It confused me. But it also made me happier than I'd been in a long, long time.

I swallowed down the greasy, bland chicken. "I did," was all I said, and stuffed a forkful of mashed—or more like unmashed—potatoes into my mouth.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“Where did you get these noodles?” Stefan asked, twirling his fork in the spaghetti like a pro.

“I told you, I made it.”

His eyebrows nearly flew off his face. “You made the noodles? From scratch?”

I nodded and continued eating. “Yep. It’s the only way. I hate boxed.”

He ate another mouthful or two before giving up and laying back down.

I stood and wiped my hands off. Then I walked over to his bed and pushed the button, so the head of his bed rose up again. “You haven’t eaten much. Stay as upright as you can for a while,” I advised him. Then I turned to sit back down again.

“I wish I could eat more but I’m full.” He pushed the table away and sighed.

“Give yourself some time,” I said, as I picked the last few strips of meat off the bones. I was still hungry. This really didn’t hit the spot. Probably because my brain wanted the spaghetti and meat sauce I’d made.

“Francesca,” Stefan said calmly. I loved how he said my name with a slight Italian accent. He definitely looked Italian to me.

Both of his hot friends did, too.

“Francesca?” he said my name again and I looked up. “You should eat the rest of this.

It would be a shame to put such a wonderful meal in the garbage.”

I thought about that for all of two seconds before I jumped out of my chair. I grabbed the margarine container and swirled the noodles around my fork. “Mmm,” I said, my eyes fluttering closed with delight. “So good.” And it was. Even though it had cooled off. I didn’t mind. Not one bit.

I loved my sauce. Hot or cold.

Stefan chuckled—well, he kind of did. His chest still hurt him quite a bit. So things like laughing—and breathing—increased his pain significantly.

“What?” I asked with a completely full mouth. But I didn’t care at all. Nothing was getting between me and eating the rest of my food.

“Nothing,” he said with a smirk on his face as he stared at me. His eyes looked me up—and down, causing interesting tingles over my skin. I liked it when Stefan did that. I liked it a lot.

“Did you make the sauce, too?” he asked and cleared his throat.

I nodded and chewed. “Yep,” I said over another mouthful of spaghetti. “And I made meatballs.”

Stefan’s eyebrows rose up and nearly flew off his forehead. “Why didn’t you pack any?” he asked like I’d ripped him off or something. It was kinda cute.

I grinned. “They’re huge. I didn’t want to pack another container.” I shrugged. His eyes stayed on me like he was trying to tell me something.

I swallowed and smiled. “Would you like me to bring you some meatballs

tomorrow?”

He immediately nodded. “Of course, I want your fuckin’ meatballs, Chesca.”

Oh, boy.

He called me by a nickname. And that did funny things to my body.

And my brain.

With a name like Francesca, I tended to get a lot of nicknames. It was a long name and kind of an awkward one to say—and spell.

Mostly, friends called me Frannie or Frankie.

But nobody had called me Chesca. Until now.

“If your noodles and sauce taste this great, I can only imagine how mind blowing your meatballs are going to be.”

I gave him a bashful smile, then turned around to sit down. “They’re pretty good, Stefan.” I grinned even wider at him from the chair.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

His eyes really bore into mine. “I have a feeling you’re about to ruin meatballs for me entirely. I won’t want anyone else’s except yours.”

Something zinged through me at that moment—but I wasn’t sure what it was. I actually thought I was low-level getting electrocuted or something. But I knew that was stupid.

Whatever was happening between me and the very critically injured man in the bed—was something I’d never experienced before.

“My meatballs are tasty, Stefan. But they won’t change your life or anything.”

He chuckled and grabbed his chest as he did. “I disagree, Chesca. I really disagree.”

6

Francesca

“I love you. I’ll take a bullet for you any day of the week, sweetheart.” Stefan’s voice drifted out of the open door to my ears.

All the air whooshed out of my lungs, and I was in immediate danger of falling over. Luckily, my hand found the wall, and I leaned on it.

“It wasn’t fair. You should have let him shoot me instead,” a woman’s soft voice said as she wept. “This is all my fault.”

Stefan sighed loudly. “Not in a billion fuckin’ years would I allow you to take a goddamn bullet. Why would you say something so stupid? Huh? And who would be around to take care of the babies? My idiot brother?”

She—whoever the heck she was—let out a laughing cry. “He’d do just fine without me. You know that.”

Stefan’s voice boomed over hers, “Bullshit! Stop talking like that, Giselle. None of us can ever do just fine without you. Say that again and I’ll—”

The woman—Giselle, I guess—hiccupped, “Or what, Stefan? You’ll give me a dirty look?”

Silence filled the air for a moment before they both laughed.

And it turned my stomach something awful.

The familiar way they spoke.

Like they knew each other—but they also—knew—each other.

And like there was a lot of history there. History that I had no knowledge of whatsoever.

For some reason, that made me sad.

When the laughter petered out, Giselle said, “You need to talk to him. He’s your brother. You need to forgive him. And Nick.”

A few seconds later Stefan’s tone was harsh and clipped. “Don’t hold your fuckin’ breath on that one. They can both rot as far as I’m concerned.”

This time it was Giselle's turn to sigh. "They're so worried about you. After—" she sniffled, "after, you know, they were out of their minds worried for you. I don't think Carlo has slept a minute since it happened. Eve says the same thing about Nick. He's sick about the whole thing."

Stefan chuckled, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "Aww, poor assholes."

I quietly stepped into the room. He was clearly getting upset. I should stop this little visit now before he goes off the rails.

The gorgeous brunette I'd seen outside Stefan's door the other day was apparently—Giselle. And she didn't look any less beautiful today even though she was crying.

She stood at his bedside, holding his hand with both of hers.

"Just listen to them? At least let Nick come and talk with you?"

I could tell Stefan was trying his best to harness his rage. I could hear it in his voice when he said, "I don't give a fuck about either of them."

Giselle's head fell forward, and she sobbed, "You don't mean that." Then she looked up at him. "What about Eve? She wants to see you. Please, honey?" Hearing her call Stefan "honey" made me sick to my stomach. It also made me want to rip her arm off.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Stefan pulled her hand until she got closer. Like really close. “Tell Evie that if she wants a break from all those kids, she can come and see me anytime.”

Giselle smiled and nodded through her tears. “Thank you.” She inhaled shakily. “She’s going to be so happy to hear that.”

What Stefan did next felt like a punch to my stomach. He slid his hand into her hair and whispered, “Stop crying, sweetheart. You're breaking my fuckin' heart.”

And then—

He kissed her.

His lips on hers.

It looked like a closed mouth kiss from what I could tell. But it also wasn't just a brief peck on the lips.

“Okay. I'll stop. I promise. But you're breaking my heart, too. I want our family to be a family again.”

That was it.

About all I could freaking take.

“My patient needs his rest. You'll have to leave,” I said in my best no-nonsense voice as I stared down Giselle.

But instead of giving me any kind of pushback—she smiled.

Really, really smiled. She pushed away from Stefan and took a big breath while she wiped under her eyes. “You’re right. He needs to rest. I’m sorry, I stayed too long.” Then she turned back to Stefan. “Do what your nurse orders, okay?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I always do. Give those babies a hug from me. All of them.”

Giselle nodded and got all teary-eyed again. “I will. They get bigger every day. You’re missing so much.” Then she leaned down and gave him a hug. Stefan said something to her, but it was too faint, and I couldn’t hear.

“Yeah, bye, honey. Be good.” Her hand lightly touched his cheek, and he—leaned into it.

Yeah.

I might just break her arm when she walked by me.

Giselle straightened and walked in my direction. She stopped a foot away and—hugged me. “Thank you for taking such great care of him. He looks so much better because of you.”

Giselle didn’t just give me a hug. She gave me a—hug.

I mean, she must’ve held onto me for a good full minute at least.

A minute was a long darn time to hug a stranger. When she finally did let go, she said, “We can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done.” More tears fell down her cheeks. She brushed them away and glided out the door like some kind of movie star

or super model.

I turned back to Stefan. “Who the hell was that?” I could feel myself scowling at him.

And what did he do?

He laughed.

The big jerk—laughed.

“What's so funny?” I asked as I wandered over to his bed. I wasn't exactly sure why I was so mad. But I was.

“You are,” he said, still laughing.

At me.

“Come here, woman.” He reached out and grasped my arm, pulling me closer. “Lay down with me for a minute.” He moved over gingerly. But still, he moved over.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I felt myself scowling at him again. “I’m not laying down beside you,” I said, and tried to pull my arm away.

“Yeah, you are.” He grinned his smexy little smile at me. And for some reason, that really ticked me off.

“No, I’m not. I don’t want to lay down beside you,” I snapped. He still wouldn’t let go of my arm.

“Yeah, you fuckin’ do.”

Oh, my gosh. This man made me so angry sometimes.

“Trust me, Stefan.” I glared straight at him. “I don’t.”

He chuckled and pulled harder on my arm. “Give me one minute. I’ll tell you who that woman was. But only if you lay down.”

Jerk.

I wanted to know who she was. Stupid curiosity.

I looked at him and pointed. “One minute. That’s it.”

He smiled and moved over a bit more. I carefully laid down beside him. He rolled onto his side. It took him some time to get situated. That was a difficult feat with his chest wound.

Finally, he settled—his arm under my head.

“That woman was Giselle. She’s my sister-in-law. She's married to my brother, Carlo. They've got three kids.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn't say a word.

“What?” he asked, his hand starting to run up and down my arm. “Something's bothering you. What is it?” he said in a low voice.

It didn't matter what tone he used with me. I was still mad.

“You kissed her. On the lips. Is that something you do with all your sisters-in-law?” My tone more than accusatory. Because really, who the heck kisses their sister-in-law on the lips?

He chuckled and exhaled a long, slow breath. “I do. The guy who was here with my brother? That's Nick. He's been like a brother to me for years. He's married to a woman named Eve. And I kiss her on the lips, too.”

That angry ball I'd had in my stomach doubled.

Stefan laughed softly. “You're jealous.”

That angry knot in my belly quadrupled.

“I am not,” I said stubbornly. “Kissing other men's wives is weird. But go ahead. It's a free country.”

He laughed as his fingers trailed up my arm, over my neck, and up to cradle the side of my head. “I don’t kiss other men's wives. I kiss Giselle and Eve. That's it,” he said

so matter of fact—as if that should suddenly make it okay.

“Good for you. I bet their husbands think that's great.” The sarcasm in my voice was obvious.

“You don't know the half of it,” he said mysteriously. But it didn't matter. I didn't care. Stefan could kiss whoever he wanted.

“Fuck, your jealousy is makin' me hard, Chesca.” His hand tightened on my head.

“I'm not sure that's good for someone with a gunshot wound to the chest,” I remarked, feeling a mixture of things at the moment. First, for some reason, I was ticked right off with him telling me how many women he regularly kissed on the lips. And secondly, I was feeling—hot. And frustrated.

Sexually frustrated.

This man had just informed me that he was hard.

No.

That I was making him hard.

And that was doing strange things to my body. Like my nipples hardened and my lower belly grew achy.

“You have to accept that Giselle and Eve are in my life.” His voice was low and calm—laced with something very intense. I just had no idea what that intensity was.

“I really don't care,” I lied. Because even at this early moment—I knew I cared who Stefan kissed. And I cared a lot. “Kiss whoever you want, Stefan,” I said half-heartedly.

Said it.

Didn't mean it.

The smexy grin on his lips widened. “Oh, I intend to, Chesca. I fucking intend to.” His gaze trailed over my face and then he said, “Only one time I regretted not kissing someone. And that came back to bite me,” he spoke to me, but I obviously had no idea what he was talking about. His eyes landed on my lips. “Waited too long. Not going to make that mistake again, Chesca.”

And then—

He pulled my head closer and—

Kissed me.

It shocked me so much I immediately tried to pull back. But Stefan's hold was too strong. Just like his lips.

They were forceful. Just like his tongue. He instantly plunged into my mouth—and I had no clue how to deal with that. I'd never been kissed before, let alone plundered like this.

The kiss Stefan was giving me wasn't nice and sweet.

Nope.

He meant business.

Business that I knew nothing about.

I gasped and floundered, my hands gripping his shoulders. His tongue retreated and then re-entered. Calmer. Nicer.

I tried to copy what he was doing with his tongue until I kind of got the hang of it. This was all new to me. I really, really hoped I was doing it correctly.

Stefan didn't seem to mind.

Nope.

He appeared to be—very—into our kiss.

“Fuck, you taste so good. So sweet.” His tongue did a longer, deeper sweep of my mouth. “You're fuckin' sweet, aren't you, Chesca?”

He stopped kissing me for a moment and pulled back, gazing at me with half-lidded

eyes. “You're sweet, right? Tell me you're fuckin' sweet.” His voice was all forceful and gravely.

I didn't understand what he meant by sweet. But he was definitely waiting for an answer from me. And I was definitely ready to start kissing him again.

“Yes, Stefan. I'm sweet,” I barely got out before his mouth was on mine again.

And I loved it.

I felt like I was contributing to the kiss now. Not like at first.

No, now our kiss was definitely a back and forth, equal opportunity interaction.

“Look what you're doing to me, Chesca.” He found my hand and dragged it down his stomach to his—

Holy crap.

Stefan was—hard.

Rock hard.

“Wrap your hand around it. Like this.” Stefan wrapped my hand around his cock. Well, not all the way around it. He was too big for that.

“Yeah, angel. Just like that. Up and down. Fuck,” he muttered as I did what he asked and stroked him. He was so velvety and so soft. But also so, so, so incredibly hard. I had no idea men could get this hard. I mean, I'd dealt with men here in the hospital. But none of them were—excited.

“Yeah, that's right. Ah, fuck, yeah. You're doing so well,” he panted and touched his lips to mine again.

This time—our kiss took on a whole other level. He was back to plundering, but this time I could take it. And plunder right back.

His hand slid up my side and landed on my breast.

Holy.

Crap.

My lower belly clenched and ached so deeply, I thought I might just orgasm right here in Stefan's bed.

He brushed his thumb over my impossibly hard nipple and that made me clench again even harder.

Oh, my gosh. I was in real danger of coming. He squeezed me and played with my hardened nipple, bringing me higher and higher. A trickle of wetness escaped between my legs.

I felt his fingers on the hem of my scrub top. “Pull this up. I want to see your big tits.” He stopped kissing me and I let go of him to lift my top for him.

“Fuck, you are beautiful.”

I didn't have pretty bras. This one was just a run of the mill, plain white. In my size, you couldn't find anything really nice for a good price.

“Take this off. I have to see you.” His hand caressed my breasts.

“It's a front closure,” I said, rolling to my back, so I had two hands to undo the clasp. It didn't take me long.

But once I bared my chest to him, Stefan bent to my exposed breasts. “Christ,” he said and then he licked my nipple with his red-hot tongue.

“Oh,” I said, surprised at the feel of him. Then he licked my other nipple, but this time he briefly closed his lips around me and swirled his tongue.

And that felt freaking awesome.

Next, before I even knew what he was doing, his hand slipped into my scrub pants—under my panties. Right on me.

