



GRAPHIC LIAISONS

...Toni watched him smooth a hand along the curves of the brass-toned instrument, his fingers lingering over the rounded pearl keys. Her breath caught in her throat. His gentle care of the sax was that of a lover, and she felt a warm tingle begin in her stomach. *Tender hands.* With seeming reverence, he lifted the glittering golden instrument.

Toni's gaze was riveted as she watched him position the mouthpiece between his sensual lips, wetting the reed and testing the pitch. Her breathing quickened at the remembered feel of those lips on hers, the intimacy of his tongue as he claimed her.

She never expected to find watching a musician so sensual. He ran a short scale, limbering up his fingers, then adjusted the mouthpiece slightly. And she was mesmerized as his long fingers brushed across the keys. She shivered as she felt their ghostly touch seem to echo along her spine. Leaning toward Joey, Sal whispered to him, causing Joey to laugh and nod his head.

Sal again put the sax to his lips, turned away from the tables and nodded to Joey, who executed an introductory scale. As Sal began to play, the crisp purity of the notes eased along Toni's senses, sheathing her in the lyrical symmetry of his skillful improvisation...

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GRAPHIC LIAISONS

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*For my husband,
my own musical inspiration
and creative muse.
I wouldn't have reached this
point without him.*

CHAPTER 1

Damn, she's pretty. Sal rested against the wall of the large, domed exhibition hall and narrowed his gaze as she dipped forward to examine the illustrations. *Of all places to run into her.* During the last six months he'd attempted to keep his distance, and discovered how damned difficult it was when two people worked in the same office.

As he watched, she raised a slender hand to anchor an errant red-gold curl behind her ear. The urge consumed him to discover, firsthand, if the texture of her hair would be as silky as it appeared. He envisioned his hands wrapped within its luxuriant mass as he pulled her closer and inhaled her essence. Would she carry the scent of a summer meadow? Lush and fragrant, wild and sweet? Sal struggled to end that dangerous tangent of thought.

Toni Fallon. Most of the women of his acquaintance were forgettable after the first five minutes. They lingered as mere colorless shadows, blurred one to the other, none distinguishable, nor

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memorable.

Toni's image alone floated free—invoking a vibrant rainbow of sensations, disturbing, ethereal. His thoughts often turned to her, and his gaze sought her image at odd times during the day, unwillingly attracted to her delicate, tranquil allure. In some strange way her presence soothed him. His firm resolve to retain sentimental distance in his personal relationships began to disintegrate the moment he'd glimpsed her in the convenience store all those months ago.

The present reasserted itself as a golden sunbeam burst through the tall window of the hall and trapped her in its aura, as though undeniably lured to her. Just as he was.

Shimmering red-gold waves cascaded past her shoulders, accenting the flow of high, delicate cheek bones, and a slender nose upturned at the tip. It was a kissable nose. And he wanted to be the one doing the kissing. The faded jeans blended against and caressed her hips. And her ass. Damn, talk about finely-sculpted. He'd fantasized how it would feel to have those sweet, curvy legs gripping him as he stroked inside her velvet depths. His cock hardened at the taboo thought. He should leave, walk out and not look back. Unfortunately, this time, he didn't think he could do it.

The bulk of her cropped cable-knit sweater hid the rest of what he knew from watching her every day were mouth-watering curves. He hungered to taste her; every inch of her warm, glowing skin would deserve special attention. She was a craving he'd hoped to have mastered. Office etiquette required it, demanded it. In all honesty, he'd tried to conquer his passion for her.

But today he'd come to the conclusion certain edicts were designed to be broken. Being Bronx born and bred taught him the fragility of rule boundaries long ago. He lived his life by the rule of breaking rules. He had a feeling another was about to hit the boneyard.

He wasn't one to wax poetic, even if he was a writer by profession.

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But there were things about her that defied concrete, colorless definition. Like the fact the hue of the sweater matched her sky-inspired eyes, the tint indelibly imprinted in his memory. They were a cloudless winter sky intensifying to sunset indigo at their outermost rims. They reminded him of shooting stars captured at a perfect moment of mid-motion. On more than one occasion he'd wanted to drown in their depths.

His sexual fantasies surged at the most hellish times, being particularly uncomfortable as he attempted to conduct business meetings. Yet, knowing her effect on him, he couldn't keep his gaze away from those amazing blue orbs. He would picture how the color would alter in the heat of passion as he entered her slowly, his hard shaft buried deep in her yielding soft heat, the blush of roses on her skin. His body tightened painfully and tingled at the urge he felt to turn that illusion to reality.

Damn, it's hot in here. He yanked off his black leather jacket and slung it over his shoulder. His feet were moving, and he knew he was going to be fucked and not in the pleasurable way he envisioned, as better judgment and common sense fled out the door of the museum, leaving him exposed. There was only so much self-control a man could be expected to exert.

Blame it on the sunbeam, the perfect frame for a fairy-girl, or the fact this wasn't the office, and his safeguards were down. The warning lights weren't flashing. Whatever the reason, he knew the steps he took were probably going to change the direction of his life—one way or the other.

* * *

"If it isn't Toni Fallon, Graphic Artist Extraordinaire," a deep voice drawled behind her.

Fluttering panic gripped her stomach. She hoped the flare of heat flooding her cheeks would be attributed to the late afternoon warmth of

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the sun's rays.

No one could mistake the distinctive deep timber of Sal Agüero's voice, her boss at *Calisto Magazine*. And the man she'd lusted after for the last six months.

She shifted to meet his dark coffee-colored gaze. What he definitely defined was a whole bowl full of dark, decadent chocolate. Raven-colored hair and the ever-present dusting of whiskers shadowing his solid jaw contributed to the cocky, roguish look women lusted after. He oozed sinful and it branded him a sensual dream far removed from her safe, narrow sphere.

"Sal Agüero, Senior Editor of that most controversial magazine, *Calisto*. Fancy meeting you here. I wouldn't have imagined this to be your usual hunting ground." *Stay cool*, she reminded herself. *Don't let him see how darned hot you are for him. Or that lately the thought of him in your bed keeps you from sleeping most nights.* Toni wanted to glance away, certain he'd see exactly those thoughts, but for some reason she couldn't stop staring at him.

Amusement glinted in his eyes, flashing copper lights, and one of his dark eyebrows arched. "Really? I would have said the same for you." He turned to glance at the exhibit. "Most of the women I know wouldn't find this particularly entertaining. They'd prefer dancing the night away and painting the town red."

"Ah, well...the women of *your* acquaintance probably aren't interested in the art exhibition or its impact on society. I would guess they'd be more interested in *your* exhibition and—uhm—impact on them."

The corner of his very sensual mouth curved upward and a chuckle erupted from deep in his throat. Such a sexy sound, like fine-grained white sand beneath her bare feet, gritty and warm. Her body heated in response. He looked younger, more boyish when he smiled...even more charming. She felt an answering dampness pool between her

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thighs. That seemed to be an ever present calamity when he was close by.

Leaning back on his heels, he shook his head. "Point to you, Ms. Fallon. What brings you here?"

"Art," she answered succinctly. "I *am* an artist after all. You do remember I'm employed in that capacity, right?"

"Another point for you. And a quick mind. I like that."

Toni again sensed heat rising to her cheeks at the compliment. She tried to divert the conversation. "Anyway, I'm very interested in the earlier magazine illustrations. Actually, I have a small collection of my own. It kind of grounds me, keeps me in touch with the roots of my profession, if you know what I mean."

"I understand what you're saying. This exhibition showcases the forerunner of magazines like *Calisto*. Or at least what I envision for it."

Strange emotions flickered inside her in the knowledge they shared common ground, common interests. It caught her unaware. Desires she fought to control pounded at the gate she refused to open. Taking a deep breath, she studied him for a moment, attempting to quell her fascination for this man. "You're very dedicated to its success, aren't you?"

"*Calisto*? Yes, I guess I am."

In her estimation, he illustrated contradiction. The passion and determination he exhibited when presenting the content he demanded for inclusion in each issue was magnetic. Shoddy research was never tolerated. More than one employee had been fired who didn't rise to his standards, and he accepted no excuse for lazy reporting. He hired the best and expected them to outdistance the ordinary.

She was also aware that same passion flooded his personal life—heard the gossip regarding his sexual liaisons, short though they usually tended to be. Was thankful she wasn't the type to engage his interest in that arena. At least she thought she was thankful. With a certainty, sex

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with Sal Agüero would be like plunging into a sensual vortex, unable to distinguish up from down, or dark from light.

Yet she also was aware a different side existed which he didn't allow people to see. At a point when she'd been abandoned by her boyfriend, left penniless and without a job, Sal had strode into her life and offered her hope. She'd been the recipient of a generous spirit he kept well hidden, and it colored her perception of him differently than what others saw. Probably not a good idea, because it made her want to know more about him. And that could be dangerous.

A measure of comfort and security was now a part of her life. Her position at *Calisto* was important to her livelihood, and she wasn't willing to jeopardize that sense of safety. Since her parents' deaths, her safeguards had been laid low. Chuck destroyed what remaining defenses were left by using her and then leaving her when he found better pastures.

Sal's job offer had guided her back to solid ground. She'd closed herself off from passion and had at last found her way to a sense of equilibrium. There was no way she would jeopardize what she'd achieved over the last six months. Not even for Sal Agüero.

She hoped.

Glancing away, she studied the illustrations displayed. "You know, not everyone considered *Everybody's Magazine* the best in investigative reporting. Some considered it muckraking. What do you think? What do you see happening with *Calisto*?"

She turned and challenged his gaze, which now seemed to hold a flare of surprise, as well as a hint of respect. "You've done your homework. I'm impressed. The easy road would be tabloid journalism—it sells, the public eats it up. But that's not what I want. Honest, in-depth investigative reporting is what I envision. Supported by irrefutable, verified facts. It's also why I've beefed up our research team. I want every statement we print checked and double-checked for

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accuracy before it goes to print.” He stopped speaking and laughed, shaking his head. “How’d you do it?”

“Do what?” she blinked and mumbled. He’d mesmerized her by the impassioned intensity of his words. It made her feel like a star-struck schoolgirl.

“Get me to tell you more about what I want for *Calisto* than I’ve even expressed to the owners. Or anyone else for that matter.”

She shrugged, trying to make light of the connection she felt to him. “I expect you don’t talk to the right people.”

“Or maybe they don’t want to listen,” he countered.

“Maybe you need to change your friends.” Ignoring her fervent wish to be closer than a friend, she looked down at her watch. “I have to be going, it’s getting late.”

She turned away, not wanting to meet his gaze, acknowledging silently her self-control wasn’t going to last much longer. Sal placed a hand on her arm, and she halted, glancing up.

“Wait. Have dinner with me.” His hot, intense stare and firm grasp spiraled through her.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” She looked away, wishing more than anything she could accept, not wanting him to see it in her eyes. He was too tempting. “We work together. Or rather, you employ me.”

“I’m not your supervisor.”

She wished he hadn’t pointed that out. “Still, I don’t think it would be wise. Let’s be honest. You’re not known for long-term relationships, and I’m no good at one-night stands.”

“So, you think you have me pegged, is that it? I didn’t think you were the type to listen to gossip. Apparently, you are.”

“Whether or not I listen to gossip isn’t the point, is it? The fact is gossip, truth or not, is such a destructive force. Maybe you can let it glide off your back, but me?” She shook her head. “I don’t think my

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back's solid enough to do that. I'd absorb every little bit, and I can't afford it. I'm sorry." She had to get out of there before he convinced her to change her mind. Right now it felt like her barriers were resting in quicksand, and her instinct for self-preservation wasn't doing its job.

His hand slid down her arm and his warm touch left her tingling, eager for more. The electric sizzle of his gaze pierced her, and she badly yearned to give in and see where it led—to take that chance.

"You're right, of course." He removed his hand and stepped away from her. All expression left his eyes, changing the look to a cool, emotionless regard. It was a look that probably earned him the nickname of "Hard-Hearted Sal," and it left her with an odd, cold feeling of loneliness. "I wouldn't want to cause you any embarrassment. The magazine can't afford to lose an artist of your caliber, and I wouldn't want to jeopardize that." He offered her a brief smile, that didn't reach his eyes. "Their gain, my loss." He pivoted and walked away without a backward glance.

Stop him! Tell him you've changed your mind. Why did she feel like crying or racing after him? *Use your head.* Any liaison other than professional would endanger everything she'd worked so hard to achieve. Would it be worth it?

But knowing she'd done the right thing didn't seem to help. Why did it feel like she'd just been given the opportunity to make the most important decision in her life, and she'd blown it? For just a fleeting moment, it felt like her soul had recognized his, and then it was gone, leaving an ache behind. *Get real, Toni. The man doesn't have the word commitment in his vocabulary.*

It was for the best, she tried to convince herself. Why was it she felt more alone now than when Chuck abandoned her all those months ago?

CHAPTER 2

When Toni arrived at her desk on the Monday following her conversation with Sal, she was certain he'd make some mention of their meeting on Saturday. When he made no move to talk to her, she felt somehow deflated. *It's for the best*, she kept reminding herself, and tried to forget how close she'd come to realizing her fantasies.

But on Thursday, when she turned on her computer, the first email awaiting her attention was from Sal Aguero. Her heart stopped. Why would he contact her directly? She reported to her department head, and project requirements were communicated through that channel. In trepidation, she opened the email.

What do you think of Thomas Nast?

She should have known. He was a man with a reputation for getting what he went after. Contrary emotions warred inside her. Tremors erupted and spiraled. Why did he continue to pursue her? Beautiful women lined up demanding his attention. She thought he'd given up.

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Hoped he had.

Sort of.

If only her erotic dreams would leave her in peace.

She gave him credit, he aimed for the jugular when he wanted something. Thomas Nast, recognized as one of the greatest political cartoonist in U.S. history, had always intrigued her. Several copies of his illustrations were part of her own personal collection. How had he known? What exactly was he up to?

Thoughts tumbled against each other. She could ignore the email. Pretend it didn't exist. Rubbing her hands along her thighs, she stared at the screen, knowing the message wouldn't disappear. It taunted her.

