



His Fantasy Bride (Things To Do Before You Die)

Author: *Nina Croft*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: I can't marry you. You don't love me.

Two sentences, that's all Gabrielle Harper left Vito D'Ascensio when she vanished the night before their wedding. If he wants his bride back, he's going to have to hunt her down and prove his love. But when he searches for Gabrielle, he finds Gabby instead; it seems his perfect bride is nothing but a fantasy.

After six months, Gabby presumes it's over, an episode in her life she's totally ashamed of. But now Vito is back. He's the one man she can never have, but as desire explodes between them, she has a tough time remembering why they shouldn't be together. Oh, right, her family hates him, and he's done terrible things. Or has he? But it doesn't matter. When he finds out the truth about who she really is...he'll never want to see her again.

Total Pages (Source): 70

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Chapter One

Today would have been the six-month anniversary of her wedding.

If I hadn't run.

The thought caught Gabby in an unguarded moment. For a second her surroundings faded and she was back under the warm Sicilian sun. With Vito.

Her feet faltered—the dancer on her right whirled around, rammed into her, and Gabby crashed to the stage floor with a thump, the air knocked from her lungs. She lay for a minute, gazing at the sea of multicolored legs around her and the empty chairs in the front row.

“Crap,” she muttered, pushing herself up onto her hands and knees and then to her feet, brushing down her purple leotard and hitching up her bubblegum pink legwarmers. The music stopped and everyone's attention focused on her. She gave a shrug. “Sorry.”

It had been her fault; she'd turned the wrong way. Luckily it was only a rehearsal, but all the same—she was better than this.

Get a grip, wuss.

“Perhaps we could have a little more attention, Gabby.” The choreographer's voice held more than a hint of sarcasm. “And we might all get home before midnight.” Yeah, that would be good—it was only eleven in the morning, and they had a show

tonight.

She was the newest member of the cast of a long-running West End musical, but that shouldn't have made a difference. She was a professional. It didn't help that her miserable state was self-inflicted. Her head pounded from too many chocolate-strawberry martinis the night before. She'd gone out with her bestie Theresa and drunk way too much, drowning her sorrows.

Wimp.

Not that she had anything to be sorrowful about. Not really. Her mum was doing well, responding to the treatment, and her brother was out of trouble—fingers crossed the little monster would stay that way.

And finally, she had a good job. Yay!

Not as good as the one she'd lost when she broke her arm, but good enough to pay the rent if she ever got off her pathetic backside and looked for a place of her own instead of Theresa's couch. And if she didn't mess up, the job would go on for a long time. The show had been running for years; there was no reason to believe it would end anytime soon.

Which all meant that there was absolutely no reason to feel so goddamn miserable all the time.

Just don't think about a certain Sicilian.

A face flashed up in her mind—a stunningly flawless face, with sharp cheekbones, eyes like bitter chocolate, and the longest, blackest lashes she had ever seen.

Oh God, I just thought about Vito. Total bummer.

“Gabby!”

She jumped and found everyone still staring at her.

“Are you ready?”

She gave a quick nod. “Yes, boss.”

The music started, and she forced everything from her mind and, thankfully, soon lost herself in the rhythm. She loved that moment when the dance and music took over, her surroundings faded, and she was transported to another world. She danced until her legs ached and a sheen of sweat covered her body. She was just congratulating herself on not putting a foot wrong when she raised her head and caught sight of a tall figure standing in the aisle.

Her mind went blank, her feet tangled, and for a second time that morning, she crashed to the floor. This time she lay with her eyes tight shut, unwilling to open them until someone nudged her in the side.

She peeked through her lashes, stared at the spot, but the man was gone. A figment of her imagination? Not a chance in hell. She wasn’t that lucky.

She scrambled to her feet. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she mumbled, giving another little shrug. “I got distracted. It won’t happen again. Super big promise.”

“We’ll start from the beginning.”

The rest of the dancers groaned, but as far as Gabby was concerned, he could keep them there all day and past midnight. Here on the stage, she was someone else, and real life couldn’t touch her.

But once she left the stage, all bets were off.

...

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Madre di Christo.

Vittorio D'Ascensio backed up and collapsed into one of the crimson velvet seats at the rear of the auditorium, never taking his gaze from the stage and the woman he'd come to find.

What the hell?

He would never have recognized her if she hadn't fallen over and drawn attention to herself. Even then, it had taken long moments for him to realize that this was his Gabrielle.

It was inconceivable, as though the world had tilted, leaving him floundering and off-balance. For a moment it was as though he was back on that burning ship, struggling for air, in a world turned to chaos. He'd nearly died that night three weeks ago, and it had been Gabrielle's image that had kept him going, given him the strength to fight his way out of there. To survive.

Confronting death could have a profound effect on a man, bringing him face-to-face with his regrets. Afterward, in the lifeboat, Vito had made a vow that he would find Gabrielle, convince her that he did love her, persuade her to come back to him.

He rubbed a finger over the scar that ran down his cheek from his eye to his upper lip—a constant reminder of that night and the vow he'd made.

Now here he was.

The loud music assaulted his ears, thumping in his head. She'd told him she was a classical ballerina on a hiatus as she waited for a wrist injury to heal. This was as far from classical ballet as it was possible to get. All the same, he couldn't drag his gaze from her figure as she moved to the music. She was so...colorful. Gabrielle had always been subdued, tasteful. This woman was bright, like a tropical bird, in a purple leotard and pink leggings, her hair pulled into a high ponytail.

Six months ago, he'd fully expected to marry Gabrielle; she'd been everything he'd ever wanted...his fantasy bride. Then the night before the wedding, she'd vanished, leaving him a note, just two sentences which made no sense then or now.

"I can't marry you. You don't love me."

Did she believe he'd been unfaithful, that there was someone else? But why?

Maybe he should have gone after her back then, but he'd wanted her—noneed her—to come back of her own accord. He didn't make mistakes. He couldn't have been so totally wrong about them. So he'd thrown himself into his work, every day expecting her to turn up and tell him she'd just needed time. But months had passed and nothing. It had taken a life and death situation to accept she wasn't coming back to him. If he wanted to discover the truth, then he had to go out and hunt it down.

But he'd never expected to find this.

Watching her supple body dance in the fitted leotard that clung to the swell of her breasts, her narrow waist, the curve of her hips, his body reacted almost instantly, growing hot and hard.

They'd never made love. She'd always backed off, and he'd respected that, believing she wanted to wait for marriage. He wouldn't have held it against her if she hadn't

been a virgin, but all the same, he'd liked the fact that he would be her first. It had evoked some primordial feeling inside him.

It also meant he hadn't slept with a woman since he first caught sight of her all those months ago. Now, he couldn't take his eyes from her. As he watched, she turned around, bent over from the waist, her ass facing him. She glanced over her shoulder, and he almost exploded.

This was unexpected. He'd always wanted her, but never with the urgency that now coursed through his body.

He sat unmoving for maybe an hour, thoughts churning in his mind.

If he confronted her now, would she tell him why she'd doubted his love? Would she have an explanation as to why she'd vanished without a trace, changed her cell phone, left her old address?

He'd been aware he'd rushed her, but he'd wanted to make her his, to prove his commitment—a commitment he'd never been able to give to any woman before. Had he come on too strong and frightened her away?

Something churned in his gut.

Fear?

Finally, the music stopped, and the dancers left the stage. He watched until she disappeared from sight, then rose to his feet.

Time to get some answers.

...

At least she'd managed to get through the routine without another slip-up.

A prickle ran down her spine as she headed for the changing room. Gabby made sure she was in the middle of the group. She was shorter than most of the dancers and hidden from view. But it also meant she couldn't see much of what was around her.

Not that she wanted to see. She kept her eyes on the ground, but her heart was hammering.

Why was he here?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Why now? Six months had passed. If he was going to come after her, why hadn't he come before? She'd presumed she was safe, and it was over—an episode in her life that she was totally ashamed of. But at the time she'd felt she had no choice. Hell, she had had no choice. She'd needed the money. Besides, when Luciano Scarlesi had put the proposition to her, it hadn't sounded like such a bad thing. She was doing something for the family.

Her dad had married Luca's aunt, Maria Scarlesi, when Gabby was seven. Consequently, she'd grown up on the edges of the sprawling Scarlesi family, and she knew all about Sicilian family vendettas and how the wicked D'Ascensio family had ruined the Scarlesis and driven them out of Sicily. Now she had a chance to help them right an old wrong.

And she'd wanted to help. She'd never really felt like she belonged. Hell, she didn't even look the part, a blonde and blue-eyed alien surrounded by a sea of black hair and dark eyes. This was her chance to do something, to prove she really was part of the family.

“Did you see that total hottie?” Sally asked, fanning her face, as the door to the dressing room shut behind them.

With the words, the last hope that she'd somehow conjured up his image, drained away. “Total hottie” just about summed Vito up. He was all long, lean muscles wrapped in golden skin. The body of a Greek god and the face of an Adonis. She'd known she was in trouble from the moment she'd first seen him; he'd been way more charismatic in real life than the photos Luca had shown her. She'd only kept her hands off him because of guilt and the ability to completely submerge herself in her

role.

She was a good girl.

Hah.

A good actress, maybe.

She'd always had a thing for Mediterranean men. After all, Luca had been her first crush, but perhaps best not to go there. "Best not go there" seemed to be the recurring theme with her love life.

But it looked like she wasn't going to have a choice in the matter. She was going there whether she liked it or not.

She kicked off her shoes and sank down onto the stool in front of the mirror that ran along one wall of the changing rooms, but she didn't even see her reflection. Maybe if she sat here long enough, he would lose interest and go away. The chatter of the other girls washed over her. Her mind was numb; she had no clue what to do. What to say to him. Obviously, the truth wasn't an option. But she was done with lying.

Maybe she could fake a case of bronchitis and pretend she'd lost her voice—except he'd no doubt seen and heard her sing on the stage.

Amnesia?

She liked that one.

The room slowly emptied out, and still she didn't move. Finally, the door clicked shut behind the last of her workmates, and she shifted on the stool. She couldn't stay here forever.

Or could she? They'd find her mummified corpse years from now... Maybe not.

She glanced around—there was no other exit, not even a window to jump out of, and the only other door led to a bathroom. A rack with the costumes stood along the wall opposite. A disguise perhaps. Or a hiding place.

Wimp.

She was being pathetic.

Just get it over with.

But put some clothes on first.

She definitely didn't want to face her ex-fiancé in nothing but a leotard, tights, and legwarmers. She stood up and reached for her sweats as the door handle turned...and the world stopped.

Oh, hell. Too late.

...

He'd been loitering outside for half an hour, like some lovesick admirer, as one by one, the other women had exited what he presumed was the changing room.

But no Gabrielle.

She was in there. He was sure. She couldn't have gotten past him and left the building.

The door opened, and his breath caught in his throat...then released on a sigh as yet

another stranger appeared. She glanced at him curiously, and he stepped forward.

“I’m looking for Gabrielle Harper,” he said.

She gave a little pout but then nodded back toward the dressing room. “Gabby? She’s in there.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

He stared at the door as if willing it to open. What would she say?

When nothing happened and another five minutes passed, he took a deep breath and stepped toward the door. He almost expected it to be locked but the handle turned, and he pushed it open.

It led into a long, narrow room, but his surroundings faded because there she was.

She stood only a few feet away, a startled expression in her wide blue eyes. He pushed the door open further and stepped into the room, enveloped instantly in a wave of feminine perfumes. She took a step back.

He released the door, and it swung shut behind him, the click loud in the silence.

She stared at him for long moments. He stared back. She was the same but completely different. She'd always worn her hair in a tidy blond bob, cut off neat at the shoulders. Now it was pulled into a high messy pony tail and the blond was mixed with bright magenta streaks. Her face was free of makeup, where before she'd always worn a small amount, subtle and understated. Now her skin was clear, her lips dark pink, pouty. His eyes skimmed over her face and then back—she had a diamond stud in her nose, and he started in shock.

It occurred to him that he would never have looked twice at this woman. She reminded him too much of his students, young and edgy and off-limits. It was one of his unspoken rules—never get involved with anyone at his work, and certainly not a student.

But Gabrielle wasn't a student, and she was twenty-four—five years younger than him. At least, that's what she'd told him, though now he was beginning to question everything.

He'd always thought her classically beautiful. Now she looked...sexy. Her heart-shaped face had a dimple in the chin. Her nose was small, her cheekbones high, and her eyes huge and midnight blue.

He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze.

Merda.

She still wore the purple leotard, and it was skin-tight and clinging to her curves. Cristo, he could see her nipples pressed against the soft material, and the blood drained to his groin. Her breasts were small but rounded. He was pretty sure she was naked beneath the thin material and saliva flooded his mouth.

She still hadn't spoken, just stood there staring back at him, her gaze fixed on his face. Then she took a step toward him. Her hand reached out, and she stroked a finger down over his cheekbone.

Of course, the scar. That was new.

"What happened?" she murmured and even her voice had a sexy edge, low and husky. He'd always thought she had a beautiful voice but never considered it sexy. Maybe this wasn't Gabrielle. A twin sister? With the same name? Unlikely.

"Vito?"

He shook his head. What had she said?

Her finger caressed the curve of his cheek. The scar? That was it. He cleared his throat. “An accident. On a cruise ship. I was hit by a burning cable.”

“Ouch.”

He shrugged. “It could have been worse.”

Her hand dropped to her side, and she studied him, her head cocked. While she wasn’t short for a woman, she only came to his shoulder, and this close, looking down, he could see the swell of her breasts above the tight material. He tried to focus on her face.

“It suits you,” she said after a minute. “You were too perfect before.”

If he was so goddamn perfect, why had she run? The first flickers of anger licked along his nerves. She’d clearly moved on with her life—a completely different life than he had imagined.

“Why?” he asked, and the word came out as a growl, harsher than he’d intended.

She took a step back, her eyes widening. He’d never spoken to her in anger. He always kept his temper in check. Anger never achieved anything, but now he could feel it churning in his gut, rising up, unfamiliar, and tipping him further off balance.

She looked away, licked her lips with a small pointed tongue and heat flared up, mingling with the rage. Her gaze returned to his face, and she focused on his lips.

“Gabrielle?”

“I think I need to kiss you.”

At first, the words made no sense. They were certainly not what he expected, but then nothing about this encounter was like anything he'd imagined. And he could think of absolutely nothing to say. Then she took a step toward him, and his mind slid into chaos. He tried one last time. "We should talk—"

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. "Later. Kiss me first, and then we'll talk."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

This close he could breathe in her warm scent—sweat mingled with a sharp, citrusy perfume, as unfamiliar as the rest of her. She'd worn Chanel when he'd known her before. Her hands rose to rest on his shoulders, and she came up on tiptoe.

He should move, back away. He'd come here to talk, to find out what had gone wrong between them. Persuade her to come back and give him another chance.

Time seemed to slow. They'd kissed plenty in the month he'd known her, but always in control. Now his heart raced, his blood thundered in his veins, and he had an inkling his control could snap at any moment.

Move.

But he couldn't do it. He was physically incapable of shifting his feet. He was stuck in place as her hands slid from his shoulders to sink into the hair at the back of his neck. A shiver ran through him as her fingers glided across his skull then exerted a slight pressure to lower his head.

Her eyes were half-closed, her lips slightly parted. Her tongue swiped across her plump lower lip, and every muscle in his body clenched up tight. His hands were hanging by his side, now they moved of their own accord with no direction from his brain. They settled on the deep indent of her waist, urging her closer.

He'd let her have her one kiss, and afterward they'd talk.

Then her lips touched his and all rational thought fled.

Chapter Two

Holy freaking moly.

The man could kiss.

Get a grip.

She wasn't supposed to enjoy it—it had been a means to an end, that was all. She'd had to do something to get out of answering his question because she had no clue what to say. And hey, they couldn't talk if they were kissing, so it was the logical thing to do.

And who am I kidding?

She'd been fighting the need to kiss him from the second she'd touched that sexy scar on his cheek. It gave him the look of a wicked pirate. She'd told herself it was merely curiosity—they'd kissed before, but she'd never really allowed herself to let go, had always felt a little guilty, and consequently kept herself detached. Those kisses had been nothing like this. Now with his mouth on hers, she never wanted to stop.

Okay, so it's a crap plan and I'm delusional.

Once he learned what she'd done, he'd never want to see her again, let alone kiss her. He was going to hate her so badly. So she was taking this, because it would be the last chance she would ever get. And maybe, if she had him just the once, then she'd be able to get him out of her head and her heart, where he had no goddamn right to be.

He'd taken control of the kiss as soon as their lips had touched, his mouth firm and warm, his hands on her waist sending tingles along her nerve endings to settle

between her thighs, flooding her sex with heat. Her breasts were crushed against the rock solid chest, her nipples already swollen. Nothing had prepared her for this. Then his lips parted, and his tongue pushed into her mouth. He tasted of hot Italian sunshine and spices and heat. His tongue slid along the edge of hers like warm wet velvet, and he kissed her until she was starved for oxygen, light-headed.

She came up from the kiss, gasping, her hands still clutched in the silky hair at the back of his neck. His dark eyes held a dazed expression, which was slowly clearing as he stared down at her.

If she stopped now, then he'd only start talking again, and she still had nothing sensible to say. So really what choice did she have? She had to keep kissing him.

Yes, Gabby, of course that's why you're doing this. Liar!

Ignoring the annoying voice in her mind, she tugged his head back down to her, and this time her tongue pushed inside his mouth, purely to stop any words coming out. She sensed a moment of resistance, a tenseness in his muscles, and then he gave in and kissed her back. His hands slid from her waist to cup her ass, and she groaned into his mouth as his fingers dug into her softness.

Damn. It feels so good. He feels so good. How had she ever found the strength to keep him at arm's length before?

He lifted her without breaking the kiss, pressing her up against the wood of the door, his body hard against hers. As she wrapped her legs around his waist, she felt the push of his erection against her core, flooding her with heat. He was huge and hard, and how the hell had things gotten so hot between them so fast?

Never in the past had either of them come close to losing control. Now she didn't think she could stop.

A small part of her mind niggled that this was wrong. This would complicate things, but her body was on fire with need. And she recognized that the attraction had always been there. She'd wanted him from the start, from the first time she'd seen him on that golden beach in Sicily. The intensity of that need had scared her, and from that moment, she'd kept herself in tight check.

Because she couldn't have him. And she certainly didn't deserve him.

Now she had to. Just once. She had to know what he felt like buried deep inside her. Her hands slid from his shoulders, pushed down between their bodies, over his chest, and she shoved them up beneath his shirt to graze the skin of his belly. Like hot satin.

As her fingers caressed his bare skin, he stopped moving, his eyes closed and his breathing shallow. In this position she couldn't get close enough, couldn't reach the parts she needed to touch, and she wriggled in his arms.

He seemed to understand, his hands tightening on her, squeezing, then he turned her, backed her up, and rested her bottom on the cold marble of the wide counter that ran along beneath the mirror. He released his hold so he stood in the V formed by her thighs. His eyes were dark, and she could read nothing in them except need. A need that echoed her own. Some of the tension left her. She'd been in no way sure of him. He'd always been in such control, never pushing her further than he believed she wanted to go. A true gentleman.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Today was different. Somehow she had stripped the veneer of civilization from him. A tic jumped in his cheek, and his jaw tensed as he stared down at her. Then with a certain deliberation he reached out and trailed one hand over the curve of her breast, caressing the swollen nipple through the thin material covering it, rubbing with his palm, sending sparks of desire shooting through her. Hooking a finger in the shoulder of her leotard, he raised an eyebrow as if in question but didn't wait for an answer, just shoved the strap down over her arm, then the other one, so she was naked from the waist up.

“Cristo,” he muttered.

She held her breath as he cupped one pale breast in his big hand. And the contrast was the most erotic thing she had ever seen. Slowly, he lowered his head, stroked his tongue over one taut peak, and she felt the caress between her thighs, growing hot and wet for him.

“More,” she whispered.

His mouth never left her, but his eyes rose to her face, and he peered up at her through a fringe of midnight-dark lashes. He held her gaze as his hand tightened on her breast and he closed his lips around her nipple, suckling her hard. Her breath was coming short and sharp, and her hips rose of their own accord as if begging for his touch. It had been so long, too long.

He lost it then, showering kisses on her breasts, on her throat, nipping with his sharp teeth, sucking, licking. He bit down on her earlobe, drew it into his mouth while his hands played with her breasts, fingers tugging at the nipples, pinching hard, just this

side of pain as though he knew what she liked. And maybe he did—maybe he read the small moans she couldn't hold back.

She shifted her hips against him, rubbed up against the hardness of his erection through the material of his pants and her leotard. There was too much separating them; she needed flesh on flesh, and she pushed a hand between their bodies to fumble with his belt buckle. By the time she finally got it undone, she was breathing heavily, need driving her.

She wanted his hands on her sex, his cock deep inside her, and if she didn't get it soon, she was going to go insane. He must have read something in her frantic movements, as his hands slid from her breasts, down over her flat stomach beneath the tight material, pushing it out of the way over the sharp jut of her hip bones. He stepped back so she could complete the process, shoving the leotard over her legs, kicking it off, taking her tights and panties with it, leaving her naked. His nostrils flared as he took her in, his eyes narrowing as he trailed a finger over the ruby stud piercing her navel then brushed over the small tattoo at her right hip.

As though he couldn't stop himself, he cupped her between the thighs, his fingers slipping between the folds of her sex and then into the hot wet heat of her. He flexed his finger, rubbing against her inner walls, sending tingles through her body. Her eyes drifted closed as she concentrated on the sensations coursing through her.

“You want me.”

At his words, her eyes flew open, and she looked at him. It wasn't a question and she had no thought or desire to deny it.

Holding her gaze, he withdrew his finger, gliding it up between the folds of her sex to find the swollen bundle of nerves. He circled it with his fingertip until her hips were jerking toward him, begging for more.

“Please.”

He stroked her once, twice, and then massaged the tiny nub. Seconds later and she was flying. Her head fell back as pure pleasure pulsed through her. He stayed motionless while the pulsating between her thighs slowed to a steady throb, then he squeezed her clit between his thumb and finger and she came again.

As he stepped back, panic filled her. He was leaving her and she needed him. She couldn't allow him to go. But before she could speak, his hand dropped to the fastener of his pants. She held her breath as he flicked it open and lowered the zip. His cock sprang free—hard and huge, satin skin taut, the head flaring and flushed deep red. Saliva flooded her mouth as she stared. He wrapped his fist around himself and squeezed, then took a small step toward her.

There was something she had to remember. “Stop.”

He slowly raised his head.

“Condom. Bag.” She waved a hand at her bag sitting on the side, a foot away.

His eyes narrowed, but he reached across and pushed the bag toward her. She scrabbled inside with shaky hands. She always carried condoms. Didn't she? While she hadn't had sex in a long time, old habits die hard. A sigh of relief left her as her fingers found the foil packet. “Voila!”

His brows drew together. “So you're not a virgin, then?”

She bit her lip. “I never said I was a virgin.”

“I...” He shook his head.

Don't stop.

He couldn't stop now. This was her one and only chance. She could justify this one time to herself. She was in shock, had needed to stop him talking, but after this she couldn't hide behind excuses. Reaching out she trailed a finger down his chest, felt the heat of his skin, then lower to wrap around the steely length of his erection. With her other hand, she passed him the condom, held her breath, saw the moment he gave in. He shoved into her hand, and she squeezed him hard and released him, blowing out her breath as he tore the packet open and rolled the condom down over his length.

He took a step toward her, his fingers parting the folds of her sex, and then he shoved into her with one hard lunge of his hips. He filled her completely, and she gasped at the sensation of all that masculine power deep inside her. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she shifted closer, wanting more. His hands slid into her hair on either side of her face, tugging it free of the pony tail, then lowering his head to kiss her, hard, his tongue thrusting inside as he flexed his hips then withdrew from her and she tightened her legs, holding onto him.

He released her mouth, moved his hands to her hips and gripped her tight, then pushed in, his movements almost rough. But she welcomed him, her body softening.

She lay on the cold, hard counter, back arched, and he placed his palms over her breasts as he thrust into her over and over. She kept her gaze fixed on his face, because he was quite the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, his cheeks flushed with heat, his eyes dark, half-closed. She lost track of time as her surroundings faded, her world reduced to nothing more than the sensation of his big body on her, in her. Inside everything coiled up tight, a heavy weight swelling in her belly as he drove her upward, each powerful thrust of his hips stronger than before, skirting on the edge of pain, his fingers digging into her breasts, his expression twisted with sheer concentration.

Then he changed, slowed, and ground his hips against her clit with each inward stroke, and she was flying once again, bursting into a million pieces. Shattering.

She vaguely sensed him coming inside her, his growl filling her ears, the final thrust pushing her backward so her head hit the mirror behind her. His face buried in the side of her neck, and he went still.

It seemed like an age they lay there. Something beneath her dug into her left buttock. She hadn't noticed it before—hardly surprising—and she wriggled beneath his heavy weight. When he still didn't move she pushed a hand between them and shoved him hard.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

A shudder ran through him, then he pushed himself up slowly, pulling out of her, and for a moment, she felt bereft. Empty. He stared down at her sprawled beneath him. His gaze dropped, and his brows drew together. She came up on her elbows and peered down her body. Faint marks showed against the pale skin of her breasts.

“Sorry. I was rough.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But it’s been a long time.”

She cleared her throat. She had no clue what to say, though a small part of her liked that it had been a long time for him. That there had presumably been no one since they were together.

Don’t go there, Gabby.

She pushed herself up so she was sitting. “There’s a bathroom through there.” She waved a vague hand down his body and he nodded, opened his mouth and then closed it again. Shook his head and turned away, disappearing through the door.

Gabby sat for a moment staring at the spot where he’d disappeared. She needed to move.

Clothes. Clothes would be good here.

She jumped down off the counter, grasping the edge as her legs almost buckled under her. Her body shook in the aftermath of what had to be the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced.

Don’t think about it.

She glanced up to find Vito standing in the bathroom doorway, one shoulder leaning against the wall, his expression shuttered. He'd fastened his clothes, and he was once again Mr. Impeccable in his designer business suit.

While she was naked.

She finally spotted her clothes over the back of a chair and grabbed them. Vito said nothing, just watched as she pulled on sweats and a T-shirt. Time to get out of there; she couldn't take the accusation in his dark eyes. She felt strangely vulnerable in a way sex had never made her feel before. And she needed to be alone to work out her next move.

Though, surely, he would just walk away now.

Clearly, she wasn't the "perfect" woman he'd thought her to be.

But she wasn't ready to hear the words of condemnation spoken out loud. Even if she did deserve them. And worse. Deserved whatever he could throw at her.

What she'd done had been wrong. She might not have thought she had a choice at the time; that didn't justify her actions.

If Vito walked away now and didn't come back, then he would never need to know the whole truth. That would be the best thing. Really, it would.

So, why does it hurt?

She blinked a couple of times then scrabbled in her bag for her sunglasses, shoved them on her nose, slung the bag over her shoulder, and then hurried to the door.

He spoke as she turned the handle. "I don't know who you are."

“No.” What else was there to say? She opened the door, slipped out, and heard the click as it shut behind her. And then she ran as fast as her shaky legs would carry her.

...

Vito scrubbed a hand over his hair as he stared at the closed door where she'd vanished.

Christo. What the hell had happened to one kiss and then they'd talk?

Sinking down onto one of the stools, he pressed his fingertips into his scalp. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, eyes sleepy, hair mussed. He looked like he'd just gotten laid. Not a look he'd sported in a while. Maybe that's why he had so thoroughly lost control.

Even now, his body felt sated while his mind was in turmoil. He'd never lost control like that before. He was always aware of the darker side to his nature, the side he'd kept firmly in check.

And he hated that he had no clue what was going on here. All he knew was somehow he'd been played.

But played now? Or six months ago?

He pressed a finger to the spot between his eyes as a wave of exhaustion washed over him. He hadn't slept last night. Too on edge. And maybe his subconscious had been warning him something wasn't right. Yesterday had been full of meetings; he'd finally sold the last of the subsidiary companies. Then he'd flown in from Sicily this morning on the company jet, which would be sold soon as well.

It was time to get back to his real life—as a Professor of Archeology at Cambridge

University. Though in a weird way, he'd enjoyed the year running his grandfather's company, enjoyed acting the part of the billionaire playboy CEO. Not that he'd been much of a playboy. He hadn't had time. The learning curve had been steep, and he'd promised his grandfather he would give it his all for one year.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

He'd come here straight from the airport, not wanting to put this off. His driver had dropped him off at the theater and taken his bags on to the hotel. He'd head over there now, shower, catch some sleep, and then go hunt down his runaway bride a second time.

And this time he wouldn't be distracted.

Chapter Three

Something nudged her in the side. Gabby grunted and rolled over, burying her nose in the back of the sofa and pulling the blanket up over her head.

"Go away," she mumbled.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead. And what are you doing fast asleep in the afternoon, anyway?"

Trying not to think.

But no way was she saying that to Theresa, who was just about the nosiest person Gabby knew. If she got an inkling anything was going on, she would attempt to worm the truth out of her. And she wouldn't give up.

