



With Every Breath
by Anisa Damien
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ISBN: 0-9773043-038-029
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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:
To Monica; My promise to you fulfilled. Miss you!

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PROLOGUE

Hell had no scorn like a man behind bars, Zacharias Bertram decided.

"I want him dead."

Bertram knew when Tariq Aziz was giving a reprimand and when he was one step from slitting a man's throat. He was betting that the thick steel bars between them wouldn't stop his wrath. Aziz was a man of many lusts and revenge was always at the top of his list. They had been allies for many years, yet Zacharias would never let his guard down. The distance between friend and foe was slim when it came to a business such as theirs.

Zacharias took a deep breath. "As do I."

Aziz scowled. "Make no doubt, that if Sebastien is not dead within then the next few days, you will take his place, Bertram. I was the one doing you a favor by holding him in prison and now, here I sit, my freedom robbed from me."

"So you think I delivered you to the government?"

Aziz folded his arms cross his wide chest. "You wouldn't be that stupid Bertram, especially when you were the fish they wanted to bait. You must find out who betrayed me."

"I did. He was one of your informants, Khalid Ihsan." Zacharias flicked an imaginary speck off his suit jacket.

"Ihsan? He was engaged to my sister." Aziz sat rod-straight in his chair.

"Yes, well...now he will have to wait in eternity to see her again."

Aziz shook his head. "Leila will just have to understand. Betrayal will not be tolerated." He looked the other man firmly in the eye. "You know what you must do."

Zacharias stood to leave. "Consider it done."

* * *

Lawrence Wellington grinned at the man he'd been waiting for stood at the table. The relaxed air about Gabriel Sebastien didn't fool him. He knew beneath that peacefully calm demeanor rested a skillfully trained

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lethal weapon. One, his secret ops group, Talon, had used over and over again. "Well, well. You are a sight for sore eyes."

Gabriel Sebastien looked down at his former boss, shook hands and sat down. "I was surprised to hear from you, Lawrence, especially when you know I've walked away from that life."

"But has that life walked away from you?"

Gabriel felt his senses kick to high-alert. In the nearly six years, he'd worked as an undercover CIA agent; he'd never known Lawrence to be too sociable. Something was wrong. The muscle in his jaw clenched. "What's brought you to New Orleans?"

The older man took off his glasses and glazed into Gabriel's stormy eyes. "Bertram is hunting."

His heart accelerated. "And?" His eyes darted about the sidewalk café and watched the people sitting around them.

Lawrence took a sip of his coffee and then gently settled the china cup down on its saucer, his gaze once again on Gabe. "Have you made your presence known to Cassidy?"

"No."

"Good, then now might not be the time or the place."

Gabriel leaned over the table. "I will not be intimidated, Lawrence or lured back into that life." He sighed. "I've lost too much already."

"Are you prepared to lose more?"

"If Bertram is looking for me; I'll be ready."

"You always were hardheaded Sebastien, ready to take on the world."

Gabriel chuckled, sitting back in his chair. "The world took me on long ago. I'm just catching up."

"What will you do about Cassidy?"

He scowled, his decision made. "Protect her to my last breath."

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CHAPTER ONE

Cassidy Raleigh felt anger bubble up inside of her as she gazed down at the muddy streak of earth and oil zigzag across her designer gown.

Damn it!

She didn't have time for this. She was already an hour late for the masquerade ball at Maision de Bayou Eclipse. Sage – her best friend – was going to kill her. She pushed air out her lungs, cursing the high heels and slammed the hood of her two-year old SUV; a model the car salesman had declared would be dependable.

Yeah right!

Cassidy dusted the motor oil off her brown hands as best she could. She wasn't a weak, dependent female. Despite the fact, that she was an heiress to a multi-million real estate fortune, helpless she was *not*! However, when her car had come to a complete halt on the deserted road, she'd popped the hood and oil had spewed out everywhere, and her frustration multiplied.

Despite the frantic call she'd placed to Sage; she now had her doubts if it had been a good idea, especially as her friend's solution to the problem was to send Gabriel – Cassidy's ex-husband to the rescue.

She didn't want him to rescue her. Hadn't she learned that lesson the hard way? Hadn't Gabriel proven unwaveringly just how undependable he could be?

"Hell, yeah!" came Cassidy's gruff response. She hadn't been happy when Gabe had interrupted her life two weeks ago, announcing to that her and all of New Orleans that he was back home – for the duration. A frown marred her pecan-brown face. What the hell did home mean to a man like Gabriel anyway? Heavens knew he hadn't been able to provide the stability in their home, or marriage for that matter.

She leaned her shapely hip against the door of her car, willed her demons from the past to diminish. Yet that strange ache she hadn't been able to rid herself of for the last three years nestled inside her. Too close to the surface. Almost suffocating her senses. She closed her eyes. It was over

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between her and Gabe. Finito! She told herself she didn't care that he'd moved back to New Orleans, that his six-four inch muscular frame and bedroom eyes moved her hormones in ways that could put a horny teenager to shame.

Damn the man anyway! She didn't need this aggravation!

Cassidy's eyes opened abruptly at the sound of a car slowing down. Her eyes widened, her heart sped up as the devil himself pulled up beside her and the passenger side window rolled down. "Wonderful!" she grumbled.

"You look like a woman who could use a ride." Gabriel's resonating voice filled her to the bone, coated with innuendo and that slow Southern charm.

Cassidy rolled her eyes, her breath caught as he hefted his tall body out of the Mercedes convertible and slowly walked up to her. He filled out the black tux to the point of distraction. Her mouth went dry.

Lord, no man has the right to look that good, like he was drizzling honey over iron-clad muscles.

Cassidy forced her eyes not to focus on the total package and looked Gabe in the eye. Those stormy gray eyes that reminded her of the many rainy nights she'd spent making love with him steal her soul - if she let him.

"Get it together, girl!" She chided herself. What the hell was wrong with her? They'd been divorced for the last thirteen months. No communication had been exchanged after the final divorce papers had been served. And now, she couldn't stop her hormones from taking a swan dive anytime he was within shouting range.

"You never have to me to help." Gabriel leveled her with a stern look that brooked no argument from the average person, but Cassidy knew better. She wasn't afraid of him or that deep voice he used as a lethal weapon against her sex drive. "You know I would have come anyway." He stopped mere inches from her, his curious eyes taking her in from head to toe, a slow smile tugged on his full lips. "You look like you had quite the battle, Cass." His eyes roamed over her again, lingering on the deep plunge of her neckline, at the swell of her full breasts. "Too bad, too, because that dress was a killer."

Cassidy watched his eyes darken as his gaze lowered on the high split of her gown. She made no move to cover her exposed skin. "I'm not your responsibility anymore."

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"It has nothing to do with responsibilities between us, Cass and you know it." His voice turned rough. His eyes burned into hers.

She couldn't tell if it was anger or desire or a little of both. Her pencil-thin eyebrows quirked upward. "Well, be that as it may, the car won't start and I -" She looked down at her ruined dress. "-don't have time to go home and change."

"Don't worry about the dress. I have another in the car." Gabe moved past her to lift up the hood, his smooth, calming cologne wafted through the air, causing Cass's head to fog with memories.

She shook her head, staring at him. "You don't even know what size I wear."

His head came up abruptly, his heated glare settled on her with warning. "I know every nook and crevice of your body, Cassidy Sebastien."

She sucked in her breath. Hadn't she known Gabe would try to have the last word? Like always. "It's Raleigh." She managed to croak, her eyes met his. "I went back to using my maiden name after the divorce."

Gabe didn't respond as he slammed the car hood closed, the loud thud ending the brooding argument between them. "We'll send for your car later."

Cassidy didn't argue as she grabbed her purse, locked her car door and shimmied herself into his sports car. Within minutes they were off, as she tried not to get lost in the sheer magnitude of Gabe's presence but found herself inhaling the sexy stirrings of his masculine scent. His chemical aroma was powerful, just like the man himself. She watched quietly as his large hand covered the clutch and the muscles in his long legs stretched as he maneuvered the car through the dark streets. She remembered that same movement anytime she'd straddled him in bed and he'd lifted his taut hips to thrust deep inside of her body.

It seemed like a lifetime ago. Yet, with Gabe just a touch away, time lapsed and she felt her body grow aroused, her pussy throbbed for something she'd been denied for a long time: his touch.

Her legs turned into mush. Her brain befuddled with lust. How could this be? The man hadn't been a fleeting thought until he'd visited her restaurant. Now, she found herself at a disadvantage. She was lusting over a man who could never be hers again. She briefly, wondered if he'd ever been hers. She turned her head quickly, dismissing her wayward

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thoughts. She had to get herself together and fast. She looked down at the dress shrouded in the garment bag.

"So Sage loaned the spare?"

Gabe turned to face her; a knowing smile covered his lips. "No ma'am." He chuckled. "It's a little something I picked up."

"What? You didn't have to do that. I don't want you buying me things, Gabe." She stated adamantly. "That part of our life together ended long ago."

"So we have to hate each other?"

Cassidy sighed. "Look, I don't think I need to explain this, but since you want to go there, we don't have to hate each other. But I refuse to play this game with you."

"Game? What game do you think I'm playing?"

"Apparently, you think blowing into town and announcing your great return is supposed to undermine the life I've made for myself."

"Cass, I have no intention of undermining a damn thing. I wanted to be upfront with you."

