

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 3 Even though she believed she was ready to face him again, her first glimpse of Dave standing barely inches away from her stunned her.

Her terror was replaced by an intense sense of incredulity... and uncertainty as she lifted her fingertips to her lips. Although she recognised his voice and perfume, she couldn't place the harsh, disapproving face staring back at her.

The flowing golden locks that would have accentuated his slim, pointed cheeks and hard, square jaw were hidden beneath a black knit skullcap. While she knew he had dimples on either side of his sumptuous mouth when he smiled, his sculpted lips were kept in a cruel, unforgiving line right now. His brown eyes were focused, his brow furrowed as he held her in a measuring stare that seemed as threatening and unyielding as his grip on her a minute ago.

"What in the world!" Dave exhaled sharply and muttered. His face stiffened even more. "It's truly you, Chelsea. I needed to be certain. I refused to believe it."

She frowned. He seemed as astonished to see her as she was to see him.

They hadn't seen each other in over a year. Since her best friend's wedding. He broke her heart and walked away a year ago, never to return. Why is this so? She had no idea. Now he was there, clothed like a nightmare in black battle gear, accusing her, as if she were the one to blame. His gaze scorched her, leaving her chilly and exposed in the curve-hugging golden silk gown she was forced to wear tonight. She knew what she had to look like and what Dave was thinking. As much as everything inside her urged her to explain, she had bigger things to worry about than his opinion of her now.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? How did you get in here?" She couldn't hide the shock in her voice or her dread. If any of her guards discovered Dave inside the mansion, they would kill him. And Chelsea didn't doubt for a second that she would be made to suffer too." Are you insane? Get out of here now, Dave. You have no idea how dangerous it is for you to be here."

He gave her a smile that chilled. "I'm not the one in danger. Your lover and his cronies are. I rigged this place to blow sky-high as soon as I hit the detonator in my pocket."

Oh, my God. She swallowed, shocked to hear him say what she had already suspected. He had come to kill Hermano. And she was not going to let that happen. Because if he died, he had sworn to kill her and her remaining relatives and friends. The salon downstairs was filled with stifled laughter. And his visitors would soon become restless. She'd been gone for far too long. She couldn't risk anyone looking for her. No more than she could risk allowing Dave to do what he'd come here tonight to do.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, shaking her head as she took a step away from him. "I'm sorry... Dave, I have no choice."

Before he could stop her-before he probably even guessed what she was about to do Chelsea screamed at the top of her lungs. There was hardly a second of silence between

Chelsea's scream and the chaos that ensued. Male voices could be heard shouting from the salon below. Outside, perimeter floodlights began to flash on, illuminating the mansion and its surrounding gardens in a brilliant daytime glow.

Oh my god. He couldn't believe she'd done it – let the entire mansion know about his presence.

However, this should not come as a surprise. He'd certainly earned her disdain. Chelsea owed him nothing anymore, not even an explanation for how she'd landed herself on the arm – and potentially in the bed – of a crook like Hermano.

No choice, she'd said. What the hell did she mean by that?

"Chelsea-"He reached for her, but she jerked out of his grasp, putting several paces between them. "Get out, Dave." Her soft brown eyes were desperate beneath her furrowed brows. And outside the closed door of her quarters, it sounded as though several of Hermano's men were already rushing up the stairs to the second floor. She threw an anxious glance over her shoulder at the pounding of approaching feet in the hallway. Her voice was a tight, fearful whisper. "Please, go. Get out of here while you still have a chance!"

Jesus, she was terrified.

And it wasn't directed at him.

What the hell had that b*****d done to her?

Dave ground out a curse, feeling precious seconds tick by. He had a mission to carry out tonight-and he would-but not until Chelsea was safe and secure. Whether or not she intended to cooperate with that plan.

"Come with me." He grabbed for her again, this time snagging her wrist. "No. Let go of me!" she cried, projecting her voice louder than necessary. For who? Hermano and his goons? "I said stay away from me!" "Listen to me, d**n it." Dave took hold of her shoulders and forced her to meet his gaze. "I'm trying to save you, Chelsea." She scoffed bitterly. "You can't save me. No one can." Christ, she really believed that. He knew her too well to think otherwise. He'd always been able to read her emotions in her eyes, in that lovely face that had haunted his dreams for longer than he cared to admit.

When she tried to break free from his hold, he realised there was only one way he would be able to get her out of the mansion without fighting her every step of the way. She might hate him even more for this, but he had no choice either. He wasn't about to leave her behind.

He placed his hand to her lips and gave her a small white cloth with substances on it that put her into an instant and deeper sleep.

The door to her chambers slammed open, revealing two armed guards. Dave was hunched low on the rug, having just assisted Chelsea's motionless body onto it. His revolver was already drawn and ready as the men surged into the room. He took them both out with sniper precision, firing two headshots between the eyes of each guard.

There would be more behind them. By the sound of the chaos unravelling all around the mansion now, Dave expected he'd have to take on Hermano's entire army of thugs as soon as he stepped out of the room. Fortunately, he had another plan. He ran to the opposite side of her suite, where a wide window viewed the circular driveway below, carrying Chelsea over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. A swarm of armed guards dashed across the paved bricks, some hurrying into the mansion as backup, while others fanned out to police the grounds.

The odds of getting past the security detail down there weren't great, but they were a hell of a lot better than charging into the fray inside the mansion.

He lifted the glass, swung his legs over the sill, and then dropped to the ground with Chelsea held securely in his arms. He opened the nearest vehicle, smiling to himself when the Ferrari rumbled to life. The gullwing doors lifted, and Dave hurried over to slip Chelsea into the passenger seat and fasten her in.

One of the outside security personnel noticed him and alerted the others. Bullets flew in all directions. Dave swerved into the driver's seat of the sleek sports automobile and slammed the doors shut. He sped away from the mansion, shifting into high gear, just as Hermano and several of his flunkies appeared behind him. Dave already had the detonator in his hand, and the safety was turned off. He pressed the trigger, gazing in the rearview mirror as a fireball erupted and the entire structure burst against the night sky. The percussion caused the Ferrari to skid on the pavement, but he grabbed onto the wheel and pushed the pedal all the way to the floor.

He couldn't help but smile as he saw the blazing plume and cloud of black, seething smoke behind him. He could only pray that the bombs completed their job. Normally, he'd stay to ensure his target was neutralised, but not tonight. Not with such valuable goods in tow. His eyes were drawn to Chelsea. She slept as softly as a cat, draped in her golden silk robe on the seat beside him, her mind still trapped in the web of the hypnosis he'd set on her. The desire to touch her was too strong to resist. He stroked a straying blonde tendril off her cheek, reaching over.

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Chapter 4

Dave sighed. Looking at Chelsea seemed like just a dream, and d**n, she was even lovelier than he recalled. No longer the model sweetheart girl who'd been his sister's best friend. No longer the little pretty girl next door who used to delight in racing through the male population of massive billboards, but a matured woman with a refined beauty that stirred everything male in him.

Not to mention his friend down there. What happened to them anyway? A year ago, after his sister's wedding, he vanished into nothingness to avoid anyone tying Chelsea into his life just because he didn't want to repeat what happened. He knew Alfonso wasn't kidding when he told him that the woman he loved was under the b*****d's watch and anytime they could kidnap and hurt Chelsea in any way, he avoided her like the plague.

Memories of a night two years ago came to life in his mind in vivid, e****c detail. Her warm, naked skin against his. Her sweet, breathless cries as he tasted every virginal inch of her beautiful body. Her trusting, open-hearted gaze as he made love to her for the first-and only

-time.

How she must have hated him afterwards. Yes, he knew Chelsea wasn't the commitment type of gal and she detested being in a relationship, but he hoped for something else, but fate intervened.

He'd despised himself enough for both of them. If he'd been in the least to blame for pushing Chelsea toward another man-especially one like Hermano-he would never forgive himself. And if he wanted to pretend he had forgotten her even for a moment during the past year, seeing her beside him now was as if all that time had simply evaporated.

He didn't know what he was going to do with her now. She sure as f**k hadn't been part of the equation when he'd set out on tonight's mission, but seeing her again had changed everything. Once he had spotted her inside the mansion, nothing would have kept him from making sure she was safe.

Not even Chelsea herself could have stopped him. So much for a simple operation going according to plan. Dave forced his gaze away from her and put both hands back on the wheel. His eyes trained on the road, he buried the Ferrari's accelerator and headed for the highway that would take them back to the nearest airport, back to London.

Chelsea couldn't wake from the sleep that cocooned her. Nor did she want to. Warm fingers stroked the side of her face as she slept, soothing her with a touch that was both sheltering and enticing. So strong. So infinitely gentle. Dave's touch.

Wait, what?

Her senses knew it, even if her mind struggled to comprehend it. His caress felt like a dream, but it was real. As real as he was, seated close enough to her that his scent filled her lungs with each waking breath she drew. No, this was no dream. This was something deeper than sleep.

Her head felt heavy as if her mind were cushioned in cotton. Then she remembered. The shock

of seeing Dave inside his father's mansion. Her dread at learning what he had come there to do. She remembered him insisting that she leave with him, go somewhere safe. When she refused, he reached up to touch her brow... He'd drugged her to sleep! How dare he!

Outrage speared through her. The sudden jolt of adrenaline and fury helped shake off the loose threads of the fading trance. She opened her eyes and found Dave glancing at her. His handsome face and solemn hazel eyes held her gaze in the dim light of the vehicle's dashboard.

