



ANNA

*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HACKETT

SENTINEL  SECURITY

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# HADES

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SENTINEL SECURITY #2

ANNA HACKETT

Hades

Published by Anna Hackett

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Cover by Mayhem Cover Creations

Cover image by ADB Imagery

Edits by [Tanya Saari](#)

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-922414-62-5

ISBN (paperback): 978-1-922414-63-2

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# WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT ANNA'S ROMANCES

**The Powerbroker - Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby)  
winner 2022**

**Heart of Eon - Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) winner  
2020**

**Cyborg - PRISM Award Winner 2019**

**Edge of Eon and Mission: Her Protection - Romantic Book  
of the Year (Ruby) finalists 2019**

**Unfathomed and Unmapped - Romantic Book of the Year  
(Ruby) finalists 2018**

**Unexplored – Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) Novella  
Winner 2017**

**Return to Dark Earth – One of Library Journal's Best E-  
Original Books for 2015 and two-time SFR Galaxy Awards  
winner**

**At Star's End – One of Library Journal's Best E-Original  
Romances for 2014**

**The Phoenix Adventures – SFR Galaxy Award Winner for  
Most Fun New Series and “Why Isn't This a Movie?”  
Series**

**Hell Squad – SFR Galaxy Award for best Post-Apocalypse  
for Readers who don't like Post-Apocalypse**

“Like Indiana Jones meets Star Wars. A treasure hunt with a  
steamy romance.” – SFF Dragon, review of *Among Galactic  
Ruins*

“Action, danger, aliens, romance – yup, it’s another great book from Anna Hackett!” – Book Gannet Reviews, review of *Hell Squad: Marcus*



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## CHAPTER ONE

---

“Gabbi!”

Gabriella Hansley looked up from the text messages on her phone and glanced back down the corridor.

At 6:30 PM on a Friday, the halls of CIA Headquarters were fairly empty. She was hoping to make it home for a bath, a glass of wine, and some Netflix.

*Oh wow, Gab, what a wild life you lead.*

She ignored her inner voice. She was fine with her life. It was exactly how she liked it.

Her phone chirped again. Another nasty message from her brother. *Ugh.*

“Gabbi?”

Now she spied Doug Bernard, a fellow CIA business analytics officer, poking his head out of his office.

“Hey, Doug, I’m on my way out,” she said.

Her colleague hurried over. He looked his usual ruffled self, including remnants of some spilled lunch on his shirt.

He held up his hands. “I have a *huge* favor to ask.”

Gabbi suppressed a groan. Doug always needed a favor. It often involved less work for Doug and more work for whomever he cornered.

“I really need to—”

“Look, I have an encrypted external drive and some paperwork that needs to get delivered to a security contractor. He works for Sentinel Security out of New York. They’re doing some work for us, and this data can’t be shared online.”

Gabbi had been with the CIA since she’d graduated from Georgetown University. She enjoyed her analyst role, evaluating and analyzing digital business data from around the world to help meet mission requirements. She knew she’d suck as a field agent, but she rocked her desk.

She’d heard of Sentinel Security. The private security firm in New York was run by a former CIA agent. One who people still talked about with hushed awe, tinged with fear.

“Look, Doug—”

He barreled over her. “So, the Sentinel contact’s having dinner at the Lafayette Restaurant. I’m supposed to deliver this intel by hand today. He leaves D.C. tomorrow.”

Gabbi’s phone vibrated again. Probably her brother or her mother. Her stomach clenched painfully. They both gave her heartburn. She really needed an antacid.

She focused back on what Doug had said. The Lafayette was one of the top restaurants in D.C. She’d always wanted to go there. She’d heard it was elegant, with great food, and had amazing views over Lafayette Square to the White House and the Washington Monument.

She sighed. It was expensive and romantic. There was no way she’d ever eat there alone, and her dating game was very weak.

“Get to the point, Doug.” She pictured her clawfoot tub filled with bubbles.

“So, I have a date.” Doug’s tone turned wheedling. “A second date. I *really* like this guy, Gabbi, and I don’t want to cancel.” He held up the tiny, matte-silver hard drive and slim file, his eyes pleading. “Please, please, can you take these to the contact?”

Gabbi’s stomach dropped. One, from the fact that Doug seemed to have a better dating life than her. And two, the

Lafayette was right in the center of the city, so she'd have to fight traffic, tourist, and people. She saw her fantasy of a bubble bath fading, all the bubbles popping into nothingness in her head.

"I don't think—"

"*Please.*" Doug clasped his hands together like he was praying. "You live in Georgetown. It's practically on your way."

She snorted. Hardly.

"Please, Gabbi. I really like this guy. I'll owe you."

"You'll owe me big time." She snatched the drive and file out of his hand.

"Totally." He squeezed her arm. "Thank you. Thank you. The contact's name is Matteo Mancini."

As Doug turned, she shook her head. "Doug, you might want to change your shirt before your date."

He looked down. "Right." He waved at her. "Thanks again, Gabbi."

Doug hurried down the hall, and Gabbi mentally called herself some choice names. It was like she had a gene for allowing people to walk all over her.

Usually, it was her family.

She'd fought hard to escape her family's dysfunction. She'd moved across the city from her gambler father, alcoholic mother, and drug dealer brother.

Her sister had escaped, too. Jasmine was off traveling the world and rarely checked in. A slight, stinging sensation pricked at her heart, but Gabbi couldn't really blame her sister.

*Right.* Time to brave the Friday evening traffic full of all the other people, tired from the week and desperate to get home.

"Or getting out and having a life, Gab," she muttered. "You should try it sometime."

*No.* She had a plan. One she'd hatched as a teenager desperate to escape the trailer she'd lived in. Get educated, get a good job, get a good house, and make a stable, secure life for herself.

She'd made that happen, and she wasn't letting anything ruin it.

Grumbling, she clutched the hard drive and file and headed for her car.

Battling the traffic did nothing to improve her mood. When Gabbi finally pulled her Tesla Model 3 up in front of the historic, grand entrance of the Hay-Adams Hotel that housed the Lafayette restaurant, her belly was rumbling with hunger, and her feet were aching.

She handed her keycard to the valet with a smile.

Oh, the hotel was gorgeous. Class and history oozed from its Italian Renaissance exterior. It was the kind of place she'd dreamed about visiting when she was a kid.

She ran her hands down her gray pencil skirt and white shirt. Her shirt was a little wilted, but she looked respectable. She headed inside.

More class greeted her. Wood paneling, arches, and old-world chandeliers hanging from the fancy, decorated ceiling.

Gabbi spotted the elevators and changed course. She spied several senators striding through the lobby. The British ambassador was standing nearby, the woman wearing a bright suit and scarf, chatting with a small group of people.

The elevators opened, and a tall, glamorous woman came into view.

She had to be almost six feet tall in her high heels. Her tiny, silver dress clung to her willowy, supermodel figure, and she had a fur stole—God, Gabbi hoped it wasn't the real thing—draped around her.

The woman tossed her mane of black hair over her slim shoulders and strode out. She'd no doubt have a fantastic name like Esmeralda or Ambrosia.

The woman flicked a glance at Gabbi for about half a second, her nose wrinkling. Clearly, Gabbi's skirt, plain shirt, and sensible pumps didn't pass muster.

*Yes, yes, you think I'm dowdy and plain; I think you're superficial and shallow.* Esmeralda stalked off like the Hay-Adams lobby was a Milan runway, and Gabbi stepped forward to stop the elevator doors from closing.

She slipped inside and hit the button for the restaurant.

Okay, so she wasn't a glamazon. She didn't care. She didn't want to be. Growing up, she was lucky if her parents remembered to feed her, let alone clothe her in something fashionable.

She knew she wasn't unattractive. She was just...ordinary. Her hair wasn't blonde or brown, just somewhere in the middle. Light brown was the best description. Her eyes were blue. Okay, sort of blue-gray.

Some of the field agents she worked with were striking. Beautiful, confident, and quick on their feet, like her friend Devyn. The redhead was well on her way to making herself a legend at the CIA.

Gabbi shook her head. She was a CIA analyst, for God's sake. What mattered was making a good, secure life for herself, far away from her problem-riddled family.

The elevator stopped. Two men in dark suits, about her age, got on. They didn't even look her way.

Gabbi sighed and clutched the encrypted drive and file to her chest. She may as well be invisible. She eyed the men in front of her. One had a strong jaw and clean-cut, even features. She'd dated a few clean-cut men like that. D.C. was full of them. But she'd never clicked with any of them. She found most of them self-absorbed, too dedicated to their careers, or looking for a gorgeous creature like the one who'd exited the elevator earlier.

For a while, Gabbi had wanted a man in her life. A loving man who'd be her partner. Someone to travel and go out with, but mainly she wanted someone to come home to. To

commiserate with on a bad day. To rub her feet when they were aching. To have regular sex with.

But after some bad dates and a lot of boring ones, she'd come to the conclusion that love was a fairytale that the wedding industry made up to sell expensive dresses, cakes, and flowers. She'd seen her parents' explosive, abusive relationship and was certain that wasn't love. Her brother was usually dating several women at once, without any of them knowing.

No, she'd scratched *Man* off her plan.

Right now, she was focused on work, saving to renovate her downstairs bathroom, and maybe planning a holiday somewhere fun. France, Italy, or Greece would be nice. She'd always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower, the Coliseum, or Santorini.

The elevator slowed, and she shook her head. She was going to deliver this damn drive, get home, and have her wine in the bath.

The men in suits walked out ahead of her. She waited patiently for the elegant restaurant hostess to deal with them before she turned to Gabbi.

"Yes?" the woman said.

"I just have something to deliver to Mr. Mancini."

A look crossed the woman's beautiful face, followed by a dreamy smile. "Of course. He's at that table by the window." The woman pointed.

"Thank you." Gabbi took in the lovely décor of the restaurant, her gaze drawn to the spectacular view of the White House and the Washington Monument all lit up.

Now, if a guy took her here on a date, she'd be impressed.

Then her gaze moved to the man sitting alone at the table in front of the window.

Gabbi's steps faltered, and her mind went blank. She stared. Any thoughts of the suits in the elevator being attractive went up in smoke.

The man was looking at the glass of wine in his hand but still managed to seem like he was all coiled energy, ready to erupt.

He wasn't wearing his jacket and had rolled up his shirt sleeves to show off bronze skin and the corded muscles in his arms. Her gaze drifted upward.

He had a strong jaw covered in stubble, a straight nose, and the sexiest, most perfectly formed lips.

Her heart skipped a beat. Or maybe ten.

His hair was thick, nearly black, with a hint of a curl. He looked like a dark angel, a dangerous bad boy.

Then his gaze flicked up and met hers.

Her lower belly clenched. Something sexual oozed off him. Some sort of built-in instinct told her he'd be an extraordinary lover.

She wouldn't say no to a man like this—a magnificent man who'd make her fantasies come true.

Gabbi saw the Italian god's sexy lips quirk. He knew how he affected women. Hell, he probably dealt with rendering women speechless all day long.

*Mancini*. An Italian name.

Her brain clicked back into gear. He was her Sentinel Security contact, and crap, now she'd have to talk to him.

---

PREOCCUPIED WITH HIS LATEST CASE, Matteo "Hades" Mancini didn't pay much attention to the woman staring at him.

He was used to getting second and third looks, come-hither smiles, and flirty glances.

He loved women in all their shapes, sizes, and varieties. This one didn't attract too much attention. She was medium height, not slim, but not overly curvy, and her light-brown hair

was twisted up in a simple roll at the back of her head. Her clothes didn't draw any attention.

But as she straightened her shoulders and headed his way, his attention sharpened. She held a file and hard drive in her hand.

She didn't set off his radar. His years in the DIA—Direzione Investigativa Antimafia— hunting dangerous mafia syndicates in Italy, had made his radar finely tuned for danger.

He saw the woman open her mouth, fumble the file in her hand, then drop it. Papers flew everywhere, and the slim hard drive fell on the carpet with a thud.

The woman made an annoyed sound and crouched, grabbing at them.

Matteo rose, fighting amusement. There was nothing quite like affecting a woman. He squatted and reached for one of the papers.

She did the same thing at the same time, and their fingers brushed. She sucked in a breath and raised her head.

Their faces were only an inch apart. She froze, her lips parting.

Matteo froze as well, a strange sensation washing through him.

He clearly hadn't paid close enough attention to her before.

This close to her, he smelled her perfume. Feminine, but with a touch of heady musk. Her skin was a golden-honey color, and so fine and smooth he saw the blue tracery of veins beneath the surface. Her eyes were a unique, blue-gray color, clear and intriguing. A beautiful color he could look into all day.

And her lips. There was nothing ordinary about her plump, perfectly shaped, full lips.

Lips he suddenly wanted to taste. Corrupt.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was clear, with a husky undertone. She dragged her gaze off his face, grabbing at the rest of the



papers and stuffing them into the folder.

Yes, this was a woman who you didn't notice until you looked a little harder.

“No need to be sorry, *bella*.”

Those blue-gray eyes ticked back up to his. A faint pretty flush filled her cheeks.

“It is certainly no worry to fluster a pretty woman,” he added.

Her brow creased. She grabbed the now-back-together file and stood.

Matteo rose, as well. The top of her head reached his chin, and now he could properly appreciate the way her skirt hugged her gentle curves.

She cleared her throat and held out the file and hard drive.

“These are for you, Mr. Mancini.”

Now he frowned. “You're the CIA analyst? I was expecting a man. Doug Bernard.”

“Yes, well, he had a previous commitment.”

She grumbled under her breath, and Matteo was pretty sure she'd said something about being a pushover.

He hid a smile. “He conned you into coming into the city to deliver this.”

She sniffed. “I do favors for my work colleagues when required.”

“Even when it ruins your Friday night plans?” Perhaps she'd had a date?

“Yes, but this was important.”

Matteo took the file and drive. He strangely didn't like the idea of her having a date. At all. “*Grazie*.”

“*Prego*,” she responded.

He arched a brow. “You speak Italian?”

“A little.” She angled her chin. All Matteo could do was take in the creamy skin along her jaw line. He wanted to touch it, lick it.

He frowned. *Merda*. What was wrong with him? He’d spent many nights with more beautiful, experienced women than this one. He rarely had trouble controlling his desires or keeping things fun and temporary.

What was it about the slightly awkward woman that got to him?

“I speak Portuguese, some French, and Spanish and German as well,” she said.

“A woman with brains and beauty.”

Her flush deepened. “Are you making fun of me, Mr. Mancini?”

He shifted closer. “It’s Matteo, and of course not.”

“I’m not beautiful. I’m sure you have beautiful women throwing themselves at you all the time. You must know the difference.” She started to turn away.

He grabbed her arm. “*Bella*, beauty isn’t one thing. It isn’t what they show on the TV screen or on the pages of a magazine. It’s smooth golden skin, silky brown hair, a beauty spot on the side of a slim neck, begging for a man’s lips.”

Unconsciously, she lifted her hand to the small mark on her neck.

“It’s fathomless blue-gray eyes.” He leaned closer. “It’s sweet, subtle curves encased in a sexy skirt.”

He saw her eyes widen, and something flare in them. “Wow, you’re good.”

He scowled. “This isn’t a come-on.”

She pressed a hand to her hip. “No? No one has ever said any of that to me before.”

“Then the men of your acquaintance are fools.”

Her nose wrinkled, her gaze turning inward. “You’re probably right about that.”

Her honesty made him smile. He liked it. Most women he dealt with flirted and flitted, saying what they thought he wanted to hear, not the truth.

Except the ladies he worked with at Sentinel Security. They never held back. They’d like this quietly sexy CIA employee.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving now. Good night, Mr. Mancini.”

*No.* He had an instant gut reaction. Two things hammered at him. He couldn’t let her walk out and never see her again.

And he needed to know her name.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her closer. She managed to trip and collided against his chest. That tantalizing scent of hers filled his senses.

She stared at his chest and pressed a hand to his shirt. He saw the pulse flutter madly in her throat.

She looked up, gaze locking with his.

Delicious heat curled in his gut.

She felt it, too. Whatever the strange magic was between them.

Then her cell phone rang.

She jolted, fumbling to reach for it. “Ah, I should—”

“Answer it, *bella*.” Matteo kept a hold on her arm.

She didn’t even look at the screen, just held it to her ear. “Hello?”

Then she winced.

Matteo frowned. A whiny female voice came through the line but he couldn’t make out the words.

“Hi, Mom.” His woman closed her eyes. “No. Look, I’m busy.” A pause. “Yes, because I work. No, I haven’t heard from Casey.” Her blue-gray eyes opened, filled with deep resignation.

Matteo hated seeing it. He didn’t think she realized he was still there.

“No, Mom, I can’t make his charges disappear. Casey made his choices, he deals drugs, and he has to face the consequences.” The voice on the phone rose.

Matteo’s hands flexed, and he fought the urge to snatch the phone away.

“No, I won’t send money for his bail. Not to bail him out, or for you to fritter away on shopping or wine. Or for dad to lose at the card tables.”

Matteo made a sound. Her gaze whipped up to his.

Her cheeks paled and he watched embarrassment suffuse her features. She hunched her shoulders.

*Oh no, bella. You’re not going to run and hide.*

He was just realizing he might have found a flower who’d bloomed in a patch of weeds.

She ended the call. “I need to go.”

“Stay. Have a glass of wine with me.”

Her gaze drifted over his face, and down to his throat. “I can’t.”

“You can.” He toyed with the silky strands of hair that had slipped loose from her roll. One was a gold strand that shone in the light. “Tell me your name.”

She pulled in a deep breath. “Gabriella. Gabriella Hansley. But everyone calls me Gabbi.”

“Gabriella. A beautiful, Italian name.”

“My mother probably didn’t know that. She just picked something she thought sounded fancy.”

Suddenly, Matteo's radar went off and he lifted his head, scanning the restaurant.

Three men in suits stepped off the elevator. There was nothing refined about them. They were stocky and muscular, with hard looks on their faces.

One of them had tattoos twining around his neck.

The men perused the restaurant, their gazes hitting Matteo and Gabbi.

*Cazzo. Fuck.*

His radar went crazy.

He yanked Gabbi to him and she let out a small cry.

The men reached under their jackets and yanked out guns.

Matteo snapped into hyper-focused mode.

“Everyone, get down!” he bellowed.

Then he dived, pulling Gabbi with him to the floor, just as gunfire tore through the restaurant.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

**O**h God, oh God, oh God.

As bullets ripped into tables and chairs, and glass shattered, Gabbi's heart did its best to jump into her throat.

She bit her lip. The heavy, male body covering her was keeping her pinned to the floor. She could hear Matteo Mancini cursing in Italian.

A bullet thudded into a chair nearby and she swallowed a scream. She was an analyst. She'd been to the firing range with Devyn a few times, but she'd never been in a firefight. The field agent could hit a bull's-eye with her eyes closed, while doing the tango. Gabbi was more likely to cause a friendly-fire incident.

"We need to move," Matteo growled into her ear.

She swallowed.

"Gabbi?" He lifted up and scanned around. They were hidden behind a table.

The analytical part of her brain clicked back into gear. Yes, they were hidden, but any second now, the guys with the guns would come after them.

"Gabbi?" Matteo cupped her cheek. "You with me?"

She met those mesmerizing brown eyes. They were a rich, deep brown. She stared into that face, like a fallen angel crossed with Casanova. The charm and sexiness she'd seen earlier was gone, replaced with a harder, harsher look.

She was looking at the security expert right now, not the man.

“I’m with you,” she said.

“Good, *bella*.” He helped her sit up and pressed the file and drive into her hands. “You keep a hold of these and follow me.”

“Okay, I’ll—”

He reached back into the waistband of his tailored pants and pulled out what looked like a SIG Sauer. Then, despite the hard set of his face, he winked at her.

He rose to a crouch in a fluid motion.

A predator on the hunt.

Matteo leaned over the table and fired, the gunshots loud. Then he yanked her up and they were moving.

Gabbi focused on not tripping. She wasn’t a klutz, but she had her moments. Usually very embarrassing ones.

If she stumbled now, she’d get herself and Matteo killed. Her pulse raced so fast; her heart hammered.

He kept firing as they ran across the restaurant. He pulled her around the corner as a rain of bullets slammed into the floor and tables nearby. A window shattered, and diners screamed. She spotted several servers in white cowering behind a table.

They were still too exposed.

“Quickly.” She darted out and waved. “Get to the back of the restaurant. Now.”

The terrified people nodded and scuttled backward. She helped one young man to his feet.

More loud gunshots had everyone scrambling.

“Gabbi.” Matteo yanked her back into cover.

She pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart was hammering so hard she was surprised it didn’t burst out of her chest and flop on the floor like a panicked fish.

“Okay?” With his back pressed to the wall, Matteo calmly reloaded his handgun.

*Hell, no.* “Sure.”

His gaze narrowed, then he peered around the corner.

Gabbi couldn't help but take a second to appreciate the back view of his pants pulled over his muscular ass. His white shirt was tucked into a narrow waist and stretched over broad shoulders. His dark hair curled at his collar.

*Jesus, Gab, you're in the middle of a firefight, and you're ogling the man.*

She was losing her mind.

Over his broad shoulder, her gaze settled on the three men with guns. They were spread throughout the restaurant. One stopped by a frightened couple huddled under a table. The man shielded the woman.

The thug just grunted and moved on.

“The entrance to the stairs is on the other side of the restaurant.” Matteo made a frustrated noise. “We'll have to use the elevator to get out of here.”

Gabbi glanced that way. “It'll take too long for the elevator doors to open.” They'd make perfect targets for the gunmen.

He shot her a faint but grim smile. “Not if I cause a diversion. Gabbi, I need you to run straight to the elevator. I'll keep them—”

A man barreled out of the door to the kitchen.

Gabbi had half a second to realize it was a fourth attacker—tall, broad, gun in hand.

Matteo moved fast. He and the man slammed together.

She shrank back, watching as Matteo went stone cold. His hits were brutal. He rammed the man into the wall and the thug grabbed a plate off a nearby table. He smashed it over Matteo's head.



She gasped, but he barely reacted, hammering his fist into the man's torso.

This wasn't elegant or practiced fighting. It wasn't smooth moves. It was raw, rough, and brutal.

The man whirled and Matteo got a kick in. His attacker grunted and elbowed Matteo in the face. His head snapped back.

It was the opening the thug needed. He reached for his dropped gun.

*No.*

Without thinking, Gabbi whirled to a nearby table. She dropped the drive and file and snatched up a heavy tray some server had left behind. She charged forward, lifted the tray, and brought it down with all her strength on the thug's head.

The man staggered sideways. It gave Matteo enough time to recover. He slammed into the man, landing heavy punches into the man's gut. He followed with a knee to the face and a shove that sent the man crashing into some tables and chairs.

Chest heaving, Matteo turned and met her gaze. He snatched up his weapon. "Go!"

Gabbi grabbed the drive and file, then whirled and ran for the elevator.

Behind her, she heard more gunfire.

She tried to block it all out. The shouts, the screams, the shots. Any second, she expected a bullet to hit her.

Her focus narrowed to the elevator. Reaching out, she slapped a palm to the button, then dropped down to the floor.

Matteo was still firing on the attackers, swiveling smoothly and standing out in the open, like he was bulletproof.

Her belly twisted. *Get into cover.*

She realized that he was drawing their focus, covering her.

She looked back at the elevator. *Come on.*

Finally, the doors slowly opened. It felt like it took an eternity.

She crawled in and hit the button for the lobby.

“Matteo!” she yelled.

He swiveled, then backed up, still firing. The doors started closing.

Then, with a burst of speed, he dropped his arm and sprinted.

He moved well. Strong, fast, powerful. As he got close, he slid in feet first like a baseball player into home plate.

Over his head, she saw the attackers running. Bullets pinged, one hitting the wall above Gabbi’s head.

She gasped and ducked.

Then Matteo wrapped himself around her.

The doors closed and the elevator descended.

Oh. *God*.

Reality crashed in on her. Her chest was tight she couldn’t breathe, and her hands shook. They’d almost *died*. Who shot up the best restaurant in Washington D.C.?

It could’ve been the end, and she wouldn’t have done half the things she’d always secretly wanted to do. Yes, she wanted security, but she also wanted to eat escargot in France, holiday on a Greek island, skinny dip on a white-sand beach, have mind-blowing sex that included an orgasm that wasn’t self-induced. Have a baby. Learn to make pizza dough from scratch.

Okay, her priorities were a bit skewed, but she was having a full-blown panic attack.

The edges of her vision started to gray.

“Gabbi? Gabbi?” Long-fingered hands cupped her cheeks. “Gabriella, *cara*, look at me.”

She met Matteo’s gorgeous brown eyes.

“Breathe,” he said. “Nice and slow.”

“I...I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Focus on me.”

She opened her mouth and air rushed in. “We nearly died.”

“Nearly never counts, *bella*. There you go. Keep breathing.”

She reached up and touched one of his hands. He curled his fingers on hers and held on.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured.

She wished that was true. Nobody had ever had her. Ever. Her belly tied into knots. You had to trust yourself because everyone always let you down.

“Breathe, Gabbi. You’re safe now.”

For just a second, she leaned her face into his strong palm. His touch steadied her.

Sensible Gabbi knew a man like him wasn’t for her, but she could pretend, just for a second. Her chest loosened a little. As long as Matteo was touching her, she felt fine.

“You’re safe,” he crooned.

She pulled in a deep breath and set her shoulders back. “I’m okay now.”

Then, the elevator jerked to a stop between the floors. The main lights went out, and the wash of red emergency lights came on.

Her belly cramped.

*Oh, no.*

---

CAZZO.

Matteo scowled at the elevator controls. The bastards after them must have stopped it.

He heard rasping breathing and looked back at Gabbi.

*Shit.* She was close to hyperventilating.

“Hey, *cara*, it’s okay. I’ve got you.”

She heaved in air, her face impossibly pale.

Matteo felt a strange twinge in his chest. He wanted—no, needed—to comfort her. To make her feel safe.

“Gabriella, look at me.” He slid closer and pulled her against him. Her hand twisted in his shirt.

“Those men are coming for us,” she said.

“We don’t know that.” He smoothed a hand down her back. “And if they do, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

Those beautiful blue-gray eyes met his. “No one’s ever kept me safe. It’s up to me.”

Another stroke. He felt the delicate knobs of her spine under his fingers. “Not today, *cara*.” He pulled out his phone and dialed the Sentinel Security office.

“Yo, H-man. How’s D.C.?” The spirited voice belonged to Jet “Hex” Adler, Sentinel Security’s tech expert.

“Hex, I was attacked in the Lafayette restaurant. Four armed gunmen.” He saw Gabbi watching him in the low light. As he’d hoped, she was now focused on his conversation and not her panic.

Hex let loose with some impressive curses.

“*Bella*, that mouth,” he murmured.

“Okay, I see reports of the shooting. Looks like the gunmen took off.”

“I’m in the elevator with my CIA contact. It’s been stopped between floors.”

“Shit. You think those assholes are coming for you?”

“It seems likely.” But Matteo felt a niggle in his gut. Those men had been muscle, not people with the technical knowledge to shut down elevators.

“I’m hacking hotel security now,” Hex said.

He easily imagined her in the high-tech command center in the Sentinel Security warehouse in Chelsea in New York.

She cursed again. “For a hotel, they have good cybersecurity.”

“They are across from the White House. Their guests include a lot of rich, connected people.”

“Obama stayed here with his family before he moved into the White House,” Gabbi said quietly.

Matteo was pleased to see some color back in her cheeks. As he watched, her mouth firmed, and her spine straightened. He felt a punch of approval. She had inner strength. She wouldn’t fall apart.

“I need a bit of time,” Hex said. “I’ll get back to you ASAP, Hades.”

“Thanks, Hex. Is Killian in?”

“No. He’s in the air. He’s headed down to New Orleans for a meeting. Sit tight.”

Matteo settled back against the wall and rested his phone beside him. “My colleagues will find out what happened.”

Then once he had more intel, he could do what he was good at—thinking on his feet and getting out of sticky situations.

Gabbi pulled in another shaky breath. “I don’t want to die.”

“Not going to happen.” His voice was a growl.

She tucked some of her hair back. “There’s so much I haven’t done. I’ve been focused on work and my house, but I want to travel. I’ve spent a lot of time trying to get away from my family, and not much time having fun.”

“I heard a little before. They sound...”

“Like losers. Users. My childhood was...let’s leave it at not great.”

Matteo felt a spurt of anger. How could anyone mistreat this woman? “You don’t cut them off?”

She fiddled with her skirt. “I do, but sometimes they aren’t all bad. They suck me back in, then *bam*, they hit me up for money, usually.”

He squeezed her fingers. “It sounds like you’ve done well. With your work at the CIA.”

She looked up, a spark in her eyes. “All I do is work. And putter around my house. My aunt left it to me. She was my father’s sister, but I didn’t know her well. She’d escaped the family as well and did very well for herself. My father hated her. When she left me her house, he contested the will.”

Matteo swallowed a curse.

“Yeah, he’s not going to win father of the year.” Gabbi shook her head. “I’ve put myself in some narrow lines. I take no risks, I don’t try new things, because I’m afraid I’ll be like them. That I’ll get addicted to something or make bad choices.”

“*Cara*.” He didn’t know her well, but he didn’t think that was possible.

“I don’t really date. I’ve tried dating apps.” Her face twisted. “I’d prefer having my fingernails pulled out.”

He cleared his throat. “No, you wouldn’t.”

She gasped. “That’s happened to you?”

“No, but I’ve seen it done.” Old memories stirred. Like a dark Leviathan rising from the depths. “I was Direzione Investigativa Antimafia for many years.”

Her eyes widened. “DIA. A mafia hunter.”

He inclined his head. He’d seen so much darkness during that time. He’d had a cause, had known the work was important, but there had been so much horror, so many terrible things.

He knew that darkness had infected him. He felt the heavy weight of it every day. He knew it was a stain he could never

get rid of.

“So, you have no man?” he asked.

Her cheeks pinkened. “No.” The spark was back in her eyes. “All my dates have been disasters. Most have been self-absorbed, and others—” She looked away.

“Don’t stop now.”

She tossed her hair back. “Most find me lacking.”

Matteo’s brows winged up. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Believe it. I’m too boring, ordinary, work too much.” She hesitated. “I’m not good in bed.”

He snorted. “*Cara*, it takes two to be good in bed. Whoever told you that is lazy.”

Her face was flaming pink now—an intriguing mix of anger and embarrassment. Matteo found her equal parts charming and attractive.

“I’ve never orgasmed,” she blurted out. “I mean, with someone else.”

He jolted. No one had ever given this quietly beautiful woman pleasure? What was wrong with the men here?

She turned her head and groaned. “I can’t believe I said that. Or any of this. Forget it. Must be the reaction to the near-death experience. All the adrenaline.” She tried to snatch her hand away from his.

He held tight. Their gazes met.

Then his phone rang.

Swallowing a curse, he pulled it out. “Hex?”

“Hades, I have good news and bad news.”

“Hit me,” he said.

“So, the bad guys have left the building. The police are on-site, and I have camera footage of the four assailants, and a fifth from the lobby, heading out in a hurry.”

Matteo released a breath. “They’re gone.”

He saw relief shudder through Gabbi.

“And the bad news?” he asked.

“Well, the elevators malfunctioned. It appears unconnected, or perhaps a stray bullet hit something. I informed hotel security that you’re in there. The cameras and main power are down. The elevator technicians are on the way, but...you might be stuck for a few hours.”

For some reason, he didn’t feel too concerned about that. Trapped with Gabriella? Things could be far worse.

“Thanks, Hex. I want you to identify the attackers.”

“I’m already working on it.”

“Thanks, *bella*. Keep me updated.” He slid the phone away. “The bad guys are gone. The elevator malfunction is purely coincidental.”

“Perhaps the gunfire hit something.” Gabbi tilted her head. “And? When will we get out of here?”

“The repair technicians are on the way, but we might be stuck here for a couple of hours.”

Dismay filled her face. “A couple of hours?” She huffed out a breath and slumped back against the wall. “There goes my dream of a glass of wine in a warm bubble bath.”

Matteo took a second to allow himself to savor the image of Gabbi naked in a bathtub. He was very curious to know what she looked like under that sensible skirt and shirt.

“You don’t need to be afraid.” He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

That earned him another attractive blush. “I’m sorry I lost it before, and almost had a full-blown panic attack, and blurted out my life story.”

He stroked her wrist. “There’s no need for apologies, *cara*. I’m glad you aren’t used to being shot at.”

Serious eyes met his. “But you are.”



He knew it wasn't a question. "Not so much now that I work for Sentinel."

She shifted. "Kind of puts things into perspective. My life could have been over today, and I haven't fully lived."

Dear God, she was so sweet and fresh. Almost innocent. He'd spent so long in the shadows, hell, so long in the pitch black, that she almost blinded him with her light.

"I need to make a list," she mused.

"A good plan," he said.

Her gaze hit his, an unreadable look in her eyes that made him cock a brow.

"Starting with orgasms." She lifted her chin.

Matteo froze. "What?"

"I want you to help me orgasm."

## CHAPTER THREE

---

**H**oly shit. Gabbi blinked. Had she really just asked this gorgeous man to help her orgasm?

One part of her wanted the ground to open and swallow her up.

Another part of her was shouting at her to go for it.

She'd never see Matteo Mancini again once they got out of this elevator.

That left a strange pang in her chest. Even if he'd lived here in D.C., he wasn't for her. He needed some beautiful woman who'd storm into every dangerous adventure with him.

Right now, he was staring at her like he'd taken a blow to the head.

Her embarrassment grew claws. She curled her legs under her and pulled her hand free of his. "God, forget I said anything—"

"No."

She froze, breathing deeply. "What?"

His long fingers gripped her jaw. "No, let's do it."

Her skin flushed hot.

"It's no hardship for me to give a beautiful lady pleasure," he said.

"I'm not beautiful."

“I told you before that I disagree. Beauty isn’t a certain look or body type, Gabriella. And every person sees it differently. Is attracted to different things.”

His fingers stroked over her jaw, a light caress. Tension filled her—edgy, exciting—and made her belly fill with butterflies.

“For me, beauty is silky smooth skin.” He stared at her, like she was something rare. “Delicate skin, that lets me see your veins.” He traced up her temple.

She sucked in a breath.

“It’s all the colors in your hair.” He reached up and loosened her twist. Her hair fell around her shoulders. “I see chestnut, mahogany, gold, honey.” He stroked his fingers through it. “It’s the sweet curve of your mouth, just this side of carnal.” His thumb swiped over her lips, and they parted.

Beyond her control, her tongue slipped out and licked his thumb.

She saw his dark eyes flare.

“It’s your courage under fire. Your selflessness when you helped those people upstairs, when you attacked a far bigger opponent to help me. And it’s the desire in your eyes. The courage that drove you to ask me for what you want.”

Her pulse was racing. Her clothes felt too small. Her skin was scorching hot.

He was so good at this.

“That’s your beauty, Gabbi. Not what you weigh, or the clothes you wear, or the makeup you put on.”

He was mesmerizing her. Seducing her.

His hands drifted down and flicked open the top button of her shirt. She stilled.

“You’ve orgasmed alone?” he asked.

God, was she really having this conversation? “Yes.” Her voice was husky. “I, uh, have a toy.”

A sexy smile broke out on his handsome, fallen-angel face. “I like the idea of you playing with your toy very much.”

Gabbi squirmed, her panties growing damp.

“But you haven’t orgasmed with a man?”

Ugh, this was the part of the conversation she didn’t want to have.

*You started this, Gab. Finish it.*

“No. A few times with an old boyfriend, I came close, but... He got impatient.” She’d been taking too long, tensing up, and he’d snapped at her.

Matteo frowned. “He sounds like an *idiot*.”

She smiled. “He was.”