Theresa Scarlesi was her best friend, had been since they'd first met when they were both seven. But she was also Luca's sister, and it was testing her loyalties as it was, asking her not to tell him Gabby's whereabouts.

But then, Gabby hadn't told Theresa of the little deal she had made with her brother. All she'd said was that she was avoiding Luca for a while. Theresa was sympathetic; after all, she believed Luca had broken Gabby's heart a long time ago. In actual fact, he'd only bruised it a little. Gabby hadn't really loved him. He'd just been a way for her to belong—or not, as it turned out.

But Theresa was a good friend and had offered her unconditional support, along with her couch, when Gabby had come back from Sicily homeless and a little...lost.

Six months later and she still hadn't found herself.

Her life was one big messy mass of lies.

And, oh God, I just had sex with Vittorio D'Ascensio.

Arch enemy of the Scarlesis.

And it had been the best sex ever, even if it should never have happened. She had a flashback to the feel of him deep inside her, and her thighs clenched together.

"Haven't you got a performance tonight?" Theresa asked, pulling her out of the pit of depravity her mind had sunk into.

She rolled back over and slowly emerged from her cocoon, sitting up and pushing her hair out of her face. "Yeah." She glanced at her watch. She'd slept for three hours—a post coital snooze; sex always made her sleepy—and she had to be at the theater in an hour and a half.

"Here." Theresa pushed a mug of coffee under her nose, and she wrapped her fingers around it, brought it to her face, and breathed in the caffeine fumes.

“Thank you.” She glanced up at her friend. “You want to meet after the show?”

“Can’t. I have a night shift.” Theresa was an ER nurse. It was all she had ever wanted to be, and she worked long hours but seemed to love it. Plus, she was in lust with one of the ER doctors who so far didn’t know she existed but for whom she had high hopes. “Are you okay?” Theresa sank into the chair opposite and was studying her, eyes narrowed. Theresa was pure Sicilian—curvy, dark haired and dark eyed, with smooth olive skin. A total contrast to Gabby.

She tried for a nonchalant shrug. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Your lips are swollen. You look like you’ve been thoroughly kissed.”

“I wish. Though I did fall flat on my face during rehearsal this morning—twice.”

“Hmm.”

Trouble was, Theresa knew her too well. Gabby swallowed the lukewarm coffee in one gulp, then pushed the blanket off and got to her feet. “Shower time.”

She stood under the hot spray, trying to wash away her worries and failing.

Oh Lord, why had Vito come back now, after she’d finally let down her guard?

For the first few weeks after she’d run, she’d spent the whole time looking over her shoulder, expecting him to pop up at any moment.

And what had she felt when he hadn’t? Relief obviously. But lurking beneath the relief was a huge dose of disappointment. Had some stupid, pathetic part of her actually believed that deep down he’d loved her? That he’d seen through her pretense to the real Gabby underneath and fallen in love.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Hah. Never going to happen.

She'd been living in fantasyland.

He would have run a mile from the real Gabby. The real her was not his type. She knew because she had studied his type, turned herself into his ideal woman. And as far as she was concerned—his ideal woman was a boring prude.

But in case he turned up again, she needed a plan of action. Something to tell him that would get him off her back once and for all. And if she felt a little twinge of...sadness at that, well, suck it up, bitch. He might be the best looking man she had ever kissed, and he might have the biggest cock she had ever encountered, and he might know exactly what to do with it...

All that was beside the point.

None of it changed the fact that his big cock was attached to a D'Ascensio, and was therefore off-limits and always would be.

When she came out of her bedroom, dressed and ready to go, Theresa was still sitting where she had left her. She glanced up as Gabby came into the room. "Luca called."

That wasn't good news. "What? When?"

"Five minutes ago. He wanted to know if I'd seen you."

Gabby caught her upper lip between her teeth, worried on it for a while. She was

quite aware that Theresa hated lying to her brother. But she wasn't ready to face Luca yet. With luck, she'd soon be able to repay the money she owed him, and then she'd put an end to this. "What did you tell him?"

"That I hadn't seen you in a while. Well, it was sort of true—I didn't bother to define 'a while.' What's going on between you two? Why are you hiding?" She pursed her lips. "What did my brother do to you? I'll kill him."

"Nothing. Really." She shrugged. "I agreed to do him a favor and I sort of failed. But he lent me some money and maybe he's a little pissed."

"The money for your mother's treatment? I wondered where you'd gotten it. I know you were broke at the time, but you clearly weren't ready to talk." Her lips turned down, and she rested her hands on her hips. "And Luca made you do something for it? My brother's an asshole."

"I wanted to help." And she had at the time. And it hadn't seemed such a bad thing, saving the family honor, or regaining it...or whatever. Now, it just seemed totally stupid, like something out of a bad movie. "Look, I've got to head out. I'm going to be late, and I'm already not the most popular person there. I don't want to give Anton any more reason to be pissed at me."

"But you'll talk to me soon?"

She crossed to where Theresa stood and gave her a hug. "Yeah. Soon."

After grabbing her bag, she headed for the door. As she exited the flat she almost catapulted straight into Vito. He stood just outside, finger raised as if to ring the doorbell.

Holy freaking moly.

She glanced back to make sure Theresa hadn't spotted their visitor, and pulled the door closed behind her.

"What do you want?" The words came out harsher than she'd intended, but she was in shock. Why did he have to keep popping up where he wasn't supposed to be? And how had he found her? She'd thought she would have a little more time to get her act together.

Christ, what had she decided to tell him? It had sounded so plausible when she'd come up with her plan in the shower.

"To talk." His answer was clipped. "Don't you think you at least owe me that?"

Of course she did. She'd behaved atrociously. For a moment, she considered telling him the truth. But just for a moment. She couldn't reveal the extent of her bad behavior without mentioning Luca, and there was a chance that would get Luca in trouble. She needed to clear it with him first, which she would as soon as she had the money to pay him back. Hopefully that would be soon, but not yet, so she had to put Vito off some other way.

But right now, she didn't have the time. "I'm late for work," she muttered, taking his arm and almost dragging him away. She didn't want him and Theresa meeting up and introducing themselves. That would be seriously bad news.

He raised an eyebrow but allowed himself to be pulled out of the building. "I'll drive you."

The theater was a fifteen-minute ride on the underground from Theresa's small flat, maybe the same by car if the traffic wasn't too bad. She chewed on her lip as she decided, then gave a quick nod. He raised his hand, and a long dark, expensive car pulled up beside them. Of course he would have a driver. He was a billionaire. Or he

had been—he'd told her it was purely temporary. That was when she'd started to realize that no way was he the monster Luca made him out to be.

She climbed into the back and shuffled across to the far side, fastening the seat belt as he got in beside her and the car pulled smoothly into the traffic. She stared out of the window, totally conscious of his big presence beside her, her body tingling with sexual awareness.

They'd spent a month together on Sicily, and she'd not felt a fraction of what she was feeling now. Oh, she'd wanted him from the moment she saw him, but guilt had held her back from giving in to the sexual pull between the two of them. Plus, she'd been acting a part—a good girl. But how many times in the last six months had she wished they'd made love just once so she had one memory to take with her when she'd run? Well, she had her memory now.

She gave him a quick sideways glance. Tonight he was dressed in black pants and a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up over his forearms. His hands rested on his thighs, big hands with long fingers. Fingers that had touched her intimately, pushed inside her. Wet heat flooded her core, and she shifted on the seat.

Stop thinking about sex.

She so didn't need sex complicating things.

He turned to face her, and she was caught in his dark-eyed stare. He was all Mediterranean hotness, and just looking at him did weird things to her insides. This side of his face showed the scar, an angry line that ran from just below his right eye to his upper lip. He'd always had an air of total civilization and control, but the scar gave him a dangerous look, and if she wasn't mistaken, he'd lost weight in the last six months.

"Tell me what happened," she said, raising her hand to his face but dropping it at the last minute.

He shrugged. "I told you I was on a ship—"

"What sort of ship?"

"A cruise ship. It belonged to the D'Ascensio Corporation, and I was in negotiations to sell the line when a storm struck. The ship caught fire, and I was hit by a burning cable."

A shiver went through her. "You could have been killed."

He glanced out of the window, then back to her. "At one point I thought we would be trapped, cut off by the flames."

"We?"

“Just a couple of guys who helped me.” He gave a tight smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “When it seemed I might die, you were the one thing I thought about. Never seeing you again. Never understanding why you left so suddenly.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Shit, Gabrielle. Why the hell did you run? Why not stay and talk to me? Tell me what the fucking problem was.”

She winced. Vito rarely swore. She’d never seen him lose his temper, but now he was like a bomb waiting to blow. Had she done that, or had it been the accident? Maybe a bit of both. The thing was, despite his asking her to marry him, she’d never really believed that her running would bother him long-term. She’d thought he would get over it quickly. Maybe because it hadn’t seemed real to her, she’d kidded herself that his feelings were equally superficial. It made her feel better, lessened the guilt.

“I wasn’t ready.”

“And you couldn’t just come and tell me that? You had to run?”

“I thought you would persuade me to stay and go through with the wedding. I felt like everything was moving too fast, and that you couldn’t really want to marry me. That you didn’t really know me.” She took a deep breath. “That I didn’t really know myself.”

He seemed to latch on to those words, his eyes narrowing on her face, running over her, from her pink-streaked hair to her matching T-shirt and tight jeans. “Is that what this whole change of...image is about?”

She couldn’t have asked for a better response. But part of her hated herself, because she was still lying. She nodded quickly. “I just needed to try something different. To find myself.” She almost winced again as she said the trite words, she sounded like a complete cliché.

The car was slowing, and she glanced out of the window. They were pulling up in front of the theater. She looked back at Vito and frustration flashed across his face.

“On the lifeboat, after the ship went down, I made a vow that I would come and find you, discover why you had run. Prove to you that I do love you.”

Oh God, he was killing her here. Guilt ate up her insides. She had no clue what to say to him. “Look, I have to go. I’m late.” He continued to stare. “I need this job.”

He studied her for a moment longer, and then shook his head. “Go then. But you owe me more of an explanation than you needed to find yourself.” He exhaled loudly. “I’m staying at the Savoy. Come and see me tomorrow morning and we can talk.”

She nodded, just needing out of there.

“And Gabrielle...if you run again, I will find you.”

Was that a threat? And if so of what? Another sign of the change in him—the old Vito would never have threatened her. Had she done this?

“I’ll be there.”

At least it would give her time to polish her story. She scrambled out of the car, slammed the door behind her, and watched as it pulled out into the traffic, unable to see Vito through the tinted windows but still conscious of the fact that he was staring after her.

All she had to do was convince him that he hadn’t really loved her. Should be easy—she’d never considered herself as particularly loveable, anyway.

She’d just give him a quick overview of the real her.

He'd probably turn tail and run.

Chapter Four

Vito hadn't slept well, and he woke late.

Yesterday had been surreal.

In all honesty, he hadn't known what to expect. When she'd run out on him all those months ago, she'd left him reeling.

He'd been going through something of a crisis of character, anyway. The previous months had been crazy. His grandfather's death. The promise he had made the old man just before he had died. He'd been living a life so different from his normal existence that he didn't know who he was anymore, didn't recognize himself. And he'd been stunned by how much he'd enjoyed the role he had taken on.

Maybe his grandfather had seen that in him, some sort of lust for money and power. He'd even once or twice considered keeping the company, becoming CEO of D'Ascensio Corporation for real instead of just as a favor to the grandfather he'd loved. "Just try it," hisnonnohad asked. Get the company through the dangerous period after his death and make sure the vultures didn't pick his life's work to pieces. One set of vultures in particular—the Scarlesis. Of course, Vito knew all about the feud that had gone on since his grandfather had been a young man. But he hadn't thought much about it—it seemed like something out of another age.

But he'd enjoyed running the company far more than he would have believed possible, enjoyed the cut and thrust, the high level negotiations, the jetting between cities.

Then Gabrielle had come along, and she'd grounded him, made him remember what was important to him. He'd been excited to show her his other life, and genuinely believed she would prefer it.

The life of a university professor over that of the head of a multi-billion-dollar company. Was that why she'd run? Because in the end she had only wanted him for the money and the glamorous lifestyle?

Could she really be so different from what he'd believed?

No, she'd just been running scared. He'd moved too fast for her, but something inside him had pushed. Had he known all along, in his subconscious, that his hold on her was tenuous?

But if he could have designed his ideal life partner, she would have come out exactly like Gabrielle. Had she been too good to be true? Should that have warned him?

The beautiful, demure, ballet dancer he'd met and fallen in love with on Sicily was completely different from the sexy, exotic creature of yesterday with her pink hair and tattoo. And Christ, she'd had her belly button pierced. A wave of lust washed over him as he remembered. If asked, he would have categorically denied that body piercings of any sort were a turn-on. But now his dick was hard just from the memory.

Christo, she had felt good, wrapped around his cock.

Yesterday, she'd tasted sweet like bubblegum, and her skin had been so soft.

He groaned and rolled over onto his back, staring at the ceiling high above, his hand pushing beneath the white cotton sheet to fist his cock.

It was as though she'd brought him to life again. Or at least his dick.

He squeezed, closed his eyes, and imagined her tongue licking his length, her mouth, hot and warm, taking him inside. The old Gabrielle, he'd never considered in this

role. The new one—his imagination couldn't get enough of her. His hips arched as he stroked himself, the pleasure swelling in his balls, flowing up his spine, concentrating on the tip. So close.

A knock sounded on the door, and he went still. It took a moment for him to get his head together, in which time, the knock sounded again. Reluctantly, his hand left his cock, and he groaned in frustration, waiting for the sting of desire to subside.

He'd put up the Do Not Disturb sign last night so it wouldn't be one of the hotel staff.

It could only be Gabrielle. Somehow he hadn't thought she'd be an early morning person. Then he glanced at his watch. It was already nine o'clock.

The knock came again, louder this time.

"Coming," he called out. Unsure whether his voice would carry outside the room, he moved quickly, not wanting her to disappear before he could open the door. He pushed down the sheet and rolled out of the king-size bed. He was naked and he grabbed his pants from the night before and pulled them on, tugging up the zipper but not bothering with anything else.

He crossed the room, then the sitting area of the suite, and got to the door. He took a deep breath and opened it. And no one was there.

Panic flared.

He stepped out and peered down the corridor just in time to see her slim figure disappearing around the corner. "Gabrielle!"

She halted and turned, approaching him slowly. This morning she was dressed in a tight denim skirt that revealed lots of leg, with high-heeled pink sandals on her feet

and a short black T-shirt that bared her midriff and the little ruby nestled in her belly button. Inappropriately, his dick twitched. He forced his gaze upward. Her hair was loose around her face, and her eyes appeared huge, deep blue, and her lips were darkened to match her hair. She looked breathtaking. Like a breathtaking total stranger.

She returned his stare, her gaze fixed on his chest. His bare chest. Did she like what she saw? The old Gabrielle had hardly seemed to notice his body. This one was devouring him with her sultry eyes.

Her gaze lowered to his crotch where he was pretty sure his hard-on was clear to see.

He ran a hand through his hair and then across the rough skin of his jawline. He gave a shrug. "Sorry, I was still in bed."

She screwed her face into a grimace. "I woke up and I thought—let's get this over with."

His jaw tightened and a tic jumped in his cheek. What the hell? Was he something to be gotten out of the way as fast as possible? "Hardly flattering."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

“Fine.” She curved her lips into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Maybe I couldn’t stay away.”

“A little better.” But he was thinking her first explanation was more accurate. Except her expression didn’t convey that message. Her eyes were eating him up. She swallowed, licked her lips, and he could almost feel them wrapped around him. His earlier fantasy had primed him, and he didn’t seem able to get the image out of his head.

He was standing in the hotel corridor in nothing but his pants with a raging hard-on and no way to hide it. He shook his head.

“You’d better come in.” He turned and swore as he saw the closed door. “Shit.”

“You locked yourself out?” Amusement threaded her voice, and this time the smile was reflected in her eyes. Finally, he got a hint of his Gabrielle, and something twisted inside him.

“It appears so. Have you got a phone?”

“Of course.”

“Well, call reception and tell them to get the hell up here and let me in.”

Her lips twitched, but she pulled a phone out of her bag, swiped a few times, presumably finding the number, and then spoke quietly and quickly. “They’re on their way,” she said, slipping the phone back into her bag.

She leaned against the wall and watched him, nibbling on her lower lip, and he wished she'd stop. "So how have you been?" she asked as the silence drew out.

"You mean apart from almost dying?" He waved a hand in the general direction of his face, and her lips twitched again, then her expression grew solemn.

"I'm glad you didn't. Die, I mean."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. When was it by the way? This accident?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Oh."

Then he shrugged and allowed the bitterness to drain away. "I've been okay. Just finishing up the sale and transfer of the company, and then it's back to real life."

"I can't believe you're giving all that up."

"Is that why you ran? Did you think you were marrying a billionaire and I turned out to be just an ordinary guy?"

She snorted. "Hardly ordinary. No ordinary guy would give away a billion dollars."

"So is that why?" He pushed for an answer he didn't really want to hear.

She looked...calculating for a minute, her brows drawing together. Did she have to think about it so hard? He hadn't expected an honest answer. Really, the possibility that she was a mercenary money-grubbing little bitch had never entered his head.

Then her expression cleared.

“No, that wasn’t it.”

“So?”

She opened her mouth to answer as housekeeping came around the corner. The woman gave him a small smile and a discreet glance down his half-naked body and then stepped between them and slid the key card into the door.

He gestured for Gabrielle to enter ahead of him. She hesitated but then gave a nod. He breathed in deeply as she passed, catching a hint of sweetness, maybe strawberries.

She stood just inside the room, looking around her. “Well, you’re certainly still living the billionaire lifestyle,” she murmured. “This place must be costing a fortune.”

“It’s the suite my grandfather always used.”

He wouldn’t lie. He liked money—liked the way it made things easier and liked the trappings of wealth, the cars, the private jet. Even things he hadn’t thought would mean anything, like the designer clothes, he liked. But not enough to make his life about those things. Looking around the opulence of the Savoy, he had the urge for a simpler life. He’d been asked to join a dig for the last month of the summer. In the Nubian Desert—one of his favorite places, where you could stand and see nothing for miles all around you.

He closed the door behind them and suddenly the huge suite seemed smaller.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

“Would you like coffee, Gabrielle?”

She glanced at his face. “Call me Gabby.” He didn’t want to. It seemed one more step away from the woman he’d known. But maybe that was a good thing. “And no, I’m fine, thank you.”

He thought about grabbing a shirt, but the truth was, he liked the way she looked at him. She kept sending him discreet little glances when she thought he wasn’t paying attention.

“Will you get rid of everything your grandfather left you?” Gabrielle asked.

“I’ll keep the personal stuff, including the villa on Sicily and the yacht. I have good memories of them. They were his real home.”

“I’m glad. It was clear you loved the place.”

He perched on the edge of the mahogany dining table while she wandered around the suite, touching things, peering out of the window, running her hands along the crimson brocade of the sofa, peeking into the bedroom. “Sorry I woke you.” She glanced back at him and then to the bed, a flush staining her cheeks as if she were imagining the two of them there, just as he’d been doing when she’d interrupted him. At the memory, and the knowledge that she was here in reality now, the blood pooled in his groin, and he had to bite back a groan.

“You didn’t.” Fuck it. Why should she be let off so easily? And suddenly, he didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to hear her reasons for leaving him all those months ago.

“You did disturb me, though.”

“I did?”

“Si. I was deep in this fantasy where your mouth was on my cock.”

Her gaze flew to his face and then dropped to the bulge in his pants, her eyes widening. “Oh.” Her eyelids lowered so he couldn’t see her thoughts, but her lips were slightly parted, and her breasts rose and fell with each breath, a pulse throbbing at her throat.

The air was charged with sexual tension. She wanted him. Again.

How had he not noticed before? Or had there been nothing to notice? And if so, why now?

His gaze fixed on the ruby in her navel, and he took slow, deep breaths.

Then again why not?

He straightened from the table, and she took an involuntary step back. “You were my fantasy bride.”

Some expression crossed her face, fleeting and gone. Bitterness, perhaps. “And now you’re looking for a fantasy blow job?”

She was so up front. He couldn’t even imagine Gabrielle saying those words, but the truth was, he liked it. Fucking loved it. “Actually, I’d prefer a real one.”

A little voice muttered in the back of his mind that they were supposed to be talking. He shut it down because she was actually considering the blow job—he could see it

in her expression. His mouth went dry and the tension in the room ratcheted higher.

“Would you really?” she murmured, her gaze dropping down over his body.

“Sì, cara mia. And afterward, I’ll return the favor.” An image flashed in his mind of his head between those slender thighs.

He’d never gone in for casual, uncomplicated sex before, never had a one-night stand. But then this was far from casual or uncomplicated. And whatever the hell happened next, whatever she told him, or even if she walked away again and never looked back, he wanted those luscious pink lips around his cock just once.

Did that make him shallow?

Right now he didn’t give a fuck.

Right now his dick was hard as rock and pushing against his zipper almost painfully. He held his breath as she took a slow step closer, her hand reaching out until her palm lay flat against his chest.

“So hot,” she murmured.

He was burning up.

Sliding her hand down over his stomach, she hesitated as she hit the waistband of his pants, then pushed inside. “And so hard.”

He would have replied, but he’d lost the ability to speak, could do no more than stand there, head back, sweat beading on his forehead as her other hand slowly lowered his zipper, her movements sure and unhurried.

It occurred to him, briefly, that she was the one in charge here. But he didn't want to think.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

A groan of relief tore from his throat as his cock sprang free. She tugged his pants down over his hips and he kicked them off and was naked in front of her.

“So beautiful,” she murmured, her fingers trailing fire over his stomach and thighs, teasing over his cock so it jerked toward her with a life and a will of its own.

Finally, she wrapped her hand around him and squeezed. “I always wondered what you would look like naked. What your cock would feel like.”

The words niggled in his mind, something wasn’t quite right, but he pushed the doubt aside because the feel of her small hand gripping his shaft was making his blood boil. This was happening. He could worry about her words later.

Then she looked up into his face, lips parted, cheeks flushed as she slowly lowered herself to her knees at his feet. Leaning forward, she let her warm breath feather over his cock, and his every muscle clenched up tight.

She hesitated for what seemed like a year but was probably only a few seconds, and he reached out, his hands slipping into the silky hair at her nape. “Gabrielle,” he urged.

She lifted her gaze to him and backed away slightly. “Gabby,” she said. “Call me Gabby.”

At that moment he would have called her absolutely anything. “Please, Gabby.”

She smiled and lowered her head, and at the first touch of those soft lips, his world

stopped turning. Everything vanished from his consciousness except the warm wetness engulfing him. She slid her mouth over him as far as she could go, then drew back.

He had to bite down a growl as she raised her head, but then her soft, wet tongue was stroking his balls, up the length of his shaft, circling the head. She took him inside again, her hand squeezing the base as she suckled the tip.

He had no clue how long it went on, as he gave himself over to the sensations of pure pleasure pouring through him, building at the base of his spine, his balls tightening. She must have sensed he was close, as the suction increased and her hand slid up and down his length. Then she cupped his balls, squeezed, and he crashed over the edge, pleasure shooting down his cock, flooding his balls, running up his spine so that he had to tighten the muscles of his legs so as not to crash to his knees.

Finally, the pumping of his hips slowed. His hand was still in her hair, and he loosened his grip as she gave the tip of his cock one last kiss.

She looked up at him and grinned. “Why the hell didn’t we do that before?”

His mind was clearing, and he didn’t want to think about that question, because he had no clue about the answer. But he was guessing Gabby knew. Only Gabby.

Right now, he felt too good to contemplate the question.

Something else for later.

He held out his hand to her. She raised a brow but reached up and slipped her fingers into his, and he pulled her to her feet. He had a favor to return, and his mouth watered at the thought. He was going to make her scream his name, and afterward they would talk—but that was a long way off.

He stood and looked at her for a minute, taking in the flushed cheeks, the nipples poking at the front of her T-shirt. He wanted to see them, and hooked his fingers in the hem and tugged the shirt over her head, leaving her in a pale pink satin and lace bra. He recognized it as part of a set he'd bought her as a present. He'd liked buying her underwear even if, back then, he'd never gotten to see her in it.

"Nice," he murmured.

"You're a man with taste."

Reaching behind her, she unfastened the bra, peeled it from her shoulders then tossed it to the floor. Her breasts were exquisite, full without being too big, the skin pale, and the nipples deep pink with tight little nubs.

His dick came back to life at the sight, filling, stiffening. Time to move this on, and then... He remembered the feel of being deep inside her, and heat coiled in his belly.

He cupped her breasts briefly before sliding his hands down the deep indentation of her waist, over her denim covered hips. He bent slightly so he could shift his palms lower, to her bare thighs beneath the skirt, then glide them upward pushing the material out of his way to cup her ass through the satin of her panties. He glanced at her face—her eyes were half closed and her lower lip was caught between her teeth. Searching the room, his eyes settled on the mahogany dining table. It seemed appropriate. Stepping in close, he lifted her from the floor and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, clinging on as he walked her backward to rest her ass on the edge of the table. His hands shoved her skirt up further and her thighs parted, baring the pale pink panties.

He rested a palm on the soft skin of her belly, pushing her gently until she lay flat on her back. Lowering his head, he sucked a nipple into his mouth; she tasted as sweet as he remembered. Then he stood and reviewed his handiwork. She looked wanton

sprawled out in front of him. All for him. To do with as he liked.

A wanton stranger.

He pushed the thought away. Yet another thing to consider later. He trailed a finger over the silk, where he could clearly see the line between the folds of her sex. He slipped one finger beneath the lace and found her slippery with desire. The knowledge that she wanted him twisted some need deep inside. Whatever her reasons for running, right now, in this moment, she wanted him. He'd make her come so hard that she'd never want another man. Never run again.

“Christo, you're wet.”

She didn't deign to answer, but her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths.

The panties needed to go.

Hooking a finger in either side, he slid them down her legs, tossed them to the floor, and stared. She was almost cleanly shaved, with just a thin strip of golden curls covering her sex. Her lips were swollen and her clit pouted out from between, glistening with desire.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

Unable to wait, he lowered his head, and the scent of hot, aroused woman filled his nostrils, draining the last of his blood supply to his groin, stiffening his already hard erection and leaving him light-headed.

“You are so beautiful.”

He kissed her gently between her thighs, heard the breath leave her in a sigh. Then he slowly parted her lips with his tongue. She tasted of sweetness and desire and need. He pushed inside, finding the entrance to her body and filling her, then licking up over her sex stopping just short of the swollen bundle of nerves.

Her hips jerked as if urging him on, and when he glanced up the line of her body, her hands were fisted at her sides, her small white teeth clamped on her lower lip. He used both hands to part the folds, revealing her to him completely, then he stroked his tongue along the length of her, flicking her clit so she let out a squeak. As he repeated the process, her hips lifted, pressing against his face. She was so wet, and he loved the fact that he could do this to her, make her lose herself.

“Vito, please.” At her murmured words, he pushed a finger inside her massaging her, finding the spot that made her spasm and jerk against him.

Finally, when her small hand fisted in his hair at the nape of his neck, holding him to her, he took pity on her and kissed the swollen nub, sucking her into his mouth, laving her with his tongue while he fucked her with his fingers.

She went wild beneath him and he held her in place with one hand splayed across her belly while his mouth ravaged her sex. She was so close now, and he bit down gently

on her clit then flicked her hard with his tongue, and she fractured beneath him. He felt the moment she tipped over the edge, her sex pulsing against him. He raised his head, stared into her face, wanting to see what she looked like when she came for him. Her head went back, and he reached up and put his hand to her mouth to stop the scream hovering on her lips. She was panting, and as her breathing evened out, he pressed the pad of his thumb over her clit, massaged in slow circles, and she came again.

When he was sure she wasn't going to scream, he removed his hand, lowered his head once more, gave her one last kiss and straightened.

His dick was rock hard now and more than ready to go again. She gazed up at him, her eyes replete, her body splayed out, boneless. The bedroom. This time he was going to make love to her in a bed, and it was going to last for hours. Maybe he'd never let her up. But first...

"Condom," he muttered. "Your bag?"

She was silent for a moment, a frown turning down her lips. Then she came up on her elbows. "Crap."

"Crap?"

Chapter Five

Crap, bugger, fuck.

Gabby pushed herself upright then reached down and rubbed her ass with one hand.

Christ, the table was hard.

She hadn't noticed it until now, her mind being occupied with the biggest orgasm she had ever had. Likeever. She glanced at Vito and had to bite back a smile. He was totally goddamn naked, and his cock was huge and hard and...

Not fair. I want that cock.

She heaved a huge sigh. "I didn't bring any condoms."

"You had a whole packet. I saw them yesterday." His eyes narrowed. "What did you do with them?"

Hah—did he think she'd gone through a whole packet between then and now? She had made an impression. "I didn't use them," she muttered. "I took them out of my bag this morning."

Why did I do that exactly? Oh yes...

At his look of disbelief, she shrugged and continued, "I...didn't want to be tempted."