Decide. Stop waffling, you know what you want. But did she? What she knew was she lusted. Nothing more, nothing less. And that kind of heat didn't last. A match once lit, bursting into fierce flame, was soon extinguished, leaving cold ash in its wake. Still, she remembered that inner flare of recognition when they spoke at the museum. Was it only lust?

Raising her hands from her lap, she held them a scant breath above the keyboard in a long moment of indecision. This was a second chance. It wasn't likely she'd be offered a third. With trembling purpose, she lowered her hands to the keys.

Why? she typed and hit the send button. Yanking her hands away as if burned, she sank back in her chair and waited. This wasn't flowers, or cinnamon rolls, effortlessly discounted gifts offered with little thought. No, Sal's tactic was more subtle. Awareness of where her actions could lead caused her stomach to churn.

Still, whatever his game, it could make her the brunt of nasty office gossip, and she didn't think she could deal with the resulting aftermath. She also reminded herself, it could jeopardize her job; compromise the security she'd worked so hard to attain. A situation she wanted to avoid.

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His response was immediate. *I have tickets to a lecture and exhibition on Thomas Nast. Hard to come by. Interested?* So nonchalant, no pressure, just a friendly inquiry. Boy, was he slick or what? And by email. Was he protecting her or himself? The words on the screen burned in her brain.

Her mouth watered at the chance to attend a lecture on Nast's work. She'd known about the lecture, but by the time she'd had a chance to call, it was sold out. The added inducement of Sal's company made it an irresistible combination.

Was it worth the risk? Why did she feel the first nail was about to be hammered into her coffin? Shivery anticipation raced along her spine. In surprise, she realized the knowledge of the forbidden personal contact amplified her desire. The culmination of months of frustration delivered her to the only possible conclusion.

Where and when? What's it going to cost me? she typed quickly, sending the message before she changed her mind. She knew the price of her response would be higher than she could afford, but she couldn't resist.

* * *

His vow to ignore the attraction for her lasted all of twenty-four hours. By Sunday night he couldn't find it in himself to disregard the suffocating, unconsummated need to be with her. To know her, and not solely in the Biblical sense.

Was it his instinctual predatory male ego that rose to some hidden agenda? Up until recently the concentrated focal point of his life was to advance his career—women and the whole emotional roller coaster involved in any kind of committed relationship—didn't figure into the equation. At least not in any prominent way.

Constantly driven to succeed in a tough, unforgiving business, and using the ability to rein in his emotions to get the job done, brought him to where he was today. At the top of his profession. It was satisfying,

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everything he wanted. Until fate dropped Toni Fallon into his path.

Where his career once filled all the important facets of his life, now it wasn't enough. He was restless, aware of an emptiness which hadn't been evident before. It wasn't difficult to identify the problem. She stared him in the face every day.

By Tuesday, he was fed up watching what seemed like every other male in the damned office sidle up to her desk.

Again.

Still.

For weeks he'd observed the traditional mating game; gifts appearing on her desk, like ancient offerings to the goddesses, attempting to woo her, declaring their interest. Every time another male approached her, his breathing halted somewhere in the vicinity of his gut, while he speculated on their chances of success. As he kicked himself for not staking a claim himself.

When he'd first encountered her, she'd been a sad-eyed, lost waif. Intuition suggested she was on the rebound from a broken relationship, and he'd kept his distance. He'd watched her metamorphose from the hungry, desperate woman he'd first met to someone with spirit and a quiet self-confidence, determined to succeed. Her eyes were now clear, a hint of humor and feisty determination residing at the fringe. The combination only made his desire for her burn fiercer.

His role as observer had become tedious. Silently, he thanked the powers that be every time he saw her turn down another would-be suitor. He waited with baited breath as with a pretty smile, and gentle laugh, she thanked and then sent them on their way empty-handed. Then, he could breath again.

He'd always known it would take more than the obvious to woo a fey creature like Toni. And, by God, he promised himself, he'd be the one making the offer she wouldn't refuse.

Where and when? What's it going to cost me? Sal felt the grin on

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his face spread ear to ear as he read Toni's response.

Gotcha! He leaned back in his chair, hands cupped behind his head, as he savored the sweet taste of success.

His intentions of staying away from her were honest. But each day that passed his control slipped further. Finally, it developed into an obsession to discover the one undeniable temptation he could dangle before her which would result in a change of heart. And damn if he didn't find it. Those tickets cost a small fortune, but in his estimation, were well worth the money.

Was it the thrill of the chase? The excitement of finding just the right bait to get her to agree to see him socially? Hell if he knew, but he couldn't leave it alone. Political correctness stayed his hand far too long, and it ate at him to the point he finally determined to do something about it before he imploded.

Nast's work interested him, so it was no great hardship. As a matter of fact, it would be a unique experience. To hold an intelligent conversation with a beautiful woman would be a nice change. The women he dated generally had no other interest than seeing how fast they could get him into bed and how well he could fulfill their sexual fantasies. Their sophisticated, brittle appeal had begun to wane.

Friday night. Seven o'clock. Lecture first, dinner with me as payment. I'll pick you up. Agreed? He sent the message and waited.

He didn't need to wait long.

This is against my better judgment, but okay. Sal chuckled. In his mind, he could hear her grumbling. He stood and walked to the door of his office. Looking across the expanse of bustling people on deadline, his gaze caught and held hers through the glass separation as she glanced up. Quickly, she turned away, but not before he caught the little smile that played at the corner of her lips. With a jaunty pivot, he walked back into his office.

Damn, he was in a good mood. Not even the glitch with this

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month's cover story could dampen his spirits.

* * *

Why had she ever agreed to go out with him? Toni asked herself for the hundredth time as she dragged out and flung aside at least seven different outfits, unable to choose. Either they were too business-like, too sexy, too long, too short, and on and on. The real problem being, she was nervous at the thought of spending time alone with him. Finally she settled on a simple brown, long-sleeved, velvet dress with a flared skirt that dropped to mid-thigh. The neckline dipped, but not daringly so. A pair of tan sandal-styled shoes, with three-inch heels complemented the dress.

As she studied the effect critically in the mirror one last time, the door chime startled her. She glanced at the wall clock, noting it was seven o'clock on the dot. Smoothing her hands down the sides of the soft material, she left the bedroom and walked along the entry way to the door.

When she opened it, her first thought was, *no wonder women swooned at his feet*. Dressed in black, he exuded dangerous, carnal attraction.

A turtleneck sweater hugged and framed his dark, rugged good looks, stretching across a broad chest; relaxed trousers hinted at the muscular power they clothed, and a leather sports coat sheathed solid, firm shoulders. She forgot to breathe, and when she finally inhaled for lack of oxygen, his scent overpowered her in a mix of sandalwood and clean fresh air. It traveled through her, reaching down into regions best ignored.

As good as he looked clothed, she yearned to explore what was hidden beneath. The sensual animal now standing before her was not the same polite, no-nonsense editor she confronted daily at the magazine. Thank God for small favors.

His dark gaze traveled over her, like a blazing torch, igniting a path

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through her body. “You look lovely. Are you ready?”

Unable to find her voice, she nodded, and then shook her head. “I don’t think so,” her voice a mere croak.

He quirked an eyebrow and laughed, which devastated her. Add the flash of that perfect white smile, how could anyone tell him no? Again she inhaled, and flattened a palm against her queasy stomach. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Grabbing a shawl from a closet near the door, she turned the lights off, stepped into the hallway, and closed the door.

She studied his strong profile as they waited for the arrival of the elevator. “You realize you’re testing my self-control?”

He offered her a wry sideways grin as the doors slid open and he guided her inside. “I certainly hope so. You’ve been a sore trial to mine for the last six months.”

She wouldn’t touch that remark if her life depended on it, knowing it would lead into waters best left uncharted.

The hour-long drive to their destination was uneventful. With a clear sky and minimal traffic, it looked to be a beautiful evening.

Walking into the lecture hall on the arm of the most attractive male present, Toni felt every female’s attention immediately riveted to them. Heated glances coveted Sal and hurled daggers at her. It was a strange feeling, knowing she was the envy of every female in the room. It shouldn’t have been unexpected, but it was uncomfortable. She met the piercing glare of one statuesque green-eyed, redhead and felt hot needles of jealousy pierce her skin.

As they moved to take their seats, Sal cupped her elbow and his firm, but light grip melted her bones. “I’m not sure I’m going to get out of here unscathed, you know,” she murmured as they sat in the burgundy cushioned seats.

“What do you mean?”

Apparently, he was used to being the recipient of appreciative

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glances. But the envious stares she received made her feel out of her depth. “Every woman in this place,” she whispered back, “would like to see me dead at your feet right now. That’s only a guess, of course.”

He smiled as he pulled her hand from her lap and threaded his fingers through hers in a possessive fashion. “I think you’ve missed the male stares,” he whispered back. “I’m accompanying the most desirable woman in here. Their gazes may rove, but mine doesn’t.”

He raised their entwined hands to his mouth and grazed along her knuckles with his lips. His dark scrutiny never wavered and she saw a devilish golden twinkle. A shiver raced down her spine. “You’re lethal, do you know that?”

“I hope so,” he responded. “But only to you.” Lowering their hands back to the armrest, he settled back in his seat as the presenter for the evening stepped to the podium.

Toni wasn’t sure how she was going to concentrate on the lecture. Her body was tuned to the electricity generated by their clasped hands, and her mind centered on what it would feel like to be kissed by him.

He’d certainly taken her mind off all the glares she’d received since entering the auditorium. The fact she never saw his focus waver and his attention remained constant, made her feel protected and cared for. The sensation was unique—and dangerous. With a sigh, she settled back in her seat to listen to the speaker.

Once the lecture concluded, they moved into the reception area where Nast’s work was displayed. Sal stepped away to procure drinks, and as she waited, she studied the familiar renditions of the G.O.P. Elephant and Democratic Donkey, as well as the infamous Santa Claus.

Sal returned to her side and handed her a glass of white wine. She took a sip to cool her dry throat. “Do you think he had any inkling of the impact he would make with his illustrations?” she mused aloud.

“Do any of us ever know that? We just do what calls to us and whatever comes from that is meant to be, I guess. Sometimes, it just

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snowballs out of control without our even realizing it.”

Toni turned her head to study him. “How very philosophical of you. I’m not sure if I’m surprised or not.”

“Well, thanks. Is that a nice way of saying you considered me shallow before this?”

She laughed. “I’m sorry, I certainly didn’t mean it to come out like that. I guess I’m not really sure what I meant. I just think there’s more to you than what you let people see.”

Those deep brown eyes of his studied her intently. He brushed a stray lock of her hair behind her ear. “I think you’re dangerous. No, maybe I should rephrase that.” He lowered his head until she felt the heat of his lips nuzzle the curve of her ear. “Make that dangerously sexy.” His tone had lowered to an intimate husky whisper meant for her alone, then he pulled back before she could respond.

She took a long sip of her wine for courage. Wanted to say something, but couldn’t think of a good retort at the moment.

His eyes glittered with amusement, and he flashed that killer grin. “What? No comeback? I’m flattered I’ve rendered you mute.” He took the glass from her unresisting hand and set it on a side table, along with his own. “Had enough of Nast? I think it’s time for dinner.”

She managed to recover from her dazed state. “Where are we going?”

“A small place I know near the beach. Domenico’s. I hope you like Italian food.”

Jitters overtook her and her heart thumped. As though she’d be able to eat anything, but she’d try to maintain appearances. “Yes, I do.”

At the car, he halted her, and gently turned her to face him. “There’s something I need to do first.”

She looked up at him in inquiry. “What’s that?”

Lowering his head, his mouth hovered infinitesimally above her own. “This,” and his firm lips slanted over hers. Her limbs shifted in

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quivering response as he teased and coaxed, until she parted her lips and his tongue seduced its way into her moist depths. With firm pressure he branded her and captured her breath. Enfolding her in his arms, he molded her body to his. She felt his arousal press against her, hard and urgent. Molten heat seeped from her center, need for his touch an aching throb.

When he raised his head, his dark perusal seared her, and held her immovable. “Just as sweet as I expected,” he murmured. “I couldn’t let another second go by without tasting you. For six months I’ve wanted to do that.”

Toni released her breath on a shuddering sigh, collapsing against him, his scent anchoring her, offering safe haven from her turbulent emotions. That kiss had rocked her world, sending it twirling out of control. Her desire flared beyond fierce, requiring all her strength to restrain it.

“Wow,” was all she could manage to utter as she tilted her head to look at him.

The corners of his mouth curved upwards. He brushed a hand over her hair. “I take it that means you liked it, too.”

Like was not a word she would have used to describe that kiss. Still holding her, he turned, opened the car door, and settled her into the seat.

Man, was she in over her head or what? She’d never experienced a kiss like that, one that shattered every bone in her body right down to her toes.

Spending time with him was going to do major damage to her heart, she could see it coming. But like an out-of-control freight train, she didn’t see a way to avoid the collision. Set on a course to crash and burn, she was unsurprised to discover she actually anticipated the impending explosion.

CHAPTER 3

Domenico's was an intimate restaurant located near the beach.

A dark, robust man with a wide smile on his face rushed to greet them as they walked in. "Hey, Sal! Good to see you." He grabbed Sal's hand, and yanked him into an engulfing bear hug, almost lifting Sal from the floor. "*Dannare, amico*, it's been too long."

Sal laughed and returned the enthusiastic grip. Eventually pulling away, he stepped back and swung to face Toni. "Dom, I want you to meet Toni Fallon. Toni, this is my cousin, Dominick Brizano."

"*La signorina bella*, Sal. *Benvenuto, Signorina* Fallon. Welcome." He clasped her hand and raised it to his lips in a gallant gesture. "*Che bellezza*." Looking over at Sal, he winked. "*Speciale quella?*"

A crooked smile tugged at the corner of Sal's lips. His eyes darkened as his gaze met Toni's. "*Davvero, si*," he murmured.