Beneath her, the low purr of an engine vibrated. "Are you okay?" he asked, drawing his hand away from her face now. She instantly missed the warmth, despite the alarm that was flooding her veins..

"What are you doing?" She dragged herself out of her slump in the soft leather seat. On the other side of the passenger window, the nighttime landscape was a blur. Jesus, Dave was driving like a bat out of hell. She swung an anxious look behind them.

"Where's Hermano?"

"Don't worry about him. He was mine to deal with. And I did."

Fresh horror swamped her. "You killed him?"

Dave looked at her, his expression was grim. "I hope so, but there wasn't time to verify that."

Oh, God. "Where are we going?"

A frown creased his brow. "I'm taking you to London, Chelsea. You'll be safest at my command centre there. My comrades and I will make sure of that."

The what? As shocked as she was to realise the golden, charming young man she had known all those years ago now made his living dealing in violence, she also knew that no one-not even the Order-could protect her from the worst of Hermano's threats.

For all she knew, it was already too late. "Let me out of here, Dave. Let me out right now." "What do you mean, let you out?" He gaped at her as if she had lost her mind. "Sweetheart, we're going a hundred and twenty miles an hour." "I have to go back. Please, Dave!"

Overcome with worry, she fumbled with her seatbelt, unfastening it and tearing it away from her body. She had to get out of the car and go back to beg Hermano's forgiveness.

If he was still alive.

Dear God, don't let him be dead.

Don't let her family be killed because she failed to protect them. A sob racked her throat." Goddammit, I said stop this f*****g car!" He slowed the growling sports car and eased off the empty highway to the shoulder. As soon as the vehicle stopped, she leapt out. She paused only long enough to toss her high heels into the grass, then started running the opposite way on the rough gravel that edged the pavement. Dave's curse exploded behind her. "What the hell are you doing?"

He caught up to her instantly. He blocked her path, his big male body filling her vision and all

of her senses. When she tried to dodge him, his hands came down firmly on her shoulders, holding her still.

"Talk to me, Chelsea. Tell me what this is about."

"My family... my step-sister and her son." She couldn't contain the shiver that rocked her when she thought about what they might be enduring because of her, possibly at this very moment. "Hermano promised me that if anything ever happened to him, he'd have them killed."

"Stepsister?" "Yes, from my mom's side. It was a secret, I didn't tell anyone about them." Dave's scowl deepened. "Your father might have something to say about that." She gazed up at him, shaking her head in misery. "My father's dead. I guess you didn't know. How would you, right? You left and never looked back" He flinched as if her words stung as much as a slap. Yet when he spoke, there was only quiet, patient concern in his deep voice. "I heard about your father, um-Thailand. What happened?" "They were his associates from his treasure hunting business," she said, still wounded by her father's fall from grace-and the betrayal that followed. "Three years ago, my father made the mistake of turning over his business to Hermano, his closest friend and ally. Hermano was... well... wealthy, and belonged to a very rich family in Russia.

Things didn't go very well. My father was careless with the accounting of his own business. Worse than careless. None of us realised how deeply in debt the business was-or why-until his secretary confided in me about his father's gambling and debt. He was worried for him. But it was already too late. My father got mixed up with bad people, the worst of them being Hermano." Dave let out a sharp curse. "The idiot. Your father owed him money?"

"A lot of money. More than any of us could pay. By the time we learned what he'd done, Hermano was out of patience. He tortured my father's secretary, nearly killed him." Chelsea took a fortifying breath. "My father was scared and desperate, in fear for his life. He couldn't have been thinking clearly... At least, that's what I've had to tell myself to forgive him for what he did to me. That's why he was back into his treasure hunting," She watched Dave's eyes darken with grave understanding. "Your father is the reason you're with Hermano?"

She gave a nod. "Yes, a month before he died in Thailand. Hermano showed up at our mansion one night with a dozen armed men. He wasn't there to negotiate. The men shot our staff in front of all of us. Father was going to be next. He made all sorts of commitments, offered to give Hermano the mansions, his business-everything he could think of."

"No," Dave said, his voice dropping to a hoarse growl. "He didn't, Jesus."

Chelsea gulped. "Dad told him about me, um-being a stepdaughter and being a model and famous. He told Hermano to imagine how much richer he could be if he had me to use against his enemy. My father promised that I was worth ten times as much as the debt he owed. In the end, I'm sure he was right. Hermano took me away that night, after giving his men the order to kill my father's men, leaving him alone with nothing."

ve's eyes were no longer dark but crackled with amber shards that glowed with his wrath The tips of his teeth glinted dazzling white behind his lips as he spoke. "That cowardly son of a b***h. If your father was alive right now, I'd f*****g kill him personally." He reached up to touch her face, and she could feel the intensity of his rage beneath his soft fingers. "It doesn't matter anymore. I did what I had to to survive. Christie and my little nephew are what matter most to me. They're the reason I stayed with Hermano. He held their lives ransom to make sure I never crossed him or tried to get away." "Well, he can't hurt anyone now," Dave said. "As of tonight, Hermano's either dead or damned close to it."

"No.You don't understand." She stepped back, shaking her head. She wished she could stand there all night under the warmth of his caress, but her dread was only intensifying by the moment. "You don't realise what you've done, Dave. He gave instructions to his entire criminal network to hunt down Chisty and little Peter if anything ever happened to him. If he's dead, so are they. Or they will be soon." Dave studied her for a moment before hissing a tight curse. "um-are they still at your place?"

She nodded. "Here in Paris, in my apartment."

"F**k That's an hour in the opposite direction," he said, his face bleak but determined. "The Ferrari should get us there in under thirty minutes if we push it."

"Does that imply you'll assist me?" "Until my last breath, Chelsea," he said, cupping her face in his powerful palm, his eyes burning with purpose and something more. Something that reawakened a dormant hope in her chest and made her veins thrill. She knew he was feeling the same way. It was seen in his sparkling eyes and the lengthening points of his pupils. He may have abandoned her without explanation a year ago, but the attraction and need that had existed between them remained, blazing within both of them. "Come on," he finally murmured after a long pause, his voice raspy. "We'd better get going."

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Chapter 5 They made it to Chelsea's apartment in just under thirty minutes, thanks to clear late-night roadways and the seven hundred horses at work inside the Ferrari's massive engine. Even before Chelsea pointed him in the right direction, Dave turned onto a narrow two-lane and headed to the beautiful and obviously expensive neighbourhood. Unlike Chelsea, however, he had no family of his own, just Catherine and her family.

For a long time, he thought he'd found a place to belong when he began hanging out with his sister's pals, Jane and Chelsea. He had belonged... until he fell in love with Chelsea. Yes, Catherine had informed her that, even though Chelsea was her friend, she was known to have numerous unsuccessful relationships and never took her last relationship seriously. But he never listened, and even Chelsea's coworker thought he was unsuitable for her.

Chelsea deserves someone better. Even now, Dave would not argue that. But as he looked over at her and saw her exquisite face turn ashen with fear as they approached the long paved drive that led to the homestead at the bottom of the mountain, he felt a wave of possessiveness and protectiveness-that he couldn't deny. He, too, felt guilty. For leaving her in the manner he did, for giving her the impression that he didn't care. For not being present to assure that she never experienced any sorrow, heartache, or fear. Everything he could see now was playing across her features, because of him. But he did it to keep her safe, to keep her away from his own trouble.

Chelsea sucked in a sharp breath when she spotted the ominous-looking, empty three black SUVs parked halfway up the drive to the rambling neighbourhood. "Oh, no. Dave, we're too late."

He clamped his molars tight, holding back the curse that leapt to his tongue. She was right. It didn't look good.

A plan formed in his head—a risky one, but the best option he had.

He didn't dare ditch the car with Chelsea inside it and damned if he was going to let her out of his sight for as much as a second. "Slide down as far as you can," he told her. "Don't move, Chelsea. Not unless I tell you to."

"What are your plans?" She shot him an anxious glance but did as he instructed.

He swept off his black knit skullcap and tossed it aside. Instead of keeping his cautious pace up the meandering drive, Dave gunned the engine, letting the tyres chew up the dirt and dust as he roared all the way to the homestead.

Up ahead in the dark, a pair of mob thugs in black suits were prowling the perimeter of the building and surrounding grounds. S**t. They were both carrying semiautomatic pistols and looked short on patience. Maybe that was a good thing as far as Chelsea's family members were concerned.

Dave threw the Ferrari into the park but left the engine running. Since his attire could raise questions he didn't want to answer, he would have to employ his unique brand of obfuscation to get past the other males' suspicion.

He then took a pair of dark tactical gear from his backpack that was almost identical to what the mob wore, "Dave? What are you doing?"

"Don't move OK?" He turned into a black suit and covered his face with the same dark mask. Then he pulled his gun and climbed out of the car as if he had every right to be there.

"What the hell," he muttered loudly as he stalked toward the goateed man out front. "Where the f**k are the other guys?" The henchman scowled. "What other guys? As far as I know, I and Jay were the only one called out for this job. Who the hell are you?"

"Backup," Dave said, giving the man a look of disdain. He called out to the second man, a thick-necked mountain of a male who was just coming around from the rear of the building. "What the f**k's taking you so long, man? You find that b***h and her brat back there?" Luigi shook his head as he started jogging over to meet them. "Not yet. They must've cleared out before we got here." Dave grunted. "Good." He fired a round into each man's head before they could respond. He jogged back to the Ferrari, the two would-be killers dead on the ground. Chelsea remained huddled on the floor in front of the passenger seat, as he had directed.

