

HASSIE  
CALHOUN

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*a las vegas novel  
of innocence*

PAMELA CORY

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## chapter twenty-one

● HASSIE AWOKE to the noise of two dogs barking in what sounded to her like friendly conversation until one of the dog's owners caterwauled its name five or six times and peace was restored to the neighborhood amid the sound of twittering birds. She felt the warmth of the morning sun through the window while the curtain fluttered feebly in the faint summer breeze. She lay still and closed her eyes until her curiosity drew her to the window where she pulled back the curtain to a bright, blue-skied day. She spotted the dogs' owners and wondered if they were as nosy as the neighbors on her street in Corsicana – sniffing around their house when her mother came home from the hospital with her little brother, asking questions about where her father was and tsking over his misfortune at missing the arrival of his son.

She yawned as she heard the shuffle of feet in the kitchen. The smells of coffee and frying bacon wafted through the beads. She put on the lightly quilted robe that Morty's wife had given her a couple of Christmases ago. She'd thought it strange that this Jewish woman that she barely knew would find it appropriate to give her a Christmas gift, but she'd graciously accepted it as a token of seasonal cheer from her boss.

She went to the toilet before making an appearance, and then joined Henry standing alone by the stove. "Where's Julio?" she asked and looked longingly at the coffee pot on the kitchen counter.

"He's working at one of the studios." Henry reached for a coffee cup. "How do you feel today?"

“A little rough, and I’m starving.”

Henry poured the coffee and pushed the cup in her direction. “I was just about to cook some eggs to go with the bacon. Or would you rather have a jelly doughnut?”

“Very funny,” Hassie said, stirring sugar into the coffee. “Bacon and eggs would be great. I’ll be too nervous to eat anything this afternoon before my rehearsal at the Tropicana.” She took the cup and sat down at the dinette table while Henry poured the bowl of beaten eggs into the sizzling pan. “By the way,” she said. “If you’re not busy today, why don’t you come with me? I could use the moral support.”

“In case you forgot, I have a job at the Sands. Anyway, Dotty will be there. Does she know you’re coming in today?”

Hassie nodded and swallowed a sip of the coffee. “I told her I’d give her a call this morning. La Chanson has really little to do with her but she’s offered her support so I’m gonna take it.”

“Of course, you are.” Henry scraped the eggs onto a plate along with two slices of bacon and a piece of toast. “Here you go.” He placed the plate on the table in front of her and bowed. “Show me that big appetite of yours.”

She mouthed a kiss at him, and then looked at her plate before saying, “You got any jam or jelly for the toast?” and then took a big bite of the eggs.

Henry laughed and opened the refrigerator door. “I knew you wanted some gooey sugar.”

“Yum. This is delicious,” she said and ignored Henry’s smirk. “Julio told me that he was the cook in the family.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what he likes to tell everyone. But unless you like enchiladas and beans for every meal, I’d be careful of his offer to cook for you.”

She laughed and held up her cup as a signal for more. “Sit down and join me for a few minutes.”

Henry brought another cup and the percolator to the table, refilled her cup and poured some for himself before sitting down. She devoured the plate of food, and after she’d taken the last bite, Henry pushed the plate away from her and watched her stir sugar in her coffee before saying, “You know, I’m not very good at keeping things to myself where you’re concerned.”

She had felt him looking at her scar several times; now was as

good a time as any to broach the subject. “That might be an understatement,” she said.

He reached over and gently touched the nubby reminder on her eyebrow. “If I’d had a gun, I would have killed Jake that night.”

Hassie took the open pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her robe and laid them on the table next to the lighter. “I don’t really remember much about it after he –”

Henry sat still while she lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. “I’ll never forget that first sight of you in the hospital,” he said softly. “We couldn’t recognize your face – between the bandages and the swelling. It was like a bad dream and so scary to realize that Jake was capable of such violence.”

“Although the memory is vague, I still relive parts of it in my dreams and keep thinking that it was all my fault – that I did something to set him off – but I also remember trying to apologize to him. He wouldn’t listen.” She laid the cigarette in the ashtray, put her hands over her mouth and rested her elbows on the table, tears filling her eyes.

Henry took hold of her hands. “You listen to me. You could never have done anything that would have warranted what he did to you. Don’t tell me you forgot how long it took you to recover. And I’m just talking about the physical recovery.” He touched her scar again and said, “This is nothing compared to what it must have felt like to realize that someone who claims to love you more than life itself can turn on you like a mad dog and, in one destructive moment, basically put your life at risk.” He sat back in his chair and breathed deeply. “And the sickest part of this now is that I don’t know if Jake is really aware of how badly he hurt you.”

“What do you mean?” Hassie wiped her eyes with her napkin. “He never came to the hospital or even called to see how I was?” She picked up the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“Are you kidding? He was in hiding for days into weeks – ran off to New York or LA or somewhere.” Henry stopped and looked at her. “Are you sure you want to talk about this now? Do you want more coffee?”

