



Pulse

By Anisa Damien © 2006

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## **Pulse**

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## **Pulse**

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**Anisa Damien**

**Dedication**

To Avery! Your support over the years as meant the world.  
Thank you!

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### Prologue

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

"I want him dead."

Zacharias 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 were the only obstacles stopping his wrath. Aziz was a man of many lusts, and revenge was always at the top of his list. They'd been allies for many years, yet Zacharias would never let down his guard. 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, if Sebastien is not dead within the next few days, you will take his place. I was the one doing you a favor by holding him in prison. Now here I sit, my freedom robbed from me."

"You think I delivered you to the government?"

Aziz folded his arms across his wide chest. "You wouldn't be that stupid, 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 glared at Zacharias. "You know what you must do."

Zacharias stood to leave. "Consider it done."

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Lawrence Wellington grinned as the man he'd been waiting for came toward the table. The relaxed air about Gabriel Sebastien didn't fool him. The former operative's senses were on full alert. An operative his secret ops group, Talon, had used repeatedly. "Well, well. You're a sight for sore eyes."

"I could say the same about you." Sebastien shook his hand and sat down as a sardonic grin played over his face. "I was surprised to hear from you, especially since you know I've walked away from that life."

In the nearly twenty years he'd worked as an undercover CIA agent, he'd never known another associate he was more wary of. He had to watch himself. The muscle in his jaw clenched. "But can you say that your former life has walked away from you?"

"What's brought you to New Orleans?" Sebastien practically growled.

Lawrence realized he'd struck a nerve as he took off his glasses and gazed into Gabriel's stormy eyes. "Zacharias Bertram is hunting."

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

Lawrence sipped his coffee and then settled the china cup on its saucer. "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 or lured back into that life. I've lost too much already."

"That life, as you call it, was good enough for you for the last six years."

"Well, it isn't now."

Lawrence frowned, trying to downplay his anger. "Are you prepared to lose more?"

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

"You always were hardheaded, Sebastien, thinking the world was yours to take on."

Gabriel chuckled. "The world took me on long ago. I'm just

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catching up.”

“What will you do about Cassidy?”

“Protect her to my last breath—whether she wants me to or not.”

## Chapter One

Anger bubbled up inside Cassidy Raleigh as she gazed down at the muddy, oily zigzag streaked across her designer gown.

*Dammit!*

Sage—her best friend—was going to kill her. She was already an hour late for the masquerade ball at Maison de Bayou Eclipse. She heaved a sigh, cursed the high heels pinching her toes, and slammed the hood of her two-year old SUV—a model the car salesmen had declared *dependable*.

*Yeah right.*

Cassidy dusted the motor oil off her brown hands as best she could.

She wasn't a weak, dependent female. So, when her car had come to a complete halt on the deserted road, she'd popped the hood to take a look. Oil had spewed from the engine, making the situation even worse.

To make things worse, she'd placed a frantic call to Sage, and 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 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 her and all of New Orleans that he was back home—for the duration.

She frowned. 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.

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She leaned her hip against the door of her car. 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 between them. *Finito!* She told herself she didn't care that Gabe had moved back to New Orleans, or that his six-foot-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 jerked her eyes open at the sound of an approaching car. Her heart sped up as the devil himself pulled beside her and the passenger side window opened. "Wonderful," she grumbled.

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

Cassidy rolled her eyes, but 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. No man had the right to look that good. Like drizzled honey over ironclad muscles.

Cassidy forced herself not to focus on the total package, and looked him in the eye. Those stormy gray eyes that reminded her of the many rainy nights they'd spent making love. Eyes that would steal her soul—if she let them.

*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 once the final divorce papers were served. And now, she couldn't stop her hormones from taking a swan dive anytime he was within shouting range.

"You never have to ask 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



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from head to toe, a slow smile tugging at his full lips. "You look like you had quite the battle, Cass." His gaze 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."

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

She couldn't tell if it was anger or desire, or a little of both. "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 the hood. His smooth, calming cologne wafted through the air, causing Cass's mind to fog with memories.

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

His head came up, his heated glare settling on her in 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. "I went back to my maiden name after the divorce."

Gabe didn't respond as he slammed the hood shut. The loud thud ended 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.

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 gearshift.

Cassidy imagined the muscles in his long legs stretching 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.

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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.

"There's something in the backseat for you."

Her legs turned into mush. Her brain befuddled with lust. How could this be? He hadn't been a fleeting thought until he'd visited her restaurant and announced his return. 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 forced her mind back to what Gabe had said and turned her head to the black garment bag. She reached for the bag, hauling it into her lap.

"Sage loaned a spare?"

Gabe turned to face her, a knowing smile curving 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. That part of our life together ended a long time ago."

"So we have to hate each other?"

Cassidy sighed. "No, we don't have to hate each other."

Gabe gazed at her for a second then turned his attention back to the road. "You sure act like we do."

She pursed her lips. "I'm not playing 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 get out of Gabriel's presence as fast 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.

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A young man opened her door. "Welcome to Maison Bayou de Eclipse, ma'am."

She turned back to her 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 as he stood between her and the door. When she looked up what she saw amazed even her. Hurt splintered in his eyes, making her feel small.

Hesitantly, she took his hand. "Gabe, I—"

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.

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'd be damned if Gabriel would leave her at a disadvantage ever again.

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It was funny 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, wearing 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, but his ex-wife would never have any idea how much.

His wife? He sighed. It had been over a year, and 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 onto her finger in front of their closest friends and family in a small chapel.

*Mon Dieu!*

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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 than the Sahara. Did she really think he wouldn't know her body and soul? His gaze crept slowly over her. His cock hardened with an intense desire to claim her, to bury himself into her until they found a way past their differences and clung to each other.

