

A movie poster for 'Sweetest Taboo'. The background is dark. On the left, a large, close-up portrait of a woman with dark, wavy hair and a slight smile. On the right, a shirtless man with short, light-colored hair, looking down. The title 'Sweetest TABOO' is in the lower left, with 'Sweetest' in a red script font and 'TABOO' in a red, outlined, serif font. The names 'Liz ANDREWS' and 'Lena MATTHEWS' are at the top in a similar red, outlined, serif font.

Liz ANDREWS
Lena MATTHEWS

Sweetest
TABOO

Loose Id

THE SWEETEST TABOO

Liz Andrews and Lena Matthews

Loose Id.[®]

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (light bondage).

The Sweetest Taboo

Liz Andrews and Lena Matthews

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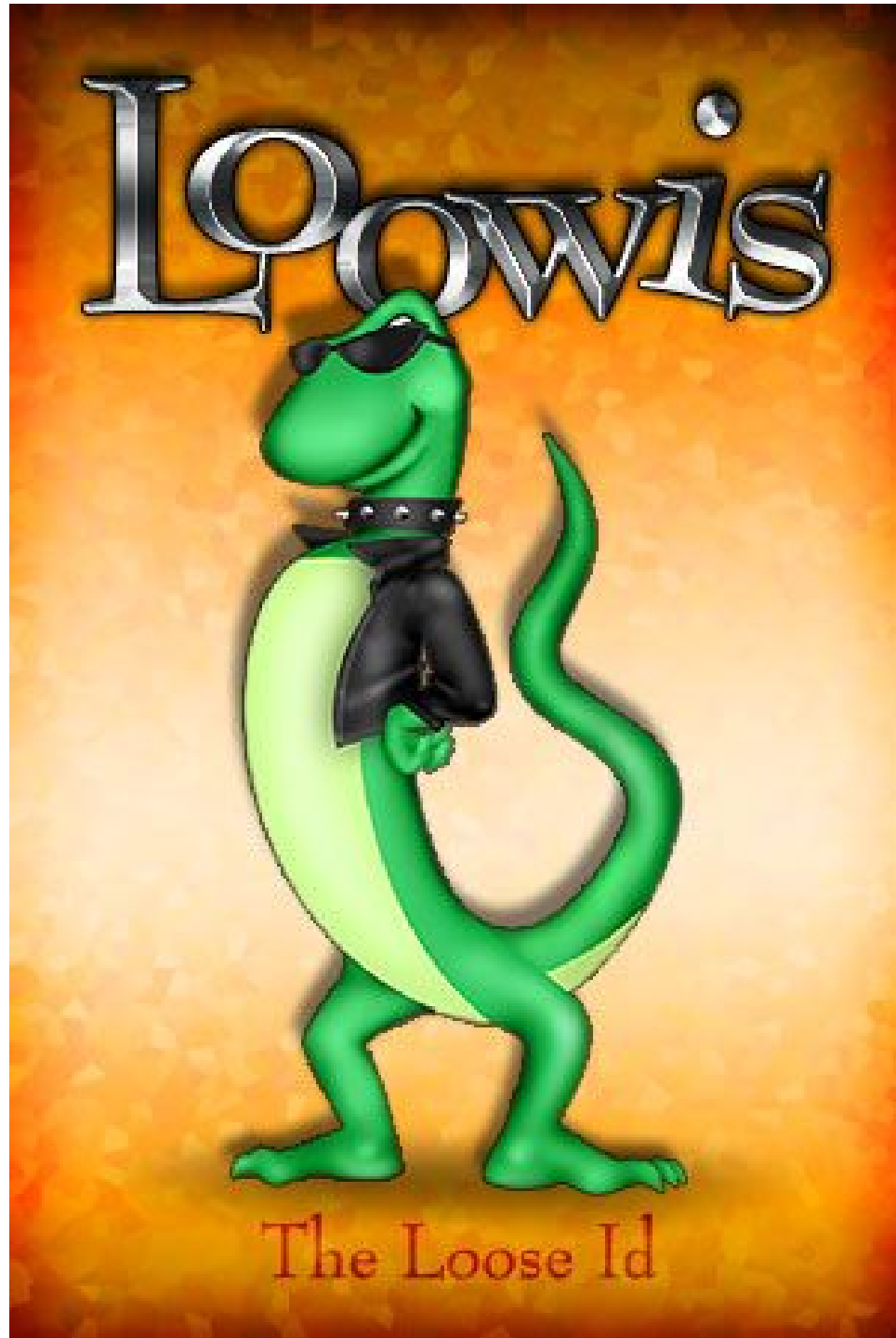
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Chapter One

“I can’t find my daddy.”

The sound of the little voice whimpering behind Cory Turner sent the normally urbane woman tumbling forward from her kneeling position head first into her newly hoed garden. Muttering every curse word known to man, Cory pushed herself up, brushing the damp mulch from her hands. “What the fuck!” didn’t express her ire quite right.

Looking down at her once clean yellow shirt, she sighed in dismay. There didn’t seem to be much sense in trying to right her appearance, not when she had landed face and chest flat into the ground. Lucky for her though she had enough cushion in her chest to buffer her fall.

So much for doing a little gardening before heading to work.

With a groan, Cory moved from her knees to her butt and faced her little backyard intruder. She had lived on Mulberry Fall for over three years and she had never come across the little urchin before her, which was actually saying a lot. Cory’s house was well known for handing out the best Halloween treats for miles around, making her front porch one of the most popular ones in town.

“Do you know where my daddy is?” the little voice asked. His expression, much like his voice, was just a step shy of panicked which spun Cory into action. The last thing she needed was a crying screaming kid on her hands, especially a white one. Despite growing up in River Bend, Cory knew that with one look at the terrified towheaded kid, the cuffs would be out and her black butt would be locked up so fast her head would spin.

“No sweetie, I don’t.” Of course those were the wrong words, because his nose squinted up, his head went back, and a wail louder than fireworks going off spewed forth. Petrified, Cory reached out and dragged the little boy down into her lap. “But don’t worry little one, we’ll find him.”

“I’m lostttt!” he wailed, while making himself comfortable in her lap.

“Not for long though. Now please quiet down.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than her back door swung open and her older sister and roommate, Nichelle, came sprinting out. If it had been for any other reason, Cory would have found the shocked look on Nichelle’s face downright hilarious. Nothing, or nothing to date, shook the normally reserved woman’s cool.

“What is that?”

“A little boy.” Cory had to speak loudly to be heard over the wails.

“I can see that,” Nichelle yelled back, eyeing them warily. “But what is he doing here?”

“Crying.”

Cory was as in the dark as Nichelle was. She bounced her legs and squeezed the child more, offering him the only comfort that she could. It didn’t seem to lessen his tears but he did tone down the volume. From the looks of him, Cory hadn’t been the only one playing in the dirt today. His scrawny little legs were caked in mud as were the jean shorts and tee shirt he was wearing.

“Hey sweetie, what’s your name?” Cory was hoping to distract him enough that he’d stop crying for a minute.

The boy blinked up at her for a moment, popped his thumb in his mouth and stared up at her with huge beautiful blue eyes. He wasn't saying anything, but he wasn't crying any more either. His face was streaked with dirt and tears.

"Well, what are you going to do with him?"

The child started at Nichelle's harsh words and snuggled closer to Cory, hiding his head in her chest.

Cory resisted the urge to say boil him alive and make him into a cake. Seriously, what did Nichelle think she was going to do with him?

"Don't scare him. He finally stopped crying." Cory spoke softly, stroking his back as she rocked back and forth.

"Whatever. You just better figure out who he is before someone thinks you snatched him." Nichelle turned and walked back into the house in a huff, letting the screen door slam behind her.

A little hand reached up, snagging her braids, a chubby little finger, twisting around the curly ends.

"Pretty."

"Hey there, little man. The scary lady is gone. Can you tell me your name?"

He giggled for a moment and ducked his head, acting shy. He mumbled something in the direction of her chest, but she couldn't understand what he said. Tilting his head up, she asked, "One more time, so I can hear you."

"TJ."

"Hi TJ, I'm Cory."

TJ giggled again and then squirmed to get out of her arms. Leaning over her lap, he picked up the mulch she'd just fallen into. Grabbing two child-sized handfuls he threw them into the air, letting the wood chips fall on them. Before she could stop him he grabbed at the mulch again, intent on this new game.

“Oh no, let’s leave that alone.”

Cory grabbed his hands, prying the mulch from his fingers. TJ’s forehead furrowed and his lower lip quivered. Worried that he’d begin crying again, Cory stopped pulling at the mulch and looked around for something to distract him. Unfortunately all she could find were gardening tools and she didn’t think handing him a trowel was a good idea.

“Hey, how about a cookie? TJ, do you want a cookie?”

“I like cookies.” TJ bounded off her lap, ready for the treat. He grabbed at her hand, trying to urge her along.

“Give me a minute here.” Cory struggled to her feet. She tried to wipe off the dirt, but finally just gave up. Taking TJ’s hand, Cory headed toward her back door, hoping she actually had some cookies. Otherwise her distraction wouldn’t last for long.

When she neared her bottom steps she noticed her gate was wide open, answering at least part of the riddle of the how’s and why’s of TJ. The latch on the gate was a constant source of annoyance. TJ wasn’t the first little interloper the wide-open entry had attracted. Normally her intruders were of the four-legged variety, but still, Cory was going to have to get the gate fixed.

“Let’s see what we can find.” Cory sat TJ in a chair and headed for the pantry. Unfortunately she didn’t see any cookies. She didn’t like to keep sweets around the house because she’d eat them if they were available. Wondering if he’d settle for a graham cracker instead, Cory walked out of the pantry and realized TJ was no longer sitting in the chair.

“TJ, where are you?” Cory glanced out to the backyard, but didn’t see anyone. Heading into the living room, she came to a stop. TJ was sitting in front of the television, all the DVDs pulled out on the floor in front of him. How he had taken all this out in such a short time she had no idea.

“I like *Cars*.”

“Cars?” She figured most little boys probably liked cars, but what that had to do with DVDs she hadn’t a clue.

“It’s a movie.”

“Oh, I don’t have that movie. Come on. Let’s get back to the kitchen. I found some graham crackers.”

“I want chocolate chip cookies.” TJ had definitely found his voice.

“I don’t have chocolate chip.” Cory frantically tried to think of anything chocolate she might have. “But guess what. I can make you a chocolate cookie sandwich.”

TJ looked at her with a bit of distrust, as if he wasn’t sure what this possible cookie sandwich might entail, but he was willing to try it out. As he tried to stand up his feet tangled in the mass of DVDs and he started to trip. Cory leapt forward, catching him before he slammed into the floor.

“Okay kiddo, you have had a wild day so far. Let’s go.”

Picking him up, Cory swung him onto her hip. TJ was heavier than he looked. She could get a good workout hauling him around. Returning to the kitchen, Cory headed for the pantry, unwilling to leave TJ alone again. She snagged a can of chocolate frosting and the graham crackers and headed back to the table. Cory settled TJ in a chair before finding a knife and pulling up a chair for herself.

“Crap, you probably need to wash your hands.”

TJ’s eyes widened. “You said a bad word.”

“What, crap?”

“Awww.”

“Oops, okay, sorry.” Cory had no idea crap was considered a bad word. She figured it was better than shit, but obviously not. “Why don’t we get you cleaned up?”

“Kay. Then we get cookies?”

“Yep, then we get cookies.”

Cory picked TJ off the chair and headed to the half bath off the kitchen. Unfortunately he was too small to get his hands under the faucet, so Cory had to lift him up. He didn’t want to use the soap and she had the water too hot for his liking, but finally his hands as well as her own were washed. She even grabbed a wash cloth and cleaned his face up before they headed back to the kitchen.

“This is how we make a chocolate cookie sandwich. First you take a graham cracker, spread on the frosting, and then top it with another graham cracker. Tah-dah.”

TJ reached out to grab it out of her hand, but Cory held it out of reach for a minute.

“What do you say?”

“Please?”

“Good boy. Here you go.”

Cory handed him the cookie and TJ mumbled a hasty thanks before he shoved half of it in his mouth in the first bite. “Slow down kiddo. You’re going to choke. Hey, do you want some milk?”

TJ nodded his head, chocolate frosting smeared over his face as he gobbled up the cookie. Cory poured him a glass of milk and handed it to him. As he tried to take a sip, the glass tipped, spilling milk all over the table and chair as well as down the front of him. He broke into tears immediately as Cory jumped up.

“TJ, sweetie, don’t cry. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, Cory. I didn’t mean to spill it.” He tried to grab at the napkins, tears continuing to run down his face.

“I know. Don’t worry about it. We’ll get it all cleaned up.”

Cory helped him mop up the milk. Then they returned to the bathroom so she could wash his face and hands again. His clothes, on the other hand, were a complete disaster.

Covered in dirt and milk, they needed to be washed and no amount of spot cleaning was going to work.

"I think this is as good as it's going to get. Now, we need to find your dad." Cory realized she'd been with TJ for a good half an hour and hadn't seen a sign of his father or any other adult for that matter, looking for this child. Of course they'd been in the house for a good portion of that time.

"My daddy's gonna be mad."

"Why would your dad be mad?"

"I'm not supposed to eat cookies before lunch."

"I think he'd understand this one time. Come on, let's start knocking on some doors." Cory took TJ's hand and headed toward the front door. Just as she pulled the door open, Nichelle came barreling down the stairs. She skidded to an abrupt stop when she saw TJ's hands in Cory's. "Is he still here?"

At her harsh words TJ stepped closer to Cory and gripped her leg tightly. There had been plenty of times over Cory's short twenty-seven years on this earth when she'd harbored harmful wishes toward her eldest sister, but no time rang as true as now. The last thing TJ needed was the wicked witch scaring him into another crying fit.

"Nope, you're seeing things."

"I can't believe you brought him into the house. Don't you know --"

"Don't you ever shut up?" Cory shook her head grimly as she loosened TJ's grip on her leg and headed out the door. When she came back home she was going to kick Nichelle's ass up and down the stairs.

Muttering to herself Cory almost ran over TJ who was looking up at her solemnly with a hint of disapproval in his eyes.

"What?"

"Shut up isn't very nice."

Startled Cory stepped back as she looked down at the tiny tyrant. She'd never been reprimanded by a child before. She had no idea how to react. "Uh ... I guess it isn't."

"You need to say sorry."

"Ohh ... 'kay. I'll do that as soon as I get back." *And as soon as I drop your little dirty, house-destroying, reincarnated Emily Post butt off with your father.* "Do you remember which way you came from?"

As if her statement reminded him of his dilemma, TJ shoved his thumb in his mouth and shrugged his shoulders.

Not a good sign. "Did you cross the street?"

His only response was a limpid look accompanied by another shrug.

"I should have called the cops," Cory murmured to herself as she walked down the pathway to the sidewalk. Biting her bottom lip, Cory tried hard to remember which house had boasted a for sale sign lately. Between the rising housing market and working mounds of overtime, Cory hadn't paid her neighborhood as much attention as she should have. Surely someone had though.

In a neighborhood of busybodies and desperate housewives, there had to be one person in "the know." Someone who knew of a new family moving in with a kid as cute as TJ.

"Anything looking familiar yet, kiddo?" she asked hopefully.

TJ removed his thumb long enough to dash her waning hopes. "Nope."

That's what she figured. "Let's head down this way first. We'll knock on a few doors and see if anyone knows who you are. And if we can't find your house we'll come back and make a phone call or two."

"Kay." He said it so simply as if getting walked down the street by a complete stranger was an every day occurrence to him.

"I think we should try this house. I know it isn't yours, but Mrs. Flynn has lived here a long time and I'm sure she'll know who ..."

“TJ!” A faint call wafted out on the afternoon breeze. “Where are you son? This isn’t funny. Answer, Daddy.”

Hope sprung forth, filling Cory with a relief she didn’t think possible.

“TJ!”

“Over here!” she shouted back, as she picked up the toddler. “I have him over here.”

Cory headed off in the direction of the call in a quick stride. TJ giggled as their quick pace caused him to bounce around in her arms. His laughter brought a smile to her own lips. Only a child could find such joy in a stressful time like this. At least someone was having a good time.

* * * * *

Elias Kohler had never tasted fear as he did today. The world as he knew it had been turned on its axis in a space of a second. One minute he was the proud, tired father of two, needing a quick shower and few minutes to himself and the next thing he knew, he was living a nightmare. His youngest child gone. Vanished into seemingly thin air, and Elias knew there was no one to blame but himself.

It was he who had put Jodie, his eight-year-old daughter, in charge of the precocious three-year-old. Hell it had even been his idea that they play hide and seek in the backyard. Besides he would be inside, taking a quick shower. All he needed was a few minutes, ten minutes top, to wash away the dirt and grime he’d acquired unpacking their belongs and putting them away in their new home.

He never knew his life could be completely uprooted in the space of a heartbeat. He had to find him. He had to.

“TJ!” he screamed again, his voice cracking with fear. The sound of his son’s name echoed through the empty backyard and his mind. “Come out son, this isn’t funny any more.”

He needed to call the police. He couldn't kid himself. TJ had been missing for at least twenty minutes. The longer he waited the harder it would be to track him down if someone ... no ... he wasn't going think that way. They would find him. TJ was just lost, not taken.

Get the phone. Get the phone.

Elias ran into the house, past his daughter who was standing as still as a statue in the entryway, and grabbed the phone off the charger in the kitchen. Elias didn't want to be in the house for too long. He needed to be outside looking for TJ, calling his name.

"Daddy, I'm so sorry." Jodie sobbed, tears running down her face. She had finally moved from her watchtower position. "It's all my fault."

Elias looked up from the phone he had gripped in his hand like a lifeline into the eyes of his daughter, swimming with tears. In his own fear, he'd overlooked the self-loathing his daughter must be feeling. "No sweetie, it isn't your fault. TJ just wandered off, but we'll find him."

"What if we don't?"

Jodie's words echoed his own fear. "We will." Putting on a brave face Elias took her clammy hand in his own and led her back outside. "I need your help calling his name. I'm going to call the police ..."

"The police!" Her brown eyes widened with fear.

"Just to be on the safe side." Elias promised. "He's going to be fine. Now call his name with me. TJ!"

"TJ!" she parroted but not as loud.

"Louder honey. TJ!"

"TJ!"

"That's right. You keep doing that and I'll ..."

"Over here!" Elias and Jodie froze, staring at each other in shock. Their prayers couldn't have been answered that easily. "I have him over here!"

A dark-skinned woman, with cascading braids, held TJ in her arms as she jogged toward them. His son was laughing, his chubby little arms wrapped around the woman's neck.

Dear God, TJ was all right.

"More Cory, run faster." TJ was prompting the woman, whose name must be Cory, as she came to a halt beside Elias and Jodie.

"We're here, kiddo. There's nowhere else to run."

Elias snatched TJ out of her arms, crushing him in his embrace.

"Thank God. TJ, I was so worried about you."

"Daddy!" TJ threw his arms around Elias and snuggled into his neck. Elias released the pent up breath he'd been holding and sunk into the embrace.

"You must be TJ's dad. I'm Cory Turner."

The woman held out her hand, but Elias couldn't respond. He was still in shock, unable to believe he had lost and then found his son so quickly. He knew the woman in front of him was speaking, but nothing was getting through to his brain.

"*Okay* then. See you around, kiddo." Cory lowered her hand and rolled her eyes before turning to leave, obviously miffed by his lack of response.

Elias could have kicked himself. He was spacing out instead of paying attention. Reaching out he stopped her from leaving.

"I'm sorry. Yes, I'm Elias Kohler. And this is TJ's sister, Jodie." Jodie stood quietly beside him, arms wrapped around his waist. She didn't even look up at the introduction.

"Nice to meet you Elias, Jodie."

"Thank you so much for finding TJ. I was frantic."

Cory's face softened at his impassioned statement. "Yeah well, he's a cute kid. We had a great time, huh TJ."

“Cory made me a chocolate cookie sandwich.” TJ gasped as he realized what he’d revealed.

“A cookie sandwich?” Just how long had TJ been with this woman? “So, Ms. Turner, could you tell me what happened?”

“Please, call me Cory. Well, I was gardening, and out of nowhere, TJ showed up looking for his dad.”

“So you knew he was lost and you fed him a cookie sandwich instead of helping him find his dad?” Elias had been insane with worry while this woman was having milk and cookies as if nothing was wrong.

Cory’s brow furrowed and she took a deep breath. “Look, I wasn’t the one who lost him, remember, that was you. And I only fed him the cookie sandwich to distract him. He was crying and would barely talk.”

“Daddy.” TJ began pulling at Elias’s hair.

“Just a minute, TJ.” Turning back to Cory, Elias tried to defend himself. “My daughter was playing hide and seek with TJ in the backyard when he ran off. This is not a case of anyone being at fault.”

“Well then why are you insinuating I did something wrong?”

Elias sighed, running his hand through his hair. He was screwing this up royally. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” Cory stood with her hands on her hips, looking like a vengeful Nubian goddess. Elias realized he had been projecting his own guilt onto her.

“Daddy, don’t be mad at Cory ’cause of the cookies. I only ate one before I spilled the milk.”

“Daddy’s not mad at Cory and he’s not mad at you either. Daddy’s mad at himself.” Looking back at Cory he tried to smile. “I’m sorry. Really, I’m not usually this rude. Almost losing my son has turned me into an ass.”

“Bad word, Daddy.”

Cory may not have been softened by Elias’s words, but he couldn’t help but see her trying to smother a laugh at TJ’s admonishment. Elias had a feeling she may have had a similar experience.

“Daddy will pay a quarter into the swear jar.”

“Sounds like you have a lot to do, so I’ll just be going.” Cory turned and once again Elias found himself grabbing her arm to stop her flight.

“Please, I want to thank you for finding my son.”

“No problem.” Cory continued to walk away and Elias found he didn’t want to let her go.

“Wait. I’d like to do something to thank you.”

“Really, that’s not necessary.”

“How about ...” Elias shifted TJ over so he could hold him up with his left arm while patting his back pocket with his right hand. “I could pay you.”

Well if he was trying to get her attention that definitely worked. Cory whipped around as if he had called her a foul name and placed her hands on her very shapely hips. “I don’t think so.”

“I meant no disrespect.”

“Yeah, whatever. Welcome to the neighborhood.” Without another word she turned and stormed away.

“Dad, I need to ...” Jodie pulled him down to whisper in his ear, “go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, sweetie.” Elias was distracted as he automatically responded, standing for a moment as he watched Cory walk away. She went into a house just two doors down from his own. At least he knew where she lived.

“Dad.” Jodie was pulling on his arm and he finally turned back toward her.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter Two

Cory massaged her neck, standing still for the first time all morning. Working at her sister Samantha's diner as a waitress afforded her a lot of perks, one of which was the tips currently weighing heavily in her pocket. But some days, she felt as if she didn't get a moment to herself. The breakfast crowd had been hopping, but now there were only a few patrons left and Cory could finally take a quick breather before the lunch crowd came in.

With a soft groan, Cory shifted her weight from one foot to the other, counting down the minutes until she could go home. If anyone would have told her that she would still be waiting tables at twenty-seven, Cory would have laughed. Laughed and cried.

"So did I miss anything yesterday?" Samantha had walked up behind her, startling the pensive woman out of her trance.

"Not much. I just ended up playing Rescue Ranger."

"Explain please." Samantha poured herself a cup of coffee as she waited for her sister's reply. "We old fogies don't understand your young kid lingo."

Cory rolled her eyes. "Give me a break, you're only two years older than me, and besides no matter how old you are, you'll always be younger than Nichelle."

Cory added that last part loud enough for Nichelle, who was ringing up a customer, to hear. The one good thing about working with family was that it came with the added bonus of annoying the hell out of each other.

Nichelle pounded harder on the register in lieu of a reply, her actions being words enough for Cory.

She shoots, she scores. Age was Nichelle's Achilles' heel.

Samantha hissed out a "be nice" before sitting down at the counter. "Come on, I want to hear the story of Cory, the Rescue Ranger. Who did you rescue and how cute is he?"

With a secret smile, Cory pulled apart the napkin dispenser and began to refill it. "What makes you think there's a man involved?"

"Well isn't there?"

Technically TJ wasn't a man -- yet. He would be one day, and if he was lucky he'd grow up to be half as attractive as his father. Not that she'd noticed Elias was attractive, not at all. Because if she had, Cory would have marveled at Elias's chocolate brown eyes, dark wavy hair, and muscular physique -- not that she was into all of that.