“So fuckin' wet for me, angel. Aren't you?” he said against my breast. “So fuckin' wet.” And he was right. I'd never been like this before. His finger roamed all through my wetness. It was unfathomable how good all of this felt. Stefan's mouth on my breast, his fingers doing amazing things to me under my pants. I was seriously only moments away from exploding.

“Touch me again,” he said, bringing me up from my sex haze.

My hand slid down and found him. Still hard as a rock. I stroked him like he'd shown me. Up and down.

“Faster, Chesca,” he ordered as his mouth completely covered my nipple and he pulled it into his mouth. I gasped at the thrill that sent through my body.

His fingers left me and landed on the elastic waist of my scrubs. He pulled and his other hand joined to yank them down.

Holy.

Crap.

Was he going to fuck me?

“Don't stop, jerk me faster. Harder.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I did what he asked. However, I found it more than difficult to concentrate because of everything he was doing to me at the same time. His hand was back on me, between my legs. This time, he stuck his finger directly at my core—and pushed upward.

“Stefan,” I breathed out. It hurt a little, but nothing I couldn't handle. And when he started moving his finger in and out, thrusting it slowly inside of me—oh, my gosh. It was the best thing I'd ever felt in my life.

And the way I was stroking him in time with his finger entering me—it was almost like having him fuck me.

Not that I'd know what that felt like, but I could imagine this was much the same.

“You're so close. I can feel your pussy clamping down around me,” Stefan said, and I nodded. I might have even whimpered a little.

Because he was right. I was so, so, so close.

“You're going to make me come. I'm going to come all over you.”

Gosh.

His dirty words drove me to a whole new level of hot.

His cock grew bigger. And harder. Right in my hand. I imagined it was inside me instead of his finger. It would feel amazing to have Stefan over top of me, shoving his big cock inside of me. Kissing me. Sucking on my breasts.

Speaking of breasts, his pulls on my nipples were getting harder and harder. Just bordering on the edge of pain.

And that was all it took—along with a well-timed swipe of his thumb over my clit. He sent me over the edge. And I was falling. Falling. Falling. Not wanting anyone to catch me.

“Fuck, I'm coming, too,” Stefan wheezed as I increased my grip on him. But he didn't want it. He moved my hand and took over, bursting his hot come all over my belly.

I'd never seen a man orgasm before, but I thought for sure Stefan's orgasm must be the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The look of ecstasy on his handsome face. The way he shut his eyes in pure bliss.

Knowing that I'd caused this—made me come even harder.

After he milked his cock, shooting the last of his orgasm on my belly, he collapsed beside me.

“Fuck, that was good,” he breathed out heavily, his chest moving up and down quickly with each breath.

What he did next shocked the heck out of me.

His hand covered my breast, and he touched me there. Softly. Gently. Then he touched my other breast, squeezing my hard nipple between his fingertips.

Then his hand began the descent down my chest, over my belly—directly to a load of come. He circled his middle finger in it and then slowly moved down to my pussy.

Between my legs.

And inside of me.

He repeated that movement, leaving me without words as I watched him mark me with his come.

The musky tang of his scent filled my senses.

He used two fingers this time, scooping up his come and then inserting it into my core.

When reason finally returned, I grasped his arm. "I'm not on birth control, Stefan."

And what did he do?

He grinned and laughed in a low, smexy voice. "Good," was all he said.

I blinked and tried to make sense out of his words. "What do you mean, good?" I asked, as the sexy stupor he'd had me in started to fall away.

He ripped his hand out of my grip and swiped his fingers over my belly where a puddle of his come still lay. Then he shoved those fingers up inside of me.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Again.

I wasn't sure what the heck he was trying to do. But I definitely knew the consequences.

“I mean,” Stefan's fingers stayed inside of me this time and he moved them around, “good.”

Oh.

My.

Gosh.

Whatever he was doing now down there was even better than thrusting his fingers inside me.

Okay, maybe not better, but equally wonderful.

He started kissing me again. And that was way, way, way better. Having Stefan's fingers inside of me while his mouth was on me was—perfection.

He wound me right up again, and I was—there.

Right.

There.

When he suddenly pulled his fingers out. “Oh, shit.” He thumped down on the bed beside me and I had never been more confused in all my life.

Until he clutched his chest.

“Oh, no. Are you okay?” I asked, pushing up and off the bed.

What I had forgotten was the fact that Stefan had pulled my pants down to my knees. Therefore, when I tried to stand up—I quickly lost my footing.

And fell directly back on my behind.

My very bare behind.

Who knew hospital floors were so cold?

“Dammit,” I said as I scrambled to get to my feet. I yanked up my panties and scrubs all in one go. But it took me longer to refasten my bra and pull my top down.

During that time, Stefan appeared to be getting worse. I hit the call button and ran out of the room for help.

7

Francesca

“Marcello looks just like Carlo. Don't you think?” Giselle asked, rocking one of the babies in her arms.

“I guess there's a reason for that, sweetheart,” Stefan said. He held the other baby. He was currently sitting up in bed. Something he hadn't been able to do for the last three

days.

After our little—incident, Stefan had to be given a plethora of medications. And a minor surgery. As it turned out, fooling around so soon after being shot was a bad thing.

Who'd have known?

Sigh.

He was back on oxygen as well. And he also had to have a few stitches redone.

All in all, our little—big—make-out session had caused him a ton of damage.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Giselle's head turned, and she spotted me. "Francesca," she said like we were old friends. "Can you do me a favor? We're leaving soon, and I'd like to use the ladies room. Could you look after this little guy for me, please? I'll be quick, I promise."

There really was only one answer to that. "Sure," I said and walked up to her.

She handed the baby off to me and said, "Thank you." Then she dashed out of the room.

"Hi," Stefan said, but I couldn't tell if he was speaking to me or the baby. Either way, I stayed quiet.

He hadn't said much to me since the night he'd come all over my belly. And then practically died right after.

He mostly slept. The medications likely made him groggy. He hadn't yelled at anyone since then, either.

"Are you okay with holding him?" I asked. The stroller was here. I could always put one of them in there if he were too tired to hold the baby.

"I'm fine," was all he said. He talked to the baby in a calm voice. And with a smile on his face. He seemed more than comfortable around him. I wondered then if Stefan had any babies of his own. If so, I wondered if they had his dark hair and broody eyes. Or his sharp, movie star chin.

But I wasn't going to ask. Not right now.

I wasn't sure what the protocol was for talking to someone who'd blown their load all over your belly and then scooped it up and tried to insert it inside of you. And then nearly died right after.

I figured I'd let him make the first move. Seeing as I didn't know where we stood.

I mean, I knew we weren't boyfriend and girlfriend.

The guy was way older than me. He must be in his mid-thirties. I was only twenty-three. He likely wasn't looking for a girlfriend. Or not one like me, anyway. I had my own problems. That didn't include mysterious men getting gunshot wounds to their chests.

I hadn't asked him how he'd gotten hurt. Whatever had happened, Giselle seemed to think that bullet was meant for her.

None of this was my business. And quite honestly, I didn't want anything to do with them if it came with bullets and chest wounds.

No, thank you.

I had my own pile of steaming crap to deal with. I didn't need to take on anyone else's.

“Are you still mad at me?” Stefan asked the baby. I thought that was a pretty dumb question to ask an infant.

The baby in my arms was starting to wriggle around. His little face was getting red, too.

“Francesca,” Stefan said, making me look over at him. His eyes were now directly on

me.

“What?” I asked in a clipped tone. One that I didn't really mean to use. But I was trying to figure out what this baby needed. And I couldn't tell. For one thing, I only had one sibling. And she was exactly the same age as I was. I'd never been around tiny babies like this. Never even babysat.

Looking after my dad and my sister was enough of a chore when I was growing up.

“Are you still mad at me?”

I blinked and tilted my head. Then I frowned. “Why would I be mad at you?” My mind raced with what the heck he was talking about. And I couldn't come up with anything.

Stefan sighed but held my eyes with his. “After the other night?”

I put the baby against my chest and rocked him, hoping he'd settle that way. “You mean when you almost died? Again?”

Stefan chuckled and shook his head. “I didn't almost die. I popped a few stitches. That's it.”

Now it was my turn to shake my head at him. “Yeah, internal stitches and you started bleeding again.”

He shrugged and held his finger out to the baby. He grabbed on tight. It was sweet—Stefan's big finger and the baby's tiny fist grabbing it. So cute.

“They sewed me back up again. I'm as good as new.” He smiled at me.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“You had to have emergency surgery. Again. You shouldn't have been doing—” I started to get all flustered, “what you were doing.”

He laughed quietly and said, “I was having a great fucking time.”

Heat rose to my cheeks before I could fully process what he'd just said. In an instant, my nipples were hard.

Gosh.

I was weak.

“You're in the hospital for a reason, Stefan. And that is not something you should be doing under the circumstances.”

His eyes dragged down my body and back up again. “Was that the first time anyone's made you come?”

My.

Jaw.

Dropped.

Was this guy for real?

“Is this an appropriate topic around babies?” I snapped at him, even though what I

really wanted to do was put both of the babies in the stroller and kiss Stefan.

“They don't understand a word we're saying.”

I frowned at him and switched the baby to my other shoulder. He was starting to fuss around. I hoped Giselle came back soon.

“Answer my question,” he asked, but I ignored him. I patted the baby's back and walked around the room a bit. That only seemed to make it worse.

The poor little guy started wailing.

Yikes.

“Bring him over here. You take this one,” Stefan suggested. I didn't think that was a good idea.

“So you can rip more stitches? I don't think so.” I frowned at him and added a little bounce to my walk.

The baby didn't dig that either.

“The nurses are going to come in and give us shit. Bring him over here,” Stefan ordered again. But there was no way I was going to do that.

Nope.

Stefan wasn't going to have emergency surgery again.

“He's fine,” I said right back. I wasn't sure if he heard me over the screaming, though.

A minute later, someone strode through the door.

Holy crap.

It was the lumberjack.

“I’ll take him,” Carlo said, stepping up to me. I handed the baby over gratefully.

“Sorry, I don’t think he likes me.”

Carlo’s eyes landed on mine, and he grinned. “He likes you. He just likes his brother more. Watch this.” He jerked his head toward the stroller and set the screaming infant in there. Then he walked up to Stefan and whisked the baby away from him.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

As soon as he laid the second baby beside the first—the first one quieted.

Instantly.

Carlo gazed over at me. “See? Magic.” He winked at me, and I shivered. I didn't feel bad about doing it.

Carlo was extremely hot. I bet he made dozens of women shiver like that every day. Giselle was one lucky woman.

“Didn't I tell you to stay the fuck away?” Stefan's voice cut short the little flirty moment I had with Carlo.

Carlo straightened and set his hands on his hips. “Do you really think I'm letting my wife travel to the city with my babies by herself?”

Stefan didn't have a response for that, it seemed.

Apparently, Carlo did. “You look like shit.”

I had to stifle a giggle. Carlo wasn't wrong, though. Stefan really did look terrible.

“Thanks. You can go now.” Stefan brushed him off with his hand.

There was a minute of silence in the room where nobody said a thing. Not even the babies.

“The girls are worried sick about you. So are we. Dani's been crying. She wants to know where her uncle Stefan is.”

Stefan swallowed but didn't say anything.

“I'm sorry how things went down. But you know damn well you'd have done the same thing.” He pointed at Stefan's chest. “But that is not my fault. That is—our—fault. And you know it. I thank God every night that you were there to take it instead of my wife. You gotta stop this shit between us. We're brothers. This is not how things are supposed to be.” Then he pointed at his two sons in the stroller. “Like them. See? They can't be without each other. I need my brother back.” Carlo's voice cracked at the end, and I decided I'd been eavesdropping for far too long. I turned around and rushed out of there.

As soon as I stepped out into the hall, I saw Giselle standing there, leaning against the wall. She looked up and waved me over.

I walked down the hall wondering why she was there and not inside with her family.

She grabbed my arm with her soft hand. “They need to talk this out. It's literally ripping me up inside.”

I bit my lip and turned more fully to her. “I'm sorry. I don't mean to intrude. This is a family matter. I really shouldn't be discussing this.”

Her eyes flashed to mine, and she pushed off the wall and hugged me.

“Yes, you should. Stefan cares for you. And that's reason enough.”

My body froze, and I said, “He does not. I'm just—” I started to explain, but she cut me off.

“I was here that night,” she whispered. “I came back in to ask Stefan something and I saw you two in bed.”

I gasped slightly and tried to push away from her. But she held me close. “You two were beautiful together. Stefan cares for you. I can tell. Evie and I are looking forward to bringing you into the fold.”

Into the fold? Into the fold? What the heck did she mean—into the fold?

“With all due respect, Giselle. Your fold seems to include gunshots and gunshot wounds to the chest. This is not the kind of fold I want or need.”

She let go of me and backed up against the wall again. “That wasn't Stefan's fault. It was mine. And it won't happen again. That threat is—” her eyes dropped down for a few seconds and then back up to me, “gone.”

The look on her face when she said “gone” was full of—relief?

And probably a dozen other things.

Even so, I didn't want to know. This was not my problem.

“I think you have the wrong idea here. I can see how you'd be mistaken. But this—” I pointed in the direction of Stefan's room, “is not what it seems.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Giselle's eyes got watery, and she nodded. "Okay, Francesca. Whatever you say." She looked down and pursed her lips. "But can you do me a favor?" Her eyes hit mine. "Don't hurt him. He's a wonderful man, and he doesn't deserve it. Be gentle with his heart. Okay? Promise me you'll be gentle." Giselle looked like she was about to cry. Over what, I had no idea.

So what if she caught me making out with Stefan? That didn't mean we were going to get married and have six kids.

"Look, I don't know you. I don't know Stefan. I don't know any of your family. I don't know what you think you saw the other night. And I don't care. And, no. I won't be hurting anyone."

Giselle nodded and gave me a small, sad smile. "Okay, fair enough. But he really likes you, Francesca. I can tell. And so do I." With that, she turned and headed down the hallway.

I decided to get lost for a while. I didn't want to go back into Stefan's room yet. Instead, I helped out some of the other nurses. Until one of them pointed me in the direction of Stefan's room. I was ordered to go "deal with him."

So, I did.

He was alone when I walked in, and I was glad for it. Giselle seemed nice enough, but she had gotten the total and completely wrong idea about us.

Honestly.

The woman practically already had us moved in together. And that was never, ever going to happen.

Not in a billion years.

“Decided to come back?” he asked, still sitting up in his bed. “Where'd you run off to?”

I walked up to the side of his bed. “I work here, Stefan. I have stuff to do. What do you need? I don't have much time.”

He smiled and set his hand on my arm. “Bullshit. They sent you in here because none of them want to deal with me. Were you the last hired nurse on the floor? I'm assuming everyone else has seniority over you.” His hand started rubbing up and down my arm, and it felt way too good.

“No, I'm not a nurse. I only have my nursing assistant certificate. That's it.”

His eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

I sighed and said, “It means I took a course. I don't have a degree.” Talking about this made me uncomfortable, and I really hoped he gave up on this soon.