“Okay, let’s start.”

She went rigid.

Matteo arched a brow. “That’s not a good start, *cara*.”

“I know. It’s what I do. I tense up and I think too much.”

*Hmm.* He leaned in and kissed her. He nibbled her lips.

Her mind went blank. This gorgeous, masculine creature was kissing her. She made a sound and gripped his shirt. Her mouth opened.

She wasn’t expecting what happened next.

Matteo groaned and slid a hand into her hair and kissed her. Hard.

Their tongues stroked together. He tasted divine, like rich, red wine. Desperate, she gripped him harder and kissed him deeper.

He dragged her closer, taking full control of the kiss and possessing her mouth.

Gabbi moaned. She’d never, ever been kissed like this before.

“You need to enjoy,” he murmured against her lips. “Savor the pleasure.”

His mouth traced her jaw and slipped lower to her neck. Everything inside her lit up, and she slid a hand into his hair. It was thick and luscious. It was unfair for a man to have hair like this.

She felt a hand at the buttons of her shirt, and she stilled.

His deep brown eyes met hers. “Yes?”

She licked her lips. “Yes.”

He deftly flicked the buttons open, baring her bra.

“*Cara*,” he breathed, tracing the edges of the lace.

There was blatant appreciation in his voice. It shot her own desire higher. “I like pretty lingerie.” Today’s matching bra and panties were a sunny yellow.

“It’s not the lingerie I like.”

He cupped one of her breasts. They weren’t huge, but she’d always thought her breasts were okay. High, nicely shaped. Right now, her nipples were hard points. He flicked one and she moaned.

He smiled. His teeth white against his bronze skin.

Was his skin that color all over? Or was it just where the sun touched him? She wished she could find out.

He nipped her lips again, then peppered kisses along her collarbone.

Oh. *Oh, God*. Sensations like hot wax melted over her skin. She arched up to his mouth.

Then he shifted, reaching down so his hand circled her ankle. He slipped her sensible heels off.

“Such pretty feet.” He stroked the arch of one.

“No one has pretty feet,” she said.

“Cute toes, delicate arches. You do.”

She blinked. This man seemed to find beauty in the smallest and most unique things.

His hand slid up her calf, and goosebumps broke out on her skin. His fingers tickled behind her knee, and she gasped.

“Ah, you have a ticklish spot,” he said.

She’d never known that before, but then his hand slid up her thigh and her thoughts whirled like a sandstorm.

He had some calluses, just enough to give her shiver-inducing sensations. Her pulse kicked up a notch.

His fingers slid under her skirt and brushed her inner thigh. Her chest hitched.

His gaze flicked to her breasts, and she saw heat in his eyes. Hunger on his handsome face.

God, she felt shocked and elated that *this* man wanted her. Plain, sensible Gabriella Hansley.

Then his fingers brushed the lace of her panties. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. The sensations were electric.

“Are you wet for me, *cara*?” He sounded pleased.

Thoughts pinged in her head. She felt embarrassingly wet. Was she too wet?

She tried to push the worries away, but she couldn’t focus because both his hands slid under her skirt. Her eyes flew open and locked on hot brown ones.

“There you are.” He hooked his fingers in the side of her panties and pulled them down slowly.

Her breathing quickened. Watching Matteo pull her panties down her legs was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen.

He lifted the scrap of yellow lace, then put her panties in his pocket.

She sucked in a breath.

“Okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Good.” Those strong hands slid up her legs again. His skin so much darker than her paler hue.

His fingers dipped beneath her skirt, and her muscles went taut.

The anticipation was killing her.

Then blunt fingers brushed her folds, and she moaned.

“Soft,” he murmured. His gaze stayed on her face as he stroked her.

His knuckle grazed her clit, and she moaned.

“Yes, *cara*. Let me hear your pleasure.” Then he sank a finger inside her.

Gabbi cried out, her hips jerking.

“Just feel, Gabriella.”

She did. So much.

When he slid a second finger inside her, more pleasure hit. He stretched her a little. It had been a while since she’d been with a man. His thumb rubbed her clit.

“You’re so beautiful.”

He kept working her, and she felt the bright, shining, glowing ball of pleasure getting closer.

Worry nipped her. She’d take too long to reach a climax. She always did. She’d feel it and lose it and get frustrated. He’d get fed up.

God, maybe it wouldn’t slip away like it had so many times before?

As the thoughts crowded her head, she felt her pleasure dim.

*Oh, no.*

Disappointment and embarrassment were a potent mix. One she didn’t like.

She stiffened and gripped his wrist.

“I’m...sorry. I can’t.” She pushed his hand away, his fingers slipping free of her body. “It’s not you, it’s me. I told you I couldn’t do this.”

Embarrassment burned her cheeks, and she couldn't meet his gaze.

---

MATTEO STARED at Gabbi's bent head. Desire pounded through him. Touching her, hearing the sounds she made, smelling her arousal, had left him on the edge. His cock was rock hard and pressing uncomfortably against the zipper of his pants.

For him, sex was a fun pastime. An enjoyable release. He always tried to leave his lovers smiling as he walked out the door.

But right now, he felt a vicious sense of possession toward this woman who'd crashed into his life tonight without warning.

The men in her life hadn't given her what she needed. And whatever things had forged her, they'd left her doubting herself

"Gabbi—"

"God. I can't even escape you."

He caught her hand. "I don't want you to escape, and you don't really want to, either."

She pulled in a shaky breath.

"You were enjoying yourself. What happened?"

She didn't look at him. "I felt good. I felt it building, then I started to worry. That I'd take too long, that it would slip away."

He pushed her hair back and kissed her. *Dio*, she tasted like heaven. And as he kept kissing her, she lit up for him.

How could she believe that she was incapable of finding her pleasure? The passion was there, she just needed to relax enough to let it free.

"*Cara*, let's try this differently."



Her head jerked up, and she blinked. “You want to keep... um...trying?”

He smiled and rubbed his thumb across her lips. “Oh, yes.”

She swallowed. “I’m not sure.”

He pulled her toward him, pushing her skirt up until she straddled him. She made a soft sound, her hands resting on his shoulders.

Matteo leaned back against the wall of the elevator, placing his hands on her hips. Her pretty, lace-covered breasts were right there. He’d give anything to have more time with them. To kiss them, bite them, and slide his cock between them.

Said cock pulsed, and she felt it. Her lips parted.

“Do you feel how much you turn me on?” He smoothed his hands up her slender thighs, shoving her skirt up to her waist. “Look at this pretty pussy.” He stroked the strip of brown curls he’d exposed.

She shifted, trying to bite back a moan.

“This time, I don’t want you to come,” he said.

She blinked, her brows drawing together. “Huh?”

“Don’t focus on your orgasm. Your only job is to feel. Enjoy the sensations until I say stop.”

Gabbi sucked in a breath. “That’s it?”

Matteo nodded. If only she knew how much control he was exerting to not toss her on the floor and thrust himself deep between her thighs.

But this wasn’t about him.

“Can you do that, *cara*?”

She stared at him a beat, then nodded.

“Good.” He slid his hand lower. “Just feel.”

Moving slowly, he slid his hand between her thighs. She lifted her hips, giving him better access.

He couldn't take his gaze off her face. Every emotion she felt flitted across it.

*Dio*, he'd been guarded pretty much his whole life. Too many times to count, his life depended on him not sharing how he truly felt. He could only show the ugly emotions—anger, hatred, annoyance. Being undercover could strip your soul of everything good and light and sweet.

He slid his fingers inside her, and listened to her sweet, husky sounds. She was tight, wet, and warm.

He thumbed her clit and she jolted.

“That's it, Gabriella, move your hips. Find what feels best.”

Her fingers dug into his shoulders. She moved faster now, her face beautifully flushed.

She was losing herself to the pleasure. He gave her swollen clit more pressure. She rewarded him with a long moan.

“Ride my hand,” he ordered.

She moved faster.

“So beautiful.” She was. In that moment, he'd never seen anything so gorgeous.

Her eyes flew open. They were unfocused, drenched with pleasure. “*Matteo.*”

*Fuck.* The way she said his name. His cock was weeping in his boxer shorts.

“Just feel, my sweet *tesoro.*”

A second later, he felt her body clench on his fingers.

She went taut, threw her head back, and cried out.

Matteo couldn't stop himself. He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to her neck, biting hard.

She shouted again, still coming.

Then she slumped forward on his chest. Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away and heard her soft mew.

Then he wrapped his arms around her.

“That was...” Her voice was husky. “Thank you, Matteo.”

“I don’t need thanks. It was my pleasure to watch you come.”

She lifted her head, a lazy smile on her face.

Suddenly, the lights in the elevator flicked on.

“*Oh.*” She scrambled off him, righting her clothes.

His cell phone pealed. “Hex?”

“Great news. The elevator techs will have you free in a few minutes.” The tech guru laughed. “I know how much you hate sitting still, Hades. You can thank me for the rescue later.”

His gaze flicked to Gabbi, who was rebuttoning her shirt.

Normally he did hate sitting still. When he did, that’s when old regrets liked to crawl out of the dark and attack.

But he’d had no problem being trapped in an elevator with Gabbi.

Hex was still speaking. “—booked you a room at a new hotel, under an alias. I don’t know yet who was so keen to mow you down in a hail of bullets, but they can’t do that if they can’t find you. The Sentinel Security jet will be there in the morning to pick you up.”

Gabbi lifted her head, and gave him a faint smile as she tried to finger comb her hair.

For a second, he hated the idea of leaving.

“Do you think the CIA contact who’s with me will be safe?” he asked.

“I think so. They weren’t the target, and any search would show she’s CIA and has no link to you.”

No link. Why did he hate the sound of that so much? No link except that she’d just orgasmed with a man—with him—for the first time. Riding his fingers. Crying his name.

*Cazzo.* He needed to get this irrational possessiveness under control.

“Okay, Hex. *Grazie.*”

“See you tomorrow, H-man.”

The elevator jolted, then started moving downward. They pushed to their feet, and he scooped up the file and hard drive.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“We’re getting our freedom. I’m going to change hotels for the night, and fly back to New York tomorrow morning.”

Her eyes dimmed a little. “Right. Any idea who the shooters are?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. My colleague thinks you’re safe. They were after me.” He reached out and slid her hair behind her ear. “But you should be cautious.”

“I will.” She gave him a faint smile. “I’m used to looking after myself.”

Her words made his gut churn. He wished he had the right to keep her safe.

It was crazy. He barely knew her.

But he did know what sounds she made when she came.

Gabbi cleared her throat. “Um, I need my panties.”

“No.”

Her eyebrows winged up. “What?”

He stroked her cheek. “I’m keeping them.”

The elevator stopped, preventing her from saying anything else. The doors opened.

“Everyone all right?” An older man in a suit with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut stood in the doorway. “I’m Burke Richards, hotel security.”

“We’re fine.” Matteo pressed a hand to her lower back.

“You were in the Lafayette during the shooting?” Richards asked.

Matteo nodded.

“The police will have some questions for you. You need to give a statement.”

The next hour was a whirlwind as they both gave their statements to the police.

He knew Gabbi wouldn't share info he didn't want shared. He kept glancing over at her.

Then finally, the two of them stood at the front of the hotel as the valet drove her white Tesla to a stop in front of them.

“Well.” She looked up at Matteo. “Be careful.”

“I will, *cara*.” He couldn't stop himself from bending his head to press a gentle kiss to her lips.

He wanted more. He wanted to let the fiery need inside him free.

He wanted to drink in the passion she'd just shown him a hint of.

But he had a job to do, and a woman like Gabbi—bright and sweet—was not for a man with shadows like him.

“Goodbye, Gabriella.”

“Bye, Matteo.”

She slid into her car and Matteo stood on the hotel steps, watching long after her taillights had disappeared into the night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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**W**ith a harsh exhalation of breath, Matteo shoved the sheet off his body and sat up.

He couldn't sleep.

His body was filled with tension, and he felt hot.

He rose, naked, and crossed the hotel room at the Ritz-Carlton Georgetown. He always slept naked when he was alone and somewhere secure.

Standing at the window, he stared out at the Potomac River. The Ritz-Carlton was housed in an old renovated industrial building on the river. It still had a one-hundred-and-forty-foot smokestack as a feature in the lobby. His room was luxurious, and he knew Hex would've picked it because the rooms all had bulletproof glass to entice diplomatic guests.

His gaze drifted along the dark waters of the river to the lights of the city surrounding it. But his thoughts were on big blue-gray eyes.

He shifted, his body wanting movement, not rest. He snorted, he wasn't fooling anyone, least of all himself.

His body wanted sex.

He wanted Gabbi.

He pressed a hand to the glass. He shouldn't want her. Someone like Gabbi was not for a man like him.

He usually gravitated toward beautiful, experienced, and temporary.

Gabbi was the first, in her own quiet way, but not the second or third.

Her husky cries came back to him, the way her pussy clenched on his fingers. He growled in the darkness. He could smell the sweet musk of her arousal.

*Not for you, Mancini.*

But he couldn't stop imagining her. If she was here, the moonlight would make her skin look like silver. She'd look at him with faint wonder in her eyes.

He imagined her spread out on his bed. Funny that in this fantasy in his head, it wasn't in this hotel bed, but his bed in his apartment in the Sentinel Security warehouse in New York.

Where he never took women.

But he wanted her there. Wanted her scent on his sheets, her hair spread across his pillow, her body under his.

With a groan, he lifted a hand and circled his cock. His first stroke was slow, but imagining Gabbi watching him, he picked up speed.

A low, rough noise escaped him. She'd watch him, mesmerized, squirming in place with her gaze locked on his cock.

Matteo hissed out a breath. He moved faster, fucking his own fist, squeezing tight at the top.

*Don't stop, Matteo. I want to watch you come.*

On those imaginary whispered words, he came. His body went taut, and with a curse, he grabbed his discarded shirt off the nearby chair.

He got a faint whiff of Gabbi's perfume on it.

*"Fuck."* His release geysered into the fabric.

Hot, fiery pleasure rushed through him.

He cursed again, his legs feeling weak. He made it to the bed, dropping the shirt onto the floor.

If only Gabriella was there...

Shockingly, his spent cock twitched. What had she done to him?

Then his cell phone buzzed on the nightstand. It was Hex's ringtone.

Instantly, he tensed.

At this time of night, it couldn't be good.

He pressed it to his ear. "Hex?"

"Okay, my news isn't great," she said.

He figured as much. "I'm listening."

"Matteo," another deep voice cut across the line.

It belonged to his boss, Killian "Steel" Hawke. Matteo respected the hell out of the man. He had an iron-strong sense of right and wrong but did things his own way. A man who could navigate both the rules and the shadows.

A man who knew the darkness like Matteo.

"Killian, you're in New Orleans?" Matteo asked.

"Yes. Hex called and updated me. I said no trouble, remember? This was supposed to be an easy, one-day job."

Matteo laughed darkly. "I'm not to blame. I was calmly enjoying my glass of Valpolicella when trouble found me."

"I identified two of your bad guys."

Hex's tone made the back of his neck prickle.

"Vito Bruno and Roberto Moretti. Both citizens of Italy."

Matteo sprang to his feet. "I don't know the names. They don't ring any bells."

"I'm thinking their passports are fake," Hex added.

"Could they be mafia?" Killian asked.

"It's possible." Matteo let out a breath. "I made a lot of enemies."

But who did they belong to? Which brutal, bloody group?



Matteo had infiltrated and taken apart several mafia syndicates. It'd been a hard, bloody, soul-destroying job. One he didn't regret, and one he hadn't wavered from.

Most of the mafia groups in Italy had their fingers in smuggling, drugs and arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion.

One of them had to be responsible for this attack.

Old images slid through his head like Polaroids. All the car bombings, robberies, vicious beatings, and dead bodies that he'd seen in his time with the DIA.

But most of the groups that he'd dismantled were now in disarray. Internal squabbling had let the police sweep in and take apart most of the criminal operations.

That said, most Italians had a highly tuned sense of revenge.

"Someone's coming for you," Killian said.

"I don't know this Bruno or Moretti. It could be anyone."

"Someone angling for vengeance."

"It's a strong possibility."

"Okay, I'll dig deeper," Hex said. "Can you tap your contacts?"

"Yes. I'll talk to my contacts at DIA and Interpol."

"If you think of any particular mafia groups that could be behind this, send me the info."

"I will, Hex," Matteo said. "Thanks, *bella*."

"I'm on it, Hades. Luckily, no one can find you tonight, and you'll be on the jet in the morning."

"I won't stand for my people being threatened." Killian's voice was an icy drawl.

Matteo took a deep breath. The Sentinel Security team, his friends, had his back.

They'd become his family, since his own were no longer an option. Most of his extended family in Italy would never

disrupt their lives to help him.

“Wait,” Hex said. “I got a ping.”

Matteo’s hands clenched on the phone.

“A traffic cam caught Vito Bruno driving a black Suburban.”

“Where?” Matteo demanded.

“Georgetown.”

Killian cursed. “Have they located Matteo?”

“No. It looks like they’re heading away from the Ritz-Carlton into a residential area.”

Matteo frowned, turning to stare out the window.

“Maybe they’re staying close by?” Hex suggested. “Could just be a coincidence?”

Matteo’s gut clenched hard. He didn’t believe in coincidences. “Hex, I need you to find an address.”

“Okay,” she said.

“For a CIA analyst. Gabriella Hansley.”

“This was your contact tonight?” Killian asked.

“Yes.” If the thugs after him couldn’t find Matteo, maybe they were reckless enough to go after Gabbi.

“She lives in Georgetown,” Hex said. “She owns a townhome.” Hex rattled off an address. “Oh, fuck. That’s in the direction these guys are heading.”

Matteo’s jaw went tight. He raced to his overnight bag and pulled his clothes on.

“Hades,” Killian said. “Call the police.”

“They’ll take too long. It’s my fault she’s in the line of fire.” He pulled out his SIG and his backup Glock.

He jammed them into the waistband of his pants. “I need to get to her.” He slipped a leather jacket on.

Killian made a sound. “There are five of them, and one of you.”

“Going after an innocent woman. If these guys are mafia, they won’t be gentle.”

The thought of Gabbi hurt, violated, with her throat slit...

*No.*

His entire body rebelled.

He was not letting them touch her.

He sprinted out of his hotel room.

Now, he just had to make it to her in time.

---

GABBI ROLLED over for the thirtieth time, then rolled back. She scrunched her pillow under her head, sighed, and looked at the lights from the window flickering on the ceiling.

Sleep was proving very elusive.

She kicked at her covers and felt a little twinge between her thighs.

From when Matteo had touched her.

She squeezed her thighs together and closed her eyes.

She had to stop thinking about him.

She pressed a hand against her silky, white nightgown—they were her secret indulgence. She loved to splurge on pretty nightgowns and lingerie. Her encounter with Matteo, and the shooting, had lit something inside her.

She wanted to feel.

She wanted to experience life, not sit safely on the sidelines.

Gabbi was self-aware enough to know that her family had affected her. She sniffed. No more. The evening’s events had sparked something inside of her. She was going to live.

She wanted experiences.

Matteo had aptly proven that she damn well could orgasm with someone else. Her belly pulsed. She wanted more of that. Although, when she tried to imagine a man in her bed, he was Matteo.

Her hand moved to the side of her neck, and the tender spot where he'd bitten her. She shivered.

"You barely know him," she whispered.

And she wasn't going to let herself look him up.

"He's not for you, Gab." She sighed. The thought made her sad.

There was no way she was going to get any sleep. Maybe she'd make a cup of chamomile tea.

She sat up, pushing her hair back. She quietly crossed her bedroom. The scent of lilies filled the space. She'd bought a bunch the day before, and loved them.

In the hallway, she headed for the stairs.

The tinkle of breaking glass had her jerking to a halt.

Her heart jumped. *What was that?*

Gabbi moved soundlessly down the hall. At the top of the stairs, she paused and peered downward.

A low murmur caught her ear, then a thin beam of light moving in her living area.

The air in her chest turned to mud.

*Someone was in her house.*

She pulled back out of sight, but stayed on the landing, her mind whirling.

Her phone was plugged into her charger downstairs. She couldn't even call for help.

She heard the murmur of deep voices. Was it thieves? She sucked in a deep breath and realized something.

They were speaking Italian.

Quickly, she headed back to her bedroom, her heart knocking hard. She could hide, but if these were the same guys as the ones from the restaurant, she assumed they'd be messy and thorough.

She pressed her back against the wall. *God. Think, Gabbi.*

Then the floorboards outside her bedroom creaked.

Her blood turned ice cold. She darted into her bathroom. She needed a weapon. It was so dark, that she could barely see anything.

She spotted her hair dryer and grabbed it.

Near the door, she glanced out.

A big shadow was moving through her bedroom. She watched the man pause by the bed, note that it was empty, and tense.

Fear coated her mouth. The man had no problems spraying a busy restaurant with bullets.

He'd have no problem killing her.

After he got what he wanted.

The man opened her closet, pawing through her clothes. Then he turned toward the bathroom.

*Now or never, Gabbi.*

She lifted the hairdryer and darted out. With all her strength, she slammed the hairdryer into the man's head.

The plastic cracked, and the guy grunted.

Then he lunged and grabbed a handful of her nightgown.

*Oh, shit.*

Panic beat inside her, along with a flood of adrenaline. She fumbled behind her, and her fingers closed on her glass vase filled with lilies.

She hefted it and threw it at her attacker.

Water splashed and the glass made a *thunk* as it connected. He uttered a vile curse.

Gabbi poked at his eyes. He batted her hand away, turning them in a circle. Gabbi tried to kick him, but instead, managed to trip them both.

Her attacker fell, and she tumbled with him.

She heard a sickening thud as the back of his head connected with the corner of her pretty, wooden nightstand.

He hit the floor, and she fell on top of him with an *oof*.

Frozen, she stayed there for a few seconds, hands pressed to his beefy chest.

Then she realized that he wasn't moving.

God, was he dead? She scrambled up, her heart pounding so hard it hurt her ribs.

Noises rose from deeper in her house.

“Vito?” Running footsteps.

Springing to life, Gabbi darted toward her bedroom door and locked it. Then she pushed her armchair across the front of it.

It wouldn't hold a grown man out for long.

Someone yelled out in Italian. “Vito? Where are you?”

“He must've found the woman,” another voice said.

There was a harsh laugh. “We can have a little fun with her, no? To make her share about *Agente Figlio di puttana*.”

Agent Son of a whore, or son of a bitch. *Matteo*. They were after Matteo.

She looked back at the body on the floor.

If they were Italian, they had to be mafia.

They wouldn't let her live.

She needed to get out.

*Now*.

She raced to the window. It was the only other way out of her room. As she opened it, the door rattled behind her.

Her heart hit her throat.

She heard shouts. There was a thud against her door.

She had to go. She climbed onto the windowsill.

*Shit.* It was a long way down to her tiny, shadowed back garden below.

All she needed to do was jump, and bend her knees on landing. She knew for certain that Devyn had leapt off buildings higher than this.

Her friend wouldn't be afraid.

Gabbi dangled her legs over the edge and gripped the sill.

Behind her, the man on the floor groaned, and the door rattled under another heavy blow.

She thought of Matteo's sexy smile. Of him saying that he liked her courage under fire.

*Go.* She pushed off.

Two frantic heartbeats later, her bare feet hit the cold grass with a jarring slide. She bent her knees and toppled over.

She landed in an ungraceful pile. *Crap.* Stunned for a second, she lay there with the scent of grass hitting her nostrils.

Along with the cold night air.

She pushed to her feet. She needed to get away, make some calls—

A flashlight cut through her garden. She heard a man curse in Italian.

The light hit her in the face.

*“Lei è qui!”* the man bellowed. He charged at her.

Gabbi ran, aiming for the gate at the side of her house. She had to get out.

The man wrapped an arm around her neck from behind, lifting her off her feet.

She choked, kicking and scratching. Her captor squeezed harder.

She...couldn't breathe.

Gabbi kept twisting, but her movements were slowing down. She clawed at his burly arm. She stared at the tattoo on his skin in the dim light. A snake.

Then, all of a sudden, he was gone.

She fell to her knees, and heaved in air.

She heard a scuffle, the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

Turning, she saw a tall, lean shadow slam punches into the stockier thug. Another blow, and her attacker hit her flagstone path facefirst.

He didn't get up.

Gabbi tensed, and her rescuer took a step closer, moving into a shaft of moonlight.

His handsome face looked sharper, more menacing in the shadows.

The air rushed out of her. "*Matteo.*"

He reached for her, and without thinking, she bounded up and threw herself at him.

His arms closed around her. "It's okay. I've got you, *cara.*"

She clung to him, drinking in his strength.

Then he pulled back, his eyes as dark as the night. "We need to go."



## CHAPTER FIVE

---

**T**hank God she was safe.

It was hard for Matteo to pull himself away from Gabbi. Her hair was loose, spilling around her shoulders, silver in the moonlight.

He wanted to run his hands over her, make sure for himself that she wasn't hurt.

But shouts from inside the elegant brownstone made him stiffen. He needed to get her safe.

“Come on.” Matteo took her hand and tugged her. He headed for the gate, and it opened soundlessly.

Seconds later, they were on the sidewalk.

He broke into a jog, sticking to a pace he knew Gabbi could keep.

Damn, she had no shoes on, and was just wearing a filmy, white nightgown.

He saw a shiver wrack her.

*Merda.* It was cold. She had to be freezing.

*Get her safe first, Mancini.*

His car was parked just down the street. They just had to—

More shouts behind them. The sound of a gunshot cracked through the night air.

*Cazzo.* Matteo assessed quickly. He didn't want these assholes to see his car.

The thud of running footsteps sounded behind them.

*Fuck.*

“Here.” He gripped Gabbi’s slim waist and lifted her over the low fence of a nearby house and into a tiny patch of greenery in front of the house. There were some bushes they could hide in, and he leaped the fence and pulled her into the vegetation.

Damn, was her nightgown noticeable? She shivered again.

He pulled her against him and wrapped an arm around her. She pressed her face to his throat and slid her arm under his jacket.

He jolted. He felt her warm breath on his skin. That small sensation ran all the way through his body like an electric shock.

He liked women, and he loved sex. He’d had some very creative sessions in bed. He knew what he liked, and he’d enjoyed some very experienced lovers.

But for some reason, that small move, the brush of her lips at his neck, felt incredibly intimate.

Then he heard footsteps close by.

Matteo mentally cursed himself. They were in a life-or-death situation, with likely violent men after them, and he was thinking with his cock.

“Matteo.” A near-silent whisper. “They’re after you. They wanted information on you.”

His hands tightened on her. He figured as much. She’d been dragged into this shit because she’d done one small favor for a colleague, and Matteo’s past had reared up to strike. He was going to make sure she walked away from this without one hair on her head touched.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’ll get us out of this. Trust me?”

There was enough light for him to make out her nod.

Then the shadow of someone stepped in front of the streetlight. A thug had stopped on the sidewalk nearby, scanning around.

Matteo squeezed Gabbi close, then released her. He needed his arms free in case he needed to fight. The guy stepped closer, and frowned, gaze running over their hiding place.

The man moved closer. Shit, could he see Gabbi's white nightgown?

Matteo took a deep breath, then launched an attack.

He burst through the bushes, and slammed a fist into the guy's face. He followed through with an elbow rammed into the man's nose, leaving him dazed. Matteo jerked him over the fence.

They crashed into a garden bed, crushing someone's prized plants.

Matteo had long ago learned that if he committed to a fight, he fought hard and dirty.

He landed several brutal blows. The thug made a gurgling sound.

"Matteo, look out! His hand," Gabbi whispered frantically.

Matteo lunged to the side, and saw the man pull a gun.

He gritted his teeth and hammered a punch into the man's arm.

"We'll have some fun with this little woman of yours, *stronza*," the man spat in Italian. "Make her scream. She won't be so pretty once we're done with her."

Ice coated Matteo, fueled by a fierce, protective urge. He yanked the gun away from the man, then gripped the man's neck and yanked him back, choking him.

The thug let out a gagging noise, his eyes going wide. He fought back, and Matteo used all his strength to hold him. Finally, the man slumped and Matteo dumped him in the bushes.

"Oh, God."

Matteo turned his head. Gabbi crouched there, shivering, her face bloodless. She stared at the unconscious man.

*Fuck.*

She'd just watched him choke a man half to death. She must be scared and horrified. "Gabbi..."

Her gaze flicked to him. She swallowed, then he saw her square her shoulders. "We should go."

He blinked. "Yes, we should."

With a nod, she rose and took his hand.

His fingers clenched on hers.

He needed to protect her and get her somewhere safe. Right now, that was all that mattered to him.

He lifted her over the fence and tugged her toward the black BMW 4 Series he'd rented.

He'd just opened the door when he heard the shouts down the street.

*Dammit.* He shoved Gabbi in, then sprinted to the driver's seat. He started the engine and it roared to life. He sped onto the street.

Behind them, he heard gunshots.

Gabbi gasped and huddled in her seat. Matteo took the next corner fast.

He cursed.

"They can't catch us now," she said.

"No, but there's a chance they saw the license plate." Which means they'd track his alias to the Ritz-Carlton.

The jet wouldn't be here until morning to pick him up. They needed somewhere safe to stay.

"We need to go to the police," she said.

Matteo's jaw tightened. "I doubt they can help. These men aren't going to be easy to track down."

She glanced his way. "You want to handle it yourself."

“It’s my mess.”

A cellphone rang and Gabbi’s eyes widened. “That’s my ring tone.”

He pulled out her phone. “I grabbed it when I was in your house. Then I saw you jump out the window and ran back outside.”

She took it and her brow wrinkled. “It’s my brother. He knows better than to call me in the middle of the night, unless it’s an emergency.” She hesitated. “Or he’s high and he forgets that it has to be an emergency.”

Matteo felt a flash of sympathy. Family always generated such complicated emotions.

She thumbed the speaker button. “Casey.”

“Gabs. Oh, fuck, Gabs.”

The man sounded frantic, terrified.

Gabbi stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

“Some guys dragged me off the street. They...they want to talk to you.” Harsh breathing. “Said if you don’t come, they’ll kill me.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “What guys?”

“Italian guys.”

*Cazzo.*

Her brother rattled off an address. “Hurry, Gabbi. Fuck, please. I know I’m a pain in your ass, but I don’t want to die.”

The line went dead.

Gabbi pulled in a deep, shaky breath. “I...”

“Plug the address into the navigation,” Matteo said.

“Thank you.”

Soon, they were headed to Columbia Heights.

“It’s not the safest area,” she murmured. “It’s improving, but the crime rates are still high.” She rubbed her hands on her nightgown.

Shit, she had to be cold. He turned on the heat, and as soon as they stopped, he'd give her his jacket.

They passed the Metro station, then several large apartment buildings.

"Here," she said.

He parked on the street, and she nodded toward an alley.

"That's the place."

Matteo frowned, jaw tightening. He didn't like this at all. Several streetlights were out, and the place was too dark. "I want you to stay in the car."

She shook her head. "I can't. They want me."

"To get to me."

"This isn't your fault, Matteo." She opened the car door. "He's my brother. I don't like him much, but I can't leave him to die."

Matteo checked his weapons and climbed out. He shrugged off his jacket and held it out to her. He could see she was shivering.

"Thanks." With a small smile, she pulled it around her.

They approached the alley, and he lifted his gun. No way in hell was he letting her walk in there alone.

Colorful artwork was sprayed on one side of the alley in a vain effort to brighten the place up. Their steps were quiet, and he hated that her feet were bare on this cold, dirty ground.

"Gabbi?" a man called out.

Matteo tensed, and watched a man stagger out of the darkness. A tall shadow of another man walked close behind him, cloaked in darkness.

The smaller man's gaze locked on Gabbi. Her brother looked nothing like her. He wasn't very tall, body past the point of skinny, with thinning brown hair, a sallow face, and eyes that looked brown, but it was hard to tell in the gloom.

"Casey, are you all right?" she asked.

Her brother swallowed and nodded.

“*Si*, he’s done well.” The man behind him stepped forward, clapping a hand to Casey’s shoulder.

It was the man with the tattoos from the restaurant. Roberto Moretti.

“*Grazie, Signor* Hansley. You brought your sister and her companion here, as promised. Your debt is cleared.”

Every muscle in Matteo went tight as he watched Moretti aim a gun at Gabbi.

---

GABBI BLINKED, cold filling her chest, trying to comprehend what the hell was going on.

“Casey—?”

“I owed some guys money.” Her brother swiped his hand across his mouth, his gaze darting everywhere but hers.

“You set me up.” Oh, God, she just never learned. Still, she never expected her own *brother* to sell her out to save his own skin. “You asshole!”

“Go!” the tattooed man bellowed.

Casey took off, stumbling. He ran out of the alley and never looked back.

He’d left her.

“Moretti, or whatever the hell your real name is, this isn’t going to end well for you,” Matteo said darkly.

Moretti laughed. “It will end very well, *stronzo*. With you dead and vengeance for so many.”

“Which mafia asshole is pulling your strings?”

The man didn’t respond. “Put your weapon down, Mancini, or I put a bullet in her brain.”

*God*. Gabbi tried to stay calm. How the hell could they get out of this? Now it was her fault for dragging Matteo here,

lured here by her own damn brother.

Then to her horror, Matteo leaned over and set his gun on the ground.

“Matteo, no!” she cried.

With a sharp smile, Tattoo Man whipped his gun toward Matteo.

Everything seemed to move into fast forward. Matteo ripped another gun out of his waistband, whipping it up, and diving toward Gabbi.

Gunshots echoed in the alley, deafeningly loud.

She hit the ground hard, skin scraping off her hands and knees. She looked up in time to see Tattoo Man’s gun fall from his hand, a second before his body hit the ground. He pressed a hand to his bleeding shoulder.

Matteo advanced on the man. He looked like an avenging dark angel. His mouth was set in a hard line as he kicked the man’s gun away.

Then she saw a shadow move.

“Matteo, watch out!”

A huge thug barreled out of the darkness. He rammed into Matteo.

The men scuffled, and she saw Matteo’s gun hit the ground. The big guy swung his fists, punching at Matteo. He blocked one blow and took another to the gut. With a grunt, he rammed a kick into his attacker.

Helpless, she watched the men circle each other and collide again. The sounds of the vicious hits made her wince, and she saw them ram into the brick wall of the alley.

Movement. She saw the injured Tattoo Man sliding toward Matteo’s dropped gun.

*Oh, no you don’t.* She darted forward and stomped her foot down on his arm.



He cried out and she followed through with a kick to the face. He fell flat on his back.

Gabbi crouched and picked up the Glock. She quickly checked it over, hating that her hands weren't exactly steady. She lifted it, trying to remember all the lessons Devyn had given her.

She swallowed. There was no way she could try and hit the thug without risking hitting Matteo.

Instead, she aimed wide and fired.

The gunshot reverberated down the alley.

Matteo and the thug pulled apart.

“Get down on the ground,” she yelled.

The man just grinned and pulled a knife. He lunged at Matteo.

Lightning fast, Matteo blocked. They moved too fast for her to follow the rest of the fight. It was a whirl of grunts, swings, and kicks.

Then Matteo did some move and toppled the thug to the ground. He landed hard and followed him down, landing several hard punches to the man's head.

Then he rose.

His white shirt was streaked with stains, his hair mussed. He strode toward her, and she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Gently, he took the gun. “Thanks for the help, *cara*. Now, let's get out of here.”

She nodded, and a moment later, they were back in the car as Matteo screeched out onto the street.

“My brother sold me out.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “He didn't care at all that those men would have killed me, or you, someone he didn't even know.”

“I'm sorry, Gabbi.”

“I shouldn't be surprised,” she whispered. What was so wrong with her that no one loved her?

Matteo turned and once they were several blocks away, slowed down a little. She saw a muscle work in his jaw. Then she saw one stain on his shirt getting larger.