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

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

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

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

His gaze stalked her as every man in the ballroom turned appreciative glances at her. He gritted his teeth. It did something to him to know that other men wanted what he 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 zeroed in on him. He wasn't a fool; Sage had 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 smiled at her. "You always could read me like a book."

Sage smiled, dimples appearing on her heart shaped face as she

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shook her head. Deep brown curls cascaded over her shoulders. The red gown enhanced her ebony beauty. She placed the mask over her face. Constructed of lace and intricate little pearls, it made her feminine features appear whimsical. "As if you were ever that complicated, Gabriel."

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

Laughing, she linked 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 gaze back on Cassidy as she turned to talk with a man who kept touching her. He tensed. The sight was one that he would never grow accustomed to witnessing—another man touching the woman whose mere smile could make his body pulse.

"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."

"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

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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."

"And I feel guilty every day that Cassidy doesn't know about your assignments." 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. I worried about you, and when Lawrence called to tell me that you were taken hostage in that terrorist compound I—"

Gabe closed his eyes and willed that bleak, dismal time to evaporate from his mind. The scar tissue on his body was memory enough. He reopened his eyes, his soul tortured. "You didn't tell Cassidy, did you?"

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

He smiled. "But I didn't."

"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 in and raised him into the man he was today. They'd been devastated when her father died several years ago. Sage had been 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 you abandoned her."

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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. 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 changing from one identity to the next. Somewhere he'd lost the man inside, but he knew exactly where he would start to find 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**

In the garden Cassidy inhaled the fresh scent of new blooms. 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's successful venture of turning the mansion into a bed and breakfast, Cassidy couldn't achieve more than a stiff smile. She wasn't the type of person who put on airs, and Gabriel's appearance tonight didn't make things any easier. She'd tried to steel herself against the blatant hunger that streamed through her body. She wanted him as fiercely as ever. The potent heat in his eyes took her breath away.

Cassidy groaned and silently chided herself for letting Gabe affect her. The attraction she felt towards him couldn't be diminished. He invaded her senses, made her feel emotions that were suppose to be dead.

She turned onto a secluded path that led her into a picturesque section of the garden. Moonlight cast a silvery kiss over the manicured hedges and weeping willows that outlined the labyrinth design.

The sexual edge refusing to be shrugged off vibrated through her body, to her core. And then anger licked her nerves.



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*Damn Gabriel for coming back.*

Her life had been uncomplicated, 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. He haunted her.

She bit down on her lips, clenching her legs together as she collapsed onto the wooden bench. She tossed off her heels, and her sore feet thanked her for their reprieve. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply as the truth hit 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 that had ignited 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 so 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. "Dammit!" She shouted into the darkness of the night. "Don't I deserve some happiness without always having to sacrifice it for that man?"

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 dead 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'd be able to stop wanting him. Maybe the hard brush of need for him would stop stroking deep within her womb.

Maybe...

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

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to her.

Cassidy jolted from the bench, placing her hand over her chest.

"Wh-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 you have the slightest clue what I need?"

The man chuckled. His voice was raspy. Did she detect an East Coast accent? She couldn't be sure. He spoke in nothing more than a seductive whisper.

"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."

He walked closer, but Cassidy couldn't make out his form. Her heart ricocheted against her chest. She felt the man's erotic 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's pussy grew 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, half his face shielded by a mask.

The powerful outline of his physique was solid, yet the shadows hid his face. 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." The sound of his chuckle was deep and raspy. "Yet, you want my hands on you, don't you?"

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"You're also cocky."

The stranger laughed. "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, that the man in the garden with her was a stranger. Yet, the more his alluring words floated across the night, 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 memories and dreams that would never be fulfilled.

"Maybe *touch* is the wrong word. Would you prefer *fuck*?"

The sweet tension splintered and shattered 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?"

"*Chérie*, nothing matters except 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 do." His whisper 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 the most carnal and indecent invitation she'd ever experienced. Her body cried to accept.

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Silence.

Cassidy thought of running away, and turned to do just that, but she couldn't leave. 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 so close his breath tingled her ear, but she didn't move.

"You can't leave, can you?"

She gritted her teeth, hating her weakness. "Nor can you."

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

Cassidy cast her gaze skyward. As he leaned into her body, her hips pressed against the hard ridge of his cock. He smelled so good, familiar somehow. 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 hands at her hips.

"Wh-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 clanging in her head. Her mind went blank as his mouth brushed against her neck, his teeth grazed her nape.

"Yes," he answered as his fingers slowly opened the top button of her gown. The sound of her zipper sliding down the back 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 brushed her flesh. His fingers delved against the hard nub of her clit through her lacy panties. As he pressed his fingers down her body, her pussy spasmed as she came.

Guilt attempted to engulf her brain, but she shunned it. She needed this. Wanted this. "What do I call you?"

His intimate touch brought a sharp gasp from her mouth. She bit

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down on her lip to keep from screaming. It'd been way too long since she'd given in to pleasure.

She thought of Gabriel and the way he could turn her insides into molten lava within a blink 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 done 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 thumbed out on the edge of abandon.

"Gabe."

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

She reached behind her to cradle 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."

She grinned. "We're both wearing masks and the night is so dark I can barely see you. Besides, what I want is below the waistline."

"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.

"Then it appears that you're the right man for the job." Cassidy shuddered, closing her eyes and letting his talented fingers stroke her into oblivion.

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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. His dreams couldn't compare to the reality of fucking Cassidy in the flesh. 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.

Something within him snapped. Shattered. 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 forget her.

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 rerunning every little detail of Cassidy? Of everything she'd ever done or said? He gritted his teeth, the palm of one of his hands forcing her flesh against his.

The aroma of garden blossoms and the mesmerizing scent of her pussy licked at his senses, nearly sending him over the precipice of sanity.

