



Salvation: The Italian's Story
By Reana Malori



Salvation

The Italian's Story

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Dedication

To The Italian . . . This one's for you baby.

Chapter One

“Come on girl, you can do this.” Sydney Clark gave herself a pep talk as she stood outside of *Antonio's*, an upscale restaurant in downtown Boston. “First, you need this job. Second, you love working in restaurants. If you ever want to have your dream career as a Chef, you need to start somewhere.”

While in high school and college, Sydney worked at fast food places and fine restaurants to make ends meet. None of them compared to *Antonio's*. Arriving for her interview the other week, she was impressed with the restaurant's décor of deep mahogany hues and burgundy accents. The low lighting provided only enough illumination to see your dining partner. Booths were the only seating available and their height created an illusion of privacy for the diners. In her opinion, it was a perfect setting for a romantic night out.

Antonio's opened five years ago to critical acclaim. The co-owners, Arturo and Angelo Sabatino had been up and coming Chefs who decided to open a restaurant in honor of their father, Antonio.

Born and raised in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, their humble upbringing gave them a drive that made them extremely successful. Their father had worked his entire life to provide a good life for his wife and two sons until his death fifteen years ago from a heart attack, and his untimely passing nearly tore the family apart. As a family, they had looked to their father for support and guidance, and then all of a sudden he was gone. They could think of no better way to honor their father than to finish college and then work hard to achieve a success their father would have been proud of.

Both brothers had been in college when the senior Sabatino had passed, and the following year they changed their major from pre-law to culinary studies. They then transferred from the University of Rhode Island to Johnson & Wales and never looked back. They took extra classes in subjects they were unfamiliar with, but they were on a mission. Once they realized that both their fellow students, and more importantly their instructors, enjoyed their culinary creations, they knew they had found their calling.

Sydney had read anything she could grab about these two elusive bachelors and secretly had a crush on both of them. Although it was Arturo who

really made her pulse race and filled her dreams at night. Both Arturo and Angelo had enjoyed consistent coverage from the Boston media, so much of what she knew was second hand knowledge. People loved to speculate about their lives. Who were they dating? Was it love? Would wedding bells ring anytime soon? It never seemed to stop. Arturo was thirty-six years old and Angelo was thirty-four, but even though they were still considered young, they were obviously on a roll.

From what she could tell, Angelo was the friendlier and more level-headed of the two. Arturo on the other hand was a hot head and was also rumored to be quite an asshole by many who dealt with him. There had been several scuffles reported by the news organizations, typically over something minor, and Arturo was usually at the center of it. Arturo's bad boy personality certainly didn't stop women from wanting to be seen in public with him. If anything, it seemed to increase his attraction to the ladies.

Even though her dreams at night were filled with images of two sexy ass Italian men taking turns paying homage to her body, today was about business. It was her first day in her new job as a hostess for *Antonio's* and she wanted to make a good impression.

Looking down at her outfit for the first evening of work, Sydney knew she looked damn hot. She could admit that she had not been able to appreciate her look or shape until a few years ago.

Unfortunately, while she was growing up, she had never been confident or comfortable in her own skin. She was too thick in the hips, her breasts too big, and her nose too black for her to truly be considered "pretty". At least that was the message she picked up from the magazines and on the television screen.

She had always thought her looks were passably good and that she was "cute", but she'd never been told she was beautiful. Sure, her parents had told her she was beautiful almost daily, but it was their job to love her just the way she was.

A few of her high school and college friends had the beautiful moniker attached to them. Never Sydney. However, as time passed, her confidence grew and she became comfortable indeed with her looks. As she grew older and realized that beauty came in many forms, her outlook and opinion of

her attractiveness and sexuality began to change as well. It no longer mattered that her nose was not skinny or her hips a little too thick, she was beautiful in her own way and never again would she doubt herself or her appeal.

No matter what came her way, she always held her head high and walked down the street as if she had all the confidence in the world. She would not apologize for who she was and anyone who didn't respect that could just kiss her ass. People could hate her if they chose to do so, that was their choice. She refused to allow the opinions of others to change the way she ran her life. It was always better to be liked and wanted, and she had experienced her fair share of each over the years. However, at this point in her life, she lost no sleep over whether or not she was pretty enough, sexy enough, or thin enough. She knew there were men who found her irresistible and that felt damn good.

Hitching her bag over her shoulder, Sydney opened the door to *Antonio's* and walked in. She was ready for anything tonight and had several pep talks with herself as she drove to the restaurant. She walked over to the hostess station and placed her purse underneath for easy access. Although Angelo had said a locker would be available for her use, she was too nervous to go looking for one. Not seeing anyone in the lobby, Sydney considered searching for a staff member, but decided against it. Angelo said he would be here today, but he was the owner for goodness sakes and she was sure he was doing "owner stuff".

"Plus, I'm sure he doesn't want me to seek him out as if I don't know what to do," she said aloud to break the silence.

Sydney opened the reservation book and began to scan the list of people who decided to have an evening out at *Antonio's* tonight. She didn't have access to the reservation computer just yet, so this was the next best way to prepare for her first day. So lost in the process of looking over the reservations and memorizing the names and number of people in the dinner parties, she failed to notice the two men who walked into the dining area until she heard one of them speak.

Chapter Two

"Who the hell is that?"

"Stop yelling Arturo, and show some manners for once. Who are you talking about?"

"Her! The woman sitting at one of our tables slowly going through our reservation book. Do you know her?"

"Ah, yes, I do. That's our new hostess and her name is Sydney Clark. Excuse me while I go say hello."

Hearing the outburst from Arturo, Sydney looked up and met his gaze. Although his eyes appeared to be almost golden in color, and were quite beautiful, the fire that glowed in their depths was far from comforting.

"Oh shit. This doesn't look good." Although she said this under her breath, she was almost certain that Angelo heard her as he made his way over toward the booth.

"Good afternoon Sydney. I'm so glad you could make it."

"Thanks Angelo. Your brother doesn't seem too happy to see me. Is there a problem?"

"No, he's just cranky today. *Antonio's* is being featured in a new magazine article and the managing editor is coming in for dinner sometime this week. We just want everything to be perfect. Since the notice did not say when he would arrive, he could be here on any given night. Arturo will be fine once it's over."

"Maybe this isn't the best night for me to start. I can come back tomorrow or later this week if that would be better." Sydney hoped he would not take her up on the offer. If she walked out that door today, she wasn't sure if her nerves would allow her to come back. Arturo might be a bear, but she needed to face him head on. If she ever decided to become a chef or own her own restaurant, there would be more people like him that she would have to deal with. Now was as good a time as ever to learn how to handle someone like him.

Angelo gave her a gorgeous smile, which she was sure had melted the hearts of many women, and a few men. He sat down at the table with her and gave her a look that hinted at a bit of mischief.

"No, I really want you to start this evening, but I have to confess that Arturo usually does the interviewing and hiring. While he knows I was interviewing for a new hostess, he was a little, shall we say, "upset" that I didn't go through him first."

"Angelo, are you telling me that the person I'm going to be working with every day doesn't want me here? Please, tell me I didn't accept a job where I'm going to be battling my boss everyday." She sighed and briefly shut her eyes. "While I'm really excited about this job, I just don't need the hassle. Plus, he's a co-owner. He could make things very difficult for me."

"No, he won't. Listen, when I interviewed and hired you, I did it for a reason. You are the best person for the job and you were head and shoulders above anyone else who came in for an interview. Just give Arturo time to get to know you. Things will be fine. And if they're not, let me know. I know how to handle my brother." He stood up and extended his hand. "Now, let's get you situated and introduce you to the team."

Sydney heaved a sigh and stood up next to Angelo. If only her crush was on this Sabatino brother, things would be much simpler. While handsome as the devil, Angelo didn't make her want to push him back on one of the tables and have her wicked way with him.

In one of the numerous articles written about the brothers, she recalled that his fiancé had been killed in a car crash a few years ago. There was speculation that he never gotten over the loss. It was a very sad situation, but one that she wasn't going to touch with a ten-foot pole. If the article had been correct and he still hadn't gotten over his lost love, she truly hoped he found someone to give him back the happiness he deserved.

As they walked toward the back of the restaurant, she could feel Arturo's hot stare. Why would some she never met seem to dislike her so? While it would have been nice to have him as her friend, someone in her corner, she would still do a good job without it. He had been damn rude to her, especially as a new employee, and she was a little offended by his behavior. Not bothering to look in his direction as she walked by Arturo, she followed Angelo to the back of the restaurant.

Arturo was shocked. She didn't even acknowledge his presence! What the hell was that all about? No woman had ever walked by him and not at least given him a side glance. Okay, sure, he could have been a little less loud and obnoxious when he saw her sitting in the booth. But now he was pissed. He knew Angelo had hired a new hostess, but he had expected to see someone...different.

Arturo growled low in his throat. Damn! Angelo had done this on purpose. He knew of Arturo's effort to stay away from any woman who reminded him of the one he let get away—Nicole. He was younger then and had thought the world revolved around him and his needs. He had been a fool to think his money and power would guarantee that she would never leave him. Wrong! No matter how many gifts and expensive trips he had given her, when she left him that final time, the one thing she said she wanted most of all was him. Just him. Fool that he was at the time, he had never considered that the one thing truly within his power to give her, and didn't have to buy, was the one thing she felt was missing.

He'd heard through the grapevine that she married a really decent guy and was living a good life. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that there were times at night after the crowds left and the quiet became stifling, that he wondered why he couldn't really open up and express his feelings to Nicole when she needed him most. No one had ever come close to replacing her, but then again, once she left, he made a point to date only women who were the total opposite of her.

Nicole had been mixed with African-American and Japanese and was maybe the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. Until now, that is. There was something about this woman sitting in his restaurant so casually that caused his body to react strongly, as if the feelings and emotions he had suppressed so long, were finally coming back to life.

Damn, he really did not need this right now. Life was good and he needed no romantic entanglements to mess things up. He had finally gotten rid of his ex-girlfriend, who did not seem to understand the words *go away*. At least not when it came to him. It has taken him more than a year to finally get her out of his life and he couldn't be happier. No, he did not need the headache and he definitely would not allow Ms. Sydney Clark to get under his skin.

However, he was a man who fully appreciated a beautiful woman and he could admit that her luscious curves and beautiful face had caught his attention. Her skin was smooth and reminded him of whipped chocolate. Her clothes didn't seem intended to showcase her curves, but the way her skirt molded to her hips—wow, he'd never seen anything sexier. Her lips were perfectly formed, with just enough thickness to make them irresistibly kissable. Her gloss gave them a shine that drew his eyes to them, tempting him beyond anything he had seen or experienced in years. Damn, his new hostess was one sexy woman.

As he turned his thoughts back to the upcoming evening, he stood up to walk back into the kitchen. As he walked in that direction, he couldn't help but move toward the sounds coming from his office. He recognized his brother's voice and knew he was talking to Sydney about her new job. Then he got pissed—again. Who the hell did she think she was, coming in here and tempting him this way? He didn't need these complications in his life. Not now, not ever! Shit! This was not good. He really had to get control.

Arturo turned and walked away from the office, intent on forgetting all about the reaction he had to their new hostess. He was not going to make a fool of himself over her. He would stay as far away from her as he could. And when he couldn't stay away because of work, then he would make sure their relationship was strictly correct and professional. That was the only way he could keep his sanity. Only problem with that approach was convincing his swelling cock.

Chapter Three

Sydney was in her element. Although the work week had a rocky start, she was in a groove and loving life right now. The restaurant was packed to the rafters and the reservation book did not have an open entry. The phone was ringing off the hook and the crowds were endless. The best thing about the night was that every single customer had a smile on their face when they left the restaurant. To cap off the night and their experience at *Antonio's*, she made sure to say goodbye to everyone and wish them a good night.

There had been a tricky moment when the managing editor of the magazine walked in the door tonight. The lobby was jammed when he arrived, and except for the suddenly panicked look on the servers faces Sydney would have missed him. She quickly pasted a smile on her face and swung into action. The skills at moving a crowd, which she had learned while working in a local sports bar during college, had come in handy.

Within five minutes every single person standing in the lobby had been seated. Sydney called back to the kitchen to alert them to the editor's arrival and to make sure that everyone was on top of their game. Within thirty seconds of the call, Arturo strolled out from the kitchen looking damn fine in his Chef whites to introduce himself personally.