She couldn't stop the words before they were out her mouth. "Like you were when we were married?" The silence that loomed between them only enhanced her regret and refueled her resolve to ensure her sanity and to be out of Gabriel's presence as rapidly as she could. She slumped back into the soft leather seat. "I just want it clear that I have no intentions of going back."

"Back?" He grumbled; his voice strained with anger.

Before Cassidy could respond, they pulled up to the valet quarters. A young man opened her door. "Welcome to Maison Bayou de Eclipse, ma'am."

She turned back to ex-husband but he was already walking to her side of the car. Grabbing her clutch and the dress, Cassidy felt the heat emanating from his body without looking up, but she did and what she saw amazed even her. Hurt splintered in his eyes and made her feel small. Hesitantly, she took his hand. "Gabe, I -"

But he pretended not to hear her as the booming sound of the ongoing party inside the two-story Georgian style mansion turned bed and breakfast, loomed towards them. The opportunity was gone to clear the air between them, just as it had been over a year ago when he'd left on what was suppose to be his last mission. The end of their marriage.

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Cassidy excused herself and made a mad dash to the ladies room to change, knowing the sooner she distanced herself from the seething giant beside her the sooner she would regain her composure. She be damned if Gabriel would leave her at a disadvantage ever again.

It was funny just how donning a costume could change a man, Gabriel Sebastien thought sullenly as he sampled the expensive champagne in his glass. The mask he wore resembled some sort of bandit. The penguin suit felt more like a noose. He could only think of a handful of occasions in which he'd worn a tux. He would rather be somewhere with a cold beer, in his standard worn blue jeans. But he hadn't been able to turn down the invitation hand delivered to him, by Sage Vachon, his ex-wife's best friend, and surprisingly, still a friend of his as well, despite the outcome of their marriage. Guilt consumed him and his ex-wife would never have any idea how much.

His wife? He sighed. After two years he still hadn't been able to stop thinking of Cassidy as his. It felt as right as it had the day he'd slipped the two carat princess cut diamond ring on her finger in front of their closest friends and family in a small chapel.

Mon Dieu!

How naïve he'd been then. To think that love was enough to heal everything. It hadn't been able to heal the pain he'd caused Cassidy – he'd seen it in her eyes and each time, he'd wanted to reach out to her. Make love to her. Time hadn't changed his body's response. A hundred years could pass and his reaction to her sensual beauty would be fast, hard and unrelenting.

He wanted a chance to make it right between them. But how?

Gabriel felt her presence before he turned his head. His mouth went drier then laying under the sun in the Sahara. Did she really think that he wouldn't know her? Body and soul. His eyes crept slowly over Cassidy. His cock hardened with an intense desire to claim her, to bury him self into her until they found a way past their differences and cling to each other.

His fingers tightened around the empty champagne glass as he envisioned his hands on her, being inside of her and watching her call out his name as she reached her climax.

The flesh colored organza gown, with lace décolleté, fit her curvy angles like a glove and contrasted beautifully against her rich brown skin – just as he'd known it would.

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She descended slowly on the stairs. Her hair piled high on her head, seductive brown eyes enveloped under a lacy mask and sweet, red coated lips glistened under the skylights.

Before the end of the night, Gabriel would have her again.

His eyes stalked her as every man in the ballroom, turned appreciative glances at Cassidy. He gritted his teeth. It did something to him to know that other men wanted what every fiber of his being still felt was his. His dick certainly didn't know the difference.

"You've got it bad."

Gabriel turned to look down into the pretty face of Sage Vachon. Her laser-like hazel eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the innocent look on his face. Gabe was no fool; Sage had always been able to read him, since they were children. She'd been his sole female child friend and in turn had become Cassidy's best friend. He returned her smile.

"You always could read me like a book."

Sage smiled, dimples appearing on her heart shaped face as she shook her head, deep brown curls cascaded over her shoulders, the red gown only enhanced her ebony beauty. She placed the mask over her face, made of lace and intricate little pearls made her feminine features appear whimsical. "As if you were ever that complicated, Gabriel."

He quirked his eyebrows upward, and chuckled. "Not for a smart, beautiful woman like you Sage."

She laughed, linking her arm through his. "Yes, do go on."

"I see you haven't lost your modesty."

"Nor you, with your charm, brotha'."

They laughed.

Soon Gabe found his eyes back on Cassidy as she turned to talk with a man, who couldn't stop touching her. He tensed; the sight was one that he would never grow accustomed to witnessing - another man touching the woman who could make his body pulse just from a mere smile.

"You still love her, don't you?"

He looked down into his friend's concerned gaze. "You know I do."

"You fucked up, Gabe."

"I know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

He shook his head, his gut twitched. "She doesn't want me here."

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"I wouldn't be too sure of that." Sage bit down on her lip. "I shouldn't say anything."

"What do you know?" He scrutinized the conflicting emotions on Sage's face.

"You really hurt her."

Gabe turned to face the woman he loved like a sister. "I want to make it up to her."

"I know you do, but sometimes you can't go back."

"Is that what she told you?"

Sage shrugged her shoulders. "You know, Cassidy. She wears her feelings on her sleeve. You never have to guess for long what she's feeling."

Gabe thought back to their exchange in his car. "Ain't that the truth."

Look, I don't want to see either one of you hurt, but I also know there's a lot of love between you two."

His head snapped up. "You said "between the two of us" are you telling me that Cassidy still loves me?"

Sage looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. "I've said too much - "

Gabe took her hand and pulled her into a deserted corridor. "Sage, you and I have never kept secrets from each other. Not even about my job."

She hung her head, her eyes shooting sparks. "And I feel guilty every day that Cassidy doesn't know about your assignments, Gabe." She placed her hands on her hips. "For God's sakes, she was married to James Bond."

"Not quite."

"Don't underestimate the danger that emitted from your position in the CIA, Gabe. I worried about you and when Lawrence called to tell me that you were taken hostage in that terrorist compound I -"

He closed his eyes willing that bleak, dismal time to evaporate from his mind. The scar tissue on his body was memory enough.

Gabe reopened his eyes, tortured. "Sage, you didn't tell Cassidy, did you?"

She pursed her lips. "No, but I should have. You could have died, Gabe."

He smiled. "But I didn't."

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"Well, then maybe I should finish you off myself. You have no idea what hell Cassidy and I went through for a year and a half not knowing what had happened to you, whether you were alive or" Her voice broke with emotion.

Gabe held her hand. Sage's family had been good to him, an orphan, her father had taken him as and raised him into the man he was today. Sage and he were devastated when he died several years ago. Sage was his only family, until Cassidy had entered his life.

"I never wanted either one of you hurt; you know that, don't you?"

Sage wiped the tear from her face. "I know, but Cassidy doesn't. Gabe, she thinks that you abandoned her."

He grunted. "It's a small price to pay. The people I was dealing with could have hurt her or you. I couldn't let that happen." He shook his head as if the answer was as clear as day. "No, the less you both knew, the better."

"Your secrets come at too high a cost."

Gabe's gaze bored into hers. "A price I'm willing to pay if it means having you both safe."

"She deserves to know the truth."

His gut clenched in agreement. He didn't like lies and as far as he was concerned liars were the worst breed of scum on earth.

Gabe frowned; he never thought he'd see the day that he'd be amongst their ranks. He'd made his livelihood from being one identity to the next. Somewhere he'd lost the man inside and he knew exactly where he would start on him.

He turned from Sage.

"Where are you going?"

It's time I pay for my mistakes – whatever the cost."

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CHAPTER TWO

Cassidy inhaled the fresh scent of new blooms in the garden. She loved Maison de Bayou Eclipse. There was no other place in the world like the Big Easy. Her city. Her ancestors had helped build it, escaping the slave revolts in the West Indies. Her family lineage heralded a line of adventurous, thrill-seekers and rebels. She smiled in the moonlight, following the paved path to a section of the garden that she and Sage often visited during their escapades together. She was happy to be outside, away from the laughter and active festivities in the old mansion.

Despite, how happy she was for her friend and her successful venture of turning the mansion into a bed and breakfast; Cassidy hardly achieved more than a stiff smile on her face. She wasn't the type of person who put on airs and Gabriel's appearance tonight didn't make things better for her. She'd tried to steel herself from the blatant hunger that streamed over her body. She wanted him as fiercely as ever. The potent heat in his eyes was still very evident. It took her breath away.

Cassidy groaned. She silently chided herself for being affected by Gabe. She'd steeled her heart from feeling anything and yet, there it was: the attraction she felt towards him couldn't be matched. He invaded her senses, made her feel emotions that were suppose to be dead. She turned into the secluded paths that lead her into a little grotto of the garden. Moonlight cast a silvery kiss over the grounds, manicured hedges and weeping willows and trees outlined the maze design.

The sexual edge refused to be shrugged off, vibrating through her body, to her core and then anger licked her nerves.

Damn Gabriel for coming back.

Her life had been less complicated and now, she could barely think straight. She remembered the feel of his lips against hers, teasing her nipples and tasting her clit. The feel of his cock sliding in and out of her body with a cadence that had less to do with need and everything to do with possession; it haunted her.

Cassidy bit down on her lips, clenching her legs together as she collapsed against the wooden bench. She tossed off her heels; her sore feet

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thanked her for their reprieve. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. The truth hitting her square in the face; Gabriel Sebastien had always had the ability to seduce her. It didn't matter where or how. He just did. Their entire relationship had been built on the spontaneous combustion of passion from the moment they'd met during Sage's birthday party three years ago.