“Oh God, are you bleeding?” She reached over, touching his stomach.

He winced and glanced down. “Damn. I didn’t feel anything.”

She had to stop the bleeding. Gripped the hem of her nightgown and ripped the fabric.

Man, it was hard to do. The movies made it look easy. She grunted and kept tearing.

When she had enough, she wadded up the fabric and pressed it against his gut.

“We need to get this checked out, Matteo.”

He shook his head. “We can’t go to a hospital. A record of my injury would leave us exposed.”

He pulled his cellphone out and put it on speaker.

“Hades?” Hex’s crisp voice. “You all right? Did you make it in time?”

“Yes. Gabbi is with me. Say hello, Gabbi.”

“Um, hi,” she said.

“Hi, I’m Hex.” The female voice was far too cheerful for the middle of the night.

“They attacked Gabbi at her house,” Matteo said. “Then we had another little run in with them. Hex, my car is compromised, and I have a knife wound.”

“Shit. How bad?”

“I don’t know yet. We need a place to hole up with medical supplies.”

“Hades?” a man’s deep voice said across the line. It held the crisp air of power and authority. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll call you back.”

“Acknowledged.” Matteo ended the call.

As he took another turn, Gabbi leaned against him, keeping the pressure on his wound. “Was that Killian Hawke?”

“Yes.”

“The man is a bit of a legend at the CIA.” She looked up. “The stories can’t all be true.”

Matteo gave a low chuckle. “They probably are. And I’m guessing people only know a few of them.”

“Why are you called Hades?” she asked.

“From my DIA days. The mafia nicknamed me Hades, after the god of the underworld. They knew I was the dark hunter coming for them. It stuck.”

Her gaze traced his face. His tone left no doubt that it hadn’t been an easy job.

He turned into a shadowed side street and pulled over to the curb.

“The bleeding’s slowed, but I need a closer look,” she said.

“It’ll be fine.”

She arched a brow. “Are you a doctor?”

His teeth flashed white in the darkness. “No, but I’ve been cut before.”

*Oh, God.* She swallowed.

“Hey.” He cupped her jaw. “It’ll be okay. I’m going to make sure you don’t get hurt.”

“I’m more worried about you right now. I don’t want you to get hurt either, Matteo.”

He stilled. Their gazes met. “It has been a really long time since anyone has truly worried about me being hurt.”

Then his cell phone rang, making Gabbi jump.

He frowned at the phone. “I don’t recognize the number. Mancini.”

“Hades. Go to this address,” a low, deep voice said. The man recited an address.

The line went dead.

“Who was that?”

“If I’m right, then Killian has gotten us some high-level help. Of the very-covert, off-the-books, so-deep-in-the-shadows-most-people-only-knew-the-man’s-codename, not-his-real-name kind.”

## CHAPTER SIX

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She really didn't like how much blood Matteo was losing. Gabbi nibbled her lip, her stomach churning. The fabric in her hand had turned from white to solid red.

Her Friday night had *not* gone to plan. She shivered. She was cold, shaken, and scared.

Her brother had thrown her to the wolves to save his own skin. He didn't care if she lived or died.

And now Matteo was hurt, bleeding, because of her fucking brother.

A part of her felt numb.

Matteo cursed. "You're freezing." He turned the heat up more in the car.

"And you're bleeding."

He was sprawled in the seat, turning corners faster than she could. She was a cautious driver because she'd learned late. Her parents hadn't had any interest in teaching her. She'd waitressed and saved the money for lessons.

The warm air felt good on her cold skin. "I think you have more to worry about than me being cold."

He grunted. "We're going to be fine."

A hysterical laugh escaped her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry. I'm okay." She felt him staring at her. "I swear. Just the shooting, the attack in my home, my brother, you having a stab wound—"

“Cut. It’s just a cut.”

She rolled her eyes. *Men.*

“And now we’re on the run from some unknown bad guys.”

“I’ll find out who they are.” There was a dark promise in his deep voice.

Gabbi had no doubt this man had earned his codename. She could totally see him as god of the underworld.

He suddenly pulled into a driveway, and she peered ahead. It looked like an auto shop. The large, roller door was closed, and the workshop was dark.

Matteo reached over and slid an arm around her. She kept the pressure on his wound, but leaned into him. She barely stifled a moan. He was so warm and, God, the man smelled so good.

A delicious-smelling man had to be an evolutionary tactic, to make a woman stop thinking logically.

“You held up well tonight, Gabbi,” he said.

She felt a flush of pleasure. “I was terrified every step of the way.”

He leaned over and tucked her hair back behind her ear. “True courage is acting even when you’re afraid.”

“I’m not afraid now.” Not when she was with him.

His fingers traced down her cheek. “You should be. I’m far more dangerous than those men.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Suddenly, there was a rap on the driver’s side window. Gabbi jumped, but Matteo didn’t.

There was a dark shadow outside the window.

“Pull in,” a deep voice said, muffled by the glass.

Ahead, Gabbi saw the garage door opening.

Matteo pulled the car into the auto shop. There was one car up on a lift, and another in pieces.

She climbed out, while Matteo circled the car. The oil-stained concrete was cold under her feet. He took her hand, and they both turned to face the man who was standing in the shadows.

“Hades, it’s been a while.” The man’s voice was a deep, lazy drawl.

“It has. You’re still alive, I see.”

“Much to numerous people’s disappointment.”

The man stepped forward, and Gabbi’s eyes widened.

He was hard to look away from.

He was tall, muscular, with dirty-blond hair pulled back in a short ponytail. His face was aggressively masculine, a hint of a smile flashing on his lips, generous stubble covering his jaw.

Matteo made her think of dark, sexy nights, and silk sheets. This man made her think of a hot, sweaty quickie against the wall.

Matteo suddenly slid an arm across her shoulders, pulling her to his side.

The newcomer’s lips twitched. “Well, let’s see if we can keep you two alive.” He pointed out back. “My ride’s this way. I’ll drop you at a safe house. Killian said you’ve got a jet picking you up in the morning.”

God, Matteo would be gone in the morning. It was like a fist to her belly.

“What about me?” she asked.

Matteo’s arm tightened. “You’re coming with me.”

Her brain lurched to a stop. “What?”

“It’s too dangerous for you to stay here. These people know who you are, and where you live. Your brother’s

probably told them everything about you. You're coming to New York with me."

A warmth spread through her, but she wrestled it back. "I can't leave. God knows what state my house is in."

"I'll have someone secure it for you," the pony-tailed hottie said. "And I'll let your employer know that you need some time off."

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"You can call me Cain. And the same employer who signs your paycheck signs mine."

Gabbi blinked. "You're CIA?"

He inclined his head.

"I've never heard of you. Is Cain your first or last name?"

"Most people haven't heard of me. I prefer it that way." His sexy smile widened. It was devastating, and he likely knew it. "Some people know me as Shade."

Gabbi froze.

He flashed her another smile, then opened the back door and stepped outside. "Let's move. Hades' shirt is going from white to red."

Matteo pressed a hand to her lower back.

"He's dangerous," she whispered.

"Very. But not to us."

Shade was a bogeyman whispered about in the CIA corridors.

Killian Hawke had been a brilliant spy. Dangerous and frighteningly good at his job.

Shade...well, no one knew much about him at all. She'd heard that he'd pop up out of nowhere on missions, help out, then disappear. She'd also heard that bad guys would turn up dead, and Shade's name would be whispered in connection.

Gabbi suspected her friend Devyn knew Shade, but the woman refused to answer any questions about the spy. Or



assassin. Or whatever the hell he was.

Now Gabbi was getting into a car with him.

She found a black Mercedes GLC SUV sitting outside, the engine running.

“It’s going to be okay, *cara*. I promise Shade is one of the good guys.” Matteo helped her into the back seat. There was an alarming amount of blood on his shirt.

For now, the focus was on getting Matteo’s wound treated.

In the front seat Shade, Cain—calling him Cain made him seem less intimidating—got behind the wheel.

“You know who’s behind this?” Cain asked as he drove off.

“Not yet,” Matteo replied.

The spy nodded. “I’ll drop you at the CIA safe house near Ronald Reagan Airport. Someone will pick you up in the morning to take you to the jet.”

“Thanks,” Matteo said. “I owe you.”

“No, Killian owes me.” There was amusement in the man’s voice. “And he hates that.”

Washington was a blur outside. They crossed the river, then Gabbi saw they were pulling into a marina on the water’s edge. Cain brought them to a stop.

“The safe house is a boat?” she asked.

“Actually, it’s a sexy, thirty-seven-foot cabin cruiser. The galley’s fully stocked.” Cain glanced at Matteo as he slid out of the SUV. “And there are medical supplies. Come on, I’ve shut down the CCTV for five minutes.”

He led them through a gate, and down the dock. He stopped at one of the white cruisers that looked like all the rest.

“You stay out of trouble,” Cain said.

“Thanks again,” Matteo said, shaking the spy’s hand.

“Any time.” Cain grabbed Gabbi’s hand next. “If you need any help, I’m all yours. We are colleagues, after all.”

His hand was hot, like he radiated extra heat and energy. He gave her a wink.

“Um—”

“Goodbye, Shade,” Matteo snapped, tugging her onto the boat.

With a chuckle, the CIA agent disappeared into the darkness like he hadn’t even been there at all.

Matteo led her down into the cabin and flicked on some lights.

The interior was filled with blonde wood and cream leather. A neat, compact living area with a kitchenette led to the door of the stateroom.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“No. It’s the middle of the night.” It was funny that she wasn’t even embarrassed about only being in her nightgown anymore. She touched his side, and he groaned.

Gabbi straightened. “Sit. I’ll find a first aid kit.”

When he grunted and sat on the in-built seat that curved around a small table, she felt a blip of worry.

She opened and closed cabinet doors until she finally spied a large red box with a white cross on it. *A-ha*.

When she turned back, Matteo was taking off his now-unbuttoned shirt.

Her fingers clenched on the handle of the box. She tried hard not to stare. Really hard. Okay, not that hard.

But really, she didn’t think there was a woman on the planet who wouldn’t stare at this man’s chest.

His skin was bronze, and taut over his hard, lean muscles. Her gaze traced from his shoulders to the higher planes of his ridged stomach. She swallowed, a bunch of words floating

through her head: muscular, hard, athletic, hot, handsome, perfect.

And covered in blood.

Shaking her head, Gabbi called herself a few names and opened the first aid kit. She pulled out gauze, antiseptic, and a few other things.

Then she knelt by Matteo and pulled the blood-soaked wad of her ripped nightgown away.

She tipped some antiseptic onto the gauze and started wiping.

He stiffened but didn't make a sound. As she wiped the blood away, she noted a few old scars. She swallowed. What had he survived? She shifted, her shoulder bumping his thigh. Suddenly she realized she was kneeling between his legs, and her belly flip-flopped.

*Jeez, Gab, the man is hurt.*

She cleaned up the wound and released a breath. "I'm not an expert on cuts, but this doesn't look too deep."

"It'll be fine. Bandage it up."

First, she got a clean cloth and finished wiping off all the blood. Then she washed her hands in the small galley sink.

Next, she found a bandage, knelt back down, then pressed it gently over his skin.

"Thanks, Gabriella."

At the deep murmur, she looked up. Her hands went still on his warm skin. His eyes made her think of melted chocolate. She stroked the skin beside the bandage.

A lazy heat curled through her. Who was she kidding? There was nothing lazy about it. Anytime she looked at this man, it fried all her circuits.

She stroked a hand across his abs, heard him suck in a breath.

She felt hot. So, so hot, when just moments ago she'd been chilled.

She saw something in his gaze—was it desire? She really couldn't tell.

All she knew was that she was drawn to him, and it was hard to get control of it. She moved her hand, her fingers trailing over the taut skin of his abdomen.

Then his hand caught her wrist. "Gabbi."

Not Gabriella this time. And she couldn't mistake the regret in his voice.

Oh. *God.*

She looked up. His handsome face was blank—no desire, no need.

The warmth in her belly turned to curdled knots.

*Stupid, Gabbi.*

*He's hurt, and you're stroking him like a desperate, under-sexed housewife.*

He'd probably never expected to see her again after the elevator, and now he was stuck with her.

A man like Matteo Mancini would never lust after her.

She shot to her feet.

"Sorry. Um, I'm going to...shower. Find some clothes." She stumbled backward.

"Gabbi—"

"No, it's fine. I'm sorry." Now she was freezing cold. "I just need—"

*For a large chasm to open up so I can toss myself in it.*

Even with her gaze on the floor, she saw him rise. "Gabbi, I—"

"I need to clean up. And sleep. Some sleep would be good."

She raced into the small bedroom at the front of the boat. No, what did they call it? Stateroom.

She slammed the door closed, then she sagged against it. *Idiot*. She closed her eyes for a second.

Then she did what she always did, she pulled herself together.

She knew better than anyone you didn't always get what you wanted.

Hell, mostly she never got what she wanted.

Like her safe, quiet Friday-night bubble bath, and definitely not hot Italian sex gods. Not for a woman like her.

Matteo Mancini was not a part of her plan.

She headed into the tiny bathroom. Now she'd try and salvage some pride and get out of Matteo's hair as soon as she could.

---

AS THE SENTINEL Security jet descended into Teterboro Airport, Matteo scowled out the window.

Gabbi was asleep in the spacious seat beside him. He couldn't blame her for falling asleep as soon as the jet took off from D.C. It'd been a hell of a night.

At some stage, her head had slipped off the headrest and was now resting on his shoulder. He resisted the urge to stroke her hair.

She'd left it out and it was so silky. His scowl deepened.

She'd managed to avoid him last night on the boat. After she'd showered, he'd given her some time. When he'd gone in, she'd been curled on the stateroom bed, asleep.

Then only a few hours later, when a young, overeager CIA agent had come to take them to the airport, she'd managed to avoid him then, too. She hadn't made eye contact, and just sort of looked through him.

His hand curled into a fist.

After the night they'd had, when she'd touched him on the boat, he'd been close to fucking losing it.

She'd knelt there, disheveled in her torn, stained nightgown, wiping up his blood. Her whole life had blown up in her face.

He'd been mad. Was still mad that his shit had leaked into this sweet, smart woman's life.

It was why he'd always avoided relationships. It sounded like Gabbi had worked hard to avoid her shit family and get where she was. And what had Matteo done? Brought shit from his life into hers.

He'd also been turned on, so tempted. Gabbi, kneeling at his feet, touching him...

Yeah, he had been close to throwing her on the floor and burying himself inside her. He still remembered the sweet, sweet sounds she'd made when she came in the elevator.

His cock twitched and he gritted his teeth. After a rough night, being shot at, attacked in her own home, and fucking betrayed by her brother, Gabbi deserved better than a quick, rough fuck on the floor of a boat.

But he'd barely said anything when she'd sprung up like a startled cat.

No, a hurt one.

He didn't know what was going on in her head, but he'd find out. Once he had her safe.

He looked down at her and fingered a strand of her hair. So soft.

Her blue-gray eyes opened, a little sleepy and unfocused. Then that sharp intelligence snapped back into place.

She jerked upright in her seat. "Sorry."

"I don't mind being your pillow."

That got him a grimace-like smile. She glued her gaze to the window. “We’re landing?”

“Yes. A Sentinel Security car will meet us and take us back to the warehouse.”

“Matteo, I can easily go and disappear. I’ll lay low until —”

“No.” He gripped her knee. She’d found some clean, gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt in the stash on the boat. They swamped her, making her look like some high school girl dressing up in her boyfriend’s clothes.

The thought of her out there, alone, where he couldn’t keep track of her made his gut churn.

“The Sentinel Security warehouse is secure. You’ll be safe there.”

She nodded, still not looking at him.

He squeezed her knee. “Gabbi—”

The pilot’s voice came over the speaker. “Buckle up, folks. We’ll be landing shortly.”

Annoyed at the interruption, Matteo fastened his belt.

Soon, they landed, and he ushered Gabbi down the stairs.

A big, black Dodge Ram was waiting for them, with a tall, russet-haired man standing beside it. The man’s shoulders were doing their best to bust out of his suit jacket.

“Bram,” Matteo said.

“Hades. Trust you to find trouble.” The man’s green eyes flicked to Gabbi. “And to bring a woman home.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” Gabbi said hurriedly. “I just got caught in the crossfire.”

Matteo wrestled back his annoyance. “Gabbi Hansley, Bram ‘Excalibur’ O’Donovan.”

Bram nodded. “Glad you’re okay. Let’s get you guys secured.”

Gabbi sat in the backseat of Bram's huge truck. Matteo took the passenger seat up front.

"Did Hex uncover more on these guys who attacked us?" Matteo asked.

Bram shook his head, maneuvering out of the airport. "Not yet. She's been working all night. Maybe these guys just didn't like your pretty face."

Matteo shot his friend the finger. Bram's lips quirked.

Matteo glanced into the rearview mirror. Gabbi looked tired, and he knew she needed some more sleep.

A picture of her sprawled in his bed popped into his head. He shifted in his seat. He liked it, and that was weird. He didn't bring hook ups back to his apartment at Sentinel Security because it was his private domain. A safe place where he could shed all his personas and just be himself. Working DIA, going undercover, he'd pretended to be a lot of shitty people, and done a lot of shitty things.

It was hard to switch off the caution and defenses, even when he was alone.

Soon, they were in the heart of the city, driving through West Chelsea. The Sentinel Security warehouse came into view.

The huge, brick warehouse had been built over a hundred years before and had been an important storage and transfer point for cargo heading in and out of New York. A modern glass and iron addition perched on top of the historic brick structure. All the arched windows flanked by black shutters, dotted the brick façade. The central interior of the building housed a large, green-filled courtyard.

Gabbi leaned forward, taking it all in. He watched her, intrigued, seeing that brain of hers cataloguing everything she saw.

After Bram parked in the underground parking level, Matteo pressed a hand to Gabbi's lower back, leading her to the elevator. She tried to sidestep his touch.



He frowned at her.

The elevator ride was short, and soon they stepped into the Sentinel Security office.

The warehouse was a mix of residential and commercial space. Sentinel Security rented out secure spaces to vetted clients. The upper levels of the security office contained admin staff and security stuff for the main corporate-security and cyber-security wings of the business. This lower level was where Sentinel Security's elite alpha team did their work.

Gabbi remained quiet, absorbing everything around her with interest. There was lots of exposed brick, arches for doorways, and sleek, modern but functional furniture.

They headed for the command center.

Hex, tech wizard and hacker extraordinaire, was sprawled in her huge chair in front of a large, interactive computer screen filled with data. She was dressed all in black, in trendy cargo pants and a tight tank top. Hadley "Striker" Lockwood was sitting on one of the desks, her long legs crossed. As always, she was dressed stylishly in wide-legged black pants and a green shirt with a deep V neckline. Both women turned their heads when they entered.

"Jesus, you had us worried, Hades." Hex leaped up, raced over, and hugged him. Hadley was one second behind her and gave him a quick hug, as well.

"I'm fine," he told them.

"It was a simple job." Hex put a hand on her hip.

"Hey, it's not my fault a bunch of bad guys shot at me."

He glanced over and saw Gabbi standing to the side, her hands clenched, studying Hex and Hadley.

"Hadley, Hex, this is Gabbi Hansley."

"Hi." Hex pumped Gabbi's hand. "So sorry you got dragged into this."

"Thanks." Gabbi cocked her head. "You look familiar."

"I'm former CIA. My name's actually Jet. Jet Adler."

Gabbi's eyes widened. "You were with the Center for Cyber Intelligence. You're a hacker."

"That's me." Hex grinned and gave a little curtsy.

"It's nice to meet you, Gabbi," Hadley said in her crisp, British accent and offered a slim hand.

Matteo was happy to be home and see his friends, but he was battling the urge to have Gabbi to himself.

To get her to knock off the robot act.

"All in one piece, I see," a deep voice said.

Matteo turned to see Killian in the archway. His boss moved soundlessly. You only heard Steel coming if he wanted you to.

"Back from New Orleans already?" Matteo asked.

"It was just a quick meeting."

Matteo watched Gabbi take in the head of Sentinel Security, her eyes widening. Matteo shifted closer to her and pressed a hand to her shoulder. "Gabbi, this is Killian Hawke."

"Steel," she murmured.

Killian inclined his head. "I'm sorry to hear you got caught up in this mess. I assure you, Matteo and all of Sentinel Security will keep you safe."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Wow.

Gabbi blinked a few times, trying to get her brain cells to come out of stasis.

Killian Hawke was the kind of man who made an impression.

He was handsome, in a sharp, scary kind of way. He had a fit, muscular frame, and his dark eyes felt like a laser—focused and cutting.

If even half the stories she'd heard about this man were true...

She hadn't realized he was also so brain-meltingly attractive.

Her friend Devyn had left a few salient details out whenever she ranted about clashing with Killian "Steel" Hawke.

"Thank you," Gabbi murmured. "I'm sorry my presence complicates things."

Poor Matteo. He was saddled with the woman he never expected to see again.

Strong fingers pressed into her back, and, without thinking, she looked up.

Matteo was scowling at her.

She looked away. He must be annoyed to have to deal with her. She straightened. This wasn't her fault.

“Hex,” Killian said. “Any more intel on the men who attacked Matteo and Gabbi.”

The hacker blew out a breath, ruffling her pink-tipped dark hair. Gabbi loved the woman’s funky ‘do. Never in a million years could she pull that off.

“Not yet,” Hex said. “All I know is what I already told you. They’re Italian. One from Rome, and one from Sicily.” Photos of Bruno and Moretti popped up on the screen.

“If it’s mafia, they’re either the Cosa Nostra, or the Camorro,” Matteo said.

“I can’t find links.” Hex threw a hand up. “If these guys are members of any group, they aren’t overt about it.”

“Someone’s giving the orders.” Matteo scowled at the photos on the screen.

Gabbi steeled herself. “My brother is also involved.”

Everyone’s gazes swung her way.

“Casey’s a low-level drug dealer. Always in trouble.” She swallowed, the hurt from his betrayal still a pain she couldn’t shake. “He called me. Said men had snatched him and were going to kill him.” She clenched her hands together. “He sold me out. They wanted to lure me and Matteo there.”

A strong hand gripped the back of her neck and squeezed. She looked up at Matteo.

“What an asshole,” Hex snapped. “I’m so sorry, Gabbi.”

She glanced back at them all and saw them looking at her with sympathy.

Where were the accusations? The anger that she’d almost gotten Matteo killed?

“You know who your brother works for?” Killian asked.

Gabbi shook her head.

“Another piece of the puzzle for me to find.” Hex tapped on her tablet.

The other woman, Hadley, stepped forward.

She was so beautiful and elegant, wearing stylish, black pants and a pale-green shirt. Gabbi felt incredibly dowdy in her borrowed sweats.

“It’s a lot of trouble and expense to send a team all the way here to target Matteo.” Her British accent was cultured and educated. “Someone is highly motivated.”

A cold shiver slid down Gabbi’s back. Matteo was in someone’s crosshairs. Her belly tightened.

The man was highly trained. He’d be fine.

“Keep searching, Hex,” Killian ordered.

“I’ve already spoken with my Interpol contacts,” Matteo said. “They didn’t have anything useful. I’m waiting to hear back from some friends at the DIA.”

Hadley swiveled, her blue gaze skimming over Gabbi.

Gabbi fought the urge not to shrivel.

“Gabbi, you must be dying for a hot shower and a change of clothes,” Hadley finally said.

With a small laugh, Gabbi plucked at her sweater. “I don’t know, sweatsuit chic might catch on.”

Hadley smiled, and Hex laughed.

Hadley nodded. “We’ll organize you a place to stay in the building—”

“She’s staying with me,” Matteo announced.

Gabbi saw the women freeze for a second. Hex blinked, then a huge smile broke out on her face. Hadley’s lips twitched.

“You got it, Hades,” Hadley said. “Come on, Gabbi.” She grabbed Gabbi’s hand. “I’ll get you settled in Hades’ apartment, then I’ll go and get you some clothes.”

The woman was stronger than she looked. She towed Gabbi out of the command center.

They continued through the office, and Hadley pulled her to a stop in front of the elevator and pressed a palm to a reader.

Sentinel Security sure had top-notch security.

“So, you’re British?” Gabbi mentally slapped herself. *Start with the blindingly obvious, Gab. Well done.*

Hadley smiled. “Yes, I was with MI6 for years before I decided it was time for something new.” The doors opened and she waved Gabbi into the elevator. “Killian made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.” She pressed a button. “I love it here. We have a great team, interesting work, and there are fewer people trying to kill me. Generally.”

“You don’t miss the UK?”

“I love London, but I hate the weather. I can always visit.”

The elevator slowed and Gabbi’s eyes winged up. “Matteo lives in the Sentinel Security warehouse?”

“We all do. One of our job perks is free rent.” Hadley stalked down the hall. She was so elegant, but her heels made Gabbi wince. She could never wear them without risking a massive stumble. And Hadley’s cheekbones... Gabbi would sell state secrets for them.

The woman stopped at a door and tapped in a code on the pinpad lock. “My place is down the hall, this is Matteo’s.”

Gabbi stepped inside, drawing in a breath. The warehouse apartment was stunning with lots of exposed brick, a polished-concrete floor, and black accents. The kitchen cabinets and island were matte black, and a huge television rested in front of a comfy, brown leather couch. There was a terrace outside, and a view of the water.

“This is great,” she said.

“The layouts are similar, but we decorated them ourselves.” The woman’s lips tilted. “This one says ‘sexy man.’”

Gabbi’s head jerked up.

“I’m interested to know what’s going on with you and Hades,” Hadley said.

“Nothing. I only met him last night.” A sour feeling filled Gabbi’s gut. “Are you...interested in him?”

Hadley’s ice-blue eyes widened. “No. *No*. We’re colleagues and friends. To be honest, all of us on Killian’s alpha team are family.”

“Alpha team?”

“We take care of the more...complicated cases. Only one of us is loved up. Wolf. Nick Garrick. He has a few days off. He and his girlfriend, Lainie, are moving into a larger apartment a few levels up. She had some trouble recently, and Wolf was all-in to keep her safe.” Hadley cocked her head. “So there’s nothing between you and Matteo?”

Gabbi laughed. “No. Have you seen him?”

Hadley frowned in confusion.

Gabbi threw her hands in the air. “He’s gorgeous. Handsome, built, charming, and...” She waved a hand, running out of words.

“Sexy?” Hadley suggested.

“Yes. So sexy. And I’m... Me. Very unremarkable Gabbi Hansley. Boring and predictable. I hardly think the dashing security agent would look twice at me. He must have women tripping over themselves to get to him.”

“He doesn’t lack for company when he wants it.”

*Oh*. Gabbi didn’t like hearing that. “See?”

“I might be starting to see.” There was a curious undertone to the other woman’s voice.

The apartment door opened, and Hex bustled in. “You get anything good out of her?”

“I’m working on it,” Hadley replied.

“So, you and Hades aren’t a thing?” Hex’s eyes were bright.

Gabbi suddenly realized the hacker had one blue eye and one green. “No. Definitely not.”

“She thinks she’s boring and unremarkable, and Hades is the adventurous, handsome agent.”

Hex blinked. “So, he hasn’t made a move?”

Gabbi shifted. “Not really.”

Both women’s gazes sharpened.

“Not really?” Hex repeated.

“Have you kissed?” Hadley prompted. “Has he taken your clothes off?”

This felt like an interrogation. Gabbi blushed, thinking of the elevator. “Not really.”

“These are yes or no questions, Gabbi.” Hex looked amused.

“Leave her alone,” Hadley said. “Gabbi, I’ll rustle up some of my clothes for you to wear for now, then I’ll go shopping.” The woman’s gaze sized up Gabbi, and she felt like she was being dissected.

“Really, it’s not necessary to—”

“You have nothing. A girl needs some essentials. Besides, I’m very good at shopping.”

“She is,” Hex said. “Scary good.”

“This way.” Hadley led Gabbi down the hallway and into a large bedroom.

Gabbi pulled in Matteo’s scent with a small sigh. There was a big bed, with a modern iron headboard. Unmade, slate-gray sheets were rumped on top. The bed was set against an exposed-brick wall.

She stumbled to a halt. This was Matteo’s bedroom. He slept here.

“Isn’t there a guest room?” she asked.

“Matteo’s place is one bedroom.” Hadley sounded almost gleeful. “Wait until you see the bathroom.”

“He was very insistent about wanting you here.” Hex leaned against the doorway.



The bathroom was dark, moody-gray marble with touches of brass. The rainfall-style showerhead above the large, glass-walled stall was enormous.

Hadley reached in and turned on the water. “Which is interesting.”

Gabbi pulled herself out of the daydream of imagining Matteo naked under that showerhead. “Why?”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

“Because he’s never let a woman in here, apart from us,” Hex said.

“Ever,” Hadley added, with a small smile.

Gabbi’s chest tightened. What the hell did that mean?

Nothing. It had to mean nothing.

“He just feels responsible for me.”

Hadley made a humming noise. “Right. I’ll sort out some clothes.”

“I’d better get back to finding the bad guys.” Hex pulled a face. “They’re being very elusive.”

Gabbi watched the women head out, leaving her alone in Matteo’s fancy bathroom, feeling like she was just sucked into a tornado.

---

MATTEO LET OUT a growl of frustration. He shoved his desk chair back and stood.

He had nothing.

He had the names of his and Gabbi’s attackers, or rather names on their passports, which were definitely fake.

He strode across the office, hands on his hips.

He’d sent emails to his contacts. His friends at Interpol and the DIA were looking at the pictures of the men, to see if they could identify them.

Someone was definitely gunning for Matteo, but he had no interest in being shot down.

He'd used the office shower and changed his clothes. His hair was still damp.

His laptop chimed with an incoming message. He saw the unobtrusive, generic name. Hex had made sure it was untraceable.

*I heard you were in an incident. Okay?*

Matteo shook his head and replied.

*Your sources are impressive as always. I'm fine.*

*Good.*

He smiled. He could almost hear her voice.

*Ti amo.*

He typed back, throat tight.

*Ti amo.*

There was movement in the doorway, and Gabbi appeared. He closed the window on the screen.

She was wearing fitted jeans and a raspberry-red sweater that draped over her breasts. *Merda.*

“How are you feeling?” He circled the desk.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Fine. A little tired.”

He wanted to touch her, but he wasn't sure she'd welcome it. “Coffee?”

Her blue-gray eyes lit up. “Yes, please.”

He chuckled, then saw her gaze drop to his mouth. Then she shook her head and stepped back.

“I love your office. It beats my boring, gray box at Langley any day.”

“Gabbi—”

“I'm really sorry, Matteo. Sorry about everything.”

He frowned. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“You’re stuck babysitting me. It’s awkward. After the elevator...”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her toward him.

Her eyes were wide.

“I’m not feeling awkward.”

Color filled her cheeks. “The boat—”

“On the boat, you were tired and shaken. And I was concerned for your safety.”

“Oh.” Her brow creased.

God, so many emotions ran over her pretty face. He was pretty sure Gabbi Hansley couldn’t tell a lie.

“Come on.” He threaded his fingers through hers. “Let’s get some coffee.”

He pulled her toward the small kitchen. There were some tables and chairs, and a green wall filled with lush plants.

He saw her looking at their joined hands.

“What?” He couldn’t quite read the look on her face.

“No one’s ever held my hand before.”

Matteo stilled. “What? Ever?”

The blush was back. “My family are not...they’re not really touchy-feely.”

“And boyfriends?”

“Um, no...”

He brought their joined hands up to his mouth. He kissed her knuckles, and she sucked in a breath.

“I like that,” he murmured.

“Like what?”

“Knowing I’m the first.”

She just stared at him. He had a feeling Gabbi hadn’t experienced so much that she deserved.

And he'd very much like to show her more pleasures, large and small.

He stepped up to the coffee machine and tried to get his unruly cock under control. He showed her how to use the space-age appliance. "What would you like?"

"A mocha, please."

"You like it sweet." He set the machine whirring.

"Who doesn't like chocolate?"

Handing her the coffee, he watched her take a sip. She closed her eyes and moaned.

His subsiding cock surged to life again. That sound.

He wanted her to make that sound for him.

He wanted her.

Matteo let the thought turn around inside him. Women came and went. He liked to keep things fun and light.

But he wanted more than just fun with this woman.

He made himself turn to the machine and make an espresso. He sipped it.

"Ah, coffee the Italian way." She smiled.

"The *only* way." He turned back to her. "Is there anyone you need to call? About your absence? People who'll worry?"

Her fingers clenched on her coffee mug, and she looked away. "No. My friend Devyn is CIA as well. She's out of the country at the moment. I'll touch base with my boss later."

Matteo's jaw tightened. No family member that she'd call. He'd like a word with her unworthy family. "Come on."

He led her to the command center. They found Hex scowling at the huge screen.

The woman spun. "Did your contacts give you anything?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. You?"

"No." Hex let out a big huff. "I'm pulling any data I can on your attackers. Where they stayed, ate, the things they

bought..." She looked at Gabbi. "Gabbi, red is your color."

"Oh. Thanks." Gabbi plucked at the sweater. "I don't wear a lot of bright colors." Her gaze moved to the screen. "These guys are using credit cards?"

"Yeah. But the cards are new and registered to dummy companies."

Gabbi set her coffee on the desk and walked over to the large screen.

Matteo crossed his arms and leaned against the long table that sat in the middle of the room. He saw the look of concentration flow over her face.

"Can you track the banks and untangle the businesses?" she asked.

"Maybe?" Hex tapped on her tablet. "It'll take time. You're thinking to follow the money?"

"You always follow the money," Gabbi said.

"Unfortunately, criminals are good at hiding things."

"They always leave business fingerprints."

Matteo and Hex looked at her.

Gabbi shrugged a shoulder. "I'm a business analytics officer at the CIA. This is my thing." She turned back to the screen. "Let's see what we can do."

Matteo watched the women work. Hex explained how to use the interactive screen, and soon Gabbi was lost in her work, fingers dancing, running searches.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. Here she was all confidence, running searches and digging into information. Once she got going, even Hex had trouble keeping up with her.

He felt a little aroused just watching Gabbi work.

He discovered when she was deep in thought, she nibbled her bottom lip. It was sexy as hell.

"Here." Gabbi stabbed a finger at the screen.

"What?" Hex asked with a frown.

Matteo wandered over, standing close to Gabbi. His shoulder brushed hers and she jolted. Like she was only just remembering he was still in the room.

“What did you find?” he asked.

Her gaze fell to his mouth.

He fought back desire-laced amusement. “Gabbi?”

“Oh. I tracked a card to a bank in New York. Atlantic Savings. The account was opened by a dry-cleaning business in Brooklyn. I’m pretty sure our guys don’t clean clothes.”

“Brooklyn?” Matteo said.

Gabbi tapped, and a map appeared. A red dot glowed brightly.

“Oh, hell.” Hex stared at the screen.

“What?” Gabbi frowned.

“It’s in Giorgio’s territory,” Hex muttered.

Gabbi raised a brow. “Giorgio?”

“Giorgio Ambrosino,” Matteo said. “He runs the main mafia businesses in Brooklyn.”

“Does he have links to Italy?” Gabbi asked.

“Loose ones. He’s...an ally of Sentinel Security, of sorts.”

Hex snorted. “He is not. He’s just afraid of Killian, so he does us the occasional favor.”

“Well, he’s going to answer my questions.” Matteo crossed his arms. Giorgio was usually at his club in the evenings. “I’ll go and see him at Envy.”

“Envy?” Gabbi turned.

“It’s an expensive club.” It was Hadley who answered, as she strode in. “Part old-boys club, part strip club, part nightclub. The old men all like to smoke cigars, drink, and fondle young women.” Hadley’s hands were filled with shopping bags.