"Ah ha, I knew it." Samantha was practically bouncing on her stool, filling the silence Cory's flashback had created. "Spill it. I want his vital statistics."

"Let's see, he's blond haired, blue eyed, devastatingly handsome," She purposely lingered on her description of TJ, enjoying the way Samantha's eyes widened in shock. Cory leaned forward and lowered her voice, and when Samantha moved forward inquisitively, she let the other shoe drop, "and *three years old*."

"Three." Samantha's wide-eyed stare narrowed menacingly. "Sorry, not good enough, baby girl. You don't get that dreamy look in your eye for a toddler. What gives?"

Cory laughed and grabbed herself a diet Coke before joining Samantha on a stool. She could take a minute to fill Samantha in. She knew the boss. "No, it's true. I was gardening when the cutest little blond angel scared the living shit out of me, asking for his daddy."

“His daddy?”

“Yes. He wandered away from home and became lost. Poor little thing couldn’t figure out where he lived.”

“And you knew?”

“No.” Cory rolled her eyes. “How would I know?”

“Hell if I know. This is your story.”

“Then let me tell it.”

“You’re taking too long.”

“Let me tell it.” Nichelle sidled up in front of them with her hand firmly planted on her hip. She’d been refilling the sugar containers, getting louder and louder with her sighs and slamming the lids on as Cory and Samantha talked. But finally, as Cory knew would happen, her nosy never-heard-a-conversation-she-didn’t-have-an-opinion-about sister butted in.

“Please do.” Samantha said at the same time Cory spit out. “My story. I’ll tell it.”

“Your sister --” Nichelle powered on as if Cory had never spoken. “-- little miss straight A student, did the stupidest thing known to man --”

“Don’t listen to her.” Cory interrupted. She should have known that big mouth was going to have to put her two cents into it. Laughing, Samantha held up her hand, silencing Cory as she turned her rapt attention to Nichelle, who, from the evil glint in her eyes, looked as if she was just warming up.

“-- Took a missing child. A *white missing child*, I’d like to add, into our house and fed him milk and cookies, while his father, *Mr. White Man* was combing the streets with the cops on standby, looking for his kid.”

Samantha’s head whipped around so quickly Cory could have sworn she felt a breeze. “You brought him into the house. Cory, what were you thinking?”

“She wasn’t thinking, as usual.” Nichelle was obviously on a roll and wasn’t about to let up anytime soon.

“He was lost. I was trying to help.”

“Help! Are you kidding me? One wrong word from that ‘poor little thing’ and your ass could’ve been grass.”

“Thank you.” Nichelle smacked her hand down on the counter. “That’s what I tried to tell her.”

“And you.” Samantha turned on Nichelle, her anger wiping the smug grin from her sister’s face. “How could you let her?”

“Let her.” Nichelle’s mouth dropped open. “I ... I didn’t let her. I tried to stop her.”

“You’re supposed to look out for her.”

Look out for her. Cory’s amusement quickly drained away. What the hell?

“I am looking out for her ...”

“Excuse me.” Irritated now, Cory rose from her seat. “I’m a grown ass woman. I don’t need Nichelle or anyone else looking out for me.”

Totally ignoring her remarks, Samantha rose as well. “You know she’s too kindhearted for her own good.”

“You say kindhearted, I say naive and stupid.”

“Stupid.” *Oh no, she didn’t.* “I’m far from stupid.”

“You could have fooled me.” Nichelle fired back.

“That’s not hard to do.”

“If you’re not going to watch out for her ...”

Frustrated now, Cory shoved her fingers in her mouth and blew as hard as she could. The loud piercing whistle not only halted her sisters in mid feud but also drew every eye in the diner their way.

Startled Samantha looked around and flushed. Smiling sheepishly, she eased back down in her chair, but not before grabbing Cory's hand and tugging her down as well. "Cory, I can't believe you."

Still bristling about the "taking care of Cory comment," Cory crossed her arms across her chest angrily. Okay, she might be pouting now, but she wasn't a kid. She did a good thing, damn it. "I fed the kid some frosting and graham crackers to distract him from the crying."

"Inside your home, baby girl. Not smart."

Could they not move on already? "I was helping him."

"Did his parents see it that way?"

Nichelle snorted. "Hardly."

Samantha snapped her fingers shut. "Zip it. You're not helping. Well, did they?"

"I only met his father and sister."

"And ..."

"He was hardly pleased." Nichelle cocked her brow triumphantly. "Go ahead, tell her how he was all so pleasant."

"At first, he was naturally upset."

"Hell, he practically accused her of holding onto his kid instead of returning him."

"What's she talking about?" Samantha's head was volleying between them as she tried to follow the conversation.

"She's blowing the whole thing out of proportion, as usual." Cory wasn't sure how this conversation had degenerated from a simple story to another "Careless Cory" tale. Nichelle and Samantha had taken it upon themselves to pick up where their deceased mother had left off and no matter how hard she tried to get them to see her as an equal, they continued to put her in the kid sister box, with kid being the key word.

Nichelle snorted, sweeping up the sugar containers and putting them on the tables. “Why don’t you tell her what you told me and let her decide for herself.”

“He was upset when he found out I didn’t immediately start looking for him and fed TJ cookies first. But he apologized.”

“Yeah, and then offered to *pay* you.” Nichelle just couldn’t keep her mouth shut. Cory had been fuming about the offer to pay her when she’d returned home and had spilled the entire story to her sister, which she was now regretting.

“What? Cory, what happened to the smart girl I know must still be in there somewhere.” Samantha tapped on Cory’s forehead as she spoke.

“Okay, I’m so done with this conversation.” Cory rose again, jerking her arm out of the way when Samantha reached for her. “I did what any compassionate person would have done.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Nichelle announced.

“I did say *compassionate*.”

Nichelle’s eyes widened at her words. Even Samantha seemed a bit surprised by Cory’s comments, but for once Cory didn’t care. She was tired of them acting like she didn’t have a brain in her head. “I comforted a child in need and helped return him to his family and instead of praising me, you two are giving me shit. I may be your baby sister, but I’m not a baby. Back down already. Enough is enough.”

Cory stood there, waiting for the blow up, but surprisingly neither one of them said anything. The silence in the diner was palpable, with none of them willing to be the first one to speak. That was a first for the Turner sisters.

Just when Cory was sure she wouldn’t be able to stand it, the bell over the door rang as someone entered the diner. *Saved by the bell.*

“Speak of the devil.” Nichelle’s comment, said as she was walking away, was only audible to Samantha and Cory, who turned around to look at their new patrons.

That fucking bell. Maybe Cory should have been a bit clearer on how she wanted to be saved.

“Is that Mr. White Man?” Samantha whispered, standing as well.

“His name is Elias, and yes.” As if saying his name drew his attention, Elias glanced over to where they were standing. His eyes widened a bit in shock before he quickly masked his surprise.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed her though.

“Cory! Cory! Cory!” TJ came running over to her, grasping her leg and pulling the apron tied around her waist. Laughing, Cory reached down and brushed her hand against his soft hair. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“My daddy’s letting us have chocolate milkshakes.”

“Wow, he is a brave man.” And a bit of an asshole, Cory reminded herself just in case her hormones didn’t remember. Although to be honest, it was hard to keep that in mind, when he came strolling up toward her with a sexy little swagger. Looking him over, Cory knew for a fact that he was the reason jeans had been invented. Taller than she recalled, Elias long lanky frame filled out the denim pants like heaven itself had poured the man in them.

“That I am,” Elias said as he and Jodie reluctantly crossed over to where she was standing with Samantha. “And apparently very stupid.”

Her momma always said, “tell the truth shame the devil,” but Cory was too polite to agree ... out loud. “Stupid?”

“For my very inappropriate response yesterday.”

“I hadn’t given it another thought.” Cory lied. “Did you stop in here to apologize?”

“No, we stopped in here to eat. I didn’t know you worked here.”

“My sister Samantha owns the diner. Samantha, this is Elias Kohler, his daughter Jodie and son TJ.”

“Nice to meet you all.” Samantha smiled before giving Cory a speculative look, as if she was mulling something over.

“Have a seat and I’ll get you some menus.” Cory ushered them to a booth, getting them menus and then headed back to the counter, where Samantha and Nichelle had gathered. The smug look Samantha sent her was enough to set her teeth on edge. “What?”

“That explains it all.”

“Oh please,” Nichelle muttered, before turning and heading back toward the kitchen.

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” Grabbing three glasses of water, Cory headed back to the table to take their order. “So, what can I get you?”

“Chocolate milk shakes!” TJ had a one track mind.

Elias smiled indulgently at his son. “Now TJ, I said you could have a chocolate shake, but you have to eat lunch.”

Unfazed, TJ just smiled. “Macaroni and cheese, please.”

“Mac and cheese, check. Jodie, how about you?”

Jodie ducked her head, muttering something Cory couldn’t understand.

“Jodie, speak up,” Elias ordered.

Jodie blushed and shot her a look of disgust, as if it were Cory’s fault she’d been embarrassed. Great another person with attitude, maybe she should let Nichelle wait on her.

“A cheeseburger, fries, and chocolate shake.”

“I’ll have the same.” Elias grabbed all the menus and handed them back to Cory.

“Great, I’ll get that right out to you.” Her fingers brushed against his as she took the menus and time seemed to stop for a heartbeat.

Elias locked his gaze with hers for a moment before releasing the menus and saying, “Take your time.”

The hell she would. Cory backed away quickly, needing to put as much space between her and her very appealing new neighbor as possible because he was trouble with a capital T.

If Elias didn't know better, he would have sworn Cory was avoiding him. It wasn't as if they were receiving less than stellar service, in fact, far from it. Samantha's Cafe was a Ma and Pa type restaurant that reminded him of why he wanted to move to a small town. Everyone seemed to know everyone else and it had a family atmosphere that made everyone, even newcomers like him, feel welcome.

In fact everything would have been perfect if he could've got their waitress to slow down a bit and drop by their table for something more than to deliver their order. Well that and if he could figure out why the other waitress was staring at him as if he was a serial killer. From her comely familiar features, Elias would bet his last dollar she too was related to Cory. If she was, there was a lot to be said for the Turner gene pool.

All three women had the same basic body type, curved in all the right places, something he more than appreciated. Staring at the three of them though, he was surprised it continued to be Cory who attracted his attention. Although they didn't look far apart in age, he suspected Cory was the youngest and the sister giving him the evil eye was the oldest. There was just something about her glare that sent a "back off buster" message.

"Daddy, why can't Cory stay to talk with us?" TJ was asking the question Elias couldn't admit he wanted the answer to as well.

"Because, little brother, she's working. She's not here to eat lunch." Jodie shot Cory a look of barely concealed venom before quickly lowering her gaze. She'd barely said two words the entire time they'd been there and he had no idea why she seemed to have taken an instant dislike to Cory. It wasn't like her. Not at all.

As if he'd silently called her over, Cory sailed up to their table. "So, how was everything? Ready for the check?" It was like she was pushing them out the door.

TJ jumped up on the seat, bouncing as he tried to talk. "Cory, are you going to stay now?"

Cory couldn't seem to suppress the smile that came to her lips. "Hey kiddo, have you felt neglected? Sorry about that, but I have to wait on all these other tables too."

"Why?"

"Because it's my job."

"But why?" Tigger had nothing on TJ. With every question, he bounced. His son was a never endless bound of energy, and although he was used to it, Elias knew others might find it a bit daunting.

Elias grabbed at TJ, but his spry son bounded out of his way edging closer to a smiling Cory.

"Because," she drawled out, capturing TJ's arms in mid spring, "I need money to buy graham crackers to make cookies for little lost boys. Now cop-a-squat or no dessert for you."

Giggling, TJ returned to his seat seemingly happy with her response.

"You're very good with kids; do you have any of your own?"

Cory seemed to bristle with his question. "No, not all of us breed young." She turned away from the table, but Elias grabbed her hand.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't implying anything. You just seem to have a way with children."

Cory's expression was still wary as she nodded and tried to pull away. But Elias wasn't willing to release her just yet. The feel of her skin beneath his hand was soft as silk. He rubbed his thumb over the pulse at her wrist and watched as her eyes widened in awareness. At least that look of distrust was gone.

"I'd like to know a little bit more about you and you could learn more about me, us. Then maybe when I put my foot in my mouth you'd be more willing to forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

“Now why is it I don’t believe you.” Elias continued to hold her wrist and he could feel the steadily increasing beat of her heart as they spoke. She wasn’t as immune to him as she pretended.

Cory frowned at his words. “You know, I’m getting a bit tired of people treating me like a child. It seems to be an epidemic around here.” She glanced over at her sisters as she spoke, a frown creasing her pretty brown face.

“I assure you, I don’t think of you as a child.” His words came out a bit huskier than he intended or from the surprised look on Cory’s face, than she expected.

Down, boy. Step away from the lovely lady. He reluctantly released her wrist.

“So you must be awful close to your family to work with them?”

“We’re not the Huxtables, but the tips are great, hours are flexible and plenty, and the customers are cute.” She winked at TJ who once again giggled in response. “So any desserts today?”

“Yes.” Actually Elias couldn’t have eaten another bite, but he wasn’t quite ready to leave yet. Even though he knew absolutely nothing could ever come of his attraction to Cory, Elias still wasn’t ready to leave. “Give us a minute.”

“No problem, just give me a holler when you’re ready to order.” Elias followed Cory with his gaze as she left with their empty dishes, his stare firmly locked on her delectable derriere.

“Dad.”

Cory seemed like a very giving woman. He wondered if she would be that giving in bed. If she would be the type that just laid there or if she would meet him thrust for thrust, pound for pound, enjoying giving as well as --

“Dad!”

“What?” Elias swung his head back around and met his daughter’s accusing glare with his own guilty one. What the hell was wrong with him? This was neither the time nor the

place, and she sure in hell wasn't the type of woman he should be having dirty thoughts about, especially in the presence of his kids. "Sorry, honey, my mind was elsewhere."

"I'm ready to go."

"Don't you want to order dessert?"

"No," Jodie said crossly. All that was missing from his petulant daughter's pout was crossed arms and a lowered lip.

"I want dessert, Dad." TJ chimed in much to his sister's dismay.

"Okay, TJ. What do you want?" Elias knew he shouldn't allow the kids to eat dessert after a chocolate shake, but of course he was under Cory's thrall as much as his son seemed to be and was willing to use any excuse to remain at the diner.

"Cory's cookies."

Elias chuckled. "Sorry, sport. I don't think they serve graham crackers and frosting as dessert here."

TJ wrinkled up his nose. "How come?"

"Because that's not even really a cookie." Jodie rolled her eyes as she spoke.

"What do you mean that's not a cookie. Those are Cory cookies."

"Please. She made it up."

TJ's lip began to quiver at Jodie's words. "Daddy?"

Elias had just about had enough of Jodie's bad attitude. He didn't think puberty hit until twelve, but she was getting mouthy already. Unfortunately it all seemed directed at Cory or anything involving her. "Jodie. Stop antagonizing your brother."

"Fine." She crossed her arms, shooting Cory a glare. If looks could kill, Cory would have been a pile of ashes right about then.

"It's a good thing you don't want dessert young lady, because right about now I'd be taking the offer off the table. We will be talking later, do you understand?"

Jodie bit her lip, a small look of doubt passing over her face. She nodded her head briefly before excusing herself to go to the restroom. As Elias watched her walk away he wondered if she was suffering growing up without a mother in her life, especially as she matured into a woman.

“Daddy, what are we going to get?” TJ interrupted his thoughts, bringing him back to the immediacy of dessert.

“Why don’t we ask Cory what’s available, okay?”

“Okay.” Standing up on the vinyl covered bench TJ yelled out across the diner, “CORY!”

The diner came to a halt as heads turned to stare at their table. Wow, what a way to introduce his family to the town. Now they could be known as the rude city folk. Elias grabbed TJ, pulling him back down to sit. “TJ, what are you doing?”

“Cory said to holler when we were ready. I was just hollering.”

Elias’s gaze locked with Cory’s as she sauntered over to their table, a huge smile splitting her face. He was glad one of them could be amused by TJ’s antics.

“He’s right. I did say that. I’ll have to learn not to be so literal when I speak to a three-year-old.”

“I’m sorry. He’s not usually this ... rambunctious. I think it’s just the newness of everything.”

“Hey, no problem. Three-year-olds have a right to be rambunctious.”

“Excuse me.” Jodie had returned to the booth, and surprisingly was at least being polite to Cory.

“No problemo.” Cory smiled at Jodie, although she didn’t get a return reaction. “Have you decided on dessert?”

“I wanted your cookies Cory, but ...” TJ looked across the table at Jodie, obviously reluctant to reveal his sister’s comments. Thankfully Cory jumped into the conversation, putting TJ at ease.

“Sorry kiddo, we only have those at my house. Now my sister makes a great pie if you like that.” TJ wrinkled his nose and shook his head before she’d barely finished speaking. “Okay, I can see that’s a no. How about a brownie?”

“Does it have nuts?” TJ hated anything with nuts.

“No way. We only serve nut-free brownies here.”

“Yeah! Daddy, I want a brownie.”

“Two brownies then.”

Cory raised her eyebrows, shooting Jodie a glance. Elias shook his head briefly in silent communication.

“All righty then. Two nut-free brownies coming up.”

“Nut free. Nut free. Nut free.” TJ chanted, much to Elias’s dismay. His son’s developing personality was taking a bit of getting used to. Elias wasn’t sure if it was the age, the fact that he was a boy, or just in TJ’s nature to be boisterous and outgoing, but he truly was an original. Quite the opposite of how Jodie was as a child. Then, like now, she had been a bit of an introvert. The quiet shy child had morphed into a pensive young lady who despite her attitude of late was as giving and sweet as TJ was loud and busy.

“Dad, make him stop.”

“Think a headlock might do it.”

Jodie scrunched her nose in annoyance, but not before a brief smile dashed across her lips. The two loves of his life were as different as night and day, but he adored them all the same.

Cory only had time to quickly drop off the brownies on her way to wait on another customer much to both his and TJ’s disappointment. They both halfheartedly nibbled at the

brownies. Apparently it wasn't the type of sweet chocolate either of them were in the mood for.

"Come on, gang," Elias said, after realizing the filling diner was going to take up even more of Cory's time. "It's time for us to head home."

After gathering up their belongings, Elias ushered his kids to the counter where much to his dismay they were waited on by the frowning-possibly-related-to-Cory-lady.

"Everything was delicious." Elias's try for civil conversation was met with cold disinterest.

She handed him his change and muttered, "Good," slamming the drawer shut as she moved back behind the counter.

"What's wrong with her?" TJ asked.

"Old age," Cory replied loudly from behind him. Her comment halted the woman in her tracks for a moment, which seemed to amuse Cory all the more. "Don't mind my *older* sister, Nichelle, she's just having a bad day."

"Keep it up, Cory," Nichelle replied crossly.

Cory just smiled, seeming unbothered by her sister's remark. "I hope you all enjoyed everything."

"We did," TJ said, answering for everyone. His adoration shone brightly on his face as he stared at Cory. Apparently his daughter wasn't the only one missing a woman's touch.

"Yes we did." Clearing his throat, Elias did something he should have done the first day they met. "I never did properly thank you for what you did the other day. The world isn't the place it used to be, or could be for that matter, and things could have ended up, well they couldn't have just turned out bad. Thank you, Cory. For everything."

Elias could see the pleasure alight in her eyes at his words. "You're very welcome."

"I guess we'll be seeing you around."

"You count on it."

Chapter Three

“Hey, Cory. You got any cookies?”

Surprised, Cory looked up from the book she was reading to find TJ leaning on her glass-topped patio table staring at her with a crooked little smile. It had been over two weeks since she’d seen said smile, and Cory found she had actually missed it.

For someone who wasn’t sure she even wanted kids, Cory had spent a lot of time thinking of them. Well, two kids in particular. Which didn’t make a lick of sense. She barely knew them, and yet she couldn’t help glancing at their house every time she drove by.

And it was the kids she was looking for. Not their extremely handsome father. Yes sirree ... not the dad, it was all about the kids. Cory was good at lying to herself.

“Where did you come from?” Cory laid her book down and sat straight up. One minute she was alone in her backyard enjoying the mid-afternoon rays of the summer day and the next thing she knew she had company. Adorable company, but company nonetheless. Looking around, she frowned. TJ was alone. “Where’s your dad, kiddo?”

“Work.”

“Is your mom watching you?” Cory had officially reached an all time low. She was pumping a baby for information about his dad.

“We don’t got a mom. Just a dad.”

Good to know. “So who’s taking care of you?”

“Jodie.”

His causal answer sent her eyebrows skyrocketing to her hairline as her eyes widened in shock. “He left you home alone with your sister?”

“No, he left us home with Molly. She’s babysitting us.”

Not very well apparently. “Does Molly know you’re here?”

TJ shrugged his shoulders in response as if it was answer enough.

“TJ, did you tell her you were coming down here?” Cory asked firmly, using her best adult voice. Not that it worked, because instead of looking intimidated, TJ beamed.

“She was sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” Good lord, could this get any more confusing?

“Yep. Then Jodie said she was in charge of me and I got to do what she says. But I’m not gonna.” TJ leaned forward as if to impart a secret. “She’s bossy. So how about some cookies?”

“In a minute. Where’s Jodie.”

“At home I think.”

“You think.” Muttering to herself, Cory rose, exasperated beyond belief. *See this is why I don’t have kids.*

“When I left she was cleaning up something and she told me to go to my room. But I didn’t want to so I came over here instead.” TJ plopped down on the grass next to her lounge chair, pulling at the grass as he spoke. “So can I get some cookies?”

“Let me ask you a question. Was Jodie cleaning up and sending you to your room because you did something you weren’t supposed to be doing?”

“Maybe. But it wasn’t my fault. I was playing with my trucks and knocked over the planter. Jodie got mad ’cause there was dirt everywhere.”

Cory heaved a heavy sigh. It sounded as if there was a lot of drama going on over at the Kohler house and Elias was completely in the dark. She wondered who this mysterious Molly was that she could sleep through all the apparent devastation.

“All right kiddo, let’s head back down to your house to see what’s going on.”

“No cookies?”

“Not right now. Maybe later. *After* I see what’s been happening.”

Cory stood, snagged TJ’s hand and headed out the backyard and down the street. As they approached the house, Cory wondered if she should knock on the door. TJ made the decision for her by pulling open the screen door and waltzing inside.

Jodie stood in the middle of the living room, broom and dust pan in hand, desperately trying to sweep the hardwood floors. Unfortunately it didn’t look like she was able to coordinate using the broom and dustpan at the same time and dirt from the planter was everywhere. She glanced up at their entrance, frustration clearly apparent on her face.

“TJ, what ... I told you to go to your room!”

“You’re not the boss of me!” TJ stomped his foot, clearly unwilling to take orders from his eight-year-old sister.

“When no one else is around I am!”

“Enough!” Great, now she was yelling too. Cory wondered how she had become embroiled in this mess. “Where is Molly?”

Jodie stood holding onto the broom, her lower lip pooched out. “Why are *you* here?”

“I’m glad to see you too Little Miss Sunshine, but that wasn’t the question I asked.”

“She fell asleep in the family room.”

“Come on Cory, I’ll show you.” TJ slipped his hand in hers as he led her from the room. She noticed he turned at the last minute and stuck his tongue out at his sister before he scampered into the hallway, dragging Cory behind him.

As they entered the family room Cory saw an older woman slumped in an overstuffed chair, a cell phone clasped in her hand. She looked vaguely familiar, as if Cory had seen her around town. Her skin was very pale and for a moment Cory suspected she wasn’t sleeping at all, but dead. She so did not want to see a dead person, let alone touch one. Fortunately the woman moved ever so slightly and Cory drew a breath of relief. Stepping forward she shook her shoulder lightly.

“Molly, Molly, wake up.”

The woman’s eyelids fluttered briefly, before opening. “Oh dear, did I fall asleep?”

Cory wondered for a moment if the woman was drunk. How could someone not realize they had fallen asleep? But Cory didn’t smell alcohol and the woman looked as if she were ill. Please don’t let her have a heart attack.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, dear; I didn’t realize I was so sick today. I thought it was just a cold, but now I’m thinking I’ve got the flu.” Molly had struggled to sit up as she spoke, but slumped back in the chair as if the effort was too much.

