



## Chapter One

Okay, this night had *not* turned out the way she'd planned.

Gia Norcross raced along the balcony, her Aquazzura heels clicking, her Alberta Ferretti dress flowing out behind her.

Not to mention the Ruger in her hand, and the bad guy chasing her.

Yes, her night had *not* gone according to plan.

She reached a set of stone stairs and flew down them. They led her into a tiny, shadowed courtyard at the back of San Francisco's Hutton Museum. The courtyard was ringed by trees starting to lose their leaves. A fountain burbled quietly in the center of the space.

Ordinarily, it was a peaceful spot. Gia had eaten lunch here a few times with her best friend, Haven McKinney. Haven was the curator of the Hutton, and Gia's oldest brother, Easton, owned the museum.

Gia darted under the trees, and sank into the shadows. She kept a tight grip on the Ruger. The handgun was small and light, making it easy to conceal and use.

She was a Norcross. She knew how to shoot. All three of her brothers were former military. Two of them had been in some classified, beyond-black-ops, special forces team. They'd not given her much choice about being able to shoot and defend herself.

Gia took a deep, calming breath to counter the adrenaline pumping through her system. Tonight was supposed to have been a relaxing and enjoyable evening at the museum's charity gala.

It had all started out fine. She'd been so happy watching Haven and Gia's youngest brother, Rhys. The pair were so in love they practically had little cartoon hearts floating around their heads. Haven had been in danger recently, when a multi-million-dollar painting had been stolen from the museum. Add in a very bad ex-boyfriend and the Russian mafia, and things had been messed up.

Needless to say, Haven had been in danger, and Rhys had stepped up to keep her safe. Haven could no longer ignore the sizzling attraction between her and Rhys.

A scrape of sound and Gia froze.

A large shadow moved in her peripheral vision. *Shit*. He was down here already. She hadn't even heard him.

The man moved stealthily through the courtyard.

*Hunting her.*

Gia's pulse spiked, followed by a punch of fear. She shoved it down. She had no time to be afraid.

This asshole had threatened Gia's old friend. Willow had messed up, for sure, but Gia wasn't going to let her get hurt.

Willow had come to Gia looking for a place to stay. Gia sighed. She couldn't seem to say no to her old high school bestie. Of course, Willow had neglected to mention she'd stolen something from a not very nice guy. And he'd sent a *really* not nice guy to retrieve it.

He'd found her and threatened her, but Gia had intervened with her Ruger and sent him packing.

But the man's eyes had promised retribution.

And that brought them to now.

Unfortunately, the bad guy had found her at the gala. She'd spotted him in the crowd, and Gia had known she needed to get him out of there before he hurt someone.

Before her brothers got involved.

Her stomach jittered. She hadn't expected the idiot pull a gun on her on the balcony, in full view of a wall of glass windows and every guest at the party.

Her brothers would be here in minutes. She needed to take care of this.

That's what Gia did. She tidied up messes, helped people, made things right. Her PR firm was the best in San Francisco, and there were more than enough people and messes to keep her busy.

The man turned.

Gia darted out and kicked him. She felt her heel dig into his leg. He staggered and grunted.

She landed another kick to his leg, and he went down on his knees.

She pressed her gun to his temple and he froze.

"Don't move," she warned.

"You won't shoot me." He had a normal voice, nothing distinctive about it. He looked the same, as well. Ordinary. It probably made it easy to do your boss' dirty work when you blended into the crowd.

"You don't know me," she said. "You have no idea what I'm capable of." She sank confidence and authority into her voice. It was her "work" voice. "Leave me and Willow alone."

"My boss wants his gems back."

“Gems?”

“Yeah. Your friend helped herself to a bag of precious stones. Sapphires, emeralds, rubies.”

*Stupid, stupid Willow.* All she’d told Gia was that she’d been seeing this guy, and then things had gone bad. Now she’d stolen *gemstones* from him. *God, Willow.*

“I’ll talk to her.”

“That’s not good enough. Mr. Dennett needs more than that.”

“I’ll *talk* to her.” Gia emphasized the words. “He’ll get his gems back.”

“I think it’s better if you come with me. Your life might convince your friend.”

The man exploded upward. He knocked the gun out of Gia’s hand and it clattered to the stone paving.

*Crap.*

He rushed her. Gia dodged, well aware that he was bigger and stronger than her.

But Gia was smarter.

He reached for her, pushing against her shoulder. She let herself stagger and let out a gasp.

He grabbed a handful of her dress. *Better not ruin it, asshole.* “Please... Please don’t hurt me.” She made herself cower.