“The nightclub is popular for its cocktails and dancing,” Hex said.

“I’ll pay Giorgio a visit,” Matteo said.

“Wait.” Gabbi straightened, her gaze boring a hole in the screen. “I’m coming.”

Matteo scowled. “No.”

She cocked her head. “Did I miss the memo about you being in charge of me?”

Hex and Hadley did a poor job of hiding their grins.

Matteo put his hands on his hips and stepped closer. “No, but I’m keeping you safe. Remember, you have bad guys after you?”

“They’re after you, too.”

“They won’t see me.”

“Then they won’t see me, either. I know all this information.” She waved at the financial data on the screen. “And I want this situation resolved. The sooner we find these people, the sooner we’re safe, and the sooner I can get back to my life.”

He made a frustrated sound.

“I’m not some useless damsel, Matteo. I work for the CIA.”

He released out a sharp breath.

“And while I accidentally got dragged into this, my brother painted a target on me. I want these people stopped.”

“I’ll make sure no one recognizes her,” Hadley said. “And that she’s dressed for Envy.” The woman rustled one of the bags. “I have just the thing.” She eyed Gabbi.

Gabbi lifted that stubborn chin.

*Merda.* Damned if he didn’t find that sexy, too.

“Fine. But you stay by my side the entire time.” His gut hardened. He hated the idea of taking her into Envy. “You follow my lead.”

“Sure.”

Matteo was pretty sure he was going to regret this.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Hadley made a sound. “It’s an excellent idea, Gabbi. That gold color is perfect for you.”

Gabbi liked the color of the gold-sequined dress, it was the length and plunging *V* neckline that made her twitchy.

She stood in front of the mirror in Hadley’s apartment.

It was a similar layout to Matteo’s but managed to look totally different. It oozed classy femininity, with softer whites and grays, and touches of pink and blue in the accessories.

The dress Gabbi wore ended at midhigh. As she shifted, the light glinted off the sequins. It had long sleeves at least, which offset the neckline that plunged low. Really low.

“It’s not really me.”

Hadley stepped up behind her, fiddling with Gabbi’s hair. She was wearing a black wig in a blunt, bob-style cut. It was sexy.

“Let me guess, what’s you is a safe little black dress that hits at mid-calf.”

Gabbi resisted the urge to hunch her shoulders. “Maybe. I’m definitely not gold minidress.”

“How do you know?” Hadley met her gaze in the mirror, challenge in them.

“I was always the smart girl from the poor side of town, Hadley. I wasn’t the pretty girl. I wasn’t the rich girl. I wasn’t

the stylish girl. I was smart, sensible, and desperate. That's what got me where I am."

Hadley's face turned serious. "Someone did a number on you. Bad ex?"

"No, I—" Her cellphone rang. "Excuse me."

Her mother's name appeared on the screen, and she hesitated. Maybe they'd been worried about her.

"Hi, Mom."

"Why haven't you answered your phone, you stupid idiot? Your brother got picked up by the cops again. Someone beat him up bad. You have to get him out. Send me some money —"

A headache sprang to life. Gabbi pressed a finger to her temple. "I've been busy, Mom." Running for my life.

"So fucking selfish. You always thought you were better than everyone. You're trash, girl, just like the rest of us. You can get a fancy job, and a fancy house, but it doesn't change anything."

"I know. I'm busy, Mom. And Casey made his bed. He... did something unforgiveable to me. I'm done with him. There's nothing I can or want to do." She ended the call, pressed her palm to her forehead for a second, then pasted on a fake smile. "Where were we?"

Hadley stared at her for a beat. "Not an ex, then." She straightened. "Let me touch up your makeup and find you some shoes."

"If you give me stilettos, Hadley, I'll be on crutches before the night's over."

The woman flashed a smile. "I've got just the thing."

The thing turned out to be gold heels, but the heel wasn't too high, and it was wide, so she didn't feel like she was balanced on a needle.

She wouldn't be running in them, but at least her ankles weren't in danger of being broken.

Hadley turned her to face the floor-length mirror again.

Oh...*oh*.

The woman in the mirror looked hot.

“You’re gorgeous,” Hadley said. “The gold is perfect, and you have fabulous legs. You need vibrant colors.”

Gabbi reached up and touched the neckline.

“It’s lucky you aren’t too large in the chest, so you can pull this neckline off.” Hadley smoothed some of Gabbi’s wig. “You’ll knock his socks off.

Gabbi whipped her gaze up to meet Hadley’s. “Who?”

The Sentinel Security woman tipped her head to the side, a little smile playing on her lips.

“You know who. The hot-as-sin Italian.”

Gabbi swallowed. “There’s nothing between us. We barely know each other.”

“He’s awfully protective of you.”

“He seems like a protective kind of guy.”

“I’ve never seen him like that with anyone.”

Gabbi’s heart did a flip, or a flop. She ignored it. “Look, I have a life plan. Good job, nice house, stable life.”

“That sounds...”

“Boring. I know. After nearly getting gunned down, I’m going to start living a little more. Travel. Eat out more. Go places. But nowhere in my plan is a man like Matteo Mancini.”

Hadley just smiled. “Come on, we’d better get back downstairs.”

They headed down to the Sentinel Security office, and Gabbi’s heels clicked as she followed Hadley. She was grateful the heels were surprisingly easy to walk in.

She’d spoken with her boss earlier and given him a rundown on her situation. Cain had already shared most of the

details. Her boss had told her to stay safe, and that she'd been reassigned to assist Sentinel Security in any way they needed.

So, for now, she was on loan to Sentinel Security.

Killian and Matteo were in the command center with Hex. Another man was with them. He wore suit trousers with a white shirt that had the sleeves rolled up, showing muscular forearms. His hair was a deep brown, and he had a neatly trimmed beard.

Another rugged hottie. She wondered if it was a requirement to get a job at Sentinel Security.

The bearded man saw them first, and his eyes widened.

Then Matteo's head lifted. He froze.

"She's ready," Hadley announced.

Matteo just stared at Gabbi, and she fought the urge to fidget. Then his gaze slid to Hadley.

"Really?" he said.

"She needed to look the part for Envy. Now she does."

Gabbi ran her hands down the dress. Damn, it was really short. "I look okay?"

"Fine." There was a snap in Matteo's voice. He grabbed his jacket and slid into it.

"Gabbi," Killian said. "This is my second-in-command, Nick 'Wolf' Garrick. He has a few days off right now, but dropped by to check in."

The bearded man nodded. "Hi, Gabbi."

"Hello."

"You look hot." Nick looked like he was hiding a smile.

She flushed. "Oh, thanks."

Matteo growled.

He'd changed into a dark-gray shirt with his dark suit. He looked a little dangerous.

"Let's go," he said.

She felt a little disappointment at his lackluster reaction but waved to the others. She caught Hadley shooting an annoyed look at the ceiling.

Matteo led her to the parking level, then to a sporty, sexy-shaped car in black. She glanced at the trident logo. A Maserati. Of course, he'd drive something Italian.

"Is this your car?" she asked.

"Yes." He opened the door for her. "I like to go fast and do it in style."

The leather was smooth and soft. The interior smelled like expensive car, mingled with Matteo's cologne.

He didn't say much as they headed to Brooklyn.

"We'll meet Giorgio. He usually presides over things in Envy, surrounded by his enforcers. Stay close to me."

"And look pretty?"

He glanced her way. "Yes. And use that observant brain of yours."

She pulled in a deep breath. "Once again, I'm sorry you're stuck with me."

He blew out a breath. "I'm not."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"I have a temper, Gabbi. Since I stopped undercover work, I let it loose more than I should."

She fidgeted. "That's good. It's better not to bottle things up."

He looked at her. "Is that what you do?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm a master at it. I had to be. I learned as a child. Crying and yelling only ever got me a slap. It was best not to show embarrassment or disappointment. That earned sympathetic or pitying looks from strangers." She'd hated that. "Or my family would use it against me."

Why was she talking about this?

She heard him curse. Then she saw what had to be the club, ahead.

Envy didn't stick out much. It was an ordinary building, but it had a discreet, glowing-red sign above the door, and two burly bouncers who gave it away.

Matteo parked the Maserati right out front. He stalked around the car and helped her out.

She rose and set her shoulders back. Devyn described undercover work as stepping into a different skin. Like an actor. You let it slide over you.

Gabbi pinned what she hoped was a flirty, enigmatic smile on her face and walked with Matteo toward the door. The bouncers' gazes sharpened on her, or rather, her legs.

Matteo frowned and took her hand.

"Tell Giorgio that Hades is here to see him."

Something flashed on the big bouncers' faces. One turned away to talk on a radio.

The other waved them inside.

The décor was black, with red accents. Huge, gold-framed paintings of embracing couples graced the walls.

Music was thumping, and they followed the sound of it. He led her through some large doors, and beyond, lay the large dance floor.

It sat in the center of the room with a vast, vaulted ceiling overhead. Tables and chairs were tucked into the shadows at the end of the room.

A waitress sauntered past with a tray of drinks. She wore a very short skirt, and a wisp of red satin for a top.

Men in suits sat on the chairs. As Gabbi watched, one man patted the thigh of a woman sitting on the arm of his chair. His hand disappeared under the skirt of her short dress.

"Hades!"

A younger man in a pinstriped suit appeared, clearly Italian-American. His dark hair was slicked back, and he probably wished he looked more like Matteo. His nose was a little large, his jaw a little soft.

“Tommy, Giorgio’s son,” Matteo murmured.

She nodded.

“Tommy,” Matteo said to the man.

“Who is this?” Tommy’s gaze ran over her.

“Gabbi.” Matteo slid an arm around her, pulling her to his side.

“Nice. He’ll be ready to see you in a bit. He’s on a call.” His gaze drifted to Gabbi’s legs. “Why don’t I take the lovely Gabbi for a dance while we wait?”

Matteo stiffened. “No.”

Tommy scowled. “You should show some trust, Hades.”

“You don’t tell me what to do.”

She felt the tension rising.

She licked her lips. “It’s fine. I’d like to dance.” She met Matteo’s gaze and gave him a look. *Maybe I can get some intel.*

His hand tightened on her hip. “Don’t go far, *cara*.”

She went up on her toes and kissed the corner of his mouth. “I won’t.”

---

MATTEO SAT in the wingback chair, barely resisting the urge to stride onto the dance floor and rip Tommy away from Gabbi.

They weren’t standing particularly close as they danced, but the asshole had his hands on her, cupping her hips, smiling like he was picturing her naked.

“Hades.”

He turned his head. Giorgio came toward him, flanked by two muscle-bound bodyguards.

Matteo rose. “Giorgio.”

He looked like everyone’s favorite, prosperous uncle. On the shorter side, carrying extra weight around his middle that his designer suit couldn’t hide. His hair was flecked with gray, and he had a jovial smile.

Giorgio might be smiling, but he had eyes like a shark—flat, soulless, and calculating.

“Sit, my friend, sit.” Giorgio dropped his bulk into the chair across from Matteo. He waved a waitress over.

“Two 25-year-old Macallans. Straight.”

The young woman nodded, keeping her smile in place, even when Giorgio squeezed her ass.

“So, my friend, what brings you to my establishment?”

Matteo’s gaze shifted back to the dance floor again. Gabbi was moving to the beat. She moved surprisingly well, with natural grace. When she didn’t overthink things, her sensuality came out.

Then Tommy tried to slide closer, and Matteo scowled.

“Your woman?”

His gaze snapped back to Giorgio. He knew he should say “for the night,” that she was temporary entertainment, but those words wouldn’t come.

“Yes, she’s mine.”

“I see the attraction. I usually like a little more flash, but that often equals more headaches.”

“I won’t waste your time, or mine,” Matteo said. Really, he just wanted to get Gabbi out of there. “I was attacked by some people in D.C.”

When the waitress returned, Giorgio accepted his drink and swirled it. “You have enemies, Hades. As does your boss.”



“These men were Italian. Italian passports, but using credit cards attached to one of your businesses here in New York.” Matteo took his own glass, and the waitress gave him a long look and a flirty smile.

“Ah.” Giorgio frowned. “Which business?”

“Clean and Easy Dry Cleaner.”

“Emilio.” Giorgio snapped his fingers.

One of the bodyguards stepped forward. Giorgio barked out some orders for information, and the man ambled off.

“Drink.” Giorgio took a swallow. “You’ll tell Hawke I cooperated.”

“Of course.”

Giorgio looked past Matteo and smiled. “Careful. My son might steal your woman out from under you.”

Matteo turned his head. Tommy had slid an arm around Gabbi, whispering something in her ear. Matteo was about to stand, but Gabbi playfully shoved the man back and said something.

Tommy looked disgruntled but obeyed.

Matteo hid his smile. His *cara* could take care of herself. She was smart and capable. Sure, her inner confidence had been dented by her asshole family, but it was there.

What would it be like to see her shine? To stop holding herself back?

Matteo wanted to see it.

The bodyguard returned and whispered in Giorgio’s ear. The mob boss swirled the amber liquid and looked uncomfortable. “The credit cards were a favor. For a family friend.”

“I need more than that.”

The music changed. Gabbi stopped talking to Tommy and started to dance by herself. Moving to the music.

Matteo's heart squeezed. She was so mesmerizing. The hem of her short dress floated higher.

"I have a nephew," Giorgio said. "Pain in my ass. I was happy when he married into a family in Washington D.C."

Matteo forced his gaze back to the man. "There's mafia in D.C.?"

"There's mafia everywhere. This family, they keep under the radar, considering how many agencies have their home bases in Washington. They own a chain of pizza stores. Full-service." He chuckled. "The customers can order more than just pepperoni. Cocaine. Heroin. Ecstasy. Weed. Whatever your fancy."

*Jesus.*

"They're expanding and have made some overseas connections," Giorgio continued.

"Go on," Matteo prompted.

"With some family in Italy. One that's keen to expand."

"Name."

"I don't know. In D.C. it's the Morello family. I don't have the details of their international friends. But they needed clean credit cards, as their friends were here doing work and wanted to stay invisible. I take it that they haven't if they have your attention."

"No. They didn't stay under the radar when they shot up one of D.C.'s top restaurants to get to me."

Giorgio tsked. "Amateurs. Seems you've made someone very unhappy."

Matteo grunted. "There's always someone who's unhappy. You know what that's like."

Giorgio let out a booming laugh. "I know that very well. You just finish dealing with one, then another one pops up. Before you know, their babies are growing up and holding a grudge as well."

On the dance floor, Matteo watched Tommy trying to get close to Gabbi again.

He was done.

“Thanks for the whisky.” He rose, swiveled, and strode onto the dance floor.

Lights strobed through the shadows.

Gabbi was in her own world, her hips swaying, a shaft of gold in the darkness.

He stalked up behind her and caught Tommy’s eye.

The man frowned, looked like he was going to argue, then sniffed and walked off.

Matteo pressed up against Gabbi. She jolted, and he pressed his mouth to her ear.

“Easy, *cara*.”

She relaxed against him.

He realized at that moment that he had her trust.

A precious thing, a woman’s trust.

Matteo moved to the music. His mother had always had music playing or was always hosting a party when he was younger. He’d grown up dancing.

He slid an arm around Gabbi. She fit back against him so well. As they moved together, her ass pressed against his hardening cock. His groan was drowned by the music.

He pressed a hand over her belly, and she put her hand over his.

They moved together to the beat of the music. It moved through him like a heartbeat.

Matteo slid a hand down her arm to tangle his fingers with hers. He felt her belly hitch under his palm.

Desire was a slow liquid burn in his veins. To Matteo, there was no one in the room but the two of them.

He turned her. Those big, blue-gray eyes met his.

He cupped her face, stroking the line of her jaw. Her lips parted.

*Fuck.* He was so tempted to kiss her. He drew in her scent.

But he couldn't. Not in this place.

He wasn't sure he could stop with just a kiss.

He ran his thumb over her lips. "Gabriella..."

She pressed into him. He lowered his head, their mouths a whisper apart.

"We need to go," he said.

The song changed. The music more upbeat. Gabbi blinked, like she was coming out of a trance.

He stepped back, but he kept her pinned against his side.

She swallowed. "Did you get what you needed?"

He nodded. "Not as much as I wanted, but it's a start."

"Okay. Tommy didn't have anything useful to share either." She went to step back, but Matteo pulled her close again. She rested both hands on his chest.

"You're gorgeous," he murmured.

Her eyes widened.

"I wish we were somewhere else, somewhere safe," he said.

"Matteo, I know I'm not the kind of woman you must spend time with."

"Smart and beautiful?"

Her gaze moved to his mouth.

He groaned. "Gabriella, you shouldn't look at me like that. Not here."

"Okay." A whisper. "You're right."

Keeping her hand tight in his, he headed for the door.

He wanted her out of there. He wanted her all to himself.

## CHAPTER NINE

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**L**eaning back in the seat of the car, Gabbi clenched her hands in the skirt of her dress.

Her pulse was still pounding, her blood still hot.

She glanced at Matteo in the driver's seat. He was sprawled there like a big, dangerous predator.

The purr of the powerful engine vibrated through her, and she tried not to squirm.

Dancing with him... So hot.

Her skin felt hot, her belly felt hot.

On the dance floor, under the strobing lights, he'd made her think of the dark god, Hades. He'd been stalking her, like Persephone. Seducing her.

She looked at his strong jaw, the line of his nose. So damn handsome.

*I want you.*

The voice echoed in her head. She really wanted him to be hers.

She suddenly realized he was frowning, and glancing in the side mirror.

He sped up and took the next corner sharply. She was thrown back in her seat.

“Matteo?”

“Someone's following us,” he said.

She looked in the rearview mirror. “The black Mercedes?”

“That’s it.” He raised his voice. “Call Hex.”

The call connected on the console. “Hey, Hades.” Hex’s voice filled the car. “How did it go?”

“Fine. Gabbi and I have just left Envy, and we have company.”

“I’m pulling up your tracker now.” Hex’s voice sharpened.

Gabbi realized that while Hex could tease and be irreverent, she was damn good at her job when it mattered.

“Black Mercedes,” Matteo said. “C class.”

“I see it. AMG.”

Matteo cursed. “So it’s got power under the hood.”

“Yes,” Hex confirmed.

He changed lanes and took another corner.

Gabbi pulled out her phone. “Hex, do you have a traffic app?”

“Yes. It’s already on your new phone.”

Gabbi paused. “What?”

“I nabbed your phone earlier and installed some extra security and a few other things.”

Shaking her head, Gabbi pulled up the app, tapping at the screen. “Matteo, take the next right. That street is clear of traffic.”

“On it,” he said.

She felt a flush of pleasure. He didn’t hesitate at her suggestion.

“Okay. Take the left turn in two blocks.” She glanced in the side mirror. “They’re still following, but they’ve dropped back.”

Matteo grunted and accelerated.

Gabbi flicked across the map, studying the traffic patterns. They needed to lose these assholes.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You think Giorgio ratted us out?”

“I doubt it, but someone at the club might have.”

A car pulled out of the street in front of them.

Matteo slammed on the brakes, and Gabbi was tossed against her seatbelt. Her phone dropped onto the floor.

The Mercedes closed the gap and sped up beside them, its windows tinted dark.

Then the back window opened, and the barrel of a gun appeared.

“Shooter!” she cried.

Bullets pinged off the car. Matteo hit reverse and they sped backward. More bullets hit their windows, but the glass didn’t break.

Gabbi exhaled sharply. It was bulletproof.

Still, she knew that nothing was one-hundred-percent bulletproof, given enough time and sustained gun fire.

“Hold on,” Matteo barked.

He yanked the wheel, then the car shot forward. They changed lanes and sped past the Mercedes.

She was pressed back into her seat. The street was fairly empty for this time of night, thank God.

Suddenly, Matteo braked hard and set the car into a tight, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn.

Gabbi’s heart leaped into her throat. She gripped the edge of her seat as they spun.

Then they were facing the Mercedes speeding toward them.

*Oh. God.*

They shot forward. She forced herself not to close her eyes. At the last second, Matteo jerked the wheel and went onto the wrong side of the road, speeding around the Mercedes, which slammed on its brakes.

Pulse racing, she hunted around the floor for her phone.

Matteo moved into the correct lane of traffic.

She tried to focus, blowing out a breath. “Take the next left. Then you’ll see an alleyway on the right. If we cut through it, we might lose them.”

Matteo’s teeth flashed as he grinned. “Thanks, *cara*.”

He was enjoying this. Meanwhile, if she thought too hard, she’d panic.

“There’s the alley.” She pointed.

He turned, barely reducing speed.

She winced, waiting for them to scrape against a wall, but he drove them neatly down the narrow alleyway and out the other side.

Back on the street, he turned and blended into the traffic.

“Any sign of them?” he asked.

She turned in her seat, then released a breath. “No. I think we lost them.”

“Thanks to you.”

“You guys okay?” Hex asked. “I see you, no sign of the Mercedes on CCTV.”

“Who are they, Hex?” Matteo asked.

“I ran the plates. The car’s stolen.”

Matteo cursed.

“Get back to base,” Hex said.

“On our way,” he replied.

Gabbi’s pulse was still pounding when they pulled into the garage at the Sentinel Security warehouse.



Matteo parked the car and shut off the engine.

When she climbed out, her legs wobbled a bit. He was running a hand over the damaged side of the car.

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“Nothing that can’t be fixed.” He looked up. “I know a guy.” He grabbed her fingers. “You all right?”

“Um, I’m not sure. I’m a little shaky.”

“Adrenaline rush.”

“Yes.” It fizzed in her blood, and she felt a little wild. She stroked his fingers. “I feel...wired.”

He smiled that sexy smile. “It’ll pass.”

She stepped closer to him. “Will it?”

His gaze latched on to her mouth and he lowered his head. “Yes.”

*Screw it.* She was sick of second-guessing herself and dancing around this attraction. She gripped the lapels of his jacket and yanked him toward her.

Her mouth collided with his.

Her aim was a little off. Her teeth hit his lips. She gave a mental groan. God, she couldn’t even get a kiss right.

She started to pull back. “Sorry. I’m an idiot. Ignore me—”

He yanked her close, and she bumped against his chest. Then he backed her up.

Her pulse went crazy. Her back hit the wall.

“Matteo...?”

“Let’s try that again.”

His mouth took hers.

His tongue stroked past her lips and her brain short-circuited. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed into him, and then melted against his body.

Gabbi kissed him back, instantly starved for a taste of him.

Their tongues tangled, and all she wanted to do was climb that big, perfect, muscular body of his.

He lifted her off her feet and pinned her to the wall.

She clung to him. She needed more. She was desperate for more.

Then he pulled his head back and rested his forehead on hers.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she said.

He made a sound. “I think we should.”

“Matteo—”

His deep brown eyes met hers. “We’re going to be spending time together while we work this case. So, I have a plan for you.”

Gabbi pulled in a steadying breath. Did he know how hard it was to think with his delectable body pressed against hers? “I like plans.”

He smiled. “I know you do. You hadn’t orgasmed with a man before me.”

He sounded awfully smug about that.

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“Let me show you more.”

Her belly clenched, and she felt a pulse between her legs. “What?”

He leaned in and nibbled at her ear. “Let me give you more lessons, Gabriella. Show you all the ways a man can please a woman.”

*Oh. God.* Heat washed over her. Have Matteo as hers, for the next little while before she headed back to her real life.

Have what she was sure would be hot, amazing sex.

She met his gaze. *Do it, Gab.*

Enjoy this gorgeous man for as long as she could. Hoard away the experiences, ones she was sure she’d remember for

the rest of her life.

“Okay,” she whispered.

His smile broke free. “Yes?”

She nodded. “Yes.” God, she hoped she wasn’t making a mistake.

No, she was well aware there wasn’t a forever here. And she didn’t need or believe in love anyway. There was no risk she’d fall for him.

As his head lowered again, her stomach rumbled.

That sexy smile widened, threatening to turn her brain to mush.

“Come on, *cara*.” He set her down. “I’ll feed you. Then later...” His sensual drawl left no doubt as to what later would include.

She clung to his hand; her legs still unsteady. Thankfully, it was a short elevator ride to the Sentinel Security office.

Hex and Killian were waiting for them.

“You both all right?” Hex had worry in her eyes.

Gabbi managed a nod.

Then the hacker’s gaze took in Gabbi’s swollen, lipstick-smudged lips, and Matteo’s tousled hair.

Gabbi didn’t even remember running her hands through the thick strands, but it looked like she had.

Hex’s worry turned to amusement.

“What did Giorgio give you?” Killian asked.

“The credit cards were a favor to the Morello family in D.C.,” Matteo told him.

Killian frowned. “Why would they attack you?”

“We haven’t connected the dots yet, but the Morellos recently made ties with a group in Italy. An alliance for expansion.”

Hex ran a hand through her hair. “I’ll get busy pulling everything on the Morellos.”

“Thanks, Hex. Now—” his fingers curled around Gabbi’s “—I’ve got to feed my woman.”

“I’m not your woman,” she said.

He just smiled at her.

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WITH A FLICK OF HIS WRIST, Matteo stirred the crab, tomatoes, and white wine sauce in the frypan.

Behind him, he heard quiet footsteps.

“The pasta’s almost ready. I poured you a glass of white wine.” He turned.

He felt his chest squeeze.

Gabbi had changed and cleaned her makeup off. He was happy to see her own hair pulled back in a simple ponytail instead of the wig. She wore a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved, black T-shirt that scooped low in front.

He tried to keep his gaze off the swell of her breasts.

“Sit. We’ll eat shortly.”

He turned back to the stove, drained the pasta, and served it up.

“So, you can cook?” she said.

He glanced back at her. “Yeah. I don’t get to do it much, but I like it. One of our housekeepers when I was younger taught me. I was always getting into trouble.” He smiled. “I was a pretty energetic young boy.”

“I bet.”

“Donata took pity on me and kept me busy in the kitchen.”

Gabbi fiddled with the stem of her wine glass. “You had a housekeeper?”

They'd had an entire fleet of staff. "My family is well off."

She cocked her head. "Are you close?"

"No." His throat tightened. "They weren't thrilled when I joined the police." Especially when his job threatened their luxurious existence. "My father wanted me to go into the family business." He shrugged. "We're estranged."

"I'm sorry."

He reached across the island and squeezed her hand. "Family is always complicated. No one has that picture-perfect family we all dream about."

She snorted. "Mine is so far from perfect, it isn't funny."

He tightened his grip. "But you got free."

She wrinkled her nose. "They keep trying to pull me back. To be honest, I let them. I keep thinking they'll change... It's stupid. I let them use me."

"Because you're a good person."

"Well, Casey has cured me of that." Sadness etched her face.

Matteo squeezed her fingers. "Now, come with me."

Her brow creased. "I thought we were eating?"

"We are." He grabbed a thick, fluffy coat in a soft gray off the back of the chair. "I borrowed this for you from Hadley."

He helped her into it, and she looked confused. Then he touched a switch on the wall and fairy lights on his terrace lit up.

Her mouth dropped open.

He opened the sliding door and led her outside. The air was cool, but he'd already turned on a brazier and set the table.

He held out a chair for her. She sat.

"I'll be right back." He brought out their plates and his own drink. "Now eat, *cara*."

She blinked, staring at the table, then looked at the lights.  
“This is beautiful, Matteo.”

“A beautiful woman deserves a beautiful meal.”

She kept staring at the table.

He frowned. “*Cara?*”

She looked up, a shimmer of tears in her eyes.

“No one’s ever done anything so nice.”

He felt a spurt of anger. “You should expect more.”

“It hurts when you want something and don’t get it.” She cleared her throat and shot him another glance, then she grabbed her wine glass. “Forget I said that. I don’t want to ruin the moment.” She clinked her glass to his.

He nudged the plate in front of her. “Eat.”

She did and it was clear she enjoyed it. He felt an unfamiliar sense of satisfaction watching Gabbi eat.

“Oh, it’s so good.” She patted her belly, then she tipped her head back. “It’ll snow soon. And Christmas will be here.”

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head.

“What do you do for Christmas?” he asked.

Her nose wrinkled. “That ventures back into ruining-the-moment territory.”

He took her hand. “Tell me.”

“Avoid my family. Often, they come looking for money, hoping the holiday spirit will weaken me.” She sighed. “Last year, I went to Florida and came home to find my brother had broken into my place. He and his friends drank all my booze and left a mess.”

Matteo cursed in Italian.

“I can’t eat another mouthful,” she said. “It was so great, Matteo.”

He rose, took the plates inside to the sink. “Now for the next part of our evening.”

Her brows rose.

“Consider it step one of my plan.” He held out a hand.

She took his hand, one brow arching.

“Your next lesson. You’re going to lie on the couch, and I’m going to peel those jeans off you. Then I’m going to eat your pretty pussy until you come.”

She jolted, color filling her cheeks. “Matteo.”

He stepped closer. “I love when you say my name like that.”

“Maybe our plan isn’t a good idea. We make no sense. You’re... You. And I’m... Me.” She closed her eyes. “See, you already reduce my ability to communicate to a few simple words.”

He touched her hair, tucking a loose strand behind her ear. “I like it.”

“It makes me feel silly.”

He stroked her jaw. “You’re not. Just feel, *cara*. Turn it off for a bit. Let me give you pleasure.”

“Matteo...” Her voice was a murmur.

The way she whispered his name, with a mix of desire and yearning, went straight to his cock.

He also saw the way she tensed up.

He tugged her inside and closed the sliding door. “I loved seeing you in that gold dress.” He pulled her against him. “I loved moving against you on the dance floor.”

She shuddered.

He tried to keep a leash on his own growing desire.

This was for her.

The woman who gave so much and expected so little in return.

He kissed her, driving his fingers into her hair, holding her for his fierce kiss.

Her stiffness evaporated and she moaned into his mouth. Their tongues clashed and her hands twisted in his shirt. Had he ever had a woman want him so earnestly? Like she needed him to breathe?

He backed her up, then pushed her down on his couch.

“There’s a pretty sight.” He knelt and unfastened her jeans, working them off.

She was panting, her chest heaving.

He found long legs and a scrap of gold lace.

Matteo made a humming sound, then hooked his fingers under her panties. Before he removed them, he stroked downward over the lace.

Gabbi arched, letting out a gasp.

“*Cara*, you’re soaked.” He worked the lace down and off her legs. Then he nudged her thighs apart. “Mmm, that’s very pretty.” He stroked her sleek folds.

She made an inarticulate sound, her gaze locked on him. He was sure she wasn’t worried about not orgasming.

“You’re all pink and swollen, *tesoro*.” He stroked up and uncovered the small nub nestled there. He teased it and her hips lifted.

“Matteo!”

“You’re going to taste so sweet.”

But he wanted to give her more than just pleasure. He wanted to see her trust herself, watch her bloom.

He sat on the couch beside her, on the wider chaise lounge, and laid back.

Gabbi rose up on one elbow, breathing hard, her face a little desperate. “What are—?”

“Come here, Gabriella.”

She froze for a second.



“Come here, gorgeous girl, and straddle my chest.”

She rose up. “Why?”

“Because then, I’m going to push your sweet thighs wider and have you ride my face.”

She moaned, biting down on her lip.

“I think you like the idea. Come, take what you want.”

Her eyes locked with his, and she took a deep breath before she crawled across the couch. When she got closer, he gripped her shirt and helped to pull it over her head.

Gold lace cupped her breasts.

“Good, *cara*. Straddle me.”

She did, moving her thighs over his chest. He smelled her arousal, his cock hard against his zipper.

“I’ve never seen anything more beautiful,” he growled as he gripped her thighs and yanked her forward.

Gabbi gasped. Matteo kissed her pussy, and the gasps turned to moans. He took his time, kissing, licking, learning her sweet folds.

He’d known she’d be sweet.

When she rocked against him, he used his tongue to stroke.

“God... *God*.” Her hands sank into his hair.

He cupped her ass cheeks, fingers biting deep as he found her clit. He laved it, then sucked.

She cried out, her hips jerking and her thighs tightening.

“Good, Gabriella?”a

“Yes, yes. Don’t you dare stop.”

*I’ll give you whatever you want. Everything you deserve.*

Flattening his tongue, he licked faster and faster.

“Oh...*Matteo*.”

“Come, Gabriella,” he growled against her pussy.

She arched and screamed. Her body shook, her hands tugging hard on his hair.

Matteo had never felt more pleased with himself.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

She had to grip the back of the couch to stop from melting into a huge puddle.

Sitting back, pleasure still thrumming through her, Gabbi looked down into Matteo's dark eyes. He had his signature sexy, smug smile in place.

He ran a hand up her side and she shuddered. Her skin felt sensitive, every nerve cell filled with energy.

And desire for this man was still an insistent throb inside her.

He nudged her onto the couch beside him. Then he leaned over her and gently collared her neck, finger rubbing her rapidly beating pulse.

"I like tasting you when you come." He ran a hand down her chest, flicking at a lace covered nipple. "You have no idea how beautiful you are."

She licked her lips. Maybe she did. He made her feel beautiful.

And made her feel confident to ask for what she wanted.

Gabbi reached out and rested a hand on his thigh. She felt the flex of his muscles.

"Now it's your turn," she said.

He caught her wrist. "Tonight was for you, *cara*. Your pleasure."

That might have made Gabbi pause in the past, and worry that he didn't want her enough.

Instead, she squeezed his thigh. "This is my pleasure. It is what I want."

She saw a flare in his eyes. Molten hot.

"What do you want?" His voice was a raspy, sexy growl.

Her pulse skittered like crazy and she licked her lips. "I want to suck your cock."

He hissed and pulled her against him. He sank a hand into her hair and kissed her so hard it almost hurt. Pleasure with an edge.

Then he pulled back and settled back against the couch cushions. He threw one arm behind his head.

With the other, he guided her off the couch to her knees between his spread legs.

"Take it out, *cara*."

That deep rumble made her shiver. *Oh, boy.*

He palmed the bulge in his pants. "You want this, don't you?"

"Yes." She rose up on her knees.

His dark gaze skated over her. "You have no idea how gorgeous you are. Your breasts pushing up against gold lace, hair spilling everywhere. A damn siren."

The words made more heat pool in her belly. She reached for the zipper, fumbling in her eagerness. She made a frustrated sound and finally got the zipper open.

He wasn't wearing underwear.

"Of course, even your cock is beautiful," she said. It was long, smooth, and thick.

"It's hard for you, Gabriella."

He used a hand in her hair to guide her head down.

Gabbi gripped the base of his cock, her heart pumping hard. “I... I don’t think I’m good at this. But I want to be.”

“Stop thinking. Just feel. Do what you want.”

She ran her tongue over him.

He made a low sound, and it urged her on. She licked the length of him.

“Good. Now suck it, Gabriella.” His voice was all grit.

She opened her mouth and wrapped her lips around him, sucking him down as far as she could go. He groaned.

Oh, she liked that sound. So much.

She bobbed up and down, taking more of his cock into her mouth.

“That’s good. Fuck, so good.”

His fingers tightened in her hair, his hips moving, fucking her mouth.

His next thrust was deeper and she gagged. She lifted her head and took a breath.

He massaged her scalp. “Relax, *cara*. Take your time.”

On her next slide, she did relax, and he went deeper. She started moving faster.

Soon, she felt Matteo’s body tense. He growled out a curse.

“Fucking hell. I’m going to come, Gabriella. You going to swallow my load, or will I come on your breasts?”

She sucked harder in answer. She kept her gaze locked on his.

Then color suffused his face, and he groaned loudly.

She kept sucking as he spilled down her throat. His body shook, hips lifting. She tasted his saltiness.

Gabbi was on fire. He tipped his head back, the tendons in his neck tight as she swallowed everything she could.

He made a deep, choked sound. Then he yanked her up into his arms. He kissed her, cupping her jaw. Then he tucked her head under his chin.

“Amazing,” he said.

She felt glorious. “I’m pretty sure most guys say that after a blow job.”