Toni blushed and looked away, uncomfortable with the knowledge she was the subject of their bantering exchange. Dom chuckled,

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released her hand, and turned back to Sal. “We have embarrassed her, *cugino*. Follow me, I’ve a table especially for you.”

Once settled, Dom left them, only to return with two wine glasses and a bottle of wine. “The *speciale* tonight is the fresh stuffed trout. Superb. I highly recommend it. And for dessert, our tiramisú cannot be surpassed.”

“What do you think?” Sal queried Toni. “Would you like to try the trout?”

“That sounds delicious.” Not being one for extremely exotic food, the trout seemed a safe selection to her.

“Excellent choice. Gina will bring your salads shortly.” With a flourish, he tipped the bottle of wine, poured the sparkling golden liquid into the wine glasses, then set the bottle on the table. “This label is from my private stock. It is always cause for celebration when Sal stops by.” Dom winked at Toni. “Enjoy your meal.” He then hurried away to greet two new customers who’d stepped through the door.

Toni stole a moment to study her surroundings. The room offered a very intimate atmosphere with possibly fifteen tables placed strategically throughout the dining area. The lighting was low and a candle and fresh flowers decorated each table. On a small stage at the opposite end of the room stood an upright piano. Adding to the bistro-styled ambiance, the piano player rendered a lazy, jazz-style number.

Toni relaxed back and sipped at her wine, tension oozing away in the soothing, intimate setting. “This is very nice. Thank you for bringing me. I like your cousin.”

“Dom’s a good guy. We grew up in the same neighborhood and I try to stop in when I can.”

“From the sounds of it, that’s not often.”

“Yeah, well, I keep pretty busy. The job demands a lot of my attention, so I don’t have much time for leisurely dinners like this.”

Images of the woman his name was constantly linked with in the

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newspapers flashed to mind. She couldn't help being curious whether Sal brought them here. An unexpected wave of territorial possessiveness seethed inside her. *Where did that surface from?* She fought its ugly grip, unwilling to allow supposition about the past tinge her pleasure of the present. It wasn't her concern anyway, she reminded herself. This was supposed to be a nice evening between friends. Just friends.

And who are you trying to kid? a little voice whispered. She ignored it.

"I'm glad you coerced me into coming with you tonight."

Sal laughed. "Coerced? I'd never do such a thing."

"Oh, right. But I'm curious. How did you know Nast would entice me to ignore my own rules?"

"An educated guess on my part." He reached across the table to clasp her hand. "And I'm glad it did. I've always thought some rules were made to be broken."

Looking down at his darkly bronzed fingers linked with hers, she was honest enough to admit she was glad as well. She also acknowledged the more time she spent in his company—the more she learned about him—the harder it was going to be when she had to tell him she couldn't continue to see him. Why did the thought of that ache so badly?

She needed to distance herself from these overwhelming feelings of attraction. To look at the relationship rationally. Their server arrived with salads and for the present, the emotional tug-of-war taking place inside her halted.

Dinner was delicious, leisurely and pleasant. As they were enjoying their espresso, Dom returned to their table. "Everything was satisfactory?"

Toni inhaled deeply and patted her stomach. "It was all wonderful. I can't remember the last time I ate such an excellent meal. I know I've

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eaten way too much.”

“*Buono*. I’m glad you liked it.” He turned to Sal. “So, Sal, when was the last time you picked up a sax?”

Sal held up his hands as if to ward Dom off. “Oh, no. You’re not roping me into that.”

“But, Sal, that’s a very lonely saxophone setting on that stand. It needs some warming up. And you’re just the person to do it.”

“You play saxophone?” The man had so many hidden talents. What would she discover next?

“A little,” he responded in exaggerated understatement.

“A little?” She look up to Dom. “Do you agree with that assessment?”

“Help me encourage him to give us a tune and hear for yourself. You mean he didn’t mention it?”

Sal sank back in his chair. “Dom, stop getting me into hot water.”

“Well then, get up and play a tune. No one beats the sound you get out of that reed and you know it. Joey can follow you on the piano. Come on, just one song.” Dom pleaded with a hopeful puppy dog look on his face.

“I’d like to hear you play. Please,” Toni encouraged him softly.

Finally, he held up both hands. “Okay, just one song. It’s been a while, so don’t expect any miracles.” He rose and walked across the room to the small stage.

Toni watched him smooth a hand along the curves of the brass-toned instrument, his fingers lingering over the rounded pearl keys. Her breath caught in her throat. His gentle care of the sax was that of a lover, and she felt a warm tingle begin in her stomach. *Tender hands*. With seeming reverence, he lifted the glittering golden instrument.

Toni’s gaze was riveted as she watched him position the mouthpiece between his sensual lips, wetting the reed and testing the pitch. Her breathing quickened at the remembered feel of those lips on

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hers, the intimacy of his tongue as he claimed her.

She never expected to find watching a musician so sensual. He ran a short scale, limbering up his fingers, then adjusted the mouthpiece slightly. And she was mesmerized as his long fingers brushed across the keys. She shivered as she felt their ghostly touch seem to echo along her spine. Leaning toward Joey, Sal whispered to him, causing Joey to laugh and nod his head.

Sal again put the sax to his lips, turned away from the tables and nodded to Joey, who executed an introductory scale. As Sal began to play, the crisp purity of the notes eased along Toni's senses, sheathing her in the lyrical symmetry of his skillful improvisation.

He closed his eyes, obviously absorbed in the soulful cadence of the melody. Everyone in the room paused to listen to the jazzy, sensual rendition of "I Only Have Eyes for You." Suddenly, Sal swiveled around, opened his eyes and pinned her beneath his ebony, fathomless gaze. She was enthralled, unable to look away, enraptured, as the low, lazy rhythm flowed over her. He seduced her, without laying a hand on her. Her breasts swelled, and her nipples tightened painfully, wanting the touch of the fingers that rippled along the pearlized keys, stroking her.

Her eyes must have given her away, because she saw a knowing, earthy look flicker in his onyx gaze. Seemingly satisfied, he closed his eyes and she watched his fingers glide over the keys, sure of their path, caressing in their touch, as was the tone of the music. Would he play her as expertly?

The simple character of the tune carried an unexpected deeply resonant texture, as he weaved a rapturous spell over her body. It was with a sense of aching loss, the tune wound to silence, yet still its vibrations reverberated through her.

In a sensual haze, she waited as he carefully replaced the instrument on the stand, the sound of the applause in the room muffled in her

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mind, and he walked toward her. No man should be that sexy, or talented, she mused.

He held out his hand, and as if wrapped in a dream, she stood and clasped it, still captured in his sensual spell. He looked at Dom, smiled and saluted. Dom returned the gesture of goodbye. Sal wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she couldn't help but lean into him. "I think a walk on the beach. What do you think?"

She stared down at her feet. "I don't think these shoes will be much good."

"I can take care of that."

Once outside the restaurant, he hunched down. He lifted one foot, and she instinctively reached out, balancing herself against hard, unyielding shoulders, muscles contracting beneath her fingers. His warm hands stroked the length of her calf, transmitting pulsing shocks through her system, before he released her foot from the shoe. He cupped each foot for long moments, massaging the arch, before lowering it back to the ground. Straightening, he stuffed the shoes into the pocket of his jacket. His dusky gaze met hers. "There, all better. Now, about that walk."

Pulling her into the curve of his hard body, they stepped onto the dark, deserted beach. Their only company were the deserted picnic tables scattered at intervals as a full moon lit their path. A tense awareness radiated throughout Toni's body. She definitely needed the cool breeze of the ocean air to dampen the fire raging inside her.

"You keep a lot hidden don't you, Sal? I would never have guessed you were an accomplished musician."

"I wouldn't say accomplished. I played in high school and college. It kept me out of trouble. Some friends and I formed a jazz band, played a few weddings, things like that. It was never anything serious."

She stopped and faced him. "But you play beautifully, you have a gift. It was so rich and perfect. You'd rival Kenny G in my book."

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“That’s nice of you to say, but it really is just a hobby.”

The lights of the restaurant had disappeared, and the sounds of the deserted shore swirled over them. “Thanks for coming with me tonight.” His fingers swept back several strands of her hair. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips against hers, then leaned away, his dark gaze pulling at her. “I want to see you again.”

Her vision slid away from his and she turned to stare out at the ocean vista. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” She tried to step away. Being this close made her want to forget everything else—that there was a magazine where they both worked, that he wasn’t known for committed relationships.

He drew back. “I’m just asking for a chance, Toni.” Unexpectedly, he released her and turned away, running a hand through his hair. “God, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“What are you talking about?”

He scanned the expanse of sea. “I can’t believe I’m begging you to see me.” Shaking his head, he wheeled around and faced her. “That’s not entirely true, I can believe it, I didn’t want to accept the truth.” He cupped her face, gazing intently into her eyes. “What I feel for you is different, Toni. I knew it from the first minute I laid eyes on you. You’ve never been out of my thoughts, never given me a moment’s peace. I’ve fought this attraction for six damned months.”

His mouth descended once again to crash against hers. She burned inside with an aching need for him. He pulled her against him.

He lifted his head to look at her. “God, you are so beautiful, so sweet. Now that I’ve tasted you, I can’t get enough,” and his hard mouth claimed hers again, drawing her passion.

She trembled with awareness, couldn’t fight the sensations engulfing her. Didn’t want to fight them. Common sense blurred. Sal evoked turbulent feelings inside her she’d never felt before.

Unable to help herself, she wound her arms around his neck,

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drawing him closer, moaning with the urgent longing to savor him, craving his hands on her body. She quivered with desire and finally melted in surrender.

Sal must have felt her capitulation, because he lifted her, anchoring her to him and she wrapped herself about him. There was no thought to deny him. She'd watched and wanted him for too long. All the tumultuous hunger she'd suppressed rose to destroy the determined barriers she'd constructed to protect her heart.

His tongue darted fast and hard into her mouth, claiming her. She tasted wine, male, heat, and want. He stepped forward, and she felt the cold, solid wood of a picnic table support her bottom. He released her and slid his hands over her knees, beneath the hem of her dress.

"You feel like cool silk, honey. So creamy and soft. Will you open for me? Let me in? I need you, baby."

Drunk with overwhelming craving, she unwrapped her legs and opened in silent assent, every nerve sensitive to even the air around her. Desire coiled tightly inside.

He feathered hot kisses along her jaw as his hands roamed along her naked thighs. Electricity zinged through her veins. She stroked his shadowed jaw, enjoying the sensations of its rough texture.

"Sal, I want you, too. I need you closer. I can't deny what I feel any more."

He eased her back, and raising her hips slightly, drew her panties down. She watched through slitted eyes as he pocketed the white silk with her sandals. Sliding his hands beneath her dress, he cupped her lace-covered breasts, kneading and teasing. She arched to him, wishing there were no barriers of clothing between them. "Sal, oh, God, please." She ached with pleasure, soared with yearning.

Feeling a hand move away from her breast, she then felt him raise the hem of her dress and the cool ocean breeze and his hot, moist breath mingled at her drenched entrance.

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He carefully placed her feet at the edge of the table and she arched further as she felt his finger separate and glide teasingly between her swollen lips, then into her welcoming, hot passage. His tongue teased at her passionate bud, sending her spiraling beyond reason.

“Open for me, baby. Let me taste your desire, honey.” His whisper vibrated against her skin. “I want you to fly for me.” Entering her with one finger, then two, he widened her, teasing her clit with his mouth and his tongue. She gasped in burning response as he drove her higher and higher.

“Oh, yes. Sal.” She begged, rocking her hips against his fingers. It felt so good, so right.

Tendrils of heat enveloped her. The music he’d played earlier echoed in her head, as he now moved in a slow, steady rhythm, driving her upwards towards the stars above. The sound of the waves as they surged against the shore and the music in her head intermingled as his mouth danced to the phantom rhythm of the sea and the nuance of the night. The fire in her blood scorched her. Like hot, flowing lava she was scalded by his caresses.

The seas opened, swirled around her, and swallowed her into a whirlpool of sensations. His finger slid out and his tongue replaced it, his mouth milking, suckling, taking from her everything she had to give, until there was nothing left. And she voiced her release to the wind.

The cool night air hummed across her sensitized, heated body. The sounds and smell of the ocean magnified as the images of this night, the sea, and Sal’s touch were forever indelibly branded in her memory.

But she knew it wasn’t enough, would never be enough. He would be an addiction she could never appease. The wild need she felt for him frightened her. It had never been like that before and, something told her, it never would be again with any other man. This was special, unique. What she already felt for him scared her like nothing else.

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Because Sal Agüero was not a man to make commitments. And she was aware that sooner or later, he would break her heart.

CHAPTER 4

On Monday morning, Toni was tense, not knowing what to expect, wondering if any of her co-workers saw them; worried about the possible gossip that would ensue. She'd only started to make a name for herself in graphic design, and any talk linking her with Sal Agüero could be detrimental to the career she was trying to build. Being a woman and taken seriously was hard enough without having her name attached to a man with Sal's reputation when it came to women.

Following a weekend spent pacing and pondering the seesaw of her emotions, it felt anticlimactic to power up her computer and be confronted by nothing more than the usual communications regarding her ongoing projects. The deadline for the issue of *Calisto* currently in pre-publication mode was fast approaching. Everyone was zoned in on editing, polishing, and finalizing until the magazine was honed to perfection.

Toni considered it a blessing. The staff was so intensely focused on

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the job at hand there was no time for standing around and trading racy tidbits.

She liked Sal. A lot. But she wasn't ready to contend with a round of sly innuendo and jealousy. Even a hint would spread like wildfire and morph into a story that was unidentifiable as truth in any form. She was honest enough to admit she didn't have the strength to hold up under that type of scrutiny.

There were no emails waiting for her, no surreptitious gifts on her desk, nothing. Often, her attention would waver, and she'd glance through the glass partition of her cubicle to Sal's office. In the back of her mind she weighed the gossip against the somewhat tenuous relationship building with Sal, unable to reach any concrete solutions.

