

## *Sabella*

The slamming of the front door announces my husband's departure.

I'm familiar with the sound. The brutality and finality that resonate in the echo are recurring themes in our lives.

We're not a normal couple. Angelo Russo isn't just any average man. There's nothing mediocre about him. He's the head of the most powerful crime organization on the island of Corsica, and I dare say also the most despised.

Who can like a man who rules his kingdom like a devil from his throne? Who can love a man incapable of compassion?

After the violent scene that took place when he discovered me in his family graveyard, he brought Sophie home like he promised. Nothing changed from earlier. I opened my heart, made myself vulnerable, and apologized for what my family did to his. Instead of mending what's broken between us, my apology made it worse. Yes, he didn't punish me as he set out to do. But closing himself off as if I'm nothing to him and leaving me cold and alone hurt more than any punishment could. Taking that first step of saying I'm sorry took tremendous courage. Rejecting my compassion and trampling on my heart confirm what I didn't want to face.

We're irreparably damaged.

It's just me now. I alone am responsible for my happiness. There aren't two people in this marriage equation.

I always knew that. Then why does disappointment sink in my belly? Why does my stomach bottom out?

The answer catches me off guard.

Because, deep inside, I kindled a spark of hope for us. Because I wanted him to like me. No, it's time to stop watering down the truth. I wanted him to *love* me. Stupidly, I craved what most women want from a marriage, knowing very well that was never my destiny.

If going down on my knees and apologizing for my family's sins didn't break through my husband's defenses, nothing will. Why did I even try? What does it matter anyway? He doesn't trust me. He'll never give me the benefit of the doubt. There's nothing to fix here, nothing less

ugly than hate in the cards for us. He'll always be my dad's killer. The blood of the family that murdered his will always run through my veins.

"Don't you think so, Sabella?" Sophie asks, tugging on my sleeve.

I look at her. She posed her two dolls on the kitchen table and is feeding them an imaginary dinner.

Giving myself an internal shake, I put bread rolls in a basket. "What was that, sweetheart?"

"Beatrice thinks she should stay."

She means the new doll Angelo gave her. The beautiful porcelain doll will never replace the stick doll. As far as Sophie is concerned, that crudely made doll is more than sticks, rope, and cork. Beatrice has been Sophie's only companion for years. To Sophie, Beatrice is as real as I am. Given Sophie's loyal character, it's only natural that she'd stay faithful to Beatrice. I hope Angelo realizes that. If he gave Sophie a pretty doll in the hope that it'll replace the imaginary friend who shared all the hardships of her short life, he doesn't understand his niece at all.

I smile. "That sounds like a clever decision."

Sophie stares up at me. "What shall we call her?"

I caress her soft, wispy hair. "That's for you to decide. What does Beatrice think?"

Sophie scrunches up her face as she considers the answer.

I fetch the soup from the stove and put the pot on the table, making sure the hot liquid is far out of her reach.

"How about Alison?" she asks with a cute little frown.

"Alison? Do you know someone called Alison?"

"No, silly." Sophie giggles. "Alison is from a story. It's one of the books Angelo gave me."

I dish soup into her bowl. "I don't recall that story, and I'm pretty sure we read them all."

"It's not here. It's at Angelo's house. Heidi showed me. There's a big room with a dollhouse and tiny fairies on the windowsill and a cave right in the middle with a table and chairs." She stretches her arms to the sides. "And a bookshelf this size full of books."

Unease creeps up on me. "That sounds nice."

"It's very pretty, but I like my room here better." She adds, "With you."

"Let's eat before the food gets cold." I don't show her how much her comment bothers me. My husband never said she could live here indefinitely, but I became attached to her. More than

that, I don't want her to harbor unrealistic expectations and be disappointed when things don't work out the way she envisions. She's Angelo's family, and I don't have a say in her future.

"Alison must be hungry."

"She just arrived from the city, and it was a very long journey."

The grown-up way in which she says that makes my smile stretch. For a little girl who's practically grown up wild and hasn't attended school, her language skills never cease to amaze me. Unlike her brothers, she has no accent, a perfect pronunciation, and a vocabulary that's advanced beyond her age. She's clearly a very intelligent little girl.

Curious, I ask, "Besides your family, who else did you visit?"

"No one," she says, turning her attention to the dolls.

I sense her clamming up. "I only ask because you're so clever. I was wondering if someone taught you to speak English. It's not even your first language."

