



The Legend of de Marco

By Abby Green

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If waitress Gracie O'Brien's first meeting with Rocco is memorable, the second is unforgettable. For when he finds her breaking in to his office he doesn't believe her innocence—so he'll keep her close until he finds the truth.

Yet it's impossible for Rocco to stay angry with the sparky redhead—she's making him feel emotions he thought he'd buried forever. And the sexual tension between them is reaching explosion point....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Abby Green worked for twelve years in the film industry. The glamour of four a.m. starts, dealing with precious egos, the mucky fields, driving rain...all became too much. After stumbling across a guide to writing romance, she took it as a sign and saw her way out, capitalising on her long-time love for romance books. Now she is very happy to sit in her nice warm house while others are out in the rain and muck! She lives and works in Dublin.

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Rocco de Marco felt contentment ease into his bones as he took in his surroundings. He was in a beautiful room in a world-renowned museum, right in the heart of cosmopolitan London. It had been designed by a famous French Art Deco designer in the 1920s and drew aficionados from all over the world to see its spectacular stained-glass windows.

The crowd was equally exclusive: high-ranking politicians, erudite commentators, A-list celebrities and billionaire philanthropists who controlled the world's stockmarkets with a flick of a finger or the raising of a brow. *He* was in the latter category, and at the age of thirty-two was surrounded by hushed and awed speculation as to how he'd achieved his untouchable status in such a short space of time.

At that moment he caught the eye of a tall, elegant, patrician blonde across the room. Her glossy hair was pulled back into a classic chignon, and her haughty blue gaze warmed under his look. He did notice, however, that not a tinge of *real* colour came into those carefully rouged cheeks. She was dressed head-to-toe in shimmering black, and he knew that she was as hard as the diamonds at her throat and ears. She smiled and raised her glass to him in a small but significant gesture.

A sense of triumph snaked through Rocco as he raised his glass in a mirror salute. The prospect of wooing the immaculately bred and oh, so proper Ms Honora Winthrop flowed like delicious nectar through his veins. His gut clenched hard. This moment was *it*. He was finally standing at the pinnacle of everything he'd fought so hard for. Never had he dared to imagine that he would be in such a position—hosting a crowd such as this, contemplating becoming an indelible part of it.

He was finally standing far enough above and away from the degradation of his young life in the slums of a poor Italian city where he'd been little more than a feral child. With no way out. He'd been spat upon in the street by his own father and he'd watched his half-sisters walk past him without a single glance at their own flesh and blood. But he *had* clawed his way out, with guts and determination and his infamous intelligence. And to this day no one knew of his past.

He put his empty glass on the tray of an attentive hovering waiter and declined another one. Keeping his wits about him was as ingrained in him as a tattoo on his skin. For a second he thought of the crude tattoo he'd borne for years, until he'd had it removed. It was one of the first things he'd done on his arrival in London almost fifteen years ago, and his skin prickled now at the uncomfortable reminder.

He shrugged it off and went to stake his claim on Ms Honora Winthrop. For a brief second a sense of claustrophobia rose but he clamped down on the sensation. He was where he wanted to be, where he'd fought to be. Composing himself, and irritated that he felt the need to do so, he found his eye snagged and caught by a lone figure. A female figure. He could see immediately that she was not half as polished or alluring as the other women in the room. Her dress was ill-fitting and her hair was a long, wild tangle of vibrant red. It

suggested that there was something untamed about her, and it called to him on some deep level.

Rocco's mind emptied of its original purpose. He couldn't look away from the enigmatic stranger.

Before he had even registered his intent he'd veered off course and was moving in her direction...

Gracie O'Brien was trying to look nonchalant. As if she was used to being a guest at glittering functions in London's most prestigious venues. When in fact she was more used to being a waitress...in far less salubrious surroundings. The kind of places where men habitually pinched her bottom and said crude things about her lack of ample assets.

She gritted her jaw unconsciously, acknowledging that in today's economic climate a hard-won yet paltry art degree didn't count for much. She had a dream. But unfortunately to finance her dream she needed to work and to eat and survive. And the only jobs available to her right now were on the menial end of the scale.

She mentally shook herself out of the uncharacteristic introspection. She could handle the menial end of the scale. She couldn't handle *this*. She was clutching her bag to her belly. *Where had Steven gone?* She'd only come tonight as a favour to him. Her mouth compressed. Tension gnawed at her in this kind of surroundings—along with the habitual anxiety she felt for Steven.