His other hand clung to her shapely thighs. He knew he had no right to touch her, yet at the same time, deep in his soul, he felt 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 knew that the pulse of excitement running 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

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fucking her senseless. 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 gaze roamed over her as the moonlight sprinkled through the hedges. 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 on his pants and quickly unzipped them, then shoved them 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.

He found himself lifting his hips methodically, naturally, to her manipulations, all the while trying to rein 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 deep within her pussy that time would suspend.

He forced his tormented thoughts away. He didn't want to think of anything but the feel 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. There was no need for words. There was only lust. Passion. This moment.

Gabe thrust a finger into her slick pussy. He clasped his lips over hers to keep her from screaming out in pleasure.

His tongue mimicked the teasing moves of his fingers, plunging deep into her mouth, liking the sweet taste of her lips and the way she flirted with him using her tongue.

She tasted so good. His memories didn't quite live up to this moment. Moving down her body, he nipped at her tight nipples with his teeth, sucking her flesh between his lips and tongue. He didn't doubt for one moment that trying to forget about Cassidy would be as difficult as his year of captivity in a Middle Eastern jail cell.

He slipped another finger inside of her. She rotated her shapely hips 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

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snagged it away from him.

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. "Hmm, you look ready to me."

"Are you?" he asked.

He 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.

*At long last, I'm home.*

His eyes slipped close. If there was one moment he wanted to remember for the rest of his life, it was this one. He remained still, feeling Cassidy's inner muscles strain and relax around his cock. He caught the faint flash of her white teeth in the darkness as she smiled.

"I haven't had sex in a long time," she said, "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, only to thrust 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.

"Ahh. 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 only man she craved.

"*Fuck*," Cassidy cried 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. She moaned and thrust up against him.

"What's that? Want more?" He retracted from her body, maneuvered her to her knees and positioned himself behind her. He slipped a finger into her pussy, crooking it just so, and felt her body quiver. The grooved flesh responded to his touch, as he knew it would.



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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 ground 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 in his tightly clutched fingers.

He slowed, taking calculated thrusts in and out. He felt her release building. The fire within his body raged out of control. He wasn't going to give 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.

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### Chapter Three

Cassidy could barely catch her breath. His cock was hot and hard in her body. Her nails dug into the ground beneath them, the scent of grass had never smelled so erotically earthy. The sounds of the city, the laughter from the party, 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 meticulously slow thrusts he delivered to her had her teeth on edge; everything within her was revved 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. 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 domino. 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. "Do you want to be fucked? *Oh!*"

"Oh, shit," he yelled, pumping his hips upward.

"Yessss..."

Cassidy gyrated her hips into shorter, intense circles, hearing his breath become as ragged as hers. She bit her lip, but the pent-up desire

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burst through her self-restraints as his fingers massaged her clit. She gave into the hedonism riveting her body and shook with spasms as she came hard around his cock.

"Baby!" He pulled her down over him and kissed her lips, his tongue melding with hers as he pounded into her, exploding on his third breath-shattering thrust.

"Oh, Gabriel..."

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

For several moments they lay silently, holding on to each other.

His arms wrapped around her waist, bringing with it an intimacy Cassidy had nearly forgotten. Tears burned her eyes. She bit down on her lip. "It was wrong of me to pretend you were someone else."

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

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

"Ah."

"Who are you trying to forget?" Cassidy asked, wiping the moisture from her eyes.

He tensed. "My only love."

"It's hell, isn't it?"

"It's worse than having your freedom stripped away."

Cassidy smirked. "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 under her tensed. "Sounds like you did the best thing, leaving your ex."

Cassidy glanced at her hand. 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 how long it would be before she felt like this with another man. When would she feel a man's need as savagely as she had tonight?

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

\* \* \* \* \*

## Pulse

Gabriel looked out at the 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 new and fresh. He couldn't say the same concerning the myriad of emotions playing tug-of-war in his gut.

He 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.

He turned from the window, his heart settling in his throat.

Cassidy's warm, sexy body was snuggled between the sheets. She'd fallen asleep in his arms last night. Being that he couldn't leave her in the garden, he'd snuck her into the eleven-bedroom mansion through the secret passageways—the way he'd grown accustomed to doing with girlfriends when he'd been a wild, reckless teenager. He doubted that anyone would think to journey to his old bedroom.

His gaze wandered over her. 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 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, even though his love for her was suppose to be dead. How was a man supposed to cope with that?

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

He stood at the foot of the bed, his heart heavy, and then he looked away from Cassidy, saying a silent goodbye, and quietly left the room. He closed the door behind him, the soft click echoing in his years.

"And where do you think you're going?" Sage asked with a smile.

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"Sage. For crying out loud." Gabriel turned to see 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 arms over chest. "I was just checking out my old room."

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

"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?"

She grinned. "Don't even try it, Sebastien. I bet there's nothing cook has prepared this morning that will be as mouthwatering as 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?"

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.

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An evil smile grazed his lips. Maybe, if she was a good fuck, he'd keep her for himself. Or perhaps 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 and human flesh. Now his closest allies doubted his word.

Zacharias 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. Now he had to die. But first, a little fun.

\* \* \* \* \*

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, then wrapped the starched floral sheets around her naked body. Her throat constricted and her skin tingled as she thought about last night, the stranger without a name, and the feel of his cock inside 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. She shamelessly craved more of him. *Now*.

Cassidy rose from the four-poster bed, noting her clothes 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 whispered voice had stroked her in places she'd thought long forgotten. His gentle yet powerful passion reminded her so much of Gabriel during the early stage of their lightening quick marriage. There'd been 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.

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She 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. She sure as hell needed to 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 huge planter to keep from being seen.