From then on, the night was absolutely perfect. She caught glimpses of both Angelo and Arturo throughout the night as they walked around the restaurant and greeted customers. Each time Arturo smiled, her insides would turn to mush and her stomach would turn cartwheels. He had a devastating smile that made him even more handsome each time she saw it.

Several times throughout the night she had caught him looking at her when she glanced his way. Not only did she have no clue why Arturo kept looking at her, it pissed her off that each time they made eye contact, his smile would dissolve into a frown and this look of frustration, apparently aimed square at her, would cloud his face. This made absolutely no sense, considering how well she was doing tonight and had done all week. It was too bad that he was such an ass to her. If it wasn't for that, he would be almost perfect.

As the night wore on, the restaurant traffic hummed along and the kitchen was bustling. When the crowd finally tapered off and some of the tables remained empty, she glanced at the clock and noticed it was after midnight.

"Wow, time sure does fly when you're having fun," she whispered as she straightened up the papers on the hostess station.

Sure, she was tired, but her mind and body felt invigorated at the same time. Sydney loved the restaurant life and tonight had given her even more proof of that. She took a few more minutes to clean up the front area and marked off items in the reservation book to track the number of seated customers that had come through tonight. She then entered the information into the computer system to make sure the two tracking systems matched.

As she moved to take some of the pressure off her feet, she knew her work attire would have to change. If this was the normal pace each night, she would need more comfortable shoes, because there was no way she would survive another evening like this in three inch heels.

The last patrons didn't depart until almost one o'clock, and Sydney breathed a satisfied sigh as she locked the door behind them. The smiles on their faces confirmed that this had been yet another successful night for *Antonio's*. Now she could take a breather for five minutes before she checked out and went home.

The first thing she did after sitting down was to take off those torture devices, commonly referred to as "high heels", and stretched her toes. She lifted her right leg over the left and began massaging her sore foot, pressing her thumbs into the arch. Damn, that felt good! She would definitely have to make a trip to the salon tomorrow morning for a pedicure. As she continued massaging away the aches and pains, she momentarily forgot where she was and let out a loud moan.

"Well, that was an interesting sound." Arturo stood by the entrance to the kitchen and leaned up against the wall. Surprised to hear him, she gave involuntary wince. Damn, he must have just come out and heard her. He had an annoyed look on his face, again, and she could tell he didn't seem too happy to see her still sitting here. Just what she needed, another reason for him to dislike her.

"Oh, excuse me. My feet really hurt from standing and I just needed to take a break. I'll be going now." She could tell when she wasn't wanted and she had no desire to sit here and continue to let him growl at her.

His voice has a definite edge to it as he seemed to question her common sense. "Why didn't you wear comfortable shoes? Haven't you worked in a restaurant before? You should have been more prepared for this type of work."

He started to walk towards where she was sitting and Sydney went to grab her shoes and leave. It was just her luck that this sexy motherfucker had to be such a jerk. It just wasn't fair. She had fantasized about meeting him ever since she had read the first article about the two brothers. After all this time and finally seeing her fantasy realized, she was sorely disappointed.

In actuality, she was more disappointed she was still attracted to his fine ass even though the stories about his "stellar" personality were true. She would just have to put aside her cravings for him and move on. He wasn't worth it—well, he actually *was* worth it, but she would be damned if she would continue to lust after a man who couldn't be nice to her for two fucking minutes. It was almost like he went out of his way to be rude to someone he hardly knew.

Sydney winced as her still tender toes protested over being forced into her high heels. Damn, she'd never be able to walk out of here with her dignity intact. She actually did know better than to wear three inch heels when working as a restaurant hostess. Unfortunately, when she had gotten dressed this afternoon, she was more focused on looking good for the Sabatino brothers, especially the one standing in front of her right now. Her focus hadn't been where it should have and now she was definitely paying the price.

"Ms. Clark, what's wrong with you? Why are you being so stubborn? Are you in that much pain?"

"Call me Sydney. And yes, my feet are killing me but I'll be fine. I just needed to sit down for a bit. Once I get home, I'll give them the attention they need."

"Dammit Sydney, I will not have Angelo yelling at me because you can't walk. Don't move from that spot until you're ready. Just sit there for a few minutes and rest your feet."

Although it wasn't friendly, he made the offer and she was going to accept it. "Thanks. I just need a few minutes and I'll be on my way home. I'm scheduled to be back here tomorrow at four o'clock, so I need to get some sleep."

They sat quietly for a while, both trying to relax from the hectic pace of the evening rush. She noticed that Arturo had a glass of wine in his hand and as he brought the glass to his lips, her gaze was drawn to his mouth. Although he had not been very nice to her this week, she still found him irresistible. His full lips wrapped around the rim of the glass and when he finished his sip, there was just the tiniest hint of red wine lingering on his top lip. Damn, she wanted to lean over and lick it off. Then he did the sexiest thing she'd seen in years. The tip of his tongue came out and swept over his lip, gathering the remnants of the wine.

Hopefully he didn't notice her quiver as she felt her body instantly heat up. He was sex on a platter and he seemed completely unaware of the effect he had on her.

"Sydney? Sydney? Are you listening to me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you say?" Smooth move Sydney, let him catch you staring at his mouth. Damn girl! Get a grip.

"I asked you to tell me about yourself. I'm at a bit of a disadvantage since Angelo was the one who hired you. This week has been so hectic with preparations for the magazine editor, there hasn't been a chance for us to talk. What's your background? Why did you want to work here?"

Thank God the question was generic, because this she could handle. "First, Antonio's is one of the best restaurants in the city and its reputation is known all over Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. It's been featured in several culinary magazines and you and the press has followed the two of you since you opened the doors. It was a no-brainer! As far as my background goes, I recently graduated from Johnson & Wales with my culinary arts degree. I started college a little late in life since I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my career."

She dropped her right leg on the floor and lifted her left, intent on giving her other foot some much needed attention. "I've always loved cooking and creating meals for my family and friends. It's been a passion of mine and I have always been the one in my family to try new things when cooking. I have a skill for creating new combinations, whether it's spice combinations or sauces, or simply pairing one item with another. Once I made the decision to go to Johnson & Wales, I never looked back. Ultimately, I want to be an executive Chef, but I know I have to work my way up and someone has to take a chance on me. Whether or not I have that chance at Antonio's is yet to be seen, but if I'm going to have a good career, I can't think of a better place to start."

He nodded silently as she spoke, his eyes never leaving hers as she shared her dreams and hopes for the future.

"So, you can create meals from scratch?"

"Yes, I seem to have a skill for creating taste combinations that people like. I know not everyone can do it, but I've always been able to cook meals that people love."

"So, why aren't you working as a Chef in restaurant, or at least working in a kitchen? Why are you here as our hostess?"

Did she really want to go into all the reasons why she wasn't working in a kitchen? No, not really, but she knew she had to give him something.

"When I graduated, I had offers to work in a kitchen at several restaurants, but I didn't want any of them. Something always seemed to be missing. Pretty soon the offers stopped coming in. When that happened, I knew I had to make a decision about my next step, so I decided to start at the bottom and work my way up. I'll get my chance again one day."

Sydney knew that she had the skills to make it as a top-notch Chef. She just needed to find a kitchen where she could feel at home. How could she explain to Arturo that she'd never felt *right* about any of the offers made to her. Sure, she could be picky because it was her career, but sooner or later she would have to make a decision about which direction she wanted to go. If she had to take a little longer to get where she wanted to be, then that's what she would do.

She looked at Arturo and noticed he had a half-smile on his face and a gleam in his eye. What the hell was that all about? "So, if I were to ask you to go into the kitchen tonight and whip up a meal for my customers, with no prep, you're saying you could do it?"

Although she didn't want to appear over confident, she wasn't going to lie. "No problem..."

His look of disbelief wasn't encouraging, but then again he wasn't the friendliest man in the world. At least that's the type of person he was showing her tonight. Would it hurt for him to be a little friendly to her? After all, she was a new employee at his restaurant. Asshole!

Arturo couldn't help himself. He could tell she was getting riled up, but he couldn't stop. When she got angry, her eyes seemed to sparkle and her cheeks turned the most beautiful color, with just a hint of deep red highlighting her brown skin. Damn, he was definitely in trouble.

"I'll make deal with you. Come in at three tomorrow. If you're as good as you say you are then I'm going to give you a chance to prove it. I want to run a few things by you in the kitchen and see how you respond. I'm a pretty good judge of what it takes to be a good Chef and since you seem confident in your skills, I'd like to try you out." As soon as the words left his lips, he realized he gave her a double entendre. When he saw her gaze widen, he knew that she knew too.

"Uh, OK, sure. Just to be clear, I didn't tell you what I did so that you could hire me as a Chef. You asked about my background and I told you. I've already told all of this to Angelo and he understands why I wanted the hostess job. I don't expect any handouts."

"And I'm not giving you any. Listen, I know we didn't start off very well and that was unfortunate. How about we start over? I promise not to growl at you if you agree to not think of me as a jerk. Deal?"

Sydney smiled at him and his cock jerked to life, pressing against the seam of his pants. She truly was a beautiful woman and he wondered if she had any idea of how she turned him on. During the evening rush, when he'd come out to play friendly host with all the patrons, he just couldn't keep his

eyes off her. He was like a moth to a flame and he was helpless in her presence.

All evening he just couldn't keep his eyes off her hips and womanly curves as she worked the lobby and shepherded the customers to their seats. Her breasts were just perfect and looked as if they would fit within the palm of his hands, with just a little spillage. Mmmmm, just the way he liked it. The heels, which he now knew were the cause of her pain, made her calves curve beautifully and he had ached to wrap his hands around them and find out if her skin was as soft as it looked.

He knew he was treading a dangerous path, especially since his body reacted so strongly to her, but he couldn't stop. He hadn't been fair to her earlier today and he had to make up for it somehow. The easiest and most effective way to do that was to take an interest in something she enjoyed. It just so happened that they both enjoyed cooking.

This wasn't an attempt to get into her pants although he wouldn't refuse the chance. No, after his last girlfriend fiasco, he needed a break. It was time to take a long look at his life and decide what he was going to do with his future.

The restaurant was successful and things couldn't be better. Plus, he'd never give that up, no matter what. He loved being with his brother and living their dream—their father's dream. Although he was the older sibling by only two years, he and Angelo were like twins. They knew when the other was hurt, upset, or simply needed the other one's presence. Their connection was undeniable and he would continue to be there for his family until his last breath.

No, what he needed to reevaluate was whether he was done being viewed as the asshole brother, while Angelo was the silent, but misunderstood one. No one knew what it was like for him. Being the oldest son brought a lot of responsibility with it and he took his role quite seriously. He'd always been the one to look out for his family, even when his father had been alive. Now that his father was gone, his mother needed him even more. She needed Angelo as well, but he was the older brother and that made all the difference.

The true question was would his family ever include anyone else besides his brother and mother. His extended family was there as well, but it was

his brother and mother that whose approval he craved. Would he ever have the kind of love his parents had? After thirty years of marriage they had still had a deep and abiding love for each other. His mother still held on to that love, even after his father passed away. That just didn't happen anymore.

He lifted his eyes to the room and looked around at the employees cleaning up. His gaze returned to Sydney and saw her still rubbing her sore feet and looking way too tempting, even though she looked completely worn out. He suddenly realized he too was tired. Truly and deeply tired, and he knew it was time to make a change.

The first step toward inventing a new Arturo would be to have a friendly and non-confrontational conversation with his bewitching employee. That would start tomorrow when they met at three. Heaven help him, he hoped he could hold back his temptation to do more.

Chapter Four

Sydney was nervous about meeting Arturo at the restaurant. Not because he wanted to test her skills in the kitchen, because she knew they would be alone together. He was the star of her nightly dreams, making her toss and turn all night. She knew she should not think this way about her still enigmatic new boss. Sure, he had been much nicer at the end of the evening and the conversation was civil, even nice. Problem was, she didn't trust his sudden turnabout, and she didn't necessarily trust that his opinion of her had miraculously changed. Even though he tried hard not to growl at her while they spoke, she would continue to keep her guard up just in case he reverted back to his grouchy behavior.

