



*Troy Morgan is at the top of his game in this sexy tale of love, danger, and the one woman who may finally tempt him to change his single status. . .*

Groomed for success, gorgeous Gabriella Stone is now a #1 pop and R&B sensation. She's also her controlling daddy's princess, and when she marries it will be to a man who can expand her empire, not some ordinary guy. Of course, Troy Morgan, founder of Morgan Security, is far from ordinary. Papa Stone just doesn't know it yet. . .

When it comes to guarding the country's VIPs, Troy Morgan is the man. But when he's hired to protect Gabriella, her father makes it clear he won't be her man, no matter how hot their attraction. With her future on the line, will Gabriella risk it all to go from being daddy's little girl to Troy's one and only woman?

## Chapter 1

*He's my protector,*

*and I love how he makes me feel.*

*Strong arms, charm, and sex appeal.*

*No hurt to my heart, his love heals.*

*The real deal . . .*

*He's my protector.*

"Wipe that smile off your face, fool," Troy Morgan said, pushing his top employee's feet off the desk before taking a seat. "She's not talking about you."

Alex reached over and turned down the number one song in the country. "I wish she were. This chick is the truth!"

"What? Somebody knocked Beyoncé off the throne?"

"Man, Gabriella is getting ready to be my wife."

"As soon as you meet her, huh?"

"No doubt! I've even put her on my iPad screen saver." Alex fired up his notebook. "Check this babe out."

Alex turned his iPad toward Troy, who checked out the newest pop and hip-hop sensation, Gabriella Stone, known to the world simply as Gabriella. Alex was right. The triple threat performer was definitely a stunner: doll face, hourglass shape, and creamy brown skin. Her naturally curly hair gone wild was very unlike the sleek weaves and wigs worn by her counterparts. But her sexy image and deep, raspy voice was the stuff that stars were made of.

“She’s hot, I’ll give her that,” Troy said, with a nod of his head. He turned the iPad back toward Alex.

“Man, I’ll give her whatever she wants!”

“Ha! Well, son, you might just get that chance.”

“How so?”

“It’s not a done deal yet, but we might get the security contract for the West Coast leg of her world tour.”

Alex straightened up so quickly he almost upended his chair. “Word?”

“Calm down, man. We’re probably one of at least a dozen firms that put in a bid.”

“Oh, man! I’d take five or ten years off my life to guard that girl.”

Troy chuckled. “I think you’re serious.”

“As a brain tumor. Troy, I’d give up my pay and guard her for free! Promise me, man.”

“Promise you what?”

“That if we get the contract, you’ll give the job of being her personal bodyguard to me.”

“You’ll definitely be on the detail, Alex. The job will call for at least five guards working various points around the venues. Maybe more.”

“I’m not talking about working somewhere in the building, man. I’m talking about personally guarding my girl!”

“I don’t know, dude. The last thing my company needs is a sexual harassment lawsuit, and I don’t know if you’d be able to restrain yourself.”

“You might be right about that!” Alex clicked on a link and began scrolling through images of his idol.

“Damn, this chick is fire.”

“Enough ogling, my brother. It’s time to go to work.”

“What do we have?”

“For me, a Saudi prince arriving in town by private plane. For you, your favorite rapper with the death wish.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Great. I ask for the babe and get the bonehead. When?”

“Late tonight.” Troy handed over a file. “Here’s the workup on him: itinerary, bio, you know the drill.”

“Man, how can you get me excited about possibly guarding Gabriella and then hand over the manifesto on this fool?”

“That fool is responsible for your paycheck this week, Alex. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

“You get that contract with Gabriella and I’ll be biting something, all right.”

“Ha! Too much info, man. I don’t need to hear your fantasies.”

“More like prophecy. Get that contract and give me a shot.”

“You know there’s no fraternizing with clients, right?”

“I sure do. That’s why as soon as I get that first date with baby girl, I’ll be turning in my resignation.”

“Damn! You are wide open!”

“No shame to my game, man.” Alex reached for the file on the temperamental hip-hop artist Sho’Nuff and began flipping through it. “Give me your word, Troy. If we get that contract, I get to guard her person.”

“I’ll give you my word to think about it,” Troy said, rising from the chair and heading to the door. “Until then, *as-salaam alaikum*.”

Alex laughed at Troy’s use of the Arabic greeting--which meant “peace be unto you”--one that he’d soon be using with his client. He nodded and responded, “*Alaikum as-salaam*.”