“I’d like a drink, but that’s a bad idea before I go to work.”

He gave her a disapproving look and said, “Never mind the fact that it’s only ten o’clock in the morning.”

She laid the cigarette on the ashtray. "I can talk about all this now, Henry. I'd actually like to fill in some of the missing pieces that have haunted me since I left Vegas. What happened right after the - fight?"

"To be honest, I don't know how you got to the hospital. Julio was in the Copa Room and heard that you'd been hurt and that Donnie had been called to get you to a doctor. Julio found me and we called Donnie's office and learned that you'd been taken to the hospital. When we got there, you were in the emergency room and we weren't allowed to see you. Donnie was there. He said you'd be okay and that we should go home and wait for a phone call. You can imagine our response to that suggestion. We made a few calls and paced around the waiting room for a couple of hours until I was finally able to coerce a nurse into telling us what was going on." Henry finished the coffee and then took his cup and the percolator back into the kitchen.

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Hassie stubbed out the cigarette and followed him. "I was unconscious all of this time?"

"I would think so," Henry said and plugged in the percolator to brew a fresh pot. "By the time we were allowed to see you, you were heavily sedated, which was a good thing because Julio and I completely fell apart." Henry cleared the emotion from his throat and put his arms around her. "I hate Jake for what he did to you. And I don't ever want to hear you say again that anything about that night was your fault." He pulled back from her and held her forearms while looking into her eyes. "There will never be a valid excuse for his brutality. And you must never forget it. Stay away from him and get on with your life and this great new opportunity."

Hassie's throat ached; she knew that everything Henry said was right. His mention of the emergency room and the bandages brought back flashes of memory of waking up under the fog of drugs and swathe of gauze; the agonized faces of people around her, calling her name and holding her hand. She leaned back against the kitchen counter and wiped the tears from her face. "I had forgotten how bad it really was."

Henry handed her a tissue and said, "Well, I'm not gonna be an 'I told you so' now, but I'm here to make sure that you remember and that you'll remember no matter what happens where Jake is concerned. In his own distorted way, he loves you. And I won't be surprised if he tries to make it up to you."

“He’ll have a tough time with that because I won’t be going anywhere near the Sands. Anyway, he’s got enough going on with a wife and child.” She studied him for a few seconds and then said, “You told me on the telephone that Jake has changed. What did you mean by that?”

Henry took a step back and checked the percolator. “After everything else I’ve said, this is gonna sound strange. But in a perverse way, his treatment of you turned him into a nicer guy – after you left, of course. He’s more rational and patient where the rest of us are concerned. And, needless to say, he surprised the universe by his responsible handling of the situation with Natalie and the kid. That’s why I’m fairly certain he’ll try to make it up to you. Somehow, some way.”

Hassie crossed her arms over her chest and said, “I don’t care what he says or does. Jake Contrata is ancient history. And that’s a promise.”

“Good,” Henry said. “I’m gonna hold you to that. So. Why don’t we get off this dreary subject and talk about the rest of your day?”

Hassie took a cup of coffee and walked into the living room, motioning for Henry to join her. She furtively relocated the ashtray and lighter to the coffee table, her cigarettes tucked back into the pocket of her robe. They sat on opposite ends of the sofa and for a moment, everything was strangely normal. She was in the safe company of her best friend who knew her so well and always had her best interests at heart.

Henry held the coffee cup with both hands and said, “What time is your rehearsal?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but it’s not until the afternoon so I think I’ll go over to see Dotty around lunchtime. When are you going to the Copa Room?”

Henry looked back at the clock on the dining room wall. “Technically, I’m late. But there’s nothing pressing me today so I’ll go over soon. I’d offer to drive you to the Tropicana but don’t think you’ll be ready to go yet. Did Morty work out something for transportation in your contract?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she said. “I need to sort out all those details today so maybe I can just take a taxi over.”

Henry set his cup on the coffee table, walked over to the tele-

phone on the sideboard and located a small pad of paper. He jotted something on the top sheet, then tore it off and came back to the sofa. "Here's the number for Casino Cabs. Call them with a fifteen-minute warning and they'll pick you up and take you anywhere you want to go. And that's our address."

"Thanks, Henry. I'm so glad I decided to stay here with you guys." She sat on the edge of the seat and pulled her hair off her neck. Her skin oozed sweat, and she wanted another shower. "I think I'll make a couple of calls and then organize my room. *My* room," she said, smiling at him.

"It's not much but it's yours for as long as you need it," Henry said and cleared the cups from the coffee table. "Something tells me Dotty will be on a campaign to coral you into the Tropicana. Do whatever you want to do, honey. You know you're always welcome here."

