



Reconstructing Jada Channing

Savannah J. Frierson

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To my mother Adrenée, and my grandmothers
Katie and Lillie. I love you very much.

ONE

She shivered as if she were standing outside in the snowstorm wearing nothing but her current attire of a ratty T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Her breath whooshed out through her nose, and her eyes were squinted tight. She balled her hands into tight fists, and she felt perspiration pool in the lines of her palms. Her ears concentrated on the winds tearing through leafless branches that cracked underneath the gusts, and the whistles of the currents navigating around the buildings, trees, and lampposts outside. It matched the turmoil inside her.

“Jaybird?”

Jada took a deep breath and relaxed her hands, but still kept her eyes shut, still shivered more violently at the sound of her name. Moments ago, the wet smack of lips had inundated her eardrums as an oxford, trousers, and socks littered a path from her living area to her bedroom. When her hands had met a bare, defined, masculine chest, however, had felt the rapid, thunderous heartbeat matching hers, she had panicked and backed away.

“I’m all right,” she reassured, even if her actions made the words null and void. She just needed to gather herself.

She felt more than heard the footsteps upon the carpeted floor; and when large, steady hands closed over her shaking shoulders, she opened her eyes to the ground. Bare, pale feet stood opposite bare, dark feet with painted green toes. She moved her eyes from the toes of the pale feet to pale ankles—strong, sturdy ankles that supported a strong, sturdy body. Soon, black hair—covered pale legs up muscular shins and calves, knees and defined thighs, to black boxers that barely hid the part that made him a man.

The part that would truly make her a woman.

A pale hand, its back dusted with the same black hair as the legs, but of a finer variety, cupped her chin and tilted it upwards. She closed her eyes and didn’t open them again until the hand squeezed her chin. She stared into green eyes full of concern and care, tenderness and desire. The knowledge he truly wanted her finally hit her then, more so than the hard length of him hidden behind black silk. There was another crack, this time coming from inside her, of another internal obstacle preventing her from doing what she had known would happen the moment he’d kissed her on the couch ten minutes earlier.

The evolution of friends to lovers.

“I—”

“I want this,” Jada interrupted him. Her shivering decreased. “I want you, Aaron.”

Her voice couldn’t get above a whisper. As certain as she was about this moment, she still feared its echo. She could deal with her dreams better inside her head. Putting them out in the universe meant she no longer had control; and if there were ever a time she needed her wits, it was now.

The other pale hand came to her cheek, and both framed her face. “I want you, too, Jada,” he said, also whispering. She wondered if it were impossible for him to speak louder the same way it were impossible for her. “What I want more, however, is for you to be comfortable—”

“I’m—”

“And what I want the most is for you to never regret this,” he pleaded over the beginning of her automatic protest. He pressed his lips upon her forehead and his thumbs fanned her cheeks. “Never regret this.”

Her hands slid up the ridges of his naked abdomen, his hard nipples atop hard pectorals. He was warm, soft, and unyielding at the same time. Jada hadn’t known such a thing were possible. She felt tiny tremors coming from him, too, and her hands slid to his back as she brought him to her in a hug. His arms came around her and they stood forehead to forehead, an awkward position for him, she knew, because of their significant height difference. Her hands smoothed along his back, feeling his muscles move beneath them as he pulled her even closer. There was something desperate about this embrace to her, plaintive. He’d never held her so tightly in the three years they’d known each other.

She’d never held him so tightly.

“Just because we leave tomorrow doesn’t mean we...” He trailed off, his breath fanning her nose and upper lip. “No regrets, Jada. No hard feelings.”

She buried her face in his chest, inhaled his scent mixed with oregano, peppermint, and soap. His hands kneaded her neck and back muscles, and she felt cocooned, exhilarated, and steady. His arms became her safe space, and it was here where her final barrier melted away.

“I’d regret it more if we didn’t,” she murmured against his chest, right above his heart. The universe had her verbal proclamation now. Her body shook from her release, from the terror she would never be able to take it back, from his lips falling upon hers as they put words into action...

The soft click of a door jerked her awake, and a chill greeted her.

This chill wasn’t merely from the temperature of the room or the empty spot next to her on the bed; it was from the feeling something drastic had happened, affecting her for the rest of her life. Never mind she had lost her virginity last night or that the man who had found it was gone. It was something far worse.

She had become a traitor.

Well, perhaps “traitor” was too harsh a word, but why did this shame settle in the pit of her stomach, digesting and traveling throughout her body in her veins? It was a burning sensation, as if the blood itself rebelled because she’d contaminated herself by lying with this man—this *white* man—the kind of man her family had always told her to avoid.

She shuddered.

“Jada?”

He was leaning against the doorway, towel haphazardly tied low on his hips, black hair still damp, and water dripping from its curled ends. His head rested on the arm he leaned against, and he stared at her with slumberous eyes. If he’d been in any other setting, Jada would consider him drowsy, but she knew better. He was very alert and all his attention was on her, filing her in a compartment in his brain because he couldn’t live his life in chaos. She pulled the sheet tighter around her bare torso as if to shield herself from his eyes and whatever category he’d designated for her. However, it was too late for that. He’d broken down whatever defenses she had had long before last night.

“Aaron.”

It was a flat sound, a plateau of a name whose owner meant far more than he should.

Jada never would’ve imagined *this* when they met three years ago as tutors at a community center in Roxbury. They had been colleagues and treated each other with the typical polite detachment of co-workers, only asking superficial questions and responding with superficial answers. The age difference had had much to do with it—she being a freshman in college while he a semester away from starting at the business school—but there had been something more salient keeping them at a distance, and, if she were honest, it had been more because of her than him. Yet the genuine warmth with which he had greeted her that first day and every day since then had surprised her, disoriented her to the point where she had limited contact with him. This had forced Aaron to initiate the conversations that usually, seconds later, ended with his awkward chuckle, small smile, and shy wave.

He had eventually given her a nickname: Jaybird. It had been ironic because she rarely spoke to him, but each small, brief, impersonal greeting he’d given her had paved the way to conversation, greater intimacy, friendship. It were as if she had been a block of stone and Aaron the sculptor, his conversations a chisel chipping away her unnecessary hardness to reveal the woman who was Jada Channing. She wasn’t quite sure when the sculpture had been completed—perhaps it wasn’t yet—but she knew she felt far more exposed now than she had at any other point in her life.

And that fact had nothing to do with their current nudity.

Jada watched him approach, his towel falling away mid-stride, and she detached herself from the situation enough to appreciate his body. Slightly

muscular, yet strong—her preferred body type. He was well defined and hard, but he had yielded to her so well, and she shivered at the memory.

Gentle was the first word she'd think of whenever she remembered last night. His gentleness alone had made her want to cry—soft touches of his hands and lips; soft caresses of his breath and voice along her skin; soft embraces that left her too weak to leave. There was even a soft declaration of love she had convinced herself she'd imagined, and Jada didn't have the courage to ask him to confirm it. She was so sure, now that the heat and passion of the moment were gone, the answer would change.

Jada couldn't take a retraction.

A retraction would mean her family was right, her community was right, that a white man like him could never fully understand or love a black woman like her. This was the one time she needed her upbringing to be wrong, to know what she did last night could not be a mistake; that the feelings she'd been nursing for almost two years could blossom and grow into something that would survive long after both had taken their last breaths.

The bed dipped when he sat, and he crawled next to her, sliding a damp, pale arm around her dry, darker waist. The black, wet hairs on his arm tickled her skin and her body quivered from the contact. He moved her curly tresses from her neck and replaced them with his lips, making Jada sigh and grant him more access.

"Good morning, love."

That was certainly a matter of opinion, but Jada responded in kind, not wanting him to know her inner turmoil. The "adverbial questions" of last night, suspended due to overwhelming feelings and long pent-up desires, seeped into her consciousness, and she drew up her covers to hide from them. What would happen now? He was leaving for New York that night and probably wouldn't be back until graduation in the spring. When would they see each other again? Where would last night lead them today or even two months from now? How would they continue this relationship—as friends, as lovers, or, God forbid, as strangers? Why should it even matter?

It did matter.

It mattered because Jada felt like she had turned her back on everything for this man, compromised everything because she loved him. She didn't hop into bed with just anyone; she'd been taught sex was about giving something so personal and sacred that she had to be explicitly sure and confident about her partner, regardless if she were a virgin or not. The fact Jada had chosen Aaron McKensie had consequences that reverberated well beyond themselves.

But Aaron would never know that. He was a Ricci from *the Ricci's* Pasta products she had seen in grocery stores—products too expensive for her budget—and posh Italian restaurants with flagships in Tuscany and New York. Though Jada hadn't discovered this until well into their friendship, the shock and intimidation had still been there. Jada had been even more surprised

when she had realized his father was Alexander McKensie of McKensie Lowman Accounting. Granted, that name had meant little in her small Georgia town, but at college, especially during recruiting season, McKensie Lowman Accounting was everywhere—on fliers, mailing lists, the lips of many a senior who needed job security upon graduation. To know she had worked with and befriended the heir-apparent to the company had made Jada wary of him for a few days, and her bemusement returned ten-fold now that they were lying nude in her twin bed.

“You’re so quiet, baby,” he whispered against her skin, his mouth traveling along her jaw to her chin. “Why are you so quiet?”

“Thinkin’,” she said on a sigh, pursing her lips as he kissed them lightly.

“Oh? About me, I hope.”

“A mind reader, you are.”

He laughed and kissed her again, this time cupping her cheek to kiss her more intensely. Heavy thoughts moved away like rings of a ripple, disappearing into the far corners of her mind only to be revealed later.

They made love again, communicating only with touches and breathy moans. She ran her hands through his silky hair, so different from her own kinky, curly strands, and kissed lips that were fuller than those typical of his kind. Jada stared into eyes so green they made emeralds jealous, and fully gave herself over to this man, loved herself some Aaron McKensie, that she was sure she loved enough for both of them.

As they lay there after their climaxes, sheened with sweat and panting, Jada’s thoughts were only on the man who held her. He was staring at her as she looked at the ceiling, his thumb rubbing the skin underneath her right breast, and he dropped tiny kisses along her neck, collarbone, and shoulder. Cool fingers touched her cheek, applying pressure so she turned her head. Those green eyes, the very first feature she had noticed about him aside from his skin color, were clear and bright as he stared at her.

“Still thinking about me?” he murmured against her jaw line.

“Maybe.”

He shifted so he could kiss her temple. “I’m thinking about you.”

“Really.”

“Yes. I’m thinking about how much I’m going to miss you...”

A sharp pulse sent her heart into her throat before it fell into her stomach right next to the shame. She didn’t respond, looking at the ceiling again. For some reason, the words rang hollow, and Jada didn’t know if they were truly hollow or if she were projecting her worst-case scenario. Missing a person was so...unpredictable. Who knew how long that feeling would last, or how strong it would be? What would happen? Jada had no doubt he’d miss her immediately, maybe even weeks after, but what about months? Years? Deep inside, Jada felt this separation was going to last a while, maybe even forever. She wasn’t

thrilled by that reality, but she had accepted it as the way things were. She almost wished he wouldn't miss her. Aaron missing her gave her hope.

Aaron moved from her shoulder to rest his head on her chest. Immediately her hand went into his hair, loving how it felt sliding through her fingers. Aaron twirled a tendril of her hair around his finger and sighed, pressing a kiss to the space above her heart before closing his eyes. *It's yours*, Jada thought, her fingers tracing his hairline behind his ear. The arm around her waist tightened and the finger in her hair tugged, drawing her attention to Aaron.

"Yes?"

He pouted slightly. "Why are you so far away?"

She looked pointedly at his arm, which he had dropped onto her stomach, and laughed a little. "How much closer do I have to be?"

His hand slid from her stomach to her heart, staying there for a few beats before traveling up her chest and neck to the back of her head. He kissed her hard.

If that was how close Aaron wanted to be, then he had nothing to fear. He was already in her heart, unpacked and lounging in a recliner with a glass of Merlot in one hand and a TV remote in the other.

He broke the kiss with little pecks before dropping his forehead to hers. His warm breath tickled her nose, and she brushed it against his chin. "Don't you have a plane to catch, Mr. McKensie?"

"Don't you?"

She did, but she wasn't eager to leave her room, much less the bed, to go to a town far too small for her now. She'd grown in the last three and a half years, much of that thanks to Aaron.

He rose above her, kissing her again, and she made herself ready for him. He was hot and hard against her inner thigh, so when he didn't enter her, she became confused.

"What're you doin'?"

Clearly, he wasn't worried about his flight either, by the snail-like speed his hands traveled along her body, or the unhurried nature of his kisses. That was all he did—touch and kiss—never going further than that, seemingly not *needing* to go further. Jada was glad. It exhibited his control as well as the fact this wasn't just about sex. Real affection existed with the carnal, and the realization eased her worries a little.

"Stay here," he whispered against her neck, placing one final kiss to it before leaving the bed. Jada grinned and watched him go down the hall.

When he returned, his manhood bobbing against his thigh, Jada averted her eyes, suddenly fascinated by the plain white of her sheets. There was no reason to be shy *now*, especially having felt it inside her more than once, but there was something very personal about that part of him, intimate. Nevertheless, she was surprised when he knelt beside her and squeezed her knee, forcing her to look at him.

"May I?" he asked, holding up a damp cloth.

"May you what?"

"Trust me?"

Jada nodded, and he drew the sheet from her body. Goosebumps broke out along her skin, but she didn't know if it was because of the cool air or Aaron's eyes. His hand went to the juncture of her thighs and she instinctively squeezed her legs tightly. Without the haze of arousal, Jada couldn't expose herself so freely, but his whispered reassurance and the pulse of his hand around hers relaxed her enough so he could complete whatever he set out to do.

When Aaron spread her legs, her stomach clenched. Jada had known there would be blood; she just hadn't expected so much of it. It had stained noticeably on her sheets and dried on her thighs along with other excretions, and she was embarrassed. Aaron kissed the back of her hand, saying this, except for the blood, happened all the time, and was another element of lovemaking—pleasurable but messy. She laughed and so did he, but her laughter turned into a gasp at the first touch of the warm, damp cloth against her inner thigh. He worked in silence and she let him, stunned by the care he put into the act of cleansing her. She felt as if he were baptizing her, purging her of a sin that didn't actually exist, yet made real, visceral, by her family and community.

When Aaron finished, he folded the cloth and kissed her hip, then her stomach, before resting his head upon it. Jada played with his hair again, the time ticking away with every heartbeat.

"What time is your flight?" he asked, his lips brushing against her navel.

"Quarter to six."

"Taking the shuttle to DC right?"

"Yes, then goin' to Atlanta."

"Good...a few more hours together..."

Jada looked at the clock and sighed. It was a little after noon, and his original flight had been for eight o'clock last night. A snowstorm had grounded evening flights, but Aaron would've missed it anyway because he had been with her, eating a home-cooked meal they had made as a send-off dinner to celebrate their friendship and the successful completion of his final semester at business school. The meal had been impromptu and Aaron's idea, even with Jada reminding him of his impending flight. It had begun innocently enough, and they had exchanged Christmas gifts.

Jada had given him a ballpoint pen with his name engraved in gold on the side. She'd told him she hoped he'd think of her whenever he signed important documents, especially if he decided to start an internship program at McKensie Lowman for inner-city youth as they'd discussed over the years. He could use the pen to sign the acceptance letters for the program. Aaron, meanwhile, had given her a photo album. On the cover was a picture of her and Aaron at the community center's Christmas party last year. He was holding mistletoe above

their heads and pressing a comical kiss to her cheek as she scrunched up her face in mock disgust. He had surprised her with that kiss, and in hindsight, she realized the gesture meant they had reached an intimacy that didn't make the kiss odd.

Another picture was of her curled on the bay window seat in his apartment, eyes closed and a small smile on her face. Aaron had told her that was his favorite because she appeared so serene and open.

Jada was far from that now in the dying hours of their time together.

Aaron kissed her stomach again, then lifted his head and met her eyes. Jada saw what she needed to see there, and gave him a tiny smile.

"Want me to give you a ride to the airport?"

"Why don't you just drive down to New York? You have a car!"

"I'll get it later."

"But the garage charges—"

"I can handle it."

She shook her head. Of course he could. He was Aaron McKensie!

He stood and took her hands, pulling her up as well. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead for a long time. Aaron had done this even before they became intimate, and for him to do it now brought their relationship full circle: they'd come together as friends, and they would separate as friends. It didn't matter both were still nude; there was nothing sexual about the embrace, and Jada put herself fully into it, comforted by his heartbeat under her ear.

"Walk me out?" he asked softly.

"Yeah."

They dressed, she into a robe and he into the clothes he wore yesterday, and they went to the door, neither touching the other.

"I'll be back at three," he said, standing just outside of her door. She tightened the already tight ties of her robe and nodded, staring at her slippers.

"Hey." Fingers tipped up her chin, and lips quickly touched hers. "See you."

"Bye."

Alone. The chill came back tenfold, and she went in the shower to rid herself of it. Before she picked up her shower poof, though, she just stood there, letting the water beat the tension out of her shoulders, the dread out of her body, the chill out of her soul. It worked briefly, taking her mind to that place of relief and pleasure as the hot water gave her a full-body massage. She shivered when she washed her hair, face, breasts, stomach, legs—his favorite places, she knew, because he had told her so. They were all darker, softer, probably bigger than what he was used to; yet he had acted almost as if it were the first time he had ever made love with someone. Perhaps it was different with a black woman, but as soon as the thought came, she quickly dismissed it. Jada didn't think Aaron would pass off the experience as an experiment, something he catalogued in the back of his mind until he was with his buddies

and pulled out the file that said: Jada, twenty, African American, not as wild as black women were supposed to be, might need further testing. She didn't consider last night a Petri dish and hoped he didn't, either.

But as she remembered his caresses, the almost reverential way he had made love to her, Jada knew, deep down, her fears were unfounded. Jada honestly didn't think he would work with her, befriend her, be *best friends* with her, all for one night of loving. There was an easier way to do it, and with far more willing women. Last night was something unexpected, yet so right and perfect for that one moment, as if the planets had been aligned for it. The transition from friends to lovers had been natural, particularly because neither thought they had anything to lose. There would be a morning after, but that was it, and that was enough for Jada. She would rather have one spectacular night with the man she loved than fifty years with his runner-up. The past twenty-four hours would be enough to sustain her for the rest of her life.

Jada left the shower, dressed, and packed the last remaining things for her trip home. Felicia, her roommate, had left for the winter break early, so Jada made sure the apartment was all shut down. She sat with the lights off when she finished her inspection, appreciating the soft gray glow of outside light filtering in through the windows.

The buzzer startled her, and she went to the intercom. "Yes?"

"I'm here."

Jada didn't ask for help with her luggage. It was only a small carryon and her backpack; but when she met Aaron at the elevator, he chastised her and took both pieces of luggage from her. Jada let him do this. It felt good for someone to take care of her.

The traffic wasn't so bad. The mixed Donny Hathaway CD she had burned for Aaron almost a year ago serenaded them as they drove to Logan Airport. She was surprised it was still in his CD changer.

"I wish we could spend Christmas together," he said as they went into the tunnel to get on airport property, Donny singing "shake a hand, shake a hand" in the background.

"Me too; that would be very nice."

"Maybe we will one day..."

Possibly, but that was assuming they would remain close in the interim. He'd gone away before, taking some time off in Italy when Ricci's opened a new restaurant in Milan. Aaron had kept in contact with her regularly through phone calls and e-mails; the only way he would've been closer was if he had been sitting next to her. But this separation was different. He wouldn't be returning next semester or any semester after that. He would be working—maybe in New York, maybe in Italy, maybe in London where a new McKensie Lowman office was—but he wouldn't be in Boston...he wouldn't be with her.

Jada would come to terms with that eventually.

Aaron pulled up in front of the airline terminal, telling her to go inside while he found a parking spot. She was glad her cousin Zeke had booked her an electronic ticket so she could avoid the very long line of people waiting at the counter. She went to the kiosk, got her ticket, and stood in the security check line. It moved slowly, so slowly that Aaron had parked, gotten his ticket from the kiosk, and met her in the line.

They passed the security check on the first go and went to their gates. Hers was all the way at the end of the terminal and his was three gates earlier, but he sat with her, beside her, linking their fingers together as they people-watched and made idle chitchat. She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. His thumb caressed the back of her hand. Both were content.

Contentment was quiet, tactile, Aaron's presence, and the ironic privacy of the airport terminal. Jada didn't hear the wailing baby two rows ahead of her, or the static of the intercom paging "Anderson, Jan" to gate sixteen. She didn't feel the rolling suitcase bump her foot; or the man next to her confuse her arm for the armrest; or the kid tugging her hair from behind. She didn't smell the pretzels or the Chinese food or anything else.

Just Aaron.

Just Aaron caressing her hair...telling her about an annoyed passenger's heated conversation with the terminal agents...laughing as a little girl threw a fit and her just-made ice cream cone on the floor.

Just Aaron saying her flight was ready to board.

"So?"

He gave a sigh, a deep one that expressed the frustration and sadness she shared with him. "Gotta go home, Jaybird."

She was home. "Okay."

They stood slowly, Aaron holding her carryon as she put her book bag on her back. They went to the line, but she wasn't in a hurry to board as everyone else was. There was a long hug, a hard hug; tears flirted with her eyes when Aaron pressed a long, intense kiss to her temple.

"Have a safe flight, okay?" he whispered into her hair.

"You too."

Separation, less than a half a foot, but it felt like a gulf between them. Sad green eyes stared at her, and Jada thought he might cry. Aaron didn't cry. Irish-Italian men didn't cry. Jada wanted to maintain that belief so she turned away and boarded the plane.

Aaron would be fine. He'd make a ton of money, start internship programs in multiple cities, marry a beautiful woman and have beautiful children. Jada would be happy for him because she loved him. Life was about beginnings and ends, and though this ending was sad, there would be an even better beginning for her on the horizon...maybe not immediately, but eventually.

For now, however, Jada would cry for both of them.

Two

“Mommy, where you goin’?”

Jada smiled into the mirror as she put on the diamond earrings Zeke had given her as a graduation present, looking at her son who was the spitting image of his father—all except for the gray eyes and curly hair.

Those had come from *her* side of the family.

“Where am I goin’?” she repeated, straightening out the sapphire cocktail dress she had impulsively bought at TJ Maxx last year, loving the way it gently highlighted her more-pronounced curves instead of grotesquely magnifying them. It would be the first time she wore the dress in public. “Your Auntie Deshae is takin’ me to a party.”

“Can I go?”

Jada frowned sympathetically, twirling her mass of straightened hair into a bun. “I’m sorry, Little Man, but they don’t allow kids.”

“I’ll be good...”

She turned and knelt, opening her arms. The little boy ran into them, snuggling up to her as she stood and walked to the room he shared with Deshae’s son Malcolm. It would be the first time Jada went out for something *fun*—not for work at her family’s restaurant Charlie’s Grille; not for classes for her master’s degree in education; not even for visiting her grandmother, who lived twenty minutes away in the suburbs. Admittedly, she felt a little guilty. What right did she have to send her son to her grandmother’s house while she went to a party, especially when she was certain she would want to leave within an hour of arrival?

“You know what, Joshua?” Jada said even as she packed an overnight bag for him. “I don’t think I’m gonna go—”

“Oh, you goin’, Jada Mae Channing, and you gon’ have a good time too!” Deshae said, standing in the door with her hands on her hips and an eyebrow arched.

“Because everyone *loves* bein’ the third wheel!” Jada teased, reluctantly continuing to pack. She looked over her shoulder again and smiled at her friend. “But you do look beautiful. Jamal’s gonna love it.”

"Really?" The transformation was immediate, no-nonsense melting into shy insecurity. "You think?"

"I know," Jada assured her, zipping up Joshua's Pokémon book bag and standing. Deshae wore a floor-length, off-the-shoulder champagne evening gown with her hair free around her shoulders and a small matching purse dangling from her wrist. Truth be told, Jada was proud of her friend, humbled by all she had to overcome.

Deshae Singleton had been a child from a broken family and had a mother who spent more hours outside the home than in it, working hard to pay the bills and buy clothes and food for her daughter. With little parental guidance, it had been easy for Deshae to go with the wrong crowd. She had used drugs for a time, and then had become pregnant and a mother by the age of sixteen. She'd been a woman in and out of abusive relationships, a woman who seemingly had no way out of her rut. Deshae's was the life Jada had studied in sociology classes during undergrad, one of a thousand other "black single mother" stories many liked to analyze but few wanted to solve.

Yet Deshae had transcended statistics. She had graduated high school, cleaned up, gone to a training school and studied massage therapy. Now she had a job at one of Atlanta's exclusive spas. When she had first started her job two years ago one of her first clients had been Jamal Green, a star running back of the Atlanta Falcons. Small talk had led to a date, and that had begun their current relationship.

Jada wished she had half of her friend's perseverance.

"Do I *really* have to go to this party?" Jada whined.

Deshae laughed and hugged her, pulling away to frame Jada's face. "Yes. You will have some fun, dammit! Even if it's forced upon you! Besides, it's almost Christmas!"

"Can't we go putt-puttin' or somethin'—?"

"Putt-putt in the middle o' winter?"

"Putt-putt!" Joshua exclaimed, jumping up and down before running to his mother's legs. "I wanna go putt-putt!"

Deshae smothered a laugh at Jada's weary expression. "You said it, not me!"

"Oh, shut up," Jada said, her grin taking the sting out of the words. Jada ran her hands through her son's curls, frowning and pulling out the index finger that had found its way in his mouth. Joshua grinned at her, gray eyes bright and happy, and Jada's smile widened.

Perhaps it was cliché to think it, but Joshua was the best thing that ever happened to her. Of course, Jada had been out of sorts when she discovered she was pregnant—ironically on Valentine's Day. She had never had morning sickness, and had waved off her missed periods and fatigue as stress. She had been tutoring, attending classes, writing a thesis, missing Aaron...more than once, Felicia had found her sleeping on the couch and drooling over books or her laptop.

I was stressed all right, Jada thought, squeezing Joshua tighter. Felicia had taken her to the doctor after she had gone through a frightening dizzy spell, and that was when Jada had gotten the news.

Her grandmother had cried when Jada told her. Jada could still hear Candace's wail of "Jada Mae no..." She had known who the father was before Jada even told her.

Candace's disappointment had been the most heartbreaking thing for Jada. Her grandmother had pinned all her hopes on her grandchild, praying Jada wouldn't be a young, unwed mother just like the other women in her family. She had hoped Jada would do something with her life other than raise her children alone. Then the fact Joshua's father was white...

"C'mon, Little Man, let's go to GG's."

After ten minutes of negotiations with Malcolm for "one more play" on his NBA Live video game and chasing Joshua around the room trying to get him in his coat, the foursome was finally off to Candace's house. Candace was a surrogate mother to Jada and Deshae, regardless of the fact only one was related to her by blood, because Jada's mother had died of cervical cancer when Jada was eleven and Deshae's mother had been perpetually absent. They considered each other sisters in every way, and Malcolm and Joshua were more like brothers. In fact, everyone in their neighborhood was family—the older women were Aunt or Auntie, and the older men were Uncles. Everyone watched out for everyone else, sometimes to the annoyance of the children. Rest assured, if one had misbehaved in school back in the day, two spankings came—one at school and the other at home. It only took Jada one time to learn that lesson.

Jada was glad her son belonged to such a tight-knit community, hoping he understood there was a stable, secure network of people upon which he could rely. Of course, the community wasn't perfect. Jada had overheard the whispered comments; had felt the stares as her belly swelled without a ring or man to show for it. She'd heard the derision in people's voices as they commented on "how light" her baby was and the "told you so's" whispered to her grandmother, though no one had had courage enough to say it to Jada's face. What did they know? As she had felt her baby quicken and thought about the night of his conception, Jada had remembered these people had no idea about what had happened between her and Aaron. They thought she had been mindless, suckered into bed. She had wanted that night with him, wanted the opportunity to show Aaron how much he meant to her; and if a baby was the fruition of those feelings, so be it. It made Jada angry when others snickered about her son, the most perfect little boy who didn't deserve the snide remarks.

"Seems Joshua gave you a backbone," Deshae had teased after one particular episode in the grocery store, in the pasta aisle of all places, when Jada, quite politely yet pointedly, had told another man to stop staring at her son as if he were some freak of nature. When the man started calling her outside her name,

white man's whore in particular, Jada had merely said she didn't have time to respond to simple men with simple minds and had left the man ranting and raving behind her.

Things had gotten easier as time passed, though, undoubtedly helped by Joshua's charm. He had the ability to wrap any woman around his little finger, especially his mama, and Zeke had all but adopted him. Zeke, or Ezekiel, was the only child of Harold and Lucille Channing, and more like an older brother than a second cousin. He and her mother had been close growing up, practically siblings instead of the first cousins they were, and Zeke was Jada's godfather. In fact, Jada would slip and call him "Dad" occasionally, and neither of them seemed to mind. However, Zeke certainly didn't often behave like the forty-seven-year-old man he was, nor did he look it. With his wrinkle-free onyx skin, clean-shaven head, tall stature, and muscular build, he barely passed for thirty-five.

"Mama, can we go see Zeke?" Joshua asked when they passed the Grille. They were a few streets away from Candace's house now, but she and Deshae were already running late for the party, so Jada had to tell him no. She saw him pout in the rearview mirror and promised she would call the restaurant to see if Zeke could stop by GG's house before he went home. That compromise made Joshua smile.

They pulled into the driveway of a modest, one-story brick structure with green awning over the windows and a front porch. It was a quaint little home, but Jada loved it. Childhood memories flooded back whenever she saw that screen door and the always-on porch light to greet her. There was a simple candle in one of the windows, Candace's contribution to the holiday spirit.

The kids tore through the front door once Jada unbuckled Joshua out the car seat, leaving their mothers to gather their belongings and bring them in the house. Candace had let the children inside and they were already on the floor in front of the television, watching the Disney Channel and eating cheese puffs from a bowl Candace had prepared for them.

"Well, ain't y'all somethin'?" Candace exclaimed when she saw the two young women. They hugged and kissed Candace's cheek before going down the hall to put the stuff in the boys' room. The house had three small bedrooms and one bathroom, not counting the master bath in Candace's room. When Jada first had Joshua, she had lived with Candace, and she would never forget the kindness her grandmother, Aunt Lucy, and the other women in the neighborhood had given her. Jada had insisted she pay a little rent once she was able to work at the Grille, but before long she and Deshae, who'd been living alone in her mother's apartment across town, finally decided to break out on their own. They still came over often, particularly because Candace lived alone; and at seventy-seven years old, Jada wanted to make sure her grandmother knew she had family and would never be lonely.

"This must be some party, huh?" Candace said, sitting gingerly on the couch once Deshae and Jada returned to the living room.

"Yes, ma'am. Jamal invited us," Deshae said with a small smile.

"Y'all still datin'?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Betta than that other fool you were carryin' on wit—"

"Aunt Candy!"

"Lawd girl, Jada Mae you shoulda *seen* this fool, comin' up in *my* house with gold fo' teeth yet no money to pay fo' gas! Glad you got yo' mind right and found you a *good* man, Deshae!"

"Agreed," Jada added, tightening her coat around her. "Jamal's a good role model for Malcolm too." Candace glanced at her and Joshua, who was happily laughing and clapping along with the action on the television. Jada went to the boys and kissed her son's head, Deshae doing the same to Malcolm. "Mommy will get you tomorrow okay?"

"Yes, Mommy. Bye, Auntie Shae!"

"You two be good for Aunt Candy, now!" Deshae called as they went to the door. The boys nodded and Candace arched an eyebrow.

"We'll see how long that'll last," the older woman said, walking with them. Candace kissed Deshae's cheek but framed Jada's face in her hands, looking deeply into her granddaughter's eyes. "You have a good time tonight."

"Grandma—"

"I *want* you to have a good time tonight! Find you someone like Deshae did! Joshua's daddy ain't ever comin' back fo' you, you hear me?"

"I never said he would, Grandma."

"But you want him to."

Jada glanced at Joshua briefly, then pasted on a smile and kissed her grandmother's cheek again. "We'll be back before noon tomorrow. Oh, and call Zeke and see if he would come over. Little Man wants to see him."

Candace frowned at her granddaughter, clucking her tongue and shaking her head, but said she would. Jada gave Candace one last kiss before getting in the car, and soon she and Deshae were on the freeway to downtown Atlanta. The drive was full of the local radio station and Deshae making comments about the ineptitude of the other drivers on the road.

Her grandmother was right. Jada *did* want Aaron to come back, but not necessarily in the romantic sense. She genuinely missed his friendship; ironically, he was one of the few people with whom she could be herself. He never expected her to act a certain way because of her race or her education; just accepted all her flaws and merits as a friend would. Aaron was similar to Deshae in many ways, except he was male, white, and the father of her child.

"You all right over there?" Deshae asked as she maneuvered the car into the fast lane. "You all quiet..."

"Just thinkin'."

“About?”

“Life.”

Deshae laughed, tapping her fingers along the steering wheel. “Instead o’ thinkin’ about it you should live it! You used to be so full of life before—”

“I’m a mother now, Deshae.”

“So am I; don’t mean I died because of it.”

But you’re in love, Jada wanted to say, but didn’t, staring out of the window and trying to isolate the concrete hexagons along the freeway’s walls. Jada knew she was still in love with Aaron, but also knew he didn’t feel the same, regardless if they had slept together. Emotions had run high that night, culminating in sex and the conception of a child, but that didn’t mean one was in love. Deshae and life in college had awakened Jada to that quickly, but she would put all the love she felt for the father into the son.

Jada settled back into the seat and sighed. She would try to have fun at this party, at least for Deshae and her grandmother’s sake.

It seemed, however, fun wasn’t to be had, and not thirty minutes after arriving Jada found herself outside on the terrace. The cool air and the solitude were very welcoming. She had been feeling claustrophobic and suffocated amid the dancing, tipsy bodies of the party. As soon as she and Deshae had arrived, they spotted Jamal chatting and laughing with his teammates. It hadn’t taken long for Deshae to get into the party mood, and she had rarely left Jamal’s side during the night. Jada had either staked out the party spread or had been reluctantly coaxed into dancing with Jamal and Deshae, but she had quickly grown tired of the staged fun and gone outside for a breath of fresh air.

I would’ve had more fun at home reading Joshua a book, Jada thought to herself, smoothing out her dress though she’d done little to crease it. The party was lively, the people were nice...but she had no desire to be an actress. She just wasn’t having the good time her grandmother and best friend wanted her to have, and she felt guilty.

“Suck it up,” Jada told herself, grasping the railing and taking a deep breath, being calmed by the view of the Atlanta skyline. Lights dotted the skyscrapers and a spotlight beamed, no doubt for another swanky party in the city, and cars zoomed and honked from below as they tried to get to their destinations. How Jada wished she could be in one of those cars with her son and far away from this party—maybe on a beach somewhere, enjoying the crashing waves and the salty air as they built sandcastles and she taught him how to swim. It would be just the two of them as she raised a fatherless but happy child, free from the pressures of everyone’s expectations of her. But in the meantime, Jada would go back inside and brave the party. It was getting a little too cold for her liking.

She took in one last breath before turning towards the glass doors and freezing, exhaling harshly and falling back against the railing for support. Jada could only blink, disbelieving her eyes. He stood not even five feet away from

her, wearing a perfectly tailored suit, Versace if she remembered his tastes right, and looking every bit as handsome as he had five years ago, even with his new beard. His hair was shorter though, yet the waviness of it was still apparent, and his green eyes looked right through her, as if he had X-ray vision and could see all the secret pining for him she'd hidden for years.

Jada gripped the railing tighter when he came closer, slowly, as a hunter cornering his prey. He put his hands in his coat's pockets and stopped a foot away from her, eyes darting all along her face.

"Jaybird?"

She closed her eyes at the familiarity, having not heard that name in years. She counted to ten and opened them again. "Aaron."

He smiled and Jada instantly felt warm. She smiled in return because it was an automatic response whenever he did. His smile widened and he enveloped her in a large hug, lifting her off the ground with ease despite her filling out a bit since the last time he'd seen her.

"It's been so long," he whispered in her hair and he set her on the ground, his hands cool against her bare shoulder blades as they slid up her nape to tangle underneath her bun.

"Five years," she said softly in his neck, eyes closed as she allowed her body to settle into the intimacy and naturalness of the embrace. It was as if they'd just seen each other yesterday and not five years ago, as if they hadn't exchanged the first words to each other in over four. She pulled back, but not before he snuck a kiss to her forehead.

"You're beautiful," he said seriously, rubbing his hands along her arms. She gave him a skeptical look and shook her head. "You are. You're absolutely glowing."

"It's the shimmer makeup."

"Still can't accept a compliment, can you?" he asked on a light chuckle.

"You always flattered me too much."

"Every word I say I mean," Aaron said, his stare intense.

Jada laughed and stepped away, needing to put distance between them. He was making it too easy to fall back into their friendship, but too much had happened for that to be the best thing to do. There was an entire seaboard separating them anyway, and she didn't have the freedom she once had while in college. She had responsibilities now...

"How's McKensie Lowman doing? And Ricci's? Things going well there?" Jada asked, steering the conversation to safer territories.

"Both are doing well. In fact, we're opening a McKensie Lowman building here, and I'm overseeing it."

Panic briefly flitted across Jada's face before it settled into a smile again. "Really?"

"Yes. I thought it was about time we had a southern division; makes us more accessible to our clients that way."

"And the Falcons are one of them?"

"Yes. Besides...I won't deny I had a personal motivation to open offices down here..."

Surreal was the only word Jada could think of during this entire reunion. But she gathered her bearings quickly. "Is that right?"

"Yeah..."

Jada wouldn't entertain the fact *she* could be this "personal reason," no matter how tempting the thought was. She pasted on another smile and held out her hand. "Well, I hope you enjoy your stay in Atlanta, Aaron."

He took her hand and closed his other one on top of it, a small frown on his face. "What's wrong? You act like you're not happy to see me."

"It's just that my friend's inside and—"

"*There* you are, dearest!" another voice sounded from behind Aaron, and Jada tried not to tense. The woman's heels clicked against the stones of the terrace as she came toward them, and though Jada began tugging her hand from Aaron's, he wouldn't let go. He smiled over his shoulder at the arrival.

"I'm not lost, sweetheart."

"But I still couldn't *find* you," the woman said on a laugh, but it petered out when she saw who was with him. Jada gave a small smile, and the other woman arched an eyebrow but returned the gesture. "Well...aren't you going to introduce us?"

Aaron was staring at Jada again, and she cleared her throat. "Oh!" Aaron exclaimed, then chuckled embarrassedly. "Of course! Jada this is Veronica Prescott; Veronica, this is Jada Channing..."

"Charmed," Veronica said, holding out a hand.

Jada accepted it. "Likewise."

Veronica's handshake was as flimsy as her act of genuine pleasure, and they dropped hands after a quick interval. Jada shrunk a little as she looked at Veronica, with her beautiful black hair and beautiful blue eyes along with a model's lithe form. Jada felt self-conscious.

"Did you need me for something?" Aaron asked Veronica. The woman slid her arm through his free one and gave him a large, bright smile. "One of the owners wanted to talk to you about financial forecasts for the Falcons if they go all the way to the Super Bowl...I told him I'd come find you."

Aaron groaned and gave Jada a sympathetic smile. "Even at a party I'm on the job. I guess we'll have to cut this reunion short..."

"That's fine," Jada said kindly. "I have to find my friend anyway."

"Well, how about we get together later so we can catch up more?" Aaron asked, gazing earnestly at her. Jada didn't look at Veronica though she felt the other woman's eyes on her. It wouldn't be a good idea for Aaron to re-enter her life; they should just leave this meeting as an aberration instead of making a habit of it.

"I'm going to be really busy, as I'm sure you will be—"

“Oh, c’mon Jada, you know I’d always make time for you.”

Then what about these past few years? Jada only smiled, squeezing his hand subconsciously. “We’ll see.”

“Yes...” He pulled his arm from Veronica and reached into the inside of his suit jacket, pulling out a business card. “Here’s the information to my office. And—oh, wait—” He pulled his hand from hers to take out a pen and write a number on the back of the card.

“That’s my cell number,” Aaron said, closing the card in her hand and his own hand over hers. “Unfortunately, I don’t have yours anymore; I think I accidentally erased it when I got a new cell phone a few years ago.” All three laughed, but only one was genuine. “But now we’re reconnected, right?”

“Hmm.”

Aaron’s smile turned soft, and he cupped her face, bringing her cheek to his lips. “It’s wonderful to see you again,” he said lowly, for her ears only. “It really makes my Christmas...”

“Mine too,” she said. He rubbed her cheek with his thumb before dropping his hand and leaving, Veronica slipping her arm back through his as they left.

The chill was back, and Jada wrapped her arms around herself, but she didn’t go inside until the crowd swallowed the couple from her sight. Jada was dazed when she finally went back to the party and searched for Deshae, who, upon view, was slow dancing with Jamal. Their arms were wrapped around each other tightly and they were whispering private words to each other. Jada didn’t want to break up their dance so she went back to her station at the table where the punch and snacks had all but disappeared.

“Lovely party, isn’t it?”

Jada poured some remaining punch, holding out the cup to her guest. Veronica hesitated, yet accepted the offer, then Jada poured her own cup. “Very lovely.”

Veronica took a small sip before speaking again. “You look different from the pictures...”

“Pictures?”

“Yes. He has two pictures of you—one in his office and one in his study at home. You two were close?”

If only she knew... “We were friends.”

Veronica looked at her though Jada had turned her attention to the dance floor. The song was ending, and Deshae and Jamal started rearing up for the segueing, up-beat jam. Jada wanted to go home now.

“Close friends by the looks of it.”

