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ABBY GREEN

The Legend of de Marco



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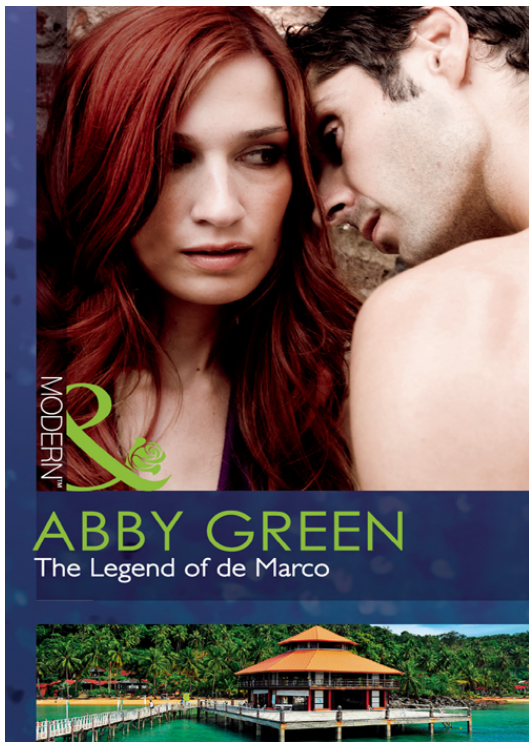
The Legend of de Marco

Аннотация

Rocco de Marco. Legendary financier and billionaire. The most important man in the room. And he'd just witnessed her filching canapés from the buffet... If waitress Gracie O'Brien's first meeting with Rocco is memorable, the second is unforgettable. For when he finds her breaking into his office he doesn't believe her innocence – so he'll keep her close until he finds the truth. Yet it's impossible for Rocco to stay angry with the sparky redhead – she's making him feel emotions Rocco thought he'd buried for ever... And the sexual tension between them is reaching explosion point!

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‘I’m going to make you mine over and over again, until you don’t even know who you are any more.’

Rocco was standing at the window of his bedroom with his back to the view of a faint pink dawn breaking over London’s skyline. His arms were crossed and he was looking warily at the woman sleeping in his bed, feeling as if he’d just been catapulted

back into reality after a psychedelic mind-altering experience.

Those words were reverberating in his head. When he'd said them to her he'd meant that he wanted to make her forget her own name because she'd made him forget ... *everything*. Who he was. What he was. Why he was.

About the Author

ABBY GREEN got hooked on Mills & Boon® romances while still in her teens, when she stumbled across one belonging to her grandmother in the west of Ireland. After many years of reading them voraciously, she sat down one day and gave it a go herself. Happily, after a few failed attempts, Mills & Boon bought her first manuscript.

Abby works freelance in the film and TV industry, but thankfully the four a.m. starts and the stresses of dealing with recalcitrant actors are becoming more and more infrequent—leaving her more time to write!

She loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her through her website at www.abby-green.com She lives and works in Dublin.

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The Legend of
de Marco

Abby Green



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This is especially for Haze, you're a doll. Thanks for being my friend since we were spotty teenagers with dodgy hair styles. Point Break Forever! x

CHAPTER ONE

ROCCO DE MARCO felt contentment ease into his bones as he took in his surroundings. He was in a beautiful room in a world-renowned museum, right in the heart of cosmopolitan London. It had been designed by a famous French Art Deco designer in the 1920s and drew aficionados from all over the world to see its spectacular stained-glass windows.

The crowd was equally exclusive: high-ranking politicians, erudite commentators, A-list celebrities and billionaire philanthropists who controlled the world's stockmarkets with a flick of a finger or the raising of a brow. *He* was in the latter category, and at the age of thirty-two was surrounded by hushed and awed speculation as to how he'd achieved his untouchable status in such a short space of time.

At that moment he caught the eye of a tall, elegant, patrician blonde across the room. Her glossy hair was pulled back into a classic chignon, and her haughty blue gaze warmed under his look. He did notice, however, that not a tinge of *real* colour came into those carefully rouged cheeks. She was dressed head-to-toe in shimmering black, and he knew that she was as hard as the diamonds at her throat and ears. She smiled and raised her glass to him in a small but significant gesture.

A sense of triumph snaked through Rocco as he raised his glass in a mirror salute. The prospect of wooing the immaculately

bred and oh, so proper Ms Honora Winthrop flowed like delicious nectar through his veins. His gut clenched hard. This moment was *it*. He was finally standing at the pinnacle of everything he'd fought so hard for. Never had he dared to imagine that he would be in such a position—hosting a crowd such as this, contemplating becoming an indelible part of it.

He was finally standing far enough above and away from the degradation of his young life in the slums of a poor Italian city where he'd been little more than a feral child. With no way out. He'd been spat upon in the street by his own father and he'd watched his half-sisters walk past him without a single glance at their own flesh and blood. But he *had* clawed his way out, with guts and determination and his infamous intelligence. And to this day no one knew of his past.

He put his empty glass on the tray of an attentive hovering waiter and declined another one. Keeping his wits about him was as ingrained in him as a tattoo on his skin. For a second he thought of the crude tattoo he'd borne for years, until he'd had it removed. It was one of the first things he'd done on his arrival in London almost fifteen years ago, and his skin prickled now at the uncomfortable reminder.

He shrugged it off and went to stake his claim on Ms Honora Winthrop. For a brief second a sense of claustrophobia rose but he clamped down on the sensation. He was where he wanted to be, where he'd fought to be.

Composing himself, and irritated that he felt the need to do

so, he found his eye snagged and caught by a lone figure. A female figure. He could see immediately that she was not half as polished or alluring as the other women in the room. Her dress was ill-fitting and her hair was a long, wild tangle of vibrant red. It suggested that there was something untamed about her, and it called to him on some deep level.

Rocco's mind emptied of its original purpose. He couldn't look away from the enigmatic stranger.

Before he had even registered his intent he'd veered off course and was moving in her direction ...

Gracie O'Brien was trying to look nonchalant. As if she was used to being a guest at glittering functions in London's most prestigious venues. When in fact she was more used to being a waitress ... in far less salubrious surroundings. The kind of places where men habitually pinched her bottom and said crude things about her lack of ample assets.

She gritted her jaw unconsciously, acknowledging that in today's economic climate a hard-won yet paltry art degree didn't count for much. She had a dream. But unfortunately to finance her dream she needed to work and to eat and survive. And the only jobs available to her right now were on the menial end of the scale.

She mentally shook herself out of the uncharacteristic introspection. She could handle the menial end of the scale. She couldn't handle *this*. She was clutching her bag to her belly. *Where had Steven gone?* She'd only come tonight as a favour

to him. Her mouth compressed. Tension gnawed at her in this kind of surroundings—along with the habitual anxiety she felt for Steven.

Gracie forced herself to relax. This annual charity benefit thrown by the company her brother now worked for signified a huge turning point in his life—which had to explain his moody humour and nerves lately. That was all it was. She had to stop worrying about him. They were twenty-four now, and she couldn't go on feeling responsible for him just because she'd taken on that role from as far back as she could remember, when she'd been the one who had inevitably stood between him and some bully. She still bore scars of the scrapes she'd been in, protecting her little brother—younger by twenty fraught minutes.

