

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

Escape
to

Heaven

Reana Malori

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To every woman who has ever felt that she had no way
out. Your strength will guide you and I know you'll
find your escape to heaven as well.

—Reana

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book deals with the very real subject of domestic violence. Some of the scenes are graphic in nature and may be challenging to read. If the subject of domestic violence is difficult for you to read or you do not wish to be exposed to this topic, please be forewarned.

Very Respectfully,

Reana Malori

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Prologue

Oh, God, please make him stop. I don't deserve this. Adele Bittner cowered in a ball as she leaned up against the closet door, her body tense and tight with fear and frustration. Asking a question that no one but she could answer, her thoughts rushed through her mind at a furious pace. She tried to protect her body from the brutal force of his blows while also watching the man who had made her life a living hell in such a short time.

How could I have put up with this for so long? Under the guise of shifting her hands to cover her face, she glowered at Joey Bittner, her husband of two years. He, on the other hand, continued to stare at her with loathing in his eyes as he stood over her body, poised to strike at her like a snake. Once he found a weak spot, an opening to take another opportunity to hit her, she knew his fist would fly.

Passing out and falling into the abyss was not an option, so she did everything she could think of to stay

clearheaded and awake for a bit longer. The one and only time she had fallen unconscious, he had become even more enraged. Her body was riddled with bruises, the pain almost too much to bear. She had lain in bed for almost a week trying to recover. Joey had called her supervisor and fed him a story about Adele having the flu. To this day, Adele would swear her boss knew exactly what was going on, but every time he tried to ask about her home life, she changed the subject. Fool that she was, she had always believed that some things should stay behind closed doors. At least that was what her mother had always told her.

If I can hold on a little more, he'll stop. I know he will. He always does. Knees pulled up to her chest, she wrapped her hands around her head. Tucking her body into a tighter ball, she tried to make herself a smaller target. Maybe the blows wouldn't hurt so badly if they didn't connect with soft flesh.

"You fucking bitch! You always start this shit with me. I'm tired of always having to answer to you. I can come and go when I damn well please. You don't

question me. Ever! I never wanted to marry your stupid ass anyway!” Her neck jerked to the side from the force of his fist landing on the side of her face.

Damn, that hurt like hell, but if she could just hold on and keep her mouth shut, he would eventually leave.

“You always make me do this to you, Adele. You will learn to mind your own fucking business and leave other people alone.”

He leaned close to her face, and spittle sprayed from his mouth and landed on her skin. The cloying scent of cheap perfume clung to his clothing and skin from his night out with that bitch he was sleeping with. He continued screaming at her, as if he were trying to shatter her eardrums. “You shouldn’t have told her husband. You need another lesson on who’s in charge here! I’ve tried to warn you about what would happen if you didn’t learn your place. Why didn’t you learn your lesson?”

Although her arms were raised in an attempt to block her face from his attacks, Joey violently yanked her arm down and out of the way. His strong,

punishing grip prevented her from reclaiming her arm and covering her face. He threw another punch, this time directly to her eye, landing on the bone with precision accuracy.

“No, please stop!” She couldn’t help crying out loud. The tears were flowing freely down her face. There was so much pain. She’d been through this so many times before, but his anger seemed unreasonable. Without the strength to stop him from doing whatever he wanted, she knew he would only stop when he was ready.

Finally pulling back, he stood up straight and started pacing in front of her. His voice was low and angry as he talked to himself. About what, she couldn’t really understand. Although he was distracted, she knew his attention was still focused on her and it would be stupid to try and get away.

As the tears continued to flow down her face and blur her vision, she thought about her situation and couldn’t believe her life had become such a joke. Why had she married this man? Why couldn’t she see his true nature before now? Had she been so blinded by

the thought of someone so handsome and desirable to other women actually wanting her? Hindsight was always twenty-twenty, and she could now see there were signs from the very beginning that all wasn't how it appeared.

Shortly after they'd started dating, she and Joey had been driving to dinner one night and a very odd conversation had ensued. At the time, she'd had no idea where the topic had come from or why the discussion had started in the first place.

Glancing at her as he tilted his head in her direction, he asked what appeared to be an innocent question. "So, you know Terrell Johnson, right?" He gave her a sideways glance, maybe judging her response to his question, then continued, "You and he dated for a bit is what I hear."

She wasn't sure how Joey knew this bit of information. She'd always thought he and Terrell had moved in different circles, as they'd always seemed so different from one another. However, New Bern, North Carolina wasn't a very big town, and it seemed that most everyone knew each other in some form or

fashion. After he finished his question, Adele was hesitant to answer because she hadn't really wanted to discuss her prior relationships, but didn't want to lie to him either.

Trying to keep her voice light, as if it were no big deal, she answered him. "Yeah, we dated for a bit, but it didn't work out."

"Hmm. I saw him a few times at the club and he mentioned this bitch Adele he was seeing. I guess that was you."

Shock was the first thing she felt. Then she quickly realized how hurt she was that he would make such a casual remark about her. Adele hadn't responded at the time and had just let it go. If only she had heeded her gut at the time, she would have realized a mean streak existed within Joey and left him a long time ago.

Not one to start confrontations if she could avoid them, several months after that conversation Adele still questioned why Joey would bring up Terrell's comments about her so casually. Even with those doubts and constant second-guessing, it still hadn't

prevented her from saying yes to his marriage proposal. It was quite sad when she looked at the situation. She had fallen into the trap that so many women do when it comes to men. For some strange reason, she had actually believed he would change for her. Stupid. That was what she had been, and now she was paying the price.

Jarred back to the present when Joey grabbed her hair and slammed her head against the hard closet door, she screamed, “Joey, stop doing this! Why are you always hitting me? I don’t deserve this.”

“Fuck you, Adele. I’m gonna show your ass not to fuck with me.” He stalked from the room, and she listened as he rummaged around in the kitchen. A loud banging caught her attention, and she knew time was running out. Not sure what the hell he was doing, Adele began to lift herself off the ground and realized that she must have a broken rib. Intense pain shot through her body and forced her to buckle her knees, dragging her back down to the ground. This motherfucker had done this to her again. They’d been married for only two years and during that time, he

had broken two of her ribs, given her numerous black eyes, and split her lip on at least three occasions.

He had always claimed it was because of something she had done. As if that could explain away what he had done to her. His excuse this time was that she'd talked to the husband of the woman he was cheating on her with. But it wasn't her problem that the man was caught off guard when she mentioned Joey and Regina were in Atlanta visiting mutual friends.

How the hell was she supposed to know Regina had never told her husband she was going out of town with Joey? Hell, everybody else seemed to know about the two of them. Adele hated the pitying looks thrown her way when they were around their friends. The son of a bitch had brought his whore to their house for almost every major holiday and special event. Everyone knew what was going on, and no one had said a damn thing to her!

Adele realized she was probably the stupidest woman in the world. She had allowed her man to

leave town with another woman, no questions asked. God, she'd been such an idiot.

Realizing she only had a few more seconds to get herself together, she tried getting up again. She moved too quickly and slipped on the blood that was gushing from her nose and mouth. Her right eye was almost completely closed from Joey's repeated punches, and her mouth felt as if it was swollen to twice its normal size. *Oh God, what am I going to do now? I can't take this shit anymore.*

Hearing Joey walk back in the room, Adele knew time had run out. She curled into a ball on the floor, not only making herself smaller, but not giving him an easy access point. Her anxiety increased as she waited for the blows to begin. When she didn't feel the punches raining down on her, she looked through her fingers to see what was going on and her blood ran cold. A large butcher's knife was in his hand, and it was pointed menacingly toward her face. The sick fuck was slowly twirling the handle around in his hand. Oh God, this was it. She was about to die at the

hands of her husband, a man who was supposed to love her above all others.

“I told you to quit fucking around with shit that you don’t know about. I’m done with you, Adele. I could kill you right now and no one would give a shit. You don’t have any family to speak of. You and your mother haven’t spoken two words to each other in years. I was all you had to keep your sorry ass from being nobody.” His laugh was almost crazed. “My family told me not to marry your trifling ass. You’re not even that pretty.”

“Joey, please stop. You don’t want to do this. I’ll leave. I’ll give you a divorce and you can just walk away. I promise not to tell anyone about tonight. I’ll say that I fell. Aaaggghh!” He plunged the knife into the closet door right next to her head. “Oh God, please, Joey, don’t do this! Please let me go.”

“I can’t stand you. I wish I’d never married you.” Another plunge and the knife landed on the other side of her head and lodged in the closet door. Adele didn’t know what else to do. She now realized he was truly capable of killing her if he wanted to, and dammit, she

was *not* going to die like this. Cowering on the floor, afraid of the man she had vowed to honor until death did they part, was a bunch of bullshit. There was no way she was going to let him be the one to bring death to her door. Damn, she needed to grow a fucking backbone, and fast.

Thinking quickly, Adele rolled back onto the floor and rose on her knees. She had to get into a position where she could jump up quickly. She wasn't in the best shape, but she wasn't a slouch either. Fuck this shit! She was done being scared of this sorry son of a bitch. He had put his hands on her for the last time.

Joey shifted his position to get out of her way as she moved onto her knees. He was still spouting off stuff about how stupid she was and how he never should have married her. *Yeah, motherfucker, the feeling's mutual.* The sarcastic thought entered her head, but she didn't say it aloud.

"Joey, please stop!" She needed him to think she'd let him continue beating on her. She'd grown up in a house where her mother had been beaten up

numerous times by several boyfriends, and she'd sworn she would never put up with the same. Personal promises were all fine and good, but just look at the unbelievable situation in which she now found herself.

Seeing an opening as he went to shift from his crouching position to standing, she threw her arm out and knocked him off balance. Not expecting her to do anything, he was caught off guard and lost his footing. He fell to the ground and banged his elbow. He winced in pain, and she knew it had only made him even angrier with her. As he was getting up from the ground, she quickly crawled out the bedroom and got to her feet. It was hard to see anything since her right eye was swelling and closing. However, the heavy lamp she'd just purchased two months ago was right at her fingertips. She picked it up by the neck and swung the heavy base of the lamp blindly toward the bedroom door, knowing he would be close behind her. The blow landed on the side of his face with a hard thud, but the lamp didn't shatter.

“You fucking bitch,” he yelled at her. Joey was holding his head, and she knew he was dazed. She knew no one would fault her if he died. Hell, this sorry-ass excuse for a man deserved to meet his maker after the pure hell he had put her through tonight. Getting a firmer grasp on the lamp, she swung it at the side of his head, her target in sight. She hit him with everything she had and watched as he slumped to the floor unconscious. The impact of the blow caused pain to race up her arms as the lamp crashed against his skull and shattered into multiple pieces.

Wanting to inflict more pain but knowing she needed to get the hell out of Dodge, Adele ran out the front door and across the street to the only neighbor who had ever been kind to her. Praying she was at home and would open the door this late at night, Adele rang the doorbell in rapid succession.

“Please, help me! Please, open up! I need help!” Looking back to the open door of her house, Adele didn’t notice any movement from inside, but she wasn’t willing to take any chances. Knocking again,

she saw lights come on upstairs and knew she was almost free.

When the door opened, she almost fell down with relief. Cops. She had to call the cops—they would help her to get away.

The neighbor looked at her in complete shock and horror. “Adele? What’s happened to you?”

“Please, call the police. I think I may have killed him.” And with that last thought, with a woman she barely knew staring at her bruised and battered face, Adele finally passed out.

Chapter One

Five years later...

Adele Bittner was no more. Adele Woolner had replaced that person, and she was a take-no-prisoners type of woman. Adele had tried everything she could to move on and forget about the hell she had experienced with her ex-husband Joey Bittner. They'd been married for such a short time, but the damage he had inflicted on her had taken a serious toll on her ego, her pride, and her self-esteem. Years of self-reflection were hard on a woman who had felt like nothing for so long, and it had taken a long time to get back on solid ground again.

After that last night with Joey in North Carolina, a short stay in the hospital, and some difficult conversations with the local police, she had known it was time for a change. Three months after her escape from Joey and a very speedy trial, she had moved to Alexandria, Virginia. The first thing she had done was

to find a job as a manager at a consulting company with a good reputation.

Reinventing herself had become her only focus, and she tackled that goal with a vengeance. No one, and she meant *no one*, would ever know the scared woman she had been before. Reflecting on the woman she once was, Adele was ashamed that she had ever been so weak and made a vow to never let a man control her life again. This time, she was making a promise she would actually keep. Finally doing well and building a life that she wanted, Adele was impressed by all of the changes she had made in her life. All in all, she was damn proud of what she'd accomplished.

Shortly after moving to Virginia and settling into her new life, she'd found some boxing classes at a local gym that became both a stress relief and her salvation. Three times a week for more than three years, Adele had taken boxing to help her gain more confidence. The sport also had the added benefit of teaching her to not feel so helpless. She had gained strength, muscle, and a very effective right hook.

That right hook, when combined with her vicious uppercut, could stop a man in his tracks if she wanted. Most recently she had cut back to one or two nights per week due to work conflicts, but she never gave it up all together. She did other things for her workouts as well, but she was glad the gym was always available when she needed it.

Part of the reason she never stopped the boxing classes was just in case Joey ever got the crazy idea to come looking for her again. She would be ready for his ass this time. Adele was no fool, and she would be damned if that motherfucker got close enough to lay another hand on her. No man would ever get the opportunity to hurt her again. She vowed to kill the next son of a bitch who tried, not just break a few bones in his face.

No, she wasn't scared anymore and had the skills to back it up. Over the years, she had met some badass motherfuckers in her boxing class, and they'd taught her a thing or two. Five badass motherfuckers, to be exact. As it turned out, all of them were current or former military. When she'd first met some of the

guys at the gym, she had been reticent about striking up any type of conversation. Her natural inclination was to be reserved, and she'd really tried to stay out of their way. Initially, the only person she'd spoken to while working out had been Hank, the gruff but friendly owner. She was always allowed her space and never felt crowded, which had been extremely important at the time.

Over time and as she continued to visit the place, she let her guard down enough to show a smile or say a few friendly words. Something in her eyes or posture must have given something away. The men must have recognized something that triggered their protective instincts. The entire group had taken her under their wing as if she was their long-lost baby sister, and she was accepted into the fold without hesitation. It was a slow process at first, but gradually, she carved out a place in her life for them, and they seemed to fit right in.

They never asked about what happened to her. Of course they knew whatever it was had given her an intense need and desire to learn how to defend herself.

The guys weren't stupid by any stretch of the word, and Adele knew they weren't fooled by her tough exterior and cool-as-a-cucumber façade. It had been very difficult for her to trust them at first, but they had been patient, never pushing her further than she was willing to go. After about one year, her walls had come crumbling down, and she had gained the one thing she'd never had. A family.