“How long did you go to school for your certificate?”

I huffed out a breath. “About five minutes. Any other questions?”

He nodded. “I'm guessing you don't get paid as much as the nurses.”

I let out a laugh. “You guessed right.”

He gave me a frown. “You do everything around here that they do. Why don't you go back for your nursing degree?”

That made me laugh. “Why don't pigs fly, Stefan?”

I tried to pull my arm away from him, but he tightened his grip. “Why are you getting pissed? I just asked you a question.”

I rolled my eyes and stared down at him. “Why do you think? Do you know how much a nursing degree costs? Do you think I'm made of freaking money? Do you even know how long it took me to scrape together the cash to get my stupid certificate?”

He shook his head. “No, how long?” His tone wasn't cutting or mocking.

And that made me take a breath before I spoke again, “It doesn't matter.”

He went quiet for a moment and then asked, “You could take a loan out.”

My head fell back, and I laughed.

Hard. “No, you could take a loan out. Things like that aren't as easy for people like me.”

The confusion on his face was real. And that stunned me. How could he not know what kind of person I was? Where I came from?

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“People like—you? I'm not understanding what you mean.”

Good grief.

He was going to make me spell it out for him. “I'm from the wrong side of the tracks. And from the look of your expensive haircut, and the company you keep, I'm guessing you're not.”

Giselle and Eve wore expensive-as-heck designer clothes. That stroller Giselle wheeled in here was definitely top of the line. You didn't have to be a genius to realize that. And those babies were decked out in the best of the best.

Even Carlo, the lumberjack, had on great quality clothes.

As my father would say, they all reeked of money.

“No, I'm not,” he said. “But Eve and Giselle had humble beginnings.”

This man. What was he trying to prove?

“Any other questions before I go?” I could feel my frustration growing. I needed to get out of here. Talking around in circles was getting us nowhere.

“I'm sorry.” He sighed and laid his head back as he looked up at the ceiling. What he didn't do, though, was let go of me.

Nope.

He kept a tight grip on my arm. “I’m saying all the wrong shit to you. And that’s just pissing you off. Which is the last thing I want to do. Christ,” he breathed out, sounding just as exhausted as I was.

He turned to me and said, “What I was trying to say is,” he cleared his throat, “is that I’m grateful you were there in the emergency room when I got there.”

Oh, my gosh. He remembered.

Up until now, I thought he’d been too out of it back then to know what was happening.

“You saved my life, Francesca.” His voice grew deeper, and his eyes pulled me in. “When everyone else gave up and left me for dead.” His hand pulsed on my arm. “You stayed with me. You fought for me. It’s because of you that I’m here right now. We both know that.”

An intense burning set up behind my eyes. Bringing back those memories was forcing me to visit that time when—everyone had left. They had given up on him.

And if I hadn’t lied my face off to that surgeon—Stefan definitely wouldn’t have made it out of that room alive.

“I wasn’t sure you remembered me,” I whispered, sinking into his eyes. I couldn’t help it. Stefan had the most handsome eyes I’d ever seen.

He pulled on my arm, drawing me closer. “I didn’t at first. Things were so cloudy when I was in the emergency room. And then when I woke up—I was confused and didn’t know what happened.” His eyes started getting glassy.

And that was what finally made me forgive him. “But everything slowly came back.

The shooting. The aftermath. Arriving at the emergency room.” He inhaled shakily. “Being left for dead. Meeting a beautiful nurse named Francesca,” he said, grabbing onto my shoulders. “And then you lying to that doctor. Christ, Chesca. Without your quick thinking, I’d be six feet under right now.”

I couldn't argue with him. We both knew how dire things were. More so him. I didn't experience all that from inside his body. I could only imagine how much pain he'd been in. How much pain he was currently in.

“And I'm grateful for everything you've done to help me up here. I know I'm not the best patient around—”

I couldn't help but snort out a laugh when he said that. And then he followed suit.

“That's putting it mildly, Stefan.”

He pulled me closer until my breasts were tight to his chest. “What I'm trying to tell you, Chesca. Is that I'm falling for you.” His eyes trailed over my face and to my lips. “In a big way. Don't think I've ever felt like this before with anyone.”

Oh.

My.

Gosh.

Did he just say that?

Page 28

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

My knees got weak, and I leaned on him. His hand slipped into my hair, and he pulled me the rest of the way to him.

His lips crushed onto mine, and he kissed me.

Thoroughly.

And I met him with everything I had. It felt like years since I'd kissed him last. Even though it had only been a few days. It was still too long.

“Uncle Stefan!” a high-pitched voice pierced my ears. I pulled away from Stefan to see a tiny little girl running toward the bed. She had long dark ponytails and a huge smile on her face. Gosh, she was freaking adorable.

“I drew this for you!” she said excitedly, waving a scribbled picture in her hand.

“Sorry for interrupting. She's so excited to see her uncle.” It was the blonde-haired woman who I'd seen in the hallway a few days ago with Giselle.

Eve.

And she was equally as gorgeous as Giselle.

Where did those guys find such beautiful women?

“Daniella!” Stefan yelled equally as loud. “Come up here and give me a hug.” He grinned at her and held his arms out.

Eve picked her up and put her on the bed. "Careful, now. Uncle Stefan has a big booboo on his chest. Be gentle, okay?"

Daniella nodded obediently as she looked at Eve. Then she turned around and gave Stefan a big hug.

"Oh, my girl. I missed you so much."

She nodded her little head. "I missed you, too," she said in her sweet voice.

"I missed you, too," Eve sputtered out, tears falling freely down her face. "So much, Stefan."

Stefan gazed over at Eve and something transpired between them. Something strong. Something powerful.

Something that made me jealous.

"Christ, Eve. Come here. Don't cry. Jesus." Stefan moved Daniella to his right side. "Let's make some room for your auntie Evie, okay? Squish over a bit," he said into Daniella's hair. She nodded and complied instantly.

Eve cried harder but managed to sit down on the bed beside them. Stefan wrapped his arm around her and said something into her ear. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but whatever it was, it made her cry even harder.

Oh, boy.

"Daniella? I'm Francesca. Would you like to come with me and find some stickers? I know where some are at the nurse's station. I think we have some crayons and coloring pages too."

Daniella perked up at that and looked right at her auntie Eve.

“Go ahead. Don't forget your manners,” she said, still crying. Then Eve looked at me as I picked the little girl up and set her on the floor. “Thank you,” Eve said to me.

I nodded and offered my hand to Daniella. Then we walked down to the nurses' station to find what I promised.

8

Stefan

“Stop cryin', sweetheart. Fuck, Evie. Stop already.” I kissed the top of Eve's head while she continued crying on my shoulder. “I'm fine.” I rubbed her back.

She shook her head and cried harder. “We almost lost you, Stefan. We almost lost you.”

The woman wasn't wrong. But her getting all upset wasn't going to change that fact.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“Nah, I'm too tough. Couldn't let fuckin' Sergio win.”

Her body shook with more sobs. “I was so scared. Seeing you on the ground in the stables.” She held onto me tighter. “I was so scared, Stefan. I thought for sure we lost you forever.”

I kissed her forehead and tipped her head back. “You didn't lose me. I'm right here.” Then I kissed her lips briefly.

She sighed while I wiped her cheeks. “Am I still allowed to kiss you? Your lips looked pretty busy a few minutes ago,” she teased.

I quickly kissed her again. “I told her I kiss you and Giselle.”

Her eyebrows rose, and she bit her lip. “And did you tell her what else you do with me and Giselle?”

I laughed and kissed her again. “I don't think she's ready to hear all that.”

She laughed—which was a whole lot better than having her cry. “She's beautiful, Stefan. I can't wait to bring her into the family. Nick and Carlo are looking forward to it, too.” She looked up at me with wet eyelashes.

Hearing her say that was like a punch to the gut.

“That's not going to happen.” And it wasn't. There was no fucking way I was letting Nick—or my goddamn brother—near Francesca.

Eve shrugged and gave me a sad smile. “Can't blame a girl for trying.”

I decided to change the topic. “Thanks for bringing Dani down. I miss that kid.”

Eve laid her head on my shoulder and snuggled in. Just like she had many times before. “She was jealous that the babies got to go but not her. Nick and I took her with us to that gymnastics place. She's so good with our kids. They all had a blast. But when we got home and told her that her mom and dad took the babies to visit you here—she freaked out. Like literally lost it.”

I shook my head. “She's dramatic, that one,” I agreed.

Eve laughed. “Honey, she was purple. My kids can scream, but they've never turned that shade before. Dani wasmad.” Eve lengthened the last word considerably.

“So, I promised her as soon as her parents got back, I'd take her up to see you. Besides, Giselle and Carlo owe me for dealing with that momentous temper tantrum.”

I hated the fact that Dani's temper tantrum made me feel good. But it did. Knowing how badly she wanted to come and visit made my heart crumble.

“So, the new girl,” Eve said in a hushed tone as she nodded toward the door. “Is she a keeper? Please tell me she's a keeper. Giselle really loves her. Even though Francesca essentially told her off in the hallway.”

I looked down at Eve. “What are you talking about?” My hackles raised, wondering what the hell had gone on in the hallway.

Eve sat up and moved off the bed. “When Carlo was in here talking with you. Giselle ran into Francesca in the hallway. Giselle wanted to welcome her, but I guess it didn't go as planned. I'm not sure. But Giselle still loves her. She said she's tough—but

kind. She said that's exactly the type of woman you should have.” Eve grinned down at me. “Oh, and the guys love her, too. Carlo said she's got great tits and an incredible ass. Nick agrees with Carlo's assessment and also said that she'd make a superb addition to our little—group.”

I wasn't sure what emotion had washed over me. But whatever the fuck it was—made me want to snap Nick and Carlo's necks.

“They're not touching Francesca. Ever,” I said firmly. And I fucking meant it. “There's no way in hell that's ever going to happen, Eve. So, get it out of your mind.”

Instead of being intimidated—Eve giggled.

Yeah.

She laughed her guts out. She doubled over and held onto the bed. When she could finally catch her breath, she leaned over me, breasts against my chest. “You should see yourself, honey.” Her eyes looked directly into mine. Then she kissed me. “You're in love,” she whispered against my lips. She moved back when Dani came tearing into the room again. “I'm so happy for you. And for us.” Eve winked at me and wagged her eyebrows.

Fuck me.

9

Stefan

“You should have died,” the doctor standing in front of me said frankly. “There is no medical reason you should still be alive. Other than pure stubbornness. You got to the ER too late. By the time Francesca convinced me to try a hail Mary—” he shook his

head and wrote something into my chart, “you hardly had a drop of blood left in your body. I wasn't sure how I'd patch you up. We took you back into surgery three times to fix bleeders.” He set the chart on my bed. “There's no medical reason you should be breathing here talking to me right now. I want you to appreciate that. And live your life accordingly. Because if this happens again,” he tapped his finger on the chart, “I can guarantee you that the outcome won't be as much fun. Whatever—” he cleared his throat and glared at me, “activities got you here, I advise you stop them immediately. Or next time, this will be an entirely different ending.”

I nodded and thanked the doctor before he left. I was grateful he'd saved my life. But he didn't appear all that pleased about it himself.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“All right, do you want to call your family to come and pick you up? Or do you want the nurses' station to do that for you?” Francesca asked as she started cleaning my table off.

Her question pissed me off and set me on edge. “No, I don't want you to call any of them,” I spat out harshly. Perhaps too harshly.

Francesca stopped cleaning and looked at me. “Then how are you getting home? You'll need help for a while. Who's going to be there for you?”

I shook my head, getting more annoyed with this subject as every second passed. “You can drive me home. Since you'll be staying there anyway.” Christ, what did she think was happening here? Did she think I was going to stay with my fuckin' asshole brother?

“Wha—what?” she stammered and stuttered. “What are you talking about?”

I rolled my head from side to side, cracking my neck a few good times. This hospital bed was doing a number on my body. “I mean, you're coming to my house. And living with me. Why are you so confused about this?”

She set down the rag in her hand and said, “I'm not coming to your house. I'm certainly not living with you. Give me Giselle's number and I'll call her.” She pulled a pen and small pad of paper out of her pocket and tried to hand it to me.

Fuck.

“Chesca, what do you think's been going on here? Between us? Because obviously you've somehow spun this around in your mind.”

She gave me that adorable frown that I fuckin' loved. “I have no idea what you're talking about, Stefan.”

My head fell forward, and I huffed. I looked back up at her and said, “You're mine, Chesca.”

She frowned deeper. “I'm—yours?”

Christ.

I was going to have to explain this to her. “How many times a day do I have my tongue down your throat?”

A shocked expression crossed her face. It would have been comical if I wasn't so pissed. And she knew the answer to that question just as well as I did.

And that answer was—a lot.

Over the two weeks I'd been here, she'd learned how to kiss quite well.

“And Chesca, who came all over your belly? And then who scooped up that come and shoved it inside your tight pussy?”

Her cheeks turned a deep shade of red.

And I fuckin' loved it.

Her eyes widened but she didn't say a word.

“Did you take the morning after pill, Chesca?” I asked, hoping like hell she said no. She'd admitted to not being on birth control. And she didn't exactly stop me from stuffing my come inside of her.

No.

Instead, she'd opened her legs even more for me.

“Answer me. Did you take the morning after pill?” I knew the chances of her getting pregnant that way was slim to none. Even so, the prospect of planting my baby inside of Francesca had been fucking heady.

Her eyes looked at the floor briefly before she met my gaze. “No.”

My fucking heart soared at that news.

I smiled at her. “Good. I'm happy to hear that. Now, cut the shit and grab me a wheelchair. I want to get the fuck out of here.” I nodded toward the door. I couldn't wait to get out of this shithole. The smells alone from this place were enough to kill me.

Francesca's cheeks were still red. But her expression changed. It was like she'd put on a mask. “I'm not taking you home, Stefan. And I'm not living with you.” She swallowed and backed up. “And I'm not yours.”

I see. She wanted to play hard to get, I guess. “Chesca. You are. And you know it. You feel what we have between us. Now, stop acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. Grab a wheelchair and let's go.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

She pushed the table against the wall and took her gloves off. After she dropped them in the garbage, she said, “I hope you get back on your feet soon, Stefan. And I hope you never have another gunshot wound. Anywhere on your body. Stay safe.”

And then—

She walked out.

10

Francesca

Oh, my gosh. The last hour of my shift dragged so badly.

Absolutely dragged.

I couldn't believe I'd never see Stefan again.

He'd become such an important person in my life so quickly. And I'd allowed it.

All of this was my fault.

I'd crossed the line.

No, I'd pole vaulted over that sucker.

And given Stefan the completely wrong idea about—us. I mean there was no—us.

There couldn't be.

My life was in total chaos at the moment. And it wouldn't be fair to pull anyone into a mess that was my own.

From the sound of it, Stefan's life wasn't exactly a cakewalk. Gunshot wounds aside, his family life seemed to be in rough shape.

But even if none of that was going on—Stefan and I still wouldn't work.

He was some rich guy who got expensive haircuts and probably played tennis three times a week. I couldn't even afford a tennis ball.