He waved a hand at her almost naked figure hunched on his dining table. "Well, that worked out well."

"What about room service?"

He cast her an incredulous glance. "I don't think they have condoms on the menu."

"Oh."

He turned away, and the back view was just as good as the front. He had a beautiful tight ass, narrow hips and broad shoulders. His skin was smooth and olive and unblemished, and her mouth watered.

More not fair.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair. “Didn’t want to be tempted,” he mimicked not quite under his breath.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

She frowned. No way was he putting all the blame on her. At least she'd had good intentions. Even if they hadn't lasted past the offer of oral sex. So, she was weak willed.

She pushed herself off the table and wobbled over to where her bra lay on the floor. "You were the one who brought up blow jobs," she muttered, grabbing it and slipping her arms in, reaching around to fasten the catch at the back. When she glanced up, his eyes were fixed on her breasts, a hot hungry expression on his face. His cock was still sticking up with an air of expectation, and a pulse started up between her thighs.

Not going to happen.

Sadly.

"Cover that goddamn thing up," she said, waving a hand at his dick. She found her T-shirt slung over the back of a chair, pulled that on and down over her breasts. Now she was covered while he was still pacing the floor with nothing on at all, seemingly oblivious to the fact.

She crossed the room so she intercepted his route. "You're still naked."

He stopped abruptly. "Really? How observant of you."

She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry about the condoms. But I really did come here to talk, and I thought..."

What had she thought? That with condoms at the ready she would have dived straight

into bed with him and bugger the consequences?

Well, no one could say she didn't know herself. Vito was clearly a weakness, one she now realized had been kept at bay by guilt. No way could she have had him while she was lying and in league with his enemies.

But once he'd come after her, things had changed.

This was the real her. Well, as real as she got. And seemingly, he still wanted her. That's why she had succumbed so easily.

How sad is that?

But that didn't mean he liked her. And it certainly didn't mean he loved her. Sex and love were two entirely different things. He'd loved the old, fake Gabrielle. Hewantedthis new Gabby. It meant nothing—except maybe that under that Mr. Perfect exterior he was as screwed up as she was. And besides, there was still the fact that he had no clue of her connection to the Scarlesis, and she had no intention of telling him. Not yet, anyway. And not without talking to Luca first—which wasn't happening anytime soon.

Christ, her life was a mess. She'd think it was getting better, that she was sorting her shit out, and then everything would fall apart again.

Keep focusing on the positives. Her brother was out of trouble, and her mother was responding well to treatment. After all, that's what this whole thing had been about, and she refused to regret it.

“You're thinking way too much.”

Vito interrupted her thoughts—still naked, still rampantly erect. She gave his cock a

last longing look and turned away.

Pity.

He exhaled loudly. “I’ll go put some clothes on. Why don’t you order room service? I need coffee and food.”

She gave a weak smile. “I could ask for condoms. The Savoy probably has an emergency stash for frustrated guests. I’m sure somewhere they say they provide you every need.”

He shook his head. “Probably not a good idea. I think the moment has passed.”

Tell that to your dick.

His erection clearly hadn’t caught up with the no-condom situation. She bit back a smile as he turned and headed into the bedroom then through the door opposite, presumably into the bathroom. He didn’t bother closing the door, and a moment later she heard the shower run.

She searched the floor, found her panties and pulled them on, then crossed to the phone. As she picked it up, her stomach rumbled. Mind-blowing orgasms had that effect on her—not that she’d ever had one quite so mind-blowing. Or two, really. It was a good job she hadn’t known just how clever he was with that mouth of his, or she might never have found the strength to walk away six months ago.

She called room service and ordered two full breakfasts then sat down on the scarlet brocade sofa. Thirty seconds later, she jumped up again, too restless to relax.

So far the morning had not gone as planned. But she could still get things back on track. She had her story down pat, basically no real lies, just a little...embellishment

here and there. For his own good.

She'd dressed as slutty as she could manage in an attempt to show him clearly that she was not his type of woman. Vito would see the sense in what she was saying, and this time he would be the one to walk away. He would get over her, and she could somehow lose the guilt that dogged her since she'd agreed to Luca's crazy plan.

Ten minutes later—what was he doing in the shower all that time? —he came out fully dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt. He looked nothing like a business tycoon and it knocked her off-balance a little. Of course, he'd occasionally been sort of casual in Sicily, but smart-casual, and more often than not he'd been in full businessman, billionaire mode, dashing from meeting to meeting, but somehow finding time for her in his busy schedule.

This looked relaxed-casual, and he appeared at home in the clothes. A knock sounded at the door, and he crossed over, opened it, then stood aside to allow the waiter to wheel in the trolley. He set the food out on the dining table where she had so recently been pleased—a twinge ran through her—and wheeled the trolley away. Vito pulled a bank note from his pocket, handed it to the man, and closed the door behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

The smell of bacon and eggs and fresh coffee wafted across. Gabby followed the scent and sank down into a chair, breathing in deeply.

“This might be even better than sex,” she said taking a mouthful of crispy bacon. As she swallowed, an image flashed in her head: her sprawled across the table, Vito’s hungry mouth between her legs, and she shifted. “Or maybe not.”

She did her best to ignore him as she concentrated on her food. When her plate was empty, she sat back and sipped the strong coffee, keeping her mind blank, just watching him. He really was one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen, but with a dark masculine beauty only heightened by the scar running down his cheek.

He finished his own food and then glanced from her empty plate to her face. “I don’t remember you having such an appetite.”

“I’m always hungry after sex,” she said, then wished she hadn’t been quite so blunt. But it was true. Also, she hadn’t had much appetite during her time with him in Sicily—guilt again, she guessed.

He drank his coffee as he studied her. “How many lovers have you had, Gabby?” He emphasized her name as though stressing she was a different person.

She gave what she hoped was a casual shrug. “A few.” Actually she could count them on one hand, but he didn’t need to know the details. And there had been no one else since she’d met him.

He refilled both their cups from the coffee pot, pushed back his chair and got up,

gestured to the sofa. “Time for that conversation.”

Do we have to?

Her guts tightened, but she rose to her feet and followed him, sinking onto the corner opposite him. Reaching down she unfastened the buckles on her sandals, kicked them off and tucked her feet under her, turning slightly so she could watch him as they talked. The silence drew out as though he didn’t want to start, then he cleared his throat.

“Tell me why you ran.”

She took a deep breath. Showtime. “I told you, yesterday, I wasn’t ready.”

“And you couldn’t have just told me that six months ago? Asked for more time?”

She fiddled with her hair. “You were so intense. I thought you would try and persuade me to go through with the wedding, and I knew you would succeed. I could never say no to you.”

“It appears you said no all the time.”

It took her a moment to realize that he meant sex. “You never really asked.”

“No, something told me you weren’t ready for that. And yet now...” He studied her, his gaze dropping over her body. “Now I get the impression you’d say yes to just about anything I suggested.”

“That would be a bad idea.”

“Maybe. And good or bad is not the point. Why have you changed so drastically?”

Another deep breath. “I felt that with you I couldn’t be myself. I spent the whole time trying to be the sort of woman you wanted.” Well, that was the goddamned truth.

“I never asked you to be anything you’re not.”

You might not have, but Luca did. She kept that little snippet to herself.

She’d spent the night thinking what to say, how to explain, and during that time she’d realized how much basic truth there was in her answer, even if it didn’t tell the whole story. “I don’t think you understand quite the effect you have.”

He frowned. “You’ll have to explain better than that.”

“You’re just so...” She sat back in frustration as she thought how to get through to him. “You’re perfect.”

His lips turned down in a scowl. “Of course I’m not. Nobody is.”

“You’re gorgeous. You must know that.”

He shrugged. “It’s just looks.”

“You see, there you go. You’re gorgeous, and you’re modest. We’d walk through the streets, and there would be all these woman, stunning women, with their tongues almost stuck to the sidewalk, drooling after you. And you didn’t even notice.”

“I was with you. Why would I notice other women?”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:12 am

He was so obtuse. Her palm itched to slap him, which wasn't really fair. "And then there was the money."

"The money?" He looked slightly wary now.

"You were giving it all away. What sort of person gives away billions of dollars?"

"It wasn't mine." He drank the last of his coffee, placed the cup carefully on the table in front of him and she got the distinct impression he was thinking about his next words carefully. "Is that why you changed your mind? Because I was giving away the money?"

"Of course not. Or not in the way you mean." At least that was the truth. Christ, she wished it had been that simple. Then she would have just been a gold digger instead of a... She cut off the thought. No point in going there. What she had to do now was resolve the situation.

"Would you have preferred me if I was a money-grubbing billionaire?" he asked, and she could hear the confusion in his tone.

"In a way. It would have shown you have faults. But you weren't, you were a professor—brilliant as well as gorgeous—and you were giving away all your money, so accept it—you're a fucking goddam perfect angel."

He sat back and ran a hand through his already ruffled hair. He hadn't shaved, and stubble darkened his jawline. It suited him.

She pushed on, “Don’t get me wrong—I like money. But that sort of money isn’t real. No, it was more the fact that you were giving it to a charity. Gorgeous, modest, brilliant, totally fucking altruistic.” She looked away for a moment, then back, and gave another shrug. “And the real bummer is—you expect the other people in your life to be the same.”

“But you are.” He frowned. “Or rather you were.”

She snorted. At least he was honest. And yeah, that was the point.

He frowned. “From the first moment I met you, you were so right for me. We fitted together like we were meant to be. I kept thinking that I had somehow conjured you up.”

“I was pretending. I liked you, and I wanted to be good enough for you, and so I played out a part. But deep down I knew I could never be good enough, never measure up.”

“You make me sound very judgmental.”

“Maybe a little. Or maybe we were both trying to live up to each other. Except with you it really wasn’t an act. It goes bone deep. With me it was all on the surface.” She waved a hand down herself. “Look at me. This is the real me. Sicily was time out from real life. For a little while I believed I could be worthy of you.” Was she laying it on too thick? But really every word she’d said was sort of true.

“Of course you’re worthy of me. More than worthy.”

She ignored the comment and soldiered on—she’d gone over this so many times through the long hours of the night, and she wanted to get through it. “Then the night before the wedding, I took a long look at myself, and I knew I couldn’t keep up the

act. That I would betray myself in the end, and you'd look at me and be disappointed and realize you didn't love me, and then it would be too late and I'd be in too deep." Inspiration came to her. "And it occurred to me that, really, all my life I'd been acting. And I had to go out there and find the real me." Shit, this was so corny, even if it was true.

He looked dubious. "And have you found her?"

"Still looking."

"So the real you has pink hair, a tattoo and a ring through your belly button?"

"Yeah. I think so." What was she supposed to say—she was a work in progress?

His gaze dropped. "I like it by the way—the belly-button ring." He sat back. "Were you ever a classical ballerina?"

"For a little while." She'd trained with a prestigious ballet school up to the age of sixteen, but there was just too much discipline involved. She loved to dance but it wasn't her whole life. And maybe she'd just been a little afraid of giving her all and still failing.

"And were you taking a hiatus from work?"

She nodded. "I'd cracked a bone in my arm." She pursed her lips. "Anyway, I hope that's answered your questions." When he remained silent, she forced herself to continue. "You're a great guy, Vito. And I'm sure there's an equally great woman out there for you. You just have to keep looking." She jumped to her feet, ready to go.

His eyes narrowed. "No."

“No?”

“Sit down.”

For a moment she considered ignoring the order, and then she plonked herself back down and stuck out her lower lip.

“My turn,” he said. “I think there’s some truth in what you’re saying. Though I reject the accusation of perfection.”

“It wasn’t an accusation.”

“Well, it was hardly a compliment. You make me out as a pompous prig.”

“No, I—”

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. “I’m not perfect. I’m far from it.”

Liar, Liar.

But she kept her lips clamped shut and let him have his say. Though it was hard. She needed out of there, because he was everything she’d said he was, and this close, he did weird shit to her insides.

“And I believed we were right for each other.”

“You didn’t come after me.” As soon as the words were out, she wanted to snatch them back. They sounded like an accusation, and they made her sound pathetic, and until she’d spoken them out loud, she hadn’t realized how much that little fact had rankled.

He hadn’t come after her. He’d told her he loved her, and then he’d let her walk away as though she didn’t matter. If he had really loved her, he would have hunted her down, and found her, and thrown her across his horse, and galloped into the sunset to live happily ever after.

Like in a fucking fairy tale.

He was her prince, even if she had been the wicked witch in disguise rather than the princess she had pretended to be. But he hadn't known that, and he'd still let her go.

Had she mentioned pathetic?

But she'd always been a dreamer.

At least he had the grace to look a little bit uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat, and then took a deep breath. "After you left, I was in shock, I suppose. And I truly believed you would get over your doubts and come back to me. And as time stretched out, I maybe got a little angry. You left me two lines. Two fucking lines. I can't marry you. You don't love me. What the fuck was with that?"

His facade was cracking, but as she watched, he wrapped it around himself like a cloak, and the anger faded from his features. "I needed you to come back. I couldn't have been so wrong about us. I don't make those sort of mistakes." He gave a small shrug. "And I was busy. I threw myself into the company. We were having some issues—a hostile takeover attempt." And she could guess who had been behind that. "I hardly had time to think, but I still believed you would come back."

"Sorry." What else could she say?

"But when I thought I might die trapped by the flames in that ship, it was your face I saw, and afterward in the life boat, I vowed I would come and find you and ask you why you'd left. Prove to you that I do love you."

For a moment she wished he could—or rather, he did. But it would never happen. He didn't love her, just the woman she had pretended to be. But how she longed to be that woman.

Or maybe not.

What she really longed for was that Vito had seen past the actress to the real woman beneath. Then again, if that was the case, he would never have fallen in love.

“And now you’ve realized that you don’t,” she said.

“No.” He sounded emphatic. Too emphatic, as though he was trying to convince himself as much as her. He was lying.

“I think the sex has muddled your mind.”

He caught her gaze and held it. “Then no more sex until this is resolved.”

Her brows drew together. “It’s not resolved?”

“Not by a long way.” He reached across and took her hand. The move caught her by surprise, and she didn’t pull back. The stroke of his long fingers over her palm sent shivers up her arm. “I believe my Gabrielle is under there somewhere.”

Oh, no, she’s not.

“I believe you’ve built me up into some sort of paragon that you can’t live up to, but that’s not who I am.”

Want to bet?

“I think you should give me a chance to prove to you that I’m just an ordinary man.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Hah! Of course you are. Not.

“Just give me some time. It’s all I’m asking. Let me show you the real me. Sicily was time out for both of us. Let’s see how we get along in real life. Just a few weeks.”

When she remained silent, he raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, and she tingled everywhere.

“Please.”

Oh God, how the hell am I supposed to say no when he asks so nicely? Not fair.

She was weak willed as well as pathetic. Somehow she couldn’t bring herself to deny him. She’d actually hurt him when she’d run. When he hadn’t come after her she’d presumed his feeling were shallow, but maybe he’d felt too much.

“Gabby, say something.”

What?

She was so tempted to give him his few weeks. But it would be wrong. If she was a decent person, she would make a clean break now. Just get it over with and tell him the truth. He’d hate her. But he’d hate her even more if she strung him along, pretended there was a chance for them, until the truth came out—as was inevitable. There were no words bad enough for what she’d done.

On the other hand, there was a chance—probably quite a big chance, huge in fact,

considering her personality—that he’d spend time with her and come to the conclusion, all on his own, that they were totally unsuited for each other.

And he’d walk away. She wouldn’t need to tell him anything.

God, she was a coward.

But it would be better for him as well as her. She was doing him a favor.

Self-delusion at its best.

She took a huge, deep breath. “Okay.”

After all, how long would it take him to realize that Gabrielle just didn’t exist? Then he could move on. Yeah, she was doing this for him, to atone a little for her sins. Totally for him.

And now who’s the liar?

But he was right about one thing—sex did cloud the issue.

“But no sex.”

Chapter Six

Vito leaned against the wall of the dimly lit corridor and tried to look inconspicuous. He’d paid somebody fifty quid to let him backstage, but he wasn’t supposed to be here, and he was far from sure that Gabrielle—Gabby—would be pleased to see him.

She’d left him at the hotel that morning with a promise to meet him for dinner tonight. He’d made reservations at his favorite Italian restaurant. He was sure she’d

love it—she'd always loved Italian food. They'd talk, not about the engagement or the marriage that didn't happen, but just about themselves.

He still couldn't believe her explanation, though he had sensed an element of truth behind her words.

She thought he was too good for her.

He wasn't.

But he had always tried to live by certain standards. His mother and father were missionaries. Living with their example, it would have been hard not to grow up with a strong moral code. Of course, that had been tempered by the fact that his grandfather had been a total unashamed reprobate.

He'd never told Gabrielle about his family. Looking back on that time in Sicily, he realized that they hadn't talked much about themselves at all, as though they both had things to hide. And she'd seemed such a normal person that maybe he'd subconsciously worried that she'd be put off by his somewhat colorful family.

They'd talked of dancing—she'd been so knowledgeable and had clearly spoken from such personal experience that he hadn't even questioned the idea of her being a ballet dancer. And they'd talked of books and art. Not his business, though. In fact, if he ever started talking about a business deal, or what was happening within the company, she'd shut him down and change the subject. He'd presumed she wasn't interested.

Anyway, he'd had a meeting which had finished earlier than he'd expected. And he wanted to see her. She was performing in the matinee that afternoon. What harm would it do to go along and watch? So, he'd gotten his secretary to procure tickets, a box above the auditorium where he would be inconspicuous.

His attention had never left her while she'd been on the stage. She was just in the chorus, but they were present for most of the show. He suspected he was prejudiced, but she was by far the best person on the stage. No way was this ballet, or his sort of thing at all, but she was good. Afterward, he should have left, gone back to the hotel, waited until the agreed upon time, and met her at the restaurant. They were supposed to be taking things slowly. Getting to know one another...not having sex.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

And why the hell did I agree to that?

Because it clouded the issue. How could he get to know the real Gabby if he was constantly focused on getting inside her pants? God, they hadn't even had intercourse that morning, yet it was the best sex he had ever had—the feel of her lips around his cock, the sweet taste of her pussy...

Don't think about it.

In the end, he hadn't gone back to the hotel. Somehow he'd found himself drifting down to the back of the theater, knocking on the door to the backstage area, and handing over a fifty-pound note to the man who wouldn't let him through. She was a bad influence—bribery, now. What next?

So here he was, pretty much as he had been yesterday, gaze fixed on the dressing room door.

This time though when the door opened, she was the first to appear, wearing black sweats and a loose white T-shirt. Her hair was scraped back in a ponytail and she'd removed her stage makeup so her pale skin was clear and flawless, her lips pink.

She was reading messages on her phone and walked right passed him. Then she stopped, backtracked, and turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised. "Vito. What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "I came to see the show."

“Really? I wouldn’t have thought it was your sort of thing.”

He stepped forward. “You were good. Very good. You deserve better than the chorus.”

For a second a smile flashed on her face, then it was gone. “I’m not sufficiently focused. And I don’t work hard enough. I guess I’ve never really thought I was good enough to make it big, so I never really tried.”

“Why?”

She shrugged then looked around. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” Hooking her arm though his, she gave him a little tug, pulling him down the corridor and to the street door. The same young man who he’d bribed earlier opened it for them and grinned.

“Night, Gabby.”

“Night, Dave.”

As the door shut behind them, she looked at him. “So, how much did you have to pay him to get through?”

“Fifty quid.”

She snorted. “Next time, tell him I’ll punch him in the nose if he takes any more of your money.”

The door opened into an alley that ran alongside the theater. The early evening was warm, the air heavy with fumes. Up ahead he could hear the drone of traffic on the main road, and a double-decker bus passed the entrance. Gabby tucked her phone in her bag and studied him for a moment. “You look very smart and all ready for our

dinner date, which isn't actually for"—she glanced at her watch—"an hour and a half yet. While I look like a complete mess."

"You look gorgeous."

"And you're a gentleman. I always knew it. But I'm going to have to go home and get changed. I'll meet you at the restaurant as arranged."

"Why don't I take you back to your flat, wait while you get changed, and we can go to the restaurant together?"

She frowned. "I don't remember you being this pushy."

He shrugged. "It makes sense."

She thought for a moment, tapping a fingernail against her thigh. Finally, she nodded. "Okay."

He called his driver, told him to meet them at the entrance to the alley, then took her arm again and led the way. She was silent, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The car pulled up just as they got there, and he held the back door for her while she climbed in. "So will the car and driver go when the company closes?" she asked.

"Yes. I don't really have the need in my...other life. But Jack already has another position to go to."

It was one of the things he'd ensured with the dissolution of his grandfather's company—that no one went without a job. It was what had taken the most time.

The drive to her flat didn't take long. He followed her up two flights of stairs then stood to the side as she unlocked the front door and waved him through.

He was curious to see where she lived. The place wasn't big, but it looked comfortable—and even small, it must be expensive in this area.

“Nice,” he said as she closed the door behind her.

“It’s not mine,” she replied. “It belongs to a friend—well, actually doesn’t belong to her as such. Her family bought it for an investment and they allow her to use it while she’s working in the city.”

“Is she around?”

He’d like to meet her friends, get some insight into the real Gabby.

“Afraid not. She’s an ER nurse, and she’s on a late shift. But she’s a good friend and let me use her sofa when I had nowhere else to stay.”

“You’ve been here since you left Sicily?”

“Yes, but I’m going to look for my own place now I’ve got a steady income. Have a seat.” She waved at a comfy sofa...her bed? Did she sleep here every night? “I’ll go clean up and get changed. You want a drink?”

“No, I’m good.” He sank onto the sofa as she disappeared through another door. A few minutes later, he heard the running water as she showered.

He looked around the small room. Where had she put the condoms when she’d taken them out of her bag that morning?

None of your business.

Shit, he was growing hard.

Think about something else.

After the summer, he'd be back at his old job. He had lectures to prepare. He'd concentrate on that.

Instead, he stretched out his legs, put his hands behind his head and imagined Gabby naked in the shower, soaping herself, perhaps touching herself, because she was as turned on as he was. He'd almost convinced himself it was his duty to help her out, to go to her assistance, lend a helping hand or a helping cock, when the water went off and the door slammed. He sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and forced himself to relax.

This "no sex" thing was what he'd wanted, what she'd agreed to. He had to try. And it was the right thing to do; sex did complicate matters. In fact, it was all he could think about.

Stop thinking about sex!

Five minutes later, the bedroom door opened, and there she stood. For a second he felt a frown tug at his mouth. She looked almost like his old Gabrielle. She wore a black dress, fitted but demure, reaching just above the knee, with short sleeves and a modest neckline. Pearls circled her slender throat and her hair was pulled up into a chignon, which minimized the effect of the pink streaks. Sheer black tights and high heeled pumps finished off the outfit. She looked beautiful but somehow...not what he was expecting.

He stood up. "Gabrielle."

Her eyes flashed. "Gabby."

“You look like Gabrielle tonight.”

“I do?” She peered down herself, a frown forming between her brows, lips pursing.

“I—”

She was interrupted by a key turning in the lock. She went immediately still, eyes widening as the door opened to reveal a young woman in jeans and a red shirt that showed off her olive skin and dark hair. Then Gabby sprang into action, rushing forward and taking the other woman’s arm.

She winced. “Ouch.”

“What’s the matter?” Gabby asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I had a little accident, and they sent me home.” She dragged up her sleeve to show the white gauze of a bandage.

“Are you okay? You need anything? You want me to stay?”

The other woman looked around, her eyes resting on him for the first time. Then she looked back to Gabby, a frown forming as she took in her appearance.

Vito stepped forward and held out his hand. “Hello, I’m Vito D’Ascensio.”

He heard Gabby’s indrawn breath, and the other woman’s eyes narrowed. She hesitated for a second, then thrust out her hand and shook his.

“I’m Theresa. I live here.” She turned to Gabby, her expression grim. Maybe she didn’t like the look of him? Maybe she was protective of her friend. “Could you excuse us for a second?” She took Gabby’s arm and tugged her toward the bedroom, wagging the fingers of her other hand at Vito. “We’ll only be a couple of minutes.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

And then the door shut behind them, and he sank back onto the sofa.

...

“Vittorio D’Ascensio!”

It was amazing how loud a whisper could sound.

“What the hell is Vittorio D’Ascensio doing in my goddamned apartment?”

Gabby decided to ignore the question while she thought about an answer. Christ, if she’d thought there was any chance of Theresa turning up, she never would have allowed Vito to step foot in the place. That reminded her of why Theresa was here.

“Are you really all right?” she asked. Beneath her olive skin, Theresa was pale.

“I’m fine. Well, fine-ish. A patient decided he didn’t want me removing a piece of glass from his arm. I got cut in the ensuing fracas. Bastard.”

Gabby knew the implications of that—infection was a continual risk for a nurse, especially at the hospital where Theresa worked, as many of the ER patients were drug users or prostitutes. “Will you need to be tested?”

“Yeah, already done. But it’s minimum risk. They cleaned the wound out really well. Too well—it hurt like fuck. I’ll be fine.” Her eyes narrowed even further. “Forget about me and just explain how Vito D’A-fucking-scensio is out there in my living room, and you’re dressed up as if for a date. A date with D’Ascensio. Tell me I’m

hallucinating.”

“It’s complicated. I just met him, and I didn’t know who—”

“You’re lying.”

She gave a small nod. “Yeah.” Theresa always saw straight through her—there was no point in trying to convince her. Never going to happen. “But it’s complicated. Really complicated.”

She studied Gabby through narrowed eyes. “And why do you look like you’re going to a funeral.” She peered closer. “In fact, that is the dress I bought for my aunt’s funeral last year—and those are my pearls. You’re not going to a funeral are you?”

Gabby frowned. She hadn’t thought much as she’d dressed. Her hands had just gravitated toward the black dress—it seemed appropriate. “No. Sorry, I just borrowed them. We’re going to dinner.”

“Dinner with a D’Ascensio, dressed for a funeral. Hmm, what’s going on, Gabby?”

Her brain churned furiously, but what could she say? Maybe the truth—she’d always meant to tell Theresa what had happened, but she’d never found the right time.

And with Vito in the room next door, it wasn’t now.

“Look, if I promise to tell you when I get back, will you let us go now? No torture, no revealing who you are to your dreaded archenemy in there. No reliving ancient blood feuds.”

“You’ll tell me when you get back? Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Cross my heart.” She made the childhood gesture they always used when they were sharing secrets.

Theresa nodded. “Okay, you have a dispensation.” She grinned. “He’s hot, isn’t he? Better looking than Luca. I bet that pisses my brother off.”

Gabby exhaled a sigh of relief. She was saved for now. “Are you really going to be all right? I can cancel and stay here.”

“No, really, they’ve given me some super-strong painkillers. I’m going to take them, and I’ll be woozy for the next few hours, and I want to be wide awake when we have our conversation.”

She heaved a huge sigh. “Okay. I’ll see you later.”

As she was opening the door, Theresa spoke again. “You’re not in any trouble are you?”

“No.” Of course she wasn’t in trouble—she’d just spend a bit of purely platonic time with Mr. Super-Hottie, he’d realize she wasn’t anything like what he wanted, and this time he would be the one to vanish. And she could get on with her life without this horrible guilt eating away at her. Win-win situation.

Then she glanced down at the little black dress she was wearing. So not her style. Was she subconsciously channeling Gabrielle, when she’d promised herself Gabby from now on? Subconscious or not, it was too late to change. She put on a bright grin for Vito as he turned from where he’d been staring out of the window. “Let’s go then.”

“Your friend is okay? You don’t want to stay?”

He was just so nice. “She’s fine. She’s going straight to bed—it will make no difference if I’m here.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

He’d sent his car away for the night, and they walked to the restaurant. They strolled side by side, and he held her hand, but they didn’t speak. It was only ten minutes, one of the advantages of living so central. Not that she’d ever be able to afford this area even with a steady job. Once she moved out, she’d be facing a lengthy commute to work each day. But it would be nice to have her own place and a real bed.

The restaurant was not what she expected—or wouldn’t have been if she’d expected anything—and it came to her again how little she knew of Vito.

The place was down a backstreet, cozy with low, dark beams and red-checked tablecloths. The hostess appeared to know him and led them straight to a table in the corner, away from the other diners. The best table in the house, if she wasn’t mistaken.

“Do you come here often?” she asked.

“Not for a while. It was my grandfather’s favorite restaurant when he was in London. He’d meet me here for dinner as often as I could get up to the city. The food’s good.”

It certainly smelled good, the air heavy with the scent of garlic and herbs, and fresh bread, and her stomach rumbled. “Sorry, but I’m starved. Dancing always makes me ravenous.”

“And sex. Anything else make you hungry?”

At the word “sex,” heat flushed through her. Maybe they should have banned talking about it as well as doing it.

Don’t think about sex.

“Lots of things. Most things. I have the most amazing appetite and luckily I never put on weight.”

He frowned. “In Sicily you hardly ate at all. I thought you were worried about your weight.”

No, it was the guilt that had killed her appetite. Plus, back then, she’d wanted to appear a woman in control of all her appetites, rather than the sex-starved glutton she no doubt seemed right now. Hard luck—he’d wanted to see the real her after all.