He pushed open the door. "It's fine. Christie and your nephew aren't here, and the two men dispatched to find them aren't coming back."

"Thank God," she said, raising her head and peering into the darkness, where Hermano's men lay still on the grass beside the house. "However, Christie would not

have known to flee.” There wouldn’t have been time to get very far, especially with a small kid in tow.” She looked up at him, worried and hopeful in her gentle brown eyes. “However, I believe I know where they are.” Dave held out his hand to assist her from the car. Gathering up the long skirt of her golden dress, she ran past the dead mobs with Dave at her side. They entered the building, and she headed immediately for the sampling room at the back of the expansive house. An immense wine cellar was attached to the room, its floor-to-ceiling wine racks filled with bottles of nearly every vintage the vineyard had ever produced. “Over here,” Chelsea said, walking to the far wall.

The bottles housed in those racks looked to be the oldest in the collection. Most of them were covered in a fine layer of dust. She pulled a sliding wooden ladder toward her, climbed up and reached for one of the highest bottles in the old rack. Instead of pulling the aged bottle of Aglianico out, she twisted it clockwise. It wasn’t a bottle. It was a lever to a secret chamber. One narrow section of racked wine popped open soundlessly.

Chelsea swung a glance over her shoulder at him. “I had this panic room installed three months ago.”

She started to duck inside. Dave caught her by the arm. “Stay close to me, Chelsea. If anything happens to you, I can’t...”

He let the thought run, but his touch lingered a little too long. She gave him a puzzled look before nodding. They entered the dimly lit, vast room. Large oak barrels, paper supply shelves, and massive, hand-hewn wooden tables gave the impression that the secret chamber was nothing more than a workroom. Chelsea reached inside to flip on a light switch. “Christie?” She spoke quietly. “Are you here? Peter? This is Chelsea.”

A tiny whimper could be heard from behind the barrels. Then, from the shadows, a small, attractive brunette appeared, holding her dark-haired toddler son protectively in her arms. “Chelsea!”

The two ladies ran to each other, embracing in the midst of Christie’s sobbing and Chelsea’s hushed assurances that she and Peter were OK now. They were secure.

Dave stepped back from the emotional reunion, all too aware that every minute they waited here was another minute they risked being detected. They were lucky that only two of Hermano’s thugs had been sent to the vineyard. That didn’t mean more wouldn’t be deployed to sniff about and make sure the job was done right. It would be a disaster if there were dead mob males in the yard, but whoever sent them would be waiting for them to return or report in. He couldn’t risk losing his authority by going after them.

And now that he was thinking about daylight...

It was late, and all too soon it would be dawn. They were too far afield to make the trip back to London, which meant he needed to find them somewhere secure to settle in for the night.

Grabbing his phone, Dave called the scrambled line at his men in Paris to apprise them of the situation. He'd already ignored more than one call from base demanding the status of the mission. He'd have hell to pay when he got back, no doubt. Probably right now too.

Tyler's dark growl greeted him on the other end. "Having a good time out there?"

Dave grunted. "There's been a slight change of plans."

"No s**t? Was that before or after you jeopardized the entire mission to chase after some model?"

Okay, so maybe he deserved that. He definitely deserved it. But Tyler didn't understand, and Dave didn't have time to explain it right now. "Her name's Chelsea. I had to go back in for her and get her out of there. You're going to have to trust me on that."

"Not my trust you need to worry about," Tyler said. "You are the boss, remember?"

"Yeah, well, I got the job done."

"Are you sure about that? You verified that Hermano blew up his villa, right?" When Dave let the question hang a second too long, Tyler hissed a low curse. "You didn't verify it. Jesus, Dave. I hope to f**k she's worth it, man."

He cast a glance over at Chelsea. Yes, she was well worth it. Her life—the relief and happiness he saw in her eyes right now—was priceless. "I'll handle it if I screw up with Hermano. I need to find a safe place to stay for the day right now. I'm currently in Chelsea's apartment with two women and a young son. I need to make sure they're safe somewhere."

"Two women and a child? I'm not going to ask," Tyler grumbled. He remained silent for a minute before letting out a sour sigh. "How far away from the airport are you?"

Dave knew the town; he had prowled the ancient streets and subterranean caverns of the old settlement more than a few times in his youth. "It's not far. An hour, give or take."

"Come on. I know somewhere you can go," Tyler said quickly, pointing out locations that would lead him to where he needed to go once he arrived. His friend didn't seem to be sending him into the touristy core of the old town, but rather down into the surrounding town. "GO behind the church and up the old stone steps. Take the path on the left."

Someone will be waiting for you to transport you to safety.” “Whom am I on the lookout for?”

“Salvatore, an acquaintance with long black hair and raven eyes.” “Salvatore? Sounds like a horrible guy.”

“You didn’t ask for friendly; you asked for safe, and that’s where I’m taking you.”

“Point taken,” Dave said, remembering Tyler was nothing if not literal, dealing in absolutes whether in fight or discourse. “What I’m asking is, you’re sure about this dude, this Salvatore?”

“Completely.” “Would you like to explain?” After a long silence, Tyler finally said, “He’s my brother.”

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Chapter 6 Chelsea dreaded letting go of Christie and Peter, but Dave’s solemn expression as he completed his call to his partner left little doubt that they were still in danger. “Come on,” Dave replied, as he walked over to get them. “We can’t stay any longer.” It’s best if we get started.”

“Return to Paris?”

“There isn’t time for that now. It’ll be daylight in a few hours. The police might be on the way. We are good at night, but travelling after the two men outside is risky.” She grinned wistfully, but the dangers he was taking for her tonight were not amusing for all of them right now. And she could tell from the tone of his speech that his desire to move on was not just motivated by his duty. His concern was more profound. “Do you believe Hermano is still alive?”

Dave’s square jaw pulsed with a tendon. “If he isn’t dead yet, I promise you I won’t stop until he is.” But first, I need to make sure you and your family are safe. My buddy is preparing for someone to meet us in a safe location. We’ll be able to stay there for as long as we need to.”

Christie took a step forward, her little kid grabbing her hand, as Chelsea and Dave spoke.

Dave cast a glance up at the youngster, who was peering up at him with suspicion. He knelt to his level and delicately rested his hand on the child’s shoulder. “You were brave to keep your mother secure here until we arrived. Excellent work, Peter.”

Chelsea’s heart swelled as she saw the small boy’s terror fade away as a result of Dave’s kind care for him.

“How long do we have to stay away?” Christie inquired, cautiously. As he stood up, Dave’s gaze met Chelsea’s. She knew what that weighty stare meant. The two assassins who’d turned up tonight hadn’t succeeded because of him, but it was virtually certain that there were more behind them. Chelsea’s apartment, where she lived for a year, may never be safe again. But it hadn’t been genuinely safe in months. Not since Hermano walked into their lives.

Chelsea met Christie’s eyes while softly combing her fingers through her tiny nephew’s dark hair. “We’ll figure it all out afterwards. Right now, we must do as Dave directs.” “Of course, yes.” Can I get a couple of items for Peter before we leave? I swear I’ll hurry.”

Chelsea looked down at her golden gown and bare feet as Dave nodded. “I’m guessing you don’t have anything in your closet that would fit me?”

Christie gave a nice smile. “You might look in your own closet, sis. I kept your room exactly as it was on the day you were abducted by the b****d, hoping that you might return one day.” Chelsea’s throat tightened as she thought about the compassion of that gesture-the sisterly affection. “I appreciate it.” She drew Christie in for a quick embrace before Dave led them all out of the panic room and

back into the empty flat to prepare to leave. Chelsea appeared a few minutes later, dressed in dark pants, sneakers, and a red T-shirt. Christie threw a small bag holding Peter’s favourite blanket, toys, and various other things over her shoulder. Dave took the bag from her and led the way outside.

“We have to abandon the Ferrari,” he murmured, turning away from the two-seater sports car. “There isn’t enough room in there, but we also don’t want to call attention to ourselves.” I don’t like the thought of taking Hermano’s men’s vehicle, but I can abandon it once we arrive in the adjacent town in case someone is looking for it.”

“I have a pickup out back,” Christie explained. She indicated the parking lot behind the building. “It’s not fast, but it will get us there.” And it’s obvious enough that it won’t attract any attention along the way.”

Dave paused for a bit before shrugging. “This sounds preferable to our other possibilities.” They climbed into the rusted-out old Toyota Hilux pickup truck, Chelsea wedged between Dave, Christie, and Peter on the short bench seat.

As they drove off into the fading light, it was hard to overlook the heat of Dave’s thigh pressing against hers. Chelsea knew a fulfilling feeling of security-that had escaped her for so long she hadn’t remembered what it was like to feel safe and protected. Being this close to him again, her senses were overwhelmed with his warmth, strength, and scent.

Long before Catherine’s accidental marriage to Richmond, she had a crush on her best friend’s younger brother, and despite having a dozen flings around her, she never

imagined hooking up with him while they were both drunk would change their relationship from friendship to someone who deeply cared for each other. But what bothered her was that since Catherine and Shawn's wedding, Dave had ignored her immensely, as if she didn't exist.

She hadn't realised how much she desired that sensation until now. Along with him, Christie and Peter must have felt a sense of security as well. They'd both passed out a few minutes into the drive.

No doubt the late hour and the anxiety of everything they'd gone through tonight had fatigued them, but Chelsea knew their calm breathing had a lot to do with the man who'd undoubtedly saved their lives. In the dim light of the ancient truck's dashboard, Chelsea cast a peek at Dave. His gaze was locked on the road ahead, one hand-stretched over the steering wheel's top. He appeared to be deep in concentration until the weight of her stare caught his attention. He looked at her, and while she was mortified to have been caught staring at him, she couldn't pretend she hadn't.