And yeah, he said that Giselle and Eve came from “humble” beginnings. But there sure wasn't anything humble about them now.

Not their shoes.

Not their clothes.

Not their hair.

Not their makeup.

And not their men.

Giselle and Eve had definitely married well.

And good for them if that was what turned their crank.

That wasn't my thing.

They probably had memberships at all the fancy clubs. And they probably lunched with other well-to-do ladies.

I was not and never would be a lady who lunched.

That thought was bizarre in my mind. Especially when it was a daily struggle to eat. And pay rent. And get my crappy little car to and from work on time.

Speaking of my crappy little car, I looked around for it in the parking lot. I'd been close to being late this morning. And now I couldn't remember where I'd parked.

Dammit.

I wandered around to the side where I usually parked—but no crappy brown car.

Then I walked down to the far end and—yay! Crappy brown car.

It really looked like a piece of crap. Literally.

When I'd told Stefan that last week, he'd laughed and said it couldn't be that bad. But when I'd described it to him, he said, “Hmm, maybe you do drive a hunk of shit, Chesca.”

Even if it looked horrible, it still got me from point A to B.

Mostly.

A lot of times it crapped out halfway there or back. And I had to do some fiddling under the hood with this or that. Lately, it'd been overheating on me. So, I kept a few extra bottles of water on the floor of the passenger side.

I still felt plenty lucky to have a car. Even if it was a piece of crap.

I swiftly rushed up to my car. I hated parking lots. They always gave me the creeps. I unlocked my door and slipped in. After I chucked my sweater and my bag onto the passenger seat, I started my car. Or at least I tried to.

It took a minute of pumping and careful timing—but I eventually got it to start.

“Thank you, crappy brown car. You can do it. Come on!” I backed out of the parking spot and my car threatened to choke out.

“No, no, no. It's been a bad day. I need to get home. Please,” I begged my car.

And luckily, it listened.

As I drove, my mind quickly fell back to what—or more like, who—I constantly had on my mind.

Stefan.

The words that he'd said to me today. “You're mine” being at the top of that list. That was the phrase that had really floored me.

Did he actually mean that? Or was he just looking for someone to help look after him while he got back on his feet again?

Someone who'd also make out with him and allow him to come all over my—

“Gah, you need to stop thinking about him. Stop!” I yelled at myself in the otherwise quiet car.

I reached over and turned on the crappy radio. It was stuck on one station. No matter what I did, it stayed there.

It was a lite-rock FM station. So, it wasn't horrible, but it wasn't anything great.

Of course, with my luck, they started playing a bunch of sappy love songs. About the one who got away. And seeing your ex-lover again, years later with their wife and family.

The thought of bumping into Stefan on the street one day with his wife and kids—

Oh, crap.

That would kill.

Tears started streaming down my face. Seeing the road ahead became difficult.

That didn't matter.

I just kept crying harder and harder. Until my car decided to crap out.

“Gah, dammit. Stupid car!” I shouted and hit the steering wheel with my hands. I pulled over to the side of the road. At least it let me do that much before completely petering out. Steam was pouring from under the hood. I leaned over to grab a few bottles of water and jumped out of the car. The hood was hot, and I had to be careful not to burn myself.

I opened the waters and dumped them in the appropriate place. Then I closed everything up again and stomped back to the driver's side. I got in and turned the key. It wouldn't start. A few minutes later, it finally did, though.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“Thank you, crappy little car!” I shouted and signaled back into traffic.

Well, at least the car stopped my crying fit. And I was almost home. One step closer to a warm bath and a bowl of cereal. I was too tired to make anything else.

Well, I didn't have anything else. Payday wasn't until Friday. So, it would be cereal until then.

I parked around the back of the butcher shop and gathered my stuff together.

But before I opened my door, I heard, “A little help back here, please?” And I screamed and turned around so fast I thought I was about to be murdered.

There was Stefan. Laying on my back seat. “What are you doing here?”

He grabbed his chest. “Bleeding, I think. Can you help me up? I don't think I can do it on my own,” he groaned, a pained expression on his sweaty face.

“No, I'm not helping you. I'm taking you back to the hospital. Or to Giselle's or Eve's.”

He shook his head. “Giselle and Carlo live an hour out of the city. Your piece of shit car won't make it that far.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then I'll take you back to the hospital to get checked out.” I turned around, my hands shaking. That idiot had scared the crap out of me. I took a deep breath and started the car.

Or at least I tried to start it. But the brown crappy car had other ideas. It was done for the day, apparently.

“Chesca, please,” Stefan breathed out. “I don't want to be around my fucking family. I want peace and quiet. And you.”

A small thrill zinged through me at his words. But a large part of me thought he only wanted someone to take care of him.

“I'll call Eve. Does she live in the city?” I tried grasping for other options because Stefan living at my place was not going to happen.

Not now.

Not ever.

“She and Nick and the kids are at Giselle and Carlo's for now. I don't know how long they're staying. So, no. You're not fucking calling Eve. Or Giselle. You're taking me to your place. Stop stalling, Chesca. I'm in fuckin' pain back here.”

We argued back and forth for a few more minutes, but it was apparent—short of military force—Stefan refused any other help than me.

“Fine! Mr. Stubborn gets his way. Again.” I got out to help the bossiest person I'd ever met in my life.

“Slide down,” I told him once I opened the back door.

He lifted his head. “I can't. It hurts too much. You need to help me,” he grunted and laid back.

“Geez, Louise,” I muttered and maneuvered in over him.

Suddenly, his arms clamped around me. His hand grasped the back of my head, holding my face close to his. “You can’t be pissed, Chesca.” Then his lips touched mine.

But I was not having it. I moved back as much as he'd allow. Which wasn't that far. He was strong for a guy who couldn't sit up on his own. “Yeah, I can.”

He shook his head. “I'm getting better every day. Look after me for a little while longer.” He pulled my head closer, kissing me again. “And then I'll look after you forever.”

My body stilled at what he'd just insinuated.

No.

Not insinuated.

What he'd said.

Stefan took that opportunity to kiss me—really kiss me.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

And I might have participated in that kiss. For a while.

I finally pulled my head away and backed up. “You're bananas. But not as bananas as me. Because I'm going to take you in. For one week. Do you hear me? One freaking week, Stefan. And that's it. You should be healed enough by then to call a cab and go home.”

He grinned and yanked me down for another kiss. “Deal,” he said against my lips.

Then I helped the bossy, stubborn man out of the car. It was no small feat. It took us forever. And then he had to sit on the seat with his legs hanging out of the car for a while. He felt nauseous and dizzy. I gave him some water—and waited for him to get his bearings.

The only godsend was the cane he grabbed from the floor of the back seat. When I asked him where he got it from, he said, “You don't wanna know.”

So, I dropped that subject.

Getting a gunshot victim up the stairs to my apartment was another trial of the unfittest. He sat down a dozen times. At least. I honestly thought I'd have to give in and call the fire department to come and get him down. It wasn't like I could carry him.

At least these were outside stairs, so they wouldn't have to struggle in a narrow hallway.

Eventually, we got him up the stairs and into my tiny apartment.

We stumbled together to the bed. Stefan was so exhausted by then, I thought for sure he was going to die right there. “What smells like corned beef?” he asked as I grabbed his feet and lifted them onto my bed.

“Probably corned beef. I think Bernie's also cooking roast beef.” I gave the air a sniff. Yeah. Definitely roast beef as well. “There's a butcher below me, remember? I told you that. He sells all kinds of meat. A few other things, too.”

Stefan chuckled. Or he tried to, anyway. He was panting so hard that even breathing was difficult for him at the moment. “Ah, yeah. The guy who wants to fuck you. I forgot.” His chest moved up and down at a frantic pace.

“What? He does not.” I frowned at him and started to undo the buttons on his shirt.

“Yeah, he does. And when I get my strength back, he and I will have a little talk.”

I rolled my eyes and opened his shirt. “Crap, you're bleeding. Let me take a look.” I slowly removed the bandage and assessed his wound. “It actually doesn't look bad. Let me grab a few things from the closet.” Occasionally, a few supplies might make their way back to my place. I didn't feel bad about taking the odd bandage home. They paid me next to nothing. I figured I deserved a perk or two.

I came back with my little box and set about fixing him up. He sucked in his breath when I disinfected his wound, but otherwise, he never said a word. When I was finished bandaging him up again, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to him. “Thank you.” He kissed me. Nice. And gentle. Stefan was a wonderful kisser. I mean, I didn't exactly have anyone to compare him to. But the way he kissed always made my toes curl.

“I would say you're welcome. But you're not. You should be at home with your family.”

Stefan kissed me one more time before letting go. “No, I should be here with you.”

I stood and cleaned up the old bandages and gauze pads. After I washed my hands, I picked up the dishtowel and turned to Stefan. “I hope you like cereal because that's all I've got.” He was still lying in the same position, shirt wide open displaying his torso. Even all sweaty and disheveled, he was undeniably the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

Actually, his tousled hair and glistening skin were not a turnoff. Not at all.

Stefan could absolutely pose for any fashion magazine around.

“Sounds good,” he said, his breathing better now. And that was a relief. It wasn't like I had a tank of oxygen here. If things went bad, I'd have to call an ambulance.

I poured two bowls of cereal for us and then pulled the milk out of the fridge. There was half a jug left. I would have to make it work for the rest of the week. Before I sloshed the milk in, I dumped half of my cereal back into the box. Stefan probably wasn't used to rationing out his food. And he was still on the mend. He needed the calories more than I did. I grabbed a couple packs of sugar from the cupboard and two spoons from the drawer. Then I walked over to the bed with our supper.

Stefan took the bowl. I dropped the sugar packets beside him.

Then I sat on the small couch.

There wasn't a whole lot of room in here. But I counted myself lucky to have a couch and a bed. This place came already furnished, thank goodness. It wasn't like I had

money to buy furniture.

I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. I surfed around until I found a show about rich housewives. There was always good drama happening somewhere in their world.

I ate slowly, trying to make it last. I'd have to try and swipe something from the hospital tomorrow.

“Is that all you're eating?” Stefan asked over a mouthful of cereal. A few drops of milk dripped down his chin before he wiped it.

I nodded and smiled. “I'm not that hungry,” I lied and went back to watching the show. Two of the women were yelling at each other. One of them had accused the other of sleeping with her husband. It was getting juicy.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“You were on your feet for twelve hours. You have to be hungry,” he said in his bossy voice.

I looked over at Stefan and shook my head. “I’m good. Be quiet. I don’t want to miss this.” Then I watched as the two women narrowly avoided a physical altercation. It was awesome.

After the show ended, I took our bowls and washed them up. Then I filled up two water bottles. One for Stefan and one for me. “I’m going to shower. Do you want anything?”

He nodded and let his eyes trail up and down my body. “Yeah.”

I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to hurry him up.

“To watch you shower.”

I rolled my eyes and turned around. “Whatever,” I said and headed to the bathroom.

I was all sweaty and gross from work, but also from helping my new roommate get out of the car and up the stairs.

I’d have to give Stefan a quick sponge bath before I went to bed. He wasn’t able to shower by himself yet.

It took me a while to shower. I had to wash my hair, too. And shave my legs. Stefan had enough problems. He didn't need to get poked by my prickly legs.

After I was done, I finally felt human again.

It was then I realized my fatal mistake. I'd neglected to think ahead and bring my pajamas in here with me. They were currently sitting under my pillow.

Dammit.

I opened the door and walked across my tiny apartment, knowing full well Stefan could see a good portion of my body. My towels didn't cover much. And I had to walk right in front of the TV he was watching.

Ugh.

“Chesca,” Stefan said in a deep, growly voice.

I didn't answer. I didn't even look at the man.

My feet hurried to the other side of the bed. I quickly slipped my hand under my pillow and—“Hey!” I said as a large hand grasped my arm.

I looked up to see Stefan's dark eyes gliding up and down my torso. “Come here. Give me a kiss,” he said with a smirk on his face.

Luckily, my skin was wet, and I easily slid out of his grip. “Nope, I'm busy. And naked,” I said and rushed to the small set of drawers opposite my bed so I could grab a pair of panties. Then I flew to the bathroom where I changed and dried my hair.

It also gave me a little while to settle my heart rate. I hadn't seen Stefan's eyes like

that since the night we—fooled around. He had the same fever of desire in them then, too.

We would be sleeping in the same bed tonight. Just like we would for the rest of the seven days and nights he was here. The couch was ridiculously small. And I certainly wasn't going to sleep on the floor. So, we'd have to share. And that also meant Stefan needed to stay on his side of the bed.

I stuck the hairdryer away and brushed out my hair. Then I wandered out, playing it casual. And not like I'd just probably given Stefan an eyeful or two. “Do you want anything else before I lay down?”

Stefan's eyes were on me. And they looked hungry. For more than just cereal.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I left my crap in the car.” I hurried to the door and slipped on my tennis shoes and grabbed my keys.

“Stop!” Stefan barked, making me jump. I turned around to look at him. And he was ticked right off.

Furious.

“What? I have to get my bag and my sweater.” I frowned at him.

“You are not stepping outside dressed like that.” He pointed at me. The look on his face was downright murderous.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“Pfft, it's fine. Nobody will even see me back there. The only person who ever comes out is Bernie.” I turned the door handle.

And Stefan had another fit. “Open that fucking door, and we're going to have a problem, Francesca!”

I turned around and glared back at him. “Are you seriously trying to tell me what to do?”

He groaned and shut his eyes. When he opened them, he tilted his head and said, “I'm not kidding around. If you—”

I instantly cut him off, “Whatever, Stefan. What are you going to do? Run after me and give me a spanking?” As soon as that tumbled out of my mouth, I desperately wanted to stuff it back in. I didn't wait for him to respond. I pulled on the door and ran out.

11

Stefan

“Christ!” I yelled at no one. I was alone.

Again.

Francesca was hardly ever here. And when she was, it was all business. Eat, watch TV, shower, and go to sleep.

The sleep part I wasn't complaining about. Being next to an almost naked Francesca was not a chore. But what was a chore was not being able to touch her. And kiss her.

Ever since I'd yelled at her the first night I arrived, she'd been cold toward me.

Yeah, she still fed me. Crappy food. But it was still something. I hoped she ate more at the hospital than she did here. The last three nights, all she'd eaten was half a bowl of cereal every night before bed.

There wasn't much cereal left in the box.

I'd checked out her cabinets the first morning I was here. After she took off for work. Someone had called her at four o'clock in the fucking morning. One of the workers went home sick, and they wanted to know if Francesca could come in early.

She'd bounded out of bed, slipped on her scrubs and escaped with a, "Good luck today."

Yeah.

Good fuckin' luck.

It had taken me ten minutes to walk to the bathroom. And another ten minutes to walk back. At least that was what it felt like.

She didn't have many cabinets in her small as fuck kitchen. But what she did have was bare. Other than for a few packets of sugar and a rapidly diminishing supply of cereal.

Her fridge wasn't any better. All she had in there was a pitcher of water and half a jug of milk that was ready to expire any second.