Their mother, before she'd abandoned them, had never let Gracie forget that her beloved son had almost died, while Gracie had had the temerity to flourish with rude health. Her mother's parting words to Gracie had been, *'I'd take him with me and leave you behind if I could—he's the one I wanted. But he's too attached to you and I can't deal with a screaming brat.'*

Gracie pushed down the surge of emotion she felt whenever she thought of that dark day, and sighed when she finally caught sight of her brother in the distance. Her heart swelled in her chest with love for him. Despite their abandonment, and so much that had happened since then, they'd always looked out for one another. Steven's inherent weakness had meant that even Gracie's strength hadn't saved him for a few dark years, but now he was

back on track.

Her brother had implored her earlier, 'Please, Gracie ... I really want you there with me. They're all going to have their wives with them. I need to fit in. Do you know what a coup it is to get a job with De Marco International ...?'

He'd gone on to wax lyrical once again about the godlike Rocco de Marco. So much so that Gracie had relented just to make him stop rhapsodising about this person who couldn't possibly be human because he sounded so perfect.

She'd also relented because she'd seen how anxious he was, and she knew how hard he'd worked for this chance. Long hours in prison, studying and sitting his A-levels so that he could get into college as soon as he got out. The constant fear that he would relapse back into his old drug-addicted ways. But he hadn't. Finally his uniquely raw talent and intellect was being used.

He was talking to another man. To look at Steven across the room, no one would even think he was related to Gracie. Steven was tall, and as skinny as a rake. Gracie was five foot five and her almost boyish figure caused her no end of dismay. Her brother was blond, pale and blue-eyed. She was red-haired, freckled and brown-eyed, taking after their feckless Irish father. Another reason why her mother had hated her.

She grimaced now, when her dress slipped half an inch further down her chest, exposing even more of her less than impressive cleavage. She'd seen it in a charity shop earlier and hadn't tried it on. *Big mistake*, Gracie grumbled to herself. The dress was at

least two sizes too big and trailed around her feet like her nan's dresses had when she'd been a child playing dress-up.

She gave up hope that Steven was coming to look for her, figuring he was too busy, and turned her back on the crowd to hitch up her dress. She faced a buffet table groaning under the weight of platters of deliciously delicate canapés and an idea struck her.

Happily engrossed in her task a few minutes later, she froze when a deep and sexily accented voice drawled from nearby, 'The food won't disappear, you know ... Most of the people in this room haven't eaten in years.'

The cynical observation went over Gracie's head. She flushed guiltily, her fingers tightening around the canapé she'd just wrapped in a napkin to put in her bag along with the three others she'd already carefully wrapped up. She glanced to her left, where the voice had come from, and had to lift her eyes up from a snowy-white broad chest, past a black bow tie and up to the most arrestingly gorgeous vision of masculinity she'd ever seen in her life.

The canapé dropped unnoticed from her hand into her open bag. She was utterly gobsmacked and transfixed. Dark eyes glittered out from a face so savagely beautiful that Gracie felt ridiculously like bowing, or doing something equally subservient. And she was *not* a subservient person. Sexual charisma oozed from every unashamedly masculine molecule.

'I ...' She couldn't even speak. Silence stretched between

them.

One ebony brow went up. ‘You ...?’

His mouth quirked, and that made things worse because it drew her attention there, and she found herself becoming even more mesmerised by the decadently sexy shape of his lips. There was something so provocatively sensual about his mouth. As if its true purpose was for kissing and only kissing. Anything else would be a waste.

Her face flaming now, because she was not used to thinking about kissing men within seconds of meeting them, Gracie dragged her gaze back up to those black eyes. She was aware that he was tall and almost intimidatingly broad. But it was actually hard to process the reality that the rest of him was equally gorgeous. His hair was thick and black, with one lock curling on his forehead. It gave him a devilish air that only enhanced the strong features which held a slightly haughty regard.

He carried an unmistakable air of propriety, his hands in his pockets with easy insouciance, and that realisation finally managed to dissolve Gracie’s paralysis. She contracted inwards, lowered her eyes. ‘The food isn’t for me ... It’s for ...’ She searched wildly for some excuse for her gauche actions and thought belatedly of what Steven would say if she was thrown out for this. Maybe she’d read this man all wrong? She glanced up again and asked suspiciously, ‘Are you Security?’

Even as the words left her mouth, and there was a clearly incredulous split second before he threw his head back to laugh

throatily, she knew she shouldn't have said anything. This man was no mere security guard.

The sting of embarrassment, the knowledge that she was utterly out of her depth in these surroundings, made Gracie retort sharply, 'There's no need to get hysterical about it. How am I meant to know who you are?'

The man stopped laughing, but his eyes glittered with wicked amusement—further raising Gracie's ire. She knew that she was reacting to the very peculiar effect he was having on her body. She'd never felt like this before. Her skin was sensitive, with goosebumps popping up despite the heat of the room. Her senses were heightened. She could hear her heart thumping and she felt hot—as if her insides were being slowly set on fire.

'You don't know who I am?'

Blatant disbelief was etched into the man's perfect features. Gracie amended that thought. They weren't actually perfect. His nose looked slightly misaligned, as if it had been broken. And there were tiny scars across one cheek. Another faint scar ran from his jaw to his temple on the other side of his face.

She shivered slightly, as if she'd recognised something about this man on a very deep and primal level. As if they shared something. Which was ridiculous. The only thing she shared with a man like this was the air they were currently breathing. His question and his incredulity brought her back to earth.

She hitched up her chin. 'Well, I'm not psychic, and you're not wearing a name tag, so how on earth *should* I know who you are?'

That gorgeous mouth closed and firmed, as if he was trying to keep in a laugh. Absurdly Gracie felt like smacking him and had to curb the flash of her renowned temper, which unfortunately *did* match her hair.

‘Who are you, then, if you’re so important that everyone should know you?’

He shook his head, any trace of humour suddenly gone. Gracie shivered again, but this time it was because she saw another facet of this fascinating specimen of maleness. Strange how in the space of just mere seconds she felt as if she was seeing hidden layers and depths in a complete stranger. Now he had a speculative gleam in his eyes. She sensed strongly that behind the easy charm lurked something much less benevolent—something dark and calculating.

‘Why don’t you tell me who *you* are?’

Gracie opened her mouth, but just then a man materialised between them and directed himself to the tall man/god, completely ignoring Gracie as if she was some random nobody—which, she needed no reminding, she was. But also as if he was used to inserting himself between women and this man—which was extremely irritating.

‘Mr de Marco, they’re ready for you to give your speech.’

Shock slammed into her. *Mr de Marco*? This man she’d just been ogling was Rocco de Marco? From the way Steven had described him and his achievements she’d imagined someone much older. And quite possibly short and fat, with a cigar. Not

this dynamic, virile man. She guessed him to be early thirties at the most.

The obsequious man who'd interrupted them melted away, and Rocco de Marco stepped closer to Gracie. Immediately his scent hit her, and it was musky and disturbingly masculine. He put out his hand and, still in shock, she lifted hers to let him take it. His eyes never leaving hers, he bent down and pressed a kiss to the back of her small, pale and freckled hand. Inwardly, even as her blood leapt to his touch, she cringed at how work-rough her hands must feel.

He stood again and let her hand go. He wasn't speculative any more. He was all hot and seductive. 'Don't go anywhere, now, will you? You still haven't told me who you are ...'

And then after a searing look he turned and strode away into the throng. It was only then that Gracie breathed again. Unable to stop herself, she took in the sheer masculine majesty of his physique. He stood head and shoulders above most of the crowd, who were parting like a veritable Red Sea to let him through. A broad back tapered down to narrow hips and long legs. Physical perfection.