“I’m hungry now.” She picked up the menu and hid behind it. “I’ll have the goat cheese ravioli to start, and then the Osso Buco.”

He smiled. “That was what my grandfather always ordered here. I’ll have the same.” He ordered for them and added an appetizer of stuffed garlic bread. “To keep you going until the food arrives,” he said as the waiter walked away.

Another waiter filled their glasses with deep red wine, and she sat back, strangely content. “So talk to me,” she said. “Tell me about yourself. It occurred to me that despite spending so much time together, I don’t really know you.”

“I was thinking the same.”

She took a sip of her wine; it was delicious, rich with flavors of vanilla and blackberries. “So, spill.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Tell me about your family.”

“You really don’t want to know. They’re a little...unusual.”

“Then I definitely want to know.”

“Okay—” The waiter placed the basket of garlic bread between them, and she leaned across and tore off a piece. Not simple garlic bread; it was topped with sun dried tomatoes and parmesan and tasted of Sicily, dragging back memories of warm lunches under the winter sun.

“My family comes from Sicily, as you know. They lived on that land for generations. But my grandfather was never content to be a farmer and he started a business when he was hardly into his teens. He was what we’d call today an entrepreneur.” He paused and drank some wine, watching her as she nibbled on the bread. “He was also a ruthless bastard. Sicily was barely civilized back then, and there was plenty for the taking if you were willing to accept the risks and not worry too much about collateral damage.”

“Was he part of the mafia?”

He grinned. “No. He was a loner. Didn’t like the organization or the hierarchy. Though, he did have a partner in the early days. That ended badly.”

Hah, and she was betting she knew who that partner was. Luca and Theresa’s grandfather. “Obviously, he was a success,” she said, not wanting to get on the subject of the Scarlesis.

“Si. And he loved it. He married my grandmother, and they had a single son—my

father. He followed Grandfather into the business, and for a while it looked like he would also follow his father's somewhat non-PC footsteps. He married my birth mother when he was only twenty. She was a local girl he got pregnant, but who by all accounts he loved. She died giving birth to me."

She reached across and touched his hand. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I never knew her. For a while my father threw everything into the business. If my grandfather was ruthless, my father was doubly so—my grandfather told me all of this years later. Then when I was ten, I—"

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

The waiter brought their ravioli at that moment, and they were quiet for a while. Each mouthful was such a pleasure she almost groaned. The buttery ravioli, the salty tang of the goat cheese, the flavors of the herbs... After wiping the plate clean with a piece of garlic bread, she sat back to find him watching her, hunger in his eyes, and she didn't think it was for ravioli.

"Go on," she said, "what happened when you were ten?"

"I had this nanny; she was English, and was going to be a nun. She and my father fell in love."

"How romantic. Just like the Sound of Music."

"My grandfather wasn't impressed—he described their marriage as a goddamn disaster that ruined my father for anything useful." He popped the last of the ravioli in his mouth, chewed, and then swallowed. "Anyway, in her own way, my stepmother Lucy is as formidable as my grandfather. She won that particular battle, and she and my father were married. She changed him, tamed him. Before her, he'd never been happy, but he loved her, and with her he was a different man."

"That is so romantic."

"I'm sure it was. All I remember is tremendous fights. My grandfather wanted him to stay in the business; my stepmother wanted him and me away from the evil influence of my nonno. She won. Mostly. Though I always spent a month of each year in Sicily with my grandfather."

“And where did your father and stepmother go?”

He grinned, crinkling his eyes. She loved the look on him. “They became missionaries.”

She put down her glass and stared at him. “What?” Whatever she’d expected it wasn’t that. When Luca had originally told her about Vito, she’d presumed he was an orphan. And he’d never spoken of his parents when they were together before.

Something occurred to her. “Did they know about us? That we were going to get married?”

“No.”

Their main courses arrived then, but her appetite had diminished, and she just picked at the rich dish. “Why not?”

“I wanted you to myself. It was as though if I let real life in, then the bubble would burst.”

“Except in the end, I burst it for you.”

“Yes.”

He’d gone solemn, and she wanted smiling Vito back. “So what was it like growing up with missionaries for parents?”

“In some ways, pretty great. We lived all over Africa—I had more freedom than children usually got—I ran wild with my friends.”

“What about school?”

“I was homeschooled and probably got a better education than my peers.”

“Did they expect you to be good?”

“My father said it wasn’t a reasonable request, considering I was a D’Ascensio and I took after my grandfather. But they tried to instill some decent values in me to counteract my natural tendency to stray from the straight and narrow.”

“And they succeeded.”

“Perhaps. I wanted them to be proud of me.” He looked at her nearly full plate. “Finish your food.”

She did, giving herself time to process all he’d told her, so different from what she’d expected, and maybe explaining many of the contradictions he posed. Switching between a life with missionaries and one with a shady Sicilian gangster character, he’d obviously had to find his own middle ground.

She finished her food and sat back, replete. She had an idea he’d be questioning her soon, and she didn’t want to answer anything tonight. She took a gulp of wine and placed her empty glass on the table. The waiter swooped in and refilled it. “You get good service here,” she said.

“My grandfather loaned the owner the money to start the place.”

“That explains it. So, tell me how you got into archeology.”

“When I was twelve, I met a man in Egypt, an archeologist. He let me follow him around. I found it fascinating, digging up history. After that, when we moved, he’d put me in touch with any local digs. By the time I was applying for university I knew most of the prominent people in the field. I got a place at Oxford and that was it. I

mix my time between the university and whatever digs I can fit in.”

“Except when you’re playing the billionaire.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“A purely temporary aberration. It was my grandfather’s last request that I take over the company for a year. I think right to the end he believed—or hoped—I would see the light and want a different life.”

“Move over to the dark side. And did you?”

He considered her over the rim of his glass. “In some ways, I loved it. It made me feel alive.”

“And the luxury, the Armani suits, and the five star hotels?”

“I had to look and act the part otherwise our competitors would have torn the company to pieces like a pack of hyenas. It’s a cutthroat world.” Then he grinned again, looking boyish and something melted inside her. “But yeah. I enjoyed those things—and the private jet and the driver.” He was pensive for a moment. “But in the end it wasn’t enough. I love my real life. You’ll have to come on a dig with me sometime.”

“I’d like that.” She felt a pang of...something. She wouldn’t be going on any digs. They had no future however normal and pleasant this might seem.

“You want anything else?” he asked.

“No, I’m full.” Her thoughts had taken on a downward plunge. She rested her chin on her hand and gazed around the place. The tables were all occupied, the waiters scurrying around, carrying plates and bottles, constantly on the move.

“You seem a little distracted,” Vito said.

“Just worried about Theresa.”

“She looked fine.”

“She’s tough, but she doesn’t let on if she’s hurting.” You tended to grow up with at least the outward appearance of toughness in the Scarlesi family or get walked all over. But she could hardly tell Vito that.

“Call her.”

“I don’t want to disturb her if she’s gone to bed.”

She shrugged off the worry of her up-and-coming meeting with Theresa. It was going to happen whatever she did. Theresa was tenacious if nothing else. But perhaps she could put it off as long as possible. “You’re right. So what shall we do next?”

“What would you like to do?”

“Let’s go dancing.”

“Dancing?” He sounded as though he had no clue as to the meaning of the word.

“You can’t dance?”

“I think it’s more a case of I don’t dance.”

“Well, we all have to try new things. I’m just popping to the ladies’ room. You can have a think about where to go while I’m away.”

She almost grinned at the expression on his face, but then grabbed her bag and headed to the ladies', where she stared at herself in the mirror. She looked like Gabrielle. It made her feel uneasy, like a fraud.

And his parents were goddamn missionaries. That made him almost one. And he didn't dance. They had zero in common. Less than zero.

For a while there, talking over dinner, they'd seemed like a couple, a normal couple finding out about each other. But they weren't, and pretending would only get her in deeper, and then she'd never climb out.

She pulled the clips from her hair, fluffing it up then holding her head upside down and zapping it with hairspray from her bag, so it tousled around her face. She had a small makeup kit and she rimmed her eyes with kohl, slapped on a couple of layers of mascara, and glossed her lips fuchsia pink. Pouted. Yeah, Gabby was back.

She was starting to feel just a little bit schizophrenic.

Chapter Seven

She'd changed when she came out of the ladies' room. Not literally—she still wore the little black dress, but for some reason it no longer looked demure. She'd loosened her hair, added makeup. It was as though she'd donned a whole new persona as she walked across the room with a sexy sway of her hips that did weird things to his insides.

Which was the real Gabby?

He'd thought they'd made a sincere connection over dinner. Though he was the one to do all the talking, she'd seemed genuinely interested.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Then she'd gone all distant again, almost as though she'd relax and then feel guilty about relaxing, which didn't make one bit of sense.

Time for her to do the talking.

Except now they were going dancing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone dancing. He was guessing "perfect" wasn't going to come into it—but that wasn't a bad thing. If nothing else, it would show his more human side.

"So where are we going?" she asked coming to a halt in front of him.

"I just phoned a friend of mine—he owns a nightclub—Sound Effects."

"I've heard of it, and the owner. One of the girls I'm working with now used to dance there. Apparently, he's seriously hot. How come you know him?"

Seriously hot? Suddenly, introducing Gabby and Logan seemed like a bad idea. "I was trying to sell the cruise line to Logan when the ship went down. You could say we got to know each other well."

"I take it he didn't buy."

"No." He got to his feet. "Come on, the hostess has called us a taxi."

Time to dance.

...

As Logan promised, when Vito gave his name to the bouncer on the door, they were ushered straight in. The bouncer handed them over to a waitress who led them through the main room.

The music was loud but not unbearable, the place full of writhing dancers, and a woman with red hair in a skimpy black dress danced alone on a podium. Her eyes followed him as they walked past. The waitress led them to a door opposite, with a second bouncer outside. She spoke to him quietly, and he nodded and let them in.

“Where are we going?” Vito asked.

“The VIP area, sir.”

“Cool,” Gabby murmured from beside him and led the way. This room was quieter, the music a little more subdued. Most of the seats were taken, and a couple of staff wandered around with trays. The lights were low and the decor tasteful if a little...red for his liking. He’d never been to a place like this.

They were shown to a plush, dark-red velvet booth with a semicircular seat around a circular table. Quite private. Gabby slid in, and he sat next to her, his thigh touching hers. Almost immediately a waitress appeared with a bottle of champagne and glasses. She poured them both a glass and left the bottle in the ice bucket by the table.

“Compliments of the house, sir.”

“Mmm...what it is to have friends in high places,” Gabby said taking a sip of champagne.

“And here he comes,” Vito muttered. Logan sauntered across the room, looking totally badass in black jeans and a T-shirt that showed the tattoos snaking down his arm.

Gabby looked up as Logan came to a halt by their table. He leaned across and shook Vito's hand, seemed genuinely pleased to see him. He hadn't actually visited Logan since the ship had gone down. He'd spent a couple of weeks on and off with Josh, who had stayed at his villa on Sicily while his broken leg healed. But Logan had come straight back to London.

"I thought you were in Sicily?" he said.

"I flew in yesterday."

Logan turned his attention to Gabby and smiled. "And this is?"

"Gabby Harper meet Logan McCabe."

"Lovely to meet you," Gabby said. "And thank you for the champagne."

"My pleasure—order whatever you like." He turned back to Vito. "Is Gabby...?" He didn't quite waggle his eyebrows but he might as well have.

Vito bit back a smile. "Yes."

"Good. Excellent. Well, I'll leave you to...do whatever you like. We must have dinner while you're in town. I don't want to interrupt your evening. A pleasure meeting you, Gabby. I hope things go well."

Vito waited until he'd disappeared through another door at the back of the room then picked up his glass and turned back to Gabby.

“Is Gabby what?” she asked.

He thought for a moment, but why not tell her? “I was with Logan and another man—Josh Slater, the ship’s head of security—when the ship went down. We worked together, almost got cut off together. Josh broke his leg. Logan carried him out while I cleared the way. That’s how I got this.” He stroked a finger down the scar on his cheek.

“I like your scar,” she said. “Makes you look like a pirate.”

“Why would you want me to look like a pirate?” He shook his head. “Don’t answer that. Anyway, we nearly died, and in the lifeboat afterward we got talking and we decided that we’d each go back and change something. Things to do before you die, we said.”

“And you decided to come and find me.”

“Si. Find out why you ran. Prove to you that what we had was real.”

She glanced away, a frown forming between her brows. For a moment he thought she was going to say something about love, but she took another sip of wine instead.

“And what sort of vows did the others make?”

“Logan is going to find his fantasy girl...some woman he had a one-night stand with eleven years ago. And Josh was planning to find the wife he hasn’t seen in five years and get an annulment, move on with his life.”

“Oh.” She put her glass down and stood up. “Right, enough of the chit-chat. Let’s dance.”

“Do we have to?”

“Yes.”

He gave in to the inevitable—next time they would do something of his choosing, and he’d show her something of his real life. He had a few ideas. But tonight he was dancing.

The music was fast, a song he vaguely recognized, and everyone else was moving unselfconsciously on the floor, oblivious to anyone watching. Gabby seemed to slide into the music, become one with it, closing her eyes, raising her arms above her head, her whole body undulating to the beat. He stood and stared as the black dress he’d thought so demure stretched taut over her breasts, the hem lifting to show her thighs and a glimpse of pale skin. She was wearing stockings. God almighty.

Her eyes flickered open, and she looked at him, then her arms dropped and her hands rested on her hips. “You’re not dancing.”

He cast a look around him at the other dancers, tried to imitate their moves but he felt jerky and awkward. He closed his eyes, determined to do this.

How hard can it be?

He attempted to feel the music—isn’t that what you were supposed to do? But he just felt a complete ass. He opened his eyes to find her still watching him, and stopped moving.

She grinned. “You really can’t dance, can you?”

He scowled. “It appears not.”

At that moment, the music changed from a fast rock beat to a slow ballad.

“Reprieve,” she said with a little shrug of her shoulders and then held out her arms.

Bad idea.

But as the lights dimmed even further, he couldn’t resist. Stepping in close to her, he breathed in her sweet scent. She rested her hands on his shoulders, and he slipped his arm around her slender waist, drawing her against his body. Her breasts pushed against his chest, her head at his shoulder. As she swayed to the music, her body slid against his, sending the blood rushing to his groin.

“Relax,” she murmured.

He glanced around, but other couples were dancing equally close. The light was dim, and he eased the tenseness from his muscles. He hadn’t considered he’d get to hold her tonight. This was an added bonus he should make the most of.

They’d agreed “no sex” but there was no reason they couldn’t touch. As if in agreement, she pressed her hips against his, and he gave out a silent groan as his dick jerked to life.

He felt like a randy teenager about to explode, which might be embarrassing.

She turned her head slightly and he felt her soft lips against his throat and then her tongue tracing patterns on his skin, sending darts shooting through his body, to settle in his groin until he was hot and hard.

“Hey, didn’t we say no sex?” he whispered into her ear.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

She stopped tormenting him for a second and raised her head. “So we did.”

Merda, why had he said anything? He thrust what was now a truly impressive—if he did say so himself—erection into her stomach. Sliding his hands from her waist to her ass, he pulled her against him. He allowed himself to enjoy the sensation for a moment longer then took a deep breath and released his hold just as the music changed again to a faster beat.

“Time for some champagne,” he murmured.

He had a feeling the evening was going to become some slow form of torture. But he could do it to prove to her that...

What? He was no longer sure what he was trying to prove.

...

It had taken all Gabby’s willpower to say no when he’d asked if she wanted to go back to the hotel with him.

But the trouble was she wanted him too much.

It was scary how quickly and deeply he got under her skin. Dancing with him had been a sort of self-inflicted punishment. Though she’d allowed him to skip out on the fast dances, he had joined her for the slow ones. Each time they had stepped onto the floor, the desire between them ratcheted a notch higher. He’d felt it, too—it was impossible to hide an erection that big when you were welded together.

In between dances, they sipped champagne, and he held her hand, stroked her fingers, and kissed her palm, but nothing more. They didn't speak, but the silence hadn't been awkward; it was more expectant, rather.

And sometimes she'd danced alone, for him, loving the feel of his dark gaze following her every move. He didn't seem put off by her flamboyant dancing.

Tomorrow she'd worry about that.

It was long past midnight when he ordered them a taxi. In the darkness, as the streets of London whizzed past them, he'd taken her hand and asked her to come back with him. And she'd wanted to so much it had been like a physical pain stabbing her in the gut.

Never had she felt like this, and in the end that had given her the strength to say no. He hadn't pressed her, and she suspected that, in his way, he felt the same, and he hadn't expected to. They were both in shock.

So, here she was back in her own apartment, contemplating her lonely sofa. At least there was no sound from Theresa's room so she was saved the interrogation a little while longer.

Obviously, she'd thought too soon, because at that very moment, the door to Theresa's room opened and her friend stood there, wrapped in her comfort dressing gown she'd owned since she was sixteen. At least some of the color had returned to her face.

She peered around the room. "You alone?"

"Of course."

“Just give me a second to make a coffee, and then we’ll have our little chat.”

Inquisition, more like. “Do we have to?” She hated the pathetic whine in her voice, but pushed on. “Can’t we wait until morning? Don’t you need to rest? How is your arm, anyway?”

“My arm is fine, and not a chance.” She disappeared into the small kitchen, where the sounds of coffee-making drifted out. Gabby grabbed a blanket from the cupboard and wrapped it around herself—more for comfort than anything else—and sat cross-legged on the sofa, composing herself. She’d been meaning to tell Theresa, anyway. When she’d asked her not to mention to Luca that she was staying here, she’d known there would be a day of reckoning, but Theresa hadn’t pushed, maybe sensing that she needed time.

She came back five minutes later with two mugs of coffee, handing one to Gabby and taking the seat opposite.

“Luca called again earlier,” she said.

“He did?”

“He’s been calling a lot lately. He asked again if I’ve heard from you. If I know where you are.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“That I didn’t. Which was true at the time. But I hate lying to him, Gabby. So, what’s going on?”

“Okay. Full disclosure.” She needed to explain what led up to her somewhat bizarre behavior. “You know I cracked that bone in my arm a while back?”

Theresa frowned. “Yes. What has that got to do with you dating a D’Ascensio?”

“Have a little patience and I’ll get there. It was just after my brother got in his spot of bother.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“You mean running up enormous gambling debts? You should have made the little monster take the consequences.”

“He’s only seventeen.”

“So why didn’t he go to your father?”

“They’d just bought a new house. Between that and my stepmother’s latest plastic surgery, they’re broke.”

“Bitch.”

She didn’t want to get into a discussion about her stepmother right now. Theresa’s assessment wasn’t really accurate. Maria was actually quite sweet, just a little self-obsessed. “Anyway, I went to see the people involved and told them I’d pay. I gave them what I had in savings, and we sorted out a payment plan, which I could afford because I had a good job.”

“Except you broke your arm and lost your job.”

“I did. I might have scraped together the money and still been okay, but that was when my mom contacted me.” She didn’t have much to do with her mother, had never really gotten over the fact that she’d dumped her and her dad for a job in Hollywood. She was an actress but not a very successful one. They got on okay; she wasn’t a bad woman, just not a particularly maternal one. “She was ill, with this really rare disease, and the best hope of a complete recovery is this pioneering treatment only available in the States.”

“I remember. You told me it was expensive.”

“Extremely. She was selling her house to pay for it, but it was taking time, and she didn’t want to put off the treatment—delaying it would lower the chances of a full recovery. She came to me and asked for a loan—I think she expected me to go to Dad, but...” No point in rehashing that.

“You should have asked Luca. You’re family. He would have helped. Or you could have asked me to ask Luca.”

“I’m not really family. And my mother certainly isn’t.”

Theresa glared. “You are too family! You were from the day your father married Maria.”

Now wasn’t the time to get into that conversation. “Anyway, no reason to get your panties in a twist, because, in fact, I did go and see Luca. I asked him to loan me the money until mom could pay him back.”

Theresa shrugged. “So what was the problem? He didn’t turn you down did he? If he did, I’ll go set fire to his Ferrari.”

Gabby bit back a smile. Theresa could be fierce defending the people she loved, and Gabby was lucky enough to be one of those people. “Actually, he offered to give me the money.”

Theresa smiled. “Aw, my brother’s a lovely person.”

Not that lovely. “Except he asked for a favor in return.”

That was how he’d put it—a favor to help the family. And she’d jumped at the

chance because she was pathetic and needy and had always wanted desperately to belong.

It should have been easy peasy.

Hah.

“A favor? What sort of favor?” Theresa sounded suspicious, and well she might. Gabby had an inkling Luca had better keep a careful eye on his beloved Ferrari.

“He asked me to try and get close to Vittorio D’Ascensio, and send him back any information I could get that might help Luca take over the company.”

“What? Like some sort of industrial spy? Isn’t that illegal?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure. It didn’t sound illegal when Luca explained it.”

“Luca is in big trouble.”

She didn’t doubt it. “Apparently, I’m Vito’s type. He always goes for blondes just like me.”

“A man with taste. I’m guessing there’s a ‘but.’”

“There is. He likes good girls, girls who dress nicely and speak nicely and probably go to church. Luca had a PI look into him, and he came up with all this information, and then drew up a profile of his ideal woman. All I had to do was be that woman, make sure I popped up in his vicinity, and then make sure I stayed there and sent back anything I found out that might be useful to Luca.”

Theresa was studying her, head cocked to one side. “I bet the effort of being nice

nearly killed you.”

“Hah. Hah.”

“But really, Gabby. How were you ever okay with this?”

She had no clue and could only put it down to a momentary mind-fuck. “Luca made it sound sort of exciting and important and... Okay, no, not really. But I didn’t have a lot of options. The mob was after me for Bertie’s debts, I had nowhere to live, and my mom needed the money desperately.”

“I can’t believe Luca blackmailed you like that. I’m going to beat him to a pulp.”

“He didn’t really put pressure on me.” Well, not a great deal—it was more like laying on the whole do-this-for-the-family-that-took-you-in sort of thing. “And I was out of work until my arm healed, and I am an actress and a dancer, after all. It was just one more job.” Right until the moment she set eyes on Vito.

“So, tell all. What happened? Did you meet him—well, obviously you did. Come on, Gabby, I’m dying here.”

“I went to Sicily. He has a villa there, and I made sure I was on the private beach where I had no right to be, and he came and introduced himself, and I was nice, and so was he.”

“What?”

“He was nice. Really nice. Though maybe nice isn’t the right word. You saw him tonight. He’s stunning. But Luca was wrong. His grandfather might have been a bad

person, but Vito is an honorable man.”

Theresa was eying her up, lips pursed. “Tell me you did not sleep with this man, Gabrielle Harper. That would be bordering on...prostitution.”

“No, I didn’t sleep with him. I was a ‘good girl’ remember. Besides, it wouldn’t have felt right. As soon as I met him I started to feel this really inconvenient guilt. And the more time I spent with him, the more I liked him and the guiltier I felt.”

“So why didn’t you just leave?”

“I don’t know. I meant to, so many times. I packed my bags and...” She tugged on her hair then screwed up her face. “I liked him. I liked spending time with him, but I was also acting a part, and the longer I acted, the more natural it became and...agh! I can’t really explain it. It was like I was someone else. I was Gabrielle. Not madcap Gabby. And helikedme.”

“Lots of people like you. So go on—what finally brought you to your senses?”

“He asked me to marry him.”

“What? You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Nope.”

“So, he asked you to marry him, and you finally realized you had to get out, and you came home.”

“Er...not quite.”

“How not quite?”

“I said yes.”

“You said yes?” The words came out as a screech.

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time?”

“Are you insane?”

Probably. “It was so romantic. He asked me on the beach where we met, and he got down on one knee and gave me such a beautiful ring.” It had broken her heart to leave that ring behind. She’d never considered herself mercenary, but she’d loved that ring.

Theresa shook her head. “I feel like I’ve wandered into this parallel universe. Where my friend Gabby has turned into this...” She trailed off and shrugged. “Actually I have no words for it. So what happened next?”

“Vito got a special license, and it was all moving so fast that I was just carried along. Then the night before the wedding, he told me that I was his ideal woman and he loved me, and it all came crashing down. I wasn’t his ideal anything. I was a fraud, and if he knew the real me, he wouldn’t have looked twice. He would never love me.”

“And, of course, there’s always the fact that if he ever found out that Luca had sent you...”

Gabby put her hands over her ears to shut the words out. Then she took a deep breath and finished her story. “So I ran. I left him this stupid note and took off, came back here, and I’ve been sleeping on your couch—and avoiding Luca—ever since. And by the way—I never told him anything about Vito’s business, so he presumably isn’t very happy with me. But Mom’s sold her house now, and as soon as I get the money I’m going to go pay Luca back, and then this whole mess will be over.”

“Sounds like a plan. But there’s something I don’t understand. This all happened six months ago. So what is he doing here now? Have you been seeing him all along?”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“No. He said he hadn’t come after me because he wanted me to return of my own accord.”

“Which was obviously never going to happen.”

“Obviously. Then apparently a few weeks ago, he was on this ship that sank, and he nearly died, and he had this epiphany so he had to come and find me and prove his love.” She ran her hands through her hair, clutching her head. “And it’s a total, total fucked-up mess.”

“Why didn’t you just send him packing?”

“I meant to, but he can be very persuasive.” She had a flashback to the feel of his mouth between her legs, his tongue on her clit, and a wave of heat washed over her.

“Gabrielle Harper, I know that expression. What evil thoughts are you thinking?” Theresa could read her far too well. “You’ve slept with him, haven’t you?”

She sniffed. “I haven’t slept with him.”

“You little tart.”

“Hey, well, I’m not playing the good girl any more. And I didn’t know what to say, so I kissed him instead and... Anyway, I have a plan. I’m going to let him get to know the real me. He’ll soon realize I’m not nice at all, and then he’ll walk away.”

“Shut up. You’re my best friend, and you insult my taste when you bad-mouth

yourself.”

She shrugged. “Whatever. But the fact is the real me is so not his type. All I have to do is stop acting and wait for the realization to filter through, and I’m free.”

Theresa studied her. “Just tell me you don’t love him. Because that would be really bad. If he sticks around, one day he will find out the connection between you and his archenemy. And I’m guessing he won’t be pleased.”

No, he wouldn’t. He had such high standards, hated deception of any sort. It was one of the reasons she had agreed to the “no more sex” thing, however much she wanted it. Because she couldn’t sleep with him while she was... Well, if not exactly lying to him, then not telling the whole truth.

“Of course I don’t love him,” she scoffed. As if. But Gabrielle had loved him, and that complicated things.

“Maybe you should just come clean. Tell him.”

She knew she had to, and that once she did it would all be over. He would never forgive her. And she didn’t blame him. “I will. Just not yet. I owe Luca that much—I agreed, after all. So as soon as I’ve talked to Luca, which I will do as soon as I can pay him back, I’ll tell Vito everything.”

And then he would definitely walk away.

And that was a good thing. Really it was.

He’d never love the real her, and she didn’t want him to. Really she didn’t. He’d be murder to live with, always expecting her to do the right thing; she’d probably explode under the strain.

Why the hell did he have to come after her? If he'd stayed away, eventually she would have gotten over him, and he could have remembered her as the fantasy she had been.

Not the tawdry reality.

Chapter Eight

Gabby traced a fingertip over the photograph. "Oh my God, it's a skeleton."

Vito laughed at her reaction. He'd decided it was time to show her a little of his real life. Today she would see that he was just an ordinary guy who had been cast into an extraordinary situation by the death of his grandfather.

While she was spending time with him, she was also keeping her distance both mentally and physically, almost as if just going through the motions, waiting for him to... To what? Give in and go away, he suspected.

So he'd brought her to an archeological dig right in the center of London, run by a friend of his. They were in the office waiting for him to show up to give them the official tour.

"This was the site of the Bedlam burial ground, named after the old mental hospital," he told her. "Though it wasn't only patients buried here." Vito had spent a week helping to remove the bodies when the dig first started. "It's given a fascinating insight into life in London in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."

"Are there still bodies here?"

"No, they've all been moved now. Transferred to consecrated ground."

She gave a theatrical shudder. “And this is what you do? Dig up bodies.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“Not usually. It tends to be buildings or artifacts, but bodies occasionally turn up.”

“It must be fascinating.”

“You should come on a dig with me sometime. Get your hands dirty.”

Her eyes twinkled, and she opened her mouth to answer but then closed it. She bit her lip. “Maybe.”

There she went again, holding back on her natural response, as though scared to give something away.

The door opened, and Nick walked in. He grinned when he saw Vito and came across and shook his hand. “Glad to see you back in the real world.” He turned to Gabby. “And this is...?”

She held out her hand. “I’m Gabby.”

He looked her over and smiled. “Are you a student, Gabby?”

“No, I’m just a...friend of Vito’s.”

“And you’d like a tour?”

“Yes, please.”

“Well, come along then.”

Vito allowed them to walk in front, happy to tag along behind, where the view was pretty good. She was wearing jeans today, tight jeans that hugged the curve of her ass, and a pink T-shirt that matched her hair. She looked younger than her twenty-four years, and he could see why Nick had mistaken her for a student.