TJ had stood silently during their exchange, his eyes wide. Glancing back over her shoulder Cory realized Jodie had followed them into the room and stood uncertainly in the doorway. Although she had gone about it in an overbearing big sister kind of way, Jodie had been doing her best to keep TJ away from Molly and allowing the sick woman some rest.

“Molly, can I call someone for you?”

“Thank you, dear. I’ve been trying to reach my husband, but the cell phone reception has made it impossible to reach him. He should be home by two o’clock.”

“It’s almost three-thirty,” Cory said as she glanced at her watch. “Why don’t we try again? TJ, go get a glass of water for Molly.”

“I’ll get it.” Jodie headed toward the kitchen. Cory took the phone Molly offered her and sat on the couch, dialing the last number in memory. TJ crawled onto her lap as she waited for the connection, breathing a sigh of relief as the phone was answered on the second ring. She quickly explained the situation and Molly’s husband, who told her his name was Ed, said he’d be right over. Cory ended the conversation and handed the phone back to Molly.

“Thank you so much, dear. I appreciate your kindness in watching the children for me.”

What! Who said anything about watching the children? Molly must have thought Cory had been watching the children the entire time she’d been out of commission. What was worse, it looked as if she was under the false impression Cory would continue to watch them until Elias came home.

“Um, I wasn’t really ... um have you contacted Elias? Maybe he’ll be able to come home.” Cory prayed that Molly would tell her Elias was on his way home already.

“I left him a message; at least I think I did. I must say, it’s young people like you who renew my faith in humanity. Thank you so much for helping out a sick old woman.”

Cory smiled sickly, knowing there was no way she could bolt now. Jodie returned with the water, handing the glass to Molly.

“What’s going to happen now?” Jodie stood with her arms crossed, a sullen look on her face.

“Ed, Molly’s husband, is on his way over to pick up Molly and take her to the doctor.”

“Who’s going to stay with us?”

“Three guesses and your first two don’t count.”

“You can’t watch us. We don’t even know you.”

Cory was exasperated. Hell, did the girl think she was looking for this job? It's not like Cory was thrilled about the prospect much herself.

"I want Cory to stay." TJ piped up. He'd been awfully quiet throughout their conversation, which was very unlike him. From the few times Cory had been around him TJ was a firecracker who didn't often stay still.

"Thanks, sweetie." Cory hugged TJ, glad someone was happy to have her around.

"I don't want her here."

"Well aren't you lucky that your dad will be home soon. Until then, I'm the adult in charge. TJ, why don't you and Jodie head into the living room and we'll let Molly rest until Ed gets here." Cory knew it was childish, but she got a secret thrill out of giving the order to Jodie.

TJ crawled off her lap and followed a gloomy Jodie out of the room. Cory checked on Molly one last time, assuring her that the children were fine. Heading into the living room, Cory jumped when the doorbell rang. Since Elias wouldn't ring the doorbell at his own home Cory assumed it was Ed. She headed to the door, but Jodie jumped in front of her.

"It's my house. I'll answer the door."

Cory rolled her eyes but said nothing. If Jodie wanted to play this game, Cory was more than willing to allow her to open the door. As Jodie opened the door, Ed looked around in confusion.

"Cory Turner?"

"That's me. You must be Ed."

"Yes. Is Molly ..."

"She's in the family room resting." Cory led Ed back through the house where they found Molly struggling to rise. She had heard the doorbell and knew her husband had arrived. Ed immediately rushed to her side, and with Cory's help, they were able to get Molly out to the car.

Ed shook her hand as he settled himself into the car. "Thank you so much for your call. I'll be taking her to the doctor immediately. Will you be able to tell Mr. Kohler that Molly may be out of commission for a few days?"

"Of course. Don't worry about Elias and the kids. I'll take care of everything." Cory winced inwardly at how that sounded, almost as if she would be doing more than watching the kids for the next couple of hours.

As she headed back in the house her cell phone rang. Digging it out of her pocket, she grimaced as she saw her own home number. She flipped open the phone.

"Hey, Nichelle."

"You know I hate it when you answer the phone like that."

"Yeah well, you know I love to do the things you hate."

Nichelle's sigh could be heard through the phone. "*Anyway*, where are you? I went out to the backyard to ask about dinner and you were gone."

"It's a long story, but I'm down the street. And you can probably forget about me for dinner."

"Down the street? Don't tell me you're hanging out with the kid again."

At least she hadn't referred to TJ as the white kid. "Okay, I won't tell you."

"Girl, where are your brains? I thought you were the smart one, but this is just plain dumb."

"Nichelle, I don't want to fight with you about this. He needed me."

"He needed you or his dad needed you? Don't tell me you're not interested in that man, because I'm not blind. I saw the way the two of you made goo goo eyes at each other in the diner."

"We were not making goo goo eyes at each other. God, you sound like we did in high school."

“That’s because you’re acting like a teenager, thinking only with your hormones. This man has two children. Are you ready to be a stepmother?”

“Hells bells, Nichelle. You have us married already. Give it a rest okay. I’m helping out someone in need. End of story. Okay?”

“Fine, I’ve said my piece.” Cory pulled her head away from the phone as Nichelle slammed down the receiver. This day was turning out to be a real dandy. Returning to the house, she stared at the dirt still covering the living room floor, shaking her head at the mess. It was time to get to work.

“Okay, I’ll sweep up. Jodie, why don’t you hold the pan?”

“Why don’t you hold it yourself?” Jodie flung the broom and dustpan down in a huff and ran up the stairs.

“I can help, Cory.” TJ picked up the dustpan, twirling around before dropping it on the floor. Cory could see how easily TJ playing in the living room led to a disaster with the planter.

“Thanks, but I think I can handle it.” Cory just hoped she could handle the next couple of hours until Elias came home.

* * * * *

As Elias pulled into his driveway he let out an overdue sigh of relief. This had been the day from hell. Murphy’s Law in full effect. Not only had he been sent out on a field assignment but then, in the midst of a perfectly good summer day, it began to rain. And not just a sprinkle here or there, but a downpour of biblical proportions – as in Noah and the Flood.

Elias would never understand the weather in Ohio. It made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Hell, it was almost as confusing as why, in such a seemingly conservative state,

there was a porn store on every corner. Of course that part he could probably get used to, but not the damn change-your-mind-at-the-drop-of-a-hat weather.

After turning off the car Elias pocketed his keys and began to gather everything together. He wanted to make a run for the front door avoiding as much rain and damage to his work as possible. With the weather as it was Elias wondered if he should offer to take Molly home so her husband wouldn't have to drive all this way in the rain. Even for him, the slick drive home had been a bit nerve wracking. He didn't want Ed to have to deal with the same situation if he could avoid it.

Of course it meant he would have to wake the kids up and take them with him, but grumpy kids was a price Elias was willing to pay to make sure Molly arrived home safely.

Elias swung open his car door and dashed out, quickly slamming it shut behind him before he sprinted up the walkway and safely onto his porch. Elias unlocked his front door, happy he hadn't slipped and eaten concrete in his desire to stay dry.

The house was quiet, almost too quiet. Elias hung up his wet coat and placed his briefcase on the hall table before heading into the living room. Careful to keep quiet, Elias strolled into the dark living room lit only by the muted television, expecting to see Molly asleep on the couch.

Man was he wrong. And shocked all to hell.

There was a woman sleeping on his couch all right. Just not the one he'd been expecting. Much to Elias's surprise, Cory was splayed out, sound asleep on his couch with TJ tucked in right next to her, seemingly dead to the world.

A soft snore from the recliner gave away his daughter's position, but Molly was nowhere to be seen. This was not a good thing. Where was Molly? And damn it all to hell why did the homey scene just look so right?

After the way he and TJ had reacted to her at the diner, Elias had moved Cory completely to the hands off category. Sure he was attracted to her. More so than he had been to any other woman in a long time, but it wasn't something he was able or willing to act on.

He had to think of his kids first and himself dead last. Elias couldn't ignore Jodie's obvious dislike any more than he could overlook TJ's adoration of her. Hell his son hadn't stopped talking about her since their very first meeting. Elias couldn't count how many times he'd had to stop TJ from trying to go to her house. For a three-year-old, his son had a surprisingly strong will.

And now, just when Elias thought he might be making progress, he walked in and found her here.

Resolve in place, Elias knelt down in front of the couch, intent on waking her up and sending Cory on her way. Yet when he reached out to gently rouse her, he noticed the way Cory held TJ and cursed silently to himself. It was even worse than he thought. TJ was cradled against Cory, with his tiny hand clutching tightly to her shirt. His son's actions spoke volumes about his feelings for their pretty neighbor.

As if feeling his stare, Cory opened her eyes. She jerked in surprise when she noticed him, her actions causing TJ to stir. Quickly, she reached down to pat his back at the same time Elias did and their hands collided making the awkward situation even more uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?" Although his voice was low, it was gruff, his frustration pouring out with every word.

Cory quickly jerked her hand away as she narrowed her eyes menacingly. "Fuck you very much."

She spoke just as softly as he did, but her words carried far more weight. Cory struggled up, easing TJ down as she rose. Elias stood and backed away from her, needing some space between to them.

When she was standing, Elias jerked his head toward the kitchen, gesturing for her to go in the other room so they could talk. But his actions seemed only to further irritate her.

Cory crossed her arms over her chest and just stood there. Waiting. Elias took a deep calming breath before biting out, "Please."

With a sneer, Cory pushed past him, muttering under breath, "Better had," as she walked into the kitchen.

He was going to find out what she was doing there then kick her sexy little ass out of his house, before he went against his better judgment and asked her to stay. Forever.

"What the hell ..." Cory's raised brow forced his words back. "Could you *please* explain to me what you're doing here?"

"I've been asking myself that all night," Cory muttered, running her hand through her long flowing braids. It was something Elias had wanted to do since the first moment he'd met her. Shaking his head, Elias tried to clear his mind.

Focus. And not on those millions of little braids that made her look like an exotic Angel. And definitely not on her full pouting lips or angry dark eyes that shone like onyx pools. No stay angry.

"Could you stop staring at me like I'm a zombie from the *Night of the Living Dead* or something. It's creeping me out."

Elias dialed back his intensity a bit. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "Could you please tell me why you are here?"

"I'm here because you can't seem to keep your son at home."

Elias waited for a minute, but she didn't elaborate. Instead she was pacing back and forth in the kitchen, muttering to herself under her breath. He was pretty sure he caught the word "moron" and wasn't sure if she were referring to him or herself.

"As fun as this is, I really don't relish pulling this entire story out of you one sentence at a time."

Cory spun around to face him again, her hands landing on her hips with such sexy sass that Elias was torn between amusement and arousal. She was definitely a feisty one. “Oh, you’re a laugh riot. While you’ve been out all day, and all night I might add, I’ve been running around here trying to take care of two children, one of whom hates my guts and the other, although lovable, is the Energizer Bunny incarnate.”

That described his crew all right. “This is my fault, why? I never told you to come over here and take care of my children. Where’s Molly?”

“Molly is still sitting in the Emergency Room, or at least she was at eight o’clock when I talked to Ed.”

His amusement fled. Elias felt as if all the air had been released from his body. Reaching out blindly, he grabbed a chair and dropped into it. “Dear God, what happened?”

“Not sure exactly, although she thought it was the flu. Of course at her age, the flu can cause serious complications.”

She was so right. Poor Molly. He should call Ed to see if everything was all right. Elias reached for his cell phone but stopped when he heard Cory’s gasp. “What?”

“You have a cell phone?”

“Who doesn’t in this day and age?”

“You.” Cory ran her hand through her braids again, in what Elias was beginning to think of as a nervous tick. “If you have a cell phone why didn’t you call in to check on your kids?”

“Normally I don’t explain myself to anyone.” Elias raised his hand when Cory opened her mouth, cutting the angry beauty off. “But since you were here doing me a favor, I’ll make an exception.”

“That’s mighty white of you.”

Elias let out a deep breath and forged on. He was going to spank her ass. “I don’t have service in the area we’re working, *but* I always check my messages.”

“Apparently not.”

“Look, I never received a message. Jodie has my cell phone number and knows the emergency protocol as does Molly. If there was a problem she could have left a message and I would have been here in a split second.”

“Apparently Molly forgot.”

“That still leaves Jodie. What did she say?”

“That little ...” Cory held up her hand, taking a deep breath. “Your darling daughter hid out in her room most of the evening, coming downstairs every hour on the hour to ask if I was ‘still here.’ She finally stayed when I put on a movie she wanted to watch. So you might want to ask her why she didn’t call you herself.”

With a heavy sigh, Elias slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. A slow yet steady heavy pressure began to build behind his eyes, a sure sign of an impending migraine. Today just wasn’t getting any better. “How did you even get pulled into this mess that I amusingly call my life?”

“TJ showed up in my yard again.”

“What!” He was going to have to buy a tether to keep TJ away from Cory.

Elias opened his eyes to find Cory watching him warily. Without another word, she turned and began bustling around the kitchen. She grabbed the teapot and filled it up, setting it on the stove.

“What are you doing?”

Cory paused in her act of rummaging through the cupboard to shoot him an incredible look. “Looking for porn. What does it look I’m doing? Of all the lame ass --” the rest of her comment was lost to him as she chose a can of soup from the shelf. Even though she continued to talk under her breath, no doubt about him, Cory began to cook. She emptied the soup into a pan placing it on the stove next to the teapot on the stove, then opened the refrigerator and pulled out more food.

“You’ve certainly made yourself at home.” Elias wanted his comment to come out snarky, but instead it came out with a tone of wonderment. Surprisingly, she did look right at home, and he was worried about how he felt about that. Because initially, it made him feel as if she were a part of their family, which then scared the shit out of him. He didn’t want to start thinking of her as part of his family.

“Ah, yeah, well I’ve been here for a few hours. Besides you look damp and I refuse to come over here tomorrow to babysit for you again because you got sick. You people need a keeper.”

“We’re doing just fine on our own.”

“You could have fooled me.” She buttered bread while she spoke, continuing to prepare dinner. She was chewing him a new ass, yet taking care of him all at the same time. It, like she, made no sense.

“Stop,” he ordered standing up.

Cory glanced over her shoulder. “What?”

“Stop fixing me dinner like some good little wife. Stop muttering about me under your breath. Stop acting like being here like this is the most normal thing in the world.”

Cory tossed the bread and knife down. “You are so fucking frustrating. I was trying to help you.”

“Stop interrupting me.” Elias was getting mad and from Cory’s wide-eyed angry stare, he wasn’t the only one.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Cory stormed toward him, flames of anger coming off her in waves. “I can’t believe how ungrateful you are. Twice.”

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Elias reached out and pulled her into him, silencing Cory for the first time since they’d met. “And stop haunting my every waking hour.”

Giving into the need that had consumed his soul from the moment they'd met, Elias covered Cory's mouth with his.

Chapter Four

Cory had been itching for a fight all night. She'd had every intention of giving Elias a tongue lashing as soon as he got home, but not exactly the way she was doing it now. Not that she was going to complain because the man had some serious skills when it came to lip locking. One second she was ready to kill him and the next she was ready to push him to the ground, climb on top of him, and ride him like Secretariat to the finish line.

Had it really been that long since she'd been kissed or was he really that fucking great? By the way, her panties were moist and her nipples hard, Cory was willing to bet it was the latter.

His tongue swept over hers, serenading her senses with his taste. Hands that had once gripped her arms were now entangled in her hair, angling her face so he could devour her lips. Gone was the sweet paternal man Cory had mistaken Elias for and in his place was a passionate force to be reckoned with.

This was happening too soon and so in the wrong place. Cory eased her hands between them, intent on pushing herself free. It was a great plan and all, and more than likely it would have worked, if her fingers hadn't brushed against a chest, harder and firmer than she'd thought. If her palms hadn't encountered nipples, pebbled like hers, under her touch, it

would have worked. Oh yes, this was too soon and in the wrong place, but suddenly Cory didn't care.

Her hand curled into the fabric of his shirt, desperately wanting to rip it off him. Instead, she found a button and loosened it from its fastening, allowing her hand to slip inside to stroke that hard firm flesh. Cory could feel the hair that lightly sprinkled his chest, following it down to the waistband of his pants, popping his buttons free as she went. Her hands rested at his waist, softly stroking his toned muscles. He was a man who obviously worked out.

At her teasing touch, Elias groaned in appreciation before breaking their kiss. Turning and pressing her back against the counter, he pulled her tee shirt from the waistband of her jeans. But he didn't stop there, pulling it higher and right over her head, before tossing it back over his shoulder.

"I don't just want to feel you, I want to see you too."

His words caused the wetness that had been gathering between her thighs to gush forth. Cory knew she had bountiful breasts, and if she was truthful with herself she often considered them one of her best physical qualities.

Cory shivered at the intensity of his gaze as Elias reached out to unsnap the front clasp of her bra. He parted the material, cupping her breasts in his hands. Her hard nipples were almost painfully sensitive as he lightly brushed his thumbs across the tips. She shuddered with the sensations coursing through her.

"Just beautiful."

Cory could feel herself flush at his words. Elias bent his head capturing one of her nipples in his mouth. The wet suction tantalized and inflamed her senses. She threaded her hands through his hair, holding his head to her breast. The feeling of his mouth on her was one she never wanted to end.

“Oh God,” she moaned, surrendering herself to him. To her dismay though, instead of feasting more, Elias pulled away from her breasts.

“My name is Elias not God.” He goaded, moving his hands from her breasts, down her stomach to the button of her jeans.

His powerful gaze bore into her own as he unsnapped her pants. Cory licked her lips in anticipation. “I know what your name is.”

“Then let me hear you say it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see these pretty lips of yours scream my name.”

“Then I’ll guess you’ll have to give me something to scream about.”

Elias took her at her word and slipped his hands into her pants. “Don’t worry, baby. I plan to.”

His touch took away all reason from her mind. The tight confines of her jeans didn’t give him much room to maneuver, but what he lacked in space, he more than made up for with talented fingers. From the outside of the lace of her panties, Elias teased her erect clit. The juice slicked material provided an unimaginable friction that forced Cory to reach behind her and grip the counter, needing the unwavering counter for support.

“Elias ...”

“Now you’ve got the idea.” Elias brushed his lips softly against her neck. The light touch was a vast contrast to the firm stroke he made against her aroused bud.

He tantalized and aroused her, each brush of his finger adding kindling to her own personal flame. Eyes closed, Cory arched into his touch. She was so close to coming she could practically taste her release.

“Do you want to come for me, baby?”

Something still wasn’t right for her. “You say it.”

“Say what.” His lips were back against her neck, his tongue now teasing her heated flesh.

“Say my name. Not baby. Cory.”

Elias’s chuckle flickered across her damp skin. “I’ll say it, if you’ll come for me.”

“I’ll come if you say it.” Cory bluffed, her body tense, primed for release.

“You mean --” Elias brushed his thumb against her clit, taking the tingling bundle of nerves between his fingers. “-- you’ll come if I just say it.”

Each word was accompanied by a tug. Her breathing labored, Cory’s eyes rolled to the back of her head. “Just say it damn it.”

“Say what?” Elias bit her, his teeth sinking into her flesh.

“Damn you Elias!” she screamed, so tense she thought she’d pass out from the pleasure.

“Cory, come for me. Come for me, Cory.”

And she did. Over and over her body shook with her release. Her knees buckled and if it wasn’t for her death grip on the counter, Cory knew she would have melted to the ground, into a pool of pleasure at his feet.

Cory opened her eyes as she slowly regained her senses. She felt weak from the force of her orgasm. Reaching out to clutch his shoulder, they both froze for a moment as they realized there was movement from the other room.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Cory pushed past Elias, frantically searching for her shirt. Finding it tossed on the table she quickly clasped her bra before pulling it over her head and then buttoned and zipped her jeans. She saw that Elias had re-buttoned his own shirt and was running a shaky hand through his hair.

“Cory, where’d you go?” TJ came toddling into the kitchen, rubbing at his eyes. When he spotted Elias, he cried out with joy, “Daddy, you’re home,” before running up and grasping his father around his legs.

Cory was feeling decidedly uncomfortable. If there hadn't been a break in the action when there was, TJ could have seen a lot more than any three-year-old needed to see. She could hear TJ chattering away, telling Elias all about the time he spent with Cory. But all she could think of at that moment was escape.

"I'd better be going." Cory started to ease around the table, out of Elias's reach, but he grabbed her arm before she could escape him.

"I should walk you home."

"No, don't be silly. It's just a couple of doors down. Besides, you'd have to wake up Jodie, and that would be senseless. I'll be fine."

Cory could see the frustration on Elias's face as he realized the truth to her words. She figured he would want to talk about what had just happened, but just now she preferred to avoid that discussion at all costs. Pulling out of his grasp, Cory moved toward the hallway, but was stopped by TJ's voice.

"I need a kiss goodnight."

Cory bent down to hug TJ and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, sweetie."

"When are you coming back, Cory?"

"Ah, I don't know." Cory stood, uncertain as to what to say to TJ.

"TJ, I'm going to walk Cory to the door. Why don't you head on up to bed and I'll be right up."

TJ grinned and gave the thumbs up before he ran off, bounding up the stairs. Cory swiftly headed for the door, grasping the knob to open it. Elias leaned behind her, placing his palm firmly on the wood, stopping her.

"Why are you running?"

"I'm not running. I'm going home."

"This isn't over, you know."

Cory licked her lips. She wanted to lean back into him, but instead held herself stiffly away from his body. She didn't want to want him, to want his touch. Getting involved with a divorced man who had two kids was not in her plans.

"I don't know what you mean." *Who am I kidding?*

"Daddy, I'm ready." TJ's voice carried down from the second floor, causing Jodie to briefly stir on the couch. Cory could hear Elias sigh before he leaned in closer, whispering into her ear, "We will talk about this later." Stepping back, he allowed her to open the door. As she stepped out onto the porch she realized it had stopped raining. Elias followed her out on the porch and she turned to look at him questioningly.

"I'm going to watch to make sure you make it home safely."

Cory ducked her head, unwilling to admit to herself how pleased she was by his words. As she walked home she imagined she could feel his eyes on her, him watching her every move. She chanted to herself the entire time, "don't turn around; don't turn around."

Finally reaching her door, Cory was unable to stop herself from turning. Elias stood at the edge of the porch, still watching as she quickly unlocked the door and slipped inside. She vowed that she would immediately head to bed and forget tonight ever happened. Unfortunately it didn't work out that way. Cory tossed and turned all night, sleeping fitfully and waking in the early morning hours feeling as if she'd had no sleep at all.

Dragging herself downstairs the next morning, Cory was unable to stop herself from reliving every second of the previous evening with Elias. She was thankful Nichelle was scheduled to open the diner today so Cory could spend her day off just as she wanted, alone. Unfortunately, the rest of the world had other plans as the doorbell started to ring. Stomping to the door, Cory flung it open, only to realize she was dressed in a threadbare night shirt that probably showed off more than it covered.

"What?"

"It's later."

From Cory's wide-eyed stare, Elias was pretty positive he was the last person she was expecting to see on her doorstep.

Slacked jawed, Cory asked, "Are you serious?"

"Very." Elias stepped into the house, forcing her to step back or be trampled. The slamming of the door behind him was the only sound in the silent room.

From the sleep tussled look of her hair, and the thin barely grazing her thigh shirt she was wearing, Cory had just gotten out of bed. Elias was glad he'd caught her like this, unaware and without the normal barriers she wore like a badge of honor. Maybe they could finally stop arguing and move on to where they were really meant to be, in bed.

"Why are you here?"

The air between them was electric. The passion that had burned deep and hot was fresh on his mind. Hell, Elias hadn't been able to think of anything else all night. Cory's look of rapture was embossed on his memory, and her taste would haunt him for the rest of his days.

"I told you last night this wasn't over. I'm not letting you get away as easily today as I did then." Elias hadn't doubted for a second he would be here, with her, this morning. It had only been a matter of time.

"You didn't *let* me do anything. I walked away."

"You ran."

"No. I walked away." Cory crossed her arms over her chest, forcing the pink shirt to ride up higher, exposing her smooth chocolate flesh to his hungry gaze.

Elias's cock stirred to life. The feistier she became, the more he wanted her. The desire to tame the spirited woman ran roughshod over his soul. Elias knew her passion wouldn't be just one-sided. She would be as fierce in bed as she was out of it.