"Thank you for assisting them," she added softly. "Thank you for assisting us all evening."

He gave a small shake of his head. "There's no need to thank me, Chelsea. I would do anything for you. Don't you know that?"

No, she didn't know that. For all she knew, she'd meant absolutely nothing to him. Not even a year ago. Certainly not after all this time. "Why did you ignore me, Dave? Why did you leave the wedding and never come back? Was it because of something I did?"

"No." His answer came swiftly, his brows furrowing in a scowl. "Christ, no. You didn't do anything at all. I did it to protect you."

"Protect me?" A sick feeling opened up in the pit of her stomach. "From where?"

His silent stare was confirmation enough. "Tell me," she prompted. "From where?"
"From someone like Hermano, from my... um... job... from my activities."

"What? I don't get it." "I will tell you soon enough, but not now."

She sighed. He glanced back at the road. "I'm only looking out for your best interests, Chelsea." "Are you saying you pushed me away? No... Surely you would not. Are you saying you didn't want us together, so b****y ignore me when I needed you most?"

Anger clawed up the back of her throat. She could hardly stand the thought of what his interference had caused her. To think she'd cried over him. "Tell me!" She whispered.

He gave her a sober look. "I care... I want you safe. I wanted to make sure you found a man who could provide for you and give you all the things you deserved in life. I am not

the sort... I do not deserve you. I have my issues. Trouble has followed me everywhere since Catherine's abduction since I built my company." She was dumbfounded. "Are you seriously that f****d up?" He nodded. "I want you safe." Her response scoff was brittle. "Look how that turned out."

"I couldn't have known how things would end up, Hermano was one of my outside missions. Your involvement was never in the plan. But I just can't leave you there. Can I? I will do everything to keep you safe, Catherine will kill me." he gently assured her. "But I wish I had known. I wish my intelligence had been on Hermano months ago, so I could've killed the b****d before he had the chance to lay a hand on you." "It could've been worse," she admitted quietly. "I endured his temper sometimes, but at least I avoided his l**t."

When Dave glanced at her, there was surprise in his gaze and more than a little relief. "You mean, he never-"

"Never," she said. "I told him I would only last as long as I was never touched by him or any of his men. "After I made him wealthy with my beauty and infiltrated his enemies, he apparently decided that collecting his money was more fun than abusing me." He smirked. "Clever girl. Except for one thing."

"Fortunately, Hermano never doubted me. I think he might've eventually, but he had other women to satisfy his needs."

She dearly hoped Dave had been successful, because if Hermano were alive to get his hands on her now, his punishment would be beyond brutal.

Dave's mouth flattened into a grim line. "I never should've left you." I decided to make. I was wrong. I didn't understand that until after I was gone." He reached over and stroked her cheek. "I should've come back for you, Chelsea. I'm sorry I wasn't there." She surrendered to his caress, feeling nothing but gratitude. And a love that went far deeper than that. Far deeper than her desire to be so close to him, his reassuring touch lingering on her face.

"You're here now," she whispered, softly kissing the centre of his palm. His eyes flashed with amber light as her lips touched his flesh. She merely meant to make a grateful and caring connection, but she felt a thrill of awareness as well.

Her chest clenched, and she felt heat travel across her b****s and lick down to her core. Oh, she still cared for him.

She wanted him.

Her mind was flooded with images of stolen kisses and sweet hugs. She'd only had one night with Dave, nude in each other's arms, but she'd treasured it ever since. Nothing she felt for him had been reduced by the cruelties of time or fate. On the contrary, it just

intensified the urge. It had simply made her realise how deeply she had felt his absence all along. And how relieved she was to be reunited with him. Even though she feared in the back of her mind that fate wasn't quite done with them yet.

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 7 Dave had no idea how he'd survived more than an hour in the truck, sitting so close to Chelsea. Her leg had rested against his the entire journey, causing him to feel distracted, calmed, and... aroused beyond reason. It took him back to another evening drive they'd done together after a night in the pub in London. The one that had finished with them both nude and intertwined on a blanket beneath a midnight grey sky streaked with shooting stars.

"Dave, hurry up! Isn't it incredible?"

She grabbed a bottle of the newest and most expensive wine from the wooden cases in the back of the yellow Subaru and started running up the side of the nearby hill. Half drunk. He watched her go, her long legs bare and her curvy backside clad in grape-stained, faded denim shorts. He was always in a state of arousal around her, but seeing her dance away from him under the thin moon glow turned his c**k to granite.

"Chelsea, you'd better come back. I don't think this is a good idea." Nevertheless, he pulled an old wool blanket from behind the seat and jogged after her.

She helped him spread it out on the cool grass, and then pulled him down next to her. "Here, open this." She handed him the bottle and a corkscrew.

"We are already drunk. One of us needed to drive back." he reminded her as he pulled the cork out with a soft pop. None of his kind did, but she knew that well enough. "Do you ever wish you could taste this? This is one of the most expensive drinks ever. Want a taste?"

"No."

"Come on, this is Glenfiddich, 40-year-old rare single malt." He had never had that sort of drink ever, but then he watched her tip the bottle to her lips to take a sip, and he knew a thirst unlike any he'd ever known. Her throat worked as she swallowed. Her head tipped back, drawing his eyes to the creamy column of her neck.

He cleared his throat, searching for his voice. Was he willing to betray her sister's trust?

He and Chelsea naked underneath the moon? Those visions started to glow with amber. "Jane and the yoga girls are waiting for us to return to your flat."

"Don't be silly, Jane is busy with her boring husband," she said as she slowly removed the bottle from her mouth and placed it on the grass. Her lips were slick and as dark as

the wine soaked cherries. Her serious pools of eyes were rimmed by long black lashes. "Would you like to go, Dave?"

He saw it for what it was: his sole chance to put an end to his desire for Chelsea before it became too strong. For weeks, they had been anticipating this moment. Hell, from the first time he entered into her life.

A few fleeting looks. Just a few words. We laughed together. Then, after he'd resisted his

attraction for as long as he could, there was a kiss and a few stolen embraces. Then came the passionate caresses that had both of them on fire.

But she wasn't a fool, she was a master of the game she desired to play. He shouldn't be sitting alongside her in the moonlight, staring at her throat and wishing he was a better man. One with enough honour to lie and claim he wasn't insanely in love with her. "What exactly do you want, Dave?"

"You."

He tucked her beneath him on the blanket and unwrapped her with the reverence of a cherished gift. From her quiet moans, as he kissed, licked, and sucked every tantalising inch of her... to her quivering cries as he penetrated her virgin body and introduced her to an even deeper pleasure as a sea of shooting stars slid overhead, every breathless moment was burnt into his senses.

Dave sighed at the unexpected recall and the desire it sparked in him even now.

Tyler's body was replete with desire by the time they arrived in Tyler's brother's town, his shaft so hard it was a marvel he'd been able to drive. His palm was still red from the beautiful kiss she'd given him. His veins throbbed with a longing for her that was far more profound than mere desire. If he'd thought their months apart would chill his affections for her, that delicate kiss to the centre of his hand had shattered all hope.

He was in big trouble here, f**k! He should have been thinking about his duties – and the mission's dubious status – but his mind was wrapped around Chelsea and her stunning naked body.

His heart was as well. To be fair, she had held that part of him for far longer than his life had been devoted to the treasure-seeking business. How many times had he pondered defying his conscience and going back to ask her forgiveness and carry her away with him forever? All he had now were regrets.

He only hoped that he would be allowed to set things right. But first, he wanted to ensure her safety.

"This way," he said to the women after parking the rusty truck in a church parking lot, as Tyler had ordered.

Dave placed his hand on the small of Chelsea's back and led them up a flight of well-worn stone steps on the other side of the property, so Christie could focus on her kid. The stairs descended from the quaint hotels and restaurants near Matera's city centre into the densely packed community of limestone dwellings that looked to grow out of the huge ravine's walls.

The uneven track Tyler had given them to follow was lighted by waning blue moonlight and the golden glow of scattered lanterns and city lamps. There were no tourists in the area's convoluted network of stone walkways and winding staircases at daybreak. The only sounds in the ravine were their footsteps on the dusty old cobbles and the odd jangle of a sheep's bell from the herd awakening on a grassy flat across the way.

As instructed, Dave took the trail to the left, which led them to what appeared to be the low rent area of the Paleolithic-era neighbourhood.

The white limestone homes with the occasional flower box in the window or palm tree outside the door gave way to a darkened stretch of cobbles flanked by rustic homes in varying degrees of neglect, the majority with weeds and cacti shooting out of their cracked and disintegrating walls. "Stay close," Dave said as he led the women deeper into the community. "We should be almost there by now." Tyler's brother was waiting up ahead on the sidewalk a few minutes later, exactly as Tyler had stated. Dave hoped the massive, black-haired man was Sebastian, Tyler's twin.

The other male lifted his head and flashed a glance in their direction as they approached, Dave striding securely in front of Chelsea and Christie. His long onyx hair hung three inches past his shoulders, and his gravely set jaw was framed by a well-groomed black beard. The male's jet-black eyes narrowed on Dave across the distance. Yep. Tyler's twin, for sure. Dave greeted him with a nod. Sebastian's face was expressionless under his dark hair curtain. The male appeared to be a cold blooded killer, dressed in a black suede trench coat that concealed more black gear beneath it. That said a lot came from Dave, a fighter whose speciality was dealing with death.

