

Chapter 5

WEDNESDAY MORNING FOUND ME IN A CHIPPER MOOD. I was up an hour earlier than usual, listening to Maggie's station and singing along with the music while preparing to go to the office. It wasn't long after going through Lady's ritual that I was out the door.

Arriving early at the office meant I would have time to plan my special evening with Christina. As I walked in the door, it occurred to me that my waiting room was singularly drab with its black sofas and non-descript tables. I had wanted a conservative look, and had somehow managed to create an atmosphere that reflected my own mood.

After pausing by Maggie's desk to smell a single rosebud, I went to my office and jumped on the computer to make plans for the evening I had in mind. It took no more than fifteen minutes to find the Web sites I needed to complete my reservations. The ringing of the phone startled me.

"Dearest, I needed to hear your voice," Christina told me. "I couldn't sleep last night. I kept tossing and turning, thinking about you."

"Now, princess," I admonished her, "you know you have to perform tonight. You have a long career to think of, after all. And I have a lot to do as well. That's why I am here earlier than usual."

“I’ll be fine,” she assured me. “Particularly since the next night will be devoted solely to you.”

“I’m glad of that,” I told her. “I wouldn’t want you not to be at your absolute best.”

“I know you’re right,” she said with a sigh. “I must go and practice. I wish I could spend the entire day talking with you, my love.”

“I know, princess,” I said, “I feel the same way. But we’re both busy people.”

It would do us no good to be derelict in our duties, I thought to myself. But she had said “my love.” Those words had triggered an upsurge of emotions, but before I could give it any further thought, Maggie appeared with notepad and pen in hand. I told her to put them away.

“I want to explain something,” I told her.

“Something personal?”

“Yes, sit down and listen. You see, I woke up in a most peculiar mood this morning. I actually found myself listening to your favorite station on my way to work. I stopped to smell the roses on your desk. And when I went through the foyer, I suddenly realized how drab everything is here. Drab and utilitarian.”

“I can take care of it,” she told me. “Just leave everything to me.”

All morning Maggie was on the phone talking to decorators. I kept overhearing bits and pieces of her conversations as I hurried between my office and the conference room, putting the final touches on John’s new campaign blitz.

“You are to spare no expense,” I heard her say once. “Everything must be changed. I want the very earliest appointment.”

Thursday, overanxious about my arrangements

for the evening, I left the office around one, and, since it was still early, went back to the marina. There was nothing ominous about the park in the daytime. Joggers were running, mothers pushed their children in carriages, and couples held hands and watched the boats sail by. It occurred to me that it was ironic that a place to which so many people swarmed during the day should be a spot where drunks and addicts gathered at night.

I saw a father wheeling his son on a bike and I thought about what a wonderful experience fatherhood must be, passing on your knowledge and wisdom, preparing your children for life. What makes some men such good and loving fathers, I wondered, while others like me have been cheated out of our opportunity?

No longer able to watch them, I left the park, troubled and a bit resentful, dismissing the past from my mind. I had to get ready for a lovely evening and didn't need anything dampening my mood.

At five o'clock precisely, the driver from Royalty Limousine arrived. His name was Matt. He was around five feet, six inches tall with a bodybuilder's build, surprisingly soft eyes, and a nose that must have been broken a few times.

"I'll be waiting by the car whenever you're ready," he told me.

After I attended to Lady's needs, I was ready. As Matt held the door open for me, I told him that I was indeed fortunate tonight.

"How is that, sir?"

"I have to thank the people at Royalty, for they not only sent me a driver, but a bodyguard as well."

"That is one way to look at it, sir."

“Ever done any boxing?”

“Yes, sir. Is it that obvious?”

“I couldn’t help noticing that your nose seems to have been broken,” I told him. “The only thing I didn’t know was whether it was due to boxing matches or barroom brawls.”

He laughed aloud. “I would say a little of both, sir.”

“Can we come to an agreement tonight, Matt? ‘Sir’ makes me feel as if I am an old man.”

“Okay, boss,” he replied. “How’s that? We are trained to provide excellent service, and it wouldn’t look good if I called you by your first name.”

“Very well,” I replied. “Far be it from me to tell you how to do your job.”

When we pulled up at the Waldorf, Matt remained in the car while the doorman opened my door. To my surprise, Christina was waiting in the lobby, a sight to behold. She wore a lovely, black slip-dress studded with a rhinestone neckline and a matching popover shrug, a combination which accentuated her cleavage. Her black pumps featured a unique strap formation that wrapped around her slim ankles. Her earrings were diamond studs, and a Louis Vuitton evening purse completed the outfit.

“I hope I haven’t been guilty of keeping you waiting, pretty lady,” I said, guiding her to the door. “Your chariot awaits.”

I introduced her to Matt, and off we went to the World Yacht Marina from which our yacht was scheduled to depart at seven, with boarding to begin promptly at six from Pier 81.

“I’ll be back at ten to pick you up, boss,” Matt assured me as he held the door for us.