It broke my fucking heart. And then it made me goddamn mad. Just like years ago, when I'd walked into Giselle's small house, taken one peek at her empty fridge, and then went out to buy her some fuckin' groceries.

And what could I do right now for Francesca?

Absolutely nothing.

I didn't even have my wallet with me. That was probably in Giselle and Carlo's barn. If someone in the emergency department hadn't ripped it off.

Fuck.

There was nothing I could do. Except eat cereal three times a day.

I sat down on the couch and turned the TV to Francesca's stupid show. She wasn't home yet. She was late.

I couldn't call her. I couldn't text. Christ.

Anything could be wrong.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

With her.

Or with that fuckin' car of hers.

She'd been right when she said it was a piece of shit. That goddamn car was not roadworthy in the least. I couldn't believe some cop hadn't pulled her over and ordered a tow truck on the spot.

Fuck.

Maybe that's where she was. Stuck on the side of a road somewhere. And maybe some asshole stopped to help her. And maybe that asshole started to get aggressive.

Fuck.

If she wasn't home soon, I was going to lose it.

Her show started and I turned it up. Yesterday's cliffhanger had been kind of crazy. One of the housewives had opened the door to her bedroom and you could tell her husband was in bed. But there was also another head in there. With long red hair. And her best friend had long red hair.

Personally, I didn't see why she couldn't have just stripped and joined them in bed. But most people were too narrow-minded to even try something like that.

The theme song came on and I put my feet up on the coffee table. Well, it wasn't so much a coffee table as it was four milk crates zip tied together with a piece of painted

wood on it. Half an hour later, it was revealed that her husband had absolutely fucked her best friend. “Idiots,” I said as my stomach started to growl. I looked at the time and tried not to think about Francesca being in danger. Or hungry.

I'd put a bowl out on the counter with a spoon in it and splashed a spoonful or two of milk in it. Just so she'd think I already ate.

I checked her wallet every night when she was in the shower. Not to steal anything but to see if she'd taken money out of an ATM.

There was no evidence of any kind of cash in her wallet. She might be using a card to pay for her lunch. But I severely doubted that. Not once the entire time I was in the hospital did she ever go down to the cafeteria for lunch. Or for anything at all.

Francesca always brought her food from home.

I watched her leave. And I watched her come home.

And not once did she pack a meal or bring any empty containers back from the hospital.

My hungry gut told me that woman wasn't eating. And the reason she wasn't eating was because I was here. She was fucking sacrificing her food—for me.

My stomach growled again. I grabbed my water bottle from the couch and took a long drink.

Fuck.

Where was she?

A noise at the door got my attention.

“Sorry, I’m late,” she said, carrying in a few paper bags with her on top of the bag she took to work every day.

“I stopped to grab us some food on the way home.” She gave me a quick smile and walked to the kitchen. “Give me a minute to change and I’ll make supper right away.” She stuffed some food into the fridge and left the rest out on the counter.

She turned around and clasped her hands together. “Oh, hang on. I almost forgot.” She opened her own bag and pulled out a sandwich. “Here, I got two from the hospital. They’re a few days old, but you’ll be okay. You’re not immune suppressed or anything.” Then she tossed me a plastic wrapped sandwich and headed to her drawers. She pulled clothes out and hurried to the bathroom. She always did that. Changed in the bathroom. The only time she hadn’t was that first morning when she got called in early. She’d pulled off her pajamas and dressed in the dark. If I had to guess, I’d say she probably forgot I was there.

Just because she’d jerked me off, and I came all over her—and then shoved my come inside of her—apparently that didn’t mean a thing.

I opened the sandwich, and my stomach growled again. I sniffed the bread and the roast beef inside. Admittedly, it smelled a little—off. Considering I hadn’t had a decent meal in days, I decided to take a bite. Not great. But it was food. I chewed and watched the show. One of the husbands had surprised his wife with a trip to Italy for their anniversary. The wife was so happy she kissed the fuck out of him.

I wondered if Francesca would do the same thing to me when I took her to Italy for the first time. I’d asked her in the hospital if she’d ever been. And she said no.

Fuck.

I was going to take her to Italy so many times it would make her fucking head spin. My house looked like a goddamn castle compared to this shithole she was living in.

Okay, so it was an actual castle. But she didn't need to know that. Not yet.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Francesca burst out of the bathroom and went straight to the kitchen.

“How's the sandwich?” she asked, washing her hands.

“Good, thanks,” I said as I chewed.

“Hang on, I forgot.” She opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles. One was mustard and one was mayo. She grabbed a plate from the cabinet and walked over to me. “Here, I like to add these. Makes it go down easier.” She gave me another—polite—smile and headed back to the kitchen.

I did what she suggested, and it actually helped to mask the weird taste. I ate and watched the show. But mostly, I watched Francesca in the kitchen. She was chopping something up and boiling something on the stove. It honestly smelled pretty horrible. Not that it mattered. If I could eat this pathetic sandwich, then I'd be able to scarf down whatever she was making.

Fifteen minutes later, she walked over with two bowls of salad. It looked all right. Mostly. The lettuce was limp and so were the cucumbers. But it smelled good. “The dressing is great. I promise, even though the veggies are a little sad.”

I took the bowl and said, “Thanks.” She set her bowl on the coffee table and walked back to the kitchen. She picked up two more bowls and brought them back with her. They were both steaming and smelled vaguely familiar. But I couldn't place it.

“Here, watch out. It's hot.”

I grabbed the bowl and what was inside made me chuckle. “I haven't had this in decades,” I said as I gazed into the bowl of orange macaroni and cut up hot dogs. I took the spoon and shoveled it into my mouth. “Christ, this brings back memories,” I laughed while I ate.

“Why?” she asked, already making a good dent in her bowl.

“Carlo used to make this for me and Nick at college. He brought in a hot plate and made us all kinds of—” I cleared my throat, “things.”

She peered at me and tilted her head in the cutest way. “Carlo cooks?”

I nodded and kept eating. “He's a great cook.” And he was. My brother had always been talented in the kitchen.

“What about you? Do you cook, too?” she asked, and it surprised me in a good way. Our conversations had been rather stilted the last few days. Thanks to me.

“I know my way around a kitchen, Chesca. When I can stand up longer than five seconds, I'll show you.”

She shrugged and looked at the TV. “You're leaving in a few days. There probably won't be time for that.”

Fuck.

Me.

Her words couldn't have hit any harder if she'd punched me directly in the gut. Yeah, she'd said I could stay a week. But I had no fucking intentions of leaving then.

Or ever.

Well, eventually I'd take her to my place. Once I was stronger and I could deal with her attitude.

I couldn't remember a time when a woman out and out defied me like she had. Thinking about other men's eyes on her gorgeous curves when she walked out of the house in just her thin pajamas was still driving me up the wall. And there was fuck all I could do about it.

"Why do you hate him so much?" she said, scooping another large spoonful of macaroni and hot dogs into her mouth.

"Hate who?" I asked, confused at the sudden topic change.

"Your brother," she said, chewing.

My guts clenched, and I swallowed. "He took something that was mine," I answered back, not elaborating about that. Because that was definitely not something Francesca ever needed to know about.

She frowned and turned to me. "What did he take?" Her voice was skeptical as she pursed her lips together.

I cleared my throat and took a sip of my water. "Something he shouldn't have taken." I gave her another short response.

She raised her eyebrows and turned back to the TV. "Huh, he doesn't seem like the thief-type. Are you sure what he stole from you was really yours in the first place?" she asked, so carefree, as if Carlo stealing Giselle from me hadn't shattered me in every way possible. I didn't have an answer for her. And I knew she didn't understand

the consequences of what she'd just said.

Her words echoed deep inside me.

Page 39

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Had Giselle been mine in the first place? Or had I made it all up in my fucking head?

Had.

She.

Ever.

Been.

Mine?

Could the answer be—that simple?

Francesca gazed over at me casually. “Well? You didn't answer me.” Her spoon dug into the depths of the orange macaroni again.

But before she could lift the spoon from her bowl, I slipped my hand around the back of her head and guided her head to me. “I'm beginning to think you're right.” My eyes darted from one eye to the other. And then I kissed her. She tasted like cheesy orange macaroni. And hot dogs. And a hint of cucumber.

I couldn't remember a better kiss.

Part of me was scared she'd push me away. And I didn't know if I could handle that.

But just then she—smiled against my lips. “Sometimes when we lose something that

we wanted,” she kissed me and pulled back a bit, “something better comes along to replace it.” She kissed me one more time. “Wait for your something better, Stefan. It’ll be worth it.” Then she sat back and drew her legs up and crossed them while she ate.

And I thought she was likely correct, except for one thing.

Something better had already come along. I didn’t have to wait.

After a sandwich, two bowls of cheesy macaroni and hot dogs, a bowl of limpy salad, and a few handfuls of microwave popcorn—she’d eaten the rest—we were in bed.

I’d managed a shower. Thank God. Francesca set one of the kitchen chairs in there and I was able to wash myself without too much assistance.

To be honest, I felt like a new man. It was amazing what a shower could do for your spirit.

It was also amazing what a full belly could do. I didn’t feel nearly as angry as I normally did.

I wondered if part of it wasn’t Francesca’s words still bouncing around in my head.

“Maybe it was never yours in the first place,” she’d said.

I loved Giselle. I’d love her until the day I died. But she was with Carlo. They had kids together. She wasn’t coming back to me. Not ever. I knew that. And I’d known that months ago when he’d essentially taken her from me.

But was she ever really mine? I’d blown my shot with Giselle. I’d made the fatal error of waiting to show her my hand. Instead, I spent fucking months being the good guy.

Bringing her and Dani groceries and whatever else they needed. I hung out at their shitty rental house, cooking and playing. And helping.

But I didn't make the first move until my brother was already in the picture.

Not that I knew that at the time.

And now that I look back on it—Giselle was always his. Daniella had called him Dada, for Christ's sake.

And when Carlo and I'd eventually agreed to share Giselle—well, that was a shitty idea right from day fucking one.

I mean, it was fun. A lot of fun at times.

But I think I knew deep down inside that it wasn't a real solution.

I think I knew I'd already lost Giselle. Even then.

I was only holding onto the smallest vestiges of her.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Surprisingly, that revelation didn't cause the pain I thought would follow.

Not at all.

In fact, it only made me feel—lighter somehow.

Maybe it was the cheesy macaroni and hot dogs. The same shit Carlo used to cook for us at college. He made it the best. You wouldn't think there was a good way or a bad way to make that macaroni. But there was.

Fuck.

I missed my goddamn brother. My father would be crushed knowing we weren't speaking. Thankfully, our mother was in Italy, so she didn't know the extent of what was really going on.

And then there was Nick. My best friend. He and Eve had gotten tangled up in all of this garbage, too. I missed my best friend. I'd been lonelier than I wanted to admit without all of them.

Could I forgive those assholes for what they'd done?

Giselle and Eve had begged me to come back and rejoin the family.

Could I do that?

Could I forgive all the shit my brother and Nick had pulled?

Was I a big enough person?

“Chesca, come here,” I whispered as I reached out and rubbed her back.

“Tired.” She yawned. “And full. Sleepy.”

Fuck, she was adorable.

I smiled into the dark and leaned over and kissed her shoulder. “Just for a minute. And then you can go to sleep.”

She shook her head. “Tired.”

My hands slipped around her and turned her to me.

“Stefan,” she whined against my chest. But she didn't fight it.

No.

Instead, she cuddled in and laid her head on my shoulder and chest. Her hand rested on my stomach, avoiding my bandages.

“I'm sorry, Chesca. So sorry.” I kissed her forehead and held her tight.

“Sorry for what?” she asked against my chest.

“For yelling at you the other day. When you went outside mostly naked.”

She laughed softly, her body shaking next to mine.

“I wasn't naked. And nobody's down there, anyway.” She snuggled in closer to me

and I felt my cock stir. Not that it wasn't already stirring. Because it was. Just like it was most of the time when Francesca was around.

Or when she wasn't around, and I was simply thinking about her.

“Yeah, you were. And we need to talk about that. You're mine, Chesca. I don't think you understand what that means. But you will. For now, all you have to understand is that this body belongs to me. No one else gets it. No one else gets to see it. Just me. Only me. So, when you go out in see through as fuck clothes, that pisses me off. And you can't pull that with me. Not anymore.”

Her body stilled, and her hand began sliding off my stomach. But I grabbed it and stopped it.

“I'm not yours, Stefan,” she whispered and tried to pull away.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I didn't allow it. My arm around her tightened.

“Yeah, you are. My come's been on you and in you. I've marked you. You're mine.”

She inhaled a deep breath. “I'm not. And just because we made out one night, weeks ago—does not mean I'm—yours. That's bananas.”

I chuckled and kissed the top of her head. “That's the way it works. And what we did was a hell of a lot more than just make out. I came on you. You came on my hand. We were one step away from me taking your virginity. Which I'll do once I have my strength back.”

She gasped and pushed even harder against me. But even as injured as I was, my upper body strength outmatched hers. “Let me go!” She fought with me, trying to untangle herself from me.

“Settle down. I'm not fucking you tonight. Or anytime soon. And when I do, you'll beg me for it.”

She inhaled a deep breath and said, “That's not going to happen. And who says I'm a virgin? I've slept with dozens of guys.”

I laughed right the fuck out loud. I could tell she didn't appreciate that. “Not only are you a virgin, you'd never been kissed before. And I'm fuckin' happy you hadn't been. Glad my tongue was the first to have that. And I can't wait to take your virginity, Chesca. It's been a long time since I've initiated a woman. And I have a feeling you're going to be the tightest one I've ever broken.”

She struggled in my grip, but I refused to let her go.

“You're a pig!” she spat out angrily.

I couldn't deny that fact. I laughed and pulled her on top of me. Which I could tell she did not expect in the least. Add in the fact that I was now fully hard, it must've been a shock to her.

“Never once said I wasn't a pig, Chesca.” My hand dug into her hair, and I pulled her head close to mine. “But I do know one thing,” I said against her panting lips. “You like it.”

And then I kissed her, crushing my lips against hers. And almost instantly, she stopped fighting.

And met my tongue, tangling with it as she melted into me. She was careful of my chest, holding herself up with her hands. But her tits still pressed against me. Speaking of which, I needed to get rid of her tiny tank top.

“Lift up,” I said after raising the shirt over her breasts. Surprisingly—but not—she sat up and pulled her top off the rest of the way.

Fuck.

My hands slid up her thighs to her short as fuck shorts. “These, too,” I ordered, already feeling out of breath. She hesitated—but only for a moment. And then I helped rid her of her shorts.

Fuck.

She was naked on top of me.

“Hold on,” I said, pulling my boxer briefs down and kicking them off.

“What are you doing?” she breathed out in a low, sexy as fuck voice.

“I just want to feel you, angel. Rub yourself on me. We're not fucking. Not tonight.”

She appeared uncertain of what exactly to do. And that made me even harder.

“Like this, angel.” I set my hands on her waist and pulled her down until her hot pussy was on my cock.

Fuck.

She was already wet.

“Move, Chesca. Do what feels good.” I guided her with my hands. Encouraging her to slide against my hard cock with her warm, wet pussy.