"If it makes you feel better to think that, go ahead." Elias slowly stalked toward her, intent on making her his.

Cory licked her lips nervously and backed up. "Where are the kids today?"

"Summer camp started today. I dropped them off and don't have to pick them up until this afternoon." Elias matched every retreating step with an advancing one of his own. "Late afternoon."

"This is a mistake."

"I know."

Cory bumped into the wall, her progression halted in its path. "You know and yet, you're still here."

"You know and still *you're* here."

"You came to my house." Cory held up her hand, but it didn't stop him from his progress. She was like prey to him and Elias couldn't wait to devour her.

"And you *came* in mine."

They were merely inches apart now, their breath in sequence, their gazes locked.

"I don't know anything about you." Cory tried again, but it wasn't enough. Elias wasn't going to allow her to run this time.

Elias pressed into her hand. "You know enough."

Cory's nails dug into his chest, sending his cock soaring to life. A little pain was never a bad thing.

"I don't know anything."

"What do you need to know?"

"Are you married?"

"No, divorced."

"How old are you?"

Elias chuckled. "Is that important?"

"No, but it's normally one of those first date questions."

"Are we on a date?"

"No, I don't have sex on the first date."

"Well then this is definitely not a date. I'm thirty-five."

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Any more questions?"

"I don't want to get involved with you. You're too complicated."

"Fine." Elias pushed her hand aside, and pulled her flush against him. "Then we'll just fuck until you do."

Bending his head he captured her lips in a bruising kiss. Cory groaned into his mouth, initially resisting him. "No, this isn't right." She pushed on his shoulders, breaking the kiss.

"We're two consenting adults. You want this as much as I do."

Cory shook her head. "I can't."

"You can lie to yourself, but don't lie to me. You want me to pull off that shirt and suck your nipples until they're so hard they can cut glass." Elias grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. Cory tried to cover herself, but Elias wasn't willing to let her hide from him. He drew her arms down, softly stroking her breasts as he continued to speak.

"You want me to drag those panties off your firm ass, part those luscious thighs and tongue your pretty pussy until you come all over my mouth. And you want me to lay you down and sink my cock into you, fucking you hard and fast until you're screaming my name."

"I ... I ..." Cory gasped as Elias dropped to his knees and followed his words with the actions, dragging her panties down her legs. He gently lifted each foot as he helped her step

out of them. Staring up at her, he saw her close her eyes briefly before she slowly parted her thighs for him. “Yes.”

Starting at her ankles, Elias learned the feel of her legs, working his way up until his hands were at the juncture of her thighs. He pushed her legs farther apart, slipping his hand between them. She was already wet and Elias was able to easily rub his fingers along her slit, gathering the moisture there.

Cory moaned in response, her head tilting back against the wall as she pushed her hips toward him. Elias stroked her faster before pressing a blunt finger inside. Parting her tender flesh, he nibbled at her, his tongue sucking her clit into his mouth. Cory threaded her fingers through his hair and held his head firmly against her heated pussy.

“Eliiiiias.” The way she drew his name out, Elias knew she was ready to come. Fleetingly licking her one last time, Elias sat back on his heels, breaking her hold on him. Cory collapsed back against the wall, her breathing erratic as she tried to hold on through her denied orgasm. “Why did you stop?”

“The next time you come, I want to be deep inside you.” Elias stood up and took her hand, leading her toward the stairs. “Besides, I’m too old to be fucking you on these hardwood floors, so we’re going to your bedroom.”

Cory hesitated for a moment and Elias thought he was going to have to convince her once again about the rightness of them being together. But before he could begin, she headed up the stairs. Stopping at the landing, she turned and looked down at him where he still stood at the bottom of the steps.

“You are coming, aren’t you?” She looked like a screen goddess from the fifties, all curves and seductive smiles.

“You bet your life I’m coming, and so will you.” Elias bounded up the steps, following her husky laughter to the bedroom. Cory lay on her side in the middle of the bed, covers still

askew from her night's sleep. She almost looked just fucked, if one didn't notice the banked hunger in her eyes.

"You look good enough to eat."

"You've already eaten. I want what was promised me."

Elias had begun shucking his clothes, dropping them where he stood. "Just what do you think was promised to you?"

"I don't think, I know. 'Hard and fast until I'm calling your name'."

"I believe that was screaming my name."

"Fine, screaming. You just better hope the neighbors don't call the cops. Now get your ass over here and fuck me." Cory rolled over onto her back, spreading her arms and legs wide in welcome.

"I don't think so." Elias paused at the foot of her bed and beckoned to Cory. "Come here."

"Where?" Cory rose to her knees and edged over to him, pausing a hair's breath away from him.

"Here?" She brushed a kiss against his collarbone.

"Here?" She ran her tongue across his puckered nipple, sending waves of pleasures down his spine.

"Or here?" Cory moved a hand down and up his thigh, across his pelvis, until she was holding his cock in her grasp.

Elias chuckled deeply, loving the boldness she exhibited. Cory was coming alive in her passion and taking him along for a hell of a ride.

Wrapping his hands into the entangled mass of her hair, Elias brought Cory's mouth up to his once more. He couldn't get enough of her sweet honey taste. The way her full thick lips felt like home pressed against his own. She kissed with a fervor that he had never before experienced, and she stroked him like a woman bent on seduction.

He was seduced.

He was enslaved by her touch.

Elias broke away from their kiss. He reached down and grabbed the back of Cory's thighs and lifted her, much to her surprise. Gasping, Cory released his cock and grabbed on to his shoulders, laughing all the while.

"Impatient?"

"Am I breathing?" Elias laid her back gently on the bed. Backing away, he grabbed his pants off the floor and took out the protection he had brought for just this moment.

"Sure of yourself, were you?"

"No." Elias sheathed himself, and followed her down on to the bed. "Sure of us."

Cory's dark eyes widened as if in fear. "There is no us. Only now. Only today."

Elias began to sink the full length of his cock into her, savoring the feel of her body giving and opening to him. "Keep telling yourself that, baby."

"Elias ..." His name was all she whispered, the need to fight obviously slipping away as he slid in.

Hell by the time he was buried to the hilt, Elias had damn near forgotten his own name. From the tight clutch of her pussy, Elias could tell it had been awhile since Cory had made love. It was a thought that brought him immense pleasure. That and the feel of her underneath him.

"Damn, baby --" Elias pulled slowly from her tight sheath, his eyes nearly crossing from the pleasure. "-- you feel so good. So fucking good." Her moans of satisfaction were words enough. Gripping her thigh in his hand, Elias anchored her hips up, on his downward thrust, sinking into her deep and faster than before.

"You ... too. Feel good, so good." Cory was biting her bottom lip as she spoke, barely making sense, as if it were too much effort to form words. Her body was gripping him tight and Elias could tell her orgasm was imminent. He was discovering, after just one encounter

with Cory, that he was quickly becoming addicted to watching her as she reached climax. Controlling his own release, he reached between them, strumming at her clit.

“Come for me Cory, that’s it, baby.”

Her head thrown back, Cory screamed as her body reached the pinnacle and she plunged over the edge. Elias continued to thrust as her pussy milked his cock. Watching her face as she was hit by a second orgasm, he was unable to hold back a moment longer and plunged one last time, burying himself deep inside as he exploded.

Collapsing on her, he literally felt paralyzed for a minute as he tried to gather his thoughts. Although he’d tried to fight his attraction to her, he’d known when he came over this morning this was the outcome he was hoping for. He hadn’t thought much past that point, but when she tried to limit them to “now” and “today,” Elias felt the need to adamantly deny her.

He realized Cory was pushing on his shoulders and rolled away from her. Propping his head on his hand he lay on his side staring down at her. Cory’s eyes were closed, and he could tell she was slowly getting her breathing under control. Elias reached out and cupped her breast, enjoying the feel of it in his hands. But only for a moment, as Cory became aware and sat up abruptly before settling back against the pillows.

“You know we can’t keep doing this. It’s madness. This was an anomaly, never to be repeated.” Although her words were strong, they were tinged with laughter.

“First, this isn’t madness, it’s attraction. What’s madness is us trying to fight it. Second, I told you when I came here this morning I had until this afternoon, so if you think I’m going to let you kick me out of bed this early, you are crazy. Third, just give me time, it can definitely be repeated.”

Cory was silent for so long Elias wondered if she had fallen asleep. Looking down, he saw that she was wide awake however. “What are you thinking?”

Cory rolled over until she was half straddling him, her chin propped on his chest.

“You’re arrogant.”

“True.”

“And overbearing.”

“True.”

“And probably the best lover I’ve ever had.”

“Probably?” Elias reached out to push her braids back, wanting to see her face as she answered him.

“Yeah well, I think I need more evidence before I make a final determination if you’re the *best* lover.”

“I’d be pleased to serve ma’am.”

Chapter Five

Cory was amazed by her bravado or stupidity, she wasn't sure which emotion was the more dominant of the two. Although she'd fought her attraction to Elias, once in bed she'd been more than willing to throw caution to the wind and let him have his wicked way with her. And it had been damned wicked.

"I need to eat before we start on round two. Are you hungry?"

"I worked up one hell of an appetite and I do have a promise to deliver on."

"Then get your ass out of bed and help me fix breakfast." Cory slipped out of bed and hunted around for her sleep shirt, before remembering it was still downstairs. Elias pulled on his own jeans, although he left them unzipped and unbuttoned. It made Cory want to trail her hand down his stomach and discover what was hidden under the stiff denim.

"You keep looking at me like that and we'll never get breakfast."

Cory stared guiltily before going on the defensive. "You wish. I'm hungry." Stalking past him with as much dignity as she could muster while completely naked, she headed downstairs, Elias's laughter following. Cory spotted her sleep shirt lying in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. She quickly snatched it up and pulled it over her head. Glancing around

she hunted for her panties, but they were nowhere to be found. The slap on her ass startled her out of her search.

“You promised me food.”

The shirt was just going to have to do for covering.

Cory headed to the kitchen with Elias following. She felt a tingling up the back of her neck and turned to find Elias staring at her ass. Embarrassed, Cory grabbed at the hem of her shirt and tried to tug it down. To her mortification, Elias laughed at her reaction, which only fueled her discomfort. It was one thing to be naked in the heat of passion, and quite another to walk around the kitchen with her business hanging out. With as much dignity as she could summon, Cory shot Elias a stern look.

Elias fought down his grin, although his amusement stayed fresh in his big brown eyes. Clearing his throat, Elias asked, “What’s for breakfast?”

“Do you like bacon and eggs?”

“Sounds great.”

Cory opened the refrigerator and started picking out ingredients. She was going to treat this as normal as she could and not think of the ramifications of her lustful actions. One thing though, Cory was beyond happy that she didn’t have the morning shift and Nichelle did. There was no way in hell she would have let Cory live it down. In fact, Cory was quite sure that there was no way in hell Nichelle would have let Elias live period. Her sister wasn’t known for her ability to embrace physical relationships across the color lines.

Silently chuckling to herself, Cory thought of what would happen if Nichelle walked in right now, with her bare assed and Elias half dressed and chilling in the kitchen. Without a doubt, Cory knew Nichelle would have a conniption fit. Seeing her that pissed off was almost worth calling her ass up at work and telling her that there was an emergency at home.

With an evil little smile, Cory turned and shut the door, only to be stopped in her path by Elias, who was blocking her and boasting a devious smile of his own. Pushing her up

against the door, he began to remove the items from her hands, and place them on the counter.

Licking her lips, Cory stared into his lust filled eyes. His intense stare told her he was hungry for something and it wasn't food. "We're never going to eat at this rate."

Elias smiled seductively as he held up the butter dish. "Have you ever seen *The Last Tango in Paris?*"

Oh, hell no. Cory hadn't seen the film, but she'd heard about the scene that he was referring to which involved butter for lube. "In your dreams. No way I'm playing with food like that."

Butter in the ass just didn't seem sexy at all.

"It could be fun."

"There's not a snowball's chance in hell I'm letting you fuck me in the ass with butter as lube."

"But you'd let me fuck you in the ass with a different kind of lube?"

She wasn't even going there. "I'm ignoring you."

"Spoil sport." Elias picked her up and sat her on the counter. "Stay put."

"Arf, arf."

Elias sent her a level look before reopening the refrigerator and looking into it.

"What are you looking for?" Cory couldn't keep the hint of wariness out of her tone.

"Food can be seductive."

White people were crazy. "If you pull out a cucumber you can take your ass on home. I don't do raw vegetables."

"So cooked ones are okay?"

“Uh no.” Elias laughed at her response as he pulled open the freezer door. Cory wasn’t sure if he was teasing or not. Most of her former boyfriends were the kind who were fun in the bedroom, but not necessarily in the kitchen.

“What about ice cream?”

Glancing over, she saw Elias had a pint of her favorite French vanilla ice cream in his hands and what looked like the beginning of another erection in his pants.

Damn. Cory had always been a sucker for naughty boys. “What are you planning to do with that?”

“Whatever I want.” Elias pushed the door shut with his free hand.

“You think so, do you?”

“I know so.” Elias sat the ice cream down on the counter next to her. The chill radiating from the ice cream caused goose bumps to break out on her thighs. Cory should have been cold, but the heat raging from within her kept her nice and warm. “You know what else I know?”

“What?” Her voice sounded as dry as her throat felt.

“I have a terrible sweet tooth.” Elias snagged the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and off in one swoop and tossing it over his head. Cory could feel herself reacting to his seduction, her body flushing with desire. How could they fuck like bunnies all morning and she still be craving him as soon as he touched her again?

Elias lifted the top off the ice cream container and dipped his fingers into the icy confection. “Now this might be a bit cold.”

Those words were the only warning Cory received before Elias doused her nipple with the dessert.

“Elias.” She screeched as the freezing sensation stole her breath away.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be cold long.” Elias promised as he coated her now rigid nipples with the frozen mixture. He was true to his word. The cold was soon a faint memory as his toying fingers soon had her body ablaze.

Cory gripped the edge of the counter as she fought to keep her hips from writhing on the counter. “I don’t think that the good people of Ben and Jerry’s had this in mind when they decided to go into the ice cream business.”

“If they didn’t they were damn fools.” Elias leaned down and gently blew onto her chilled nipples, causing her to jump and squirm. “Oh, baby, you should see what I see.”

“What?” Cory arched her back, offering her breast up to him like a pagan at an altar.

“This beautiful blend of colors. The stark white of the ice cream against the smooth brown of your skin is like an erotic water painting. You look so fucking hot.” Elias swiped his tongue across her pebbled peak. “And you taste even better.”

“Mmmm.” Cory released her death grip on the counter and entwined her fingers in his hair. She pulled his mouth back down to her breast, needing to feel his lips surround her once more. “Don’t tease me, Elias.”

“As you wish.” Elias clamped his mouth around her nipple, and drew the tight bud between his teeth. He was firm yet gentle, much like the man himself. After tormenting her left nipple, Elias turned his attention to the right one, licking and cleaning her breast until not a drop of cream was in sight.

Elias palmed her breast as he pulled away, brushing his thumbs across the trail his mouth had cleaned. “Food play isn’t so bad, now is it?”

Not when he was the chef. Cory sat up and removed her hands from his hair. “I’m ... still weighing the pros and cons.”

“You are, are you?” Elias slid his left hand from her breast, down to her side. “Open your legs.”

The boy was mad. “I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t ask you what you thought. I told you what to do.”

“I don’t care what --”

Elias placed his hands on her thighs. His fingers dug into her skin, not enough to hurt, but definitely enough to get her attention. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

Cory couldn’t help the thrill that shot through her at his touch and his commanding words made her pussy weep for his attention. She should be hopping off the counter and threatening to kick his ass, but instead she slowly parted her legs. Elias’s smile at her compliance almost made her follow through on her previous thought. Almost. Until he pulled her body forward so her ass was barely perched on the edge of the counter and pressed her upper body back so she was supporting herself on her elbows.

“Now don’t move.” Elias reached over to the ice cream container and dipped his finger inside.

Cory gasped at what his movements were implying, but she didn’t move. Her momma didn’t raise a fool. “That’s going to be freezing.”

“And I’ll warm you right up.”

“I don’t --” The rest of her words were cut off in mid stream as the cold sensation of the frozen treat against her clit took her breath away. Cory could feel the drip of the chilly cream as it melted against her heated flesh. “So cold,” she moaned, licking her lips at the numbing feeling spreading through her.

“Now to warm you back up.” Elias lips soon replaced the burning cold and he swept his tongue over her wet folds, licking at the cream like a cat. Attaching his lips to the bundle of nerves, he sucked hard, before curling his tongue around her clit and continuing his oral assault on her.

Elias pulled back and grinned up at her. “Still not convinced?”

“No, not yet. Keep trying.” Cory was listening to the devil imp on her shoulder, continuing to push Elias. And every time she did, he pushed back, demonstrating his dominance. She could see the fire, previously banked, flare to life in his eyes.

Elias bent to lick at her seam, slowly teasing the soft flesh. Parting her lips, he pressed a blunt finger inside testing her softness. Cory arched into his touch, moaning as he added a second finger, thrusting them back and forth in an even motion as he continued to suck and nibble at her clit.

“I think you’re starting to convince me.” Cory could barely breathe as she gasped out the words.

“Starting to? I guess I need to work harder then.”

Elias licked at her clit, light touches that drove her to the edge. She needed more and he was deliberately teasing her into insanity. Her hands gripped the edge of the counter tightly as she fought for control. Cory wanted to come so bad she was almost ready to beg.

“Elias, please.”

“I think you know what you have to do.”

Cory racked her passion-fogged brain to remember what they’d been talking about before he started his seductive attack of her pleasure centers.

“You’re the best ever. Please let me come.”

Elias chuckled. “Thanks and really nice try. But not exactly what I was looking for.” Bending his head again he sucked her clit into his mouth at the same time he curved his fingers, brushing against a sensitive area inside she didn’t know existed. But just when she thought she’d reached her peak, he released the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Want to try again?” His fingers were still inside her, not moving. Cory shifted on the counter, but couldn’t really move with Elias’s hand trapping her thigh.

“Stop teasing me.” Cory couldn’t think when her body was in overdrive.

“Food?” He reminded her.

“Yes, yes, food play is wonderful.” Cory gasped in pleasure when he smiled and returned his attention to her engorged nub. Gently nibbling at her, his fingers began their come hither motion meant to drive her over the edge. Never breaking contact, Elias sucked her clit hard.

Cory arched her back, fingers curled around the edge of the counter, head thrown back as she screamed out her orgasm.

Ice cream had never tasted sweeter. Elias stood up and shoved his pants down his hips. After stepping out of them, he picked them up and rifled through his pocket for the lone condom he had stashed in there before they headed downstairs. He had only brought two with him when he came over.

Apparently a big mistake on his part. Elias should have known her little hot box would require more than two fucks to satisfy it. Lucky for them both, his cock was as hard as stone again. It was as if their romp upstairs had been days ago instead of merely minutes. Quick come back. He must be living right.

Still lethargic from her orgasm, Cory leaned back against the cabinet gasping for breath. She had never looked lovelier to him. Her brown skin was drenched with perspiration, her eyes glazed from pleasure. If he hadn't already been hard, Elias knew his cock would have leapt to life at that moment.

Her pussy, her glistening brown cavern of pleasure called to him like a siren at sea. He needed to sink his cock into her now, before her body forgot who it belonged to. Grabbing her by her hips, Elias lifted Cory off the counter and pulled her tight against his body.

Startled, Cory clutched his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Taking this somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“Upstairs.”

“No.” Elias held her tight to him with one hand while he swiped his hand across her kitchen table, clearing the place settings in a single sweep. “This should do.”

“Animal.” Cory teased as he sat her down on the table. “I could have cleared it.”

“Who has time for pleasantries?”

“Not you that’s for su --” Elias silenced her taunting lips with his own. Kissing her, he penetrated her mouth with his tongue. Passion raged inside Elias as he drew her deeper into his embrace. His tongue stroked hers as he kissed her deeply, with a hunger that could not be denied.

Everything within Elias screamed out for him to claim this woman for his own. To take her with the animalistic urge that permeated his mind, body, and soul.

Blindly he fumbled between them for the condom, ripping through the wrapping like a kid at Christmas with presents. Breaking away from her tempting mouth, Elias sheathed his cock for their protection and lowered his sex to the opening of her sweet juicy entrance.

“Lean back, baby, and brace yourself. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.” Without further adieu, Elias anchored his hand under her bottom and brought her hips to a workable angle at the same time as Cory dropped back onto her elbows to accompany his command.

“Like this?”

Instead of powering forth like he wanted, Elias took a minute to consume the lewd and rousing view of Cory’s wanton body on display. She was every sexual fantasy he’d ever had come to life. “Just like that, baby,” he replied hoarsely as he centered his cock and plunged forth. “Just like that.”

Cory winced as Elias clenched his teeth and sank balls deep into her tight pussy. “Tender?”

“A little.” Cory tightened her legs around his hips when he attempted to pull out. “But don’t stop.”

As if he could. Elias dug his fingers into her hips and began to piston into her. "I'm not going to stop, not until you've milked the very last ounce of jism from me."

"Yes, don't stop. Don't ever stop." Cory arched her hips toward him and moaned. Eyes closed, she dropped her head back and gave herself up to him, up to his control. He liked the submissive bend of her body, but not the way she shut him out by closing her eyes.

Pulling out, he powered forward with one smooth stroke, damn near lifting her hips into the air with his thrust. "Look at me. Don't close me out."

Cory raised her head, her passion glazed eyes scarcely focusing on him.

"Good girl. I want to make sure you know who's fucking you."

"As if I could forget." Her raspy voice, so filled with need, almost did him in.

"You'll never forget because I won't let you." He gritted out, pumping into her over and over. "You're mine, baby. All mine."

"Hmm ..."

"No, say it. Tell me you're mine."

"You're ... mine." Cory taunted, tossing his words back at him between pants.

Leaning forward, Elias wrapped his hands into her hair, loving the way the coarse braids felt entwined within his fingers. He slowed down his strokes to get her attention, but didn't stop fucking her. He had a point to make.

"That's not what I said, now was it." He tightened his grip and pulled her head back, exposing her neck to his gaze.

"No."

"Then tell daddy what he wants to hear." Elias punctuated his demand by sinking his lips onto her collar and taking her flesh in a punishing bite.

"I'm yours." She whimpered, surrendering to his dominating gesture. "All yours."

Satisfied, Elias removed his mouth and released his demanding grip on her hair. “And don’t you forget it.”

His knees quivered as he rode her hard and fast. Elias sank into her over and over again until their labored breathing became one long steady stream of grunts and groans. The once silent kitchen was soon filled with the sound of flesh pounding into flesh and guttural moans of passion. The heavy scent of their heated fervor saturated the room.

“I can’t wait.” Cory’s nails bit into his forearms as she fought her oncoming orgasm.

“Don’t wait. Fly.”

Cory bent her legs, allowing Elias to sink even deeper as her body gave up the fight and convulsed around his cock. The sensation was enough to push Elias over the edge and he thrust one last time, sinking himself into her, trying to reach her soul. His orgasm seemed to last an eternity until he finally collapsed onto Cory’s prone body.

Raising his head, Elias looked down into Cory’s face. Her eyes were closed, but she had a Mona Lisa smile gracing her lips.

“You look like the cat that ate the cream.”

Cory slowly opened her eyes, the smile never wavering. “No, you were the one who ate the cream.”

“And it was delicious.” Elias pulled out of her body, removing the condom and disposing of it in the trash. Falling into a chair, he drew Cory back into his embrace, unwilling to let her break the closeness he was feeling right now. He never was the type to cuddle after sex, but with Cory he was thinking about all the ways he could tie her to him. Which brought some other dirty thoughts to mind, such as ropes.

Cory trailed a finger down his chest, bringing his attention to heel. “You owe me a pint of ice cream. I was saving that to make a sundae.”

“How about I buy you bananas, whipped cream, and chocolate sauce and we can both have a sundae?”

“Hmm, sounds like a plan, but only if I get to lick it off you. It looked like you had a lot of fun.”

“Speaking of food ...” Elias cocked his eyebrow.

“We both could have eaten by now if you hadn’t distracted me.”

“You started it by tempting me.”

Cory licked at his nipple. “Like this?”