He was Rocco de Marco. Legendary financier and billionaire. Some people called him a genius. Wildly her glance searched for and found Steven, who was looking raptly to where Rocco now stood on a dais, commanding the packed ballroom.

Without even knowing quite why it was so important to get out of there, Gracie just knew she had to leave. The thought of facing

that man again was frankly overwhelming. Her utter gaucheness screamed at her. The rough skin on her hands itched. Not one person in that room could be unaware of who he was. Except her. The sheer class of these people struck home—hard. The jewels the women wore were *real*, not like her cheap plastic baubles. She didn't belong here.

She thought of how the most important man in the room had witnessed her filching canapés from the buffet, and when she had a scary vision of being introduced to him by Steven she blanched. Steven would be mortified if Rocco de Marco mentioned it. He might even get into trouble.

That well ingrained sense of responsibility kicked in and Gracie did the only thing she could do. She ran.

Rocco de Marco regarded the profile about him in the newspaper's financial supplement with a disdainful twist of his lips. A cartoon depiction of his face made his features markedly more masculine and dark. A dart of satisfaction ran through him, however, when his eye went to the picture which had been taken of him with the glacially beautiful Honora Winthrop. He knew without arrogance that they looked good together—dark against pale. It had been taken at the De Marco Benefit in the London Museum the week before. The night he'd embarked on his campaign to seduce his way into respectable society for ever.

His smile turned hard at the thought of how eager Ms Winthrop had been to get into his bed. But so far he'd resisted her lures. He'd made the decision that night that the endgame would

be to make her his wife, and in pursuing that aim he wouldn't allow sex to cloud the issue. His smile faded when he conceded that it hadn't taken much effort on his part to resist her.

As if to taunt him, the image of a petite, sparky redhead inserted itself mischievously into his mind's eye. It was so vivid that it drove him up and out of his chair. He stood at the vast window of his office which overlooked London. The view went as unnoticed as the paper which had fallen to the floor with his abrupt move. Rocco's jaw clenched in utter rejection of that image and memory. And the extremely uncomfortable reminder that after his speech he'd not gone straight to Honora Winthrop's side but to look for the nameless stranger—only to find that she'd disappeared.

He could still remember his shock and surprise. No one—especially not a woman—walked away from him.

He didn't relish the fact that not once before in the fifteen years since he'd left Italy had he ever deviated from his well-laid plans—not even for a beautiful woman. She hadn't even been that beautiful. But she'd been *something*. She'd exerted some kind of visceral pull on him the moment he'd seen her across the room.

For that entire evening he hadn't quite been able to stop his reflex to look for her. It burned him to acknowledge that he was still thinking of those few seconds of what should have been an unremarkable meeting. Especially when he was on track to achieving the stamp of respectability which would forever put him in a sphere far, far away from his past.

In an uncharacteristic gesture of fatigue Rocco rubbed the back of his neck. He put his momentary introspection down to the recent security breach in his company. It had been quickly discovered and sealed off, but had made Rocco realise how dangerously complacent he was becoming.

He'd hired Steven Murray a month ago—as much on a gut instinct as anything else, which was not normal practice for him. But he'd been unusually impressed with the young man's raw eagerness and undoubted intellect, and something about the man had connected with Rocco on a deep level. So, despite the worryingly vague CV, Rocco had given him a chance.

Only to be rewarded just this past week by the same man transferring one million euros to an unlocatable account and disappearing into thin air. The party last week had been a high point—and now this. It was like a punch in the face to Rocco. A sharp reminder that he could never let his guard down for a second.

His skin went clammy when he thought of how the people he sought so desperately to be his peers would turn their backs on him in a second if he revealed himself to be vulnerable in any way. And if that happened how quickly Honora Winthrop's gaze would turn disdainful if he even dared ask for her hand in marriage.

For so long now he'd been in absolute control, and suddenly he was chatting up random women in ill-fitting dresses and hiring people on gut instinct. He was in danger of jeopardising

everything he'd worked so hard to attain. He was courted and fêted now because wealth made him powerful. It would be social acceptance that would secure his position for ever.

This chink in his otherwise solid armour made him wary. People were already curious about his past. He didn't want to give the hungry English tabloids any excuses to dig even further.

The fact that his security team had failed to find Steven Murray yet was like an irritating splinter stuck in Rocco's foot. He would not rest until the man had been found and questioned. And punished.

With a grimace at his own moody thoughts, Rocco turned from the view and picked up his jacket to leave his glass-walled office. Dusk was enveloping the city outside and the offices surrounding him were empty. It was usually his favourite time to work—when everyone had left. He liked the enveloping silence. It comforted him; it was so far removed from the constant cacaphony of his youth.

Just as he was almost out of his office the phone rang. Rocco turned back and picked it up. He heard what the person on the other end said and his whole body tautened. He bit out his words. 'Send her up to me.'

Tension kept Rocco's body tight as he walked to his lift and watched the numbers ascend. Someone was here asking for Steven Murray. There was a pause when the lift stopped, and in the split second before the doors opened Rocco had a prickling sensation of something momentous about to happen.

The doors opened to reveal the petite form of a woman dressed in a grey T-shirt, faded jeans, and what looked like a cardigan tied around her waist. Her form was lithe and compact, with small pert breasts pushing against the fabric of her top. A heavy coil of red hair lay over one shoulder, reaching almost to those breasts. Her face was pale and heart-shaped, her freckles stood out, and her eyes were huge and brown, flecked with gold and green.

Instant recognition, shock, and something much hotter slammed into Rocco as he reached in and clamped his hands around slim arms almost as if he had to touch her before doing anything else.

He breathed out incredulously. *'You!'*

CHAPTER TWO

‘YOU ...’ Gracie echoed faintly, still reeling after the lift doors had opened to reveal ... *him*. In a haze she asked, ‘What are you doing here?’

Rocco de Marco’s hands pulled her from the lift, forcing her legs to move and she heard the faint swish of the doors closing again behind her. Her heart was thumping, and shock choked her at being faced with this man again.

His hands were on her arms like vices. ‘I own this building,’ he ground out, dark eyes blazing down into hers. ‘I think the more pertinent question is this: why are *you* here, looking for Steven Murray?’

Dimly Gracie realised that he recognised her from that night they’d met a week ago. But there was no comfort in that. Adrenalin was pumping through her at seeing Rocco de Marco again, but from one look at his face she could take a wild guess and assume Steven was far away from this place. And in big trouble.

She couldn’t speak. She could only look up into the most arrestingly handsome features she’d ever seen for the second time in just over a week.

His grip tightened. ‘*Why* are you here?’

Gracie shook her head, as if that might force oxygen to her malfunctioning brain. ‘I just ... I thought he might be here. I

wanted to find him.’

Rocco’s mouth tightened into a flat line. ‘I think it’s safe to assume that Steven Murray is in any number of locations now—none of which are close to here if he’s got half a brain cell. He’s done what most criminals do: they go underground.’

Gracie’s heart stuttered at hearing her own fears so baldly spoken, but her innate protectiveness surged upwards even as her conscience protested. ‘He’s not a criminal.’

One of Rocco’s brows arched up. ‘No? Then what would *you* call stealing a million euros?’

If Rocco de Marco hadn’t been holding her arms then Gracie would have fallen down. *A million euros?*

‘What is he to you? Your lover?’ He almost spat the words out.