The mere thought of spending time with him caused her body to burn from the inside out. Bound and determined to show him that she was not like the other women he had experienced before. Sydney was fully prepared to showcase her skills this afternoon. She would impress him with her cooking skills and food knowledge and he would see the value she could bring to the restaurant. If this truly was a chance to showcase her skills, then she would take it. Her skill in the kitchen was one of the things she was most proud of and she knew she was one of the best.

Well, it was time to put on her game face. As she looked in her bedroom mirror, her gaze fell on the clothes she'd picked for the day. She had taken great care at choosing her outfit for this meeting with Arturo. She wanted to be relaxed and comfortable, but she wasn't going to look like a slouch either. Her dark brown hair was brushed straight and pulled in a ponytail. A touch of make-up that served to highlight her skin tone and features rather than detract from them was applied to her face. She put on just enough to give her skin a nice glow and show off her best assets, which were her rosebud shaped lips and her long curved eyelashes.

Tailored black slacks framed her lower body and showcased her womanly hips. A royal blue blouse topped off the outfit and diamond stud earrings completed the look. She walked to her bedroom mirror and reached for her flats next to her dresser which she would wear tonight while she worked. There was no way she would be wearing heels again. She had definitely learned her lesson—a painful one at that. Her feet still ached and while the pedicure helped a great deal, she had no desire to repeat the painful experience of this past week.

Damn! Sydney looked at the clock and realized she only had an hour to get to work, so she rushed to complete the final wardrobe touches. Because traffic was always unpredictable, she needed to hit the road soon to make sure she would be there on time. Making the boss wait for her was not how she wanted to start the day, especially after how well things had gone last night. He seemed ready to give her a chance and Sydney was not going to screw this up. She grabbed her purse from the dresser, checked for her keys and wallet inside, then turned off the lights in her apartment and walked out the door.

As she drove to the restaurant, she wondered what exactly Arturo had in store for her. She was sure he doubted her skill in the kitchen, but then again, she hadn't applied for a Chef position. Maybe it hadn't been the best idea to tell him that she had a knack for creating food combinations. While it was true that she had never created a meal that people didn't love, she probably shouldn't have told Arturo. He probably viewed it as a challenge and saw a chance to bring her down a peg or two. Oh well, she would find out what he had in mind for her soon enough.

Arturo was nervous. He had never worried about meeting a woman before. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat, and so he decided to get to work early. He arrived at the restaurant just before two o'clock, almost a full hour before Sydney was scheduled to show up. As he paced the floor waiting for her to come through the front door, he didn't want to explore all the reasons why he was so excited about this meeting with her.

Arturo told himself that he was just excited about sharing his kitchen with someone who had a passion for cooking as much as he did. After spending a few minutes with her last night, he realized that she was a friendly and engaging person. Someone that he wanted to get to know better. Plus, if she was going to succeed as their hostess, she would need to understand what it took for him and his kitchen staff to create the wonderful dishes that came out of the kitchen each night.

He had several new menu items that he wanted to add to the menu, and he really needed a second opinion. His brother was a good taster and was always willing to help out, but he sometimes felt that Angelo told him the dishes tasted good just to appease him. For some reason, he did not think

Sydney would pull any punches. She seemed to be honest to a fault and he found that extremely refreshing.

Analyzing why he could not stop thinking about her since yesterday was not worth doing, at least not when he was sitting here like a caged lion waiting to pounce. Even though his dreams had been filled with images of her naked and writhing beneath him, he had to be careful today and would not overstep his boundaries, even if it killed him.

He heard the door open and looked at the clock. Three o'clock sharp! She was right on time for the meeting, which he liked. It showed that she respected his time and as such, respected him as well. Walking out of the kitchen, he couldn't help but notice how beautiful she looked today. He almost came to a full stop when he saw her. His fists clenched and his nails dug into his hand as he struggled to control his reaction. *Shit! She's an employee Arturo. Control yourself.*

"Hi Sydney, I'm glad you decided to come in early." He heard the huskiness of his voice and hoped she didn't pick up on it. How the hell was he going to get through an entire hour of being alone with her?

"Well, you're the boss and you asked me to be here at three o'clock today. So, here I am."

"True, but this is outside the original job description. So, I appreciate you arriving a bit early to humor me. I have some new recipes that I'd like to try out and our conversation last night gave me an idea."

"Is it a good one?"

"It is, but I want you to hear me out first." He reached out for her arm, but pulled back at the last minute. "Let's sit down."

He walked over to the bar area and waited for Sydney to curve her lush body into the booth before taking the seat across from her. "Sydney, my creativity comes out in the kitchen, in the dishes I create for *Antonio's*. Up to this point, it's been a success and I haven't been let down yet. However, from the time it takes me to create an idea and up through all of the tasting and changing of ingredients, it can take up to three months for me to get a meal from concept to the menu. This is where I think you can help me."

"Uh-oh. I think this spells trouble, but I'm still listening."

“Good, I think you’ll like the idea. Last night you said you have a skill for creating a meal and instantly knowing if it’s going to be successful. I want you to be my taster. I also want your opinions on presentation of the meal. You can taste my creations and tell me if they’re good or not. Tell me if they would appeal to our customers. If they’re good, we put them on the menu. If they’re not, we keep trying.”

“You’re right. That’s way out of the original job description, but I guess I asked for it. Still, I don’t know if I want that kind of pressure.”

“Sure you do.” He smiled after making this outrageous assumption on her behalf, but he could see that she was intrigued by his suggestion. “You told me last night that you’re a good Chef. Well, from one Chef to another—I’d like your help. I need you to help me become better.”

He could tell she was thrown off kilter by his request. This idea may not work and she may not be any good, but he had to find a way to spend more time with her. Asking her to help him was the best thing he could come up with at the time.

“Are you sure? What if you create something and I absolutely hate it. Should I tell you that? I won’t lose my job if I tell you something isn’t good, right?”

He laughed, although he knew it was a valid question. Maybe his reputation really was horrible. *He couldn’t be that bad, could he?* “No, Sydney. I’ll even let Angelo know what you’re doing so that he can keep me in line. Come on, what do you think?”

“Okay, fine. I’m in. When do we start?”

“Right now. Come on, let’s go get started. I already have a few things for you to taste.”

As they turned to walk into the kitchen, Arturo let Sydney enter through the doors ahead of him and he was able to catch a whiff of her scent. She smelled so good, he wanted to reach out and pull her in his arms and take a deeper inhale. Damn, he really had it bad and he knew—right at that moment—that she would be his. There was no way he would be able to keep his distance.

He watched her take a seat at one of the stools in front of three dishes that he'd already prepared. He wasn't going to tell her the ingredients in each dish, because he truly wanted her honest reaction to the taste. He had a glass of wine for her to drink as she tasted each item, which would allow her to experience the entire meal as it would be presented.

While he had no doubt that he was good at what he did—some might say great, he was nervous about her tasting the food. He really wanted Sydney to like the meals he had prepared. It seemed very important to him and he felt the churn of nerves in his stomach as she eyed the dishes with a hungry gaze.

"So, can I start?" Sydney had already picked up the fork and was ready to dig in.

"In a second." He watched as she laid the fork back down on top of the napkin. "Okay, so I really want your honest reaction to the meal, but I don't just want "yes, it's good" or "no, it sucks", I want to know why you make one decision or another. Can you do that?"

"Sure. Why are there three different wines? Are you trying to get me drunk before my shift?"

"Yeah, I wish, but no."

"What—?"

"That's not what the wine is for. I also want you taste the wine with the dish to let me know if I have the right pairing. It's all about the experience. So, are we you ready?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm ready."

Sydney knew she could not have heard him correctly. He was throwing out mixed signals all over the place. Was he serious? Hell, he looked serious. Every time he used that Sabatino charm on her, she couldn't help but fall under his spell a little more. Her luck could not be this good. Was she really going to be the taster for any new dishes created at *Antonio's*? Wait until she told her friend Krystal. There was no way she'd believe her.

She picked up the fork again, and went for the first dish. Her hand shook just a little, even though she wasn't really nervous about the dish. She was nervous about giving her opinion to Arturo. As she lifted the fork to her mouth, he looked like an eager kid on his birthday waiting to open his presents. He was as still as a statue and watching her every move.

"Okay, here goes nothing." She put the forkful of food in her mouth and almost fell off her chair. It was so good. "Mmmmm. Mmmmm. Oh my goodness, this is so good. The flavor just burst on my tongue. The combination of the textures is amazing. Wow, how did you do this?" She took another bite, which was just as delicious as the first. Damn, this man was good.

When she looked over at Arturo, his eyes were locked on hers and there was a very different look on his than the one she expected to find. It was a look she had never thought to see, at least not from him. Desire.

"Arturo? Are you okay?"

"Yes. Damn woman is that how you always respond to good food? If so, then I'll have to make sure I'm the only one who sees you like that."

"Not always, but if it's really good, then maybe." She picked up the wine and took a sip, since her throat had suddenly become quite dry.

Arturo stood up and walked over to her. "So, I take it you really liked my first dish."

"Yes, I did." Why did her voice sound low and husky? Oh, right, because he was inches away from her and her hands ached to reach out and touch him.

"Good. I'm glad. Oh, wait, you have a little something—." He then reached out his thumb and rubbed the side of her mouth, removing a bit of sauce. He caught her gaze as he pulled his thumb into his mouth and sucked. "All better."

Her panties instantly became dripping wet. Oh my goodness! This is why so many women wanted him. Her body instinctively moved toward him, not sure what she was hoping to find, but unable to resist. When he moved back unexpectedly, she snapped back in her seat, steadying her nerves and forcing her thoughts away from the sexy man in front of her.

“So, how about the next one, huh?” One corner of his mouth was turned up, as if daring her to say something about what had just occurred.

“What? Oh, sure.” Sydney picked up a clean fork and moved on to the second dish. *She could do this. She could get through this.* That mantra floated through her mind as she picked up the next bite of food. She was bound and determined to not be tempted by him anymore today.

For thirty minutes, Sydney tasted each meal, gave feedback to Arturo, and made suggestions. While each meal was absolutely to die for, she wanted to make sure she gave honest suggestions about taste, texture, and presentation. Each time she took a bite, he found a reason to touch her in some fashion. He patted her hand, rubbed her arm, or massaged her shoulders. One time she could have sworn he leaned down to inhale her scent, but she knew that was just her own fertile imagination running wild.

She was looking into it more than she should, letting her fantasies take over her good sense. “So, now that I’m completely stuffed and practically useless, I’d better get ready for work.”

“Why the rush? Talk to me for a few minutes. So, do you think you can help me with this whenever I need you? It will only be once a week or so, maybe more if I get creative.” He worked to clear away the plates and utensils, efficiently moving around the kitchen as she watched him.

Arturo was a man who commanded attention. His mere presence was a feast for the senses and her hands itched to grab him and pull his face to hers for a mind-blowing kiss. A kiss that would make it absolutely clear to him how she was feeling right now. Standing 6’2” with broad shoulders and a tapered waist, he had the type of body most women dreamed of and most men wanted to have. His dark hair was cropped close to his head, which gave him a bad boy look. In one magazine, there was a photo of him walking down the street in a pair of loose fitting jeans and maroon t-shirt. That photo quickly became a favorite of hers and the magazine was stored somewhere in her home, only to be pulled out when she needed a little pick me up.

His voice pulled her back from her musings. Although, she was struck dumb by what she heard come out of his mouth.

“Sydney, I can’t help it. You are so beautiful. I want to kiss you—no, I need to kiss you.”

Chapter Five

He walked toward her slowly, as if giving her time to stop him from his course of action. Little did he know that wouldn't be happening anytime soon, especially since she had dreamed of this moment for years. Was this the smartest thing to do? No, probably not. Was she going to do it anyway? Hell yeah! It only took three short steps to bring him flush against her body. Her thick thighs opened to allow for his body to fit in between. *Ahh, perfect fit.* His strong frame molded to hers and she could feel every line in his body, every muscle that rippled under his skin, as he pressed up against her softness.

He stared at her for another long minute, as if giving her time to back away or tell him to stop. Not even a band of wild horses could pull her away from this man. While her intention had not been to seduce Arturo in his kitchen, now that they were in this moment, she knew that every encounter they had over the past twenty-four hours had been building up to this moment.