Dave heard Chelsea s**k in a faint gasp behind him. "It's all right," he reassured her, patting her arm. "This is the person we were supposed to meet."

Without introduction, Sebastian turned and started walking away. Apparently, he was as people-friendly as his brother. So long as the male was trustworthy and his safe house was secure, Dave would give the lack of social skills a pass. "Let's go," he replied, hesitating to kiss Chelsea on the cheek. "I swear we'll be comfortable here."

They followed Sebastian to one of the last underground houses on the path, a squat house with no windows and entry via an iron grating reinforced door. Dave wasn't expecting much when the other man opened the door and allowed them in, but the

place turned out to be imposing and neglected from the outside. They entered a pleasant, albeit minimalist, home with hand-hewn furniture, arched stone walls, and warm, grasscloth floors. Once inside, Sebastian indicated for them to follow him deeper into the building. More rooms were carved out of the ravine's rock, linked by winding passages large enough for both men to walk through at full height. "I don't usually have guests," Sebastian stated, sounding dissatisfied. As he rushed ahead of them, his accent was low and dark, almost a sneer, his words reverberating off the walls." There is a little bed to your right in the room and a larger one at the end of this passage. Use them how you see fit." Dave cast a glance at Chelsea. "You and Christie are in charge of the beds. "I don't have to sleep. I need internet and a phone call."

That was correct. He needed to phone someone and find out where Hermano was; he didn't need much sleep, but he doubted his thoughts would bring him much serenity. To say nothing of his body, which was still aching for Chelsea.

She appeared to be protesting his sacrifice, but her sister-in-law was shaky on her feet, and Peter hadn't lifted his head since they got out of the truck. "I'll go help them get settled."

As the women left for the room, Dave waited in the doorway. When he looked over at Sebastian, he noticed the man with narrowed eyes staring at Christie. His brow furrowed in a gloomy scowl. "Tyler made no mention of a child being at risk" "Didn't he?" Dave smirked. "I'm sure I brought the boy to him when we chatted." Sebastian muttered. "Yeah. I'm sure you did as well."

The mysterious response piqued his interest. "Does it pose a problem?" Sebastian's lack of response conveyed to Dave far more than any sentence could. "Please let me know if you or the girls require anything." Okay, obviously the talk was over. Dave extended his hand to the other man. "Thank you so much. I owe you this, and I will never forget it." Sebastian locked his gaze on his extended hand for a long period. At first, Dave didn't understand why. Then he noticed it: an amputated stump at the end of the other man's right wrist, where a hand had formerly been.

And there was something else peculiar about Sebastian that he hadn't noticed until now.

A circle of deformed, vicious-looking scars circled his tattoo-covered neck. From their harshness, Dave deduced that the man had nearly lost his head at some point in his life as well. "Marines?" Dave asked.

"Army," The man nodded. Sebastian shrugged. "We'd been raised to think we were invincible. It makes many of us reckless. Not many survived after we got our first taste of freedom." "Freedom from what?" "From our oath."

The newsflash took Dave completely by surprise. He gaped at the lethal, clearly antisocial ex army. "So, you are out of duty?" "Obviously."

Looking at him now, it makes sense. As far as assassins and stealth operatives went, they didn't come any deadlier than the killers Dave was looking at one of them. He met Sebastian's shark-black stare with a question. "Tyler said you were his brother."

"He is. As are the others."

"Others?"

Sebastian acknowledged with a curt nod. "The other lost boys. The dozens of young ex-army who escaped their collars from Afghanistan."

"Interesting... want a job?"

"Let's talk about that tomorrow." Sebastian smiled, knowing full well what Dave was talking

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 8 Chelsea went out of the bedroom where Christie was napping with Peter as Dave and their menacing enormous host parted ways. She waited until the massive black-haired male had walked away before approaching. Dave gave her a sidelong glance, his eyes wide with surprise. "Is everything okay with your friend?" she inquired. He grumbled, raking his hand through his blond hair. "I wouldn't call Sebastian a buddy just yet, but we're fine." Chelsea shuddered as she registered the name. It was an appropriate title for the brusque, intimidating man. "If Sebastian's glower is any indication, he doesn't appear to be delighted to be burdened with guests." "Are you serious? That's his normal, happy face," Dave said, exposing the twin dimples that had always charmed her. "How are Christie and Peter getting along?" "Exhausted. They've already fallen asleep." "You should be," he continued, his voice softening to a compassionate worry. His hand was tenderly placed on her shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you situated in the other room." Being in this foreign area, feeling safe despite the fact that she was on the run from an awful man and his network of criminal companions, seemed absurd. Dave took care of it for her. When she was with him, she always felt safe. The pistols and knives bristling from his waist belt had nothing to do with how safe he made her feel. It was always him, the man, who could put her at rest.

He aroused her just as much. As they stood together at the chamber's open threshold, her skin still felt too hot, too tight. Everything they'd said in the vehicle, the stolen kisses they'd exchanged in those brief seconds of semi-privacy earlier tonight, hung between them like a wound that needed to be treated.

Dave appeared to be aware in the same way she was. The heat radiating from him was palpable, his touch at the small of her back light, yet searing. She wanted to feel his hands on her everywhere, not just in comfort or reassurance, but in passion. He cursed as his eyes met hers, his hazel irises dark but glittering with flecks of amber. "For God's sake, don't look at me like that, sweetheart. I'm hanging by a thread here." "I am too."

She couldn't resist reaching up to him, letting her hands skim the firm muscles of his chest. "I've been hanging by a thread since you showed up at my apartment with pizza all those years ago, Dave. I don't care if Catherine will kill me now."

His heart was thundering. His pulse slammed against her palm, hammering like a drum. He searched for her gaze for a long moment, his breath rolling in deep, panting gusts. The curse that boiled out of him was sharp and hissed between his teeth. "I wasn't expecting any of this. My first duty is to my company. I have a mission to carry out. Until I'm certain I've completed it, I shouldn't be thinking about anything else. Not even you. Hell, especially not you."

"Of course. I understand." She glanced away, weathering a sting she hadn't seen coming. "Dave, I didn't mean to suggest—".

He took her hand and hauled her against him, silencing her with a kiss. When he drew back from her lips, his gaze had gone molten. "I have no right to be thinking about anything but my duty to the company. That's what I keep telling myself, Chelsea. But then I look at you and none of those other things matter."

She swallowed, watching the fire dance in his eyes. His pupils were narrowed to thin black slits, and his teeth surged even larger behind his parted lips. The sight of his transformation sped her pulse, while at her hip, the hard steel of his arousal sent a current of hot need licking through her senses and straight into her core.

"I walked away once," he snarled. "God help us both. I don't think I can ever do it again. You are mine and always will be mine."

His name was a jagged sigh on her lips as he grasped her face in his palms and covered her mouth with his once more. Kissing her so deeply she could hardly find her breath. He walked her backward into the chamber with him, kicking the door closed behind them with his boot heel.

Something wild had been unleashed in him. She saw it in his eyes and heard it in the rough scrape of his voice. And now all of that unhinged desire was pouring into her through his kiss.

"You're mine," he murmured against her mouth. Her moan of confirmation evidently wasn't enough. "Say it, Chelsea. Let me hear it."

"Yes." Oh, God. She could hardly hold the desire that raced through her. Every hot sweep of his lips over hers, every carnal thrust of his tongue, inflamed a need in her that was swiftly burning out of control. "Please, Dave. I need you. I need to feel you inside me."

His response was a primitive, dominating snarl. He pressed her down onto the little bed and pulled off her clothes before rapidly removing his own. Part of her wished he would

take things gently, allowing her to relish every facet of the rock-hard, exquisitely shaped body she still saw in her most feverish fantasies. But their feelings for each other had been suppressed for far too long.

They had already lost far too much valuable time. She was in dire need of him. Above all, she needed to feel his skin against hers and know that this was no longer a fantasy. That he was genuine. That he was hers once more. Always, she amended silently, allowing the wish to live in her heart as he settled himself atop her.

His eyes blazed as he watched her, his hand moving between their bodies to tease and stroke her s*x. His fingers slid through her juices, a groan ripping out of him as he cleaved her folds and found the slick entrance to her body. "You're already wet for me," he murmured, a grin tilting the edges of his wicked mouth. "D**n, you're soft, Chelsea. So beautiful. So f*****g hot."

She couldn't hold back her moan of delight, both at his compliment and at the depth of her need for him. He teased her tender skin, taking her mouth in another soul-searing kiss. She felt him test her tightness with his fingers, one at a time, his thumb working unholy magic on her c**t. There had been no one since him, and the exhilaration of being naked with him now,

in his arms after so much desire, was unbearable. Her o****m came on her unexpectedly, far too wild to contain. She clutched his shoulders as her cry tore out of her throat. Arching off the mattress, she rode the wave to its crest, grinding shamelessly against his hand as the bliss poured over her.

"Open your eyes, my sweet, open for me," he pleaded as he proceeded to tickle her with his fingertips. "I've waited far too long to see this emotion on your face again." Chelsea, you've only gotten more beautiful." She gripped her lip between her teeth as the aftershocks rippled through her nerve endings, while another climax was already building beneath the pleasure. "Please, Dave..." He was aware of her needs. He shifted his weight and slid between her wide thighs. Her body was ready for him, slippery, hot, and open. Yet it was still a shock to feel the impossible thickness of him as he pushed the head of his c**k inside her, then thrust to fill her with the hard length of his shaft. "Chelsea," he uttered tightly, "you have to tell me if I'm hurting you.