“Come without any trouble and—”

Gia rammed the side of her stiff palm into his throat. He let her go and gagged.

She jammed her thumbs into his eyes and he growled, doubling over. Next, she grabbed his head and rammed her knee up, smashing into his nose.

She heard a crunch, and he cursed viciously.

She had to admit to feeling a bit of satisfaction. She’d always hated bullies who intimidated with their size.

She looked for her gun. *Where the hell was it?* Spotting the glint of something in the low light, she raced for it.

There was a bellow behind her, and the man charged. He tackled her, and they hit the ground hard.

The air whooshed out of Gia and pain exploded in a dozen places. *Ow.*

“Bitch, you’ll pay for that.”

She struggled, kicking at him. He was half on her body, pinning her down. Her dress hampered her movement. “You came after *me*, and you’re pissed I fought back? Grow up.”

He rose, and picked her up like a football, pinning her to his side. He let out an annoyed grunt.

He strode across the courtyard, skirting some construction work where a low stone wall was being rebuilt.

“You don’t want to do this,” she said. “You *really* don’t want to meet my brothers.” Speaking of her brothers, where the hell were they?

The bad guy grunted.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she said breezily.

“Shut up,” he bit out.

She tried to elbow him.

He reached over and slapped her face. *Ouch.* She pressed a hand to her cheek. *Asshole.*

The attack came out of nowhere.

There was the tiniest flash of movement and suddenly Gia was free. She hit the ground, landing on her hands and knees.

Her assailant staggered back, and a tall, dark, lean shadow attacked him.

Gia's heart leaped into her throat. She watched the vicious kicks and methodical punches. Her rescuer was almost elegant in the way he moved as he destroyed his opponent.

Except there was too much brutal power in his blows to be elegant.

Even in the darkness, she knew who it was.

She swallowed an inner groan. Of course, it had to be *him*. The bane of her existence. Her nemesis.

A shaft of light caught his face.

It was a hell of a face. Saxon Buchanan was not one of her brothers. He was her brother Vander's best friend, and Gia had known him half her life.

He was tall, with a muscled body that almost hid his strength. His collection of well-cut suits—which included the designer tuxedo he currently wore—disguised just how muscular and strong he was. It somehow minimized his broad shoulders and powerful legs. Her gaze moved back to his face.

Saxon had been in the military with Vander. He was from a wealthy, San Francisco family that went back generations, and they'd forbidden him to join the Army. He went anyway.

Saxon made his own rules.

He finished hitting her attacker and the man curled into a ball on the ground.

Saxon's head lifted, his gaze on her. The light caught his hair, and she couldn't decide if it was dark blond, or golden brown.

"You have some explaining to do," he said.

She sniffed.

His good breeding showed in the most handsome face she'd ever seen— strong jaw, straight nose, aristocratic features, and green eyes. Those eyes flared. He strode toward her and grabbed her forearms.

His long fingers on her skin sent a sizzle of sensation up her arms. She gasped. "I just needed some air."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Now isn't the time for clever words and games, Gia."

"Everything's fine. I had it under control."

Saxon made a harsh sound. "Under control? He was about to carry you out of here."

Wow, Saxon was really pissed. He was usually Mr. Cool and Suave, so it was interesting to see the tension in his face and body.

"It was *fine*." Damn, he had a habit of seeing her at her worst and rubbing it in.

He snorted. "What have you gotten yourself mixed up in?"

"None of your business." She went toe to toe with him. She hated that he towered over her measly five feet, four inches. "You always try to stick your nose into my business. I already have three brothers. I don't need another one."

Saxon glared at her. "Believe me, I don't think of myself as your brother."

They stared at each other, gazes locked. Then one of his hands slid up and cupped her cheek. Her traitorous body shivered.

"I just saved you, and this is the thanks I get?"

"*Thanks*." She was well aware she didn't sound very grateful. She struggled for some control. "I had it in hand."

He glanced at the man, then back at Gia. "Willow dragged you into something."

Gia lifted her chin. "Like I said, none of your business."



Saxon leaned closer. “Contessa, after seeing this asshole shoot at you, I’m making you my business.”

*What?* “Don’t use that ridiculous name.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

The deep voice, with a lethal edge, made goosebumps rise on Gia’s bare arms.

She turned her head and saw Easton first. Her older brother wore a tuxedo and looked gorgeous. Their Italian-American heritage showed through in Easton’s dark hair and good looks. He had an air of authority, every inch the big brother and successful businessman. He frowned at the attacker, then scanned her, relief on his face.

But it was Vander who’d spoken. He stood half in the shadows, like the darkness wanted to cling to him.