Jada laughed humorlessly, staring into her cup and watching the ice swirl in the red liquid. What did it matter now? It was obvious Veronica and Aaron were serious if Veronica knew he had a photograph of her “at home”... “We haven’t really spoken since college.”

Veronica shrugged and finished her drink. "Well, I'm sure you two will have plenty of time to catch up. Very nice to meet you, Jada."

She disappeared in the dancing bodies, and Jada finished off her punch. She needed to leave before she burst into tears in front of all these strangers. There was a break in the music and Jada took that opportunity to approach Deshae, noticing her and Jamal talking to his other teammates. She put on a smile and went into the crowd, pulling Deshae away so they could speak privately.

"Can I have the valet ticket for the car please?" Jada asked, trying to ignore the pointed look her friend gave her.

"Why? The party just got started!"

"I'm tired, Deshae. I wanna go home."

Deshae started to say something else, but she pursed her lips and gave her friend a suspicious look. "What happened, Jada Mae? You seem...spooked."

"You say spooked, I say tired. Besides, ain't like you gon' miss me." A guilty look passed across Deshae's face and Jada sighed, shaking her head and drawing her friend into a hug. "You *should* forget about me, girl! I'm just a drag and you're here with yo' man all happy and stuff. You don't think he'd mind bringing you home?"

"No, but—"

"Then let me take the car. I'll get the kids from Grandma's and you can have a good time here."

Deshae pulled back, still reluctant to take on the suggestion. "But that's the whole reason *you* here, so *you* can have a good time!"

"Shoot, I have a good time readin' *Clifford* books to Joshua and helpin' Malcolm with his homework. I don't need to get all dressed up to have fun!"

They stared at each other, and Jada couldn't help but wonder what she did to deserve such a good friend. Sure, they'd had their rough spots, particularly when Deshae had been strung out on drugs, but they had gotten through them together. Jada had tried, really she had, to have a good time, but some things weren't meant to be.

"C'mon...I'll go with you to coat check..."

It didn't take long for Jada to retrieve her coat. Deshae watched her friend's progress with a distressed look. Jada knew she deserved an explanation, but her nerves were shot and she didn't want to ruin Deshae's good time anymore than she already had.

"We'll talk in the mornin'," Jada promised.

"Ya damn skippy we will!" Deshae exclaimed, and Jada laughed.

"Always lookin' out fo' a sista..."

"That's because you *are*..."

Jada squeezed Deshae's hands and whispered goodbye, then went to the parking garage, and presented the valet with the stub. She felt the chill come through the garage and she tightened her coat around her, but she wasn't prepared for the gentle hand on her back and she jumped.

"Sorry," a deep voice said apologetically.

"That's all right..."

Jada didn't look at him, wondering *why* and *how* Aaron had known she was leaving. She had looked around the room to make sure she could make a clean getaway, but apparently her sight had failed her.

"So you were going to leave without saving me a dance?"

"Oh...I didn't think you would mind," Jada said lamely. That sounded false even to her own ears.

"But you're my best friend..."

"Still? After all these years?"

"Don't sound so doubtful."

Jada merely shrugged, not trusting herself to speak. Didn't this man realize they could *not* be best friends anymore? Their last night together had been *the* last night—no more friendship, only small, private acknowledgements of someone from the past, of someone who wouldn't mean anything in the future. Of course, Jada hadn't lived up to her end of the bargain, she had gotten pregnant, but the least Aaron could do was relieve some of the burden from her shoulders, couldn't he?

"I'm just being realistic," Jada said finally.

It was Aaron's turn to be silent. They really had little to say to each other now that their lives had moved on without the other in it. However based on his reaction to seeing her and what Veronica had said, Aaron still held a fondness towards her.

Jada didn't know how to reconcile that.

The car pulled up and Jada went to it, not saying a word to Aaron. She hoped he'd get the clue and go back to the party, but instead he followed, not letting her slam the door shut as she wished.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

The apology disarmed her, yet Jada knew, instinctively, why he did. She smiled at him, a genuine one this time, and shook her head. "No need to be sorry. We both knew it would come to this—"

"I didn't want it to."

Good intentions paved the way to hell, she wanted to say, but refrained, staring out of the windshield. "I know."

Aaron pushed the door shut and she drove away, not looking back or even waving to him. Once on the freeway, she shuffled through her purse where Aaron's business card had disappeared and fingered it gently before letting in cool December air while letting the card out.

THREE

Aaron honestly hadn't expected to see Jada...really ever again, regardless of hoping he would.

He had been glad to see she hadn't changed much in the years since, but that light, that fire in her eyes hadn't been as bright as he remembered. He wondered what had happened during their time apart, and cursed himself for not maintaining contact with her as he should have. At first, they had been very good about it, both using instant messenger services, e-mailing, and calling. Soon, however, work, school, and thesis had overwhelmed both until they could only spare short, sparse e-mails. Then the e-mails had stopped altogether; intentions to call never materialized; and eventually, funnily, almost five years had passed.

That it had been so easy to lose touch with Jada unsettled him. And since she hadn't made any attempts to reconnect, he had prepared himself for a life without her, had moved on and tagged those years with her as among the best in his life, very fond memories he would treasure for the rest of his days.

Those memories had stared him straight in the face that night, and never had they been so beautiful.

"Aaron?"

He was proud that he didn't jerk at the sound of her voice, but he only spared a small glance. "Veronica..."

"You seem a million miles away—are you all right, honey?"

"Yeah."

That was a lie. He wasn't fine. Aaron hadn't been fine since the moment he'd seen Jada on the terrace. He hadn't recognized her at first, but that didn't mean he could tear his eyes away. Those lush and full curves would make any man stop and stare; and when she had finally turned and faced him, his heart had swelled and dropped as if he were going down the first hill of the world's tallest rollercoaster.

"Thinking about your friend?"

"Hmm?"

The bed sunk behind him, and Veronica's delicate hands began massaging his shoulders. Aaron let his body relax, lazily pulling off his tie and dropping his head forward to give Veronica as much access to his tense muscles as possible. She was a very good girlfriend, the niece of his father's partner, a girl he'd known all his life. Veronica had always been beautiful, and there had been much teasing when she had appeared in various magazines and commercials during their younger years. They'd had a bit of a relationship when they were in college—she at Wellesley while he was at Harvard—but they had parted amicably. He had been too involved with life on his campus and she with hers, and they didn't make much of an effort to see each other after the summer of junior year. It had been serendipity when they met again three years ago, in Paris of all places, where she was a buyer for a high-fashion boutique there and he was visiting a friend from boarding school. At first, they had only gotten together to reunite and reminisce, but Veronica had eased the emptiness Jada had left in his life, and they had been together ever since.

The soft press of lips to his neck took him out of his thoughts, and he smiled at Veronica's tender look. Her chin was on his shoulder, and Aaron kissed her nose playfully.

"Yes?"

"What's going on in that head of yours?" she whispered. "What's on your mind?"

"Actually, you."

"Oh?"

Aaron heard the humor in her voice and chuckled. "Just thinking about how much you mean to me...how wonderful you've been."

"Hmm...as wonderful as Jada?"

He bristled at her name coming from Veronica. He couldn't understand why, but he didn't...like it—it seemed, off...wrong.

"Veronica..."

"What?" she asked, taking her chin off his shoulder and massaging again. "I just mean...that was an awfully intimate reunion you two had, and she seemed very tight-lipped about your relationship when I tried asking her about it."

"You were snooping."

"Oh, I wasn't..."

Aaron didn't reply. He didn't blame Jada's reluctance to talk. It was awkward, and really, a non-issue. Aaron was sure Veronica had had relationships from college that she wouldn't talk about with him, and his with Jada was one he wouldn't talk about with her. He considered that relationship as his most cherished, most personal.

"She's cute, I suppose," Veronica continued, "though I don't know how you ever met her, let alone became friends with her..."

Something about Veronica's tone rubbed him the wrong way, despite the genuine confusion in it. Then again, why wouldn't she be confused? There

weren't many minorities in their circle of friends, and Jada was a little too rough to be a refined society girl. He had appreciated that about Jada when they first met—she was raw and real, if a bit hesitant, and he had found that refreshing.

"She worked at the center—you remember the mentoring program Philip started?"

"Oh, *right*," Veronica said. Suddenly her blue eyes lit up and she smiled slyly. "Philip's still smarting over his break up with Carla, no?"

Philip Ingram—wealthy, smart, handsome, black—perfect for Jada.

"Veronica."

"What? It was awful how that all went down—Carla with the chauffeur—but...hmm...perhaps not. I don't think Philip's parents would like her."

"Why wouldn't they? She's beautiful, intelligent, funny, witty..." He looked at Veronica fully. "Besides, she's not for them to like; *he's* the one who's going to be with her!"

"Legacy, Aaron," Veronica said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Pedigree is still important, and she...doesn't have any."

Aaron left the bed and went to the bathroom. Jada wasn't a *puppy*; she was a human being! Aaron hadn't been thinking about her last name when they first met, or when they forged a deep and dear friendship. He *certainly* hadn't been thinking about it when they made love...

He had never been closer to anyone in his life. It hadn't been his first time, but making love with Jada had been the most beautiful experience he ever had. It hadn't been planned. They had been snuggled on the couch like always, watching a nameless Christmas special while winding down from a party-filled day at the center and a nice homemade dinner of spaghetti and meat sauce—all Ricci's products of course. Aaron had kissed her temple—nothing out of the ordinary, he'd always been very affectionate with her—and Jada had looked up at him with a small smile. His heart had kicked over then; he'd realized then he wouldn't see that smile...wouldn't see *her*...for a long time again.

He had kissed her upon the realization.

She had kissed him back.

Everything had fallen into place then, everything he had tried hard to deny became suddenly undeniable. He felt more than platonic love for her. It had been easier when Jada was younger, a shy girl newly arrived to the big Northern city from her small Southern town. She'd blossomed during her time at the center, and the kids had all loved her because she was relatable, clever, and sharp. Jada hadn't come from much money, even though her family owned a restaurant. She had a wit that made people laugh and think at the same time, and she would create inventive exercises to make the kids *want* to learn. When they had succeeded, she was the first to give them a high-five or a hug.

Jada had fascinated Aaron from the beginning; but during their friendship, the fascination had turned into something much more.

Aaron shook his head and splashed water on his face, the droplets catching in his beard. "You, my friend," he said to his reflection, "are an idiot."

A scared idiot.

Sex changed everything...love changed everything. He'd been so cool and collected the morning after, knowing he had to keep it together because it had been obvious Jada was shell-shocked. He had known she had been a virgin, and when things had started getting heavy, he'd tried pulling back, but couldn't. She'd made such an alluring picture with her well-kissed lips, disheveled hair, and flush he could see creeping up her neck to her face. He'd asked if she were certain she wanted to go further, and when Jada had responded by kissing him, he had lifted her in his arms and gone to her room.

Discovering Jada had been indescribable. She had been soft, warm, and plush...perfect. He couldn't stop touching her, had loved making her lashes flutter against her cheeks or her brown eyes darken to black whenever he touched an eager spot on her body. She'd had a pudgy stomach he loved to nuzzle and enough meat on her body that he didn't feel bones whenever he squeezed her...

"Aaron?"

Veronica's voice startled him. He'd been in the bathroom too long, doing nothing but staring in the mirror. He shook his head to release the remaining water drops in his beard. "Coming."

He brushed his teeth quickly and left, dropping a minty kiss on Veronica's forehead as she passed him to use the bathroom herself. She would be leaving to go back to New York in a few days and would spend Christmas with her family, while his parents planned to spend it in Italy with the maternal side of his. His mother hoped he could join them, but as of yet, he'd not decided whether he would. Spending Christmas alone wasn't what he wanted to do; but since his relationship with his father was currently strained, he needed to find other options.

Jada...

His boxers tightened as he remembered how they had spent their last holiday season together, and he groaned. Now was *not* the time to go there...

Aaron got into bed, bunching up the covers over his burgeoning crotch to hide his reaction to a simple thought...he was still riding the emotional high of his reunion, that was all.

And if she were really "just your friend" now, Mini Aaron wouldn't be trying to come out and play!

He groaned again and turned on his side, facing the wall. Perhaps coming to Atlanta *had* been a bad idea. When his father Alexander had announced they would be establishing southeast offices, Aaron jumped at the chance to open them, but Alexander had been adamantly against it.

“That girl is down there, isn’t she?”

Alexander’s question had held so much disgust and mistrust that it had taken Aaron aback. Aaron knew Alexander wanted him to marry Veronica; she was Keith Lowman’s niece and the most obvious, appropriate, choice for a McKensie. The only way Veronica could have been more perfect were if Keith had had a daughter himself, but he could only give his wife Mary two sons. That Aaron had grown so close to someone so completely *wrong* for him while in Boston did not sit well with his father, and Alexander had sent him to the London offices upon graduation from the business school so he could get Jada out of his system and his head back on straight.

“Keep it in the family, son,” Alexander had said on numerous occasions. Aaron would be the third generation McKensie to inherit the company, and it had grown exponentially since his father had taken control. Aaron’s grandfather was still involved, but more as a silent partner than anything else, and both men had groomed him to be the future CEO.

Aaron hadn’t realized that grooming him for the top position meant he had to *be* a groom as well. He wasn’t ready to get married, least of all to Veronica. He loved her, thought she would make a wonderful wife and a wonderful mother someday, but with him? He wanted what his parents had—spice, flair, genuine affection, unfailing love. He didn’t feel half of those things with Veronica yet...

Veronica stepped out of the bathroom wearing some silk number that, on a regular night, would have Aaron sharing her secret smile, but he couldn’t get excited...not for *her* anyway. Veronica slid into bed and wrapped her arms around his waist, kissing along his shoulder blades and spine. He tried to remain aroused, but the erection he’d had earlier dissipated to nothing.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. She stopped kissing him and he rolled onto his back, dragging his knuckles along her cheek. She kissed the back of his hand.

“That’s okay, dearest,” she said. “Hold me?”

“Of course,” he murmured, turning so she spooned into his front. She turned off the lights and soon after, Aaron heard Veronica’s soft snoring. After waiting a few moments, Aaron eased his arms from around her and sat up, sliding his fingers through his hair. He was too wired, so he padded from the bedroom to his study.

He did some reading, then ran on his treadmill, trying to get his body fatigued enough so he could fall asleep. After about two hours, his body started becoming weary, and he decided to go to bed. However as Aaron passed by his desk, a sudden thought occurred to him. He flipped open his laptop and opened a web browser. After typing in an address, he filled in the text boxes and pressed the submit button.

Aaron grinned when he got back the results, saving the page to his hard drive and printing it as well. He would need it later.



Jada sat at a dining table with a mechanical pencil between her teeth and tried reading three books simultaneously. Since there was no more space on the tabletop, she balanced her notebook in her lap, bouncing her thigh intermittently to keep the spiral steady. She had stolen a free moment at work to study during a slow Monday afternoon. The weekend had been blessedly busy after the party Friday night, keeping her too distracted to think of Aaron.

Well...so much for that, she thought wryly. It was a waste of time. He had someone more his type now—gorgeous, slim, wealthy, white. Veronica Prescott was the perfect woman for Aaron, and he seemed to be happy with her. All the more reason not to disrupt things.

“You study too much.”

Jada grinned around her pencil and shook her head. “Do not...” Her guest sat opposite her, taking away one of the books she was reading to read it himself. “Zeke!”

“Jada!” Zeke mimicked, still perusing the pages as if enthralled. “You really think you need to know all this stuff to be a teacher?”

“Doubt it,” Jada admitted, holding her hand out to reclaim her book. Zeke sucked his teeth, but gave it to her before leaning back in the booth.

“I thought you liked your job at the daycare.”

“I do, but with a master’s, I command more money and maybe, eventually, save up enough for a down payment—”

“You know I can just give you that money, Jada Mae,” Zeke said seriously. “With all the work you do around here, you’ve more than earned it—”

“And yet it would still feel like a handout,” Jada said softly. She smiled at Zeke and nodded. “You’ve done so much as it is. I want to do this for myself and Joshua.”

“Joshie! How’s my Little Man doin’?” Zeke asked, a smile immediately forming on his face. Just as Zeke had done with her, he had willingly stepped into the role of father for her young son. Joshua adored Zeke, and Jada was glad her son had a strong male presence in his life.

Consequently, Jada and Joshua spent much of their time at Charlie’s Grille, the popular neighborhood restaurant established by Zeke’s father Harold. Harold had started the business after returning from Korea where he and Lincoln, Jada’s grandfather, had been mess cooks, and he’d named the restaurant after their father Charles. Harold had liked their assignments, preferring the heat of the kitchen to the swamps and firepower on the Korean battlefields. Lincoln hadn’t, saying he didn’t learn to shoot a gun only to be somebody’s cook. Harold had gotten the idea after one of their superiors had commented that eating their food was “almost like eating in a restaurant.”

It hadn’t taken much for Harold to convince Lucille, his wife, to establish the restaurant and he started the neighborhood takeout and catering service

from their home. Eventually, Uncle Harold had persuaded the bank to take a chance on the restaurant and had gotten the loan for a lease to a small hole-in-the-wall, then not located in Atlanta proper, but still in the black section of town. It hadn't been easy at first, either. There had been early hours and unpleasant customers and recipes that just didn't work. There had been vandalism and threats on their lives soon after white customers had begun coming to their restaurant. There had been times Uncle Harold had thought it would be best to close down the place, but Aunt Lucille and even Candace wouldn't let him. Their neighborhood needed a place like the Grille; it offered more than food.

Almost thirty years after its opening, Charlie's Grille remained, and it stood tall and proud. Granted, it wasn't a Ricci's, but it didn't have to be. It served its function as the neighborhood kitchen, where people came for good food and good conversation. Jada loved working there as a cook, especially since she could prepare dinner meals for the family and take them home. The hours were convenient and the money was enough to help her to pay her part of the rent and go to school. Besides, she wanted her son to know the people from her childhood, and there was no better place than the Grille to do it.

"Joshua is fine, though he's startin' to wear me out about all the toys he wants fo' Christmas," Jada grumbled, rolling her eyes. "I swear I've never been so close to putting my foot through the TV screen in my life!"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really, and Malcolm ain't no better. I swear those two are gonna put a serious dent in my wallet!"

"Not if you get Jamal to buy them for you," Zeke chuckled.

"I ain't gettin' that man to buy them nothin'," Jada said. "Besides, he's dat-ing Deshae, not me."

"He will if he wants to stay on Deshae's good side," Zeke said. "If he wants Deshae, you, Malcolm, and Joshua come along with her."

"That's not fair..."

"Maybe not, but it's true and you know it."

"Even more reason for me to get this master's and get a house," Jada insisted. "It's time for Joshua and me to be on our own anyway..." Jada liked Jamal very much, and felt guilty that he was spending so much of his time and money on her and Joshua. Every time he had a gift for Malcolm, he had one for Joshua; and whenever he brought something for Deshae, he had something for her as well. He might be a successful football player, but his money wasn't infinite.

"Or you could just contact Joshua's daddy and tell him what the deal is," Zeke said.

Jada closed her eyes and counted to three. Zeke had been trying to get her to tell Aaron about Joshua from the moment she returned from college, saying if she loved someone she would give that person a chance to step up to the

challenge. Jada knew it wasn't that simple, and honestly, didn't think she was strong enough to have Aaron walk out as she was certain he would. A baby changed everything—it represented permanence, legacy, commitment. One night of sex did not a committed relationship make.

"Must be an Ames thing with you," Zeke muttered. "Falling in love with men y'all ain't supposed to—"

"You ain't had to go there," Jada said, glaring at her notes. "Besides, my grandfather is your uncle..."

"And what a ray of sunshine *he* was," Zeke said. "Ebenezer Scrooge would be better company than Lincoln Channing!"

"I don't think that's fair; he was certainly nice to me..."

Zeke snorted. "That's because he knew he was gonna die soon."

Jada's grandfather Lincoln had died when she was six, but while he was alive Jada had adored her grandfather. He would take her to the pond to fish, and though they rarely caught anything, Lincoln would sit her on his lap and let her hold the pole while he told her stories of his youth.

"He treated Aunt Candy and yo' mama like they were strangers," Zeke said, his face in a small scowl. "And he wondered why Lynn acted out like she did—"

"Sorry to interrupt, but Jada, you have a call."

Jada glanced at Zeke before setting her notebook and pencil on top of the books on the table. She followed the hostess to the front and picked up the phone at the podium. "Jada Channing."

"Jaybird."

Jada's eyes bugged out and she turned away from the hostess who was doing a very poor job of minding her business. "How did you get this number?"

"Your family owns a restaurant, love. All it takes is a few keystrokes and mouse clicks to find a site that will get the number," Aaron said on a slight chuckle. "Not that hard."

"How'd you know I was here?"

"I didn't; I just asked for you, and here you are. Simple as that, love."

He needed to stop calling her "love"; it was distracting and wonderful. "What do you want?"

"Wow...did I catch you at a bad time?"

Jada winced and sighed. "No—I'm sorry I just—I didn't expect your call."

"Why not? I gave you every number imaginable *and* my e-mail—why would you think I wouldn't want to talk to you?"

"Because you haven't," Jada said before she could temper her mouth. She sagged against the post and pinched the bridge of her nose. This was bad, and the last thing she wanted to do was make him feel too guilty. She hadn't contacted him either, but then again, she had extenuating circumstances.

"And damn me for trying to rectify that?" Aaron said lightly, though Jada heard the hurt in his voice. "I'll admit I've been awful contacting you, but we both kind of drifted apart, didn't we?"

"Yeah..."

"But fate or whoever decided for us to drift back together, so who am I to say no?"

"Maybe not you, but I'm sure your girlfriend would have something to say," Jada muttered.

"Girlfriend?!" the hostess exclaimed, then slapped her hand over her mouth when Jada gave her a quelling look. "I'mma go...somewhere else..."

Most likely to pick up another phone, her nosy self? Jada thought dryly.

"Why would she have something to say? She knows you're my friend," Aaron said. "And what about you? Should I have to worry about your boyfriend?"

Jada rolled her eyes and scoffed. "You know good and well I ain't got a boyfriend..."

"Pity that," Aaron said. "Any man would be very lucky to have you."

She shouldn't have felt warmth by the compliment, but she did, and bit her lip to stop the grin that wanted to form. "Flattery, Aaron."

"Yes, I'm hoping it gets me dinner tonight with a very dear friend of mine."

"And you're calling me because...?"

"Jada," Aaron said, his laugh husky. "I'm serious. Didn't you feel it the other night, as if no time had passed at all?"

"Yeah..."

"That's what friendship is, Jaybird, picking up where you left off no matter how long."

It was an interesting theory, but Jada had never been the kind to test it. Then again, if Jada hadn't called Deshae often enough while she'd been away in college, Deshae would have picked up the phone and called *her* to chew her out before going into whatever discussion they were going to have. Deshae had refused to have Jada forget about her.

As if *that* were ever possible!

"So..."

"So what?"

"Dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"Are you going to repeat everything I say now?" Aaron asked, again laughing. Jada smiled this time, remembering she used to mimic whatever he said when Aaron was being particularly annoying or difficult. This again was one of those times.

"You tempt me greatly, but I won't," Jada admitted. She sighed, tapping a beat against the post. "Dinner?" She hadn't prepared the dinner for their home yet, but she had a child. She couldn't just drop things and meet with Aaron as she had in school.

“Yeah, and I even picked out a place.”

Dear Lord... “Where?”

“Waffle House.”

“Waffle House?”

“Yes, with the way you raved about it in college, I feel I should experience it myself!”

Jada’s mind screamed this was a bad idea, and knew instinctively that if she met Aaron in a familiar setting she would let her guard down. She couldn’t do that...not anymore...

“Aaron—”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re about to shoot me down?”

Jada blew out a breath. “I have responsibilities now; I can’t just drop things at a moment’s notice—”

“Then let’s set a time? Not necessarily today but...whenever you’re free?”

Damn him for being reasonable. “Um...”

“How about I give you time to think about it,” Aaron suggested, “and then I’ll call back—what’s your home phone? Your cell?”

“I’ll give you my cell,” Jada said. “I have...roommates and I remember you like calling at all hours of the night—”

Aaron laughed. “Still do!”

Jada smiled and gave him the number, and after a few more moments of chatting, hung up the phone. Talking to Aaron had always been easy, and she knew she could’ve spent hours with him on the phone doing just that. But she thanked God she was at work, so she was forced to cut the conversation short.

When she went back to her table the hostess grinned and winked at her, mouthing “you go, girl!” as she passed. *Dear Lord in heaven above*, Jada thought, sitting back down and looking at the books as if it were the first time she had ever seen them.

She knew studying was futile.

Jada packed up her books and went to the kitchen to tell Zeke she was heading out, and smiled when she saw he had already prepared takeout for her.

“Where would I be without you?” Jada said, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“Luckily, we’ll not have to find that out for *years* to come,” Zeke vowed. “Tell everyone I said hello.”

“I will,” Jada promised, grabbing the takeout and going home.

When Jada arrived, the boys were watching television and Deshae was taking a nap, so she put the food in the microwave for Deshae and fed the boys and herself. Joshua’s happy chatter had her smiling and noticing all the similarities between him and his father. Both talked faster the more excited they became, and both loved using their hands to emphasize what they said. Joshua’s gray eyes sparkled just as his father’s green ones did, and both always focused intensely on the person to whom they spoke. It was uncanny for Jada,

because she felt like she were actually looking at a younger version of Aaron himself, not just his son.

Aaron must have been adorable all his life, and if that were so, she was in for some trouble with Joshua.

After dinner, Jada bathed Joshua and put him to bed, then spent the next hour helping Malcolm with his homework. Deshae padded from her room during the middle of the session and ate dinner opposite them.

"Next time think you or Zeke can pack a sista some ribs? I know we black and all, but damn, we like other meat besides chicken!"

"Why you went there?" Jada asked, though chuckled at her friend. Deshae might have been complaining, but she was clearly enjoying her meal as she licked her fingers with gusto.

"Just sayin'," Deshae said, winking at her son. "How you doin', Mac?"

"Fine. Aunt J's helpin' me with Spanish homework."

"Ain't that somethin'? Givin' 'em Spanish already..." Deshae asked, scooping rice on her fork with a concentrated look. "This food is good..."

"I wish they'd done that with us, or I wouldn't have been strugglin' with Spanish through middle and high school!" Jada laughed. Eventually, she had learned it well enough to be conversational, but not to her desired proficiency.

"Done," Malcolm announced, showing his mother and adopted aunt his work.

"Yeah, you sure are," Deshae said, nuzzling her son's cheek. "Now go to bed—"

"Ma!" Malcolm complained, looking to Jada for support.

"Don't even try it," Deshae said, pointing down the hall toward his room. "Jada's been workin' all day and I know she'd like some little peace for herself. Besides, it's after nine and you have school tomorrow."

Jada shrugged and gave him an apologetic smile. "At least tomorrow is one day closer to Friday, right?"

Malcolm rolled his eyes but couldn't keep a small grin from forming. "Nice try Aunt J." He kissed both women's cheeks and gathered his belongings. "Goodnight."

"Night," they replied, Deshae going back to her dinner and Jada cleaning up her place. She hand-washed the dishes even though they had a dishwasher. She was so focused on her task, she didn't notice Deshae had finished and snapped out of her zone when Deshae put her plate underneath the faucet.

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Jada asked, taking Deshae's plate and washing that as well. "Nothin'."

Deshae sucked her teeth. "You don't wash dishes unless you thinkin' about something or the dishwasher's broken, and since I know it ain't broken..."

Jada grinned. "Is that right?"

“Since I’m always right, then yes,” Deshae said, and bumped Jada with her hips. “Spill.”

Jada finished her task, buying herself more time before answering her friend. Deshae was practically on her heels as they went to the couch, and once they got comfortable, she pinned Jada with a no-nonsense look.

“Why I left the party early,” Jada began, glancing at Deshae before looking at her hands. “Aaron was there.”

“Aaron? Aaron who? Aaron as in yo’ *baby’s daddy* Aaron?”

“Yep.”

Deshae could only gape at her, and then suddenly punched Jada’s arm. “Heffa! Why you ain’t *tell* me!”

“Ouch!” Jada hissed, rubbing the smarting area. “What was there to tell? He’s in town for business and has a girlfriend. The end—”

“Hell no it’s not ‘the end’ and it won’t *be* ‘the end’ for at least another eighteen years! Honey, it’s called *child support* and Lord knows you need it!” Deshae said, glaring at her.

Jada rolled her eyes and burrowed into the couch. “He’s moved on—”

“You *let* him,” Deshae interrupted. “Shoulda told him the moment you were pregnant—”

“And what good would that have done? You and everyone else keep tellin’ me he wouldn’t have stayed—”

“He doesn’t have to stay to do right by you and his son,” Deshae said. “Now, I know your grandmother’s still mad about *her* grandfather, but Aaron ain’t Mr. Joseph, and he *certainly* ain’t Malcolm’s daddy. All women are fools in love, and you were always particular...”

Deshae had teased Jada about her lack of interest in dating when they were in high school. Yet considering Candace’s strict rules about dating, the lack of interest had been convenient.

“You called me uppity,” Jada mumbled and pouted.

“You were!” Deshae said unapologetically. “You were very specific in what you wanted, and wouldn’t settle for anything less.”

“So explain Aaron to me,” Jada muttered. “I don’t remember ever sayin’ I wanted some rich white man from New York...” It wasn’t as if she had never been attracted to white men before—both she and Deshae had had giggling conversations about them—but they were guys they knew they could never have, so there was safety in the attraction. Perhaps that was why Jada had allowed herself to be attracted to Aaron in the first place—he seemed too out of her league for him to be dangerous. Then they had become friends, and out of reach had become too close for comfort.

Or not close enough...

"Sometimes the heart knows more than it tells the mind," Deshae said on a sigh. "You *thought* you knew what you wanted, but the heart told you who you *needed*."

"Stupid heart."

"And hormones!" Deshae laughed. "Girl, you stronger than me, 'cause I woulda *been* let him dip some o' his cream in *my* coffee!"

Jada threw a pillow at her, but buried her laughter in the couch cushions. She had been very good about hiding her feelings for Aaron at the beginning, but the more time they spent together, the harder it had been, especially when she saw him returning those long stares or touching her more than necessary. Of course, she had convinced herself she was imagining things, but during their last semester together, it had become apparent that Aaron had been at least as attracted to her as she had been to him.

"See what one dip gets you," Jada said after a few moments.

"A beautiful baby boy," Deshae said, putting the pillow on Jada's lap and lying on it herself. "Are you gonna see him? Talk to him?"

"He called me at work," Jada admitted.

"Suki now!"

"He wants to see me..."

"Tell him about Joshua?" Jada didn't answer her. "*Gonna* tell him about Joshua?"

Jada sighed and rubbed her eyes. "If I do it won't be right now. I can't just dump something like that on him..."

"He's missed four years of his son's life, Jada Mae," Deshae said seriously. "If Aaron's half the man you've said he was, you at least owe him the opportunity to meet his son. You ain't gotta marry him, but still...you *do* have to be fair."

Jada nodded but didn't say anything, letting her friend's words seep into her brain. She didn't know how much time had gone by before Deshae went to bed, and Jada turned on the television low, watching the local news with half interest.

Deshae was right—she had to meet Aaron again, at least once; and though Atlanta was a city, it was only so big before someone figured something out.

Jada dozed off just as the sportscaster began talking about the Falcons' upcoming game against Tampa Bay.

FOUR

Three days passed since Aaron and Jada spoke. He had been good, Aaron thought while staring at the phone on his desk and fiddling with the pen she'd given him that fateful Christmas, in giving Jada space and not calling her. In his down times, however, his resolve would begin to slip. It was currently late and he was still at the office, tying up loose ends for a presentation tomorrow. He had to meet with the team sponsors and investors to give them financial outlooks based upon different scenarios of the postseason. Of course, the ultimate goal was winning, but even a nice run at the Super Bowl would make the sponsors and investors more money than not.

Aaron sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. Veronica was back in New York and had called earlier, extending an invitation to spend Christmas with her should things die down, but Aaron had given her a vague, yet plausible excuse "just in case" he didn't come. Truthfully, he preferred not spending Christmas alone; then again there was always—

"No," Aaron whispered to himself, shaking his head. His mind shouldn't go down that all too tempting path again. Nevertheless, his mind flashed back to five Christmases ago in Boston with Jada. How many times had he dreamed of her, of that night? Too many to count, and he had a feeling tonight would be another one. They were friends—*best friends*—who for one night became lovers in every sense of the word.

At least in his mind.

Afterwards they had said things were okay between them and they would remain best friends, but that had never happened. Now he was staring at the phone, yearning to make a call that in another time had been as automatic as breathing.

How had things come to this? And for how long would they stay that way?

Not long, he thought, picking up the receiver and dialing her cell phone number.

"Hello?"

She sounded tired, as if she hadn't slept yet, and Aaron felt bad for disturbing her. "Jaybird."

“Aaron?”

He chuckled a little. “Yeah, Jada, it’s I.”

“It’s almost midnight—somethin’ wrong?”

“No...nothing’s wrong...just that I missed you...” He heard her suck in a sharp breath.

“Didn’t you call me earlier this week?”

He pulled his tie off and unbuttoned his shirt to get more comfortable.

“Yeah, I did. Does that mean I can’t miss you in the interim?”

“So does that mean you haven’t missed me in the last four years, based upon that logic?”

Ouch. She’d gotten him there. “No. You’re to assume that I’m an ass, and that I’m very sorry for not calling or e-mailing you or finding some way for us to keep in touch. There’s no excuse for my behavior, and I apologize—”

“No...no...” she said, breathing deeply. “It takes two. I didn’t make an effort to keep in touch with you, either.”

Her sigh had his mind drifting off into fantasy. He imagined her breath fanning against his bare chest, holding her nude form close to his, squeezing her as if he would never let her go. But he had, and in the worst possible way. He hadn’t been ready to face what that night had meant to him, to the potential future of their relationship. With each subsequent call after their separation, he had become increasingly aware Jada wasn’t “just a friend.” He had wanted something more from her, something for which he hadn’t been ready, and even if he had, hadn’t the courage to pursue.

“Meet with me,” Aaron said impulsively, suddenly struck with the need to see her. “Now.”

“What?”

“Waffle House—you said it was open twenty-four hours, right?”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“It’s just me.”

Jada snorted, and Aaron imagined her shaking her head as well. “There’s nothin’ ‘just’ about you, Aaron.”

“Meet with me,” he said again over her, though feeling a shiver at her comment. “We used to do this all the time, remember?”

“But it’s not the same—”

“I’m still at work, and I haven’t eaten yet. Besides, you *did* promise...”

“I can’t—I’m finishin’ this paper that’s due tomorrow—”

“Study break,” Aaron interrupted, his excitement growing at the prospect of seeing her. “If you’re still like anything from before, you’ve been up all night perfecting an already perfect paper. What’s what—an hour—really going to do?”

She was quiet for a while, then she chuckled. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

Aaron smiled, rapping the table triumphantly. "I can—it's because you love me."

"Aaron..."

"You do!" Aaron teased. "Don't bother denying it! You love me!"

She laughed and he joined her, suddenly aware of how much he missed hearing her do so. "You are so silly."

"Silly and right," Aaron insisted. "At least it's mutual."

"About me being right, yeah!" Jada laughed again.

"No...about me loving you," Aaron said, suddenly serious. "Because I do."

"Okay, Aaron," Jada said after a few silent moments. Something about her tone was wistful and skeptical at the same time. They had told each other "I love you" before, but always with a platonic meaning. He could understand her hesitancy to believe him now, but Aaron needed to reassure her of that at least. Distance or no, Aaron would always treasure her dearly. "Let me get you the directions to the restaurant..."

Aaron scribbled them down on his legal pad, grinning madly when he was finished. "I'll see you in thirty?"

"I can't believe I'm doing this..."

"You're heaven sent, love," Aaron proclaimed. "I can't wait to see you, Jay-bird."

"Bye, Aaron," she said, almost wearily, and he chuckled as he hung up the phone and closed down his office.

He arrived at the Waffle House fashionably late, not wanting to seem too eager, but she wasn't there. He took a booth toward the back of the restaurant, the window giving him access to the parking lot's entrance. Aaron was on his third cup of coffee when the bright fluorescent lights of the parking lot hit the side of a gold, older model Acura Integra. The car turned in the parking spot right in front of his booth, and his heart sped up as he watched Jada get out. Aaron hid behind his cup but she gave him a shy smile, one he acknowledged by lifting his eyebrows amusedly. Jada was wearing Snoopy pajama pants, a large jacket, and a winter hat with a bobble.

She was the very picture of adorable.

"You always were a coffee nut," she muttered upon reaching the table, dropping her purse on the orange seat across from him.

"My third."

She shook her head. "And the sad thing is you probably don't have a buzz yet."

He winked at her and grinned. "You know me too well."

Jada shrugged. "We were close once..."

"I'd like to be that close again."

Jada seemed hesitant, tucking a stray tendril of curly hair behind her ear. Her hair was in a sloppy bun atop her head—a typical hairstyle for her when she had been in college—and when she shrugged out of her overcoat, Aaron

saw she was wearing a Harvard sweatshirt—a sweatshirt that used to belong to him.

“I’ve been wondering where that was,” he said lightly, taking another sip of his coffee.

Jada looked at her attire and quirked her lips. “You had a habit of leaving things in my room, and I’d had every intention of giving it back to you except...I liked it too much for myself.”

“Looks better on you anyway.”

“It’s a little snug as I’ve gained some weight since college,” Jada murmured apologetically.

“You look better in it now than before, love,” Aaron said sincerely. “You look better now than before.”

“*There’s that coffee kicking in!*” Jada laughed. “Perhaps caffeine is more of a hallucinogenic than anyone thought!”

“Silly,” Aaron muttered, grinning at her over his cup.

Conversation was steady until the server came, and Jada perked up, enthusiastically telling him her favorite meals and giving him suggestions. The easy camaraderie they had had before returned and soon they were laughing and reminiscing fondly.

Two hours later Jada sighed and checked her watch. “An hour, huh?” She snickered. “I gotta get goin’. Gotta finish my paper and I have a long day tomorrow.” She pulled out her wallet and a few bills but his hand closed around hers.

“I got it.”

“So do I.” They stared each other down until she relented, replacing her money and wallet in her purse. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he replied.

Jada licked her lips and folded her hands on the table, starting to say something, then stopping. She did this a few more times before blurting it out. “This was nice, Aaron...thanks.”

He grinned. “Likewise, Jaybird.”

“Makes me really regret all the time missed.”

“I don’t think I can apologize anymore if I tried,” he said, resisting the urge to cover her hand with his again.

“I didn’t do my part, either.”

“But that won’t happen again,” Aaron vowed. “You have to give me a tour of Atlanta...”

“Do I?”

“You promised,” Aaron reminded her with a little grin.

“But when? Aren’t you going back home for Christmas?”

“I don’t think I will.”

“Why?”

“My father and I are having a...disagreement.”

“About?”

“Me being down here.”

“He doesn’t like the South or somethin’?”

Aaron grinned a little at that, but he couldn’t tell her the real reason. “Difference of opinion about where to take the company.”

“I thought he was all about expanding office sites. Did he want another site or—”

“He agreed Atlanta was the best place, but he didn’t want *me* establishing it—”

“But you’re his son!” Jada said. “And not only that, you can’t tell me he’s stopped trying to make you CEO by thirty-five...”

“You still remember that?” Aaron laughed. They had talked about that often while in school, his being groomed for his father’s company though he was more partial to the restaurant business. However, the main heir of Ricci’s was his mother’s oldest brother, and Alexander McKensie wanted more for his son.

“Of course I remember that,” Jada said. “I remember mostly everything you’ve told me—”

“Is that a good thing?”

Jada rolled her eyes but grinned slightly. “Depends...”

Aaron grinned in return, looking at his watch to see it was now pushing 2:30 AM. “It doesn’t feel like so much time has passed—”

“Damn!” Jada exclaimed, standing and bundling herself back up. “I have class in the mornin’...”

Jada was having problems with her zipper, and Aaron helped her, removing her hands and zipping up the coat himself.

“Thanks,” she whispered softly, not looking at him.

“You’re welcome,” he returned, smoothing his hands down her shoulders to her biceps. “Can I walk you out?”

She shrugged and he took that as a yes. They said nothing as he paid the cashier, then they went to her car. He leaned against it, watching her put the key into the lock. He touched her shoulder again before she could slide into the car, making her look at him. They stared at each other silently...intently...before she spoke again.

“I’m glad we got to meet,” she said, dropping her eyes to the ground.

He hugged her in response, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. She snuggled into him and he kissed her temple.

“It won’t be the last time, love. The tour, remember? And there will be other times.”

She chuckled slightly and separated. “We’ll see.”

He touched her cheek and sighed before giving a wan smile. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

He hadn’t meant to blurt that out, but he did—actually since the moment he saw her again at the party. He wanted to know if she tasted the same.

Jada eased her cheek from his touch. "That wouldn't be wise—"

"I know. Doesn't stop me from wanting to."

"We can't always have what we want."

He grasped her face in his hands again and pressed a long kiss to her forehead. "And that is most unfortunate," he whispered against her skin. Her fingertips caressed his cheeks and he leaned into them. This closeness, this intimacy, was what he had been lacking for so long, what he had been trying to achieve with Veronica but to no avail.

"I really have to go," she said quietly. He nodded and stepped away. With one last smile and a whispered goodbye she left, leaving him standing in the parking lot and wondering why there was a car seat in the back of her car.

Jada's heart sped almost as fast as she did as she drove home, and she let out a long breath to calm herself. What *had* she been thinking? She had lost her mind! Everything in her had told her meeting Aaron was a bad idea, everything except her heart. The damned thing had overruled her common sense, and she had just spent the past two hours talking with the father of her child, a child he didn't know existed.