"No." She shook her head, even as tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, God...it feels so good. I thought I remembered, but this..."

"I know, baby." He started to move within her, rocking slowly at first, each stroke taking him deeper, pushing further inside her, until she wasn't sure where he ended and she began.

"Ah, love," he murmured. "Your body is so tight around me. So damned perfect. I can't-"

His words were lost to the feral groan that ripped out of him. Caging her between his forearms, he drove inside her faster, deeper, untamed in his need. His handsome face contorted with the ferocity of his thrusts. Chelsea's gaze fixed beautiful lips. She couldn't get enough either. She wanted all of him. Not just this moment and the wish that it might last. She wanted forever with Dave Brown. After just one time together and long years in between, he was still the only man she craved. In her heart-to the depths of her soul-she knew he was the only man she would ever love.

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 9 The Montblanc Mountain Range Goldsmith's Inn, Twenty Miles from Sebastian's residence The early autumn chill bit at the man's skin, which was still exposed to the elements. It wasn't the bone-chilling cold of winter. This had a distinct vibe, softer in some ways.

Dry leaves and campfires filled the air. The source, the golden-haired man understood, was the fireplace of Goldsmith's Inn. He'd been there before on his way through this region of the northern mountains, and he knew the owner and c**k, Mrs. Gray, would be making some kind of stew right about now.

He got a scent of onions, garlic, and chicken stew just on cue. The odour entered his nostrils and travelled directly to his gut, generating a loud rumble.

He hadn't eaten anything all day, save for a biscuit for breakfast and a piece of dry pork for

lunch. His strategy had always been to travel light and quickly, then have a large dinner.

However, he couldn't see the Inn's lights, but he knew it was around the corner.

He yanked on his jacket's long collar to keep the last few minutes of chill at bay. A gentle breeze rustled through the trees, flinging leaves from their limbs. The colourful flurries danced through the air as they fell around the man, driving an old jeep. While he would have liked to enjoy the display illuminated by the light of a half-moon, he knew the sooner he arrived at Goldsmith's, the better.

The Montblanc northern trail was a dangerous patch of road. It has one of the most impressive and beautiful ranges in the world, and it's a relatively accessible trail for anyone in good shape, but it's among the hardest, patrolled by bandits and the occasional native. The bandits were the worst of the two-though there were stretches that ran through some of the more aggressive tribes' land. The mountain stands between the regions of Aosta Valley, Italy, and Savoie and Haute-Savoie, France. It gives its name to the Mont Blanc massif, bordering Switzerland and forming part of a larger range referred to as the Graian Alps. The location of the summit of Mont Blanc was on the watershed line between the valleys of Ferret and Veny in Italy and the valleys of Montjoie, and Arve in France, on the border between the two countries.

Something other than the wind rustled in the forest to his right. The golden-haired man pulled one of his pistols and swung it around, aiming it into the pitch-dark thicket of oak, maple, and poplar trees. The branches above loomed like skeleton fingers against the pale glow in the sky and the twinkling stars.

The noise to his right grew louder. The camper's horse snorted and shifted its feet while he watched another man in the saddle keep his focus a dozen feet below the ravine with a torch in its hand. He wasn't new to this sort of thing and didn't spook easily. In fact, the sense of fear sent adrenaline coursing through his veins, and for the first time in three years, he felt alive as he halted the jeep and waited.

Levi's breath pulsed out of his nose and mouth in short bursts of misty clouds. His eyes remained focused on the dark as the sound grew closer. Someone was coming, and they were

being clumsy about it. A drunk from Goldsmith's, perhaps, lost in the woods? The sound swelled, feet clomping through leaves and sticks, fur brushing against the bark of tree trunks. The man's trigger finger tensioned, and he cocked back the hammer. If he missed, he had three more, plus a rifle and a small gun. Suddenly, the intruder's eyes flashed white amid a long, pointy face covered in light brown fur. "Just a deer," Levi grumbled. He sighed, while the man on the horse kept its steady pace, almost disappointed, as the animal emerged from the forest. Its antlers branched out in several directions, showing the buck's age. Levi watched the man disappear in the next clearing as he continued his drive to the dirt road.

Levi bit his lip, took another look around to survey the area, and stuffed the pistol back into the folds of his coat. Five years. Five long years since he'd come back to a hero's welcome. There'd been parades, fanfare, and every luxury he could have ever imagined. Luxury, however, wasn't something Marcos Levi desired.

The mission to map a large section of the Montblanc Mountain range and hopefully discover a northwest passage to the Champex-Lac had been an immense success. Though they never found the legendary river system that could connect the eastern part of the continent to the west, Captain Levi and his friend Sebastian had explored further than anyone up to that point and were lauded as celebrities.

Those days seem like ancient history now.

The adventures they encountered along the way were something right out of legend. They'd met natives of almost every kind. His friend Sebastian had been instrumental in the success of the mission. He'd made it possible to safely communicate with the various tribes they had met along the way and helped them navigate difficult terrain that was unfamiliar to Levi and the rest of his comrades.

He needed a drink.

The matters pressing on him had taken his anxiety to new heights. When he was out in the wilderness with his own men, he didn't have to worry about stupid financial matters or politics. His new life forced those things on him, squeezing him like a vise. Politics. He hated the thought of it. He was one of the larger landowners of the mountain territory and had been made a mountain ranger, a position he loathed. His grandfather's journal had also been on his back, which he'd kept during the mission. Five years later, Levi still hadn't delivered his entire report to his grandfather and for good reason; his grandfather was no longer in office. Levi did his best to skate around the subject, coming up with excuses as to why his full report had yet to be given to the old man, but time was up. He couldn't run from the truth any longer. The jeep came along the dirt road. The monotonous sound was almost peaceful, and Levi found himself dozing off numerous times, only to be awakened as he nearly lost his balance and fell off his steering wheel. He shook his head side to side to stay awake, knowing the safety and warmth of Goldsmith's Inn were just around the bend.

Instinctively, he reached down and touched the satchel at his side. His journals were in there, detailing every aspect of the mission of discovery's journey, including one particular piece he

knew would be a shock to his grandfather. The retired army general.

Levi hadn't told anyone about what he found that fateful night. He trusted his team implicitly, especially his friend Sebastian. There were one or two they'd picked up along the way that he didn't trust, but they weren't the reason he'd kept his discovery a secret. What he found would have profound implications not only for history but for the young nation as people began to migrate west. Indeed, the security of the nation could be at risk

Construction on the permanent camp began after they erected a base camp at the clearing with temporary constructions such as tents. While assisting in every way he could, Levi slipped away in the early hours of the night to work on his own project, which he couldn't tell anybody else about, at least not yet. He'd have to talk to the general first before telling anyone else about what he witnessed. He worked at both ends of the fire, surveying the surrounding area during the day, erecting living quarters for the winter, and then hiding his secret after the sun went set.

Those were long evenings. He'd been sleep deprived on more than one occasion, but he'd had no choice. Sebastian had voiced anxiety about his health. At first, he was aware that he must have appeared gruff, and there were times when he found himself conversing with no one but himself.

His awareness was concentrated on the work at hand, on covering up what he'd witnessed. It had taken nearly three weeks, but he was happy that he had done his best. Once the general was informed of the issue, a more appropriate solution could be developed and implemented.

Levi groaned when he noticed a pale light streaming through the cracks in the windows of the inn ahead. Outside, a bonfire raged, spewing a thick pillar of smoke into the air and a shower of bright orange sparks. The chimney at the back of the home attempted to compete with the bonfire's output, but only permitted a tiny trickle of smoke to escape from its top.

The idea was to spend the night at Goldsmith's, then rise early and continue on the trail west, to a nearby valley where he would meet with his grandfather and finally reveal everything, including the secret he'd uncovered near the mouth of the Montblanc. It sent shivers down his spine just thinking about it. On top of all that, the old man was no longer in command of the corps. While Levi continued to refer to the man with that title, his replacement was now in charge and, theoretically, the person who should have received the diaries. Levi knew the man, but not well, and he wanted to make certain that the documents were given to someone he could rely on. To his friend Sebastian who had a small underground haven, a few miles from the Inn.

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Chapter 10

Sebastian could then do with the information what he saw fit, delivering it to the higher ups, or possibly someone else if necessary. Levi really just wanted to be the delivery boy and be done with it at this point. He'd been thinking about it for a long time.

He shook his head to shake off the chill and flicked the gas from his vehicle down the final hundred yards to the clearing and the promise of a warm bed, a nice meal, and a good night's sleep.

Levi felt he heard another disturbance in the woods, possibly a second deer. Whatever it was, he didn't hear it again, but his nerves were on edge until he entered the clearing and heard voices within the small building.

He got out of his jeep and walked up to the modern wood inn. Blood rushed through his legs, causing a tingling feeling throughout his entire body. He bent down toward his toes and stretched to restore normal circulation before standing up straight and fastening the satchel at his side.

As he headed toward the door, he took the gun from the belt attached to his seat and propped it over his shoulder.

Levi pressed against the door, which squeaked open with a loud, gritty screech that would have scared any animal brave enough to venture too close to the inn.

There was a countertop to the left of the fireplace inside. A big dark iron kettle rested over a smouldering mound of crimson coals, steam billowing up from the top, as expected. The odours he'd noticed outside were far more potent indoors. His stomach

grumbled once again as the steak, onions, peppers, and other veggies simmered. There was one patron sitting at the bar with a half-full glass in one hand, probably filled with cold beer of some kind.