Cassidy thought him the sexiest man she'd ever known, and given the fact that her experience had been limited in the men department before Gabe, it was no wonder she'd fallen prey to his hypnotic spell.

Even now there was something mysterious about him. Those inquisitive deep hazel eyes watched, tested and measured the slightest detail without giving anything away. She felt the dull ache in her chest and knew that his reappearance had caused old wounds to gape open. Again.

Cassidy reopened her eyes. "Damnnit! Don't I deserve some happiness without always having to sacrifice it for that man?" She shouted into the darkness of the night.

Slowly, she'd rebuilt her life by opening her restaurant, Vivid, lost the twenty-five pounds she'd gained from the stress of not knowing if Gabe was alive or done over the last year, and if miracles happened she might be able to remove the hold he had on her.

Maybe if she willed it enough, hoped enough she would be able to stop wanting him, maybe the hard brush of need would stop stroking deep within her womb for him.

Maybe...

"Is it happiness you truly seek?" a male voice suddenly whispered to her.

Cassidy jolted from the bench, placing her hand over her chest. "Who's there?"

"Someone who might be able to give you what you're seeking."

Cassidy squinted, trying to make out a figure. She'd learned karate and several other defensive moves from Gabe. So, she wasn't afraid, she could kick some ass.

"What makes you think that you have the slightest clue what I need?"

The man chuckled. "I know what it is to forget, yet to burn with cravings that are left unsatisfied; to hunger for what your deepest fantasies can't quench."

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He walked closer, but Cassidy couldn't make out his form. Her heart ricocheted against her chest. She felt the man's sensual words stirring the sexual energy that had lain dormant for over a year. He spoke in a soft, rhythmic baritone.

"You sound as if you've experienced a loss."

"Yes, but I know what it's like to give in to release the torment. To lose myself."

Cassidy felt her pussy grow wet. She was more than a little aroused, excited. She hadn't felt this way since Gabe.

She grunted. "And you think you have the ability to do this for me?"

He walked closer, but the night shadows only displayed half of his outline. He was dressed in a tux; the mask over his face shielded half of it. The powerful outline of his physique was solid, the cut of his jaw line sharp. He oozed sexual prowess.

"I know it."

Cassidy frowned. "You sound very confident."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Should it?"

"After all, you don't know me." He chuckled; the sound was deep and raspy. "Yet, you want my hands on you, don't you?"

"You're also cocky."

The stranger chuckled. "Do you really care?" He walked closer yet, she still couldn't make out his face. The fact brought with it an air of power and mystery. The game had started.

Would she play?

"What would you say if I told you that I could make you forget – just for tonight?" She tried to remember, despite it all, the man in the garden with her was a stranger. Yet, the more his alluring words floated across the night sky, the more she wanted to know. The more she wanted to have a man's hands etch her skin into a bundled mass of nerves.

"You're presumptuous as well, what makes you think I want you to touch me?"

Her heart longed to be free from what she would never manage to have – Gabe – free from the haunting of memories and dreams that would never be fulfilled.

"Maybe 'touch' is the wrong word, would you prefer 'fuck?'"

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Cassidy felt the sweet tension splinter and shatter deep within her. She almost groaned out loud. "You don't know me and I don't know you."

"Oh, but don't we? We know each other well. Two, lonely souls who want nothing more than a moment of pleasure."

The prospect seemed so forbidden, illicit to be sure; yet, she opened her lips and said, "How do I know you're not after more?"

"Cherie, nothing matters except for this moment."

Cassidy pursed her lips. "How do I know you're not married?"

There was a pause.

"I was married once, but that relationship is dead."

Cassidy felt the finality of his words in his voice. She knew the source of that kind of pain. "What do you want to do to me?"

"Everything you want me to." His voice grew rugged. "And more."

Cassidy's pussy pulsed, wet with longing. There was nothing kind, or patient about the need to be fucked. Her knees shook.

This was an invitation most carnal and indecent as she'd ever experienced. She wanted to accept with everything within her.

Silence.

Cassidy thought of running away and turned to do just that, but she couldn't walk away. She knew she should, but she stayed rooted where she stood, pulverized by this mysterious stranger's voice and sexual predatory force.

"Run." The single word was whispered against her ear. His breath tingled against Cassidy's ear. "You can't leave can you?"

She gritted her teeth, hating to be so weak. "Nor can you."

"I never said I wanted to. What's your decision?"

Cassidy rolled her eyes skyward, as he leaned into her body, her hips pressed against the hard edge of his cock. He smelled so good. His body was made of muscle. A flesh and blood man, wanting to fulfill her needs not some memory. She bit her lip. "No one must know."

"No one will know."

Cassidy started to turn to face him. He stilled her with his arms at her hips. "W-What?"

"No. If this is to continue, we will not show ourselves."

"Fine, if that's the way you want to play it." She tried to disregard the hundreds of alarms shooting off in her head. Her mind went blank as his mouth brushed against her neck, his teeth grazed her nape.

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"Yes." He answered as his fingers slowly unclasped the top button of her gown. The sound of her zipper sliding down the fabric of her dress crackled through the air, drawing with it anticipation of what was to come.

The man raised the hem of her dress, the night air contacted against her flesh. His fingers delved against her the hard nub of her clit through the lacy panties she wore. He pressed his fingers down her body, heat emanating through the layers of her dress, drenching her pussy with spasms of moisture as she came.

Cassidy was ripe; her juices ran freely with abandon. She shunned the guilt that attempted to engulf her brain. She needed this. She wanted this. "What do I call you?"

His intimate touch brought a sharp grasp from her mouth. She bit down on her lips to keep from screaming. It'd been way too long since she had given in to pleasure.

The man went silent behind her, as if contemplating just how truthful he could stand to be in her presence. "Whatever you want to." He finally said in a low rumble.

She thought of Gabriel and the way he could turn her insides into molten lava within a flash of an eye. This was his fault.

Her pussy craved him and tonight, even if for pretend, she would have Gabriel without surrendering her heart.

Common sense would have told Cassidy to run, to tear herself out of the stranger's arms and to forget what she'd almost consummated in the garden with this virile man who melded his rock-hard cock against her ass. Instead the last word she thought she'd ever render out of her mouth thumbed out on the edge of abandon.

"Gabe."

"Gabe? Is he who you want to forget, love?"

She reached behind her, her hand cradling the man's large dick in her palm. "Yes." A sigh of pleasure mewed from her lips. She squeezed him through his tux pants. Excitement shot to her clit, the dull throb almost more than she could bear.

Cassidy used a quick move that had the man on his back on the ground within seconds. She tossed her bra aside, loving the feel of the cool night air on her skin. Her nipples were taut and ached for what only a man could give her.

"We aren't supposed to see each other."

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She grinned. "You're both wearing masks, besides what I want is below the waistline."

The man's lips twitched into a half grin. "Come and get it then."

Cassidy lowered herself to the ground, quickly straddling the man. "Oh, I plan to."

His arms fastened around her waist. "Let me help you with that." His fingers trailed into the tight curls between her legs, parted her lips and teased her clit with measured strokes.

Cassidy shuddered, looking into his heady gaze. "Then it appears that you are the right man for the job."

* * *

It was on the tip of Gabe's tongue to blurt out that he was the only man but the gut-wrenching fire in his belly outweighed his need for absolution. He'd spent months thinking of this moment, yet, he'd never thought that it would be as intently blatant as fucking Cassidy was about to become. The fact, that she was prepared to offer a complete stranger what he felt was his, burned into his brain and intensified his need to be inside of her.

Masculine pride, he knew, but he couldn't seem to help himself when it came to Cassidy. Giving her what she craved and what he desired more than his next breath was the only thing on his mind. He'd deal with everything else later.

Gabriel felt something within him snap. Shatter. Anger. Pain and need coursed through his veins as truth seared his blood. He thought of all the nights of being without her love, her smile and the tight sheath of her pussy.

Cassidy wanted to forget him? He couldn't summon enough strength to do the same.

He wanted to punish her, to make her do the exact opposite of what she wanted.

Forget him?

When he could barely close his eyes without his mind running re-runs of some little detail Cassidy had done or said. He gritted his teeth, the palm of one of his hands forcing her flesh against his.

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Gabriel's nostrils filled with the aroma of garden blossoms, the mesmerizing scent of her pussy licked his senses and nearly sent him over the precipice of sanity.

His other hand clung to her shapely thighs. He knew he had no right to touch her and at the same time, deep in his soul he felt that Cassidy would forever be bonded to his body. Either way he lost.

Gabriel ripped the strappy lace of her underwear and smiled in the darkness as she gasped out loud. He didn't want her to be afraid of him and doubted that the pulse of excitement running rampant through her body had little to do with fear and more to do with lust.

After tonight he would walk away. For good. But not before fucking her to within an inch of her life. He would carry this memory for the rest of his life, and he would do so by memorizing every nuance, every crevice of her sweet cunt that he could.

His eyes roamed over her, his heart clenched. "You're beautiful."
She smiled. "And you're not naked."

Gabe leaned forward, shucking off his jacket, his shirt was next to follow. Her hot little hands went for the snap at his pants and quickly unzipped them, shoving down his legs, but not before Gabriel reached for a condom. Air hissed between his lips.