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

Cassidy peeked through the crevices provided by the plant's foliage, getting a direct view of Gabe's handsome profile. His smooth skin reminded her of golden honey, and he oozed sexual energy as natural as breathing. His gray eyes were shadowed with secrets, and Cassidy found herself wanting to know what they were. Her heart pounded.

He was wearing jeans and a white shirt that molded his muscles as if painted on. 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 can make a man 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 hadn't he 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 onto the veranda. They both looked up at her. Her gaze flashed on Gabe, and then Sage. "Good morning. I hope I

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didn't interrupt anything."

The look on Gabriel's face was priceless. She witnessed hunger, surprise and worry within those dove-gray depths. "Cass." He stood up, his chair scraping 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 lie to me?"

Sage reached for her hand, but Cassidy yanked it out of her reach.

"Sweetie, it's not what you think."

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

"Baby—"

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

He grabbed her elbow, twisting 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.



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Hard. "You played me as your fool. I won't be again."

Cassidy's mind whirled, trying to process what truths he'd told her, and what were lies. There were so many emotions barreling down on her soul, she could barely think straight.

Gabriel 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. As she rushed down the stairs, tears streamed from her eyes. "Stop following me and leave me alone!"

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

She whirled around and walked backwards, trying to put some space between them. "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 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. There's still so much I have to tell you. I—"

"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 and his eyes filled with pain.

"You did drop me." Her words hit their mark. She watched as he stood perfectly still. Large. Sullen. Threatening.

"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 only three feet away.

Heat, glass and metal splintered through the sky and sent her sprawling backwards. The blast hurt her eardrums and roared with a

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ferocity that suspended in time. She was thrown onto the front lawn and hit the ground with a solid thud. Everything around her blurred, pain seared through her body. The sound in her ears thundered, drowning out the scene before her.

Cassidy blinked once and then again, before the sky spun around at a dizzying pace. And then she slipped into the black pit of consciousness.

## Chapter Four

Gabriel slowly came to. His eyes burned from smoke, and the smell of burnt rubber and fuel stung his nose. He'd crashed against the pavement, and every bone in his body protested as he sat up.

His mind cleared as he sought for Cassidy, fear slicing through him. He caught a glimpse of her dress over the hedge. He got up slowly and limped over to the front lawn.

"Cassidy," he shouted. Dear God, if anything happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

Gabe found her lying on her back, sprawled out like a rag doll, her long hair curtaining the ground like a veil. He dropped to his knees, tears burning in his eyes.

He checked her vitals. She had a pulse, but it was weak. He bent down and rested his head against her chest as pain wrecked his body. He knew he shouldn't move her, but had to fight the urge to scoop her into his arms and never let go.

"Cass."

*A bomb.* Gabe gritted his teeth. This was no accident.

"Gabe! What was that?" Sage yelled as she ran across the drive toward him. "*Oh My God. Oh my God,*" she cried upon seeing Cassidy.

Gabe pushed to his feet and braced Sage arms, gently shaking her. "Go back in the house. Call 911."

"But—"

"Now, Sage. Go."

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

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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, evil pleasure gleaming in his eyes. He moved to within a foot of Gabriel, and then paused, placing his hands into the pockets of his black suit pants, while he shook his head at the sight of Cassidy. "It didn't have to come to this, you know."

At a definite disadvantage, Gabriel gritted his teeth as rage shook his body. "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." He 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."

Gabe snarled. "I will hunt you down and take pleasure in watching you take your last breath."

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

Gabe watched as his enemy slipped 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. He fell to his knees. 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 associated with it 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. Squad cars surrounded them within minutes. The sound of screeching tires vibrated in his ears.

"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 had to move fast and the last thing he needed was to be held up by

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answering questions to the police.

He turned to Sage and placed 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," Gabriel said, his voice husky with emotion. "You need to understand that this was no accident." 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? Someone did this intentionally?" Sage's hazel eyes widened. "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 on a 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 to leave 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'll 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 on Cass later."

Sage nodded then sprinted over to the ambulance. Within minutes the vehicle whirled out of the circular driveway toward Memorial

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Hospital.

Gabriel took a deep breath, slipping away just as the cops turned his way. His resolve turned into stone as he once again stepped back into that world of darkness, allure and danger. And this time he wouldn't leave before Bertram lay in a body bag.

He made his way around the back of the mansion and talked to Hiriam Graves, Sage's second in command, explaining that the Maison de Bayou Eclipse would be closed, and that everyone was to leave immediately.

His next move.

"Wellington, meet me outside St. James Church in tonight. Six-thirty."

Gabe ended the call.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bertram knocked on my door," Gabriel said, as Wellington, dressed in a pearl gray 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—"

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

Gabriel stopped walking. "For the time being. 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've already called in a team and we're working on finding Bertram."

"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

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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?" Zacharias laughed and popped 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."

Zacharias' head popped up. He narrowed his gaze on the flustered face of his partner. "Don't start getting a conscience, 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."

Zacharias laughed. "Have you ever heard of the 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. He's dead."

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

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

When the slam of the door indicated his partner's exit, Zacharias grinned. "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 shone on her battered face.

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

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

Wearied and guilt-ridden, Gabe nodded, angling his long frame in a chair beside her. Suddenly, the consequences of his actions struck him hard in the face. He'd have to make the first move and be honest with her. Just a night before he'd been ready to walk away from her, or so he'd told himself. He reached out to take her small hand in his, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips when she didn't flinch away. "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 from his. "You mean kill someone."

He couldn't deny it, not 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 within the CIA, for six years—before you knew me."

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

The lie he'd fed her slapped him 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."

"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,



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waiting, his anger growing.

"Yes."

Gabe's frowned as he leaned forward. His gaze bore into 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 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!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassidy's mouth dropped open. His words pierced her soul. She wanted to cry, to shout at him and kick his ass. Something deep within had registered the similarities between the man in the garden and Gabe, but she'd denied it. 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 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 leaned 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 last night and the feel of having Gabe's thick 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."