Gracie shook her head and tried to back away—a futile exercise while he still held her arms. Paramount was the need to protect Steven at all costs as she tried to assimilate this mind-boggling information.

‘I’m just worried about him. I thought he might be here.’

De Marco all but snorted. ‘He’s hardly likely to return to the scene of the crime. I don’t think he’s stupid enough to try and steal another million from the same source.’

Gracie felt trapped and claustrophobic, but fire surged up. ‘He’s not stupid!’

With a desperate wrench to get away that had more to do with this man’s intensely physical effect on her than anything else, Gracie finally freed herself from his hands and whirled around,

wildly searching for escape. She spotted emergency doors in the distance and sprinted, hearing a faint curse behind her. Just as her hands were about to touch the bar her shoulders were caught and she was twirled around, landing with a heavy thud against the doors. Rocco de Marco was glaring down into her face, hands either side of her head, effectively trapping her.

On some rational level Gracie knew she shouldn't have run, but the shock of hearing what her brother had done was too much. She realised now that she'd just made herself look as guilty as Steven.

As if reading her mind, Rocco de Marco breathed out and said in a chilling voice, 'You're obviously in this too—up to your pretty neck. The question is: why did you come back here? It must have been to get something important.'

She shook her head, her anger fading as fast as it had risen and leaving her feeling sick. 'Mr de Marco, I swear I'm not involved. I'm just worried. I came because I thought Steven might be here. I don't know anything.'

His face grew even harder and it sent a shiver through Gracie. 'You knew who I was last week when we met.'

It wasn't a question. She shook her head again. There was a quivery feeling in her belly at the thought of that meeting now. 'No ... I didn't. I had no idea. Until that man came and used your name.'

As if not even listening to her, Rocco de Marco said, 'You were there with Murray as his accomplice. You and he cooked

the whole thing up.’

Gracie just shook her head. It was throbbing with a mixture of anxiety and lingering shock. Rocco de Marco’s focus seemed to come back to her, and with something that sounded like a snarl he stood up straight and took her arm, ignoring her wince. He was frogmarching her back to the lift and Gracie panicked, having visions of police waiting for her downstairs.

She started to struggle. ‘Wait ... Look, please, Mr de Marco, I can explain ...’

He cast her a dark look as he punched a button on the lift. ‘That’s exactly what you’re going to do.’

Fear and trepidation silenced Gracie as he pushed her into the lift ahead of him, yet kept a hold on her arm, and pressed another button once they were in. Silence, thick and tense, swirled around them, and Gracie cursed herself for coming here in the first place.

Standing next to him in the lift, she had a very real and physical sense of the disparity in their sizes. Her head barely grazed the top of his arm. His tautly muscled strength radiated outwards, enveloping her in heat. Gone was any trace of the man who had oozed warmth and seduction the night they’d met. Evidently if you moved within his rarefied milieu you were accorded his attention. A few steps out of it, however, and it was an entirely different story.

Gracie did not need this situation to demonstrate to her that someone like Rocco de Marco would look right through her if he

saw her in her natural habitat. Her stomach twisted. She'd faced down many opponents over the years with plucky resilience, but for the first time she recognised someone who was immovable. And more powerful than anyone she'd ever encountered.

Oh, Steven, she groaned inwardly. Why did you do this?

He'd rung her earlier, and she could still taste the acrid fear in her mouth when he'd said, 'Gracie, don't ask any questions—just listen. Something has happened. Something really bad. I'm in serious trouble so I have to go away ...'

She'd heard indistinct noises in the background, and Steven had sounded distracted.

'Look, I'm going away and don't know when I'll be able to get in touch again. So don't try and call, okay? I'll e-mail or something when I can ...'

Gracie had clutched the phone with sweaty hands. 'Steven, wait—what is it? Maybe it's something I can help you with ...?'

Her heart had nearly broken when he'd said, 'No. I won't keep doing this to you. You've done enough. It's not your problem, it's mine—'

Gracie had cut in, with fear constricting her voice. 'Is it ... drugs again?'

Steven had laughed, and it had sounded a little hysterical. 'No ... it's not drugs, Gracie. To be honest, it might be better if it was. It's work ... Something to do with work.'

Before she'd been able to ask him anything else he'd said goodbye and cut her off. She'd kept calling his phone but it

had only answered with an automated message to say that it was out of service. With a sick feeling she could well imagine he'd chucked his phone. She'd gone round to the small, spartan bedsit that he'd been so proud of and found it trashed, his stuff everywhere. No sign of him. And then she'd remembered him mentioning work and so she'd come here, to De Marco International, to see if by some miracle he was sitting in his office.

But she hadn't even got that far. The minute she'd seen Rocco de Marco's face she'd known her brother was in serious trouble.

Gracie was so preoccupied that it was a moment before she realised they'd ascended and she was being walked out of the elevator and into what looked like a penthouse apartment. The stunning dusky views over London added a surreal touch to the events unfolding.

A huge full moon was rising in the beautiful bruise-coloured sky, but it went unnoticed as Rocco let her go and moved about, switching on lights which sent out pools of inviting warmth. Gracie shivered and rubbed her arms. The rush of adrenalin and shock had dissipated, leaving her feeling drained.

She looked around and was surprised to notice that the penthouse, for all its modernity, exuded warmth and an understated opulence. The parquet floor added an antique feel, and the heavy dark furniture stood out against the more industrial architecture, somehow working despite the apparent incongruity. Huge oriental rugs softened the austere lines.

If she hadn't been in such dire straits the artist in her would have longed to explore this tantalising glimpse into Rocco de Marco. Her eyes snagged on his powerful form as he bent and stretched. Her insides twisted and tightened—who was she kidding? Her interest in this man stemmed from a much more carnal place than an interest in aesthetics.

Rocco rounded on the petite woman who now stood in his apartment and curbed his physical response to that pale freckled skin and the wild russet hair which still trailed over one shoulder to rest on the curve of one small breast. The wild look in her eyes just before she'd sprinted away from him downstairs was burnt into his memory. It had touched something deep inside him. A memory. And he'd lost precious seconds while he'd been distracted.

She was nothing like the *soignée* beauties he usually favoured. Women renowned for their breeding, looks, intellect and discretion. Women who wouldn't have allowed him to lay a finger on them if they knew what kind of world he'd been born into.

Anger at his own indiscriminate response and something much deeper—a dark emotion which seethed in his gut as he thought of her as Steven Murray's lover—made him say harshly, 'You will tell me everything. Right here and now.'

When she flinched minutely, as if he'd struck her, he ruthlessly clamped down on the spike of remorse. She looked very pale and vulnerable all of a sudden. Rocco chastised himself. She was no quivering female. There was an inherent

strength about her that warned of a toughness only bred from the streets. He recognised it well, and he didn't like to be reminded of it.

He dragged out a nearby chair and all but pushed her into it. Her small heart-shaped face was turned up to him and his insides tightened. *Dio*, but she was temptation incarnate with those huge brown eyes and those soft pink lips. Displaying a kind of artful innocence. His instinctive reversion to Italian even in his head just for that moment surprised him. He'd spent long years doing his best to erase any trace of his heritage. His accent was the one thing that proved as stubborn as a stain, reminding him every time he opened his mouth of his past. But he'd learnt to embrace that constant reminder.

There was a long, tense silence, and Rocco tried to figure out what was going on behind her wide eyes. And then she looked as if she was steeling herself for a blow. 'What did you mean when you said Steven stole a million euros?'