"No," she says, her voice quiet. She picks Beatrice up and places her in front of Alison. Her lips move with a faint whisper as she imitates the dolls' conversation.

"It's not important." I sit down and pick up my spoon. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

She continues to whisper, alternating between animating the two dolls. I'm dipping my spoon in my soup when she says so softly I have to strain my ears to hear, "I sometimes hide and listen to people."

I pause. "In the village?"

She walks Alison across the table and shrugs. "Not this village. The one close to the camp. Sometimes, I sat behind the bushes by the shops or in the tree above the market. If I sat under the window of the school, I could hear what they said."

"Would you like to go to school?"

"I guess."

"You'll learn many interesting things, and going to school will allow you to do the job you want when you grow up."

My chest squeezes as I think about my own shattered dreams of a career. I never want that for Sophie.

"Can Johan and Étienne and Guillaume go too?" she asks.

"Your brothers?"

She nods.

“I’m sure Mr. Russo will see to it that they go.”

That seems to satisfy her. She puts the dolls aside and reaches for a bread roll.

When my siblings and I were little, my mom never allowed toys at the table. My instinct tells me that Sophie needs them to cope with her new reality. I’ll have to wean her off them slowly until she’s secure enough to brave this different world on her own.

“Let’s put Beatrice and Alison aside until we’ve eaten,” I say. “You can take them up for a bath after dinner.”

“Why?” She blows on her soup. “Is it not good table manners?”

“That’s right, sweet girl.” I reach over and caress her cheek. “You’re a fast learner.”

At the compliment, her face glows. She puts the dolls on the chair next to her before dunking her bread in the soup.

During the rest of the dinner, she’s her old chatterbox self, telling me about the food fight at Angelo’s house and how angry he was. She relays her brothers’ punishment with big eyes. Grounding seems to be a huge deal to the kids who’re used to wandering outdoors at will.

Later, after I helped Sophie with her bath and read her a story, I crawl into bed. The emotionally charged day left me exhausted. I should work on my shark notes for Mrs. Powell, but I’m physically and mentally drained.

Not long after switching off the light, the bedroom door squeaks open. Soft footsteps fall on the floor. The bed dips as Sophie climbs in next to me.

“What are you doing, sweetheart?” I ask, switching on the bed lamp.

“I want to sleep with you.”

“What about Beatrice and Alison? Won’t they be lonely if you sleep here?”

She thinks for a moment before her eyes light up. “They can sleep here too.”

“The bed is too small for the four of us.” I want to wrap her up in my arms, but I also don’t want to encourage bed hopping. I know from experience with my nephew, Brad, that the habit is difficult to break. “It’s best you stay in your bed next to theirs.” I take her hand. “Come on. I’ll walk you back.”

I give her a comforting cuddle before tucking her in again. Back in my own bed, I lie awake, thinking about the children and Angelo and the uncertainty of their future. For most of the night, I toss and turn.

At dawn, I give up on sleeping and get out of bed. The house is warm, but I feel cold. I pull on a robe and warm socks before going downstairs to make coffee.

I fortify myself with the strong brew, sipping it in front of the kitchen window while appreciating the view. The sun paints everything in gold as it rises above the mountain.

When the caffeine kicks in and I feel more awake, I check on Sophie, who's sleeping soundly with her palms pressed together under her cheek. The sight melts my heart. I lean in the doorway, enjoying the beautiful display of childish innocence.

Has Angelo inquired at the school yet? I make a mental note to ask him about it as I back away quietly and go to the bathroom to do my grooming.

Brushing my teeth is my mental reminder to take my birth control pill, a sort of conditioning I developed so that I don't forget. I open the drawer and feel underneath, but my palm brushes over nothing but smooth surface. I frown and bend down. The packet isn't in its hiding place secured by the elastic band.

My heart jolts in my chest.

Did it fall into the cupboard below?

Frantic, I go onto my knees and yank the door open. I push tubes of cream and bottles of lotion aside, knocking items over in my clumsy fumbling.

It's gone.

I don't want to believe it. I can't face what that means.

Burying my head in the cupboard, I search again, but I didn't overlook the silver rectangular packet. It's not there.

When I sit back on my haunches, I don't have a choice but to acknowledge the suspicion that formed in my mind when my hand first came up empty.

No.