He stepped forward. Vander had badass deeply embedded in his DNA, and it had been there even when he was a kid. Despite loving him to bits, there were times when he scared her.

He was intense, and he thrived on control, and she was well aware that he was dangerous.

His tuxedo didn’t hide any of that.

Saxon gave her a little shake. She looked up at him and she gave a start.

She realized that he had the same dangerous glint in his green eyes. He just hid it better than Vander.

She cleared her throat. *Time to face the music.*

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Saxon Buchanan was pissed as hell.

He saw the man on the ground move and shot him a glare. The guy stilled. The asshole had fired on Gia. Tried to abduct her. Had put her in danger.

Saxon's fingers flexed on her arm. *Big mistake.*

He looked down at Gia. As always, her stubborn jaw was lifted as she faced down Vander. And as usual, Saxon felt the competing urges to hit that jaw, or bite it.

The thought of biting Gia Norcross—in many and varied locations—fired his blood.

*Fuck.*

He shut the thought down as best he could. He'd had years of practice. He tried to remember her as the opinionated, twelve-year-old from the first time he'd met her. At sixteen, after being booted out of his expensive private school, Saxon had been sent to a local high school. Despite their differences, he and Vander had clicked. He'd spent as much time in the Norcross family home as he could. It had been much better than the stifling mausoleum his parents called home.

He'd watched Gia transform from his best friend's pesky sister into a gorgeous, feisty, smart woman.

It'd been uncomfortable at first—the flashes of lust he'd had for her when she'd grown breasts. *Definitely* not appropriate.

But as always, she'd been off-limits—far too young, and Vander's little sister.

Vander wasn't related to Saxon by blood, but they were brothers in every other sense. Saxon had vowed that he would never, ever cross the boundary with his best friend's sister.

It didn't help that he and Gia seemed to irritate each other without barely trying. Damn, Saxon loved seeing her chocolate-brown eyes fire up.

She was no longer underage, but after ten years in the military, and a lot of those in Ghost Ops doing the dirtiest, meanest, and hardest jobs the government needed done...

Saxon blew out a breath. Not to mention his fucked-up family. He had baggage he'd never, ever unload on a woman. He liked his relationships brief, uncomplicated, and simple.

And Gia would always be Vander's little sister.

But seeing that asshole draw a gun on her...

Seeing her in danger.

Something inside Saxon had cracked open. He would pull out all the stops to keep Gia safe.

"Willow has a thing," Gia said.

Vander cursed and Easton looked up at the night sky, jaw tight.

Saxon *knew* it. That woman was trouble.

Vander cocked his head. "Willow dragged you into this mess, which ends up with you getting shot at and almost snatched."

"Yes." Gia's chin lifted another inch.

"Cut her loose," Vander bit out. "I'll get word out to whoever's after her that you are *not* involved."

The man on the ground finally shook off his grogginess and raised his head. He looked at Vander and went still. "You're Vander Norcross."

Vander just stared at him.

"And she's his sister," Saxon added.

"Fuck," the man breathed. Then he gathered himself. "It won't stop my boss. He wants his gems back."

"Gems?" Saxon cut a glance to Gia.

She sighed. "Willow was seeing a guy. They had words—"

"He dumped her drug-addicted ass," the man said.

"She took a bag of precious stones from him," Gia said.

"Jesus," Vander scowled. "Cut her loose."

“Vander, no.” Gia grabbed her brother’s arm. “You know she had a rough childhood. She—”

“Is an adult,” Saxon said, interrupting her. “She can’t keep using that as an excuse to fuck up.”

Gia’s eyes narrowed. “You might’ve grown up with a set of silver spoons shoved in your mouth, but she didn’t.”

“She’s trouble, Gia,” Easton said. “Always was, even though you couldn’t see it. Your loyalty is admirable...”

“No, it’s not,” Saxon said. “It’s stupid.”

Those brown eyes—surrounded by ridiculously long lashes—flared hot. “You never miss a chance to tell me I’m stupid.”

“Contessa—”

“No.” She cut her hand through the air. “Willow has no one. Anyway, she’s gone now. If she calls, I’ll tell her to return what she stole.”

*Shit.* Saxon did admire Gia’s loyalty, but he was still mad. He knew that whoever Gia loved, she protected them fiercely.

Vander crouched by the man. “Who’s your boss?”

The man didn’t hesitate. “Kyle Dennett.”

Saxon barely controlled his sneer. An upstart trying to make a name for himself in the San Francisco drug trade. The guy had a few legit businesses—bars, a club. But you didn’t have to dig far below the veneer of businessman to find filth.

