

MURDER, MI AMORE

BY

CARA MARSI

Chapter One

A prickly sensation, like someone breathing on the back of her neck, sent chills slithering down Lexie Cortese's spine. She glanced around the small, exclusive leather goods shop on one of Rome's busiest streets. A well-dressed older woman perused a richly sequined evening bag while a smiling saleswoman looked on. A middle-aged man, dressed in a beautifully tailored gray suit, studied a display case of couture handbags. Nothing sinister. Yet the feeling of being followed had started before she'd entered the shop and had grown stronger in the forty-five minutes she'd been there.

"*Signorina? Carta di credito?*" Lexie started at the saleswoman's words and turned back to her with an apologetic smile. Although she couldn't speak Italian, Lexie had done enough shopping to know the saleswoman wanted her credit card. She dug into her plain black shoulder bag, pushing aside the bright scarf she'd tied on the handle to liven it up a bit, pulled out her card and handed it to the woman. As she waited for the clerk to ring up the sale, someone jostled her. "*Scusi, per favore.*" The middle-aged man in the gray suit had bumped her. His flat black eyes bore into hers, as if sending her a message. She backed away. "No *problema*," she said, hoping she had the Italian right. With a cold smile, he moved on, heading to the door.

Clutching her shopping bag with one hand and holding her shoulder bag tightly against her, she left the shop and joined the throngs of pedestrians on the Via Corsi. Despite the festive atmosphere from shoppers and tourists enjoying an unseasonably warm April day, Lexie couldn't shake the feeling that someone followed her. Was it the man who'd bumped into her, the one with the dead eyes? She shouldered her way along the crowded street and looked behind her. He wasn't there. God, she was becoming paranoid, letting her imagination run amok. Nevertheless, she tightened her grip on the shopping bag that contained the way-too-expensive dark green designer handbag she'd just purchased. Rome was as well-known for its pickpockets and muggers as for its art and history. Why would anyone follow her, an ordinary tourist?

Then again, she wasn't ordinary any more. Not since she'd come to Rome. And now she had a new handbag to go with her new attitude. In the past two weeks, the cautious, always-do-what's-right-eager-to-please-everyone Lexie Cortese had become a confident, take-charge woman. For all of her twenty-eight years she'd done what others wanted—her parents, her teachers, that louse Jerry. But no more. Smiling at a vendor selling flowers, she inhaled the heady perfume of early spring blooms and put a

little bounce in her step. A good-looking twenty-something man nodded to her as he passed. Lots of handsome Italian men had flirted with her in the two weeks she'd been here. Sure helped make up for what that scum of an ex-fiancé had done. From now on she'd do whatever she damn well pleased. Spend a month in Rome? Check. Buy a designer bag that cost more than a month's pay? Done. Have a fling with a sexy Italian, then walk away, in control, her heart untouched? Not so sure about that one, but she could hope.

To celebrate the new Lexie, she'd have a glass of wine. Maybe even two glasses. The Trevi Fountain was close. She'd enjoy her drink in the popular piazza admiring old Neptune and his trident. The prickly feeling swept over her again, raising goose bumps on her arms. She stopped and scanned the street. Nothing. Damn it! Her imagination was in overdrive. It had to be. Thirsty for some calming wine, she hurried toward the piazza. She found a seat at one of the outdoor tables directly across from old Neptune and ordered a glass of Pinot Noir. The piazza buzzed with tourists snapping pictures and throwing their three coins in the famous fountain. She'd made her three wishes the day she'd arrived. Wish one—that she'd find success in her new job and in grad school; wish two—that she'd come back to Rome, maybe even study here; and three—that someday she'd find real love and happiness. Whatever real happiness was.

When her wine arrived, she held the glass up in salute to Neptune. *Okay, water boy, do your stuff. Grant my wishes and toss a little excitement my way.* With a smile, she took a sip. The rich liquid flowed down her throat, soothing her jumbled nerves. How foolish she'd been to feel so unsettled earlier. Maybe traces of the old, skittish Lexie lingered. A movement from a side street near the fountain snagged her attention. A man wearing jeans and a hoodie shot from the street, running directly toward... Her? Lexie gasped and grabbed her purse from the tabletop as the man raced past and snatched her shopping bag from the ground next to her. "Hey!" Lexie jumped to her feet. "That's mine!"

