

(Penny's POV)

I woke up with a splitting headache, the annoying thud, thud, thud in my temples threatening to tear my head apart.

A little groan slipped past my lips as I struggled to recall last night and everything that came with it, but it was all vague, like trying to grasp at fragments of a broken dream.

I wished I could just snuggle deeper into the warm, dark sheets that cocooned me, shutting out the world and the persistent throbbing in my head.

But wait, dark sheets?

Panic jolted through me, cutting through the haze of my hangover as I frantically sat up, my eyes darting across the unfamiliar bedroom in fear and confusion as I struggled to figure out how I had ended up there.

Maybe it was a hotel?

But why didn't I remember checking in?

In my haste to escape the disorienting bed and its sleep-inducing sheets, I rolled over something solid and stumbled to the oor with a loud 'oomph'. Pain shot through my body as I landed in what I could have sworn was an awkward position, but when I made it to my feet after what felt like ages, I was surprisingly okay. I took a moment to regain my bearings.

When I nally managed to lift my gaze, my eyes widened in sheer horror.

Maximo Tarantino!

I had spent the night in my stepbrother-in-law's bed, and judging from his deliciously naked torso with tattooed muscles that bulged even in his sleep, only God knew what we had done.

Just like that, the memories all started to come to me.

The party,

My meeting with my company's board,

Going to Kira's place...

The ultimate betrayal.

I remembered it all, and with the recollection came a resurgence of all the emotions I had felt last night.

The anger.

The pain.

The bitterness...

The brokenness.

I remembered my pathetic walk around the city, remembered stumbling into that bar, bumping into Maximo... my crazy inebriated proposition... I don't remember anything else after that.

"No, no, no, no... this couldn't be happening." I started to murmur as I began to pace, my eyes glancing down at the simple, baby blue nightie I was now in instead of my gown from last night, and my heart began to thud loudly in my chest as more and more, my reality became clear.

I had s\*x with Maximo Tarantino, my husband's stepbrother!

My shuing must have woken Maximo up, for he suddenly stirred, his movements graceful and languid as he stretched, exing his muscles in a way that almost had me melting to the ground.

My heart rate picked up some more speed.

"Morning, Dulce... sleep well?" Maximo asked, his husky morning voice stunning me for a hot minute as he ashed me a charming smile, but something about that question just set me off. It was the bucket of ice-cold water I needed to snap myself back into focus, and now that I was focused, anger crashed into me in full force. "Sleep well?" I repeated the question incredulously, "Sleep well? We... we had s\*x for crying out loud! I don't know how you can ask me such a thing."

My stepbrother-in-law looked at me in what seemed to be confusion. "I don't understand, Penelope. Was last night not up to your taste? This feedback is one I'm not familiar with... I'm afraid. I've only had positive reviews from all of the women I have bedded so far, so tell me the issues so I can work on them with immediate effect."

I glared at him, my headache and embarrassment not enough to deter the rage and disgust that coursed through me. "You... you took advantage of me!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," He raised his hands, trying to signal for me to calm down as he cut me off with a displeased shake of his head and amusement in his eyes, "Penelope, you practically begged me to have s\*x with you, and I made it quite clear that I wasn't interested, but then you just had to threaten to nd someone else, what was a guy supposed to do? I mean, better to keep you right in the family than have you out there with some other man, right?" He drawled lazily.

This...this man!

I couldn't believe him!

At that point, I was practically shaking as I stared at him, my frustration with his nonchalant attitude reaching critical levels. "I was drunk, Maximo, d—drunk! E—even for you, this is a whole new low!" I sputtered.

Maximo sat up in the bed, some kind of realization dawning on him at my words. "Fanculo, you really think I am serious?" He asked me. "I was only joking, Penelope... nothing happened between us." A quick icker of hurt ashed on his handsome face, but it was gone before I could make sense of it. "Do you think me that much of an animal that I would take a drunk woman even when she won't stop throwing herself at me?"

My words caught in my throat, and I was reduced to a sputtering mess once again. "B—but my clothes..."

"I got one of my maids to change you," He cut me off matter-of-factly.

"A—and you're naked..."

"I have boxer shorts on." He refuted that point too, tossing the sheets aside and standing to his feet, revealing toned legs and the outline of a certain body part clad in Calvin Klein that instantly sent heat into my cheeks in embarrassment, but I don't think he even noticed.

"You really do believe that I am every bit the monster that the media has painted me out to be, don't you?" Even though he had framed it like a question, he did not need any answer from me, it seemed. He really looked disappointed, and I don't know, something about the realization made me want to turn and hide my face in shame.

I wasn't as repentant as I wanted to be though.

"Look, Maximo... I am really sorry for jumping to conclusions like that." I apologized, or at least tried to. "It's just... I panicked, okay... and it made me realize one thing, that I really would have berated myself if that stupid proposition had taken place, you know?"

"What do you mean?" Maximo softly asked me.

I blinked at him in surprise. I couldn't believe he was asking me that. "Why, it would have been a huge mistake, of course! I am married to your brother, Maximo, or have you forgotten?"

"Stepbrother, Penelope." He corrected me with a growl, his eyes darkening with a mixture of anger and frustration, his jaw clenched tight. "Fabian is my stepbrother, and need I remind you that he cheated on you... that he framed it like cheating on you with your own best friend?"

I winced as the mention of Fabian's indelity sent a painful jolt through my chest, but I fought back the tears. The last thing I needed was to bawl my eyes out in front of this man, lord knows I'd made a fool out of myself in front of him enough.

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to get rid of the ache in my chest. When I opened my eyes, I was so cool and calm and relaxed that it freaked even me out a little bit. "None of that matters, Max," I told him softly, calmly. "I love him. We can make this work."

It was more of an assurance to myself than to him, but hey, who was keeping score?

I'll be honest, I really hated the look of pity and disappointment in his striking green eyes. I ignored it as I grabbed my gown from last night off a cozy chair at the corner of the room where it had been neatly laid out for me.

"Can... can you excuse me? Or... or show me to the bathroom? Whichever's ne." I stammered, surprisingly nervous. "I need to get changed."

But Maximo shook his head, refusing to budge from his spot, "Not if it means you'll dress up to go back to that bastard." He deadpanned seriously.

I rolled my eyes, feeling anger well up in me again. I tried to quell it, a little part of me actually afraid that he would talk me out of my decision if I had that back and forth he looked like he desperately craved with him.

And so, under his heated gaze, which was mostly anger-lled, though I could have sworn I caught a hint of lust in there, I expertly changed back into my gown, stepping out of the nightie and laying it out on the chair, basically ignoring him.

"I have half a mind to keep you locked in here to stop you from committing the worst mistake of your life," He remarked, his voice laced with irritation. I could feel his gaze still burning into me as I fastened on my heels.

I turned to meet his gaze, deance and determination in my eyes. "You said it yourself, Max... it's my mistake, my life... so let me live it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a mother-in-law to attend to."

Without waiting for his response, I walked out of the room, leaving him behind.