“It wasn’t just the blow job, *cara*.”

She snuggled into him. God, leaning on his big, strong body, knowing she was safe...

She liked it.

A lot.

*Don’t get used to it, Gab. It’ll hurt too much once it’s gone.*

Still, that thought didn’t stop her kissing the underside of his jaw.

His fingers squeezed her hip. “You need something to sleep in. So I don’t get ideas.”

“I’m okay with ideas.” She tipped her head back. His eyes were as dark as night. “We have a plan, remember?”

“And a good plan should never be rushed. I’m not going to fuck you tonight, Gabbi. I know you’re tired.” He traced the dark shadows under her eyes. “I want you wide awake and ready for an entire night of taking my cock.”

Her eyes went wide. “An entire night?” She’d always thought that only happened in fantasies and romance novels.

“All night.” He pressed a light kiss to her lips. It felt sexy, intimate. “Now, I’ll find you one of my T-shirts, and you can get that sweet ass into my bed.”

“I think Hadley got me a nightgown.”

“You’ll wear my shirt.”

His tone said he wasn’t going to argue.

A few minutes later, she found herself brushing her teeth beside Matteo, wearing a super-soft, navy-blue T-shirt. He hadn’t changed yet, and she wondered what he slept in.

Standing there with him, brushing their teeth, was almost as intimate as having her mouth on his cock.

She shifted, desire still simmering. She rinsed, then headed into the darkened bedroom.

She wasn't sure she could sleep beside Matteo. She was too worked up, even though she was tired. She climbed in. A second later he exited the bathroom, and turned the lights off.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She saw him shed his clothes.

All of his clothes.

He climbed into the bed.

"You're naked," she squeaked.

"Yes. I always sleep naked when I can."

"I can't sleep beside you, knowing you're naked."

He pulled her against him, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Why not?"

"It's...distracting." His skin was so hot. She fought not to snuggle against him. *Screw it.* She snuggled.

"Sleep now, *tesoro.*"

Funnily enough, she fell asleep in minutes, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

---

THE NIGHTMARE JERKED HIM AWAKE.

Heart pounding, Matteo sat up, heaving in air. His skin was sheened with sweat.

*Fuck.* He dropped his head into his hand. The old images faded. The horrible things he'd seen done at the hands of mafia bosses. The sick fucks who'd loved violence and torture.

The screams of the people he hadn't been able to save.

He heard quiet breathing beside him.

*Gabbi.*

She was curled on her side, asleep. Thank God, he hadn't woken her. This was why he preferred to sleep alone.

He touched her hair, pulling in some deep breaths. He wanted to curl around her. Absorb her.

*You shouldn't even be touching her with your dirty hands.*

His jaw tightened and he pulled away. He slipped out of the bed, and pulled on his suit pants. Shirtless, he strode into the living area.

Matteo dropped heavily into an armchair. He stared blindly at the dark windows, but in his head, he saw every horrible thing that haunted him.

It wasn't always like this. Usually, he kept his sleep short, and got up, had some coffee, did some work. But every now and then, the darkness that lived inside him got too fucking big.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there in the dark, lost in his nightmares, when he heard the soft pad of footsteps.

He tensed, but stayed silent, didn't look up.

Gabbi walked over to him and stopped.

"Go back to bed, Gabbi." His voice was deep, gritty.

"Nightmares?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. "Now go back to bed."

But once again showing that inner strength of hers, she reached out and cupped his jaw. "This is why you don't sleep much."

Matteo released a breath. "Just leave me alone and go back to bed."

"You don't scare me, Matteo." She moved closer. That gently curved body clad only in his T-shirt. Her scent wrapped around him and like a junkie, he breathed it in.

Both her hands slid up to cup his cheeks, skin scraping over his stubble.



“If you knew the things I’ve done, you wouldn’t touch me. You wouldn’t let me touch you. You’d run.”

“You’re wrong.”

He looked up now, their gazes meshing. “I shouldn’t touch you.” He pulled in a breath. “I’ve killed, Gabbi. I’ve seen so many things that would make you sick.”

Her fingers stroked his skin. “I work for the CIA, Matteo. I joined because I wanted a safe, stable job, but I also joined because I wanted to help do the difficult jobs that keep our country safe. I may not be in the field, gun in hand, but I am well aware of what we have to do. That sometimes, the good guys have to do the difficult, tough, and not-very-nice jobs.”

Her tone was matter-of-fact. He lifted a hand and gripped one of her slim wrists.

“The worst thing, the things that haunt my sleep, are the people I couldn’t save.” His body shuddered.

She moved between his spread legs, and he found that even when he knew he should push her away, he couldn’t. He snaked an arm around her, yanked her close, and pressed his face to her belly.

Having her close, in his arms, soothed something. He released a long breath.

Her fingers toyed with his hair. “Tell me.”

The warmth of her seeped into his chilled skin. And her softness was a comfort he was sure he didn’t deserve.

“When I joined the DIA, I was cocky, overconfident. I was sure I could bring the dangerous mafia groups down in one fell swoop. I went undercover. For several years, I had to pretend to be the monsters I hunted. Had to watch the things they did, pretend to join in, pretend I liked it.”

“I can only imagine how hard that is. Undercover work can be brutal.”

Soul-destroying. All those people he’d seen hurt and killed. “So many times, I had to stand there, listening to people

beg and plead, and I couldn't do a thing without risking the entire operation."

"Which saved more lives in the long run."

He knew that, but it didn't make it easier. "I stuck it out. I took down several prominent, powerful bosses." He rubbed his cheek against her belly. "Eventually, my identity was compromised. Then I could fight out in the open. That's when they started calling me Hades. The god of death and punishment. I hunted down everyone I'd seen kill and torture."

Her fingers stroked through his hair. "But it didn't get easier."

No. He'd thought being out in the light would make him feel better, cleaner, free of the darkness.

"There were several attempts on my life." And one on his family that had left his father enraged. "And eventually, I needed a change." Or he would have lost himself. "I joined Interpol, but I only lasted a year. Too much paperwork and phone calls, and not enough action."

She stayed quiet, fingers still sifting through his hair. That was one thing he'd noticed about Gabbi, that she was an excellent listener.

"Then Killian turned up at my office. We'd met once when he'd been with the CIA. He made me an offer."

"You like it here."

"Yes, I do." And he'd found good friends—no, a family—in his Sentinel Security colleagues. "But nothing I do changes my past. The things that stained my soul. Gabbi, I should never have let myself touch you. I know I'm just as bad as the men I once hunted."

She tilted his head up, a fierce glint in her eyes. "Now, you listen to me." Her fingers tightened on his skin. "Believe me, I've seen bad people, up close and personal."

His chest tightened. She was talking about her family, and whatever assholes they'd exposed her to while growing up.

He yanked her forward onto his lap. With a gasp, she straddled him.

“Did anyone hurt you? Touch you? Did those fucking assholes of parents let anyone—”

“No.” She stroked his temples. “No. I was very good at hiding.”

A survivor. He wished he could go back and protect her. Take away the pain of the young Gabriella.

“I might be in the office, but I see the mission reports. I see what happens out there.” Her gaze was steady. “And there is a huge difference between you and the criminals you take down, Matteo.”

“What?” His voice was a rasp.

“They like hurting people. They don’t lose a wink of sleep over the people they hurt and kill. They revel in it. That’s the opposite of you. Of the man who won’t forgive himself for the people he couldn’t save.”

Her words shuddered through him, and he pulled her tighter against him.

Gabbi wrapped her arms around him, and held him tight. “The darkness might want you, Matteo, but it isn’t in you. It can’t have you, because you’re a good man, fighting to keep people safe and making sure the bad guys are stopped.”

*Merda.* There was that light and goodness again, seeping out of her and into him.

“Do you know that in mythology, Hades wasn’t portrayed negatively? He wasn’t death. He was in charge of keeping balance, and holding people accountable to the law.”

“Gabbi...” He pressed his cheek over the steady beat of her heart.

“Just hold on.” She bent her head over his. “Hold on for however long you need. Then, we’re going back to bed and you’re going to sleep.”

He slid a hand up and gripped her jaw. He made her meet his gaze. “Be careful. Hades might not have been all bad, but when he saw Persephone, the woman he wanted, he took her, and he never let her go.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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**W**hen Matteo woke up next, it was to sunlight, an empty bed, and the smell of bacon.

He stretched and smiled, every thought on Gabbi.

They'd stayed together in the darkness, holding each other, until she'd finally dragged him to bed. He'd fallen asleep wrapped around her, his face buried in her hair.

He'd slept deeply. No more nightmares.

He rose, visited the bathroom, then pulled on some black sweatpants. When he walked into his kitchen, he found something he liked. A lot.

A barefoot Gabbi, wearing only his T-shirt, cooking bacon and eggs at his stove, and humming to herself.

"Good morning," he murmured.

"Oh!" She jolted and looked over her shoulder. "I didn't hear you. Make some noise."

He moved up behind her and felt her go still. He pushed her hair aside, kissed her slender shoulder, then her neck.

She made a sound. "You shouldn't be doing this."

"Why?"

"The bacon will burn."

He nibbled her skin. "It's fine."

"We shouldn't do this." Her voice was a little shaky.

*Ah.* Another Gabbi speech.

“Why, *cara*?” He scraped his teeth along the tendon in her neck and heard her stifle a moan.

“You make me feel out of control.”

“Mmm.” He nuzzled her neck. “And you’re afraid when you don’t have control.”

“Yes.”

“Do you trust me, Gabriella?”

She was silent a moment. “Yes.”

“Do you like the way I make you feel?”

She licked her lips. “You know I do.”

“Did you enjoy our lesson last night?”

“Matteo—”

He nibbled at her neck, right where he saw the fading bite mark he’d given her. *Mmm*. He didn’t like to see it disappear. “Did you enjoy lying on my couch and coming on my tongue?”

Furious color filled her cheeks.

“And sucking my cock?”

She sniffed. “Stop it. You’re gorgeous, handsome, and good with your mouth, you probably have women all over the world. There’s another thing. You travel, and I’ve never even left the USA.”

“*Cara*, I’m unattached. And where we’ve traveled means nothing. They’re excuses.” He nibbled her delectable skin again. “I’d like to take you many places. A white-sand beach where you can wear a tiny bikini. The beautiful streets of Paris. Lake Como.”

She brandished the wooden spoon at him. “That’s never going to happen.”

*So stubborn*. “Yes, it is.”

“You’ll lose interest long before then.” She turned back to the bacon.

Matteo rolled his eyes to the ceiling and fought for patience. That fucking family of hers. If he ever got his hands on them...

His *cara* would need proof that he planned to stick around and take care of her.

They ate the bacon and eggs in an easy, companionable silence. She ate everything on her plate, and he liked that. No picking or pretending.

“You got some sleep?” she asked, studying his face.

“Yes. Thanks to you.” The way she’d held him. Shielded him from the darkness. She couldn’t know how much that had meant to him. How much he’d needed it.

She smiled, and he touched her thigh.

Her fork froze halfway to her mouth, her gaze narrowed.

He let his fingers brush over her skin. “Your skin is so smooth.” He traced his fingers upward, felt her thighs quiver.

“Matteo...”

“You know I love when you say my name like that.” He leaned into her. “It makes me hard.”

Her breath hitched. He brushed his lips over hers.

“Perhaps it’s time for another lesson,” he murmured.

She bit his lip. “Yes—”

Then his cell phone rang.

“*Merda.*” He stabbed the button. “Hex.”

“Hades, morning. You and Gabbi better come down to the office.”

He stiffened. “You found something.”

“A steaming pile of something.” Hex’s voice sounded off.

*Fuck.* This was not going to be good.

“We’ll be there.” He slid the phone away. “You shower first, *cara*. I’ll clean the kitchen and then let’s see what Hex has for us.”

Gabbi nodded, gnawing on her bottom lip, then disappeared into his bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, they entered the command center and found Hex, Hadley, and Killian waiting for them.

“Hey.” Hex looked a little tired, which was uncommon for her, because she was normally a little Energizer bunny. He’d seen her work nights on end without getting tired.

Matteo took Gabbi’s hand. “What have you got?”

“Salvatore Morello, the head of the family in D.C., has made lots of trips to Milan,” Hex said.

Matteo frowned. “The mafia families never made inroads into Milan. It’s too wealthy.”

“Someone’s trying,” Killian said.

“Looks like they’re recruiting members from other areas,” Hex said. “From areas where the mafia families were taken down and arrested.”

Matteo stiffened. “Areas where I took them down?”

Hex nodded. “I don’t know who the ringleader is, yet.” She leaned back in her chair. “But I found a link. Vito Bruno. His real name is Vito Bagiletti. His father was—”

Matteo stiffened even more. “Leonardo Bagiletti.”

Hex nodded.

“Who’s Leonardo Bagiletti?” Gabbi asked.

“He was an enforcer for the Società foggiana.”

She frowned. “I’m not familiar with that.”

“A small, but ruthless, mafia organization that operated in the province of Foggia, in Southern Italy. It was known for being the most brutal and bloody of the families. It was run by a man called Francesco Carella. Carella and Bagiletti were best friends. Blood brothers.”

“What happened?” Gabbi asked

“An ambitious, dedicated DIA agent went in undercover in the Società foggiana,” Killian said. “Dismantled it from the



inside.”

Gabbi turned to look at Matteo.

Dark memories filtered through his brain, and something stirred in his gut. Something dark and acid. “I ripped it apart. They were killers, and I wanted them stopped. Carella was killed, Bagiletti was jailed, and the Società foggiana was left in tatters.”

“So, Vito Bagiletti is out for revenge,” Hadley said.

“Likely,” Killian replied.

Gabbi gasped, her face pale.

Matteo ran a hand down Gabbi’s back, his mind running through memories and facts. “Vito Bagiletti isn’t the head honcho. His father was an enforcer. He was muscle, didn’t have the brains to be the leader.”

Hex frowned. “You think someone else is running the show?”

Matteo frowned. “Yes.”

Gabbi blinked. “Did Carella have kids?”

Matteo shook his head. “Not that he claimed publicly. He had several mistresses, though.”

“I’ll take a look.” Hex tapped on the keyboard.

“Hey.” Matteo tipped Gabbi’s face up to his.

She had a fierce look on her face. “I’m going to stop whoever this is.”

His chest locked. He’d never had someone be so determined to protect him. “*Cara—*”

“I won’t stop, Matteo. These people have to be stopped. And—” her voice dropped “—I don’t want you hurt.”

*Fuck.* He really, really wanted to fuck her.

“Hot damn,” Hex cried.

Killian swiveled. “What?”

“I think I found something.” Hex snapped her fingers. “Carella had a mistress, a model named Claudia Lanza. She gave birth to a boy twenty-six years ago.”

Matteo sucked in a breath. “Giorgio said something to me last night. About dealing with rivals and how their babies grow up and hold a grudge.”

“Carella never acknowledged the boy,” Hex said. “But he supported them...up until Matteo busted up the Società foggiana and Carella was killed.” Hex pulled a face. “It looks like things got tough for her and the boy after that. His name is Rocco Lanza.”

Matteo’s gut clenched. “So, he holds me responsible.”

“Rocco Lanza?” Hadley frowned. “The name sounds familiar.”

“Because he’s well-known. He’s an up-and-coming celebrity chef in Milan.” Hex tapped, and pictures appeared on the screen on the wall. “Has a cooking show that’s popular on Netflix.”

Matteo studied the young, handsome man. He could see some resemblance to Carella, but he must have gotten a lot from his mother. He had thick, dark hair styled with streaks of gold, and was clean-shaven with brown eyes.

“He looks a little like Carella,” Matteo said.

“Rocco Lanza is on the rise.” Killian crossed his arms. “Would he risk it all for revenge?”

“I found this.” Hex tapped her tablet.

There was an image of Lanza, dressed casually in a hoodie, and walking with Vito Bruno—aka Vito Bagiletti—on a Milan street.

“They know each other,” Gabbi breathed.

“There’s one way to find out for sure,” Hex said. “Talk to Rocco Lanza.”

Matteo frowned.

“Because he’s here in New York,” the hacker continued. “Hosting an event for a restaurant collaboration he’s doing in downtown Manhattan. The event is at the 230 Fifth rooftop bar. Tonight.”

“A rooftop bar in winter?” Gabbi asked incredulously.

“They have these glass igloos set up on the roof,” Hex said. “They’re popular in winter.”

“Can you get me a ticket?” Matteo asked.

“*Tickets*. I’m coming.” Gabbi’s chin jutted.

Matteo didn’t like it, but he saved his breath. “I know, *cara*.”

“Get four tickets,” Killian ordered. “Hadley and I are coming, as well.”

Hadley smiled. “Excellent. Gabbi, let’s sort out what we’re going to wear.”

---

“GOD, YOU LOOK GREAT IN THAT.”

Gabbi heard satisfaction in Hadley’s voice.

Gabbi stood in front of the mirror in Hadley’s lovely apartment. She stared at herself in the mirror.

She did look good.

She wore a cream dress that hugged her curves. Hell, she could see curves she never knew she had. Long, black boots slicked up over her knees, and Hadley had draped a large, caramel-colored coat over her shoulders. Her hair was up in a sleek ponytail, and Hadley had worked some makeup magic. Gabbi’s eyes were smoky, her lips red.

She looked winter sexy.

She straightened. “I do look great.”

Hadley smiled. “I’m glad you finally admit it.”

“And so do you,” Gabbi added.

The Sentinel Security agent wore all black. Black fitted pants, a black turtleneck, and a black, three-quarter-length coat. Her brown hair was loose.

“Let’s go find your man, then find out how chef Rocco Lanza fits into all of this,” Hadley said.

A lump formed in Gabbi’s throat. “Matteo’s not my man.”

Hadley grabbed a small bag and slipped it over her shoulder. “He is, even if you haven’t accepted it, yet.”

“It’s...temporary.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“We’re just enjoying each other for the moment.” Gabbi looked back at the mirror. “This woman isn’t really me. Underneath, I’m just simple Gabbi, with a crappy family. One day, Matteo will move on.”

Hadley touched her arm. “We aren’t our pasts, Gabbi. We are who we make ourselves. We’re the values we hold, the actions we take. Matteo sees you just fine. I think you’re the one who doesn’t see yourself clearly.” Hadley smiled. “Now let’s get to this party.”

When she and Hadley walked into Sentinel Security, a sharp whistle cut through the air. Hex cocked her hip. “Ladies, I’d do you.”

Gabbi laughed. “Thanks. I think.”

She lifted her head and met Matteo’s gaze. He was frozen, but his gaze was hot and liquid as it skated over her.

“*Belissima*, ladies,” he drawled.

“Charmer,” Hadley said.

Matteo was in a well-fitting, dark-blue suit. Killian was in unrelieved black, and looked as dangerous as ever.

“Let’s go.” The head of Sentinel Security waved a hand.

Soon, Gabbi found herself in the back of a large, plush BMW. The men sat in the front, with Killian at the wheel.

“So, we’ll get a feel for the party, then make contact with Lanza,” Killian said.

Gabbi’s heart rate picked up speed. The three of them were so calm and cool, and had clearly done things like this thousands of times.

She fought the urge to fidget. She was really not cut out to be a field agent.

At the 230 Fifth building, Killian pulled up at valet parking. The back door opened, and Matteo reached in, holding a hand out to Gabbi.

He helped her out of the car, then kissed her palm. “I’ll be with you the entire time, *cara*.” He tucked her arm into his.

Moments later, the elevator delivered them to the rooftop.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed.

The glass igloos dotted across the roof glittered with light. Music pumped across the space, and the crowd of beautiful people was large. Several were wrapped in red blankets that the venue supplied. There were lots of fire pits scattered around, most surrounded by boisterous partygoers.

But the view was the real scene stealer. Manhattan’s buildings rose up around them, shining monoliths that stretched toward the sky. Stunning.

They walked past one igloo, and through the glass, she saw people sitting on comfy chairs, cocktails in hand, and a tray of pizza slices resting on a low table between them.

Servers walked around with trays offering pizza, arancini balls, and other delicious-looking food.

“There,” Matteo murmured.

Gabbi lifted her head. A man was standing on a raised dais at the far edge of the rooftop. There was a large table in front of him, with portable burners on it. He shook a pan with expert skill, smiling and talking to the crowd gathered around him.

Rocco Lanza.

He had that mid-twenties cockiness, like he had everything in his life sorted. He was handsome, but in a far-less-seasoned way than Matteo.

His hair was longer, curling over his jacket collar, and streaked with gold highlights. He wore an apron over his black suit.

As she watched, he leaned over and offered a mouthful of something to a woman in a tiny cocktail dress. The woman chewed and swallowed, then moaned in delight.

“Hadley and I will circle the rooftop, ask a few discreet questions.” With a nod, Killian and Hadley peeled off.

Gabbi noticed several women turn to watch Killian. He moved with a powerful stride, a man accustomed to being in charge. It just oozed off him.

“Feel like a little snack, *cara*?” Matteo asked.

“Sure. Why don’t I go first? He seems to like the ladies.”

Matteo hesitated, then nodded.

She ran a hand down her dress, then made her way to the chef’s table.

“Invest in your ingredients,” Lanza extolled, his Italian accent charming the crowd. “That’s my number one tip. High-quality, fresh ingredients will make your meal better.”

“Oh, this pasta tastes so good.” Another woman licked her lips.

Lanza smiled. “Hand made. I don’t skimp on the salt, or lemon. I put lemon in *everything*. And make all your dishes with a healthy serve of love.” He winked and the crowd tittered.

A moment later, brown eyes a much lighter shade than Matteo’s met Gabbi’s. He flashed her a smile that looked practiced.

“Would you like to try some of my world-famous risotto?” His smile widened.

She smiled back and raised a brow. “World-famous? How can I say no?”

Rocco leaned closer. “I promise, you’ll love it.”

He had a real bedroom voice, that was for sure.

She accepted the forkful of food, and flavors exploded in her mouth. So many of them. She had to admit it was good, and she nodded.

Rocco’s smile flashed again. “I’ll soon be opening a chain of restaurants, starting here in New York. My name will become synonymous with amazing, accessible Italian food.”

Well, he didn’t lack confidence, that was for sure. “It’s very good.”

He winked. “I’m very good at what I do, *bella*.”

Did that include reviving his dead father’s crime syndicate and trying to kill people?

She felt a presence behind her, and an arm snaked around her, pulling her back against a hard body.

The change on Rocco Lanza’s face made her chest lock.

The easygoing charm dissolved, morphing into an expression of pure hatred.

“*Agente Mancini*.” Rocco’s voice dripped with disdain.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Matteo said.

Rocco looked at a nearby assistant. “I’m taking a break. To mingle with the crowd.” He untied his apron and tossed it at the hovering young man. Then he swiveled and strode into an empty igloo that had clearly been reserved for him.

Pulse skipping, Gabbi followed with Matteo, her fingers twined with his.

Killian materialized almost instantly nearby. Matteo jerked his chin toward his boss.

Then Matteo and Gabbi stepped into the igloo.

Rocco poured some yellow spirit from a long bottle. He sipped.

Then he met Gabbi's gaze. "You have poor taste in men, *bella*. This one destroys lives."

"You're wrong," she replied quietly. "He's a man who fights for what's right. Forces criminals to face the consequences of their actions."

Rocco gave a harsh laugh. "Is she really that naïve? If you think he's some sort of white knight, think again."

"You're Carella's son," Matteo said.

The man's eyes flared with heat. "Yes. You destroyed him."

"I did my job."

"You ruined my life." The words hit the air like bullets. "You killed my father. Destroyed my mother. I crawled through shit, because of you."

"Your life seems to have turned around," Gabbi said.

The man's face twisted. "Because of my own hard work."

"Or because you're following in your father's footsteps?" Matteo asked quietly.

Rocco tossed his drink back. "I'm smarter than you. No one can pin anything on me. I'm the great Rocco Lanza." He threw out his arms. "And I won't stop until you're dead, Mancini."

"Secrets always come out," Matteo said.

"Ah, so your lovely lady knows all your secrets? You aren't good or righteous. Dirt sticks, Mancini. And I can see it all over you." He smiled. "I look forward to enjoying my reign as head of the new Società foggiana, while you're dead and rotting. Watch your back." He strode out.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

**M**atteo slammed into the Sentinel Security office, blood raging.

All of this was because of his actions.

He dismantled the Società foggiana, taken Carella down, and spawned Rocco Lanza in the process.

Gabbi was in danger because of him.

He knew how much work and effort she'd put into creating a life for herself, separate from her family.

Because of Matteo, it was threatened.

"Matteo." Her soft voice behind him. He sensed Hadley and Killian, as well.

Rocco was right. He was no white knight.

His hands balled into fists.

"Matteo." Gabbi's voice grew sharper as she circled in front of him. She'd taken her coat off, and the cream dress clung to her. "Whatever you're thinking, stop it."

"Rocco Lanza is my fault."

"Bullshit." Her voice was filled with emotion. "You did your job. You took down criminals who hurt and murdered so many people. Men who'd destroyed so many innocent families. You're a damn hero."

He made an annoyed sound.

“Rocco is a product of his upbringing, and likely has some sociopathic tendencies.” Gabbi gripped his arms. “Let’s focus on stopping him.”

Matteo stared down at her, then looked at Hadley and Killian. Hadley looked worried. Killian’s face was blank, but alert.

Killian nodded. “Lanza needs to be stopped.”

Matteo drew in a breath.

“Hey, you guys are back.”

Hex came out of the kitchen, holding a steaming mug of something. Probably tea. She mainlined soda and coffee in the daytime, but tea at night.

“So, this Rocco Lanza is a real piece of work,” she continued. “While you were gone, I did some digging. Come and see.” She headed into the command center.

Matteo took another deep, steadying breath. Gabbi’s fingers brushed his. He didn’t look at her, but latched on to her hand. She squeezed.

They followed the others.

“So, after Carella went down—” Hex sat in a chair and blew on her mug “—Rocco and his mother had no funds. They moved to Milan and she modeled for a bit, but she was getting older, and got herself a drug habit. Modeling turned into prostitution.”

“Hell,” Killian muttered.

“Higher-end, at first. Picked up a few sugar daddies, but as her addiction spiraled, she got desperate. She was arrested for solicitation a few times.”

“Any mention of Rocco?” Matteo asked.

“No. He was twenty when she died.” Hex fiddled with her hair.

“This is not on you, Matteo,” Killian said. “Carella and the Società foggiana were killing people, torching the shops of people who didn’t pay protection money, dealing drugs,

bombing the cars of anyone who stood in their way. They had to be stopped.”

“And now Rocco wants to do the same,” Gabbi murmured. “You know the devastation he could cause. When people are willing to hurt others for money and power...” She met Matteo’s gaze.

Matteo did the math to calculate the time in Italy. It was late, but Aurelio would still be awake.

“I need to call my DIA contact.”

“Do it,” Killian said.

Matteo went straight to his office, and strode under the brick archway.

Footsteps sounded behind him. Gabbi followed him, that stubborn look on her face.

His hands flexed. That damn dress. It made him want to lift her onto his desk, shove it up—

*Shit.* Now he was hard. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore her presence. She dropped into the guest chair across from him and crossed her legs.

*Hell.*

He touched his laptop and placed the call.

It connected quickly, and the rough, craggy face of Aurelio Conti appeared on the screen.

“Hades.” His voice was a deep rasp, thanks to the cigarettes he could never quite give up. The DIA agent was a decade older than Matteo, and career DIA. He’d been a mentor to Matteo.

The man had an unbreakable core of honor.

The mafia had killed Aurelio’s parents when he was a boy. After that, he’d dedicated his life to taking them down.

“Figured you’d still be in the office,” Matteo said.

“My home away from home. How have you been?”

Matteo’s gaze flicked to Gabbi. “Busy.”

“I’m guessing from the late-night call that something’s up?”

“What do you know about Rocco Lanza?”

Aurelio’s face changed. Hardened. “Lanza shows the world a handsome, charming, oh-so-squeaky-clean face, but he’s dirty to the core. He’d been on our radar for years, before we realized he was the boss. We have no idea exactly how deep his criminal empire runs.”

“You planning to take him down?”

Aurelio made a frustrated sound and scraped a hand over his short hair. “I want to, but he’s smart. We have nothing connecting him to the revived Società foggiana. He has legitimate businesses, and a popular reputation as a celebrity chef. He’s got lots of important friends in high places in Milano society.”

Matteo cursed.

“We have him under surveillance. He owns a fancy villa on the outskirts of Milan. He doesn’t step one fucking step wrong in public.”

Gabbi rose and paced.

“Why the interest, Matteo?” Aurelio asked, sitting back in his chair.

“He’s in New York. I met him. Let’s just say, he blames me for every problem in his life.”

Now his friend cursed. “He wants revenge.”

“Yes.

“He’s young, but don’t underestimate him. He’s ruthless, Matteo. We’ve seen the results of his torture. Rumor has it that he does his own dirty work and enjoys it.”

“How do we stop him?” Gabbi rounded the desk and stood behind Matteo’s chair, looking at the screen.

Aurelio’s eyebrows rose. “Hello. Who are you?”

“She’s mine.” Matteo took her hand. “Gabriella Hansley, meet Aurelio Conti.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

“You work for Sentinel Security too?” the DIA officer asked.

“No, CIA,” she said. “It’s a long story, but I’m working with Matteo. It’s vital we stop Rocco and his plans.”

“I agree with you, *Signorina* Hansley. But it’s not easy. We’ve been trying for years.”

“Lives depend on it,” she said.

“I’m aware. We had an agent undercover at Lanza’s villa.” The man’s face turned grim. “Young, smart. She wasn’t known as DIA.”

Matteo’s gut hardened. How many young, idealistic people had he sent in? Seen chewed up, hurt, or killed. “What happened?”

“She got some good intel to us before we lost contact. She’s not been seen again.”

No doubt chained to something heavy at the bottom of a river.

“She found something?” Gabbi prompted.

Aurelio nodded. “Reported to have seen electronic books that Lanza keeps of all his criminal businesses. All in great detail. On a discreet computer that’s not networked. He keeps the laptop in his safe, under his villa.” Aurelio huffed out a breath. “An unbreakable safe. A Riv3001.”

“Shit.” Matteo ground his teeth together.

Gabbi had heard of it. The Riv3001 was a super-high-tech safe made by tech billionaire Maverick Rivera’s company.

“So, if you had that laptop, you’d have all the information needed to take Lanza down?” Matteo asked.

“Yes. But getting into that villa is impossible. He hires an army of guards, strengthened with ex-military mercenaries.

Then there's the Riv3001—”

“You get me in there, I'll get the laptop,” Matteo said.

Aurelio growled. “You aren't listening to me.”

“I can crack the Riv3001,” Matteo said.

The other man hesitated. “Really?”

Matteo nodded. “Do you have a way we can get into the villa?”

His friend looked away then back. “If anyone can do it, it's Hades. And your team at Sentinel Security. In two days, Lanza is holding a large masquerade party at his villa. Huge. He does it every year. The place will be flooded with people.”

Matteo's heart kicked. “We can sneak in.”

“Better than that, I can get you invites.” Aurelio scraped a hand over his jaw. “You're sure, Matteo?”

Take down Rocco Lanza and keep Gabbi safe.

Maybe find some redemption.

“Yes. I'm very sure.”

---

SHE HADN'T SLEPT LONG ENOUGH.

The next morning, Gabbi was a little groggy. She filled a large mug with a latte, battling a little with the crazy, high-tech machine in the Sentinel Security office.

The few hours of sleep she'd gotten had been in Matteo's bed, alone. She hadn't heard him come in, and she suspected he hadn't slept at all.

When she found him in the command center with Hex, they all looked far-too-chipper for having worked all night.

“Hey.” Matteo smiled at her. “Sleep okay?”

She nodded. “You?”

He shook his head. “We were busy planning our trip to Milan.”

“You’re sure this safe is crackable?” she asked. “Everything I’ve heard about it, it’s impregnable.”

“To most people.” His smile widened. “Get a travel mug for your coffee. We’ve got an appointment.”

She blinked. “Okay.”

Killian and Hadley walked in.

“Jet’s being fueled,” Killian said. “You off to Mav’s?”

Matteo nodded.

“We’ll meet you at the airport.”

“I’ll pack,” Hadley said.

Gabbi felt caught in that whirlwind again. These Sentinel Security guys moved fast. When they had a mission, they were all action. “Um, I don’t have a passport.”

Hex snort laughed. “That’s the easiest problem to fix.”

“It’s already taken care of,” Killian told her.

With some sort of Killian Hawke magic. Gabbi decided it was best not to ask for details.

After she’d decanted her coffee into a travel mug, Matteo led her down to the parking level and to a sleek, silver Audi A7.

“You have another car?” she asked.

As they neared, the locked bleeped. “No. This is a Sentinel Security ride.”

Before she’d finished her coffee, he’d driven them to SoHo. He pulled up in front of a seven-story, historic, cast-iron building.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Maverick Rivera’s penthouse.”

She goggled. “You just stop in to visit billionaires whenever the mood strikes?”

He joined her on the footpath and smiled. “His fiancée used to work for Sentinel Security.”

“Really?”

“Really. She’s a damn good hacker.” He touched the fancy intercom, and they were buzzed up.

After a short ride to the penthouse of the building, they headed for the front door. Before they rang, the door was thrust open.

The woman was petite and curvy, with a spill of dark hair.

“Hades.” The woman flung herself at him.

“Hey, Remi.” There was affection in his voice as he hugged her.

They looked good together. All coordinating, dark good looks. Gabbi felt a sudden stab of jealousy.

Then a big, brooding man arrived, standing right behind Remi. A second later, Remi was tucked under his arm.

Matteo grinned. “Rivera.”

“Mancini.” The billionaire had a deep voice and an impressive scowl. “Come in.”

“Remi, Maverick, this is Gabriella Hansley. She’s CIA.”

Gabbi nodded. “Nice to meet you.”

Remi waved a hand. “Come into the kitchen. There are coffee and pastries.”

The spacious kitchen was gray, with floor-to-ceiling cabinets, and a long, rustic wood table.

Gabbi looked around, more than a little bit in awe. The place was amazing. She was in a freaking billionaire’s home. Gabbi used Rivera Tech computers at work.

As they walked in, Gabbi spotted another woman. The slim brunette was sitting on the huge, black stone kitchen island, long legs crossed, eating a pastry. She was dressed casually in jeans and a drapery blue sweater, her dark hair up in a messy bun.



The woman eyed them and smiled. “Hi.”

Matteo nodded and Gabbi lifted a hand.

“This is my friend, Monroe.” Remi said. “She has her own home but turns up here looking for food.”

The brunette blew Remi a kiss. Clearly, they were good friends.

Remi moved to the coffee machine. “Who wants something?”

Gabbi shook her head, but Matteo asked for an espresso.

Maverick crossed his arms over his chest. “So, what’s this about? You said it was urgent.”

“It’s about a very bad guy named Rocco Lanza,” Matteo said.

Remi’s brow creased. “The chef?”

“Yes.” Matteo gave them the basic details on Rocco.

Maverick’s jaw tightened.

“Sounds like a real winner.” Monroe finished her pastry and licked her fingers.

“We’re headed to Italy to stop him,” Matteo said. “The guy’s dangerous and reckless. He shot up the Lafayette restaurant in D.C. to try to get to me.”

Monroe gasped. “I heard about that on the news.”

Gabbi studied Monroe. The longer she watched her, the more the woman looked familiar. She just couldn’t place her.

“The DIA, the anti-mafia division in Italy, have intel that Lanza keeps a record of all his criminal dealings on a laptop,” Matteo said. “With it, we can nail him.”

“But?” Maverick asked. “I can hear a *but*.”

“He stores the laptop at his Milan villa, in a Riv3001.”

Everyone in the room stilled.

Matteo went on. “I want you to show me how to break into it.”