As Cassidy's perfectly skilled fingers wrapped around the thick width of his cock, he could barely think straight. Her touch was tender, but powerful as she ran her hands up and down his eight-inch dick. He found himself lifting his hips methodically, naturally to her manipulations all the while, trying to reign in the fierce need to rip the damn mask off his face and tell her it was him she was fucking. It was his cock about to be buried so deeply within her pussy that time would suspend.

He forced his tormented thoughts away. He didn't want to think of anything but the feeling of having Cassidy's hands on his skin and being within her body and he wasn't going to wait a moment longer. He grabbed her, maneuvering her under him. His eyes never left hers. There was no need for words. There was only lust. Passionate. This moment.

Gabe thrust a finger into her slick pussy, watching her eyes opened wide. He kissed her lips to keep her from fully screaming out in pleasure. His tongue mimicked the teasing moves, plunging deep into her mouth, liking the sweet taste of her lips and the way she flirted with him using her tongue.

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She tasted so good. His memories didn't quite live up to this moment. He nipped at her tight nipples with his teeth, sucking her flesh in between his tongue. He didn't doubt for one moment that trying to forget about Cassidy would be as hard as it had been to be held captive in the Middle Eastern jail cell for the last year.

He slipped another finger inside of her, watching her rotated her shapely ass against him. He needed his cock inside of her before he went insane. He pulled away from her, tore open the condom and smiled as she snagged it away from him, a saucy look in her sensual brown eyes.

By God, how would he ever be able to walk away, when all he wanted to do was hold her, make love to her? Fate was cruel, Gabe decided. Despite the hard slap reality had dealt him, he would indulge himself.

Cassidy slipped the condom over the head of his cock. "Hmnn, you look ready to me."

He smiled. "Are you?"

Gabriel cradled her hips in the palm of his hands, shifting her closer to him. He angled his dick against her moist folds, thrust once – hard, catching her off guard as his cock filled her pussy. He grunted aloud.

At long last, he was home!

His eyes slipped close. If there was one moment he wanted to remember it was this one. He remained still, feeling Cassidy's inner muscles strain and relax against his cock. He gazed up into her eyes.

She smiled and his heart tripped. "I haven't had sex in a long time, but if memory serves me – I think you're supposed to move."

Gabriel smirked. "Ah, yes. You would be correct." He pulled his cock out of her only to thrust again and again, fitting snugly within her tight cunt, watching as whatever word had been on the tip of her tongue slid off into a harsh moan.

"Ah-My-God!" She screamed.

She was so tight. His male ego had jumped when she'd stated that she hadn't had sex in a long time. He wanted to be the only man she thought of. The man she craved.

"Fuck!" Cassidy struggled with words as her nails bit into his shoulders. Gabe ignored the pain, the pleasure outweighing it.

"But baby, I am." He gripped her ass hard and rocked against her. "What's that? Want more?" He retracted from her body, maneuvered her

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on her knees and positioned himself behind her. He slipped a finger into her pussy, crooking his finger just so and felt her body quiver, the grooved flesh responded to his touch as he knew it would. He smiled in the darkness. "I don't think you heard me."

Gabe replaced his finger with his cock, not stopping to be gentle, not like he would if the circumstances were different. For him, it was total domination, no more, no less. He grounded his cock into her and gritted his teeth. "Do you want to be fucked?" His hands swept to her long hair, pulling the pins out and gripping the long inky black tresses through his tightly clutched fingers.

He slowed his thrusts, his cock taking slow, calculated thrusts in and out. He felt her release building stealthily. The fire within his own body was raging out of control; he wasn't even close to giving in. No that would be too easy and he wasn't about to make it easy on Cassidy. He wanted her to feel what he'd felt for the last year of being without her, without coming inside of her.

Her pleasure would be his greatest torment!

CHAPTER THREE

Cassidy could barely catch her breath. His cock felt was hot and hard in her body. Her nails dug into the earth beneath them, the smell of grass had never smelled so erotically earthy, the sounds of the city, the laughter from the party all faded in the background as his body rammed into hers. She opened her eyes, colors blended, all she could see was the blunt edge of tension slamming into her body.

The slow, meticulously slow thrusts he delivered to her, had her teeth on edge, everything within her was revved up to the hilt. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears, she thought surely she was having a heart attack.

"Sweetheart, I can keep this up all night long." He chuckled.
"However, I don't know if you can take it."

Cassidy groaned as she rose upward in a cat-like stretch and slowly disengaged his body from hers. She turned and pushed him flat on the ground, watching as he tumbled like a row of dominos. She grinned and straddled him. "I'll tell you what I want, Gabe."

"What's that?"

She didn't respond as she guided his cock inside of her and rode him hard. She smiled, as his hands crept to her hips, moving her faster and faster. His face contorted with pure pleasure as he got as swept away by passion as she did. "Do you want to be fucked? Oh!"

"Oh shit!" He yelled out loud, pumping his hips upward.
"Yessss!"

Cassidy gyrated her hips into shorter, intense circles, watching as his breathing became as ragged as hers. His eyes looked hazy. She bit her lip, but the pent-up desire busted through her self-restraints as his fingers massaged her clit. She gave in the hedonism riveting her body into spasms as she came harshly against his cock.

"Baby!" He kissed her lips, his tongue melding with her own. He pounded into her, exploding on his third breath-shattering thrust as his release came as turbulently as Cassidy's had.

"Oh! Gabriel!"

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She collapsed against him as if her climax had rendered every drop of her strength.

For several moments, they laid silently, holding on to each other. The thud of their heartbeats mirrored the storm sure to follow after their rugged lovemaking.

His arms wrapped around her waist, bringing with it an intimacy Cassidy had nearly forgotten. Tears came to her eyes.

She bit down on her lips. "It was wrong of me to pretend you were someone else."

"I agreed to the terms." He was silent for a moment and then, "Who is Gabriel?"

The bitterness in his voice made Cassidy turn away, "My ex-husband."

"Ah."

"And you?"

He tensed. "My only love."

"Its hell isn't it?"

Her new lover faced her, the gleam his dark eyes shined with hardness. "It's worse than having your freedom stripped away."

Cassidy smirked, propping her head up in the palm of her hand. "There is no steel door stronger than knowing that you can't love the person you can't stop wanting. It's like poison."

The man tensed below her, clenching his jaw. "Sounds like you did the best thing, leaving your ex."

Cassidy glanced at her hands, she'd taken off her wedding ring months ago, yet some days it felt like it was still on her finger.

She laid her head on his chest, wondering when the next time she would ever feel like this with another man again. When would she ever feel a man's need as savagely as she had tonight?

She closed her eyes. "He was the love of my life."

* * *

Gabriel looked out into the early morning of dawn, mask gone, penguin suit replaced with blue jeans and a t-shirt.

He believed the most peaceful time of the day was the early morning when everything was anew and fresh. He couldn't say the same concerning the myriad of emotions playing tug-a-war in his gut. He

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hadn't slept. He'd wrestled all night with temptation, wanting to slip between Cassidy's thighs and make her scream his name – this time knowing it was him!

Gabriel turned from the window, his heart settled in his throat. Cassidy's warm, sexy body was snuggled against the sheets. She'd fallen asleep in his arms last night. There had been no way that he could leave her in the garden. Luckily, growing up the wild and reckless teenager, he'd grown accustomed of sneaking a girlfriend or two over the years through the secret passageways in the mansion with eleven bedrooms. He doubted that anyone would think to journey to his old bedroom.

His eyes wandered over Cassidy. She was beautiful and looked like the angel she hadn't been last night. Guilt hit him, it was entirely his fault. He'd done this to her, with his secrets, his job, his life.

He balled up his hands into fists, trying to contain the anger sweeping through him.

Cassidy deserved to be happy even if it wasn't with him. Wasn't that what real love was about?

Memories of last night flashed before his eyes. He'd sell his soul a million times just to have her again. He would never forget what last night had meant for both of them or the fact that he'd never felt so alive, yet his love for Cassidy was suppose to be dead. How was a man supposed to cope with that?

Gabriel knew he had to leave. His eyes wandered over Cassidy again. Her black curls cascaded over the pillow, the palm of one hand rested over her breasts. He tried to keep his mind off the fact that she was completely naked underneath the sheets and the fact that he wanted to be under them with her.

He stood at the foot of the bed, his heart heavy, he turned away, saying a silent goodbye and quietly walked out the room. He had just closed the door behind him, the soft click echoing in his years.

"And where do you think you're going?" Sage smiled.

"Sage! Crying out loud!" Gabriel faced the mischievous look on her face.

She ignored his shock and looked past him to the door. "Still bringing girls to your room?"

Gabriel cleared his throat, folded his chest. "I was just checking out my old room."

Sage looked unconvinced. "You know it's still here if you want it."

With Every Breath

"I might take you up on that."

"So did you enjoy the party?"

Flashes of last night and fucking Cassidy materialized before his eyes. He didn't care to tell Sage that the real party had been outside. He shook his head. "Ah, it was nice. You put on one hell of a gala."

"Surprisingly, I never got a chance to say goodbye to you or Cassidy last night." Sage placed her hand under her chin, looking up at him with mock innocence. "Did you happen to say goodbye to her?"

Gabe's throat tightened. "In so many words, yes." Over and over again, he wanted to add, but smiled instead. "What's with all the questions about Cass?"

Sage grinned. "Don't even try it, Sebastien! I bet nothing cook has prepared this morning, will reveal what's on the other side of that door."