“Make sure that my other arrangements are confirmed,” I said in a low voice, gratified to see Christina’s eyes grow wide as she realized what was in store.

I had chosen a cruise on the yacht because it made for such a luxurious setting, with panoramic windows that allow one an unobstructed view of the world-famous skyline, plus a sundeck that was perfect for lounging over dessert or for a simple stroll after dinner. Style, class, and comfort were what the World Yacht was famous for, and their representative had assured me that they would do everything in their power to make the night a memorable one.

I had even added “ambassador service” which included a number of extras such as preferred seating, caviar, a glass of champagne, and personalized service. As soon as we were seated, our waitress came by and handed Christina a bouquet of long-stemmed roses.

Christina cradled the roses and then excused herself. I saw that her eyes had welled up with tears.

“Are you all right, princess?” I asked when she returned.

“Yes, dearest, I am perfectly fine,” she told me. “It’s just that I’ve never had anyone treat me so special before, with their thoughts only of my happiness. I had to leave for a few moments, otherwise I would be crying uncontrollably.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Dearest,” she said, “there’s nothing to be sorry about. The tears I shed were from happiness. You don’t realize how you’ve changed my life.”

Have I really? I thought to myself. My God, she is a lovely woman. How do I break her heart? How can

I convince her that she is better off with someone else, and not with some basket case who can't let go of the past?

But, for the time being, the ambiance was incredible with the view of the skyline. The combination of soft lights and music added to an amorous mood which I was certain both of us were feeling.

Five years is a long time to have held on to the past, but how could I forget? All I had done since that tragic day was live my life in her memory.

The waitress approached as Christina finished her strawberry daiquiri, and I, realizing that I had fallen behind, quickly drank the remainder of my usual piña colada. Christina ordered a shrimp cocktail for an appetizer and I the seafood ceviche.

The band was playing something soft that I immediately recognized. It was a Steve Cole track from his latest album, entitled *Our Love*.

Christina took my hand. "I love the way you look at me," she said, "as though there were no one else in the room!"

Was I looking at her or reminiscing about the past? Perhaps, they are one and the same. What purpose had meeting Christina served? Had she helped me to forget, or set me on a course of repeating history? Whichever it was, I had to forget all of that and follow through with my plan. But somehow my heart betrayed me.

"I can't help myself, princess," I told her, brushing back her hair with one hand. "You're a sight to behold. It seems that when God was making you, he told his angels, 'On this one, spend a little more time.'"

When she smiled at me, it was as if the radiance from her smile reached down to the darkest recesses of

my heart and illuminated it, but Kenny G's "Innocence" brought me back to reality.

And yet our worlds were so different. She has a talent that deserves to be shared, I thought. Her music could touch the lives of so many and inspire others to develop their gifts. I had always believed that music is the beacon of hope that there is still beauty and good in the world. And then I told myself I must not lose sight of why I was there.

"Tony, what is wrong?" she asked me.

"What do you mean?" I said, genuinely puzzled. "What could possibly be wrong on a night like this?"

Christina squeezed my hand a little tighter. "I know we're together," she said, "but I sense that you're far away. What has made you so sad? Can't you at least share your thoughts with me?"

How can I share? I thought to myself. There was no way I was going to relive that hell again. But Christina's declaration had touched my heart in a way that I thought was lost to me forever. She told me that, from the first moment she had set eyes on me, she had fallen in love.

She went on to say that she thought about me all day, and dreamed about our being together when she went to sleep at night. But what she was trying to understand, she said, was why I seemed so sad. She believed that somehow I must have been hurt in the past, and she said that she would do anything to ensure my happiness.

"All that I am," she said, "all I will ever be, is centered on loving you for the rest of my life."

It must have been the music, but this time I had to leave. I went onto the sundeck and gazed at the Hudson River. I felt the breeze brush against my face,

and then the tears that I had held in for so long began to overflow.

I couldn't help myself. Such innocence. Such passion. Such outward and inward beauty. My world would never be the same again.

I didn't realize that Christina had joined me on the deck until I turned to find her standing behind me, hugging herself against the chill. Taking off my sports coat, I wrapped it around her shoulders, and we embraced without saying a word. "You're The One" was playing. I didn't know what happened to me, but suddenly I had to confide in her.

I told her about the war that raged within me because of what she was: innocent, youthful, gifted, with all the attributes that would take her in a direction different from my own. How I had tried to avoid her due to the obstacles that threatened our being together, and how my heart had betrayed me because of the beauty and excitement she had brought back into my world.

I tried to make her understand that I couldn't justify the way I was feeling, that cooler heads must prevail, but I was afraid that, just as she had done, I too had fallen in love.

"Dearest, there is no need to be afraid," she said, putting her fingers to my lips. "Please, no more words."

She inched closer and our eyes met. Hesitantly, we moved toward one another. Awkwardly at first, I tried to trace the outline of her lips with mine. Somehow I felt safer on the perimeter, but Christina was entirely different.