Ethan Dickerson was still serving in the Navy, and although he did not speak in much detail about what his job involved, she had figured out pretty early that he was a Navy SEAL. He never denied it and once she made the assumption, he never tried to hide what he did for a living—he simply didn't talk about it around her. A protector by nature, he was always the first one to start trouble and usually the last one to end it as well. He never let her forget that it was their responsibility to take care of her, whether she wanted it or not. Often she would catch Ethan giving her a questioning look, as if he was trying to figure something out. He never broached the subject, but she knew he had guessed her secret early. People

often disregarded Ethan because of his blond hair and sea-green eyes. He looked too friendly and nice to be such a badass. However, once people realized that his pretty-boy, model-worthy looks were simply a product—or accident, according to Ethan—of his birth, they never made that mistake again.

Tyler Greene was the jokester of the bunch, and she had rarely ever seen him without his trademark smile that highlighted the deep dimples in his chiseled face. He had been more forthcoming about his career, so Adele knew that he was a Recon Marine and he loved every second of it. His father had retired from the Marines after twenty-three years, and both of his brothers were currently serving Marines. It was definitely a family tradition, and she saw how he soaked up every second, proud of who he was and the bond he shared with his unit.

Tony Chavez-Avitia was the quiet one of the bunch. He was former Army Delta Force and was another who had never spoken about what he did while serving. Hell, she was surprised she even knew that's what he was. Tony had only ever admitted to

her that he was Army Special Forces, but she had heard him and Ethan talking one day and realized he had been so much more. And although she had this bit of information, not once had she ever asked Tony about it. Until he was comfortable telling her about it, she would leave well enough alone. Even though he was now out of the military, Tony still protected people every day of his life. He now owned a personal security company, and not only did he provide security details and protection to the rich and famous, along with a few political figures, he also performed some intelligence work for a few three-letter agencies. A couple of years after they all met, Tony had once let it slip that he and his family had grown up extremely poor and had to scrape by for every meal and every piece of clothing they had. Although his parents' financial situation had improved, they made sure their children never forgot where they came from.

Daniel Pearson, who, she fondly referred to as “the peacemaker,” was the one many of them went to when they needed to vent about a situation or about one another. He had a knack for diffusing conflict,

and if Daniel was involved, you knew everyone would come out on the other side with all their limbs intact and only a few bumps and bruises for their trouble. Daniel was also a Navy SEAL and had served for more than ten years. He was a former Marine who'd switched over to the Navy for the sole purpose of becoming a SEAL, and Tyler always gave him a hard time about that. The two of them were constantly going at it, but it was all in good fun.

Adele smiled as she thought of the final member of their group, Noah Braddock. Now he was the one none of them ever messed with. Not that he was unapproachable or unfriendly—actually, it was just the opposite, and he was quick to smile and laugh with the best of them. However, Noah had become the adjunct head of their family, either by default or design; no one really examined how it happened. Older than Tony by only one year, Noah had an aura about him that demanded respect. He was the one everyone avoided when they were up to no good. But when something went wrong or there was a situation, Noah was usually the one they would call first. The others

were more than capable of taking care of things themselves, but when you had Noah on your side, you didn't have to do it on your own. And for this group, beyond all the male posturing that could take place in a room full of strong-willed men, that meant something.

There were times when one or more of them left suddenly for weeks at a time and would come back with scrapes, bruises, and a few broken bones. Adele constantly worried about them when they had to leave, and usually one or more of the guys remaining in the area would hover around her a bit more than usual during those times. Protectors to the core, she knew no matter how much grumbling she did, they would not—could not—change who they were.

When the guys returned from wherever they had gone, she would usually have them on her front porch in short order. This was their check-in with her so she'd know they were home safe. Although they seemed all tough and badass, she knew they hated it when she worried about them. It was their routine. They knew she fretted nonstop until they came home,

and they wanted to remove that worry from her as soon as they could. No matter how long they had been gone on assignment, she would freely open the door to her home and allow them to hang out in her living room. It didn't matter if it was one of them or all five. They were her brothers. They had claimed her—whether she had wanted it or not—and she had claimed them right back. That was just how things were.

Over time, they had continued to show her some defensive moves, and a few ass-kicking moves, that she knew weren't taught in the self-defense classes at the local YMCA. Although she was curious as to how they had learned the skills, the question never left her lips. They never volunteered specific details about what they had learned while training or how they had perfected the skills, and she wasn't going to press.

Now, turning toward her living room window, Adele didn't understand why she was rehashing her entire life history today. Maybe things were just bothering her a little more lately and she was questioning her place in the world. Work was going

well, but damn, she was stressed out. The company was doing back-flips in this economy, and four members of her staff had been laid off. She wasn't necessarily worried about her own job, but everyone was under the microscope. Being asked to do more with less seemed to be a recurring theme, and people were stressed out and tired.

Overall, her staff was great, but in a group of twelve people, there had to be one who worked her last nerve. Donna, a marketing specialist on her team, was a thorn in her side and tried everything in her power to undermine Adele's authority. She constantly went over Adele's head to the department director and tried to make her look bad at every turn. It was always about something stupid that didn't amount to a hill of beans, but that didn't take away Adele's annoyance that Donna continued her childish antics. Thank goodness her boss never fell for the crap Donna spewed and would always support Adele. Nevertheless, it was stressful to feel as if she had to constantly defend herself and explain her actions to someone who didn't deserve her time and effort.

Plus, she was banging on the door of twenty-eight, which was just a hop, skip, and a jump from thirty. The big three-zero. No one enjoyed getting old, and Adele knew she absolutely hated, loathed, and abhorred the idea. She had no boyfriend, but then again, she wasn't really looking for one. Plus, the guys never failed to run off any man who even tried having a conversation with her. As a result, her prospects for dating weren't looking very good at the moment.

Adele picked up her double white mocha with extra whipped cream and walked over to her living area. She sat on the plush loveseat and looked out her window into the manicured front yard. Laying her head on the window pane, she took a deep breath and pulled a blanket over her legs. She loved her home, if only because she had purchased it herself. No one had helped her buy her little slice of heaven on earth, and she loved every inch of it.

The weekend would be here soon, and Adele was looking forward to it. She needed a nice quiet couple of days to read a book and simply relax. Ethan, Tony, Daniel, Noah, and Tyler were all coming over for a

cookout on Saturday, and she needed her rest before they started to arrive. With them converging on her house first thing Saturday, that would still give her all day Sunday to do her own thing without the Fabulous Five looking over her shoulder.

It would be good to see them and spend time laughing and just having a good time. It had been a few weeks since the last time they were all together just to hang out. Usually one or more of them were off doing only God knows what, but this time they would all be with her at the same time. Plus, this would give her some time to press them on finding their soul mates and settling down. She kept bugging them to find good women and get married, but they weren't biting. No matter how hard she pushed, they all seemed to ignore anything that had to do with marriage and kids. It wasn't that they weren't ready for marriage, because in her opinion they were well overdue. The problem was finding women willing to put up with all of them.

It was funny how it happened, but she could almost guarantee that by the second date, women

realized they were a package deal. All six of them came together as one unit—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. When you married one, you got every single one of the crew. Not an easy thing for someone to deal with, but that was just how it was.

Laughing now at how difficult it had been for her to trust them in the beginning, Adele knew her life had never been as good before they entered it. At first, she had been very resistant to opening up and wasn't willing to believe that they simply wanted to be her friends. Having never experienced anything like it in the past, it completely threw her when these five gorgeous men, who could be doing anything they wanted with their free time, chose to spend it with her.

Thinking about her big brothers, it amazed her how five people who were so diverse could have such a close bond. If you saw them separately or didn't realize how close they were, you would think they hated each other. They cursed at each other, wrestled with each other, punched each other, and the insults were nonstop. But the wonderful thing about their haphazard family was that they could say whatever the

hell they wanted to each other, and things would be okay. Other people didn't have that same luxury, and they would not hesitate to stomp a hole in the first person who tried.

There would be no hesitation in fucking somebody up if they didn't come correct at any one of her brothers, and she knew they felt the same way about each other. That was just how they were. They may not have known each other their entire lives, but that didn't matter. Their bond was thicker than blood, and she dared anyone to try and mess with that.

Adele gave a small smile and finished her coffee. She recognized that her confidence had grown exponentially during the past five years. Her former self would never even recognize who she was today—and she was okay with that. Adele knew she owed part of her change in personality to her newfound family. She also realized the other part of her change was based on the fact she had finally grown a damn spine.

Adele stood up to stretch her muscles after being cramped in one place for so long. She looked at herself in the half-length mirror along the foyer wall

and smiled. For a women almost reaching the ripe old age of thirty, she looked damn good. In her opinion, her dark brown eyes were her best feature. Her eyes were wide and expressive, and they could turn soft or hard at the drop of a dime. Ethan and Tyler always told her they could tell when she was pissed at them by the look in her eyes. She knew that was why they often gave in to her crazy demands. She was the baby sister to their crew, and they loved her for it.

She stood about five feet nine inches and had womanly curves in all the right places. No matter what diet she tried or what workout she performed, even the boxing, she never seemed to get any smaller and her hourglass shape seemed here to stay. Not that she was complaining in any way, because she truly liked the way she looked. Her body was well proportioned and, without ego or conceit, she knew that men found her physically attractive.

Her legs were long and her ass was perfectly curved. She could wear a rockin' pair of jeans one day and look just as good the next day in a tailored pantsuit. Her hair was kept in a neat bob that reached

just above her shoulders. When she was feeling frisky, she left it curly and let it fall around her face in ringlets. Her skin was pecan tan, as the older ladies of her generation would say, and her lips were nice and full, but not overly so. All in all, Adele knew she looked damn good, and any man worth his salt would be happy to have her by his side.

Looking back at her life with Joey, she could accept that his insults about her looks were meant to make her feel ugly, unworthy, and to lower her self-esteem. It was a calculated move on his part to make sure she never stepped out of line or tried to leave him. Laughing to herself, she wished she could let Tony, Ethan and Daniel loose on his ass for fifteen minutes. That would show the sorry excuse for a man what it felt like to get beaten up with no way out. Plus, she knew they were itching to get their hands on him—although they didn't know the full extent of what he had put her through.

She looked at the clock on the wall—a quarter past six. Turning off her computer and picking up her gym bag and purse, Adele groaned at the thought of

going to the gym. However, she needed the stress release, and the gym had been calling her name for a few days now.

Hopping into her car, she sped off toward Hank's Gym, hoping it wouldn't be too full tonight. She needed a distraction in the worst way, and fighting for gym space just wasn't in the cards tonight.

Chapter Two

Stefano Indellicati was new to the Virginia area and had found Hank's Gym by chance. This was his kind of place, and he was damn happy he had taken the wrong turn two months ago and had come inside to ask for directions to a local restaurant where he was meeting an old colleague. This was a man's gym, and it felt good to take out his frustrations on a punching bag. He could visualize the bag as just about anyone he wanted to, and after running his own company for years and then moving into the CEO role for a larger company that was about to have its first Initial Public Offering, he had plenty of faces he could picture.

Stefano was a former Recon Marine and was damn proud of what he had accomplished during his two tours in the Corps. Being an officer had its perks, but he had loved nothing more than being out there with his Marines, arm in arm, working the trenches right along with them. He knew they respected him for his willingness to roll up his sleeves and work

beside them while the other officers walked by. Those young guys fresh out of boot camp had trusted him implicitly and had respected him more than any other officer in their battalion. There was no way he could have let them down, and he hadn't. Every mission they had the unfortunate opportunity to go on, he had made sure that every one of his guys came back.

Getting out of the Corps had been more about doing something different than not liking it anymore. He had reached the rank of Major, had made some lifelong friends, and served his country at the same time. He was proud of what he had accomplished and looked at his time in service with fondness.

His mom and dad had been only too happy when he had told them he was retiring his commission and getting out. He knew his mom had prayed nonstop for his safe return every time he left on a mission. Well, she didn't have to do that anymore. Now she just prayed that he and his brother Mauricio would give them grandkids. Chuckling under his breath as he climbed out of his luxury vehicle, Stefano knew it was time to think about beginning a family. While he was

in no rush, he was almost thirty-eight, and he needed to make some decisions.

His thoughts turned back to his mother, whom he loved very much. He could admit that she was a typical Italian mom. Whenever he went home, she swore he was too skinny and didn't get enough to eat. However, at six feet three inches tall and two hundred twenty-five pounds, he was still amazed that she could say this to him with a straight face. No matter how much he protested, she used every trick in the book to keep him stuffed twenty-four hours a day. Not only did she feed him all the foods he had grown up on, she fed him a few new dishes as well, hence the need for his continued gym membership. His mother was doing her best to fatten him up, and he was doing his best to prevent that from happening.

Grabbing his gym bag, he walked through the doors of the gym and inhaled the smell of honest hard work and sweat. There was nothing like it. He could admit he was one of those men who got off on shit like this. A place like Hank's was a man's last sanctuary. Glad that Hank hadn't turned the place into one of

those coed gym's, Stefano walked to the locker room to change, greeting some of the other regulars he'd come to know.

As he walked out of the locker room fifteen minutes later, Stefano saw someone in shorts and a t-shirt standing in the boxing ring doing some practice hits with a trainer. Since the heavy bag was across the room, he had no choice but to walk by the ring on his way over. As he walked over to his spot, he couldn't help glancing at the ring, and he noticed that something just didn't look right with the guy throwing the punches. His hips were a little too rounded. Legs just a little too long and curvy, hair pulled back into a ponytail... Holy shit! Was that a woman? In Hank's?

What the hell? Coming to an abrupt halt near the ring, he simply stared. His willpower fled and he was forced to stand and watch. Well, at least she had good form, he thought as he leaned up against one of the corner posts. Her jabs were straight and she canted her hips exactly so, coming up on the ball of her foot as she turned. Her body was muscular and toned, and she definitely didn't look like a novice to

boxing. She wasn't skinny though. No, her body was all woman, and damn she was lush. Italian men had a certain fondness for women with a little meat on their bones, and the woman in the boxing ring was no exception. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail and pulled away from her face, allowing him to catch a glimpse of her profile.

Damn, she was beautiful. Even with sweat dripping down her face and the look of concentration etched on her features, she was a vision of loveliness. She was focused on the task at hand, ready to respond to the rapid-fire orders coming from the trainer, and she truly looked like she belonged in the ring. She looked comfortable, like a natural. How long had she been coming here? And why hadn't he seen her before today?

So focused on looking at the woman in the ring, he failed to see the two men approach him from each side. Until it was too late.