Gracie forced herself to relax. This annual charity benefit thrown by the company her brother now worked for signified a huge turning point in his life—which had to explain his moody humour and nerves lately. That was all it was. She had to stop worrying about him. They were twenty-four now, and she couldn't go on feeling responsible for him just because she'd taken on that role from as far back as she could remember, when she'd been the one who had inevitably stood between him and some bully. She still bore scars of the scrapes she'd been in, protecting her little brother—younger by twenty fraught minutes.

Their mother, before she'd abandoned them, had never let Gracie forget that her beloved son had almost died, while Gracie had had the temerity to flourish with rude health. Her mother's parting words to Gracie had been, *'I'd take him with me and leave you behind if I could—he's the one I wanted. But he's too attached to you and I can't deal with a screaming brat.'*

Gracie pushed down the surge of emotion she felt whenever she thought of that dark day, and sighed when she finally caught sight of her brother in the distance. Her heart swelled in her chest with love for him. Despite their abandonment, and so much that had happened since then, they'd always looked out for one another. Steven's inherent weakness had meant that even Gracie's strength hadn't saved him for a few dark years, but now he was back on track.

Her brother had implored her earlier, 'Please, Gracie... I really want you there with me. They're all going to have their wives with them. I need to fit in. Do you know what a coup it is to get a job with De Marco International...?'

He'd gone on to wax lyrical once again about the godlike Rocco de Marco. So much so that Gracie had relented just to make him stop rhapsodising about this person who couldn't possibly be human because he sounded so perfect.

She'd also relented because she'd seen how anxious he was, and she knew how hard he'd worked for this chance. Long hours in prison, studying and sitting his A-levels so that he could get into college as soon as he got out. The constant fear that he would relapse back into his old drugaddicted ways. But he hadn't. Finally his uniquely raw talent and intellect was being used.

He was talking to another man. To look at Steven across the room, no one would even think he was related to Gracie. Steven was tall, and as skinny as a rake. Gracie was five foot five and her almost boyish figure caused her no end of dismay. Her brother was blond, pale and blue-eyed. She was red-haired, freckled and brown-eyed, taking after their feckless Irish father. Another reason why her mother had hated her.

She grimaced now, when her dress slipped half an inch further down her chest, exposing even more of her less than impressive cleavage. She'd seen it in a charity shop earlier and hadn't tried it on. *Big mistake*, Gracie grumbled to herself. The dress was at least two sizes too big and trailed around her feet like her nan's dresses had when she'd been a child playing dress-up.

She gave up hope that Steven was coming to look for her, figuring he was too busy, and turned her back on the crowd to hitch up her dress. She faced a buffet table groaning under the weight of platters of deliciously delicate canapes and an idea struck her.

Happily engrossed in her task a few minutes later, she froze when a deep and sexily accented voice drawled from nearby, 'The food won't disappear, you know... Most of the people in this room haven't eaten in years.'

The cynical observation went over Gracie's head. She flushed guiltily, her fingers tightening around the canape she'd just wrapped in a napkin to put in her bag along with the three others she'd already carefully wrapped up. She glanced to her left, where the voice had come from, and had to lift her eyes up from a snowy-white broad chest, past a black bow tie and up to the most arrestingly gorgeous vision of masculinity she'd ever seen in her life.

The canape dropped unnoticed from her hand into her open bag. She was utterly gobsmacked and transfixed. Dark eyes glittered out from a face so savagely beautiful that Gracie felt ridiculously like bowing, or doing something equally subservient. And she was *not* a subservient person. Sexual charisma oozed from every unashamedly masculine molecule.

'I...' She couldn't even speak. Silence stretched between them.

One ebony brow went up. 'You...?'

His mouth quirked, and that made things worse because it drew her attention there, and she found herself becoming even more mesmerised by the decadently sexy shape of his lips. There was something so provocatively sensual about his mouth. As if its true purpose was for kissing and only kissing. Anything else would be a waste.

Her face flaming now, because she was not used to thinking about kissing men within seconds of meeting them, Gracie dragged her gaze back up to those black eyes. She was aware that he was tall and almost intimidatingly broad. But it was actually hard to process the reality that the rest of him was equally gorgeous. His hair was thick and black, with one lock curling on his forehead. It gave him a devilish air that only enhanced the strong features which held a slightly haughty regard.

He carried an unmistakable air of propriety, his hands in his pockets with easy insouciance, and that re...

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