“You tell him that Gia is off your radar, otherwise he’ll deal with me,” Vander said.

The man nodded.

Saxon stepped closer, then noticed something. He gripped Gia’s chin and tilted it up.

“Hey, hands off—” She tried to jerk out of his hold.

“Your cheek is swelling.”

Three sets of male eyes swung to the man. He looked like he was hoping the ground would open and swallow him up.

“Did you hit her?” Saxon asked softly.

Gia cleared her throat. “Guys—”

Saxon gripped the back of the man’s shirt and started dragging him across the courtyard.

“Saxon!” She moved to follow.

Then Saxon heard her make a sound.

“Let go of me, Easton!”

Saxon delivered a hard punch to the man’s face. He groaned. Saxon felt icy, deadly calm spread over him.

Suddenly, the man leaped up and attacked. He kicked Saxon’s knee and Saxon staggered, but caught his balance.

The man launched at Saxon. Clearly, the guy had been play-acting, and wasn’t as hurt as he’d seemed.

“Do something!” Gia cried.

“Sax has it,” Easton murmured.

Dennett’s man lunged forward, and Saxon let him get a hit in. His fist rammed into Saxon’s gut. But that got the man close, and Saxon followed through with a hard jab to the face, then a chop to the back of the man’s neck. Saxon put all his strength into it.

With a groan, the man went to his knees, blood streaming down his face and soaking into his shirt.

“Hurt her again, and this will seem like just a bit of fun,” Saxon warned.

Then Saxon turned, tugging the hem of his jacket and dusting it off.

Gia was staring at him, her gaze running over his body like she was looking for injuries. Then she looked behind Saxon. Her face changed and he tensed.

Suddenly, she broke free of Easton. She was right near the construction and scooped up a hunk of rock. She threw it.

For a second, Saxon thought she was throwing it at him.

The rock sailed right past him and as he swiveled, he saw the chunk of stone hit Dennett’s guy right between the eyes.

He howled, and dropped the gun that he’d pulled from somewhere.

The Norcross brothers raced forward, and soon had the man on his belly, hands zip tied.

Saxon stared at Gia. He saw fear on her face before she quickly hid it.

“*Bastardo.*” She spat at the man on the ground.

Saxon’s lips twitched. Mrs. Norcross was Italian-American, and had clearly passed on some curses to Gia.

God, she was beautiful. A tiny Italian goddess.

“Gia.” Saxon desperately wanted to touch her, but couldn’t risk it.

He’d want more, take more.

He was pretty sure her brothers wouldn’t like him kissing the hell out of her in front of them.

“Lucky you were so damn good at softball, Gia,” Easton said.

Vander and Easton heaved the man up.

“I’ll take care of this.” Vander shot Gia an unhappy look. “You fucking deal with Willow, Gia. She’s out of your life.”

With one hand clamped on the groggy thug's arm, Vander dragged the man away.

"I'll check on Rhys," Easton said. "He's with Haven, and mom and dad, keeping an eye on things inside. I'll let everyone know that you're okay." Easton swiveled and headed up the steps back to the gala.

"I'll take you home," Saxon said.

Gia wrapped her arms around herself, her face pale. "I have my driver."

"I'll take you home," he said again.

"No." She shook her head. "I've had enough for tonight. I want to be alone."

"You need to cut Willow off, Gia."

"Don't start, Saxon."

He grabbed her arm. "Her mess could have gotten you killed. Tonight could have turned out very differently."

Gia looked sad and tired. "She's my friend."

"She's not a very good one."

"Enough. *God*. You're always questioning my judgment. Back off, Saxon. I'm not a brainless doll."

No, she was one of the smartest, savviest people he knew. But he didn't want her hurt. Willow would take advantage, like she always did.

"I never said you were brainless, but sometimes you make bad choices when it comes to those you care about."

"And you never let me forget it." Her hands balled into fists. "Quit picking on me!"

He reached out and tugged on one of her curls. He loved her thick mass of curly, dark hair.

"Contessa, if I didn't pick on you, you'd feel deprived."

She made an annoyed sound and knocked his arm away. “Leave me alone, Saxon Buchanan!”

He waited a beat. She usually got creative when she started ranting. “That all you’ve got?”

Damn, arguing with her got his blood pumping.

Her nose wrinkled. “I was hoping for something more dramatic than that, but that’s the best I’ve got. I’m tired and sore.” She stormed off, her dress flaring behind her.

Saxon shook his head. It was getting harder and harder to ignore how he felt about Gia. He’d been trying to leave her alone for years. His hands flexed.

Gia Norcross had been off-limits for a long time.

But tonight, that changed.