Her eyes met his and she swallowed, seeing his gaze moving over the curves and swells of her body covered by her professional clothing. Unfortunately, her clothes did nothing to hide her growing arousal. Her nipples were hard, fighting against the material of her bra and stretching against her shirt as if seeking him out. He looked back and forth between her two breasts as her nipples poked out against the material, his gaze heating her up from the inside out.

Searing her skin as his eyes darkened, he stared at her as if he could not decide what to do first. His hands spanned her waist, pulling her close and kissing on the side of the neck, just under her ear. His hitching breath, the heat of his lips, the way his hands gripped her sides, all made her feel weak and dizzy and aching for something. Something only he could give.

His words further melted her already weakening resistance. "I can't stop thinking about you. You are so beautiful. All I can think about it touching you, kissing you, hearing you scream my name."

His words thrilled her and Sydney gasped in shock and pleasure when she felt his thigh slip between hers, fitting his body against her even more. She felt his erection against her hip, and knew just what it meant. He wanted her as much as she wanted him and the time had come for her to make a

decision. She moaned when his fingers moved over her breast through her shirt, pulling and tugging at her nipple as his head tilted down to take her lips with his, probing her lips with his tongue, gently prodding her to open up for him. She could no more stop what was happening to her than she could stop the sun from rising. Allowing him entry into her mouth, her knees almost gave out as she felt his tongue meet hers.

The sensations from his tongue, his hand, and his hard erection pressing into the various pleasure points on her body, drove her mad with desire. She instinctively pressed her body closer to his, seeking that elusive feeling of letting go and coming home at the same time. It had been four long years since her last boyfriend, since her last night of sex—which hadn't been all that good—and her body craved what only this man could give her. One night, or day, in his arms would give her enough memories to last a lifetime if she was willing to reach for it.

His mouth continued to devour hers, branding her, ensuring she would never kiss another man and not think of him. Her hands gripped his hair, holding on as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did, because she didn't know how she would continue living her life without him being a part of it. She never wanted to let him go and he apparently felt the same way.

Her pussy throbbed, grasping at air as it screamed at her to let him let him take her. The wetness in her panties mocked her, dared her to deny that nothing else in the world mattered at this moment except the man in her arms. The hand kneading her breast moved over to the waistband of her pants and pulled her shirt out. He reached under her blouse and his fingertips began heating a path up her skin, tracking her ribcage and finally making it to her bra. One tug—the man must be a pro—and the front clasp of her bra was undone and her breasts spilled out.

His fingers went to her shirt and unbuttoned it freeing her to his lust filled gaze. "I want you Sydney."

His mouth dipped down to her breast and sucked one nipple into his mouth, creating a sucking motion that almost pulled her off the seat. *Oh my God!* How could one man's mouth cause such intense feelings to course through her body? If she didn't get a hold of herself, he would be making love to her in the kitchen of his restaurant. She had to get a grip.

"Arturo, we have to stop. Oh please, no more."

He lifted his gaze to her, his golden brown eyes piercing her with an intense stare. "Why? Why should I stop when I want you so bad?"

Hell, she didn't really have a good answer for that. "If we don't stop now, we'll regret having sex in your kitchen. Plus, it's almost time for the kitchen staff to arrive. Do you really want them to catch the owner and the new hostess getting hot and heavy where they cook the food?" This was the best argument she could give, but she hoped it would work. Not that she wanted to stop, but she knew it was the best thing at the moment.

His breathing was still ragged and he dropped his forehead against hers. She knew what he was feeling because she was feeling it as well. It had been a long time since she'd wanted someone as much as she wanted Arturo, but she had to pull away. As she went to step out of his arms, he tightened his hold on her, keeping her in place.

"Wait, don't go. Don't run from me."

"I'm not running from you. I'm just putting myself back together. We need to get ready for tonight and I don't want to look flustered when the staff starts arriving."

"Shit. I shouldn't have started this. It was not my intention to kiss you, but watching you and spending time with you...I found that I had no choice. I don't want this to end."

"Arturo, this isn't good. I don't want to be just a one-night stand or a fling at work for you to dally with in your spare time. We are so different and the life you lead doesn't fit in my world. This has been fun and all and I've enjoyed your kisses immensely, but I won't be your plaything." Voice steady, she managed to say the one thing she knew had to be said. She wasn't angry with him since she had wanted this just as much and although she had stopped him, she wished there hadn't been the need to do so. He still wanted her. She could feel his erection against her leg and it was sending a clear message that he was *extremely* aroused by her.

No, the problem was hers. If she allowed herself to be with Arturo, she knew where things would lead for her. He wasn't the type of man that a woman walked away from. He would overwhelm her senses and she would never be happy with the type of relationship he was used to having. No,

she needed more. So, while this little interlude was nice, it had to be the last time.

"I never suggested such a thing and would never ask you to be my plaything. The gossip magazines don't always get it right Sydney." He trailed his fingers down her arm, stopping at her hand and clasping it within his larger one. "Do I make you nervous? Can you not feel how much I want you right now? I don't want a plaything Sydney, I want you. Come on baby. Let me make love to you."

His hold on her loosened slightly and she was able to pull away and put her clothing back together. "Arturo, I can't lie to you, I am extremely attracted to you, but we can't do this again. I don't even want to think about all the different ways this is wrong. But first and foremost, we hardly know each other."

Her resolve hardened the longer she was out of his grasp and was no longer intoxicated by his kisses. "You didn't even like me yesterday! Hell, you went out of your way to make me feel unwanted in your restaurant. Now you want to have a quickie in the kitchen. No, this can't be happening." She began to gather her belongings so that she could walk into the front area.

"Sweetheart, you'll never have a quickie with me. I can guarantee you that.

Although she'd walked out of the kitchen at his last comments, it had stayed on her mind the rest of the day and night. His taste lingered on her lips and the feel of his hands on her breasts continued to haunt her throughout the day. The man was pure sex and she couldn't continue like this. Something had to be done and quickly.

Arturo wasn't playing fair either. He had come out to the restaurant several times with food items that he wanted her to taste. There were times when the front area was full of customers, but Arturo would still make a point to bring out small tidbits of food combinations and ask for her opinion. She was no fool, she knew he was trying to seduce her taste buds and in turn, seduce her. Several other times during the night he would come out of the kitchen and give her a look so intense, she thought she'd

go up in flames. The man was sending some definite signals in her direction and she was picking up the message loud and clear.

At one point during the night, he'd come out of the kitchen and walked over to the hostess station and simply stood near her. She had just finished walking an older couple over to their booth, when he came up behind her and whispered in her ear.

"Why are you tempting me? Why won't you give me what I want? What we both want." Without so much as a "hey, how's it going", he made his statement and walked away. Now how the hell was she supposed to respond to that? The man was driving her crazy. Luckily, Angelo was still a calming force for her. It was amazing how different they were, but how alike as well.

"Hi Sydney. Are things going okay for you up here?"

"Yes, thanks Angelo. I'm really enjoying myself. Things couldn't be better."

"Good, is Arturo behaving himself? Not giving you a hard time is he?"

"Giving me a hard time?" Oh goodness, if only he knew. "No, things are much better. He's been very nice and has sought me out several times to sample dishes."

"Yes, he told me about his plans to have you help with tasting new meals. How do you feel about that? I don't want you to feel any pressure. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. I can just tell Arturo—."

"No!" When one of his eyebrows shot up, she knew she had put her foot in her mouth. He was bound to know that something was up now. "I mean, thanks, but that's okay. I don't mind at all and I enjoy tasting the new dishes."

"Okay, well, as long as you're fine with it. If he reverts back to his old ways, just let me know." His gaze turned to the right and his face took on a look she hadn't seen before. He almost looked angry. "Ah, I see an old friend dining tonight. Excuse me. I'll come back and check on you later."

As she watched him walk away, she looked past him to the table where an attractive couple was seated. One-half of the couple was a sexy black man who looked like he filled out his suit quite nicely. He seemed tall and his

smile was quite charming as he looked across the table to his dining companion.

Sitting across from him was one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Her hair was long and lush, her skin just a hint darker than coffee liberally laced with cream. Her eyes showed pleasure at seeing Angelo, then shock as he said something to her dinner date. Now that was interesting. The beautiful woman looked extremely pissed and her anger seemed solely focused on Angelo. Sydney could admit that she was nosey as hell and right now, she wanted nothing more than to find out what just happened at that table.

"Why are you staring at Angelo?" Damn, how did he do that?

"Arturo! Damn, how do you do that? By the way, who's in the kitchen cooking the meals for your customers? I mean really, if you're always out here bothering me, who's taking care of the business end of things?" She couldn't help but show some of her annoyance with him. He was everywhere she turned and was constantly overloading her senses with his voice, smell, and touch. How could she keep up her resolve to resist him when she couldn't get away from him for thirty minutes?

"Don't worry about the kitchen. I have plenty of people to help with the meal preparation. That's what they're here for. I don't handle much of the direct cooking anymore, but I'm there to help them get things right. Now, back to my question. Why are you staring at—oh fuck!"

"What's wrong?"

"Angelo can't be happy to see Kasey in here tonight. Especially with *him*. Damn, I'd better go over there before World War III breaks out. I'll be back for you later."

Okay, now this was just odd. She was dying to know just who Kasey was that she would cause a reaction from both Angelo and Arturo. She watched Arturo walk over to the trio. Once he arrived at the table, put his arm around Angelo's shoulders and greeted the couple. Although she had not noticed it before, Angelo must have been extremely tense, because his shoulders immediately dropped and he took a deep breath as he turned toward his brother. The smile that had disappeared from Kasey's face had

reappeared when Arturo arrived at the table and she stood to give him a hug.

While she could watch this play out all night, the customers coming in the door took her attention away from the scene in the back of the room. As she turned to greet the couple, she wondered how she could get more details out of Arturo about what just happened back there.

Closing time had come and gone, and Sydney was worn out. Arturo had continued to bother her throughout the night, but as things became busier in the kitchen, he found less opportunity to tempt her with innuendos and suggestions about what he would do with her. If only she could truly let loose and have fun. Unfortunately, that had never been her style and she didn't think she was going to start anytime soon. She never jumped into a situation without knowing what was in store for her. She always tested the waters, which had resulted in a few lost opportunities.

This was why her response to Arturo bothered her so much. She had never let a man get to her so quickly, but it seemed as if he had gotten past her defenses almost immediately. And to almost let him make love to her in his kitchen was not like her at all.

Something this big could not be rushed into without fully understanding the ramifications. He was her boss for goodness sake and if something went wrong with their relationship, she would be the one to lose out. Not him. Just her luck, the novelty of being with a thick black woman would wear off as quickly as it had come upon him and she would be shit out of luck and out of a job. There was no way she could stay here at the restaurant and see him everyday if things didn't work out between them. She was no one's fool and she sure as hell wasn't a glutton for punishment.

She closed out the reservation book and turned off the computer, preparing to head home for the night, when she saw Arturo walk out from the back of the restaurant. Damn, this man was sexy. He didn't just walk, he strutted. It was as if he knew the whole world was at his feet and awaiting his beck and call. Why in the hell did he want her?

"Are you heading home Sydney?"

“Yes, heading out now. Although, I’ll probably be up until two o’clock trying to relax. I can never go right to sleep.”

“In that case, would you like to go for a drink or dessert? I know this all night grill that makes the best apple pie. I’m all done in the kitchen and headed out myself. I try to stop by Martha’s Grill at least twice a week and tonight’s the night.” He walked up close to her, separated by only inches, and rubbed his fingertip along her arm. “Join me? I promise to behave. I just want to talk and get to know you a bit more.”

She knew what her answer would be. Hell, there wasn’t really an option for it to be anything else. Why couldn’t she say no this man? She had no resistance when it came to him. Well, yes, she did, but not the kind that counted. *It’s only apple pie, right?* Yeah, famous last words.

“Sure, apple pie sounds good. I’ll follow you there.”

Chapter Six

Luck was on his side tonight. He never thought she would come with him, but he was glad she did. In all honesty, he *had* been telling the truth. Martha's Grill had the best apple pie in town. However, he had not planned to come here tonight. He had been heading home for the evening to get some much needed sleep until he saw Sydney standing there.

His mind had focused on only her and the fact that he wanted to spend some time in her presence. All night he'd teased her, tested her, and caught her off-guard with his impromptu visits and taste-testing. He wanted to make sure he was never far from her thoughts. It had only been just over a week since she had walked into his restaurant, but she was all he could think about. In the kitchen he was constantly distracted by thoughts of what she was doing, was she flirting with other guys, were other guys flirting with her, and more importantly, how to let her know that he wasn't having it. There would be no other man for her.