Gabbi watched Maverick's jaw harden, and his dark eyes flashed.

The two women exchanged a look.

"It's unbreakable," Maverick said.

"Maybe to the general public, but not to the man who designed it," Matteo said.

Maverick shook his head. "If it got out that I gave out a way to crack my own product, it would destroy my company's credibility."

"Rocco Lanza is a very bad man," Gabbi said.

A muscle ticked in the billionaire's jaw. "I can't help you."

"I'll help you." Monroe leaped gracefully off the island.

"Me too," Remi added.

Maverick made a strangled sound.

"I've cracked a Riv before," Monroe said.

"You cracked a Riv3000," Maverick said grumpily. "And after you did it, I invented the 3001 to plug the gap."

Monroe shrugged. "I've cracked a 3001 as well. For fun."

Remi licked her lips. "I gave her one to practice with."

The man turned to stare at his fiancée.

She smiled back, unperturbed. "She promised not to tell anyone."

Rivera growled.

Matteo focused on Monroe. "You've cracked the safe?"

She nodded. "I'm a locksmith."

Like a click, Gabbi suddenly realized who the woman was. "Monroe O'Connor. You own Lady Locksmith."

She smiled and nodded. "It's Monroe O'Connor-Roth now."

"You're married to Zane Roth." The billionaire finance King of Wall Street. One of Maverick Rivera's best friends.

Gabbi had read an article about how Monroe and Zane had met...when she'd been blackmailed into stealing from him.

The woman just smiled brighter.

“I don't think your friends are going to share how to crack the Riv3001 with the world, Mav.” Remi moved to stroke his arm. “If they can stop this guy, it's worth it.”

He gripped her chin, staring at her.

She smiled up at him.

Then he shook his head. “Fine. But Monroe tells me how she cracked it.”

Gabbi hid a smile, suspecting they'd see a Riv3002 released before too long. “Thank you.”

---

WHEN GABBI and Matteo pulled into Teterboro Airport, they possessed a file with the full schematics for the safe, and detailed instructions for cracking into it.

Ahead, she glanced at the sleek, black jet that they'd flown on before.

As they climbed the stairs, she couldn't believe how crazy her life had gotten. Flying in private jets, visiting billionaires, running from bad guys. She looked up at Matteo. And spending time with the sexiest, most handsome man, she'd ever met.

Their sexy lessons had been interrupted, and a part of her hoped they had time for more before she had to return to her regular life in D.C.

She wanted more of him.

She wondered if she'd ever not want him.

*Careful, Gab. Don't get too attached.*

Inside the plane, they found Killian and Hadley. Hadley was in a seat, flicking through a magazine. Killian was

standing, phone pressed to his ear.

He finished his call and met Matteo's gaze. "Did you get it?"

"We got it."

A dark smile curled Killian's lips. "Then let's go hunting."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

The lake glittered like a jewel.

Even in winter, Lake Como was beautiful. The water was blue, the mountains surrounding it were topped with snow, and picturesque villages nestled against the water's edge looked like something out of a fairytale.

Matteo turned the rental car—another Maserati, of course—down a tree-lined driveway.

Gabbi was so busy soaking up the lake and mountains, she didn't pay attention to their destination.

Their flight from New York had been uneventful. They had the rest of today and all of tomorrow before Lanza's masquerade ball in Milan.

Killian and Hadley had stayed in Milan to do some surveillance on Lanza's villa. They'd come down to the lake tomorrow so they could all go over the plan again.

Today, Matteo was going to set up a model of the Riv3001 and practice cracking it until he had it down pat.

Gabbi had been surprised when Matteo had said that the two of them were heading to Lake Como. Apparently, he had a place here.

The car slowed, and she turned her head.

Her eyes went wide.

“Matteo,” she breathed.

“Hmm.” He stopped the car.

A little dazed, she climbed out. She'd been imagining a cute apartment or a little cottage.

She stared at the huge, beautiful villa.

It was three stories, covered in cream stucco with lots of arches and black accents. Definitely not what she'd been expecting.

She looked at him. "You own an enormous villa on Lake Como? A huge, freaking villa."

He looked like he was fighting a smile. "Yes."

She was pretty sure villas that looked like an Italian count lived in them, perched on the lake's edge, had to be worth a fortune.

"You're rich," she said accusingly.

He shrugged a shoulder and skirted the car. "My family is. My grandmother left me this."

Gabbi couldn't quite get her thoughts together. He took her hand and led her up the marble steps.

"The kitchen will be stocked and the beds made. I gave the staff a few days off."

"Staff," she said faintly.

He pulled out a set of keys, opened the enormous front door, and led her inside.

The interior was the perfect blend of old and new. The historic touches shone through, but it was obvious the place had been renovated with a traditional, modern style. The grand entryway had a black and white checkered floor, and the impressive staircase curled upward. Large, ornate vases sat in niches on the wall.

God, she'd never been in a place like this before.

He led her through into a spacious living area. The walls were a buttery cream, and the furniture was all elegant, neutral colors, except for touches of blue and brown in the pillows, artwork, and other accessories dotted on the shelves. A grand marble fireplace had a crackling fire lit in it. A lovely, thick

rug sat in front of the hearth, and a huge, gold-framed mirror hung over the mantle.

But Gabbi's gaze shifted to the long wall of windows. They framed the view of the lake perfectly.

A long, rectangular pool sat between the villa and lake, almost looking like it blended into the water. Several pool loungers rested alongside it. She wished it was summer so she could enjoy swimming in it and soaking up that view.

Matteo ran a hand down her hair. "Do you like to swim?"

"I love it. I was just thinking it's a shame that it's winter... Not that we're here for a vacation."

"I'll bring you back in the summer, *cara*. And this afternoon, relaxation is on the cards. We need to be well rested for the masquerade tomorrow."

It was lunchtime in New York, so she wasn't tired at all.

He smiled at her. "Come." He took her hand. "I have something to show you." He pulled her through the house.

There was more lovely décor. She sighed. It was all gorgeous.

He led her down some stairs.

"Do you come here often?" In her head, she imagined him here with some glamorous model.

"No." He met her gaze. "I don't come back to Italy often. And I've never brought a woman here."

Her head whipped up. Was he reading her mind?

He led her down a short hall, and she smelled chlorine as he pushed open a door.

Gabbi's mouth dropped open.

It was an indoor pool.

The rectangle of water shimmered, surrounded by travertine paving. A large skylight overhead let in the afternoon light, as did the rows of arched windows running down either side of the room. Potted plants were dotted along

the walls, giving pops of green. Out the windows on one side, she saw the lake. A boat was passing by.

“I figured we’d relax here, have a swim,” he told her.

She looked at him and saw the hunger in those brown eyes. Heat coiled inside her.

“Is this our next lesson?” she asked breathlessly. “Is it safe to get...distracted?”

Something moved across his face, too fast for her to read it.

Then he smiled. “It’s just you and me, *cara*. We’re safe here, and only my team knows our location.”

She swallowed, desire spreading through her veins.

“Let’s swim,” he said. “The water’s heated.”

“I didn’t bring a suit.”

That sexy smile appeared. “You don’t need one, but there is a box of swimsuits over there.” He pointed. “Near the door to the change rooms.”

She shot him a glance, then headed toward the wooden box. She rifled through it and grabbed a couple of swimsuits.

When she entered the change room, it looked like a fancy spa. It was all marble with some rich wood benches, a huge mirror, and some padded seats. There were fancy lotions and products set out beside the sinks.

She tried on the suits. One was too big, the bikini was too small. The tiny triangles didn’t even try to contain her breasts.

There was only a boring black one piece left. Sighing, she pulled it on. She turned to the mirror and her eyes widened.

Not so boring after all.

It had a plunging V neckline, and the legs were cut high. Two strips of mesh ran around the middle.

It was sexy as hell, and it looked good on her.

She set her shoulders back.



Tomorrow, they were heading into danger. If any part of the plan went wrong...

Her fingers curled. The idea of Matteo being hurt—

*No.* She wasn't going to think those kinds of thoughts.

He'd be fine. Then he'd go back to New York, and she go back to D.C.

She felt a pang at the thought.

She was going to make the most of their time together. She met her gaze in the mirror. She'd squeeze everything she could out of this night together.

She strode out.

He'd just finished a lap of the pool, slicing through the water. He spotted her and rose out of the pool.

Her mouth went dry.

The small, black swimming shorts and bare chest were a hell of a combination. God, he was perfectly formed. She watched the beads of water run down his chest, his ridged abs.

He flicked his wet hair back. His hot gaze ran over her. "*Cara.*"

He stopped, only inches away. Then he reached out and ran a finger along her daring neckline.

Goosebumps broke out on her skin.

"Beautiful." He took her hand. "Come. Let's enjoy the view." He sank onto one of the comfy pool loungers by one of the windows. He tugged her onto his lap.

"I could stare at the lake all day," she said. "It's so beautiful."

He nuzzled her neck. "It's nothing compared to you."

She stifled a moan, tilting to give him better access. His lips teased her skin and pleasure sparked all over. She slid a hand along his damp thigh.

"Matteo."

“When you say my name like that, I want to throw you down and sink my cock inside you.” His voice was a growl.

She turned her head, pressed her lips to his. “Do it.”

He bit her bottom lip. “Oh, no. I’m not rushing this.” He smiled. “Besides, anticipation makes everything better.”

She shivered. “Are you sure?”

“Let’s test the theory.”

He toyed with the neckline of her suit and traced her collarbones. She shivered, enjoying his touch.

Then he pushed one strap of her suit aside, then the other, letting her breasts fall free.

“*Matteo.*”

He played with her nipples until they hardened into pointed nubs. She stared blindly out the window at the lake.

“Someone could look in and see us,” he whispered in her ear.

It was unlikely, but Gabbi didn’t care, she could only feel. It felt a little naughty, but she liked the idea of someone watching them.

Under her butt, she felt his hardening cock. She wasn’t the only one affected.

He tipped her head back and kissed her. A deep, possessive kiss that left her gasping.

Then one of his hands drifted between her thighs. She squirmed.

“You haven’t even been in the pool yet and you’re wet, Gabriella.” He stroked her through the fabric, then pushed it aside.

“Oh, *God.*” She writhed, her ass grinding down on his cock.

He stroked her folds, then found her clit. She moaned, working her hips to meet his firm, teasing rubs. Her pulse was racing, her belly hot.

“Soaking wet for me. Ready for me to sink my hard cock in here.”

Yes. *Yes*. The dirty talk was totally working for her. This anticipation thing was torture, but effective.

Then he sank two fingers inside her.

“Matteo, I... It feels so good.”

He drove his fingers into her. He swallowed her cry with his mouth.

“You feel so good, *cara*.”

His fingers kept plunging, she kept grinding against his touch. She was riding his hand with abandon. Hot feelings coalesced inside her.

“Come, Gabriella,” he growled. “Come for me.”

On the next plunge of his fingers, her muscles clamped down on his fingers. Her climax hit hard.

“Matteo!” She was pure sensation, nothing but her body and what Matteo was doing to it.

He swallowed her cries, his tongue plunging deep.

When she finally came down, she was still shaking with residual pleasure. She tried to pull air into her lungs.

Beneath her, Matteo’s body was taut, his cock a steel rod against her ass.

“Need you, *cara*.” He bit her ear. His fingers were still inside her, and he twisted them. “Need this tight wet heat on my cock.”

She turned her head. His eyes were burning, and her breath hitched. “It’s yours.”

He made a hungry sound. “Not here.” He pulled his hand free of her pussy and she made a husky sound.

Then he was lifting her into his arms and striding out of the pool area.

---

DESIRE WAS TEARING MATTEO APART.

He carried Gabbi up the stairs, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, her hungry mouth at his ear.

Desire was a raw, potent rush pounding inside him with every beat of his heart.

He'd felt desire before. But not like this.

A primal, possessive need drove him. Made him desperate to get closer to this woman.

To be deep inside her.

To claim her.

He wanted their first time to be in a bed. To make it romantic for her. He wanted the space and comfort to do everything he desired to her. To give her everything she wanted.

He made it to the living room, her mouth still at his neck and his hands clasped on her ass. She bit the tendon in his neck, and he groaned. His cock was so hard it was painful. He wasn't going to make it any further.

"The bedroom's too far away," he growled.

"Yes. Here. *Anywhere.*" She was breathless.

He crossed the room and then dropped to his knees on the huge rug in front of the crackling fireplace.

Matteo fought for some control. His need was so great he was worried he might hurt her. He pulled the swimsuit off her with rough tugs, leaving her naked.

He growled. He ran a hand down the center of her naked body.

"I love the way you look at me," she breathed, arching into his touch. "I love the way you touch me."

"And you'll love taking my cock." His voice was ragged.

“*Yes.*” Her face was flushed with heat and need. “Please, I ache for you, Matteo.”

Her words made his cock throb even harder.

“I wanted to make it perfect for you.” He felt a stab of guilt. They were on the damn floor. “Give you soft sheets, some romance—”

She made a needy, frustrated sound and reached for him.

“I just want *you*. Like this. Real. I want you on top of me. I want to see your muscular arms caging me, your weight pinning me down as you fuck me.”

*Merda.* Her words sent a fierce jolt of heat through him.

Straight to his straining cock.

He quickly ripped off his swim shorts and slipped the condom packet from his pocket. In seconds, he tore it open and slid the latex over his distended cock.

Gabbi watched him, need on her face.

He gripped one of her thighs, then stroked her, checking that she was ready.

She made a sexy sound, hips bucking. “Fuck me, Matteo. *Please.*”

He covered her and gripped his cock. He strained to stop himself from just shoving inside her. He nudged the head of his cock against her damp heat. For a second, they both froze.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

Her beautiful blue-gray eyes locked on his face.

“I want to watch you, Gabriella. Watch as I slide deep inside you.”

“*Matteo.*”

His name on her lips sliced through the last of his restraint.

He plunged into her, filling her with one hard thrust.

She cried out.

He felt her stretch around him. “Made for me,” he whispered.

He pulled back, then thrust inside her. Deep. So deep.

*Mine.*

With that word reverberating around his head, his hips hammered against her. He couldn't get close enough, deep enough.

Hot sensation cut through him.

She locked her legs around him, her nails biting into his shoulders. As he kept up the ruthless rhythm, she didn't lie still. She lifted her hips, meeting his thrusts, fucking him back.

She let out a sharp cry, and he felt her body tensing.

She was close.

Close to coming on his cock for the very first time.

Matteo shifted his angle, and she cried out. There was the spot. He kept thrusting.

“You feel so big inside me, Matteo,” she panted.

“Come, Gabriella. Fucking come for me.”

She did.

She cried out, her pussy clenching on his cock.

He kept powering deep, grunting at the pleasure of watching his woman come. His own orgasm rushed closer.

Matteo's climax hit like a one-two punch.

He buried himself inside Gabbi, his head jerking back as he groaned her name. Waves of pleasure whipped through him, left him gasping for air.

Then they were spent.

They lay there on the rug, wrecked, the crackling of the fire the only noise in the room.

He didn't want to pull out. He wanted to stay connected to her.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, and she pulled him down for a kiss.

Matteo rolled to the side, keeping her close. He didn't want to crush her.

"You were right." Her voice was husky.

He could barely string his thoughts together. "About what?"

"Anticipation does make it better."

"Mmm." He nuzzled her neck, tasted the salt on her skin, and smelled the musky scent of sex. "Well, I hope you're anticipating what comes next."

Her eyes widened. "Next?"

"I'm hoping to make it to the bed, as I'd originally planned." He shifted, then tugged her nipple into his mouth.

She gasped.

"I plan to explore the parts of your body that I've neglected. And then test all the sex positions I can think of. And I can think of a lot of them."

Her lips parted, and he saw desire—fresh and hot—appear on her face. "Matteo..."

"*Cara*, my name on your lips and my cock still wet from your sweet pussy, well, you're making me hard again."

She licked her lips.

He rose, and she lay there, sprawled on the rug like some barbarian warrior's prize. Her gaze locked on his cock.

"I'll deal with the condom, then I'll be back," he said.

"Okay."

"You prepare for our next lesson."

Her eyes flashed. "What's that?"

"You on top."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

Gabbi pressed her cheek to the cool sheets, her hands twisted in the disheveled covers. She was on her knees, Matteo's hands clamped on her hips as he powered into her from behind.

"Is this what you need, *cara*?" He thrust deep.

Her cry echoed off the walls. "Yes," she panted.

"All I wanted as soon as I woke up this morning was this. You under me, your skin against mine." His hand slid over her ass. "Your pussy taking my cock."

"Yes." A whimper.

"It's not enough." His hand slid up to her neck and into her hair. He pulled her mouth up to his for a kiss.

"Never enough," she whispered.

She felt his cock throb.

"Time for you to come for me, *tesoro*. Then I'll come inside you." His hand slid along her jaw. "Now."

On his next thrust, her body splintered apart.

Gabbi screamed, her back arching. The pleasure was a hot rush arrowing through her, straight between her legs, to her belly, her soul.

He pinned her down, his thrusts quickening. Flesh slapped against flesh. On his next thrust, he buried his cock deep and found his own release. He made a deep, male sound, his body shuddering.



“Feel you milking me.” His words turned to a groan.

Spent, Gabbi stayed sprawled on the bed, his weight on her.

He didn't rush, taking his time to move off her.

He didn't go far. He laid beside her and pulled her against his sweat-slicked chest. Then he buried his face in her hair, his hands drifting lazily over her back.

She'd learned during their long night together that Matteo liked to touch her. To play with her hair, caress her skin. He was so sexy and tactile.

She shivered, letting out a soft sigh.

“I smell of you, *cara*.” He pressed his mouth against her neck and breathed deeply. “Your taste is on my lips.”

God, everything he said made her shiver.

She looked around the bedroom. The bed was wrecked. Most of the pillows were on the floor. The remnants of the snack he'd made for them in the night was on the dresser, along with some empty wine glasses.

A chair was tipped over. She smiled. He'd sat on it, coaxed her to straddle him, and she'd ridden him. He'd showed her how to move to drive them both crazy. He'd played with her clit until she'd come.

Gabbi had learned she liked being on top.

Matteo sat up. “Unfortunately, I need to get to work on the safe.”

It was a reminder of what they had to do tonight. It made some of her nice sex haze fade.

He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck, then rose. “Stay. Rest a little longer.”

She unashamedly watched his naked, perfect ass as he walked into the bathroom.

*Hmm*. She heard the shower turn on. It was far too easy to imagine that hot body under the water. She'd touched him all

over during the night. She loved his chest, abs, thighs, cock.

Suddenly, the underlying panic that had been growing quietly in her belly over the last twelve hours rose up to choke her.

*Oh, shit.*

She sat up and pushed her tangled hair off her face.

She was falling for Matteo Mancini.

“No.” A low whisper. She couldn’t be that stupid.

Matteo wasn’t a forever kind of guy. He didn’t bring women to his apartment. He didn’t do relationships.

And if he did, it wouldn’t be with someone like her.

She released a shaky breath.

Love was a trap. It made you do stupid things. It gave people the ammunition to hurt you.

The shower shut off and she laid back down.

This mission would be over soon. Her nails bit into her palms. Before she knew it, she’d be back in D.C., alone. Back in her home. Back in her cubicle at Langley.

All she’d have were memories of Matteo.

He strode out of the bathroom. He was wearing tan chinos and a dark navy henley. His thick hair was damp.

He leaned over the bed, that sexy smile in place. He pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

“Take your time, *tesoro*. I’ll be in the pool room with the model of the safe. I left a swimsuit and wrap for you in the bathroom. You can swim while I practice cracking Rivera’s pride and joy.”

Last night Matteo had spent some time printing out parts for the safe model on a 3-D printer.

“I want to go over the layout of Lanza’s villa.” She liked to be prepared. She didn’t want any surprises.

Matteo kissed her nose. “You must have it memorized by now.”

“Almost.”

With another smile, he stalked out with his loose-hipped stride.

Once he was gone, she pressed a hand to her chest.

She *couldn't* fall in love with him. That would be a disaster.

Her heart thudded. She'd survived her family. She'd survived a lack of love, combined with bullying and neglect.

She didn't need love; she only needed herself.

She sat up. She wouldn't regret Matteo or the time they had together.

But she wouldn't take such a terrifying risk as falling in love.

Gabbi showered and discovered that Matteo had left her a tiny, emerald-green bikini with tie sides and a matching green wrap.

With a shake of her head, she slipped it on.

Well, she wouldn't wear it to the beach, but she'd definitely wear it to tease the man she was currently sleeping with.

She smiled and headed for the indoor pool. She made a quick detour by the kitchen for a pastry, then grabbed her laptop from the living room.

She found Matteo sitting on a chair beside the pool. On the low table in front of him rested the mockup of the safe.

“How's it going?” she asked.

His head lifted. When he saw her outfit, his eyes warmed. “Better now.”

“I meant the safe.”

A frustrated look twisted his face. “Okay. I can crack it, but I'm too slow. I need to get faster.”

Gabbi settled on the lounge beside him and opened her laptop. "Practice makes perfect." She pulled up the schematics for Rocco Lanza's Milan villa.

"Why does a single guy need a place this big?" Aside from the ten-bedroom villa, set on several acres of land, there were gardens and several outbuildings.

"Status symbol." Matteo leaned over the safe, fiddling with the lock.

"Have you heard from Killian and Hadley?" she asked.

He nodded. "They haven't seen any sign of Lanza. But there are deliveries coming and going into the villa for the masquerade ball."

Nerves hit Gabbi. She studied the layout of the villa again. "There's no record of a basement office here."

"No. I'm sure he's kept it secret. I'll find it." He looked up. "Killian and Hadley will be here in a few hours."

With a nod, she watched him work. He had his own laptop set up beside him. He worked several times, cracking the safe and shaving time off.

Gabbi decided a swim might help her shake her growing nerves. She slipped off her wrap, then dived into the pool. She did a few laps before something grabbed her ankle.

She shrieked, and found herself pulled up against a hard male body.

A very naked male body.

"I thought you were working." Heat pooled in her belly and her heart rate picked up speed.

"I decided I needed a break as well." He kissed her, backing her across the pool.

She slid her hands into his hair.

"Regular breaks are good for creativity," he told her, kissing her jaw.

"Is this another lesson?"

His gaze met hers, serious. “No. This is just me giving my woman pleasure.”

*His woman?* Her chest clenched.

Then he lifted her out of the water, and set her on the edge of the pool.

“Matteo?”

His hands were at the sides of her bikini bottoms, untying them.

“I wanted to do this as soon as you walked in.” He pulled the scrap of wet fabric free and tossed it aside. Then he pushed her thighs apart and lowered his head.

*Oh. God.*

His tongue licked her. Gabbi writhed on the pool edge. She looked down at that dark head between her legs, his mouth working her over. He sucked on her clit.

“Yes, Matteo. Don’t stop.”

She trembled, her orgasm so tantalizingly close.

“Your taste, I crave it.” Then his mouth was gone.

“No. I was nearly there.”

“You’ll come with me inside you.” His tone was a harsh growl.

He lifted her back into the pool, arms around her, and slid her right onto his cock.

She cried out in shock. Oh, he stretched her. She’d lost track of how many times they’d made love during the night, but still when he filled her, it felt like the first time.

“Ride me, *tesoro*.”

She gripped his shoulders and lifted her hips. Sensation rocked her. Her eyes started drifting closed.

“No,” he growled. “Keep them open. Look at me.”

She met his gaze.

*God.* She couldn’t look away as he moved inside her.

Emotions welled up, she couldn't stop them or control them.

“Gabriella. *Tesoro. Tesoro mio.*”

She'd already been on the edge of a climax, and it only took a few thrusts before she started coming. She cried out.

Matteo's hands clenched on her hips. He thrust her down, his cock deep inside her as he followed her, groaning through his own release.

---

BACK IN HER bikini and wrap, Gabbi flicked through the information on her laptop.

Rocco Lanza spent a lot of money on security.

She felt a trickle of fear. Matteo didn't seem stressed or worried about the impending mission, but she knew if anything went wrong...

Her stomach churned. If Lanza discovered Matteo tonight...

Matteo had gone to deal with the condom he'd sneakily put on before he'd even entered the pool.

The way he'd stared into her eyes as he'd loved her. She pressed a palm to her belly. Did he feel more than desire?

God, that thought terrified and left her giddy at the same time.

His laptop dinged. An incoming message. It dinged again.

Maybe it was Killian and Hadley? Gabbi leaned over. The message window was open in the center of the screen.

***I heard you're in Italy. I want to see you, caro. It's been too long since I had your arms around me.***

Gabbi's stomach dropped. Her gaze flicked up to earlier messages in the thread. Ones where Matteo had interacted with whoever this was.

Two words stood out.

*Ti amo.*

*Ti amo.* He'd typed that to this person.

I love you.

Gabbi felt a little sick. Pulling in a shaky breath, she sat back.

Maybe it wasn't just his work that had made him swear off relationships? Maybe he was already in love with someone?

With someone he couldn't have.

Gabbi set her laptop down and stood. She had no claim on him. No right to feel... whatever the hell she was feeling.

Right now, she needed a bit of alone time to pull herself together.

Matteo strode back in, dressed in his clothes again.

"*Cara*, are you hungry—?"

"I'm not." Her voice was sharper than she'd intended.

He slowed and eyed her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm going to change." She walked around the pool. As she passed him, he grabbed her arm.

She snatched it free. "I'll...be back in a minute."

He frowned. "Gabbi—"

She shot him a fake smile. "I won't be long."

As soon as she stepped out of the pool room, she picked up speed. She jogged up the steps.

*I'm not in love with Matteo Mancini.*

*Oh, God. No, I'm not in love with him.*

But she felt terribly hollow.

"So stupid, Gabbi," she whispered.

Suddenly, a hard arm snaked around her. She was pulled back against a hard, familiar body.

“*Cara.*”

She swallowed. She hadn’t even heard him.

“Talk to me,” he said.

“I just need to get changed. And get my head in the right space for tonight.”

“You saw my messages.”

She closed her eyes. *Shit.* “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

He growled in her ear. “Weren’t you just screaming my name? Coming on my cock? I think that makes it your business.”

She swallowed, her throat impossibly tight. “We aren’t a couple, we’re just...”

“Fucking.”

He sounded angry. She gripped the arm wrapped around her waist. “It’s not my business.” She just needed to get back to the bedroom. To be alone so she could pull herself back together.

“If I saw you messaging some guy, I’d make it my business,” he said.

His teeth dragged across her neck, and she gasped.

“Your family trained you to expect nothing.” His tone vibrated with anger.

She bit her lip. *Why was he doing this?*

He spun her, his face set in hard lines. “Ask me.”

“It’s *not* my business.”

“Ask me who she is.”

Pain cut through Gabbi’s insides. She turned her head. “It doesn’t matter.” She couldn’t let it matter.

“Damn, you can be stubborn when you’re protecting yourself.”



Anger burst through, and she glared at him. “Do you blame me? Any time I’ve wanted something, it’s been snatched away or denied. I know disappointment. I know that it’s better not to take the risk than to suffer for it.”

“You’re braver than that.” He cupped her cheek. “You deserve more.”

“I’m not.” She tried to pull away. “Please let me go and change.”

He held her tight. “Ask me.”

She yanked away, furious at him. “Why are you doing this?”

“Ask me,” he growled again.

“I don’t need to know about whatever gorgeous, glamorous Italian woman you fuck when you’re here!”

She was almost shouting. She tried to pull away again.

“Her name is Monica.”

“I don’t want to know!” Gabbi wanted to kick him.

“Monica Mancini. She’s my mother.”

Gabbi stilled. “What?”

He smiled. “My mom.”

“I thought you were estranged from your family?”

“Oh, I am. My father gave me a fiery ultimatum years ago, law enforcement or being a part of the Mancini family. When I was still with the DIA, one of the mafia groups bombed his car.”

Gabbi sucked in a breath.

“Luckily, he wasn’t in it. My father can be an asshole a lot of the time, but I never wanted him dead. When I refused to give up my career, I distanced myself. It made sense because even when they drive me crazy, I don’t want any of my family dead.” A faint smile tipped his lips. “There are a lot of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Most of my family was relieved, but not my mother. She’s kept in touch, and I see her occasionally

when it's safe. But I would never do anything to put her in harm's way."

"Oh," Gabbi said.

Matteo rubbed his thumb over her lips. "You're the only woman I want in my bed, *tesoro*."

"It's temporary," she whispered.

His smile widened. "I've decided I don't want temporary."

Her eyes widened. "You can't just change your mind."

He reeled her in closer. "I can. I have. You've changed me."

"No."

"Yes. I'm claiming you, Gabriella Hansley."

She shook her head wildly. "No." Fear was like a rush of birds in her chest.

He kissed her. "*Si*. You'll see. Now, go and get changed. Killian and Hadley will be here soon."

"Matteo, you can't just say—"

He gave her ass a pat. "Go. I don't need Killian seeing you in a bikini. Now, I need to get back to the safe." He swiveled, heading back toward the pool room.

"Matteo," she called out. "We'll talk about this later."

He looked back at her and winked.

*Stubborn man.* Gabbi swallowed a growl.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“Done.” Matteo stood back from the table as his prototype safe clicked open.

Beside him, Killian looked at his Patek Philippe watch. “Good. You were under the time limit that time.”

Matteo grinned. “Now all I need is to do it on Lanza’s safe. I couldn’t have done it without the intel from Mav, and Monroe O’Connor-Roth’s input.”

They were in the villa dining room, at the large, long table that was covered with printouts of the safe, the model, surveillance photos, and laptops.

He and Killian were already dressed in their suits, their jackets hanging on the backs of the chairs. Hadley and Gabbi were upstairs getting ready.

When Hadley had arrived, she’d swept in with several garment bags and dragged Gabbi away.

He looked down at the table. There were some surveillance shots of Lanza outside his villa that Killian had taken earlier in the day. He had a woman tucked under each arm, and in the shots, was kissing both of them before the women left.

*Charming.*

Matteo’s thoughts turned to Gabbi.

She was scared.

Not just about the mission, but of her feelings for him. His jaw tightened. He got it. He knew what she’d been through

growing up. She'd created her defenses to protect herself.

He'd done the same. After everything he'd done and seen in his work, keeping everyone—especially women—at arm's length was something he'd perfected.

But he was done with that now.

Gabbi felt like redemption, salvation, and light all rolled into one.

As soon as he'd looked into her blue-gray eyes, he'd been done keeping his distance.

Now, he just had to get through tonight, see Rocco Lanza locked up, and then Matteo would set about convincing Gabriella Hansley that she was his.

His heart pulsed. And that he was falling for her.

“Matteo?”

He looked up. Killian was watching him with a sharp gaze.

“Sorry.” Matteo slid his hands into his pockets. “Killian, whatever happens tonight, I need you to promise me something.”

His boss and friend nodded. “Anything. You know that.”

“If something happens to me, look after her. Look after Gabbi.”

Killian stared at him for a beat. “Nothing is happening to you.”

“You know better than anyone you can't promise that.”

Killian leaned in, his tone sharpening. “*Nothing* happens to my people. I take care of them, and I take care of the people they love.”

“Love. Shit.” Matteo ran a hand over his hair.

Now Killian smiled. “I hadn't pegged you to be the next to take the fall, but I'm happy for you. Gabbi's smart, quietly beautiful, and loyal.”

“She's afraid. Her fucked-up family means she's got defenses. Not spiky, angry ones, but quiet, solid walls to keep

everyone out.”

“Sounds like someone else I know. Who denies himself all the good in life because he doesn’t think he deserves it. Who hides behind a charming smile.”

Matteo blew out a breath. “I’m changing my ways.”

“Good.”

“But I still need to convince Gabbi that she’s mine.”

“My money’s on you, Matteo, but first, let’s put Rocco Lanza behind bars.”

Matteo heard the sound of heels clicking on the floor.

He turned to see Hadley sweep down the stairs.

She was stunning in silver. Her dress had a V-neck, no sleeves, and had shimmering beads that hugged her torso. The beads petered out by her waist and gave way to a gauzy skirt that fell in a long sweep to the floor. As she walked, one slim leg showed through a high slit. She held an ornate silver metal mask in her hand. Her brown hair was up in a fancy twist, and diamonds winked in her ears.

“Well?” She cocked a hip.

“Beautiful as always,” Killian said.

“Hot, *bella*.”

“Wait until you see Gabbi.” Hadley’s grin was more than a little smug.

It set nerves alive in his gut.

A second later, Gabbi descended the stairs. Matteo’s breath hitched in his chest.

Her dress was red, but it was a deep, rust-colored satin. The fabric only covered one shoulder which left the other one bare. He stared at the expanse of golden skin on display. The long, full skirt swept behind her. Like Hadley’s, it had a long slit and yes, showed *way* too much leg for his liking.

She stopped in front of him and fidgeted a little. A black mask dotted with silver and red crystals was clutched between

her hands.

“Do I pass muster?” she asked.

Matteo didn't say anything. He strode forward, yanked her to him, and kissed her.

She gripped his shoulders and kissed him back.

He didn't want to let her go. He wanted to drag her back upstairs. He wanted her safe.

But he forced himself to step back.

“Well, now I'll have to redo her lipstick.” Hadley bustled forward, grinning.

“You look gorgeous, Gabbi.” He traced her cheekbone.

“All right,” Killian said. “Everyone knows the plan. We get inside and scout out the villa. I'll plant a bug so Hex can get into the security system and take care of the cameras. Hadley will get a security key card from one of the guards. She'll hand that off to Matteo, who'll sneak into Lanza's office, crack the safe, and retrieve the laptop.”

“After I have the laptop, Gabbi and I will hand it off to Aurelio,” Matteo said. “Who will be waiting outside with a team of agents. Once they verify the information, they'll arrest Lanza and we'll go home.”

Gabbi blew out a breath. “You make it sound so easy.”

Matteo squeezed her hand. “It's going to be fine.” He leaned down and lowered his voice so only she could hear. “Then we'll come back here, I'll get you out of that dress, and convince you that you're falling for me.”

She groaned, one of her hands gripping his bicep. “Matteo”

“No arguments, *tesoro*. Save them for later when I have you naked.”

She drew back, her gaze direct on his.

“I'm going to keep you safe.” He traced her jaw. “Whatever it takes.”

A flash of fear in her eyes. Her hand tightened. “You have to stay safe, too.”

He jerked his chin.

“I mean it, Matteo. No unnecessary risks. No getting hurt. No confronting Lanza.”

This woman was definitely falling for him.

He kissed her again, Hadley squawking about not ruining her makeup.

The truth was, he didn’t want to lie to Gabbi.

Because he’d take every risk to protect her. He’d take a knife or a bullet to keep her safe.

---

THE ENTIRE DRIVE TO MILAN, Gabbi tried not to fidget. She kept her nerves at bay by cradling her laptop and triple checking the plan.

So many things could go wrong.

Matteo reached out from the driver’s seat and squeezed her knee. They were together in the Maserati, while Killian and Hadley were ahead in a Bentley.

Gabbi let out a shaky breath.

It wasn’t just the mission messing with her. It was Matteo insisting that she was developing feelings for him.

Her insides squirmed.

She knew that while her family had left scratches on her heart, Matteo Mancini could destroy her.

*Don’t think about that now, Gab. Later.*

“It’s going to be fine.” He navigated the Milan streets as if he’d lived there his entire life.

“I just want this to be over.” She wanted Lanza in police custody and Matteo safe.

“Soon. I promise you that you’ll sleep like a baby in my arms tonight, *cara*.”

She closed her eyes and shivered at the promise in his voice.

The villa came into view, along with a long line of limos and expensive cars pulling through the ornate gates into the drive.

The villa was large, old, and sprawling. The yellow façade was grand, with green shutters and lavish carvings.

A message pinged on the laptop. She looked down and saw a message from Hex.