Deshae and her grandmother would *kill* her for doing such a stupid thing!

Jada turned into her apartment complex and parked, shutting off the engine and just sitting there. Groaning, she rested her forehead against the steering wheel and tried to figure out how she was going to pull herself together enough to go to class and both jobs tomorrow without falling over from exhaustion.

She wondered why she didn't regret her decision to see Aaron...why she didn't invite him to spend Christmas with her...why she didn't tell him about Joshua.

"You are *such* an idiot, Jada Mae," she muttered. She was so busy berating herself she didn't register her car door opening until it slammed shut, causing her to spring up like a jack-in-the-box and swallow a scream.

"And just where the hell have *you* been?"

Jada groaned again and returned to her previous position, feeling Deshae glaring at the back of her head. "Leave me, 'lone, Shae!"

"I *know* you ain't tellin' me that! You better have a good reason fo' bein' out all hours of the night! You got class in, oh, five hours!"

"I know, Shae—"

"Miss Candy all right?" Deshae asked, cooling her temper a bit. "Cause that's the only good reason fo' you to be out like this...lookin' a straight mess—you clearly ain't went on a date."

"No, not a date," Jada said, now reclining against her seat. She exhaled slowly. "I met Aaron for...a meal."

"Aaron? Baby daddy Aaron? Rich white man Aaron, with you lookin' broke like you is?!" Deshae asked.

"I am broke!" Jada chuckled. "Besides, it wasn't a date. He was hungry and wanted to try Waffle House—"

"And what that got to do wit' you?"

"I had promised him I'd take him—"

"Homeboy can't tell time? He know you got class this mornin'? Got a paper you been moanin' and groanin' about all night—you finished it?"

"I could've said no," Jada said in Aaron's defense. "And I only got a few finishing touches and then print it out—"

"And you didn't tell him no because..."

"Because..."

"Because you sprung, that's why!" Deshae answered for her. "You can't be doin' that anymore, Jada Mae! You got a little boy now. What woulda happened if he come up sick? How I was gon' get in touch with you?"

"You act like I don't have a cell phone, Shae," Jada muttered, irritated by her well-deserved lecture. "You coulda called."

"Yes, but the point is, I shouldn't have to—"

"Ain't you, Grandma, Zeke, and everybody else in this damn town tellin' me I should get out more?"

"But not at no one o'clock in the mornin'!" Deshae said. "Figure when you decide to listen you do somethin' like this just to *still* be ornery!"

Jada began laughing, and soon Deshae joined her, until they were leaning against each other, sides hurting and tears streaming from their eyes. It was cathartic for Jada, laughing like this, riding the emotions of her time with Aaron and Deshae's reprimand. When both women settled down, Deshae smoothed down Jada's hair from her newly uncovered head and Jada rested her cheek on Deshae's shoulder.

"Well?" Deshae started after a moment. "How was it?"

"Was what?"

"Waffle House?"

A deep breath. "Like nothin' had changed."

"Really?"

"Really."

Deshae whistled then shivered. "Mind if we continue this discussion in the house? We may be in Georgia, but that don't mean it don't get cold as a mug down here!"

They went inside, and by the time they had finished talking it was five-fifteen. Two hours later Jada was getting the boys ready for school and printing out her paper before heading to class, but not before stopping by McDonald's for a cup of coffee. While not as addicted as Aaron to the drink, when she needed a quick pick-me-up, there was nothing better.

On the drive to campus she heard her phone vibrating, and since she had a cup of hot coffee in one hand and the steering wheel in the other, she let it go. Jada hoped it wasn't anything important.

She made it into her class with five minutes to spare, pulling out her paper and setting it on the professor's desk before settling into hers. As she caught her breath and waited for the professor's arrival, Jada vowed never to cut anything this short again—especially for Aaron. The professor, apparently in the holiday spirit, decided to put on a movie since it was the last class before break, and Jada tried fighting off the nap that had been teasing her all morning.

She was about to concede defeat when her phone vibrated again, earning annoyed looks from her classmates sitting beside her. She muttered an apology and looked at the display before putting the phone on silent.

Aaron.

"You got some nerve," she whispered to her phone. Half a day hadn't gone by and he was calling again. Irritation and excitement warred within her, but she put the phone away and tried watching the movie. However that proved unsuccessful, judging by the fact that someone behind her had to nudge her awake at the end of class. She muttered her thanks and went back to her car, deciding to blow off the rest of her classes and go home.

She all but collapsed on the couch when she entered her apartment, and slept so soundly that it wasn't until Joshua jumped on her back in greeting did she awaken.

"Hey, Mama!"

"Joshie," Jada groaned, burrowing her head in the couch cushion and wincing as he started climbing along her back.

"You slept on the couch, Aunt J?" Malcolm asked, setting his book bag at the foot of the couch before going into the kitchen.

"That against the rules?" Jada asked teasingly, turning onto her back so she could snuggle with her son. Joshua kissed her chin and laid his head on her chest, his fingers playing with a loose thread on her sleeve.

"No, ma'am," Malcolm said with a grin. "Just weird."

"You callin' yo' Aunt 'weird'? That's not nice!"

"You *are* a lil' weird sometimes, Jada Mae," Deshae said with a wink as she walked in the house, bags from Walmart in her hands. Jada stuck out her tongue.

"Auntie Shae let me get some cheese puffs," Joshua announced, sliding off his mother and rifling through the shopping bags for the orange package. "See!"

"Well you can't have any o' that right now, Little Man, it'll spoil yo' appetite," Jada said.

"But Ma—"

"No."

Joshua held the bag to his chest and pouted before stomping off to his room. Jada sighed. "Malcolm, make sure he don't open that bag. Just because I'm tired, don't mean I'm too tired to give him a spankin'!"

"All right, Aunt J," he said, and followed Joshua into their room.

Deshae came over to the couch, lifting Jada's head so she could sit before replacing it in her lap. She massaged Jada's temples and Jada hummed.

"You skipped class, didn't you?"

"Ain't like I'm missin' anything. Besides, I've been a good student all term and it's the last day before break—"

"Girl, I was just makin' an observation, not handin' down a sentence!" Deshae defended. "Besides, I don't blame you. You turned in that paper?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Deshae's hands moved down to Jada's neck and shoulders. "Aaron called you again?"

"You psychic?"

"So he did?"

"I ain't talk to him—he called durin' class."

"Hmm," Deshae said, then sucked her teeth. "Maybe I need to surprise Jamal in some pajamas every now and again—"

Jada laughed. "Shut up!"

"I'm just sayin'! You show up in pajamas and sleep in your eyes and creases on your cheek and he's sweatin' you like *that*—"

"We had good conversation last night," Jada admitted. "And he's down here by himself. It's natural for him to gravitate to someone he knows—"

"And someone he *knows*," Deshae snickered.

"You're such a punk."

"Don't mean I ain't right!"

Jada remained silent and enjoyed her friend's massage. Eventually Joshua came back into the living area, a finger stuck in his mouth, face contrite, and climbed onto his mother again, snuggling his apology. Jada smiled softly, kissing the top of his head in acceptance of his repentance. Deshae eased from underneath Jada's head and began preparing dinner. It would be spaghetti—that was the only thing Deshae could do well.

"How was your day, baby?" Jada asked, sinking her fingers into her son's curly hair.

"Fine. We had a party."

"A party! Was it fun?"

"Yeah..."

Jada chuckled. Her son was tired, or else he'd be tearing through the apartment with no sign of stopping.

"Sleep, my baby," Jada murmured, reaching blindly for a pillow and putting it underneath her head.

"Dinner'll be ready in fifteen," Deshae announced.

"Okay..." Jada said, her eyes growing heavy. She'd rest them until it was time to eat.

FIVE

Aaron's headache built slowly, layer by layer, from the back of his neck to the top of his head. His father was a master architect, his materials guilt, threats, and bribery.

"Your mother misses you," Alexander said flatly, as if that alone would make Aaron book travel arrangements. "This will be the first time you've not spent Christmas with us—"

"I miss her too," Aaron conceded, "but I doubt it would be a 'Merry Christmas' if I were there."

Alexander's sigh crinkled through the computer speakers, his image clear and sharp on the monitor as they spoke via webcam. Even in the tiny box, Aaron's father seemed imposing, but Aaron took comfort that there were almost a thousand miles separating them.

"Son, why are you doing this?"

"You forced my hand, Pop."

"I saw Veronica yesterday. She looks wonderful...she's spending Christmas in Austria with her parents since you're staying in Atlanta—"

"She's a grown woman who can make her own decisions," Aaron ground out, bristling at his father's accusatory tone.

"Have you seen her yet?"

Aaron didn't even pretend he didn't know of whom his father spoke. "Of course."

Alexander looked away as if trying to formulate the next thought, how to put it delicately. "Is she with you now?"

"No." Aaron didn't like talking about Jada with his father. It was frustrating and unproductive.

"Are you spending Christmas with her?"

"I don't know."

"You want to."

Aaron didn't respond.

"We decided not to go to Italy after all," Alexander said, as if sweetening the deal. "Come up here and spend Christmas with your *family* and *friends*."

Aaron merely stared at his father's face on the monitor. Alexander only wanted Aaron there so he could keep an eye on him...so that all the plans he and Veronica's parents had been making since their births wouldn't be corrupted because of Aaron's...“wandering eye.” Before, Aaron had been too naïve to see it...too willing to take the escape his father had offered. But not now...not since Jada had reentered his life.

“Goodbye, father,” Aaron said, closing the window and throwing down the mouse in disgust. Admittedly, he hadn't planned this well, too concerned with seeing Jada to consider she might have other plans...plans that didn't and couldn't include him. Aaron's pride wouldn't let him book a flight home, however; the last thing he wanted to do was give into his father.

He pulled out his cell phone and pressed a speed dial number.

“Hello?”

“It's I.”

Though it was 8 AM on a Saturday, Aaron had relied on the fact Jada had always been a morning person. She didn't say anything immediately, but groaned with such fervor that he had to quell the moan that bubbled in his throat. He remembered that sound vibrating against his throat once upon a time.

“Sorry 'bout that...you okay?”

“I should be asking you,” he teased.

She sucked her teeth. “Shut up. I had to stretch, so I'm *sorry* for soundin' like a sputterin' engine!”

“That's okay,” Aaron said with a grin. “Did I wake you?”

“Not really...” Jada admitted. “Just...slept wrong.”

“Hmm...and it always takes you awhile to fully wake up.”

“True! Awake—yes. Functional—not so much...”

Her chuckle was deep and husky, and Aaron wished he was with her as she met the new day. He knew from experience she was breathtaking in the early morning glow.

“Are you workin'?” she asked. “Is that why you're up?”

“Sort of...I talked with Pop.”

“How did that go?”

“It went.”

“That well, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because you sound upset. It's Christmas! Maybe you should go home and try to patch things up anyway? You should be with your family, Aaron. They miss you.”

Jada didn't even know Alexander, didn't even know how cutthroat and ruthless the man could be, *had been* in regards to her, yet she wanted Aaron to

mend fences because she thought it would make his parents—his *father*—happy.

Aaron ran his fingers through his hair. “It may *seem* like a good idea, but it isn’t. We wouldn’t talk to each other, and that would make Mama sad.”

“How’s she doin’?”

“Pop says she misses me, and I miss her, but...”

“That Irish-Italian pride of yours,” Jada said on a chuckle.

Aaron joined her. “Yeah.”

“That’s some pedigree for you, McKensie.”

Aaron knew that well, often wondering how his stubborn, prideful father had managed to woo and keep Isabella Ricci for the past thirty years. His mother, though gracious, was not a pushover, nor easily intimidated. Get her mad enough, she could curse very fluently in English, Italian, and Spanish, and no one could get her that mad except his father. Nevertheless, Alexander doted on his wife, so much so that one of his partners had feared he’d lost his edge.

He had found out how “lost” that edge was when Alexander had bought out his share of the company.

“That pedigree serves me well in the boardroom,” Aaron said in his defense.

“Yes, but this is your *father*. You *should* go home. Aren’t you homesick? This is one helluva culture shock to be down here alone—*especially* for Christmas.”

“But you’ve been helping me not feel that way,” Aaron said softly, sincerely. “You’ve always been able to put me at ease.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, and Aaron worried he had been too frank. He knew they couldn’t just jump back into their earlier relationship, as if time hadn’t passed but merely put on pause. However much he wished for that, or how well their late-night dinner had gone, Aaron had to slow down, go at *her* pace. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her away.

“Is that why you called?” Jada asked finally.

“Am I bothering you?”

“No.”

She said it firmly, without hesitation, and it gave Aaron the push he needed to ask his next question. “Can I see you today? Are you busy?” The lack of an immediate answer pressed upon him like deadweight and he hurried on. “You owe me a tour, remember?”

“You ain’t gonna let me forget that, are you?”

“Do you want to?”

“That question isn’t fair. Things are different now.”

She kept saying that, and Aaron didn’t understand why. He didn’t think things were so different that it meant not seeing each other! “So different you can’t give an old friend, an old chum a tour of your fair city?”

Suddenly there was rustling on her side, then a high, sweet voice saying “Auntie Shae” and “breakfast.”

“Go wash up okay?” Jada murmured softly, and the wet smack of a kiss followed by dampened pattering filtered through the phone.

Aaron grinned. “Babysitting?”

She chuckled slightly. “You could call it that...”

The image of Jada with a child flitted through his mind. He imagined her beautiful and glowing with the child smiling broadly. She had always been good with kids. “I bet he loves you.”

“When he gets his way, yes,” she joked.

“All the time. No one could know you and not love you,” he said seriously.

“Aaron—”

“But yes, we can meet later since it sounds like you’re busy?” Aaron plundered on, wincing at the obvious hope in his voice, but he knew she wouldn’t begrudge him for it.

“I’ll call you,” she promised.

“I’ll be waiting.”

They hung up, and Aaron felt antsy. He put on his running shorts and a T-shirt and went downstairs to the condo complex’s gym to do a few miles on the treadmill and weight training. That should keep him occupied enough so he wouldn’t sit by the phone like a teenage girl.

Jada watched her son setting the table with Malcolm and shrieking with laughter as they raced to see who could set the most places. He was happy, healthy, and fatherless—all because she was too scared to tell Aaron. When Joshua had interrupted the phone call, Jada had almost had a heart attack, and then Aaron had commented...

That had been the first time Aaron had ever heard his son.

Jada breathed deeply, the afghan tangling in her lap and legs as she drew them on the couch. Deshae walked into the living room fully dressed and smirking.

“Mother and son were pooped!” Deshae teased. Jada and Joshua had ended up sleeping on the couch all night.

“Yeah.”

Deshae stood in front of Jada and ran her fingers through Jada’s hair. “Jamal and I are goin’ shoppin’ today and wanted to know if you and Joshie want to come.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Aaron.”

Deshae nodded, moving her fingers to the back of her neck. Jada moaned. It paid to have a masseuse living in the house! “Talked to him?”

“He heard Joshua on the phone,” Jada explained.

“Did you tell him?”

"He wants to see me," Jada whispered helplessly. And she wanted to see him.

Deshae cupped Jada's chin and tilted her face until they were eye to eye. "You've kept this secret long enough, Jada Mae," Deshae said. "What are you so afraid of? If he won't stick around, he won't stick around. You've raised Joshua beautifully thus far and if for nothin' else, *Joshua* should know the McKensie side of him—the reason why he doesn't look like the rest of us..."

Joshua was already starting to ask those difficult questions, and he was just four years old. Jada had said he and Candace's mother were the same color, and Joshua had been satisfied with that answer. Of course Calliope Ames and Joshua Channing were the same color for a reason—white fathers—but unlike Calliope, Joshua didn't know about his father. The guilt and fear of keeping this secret increased ten-fold every year Joshua got older.

"I know," Jada muttered. "I thought I was strong—"

"You *are*," Deshae insisted, squeezing Jada's chin. "This is not easy and I appreciate that; but if what you and Aaron had was a real, *true* friendship, then he'll understand."

Deshae's words remained with Jada throughout their breakfast of biscuits-from-a-can, eggs, and ham. Joshua was in a much better mood this morning, and he happily regaled them with stories from his class's party. *Aaron should be here*, Jada mused, not tasting the eggs she just fed herself. She imagined him being just as excited listening to his son's story as Joshua was telling it, and Jada winced.

She cleaned up the kitchen, needing to distract herself, and hand-washed the dishes while the boys showered and changed for their shopping excursion. Her secret was starting to weigh her down more than usual, and Jada knew it was because Aaron was back in her life. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, best for all involved, to keep her pregnancy a secret—especially when his phone calls and e-mails had stopped coming.

"Don't let that boy get you in trouble!" Candace had said more times than Jada could count, and at the beginning of her friendship with Aaron, she had thought her grandmother's warning was silly and empty. After a year had gone by, however, Jada had realized she was sinking further and further into trouble. Aaron's charm had been an undercurrent, a riptide Jada had been too weak to fight. He had lured her into the uncharted waters that was their friendship, had convinced her she could still feel the soft sand of reality under her feet, even if she could only touch it with the tips of her big toes. Jada had thought she was still close enough to swim to familiarity's safe shore.

Then, in her junior year, it had happened.

It had been a random day, ordinary and unexceptional. She couldn't even recall it except for knowing it was not yet winter but fall was definitely over. She had been tutoring a student with difficulty in English, and towards the end of this particular session, tutor and student had had a significant break-

through. Jada's joy had lasted long after the tutoring session had ended, and she had floated upon it as she said goodbye to Aaron for the night. He'd stood, looked at her with pride and something that had made her breathless, and hugged her.

"I'm proud of you, Jaybird," he'd said feather-light against the top of her head. He had held her close, squeezed her, his large hands kneading her back slightly, his thumbs caressing. She'd sighed and snuggled into him, offered a whispered "Thank you," and had allowed herself to go under.

That had been when she realized she no longer held platonic feelings for her friend...that "trouble" had felt like strong arms and smelled like Ivory soap and sounded like decadent chocolate and looked like Aaron McKensie. He hadn't *gotten* her into trouble—he *was* trouble—and she had found out too late.

"Mama! You not comin'?"

It took all of Jada's control not to jump or drop the plate she had been holding limply underneath the now lukewarm water. She smiled at Joshua as she passed the soapy sponge over the dish. "No, sweet love, Mama's gotta handle some stuff, but you have fun with Auntie Shae and everyone, okay?"

Joshua nodded and came to her hip. She set the plate in the drying rack and bent down to adjust his coat and cap. "You be my good Little Man, okay, baby?"

Joshua kissed her cheek. "Okay, Mama."

"We'll call you before we get back—should we bring dinner?" Deshae asked.

"I'm gonna stop by the Grille today so...no, you don't have to."

Deshae nodded and winked as she beckoned Joshua to her. "We're gonna get somethin' nice for Mama, ain't we?" she asked the little boy.

"Yeah!"

Malcolm walked into the living area twirling a football in his hands and Deshae arched an eyebrow. "Boy, please!"

"But—"

"Put it back!"

Malcolm grumbled but did as instructed.

"Jamal spoils him," Deshae muttered.

"Jamal loves him."

"And if you give Aaron a chance, he'd love Joshua too."

Jada watched the three of them leave as she hunched over the still-damp sink, now more conflicted than ever. She had to talk to someone...

Candace Channing set down the crochet needles and yarn she had been manipulating and frowned when Jada walked into the house. Though the holiday season could be stressful, Jada always had managed to avoid the "bah humbug!" that was so contagious during December.

Candace's frown deepened when Jada dropped a perfunctory kiss on her cheek, and her rough, wrinkled, nutmeg-colored hand grasped its younger counterpart and squeezed. "What's wrong, baby?"

Jada didn't free her hand and sat on the edge of the couch perpendicular to the easy recliner in which her grandmother sat. She looked around the living room of her youth, at the new television where before a too-large Zenith model used to sit on the floor and doubled as a mantle for pictures and albums. Lace curtains, which had belonged to Candace's grandmother Dorcas, hung on the large window behind the television. Out the window, they could see the streetlamp shine on Jada's golden Acura and Candace's across-the-street-neighbor's son taking out the garbage. The coffee table had been an anniversary present from Lincoln, with the rug Mr. Joseph had insisted on giving Candace "just because" resting underneath it, and a brand new ceiling fan whirled on low above them though it was the middle of December and the heat was on.

Candace didn't crack a window because she was too afraid of it becoming stuck.

"Joshua's father's in town...indefinitely..."

"Lawd, Lawd," Candace murmured and squeezed Jada's hand again. "You seen 'im."

"Grandma—"

"You ain't gotta say it; it's plain all over yo' face—the same look Mama Dorcas had whenever she saw or spoke of Mr. Joseph."

"Accidentally," Jada said hastily, defensively. "At the party earlier this month."

"Lawd, Lawd...had I known that boy was gonna be there, I woulda tol' you to stay home—!"

"I know, Grandma...I know..."

"So had Dorcas Ames, but that ain't stop her from carryin' on wit' Mr. Joseph for the better part of sixty years! Mama Dorcas missed out on a lovin' husband and a respected family, instead lived in sin and shame and took scraps from a man who could never love her the way she shoulda been...deserved to be—"

"Ma—"

Candace sighed deeply, as if trying to expel all of the negativity from her body. "I think you should leave 'im alone—"

"It's not that simple, Grandma. He has a son..."

"You really think that white man's gonna do right by you and his *black* son—?"

"Joshua's about a black as chalk—!"

"So was my mama! That ain't mean Mr. Joseph treated her like his daughter, even though the entire town knew she was! Mama went off to Europe because of it! You really wanna do yo' son the way Mama Dorcas did her?"

"No, I don't, but that's not gonna happen. We have a good support system here, and...Aaron isn't Mr. Joseph."

Candace sucked her teeth. "So you think! You betta ignore that man, Jada Mae! He got you in enough trouble as it is, and all he gotta do is say some purty words and get you in trouble again—"

"He has a girlfriend—"

"Mr. Joseph had a wife," Candace interrupted. "They don't care! You ain't worth nothin' more than some change minutes at night...at yo' house, because you ain't good enough to darken their doorstep and ruin the purty little picture they want everyone to believe o' 'em...but nobody does...everybody knows..."

Jada squeezed her grandmother's hand again. Candace, "Miz Dorcas's" granddaughter, the daughter of the white black lady who sang in nightclubs an ocean away. Everyone had waited to see what kind of nefarious dealings she would get into, for an Ames woman wasn't an Ames woman unless she did something to sully her reputation. For Dorcas it had been a married white man. For Calliope it had been being a passing-for-white nightclub singer. For Candace, it had been having Dorcas as a grandmother and Calliope as a mother, but people had been surprised she had managed to marry respectably.

That had been all Candace ever wanted—people to call her "Mrs. Somebody" instead of "Miz Candy" with illegitimate babies hanging off her hip. She had been successful, but then she had Lynn, and Lynn had brought the shame back by becoming a young, divorced mother. When Lynn had died, Candace had thought she would *finally* get it right with Jada, that her granddaughter would *finally* learn from Dorcas's, Calliope's, and Lynn's mistakes, but Jada hadn't.

Jada was "just like Dorcas"; at least that was what Candace had said when she had first been pregnant.

"Aaron would never treat me that way," Jada finally said, a quiet declarative with the tiniest hint of doubt.

Candace pounced upon it. "You met his parents? Gone to his house? Met his friends? He ain't treated you like a friend...he treated you like a kept woman—"

"We were best friends, Grandma. We didn't sleep with each other but once—"

"Once is all it takes—!"

"Grandma," Jada sighed, shaking her head. "I understand where you're comin' from...I really do, and I appreciate it. But...I don't know...maybe I didn't give this the proper shot? Maybe I didn't give him enough of a chance—"

"Oh, you gave him enough of a chance, all right," Candace contended, "the proof o' that is currently walkin' around and four years old!"

Jada moaned. "It's a different time—"

"Ain't that different," Candace muttered. "Know how many times someone asked me who I'm babysittin' for? I tell 'em and they look shocked, disappointed. If I had a nickel after every time I'd be rich..."

Jada knew; she had gotten the same reactions herself. Everyone in town knew who she was—the first black salutatorian at the high school, the first black person ever admitted to an Ivy League from the district. There had been such high expectations for Jada Channing, hopes that had gone beyond Candace and the "Ames Scandal," and none of them had included a white-looking baby at the age of twenty-one.

"Why're all the Ames women so naïve?" Candace continued muttering. "I'd thought some Channing blood would smarten us up down the line, but that Ames blood..."

"Without that 'Ames blood', we wouldn't be here," Jada reminded her.

Candace rolled her eyes, ignoring her. "He asked you to marry 'im yet? He talked to you since he knocked you up and lef' *before* he came down here? Chile, all that man is is lonely and he knows you so much o' a sucka you'd go there and keep him some 'company'—"

"Grandma, give me *some* credit—"

"I'm givin' you all the credit you deserve!" Candace said. "I'm too old to raise another great-grandchild! Why couldn't you be like Deshae? *She* had outside children and she managed to move on with a lovin', carin', wealthy *black* man! I'm sure there's *one* out there willin' to take care of a white man's baby!"

Jada stood, unwilling to hear her grandmother's ranting. Why had she come here, knowing how Candace felt about everything? She needed guidance, not a speech about how disappointing she was as a granddaughter!

"Jada Mae," Candace sighed, patting Jada's hand and softening her voice. "The only thing I *ever* want for you is to not live yo' life wit' regrets. You live longer and happier without 'em, and everything I've said and done was my way o' makin' sure you had as few regrets as possible. Now, I know this a new century, and I know things've changed from the last one...but one thing hasn't changed—black women are the mules in this society. Hard enough to find a decent *black* man, but *you*...why you had to go make your life more difficult and run around after a white one?"

Jada treated Candace's question as rhetorical and covered Candace's hand with her free one, rubbing the veins and wrinkles of it. "You still don't think I should tell Aaron, do you?"

"What good would that do? All that'll bring is heartache and give poor Joshua the complex he ain't good enough. I've seen it happen....I don't want that happy child thinkin' that way. You've done good raisin' him by yo'self—just wait 'til Joshua gets older and has more sense o' himself before tellin' 'im anything."

Jada turned her attention to the television; some crime drama was showing. Candace kept the set on one channel and the volume just loud enough to be audible, the television a glorified radio more than anything else.

"I can't keep this secret forever. It's not fair," Jada whispered.

"Life's not fair. If it was fair, Mama Dorcas woulda married somebody. I woulda had a mother who raised me...*you* woulda had a mother who raised you...and you woulda met a man who could love you like you ought to be loved." Candace had often said a black woman in love was the worst place for her to be—it brought nothing but heartache and misery. Jada wondered how much of that was really self-inflicted.

"I gotta go," Jada said flatly, standing but keeping their hands locked. "I'mma stop by the Grille."

"You give Joshua a thousand kisses for me," Candace said.

Jada kissed her grandmother's weathered cheek and nodded. "I'll call you when I get home." Jada left the house, no closer to a resolution than she had been when she had arrived. She didn't know if she would take Candace's advice, especially since Candace's opinion of Aaron was biased. Yet if Jada knew the real Aaron instead of the boogey-man one Candace had in her mind, why didn't she just tell him?

Jada hated being so torn.

SIX

Aaron wasn't nervous...*too* nervous...

"Liar," he whispered to himself, glaring at his reflection in the mirror. Aaron pulled off his shirt and threw it on the ever-growing pile of garments on his bed. He wanted to be casual, but not *too* casual...not *too* formal. He felt like Goldilocks trying to find something "just right," but it was taking much more than three attempts to do it.

He had tried not to sound like an excited puppy when Jada had agreed to take him on a tour of the city, and though he had just finished a six-mile run on the treadmill and an hour-long weight-training session, Jada's voice had provided him with a second wind. The tips of his inky hair were still damp from his shower though his beard was dry, and the charcoal trousers he ultimately chose to wear rode low and unzipped around his slim hips. His chest was bare and cool as he draped shirt after rejected shirt across it, the mantra *This is not a date*...going through his head. He didn't bother thinking about how much more he stressed over this "non-date" than any date he'd ever had.

Finally, he decided on a dark-blue oxford with black buttons and opted out of wearing a sweater. That was too New York...too Hamptons...he wondered if Jada were this antsy.

The condo door buzzed and the foreign flutter in his stomach had him exhaling a harsh breath as he walked to it and pressed the intercom's button.

"Who is it?"

A brief moment of silence before, "Jada..."

Aaron took a deep breath. "Come on up."

He unlocked the downstairs door for her, then ran back into his room and threw the piles of clothes into his closet. He checked himself one last time, then went into the living room, debating whether to wait by the door or sit on the couch. He stood in indecisive limbo until he heard the knock on his door. He shook himself, looking like an out-of-control puppet, before walking slowly to the door so that he wouldn't give into the urge of running to it.

He gripped the knob when the peephole revealed Jada on the other side of the threshold looking radiant. Her light pink turtleneck brought out the red undertones of her skin, and her hair was in two braided pigtails tied together by a rubber band at her nape. Dark blue jeans and black boots completed her ensemble, and Aaron was glad he erred on the more casual side.

"Hi," she said, offering him a tiny smile when he opened the door. "Sorry I'm late—I stopped by the restaurant to pick up some dinner for home and dropped it there."

His returning one was instinctive, reactionary, and he released his death grip on the knob to grasp Jada's hand and pull her inside. "That's all right. Come in..." He gave her a mini tour of his condo; though sparsely furnished, it was staring to feel like home.

"I think your living room is bigger than my entire apartment!" Jada chuckled.

Aaron laughed and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry?"

"Not your fault," she said and eased her hand out of his. He hadn't been aware he was still holding it. Her finger ran along his black leather couch and she stared at his flat-panel plasma television that hung on his wall like a painting. "Malcolm wants one for Christmas."

Aaron's heart constricted. "Malcolm?"

"My girlfriend's son. Jamal has one at his house, and Malcolm loves it."

"Jamal?"

"Jamal Green? Star running back of the team you work with?"

"Oh...right."

Aaron shouldn't have felt as relieved as he did, and he slipped his hands in his pockets to keep from pumping them in the air victoriously. So Jamal dated Jada's friend...they should have a chat soon...

Jada grinned. "And you kept the coffee table."

"It's a good table." Aaron walked towards the glass table that had seen a lot of pizza, Indian, Chinese, and laptops in its seven-year history.

"I wrote the majority of my thesis on that table," Jada murmured. "Well, the first draft."

"How did you do on that, by the way?"

She ducked her head and mumbled, "Magna."

"Congrats!" Aaron said with a large smile. "Not that I expected anything less!"

He had stayed up many a night with her as she worked on the first draft of her thesis, providing snacks, caffeine, and support: *Brown v. Board's Fine Print: How Latent Racism and Lowered Expectation Undermine the Promise of Integrated Education*, if he remembered the title of her thesis correctly. He had learned much from reading her drafts, how her personal experiences had inspired her topic. He also understood why she was so passionate about tutoring at the community center. She hadn't wanted the children—mostly poor, mostly

children of color, mostly “at-risk”—to fall by the wayside because no one supported them...had *faith* in them. Everywhere around them were messages of “you can’t”; “you won’t”; “you aren’t”; and if Jada had to be the lone voice saying, “you can, you will, you are,” then she would shout it from the rooftops if necessary. Aaron had been naïve when he first started the mentoring program with Philip. He thought it would look good on his résumé, had been feeling guilty about his wealth when there were people...just down the street...who were lucky to scrape up enough money to pay a rent that cost less than a pair of shoes he owned. Philip’s interest was similar to Jada’s, but not nearly as passionate, as he had come from money too. Jada had helped make them more sensitive to their young charges.

“It’s hard,” Jada had said once as she worked on her thesis. “To fully understand how much of a pariah you can become if you decide to succeed academically instead of athletically—not that there should be a choice, you should do both—but when everything around you says, ‘be a basketball player! be a football player!’, and there’s a certain kind of *status* and *celebrity* and *instantaneous payback* to it...it’s often the most attractive route.”

“But it’s fleeting,” Aaron had said.

“And there’s the rub,” Jada had replied. “There’s the rub...”

Yet here she was, going to school to become a teacher, to follow through on the work she’d started in college while he’d all but abandoned the idea of internship he’d talked about establishing, letting the idealism of his college days shrink in the midst of business and competition.

Jada humbled him.

“Are you ready to go?”

He started, unaware he’d drifted off into his memories. She was twirling her keys in her hands and looking at him expectantly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Lead the way.”

The afternoon was cloudy and chilly, so they stayed in car for most of the tour. It seemed very well lived in, and the car seat he’d noticed earlier was no longer there, in its place a pile of textbooks and burger wrappers from Wendy’s.

“How did you do on the paper?” he asked. He would inquire about the car seat later.

“I think I did all right on it,” she said, making a left onto Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive into downtown Atlanta. “Even if I had to rush through the editing process.”

Aaron grinned, drumming his hand on the handle above the car door. “Want me to apologize for wanting to spend time with you?”

She sucked her teeth. “Why do you have to say it like that?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

Jada’s response was to point out the campus of Georgia State University.

The tour took about an hour, accounting for traffic, and the fact the best sites were better seen in warmer temperatures. As Jada began driving back to his condo, Aaron was struck by a thought.

“What about *your* place?”

“My place, what?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “It’s not included on the tour?”

Jada snorted and shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Why the fascination? It’s not nearly as grand as yours...”

Aaron wouldn’t be deterred, however, his desire to see where she lived growing even more because of her reluctance. “What if I want to visit you? Isn’t that what friends do? Or...how am I going to get your Christmas present to you—?”

“That’s *really* not necessary—”

“It is,” Aaron insisted. “I have about four years’ worth of Christmas presents to give you.” Jada stopped abruptly at a red light, causing Aaron to clutch the handle he had been drumming on in surprise. “All right?”

“No...I feel sick...”

She looked sick, too, or at the very least distressed, and Aaron placed a gentle hand to her cheek. She didn’t feel warm, but it was better to be safe about these things.

“Pull over,” Aaron demanded. “I’ll drive.”

She didn’t argue, pulling into a strip mall’s parking lot and getting out of the car. In a flash, Aaron was at her side, helping her to the passenger’s door. He was just opening the door when her forehead rested against his chest; and he, unable to resist, put his arms around her.

“Let’s get you home, yeah?” he murmured. She nodded.

It would have to be his home, he realized as he got into the driver’s seat. Aaron wasn’t too disappointed...it meant a few more minutes with her before she left again.

“Do you need me to carry you?”

Aaron had said it seriously, but his eyes sparkled, his mouth in a boyish grin, and Jada didn’t know whether to smack him or kiss him.

“I can walk,” Jada said instead, and he helped her out of the car into his building.

His condo. It had to be *his* place because he didn’t know where she lived...and couldn’t know that until she told him about his son.

He held her close as they walked, but not too close to make her uncomfortable, although she was fairly sure that was impossible. He kept shooting her concerned glances as well, and it was all she could do not to sag against him.

Once inside his place, Aaron eased her onto the couch and took off her shoes, then draped a blanket over her.

"I'll be right back," he promised, then disappeared around the corner into what she assumed was his kitchen.

Jada blew out a breath and drew the blanket over her face. She couldn't do this...she couldn't keep this secret from him, not now that he was *here*. It was much easier to do when they were apart, when she thought they would never see each other again, when she thought he hadn't *cared*; but between the Waffle House and the tour, five years' worth of building barriers was falling down as if they had been made with little more than popsicle sticks.

Her stomach roiled and she moaned. Her head pounded and she burrowed deeper into the cushions. It was as if her body were rebelling, repelling the secret out of her, as if she'd been carrying a dormant disease that all of a sudden decided to activate. But Aaron had his own life now, with his own girlfriend—what did it matter that their one night stand had produced a child?

"A clear conscience," she muttered. Since Aaron's return into her life, her guilt had gone from an irritating tag in her shirt to a two-ton weight she dragged on her back. She wasn't strong enough to haul it around anymore.

So consumed she was in her thoughts that she didn't hear Aaron's return, but she groaned when he pulled the blanket from her face.

"It's aspirin," he said, holding out his palm with two circular white pills sitting atop it.

"Thank you," she whispered, taking them from his hand and popping them in her mouth. He gave her a glass of water and she drank from it, nearly draining the contents in one gulp before lying back down on the couch. He set the glass on the coffee table and knelt beside her, smoothing his hand over her hair. She closed her eyes at his comforting touch, and the image of him doing this to their son came unbidden and sharp, bringing tears to her eyes.

"You work too hard, Jaybird," he said quietly, his fingers tucking tendrils of hair behind her ear before cupping her cheek. "Studying, early-morning breakfasts, babysitting...when do you ever make time for *you*?"

They had been reunited for barely two weeks and he was already reciting Deshae's and Candace's speech.

"It's not that simple," Jada whispered.

"You were never the type to say 'no' to anything," Aaron said, and she heard him chuckle. "There were times I threatened to fire you from the mentoring program because you practically lived there...remember?"

She did, as she'd spent so much of her "free time" at the center that she would feel bereft when she didn't have to go.

"You ought to let someone take care of you once in a while," he said.

That was a luxury she couldn't afford, especially not now.

Jada clasped the hand at her cheek, and he rested his forehead against hers. She had missed this, the easy closeness she had with Aaron, and was a little disconcerted it hadn't taken more time for them to fall back into it.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his breath fanning against her nose and mouth.

“Why?”

He sighed. “Abandoning you the way I did.”

Jada’s throat tightened and she shook her head. “You didn’t—”

“I did,” Aaron insisted. “I stopped calling, e-mailing...everything. I couldn’t handle—”

“Handle?” Jada’s heart clenched, and so did the hand holding his. Did he know? Did he find out about Joshua?

Aaron drifted his nose against her hairline and cheek. “My feelings for you...”

Jada blew out a deep, harsh breath, her heart beating so hard she felt it would break through her chest. She sat up, Aaron moving away from her, but not too far as he knelt in front of her and rested his arms outside her thighs.

“Jada—”

“I have something to tell you...show you,” she whispered.

“You can tell me anything, love.”

“I would’ve told you sooner...maybe...” Jada murmured, looking into her lap rather than at him. Shaking her head, she reached blindly for her purse, giving Aaron a small thank you when he placed it in her lap.

Her hands trembled and her breath was shallow as she looked for her wallet. Aaron caressed the outside of her thighs as if to calm her, but Jada didn’t know if he were succeeding.

Jada found the wallet and squeezed it before pulling it out. She felt his eyes on her, his curiosity, but ignored them. Opening the wallet, she flipped through the photographs until she found one in particular. She gave the wallet to Aaron wordlessly, still not looking at him, not having the courage to do so.

For a minute...a lifetime...all she heard was breathing, her heartbeat...his, until finally—

“Jada...”

She couldn’t tell by his tone what he was thinking, and she still couldn’t look at him. She prepared excuses in her head, her reasons for keeping Aaron in the dark, when suddenly his fingers grasped her chin and forced her eyes to his.

“I have a son?”

Jada nodded, closing her eyes again, but he shook her head to keep them open.

“Why didn’t you *tell* me?” he whispered fiercely, his eyes getting teary. “He’s...my God, Jada—*four years*—and I didn’t even know!”

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed, her throat too tight to use her voice.

He shook her head again, then, to her immense surprise, hugged her. When she heard him sniffle, she let loose her regret, sadness, and shame onto his shoulder. His grip around her waist tightened almost to the point of pain.

How long they remained that way she didn’t know, but soon his hold slackened, her tears stopped, and they were reclined on the couch again,

touching each other as if to reaffirm the other's presence. He rested half on top of her, but she didn't mind his weight; she drew comfort from it.

"You should've told me, Jada," he said, his lips brushing her neck.

"I wanted to—"

"Why didn't you?" When she didn't answer right away, he tilted her chin so she would look at him.

"Are you angry?" Jada asked instead, bracing herself for his answer.

"Honestly? I'm more hurt than angry," he said. "I thought we were friends...*best* friends...that we loved and trusted each other—"

"We had sex and I got pregnant," Jada said. "One night stand and now...I knew you didn't plan on having children—"

"I didn't," Aaron conceded, moving his hand from her chin to her neck. "And neither did you. It takes two to create a baby, Jada, and it takes two to raise it."

"I've had plenty of help—"

"But not mine, and I'm the one who should've been there the most," Aaron said with an edge.

Was he really that naïve? "What about your girlfriend, huh? Your parents? You think they'll be happy to know you got a black baby runnin' around—"

"He's not all *that* black—"

"Oh, no you didn't!" Jada whispered, bristling at his comment despite the fact she had said the same thing on numerous occasions. She tried getting up but he pressed her back into the cushions.

"He looks just like me, love," Aaron said, then he sighed and nodded, "but I would love him if he were purple and orange with yellow stripes. That's *my* son...and he's beautiful." He moved his hand to her too soft, too rounded tummy, and Jada held her breath. "I regret not being able to see you grow with him inside you."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

His green eyes were dark when they met hers. "There's a lot of things that should be said but haven't been, Jada."

"I was afraid," she admitted, ducking her head. "I was afraid you'd hate me for ruining your life—"

"Don't you know that's impossible?" he asked sharply, lifting her hands and kissing the backs of them. "I could *never* hate you—!"

"Or that you'd regret it once you found out—"

"I regret," he began, rubbing his nose against hers, "not being there for you...that you thought you couldn't depend on me—"

"Aaron—"

"I regret," he continued, kissing her cheek, "that I didn't tell you I loved you."

Jada shook her head. "Aaron—"

"I should've told you that from the beginning."

"We're friends—"

"I loved you as more than a friend, Jada."

"Don't say things like that."

It was easier to deal with her feelings when there wasn't the possibility of him feeling the same, of him breaking her heart...without seeing her happiness staring her in the face. Dreams offered a safety that reality didn't. There was no risk in fantasy.