He rubbed his stomach as it growled. "Cook makes a mean beignet."

Sage laughed, jabbing him in the arm. "Stop diverting me with food."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me, Gabe?"

He chuckled. "Who's the spy here?"

* * *

Zacharias Bertram gazed down at the sleeping woman in the bed. She was beautiful. He could see why a man ruled by his passions such as Agent Sebastien would fall in love with her and want to keep her in his bed.

An evil smile grazed his lips. Maybe, if she was a good fuck, he'd keep her for himself or maybe he'd kill her right before Sebastien's eyes. His choices were endless. He would strike his enemy down once and for all.

Sebastien had caused him millions in drugs, human flesh and his closest allies now doubted his word.

Zacharius clenched his fists. He'd caught Sebastien once, he could do so again. The jail cell he'd escaped had been meant to be his death.

The American spy had had no right meddling in his affairs, and now, he had to die, but first a little fun.

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* * *

Cassidy awoke with a start. She could have sworn she'd felt someone in the room with her. Disoriented, she looked around the bedroom. The antique furniture and the scenic view of the garden confirmed that she was still at the mansion.

She peeked under the covers and tightened the starched floral sheets around her naked body. Her throat tightened, her skin tingled as she thought about last night, the stranger without a name and the feel of his cock in her body.

She bit her lip, waiting for the guilt, but felt none. Everything had felt strangely 'right.' His touch hadn't felt foreign, but inviting, appealing and shamelessly she craved more of him. *Now.*

Cassidy rose from the four-poster bed, noting her clothes were neatly folded on a Louis XV chair. She'd fallen asleep in his arms. A damn foolish thing to do considering she didn't even know a thing about him, other than he was a splendid lover. The mellowing timbre of his voice had stroked her in places she'd thought long forgotten. His gentleness yet, powerful passion reminded her so much of Gabriel during the early stage of their lightening quick marriage. Yet, there was an urgency that defied meaning as he'd thrust his body against hers. She could only describe it as desperation – desperation not to forget, and for that she wouldn't apologize.

Cassidy decided to take a shower and locate Sage, if she hadn't left for the day already. She wasn't going to live in regret, or be reminded of the fact, that no man could replace Gabriel, but she sure as hell could try to go on with her life, starting right now!

Thirty minutes later, Cassidy found Sage and Gabriel at a small table on the veranda. She stepped behind a tree to keep from being seen.

"When are you going to confess how you feel about her, Gabe?" Sage was saying.

Cassidy peeked through the crevice of the door, getting a direct view of Gabe's handsome profile. His smooth chocolate skin reminded her of melted chocolate and he oozed sexual energy as natural as breathing. His grey eyes shadowed with secrets and Cassidy found herself wanting to know what they were. Her heart pounded.

With Every Breath

He was wearing jeans and a white shirt; the three top buttons were unfastened. Her mouth watered. Desire hit her as hard as the first time she'd ever laid eyes on him.

"Shit!" she whispered and then covered her mouth, hoping that the two of them hadn't heard her.

Gabe grinned. "Weren't you the one telling me that sometimes you can't go back?"

Sage lifted her fork at him. "Don't go using my words against me, Sebastien."

He sighed. "Do you really think one day has passed that I haven't thought of Cassidy or the fact that I can't seem to let her go? Being in prison has the effect on a man to make him put a whole lot of things into question, especially regrets."

Prison?

Cassidy's mouth dropped open. Gabe had been in prison? When? For how long? Why he hadn't told her, yet, he'd confided in Sage! Anger sliced through her heart. How could her best friend keep secrets from her? And Gabriel; if he'd cared about her at all; wouldn't he have been truthful with her?

"I don't intend on telling her anything."

Cassidy stepped calmly into the room; the brushing sound of her dress caused both of them to look up. Her eyes flashed at Gabe and then Sage. "Good morning. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

The look on Gabriel's face was priceless. She witnessed hunger, surprise and worry within those dove-grey depths. "Cass." He stood up immediately, his chair scrapped across the concrete.

"Cassidy? I had no idea you stayed the night." Sage smiled. "Since you're here, girl, come and join us for some breakfast. Cook has made some wonderful –"

She stalked over to them as Gabe pulled out a chair. His curious eyes tried to read hers. "No, thank you." The stiffness in her voice didn't belie the betrayal she'd overheard. "I'll stand. I only have one question: how long were you two going to continue to lie to me?"

Sage reached for her hand but Cassidy yanked it back. "Sweetie, it's not what you think?"

Cassidy laughed. "Not what I think? I think I just heard Gabriel say, you'd been in prison and you, my best friend knew about it." She

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turned to look away from the apologetic tears in Sage's eyes and frowned at Gabriel. "I thought I knew you."

"You do know me."

"No, I don't."

"Sit down Cassidy and let me explain."

"What's to explain? Everything makes perfect sense now. You were in prison when I filed for divorce, weren't you?"

He hung his head.

"Answer me, damn you!"

Gabriel stood up. "Baby -"

"Don't!" Cassidy pointed her finger at him, tears slid down her face. "I trusted you. I don't even know who you are anymore." She ran out the room, bundling the underskirts of her dress in her fist, fully aware that Gabe was right on her tail.

He grabbed her at the elbow, twisted her around to face him. "You don't understand."

"Yes I do - you're a liar. All this time I assumed that you had simply been too busy with your top-secret job to be concerned with my needs, instead you were locked up in some jail cell." She slapped him. Hard. "You played me as your fool. I won't be again."

Cassidy's mind was whirling, trying to process the truth he'd told her. There were so many emotions barreling down on her soul, she could barely think straight.

Gabriel hung his head, sighed and then gazed deeply into her eyes. "I never meant to hurt you."

She yanked her arm out of his grasp. "Well, you did." She opened her purse, found her keys. "But that has been easily rectified." She opened the door to the mansion, tried to close it but Gabe's long body blocked the action as he followed her out. Rushing down the stairs, the tears streamed down her face. "Stop following me and leave me alone!"

"Cass, wait a minute! Listen to me. Damnnit!"

She whirled around, walking backwards. "Go to hell Gabriel. I want you to know what I felt, every day for over a year thinking you cared more about your contracting job, only now to find out now, that you were held up in some prison. What the fuck is that, Gabe?"

He scowled. "I couldn't tell you all the details about my job." He hung his head. "There's still so much I have to tell you. I -"

With Every Breath

"No, don't! *You* didn't trust me enough to tell me. It all makes sense now; the urgency of these meetings, the business trips." Cass chuckled bitterly. "At first, I thought you were cheating on me – at least then, I could have just dropped your ass."

He growled; his eyes filled with pain. "You did drop me."

"It was smartest decision I ever made concerning you, Gabriel." Her words hit their mark. She watched as he stood perfectly still. Large. Sullen. Threatening. His cloudy gaze fused on hers.

"We said we'd never leave each other, Cass."

The statement came in a hoarse whisper, so dark and passionate that her heart almost exploded at the intensity behind them. The knot in her throat strangled her with forbidden emotions; she'd sworn she would never deal with again.

"Face the truth, Gabe. You left me a long time ago." She turned to walk away from him; her car was about three feet away.

Cassidy lost her balance rocked as heat, glass and metal splintered through the sky and sent her sprawling backwards. The blast hurt her eardrums and roared with a ferocity that suspended in time.

She was thrown into the front lawn and hit the grass with a solid thud. Everything around her blurred, pain seared through her body. The sound in her ears vibrated loudly, drowning out the scene before her.

Cassidy blinked once and then twice before the sky spun around in a dizzying pace and she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gabriel slowly came through, his eyes burned from the smoke and the smell of burnt rubber and fuel. He'd landed against the pavement violently and every bone in his body ached and protested as he sat up. His mind cleared as his eyes sought for Cassidy, fear sliced through him. He caught a glimpse of her dress over some hedges. He got up slowly, limping over to the front lawn.

"Cassidy!" He screamed. Dear God if anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

Gabe found her lying on her back, scrawled out like a rag doll; her long hair curtained the ground like a veil. He dropped to his knees, tears shining in his eyes. He checked her vitals. She had a pulse, but it was weak. He bent down resting his head against her chest as pain wrecked his body. He couldn't move her and fought the urge to scoop her in his arms and never let go.

"Cass."

A bomb! Gabe gritted his teeth. It was no accident.

"Gabe! What was that?" Sage yelled, running across the drive, upon seeing Cassidy. She screamed. "Oh My God! Oh my God!"

Gabe gently laid Cassidy's body down and stood up. He braced Sage arms, shaking her, his hard gaze forged into hers, trying to make her understand the urgency. "Go back in the house. Call 911."

"But - "

"Sage. Go. Now!"

"Take care of Cassidy. I'll be back." Sage ran back into the house.

Gabe smoothed his hands over Cassidy's forehead. "Baby, don't you leave me."

The sound of a twig snapping brought his head up.

"We meet again, Agent Sebastien." Zacharias Bertram said aloud, pleasure gleaming in his eyes; he stood within a foot of Gabriel. He paused, placing his hands into the pockets of his black suit pants and shook his head at the sight of Cassidy. "It didn't have to come to this, you know."

With Every Breath

Gabriel gritted his teeth, at a definite disadvantage, rage shook through his body. "Bertram, I'll kill you." The man smiled. "Good, I love a fight. However, you are in no position to make such promises as your ex-wife's life drains right before you." Bertram chuckled. "Lucky for you, I'm a generous man and I believe in even odds. Therefore, I won't murder you and everyone within that mansion, yet."