***Gabbi, good luck! You’re a part of the team now. Remember, they have your back.***

Gabbi typed in a response.

***Thanks, Hex.***

***And I’m pretty sure Matteo has more than your back.***

A winking emoji followed.

Gabbi laughed. “It’s Hex.”

“What is that troublemaker saying?”

“She’s just wishing us luck.” They couldn’t risk earpieces in the ball, because they could be discovered, so Hex was out of contact with them.

Gabbi slid the laptop away. The villa grounds were just as stunning as the building. Lanza must have an army of gardeners.

Lights were strung up in the well-pruned trees. The villa was all ready for the party.

Matteo pulled the car to a stop. Then he grabbed his black half mask and rested it over his face.

God, he was so handsome. He was dressed all in black, with a black shirt and mask.

Hades come to life.



She felt a tingle. She wanted to slide her hands under his shirt and feel his skin. Feel the warmth of him. She wanted to be wrapped up in bed with him.

He'd made her addicted to what he could do to her body.

He got out and circled the car. As he spoke to the valet, Gabbi pulled on her own mask.

Matteo opened the door, and she accepted his hand, then stepped out.

His lips quirked, and he tucked her close to him as they ascended the stairs, following the line of glittering guests heading inside.

Ahead, she saw a flash of Hadley's silver dress.

As they walked up the steps, Gabbi felt people looking. One masked man caught her eye and smiled at her.

Matteo leaned down. "They're all wondering who the gorgeous creature on my arm is."

She fought back a flush.

As they moved forward, she noted several severe-looking security guards standing around. Her stomach knotted.

Then they were inside.

The inside of the villa lacked the modern, homey charm of Matteo's. This was very grand with lots of gold leaf, opulent ceilings, and chandeliers. It screamed of wealth and history.

When she stepped into the ballroom, she didn't bother to hide the fact that she was gaping at it all. It was so grand. There were glossy parquet floors, enormous chandeliers, and heavy drapes. Large potted plants and vases of elaborate flower arrangements filled the space.

Lots of couples were dancing. At the far end of the room, she saw long tables loaded with food. One had an ice sculpture of swans on it.

All these people preening, drinking, and eating, with no idea that their host was an up-and-coming mafia don.

A thief and a killer.

“Do you see Lanza?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

Matteo sauntered along like he didn't have a care in the world. They circled the room, checking the exit and entry points, and noting the positions of the guards.

The first part of the plan was for Killian to plant the bug to give Hex access. Hex would then take out the cameras and text Killian once she had them on a loop to fool the security guards.

Then it would be Hadley's turn to steal a key card from a guard and hand it off to Matteo. The card was the only way down to Lanza's secure level.

She saw Matteo pull out his phone, read a message, then smile. “Aurelio's in place outside.”

She nodded.

“Would you like to dance?” Matteo asked.

She looked at him askance. “No. I'm too nervous. I'd trip for sure.”

He cupped her face. “You don't give yourself enough credit. You're smart, beautiful, with a stubbornness that you keep well hidden. You're capable of so much. On top of that, you overcame a horrible family. You're a miracle, Gabriella.”

He meant it. It was obvious from his tone and the look in his eyes.

Behind her mask, tears welled, and emotion swamped her.

It was too late.

She was already madly in love with Matteo Mancini.

She went up on her toes and kissed his jaw. “And you're a good man, Matteo. Bold, charming, a protector. A man who fights for what's right, no matter how hard it is.”

His hands tightened on her. “I'm not all good.”

“I know. I know the darkness is there.” She nipped his lips. “It’s a part of you. It helped make you who you are. Stop fighting it so hard.” She lowered her voice. “Besides, I like the darker you sometimes.”

With a growl, he tipped her head back. Her lips parted.

“You want the rougher, edgier me as well, *cara*? If you do, be sure.”

“I want all of you, Matteo. Just as you are.”

Suddenly, she sensed a presence and saw Matteo tense. They spun.

An older woman with a fabulous figure stood in a long mermaid-style dress in deep green. It had a strapless bodice with a short jacket on top. Her hair was pulled up in a dramatic updo, and her face was covered by a mask decorated with feathers. She rested one hand on her hip.

“Matteo,” the woman drawled.

He tensed.

*Oh, no.* Gabbi glanced at him. *Who the hell was this?*

“Mom,” he replied.

*What?* Gabbi jolted. This stylish creature was his mother?

Sharp green eyes settled on Gabbi. “And who is this?”

“This is my Gabriella.” He smoothed a hand down Gabbi’s arm.

“Hello, there,” the woman said with a faint American accent.

“Hi,” Gabbi said.

“Mom, we’re working,” he warned her.

“Really?” Signora Mancini sounded amused. “You look like you’re ready to drag the girl off to a dark corner.”

Matteo grinned. “That’s for later.”

Gabbi’s cheeks flushed. “We aren’t together.”

Signora Mancini’s eyebrows winged up.

“We *are*,” Matteo said. “Gabbi is still adjusting to the idea.”

He sounded supremely confident, and she glared at him.

His mother laughed. “A woman who keeps you on your toes.”

“Instead of falling on them,” Gabbi said dryly.

Signora Mancini laughed again. “Exactly. Just what he needs.” She reached out for Matteo’s hand, squeezed. Even with the mask on, Gabbi could see the love on the woman’s face.

“I feel a trip to New York coming on.”

“You’re welcome anytime.” He paused. “Is father here?”

Signora Mancini’s nose wrinkled. “No. Working, as usual. Although, he’s...mellowed a lot lately. Now, it’s time for more champagne. Be safe, darling. Gabriella, a pleasure. We’ll talk soon.”

She turned and stalked back into the crowd. More than one gaze turned to watch her.

A moment later, Hadley appeared, looking a little flustered. “We have a problem.”

“Have you got the key card?” Matteo asked quietly.

She shook her head. “Someone recognized me. He’s following me, so I can’t get the card with him watching.”

“Who?” Matteo frowned, scanning the crowd.

“Him.” Hadley jerked her head.

Gabbi followed the woman’s gaze. “Oh, wow.”

*Him* was a lean, good-looking man in a classic tuxedo, and a black and gold mask. He had well-cut brown hair, and the faintest five o’clock shadow.

“Who’s that?” Gabbi asked.

“Bennett Knightley,” Hadley said.

“The British billionaire?” Gabbi had heard of him. Hell, everyone had heard of him.

“Yes. But don’t let the rich-guy persona fool you. He’s also ex-SAS. Special Air Service. His company has numerous contracts with MI6, and makes all kinds of military tech. We’ve met once before, when I worked in MI6. He’s charming, proper, but powerful. Do not underestimate him. He’s dangerous.”

“Friend or foe?” Matteo asked.

“Friend. Knightley has a strong code and he sticks to it. But right now, he’s a friend who’s in my way.”

And with that, Knightley joined their group, his gaze on Hadley.

“I thought that was you, Ms. Lockwood.”

“Mr. Knightley. A pleasure.” Her tone said otherwise. She introduced Matteo and Gabbi.

Knightley’s gaze flicked between them, and Gabbi had the distinct impression he knew they were up to something.

“Ms. Lockwood, may I have this dance?” He held out a hand. Something in his voice warned that he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Hadley shook her head. “No, I’m sorry I—”

“She’d love to.” Gabbi smiled and gave Hadley a shove. “Don’t worry, Hadley. We’ll take care of...things.”

As Bennett Knightley whisked Hadley away, the woman sent Gabbi and Matteo an annoyed look over the man’s shoulder.

Gabbi swiveled. “Now, I’d better get going.”

Matteo cocked his head. “Go where?”

She stiffened her spine. “To steal a key card.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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**W**atching Gabbi move through the crowd toward a guard almost killed him.

Matteo had never felt this nervous on a mission before. In the past, he'd just been risking himself. At times, he'd relished the risks he'd taken in order to take down his targets.

But risking Gabbi, in any way...

No, he didn't like it.

After this, he was going to love her so hard she'd never doubt his feelings. He was going to keep her safe and protected.

The red dress flared behind her. People watched her, mainly men.

Scowling, he followed her at a distance.

She had a confidence that she'd lacked just a short time ago, when he'd first seen that sensible CIA analyst in a D.C. restaurant.

He saw her stop. A guard stood nearby. He was a big guy, who looked like he'd prefer not to be in a suit and at this party. He was scanning the crowd with a blank face.

"You look like you need this." Killian appeared, holding two glasses filled with what had to be whiskey. Knowing Killian, it was the good stuff.

Matteo took the glass, and knocked it back in one gulp.

"She'll be fine," Killian said.

“You saw Hadley got cornered by Bennett Knightley.”

Killian lifted his chin. “The guy checks out. I’ve met him a couple of times before.”

“He picked a bad time to be friendly.”

“He did. And I’d prefer not to bring more people in on our plan tonight.” Killian sipped his drink, his gaze skimming the crowd. “The man of the hour appears to be enjoying himself.”

Matteo turned his head. The crowd parted a little.

Rocco Lanza stood in the center of a large group. People were laughing, hanging on his every word.

He wore a tailored suit with a deep-red, three-quarter length coat covered in gold embroidery, a cravat, a red top hat, and a gold mask.

No blending in for Lanza.

Several women hovered nearby, trying to claim his attention.

*You are going down, asshole.*

Matteo turned his back on the man. Gabbi was approaching the guard. She was looking in her tiny purse, pretending to look distressed, as if she couldn’t find something.

Then suddenly, she pitched forward and slammed into the guard.

The man caught her. Matteo saw Gabbi’s mask was askew, baring her face.

*Shit.* His gut clenched, but she quickly righted it, lifting a foot to show the guard the broken heel of her strappy shoe.

The guard frowned at her, but as she lifted her foot, and showed off a whole lot of leg, the guard noticed that too. The guy’s face softened a little, and he grabbed her elbow to steady her.

Matteo gritted his teeth.

Killian made a sound and Matteo looked up. His boss looked highly amused.

“One day you’ll know what this feels like,” Matteo growled.

Killian sipped his drink. “I doubt that.”

Matteo scoffed. “You’ll go down eventually, my friend.” He glanced over at Gabbi again.

She was smiling, apologizing profusely. She kicked off both her shoes. That had probably been part of her plan all along. He knew she hated high heels.

“It’ll be the best thing that ever happens to you,” Matteo said quietly.

Killian made a noncommittal sound.

“I’ll just enjoy watching you and Wolf bask in your bliss.” Killian turned. “Now, get that key card and let’s get this done. I’ll do another lap to check the exits are clear, and ensure Lanza is kept busy.”

Matteo slid his gaze to the women fawning over the young chef. “You arranged that?”

Killian’s gave him an enigmatic look and disappeared into the crowd.

Matteo focused back on Gabbi, watching her move away from the guard.

Suddenly, a woman stepped in front of Matteo, blocking his view.

“Hello there,” she purred.

The woman wore a painted-on black dress that was see-through in strategic places. She held a white mask on a stick up to her face, and her tumble of dark-brown hair fell in an artful mess around her shoulders.

“I’ve been watching you, and you are...” She licked her lips. She dropped the mask, and he recognized her as a well-known Italian model.



“I’m sorry,” he said. “I need—”

The woman pressed a hand to his chest. “You need to take me for a dance.” She leaned in, her perfume engulfing him. It wasn’t a bad scent, it just wasn’t Gabbi’s sweet smell.

The woman rubbed against him. “Then you need to find a dark, private corner and fuck me.”

Over the woman’s shoulder, he saw Gabbi watching them. Her steps faltered, her wide eyes on the back of the woman’s head.

*Merda.*

He tried to push the woman back a step. “I already have plans.”

The woman arched a well-plucked brow. “No one says no to me.”

And a week ago, he wouldn’t have either.

But now everything had changed.

“Excuse me.” Gabbi’s sharp voice interrupted them.

She wedged a hand between Matteo and the woman, then shoved her shoulder in.

“This one is mine,” Gabbi said. “Go find another victim.”

The model towered over Gabbi. In her heels, she was only a few inches shorter than Matteo. Her dark eyes flashed. “I’m every man’s fantasy, and you are—”

Matteo tensed.

Gabbi snorted. “Real. I’m real. When he drags me down on our bed, every move I make, every sound I utter, every time I touch him, it’s real. It’s not a stage show. It’s not a competition.”

*Dio, he loved her.*

He wrapped an arm around her middle and nuzzled her ear. “I want to fuck you so badly.”

She melted back against him, then she glanced at the woman. “Go.”

The model sniffed, swiveled on her sky-high heels, then strode off.

Gabbi turned and gripped his lapels.

“Really want to fuck you,” he said again.

“Later,” she replied. “Right now, you have a job to do.” She moved her hand, and he saw the security key card in her fingers.

“My clever, *cara*.” He kissed her and slid the card from her fingers and into his jacket pocket.

Her face turned serious. “Be careful, Matteo.”

“I will.” He cupped her cheek. “I have something very important to get back to.”

For a second, she looked like she wanted to say more. Then she smoothed her hands down his lapels.

“Go. Be quick. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“This will be over soon.” He gave her sweet lips another quick kiss, then he stalked into the crowd, heading toward the corridor that would lead to the basement level.

*Show time.*

---

GABBI TAPPED her bare foot on the floor.

Her chest was tight, her hands sweaty.

Matteo was right now sneaking into Lanza’s office below. She clenched her hands together and stared blindly at the party.

She’d gotten the key card. Maybe she could be a field agent after all.

Her stomach did a sickening twirl. Or maybe not.

A server in a fancy mask walked past with a loaded tray of drinks.

“I’ll take one of those.” She nabbed a champagne flute.  
“*Grazie.*”

She took several gulps, and the bubbles fizzed uncomfortably in her belly.

What if he got caught? What if he couldn’t crack the safe? What if he triggered an alarm? What if Lanza hurt him?

She felt like she had a rock in her throat.

Being in love with someone hurt. The worry for them was terrible.

She reached over and ditched the champagne glass on a table.

Then she touched her lips. She still felt Matteo’s kiss. She couldn’t change her feelings for him, even if she wanted to.

Loving him had changed her.

It made her feel stronger, not weaker.

She knew in her heart that Matteo would never willingly hurt her. He wouldn’t use her feelings against her as her family had.

She tried not to glance at the doorway where he’d disappeared. Instead, she looked around. She couldn’t see Hadley or Killian anywhere, but she knew they wouldn’t be far away.

Soon, Matteo would be back with the laptop, and they’d get out of here.

Lanza would go to jail, and Matteo would be safe.

She turned.

And her gaze crashed into a light-brown one.

Rocco Lanza was looking at her.

She froze. He couldn’t know who she was. Her body itched to turn and run, but she forced herself to stay still.

He smiled at her, then turned back to the other partygoers beside him. He didn’t seem worried or upset.

Just a host, acknowledging his guests.

But her belly curdled.

She slipped past some guests, skirting a woman in a huge blue gown. Gabbi stopped by one of the large potted plants dotted around the ballroom and nibbled on her lip.

She tried some breathing techniques she knew. No, the nerves were still killing her.

She'd totally suck as a field agent.

Then she saw him.

She sucked in a breath. Matteo was sauntering her way, like he had zero problems, like all was right in his world.

How did he manage to pull that off?

“*Cara.*” He reached her and kissed her. She clung to him, sliding her hands under his jacket.

He wasn't carrying anything.

“Did you get it?” she whispered.

He smiled, his voice low. “Safe opened for me like an eager lover.”

She frowned. “I'm not sure I like that comparison.”

“I got the laptop, but more guards were moving in as I was heading out. It got too risky. I didn't want to be caught with the laptop. I stashed it in one of the plants in the ballroom.”

Her heart thumped against her ribs. “Okay. So, we wait, and nab it once it's clear.”

He nodded. “Until then, we look like innocent guests enjoying the evening.”

He pressed his mouth to hers.

Gabbi lost herself in the kiss. Part of it was fueled by desire and the rest by the rush of adrenaline. It turned a little wild.

“*Tesoro.*” He groaned. “You're killing me.”

“You started it.” She looked around, and tried to focus, despite the fact that her blood was singing. “There are too many guards still.”

“Mmm.” Matteo slid an arm around her and hurried her across the ballroom.

He kissed her again, then nudged her into a side room.

Gabbi took a second to notice the grand sitting room. There was a desk, and some ornate and uncomfortable-looking couches.

Matteo backed her up, fingers sliding into the slit of her dress, and straight between her legs.

“Matteo.” She arched into him.

He stroked her. “Later, *cara*, I’m going to put my mouth here, and feast on you. I can’t seem to ever get my fill of you.”

She never wanted him to get his fill of her.

His mouth traveled down her neck. “I wish we were somewhere safe, where I could get you out of this dress.”

He pulled back, and she pressed her palm over his rapidly beating heart. “Soon.”

He nipped her lips. “Soon.” He stepped back. “Now, I need to get my cock under control.”

Her gaze dropped. He had a very large bulge in his pants and she bit her lip.

“Not helping, *tesoro*.”

She smiled.

He stalked around the room, pausing to study a painting hanging on the cream wall.

Suddenly, the door flung open.

Two big guards charged in; guns drawn.

It happened so fast.

The gunshots echoed loudly in the office sitting room, and Gabbi screamed. Matteo fell.

She pushed forward, her heart beating hard.

No. *Oh, God, no.*

She stared in horror at the spray of blood on the wall. All she could see was Matteo's feet on the floor, the rest of him blocked by one of the couches.

He wasn't moving.

No. *No.*

Her heart caved in.

*Matteo.*

"Ah, Ms. Hansley." Rocco Lanza strode in, smiling.

She couldn't breathe.

"My guard recognized you earlier when your mask was knocked off," Lanza said. "When you stole his key card."

She stared at the blood on the wall. "What did you do?"

"I finally eliminated the man who ruined my life." Lanza's face twisted. "It's not how I wanted to do it, but I have more important things to worry about." He gripped her chin, hard. She tried to pull free.

"Hades took something that belongs to me, and I want it back." His voice was cold, harsh.

*Oh, shit.* She couldn't think, the pain was so bad.

Matteo was dead.

She wanted to wail and scream.

"Ms. Hansley." Lanza shook her. "Where is my laptop?"

She looked up into the face of Matteo's killer. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His smile turned nasty. "You're a terrible liar. Luckily, I have ways to make you talk." He waved a hand. "Bring her."

"And the body?" The guard asked.

*Body.* Gabbi flinched. *Matteo.*

"Leave it," Lanza snapped.

Gabbi was roughly shoved out of the room, her heart in tatters.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

**W**ith a groan, Matteo rolled to his side.

His head was thumping and his arm was burning.

“Matteo? Matteo?” Killian dropped down beside him.

Behind his boss was a worried Hadley.

“What the fuck happened?” Killian demanded.

“Fuck. I—” Matteo touched the back of his head. He couldn’t think. He looked at the blood on his fingers.

“Let me look.” Hadley knelt behind him, probing the head wound.

Matteo lifted his gaze and saw the spray of blood on the wall. *Hell.*

“He has a gunshot wound on his arm,” Killian said.

Hadley made a sound. “Looks like it just clipped him, and ruined an excellent Zegna suit. And it looks like you must have hit your head on the edge of the table when you fell.”

“I’m fine,” Matteo gritted out, ignoring his headache.

“Matteo, where’s Gabbi?” Killian’s face was set in serious lines.

*Gabbi.*

His heart tried to punch out of his chest. “*Fuck.*” He tried to get up and the room swam.

“Easy.” Killian helped him up.



“Gabbi. Lanza and his goons busted in. They shot me, and that’s all I remember. I don’t know what happened.” The room was empty. No Gabbi. Panic slashed at him. “I don’t know where she is.” He met Killian’s dark gaze. “Lanza has Gabbi.”

“Keep it together. We’ll find her.”

“If he took her, he wants her alive,” Hadley added.

“To lure me out,” Matteo said. “He’ll hurt her to punish me.”

This is all his fault.

“Matteo, where’s the laptop?” Killian asked.

Matteo went still. “There were too many guards. I hid it in a potted plant in the ballroom. Fuck, Lanza might be trying to get that information from Gabbi.” He took a step forward. “I need to get to her.”

Someone ran through the door in a fast blur. The person slammed a kick into Matteo’s gut, knocking him onto the couch. Pain shot up his arm.

A fast swing caught Hadley in the chest, and she flew back against the desk.

Killian whirled. He and the attacker slammed together, ending up with a knife pressed to Killian’s throat.

Matteo fought back his pain and stared at the woman. She had a long fall of deep red hair that should’ve clashed with her blood-red, slinky dress. But it didn’t. It looked stunning on her. The dress had tiny straps, was cut low in front, and it had no back, showing off a lot of pale skin. Her lips were painted bright red, and she had a swing of diamonds at her ears.

“Hello, Steel.” The woman didn’t sound happy to see Killian. “Tell your people not to move, or you’ll end up with blood on your very nice suit.”

“Hold your positions,” Killian clipped out.

“Now, does someone want to tell me how the fuck Rocco Lanza ended up snatching my best friend?”

Matteo frowned. “Best friend?”

The woman's green eyes cut to him. Not a lady to mess with.

"Hello, Devyn," Killian drawled. "The knife is a little dramatic."

The redhead shoved the knife a little harder against Killian's neck. He didn't react.

"Devyn?" Matteo said. "You're Gabbi's friend from the CIA."

"Devyn 'Hellfire' Hayden," Killian said. "Meet my team. Matteo and Hadley."

"Hades and Striker. I know who they are."

"How about you cut me later, and right now, we work on saving Gabbi?" Killian suggested silkily.

Devyn stared at him for a beat, then stepped back, lowering the knife.

"Hellfire," Matteo said. "Because of the hair?"

She shot him a biting look before she slipped the knife away through a slit in her dress. "No, because of the missile."

"She hits like a precision strike," Killian said.

A small smile crossed Devyn's lips. "Some people say it's because I send bad guys to the eternal fires of hell. You pick." She glared at Matteo. "And you, Mr. Italian Lover seduced my friend and dragged her into danger."

"The danger was unintended. The seduction wasn't."

Devyn's eyes narrowed and she took a step toward him.

"I'm also in love with her," Matteo added.

The redhead paused, and her eyes widened a fraction.

"I'd really like to get her back," he said.

"Let's stop that bleeding first." Hadley opened her small evening bag and pulled out a bandage. It never ceased to amaze Matteo how prepared Hadley was. She pulled all sorts of things out of her bag in the middle of a mission.

She quickly tied the bandage around his arm.

“How’s the head?” Killian asked.

“Okay.” Nothing was going to stop Matteo from going after his woman.

“We need to retrieve the laptop,” Killian said. “If Lanza gets the location from Gabbi, he might get to it first.”

Matteo frowned. Gabbi was his first priority.

“I’ll go,” Hadley said. “You guys find Gabbi.”

“You can’t go alone.” Killian scowled. “There are guards everywhere.”

The door opened, and they all tensed.

Bennett Knightley slipped in, looking perfectly pressed in his tuxedo.

Hadley scowled. “Are we having a bloody convention?”

“I know you’re working a job,” Knightley said. “I thought I could be of assistance.” He shot them a smile.

Killian studied the man, then nodded. “Knightley, go with Hadley. She needs to recover a laptop with vital information on it, and not get caught doing it.”

There was a flash in the billionaire’s eyes. Matteo caught a glimpse of the former military operator under the expensive suit.

Knightley nodded. “My pleasure.”

Hadley sighed, then kissed Matteo’s cheek. “Bring our girl home.”

“I will.”

Hadley stalked to the door. “Come on, Knightley. Keep up.”

The billionaire’s lips quirked, and he followed her out.

Devyn straightened. “I saw Lanza with several guards and Gabbi. They were heading out of the villa.”

“There are several outbuildings on the estate,” Matteo said.

They needed to find her. *Fast.*

If Lanza hurt her, one tiny scratch, Matteo would kill him.

Killian lifted his phone and pressed it to his ear. “Hex, Lanza has Gabbi. We need a location.” He paused. “Thanks.” He slid the phone away. “A stone warehouse building where Lanza stores his wine.”

Devyn smiled. “I know the one. Come on. Luckily, I stashed a bag of flash bangs and weapons outside.”

Matteo and Killian stared at her.

The CIA agent shrugged. “It pays to be prepared.”

As they headed out, a fear unlike any Matteo had known, gripped him.

“I can’t lose her.”

Devyn and Killian turned to look at him, with near-identical deadly looks on their faces.

“Not going to happen,” Devyn said.

“We’re going to get your woman back,” Killian said.

Matteo nodded. *I’m coming, Gabriella.*

---

GABBI SHIFTED, trying to ease the pain in her shoulders.

Not that it mattered. The pain inside her would never go away.

Matteo was dead.

Every time she thought of the blood on the wall, and his feet, so still...

Agony ripped through her and she closed her eyes.

She swallowed against the pain, and when she opened them, she stared blindly at the stone wall. Why hadn’t she told him how she felt? Why hadn’t she found the courage to tell him that she loved him?

She looked around. She was in a large shed with stone walls. Rows of wooden barrels were stacked along one side of the large space. She was strung up, hanging from a wooden beam overhead.

Lanza's thugs had tied the rope tight, and hoisted her up so just her toes touched the concrete floor.

They were off to the side, murmuring to each other.

Then Rocco Lanza stepped in front of her. He set a small roll of fabric on the bench beside him.

"Why don't you make this easy, Ms. Hansley? Where is my laptop?"

She stayed silent.

He stepped closer. He looked so handsome in his outfit and styled hair.

The gloss hid the rot beneath.

He sighed and gripped her chin. She tried to jerk away.

"I *will* find it. Why don't you take the less painful option?"

"Fuck you," she spat.

He shook his head and stepped back. "After learning more of my father's legacy, I embraced it." He opened the roll and she saw the collection of implements. That looked like a cross between kitchen implements and doctor's tools.

Her belly cramped.

"My father was quite talented at getting information out of people." Lanza said it with pride.

Gabbi just glared at him.

"Plus, I'm a chef." He picked up a long knife. "I'm good with my hands."

"Your father's legacy?" she said. "He was a criminal. That's no legacy."

"He was my father and a powerful man. I was destined to take over what he built."

Gabbi laughed. “If your parents are criminals, or evil, or bad people, you reject that. You go the other way. Believe me, I know.”

A muscle worked in Lanza’s jaw. “I had my father and my legacy stolen by Hades.”

“Your father was a *criminal* who never openly claimed you. He has several other children to his mistresses. You weren’t special.”

Lanza’s mouth flattened. “You don’t understand. When my father died, I lost *everything*. Then my mother died, and I lived on nothing.”

Gabbi watched him and cocked her head. “Did you miss your father and mother, or the lifestyle and money?”

“Enough.” Lanza stepped closer. “I won’t let you ruin my life. Mancini is dead.” Lanza let out a smug laugh. “Now, tell me where my laptop is.”

“I don’t know, but I know the police are on the way. I’m not here alone.”

Anger stirred on Lanza’s face. “You’re alone now. You’ll scream for me, Gabriella.”

“You’ve already done the worst thing to me.” *Matteo*. “Nothing else could hurt me more.”

“We’ll see.” He studied the knife in his hand, then lifted another long, prong-like tool off the bench. “I’ve enjoyed refining my technique. It’s just a shame I have to keep it quick so I can get back to my guests, but I’m still interested to see what you think.”

Gabbi couldn’t look away from the shining implements. She wouldn’t break. She had to give Killian and Hadley time to find the laptop.

Lanza leaned in and pressed the knife to her cheek. She felt a slight sting and forced herself to meet his gaze.

“Such pretty skin. It’ll look good covered in blood.”

He was totally ruined inside.

She steeled herself.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

She heard Lanza curse, the nervous shifting of the guards' feet.

Then the rattle of something rolling across the floor.

*Bang.* Bright light hit her eyes. Wincing, she turned her head. More flashes and bangs.

The noise echoed in her ears, along with shouts and screams.

Gabbi jerked, swinging on the rope. Her vision blurred, afterimages from the bright lights blotching her vision. Her ears rang.

She saw the shadows of people running and fighting.

Lanza staggered, his hands clamped over his ears.

Then she heard the muffled pops of silenced gunshots.

Gabbi jerked again. *Oh, God.* She couldn't move. She was hanging here, a perfect target.

There were more gunshots, and she saw Lanza turn and run.

Her vision was still blurry, but she saw a thug go down.

Then she saw another large form tackle one of the other guards. There was the sound of fighting all around her.

Then Lanza rushed at her, knife raised.

Her chest locked. She had nowhere to go.

A figure raced in from the side, and kicked the knife out of Lanza's hand.

Gabbi saw a flash of red hair. Another kick, and Lanza staggered into some of the wine barrels and collapsed.

The figure whirled around behind Gabbi. She blinked, trying desperately to see. She heard the scrape of something on the floor.

There was still other fighting going on, shadows moving in the darkness.

She felt a tug on the ropes, then she was free.

She dropped to her knees.

“You’re okay, Gabbi. It’s all okay.”

She blinked and stared at her rescuer. The woman held a flashlight and slid an arm around Gabbi.

“Devyn?”

“Yes.” Her friend brushed Gabbi’s tangled hair back. “The affects from the stun grenade will wear off in a few minutes. Just take it easy.”

How had Devyn gotten here? Gabbi tried to think through the ringing in her ears.

The sound of fighting stopped.

“Hellfire? Are you all right?” Killian’s voice from the shadows.

“Perfectly fine, Steel,” her friend replied tartly.

Killian emerged from the darkness, looking dark and deadly. His gaze zeroed in on Gabbi.

Tears welled. “Killian...” Her throat clogged. She had to tell him about Matteo.

Devyn’s arm tightened on her. “There’s someone else who wants to check that you’re all right.” She turned Gabbi a little.

Matteo strode out of the shadow-drenched dark. Gabbi cried out and pressed a hand to her mouth. Was she imagining things?

He crouched in front of her, his gaze never wavering from her face. There was blood on the side of his head, and a bandage on his arm.

“Matteo, I thought—” Her voice cracked.

“I’m fine, *cara*.”



He reached for her, and she crawled into his arms. He was warm and alive.

“You’re real.” Tears fell and she buried her face in his neck.

His arms closed around her. Tight.

“I’m real. I’m fine. I’m sorry, *tesoro*. Sorry he took you. Sorry you were worried.”

Gabbi held him tight and cried.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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**M**atteo held Gabbi tight as he carried her out of the outbuilding.

Flashing lights strobed through the night. He saw the police cars out the front of the villa, and several uniformed *carabinieri* leading guests out the front door.

Gabbi clung to him. He moved to a set of steps and sat, keeping her on his lap.

She cupped his cheeks. There were tears rolling down her face. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm not leaving you, *cara*. And I'm not letting you get away from me." He kissed her, then ran his nose along hers. "Ever."

"Matteo."

He pressed his face to her hair. A figure detached from the group of police. Aurelio lifted a hand. His muscular body was clad in a rumpled suit.

"Hades."

"Aurelio." Without rising, he held out a hand to his friend.

The DIA agent shook it and eyed Gabbi. "Your woman?"

"Yes. Gabriella Hansley. Gabbi, you remember Aurelio."

Gabbi nodded but didn't lift her head.

"Is she all right?" his friend asked.

Matteo's gut hardened. "I got to her before Lanza hurt her."

"And you?" Aurelio studied the blood on Matteo's face.

"I've given you worse when we've sparred in the gym."

His friend grunted and smiled.

"Do you know who I am?" Lanza's high voice cut through the night.

Killian appeared, pushing the man ahead of him. Devyn was nearby, her arms crossed, watching the crime boss like a hawk. Lanza had his hands tied in front of him.

"Shut up, Lanza," Killian said.

"This is *my* villa. My party. I'm Rocco Lanza. You'll pay for this."

"He's not a bad actor," Aurelio said.

Matteo scowled. "He's a *pezzo di merda*." He pulled Gabbi tighter.

Aurelio stepped forward. "Signor Lanza, I am Agente Aurelio Conti."

"Sir, these people are trespassing." Lanza's face was red, his tone sincere and pleading. "They stole and destroyed my property and attacked me."

Several guests paused, looking over.

"I see." Aurelio nodded. "These are serious allegations."

"They've targeted me. I want them arrested!"

Then Aurelio lifted the laptop. "However, I'm afraid I have evidence to the contrary. And your entire criminal empire is detailed on here."

There were gasps from the crowd.

Panic slicked over Lanza's features. "No. That's not mine."

"It opens with your fingerprint. Save it, Signor Lanza. You're under arrest." Aurelio waved several officers forward.

"No! Let me go."

Matteo made a pleased sound.

Lanza's gaze cut to him and widened. "No! You're supposed to be dead."

"Sorry to disappoint," Matteo said.

"This is all *your* fault."

"No, it's all yours."

They watched Lanza fighting the officers as they led him away.

"It's done," Gabbi whispered.

"Yes, you're safe."

"You are too."

He pressed his mouth to hers again. Over her head, he saw his mother among the guests. She winked at him.

Matteo rose, with Gabbi in his arms. "I want a medic to check you over."

"Matteo, I'm fine. I was tied up. *You* got shot."

"You're getting checked," he said firmly.

She rolled her eyes but didn't fight him when they reached the ambulance. He kept hold of her hand as the young medic checked her over.

"You're in perfect health." The man patted her arm. "I've cleaned that minor cut on your cheek."

"*Grazie*," she replied. "Now him." She nodded at Matteo.

Matteo frowned. "I don't need checking over."

"He got shot and bumped his head." Her voice was firm. "He'll get checked."

He scowled at the medic. The young man cleared his throat. "Um..."

"Matteo." Gabbi kissed his jaw. "Please. For me."

He released a breath. She'd already worked out that he'd do anything for her. "All right."

She beamed at him.

The medic worked fast.

“Oh,” Gabbi said.

“What?” Matteo frowned at her.

She jerked her head to the side.

He looked over, and saw Killian and Devyn in a standoff. Devyn was talking, and waved an arm in Killian’s face.

Killian replied. Unfortunately, they were too far away to hear them.

The pair continued their heated argument.

Suddenly, Killian grabbed Devyn, yanked her to his chest, and kissed her.

Matteo’s brows winged up.

“Oh boy.” Gabbi grinned.

Devyn struggled for a second, then sank a hand in Killian’s hair and kissed him back.

Matteo was surprised he and Gabbi weren’t scorched from where they stood.

He couldn’t wait to tell Wolf, Hex, and the others about this. He didn’t bother to hide his grin. Maybe they could start a betting pool on how long it took Killian to tame his hellfire redhead.

Devyn wrenched free, shot Killian a look hot enough to sear flesh off bones, then stomped over to Matteo and Gabbi.

The spy pointed a finger at Matteo. “Hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

“She’s joking,” Gabbi said.

“I’m pretty sure she isn’t,” Matteo said.

“I’m not,” Devyn said.

“But it’s fine.” He met the spy’s gaze. “I plan to make her happy.”

“Good.” Devyn hugged Gabbi. “I have to go. I detoured here from my primary mission when I heard you were in trouble.”

“Who told you?” Gabbi asked.

“Shade.”

“Ah.”

Devyn gave her another hug and stepped back. “Stay out of trouble, and enjoy your sexy Italian.” With a wave, Devyn headed into the crowd. A second later, she was completely out of view.

A moment after that, Hadley pushed out of the villa, shoving people out of her way. Knightley glided behind her.

“Is everyone okay?” Hadley asked.

Gabbi nodded. “We’re fine now.” She snuggled into Matteo. “The police arrested Lanza.”

Hadley smiled. “Good.” She spied Killian. “I’ll check in with the boss.”

“Hadley, it’s been a pleasure working with you,” Knightley said.

“That man’s accent,” Gabbi whispered with a sigh.

Matteo frowned at her. “I have an accent.”

She patted his cheek. “Yours is sexy too.”

“Thanks for the assistance, Knightley,” Hadley said. “Not bad for a billionaire.”