Soon, she started to grind and takeover with her own movements. And I knew then that I had her. That we were absolutely sexually suited for each other.

I played with her gorgeous breasts, feeling the heavy weight of them in my hands. I lifted one to my lips and licked at her nipple. She gasped and pressed herself down on my cock even harder.

Yeah.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

She liked it.

I sucked her into my mouth and really let my tongue swirl and flick her hard nipple. She ground down on me more and quickened her pace.

I let one hand slide to her ass. I said, “I want you to find it, Chesca. Find it, angel. Rub that hot pussy all over my cock.” She increased her speed, and it made me harder than I think I'd ever been. “Fuck, yeah. That feels so goddamn good. Keep going, angel. Find it. I want you to come all over my cock.”

She let out a small whimper right before she ground down even harder on me.

Fuck.

She was impossibly wet. And I loved it.

If she didn't come soon, I would. Having a naked Francesca above me, rubbing her delicious heat on me, had me ready to explode.

I sucked on her nipple, pulling and grazing my teeth gently over that hard bud.

“Stefan,” she exhaled, and I felt the first shudder run through her.

“Yeah, angel. That's right.” My hand held onto her ass as she cried out her orgasm.

“Stefan, yes. Oh, yes.” Her body shook, and I absolutely felt her pussy pulse against my cock. Fuck, I was going to come any second.

I waited another few moments before my hands were under her armpits and I laid her down.

Just in time for me to grip my cock and jerk myself. The moonlight shone through the window just enough so I could watch myself come on her pussy. “Fuck,” I said, making sure I milked every drop from my cock. My finger immediately dipped into my hot release and began shoving it up inside of her. Because that was where all of my come belonged. Inside Francesca.

Finally satisfied that I'd gotten most of it inside her, I collapsed next to her.

My wound didn't feel all that great. But it wasn't like that time in the hospital when I nearly coded after I came all over her.

I knew I was going to be okay.

But I still felt like shit. At any rate, I thankfully had the strength to shove my arm underneath her shoulders. I pulled her to my chest. “Fuck, you wore me out.” I smiled and touched the side of her face. My index finger lifted that perfect chin, and I kissed my woman quickly, but fully. “It's more fun doing that in your bed and not in my hospital bed. Although you—naked in my hospital bed was pretty fuckin' hot.”

She lowered her head and kissed my shoulder. “Are you okay? How do you feel?” Her hand rubbed just below my bandage. Fuck, I loved that she cared.

“I'm fine. Didn't rip even one stitch that time.” I joked with her. But she didn't seem to get my humor.

“That wasn't funny. You needed surgery right after.” Francesca's voice was strained and—worried.

“Let me check you out.” She sighed and tried to get up. But that wasn't happening. Not after she'd just come all over my cock with her hot pussy and then I came all over that pussy. “Let me go. I need to check your bandages.”

I pressed her closer to me. “I'm fine.” I kissed the top of her head. “No, I'm so much better than fine it's not even funny. Close your eyes. I'm fuckin' tired.” My breathing was easier. But I was definitely having some pain. Francesca was right. I shouldn't have done that. I definitely wasn't healed up enough. Not that I was going to tell her that.

“Stefan, let me check you out for one minute,” she insisted. And I knew she wasn't going to give up on this.

I let her go. “It doesn't matter. Even if I am bleeding, I'm not going back to that place,” I told her the God's honest truth. They'd have to carry me out of here in a goddamn body bag. I wasn't willingly going back to the hospital again.

“I'll be the judge of that.” She sat up and turned on the bedside lamp. Then she started to undo my bandages. I looked down, and it didn't look any worse than it had before. She gently closed it back up again and pressed the tape back down. Not that I was really paying attention. What I was looking at, however, were her fabulous breasts. Christ, she was fucking phenomenal.

“Hold on, don't move,” she said and jumped out of bed.

I watched her the whole time as she walked over to her bag on the floor. I nearly groaned out loud when she bent over.

Fuck.

That ass of hers was unfuckingbelievable. It felt great in my hands, but I hadn't seen

her bare ass yet with my own two eyes. She unzipped her bag and pulled a few things out. On her way back, she unwound the tubes and crap from one of the small machines in her arms.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked, wondering what the hell she was planning on doing with that contraption and the others in her arms.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Her eyes landed on mine. “This is a blood pressure monitor. And this is a thermometer.” She pointed to one of the small machines. “And this is a pulse oximeter.”

She arrived at the side of the bed and fitted the armband around my upper arm. She proceeded to check me out with the other two machines as well.

A few minutes later, she said, “You're good. For now. But I'll probably wake you up later to check again.” She started wrapping the tubes around the blood pressure monitor. I picked up the thermometer and looked at it. The small label on it said it was the property of the hospital she worked at. She lifted all this stuff from there. Part of me was surprised at that. And another part of me wasn't.

“If you'd done all your nursing like this,” I let the back of my hand graze the top of her breast over her nipple, “I bet I would have gotten better a whole lot quicker.”

She shoved my hand away. “I'm not a nurse. I already told you that.” She stood and picked up the other two machines and walked over to the small set of drawers. After dumping them on top, she turned around. “Do you want anything?” The look of concern on her face warmed my fucking heart like nothing else ever had.

“Yeah, you. Get that gorgeous ass back to bed.”

But she didn't move. Instead, she bit her lip and said, “I'm going to shower first.”

Before she took one step, I said, “No, you're not. You're sleeping with me on you. And in you. And I'm sleeping with you all over me.” I informed her of how things

were going to be. “If you have to use the bathroom, go ahead. But that's it. Do you understand me?”

Her eyes looked me over, and then she nodded. Thank fuck.

Once she turned the light off and slid back into bed with me, I asked her, “Do you want to be a nurse? Is that your dream?”

She snuggled into my side. “I can't go to school. I told you that already.”

My hand rubbed up and down her arm. “I know what you said. But if you could afford it, is that what you'd like to do with the rest of your life?”

She nodded immediately after that. “I think so. I've been at the hospital for six months and I enjoy it. The hours are long.” She yawned fiercely. “But it's gratifying to see people get better because of something I did. Ya know?” She yawned again, her whole body shuddering with the power of it.

“No, I don't. I have no idea why you'd want to look after a bunch of humans at their absolute worst.”

She laughed softly onto my chest. “It makes me feel useful or something. I don't know how to explain it.”

The combined musky scent of our releases filled my nose, and it drove me crazy. I wanted this woman like I'd never wanted another before in my life.

“You should go to school. Get your degree.”

She giggled and lightly touched the hair on my chest. “Okay, Stefan. I'll do that first thing in the morning. I'll go right down to the university and pay them with the

leftover microwave popcorn and limp cucumbers.” She laughed again and shook her head. “Maybe they’ll give me a couple of apples back in change.”

My hand wandered over her curvy waist to her perfect fuckin’ ass. “I’ll pay for your school, Chesca,” I told her. And I meant it. It was then I realized that I’d give this woman whatever the fuck she wanted.

Anything.

She cuddled in closer to me, and it felt fucking great. A warm, soft, satisfied Francesca plastered against me.

Fuck.

If I died right now, I’d die a happy man.

“Go to sleep, honey. It’s late.” She yawned again.

Christ.

Hearing her call me “honey” had caused a visceral reaction inside of me. Something I’d never felt before in my life.

Not even with Giselle.

That realization threw me for a goddamn loop. What the hell was this woman doing to me?

“I’m serious, angel. I want to pay for your school.” And I meant every word of what I’d just said. And more. Whatever she wanted—she’d get.

“You're not paying for my school. Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I kissed her forehead and hugged her closer to me—if that was even possible. “I’m serious. We’ll set it up tomorrow.”

Her head shook slowly from side to side against my chest. “You’re not paying for my school. Don’t be stupid.”

The chuckle that burst out of me caused her head to bounce. “I’m not the one being stupid. I can afford your tuition. If I couldn’t, I wouldn’t offer.”

She didn’t answer back. A minute later, all I heard was a soft snore from her.

She was exhausted.

From work.

From looking after me.

And probably from a thousand other things I didn’t know about.

And I was going to find out what those things were.

Tomorrow.

12

Stefan

“Christ,” I said as Francesca peeled herself away from me. It literally felt like she had ripped half of me away. “What time is it?” I opened my eyes in the still deep darkness that surrounded us. Francesca was walking toward the bathroom.

“Shh, go back to sleep. It's early,” she whispered and continued on her way.

I figured she'd be back in a minute or two until I heard the shower on. The light shone out under the door, illuminating her shitty apartment a bit better.

Christ.

She deserved so much better than this.

And that was exactly what she was going to get. I was going to give Francesca the fucking world. Everything she wanted. And if that included going to school to get her nursing degree, then so be it. Who was I to judge someone else's passion in life?

Deep down, though, my hope was that she'd grow to love being a kept woman.

A kept wife.

My wife.

I'd keep her belly full of my babies. Planting a new one inside of her as soon as the last one emerged.

My cock hardened at that thought.

Francesca's big belly. Carrying my baby.

Fuck.

She'd look beautiful.

The water stopped, and I heard her rummaging around in the bathroom.

Five minutes later, she opened the door and headed straight for the small set of shitty drawers across from the bed. The light from the bathroom brightened the room somewhat.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice still groggy and filled with sleep.

“Go back to sleep. They called me in. Someone left sick. So I'll cover the rest of his shift before mine starts.” She pulled on her bra and panties and then her scrubs. It was a damn crying shame to cover up a body like that. Francesca was a fucking masterpiece.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

“Christ, woman. When do you get a day off?” I asked, sounding astonishingly whiny to my ears. But I didn't care. I wanted her to stay home. With me.

Not go back to that shithole and deal with a bunch of disgusting, smelly, sick humans. My stomach churned just thinking about going to the hospital again. But it was something she looked forward to for some reason.

Francesca laughed as she sat down on the bed to pull her socks on. “There are no days off, Stefan. At least I hope there aren't.”

I frowned and asked, “What do you mean? You haven't had one day off since I got here. You must be due by now.”

She laughed again and stood. “How many days did I get off when you were in the hospital?” She hurried toward the kitchen.

I thought back. I wasn't completely coherent every day I was there, but from what I could remember, she was always there. “None?”

She opened the fridge. “Bingo,” was all she said before pulling shit out and closing the door. Then she started scooping food into a stupid empty margarine container.

“Why? They must owe you a ton of days off by now.” I scratched my head, and a sharp pain ran through me. My body felt like I'd run a goddamn marathon or something. A sudden flash of Francesca's naked body over top of me burst into my brain. And I grinned to myself.

Fuck.

That woman had come completely unglued as she rubbed her hot, wet pussy all over my hard cock.

Speaking of my cock—it just jumped, wanting her to come back over here and do the same thing she'd done last night.

“I don't get paid if I don't work. Overtime isn't much, but it's more. So, I take whatever extra shifts I can pick up,” she said like that was the most normal thing in the world—to work yourself to the bone every day without a break.

“You're going to kill yourself. You can't work every fuckin' day, Chesca. That's not good for you.”

She laughed and opened the bread that she'd brought home. “Yes, but paying rent and buying gas for my crappy car—is—good for me. Very good for me.” She pushed down the lever on the toaster and it lit up in the semi-darkness.

“How much is rent?” I asked, determined to pay it for her. Not that it would matter. As soon as I could walk down those steps outside, I was taking her to my place and forever removing Francesca from this horrible excuse for an apartment.

“It's enough that I have to work every day.”

Her answer pissed me off. I felt my anger boil down deep in my chest. Someone like her shouldn't have to work every goddamn day to pay rent. “I asked you how much rent was, Francesca. And I expect an answer.”

Her head turned to me, and she laughed.

Right in my fucking face.

My brain almost exploded from her defiance. Honest to fuck—if I didn't have a gaping wound in my chest, I'd walk over there, sling her over my shoulder and spank that perfect heart-shaped ass until she told me what I wanted to know.

“I'm not telling you.”

Jesus Christ.

This woman.

I didn't need the blood pressure monitor hooked up to me to know it had spiked.

“Since you won't go back to sleep, do you want toast before I leave?” she asked. I could hear her buttering the toast she'd just dropped on a plate.

“I'll eat later,” I mumbled, feeling more than dejected. I couldn't believe how fragrantly Francesca disregarded my questions. I had a strong feeling it was going to take a long time to rid her of this behavior. But a very large part of me was looking forward to training her.

My way.

Once my goddamn chest didn't feel like it was on fucking fire.

I heard her bite into her toast. It wasn't even dawn outside yet and she was eating. Last night she'd eaten twice what I did. And then she ate most of the microwave popcorn. And now—she was eating again.

My heart sank, now knowing full well that she had been hungry those days when all

she had in the cupboard was one box of tasteless cereal and a few packs of stolen sugar.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Fuck, that bothered the shit out of me. Knowing she'd suffered and gone hungry just so I had enough to eat.

Fuck.

That could never happen again.

And I'd see to it.

She finished eating her toast and packing up her lunch. Then she brought me a fresh glass of water and set it on the crate beside the bed. "Drink, okay? It'll help you get better." What she did next surprised the fuck out of me. She leaned over and kissed me and said, "Thanks for last night, honey. It was fun." She giggled in the most tantalizing way. My cock pulsed underneath the sheets, wanting to start something up with her.

My hands cupped her face. "You did most of the work." I gently touched my lips to hers, giving her a sweet but memorable kiss. It was all I could give her before she started her hellish workday. I fucking hated feeling this powerless to save her from this shitty life.

She straightened up, grabbed her bag as she slipped on her shoes, and then rushed right out.

Leaving me alone.

Again.

Stefan

I woke up sometime later. I wasn't sure of the time, but the sun was fully up, shining through the window.

I tried to sit up but had a whole lot of fucking problems doing that.

For one thing, my chest was on fire. As was the rest of my body. I touched my forehead and sighed. "Fuck." I had a fever. Even I could tell that. And it wasn't just a small one. My head felt like the top of a fucking stove.

When I finally managed to sit up, the whole room moved, and I felt like I was going to vomit.

I pushed to standing and grabbed my cane that was propped against the wall. I hadn't needed it for a while. But I sure as fuck would today.

Somehow, I made it to the bathroom and back. Then I decided to take Francesca's advice and drink something. Maybe that would help. The lukewarm water still felt cool going down my parched throat. I gulped down half the glass before setting it down again.

Fuck.

I felt like shit. I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. After I surfed around, I found a channel with the time. It was one in the afternoon. Christ, I'd been asleep for hours. That couldn't be a good sign. Neither was the fever.

Or the fact I was fighting not to hobble to the bathroom to eject the water I'd just had.

Suddenly, just like the gods had heard, Francesca walked through the door. “Hi, I—” she started to say before her eyes landed on me and the smile on her gorgeous face fell right off. “Oh, no.” She shut the door quickly and came to my side. She touched my forehead and winced. “Crap. Lay down. Let me look at your wound.” She helped me lay down and then opened my bandages. “Crap, crap, crap. It's infected.” Her eyes stared into mine. “You need to go back to the hospital. They'll give you antibiotics for this.” She carefully closed up my bandage and sighed. The look of disappointment on her face broke my heart.