When his door was open, which didn't happen often, she caught glimpses of him pacing back and forth, yelling into the phone. Another time he stood, braced over his desk, white shirt sleeves rolled back revealing tanned, defined forearms, pencil in hand, talking heatedly to one of the writers, who kept shaking his head. Never once did she catch him glancing in her direction.

Continually she tried to remind herself the whole office dating thing wasn't for her. She should be glad he showed no further interest. She wasn't up to the demands it would make. Yet still she was a nervous wreck, constantly wondering when the hammer would drop.

She tried to concentrate on the designs for the article she'd been assigned. At least when she was deep in concentration on creating, the rest of the world would drop away, and she could have some peace of mind in those precious moments. Her focus would be so intense, hours would pass like minutes.

Sal gave no indication that anything happened between them. He didn't speak to her, didn't even acknowledge her presence. As relieved as she tried to tell herself she was by the fact, it bothered her that he could dismiss her so easily. She wished she could remove him from her

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thoughts in the same way.

Several more days went by, and she started to think that her life would settle back to normal. Too bad she felt an absence in her life she'd never noticed before. On numerous occasions she would again find herself unable to sleep and she'd pace the floor, unfulfilled yearnings coiling inside. It was even worse now because the reality of Sal's touch had far outdistanced any fantasies she'd once had.

When Toni walked into her cubicle the following Monday, there was something on her desk, waiting for her. She blinked and shook her head, but a small smile curved her lips. With almost a sense of relief, she slowly reached out to touch the object. He hadn't forgotten about her.

A beautiful, perfect scalloped shell resting on dried silvery seaweed was encased in a small oval blue-tinged glass box. Tiny sparkly midnight blue stars were hand painted around the edges. It was small enough to fit within the palm of her hand. She picked it up carefully. Her fingers brushed against a mechanism at its base. It was a music box. She knew what the tune would be even before she wound the key. And she was right, the tinkling, delicate strains of *I Only Have Eyes for You* soared into the air.

The music floated like silvery, delicate crystal in the stillness of the office, reminding her of his touch, his heated kisses against her skin. She shivered in remembrance and was overwhelmed by the knowledge he'd probably had it specially made.

She glanced down at her desk and her gaze encountered a small cream-colored envelope with no name on the outside. Her hand trembled slightly as she picked up the small sealed rectangle, and opened it. *Tuesday night. Dinner?* It wasn't signed, but she had no doubt who it was from. Her heart thumped. She pocketed the card and slowly sat down, finding it hard to breath. The music wound to an end and she lightly traced the beveled edges of the box with her index

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finger. He was making it very hard for her to say no.

Sal was nothing like she'd expected. The way he acted, the things he did, kept her off base. The powerful Senior Editor/playboy image he portrayed to the rest of the world seemed to contradict the sensitive man who took the time to discover her passion for political art, played beautiful, soulful jazz music, or made love to her on a moonlit beach. And he was fast burrowing his way into her heart. Is this what he did with all the women in his life? An ache passed through her heart at the thought.

She glanced toward his office, but he was nowhere in sight. It was vacant, silent. The magazine deadline had been met and the office was eerily quiet after the bustle of the last week. Toni had arrived early to work on a new piece she'd been thinking about, but now her mind scattered with other thoughts.

Would she accept his invitation to dinner? Did she dare? She stared at the small music box and it brought back the visions she'd been trying so hard to smother. Memories, sights, and sounds flooded her. And her body remembered his touch. Craved more. One taste of such decadent delight wasn't enough. She'd known it wouldn't be. That invisible scale inside her head shifted again.

Her introspection was broken by laughter alerting her to the arrival of several co-workers. Quickly, she wrapped the music box in several soft white tissues and placed it carefully in her purse. It was personal, a private matter, and she didn't want to share it, or discuss it. If she left it on her desk, it was certain to draw attention.

There was no time to consider what she was going to do right now; in another half hour she would be required to attend a department meeting and she needed to prepare for it. Her day would leave little time to ponder over her dilemma regarding Sal's invitation.

Because there were no immediate deadlines to be met and a lull fell before new ones came into play, Toni knew the office would be

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deserted once again by six o'clock.

"Hey, Toni." Toni tensed and swung around from her desk to face the door. She relaxed. Abra, her friend who worked in Advertising and Circulation, popped her head around the corner. Of average height, with short dark hair, a generous helping of curves, and an outrageous personality, she'd befriended Toni her first day on the job. Abra could always make her laugh and had a way of making her forget about her problems.

"What's up?"

"Come with us for drinks."

Toni shook her head. "No, but thanks. I have a few things I want to finish up."

"You're a party pooper, girl." Abra pouted. "You need to get out and have some fun. Are you sure?"

"Not tonight. Another time. Okay?"

"All right, but you don't know what you'll be missing. That cute guy in Sales is coming. You know, the shy one?" She grinned and batted her eyelashes. "I finally managed to convince him. Gotta go. If you change your mind, we'll be at Gorsky's. Later." With that she popped back out and was gone, taking the energized atmosphere with her.

Toni turned back to her desk. Her reason for staying behind was just an excuse. This was her chance to talk with Sal in privacy. Her stomach mimicked the butterfly effect as she waited for the office to empty completely, maintaining a watchful eye to Sal's closed door.

She'd seen him stride into the office around lunchtime, shut his door, and not surface again.

Seven o'clock came and went. Toni looked around the silent office and noted she was finally alone. She powered down her computer and cleared her desk. Taking a deep breath, she stood. It was now or never. Time to face him.

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She walked toward Sal's closed door and knocked softly. At his gruff, "What is it?" she grasped the cool brass-colored knob and opened the door. Her heart stuttered in her chest as she stepped inside.

Sal sat at his desk, a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, studying what looked like pages of numbers. He glanced up as she closed the door behind her and leaned against it. When his gaze connected with hers, she saw the stern lines appear to smooth away. He reached up and pulled the glasses off, setting them on the desk.

"Toni." Her name spoken in that deep, husky tone, had the effect of melting all her resolutions and determination to end the relationship. In that moment, the little mental scale which balanced the pros and cons of entering into a relationship with him went flying out the window.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, not at all. Come in." He stood and strode around the desk toward her.

Her hands tightened on the knob behind her, using it as a crutch to steady herself. To not touch him.

Reaching her, he cupped her face, leaned down and kissed her, drawing her to him, molding her to his hard form. Her knees weakened right along with her determination. He raised his head and studied her face. "God, I've missed you this week. I wouldn't have been much good as company though. I'm a real bear when it comes to deadline and I didn't want to subject you to that."

"I-I'm not asking for explanations, Sal. I know how crazy it's been around here. I just wanted to thank you for the music box. It's beautiful. I didn't think an email would suffice." She looked away from him, biting her lip, wanting more of his taste. Her resolve lay as so much dust beneath her feet.

His grin and the sparkle in his eyes had her heart melting all over the carpet. "I hoped you'd like it. A friend of mine designs music boxes

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and made it as a favor to me. I wanted you to have something special to remember our first date.”

He was too close, she couldn’t think, couldn’t breath. “It’s lovely.” She started to side step away from him. “Well, I guess I better be going.”

One of his dark eyebrows shot up. “Are you afraid someone will see you in my office?”

“No, no that’s not it. You were busy and I really don’t want to interrupt.”

“Toni, you’re never an interruption. I’ve stayed away from you this week because I don’t want you to be uncomfortable in the office. I know you’re worried about the gossip. About what people will say if they know you’re seeing me. I’ve had to work late every evening. You know how it gets.” He ran a hand through his hair. “You have no idea how hard it’s been for me not to come near you.”

“It has?” She’d watched him all week and found it a bit difficult to believe. He hadn’t looked her way once as far as she could tell.

“Definitely. Can you really doubt it? But I wanted to give you some time to think about us. Did you get my note?”

She nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“And your answer?”

Quickly, she glanced up at him. No was in her mind, but yes was in her heart. She nodded.

He leaned forward. “I need to taste you, again.” His lips touched hers, moved along the line of her jaw, down her neck. “Never enough,” his voice vibrated against her throat.

She tilted her head back, allowing him better access, and he took advantage. She heard the soft click of the lock on the door. They were cloaked in darkness as he switched off the overhead lights. The room was bathed in an intimate glow from the desk lamp and the city skyline glittered through the long windows in the background.

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Her breathing hitched and she finally released her death grip on the doorknob and raised her hands to his face, needing to touch him, feel his warmth, his strength. She arched into him. “Sal, we shouldn’t be doing this.”

He unbuttoned her shirt and pushed it aside, giving him access to the skin beneath. “I know. But I can’t wait. You go to my head, sweetheart. Damn, you smell delicious.”

She felt his warm breath against the silk of her slip as he removed her shirt and let it drop to the floor. “I’ve waited for you too long. Come here,” he growled. Pulling her away from the door, they sank to the floor.

They knelt facing each other, his hands caressing her, sending her thoughts skidding away, in turmoil. “Sal, I don’t know—” But she did. She wanted him just as badly as he seemed to want her.

She brought her hands up to the buttons of his shirt, as she inhaled his musky scent. Heat spiraled through her, centering in her core, throbbing.

Somehow her skirt was gone and she arched against him, aching for him. He peeled down the straps to her slip and bra, baring her to his gaze, her nipples tightened and he lowered his head to capture one with his mouth. His tongue circled, and his teeth lightly laved. His hands cupped and kneaded her bottom. Had anything ever felt so good? She couldn’t remember when, and moaned and arched, her hands twining in his thick hair, desire blurring her vision.

Her only thought was to have him naked, his body touching hers, her hands exploring him, unencumbered by his clothing. The knowledge they were in his office, his domain—a taboo realm, only heightened her desire. A raging white-hot fire encompassed her. She brought her hands down and unbuckled his leather belt, then lowered the zipper, needing to touch him, to feel his velvety, hard heat.

“Sal,” she whispered, as her hand wrapped about his turgid shaft.

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Thick and smooth, she wanted to feel him filling her, have him powering fast and deep inside her. Boiling desire lifted her, driving her onwards.

“Spread your legs for me, baby,” he growled.

He quickly removed the rest of her clothing and she offered herself to him. Moisture seeped between her thighs as she anticipated his hard cock pushing deep inside her.

The pupils of his eyes as he watched her darkened, dilated with passion. “Damn, you’re beautiful.”

She stroked his jaw, memorizing him with her hands. He pulled away to shed the remainder of his clothes, preparing himself for her, then turned back to face her.

He pulled her close and she felt every inch of his hard, warm body. He slid his hands from her hips, up her ribs and cupped her breasts, weighing them in the palms of his hand. She moaned, sensitive to his every breath. His lightest touch was heavenly fire, and she wanted more.

“I’m going to take you, baby. Hard and deep.” His voice rumbled low in his chest, and she reveled in its deep vibration as it purred against her skin.

Spreading her legs wider, he lifted her, the tip of his shaft teasing at her slick, sensitive entrance. “Oh, Sal, yes. I need you now.” She arched closer, opened herself further.

He thrust upward, sinking easily into her hot channel. Her lips parted and widened as he slid home in one stroke. Thick and hard, he filled every crevice. “Oh, God, yes,” she moaned.

“You feel so good, so tight. My sweet, Toni. Take me, baby. Open and take all of me.” He pulled her legs around his hips and sank deeper into her sheath. She welcomed every steely inch.

His mouth trailed hot, moist kisses along her neck, to the valley between her breasts. He lowered his head to capture the tight, sensitive

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bud of one breast, suckling and teasing, then offered the same attention to the other one. Every nerve ending attuned, sensitized to his touch.

She tossed her head back and forth restlessly, needing more. He started to rock her against him, thrusting and circling slowly in and out. Her own growl of wild desire was building inside her. Hot. Primal.

His mouth ravaged hers, his tongue mimicking the movement of his cock tunneling deeper. She met his thrusts, felt him shift and rub against her clitoris, and she moaned and undulated beneath him. He drove fast, then retreated slowly, grinding his hips against her, sending her spiraling upwards, a slow, steady ascent, that pulled her into a whole new sensual world of tempestuous rapture. She couldn't catch her breath. All she could do was feel and let the waves carry her away.

He began to move faster, in long, heated strokes, filling her. Lifting her hips he stroked upwards until she felt him touch her throbbing center and she shattered in minute pieces of euphoric insensibility beneath him. He groaned, released a whoosh of breath and pulled her closer. She felt his throbbing release deeply and wrapped her arms tighter, unwilling to let this moment of perfect fusion end.

She expected him to pull away from her, but instead, he sat back, leaned against the desk and pulled her with him, nestling her tightly against him, remaining sheathed inside her. His hands eased along her spine and across her bottom, shifting her closer yet. She felt his rigid shaft anchored deep inside.

Folding against his shoulder, she feathered lingering kisses along his neck, running her tongue over the rough surface of his jaw, tasting their passion in the beads of glistening sweat which remained.

He raised a hand to push back the damp tendrils of her hair and cup her face. "I don't want to move. I can't bring myself to let you go."

She smiled and trailed a hand through the curling dark hairs on his chest, rubbing across the tight nipple and traveling downwards. She felt his indrawn breath. Her hand rested at the crease where hip joined thigh

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and she looked up at him and laughed.

“Neither do I. I know I shouldn’t say this, but this feels right. I don’t want it to end.”

The darkening twilight surrounded them, shielding them from time and reality. “It’s not going to end, Toni.” She heard the firmness in his deep voice. “I don’t want you subjected to office gossip, but I won’t lose you either.” He looked down at her, his gaze solemn. “This isn’t a one-night stand or some temporary affair, you understand that, don’t you? For the first time in my life I want more.”

Unexpected emotions swirled through her. What was happening was more than she’d ever felt before and she wasn’t sure what it would mean. She cuddled closer to him. The only thing she could be certain of was that she didn’t want him to disappear from her life. Not yet. “I don’t know what we have, Sal, but I want to find out.”

He stroked her hair. “I know you’ve been hurt before and it only makes sense you’d want to go slowly. I don’t want to bulldoze you into something you’re not ready for, but I don’t think I can slow down.”

She shook her head. “What I felt for Chuck wasn’t...I don’t know how to explain it. I met him just after my parents were killed in a car accident. I felt bereft and I guess I clung to him out of some need for human contact. But I didn’t love him, not the way I should have. When he walked out on me, I realized I was more angry than hurt.”