"Veronica," Jada whispered. That was her ace and she would play it.

Aaron sighed. "Jada..."

"Don't tell me you two are 'just friends'. You are more than friends, Aaron, if you sleep with her." Jada knew his history with Veronica, and when she'd seen him at the party with the raven-haired beauty on his arm, it had struck her how well they *fit*. It was appropriate...*right*...for them to be together.

"So does that mean we're 'more than friends'?" he asked quietly.

Jada paused, wincing. "It was a one time thing with us—a fluke—"

"Liar."

Jada gasped at his audacity. "*Excuse me?*"

"You heard me," Aaron said, hands sliding up her sides to her underarms. "You never do anything lightly, Jada...you would have never slept with me if I were only just your 'friend'—"

"I had wine—"

"You had no barriers," Aaron corrected. "You were true to yourself for the first time...and so was I."

Jada shuddered and closed her eyes. That night had been a touchstone in her life, and the fact Aaron realized that left her disconcerted. That had been the first time she'd succumbed to her heart's desire, turned off the background noise that was her grandmother, her society, her history, and allowed herself to make a decision that was solely and genuinely hers.

"They seem down again."

Jada kept her eyes closed and let out a small breath. "They what?"

His arms moved to her waist and he tightened them. She felt the soft flutter of lips at her jaw. "Barriers."

"Mine?"

"Ours." His finger drifted down her nose and he sighed. "You've left me stunned with this revelation, Jada. Reeling."

She opened her eyes and frowned. "You have to be angry."

"That'll probably come later," he admitted. "But right now...I just want to see my son."

"Just like that?"

"Like what?"

"You just accept him like that? Want to see him?"

Aaron's hands went to her stomach again. "We created a child, Jada. How could I not love him?"

Jada dropped her head and she began weeping once more. All of this wasted time because of her fear and lack of faith in him...in the reasons why she loved him. She had been born with the curse of second-guessing, and she almost denied a father his son because of it. She realized then she didn't need him to be angry with her—she was angry enough for the both of them.

“Don't do that, love,” Aaron said, wiping her tears and kissing her forehead. “We'll get through this...”

Well, Jada latched onto that word even as she latched onto him. There was a saying that the first step was always the hardest, and for Jada, that was never truer. Now it had been taken, and they would begin down that path toward healing.

SEVEN

It wasn't until later, as he sat staring at his phone, that Aaron fully understood the hesitancy that had prevented Jada from contacting him all those years ago. The receiver was just inches away, and he knew the number by heart, yet he couldn't bring himself to call his parents and tell them they were grandparents.

Jada was asleep in his bedroom, exhausted from the emotional wringer they'd just endured, though he wanted nothing more than to go in there and watch her sleep...hold her while they slept.

A son...

This effectively shot to hell any plans his father might have had about "keeping it in the family." Jada was not family. She was so far from family she was a non-issue...or had been, until she'd borne the next McKensie in the line.

He was a beautiful baby boy.

Aaron didn't think that because of Joshua's uncanny resemblance to him, but rather because even through the picture Aaron could see a joy and an innocence that had been nurtured by Jada, and that beauty went beyond physical.

A buzz came from Jada's purse that was half falling off the coffee table. He checked the clock and winced, not realizing how late it was, and knew someone would be concerned about her. He answered the phone.

"Jada?"

"I'm sorry; she can't come to the phone right now—"

"Aaron?"

Well, wasn't he at a slight disadvantage? "This is he. May I ask who is calling?"

"This is Deshae—is she all right?"

Deshae, Jada's best friend. He'd never spoken to her before; but with all the stories Jada had told him, Aaron felt as if he knew her. "It's finally nice to talk to you."

"Is she all right?" Deshae asked again.

Aaron chuckled silently. No nonsense. He liked that. "She's sleeping. She hadn't been feeling well..."

"Need me to come get her? Where do you live—?"

"I'd rather not wake her," Aaron said. "And I can bring her home tomorrow if that's okay..." *I can see my son...*

Deshae didn't answer immediately. "She told you."

Aaron didn't even bother to ask her to clarify. "Yes."

Deshae blew out a breath. "Dang gum, I ain't think she would do it..."

"How is he?"

"Who? Oh, Joshua...he's fine..."

Aaron's heart clenched and he smiled. "Is he sleeping?"

"Right tuckered out he is," Deshae answered with a small laugh. "Damn near wore me out goin' from store to store—" She abruptly stopped talking and Aaron held his breath. "I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"You make it very easy to talk to."

Aaron flushed a little at that. "Is that a bad thing?"

"I'm not sure," Deshae said honestly. "What are your intentions with them?"

"I intend to be there for them," he answered without hesitation.

"*Them?*"

"Yes, *them.*"

Deshae lowered her voice. "Listen, Aaron. I realize you just got the mother of all bombs dropped in your lap, and from what Jada's told me about you, you always want to make things right with the world. But you gotta realize some things can never be made right."

Aaron didn't like where this was going. "What's your point, Deshae?"

"My point is you think real long and hard before you go makin' promises you can't keep," she said, her tone firm and full of caution, though wistful as well.

Aaron opened his mouth to respond, but changed his mind. Deshae was right. He had to think. Everything about this was complicated and messy, and he realized it would've been complicated and messy even if Jada had told him when she'd been pregnant. Well, *less* messy since he wouldn't have been with Veronica.

Veronica...

Aaron groaned and swiped his hand over his face. Not only would he have to tell his parents about Joshua, but Veronica as well. He was looking forward to that conversation about as much as he was a root canal. She would be even less happy about it, especially given how she'd talked about Jada not weeks before.

"You understand?" Deshae asked.

"I understand, doesn't mean I have to like it."

“You think Jada’s been thrilled about this predicament—?”

“If she had *told* me when she was *pregnant*—”

“What would you have done, Aaron?” Deshae asked seriously. “She made the best decision she knew at the time. You weren’t beholden to her, and she wasn’t beholden to you. Young, lower-middle-class black girl going to *Harvard* all of a sudden knocked up by one of the richest white men in the world? C’mon, now!”

“She never gave me a chance! I would’ve been there for her! I love that woman!”

That seemed to drain whatever fight had been in Deshae, if her gasp were any indication. “Aaron...”

He’d picked a hell of a time to own up to his feelings, hadn’t he? Now, when he wasn’t in a place to explore any of them fully, he decided to claim them. Why was he doing this to himself? Why was he doing this to Jada? He had a little boy to think about now. This wasn’t the time to be selfish, although he wanted nothing more than to whisk them all away to his villa in Tuscany to hide out there and play house without his parents or Veronica or anyone else interfering.

“You never told her,” Deshae deduced.

“I kind of just did,” Aaron muttered.

“And she didn’t believe you.”

“Not really...”

“Idiot,” Deshae said under her breath. “She just can’t let herself be happy...sometimes I blame her grandmother for that, but she does a hell of a good job of it herself—”

“Her grandmother?”

Deshae ignored him. “Well, when you bring Jada home tomorrow, I’ll have Joshua all dressed and ready for you. My son and I—”

“Malcolm,” Aaron murmured, recalling that tidbit of information from his and Jada’s previous conversations.

“Yes,” Deshae said, and Aaron could hear the smile in her voice. “We’ll make ourselves scarce for the introduction—”

“I’d like to meet you,” Aaron found himself saying. He’d like to meet the woman who meant so much to Jada...who’d clearly helped her when he couldn’t.

“Oh, don’t think you ain’t!” Deshae chuckled. “But we’ve had a fairly decent conversation now and...your son is more important.”

My son...

“You’re gonna love him,” Deshae said tenderly.

“I love him already.”

“There’s a lot of you in him—more than just looks,” Deshae said. “She says so all the time.”

Aaron blinked back tears. “God, this is all so fucked up.”

"And the beauty of this is it can all be un-fucked. It'll be as hard as hell to do, but it can be done."

"Priority one is my family," Aaron said, having the first clear thought since the revelation.

"Your parents?"

"No. My child and his mother. They're my family now, no matter what anyone else says. They come first."

"Even if Jada says differently?"

"Especially Jada," Aaron said.

Deshae, to his surprise, laughed heartily. "I so see why she fell in love with you now! I do..."

"She loves me?"

Deshae didn't stop laughing. "You just as slow as she is if you ain't figure that out!"

He had, he just couldn't deal with it, but it was good to know she still did. Actually, quite excellent to know that. "She doesn't hate me?"

"She couldn't if she tried," Deshae admitted.

"Has she?"

"No. But she's tried to move on without you, though it's kind of hard with your clone starin' her in the face every day!"

"I don't want her to move on without me," Aaron said, his voice steel.

"Then you're gonna have to make it safe for her to stick with you. You're a dangerous S.O.B.," Deshae said. "And Jada's all about self-preservation."

"Dangerous?"

"You're in Atlanta now, son, you'll figure out why soon enough." Deshae sighed. "It's late, and I should get my black ass to bed. Can't wait to meet you tomorrow!"

"Goodnight," Aaron said, then folded up Jada's cell phone to end the call. That had been a most...enlightening conversation, as enlightening as it was unsettling. He had a sneaking suspicion his danger had to do with something he couldn't control, and it irritated him. It was the twenty-first century! Things like that shouldn't matter anymore...

"Shit."

He went to the bedroom. Jada was sleeping and hugging his pillow underneath her ear, still fully clothed, as Aaron hadn't had the guts to make her more comfortable. He shook his head and went into his drawers, looking for a full set of pajamas, knowing his usual attire of boxers would be inappropriate. Finally finding a set, he went into the bathroom and began changing.

His face looked foreign now, older, he determined as he slipped on the bottoms. Like a father's. A switch had been flipped, one that turned on his protective nature, his desire to provide almost overwhelming. His need to love. His need to see and hold his future. Jada had given that to him, a dream he hadn't even realized he wanted until it came true. In hindsight, it explained his

hesitation to move things along with Veronica though they had been exclusive for almost three years. It explained why whenever his father talked about marriage and “the next generation” he grew frustrated because he couldn’t see any of that—or at least couldn’t see the image he wanted to see.

Who knew that all along he’d already had it?

A crash jarred him out of his musings, and he opened the door quickly. The bed was empty, his lamp in pieces on the floor.

“Shit!” he swore again, dropping the top he had been about to don and going into the living room. Jada was there, trembling, fumbling, and he went to her, cooing at her to calm down.

“I’m such an awful mother! I didn’t call! Deshae must be so worried! And Josh—”

“They’re fine, love,” Aaron said, his hands grasping her shoulders gently. “Deshae called—”

“She was worried,” Jada said, bottom lip going between her teeth.

“Yes,” Aaron said, and he squeezed her shoulders. “But she knows you’re here and that I’m going to take you home in the morning—”

“In the morning?”

“You should sleep.”

Jada frowned, her purse limp in her hands. “What?”

“I told her I’d take you home.”

“My car—”

“Will be all right in the parking lot for another day,” Aaron said. “Please, Jada...”

“I have errands...work...”

Jada was far too practical for her own good sometimes, and Aaron’s face fell. She stared at a spot on his chest, her cheeks slightly flushed, and Aaron blushed as well. He’d forgotten he was shirtless.

“You haven’t changed at all,” she said, voice still soft. She dropped her purse and touched him, and Aaron couldn’t have stopped his shiver if he tried. “Not fair.”

He held her hand to his chest and his voice dropped low. “I have changed. I’m a father now.”

Her mouth quirked and she shook her head. “And I’m a mother, but I have the body to prove it too!”

“It’s as beautiful as it’s always been.”

“Always?”

She sounded so unsure, and Aaron cursed himself for all of those missed opportunities. “I’ve always thought you beautiful, Jaybird.”

Jada pulled her hands away and stepped back, slipping her hands into the rear pockets of her jeans. “I think I’m all right to drive home.”

“I don’t think—”

“I can’t stay here.”

Aaron didn't move, though he wanted to touch her again. "Why not?"
"You know why."

"It's late," Aaron said lamely. "And I can sleep on the couch."

"I drove to the Waffle House and it was late. And I drove home."

"You can be so stubborn," Aaron muttered. "If you really can't stand to be with me why don't you just come out and say it?"

Truth be told, he couldn't stand it, either. If she stayed, they would be on precarious ground because he knew that he wouldn't be able not to touch her. Not kiss her.

"I should go home for Joshua—"

"Don't you hide behind our son, Jada," Aaron demanded, feeling a slight flutter at "our son."

That forced her eyes to his, and she smiled a little. "Sometimes I think he's more yours than mine."

"He's ours."

"He's more a McKensie than a Channing."

"He's both."

"Yes...biologically."

"In every way possible," Aaron said, going to her and framing her face. "I'm not going to abandon you two. Sorry to say but you're stuck with me."

Jada sighed heavily and stepped further into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist and snuggling into him. "That's sweet of you to say—"

"And it's even sweeter since I mean it," Aaron said with a little grin, resting his cheek atop her head.

They didn't say anything for a while, and Aaron was content holding her. He didn't want her to go back to her apartment. He didn't want her to leave him ever again. As far as he was concerned, she could move in tonight—she and Joshua. He would turn his study into a bedroom for their son, build up a wall and section of a space in the living room for his new study—

The future was damn easy to embrace when it was the one he wanted.

"Stay tonight," Aaron whispered.

"What are you really askin' me, Aaron?"

He held her closer. "I want you to stay indefinitely, but we'll start with tonight."

She shook her head, but her hands slid up his back to his shoulder blades, then back down again. "This is a bad idea, Aaron."

"The best idea I've ever had," he insisted, his own hands sliding underneath her sweater to touch the bare skin of her back. He felt her tremors and smoothed them away.

She pulled back, and they stared at one another, hands still caressing, soothing. Comforting. He kissed her forehead slowly then rested his against it.

"Stay," he said. He needed her to stay.

"Okay."

He couldn't help smiling. Kissing her nose quickly, he pulled out of the embrace, his fingers tangling with hers, and led her back into his bedroom. She tightened her hold on his hand and he stopped. "Yeah?"

"You've got somethin' for me to sleep in?"

He eyed the pajama top on the floor and he picked it up, shaking it out a little and holding it to her. "Will this do?"

"Will it fit?"

He spread the shirt over her torso and cocked his head. "I think it should. May be a little snug, but you won't get any complaint from me."

Jada rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth. "Pervert."

"No, just a heterosexual man who appreciates the beautiful feminine form," Aaron said with a devilish grin.

"Do you have shorts I can wear for bottoms?" Jada asked, smiling a little at his comment and grin.

"Why don't you go slip this on and I'll knock when I find some bottoms," Aaron suggested. She nodded and went into the bathroom. He looked through his workout wear drawer, finding a pair whose elastic was gone and knocked on the bathroom door. "I got some shorts."

"Okay." She slipped a hand through the crack of the door and Aaron gave them to her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The door closed again and Aaron picked up a pillow from the bed. He looked on the shelf of his closet for the blanket. He would sleep on the couch, despite his desire to sleep with Jada and hold her. He would be a gentleman about this, even if it pushed his self-control to the limit.

He had just garnered purchase on the blanket when the bathroom door opened again. "Do you need help?"

Aaron had to snort at that. Jada was almost a foot shorter than he was! "I've got it—"

The blanket gave way, to his surprise, and sent him tumbling onto the bed, the blanket flying with him and covering his face. He heard Jada's bark of laughter immediately go to muffled giggles, and his cheeks burned in embarrassment. So much for being smooth!

"You all right?"

"My pride isn't," Aaron groused. The blanket was moved from his face only for Jada's upside down one to command his vision. Unthinkingly, he lifted his hand to cup her cheek, his thumb caressing her chin. "And you don't think you're beautiful..."

She ducked her head slightly and eased it out of his grip before taking the pillow and the blanket away from him.

"Where are you going?!"

"To the couch—"

"Oh, no—you've got the bed and I've got the couch—"

"This is your place—"

"When has that ever stopped me from giving you the bed before?"

"I've never slept in your bed, Aaron."

She was right. They'd usually stayed on the couch because that was where they ended up falling asleep.

"You did earlier."

"I hope you didn't haul my heavy self—"

"I didn't," Aaron admitted. "I got you awake enough to walk you there. But trust me; I would have no qualms carrying you anywhere."

She held the blanket and pillows tighter to her chest. "I don't want to put you out."

"As far as I'm concerned this place is as much yours as it is mine."

Jada rolled her eyes. "Aaron—"

"We'll talk about this later. Right now, we both need sleep."

He approached her, prying the blanket and pillow from her grasp. "I call couch," he said, smacking another kiss on her forehead and leaving her in the room. "Goodnight!"

Even as he set up his couch for sleeping, he expected Jada to march in and fight him on it. However, when he slid under the blanket and put his head on the pillow, there was still no Jada, and he grinned.

Another barrier down.

Sunlight tugged Jada out of sleep as it usually did—that was, when Joshua didn't get to her first—and she stretched, her eyes remaining closed. She didn't need to open them to know she wasn't in her bed, or in her apartment for that matter. She was in *his* bed, *his* apartment, and she groaned, jealous that his sheets and mattress were ten times softer than hers were.

When Jada opened her eyes, she winced at the broken lamp on the floor. She would have to pay him back for that. In her disorientation last night, she'd knocked it over accidentally as it was where her alarm clock should've been had she been in her own room.

She stretched again as she sat up, careful not to place her bare feet on the glass. Looking around his room, she felt warm, though the colors were cool, ranging from black to brown to blue.

Cozy.

Jada shook her head of that all too enticing thought and left the bed, going down the little hall and saw Aaron still asleep, one leg hanging over the armrest and the other on the coffee table. Jada thought he looked adorable, especially since that was how Joshua often ended up asleep—sprawled. She smiled as she made her way to what she assumed was the kitchen, but paused at its threshold.

Stainless steel appliances, black marble countertops—space! It was a chef's dream-come-true kitchen. She stared at the pot rack where Caphalon cookware hung, and her fingers itched to give them a test run.

Jada averted her eyes quickly, looking for a closet that would be big enough for a broom. She spotted it next to the oven, and upon opening the door, saw a cordless sweeper and a vacuum. Jada grabbed the sweeper, knowing the vacuum would make too much noise, and went back to Aaron's room.

The clean up didn't take very long, the sweeper surprisingly powerful and compact. She went back into the kitchen and dumped the debris in the trashcan underneath the sink before putting the sweeper back in its place. However, she was unable to dispel her curiosity, so she began investigating the kitchen, going first to the refrigerator.

It wasn't stocked very well, but then again, Aaron didn't really have time to cook. Beer, orange juice, lunchmeat, butter, cheese, takeout cartons were the primary fare inside, but there were some eggs that hadn't gone bad yet, a brand-new carton of milk, bell peppers, and a long rope of Italian sausage. She snorted at that one.

"Omelet."

Impulsive though the thought was, she couldn't help but get excited. It was the least she could do, and it wouldn't take that long...

Never mind her selfish desire to get her hands on that cookware!

Grinning, she washed her hands in the sink before pulling out the ingredients, rinsing the peppers, and looking through the cabinets until she found a nice-sized glass mixing bowl. She prepared the eggs in there before tackling the pot rack, cheering when she saw the stools at the breakfast bar. Jada climbed upon it, knees on the seat, and reached out to grab the handle.

Just a little further...

"You know you could always ask for help."

Jada squealed, and would've toppled off the stool had a solid body and arms not prevented it. Her heart beat wildly, and she sagged against the person holding her.

"Sorry," Aaron said, voice deeper than usual. He removed one arm from around her to grab the frying pan she wanted and handed it to her. "There."

Jada growled. "You," *thwack!*, "are," *thwack!*, "such," *thwack!*, "a," *thwack!*, "punk!" *thwack!*

Aaron merely laughed, seemingly unaffected by the fact he had just been abused by his own frying pan, and placed his lips to her ear. "You're welcome, love."

"Ooh!"

Still laughing, he helped her set her feet on the floor and Jada refused to look at him, marching to the sink to wash the pan.

"Oh, come on, Jaybird," Aaron cooed, coming behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You did!"

He shrugged. "Well, maybe a little, but I had no intention of making you almost fall."

She took a deep breath, trying not to think of how wonderful his arms felt around her. His fingers pressed against her belly and she made a sound of protest. "Stop."

"Stop what?" He squeezed his arms, then reached and took the pan from her hands and finished washing it. He grabbed the towel from its rack and dried first the pan, then his hands, and then hers, making her chuckle.

"You are so silly."

"One of these days I'm going to sue you for slander!" he muttered, drying each finger individually and thoroughly. Jada laughed.

"It's not slander if it's true!" She sighed as he kissed the back of her now dry hands. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said and smiled. "Omelets." Jada nodded. "I'm excited."

"Sorry for snooping."

"*Mi casa es su casa*," he said.

"What? No Italian?"

He chuckled and bent near her ear again. "*Mia casa è la sua casa*." She shivered again and he chuckled, putting his nose near her neck. "You smell good."

"What?" She hadn't washed yet.

"Yes. You smell like me."

Jada was too stunned to respond, especially when he snuck in a kiss to her neck and abruptly moved away from her. She stared at the frying pan on the drying rack as if it held the clarity her muddled mind sought. Shaking her head again, she took the pan and put it on the stove.

Aaron decided to stay and actually be helpful instead of a nuisance. They worked in tandem, seamlessly, and Jada thought of the times Joshua would help her fix whatever breakfast they would have on the weekends. Once done, they sat at the breakfast bar to eat.

"This is good," Aaron said after a few bites, a forkful of omelet hovering at his mouth before he slid it inside.

"I am a cook, y'know," Jada said with a smile, staring at her own plateful of half-eaten omelet.

"About as good as Mama."

"Then I have succeeded."

Another stretch of companionable silence followed while they finished their meal. As soon as she ate the last bite, Aaron stole her plate and took it to the sink to rinse it off before putting it in the pull out dishwasher. He turned around, elbows resting on the countertop above the machine, and they stared at each other for a moment.

"I reckon I should get dressed and go back home—"

"I'll take you."

"I'm fine," Jada insisted, sliding from the stool, her hands bunching in the hem of his pajama top. "I can make it home by myself."

Aaron blinked at her, not moving from his spot, but she saw his muscles tighten. "Jada—"

"I'll call you—"

"You'll forgive me if I don't have as much faith in that promise as I should," Aaron said frankly.

Jada jerked as if he had slapped her, and then left the kitchen. The rebuke hurt, his lack of trust in her wounding. She grabbed her clothes and went into his bathroom, ignoring him calling her name.

"Jada, I'm sorry," Aaron said through the bathroom door.

She took off the clothes she wore. "But you meant it." She yanked on her sweater and hiked up her jeans over her hips.

He blew out a breath. "I didn't—"

"On some level you did and you have every right to feel that way." That was what had hurt the most—his righteous anger...the fact she had put it there. Jada tried very hard not to make people upset, to make everything as painless as possible, and this had been one giant backfire. She folded his clothes and hugged them to her chest as she opened the door. He looked startled by her sudden appearance, and she thrust his folded clothes into his arms.

"Thank you for puttin' me up for the night, and I *will* call—"

"Don't leave like this," Aaron said softly. The clothes fell onto the floor as he grasped her upper arms gently. "Don't leave angry—"

"I'm not angry..." *At least not at you...*

He squeezed. "I want to see him today."

"I'll call you," Jada reiterated.

His shoulders slumped and he looked at her with those piercing green eyes of his. His thumbs rubbed the balls of her shoulders, and he hung his head. "If you don't call me by noon I'm calling you. It's been four years too long, Jada. I'm not waiting anymore."

Jada gave a quick nod, a whispered goodbye, and all but sprinted out of his condo.

She was surprised she made it to her apartment in one piece, since her mind was not on the road or the traffic. When she entered her apartment, Joshua all but tackled her, so glad to see his mama, and she picked him up and held him close, just as happy to see her son.

"He ain't comin'?"

"Who?" Jada asked, grunting slightly as Joshua tried to hug his legs around her waist. She hung her purse on the peg by the door and all but plopped onto the couch, her son a barnacle around her.

Deshae looked pointedly at Joshua as she cleared the table from their earlier breakfast, then quirked her eyebrow. "I talked to him last night."

Jada nodded. "I know."

"So is he? I was just about to get Joshua dressed..."

Joshua looked at her with those big gray eyes of his, finger snug in his mouth, and she pulled it out with a sigh. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too," Joshua said, kissing his mother's cheek and snuggling back into her neck.

"Today?" Jada asked, not bothering to qualify it.

"Why not? It's a Sunday. You ain't got work, and apparently neither does he. Joshie doesn't have school...no more excuses, Jada Mae. Mac and I can make ourselves scarce if necessary," Desha said, walking towards the hall. "But I think you have something to say to Joshie, first." With that, Deshae disappeared to her room, leaving Jada with a drowsy, yet curious four-year-old in her lap.

Three hours, Jada had, until her world was forever rocked again.

"Little Man?" Jada said quietly.

"Yes?" Joshua replied, just as softly.

"Mama's got somethin' to tell ya..."

EIGHT

“Relax, Jada Mae.”

Jada went through all the outfits Joshua owned, though there weren’t many, but how did one dress a son who was meeting his father for the first time?

It didn’t help that Joshua kept running around their apartment, shrieking at the top of his lungs that his daddy was coming to see him. Joshua hadn’t asked any questions when Jada had told him about his father, and Jada had been as forthright as one could be when talking to a four-year-old. “Daddy had been away, but he’s coming back now, and he’d love to meet you.” No explanation of why because it wasn’t necessary, at least not right now. The main point was “Daddy” was coming, and that was all Joshua needed to know.

The picture had helped too. In fact, Joshua hadn’t let it go since Jada showed it to him—a picture of her and Aaron hugging each other and smiling into the camera at a Christmas party during Jada’s second year at the tutoring center.

“I have a shoe box full of things about Aaron,” Jada had admitted quietly when Deshae followed her to their sons’ room.

“Malcolm! Calm that boy down before he gets too tired to meet his daddy!” Deshae called out into the living area.

“Can I meet ‘im too?” Malcolm called back.

“Maybe...” Deshae responded, though she let the thought peter out as she studied her friend. Jada still hadn’t decided on an outfit, her brows furrowed and head shaking as she deemed yet another one inappropriate.

“Stop,” Deshae finally said, moving from her space in the doorway to Joshua’s bed. “All the boy needs is a top and bottoms—”

“I don’t want Aaron to think I ain’t doin’ right by Joshie—”

“Girl, if he thought that he woulda come *last night* and took Joshua, and you know it.”

Jada’s frown deepened and Deshae sighed, picking up a yellow and blue striped shirt and dark khaki cargo pants. “This will do just fine.”

“But—”

"You think Aaron's gonna come here in a suit and tie to meet his kid?" Jada shook her head. "Then...calm down. Nothing's gonna go wrong—"

"Then why am I so scared?" Jada asked on a whisper.

Deshae hugged Jada, rubbing her friend's back in soothing strokes. It had been easy to tell Malcolm's father she had been pregnant; she hadn't had any expectations that the jerk would be there for her or her child, and she'd been right. Deshae had been much more scared to tell Aunt Candy and Jada about her pregnancy, scared that the only family she really ever had would leave her to rot as everyone else did.

Aunt Candy had been beyond disappointed, but Jada...Jada hadn't lectured or given her pitiful looks, merely hugged her and told her they would figure things out.

Now Deshae was being the support.

"I wish I was like you," Jada muttered into Deshae's shoulder.

Deshae laughed, smoothing down Jada's hair. "No, you don't. You're perfect just the way you are."

"I do. You're so strong and together even despite all the curves life threw at you. I got one curve ball and I'm...not even in the batter's box—"

"You have a degree from *Harvard*!" Deshae said, pulling back and framing Jada's face. "You were pregnant for the second half of your senior year, but instead of pulling out, you worked twice as hard and graduated with honors! Ain't too many people who can do that, Jada Mae—only the strong ones—"

"You had Malcolm in high school—"

"And I had you and Aunt Candy to help me with that. You were pretty much by yourself, except for Felicia, who is, by the way, *fantabulous*. And as much as I love Malcolm, I wish he had a different daddy," Deshae admitted. "I wish Jamal was his daddy, but, then again, he is. He's as much Malcolm's daddy as if they had the same blood pumpin' through their veins. But *you*...you got the daddy you wanted for your child—"

"He's all wrong—"

"Fo' who? Fo' you? Girl, please! Ain't a man who wants to do right by you ever 'wrong'!"

Jada took the clothes from Deshae and held them to her chest. "I haven't been this nervous since Joshua's birth!"

"Ain't no reason to be nervous, Jada Mae. It'll all work out—you'll see."

Jada nodded, folding up the other clothes. "Aaron sounded...anxious when I called him. He said he'd be here before two. And that can be now—"

There was a knock on the door and both women froze at it. Malcolm's "I got it!" didn't help matters and both women sprang into action.

"Joshie!"

"Malcolm," they called to their respective sons. Joshua came into the room just as Deshae was leaving.

“Don’t you open that door!” Deshae said just as Malcolm grasped the knob. Malcolm scowled at her and she gave him a look. “Try me.”

Malcolm’s scowl lifted slightly, and he let go of the knob and went to the couch, sulking. “Dang!”

“Excuse me?” Deshae asked.

“Nothin’...”

Deshae let it go and took a deep breath, suddenly as nervous as she imagined Jada to be. The knock sounded again, and after exhaling, Deshae opened the door.

Aaron stood on the other side, in a long overcoat with one hand in the coat’s pocket and the other clutching the handles of a paper shopping bag. He looked at her through his eyelashes, and his lips quirked into a lopsided grin.

Deshae *definitely* understood why Jada fell for him.

“Deshae?” he asked, his voice deep, kind.

“Aaron. Come in...”

He nodded, and Deshae spied a look into the bag. It exploded with toys and other items, and Deshae felt her eyes sting. “Tryin’ to spoil ‘im?” she asked, moved by Aaron’s consideration.

“I’ve four years’ worth of spoiling to do,” Aaron commented, chuckling.

“I’m Malcolm.”

Deshae glared at her son for interrupting, but felt a little proud as Malcolm offered his hand to Aaron.

Aaron smiled and took it. “Aaron, nice to meet you.”

“You Joshie’s dad, right?”

Aaron nodded, letting go of Malcolm’s hand and slipping it back in his pocket. “Yeah.”

“Dang, y’all look just alike!”

“Mac!”

“Sorry...”

“Don’t worry about us; we’ll be goin’ soon—”

“It’s okay,” Aaron chuckled, looking around their apartment. “Nice place...”

Deshae snorted at that. Jada had told her about Aaron’s condo, and while she knew he was trying to be polite, she thought that was a bit of a stretch. “It could definitely be worse,” Deshae settled for instead. “Do you want to take off your coat?”

Another lopsided grin, and he nodded. “That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Deshae helped him out of his coat and hung it on a peg. “Have a seat. My son won’t bite—”

“Ma!”

Deshae chuckled and winked at Malcolm as she went to the kitchen. “Would you like anything to drink? We have juice? Kool-Aid—”

“The red kind—”

“Malcolm, don’t make me send you to your room!”

He settled back in the couch with a pout.

"Kool-Aid," Deshae began again, shaking her head and opening the refrigerator. "Sweet tea...water..."

"Water would be great, thanks."

Deshae pulled out the good glasses and filled one. "Ice?"

"No, thank you."

So formal! Deshae grinned and took a sheet of paper towel before going back into the living area. She handed him the glass and the folded up paper towel. "We don't have coasters so we have to improvise..."

"It's fine, thank you," Aaron said again, taking one large gulp of water.

"Thirsty, ain't he?"

"Room."

"But Ma—"

"Now."

"Nice meetin' you, Aaron," Malcolm muttered and left the living area. At least he still displayed his manners.

"Nervous."

Deshae snapped her head to Aaron who was grinning wryly at the now empty glass. Deshae smiled and took it from him. "You'll be fine, Aaron." He hadn't dressed in a suit and tie, though for some reason Deshae wouldn't have been surprised if he had. He was wearing khakis and red, long-sleeved Polo shirt—unassuming...hopefully approachable.

"I'll go see what's up with them," Deshae said.

Aaron nodded, rubbing his hands on his thighs and blowing out a breath.

Deshae went into the boys' room, Malcolm chasing a half-naked Joshua while Jada glared at the two.

"I don't have time for this," Jada muttered.

"What's happened?"

"Malcolm was playing his handheld video game, *Joshua* wanted to play it, Malcolm said no, Joshua snatched it out of Mac's hands and you've just walked into that drama's latest development..."

"And you're *lettin'* 'em do this?" Deshae asked with a raised eyebrow. Jada was no pushover when it came to raising their kids.

"He's out there..."

Deshae sighed and rolled her eyes. "Jada—"

"I know—Joshie! Give him his game back now."

"Mommy!"

"Your father is outside waiting to see you."

That got Joshua to stop abruptly, and he threw the game on Malcolm's bed and almost tore out of the room, but Deshae was quick and wrapped her arms around the excited child.

"You've got to get finished dressin', Joshie!" Deshae said and laughed, messing with his hair.

"Daddy!" he exclaimed, holding his arms up so Jada could slip his shirt on. As soon as he was dressed, he launched himself in his mother's arms and arched his back. "Daddy!"

"We're goin' to the movies," Deshae told Malcolm.

"What we seein'?"

"Anything that's PG or below," Deshae said, grinning with Jada when he sucked his teeth muttering he was old enough to see PG-13 movies even if he were only ten.

Jada ran her hands through Joshua's hair in an effort to make him "presentable"...to delay the meeting between father and son.

"For some reason I don't think Aaron's above comin' back here to find y'all," Deshae said simply.

"He's not..."

Deshae smiled when Joshua snuggled into his mother's arms, his earlier energy seemingly gone. "C'mon, Mac. Let's get this show on the road."

She ushered Malcolm out before her, blowing mother and son a kiss. When they appeared in the living area, Aaron shot up, clearly thinking it was Jada and Joshua, and wasn't able to mask his disappointment before Deshae could see it.

"They're comin'," she reassured him.

Aaron grinned with embarrassment. "Obvious?"

"A little."

"Ma, I'm goin' to the car," Malcolm said, taking the keys from the peg and opening the door. "Bye, Mr. Aaron!"

"Goodbye, Malcolm, nice meeting you," Aaron said politely, and he turned his green eyes to Deshae. "You too."

"We'll have to have dinner sometime—just you and me...typical best friend procedure to interview the father of best friend's child and all that..."

"I look forward to it," he replied, and Deshae knew he was sincere.

A throat cleared from the small hallway, and Aaron's voice caught. Joshua was curled into his mother's arms, his finger in his mouth, and he stared at his father with an openly curious expression. Jada's eyes were on her son, her fingers combing through his hair or pulling down his shirt. Aaron was frozen, mouth slightly agape, his hands clenching and relaxing at his sides. It was beautiful, sad, poignant, and Deshae felt like an interloper.

"Baby," Aaron whispered, and Deshae didn't know if he meant Joshua or Jada...perhaps both. Joshua curled even tighter into Jada's arms, but something about Aaron's whisper got Jada moving from the sanctuary of the hallway into the unknown of the living area.

Aaron remained rooted to the spot, watching them approach, and Deshae eased toward the door to offer them a little privacy. She couldn't leave, however, wanting to witness the first time Joshua spoke to his father.

Jada offered Aaron a shaky smile. “Hey.” Aaron reached out, hand hovering by Joshua’s cheek as if he didn’t know whether he had the right to touch his own son. “You shoulda seen ’im earlier—runnin’ around all excited he’d get to meet you...”

“Yeah?” Aaron asked, his tone reminding Deshae of when Joshua would ask for reaffirmation that he was going to get or do something he really wanted.

“Yeah...” Jada smiled wider, and Aaron smiled in return.

“Are you my daddy?” Joshua asked, a small frown on his face.

Both parents inhaled sharply, but Aaron nodded and softened his smile. “Yeah, buddy...I’m your papa...”

Frown still firmly in place, Joshua looked to his mother. “Yeah?”

“That’s your daddy, baby,” Jada whispered, kissing her son’s temple. Joshua’s frown deepened and he pulled the photograph from the waistband of his pants. “He don’t look like ’im!”

Aaron glanced at the picture, then chuckled. “I’m clean shaven in that picture, but now I have a beard, see?” He rubbed his face. “I look like I do in the picture when I shave.”

In a move that surprised everyone, Joshua leaned, almost dangerously, so he could touch his father’s face, and his eyes went wide with surprise. “Can I grow hair like that too?”

Aaron took Joshua from Jada since it was awkward for the shorter woman to hold him, and Joshua wrapped his legs around his father in the same way he would do with his mother. Two tiny hands caressed Aaron’s cheeks, and Aaron blinked rapidly. “When you get older.” It was a raspy promise, but Joshua smiled nonetheless.

“You mean I’ll look just like you?”

Aaron nodded, then hugged his son tightly to him, a sob escaping. “Oh, God...”

Joshua wrapped his arms tightly around Aaron’s neck, empathic enough, it seemed, to know his father needed his support. “Are you sad?”

“I’m very happy,” Aaron whispered, hands smoothing along Joshua’s head and back. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Daddy.”

Another sob, but this one came from Jada. Deshae was sure nothing could’ve prepared her for this—not even her deepest dreams about it. It was overwhelming for all of them, but to see a dream come into fruition was often too much for anyone to bear, especially when that dream had seemed as far off as the sun.

Deshae pulled Jada in her arms, letting the woman cry into her shoulder, shedding a few tears herself.

“How could I have done this to them?” Jada croaked. “How could I have denied them each other for so long?”

“Shh,” Deshae comforted, kissing Jada’s temple briefly. Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda didn’t have a place here—not then.

Aaron and Joshua’s meeting eradicated them for now.

Jada had meant to pull them out before Aaron came, but his early arrival, her procrastination, and Joshua’s excitement hadn’t given her the opportunity. Deshae and Malcolm had left, and Joshua and Aaron were very immersed in each other, so Jada had stolen her moment. They were two albums, one completely full of Joshua’s baby pictures, and the other a work in progress—its recent addition snapshots from Joshua’s latest birthday party in September. The first album, however, was thick, bordering on explosion. She had to keep it closed with two rubber bands and the edges of Polaroids dug into her forearms every now and again, but most were photos from Zeke’s digital camera that she’d asked be turned into hard copies. Each picture was labeled meticulously for posterity and easy remembrance...introduction. She’d give Aaron this one first.

Jada had thought of him when she put the albums together, though she’d had no timetable for when she would give them to him. She had flirted with the notion of giving them to Joshua when he was older, and leaving it up to him whether he would show them to his father. Now there was no need, for father and son were currently in her living area playing with toys Aaron had bought for Joshua. They deserved the chance to learn about one another without her interference.

Jada now worried about the ramifications of this meeting—what it meant for her grandmother, Zeke, Deshae, Malcolm...Joshua and herself. Joshua had a new set of grandparents...a whole other side to learn about...maybe even meet. Aaron’s side was wealthy and white; hers was almost the complete 180 of that. Charlie’s Grille was no Ricci’s—not even a poor man’s one. A tiny three-bedroom apartment in Atlanta was no mansion in the Hamptons or a pent-house on Park Avenue. Clothes from K-mart were not clothes from Bloomingdale’s.

A family who looked like him was not a family who didn’t.

Stories about Candace’s mother passing took root in Jada’s mind, and though Jada knew Joshua loved her dearly and that it was now the twenty-first century, Jada still feared Joshua would prefer the life the McKensies could offer rather than the one the Channings did. Joshua didn’t even look like he could have a black mother; in fact, no one would disbelieve he belonged to Veronica and Aaron. No one would ever need to know the truth...

Jada knew Aaron would never do that, but she also doubted Mr. and Mrs. McKensie would be overly ecstatic to learn they had a half-black, bastard grandchild.

The world wasn’t nearly as progressive as people wanted to believe.

“Mommy!”

A high-pitched squeal and laugh followed the call, and Jada smiled. She hugged the album to her chest and went back into the living area where she found her son giggling and writhing on the carpet as his father tickled him.

"What are you doin' to my son?" Jada asked with mock seriousness.

Aaron lifted Joshua effortlessly into his lap, and father and son gave her large, almost identical grins. "Playing," he answered innocently, then started tickling Joshua again.

She grinned back at them, setting down the album on top of the television set, and began picking up the toys strewn on the floor.

"Mommy cleans too much, doesn't she?" Aaron asked in a stage whisper. Joshua giggled and nodded while Jada rolled her eyes. "Mommy needs to chill out—"

"Chill out!" Joshua exclaimed, then fell into more peals of laughter.

"Mommy is straightening up so Mommy doesn't trip over something and break her neck," Jada said.

"Can't have that, because Mommy has a pretty neck, doesn't she?" Aaron said. "In fact, all of Mommy is pretty."

"Yep!" Joshua chirped.

"Mommy thinks Daddy wants somethin'," Jada muttered, but she couldn't help but feel flattered by Aaron's compliment.

"Daddy thinks Mommy has no idea..."

Jada cleared her throat, having a *very* good idea because she had entertained the fantasy, too—the three of them as a family. It happened when her guard was let down, the dream always catching her unawares and vulnerable.

Joshua approached her and grabbed her hand. "Mommy."

"Yeah, baby?"

He tugged, and Jada set the toys in a neat pile at her feet before following. She sat opposite Aaron, and Joshua climbed back into Aaron's lap, Aaron immediately winding his arms around his son and kissing the top of Joshua's head.

The silence between them was not uncomfortable. Joshua was rubbing his father's cheeks again, and Aaron would blow them big and smile to get his son to laugh. They were behaving as if they had known each other all their lives; there had not been one awkward moment between them since they first laid eyes on each other, and Jada was relieved and humbled by it. Family was family, no matter how long the separation was.

"I think someone's getting sleepy," Aaron murmured after a while. Joshua rested his head on his father's shoulder and stuck his index finger in his mouth. Aaron laughed, brushing Joshua's curls from his forehead. "And I sucked on that finger, too, when I was little."