“I'm fine. I'll be better later. I just need to get some sleep,” I tried to reassure her that I was fine. That I would be fine. Soon.

She shook her head. “This is a big deal, Stefan. You need the proper treatment. You can't fight this on your own,” she said in a calm, cool voice.

“I'm not going there again,” I told her the truth. I wasn't.

She grabbed my hand and kissed it. “I have to go back to work right away. I just wanted to check on you.”

Her lips felt cool on my hand. “Give me Giselle's number, honey. I'll call and she can send the guys over to help take you in. You don't want me to call an ambulance, do you?”

My already hot body grew even hotter. “You're not calling anyone. I'm going to be fine,” I gritted out.

She shook her head and set my hand down. “You have to go in. You're really sick. If you don't get this taken care of right now, you could take a turn for the worse.”

Anger boiled inside of me, thinking about Carlo and Nick inside Francesca's

apartment. Trying to help me.

“Fuck, no. You're not calling anyone. I'm not leaving. Grab me some pills from the pharmacy. I don't give a shit what you get me. But I'm not fucking going back to the goddamn hospital!”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

She tried over and over again to talk me into getting help. But I refused. There was no way she could force me to go.

Ten minutes later, Francesca sighed and stood. “You're impossible. I'll be back.” She kissed me quickly on the lips and then left.

I wasn't sure how much time had gone by when she came back. I'd fallen asleep to some stupid game show on the TV.

“Give me a few minutes to set this up,” she said, dumping her bag on the bed. A bunch of things toppled out. Everything looked familiar. IV bags, gauze, tape, and some other shit. Then she stepped up to a picture I hadn't even looked at and removed it from the wall. After that, she hung a big clear bag and a much smaller bag on the nails in the wall.

I watched her hurry to the kitchen to wash her hands. When she finished, she put on a pair of gloves and opened up quite a few packages. One being a longer needle.

She swiped the back of my hand with an alcohol wipe and carefully inserted the needle. “Got it!” she exclaimed proudly, with a huge smile on her face. Fuck, she was so incredibly beautiful. She started taping the needle to my hand and organizing a bunch of other shit. My eyelids were too damn heavy to keep open. So, I closed them for a while.

“Stefan, open up,” I heard Francesca's beautiful voice float into my ears.

Opening my eyes seemed like a hell of a chore, but I did it.

She sat there with a cup in one hand and a spoon in the other. She spooned something cold into my mouth and I took it. The small ice chips melted almost instantly inside my mouth. “Good, take some more,” my angel said, giving me more cold ice. She kept that up for a few minutes until she said, “We have to get your temperature down. Can you swallow these for me? Open up.” She gave me a couple of pills and held a glass of water for me to sip from.

I nodded and did what she asked. The water she gave me was cold, and it felt good going down.

The TV was on low, and it was the only light on in the room.

Francesca stood and walked to the kitchen. She pulled down a bowl from the cabinet. She filled it up and walked back over to the bed.

“Sponge bath time,” she said with a smile on her face. It didn't quite reach her eyes, though. And just from looking at her, I could see the worry she held in them.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe I should have gone to the fucking hospital.

Maybe I was going to die in her bed.

“You're all sweaty. Let's freshen you up a bit, okay?” She set the bowl down and proceeded to wring out the rag. And then she picked up my heavy, leaden arm and started wiping it with the warm rag. Even after just a few swipes, I started to feel better.

Francesca kept wiping me down. My other arm. My face and neck. My torso.

My legs and feet.

A timer went off on her phone and she reached over for it and turned it off.

“I'm giving you another few hours. And if you don't start to get better soon, I'm calling an ambulance.”

I was too tired to fight her on that. Too hot to care.

I closed my eyes and drifted off, half of me hoping I'd get better.

And the other half hoped I didn't.

14

Stefan

“Oh, my gosh. Normal! Finally,” Francesca said as she turned the thermometer off and dropped it on the bed. She'd already taken my blood pressure and changed my IV bag.

“Are you ready for some supper? I picked up some hamburgers from downstairs. Bernie makes the best ones. And you could use some protein in you after the last few days.”

I nodded and grabbed the bottle of water off the bed. “Yeah, please.” I took a long gulp.

She got up and headed to the kitchen. I finally felt almost human again. It had been a long few days of feeling like supreme shit. But I could get to the bathroom by myself now. And I didn't feel like I was waiting at death's door any longer.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

I only had Francesca to thank for that. She'd been here for me every minute. Morning and night. Watching over me. Making sure I was comfortable. Sleeping beside me—one hand on my arm at all times. It was fuckin' adorable.

The smell of cooking hamburgers soon filled the air. She'd opened a couple of windows, letting the breeze blow through the tiny space.

Everything was so—peaceful.

That concerned look that had lived on Francesca's face finally left. It was replaced with a much happier one. Her relief was palpable.

I loved watching her cook. And clean. And look after me.

I pretty much just—loved—her.

Francesca.

I was absolutely in love with that woman.

She hadn't called an ambulance when she one hundred percent wanted to.

She also hadn't called Nick or my asshole brother to come and help.

No.

She'd dealt with everything herself.

A while later, she brought over two plates and handed me one. She picked up the remote and turned to that show she always watched. It looked like one of the women and her family were in Hawaii.

“Oh, wow, look how beautiful that water is.” Francesca pointed at the TV while she sat on the bed beside me. She smiled at the screen and sighed. “I bet that sand is so soft.”

I nodded and grabbed my hamburger. “It is. I’ll take you there when I’m better.” And I fuckin’ would. “After I buy you a dozen tiny bikinis.” I smirked over at her, and she rolled her eyes. I imagined her in a small, white bikini, only covering the absolutely necessary parts. “Or would you rather go to the Bahamas?” I asked and took a huge bite of my burger. Fuck, Francesca was right. Bernie made damn good burgers. It was thick and juicy. She’d broiled it perfectly.

Francesca bit into her burger, too. Christ, I loved watching her eat. And this burger was the first real quality thing she’d brought into the apartment since I’d been here.

Once she moved in with me, quality was the only thing she’d ever eat again. No more limp lettuce and cucumbers for her.

“I’m serious,” I said after I swallowed. “Hawaii or the Bahamas? Or somewhere else? It’s up to you. I owe you for everything you’ve done for me.”

She glanced at me and looked back at the TV. “You don’t owe me anything, Stefan. Except some silence so I can watch my show.” The woman on the TV had on a bikini. She looked—okay. But nothing at all compared to how fucking fantastic Francesca would look in that bikini. The family’s four kids were walking with the woman and her husband. And I had a vision of me and Francesca walking along the beach with our kids.

Yeah.

As soon as I could hold myself up, I was going to plant my baby inside of her. I couldn't wait to start our life together.

Just her—and me. And the babies we'd make.

“I'm serious. Where do you want me to take you?” I reached over and squeezed her thigh.

“I don't know, honey. We'll check the flights when you're better, okay?” she said, keeping her eyes on the TV the whole time. It felt a little like a pat on the head. And I didn't appreciate it.

“I have my own plane, Chesca. We don't need to check anything. I tell my pilots where we want to go and they'll take us.”

Francesca immediately started choking. She set her plate on the bed and grabbed her water. “You have your own plane? As in airplane?” She looked over at me, still coughing.

I'd shocked her. And that pleased the fuck out of me.

“Yes, my airplane flies in the air,” I said, feeling my chest puff out a little more than usual. Francesca's life was going to completely change when I was all healed up. She should start to get used to the idea of having money. Because from now on, she would.

“That's bananas, Stefan. Nobody has their own plane.” She shook her head and put her glass of water down on the crate beside her. Then she started eating again.

“You'll have to quit your hospital job. If we're going away, then I'm not bringing you back home for months,” I told her the God's honest truth. Well, half of the truth, anyway. I wasn't bringing this woman back home until she was pregnant.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

She picked up the remote and turned up the volume on the TV. “No, I won't. They fired me yesterday.”

I dropped my plate and pulled the remote out of her hands. I turned the TV off and grabbed her arm. “What do you mean, they fired you?”

She raised her eyebrows. “They fired me.”

I frowned and looked at her, feeling unbelievably confused. “Why? Because you took a few days off that they owed you?” I wasn't quite sure why I was so angry. I didn't want her working there. They'd done me a huge favor in getting rid of her.

“No, it was probably all the shit I stole. You know,” she gestured to the IV still dripping into my arm, “to keep you alive.”

Fuck.

I'd been in such a fevered haze that I hadn't considered where she'd gotten all this crap.

Fuck.

I was the reason she'd lost her job.

“You stole everything?”

She nodded and shrugged. “I tried to be careful. But I must've missed a camera or

something.” She pulled the remote out of my hand and turned the TV back on. “It doesn't matter. I'll find another job soon enough. I always do.”

My stomach fell at hearing her words. She really didn't understand what was going on here.

“You're not getting another job. I have money for groceries, and I won't charge you rent.” I smiled at her, but she wasn't as amused. Why wasn't she jumping into my arms and thanking me for saving her from this fucking dump?

“Can we talk about it after my show? I haven't heard a word.”

Confusion, disappointment—and more confusion raced through me. Why was she acting this way? At any rate, I decided to drop it until later. Maybe she'd be in a better mood after her show.

Half an hour later, she still didn't want to discuss any travel plans. Or anything else. She did announce that it was time for me to get in the shower so she could change the sheets.

I was feeling pretty ripe, so I agreed. It was so much easier to get around now, but I still needed the chair in the shower. I did all my own washing. It took me a year, but at least I was able to do it myself. And get out of the shower and dry off.

When I opened the door, the kitchen was already cleaned, and she was in bed. Fuck, she looked amazing. Like she belonged on a centerfold instead of a shitty bed in a shitty apartment.

My stomach growled, which surprised me. I'd barely just finished supper. Instead of heading to bed, I walked to the kitchen to grab something. I tried to be as quiet as I could so I wouldn't wake Francesca. She seemed even more exhausted than usual. I

opened a cupboard door and peeked in. A box of cookies sat on the middle shelf. I pulled it down, wincing slightly at the way my wound tugged at the movement. They were cheap, crappy cookies, but they hit the spot. I crunched down a good handful of them before slipping the box back into the cupboard. I spotted an empty bag on the counter. Francesca must've forgotten to put it away. I picked it up and looked inside. A small piece of paper floated to the floor. With some effort, I crouched down and grabbed it.

The light from the bathroom was still on, so I was able to see the words clearly enough.

It had the name of a church on it—nearby, from a quick look at the address.

And underneath that it read—food bank.

The groceries Francesca had brought home were from a fucking food bank.

“Jesus,” I whispered as I crumpled the paper in my hand. This was goddamn disturbing. I'd been reduced to being a fucking charity case.

Fuck.

Knowing I'd just eaten food that was meant for someone who couldn't afford food made me—angry. And knowing that Francesca had been the one to search out the food bank, walk inside, get the food, and bring it back home—I shook my head.

Never again.

My woman would never have to do this.

Stefan

Page 50

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am

Francesca smiled up at me as we danced in the garden outside my house in Italy. Flowers bloomed everywhere around us, emitting the most delicious scents. But not better than how Francesca smelled. I inhaled her scent deeply into my nose, knowing I'd never forget it.

Not that I'd need to. She was mine.

Forever.

My ring was finally on her finger.

And my baby in her belly.

We didn't have a care in the world.

Life.

Was.

Perfect.

“Crap,” I heard her mutter, and suddenly—she disappeared.

I sucked in a shocked breath and opened my eyes.

Fuck.

It had all been a dream. I lifted my head from her pillow and spotted her on the couch. “What's wrong?” I said groggily while I yawned. My eyes watered and I blinked quickly as I yawned ferociously again.

Francesca turned her head toward me. “Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,” she said and gazed over at me. “How are you feeling?”

I did a mental assessment of my body parts. And surprisingly, I didn't feel like shit.

“Good. I'd be better if you came over here and gave me a kiss, though.” I stretched and rolled onto my back. Then I quickly realized I was sporting morning wood. I reached under the covers and adjusted myself.

“I'll make you some breakfast,” she said and rose from the couch. I watched her fantastic ass as she swayed to the tiny kitchen.

My eyes fell to the makeshift coffee table. She'd been doing a puzzle. A large one from the look of it. I squinted and said, “You're missing a few pieces.” I pointed at the puzzle—which was, in fact, missing three or four pieces.

“Yeah, I know,” Francesca called out. She cracked two eggs into a bowl and whipped them with a fork. “I'll fix it later.”

I had no idea what she meant by that. Either she had the pieces, or she didn't.

At any rate, my bladder wasn't going to hold out much longer. I carefully sat up and slid my legs over the edge of the bed.

Not too much pain, I noted. After I pushed myself up, I walked to the bathroom in record time. I still felt a little groggy. The cracked mirror in here reflected a very disheveled man to me.

Fuck.

I looked like hell. I needed a haircut and a good shave.

I soaped up my face and grabbed Francesca's pink razor from the side of the tub. It was far from a close shave. What could you possibly expect from a cheap piece of plastic?

Even so, it was an improvement.

I hobbled into the shower and did a thorough once over.

After I dried off, I opened the door and headed out.

The sweet smell of baking hit me.

“You okay?” Francesca stood at the sink, washing dishes. How could she look so fuckin' sexy washing dishes?

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:53 am

I wandered toward her. My hands landed on her hips, and I kissed that sensitive part of her neck that she liked so much. “I’m good. What are you making? It smells great.”

She tilted her head, giving me more room to kiss her neck. Which I immediately took full advantage of.

“Just some biscuits. They’ll be ready right away.” Her breathy voice shot straight to my cock. I wanted her to be underneath me talking in that voice.

“I’d rather have you right now.” I kissed her neck again, dragging my tongue as I did so.

She laughed and grabbed a dish towel off the counter. “You need to eat and keep up your strength.” She turned around in the small bit of space I allowed between us. Her hands landed on my bare chest. I hadn’t put a new set of bandages on after my shower. Francesca usually told me to let it dry out a bit before taping more gauze and shit on top of it.

“This looks better.” She scrutinized my wound. “Much better.” The feel of her soft hands on my skin was driving me out of my mind. “I think you should keep this open today. Don’t put a shirt on for a while.”

I grinned down at her and touched my mouth to hers. “You just want me naked. Don’t you?”

She giggled and kissed me back, her hands sliding up to my shoulders. “Go sit down. Breakfast will be ready in—” She didn’t get to finish. A loud buzzer went off,

interrupting.

I moved back and let her deal with the stove. Sure enough, she pulled out six steaming hot biscuits. My mouth watered at the sight and smell of them.

“Your pants are dry. I folded them and set them on the couch.” Francesca nodded in the general direction.

“Thanks,” I said and wandered over that way. I picked up my bathtub pants—that was what I called them in my head, anyway. Every night, Francesca washed my pants in the bathtub.

The fucking bathtub.

And then hung them to dry. Often, she used the hairdryer on them to— “soften them up a bit.” But it didn't help much. They still felt like sandpaper against my skin.

Giselle had brought them to the hospital for me. All I had was one pair of pants, one shirt, and one pair of boxer briefs. And socks. That was it.