A muscle in Gabe's jaw twitched. "I meant to tell you goodbye. It was obvious that you didn't want me. Only when I went to find you, there

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you were and—”

She glanced up from her trembling hands. “Well, do yourself a favor and keep going. You can still walk away.”

Folding his arms over his chest, he smiled. “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 pounding at her temples. “I can take care of myself.”

“As of right now, you’re 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 bedside table and throw it at him, but he dodged the roses and the glass shattered on the sparkling white floor.

“You just can’t come back and try to control my life! I’ll have no part of this or you!”

Ignoring her outburst, he said, “You need some time to rest. I’ve asked the nurse to bring a cot.”

She squinted her eyes at him, her heart hammering in her chest. “You are not staying here.”

“Just watch me, darling.” He looked down at the shards of glass, and then back 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 him, but she sure as hell wasn’t about to walk back into his life.

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

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"Where in the hell are we?" Cassidy asked two days later as she and Gabe drove up to an abandoned warehouse in a bad neighborhood. She turned to look at him, taking a sharp intake of air as her gaze 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 gray 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 that these people aren't normal average Joes? They strike and then think." Gabe placed his hand under her chin, bringing her gaze to rest on his. "I never want to take the chance of never seeing your beautiful smile again, of tasting your lips, of making love to you."

A tide of emotions washed over her. What in the hell was

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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 heaven for the 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 cot. He slept shirtless. And then there was the huge erection he woke up with the next morning and tried unsuccessfully to hide, which had stirred up a longing to have his hard cock inside her again.

Her mouth watered. She wanted him. She’d tried to rationalize the night in the garden, but was finding it difficult. 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 she’d wanted him. 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 a mere 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 she 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 free of makeup. He’d never seen a more beautiful woman. His woman,

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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.

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.

He couldn't look away as he slowly brought his glass filled with water to his mouth, 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 rose, offering him a tantalizing glimpse of that sexy belly button. The warehouse left a lot to be desired, yet Cass' curves filled the cold décor to perfection.

The silence between them was killing him. The steady strum of tension rocking between their bodies had him ready to strip off 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 would she look into his eyes and know how much he wanted her? That she was his first and last choice every time?

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

Gabe stood up, pushing his plate away, his gaze raking over her. She looked adorable, vulnerable, as she nervously looked away and ran a hand through her hair. But the signs of what she couldn't voice were evident from the peaked tips of her nipples straining against the cotton of

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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 willed herself to move, to run upstairs to the bedroom where she could hide behind the locked door and be safe 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 aching 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 stood up from the couch and marched out of the makeshift kitchen and away from temptation.

She'd 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 of 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 him. "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 had didn't mean anything?"

"No, of course it meant something." Tears blurred her vision. "You're not the man I thought you were. The man I knew is a figment of my imagination."

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Gabe leapt up the stairs toward 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. She shuddered. "A man who was imprisoned for a year and didn't tell me?" A tear slid down her cheek. "How could you do that to me?"

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 to look 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, 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 escaped her 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 his zipper and slowly slid it down. 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 sigh of satisfaction to her lips.

She pushed his jeans and underwear down over his hips and looked up into the heat emblazoned on his face. She slowly peeled off her shirt and shorts to stand before him naked. She'd never been so vulnerable. The realization scared her. She bit her lip, afraid to give in to



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the pleasure that yearned to be released.

"You're so beautiful, baby."

He picked her up in his arms, her legs instinctually wrapping around his waist. He held onto the railing and laid her on the carpeted stairs. He looked down into her eyes, and she could swear she saw his soul.

He kissed her lips softly, his tongue dipping deeply into her mouth.

She swept her fingers up his back, loving the feel of solid muscles flexing underneath her fingertips. He pulled back to look down at her as he pressed his cock against her soft flesh.

He 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 again feel as intensely as she did right now. "Mmm, 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. Gabe quickened his pace, his hot kisses and licks blunt and flirting with every nerve in her body.

She squeezed her eyes shut, felt the tension building within her womb. The sensation was heady, just like her desire for Gabe.

Before she could claim her second climax, he replaced his mouth with his cock, rubbing against her entrance slowly, nearly driving her insane.

His gaze 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,

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sheathing his cock deep within her pussy. He paused, moaning. "Cassidy, baby. You feel so damn good."

"So do you."

He 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 gaze linked with hers. The heat between them fused them as one, in perfect sync with his quickening thrusts.

She cried out, her nails clutching his back, holding onto him as his cock buried into her repeatedly. She couldn't catch her breath.

"Fuck me, Gabe. *Please.*"

"I thought you'd never ask." 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. Entering her deeply, his cock slid gently against her ass. Her muscles clamped around him. The slapping sound of flesh on flesh was all she heard as he pounded into her. Completely. Lovingly hard. "Oh, yesss, baby!"

She dug her nails into the carpet, bracing herself as best she could as he fucked her from behind. She screamed out her pleasure, but he didn't let up his sensual assault on her body.

He slipped his finger 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.

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He slumped against her and whispered 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 his 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 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's evil laugh came to Gabriel through the receiver. Ice slid into his veins, and rage condensed in his stomach. "You keep her out of this."

"Ah, but see, I cannot. 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

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shit someone forgot to flush.”

“Would you still feel that way if I told you that I’m right outside your door with enough C4 to blow you, your pretty wife, and half the neighborhood to bits?”

Gabe tensed, gripping the cell like a vise. “I don’t believe you.”

“Look out your window.”

He edged to the window and peeked out at an angle so 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?

His mind zeroed in on only one 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, but Gabe was sure the man couldn’t see him.