"I told you he was all you," Jada said.

Aaron gave her a soft smile. "He has your smile...and your good spirit. Maybe I gave him his physical attributes, but the spiritual ones...those are all you."

Jada ducked her head, hiding the motion as she stood. "I'll take you to his room so you can put him down." She ushered him into the boys' room, standing in the doorframe as Aaron took off Joshua's shoes and changed the little boy into his pajamas. Once Aaron tucked Joshua into bed, Aaron gave him a long, soft kiss to the forehead. When Aaron stood and started for the door, Jada was about to go back into the living area, but he grabbed her hand, turned her to face him, then pulled her into his arms. She felt his heart beating underneath her forehead, his arms squeeze her, his breath tickle the top of her head. She felt *him*.

"How did we create something so perfect?" Aaron asked softly after a moment. "Something so utterly and incredibly perfect and precious?"

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't know..."

"For four years I didn't even know he *existed*, that *I* had had a hand in creating something so wonderful...that I missed *you* growing and changing as a result of that creation..."

Jada left his embrace and went back to the living area, Aaron following right behind her. She grabbed the album and gave it to him, smiling slightly when his eyes grew wide.

"Is that—?"

"From random moments of me during the pregnancy, baby shower, delivery room—every minute detail of Joshua's first year...up to his first birthday," Jada said. There was also home video, but they could save that for later.

He held the album reverently, and Jada moved past him into the kitchen. "Are you hungry? We have leftovers in here—chicken, collards, rice...um...I can make you a sandwich? Ham? PB&J?"

"Jada."

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you go through the album with me?"

Her hand grasped the refrigerator's handle. There was no reason why she shouldn't, but to do so meant to be near him, and being near him was problematic.

"What are you so afraid of?"

There was knowing in his tone, and she suddenly grew angry. "Stop doin' that!"

"Doing what?"

"Talkin' to me like that! *Lookin'* at me the way you do! You're sendin' mixed signals—"

"And here I thought they were all pretty explicit."

"Explicit and wrong," Jada insisted and she looked at him. He was still standing right where she had left him, a small frown on his face.

"I doubt the emotion I'm feeling could ever be called wrong by anyone."

It would always be the same argument, and there would be nothing she could do to make him see her side. She opened the refrigerator. "I'm hungry."

"No. You're a coward."

Jada slammed the refrigerator door shut and glared at him. "How *dare* you!"

Aaron approached her. "I *dare* because there's a little boy sleeping in the other room whom I just *met* today—four years too late! I *dare* because you didn't even bother to pick up the phone and tell me I would be a father, and I don't think I ever would've known had I not come down to Atlanta on business! Were you ever going to tell me, Jada?"

She averted her gaze. "Eventually—"

"Not good enough!" Aaron insisted, careful not to raise his voice, though she didn't know if that were for her benefit or Joshua's. "I have just as much right to be a part of his life as you!"

"Have you told your parents yet?" Jada asked quietly. Aaron could talk about "rights" all he wanted, but those were precious and difficult to come by, and part of Jada knew that if he secured his "rights," she was in danger of losing hers. "And your girlfriend? You need to tell them before you go breakin' promises—"

"Give my parents some credit, huh?" Aaron defended. "And Veronica....she'll understand we conceived Joshua before I got together with her—"

"This is a *child*, Aaron, with *lasting* ramifications—"

"*Ramifications*—?"

"Everything ain't gonna be all 'Pollyanna' and nice! There is a distinct possibility you'll lose *everything* you've worked so hard to have! Your friends, your family your wealth—" She stopped talking abruptly and took a deep breath. And if *he* didn't lose everything, *she* could—Joshua *was* her everything. She didn't have the resources the McKensies did. If Aaron or his parents decided to sue for custody, there wasn't a judge in the world who wouldn't allow it; they could "provide" more. "Ham sandwich," she muttered to herself, opening the refrigerator door again.

It closed, suddenly, and not by her. Aaron's tanned hand stared her in the face, fingers flexing against the white plastic door. Like lightning, it grasped her chin firmly and he brought her face to his.

"When will you get it through that pretty skull of yours that those things don't matter?"

"When you prove it to me," Jada shot back. "And family *does* matter to you, or else you wouldn't be tryin' so damn hard to make Joshua a part of it—"

"You're a part of the equation too," Aaron growled.

"No. I'm the remainder," Jada said, and she sighed. "We aren't 'just friends' anymore; we're parents. That's a damn different relationship than I think most people are ready for—your parents and your girlfriend in particular—*especially* your girlfriend. You think she gonna like the fact that you have an outside child, and to make matters worse, *I'm* his mama?! You've got more sense than that!"

“Jada—”

“No!” She jerked her chin out of his hold and left the kitchen, pacing in front of the television. “No. I can’t do it! I can’t! I won’t give my son a complex he ain’t good enough because I’m his mama—to be tolerated instead of loved! My family may not have all your wealth but they love that little boy regardless of what his daddy looks like or how much money he makes. You think your people can do the same? You think you can stand on your own two feet and do somethin’ for yourself instead of what your father wants you to do? And what about when you and Veronica have your legitimate *white* kids...what about Joshua then?” *What about me?*

Aaron stared at her briefly, then went down the hall to Joshua’s room. After a few moments, he emerged again, his green eyes turbulent.

“I have to go out of town for a few days,” he said flatly, pulling his coat from the peg. “Joshua’s still asleep and I gave him a kiss and promised to be back as soon as I could.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“Yes I did,” Aaron said, pinning her with a hard stare. Jada recoiled, and his eyes and posture softened. “I’ll call you and Joshua every night. I’ll read him a bedtime story—what does he like?”

Jada rubbed her hand over her face and sighed. “Anansi the Spider stories.”

“Never heard of them,” he said with a frown, putting on his coat.

“African folklore,” Jada said absently. “He also likes *Clifford* and *The Berenstain Bears*; those may be easier to find, or Aesop’s fables.”

She started to say something, then paused, shook her head, and continued forward. “I think...if you don’t have any plans, I’m sure Joshua would love it if you spent Christmas with us.” The holiday was in a week, and Jada would make an effort to include Aaron in his son’s life from now on—it was only right. Their issues would be worked out as they went.

“There is no place else I’d rather be,” he said. Suddenly he crossed the room to her, cupped the back of her head, and placed a long kiss to the corner of her jaw underneath her ear.

“Every day,” Aaron whispered in her ear. “I promise.”

Before Jada could respond, he left.

NINE

Not twenty-four hours ago, Aaron was in a small three-bedroom apartment playing with his son; now, after an impromptu jet ride almost a thousand miles north, he was standing on the front porch of his family's Hamptons estate. If not in Ireland or Italy, the family spent the last two weeks of the year here, his mother preferring the peace and open space to the bustle and tightness of downtown Manhattan.

He hadn't called before coming, wanting to make it a surprise...and so his mother wouldn't break him into telling the news over the phone. He rang the doorbell, knowing his mother would answer it because she believed the owner of a house should always greet her visitors.

He smiled when the door opened, and a breath of relief left his body. "Ma-ma..."

"*Tesoro!*" Isabella exclaimed, squealing and wrapping her arms around him. Aaron lifted her and spun her around. How he had missed her. She'd been the first love in his life, and the most constant.

"You decided to come for Christmas?" Isabella asked once Aaron set her down and pulled him into the house. The house appeared to be Christmas Central with wreaths, garland, and ribbons creeping on banisters and columns, oozing out of walls, and dripping off mantles. The Christmas tree was tucked in a corner on the far side of the room, almost ten feet tall and full of silver and gold ornaments bough to bough. He felt soothed by the sight, and immediately thought little Joshua would absolutely love Christmas here.

"Rosa did a good job, didn't she?" his mother asked, standing in the center of the living room and lifting her hands to present the space to him. Rosa was his youngest uncle's wife and was a very successful interior designer.

"As always," Aaron replied, setting his bags down beside a sofa.

"I'm surprised she eked out enough time to get it done—double the orders she had last year, and you know how involved she is with all of her contracts...come to the kitchen," Isabella said, already walking and trusting her son would follow. He grinned, recognizing she would use a similar tone with his father; Alexander McKensie would stop whatever he was doing and pay her

heed. It was funny how this sweet, diminutive woman could make a man over a foot taller and much bigger...much *surlier*...bend when even the most intimidating business foe couldn't make him blink if he didn't want to.

As it was, Isabella had her dark hair piled high atop her head in a messy bun, black slacks, and an old blouse—probably his father's—all underneath a pink, full-length apron. Though there were faint lines along her eyes and across her forehead, Isabella Ricci McKensie looked as flawless as ever.

Aaron stopped in the threshold of the kitchen. "You're beautiful, Mama."

Isabella whirled towards him, eyes wide. "Oh, hush you!" she said, blushing prettily. She went to him and cupped his cheeks. "When are you going to shave, *tesoro*? I miss seeing my *bambino's* face..." He chuckled, his mother's soft, delicate fingers dancing along his jaw. "Though I will say you remind me of your father—"

"Ma—"

"You do!" Isabella said with a little grin. "You McKensies are really too handsome for your own good!"

"Everyone says I look more like a Ricci than a McKensie."

"I'm not talking only physically, *tesoro*," Isabella winked. "Come. Help your mama make this cheesecake..."

Aaron didn't bother with an apron as he took his place beside his mother and began cracking eggs. They worked seamlessly, him following his mother's instructions exactly. It was an old Ricci recipe, and as with most things, Isabella had committed it to memory. More than once Aaron dipped into the mix, unable to resist sneak peeks of what the final product would be. He grinned, wondering if Joshua helped Jada like this in the kitchen. He imagined their flour-dusted faces baking a pie or a cake and dipping in the batter as they went along.

"So...when are you going to start telling me what's bothering you?" Isabella asked, adding vanilla and candied fruit into the mixture.

Aaron could only gape at her, but before he could answer, someone else entered the kitchen. He smiled immediately, wiping his hands on a towel and approaching the new person.

"Charlotte!" Aaron embraced the other woman excitedly. Charlotte Manning had been their family's housekeeper for as long as he could remember, and though her golden hair now had wisps of silver, she remained the same sweet-faced woman of his youth.

"You dinna let me know ye were comin', Master Aaron," Charlotte said as she wagged a finger at him when they broke apart, her faint Irish accent giving her voice a musical lilt, "or else I would've made ye shepherd's pie—"

"Charlotte," Aaron moaned, already tasting the food in his mouth. He kissed her cheek. "You're still trying to fatten me up?"

"Ye can always use a mite more meat, eh, Miss Izzy?"

"I think he's turned out all right; definitely not the beanpole he used to be!"

Aaron rolled his eyes and blushed. He'd been tall and skinny as a boy, and it wasn't until the summer before his senior year in high school, as he worked on his *nonno's* farm in Tuscany, did he finally add muscle to his frame. *Nonno* had made him lift just about every bushel and crate on the farm. For that first week, one crate might as well have been fifty, and it had hurt to *breathe*; but by the end of his stay, three crates at one time had been a breeze.

"You still call me Beanpole sometimes," Aaron said wryly to his mother. Either *tesoro*—treasure in Italian, or Beanpole when she was feeling particularly playful.

"I am your mama! It is a perk I have," Isabella defended, slapping him playfully on his bum.

"I'm not yet done with the laundry, but once I am I'll start in on the stout chicken we're having for dinner—"

"Stout chicken!" Aaron exclaimed happily. Though he loved anything Charlotte prepared, he *loved* her stout chicken.

"I know, laddie," Charlotte trilled. "Just call me when ye're done, Miss Izzy, and I'll start on it right away."

"Thank you, Charlotte," Isabella said as the housekeeper left. A few more moments went by before she spoke again. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Atlanta treating you well, *tesoro*?"

"Mild weather; I almost forgot it was Christmastime."

"No snow?"

"Not even a threat."

"Hmm."

Aaron glanced at her making the graham-cracker crust. "Pop's at the office?"

Isabella nodded, her fingers pinching the crust to make scalloped edges. "He said he had to pick up some files and then meet with Marcos at the restaurant to go over figures." Marcos was Isabella's oldest brother and heir to Ricci's.

"He'll be back tonight?"

"Yes. So you can test your news on me before you tell your father."

Aaron laughed and knocked the spoon against the side of the mixing bowl. "How do you always know?"

Isabella chuckled. "I am your mama! It's my job to know!"

Aaron kissed the top of her head. "I love you so much."

"*Sì. Dirmè.*"

Aaron took a deep breath, suddenly unsure and nervous. Though he and his mother had talked about problems through baking before, he thought this development needed undivided attention.

"When we finish this," Aaron said quietly, stirring the mix again. Isabella said nothing of the change in tack, and he was grateful.

In the meantime, Aaron spoke of the new satellite offices in Atlanta, and the Falcons and how the season was going better than anyone had hoped or projected. The team had more sold-out games than the previous season, which meant more revenue and more options in terms of trades, contracts, and advertising.

Once they put the cheesecake in the oven, Isabella squeezed her son's hand and gave him a tiny grin. "The sunroom?"

"I'll meet you there."

Isabella nodded, and Aaron made a quick detour into the living room, opening up his suitcase and pulling out the photo album. He'd not had time to look through it, too busy making plans for the trip; and he hadn't wanted to open it on the plane, too afraid he would lose a photograph and not be able to recover it. But what better time, and with what better person, to look through the album than his mother?

The sunroom was Isabella's favorite place in the house other than the kitchen; and whenever possible, she entertained guests there. It was glassed-in and heated, making it perfect regardless of the season. When he entered, she was reclining on a white wicker chaise and he sat adjacent to her on the couch. The ficus and palms around the room gave it a more natural, tropical atmosphere, and there had been many occasions where Aaron had come here to read only to fall asleep soon after.

This time, however, there would be no sleeping, and he drummed his fingers on the top of the album.

"Is that for me?" Isabella asked.

Aaron cleared his throat. "Mama—"

"Let me see," Isabella said firmly.

"I need to tell you—"

"Aaron."

"Mama, please. I need to say this before I show you."

Isabella suddenly sat up and swung her legs so her feet touched the ground. She faced him now, her eyes unreadable.

Had it been this difficult for Jada? Should he give his mother the album and let her see for herself? There were so many different ways to go about it, and the right way for one person was not the right way for another. He needed to tell his mother before he gave her the visual aids to affirm it.

Aaron took a deep breath. "I have a son."

Isabella stared at him, unmoving. "What?"

"He's four years old and his name is Joshua," he continued on, unable to look at his mother as he spoke. "He's the most beautiful little boy..."

He heard her exhale slowly, and she stood. "A son?"

"I met him yesterday—"

"Yesterday? Met him? You mean you didn't know?"

"No...I just found out this past weekend."

Isabella sat down next to him and framed his face. “Are you sure he’s yours? What kind of woman would keep something like that from you for so long unless—!”

“She’s not like that,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “Jada’s not like that!”

Isabella blinked. “*Jada?*” Her hands dropped from his face and she sat straighter. “Oh, my...”

“Yeah...”

“I thought you two were just friends,” Isabella said after a moment.

“Remember that Christmas five years ago when I wasn’t all that happy or merry?”

Isabella sucked in a breath. “*Oh...*” She shook her head. “You wouldn’t talk to *anyone*—not even Rodrigo—and you two are best friends!”

Rodrigo was Marcos’s middle child and only son, and Aaron and Rodrigo were the closest in age. They behaved more like brothers than cousins, yet Aaron hadn’t told Rodrigo about Jada, either. Not that it mattered right now; currently Rodrigo was splitting time between Milan and Tuscany working with their *nonno* at the latest Ricci’s.

“I figured things out too late, Mama. I thought I’d missed my chance, and once I *had*, I wasn’t...I was scared,” Aaron admitted. It felt good to get out that confession.

“And that along with your father telling you to forget about her...” Isabella sighed. She slid her fingers in his hair and he leaned his head on her shoulder. “I knew she meant a lot to you when you snuck off to call her every night—same time without fail—when we were in Italy that year. I would ask you who it was and you would say, ‘Just a friend’, but I knew differently, even if you didn’t.”

“I’d promised I would call her everyday,” Aaron murmured. “I didn’t want to break it.”

“Integrity—I raised you well,” Isabella teased gently.

Aaron chuckled and kissed her cheek. “You did.”

“And now I’m a *nonna*!” Isabella said on a laugh. She suddenly pouted. “I’m too young to be a *nonna*...”

“If Pop had had his way you would’ve been a *nonna* long before now,” Aaron said, sitting up and rubbing his face with his hands. “He’s not gonna be happy about this.”

“No, but what’s done is done,” Isabella said. “And Veronica...”

“*Caso*—!”

“Language!” Isabella exclaimed, slapping him on the back of the head.

Aaron grinned even as he rubbed the injured spot. “Sorry.”

“Does she know?”

“You’re the first person I told...I figured you’d take this the easiest...”

Isabella nodded, then pointed to the album. “So, will you show me now?”

"Yes," Aaron said, putting the album in her lap. "I haven't seen it yet, either, but Jada says she took about every picture she could up until Joshua's first birthday..."

When Aaron opened the album Isabella gasped, a trembling finger tracing over the first picture—a Sears photograph of Joshua for his first Easter. "Aaron!"

"Yeah," he replied, his throat tight. "Yeah..."

"If I didn't know any better I'd swear you stole this from one of *your* baby albums!" Isabella said, picking up the book for a closer look. "Well...she's not lying, is she?"

"Jada wouldn't lie to me," Aaron defended quickly.

"She did, by not telling you," Isabella said, though there was no anger in her voice, just hard truth. "Seems like you weren't the only one scared..."

Aaron nodded and flipped over the page. There was a picture of Jada and her roommate Felicia while they were still in school. Jada's stomach wasn't big, but she was starting to show. She looked happy, or at the very least serene. As they got deeper into the album, Jada's belly swelled, and by the time he and Isabella got to the baby shower pictures, Jada's belly seemed to take up most of her body.

"Pregnancy agrees with her," Isabella murmured. "She's a beautiful girl..."

"And I missed it," Aaron muttered. "All of it—I should've been there!"

"How would you have been there, *tesoro*?" Isabella asked quietly, still flipping the pages. "Every other weekend? Until she gave birth? Permanently? You had obligations, Aaron."

He didn't answer, transfixed by the picture of a tiny Joshua held in the arms of a big black man—no doubt Jada's cousin Zeke. He barely registered his mother's fingers sliding through his hair, but her kiss on his cheek broke his trance.

"You did well, Aaron," Isabella whispered.

"She did all the work," Aaron said absently, looking at another picture of Jada just after she had given birth. Despite her exhaustion, she gave the camera a pleased, relieved smile. Her hair was in shambles and she was sweaty, but Aaron didn't think she ever looked lovelier. "All by herself...stubborn, prideful woman!"

With each subsequent picture, Aaron fell more in love, until the last photograph of a beaming, cake-smeared Joshua had him and Isabella laughing uproariously.

"What's so funny?"

Isabella and Aaron's head shot up, and his eyes widened when he saw Veronica standing in the door.

"What are you doing here?!" he asked, then shook his head, wincing at how that sounded. "I mean...I thought you were going to Europe?"

Veronica grinned and approached, kissing him on the lips. "I decided to stay instead. Though skiing in Austria is fabulous this time of year, I wasn't in the mood."

"Not in the mood to ski?" Aaron asked skeptically. "You love skiing."

"With you I do," Veronica said, kissing the top of his head. "With my parents...not so much..." She eyed the album in his lap and grinned at Isabella. "Breaking out the baby albums?"

Aaron blushed when he felt his mother's eyes on him and heard her chuckle. "In a manner of speaking..."

"Let me see—"

Aaron slammed the book shut and stood abruptly before Veronica could take the album, and he smiled apologetically. "They're embarrassing, really..."

Veronica gave him a weird look, then glanced at Isabella. "Is he serious? You were a cute baby!"

He blushed. "Cute or not..."

"Aw!" Veronica giggled, sliding her arms around his waist and kissing his lips again. "Always cute. You've been cute since I've met you! What are you afraid of—I'll see naked pictures of you?" She nipped his earlobe and whispered, "Not like I've never seen you naked anyway..."

This was *not* a conversation he wanted to have with his mother three feet away, and he stepped back. "You're bad."

"Perhaps later I can show you how 'bad' I can be," Veronica promised. With one final kiss to his cheek, she waved to Isabella and left.

There were a few moments of silence before Isabella began laughing softly, and Aaron scowled.

"This is not funny!"

"Your father invited her for the holiday, thinking it was a shame she would spend it alone..."

"Right," Aaron snorted. "He thinks he's so clever—"

"Yes, but you have an ace not even he anticipated," Isabella said wryly.

"This is not a game—"

"I know it isn't," Isabella said. "I understand your dilemma, I do...but I do not envy you right now. Whatever you may or may not feel about Alexander or Veronica, the sooner you tell them, the better."

"Yeah..."

She stood and smiled. "In the meantime, I have a cheesecake that needs to cool. I was thinking we could have it for dessert tonight."

"Sounds good."

"All right, *tesoro*." She winked and left as well. Aaron knew he wouldn't drop the news tonight; he wanted at least one day of relative peace before revealing everything. His mother, thank goodness, had taken the news surprisingly well, but Veronica and Alexander were the real tests. Alone in the

sunroom, Aaron hugged the album to him, hoping his brand new family would give him the strength to face his old one.



“Daddy comin’ today?”

Jada shook her head, wiping away the sweat that had dripped along her temples and neck before scrubbing her son’s back. It was bath time, and Joshua played with a rubber ducky and boat Aaron had given him. No one outside of Deshae and Malcolm knew Joshua had met Aaron, and the fact she hadn’t had to work at the Grille helped her keep that information to herself.

“Daddy had to go out of town—”

“Again?” Joshua’s bottom lip poked out slightly and his eyes shined.

Jada sighed and kissed the top of his head. “Daddy’s a busy man—”

“He comin’ back?”

She lifted his arm and washed underneath it. “He says he is.”

“When?”

Suds on his pale torso now. “I don’t know, Joshie. He didn’t tell me.”

He sported a full-on pout now, crossing his arms in front of him and preventing Jada from washing his other arm. “I want my daddy!”

“And I want to wash you,” Jada said, prying his arms apart and attacking the other arm. It was almost seven o’clock at night and Aaron hadn’t called yet. Part of her wondered if he’d forgotten his promise, then she chastised herself. One of the reasons they were in this predicament was because she hadn’t let him meet the challenge of fatherhood, and here she was failing him again before he even tried.

“Be fair to him,” she whispered to herself, pulling Joshua to a standing position to wash the bottom half of his body.

When Jada finished, she wrapped Joshua in a large bath towel and pulled him from the water, his toys spinning around the drain as the water left the tub. Joshua was still scowling, but he wasn’t mad at her because he held her close and rested his head on her shoulder. Jada hummed softly, a tune her mother had hummed to her when she was younger, and by the time she got Joshua in his pajamas, he could barely keep his eyes open.

“Read me a story, Mommy,” Joshua said drowsily.

“You’ll be out before I get halfway done!” Jada chuckled.

“Please?”

“What do you want me to read?”

“*Winnie the Pooh*...” Joshua yawned.

She went to her son’s little bookcase across the room, fingers going over the spines as she searched. He had multiple *Pooh* books, and she didn’t think he cared which, so she grabbed one. Knowing he liked to cuddle as they read, she slipped beside him, and he snuggled against her as she opened the book.

"Let's see here—"

The telephone's ringing stopped her, her heart, and she grasped the edges of the book tightly. For all she knew, it could be Deshae calling to say she and Malcolm were staying at Jamal's that night, but something inside her said it wasn't. She *knew* who was on the line, and she gave her son a little grin.

"Mama will be right back, okay?" she whispered, kissing the top of Joshua's head.

"Okay..."

Jada went to the living room and took the cordless, pressing the "Talk" button and holding the receiver between her ear and shoulder. "Hello?"

"I told you I'd call."

Jada grinned a little, walking back to her son's room. "You did. How are you?"

"I told Mama."

Jada stopped walking. "What? Where are you?"

"Hamptons estate..."

A thousand curses went through her head. "You told anyone else?"

"Just her." He remained silent for a few moments. "You sound upset."

"Warning would've been nice—"

"Like the warning you gave me?"

Jada gritted her teeth and continued walking. "You want to speak to your son." Joshua was asleep, though she hadn't been gone long, and as much as Jada loathed waking him, she knew Joshua would be more upset if he missed his father's phone call.

"Jada..."

She let the phone drop from her ear and nudged Joshua awake. She waved the receiver in front of him. "It's Daddy."

He perked up a bit at that and grabbed the phone with excited hands. "Hi, Daddy!"

Jada gave Joshua privacy as he spoke to Aaron, going into her room and changing into her pajamas. She checked her cell phone, seeing that Deshae had left a message about her and Malcolm staying at Jamal's, and a pang of envy shot through her, followed immediately by guilt. She shouldn't be jealous Deshae had found someone who could love her and her son the way they deserved; everyone should be so lucky to have that.

When she returned to Joshua's room, he was snuggled underneath the covers, barely hanging onto the conversation. She chuckled and knelt by the bed next to him, brushing his curls from his forehead.

"Say goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight..."

He was out before he could finish the word, and Jada took the phone from him. "I'm sorry about that—he was barely awake when you called..."

"That's all right. It actually gives us time to have a little chat."

Jada almost stumbled from surprise. Aaron's mother! "Oh?" Very articulate to be sure, but Jada never thought she would speak to the woman.

"He sounds as precious as he looks, Miss Channing."

"You may call me Jada, Mrs. McKensie," Jada said breathlessly, going into the living room and sitting on the couch. She needed to be alert for this conversation, and climbing into her bed would not make her be so.

"Then you call me Isabella."

"Yes, Miss Isabella."

The other woman chuckled, but Jada got the impression it wasn't at her, so she remained calm. "So...Aaron's told me his side of things, and I'd like to hear yours, if that's agreeable to you."

"You mean why I didn't tell him about Joshua," Jada clarified.

"About everything," Isabella said. "My son is...how shall I put it?...usually very careful with his paramours. The fact he...wasn't so careful with you is very intriguing—"

"We used a condom!" Jada interrupted hastily, then groaned. "Lord..."

This time Isabella did laugh at Jada and she felt even sillier. "Oh, dear, Jada! You're certainly no practiced lover that's for sure!"

"No..."

"Do you have any other children?"

"Only Joshua, Miss Isabella."

"I've seen the album, Jada. He's a beautiful little boy; looks just like my *tesoro*. He wants for nothing and he is happy."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"But your side, dear. You must tell me your side...I don't even know the mother of my first grandchild!"

Mrs. McKensie wasn't nearly as threatening as Jada had anticipated, and once she started talking, the entire story flowed easily. It shouldn't have, should it? considering this was Aaron's mother; but the only time Isabella spoke was to ask for clarification, and even then the questions were of genuine curiosity and not a cross examination. When Jada ended her story, she was snuggled into the couch and clutching a throw pillow, waiting for Isabella's judgment.

Isabella took a deep breath. "The way I see it, both of you are *sciocco*."

"Ma'am?"

"Silly."

Jada's cheeks burned. "Miss Isabella—"

Isabella laughed. "I mean that with affection, dear!" Warmth spread through Jada at the endearment, and it gave her hope.

"You are not angry?"

"I am a little angry," Isabella admitted, "but perhaps not for the reasons you think."

"Oh." Masterful articulation once again.

"Wasted time, the both of you. I'm actually more surprised at my *tesoro* than I am at you, for you've not had any experience in such things. But *tesoro*...fear is not a word in the McKensie vocabulary, mind."

"The night wasn't planned—"

"Not by you two, maybe," Isabella said, and Jada heard the other woman's smile in her voice, "but there are forces at work greater than the two of you. You may not be Roman Catholic, dear, but I know you know that."

Right then, Isabella sounded like her grandmother. "I'm sorry." It was the best she could do, a Band-Aid to a scabbed-over wound.

"Apology accepted. Now, when will I be able to meet both of you? I've seen the pictures, but now that I have voices to go along...I'd like to meet you."

"I don't know..." Jada couldn't afford a trip to New York, not with bills to pay and school starting up again soon.

"We'll figure out something," Isabella promised. "But in the meantime, I'll let you speak to my *tesoro*. It was nice finally to talk to you, Jada, dear."

"You, too, Miss Isabella."

She didn't have to wait long for Aaron, and didn't say anything for a minute after he greeted her.

"Jada?"

"She doesn't seem to *not* like me..."

Aaron laughed and Jada frowned. "My parents know about you, Jada. Always have."

"Know about me?"

"They know you mean a lot to me."

"Are you close with your mother?"

"She's my heart," Aaron said, and Jada's melted a little at that. "I'm a mama's boy, much to my father's chagrin."

"Nothing wrong with that," Jada said, thinking of her own relationship with Joshua. "You're her only child after all."

"That's true. I see a lot of me and my mama with you and Joshua."

"I don't know...I think he likes you more than he likes me," Jada said on a chuckle.

"It's not a competition."

"I know it's not."

"He's just...I'm new to him. Different. You know how kids are when they get something shiny and new."

"Yeah..." Jada cleared her throat. "Your mother wants to meet us."

"I know. We'll have to talk about when. I don't know if I want to put you in the path of my father and Veronica just yet—"

"Are you spending Christmas with them?" she asked, her throat closing a little at the mention of Veronica.

"No."

Jada took a deep breath, mouth suddenly dry, and she swallowed to moisten it. “Won’t they be upset?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I really don’t care. Pop wanted me here to see Mama, and I saw her...and she understands.”

“What about your girlfriend? You think she will understand?”

“I’m not missing this Christmas with my son. I’ve missed too many, and I’m not missing anymore.”

Jada sighed. “I don’t want things to get sour between you and your family because of us—”

“You’re my family now, Jada, you and Joshua.”

Though it wasn’t particularly late, Jada was tired, too tired to have this conversation with Aaron. She couldn’t bank her life on lofty promises and dreams. She had a son to think about, and Aaron had realities that weren’t so easy to dismiss.

“I’ll call you in the morning,” he said when Jada didn’t respond. “Tell Joshua I love him for me.”

“Okay. Have a good night, Aaron.”

He breathed deeply on the phone, and Jada knew instinctively that he wanted to say something to her, something she wanted to hear, yet didn’t. He had mercy on her, however, simply saying goodnight in return and disconnecting their call.

Jada put the receiver back on the base to charge and made a little detour in Joshua’s room before going to her own. He was relaxed in slumber, index finger tucked snugly between his lips and covers kicked to the foot of the bed. She recovered him and kissed his temple, telling him his father’s message before shuffling down to her own room.

It was there, underneath her sheets and vulnerable to Morpheus’s whims, that she dreamed of being the family Aaron insisted they were.

TEN

The next few days were pretty much the same; Jada went through her days at the Grille and at nights she and Joshua talked to Aaron and Isabella on the phone. After that first terrifying conversation with Isabella Ricci McKensie, Jada was much calmer during the subsequent ones and found she looked forward to the phone calls almost as much as Joshua did. Even Deshae got in a talk with Aaron, and Jada had been surprised to hear genuine laughter coming from her friend.

“He’s a funny dude,” Deshae had said by way of explanation after one of those conversations.

Sometimes Aaron didn’t wait for nightfall to call, and he would leave a message either on her cell phone or on the answering machine in the apartment. He talked about everything and nothing, but Jada never deleted any of the messages. It was almost as if they were in Boston again, when they would leave inane, boring voicemails just to let each other know how the day was going.

Jada, however, couldn’t bring herself to do the same. For one, she didn’t have any privacy. After Monday’s day off, she’d worked at the Grille every day and night for the rest of the week in order to curb the holiday rush. It was mostly out-orders—people too busy or unable to prepare holiday meals—so the restaurant did it for them. It would be even worse when New Year’s came around; everyone wanted the traditional Soul Food New Year’s dinner with the black-eyed peas, collard greens, cornbread, and whatever meat of choice.

Currently she was cooking a large pot of black-eyed peas—for in addition to holiday orders, they still had regular ones—and it was pretty full for a midday Thursday.

“You almost done with that?” Zeke asked, poking his head through the service window.

“There’s only one o’ me, Zeke, and I’m stirrin’ as fast as I can...” Jada said, doubling her efforts. “I didn’t know it’d get so busy—”

“I didn’t, either, but busy is good, even if we can’t move at the end of the day!”

Jada snickered. "You ain't got an energetic four-year-old waitin' at home!" "No, I don't," Zeke admitted. "But Lisa ain't all that lazy either—" "TMI, Zeke, TMI..."

Zeke laughed and winked at her before going back to the dining area. Zeke and Lisa King had been together for at least three years, and she really liked the other woman. Lisa was only about ten years older than she was, but very smart, attractive, and kind. Zeke had met her when they went to a pediatrician Aunt Lucille had recommended and Lisa had been their attending doctor. Jada had known Zeke was a goner when he couldn't keep his eyes off Lisa as she checked on Joshua. When the visit had ended, Zeke had gotten a phone number, and they'd been going strong ever since.

To be honest, Jada had been surprised at her cousin's interest—he usually liked tall, thin, willowy women with long hair and lighter skin tones. Lisa was short, plump, wore her hair short and natural, and was the color of Hershey's syrup; but Zeke loved her, she loved him, and everyone was happy...almost...

Aunt Lucille had a calendar and crossed off each day that passed without a proposal.

"She ain't gettin' any younger!" Aunt Lucille would tell her son. "And neither am I! I want some grandbabies!"

Zeke would give a pinched smile and say, "In due time, Mama, in due time..."

Jada didn't understand Zeke's hesitation, either. They were clearly crazy about each other—even living together—but something was stalling them, and she didn't know if it was because of Zeke or Lisa. Lisa had been extremely busy lately trying to start her own practice, and the school year always brought more cases than the summer. As such, the two women hadn't caught up as they usually would.

Zeke's head reappeared through the service window. "Mama and Aunt Candy's here."

"Peas are done," Jada said, passing the pot to another line cook so he could prepare the plates. She wiped her hands on her apron and left the kitchen, seeing her grandmother and great aunt sitting in a booth close to the front.

"There she is!" Aunt Lucille said, standing up and hugging her brother-in-law's grandchild. "You get prettier every time I see you."

"And bigger," Candace muttered. "I keep tellin' her she needs to lose some weight—maybe do some more walkin'—"

"When she got time to do that, Candy?" Lucille said, framing Jada's face and shaking it a little. "She's a student, a cook, and a mother—"

"Well..."

"You must be feelin' better if you got breath enough to insult me," Jada mumbled, kissing her grandmother's cheek. "Y'all want the usual?"

"I ain't insultin' nobody," Candace said, and glared at Lucille when she huffed. "I'm just tryin' to look out fo' ya—"

"Could be a little nicer about it, Grandma."

"Well, then, I'm sorry," Candace said, grasping Jada's hand and squeezing. "Christmas at Lucy and Harold's this year—"

"I think Zeke and Lisa gonna make a big announcement—"

"Mama, please," Zeke said, coming up to the table and placing two large, plastic red glasses full of sweet tea before them.

"Straw?" Candace asked, smiling when Zeke put a novelty straw into her cup. "My favorite kind..."

"You a big kid!" Aunt Lucille laughed.

"Girl, I'm almost seventy-eight years young..." Candace said unapologetically around her straw. "Sweet rolls?"

"A new batch is comin' out, soon," Jada said. "I'll bring 'em soon as they're done."

"Thank you, Jada Mae," Aunt Lucy said. "You ever gonna tell me what you put in 'em?"

Jada laughed. "No, ma'am!"

Aunt Lucy snorted. "Here I taught you everythang you know about the kitchen and you can't tell me somethin' little like that..."

"You taught me first and foremost that what happens in the kitchen *stays* in the kitchen—"

"Well, then, maybe I need to come on in the kitchen and see what you doin'!" Aunt Lucy said, standing.

Jada laughed again and hugged her aunt tight. "Love you."

"You, too, baby. I still wanna know, though," Lucille whispered in her ear.

"If you've been a good girl maybe I'll leave the recipe in the stocking for ya," Jada said with a wink.

Aunt Lucy's laugh followed her into the kitchen. She checked the oven, the sweet rolls needing only a few more minutes, and she fixed her grandmother and aunt plates of catfish, coleslaw, and fries. Once the rolls were done, she put one on each plate and went back into the dining area.

"Here you are," Jada said, serving them their meals.

"Got me salivatin' already," Aunt Lucy said, pouring a liberal amount of Texas Pete on her catfish.

"You can't eat with us?" Candace asked, and Aunt Lucy pulled Jada down in the booth next to her.

"Zeke can handle a few minutes without ya," Aunt Lucy said, handing Jada a fry. Jada ate it.

"What's goin' on with your white boy?" Candace asked immediately, and Jada averted her eyes to the ceiling. "Don't you huff and puff at me like that! Do I look like one o' the three little pigs to you?"

Aunt Lucy giggled and shook Jada's arm. "Yes! Tell, honey. Candy here been in a right mood since you two last spoke. You told him?"

"Yes."

Aunt Lucy cheered while Candace groaned. "Lawd, Jada Mae—"

"Bout time!" Lucille said. "How he take it?"

"Quite well, actually. He and Joshua adore each other—"

"What?"

"They spent all Sunday afternoon together, and Aaron calls every night," Jada explained.

"And you thought he'd run high-tail outta Atlanta!" Aunt Lucy teased Candace.

Candace didn't look convinced. "Where's he now, Jada Mae?"

Jada squirmed a little. "New York—"

"Mm-hmm—"

"His mother knows."

The women grew quiet at that announcement, and Candace frowned. "What he go do that for?"

"Why *wouldn't* he do that, Candy? That's his son! That's that boy's grandma! You think he can just keep 'em a secret—?"

"Yes!"

Aunt Lucy rolled her eyes. "You think Jada stupid enough to sleep wit' a man who don't love her? To have a kid by a man who don't love her? She ain't you, Candy—"

"I ain't never said she was," Candace said lowly, eyes narrowing at Aunt Lucy. "I'm just sayin' she shoulda had more sense than to go do somethin' so..."

"Like her mama?" Aunt Lucy said, smiling softly at Jada. "You do got a lotta Lynn in you, girl."

"And what that get Lynn? A baby wit' no daddy and cancer!"

"That cervical cancer ain't had nothin' to do with Lynn's pregnancy or Jada's daddy," Aunt Lucy muttered.

"Ain't make it no better," Candace insisted, and ate a bit of her coleslaw. "Terrence Anderson may as well been a white boy, light as he was..."

Jada didn't know her father, and had never really cared to know him. She'd been curious when she was younger, but not to the point to seek him out. Zeke, Uncle Harold, and her grandfather for as long as she'd had him, had filled that void perfectly.

"Don't listen to yo' grandma, girl," Aunt Lucy said.

"I know you think I'm old and don't know what the hell I'm talkin' 'bout, but I see it all the time! Ain't that much changed, I'm tellin' you! How many white men you see walkin' 'round wit' black women? Even black men don't want nothin' to do wit' us now!"

"What man *you* tryin' to get—black o' otherwise!" Aunt Lucy laughed, nudging Jada's side. "Maybe you just jealous Jada here got a nice young man who's sweet on her—"

"Ain't sweet enough to marry..."

"Grandma, I love you, but you really need to stop," Jada said. "Aaron's doing everything right so far and you can't even give him an inch!"

Candace pursed her lips and tore off a piece of her sweet roll. "All right, Jada. I'll drop it—"

"No she won't," Aunt Lucy muttered around her straw.

"It's your life. I know I got one foot in the grave and the other slippin' in...I just want what's best for you...I want you to be without regrets."

Jada stood, kissing Aunt Lucy's cheek, then Candace's. "Workin' on it."

The rest of the day went by smoothly, yet busily, with Jada not leaving until well after closing. Luckily, Jada had anticipated the hectic week, so the day before she'd brought home enough food to last a few dinners.

When she arrived, Malcolm and Joshua were already asleep with Deshae half-watching a nameless sitcom on television. Jada groaned and plopped onto the couch next to her, fingers pinching the bridge of her nose.

"You smell like fried everything under the sun," Deshae said, flipping channels.

"Ugh."

"You missed Aaron's call."

"At least he called. Joshua was awake?"

"Yeah. They had a nice conversation about what Joshua wanted for Christmas; I think your son's a future car salesman."

Jada made a look of distaste. "Anything but that!"

"Drug dealer it is, then—"

"You're such a punk," Jada said and chuckled.

"Or an accountant like his daddy," Deshae teased.

"Can you imagine Joshua taking over 'the family business'?" Jada asked half-sarcastically.

"No," Deshae admitted on a tiny snort, "but not for Aaron's lack o' tryin'."

"Even if it is in vain..."

"Who said it will be? You know, sometimes I think that doom and gloom is a Channing thing. Lawd hope Joshua has more McKensie in 'im than Channing if that's the case!"

Jada winced. "I'm gonna shower so I can stop smelling like a deep-fried Jada..." As she stood, Deshae grabbed her hand and squeezed. She didn't need to say anything; Jada understood. "Goodnight."

"Night, girl."

It was a longer than anticipated shower, Jada letting the water knead her sore muscles and calm her. Deshae had been right, and the revelation disarmed. She was doing the very thing she cautioned Candace to stop doing, and Jada felt guilty. Jada lived for worst-case scenarios, didn't fully know how to embrace the possibility of a positive outcome, thinking it very dangerous.

Thirty minutes later, with one towel wrapped around her head and the other around her body, Jada padded into her room and began applying lotion.

She had just finished her left leg when there was a knock on the door and Deshae entered, waving Jada's cell phone.

"I knew somethin' was afoot when your purse started buzzin' and vibratin'...it's yo' baby's daddy," she said with a smirk.

Jada stared at the phone, confused. "Why's he callin' me?"