"I will hunt you down and take pleasure in watching you take your last breath, Bertram."

"Don't worry Sebastien; I'll make sure you won't have to look too far."

Gabe watched as his enemy slipped in between some trees and swept away as easily as he'd crawled in. As much as he wanted to go after Bertram and kill the smug bastard for what he'd done, nothing meant more than being at Cassidy's side.

He gazed down into her face. Guilt swept over him. The reality that he'd brought danger to his family did not settle well.

He'd faced many things in his life, his job and the dangers had become second skin, but if he lost Cassidy he would crumble. The sound of sirens from the ambulance and fire engines and Sage's voice behind him brought his silent prayer to an end.

"She's going to be ok, Gabe. Isn't she?"

He got up, moving out of the way so the EMTs could do their job. He turned to Sage, his hand on her shoulder. "Yes, she will. I need you to ride to the hospital with her."

"But--"

"Mon Dieu! Sage, this is not the time to argue with me." Gabriel replied, his voice husky with emotion, his eyes set with determination. "You need to understand that this was no accident." His face was one of a man torn. The world that he had so desperately tried to walk away from had caught up with him and by God; Zacharias Bertram would have no hiding place from his revenge.

"Gabriel, what do you mean this isn't an accident? Some one did this intentionally?" Sage's green eyes widened. "No! This has something to do with your last assignment, doesn't it?"

"I can't get into that right now. You ride with Cassidy to the hospital. The mansion will have to close --"

Sage shook her head, jabbing her finger against his chest. "I will not be intimidated by these bastards, Gabe. That's my friend being put in a

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stretcher and this is my family's legacy. I will stand and fight thank you very much."

If his nerves weren't on edge, he would have agreed, but the players involved in this game were not planning on leaving any survivors. "This is not the time to play heroics."

Sage frowned, crossing her arms across her breasts. "I fully agree." She looked at him pointedly. "Let the authorities handle this."

"The authorities can't help with this and I'm not depending on anyone but myself. I will call in some favors and get some guards to watch the mansion, over you and Cassidy. These people won't hesitate to slit your throat,"

Sage flinched at his directness, but he needed her to know that he meant business and so did his enemies.

"Fine."

He hugged his friend, looking beyond her as Cassidy was lifted into the ambulance. He pulled away, unable to face the worry on Sage's pretty face. "Go, I'll check back on Cass later."

Sage nodded and sprinted over to the ambulance, within minutes the vehicle whirled out of the circular driveway to Memorial Hospital.

Gabriel took a deep breath, his face turning into stone, once again stepping back into that world of darkness, allure and danger and this time he wouldn't leave before Bertram laid in a body bag.

He walked back into the mansion, talked to Hiram Graves, Sage's second in command, explained that the Maison de Bayou Eclipse would be closed and everyone was to leave immediately.

His next move.

"Wellington, meet me outside St. James Church in tonight. 6:30." Gabe ended the call.

* * *

"Bertram knocked on my door." Gabriel said, as Wellington, dressed in a pearl grey suit, walked up.

"He's earlier than I thought he would be."

"Let's walk." Gabriel responded gruffly. "He put on bomb on Cassidy's SUV."

"We're not dealing with a simple case of tag, Sebastien."

"No, we're not. I need guards put on Cassidy and Sage. I-"

With Every Breath

"You got it. You're coming back in?"

Gabriel stopped walking. "For the time being or at least until Bertram takes his last breath. Where is Aziz?"

Wellington looked into his face. "Still in prison. There's no chance of him getting out. Don't worry I have already called in a team we're working on finding Bertram as we speak."

"I thought you were here to warn me?"

Wellington scowled at his criticism, his eyes clouded and then he resurfaced, perfecting a smirk. "When have you ever known me to come unprepared?"

"True." He responded. Yet, Gabe couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that punched him in the gut. It was as if the whole picture had yet to be revealed and that left him at a distinct disadvantage.

"Bertram won't know what hit him."

"That's exactly what I'm counting on. Now, let's talk strategy." Gabe said, watching the hungry light in Wellington's face come alive as they devised how to behead a snake.

* * *

"The fool! He doesn't know he's walking into a trap does he?" Bertram laughed, popping a grape into his mouth as a masseuse rubbed his back.

"It's you who keeps taking unnecessary chances." James Wellington said, "Aziz wouldn't hesitate to slit your throat or mine if he knew your plans."

Bertram's head popped up, he narrowed his gaze on the flustered face of his partner. "Don't start getting a conscious, Wellington. You were paid to forget you ever had one."

Wellington pounded his fist against the wall. "That was before I knew you were going against his family."

Bertram laughed. "Have you ever heard of causalities of war?" He gave his cohort one last withering glare and then positioned his head on the massage table. "It's a little too late to renege on our deal. Mr. Aziz wouldn't take too kindly to betrayal – just ask his future brother-in-law, Ihsan. Oh wait, you can't because he's dead."

"Intimidation doesn't work with me." Wellington said.

"Then maybe killing you will." Bertram chuckled. "Your choice."

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When the slam of the door indicated his partner's exit, Bertram laughed.

"I thought so."

* * *

After talking to the guard posted outside, Gabriel entered the hospital room. Cassidy's sweet brown eyes were on him immediately. Pain, shock, and love all registered on her face.

"You're awake." A lump formed in his throat. "H-How do you feel?" His eyes roamed over her. Her beautiful face held cuts and bruises; a small bandage was wrapped around her head.

Cassidy groaned. "Like a Sumo wrestler had his way with my body." She watched him quietly. "He left me with a huge bump on the back of my head. The doctors will keep me for observation."

Gabe nodded, angling his long frame in a chair beside her, weary and guilt-ridden. Suddenly, the weight of all the lies weighed heavily on him. It was clear that he would have to make the first move and be honest with her. Just nights before he'd been ready to walk away from her, or he'd told him he was. He reached out to take her small hand in his; a sigh of relief escaped his lips when she didn't flinch away. His gaze found hers. "I never meant for this to happen."

"I know you didn't."

Gabe looked up. "I swear to you, I will handle this."

Cassidy shuddered, removing her hands out of his. "You mean kill someone."

He couldn't tell her "no" - when his job was based on the strategy of strike first or be eliminated. How the hell could he explain that to her?

"Cassidy, hear me out. I worked for Talon, a secret ops organization for the CIA for six years - before you knew me."

"So that makes it alright, that you lied to me during our entire, albeit short-lived marriage, Gabriel? All this time I thought you were a private contractor for the government."

The lie he'd fed her slapped him harshly in the face. "I did it for your own protection."

Cassidy closed her eyes. "*Protection*? And what have you protected me against? Seems to me, my truck just blew up in my face."

"I did it because I love you."

With Every Breath

"Love me? You should have stopped when you didn't come back from prison, Gabe, then maybe none of this would be happening right now."

"And you have? Stopped loving me, that is?" He held his breath, waiting, his anger growing.

"Yes."

Gabe's eyebrows creased over his brow, he leaned forward. His eyes shot daggers at the woman who he'd fucked in every way possible. His cock jerked just thinking of having her again. "Now who's lying?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I still love you, Cassidy. I never stopped and neither did you." He sighed and growled in frustration. "It was me – *me* that you were fucking in the garden last night, not some goddamn stranger. Me. *Your* husband and it was my name you called out as you came!"

* * *

Her mouth dropped open. His words pierced Cassidy's soul. She wanted to cry, shout and kick his ass! Something deep within had told registered the similarities between the man in the garden and Gabe. She'd played his fool yet again!

"You bastard!" She willed herself to get out of the bed but was too weak and slumped against her pillows. "So let me get this straight, you purposely set out to seduce me." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"No, and if I remember correctly you didn't need much encouragement."

"Only because I thought you were someone else."

"You didn't want me to be anyone else." Gabe stepped closer. "You wanted me."

"I wanted sex. Not you." Cassidy snapped, unwilling to give in to the heat rising within her body as she thought back to that night and the feel of having Gabe's large cock inside her body. She didn't need him to remind her of how wanton she'd been when she felt it every moment of the day, unable to get his masculine scent out of her mind. "The lies just keep coming, don't they?"

"I didn't mean to deceive you."

"No, you just meant to fuck me."

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A muscle in Gabe's jaw twitched. "I meant to tell you goodbye that night."

"It was obvious that you didn't want me. Only when I went to find you, there you were and –"

She turned her head to look at him, her eyes burned into his. "Well, do yourself a favor and keep walking. You can still walk away."

He smiled, folding his arms over his chest. "After having another taste of you, Cassidy, do you think any man could?"

"You're not any man, Gabriel Sebastien."

He chuckled. "I think that's the first compliment I've gotten out of you since I returned. Besides, the man who offered us fireworks this morning is here."

"What the hell does that have to do with me?" Cassidy grimaced at the headache that was pounding at her temples. "I can take care of myself."

"As of right now, you are under my watch and don't even think about calling Sage. She's been placed in a safe house, the mansion is closed and I've instructed your manager to do the same."

"Damn you!"

Anger fueled her to reach for the vase on the side dresser beside her and throw it at him, but he dodged the roses and flowers just in time as the glass shattered on the sparkling white floor.

"You just can't back and try to control my life, Gabriel! I'll have no part of this or you!"