Rocco opened his mouth and was about to answer when he stopped. Incredulous, he said, 'You have the temerity to *still* pretend ignorance?'

He saw her small hands clench to fists on her lap. He remembered how spiky she'd been with him that night at the benefit, and how intrigued he'd been by her. He remembered kissing her hand, the feel of slightly rough palms which had been so at odds with the soft skin of the women he was used to, and how it had sent a dark thrill through him. She must have known

exactly who he'd been and *they* must have been laughing at him all week. He burned inside. He hadn't felt so uselessly humiliated in years.

She'd seen him in a weak moment and he didn't like it. At all. He hadn't been weak since he'd left Italy far behind him, with its stench-filled slums and the humiliation he'd endured. Thinking of that restored Rocco's fast unravelling sense of control. With icy clarity he said, 'Who are you, and how do you know Steven?'

Gracie glared balefully at Rocco de Marco. He had the uncanny ability to make her feel as if you had no option but to comply with his demands. The man was like a laser.

'Well?'

The word throbbed with clear frustration and irritation. He was standing in front of her, hands on hips. His shoulders were broad under the white shirt, tapering down to lean hips. In the dim light he was like some beautiful dark lord. Heavy black brows over deepset pools of black. High cheekbones. A strong nose with that slight misalignment. And those lips ... full and sensual. The lock of hair she remembered still curled on his forehead, but even that didn't soften the taut energy directed her way.

Half without thinking Gracie said, 'I'm Gracie. Gracie O'Brien.'

His mouth took on a disdainful curve. 'And? Your relationship to Steven Murray?'

Gracie swallowed. She was afraid if Rocco de Marco knew

she and Steven were related he would expect her to know where he was for sure. She could feel the blush rising even as she formulated the words. She'd never been able to lie to save her life. 'He's ... he's an old friend.'

Rocco's eyes went to her mouth and he said mockingly, with a chill kind of menace, 'Liar.'

Gracie shook her head. Protecting her twin brother was so ingrained she couldn't fight it. And didn't want to. He'd protected her over the years as much as she'd protected him. Just in a different way. 'That's all he is. An old friend. We go back ... a long way.'

Rocco's mouth twisted and disgust etched his features into a grimace. 'You go back to a double bed in a squat somewhere.'

Gracie paled at the very thought. Bile rose. She shook her head more strongly. 'No. *No.*' She stopped short of saying *That's disgusting*, and closed her mouth. 'Really ... it's not like that.' She'd half risen out of the chair and her hand was out, as if that could reinforce her words. She sat back down abruptly.

Rocco folded his arms across his chest, but that only brought her attention to the awesome strength in his arms, the bunched muscles. She felt curiously light-headed all of a sudden, but put it down to the fact that she hadn't eaten all day.

'I'll tell you what it's *like*, shall I?' Rocco didn't wait for her to answer. 'You're Steven Murray's accomplice, and both of you were stupid enough to think that you could come back to the scene of the crime to recover something important. What was it?'

he continued. ‘A flash drive? That’s the only thing small enough to have escaped our searches.’

Before she knew what was happening Rocco was right in front of her, hauling her out of the chair. Amidst her confusion and shock Gracie was aware of the fact that his touch on her arms was light, almost gentle this time. The contrast of that touch to the fierce energy crackling around them made her even more confused. But he was squatting at her feet now, running big hands up her legs.

It took a second for the fact to register that he was frisking her. His hands were now creeping up the insides of her legs. She reacted violently, jerking away, hands slapping everywhere, catching Rocco’s silky head. He cursed and stood up, catching hold of her arms again with his hands. This time he wasn’t gentle.

‘You little wildcat. Hold still.’

Holding her captive with one hand, he quickly delved into her pockets with his free one and turned them out. The speed with which he moved made Gracie feel dizzy. Soon she was standing there with the linings of pockets sticking out and the disconcerting feeling of his hands probing close to her skin.

This time when she jerked back he let go, and she almost stumbled. She felt violated—but not in the way she should have. It was in some illicitly thrilling way.

‘You ...’ she spluttered. ‘I’d prefer to be dragged down to the police station than have your hands mauling me.’ A sudden realisation sliced through the frantic pulse in her blood and she

asked faintly, ‘*Have* you called the police?’

Rocco stood back. His face was flushed. With anger, Gracie had to assume, not liking the way her blood pooled heavily between her legs even as she struggled to concentrate. He had gone very still.

He shook his head and with clear reluctance admitted, ‘I haven’t called the police because I don’t want the news that I employed a rogue trader to get out. It could ruin my reputation. Image and trust are everything in this game. If my clients knew I’d jeopardised their precious investments I’d be finished within days as rumour and innuendo spread.’

For a second Gracie felt nothing but abject relief flowing into her veins, but the cruel smile on Rocco’s face made her blood run cold again.

‘Don’t assume for one second that not calling the police gives your lover a reprieve. Do you think an overworked police force or a fraud squad can be bothered looking for one man?’ He shook his head and crossed his arms. ‘I have people looking for Steven right now, and they have infinitely more sophisticated resources at their disposal. It’s only a matter of time.’

Fear constricted Gracie. ‘What’ll happen to him?’

Rocco’s face was hard. ‘*After* he’s returned every cent of the money? Then I will blacklist him from every financial institution in the world and hand him over to the fraud squad whilst protecting my own anonymity. He could be looking at ten years in jail. I have used my own money to bridge the gap caused by

his stolen funds. He owes me personally now.'

Gracie felt weak. She groped to find the chair behind her and sat down heavily. Her brother would never survive another day in jail. He'd told her fervently when he'd got out that he would prefer to die than end up there again.

Rocco frowned. For the first time this evening he could swear the woman in front of him wasn't acting. She looked like a car crash victim. He had to resist the urge to ask if she wanted a drink.

She was looking at the ground. Not at him. Rocco wanted to go to her and tip her chin up. He didn't like how disconcerted he felt not being able to look into her eyes. And then she did look up, and her eyes were like two huge dark pools, made even darker against the sudden pallor of her skin.

She opened her mouth. He could see her throat work. She shook her head and finally said, 'I can't ... I can't lie to you. This is too serious. I haven't told you the truth about Steven.'

Rocco felt the hardness return. He ruthlessly pushed down the weakness which had invaded him for a moment.

'I'm getting bored waiting for it. You have one minute to speak or I *will* hand you over to the police as an accomplice and deal with the consequences.'

Gracie's head was too tangled up with fear and shock for her even to try and persist in making Rocco de Marco believe she wasn't related to Steven. His casual mention of jail had decimated her defences completely. Any faint hope she'd been clinging onto

that there must be some kind of mistake had also gone. Gracie knew with a defeated feeling that Steven wouldn't have run if it wasn't true. He must have been trying to play for stakes way outside his league. Was that why he'd gone for the job in the first —?

'Gracie!'

Her feverish thoughts stuttered to a stop and she looked up at Rocco. Her name on his lips did funny things to her insides. For a moment she'd forgotten she was under his intense scrutiny. Illicit heat snaked through her abdomen, and in the midst of her turmoil she couldn't believe he was affecting her so easily.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up, her legs wobbling slightly. 'Steven is not my lover and I'm not his accomplice ... He's my brother.'

'Go on.'

Rocco's voice could have sliced through steel. He'd crossed his arms again and her gaze skittered over those bunched muscles.