He may not have reacted the correct way he should have when he first saw her, but that was in the past. She was here now, with him, and he was going to make sure she stayed. The invitation to Martha's Grill was pure genius and he was damn glad his addled brain had latched onto that idea. He would get to spend time with Sydney in a place he truly did enjoy, while allowing her to see him in a different light. He would not rush her, but he also knew he was not going to wait forever. She *would* come to him, of her own free will. Of that he was certain.

"Sure, come on. It's only a five minute drive from here." They walked out together and made the quick drive to the all night diner that was amazingly quite full so late at night.

"Will we be able to get a seat?"

"Of course, there's always a place for me here. Hey Tommy, is my booth open?" He yelled his question out to the guy behind the counter, who gave him a wide smile and pointed to the back with a rag in his hand.

"Always, Arturo. You know where it is."

As they made their way to the rear of the establishment, Arturo placed his hand on the small of her back and felt her muscles jump. *Ah, so she wasn't as immune to me as she tried to pretend.* He now knew his plan of

action was the correct one. Ultimately, she would come to him and once she did, he would never let her go.

"Wow, you weren't joking! That was amazing." Sydney had never tasted anything like it before. Not usually one to stuff herself, she'd actually eaten every single bite of the apple pie and had contemplated asking the waiter for seconds.

"I told you it would be."

The plate in front of Arturo had been cleaned off more than five minutes before she was done with her slice. He had simply watched her eat while drinking a cup of coffee. Any other time, she would have felt self-conscience, but not tonight. Impressing the man sitting across from her was not her concern. She enjoyed her food and if a man couldn't appreciate that about her, well, then it was his loss.

"So, tell me, who was that woman that had you and Angelo all tied up in knots tonight?"

He stiffened and she knew she'd hit on something. "Why?"

"I was just asking the question since it seemed as if Angelo knew her and she was really upset with him. Plus, I like your brother. He's been really nice to me."

"Well, he's off-limits!" The gruff tone of his voice caught her off-guard.

"What? Arturo, I'm not talking about like that!" She couldn't believe he could think that, especially with all the sexual tension there was between the two of them. It was so thick and stifling that she could almost cut it with a knife. "Why would you say that?"

He ran a hand through his hair and took another drink of his coffee. "I'm sorry Sydney. I didn't mean to snap at you." He took another deep breath and lifted his eyes to her. "That story is not mine to tell. Angelo and Kasey have a history and have known each other a long time. Other than that, there is nothing further you need to know at this point. Plus, Angelo is a private person, despite his behavior tonight. If he wanted you to know who Kasey was, then he would have told you."

Now, enough about Angelo. Tell me, when are you going to put me out of my misery?" He reached across the table and ran his fingers across the top of her hand. Her body had been strummed all night by his every touch, every fleeting caress, this additional touch only served to create another crack in her wall of resistance to him.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you mean. You're not miserable Arturo. You're just not getting what you want, when you want it. You still haven't told me why you're interested in me."

"Yes, I have. You intoxicate me. I love the look and feel of your skin." He reached out and skimmed his hand down her bare arm. "Your curves tempt me beyond measure, as if daring me not to bend you over a table and claim you in front of the entire restaurant. To let every man with eyes know that you belong to me and only me."

His gaze lingered on her face as he continued to speak. "Your lips beg me to kiss them until their swollen." At this, his hand lifted toward her face and his thumb traced the contour of her bottom lip, wringing a moan out of her that she hadn't planned to let escape.

The words that escaped her mouth could not be stopped. "But you could have anyone. I've seen the women you've dated and trust me, they look nothing like me."

"True, but then again, they never tempted me the way you do. My cock didn't jump every time they came into view. They didn't make my hands itch to touch them, even for the briefest of moments." His golden gaze dropped down to her mouth. "I can still taste you on my tongue from earlier today and I want more Sydney. Does that tell you why I want you?"

Oh my! She couldn't think, let alone form a coherent sentence to respond to what he had just said. She made him want to do all that?

"How am I supposed to respond to that? You're trying to seduce me with your words Arturo and that's not fair. What would you do if I gave in to you? Would you lose your taste for me after one day? What about one week? I see the way women throw themselves at you at the restaurant. That's a lot of temptation for one man. No, I think I'll pass for now."

The look he gave her flashed with something akin to annoyance. "You shouldn't believe everything you read or see, but don't fully understand.

Part of my job is to give women a fantasy. They come into my restaurant and they want to meet the infamous ladies man, so that's what I give them. The façade I show them each night is not the real me. You haven't known me long enough to know that, but you will. No matter what the papers have written about me, I am not a love 'em and leave 'em kind of man. Women know exactly what they are getting with me."

"It wasn't my intent to insult you." He looked rather pissed right now and all of it was aimed at her.

"Of course you did. You see me as this gigolo, a pretty face whose only mission in life is to sleep with as many women as possible. I'm here with you tonight Sydney because I want to be."

He turned away from her after spearing her with a glance that could freeze water. Okay, so maybe she'd pushed a little much. Damn!

Arturo paid the bill and ushered her outside to their cars, which were parked next to each other. His hand on the curve of her back heated her skin and all she wanted to do was turn around and kiss him. Reclaim what had been lost by her careless words at the table.

All too soon, they were standing in front of their vehicles. "Thank you for bringing me here tonight. I really loved the dessert."

He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, she could tell something had changed. While he was no longer upset at her, he did look disappointed. "You're welcome. Thank you for coming with me. I'm going to head out now. Will you be safe getting home? Should I follow you?"

"No. I can manage. I'll see you tomorrow."

He leaned over and captured her lips in a kiss so sweet she wanted to melt. Was this the same man who had overwhelmed her senses earlier today? She leaned into him, trying to get more of the kiss, trying to keep the connection as long as she could. The kiss lasted for at least a minute and she never wanted it to end. He tasted of apple pie and a hint of coffee and she wanted more. So much more. Too bad he had other thoughts. He slowly pulled away, nipping at her lips as he broke their kiss.

"Goodnight Sydney."

They parted ways outside of the diner and Sydney headed home to her lonely apartment. The conversation with Arturo replayed in her head several times and she made a decision. She would live her life and not look back. Hell, if Arturo wanted her, why not let him have her. She would enjoy being with him, even if she had him for only a short period of time. She would have no expectations from their relationship, if that's what she wanted to call it.

Her mind made up, Sydney fell into a deep sleep once she arrived home and climbed into bed. Tomorrow would be the first day of her adventure and she would enjoy every second of it.

Chapter Seven

The next day did not turn out the way she wanted. Since this was not a day to serve as a taster for Arturo, she showed up at her regular time. Her excitement at getting the chance to tell him about her decision was cut short since he would not be coming in until later. So her plan to tell him right away that she wanted to take a chance on him and see where things led had to be put on hold.

Even though she knew where things were going to lead—a broken heart for her, she was trying to approach this as a sophisticated woman. If he knew that she was already on the verge of being in love with him, she'd never get the chance to be with him the way she wanted most. At least, this is the story she told herself to keep things in perspective.

It wasn't until almost five o'clock that Arturo walked in the door and went right past her into the kitchen.

What the hell? Did he just completely ignore her after all he said last night? She had made the decision to give herself to the man and he ignored her? Oh, hell no. This was not happening. Not today!

She stood up and followed him into the kitchen. He was in his office in the back of the room with the door cracked open slightly. Sydney walked in, closed the door, and leaned up against it.

"May I have a word with you?"

His sexy ass had the nerve to lean back and just look at her. His left eyebrow rose slightly, as if signaling for her to proceed.

"I want to be with you Arturo. You have no idea how much I wish last night did not have to end. Although my wanting you doesn't change the fact that I don't know you very well and that you are my boss, I can't help how much I want you to make love to me. But, you have to understand my concerns. If we fail and this...thing we have doesn't work out, I'm the one who will suffer. I need this job, but I'm not going to sleep with you just to keep a paycheck. If you want me like you say you do, then I'm willing to give this a shot. If you're full of shit, then let me know now and I'll walk away. There won't be any hurt feelings—minus a little embarrassment since I walked my ass in here and told you all this in the middle of your office."

When he didn't respond or speak after her impassioned speech, she folded her arms over her chest and began tapping her foot. He'd better say something and quickly.

"So...what's your answer?"

"Is that all?"

"Is that all? Of all that arrogant things to say to someone! Okay, I think I made a mistake in coming in here. I think I've changed my mind." She lifted off the door with the intent to leave and not look back.

"No you haven't. You didn't make a mistake." He stood up and walked over to her by the door, effectively trapping her in between. "You came in here to tell me that you're willing to have an affair with me, but that I have to do it on your terms. Is that right?"

She licked her suddenly dry lips. Well, damn, that wasn't exactly how she meant to come across. "Well, no. Not exactly. I just want you to know that I'm ready for this...for you...but I don't have any expectations."

He planted his hands on the door above her head and leaned in close to her ear. "What if I want you to have expectations? What if I need you to have expectations from me?"

Her sex began to pulse and drip moisture into her underwear. His breath was warm against her ear, his voice like melted chocolate, and his scent was pure Arturo, manly and spicy all mixed together.

"I want more than a one-night stand Sydney. You have to know that once will not be enough for me, will never be enough for me. Just being around you makes me want to bury myself deep inside you and never leave. Seeing you walk in here just now almost had me leaping across the desk. You have no idea how much I wanted this moment. Wanted you to come to me tonight."

"Why did you walk by me earlier? You must have known I wanted to talk with you."

"I couldn't. My sleep was restless last night because I couldn't stop thinking about you." His breath was ragged as he continued. "I don't ever want you to think that I don't want you, every second of every day. You

came into my life and I couldn't resist you. I tried, I truly did. But every time I turned around, there you were. When I close my eyes to sleep at night, all I see is you. I know it's too soon, but I need you Sydney. I want to know what makes you happy and what makes you sad. How do you look when you wake up in the morning? Do you laugh at old movies or cry at romantic ones? You have no idea how much I want you. It doesn't matter that some people may say it's too soon. I'm not giving up on us."

Listening to his words almost had Sydney in tears. She hadn't heard anything so beautiful in all her adult life. Here was a man who could have anyone in the entire world and he wanted her. Her! She leaned forward and brushed her lips across his.

"Shut up Arturo. Just shut up and kiss me."

His mouth slanted over hers and his tongue entered her mouth, dueling with hers. He didn't just kiss her, he devoured her. His hands grabbed both her wrists and pulled her arms over her head. He crossed her wrists and used one hand to keep them above her head, while his other hand traveled back down her body and cupped her ass.

Arturo's kisses were like a drug, she couldn't think beyond getting more of him. His taste was lime ambrosia and she would never get enough. He dipped his hips and lifted her up from the ground to press his bulging erection against her hot sex. She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist, pressing against him as his kisses drove her to the brink of completion.

He pulled back, his breathing heavy as he tried to force words out of his mouth. "Sydney, wait. Not here. I won't make love to you in my office up against a door. When we close the restaurant tonight, you're following me home and our first time making love will be in my bed."

"You're right. Okay, but I need a few minutes to calm down." She kept her legs wrapped around his waist because it simply felt too good. She didn't want to lose the feeling of having him pressed up against her.

"Come on baby, eight hours and then we're free." He pulled back and she dropped her legs to the floor, grabbing his arms as she waited for her legs to steady. "Make sure you eat something tonight during your break. You'll

need your energy.” He kissed her briefly on the lips while hugging her close to his body.

As she turned away to leave his office, she heard his whispered words reach her ears, “I’m never going to let you go.”

Chapter Eight

Sydney had never been this nervous in her life. As she walked next to Arturo as they made their way up to the front door of his large home, she knew things would never be the same. Tonight would change everything for her and she would never again be the person she was before this moment.

"Welcome to my home." The door opened on a magnificent foyer with vaulted ceilings and a curved staircase. His home was huge, but as she walked into the sitting room, she noticed the home looked "lived in." There were pictures of his family on the walls, tables, and bookshelves. There were papers, which were probably connected to the restaurant, lying on the table, as if he had been reading them and had to leave suddenly.

"May I have the tour?" Okay, she was hoping to stall a bit to get the butterflies in her stomach to quiet down.