Sal kissed her forehead, his hands stroked her back. “I’m glad he didn’t break your heart, honey. But I’d like to break his neck for leaving you the way he did.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter any more. If he hadn’t left, we might never have met.” She pulled away from him and looked into his eyes. “Whatever happens, Sal, I wouldn’t change this moment. I want you to know that.”

His lips covered hers, his tongue thrusting inside, claiming everything.

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It was at that moment Toni realized she'd waited all her life for this man. She felt like Sleeping Beauty awakened by her prince. The real world and tomorrow would have to take care of itself. Tonight was hers.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning Sal sat in his office staring out his office window, his thoughts drifting. Now he knew why his emotions had remained unaffected all these years. They'd been in stasis, waiting. It was like being frozen in ice and suddenly a spring warming begins. His thaw had started six months before. Intense feelings now rushed to overtake him.

Not one woman had ever touched him the way Toni did with her quiet strength and inner radiance. She brought him a peace he never knew was lacking from his life. Every time he got up from his desk and walked to his door and saw her, a calmness would overtake him, no other woman had ever offered him that. She represented his own personal fantasy of Eden.

He rose from his chair and walked to the door of his office, needing to see her. Just like sniffing out a story worth its weight in gold, he'd recognized immediately what Toni represented. Now the trick was to

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protect her from the talk that always followed his liaisons with the opposite sex. That was going to be tricky, but well worth the effort. And it was another difference that pleased him, because the women he dated usually thrived on the notoriety.

He must have been staring, because suddenly she looked up and they connected. Even at this distance he saw the blue blaze of recognition in her gaze, sparking his own carnal need. She looked away, but he saw that sexy little smile, and he couldn't turn away as he watched a rosy hue creep up her neck and into her cheeks.

It was a test of his willpower not to stride through the office and take her in his arms, caring less who saw them. He wanted to claim her lips, declare to the world that she belonged to him. But he couldn't do that to her. He turned back to his office, needed to get back to work, review the story suggestions for the next issue, look over the proposed budget, do all the necessary things that were part of his job. Concentration didn't come easily to him these days. He often found himself glancing over to the spot where they'd made love, his body tightening at the remembered passion.

A knock sounded at his open door and he was brought back to the present. He glanced up.

"Yes?"

Two men stood there, dressed in dark suits. Sal's intuition went on alert. "Salvatore Aguero?"

"Yes, I'm Sal Aguero. What can I do for you?" They had the look of law enforcement—neat, dark blue suits, almost identical. He wondered if one of his reporters had stepped on some toes and forgotten to mention it to him?

"Mr. Aguero, mind if we come in? We have a couple of questions we'd like to ask you."

Sal motioned for them to enter his office. The taller of the two closed the door behind him. "Can I ask what agency you're with? And

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I'll want to see some identification before I can answer any questions for you."

The shorter one, with sandy-brown hair appeared to be the one in charge. He pulled out a brown wallet and opened it, flashing a gold badge, turning it for Sal's inspection. "FBI, Mr. Aguero. I'm Agent Andrews, and this," he turned and pointed to the taller man with closely-cropped dark hair, "is Agent Thomas."

Sal nodded and the agent returned the wallet to his pocket. Neither of the men sat. They studied Sal with expressionless faces. "All right gentlemen, what can I do for you? Is one of my reporters onto a story that's touched a nerve?" He wouldn't be surprised. After all, it's the kind of story he expected his people to investigate.

"No, nothing like that. Mr. Aguero, how well do you know Seleena Aved?"

Sal slowly sat in his chair. The question caught him offguard. "Seleena? What does she have to do with anything?"

The two men looked at each other and then back to Sal. He was starting to get a bad feeling. "We really would like you to answer the question for us." They stood silently across from his desk, hands clasped, waiting.

His instincts told him to tread lightly and speak carefully. This wasn't about a magazine story. It was personal. "I dated Seleena a couple of times. It wasn't anything serious."

Agent Andrews's emotionless eyes bore into him. "What do you consider not serious, Mr. Aguero? Have you ever been to her apartment?"

Sal shook his head, unable to believe they were trying to delve into his personal life. "What does my seeing Seleena have to do with anything the FBI might want?"

"Does that mean no, you haven't been to her apartment?"

"I didn't say that. I just want to know why you're looking into my

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personal life.”

Agent Andrews sighed. “Mr. Aguero, we can do this the hard way or not. A simple yes or no will suffice right now. This visit is a courtesy. Based on your association, we could have come with a full team and warrant in hand. I assure you, it wouldn’t have been pleasant.”

Exasperated, Sal ran a hand through his hair. From his line of work, he knew exactly how unpleasant they could make it for him. “Yes, I guess I was at her apartment. As I said it was only a couple of dates, nothing serious. Is it Seleena you want to know about, or me?” What in hell was going on here?

Investigator Andrews pulled a small picture from his inside pocket and held it out to Sal. “Do you recognize this woman as Seleena Aved?”

Sal looked down at the picture of the sloe-eyed, dusky-skinned woman. “Yes, that’s Seleena.”

Agent Andrews returned the picture to his inside pocket. “We’d like you to come down to the office with us. We have some questions we need to ask you. You see, Ms. Aved has been identified as having connections with one of the newer cells in a terrorist organization that’s recently surfaced in this country. Your name has been connected with hers and,” he shrugged, “we want to clear up a few details about your involvement.”

The skin on the back of Sal’s neck tightened. “What exactly do you need to clear up? I told you I dated her a few times, it was nothing more than that.”

Agent Andrews nodded. “Yes, we understand that. Look at it as a way to set our minds at rest...sort of close the books on this part of our investigation. We’ve already completed a preliminary investigation on your background. We’d like to finish up, with your cooperation, of course.” He again stared intently at Sal. Why did he feel a threat was

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implied. “You don’t mind answering a few questions, do you?”

He wasn’t guilty of anything, but they sure had a way of making him feel like he was. They could make it uncomfortable not only for him but anyone associated with him if he didn’t cooperate. “No, I don’t have a problem answering your questions.”

“Then, if you’ll—”

Sal held up a hand. “Wait just a minute. I’ll drive myself. You tell me where to be and when to be there.” He returned the agent’s flinty look. “I’m not under arrest, right? You don’t have a warrant?”

“No, it’s not like that. Yet.”

Definitely an implied threat, Sal thought. “Have you arrested Seleena?”

“Mr. Aguero, we’re not at liberty to discuss Ms. Aved further with you.”

“Oh, but you can ask me all kinds of crazy questions, right?”

Agent Andrews nodded. “That’s right. You know the score. Your fingerprints were found at the scene of an investigation. Your name’s been linked with hers. We have to look into any leads we find. It just happens in this instance our evidence points to the fact that you had a liaison with a known terrorist and we have to check that out thoroughly.”

“Agreed. And I have nothing to hide. So tell me where to be and when to be there. I’ll call my attorney in the meantime.”

Agent Andrews pinned him beneath an assessing stare, then nodded. “Normally, I’d ask you to accompany us back to the office right now. But we’ve done some preliminary investigation and aren’t considering you a risk—at the moment. I expect you already know your movements are under surveillance. Just in case an associate of Ms. Aved’s should try to make contact with you.” He pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it across the desk. “That’s my name and the office address. Be there tomorrow morning at ten o’clock sharp.

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Will that be sufficient for you...and your attorney, Mr. Aguero?"

"I'll be there," he confirmed.

The agents turned to leave the office. Agent Andrews turned back. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, don't make me sorry about that. I wouldn't miss that appointment tomorrow. Things can get pretty hot if we get the feeling you don't want to cooperate."

"I'm sure they can, Agent Andrews. But I have no reason not to cooperate."

"Glad to hear that."

Once they left his office, Sal sat back in his chair and gazed out the window. Then he turned back and punched in the phone number for his attorney. No way was he heading to an FBI interrogation without legal counsel. He was smart enough to know that even an innocent man needed protection in a situation like this. Make that, particularly an innocent man.

Dammit! What was he going to do about Toni? Until this was cleared up there was no way he could pursue his relationship with her. The last thing she needed was to be involved in this kind of negative publicity, or be dragged into an FBI investigation. It could be her worst nightmare come true. The least he could do was protect her from that kind of mess. Of all times for something like this to happen.

* * *

It was hard for Toni not to smile. The world seemed suddenly richer, more alive. The night in Sal's office had been a turning point for her. He'd been so open about his feelings. Up to that point, she'd kept part of herself closed off from loving him—from admitting she loved him. But his words and his touch made her realize he really did want more than a temporary relationship. And that he was definitely worth the risk.

It felt right. Making love, here in the office had seemed somehow forbidden, wildly sinful, and that felt right, too. He made her want

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things she'd never considered before. Sal lived his life on the edge and she found she liked the feel of it. She knew if he walked up to her right now, she'd do whatever he asked and she didn't care who was watching.

She'd thought this kind of deep commitment to a lover would somehow make her a weaker person. It did with Chuck, but then she hadn't really loved Chuck, had she? He'd made her feel vulnerable and incomplete in some way. This was different.

What she felt for Sal seemed to make her stronger. The gossip she'd been so afraid of, now seemed inconsequential. And the strength came from inside her, the knowledge that what she felt was right.

"Okay, spill it. Tell me what you saw." Toni whipped around in her chair at the whispered words from her friend, Abra. It was unusual for her to stop by Toni's desk during the day. A shiver ran along Toni's spine. Her first thought was that someone had seen her go into Sal's office the previous evening. At any rate, whatever Abra wanted, it must be important.

"What are you talking about?" she asked cautiously, hoping fervently that there was no evidence of guilt in her voice or expression. She'd never been good at lying, so could only hope she achieved some level of nonchalance.

Abra stood back, hands on hips. "You have the perfect vantage point for Sal Agüero's office. Did you see them go in?"

Toni felt her skin tighten, hoped her reaction wasn't obvious to Abra. "Who? Go in where?" She'd been so inwardly focused on her thoughts, she'd been aware of nothing transpiring around her. What had she missed?

Abra leaned closer again. "Word is that two FBI agents came to see our Senior Editor. And," her voice lowered, "I heard he called his attorney right after they left. We're not talking the magazine's attorneys, his *personal* attorney, is what I heard."

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Toni's heart pounded in her breast. She'd been in such a haze she wouldn't have noticed if the Green Giant had made an appearance. She shook her head. "No, I didn't see anything. I do have work to do, you know. I'm not here to report on the minute by minute comings and goings of the Senior Editor." There was no way she'd admit how often she actually did glance in that direction.

Abra made a face and chuffed. "So you didn't see anything?"

"Sorry, Abra. I can't confirm or deny the little rumor mill for you."

"Well, darn it. I thought for sure you'd have noticed something."

At that moment, Sal's door burst open and he strode out with his jacket under his arm. For one brief second his intense gaze connected with hers and then he was gone.

"Wow, did you see that? What do you think it means? Him racing out like that?" Abra loved juicy gossip and a good mystery. She'd been Toni's source for all the little tidbits surrounding Sal's personal relationships. Toni was surprised she hadn't become a journalist...or a gossip columnist, rather than an ad exec.

She turned away from the window, her thoughts in turmoil. What had that look meant? He'd been distracted, upset, she could see that. Something had happened and she wished she knew what it was.

They'd made tentative plans for dinner, she'd offered to cook. Would she see him tonight, or would whatever had happened change things somehow? Their relationship was still so new and tenuous. She looked up at Abra.

"I have no idea what's going on. But I expect it won't be long before whatever it is hits the gossip threads." She needed to be alone, get her thoughts together, think about what it all could mean.

Abra shrugged. "Okay, I guess you're right. I need to get back to my office. But if you hear anything, let me know."

Toni turned back to her computer. "You bet. I'll talk to you later."

Why was it she started to feel this sense of doom all of a sudden?

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She again glanced over at the gaping door to Sal's office. If he was in trouble, she wanted to be there for him. Let him know she was there to support him no matter what it was. She'd been wrong when she thought she couldn't withstand the rumors surrounding a relationship with him. It didn't matter what other people thought. What mattered was what she felt inside, what Sal felt. Why hadn't she told him that last night when she'd had the opportunity?

CHAPTER 6

Sal didn't come back to the office and Toni went home to prepare dinner. Unless she heard differently, she would assume their plans were still on.

She proceeded to prepare lasagna, thinking he would enjoy a home-cooked Italian meal. Placing the pan in the oven, she set about cutting up lettuce, tomatoes, and a sundry of other vegetables to go into a garden salad. Once everything was prepared, she glanced at the clock. He'd been particularly prompt on their first date and he'd said he would be there at seven o'clock. It was now seven on the nose.

She turned the oven down and left the pan inside to keep the lasagna warm. Thirty minutes went by and there was still no sign of him. At eight o'clock she pulled the pan from the oven and set it on the counter. And still she waited. But he never arrived and he didn't call.

Finally, she got up the courage and decided to call him. Something was going on and she wanted to know what it was. The times she'd

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been with him, he'd always been considerate. This didn't seem like something he'd do, that he'd just leave her waiting without at least calling.

Pulling out the phone book, she searched for his phone number. Much to her frustration, there was no Sal Aguero listed. She couldn't call anyone from the magazine to see if they had his number because they'd ask questions she wasn't prepared to answer yet. Soon, maybe, but not right now. She bit her lip and tossed the phone book aside. There was no way to reach him, nor did she have his address. Wrapping her arms around her middle, she paced the floor. The dinner she'd painstakingly prepared, held no appeal.

Feeling angry, hurt, and worried, she paced into the kitchen, tossed the contents into the garbage, rinsed the dishes and placed them in the dishwasher. She wanted to ignore the pain of disappointment she felt.

Had he been waylaid? Had something happened to him? Was that why he didn't keep their date? Or was it that he didn't trust her with whatever it was? And it hurt to think that might be the answer.