Gracie shrugged minutely, unaware of how huge her eyes looked in her small face.

'That's it. He's my brother and I'm worried about him. I was looking for him.' She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want to let Rocco know that he was her *twin* brother. That information suddenly felt very intimate.

Rocco's jaw clenched, and then he said slowly, 'You expect me to believe that? After everything I've just witnessed and after I saw you at the benefit last week? You were both cooking up

this plan together.'

Gracie shook her head. 'No. It wasn't like that, I swear. I only went with Steven because—' She stopped. She couldn't explain about her brother's inherent insecurity and how badly he needed to fit in. And also she'd realised now why he'd been so abnormally anxious for the past few weeks—way more than she would have expected for new job nerves. She felt sick.

Rocco filled in the silence, 'Because you and he had a grand plan to do some inside trading and make yourselves a million euros without anyone noticing.' He emitted a curt laugh. 'For God's sake, you couldn't even help yourself stealing food from the buffet!'

Gracie flushed bright red. 'I took that food for my next-door neighbour. She's old and Polish, and always talks about when she used to be rich and go to balls in Poland. I thought they would be a nice treat for her.'

This time Rocco did laugh out loud, head thrown back, exposing his strong throat. Gracie burned with humiliation, her disadvantaged upbringing stinging like an invisible tattoo on her skin.

Rocco finally stopped laughing and speared her with those dark eyes again. Gracie fought not to let him see how much he affected her. It scared her, because ever since her mother had left them, and then their nan had turned her back on them, leaving them to the mercy of Social Services, Gracie had allowed very few people close enough to affect her—apart from her brother.

Becoming slightly desperate, she flung out a hand. 'I barely passed my O-level Maths. I wouldn't know a stock from a share if it jumped up and bit me. Steven is the smart one.'

'And yet,' Rocco went on with relentless precision, 'you were with him last week, flaunting yourself in front of me. You *knew* who I was.'

Gracie sucked in an outraged breath that had a lot to do with the memory of how transfixed she'd been by him that night. 'I was *not* flaunting myself. *You* came over to *me*.'

At this Rocco de Marco flushed a dull red, and for the first time Gracie had a sense that she'd gained a point. But any sign of discomfiture was quickly erased and his face became a bland mask again. Bland, but simmering—if that was possible.

Quickly, before he could launch another attack, Gracie admitted reluctantly, 'I was with Steven because he was self-conscious about going alone.'

Rocco's lip curled. 'I have yet to believe that you are even Steven Murray's sister. Why does he have a different surname?'

Gracie shifted uncomfortably and knew she must look pathetically guilty. She looked down. 'Because ... because he fell out with our father and took our mother's maiden name.' It wasn't entirely untrue.

'Not to mention the fact that you look nothing like him.'

Gracie looked up to see Rocco's dark gaze travelling up her body, over her chest to her face. She could feel the heat rising. 'No,' she snapped. 'I know I look nothing like him. But not all

—’ She stopped abruptly, realising she’d been about to say *twins*. She amended it. ‘Not all families resemble each other. He looks like my mother and I look like my father.’

She crossed her arms too, feeling ridiculously defensive, and knew it was only because for her whole life she’d wondered if she’d looked more like their mother would she have loved her the way she’d loved Steven? Would she have stayed?

The fact that she’d eventually abandoned them both was little comfort and a constant source of guilt for Gracie. She could still remember the long nights of hugging her brother as he’d cried himself to sleep, wondering where their mother had gone.

For a long time she’d felt it had been *her* fault, because her mother hadn’t wanted her. It was only with age and maturity that she’d realised their mother had had no intention of ever taking Steven—too wrapped up in her own problems and her own dismal world.

After a long moment of glaring at Rocco, Gracie could feel herself sway. Her vision blurred slightly at the edges. Just as she was inwardly cursing her own weakness Rocco emitted something unintelligible and came towards her, putting a big hand on one arm. She stiffened at his touch, hating the incendiary effect he had on her, but at the same time aware of how close she was to collapsing. Like some Victorian heroine in a swoon. *Pathetic.*

She tried to pull away, but to no avail.

Rocco said, from far too close, ‘When was the last time you

ate, you silly woman?’

This time she did pull free, and glared at him again. ‘I’m *not* a silly woman. I’ve just been ... worried. I didn’t think about eating.’

That black gaze swept up and down again and his lip curled. ‘You don’t seem to think about eating a lot.’

He strode away from her and Gracie watched him, half mesmerised by his sheer athletic grace. He flung over his shoulder. ‘There are some instant meals in the fridge. Follow me.’

Gracie felt seriously woozy now. Rocco de Marco was offering her *food*?

She tore her gaze away from six feet four of hard-muscled alpha male and looked to the apartment entrance, beyond which lay the private lift doors. Suddenly the distance to freedom seemed tantalisingly close.

As if he’d read her mind Rocco materialised again a few feet away, with hands on his hips, and said softly, ‘Don’t even think about it. You wouldn’t make it to the next floor before you were returned.’

Her heart stammered as she looked at him. ‘But ... I didn’t see anyone.’

Rocco winked at her, but there was no humour on his face. ‘Haven’t you watched any Italian movies? My men are everywhere.’

Gracie tried to reassure herself that he was just joking, but she had the very real sense that if she did try to leave some

faceless person *would* materialise and frogmarch her back to Rocco. She knew enough from the streets to know when someone meant business. And Rocco de Marco meant business. She was as captive as if he'd tied her to a chair.

He turned to walk away again and with the utmost reluctance, and yet an illicit excitement fizzing in her blood, she followed him.

It was only when Rocco was pressing the button on the microwave oven that a cold wave of realisation washed over him. What was he *doing*? Feeding the enemy? All because for a moment she'd looked as if she might faint at his feet? Her face had been so pale that it had sent a shard of panic through him, and as much as he wanted to deny it he had to admit that her shock had been almost palpable. And yet every instinct he possessed counselled him not to trust his judgement in this. He'd learnt early how women could manipulate. He'd seen his mother manipulate her way through life right up until she died.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Rocco willed the image away. His hands clenched on the countertop as he heard Gracie come into the kitchen behind him. Why the hell was he even thinking of that now?

He schooled his features and turned around. Something suspiciously like relief went through him when he saw that her cheeks were a bit pinker. Her big eyes were darting around the vast room and he welcomed the surge of cynicism. No doubt she was already calculating the worth of everything. That was what

he would have done. Years ago. Before figuring out what he could take.

The microwave pinged and he turned to take out the ready meal, finding a plate and some cutlery. He all but threw it down in front of her, then gestured to a stool and growled out, ‘You’re my only link to Steven Murray, and if you’re going to lead me to him then I don’t want you fainting away.’

Her eyes flashed at that, and her mouth tightened as if she was about to refuse the food. A shaft of desire he couldn’t control made Rocco clench his hands to fists. He hated her for his arbitrary response.

‘Go on. Eat.’

CHAPTER THREE

GRACIE chafed at Rocco de Marco's high-handedness. She hitched up her chin and tried to ignore the tantalising smell of food. Even that alone was making her feel weak again with hunger.

‘Are you going to leave it in front of me until I eat it? Like an autocratic parent?’

Rocco leaned forward on the other side of the counter and Gracie fought not to move back. ‘I’m no parent and I’m no autocrat. Just eat.’

Gracie looked down to escape that blistering gaze and saw creamy mashed potato and what looked like succulent beef pieces in a stew of vegetables. This was no standard ready meal—this was from a fancy deli. Her stomach rumbled and she went puce.