"Sure. Do you want a glass of wine? I have Chianti, Merlot, or Pinot Grigio."

"I'll have a glass of Chianti. Thanks." As she followed him into the kitchen, he turned back to look at her.

"Take off your shoes and relax. You won't be going anywhere for a while." His devilish grin promised all sorts of wicked things as he ushered her through his home and into his kitchen. She stopped at the threshold and simply stood there in awe. It was almost as large as the kitchen at *Antonio's* and just as modern. She could definitely see herself creating some masterpieces in this kitchen.

"From what I've seen, you have a lovely home. It's absolutely gorgeous. You can probably fit five of my apartments inside here."

"This was the one purchase I made for the future. One day, this house will be filled with family, either mine or Angelo's. It's too late for an outside tour right now, but tomorrow morning I'll show you the grounds and you can see everything."

"How do you know I'll still be here tomorrow morning?" She couldn't help but tease him a little, considering she had every intention of being here all night.

"Oh, you will be here. I've been waiting for this all day. Actually, I've wanted this—you—since I met you. I have every intention of keeping you in my bed with me until tomorrow and beyond if I have anything to say about it." He walked up to her as he handed her the glass of wine. He dipped his head and licked her bottom lip, before giving her a mind-blowing kiss that made his intentions for the evening quite clear.

"Arturo—."

"No, tour first so that you know where everything is. Come on, let's go."

Sydney only half-listened as he showed her around his home. She oohed and aahed at all the right places, but what she wanted to see the most was right in front of her. As he walked around from room to room showing her his home, she watched the man. Well, actually, she watched the man's ass. He had on a pair of jeans that fit him perfectly. They hung just a bit from his hips, framing his butt just enough to make her want to reach out and touch him.

She wondered if it was as taut and firm as she'd dreamed it would be. Was his chest as rippled and tight as it seemed under her hands when they'd been caught up before in his office? Was that huge bulge in his pants truly reflective of his size and, damn, when could she get a taste?

So focused on her naughty thoughts about Arturo, she didn't realize that he'd stopped and she ran into him, her body crashing into his back. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you'd stopped. What room is this?"

"Mine."

He knew she hadn't been paying attention to him as they walked through the house, but it was okay. He wanted her to accept the idea that there would be no turning back for them after tonight. Plus, there was no way that he would simply bring her in his home and take her to his bedroom.

This night was about Sydney and everything they would experience together. He knew people thought he was a playboy, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Sure, he had slept with many women, but all of them knew exactly where he stood and had accepted it. Well, all of them except Melanie. She was a mistake from day one. Angelo had tried to warn

him, but Arturo had thought he knew better. That was definitely a lesson learned.

Arturo looked at the woman standing next to him and couldn't believe he had gotten so lucky. Although his attraction to her had been instantaneous, during his subsequent conversations with her, he'd come to find out that she was as loving as she was beautiful. Nothing would prevent him from being with her tonight, and every night after, and claiming her as his woman.

She was all he would need from this moment forward. "Baby, come in with me."

He grabbed her hand and led her inside the room. His bedroom was decorated in colors of brown, beige, and off-white. Not necessarily his favorite colors, but they were very soothing to him after a long day at the restaurant. A California King bed held the place of honor in the middle of the floor and beckoned them to climb on top.

"Do you want me to go slow?"

"No."

"Good, because I hadn't planned on it." He grabbed her with both hands under her ass and lifted her up, forcing her to wrap her legs around his waist. He walked to the bed and laid her down, relishing in her soft form enveloping his body. She felt so good beneath him and he planned to show her with action and deed how much he truly needed her.

He unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it off her shoulders, baring her to his gaze. Her nipples pebbled and he couldn't resist leaning his head down to slowly get a taste. His fingers reached for her pants and slowly peeled them off her body. He threw them to the side, not caring where they landed. Her underwear was next and the wait was almost torture. His brain said to go slow, while his body screamed at him to make her his.

He kissed her hair, her cheek, her neck and Sydney felt the heat spreading in her belly as she turned her head toward him in the dimness of the room. Her lips found his and she poured all of her emotions into that one kiss. Her hand tugged at the hair at the base of his neck, drawing his head

closer to hers and sending him a clear message that she did not want this to stop.

“Oh Sydney,” he groaned and leaned in to kiss her again, a full, open-mouthed kiss. A hungry, eager, greedy kiss, drawing her in deeply. “Watching you every day, wanting to be with you, and needing to make love to you...”

His words thrilled her and Sydney gasped when she felt his thigh slip between hers, fitting his body against her. She felt his erection against her hip and she knew exactly what it meant. He would be all hers tonight and she would be his. If only this once, she would take what was offered and would take a chance.

She moaned when his fingers moved over her breast as he kissed her again, pulling and tugging at her nipple as his tongue entwined with hers.

“I’ve been imagining you in my bed,” Arturo whispered into her ear as he rolled onto her, spreading her thighs with his. “Every time I see you, I imagine how you would feel under me...wrapped around me...I want to make you come for me, Sydney.”

“Oh Arturo,” she cried when his mouth found her breasts, sucking and licking like a man sent to devour her flesh.

She saw his eyes gleaming in the darkness, the light from the full moon peaked through the window, casting them in a silver haze. He was looking at her the same way he had the other night and earlier today. As if he couldn’t get enough of her. As he stared down at her, his fingers probed gently between her legs, his lustful eyes swept over her body in the muted light of the room.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, moving his hips with hers, mimicking the motion of making love. “You’re the only one for me. You’re all I need.”

“I am?” Sydney whispered, moaning when he leaned in and kissed her.

“Yes, baby. You are.” Arturo whispered against her neck, kissing over her rounded shoulders, over the gentle swell of her breast, sucking a nipple again into his mouth.

"Fearless, beautiful, and all mine," he whispered, kissing down her belly, dipping his tongue into her navel. He spread her smooth thighs with his big palms, breathing her in and then sinking down into heaven, his tongue exploring her soft folds.

"Oh!" Sydney moaned when his mouth settled at the top of her swollen clit, his tongue making slow, lazy spirals against her flesh. "Yes...yes!"

He moaned against her softness, his face buried between her thighs, his tongue working there like a man possessed. She heard him making noises as if he was feasting on a meal, his hands opening her legs wider, pressing them back, leaving her completely exposed. His mouth sent the most divine sensations coursing through her body, making her wiggle and moan. She reached for him like he was her lifeline, and tonight, he probably was.

"Oh please," she begged, her hands roaming over her own body, her palms brushing against her nipples, increasing the feelings of pleasure coursing down between her legs. She wanted more. Her flesh was on fire, his tongue the most exquisite torture she'd ever known.

"Arturo," she cried, using her fingers to spread herself more open for his mouth. "Oh yes!"

His fingers, probing between her legs, slid into the slickness between her thighs, stroking there, easing in a little at a time. Just one finger slipping through her flesh as he licked her, moving in and out.

"Oh God," she moaned, feeling completely undone in that moment. She rocked on a cloud of her own pleasure, her hands grasping for something to hold onto and finding his hair. "Oh Arturo, yes, I'm...I'm ..."

And then she was spinning, her body exploding as she spiraled out of control. Dizzy from the intense orgasm that coursed through her body, she gasped and shuddered against him as the most delicious, rhythmic pulse beat against his probing tongue resting between her legs.

"Sydney," he murmured, kissing his way up her quivering belly, his mouth wet as he found hers and she tasted herself on his tongue. "Oh, God, baby you are so beautiful."

She felt the heat of him, a steel rod pulsing against her now quivering center. He rested between her thighs as he kissed her, his tongue twined with hers, sucking at her, biting at her lips.

He reached over to his dresser and opened the top drawer and a foil wrapper appeared in his hands. A quick rip at the top of the packet and he rolled the condom over his straining erection. Sydney was glad one of them was thinking, because she sure as hell hadn't given a thought to protection.

She reached down and touched him, rubbing the tip of his cock against her flesh, making them both moan from the sensation. He groaned when she pulled at him, pressed him, aiming him. "Please. I need you now." Sydney wiggled, squeezed, and positioned him against her softness. She rocked, the tip moving over the slick folds, through her wetness, not quite inside.

"Oh God," he moaned against her neck. "Oh fuck, Sydney..."

The words, whispered in her ear, made Sydney gasp and sent a jolt straight up her spine.

"Yes, Arturo," she whispered against his ear, still rocking, pushing him a little further. "Take me." He gasped and she clung to him, squirming. "Don't leave me, Arturo," she pleaded, the words wrenched from her throat although she never meant to say them out loud.

They both gave in to the desire that could no longer be denied. Right at that moment, a cry that sounded like he was in pain escaped from Arturo's lips as he moved into her, sinking into her welcoming body. She gasped and blinked in startled surprise as the thick length of him stretched her inner walls.

"Oh!" she cried, clutching him, and they both trembled. "Yes." Sydney squeezed him between her legs, feeling the slow stretch as her body adjusted to his size and length.

"Oh baby," he murmured as he began to move inside of her. She wrapped her limbs around him, pulling him in tighter, wanting more. The heat between her thighs began to grow, the delicious friction sliding through her body making her weak from the thrust of his hips giving her pleasure unlike she'd known before.

Sydney purred into his ear, grinding her hips up against his, feeling him driving deeper into her soft flesh. "Make me yours." He groaned at her words, his breath hot and coming fast in her ear.

"Harder," Sydney begged, digging her nails into his back, arching her body into him. He was rubbing her there, between her legs, and a slow burn turning quickly to white heat. "Faster...oh, please!"

He grunted, moving harder into her flesh, the wet sound of their bodies together filling her ears as they rocked. She moaned, meeting him, feeling every inch of him as he thrust harder into her, the bed shaking beneath her with his effort.

"Oh Arturo!" She twisted and squirmed with her ache, their body's slick with perspiration.

"Yes," he groaned, his hips rocking her into oblivion. "Come on. Come for me baby."

She moaned, clutching him and arching up, grinding her hips as her climax peaked and shuddered through her, making her cry out beneath him as her orgasm washed over her again and again.

"God," he grunted, her soft wetness fluttered around him, pulling him deeper. She knew the feeling had to be driving him crazy. "Oh fuck, I'm going to come!"

Sydney felt the heat of him, a thick pulse between her legs, his shaft swelling with it and then bursting inside of her, making him groan and tremble. He collapsed onto her and she felt him shivering against her neck.

"Oh, wow! Arturo that was amazing." She gasped as he rolled onto his side next to her. He continued to kiss her neck and face, his hands roamed over her body, causing goose bumps to rise on her skin.

"Baby, you made it amazing." He was quiet for a moment and she enjoyed a feeling a true contentment. "So, you don't want me to leave you? I hope you know I'm not going anywhere." His hold on her waist tightened as he whispered these words in her ear.

She buried her head into his shoulder, not wanting him to see the doubt in her eyes. She promised herself she wouldn't look into this anymore than

she needed to. She would enjoy him for as long as she could, but would not ask for anymore than he could give.

"I just meant that I didn't want you to stop what you were doing. Nothing more."

His eyes said he didn't believe her, but he let her get away with that white lie. "If that's the story you want to stick with, that's fine. I've already told you that I want you Sydney and I don't plan to go anywhere. And just so you know, I'm sure as hell not letting you go anywhere. So you may as well get used to being here with me, in my—no, scratch that—in our bed. Now get some rest and get your energy back. I have plans for you tonight and you'll need your strength."

Chapter Nine

Life for Sydney and Arturo fell into a routine over the next few weeks. More and more she found herself at his home after the restaurant closed at night. He shared with her his fears and dreams for the future, including his concerns about his mother. Each morning when she woke up next to him, she said a brief thank you to whatever divine entity was listening, that she'd been given another day with such a wonderful man.

He had even told her about Nicole and what happened between the two of them. It wasn't something that he had brought up, but the conversation had come about one day when she had asked him about his past relationships. Specifically, if she was truly the first black woman he had ever been with. With some stops and starts, he'd shared with her what happened all those years ago. At first she'd been nervous that he'd been trying to replace what he had with Nicole, but as they continued to be with each other and spend time together, that thought soon left her mind.

Plus, Arturo made love to her so good every single night, often times leaving her body limp and exhausted. There was no way he was thinking about another woman when they were together.