Levi smiled when he noticed Mrs. Goldsmith standing behind the counter. "Madame, good evening. I hope everything is going well for you. How are the grandkids?" She gave him a friendly grin that was tinged with anxiety. "Sir Levi, they are good... in school now," she said, with a friendly Spanish accent. At least Levi felt the sound was pleasant. He appreciated his visits to this location and wished he could do it more frequently. The "Montblanc," as the locals called it, provided plenty of outdoor adventure and natural beauty. "It's great to see you again," she grumbled, extending her arms as if to hug him but without coming over the bar to do so. "Can I get you something?" "I'll have a beer or something stronger if you have one, and some of that fine stew I see cooking back there." He took off his pack and set it next to a chair at a little square table off to the side of the room. There was a window close by, though the shutters were closed. He thought it odd but didn't make any mention of it. There was no need to have the windows shut. It was a beautiful night out, and there were no clouds in the sky. Then maybe the Goldsmiths were just attempting to make the property feel cosy so that any visitors who stopped in would want to remain.

"Do you have my regular room?" Levi inquired.

Mrs. Goldsmith nodded as she finished pouring beer into a large glass. She handed him the frothy drink and placed it on the table. "Sure do. If you want it, it's clean and ready."

She sounded upbeat. Perhaps business has been slow recently. Their outpost was in the middle of nowhere, which might be a good thing or a bad one. A facility like this could be a lifeline for someone who is tired and desperate after a long trip. Then again, how many of those passed through this area? The path was notorious for rape, theft, and murder. The bandits who lived in its forests and neighbouring hills were infamous for their cruelty. Levi could handle them as long as they weren't too numerous. He'd once taken on four robbers on his own, killing two and maiming the other two for life. He'd never told anyone about it, but he believed the two surviving bandits would take care of it. When travelling on dangerous highways, it never hurts to have a little tale about you spreading "Where are you headed, Sir?" Mrs. Goldsmith asked as she returned to the fireplace and picked up a bowl. She grabbed a long wooden spoon and dipped it into the iron pot, scooping out a hefty portion of stew. "Sebastian... I miss the b****d," he said. His right hand slipped down to the satchel again, fingers rubbing over the worn leather. "I have to meet with him." She grinned at him and placed a spoon in the bowl of steaming food. "You know he's not in the corps anymore, right? I heard he went into hiding again... Or has being out in the wilderness knocked you out of your senses?"

He chuckled as she set the bowl down on the table in front of him. He rifled through a coin

and produced enough money to cover the meal, the room, and a little extra. Levi had always been generous when it came to his accommodations and the people providing them. Maybe it was due to the fact he didn't care about money or material possessions. That was one of the most stressful facets of being a ranger. He felt more at home in a small cabin or in a tent in the forest. Civilian life, it seemed, was better suited for someone else.

Sebastian had seemed to adapt to it fairly well, but not Levi. "I wish that were the case," he said. "Unfortunately, I've been imprisoned behind a desk these last few years. There's been almost no time for adventure, save for when I come through these parts."

"You sure have a lot of courage to be travelling the trail at night, that's for sure."
"Courage or foolishness," the patron at the bar said, his voice full of gravel. He was an older man with a greying beard that stretched down to the top of his chest. His wiry hair protruded from beneath a leather cap. An old winter coat hung on the back of the chair behind him. Levi couldn't make out the stranger's face, but something about the voice sounded vaguely familiar. Probaby a Russian but he was not sure

Levi didn't take it personally. "Perhaps both," he said, clutching the handle of his mug and taking a long swallow of the ale. He was pleasantly delighted to discover that it was cooler than predicted. Beer tended to be a little warm in the summer, which was excellent for getting drunk but not so great for the entire tasting and drinking experience. Beers and malts were

much colder and more flavorful in the fall and winter.

Before placing it down, he drained about half the glass.

Levi's drinking had become the norm. Some of his mates were concerned that he'd developed a problem. He did, in fact, have a problem. The only thing that took his mind off it was drinking. As far as he could remember, his anxiety had been at an all-time high. It began after he returned home from the mission, when he realised he would no longer be an outdoorsman or a soldier. He'd be a stooge for propaganda.

That was half of it. The other half came from the knowledge laid bare in the important documents at his side. What would Sebastian say? What would he do? Would he give the information to someone else? If so, what would happen after that? Maybe it was nothing. Maybe the secret he'd discovered in the west was no big deal, something that could be brushed aside. Deep down, he knew that wasn't the case.

He scooped up a spoonful of the stew, blew it off to cool, and then shoved it into his mouth. Levi took a second to enjoy the salty and savoury flavors. He chewed a piece of beef and then swallowed before splashing another dose of ale down his throat. Then he repeated the process, making quick work of the hearty stew.

Levi hadn't realised how hungry he truly was until the food was set in front of him.

Mrs. Goldsmith was cleaning a mug when she looked up to see him finish the meal.
"Hungry, were you?"

"Yes, madam. I suppose I was... this one looks amazing."

"Would you like another bowl? On the house?"

"You never gave me anything in the house," the Russian grumbled.

"And you never paid the way Levi does, you ingrate." He muttered something under his breath and then took another swig from his mug. Levi laughed at the exchange. Then he hefted his glass and finished off the beer "Thank you, madam," he said and stood. "I appreciate the hospitality. I'm exhausted, though, and need some rest." "Should I show you to your room?" He smiled weakly. "No, thank you. I'm fine, and besides, you're busy." The inn wasn't large. It consisted of one floor with the kitchen and bar in the main area, and some smaller guest rooms at the other end of the building. Levi had always stayed in the same room and didn't know what the others looked like, though he figured they were identical. He knew that Mr. and Mrs. Goldsmith occupied one of the rooms.
"Have a good night, siri."

"Thank you so much. He turned and headed to the door on the left, but he couldn't help but detect an odd tone in her voice at her last sentence. It sounded almost... dangerous. A warning. He had to be insane. It was only an overactive imagination caused by a lack of sleep and being on the road for far too long. Nothing a good night's sleep in a nice bed can't fix.

Chapter 10

Levi opened the door, entered the bedroom, and shut it behind him.

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 11

Sebastian's Residence In the bliss of making love with Dave, he nearly wrecked her, but it was nothing compared to the pleasure she felt at his sudden thrust that made her c*m again.

Chelsea gasped at the beautiful pain, feeling his shaft all the way deeper. But that initial jolt gave way to an indescribable pleasure as his lips pressed against her skin and he drew a feverish kiss that made her groan to her core. Heat raced through her veins like rivers of nothingness, all of her senses-every fibre of her being-drawn toward the pulse that now flowed beneath Dave's lips. Each suckling tug, every e****c sweep of his tongue, confirmed what she had already known. She was his and he was hers.

If she hadn't been before, the connection he had just activated between them ensured she always would be. He could never take another as, for Dave, there would only be Chelsea.

The joy that understanding gave her was almost too much to bear. It filled her heart, even as it awakened something raw and primal inside her.

"You always belong to me, sweetheart." Dave muttered under the kiss.

She tucked her fingers through his hair, holding him to her throat as he kissed, "Yes, I'm yours."

He moaned, still rocking atop her, their bodies intimately joined. His strokes intensified along with the taste of her skin against his lips. The combined sensations flooded her with desire, stoking her need all over again.

"Beautiful... you are so beautiful," he murmured, his deep voice as rough as gravel, his breath rushing hot against her throat. She felt his tongue sweep over her skin.

He lifted his head to watch her now. Dave's eyes were glowing as bright as coals, gazing at her with such a ferocity of emotion it stole her breath. She had never seen him like this before. She licked her lips, hungry to feel him at her core again.

Everywhere.

He was ferocious and otherworldly, the most magnificent man she'd ever seen.

His wicked mouth curved as he caressed the side of her face and the tender skin where his kisses had been. "I can feel you inside me, Chelsea, and I feel your pleasure. I feel how badly you need me to make you come again." As if to punctuate, he thrust long and slow and deep, a rumble of satisfaction vibrating through him as she cried out in helpless ecstasy. "Oh goodness me, Dave!"

"My sweet Chelsea," he said, lowering his head to kiss her forehead, her cheek, her parted lips as she sighed. "I wish you could feel how much I love you."

"Show me," she whispered, reaching up to trace her fingers along his rigid jaw, her gaze drifting to his lips. "Let me taste you now, Dave. I want to taste you again."

She didn't have to ask him twice.

In a snarl, he brought himself up to her face. His fluid dripped onto her b****s, hot splashes of white haven that inflamed her dark thirst for him as he guided her mouth to his shaft. She sealed her lips over the long, rigid manliness of the man she secretly loved. Dave moaned at her eagerness. The first drop of his fluid on her tongue felt like a kiss of flame. She moaned, both in shock and thirst. She wanted him more. As Dave's

moans echoed around the room, she started moving quickly, as if she was in a hurry for something. She lapped at his skin, astonished at the intense rush of heat through her body as she drank from him. Dave's saltiness felt alive with a wildness and strength she could barely comprehend. As powerful as an electric charge, each sip blasted into her body, into her...into her soul. There was no fear left in her. No doubt. Everything peeled away, leaving only their love. This connection that nothing, and no one, could sever.

And beneath the contentment she felt as she tasted from Dave's shaft was a deeper blooming of desire. She wanted him. She Loved him!

It was the most e****c thing, watching her with those eyes that burned everything away except the bond they now shared.