Two weeks had passed, and he was no closer to understanding Gabby and why she had agreed to marry him and then lost her nerve. She cut him off if he ever tried to ask her directly, and finally he'd stopped trying.

They had spent all their free time together. She'd taken him to the ballet and the theater and insisted on going dancing again, which was slow torture. But as it was the only time they touched, he'd gone along with her more than once just to get her in his arms. Somehow, they had managed to keep to the agreement and not had sex.

It was killing him.

Occasionally, when she relaxed, he saw glimpses of the Gabrielle he had known before, but mostly she was someone entirely new. Sometimes he believed that she went out of her way to deliberately shock him. As though she were acting a part. The part of someone as different as possible from the woman he had proposed to. As though she were trying to prove that they were totally unsuited to each other.

And maybe she was right.

Gabby was certainly not the type of woman he had ever envisioned marrying.

More than once, he'd considered walking away, accepting that there was no point in prolonging this, had hovered on the verge of telling her that it was over. But somehow he couldn't do it. However much he told himself she wasn't his type, that they could have no long-term future together, he was drawn to her as he had been to no other woman.

Including Gabrielle when he'd known her the first time.

And he was pretty sure she felt the same.

Conflicted.

With hindsight, he could recognize that his relationship with Gabrielle had been of a more cerebral nature. He'd fallen for Gabrielle with his head. But Gabby, from the first moment, had captured his body, tied him in knots, until he could think of nothing else.

He watched as she listened to Nick, taking in everything the other man was saying.

Was that a twinge of jealousy? He wasn't sure. He'd never felt the emotion before. But he wanted her to look at him like that.

Back in Sicily, she had. She'd seemed to hang on his words as if his every utterance was fascinating. Was that what he wanted? Unequivocal admiration?

He wasn't that big an asshole, was he?

Maybe she was just a good listener.

He needed to find a way through to her. Get back to the beginning, where it had all started. An idea niggled at the back of his mind.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“That was fun,” she said when the tour was over. They were sitting on the wall, watching the other archeologists work, and drinking coffee out of plastic cups—a world away from the Savoy. Occasionally, someone would stop work and come over and say hi.

“You know most of the people here?” she asked.

“It’s a small world.”

“But one that you love?”

“Yes.” That love had been tested over the last year, but it had won through in the end. He’d wanted to share that life with Gabrielle, but how about with Gabby?

If he could just get a handle on the real woman. “Come to Cambridge with me.”

She’d been watching a girl painstakingly unearth a pottery artefact—there were a lot of Roman remains on the site—now she twisted to look at him. She studied his face, no doubt giving herself time to come up with an excuse, but in the end all she said was, “Why?”

“I’d like to show you where I live. Where I work. I can get you back in time for the show tonight.”

...

Two hours later, Vito pulled the door closed behind him. “So did you like the

house?”

She'd been curiously silent on the tour, and he had no clue what she was thinking. He loved his home—had bought it five years ago when he'd first moved to Cambridge. It was in the center of a tall Georgian terrace, and far too big for a single man, but he'd liked it on sight.

“It's beautiful,” she said with a sigh.

Actually, it was in need of some serious work. He'd been completing it as he'd had the time and the funds, though that wasn't a problem now. While he was giving away the proceeds from his grandfather's company, he was keeping the private inheritance. He'd certainly never be short of money again.

Maybe he should tell her that. Would it make him seem a little more mercenary? A little more human?

He wanted to ask if she could see herself living here. But something stopped him.

Fear?

But of what?

That she would say no? Or that she'd say yes?

He'd been doing a lot of thinking over the past few days. Gabrielle had been everything he'd believed he wanted in a wife. She'd been the sort of woman he had always dated in the past, but he'd never been able to take things the next step forward. If he was totally honest, when he'd gotten to know those women he'd been...bored. He hadn't been able to envisage a lifetime with any of them. They offered no surprises, never challenged him. So, he'd always backed out, told them he

wasn't ready to settle down.

Now he could see that he'd been looking for some idealized image of a woman.

Gabrielle had come into his life at a time when he'd been doubting himself. His grandfather had set him up with that deathbed wish, knowing he'd be tempted by the lifestyle. Gabrielle had been his way of rejecting that life. He'd latched onto her as the good woman who would see him through his time of temptation. But maybe there had been more. Had he sensed something else in her? Had he sensed Gabby underneath the prim and proper Gabrielle?

Had she appealed to him on some level he'd never allowed himself to feel before?

On the surface she had been so goddamned right for him.

He gave her a sideways glance—the magenta streaks in her hair stood out in the sunshine, her face was free of makeup, and she was casually dressed. She had a little frown between her eyes that disappeared when she caught him watching her.

“So what next?” she asked.

His house was walking distance to the station. She could be in London in an hour. There was no reason why she couldn't live here and still continue to work. If she wanted to.

“You want to see where I work?”

She made a quick nod. “I'd love to.”

He took her hand, wanting to touch her, to hold onto her as though she might vanish. Despite her positive comments, she was drawing away from him, and he had no clue

how to keep her.

He had a feeling that Gabby was his one chance. He could have everything. These days, a sense of excitement filled him as he woke each morning. And that was down to Gabby. She was fun, and he wanted her desperately; she made him feel alive. At the same time, he knew Gabrielle existed underneath, and she would be good for him, someone to live up to.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

If only she'd agree. He just didn't know what else he could do to persuade her they were right for each other. And he suspected she was still acting to some extent, and he had yet to see the real woman.

The idea that had been nagging at him came to the forefront. Time to try something different. The following week, she had two days off from performing.

"Come to Sicily with me next week."

Gabby glanced sideways at him and raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because it's beautiful in the summer, and we were happy there."

She cocked her head. "Were we?"

"I was." Though, even as he said the words, he acknowledged that they weren't entirely true. Maybe content, but not really happy. He'd come closer to that with Gabby in the last couple of weeks than with Gabrielle. The thought made him a little uneasy, but he shrugged it away. Long term, he didn't want wild mood swings like he got with Gabby; he wanted the cool calmness of his parent's marriage. A woman who would remind him of the person he strived to be. "Just come for a break. I'm not asking for anything else."

She nibbled on her lower lip, and he held his breath. "Okay."

He'd take her back to where it had all started. And somehow he'd find his Gabrielle, and she would finally accept he loved her and be happy with who she was.

And so would he.

Chapter Nine

A week later, Vito sat on the beach on Sicily. His knees were drawn up to hide the fact that he had a raging hard-on as he watched Gabby stride toward him in a tiny, bright-pink bikini that bared most of her body. His gaze was fixed on the glint of the ruby at her navel and the tattoo that ran down her right thigh. Hard to believe this exotic creature and his Gabrielle were one in the same.

In fact, Sicily had changed nothing, except that spending so much time together and not giving in to desire was tying him in ever-tighter knots. After two days, the sexual tension between them was a tangible thing. In her presence he was in an almost constant state of arousal, which was extremely uncomfortable and potentially very embarrassing. He hadn't jerked off so much since he'd been a teenager.

When they'd made the agreement to abstain, she'd said sex muddled his brain, but maybe by denying themselves they were building it up into something out of all proportion.

Perhaps what they really needed was to screw their brains out and get it out of their systems, and then he could maybe think straight. They flew back tomorrow. Perhaps tonight...

She halted in front of him and reached down to hand him one of the ice creams she'd fetched from the cool box sitting in the shade of the rocky outcrop behind them. The action gave him a stunning view of her cleavage, and the tension rose a little bit higher.

They were on a private beach only accessible from the sea. He'd moored the yacht offshore and brought them here in the small dingy.

She sank down onto the towel beside him.

Gabby blossomed in the hot sun, more beautiful than ever.

She had a voracious appetite for everything. Soaking up the sun, swimming in the sea, eating...

He shifted now so he could watch her as she ate the ice cream. Her eyes caught his as she swirled her tongue in the cream and then slowly licked it. Blood drained to his groin and heat coiled in his gut, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was doing it on purpose, a wicked glint in her eyes.

"Don't you want yours?" she asked, nodding at the ice cream in his hand, which was rapidly melting and dripping onto his fingers.

He shook his head. There was only one thing he wanted right now—to be buried deep inside her.

She was nibbling the cone and then licking her fingers. "Delicious," she said. Slowly she leaned toward him and started eating his ice cream, her tongue catching his skin and sending jolts shooting along his nerves, to settle in his cock.

He closed his eyes for a moment and felt again the flutter of her tongue against his fingers, heat through the cold. Opening his eyes as she finished, he saw she was still leaning close, her breasts almost bared in the miniscule bikini, her nipples pushing against the material. With a groan, he gave in to the inevitable, wrapped his hands around her shoulders, and hauled her against him. His mouth came down on hers. Her lips were cold and sweet from the ice cream, and they parted for him as his tongue thrust inside. For a moment, she went still, but then she kissed him back, her hands tangling in his hair, holding him to her.

He shifted her, lifting her slightly and then lowering her to the towel beneath him, coming down over her, kissing her again until he ran out of oxygen and he had to come up for air.

His dick was so hard it was almost painful and he ground it against the softness of her stomach. Her eyes widened, but she didn't say anything as he slipped his hand to the back of her neck and tugged loose the bow that held up her bikini top. He peeled the material from her breasts and looked his fill. She was flawless—the skin slightly paler where she'd been protected from the sun, the nipples pink and tight, and he lowered his head and took one in his mouth, sucking and licking as her back arched off the towel and she thrust against him. And his cock got even harder.

He slid one hand down over her stomach, aiming for the bikini bottoms, but before he got there, she placed a hand over his to stop the movement.

He glanced at her face, but could read nothing from her expression. "Let's go back to the yacht," he said. "Go to bed."

He could see the emotions warring in her mind. She wanted him, there was no doubt about that, but she was fighting it.

Give in.

“I can’t.”

Suddenly he was angry, with her, with him. The emotion rose up inside him, and for once, he allowed it free rein. He pushed himself off her, wincing as his dick touched her thigh, so sensitive it bordered on pain.

“What the hell are you doing to me? What’s with all the teasing? The licking the ice cream off my fingers? Are you trying to drive me insane?”

She sat up and fumbled with the bikini top, covering her breasts and fastening it at the back of her neck. It made no difference; she might as well have been naked. She must have realized as much and pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. “I’m sorry.”

“So, why? You want me. Don’t deny it. This is torturing you just as much.”

She bit her lip, looking suddenly vulnerable, and the anger drained from him. “I do want you. But...” She glanced away, gazing out to sea, and then finally back at him. “My life’s a mess at the moment, and sex with you would complicate things even more.”

He could feel a frown tugging at his brows. “How? I won’t press you for more.”

“I can’t explain. Honest, I would if I could, but right now, I can’t. But soon.”

“How soon?”

She screwed up her face. “I need to see someone when we get back, and after that...”

“After that you’ll sleep with me?”

“If you still want me to.”

Merda. He shook his head. Why the hell did she have to be so goddamn mysterious? What was she hiding? But at least her answer gave him some hope. The sex had been fabulous between them. Once he had her in his bed, then he would soon persuade her she wanted to be part of his life.

If that was still what he wanted.

Christo, he was screwed up. But at least if they had sex he would be able to concentrate on something other than his cock. And all the different ways he wanted to use it.

“I’m going for a swim.”

He stayed in the water a long time, swimming across the cove, back and forth until his body was under control and his mind clear. She was still sitting in the same position when he got back, and he caught the hunger in her eyes as she watched him. He held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s go back.”

...

They dined on the terrace overlooking the Mediterranean.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, as she had that afternoon. And it was true. She’d messed

up.

Vito had been staring out to sea. He'd been distant since they'd left the beach. Over the last couple of days, he'd been so relaxed. He clearly loved this place.

She'd never seen him so angry before, and she really couldn't blame him. She had totally led him on and then backed out when things got too heavy. But she hadn't done it on purpose; she'd just gotten carried away. He had that effect on her.

God, she was a mess.

No way could she sleep with him with the lies still between them. But how she wanted to. Because she was sure once he knew the truth he wouldn't want her around. So she was never going to have him again.

That was the way things were.

Accept it.

But if their time together was limited, she didn't want this distance between them. This was their last evening at the villa. "Did you come back here after your parents left?" she asked.

"I came back for a month or so each year. My parents weren't too happy about it—they thought Nonno was a bad influence."

"And was he?"

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“Probably. He lived by violence and coercion, but it was the way he’d been brought up, the only way he knew how to survive. He also lived life to the fullest and had no regrets. He said the one thing he couldn’t stand was hypocrisy. Take what you want and pay for it. That was his motto.”

“He sounds interesting.”

“He was. He also had a hell of a temper. And I swore I’d never be the same. I’m sorry got angry this afternoon.”

“It was my fault. But let’s forget it.” She thought about all she wanted to know about him, and how to lighten the mood. “When did you lose your virginity?”

At last, a smile curved his lips. “I was fifteen and staying here with my grandfather. She was sixteen and a local girl, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if my grandfather had put her up to it.”

Bitch.

She tried not to be jealous of something that had happened so long ago...and didn’t quite succeed.

Tomorrow they would return to London. The money she’d loaned her mother was back in her account. She had no reason to put things off any longer. She was going to have to go see Luca, pay him back, and afterward come clean to Vito. Though maybe she’d allow herself one more day.

After that...

Well, she would just go on with her life and put this whole thing down to time out of normality. Just another acting job.

Yeah. Of course I will.

Vito's cell phone rang. He got up, walked to the edge of the terrace, listened for a moment, then spoke quietly into the phone. He watched her as he talked, then finally closed off the call and came back to her.

"That was my father," he said. "He and my mother are in London next week and would like to meet us for dinner."

She frowned. "They know about me?"

"I told them I was bringing someone to Sicily."

"Oh." He'd said that he hadn't told his parents about her all those months ago. He'd obviously done so this time.

"I haven't seen them for a while, and I want them to meet you."

She bit her lip. She didn't want to meet his parents; she would feel like a liar, a fraud. He must have seen the refusal hovering on her lips.

"They're nice people, honestly. And they'll love you."

Did it matter what she said? She doubted he'd be talking to her next week, so it was academic, anyway. She took a deep breath. "Okay. I've never met a missionary."

Chapter Ten

“You haven’t broken it off yet?” Theresa asked. “Are you crazy?”

Gabby plonked herself on the sofa and prepared for a lecture. Hopefully, it would be a quick one. She was meeting Vito at the Savoy in half an hour for an early dinner before she was due at the theater, and she still had to put her makeup on. “Probably,” she mumbled. Definitely. Absolutely crazy.

She wouldn’t have mentioned the dinner, because she could have predicted her best friend’s response, but Theresa had caught her filching her little black funeral dress from her wardrobe. Gabby had thought it appropriate for her last dinner with Vito. She wanted him to remember her with some sort of affection when it all turned to crap. Maybe it would remind him why he had first fallen in love with her. She’d dumped all her Gabrielle clothes when she got back from Sicily the first time. They weren’t her sort of thing.

“Go on, get the lecture over with,” she said as Theresa continued to stare at her.

“I think you’re in big trouble.”

“No, I’m not. I have everything under control.”

“You were supposed to tell him, but instead, you go on holiday with him? That is so not under control. Why the hell haven’t you told him?”

“Because he’ll hate me. And I’m scared. And I know I’ll never see him again. And I...” The truth was she was living in fantasyland. By now Vito was supposed to have realized how unsuitable she was. She was supposed to have shocked the hell out of him. Instead, he seemed to genuinely like her. She’d tried her best to be outrageous, really she had. “I’m going to as soon as I’ve spoken to Luca.”

“Have you contacted him?”

“Not yet.”

“Jesus, Gabby.”

She took a deep breath. Time to get real. “Phone him tonight. Tell him I’ll come and see him in the morning.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She sighed. “Just let me have this one last night. Then I’ll be good.”

“You’ve goddamn fallen for him, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“You fucking love him.”

She gritted her teeth. “I do not love him.” She didn’t, did she? “I just like him.”

“You just like him. Vito D’Ascensio, the one man you definitely should not like. You know what his family did to ours.”

“That was his grandfather, and it was years ago and nothing to do with Vito.”

Teresa shook her head. “I doubt Luca will see it like that.”

“Well, it’s just as well Luca doesn’t need to know. I’ll just tell him that it didn’t work

out. That I found out nothing of any use so there was no point in talking to him.” She bit her lip. “Then I’ll tell Vito everything.” And he’ll hate me forever.

Theresa leaned across and patted her on the arm. “You know it’s for the best. You might like him, but there’s no way you can continue seeing him with this hanging over you. He’d find out one day.”

“I know.”

Gabby stood up and glanced down at herself and scowled. “Sod this. Who am I trying to impress, anyway?” If this was her last night with Vito, she wanted to make an impression, and that didn’t include him thinking she was “nice.”

She yanked down the zip on the black dress and shimmied out of it, tossing it to Theresa who caught it, her brows raised. That left her in the pale pink underwear Vito had bought her. That had to go as well. She stalked into the bedroom and across to the wardrobe, opened it and stood searching inside. A glimpse of scarlet caught her eye. She snatched the dress off the hanger, then rifled through her drawer and found a scarlet and black bra and a matching thong, grabbed them and headed for the bathroom. After stripping off her underwear, she donned the new stuff and then tugged the scarlet dress over her head and smoothed it down over her body. It was skin tight, low cut but with long sleeves, and it finished inches above her knees. She hung her head upside down and zapped her hair with spray, tossing it back and running her fingers through it, tousling it into a sexy bob. The pink streaks clashed beautifully with the red dress. She rimmed her eyes with kohl and added lashings of mascara and then matching scarlet lipstick, and she was almost ready to go.

When she came out, Theresa was still standing in the middle of the room. She took one look at Gabby, crossed to the wardrobe, fumbled inside, and came out holding four-inch red stilettos. She handed them solemnly to Gabby, who slipped them on her feet and then turned to study herself in the mirror.

There was no sign of Gabrielle at all. Not a trace of good girl left. The dress clung everywhere. She looked like a tart, but a very, very sexy tart. She'd give Vito a glimpse of what he wasn't going to get.

She felt immediately guilty at the thought.

None of this was Vito's fault.

And anyway, who was she kidding? She was in full seduction mode; if she had her way Vito was going to get all of her tonight. Not that he was going to need much seducing—he'd made that more than clear.

She turned to find Theresa staring at her, wide eyed. What?" she snapped.

Theresa's lips twitched. "Nothing. You look...nice."

Hah!Nicewas one thing she did not look. With a last tug at her hem, she headed for the front door. "Watch out, Vito—here I come."

...

Vito stared at the door then at his phone lying on the white tablecloth. Should he have warned her?

His parents had flown in a few days early. They were eager to meet Gabby, and he wanted her to meet his parents. It would make the whole relationship seem more...real?

But while she'd agreed to meet them, she hadn't seemed too keen—was she worried they wouldn't like her? Maybe she thought his missionary parents would look down on a dancer? But she was hardly a stripper. And his parents weren't judgmental

people despite their choice of professions. All the same, he had an idea that Gabby would have backed out of the evening if he'd told her beforehand.

This way was better. She wouldn't have a chance to get worked up. They'd meet the real Gabby. Whoever that might be.

Besides, he'd wanted to see her.

He glanced at his watch. She was five minutes late. But punctuality was not Gabby's strong point—whereas Gabrielle had always been on time. He looked across the table and caught his father's eye.

“I take it this girl is important to you,” his father said.

“Why do you say that?”

His father smiled. “I've never seen you this nervous.”

“Yes, I like her. And I hope you like her as well.”

“It's serious then?” His stepmother asked. She was a beautiful woman, in an understated way. It occurred to him that she reminded him of Gabrielle. In fact, she reminded him of all the women he'd dated over the years.

“It is for me, and I'm hoping for her as well.”

He glanced from her to his father. They'd been happy together. She'd turned his father's life around. Had that been what he was subconsciously looking for? The equivalent of what his father had found. A good woman to keep him on the straight and narrow.

But he'd passed that test. He'd been tempted by the billionaire lifestyle, but in the end he'd chosen his path on his own, without anyone else to prop him up. He didn't need

the love of a good woman to save him. He was quite capable of saving himself.

“What’s she like?” Lucy asked.

“She’s...” How did he describe her? She was hard to explain.

At that moment the door opened and a woman stepped inside. Shock slammed him in the gut as he recognized her. She spoke to the hostess for a brief minute and then turned toward him.

“Holy shit.”

“Vito!”

The reprimand hardly registered; his attention was all on the woman in red.

His father and stepmother had their backs to the door, and now they both swiveled in their seats to see what he was staring at.

He stood up and Gabby caught sight of him, a slow, seductive smile curving her lips. She sashayed across the floor. She was sex on legs, and his mouth went dry as the rest of the room faded from his consciousness. The dress clung to every curve of her luscious body, and the high heels caused her hips to sway. Her hair was tousled, her eyes dark, her lips scarlet. She was the embodiment of every wet dream he’d ever had.

He hurried across to greet her, and she went up on tiptoe before he could speak, kissing him lingeringly on the mouth, her hand curling at the back of his neck.

Finally, she stepped back. “Vito, darling, I’m sorry I’m late.”

“Cara mia, you look...bellissimo.” He swallowed. Why did he think the next bit wasn’t going to go down too well? He cleared his throat. “Gabby, I have a surprise for you.”

She smiled. “You do? I love surprises.”

He was betting she wasn’t going to love this one. “My parents flew in early. They’re joining us for dinner.”

...

His words weren’t quite making sense. Gabby could have sworn he just said his parents were joining them for dinner. “Your parents?”

He nodded.

This wasn’t happening. Her stomach churned. In fact, she could feel a serious case of stomach flu coming on. No way could she stay for dinner...she was probably highly infectious. Time to go before they turned up. “They’re coming heretotnight?”

“They’re already here.”

She shook her head. “No. You would have told me.”

Because if he’d told her, that would have given her the chance to dress respectably, as you do to meet your boyfriend’s missionary parents, rather than dressing like the whore of Babylon in order to seduce said boyfriend.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Or more likely, it would have given her a chance to think up a believable excuse to not turn up at all.

After tomorrow, she'd very likely never see Vito again. She didn't want to meet his parents and get deeper into his life. She'd only agreed because she'd known it was never going to happen.

"But you like surprises," Vito murmured.

Not surprises like this one. She narrowed her eyes on his face; his expression was bland. Was he being purposefully obtuse?

Grr.

She tried to back away, but he took hold of her wrist, tugged her gently forward. "They're dying to meet you."

"Not happening." She glanced down at her red dress, the pale skin of her breasts bursting out from the low neckline. Looked back up. "I can't meet your parents looking like this. I look like a scarlet woman. And they're missionaries."

"They'll love you."

He tugged a little more, and she looked wildly about, searching for a way to escape, and his lips twitched.

She gritted her teeth. "This is so not funny."

He paused and turned to face her. “No, it’s not.” His gaze drifted down over her, and his eyes grew hot and heavy. “I take it this means tonight—”

“Hah. It doesn’t mean anything. And if it did mean that, it doesn’t anymore.” She scowled. “I’m mad at you. I can’t believe you didn’t call me.”

“And then I would have missed this. You look stunning, and right now all I want to do is whisk you away somewhere and make love to you until we’re both too tired and too sore to move. But they’re here, so smile, and let’s do this.”

But I don’t want to.

The truth was that if she had to meet them, then she wanted his parents to like her, even if the logical part of her mind said it didn’t matter what they thought.

She jumped as Vito slid a hand down to the small of her back and urged her forward. A man and a woman were on their feet by a table set for four. His father was an older version of Vito, still lean and handsome in a dark gray suit. The woman was younger, medium height, slender, her blond hair caught up in a neat chignon and her face free of makeup except for a pale lipstick. She held out her hand, and Gabby stared at it. Her brain seemed to have gone blank.

Vito leaned in close. “You’re supposed to take it,” he murmured in her ear.

How to make a good first impression, by Mad Gabby Harper.

She gave herself a mental shake, pasted a smile on her face, and took the woman’s hand.

“I’m Lucy,” the woman said. “And this is Paulo, Vito’s father.”

“Hello, I’m Gabby.” Maybe time for a bit of honest speaking. She waved a hand down her dress. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting to meet you tonight. I would have dressed more appropriately.” Perhaps she should tell them she was on route to a fancy dress party.

His father had an amused twinkle in his eyes. “You look beautiful, Gabby. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my son at a loss for words.” He shook her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She waited while the hostess pulled out a chair, before collapsing into it and giving a bright smile to his parents. “It’s nice to meet you, too.” Just get through this. She could do it. But she felt all tongue-tied. “Vito has told me so much about you both.”

His parents sat down opposite, and Vito took the seat next to hers. She jumped as his hand squeezed her thigh.

Was he crazy? Touching her up with his parents opposite? She wanted to snap at him to keep his hands to himself, but that would hardly give a good impression.

“So tell us about yourself, Gabby? Where did you and Vito meet?”

Her stomach flipped. She didn’t want to lie to these people; they seemed genuinely nice and welcoming. Vito pushed a glass of red wine in front of her and she took a sip. Then a gulp followed by a deep breath. She was an actress wasn’t she? She could do this, and she started talking.

Their food came—she couldn’t even remember what she had ordered. Her appetite had abandoned her, and she just picked at her meal. In a lull in the conversation, she gave Vito a quick sideways glance, then paused to look longer. He wasn’t eating much, either, or joining in with the conversation. Instead, he sat back in his chair, watching her, a hungry expression in his eyes. She swallowed as heat washed through

her.

Not the time, or the place, or the company, Gabby.

She gave herself a little shake and turned back to his parents. “What was Vito like as a boy?” she asked.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“A complete little monster,” Lucy said with a grin. “When I first came to Sicily, he’d gone through three nannies in the last year. I don’t think Paolo expected me to last any longer.”

“But he got better with age,” his dad added.

Finally, the meal was over. They were nice people, and they clearly loved Vito to bits and no doubt wanted the best for him. But they hadn’t made her feel uncomfortable, had genuinely wanted to know about her. They’d even promised to come and see the show some time, though she doubted that would ever happen. All the same, however nice they’d been, she was exhausted with the effort and she still had to work tonight. And she had to decide whether she would see Vito later. He wanted her. Despite his parent’s presence, his desire was almost tangible. She could feel his hot gaze on her even now.

And she wanted him.

She rose to her feet. “I just have to visit the ladies’ room, and then I really have to be off. I need to be at the theater in half an hour.”

...

Vito tried not to watch the sway of her ass as she walked away. And failed. When she’d disappeared, he blew out his breath, ran a hand through his hair.

“I like her,” his father said.

“I like her, too.”

“I get the impression she surprised you tonight.”

“A little. She’s not usually this...flamboyant.” He shook his head. “She’s an actress, sometimes she likes to play a part.”

When she got back, she’d redone her lipstick. She shook hands with his mother and father again. “It was lovely meeting you both. I can see where Vito gets his manners from.” He stood up, and she gave him a small frown. “You don’t have to come with me.”

Oh yes, he did. He wanted to talk to her away from the ears of his parents. And he wanted to kiss her and have his hands all over and under that little red dress. Neither of those things was optional. “Of course I do,” he said smoothly. “I’ve called the car. It’s waiting outside.” He turned to his parents. “Enjoy your coffee. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He rested a hand on the curve of her waist as he led her to the door. She was quiet, not saying a word as they exited the restaurant, and he ushered her into the back of the car that was already waiting at the curb. As they pulled out into the traffic, he pressed the button that brought the screen up between them and the driver. Then he twisted in his seat and hauled her into his arms.

There was no resistance; she melted against him, shifting in the seat so she straddled him, shoving the dress up her thighs. He cupped her face with his palms, drew her down to him, and finally his mouth was on hers. Her lips parted beneath his and her tongue pushed inside.

He’d been inconveniently conscious of his cock all night; now it jerked in his pants. She settled herself onto him so her sex pressed against his erection and he groaned

against the kiss.

She was devouring him; he had an inkling that seeing him so turned on all night had wound her up as well. There was certainly an edge of desperation in the kiss. She sucked on his tongue, nibbled his lips, rained butterfly kisses over his jaw, along the length of his scar. She kissed the corners of his eyes. Then she went back to his mouth, her tongue filling him again, as she rubbed her breasts against his chest.

He slipped his hands down the curve of her spine, over the swell of her hips, and slid them beneath the hem of her dress to cup her ass. Her cheeks were bare, and he went still for a moment, then delved further and found the thong tucked between her buttocks.

She rose slightly so his fingers could find her, could slip beneath the material, and then he was touching her bare sex, already slippery with desire.

Desire for him—and that sent the remainder of his blood to his dick.

A car horn sounded outside, bringing him slightly to his senses, and he glanced out of the window. The traffic was heavy, and they were moving slowly, but were almost at the theater.

He leaned back from the kiss and took a deep breath. She watched him out of heavy eyes, her lipstick gone, her lips pink and full. He swiped his tongue over her lower lip as he moved his fingers against her sex and heard her breath hitch.

Then she gave a little shake of her head, exhaled, and closed her eyes for a second.

When she opened them, her expression was slightly rueful. She wriggled her hips, and he reluctantly withdrew his fingers from her. He rested his hands on her hips, then lifted her up and placed her on the seat beside him.