Sleep did not come easily to her that night. She tossed and turned in her lonely bed until finally she got up and went into the kitchen. Turning on the kettle to heat some water for a cup of Earl Gray tea, she sat at the small table staring into the darkened living room. A pain started to throb behind her eyes. Was he already tired of her? The same insecurities she'd experienced when Chuck left started to resurface. Only this time it hurt more. She didn't want to examine too closely why that was.

She rose from the table and walked over to the stove, pouring her cup of tea. No, she wouldn't do that to herself. She would not wallow in self-pity. She wasn't in the same position she'd been in when Chuck left.

This time she was self-sufficient. Emotionally drained after her parents' death, she'd been easy prey for Chuck the Magnificent. She'd

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healed since then and she had a good job and a nice place to live. Security. She bit her lip. But what if Sal really did intend to sever the relationship? Could she continue to work at *Calisto*? Be confronted by him day after day? Listen to the gossip about him and his women?

And she knew the answer was no. She couldn't put herself through that. Wouldn't do it. It would destroy her. But it was too soon to make assumptions, she reminded herself. She needed to have a little faith.

Something happened at the office today and that was the reason he hadn't called her, hadn't stopped by to see her.

The middle of the night was the worst possible time for her to try to come to any decisions. She set the cup back down on the counter and flipped off the light as she walked back to her bedroom. She needed to try to get some sleep. She'd go to work early, and confront Sal in the morning before anyone came into work. It was a plan, she told herself. So now she just needed to get some sleep so she could be clearheaded in the morning.

Nighttime was such a lonely time, she thought, as she pulled the covers around her. Empty, silent darkness enveloped her. She ached for Sal's touch, felt the echo of his breath whisper against her neck. What if it was over?

* * *

Nine o'clock the next morning found Sal at his attorney's office. Peter Davidson took care of all Sal's personal legal business, and this was by far the most serious personal problem he could imagine.

He'd spent a sleepless night, trying to decide how to handle his relationship with Toni. He didn't want to lose her, but he didn't dare take a chance on contacting her before this thing with the FBI was cleared up. He expected they were watching him and probably had his phone tapped. He couldn't drag her into this mess.

The meeting with the FBI was a nightmare, with their implied innuendos flying all over the place. Two hours of grilling and Peter had

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finally called a halt. Apparently, they didn't have Seleena in custody. They were questioning and had anyone under surveillance she'd come into contact with while in the United States. A couple of stupid dates had put him under suspicion. And it was going to ruin his life if it didn't get cleared up quickly. He had a feeling it wouldn't end until they caught up with her.

The worst part was when he and Peter walked out of the building. Someone apparently tipped off the press and he was deluged by reporters with questions on his way out of the building. It was a nightmare and he knew it would end up spiraling out of control and there was nothing he could do about it.

Toni was already worried about the gossip attached to dating someone with his reputation. She sure as hell wouldn't want anything to do with him under these conditions. He couldn't blame her. And he was going to have to be honest with her about what was happening because his personal life was about to be aired before the world.

He now sat in his office, staring out the window at the darkening city skyline wondering how in the hell he'd gotten into this situation. Hearing a soft knock on the door, he knew who it was.

"Come in." With a heavy sigh he swung his chair around to face the door, knowing it couldn't be put off any longer. He watched as Toni hesitantly came in and closed the door behind her.

"Sal, I'm sorry to bother you."

"Come in, Toni." He stood up, but didn't step around the desk. He needed the solid barrier between them. If he got close to her, all his resolutions to distance himself from her would be destroyed. "I'm sorry about last night, something came up."

She nodded. "I thought that might be the case." There was a tense silence. "What's wrong, Sal? Do you want to talk about it?"

"I suppose the rumor mill has already started on this."

"Some."

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“What are they saying?”

She shrugged. “Something about the FBI questioning you.” He saw the questions in her eyes as she watched him.

He looked away and nodded. “Yes. I was seeing someone a while back and she’s apparently been identified as having connections with a terrorist organization.”

“And they’re questioning you?”

He shrugged. “They don’t have a choice. But this changes things.” He turned back to look at her. This was going to be tough.

“Changes things...how?” Her eyes took on a guarded look.

“I can’t bring you into the middle of this. It’s going to get nasty. The media already has wind of it. You know what’s going to happen.”

“You’re saying you want to break off our...relationship.” He heard a quaver in her voice and he had to steel himself against it.

Instead, he nodded. “Yes, that’s right. You were worried before, well this is far worse than being the subject of any little tidbits about who I’m dating.”

Again, there was a pause.

“I don’t care. I can take care of myself.” He barely heard her whispered words. “Unless, that’s not the real reason. If you want to break it off, Sal, just be honest about it.”

“Well, I do care. I won’t let them tear you apart because of an association with me. I’ll be a nine days’ wonder as it is. I don’t want you taking any heat. Besides, the FBI will go after anyone I’m connected with.”

“You don’t need to try to protect me.” She raised her chin and a determined look crossed her face.

But he wasn’t going to let her make that sacrifice. He knew what the press could do, and they’d tear her to ribbons. “They’ll embroider the truth, you know that. Can you really handle the lies they’ll tell?”

Her lips thinned into a straight line. “Whatever it takes.”

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“Do you remember what you said when we talked at the art exhibition?” No way was he letting her walk into this mess.

“What are you referring to?”

“The gossip. Do you remember what you said?”

“Yes, I remember, but I was wrong.”

He shook his head. “You weren’t wrong. You were all too right.”

“I said my back wasn’t strong enough to let it slide off, but I was wrong,” she protested.

“You also said ‘gossip, truth or not, is a destructive force’ and you were right. I’m not going to change my mind on this. It’s over. At least until I can get this straightened out.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but then looked away from him. “It’s your choice, of course. I would never want to force you to continue our relationship. I guess I just thought you were made of stronger stuff.” She looked at him, her eyes large and dark. “I won’t stay where I’m not wanted. You said I wasn’t like the others, but I don’t think you believe that. Unless you do, we don’t have a chance.”

He wanted to touch her, reach out to her. The thought of never holding her again was tearing him apart. But better that he be torn than her by the rampant gossip he knew was coming.

She waited for him to say something, but there was nothing to say. It was for the best.

“Goodbye, Sal.” Her voice was low and tight. She turned and left his office, quietly closing the door behind her.

The pain he felt at her absence was more than he cared to admit. For months he’d wanted her and fought the attraction. Then, finally, he gave in to it and found her to be everything he’d desired in a woman, and he had to give her up.

He knew how the press would tear her apart. She thought she was strong enough to survive it, but he couldn’t stand to see it happen to her. There was no way he’d let her make that sacrifice.

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He'd never felt so impotent.

CHAPTER 7

“Calisto Senior Editor linked to terrorist organization!” the headlines screamed the next morning. Toni was horrified by the slant the newspapers had taken. They made it sound like he’d committed treason! The tabloids made her sick to her stomach.

She looked closer at the pictures that went with the article. One was Sal, probably a publicity photo someone had dug up from the files; the other was a picture of Seleena Aved. Toni felt a tingling of jealousy as she studied the exotically beautiful woman. Dark-haired, slender, and a come-hither look in her black eyes. Simply looking at the photo made Toni feel plain and mousy. She began to wonder why Sal had shown any interest in her at all. Toni was nothing like the women Sal usually dated.

No wonder Sal tried to push her away. The media was trying to shred his reputation, without any evidence. And Toni had no idea how to help him. Not that he seemed to want her help.

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Getting to her building was a trial in itself as reporters milled about the front door. When she arrived at the twenty-second floor, where the magazine's offices were located, it was abuzz with small groups of people whispering here and there. Many were holding copies of the same newspaper she'd read herself. It irritated her that people thrived on this kind of thing.

"Hey."

Toni swiveled around in her chair. "Abra, what are you doing up here? Looking for more gossip?"

"That's not nice, Toni. I stopped by to ask if you wanted to go to the premiere of that new movie everybody's so hot to see."

Toni couldn't quite focus on what Abra was talking about. "What new movie?"

Abra rolled her eyes. "*Quinton's Folly*. Remember?"

"Oh, now I remember."

"Well? I've managed to snag a couple of tickets. Wanna go?"

"No, I—"

"Come on," Abra coaxed. "When was the last time you were out? I know you're not dating anyone right now. You can't stay stuck in that apartment of yours forever."

There was no way Toni could admit that she wasn't quite the hermit Abra thought she was. Besides, it might not be a bad idea to get out. What good would it do to stay at home and mope anyway. "All right. What time?"

"Do you want to meet me at the theater or shall I pick you up?"

Abra liked to flirt and mingle. She was one of those people who enjoyed burning the candle at both ends. In case Abra decided to stay on and party, Toni didn't want to cramp her style. She certainly wasn't in the mood to socialize to any great extent. She wanted to see the movie, but then she was headed home. "I better meet you there."

"Okay. I'll get the ticket up to you later. It starts at six-thirty. Meet

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me beneath the marquee outside. Will that work?"

Toni nodded. "Yes, fine."

Just then, she looked out her window. Sal strode into his office and shut the door. The office was deadly silent for several minutes before voices again erupted into loud whispers. He hadn't looked in her direction, apparently focused completely on reaching his office.

"Have you heard?" Abra whispered.

Toni rolled her eyes. "Please, Abra, cut the whispering. All this uproar over those awful headlines is making me crazy."

Abra's eyes widened in disbelief. "You don't believe he's committed treason?"

"Of course not! Don't tell me you believe it." Abra stepped back at her vehement statement.

"How can you be so sure? Everyone thinks he did."

"Just who is everyone?"

Abra shrugged. "In the office. There's a pool, you know. Odds are against him being innocent."

"I don't believe this. You can't be serious."

"Of course I am." Abra confirmed. "Did you know the owners are flying in to meet with him tomorrow morning?"

"No. What does that mean?"

"Don't know. They might be planning to fire him. All this negative publicity can't be doing him or the magazine any good. Anyway, I'll see you tonight."

Toni turned back to her desk. She expected there was a pool on whether he would be fired or not as well. God! Why did people act that way?

She glanced over at Sal's door, but it was closed. Should she try to talk to him? Get him to reconsider their relationship? She had a feeling he wouldn't welcome her intrusion, he'd made that clear last night. It was just that she hated for him to have to face all this alone. Knowing

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this kind of negative talk was going on, would tend to make him feel more isolated than ever, she suspected.

She also knew the people he called “friends” would step back until he was once and for all cleared. It was at times like this you found out who your real friends were.

She would have to consider closely on how she should proceed. She turned back to her computer and brought up the graphic she’d been working on. Right now, if she didn’t get back to what she was supposed to be working on, she wouldn’t have a job and then she’d have a lot more to worry about.

Once more, she glanced over at Sal’s office. What was he thinking? What was he feeling? Going to him now might only complicate things for him. And she didn’t want to cause him any more problems than he had to deal with right now.

When they’d met, she’d been at a point when her whole world had fallen at her feet, and wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Particularly Sal. After all, he’d been the one to help her put her world back together. He’d helped her get her self-respect back. Tears pooled in her eyes, and she bit her lip. This wasn’t fair, not fair at all.

* * *

The sky was overcast as she left work later that day. As she stepped outside of the building, the first drops hit the pavement and she smiled with amusement as she watched reporters scatter. *Serves them right*, she thought, as she hurried to the bus stop across the street. City driving was not something she enjoyed, so usually she hopped the bus which went right past her apartment building.

Once home, she tried to cultivate some enthusiasm for the premiere, but found it difficult to garner excitement about much of anything. She couldn’t get Sal out of her mind. Kept seeing the dark, strained look on his face the other evening. She’d not had a chance to speak with him before he left the office.

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She looked out her window and decided with the way the rain was coming down she'd take the bus to the premiere and then a taxi home afterward. A heavy downpour like this made driving even crazier, and trying to find a parking place would be considerably worse.

Of course, the bus was late, and it was packed, leaving her only standing room. By the time she reached the theater, out of breath, it was seven-fifteen and she was soaked.

Abra paced in front of the theater. Toni came to an abrupt halt in front of her.

"Well, it's about time. Where have you been? We're going to miss the beginning," she complained. Abra hated to be late. She pivoted sharply and Toni could do nothing but hurry after her into the theater.

The movie turned out to be entertaining and Toni was glad she'd decided to attend. It helped to keep her mind off other things.

She turned to Abra as they left the auditorium. "Thanks for asking me to come. I enjoyed it."

Abra smiled, but her eyes were scoping the room. Probably looking for a likely target for her attentions. She placed a hand on Toni's arm. "Wow, did you see that? Boy, he's got a lot of nerve."

Toni looked around the room. "See what?"

"Sal Aguerro with a knock-out."

A chill ran up Toni's spine, a sense of déjà vu. Her breath caught in her throat. This couldn't be happening. "Where?"

"They're gone now, but they were right across from us. Of course, he didn't see us. Maybe you'll get a chance to spot them, once we get out to the reception area."

Toni knew she didn't want to see who he was with. And all this time she'd felt sorry for him. She should have known he wouldn't remain alone through this. She tried to get a grip on her emotions.

They entered the crowded reception area. "Come on, let's get something to drink," and Abra pulled her along through the throng of

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people.

She felt claustrophobic and knew she was about to be presented with a sight she didn't want to be confronted with, similar to facing a firing squad, she figured.

Abra stopped abruptly and pointed. "Look. Over there."

Slowly, Toni followed the direction Abra pointed in and it felt like a knife to her chest. Standing on the far side of the room was Sal leaning in intimately to a dark-haired, stunning woman listening intently to what she was saying. She saw him raise his head and laugh. He laughed!

Toni couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight, knowing she'd been taken for a fool again. But this time she'd been blindsided. For a moment, their gaze met across the room, and held. His gaze narrowed and she saw him say something to the woman he was with and she looked at Toni. It was too much.

Toni tore her gaze from the sight and pivoted away. "I have to leave," she gasped.

Abra looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean? It's just starting to get interesting."

If she didn't get out of there quickly, she would make a complete fool of herself. "I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well. Thanks for the movie. I really enjoyed it, but I have to leave."