Defiant to the end, even as she gave in and pulled back the covering she said waspishly, ‘I might have been vegetarian, you know.’

She heard a noise that sounded slightly strangled, but wouldn’t look at Rocco for fear of what she might see. She started transferring the food onto the plate, hating being under his watch but too hungry to stop.

After a moment he said, with over-studied politeness, ‘Forgive me for not checking with you first.’

She cast him a quick glance and something in her belly swooped. He'd been laughing at her. She hurriedly looked away again and concentrated on the food. Once the first succulent morsel of beef hit her mouth she was lost, and devoured the lot like a pauper who hadn't eaten in weeks.

From out of nowhere a napkin and a glass of water materialised. Gracie wiped her mouth and took a long drink of water. Only then did she dare to look at Rocco again. He was staring at her, transfixed. She immediately felt self-conscious and wiped her mouth again. 'What? Have I got food somewhere?'

He shook his head. His voice sounded rough. 'When was the last time you ate?'

For a moment Gracie couldn't actually recall. She fidgeted with the plate and mumbled, 'Yesterday ... lunchtime.' But in fact she knew she hadn't really eaten properly in days.

'Where do you live?'

Gracie met Rocco's dark and hard gaze. Something in his demeanour had changed. He was back into questioning mode. And then the full reality of her situation flooded back. She flushed and avoided his eyes. She felt like such a pathetic failure at that moment.

'Gracie ...' he said warningly, and her insides flipped again at the way he said her name. It felt incredibly intimate.

She looked at him and squared her shoulders. She couldn't go any lower in his estimation, and perhaps if he knew just how harmless she was he'd let her go?

‘I lived in Bethnal Green until this morning. But I lost my job two days ago and they wouldn’t give me my wages. I couldn’t give my landlord the full rent today, so he suggested I make it up to him in other ways.’

Gracie shuddered reflexively when she remembered his sweaty face, grabbing hands and acrid breath. Before she knew it Rocco had moved. She felt her right hand being picked up and he was inspecting the grazed and reddened knuckles. She’d forgotten, and winced slightly because they were still tender.

He speared her with a glance, ‘You hit him?’

She shrugged slightly, more mortified than ever now. She hated her instinct to fight. She’d had it ever since someone had picked on Steven when they’d been tiny. ‘He was backing me into a corner. I couldn’t get out.’

Still holding her hand, Rocco said grimly, ‘I suppose I should consider myself lucky you didn’t aim a swing at me too.’

Gracie looked up at his hard jaw and figured she would have broken her hand if she had. He was standing very close now, still cradling her hand. Her belly clenched and a coil of something hot seemed to stretch from her breasts right down to between her legs. And as if on cue she felt a throb, a pulse coming to life.

She pulled her hand away and started babbling. ‘I left my cases at Victoria train station in the left luggage. I should go and get them and find somewhere for the night.’

She was off the stool and backing away now, as if she’d forgotten for a moment why she was there in the first place,

suddenly terrified at the weak longing that had sprung up inside her when Rocco had held her hand.

He continued to just look at her with his arms folded. 'I told you before that you won't make it to the next floor if you try to leave.'

Panic rose up, constricting Gracie's voice. 'You can't keep me here. That would be kidnap. I only came to Steven's office to try and find him. That's *all*. I really don't have an ulterior motive. I didn't take anything and I didn't know about the money.'

Rocco looked at the woman in front of him. Strange how his entire world had contracted down to her since he'd seen her in the lift. For a second that knowledge threatened to blast something open inside him, but Rocco reminded himself that she was providing him with the key to finding the culprit who'd had the temerity to think he could take advantage of him.

That was why he hadn't thought about anything else.

It had nothing to do with the fact that just a moment ago, when he'd held her hand in his and seen her bruised knuckles, he'd felt rage within him at the thought of some faceless man threatening her.

To divert his mind away from those provocative thoughts, he asked, 'Why did you lose your job?'

He could see her hands ball into fists. She was like a glorious feline animal, bristling and lashing out in defence, and a curious weakness invaded his chest. When he'd watched her eating ravenously he'd been mesmerised—first of all because he wasn't

used to seeing women eat like that, and also because it had reminded him of *him*. He would never forget what it was to be hungry.

‘I had issues with some of the customers.’

Rocco arched a brow and welcomed being forced to re-focus on the present. ‘Customers?’

She flushed pink. ‘I worked in a bar in a less than salubrious part of town.’ And then she said in a rush, ‘Just temporarily.’

Again Rocco felt a kind of rage growing within him—not at her, but *for* her. He could well imagine men finding her feisty allure something to challenge and harness. She was proving to be altogether far more of an enigma than she’d appeared that night just a week ago.

Out of nowhere, immediate and incendiary, Rocco had the desire to see her tamed and acquiescent, and he wanted to be the one to tame her. Sheer shock at the strength of that desire made Rocco blanch for a moment. Women like her should hold no appeal for him. It felt like a self-betrayal. Before she could see anything of his loss of composure, and wondering if he’d lost his mind completely, he strode forward and stopped in front of her, as if to prove to himself that he *could* stand in front of her and restrain himself from tipping her over his shoulder like some caveman. The surreal circumstances of their meeting and her connection to Steven Murray was causing this completely uncharacteristic response, that was all.

As implacable as a stone wall, he told her now, ‘You’re not

leaving this apartment until your brother—’ He broke off and swore for a moment. ‘If he even *is* your brother, is found and brought to task for his actions. Now, give me the ticket for your bags and I’ll have them picked up.’

Scant minutes later Gracie found herself being shown into a sumptuously decorated guest bedroom. She still wasn’t entirely sure how she’d allowed herself to be bulldozed into submission, but on some very secret level she felt so tired. For the first time in her life she was being subservient to someone else and she couldn’t drum up the energy to fight it. She had no one to turn to and nowhere to go—literally. An uncharacteristic wave of loneliness washed over her.

‘There’s a bathroom through there, with a robe and toiletries. When your bags come I’ll bring them to you.’

Gracie looked around with wide eyes gritty with fatigue. Rocco was striding towards the door and she envied his seemingly unstoppable force. If she’d known there was a chance she might bump into him again there was no way she would have ever attempted to go to her brother’s office. She sighed. Too late for regrets now.

Rocco turned at the door, filling it with his broad frame. ‘We’ll discuss where we go from here in the morning.’

Some sliver of fight sparked within her. ‘You’ll let me walk out of this apartment. Because if you don’t—’

He cut her off. ‘You’ll what? Call the police?’ He shook his head and smiled with insufferable coolness. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

I'm sure you don't want the police sniffing around your brother any more than I want the news leaked that I employed an inside trader.'

Silence grew and thickened between them. What could she say to refute that? He was absolutely right, and for deeper reasons than he even knew.

He inclined his head in a false gesture of civility. 'Until the morning, Miss O'Brien.'

The door closed softly behind him and Gracie almost expected to hear a key turning in the lock, but she heard nothing. Experimenting, she went to the door and opened it softly. She nearly jumped three feet in the air when she saw Rocco lounging against the wall outside.

'Don't make me lock the door, because I will.'

Wanting to avoid any further questioning or scrutiny Gracie closed the door again hurriedly. She moved like an automaton to the window and looked out over the spectacular view, seeing nothing but her inward turmoil.