The man smiled, then he took Hadley’s hand and kissed it. With a nod, he turned and left.

Hadley watched him for a second, then shook her head. “That man is dangerous.”

Gabbi leaned against Matteo. “I can’t wait for a hot shower and bed. At least I ditched my heels earlier.” She wiggled her bare toes.

Matteo kissed her temple. “I love you, Gabbi.”

Her head jerked and her lips parted. Tears welled in her eyes again. “Really?”

“Really. You’re smart, beautiful, sexy.” He nuzzled her cheek. “And mine.”

“No one’s ever loved me before.”

His heart squeezed. “I will. For the rest of my life.”

He’d make sure she never doubted it.

---

GABBI PLANTED her hands on Matteo’s chest, her hips rising and falling as she rode him.

He was cupping her breast with one hand, while his other worked her clit.

Good. *So good.*

With Matteo, it was always good. Pleasure curled through her, her climax rushing closer.

“*Tesoro.*” His gaze was hot on her, filled with love.

She leaned down and kissed him.

Whatever she needed, he gave it—the sexy charm, the thick cock, delicious pleasure.

But it wasn’t just that that drew her. It was his strength. His love, protection, and support.

With him, she wasn’t alone.

She moved faster and saw the flush in his cheeks. He groaned.

It never got old, knowing how much she turned him on.

“You’re so beautiful, Gabriella,” he murmured.

She thought he was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen.

And he was hers.

He put more pressure on her clit. She whimpered, moving her hips faster, her breasts swaying with every move.

“My *cara* loves taking my cock. It was the best thing I ever did, agreeing to show you how to orgasm.”

“You’re a good teacher, but this is only for you, Matteo. I’m only like this with you.”

His eyes flared.

The next swipe of her clit set her off. She came.

Pleasure was like a violent wave. It hit her hard. She bucked, crying out his name.

With a growl, he flipped her over onto her back.

He pushed her thighs apart, and thrust back into her. Gabbi moaned through her orgasm. She held on to him as he moved harder and faster.

Then his mouth was on hers, their tongues clashing.

His next thrust was deeper, and he stayed embedded inside her. As he came, he let out a low, muted groan.

“*Tesoro*. Damn.” He nuzzled her neck. Chest heaving, he slid off her but kept her close.

She stroked his arm, careful to avoid the bandage. “How’s your arm?” she asked lazily.

“Still attached.”

She slapped him playfully.

“It’s fine. It barely hurts.

“And your head?”

He rolled over her and kissed her. “I’m perfectly fine and healthy, Gabbi.”

“Just checking. I happen to love you, Matteo Mancini. That means I worry about you. Get used to it.”

He cupped her cheeks. “I love you, too. You’ve been doing a very good job of taking care of me the last few days.”



They'd been at his villa for the four days since Lanza's masquerade.

Four days of sleep, swimming, eating, and hot sex.

Killian and Hadley had returned to New York. Aurelio had called with an update. The DIA was busy dismantling Lanza's budding syndicate. The man had lawyered up, but Aurelio had told them that there was no way Lanza was getting off.

"So," Matteo said, "I know Killian called you today,"

Gabbi rose up on an elbow, butterflies in her stomach. "Yes, he did."

Matteo raised a dark brow.

"He offered me a job with Sentinel Security."

Matteo smiled. "Did you accept?"

"I told him I'd think about it. It makes sense to weigh the pros and cons. I like my work at the CIA."

He snorted. "You like doing favors for Doug Bernard?"

"He's not *that* bad."

"New York is farther away from your family."

"True. But I own a great house in D.C."

"Killian gives a good deal on rent." Matteo fiddled with her hair. "And you'd save even more money if you moved in with me."

Her heart stopped, then restarted with a hard beat. "You're asking me to move in with you?"

He kissed her. "Yes, Gabriella. I love you. I want to make love to you every day, cook for you, sleep with you in my bed every night." His smile turned wicked. "And I still have a few lessons to show you. Naughty ones."

She felt a pulse between her legs. "You really want this?"

He slid a hand into her hair. "Even if it takes me decades, I'm going to prove to you how much I love you. I'm gonna give you everything you deserve."

“I only want you,” she murmured.

Their mouths met again. As their tongues dueled, she skimmed her hand down his abs, then circled her hand around his hard cock.

He thrust into her palm.

They’d dispensed with condoms the day before. Matteo had gotten a fast-track test in Milan. Gabbi already had a clean bill of health from her last check-up and hadn’t had sex with anyone since the check-up and Matteo. She also had an IUD.

She stroked a finger over the head of his cock. “*Matteo.*”

“Have I told you how much I like it when you say my name like that?” He bit her neck, and she writhed.

“Matteo! Gabriella!”

They both froze at the voice echoing from downstairs.

“Is that your mom?” Gabbi whispered.

“Where are you two? I thought I’d come for a surprise visit and bring lunch.”

Matteo groaned. “This is why live I in another country.”

Gabbi giggled.

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s a bit funny.”

“Hello? You’re not still sleeping, are you?” Footsteps on the stairs.

Gabbi froze. “She’s coming up?”

“I—”

Gabbi scrambled off the bed, dragging the sheet with her, and leaving Matteo naked, with his still hard erection on display.

“Gabbi!” he growled.

“I’ll be in the shower.”

“You can’t abandon the man you love in his moment of need.”

She blew him a kiss. “You’re a well-trained security specialist. I believe in you.”

She closed the bathroom door, giggling when he cursed.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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**M**atteo lifted some boxes and moved them into the hall.

Gabbi's bedroom in her brownstone was almost all packed up. Hadley was lost in the closet somewhere, still packing things.

Over the last day, they'd all worked hard.

Gabbi was ruthlessly organized. His woman loved a good plan. Downstairs was a pile of donations. She'd sold the furniture she didn't want or need anymore. They also had a pile of trash to dispose of. The rest would be packed into the Sentinel Security jet to take back to New York.

He smiled. Back to *their* place.

In a few days, Gabbi officially started her job with Sentinel Security. She'd resigned from the CIA, and would be assisting Hex and doing business analytics for the team.

And she'd be living with him.

Safe in his bed every night.

*Yes.* Life was very good.

He heard footsteps and saw Devyn coming down the hall from one of the guest rooms, carrying a box. The spy was wearing jeans, her hair in a simple ponytail.

She didn't look like a deadly, experienced spy.

"This one's for the jet," she said "Where do you want it?"

"Here." He nodded to the boxes by the wall.

Devyn set it down in the pile. “Bram has some other ones for donations.” She smiled. “I think that’s what he said. He just kind of grunted at me.”

“The man is moody.”

“Grumpy as hell, but as a fellow redhead, I’ll give him a break.” She cocked her head. “I like you for Gabbi, Mancini. I like the way you look at her.”

“I love her. I want to give her everything.”

“Think all she wants is you.”

Light footsteps and his woman ran up the stairs. She spied them and smiled. It lit up her face.

“We’re almost there.” She slid an arm around Matteo, and pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw. “Then I’m looking forward to our dinner at the Lafayette.” She looked at Devyn. “Want to join us?”

“On a romantic dinner for two? Oh, no, I’ll leave you guys to it. I bet your man has plans.” Devyn winked.

That charming blush that he loved filled Gabbi’s cheeks.

“I think I’ll take Bram and Hadley out and show them a good time in D.C.,” Devyn said.

Bram stomped down the hallway, carrying two boxes.

“If you’re going out tonight, Hades,” Bram said, “see if you can avoid a shootout this time.”

Matteo smacked his friend’s broad shoulder. “I’m planning on a quiet dinner with my woman.”

Bram snorted. “You always find trouble.”

Gabbi smiled, her arms tightening on Matteo. “Adventure. He always finds adventure.”

And Matteo had a plan to give his woman all the adventure she could handle.

Bram headed down the stairs. “I’m going to sort out the outdoor stuff in the backyard next.”

“Thanks, Bram,” Gabbi called.

“Where’s Hadley?” Devyn asked.

Gabbi’s nose wrinkled. “Still in my closet, bemoaning my lack of style.”

“I heard that,” came Hadley’s voice from the depths of Gabbi’s bedroom. “Lucky for you, I have lots of shopping trips planned once we’re back in New York.”

Gabbi pulled a face.

Matteo kissed her nose. “If you can take down a mafia crime boss, you can survive some shopping.”

“I wish Hex was here,” Gabbi said.

“She wanted to be, but Killian is working some job, and needed her running comms,” Matteo said. “She’ll be waiting for us when we get home.”

“Home.” Gabbi smiled. “Right, I’m going to get back to packing up the living room.” She raised her voice. “Hadley, sort out an outfit for me to wear tonight to drive my man wild.”

“On it,” Hadley called back.

Matteo watched Gabbi skip down the stairs. He sensed Devyn watching him.

“Yes, I love the way you look at her.” The spy swiveled and headed back into the guest room.

Matteo had just finished moving more boxes when he heard raised voices downstairs.

“What the fuck is going on here?” a male voice snapped.

Matteo tensed and headed for the stairs.

“Where the hell are you going, Gabbi?” This voice was shrill and feminine. “Why haven’t you answered any of my calls?”

“Because I was in Italy,” Gabbi replied. “Working. And I didn’t answer because I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“If you’re getting rid of stuff,” the man said. “I’ll take it.”

Matteo recognized the voice. Her brother Casey. *Shit*. He picked up speed.

“I’m donating it to people who need it,” Gabbi said.

“You’re moving?” the woman asked.

“Yes, Mom. To New York City.”

“New York,” Casey spluttered.

“Why?” her mother’s voice had risen.

“If you’re leavin’, then I’m moving in here,” Casey declared.

Matteo hit the stairs and jogged down. He wasn’t letting these assholes upset Gabbi.

“No, Casey,” Gabbi said. “I’m putting the house up for sale.”

“Then you should share the money,” her mother said. “It was never right that the old bitch left it only to you.”

“It’s mine, not yours.” Gabbi’s voice was firm. “Now, I think you should both leave. Especially you Casey. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Don’t talk to your brother like that,” Mrs. Hansley snapped.

Matteo saw them now. Gabriella’s mother was medium height and impossibly thin. She had a brittle look, and dyed blonde hair.

As he strode into the living room, he watched the woman get in Gabbi’s face.

“Back off,” he growled.

The woman saw him and froze.

Casey’s eyes widened. “Oh fuck.”

“Yes, remember me? I know what a waste of space you are.” Matteo reached Gabbi and pulled her close. “Now, back off.”

“Who the hell are you?” Gabbi’s mother demanded.

“I’m Gabbi’s.”

The woman goggled at him.

“This is my boyfriend, Matteo.” Gabbi straightened, and he saw only strength and resolve on her face. “Mom, this house is mine. Aunt Amy didn’t want you or anyone else in the family to have it. You’d just burn through any money anyway, on shopping or drinking.”

Mrs. Hansley’s face turned sour.

“And Casey, you need to sort your shit out before you get yourself or someone else killed,” Gabbi said. “Did he tell you he sold me out to the mafia? To dangerous people he owed money to?”

Their mother gasped. “What?”

Casey’s face blanched. “I was in trouble, they were going to kill me—”

Gabbi put a hand on her hip. “What did you think they were going to do to me?”

“Gabs, I panicked—”

Gabbi held up a hand. “It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving for New York, and I won’t be in touch.”

Matteo was so proud of her. Behind them, he saw Bram, Devyn, and Hadley step into the room. All three were scowling, arms crossed over their chests.

Casey eyed them nervously.

“But...we’re family,” Gabbi’s mother whined.

Gabbi shook her head. “You have no idea what that word means. You’re just worried about losing your own personal ATM.” She looked over at their friends, then smiled up at Matteo. “You’re not my family, Mom. Today, I’ll be leaving here with my *real* family.”

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*TWO WEEKS later*

GABBI FINISHED TYPING up her report. She sat back in her office chair, then looked around her new office and smiled. She *loved* it.

She loved her new work, she loved Sentinel Security, she loved her new friends.

Most of all, she loved Matteo.

Her gaze moved over the exposed brick wall, and the huge potted fiddle leaf fig that Hadley had given her as an office-warming gift. Then her gaze moved to the window. Snow was falling outside. Perfect for the lead up to Christmas.

This year, she had people to buy gifts for, and had already started her shopping.

Wolf stalked into her office like the predator he was named after.

“Gabbi, I know I only mentioned it yesterday, but I really need that business data on—”

She slapped a file down on the desk. “Done. There’s a digital copy in your email.”

He picked it up, flicked through, then grinned. “You are a gem.”

Matteo strode in. “Quit flirting with my woman.”

“I have my own, but yours just saved me a ton of work, so I’m tempted to kiss her.”

Matteo scowled. “Try it.”

Wolf grinned, then leaned over the desk and kissed Gabbi’s cheek. His beard tickled her skin.

“Thanks, Gabbi.” He strode out under the archway, avoiding Matteo’s mock kick.

“Hello, Signor Mancini.” He’d been out on a job all day, so she hadn’t seen him.

Smiling, he stalked around her desk.

His gaze fell to her gray skirt. “Is that the skirt you wore the first time we met. The one from the elevator?”

“Yes.” Although it was looking a little more stylish today since she’d paired it with a cute ruffled white shirt that Hadley had made her buy. She’d topped it with a statement necklace made of jade, and she had cute, sexy heels on. She also had a few more exciting things on under the skirt.

Hadley had made it her mission to jazz up Gabbi’s wardrobe. Soon, Gabbi’s clothes would bust out of the closet.

Matteo made a humming noise and pulled her closer. He nibbled her lips. “Missed you today.” His fingers slid over her hip. “And this skirt is giving me ideas.”

“Well, the sexy lingerie under it might inspire you even more,” she whispered.

His body went solid. She felt his growing erection poke her in the belly. With a groan, he kissed her.

*Mmm.* So good. She never, ever got tired of kissing him.

The chemistry between them was as strong as ever, and her man reveled in showing her *lots* of new things in bed.

She’d never dreamed of a man like Matteo. She’d kept her dreams on a very tight leash for too long.

She moaned into his mouth and slid her hand into his hair.

Not anymore.

“God, you two.” Hadley swept in.

“You have an apartment a few floors away, you know?” Hex followed behind, grinning.

Gabbi pulled her mouth free and leaned into Matteo. She glanced at her friends.

Then she frowned. Hex was in her usual jeans paired with a T-shirt that said *Keep calm and let the cyber security specialist handle it*. But Hadley was dressed in a stylish black

pantsuit with a long, plush cashmere coat in red on top. There was a suitcase at her side.

“You’re going somewhere?” Gabbi asked.

Hadley nodded. “London. Killian called and he has a job for me. It’s to do with MI6, so it made sense that I take care of things. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone.”

“Be careful.” Gabbi hugged Hadley.

“I’m always careful.”

“Besides, she’ll have back up.” Hex ran her tongue over her teeth.

“Oh?” Gabbi said.

Hadley rolled her eyes.

“Bennett ‘Extremely Hot Billionaire’ Knightley,” Hex said.

Matteo frowned. “Is a billionaire ever good backup?”

“Well, he did well in Milan,” Hadley begrudgingly said. “He hides it well, but the man is dangerous.” Hadley winked. “But so am I. Now, Hex, walk me out.”

The pair left with a wave.

“Knightley is toast.” Matteo stroked a hand down Gabbi’s back. “Change of subject. My mother wants to visit us. Soon.”

“I like your mom.”

He cleared his throat. “She said my father wants to come as well.”

Gabbi slid her hands up Matteo’s chest. “Are you okay with that?” Gabbi had cut her family out of her life, and it had been necessary, but she’d be lying if she said it didn’t still sting a little.

She knew Matteo had conflicted feelings about his father.

“I don’t know,” Matteo said.

“Well, I say give him a chance. I’ll be right there by your side, and if he steps out of line, I’m good at dealing with

crappy family members.”

“My tough, scary *tesoro*.” He gave her a teasing kiss. “I have a Christmas gift for you.”

“Matteo, Christmas is still a few weeks away.”

“It’s okay, I have lots more presents for you to open on Christmas Day.” He shot her a sexy smile. “And to wear in bed for me.”

She shook her head and laughed.

He pulled an envelope out of the pocket of his jacket and held it out to her.

“What’s this?” She flicked it open and pulled out a plane ticket with itinerary attached.

Greece. Paris. London.

“We’ve already done Lake Como. I thought we’d try the Greek islands, then Paris, and finish in London. Start our adventures.”

Her heart melted. This man. This gorgeous, sexy man.

“Our adventures already started the day you said you loved me,” she said.

He stroked her cheekbone. “I thought they started the day I slid my hand under your skirt and made you orgasm in an elevator.”

She laughed. “*Matteo*. Maybe let’s not tell our grandkids that story.”

“No, that one is just for us. We have so many more stories and adventures to start having.” He backed her up against the brick wall, hands sliding under her skirt. “Starting now.”

Love and desire swamped her. “Matteo...”

Her words were swallowed by his hungry mouth. She kissed him back eagerly, surrounded by his strong arms and his love.

---

I hope you enjoyed Gabbi and Matteo's story!

If you want a little more of Gabbi and Matteo, then read the Hades Bonus Epilogue: [GET MY EPILOGUE](#)

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PREVIEW: STEALING FROM MR.  
RICH



**Brother in Trouble**

Monroe

The old-fashioned Rosengrens safe was a beauty.

I carefully turned the combination dial, then pressed closer to the safe. The metal was cool under my fingertips. The safe wasn't pretty, but stout and secure. There was something to be said for solid security.

Rosengrens had started making safes in Sweden over a hundred years ago. They were good at it. I listened to the pins, waiting for contact. Newer safes had internals made from lightweight materials to reduce sensory feedback, so I didn't get to use these skills very often.

Some people could play the piano, I could play a safe. The tiny vibration I was waiting for reached my fingertips, followed by the faintest click.

"I've gotcha, old girl." The Rosengrens had quite a few quirks, but my blood sang as I moved the dial again.

I heard a louder click and spun the handle.

The safe door swung open. Inside, I saw stacks of jewelry cases and wads of hundred-dollar bills. *Nice.*

Standing, I dusted my hands off on my jeans. "There you go, Mr. Goldstein."

"You are a doll, Monroe O'Connor. Thank you."

The older man, dressed neatly in pressed chinos and a blue shirt, grinned at me. He had coke-bottle glasses, wispy, white hair, and a wrinkled face.

I smiled at him. Mr. Goldstein was one of my favorite people. "I'll send you my bill."

His grin widened. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

I raised a brow. "You could stop forgetting your safe combination."



The wealthy old man called me every month or so to open his safe. Right now, we were standing in the home office of his expensive Park Avenue penthouse.

It was decorated in what I thought of as “rich, old man.” There were heavy drapes, gold-framed artwork, lots of dark wood—including the built-in shelves around the safe—and a huge desk.

“Then I wouldn’t get to see your pretty face,” he said.

I smiled and patted his shoulder. “I’ll see you next month, Mr. Goldstein.” The poor man was lonely. His wife had died the year before, and his only son lived in Europe.

“Sure thing, Monroe. I’ll have some of those donuts you like.”

We headed for the front door and my chest tightened. I understood feeling lonely. “You could do with some new locks on your door. I mean, your building has top-notch security, but you can never be too careful. Pop by the shop if you want to talk locks.”

He beamed at me and held the door open. “I might do that.”

“Bye, Mr. Goldstein.”

I headed down the plush hall to the elevator. Everything in the building screamed old money. I felt like an imposter just being in the building. Like I had “daughter of a criminal” stamped on my head.

Pulling out my cell phone, I pulled up my accounting app and entered Mr. Goldstein’s callout. Next, I checked my messages.

Still nothing from Maguire.

Frowning, I bit my lip. That made it three days since I’d heard from my little brother. I shot him off a quick text.

“Text me back, Mag,” I muttered.

The elevator opened and I stepped in, trying not to worry about Maguire. He was an adult, but I’d practically raised him.

Most days it felt like I had a twenty-four-year-old kid.

The elevator slowed and stopped at another floor. An older, well-dressed couple entered. They eyed me and my well-worn jeans like I'd crawled out from under a rock.

I smiled. "Good morning."

*Yeah, yeah, I'm not wearing designer duds, and my bank account doesn't have a gazillion zeros. You're so much better than me.*

Ignoring them, I scrolled through Instagram. When we finally reached the lobby, the couple shot me another dubious look before they left. I strode out across the marble-lined space and rolled my eyes.

During my teens, I'd cared about what people thought. Everyone had known that my father was Terry O'Connor—expert thief, safecracker, and con man. I'd felt every repulsed look and sly smirk at high school.

Then I'd grown up, cultivated some thicker skin, and learned not to care. *Fuck 'em.* People who looked down on others for things outside their control were assholes.

I wrinkled my nose. Okay, it was easier said than done.

When I walked outside, the street was busy. I smiled, breathing in the scent of New York—car exhaust, burnt meat, and rotting trash. Besides, most people cared more about themselves. They judged you, left you bleeding, then forgot you in the blink of an eye.

I unlocked my bicycle, and pulled on my helmet, then set off down the street. I needed to get to the store. The ride wasn't long, but I spent every second worrying about Mag.

My brother had a knack for finding trouble. I sighed. After a childhood, where both our mothers had taken off, and Da was in and out of jail, Mag was entitled to being a bit messed up. The O'Connors were a long way from the Brady Bunch.

I pulled up in front of my shop in Hell's Kitchen and stopped for a second.

I grinned. *All mine.*

Okay, I didn't own the building, but I owned the store. The sign above the shop said *Lady Locksmith*. The logo was lipstick red—a woman's hand with gorgeous red nails, holding a set of keys.

After I locked up my bike, I strode inside. A chime sounded.

God, I loved the place. It was filled with glossy, warm-wood shelves lined with displays of state-of-the-art locks and safes. A key-cutting machine sat at the back.

A blonde head popped up from behind a long, shiny counter.

"You're back," Sabrina said.

My best friend looked like a doll—small, petite, with a head of golden curls.

We'd met doing our business degrees at college, and had become fast friends. Sabrina had always wanted to be tall and sexy, but had to settle for small and cute. She was my manager, and was getting married in a month.

"Yeah, Mr. Goldstein forgot his safe code again," I said.

Sabrina snorted. "That old coot doesn't forget, he just likes looking at your ass."

"He's harmless. He's nice, and lonely. How's the team doing?"

Sabrina leaned forward, pulling out her tablet. I often wondered if she slept with it. "Liz is out back unpacking stock." Sabrina's nose wrinkled. "McRoberts overcharged us on the Schlage locks again."

"That prick." He was always trying to screw me over. "I'll call him."

"Paola, Kat, and Isabella are all out on jobs."

*Excellent.* Business was doing well. Lady Locksmith specialized in providing female locksmiths to all the single ladies of New York. They also advised on how to keep them safe—securing locks, doors, and windows.

I had a dream of one day seeing multiple Lady Locksmiths around the city. Hell, around every city. A girl could dream. Growing up, once I understood the damage my father did to other people, all I'd wanted was to be respectable. To earn my own way and add to the world, not take from it.

“Did you get that new article I sent you to post on the blog?” I asked.

Sabrina nodded. “It’ll go live shortly, and then I’ll post on Insta, as well.”

When I had the time, I wrote articles on how women—single *and* married—should secure their homes. My latest was aimed at domestic-violence survivors, and helping them feel safe. I donated my time to Nightingale House, a local shelter that helped women leaving DV situations, and I installed locks for them, free of charge.

“We should start a podcast,” Sabrina said.

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t have time to sit around recording stuff.” I did my fair share of callouts for jobs, plus at night I had to stay on top of the business-side of the store.

“Fine, fine.” Sabrina leaned against the counter and eyed my jeans. “Damn, I hate you for being tall, long, and gorgeous. You’re going to look *way* too beautiful as my maid of honor.” She waved a hand between us. “You’re all tall, sleek, and dark-haired, and I’m...the opposite.”

I had some distant Black Irish ancestor to thank for my pale skin and ink-black hair. Growing up, I wanted to be short, blonde, and tanned. I snorted. “Beauty comes in all different forms, Sabrina.” I gripped her shoulders. “You are so damn pretty, and your fiancé happens to think you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Andrew is gaga over you.”

Sabrina sighed happily. “He does and he is.” A pause. “So, do you have a date for my wedding yet?” My bestie’s voice turned breezy and casual.

*Uh-oh.* I froze. All the wedding prep had sent my normally easygoing best friend a bit crazy. And I knew very well not to trust that tone.

I edged toward my office. “Not yet.”

Sabrina’s blue eyes sparked. “It’s only *four* weeks away, Monroe. The maid of honor can’t come alone.”

“I’ll be busy helping you out—”

“Find a date, Monroe.”

“I don’t want to just pick anyone for your wedding—”

Sabrina stomped her foot. “Find someone, or I’ll find someone for you.”

I held up my hands. “Okay, okay.” I headed for my office. “I’ll—” My cell phone rang. *Yes*. “I’ve got a call. Got to go.” I dove through the office door.

“I won’t forget,” Sabrina yelled. “I’ll revoke your best-friend status, if I have to.”

I closed the door on my bridezilla bestie and looked at the phone.

*Maguire*. Finally.

I stabbed the call button. “Where have you been?”

“We have your brother,” a robotic voice said.

My blood ran cold. My chest felt like it had filled with concrete.

“If you want to keep him alive, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

---

Zane

God, this party was boring.

Zane Roth sipped his wine and glanced around the ballroom at the Mandarin Oriental. The party held the Who's Who of New York society, all dressed up in their glittering best. The ceiling shimmered with a sea of crystal lights, tall flower arrangements dominated the tables, and the wall of windows had a great view of the Manhattan skyline.

Everything was picture perfect...and boring.

If it wasn't for the charity auction, he wouldn't be dressed in his tuxedo and dodging annoying people.

"I'm so sick of these parties," he muttered.

A snort came from beside him.

One of his best friends, Maverick Rivera, sipped his wine. "You were voted New York's sexiest billionaire bachelor. You should be loving this shindig."

Mav had been one of his best friends since college. Like Zane, Maverick hadn't come from wealth. They'd both earned it the old-fashioned way. Zane loved numbers and money, and had made Wall Street his hunting ground. Mav was a geek, despite not looking like a stereotypical one. He'd grown up in a strong, Mexican-American family, and with his brown skin, broad shoulders, and the fact that he worked out a lot, no one would pick him for a tech billionaire.

But under the big body, the man was a computer geek to the bone.

"All the society mamas are giving you lots of speculative looks." Mav gave him a small grin.

"Shut it, Rivera."

"They're all dreaming of marrying their daughters off to billionaire Zane Roth, the finance King of Wall Street."

Zane glared. "You done?"

“Oh, I could go on.”

“I seem to recall another article about the billionaire bachelors. All three of us.” Zane tipped his glass at his friend. “They’ll be coming for you, next.”

Mav’s smile dissolved, and he shrugged a broad shoulder. “I’ll toss Kensington at them. He’s pretty.”

Liam Kensington was the third member of their trio. Unlike Zane and Mav, Liam had come from money, although he worked hard to avoid his bloodsucking family.

Zane saw a woman in a slinky, blue dress shoot him a welcoming smile.

He looked away.

When he’d made his first billion, he’d welcomed the attention. Especially the female attention. He’d bedded more than his fair share of gorgeous women.

Of late, nothing and no one caught his interest. Women all left him feeling numb.

*Work.* He thrived on that.

A part of him figured he’d never find a woman who made him feel the same way as his work.

“Speak of the devil,” Mav said.

Zane looked up to see Liam Kensington striding toward them. With the lean body of a swimmer, clad in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, he looked every inch the billionaire. His gold hair complemented a face the ladies oohed over.

People tried to get his attention, but the real estate mogul ignored everyone.

He reached Zane and Mav, grabbed Zane’s wine, and emptied it in two gulps.

“I hate this party. When can we leave?” Having spent his formative years in London, he had a posh British accent. Another thing the ladies loved. “I have a contract to work on, my fundraiser ball to plan, and things to catch up on after our trip to San Francisco.”

The three of them had just returned from a business trip to the West Coast.

“Can’t leave until the auction’s done,” Zane said.

Liam sighed. His handsome face often had him voted the best-looking billionaire bachelor.

“Buy up big,” Zane said. “Proceeds go to the Boys and Girls Clubs.”

“One of your pet charities,” Liam said.

“Yeah.” Zane’s father had left when he was seven. His mom had worked hard to support them. She was his hero. He liked to give back to charities that supported kids growing up in tough circumstances.

He’d set his mom up in a gorgeous house Upstate that she loved. And he was here for her tonight.

“Don’t bid on the Phillips-Morley necklace, though,” he added. “It’s mine.”

The necklace had a huge, rectangular sapphire pendant surrounded by diamonds. It was the real-life necklace said to have inspired the necklace in the movie, *Titanic*. It had been given to a young woman, Kate Florence Phillips, by her lover, Henry Samuel Morley. The two had run away together and booked passage on the Titanic.

Unfortunately for poor Kate, Henry had drowned when the ship had sunk. She’d returned to England with the necklace and a baby in her belly.

Zane’s mother had always loved the story and pored over pictures of the necklace. She’d told him the story of the lovers, over and over.

“It was a gift from a man to a woman he loved. She was a shop girl, and he owned the store, but they fell in love, even though society frowned on their love.” She sighed. “That’s true love, Zane. Devotion, loyalty, through the good times and the bad.”

Everything Carol Roth had never known.



Of course, it turned out old Henry was much older than his lover, and already married. But Zane didn't want to ruin the fairy tale for his mom.

Now, the Phillips-Morley necklace had turned up, and was being offered at auction. And Zane was going to get it for his mom. It was her birthday in a few months.

"Hey, is your fancy, new safe ready yet?" Zane asked Mav.

His friend nodded. "You're getting one of the first ones. I can have my team install it this week."

"Perfect." Mav's new Riv3000 was the latest in high-tech safes and said to be unbreakable. "I'll keep the necklace in it until my mom's birthday."

Someone called out Liam's name. With a sigh, their friend forced a smile. "Can't dodge this one. Simpson's an investor in my Brooklyn project. I'll be back."

"Need a refill?" Zane asked Mav.

"Sure."

Zane headed for the bar. He'd almost reached it when a manicured hand snagged his arm.

"Zane."

He looked down at the woman and barely swallowed his groan. "Allegra. You look lovely this evening."

She did. Allegra Montgomery's shimmery, silver dress hugged her slender figure, and her cloud of mahogany brown hair accented her beautiful face. As the only daughter of a wealthy New York family—her father was from *the* Montgomery family and her mother was a former Miss America—Allegra was well-bred and well-educated but also, as he'd discovered, spoiled and liked getting her way.

Her dark eyes bored into him. "I'm sorry things ended badly for us the other month. I was..." Her voice lowered, and she stroked his forearm. "I miss you. I was hoping we could catch up again."

Zane arched a brow. They'd dated for a few weeks, shared a few dinners, and some decent sex. But Allegra liked being the center of attention, complained that he worked too much, and had constantly hounded him to take her on vacation. Preferably on a private jet to Tahiti or the Maldives.

When she'd asked him if it would be too much for him to give her a credit card of her own, for monthly expenses, Zane had exited stage left.

"I don't think so, Allegra. We aren't...compatible."

Her full lips turned into a pout. "I thought we were *very* compatible."

He cleared his throat. "I heard you moved on. With Chip Huffington."

Allegra waved a hand. "Oh, that's nothing serious."

And Chip was only a millionaire. Allegra would see that as a step down. In fact, Zane felt like every time she looked at him, he could almost see little dollar signs in her eyes.

He dredged up a smile. "I wish you all the best, Allegra. Good evening." He sidestepped her and made a beeline for the bar.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

Wine wasn't going to cut it. It would probably be frowned on to ask for an entire bottle of Scotch. "Two glasses of Scotch, please. On the rocks. Do you have Macallan?"

"No, sorry, sir. Will Glenfiddich do?"

"Sure."

"Ladies and gentlemen," a voice said over the loudspeaker. The lights lowered. "I hope you're ready to spend big for a wonderful cause."

Carrying the drinks, Zane hurried back to Mav and Liam. He handed Mav a glass.

"Let's do this," Mav grumbled. "And next time, I'll make a generous online donation so I don't have to come to the party."

“Drinks at my place after I get the necklace,” Zane said. “I have a very good bottle of Macallan.”

Mav stilled. “How good?”

“Macallan 25. Single malt.”

“I’m there,” Liam said.

Mav lifted his chin.

Ahead, Zane watched the evening’s host lift a black cloth off a pedestal. He stared at the necklace, the sapphire glittering under the lights.

*There it was.*

The sapphire was a deep, rich blue. Just like all the photos his mother had shown him.

“Get that damn necklace, Roth, and let’s get out of here,” Mav said.

Zane nodded. He’d get the necklace for the one woman in his life who rarely asked for anything, then escape the rest of the bloodsuckers and hang with his friends.

## **Billionaire Heists**

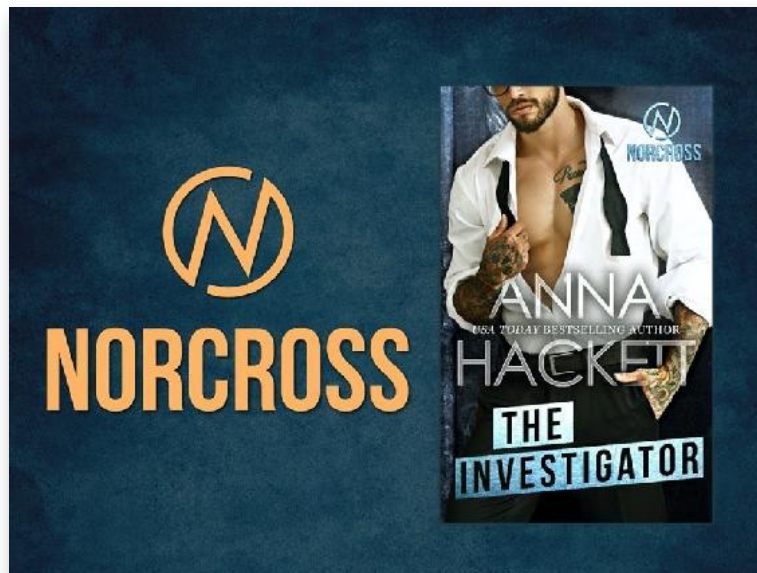
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**W**ant more action-packed romance? Then check out the men of **Norcross Security**.



*The only man who can keep her safe is her boss' gorgeous brother.*

Museum curator Haven McKinney has sworn off men. All of them. Totally. She's recently escaped a bad ex and started a new life for herself in San Francisco. She *loves* her job at the Hutton Museum, likes her new boss, and has made best friends with his feisty sister. Haven's also desperately trying *not* to notice their brother: hotshot investigator Rhys Norcross. And she's *really* trying not to notice his muscular body, sexy tattoos, and charming smile.

Nope, Rhys is off limits. But then Haven finds herself in the middle of a deadly situation...

Investigator Rhys Norcross is good at finding his targets. After leaving an elite Ghost Ops military team, the former Delta Force soldier thrives on his job at his brother's security firm, Norcross Security. He's had his eye on smart, sexy Haven for a while, but the pretty curator with her eyes full of secrets is proving far harder to chase down than he anticipated.

Luckily, Rhys never, ever gives up.

When thieves target the museum and steal a multi-million-dollar painting in a daring theft, Haven finds herself in trouble, and dangers from her past rising. Rhys vows to do whatever it takes to keep her safe, and Haven finds herself risking the one thing she was trying so hard to protect—her heart.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a USA Today bestselling romance author who's passionate about *fast-paced, emotion-filled* contemporary romantic suspense and science fiction romance. I love writing about people overcoming unbeatable odds and achieving seemingly impossible goals. I like to believe it's possible for all of us to do the same.

I live in Australia with my own personal hero and two very busy, always-on-the-move sons.

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