"What are you looking at, newbie?" the blond on his right asked him. His tone was less than welcoming and not exactly friendly.

“Just checking out the scenery.” Not sure what this was all about, he didn’t take his eyes off the woman in the ring.

“Maybe you need to check out the scenery somewhere else,” a dark-haired guy, who looked just as unfriendly, spoke in a low voice on the other side. “We don’t like anyone looking at her too long. Who are you? We haven’t seen you around here.”

Sizing the two guys up, he noticed the look of someone who’d seen too much on the battlefield. He was sure they saw the same thing when they looked at him. Stefano didn’t want to mix it up with these guys, but damn, he was only looking at the woman. Who was this lady anyway that she warranted two protectors?

“I’m new to the area. Just moved here about two months ago.” Pulling himself up, he made sure they knew he wasn’t backing down. “Listen, I’m just watching the lady in the ring. Is that a problem?”

“Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. You just need to make sure that’s all you do.” The blond guy spoke this time.

“Ethan? Tony? What are you doing?” He heard a woman’s husky voice from over his shoulder.

He hadn’t noticed that the woman in the ring had stopped fighting or had walked over to the side of the ring closest to him and her two protectors. Damn, he must be off his game. That was now twice in a matter of minutes that he’d been caught off guard. Her voice was silky smooth, and without all that sweat covering her face, she was even more beautiful than he’d first thought. He couldn’t help but wonder, who were these guys to her? Hopefully they weren’t going to cause him any trouble, because she was definitely someone he would like to know better.

Adele noticed the fine-ass man talking to Ethan and Tony and wondered what they were discussing. More to the point, she wondered what Tony and Ethan were threatening him about. Tony and Ethan looked downright surly, and so, of course, her curiosity was piqued. While training in the ring with Tyler, she’d

noticed the dark-haired guy stop and watch her from the sidelines. Too focused on not messing up, she hadn't thought much about it and had ignored him enough to focus on her workout without getting too distracted. Tyler wouldn't have been happy if she was paying attention to something else, especially a man, while training with him.

Maybe she was a novelty for him to watch. Recognizing that not many women came into Hank's, she could understand why he may have stopped to watch. But in reality, she wasn't just any woman, and everybody knew it. She had earned the right to be in this gym by virtue of her past and what she had needed to learn when she'd walked through that door the very first time. While the average member of the gym didn't know that, Hank and her brothers did, and that was all that mattered. If she remained the only woman who ever darkened the door of this gym, that would be just fine with her. Plus, the regulars knew she was protected by five guys who could be very unfriendly when they chose to be, so she was left to her own devices.

“Ethan, why aren’t you guys paying attention to me? Who’s your new friend?”

“Nobody you need to know.” Without glancing her way, Ethan was the one who responded to the question.

“Well, good gracious, guys, don’t be rude.” Leaning over the rope, she extended her hand to the stranger, ignoring the frowns that quickly formed on the faces of both Ethan and Tony. “Hi. I’m Adele Woolner. Don’t let these guys give you a hard time.”

He grasped her hand in his, his deep velvet voice reaching her ears. “Hello, Adele. My name is Stefano. Stefano Indellicati. Nice to meet you.” As he spoke, he looked into her eyes, and she felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her body. She quickly removed her hand from his and rubbed it against her leg.

When she saw his eyes drop to her hand, she knew he’d caught the motion. His mouth quirked up to the side, and she realized he was aware of how his touch had affected her. His half smile sent a silent message that she really wanted the chance to answer. Stepping back slightly, she knew she wasn’t ready to

admit—not even to herself—that she was prepared to accept what he had to offer. She’d forgotten they had an audience observing their exchange, so she almost jumped out of her skin when Tony spoke up.

“Adele, Tyler’s waiting for you in the ring.” Tony’s look was searching, trying to find out if she was intimidated by the stranger standing in front of her. Not that she could blame him. She had never been this tongue-tied by anyone else. Protecting her was all they knew how to do, so she couldn’t fault them for reacting this way. But damn, couldn’t she at least look at a man without them going into stealth mode?

“Oh, right! I’m going back now.” Giving Stefano a sweet smile, she almost reached out her hand again, but changed her mind. “It was nice meeting you, Stefano. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will.”

Adele turned away from the group and made her way back over to Tyler on the other side of the ring. Damn! Did Italian men take lessons in how to make a woman melt? His voice was like aged brandy, and the look he threw her way was full of heat and promise.

Sure, it was nice to look and all, but she wasn't ready to start something with anyone right now. However, in all honesty, she couldn't lie to herself—seeing his hungry gaze roam over her body made her feel very sexy. She hadn't felt that way in a long time, and she could admit that it felt damn good.

Stefano watched Adele walk back over to another blond guy and couldn't help but admire the woman who had enchanted him with just a smile. When he lifted his head in acknowledgement to her boxing trainer, the guy threw a look Stefano's way that definitely raised his hackles. Hell! He hoped she wasn't his girlfriend, or worse, his wife.

Grabbing his workout towel, he turned away, knowing it was time to begin hitting the bags. That woman had his body heating up from the inside out, and sporting an erection in a gym full of men was not the way to go. Seeing his way still blocked by the two guys, he sighed deeply. Damn, he really didn't need

this shit. He was only appreciating a beautiful woman. Why did these guys have to get so uptight about it?

“Listen, man, we don’t know you. But let me give you a warning. That woman back there...don’t fuck with her. She’s off-limits.”

He did not appreciate anyone telling him what he could or could not do. “I was just saying hello. But I tell you what, I’ll stay out of your way and you stay the fuck out of mine. You’re right—you don’t know me. Don’t underestimate me just because I’m new.” Taking a step to move around the dark-haired one—Tony, if he remembered correctly—he looked up when his way was blocked again.

“That woman over there, she’s like a sister to us. You don’t need to be sniffing around her. You finish your workout and move the fuck on. If she wants your attention, we’ll make sure you know.”

Laughing, Stefano sized up the two towering tree trunks blocking his way. If he went toe-to-toe with both of them at once, they might think they could take him. Maybe they could, but he would make sure they never forgot the experience. However, since they

seemed to be connected to that woman in the ring, it wouldn't help his case if he went off on them and tore up the place just because they pissed him off.

“Well, maybe she needs to be the one to decide that. You're not around her all the time, and she is a grown woman.” With that, he walked away and began preparing for his workout.

“Come on, Tony, let me fuck him up. Sorry ass newbie.” Ethan's deep growl caught Tony's attention as he watched the guy walk away from them.

“Ethan, slow your roll. He got the message.” Tony looked over at Adele in the ring with Tyler and lowered his head for a second. Acceptance of things he couldn't control was not one of his strong points. However, he'd known this day was going to come sooner or later. Adele had been so broken when they had first met her. At the time, she had needed them to take care of her as if she were a bird with a broken wing. It had taken five long years, but she had finally

healed. He knew she was much stronger now than she had ever been before. Although he hated to admit it, she no longer needed them to protect her at every turn. Intellectually, he was aware of this. Emotionally...well, that was a different story.

He'd noticed the look in her eyes as she'd talked with Stefano, and never before had he seen her respond to anyone that way. During all the years he had known her, she had never looked at anyone like that, with something more than wariness and caution. Yeah, Adele was changing. Shit, she had already changed. It was just going to take them all a bit longer to catch up.

"Ethan, you're always such a hothead. Leave the dude alone. We'll keep an eye out for him when we're here at the gym. He won't get next to Adele unless she wants him to."

"What? Hell no, she's not ready for that." Ethan had a quick temper and did not appreciate being outmaneuvered. Plus, Tony recognized that there was something in his past that made Ethan want to wrap Adele in a bubble and protect her from the world.

Ethan had never spoken about his childhood, but based on his reaction to Adele, Tony could only guess.

Speaking calmly to his friend, he tried to help him understand. “Maybe yes, maybe no. Regardless of whether or not we think she’s ready, we have to give her the chance to decide on her own. We can’t protect her forever.” Giving his brother-in-arms a moment to let those words sink in, he continued. “We will still protect her, but she has to make her own way. Maybe not this guy, but there will be someone else. Get ready, buddy—I think we’re going to have a lot of sleepless nights.”

Clapping his hand on Ethan’s back, Tony laughed at the look of utter dread that came over Ethan’s face. “Come on, man. Let’s go hit the bag.”

Chapter Three

Adele was tired and sore. Tyler had worn her body out at the gym yesterday. The man had no mercy. He'd tried grilling her about the new guy and what he had said to her, but she was staying mum on the subject, not giving anything away. There wasn't much to say anyway. Sure, she found him attractive, but that was probably the only time she would ever see him.

She looked at her weekend shopping list, mentally calculating how much food she would need for the guys. She added a few more items for the grill and headed off to the market to make her purchases before everyone started to show up. No matter how much food she bought when they came over, there never seemed to be enough. That was why she'd waited until this morning to make her market run. Just in case they called with last-minute requests.

Plus, Ethan was rather picky about the type of food she bought for their gatherings. He was the

designated master griller and had the cooking utensils to prove it. Though she wasn't sure where he'd learned his craft, that man could take any food item, cook it on the grill and make it taste like pure heaven. It wasn't just steak, chicken, and pork. Oh no, he did everything from vegetables to fruit. If anyone else tried to even go near the grill, Ethan would start brandishing his cooking utensils like they were weapons. When this happened at their very first cookout, Adele was a little unsure of how to take it until all the guys started laughing. So the one thing she knew about today's meal was that if Ethan said they needed a certain type of food, garnish, or seasoning, then she would get it. No questions asked. She also knew Ethan would pay her back every penny she spent today. Not just on the items she picked up for the cookout, but the entire grocery bill.

Pulling up to her local market, she was glad the parking lot wasn't overflowing. That was part of the reason she had arrived so early. In and out was her motto when visiting the market—she just didn't have time to linger. Gazing longingly at the coffee shop

next door to the store, she started planning the type of flavored coffee and flaky pastry she would order when finished with her shopping. Adele grabbed a cart and walked into the store, not wanting to waste any additional time dawdling. Only going to the sections that carried the food she needed, she was so focused on picking up the right ingredients that she didn't see the guy in front of her until it was too late.

“Hi. Adele? Is that you?”

“Oh! Hi.” The man standing in front of her was sexy as hell and, interestingly enough, very familiar. Then she remembered where she'd seen him before. “I met you at the gym yesterday, right?” Damn, did he have to look so good in a pair of scruffy jeans this early in the morning?

“Yes. Fancy meeting you here. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. I'm just picking out some food for a cookout this afternoon with my family.”

“Oh, that's nice. I'm just picking up a few things myself.” He shifted a few items in his arms, as if showing her proof of his statement. “Do you have a large family?”

“Yes. You met three of them yesterday at the gym. The other two were off doing God knows what.”

Adele smiled at the confused look that came over his face and waited for him to ask the obvious question. “The three guys from the gym are your family?” He shifted his feet, looking a bit more uncomfortable every second. “Yeah, I noticed that they seemed quite protective of you. So, I know this may be a pretty bold question, but are you married to one of them? Or dating?”

“Well, that’s rather forward of you.” She laughed at the thought of her dating one of the guys, but noticed that Stefano seemed completely serious. “Me? Dating one of them? Oh goodness no! They’re like my brothers. Did they tell you I was dating one of them? I’ll hurt them. I swear I will.”

He laughed at her final statement, and his hazel eyes got a wonderful crinkle on the side. It made her smile as well. “No, nothing like that. Although they did seem quite...out of sorts...when I noticed you in the ring. They made a point to give me a warning you were off-limits.”

“True, they are quite protective of me, but they just look out for me. Sometimes more than they should.”

“Well, I don’t think they view it that way.”

“No, I don’t think they do either. So, do you live in this area?”

“Yeah, I live in a condo about five miles away. It’s corporate housing since I just moved into the area.”

“Oh, so you’re new to Alexandria? Where are you from originally?”

“I grew up in New Jersey, but joined the Marines when I was eighteen. I’ve moved around quite a bit since then.”

“Is your family still in Jersey?” Adele found that she was having a great conversation with him. She had all but forgotten they were standing in the middle of a grocery store. He had a friendly smile, and he seemed quite nice now that they were having a regular conversation. She realized she was very glad they had crossed paths again.

“Most of them. My mom and dad still live there in the house where I grew up. I try to visit Jersey as often as I can since it’s not too far away. My younger brother is in Boston living life as a carefree bachelor. My two cousins are up there in Boston as well and own a restaurant.” He’d walked closer to her and leaned against one of the grocery store shelves, as if settling in for a long visit.

“So, what exactly did they say to you the other day?”

He gave her an intense stare, and she wondered if Ethan and Tony had been out of line. “Nothing. Well, nothing much anyway, other than what I said earlier. They warned me that you were off-limits and that if I had any ideas about talking with you, I’d better forget them.”

Those damn men. She knew why they did it, but damn, they needed to back off a little. She was still a grown-ass woman. Maybe she had needed them to hover a bit at first, but not so much anymore. Well, she’d show them just how grown she really was. Looking at the man standing in front of her, she

realized that he was strikingly handsome, even more so than she had originally thought when she'd seen him at the gym. His lean body was exactly the way she liked, with strong shoulders, a wide chest, and his torso tapered down in the shape of a "V." His hips were lean and his muscled thighs were visible under his loose-fitting jeans. All in all, he was absolutely luscious, and she was ready to have some fun.

She gave him a saucy grin and knew her eyes held a mischievous glint as she came up with the perfect plan to rattle the guys. "Well, Stefano, as I mentioned, I'm having a cookout today. Are you busy this afternoon?"

Eyebrows raised, his grin became wider as he unfolded his frame and stood up straight. "Well, that depends on what you had in mind."

"If you're free, why don't you come over and hang out. Meet the guys in a more relaxed environment. They're really quite nice once you get to know them."

"You mean the three guys who treated me as if they wanted nothing more than to rearrange my face?"

Those guys?” He laughed out loud, the sound causing her own smile to widen in return. “You’re not really serious, are you?” He had a devilish grin on his face and she knew he was game, even though he protested.

“Actually, no, it’s not for the three of them. It’s for all five. Come on, Stefano, join the fun. This is my payback to them, since I know the three of them will have told the other two, Noah and Daniel, all about you already. This should be interesting.”

He gave her wide grin, and she couldn’t help but laugh. A kindred spirit. She liked that.

“You know, I think I’ll take you up on that invitation. What time do you want me there?”

“Two o’clock okay?” At his nod, she reached into her purse and pulled out a business card and pen. “Great, let me give you the address.”