He ignored her outburst. "You need some time to rest. I've asked the nurse to bring a cot."

Cassidy squinted her eyes at him, her heart hammering against her chest. "You are not staying here."

"Just watch me, darling." Gabriel looked down at the shards of glass and then back up at her. "You've still got a hell of an aim. I'll go see if I can get something to clean this up."

Cassidy fought the urge to scream as she watched him stride out of the hospital room, oozing confidence and igniting a fire in her belly that had everything to do with the intense pulse between her legs. She'd never been able to turn off her attraction to Gabe, but she sure as hell wasn't about to walk back into his life.

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Giving her heart was an entirely different matter all together, especially when bullets and death seem to shroud him and now her as well!

* * *

"Where in the hell are we?" Cassidy asked two days later, as she and Gabe drove up to an abandoned warehouse in not the best of neighborhoods. She turned to look at him, taking a sharp intake of air as her eyes brushed over his ruggedly handsome face.

"This is where we'll be staying."

"We? Can't you get someone else to guard me? I don't want to be -"

He smiled in the darkness, as those sensual grey eyes tried to reel her in. "Be alone with me."

She frowned. "I'm not afraid to be alone with you." Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as his thick eyebrow rose, testing her. "There's not one part of me that wants to repeat what happened in the garden."

"No?"

Cassidy turned away from him. "No!"

Gabe chuckled, and then turned off the ignition. "I will be with you tonight and then Vincent will be here tomorrow."

"Vincent?"

"He's an old colleague of mine. What is it?"

She sighed, feeling the tight knot in her throat pull and anger resurfaced. "What do I know about you, Gabe? I mean all of this is happening so fast. It's not every damn day a woman finds out that the man she married, the man she -"

"Loved?"

Cassidy leaned back against her seat. "I loved you so much."

"And I love you."

"Not enough to tell me that truth though."

"Mercy! Woman, don't you understand these people aren't normal average day Joes. They strike and then think." Gabe placed his hand under her chin, bringing her gaze to rest on his. "I never wanted to take the chance of never seeing your beautiful smile again, to taste your lips, to make love to you."

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Cassidy felt a tide of emotions wash over her. What in the hell was happening to her? To them? She should be angry, livid and she was – only desire was taking a stronger hold on her tightly drawn emotions.

“Come on, let’s unload.” he said, opening the passenger door.

Cassidy thanked heavens for a brief reprieve from the rustlings of ‘what-ifs’ plaguing her mind. She told herself she’d lived over 12 months without Gabe; surely she could exist under the same roof with him for another night.

She thought about her overwhelming success during her hospital stay, she’d gotten little sleep as her body had been aware of every sexy rumble that came from his mouth as he’d tossed and turned on the little cot shirtless. Not to mention the huge erection he’d woke up with the next morning and had tried unsuccessfully to hide, that had stirred up a longing to have his hard cock inside her again.

Her mouth watered. She wanted him. She had tried to self-rationalize the night in the garden, but was finding it hard not to. It did something to her heart to know that it was Gabe in the garden, his hands on her body and that he’d wanted her as much as he’d wanted her. Her sexual needs had only intensified, leaving a potent hunger left unsatisfied.

“Shit!” she mumbled, grabbing her overnight bag and climbed out of the truck.

It was going to be another sleepless night.

* * *

Gabriel found himself watching every move Cassidy made. They’d only been at the safe house merely two hours and all he wanted to do was bury his cock inside of her. She’d changed into some little boy-cut shorts and a matching coral pink t-shirt. Those long legs were calling him. They were begging him to grab her and wrap them around his waist as he plunged into her sweet pussy, claiming her once again.

He shifted in his seat, looking away when Cassidy glanced up from her magazine at him. She repositioned herself, folding her legs underneath her curvy ass. Her hair was down and spilled over her shoulders, her face was free of makeup. He’d never seen a more beautiful woman. His woman, despite what she said about him; he witnessed the ache of sexual frustration in her body as much as the erection pressing against his jeans made him acknowledge his own.

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Gabe cleared his throat, chomping down on his steak. He glanced up again and found Cassidy's intense gaze on him. Their eyes held a moment, before she glanced away, appearing to be engrossed in her magazine again.

He couldn't look away, as he slowly brought his glass filled with water, wishing it was Cassidy he was tasting instead of the bland liquid. He slowly licked his lips, his eyes squinting as she did a cat-like stretch against the couch, her breasts hitching upward, the t-shirt raised offering him a tantalizing glimpse of that sexy belly-button. The warehouse left a lot to be desired yet Cass's curves filled the cold décor to perfection.

This silence between them was killing him. He had to concede it was the steady strum of tension rocking between their bodies that had him ready to strip every scrap of material of what little she had on.

Gabe chewed slowly; the flavor of the medium rare meat, lost in comparison to what his tongue wished was on the tip of it. He closed his eyes, willing himself to remain in his seat, to remain behind the table where the heavy bulge in his pants was concealed.

He reopened his eyes, knowing he had to have her; another second could not go by without him touching her, tasting her lips...

The raw need on Cassidy's face mirrored his own. His heart thudded in his ears, all the blood giving in to gravity. There wasn't one part of him that hadn't thought of this moment. When she would look into his eyes and know how much he wanted her. That she was his first and last choice every time.

They stood facing each other, yet neither broke the spell they were under.

Gabe stood up, pushing his plate away, his eyes savagely raking over her. She looked adorable, vulnerable as she nervously looked away, running a hand through her hair. But the signs of what she could not voice were evident from the peaked tips of her nipples against the strained cotton of her t-shirt, her dilated pupils, the heavy rise and fall of her chest.

Yes, she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

The question was what were they going to do about it?

CHAPTER FIVE

Cassidy chided herself to move, to run upstairs to the bedroom where she could hide behind the door and lock and be safe away from Gabe. The heat radiating off of his body made her mouth go dry, her body hummed with need, her pussy was wet, her clit hard and ached for satisfaction.

No! You can't go down this road. You can't give in. NO!

She thumbed the page of the magazine, clutched in her trembling hands. "I...ah, need to go to bed." She turned on her heels and marched out of the make-shift kitchen and away from temptation.

Cassidy had just made it to the fourth stair when she heard Gabe behind her at the landing.

"Don't run from me."

She exhaled a shaky breath, scared to face him and scared what would happen if she didn't. "Don't come after me."

"I can't seem to help myself when it comes to you. I never have."

Cassidy turned around, clutching the banister to keep from touching. "What we want from each other is merely physical, Gabriel. Our whole marriage was built on passion. We didn't know what we were doing."

His eyes turned stormy. "Are you standing here telling me that what we didn't mean anything?"

"No, of course it meant something." Tears rained down Cassidy's eyes. "You're not the man I thought you were. The man I knew is a figment of my imagination."

Within a flash, Gabe was standing one stair away from her, his eyes burning with need. "I'm a flesh and blood man, Cass. No doubt about it. I've lied for reasons I thought were the right, I'm a selfish man who wants what he wants."

He reached out to touch her cheek with the palm of his hand, and Cassidy sworn she would melt on the spot. She shuddered. "A man who was imprisoned for a year and who didn't tell me?" A tear slid down her cheek. "How could you do that to me?"

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Gabe wrapped his arms around her. "Baby, I couldn't put you or Sage in danger. The same people who captured me are the same ones who won't hesitate to kill us." He pulled away, looking deep into her eyes.

Cassidy knew the threat, she still couldn't get the sight of her truck blowing up in her face out of her mind and it would be a long time before she could. She smoothed her fingers along his jaw line. "You sacrificed everything for me?" She said as if suddenly understanding.

He nodded. "I'd do it a thousand times over. Do you know how many times I dreamt of holding you, making love to you?"

"No." she said, needing to hear the words from his lips.

"Every night. I never meant to hurt you, Cassidy but I'd sacrifice my last breath to keep you safe."

Before she could think about it, rationalize her actions to death; she leaned forward and crushed his lips under hers. A sigh of relief escaping her lips as Gabe tightened his hold around her waist. Her fingers wound behind his head. She needed him closer.

She forgot about all the reasons why she couldn't be with him and remembered the taste of his lips on hers, the feel of those hard muscles against her soft flesh. She wanted it all. She wanted him. Her fingers went to zipper and slowly sliding it downward. She grinned as he wiped the moisture from her eyes. She brushed her hands against his rock hard cock and then dipped her hand under the elastic band of his boxers. The slow growl that echoed in the hallway from Gabe's mouth brought a sign of satisfaction from her lips.

Cassidy greedily pushed his jeans and underwear down over his hips. She looked up into the heat emblazoned on Gabe's face. She slowly peeled off her shirt and boy shorts, standing before him naked and yet, she never been so vulnerable. The realization scared her. She bit her lip, afraid to give in to the pleasure that yearned to be released.

"You're so beautiful baby."

Gabe picked her up in his arms, her legs instinctually wrapped around his waist. He held on to the railing and laid Cassidy on the carpeted stairs. He looked down into her eyes and she swore she saw his soul.

He kissed her lips softly, his tongue dipping deeply into hers. Cassidy's fingers swept up his back, loving the feel of solid muscles flexing underneath her finger tips. He pulled back to look down at her as he pressed his cock against her soft flesh.

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Gabe edged her against the stairs as he kicked off his jeans and slowly lowered to his knees. He pulled her legs apart, bending down to place tiny kisses up her calf all the way up to her thighs.