Then he took her hand and held on. “Come to the hotel tonight. I’ll pick you up after the show. Spend the night with me.”

Chapter Eleven

Gabby chewed on her lower lip as she stared into his gorgeous face. It still seemed unbelievable that this beautiful man desired her. All night, his dark eyes had followed her every move. He’d wanted her, and that knowledge had fired her own desire.

She’d tried to focus on his parents. They were good people, but it had been hard with Vito beside her.

And it hurt. She didn’t want to put a name to the emotion, but it was impossible to ignore. Her heart ached.

Her heart wasn’t supposed to be involved in this.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

He brought her hand up to his mouth, his lips caressing her palm so the heat slumbering inside her sparked to life. “Come on, Gabby. You know it’s what we both want.”

She bit her lip. Tomorrow she would see Luca. And afterward she would explain to Vito who she was. Why they had met. And she was pretty sure she would never see him again. Once that was done, she would never feel the touch of his hands, of his mouth.

Would it be so bad just to have one night?

She glanced out of the window. They were pulling up outside the theater.

Decision time.

She squeezed his hand. “I’d like that.”

He blew out his breath. “Thank Christ.” Lowering his head, he took her lips in a sweet kiss. “I’ll meet you here after the show.”

She nodded as the car door opened from the outside. The driver held it for her and she slid out, tugging down the red dress as she did so. Vito got out beside her and hooked his hand in her arm to walk her to the stage door.

As they entered the alley that ran alongside the theater, she had a first inkling of foreboding.

The light above the door cast shadows on the tall figure leaning against the wall. His face was in darkness, but she didn't need to see his face to recognize him. She'd known this man most of her life. Had once—quite weirdly—believed she wanted to marry him. Of course, she'd been egged on through her teens by Theresa, who claimed it was the one way for them to be really sisters.

Her feet slowed of their own accord.

What the hell do I do now?

She knew who to blame for this. Theresa must have told him where she was working when she called her brother. That wasn't supposed to have happened. But maybe it had never occurred to her friend that he would drop by.

Why would he?

“Is something the matter, cara?” Vito said from beside her.

Was there time to turn around and run? Could she fake an attack of some kind? Maybe she could faint, and Vito would have to carry her back to the car and drive her far, far away from here.

Up to now, he hadn't taken much notice of the other man. Clearly he hadn't recognized Luca. It was weird. Luca hated the D'Ascensios—she'd always known that—but she had never actually heard Vito mention the Scarlesis in all the time she'd known him. Maybe her luck would hold.

“Nothing,” she said brightly. She turned to him and smiled—well, she formed some sort of rictus with her face that might pass for a smile if the recipient was half blind. Which, unfortunately, Vito wasn't. “Well, must dash. I'll see you later.” She tugged her hand, but he held it tight and cast a glance at the man in the shadows as though he

sensed something amiss. “I’m going to be late, Vito.”

He searched her face but then gave a quick nod, and leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I’ll pick you up here after the show.”

She nodded and tried not to look at Luca until Vito’s car had pulled away and vanished into the traffic. When she turned back, Luca had straightened and was now walking toward her. As he stepped under the streetlight, she caught his faint frown, his brows drawn together. His hands were shoved in the pockets of his black jeans, and he wore a white shirt, open at the throat. He came to a halt in front of her, his gaze sweeping down over her in the red dress. “Gabby.” Luca nodded to her. “You look...colorful.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Theresa phoned me. Told me you wanted to meet.”

“Tomorrow. I wanted to meet tomorrow.”

“You worried me. You went off to do that little job, and then you all but vanished. One message in over six months. I was concerned about you. And then you turn up, finally, and look at who you had in tow.”

She sighed and gave a little shrug. “I really do have to go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Tell you everything.” Well, probably—make that definitely—not everything. But enough. She didn’t wait for him to say anything else, just headed to the stage door. She rapped on it once, and it opened from inside and thankfully shut behind her.

She made it through the show on autopilot, hardly aware of what was going on. The meeting with Luca made it all so real. It was over.

The first time, when she'd left Vito six months ago, had been hard enough, but at the same time it had all seemed a little unreal. That was happening to Gabrielle, not Gabby, and Gabrielle was way too level-headed to lose it completely.

Gabby was a hot mess.

And she didn't know how she was going to cope with this. She was breaking in two. She wanted to bawl and scream that it wasn't fair. But, of course, it was fair.

You reap what you sow.

She deserved this.

She certainly didn't deserve Vito and any sort of happy ever after.

Part of her, deep down, understood that she should call him up and tell him not to come. She didn't know if she had the strength to go through the night with the lies between them. But she wanted him so much.

It would be her good-bye gift to him.

After the show she slipped back into the red dress and shoes. As she pushed open the stage door, Vito's car pulled up and her breath hitched. He climbed out of the back and held the door for her.

She was just about to get in when a small figure appeared at the head of the alleyway—Theresa.

"Just a moment," she said to Vito and then hurried across to her friend.

"Luca called me. He said he'd seen you with Vito." Theresa sounded breathless. "I came right over. My brother's an asshole." She took a final step and wrapped her arms around her. "Aw, sweetheart, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause trouble. It never occurred to me that Luca would come here. But he was genuinely concerned for you, so I told him you were working and doing great and... He feels guilty, and rightly so. He should never have put you up to this. He should..." She trailed off, gave her another hug, and then stepped back. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine. Vito didn’t recognize him.”

Theresa looked at her with narrowed eyes. “You still haven’t told him.”

“I’ll stick to the plan and tell him tomorrow.”

“And you’re going with him now?”

She nodded.

Theresa bit her lip. “Come home, instead. I’m on the night shift, but I’ll call in sick. You can cry on my shoulder.”

“I don’t need to cry. Go to work. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I don’t like this.” She sighed. “But...call me if you need me.” Theresa leaned across and kissed her on the cheek. “Keep safe.” And then she was gone.

“What was that about?” Vito asked as she climbed into the car.

“Nothing.” No more lies.

“Are you okay?”

She turned to face him. “It’s been a long night. I’m tired that’s all. But I want this. I want to be alone with you.”

“Okay. But tomorrow, we talk.”

They didn’t speak again until they got to the hotel. Vito held her close to his side as they rode up in the elevator. As soon as the hotel door closed behind them, he turned

to her, taking the final step so his chest brushed against the tips of her breasts and pleasure shot through her, coalescing at her center. She held herself very still.

Don't stop.

This wasn't right. She didn't deserve this. But she could not take a step away.

His hands skimmed her waist, then lower. He hooked his fingers under the hem of her dress and smoothly dragged it up over her hips, tugged it over her breasts, and then over her head, tossing it on the sofa behind them.

She swallowed at the hunger in his eyes. The cloak of civilization appeared to have dropped away. His expression was raw, filled with a need he'd been hiding so well until this moment.

She stood in her high heels and the scarlet-and-black lace underwear.

"If I'd known what was underneath, I wouldn't have been able to restrain myself over dinner," he murmured, his gaze wandering over her, tightening her nipples and the muscles in her belly.

She stood waiting, shifting from foot to foot as the anticipation built. Then she held her breath as his hands went to the front of his shirt. He flicked open the buttons, baring the olive skin of his chest, the lean muscle of his abdomen. He tugged it out of his pants, and her breath caught, then he shrugged out of it and threw it on top of her dress, leaving him naked from the waist up.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a couple of foil packets, tossing her a grin. "Since that morning, I've never gone anywhere without condoms." Dropping them on the table, he turned back to her. He seemed so happy, and guilt ate at her.

This isn't right.

Suddenly, she had to say something. She opened her mouth, but he stopped her words by pulling her closer and bringing his lips down on hers. For a second, she sensed the need behind the kiss, then he somehow got control of himself and his touch lost the element of force. He raised his head. "Don't. Don't speak. I know there's something bothering you, but for tonight let's not think about anything but making love. Tomorrow, whatever it is, we'll face it together."

He was so sweet, but she was sure he wouldn't be facing anything with her tomorrow. No, he'd turn his back, and it was no more than she deserved.

She nodded and forced her guilt into submission as he slipped his hand into her hair at the back of her neck, holding her still while he ravaged her with his mouth.

He turned her around and pushed her gently so she came up against the wall, and she balanced herself with her palms against the smooth plaster. She could feel him all down the length of her back, his mouth at her throat, then trailing kisses over her shoulders.

"I love your ass," he whispered between kisses, as he pressed his erection against her. One hand came around her, and he cupped her breast, then his palm slipped inside the lace to find her nipple. She rested her forehead against the cool wall as his fingers tugged.

Then his other hand slipped beneath the silk of her panties, his long fingers curling into her sex, pushing between the folds. "You are so wet. You want me."

One finger slid inside her, stoking her inner walls, and she whimpered deep in her throat. Then he withdrew, glided the moisture up to her clit, massaged the little nub of sensitive nerves, swelling the pleasure inside until she squirmed against him.

She pressed back into the hardness of his erection, and he rubbed up against her as his clever fingers circled her, pushing, tugging until the pleasure coalesced into a huge ball in her center that burst, shattering her, spreading the heat through her body. Her legs weakened, and he held her up with a hand around her belly.

She steadied herself with a palm against the wall as he released her, keeping her eyes closed as she heard the rasp of his zipper and the tear of the foil wrapper.

One hand held her hips still while the other caressed her buttocks then slipped between her thighs. He found the edge of her thong and ripped it, tearing the material with ease. She loved that he wanted her so desperately. This is what she needed; any tenderness and she might have broken under the guilt. Then he was there, nudging at the opening to her body. She held her breath as he thrust into her with one hard lunge.

She gasped, and he held still for a moment, and then started moving. There was no gentleness to his taking, just a pull and thrust, but her body responded, pushing back against him, wanting more, needing more. One hand was back on her breast, massaging, the other slid down over her stomach, found her clit still swollen and sensitive from her orgasm, and rubbed her, hard then soft until she was twisting in his arms. His head was buried in the curve between her shoulder and her neck, his mouth at her throat.

He squeezed her between his thumb and finger, and she came again as he spilled himself inside her, pumping hard as though he couldn't stop. Finally, his movements slowed, and they stood for a minute, his arms still wrapped around her, his mouth nuzzling her throat.

“That was so good. Better than I imagined. Just stay there a second...I’ll be back.”

She stayed where she was until she heard the click of the bathroom door, and then she turned around. She was searching for something to wear when he came out of the bathroom. His chest was bare, olive skin gleaming; his pants were open at the waist, hanging low on his hips. And already she wanted him again.

He’d splashed water across his face and his hair was damp at the edges. Silently, he crossed the room to where she stood. Reaching around her with one hand, he flicked open her bra, peeled it off her and dropped it on top of the dress. “Madre di Christo, but you’re beautiful.”

Then he picked her up and carried her through into the bedroom, lowered her onto the mattress, and reclined beside her. This time their lovemaking was slow and deep and so intense that by the time she came, she was close to tears. Afterward, he kissed her gently. “Go to sleep. Tomorrow, we’ll talk. Everything will be fine.”

No, it won’t.

But strangely, she did sleep, with his arms wrapped around her and the now familiar scent of him filling her nostrils.

...

Vito came awake slowly to a sense of anticipation and well-being; his body felt sated but already eager for more. He’d woken in the night, seemingly from an erotic dream, to find her mouth on him, warm and wet, the best feeling in the world. They’d made love again, without words, slow and intense, and deeper than anything he’d ever experienced. Neither of them might be quite ready to put a word to what was between them, but it was far more than sex. Afterward, he’d held her close until her breathing evened out, then he’d rested next to her, feeling the slow beat of her heart and

knowing that whatever Gabby's fears and problems were, they had something good between them, something worth fighting for. Then finally, he'd slept.

Now tomorrow was here, and he had to make sure she understood that whatever trouble she was in, he would stand by her, help her through it. This time there was no putting off the conversation.

Except...she was gone.

He blinked open his eyes. The room was in semi-darkness, pale light filtering through the curtains. It was still early. She wouldn't have left. Not without saying good-bye. Not after what they had shared together.

A sound came from the room next door, and some of the tension left him. She hadn't gone. He rolled out of bed and found his pants on the floor, pulled them on, and ran a hand through his hair, suddenly nervous. She was so volatile. How would he find her this morning: all soft and loving as she had been through the night, or spiky and defensive?

In fact, she was heading for the door, fully dressed, bag in her hand. She was leaving. Without even saying good-bye. It was before seven; where could she need to be in such a hurry? "Gabby?"

She visibly jumped, then turned slowly around, clutching her bag to her middle. Licking her lips, she glanced away, and then back again, her gaze dropping to his chest and a flush staining her pale cheeks. "Vito. I didn't want to wake you."

Of course she didn't want to wake him. That was more than clear. The question was why. He'd thought they'd reached a new closeness. Clearly she didn't feel the same. Or maybe she did, and that had scared her into running.

“It’s early,cara, come back to bed. I’ll order coffee, breakfast. We can talk.” He stepped slowly toward her as though she were some skittish animal that might flee at the first opportunity.

“I’m sorry. I really have to go.”

“Why?”

She ignored the question, gave him a bright, obviously fake, smile and backed away toward the door. “I’ll talk to you later. I have a meeting this morning and—”

Her words cut off as he closed the small space between them and rested his hands lightly on her shoulders. “Now, Gabby.” She fumbled behind her for the doorknob, but he slid his hand down her arm and tugged her away. “Look, whatever’s going on, do you really think it will change the way I feel about you?”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

What the hell was she hiding? He couldn’t think of anything that would make him hate her. “There’s nothing you can say that we can’t deal with.”

She raised her head and searched his face. “You really believe that? Haven’t you always suspected there’s something not quite right about...us? Maybe something too good to be true?”

A little niggle of foreboding twisted in his gut. He swallowed, but he wouldn’t back down now. “Christo,cara, what can be so bad? Is there someone else?”

She appeared shocked at the question, her eyes widening. “No.”

“Then what?”

Her shoulders slumped as she gave in, and there was that worry again. Maybe he

shouldn't have pushed her. She pulled away from him, and he allowed his hands to fall to his sides.

"Last night," she began, "at the theater. There was a man."

He cast his mind back. He'd been too focused on the fact that Gabby had finally given in and agreed to spend the night with him to take much notice of anything else. But yes, there had been a man in the shadows close to the stage door, someone tall and dark, but he hadn't noticed any more than that.

Gabby was nibbling on her lower lip, and her gaze kept straying to the door. "I remember," he said. "Who was he?" She'd already told him there was no one else. How bad could this be? Maybe she owed money and was ashamed...

She inched closer to the door. "His name is Luca Scarlesi."

Shock gripped him tight, held him still. He knew exactly who Luciano Scarlesi was—the head of the Scarlesi Corporation, the company involved in the hostile takeover bid last year. "You know him?" he asked.

"He's Theresa's brother."

"Your roommate?" So that was why the woman had been so shocked when he'd introduced himself that night. But was that his only connection to Gabby? "So he was waiting for Theresa last night?"

She shook her head. "He was waiting for me."

"Why, Gabby?" He took a deep breath. "What is your connection to Luca Scarlesi?"

"Luca paid me to go to Sicily." She spoke fast as though she needed to get the words

out and over with. “He sent me with instructions to get to know you and send back information about your company.”

For a second, the words made absolutely no sense. Then the fog in his brain cleared. A wave of coldness washed through him. He’d been so wrong. There were betrayals they could never get through. Never recover from.

It had all been a lie, after all. And he was a fool. “I need you to go.” The words were low, and it was all he could do to keep from growling. His eyes narrowed.

She appeared rooted to the spot, lips trembling. She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand. The icy cold was melting under the heat of his rising rage. “I really need you to go. Right now.”

A shudder ran through her, and then she turned, fumbled with the door, and was gone.

Chapter Twelve

“You want me to come with you?” Theresa asked, handing her a mug of coffee and taking the seat next to her at the kitchen table.

“No.”

“You want to tell me what happened with Vito?”

Gabby had a flashback to the feel of him inside her. Would she ever feel that way again? “Definitely no.”

“I am your best friend you know. These are the sort of details you’re supposed to share.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“Maybe one day.” Never going to happen.

“Humph.” Theresa didn’t sound impressed. “So are you sure you don’t want me to come with you.”

“No!”

“He is my brother. If he’s going to get a bollocking, I should be there.”

“He’s not going to get a bollocking.”

“Well, he should. This is all his fault. What a crazy half-assed idea.”

No, it was her fault. Yes, it had been a stupid idea, but she’d agreed to it. Maybe she had thought that Vito was the bad guy, but even so, as soon as she’d realized what sort of man he really was, she should have walked away instead of allowing herself deeper and deeper into the role. Instead of allowing herself to fall...

Don’t go there, Gabby. If you don’t say it, then it won’t be true.

She sipped at the coffee in the hope that a caffeine injection might somehow get her ready for the day ahead. So far it wasn’t working. She couldn’t get Vito’s final expression out of her mind. Betrayal. She’d hurt him, and really, she’d never meant to, hadn’t actually thought he would ever care enough for Gabby to hurt when he discovered the truth.

And she had her meeting with Luca to get through. Not that it was going to take long.

She was going to hand over the check to cover the money she had borrowed from him, and then, as far as she was concerned, the whole episode was over.

The show was moving to New York. She'd applied to go. A new city. A new life.

She'd be okay.

I will survive.

Hah.

"We never got around to talking about it," Theresa said, "but how did dinner go last night? Did Vito like your dress?"

God, she'd forgotten all about it with everything else happening. She huffed out her breath. "He did—it blew his mind." She took a sip of coffee. "I'm not so sure his father and stepmother appreciated it quite so much though."

"What?"

"Didn't I mention? Vito's parents joined us for dinner."

"That's...nice."

"And they're missionaries."

Theresa spluttered coffee over the table, and then put her mug down. "You're kidding me?"

"Nope."

“So the scarlet woman look might have been a little over the top.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“What were they like?”

“His father looked just like Vito, and his mother sort of looked like me but without the pink hair, the nose stud, and the scarlet whore dress.”

“Were they snooty and praising the lord the whole time?”

“Actually, after the first startled glance, they were nice. Too nice really.”

Why couldn't they have been horrible?

Then maybe she could have looked on the whole Vito fiasco as a narrow escape.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“That’s missionaries for you.” Theresa patted her on the shoulder. “All that niceness, though—they would have been hell as in-laws. Total murder.”

“Probably.” She sighed and took a sip of coffee. “I suppose it’s no wonder Vito grew up so perfect.”

“Hey, listen to me. No man is perfect. And your Vito is no exception.” She grinned. “It’s just your faults are a little more out in the open. But we love you for them.”

“Thanks.” But maybe she was right. Maybe Vito was hiding a whole load of issues under his smooth facade. She’d never know now.

“So, are you sure—”

“Yes! I’m going to see your brother on my own. I can deal with it.”

“Actually, I think he feels really guilty about the whole thing.”

“Good.”

However much Luca moaned about the way the D’Ascensios had nearly destroyed the Scarlesis, the family had actually done all right for themselves. They had a brand new office building, all chrome and glass, on the Isle of Dogs, which they had moved into a year ago. The company did everything from property development to film production. Luca had a flair for business.

He also had a lovely corner office on the top floor. His assistant knew her—she was a

second cousin or something—they liked to look after family—and let Gabby in straight away. She'd never been here before. The last time, when they'd discussed the deal, she'd met Luca in a dimly-lit bar—far more suitable for shady dealings.

The room was big, with floor to ceiling glass windows on three walls and a fantastic view of the city of London. Luca had his back to it, and was seated behind his huge black desk in his huge swivel chair. He got to his feet as Gabby entered, and looked at her at little warily.

“Are you alone?” he asked, though it must be clear she was.

“No,” she said. “I have Theresa hidden up my T-shirt waiting to jump out and give you hell.”

He grinned. “Already done. She's been on the phone to me every ten minutes. Bawling me out.” He came across, halted in front of her, and then wrapped his arms around her. “How are you, cara? I've been worried.”

The thing was she was sure he had been worried. In his own way, Luca had always been fond of her. He'd let her down very gently when she'd tried to seduce him at the tender age of eighteen. He'd been twenty-four at the time. She'd still never forgiven him, though with hindsight, it was just as well. They would have been hell together; they argued all the time. But at least Theresa would have been her sister for real.

She smiled at the memory.

Luca had gone on to marry a Sicilian girl who was connected somehow with the family. She'd been nice enough, but no match for Luca, and he was now divorced and a total playboy by all accounts. Or so Theresa told her. Gabby suspected that Theresa harbored renewed hopes in the sister-in-law direction.

Never going to happen.

She'd grown out of her crush, thank God.

Though, he was a good-looking guy, in a bad-boy sort of way. His midnight hair was overlong, there were tattoos showing beneath the rolled up sleeves of his shirt and a silver loop in one ear, and Theresa had told her he had a nipple ring. Ugh!

"Cara?"

She shook her head. "Sorry...daydreaming." She frowned. "Is it true you have a nipple ring?"

He grinned. "Si, you want me to show you?"

"No, I'll take your word for it."

"Come and sit down." He led the way across the office to a seating area with a black suede sofa and matching chairs, plus a coffee table. She sat back on the sofa and sighed, taking the cup of coffee he handed her.

"So, where have you been for six months?" he said, taking the seat beside her. "I was worried. I sent you after D'Ascensio. I got one message to say you'd made contact then nothing for a month until a final message saying it was over, nothing to report, and you'd be in touch."

She gave a little shrug and a smile. "And here I am."

"Over six months later."

She gave another shrug. "I hadn't done what you asked of me, and I didn't have your

money.” She put down her coffee and rummaged in her bag, pulling out the check. “I have it now.” She placed it on the table in front of her.

Anger flashed across his face. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me what you needed the money for?” He picked up the check and waved it at her. “If you’d said your mother was ill, I would have given you the money.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“Why? She’s not family. You’ve never even met her.”

“She’s your family, cara. And you’re mine. How could you not think we would help?”
He screwed up the check and tossed it in the bin behind him. “I don’t want your money.”

She frowned, but didn’t argue; she could send him another or do a bank transfer.

“Now,” he said, “according to my little sister, I owe you an apology.”

“You do?”

“I should never have sent you after that bastard D’Ascensio. But it was too good an opportunity. The girl I’d planned to use backed out at the last minute, and then you turned up, seeming to fit the bill in every way. How could I resist? And there was never any danger. And you know how to look after yourself. And you’re an actress and—”

“Enough,” she cut him off. “Forget it. It was a misjudgment on both our sides. Let’s leave it at that and forget it.”

He pursed his lips and studied her for what seemed like an age.

She twiddled her finger in her hair and waited for him to get to the point. Because obviously she wasn’t going to get away with this so easily.

“So, are you going to explain to me what the hell you were doing with D’Ascensio

last night?”

She shrugged. “Is ‘no’ an option?”

“What do you think?”

“Actually, I think it really isn’t any of your business.” And that was going to work—not.

“You’re joking aren’t you?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Not joking.” She picked up her coffee and finished it off.

“I sent you after him. Of course I’m responsible for whatever mess you’re in now.”

“I’m not in a mess.”

“Cara, your love life has always been one big mess. Hell, I should have taken you when you made the offer all those years ago. Kept you out of trouble.”

And what alternative universe was he living in?

She stared at him in complete amazement. “You wouldn’t have lasted five minutes.”

“Probably not. So, you and D’Ascensio. Spill. If he’s hurt you, I’ll kill the bastard.”

“I’m not hurt.” She crossed her fingers on her lap. “And there’s nothing to spill. He looked me up when he came to town, we had dinner a couple of times, and I won’t be seeing him again.”

“Did he know about our little deal?”

“Not back then.”

“But he does now?”

“I told him the bare details, and he’s not stupid.”

Luca sighed. “Then I guess I should probably expect to hear from him or his lawyer.”

She couldn’t really make herself feel sorry about that. This was at least partly Luca’s fault, after all. It didn’t seem fair he should get away with only a bollocking from Theresa. It had been a stupid plan. “Perhaps, but he’s also not the monster you made him out to be.”

“You like him?”

“It’s irrelevant.” She got to her feet.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

He stood as well. “You goddamn fucking like the bastard.”

She took a step toward him and prodded him in the chest. “None of your business.”

His face took on his pompous head-of-the-family expression, a little incongruous with the long hair, tattoos, and the earring. “You’re family. Of course it’s my business.”

“We’re not related.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re still family.”

In some ways his words made her feel all warm and fuzzy. Growing up it was all she had ever longed for, to belong, to be an accepted part of the Scarlesi family.

He took a deep breath. “Okay, we’ll leave it for now, but you still have my apology—I should never have involved you.”

“Never mind involving me. You should never have done it anyway. It was totally dishonest, and sleazy, and not fitting a Scarlesi. Not to mention childish.”

He grinned. “Again you’re right. But I did it for my grandfather’s memory. And I’d heard D’Ascensio was vulnerable and the opportunity seemed too good to miss.”

“Well, you’ll never get it again, so get over it.”

“No, maybe not.”

She picked up her bag. Time to go. She had a matinee that afternoon; maybe she could get a couple of hours sleep first.

She was heading for the door when Luca spoke again. “Gabby?”

“Yes?”

“I thought we might have dinner one night.”

She stopped and turned, and then looked at him. He appeared serious. “Did Theresa put you up to this?”

A smile twitched his lips. “No. But maybe it’s time.”

“Time?”

“Six years ago you were too young, and I had other plans.”

She was too tired for this. “And now I’m not too young and your plans have turned tits up.”

“That’s one way to describe my farce of a marriage.”

Her brows drew together. “Let me get this straight. You’re asking me out on a date?”

“Is that so strange?”

“It’s fucking surreal.” She shook her head and walked away.

He spoke as she opened the door. “Think about it.”

Not in this lifetime.

She learned her lessons. She might make a lot of mistakes, but never the same one twice. Falling for Luca was not something she planned to repeat.

“We’d make Theresa very happy.”

The words followed her out the door.

She was across the street when a dark car pulled up outside the building and Vito stepped out. She ducked into a doorway so he wouldn’t see her. It looked like Luca was getting that visit after all.

Rather him than her.

Her best bet now was to never lay eyes on Vito again.

But the thought made her chest ache.

...

“I still think this is a mistake.”

Vito glanced up as his lawyer spoke. He’d talked to Carlos on the way over here. The lawyer had told Vito to back off, not see the man in person, to let the law take its course. But he knew this was the quickest way to find out just how involved Gabby had been.

And he needed to know.

The sense of betrayal had struck him right in the heart.

He had no clue at that point who she really was, but one thing he was sure of—she was not, and never had been, his fantasy bride.

A fabrication.

More to the point, she was a fabrication brought into being by Luciano Scarlesi. He still couldn’t believe it—or that he hadn’t immediately recognized the other man last night. He’d been a huge annoyance over the year since Vito had taken over his

grandfather's legacy. Scarlesi had attempted to bring down the company at every turn. For a short while, until it had been proved an accident, he'd even considered that Scarlesi might have been behind the sinking of the cruise ship.

Once or twice, Vito had been tempted to go see the man, to tell him to get a fucking grip and put the half-a-century old feud behind him.

But to send Gabby in to spy on him...?

At that moment, the double doors opened, and a young woman walked out. "You can go in now, Mr. D'Ascensio."

Carlos stepped forward. "Come on, Vito, let's get this done."

As he stepped through the doors into the office, he tried to clear his head. He needed to be sharp here. He knew Luca Scarlesi by reputation, and the man was supposed to be brilliant, if a little unorthodox, in business.

He was standing at the far side of the office, staring out at the city below, hands shoved in his pocket.

Beside him, Carlos cleared his throat. Carlos had been a friend of his grandfather, and had been Vito's closest mentor through this last year. He was a tough old man, and his advice had always been to go head-to-head with the Scarlesis. It was the one piece of advice that Vito had ignored.

Luca Scarlesi turned around. His Italian blood was clear in his olive skin, dark eyes, and black hair. His face was clean of expression as he glanced between the two of them.

"You have five minutes. What is it you want?"

Carlos stepped forward—Vito had agreed that he would be the one to do the talking.
“What is your relationship with Gabrielle Harper?”

He raised a brow. “None of your fucking business. Next?”

Bastard.

“Did you employ Gabrielle Harper to supply you with information regarding my client?”

“No.”

Did Vito believe him? Hell, no. The man had a mocking smile on his face now, and Vito had to fight back the urge to punch him. He’d never in his life resorted to physical violence, but the need built up inside him, and he had to ball his fists at his side.

Luca strolled across the room and perched on the edge of his desk, arms folded across his chest. “Look, why don’t I save us some time?”

Great fucking idea.

“Go ahead,” Carlos said.

“I’ll tell you one thing and one thing only. Gabby gave me zero information about your client, or his business. Nothing. So leave her the fuck alone.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Vito's eyes narrowed. The man sounded almost protective. What was his relationship with Gabby? Perhaps he'd get Josh to look into it for him. But it was clear that Scarlesi wasn't going to reveal anything today.

"Let's go," he said to Carlos.

"Good idea," Scarlesi murmured. "Piss off and don't come back."

Vito headed for the door, but at the last moment he turned back and strode toward where the other man still perched on the desk. He came to a halt a foot away. "This is pathetic. You know that?"