“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 downstairs, and that Vincent was ready. He disconnected the call with Bertram as he ran for his gun and ammunition. Then he ducked back into position and looked 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 later, another and another.

Gabe cocked his gun and peeked out the window again, shocked to see James Wellington shooting at Bertram. Bertram’s 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 rang through the night air and seconds later, the front door crashed open. Gabriel reached for his gun he dropped as he’d

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dived across the floor. He turned just in time to see Wellington's gun aimed at him.

The two men stared at each other.

"How could you sell your soul?" Gabe demanded.

His former boss looked wild with fury. "It was easy, once I took out Bertram. Now one hundred million dollars of Aziz's gold will be all mine, and only I know 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 times during several mission.

Wellington grunted. "Please, working for the government will never get me the kind of power I need. You have no idea how low I can be, but I'll show you now."

"Be sure not to miss," Gabriel taunted.

Wellington's smile was pure evil. "You always were a cocky—"

One shot pierced his former boss' head.

Wellington's eyes went blank as the gun slipped from his hand, and he dropped face forward to the floor at Gabriel's feet.

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

"It's nice to see you, too," Gabriel said around a chuckle as he ran a hand over his forehead to wipe the perspiration.

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

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

"It's my wife." Gabe ran to where she stood trembling against the wall. He wrapped her 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 away 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,

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too, Agent Del Marco.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*One month later...*

“So, you’ve really hung up your spy ways?” Sage asked, dancing in Gabe’s arms. She looked up when he didn’t respond. His eyes were trained on another woman. Cassidy.

“Damn, isn’t she the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen?” Gabe couldn’t stop looking at her when she caught his eye. The connection was 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, loving the feel of 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?”

Gabe grinned. “You don’t say.” He bent down to taste her succulent lips and wished 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 writes African-American and multicultural sensual romance and has been immersed in the wonderful world of romantic fiction and creating characters known for their diversity for years. Anisa resides just out of Chicago with her family.

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Midnight Whispers by Anisa Damien

### Chapter One

*"My name is Lion. I've crossed boundaries—enough to do this. Everyone knows about boundaries. Those secrets you place in the back of your mind. Those sexy impulses that bring a smile to your face..."*

"Oh, please," Joie Reese exclaimed, slapping the palm of her hand on her thigh as she stood up from the conference table. She hit the Stop button on the recorder with the polished tip of her fingernail. She eyed Wrynne Jacobs, her station manager, owner, and friend. "It sounds like a bad porn tape."

Wrynne grinned as she pushed up her reading glasses on her pert nose. "His approach is what makes him so sexy."

"You're kidding, right?" Joie was having difficulty understanding how some man calling up the station with a disguised voice could contain any sexy quality, but the wicked streak within her was intrigued. "He calls himself a 'Lion'."

"Actually, no, I'm not kidding. Come on, think of the possibilities. This could be just what your show needs."

Joie looked out the wide windows of XKLS, Houston's station for R&B, and home of her intimate, love jams broadcast, *Midnight Whispers*. The show was hot, but evidently Wrynne didn't think so, or she wouldn't



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be contemplating this new addition. The latest ratings report showed a dip.

"All right, let's hear what he has to say." Joie exhaled, placing her hands in the back pockets of her faded jeans.

Just when she thought life was settling down for her, that she was gaining some control of it, the world had to throw her a damn curve. She should have been use to it. The car wreck that served as her six month marriage to Grant was reminder enough about uncontrollable events. He had been *everything* her parents wanted in a son-in-law. An ER doctor. Charismatic. Handsome as all get out—and fucking one of his nurse cronies.

Wrynnne chuckled, tapping her ink pen against the glass of the conference table. She sashayed over to the recorder and pushed the Play button. "Listen to the sounds of opportunity."

Joie refrained from comment; instead, she listened intently as once again the stranger's altered voice filtered through the room.

*"...I know what you're thinking—this guy has an agenda. I do. I'm in pursuit of a woman and determined for these recordings to tell her just what I want from her. I will send a new recording daily as long as I hear it being played on the broadcast. Should you choose not to proceed, I will not call again. If you choose to continue, I will be forever in your debt."*

Wrynnne hit the Stop button, looking expectantly at Joie. "Well?"

Joie's eyebrow quirked at Wrynnne's mega-watt smile. "You think this guy is worth adding to my show? What do you know about him?"

"Well, for starters, I've talked to the Lion."

Joie folded her arms over her chest. "When?"

"We met yesterday at the Milan's," Wrynnne said, a secretive smile playing on her lips.

"I love his concept; it's so yummy," Wrynnne proclaimed. Her voice heightened with excitement as she danced her way over to Joie. "Women will eat him up."

Joie frowned, crossing her arms over her breasts. "Yummy? Really Wrynnne—listen to reason. This could be some psycho on a killing spree for all we know. Do you really want to subject my listeners to this?"

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Wrynnne grinned, her dimples deepening as she met Joie's gaze. "Sexy dialogue of epic proportions? Ah...yes!"

Joie rolled her eyes, stomped away, and dropped to a chair. "He's a stranger."

"Well, not exactly." Wrynnne looked down at her hands.

"Not exactly? Do you know who this man is?"

Wrynnne sighed. "Well, he's hot as hell. I can tell you that."

"So, you got a jones for this man." Joie shook her head. "I should have known this had something to do with your year of abstinence."

"Excuse me! Just because I'm not—" Wrynnne tried to look affronted but smiled. "Damn, it has been a long time. But I digress—someone might as well be getting some even if I'm not the Lion's chosen target."

Joie sat on the edge of her seat. "Then *who* is?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Wrynnne!"

Wrynnne shook her ebony curls. "I'm sorry. I promised the Lion that I would not divulge his identity or the woman he's interested in—at least, not until he's ready to contact her. If I do, he won't continue with the tapings. Rest assured, I've checked him out."