The taxi dropped her at the front entrance to the Tropicana. It had been quite a long time since she'd been inside the imposing building. The abrupt termination of her last stay in Vegas had prevented her from seeing most of her friends outside of her hospital room before she left for Reno. Dotty had called her once a week for a couple of months after she got there, which meant a lot to her and made her wish she'd stayed in closer touch with Barbara. It was also a painful reminder of the lost relationship with her mother.

As she pushed through the heavy brass and glass door, she half expected to be greeted by Jimmy; a flash of her arrival at the Sands brought the image of Jake to mind. "Get outta my head, Jake!" Then she saw Dotty coming toward her from across the casino lobby. She waved and rushed forward to greet her in the smoke-filled space.

"Hassie," Dotty said as they embraced. "Honey, you look just great." Dotty pulled back from her, and Hassie could tell that she was trying not to look at her scar.

"It's wonderful to see you, Dotty," she said. "I can't believe I'm really here."

"And to work in this great lounge!" She took hold of Hassie's arm and started back through the casino. "I'm so proud, I could pop."

Hassie laughed and followed Dotty's lead. "Do you know the musicians in La Chanson?"

"Do I know 'em?" She suddenly lengthened her stride. "Make a note, honey. Dotty knows *everybody* at the Tropicana."

“So, you know a man named John Jacobson?” Hassie asked, practically running to stay in step with Dotty.

“Course, I know John. I believe he’s the reason you’re here.” Dotty veered around another corner as she said, “Now, hurry up. I just ran into the music director and he says they’ll all be waitin’ for you.”

“But I thought I would have a little time to talk to you first.” Hassie had half convinced herself that she would never see John Jacobson again – that his role in getting her to Vegas had been accomplished and he’d have moved on to some other unsuspecting target. Now, it sounded like she was destined to see him.

“We’ll talk later,” Dotty said and pulled open the door to a small, dimly lit space. “Go on in. I’m right behind ya.”

The room was something of a cross between Felix’s and the Copa Room with an ornately decorated ceiling and crystal chandeliers meant to conjure up the feeling of something French. The stage was small, with barely enough room for the baby grand piano, drum set and two stools; the double bass lay in the floor beside one of them. A lone microphone stood far downstage, which had been extended at two strategic points to hold the sound monitors.

“Go on, Hassie,” Dotty urged her from behind. “I see the boss over there.” She pointed to the tables closest to the stage entry.

Hassie spotted several men clumped around two of the small tables and immediately recognized John Jacobson. She picked up her pace a little as Dotty called out, “Wake up, guys. Miss Calhoun’s here.”

Hassie reached the tables just as the men turned around to face her. They stood up; Jacobson walked over to greet her, stuck out his hand and said, “Welcome.” She shook his hand as he said, “Can we call you Hassie?”

“Of course,” she said and smiled. “It’s nice to see you again, John.” The man standing to his right was short and slight with thick, black hair that was graying at the temples and wore round, black-rimmed glasses that made him a dead ringer for Poindexter from the Felix the Cat cartoons. Jacobson put his hand on the man’s shoulder and said, “This is Daniel Forrester, your keyboardist, arranger and generally the glue that holds this wild bunch together.” The man seemed unimpressed by it all but shook her hand and nodded politely.

“Yep. Dan’s the man – our fearless leader,” one of the other men said. “My name’s Tony. I’m the drummer. And that there’s Art. He’s our horn blower.”

The man he’d referenced hit him on his arm with his fist while the others laughed and cajoled, then turned to Hassie, offering his hand, and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Hassie. We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Daniel crossed his arms over his chest and studied her before addressing Jacobson, “Are you sure someone who looks like her can sing?”

“Oh, for Chrissake, Danny.” Dotty had worked her way into the middle of the group. “Give the poor girl a break. She just got here. Where’s your fiddler?”

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Jacobson took hold of Hassie’s arm and led her away from the guys while they mouthed off at Dotty and chatted about the missing player. With a half-serious expression, he looked at her and said, “I know you’ve worked with lots of lounge musicians so I’m sure you can hold your own. But you might like to know that the act preceding you was a hairy Latino bongo-playing songster who smelled like rum and thought he was Desi Arnaz. So you can imagine how the appearance of a beautiful, young woman would make the guys act like half-witted apes.”

She laughed and tried to relax before saying, “I’m sure we’ll be fine. I’m eager to go to work.”

He smiled uncomfortably and angled his body to ensure none of the others could see his face, then focused closely on her and said, “I’m glad you’re here, Hassie. I’m a thousand percent sincere when I tell you that signing you on for this show was a real coup for the Tropicana.”

She fiddled nervously with her hands and said, “But it’s not exactly New York, is it?”

The color in his naturally pink cheeks intensified as he laced his fingers together and rested them on the mound of his stomach and said, “No, it’s not New York, and this is not Reno.”