Walking up to the front door of Adele’s two-story home, Stefano knew the shit was about to hit the proverbial fan. Oh well—he wasn’t too concerned

about it. Adele had invited him over, and he would have been a fool to refuse. During their brief conversation in the grocery store, he had felt more comfortable with her than he had ever felt before with a woman.

Her smile was bright and friendly, and he enjoyed the silky, smooth sound of her voice. Still, something about the way she held herself told him he wasn't seeing the whole picture. He could tell she was reserved and held a bit of herself back. Maybe one day he would find out why. While she seemed to laugh and smile with the best of them, there was also something in her eyes that said "don't get too close." She was a very sexy woman and had a great sense of humor, which were both attractive to him.

An added bonus was that her jeans fit her body like a second glove, molding to her ass as if they had been made just for her. When they'd parted ways in the store earlier today, he'd just stood there and watched her walk away from him. His hands had itched to feel her skin and mold her body against his while pressing his firm body against her lush curves.

And her skin was simply beautiful. She had an unblemished, fresh-scrubbed woman-next-door look and was one of those rare women who didn't need an ounce of makeup to enhance her features.

But her lips, oh damn, they were oh so luscious and looked just right for kissing. Her bottom lip was slightly fuller than her top one, as if in a perpetual pout. He had never noticed how sexy that look was on a woman until he had seen it on her. It was downright sinful and made him want to kiss and nibble at her lips until she opened up for him, letting him inside.

However, no matter how attracted he was to Adele, he knew her brothers were going to be a problem for him. If she were his sister, he would be a problem for any man trying to come around her. So, while he couldn't necessarily blame them for being overly protective, it sure as hell didn't make him any less annoyed. All he had to do was find a way to get Adele alone so they could talk privately about getting to know each other better. Stefano was determined to get her away from their prying eyes and convince her that he was someone worth knowing.

He knocked on the door to Adele's single-family home and turned to look at the cars littering the driveway and street in front of her house. Other than his car, there were five trucks of varying shapes and sizes and one red sporty car sitting in the garage. This meant he was the last person to arrive and everyone else was already inside. Damn, he sure hoped he was ready for this.

Chapter Four

Adele cleaned off dishes and placed them in the dishwasher while the guys picked up trash and straightened the living room. Adele laughed under her breath while remembering the looks of astonishment on the faces of Ethan, Tony and Tyler when Stefano had walked into the house. It had been priceless!

Their jaws had dropped and their eyes narrowed, first in anger, then in suspicion. Not suspicion at Stefano, but at Adele. They knew exactly what she had done and why. Too bad she wasn't apologizing for it. Each of them had pulled her aside separately to ask what she had been thinking. They all wondered why she had invited him over to her home after only meeting him yesterday.

To a one, they each asked her, "Why is he here, Adele?" And sure, while the argument of, "This is my house and I can invite people over if I want" would have been valid with any other group of men, it hadn't worked with this bunch. So, trying to placate them

and help them understand, she tried another approach. Adele explained that Stefano was new to the area and needed to meet some people. That she had seen him in the market earlier and since it was the Christian thing to do, she had invited him over for lunch. With all the guys here, she felt it would be a good chance to introduce him to everyone. It was a plausible story and for anyone else, it probably would have worked. However, after her impassioned speech, all of them had given her looks of disbelief and shock. Not surprisingly, none of them believed a word she said.

The worst part was when Noah cornered her in the kitchen. He lightly placed his hands on her shoulder and turned her around to face him, not letting her escape. His words put it right out there on the table for her to deny.

“Adele, I know what you’re doing. We get it. You’re ready for us to stop hovering.”

“Noah, it’s not that.” She sighed deeply and knew she had no choice to be honest. Confrontation was not her forte, and she really didn’t want to force

the issue. However, she *did* need them to give her some freedom and let her do her own thing. “Well, maybe it is a little bit. But Noah, you should have seen the three of them in the gym yesterday. They were like a pack of wolves protecting their lone pack cub. Stefano seems like a nice guy, and he just wanted to talk to me. Why can’t I get to know someone new?” Adele knew she sounded like a child, but damn, enough was enough. Everyone looked up to Noah as the unofficial father-figure of the group. It wasn’t that he forced the issue or tried to take control, but he was the oldest of the group and it just seemed natural to everyone, including him. As a result, when he called her to task, it never felt good.

“Adele, I won’t push you on this. But you know you threw us for a loop inviting him over here today. Next time, just give us a little warning, okay?” Noah pulled her into his arms for a big bear hug. Considering that he was six feet five inches and all muscle, that’s exactly what it felt like. She wrapped her arms around him and smiled secretly. While he

was the one each of them looked up to, he was also the one who gave her the most freedom.

“I will, Noah. I really like him, though, and I want to get to know him better. Although I don’t think I’ll be telling the guys that bit of news anytime soon. They might try to skin him alive, and I don’t want them running him away.”

His deep chuckle reverberated throughout her body. “They’re just looking out for you, little one. So, this is the guy from the gym yesterday? Tyler, Ethan and Tony all called me yesterday about him. I think Ethan hates him the most, but that’s to be expected. Since Daniel only met him today, he’s still undecided. Then again, you know he doesn’t like meeting new people.”

“Yeah, well, Ethan can be a big bully sometimes. I should kick his ass for the comment he made earlier. How rude was that, insinuating that Stefano was in the Navy instead of the Marines. I thought they were going to come to blows. Being a Navy SEAL, Ethan should know better.”

“Well, I think Stefano handled himself quite well, so I wouldn’t worry about him too much.” Sighing deeply, he tightened his arms for a fraction of a second before he loosened his grip. “All right. I’ll get the guys to lay off of him a bit, but only on one condition. Next time, you warn us first. You may be grown and we may only be a hodgepodge family, but we protect what’s ours. The guys and I still feel it’s our right to protect you, even though you don’t think we need to.” Noah set her back from him and looked into her eyes, giving her his “don’t test me” glare, which in the past had resulted in quite a few confessions she’d never meant to give.

“Got it. I will next time. Promise.” She gave him a grin and punched him lightly in the arm. “So, where have you been anyway? I know you weren’t away for work, and I haven’t seen you in almost a week.”

When a blush crept up his face, Adele was shocked. She’d never seen him blush, and now she was very curious about what exactly was going on.

“I had to help a friend out of a situation. It was nothing. Why are you being so nosey anyway?” He tweaked her nose and walked away. Damn, she’d never seen him end a conversation so quickly. Now that was very interesting.

She walked back into the living room and noticed Stefano standing near Tyler. They were chatting about sports, the one topic guaranteed to make them best friends. The chair near Daniel was open, so she made her way over there to pick on him for a bit.

“Daniel, where was Noah last week?” Both Daniel and Noah served together in the Navy, and they had been friends prior to meeting the other three.

“Why do you want to know?” He gave her a sideways glance, and she knew he had some information. This made things very interesting, and now she knew they were hiding something from her.

“Come on, Daniel. No fair. I know he wasn’t away on a mission, because you were here all last week. If he was away doing something for work, you would have been with him.”

“Adele, you’re being noseey. Leave Noah alone. He had something to take care of.”

“Well, you’re no fun at all.” She turned to him with a gleam in her eye. Fine—if he wasn’t going to spill the beans on Noah, then she’d move on to her next favorite topic. “So, what have you been up to? Who are you dating now? When do I get to meet her?”

“There’s no one, Adele. Why are you bothering me anyway? Why don’t you go talk to your new friend?”

“Because he’s talking with Tyler. I don’t need to talk with him.”

“Fine, but quit asking me about women I’m dating. I’m not talking to you about them because none of them have qualified for ‘meet the family’ status. Drop it, pipsqueak.” She hated that fricking name, and he knew it.

“Damn, all of you guys are so cranky today.” Adele stood up and kissed Daniel on the forehead, knowing how he hated when she did that.

She walked over to Stefano and Tyler, determined to have a good time in spite of the guys.

Something was going on with each of them, and she wanted to know what. They had been extremely distracted lately, and Noah and Daniel were acting as if they were hiding something from her. She didn't like it one bit.

Her thoughts now focused on what Noah and Daniel could be keeping from her, Adele decided to take a detour into the kitchen. Margaritas and that big bowl of chips sitting in the kitchen were calling her name. Plus, she didn't really want to interfere with Tyler and Stefano's conversation. Thinking about the day and all that had happened, she knew her explanation to the guys had been partially true. She *had* invited Stefano to the cookout because he was new to the area and thought it would be a good idea for him to meet some people. Of course, the other reason for the invitation was that he'd intrigued her, and she wanted to understand her strong reaction to him.

It seemed that after five long years, she was finally attracted to a man who made her want more. Stefano wasn't making any overt moves in front of the guys, but she noticed him looking at her with a hooded

gaze at times. It wasn't just a friendly, just-wondering-what-you-were-doing gaze either. No, he looked at her as if he wanted to devour her, one nibble at a time. His wicked half smile promised serious pleasure if she ever allowed him the chance. He walked with a confidence and swagger that screamed to the world that he was a bad motherfucker and would prove it to anyone who wanted to test him.

When Tyler had discovered that Stefano was a former Recon Marine, they had formed an instant bond. Not that Tyler was letting him off easy, but at least one of her brothers wasn't treating him like a leper. Eventually they would all get used to him, but she knew it would take time. Good thing she had made the decision that he would be around for quite a while longer.

Stefano had noticed Adele walk into the kitchen and kept one eye on the kitchen door, waiting for her to return.

“You know, if you keep staring after her, Ethan’s going to come over here.”

He turned back to Tyler, the only one—other than that guy Noah—who wasn’t looking as if he would enjoy seeing him laid out flat on his back in acute pain. “So, how do you all know Adele? No one has volunteered that information just yet.”

“We met her at the gym. She came in about five years ago and met me, Noah, and Daniel. We all just clicked. About a year later Ethan joined our group. Six months later, we met Tony. She keeps us in line and we come eat her food every weekend. We’re good for each other and balance each other out in our own unique way. It’s an arrangement that’s worked for years, and we don’t plan to change it. The six of us are a family, everyone knows it, and that’s the way it’s always going to be.”

Stefano noticed the side look Tyler threw his way and knew that last statement was meant just for him. No, he decided, he wasn’t going there right now, but he picked up the message Tyler was sending his way.

With a subtle nod to acknowledge Tyler's last statement, Stefano decided he needed a change of scenery. "Hey, I need to get another beer. Want one?"

Tyler smiled, not fooled for one second, and lifted his bottle of beer, which was still three-quarters full. "Nah, man, I'm good."

Stefano walked away and headed into the kitchen. While he did want another beer, he was more concerned with seeing Adele. When he entered the kitchen, his eyes were immediately drawn to her. She was facing away from him, standing by the window overlooking the expansive backyard. Earlier in the day, they had all been out there while Ethan manned the grill, enjoying the nice fall weather and the view. The lawn and flowers were well tended and looked as if someone paid special attention to the landscaping. He had been surprised to find that Adele did everything herself and continued to maintain it now, even with her busy schedule. Adele truly had a beautiful home, and it was clear she took pride in maintaining it and keeping it looking nice.

Taking in the lovely vision in front of him, Stefano knew things would never be the same now that he'd met Adele. She was a sight to behold and he could spend all his days and nights with her, simply enjoying her company. Although he'd first noticed her beauty and was attracted to her physically, he now realized she was a genuinely good person, and that made her exceptional. She had welcomed him into her home and tried to make him feel comfortable in a new city. He hadn't experienced much of that over the years due to his nonstop travel. Opportunities to slow down and simply appreciate the kindness of others had been few and far between. But he was enjoying this now and couldn't wait to spend more time getting to know her better.

All the things he didn't know, but wanted to learn went through his mind. What made her tick? Did she laugh at commercials? Did sappy movies make her cry? How did she like her coffee, black or with cream and sugar? Was she afraid of thunderstorms? What did her skin smell like after a shower? Eventually, he would find these things out,

but he knew it would take time. Time he would freely give because he was willing to wait for her. Patience was not one of his virtues, but come hell or high water, he would give this woman whatever she needed in order for her to trust him in her life.

He could see himself coming home to her every day. Walking into the kitchen to find her waiting for him or taking over the yard work from her, giving her a chance to just relax. Surprisingly, the thought entered his mind that his mother would really like Adele.

It was about time he started thinking less about work and focused more on his personal life. Adele seemed like just the person he needed in his life to help him pay attention to what was important. Up until this point, his main focus for the past twenty years had always been the mission. First in the Marines and then once he left the military and moved into the private sector, everything he did was to help his “troops” perform better and his company grow bigger and stronger. He had a reputation of being a hard ass, but he would never apologize to anyone

about the way he ran his business. He held people to a higher standard, and either they got on board or they got the fuck out of his company.

He recognized that maybe it was time to take a step back and refocus his efforts on his personal life. Starting with Adele. He walked toward her, intent on getting some private time away from all the nosey guys in the other room. Adele tensed as he approached, and he knew she had heard him walk into the kitchen. She wasn't immune to him after all. Good. This was just the opening he needed.

Chapter Five

“Are you hiding from me?” Adele’s body responded to the sound of his voice. Hell yes, she was hiding from him, but not the in the way he meant.

“Why would you ask me that?” She turned from the window, glanced at him briefly, and then turned toward the kitchen sink. Needing to stay busy, she didn’t want to do something stupid like thread her fingers through his short hair and kiss the living shit out of him in her kitchen. She walked over to the sink and began rinsing more dishes and putting away the leftover items from their lunch, of which there wasn’t much. It shook her that Stefano made her feel things she hadn’t felt in years. Her yearning for him was impossible to resist, and the attraction to him was undeniable. She’d caught him looking at her several times during the cookout and felt her body react. His gaze had been focused on her so intently, her skin heated, tingles shooting through her body at the sheer knowledge that he wanted her.

Sure, it had been all fun and games when she'd invited him over today, but there was no denying the fact that something had drawn her to him. Now it was time to pay the piper. She only hoped she was up for the challenge.

He arrived at the sink and stood at her side, his lean hips resting against the counter, only inches away from her. "You've been avoiding me all day. I've tried several times to talk to you, alone, but you've never allowed me the opportunity—until now. I'm just wondering if it's something I've said. Did I offend you in some way?" His smile seemed casual, but she could tell there was something else there.

Her voice was a bit shaky as she began speaking, and she hoped he didn't notice the tremor. "Of course not. I've just been focused on the food and making sure everyone had enough to eat." She continued to avoid his gaze, not wanting him to see how strongly she reacted to his presence. "I'm glad you were able to make it today. I think my brothers enjoyed getting to know you."

“Uh, sure they did.” His voice was full of doubt. “But I had a good time regardless. They weren’t too hard on me. Well, except for Ethan. That guy doesn’t like me very much, does he?”