"It's this crazy phenomenon called wanting to talk to you," Deshae answered, rolling her eyes. "Pace yourself. It requires you to talk back—"

"Get out my room," Jada snapped, poking out her tongue as she took the phone from Deshae.

"Night, Aaron!" Deshae called as she left and shut the door.

Jada growled, pressing the speakerphone button and putting the phone on the bed. "Heffa."

"Someone's in a mood," Aaron said, laughing softly.

"Ain't nothin' stoppin' me from hangin' up!"

"And there's nothing stopping me from pressing your speed dial button and calling again."

That made her pause. "I'm on speed dial?"

"Two."

Two. That was major. "Oh."

"I'm not on your speed dial?"

It was Jada's turn to chuckle. "For what? All I need to do is press the call button twice and I get you—blowin' up my phone like you do..."

Aaron laughed along with her. "I'm on speaker?"

"I don't have any hands to hold the phone."

"Why not? Joshua okay? I let him talk until he fell asleep..."

"Putting on lotion," Jada said absently, "and I bet that was a long conversation!"

"No such thing," Aaron said tenderly. "And I wish I were there to help."

"Aaron, we're fine. Deshae's been helpin' me out—"

"I meant with the lotion."

The bit she'd been squirting on her hand plopped onto her lap instead, so surprised she was by that remark. "Aaron!"

"I've been missing you like crazy," Aaron said hurriedly. "You and Joshua...I feel like I'm missing a part of myself."

"Have you even told your father and Veronica yet?"

"The time's never been right—"

"God, Aaron! There is no 'right time'! If I had waited for the 'right time', you would've *never* found out about Joshua!"

Aaron didn't respond, and Jada cursed silently. She probably shouldn't have admitted that, but it was the truth. "Right times" didn't exist when it came to things like this—just come out and say it or not.

"I thought you the worst kind of coward when I accused you of that," Aaron began quietly. "But now that I'm in the same position as you, I appreciate it. I don't like it, but I appreciate it."

"Are you afraid of being disowned?"

Aaron snorted. "Mama wouldn't let him."

"But it may mean the end of you and Veronica—"

"Yeah..." Aaron said, and Jada felt sorry for him, guilty.

"You love her...she was your first love..."

"And a part of me always will," Aaron confessed, "but we're two different people now. She would've made it so easy to pretend, but pretending is what got us in this situation, isn't it?"

Jada took the glob of lotion from the patch of towel in her lap and started rubbing it on her right leg. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

He snickered. "All right, Jaybird."

She sucked her teeth. "You're always so damn sure of yourself."

"Because I'm right."

"Then why don't you tell your father and Veronica? If you're so sure everything will work out, just tell them! It's not as if you really have anything to lose—everything can stay as it is—"

"I don't want that," Aaron said firmly. "I can't stand being away from you two—"

"I'm not saying you can't see your son, Aaron," Jada said, now lotioning up her arms. "Joshua can spend the night; and from the way Miss Isabella talks, she's already converted a room for Joshua up in New York—"

"You're not listening, Jada—"

"I don't wanna listen!" Jada exclaimed. She roughly pulled the towel from her head and started drying the ends of her hair. "Listening to you is dangerous."

"Why?" Aaron asked softly, seemingly not surprised or offended by her outburst. "Because we both want the same thing?"

"You don't know what I want," Jada muttered.

"I want what we had five years ago, Jada," Aaron whispered, "and I want that everyday."

Jada sucked her teeth again. "You so nasty!"

Aaron laughed, and Jada couldn't help but smile. "I won't deny I'm quite partial to that, too, but that's not what I meant."

Jada went to her dresser and found an old T-shirt and shorts in which to sleep. He made it so hard for her to maintain resolve...not to fall in love with him even more.

"Aaron—"

"I want to wake up with you in my arms every morning, just like we did after we conceived our son. That's what I want. And I know you want it too."

She put on her pajamas, her heart beating so fast it seemed her body trembled from its exertion. "Aaron..."

"Jada."

She sniffled, unaware she was crying until tears dripped onto the back of her hand. "Damn you."

"I'm pretty sure I'll have that phrase hurled at me plenty of times before the week's over," Aaron said dryly.

"It's not funny!"

"I know, love, I know."

Jada curled under the covers, the phone next to her ear on the pillow. She cried silently, not wanting Aaron to hear. "All my life...I've been taught one thing—you were trouble the minute I met you. I *knew*, and yet..."

"I thought you were cute."

"Aaron—"

"Short with a Southern accent, thick mass of curly hair...I was suckered by your smile, Jada. I think I knew from the beginning too."

"Right..."

"But I don't think I figured it out until I came back from Milan," Aaron said lowly, as if in confessional, "and I saw you working with one of the students...all those phone calls, the e-mails—all of it didn't compare to me actually *seeing* you...my heart dropped. I stood frozen at the door, just...staring. And then when you looked up and smiled and started coming towards me...that was it."

Jada remembered that moment, remembered when Aaron had held her for much longer than she thought he would, the tenderness in his embrace and the way he had sighed her name...she had thought she'd imagined it.

"I never knew—"

"You didn't want to know."

"I don't think you did, either," Jada murmured. "You found all sorts of reasons for us not to hang out when you first came back."

She'd been very hurt by that, even going so far as to tell him to go back to Milan if he didn't want to spend time with her. She'd been ashamed at herself for such an outburst, remembering they'd never been a couple, and that he hadn't owed her anything, least of all his attention. But the next time she had gone to the community center there had been a teddy bear and a card from Aaron apologizing for his behavior waiting for her in the office.

"We're all entitled to mistakes," Aaron said.

"We are," Jada agreed.

"And we're all entitled to...happy consequences."

She had to grin at that. "Happy consequences?"

"Yes." Aaron chuckled. "None of this may have been planned...but...I'm definitely not complaining."

"Complaining will get you nowhere, anyway."

"You're right. There's no going back, is there?"

"No..."

"Right." He blew out a breath. "Right."

"Aaron?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I tell them tomorrow. Thank you, Jada."

"For?"

"Giving me a swift kick in the ass."

"Just returning the favor," Jada said.

He laughed, then sobered with a sigh. "Besides, the sooner I tell them, the sooner I can get back."

"Joshua will be so excited to see you."

"Yes. I miss him." The next part was spoken so low she barely heard him. "I miss my family."

Jada closed her eyes, her throat growing tight, and she took a deep breath. "We miss you too."

He hummed. "Sweet dreams, love."

"You too."

Jada watched the icon show up on the screen of her phone that let her know he'd ended the call. She flipped her phone closed and held it to her heart, then turned off the light. Jada often imagined she was walking down the path her great-great grandmother Dorcas had tread, and she was approaching a fork in the road. Three different paths, one where her grandmother stood, one where Mama Dorcas stood, and one that was empty.

Or at least it had been.

She watched shadows play on her closet door until she was too weak to keep her eyes open.



It was never good when Alexander McKensie paced. It meant he was thinking, usually unpleasant things, and usually worrisome for whoever had to witness the pacing. In this case, it was Aaron, Veronica, and Isabella, all in the study, all in the aftermath of Aaron's announcement. Aaron had called them there after breakfast to give them privacy, and without preamble had informed his father and girlfriend that he had a four-year-old son. Isabella had seemed proud of him; Alexander's jaw had clenched; and Veronica had become fascinated with her freshly manicured coral fingernails.

Aaron, who'd stood when he told the news, still hadn't sat down, though was now by the desk so his father had ample stomping ground. Alexander's sudden need for exercise had cut off the rest of Aaron's speech, but he could bide his time. As he'd told Jada last night, there was no going back.

"We'll order a DNA test—"

“Pop—”

“There’s really no need for that,” Isabella said.

“She could be lying to trap you!” Alexander insisted, then growled. “You couldn’t keep it in your pants for one more night—?”

“Alexander!”

“That was unnecessary,” Aaron said, eyes narrowing. This was going to be a beautiful discussion, he could see, and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“No, Aaron, let’s talk about *unnecessary*,” Alexander said, stopping his pacing, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. “This *child* is unnecessary—”

“You shouldn’t talk about your grandson like that,” Aaron said calmly.

“He’s not my grandson,” Alexander said flatly.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Pop—”

“This explains...so much,” Veronica said, earning the McKensie men’s attention. She was still staring at her hands, rubbing them now, a tiny frown on her flawless face.

“Explains what?”

Veronica shrugged, then smiled at Aaron, though he knew it wasn’t genuine. “Everything. Why this time didn’t feel the same as before...why our relationship felt...crowded.”

Aaron, guilty, knelt in front of Veronica and covered her hands with his. “I’m sorry.”

“There were two other people in there with us, though I admittedly had only known about one,” Veronica laughed, though when tears pooled in her eyes, Aaron cooed, catching one with his thumb as it slipped onto her cheek. “I was in a competition with your heart, Aaron...and I’d already lost before I even got back in the race.”

“There is no *race*,” Alexander insisted. “Why are you talking like that, Veronica? This child changes nothing—”

“You’re right and you’re wrong,” Isabella said calmly. She came over and sat next to Veronica on the couch, squeezing the younger woman’s shoulder. “The pretending stops for everyone, doesn’t it?”

“Pretending,” Alexander scoffed.

“Exactly what I said, *amore*,” Isabella insisted. “Both of them can stop pretending now. And so can you.”

“I’m quite clear about what reality is—”

“And the reality *is*,” Isabella continued, arching her eyebrow at her husband, “that this Jada Channing was not just a fling...that what Aaron feels for her is exactly what you feel for me.”

His father paused and looked at his wife in shock. “Isabella!”

“Let’s give these two a chance to chat—”

“Izzy—”

"We'll be in the sunroom if you need us," Isabella said, kissing both Veronica and Aaron on the cheek before linking her arm through her husband's and ushering him out the study.

Aaron remained kneeling, picking up the hand he held and bringing it to his lips. "I'm sorry."

"And you know the worst thing about all this is?" Veronica asked, giving him a watery chuckle. "I want to be mad and hate you...hate *her*...and I can't."

Aaron sighed, sitting on the floor with his back against the couch. "I wouldn't blame you—"

"This all happened before we got together...you just found out...but even when...I just—damn it."

Veronica slid down onto the carpet with him and Aaron wrapped an arm around her, kissing her temple. "I do love you."

"So not the right thing to say to me right now," Veronica sniffled, though she snuck her head underneath his chin.

Aaron had never wanted to hurt her, and absolutely none of this was Jada's fault—not directly anyway. Had he not been so afraid of his father, of Jada, of his feelings, he never would have been in a position to break Veronica's heart. He'd allowed his father to manipulate him, to rationalize away the feelings he had for Jada, but rationalizing did not make them disappear—it just buried them. He'd thought he could do it, especially when his tender feelings for Veronica had returned; but once he'd seen Jada on the terrace, his feelings for her had resurfaced stronger than ever.

"So that was the baby album," Veronica whispered. "Of your son?"

"Yes."

"Does he really look that much like you?"

"Clone."

"Really? I didn't know that was possible."

"Apparently her great grandmother could pass for white too," Aaron said absently, recalling a conversation they'd had about families once.

"But Jada's not very light."

"No..."

She sighed and chuckled. "You have no idea how much I want to hate her."

"You do a little," Aaron said with a little smile.

"How about I want to hate her more than I hate myself?"

Aaron frowned, pulling her head from his shoulder and grasping her chin. "That's such a wasted emotion."

Veronica's eyes darted along his face, and her fingertips brushed the beard along his cheek and jaw. "And sometimes, so is love."

"Ronnie—"

"No," Veronica said, trying to smile but failing miserably. She got to her feet, brushing lint from her pants as she did. "I think it's best for me to leave—"

"No, stay," Aaron insisted, standing as well. "I'm...I have to go back to Atlanta anyway—"

"To see her—"

"Them, yes," Aaron said softly. "And you shouldn't spend Christmas alone."

"If it's not with you, then it is alone," Veronica said. She went to the door and rested her forehead against the frame. "I don't think it's fully hit me yet, the fact I've lost you...to *her*...she should have never been a threat—"

"Veronica!"

"So I didn't see her as such until it was far too late."

"Ronnie—"

"The party was when I realized, Aaron," Veronica said. "You two couldn't see it, but I saw it. You said I was fishing, and I was, but you wouldn't bite, because you didn't see it."

"See what?"

"The fact she is in love with you." Veronica smiled, her eyes looking back into the past. "I thought I still had a shot, you know? As long as you couldn't see it, I had a shot. Or even if you did, Alexander wouldn't allow it, and you always did as your father told you."

Aaron put his hands in his pockets and bowed his head. He'd accused Jada of not wanting to see things, and she'd turned right around and accused him of the same. Hearing his mother, and now Veronica, echoing Jada's sentiments made him feel like a right heel.

"I was trying to do the right thing," Aaron mumbled.

"Yes, but I'm not a charity case," Veronica said. "And neither is Jada, from what I've gathered of her. She can't even let me play the gold-digger card! Damn her...if she weren't taking you away from me, I could've seen us as friends—"

"She's not—"

"Maybe not intentionally," Veronica admitted, "but the end result is the same. I can compete with another woman, Aaron, and I usually win—I mean, I *am* Veronica Prescott!—but a child? I can't win against a child, *especially* if his mother is the woman you really love."

"Ronnie..." Aaron went to her and cupped her face. More tears fell down her cheeks, and he brushed them away as he pressed a long kiss on her forehead.

"You were my first," he said, feeling tears sting his eyes. It was hard to let go of something so familiar, dependable, wonderful. Veronica really was a fantastic woman. She didn't deserve this.

"But not your true," Veronica said, sniffing. She pulled back, cupping his face as he was hers, and brought their lips together. Aaron gave her every ounce of tenderness he could muster, all the apologies and well-wishes inside of him.

They broke apart slowly, sharing breath and their last moments together as a couple. “Merry Christmas, Aaron,” Veronica whispered finally, then made her escape from the study to her room.

It was a graceful exit, but Veronica was nothing if not a classy woman. Aaron should’ve known she wouldn’t rant, rave, and curse him and Jada to the hottest and deepest parts of hell—that wasn’t her style—but it didn’t make the break-up any less hard or painful. His mother had said they’d been pretending, and for a few years, they’d been successful. He’d even convinced himself he could keep it up for the long haul, but Veronica was right. The party had cracked the veneer, and Joshua shattered it. This wasn’t to say that if he and Jada hadn’t shared a child that his relationship with Veronica wouldn’t have ended eventually, and that was the scarier part because both of them knew it. Jada had been the ghost hovering around their relationship since they started again—a rebound tryst in Paris that had turned into something more meaningful, and yet not enough. Veronica had stayed because she loved him, and what man wouldn’t feel guilty about not loving a woman as much as she loved him?

Aaron shuffled through the house to the sunroom where his mother sat on the couch watching her husband pace with an amused expression. Aaron kissed the top of Isabella’s head, but remained standing, patiently waiting for his father to acknowledge him.

“Veronica—?”

“She’s staying, Pop.”

His posture didn’t change, and his eyes narrowed. “And you.”

“Going back home.”

“You are home, son.”

“My family needs me, Pop—”

“Apparently not if that girl didn’t bother telling you about your ‘son’ until now.”

Aaron exhaled harshly, raking his fingers through his hair. “I’m leaving tonight—”

“You leave tonight, don’t bother coming back.”

“Alex—!” Isabella exclaimed, standing next to Aaron. “Honey, be reasonable—”

“I have a company to think of, Izzy, a product. No one wants a sullied product—”

“Nothing is sullied—”

“I understand you wanting to do right by your son, Aaron,” Alexander said. “You’re a McKensie, and McKensies don’t run from responsibilities.”

Isabella squeezed Aaron’s shoulder again. “So why are you so upset about me going back?”

Alexander crossed his arms at his chest and began pacing again. “We’ll set up a trust fund for the boy, how about that?”

"I was going to do that anyway."

"That way he won't ever be left wanting, and you won't have to give up your life here—"

"I'm not giving up anything."

Alexander stopped pacing and met his son's eyes. "She's not fit to be a McKensie, Aaron, and...while Joshua may look like one, he's not fit, either."

"Fit?"

Alexander sighed. "Our circles are...completely different. If you care about this girl as you say you do, why put her in situations where she'll be uncomfortable...conspicuous...lacking—"

"Lacking?"

"She's poor and she's black—"

"Everyone is poor compared to us, Father—!"

"Veronica isn't. She's appropriate for you in every way."

"I don't want 'appropriate,'" Aaron said. "I tried it and it didn't work."

"You didn't try—!"

"I tried for five years! You can't force a square peg into a circle."

Isabella's grasp tightened around his arm and Aaron smiled softly at her. He kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"*Tesoro*—"

"If you change your mind, you know where to find me," Aaron said to his father.

Alexander's stern features softened a bit, then his body tensed. "You too."

Aaron left his parents and went immediately into his room to pack. It didn't take him very long; he didn't want to be in the same house as his father any longer than necessary. Jada had warned him about this, but that didn't stop the searing pain in his chest. He'd lost a friend and a father in one fell swoop, and though his mother was on his side, there was little she could do to mend the tears right now. Yet even as he left the house and watched the estate shrink in the rearview mirror as the car drove away, he couldn't feel too terrible.

He still had another family waiting for him in Atlanta.

ELEVEN

Aaron forced himself not to drive directly to Jada's apartment from the airport when he got back to Atlanta. It was late; they were all asleep; and both Jada and Deshae had work early the next morning. That meant waiting, so he went to his condo that night and into the office Friday morning, mildly surprised he still had access. Isabella probably had threatened bloody murder if his father did anything drastic, and Alexander could never deny her anything.

Though Aaron had won that battle, he knew there were other ways his father could make his life hell. Alexander could block projects, potential clients, or assign him to the London offices again. He could even make Aaron a glorified secretary, burying him under paperwork until he would want to quit. Aaron shrugged internally. If Alexander managed to remove him from McKenzie Lowman, he could always work at Ricci's.

Speaking of family restaurants, he had never gone to Charlie's Grille in the weeks he had been in Atlanta. As tempted as he was to go there now, he didn't want to distract Jada from her job, but he wanted her to take him there sometime soon. He was excited to taste the food; Jada's cooking...it didn't help he was currently hungry.

He ordered something from a nearby Chinese restaurant, a carton of chicken fried rice with chopsticks, and ate as he went over memos and files that had piled up during his emergency vacation. His assistant Jamie had been very thorough during his absence, putting the more urgent files at the top and leaving the least pressing to the end. Luckily, the "urgent" weren't very urgent, so he felt comfortable waiting to tackle them until after the holidays.

The end of the day couldn't come fast enough.

Since he knew he wouldn't be able to focus, Aaron left a note saying he was leaving early. He had no real plan of where to go, but he wasn't going to his condo. He went to Lenox Square, realizing he'd yet to do Christmas shopping, but he didn't have any ideas about what to get anyone. He did a complete lap of the mall, cataloguing each store's wares and getting a general sense of what would make good gifts. He wouldn't buy anything today; perhaps he would sneak in a few questions to Jada and Deshae to see what the other wanted,

what other members of their families would like. He knew he had a lot of charming to do, and from what he'd gathered of Jada's family, especially her grandmother, he had to do a very good job at it.

By the time he left the mall it was close to five. He didn't know if Jada had left work early, but he decided to go to her apartment anyway. He stopped by his condo first to change into something more comfortable, then made his way to Jada's place. Her car was in the parking lot as he turned in and he smiled. Maybe he could take everyone out to dinner...

The nervousness he'd had during his first visit was still there, but now it was more anticipation than anxiety. When Malcolm opened the door, the smells of very good food entered his nose, and the anticipation settled into something pleasant and familiar.

"Hey, Mr. Aaron—dang it, Joshie!"

Joshua had squeezed his tiny body underneath Malcolm's outstretched arm and launched himself into his father's embrace. Aaron laughed, holding his son tightly to him and saying hello to Malcolm as he entered the apartment.

Deshae was setting the table and she smiled when she saw Aaron. "You've eaten yet?"

"No...actually I was about to ask if you all wanted to go to dinner—"

"Ooh!"

"Malcolm, I think there is a folding chair in the hall closet. Bring that out. I'll set another space for Aaron here—" Deshae stopped, raising an eyebrow at her son when he started sulking and muttering under his breath. "I think Jada Mae's tired. She seemed beat when she shuffled in here with dinner, but maybe tomorrow?"

"That's fine," Aaron said, kissing the top of Joshua's head. "She works too hard."

"Who you tellin'! Her work ethic is a curse, I swear! Some days I wanna strap her to the bed and *force* her to relax! Then she starts mumbling about 'idle hands' and I can't take it..."

Aaron chuckled and went into the kitchen. "Can I do anything to help?"

"You are," Deshae said, smiling and winking at him and Joshua. "Dinner should be served soon—she actually made somethin' other than chicken!"

"I *like* the chicken!" Malcolm said, unfolding the chair and sliding it as close to the table as he could.

"You would," Deshae muttered out the side of her mouth. "But it's pork chops—"

"I can work with pork chops," Malcolm said, looking at Aaron seriously.

"I can work with—boy, go check on the bread in the oven and make sure it ain't burn... 'I can work with pork chops'..."

Aaron laughed, smoothing down Joshua's hair as they stared into each other's eyes. "How are you doing, buddy?"

Joshua snuggled closer to him. "Fine. Are you goin' away again?"

Aaron kissed Joshua's forehead. "I don't plan on it."

"Kay."

"Have a seat; take a load off," Deshae said, preparing the plates. "I'll call you when it's ready."

Aaron glanced down the hall as he made his way to the couch, getting comfortable and cuddling Joshua's body into his own. "What did you do today?"

"I went to Aunt Lucy's house," Joshua said. "Me and Aunt Lucy and GG and Malcolm decorated the house and the Christmas tree."

Aaron noticed the apartment didn't have decorations up. "Are you going to get a tree?"

"We generally spend Christmas with Jada's family, so we don't decorate the apartment," Deshae explained. "My mother moved to Chicago to take care of a sick uncle, and neither one of us really has the time to put 'em up or take 'em down, anyway."

Aaron frowned a little. Maybe next year he would help with that. There should always be a little Christmas in the home.

"Are you comin'?"

"To what, buddy?"

"Aunt Lucy's—are you spendin' Christmas with us?"

Just then Jada padded to the room, arms stretched over her head and yawning a little. Aaron's eyes locked upon her form, watching a tendril of hair slip out of her sloppy bun and fall across her collarbone. She hadn't noticed him yet, going immediately to the kitchen only for Deshae to kick her out, saying she was "handling it."

Jada started when she finally saw Aaron, and he grinned at her, earning a small, shy smile in return. She wrapped the hem of her shirt around her fists as she approached, sitting on the couch and kissing her son's forehead in greeting.

"What about me?" Aaron asked with a small pout as she straightened herself on the couch. He wished she sat closer to him.

"What about you' what?"

"This McKensie gets a kiss but I don't?" Aaron asked, jutting his chin toward Joshua.

Jada blinked at him, and Aaron leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Did you rest well?"

"As well as expected," Jada said, seemingly grateful for the topic change. "How did..." She stopped and shook her head. "A question for another time."

Aaron knew she wanted to ask about his New York visit. "Maybe after we put the little one to bed."

"My baby's getting sleepy already?" Jada asked, combing her fingers through Joshua's hair. "Daddy makes a comfortable pillow, doesn't he?"

Joshua nodded and Aaron blushed, though he did manage a smirk towards Jada. "After I'm done with him maybe you'd like a turn?"

"Ha!" Jada said and shook her head. "That's how we got Joshua, me usin' you as a pillow and then..."

"You also had eggnog, and we were alone," Aaron said, clearing his throat and shifting Joshua a little. The last thing he needed was an inquisitive four-year-old asking what was that in Daddy's lap and why was it so hard.

"Thank goodness we don't drink that in the house!" Jada chuckled, and he gave her a serious look.

"I wasn't drunk on the eggnog," Aaron said softly.

She bit her lip and ducked her head. "I know..."

"And you weren't, either."

Jada took a deep breath. "No..."

"Food's ready," Deshae called from the kitchen.

Aaron kissed Jada's temple and nuzzled it. "Good. Let's eat."

Dinner was a lively affair, nothing like the sedate, only-talk-when-necessary dinners he had with his family. There never seemed to be too many stories to tell in Jada's small apartment, and Deshae and Malcolm spent the majority of the time trying to one-up each other. Of course Deshae won because, being a masseuse and older, she had access to more entertaining characters.

Jada spent dinner cutting up the pork chop for Joshua and telling her pouting son he could *not* sit in his father's lap during dinner because he was a big boy, and no matter how far he poked out that bottom lip, his behind would stay in that chair. It was fascinating to see Jada parent, noting her firm resolve tempered with compassion. She understood Joshua's need to be with his father, but also recognized she had to teach her son table manners and the beginnings of autonomy. Joshua wouldn't be a little boy forever; he had to start learning the lessons now.

Malcolm and Deshae put away the dishes while Aaron helped Jada bathe Joshua. There was a lot of showing off the toys Aaron had bought and how long Joshua could hold his breath underwater; a lot of splashing and soaking both parents liberally with the soapy water. Jada let Aaron wash Joshua's hair, Joshua let Aaron wash Joshua's hair, and by the time bath time was over, Joshua was wrapped in a towel and his father's arms fast asleep.

"You want to put him to bed?" Jada asked. "I can find you something to wear while I find a shirt for you..."

"Okay," Aaron said, pressing his back against the shower door so Jada could leave the tiny bathroom first. He put Joshua in his pajamas and nestled him under the covers. After a goodnight kiss, he intuitively found Jada's room, enjoying a nice view of her behind as she rifled through the lower drawers in her dresser. He smirked a bit, hit with the urge to tickle her sides, but he didn't want an elbow to the stomach or below!

"Quit starin'!"

Aaron laughed and sat on her bed, staring harder. "It's a nice view."

“Quit!”

“How did you know I was staring?”

“I can feel your eyes on me!”

That’s not the only thing I want you to feel.

Aaron shook his head and stood, paced, distracted himself from the lovely, innocent picture she made. Wasn’t it too soon to move from one relationship into another? *Shouldn’t* it feel too soon? Deshae and Malcolm were in the living area; Joshua was sleeping the next room; and all Aaron could think about was pulling Jada in his arms and never letting her go.

“I was looking for your sweatshirt, knowing that I hadn’t put it in the wash—I found it!” Jada announced, turning around and holding the garment like a banner. Aaron smiled and pulled off his soaked shirt, his eyes growing dark when he noticed hers skip over his bare chest.

“Your turn,” he said.

“My turn what?”

“My shirt goes, your shirt goes. You got soaked too.”

Jada snorted, throwing the sweatshirt to him. “In your dreams!”

“Every night—and in color too!”

“Lord...”

She turned around, hiding in her drawers again, but Aaron wouldn’t let her escape so easily. He went behind her and slid his arms around her waist, cheering a little at her surprised gasp. He hadn’t put on the sweatshirt yet.

“What are you doin’?”

“Holding you,” Aaron said, nuzzling her temple. “You’re so soft...”

“Aaron!”

“You are!” he defended. “I like how you feel. I’ve missed how you feel...”

Her body was tense and still, unwilling to yield to him. He dragged his nose along the shell of her ear and whispered into it. “I broke up with Veronica.”

He pulled back quickly enough so they didn’t bump heads when she snapped her eyes to his. “Why did you go do a fool thing like that!”

He frowned, unprepared for her anger. “I couldn’t stay with her—”

“Because we have a child? We aren’t married—”

“Maybe we should be.”

Both of them stopped talking abruptly, Aaron’s face growing red in embarrassment. He hadn’t meant for that to come out that way.

“Let go,” Jada said, voice and face expressionless.

Aaron set his jaw and tightened his arms around her. “No.”

“No?”

“No.” He bent his head so that they were eye-to-eye, breath to breath. “I let you go once and it cost me five years of my life. I’m not doing it again.”

"Your relationship with Veronica ain't even cold and now you tryin' to press up on me," Jada said softly. "In all the years you've known me, when have I ever been, or desired to *be*, the rebound girl?"

"Never."

"So why you think I'm tryin' to start now?"

"You aren't the rebound girl. You never have been, and you never will be."

Jada stared at him for a moment, then dropped her eyes, and he touched his forehead to hers. They just stood there like that, Aaron shifting her body so he could wrap his arms around her more comfortably, more fully. Because of the height difference, Aaron tucked her into his chest, but he held her close, needing to feel her and remind himself that he was here with her, with Joshua. Everything that had happened this past week would all be worth it, he knew; now he had to convince Jada of it.

"I'll let you change, love," he whispered after a few minutes had passed. "I'll be in the living area fighting Malcolm for the remote."

That earned him a grin. "He'll win."

"I can take him," Aaron insisted with a grin of his own.

Jada nodded, and Aaron kissed her forehead, cupping her face when she leaned into it. He pulled back, intending to go, but groaned and kissed her forehead again, sighing when her fingers slid up his back.

"I'm trying to be good, Jada," he whispered against her forehead.

"I'm sorry," Jada said as she stepped out of his arms, finding a shirt and pulling it out of the drawer. She went to the door, leaving him in the spot where he stood. "It's just that I've missed the feel of you too."

It was all he could do not to follow her.

Jada hid in the bathroom, her back pressed against the door, her breath coming out in heavy spurts. What had *possessed* her to admit something like that? Just because he broke up with Veronica...what? They could ride off into the sunset together—her, Aaron, and Joshua, one big happy family? Jada snorted. Veronica had been a blessing, helping them keep their lust for each other in check. With Veronica gone and Aaron apparently giving the kiss-off to his father, he was becoming more assertive with his romantic overtures, and Jada was finding herself unable, unwilling?, to ignore them.

She trembled slightly as she took off her soaked shirt and replaced it with the dry one. She threw the garment in the hamper and, after counting to twenty, left the bathroom and went back into her room. Aaron was no longer there, and neither was his shirt, so she went into the living area where he and Malcolm were sitting on the couch watching a basketball game, and Deshae was at the kitchen table.

"I put his shirt in the dryer for you," Deshae said.

"Thanks." Jada avoided eye contact with Deshae as she sat at the table, and her friend gave her an appraising look.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'."

"If that's true, why do you look so freaked out?"

"Change scares me, you know that," Jada answered vaguely.

"Right." Deshae knew she would get the dish later, so she dropped it.

"Mac! Bedtime."

"But it's just nine-thirty—"

"Well passed your bedtime, Boo. Bed."

"I can't wait 'til I'm eleven—"

"What's gonna happen at eleven that I don't know about?" Jada grinned when Malcolm sucked his teeth, but slapped Aaron's hand in goodbye. He kissed his mother and Jada's cheek then went to his room.

Deshae sighed and shook her head. "Enjoy it, you two. You only got about six more years left before they start actin' a straight fool—"

"My Joshua is an angel," Jada insisted.

"Who throws the most devilish of tantrums?! Angel indeed—dark angel, maybe!"

"Hey, if I didn't like you so much, I'd take offense to you disparaging my son!" Aaron piped up from the couch.

"And if I didn't like *you* so much I'd tell you I didn't give a f—"

"Shae!" Jada said on a laugh.

"Aaron knows I'm kiddin', don't you Aaron?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"See?"

Though Deshae had never fully disliked Aaron, she had always been careful in discussing him with Jada. She hadn't known him outside of what Jada had told him, and because he was a white man, extra caution was always afforded him. But now that they knew each other, Jada felt outnumbered for some reason, as if they had an understanding and somehow she was at the core of it. It was more than just the "mutual friend" status Jada held, it seemed. She felt as if she was at the center of a secret both of them shared.

As it was, they were currently staring at each other as if in silent communication, and when Deshae suddenly announced she was tired and wanted to call Jamal before going to bed, Jada suddenly felt set up. Awareness entered the room just as Deshae left, and Jada drummed her fingers on the table to ignore it. She heard broken speech from the television as Aaron changed the channels, but didn't look in his direction. Why did Deshae leave them alone? Was the tension too oppressive for her to endure? It was choking Jada, making her dizzy and weak...yearn...

"There's nothing on," Aaron announced, turning off the set.

"It's the heart of the primetime lineup; surely *something's* on..."

"Duds, the lot of 'em," Aaron insisted. He stood and stretched his arms over his head, giving Jada a view of his bare stomach and happy trail. She averted her eyes to the salt and pepper shakers and smirked.

"What's that look for?"

Jada's smirk settled into a grin. "What look?"

He didn't answer her immediately, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her shoulders. His fingers touched the corner of her mouth and he put his lips to her ear. "That look."

"I don't have a *look*..."

"You most certainly do! I can prove it!"

Jada giggled as he took her hand and pulled her from the chair. He steered her into the bathroom and she was just tall enough to see her head in the mirrored doors of the medicine cabinet above the sink.

"So...where's this look I supposedly have?"

His lips touched her jaw, and her eyelids fluttered. His arms held her tightly around her waist, and she bit her lip to trap a burgeoning moan.

"There," he whispered against her skin, his green eyes dark as they locked with hers through the mirror.

"Aaron..."

His lips moved down her jaw to her neck, nose nuzzling, and she was unable to dampen her moan this time.

"Look at us," he said, nipping at her lobe. "Do you see?"

"I can barely see myself," Jada said, going for levity, ignoring the fact her eyes were closed so she could experience Aaron's caresses to their fullest extent.

"I can see you, and you can see me...that's all that matters." He slipped his hands underneath her T-shirt, touching her bare stomach.

"It's not..."

"It is," Aaron said. His forehead rested against her temple. "It is."

Jada's breath shuddered out, her mind going over the bazillion reasons why this was not a good idea; but it was being overruled by the rest of her body, and she reclined against him.

"You're all that matters," Aaron continued to whisper. "You and Joshua...you're all that matters..."

Jada broke the embrace and left the bathroom. It was too cramped in there; emotions were too charged. She fled to the open space of the living area, but didn't get far as Aaron caught her again.

"The worst thing I ever did was letting you get on that plane five years ago," he said, spinning her around to look in her eyes. "Jada—"

She pressed her fingers to his mouth, sighing a little when he kissed the pads of them. "We didn't know...we'd conceived Joshua that night, Aaron. You were under no obligation to me—" Jada stopped talking when he cradled her face in his hands. His nose rubbed against hers, his breath teased her lips.

"We're friends," Jada murmured, vainly trying to latch onto the label that had kept her sane in their years apart.

"No, we're not," Aaron murmured back, then pressed his lips against hers.

It was her first kiss in five years, and she felt out of practice, and yet, not. He was gentle but firm, moving his hands from her face to pull her body close to his.

Jada dragged her lips away and buried them into his neck, her body shaking from the kiss, from what he brought to the fore within her. Honesty. He was forcing her to be honest with herself whether she was ready to be or not. Just them—just her and Aaron. She'd told him before they weren't "just friends," and he reminded her of that with his kiss.

She wanted another reminder.

Her mouth slid along his hair-covered jaw, pressing tiny, soft kisses en route to his mouth. Aaron met her halfway, this kiss harder, frantic, as if each were the last person either of them would ever kiss.

For Jada, he was.

Aaron began walking her backwards until the back of her knees hit the couch. It was a difficult maneuver, she trying to sit without breaking the kiss, but Aaron solved the problem by sitting down first, then bringing her into his lap so she straddled him. Soon he left her mouth in favor of her neck, and Jada pressed herself against him.

"Baby," she whispered, kissing his temple and sliding her fingers through his hair.

"*Aghrà mo chroi*," he sighed in reply, pulling back and cupping her jaw. His thumb dragged along her mouth and he nodded at her. "*Definitely*."

Jada closed her eyes, tears slipping from them as she rested her forehead against his. She didn't know exactly what he said, but she had an idea. He'd taught her a few Gaelic phrases years ago, and though she didn't remember some, she was sure he'd never taught her this one.

He kissed her lips lightly. "You're not going to ask what that means?"

"No."

"Why?"

Jada shook her head and buried her face in the crook of his neck. She wasn't ready to hear the translation, and even if she had been, *this* wasn't the time. Everything was changing so quickly, too quickly. Jada needed to catch up.

Aaron didn't press her, stretching out onto the couch with her on top and smoothing his hand along her hair and back. His caress made Jada drowsy, and he reinforced her why he'd always been her favorite pillow. Just as she was getting comfortable, the dryer's buzzer sounded, and she moved to get it. When his arms tightened around her, she told him she had to see to it so it wouldn't disturb everyone.

He snuck in a kiss as she left, and Jada walked with heavy steps to the dryer and took out his shirt. It smelled of the dryer sheet, and she held it to her chest as she went back to Aaron.

“All dry,” Jada whispered, holding out the garment. He ignored it and took her hand, pulling her back down to their former position. The only sounds between them were their breathing and heartbeats, lulling Jada into slumber. Just as she was about to succumb, Aaron spoke.

“Jada?”

She snuggled into his warmth and yawned. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

She smiled into his chest and kissed the space over his beating heart. “You’re welcome.”

For how ever long he liked, he was welcome.

T W E L V E

Christmas Eve was full of wrapping paper, ribbons, candy canes, Christmas television specials. Jamal had offered his house for Jada and Deshae to wrap presents, a perfect place because the entertainment room distracted the boys long enough for Deshae and Jada to wrap their gifts. Jamal was an excellent host, providing Christmas snacks and drinks for the boys and more adult versions for the mothers.

“So,” Jamal said, sitting on the floor and cuddling Deshae from behind. “Whaddya get me?”

“What makes you think I got *anything* fo’ you?” Deshae deadpanned, winking at Jada.

“Because I woke up from a nap a coupla days ago to Malcolm stretchin’ a tape measure ’round my head...so...whaddya gettin’, Boo?”

“I needed a measure of yo’ head to see what size muzzle I needed to get—Jamal!” Deshae squealed, falling over as Jamal began tickling her unmercifully.

“Tell me, woman!”

“No!”

Jada shook her head as she taped the flap of the package she’d just wrapped and cleared her throat when she noticed the tickling had stopped in favor of kissing and petting.

“Um, no?” Jada said.

“You can join us,” Jamal teased.

Deshae slapped his shoulder. “No she can’t! I’m selfish when it comes to you—though probably not as selfish as Aaron—”

“Deshae!”

“What?” she asked, batting her eyelashes in faux innocence. “I’m just sayin’...”

“You finally got a man? That’s great,” Jamal said, sitting up and pulling Deshae with him.

“Not *a* man,” Deshae clarified, “*the* man.”

“*The* man?—*oh*...well, you know I gotta meet him,” Jamal insisted.

"That's very sweet, Jamal, but I'm a big girl, and I've already slept with him as the product of that is currently sitting in your entertainment room watching *Home Alone*."

"Doesn't matter; you my girl's girl, so that means I gotta watch out for you too," Jamal said.

"And that's why your girl loves you so much, baby," Deshae whispered, pressing a light kiss on Jamal's lips. Jamal deepened the kiss and Jada cleared her throat again, reminding them she was there and wouldn't appreciate a peep show.

"Anyway," Jamal said, sneaking in one last kiss before picking up another gift—a remote control car for Malcolm—to wrap. "When do I get to meet him? Is he comin' to your Aunt's house?"

Jada frowned. "Ah..."

"Yes," Deshae answered for her. "The family finally gets to meet the baby daddy!"

Jada was so *very* looking forward to that too. She hadn't bothered telling her grandmother or anyone else because she didn't want to hear the lectures, warnings, or anything else that would ruin her spirit. For the first time in a long while, Jada felt peace, relief, and contentment. Aaron hadn't stayed over last night, for which Jada was glad because there had been too many emotions muddling her brain; but when Aaron had kissed her and whispered his promise to return the next day, the niggling doubt that had always been present before was conspicuously absent. She didn't know what they were, had no label to assign, but, strangely, Jada was okay with that. They were friends again but more than that; not lovers but perhaps not too far from that, either. The uncertainty wasn't so scary with Aaron there with her.

"She's thinkin' about him."

Deshae's voice seeped into Jada's consciousness, and she fixed her face to mask the grin she hadn't known was there. "What?"

"Ain't no need in hidin' it!" Deshae snickered. "You teased me hell on high water when I first got with Jamal, and now it's *my* turn!" Deshae laughed evilly, and Jada threw balled-up wrapping paper at her.

"Shut up."

"Doesn't feel so good when you're on the other side of it, does it?"

Jada's hip buzzed from her phone, which prevented her from responding. "Saved by the buzz, babe."

"I'm shakin' in my boots," Deshae muttered, sticking out her tongue and pulling a face. Jada went into the foyer to take the call.

"Hey, love, where are you? I'm at the apartment but no one's here..."

A smile immediately blossomed and she leaned against the wall. "Jamal's house. We're wrapping presents."

"How long will that take?"

“Dunno. Depends on if the two lovebirds can stop kissing for five seconds and wrap somethin’!”

Aaron chuckled. “Hmm...just as long as I get to see you and Joshua today—how about dinner?”

“Will I have to cook it?”

“You’ve done enough of that haven’t you?” Aaron teased.

Today Jada had a much-needed reprieve from the restaurant, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t cook something Aaron wanted.

“Let me cook for you,” Aaron said. “You and Joshua. Deshae, Malcolm, and—Jamal, is it?—can come too.”

“How kind of you.”

“Anything to spend time with you, love.”

She looked around the corner into the living room where Jamal and Deshae held each other, ribbons and wrapping abandoned and scattered around them.

“I think it just might be you, me, and Joshua,” Jada said. “Deshae’s far too comfortable here...I have a feeling I’ll be looking for a new roommate soon.”

“You won’t have to look far, love.”

“True, but Joshua can’t pay rent yet.”

Aaron’s hearty laughter made Jada warm and she giggled. Their old relationship was back, or at least a dimension of it. She hadn’t allowed herself the freedom earlier because he’d been with Veronica, and as long as he was taken, she wouldn’t let herself get close to him. But as Aaron had told her—she and he were all that mattered now, and it felt good.