“Exactly. You need to be restrained.” Elias could see it now. Cory, lying in the middle of his bed, her arms stretched out above her head. Just the thought was urging his cock back to life, something he thought nearly impossible.

“Earth to Elias. *Hello.*” Cory tapped him on the nose. “If you can get your mind out of the gutter long enough to let me up, I could fix you breakfast.”

Elias reluctantly released her, watching as she shook out her braids before bending to snag her sleep shirt.

“Nope, you don’t need that.” Elias grabbed the shirt out of her hands and held it above her head as she tried to snatch it back.

“If I get burned because I’m cooking naked, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I’ll kiss it and make it all better. Besides, I think we both need a shower before we do any cooking.” Elias held her hand as they headed back toward the bathroom. Just one morning in her bed and he was already feeling a connection with her stronger than with any other woman he’d ever been with. Hopefully she felt it too.

Chapter Six

Just like when she was a child, Cory's ears perked up at the sound of the tinny notes of the ice cream truck. Scrambling around, she found her purse. Cory knew she'd have to fight the neighborhood children when she finally reached the truck. She was jonesing for an ice cream sandwich in the worst way. Cory could feel the flush wash over her body as she remembered her early morning kitchen play with Elias. She'd never look at ice cream in the same way again.

Heading outside, Cory saw the gaggle of children already gathered around the truck. As she made her way to the incessant music machine she glanced around looking for Jodie or TJ. Although she had no reason to be searching for them, she was secretly hoping that their daddy might not be far behind.

It had been a couple of days since Elias had surprised her for some morning nookie. And then nothing. Although he'd left insinuating he'd be back around, she hadn't heard from him since. Which really pissed her off when she thought about it since she'd been daydreaming of him morning, noon, and night. How Elias had gotten under her skin so quickly, Cory had no idea.

"Ma'am, what can I get you?"

Hells Bells, when did I become a ma'am?

"Ice cream sandwich, please."

"Neapolitan or plain vanilla?"

"Plain vanilla." What moron would ruin a perfectly good ice cream sandwich with strawberry and chocolate, she had no idea.

"You're about as far from plain vanilla as anyone I know." Elias's deep voice directly behind her sent a shiver of desire down her spine. "And before you start to get mad, it's a reference to your taste in bed."

Cory looked around wildly, but it seemed as if no one heard his words but her.

"Daddy, can I get a fudigle?" TJ came running down the steps from his house, so intent on ice cream he didn't even see Cory for a moment.

"Hey kiddo, how have you been?"

"Cory!" TJ threw his arms around her legs squeezing her so tight Cory almost lost her balance. Leaning down she hugged him back. When had she started to miss these chubby little boy arms around her? Damn, the whole family was sucking her in.

"I *think* someone's trying to get your attention." Jodie's smart alecky comment made Cory quickly revise her thought. She may have mutual interest with the males in the family, but certainly not one bratty eight-year-old.

"Ma'am, your ice cream sandwich." The ice cream man handed her the cold confection as Jodie pushed past to give her order.

"Daddy, I was next!" TJ protested, stomping his foot as only a three-year-old could.

"Don't worry; you'll get your ice cream. Let Jodie go first, then you can order."

Cory rolled her eyes. She'd never let that girl get away with all the shit her father obviously let her pull.

Elias clasped her elbow and hustled her away from the thinning crowd at the truck.

“Do you have something to say?”

Cory cocked her eyebrow. “No, should I.” She pulled her elbow from his grasp and began to open her ice cream.

“I thought maybe you’ve been wondering why I haven’t called.”

“Nope.” Cory was getting a little too good at this lying bit.

“Well just in case you were, I don’t have your phone number. And your car hasn’t been around when I was available.”

“How do you know what my car looks like?”

Elias gave a sheepish grin. “I have my ways.”

“Someday I’m going to have to hear about those mysterious ways of yours.” Cory took a long lick along the edge of the ice cream sandwich and watched as Elias’s eyes darkened with desire.

“No problem. I have a lot of *ways* I’d like to show you.” He reached out and took her hand in his, entwining their fingers.

Cory looked around at the people milling about. Yep, she was the only black person there. Pulling her hand away from him, she stepped back. “Don’t do that here; people can see.”

“Dear God, you’re right. They can see.” Elias took her hand again, his grip a tad firmer. “I really don’t care what they see. I want to touch you.”

“Maybe I do.” Cory pulled her hand back once again. “I have to live here you know.”

“As do I.” Once again Elias took her hand back in his; this time when Cory went to pull away, he tightened his grip and spoke softly. “If you pull away again, I’m going to toss you over my shoulder caveman style, proclaim you’re my woman at the top of my lungs, and lug you into my house.”

Cory burst out laughing, turning all the unwanted attention that just a few seconds earlier she'd been keen on avoiding their way. When Elias didn't join her in her mirth, she let her laughter subside. He had to be kidding ... right? "You aren't serious?"

Elias stared at her, his face devoid of all humor. "Try me."

"It is my hand; I do have certain rights to it." She grumbled, but wisely obeyed.

"And after the other day, I do as well."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

Okay then. "Listen here, Elias. I don't want you thinking Thursday was more than it was. I mean it was fun and all, but a girl's got to leave her options open."

"Oh, you have options all right. Like either my place or yours."

"I'm not into casual sex."

This time he did smile. "Who's talking about sex? I rented movies. The kids and I were on our way down to your house to ask you to join us when the ice cream man sidelined us."

"Sure you were."

"TJ," Elias called out to his errant son, who was covered from ear to ear in chocolate. "What do you have to ask Cory?"

The little boy tilted his head to the side in a way that was becoming as endearing to Cory as the child himself. "We gots movies. Wanna come over and watch?"

"Told you." Elias teased in a child like voice. "So do you wanna? Huh, huh, huh?"

"I don't know." Cory hedged, wishing she could take her hand back. Elias was making her very nervous. She took a bite out of her ice cream trying to buy herself time.

"In the middle of the sidewalk. Really." The older woman who spoke had brought her grandchild to buy some ice cream and had been staring at them ever since she'd arrived.

Cory recognized her from the neighborhood, but didn't know her name. And from that comment, she didn't want to.

Elias turned to the older woman and frowned, his look sent the older woman scurrying away. "What a bit --"

"She's entitled to her opinion." Cory really needed her hand free to peel the wrapper down on her ice cream, but she wasn't going to risk it. "Besides, if you're going to insist on this --" She jingled her hand for emphasis. "-- then get prepared for that."

"I don't see the big deal. Why can't people mind their own business?"

"Because they're people." In truth, Cory couldn't understand how her sister Samantha and her husband Steven put up with crap like that. Although they had been going together practically since birth and were more than likely used to it, it was still unsettling. "The whole interracial thing is still very taboo and it more than likely always will be."

"It might be taboo," Elias looked deep into her eyes. "But it's the sweetest taboo."

Cory didn't know what was melting faster, her ice cream under the Ohio sun, or herself under his heated stare. "And to think, I was always under the impression that the Sade song was about anal sex."

Elias chuckled deeply. The sexy sound made her mouth water. So did the way he leaned in toward her. His mouth, just inches from her. God he was so ...

"I'm ready, Dad." Jodie came up, 'push-up' in hand.

"I am too." TJ echoed, now a complete mess. "You ready, Cory?"

Still lingering over her lips, Elias asked, "Yes Cory, are you ready?"

Cory nodded. "Oh yeah."

Elias brushed his lips against hers before pulling away. "The sweetest."

* * * * *

After a night of popcorn and movies the kids were drooping and he'd sent them upstairs to prepare for bed. In the space of those few minutes he and Cory had taken one look at each other and began to make out on the couch like a couple of teenagers waiting for their parents to come home. Or in this case, his kids to call out.

"Dad, we're done." Elias reluctantly broke away from Cory at Jodie's call.

"I'm coming up. Everyone better be clean, teeth brushed, and ready to be tucked in." Elias winked at Cory as he stood and stretched preparing to head up the stairs. "I'll be back soon."

"I'll be waiting." Cory sat up and stretched as well, pulling the white cotton tee up and exposing her smooth expansion of skin at the top of her waistband. Elias groaned in anticipation of pulling the shirt over her head and feasting on her luscious breasts. Or unbuttoning those jeans and exploring below.

Cory giggled at the sound and shoed him away. "Go on, you'd better get up there before they decide to start exploring and come back down here."

Elias took the stairs two at a time, quickly going through the nighttime ritual. He was eager to return to the make out session that had been so abruptly interrupted. Coming back down the stairs, he stopped in shock when he realized Cory was missing from the couch. If she had bailed while he was upstairs with the kids he'd tan her hide.

"Hey, you want something to drink?" Cory's voice from the kitchen didn't put a halt to his thoughts however. He wondered how she'd like to be spanked.

"Uh, no thanks, I'm good." He certainly wasn't thinking about something to drink as he reached down to adjust his cock behind the fly of his jeans. With one look she'd know where his mind was wandering.

"So do you play with yourself often, or only when I'm not in the room?" Cory sidled up to Elias, covering his hand with one of her own.

“Only when I’ve been thinking dirty thoughts about a certain woman.” Elias pressed her hand against his hardening erection, letting her feel the power of his desire for her as he pushed her toward the couch. Tumbling over the arm, they fell into a heap on the plush cushions.

“Dirty thoughts? Can you share?” Cory kept one hand cupping him as she reached around with the other, grasping his ass.

Elias froze as he heard footsteps on the stairs.

“Dad, I need a drink of water.” Elias sighed and got up from the couch. Jodie stood halfway down the stairs, glancing covertly over at Cory, who had sat up as well. Grinning wryly at Cory, he headed into the kitchen to get Jodie a glass of water. After handing her the glass, he sent her back to bed.

“Now maybe we can get back to where we were.”

Cory opened her arms, welcoming him back. “Yes, I believe there were dirty thoughts on the agenda.”

“Hmm, I was just wondering about giving you a spanking.”

“You have a fetish.”

“Maybe I just want to see you on your hands and knees while I spank that succulent ass of yours.”

“Dad,” Jodie called again, much to his ire.

“Doesn’t look like you’ll be spanking anyone’s butt around here, daddy.” Cory teased.

“I don’t know about that.” Elias glanced toward the stairs with a frown. “I think I’ll be spanking some ass, just not the one I intended.”

Standing, Elias walked to the foot of the stairs and called Jodie down. When his sulking daughter came down he crossed his arms over his chest and put on his serious dad face. There was no doubt in his mind that Jodie was doing everything in her power to interrupt his night. She wasn’t used to having to share him with another woman. Elias could

sympathize, hell he could even empathize, because Lord knew he wasn't looking forward to the day he had to share her attention with another man, but tonight wasn't that night. And she needed to get used to having Cory around, because he surely could.

"You need to go to bed and stay in bed."

"But, Daddy."

"Don't daddy me, young lady. Enough is enough. I don't want to see your pretty face again until morning." It was hard as hell for Elias to be stern with Jodie, but he knew if he didn't set limits now, she'd continue with her bratty behavior. Elias tilted Jodie's chin up and dropped a quick kiss on her pouty lips. "Now goodnight."

"Night." Her stomps of anger could be heard for her entire trek back to her bedroom.

Shaking his head Elias just walked away. He was becoming increasingly less amused by the moment, and it wouldn't have been so annoying if Cory wasn't watching him with a smile. Laid back on the couch, she had her arms crossed behind her head and her feet crossed at the ankle. She looked comfy as hell. Comfy and smug.

Elias picked up her feet, and sat down, placing her legs across his lap. "What's with the smirk?"

"You're a softy."

"No I'm not."

Cory snorted in her sexy little way. Lip curled, eyebrow raised, all of her little idiosyncrasies that made him want to kiss her breathless. She wasn't sexy in a sleazy Hollywood way. It was a subtle, girl next door way about her that had him panting for more. "I give her five minutes."

"She won't be back."

"We'll see."

Oh, a challenge. "You want to make a bet."

"What do you got?"

“You know what I got.”

“And are you willing to give it up.” Her last words were said so slowly and sensually it was damn near foreplay all on its own.

“More than ready.” Elias slowly began to slide his hand up her smooth brown leg. The denim shorts she wore gave him a lovely field of flesh to tease, and also an eagle’s eye view of the paradise that awaited him. When he reached her thigh, he paused, and really looked.

The differences of their skin was utterly amazing. Not the texture or the feel, but the tone. Her dark radiant skin, his pale muted flesh. They truly were as different as night and day and it was incredibly sexy.

Just staring at the contrast made him hard. Elias would have to make it a point to watch intently next time they made love, to see the contrast blend in a fury of motion as he powered into her dark flesh.

“Am I the first white guy you’ve ever slept with?”

“Why, do you have a Captain Kirk mentality?”

“What’s that?” Elias asked confused.

“You know, to boldly go where no white man’s gone before?”

Laughing, Elias shook his head. She was too much. “A world of no. I was just curious.”

“Yes. You’re the first and more than likely the last.”

Elias was planning on being the last, but probably not for the same reasons Cory was hinting at. “Why do you say that?”

“My sister Samantha is married to a white guy. He’s a great guy, don’t get me wrong, but I’m not sure if it’s worth all the drama.”

“The drama?”

“You know the pointed looks. The not so sly comments. Samantha handles it like a pro, but I’m a bit feisty. I’m not afraid to take a bitch down.”

"I didn't see you swinging at the old lady this afternoon."

"Oh don't worry." Cory's eyes narrowed. "Bitch is getting hers. There were just too many witnesses around then. You know what I can't understand?"

Elias couldn't wait to hear. "What?"

"Why someone so old can be so judgmental and mean. Think about it. She's more than likely going to die soon. Shouldn't she be trying to rack up as many brownie points as she can?"

"I suppose so. I'm surprised to hear your sister has put up with so much crap. In this day and age, you'd think stuff like that wouldn't occur any more."

Cory shook her head as if she were talking to a child. "You really have no idea. White people can look really good to other white people. It's when there's no one around that you usually get the true measure of them. I can't tell you the times I've been insulted and the person doesn't even realize what an insult they've given."

"What do you mean?"

Cory held her hand, ticking off on her fingers as she spoke. "Telling me I'm articulate, as if because I'm black this is some major accomplishment. Asking to touch my hair and then getting upset when I tell them no. Saying things like, 'you're not like most of them.' And if you confront a white person, their first response usually is that they have a black friend. 'Cause you know that gives them total insight into the black world, this one friend of theirs."

Elias sat back in amazement. He had seen or experienced all the things Cory was describing, but he'd never seen it from her point of view. This small glimpse into her everyday life was very enlightening.

"I don't --"

"Daddy!"

“I won.” Cory shook her head and swung her feet off his lap. “I should have told you. When we were growing up my mom dated once in a while and my sisters and I always played this game.”

Fuck, not now. “I can get her to sleep. I promise.”

“No, I better be going. Let me just use the bathroom first.” Cory snagged her purse off the floor and headed toward the half bath off the kitchen. Elias turned toward the stairs, intent on talking to Jodie when his foot hit something. Looking down he saw Cory’s cell phone had fallen out of her purse.

A smile came over his face as he flipped it open, quickly dialing his own number. She may be leaving early tonight, but he wouldn’t let her get away again so easily.

Chapter Seven

The phone ringing roused Cory from a very delicious reverie. In her dream she had been awakened by Elias in her bed. He had stripped her naked and was slowly kissing every inch of her body. Cory had tried to reach out to him in her dream, but it was as if her arms were lead and she couldn't move. She could only lay there and let him have his way with her.

Fighting her way from underneath the covers, Cory vowed to kill whoever had dared to disturb her slumber. With a loud grumble, she reached for her cell phone on the nightstand table and punched in the talk button.

"What?"

A deep rich chuckle filled the line, inciting her ire. "Is that the way you answer the phone?"

"When it rings before ten am, it is. Especially when Nichelle is opening the diner and I get to sleep in." Cory pushed herself up into a sitting position and propped two pillows behind her back. "How did you get my number?"

"Devious and nefarious ways."

"And that means what, stalker boy?"

Elias laughed, causing Cory herself to smile. What was it about him that turned her head? “Stalker boy. I don’t think so. Crafty man is more like it.”

“How crafty are we talking here?”

“So crafty that when you were in the bathroom I used your cell phone to call my phone, so I could have your number stored in my phone.”

Apparently he’d given this a lot of thought. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Pleasure of course.”

“Whose?”

“Yours and eventually mine.”

Cory liked the sound of that. “Isn’t it a bit early for dirty talk?”

“It’s never too early for dirty talk.”

She wasn’t going to touch that one with a ten foot pole. “Don’t you have a job to go to or kids to take care of?”

“The only thing I need to take care of right now is you.”

His words sent shivers racing up and down her spine. Cory nuzzled down in her pillows and lowered her hand underneath the covers. “I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can. I’m just going to guide you in your process.”

With a fake southern accent Cory asked, “Whatever do you mean, kind sir?”

“I mean I want you to fuck your pretty pussy for me while I talk to you on the phone.”

Whoa. Cory hadn’t been prepared for that. “What makes you think I’m going to do something like that?”

“For two reasons.”

“Which are?” This was going to be good.

“You want to pleasure yourself while I listen on.”

When you're right, you're right, but Cory wasn't going to be gotten that easily, even though her hand was slowly making its way up her thigh. "And ..."

"I told you to." Elias voice had taken on a harder, no nonsense tone, that Cory hadn't been expecting. It shocked and aroused her equally.

"Like I would do something just because you told me to." Although she was denying him with her words, Cory's hand had reached the apex of her thighs and she'd parted her legs for better access.

"You know I'd turn you over my knee for talking like that if I didn't think you weren't already fingering yourself."

Cory gasped at his intuition. Already aroused from her dream, her finger had slipped between her nether lips, gathering the moisture there.

Elias's deep chuckle sent tingles down her spine. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"You'll never know."

"No, you want to tell me. I can hear it in your voice. You're wishing I was sitting right there with you now."

Cory was slowly rubbing circles around her clit, driving herself a little bit insane with every firm touch. Damn him for seeing into her soul so easily, and damn her for so easily being aroused by his hard demanding voice.

"What do you want to know?" Her voice sounded husky, even to her own ears.

Thankfully Elias didn't gloat. "Describe what you're doing."

Cory took a deep breath. "I'm lying on my back, one hand between my legs."

"What are you wearing?"

"My sleep shirt."

"Just the sleep shirt?"

"Yes."

“And why aren’t you wearing panties, you dirty girl?”

“It’s been too hot.” Cory’s voice caught as her hand, ever so slowly continuing its rubbing while she spoke, hit a particularly sensitive spot.

“Stop what you’re doing.”

Cory paused, surprised by Elias’s command. “Why?”

“I want you to take off your sleep shirt and kick off the covers.”

Cory sat up and was pulling the shirt off before she realized what she was doing. When did she start taking orders from him? “You’re not the boss of me.”

“But wouldn’t you like me to be?”

“I’m not answering that on the grounds that it might incriminate me. However, I’ll concede that I’m taking off my shirt. Hold on.” Cory lay the phone down and quickly pulled the shirt off, tossing it to the floor and then kicked the covers down to the end of the bed. Lying back she felt bare with the early morning light peeking through the curtains. Picking up the phone, she told him, “Okay, I’m naked.”

“Good. How does that make you feel?”

“Exposed. Excited. Wondering what’s going to happen next.”

“Touch your breasts for me and tell me about it.”

Softly gliding her hand over her breasts, Cory felt the weight of the flesh. “My breasts are soft, but my nipples are hard. The air coming in through the open window this morning is a bit cold.”

“Is it just cold, or are you aroused too?”

“Oh definitely aroused.” Cory pinched her hardened nipples as she spoke, feeling the tug all the way to her pussy.

“I can hear it in your voice. You’ve gone all soft and sultry on me.” Cory smiled at his description. “Tell me, are you soft anywhere else?”

Cory stroked her hand down her belly to the soft thatch of hair between her thighs. The brief break had done nothing to abate her desire.

“Soft and silky and oh so wet.”

“Hmmm, sounds good. Tell me more.”

“I’ve got my legs spread wide and my hand is rubbing my pussy. Not too hard, very, very softly, but it feels so good.”

“Keep your legs apart. I don’t want you coming yet.”

Cory choked back a groan. “Why not? A woman can have multiple orgasms.”

“True, but don’t you love the anticipation, the ebb and flow, coming closer each time, but never quite reaching that climax.”

“I don’t know. I’m not a patient person.”

“Try it, you’ll like it.”

Cory chuckled. How this man had her so willing to acquiesce to his every demand, she had no idea. “I’d better.”

“Demanding, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

“So tell me Cory, since you are such a dirty girl who doesn’t wear any panties, do you happen to have any toys nearby?”

Cory’s hand stilled for a moment. Didn’t every single woman of a certain age have a vibrator in the nightstand? “Maybe.”

“Oh, you do. No one needs that much time to think about whether or not they have any toys. Why don’t you find your favorite toy and describe it for me.”

Cory barely took an instant to second guess her actions before rolling over to pull open the drawer of her nightstand and grab her red vibrator.

“Well?”

Talk about impatient, Elias was the poster boy.

“Well what?” Cory couldn’t help herself from pushing his buttons. It made her wonder just how far she could go without consequences.

“You’re just digging yourself a deeper hole. Punishment can be a bitch.” Instead of making her mad or worried, the threat sent a shiver of desire through her body.

“Fine, yes I have a toy and it’s a red vibrator. Satisfied?”

“Not nearly, but soon I hope, very, very soon.”

“Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

Elias chuckled without answering. “I want you to turn on the vibrator and get it nice and wet.”

Cory turned the dial at the base of the vibrator and replaced her fingers with the flexible plastic.

“Imagine I’m kneeling between your legs, my cock rubbing against your pussy. You’re so wet I slip back and forth, grazing your clit. You want me inside you, but I keep teasing instead.”

Cory followed his words with action, rubbing the red vibe against her, wanting to sink it deep inside but instinctively waiting for Elias’s words to that effect.

“You beg me so prettily to fuck you that I can’t resist.”

“Yes, Elias, please fuck me.” Cory took the red vibrator and pushed it inside her, gasping as her flesh parted to accept the toy.

“I push myself deep inside and you’re so tight around me I can barely hold out. But I want to make you wait for it, so I just settle in for a minute, letting you feel me throbbing inside you.”

Cory arched her hips to push her vibrator as deep as it would go, imagining the scene Elias was describing. She had never been so turned on while completely by herself.

“Finally, I can hold out no longer and I start to thrust, pulling out until I’m almost free and then pushing back inside. You beg me to go faster, but I just laugh and keep the slow steady pace.”

“God Elias, fuck me harder, faster, please.” Cory was thrusting the buzzing toy. Her eyes closed, she gave herself over to the sensations. “Oh God, Elias, it’s too much. I’m going to come.”

“That’s all right baby, come for me. I want to hear you. You sound so sweet when you come. I just wish I could see your face.”

Arching her back, Cory gasped as her body rushed toward her release. She was moaning into the phone, her legs pulling together as her climax hit her. As she slowly drifted down from her orgasmic high, Cory realized she had dropped the phone at some point. Rolling over on her stomach, she found the phone, still open, on her sleep shirt.

Picking up the phone, she put it to her ear. “Are you still there?” Cory wasn’t sure if she wanted him to answer or not.

“Yeah, I’m still here. How are you doing?” Even Elias sounded a bit out of breath and Cory wondered if, during her self gratification, he had joined her.

“Um, good. Very good in fact. My morning’s starting out well.” Now that it was over the embarrassment was creeping in.

“I’m downstairs. I want you to answer the door wearing nothing at all.” Elias didn’t wait for her reply, but disconnected the phone. Cory stared at the phone a minute before finally getting to her feet. She might be willing to lay on her bed naked while masturbating, but there was no way in hell she’d answer the door naked as a jaybird. Pulling the top sheet off the bed, she wrapped it around herself Toga style and headed downstairs.

With a cock as hard as granite, Elias waited at Cory's front door. It had taken everything out of him not to come when she did. He had to have the willpower of the Gods, because from the moment she screamed his name, his cock had never been the same.

The sound of the deadbolt unlocking, caused his cock to jerk. He was going to fuck her until they both were too tired to move. When the door opened though, Elias grinned. Gone was his lust-induced driving force, because now it wasn't about fucking. It was about punishment. Cory hadn't obeyed him. She was wearing a sheet.

"Testing me, aren't you?" Elias stepped into the house, his hands instantly going to his belt buckle as he freed his pants.