She heard the laughter in his voice and had to agree with him that her brothers hadn’t really “enjoyed” anything about it. But they had tolerated him because she’d asked them to, and that was all that mattered. “You’re right, he doesn’t. But he’ll be okay soon. It just takes him a bit longer to warm up to people.” She continued putting away the dishes, with Stefano moving out of her way as she moved around the kitchen.

“So, would you like to have dinner with me?”

Adele was caught off guard by the question. Although she was attracted to him, she wasn’t sure now was the time to begin dating. Stefano was too sexy for his own good, and the last time she had taken a step like that, it had turned into a nightmare. Not that all men were like that. Her brothers sure weren’t, and eventually she would have to take a leap of faith and begin dating again. Why not start with Stefano?

Dinner was just dinner, and there was nothing wrong with enjoying a meal with a handsome, sexy, want-to-strip-his-clothes-off-and-jump-him-in-the-kitchen, perfectly nice man. Right? Plus, although she was attracted to him, it didn't automatically mean he felt the same way. Maybe he was truly just being friendly and she was looking at this the wrong way. She didn't really think he was only asking to be friendly, but it was a good counterargument.

"Why?" At his startled look, she clarified her question. "Don't look so shocked. I just wanted to know why you want to take me out to dinner?"

"Can't a man ask a woman to dinner? Does there have to be a reason?"

She chuckled a bit and looked at him dead-on. "Yes, there should be. Don't you think so?"

His piercing gaze didn't leave her face. "What if I told you that I just want to get to know you? Talk to you without looking over my shoulder, waiting for a blade to be aimed at my ribcage." He smiled a bit, and she knew he wasn't really that concerned, but she fully understood why he would make the comment as he

continued listing the reasons he wanted to date her. “Find out if we have anything in common besides a love of Hank’s Gym and Ethan’s finger-lickin’ food. Adele, you must know how attractive you are, how beautiful you are to me.”

His hand crept up to her face, and he began to trail a finger down her cheek. Without forethought, her body jerked back. It was a natural instinct. No one touched her without her permission. Not anymore. She turned away from him and walked away.

“I’m sorry, Adele. That was uncalled for.”

“Yes, it was,” she snapped. Her voice was hard—too hard—and he didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of her past fears. She forced her breathing under control and took a few deep breaths to calm her natural instinct for self-preservation and survival. She sighed and faced him again. If she was going to move forward with her life, she needed to take this first step. “But don’t worry about it. So, about this dinner? What did you have in mind?” She just prayed those words wouldn’t come back to haunt her.

Red flags were popping up all over the place. Stefano knew something was up, and he didn't like it one bit. Her reaction to him touching her face was a telltale sign of physical abuse, and his protective instincts went off the Richter scale. Damn, how the hell was he going to overcome this and convince Adele that he would never harm a woman? Everything in him recoiled at the thought of a woman being abused by a man. He was pissed, and he wanted to demand to know what happened.

He had known Adele for only a short time, but he was already aware there was something special about her. There was no doubt that she was beautiful, but there was something more. Something that drew him to her in a way no one else ever had. In that very moment, he knew he would do everything in his power to have this woman in his life.

“What night is best for you? I can pick you up here.”

He saw her take a deep breath and knew she was making a decision about what to do next.

“Wednesday. But I’ll meet you there at the restaurant.”

“No, that’s not going to work for me.” Her eyes narrowed, and he knew he had to tone it down a bit. “What I mean, but don’t seem to be saying the right way, is that I would really like this to be an old-fashioned date. Which means I would come and pick you up. If you truly want to meet at the restaurant, I completely understand, and that would be fine with me.”

Her pursed lips told him she wasn’t quite convinced. He knew he had come on a bit too strong. His corporate-shark approach was never going to work at convincing Adele to take a chance on him. He tried another tactic and hoped this would go over better.

“Adele, I promise you’ll be safe with me. You might even enjoy yourself. I’ve even been told I cut a mean rug on the dance floor.” He smiled a bit, flashing his pearly whites in her direction. When he noticed her lips quiver, as if readying for a smile, he

felt more comfortable with the direction things were going. “Plus, I’ll make sure you have my contact information before I leave tonight. And, to help you feel more comfortable about the decision, you may want to tell the guys where we’re going and when. I don’t mind. I know they like to make sure you’re safe.” He stood up from the counter, grabbed a chip out of the bowl, and walked toward the kitchen door, exiting back into the living room with the other guys.

Adele could not believe what just happened. The man was sexy as sin and he wanted to take her out on a date. She’d thought she would be repulsed by strong, alpha-male types—except for her brothers, who didn’t count. There was something about Stefano that told her to take a chance, to give him a chance.

Oh well, the first step had been made, and she wouldn’t back down now. Adele gathered up the triple-layer coconut cake and apple pie she had purchased earlier that day from her neighborhood bakery and walked into the living room. The guys always made room for dessert, and she would not

disappoint. She'd just have to put this attraction to Stefano on the back burner until another time.

Once she'd said her final goodbyes to Tyler and Ethan and the door was closed and locked behind them, Adele gave a sigh of relief. The day had ended better than she'd thought it would, with only a few skirmishes between Stefano and Ethan. It seemed as if Ethan kept giving Stefano sideways glances or would completely ignore him, literally growling under his breath whenever Stefano spoke to her.

Noah had tried to bring him into the conversation several times and Stefano seemed to hold his own with them, but Adele knew they still weren't happy she had invited him over to the house.

Well, it was just too damn bad, and they could kiss her ass if they didn't like it. Laughing under her breath, she fully recognized the irony in the situation. Sure, she could only say these things when they were gone, but it didn't make the statement any less true. She was tired of living a half life, and she didn't want to hide behind them any longer. She hadn't had sex in a very long time, and if she had anything to say about

it—and she did—her five-year drought was about to come to a spectacular and mind-blowing end.

The house was locked up tight, and Adele made her way upstairs to her bedroom. It was her favorite part of the house. She'd decorated it using her favorite theme—red roses. Her floor-to-ceiling windows had rose red sheer curtains that covered the entire length. On the walls, she had framed photos of roses on white or black backgrounds. Every week, she picked up a dozen fresh roses just for her bedroom. She loved the smell of fresh roses, and it always made her feel good to wake up and see her beautiful flowers sitting on the table across the room.

She pulled out a nightgown and gathered her items for the shower. The warm water would release some of the tension in her muscles, and she would be able to get a good night's sleep. With the water heated to just the right temperature, she undressed and stepped into her own personal spa. Standing under the spray of the powerful showerhead, the hot water kneaded her shoulder muscles. She released a deep sigh and forced her body to relax, letting go of the

tension from the day's hectic events. Unfortunately, although her body was becoming more relaxed, her mind wasn't slowing down one bit and her thoughts continuously turned to Stefano.

Recalling his intense gaze, she knew he had continuously sought her out during the day. To her surprise, she wasn't afraid or turned off by his interest in her. On the contrary, she found that she enjoyed the attention and was looking forward to their date on Wednesday. Although they did not have much time alone today, he always seemed to be close by. His arm would brush hers as he moved from one place to the other, or he would place his hand on her lower back as he walked behind her. Her skin would jump and her body would heat, just from a fleeting touch. A low chuckle escaped her lips. Damn, she really needed to get laid. Not just any man would do. Oh no, that wouldn't work at all. She only wanted Stefano, and after today, she was pretty confident that he felt the same way.

Finished with her shower, she stepped out and towed off her damp body, the air-conditioning

cooling her skin and causing goose bumps to rise. She quickly completed her nightly routine of moisturizing her body and got into bed, leaned back against her headboard and opened up her latest novel. She was so engrossed in the story that when the phone rang it caught her off guard.

She glanced at the clock and noted that it was after eleven. No one called her that late, so she picked it up, thinking it was one of the guys.

“Hello?” Dead silence greeted her. “Hello?” No return acknowledgment came her way. She hung up the phone. “Asshole.”

Ten minutes later, the phone rang again. A little annoyed at this point, her tone was less than friendly when she picked up the telephone.

“Hello?” Nothing. “Who the hell is this?” Silence. “Asshole!”

She slammed the phone down this time and waited for it to ring again. She looked at her Caller ID and noticed the number had been blocked. After she’d waited for thirty minutes and nothing happened, Adele finally lay down to go to sleep.

“Stupid-ass pranksters. I wish I knew who that was.” Although she was wound up pretty tight, Adele fell asleep within minutes.

On Monday morning, the alarm pulled her out of a restless sleep and Adele turned over to slam her hand on the snooze button. “Son of a bitch!” Her phone had rung four more times during the middle of the night on Saturday. When nothing happened during the day on Sunday, she chalked it up to wayward kids. Then Sunday night when she was sleeping, her phone began to ring again. Two more times she was prank-called, with the person on the other end simply not saying anything. After the second call, she turned off the ringer. Unfortunately, sleep eluded her that night, and she was a nervous wreck until falling into a restless sleep sometime after three in the morning.

Now she was not only pissed off and extremely tired, but a little bit nervous as well. Who the hell would call her in the middle of the night and simply not say anything? The first time or two could be excused away by a prankster, but to call several times

again in the middle of the night, on two separate nights, when any sane person would be asleep... Well, that was another story.

She forced herself to get out of bed and went through the motions of her morning routine. Although today wasn't going to be a busy day at the office, she still wasn't looking forward to dealing with people. She was tired and cranky and not in the mood for any bullshit.

"I can't stand that witch! Why won't she just find another damn job? I'm so done dealing with her." Adele stomped into her office and slammed the door. She didn't really give a flying fuck who heard the noise because at this point, she was pissed. That backstabbing, lying, stupid ass Donna had done it again. Now Adele had to work with her on a project, and she knew Donna wouldn't be able to perform and keep up with the other team members. This was *not* what she needed today. She pulled open her drawer

and dropped two painkillers into her hand. A headache from hell was forming, and she needed to get rid of it quickly. It was only ten o'clock in the morning, and her day was quickly going downhill. Maybe she needed to just go home and climb back in bed.

The phone on her desk buzzed and her assistant announced a call. "Ms. Woolner, a Mr. Noah Braddock is on the line for you."

"Thanks."

She put on her wireless headset and punched the button to bring Noah on the line. Adjusting her tone so she didn't sound as stressed as she felt, she greeted him with a tone that was a little too chipper. "Hey, Noah. What's up?"

"Nothing really, just a little hectic at work today. What about you? No training session at the gym today?" Of course, he would ask about her working out. The man was relentless.

"No. Things are kind of crazy at work. I don't think I'll have the energy to go tonight."

A slight pause followed on the line, and then he spoke again. “Hmmm. So, want to take me to lunch?” Noah seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to her. He always knew when she needed to talk or just to get away from it all.

“Hey! You called me, you know.”

“Come on. Take me to that little restaurant near your office. You know I love their steaks.”

She laughed. They all loved going to that restaurant. At least once a week, one of them called and asked her to treat them to lunch. Not that she ever did, since they would always end up paying for the meal. She knew it was their way of checking up on her and keeping their connection strong. “Okay, sure. I’ll see you at noon.”

“Okay, good. Then you can tell me all about those people at work who are making you so upset. Do I have to come there and fuck anyone up for you?”

Busted. Might as well give in. “I wish you could, but no. I need to handle this myself. Maybe I need a break, so lunch will be good.”

“Okay, but you know I don’t like to hear you sound like this. It doesn’t make me happy, Adele.”

“I know, Noah. Well, let me finish up some work and I’ll meet you at noon. Love you.”

“I love you too, Adele.”

When she clicked off with Noah, she realized she felt better. They always managed to cheer her up, even when they were in protective mode and hovering like mother hens. Although she’d never call them that to their faces, that was exactly what they were.

Her thoughts turned to the weird calls she had received over the weekend. She wasn’t sure if she should say anything at lunch, since she knew how Noah would react. She also knew it wasn’t good to keep something like that under wraps. Yeah, sure, it could be nothing, but she just wasn’t the type to ignore her gut when things were odd. Someone had made weird phone calls to her home in the middle of the night and she had no idea why. Something just didn’t sit right, so yeah, she was telling Noah. Shit, her momma didn’t raise no fool, and while she might be crazy, she wasn’t stupid.

She gave a long sigh and looked over at the clock. The minute hand seemed not to have moved at all. Only ten minutes after ten? Shit, two more hours until she could break for lunch. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter Six

“Well, hell. I didn’t expect all of you to show up tonight and badger me.”

“Don’t give us that bull, Adele.” Daniel stood up and paced her living room, his hands curled in fists by his side.

“Well, it was just some crazy phone calls. I just wanted Noah to know what was going on, in case it was something more serious.” The room became quiet and Adele knew they were looking at her. This was the closest she had ever come to discussing her past with them.

Ethan spoke up next. “Something serious like what, Adele?”

Her head dropped and she sighed deeply, gathering her courage. She knew this was it. The moment of truth. She had never spoken to anyone about her experience with Joey, but those phone calls had freaked her out. Hiding was no longer an option, and while it still filled her with shame and

embarrassment to admit what had happened to her, she was no longer afraid to say the words.

She raised her eyes to the five wonderful men surrounding her and knew she had nothing to worry about. While she was strong enough to protect herself, she was damn happy she had these men on her side. No one would be stupid enough to fuck with them, and if they were...well, it was their funeral.

She stood up and walked to the front of the room so she could look at each of them. In broken words with a bunch of stops and starts, Adele told them of her history with Joey and how she'd ended up in Virginia. During her story, there were a lot of whispered "motherfuckers" and "I'll kill that son of a bitch" coming from the men in the room, but no one interrupted or asked her to stop. When she finished, Ethan got up from the couch, walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her so tightly, she almost lost her breath.

"Never again, Adele. Do you hear me? Never again will a man put his hands on you. I'll kill him. I swear it. I'll fucking kill him." The agony she heard in

his voice was heartbreaking, and she knew Ethan had been impacted by her story in a way that none of the others had. She wondered if she would ever really know what life experiences had made him the man he was today.

“I know, Ethan.” She knew she was surrounded by love and was secure and safe with these five men in her life. Closing her eyes for a minute, she sent a prayer up to God, thanking him for sending her such loyal protectors.

Ethan broke away and walked into the kitchen without looking at anyone in the room. His body was tense and she knew he was extremely angry. She made to walk after him, but Tyler shook his head. Ethan had his own demons to work through, and he needed to be alone right now. She knew that and would respect his need for space until he was ready to share. If that ever happened.

“Why didn’t you ever tell us, Adele?” This from Daniel, the one who always tried to play peacemaker.