Frantically, she turned and pushing her way through the crowded room, hurried out the door into the driving rain. She had to get away and quickly. Unable to think clearly, she looked to either side, then ran. Anything to get away from the memory of him with his hand possessively touching the arm of the woman he was with. The heavy rain enveloped her and her tears mingled with them. No one would ever be able to tell she left scattered pieces of heart on the concrete pavement along the way.

* * *

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Sal hadn't expected to see her there. It had taken him by surprise. The look on her face had practically destroyed him. He'd almost gone to her, to try to explain. But then he'd thought better of it. His life was in shambles and maybe it was best she thought him a heel. He'd seen that look of betrayal in her eyes. There was no point in bringing her down with him.

"Sal, who is that?" Felicia's question halted his thoughts, but he couldn't look away from Toni's horrified gaze. "Sal, your hand—you're hurting my arm."

He watched as Toni pivoted and raced from the theater. He reined in his emotions and turned to Felicia. "She's an artist at the magazine," he managed to mumble.

Felicia turned her large brown eyes on him, staring intently. He hated it when she did that. "Are you sure she isn't more? It looked like it to me. She looked upset. Maybe you should go after her."

"No. I'd thought at one time it could be more, but not the way things are now. You know what I mean, Felicia."

She nodded in sympathy. "Are you sure, Sal?"

"I'm sure. Better this way than to have her ripped to shreds by the public for associating with me." And he kept trying to convince himself it was for best, for her sake. There was no future for them the way things stood now. He couldn't have stood seeing her ripped apart in the press. Or grilled by the FBI. He kept reminding himself of what she said.

"Whether or not I listen to gossip isn't the point, is it? The fact is that gossip, truth or not, is such a destructive force. Maybe you can let it slide off your back, but me? I don't think my back's solid enough to let it slide. I'd absorb every little bit, and I can't afford to do that."

Oh, yes, he remembered well, her words. Too bad he didn't heed them sooner. He could at least have spared her the pain she now felt. Which he caused. But he couldn't watch while the publicity destroyed

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her. Thank God, they hadn't made their affair public. At least he'd been able to protect her that much.

Even if it now felt like an empty space where his heart once resided. He'd survive. He always did. Hard-hearted Sal could survive an earthquake if need be. But he wasn't sure he could withstand the pain he saw in Toni's eyes just before she raced from the theater.

He took a deep breath and clasped Felicia's arm. "Ready for dinner?"

He tried to escape her searching look. Finally, she nodded her head. "If you're sure, Sal."

"I'm sure. There's no turning back."

CHAPTER 8

She couldn't do it. She simply could not go into that office and face Sal.

Not today.

Not yet.

So she did something she hadn't done in the six months she'd worked for *Calisto Magazine*—she called in sick.

Not that she wasn't feeling ill considering she'd been unable to sleep the night before. She'd woken with a headache, puffy eyes, and a stiff neck. So much for getting out last night doing her any good at all. It had been a nightmare.

How could she ever have thought Sal's feelings for her were anything but superficial? She knew his reputation for short-term relationships. The kind of women he liked to escort. She was nothing like them. Why did she think there was a chance for a committed relationship with him?

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She padded across the floor in her stockings feet and curled up on the couch, clutching a small pillow like a life preserver. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. She'd survived her parents' sudden deaths, survived Chuck's insensitive abandonment, and come out stronger for it. She told herself she would survive this as well.

How had she ever let him get beyond her barriers? And so quickly. Well, maybe not so quickly, her feelings had simmered for six long months. Unfortunately, she'd been ready to explode by the time he asked her out—just an accident waiting to happen.

And boy had it been an explosive collision. Even now, hurting as badly as she did, she felt the heat rush through her at the memory of his kisses, his touch. The problem was those memories were now tinged with pain.

Darn it! She threw the pillow across the room and jumped up from the couch. Wound tightly, she paced the floor, hands balled into fists. Her body tensed as she fought the waves of pain building inside. The knowledge of betrayal. Yet was it betrayal? If she was honest, he'd told her the night before it was over. So what did she expect? That he'd sit around pining?

She gave a short laugh. That would be the day. Sal wasn't the type to linger over regrets. That is, if he really had any. He'd be the type to figure he couldn't have one woman, so another would do. And he'd go right on with his life. No mere woman would haunt the memories of Hard-Hearted Sal, that's for sure.

And she'd do the same by heaven. She was not going to let herself pine over the damn man. He'd ended it, so be it. She was a big girl, she'd deal with it. She just needed today to come to terms with her loss, to pick up all the pieces of her heart and try to mend it. *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again.*

The bludgeon of pain beat at the already weakened walls of her

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composure. The simple rhyme of her childhood opened wounds she'd thought safely healed. The remembered loss of her parents now mingled with the loss of Sal and she'd never felt so alone as at this moment. The walls of her apartment closed in on her. She had to get out before she started to scream and someone called 9-1-1, shipping her off to the funny farm.

With frantic steps she raced into the bedroom and pulled on jeans and a thick moss-colored sweater. Art had always been her source of peace, and that's where she headed now—to the Art Museum. Wrapped in the visual dreams invoked by the Masters she could lose herself in history, landscapes, and surreal interpretations. And maybe for just a little while she'd be able to forget—at least long enough to regain her balance, before she had to face reality once again.

* * *

Was his life ever going to return to normal? He couldn't ask anyone why she wasn't in the office. It would raise too many eyebrows, cause too many questions—especially now. But he stared intently at her darkened office, worried that something had happened to her. He should have followed her last night.

Ever since her gaze had met his at the reception, he'd ached to hold her, have her with him. He'd steeled himself against going to her. Breaking it off was for her own good. Even now, he was hounded by the media. He'd unplugged the phone at home because of the non-stop calls for interviews by the press. Maggie, the magazine's receptionist, was fielding all his calls at the office.

He was right not to approach her at the premiere. Already Felicia's picture was plastered all over the front of the papers questioning who she was and her relationship to him, ready to tear her apart. But she could handle it, she'd rip them a new one right back if they caused her any trouble. She'd grown up with him and Dom in the Bronx and had the same tough bite-me-and-I'll-rip-your-throat-out mentality, even if it

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was encased in a drop-dead gorgeous illusory package.

Where was Toni? What was she thinking? He saw her in his mind as she was at the beach, in his office, open to him, trusting him to take care of her. He tightened, needing her—wanting her soothing presence in the office. He was trying to take care of her the only way he knew how. A sense of impotence again invaded him.

He'd never realized all these months how much he counted on her appearance in the office. To know that he could open his door and see her sitting at her desk, how it soothed him, like walking along the ocean and the thunder of waves washing against the beach unwound all the hard knots inside him.

He'd taken her presence for granted, never understanding how important her being there was to him. And that was before they became involved. Now, the aching knowledge of loss overpowered him, the feeling that a piece of him was missing and could never be recovered, that it was lost to him forever.

He turned back to his office. There was a meeting scheduled with the owners for ten o'clock. He wasn't looking forward to it. His attorney would arrive in a half hour to attend with him. It wasn't going to be pretty. Could he convince them that he hadn't committed any acts of treason as the papers so fondly proclaimed? He hoped so.

At one o'clock he was scheduled back at the FBI's office. They had more questions—or the same ones rephrased most likely. He was getting a little tired of them asking the same questions over and over again, thinking they were going to confuse him and make him confess to something that never happened and didn't exist. But he answered them all as calmly as possible, eager for it to be over with, needing them to make that final statement that would set him free from all the public innuendo and sly rumors. He wanted his life back. Maybe then he could start to recover his relationship with Toni.

He liked being Senior Editor at *Calisto*—it was the culmination of

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everything he'd worked for. He didn't look forward to all his dreams for its success being smashed because of what he considered a couple of harmless dates with an attractive woman. How had it all spiraled so out of control?

* * *

She'd found some sense of balance from her time away from the apartment. She felt able to face things a little better now. She'd even managed to eat some of the Chinese take-out she'd picked up on her way home. After taking a nice long, hot bubble bath, and pulling on some fleecy pajamas, she now curled up on the couch with a pint of double-dutch chocolate ice-cream, watching one of her favorite classic musicals, *South Pacific*. It was just getting to the good part where Mitzi Gaynor was washing that man right out of her hair, when the phone rang.

She glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall, noting it was a little after ten o'clock. Who could be calling her this late? She hesitantly set the ice cream container on the coffee table and reaching over, picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Is this Toni Fallon?" the accented voice asked.

Her heart thudded. "Who is this?" She wasn't about to admit anything to a voice she didn't recognize.

"This is Dom Brizano. Do you remember me, *Signorina* Fallon?"

She relaxed just a bit as she recognized the name. Sal's cousin. Her next thought was why would he be calling her?

"Yes, I remember. What can I do for you?"

"*Scusi* for bothering you this late, but I think Sal needs your help."

She doubted that very much. "Why would that be, Mr. Brizano. I doubt very much Sal needs anyone's help. He appears to me to be pretty self-sufficient." Her voice dripped ice in an attempt to hide her swirling emotions.

"*Signorina* Fallon, something happened today. He's been here at the

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restaurant since about five o'clock, drinking. It's not like him. I think he's in trouble. I know from what I saw the other night, you're important to him. He needs you. He won't talk to me."

Needed her? She highly doubted it. "Maybe you should call the woman he was with last night? She might be more help than I could ever be. Good-bye, Mr. Brizano."

"Wait, *per piacere!* Are you speaking of Felicia?"

"I couldn't say. We weren't introduced."

"*Perdizione!* There's been a mistake. It must have been Felicia. I think you have misunderstood. Felicia is my wife, *Signorina*. Sal was doing me a favor escorting her to the premiere. I was required to be here at the restaurant and she wished to see the movie. Sal offered several weeks ago to escort her."

Oh, God! Could it be true? Then why hadn't he told her? Why had he let her think...what she thought?

Then she remembered the papers that morning. The mystery woman's face had been plastered all over it, with questions as to who she was. Damn him! He didn't go near her the previous night because he didn't want them to link her with him. She wanted to shake him. How was she ever going to get through to him that she didn't need protecting?

"He's been there since five, you say?"

"*Si.*"

She bit her lip. "It will take me at least an hour to get there." She grabbed a piece of paper and pencil from a small drawer in the end table. "You better give me directions again as I've only been out there once. Can you keep him from leaving?"

"I have taken his car keys from his jacket. The only way he will be leaving is on foot or by taxi, *Signorina*. But at the rate he is going, I do not think he plans to leave soon."

She wrote down the directions, hoping she could find her way

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easily, maps were not her strong point. "I'll be there as soon as I can. And, Dom? Thank you for calling me."

"Prego, Signorina, but it is I who should be thanking you."

Toni rose from the couch, hurried into the bedroom and quickly donned another pair of jeans and a knit shirt. Pausing in the living room, she turned off the television, then picked up the container of melted ice cream and tossed it into the garbage can in the kitchen.

As she raced out the door, she couldn't help but think that Sal wasn't going to thank Dom for calling her. He'd probably be mad as hell. Too bad. It was about time he realized she was a lot stronger than she looked.

CHAPTER 9

Dom greeted her at the door to the restaurant. He held a finger to his lips and motioned for her to follow him inside.

The restaurant was closed and there was no one inside except a lone figure sitting on a stool before the piano. A half-full bottle of Jack Daniels rested on the top of the upright with a glass of sparkling amber liquid resting next to it. He was turned away from the door, shrouded in shadows, the only light, a small spotlight directly above him. She saw him lift the saxophone to his lips and recognized the beginning notes of *Nature Boy*. She thought it a very lonely tune.

Quietly she pulled out a chair and sat at a table near the door, not wanting to disturb him yet. She listened to the sad strains of the melody. Dom had left her once she was seated. He now placed an espresso on the table before her and then returned to the kitchen, shutting the door behind him. The song slowly came to a haunting close. His profile was to her and she watched as he lowered the sax and

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gazed across the room, seemingly deep in thought. He turned to the piano and reached for the glass.

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink?" At her words, she saw his broad shoulders stiffen, then relax.

"Not nearly enough." He muttered without turning around. He raised the glass to his lips and downed the remaining liquid with one swallow. Turning back to his impromptu bar, he placed the glass on the piano, picked up the bottle and poured another generous measure.

Toni had seen enough. She rose from her seat and walked toward him. "Wallowing in self-pity? What happened today?"

With deliberate motions, he set the saxophone back in its stand and swiveled around to face her. "Where were you today?" he demanded. She was surprised by the fact that his words were clear, and his eyes focused, not blurry as she expected. "Why weren't you at work?"

She stopped in front of him. "I called in sick." She shrugged and offered a small wry smile. "Wallowing in self-pity. By all rights, looking at that bottle, you should be passed out on the floor right now."

"Liquor doesn't work like that with me. I only wish it did."

"Self-pity doesn't become you, Sal. Get over it and stop acting like a jerk."

His head snapped up and he glared at her. "Jerk? Did you just call me a jerk?"

"Yes, I did. A loveable jerk, but still a jerk. Why aren't you fighting back? You know the media—you eat, sleep, and breathe it. So what's your problem?"

She saw surprise mirrored in his eyes, then something sparked in them, and he shook his head and laughed. The fire returned. "Loveable, huh? I've missed you. You know, I've always written the news, not been the subject of it. I guess this blindsided me."

"And now?"

He shrugged. "I got canned today, not much I can do." His gaze met

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hers. "And you weren't in the office."

"You were fired?" she couldn't believe they'd fired him.

"Technically. The owners suggested a leave of absence until the dust settled, was the way they put it." He turned away from her.

"Stupid people. But they'll figure it out soon enough. You're the one who put the spark back into that magazine. And they're going to find they can't do without you."

His dark gaze came back to her. "Kind of like the way I feel about you," he said quietly.

She couldn't have heard him right. "I don't understand."

"When you weren't in the office today, something inside me was missing. I think I've always taken you for granted." He reached out, pulling her toward him. "You made me realize today how much I love you. I have for quite some time, I think."

Her eyes widened in surprise as she looked at him. "You what?" She couldn't catch her breath and her voice was barely above a whisper. He could not have said he loved her.