Gabriella Valencia Stone leaned against a floor-to-ceiling window, gazing dispassionately at a stunning view that ninety-eight percent of the world would never see—New York City from seventy-five stories up. Penthouse suite. Twenty-five thousand dollars a night. One of those “if you have to ask the price you can’t afford it” kinds of places. She was dressed in couture and flawless, having just finished the last interview of the day. Since her latest CD had dropped, the media frenzy had been relentless. She’d been in New York for a week—TV

shows, radio interviews, photo shoots—all leading up to the Stone Cold Sexy tour’s kickoff performance at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn. Seven shows at the nineteen-thousand-seat arena had been sold out for six months. Scalpers were getting rich off those who’d pay anything to see their favorite star. Rumor had it that tickets were selling for as high as five g’s. Apiece. Pretty heady stuff for an average twenty-five-year-old. Except for one thing. Gabriella was nobody’s average. This pop star princess had experienced such luxuries for more than half her life.

Stunning suite, startling views, stocked bar, and whatever she wanted at her fingertips--and Gabriella was straight up bored out of her gourd.

“Why are you still wearing that gown?” Carol Robbins’s voice oozed attitude as she entered the living area of the suite, carrying an iPad and an oversized bag. The cell phone that Gabriella swore was glued to Carol’s ear was in place. “I’ll call you back,” she said into the phone. She placed down the bag and threw the phone and iPad on a nearby chair. After noting that Gabriella’s stylist and dresser was nowhere in sight, she asked, “Where’s Melanie?”

“Probably meeting with the fashion editor for tomorrow’s shoot and interview.”

“Have you been standing here all this time just waiting to be unzipped? Girl, turn around,” Carol said with a shake of her head. At her former classmate, former girl group member, and current best friend turned personal assistant’s command, Gabriella dutifully complied. “I don’t know how you do it, day after day. This tour hasn’t even officially started and I’m already tired.”

“Calm down, Carol.” Gabriella slipped out of the dress and reached for the silk robe that had been retrieved from the master bedroom. “The magazine people just left. I’m surprised you didn’t see them in the hallway.”

“How was it?”

Gabriella shrugged. “Like all the others. I’ll just be glad when it’s over. You’re right in saying our schedule is a whirlwind. I’m ready to go home.”

“Okay?! You haven’t even done the first concert and you’re ready to go, too. But then again, thousands of women would give anything to be in your shoes.”

“They’d change their mind if they knew how much my feet hurt.” Carol gave her friend a look as Gabriella sat and rubbed her toes and heels. “I know I shouldn’t feel that way. I need to adjust my attitude.”

“We both do.” Carol walked over to where she’d tossed the iPad, sat in the chair, and fired it up. “I think we’ve got a couple of hours before you have to leave for dinner.”

“Please, don’t tell me the day isn’t over. I’m ready for room service, a bubble bath, and bed.”

“Sorry, chickie. You’re meeting . . .”--she paused, scrolling down the iPad screen--“Leonardo diRossi. The jeweler.”

“We’re going to have to cancel that.”

“Can’t do that, honey.” Both women turned toward the sound of Gabriella’s father and manager, Gary, coming into the room. “He’s flown over from Italy just to meet us. If we want this jewelry line designed in time for the holiday shoppers, we’ve got to meet tonight.”

“Daddy . . .”

“One hour, little bunny,” Gary said, walking over to give Gabriella a kiss on the cheek. “Then you can leave.”

Three hours later Gabriella was back in her suite and, finally, in her bed. Unfortunately insomnia had lain down with her.

“Great . . . this is just great,” she mumbled, throwing back the covers and standing. She padded barefoot into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of grapefruit juice, and picked up a copy of the tour schedule on her way back to the bedroom. Sitting against the plush backboard, she silently scanned the cities: Boston, Philly, Atlanta, Miami, a couple cities in the Midwest, and then on to the West Coast. Gabriella’s smile was bittersweet as her finger ran over the words: Los Angeles. Memories flooded her. Crazy beautiful yet conflicted thoughts about her whirlwind romance with a mega-rapper California native, hip-hop artist Marlon “Mr. President” Simmons. Her very first boyfriend and second heartbreak. The relationship that at her father’s insistence ended almost before it began.

Gabriella put down the schedule and, with a sigh, turned off the light and pulled up the covers. These were the hardest moments. When the crowds were gone and the lights had faded; when the nights were quiet and

she was alone. This was when the superstar receded and the little girl emerged. The one who in a New York minute would give up the fancy suites, international travel, and world adulation for that one thing that she wanted to experience most: true love.