I knew this could happen. My husband warned me. He told me he wanted a baby and that he wasn't giving me a choice in the matter. But I don't want to believe it. I don't want to admit what that makes him. That he has so little regard for me. That even in this choice I have no freedom. Because there was a time when he considered my wishes. After we lost our virginity together, he went to the pharmacy for me. He got me the morning-after pill. He promised to use condoms. He told me the act showed how much he cared about what I wanted. But that was then,

before all the killings. This is now. What I want doesn't matter any longer. He doesn't give a damn about my wishes. He couldn't make a stronger statement of how little he cares.

The coffee pushes up in my throat, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

My heart thumps with sluggish beats between my ribs as I look around the bathroom. My gaze falls on the trashcan. I pull it closer and peer inside.

And there it is, the proof lying like a nasty accusation on a pile of tissues and cotton swabs.

Dipping a shaky hand inside, I pull out the silver packet. The casings are empty. The packet slips from my fingers, landing soundlessly on that soft bed of trash while screaming the truth in my head.

Angelo flushed away my pills.

The betrayal burns hot. Heat rushes through me and covers every inch of my skin.

Gripping the counter, I pull myself up and heave a breath. I think I'm going to be sick.

How could he?

I'm not even twenty. He's only twenty-four. Yet he seems so much older than his age. The brutal experience that comes with his business matured him early. It made him too cruel. Too unfeeling.

The icy fingers of deception and disappointment that squeeze around my heart replaces the feverish heat of the shock. How can we bring a child into our twisted, corrupt world? I cup a hand over my stomach, imagining the injustice we'd do to a baby.

In the reflection of the mirror, my face is pale. Sweat beads on my forehead as I go from cold to hot and back to cold again.

We had wild sex only yesterday, no more than fourteen hours ago. I have to go to the village. I can buy birth control pills at the pharmacy.

In my rush to get ready, I tip over the porcelain toothbrush holder, catching it just before it hits the floor. I pause and inhale deeply. I need to get a hold of myself. Why am I so shocked? I've been training for this moment. I've been preparing myself. That's my secret weapon. Isn't that why I slip down the valley at every chance I get? Isn't that why I save the money from the casual jobs I do in secret?

The resolve gives me strength. I dress in record-time and hurry to Sophie's room.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, I gently shake her awake. "Sophie? Sweetheart?"

She moans and rolls onto her back. Her small face is flushed, and her cheeks are bright red.

“Sophie,” I exclaim, placing a hand on her forehead.

My God.

She’s burning up.

I should’ve known something was wrong when she wasn’t up early this morning. She never sleeps in.

Cursing myself for my shortsightedness, I pull back the warm covers. I need to cool her down and break the fever. I stop for a moment to think through my panic.

What would Mom do?

I remember that time when my sister, Mattie, had a fever of forty degrees. Mom ran a tepid bath and let Mattie soak in the water until her fever came down.

I run to the adjoining bathroom and open the tap in the tub. A shower is out of the question. Sophie is scared of submersing her head under the water. I barely manage to wash her hair in the basin. Besides, she’s too weak to stand on her own. Worry assaults me when I think how terrified she’ll be of lying down in the water. She’s still washing herself standing up in the bath.

I put out a couple of clean towels before returning for Sophie. She’s delirious with fever, muttering nonsense and not fully waking when I remove her pajamas. It’s a battle to pull the top over her head. She moans as I support her neck to lift her.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“Bella,” she croaks in a barely audible voice.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

When I finally manage to free the top, I pause with the garment in mid-air. Sophie’s torso is covered in small, red spots. I quickly check her arms and legs. The same rash covers most of her body. I take a better look at her face. The red blotchiness of her skin conceals the spots, but on closer inspection, I discover more spots on her hairline and on the sides of her neck.

Measles.

I recognize the signs. I had measles when I was ten. The doctor who came out on a house call told my mom there was nothing to do but give me paracetamol for the fever and to make sure I got plenty of rest.

“Poor baby,” I say, brushing away the hair that’s stuck to her sweaty forehead.

She's so small and frail it's not difficult to lift her into my arms. I carry her to the bath and carefully lower her into the lukewarm water. Supporting her head in one hand, I use the other to wet a facecloth and run it over her hot cheeks. This is the most water I've put in her bath. The fact that she doesn't resist or express her fear shows how ill she must be feeling.

When the water cools, I lift her out and wrap her up in a towel. After drying her, I carry her back to the bed and dress her in a light cotton T-shirt and underwear.

I manage to make her swallow paracetamol with a little water. Getting down beside her on the bed, I stroke her arm while she falls back into a fitful sleep. Remembering that Mom kept my room dark, I don't open the curtains.