Cory shut the door and locked it behind him, all the while keeping an eye on his hands. "It wasn't a test. I simply chose not to do as you requested."

"You mean as I ordered?"

"I'm not yours to order." Hand on hip, Cory faced him like a Nubian Goddess. The white sheet, tucked around her gentle curves, stood out like moonlight against her smooth brown skin. Her dark eyes held that sexual sedated look that was a like a challenge to his libido. Cory didn't know the definition of satisfied yet.

"Think again, princess." Elias pulled his belt from his pants loops and slowly began to wrap the long leather around his hands.

Cory's eyes widened as she watched him. Her tongue slipped out and moistened her lips as if she was nervous. "What do you think you're going to do with that belt?"

"Anything I want."

"I don't think so."

"Thinking is so overrated." Elias slapped the tail end of the belt against his palm. "Come here, Cory."

"You're crazy."

"Don't make me repeat myself."

“If you think I’d let some man beat me with a belt you’ve got another think coming.” Cory started to back away from him, obviously looking for an escape route.

“Did I say anything about a beating? There are so many other things I could do with this belt that wouldn’t mar that sweet soft skin of yours.” Stepping forward he stepped on the trailing end of the sheet, effectively halting her escape. Cory tugged for a moment, before settling back to wrap the sheet tightly around her once again.

“You’ve been very disobedient. Don’t you think that deserves some sort of consequence?”

“No?” Cory licked her lips again and Elias had to stifle his groan. He wanted to be the one licking those luscious lips.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Elias stalked forward, pulling at the sheet with his foot as he walked. Cory vainly tried to hold on to the last remnants of the sheet, but she had all but lost the battle.

“Telling you. Now stop it.” Cory was swiftly losing her grip on her shield and Elias couldn’t wait to see what she’d do when she finally had nothing to hide behind.

“Nope, you need your punishment.” Reaching up, he pulled the sheet one last time, leaving her standing naked before him. Surprisingly, instead of running, she stood facing him in all her glory.

“Like what you see?” Elias couldn’t deny her words. She was proud of her body and showed it to her best advantage, with one hand at her waist and her hips thrust forward. Unfortunately if he stared at her much longer she’d distract him from his goal.

“Most definitely.” Elias spun her around, locking her arms behind her back before she realized what was happening. Swiftly wrapping the belt around her wrists he had her trussed up before she could speak.

“Hey, I thought ...”

Pulling her back against his aching cock, Elias whispered in her ear, "I know what you thought. But punishment first, fun later." He couldn't help but run a hand over her lush curves though, tweaking her distended nipples, and brushing over her smooth belly before dipping between her legs.

"Ahh." Cory rode his hand, her desire still not abated, even after their phone call.

Elias reluctantly pulled his hand back. "No more of that." Spinning her back around he threw her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and headed up the stairs.

Cory's laughter trailed them up the stairs. "This is so not romantic."

"This is punishment." Elias landed a solid slap to her upturned bottomed. "It's not supposed to be romantic."

"Elias! Your ass is grass."

"And your ass is mine." Elias kicked open her barely closed door and leaned down, until Cory's feet were once more on the ground. "You weren't cold, were you?"

"No."

"You weren't nervous about opening the door and having someone other than me answer it, were you?"

"No."

He didn't think so. "So you simply disobeyed me for the sake of disobeying me."

"There you go with that word again. Obey. I'm not your slave."

"No you most definitely are not." Elias reached out and snagged her arm. He pulled her to him until her bare front was touching his covered chest. "But that doesn't mean that I don't want you to obey."

"What's in it for me?"

"Me."

His words seemed to silence his feisty beauty. "I want you to drop to your knees and suck my cock."

"Excuse me ..."

Elias placed his finger over her mouth. "The moment you stop enjoying my commands is the exact moment I'll stop dishing them out."

Cory jerked her head back. "What makes you think I'm enjoying them?"

Was she kidding? Her nipples were so hard they damn neared poked a hole in his chest. But if the little hellion needed more proof, Elias was more than willing to serve it up.

Elias trailed his fingers down her breast, making time to stop and brush her nipples with a teasing touch, before moving them down her stomach past her soft mound to the tell-tale sign of her damp lips. "This speaks volumes, baby."

"Fuck you." Cory moaned, as Elias teased her clit with a feathery light touch.

"Oh you will, baby, right after you wrap those pretty lips around my cock."

Elias removed his hand, and brought his damp fingers up to his mouth. "Tasty."

He slipped his fingers in his mouth, tonguing her sweet essence as it filled his senses.

Without further persuasion Cory dropped down to her knees. "Never let it be said, that I couldn't take a punishment."

Elias quickly released his aching shaft from behind its tight confines. He was so hard he hurt.

"Oh this isn't punishment baby, this is pleasure." Elias speared his hand into her thick braids, and guided her mouth to his straining erection.

Cory's pink tongue swept along the head of his cock, teasing him for a bit before she finally took him in her mouth. She continued swirling her tongue as she took his cock deeper and deeper into her throat with every movement of her head.

“Yeah, baby, that’s it.” Elias moaned as he struggled to concentrate. After their phone call and now this he was wondering just how long he’d be able to hold out. As he pulled her head away, Elias took a deep breath. “Enough. I don’t want to come in your mouth.”

Sitting back on her heels, Cory looked up at him as she licked her lips, a smile on her face. “So was that my punishment?”

Elias pulled her to her feet with a laugh. “Well it’s not much of a punishment when you enjoy it, huh?”

“Punish me some more.”

“You’re just itching to get your ass swatted.”

“Promises, promises.” Cory giggled.

Elias sat on the bed and hauled Cory over his lap. “Not laughing so much now are you?”

Cory wiggled around on his lap, causing him to groan. “I was joking. Let me up.”

“What are you going to give me?”

“Anything you want.”

Pulling her upright, Elias spread her legs until she straddled him. “I want you to ride me until we both come.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a condom, which he hastily rolled over his straining erection.

“I can’t believe I’m going to fuck you completely nude with your belt wrapped around my wrists while you sit there with all your clothes still on.”

Elias grinned. “Believe it, baby. You said anything I want, remember.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Elias helped her up on her knees before smacking her ass lightly.

“Hey!”

“None of your backtalk or you just might get more of that.”

Positioning his cock at the entrance to her pussy he slowly pressed up as she slid down on him. Cory threw her head back as he firmly seated himself in her tight pussy.

“Now ride me, baby.”

Cory pushed up on her knees, thrusting her hips as she moved. Her eyes were closed, but she was biting her lower lip as she propelled herself back and forth. Elias knew he wouldn't last long, not after all the teasing she'd put him through all morning.

Reaching between them he began rubbing against her clit as she moved, first in tandem and then in counterpoint to her motions.

“Oh God, I'm going to come.”

“That's it, come for me baby, come on.” Elias grabbed her hips and guided her movements as she frantically strained for her climax. Her rippling orgasm gripped his cock like a tight fist, causing him to explode.

Panting, Elias fell back against the bed, Cory collapsing over him. He reached around and released his belt, pulling her arms around and rubbing them to return the circulation. They both seemed to be having a difficult time getting their breathing under control as they lay there together.

“So ...”

Cory moved her braids out of her eyes so she could look at him. “Yes.”

“What are you doing tomorrow morning?”

Chapter Eight

“So are you going to share with the group, or are you going to just keep pretending that nothing’s going on?”

Cory looked up at Nichelle from the magazine she’d been perusing as she lounged lazily at the kitchen nook. From the in-depth way Nichelle was watching her, as she waited for a reply, Cory knew she wouldn’t be lounging for long. This was the first time her sister had really spoken to her in days. Not that Nichelle had been giving her the silent treatment or anything; she’d just been a bit more pensive in the last few days. It was as if she was biding her time, which was so unlike her it was scary.

When Cory didn’t immediately answer, Nichelle turned away and took down a cup from the cabinet. This too was an unusual tactic for her. Nichelle was a pouncer, a demander, not someone who calmly waited for a reply. Watching Nichelle as she fixed herself a cup of coffee, Cory wondered what was going on inside her head. Nichelle was never this composed about anything. Ever.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

Now here was the annoying sister she knew and loved. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, as usual I might add.”

Nichelle crossed the kitchen slowly as if she had all the time in the world and seated herself across from Cory. After setting her cup down, she adjusted her cranberry robe so that it didn’t gap in the front and scooted her chair all the way under the table. Her actions seemed a bit too schooled for Cory, who was becoming increasingly more annoyed by the moment.

Once situated, Nichelle crossed her arms over her chest and just sat there. Staring at Cory. The silence was as aggravating as Nichelle was, and far too much for Cory to take. “What?”

“You know what.”

“Either tell me what the deal is, or I’m going to shave your eyebrows off tonight once you fall asleep.”

Cory lifted her own lukewarm coffee up to take a drink, but froze as Nichelle uttered, “There’s no deal, little sister. I’m just curious to know how long you’re going to keep sneaking *that man* in here after I go to work in the morning.”

Cold busted. Refusing to cower, even though she knew she was caught, Cory took a drink of her coffee calmly. She was a grown up. Nichelle was her sister, not her momma, and she didn’t have to explain anything to her or anyone else.

Yet even though she told herself these truths, Cory couldn’t help but feel a sense of guilt. But she wouldn’t let Nichelle know though, because if her sister sensed any sign of weakness, she’d pounce and go in for the kill.

“We weren’t sneaking.” *Liar.*

“What do you call it then?”

“I don’t call it anything.” Except for the best thing about her days.

“Is that all you’re going to say to me? *To me?*”

Instead of railing at her like Cory would have expected, Nichelle just shook her head sadly. She looked more hurt than anything, which only made Cory feel worse. Even though they butted heads more than rams, Cory and her sisters had always been close. She'd never kept a secret, a thought, or a dream from them until now.

"You're making a big deal out of nothing."

"Is that what he is to you? Nothing."

Irritated Cory slammed down her cup. "You know that's not what I was saying."

"But that's how you're acting. This man ..."

"He has a name."

"How would I know that, Cory? You've never seen fit to introduce me to him."

Nichelle was taking this hurt bit just a little too far. "You met *Elias* at the diner."

"I met the neighbor at the diner." Nichelle fumed. "I've yet to meet my little sister's boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend." The minute Cory uttered those words, she knew she'd make a huge mistake.

"Oh he's not, is he? But you're sleeping with him, right?"

"Yes."

"But he's not your man?"

"No."

"Then what is he?"

"My business and not yours." Cory rose from the table needing to put some space between Nichelle and herself. Her relationship with Elias was complicated and she didn't need Nichelle asking questions she herself didn't have answers to.

"I'm telling you right now girl, you don't hide something you're proud of. The little sister I know wouldn't sleep with just any dick she could get her hands on."

“Don’t be crude.”

“And don’t lie to me. You care about this man. I know you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t give him something as precious as yourself.”

Nichelle’s words struck Cory’s heart. Her sister knew her better than she knew herself sometimes and with one sentence had summed up what Cory had been unable to admit. She cared about Elias. It was something she hadn’t wanted to confront. The implications would be too far reaching. But just like everything else in her life, her sister made her do what she’d thought she was unable or unwilling to do.

“It’s not just sex, Nichelle.”

“Well then what is it?”

“We do things together. We have for several weeks. And not just the mornings you leave early for work either.”

“Like ...”

“What do you mean? We go to the movies, hang out, take the kids to the park. You know the things couples do.”

“Oh, you guys are a couple?”

“No.”

This is why Cory hasn’t wanted to discuss Elias with her sisters. It was too new, too different and she didn’t exactly know how she felt about it. Their relationship was nothing like she’d ever experienced before and in some ways it scared her. In the short amount of time she’d spent with him she’d begun to care deeply for his family, even Jodie, who still gave her a hard time.

“If you’re doing all this couple stuff, even though you aren’t a couple, why is this the first time I’m hearing about it?”

“Maybe I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to be judged. We all know you have a problem with white men.”

Cory caught a glimpse of the hurt that flashed on Nichelle's face before she quickly masked it.

"I do not."

"Tell that to Steven and Samantha." Cory knew it was childish, but the longer she kept Nichelle talking about other stuff, the longer she could delay confronting her own fears about Elias.

"You don't know what you're talking about. I knew how much Samantha loved Steven, but he constantly disappointed her. I don't hate white men. I hate men who hurt those I love. I could see if they continued on the same destructive path that they were going down, Steven would break Samantha's heart. And surprise, surprise, I was right. She needed someone to be there for her and he wasn't there when she needed him."

Cory didn't need a recap of Samantha's love life. She, like Nichelle, had been there when Samantha had almost fallen apart. It was she who held Samantha's hand when she cried. It was she who watched through bitter eyes as Samantha pretended to move on with her life and prepared to marry someone else, and it was she, along with Steven's sister Lily, who had plotted to get the two back together.

Even though Samantha and Steven were happily married now, Nichelle still hadn't lightened up on him. "That's all water under the bridge. They've resolved those differences and they're happy now."

"That may be. But in my book he's got a long way to go on the road to redeeming himself in my eyes, and if he ever hurts her again he'll have me to answer to."

Well, that was one thing they agreed on. Still, Nichelle's attitude didn't make much sense. "If your issue with Elias isn't his skin color, then what is it?"

"My issue isn't with Elias, it's with you."

"What?"

“You’ve always shared everything with me. If this man is important to you, why haven’t you talked to me? Hell you haven’t even talked to Samantha.”

“Maybe I want to keep something for me.”

Nichelle’s brows rose in question. “What do you mean?”

“I work at Samantha’s diner; I live in your house. Just this once I’d like to have something that I don’t share with my sisters.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Elias isn’t going to hurt me. He can’t.” Cory paced the kitchen floor, her nerves on edge.

“And why not.”

“Because if you never give anyone your heart, they can’t break it.”

Nichelle sadly smiled. “And you say you’re not a child.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cory could feel herself getting upset all over again.

“No one wants to be hurt. It’s not like anyone plans it. But come on, the two of you aren’t starting off with an even balance here. He’s white, you’re black. That’s a difficult thing to overcome, even in this day and age, without including his ready-made family.”

“There’s nothing wrong with his ready-made family.”

Nichelle cocked her head to one side. “Are you in love with him?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in love before. I know I love being around him and I miss him when he’s gone.”

“How does he feel about you?”

“We’ve never talked about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a ’fraidy cat, okay. I’ve been enjoying our time together and ignoring the big bad future looming out there in the distance.”

“I guess I was too late with my talk about not letting him hurt you, huh? Because it looks like no matter what, that’s exactly what’s going to happen.”

* * * * *

Swearing under his breath, Elias gave up his search for the ever elusive green sweater Jodie adamantly insisted was a must-have at camp, and grabbed her jean jacket out of the closet instead. His award for father of the year wouldn’t be forthcoming once his daughter caught sight of the jacket. He’d given it his best shot, even going as far as leaving the office and coming back home to look for her sweater just so she could match the other girls in her group. Besides, if she was cool enough, she’d wear it, whether she matched the other sheep or not.

He hadn’t been able to see Cory this morning, which was probably one of the reasons he wasn’t in such a great mood. Although his schedule was pretty flexible, there were always those meetings that couldn’t be changed and were too important to miss. Of course the meeting this morning ended up being cancelled anyway, which was fortuitous when Jodie called frantic about her sweater. Still, Elias missed his morning with Cory.

Being able to spend the mornings with her had become the highlight of his day. Just thinking about Cory had him adjusting his cock and wishing for just a little more time. An hour would be a good start. Their morning ritual was more than just sex though; he was slowly falling in love with Cory, something he had only recently admitted to himself.

Unfortunately it wasn’t something he’d had a chance to talk to Cory about either. And that wasn’t going to happen today, not with his schedule. He needed to get the jacket dropped off to Jodie and head back to work.

As Elias opened his car door, he heard his name being called from behind him. The familiar voice filled his mind with rage and his blood with ice.

Anyone but her, Lord. Anyone.

“Elias.”

“What do you want?” Elias refused to turn around. His hand gripped the top of his car door, his fingers bit into the metal frame.

“To talk.”

“You and I don’t talk, Rhonda.” His ex-wife’s name was like poison on his lips. “That’s what we have lawyers for.”

“We managed to talk for ten years without them; I don’t see why we have to use them now.”

“Because the judge ordered it so.”

“Do you really need your lawyer to protect you from me?”

Elias spun around when he felt Rhonda’s hand brush the back of his arm. He wasn’t a violent man, but God help him, he wanted to hurt her. Not for the things she’d done to him, but for the things she’d done to his children. Having a womb and giving birth didn’t make a woman a mother, and no one drove home that point more than Rhonda did. “No, but you might need yours to protect you from me.”

“Don’t be silly, Elias. You’d never hurt me.” Her soft phony laughter was as familiar to him as her lying blue eyes. From the polished look of her appearance, to the elegant coif of her ash blonde hair it appeared as if the last year had been good to Rhonda. A lot more than she deserved.

Though to be honest, she had never outwardly appeared like the lying, cheating, manipulative junky she was. That was buried on the inside, right next to her black heart.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Elias turned back toward the car and tossed Jodie’s jacket inside and then closed the door. He didn’t want to give Rhonda any reason to bring up his kids. “How did you find out where we were?”

“My lawyer can be a very persuasive man when he wants to.”

Great. A new lawyer. Someone new to fall for her bullshit. “How much do you want?”

“Why do you have to be so ugly to me?” Like the stage actress she should have been, Rhonda lowered her voice to a dramatic pitch, and her eyes welled with tears.

If Elias hadn’t known her as well as he did, he might have been moved, but there was way too much heartbreak and too many years between them for him to give a good goddamn about her now.

“I’m giving you to the count of three to come up with an amount then I’m going to call the cops and enforce the restraining order.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“One.”

Rhonda stomped her foot like a child. It was true to her nature, because like a child she thought the entire world revolved around her. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Two.”

“Elias, stop it.”

“Three.” Elias reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He had every intention of making good his threat.

“I want to see the kids.”

His finger froze over the buttons. “Over my dead body.”

“They’re my kids too.”

“Not according to the state of California they’re not. I have full custody.”

“According to my lawyer I can petition for a new custody hearing. But why are we arguing about courts and lawyers.” Rhonda’s face turned sly, and she crowded up against him. “I just want to see them, to let them know I’m in recovery now. Is it too much to ask that they see their mother as a healthy person?”

Elias shook his head. He could have only wished she was healthy, but Rhonda was great at masking a lot of her faults, her drug use only being one of them. Even if she were

clean and sober and stayed that way the rest of her life there was no way in hell he'd let her within ten miles of the children. She was manipulative and conniving and he didn't trust her any further than he could throw her.

"It's not going to work. I don't fall for the sad eyes and martyrdom any more."

"Elias, you're so tense. I think you need to relax. Remember how good we were together?" Rhonda reached down to touch him, but he grabbed her hand before she reached his cock. Twisting her hand, he pushed her firmly away from him.

"Get the hell away from me and stay away. This is your only warning. If I see you again I'll call the cops." Opening his car door he got inside and slammed it shut. As he sat there, he shuddered to think what her presence could mean. Elias almost wished she had immediately asked for money so he could pay her off. Unfortunately, she'd gone for his Achilles heel, knowing he would do anything to avoid a meeting between her and the children.

Although he still had his lawyer on retainer from California, Elias realized he needed to find a local lawyer. If this confrontation with Rhonda was any indication, she wasn't going away any time soon. He had no illusions that his threats would scare her. No, she wanted something and he'd bet his last dollar it was money. She might pretend she wanted to see the kids, but in the end it was always Rhonda who was most important to Rhonda.

As he pulled out of the driveway, he got on the phone and called into work. Explaining to his secretary that he wasn't going to be in for the rest of the day, he hung up and dialed Cory. He wanted, no needed, to hear her voice. Elias tapped his fingers impatiently as the phone rang. After his confrontation with Rhonda, the thought of Cory was like a breath of fresh air.

"Lo."

Despite everything that had just happened just knowing she was on the other line made him feel loads better. "Cory, it's me."

"Me who?"

The little minx knew exactly who he was, but even their little byplay made him feel better. “Do I need to tie you up again to get you to remember my name?”

“That would only narrow the field, not exclude it.”

“Brat.”

“Oh Elias, why didn’t you say it was you.”

“Funny.” Pulling over to the side of road, Elias opened up his briefcase and pulled out a pad and paper. He wasn’t going to let Rhonda make the first move. “I have a question. Do you know any good lawyers in town?”

“What, just because I’m black you automatically think I have a lawyer on speed dial?”

“I’m serious.”

“Is everything okay?” The laughter bled from her voice, quickly replaced with worry.

“No.” Elias sighed. There was so much he wanted to say to her. To confide in her, but now wasn’t the time. His past was way too complicated to be explained over the phone and he cared for her too much not to do it the right way. “I’ll explain later, but right now, I need to know if you know of anyone.”

“Yes, Steven Weller, he’s the best.”

“Weller ...” Elias wrote down the name and address Cory rattled off to him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. If there’s anything I can do to help, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Elias glanced down at his watch. There was something, but he wasn’t so sure how she’d react. “There is one thing ...”

“Yes.”

“Could you pick up the kids from camp for me? I know you’re probably busy ...”

“Consider it done.”

Startled at her quick reply, Elias smiled. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“You don’t have to work or anything?”

“I’ll handle everything on my end; you just make sure the camp is aware that I’m coming to get them.”

“I will. Don’t worry, Jodie has a key.” Closing his eyes, Elias leaned his head back on his headrest. “Thank you, Cory. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“You’ll owe me.”

“And I’ll pay.”

“You’d better.”

Hanging up, Elias smiled. He would gladly pay her fee, but first he was going to make Rhonda pay.

Chapter Nine

“I still don’t understand why you have to watch us?” Jodie plopped down on the couch with her attitude on full blast. Jodie was taking the whole “no good deed goes unpunished” thing a bit too far. The little diva-in-training had giving Cory nothing but trouble from the moment she’d picked them up. “When is my daddy coming home?”

“Not soon enough,” Cory muttered under her breath, as she untucked her legs from beneath her. So much for watching television until Elias came home. From the way Jodie was sighing, Cory was either going to have to turn the television all the way up, or hand her a brown paper bag to keep her from hyperventilating.

It was so not cute.

“I don’t want to watch this.”

Sighing, Cory passed the remote to the sullen girl, refusing to rise to the bait. Nichelle’s words from that morning played over and over in her head. Really, who was she kidding? Cory was no more ready to step-up and play mother than Jodie was ready to accept a mother in her life.

Jodie snatched the remote from her hand, without a word of thanks.

“You’re welcome.”

Her snort of derision was a bit more than Cory was willing to take. She was over here doing Elias a favor. Not the other way around. "You're welcome."

"Thank you." The words were as ungracious as her silence had been.

"You know what --" Cory snatched the remote from Jodie's hand and slammed the power button down.

"Hey," TJ muttered from his prone position on the floor. "I was watching that."

"You can thank your sister then because until she says thank you like she means it, we'll be watching our reflections on the screen."

TJ rolled over and glared at his sister. "Just say thank you."

"I already did."

"Say it like you mean it."

As ridiculous as it was, Cory was happy to have someone on her side -- even if it was a three-year-old. "I'm waiting, Jodie."

"I hate you." Angry tears of frustration spilled from her eyes as Jodie jumped off the couch and ran to her room. Startled, Cory stared after her unsure what to do. A simple thank you shouldn't have caused all of that.

Completely out of her element, Cory looked to her back-up for advice. Unfortunately TJ just shrugged his shoulders and rolled back over onto his stomach. "You think Scooby is on?"

"I'm not sure." Cory stood up and handed the remote to him. "I'm going to go talk to your sister. I'll be back."

"Kay."

Cory headed up the stairs as if she were walking to the guillotine. Although she knew it was the right thing to do, confronting Jodie was about as fun as having a tooth pulled. At the top of the stairs, Cory looked around, noticing just one door shut. Stepping up she knocked sharply.

“Go away.” Jodie’s muffled order was accompanied by a brief hiccup.

Great, tears, could it get any better than this?

“Jodie, please open the door. I’d like to talk to you.” Cory waited for a moment, to see if there was any movement on the other side, but there was complete silence. Knocking again, Cory tried wheedling a bit. She didn’t want Elias to think she’d tortured his daughter every time they were together. “Jodie, come on back downstairs.”

There was some scurried noises on the other side of the door before Jodie pulled in open. Cory could tell she’d been crying, but had attempted to clean her face to disguise the tears.

“Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

“Us? I think TJ and I are getting along fine.”

“I mean my family.”

“Jodie, can I come in and sit down?”

Jodie flounced from the door and flopped on her bed, seemingly indifferent to whether Cory came in or not. Cory didn’t remember being this much of a pain when she was this age, although thinking back on it now she did remember her sisters complaining about her a lot to their mother. Walking into the room, Cory started to get a better idea of what Jodie was like. She was obviously very much all girl. Cory wondered if she felt left out sometimes with the two males in the house. Cory sat cross legged on the floor since she didn’t think Jodie was willing to share space on the bed.

“So, what’s with the bad attitude?” Nothing like getting directly to the point.

“I don’t have a bad attitude. I just don’t know why you have to always be hanging around.”

“Look, your dad asked me to do him a favor. He was busy.”

“He was never too busy before.”

Cory sighed. She was officially the world’s shittiest babysitter.

"I'm not trying to steal your dad away from you, Jodie." Cory had a sneaking suspicion that's where the problem truly lay.

"Like you could."

"You're right. There is nothing, or anyone, that could come between you and your dad."

"I know that."

"Then why are you giving me such a hard time?" Jodie's shrug was as telling as her tear marks. She was so confused. "I'll make you a deal. You stop giving me such a hard time and I'll stop ... I'll stop being so irresistible."

Jodie rolled her eyes at Cory's comment, but she did it with a small smile. It was better than nothing. "Let's go downstairs and watch TV."

"You only watch what TJ wants to watch."

"True, but that's because he has a limited amount of shows he can watch. He's not like the rest of us who can watch other things."

Jodie actually perked up at her words. "Yeah, well, we're older."

"Exactly." Score one for the black chick. Jodie definitely liked being in the "older" category. Just wait, one day she'd be praying she was younger. "So, why don't we go watch a show that everyone can watch and then we'll make some cookies."

Jodie rolled off the bed, heading toward the door as Cory struggled to get off the floor. Damn, it never used to be this hard.

"Um, Cory, I'm sorry I was being snotty earlier."

"Apology accepted. Now help me up. I think I'm stuck." Cory held out a hand as Jodie toiled to pull her into a standing position, vainly trying to hold back her laughter. Finally gaining her feet, Cory laughed at herself. "Okay, note to self, no more sitting cross legged on the floor."

As they headed downstairs, Cory secretly patted herself on the back. It wasn't as if the two of them were life long buddies, but it was a start. Now, all she had to do was sit through a couple of episodes of Scooby Doo, make some cookies, and hold out until Elias came home. Piece of cake.

"TJ we're making cookies do you want to --" The doorbell ringing cut off the rest of her sentence but not his shout of glee. "I take that war cry as a yes."

Jumping up, TJ barreled past Cory running full speed ahead into the kitchen. "I get to lick the bowl."

"Who said?" Jodie demanded hurrying in after him.

"No worries. I'll get the door." Cory's dry wit was lost on the two battling kids. They were arguing, but not with her, and that was good enough for Cory. Mother of the year she wasn't, but she might be able to get away with cool girlfriend of the year -- not that she was Elias's girlfriend, more like unpaid babysitter with benefits. And what great benefits they were.

One dirty thought led to another and by the time Cory reached the door she was sporting an evil little grin. After glancing through the peephole, Cory opened the door partially and peered outside. "Can I help you?"

The stunned look on the blonde's face was priceless. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" Cory fired back.

Stepping back, the woman looked at the house to her left then at the house to her right up as if making sure she had the right address. "This is the Kohler residence, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Tell Mr. Kohler to come to the door."

Tell. Tell. Oh no, she didn't. "Elias --" Cory made sure to stretch his name, putting emphasis on her familiarity with him. "-- isn't home right now. You might want to try back later."

Cory stepped back to shut the door but the woman moved forward and pressed her hand flat against the wood and put her foot between the door and the jam, effectively wedging herself in the tiny crevice. It was official; Cory was going to drop this bitch. “You want to move your foot.”

“After I speak to my husband.”

“Husband?” Startled Cory dropped her hand from the door and opened it up wider again.

“Yes he’s my husband and those,” she jerked her head behind Cory where the kids could still be heard arguing amongst themselves, “are my kids.”

“Lucky them.” Cory might not know the particulars of Elias’s situation, but from what she did know about him, Cory knew that it was a pretty safe bet, that Elias wouldn’t want this woman in his house. “Either way, you’re going to have to come back later.”

With an annoyed sigh, the blonde reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. “How much is he paying you girl, five, six dollars an hour?”

Girl! Wife or not, this ho was going down.

“Here’s fifty dollars.” She dangled the money out in front of her with the tip of her fingers. “Keep the change.”

Bitch, please. Cory reached out and snagged the money. “Thanks. I’ll tell Elias you stopped by.”

“What ... wait a minute.”

Cory pulled back and went to slam the door shut when Jodie came up behind her. “Cory, TJ is being a pest.”

“Jodie, baby.”

Jodie froze at the sound of the woman’s voice and her face went ashen. It wasn’t a look of parental love. “Momma?”

“Oh sweetie, you’ve gotten so big. Tell this woman to get out of the way so I can see you.”

Cory wasn’t about to take her gaze off the bitch queen, but she could see Jodie slowly shaking her head in disbelief as she eased back from the door.

“No, I ... I can’t see you.” Turning Jodie ran back toward the kitchen. All righty then, this was no loving reunion, not by a long shot.

“As you can see, no one here is interested in seeing you right now, but like I said, I’ll be sure to let Elias know you stopped by.” Shoving with all her might Cory pushed the woman out of the way and slammed the door shut. For good measure she flipped the deadbolt, smiling with glee as she heard a stomp on the porch before retreating footsteps.

Walking back toward the kitchen, Cory was wondering how she would approach Jodie. Obviously there were some issues between mother and daughter. Of course with a mother like that, how could there not be. Cory sent up a silent prayer, thanking the Lord for giving her such a wonderful mother. Not everyone was so lucky.

Unfortunately when she got to the kitchen, neither child was anywhere to be found. Cory looked around, but there weren’t a lot of places to hide. Maybe Jodie hadn’t returned to the kitchen and had headed upstairs instead. But that still didn’t explain what had happened to TJ. Cory hoped he hadn’t taken it into his head to run down to her house again. Of course with her here, why would he?

Cory walked through the house calling for the kids, but there was no response. She was really starting to get worried. “Jodie, TJ. No more fun and games. Hide and seek is over. Time to make the cookies.”

When she reached the top of the stairs Cory noticed Jodie’s door was shut. Positive that she had left it open when they’d left earlier, she headed into Jodie’s bedroom. But once again she was disappointed. The room was empty. Turning to leave, Cory heard a small noise and

turned back around toward the closet. She opened the door to find Jodie and TJ huddled together on the floor.

“What ...”

TJ looked scared and confused, but Jodie looked frantic. “You won’t let her take us away, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“You promise?”

What in the world had that woman done to these children? “I cross my heart and hope to die.”

As Cory held the shivering children in her arms, she made vow after vow to herself to break her foot off in Jodie’s mother’s ass the very next time she saw her. Cory didn’t have a clue what was going on, but she was going to get to the bottom of it.

* * * * *

Glancing down at his watch, Elias smiled in satisfaction. In a little over four hours he had managed to not only secure a new lawyer, but also to reinstate the restraining order he had against Rhonda. Mr. Weller was pretty much convinced she didn’t have a leg to stand on, and Elias wanted to keep it that way.

After getting in contact with Elias’s Los Angeles lawyers, Weller was quickly brought up to date on Elias’s troubled past with Rhonda. With a swish of his pen across the bottom line of his check book, Elias granted Steven all the power he needed to delve into his shady situation and delve he did. In less than two hours in his office, Steven had not only contacted a judge about the restraining order, he’d also managed to track down Rhonda’s new lawyer, who appeared as if he was going to be as big of a headache as the last one.

According to her lawyer, Rhonda was six months out of rehab and finally had her life on track. It was the same song and dance Elias had waltzed to before, and he wasn’t buying

it. In truth, he did wish the best for Rhonda. But the best had nothing to do with him or his kids. He had given her too many chances as a wife and a mother, then just as a mother, to believe anything she had to say now.

If she was clean, bully for her, but it didn't change a damn thing as far as he was concerned. Drugs or no drugs, Rhonda was an unstable force of hurricane proportion, and there wasn't a judge in the world worth his salt who would relinquish Elias's custody to her.

Blanketed in the comfort of his convictions, Elias entered his home, glad to know Rhonda's ugliness couldn't touch him or his kids. It was still reasonably early, only a bit after four, and yet the house was as still as tomb.

After checking the downstairs, Elias made his way upstairs, wondering where everyone was.

"Cory. Jodie. TJ. Where are you guys?" His voice echoed in the silent house as worry began to creep up his spine. Elias had called on his way home, but then, like now, no one answered.

Worried now, Elias quickly scanned his bedroom and TJ's to no avail before hurrying over to Jodie's door, and when he opened up the door, his heart felt as if it was about to explode.

There on Jodie's princess pink bed, was his family, curled up together sound asleep. The children flanked Cory, who had one arm around of each of them, tucking them into her body as if she would never let them go. If it had been just TJ grasping at her like a lifeline, Elias would have shrugged it off, but it wasn't. Jodie's little fist, still so small compared to his, was entangled in Cory's shirt just as desperately as her brother's.

Elias had to take a deep breath. His chest hurt and his lungs felt as if they were burning. He suddenly felt so overwhelmed by emotions he had to take a step back and gather himself.

This was what love was all about.

Moving quietly across the floor, Elias made his way to Jodie's bed, needing to be part of his family. He lowered himself down at the foot of the mattress, where there was barely enough room for him to sit, and just watched them sleep. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

The woman he loved, made up of deep hues of brown, her hair in ringlets of braids, her face set in a peaceful slumber, surrounded by his children, one fair, one dark, both a beautiful contrast to the angel who had made them whole again.

Unable to stop himself, Elias reached and brushed his hand against the Cory's bare leg. At his touch, Cory opened her eyes and tightened her hold on Jodie and TJ. Her entire body tensed up, as if she was ready to do battle.

Her stance shocked Elias. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispered back. Cory's body relaxed somewhat but not all the way. There was a wariness to her that Elias didn't like. Something was up all right.

Standing, Elias reached his hand out to her. "Let's talk in the other room."

Cory nodded but didn't take his offered hand. Instead she slowly moved from beneath the children and rose on her own, bypassing Elias on her way out of the room. Elias stared after her in wonderment. This was definitely not "nothing."

"What's ..."

Cory turned and shushed him as he tried to speak. Reaching around him, she pulled the bedroom door closed and then headed down the stairs. Elias was curious and worried now, wondering just what the hell was going on. When they reached the living room Cory sat on the couch and picked up a pillow, holding it clutched in her arms. It was a hands off gesture if there ever was one.

"Okay, we're downstairs now. Can we talk about whatever it is that's wrong?"

"Your wife stopped by today."

Elias's heart stopped beating for a moment at her words. Dear God, what had Rhonda done?

"Is everyone okay?"

"Now see, if that's the first thing you say in response to my question, I have to ask why it was I didn't even know you had a crazy wife running around."

"She's not my wife. She's my ex-wife. We *are* divorced." Elias didn't want Cory to think he was having a relationship with her while hiding a secret wife somewhere.

"Wife, ex-wife, whatever. I'm more concerned about the crazy part."

"I didn't even know she was in town until this morning."

"But you knew this morning, when we talked on the phone?"

"Yes."

Cory flung the pillow at him. Shocked, Elias stood there as he was hit in the face. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Because, I was blindsided today and it's all your fault. That crazy bitch showed up here treating me like the hired help, and I'm standing around with no clue since the man I'm sleeping with didn't have the common courtesy to tell me anything."

"I didn't know she'd come by again. I warned her away this morning."

Cory stood up and pushed by him again, stalking around the room, picking up the odds and ends left around by the kids. It was a bit of a disconnect, watching her clean up around the house as she berated him. "Oh, you didn't know she was going to come by *again*. She did it once, why not a second time, huh? And did you ever think once to say, 'Hey Cory, my crazy ex-wife is running around. We'll talk more about it later.' Nope, didn't do that because it might, oh I don't know, make sense."

"I was planning to tell you all about it tonight. I just didn't think."

"Damn right you didn't think." Turning with her hands on her hips, Cory tapped her foot impatiently. "I'm only going to ask you this one time. Are we in a relationship or not?"

Elias had a sudden clarity of thought. Cory was questioning their relationship because of her confrontation with Rhonda and there was no way in hell he was going to let that bitch ruin one of the best things in life that he had ever experienced. Although this wasn't exactly the time and place he wanted to have the relationship talk.

Grabbing Cory's hands, he pulled her into his arms as she struggled against him. "Damn it, answer me."

"Yes, we are in a relationship." Elias could feel her body relax at his words. Of course that was only seconds before she pummeled his back.

"Then you'd better start including me in what's going on in your life. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Just in case you didn't know, the whack job is the ugly."

"Yeah, I got that." Elias maneuvered them back to the couch, sat down, and pulled Cory onto his lap. She snuggled against him like a cat warming to the fire.

"So spill, what's going on and why the hell is Jodie so damned afraid of her mother?"

"I will but I want to know what happened today first."

Cory briefly explained the day's events and Elias closed his eyes as he wondered what would have happened if someone else had opened the door. He very well could have come home to an empty house. After her account Cory again asked why Jodie was afraid.

"Rhonda was a drug addict for most of our marriage and I was too wrapped up in work to even realize it. When I finally figured out what was going on and tried to get her help it was too late for us. When she was first out of rehab I thought she could still be a decent mother. Unfortunately, she proved me wrong."

As he spoke, Cory had said nothing, but lay with her head on his chest softly stroking him. Nothing overtly sexual, it was more of a soothing gesture as she listened to him. Elias sighed heavily as he went on.

"One weekend when she had the kids, she decided to visit her drug dealer to get some Meth and took the kids with her. The only smart thing she did was to leave them in the car.

The place was raided and she was arrested. I shudder every time I think about what could have happened to my children. After she was bailed out of jail she kept trying to come back to the house, so I had to get a restraining order. It was no surprise when the judge gave me full and complete custody.”

Cory looked up, propping her chin on his chest as she stared into his eyes. “You’re a good man Elias and an even better father.”

He knew Cory recognized the guilt he felt about Rhonda and the children. Elias always wondered if only he hadn’t worked so hard, would she have become an addict? But he’d realized long ago there was nothing he could have done to save Rhonda from herself.

Pulling her head down, he captured her mouth in a soft kiss. Cory wasn’t content with soft though. Wiggling around, she snaked a hand down between them to cup him through his jeans.

“Cory, Cory, where are you?” Jodie’s frantic cries broke the mood quicker than being dumped upon with a bucket of ice.

“Down here, sweetie.” Jodie bounded down the stairs as Cory sat up, trying to move away from him. Elias wouldn’t allow her to move away, however. He wasn’t planning on hiding their relationship from anyone, especially not his daughter. It was time to bring it out into the open.

Jodie approached them shyly, her gaze taking in their entwined hands. “Hi Daddy, you’re home early.”

“Come here, pumpkin.” Elias held out his free arm and Jodie ran to him as he embraced her. Cory had found his lost son and protected his daughter. Who could want for a better mother?

Chapter Ten

Cory laid her head back, closing her eyes and listening to the muted sounds of Elias putting Jodie to bed. She'd left them alone when they'd all come upstairs and then wandered down to Elias's room. Initially she was just going to peek inside to do some exploring, but before she realized it she was soon lounging on the bed.

The drama of the day was finally taking its toll. She was drained, but restless, wishing there was some way she could release this pent up energy. Of course there was a perfectly good exercise to release energy, but Cory realized there would be no way Elias would indulge her desires tonight.

With the children in the house and the reappearance of his ex-wife his mind would probably be occupied with other issues. She should just go home, but wanted at least one goodbye kiss before she went to bed, probably masturbating to her fantasies of him bending her over and taking her from behind. Hmm, she liked that one a lot.

"Penny for your thoughts. Although maybe I should offer more, because I think they're dirty."

Opening her eyes, Cory watched Elias as he stood at the end of the bed, casually unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it off.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Just a few minutes, you had a naughty little smile on your face that was screaming sex.”

Cory quirked her eyebrow. “Screaming, huh?”

“Oh yeah, but too high for most mortals to hear. I’m sure all the dogs in the neighborhood will be clamoring at the door soon, though.”

“You are such a geek.”

Elias sat down and pulled off his shoes and socks before standing to unhook his belt. Cory loved to watch him undress, the methodical way he took off each item, folding it instead of just throwing it over his shoulder, which was the way she usually undressed. It was such a stupid little thing, but it was one of the reasons she knew she loved him. That something so innocuous turned her on was evidence she was either crazy or totally in love.

“It’s been a really long day.”

“That it has.”

“Since you’re apparently getting ready for bed, I’ll head on home.” Cory stood, intent on the door, but was stopped by Elias who stood as well, blocking her exit.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

The intense look in his eyes had her clearing her throat and rethinking her answer. “Home?”

“I don’t think so.” His voice was so thick and deep it made her knees tremble.

How he was able to jumble her nerves so quickly was a mind trip, but he did. It was almost as if he had her body on a switch, one he was able to flick off and on at his command.

“No?”

“No.” A wicked little grin graced his lips, sending Cory’s blood pressure skyrocketing. No one should be this sinfully delicious. No one.

"I'll tell you what you're going to do. You're going to slip off your clothes, climb up on the bed, and get onto your knees. I want your chest down, and your ass up in the air. And I want it now."

Who the hell did he think he was talking too? She was going to knock him flat on his ass, if he didn't watch it -- yes that was what she was going to do, as soon as she rose from the position he told her to get into, that is.

"Elias ..." Cory licked her lips and willed her feet to stay planted on the ground. "The kids are in the other room. I can't stay here and we can't do this."

No matter how much she really, really wanted to.

"This stops right now, Cory."

"What?"

"This being hidden. We've nothing to be ashamed of. I'm your man. You're my woman. And the sooner the kids and the rest of our families realize it, the better. You belong in my home, in my bed, and in my life. And I'll be damned if I'll go another day without you in them."

If Cory hadn't already been sure she was in love with him, she would have fallen right then and there.

"Any questions?"

Hell he'd be lucky if she could talk.

"Yes." Walking toward him, she took his belt in hand and quickly pulled it through the loops. "Is the door locked?"

"Yes it is. Now where were we?"

"Right about here I believe." Cory unfastened his pants and pushed them down over his hips, freeing his semi-erect cock. "Someone is happy to see me."

"More than happy."

Dropping to her knees, Cory took him in her hands, loving the flushed skin of his cock, the head turning a deep purple as she stroked him with a firm grip. She leaned forward and slid her tongue up and down the length of his cock, learning the taste of him. Slightly musky, he was all male. She tilted her eyes up, knowing Elias was staring down at her and telling him with her gaze how much she enjoyed giving him this pleasure.

Elias gripped her braids tightly, causing her to wince slightly. "Damn baby, I'm sorry." He immediately freed her.

Cory pulled back, releasing his cock with a pop. "No, I like when you hold me like that. Because I know I'm driving you out of control."

"That's for damn sure."

She grasped his cock again, slowly stroking him as she licked the head, running her tongue all over the head until it was glistening.

"Oh fucking hell." Elias grabbed her head, his fingers running through her braids.

Cory had never tried to deep throat anyone before. In fact had felt no desire to do so. But with Elias she wanted to try anything and everything. The feeling of his cock scraping at the back of her throat should have caused her pain. But instead she could feel the cream gathering between her thighs. She almost wished she were naked, so she could stroke herself while she swallowed him down.

Elias pulled back, allowing her to catch her breath, but Cory tried to follow him, unwilling to lose her prize. Unfortunately he was stronger than she was and won the battle.

"Baby, you've got to stop or I won't be able to."

"That's the point. I want to give you pleasure."

"Then climb up on the bed. Your pussy will be all the pleasure I can handle." Elias took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. "You've had your fun, now it's my turn."

In less time than it reasonably should have, Elias had Cory undressed and positioned on the bed the way he wanted her. It was a whirlwind of activity that had Cory chuckling as she gazed down at the plaid comforter in wonder. What Elias wanted, he got; no doubt about it.

Somehow, somewhere in time, Elias had taken complete control of her in the bedroom. And the strangest part was she liked it. Not that she would ever admit it, aloud, but she did.

The mattress dipped as Elias joined her on the bed. Wordlessly, he moved behind her, until his jutting cock brushed against her upturned bottom. Elias grasped her waist and pulled her flush against him for a few seconds as if savoring the moment then he moved back, rolling on a condom before slipping his hand between her spread thighs.

When his fingers met the puddle of moisture gathered there, he let out a deep chuckle that wrapped itself around her senses and mind.

“Is this for me, baby?” he asked, as he dipped two fingers into her wet pussy.

“Yes.” Cory thought she should have probably been embarrassed by her desire, but she wasn’t.

Elias pistoned his fingers inside her, fucking her with his hand as she knew he would with his cock. “It’d better be.”

“Fuck me, Elias; don’t toy with me.”

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Elias withdrew his hand from her now sopping pussy and brought his moist fingers up to her erect clit. “Toying with you.” He punctuated with his words by rubbing her throbbing button. Cory tried to close her legs, but with Elias’s arm between her thighs it was an impossible feat to accomplish. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Please, Elias. I want to come with you inside me. Not this way,” she begged. Cory could feel tumultuous waves of pleasure rising from within her and she knew it was only a matter of seconds before she came. Eyes closed, Cory dug her nails into the bedding and held on for dear life, but to her surprise, Elias didn’t continue with his torture. He pulled away

right before she came. Panting and aching, Cory tried to remember why she wanted to wait now. Her body's thirst for release had robbed her of her reasoning.

"I do so love it when you say please."

"Then fuck me. Please, fuck me. Please."

"With pleasure." Without another word, Elias gripped her hip with one hand and positioned himself at her opening with the other, before thrusting deep within her. His plunge almost rocked her from the bed, and if it wasn't for his firm grip on her hip, Cory knew she would have fallen into the mattress face first.

Elias's slow measured strokes were rebuilding the heat in Cory, driving her back to the edge of reason. She began matching him thrust for thrust as he continued to fuck her. Cory wasn't expecting what happened next.

His fingers slipped between the crease of her buttocks, separating her cheeks much to Cory's embarrassment. Here she was, impaled on his erection, pumping herself backwards into his thick cock, and yet the mere thought of him looking at her asshole, had her all atwitter.

"What are you doing?" Her question was met by the feel of his thumb brushing against her rosette. "Elias!"

"Yes ..."

Her pussy clenched around his cock as the new arousing sensation robbed her of thought. She had never been touched back there before. Hell to her knowledge, her asshole had never been seen before, and yet, here she was allowing Elias to do much more than look. It felt weird, yet sexy all at the same time.

Cory wanted to tell him to stop, but she couldn't push the words past her lips. Anticipation and nervousness warred within her. Good girls didn't get fucked in the ass, but then again, no one had ever accused Cory of being a good girl.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’m not going to fuck this sweet spot tonight.” His hand moved lower, until it was brushing across the place where their bodies were joined and then before she could catch her breath, it was back on her rosette, this time wet from their mingled desires. “Just push back and enjoy.”

“Enjoy what?”

“This.” With that, Elias centered his damp thumb against her anus and pushed it slowly but steadily in. His thrust was met with resistance, but it didn’t deter Elias one bit, and before Cory knew it, he was buried knuckle deep inside her.

Gasping, Cory tried to hold herself still, to give her body time to adjust to the new sensation, but Elias wasn’t of the same mind. Instead of slowing down his plundering rhythm, Elias sped up. He moved one hand to her hip, which he used to control the rhythm and dug his fingers into her ass with the other one, leaving his thumb lodged deeply within her.

“It’s too much.” Even as she cried out, she pushed back at him, hungry for everything he had to offer.

“No such thing.”

Cory’s body trembled at his words and her arms gave out from under her. Dropping face down into the bed, she clawed the mattress, searching for some wisp of reason. This was insane. Her body was acting of its own accord.

She felt depraved.

She felt lust-driven.

She felt more alive than she had ever felt before.

“Dear God, Elias, I can’t stand any more. I need to come.” Cory was clutching the edge of the bed with all her might, her body a quivering mass. The sensations felt overwhelming to her as Elias continued to pound into her pussy with his cock and toy with her ass.