“I didn’t want to bother you guys. When I came here I needed to be on my own for a bit. I needed to

be strong without a man helping me. Although you guys were always around, I had to do it on my own. I know you understand that. I'm stronger now and I can deal with almost anything." She sat down heavily on the chair next to Tyler. "I'll never let myself get into another situation like that. I only told you guys because I felt it was time you knew."

Noah heaved a sigh and stood up. "Tony, reach out to your friends at Quantico. See what we can find out about this guy Joey." He turned to Adele. "Next time you get one of those calls, you call one of us immediately. No arguing. We're going to do some digging around, including this guy Joey, and see what we can find out. I want to make sure that sorry son of a bitch isn't the one doing this." He ran his hand down his face, the stress and frustration evident in his features. "I know you can take care of yourself if he comes around, but let us do this for you. We still need to take care of some things, and this is one of them. Just give me a few days to check on some things."

Tyler broke in and addressed Adele, "Are you going to be around the house for the next few days?"

Hesitating, she looked around the room. Feeling better about the situation now that she had shared her history, she wasn't concerned—much—about the outburst that was sure to take place at her next words. “For the most part. I—I have a date with Stefano on Wednesday.” She knew the shit was about to hit the fan now.

“Oh hell no you don't!” Ethan must have been fully recovered, because he was back in the room and his disposition was as sunny as ever.

“Yes I do, Ethan! He asked me out and I'm going.”

“Dammit, Adele, this isn't funny. How do you know it isn't him making these calls to you? He may be some psycho who latched on to you, for all we know.”

She laughed. She didn't mean to, but the looks on their faces—all of them except Noah—were hilarious. They looked as if they'd just swallowed some nasty-tasting medicine.

“Adele, this isn't a joke. What do we really know about him?”

“I know it’s not funny and that’s not what I’m laughing about. I’m sorry. Listen, I like him and I’m going on this date. Whether you guys like it or not, it’s time I begin to move forward. You can’t stop me, Ethan.”

“Just watch me! I’ll lock you in the house.” He was yelling by the time he finished. She stood toe to toe with him, not backing down one bit.

“You may be big, Ethan, but I swear I’ll kick your ass,” she yelled back at him. “I didn’t tell you this so you could make me a prisoner in my own home. I just wanted you to know what was going on.” Adele could feel her eyes well with tears, and she prayed they would not fall. Crying was not an option. She could not—would not—show weakness right now.

“Adele, don’t fight me on this. I will do whatever it takes to protect you, even from yourself. We don’t know this guy Stefano,” he sneered. He turned to Daniel and spoke again. “While you’re checking out Joey, why don’t you run the stats on this guy Stefano? I want to make sure we have the full skinny on him as well.”

“Come on, Ethan. We’re going to be in a public place for dinner. Do you think I’m stupid enough to make another bad decision?” She turned to Tony, who had been quietly observing the entire exchange. “Tony, help me out here. You know I can’t hide out and stop living my life because of this. If it is Joey, we’re already prepared for that possibility. If it’s not, hiding out isn’t going to make whoever it is go away.” She turned back to Ethan. “If you want to protect me, fine, but I won’t hide. I want my life back.”

He attempted to stare her down and make her back off, but she just gave it to him right back. It was time for her to stand on her own two feet. Sure, they had protected her when she needed it, but now it was time they realized she could hold her own. The woman they’d known before was dead and buried, and they had better get used to it. She noticed Ethan glance over in Noah’s direction and saw some of the tension release from his body. She wasn’t sure what type of communication had just passed between them, but she was happy for it none the less.

“When did you stop needing us, Adele?” He whispered his question so low that she almost missed it. The agony in his voice brought tears to her eyes, and her love for her family grew even stronger.

Speechless for a moment, she was taken aback by his comment. That wasn’t the situation at all, and she never wanted them to think she didn’t need them, because she did. She would always need them. She loved them and no matter what happened, they were hers and she wasn’t giving them back. She placed her hand on his arm. “Ethan, I will always need you. Never doubt that. I’m just ready to move on and start living again. I like Stefano, and I want to get to know him and he wants to get to know me. You can check him out if you want—I won’t complain. But if he checks out okay, then you have to back off and let me enjoy myself. I’ll even let you know where I’ll be on Wednesday. Stefano already knows I was going to tell you. Okay? Agreed?”

He mumbled something under his breath, but finally gave her the answer she needed. “Fine, agreed.”

She turned to the other four, knowing they wouldn't be as difficult to deal with as Ethan was. Capturing them all in her gaze, she repeated her demand. "That means all of you. I want your agreement." She laughed under her breath at the dejected look that came over their faces. They were all acting as if their favorite toy had been taken away. "Noah, make them agree."

Tony was first to answer. "Agreed, Adele, but if anything looks shady, you no longer have a say in how we handle it."

Daniel was next. "And if this Stefano guy doesn't come correct, he'll regret ever meeting you. He won't even see it coming."

"Daniel, did you just threaten to—"

Tyler piggybacked on that. "Yes, he did, and don't you forget it. You're family, Adele, and we protect what belongs to us. Make no mistake about it. We'll back off, but we won't be far. First we need to find out who's making these calls to you, and then we'll deal with your burgeoning love life." He said this

as if swallowing nasty cold medicine. They were amazing—crazy—but amazing.

Noah walked to her and turned her around to face him. “Tony will be sleeping in the spare bedroom for tonight, and we’ll rotate with one of us being here at all times until this is over.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” she said under her breath with a tone full of piss and vinegar, but she couldn’t help but feel a little comforted that one of them would be at the house, just in case.

“Don’t look at us as babysitters, because that’s not what it is. Consider it your own private security detail.” He paused as he lifted her chin so that she could look at him. “I will not be moved on this, Adele.”

“Yeah, I love you guys too.” Her sarcasm was not lost on any of them, but they chose to ignore it.

“We know you do. Now, what are you going to feed us tonight? We’re hungry.”

Two nights later, Adele was dressed in a royal blue shirt and a knee-length black skirt for her first real date in years. Hair in an up-do with curly tendrils strategically cascading down her neck, she knew she looked sexy as hell. She never wore stockings, so her bare legs were smooth and well moisturized. To finish off the outfit, she wore three-inch black heels with peek-a-boo toe openings. He wouldn't be able to resist her, and that was exactly what she had in mind.

Tony was on babysitting duty tonight, but he wasn't due to come over until later. Thankful that he wouldn't be there to witness Stefano picking her up for their date, she gave one last look at her appearance in the mirror before turning away. Stefano would be arriving soon to pick her up for their dinner, and the butterflies were kicking off a serious house party in her stomach.

Yesterday afternoon, she had heard from Tony that Stefano was exactly who he said he was. Not one blemish or questionable indiscretion was listed on his record. Although she would never admit it, she was

glad they had checked him out. Now she could relax and enjoy her evening out.

She walked into the living room just as she heard the front doorbell chime. Suddenly her palms became sweaty and her heartbeat increased. Never before had she been so excited about seeing a man, but this was different. This was Stefano. She had thought of him constantly at work during the past couple of days. She wondered what he was doing and if she should call.

At least once an hour, she picked up the phone, prepared to call him and just say hello. After only a couple of days, she was starting to crave him, his voice. He had called her each night after the cookout, and they had talked everything and nothing all at the same time. It was as if he wanted her to get to know the person he was without the distraction of being in his presence. He had no idea how much she appreciated what he was doing. She had never been wooed before, but she had a feeling that was exactly what he was doing.

After their long telephone discussions, she now knew his reasons for accepting an officer commission

in the Marines right after graduating college, instead of choosing to sit behind a desk. He explained his feelings of responsibility for his troops in the field and how he had made a vow to bring each and every one of them home. Which he always did. They talked about his family and how much his mother, father, and brother meant to him.

In turn, she told him about growing up in New Bern, North Carolina, a small town about thirty miles south of a Marine Corps air station. She talked—in general terms—about her move to Virginia, but she didn't go into the real reasons for the abrupt move. She presented it as a decision she'd had to make in order to give her a change in perspective. The true reason for her move would have to come another time, if they ever got to that point. They talked about her job and how she wished Donna would just leave and find another job in a different state, somewhere far away.

Their conversations would usually become heated toward the end. While he didn't say anything overt, he made it known he wanted her. Very much.

The tone of his voice when he whispered that he couldn't wait to see her was her undoing every time.

Whenever they spoke on the phone, his husky voice would cause her core to pulse with need. The increasing desire she felt skyrocketed each time they spoke, and she could sense her body responding to him more each day. She tried to understand how he could make her feel this way, respond to him so strongly, in such a short time. Interestingly enough, it all came from his voice and the sensual way he spoke to her. Admittedly, the anticipation of being with him was killing her, but she knew things had to move slowly.

Arriving at the door, she took two seconds to breathe in deeply and get her bearings. She opened the door and looked at the man waiting for her. She knew in that moment that she had made the right decision. Oh yes, he was the one, and she was going to enjoy every second of it. Maybe not tonight, but it would be soon. Very soon. Letting her gaze roam over his body, she couldn't help but appreciate the fine specimen of male flesh that stood in front of her.

He was dressed in a black blazer and trousers with a burgundy button-up shirt. He wasn't wearing a tie, and his casual look made him look irresistible. As if he'd done nothing more than run his fingers through his hair, it had a tousled, just-out-of-bed look that she knew some men would give just about anything to pull off. The cologne he wore was a perfect complement to his natural male scent, and her nostrils flared as it wafted toward her. All in all, he was perfect.

"Hi, Stefano."

"Adele. You look beautiful," he whispered when he stepped closer. He reached his left hand up and stopped. Looking at her, he did the one thing that guaranteed he would be getting a second date. "May I?"

"Yes," she sighed. Only one word escaped her lips, but she knew it meant so much more than just an answer to the question presented.

His strong hand continued its path and lightly cupped her cheek. Her skin was heated, and his light touch caused an immediate reaction in her nether regions. A whimper almost escaped as she watched

his head come toward her. He brought his lips to hers in a brief but oh-so-sweet kiss. “You look so delectable. I needed just one taste.”

Wow! That was the only thought going through her mind after his lips touched hers. She found her voice and whispered huskily back at him, “Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“Are you ready to go? If we don’t get a move on, my honorable intentions will fly out the window.” He laughed a bit, and she knew she could fully relate to his dilemma. “I’m trying to be good here.”

His hand dropped from her face and traveled down her arm, lightly grabbing her hand in his. With light pressure, he began to pull her body closer to his, taking it slow and giving her a chance to pull back. “Tell me now, Adele. I don’t care if we have reservations. I’m more than willing to stay inside for the night.”

Tempted. Oh boy, was she tempted. But she forced the words that needed to be said, not the ones she wanted. “Yes, I’m ready. You promised to feed me and I’ve been waiting for my treat all day.” She backed

up from him, his hand dropping from hers as she stepped into the house. Grabbing her purse and keys off the table next to the door, she closed the door and locked it before they went out into the night.

Sitting in the restaurant, Adele couldn't help but stare at Stefano across the table. His chiseled jaw and beautifully tanned skin drew her in like a moth to a flame. Conversation flowed between them as if they had known each other much longer than just under a week. He stimulated not only her body, but her mind as well. She could tell he was a savvy businessman who knew how to succeed in life. Whether it was natural for him or the Marines had helped him learn that skill, she couldn't tell for certain.

Without a doubt, she knew she wanted him in her life. It felt good to be with someone who looked at her as if no one else existed for him but her.

When the waiter came to check in and ask if they wanted dessert, Adele turned her gaze away from Stefano for a quick second and glanced around the room. It seemed they had been longer than she thought, and they were about to shut the place down.

The restaurant had cleared out quite a bit, and only a handful of tables had people at them. When she turned her head toward the back, something caught her eye, and she stopped and focused on that spot.

“I can’t believe it,” she said under her breath. “They promised to back off. Just wait until I get my hands on them.”

Stefano had just finished giving the waiter their dessert order and turned to her after she made her statement. “What are you looking at?” He turned his head in the direction she was looking and began to chuckle.

Across the room, tucked in a booth in a darkened area of the restaurant were Ethan, Tyler and Daniel. There was no doubt they had followed them here tonight. They were blatantly staring at them, making no secret of the fact they were spying.

“Ignore them, Adele. They’re just being overprotective. Let them sit there and sulk if they want to.”

“But how could they? I told them not to do this.” She was pissed, and they would all be hearing about it.

Although Noah and Tony weren't here, she knew they had to be aware of what was going on. There was no way the three of them would be on a reconnaissance mission involving her without the others being aware of what was going on.

"As long as they don't interrupt our date, then I'm fine." He slowly moved his hand under hers, drawing her attention back to him. She wrapped her fingers around his; grabbing his hand within hers, she gave him a clear message that she was here—with him tonight. Rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand, he gave her a lopsided grin. "I really enjoyed myself tonight, and I'm fairly certain you feel the same. I'd like to see you again tomorrow night. Are you free?"

Adele gazed at Stefano, seeing his desire for her in his eyes. She felt the passion humming along the surface of his skin and knew she wouldn't let him get away. "Yes, I'd like to see you again as well, even if we do have the Secret Service butting their noses where they don't belong."

“Baby, that doesn’t bother me at all. If you haven’t figured it out yet, they don’t scare me. I want to get to know you better, and your brothers can’t do a damn thing to stop me.”

Chapter Seven

Six weeks into her new relationship with Stefano, Adele knew that she was ready to take things to the next level. Whenever she was around him, it took everything in her not to accost him. He got sexier every time they saw each other, and her patience was skating on thin ice. All it took was a glance her way or a brush of his hand along her cheek and her body would begin to melt from the inside out.

She could tell he enjoyed how her body responded to his nearness. He expressed his appreciation of her by the number of times he made sure to kiss under her ear as they sat and watched a movie or TV show. He would make tiny gestures, such as rubbing her arm with his fingertips as they relaxed on the deck in the backyard. When they said goodnight at the end of their dates, his heated kisses and roaming hands would wring continuous moans from her body.

Alone in her bedroom at night, she couldn't help but crave the feel of Stefano's hard body and wish he was with her, his body flush against hers. On more than one occasion, she woke up panting heavily from a steamy, sensual dream with him as the star, her thighs slick from her innermost thoughts. In some ways, she was surprised that he hadn't pressed her to spend the night, but she also had an idea of what was holding him back.

This was his way to prove to her that he was the real thing. That he wanted her for more than just her body and the sex they could have together. While she appreciated the sentiment, the rather large bulge in his pants after their heated make-out sessions in her living room couldn't hide how much he desired her. On more than one occasion, she had attempted to wrap her hand around him, just to let him know she was ready to move things forward. Each time, he would remove her hand and place it elsewhere on his body, usually whispering words like, "Baby, please don't tempt me tonight."