As soon as we got to my place, I was throwing all of it into the fireplace and burning it.

My pants didn't feel any better today as I slipped them on and sat down on the couch. The puzzle caught my eye, and I leaned over slightly to get a good look. That was when I noticed a piece of paper with three puzzle-shaped pieces sketched on them.

“Here, watch out. Everything's really hot.” Francesca handed me a plate and then sat down beside me. She'd put eggs, cheese, and sausage inside the biscuit. I took a bite and closed my eyes. “This is so good,” I mumbled over a mouthful of great-tasting food.

“I know,” Francesca said, chewing. “Bernie stuck in a few sausage patties with the hamburgers yesterday. That guy is the best.” She nodded and took another bite.

Jealousy that I'd never felt before in my fucking life curled up in my gut, ready to strike out. “Do you like that guy?” I asked, ready to hobble on down the billion stairs to go strangle the little asshole.

“Yeah, he's great.” Francesca nodded and grabbed the remote.

But I slipped it out of her hand. “Exactly how much do you like him?” I glared at her, my heart suddenly beating furiously inside my chest.

She tilted her head slightly and frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked in an unsure voice. From the look in her eyes, I could tell she had no idea what I was getting at. Francesca needed this spelled out for her. So, that was what I'd do.

“Do you want to fuck him?” I snapped, perhaps a little harsher than I meant to.

Actually—no. I fucking meant it.

Her mouth dropped open, and she moved away. “No. Why do you ask?” she clipped right back. Her defensiveness was not a turnoff. Seeing the fire inside of her only made her more appealing to me.

“I ask,” I set my plate on the crate, “Francesca.” I tossed the remote onto the couch beside us. “Because I need to know when I should snap his neck. Now,” I grabbed her plate out of her hand and shoved it onto the crate beside mine, “or later.” My hands grasped her arms, preventing her from moving away.

“You're crazy,” she whispered in disbelief. But I had to get this through to her. Make her understand that she was mine.

And no one else's.

“Maybe. But I'm really fuckin' jealous, Francesca. Don't ever forget that. You belong to me. Not that snot-nosed imbecile downstairs.”

Her eyes widened. “Bernie is sixty. At least. And he doesn't want to date me. He's fed me—for free—more times than I can even count.” Her voice was calm, but I could still detect the underlying fear behind it.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:53 am

“If he's feeding you,” my grip tightened on her, “then he wants to fuck you. I don't care how old he is. Or how fucking nice he is.”

Francesca's back straightened, and she tried to pull out of my grasp—but I wouldn't let her. “Well, Stefan,” she narrowed her eyes, “he can want whatever he wants. But, no. I don't want to date a sixty year old man. Bernie has only ever been kind to me. He lets me use his cable and WiFi for free. And he could easily get a different renter in here who'd pay double what I am.”

I barked out a sarcastic laugh. “Because he wants to get into your panties, Chesca.” Fuck, that guy was pissing me off, and I'd never even met the asshole. But I would. As soon as I could make it down those fucking stairs.

“He's renting to me illegally, Stefan. And he knows I'll keep my mouth shut. That is why he keeps me around.”

I leaned in closer—much closer. And crushed my lips against hers. She opened immediately with a small mewl.

No fight left in her.

Not even a little.

Fuck.

The intensity with which she kissed me back made my cock so fucking hard. Her tongue searched out mine and I growled.

I fucking growled into her mouth and took over the kiss. She submitted to me beautifully. And I knew this was how she'd always be. Ready and willing for me to take over. And it excited the shit out of me.

“Okay, okay,” she breathed out, breaking our kiss. “You need to settle down and eat. You can't get upset like this. It's not good for you.”

It was difficult for me to catch my breath. I wanted to claim her.

Right here.

Right now.

But I also knew she was right. This wasn't good for me. I'd healed. But I still had a long way to go. And attempting to fuck Francesca would likely end in disaster. And that wasn't something I wanted.

No.

The first time I fucked Francesca—when I took her virginity—I wanted it to be perfect. Just like she was.

I wanted her to remember it for the rest of her life.

“Eat,” I said, still finding it difficult to catch my breath. “And if you mention that asshole's name to me one more time—”

She gave me a small smile, and then lightly kissed my lips. “Shh,” she said directly against my lips, “eat.”

We grabbed our plates and sat back. Francesca turned the TV on and found a channel

that didn't suck too badly.

And then we ate.

In silence.

16

Stefan

“Voila!” Francesca exclaimed. Happily shooting her hands up into the air in celebration.

I leaned over and took a look at what she'd been working on most of the afternoon. Somehow, she'd made, drawn, and filled in three new pieces to complete the puzzle. Her homemade ones were still fairly obvious. But fuck if she didn't do an excellent job.

“Unbelievable. Where'd you learn how to draw like that?” I carefully touched the smooth top of one piece with my finger.

“Oh, careful. I still need to add some clear glue around them. So they don't get ruined right away.” She stood and crossed the floor to where her backpack sat. And yes, I stared at her ass as she bent over and picked it up. “I swiped some medical grade glue.” She grinned and headed back to the couch. She unzipped her backpack and riffled through it and pulled out a small bottle. A piece of paper peeked out and I pulled it out the rest of the way.

“Hey, don't,” she said, and tried to grab it back from me. I held her back with my arm while I read the letter.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:53 am

“Dear Francesca, we are pleased to welcome you—” my eyes skimmed down the rest of the page. And I smiled. “You got into nursing school? Congratulations.” I felt my eyebrows nearly jump off my face.

I expected to see a giant smile on her face. Instead, what I saw was—disappointment. “Yeah, thanks.” She tried to take back the letter, but I wouldn't let her.

“Why are you mad? I thought this would be a good thing?” I asked, confused. Francesca hadn't told me that she was applying for school. But I could understand why. She might not have wanted anyone to know if she didn't get accepted. That wouldn't have mattered to me. At all. Even so, I could understand why she'd want to keep something like that to herself.

“Yeah, it's great.” She reached into her backpack and pulled out a pair of gloves. She slipped them on and opened the glue. Then she picked up one of the homemade puzzle pieces and went to work on it.

There was still something off, though.

Really off.

Getting into nursing school had been a dream of hers. There was no reason why she shouldn't be excited about it.

She was hiding something from me.

I tossed the acceptance letter to the floor and yanked her backpack onto my lap. There

was a stack of papers inside, and I pulled them out.

“Wait! Don't!” Francesca said, but I was already standing and walking to the bed. I sat down and flipped through the many pages.

She'd applied for a—loan.

A fucking student loan.

And they'd denied her.

Flat out told her to go to hell. Immediately.

I dropped the papers beside the puzzle and looked over at her. “I told you I'd pay for your school. Why did you do this?” I jerked my head at the loan papers scattered in front of me.

She took a breath and went back to her puzzle pieces. “You're not paying for my school, Stefan.” She carefully finished gluing one piece and picked up another one.

“I am. Get me the bill and I'll pay it right now.”

She let out a small, sad laugh. “You're not paying, honey. I told you that already. This isn't your problem.” She grabbed another puzzle piece and began carefully applying glue to it.

“You're mine. So, yes, I'm paying,” I insisted, trying my best to let her know she wasn't going to win this fight. Because she fucking wasn't.

When she didn't look up—or answer me, I said, “Chesca. What's the problem here? I offered to pay. I have money. I think you understand that. I don't see an issue.”

She set down the freshly glued piece and picked up the last one. “You're not paying. I shouldn't even have tried to apply. Even if they'd given me the loan, it wouldn't have been enough, anyway. There's no way I could make enough for my rent and other living expenses.” She shook her head and shrugged. “I guess I just wanted to see if I'd get accepted. But I feel even worse now. So, it really wasn't worth it.”

I sighed and did my best not to explode. “You won't have any fucking living expenses, Chesca. You'll be living with me.” Again, I tried my level best to calm the fucking rage that was ready to burst forth. “And I have money. A lot of it. Your tuition is barely a drop in the bucket.”

Her eyes rose to mine, and she shook her head. “I don't even know you. I'm not letting you pay tens of thousands of dollars for me. That's stupid.”

If I had the strength, I'd—well, I'd do a lot of things. But at the moment, I couldn't do a damn thing.

“Give me your phone.” I stretched out my hand. “I'll make one call, and you can go pick out binders and pens.” I smiled at her and waited.

And waited.

Jesus.

This woman.

“Why are you fighting me on this?” I lowered my voice. “You're moving in with me. It's my job to take care of you. And that includes nursing school. If you go for a week and hate it—” I shrugged, “then don't go back. Fuck it. But at least give it a shot. Or you'll regret it.”

Francesca slipped off her gloves and sat back. She licked her lips and crossed her arms. “We'll talk about it in a few days. Okay? I'm just not in the right mindset right now.”

Page 54

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:53 am

She was asking me to lay off this subject. For a few days. Technically, she wouldn't have to respond to the acceptance letter for a while.

We had time.

I wasn't giving up.

I wasn't giving in.

I was just—delaying the decision making on her part.

If she needed a few days to let everything sink in—then I could do that.

She might think I was talking out of my ass—and that I really wouldn't have her move in with me. She likely had doubts. After all, the woman couldn't see inside my head. She didn't know the depths of my commitment.

But she would.

And soon.

I gathered up the loan papers and looked at her. “Okay. We'll discuss this again in a few days. While you're packing up whatever shit you want to bring to my place.”

All I got out of her was a small smile and a nod.

After that, she announced that she needed a quick shower. And then she was going

out to clean up her car.

Once she was in the bathroom, and I heard the shower turn on—I pushed off the bed and hunted down her phone. It was on top of the shitty dresser. I'd taken note of her security code. So, I quickly tapped it in. It didn't take me long to dial my assistant. When he answered, I said, "It's me. I need you to do something right now."

17

Stefan

"Fuck," I said as I pushed another load of my come up into her. She'd just made me shoot my load all over her stomach. I was breathing hard, but I was still determined to get as much of me inside her as I possibly could.

And Francesca let me.

She always let me.

And I fuckin' loved it.

I loved her.

So goddamn much.

And I was finally going to tell her.

"Chesca," I said, barely catching my breath while my hand grazed slowly up her belly. "I love you. I'm taking you home tomorrow. Pack what you want. Or leave it all and I'll buy you new shit. I don't care. I'll call for one of my cars to pick us up. Leave that brown piece of shit to die in the back parking lot where it belongs. I'll

have one of my guys dispose of it for you. If you want a car, you can drive one of mine. Or pick out something else that you like, and I'll have it delivered to the house." I kissed her temple and pulled her into me. "Whatever you want. I don't give a fuck what you drive. Or if you drive. There's always a driver available to take you anywhere you want. So, if you don't want to drive, you don't have to."

Fuck.

It felt good to finally tell her all that. I hadn't brought up her school, but I would now, as well. "You're all paid up to go to school. For your entire degree. If you want to go. Like I said before, if you go for a week and you change your mind—" I rubbed her arm. "Then you change your mind and find something else. Or not. You don't have to go to school. You don't have to work. Do whatever the fuck you want. But first, in a few weeks or so, I'm taking you somewhere hot. And all you'll wear are bikinis. Or nothing at all." I chuckled and cupped the side of her head, my fingers diving into her hair. "And you decide if I take your virginity in my bed," I kissed her lips, "or on my plane," I kissed her again. "Or on a white sandy beach." Then I kissed her with more intent. And she let me.

A few minutes after that—she was sound asleep in my arms. And I gladly followed.

Tomorrow was going to be the first day of the rest of our lives together.

18

Francesca

I moved slowly. Inch by inch.

I didn't want to wake him.

I couldn't wake him.

Most nights, he slept like the dead. For the first few hours, at least. His body was still healing. He was able to do more and more every day. But it definitely took its toll on him physically.

I silently slipped on a hoodie and my sweats over top of my tank top and shorts. Then I set out to pack what I could get into my backpack and a few bags. Not that I had much. Most of the kitchen stuff was Bernie's. Not that I'd take it with me, anyway. But I grabbed what I needed. I would only be able to do one load, so I needed to make it count. Once I closed the door on this place, I wasn't coming back.

My phone suddenly lit up, and I panicked.

And then I freaked out when I saw who was calling.

Dammit.

Not him.

Crap.

What the heck did he want?

I instantly turned my phone off so it would stop buzzing, and I looked over at Stefan.

If he woke up now, I would be in deep, deep trouble.

I waited a full minute—but he didn't move.

Thank goodness.

I pulled the envelope out of my backpack before I slipped it on. Then I set it on top of the dresser.

Stefan would find it when he woke up.

A burning sensation started behind my eyes. I picked up the bags and headed out.

I told Bernie a few days ago that I was moving out. He wouldn't be surprised not to see me again.

My stomach clenched at the thought of not coming home to the smell of corned beef ever again.

Or to Stefan.

It really hadn't fully sunk in yet. That last night would be the last time I'd ever touch him. Or kiss him. Or do all the other wonderful things to him that he taught me to do.

And he wouldn't do any of the fantastic things he did to me.

Ever again.

I'd so wanted to give him my virginity. I wasn't quite sure why I'd hung onto it for this long.

It was stupid.

But Stefan wasn't fully healed. So, I lost my chance.

Stefan would have been a wonderful first.

With the care and attention he always took of me while we did—other stuff—I knew he'd be the perfect man to go all the way with.

But that time was lost forever now. Which made me want to sit down and cry.

First, I had to get the heck out of here before Stefan woke up and saw that I was gone. Just thinking about what he'd do when he first realized I'd left—gave me a sick feeling in my stomach.

As quietly and carefully as I could, I stepped down the stairs one at a time. Half of me wanting to just toss my belongings over the side of the railing, and the other half of me wishing Stefan would suddenly open the door and yell at me to come back to him.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:53 am

Because right now—I would probably do just that.

A minute later, I was at the bottom of the stairs. I looked up at the darkened apartment and sighed. “Goodbye, home. Thank you for taking good care of me for so long,” I whispered to my tiny apartment. “Please, take care of Stefan while he sleeps. And when he wakes up.” A dry lump formed in my throat as my eyes grew watery. I didn't have time to be all sappy. I had to get out of here.

I hurried as fast as I could to my crappy little brown car and opened the trunk. I stuffed my things inside and shoved it closed. The night was cool and dark. Sirens screamed in the near distance and horns honked. I'd miss this place. A lot.

No, it wasn't perfect. But it was relatively quiet. For a rental place in a not-so-great part of town.

I opened my door and slid behind the wheel. “Please, crappy little brown car. Start for me. Please?” I expected it to give me some trouble. Why wouldn't it?

But—for the first time in forever—it started on the first try. “Good crappy little car. Thank you.” I backed up and slowly rolled out of the parking lot, practically holding my breath. Hoping against hope that Stefan didn't wake up and see me. I managed to get out onto the front street and signaled right. As I crept onto the road, I pulled out my phone, turned it back on, and hit the number I knew I needed to call.

She picked up after two rings. “Hello?” a groggy, beautiful voice answered. Sheesh. Even her voice was gorgeous.

“Hi, Giselle. It's Francesca. I need you to do me a favor and go pick up Stefan.”

Holy COW!!