He was not a stupid man and he knew that if she ever found out that he *was* thinking about someone else, she would slap the shit out of him. Then she would leave his ass and not look back. Sure it would hurt, but it would be much worse to stay with a man who didn't put her first.

She helped him with more of the taste-testing for the restaurant and a few of the items had made it to the menu. From what she understood, they were a huge success. The plan now was to rotate the new dishes into the menu on a seven day cycle. It was one of the ways Arturo and Angelo had decided to keep things nice and fresh for the customers. As they continued to get more meals for the special menu list, the offerings would increase to two or three a day.

Now that a month had passed since they had first slept together, Sydney was hard pressed to deny the truth. She was head over heels in love with Arturo. He hadn't yet said the words to her, but she could tell by the way he held her at night and his almost constant need to touch her, that he felt something similar.

When at the restaurant, he still came out of the kitchen several times a night to ask her to taste new food combinations. He was never denied and he knew it. One time he'd even kissed her briefly on the lips after a particularly tasty dish had been appropriately fawned over. The entire restaurant knew they were an item and while she should probably feel guilty, she didn't.

There was nothing for her to be ashamed of and she would not deny what was going on with her and Arturo. Neither her role nor the way she interacted with the other employees had changed. She was friendly to everyone and never failed to pitch in and help the other employees when they were busy. All in all, life couldn't be better.

Sydney was reviewing the reservation book when the door opened. The woman who walked in was not an employee, at least not any employee that Sydney had seen up to this point. She was thin and willowy, with long red hair that hung to her waist. Her skin had a golden tan, as if she spent quite a few hours in the sun on some beach.

As Sydney stood up to greet her, the mystery woman walked past her and toward the kitchen.

"Excuse you. Do you need something?" Sydney was barely holding on to her temper as she forced the words out of her mouth.

The woman halted and turned around to address Sydney. "I do, but you can't help me. I'm looking for Arturo. I can find him myself."

Sydney walked up to her and stood in front of her again, blocking the kitchen. She didn't know who this woman was, but she sure as hell wasn't going to let her walk up in this restaurant as if she owned it and the people inside. "He isn't here right now. When he returns, I can tell him you stopped by."

"Who are you?"

What the hell? "I'm the restaurant hostess. Who are you?"

"Oh, you're just an employee. Hmph. Don't worry about who I am. I'll be back for Arturo later." She turned on her heels and strode back through the door. Not caring that her waspish manners had Sydney fuming.

Oh hell no! When that man returned back to this restaurant, she was finding out who the hell that was.

An hour later, Arturo and one of his sous chefs returned to the restaurant from their trip. They had a few items with them, but she knew the routine at this point. A larger delivery would be coming shortly and so the entire team had to be ready to kick it into high gear.

She didn't want to ambush him in front of one of his employees, but she had no other choice. Thoughts of that woman had been front and center for the past hour and she had a really bad feeling that her presence was going to cause problem. "Arturo, I need to speak with you. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure, babe, will it take long? I have a delivery coming soon."

"I don't think it will." He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her flush against his body. Although it would be easy to allow him to distract her, she had to stay focused. "You had a visitor today. A woman came looking for you."

"A woman? Who was she?" His head bent down and his lips grazed the side of her neck. He'd been doing this more and more while they were at the restaurant. The need to touch her seemed to be growing every day, but she wasn't going to complain.

"I don't know. She didn't leave her name. She was tall and thin, with long red hair." At this last statement, she felt his arms tighten around her waist.

"What did you say? Red hair?"

"Yes. I also have to say, she was quite rude. She came in here as if she owned the place and said she was looking for you. It was as if she knew you personally."

"Baby, I think I know who that was, but there's no way she would show her face around here. She wouldn't be that stupid."

"Who was she?"

Then he said the one word that she somehow knew, and dreaded, would come out of his mouth.

"Melanie."

"What do you want Melanie? I told you never to contact me again. There's nothing for you here."

"Arturo, we were good once. Why do you have to be so cold to me? I know we didn't end on the best of terms, but you don't have to be like this. I needed to see you."

"Well, I'm here. You made a point of coming by the restaurant, several times, in order to get my attention. Now you've got it. You have five minutes to say what you need to say. When that five minutes is up, I'm leaving, whether you're finished or not."

Arturo couldn't believe he was sitting here with this woman. He thought she was out of his life for good. It had been over a year since he had last seen her and while she was still physically beautiful, he knew she was rotten to the core on the inside. She'd actually thought she would get him down the aisle. She'd tried everything, from telling his mother that he'd proposed, to cornering his brother and demanding that he force Arturo to talk with her.

The last time he had been in her presence had been a huge mistake. There had been a party at a local hotel, celebrating the holidays for all of the employees of the restaurant and their significant others. He hadn't invited her, since he had already been trying to extricate himself from her grasp. Admittedly, everyone had been drinking a bit and he had been somewhat disgruntled that he had not lined up a date for the party.

As he walked into his hotel room, she had been there waiting for him. The one thing he regretted most was that he had given in to her. Allowing his baser instincts to lead him down a path to do something he never should have done. As soon as they were finished, he realized that he needed to get her out of his life right then and there. No more late night calls, no more trying to be nice. He was over her and he had needed her to get out. He was cruel to her at the time, but he saw no other way. Now she was back

for something. Damn! He looked down at his watch, two minutes down, three more to go.

"Your time is ticking Melanie. What do you want? You now have two minutes and fifty seconds."

"You'll be singing a different tune soon enough. That night in the hotel, we created a baby. You have a son Arturo and I expect you to take care of him, and me. We're back now and if you don't marry me, I'm going to take my story to the newspapers. I'll let everyone know how you got me pregnant and dumped me. What would your precious mother and brother think about that?"

"You lie!" The shock of hearing the words made him almost jump out of his seat. "I will not sit here while you say these lies. We used a condom and you know it. I know what you're up to and I won't let you ruin my life. I don't want you Melanie. I want you out of my life and if you try to pursue this avenue, I will destroy you. I hope you don't have a child, because I would hate to drag a child's mother through the mud. But I will. Heaven help me, if you keep this up, I will make you regret the day you came back to Boston. I will be calling my lawyer tomorrow. I recommend you get your own. If there is a child, a paternity test will be done within twenty-four hours."

He stood up and dropped some money on the table. His appetite gone, he needed to get to Sydney. She couldn't find out about this from anyone but him. Although he'd told her what Melanie was like, something like this was not easy to overcome.

"Melanie, stay away from me. I mean it." He moved to walk away from her when she grabbed his arm.

"Arturo, I know you don't mean that. You loved me once. You'll see that the baby is yours. Why would you put me through this misery? Why won't you do the honorable thing and make us a family?"

"You have clearly lost your mind if you think I would marry you. I will never marry you. I love someone else."

Melanie's face turned an ugly shade of red and purple, her immediate anger at his statement almost shocking. "Who is it? What bitch has gotten her claws in you? I want to know!"

Arturo noticed the other patrons staring at them. She was making a scene and he really hated scenes, especially because they ended up in the newspaper the next morning. He had to get the hell away from here.

"Melanie. Stay away from me. I mean it." With that last statement, he walked away from the seething woman and headed to the one person he needed right now. Sydney.

Sydney was pacing the floor waiting for Arturo to come home from his evening out with Melanie. He had asked her to come with him, but she'd chosen not to. It was important that he understand that she trusted him to be alone with another woman. While she would have loved nothing more than to show up with him at the restaurant, because of the history between Arturo and Melanie, she knew it would cause more issues. So, here she was an hour later, pacing the floor and wondering what the hell was going on at the restaurant.

She heard the front door open and walked over to see a very agitated Arturo walking inside the house. Oh my, this didn't look good at all.

"Baby, what's wrong? What happened?" She started to get worried at the expression on his face and now wished she had gone to the meeting with him. He walked over to her and enveloped her in a hug, wrapping his arms around her waist and curving his body into hers.

"Arturo, tell me what's going on. What happened at the meeting with Melanie?"

"Sydney, before I broke it off with her permanently, there was one final night. I wore a condom, I swear I did!"

Oh no, this was not looking good at all. Her gut churned and she felt the bile rising up to her throat. Please God, please don't let him say what I think he is.

"And...go on."

"She says we have a child. She's demanding that I accept the child, and her as a result, or else she's going to go to the press. It will break my mother's heart. Tonight at the restaurant, she demanded that I marry her."

She saw that his eyes held a feral glint and she was almost afraid for Melanie. "I won't do it. I'm calling my lawyer tonight. My mother also needs a phone call and that's the one I'm dreading the most. I need you with me, by my side. Baby, even if the child is mine, I won't marry her. I'll fight heaven and earth to get my son or daughter away from her, but she'll never have another place in my life."

"How can you know that will be true? If she's the mother of your child, she'll always be a part of your life. Are you ready to deal with that?"

"Baby, can you trust me on this? I need you with me on this. This won't change anything. I love you Sydney."

"You're sure? Because I love you too Arturo and I don't want to lose you." She'd finally heard the words she'd dreamed about for all these weeks. It was bittersweet. This cloud that had suddenly come into their lives wasn't simply going to go away.

"I've never been surer about anything in my life. Come on baby. Let's start making those phone calls. I need you by my side when I call my mom."

Chapter Ten

They sat in his living room waiting for the call from Hank Metzger, the Sabatino family attorney. When Arturo had called him about the claim Melanie made, he'd already known about it. Apparently, she went to Hank first and asked him to pay her off in order to avoid her confrontation with Arturo. He'd told her absolutely not and recommended that she move on with her life and leave Arturo alone.

Her last ditch effort to get Arturo's attention had been at the restaurant. The lawyer doubted there really was a baby involved, but in order to look at every possibility, he'd hired someone to follow Melanie for a few days. The report from the investigator was due today.

Sydney watched Arturo prowl around the house. She heard him mumbling to himself about taking care of things on his own without "any motherfucking lawyers", but she knew he would not do anything he shouldn't. Both his mother and Angelo had begged Arturo to let the authorities take care of things and to not get involved. They'd then enlisted Sydney's help to keep him under control.

When the phone rang, they turned toward each other and she bolted toward the table where the handset was sitting.

"Hello. Oh, hi Mr. Metzger. Yes, he's right here. Hold on." When she handed the phone to Arturo, she attempted to walk away, but he held on to her, his arm wrapped around her waist and her body pulled up close to his.

"Hi Hank. What do you have for me?"

She tried not to listen too closely. Arturo needed to hear this news on his own, but even though she knew this, she was still itching to put her ear up to the headset.

His face didn't change one bit as he listened to the information being passed along to him by his attorney. Finally, a broad grin came across his face and her entire body relaxed. That had to be good news, right?

"All right Hank. Thanks for the report. I appreciate all you've done for us. Yes, I will. Absolutely, just give me a call when I need to show up. No, that's fine. I'm glad you did."

He hung up the phone and turned her in his arms. "Well, it's over. Apparently she was lying about the entire thing. There isn't even a baby. We're not sure what she would have done if I had demanded to see the child she claimed to be mine. I had Hank serve her with papers to stay away from me for good. If she ever shows up again, we'll have her arrested."

"Arrested? Hell, not before I kick her ass for causing all this trouble."

"Sweetheart, I can't have my future wife and mother of my children going to jail can I?" He nuzzled her neck as he made this statement.

"Just which future wife and mother are you referring to?" She needed to hear him say the words. Her heart craved the words she longed to hear.

"Sydney, you know I would do whatever it takes to make you happy. I never thought I would get to this point in my life, where I can see my future tied to another person. But I see that with you. You believed in me from day one and never doubted me when Melanie came back trying to spread her poison."

Her arms wrapped around his waist and lifted on her toes to brush her lips across his mouth. "Of course I never doubted you. You had already told me about Melanie and I knew she was trouble as soon as I knew it was her. I trusted you Arturo. Always."

"Marry me Sydney. I'll always make you happy and I'll show you every day how much I love you. We don't have to get married now, but I want to announce it to our families. Whatever type of wedding you want, you can have. Hell, we don't even need a big wedding. If you want to elope, that's fine with me. The two of us and a sandy white beach in the Bahamas would be just fine. As long as you're my wife."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet ring case. "I've been carrying this around for the past week, trying to decide when to give it to you."

"What took you so long?"