With each retreating trace of my lips, her kisses became more passionate. Moving in unison, we took

turns receiving each other until I realized that if we continued, we would never make it back to the table. I tried to pull away, but she clutched me tighter. As our passions overflowed, I gave into her.

I could have gone on kissing her forever, but I remembered the chorus from the song that was playing and I began to shudder.

*You're the one I've searched for all my life,
Loving you, girl, just feels so right,
You're the one I needed in my life,
I'll be blessed to have you as my wife.*

“Dearest,” she said, “is anything wrong?”

“No, no,” I was swift to reply. “I guess it’s a lot colder out here than I thought.”

We held hands on our way to the dining room. I felt my resolve wavering, but I was intent on seeing the night through the way I had planned.

Dinner was a struggle for me since my thoughts were back on the sundeck. I noticed that Christina picked at her food, but I never questioned her, afraid of what she might say was the cause.

Luckily for me, the photographer that had taken our picture when we boarded interrupted us for another, and we purchased both at the end of the cruise.

We arrived in port at our scheduled time to find Matt waiting with the limo. Christina’s eyes widened when Matt pointed to a magnificent white steed harnessed to an emerald-green carriage. I felt warm again when Christina rested her head on my shoulder.

“I wish this night would never end,” she whispered. “Promise that you’ll stay by my side forever.”

I didn’t know how to answer, so I kissed her as

the carriage headed to our final destination, the Empire State Building, where we were greeted by a guard who was waiting to escort us to the observation tower on the 102nd floor. It was difficult to imagine that we were 1,224 feet in the air with the entire city glittering below us. Indeed, we could see the lights from neighboring states.

Christina leaned back against me when we were alone, and I wrapped my arms about her. The green light that illuminated the tower enveloped us both. It was as if we were transported to another world. Suddenly, all my defenses seemed to disappear. This was not what I had planned and I realized that I was treading on dangerous ground, but I could not hold back what I felt any longer.

“Christina,” I said, “I thought that I locked all possible entries to my heart.” And if that wasn’t enough, I exposed myself further by telling her that somehow she had found a chink in my armor and feelings that I thought I had buried forever were starting to resurface.

I wish I would have stopped there, but I rambled on. I told her that I hadn’t made a contingency plan for falling in love and how it warmed my foolish heart to know that her thoughts were always of me. I also explained that I had brought her to the Empire State Building to illuminate our different paths in life, but how it all seemed so insignificant in that moment, surrounded by the majesty of the city’s lights.

I couldn’t believe what was coming out of my mouth. It was as if someone else had taken over my vocal chords and I was powerless to stop them. At that moment I wanted so much to be with her, but I knew the ghosts of my past would impede my desire to be with her.

“Princess,” I concluded, “not an hour, minute, or second passes that my thoughts are not of you. But the lives we have chosen to lead present an obstacle and draw us in different directions.”

She held on to me tighter and placed her fingers on my lips. She told me not to worry, for whatever obstacles came our way, we would face them and conquer them together.

“No one has made me feel the way you made feel tonight,” she said. “I will not live my life without you. Hold me, Tony. Never will I be far from your loving arms!”

It wasn't long before we were again locked in a passionate embrace. I didn't want to let her go, and yet I knew it would be a struggle to ignore the differences of our worlds. But between her ardent embrace and the glitter of the city's lights, I tried to dismiss those thoughts, opting to enjoy the magic of the moment, at least for one night, if the ghosts of my past would let me.

Back in the limo, I asked Matt to turn on the radio, hoping for some romantic music, and, indeed, the song that played during our short ride back to the Waldorf seemed to be saying all the things I could not. I don't remember all the words, but the ones that stuck in my mind were these: “*Beyond my control . . .*”

“She the one who was in the papers?” Matt asked when I returned from seeing Christina to her elevator bank. “When the fight broke out in this hotel?” Trying to decide what I should do, I didn't give his question much thought.

“I remember reading how she spellbound the audience,” he said, “and that a lot of children are now taking up the violin because of her. Not that I wonder.

The way she looked at you tonight, you can't help but notice how passionate she is."

Caught up in the emotions of the night, I had almost forgotten what I was trying to show her. But it had come back to me when I kissed her by the elevator. I felt the passion from her kisses and realized then that the obstacles were too great. She had to go on and illuminate the world through her music, and I had to continue on my desolate path, to fulfill the promise I had made to another.

At least we would have the memory of tonight and what could have been, I had told Christina. But the road I was traveling on was one I had to walk alone. I had fought the emotions that had welled up inside me and kissed her as fervently as I could before letting the elevator door close.

As I told Matt to take me home, the last words to the song kept playing in my head. How prophetic they had been. Everything was definitely beyond my . . . yet I foolishly struggled to maintain some form of control.

Maybe it is all for the best, I told myself. There had been too much anguish and suffering in my life to subject her to. What kind of future could she and I have if I was unable and unwilling to let go of the past? I rolled down the window. The breeze blew through the limo, perhaps taking my only chance at happiness with it. I wished it would take me away. I slumped in the seat as Matt drove me home in silence.