He cupped her face. "I said I love you. Can you forgive me for trying to push you away? I really did want to protect you, but I'm finding I can't simply let you walk out of my life. I can handle losing my job, but I can't handle losing you."

She wound her arms around his neck. "You haven't lost me. I love you, too. I thought you didn't want me any more. That it was just a fling for you."

"I know. I wanted you to assume that. I thought it would be easier for you." He lifted his head. "I suppose Dom told you about Felicia."

She nodded. "Yes, he did. And when I realized what you were trying to do. Well...let's just say, it's a good thing you weren't standing in front of me then. I was ready to throttle you."

His gaze centered on her lips. "I need to taste you," he growled. "It's been too long."

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She felt the heat begin to coil inside her. “So what’s stopping you?” she whispered.

His mouth captured hers and she opened to him, tasting the bite of whiskey, mixed with his spicy heat, wanting more. He pulled her to him, pressing her close and she could feel his hard erection against her center.

Ignoring the tingling, she lifted her head and looked at him. “I’m not making love with a drunk.”

There was a glint in his eyes. “I told you, I don’t get drunk.”

Her hand trailed along the length of his silky, shadowed jaw. “Hmmm. If you say so. I’m still not making love with you. Alcohol has a tendency to deaden the senses.” She leaned in, placing her lips next to his ear and whispered. “And I want you fully aware when you fuck me, mister.” She stepped away from him, pulling him up from the stool. “But I am taking you home and getting you sober. I think we’ve kept your cousin long enough. He’s got a wife waiting for him, you know.”

“What about my car?”

“We’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

He grabbed his leather jacket, slung it over his shoulder, and slowly followed her to the door. “Just a minute.” He walked to the kitchen door. “Dom. We’re leaving,” he yelled.

Dom stepped to the entrance. “Well, it’s about time.”

“You could have just kicked me out if you wanted to get home.”

Dom shook his head. “I don’t think so. You were in need of a good...kick and I thought *Signorina* Fallon was just what you needed. And I was right, wasn’t I? As usual.” He offered Sal a smug grin.

“Don’t get cocky, *amico*, or I’ll tell Felicia about that poker party you’re planning for next week.”

Dom sputtered. “That is taking unfair advantage.”

“Hah! Anyway, thanks Dom, you’ve always been there for me.”

“And will continue to be so.” Sal walked away, pulling Toni with

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him. Dom yelled after them. "I expect to be best man at your wedding."

* * *

The next morning, Toni was awakened by a tickle against her neck, then a moist tongue slid along the curve of her ear.

She didn't open her eyes, but her lips curved into a smile. "What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"I'm giving you a wake-up call, what did you think?" he murmured as he slowly pulled her t-shirt from her.

She shivered as his tongue trailed along her spine, and over the curve of her buttocks. "Sal," she gasped and tried to turn over. He smelled delicious, fresh, and male.

He held her in place. "Oh no, this is going to be nice and leisurely. A unique experience for us, making love in an actual bed."

She relaxed and giggled. "Very unique." Then she gasped as she felt his hands, cool and damp, move under her to cup her breasts and tease her nipples.

"You have such a delicious body, honey. It's going to take me a long time to appreciate it properly."

She felt his hard cock ease against the crease of her bottom and she couldn't help moving against him, wanting to feel him inside her.

The position they were in felt decadent and her pussy wept with pleasure. "Sal?"

She felt him remove a hand from one of her breasts, trailed downwards, and a finger slowly entered her moist channel.

"Ah, you're ready for me, sweetheart. Do you feel how ready you are?" He slid his finger deeper, then another one joined the first.

"Sal, please," she cried.

"Not just yet, honey. Soon."

He turned her over and she arched to him. He placed a pillow beneath her hips, elevating her. He brought his hands to cup her breasts, teasing her hardened, sensitive nipples, as his mouth fastened at her

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entrance, his tongue teasing her, driving her higher.

Her fingers threaded through his damp hair, tightening, drawing him closer. She cried out, panting with need, as she spiraled higher and finally burst into a thousand pieces. She tried to drift back down, but Sal was having none of it. His tongue teased at her clit, until again, she arched hard into his mouth.

As she was about to tumble again, he rose above her, leaving her poised at the precipice. She felt his hard shaft tease at her sensitive, engorged entrance. With one long thrust he entered and filled her. She cried out, her nails digging into the strong muscles of his back.

Slowly he powered in and out, and she matched him thrust for thrust. Winding her legs around his hips, he sank deeper, touching her most sensitive core. He brought a hand down to tease her clitoris and she whimpered. “Sal, please. Harder. Faster.”

Answering her plea, he moved and she again flowed over him, cresting and drowning in their mutual passion. In one final, long thrust, he filled her and she felt his release as he flew into the sun.

But he didn’t stop. He loved her again, teasing, touching, worshiping, building her desire, to where her orgasm was a never ending long explosion with peak after peak, blending, sending her almost into unconsciousness in a delirium of pleasure.

He lay beside her now, stroking her naked, slick body as she dozed, exhaustion overtaking them both.

She knew he was awake and thinking—she could feel it in the changed rhythm of his breathing, a tenseness in the air. “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m trying to decide how to keep you out of this mess I’m in when I can’t keep my hands off you.”

She smiled. “Stop worrying about it, will you? I’ve told you before, I can handle the gossip.”

He curled his arm around her. “I remember what you said—”

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She turned and wrapped her arms around him. “Will you forget what I said?” Her heavy sigh was one of exasperation. “I lied, okay? I’m much stronger than I led you to believe. I was trying to keep you at a distance. It was my only ammunition.”

“I don’t want you hurt by all this. Can *you* understand my need to protect you?”

She ran her fingertips along his forearm. “Yeah, this macho thing you seem to have...protect the little woman. I bet you don’t think Felicia can’t handle herself, do you?”

“Well, no...”

She threw her head back and looked him in the eyes. “Well, I can do anything she can do. So get used to it.”

“I have no doubt, firecat. You don’t give an inch, do you?”

She leaned her head back on his shoulder, cuddling close. “You betcha, so get used to it. We face this together. We start out as we mean to continue.”

He reached down between them. “Then get ready, baby, because I need you again. Right now.” He rolled her to her back, spreading her wide, following fast, as with one quick movement, he entered her. She was slick and ready, no preliminaries necessary. “And this,” he thrust deep, “is how it’s going to continue, because it’ll never be enough.”

CHAPTER 10

On Monday, Sal finally spoke up publicly about his liaison with Seleena Aved. Much to Toni's frustration, he was still adamant about not involving her. Important as she thought it was to stand by his side, showing her support, she didn't push the issue. Not yet.

A week later the FBI finally issued a statement to the media that Sal was cleared of involvement in any kind of terrorist activity. Sal and Toni celebrated quietly—and passionately—in her apartment.

"This is nice," he said as he held her in his arms while they lay cuddled on the couch watching an old movie.

"You sound surprised."

"I've never spent much time at home. I've always been on the move. There's always been something else that needed to be done, some party to make an appearance at."

She leaned her head against the back of the couch to look up at him. "Seems I mentioned a while back what I thought your problem was."

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He frowned down at her. "You did? When?"

"At the museum. When I told you I thought you needed new friends."

He chuckled and leaned back. "Yeah, I guess you did. And you were right." He leaned down to kiss her, then she snuggled closer.

"What do you think the magazine owners will do now?"

"I met with them this morning."

It was like fireworks exploded in the center of the living room. Toni bounded off the couch. "You what? And you didn't tell me?"

Sal slowly sat up. "I didn't want you to get your hopes up, and I knew you would."

"Damn right. Did they apologize?" She paced the length of the living room, pivoted and turned back to him. "Well?" she demanded when he didn't answer right away. "What happened?"

He gave her a crooked, smug grin. "Well, they didn't exactly apologize—"

"Why not, I'd like to know? They were wrong and they should have admitted it." She stopped in front of him, hands on hips.

He reached out and pulled her to him. "I love it when you get all protective like that." He placed a kiss on her exposed bellybutton.

"Don't do that," she said breathily. "I'm trying to have a serious discussion here."

He nipped at the sensitive flesh. "Mmmm, I know, and I appreciate that." He then ran his tongue around the circumference of the tiny well. "You taste sweet, baby."

"Stop trying to distract me." She shivered at the pleasant vibrations running through her body. Her hands tangled in his short, dark hair. "What did they say?" She encouraged him to stop by forcing his head back so he was looking up at her. "Well?"

He sighed and pulled her down into his lap. "I have to be back at work on Monday. They've apparently decided I'm not as easy to

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replace as they thought.”

“I should think not.”

“Okay, so now you know. Can we go back to having a nice relaxing evening?” He leaned forward apparently intent on kissing her.

She pushed at his shoulders. “Wait.”

He leaned back and took a long, frustrated breath. “Now what?”

“What about us?” she bit her lip and looked away from him.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you ashamed of our relationship, Sal? Is that why you don’t want anyone to know about it?” She needed to know what was going through his mind. In the time they’d been together, they hadn’t been out in public, in the city, once. Even after the FBI made their announcement, he’d kept their relationship secret.

Now, he looked at her a glint in his eye. He sat her on the couch and stood up. “Dammit, no, that’s not it at all. I simply don’t want you being roasted by the newspapers for being involved with me.”

“But I told you I could handle it. The FBI has cleared you, the magazine wants you back. So what is it? I need you to be honest with me.”

He turned away from her and ran a hand through his hair. She waited impatiently. Then he turned back to her.

“Okay, if you must know, I’m being selfish.”

She looked at him quizzically. “Selfish? How?”

“I don’t want to share you yet.” He moved to kneel down in front of her. “If we make it public, they’ll be invitations, the whole social scene to do.” He reached out and tugged her toward him, nuzzling her neck. “I want you to myself for a while longer. This is peaceful and I like it. I like how you make me feel. I like how I feel when I’m with you. And just so you know, I’ve never felt like this with anyone before.”

Her heart leapt at his words. She smiled and leaned back, allowing him full access to her neck, which he took advantage of. Slowly he

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pulled her jogging pants from her body and followed them with his own.

Fire raced through her in anticipation. “Well, that’s good,” she said breathlessly, “because I like being with you and how you make me feel, too.” She tried not to let him distract her, but it wasn’t working. “Sal, wait.” He obviously wasn’t listening to her, intent on nibbling his way down her neck, pushing aside her shirt to gain access to her aching breast. “Sal—”

“I hear you, baby. Soon...we’ll go public soon, okay?” He stopped and looked down at her, his eyes dilated, urgent. “You are going to marry me, right?”

She pulled his head down to her, smiled but didn’t answer. “Mmmm, I’ll think about it. Right now, I think we have more important issues at hand.”

He lowered himself over her. “You turn my brain to mush, do you know that?” he growled.

She gave him a lopsided smile, and reached down with her hand. “Your brain may be mush, but your cock is anything but. Fuck me, darling.”

“Oh, yeah, sweetheart,” he murmured as he thrust deep.

* * *

This was the day. His fifteen miserable minutes in the spotlight were over and it was time to get his life back on track. He had a ring in his pocket and he planned to take Toni out to dinner—someplace very public. In the city.

She hadn’t agreed to marry him yet, and for the first time in his life, he was nervous. What if she didn’t love him enough to marry him? He felt like a young boy again, asking for his first date.

He walked into the *Calisto Magazine* offices to a round of applause and welcome backs. A few people stopped to shake hands with him. It felt good to be back in his office. He thrived on the energy of the place,

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the adrenalin already rushed through him.

The first place his eyes were drawn to was Toni's office. He now realized ever since she'd started working there, it was the first place he looked whenever he entered the office. Confirming her presence, seeing her was almost like a drug he needed before he could start his day.

She sat there, watching him. Slowly, she rose to her feet. There was intent in her eyes. He watched as she walked out of her office, determination in her stride, as she made her way to him.

When she reached him, her fragrance wrapped around him.

"Mr. Senior Editor, it's good to have you back." Her voice was formal, her gaze wasn't.

"Good to be back, Ms. Graphic Artist Extraordinaire," he murmured in response.

He watched as one of her eyebrows arched and she got a glint in her blue gaze. "I've an answer to your question. That is, if you still want it."

There was a buzz in the air around him, he could hear people whispering, but paid no attention. He was totally focused on her. "You know, this isn't exactly PC."

"PC?"

"Politically correct."

"Ah, yes." The right corner of her mouth curved upwards as she surveyed him. "Worried I'm going to put you back in the headlines?"

He reached out and pulled her close. He heard a collective gasp and more buzzing behind him. He lowered his head. "So what's the answer, Ms. Fallon? You've kept me waiting long enough. Are we about to go public? You better be certain this is what you want."

Her eyes darkened, her smile widened, and in a clear voice she said. "Darn right, I'm sure. I love you, Sal Aguerro and, yes, I'll marry you. And this is one liaison that's going to be very public and very, very good."

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“This is one darn fine day. What more could a man ask for in life?” He lifted her, captured her lips, molding her to him, and offered a very graphic demonstration to the startled audience of exactly how much he loved her.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com.

* * *

***Don't miss Eluria's Enforcer, by Adrianna Dane,
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Devon Andromeda, a Nanus-altered Argadian Enforcer of the First Level, is assigned the mission to hunt down and eliminate Eluria Zydou, a rebel leader, who also happens to be the daughter of an Elite

Tribunal Commander. Enforcers are altered and trained as assassins who retain no memories, or humanoid emotions that would hamper their purpose. Aggression is the only emotion unblocked in an Enforcer; the Tribunal directs their existence.

Eluria Zydon's life is filled with more than enough memories and emotions for both Devon and her. She lives with the guilt of past injustice and her life has been dedicated to finding the cure to set Devon and those like him free. It is a payment she prays will also free her soul once and for all from her tormenting past.

Confrontation on the lifeless planet, Serdion, will change them both forever. An explosion delivers Devon into Eluria's hands. An experimental drug opens the floodgates to Devon's emotions...and his memory. The first emotion he faces, and must learn to control, is desire. Eluria has been trained as a Twilight Companion and has the knowledge to help him harness his passions. Will he accept her help? Or is his only intent to complete his mission—her termination?

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