She remained still and hoped her slightly addled nerves didn’t show.

He dropped his hands down to his sides and carefully said, “Can I just say that that night with you in Reno is something that I will

always remember and, regardless of what you might think, it had nothing to do with your being here now.”

She suddenly noticed that a couple of the guys were looking at them and smiled sweetly as she said, “I think the natives are getting restless, so maybe you should just say what you really want to say.” She inhaled and then held her breath, awaiting his response.

He looked over his shoulder and then back into her eyes. “I live in Vegas and have a family here and, as odd as it may sound, I love my wife.”

Hassie exhaled and then offered her handshake before saying, “New York or not, your job offer got me out of a dead end life in Reno. I’m grateful for the opportunity and I promise I’ll do a good job.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” he said and shook her hand. “There are a few details of your contract that we need to review, and you’ll want to have a good orientation of the facilities. I can see that Dotty has appointed herself as your minder, so unless you object, I’ll let her be.”

Hassie nodded her head and smiled. “Dotty’s the best. I’m happy to have her by my side.”

“Good.” He led her back down to the stage where it was evident that the guys were ready to begin. “Go have your first session and I’ll see you later.”

Daniel stood behind the keyboard and fumbled with some papers and a few pieces of music. She walked up on the stage and stood next to the piano at its bow, waiting for his direction as to where they would start. A tall, wiry black man had joined the stage and was plucking on the double bass and twisting the knobs at the top in an effort to bring it in tune. She smiled at him and offered a little wave, which he accepted with the nod of his head and hint of a smile while Daniel played the introduction to “My Funny Valentine.” Hassie looked back at him. He hesitated at the cue for the vocals, and then looked up as if to say, “Ready?”

She nodded and launched into the first verse of the song; the other musicians joined in on the second line. Daniel’s arrangement was simple and elegant, and she felt that the piano actually breathed with her as she sang. They made it all the way through without stopping; the ending took a beautifully harmonic turn that sent goose bumps down her arms.

“Not bad,” Daniel said as the other players whistled and tapped their instruments.

“That’s a beautiful arrangement,” Hassie said, then smiled and beguilingly continued, “Is this a sample of what I’m in for?”

Daniel nodded and said, “Your agent forwarded this list of the songs you like to sing. No surprises really. Torch song, torch song, torch song, ballad. Whose version of “I’m a Fool to Want You” do you do? Holiday or Sinatra?”

Hassie froze at the mention of the song that had somehow been the unraveling of her relationship with Jake, and then quietly said, “I don’t really do that song, but if I did, I’d do *my* version.”

He looked at her, shrugged and said, “It’s on your list, but so are a lot of numbers that I’d like to change. You’re heavy on gut-wrenching Porter and Ellington. We need some upbeat stuff – some Gershwin and maybe a little current Broadway. I think the audience is going to like you, Hassie, but frisky drunks need to be jostled every now and then.” He studied her for a moment. “You’ve seen Sinatra in the Copa Room, haven’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Frank’s a great crooner and gets to the heart of a song better than anyone, but he also has a lot of fun with the audience. It’s a mandatory part of working the lounges in Vegas.”

“I get it, Mister – Daniel –” she said and felt her face flush as the guys chuckled.

Daniel stood up and walked over to her. “Call me Dan.” His demeanor had softened a bit, and she relaxed as he turned to the other musicians and said, “Let’s take a break. Be back in ten and we’re gonna sort out this program before the sun goes down.”

She started to walk off the stage when Dan called out to her, “Hassie, can I ask you something else about this song list?”

“Sure,” she said and joined him at the keyboard.

“I see a couple of pieces here that I don’t recognize – maybe some original stuff?”

Hassie nodded and said, “Yeah, I’ve written it – me and Julio Villanueva. Do you know him? From the Copa Room?”

“Of course, I know him,” Dan said. “Julio and I worked as studio musicians in LA before being lured to sin city. I used to play the guitar while he pounded out the beat on the Latin percussion

instruments. We also sub for each other on the keyboard from time to time. He's a good guy."

"And one of my best friends," she said, her loyalty to Julio implicit in her tone. "In fact, I'm bunking in at his house for a few weeks."

"I heard that you're pretty tight with Henry Berman. Give them my best," he said and sat down on the piano bench. She smiled and walked away, but before she reached the stage steps, Dan called out to her, "And, Hassie? You might wanna think about laying off the cigarettes for a while."

His expression was hard to read but she took a chance and said, "How am I supposed to end up a fragile, gravel-voiced old woman if I don't live a tragic life full of cigarettes and booze?"

"You mean cigarettes, booze and men. If that's your goal in life, so be it." He stood up and laid her song list aside. "Just bear in mind that I don't kiss girls who smoke."

She smiled, looked directly at him and said, "One out of three's not bad."