Luca frowned.

"This whole feud thing. You getting worked up about something that happened nearly sixty years ago. Why do you even give a shit?" Luca opened his mouth, but Vito continued before he could get a word out. "The feud is over. As of tomorrow, there is no D'Ascensio Corporation. The company no longer exists."

"What?"

Obviously, Gabby really hadn't told him anything, as she was one of the few people to whom he'd revealed his ultimate plans. Did that make a difference? How could it, really?

"As of tomorrow the company is dissolved. All proceeds have been placed in a charitable trust."

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to. There will be a press release tomorrow. So get the fuck over it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Logan looked rough. Worse than rough, and Josh no better.

Vito should have been pleased that he wasn’t the only one having a hard time with his thing to do before he died. He clearly wasn’t the only one regretting the decision he’d made while floating in that lifeboat, drinking far too much scotch, and watching his multi-million-dollar ship sink beneath the Mediterranean.

Christ, he’d felt better back then than he did now. Why couldn’t he have left well enough alone? He would have gotten over Gabrielle eventually. She would have faded from his mind and become nothing more than a happy memory.

Instead, she was with him constantly.

He ran a hand down the scar on his cheek. Facing death had a way of changing how you thought. It made you consider how things could be different. But he’d been in pain, half-drunk, and his brain had clearly not been working the way it should.

Whoever’s stupid things-to-do-before-you-fucking-die idea this was, he should never have gone along with it.

He was seated in a booth opposite the two men, in Logan’s nightclub with a full glass of whiskey in front of him. Part of him craved the forgetfulness of alcohol, but he never allowed himself to get drunk, to lose that much control. That wasn’t who he was. Besides, he daren’t touch it. He was afraid the alcohol would loosen his inhibitions, and he’d go crawling to her and tell her he was sorry. Christ, she was the

one in the wrong, not him. He glared at Logan. This was his fault. If he hadn't been interested in buying the cruise line, Vito would never have been on that goddamned ship. He would never have nearly died. And he would never have made that stupid fucking vow.

"Things to do before you die...whose fucking idea was that, anyway?" Josh said, his mind obviously moving along the same lines. Throwing back the whiskey, he slammed his glass down on the table. Logan reached across and filled it from the bottle in front of him and topped off his own at the same time. He held the bottle up to Vito, but he shook his head.

"I think it was yours," Logan said to Josh.

Vito couldn't remember whose idea it had been. The night had been a fog by that point.

"Never," Josh said. "Not in a million years would I have put myself in this situation. Besides I had a broken leg at the time. Why would the two of you listen to a man who was in pain and obviously not thinking straight?"

Logan frowned. "I take it things are still not going well with your...wife?"

"Things are going shit. And I don't want to talk about it. I just want to drink."

"How about you?" Logan asked Vito.

"I'm not drinking. I have a gut feeling that drunk, I will make a decision that I will later regret. So I'm staying sober."

Josh eyed up Logan. "Give us some good news. How's your fantasy girl? Is she everything you dreamed of?"

Logan was silent for a moment; he didn't look like a man who had found the woman of his dreams. He drained his glass, and exhaled. "Nothing like I remembered."

"Sorry, mate."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Fantasies were merely fabrication. Look at him and Gabby. His fucking fantasy bride.

Logan shrugged. “Some things should be left alone.”

“Seems like we’re all fucked royally,” Vito said.

“Yup.” Josh agreed. “Let’s get pissed.”

Vito took a deep breath. “Fuck this.” He picked up his drink, swallowed the contents in one go and pushed his empty glass toward Logan. “Fill it up.”

Three hours later, he watched as Josh tried to push himself up, almost managed it, and collapsed back to the table. “I’m heading home. If I can get up. I need to call a cab.”

“I’ll get Mark to take you,” Logan said. He waved a hand, and the most enormous man Vito had ever seen walked up—tall and broad with tattoos crawling up his neck and over his shaved head.

“And I need to get back to my hotel,” Vito said.

Josh made another effort to get up, this time managing it. “Come back with me. Lexi likes taking in lost causes. You’ll be right at home.”

He thought about it for two seconds. He didn’t want to go back to his hotel alone. He might weaken and call Gabby. And say what? What was there to say? She clearly had no real feelings for him—otherwise she wouldn’t have found it so easy to lie.

Josh was in a worse state than him, lurching across the floor, holding on to Vito for balance. He couldn't ever remember being this drunk. Perfect fucking people didn't get drunk. He swayed and Josh grabbed him before he fell over.

"You sure it will be all right?" Vito asked. "Me coming home with you?" he added when Josh remained silent.

"Of course it will. The more the merrier. And I'll even introduce you to Prudence. She's this really hot chick."

Vito had presumed he hadn't meant a real chicken. Either he'd been wrong, or he was drunker even than he'd thought. Half an hour later, as he settled down to sleep on the huge sofa opposite Josh, he could swear that a chicken hopped up and settled on his chest.

A dream?

He was too tired to care.

Someone nudged him in the shoulder.

"Vito, you lazy bastard, time to wake up."

"Piss off," he mumbled. He lay there for a moment, hand over his eyes. He didn't want to wake up. He'd been having this dream about Gabrielle where she'd come to him, all prim and proper, and told him she'd made a mistake and that she'd decided to be his dream woman again and they could get married and live happily ever after. But as soon as she said that, he didn't want her anymore. He wanted Gabby. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He'd just been about to reach some really important conclusion when Josh nudged him.

Now he'd never know.

At least the chicken was gone.

If it had ever been there.

Finally, he lowered his arm and opened his eyes. A gold feather was stuck to his shirt. He looked away from it, and there was a woman sitting opposite—small, with a cloud of dark red curls around a heart shaped face. Sweet. He sat up and winced.

“Mi scusi, signorina. I didn't know we had company.”

“This is my wife, Lexi,” Josh said.

“Ah, much becomes clear.” It was obvious Josh had become enamored of his not-so-convenient bride.

She handed him a couple of painkillers and a mug of coffee, then sat back down. He swallowed them with a gulp of the hot liquid and relaxed back, waiting for them to kick in.

Today was the day that the last year's work officially came to an end. He should feel some sort of achievement, but he felt...empty.

Still, he couldn't put the day off forever. “You mind if I go wash up?” he asked Lexi.

“Of course. The bathroom is across the hall, the blue door.”

“Grazie.”

He stared at the stranger in the mirror. No one would call him perfect today. His hair was sticking up, his eyes were bloodshot, and stubble darkened his cheeks. He splashed his face with cold water, ran his hands through his hair and then pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called his driver.

When he got back to the sitting room, the air was thick with tension between Josh and Lexi. He was clearly interrupting something, and he needed to get out of there and leave them to it. He glanced between the two. “I’ve phoned my driver,” he said. “He’ll be here in a few minutes.” He stepped into the room, came to a halt in front of Lexi. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

As he turned to go, Josh jumped to his feet. “Can you give me a lift? I left my car at the office.”

“Of course.”

Lexi looked like she wanted to say something, but she bit her lip and kept quiet.

Josh turned to her. “I’m glad everything has worked out for you.” He strode to the doorway as though he couldn’t get out of there fast enough. “I’ll send someone over for my things.”

Josh definitely had feelings for his wife, but something was standing in their way. Vito turned from the now empty doorway and stared down at her. “Just tell yourself that he wouldn’t be running so fast if he didn’t care. And don’t give up on him.”

Him giving relationship advice. What a fucking joke.

The car was waiting at the end of the drive, through the wrought iron gates. He climbed into the back beside Josh, and the driver pulled out into the traffic. After five minutes of silence he glanced sideways.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Josh didn’t look okay. He looked like Vito felt—like shit. But he nodded.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Can you let me out here?”

Vito spoke to the driver and the vehicle slowed and pulled over. “Are you sure you’re okay? Come back to the hotel with me. We’ll get some breakfast...”

“No. I’m good. I need some fresh air, that’s all.”

“Okay.” He opened the door. “By the way, I like your wife.”

“So do I,” Josh said as he climbed out.

He watched as Josh walked away. It should be comforting that the others were also finding fulfilling their vows a disaster. But it wasn’t. He would have liked it if at least one of them wasn’t regretting their actions.

He sighed. He had to get through today, which would mean the end of an era, the end of the D’Ascensio Corporation and all it stood for. Then he could go back to his real life.

He’d get over her.

But he had a strange feeling that getting over Gabby would be far harder than getting

over Gabrielle had ever been.

If the ship hadn't gone down, if he hadn't nearly died, would he ever have gone after her?

He thought not. It had been easy to stay away. Whereas now, every cell in his body was screaming to go after Gabby.

Maybe before he went back to that real life, he could have one more look.

After all, she'd never know.

...

They halted at the stage door. Theresa rested a hand on her arm. "I'm going to go get a coffee and then catch the show."

"You don't have to stick around."

"Don't say that. I've bought a ticket. And I love this show. I'll come and see you at the intermission."

"Dave will let you backstage. I'll tell him you're a nurse. He has a thing about the medical profession."

"Lovely. Maybe I should have worn my uniform."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Theresa had come along to give her some moral support. Gabby knew her friend was worried about her. She couldn't cope with sympathy right now, but her acting abilities appeared to have deserted her for once—she was quite aware she was misery personified.

She decided to take her friend's mind off the whole Vito farce and distract her with something else. "Did you know Luca asked me out?"

Theresa went still, her eyes widening. "On a date?"

"Yup." She nodded and Theresa let out a little squeal of delight. She allowed her a moment of joy, then continued, "You know it's never going to happen, right?"

Theresa wrinkled her nose. "Why? He's obviously your type. And once you would have jumped at the chance."

"I grew out of that particular crush a long time ago. The whole 'best friend's brother' thing went to my head for a while."

Theresa gave her a considering look. "And you thought it would really make you part of the family." She gave her a quick hug. "But you are. You were from the moment your dad married Maria."

"Maybe."

"Nomaybeabout it. But perhaps you're right about Luca. I don't think I'd like to have to contemplate the two of you having sex. Ugh. Now go perform. The show must go

on.”

She nodded. And at least out on stage she could forget everything for a while.

On her way to the dressing room, she met Phillip, the producer, and he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Gabby, have you got a moment?”

She smiled—she liked Phillip, he was a good man to work for. “Of course.”

“You know the show’s moving to New York next month.”

“Yes.”

“Well, Sarah can’t come. Apparently, her husband doesn’t want her to. Crazy woman.” Sarah had one of the bigger parts in the show. Not the lead, but a lot of stage time. “I’d like you to take the part. We can start rehearsals tomorrow.”

“Wow.” She was amazed and a little confused. “Aren’t there others who’ve been with the show longer?”

He considered her for a moment. “You’re the best performer in the chorus line. Maybe the best in the show. You’ve just never pushed yourself for some reason. Well, now’s the time to decide if you want to make it in this business or not.”

“Thank you. I won’t let you down.”

At least it might take her mind off Vito and the mess of the rest of her life, and it would take her far away from him. Out of sight, out of mind. She didn’t really believe that, but it might make it a little easier, and maybe stop her from running after him and begging him to give her another chance.

She cleared her head of everything as she danced, throwing herself into the part. Had achieved a small measure of peace by intermission.

She glanced up as Theresa popped her head around the dressing room door then slipped into the room and came to stand beside her.

“Did you know he’s in the audience?”

“Who?”

“Vito D’Ascensio of course.”

Hope flared inside her, and she stamped it down.

“I saw him. He’s in one of the boxes to the right of the stage. All alone.”

Why had he come? Would he wait for her after the show?

The second half, she worked on autopilot, her attention straying to the audience, but she couldn’t see past the stage lights. Afterward, she changed quickly into jeans and a T-shirt and headed on out. Theresa was waiting for her outside the stage door. Gabby looked past her, searching the alley. She was one sad case.

“He’s not here.”

“I wasn’t expecting him to be.” But she knew that a part of her had hoped he would, if only to say good-bye. But really they’d already done that. Why prolong the pain?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“He left. I followed him. A car picked him up and drove him away.”

Suddenly she had to confront him one last time. Pain or not. “I’m going to see him.”

“You are?”

“I can’t leave it as we did. I owe it to him to explain. To apologize.”

“Go for it, girl.”

“You’re not going to tell me not to?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, then.”

Gabby hovered outside the door, trying to build up the courage to knock. She shouldn’t be here, but she’d needed to see him. Needed to apologize. Then maybe she’d be able to move on.

She’d come straight to his hotel from the theater, knowing that if she waited then she might lose her nerve. She didn’t even know if he was here or not. But she had to try.

As she procrastinated, the hotel room door opened. Her breath caught—but then released as she recognized Vito’s father.

He paused as he caught sight of her, and she waited for him to say something. Had

Vito told him? She chewed on her lip.

“What are you doing here, Gabby?”

So it looked like Vito had spoken to his father about her. Though what had he said? She'd called Luca up, and he'd told her he'd revealed nothing apart from the fact that she had never supplied him with information. At least that was one good thing. How much did Vito know? It wouldn't be hard to find the connection if he looked.

She licked her lips. “I came to apologize to Vito.”

“It might not be the best of times. He's not feeling too...fond of you right now.”

“I still have to do it.”

“You're a brave woman. And I believe whatever your reasons for meeting my son, you came to care for him. As he cares for you.”

“He doesn't really know me.”

“Of course he does.” He patted her arm. “Now go give your apology, but don't be surprised if he throws you out. Once he calms down, he'll appreciate the fact that you made the effort and faced him. He can be formidable.”

“Too right,” she muttered.

He smiled. “He has impossibly high standards for himself and expects the same of the people he loves.”

Except he didn't love her. She'd made sure that would never happen.

“Just don’t give up on him. He’s had a hard year, and perhaps learned more about himself and who he is than he really wanted to know. He needs time to digest all that. But he’ll come around.”

It wasn’t as though she had a choice. She watched as he walked away, and then she turned back to the door, took a deep breath, and rang the bell. It seemed like an age before the door opened and he stood there. Her breath hitched. He was so stunning.

His eyes narrowed on her. “What do you want?”

“Can I come in for a moment?”

“No.” Then he shrugged. “You might as well. I have a few questions for you. You owe me answers at least.”

It always seemed like she owed him something. She gave a quick nod, and he stood aside to allow her to brush passed him. She wiped her hands down her jeans and then wrapped her arms around her middle. He was looking at her as though he hated her.

His dad was right; she should have left this, given him time. “You came to the theater tonight.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

He shrugged. "I thought it would be a fitting way to say my good-byes. To see you act one more time."

"Oh." He was definitely bitter. She should have expected that. She stared at the room, finding it hard to believe that the last time she'd been here, she'd given him a blow job, and he'd returned the favor. It seemed a life time ago.

He didn't ask her to sit, and she shuffled her feet. Now that she was in here, she didn't know how to start. For once she hadn't rehearsed her lines. "I..." She rubbed her finger over her forehead trying to get her thoughts together. "I just wanted to come and say I was sorry."

He watched her out of cool eyes, arms folded across his chest as if to ward her off. "For what, exactly, are you apologizing? Your boyfriend didn't seem keen to explain."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Then who is he."

"My cousin."

Shock flashed across his face. "You're a Scarlesi?"

"Yes." She shrugged. "No."

"Which is it?"

“My father married Luca’s aunt when I was seven. So I’m not a blood relative. But Theresa is like a sister to me.”

“No wonder she looked so surprised when I told her my name.” He shook his head. “Cristo. You must have thought me a fool.”

She took a step toward him and then stopped. “No. Never.”

He stood for a moment considering her, then waved a hand at the closest chair. “Sit down. I want to know everything.”

But now that she had said her apology, she wanted out of there. She wanted to go home and lick her wounds in private, work out how she went on from here. “Is there any point?”

“Not really. Just call it curiosity. I would like to know how I was so easily duped.”

She was guessing his pride had been hit the most and that his feelings had never been particularly deep. She’d hurt him when she disappeared. Hurt his pride. But she did owe him, and nothing she said could harm Luca or his company.

She sank down onto the chair and pushed her hair behind her ears. “What do you want to know?”

He took the seat opposite. “Why not start at the beginning. How much did your cousin pay you to arrange to meet me?”

“One hundred and fifty thousand pounds.”

Shock flared in his eyes, and she suspected he’d still harbored hopes that he was wrong. Well, she wasn’t going to lie anymore.

“Obviously your skills as an actress don’t come cheap. And how did you do it? How did you turn yourself into my dream woman?”

She shrugged. “Luca had a file. He’d intended to do this all along—said your company was vulnerable at that time—but the woman he’d employed walked out on him. So he suggested I do the...job instead.”

“And you jumped at the chance.”

“Not exactly. Luca showed me a file on you. It gave details of all the women you’d dated. And I fit the profile. In looks at least.”

“So what sort of women do I usually date?”

“Nice ones.”

“So you turned yourself into the woman of my dreams, arranged to meet me, and sent back everything I said to your cousin to be used against me.”

“I never sent anything back. Not once I’d met you. It was clear that you weren’t the bad guy Luca had made you out to be.”

“So why didn’t you just back off? Leave.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“I don’t know.” But she did, and she wasn’t about to bare her soul to this cold, hard man.

“So was everything you told me about yourself a lie?”

“I didn’t lie about anything. I didn’t have to. The only lie was one of omission. I had really hurt my arm and lost my job. I was taking a break. All that was true.”

“Not everything was true. Your whole character was a lie. When I met you again, I couldn’t understand it. How could you have been so different? All the time in Sicily, you were playing a part. Acting like your interpretation of my ideal woman. Isn’t that the case?”

She nodded.

“I bet that was hard wasn’t it, Gabby. Pretending to be nice.”

“I’m an actress. It was an easy role.”

“And then I asked you to marry me. Why the hell didn’t you just say no? Why carry on with the farce?”

“I told you, I don’t know. I was playing a part, and I just got sucked in, and sometimes I forgot, and as time went on it seemed real.”

“Then you got cold feet.”

Freezing. She remembered the total panic that had engulfed her that night after he'd left her. "The whole thing was crazy. I couldn't believe I'd let it go so far, and I couldn't face you."

"So a coward as well as a liar."

"Maybe. But I couldn't tell you the truth. I might have decided that I wasn't going to tell Luca anything, but he is family, and I thought it might get him into trouble. The easiest thing was to just go. So I did."

"Leaving me that very eloquent note."

"Yes."

"Well, at least you were right about one thing. I didn't love you. The woman I loved doesn't even exist." He stood up. "You've apologized. Now, I think it's time for us to end this. Just go."

She pushed herself to her feet. "I knew deep down, all the time I was with you, that you could never love the real me. I wasn't good enough. But for a while, it felt nice to be loved. Even if it wasn't real."

He watched her steadily but didn't speak. It was over. She had to accept that. Shoving her shaking hands in her pockets she headed for the door. He hated her. With good reason.

She opened the door but then slammed it shut again and whirled around to face him. He hadn't moved.

"Have you never made a mistake?" she asked. "Done something you regret?" He didn't answer, so she answered for him. "Of course you haven't. Because you're so

goddamn fucking perfect.” She took a deep breath. “No you didn’t love me. And I doubt you’ll ever fall in love because you don’t want a real woman. You want some flawless image to match up to your own perfection. But guess what, Vito. You’re not without flaws. No one is.”

Without giving him a chance to answer—because really what more was there to say—she turned and left, making sure the door closed behind her before the first tear slid down her cheek.

Chapter Fourteen

He hadn’t been back to the theater.

It had been a gargantuan feat of will power.

Tomorrow he was heading home to Cambridge, but he didn’t think he could just walk back into his old life. Not now. He’d put out feelers for an alternative, somewhere far away. But he couldn’t get his head around it, really. Couldn’t focus on anything but Gabby.

The fact was she’d taken money to betray him.

But she hadn’t.

That was beside the point. She’d intended to.

And he couldn’t forgive her.

She’d said she hadn’t lied, but she had actually lied with just about every word that had come out of her beautiful mouth, every gesture she’d made. She’d pretended to be his ideal woman, wrapped him around her little finger like some sort of mindless

imbecile. He was a complete moron incapable of telling reality from fantasy.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

He'd told her he loved her. He'd never said that to any woman.

And the scary thing was, he'd believed it.

And it had all been pretense.

The real Gabby was nothing like the woman he'd proposed to on Sicily. He'd noticed that as soon as he'd met her again. But he'd concluded—totally incorrectly—that the first woman he met was the real one. The second had been acting a part for some reason he couldn't comprehend.

Because there wasn't one.

Christo, he didn't know anything anymore. Who he was, what he wanted. Except he wanted Gabby.

Or Gabrielle. He wasn't sure. Was one even more real than the other or had he yet to meet the real woman beneath the actress? He actually suspected that she was a mixture of the two. She said she wasn't nice, but he reckoned she was deluding herself. Gabrielle had to come from somewhere.

She'd seemed so broken when she'd walked out. But could he trust any emotion she portrayed?

The real problem was he'd lost his ability to trust his own instincts. And he was totally pissed off at himself for being so easily played. Maybe one day he'd forgive Gabby, but he doubted he would ever forgive himself.

And her words came back to him.

Maybe he expected too much of himself.

The hotel phone rang and he walked across and picked it up, glad of the distraction.

“Mr. D’Ascensio, this is the reception desk. There’s a Mr. Scarlesi here to see you.”

For a second he considered instructing him to tell Mr. Fucking Scarlesi to fuck off. But he was curious. What the hell could he have to say? Was it about Gabby?

“Tell him I’ll meet him in the bar in five minutes.”

He put the phone down. At least it would take his mind off the pathetic state of his perfect fucking existence.

He realized with a jolt of surprise that he was angry.

It wasn’t an emotion he’d experienced much in his life. But now he was angry with Luca Scarlesi for his part in this. With Gabby for being so mercenary. Though, it did occur to him to wonder why she was still sleeping on her friend’s couch if she had a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in the bank. Surely she couldn’t have spent it all already. He was angry with his grandfather just for being the man he was. But most of all he was angry with himself.

Fucking furious.

He wanted to hit something or somebody. So maybe a meeting with Luciano Scarlesi was just what he needed after all.

He found him in one of the plush dark leather booths that lined the walls of the bar.

He didn't stand up when Vito approached, just watched him and sipped his drink. Vito tagged a waiter as he passed and ordered a scotch. He felt like drinking. A lot.

He slid into the booth opposite Luca. "What do you want?"

Luca watched him over the rim of his glass a slightly mocking expression in his dark eyes. "I was just curious, really."

"Curious about what?"

The waiter placed his glass in front of him, and he picked it up and swallowed in one gulp, then ordered another.

Luca raised a brow. "My sister tells me Gabby...likes you. I just wanted to see what there is to like."

Gabby liked him? Of course she didn't like him. "If she'd liked me she wouldn't have fucking lied to me." The other man's lips twitched. So he found him funny did he? "Testa di Cazzo," he muttered not quite under his breath.

"What did you call me?"

"I called you a dickhead. You going to argue with that?"

"Hell, yes." But the other man seemed more amused than anything else. "You seem a little pissed off, D'Ascensio. Maybe you need to get over it."

“Fuck off.”

“What did she actually do that was so bad?”

“I asked her to marry me. She said yes, and all the time she was working for you. Fucking asshole.” The scotch was loosening his tongue.

“You asked her to marry you? No wonder you’re pissed off. No man likes to be made an idiot of.”

“Thanks for those words of support. But she’s a very good actress.”

“Yes, she is.” He gave a small smile. “You know, she tried to seduce me when she was eighteen.” He kissed his fingertips. “Mama-mia, but she was a beauty.”

“You’re lying.”

“Nope. Unfortunately, I was about to get engaged to a nice Sicilian girl at the time. Otherwise...”

Vito remained silent.

“I’m divorced now. Maybe it’s time to take her up on that offer.”

Red hot fury flooded his veins. “Don’t lay one slimy finger on her.”

“Well, clearly you don’t want her now and why would you? She made a fool of you.

Mind you, she did look hot in that red dress the other night. Maybe a man would overlook a little bit of humiliation for some of that.” He sipped his drink. “Okay, alotof humiliation.”

“Go to hell.”

“I asked her to dinner.”

She’d better have said fucking no.

“She said no. But I’m sure once she’s got over you, she’ll be more receptive, and it would make my sister very happy.”

“There’s nothing to get over. She was acting.”

Luca sat back, resting his arms along the back of the booth, watching him, a mocking expression on his face. He was trying to wind him up, but Vito had no clue why, or what the other man wanted.

“Did she tell you why she agreed to do it?” Luca asked.

“A hundred and fifty thousand fucking pounds.”

“But did she tell you why she needed the money?”

He’d presumed that she’d just liked the idea of all that money. Maybe he’d leaped at the idea she was mercenary, latched on to it because it made her easier to hate. And hating her was easier than loving her, when he’d told himself he couldn’t have her. Now his curiosity was piqued. What did Scarlesi know? “No.”

“She cracked a bone in her arm a month before. Couldn’t dance, and lost her dream

job. She has a brother—half-brother actually—my aunt is his mother. He’s a little bastard.”

“Must be the Scarlesi blood.”

He grinned. “Yeah. Anyway, he’s only seventeen, but he lost a shit load of money to people he should have had the sense to stay away from. Gabby used her savings to bail him out, but still owed more, with no way of paying.”

“So she did it for her brother.”

“Hold your horses. There’s more. Her mother got some sort of tumor thing. I never got the details, but she needed treatment she couldn’t get over here. Had to go to the States and pay an arm and a fucking leg. That’s where the money went.”

Vito sat for a moment digesting the information. His anger was rising again, and without giving himself time to decide it was a bad idea, he raised his arm, bunched a fist, and punched Luca Scarlesi in the nose.

The punch carried little power; it was difficult with a table between them.

“Hey, what the fuck was that for?” Luca said, glaring.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“You said Gabby is family and yet you took advantage of something like that and got her to do your sordid little spying job for you.”

“She was happy to.”

“Of course she wasn’t happy to. She needed the money desperately and you used that. Fucking bastard.”

This time he stood up, reached across, dragged Luca to his feet and thumped him again. The blow had more force and knocked Luca out of the booth. Unfortunately, Vito still had hold of his shirt, and he was dragged down after him as they both crashed to the floor.

Vito had never been in a fight before. Now, seemed a good time to have his first. He released his hold and came up on his knees. Drew back his fist—

“Hey, hold it.” Luca held up his hands palms out. Blood was trickling from his nose, and that made Vito feel good. He wanted more.

“I’ve already apologized to Gabby. I would have given her the money, anyway, but it gave her something to do.”

“Bastardo.” He got to his feet and took a step forward. He was going to kill the bastard.

“Whoa. Easy, boy.” Luca still sounded amused, and the blood in Vito’s veins boiled. “Well, at least we’ve established one thing.”

His eyes narrowed. “And that is?”

“You do still care about her.”

Of course he cared about her. You couldn't turn feelings off that easily. Or rather he cared about some construct of a woman who didn't exist. “The woman I care about isn't real. You made her up.”

“Gabby's about the realest person I know.”

What the hell was Scarlesi doing? The scotch was fogging his mind. “What do you really want?”

“Right now? To get out of here. You do realize you just started a punch up in the Savoy, and I'm betting the barman is calling the cops.”

Vito forced himself to relax and then glanced around. The place was quiet and it was early, but the few customers were all watching them, as were the staff. He lowered his arms and took a step back. Getting arrested right now would not be a good idea. Maybe they should go somewhere quieter, and then he'd beat the shit out of Scarlesi. “Let's get out of here.”

They came out on to the street and Luca turned to him. He'd grabbed a napkin off the bar as they exited and was dabbing the blood from his face. He looked at it in disgust. “I can't believe I let you get that second punch in.” He dabbed again. “I need a drink. You?”

He still had no clue why Scarlesi was here. And he wanted to know. Wanted to hear more about Gabby. Pitiful or what? “Why not?”

Ten minutes later they were seated in a somewhat less fancy bar, this time at a table

with a bottle of scotch between them.

Vito swallowed his first and then refilled both glasses. “So, you do realize that this whole vendetta thing is pathetic? Fucking pathetic. Like we’re some sort of mafia families and our honor is at stake.”

“Isn’t it? Your grandfather drove mine out of Sicily.”

“For Christ’s sake, it was nearly sixty years ago, and both of them are dead now.”

Luca grinned. “That’s what Theresa said to me.”

“At least all the Scarlesis aren’t complete idiots. Present company notwithstanding.”

“Everyone’s got to have an interest. I grew up with my grandfather telling me tales of the old country. It broke him, having to leave. Maybe I was doing it for him.”

“Get a life.”

Luca laughed. “Theresa said that as well. And I’m thinking about it.” He gave an exaggerated sigh. “If only Gabby will give me a chance. Another chance,” he added slyly.

It was as though he was trying to piss Vito off. Or maybe trying to make him accept something—his feelings for Gabby were far from dead. Just the thought of Luca setting a finger on her made him want to kick the other guy in the balls so hard he’d never think about sex again.

He didn’t want to talk about Gabby just then. Thinking about her confused him.

“Do you even know what started the whole vendetta thing?” His grandfather had

never told him. Just that he'd broken the partnership, left Scarlesi with nothing, then made sure the man would never work in Sicily again. In the end he'd had to leave in order to provide for his family. That was all he knew.