"I wasn't sure of your response to a marriage proposal so soon. Our relationship is still new, but I know who I want. My life was so different before you came along. After all this time, the one person I needed to make

me whole, bring me salvation, walked through the front door of my restaurant.”

Tears pooled in her eyes and her throat clogged. “I love you so much. Of course, I’ll marry you.”

Arturo pulled her up close, his mouth capturing hers in another one of his soul-searching kisses. “I need you Sydney.” He lifted her into his arms and carried her up the stairs and into the bedroom.

She was still amazed that he carried her as if she weighed nothing. That fact alone made her love him even more. His muscles rippled beneath her hands and she marveled at the contours of his body. She reveled in the fact that he belonged to her and no one else.

He never asked her for anything, just that she be with him. She would fight the world in order to keep him safe. What they had was real and it felt so right. Nothing could change that and no one could come between them.

He laid her on the bed and followed her down, pressing her into the mattress. He continued his sensual assault, kissing her and letting his hands roam over her body. She returned the favor and stroked his back and narrow hips as their passion continued to rise. Her legs wrapped around his body and pressed down, pulling his erection closer to her hot center.

“It’s my turn.” She rolled them over and straddled his hips. He pulled his polo shirt over his head and threw it to the side. Fine hairs covered his chest and she loved to run her hands from his flat stomach up to his chiseled chest. Anticipation coursed through her body as she contemplated how to please her lover and future husband. It had been a long time since she’d done anything like this, but for Arturo, she’d gladly show him pleasure this way. She unbuckled his jeans and reached her hand in to curve around his stiffness. Her fingers squeezed around him, tightening just under the helmet as his head lolled back and his eyes closed.

“Baby, that feels good. Don’t stop.”

“Oh, I won’t. As a matter of fact, I have something else in store for you.” She grabbed his pants and pulled them down his legs, baring his body to her hungry gaze. God, how she loved this man. Jeans and underwear removed, he was stretched out on the bed in all his glory, waiting for her

next move. His hand blindly played with his erection as he waited for her to return to him.

She removed her clothing as well, shimmying her hips a bit as she removed her own bottoms. She turned her back to him, giving him a clear view of her behind, which he seemed almost obsessed with touching.

“Oh baby,” he groaned while looking at her naked body between his legs. He lifted his torso off the bed and reached out a hand to her, his fingers brushing against her breast.

“Do you like them?” She gasped when he found her nipple, rolling the dark, fleshy bud between his thumb and forefinger, sending a jolt through her.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered, his hand moving faster on his cock as he tugged and squeezed her breast.

She pushed him back down and crawled on the bed and up between his legs. He simply watched her, no longer making a sound. His body was completely still and he was no longer moving his hand on his rigid cock. It was if he was afraid that any movement would stop her progress. He moaned as she took him in her hand and slid her tongue around the tip of his erection. She watched his face as she began to suck him, his mouth opening at the first downward motion, as if he couldn't catch his breath. She couldn't take her eyes off him, the way he looked at her, like he was lost in a dream and couldn't quite believe this was happening.

She couldn't believe it either—but it felt so good to be doing this to the man she loved more than any other. It had been ages since she had done this, but she remembered it, and savored it, making soft noises in her throat as she swallowed as much of his cock as she could.

Watching her through his half-closed eyes, he reached down to touch her breast again. His touch sent immediate heat flooding through her body when he found and rubbed her nipple, pinching it just a bit as she continued her ministrations. She squirmed between his thighs, sucking him harder, licking all around the head before going back down on him.

“Baby, no more. That's enough.” She didn't want to get up, she wanted to bring him to completion, but he seemed to have a different idea.

He pushed her off of him and flipped her over. Her head dove down into the apex of her thighs and dove into her slick sex. She whimpered, both in shock at how quickly he had turned the tables on her, but also how good his mouth felt. Her hands grabbed his thick, dark hair, while her body rocked against his tongue. Moans of pleasure were torn from her throat as the feel of his tongue made her come apart. He added two of his fingers to the mix and entered her body while his mouth continued feasting on her.

Even as her body quivered and tremors coursed throughout her limbs, his fingers didn't stop. They drove faster and harder into her flesh as he licked her to completion. Soft noises from his throat reached her ears as he continued to lap at her.

Eyes full of desire and love looked down on the man between her legs. Seeing his eyes looking at her, his mouth tight against her pussy, working her flesh with his tongue, was too much. She knew she was going to come. She couldn't stop it and didn't want to anymore.

He seemed to know it was coming, his tongue moving lightning fast between her lips, back and forth now, his fingers dove into her flesh, and she couldn't resist it anymore. She shuddered, her back arched off the bed, her hands grasped at his hair as she tried to grab a hold of his head and push him away. The pleasure almost bordered on pain and she didn't think she could take any more. Her inner walls began to spasm around his fingers again and again, but still he didn't let her go. One of his hands was underneath her ass, steadying her as his tongue continued to send waves of pleasure through her body.

He finally lifted his head and removed his hand from her body as he slid his body up hers, capturing her lips in a tender kiss. Her legs fell open even further to accommodate his larger frame. She wanted this, needed him to fill her. Hands itching to draw him closer, she grabbed his ass and squeezed.

He groaned, thrusting up towards her, his cock finding her opening, his hands going immediately to her hips. They both gasped when she was fully impaled on his cock, their eyes meeting, their bodies' slick and trembling together. Sydney thought her heart would stop, seeing the pleasure bordering on pain on Arturo's face. Then he began to move inside of her. There was no thinking then—there was only the sweet, delicious friction between them building up as they rocked together.

She leaned up toward him, kissing his cheek, his ear, his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat. She bit at his shoulder when he dug his fingers into her ass and lifted her hips to accept more of his thrusts. His love making took her to dizzying heights as her body exploded from the inside out.

When they called his mother to let her know about the engagement, she screamed into the phone and started speaking in rapid Italian. He heard the emotion in her voice and knew she was thinking of his father, wishing he was here with them to see this momentous occasion.

"Mama, are you happy for me?"

"Yes bambino. You are my oldest son and I trust that you know your own heart. Plus, your brother has already told me about Sydney. He called about a month ago to let me know that he thought you'd found the one. I'm glad he was right. I just wish..."

"I know and I miss him too, but he's still with us. Papa would like Sydney and I think you're going to love her. She makes me want to live again and I never thought I'd feel that way after all this time."

"If you love her, then so will I. Bring her home to me this weekend. I want to meet her and make sure she's getting enough to eat. You know I've always thought there is something wrong with those women who only eat salads for dinner. Are you feeding her Arturo?"

"Yes mama. She's a Chef as well, so she's feeding me as well."

"Hmmm. Well, let me know what her favorite dishes are and I'll make sure to have them ready. I love you."

"I love you too."

As he clicked off the phone with his mother, he turned to look over at the woman who had agreed just last night to be his wife.

"My mother wants us to come by for dinner next week." At the stark look of terror in her eyes, he couldn't help but chuckle. "It'll be fine. Angelo already told her about you more than a month ago. Don't worry. She'll love you as much as I do." He got up from the chair and walked over to

her. He lifted her up and sat down on the couch, settling her down on his lap. "You'll love my mom. Plus, you know I'll take care of you. Nothing bad will happen."

"I'm not worried. At least not that much. I do want her to like me though. However, you still have to meet my mom and dad and my dad has never liked anyone I brought home."

"Uh, babe, your dad does know that you've been staying here overnight, right? I don't plan to be separated from you anytime soon, so I hope we're not going to have an issue."

"What? Heck no, my dad still thinks I'm a virgin." The look on his face had her laughing and holding her stomach.

"Please tell me your joking Sydney. Stop laughing, it's really not funny."

Her laughter died down to a light chuckle as she played with his hair. "Yes, I'm joking. They already know I'm seeing you. When I began spending more of my nights here, my parents were curious about where I was spending so much of my time. Don't worry, they'll love you. Now let me up so I can call them. My mom will want to get started on the wedding arrangements."

Epilogue

“Dammit Arturo! You are about to piss me off and I’m gonna kick your ass on our wedding day. Get out of my kitchen!”

“Sweetheart, I just want to help...and this is *our* kitchen. You know I don’t want you in the kitchen all night worrying about the food. Come on out and enjoy the party. Our families are in the restaurant waiting on us to make an appearance. You can let the others take care of the food. Your mom is going to come in here and get you if you don’t come out. And just so you know, I like your mom and I really don’t want her angry with me at our wedding reception.”

She looked over at her husband of three hours and couldn’t help but smile. Their wedding had been held in Arturo’s backyard and it had been absolutely beautiful. Some people might ask why the reception wasn’t held at the same place, but that was a conscience choice. Truthfully, neither she nor Arturo wanted to take the chance that any of their family or friends would imbibe a little too much and have to stay over. There was currently a cleaning crew at the house putting the backyard back to rights and clearing out all of the debris and mess from the wedding preparation.

When they went home tonight, which would be soon if she had anything to say about it, they wanted to be alone. Two airplane tickets were ready and waiting for them to leave on an early morning flight tomorrow when they would leave for a two-week vacation to Turks and Caicos. Arturo had rented a beautiful bungalow on a secluded section of the beach for them to use. Bikini and snorkel gear had been purchased and packed and she was ready for some fun. While this *was* their honeymoon, she was determined to make the best of the situation and experience as much as she could.

However, first things first, she had to get through her wedding reception. Although she found that it wasn’t a common occurrence, Arturo was right. Hiding out in the kitchen of the restaurant at her wedding reception was not good. Their family and friends were out there waiting for them to join the festivities. The food would be fine. It was time for her to enjoy this day, because it was the only wedding she would ever have.

She had begun to take on more responsibilities for the operation of the restaurant. Hostess duties were still something she handled, but she also took on a greater role with planning the menu with Arturo. Actually, he

had practically forced her to do it since the items that she tasted and approved for the menu had started to do so well. Angelo still handled the business end of things and this split worked out very well. Sydney knew she'd found her home, in more than ways than one. Working at *Antonio's* was the best decision she'd ever made.

"Okay, here I come." She pulled off her apron, washed her hands, and walked toward the kitchen door.

"Wait, aren't you forgetting something?" He grabbed her hand and pulled her up against him.

"No, what could I be missing." Grinning from ear to ear, she wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and tilted her head up to him. "Hmm, the food's all done, the drinks are flowing, and the plane tickets are packed away. Nope, not missing a thing."

"Okay, Mrs. Sabatino—I like how that sounds by the way—don't make me throw you over my shoulder in front of my mother. She'd never forgive me for behaving like a caveman."

"Of course not. I wouldn't want that to happen. Okay, so let me think. Oh yeah, I think I know what I'm missing." She leaned up and gave him a light kiss on his lips. "I love you Arturo."

"That's better. I love you too sweetheart. Oh, by the way, Kasey's out there. Angelo's not happy."

"Uh oh, did she bring a date?"

"Yep, she sure did." His smile was wide as he remembered the look on Angelo's face when Kasey walked through the door.

“There can’t be any fighting today. Arturo, did you tell Angelo no fighting?” He kissed her quickly and grabbed her as he made his way out the door without answering her question.

“Come on baby. Let’s go greet our guests and have some fun. Angelo will be fine. Kasey knows how to handle him. However, the fireworks will be something to see and I want a front row seat.”

The End

About the Author

Reana Malori is a pseudonym for a chick with dreams of world domination. However, if that's not possible, I'm willing to settle for being one of the best interracial romance erotica writers on the market (along with some of my favorite authors who already know who they are). While I'm new to the art of writing and putting my work out there for others to read, I've been reading romance novels since the age of fourteen and know what appeals to me as reader. The goal is to provide that same experience for the people who read my work.

I'm a former Marine and served for eight years (so, yes, that means I'm a deadly force to be reckoned with) and have been stationed at Parris Island, South Carolina; Camp Delmar, California; Cherry Point, North Carolina; and Arlington, Virginia. Strong military men will always be a favorite topic of mine, so expect future stories revolving around them. I'm a fan of Highlanders, Alpha males, and strong women who love with everything they have.

I currently live in Northern Virginia with my very own prince charming and my two handsome sons. I hope to write books that will help folks escape for a bit and relax. I'm sure there will be plenty of additional books, and I think you'll like what you get from me. Please send me an e-mail at reanamalori@yahoo.com. I'd love to hear from you.

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Other Books by Reana Malori:

Claiming Lana (Naughty Bites Vol. 3)

Second Chances

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