“That’s true,” Aaron conceded, “but his papa can.”

“Is that right?”

“Everything about us is right,” Aaron determined.

“Well, we all piled into Deshae’s car to come to Jamal’s house, so I’ll let you know—”

“Why don’t I come pick you guys up?”

“You want to come now?”

“Why not?” he asked. “That way I can see what you got me—”

“Your gift’s already done, man,” Jada deflected.

“Yes. He’s four years old and the most beautiful boy in the world.”

Aaron really made it too easy for her to love him, and the sentiment didn’t have the paralyzing fear it had when she was younger. “You got a pencil and paper handy? I need to give you directions...”

Aaron took them down and they chatted a few more minutes before she hung up. He would be at the house in about thirty minutes, and Jada decided not to tell Joshua Aaron was coming to surprise him. Taking a deep breath, Jada turned around, eyes closed just in case Deshae and Jamal were indecent.

“I’m comin’ in! Everything better be covered and put in the proper place by the time I do!” Something hit her cheek and she heard Jamal snicker. “Shae!” Jada picked up the balled-up wrapping paper again, but didn’t throw it,

tossing it up and down in her hand. "You *really* wanna know what Deshae got you, Jamal?"

Deshae scrambled off the floor and gave chase. Jada made it to the kitchen before Deshae caught her around the waist and poked her sides.

"You weren't gonna really tell him were you?"

"Course not!" Jada laughed. "But next time you throw somethin' at me—"

"You threw it at me first!"

"If I wanted to see naughty stuff, I'd go on the Internet—"

"Or call Aaron," Deshae snickered.

Jada blushed, squeezing the Christmas tree paper. "It's really not right, is it?"

"If you had to pick a white boy, you picked a *fine* one," Deshae said, nudging Jada with her elbow.

Jada smiled but shook her head. "Picking implies intent. I certainly didn't intend on falling in love with Aaron."

"And Lord knows your grandma ain't!"

Jada thought Candace would've preferred her to be a nun, but that was rather moot now.

"Ain't no blood in my kitchen?" Jamal asked as he came inside. He pressed a smacking kiss on Deshae's cheek as he continued to the refrigerator. "A brotha be *starvin'*! You think you can whip us up somethin, Jada Mae?"

"Oh, *no*!" Jada asked. "I'm off duty! In fact, Aaron's gonna cook dinner to-night—"

"Oh...well lah-tee-dahl!" Deshae said, hooking her arm through Jada's. "Probably something Italian—"

"Probably Indian," Jada countered. "That boy loves himself some curry."

"Or haggis!"

Choking noises came from behind them and Jada laughed. "Doubtful, considering that's Scottish and not Irish—"

"White man's version of chitlins—" Jamal joked.

"Haggis!" Deshae proclaimed again, and the couple laughed uproariously.

"Y'all stupid!" Jada determined, but bumped Jamal out of the way to see what she could rustle up for lunch.

They decided to make ham sandwiches from the Honey Baked Ham he had. All three formed an assembly line of sorts as they built the sandwiches, and Jamal took two of the plates down for the boys.

"Imma pop in *The Wiz*," Jamal said. "We all need a break from the wrapping."

Jada snorted. "Or the *unwrapping*."

"You just *beggin'* me to squeeze this mustard all over you, ain't you—?"

The doorbell provided Jada a quick exit, grinning as Deshae muttered how she was answering the door as if it were *her* house. She opened the door and damn near melted at the smile Aaron gave her.

"Festive," Aaron said, tugging on the candy cane stuck in her elastic tie holding her hair in a ponytail.

"If you're a good boy you can get one too."

"I don't know," Aaron said as he stepped inside and wrapped an arm around her waist. "I'm quite partial to mistletoe."

They grinned at each other, Aaron bringing his forehead to hers and Jada wrapping her arms around his neck. "Mistletoe is poisonous, dear."

"You'll heal me," Aaron said confidently, kissing her cheek.

"Oh...hey! This 'The Man'?"

"Ah," Aaron began, his face burning. Jada giggled and kissed his cheek.

"He doesn't mean like *that*," Jada reassured him and introduced the two men. "Jamal, this is Aaron. Aaron, Jamal."

"Nice to meet you," Jamal said, giving Aaron a firm handshake. "I hear you work with the Falcons too?"

"Yes, but my job isn't nearly as glamorous as yours..."

"About as glamorous as it is painful!" Jamal said. When Deshae came from the kitchen, Jamal's smile softened. "But no pain, no gain, huh?"

"What's this fool talkin' 'bout, now?" Deshae said, leaning into Jamal's kiss on her neck. "Hello, Aaron."

"Hello, Deshae," Aaron parroted back. "Where's your candy cane?"

"Jamal ate it," she replied without inflection.

"And I'm about to be hungry for some more o' yo' sugar, too, you keep playin'," Jamal said, nibbling at her jaw.

Jada rolled her eyes and led Aaron into the kitchen. "Would you like a ham sandwich?"

"That sounds great. Where's Joshua?"

"In the entertainment room. We were all going to eat there and watch *The Wiz*. Have you ever seen it?"

"No. What's it about?"

"Basically *The Wizard of Oz* for Negroes," Jamal said, pulling out two Diet Cokes from the fridge. "Get on down the road!" He did an awkward jig as he left the kitchen and Deshae let out a long-suffering sigh.

"That's *your* man," Jada reminded her.

"And if I didn't love him so much..." she said, following behind the dancing and loud, off-key singing.

Aaron slid behind her, cocooning her in his arms as she prepared his sandwich. He kissed her jaw and neck, earning little giggles from her. She was giddy and liked feeling that way.

"I'm so glad we're not friends anymore," Aaron muttered, his teeth closing around the curve of her ear.

"And what are we then, other than parents?"

He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled. "I'm afraid to say."

"Why?"

He chuckled a little. “I just think it’s safe to say we’re *definitely* more than friends.”

Jada wouldn’t let herself be concerned over his lack of an answer. Now wasn’t the time, especially when their new, if vague status, was so wonderful. Jada understood he needed time to transition; maybe he needed a few months to be alone. She knew she needed time to get used to the *possibility* of a romantic relationship. What were a few kisses and cuddles between friends, anyway?

“All done,” Jada said, patting the sandwich as she gave him the plate.

“Looks good,” Aaron said, sweetly kissing her lips. “Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome.”

He set down the plate and framed her face, smiling slightly before bringing his mouth to hers. Okay, so they were *more* than a “few kisses.” They were intoxicating, leaving her drunk and yearning for seconds and thirds. She understood why women became silly when they fell in love—something about abnormally high serotonin levels she was sure.

“I smell like mayonnaise,” Jada muttered against his lips when he granted a reprieve.

“If you’re trying to get me to stop kissing you, it’s not working,” Aaron murmured back, going in for another kiss.

Suddenly his mouth was knocked from hers, and they both looked down to see Joshua holding on to his father’s legs for dear life. Aaron pecked her lips one last time before picking up Joshua and giving him a wet kiss to the cheek. Jada prepared her own sandwich while Joshua rattled off the movies he’d seen that day and more things he wanted for Christmas.

Aaron chuckled. “Isn’t this list a little late, buddy?”

“No.”

Jada snickered and took her plate, heading downstairs to watch the movie. It had just started, Deshae flanked by her two boys, and Jada sat on the floor with her back reclined against the easy chair. A few moments later, Aaron and Joshua joined her, Joshua in Aaron’s lap and Aaron wrapping his arm around Jada’s shoulder to snuggle her to his side. Deshae and Jada shared a smile with each other before turning their attention to the movie.

Though Dorothy’s search for home had just begun, Jada thought hers was finally ending.



Aaron didn’t think he would ever get used to any of this—a sixty-seven-degree sunny Christmas; the lack of dread that usually came with the day; a giggling boy jumping on the bed in excitement; a woman incoherently telling him to stop and burying her curly head underneath the covers. This was what it felt like to have a family of one’s own, and Aaron was addicted to it. Things were put in perspective; priorities made a hell of a lot more sense; and the

peace that came with it was almost overwhelming. Aaron knew it would be harder than this—immunization shots and teenage rebellion and college funds to worry about—but right now, he was a new father, and none of that could dampen the joy he experienced.

“Commere, you,” Aaron said, grabbing his bouncing boy and blowing raspberries on his stomach. Joshua shrieked and kicked in delight, wrapping his tiny arms around Aaron’s neck.

“I love you, Daddy,” he said, pressing a kiss to Aaron’s mouth.

“I love you, too, buddy,” Aaron returned, kissing Joshua’s forehead to hide his tears from his son. He was becoming a pansy; Alexander McKensie would be so disappointed. McKensies didn’t show emotion, weakness—at least that was what Alexander thought tears were—but Aaron didn’t feel weak. He felt he could give Hercules a run for his money.

“Mommy’s hidin’,” Joshua whispered conspiratorially.

“Yes...I think she wants to sleep in.”

Joshua crawled from Aaron’s arms and slid his head underneath the pillow. A few seconds later, Jada lifted the pillow from her head, scowling at her son.

“You are bad.”

“No!” Joshua giggled, rubbing his nose against his mother’s. “It’s Christmas!”

“And it’s Sunday. Mommy wants to sleep.”

“Presents!”

“Baby love, please...Mama’s *tired*...”

“Just *one* present—”

“Yeah, Mommy, just *one*...”

Jada turned her scowl to Aaron, and he waggled his eyebrows. “The presents are at Jamal’s—”

“Not all of them.”

Joshua gasped, then scrambled off the bed and out the room. Jada sat up quickly but Aaron shook his head, grasping her shoulders and laying her back down. He kissed her collarbone. “Sleep, love. You *do* look tired.”

“No thanks to you...”

Another kiss. “Don’t expect an apology, either.”

Jada grinned sleepily before falling back into slumber. Aaron stared at her for a few minutes, completely enamored. This was where she belonged—by his side, in his bed. Last night and this morning were his Christmas presents, and he hoped they lasted for a very long time.

After leaving Jamal’s, Aaron had brought them to his condo. Jada and Joshua had helped him make cheeseburgers using a recipe his mother had invented. He and Joshua had had massive fun rolling the meat in their hands, and Jada had made cold macaroni salad to go with the burgers. After dinner, they’d danced and sang Christmas carols until Joshua fell asleep on the couch. Jada had wanted to take him home then, but Aaron had told her he was home.

To Aaron's immense delight, Jada hadn't fought him on it, but had told him he was lucky she'd packed spare Pull-ups just in case he made a mess in the bed. Aaron had carried their son to his bedroom and tucked him in the middle of the bed, sheepishly admitting he hadn't had the time to convert a room yet, but he would.

The rest of the night they'd just talked, Jada in Aaron's arms on the floor with the television on low and a fire in the grate despite the mild outside temperature. She'd told him of letters she'd gotten from their former tutees, of her classes, of how she wouldn't miss the sight of black-eyed peas or collard greens for a long time to come, then laughed as she'd revealed that would be their New Year's Day dinner in keeping with tradition.

Jada had talked about her mother, too, about how she always missed her so keenly during Christmas because it had been her favorite time of year. She had a wreath to put on Lynn's grave and Aaron had promised to go to the cemetery with her to take it there.

Before either of them had known it, it was pushing three in the morning, and they'd ambled to bed, lying on either side of their sleeping angel. Jada had fallen asleep. Aaron hadn't, too busy staring at the both of them, too excited for the Sandman to be of any use.

So now here he was, Christmas morning, watching his son pull the cushions from the couch in an effort to find his elusive presents.

"What are you doing, son?"

Joshua kept looking, not even giving his father a glance. "Presents?"

"What makes you think they're under the cushions?"

Joshua gave him a sheepish smile. "I dunno..."

Aaron held out his hand and Joshua took it. They went to the hall closet where there were red, green, and gold packages stacked neatly atop each other on the floor. Just as Joshua lunged for the gifts, Aaron picked him up and placed him on his hip. "You don't even know which one's yours!"

"All of 'em!"

Aaron chuckled. "No, but that green one is."

Joshua wiggled down his body and went for it, sitting at Aaron's feet and tearing the paper off the box.

"What is it?" Joshua asked when he'd finally opened it.

It was the McKensie tartan, passed down the line for centuries. He'd asked his mother to express the cloth down and had received it yesterday—perfect timing.

"This is a traditional Irish garment worn by the men of our family for generations, and now it's yours."

Joshua caressed the cloth almost reverently, and Aaron knew he'd made a good decision in giving this to him. "Can I wear it?"

"You can, but probably not today, okay? It's more for show than anything else, but one of these days I'll teach you how to put it on and then you can show it off to your mother."

"Mommy..." Joshua stood. "Can I show it to her?"

"How about we let her sleep more," Aaron said, taking the tartan and folding it back into its box. "Wanna help me make breakfast."

"Pancakes!"

"Pancakes. How about crepes? My friend Charlotte would always make crepes for Christmas breakfast when I was younger, so how about we make some today?"

"But I want pancakes..."

"They're very similar to pancakes, love," Aaron promised. "Just a little flatter."

"You promise?"

Aaron picked Joshua up and walked to the kitchen. "I'd never break a promise to you, buddy."

Aaron didn't realize how messy cooking with a child could be, but he took it in stride. Flour was on the floor and around the countertop where they worked, not to mention on their persons. Aaron was surprised they'd even had enough to *make* the crepes, but they came out golden and perfect. Aaron scrambled eggs and broiled Italian sausage in the oven; and by the time Jada shuffled into the kitchen, Aaron was setting the table and Joshua was cleaning his face with a paper towel.

"Mommy! We're havin' craps!"

"Excuse me?"

"Ah," Aaron said, giving Jada a lopsided grin as he tugged her further into the kitchen. "He means crepes, love."

"Crepes!"

"Yeah, they're like pancakes, but fatter," Joshua informed her.

"*Flatter*," Aaron corrected, and Joshua gave a giggled "oops!"

"You used the beautiful cookware without me?" Jada pouted, eyeing the pot rack over the very messy smooth top electric range.

"You've used it before," Aaron reminded her with a kiss on the cheek.

"But still..."

He kissed her other cheek. "You want to eat before you open your present?"

"I opened mine!" Joshua said, climbing into his seat.

"After," Jada said, taking Joshua's napkin and spreading it in his lap. "My stomach must have eyes, because it wants all the food I see *right now*!"

The crepes were a hit. Everyone ate enthusiastically and Joshua asked for seconds. Aaron had forgotten to eat, enjoying the company much more than the food, and it wasn't until Joshua said, "Daddy, you're not eating," that he continued his meal.

Jada gave him a soft smile after the reminder, making Aaron remember the times his mother had given his father a similar smile, usually when Alexander was too involved in *The Wall Street Journal* during breakfast or the daily stock market report at dinner. That smile, beautiful yet admonishing, would bring Alexander back to the meal and the conversation.

"Where were you just now?" Jada asked softly.

"Thirty years from now," Aaron said with a small smile.

"Thirty?!"

"Yeah, wondering if we'll be like my parents then..."

"Do you want to be?"

Aaron shrugged. "I'd certainly like to be similar."

From the way she avoided his eyes, he was sure she caught his drift.

It wasn't long before breakfast was done, and Jada offered to clean since they'd cooked. Aaron took Joshua to the bathroom so he could use the toilet and wash his sticky face and hands.

"Can I show Mommy my present now?" Joshua asked once he was clean.

"I'll bring out her gift as well as yours. Why don't you go sit on the couch—but don't open anything okay?"

"Kay, Daddy."

Joshua ran out of the bathroom while Aaron switched gears and returned to the kitchen. The dishes were sparkling in the drying rack and Jada was attacking the messy countertop and stove.

"Something tells me you wouldn't like a housekeeper," Aaron said wryly.

"Something' speaks truth," Jada said, not looking up from her task. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of a house by myself."

"But a big house with multiple floors?" Aaron asked with a teasing lilt.

"What would I need with a 'big house with multiple floors'?"

He was behind her now, and slipped his arms around her, fingers splayed against her abdomen. "Dunno..."

Jada turned her head slowly and arched an eyebrow at him. "Aaron McKensie!"

He kissed her as his finger made a circle around her navel. "Jada Channing."

"You can't do that," Jada muttered, licking her lips as she went back to cleaning a virtually spotless stove.

"Do what?"

"Kiss me to stop me from being irritated with you!"

He squeezed her. "But it's so much *fun*..."

When she didn't respond, Aaron pried her fingers from the sponge and cleaner and pulled her from the kitchen. "Our son wants you to open your present."

"Our son..."

"Yes, my love," Aaron said, kissing her lips. "And his papa too."

Joshua implanted himself between his parents when they entered the living room. Joshua modeled his tartan and gave her the history behind it. Jada's eyes became misty and she squeezed Aaron's hand softly. Once Joshua's mini-fashion show ended, Aaron picked up the small, gold-wrapped package and placed it in Jada's lap.

"Merry Christmas, love."

Unlike her son, Jada unwrapped her gift carefully and folded up the paper before opening the box. She picked up the flimsy piece of paper with expressionless eyes.

Aaron shifted slightly in his seat. "Well?"

"This says my tuition has been paid in full."

Her voice was flat, and Aaron cleared his throat. "Yes..."

"You paid my tuition?"

"Yes."

Jada put the paper back in the box and set it on the coffee table. "I can't accept it."

He should've prepared himself for the rejection, but even if he had, Aaron knew he wouldn't have been able to stop his heart from smarting. "Why not?"

"That's a lot of money, Aaron."

"I case you've forgotten, I've a lot of it—"

"But...too expensive!" Jada insisted. "Can you get your money back—?"

"I don't *want* my money back," Aaron said, and he cupped her cheek. "I did this for you—you work too hard. You're always tired, and I know you have bills and school and things for Joshua. I'm here now, and I intend to help anyway I can—"

"It's called *child* support, Aaron, not *baby mama* support—"

"You are more than that and you know it!"

Jada removed his hand from her face and clutched it in her lap. "What I most need from you, Aaron, isn't monetary. I can handle my tuition—I have since the start of school. That's what financial aid is for, and grants...and nepotism." They shared a grin at that. "But, the one thing my grandmother taught me that I *really* took to heart was the need to stand on my own. Things happen, Aaron, whether in our control or not, and I need to be able to survive them if need be—"

"What if you can't stand, Jada?" Aaron said softly, squeezing her hand. "What if you're just so tired that you can't? Someone should catch you. I'm volunteering myself. Let me catch you."

Jada gave him a sad smile, then kissed the back of his hand. "We should leave so we can go to the cemetery and make it to Aunt Lucy's on time."

Aaron let the conversation drop for now. They would do better to talk about it without a curious four-year-old between them.

Jada stood, tugging on his hand so Aaron would follow, and Joshua jumped from the couch. "If you want, you can bring some clothes to our apartment and

change there since we have to go back for the wreath and a fresh outfit and Pull-ups, don't we Joshie?"

"Yes," Joshua agreed, hugging his gift to his chest.

Aaron kissed Jada's forehead and nodded. "All right."

It didn't take him long to find an outfit, and he packed up his Lexus RX 400h with the gifts before the trio made the drive back to Jada's apartment. He understood Jada's hesitancy, her need to protect herself and her heart, but she had nothing to fear. He was very good at taking care of things that belonged to him, and Jada's heart would be his most precious possession of all.

THIRTEEN

It was loud, hot, and hectic—the complete opposite of any Christmas Aaron had ever experienced with Veronica’s family. It was crowded in the small dwelling, though not in a constricting way. Of course when he, Jada, and Joshua had entered, everyone’s attention immediately fell on them. Jada did her best to quell it; and since Deshae had been there before them, she helped ease him into the fold.

“I didn’t know Aunt Lucy would invite so many people,” Jada said. To Aaron, it almost sounded like an apology. She explained the others were Lisa’s family, some regulars from the restaurant, and the pastor from their church, and chuckled at Aunt Lucy’s none too subtle expectation of a proposal.

“I don’t mind,” Aaron said, kissing her temple and well aware of the eyes on them. “Do you?”

“A little,” Jada admitted. “I hate the feeling of being on display.”

Joshua, who’d been in his father’s arms, slid down Aaron’s body and ran into Zeke’s embrace. The other man approached and kissed Jada’s forehead.

“Merry Christmas...you so gonna get it...” Zeke murmured against Jada’s skin.

“What else is new? Merry Christmas,” Jada said with a little grin. “Zeke, this is Aaron.”

Zeke didn’t give away anything with his eyes, which unsettled Aaron a little, but he held out his hand and Aaron took it. “Merry Christmas, Aaron.”

“You, too, Zeke.”

One introduction down, and a hell of a lot more to go. Everyone was cordial and gave him Christmas wishes, and he returned them just as cordially. He could see the questions in people’s eyes, however—“What is *he* doing here?”—or the answer—“So *this* is Joshua’s father.” One person had murmured, “Like he spit ‘im out...” and Aaron had heard Jada snort beside him.

“I think a lot of them never expected to see you,” Jada muttered out the side of her mouth. “As if I was Mary reincarnate or somethin’—”

“But I didn’t know—”

“Some assumed you did,” Jada said, and introduced him to someone else.

During all these introductions, however, Aaron felt a pair of eyes on him more piercing than others. He saw a slender, nutmeg-skinned elder woman watching, and he didn't need an introduction to know she was Mrs. Channing. She and Jada had similar facial structure, but her suspicion overpowered him, reminding him a little of his father.

Candace Channing seemed far more intimidating.

Jada led Aaron to the Christmas tree where the gold and green garland and blinking multi-colored lights calmed him. He could tell which part of the tree Joshua had decorated, because everything was bunched together and colorful. He grinned towards his son who was sitting in Zeke's lap and playing with a Christmas present, looking very much at home. After the gifts were snug at the base, Jada adjusted a few ornaments on the tree and Aaron squeezed her shoulders.

"You're stalling."

"I know."

She turned a few more ornaments so their faces were outward, then took Aaron's hand and led him to the last few people he had to meet.

Another woman, shorter, darker-skinned than Candace yet far more pleasant-looking, approached them with a beaming smile and smelled like cinnamon.

"He's here!" the woman exclaimed, cupping Jada's face and kissing each cheek. "Merry Christmas, Jada Mae!"

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Lucy," Jada said on a laugh.

"And you must be *Aaron*...hmm, Jada Mae, I certainly get it, now!" Aunt Lucy said, giving Aaron the same treatment as she did Jada.

Aaron blushed, feeling slightly better that Jada had as well. "Nice to meet you." He took one of her hands and kissed the back of it.

"Manners! Oh, my word, I thought they went away with the 8-track!" Aunt Lucy said, giggling. "Oh, Harold! This is Jada's Uncle Harold, my husband, her grandfather's brother..."

"Aunt Lucy—"

"He needs to get to know the *family*," Aunt Lucy said as a tall man approached her side. Aaron could see where Zeke got his build from, and though the man appeared very daunting, his eyes were bright and kind when he hugged Jada.

"Hello, sir," Aaron said when they broke apart, holding out a hand.

Uncle Harold narrowed his eyes shrewdly and took it, almost squeezing out the blood and bones. "Hmm."

"Uncle Harry," Jada warned, eying the handshake.

"What?" he asked. "All I said was 'hmm'..."

Aaron didn't know how long he could withstand the grip without breaking, but when Uncle Harold finally let go, it was all Aaron could do not to shake the feeling back into his hand.

"Lesser men woulda cracked," Uncle Harold said, and he smiled. "Good to meet you."

"You, too, Mr. —"

"Uncle Harry," Aunt Lucy said. "And I'm Aunt Lucy!"

"All right," Aaron said, looking to Jada for confirmation, and she nodded.

"Well," Aunt Lucy said, looking behind her to see Candace staring at her fingernails, the opposite wall...anywhere but at them. "There she is. Sulkin' like usual—"

"Lucy, not right now!" Candace muttered, finally turning her attention to Jada and Aaron. "How come you ain't tell me he was comin' here?"

Jada tensed beside him and he tangled their fingers together in support. "I wasn't aware I needed to clear it with you, Grandma. Merry Christmas." She gave her grandmother a hug, and Candace returned it, though stared at Aaron the entire time.

"So, you the boy who got my baby pregnant," Candace said, arching an eyebrow.

"Grandma!"

"Ma'am?" Aaron said, bristling under Candace's attack.

"You are handsome," Candace said, almost in concession, "so was Terrence—"

"Candy!" Aunt Lucy said.

Candace shook her head and after a few tries, finally got to her feet. "I gotta check on the food..."

Jada let out a shuddering breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Damn it!"

Aaron closed his hands over her shoulders but remained quiet. He honestly hadn't expected so much hostility, and it seemed more directed at Jada than himself. Aaron knew he would have to be on his better behavior with Jada's grandmother. She was old, set in her ways, and clearly nervous about their relationship. This wasn't the 1950s, though; he and Jada could be together now...

"I need to...if Joshua needs me..." Jada didn't finish her thought as she went to the kitchen, and Aaron began to follow.

"This conversation's long overdue," Aunt Lucy said, eyeing him seriously. Aaron paused. "Conversation?"

Uncle Harry folded his arms at his chest. "Just how serious are you about our Jada Mae? Because if you think Candy's bad, you ain't seen nothin' yet, you hear me?"

"I'm very serious about your niece," Aaron reassured them. "Heart attack serious."

"And I don't care if you white, brown, green, yellow, purple—you just better treat that gal right!" Aunt Lucy added. "Candy's got her so spooked 'bout fallin' in love, and I would *hate* for Candy to be proven right, 'specially by you—"

"But no pressure, huh?" Zeke said, approaching Aaron's side and clapping him in the back.

No pressure, indeed, Aaron thought and continued on into the kitchen. Inside, Mrs. Channing sat at the table facing his direction, elbows propped up and her face in her hands. Jada stood at the stove stirring something in a pot and mumbling incoherently under her breath. Aaron hung at the door, unsure whether to go in, but unable to leave, just in case Jada needed him. Mrs. Channing's opinion meant very much to Jada. At the beginning of their friendship, Jada's stories from home or about herself had usually begun: "Grandma says..." or "Grandma thinks..." or "Grandma won't believe this..." The longer they knew each other, however, the less frequently Jada had referenced Mrs. Channing, but she was never far from the conversation, from Jada's scope. He and Jada had talked often about their parents' expectations for them, and both had wanted desperately to live up to them—sometimes even at the expense of their own. Though Aaron had had his mother to foil Alexander, there had been no such foil for Candace Channing.

"The mashed potatoes are fine, Grandma," Jada said and opened the oven to check the pans inside. "Macaroni's good and cornbread's not burnt—"

"You sound just like Mama Dorcas right now, you know that?"

Jada stood straight, her fingers drumming against the cabinet door beside the oven. "Grandma—"

"She'd hide in the food whenever Mr. Joseph left to spend Christmas with his *real* family," Mrs. Channing said, lifting her face from her hands, but her eyes were closed, so she didn't see Aaron. "He'd come over, give her a second-hand gift and me an orange, wish us a 'Merry Christmas', kiss Mama on the cheek, then leave. Then Mama spent the rest of the day bakin' and deliverin' pies and cakes throughout the neighborhood so she ain't had to deal with the fact she was *never good enough*—"

The oven door slammed shut, cutting off whatever else Mrs. Channing wanted to say. Startled, Mrs. Channing opened her eyes and finally saw Aaron. He entered the kitchen fully, eyes unyielding.

Mrs. Channing squinted hers. "You think that boy—?"

"He's not a *boy*, Grandma, he's a *man*," Jada said quietly, profoundly. "He's a man, and he's Joshua's father, and he's good—good to him, good to *me*, good in general. He is a man."

Jada didn't turn around, and Aaron didn't take his eyes off Mrs. Channing, but it made him happy to hear Jada say those things.

"Jada Mae—"

"No, Grandma, I need to say this before I lose all my nerve," Jada interrupted, and took a deep breath. She played with the towel on the oven handle, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she gathered her thoughts. Aaron's eyes darted between the two women before resting on Mrs. Channing again. There was censure in her eyes, accusations, but Aaron refused to feel apologetic. Both

of them had been too ruled by their parents, and it was time to stop before the cycle continued with Joshua.

"You gotta stop putting Mr. Joseph's face on every white man you see—"

"I do *not*—" Mrs. Channing said, whirling around to Jada.

"You do!" Jada insisted, still staring at the stove and playing with the towel. "You can't see Aaron for Aaron and you can't see me for me! I'm *not* Mama Dorcas, and even if I was, I'm going in with my eyes open; and from the stories you tell, so did Mama Dorcas!"

"Mama Dorcas was the laughingstock of the entire town—!"

"Mama Dorcas was in love," Jada said on a sigh. "She was in love with him—"

"Fat lot 'o good it did her—!"

"It got her a beautiful baby girl—"

"Who resented her—and me! You just wait for Joshua—"

"The only way Joshua will resent me is if I keep him from his father, and I'm not gonna do that," Jada said. "Not anymore. I wasted four years of my son's and Aaron's life because I let *your* resentment feed my fears. All I wanted to do was the right thing—"

"The right thing woulda been to *leave that white boy alone—*"

"Didn't I just say Aaron was a man?"

"He's white!"

"I'm not blind, either," Jada said. "I know what color he is; I know how rich he is; I know how, on paper, this friendship shoulda never happened, but you know what? I'm glad it did. I'm *glad* I met Aaron and that we have this amazing friendship and we have this *beautiful* little boy who I adore to death. I'm *glad*. And I'm sure that's how Mama Dorcas had felt too."

Mrs. Channing glared at Aaron and shook her head. "He ruined her. He'll ruin you—"

"I'm not ruined, Grandma," Jada said. "I'm...I'm not ruined. And I don't think Mama Dorcas felt that way, either."

"No, she was too selfish to feel anything else," Mrs. Channing muttered. "She ain't think about her children or her grandchildren...how confused they would be, how the fact that Calliope was so light that she couldn't even love *my* father freely—gettin' himself lynched while goin' through Virginia because people *thought* he was wi' a white woman! I was denied a father *and* a mother because Mama thought herself *in love* with a man who couldn't even be bothered to leave her alone! Selfish! The both of 'em! Just like the both o' you!"

Jada turned to face her grandmother, finally noticing Aaron and sucking in an embarrassed breath. Aaron met her eyes, saw fear in them, and cursed Mrs. Channing for it.

"I'm not like your grandfather," Aaron said, talking to Mrs. Channing but looking at Jada. "I'll do it right this time."

"How you gonna do that?" Mrs. Channing asked. "Y'all too different! You really think people'll leave y'all 'lone? Jada's a *liability*—"

"Never that," Aaron said softly, full of meaning. Jada dropped her eyes. "And you sound awfully like my father."

"Because he knows better," Mrs. Channing determined.

Aaron smiled wryly and nodded. "Mrs. Channing, are you aware that my father is Irish and my mother is Italian? No one greeted that union with open arms, I can assure you. In fact...they had to elope and get pregnant with me before their families calmed down, and since both families are devout Catholics, they couldn't divorce."

Mrs. Channing pursed her lips, then shrugged. "Jada's Baptist—"

"Jada's this, Jada's that, but more importantly, Jada is the mother of my son, and she means very, very much to me. I won't hurt her."

"You mean like you have for the past four years?" Mrs. Channing said.

"Grandma—"

"No, baby," Mrs. Channing said, eyes hard on Aaron. "You know she cried on the phone for *hours* when she told me she was pregnant? *Hours*. You ain't call her, write her—nothin'! She was a bright woman who was on the brink of *bein'* somebody and you had knock her up and leave her alone—"

"Grandma—"

"No!" Mrs. Channing gave her a quelling look before turning her attention back to Aaron. "She cried out for you in her sleep, talked to her belly about you and how good o' a man you were, and yet you couldn't even be bothered to check on her! To call her! And now, you stand here and tell me that you won't hurt her? You already have! And I ain't givin' you the chance to do it again!"

"Grandma—" Jada began, approaching Mrs. Channing.

Aaron shook his head and Jada stopped walking. He went to Mrs. Channing's side and knelt on the ground, looking at his knee as he tried to gather his thoughts. How could he reassure this woman of his devotion to her granddaughter? All her life she'd either been without it or seen how destructive it could be. Mrs. Channing's hesitancy wasn't without merit, but not enough for him not to try and set things right.

"I...admit...that I made a mistake," Aaron began gruffly, looking into Mrs. Channing's cloudy, watery eyes. He heard a snuffle, though he wasn't sure if it had come from Jada or himself. "I was overwhelmed, afraid. These feelings I'd felt before, but not with the intensity I felt with your granddaughter."

He sighed, and in an impulsive, bold move, took Mrs. Channing's small, weathered hand in his. She squeezed, and Aaron smiled slightly. "I'm none of those things anymore, Mrs. Channing. I'm not overwhelmed; I'm not afraid; and I'm ready to be the father Joshua deserves...the man *Jada* deserves. I ask you, now, Mrs. Channing, to give me that chance. I'll have to warn you that I'll take it regardless of your blessing, but it would make Jada and Joshua much happier if you grant it."

Mrs. Channing looked away from him, focusing on something invisible to him, but probably very clear to her. Two teardrops slipped from her eyes and she shook her head, squeezing his hand again.

"She's grown now," Mrs. Channing said, still staring at that spot. "Gotta make her own mistakes, live her own life."

Though not the blessing Aaron wanted, it was permission, and he would take it over a flat-out "no" any day. "Thank you," he whispered, kissing her hand.

Mrs. Channing wiped away her tears but didn't reply or indicate she'd heard him. Still holding her hand, Aaron stood and his eyes met Jada's. She was openly crying, and without thought, Aaron went to her and held her.

"I meant what I said," he whispered, drying her cheeks with his thumbs.

Jada took a deep breath, eyes closed as he caressed her face. "I did too."

He kissed her forehead and leaned his against it, remaining that way until Joshua ran into the kitchen announcing it was time for them to open presents.

Jada sat on the couch with her head on her grandmother's shoulder as she watched Malcolm, Joshua, Aaron, Jamal, and Zeke tear open the remaining gifts. Deshae snapped pictures, her new hardware twinkling in the Christmas lights, and Aunt Lucy served drinks to the remaining guests.

Aunt Lucy got an announcement, all right, just not from Zeke.

One of the presents Malcolm had opened was a ring, a rather expensive, ruby emerald-cut solitaire with a gift certificate saying, "Redeemable for one step-father; ask your mother for permission. Love, Jamal." There had been much screaming and hollering, and Deshae had missed the entire thing because she'd been helping Joshua try on a sweater Aunt Lucy had gotten him. When Malcolm had handed Deshae the ring and the gift certificate, she'd gaped, stared, then promptly fainted.

"Not the announcement I was lookin' fo', but that works too!" Aunt Lucy had determined, and joined in the celebration. Jamal had held Deshae until she came to, and the newly engaged couple had shared a kiss bordering on indecent. Zeke had covered Joshua and Malcolm's eyes, claiming they were too young to see such things.

"I smell another baby on the way," Aunt Lucy had predicted, and Zeke and Lisa shared a smirk while Jamal and Deshae remained too lip locked to hear.

After that, gift opening had stopped in favor of dinner. Aaron had helped serve the food, and had surprised Uncle Harry with how well he did. When Aaron informed Uncle Harry about his family's restaurant, they'd spent the majority of the meal going over restaurant tricks of trade and other business and culinary feats. Deshae had stolen her for a few moments, showing off the ring and asking if Jada had had any idea about the proposal.

"Who you think gave him the gift certificate idea?" Jada had replied, and earned an affectionate pinch in the side.

"Now a baseball cap seems kind of silly," Deshae had muttered, eyeing her ruby engagement ring. It was a fitted baseball cap and jersey of the Atlanta Black Crackers—a Negro Leagues Baseball team Jamal absolutely adored. Of course, they were only reproductions, but they were authentic; and upon opening the present, Jamal had given Deshae a kiss as big as the one he'd given her when she'd agreed to marry him.

Now, with dusk settling outside and Lisa's family gone, some disappointed that Lisa and Zeke didn't have an announcement as well, the house was at a more manageable level for Jada's sanity, the thoughts that had been whirring around in her head slowing to a speed where she could process them.

Jada grinned at Aaron helping Joshua build something from the new Lego set he received. She'd bought Joshua some clothes he really needed and a Tonka truck, and had given Aaron a voucher for a Christmas gift because she hadn't known what to get a man who seemingly had everything. Aaron had grinned and kissed her cheek before whispering, "I'm *sure* I'll think of something," in her ear. Jada had blushed and mumbled something about someone and slinked away from his teasing innuendo.

A flash blinded her momentarily and Aunt Lucy smirked, waving her brand-new digital camera from Jada and Deshae in their faces. "I had to take a picture of Candace not sulkin' before it went away. Had to make sure such a phenomenon existed!"

"I pray fo' Harold everyday, I do," Candace grumbled, glowering, and Jada laughed into her grandmother's shoulder.

Joshua was tucked out by the time they drove back to Jada's apartment. Malcolm and Deshae were spending the night at her *fiancée's* house again. The hunt for a new roommate would be sooner than Jada had anticipated.

"It's gonna be very weird livin' here without her," Jada murmured into the empty living space. Aaron was tucking Joshua into bed, and Jada reclined on the sofa, eyes darting around the space she'd shared with her best friend for the past three years. "Maybe I should move back home..."

"That's a good idea," Aaron said, leaning against the frame where the hallway began. Jada locked eyes with him. His glinted and he grinned.

She frowned. "You've *met* my family today, and you're standin' there tellin' me it's a good idea to move back home? Have you *forgot*ten that quickly?"

He chuckled and approached, toeing off his shoes as he advanced, until, with a very loud groan, he settled atop her, head on her chest and arms slipping about her waist. Jada laughed as he snuggled, almost obscenely, into her body. She slid her fingers in his hair and over his beard, needing the touch almost as much as he seemed to need it.

"Like father, like son," Jada murmured.

"Sometimes I'm jealous you allow Joshua this and not me." His hands slid up her sides until they cupped the outsides of her breasts. He dragged his eyes

to hers and Jada forgot to breathe. He was being aggressive, and though Jada didn't necessarily mind, she was curious as to why.

"Aaron—"

"I'm not Mr. Joseph, Jada," he whispered seriously, squeezing his hands softly before cupping her jaw. "I'd never treat you or Joshua like that."

"I know you're not," Jada said, closing her eyes as his fingertips danced along her jaw and neck. His lips replaced them, and Jada sighed, relaxing into the couch further. She was starting to get warm, and her hands trailed the column of his throat. "But I think I'd be Mama Dorcas regardless."

He rubbed his cheek against hers and breathed into her ear. "How about you be Jada and I'll be Aaron? I like being them so much better."

Her gasp cut off whatever she had wanted to say as he sucked on her earlobe. One of Jada's legs slid off the couch, bracing against the floor as her back arched when Aaron hit the erogenous zone behind her ear. "You remembered?" She had forgotten about it until just then.

"I remember everything," Aaron admitted, nose nuzzling. "I relive it."

"Aaron?" she asked, trembling at his tone, his fingers, his breath. Aaron was awakening her body to something she hadn't needed since she'd been pregnant, something she hadn't *wanted* because he hadn't been there to give it to her. Now that Aaron was, Jada was scared, unsure.

"I want to love you," he murmured against her skin. "Let me make love to you."

Panic doused Jada's arousal, and she pushed him away, scuttling off the couch and standing. She pulled air into her lungs, desperately needing oxygen, clarity. The first time they'd been together there was no explicit wish for it—it had just *happened*. To hear the desire plain from Aaron's mouth was an entirely new, almost *stressful* experience. Being desired...felt like a lot of pressure.

"Jada," Aaron said, sitting on the couch, concern in his eyes. "I didn't mean—"

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why me?" They wouldn't be able to hide in friendship after this, in alcohol and the grief of a future parting. Was he doing this because Deshae and Jamal had become engaged?

"*A ghrà mo chroì*," Aaron whispered. "*A ghrà mo chroì*."

Even in the dim light, his eyes were verdant, and Jada forced herself not to move when Aaron approached, all tall and masculine and beautiful. She felt small, dumpy, compared to him, to his former girlfriend and first love. She and Aaron made even less sense now than they had when she was in school; Prince Charming didn't go for the stepsister, after all.

"You still haven't asked me what that means," Aaron said, standing so close but not touching her.

"It sounds pretty in Gaelic," Jada murmured.

"What good is pretty if you can't understand it?"

Jada shrugged. "You're pretty, and I can't understand you or your motives sometimes."

"Touché," Aaron conceded with a smile, and tipped her chin up with a finger.

Easy banter. Jada could handle that. It was familiar and safe. "You're prettier."

"I take great offense to that," Aaron grumbled and frowned. "I am handsome."

"Handsome pretty," Jada giggled as his frown deepened. "But still very masculine."

"And you, love," he began, wrapping strong, solid arms around her waist and bringing her flush against him. "Are beautiful and feminine. Soft yet strong. More than I ever thought I wanted or needed."

"I'm sure I look nothing like the dream girl you imagined," Jada said wryly, unable to deny how good it felt being pressed up against him.

"No," he admitted, kissing her nose. "Reality is so much better."

"You say that now—"

"I'll say that forever," he vowed.

"Even when you start losing contracts, or start being denied certain places, certain company, will you still say that?" Jada asked, half-fearing the answer. This was not a game and the world was cruel. Sure things were infinitely easier than when Mama Dorcas and Mr. Joseph had been alive, but Candace had been right. The life of the wealthy seemed to change at a snail's pace compared to everyone else.

"The benefits far outweigh the opportunity costs," Aaron said, giving her a wry smile.

Jada scoffed playfully and shook her head, reluctantly amused by his economics jargon. "Aaron—"

"*A ghrà mo chroi*," he whispered against her lips, eyes closed. "Love of my heart."