Joie frowned. "Lord forbid."

"Don't you see? His anonymity is what makes him alluring? It's like a behind-closed-doors angle and from a man's point of view."

"Girl, somewhere I missed the alluring part."

Wrynnne pursed her rosy colored lips. "Joie, you know after taking over as the owner of XKLS after daddy stepped down that I have to step up my game to prove myself."

*Here it comes*, Joie thought silently, forcing herself not to look at her. They were girls, but she refused to be manipulated. If she didn't make eye contact with her, she could remain disconnected. She could remain strong in the fight. She would win, damn it.

"I mean, I'm out to prove I'm not daddy's little girl. That I'm establishing myself outside the family name and money."

*She wasn't saying that when she spent five-thousand dollars shopping last week with daddy's money.* Joie sat rod straight in her chair, and placed her

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hands in her lap as she crossed her legs. Wrynne wasn't going to give up and neither was she.

"Come on, this could be just the edge the station needs to up ratings and let's face it, that's what daddy cares about—the bottom line is profit. More listeners, higher ratings, and more money. I wouldn't jeopardize that with some psycho. The man's legit."

Joie looked into her friend's eyes and slowly conceded. "It would be like bare confessions from a man's point of view."

"Yes. We can give it a trial run. You have to admit he could be a hit, to think of a man baring his soul for the woman he's hot for. Listeners will eat it up. Ratings will soar."

The Lion's approach did hold a certain mystique behind it, and listeners would love it. She sighed. "Fine, but we agree this is only for a trial basis?"

Wrynne hugged her friend. "Oh, you'll see, this will be great!"

Joie shook her head, hoping she wasn't going to live to regret this.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did she take the bait?"

Wrynne glanced over at the handsome man sitting across from her at a booth at Lucy's Diner. She grinned. "Yes, but it wasn't easy."

Leo smiled. "Nothing about Joie is."

"I wish I met a guy willing to pull out all the stops for me." Wrynne sighed, dipping her spoon into her ice cream sundae. She looked up, pointing her silverware at Leo. "So what's your story?"

He winked. "Because Joie's worth it."

Wrynne nodded her head and smiled at him. "You passed."

\* \* \* \* \*

"To all my listeners out there tonight, welcome to Midnight Whispers. To all those who have someone to hold close—don't let go."  
And he had never intended to...

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Her husky voice filled him with need. Raw sexual hunger coursed through his body like a shot of Irish whiskey. Leo Tobias gritted his teeth. His fingers clenched the white sheets on the king-sized bed he'd requested when booking the hotel suite. The windless summer night air in Houston did little to assuage the heat shifting through his body. Home. He was back home.

His cock stirred in agreement. He had sported a hard-on since the moment he'd arrived yesterday afternoon. A new start. A new life. And her. He wasn't about to pretend he hadn't come back for her and the tight fit of her sweet pussy. He wouldn't pretend she didn't set that cagey streak on edge whenever she was near. That there hadn't been one moment he hadn't dreamt about Joie Reese. Things between them were not settled, not by a long shot.

"Tonight is ladies' night." Her hypnotic voice whispered through the speakers. The soft hues of her words only made him ache for her touch. Her lips. Her taste. It was as if she was speaking directly to him.

Leo massaged the head of his cock and closed his eyes. His callused touch could not compare to the tight fit of her cunt or the wet sheath of her mouth. He would find a way to have her again, underneath his body as he fucked her. He wanted to be deep inside her, to feel his cum blending with her spicy heat. He stroked the long line of his shaft slowly at first, and then quickened his pace to build the release his body desperately craved. He wanted to explode, wanted lust to consume him as her warm touch once had.

"Joie!" Leo groaned in frustration at his failed attempt at masturbation. A hand job sorely lacked the satisfaction he knew he'd find if she were laying next to him. Nothing was enough to ease the tension coursing through his system. He leaned against the pillows while every muscle in his body throbbed.

He threw back the covers, rising from the bed, naked—the way he preferred to sleep every night—and walked over to the window. He'd made so many mistakes when it came to Joie. The-friends-with-benefits status they'd both claimed was enough only left him hungry for their next hook up. That thirst made him question so many things he hadn't before.

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Leo scrubbed his fingers through the short spikes of his black hair, and then walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower head. He stepped in just as the first icy blast hit his overheated skin.

“Shit!”

Leo forced his mind to think of something else. Anything else. He’d come home, much to his aunt’s pleasure. Sooner or later, he would have to visit his Aunt Shelby. She was really the only family he had after his parents had died in a car accident while he was in grade school. He’d given her hell—in and out of trouble, threatened with juvenile detention and, still, she’d loved him like her own.

His thoughts quickly turned back to Joie. It’d been a year since he’d seen her last, before he’d left for Chicago. The wound left by the gunshot that had pierced his ribcage was proof enough of how much a year changed things. He couldn’t waltz into her life as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Although, his cock disagreed.

Leo turned off the water, wondering if he could actually settle in Houston, make it his home, and find some peace from the events of the last year. He stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel.

A love song broke through his musings while a wicked smile crossed Leo’s face. A plan of action in mind, he picked up the small voice recorder. He wasn’t called a hell raiser for nothing. As an ex-Navy SEAL, he’d conquered greater feats during his stint on the secret ops team. He knew what it took to go after what he wanted: a game in seduction.

He hoped Joie was ready to play.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next evening, Joie juggled two bags of grocery, her purse, and tried to slip the key in the lock of her apartment. A package caught her eye. She glanced over the manila colored envelope at her door.

“Special delivery,” she mumbled, setting down the bags to scoop up the package and shake it.

“A very handsome man delivered that.”