The man ignored her, clutching the bag with her new, expensive purse against his chest like a football as he sprinted down a small alleyway. "Somebody stop him!" she shouted, knocking over the table. The wine goblet shattered onto the cobblestones, splattering red wine all over her black sandals. The piazza erupted in cries and frantic calls for the police. Onlookers, yelling in several languages, pointed toward the narrow street where the thief had disappeared. Several men ran after him. Lexie started to follow them. "Stay, *signorina*," her waiter implored, grabbing her arm and holding her back. His eyes, wide and stricken, darted from her to the piazza. "See. The police. They are coming." He pointed out two policemen racing toward the alleyway. "Please, *signorina*, sit, have some wine. No charge." He pulled out a chair at a freshly made up table. Another waiter stood close, holding a full glass of wine out to Lexie. Reluctantly, she turned away from the chase. "Thank you." She sank into the chair and took the proffered wine, grasping the glass tightly to control her sudden trembling as she noticed people staring.

Damn it all to hell! That purse was supposed to symbolize her new attitude. And now some scumbag had stolen it not ten minutes after she walked out of the store with it. What did that say about her chances for a new start? She looked up to see strangers hovering, offering help in a scattering of languages. She tried to respond, to reassure them she was all right. Her bout of self-pity dissolved with the strangers' kindness. She could handle this. Fifteen long minutes later, her wine untouched, Lexie stared dismally across the piazza in the direction the thief and his pursuers had taken. Her waiters stood nearby, their faces tense. "The police will find him, *signorina*. They must."

Then, like ancient Roman warriors returning from battle, the two policemen, followed by a large group of raucous men and boys, materialized from the alleyway. A tall man wearing a suit and holding her shopping bag walked between the policemen. Who was he? Not the thief. She stood as they approached, wishing she knew enough Italian to ask. His well-cut, dark blue business suit emphasized his broad shoulders and muscular frame as he strode across the piazza toward her. His thick, wavy black hair was expertly slicked back from a face boasting razor sharp cheekbones and a strong jaw. He might as well have jumped from the pages of a men's fashion magazine into her Roman holiday. "*Signorina*," Mr. GQ Cover Model said, smiling and holding her bag out to her. He said something totally incomprehensible in Italian, and when she simply stared, he arched one dark eyebrow and tried again. "I believe this is yours?"

His English, spoken with a lilting Italian accent, sent unexpected spasms of pleasure over her. Unwilling to tear her gaze away from that oh-so-charming smile, Lexie stalled. She'd never seen a man so ruggedly beautiful. She'd been without sex for too long. That was the only explanation. "*Grazie*," she finally said, taking the bag from him. She opened the bag to make sure her purse was indeed inside, then smiled up at her handsome knight. "Thank you so much. You could have been hurt going after that jerk."

He lifted one elegantly-clad shoulder. "It was nothing. Vermin like that give my city a bad name." He studied her. "You are American." Surprise edged his deep, rich voice.

She nodded, then turned to the policemen, who stood silently by. How odd. "*Grazie* to both of you too." They touched the brims of their hats at the same time. "We did nothing," the older of the two said. "This gentleman had wrestled your bag from the thief before we got there."

"Where is the thief?" Lexie asked, glancing around.

The policeman shrugged. "He got away, but be assured, we will find him." He smiled and pulled a small notebook from his inside jacket pocket. "Please to give us a little information for our report."

"Of course," she said. She quickly gave them the information they wanted.

"Thank you, *signorina*," the policeman said as he snapped his notebook shut and stuffed it back into his pocket. His partner remained silent and she assumed he didn't speak English. With nods to her, the policemen left. "Thanks again," Lexie called after them. She turned to the handsome stranger who'd rescued her bag. "Please, let me buy you a drink as thanks for your help."