She felt him shudder against her. "Gabe?" He didn't answer as he dipped the blunt tip of his tongue against her clit. "Oh!"

He didn't let up on his assault as he pulled the sensitive nub into his mouth, teasing her with his tongue and teeth.

Cassidy wrapped her fingers around his head, urging him closer. She felt as if she was flying, swept up in the fire that he'd lit. She didn't think she would feel as intensely as she did right now. "Mmmn, baby! More. I want more."

Gabe positioned both of her legs over his shoulders; her hips barely touched the stairs as he plunged his tongue into her moist heat again and again. He laved and teased. Teased and suckled. His fingers rubbed rhythmically against her clit and Cassidy felt her world slowly coming apart as passion and lust combined and she came, but Gabe only quickened his pace, his hot kisses and licks blunt and flirted with every nerve in her body.

Cassidy squeezed her eyes shut. She felt the tension building within her womb, deeply. It was heady, just like her desire for Gabe. Again. But just before she could claim her second climax, he replaced his mouth with his cock, rubbing against her entrance slowly and nearly driving Cassidy insane.

His eyes sought hers. "I never want to be without you again." He gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry I can't wait." He thrust inside of her, sheathing his cock deeply within her pussy. He paused, moaning. "Cassidy, baby. You feel so damn good."

"Oh! So do you."

Gabe moved slowly, gripping her hips in his palms as he pumped his hips against hers. He smiled wickedly. "Your cunt fits around me like a glove."

Cassidy grinned and then groaned. "Some things never change."

"It never will, baby. It never will."

Gabe quickened his thrusts, inching out of her moist heat and again impaling her hard, unforgiving, as his cock claimed what was his. What had always been his. "Your sweet pussy is mine, Cassidy." His eyes linked with hers. The heat between them fused them as one, in perfect sync with his quickening thrusts.

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She cried out, her nails clutching his back, holding on to him as his cock buried it into her again and again. She could barely catch her breath. "Fuck me, Gabe. Please! I can't take it!"

"I thought you'd never ask." Gabe replied, he pulled out of her completely. "Turn around."

Cassidy complied, knowing what was next and wanting him as much as he wanted her. "Give it to me." She sat on her knees, her hips angled in the air and waiting for him to join their bodies.

And he did.

Gabe entered her deeply, his cock edging her against her ass. The slapping sound of flesh on flesh was all he heard as he pounded into her. "Oh! Yesss, baby!" Completely. Lovingly hard.

Cassidy dug her nails into the carpet, bracing herself as best she could as Gabe fucked her from behind. She screamed out her pleasure but he didn't let up his sensual assault on her body, his finger slipped between her legs and teased her clit.

"You like that?"

Her muscles clamped around his cock taking everything he had. "Yes! Oh God! Yes. Don't stop - please!" She climaxed as he pinched her clit and slammed into her three more heart pounding times and roared out his own release.

"Cassidy!"

He slumped against her and whispering into her ear. "I'm the man you love. Don't you ever forget that."

She nodded, feeling the love Gabe had shown to her, after all this time. She wanted to step out in faith, wanted to trust him. But could she - after all the secrets and lies?

Cassidy opened her mouth only to be interrupted by the shrill of Gabriel's cell phone. Her moment was gone. She turned from him, leaning on the stairs on her back, and quietly redressed.

"Be right back." Gabriel picked up his jeans at the bottom of the landing, pulled out the cell and spoke. "Sebastien." There was a pause.

She tried not to listen, tried not to hear the sound of the voice deep inside of her. He turned slowly to face her. "I have to take this."

Cassidy closed her eyes. It had started again. The secrecy. The mystery. "Do what you have to do," She reopened her eyes to find him gone. "Perfect!" This had been the common scene during their marriage. How many times had they been in the middle of something, anything

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only to be interrupted by some mysterious phone call that lasted for hours.

She rose from the stairs and decided to go to bed. After all, nothing had really changed. Their lives were still in danger. Gabriel was still an enigma to her.

No, the biggest difference was, Cassidy would never be able to give in to the love she felt for him, to do so would mean accepting his other life. A life where death was just a breath away. She couldn't wait for that to happen.

* * *

"I've been meaning to tell you, Sebastien, that that ex-wife of yours is a fine piece of ass." Bertram laughed evilly into the receiver.

Gabriel felt ice slide into his veins and rage coated every fiber of his being. "You keep her out of this."

"Ah, but you see, I cannot." Bertram laughed. "For you see, I want to take everything away from you that you've taken from me."

"You were a flesh peddler, a drug smuggler, and selling anti-defense machinery designs to the highest bidder. You're just a piece of shit someone forgot to flush."

"Would you still feel that way if I told you that I am right outside your door with enough C4 to blow you, your pretty wife and half of this neighborhood to bits?"

Gabe tensed; he gripped the cell like a vise. "I don't believe you."

"Look out your window."

He edged to the window and peeked out to an angle that Bertram couldn't see him, sure that he'd have a sniper rifle on him. His throat tightened. How the hell had he found out where they were?

Gabe kept coming back to the same person. Wellington. "Fuck!" His boss had betrayed him! He'd known that something wasn't right, that Wellington's sudden appearance wasn't as it seemed. He just hadn't wanted to be right.

Bertram waved, not seeing Gabe. "Hello neighbor. I thought I'd drop by and pay my respects."

"Fuck you."

Gabe darted away from the window. The only thing he could do was hope that Cassidy didn't come down stairs and that Vincent was

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ready. He disconnected the call with Bertram, ran for his gun and ammunition. He looked back out the window.

"Ready or not Sebastien here I come." Bertram yelled, holding a semi-automatic in his hand.

Gabe said a quick prayer. Whatever was about to happen would not be pretty, his only wish was that Cassidy knew how much he loved her.

A gunshot rang through the air and a few seconds another after another.

Gabe cocked his gun and peeked out the window again, shocked to see James Wellington's shooting two shots into Bertram's body, his gun went off as he fell to the ground and Gabe skidded across the floor as several shots pierced the interior of the warehouse.

Two more shots rung through the night air and seconds later, the front door was kicked open. Gabriel reached for his gun that had been knocked out of his hands as he'd dived across the floor. He turned just in time to see Wellington's gun aimed at him.

The two men stared at each other.

"Wellington? How could you sell your soul?"

His former boss looked wild with fury. "It was easy, once I took out Bertram. Now one billion dollars of Aziz's gold will be all mine, and only I know of its location."

"You gave up your career for money? You really are scum." Gabriel slowly rose from the floor, his gun trained on the man he'd trusted countless of times during several mission.

"Please, working for the government will never get me the kind of power I really need. You have no idea how low I can be, but I will show you now." Wellington trained his gun on him.

"Be sure not to miss." Gabriel taunted.

Wellington smiled evilly. "You always were a cocky -"

One shot pierced his former boss in the back of the head. Wellington's eyes went blank as the gun slipped from his hands and he dropped face forward to the ground at Gabriel's feet.

Vincent Del Marco, Talon's newest second in command, squatted down, checking Wellington's vitals. He smiled up at Gabe. "He's toast."

"It's nice to see you too." Gabriel chuckled, running a hand over his forehead to wipe the perspiration.

"You didn't think I would let you down, did you?"

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Before Gabe could answer, his eyes caught a movement out of the corner of his eyes. Del Marco trained his gun, but Gabe stepped in front of him. His eyes met the fearful gaze of Cassidy as she took in the Wellington's dead body.

"It's my wife!" Gabe ran to where she stood trembling against the landing. He wrapped her up in his arms and then kissed her long and hard. "Baby, this is Agent Del Marco."

Del Marco grinned. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sebastien."

When Gabe pulled apart from Cassidy, he expected her to be breathless, happy. Even he, a trained CIA agent didn't expect the mean right hook that sent his head spinning.

Cassidy exhaled, finally glancing at the man. "Nice to meet you too, Agent Del Marco."

* * *

A month later...

"So you've really hung up your spy ways?" Sage said, dancing in Gabe's arms. She looked up when he didn't respond; his eyes were trained on another woman.

Cassidy.

"Isn't she the most beautiful woman you've ever seen? Damn!" Gabe couldn't stop looking at her as she caught his eye. The connection immediate between them as usual.

Sage chuckled, pulling out of his arms. "Why don't you go dance with her, while I go find that cute Agent Del Marco."

Gabe kissed her cheek. "Be good." He watched Sage saunter over to Vincent and asked him to dance.

"May I have this dance?"

He turned to look down into Cassidy's eyes. By her side - where he wanted to be. Forever. He smiled. "Yes, you may." He took her into his arms, loved the feel of having her there. He looked down at the four carat princess cut diamond on her finger. "Damn, now that's a rock!"

Cassidy playful hit him in the arm and smiled as they swayed to a song. "Some lucky man loves me so much. He made me his wife again, you know?"

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Gabe grinned. "You don't say." He bent down to taste her succulent lips and wished that they were alone. The restaurant was packed with their friends and family, all celebrating their new marriage. His heart threatened to explode with joy.

"Yeah, and this time I'm never letting him go."

"What a lucky bastard."

Cassidy laughed. "Why, yes he is."

THE END

Anisa Damien

AUTHOR BIO

Anisa Damien lives outside of Chicago with her husband, 10-year old son and demonic cat, Sly. The love for writing has held her captive since grade school and hasn't let go since. When not working at her day job, she is concocting sexy heroes, sassy heroines and the mischief she can get them into!

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