

AN EXCERPT FROM THE LAIR:

Book Two in the Sinner's Grove Series by A.B. Michaels

[The following scene takes place after the funeral of Mando Forcelli, Dani's long-estranged father.]

The reception that followed at La Tana continued what Dani was coming to think of as “the farce.” Fausta had opened up the Great Hall and transformed it into a lush garden with miniature cypress and fruit trees, and enormous coils of ivy interwoven with periwinkle, narcissus, and violets. All the mourning bouquets had quickly been transported from the church and now competed for space along with artistic displays of roses and lilies. The scent of flowers was cloyingly sweet, almost too much to bear. The atmosphere reminded Dani of the last extravagant event she had attended here. Memories of that earlier time threatened to derail her and she concentrated on banishing them from her mind. *That was then, this is now* became her silent refrain.

Had this been the wake of an average *Veronese*, friends and neighbors might have brought bowls of pasta, crisp garden vegetables, fresh-baked panini or perhaps some *torta di cioccolata*—classic, Italian style comfort food. But this was the death of a Forcelli, and that called for something else entirely. Fausta hadn't exaggerated about the menu. The executive chef of the Stella d'Italia Verona had been called in to oversee the preparation of a spectacular buffet, one that touched only briefly on local favorites before branching out into an international feast. Succulent bites of chateaubriand shared the spotlight with pigeon breast *en crouete* and *foie gras* with truffles; yubari melon balls complemented morel mushrooms and rack of lamb. Fausta had even ordered a larger-than-life ice sculpture of a dove whose base was surrounded by Beluga caviar and Oysters Rockefeller. It was over the top.

As guests made and devoured their selections, waiters passed around flutes of Campari and champagne while discreetly taking orders for more fortifying cocktails. While they ate and drank, those who wanted to climb another level in the social strata made sure to connect with those who already had. And watching over everything were dark-suited centurions with ear buds—Santo's hired guns, no doubt. They kept discreet eyes on the crowd, lending an even greater sense of consequence to the proceedings.

But peel away the veneer and the scene could have been a sales incentive gathering, or a Vegas retreat for CEOs; it had nothing to do with the loss of a father, or a brother, or a son.

Gabe had stayed near Dani throughout the ordeal, never imposing, just letting her use him however she needed to, as an attentive date, a sounding board, or simply a solid presence. Only once had he left her side, to go and speak to one of the security guards. From her vantage point she could see them shaking hands, and then embracing. Obviously, Gabe knew the goon.

“What, are you in need of some cop bonding already?” she asked when he returned. Even she didn’t like the sarcasm in her voice, but her escort ignored it.

“Oh, that was Marco Clemente,” Gabe said, sipping his champagne. “He’s a detective with the state police force, but he’s moonlighting tonight. We were *amici* way back when.” He leaned closer and whispered, his breath tickling her ear. “Believe it or not, we were occasional pen pals. But don’t tell anyone. It’s bad for our tough guy image.” He straightened and smiled at her. “We’ve stayed in touch through the years. He visited me in L.A. once, and I went to his wedding. His wife’s a sweetheart.” He drained his glass. “You know, he had a thing for Agnese, but she shined him on. Now he’s happily married with a *bambino*. Too bad for my cousin. Marco’s a good guy.”

The family had eschewed a formal receiving line, which relieved Dani because participating in that would probably have sent her over the edge. Nevertheless, a few individuals who somehow recognized her as a member of the family stopped by to give her air kisses and murmur platitudes.

“We’re sorry about your loss.”

“*Poveretto*.”

“We will miss him.”

And Dani dutifully responded with similar banalities: “*Seite molto gentili*, you are very kind.”

Dani took time to visit with her grandmother, who looked worn out and stayed only briefly before returning to her penthouse at the Stella d’Italia Verona. They made plans to visit in the next few days. Dante sought Dani out to give her a hug and shake Gabe’s hand, then apologized for having to rush off because Santo wanted to meet with him over a business matter.

“Right now?” she asked, incredulous.

Dante shrugged. “It’s ludicrous, I agree. But you know Santo. When he says jump ...”

“Yes, I know.” Dani watched her cousin stride across the room and counted herself lucky she hadn’t had to interact with their uncle for the past twelve years.

An hour later her luck ran out. Uncle Santo headed straight toward them, leaving no avenue of escape. As he drew near, Dani found herself moving closer to Gabe.

“I am sorry we have not had a chance to speak until now, dear niece,” Santo said, capturing her eyes with his. “I trust you are being well taken care of?”

Dani couldn’t help but shiver at the glitter in his eyes and the way he had said “dear niece.” It sounded almost...intimate. She glanced at Gabe before responding. “I...we...that is, yes, we are, Uncle. Um, you of course know Gabriele de la Torre, Fausta’s nephew?”

Santo shifted his gaze to Gabe and the light in his eyes dimmed. “Yes, we are acquainted.”

“More than acquainted, Signore.” Gabe said, extending his hand. “I am sorry for your loss, but I am glad to see you after so much time. In fact, I would like to make an appointment to see you in the next day or two, if your schedule permits.”

“You would like to see me.” Santo continued to assess Gabe, his tone slightly condescending. Gabe didn’t seem to notice.

“*Sissignore*, about a financial matter.”

Dani watched the two of them. Something was definitely going on here, and it didn’t seem to be connected to her or the funeral. Had helping her only been an excuse for Gabe to come to Verona on business? She chalked another mark under the “What I don’t know about Gabe” column. The man had a lot of explaining to do.

“Very well, then. I believe I will have some time tomorrow morning. You may contact my secretary at your convenience.” Santo verbally dismissed Gabe and turned again to Dani. “And you, dear, you must come to me as well...separately, of course. We too have financial matters to discuss.” His eyes didn’t leave hers and Dani felt a frisson of unease. Unconsciously she slid her arm around Gabe but didn’t dare look at him for fear he’d give their charade away.

“Yes,” she said to Santo, her chin lifting slightly. “I suspect we do.”

After a gaze that lasted too long for Dani’s comfort, Santo nodded to the two of them and walked away. He was soon surrounded by a trio of older Middle Eastern men who seemed to be introducing themselves to him.

Dani immediately turned to Gabe. “What do you mean, you have something financial to talk to Uncle Santo about?”

“What do you mean by pretending we’re a couple?” Gabe countered.

Dani immediately made to drop her arm, but Gabe quickly turned her to face him and locked his arms around her waist. He smiled slowly, in a way that, were she any other woman, would have clinched the deal right then and there. As it was, she couldn’t suppress the warmth that had begun to spread all through her at the feel of his body so close to hers. The “rightness” of it shocked her; she stilled to soak in the feeling and barely noticed that he had gone still as well, the teasing look in his eye replaced with something much more intense. Something that made her uneasy but in a totally different, totally wicked way. She blinked to rid herself of the feeling and took a deep breath to will herself back to sensibility.

“I...I’m sorry,” she said, pushing against him slightly. “It must be the emotion, I guess. I shouldn’t use you like that.”

Gabe released his hold but kept one hand resting lightly on her hip as he bent down to her. “I’m not complaining,” he whispered. “You may use me however you want, whenever you want, bella. I am yours. Completely.”