Joie jumped, looking into the intent gaze of her nosey, next-door neighbor, Mrs. Hilliard. As usual her face was flawless with the makeup

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she'd applied. The cosmetic surgery she'd had belied the fact that the woman was nearing her seventies.

"Hi, Nolia."

She wanted to escape but short of opening her apartment door and closing it in front of the busybody's face there was no running away from Magnolia Hilliard.

"Joie, it *is* about time you got yourself a man."

*Strike one.*

"I don't need a man. It's the twenty-first century. I'm too independent to worry about things like commitment."

Her neighbor looked unconvinced as she angled her stylishly auburn head at Joie. "I don't know about you, but what woman wants to go to bed alone with independence? I don't and—" Nolia winked at her. "I *don't*."

*Strike two.*

Joie rolled her eyes. Even the busybody was getting her groove on? This was a sad day and more information than she'd ever wanted to know about the woman.

"What's his name?"

"What's whose name?"

Dressed in her silk robe, her grey eyes probing, the older woman winked as she inched towards Joie. "The delivery guy. I remember he wasn't wearing a uniform—so it wasn't a professional service, but he had the most charming smile. He'd be perfect for you."

*Damn! Strike three.*

"I have no idea, Nolia, but he seems to have made quite an impression on you; however, I'm really tired and will investigate this further—later." Joie turned to insert her key into the door and breathed a sigh of relief to see her familiar belongings after a long day. She turned to face the smile on Nolia's face.

"Do let me know what you come up with."

Joie smiled. As if the woman would let her forget. She picked up her grocery bags, said a hurried good night and closed the door to her

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sanctuary. Damn, it felt good to be home, even at this ungodly hour in the morning.

After taking a quick shower, Joie threw on an oversized T-shirt, and went in search of milk and cereal. Her gaze landed on the manila envelope. What was it? She thought back to what Nolia had said about the man who delivered it. Handsome and a charming smile sounded like a description for trouble to Joie.

She placed her bowl on her coffee table and plopped down on the couch. Her eyes landed on the package. She was sure the contents would never be as illicit as a man mailing her handcuffs—one of her secret fantasies. She lifted it in her hands, tore it open, and a CD popped out labeled *Indulge me*.

“Cute, just what I need—a damn stalker.” Joie groaned, yet she was intrigued, and a tingle of anticipation shot up her spine. Curiosity won the battle. She rose from the couch and placed the CD into her player, then used the remote to turn up the sound.

“Indulge Me.”

The smooth male voice was muffled. Apprehension settled in her stomach, but she couldn’t tear herself away. She leaned against her chaise as she listened to the man on the CD.

“I realize this might seem a little strange. After all, you think me a stranger.”

Joie shook her head, folding her arms around her chest. “Now, why would I think that?”

“But I know you, Joie, every sweet nuance of you. Please believe that I have no intention of bringing you harm, only pleasure.”

Her breath hitched. *Why was he doing this?*

As if reading her thoughts, the man chuckled. “You want to know why? Why I want you? You are the woman I want to have. Every inch of you, Joie. I want you in ways that scare me.”

An unfathomable, yet delicious shudder ached between her thighs; her panties were wet. Her pussy throbbed. She was being aroused by a man she didn’t even know, a voice on a CD no less.

“You’ve got me addicted. I’m lusting after you, and I want you to lust after me. I’ll be sending you these private recordings for your

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pleasure. No one has to be the wiser. This game is meant for two. To begin, there's something I want you to do for me...."

"What?" Joie said aloud, tension in her body strummed so tightly, she swore she'd snap in half. Her fingers clutched the fabric of the chaise. She blamed her reaction on the fact that it had been too damn long since she'd had a man in her bed.

"Touch yourself."

She pressed the Pause button on the remote, and a slow smile spread across Joie's full lips. She'd never been one to avoid a game of an amorous nature, as long as the terms were fair. The thought of playing with a stranger made her feel naughty and uninhibited.

*He wanted her... Lusted after her...*

Joie caught a glance of herself in the mirror. She'd recently experienced the horror of a lifetime when her beautician had chopped off generous inches of her tresses into what Genevieve had called *hip*. Like a fool, she had trusted the stylist only to shriek in horror at the layers of short, razor-cut wisps. Although she'd left the boutique, accusing Genevieve of sipping on too much Jesus juice, the new look was growing on her.

Did he know what she looked like? *He said we know each other, but from where? When?* Did she really want to play this game?

She was thirty-three years old, the eldest daughter out of three. She was the remaining, *unmarried* child of her parents, Brenda and Curtis Reese. The more worrisome one, her mother always proclaimed, although Joie begged to differ. She had never been able to march to the beat of anyone else's drum. She supposed that same fierce determination to be independent sometimes contributed to her being lonely. She just couldn't settle for less. She wanted all or nothing.

You don't have to be lonely....

She looked at the CD player, biting her lip as she contemplated her course of action. Giving in to curiosity, she hit the Play button on the remote and closed her eyes.

Joie smoothed a strand of her hair; her doe-like, brown eyes twinkled back at her. Her complexion was the color of roasted pecans. Her



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body—five-foot-six inches of curves—that refused to bend to society’s rules of what “thin” meant were just fine with Joie. She’d learned self-acceptance at an early age. Her features were more classical than exotic, except for her bee-stung lips—her best asset according to Leo.

A secret smile crossed her face at the thought of him.

It’d been a long time since she’d heard his sexy voice or felt his knowing hands on her body.

“Hmm, now there was a man who knew how to do a body good.” Joie laughed. Her heart twisted. Thoughts of what she’d once wanted from their no-strings-attached relationship had somehow always reigned supreme in her mind. Grant never really had a chance because, in the back of her mind, she’d always compared him to Leo. It wasn’t something she was proud of, but the fact remained, Grant could never be the man who kindled something deep within her. No one could.