“I take it you don’t,” Luca said. “Your grandfather was probably too ashamed to tell you.”

“So you tell me.”

“He stole my grandfather’s betrothed. And not satisfied with that, he made sure he had to leave the country so his wife wouldn’t be reminded she’d once loved another man.”

“Really?” He liked the idea. It was sort of romantic. He hadn’t known his grandmother; she had died of some sort of complications in childbirth before he was even born. He’d never considered his grandfather a romantic, but he’d also never married again.

“Maybe we should fight for her.”

His brain was going fuzzy with the scotch. “My grandmother? She’s dead.”

“No. Gabby.”

“She wouldn’t have you even if you won. Anyway, I don’t fight.”

“You punched me.”

“So I did.”

“Let’s have a few more drinks, and then we’ll decide. Or maybe we could toss a coin.

Or go around and ask Gabby to choose.”

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s have another drink first.”

Many drinks later, he didn’t think he would manage to hit Luca even if the other man stood stock still. So it was probably a good thing that he didn’t plan on any more fighting that night. Didn’t plan on anything. Wasn’t sure he was capable of even getting up.

“So, what do you plan on doing about Gabby?” Luca asked.

“Mind your own fucking business.”

Truth was he had no clue.

Who was he punishing? Her or himself?

If he was punishing her, and he couldn’t remember what for now—oh, right, doing what she had to do to save her mother’s life—then why was he the one who hurt so damn much?

“You know she’s moving to New York?”

That got through the blur of scotch fogging his mind. “What?”

“Yup, so you’d better get your act together quick, or she’ll be gone for good.”

...

“I don’t want to play anymore. You cheat,” Gabby grumbled, slamming the cards on the table and picking up her glass. She peered into the bottom. “It’s empty. How the

hell did that happen?”

“Easy,” Theresa replied, emptying her own glass. “But also easily solved.” She pushed herself to her feet and shuffled into the kitchen, emerged a minute later flourishing a bottle of wine and a corkscrew. “Medicinal purposes only,” she said.

Gabby stared at the bottle for an age, then at the two empties beside it, and shook her head. The medicine wasn’t working, anyway. All she could think of was that last glimpse of Vito. And it hurt.

At that moment the doorbell rang. “It’s after ten. Who the hell can that be?”

“Ignore it?” Theresa suggested.

Gabby was still trying to decide—her brain really wasn’t functioning that well—when someone called through the letter box.

“Gabby!”

What the hell?

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

“What is my brother doing here at this time of night?” Theresa asked.

Then another voice. “Let us in, Gabby.”

Vito.

Vito and Luca. Together. Outside her door. Well, Theresa’s door actually. She looked at Theresa. “Should we just go to bed?”

“We love you, Gabby.”

Luca again. She couldn’t even imagine those words coming out of Vito’s mouth.

“They’re going to upset the neighbors,” Theresa muttered.

“Fair Gabrielle, let us in...”

“My brother is such an ass. Just wait here.”

She followed Theresa and peered into the hallway as she answered the door. When she opened it, Vito fell inside and Theresa had to step back. He picked himself up, brushed himself off, and looked up. His gaze caught hers and he went still.

Luca followed him inside, and the connection was broken.

“What the hell do you two want?” Theresa said. She sniffed the air around them.

“Shit, the pair of you are pissed.”

Gabby was sobering up fast. This was pretty surreal. Vito and Luca in the same room. She peered at Luca—his nose was swollen—it looked like someone had punched him. Theresa must have come to the same conclusion. “Have you been fighting?”

“He”—Luca waved a hand to where Vito stood still staring at Gabby—“hit me. Twice.”

“I’ve no doubt you deserved it, but why?” She shook her head. “Don’t bother with the explanations; I’m sure they wouldn’t make sense. What the hell are you doing here?”

“We’ve come for Gabby.”

She perked up at that. “What do you want me for?”

“You must choose between us. If you don’t, then we will fight to the death.”

Theresa turned to her. “I vote we kick them out and let them get on with it.” But her eyes twinkled. “Do you want that wine yet? I could really use a drink right now.”

No, she didn’t. She wanted her brain clear. Unfortunately, that was wishful thinking, and she could make absolutely no sense of any of this. Except that Vito was here and he was beautiful. And for some reason he’d punched Luca, which sort of hinted that he felt something. But what?

Actually, it might not mean anything about her at all. He probably hated Luca, as well. Probably not as much as he hated her—Luca hadn’t pretended to care.

But then, why was he here?

He was swaying slightly and put out his hand to the back of the sofa for balance.

He caught her glance again and shrugged. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I’m not sure how I got here.”

She was; this was Luca’s doing, but why? She peered over Vito’s shoulder, to where Luca stood, balanced against his sister. “Well,” he said. “Time to choose. Just remember I knew you first.”

She didn’t even bother to answer.

“I’m going to take him home,” Theresa said, pointing a finger at her brother. “Are you okay with...?” She nodded at Vito, who was still upright, though his eyes were closed, and he was swaying gently.

She waited until the door closed behind them, and then turned to Vito.

“Come on, sit down before you fall down.”

She led him around the sofa and pressed gently against his chest until he collapsed backward. He grabbed her hand as he fell.

“You’re an angel,” he murmured.

“No, I’m not.”

“No, maybe you’re not, Gabrielle...Gabby...whoever you are.” He was silent for a moment, his eyes closed and his long lashes shadowing his cheeks. She fought the urge to stroke a finger down over the scar. To comfort him. “Don’t go out with him.”

For a second, she had no clue who he was talking about.

“That asshole Scarlesi,” he supplied, blinking his eyes. “Don’t go out with him.”

“Why not?”

He gazed at her solemnly. “He drinks too much.”

Her lips twitched. “You want a coffee?”

“No. I want to sleep. I want to sleep with you watching over me like my own personal guardian angel.”

She wanted to tell him that wasn’t a good idea. But he rested his head against the sofa’s back, closed his eyes, and his breathing evened out.

She shook her head, and then crossed the room to the cupboard and pulled out a pillow and blanket. She threw the pillow on the sofa then knelt beside him, tugged off his shoes, and lifted his legs so his head fell sideways onto the pillow. She

straightened his legs, unable to resist the chance to touch him. She had no clue why he'd come here with Luca. Or why he was drunk. Vito never drank to excess. And yet here he was. This was a bonus, extra time. And once she tucked him in, she took the seat opposite and stared her fill, a little spark of hope igniting inside her.

She fell asleep watching the rise and fall of his chest.

When she woke he was gone.

...

“Happy birthday!”

It was a week since Vito had fallen into a drunken stupor on her sofa, and she hadn't seen or heard from him since. She could only presume he regretted the visit—he'd certainly made no effort to tell her otherwise. He'd slipped out while she was asleep in the chair. No note. He just disappeared.

And she'd heard nothing from Luca either.

The little spark of hope had faded. She'd been moving through her life in a fog of misery, throwing herself into rehearsals for the new part while still performing in the chorus line. It kept her busy and tired, and still she dreamed of Vito.

She'd actually forgotten today was her twenty-fifth birthday. That afternoon, she'd worked a matinee then come home and fallen asleep. She'd planned on a pizza in front of the TV and an early night. Instead, Theresa had told her to get her lazy ass off the sofa, into the shower, and into a dress. She was taking her out.

She'd expected a quiet dinner for the two of them, followed by dancing. Instead, the room was full of people. Scarlesis to be precise. It looked like the whole clan was

here.

Her father and Maria approached her. Her stepmother handed her a brightly wrapped present, and her father leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “Happy birthday, darling.”

She’d presumed, like her, everyone had forgotten her birthday. It had happened before.

“A quarter of a century,” Maria said. “We had to do something to celebrate.”

Tears pricked the back of her eyes. As they wandered away, she turned to Theresa. “Did you organize this?”

“Actually, it was Luca’s idea, and he’s paid for it all. I think he still feels a bit guilty. And so he should.” Theresa tugged her arm. “Come on, I ordered the best champagne, since Luca is paying. Let’s go get pissed. Family get-togethers always drive me to drink.”

Throughout the evening, she was smothered in hugs and kisses, and everyone had presents. She drank too much champagne and got maudlin and misty-eyed. At the end of the evening, as people were drifting away, she took a bottle of champagne and sat on the balcony with Theresa, their legs hanging over the edge.

“That was...nice. I love your family.”

“They’re yours as well.”

“I know. Well, most of the time I know, though I’ve always felt something of an alien in their midst. But tonight everyone was so...welcoming.”

“Aw, they love you, sweetie. They always have. You’re just too thick and stubborn to see it. And sometime they do have an odd way of showing it.”

“You mean like constant criticism.”

“It shows they care. If they didn’t, they would just let you do what you like. They want you to fit in, be more like us. But you’re one of a kind. That doesn’t mean they don’t love you.”

“What are you two up to out here?” Luca said from behind them. He looked smart tonight, and slightly sinister, all in black, more like mafia than the businessman she knew him to be. That reminded her of the whole vendetta thing, which reminded her of Vito, which made her sad and then angry.

“We’re just discussing how loveable I am,” she said.

Luca snorted, then dragged a chair over and sat down.

“It’s true, I am.” She’d never really felt that before. Her own mother had left her, and while she understood now, at the time it had had an enormous effect on her self-confidence. That in turn had affected her relationship with her stepmother. She had never disliked or resented Maria, but she had also never allowed herself to get too close, probably in case her stepmother walked away as well. So, she’d always held herself a little aloof from people. Except from Theresa who had made it impossible.

But maybe she was loveable after all. “And Vito D’Ascensio is a goddamned idiot if he doesn’t think so.”

“He is,” Theresa agreed, lifting her champagne glass in a toast. “A total idiot.”

So, she'd made a mistake. She'd had her reasons, and it was about time he got over it. But even if he did forgive her, she was still not the sort of woman he wanted to fall in love with. "But then, he loved goody two-shoes Gabrielle."

"He's obviously got no taste. Except you are Gabrielle."

"Not."

"Are."

"She's boring and nice."

"You're nice, too." Theresa studied her for a moment, head cocked. "You might not like to admit it, but there's a lot of Gabrielle in you. I'm guessing that's why you found the part so easy. You're both Gabby and Gabrielle. You're nice and you're crazy and that makes you interesting as well." She emptied her glass in one swallow. "And if that asshole can't see that, then he doesn't deserve you."

She was right. And maybe it was time Vito realized you don't always get what you want. "Yeah. In fact, I think I might tell him that. And if he doesn't like it, he can kiss my ass."

Theresa raised her empty glass. "You go, girl."

There was one problem. "Except he hates me."

"Hate's better than indifference," Luca said. "And I wouldn't be so sure he hates you."

"Of course, you would know. You are drinking buddies after all." She narrowed her eyes on him. "So have you heard anything from him since that night?"

He tapped the side of his nose. “That would be telling.”

“Has anyone ever told you, you can be really annoying?”

“Never.”

Liar.

So she was going to tell Vito that she was loveable. And maybe he’d believe her. And maybe he wouldn’t. But she wasn’t being a coward any longer. She wasn’t letting her old insecurities rule her life. At least she could say she had tried.

Except...two days later, she still hadn’t been able to confront him. She’d tried the Savoy, but he’d checked out days ago. She’d phoned his office in Cambridge, but was told he wasn’t expected in that week. She’d even taken the train up to Cambridge yesterday morning, but his house had been locked up and empty. She didn’t know where his parents were staying, so she couldn’t ask them.

It was all very well to have a plan. But extremely frustrating when you couldn’t even get started.

“Wake up,” Theresa said. At her cheerful tone, Gabby buried her head under the pillow. “Bugger off.”

“No.”

The duvet was ripped off her, and she sat up, teeth gritted.

Theresa held out an envelope. “This came for you in the post.”

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Gabby took it. The envelope was thick, cream, looked expensive. “What is it?”

“How should I know? But open it, or I will.”

She slid her finger along the seal then pulled out the card inside. “It’s an invitation to a dinner at the Ritz to celebrate the opening of the D’Ascensio Charitable Foundation.”

“Cool. You’ll get to see Asshat again.”

“It’s a mistake. The list was probably done before Vito found out about me.”

“Does it matter? You wanted to see him. Here’s your chance.”

“It’s on Friday.”

“That’s two days to perform a miracle.”

“What miracle?” she asked suspiciously.

“Have you looked at yourself recently? You’re a mess.” Theresa leaned across and patted her on the arm. “But don’t worry. I’m here to sort you out. Cinderella, you shall go to the ball.”

Chapter Fifteen

The party room was filling up, but so far no sign of Gabby.

Would she come?

Over the past few days, Vito had resisted phoning his new friend Luca and asking him to find out from Theresa. He had to have faith.

And if faith didn't work, and she didn't turn up, then he would just have to go and find her and drag her here. Tonight there would be no more running. It was time for them both to face up to who they really were and who they wanted to be.

Luca was already here, along with his sister, who kept casting him sideways glances as though she was holding herself back from coming over and saying...what? Sorry, perhaps.

Across the room, Luca raised a glass to him. He nodded back.

He was paying for this party himself as a thank-you to all the executives at the D'Ascensio Corporation who had helped him through the past year despite his plans to effectively take their jobs away. Now he looked around at the familiar faces.

He would miss the cut and thrust of business.

But it wasn't the life he wanted for himself. No, he knew what that life was and who he wanted at his side. He was just in no way sure she wanted the same thing. How much had been real for her?

He was aware she'd been trying to get in touch with him, and it gave him hope. He looked at the door again and cracked his knuckles.

Madre di Dio, where the hell was she?

"Are you okay?" his father asked, coming up beside him. "You seem a little

distracted.”

His father was going to take on the running of the charitable trust. He’d turned sixty this year and claimed he was getting too old for field work.

“I’m fine.”

But he wasn’t fine, because it was becoming clear that she wasn’t coming. He shouldn’t have left her this long, but he’d wanted to get his life sorted so he knew what he could offer her. Perhaps he should have just gone to see her and groveled.

Then the door opened, and she was there.

Would she be Gabrielle or Gabby tonight?

If he was honest, he’d admit he was greedy and wanted both of them, all wrapped in one pretty package. And, in fact, she was a curious mixture of both. She wore a black lace dress, demure except for the slit up the side. She’d had her hair redone, and the magenta pink glowed against the blonde. She wore a pink stud in her nose, and pink high heels.

She stood just inside the door, searching the room—for him?—and nibbling on her lower lip. Finally, she caught sight of him and went still.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

The party faded as she filled his consciousness. He strode toward her, ignoring the people who attempted to get his attention as he passed. Coming to a halt in front of her, he stared his fill.

Her expression was serious as she returned his gaze. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

He shook his head, trying to get his brain to function. “I wanted to give you some time.” He blew out his breath. “And maybe I needed time as well. But you came. Grazie. I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to.”

“I wanted you. You look beautiful, cara mia.”

He took a step closer and cupped her face with his hands, lowered his head and kissed her. If she was going to tell him it was over, that he was nothing more than a job to her, then he wanted this kiss first.

But she was kissing him back and all around him the room vanished, leaving nothing but Gabby. Finally, he came up for air and stared down into her face. Her lips were swollen, her lipstick gone and she was quite the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“Tell me just one thing,” she said.

His heart stalled. Anything, he’d tell her anything. “What?”

“Tell me you forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you.” He stroked a stray strand of hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “I won’t lie. What you did was wrong, and you hurt me. But Luca told me about your mother. You did what was necessary to protect the ones you love.”

She bit her lip. “So where do we go from here? I’m still not who you really want. You wanted Gabrielle. I’m just Gabby.”

He’d thought about this a lot in the time they’d been apart. “You’re not just anything. And you’re wrong. I thought I wanted Gabrielle, but I was playing safe. Going for the sort of woman I believed I needed. But maybe I had to lose Gabrielle to realize what I truly wanted.”

“What do you want, Vito?”

“I want you. All of you. I want a woman who challenges me, brings me to life, but at the same time makes me feel safe, as though I can face anything as long as you’re at my side. I want a fighter, someone who’ll stand up to me and tell me I’m flawed. You’re all that to me.”

“I am?”

He nodded. “And I know if I screw up, you’ll understand. You’ll forgive me and you’ll help me forgive myself.”

She sniffed. “Always.”

She still wasn’t giving anything away, still hadn’t told him how she felt. Had she come tonight to say good-bye? To tell him she was leaving, going to New York

without him. That it was over. He had to convince her to give them a chance.

Someone touched him on the shoulder and turned reluctantly.

His father stood at his side; Vito hadn't even noticed him approaching. He glanced from him to Gabby and smiled. "Gabby," he said. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to be here."

His father nodded to the front of the room where a small podium had been set up. "They're ready for you."

He didn't want to leave her, even to go just across the room. But maybe he could use this. Gabrielle, he'd kept a secret; he wanted the world to know about Gabby.

He leaned in to her, gave her a swift kiss on the lips. "I have to give a speech, but don't move. I'll be right back."

The room fell silent as Vito stepped up onto the podium. "Thank you all for coming tonight, and for your help over the past year." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He had one chance to get this right. "I had all sorts of things I wanted to say to you, but I'm going to leave that to someone who can say it much better—my father. But before I pass you over to him, there is one thing I would like to share.

"This year has been a time of change and self-realization for me. Someone I've come to care about deeply has taught me a lot about who I am and who I want to be, the sort of life I hope to lead. She's shown me that it's okay to make mistakes occasionally, and that forgiveness is a two-way street. But most of all she's shown me who I want to share my life with." Across the room, his gaze caught and held hers as he continued, "Gabrielle Harper, I love you. Deeply. Madly. Irrevocably. And, Gabby, know this...if you ever run again, this time I'll be right behind you."

Holding his breath, he stared down through the sea of faces to where she stood, eyes wide, hands clasped to her chest. He searched for a reaction. Some evidence that she returned his feelings.

Finally, she took a step forward, and it was enough. He jumped down from the podium and stalked toward her, the crowd parting for him. He came to a halt in front of her.

“I have something that belongs to you,” he murmured, pulling the small box from his pocket. His heart thumped as he flicked it open. She still hadn’t spoken, and he had no clue what she was thinking.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

She reached out a trembling hand and touched the diamond solitaire. It was the ring she'd left behind all those months ago when she'd run. He took hold of her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. "Back where it belongs." Then he took a deep breath. "Gabby, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She swallowed, then blinked. "Oh, I will, definitely, totally. And I'll be the best bride ever."

He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, whispering against her skin. "Cara mia, just turn up this time, that's all I ask."

She grinned. "I absolutely promise. Cross my heart."

He pulled her into his arms, then picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and headed for the door. A ripple of a cheer rose from the crowd all around them.

She thumped him on the back. "Hey, where are we going?"

"Does it matter? Just out of here."

"Isn't this your party?"

"My dad will deal with it. He's good at that. And we'll be quick, but there's something important we need to do."

"There is?"

“Yes.”

“And we can’t do it here?”

“We could, but we’d probably be arrested.”

“Oh.”

They were out of the main room now. Where to go? He looked around. Too many people. He hauled her along the corridor, one hand on her ass, halting when he came to a door that said, Conference Room 2. Pushing it open, he found the room blissfully empty. It was big, a table running the length of the room with chairs all around it. No bed, they would have to improvise.

No problem.

Kicking the door shut behind him, he shifted her in his arms so he held her around the waist, then whirled her around until he was dizzy. She was laughing as he put her down just inside the door. He loved the sound.

Mine.

It was sinking in—she’d said yes.

After locking the door behind them—he didn’t want anyone interrupting this particular conference—he turned back. “Gabrielle Harper you are mine. So is Gabby. And any other parts you play in the future.”

“No more parts, I promise. Unless I’m on a stage.” Her teeth nibbled on her lower lip. “Look, there’s something I haven’t told you but—”

“We’ll talk later.” She was about to tell him she was leaving London, but he already knew. “Wherever you go, I’ll follow. I’ll find a way.”

Enough words.

Pulling off his tie, he stuffed it in his pocket, then unbuttoned the jacket of his tux and shrugged out of it. He tossed it on the table behind him, went back to it, pulled the condom out of the inside pocket and tucked it into his pants pocket. He’d come prepared. Hopeful. When he looked back at her she was still standing there, still fully dressed, a faintly bemused expression on her face.

“Madre di Dio, you’re killing me, cara.”

Taking a step back, she looked him up and down, lingering on the growing bulge in his pants, so the rest of his blood supply drained to his dick. Her eyelids lowered, and she licked her lips. It looked like she was getting the idea—thank Christ.

“Hmm...I suppose we are engaged now.” Lifting her left hand, she waggled her fingers. “Did I ever tell you how much I love this ring?” She sighed dramatically. “How painful it was to leave it behind?” Without waiting for a reply, she reached up and pulled the pins out of her hair and ran a hand through it, tousling the waves. She turned her back to him. “Zipper.”

For a moment, he didn’t understand the word.

She peeked back over her shoulder, eyes twinkling. “Well, there’s no way we’re having sex with me in this dress. Not physically possible.”

At her words, his dick jumped in his pants, and the last of the tension drained out of him. Moving up close, he lowered his head, kissed the soft silky skin where her neck met her shoulder, and felt her shiver against him. His fingers found the tab beneath

her hair and slowly lowered the zipper. It went all the way to her ass, the material parting to reveal her golden skin. He trailed a finger over the smooth curve of her spine, the swell of her buttocks. Her back arched, and she made a low groan that had the blood boiling in his veins.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

All mine.

And soon he'd be buried deep inside. First, the dress had to go. He slipped the thin straps off her shoulders, gave a tug, and the material pooled at her feet.

She stepped daintily out of it and turned to face him. His breath caught in his throat: she was all but naked, wearing nothing but a black thong and her pink high heels. One hip thrust forward in a model's pose and he drank his fill, growing even harder, almost painful now. He cupped her face and stared down into her blue eyes. "I need you."

"I can tell." Her fingers grazed over his hard cock so he groaned low in his throat.

Tease.

"I know we have a lifetime together, but, cara mia, if I don't get inside you within the next few seconds, I might explode."

Her lips twitched. "We definitely wouldn't want that—very messy." She raised her face to his, and he took her offered lips in a deep, hot, wet kiss. He thrust his tongue inside, dancing with hers, until his senses were filled with the sweetness of her. He broke the kiss only to lower his head and suck one pink nipple into his mouth, flicking her with his tongue.

The last time they had made love, she'd been saying good-bye. Now, he was overwhelmed with the need to wipe that from both their memories.

He went down on his knees, kissed the ruby at her navel. “I like this.” His teeth tugged at the little ring, then he moved to her hip, his tongue stroking over the flower tattoo. “And this,” he said. Finally, he hooked his fingers in the lacy edges of the thong, dragging it down over her legs. She lifted each foot in turn, and he tossed the scrap of lace aside, leaning in to blow gently on the curls that guarded her sex. “And Ilovethis.”

“Oh God, Vito.” Her hips leaned in toward him, her hand curling around the back of his neck to hold him close, and he kissed her. Hands gripping her hips, his tongue snaked between her open thighs, pushing through the folds of her sex, finding the honeyed sweetness. She wanted him. That, combined with the taste of her, nearly drove him wild.

No more waiting.

He pushed to his feet, hands still on her hips, then picked her up. Her fingers dug into her shoulders as she wrapped her legs around his waist, and he backed her up toward the table.

Perching her on the edge, he kissed her mouth—hot, wild, needy kisses. “Tell me you want me. Tell me you need me...that you’ll never get enough of me.”

“Never.” Her hands clutched in his hair, and her legs tightened around him. “I’ll never get enough.”

Her fingers left his hair, and she reached behind him, pulled the condom from his back pocket, placed it between her teeth while she pushed a hand down between them, tugging the shirt out of his pants, sliding her palm over his belly. She groaned in frustration then found the button on his pants, flicking it open and lowering the zipper. With her other hand, she pushed his pants and boxers down over his hips.

The relief was huge, and then her hand wrapped around him and he was lost.

“Mine.” She echoed his earlier thought. “Allmine.”

“Forever.”

Need and want all coiled up inside him as she tore the foil open, tossed the packet to the floor, and then raised a brow as if she didn’t know what to do next.

“Faster,” he muttered. “You need to move faster.”

She gripped him in one hand while she rolled the condom down over his length. And finally he was ready. No more waiting.

“Tell me what you want,” she whispered.

“I want you. I love you, Gabby, Gabrielle...all of you.” Then he flexed his hips and was deep inside, where he belonged.

Heaven.

He just needed one more thing to make his fantasies come true. She still hadn’t said the words.

...

Vito loved her.

All of her. The good and the bad.

His eyes were closed, his face filled with a savage need that was almost enough to

make her come. Reaching out a hand, she touched her fingertips to his lips, and his dark lashes fluttered open, his eyes filled with desire.

Then he moved slowly, withdrawing from her, the movement an exquisite drag of skin against skin. He pushed back in until his body met hers, he was so close. His hands moved, sliding under her ass to bring her even closer and she felt the roll of his hips grinding against the sensitive point between her thighs.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am

Then again, and again, each thrust driving her closer. She'd expected him to be fast and wild, but he moved so slowly and purposefully, building the pleasure inside her until she was wound up so tight she knew she would shatter with one more thrust, one more grind. But still she climbed higher.

Her whole body was strung tight with need, then one final stroke of his cock and she was flying.

He did speed up then, holding her tightly as he pumped into her, his gaze never leaving her face as the pleasure built again, and this time he came with her, his head coming down, swallowing her scream with his kiss.

Finally, he went still, though she could feel the rise and fall of his breath, the beat of his heart against her.

He kissed her one last time and then straightened. "Thank you."

She opened her mouth to say something. Closed it again. She wasn't sure she could speak. Her body limp and boneless.

He grinned. "Have I rendered you speechless?"

She nodded. "I can't move. I may never move again."

"That good, huh?"

"Better."

He pulled out of her, and already she felt bereft, needing him back. Her body was still singing from the intensity of her release. She didn't want to return to the real world. And there was still something she needed to say. She wrapped her arm around his neck to stop him drawing away, then stroked a finger down over the scar on his cheek. "I came so close to losing you."

"I'm here now, cara. Forever, if you want me."

"Forever sounds good." Cupping his cheek, she stared into his dark, hopeful gaze, and spoke the words she knew he wanted to hear. "I love you, Vito D'Ascensio."

A smile blossomed on his face. "And I love you."

Epilogue

A year later

"Did you really need the handcuffs?" she asked.

Vito grinned. "I wasn't taking any chances, cara mia."

Last night, he'd cuffed her to the bed, and this morning, they'd been married at the church in the village where Vito had grown up. Vito's friends, Logan and Josh, had been their witnesses. And Vito's parents had been there along with the whole Scarlesi clan.

They'd had a magical year. She'd moved to New York with the show, and Vito had come with her. He'd made a swap with an American professor to take his place for a year. She'd been a great success in the show and been offered the lead in another in London starting in the autumn. So they were returning to the UK and would live in Cambridge. She was looking forward to it.

It had also been an incredibly busy year, and they'd delayed the wedding until they could both take time off to honeymoon in Sicily.

Now they were on Vito's yacht. He'd wanted to show her where the cruise ship went down. Where it had all begun. Wrapping one arm around her, he waved a hand toward the rocky shoreline. "That's where it happened. We sat in the lifeboat and watched as she went up in flames and then sank without a trace."

A shiver ran through her. "Were you scared?"

"No, there was too much going on. We had to get everyone to safety, and then Josh broke his leg. It was just a matter of keeping going."

She pressed herself closer. "You could have died."

"At one point I believed it was a possibility, and all I could think was how I would never see you again. Never know why you had run from me."

"And now you know."

"I certainly would never have guessed the truth. But I'll never regret how things happened."

"Me, neither. Maybe we both needed a reason to take a closer look at ourselves."

He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. "Perhaps this is what my grandfather wanted for me all along. You know, the day he died, when he made me promise to take over the company for a year, he told me he wanted me to have what he'd had. I thought he meant the power and the money."

“And now?”

“Now I’m not so sure. Do you know what started the feud between my grandfather and the Scarlesis?”

She shook her head.

“He stole his partner’s betrothed.”

Her eyes widened. “That was your grandmother?”

“It was. All for love. So be warned.”

“Warned?”

“That I’ll never give you up.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t let you. You’re mine now, Vito D’Ascensio.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “So you think your grandfather wanted you to find love?”

“I think it was more that he wanted me to find my real self. I always believed I knew the sort of man I wanted to be—a good man like my father.”

“You are a good man.” She sounded almost angry. He liked that.

“Maybe I am. But that’s not who I want to be, not really. I want to be the sort of man who goes after what he wants, who doesn’t let anything stand in his way. And I think

that's what Nonno wanted for me as well, because only then could I really fall in love."

"Aw, I bet he loved your grandmother so much."

"He wasn't one to talk of his feelings, but I'd like to think so."

They watched as the sun set, turning the sea to red and gold, and the air cooled. As Vito took the boat back to shore, the moon rose, reflecting silver in the darkening sea.

"So," he said as he lifted her onto the sand, "finally, my fantasy bride is my fantasy wife and back where she belongs."

She took his hand as they headed toward the villa. "I guess some fantasies really do come true—if we want them enough."