It had always been her and Steven—even when their mother had still been with them. And then when their nan had taken them in until she'd declared she couldn't handle two children and had given them over to Social Services.

Their bond had been forged early, when their mercurial mother had cossetted Steven and treated Gracie harshly. One evening, when Gracie had been sent to bed with no dinner for some minor misdemeanour, Steven had crawled in beside her

with some food which he'd hidden for her. They'd been four years old.

Steven had always been a target for bullies with his weedy, sickly frame and his thick glasses, so Gracie had got used to stepping in with raised fists. He'd been preternaturally bright, and Gracie knew now if they'd grown up in different circumstances he might well have been nurtured as a genius student. As it was he'd constantly been ahead of his classmates, and yet had patiently and laboriously helped Gracie through the torture of maths and science.

It was thanks to him she'd managed to scrape enough marks in her exams for art college. Even whilst he'd been in the midst of drug addiction and had given up studying himself he'd still been advanced enough to help her. Her belly clenched now when she thought of how Steven had protected her from far worse things than inexplicable maths.

She leant her forehead against the cool glass, and even though her mind was churning with sick worry for her brother she couldn't get another face out of her head. A dark, compelling face with eyes so intense she shivered even now. And she couldn't stop a wave of heat from spreading outwards from her core, threatening the cool distance she'd protected herself with for so long.

Rocco looked at the two battered bags that had been delivered a short time before. One was a backpack and the other an old-fashioned suitcase. The kind you might see in a movie from the

1940s about immigrants leaving Europe for America. She'd left her flat with just *these*? Rocco was used to women travelling with an entire set of matching luggage, complete with personally monogrammed initials. But then he didn't need reminding that *this* woman was a world away from the ones he knew. He shook his head and picked up the bags. He'd long ago given up on the notion of sleeping tonight.

Opening the door to the guest bedroom silently, Rocco half expected to see Gracie standing on the other side, as obstinate and defiant as ever, but she wasn't. In the gloom his eyes quickly picked out a shape on the bed. Standing still for a moment, he registered she was fast asleep.

Putting down the bags, he felt compelled to go closer. Gracie was lying on top of the covers in a white robe. She was curled up in the foetal position, legs tucked under themselves, hands under her chin. Her hair flowed out around her head like something out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, the curls long and wild.

Everything in him went still when her head moved and she said brokenly, *'No, Steven ... you can't ... please ...'*

That brought Rocco down to earth with a bang. Once again it was as if she'd exerted some kind of spell over him, making him forget for a moment who she was and why she was here. She was a thieving, lying nobody and her brother had had the temerity to think he could abuse Rocco de Marco's trust.

Rocco stepped back and away from the curled-up shape on the bed, and ruthlessly clamped down on any tendrils of concern

or unwelcome desire. He vowed there and then that he would not let her go until he was satisfied that she *and* Steven Murray had been brought to justice.

When Gracie woke in the morning she had the awful sensation of not knowing where she was or what day it was. Her surroundings were completely unfamiliar and scarily luxurious. She was lying on top of a massive bed, in a robe. Slowly, it all came back. Leaving her awful damp flat after nearly being mauled by her landlord, getting that worrying phone call from Steven, and then coming to his office to see if he might be there.

And then she remembered coming face to face with Rocco de Marco. Gracie groaned and put a pillow over her face. *Rocco de Marco*. Her stomach cramped at the vivid memory of his hands around her arms, the way they'd felt when he'd frisked her. The intense excitement in her blood at seeing him again.

Groaning even more, she sat up and saw that the curtains were still open. She now had the most jaw-dropping views out over London, with the Thames snaking like a brown coil through the grey and steel buildings.

She turned away from the view and something caught her eye. She saw her two battered bags just inside the bedroom door. Her face grew hot when she thought of Rocco coming in while she lay sleeping.

Feeling seriously at a disadvantage, Gracie scrambled out of bed and dragged the bags over. She pulled out some jeans and a T-shirt and found her sneakers. After washing her face she

dragged her hair back into a knot at the back of her head and left the room.

The entire apartment was still and quiet. Gracie checked her watch. It was still early. Maybe Rocco wasn't up yet? But even as she thought that she got to the doorway of the enormous kitchen and saw him sitting at a large chrome kitchen table. Her heart stopped. He was reading the distinctively pink *Financial Times*. His hair was damp and slicked back from that strong profile. Skin gleaming dark olive in the morning light. Immaculately dressed in a light blue shirt and royal blue tie.

And then he looked up, after taking a lazy sip from a small cup which should have looked ridiculous in his huge hand but didn't. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning,' she echoed faintly, for all the world as if she'd been some benign overnight guest and not one step away from being locked in her room.

Rocco gestured with a hand to the kitchen. 'I'm afraid you'll have to help yourself. I'm currently without a housekeeper.'

Gracie tore her eyes away from his raw masculine appeal and helped herself to some coffee and toast, which was already laid out. She hated that her hands were shaking. Very little had ever intimidated her, but this did.

She stood awkwardly at the huge island in the middle of the room until Rocco said, a little impatiently, 'Come and sit down. I won't bite.'

Gracie gritted her teeth and reluctantly picked up her coffee

and plate and sat down at the other end of the table. She didn't miss his sardonic look. She felt very pale and washed out next to his vibrant masculinity.

She swallowed her toast with an effort and wiped away some crumbs, studiously avoiding Rocco's eyes, and nearly jumped out of her skin when he said, 'I spent a little time investigating your brother last night, and the full picture is very interesting.'

Gracie went cold inside and put down her cup. Frantically she rewound events in her head and froze. She'd told Rocco Steven's real name by revealing her own. She looked at him with wide eyes.

Rocco looked almost bored, but she could sense the underlying anger as tangibly as if he'd started shouting. 'He's got quite an impressive rap sheet. Three years in jail for carrying Class A drugs. Not to mention the fact that he forged papers to get a job in my company so we couldn't find out about his past. His crimes are mounting, Gracie.'

Feeling desperate, Gracie blurted out, 'He's not like that. He really was trying to make a fresh start, to use his intelligence and turn his life around. He did a degree. There has to be some good reason for what he's done—he wouldn't have risked jail again.'

Rocco was impossibly grim. 'I think a lot of people would agree that a million euros provides quite a good reason.'

Gracie sagged back into her chair and looked down at her pale hands. They were trembling and she clasped them together. Hot tears pricked at the back of her eyes. Rocco's mention of the

astronomical sum of money struck hard. She'd almost forgotten about it with everything else that had happened. How could Steven ever come back from this? He'd spend his whole life paying it back. And that was if he was lucky enough to get the chance.

She heard Rocco sigh but couldn't look up, terrified he'd see her emotion. He said with palpable reluctance, 'Nevertheless, I don't think you're about to phone him and tell him to give himself up?'

Willing the emotion down, Gracie looked up. Huskily she admitted, 'I did speak to him yesterday, but he wouldn't tell me where he was, or where he was going, and when I tried to call him back his phone was switched off. I think he's thrown it away.' She omitted to mention that he'd said he'd try to contact her when he could. Gracie vowed then that if that happened she'd tell Steven to stay away and never come back ...

Rocco stood up and held out a hand. 'Give me your phone.'

Gracie's mouth opened and closed. Feeling bullish now, she said, 'Why?'

Rocco's mouth tightened. 'Because I don't believe you. Because I think you'll make every attempt to get in touch with your brother and warn him to stay away. And because if he does try and contact you then we'll have him.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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