The paracetamol helps, but as soon as the medicine is worked out, her temperature flares again. Fabien, Angelo's personal shopper, had the foresight to supply a medicine kit with a few basic first-aid items like band-aids and disinfectant. Sadly, there's no thermometer.

I alternate between placing cool, wet cloths on Sophie's forehead and giving her paracetamol at six-hour intervals. She sips a little water, but refuses the soup I try to feed her. As the hours drag on, my resentment toward my husband builds. This is why I need a phone. What if Sophie doesn't get better and needs a doctor? The helplessness only adds to my anger.

The days pass slowly, my anxiety making it impossible to eat. The only reason I gobble down a sandwich at mealtimes is because my body needs the energy. Not wanting to stay away from Sophie for longer than necessary, I just grab the bread, bananas, and peanut butter and make the sandwich right there in her room. I let the dishes and the washing pile up, not even taking the time to load the dishwasher. At night, I sleep in the armchair next to Sophie's bed. I'm too frantic she'll go into a convulsion from the high fever. The tepid baths and paracetamol help for a short while before her fever spikes again.

On the third day, she seems a little better. Her eyes are less glassy, and the color on her cheeks is more normal.

"Bella," she says in a voice that sounds clearer than it has in days. "I'm hungry."

The relief is so great I almost cry. Not wanting to make a fuss in front of her, I pat her hand. "What would you like to eat?"

"Soup. With bread and butter." She adds quickly, "Please."

"Coming right up." I get to my feet. "You stay in bed. I'll bring a tray."

"Am I very sick?"



I manage a tremulous smile. "You have measles."

"Measles," she says slowly, testing the word. "Is it bad?"

"It's not serious if you take good care of yourself and get plenty of rest."

She stares at me with big eyes. "Am I going to die?"

"What?" I take her hand. "No, sweetheart. You're going to be fine."

She bites her lip.

"I had measles when I was a little older than you," I offer.

She tilts her head. "Really?"

"I had the same symptoms that you're having now, but I was better after a few days."

Seemingly put at ease, the tightness of her small body eases. "Okay."

I squeeze her hand before letting go. "You haven't been sick much, have you?"

"Grandpa says we have strong genes because our blood is well mixed."

"You sure are a strong little girl." I adjust her pillow. "Rest a little more. I'll be back with dinner in a minute."

In the kitchen, I heat up a tin of soup and prepare a tray that I take to her room. I feed her spoonfuls of soup until the bowl is half-empty and she says her tummy is full.

After she's eaten, her strength returns quickly, but so does the fever. However, it's not as scary as before. She's more lucid. When she asks me if she can watch television with Beatrice and Alison, I know the worst is over. And when she asks if they can have popcorn, I'm overjoyed that her appetite is returning.

While she's snuggled up under a blanket on the sofa in front of the television, I use the time to tidy the kitchen and start a load of washing. I check on her every five minutes, unable to quell my worry.

Before the movie is over, she's tired again. I put her and the dolls to bed and settle in the chair next to her. For the first time since Sophie woke up with a fever, I allow myself to relax a little. Now that I'm no longer so anxious about the complications that can occur with measles, I let my thoughts wander. As I've done so many times in the dead of the night, I reflect on my own stressful situation.

Three days have passed. I have a two-day window before it will be too late for an emergency contraceptive pill to be effective. Will Angelo's housekeeper, Heidi, return before then? I can't count on my husband to get me the pill, and I can't leave Sophie alone to walk to

the village. Besides, I could still be contagious. I'm immune, but I can't risk spreading the disease to a population of mostly elderly and frail people who may not have immunity. If Heidi doesn't show up in the next two days, my only choice is to wait for my next period and pray that it will come. It can take anything between two and four weeks. If nothing happens after four weeks, I'll take a pregnancy test to be sure.

The concern of that thought keeps me awake. I'm well aware that I'm burning myself out by not sleeping. At best, I'm dozing for an hour here and there in the chair. I can hardly take care of Sophie if I'm nodding off from exhaustion during the day.

Taking a deep breath, I chastise myself mentally. I'm overreacting. Having missed a few pills means I'm no longer protected against pregnancy, but that doesn't mean I will definitely fall pregnant. But even as I tell myself I shouldn't worry about something that may not happen, anguish burns like a hot coal in my stomach. The only thing that compels me to stay calm and not to go out of my mind is knowing that Sophie needs me. So I continue to watch over her, praying that Heidi will show up before my window of opportunity closes.