“Not. Yet.” His words were punctuated with his thrusts. “You. Come. When. I. Tell. You. To. Come.”

Cory bit her lip and tightened her muscles as he continued to fuck her, intent on driving him as crazy as he was making her. She knew her efforts were working when he gasped and groaned her name.

“Now Cory, come now.” Elias’s words sent her flying, her body spasming in contractions as he exploded deep inside her. Cory’s legs gave out as her body finally collapsed from the overload.

Elias dropped beside her and they lay spooned, still locked together. Cory shivered from the cold and realized she was covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

I may never need to visit a gym again if I continue getting this type of workout.

“I know you’re exhausted, but I’m going to run us a nice hot shower and then we’re going to bed.”

Cory blinked for a moment, letting the impact of Elias’s words sink in. He wasn’t just saying they’d be sleeping together under his roof, but waking up there as well. The love she felt for this man washed over her and she savored the rightness of it all.

“Sounds good to me.”

* * * * *

Slowly coming awake, Elias couldn’t feel his right arm. Prying open his eyelids, he turned his head to see Cory curved around him, his arm under her neck. He smiled at the sight of his woman lying in his arms. This was the way it should be. Always. Cory naked after a night of loving, happily sedated, snoring lightly in his arms in soon-to-be *their* bed. It was just perfect.

Elias didn’t know exactly when it happened but somewhere between the first time he saw Cory carrying TJ in her arms, and last night when she had surrendered so sweetly in his

arms, he'd fallen -- crashed hard -- into love with her. And he was ever so serious about letting the world know.

As cheesy as it sounded, he truly wanted to climb the highest water tower in Ohio and proclaim to all that she was his. His woman. His lady. His love. And he didn't care who opposed it. Elias was willing to fight to the death for her -- for their love.

Smiling down at her, Elias resisted the urge to kiss Cory awake. As if she could sense him watching her, Cory tilted her head up, blinking at the early morning light shining in from the windows.

"You're going to have to move the bed. It's too damn bright in here in the mornings."

Leave it to Cory to say the unthinkable. "Good morning, sunshine."

"What's so good about it?" Rolling over, Cory nuzzled into his body, turning her face from the bright light streaming through the room.

"You. Me. Us."

"It's too early for sweet talk."

"It's never too early." Chuckling, Elias brushed his fingers against the small of her back. Her skin was warm to the touch, and so velvety soft, it made the tip of his fingers tingle. *Was it possible that everything about her was perfect?* Even the way she grumbled under her breath made his heart skip a beat. Elias wondered if he would ever get used to the contrast of their skin.

God he hoped not.

He liked the fact that they were built of polar opposites -- him of the light sand of the earth, her of the dark rich clay of the land. Each flawed in their own way but perfect for one another.

"Did you forget I'm not much of a morning person?" Cory mumbled from where she'd ducked her head, snuggling into his chest.

"I wouldn't say that. Remember, I've had you many a morning."

“Yeah well, I had some incentive to being bright eyed and bushy tailed then. I was getting laid.”

“Excuses, excuses. Up and at ’em.” Rising his hand, Elias brought it down sharply on to her shapely bottom, causing Cory to whoop in protest.

“Hey now, no reason to get all caveman.”

Cory sat up, stretching her arms high overhead and showcasing her breasts. His cock, which was already doing its normal morning salute, rose up a bit more. Talk about caveman. Elias had to drive back the desire to lift her up and plant her pussy on his awakening shaft.

“Damn woman, that is one fine show you put on.”

Cory shimmied her shoulders causing her breasts to bounce. “You like?”

“Sexy little, tease.” Elias reached for her, but Cory eluded his grasp.

“Nope, I’m making breakfast, so none of your funny stuff.” Cory stood up and started gathering her clothes from last night and began dressing. “Are you coming?”

Elias pulled back the sheet and looked down at his poor cock. “Sorry buddy, I guess it’s just you and me.”

“I don’t think so.” Cory tossed his jeans at him. “I’m not facing your kids alone. The sleepover was your idea, buddy.”

“And there are more of those where that one came from.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Come on.” Elias teasingly patted the space she had just vacated. “It will only take a minute.”

“Word to the wise, if you’re trying to get a woman to go to bed with you, you shouldn’t mention it will only take a minute.”

“Are you implying that it will take more than a minute to get you off?”

"I'm not going to even touch that one." Smiling Cory shook her head and headed out the door.

"You don't have to touch him." Elias called after, as he rose from the bed. "I'll do all the touching."

The sound of Cory's laughter filled his heart with happiness, satisfying Elias's soul with a feeling of rightness he hadn't felt in an awfully long time. After visiting the bathroom Elias quickly dressed and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Cory had already started breakfast. The aroma of bacon had his mouth watering and his stomach grateful someone else was doing the cooking for once. It wasn't as if Elias was a bad cook, he just wasn't a good cook and there was a world of difference between the two.

From the sound of scampering feet on the stairs, Elias wasn't the only one who'd been enticed by the smell of her cooking to come downstairs. He'd barely made it to the island before TJ came barreling into the kitchen.

"Daddy." TJ, in all his morning glory, ran right over to Elias and hugged him around the knees, per their morning ritual, before bounding over to Cory. "Cory, you making cookies?"

So much for wondering how TJ was going to handle things. TJ was so accepting of Cory he had no qualms about her cooking in his kitchen in the early morning. It seemed as if he and his son were of like minds. Cory was meant to be in their home and in their lives.

"No, buddy. I thought I'd make pancakes." Cory laughed as she pulled him in for a quick hug.

"With chocolate chips?"

Elias almost laughed when Cory's questioning gaze met his. Without saying a word he let her know it was her decision to make. She needed to realize that if they were going to be together forever she would be making these types of calls on a daily basis.

"Um, how about strawberries instead?"

TJ wrinkled up his nose in protest, but seeing no sign of weakness on either Cory's or his dad's face he finally nodded. "Okay, but I'm gonna eat it with lots of syrup."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Cory's words were as solemn as the look on TJ's face, but her eyes twinkled with merriment. Elias apparently wasn't the only one who got a kick out of his son's antics.

"Morning." Elias turned and saw Jodie standing in the doorway, staring at the little family gathering. Elias's heart ached for her. He knew Jodie was at a vulnerable time right now and he only hoped she'd join in.

Cory smiled and returned Jodie's quiet greeting. To his surprise, Elias noticed the lack of tension normally there between the two lovely ladies in his life. He'd hoped and prayed the two of them would find a common ground and it looked like for once in his life, his prayers were answered.

Even though Jodie's words held no venom, she still held herself apart from the rest of them. Twisting her hair around her fingers, she appeared nervous. "I love strawberry pancakes."

"You do?" Cory beckoned her over. "Great. Why don't you help cut up the strawberries and I'll start mixing the batter."

Jodie bit her bottom lip for a moment and Elias was worried the old attitude was going to come out. He wondered how Cory would handle Jodie if she decided she didn't like taking orders from her. Elias was amazed however at Jodie's words.

"What about Daddy and TJ? Don't they have to do anything?"

Cory winked at Jodie before turning on the two males in the kitchen. "I think you're right, Jodie. These two are not being very useful. Elias, why don't you and TJ set the table?"

"Aw Daddy, do we have to set the table?" Even though he and TJ were on the same page, Elias knew better than to bluster about it. Hell, he wasn't cooking, that alone was worth setting the table.

"You heard, Cory. We better show these two ladies just what a couple of guys can do."

"But I wanted to lick the bowl."

"This isn't that kind of batter. Boys." Jodie gathered the strawberries from the table and placed them in a bowl. "You're lucky you only have sisters."

"You won't think so when I tell you some of the things I had to deal with. Being the youngest isn't much fun."

"Really?" Jodie tilted her head to the side. "Cory, weren't you wearing that yesterday?"

Cory shot a startled gaze his way, but Elias couldn't save her. He was as lost as to what to say as she was. Picking up the bowl of batter, Cory began to stir with a vengeance. "I'm not sure. Can you rinse those off for me before you cut them?"

"Sure." Jodie trudged off to the sink, much to Elias's relief.

"That table isn't going to set it self. Come on, kid." Elias went to the cupboard and gathered the plates. As he passed Cory, he paused to whisper, "Tonight, we clear out a drawer for you."

"Oh yeah," she whispered back. Shooting him a wink, she turned back to Jodie who was once again at the island. "Let me tell you about this time Nichelle chopped all my Cabbage patch doll's hair off."

"They had Cabbage Patch dolls back then?" The wonder in Jodie's tone almost did Elias in. He coughed to cover his laughter.

"Yeah, kid," Cory said dryly. "They did."

"Wow."

"It's not that amazing." Cory shot Elias a sarcastic glare before launching into her tale, leaving him and TJ to start their task.

"Why do we have to help?" TJ questioned as he begrudgingly sat the plates down.

"It's all part of being a family. Everyone chips in."

TJ paused and looked up. "Is Cory part of our family now?"

"Yes." Elias crouched down until he and TJ were eye to eye. "What do you think about that?"

"I think it's cool."

Elias looked over at Cory and Jodie who were chatting and off in their own little world and he couldn't have agreed more. "Me too son. Me too."

Chapter Eleven

“I think that little brat stole my tip.” Nichelle’s grumbled comment sent Cory off into a spill of laughter.

Jodie, their official new busboy, was carting around the bucket like it was attached at her hip. It had been Cory’s idea for her to come in with her today, and she hadn’t regretted it for a minute. In an apron two sizes too big and a yard too long, Jodie shuffled from table to table as if she’d been bussing tables all her life. At first Cory thought she would have to carry her through the day, but the eight-year-old had energy to burn, and was cleaning tables well before people were ready to leave them.

“She’s not a brat.” Those were words Cory would have never thought she’d utter, but truly wonders would never cease. It had been three days since the Rhonda incident and to Cory’s utter shock and amazement Jodie had morphed from a sullen girl to cheerful. Not that everything was wonderful all the time, because it wasn’t. Jodie still had traces of brat in her; she just didn’t act like it was her goal in life to make Cory’s existence a living hell.

“Maybe. Maybe not. All I’m saying is, if I go over to table seven and my money is gone, we’re going to have words.”

“You are not.”

“Watch me.” Nichelle tossed over her shoulders as she began to fill her drink order.

“Hey, Chelle.” Jodie rounded the counter with her little face as flushed as a rose. Setting the bucket down on its cart, she reached into her back pocket and pulled out a wadded bunch of bills. “Those people left this on the table for you.”

Without sparing the money a passing glance, Nichelle picked up her tray and sashayed past the little girl. “Keep it, little bit.”

It took everything in Cory not to let loose and roar with laughter. Her sister, the hard ass, was being nice. And if that didn’t beat all, Cory was willing to bet, even though she knew Nichelle would deny it, that Nichelle actually liked Jodie. Nichelle who didn’t like kittens or puppies and who flipped off the Goodwill Santa every year, actually liked something other than herself. What was the world coming to?

“Wow.” Blue eyes widened in awe. “Do you think she means it?”

Cory reached out and pulled Jodie against her hip. “There’s one thing you need to learn about Nichelle. She never says anything she doesn’t mean.”

“What do a couple of fellas have to do to get some service around here?”

Cory and Jodie looked up to see Elias standing at the counter with a grinning TJ in his arms.

“Daddy, look what I made.” Jodie waved her money in the air like a blue ribbon.

“Wonderful, looks like lunch is on you.”

“No way, Jose.” Jodie shook her head and grinned as she stuffed the money back in her pocket and stepped away from her father and brother. “It’s all mine.” Jodie turned with her bucket of dirty dishes and headed into the kitchen.

“Ah ...” Elias turned to TJ and asked, “Now what are we going to do?”

“Fight her for it.” TJ offered much to Cory’s amusement. “We can take her Dad.”

“Or we could try charming this beautiful lady right here to see what kind of discount she might be willing to give us.” Elias sat TJ down on the stool and leaned over the counter to kiss Cory, but his overture was overturned by Nichelle.

“So *Mr. White Man*. You’re back.”

Rolling her eyes, Cory turned to her sister who was looking at Elias like he stole something. “Go away.”

“I don’t think so.” Nichelle butted her way between Elias and Cory and crossed her arms over her chest. “As the eldest Turner, it’s my job to see what *Mr. White Man’s* intentions are toward you.”

“Mr. White Man is my Indian name, I prefer Elias.”

Cory could have sworn she saw Nichelle’s lip twitch, but she wasn’t willing to put money on it. “You still didn’t answer my question. What do you want with my little sister?”

“My intentions are completely honorable. Except for the times when they’re completely dishonorable.”

This time, Cory was sure she saw her sister smile.

TJ tugged on his father shirt in order to get his attention. “What’s dishonorable, Dad?”

“Yes, Elias. Why don’t you explain to my son what dishonorable is.”

“Oh, shit,” Cory muttered as Rhonda stormed up to Elias.

Nichelle took one look at Rhonda and immediately grabbed TJ out of Elias’s arms. “Come on kid, let’s find your sister.” Cory saw Nichelle head off Jodie and hustle her into the back.

“Nice, when did you hire the mammy?” Cory knew Rhonda was waiting for a reaction, but she was too old to play schoolyard games. Cory just smiled, and thanked the good Lord Nichelle was out of the room because she wouldn’t have restrained herself. There would have been blonde hair all over the floor.

“That comment was uncalled for. I told you before Rhonda, you better stay away from me and the children.”

“You’re being totally unreasonable. My lawyer says ...”

“I don’t care what your lawyer says. I’ve talked to a lawyer too, as well as the police. The restraining order has been reinstated. Do you know what that means, Rhonda?”

“It means you’re a bastard, but that’s not anything I didn’t already know.”

Every eye in the diner was turned their way, much to Cory’s dismay. It wasn’t a large establishment, and she knew if their words were ringing in the diner, then it would be echoing to the back where the kids were. “You guys need to tone this down or take it outside.”

“And you need to butt out of things that don’t concern you.” Rhonda turned on her, rage filling out every pore of her face.

“This is my family’s diner and they are my ...” Cory paused, not quite sure what they were, except hers.

Apparently Elias had no problem filling in the blank. “We are her family. She’s been more of a mother to Jodie and TJ in the past few weeks than you’ve managed to be in your entire life.”

Even though Cory’s heart warmed at his words, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pain for the other woman, but only a twinge. The look of horror that had crossed Jodie’s face when she saw her mother again wouldn’t allow it to be more than a twinge.

“And whose fault is that?”

Elias shook his head sadly. “Your own, Rhonda. Your own.”

“I have a right to see my kids.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Don’t talk to me about rights,” she yelled, clearly upset. “You don’t even have any rights to TJ. He isn’t even your kid.”

Shocked, Cory's gaze darted to Elias, wondering if he would believe Rhonda's lies. But to her amazement, instead of looking surprised, Elias just looked disappointed. TJ wasn't Elias's son. And from the look on his face, Elias wasn't shocked by this news.

"Lower your voice, Rhonda."

"Don't tell me what to do." Rhonda grabbed Elias's shirt, bunching it in her hands. "You're not his father. Stop acting like you are."

"When you start acting like a mother to him I will."

"Unlike you I don't have to act. I am his mother."

"Then start behaving like one. Would a mother, a caring loving mother, let her three-year-old son know that the only man he's known as a father, the only person who's been there for him from day one, wasn't his father?" Elias gestured around him to all the curious faces. "In a setting like this, surrounded by strangers. Is that what a mother would do, Rhonda?"

"A mother would fight for him."

"And so would a father." Elias cool words had a sobering effect on the mad woman. Rhonda released him as quickly as she had grabbed him and stepped back.

"DNA isn't what makes a man a father. Bloodlines didn't make me a dad. Love did. He's my son. In all the ways that count."

"I want to be a mother to him, to them, Elias, in all the ways that count." Unbelievably, Cory actually thought this was the first real statement Rhonda had made since she'd met her.

"If you want what's best for them, clean up your act, get in some counseling, and turn your life back around."

"I am clean." Rhonda reaffirmed, her chin held proudly high. "And this time for good."

"Then stay that way, but not just for them, Rhonda, for yourself. But until I can trust you, you need to leave. Prove to me you can do what needs to be done and then we can talk. Until then, do what's best for the children and leave them with me."

Rhonda turned to walk away, but stopped after only taking a few steps. Without turning back around, she asked in a shaky voice, "Can I see them. Just for a moment?"

"Not now." Elias was firm in his denial.

"They're growing up so fast. I'm afraid it will be too late and I won't know who they are."

Elias reached into his pocket and pulled out something. Walking over to Rhonda he handed her a photo and Cory could see it was a family picture of the two kids. "It's never too late, Rhonda."

"Thank you, Elias." Rhonda took the picture from him and slipped it into her bag. "I'll prove to you that I can stay clean. You'll see."

"For their sake, I hope so."

Rhonda nodded and walked out. Cory released the pent up breath she'd been holding. Elias ran a hand through his hair, looking worn out from the confrontation. She wanted to go to Elias and wrap her arms around him, but at the same time she felt betrayed that he hadn't shared TJ's parentage with her. She understood his belief that he would always be TJ's father, no matter the biological evidence. Still, she wished he had told her.

"I'm sorry she came here making a scene."

If Elias thought that was why she was mad, he was sadly mistaken. A scene she could handle, lack of communication on the other hand was something else entirely.

"I'd better get the kids and head home."

"Let me get them." Cory headed to the back of the diner, looking for Nichelle and the children. The door to Samantha's office was open and she could see Nichelle was sitting in there telling them a story. She may have tried to hide it, but Cory believed Nichelle liked Jodie more than she was letting on because they were like two peas in a pod, both a couple of bossy big sister types.

"Jodie, TJ, time to go."

“Do we have to go? Nichelle was telling us a story.” TJ’s plaintive cry brought a smile to Cory’s lips. Who would have believed TJ would be begging to stay with Nichelle?

“Yep, sorry kiddo, but your dad wants to head home.”

“Is everything okay out there?” Jodie’s tentative question had Cory giving her a big hug.

“Everything’s fine, no worries, okay?” Jodie smiled at Cory’s reassurances. Too bad Cory didn’t exactly feel all that free from worry herself. “Go on up front and say goodbye to your dad for me.”

“You’re not coming?”

“I need to talk to Nichelle for a minute.”

Cory sunk into a chair, weariness from the day overwhelming her. Nichelle gave her a speculative look before standing and straightening up her skirt. “So I guess the bitch is gone.”

“Yeah, for now.” But it would only be for now. Cory really hoped, for all of their sakes, that Rhonda could get her shit together, because like it or lump it, she was Jodie and TJ’s mother.

“Well, you know I don’t like talking bad about anyone.”

“Oh yeah --” Cory smirked, amused by her sister’s blatant lie. “-- it just kills you.”

“Those kids are going to need a lot of counseling with a mother like that. A lot of counseling and love.”

“You ain’t never lied. TJ maybe not so much, but Jodie for sure.”

Nichelle walked over to Cory and placed her arm around her sister’s shoulder. “We can’t do much about the counseling, but this family’s always been big on love.”

* * * * *

Elias stood on his porch, looking up at the night sky. It was a warm summer night and he could hear the crickets and cicadas singing in the background. Soon the summer would be

turning into cool autumn nights and bonfires. He knew he wanted to spend those nights with Cory. Now he just needed to convince her of that.

Heading down off the porch he walked the short distance to her house. As he came close to the house, he noticed the gate to Cory's backyard was open and walked over to shut it. Elias was surprised to see Cory sitting on her chaise lounge, a glass of wine in her hand. He approached her quietly, intent on discovering why she was sitting in her backyard in the middle of the night.

"What is it with the males in your family and my backyard? Is there a magnet here I don't know about?" Cory spoke but didn't turn around.

"How did you know it was me?"

Tilting her head back she opened her eyes. "I figured you'd be coming over eventually."

"So what are you doing hanging out back here?" Elias sat on the edge of her chaise, trailing a hand along her bare leg.

"It's quiet. I like to enjoy the night, have a glass of wine, and just relax."

"I missed saying goodbye to you at the diner. I got the feeling you were avoiding me."

"I wasn't avoiding you." Cory moved her leg from underneath his hand, much to Elias's disappointment.

"You weren't, huh."

"No. I just didn't want to talk to you right then."

"And now."

"Now I'm fine and ready to talk." Cory pulled her leg back and delivered a hard kick to his thigh.

"Hey." Cory's actions amused him more than hurt him. She was still talking to him, and was in the mood to fight. Everything was going to be okay. "What was that for?"

"How could you not tell me about TJ?"

“Because it never occurred to me that it would matter. Does it?”

“It doesn’t matter, but it would have been great to be in the know. When did you know?”

“I always knew. Rhonda was pregnant when we reconciled. To be honest, it was the only reason that we did. I was done with her. She wasn’t going to change, and she wasn’t in any place to be a mother to Jodie.”

“So then why did you take her back?”

Elias reached out and took her hand, entwining their fingers as he spoke. “Because I knew if she wasn’t able to take care of Jodie, she would never be able to take care of her unborn child.”

“It takes a hell of a man to raise someone else’s child.”

“No, it just takes love. Besides, he’s mine in every way possible. I adopted him; I’m raising him; I’m loving him. I’m his father. I mean, he may not have my eyes, but he does have my great taste in women.”

“You mean the great taste you’ve seemed to develop *after* you separated from your wife.”

Elias laughed at Cory’s pointed look. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Speaking of the kids --” Cory set her wine glass down and edged closer to Elias. “-- where are they?”

“Nichelle is watching them.”

“Nichelle!”

“Yes. She said didn’t have to work tomorrow morning and didn’t feel like being disturbed. I’m not quite sure what she meant by that.” But from the sheepish look on Cory’s face, she did. “But I was more than willing to take her up on the offer. She and Jodie seem to get along rather well.”

“Two peas in a pod.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” Cory slipped her leg over his thigh and seated herself on his lap.

Curving his fingers into her hips, Elias rocked Cory against his ever growing erection. There was a lot he wanted to do to her right now, but first he had to get something clear. “You said that it takes a hell of a man to raise another man’s child. Do you feel the same way about yourself?”

Cory pressed her hands into his shoulders and looked him dead in the eye. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re one hell of a woman who can do just about anything she sets her mind to.”

“Good answer.” Leaning forward, Cory pressed tiny kisses along his jaw line. “I love your children Elias and I love you. Crazy ex-wife be damned. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Glad to hear it.” Elias slipped his hands under the hem of her shirt, stroking at the soft skin of her bare midriff. “You know I’m a package deal though.”

Cory laughed. “Hell, you’ve met my family. So am I.”

“Good, then I can tell Nichelle I’ll be making an honest woman of you.”

Cory pulled back, one eyebrow cocked. “Excuse me. I don’t think I’ve heard a proposal just yet.”

Slipping off the chaise, Elias knelt next to her taking his hands in hers. “Cory, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and mother to my two children? Will you live with me, fight with me and love with me until the end of time?”

Cory pressed her lips together, tears shining in her eyes. “Where’s the ring?”

“Is that a yes?”

Smacking his shoulder, she threw her arms around him. “Of course it’s a yes. But I still want to see the ring.”

“Tomorrow. Tonight I’ve got other plans.” Elias grinned seductively.

Reaching back behind her, he unhooked her bra, releasing her breasts to his questing hands. Cory pulled his shirt from his jeans, and was tugging it over his head. Stopping for a moment, he helped her remove his shirt before divesting Cory of her own shirt and bra. Elias pulled her down on the chaise until they were lying side by side.

Cory reached out, snagging his belt, unhooking it as she spoke. “I’ve got plans too.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Maybe not. I’d like to use this,” gesturing to the belt she’d pulled loose from his waistband, “on you tonight.”

“Hmm, kinky. Think you can handle tying me up?”

“Baby --” Cory looked up at him with a smile that made Elias catch his breath. “-- I can handle anything you dish out.”

“We’ll just have to spend the rest of our lives testing that theory.” She was his soul incarnate and everything and more he could have ever wanted in a woman. And she was his. Life didn’t get sweeter than that.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

 THE END 

Liz Andrews

I am an Ohio native who loves rooting for the home team. When I can manage to unlock myself from the ball and chain that connects me to the Internet I enjoy reading, going to the movies and hosting dinner parties for my friends. In the real world I have my MBA and work in the hospital business. However, I much prefer to escape into the world of books. I have admired and read various writers for many years and am happy to have finally joined the rank of author.

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