Soon enough—specifically, tonight—she would no longer allow him to get away from her so easily. The decision would be taken out of his hands and she would claim her man. No more playing around. Stefano had better be prepared for what was coming, because tonight there would be no going back for them.

Luckily, the guys had stopped hovering about two weeks ago. The strange calls hadn't reoccurred after the weekend of the cookout, and while she had chalked it up to her overactive imagination, they chose not to listen to her when she said they weren't needed. They hadn't yet been able to locate Joey but were still searching for him, just in case he had made his way to Virginia.

Although he wasn't their favorite person in the world, they'd also realized Stefano wasn't going anywhere. Well, Stefano had something to do with that as well. Although she could tell it pissed him off to do so, he met with each of the guys individually, starting with Noah and ending with Ethan. From what Tyler and Daniel explained, he had made his

intentions very clear. Eventually, they all recognized the man underneath the suit as one of them and decided to give him a chance. Stefano seemed to have a stubborn streak just as wide as theirs and wouldn't allow them to dismiss him from her life so easily. So, while a stalemate had been in place for about two weeks, eventually the guys began to thaw to him. For Adele, that had broken the last barrier; it was time to give all of herself to the man who had mended her heart and made her feel like a whole woman again.

Earlier in the week, her friend Toya had helped her shop for the perfect items to wear under her dress tonight. Something that would make him stand up and pay attention, and never want to leave her bed. What they had picked out was something she never would have worn before, and she was still amazed she'd agreed to it. The black lace and red satin matching underwear set was a neon sign flashing "take me, I'm yours" if there ever was one. Hopefully, Stefano would be able to pick up the message.

She sprayed perfume under her ears and on her cleavage. Her red dress clung to her body in all the

right places and her hair surrounded her face in soft curls, revealing her as a sensual woman of the world. She was a woman on a mission tonight, and she was bound and determined to see this through.

It felt like a flock of birds started to do flips in her stomach when Stefano arrived and rang her doorbell. As soon as he saw her, she knew he would understand exactly what she wanted to do tonight. There would be no turning back, and she was perfectly fine with that.

She walked to the door and opened it to find Stefano leaning up against the side. His hands were in his pants pockets, his head dipped low. He looked like a real-life dream come true.

“Hi. Come on in.” She moved aside to allow him to enter.

“Evening, beautiful. Are you ready for our night out?” he said as he walked in and grabbed her around the waist, bringing her lower body flush with his.

“Can I be honest?” She might as well put it out there now. Food wasn’t what she wanted right now, and they could make reservations another time.

“Of course, baby.” He began to maneuver her toward the living room while planting soft kisses on her neck and shoulder.

“I’m not that hungry...at least not for food.”

He stopped walking and his head lifted so he could look her in the eyes. His grip around her waist tightened, and a moan was torn from his throat as he reacted to her statement. “Adele, baby, please. I’ve tried to be patient and give you time, which I know you need. I don’t want to rush you into anything.” He sighed deeply, dipping his head low and closing his eyes. A few seconds passed as she waited for him to continue speaking. “But, yes, if we’re being honest, I want you more than I have ever wanted anything or anyone in my life.” His gaze intense, his eyes darkened, he finished, “Are you telling me what I think you are?”

“Yes, I am. Tonight is perfect for us, and I want you just as much as you want me. I think it’s about time we took our relationship to the next level.”

“If we take this step, you do realize I won’t be able to walk away from you.”

“I don’t want you to. I know what it means and I’m ready. This is what I want. *You* are who I want.”

She heard him sigh deeply, felt his hands tighten around her for a second. “Baby, you have no idea how much I’ve longed to hear you say those words. I wanted to prove to you, to your brothers, that I wasn’t going anywhere. I’m here to stay, Adele.”

“Then come with me. I have something I’d like you to see.”

As they made their way to the back of the house, Adele’s stomach was still doing flip-flops. Not from nerves, but from need and desire for the man behind her. Tonight was the night she had waited for since she’d made the decision to give him a chance. Sexual tension unlike anything she had experienced before constantly simmered under the surface, and it was on the verge of boiling over if they didn’t do something about it.

As they entered her bedroom, Adele attempted to release Stefano’s hand and move away, but a firm grip on her hand stopped her movement. In a quick motion, he turned her body around and pulled her

close so that her body was tight against his, the hard erection in his pants pressing against her stomach. Head dipped low, his lips touched hers and she felt her internal walls pulse in anticipation. Almost simultaneously, her womb began to clench in response, as if it were excited about what was about to happen. As Stefano pulled away and looked at her, his beautiful hazel eyes seemed to see right through to her soul, communicating without words that this would be something neither of them would ever forget.

“I never want to let you go, Adele.”

“Then don’t,” she whispered as her mouth captured his in a sizzling kiss. Her lips latched on to his, her tongue snaking its way into his mouth. Strong hands gripped her ass, pulling her closer to his body, the barrier of clothing the only thing preventing their joining.

“Close your eyes. I want you to feel what I do to you. Feel how your body craves my touch and knows that we belong together.” His whispered words held her immobile. There was no way she could resist him, and although she wanted to take just one tiny peek,

there was no way she was opening her eyes. He moved away for a second, and she almost reached out for him. After a short delay, where it sounded as if he were removing his suit jacket, she felt the warmth of his body as he pressed against the length of her. He placed a light kiss just underneath her ear and lightly nipped her earlobe. Her core clenched in response and her nipples hardened.

Stefano's fingers traced lazy circles down her stomach, heading due south to the ultimate treasure. Adele wanted to see his face, but contented herself with enjoying the feeling of her lover's hands roaming across her body. His large hand made it to the belt of her dress and slowly started to pull. Since it was a wrap dress, that belt was the only thing standing in the way of pure bliss. He dropped to his knees as the belt came undone; his sudden intake of breath was the only indication that he enjoyed the sight in front of him.

Adele was no fool. Her plans this evening for Stefano had always included seduction, and her undergarments reflected that single-minded purpose.

Her red and black thong underwear hid just enough of her to be sinful, while the matching bra lifted her breasts in such a way that they seemed to call out to him to suck, lick, taste...to enjoy the bountiful fruit displayed in front of him.

Stefano's hand began to slide up and down her hips, tracing her curves and learning her body with every touch. When he reached the back of her knees, she let out a reluctant gasp and squirmed, her body involuntarily making a jerking motion.

"Are you ticklish? Hmmm, somehow that seems just like you. I'll have to remember that." His deep, husky voice was driving her crazy, even as it made her ache for more.

"Not..." Adele cleared her throat and tried again. "Not ticklish, exactly. Just...uh, something about your hands touching my skin there."

Stefano slowly stood up to his full height, his hands coming up to cradle her face so lovingly, so reverently, that it almost brought tears to her eyes. How could she have waited so long to make love to him? Never before had she experienced a man who

touched her with so much feeling and yes, so much love. Oh goodness, what had she been missing over the years?

“Look at me, Adele.”

She shook her head no. If she opened her eyes, he would see the fear she was trying to hide, but he would also see her love for him shining through.

“Yes. Open your eyes and look at me,” he whispered gently against her lips, and she heard the plea in his voice.

After a brief moment, she slowly opened her eyes to look at him, and she was stunned speechless. She knew the look in his eyes without him needing to say a word. Everything she had been hoping for, praying for was within her grasp. Passion, devotion, love...all of his feelings for her laid bare for anyone to see. He wasn't hiding it. She felt as if he were standing on top of a building yelling at the top of his lungs, declaring in no uncertain terms exactly what she meant to him.

There was nothing else to do but allow herself to fall, because she was sure, more than anything else in her life, that he would catch her.

Stefano pulled her dress off her shoulders, letting it slide down her body and onto the floor. Her bra was next and then her panties. All the while, his eyes never left hers. The connection they shared was never broken as he bared her body to his gaze and prepared her for his lovemaking. When he was finished, he walked her backwards to the bed so that the back of her legs hit the edge.

“After tonight, there will be no one else for you. I love you, Adele. With everything in my soul, I love you. Maybe it happened too soon, but I know what I want.” He placed feather-light kisses on her lips, cheek, eyes, as he continued to pay homage to her and express his feelings.

“I want to be the man who protects you, loves you, cherishes you, and helps you to accomplish everything you want. No matter what, I will be by your side. This is my promise to you, and I want to make sure I say it before I claim your body.” He

pulled back and cradled her face in his hands, forcing her to look into his eyes.

“Love, I need you to understand that I mean every single word I’m saying to you. And if you still have doubts, I’ll do whatever I need to in order to prove it again and again until you believe me with every fiber of your being.”

Her mouth dry and her throat closed tight from trying to force the tears back, Adele could do nothing but nod. She feared she needed to say something more, or else he wouldn’t understand that she accepted and believed in everything he’d just said. But when she tried to talk, she was barely able to get out a whispered, “Yes.”

Stefano laid her on the bed, her body prone while he stood over her, gazing at her naked form in all its glory. His body then lowered and his head was flush with her pulsing channel, his hot breath fanning over her flesh.

“No matter what, you can’t touch me. Your hands must stay at your side. Do you understand, Adele?”

This time, her voice actually worked and she croaked out a hoarse, “Yes.”

His mouth descended on her, his tongue swiping her thick lips and gathering up the moisture that had managed to seep out. The feeling of being wide open to him while lacking the ability to touch him drove her even crazier. The bed sheets didn’t have enough grip or traction, and her hands slid along the smooth sheets as his mouth drove her to new heights of pleasure. Her moans grew louder as he did things to her that were probably outlawed in more than a few countries. His tongue danced and twirled on her clit, making her pray for relief and hoping he would never, ever stop. As she felt her orgasm upon her, all she could do was repeatedly chant his name.

Briefly, his head lifted as he gave her the words to help her find release. “Come for me, baby. Let me hear you.” Mouth latching on to her swollen pussy, his tongue beat a quick pulse against her clit as he took her to Heaven and back.

As her body sprinted towards the finish line, the feelings of ecstasy and satisfaction coursed through

her like nothing she had ever felt before. Even as she squirmed and twisted her hips, her juices released into his mouth, and still he did not stop. Stefano continued to lick and suck at her flesh, while her body continued to release mini-orgasms that made the pleasure seem unstoppable, almost unbearable.

She vaguely registered him sitting up and licking his lips, capturing even more of her essence on his tongue. Shirt, belt, and pants slowly peeled away from his body, and a condom was produced and fitted over his cock. And oh, damn, what a specimen of manhood he had. Their nights of kissing and touching had never prepared her for the real thing. His body was absolute perfection. Obviously in great shape, Stefano was perfectly proportioned and sported a wonderful deep golden skin tone that complemented his dark hair. It made her ache for him all the more and thank her lucky stars that this man wanted her as much as she wanted him.

As he leaned over her, lifting her legs to allow more room for his frame, her arms lifted and grabbed hold of his biceps. There were no concerns about

being ready, but she knew the ride wouldn't be easy. It had been a long time since she had been this intimate with a man, and it would be a tight fit.

His lips met hers in a sensuous kiss, his tongue mating with hers as he slowly began to press into her body. Tasting her essence, she became even wetter, knowing his passion matched hers. Because of his size, he took it slow, rocking into her body an inch at a time, allowing her slick channel to stretch and become accustomed to his size. With each motion forward with his hips, he whispered hot, sexy words to her. Telling her how much he wanted her, desired her, and needed her.

Finally, once he was fully seated, his strokes became longer and deeper. The sensations were so intense, her skin tingled. Their groans of pleasure became louder and more frequent as his hips rocked into hers, the tip of his cock reaching for her womb. There was no going back, and nothing had ever been this good, this all-consuming. As they both screamed out in completion, Adele knew she would do everything she could to make sure this man stayed by

her side. All the challenges, all of the heartache she had been through, had led up to this point in her life. Now that she had touched happiness and understood what it felt like to be truly loved as a woman, she would not give it up without a fight.

Chapter Eight

Stefano was not happy with the information Tony's contact had found. He had received the package this morning with a message to call Noah, Tony, and Daniel as soon as he received it. It seemed that Joey was nowhere to be found and had missed several check-in meetings with his parole officer. Three months ago, he had been released from prison for good behavior. What they had not found out until after he was released was that someone on the outside had been helping him keep track of Adele's whereabouts.

He was still a bit upset that Adele had waited so long to give him the full story of what had occurred with her ex-husband. Even though he understood her need to be cautious, it still hurt that she had not felt he could be trusted with the information from the very beginning. The signs of abuse had been there from the start, but he had not understood the true reality of her

situation until she'd explained to him, in excruciating detail, what she had gone through.

Adele had also explained about the calls that had come through when they'd first met. He was amazed that even though she was stressed and concerned about the calls, she had still given him a chance. He now understood what had prompted the guys to stay overnight at her house when they'd first started dating. At first he'd thought it was because of him, and he wasn't sure if he was pleased or not to hear the real reason. However, once he'd left Adele's house after their conversation, his chest feeling as if someone was squeezing the breath out of him, he had quickly made his way to Tony's office off of K Street in the heart of Washington, DC and not so subtly demanded to see him and get some answers. Unfortunately, the answers did nothing to make him feel better. If anything, they only made him that much more determined to protect Adele, while also solidifying their relationship and showing her how it felt to be truly loved.

Although the late-night calls had stopped, looking at the papers in his hand, he knew Adele wasn't out of danger. His gut churned with the implications of this information, and he knew he had to call a meeting with the guys today. Mouth twisted into a grimace, he acknowledged that meeting would also involve Ethan. Adele had made it quite clear that all of the guys were her family, and even if he and Ethan never became best friends, he respected his place in her life.

Picking up the phone, he called around to the guys, arranging to meet them at six o'clock that evening. He had a date with Adele at seven this evening, so that would give them plenty of time to come up with a plan. He just prayed Joey wasn't stupid enough to try something. While Stefano's ego and male pride screamed at him to go over there and whisk Adele away, he also knew Adele had an entire family to think about, and each and every one of them would give their own lives to keep her safe. If Joey came within spitting distance of Adele, none of them

would have any qualms about doing what had to be done.

Joey had been biding his time for a long time....too long, in fact. Tonight was the night, and he was ready to make his move. Adele thought she could get away from him, but she didn't realize just how determined he was to make her pay for what she had done to him. How dare she attempt to move on with her life after he had been stuck in that hell-hole prison for almost five years? She had no idea what he'd had to endure because of her. His entire life was down the drain. Convicted of attempted murder, there was nothing else for him to do now. His life would never be the same. It was all her fault, and he would finally have his revenge.