She didn't think her body could withstand another hot race toward climax, but Dave had unleashed something inside her. Something fierce and demanding. Something violently carnal.

"Ah, Chelsea, I'm c*****g.." He groaned, she suckled his shaft and writhed beneath him. "I know. I can't be gentle now either."

With a smile, Dave pulled his shaft away from her lips then flipped her over onto her stomach. One strong arm slid beneath her, hoisting her backside up to meet him as he slammed home from behind her.

He took her swiftly, aggressively, giving no quarter until they both were fully spent and collapsed on the bed in a sated tangle of limbs.

She didn't know how long they lay there, wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies slick with sweat and the musky scent of their lovemaking. Chelsea could have stayed there for hours. Days. Even forever.

She groaned when he rolled away, bringing her with him. Dave went to the bathroom, the water began to run in the tub after a minute. Chelsea rose off the bed with him, smiling as he caught her in his embrace and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

She drew back, searching the banked ocean of his gaze. "That was... amazing."

He inclined his head in solemn agreement. "Yes, it was. More than amazing."

"So...where do we go from here?" He grunted, a smile playing at the edges of his sensual mouth. "To the bathtub, for starters. I've made a mess of you." "No, Dave." She slowly shook her head. "You've made me whole." His expression intensified, sparking a positive energy. "Ah, Chelsea, I love you," he murmured. "But I don't know where we go from here. Back to London to begin with. From there, we'll have to figure it out. Right now, I only know that I need you with me." DA BI BITI It was all the promise she needed. Him. With her. Together. She could hardly believe this was her new reality.

Tipping her chin up, he kissed her with reverent care. Then, he startled her when he scooped her into his strong arms and carried her to the bathroom. He stepped into the tub with her, sinking down into the water with her straddled against him. Chelsea sighed into the comfort of his arms and the softly lapping pool around them. "This is heaven," she murmured, resting her head on the muscled pillow of his shoulder. "I've never been so happy. I never thought I would be." As he bathed her, Dave tenderly caressed her. His hands were wet and warm and soothing. She started to drift, her mind relaxing as she watched the little ripples dance in the bath water.

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Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 12

After receiving a call from Tayler, Chelsea's worry weighed on Dave like a ton of bricks, a weight that had only grown in the hours since he'd recounted what he'd seen on the CCTV.

The exact thing he'd dreaded, the error he'd made in not ensuring he'd finished the job, was about to come home to roost. He was certain of it. Unfortunately, Tayler wasn't sure if he'd seen Hermano in the last few hours or not.

It didn't matter. The b***h's son had survived the explosion that should have killed him. Dave's goal had failed because Hermano was still alive. He could only hope that he hadn't let Chelsea down.

And in order to assure their safety, he was doing the only thing he could think of.

"Is everyone prepared to go, babe?"

She nodded as she marched from the back bedroom toward him. "Christie will be right behind me. She's having some issues with Peter. The poor thing has been having nightmares all night.

"Understandable," Dave responded. "The child has been through a lot. "You all have," he said, drawing Chelsea under his arm. "We need to be at the airport as soon as the sun goes up." Although it is only a few hours away, the sooner I get you and your family there, the better."

She raised her gaze to him, massaging his tight jaw. "Are you sure your friend won't mind taking us in for the night?"

"Chelsea, you are now part of my family, as are Christie and Peter." The command center may not be a good home for a child, but we'll figure something out." Her eyes were soft on him. "Thank you Dave, you are a good man."

"I want to be," he declared. "For you. That means keeping yourself as far away from Hermano as possible. At least until I can finally end him."

"Did Catherine and Shawn know about this um-mission of yours?"

"Dave snorted, "No, Catherine will kill me. You know how overprotected she is and, trust me, she has become worse since she had a baby in her tummy."

Chelsea smiled, "I'm too excited to see her."

"Dear, we can't, not until I can confirm that Hermano is dead, for now. We are going to hide you."

She nodded in understanding. Dave was consumed by the desire to personally and brutally correct his blunder with the jerk. He would have done so at one point.

He'd thought nothing of storming into the fray of a risky situation to take out a target before Chelsea reappeared in his life. He'd never had a death wish; his life had always been disposable if it meant the success or failure of one of his missions. Everything has changed now.

Hermano will pay. So, no matter how viciously he wanted to make the b*****d pay for every hour of every day he'd held Chelsea prisoner for his own gain, Dave had to exercise caution. He had to be sure he didn't fail—with her or with the mission.

She rested her head against his chest, where the heavy pound of his heartbeat throbbed. "I'm scared, Dave."

"Don't be," he murmured, placing a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm not going to let him get you. I'm not going to let him get Christie or her son either." "I know you won't. But I'm scared for you." She drew in a shallow, ragged breath. "If I ever lose you again"

"You won't." Guiding her gaze up to his, Dave urged her to see the resolve in his eyes. He slid his hand around her nape and brought her to him for an unhurried kiss that ensured she felt all of the love and promise that he held for her in his heart.

He could have kissed her for hours, and he swore to himself that he would, once he made sure she and her family were safely returned to London.

Sensing they were no longer alone, Dave turned his head and found Sebastian standing there. Christ, the male might be immense and formidable, but he moved like a wraith.

He held out his left hand, a vehicle starter in his palm.

HIC

“What’s this?” Dave he asked, pivoting to face the former soldier. The key fob was for a Hummer-a new one, by the look of it. Sebastian handed it to him.

C

“The truck you arrived in might get you where you’re going, but this will be better.” “I left that vehicle half a mile away at the abandoned coffee shop. How the hell did you know what we were driving?”

Sebastian didn’t answer, and Dave figured there was a lot about the reclusive man and his methods that would remain a mystery. Instead of pressing him, Dave slipped the welcome gift

into his pocket.

“Thank you.”

Sebastian gave him a faint nod. “We’re ready!” Christie called from behind them. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” The petite brunette had her son’s little hand grasped in hers as she approached from the other end of the corridor. As they drew closer, Dave felt a cold shift in the air. He didn’t realize what it was until he looked at Sebastian and saw that the man had gone utterly still. His onyx eyes were stark, almost haunted, beneath the harsh slashes of his black brows.

Christie must have felt the chill too. She looked nervously up at Sebastian and almost pulled Peter by his dark hair when the boy’s steps slowed down in front of the former soldier.

But the child didn’t seem to have any fear of the sinister-looking male. His feet halted in front of Sebastian, his little head tilting up to stare in unabashed awe. “How’d you hurt your hand?”

Christie and Chelsea both sucked in their breath. Hell, even Dave felt a jolt of unease as Sebastian’s hard gaze slowly descended to look at the boy. When he spoke, the male’s deep voice was as unreadable as his stoic face.

“I tried to help someone a long time ago.”

By the male’s grave tone, Dave assumed his hand wasn’t the only thing Sebastian lost.

“Come on, Peter.” Christie gave her son’s hand a small tug. She looked up at the big man, her cheeks flaming with color. “I’m sorry. He’s just starting to learn about manners.”

Sebastian shrugged vaguely, but his bleak eyes lingered on the pretty mother. "It's all right."

Dave cleared his throat. "We should get moving. It's past sundown now, and we have a lot of time ahead of us on the road."

As he spoke, the faint sound of a woman's scream went up somewhere in the distance outside the house. Sebastian heard it too. His dark head jerked to instant attention. Just as another shriek sounded-this one closer and belonging to a man. A man who was screaming for his life.

Dave's blood iced over with dread. "What the f**k?" Sebastian took a phone from his leather trench coat and looked at the screen. His curse was guttural and rife with rage.

"We have to leave," he remarked solemnly.

He swung the item around so Dave could view it. The screen displayed live video from numerous different cameras located across the town center. Children and women were racing in all directions while a swarm of mobs-he counted a dozen in the few seconds he watched poured into the streets to assault them.

"Oh, my God," Chelsea exclaimed, her terrified gaze fixed on the small display. It wasn't the first time a city has been taken over by drug-fueled gangs in recent weeks. Violence like this was becoming nearly epidemic again in many parts of the world, thanks to Hermano's dissemination of golden coins, the drug that had converted dozens of the gangs into bloodlusting animals.

Dave cursed angrily. So much for going somewhere soon. He wasn't about to endanger Chelsea or anybody else's life by venturing out into the turmoil outside their safe haven. And the thought of allowing the town's innocent people to be massacred by bloodthirsty youngsters was too much for him.

He saw the same resolution in Sebastian when he met his fathomless black eyes.

"Do you have any more firearms in here?"

He received a curt nod from the man.

More screams could be heard in various parts of town. Death is getting closer by the minute. If the mobs weren't halted, their attack would soon continue down into the ravine.

Dave looked at Chelsea. He took one of his pistols from his belt and placed it in her hand. "Did you ever do one of these?"

“No.” She shook her head, but the worry he felt coursing through her veins was there for him. “What are you doing, Dave?”

“Take it,” he said, quickly demonstrating how to remove the safety. “You point this at anyone else who comes to the door who isn’t me or Sebastian.” Take this as well.” He unclipped his belt and handed her a sheathed dagger. He hoped she never got close enough to one of them to use either weapon, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. “Do you hear what I’m saying?” He drew her in close, pleading her with his gaze and the harsh, urgent pounding of his heart. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.” “Make me a promise.” He hauled her against him and kissed her—a brief but passionate affirmation that he wasn’t about to lose her while they were so close to a future together. It wasn’t easy to let her go. But as the terrified shouts of the town’s residents continued to ring out, he realized he had no choice. He turned to face Sebastian, his new odd ally. “Let’s get started.”

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