“Of course. How can I refuse an invitation from such a beautiful woman?”

Lexie blushed. Italian men sure knew how to make a woman feel sexy. She turned back to her table where her waiter stood waiting. With a smile of gratitude, she slid into the chair he held for her. She put her purse and shopping bag under the table, on the side closest to the wall. Mr. GQ Cover Model sat in the opposite chair and ordered a glass of Pinot Noir in beautiful Italian. “I’m Lexie Cortese,” she said, holding out her hand to shake his. He took her hand and turned it over, brushing his lips on her wrist. Sparks seemed to fly up her arm and she felt her eyes widen. *This man could charm Neptune’s nymphs right out of the fountain.* Trying her best not to blush again, she smiled and pulled her hand free.

“Dominic Brioni,” he said, gifting her with a melt-her-bones smile. Despite his overt sexuality, humor flashed in his eyes, as if he didn’t quite take himself seriously. Oh, yes, she definitely could get used to this. “Cortese,” he said. “Italian?”

“My great-grandparents came from Abruzzo.”

“Abruzzo. That explains your beautiful hazel eyes.” He was a practiced charmer all right. But she liked it. “Do you speak Italian?” he asked.

“I don’t, I’m sorry to say. But you speak beautiful English.”

His eyes sparkled with even greater good humor. “Thank you.” When the waiter handed him his wine, he held up his glass to her in salute. Two hours and two glasses of wine later as he walked her back to her hotel—to make sure she arrived safely he’d insisted—she realized she’d done most of the talking. She’d told him about her home in Las Vegas, her new job at the college, her plan to some day earn a doctorate in Ancient Roman studies. But she didn’t tell him about Jerry. She was growing. She was healing. Her life was far from exciting, yet Dominic continued to listen to her as if she were fascinating. A little niggles of doubt arose as she realized he’d told her very little about himself, only that he was a native Roman who worked in the banking business.

“I would like to see you again, Lexie Cortese,” he said when they reached her hotel. His gaze, as warm as the heat of the sun that had made her feel so relaxed and content in the piazza, now sparked another kind of heat in her. When he brushed back a strand of hair from her forehead, jolts of electricity shot to every part of her body. The man had magic in those fingers. Lexie had always been fond of magic shows. “I’d love to see you again too,” she said, tilting her face up to look at him. He was tall for an Italian, towering over her by about a foot.

He smiled. “It’s a date. Dinner tomorrow night?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, her mind and her body filled with his smile.

“I will pick you up here at eight,” he said.

God, he was gorgeous. Could she put aside a lifetime of caution and take a chance on him? “Eight is good.”

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “*Buon giorno*, Lexie Cortese. Until tomorrow.”

Dominic made sure Lexie entered the hotel, then walked away as casually as possible. He recognized the middle-aged man who lounged against a nearby building, his gray suit blending with the shadows. The same thug had gone into the leather goods shop right behind Lexie. Dominic was sure the guy hadn't noticed him and Ruggiero standing near the shop, nor had the scum suspected one of their female agents was in the store posing as a shopper. The agent had signaled Dominic when the man slipped the diamond into Lexie's purse. The hand-off complete, the thug should have disappeared. Yet he'd continued to follow Lexie. Maybe the jewel thieves didn't quite trust her and wanted to be sure she made it to the hotel with the diamond.

Hands in his pockets, Dominic pushed through the pedestrian traffic and crossed the street, deftly avoiding some of Rome's ubiquitous motor scooters, and headed toward Ruggiero, waiting by the bank. They'd been lucky today. The police had almost screwed things up back at the piazza. With his hooded sweatshirt gone, no one would recognize Ruggiero for the street thief who'd grabbed Lexie's bag. As he headed toward his partner, Dominic's mind replayed the afternoon's events. Lexie Cortese didn't fit the profile of a courier working for international jewel thieves and terrorists. He'd been in the business long enough that nothing shocked him, yet when he'd learned the petite brown-haired beauty with the big hazel eyes was American, he'd been thrown. But Dominic knew better. Galina had looked innocent too. Until she'd betrayed them.