After watching her for almost three months, he knew her routine like the back of his hand. Those six guys who always hung around weren't coming over tonight, and even if they were, it wouldn't be until

later. If he was going to act, he needed to do it now. His patience was running thin, and he hated that she seemed so happy. Weak women like Adele needed to be scared and cowering on the ground while they were trained to stay in their place. She must have forgotten the lessons he'd taught her so many years ago. His job tonight was to make sure she never forgot again.

Grabbing the bag of groceries from her car, Adele made her way up to the front door of her house. Tonight was a special evening for her and Stefano. Two months had passed since they'd first started dating, and things were progressing nicely. He seemed to take it in stride when she told him she wanted to cook him a special dinner for their anniversary. While it wasn't a major milestone for everyone else, for her it was something to be celebrated. She had finally moved on with her life, and Joey had no place in it. Her dreams no longer turned into nightmares, nor did she wake up in fear,

her arms instinctively rising up to protect her face from a phantom attacker. She no longer jumped at every sound, practically afraid of her own shadow. It felt good to simply live life and enjoy herself for the first time in so many years.

After that first night they'd made love, it was like she turned into a different woman. She wanted him all the time, and she never let him forget it. The things he did to her body and the sensations his touch invoked made her feel so special. Never had she felt this free, this happy, just living her life. Stefano made her feel protected and gave her something she'd never thought she would have—and it felt damn good.

The guys had even remarked on it, in a very begrudging manner. When they were all together, they commented on how much more relaxed she seemed and how her smile came more easily. And although Stefano was a part of her life, he recognized and understood that her brothers weren't going anywhere. Sunday dinners at her house continued to take place, and Ethan was still the Master Griller. There was just an extra person in the group now, and

his presence was slowly becoming part of the normal arrangement. When one of the guys came back from a mission and stopped by, they would be just as likely to catch Stefano there with Adele, just hanging out. Although they were happy for her, it didn't stop them from giving him a hard time. Laughing under her breath, she knew things were good now. She lived a good life, and things would only get better from here.

Her distracting thoughts about Stefano dulled her awareness of her surroundings. She was usually on high alert, which was a product of always wondering what would happen next with Joey. But not tonight.

As she opened the door to her house and began to step over the threshold, she felt the arm come up and wrap around her waist, while another hand covered her mouth. *What the fuck?* She froze, the groceries for her special dinner with Stefano dropping to the floor as her arms lost their grip. Unsure of what was going on, but knowing she had a problem on her hands, she tensed, ready for almost anything.

“You thought you could get away from me. I found your ass, and I’m going to make you pay for what you did to me.” The words made her blood run cold.

Oh God! It was Joey. She would know that voice anywhere. She had heard it over and over in her nightmares for years. How had he found her? Why was he here?

He spoke again, his voice shaking with what she remembered as anger. “Get in the house. If you make a move and give me a hard time, I won’t kill you quickly. I’ll make it very painful for you, and you really don’t want that, do you?”

Vibrating with both fear and anger, Adele tried to get a grip on her emotions. Joey would not know she wasn’t that scared woman he’d known five years ago. Caught up in the memories of what she’d experienced with him, she had momentarily reverted back.

She wasn’t going to make any rash moves until he showed his cards. Not sure what type of weapon Joey had on him, she knew the smartest thing she

could do was to wait. He had gotten the drop on her, but that had been his only advantage. He should have done whatever he was going to do from the get-go. Because now that she had time to think about the situation, there was no way in hell she was going out like this. Not by his hand.

Groceries forgotten where they lay scattered on the floor, Adele knew she would only have a short window of time before he turned on her. He walked her into the house, his body pressed up against hers. Since she knew where both of his hands were, she realized that if he had a weapon, it was put away. She mumbled behind his hand, trying to get him to release her. Yeah, he must be real sure of himself, because he released her mouth and placed his hand around her throat.

“You got something to say?”

“What do you want, Joey? I didn’t do anything to you. You did it to yourself when you attacked me in our own home.”

“Yes, it *was* your fault! If you hadn’t made me so mad at you, I never would have hit you. It was

always your fault. You always made me so angry with you. You knew what would happen and you did it anyway. I never wanted to hurt you, but you always made me. And then you got me sent away. How could you?”

He was losing it fast. Spittle was flying out of his mouth and onto her face as he yelled at her. Body odor wafted off of him, as if he had not bathed in weeks. His hand tightened on her throat as his anger grew. Adele thought back to all the training she had received over the years and knew that it was now or never. He had begun to drag her into the living room, and that just wasn't going to happen.

It appeared to take place in slow motion, but she knew it was only a few seconds. It didn't escape her notice that even though her mind was strong, her body remembered what it felt like to be at this man's mercy and what she needed to do in order for him to stop beating on her. Her hands dropped down in a submissive posture, her body relaxing in his arms as he continued to yell and scream about how it was her fault he had beat on her. One leg moved out, giving

her a wider stance that would allow her weight to shift quickly, her hips canting to the side to give her leverage for what she needed to do. Moves she'd practiced repeatedly over the years played through her mind as she recalled her training sessions with the guys.

Suddenly, her arm flung back and smashed into his testicles, stunning him with the intense pain. Her right knee came up to her waist and she slammed her heel down on his foot, making him yell out in pain, spit forming at the corner of his mouth. In his confusion about which pain to deal with first, he suddenly released her.

She turned her body and grabbed his right arm with her left hand, his body limp due to the pain in his nether regions. Her right arm swung up and her hand slammed into his throat with brute force. The sound of his windpipe being crushed reverberated throughout the room, and his eyes widened at the shock of realizing what she had done. Broken gasps were the only sounds escaping his mouth as the impact of the blow took its toll. His eyes watered,

blurring his vision, while his windpipe began to swell, literally choking him where he stood. She couldn't help yelling her own choice words at him as she gave him a taste of his own medicine.

"You motherfucker, this is the last time you'll ever come after me. Did you really think I wouldn't be waiting for you? Surprise, asshole. I'm well prepared for your sorry ass. You'll never come searching for me again."

Adele twisted her body around, grabbed hold of his upper arm and flipped him over her side, his body crashing to the floor. Keeping hold of his arm, she lifted her right leg high in the air, simulating a dancer's kick, her foot reaching level with her face. She knew what she was doing and the potential ramifications of her actions, but nothing would stop her at this moment. She was done with being scared, and this son of a bitch was going to pay. As she slammed the heel of her boot down onto his throat, the impact making a final, sickening crack, the door crashed open and there stood Stefano, Noah, and

Ethan. Their nostrils flared wide and their skin flushed with anger.

Stefano rushed to her, pulling her away from Joey's body, while Noah pulled out his cell phone and dialed the police. Adrenaline high, she turned into Stefano's comforting and strong embrace, her body shaking from the experience of forcing down the devil who had subjected her to hell for so long. She heard Noah on the telephone, his voice sounding as if he were in a tunnel.

"Yes, please, send the police. We have a situation."

"Baby, are you okay? Tell me, Adele! Are you hurt?" Stefano's tortured voice reached her ears.

Not releasing her hold on him, she nodded her head. "I'm fine. Stefano, please take me out of here."

He lifted her in his strong arms and walked out of the living room, whispering *I love you's* in her ear the entire time. Relaxing in his arms, Adele allowed the words to roll over her like a protective shield.

This was it. It was over. Finally it was over, and she had no regrets. She would do it again if needed.

Tightening her arms around the man who had given her a slice of Heaven, she breathed her first breath as a woman who was truly free.

Chapter Nine

Adele relaxed on her lounge chair and took a deep, refreshing breath. “Oh, yes. This is the life. There’s nothing better in the world.” She had purchased a new book from one of her favorite authors and was just about to crack it open when a voice whispered in her ear.

“Love, I would beg to differ with you on that. I can think of a few choice things we could be doing that are much better than this.” Would this man ever cease to amaze her? He continued to surprise her at every turn with the depth of his love for her. Not once had she ever felt anything but protected. At all times, she knew exactly how much he wanted her to be in his life, by his side. Turning her face into his, she gave him a kiss full of promises for later.

“Stefano, your mind is always in the gutter. We’ve been here on the island for four days, and this is the first time you’ve let me out of our room. If you don’t stop I’m going to tell on you.”

“Adele, you can’t keep threatening me with your brothers all the time. You know it doesn’t work.” His hand rubbed along her leg as he made his outrageous statement. She knew he wasn’t afraid of her brothers, but she still liked to tease him.

Actually, all six of her guys got along quite well. Even Ethan had come around, and he and Stefano had become quite close over the last few months. After the incident in her home, it had taken Ethan the longest to get over the fact that she had been alone with Joey and forced to defend herself. The two of them had some pretty intense conversations during that time, and while she would never reveal their private discussions to anyone, she now understood the true significance of what Ethan had experienced and what made him the man he was today. If he needed to look out for her just a little more than the others, then that would be just fine with her.

Pulling her shades down to look at Stefano, she threw him a sassy look that she knew would get his blood racing. “Oh yeah? Then why are all of them on

the other side of the island with your parents and brother?”

“Hell, that’s not my fault. Blame my mom.” He lifted her up from her chair and brought her over to sit in front of him, cradling her body between his strong legs. “After my mother met them when she and my dad visited Virginia, she all but adopted them. Against my wishes, thank you very much. Nothing I said would change her mind.” His chest shook with laughter behind her. “I can’t believe how they turned on the charm and made her putty in their hands. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Adele couldn’t help but laugh. Stefano was acting like a kid who’d dropped his favorite ice cream. Although she laughed at his pouting, she could admit that it was completely true. The guys really had wormed their way into the heart of Mrs. Indellicati in record time, and they loved every minute of the attention they received from her.

Relaxing against his broad chest, Adele knew she could thank her lucky stars every day for the life she was now blessed enough to live.

Although it was only a couple of months ago, it seemed like a lifetime had passed since that night Joey had come to her home. After many days and nights of questioning by the authorities and some favors called in—to whom, she really didn't want to know, nor did she care—the authorities had closed the case on Joey Bittner, and she'd walked free.

During that time, not only had Stefano's parents and brother come into town to provide support, but friends of Noah, Tony, Daniel, Ethan, and Tyler had as well. She'd had more protection than she could stand for a good two months. After all was said and done, Stefano's parents had invited everyone to their family vacation home, which was situated on an island just off the coast of Sicily. Although Stefano shot daggers out of his eyes at the guys, they all just smiled and gladly accepted the invitation.

His mother had kept them all busy while on the island, parading every eligible single lady she could find in front of the guys. Unfortunately, none of them were taking the bait. Luckily, Adele and Mama Indellicati weren't giving up anytime soon, and both of

them were bound and determined to get those five married off to good and honorable women.

“Stefano, quit pouting and go away. I want some alone time.”

“Baby, how about just give me five minutes of your time, and then I promise to leave you alone if you want.”

Although she would gladly give him all the time he needed, she feigned a long-suffering sigh and placed her book facedown on her lap. As she turned her head and looked up at him, ready to hear what he had to say, her mouth dropped open in shock as he pulled out the most beautiful diamond ring she had ever seen.

“I feel as if we already belong to each other. In my heart, you are already my wife and future mother of my children. But I need to make this official. This ring symbolizes my pledge to you that I will always love you, protect you, cherish you, and even though you don’t need me to fight your battles for you, I will never hesitate to do so. I love you, Adele, with all that I am or will ever be. Please marry me.”

Tears in her eyes, Adele sat up and turned around, almost kneeling him in his most precious area. “Sorry!” Her left hand shot out as she nodded yes, a huge smile on her face. This was what she had dreamed of for so long. This man, who had come into her life and given her a reason to believe in love again, was everything she had hoped for. She realized that although she had lived through hell for so long, her heaven on earth was right in front of her, asking her to pledge his life to hers.

“Adele, say the words. I need to hear you say them.”

“Yes! Yes, Stefano, I’ll marry you.” Throwing her body against his, she planted kisses all over his face and lips. Suddenly she pulled back and gave him a bright smile. “You do know that you’re stuck with all six of us now.”

Above them, Adele heard hoots and hollers and recognized both of their families cheering them from the bluff overlooking the private beach. The smiles on their faces let her know they had all been in on Stefano’s surprise. She caught Stefano’s gaze as he

smiled at her, his eyes lit up with excitement and happiness.

“Baby, for you, I’ll deal with anything, even your brothers. Now kiss me.”

****RM****

Dear Friends,

I truly hope you enjoyed Adele and Stefano's story. Although Adele found her happily-ever-after, many women do not. While some progress has been made with regard to awareness, education, and prevention, we still have some work to do. If you are not already aware, October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. The Department of Justice has established The Office on Violence Against Women (<http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/>) to specifically address this important issue within our communities.

According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund (2010),¹

- On average more than three women a day are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in the United States. In 2005, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner.
- Nearly one in four women in the United States reports experiencing violence by a current or former spouse or boyfriend at some point in her life.
- Approximately one in three adolescent girls in the United States is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner—a figure that far exceeds victimization rates for other types of violence affecting youth.

This is a subject that should not—cannot—be ignored. If you, or someone you know, is a

victim of domestic violence, please reach out and seek help from a professional.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.



[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) available 24 hours a day/7 days a week.



[National Sexual Assault Hotline](#): 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) available 24/7 for the nearest rape crisis center.



[National Stalking Resource Center](#): 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) M-F 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM EST or email gethelp@ncvc.org.



[National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline](#): 1-866-331-9474 (1-866-331-8453 TTY) available 24/7 or connect with a trained Peer Advocate online at www.loveisrespect.org from 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily (CST).

Reference:

Get the Facts: The Facts on Domestic, Dating and Sexual Violence (2010).

Family Violence Prevention Fund. Retrieved from http://endabuse.org/content/action_center/detail/754.

REANA MALORI

Reana Malori is a pseudonym for a chick with dreams of world domination. However, if that's not possible, I'm willing to settle for being one of the best interracial romance erotica writers on the market (along with some of my favorite authors who already know who they are). While I'm new to the art of writing, I've been reading romance novels since the age of fourteen and know what appeals to me as reader. I want to provide that same experience for people who read my work.

I'm a former Marine and served for eight years (So, yes, that means I'm a deadly force to be reckoned with!), having been stationed at Parris Island, SC; Camp Delmar, CA; Cherry Point, NC; and Arlington, VA. Strong military men will always be a favorite topic of mine, so expect future stories revolving around them. I'm a fan of Highlanders, Alpha males, and strong women who love with everything they have.

I currently live in Northern Virginia and my day job is quite serious, so I won't bore you with the details. I hope to write books that will help folks escape for bit and relax. I'm sure there will be plenty more stories, and I think you'll like what you get from me. Please send me an email at reanamalori@yahoo.com. I'd love to hear from you!

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