She let the sentiment wash over her, flood her in the sea of disbelief and dreams come true. She didn't know if Mr. Joseph had ever told Mama Dorcas that he loved her—Candace had never heard him say it—but from the stories, Jada felt Mr. Joseph had and that Mama Dorcas had known it too. Verbal reinforcement of the feeling, however, meant more than Jada ever thought.

She clung to Aaron's shirt, unsure if she could stand.

"I love you," Aaron whispered. "I love you."

Jada would have said it back had her throat not been so closed up with tears, or if she had access to the part of the brain that made speech possible. Instead, she kissed him, tears trailing over their mouths as she did so, though unsure to whom they belonged. Aaron lifted her in his arms and she wrapped her legs around his waist, too busy kissing him and being loved by him to

worry about her weight, especially when he carried her effortlessly to her bedroom.

He settled her onto the bed, mouth never leaving hers, and he slid her shirt up her body and over her breasts. His hands drifted along her plush stomach and sides, sometimes ticklish, sometimes very much not, and she bit back moans and giggles under his ministrations.

"I need to reacquaint myself with the beauty that is you," he whispered against her cheek, then pressed his lips onto her belly button.

Jada sucked in a breath and arched her back, his name shuddering out of her. She'd forgotten how it felt to be touched and kissed this way, and yet it felt so familiar, as if it had been only yesterday when they were last together like this. She remembered, too, relived it; but the memory didn't compare to this.

His lips and tongue left no part of her torso untouched. His hands soothed and ignited her body until she writhed with abandon. Somewhere along the way, their shirts came off, and she lay underneath his bare chest as he rested his arms on either side of her head and kissed her.

"I love you," Aaron said, staring into her eyes. "*A ghrà mo chroi.*"

"*A ghrà mo chroi,*" Jada whispered back, knowing her Gaelic wasn't perfect, but when he smiled, she knew it was perfect enough.

"Gaelic with an American Southern accent," Aaron teased, pecking her lips. "Very adorable."

"You're teasing me *now*?" Jada asked incredulously, bucking her hips a little.

Those green eyes turned black, and his smile became sinfully sexy. "You have no idea."

He gave her plenty to go on, though. Kissing and nipping at her, Aaron pulled down her bra straps, groaning when the cups caught on the generous swells of her breasts. He used his teeth to drag down the offending garment, and her nipples hardened under the warm air and his gaze.

"*Bella,*" he gasped, kissing down her sternum to her navel. "*Molto bella...*"

"Aaron..."

"You nourished my baby with these," Aaron said, his fingers flitting over her nipples. Jada keened from the touch. "Can you nourish me too?" He slipped the nipple into his mouth, the warm, wet sensation causing a comparable one in her center. She was not too far from the edge, and Aaron kissed, sucked, nibbled, and bit to bring her too close, and yet never close enough. As he suckled her, he took off the rest of her clothes. One hand returned to her breast while the other slid up the inside of her leg until it found her essence.

"God, baby!" Jada groaned, thrusting against his hand.

"Not God. Aaron," he said cheekily, and increased the pressure.

At another time, Jada would have been ashamed at her behavior, embarrassed at how wanton he made her, but at that moment, she couldn't care less.

She needed this release like she needed air to breathe; and after she finally found it, she collapsed in a sated, exhausted heap, eyes closed with hair stuck to her forehead and neck with sweat.

Aaron's bare hardness brushed against her thighs and her heat as he settled his long, lean body over hers. He kissed and nuzzled her back to awareness; and when she opened her eyes to his, he looked at her with wonder.

"Just as pure and as genuine as the first time," he said, brushing her hair from her forehead. "It humbled me then, and it humbles me now."

"I loved you then," Jada admitted on a whisper. "And I love you now."

"Yes," Aaron nodded, cupping her cheek and kissing her softly. "Yes..."

He entered her with one smooth thrust, and Jada gasped, wincing in pain. Her body was unused to such an invasion, and Aaron kissed and cooed at her, keeping still until her discomfort subsided.

"You humble me again, love," Aaron said, understanding what her tightness meant.

"Kind of hard to get your mojo on with a rambunctious little son!" Jada said wryly.

"That's what we're doing now," Aaron reminded her, easing out and sliding back in slowly.

Jada moaned. "Yes, but he's your son too."

"Mine," Aaron said, thrusting again, making her whimper in pleasure. He bent his face down, eyes boring into hers, his mouth stealing her breath. "Mine."

"Yours..."

He tried to keep it slow to help her get used to him again, to drag out their lovemaking for as long as possible, but Jada couldn't stand the pace for long. She began meeting his thrusts, wrapping her legs around his slim hips, her fingernails boring into his back and shoulders, unable to say nothing but "I love you" over and over again. Aaron went faster, harder, alternating chants between "*a ghrá*" and "*amore*" and "my love."

They locked fingers together and held them over her head, looking into each other's eyes. Their movements grew ever faster until suddenly Jada froze, her back making a perfect arc from the bed, and her breath swooshing from her body. Her completion wrought his and he grunted, sliding into her one last time as deep as he could go, his fingers squeezing hers to borderline pain.

They collapsed onto the bed, hands still intertwined, his face buried into her neck. Jada ran her thumbs along his knuckles and smiled when he pressed his lips against her skin.

"This has been the best Christmas present ever," Aaron muttered after he caught his breath.

Jada burst out laughing and hugged him tightly, his echoing laughter vibrating against her neck and collarbone. "And you didn't even need the voucher!"

Aaron pulled back and looked at her with surprised eyes. "Jada!"

Jada continued laughing as she framed his face and kissed him sweetly.
“Merry Christmas, baby.”

“Merry Christmas, my love.”

They settled deep in each other’s embrace, laughter, kisses, and love peppering their road to slumber.

FOURTEEN

One would think Jada would be used to waking up in someone's arms after a few nights of it, but every morning she was surprised by the pale, hairy arm wrapped around her sometimes bare, sometimes not, middle. The first time, Jada had started awake, but Aaron had murmured unintelligibly in her ear and drifted back to sleep, his arm tighter around her. The second time, Joshua had been between them, but wide-awake and giggling at his parents' bedhead and matching attire—Aaron's pajama top for her and the bottoms for Aaron.

For the third instance, they'd been alone at his condo because Aaron had invited her for takeout Indian and a movie while Joshua spent the night with Malcolm, Deshae, and Jamal at Jamal's house. The pair had barely gotten through dinner, and the movie had been a lost cause as they'd ended up on the carpet between the sofa and the coffee table.

The carpet burn on her hip was just now starting to fade.

"You're seducing me, love."

Jada pulled up her shorts quickly and looked behind her at her bed...her *man*. Today was the eve of New Year's Eve, a week after they'd kissed for the first time in five years. If someone had told her Aaron would be nude, rumped, and far too delicious reclining in her bed a few days later, she would have had that person committed for psychiatric evaluation.

Jada rolled her eyes and turned forward again, picking up the rash cream on the dresser. "Am not..."

"Are too."

Jada scoffed, pulling down her shorts again to tend to her burn and watching him pull on his boxers through the mirror. "I should be mad at you for this."

"You would be," Aaron conceded, "had you not had so much fun getting it."

Jada twisted her mouth to hide her smirk, but yelped when suddenly he wrapped his arms around her from behind and nipped her neck. "Stop it!"

"Let me do it," he whispered, taking the tube from her hands and squeezing the white cream on his fingers. He rubbed it into her burn as he kissed up and down her jaw, and Jada hummed low in her throat.

"There," he said, kissing her shoulder. "All better."

"Well, considerin' you're the one to give it to me, you *should* be the one to treat it..."

"It's *your* fault I can't resist you," Aaron said, sucking at her pulse point. "So it's a stalemate."

A knock unattached Aaron's mouth from her neck, and Joshua squeezed through the door. "Good morning!" he chirped. He hugged Jada, then Aaron, and rushed back out of the room. The parents stared at each other, confused.

"What was that?" Aaron asked.

"Dunno, but I am concerned..." Before she could leave, however, Aaron yanked her back and kissed her soundly.

"Good morning, my love," he whispered against her mouth.

Jada grinned and kissed him again. "Good morning..."

Moving boxes inundated the hall and living area, and Burger King takeout bags were on the kitchen counter and table. Jada looked wistfully at the boxes, then at her soon-to-be former roommate who was unpacking one of those bags. In a blink, Deshae and Malcolm would be moved out completely, and though Jada was happy for her friend, she would miss her too.

"Mornin', Jada Mae, you hungry?" Deshae asked, pulling out a wrapped sandwich. "Sausage, right?"

"Malcolm and Jamal?"

"Jamal had early practice and Malcolm's in his room puttin' more stuff in boxes," Deshae said, giving Jada a small smile as she took the sandwich from her hands. "Joshua's helpin'."

"My Little Man," Jada sighed, sitting at the table and unwrapping the sandwich. "I still don't think he understands you and Malcolm are moving out for good...I don't even think it's fully hit *me* yet..."

"Aw!" Deshae said, sitting next to Jada and hugging her shoulders. "It's weird for me, too, girl, but you know I'd never leave you hangin'—I'll keep paying my half of the lease—"

"Until I find another roommate—"

"It's January and you have a four-year-old. I think you should just let me pay out the rest of the lease—"

"It'll give me time to look for another apartment—"

"What's the point of that? Aaron's here now..."

Jada hid her smile by taking a sip from the half-pint milk carton that came with the meal. It was almost as if they were a real family now. The only time she and Aaron hadn't spent the night together was the night before last when he'd been at the office too late to come over. He'd called the next morning and apologized for not being there, so much so Jada had threatened bodily harm if he continued.

"He brought a toothbrush over yet?"

"Deshae..."

Deshae shrugged and unwrapped her own sandwich. "He's always here—not that I mind. Actually, I'm glad about it."

"Glad?"

"Yes. Now I don't feel so guilty for leavin'."

Jada shook her head. "Ain't no need for that! You and Jamal have been goin' out the better part of two years, and for *most* of those years it's been drama free. If he hadn't asked you to marry him soon, I woulda been concerned!"

"Same thing with Aaron."

"Aaron hasn't asked me," Jada muttered.

"And what if he did?"

"Too soon..."

"When has—shucks, almost *eight* years—*ever* been too soon?"

"We've just reconnected after four—"

"Key word right there. *Reconnected*, not started over. After that initial reunion, it was like you two were never apart, wasn't it?"

Jada didn't answer, both already knowing it was true. Jada wasn't the type to rush into things, yet nothing about this time with Aaron did; it felt *right*, and that made Jada uneasy.

"We've never tried a romantic relationship before," Jada said under her breath.

"Because y'all were friends first and let the relationship evolve naturally. There's no 'right' way to fall in love, Jada Mae—we both know that better than anyone. I fell in love with a client—*big ass* no-no, and now...we're getting married—"

"Instant family—"

"Just add water," Deshae snickered, and the women laughed.

"What's so funny you two?" Aaron asked, coming from the hall and looking very dapper in a charcoal-gray business suit. He kissed Deshae's cheek and the top of Jada's head before sitting down. "Got anything for me?"

"You know it, baby," Deshae said, passing him the bag and he pulled out his meal. "Cini-minis. I took a guess. Hope that's all right."

"Perfect," Aaron assured her and took a bite. "Mmm..." Some crumbs caught in his beard and Jada dislodged them. He grabbed her wrist and swirled his tongue over her thumb. Jada's cheeks reddened and Deshae cleared her throat audibly.

"Nasty," Jada hissed at him. Aaron waggled his eyebrows and puckered his lips in a kiss.

"But you do look handsome," Deshae said, whistling low. "You got clothes stashed over here now?"

"Not really—overnight bag. I go to the condo before coming here," Aaron said with a grin.

"Prepared," Deshae nodded. "Nice."

"Preparation is key," Aaron agreed, glancing at Jada. "Always be prepared—"

There was a thump, then a scream, and the adults shot up and ran to the boys' room. Joshua was sitting on his bed, red-faced and bawling, while Malcolm was on the floor frowning and rubbing the back of his head.

"What the hell just happened in here?!" Deshae yelled, glaring at her son. "What did you do to that boy—"

"Nothin', Ma! He's the one who went and threw a shoe at me!"

"Joshua Alexander Channing!" Jada said, frowning and folding her arms at her chest. "What in heaven's name *possessed* you to—"

He cried harder.

"Excuse me," Aaron said gently, nudging past the two women and kneeling before his son. "Buddy? You know you shouldn't have done that. You could've really hurt him—"

"But he's *leavin'*!" Joshua wailed, hiding his face in his father's neck.

"But Joshie, I'm comin' back! And you can visit! I'm not goin' away forever," Malcolm said, standing slowly. Deshae inspected the back of her son's head and deemed it hard enough to withstand a sneaker. Aaron and Jada grinned at that diagnosis.

"You can't throw shoes at people," Aaron said, kissing the top of Joshua's head. "Do you throw shoes when Mommy or Daddy leaves?"

"But you come back!"

"Malcolm and Deshae will come back too! They're moving to Jamal's house, and you know where Jamal lives, right?"

"Yeah..."

"And you'll get to have plenty of sleepovers, right?"

"Yeah, Joshie! You know you my Little Man, my dawg!"

Joshua's shoulders shook with his sniffles, and he pulled his face from Aaron's neck, turning contrite eyes to Malcolm. "I'm sorry."

Malcolm sucked his teeth and waved off the apology, approaching patting his shoulder. "Ain't no thang, man, I understand..."

"But that means no television and no toys tonight for your actions—early bedtime," Jada said, glad things were resolved, but Joshua needed to know that kind of behavior wouldn't be tolerated.

Joshua began crying again and Aaron cooed to calm him down.

"Grandma's gonna love me today," Jada muttered. "She's looking after Joshua for me and now he's in a pissy mood."

"He can come to work with me," Aaron said, and that suggestion made Joshua's tears stop immediately.

"Yay!"

"Aaron—"

"Unofficial 'Take Your Child to Work Day'," Aaron said, grinning at her. "Besides, Joshua needs to know what he'll inherit in about fifty years..."

Jada looked to Deshae for help, but the other woman winked and ushered Malcolm out the room so they could eat breakfast. “But—”

“Not many people are at the office anyway because of the holiday,” Aaron said. He came up to Jada and kissed her lips. “I want Joshua Alexander Channing McKensie to see what Daddy does for a living.”

Jada dropped her eyes, her heart swelling with Aaron’s words. “I didn’t want to assume anything...when he was born...”

“I understand, honey,” Aaron said, cupping her chin and tilting up her head. “I’ve already started the paperwork to rectify the situation.”

She smiled slightly. “I’m sure your father’s thrilled about this.”

Aaron shrugged. “He doesn’t get a say.”

“He does. You just don’t listen to it,” Jada said.

Aaron grinned and kissed her again. “Exactly.”

Jada opened her arms and Joshua climbed into them. “If you’re goin’ with Daddy, you gotta get cleaned...”

“I love you,” Aaron mouthed, and Jada responded the same.

The rest of the morning went by without incident, and father and son, looking very spry if she said so herself, left together first. Jada took her shower and put on her uniform for work. When Jada was about to leave, she kissed Malcolm on the back of the head as he packed up another box.

“Thank you for what you did back there.”

Malcolm tried to give a nonchalant shrug, but she saw his lower lip tremble. “I understand. I’mma miss him too.”

Tomorrow, all the boxes and the family to which they belonged would have a new home, and Jada looked at her best friend sadly.

“You better go so you aren’t late,” Deshae said, wiping away a stray tear. The sound of duct tape yanked from the roll perforated the air.

“See you tonight?” Jada asked.

“You know it.”

When Jada got to work, she called her grandmother to tell her Aaron had Joshua for the day. There was no lecture this time, not even resignation in Candace’s tone, but rather a genuine, “That’s nice,” that made Jada pull back the receiver and stare as if it had sprouted leaves.

“Come again?”

“You heard me,” Candace muttered, but with a teasing lilt.

Jada smiled. “You are giving him a chance.”

“Like y’all said, he ain’t Mr. Joseph, right? And so far he hasn’t been—even if it’s only been a week. Besides, I’m too old, and you a smart girl. Time for me to let you live yo’ own life.”

Jada wrapped up the call soon after, afraid Candace would forget her truce and start lecturing again. The restaurant wasn’t too busy save for people coming in and picking up their New Year’s orders, and the general mood was relaxed.

"Jada Mae," Zeke said, bumping her with his hips.

"Ezekiel Job," she quipped in return. She watched him rinse snapped beans in a colander as she kneaded dough for the sweet rolls and grinned a little. "You still here, which means Aunt Lucy ain't too mad you ain't make an announcement."

Zeke snickered. "If we had, she *definitely* woulda killed me."

"Why's that?"

"Lisa and I...well...we *kinda* eloped—"

"*What?!*"

The bustle in the kitchen stilled at Jada's outburst, and Zeke barked at the others to get back to work.

"Are you just plain *outside your mind*?" Jada choked in a much quieter voice. "And you better be glad I wasn't choppin' an onion or somethin'—woulda lobbed off a finger after hearin' that!"

"Jada—"

"Yo' Mama's gonna *kill you*..."

"Which is why we ain't say nothin' over Christmas! She woulda brought me back to life and killed me again for sending her to jail on Jesus's birthday!"

A few days after Thanksgiving, while sitting on the floor in Zeke's house and watching *Miracle on 34th Street* of all movies, Lisa had told him of a colleague who had become engaged over the holiday. Zeke impulsively had suggested they should get married too.

"Lisa couldn't speak for, literally, five minutes," Zeke chuckled. "She hadn't been ready for me to say that."

"Well, considering you had been so hell-bent on being a bachelor 'til you died, I can see why she was a bit shocked."

"Yes, but...I realized I wanted nights like that every single night for the rest of my life, and if I didn't marry her, Lisa could find someone else to have those nights with. I may not be the world's brightest man, but I'm not the stupidest one, either. Me not making things permanent with Lisa would've been stupid."

"And the elopement?"

He shrugged. "Also my idea. I knew Mama would drive us crazy with planning, but we are two grown people, and I...well, Lisa agreed with me. Her family's almost as crazy as mine!"

"So when are y'all gonna tell them?"

"New Year's...can't decide if I want 'em drunk or sober when we do!"

"Come here," Jada said, crooking her finger at him. Zeke leaned down and she stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "I'm proud of you."

"And I'm proud of *you*...standin' up to Aunt Candy like that," Zeke said. "I think Lynn would've liked Aaron."

"Really?"

"Yes. He loves you. That's all she ever wanted for you, Jada Mae—a man who loved you."

A soft smile spread on her face. "Yeah..."

"And my parents like him—I think he won Dad over with the restaurant talk," Zeke chuckled. "Mama couldn't stop talkin' 'bout 'how handsome' he was."

Jada laughed as Zeke rolled his eyes. "He is that, but that's not why I fell in love with him."

"No, you've always had crushes on very...er...*unconventional* people."

"Shut up."

"I always thought Mortimer Jones was a keeper—"

Jada swatted him with a towel, halting Zeke's jaunt down memory lane at her expense.



The elevator dinged open, acting as a cue for Joshua to dash into the office. Aaron, far too happy to show off his son at work, only gave a half-hearted appeal for Joshua to slow down. His legs were longer should he need to catch up; he would be able to prevent Joshua from getting into *too* much trouble.

"Mr. McKensiel!"

Aaron smiled at the receptionist Mrs. Cox who seemed very surprised by the curious preschooler hovering at her desk.

"Brenda, good morning," Aaron said, pulling investigative, tiny hands from the desk. "My son, Joshua."

Mrs. Cox's eyes widened and she gave a small smile. "Oh!...uh...you're needed in the conference room."

Aaron frowned and picked up Joshua to contain the little boy's excitement. "Why? Is there a meeting I don't know about?" He hadn't thought to check his PDA for the latest memos and messages.

Mrs. Cox nodded. "Emergency."

Aaron hadn't anticipated the possibility of emergency meetings, and wasn't comfortable leaving Joshua alone with Mrs. Cox as she had work to do. "Is Jamie here?"

"Conference room as well. Don't worry; Jamie was just as surprised as you are."

Aaron felt a little bit relieved at that, but he didn't appreciate being caught unawares—especially during the holidays. He knew stock markets and mergers happened all the time in the dead of night, but there had been no unusual activity for the past few days.

"Thank you, Brenda," he said, and Joshua waved at the receptionist as Aaron made his way to the conference room. He would poke his head in and summon Jamie to—

"Unbelievable!"

"Daddy?"

Aaron closed the door and Joshua put his forehead against his father's. His gray eyes were so full of trust and love that Aaron smiled and kissed his son's nose.

"You wanna sit in on Daddy's meeting?"

Joshua frowned slightly. "Will it be borin'?"

Aaron laughed and bussed Joshua's forehead. "*Definitely* not!" He opened the door fully, the low hum of speech sputtering into silence at his arrival. Most of the people in the meeting expressed shock, but one showed joy, her hands covering a smiling mouth.

"Is that my *caro*?"

Joshua gasped and turned a beaming smile to his father. It seemed he recognized the voice. "*Nonna!*"

"Yes," Aaron said, setting down Joshua and watched him run to her. "*Nonna.*"

Isabella squeezed and peppered Joshua with kisses, the pair uncaring they were the subject of aghast stares. Alexander shot up from his seat while Veronica, Mr. Lowman, and Veronica's parents sat in disbelief.

"So he is a real boy," Alexander muttered dryly.

"C'mon, Pop, this isn't Pinocchio! He's real and mine," Aaron said with a smile, walking further into the room. "Jamie, why don't you escort my mother and son to the galley? There's hot chocolate there, right?" Perhaps it *wouldn't* be a good idea for Joshua to witness this.

"Hot chocolate?!" Joshua squealed, and he tugged on his grandmother's hand toward the door. "Hot chocolate, *nonna!*"

Aaron kissed his mother's cheek as she passed, staring at the trio until the door clicked shut behind them.

"Aaron—"

"Nobody speak," Aaron commanded, and to his mild surprise, no one did. He should have expected a stunt like this eventually, but he'd been in too much bliss with Jada to let his mind wander down this dark path. Alexander looked proud but slightly uncomfortable, so Aaron knew this hadn't been his orchestration, which only left—

"How were the Austrian slopes, Calvin?"

Calvin Prescott glared at him. "How could you do this to her?"

Aaron glanced at Veronica, and she shook her head in apology. "Your daughter understands—"

"Well, I don't. Enlighten me," Calvin said.

"This has nothing to do with you—"

"When you make my daughter the laughingstock of New York, I believe it is!"

Aaron rolled his eyes. He'd never liked Fiona Prescott and was so very glad Veronica hadn't inherited her mother's snobbishness. "Veronica is a beautiful, talented, wealthy young woman. She'll not have a lack of suitors—"

"Who will want her when they find out you left her for someone so...*beneath* her!"

"You give your daughter far too little credit," Aaron said, and looked between his father and Keith Lowman. "So what are we doing here? Is this an overly elaborate way to fire me?"

Keith blanched. "No, Aaron—"

"They should!" Fiona fairly screeched. "You're embarrassing your family and this company by being with her!"

"Mother, *please*," Veronica sighed, and Aaron empathized. "I'm okay—"

"My Platinum Visa says otherwise!" Calvin muttered.

"You did this to my *baby*!" Fiona whined.

Alexander glanced at his son with a wry expression and Aaron gritted his teeth. And to think he'd actually *contemplated* being in-laws with these people! Fiona Lowman Prescott had had her own share of scandal and gossip before she snagged Calvin, and now she wished him to hell for breaking up with her *daughter*? Aaron thought this entire matter trivial and quite embarrassing.

"People break up all the time—"

"But usually for someone *better*!"

Aaron laughed in disbelief of Fiona's gall. He'd always tempered his tongue around her, baffled at how such an insipid, vain woman could have Veronica for a daughter.

"Mother, that is *not* fair," Veronica said, frowning. "Yes, I cried. Yes, I went on a power shopping spree, but there is no need to talk to Aaron like that!"

This was why Veronica had been his first love, and he gave her a grateful smile.

"Be that as it may, Fiona has a very valid point," Alexander said calmly.

"If you think I am going to stand here and let you trashtalk my son's mother, who also happens to be the woman I love, you are sadly mistaken," Aaron said, meeting everyone's gaze head-on. "I really am sorry about how things ended with Veronica, and I told her as much, but I won't trap her or me into a marriage because it'll make headlines in the society and financial pages. This is *not* a *business* merger. This is my life, and I will not make allowances—!"

"We all have to make sacrifices to succeed, Aaron," Alexander said.

"But sometimes those sacrifices aren't worth the success."

Emergency meeting indeed! This was a colossal waste of time and disheartening. Aaron hadn't thought people still felt this way, or at least people *he* knew. His father, well...if Alexander could love and marry someone his parents had initially disapproved of, Aaron knew it would only be a matter of time before Alexander turned around as well. But the Prescotts...they'd always been polite to Philip Ingram.

It's always different when it happens to you...

Jada said this often when they spoke about human behavior: *saying* something and *doing* something might not always jive. This was a classic example of such a time, and it disgusted Aaron.

"I have nothing else to say to any of you," Aaron declared and shook his head. "This has been a rather disappointing and unnecessary discussion—"

"I'd at least like to see her again."

Everyone gaped at Veronica, and Aaron looked at her weirdly. "I don't—"

"I just—" Veronica stopped and chuckled wryly. "Call me a masochist but—"

"I do too," Alexander said. "I should meet her—"

"We all should," Calvin said, and Fiona nodded in agreement.

"What do you two have anything to do with this? You think I'm going to let you make snide and hurtful remarks to her?" Aaron asked lowly.

The door reopened revealing Isabella and Joshua, and the little boy ran to his father's leg. Aaron ruffled his curly head and smiled. Joshua was definitely a success for which he would sacrifice anything.

"Daddy, we had hot chocolate and cookies!" Joshua said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Isabella gave an arched look at her son and returned to her seat.

"What did I miss?" she asked, smiling at her husband.

Alexander cleared his throat and returned the smile, though it wasn't as bright or as genuine. "I invited Aaron's friend to have dinner with us."

"Dinner?"

"At the Sun Dial Restaurant atop our hotel? It shouldn't be a problem to add her to our party, even if it is New Year's Eve."

Isabella frowned. "Well, if *that's* not the *brightest* idea I've ever heard!"

Aaron bit his lip to keep from laughing and rubbed Joshua's back.

"Izzy—"

"You want to embarrass that poor girl, put her on display!" Isabella said angrily. "Good thing I came down here with you, Alexander! Talk some sense into you!"

"Izzy, really," Calvin said. "Aren't you the *least bit* curious about her?"

"No! Unlike the rest of you, I've actually spoken with her. She's a wonderful girl!" Fiona snorted and Isabella glared at her. "Fi, really, you might ruin Dr. Quentin's latest work if you're not careful."

Even Alexander had to mask a chuckle with a cough, and Aaron and Veronica shared amused looks. Fiona scowled and Calvin gave a perfunctory pat to her hand.

Keith shook his head and held out placating hands. "Isabella, we just want to make sure that the...young lady is not trying to—"

"All she's trying to do is raise a healthy, beautiful, productive little boy and become a teacher. You really think she cares about all this?" Isabella asked

incredulously. "Trust me; I've become pretty adept at weeding out gold diggers and diamonds in the rough. This girl definitely sparkles."

Unable to help himself, Aaron went to his mother and kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"Me too!" Joshua said and climbed into his *nonna's* lap.

"My *caro*," Isabella murmured into his hair, hugging Joshua tight. "My *caro*..."

Aaron didn't miss his father's soft eyes as he watched his wife hold his grandson, and his voice was gruff when he spoke. "That may very well be, Isabella," Alexander began, and he glanced at Aaron. "But I would still like to meet her."

"The Prescotts—" Aaron began.

"Are my guests," Alexander said, a sliver of apology in his voice. "I'll not start now to be a poor host."

Isabella winked at him and Aaron smiled. He really didn't want to expose Jada to their elitist poison, but at least they would be in public, which meant everyone would be on his best behavior. Joshua, comfortable against his grandmother's chest, looked at him with wide eyes and his index finger in his mouth.

Aaron sighed. "I'll have to ask her."

Alexander nodded and stood. "You do that. I look forward to seeing you at the dinner."

Everyone, save Isabella, stood and left, and Veronica squeezed Aaron's arm in support.

"Mama—"

"I tried to talk him out of coming here, but you know your father," Isabella said, fingers sliding through Joshua's hair. He blinked lazily and Aaron smiled.

"I do. I'm still not sure this is a good idea..."

"It'll have to happen eventually," Isabella reminded Aaron. "I'm not going to be kept out of my grandson's life."

"Of course not."

"And Alexander will come around," Isabella said, then tilted her head to Joshua. "He looks too much like you for him not to."

"I want Pop to like Joshua for Joshua."

"He will, but baby steps, *tesoro*. Not everyone is as enlightened or in love as you are."

With one final kiss to her two boys, Isabella left as well. Joshua stood on the conference table, taking in the mahogany-paneled walls and leather office chairs. This would be Joshua's one day, damn it; Aaron would make sure of that. Keith had no spine, which meant he was susceptible to the wrong advice...bigoted advice. At least Alexander was against handing over the company to people outside the family. Aaron had been raised since the age of

ten for the job, so there was a safe chance he would still become CEO. Joshua, on the other hand, was another matter entirely.

"I'm going to do right by you," Aaron murmured below his breath, watching his son play with the telephones and tap the mics as if testing them. Aaron would protect his family physically and financially, and that meant staying above the fray. It got Aaron to thinking about another promise he'd made to Jada long ago, one about starting internships for at-risk youth. He hadn't done it because it had reminded him of Jada, and thinking of Jada had been too painful. He would start laying the foundation for that directly after the New Year.

"Daddy, I'm hungry."

Joshua sat on the edge of the table, swinging his legs and patting his stomach. He had a flair for the dramatic, which was odd because Aaron was a horrible actor and Jada was too shy even to consider it.

"You just ate!" Joshua shrugged and Aaron laughed. "What would you like?"

"Crackers."

"Crackers?"

"Yeah. Animal crackers. With milk. I like it with milk."

Aaron set Joshua onto the ground and took his hand. "How about we add something to those animal crackers and milk?" They walked out of the conference room toward Aaron's personal office.

"Like what?"

"Like...peanut butter and jelly?"

"Okay, Daddy."

He asked Jamie to run to the closest store and buy peanut butter, jelly, bread, milk, and animal crackers. In between checking e-mail, memos, and teaching Joshua how to make outside calls, they made lunch. What Joshua wanted, Joshua got.

FIFTEEN

Perhaps...he'd gone about this all wrong, Aaron realized, when he found himself opposite the flashing eyes, firmed jaw, flared nose, and furrowed brows of his love.

"Tonight?! As in, eight-hours-from-now tonight?! As in, you've-had-twenty-four-hours-before-now-to tell-me-this tonight?!"

Aaron flushed and looked to Deshae and Jamal who were of absolutely no help. Jamal pretended he didn't see or hear them, though they were less than five feet apart. His undivided focus on the dust pile at his feet was especially irritating. Aaron had thought they would be united on the male front, but Jamal apparently had had enough experience with both Jada's and Deshae's tempers to know when to stay out of it.

This, clearly, was a prime example of that time.

Deshae, on the other hand, all but laughed in his face, yet also kept her distance. They were still moving Deshae and Malcolm's boxes into Jamal's house, and they were almost done with the first part of it. The second phase included unpacking and putting things where Deshae, Malcolm, and Jamal wanted them...or at least it *had* been until Aaron had dropped the news of his parents' invitation of a New Year's Eve dinner.

Aaron knew he shouldn't have waited, but when he'd come home last night, both he and Joshua had been tired from their day at the museum after leaving the office; and when Jada had arrived a few hours later, the last thing Aaron had wanted to do was talk about something as heavy and unpleasant as the "emergency meeting."

This morning things had been too hectic—yelling, moving, directing—it just wasn't the time. He thought that now, since Zeke was with the boys in Malcolm's new room, would be a good time to inform Jada of yesterday's events.

Aaron hadn't anticipated how exhausted, both physically and emotionally, Jada would be today and winced that he hadn't put his foot down and told his parents they wouldn't be able to make the dinner.

"We don't have to go—"

"The hell we don't!" Jada threw down the dust rag she'd been gripping onto the end table she'd been polishing. "Jesus, Aaron! Your parents already, well, maybe not your mother, but your father, certainly—and I'm sure Veronica's—*Veronica's family is going to be there?!'*"

Jamal coughed, drawing Aaron's attention from Jada's ire. The other man's shoulders were shaking, and Aaron felt a little better when another bunched-up dust rag caught the back of Jamal's head.

"I *know* you ain't laughin'!" Deshae chastised. Jamal shrugged and started sweeping again, snickering softly.

"Jaybird—"

Jada held up an index finger and stepped away when Aaron advanced. "You've put me in a...*hell* of a position, Aaron."

He slipped his hands in his track pants and hung his head. "I just...we were all tired last night, and this morning we were busy—"

"The Sun Dial Restaurant is an exclusive, *expensive* restaurant, and I have nothing to *wear*...I'm not prepared to meet your family!"

Aaron held out his hands to placate her, but didn't move to embrace her. "I...I should've told them no, that it was too short notice—"

"But you didn't," Jada said flatly, "and now I have to go to this dinner—"

"No, you don't—"

"Yes, I do," Jada insisted, and she sighed. "I've nothing to wear..."

"You have that black cocktail dress that's been hangin' in your closet collectin' dust—" Deshae began.

"I haven't worn that dress in...I may not even be able to *fit* it!"

"Look...we can take a break for now—we don't need to finish moving in today. We did the most important stuff already. Everything else is cosmetic," Deshae said, glancing between Jada and Aaron. Aaron gave her a little smile and Deshae snorted. "You and I can go shopping for a new dress."

Just then Zeke came downstairs with Joshua on his shoulders and Malcolm dribbling a basketball. "Room's done! What's next?"

"Shoppin'," Deshae muttered.

"What?"

"I have to find a dress for tonight," Jada said, glaring at Aaron, and he backed up in reaction.

"What's goin' on tonight?"

"Family dinner," Jamal snickered. "To be a fly on the wall..."

"I don't know anything about a family dinner, at least not tonight," Zeke said, looking at Jada confused.

"That's because it's with *Aaron's* family," Jada said, her voice garbled as she spoke through her teeth. "This is all kinds of not okay!"

"Okay or not, we need to go home and get you cleaned up so we can go get you a slammin' dress!" Deshae said, grabbing Jada's wrist and pulling her out the house. "What time is the dinner?"

Aaron sighed, his eyes full of contrition and frustration since Jada wouldn't look at him. "Eight."

"Fine, meet us at the apartment at seven," Deshae said. "That'll give us—"

"Not enough time for me to get myself together!" Jada moaned. "His parents! His *parents*! I'm about to integrate the damn Sun Dial Restaurant—!"

"Nah, I bet the custodial staff is black," Jamal teased just as the women left the house.

Aaron flushed again, uncomfortable with the discussion. He'd never thought about things like that, never had to, but he suddenly understood Jada's hesitation and nerves a lot more. It wasn't *just* his parents—it was everything they represented, and it was everything Jada wasn't. To make matters worse, his ex would be there; the ex everyone had wanted him to marry; the ex everyone had deemed appropriate—*perfect*—for him; and Jada was the woman who would never be seen as such no matter how hard she tried.

I hate the feeling of being on display, she'd said, and then she'd been with her own family and friends. It hadn't necessarily been a hostile environment, and Jada had more than prepared him for possible issues with her family, particularly her grandmother. Aaron had done no such thing with Jada, at least not as he should have. Aaron not caring about what others said or did didn't mean Jada didn't care, and it seemed her worry had more to do with him than herself. She didn't want him to lose anything because of her, and if Jada didn't make Aaron look impeccable, the fault, at least in her mind, would be hers.

"I should call my parents and tell them we can't make it," Aaron mumbled.

"Can't do that," Zeke said, though not unkindly. "That'll only make matters worse."

"I hadn't exactly told them we *were* coming—"

"But they assume you are," Zeke said with a little chuckle. "We all know the game—parents mask commands with suggestions, and your answer to them is purely rote. They expect you to be there."

This Aaron well knew, but he was a grown man with his own family now, and his first concern was it. He didn't want Jada uncomfortable, and she was more nervous than he'd ever seen her. His parents could meet them at another time, in a more neutral setting...*without* the Prescotts.

"I tell you what, if I *ever* pulled that with Deshae, I'd be missing the family jewels!" Jamal joked and Malcolm grinned, bouncing the basketball to his future stepfather.

"What are those?" Joshua asked, patting Zeke's head so he could answer.

"Things you won't have to worry about for a long time," Zeke deadpanned, winking at the other men.

"Do I have any family jewels, Daddy?" Joshua asked, looking very perplexed. Aaron cleared his throat and opened his arms to Joshua as the little boy climbed from Zeke's shoulders into his father's embrace.

"We'll talk about this later, son," Aaron muttered, growing red at the other males' smothered laughter.

They decided to take a break and went to Jamal's entertainment room to play an easy game of pool. Joshua wanted to learn, but he spent most of his time throwing the balls against each other.

"So...did you even think about who would be watching Joshua while you two yukked it up downtown?" Zeke asked when they all sat on the floor and half-watched Malcolm and Jamal play a video game.

"I assumed..."

"You assumed since Malcolm was going to spend the night with me and Lisa *anyway*, you'd ask if Joshua could tag along," Zeke said with an amused expression. "Y'all lucky Lisa and I don't mind sharing our first New Year's Eve as a married couple with children who *don't* belong to us!"

Joshua bounced up and down excitedly "Can I! Please! I wanna go!"

"He is your cousin and your godson..." Aaron said, proud of himself for not blanching at Zeke's scowl. "And we'd make it up to you."

"Well, Jada asks me only if it's an emergency, and this is *clearly* an emergency, so...yeah, I guess I can watch out for Little Man here—"

"Yay!" Joshua exclaimed, and tackled Zeke to his back.

"And you damn straight y'all gonna make it up to us—all y'all!" he said, eyeing the back of Jamal's head. The other man waved absently in acknowledgment, enraptured by the game.

Aaron was so glad there was family around instead of nannies on which he could rely. He'd been lucky in his youth; with all the relatives that had lived in New York, and even more in Ireland and Italy, Aaron had always been around family. So many of his peers and friends had au pairs and housekeepers to watch them when their parents couldn't, and it all seemed so impersonal, regardless how competent the employees were.

"How do you think this dinner will go?" Zeke asked after a moment, his fingers tapping against Joshua's knees and the pair doing a little dance to Zeke's private rhythm.

"Painfully polite," Aaron said. "Hopefully, anyway. If Fiona starts something—"

"Who?"

"Veronica's mother."

"I don't feel comfortable about this," Zeke admitted. "It feels like a trap."

"It is a trap!" Jamal piped up, his body shaking frantically as he pounded the controls of his Xbox. "I'm surprised you couldn't see it—"

"He's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't," Zeke said in Aaron's defense. "They *have* to show their faces."

"My mother will be there," Aaron said. "She likes Jada."

"Mother in the pocket is good," Zeke conceded, "but not enough."

Aaron was realistic. He knew not everyone would approve of his relationship with Jada, but it wasn't his job to please everyone. That didn't mean he didn't want his father's support, at the very least. He couldn't care less what the Prescotts thought.

"The first sign of trouble we're leaving," Aaron vowed.

Zeke sighed. "You gonna do that every time someone decides to let you know he doesn't like you and Jada together? Leave?"

"I don't—"

"You two have just as much right to be together as Jamal and Deshae or me and Lisa. I'll admit, I wasn't too crazy about the idea of you with Jada because...let's face it, white men don't necessarily have the best track record with black women. But you love her, and at the end of the day, that is all I want for Jada—someone who loves her and who she loves in return. Not the lopsided foolishness that seems to be all the rage these days."

"I can't control how other people think of us, just how we respond to it," Aaron said.

"But you can't start off this relationship by runnin' at the first sign of trouble, either. Otherwise, y'all will be runnin' forever," Zeke predicted.

"Yeah..."

"And give Jada Mae some credit. She may seem shy, but she can hang with the big boys when necessary." Zeke chuckled.

"Good Lord, between her and Deshae it can be *brutal* when they're pushed to their limit!" Jamal said. His cell phone rang and he paused the game, earning Malcolm's sucked teeth of indignation. "That was Shae. I gotta pick her up from the apartment." Jamal craned his head to speak to Aaron. "What time you leavin' here, man?"

Aaron checked his watch and blew out a breath. "An hour. I have to make myself look presentable too." They'd used his SUV to help move some of Deshae's things, and Aaron had let Jada and Deshae take it since Jada's car had Joshua's car seat.

"All right, just as soon as I whip Junior here I can drop you off," Jamal said, laughing at Malcolm's annoyance again.

It took longer than Aaron thought Jamal had anticipated, but eventually he did win, barely.

"A win's a win!" Jamal said even as Malcolm teased him about his almost complete meltdown, and Jamal picked up Malcolm and flipped him over his shoulder. Of course, once Joshua saw that, he demanded the same treatment, and Zeke obliged.

"Ready to go?" Jamal asked Aaron after setting Malcolm upright on his feet.

"Yeah."

Everyone left the house and said goodbye, Aaron and Jamal giving their sons big hugs since they wouldn't see them until the next day, and they

hopped into Jamal's blue Mazda RX-8 R3. They spoke of the football season with brief interruptions when Aaron gave Jamal directions, and when they reached his condo, Jamal whistled low.

"Nice."

"Yeah..." Nice and empty.

Jamal glanced at him and grinned. "Boy, you is whipped!"

Aaron laughed as they walked into the building. "I'm not the one who's engaged!"

"I've been going with Deshae for years. *You*...not even a week!"

"I've known her for almost eight years now," Aaron defended.

"You've known her as a friend, not as a girlfriend," Jamal explained. "There is a difference."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right!" Jamal insisted. "There are different sets of rules, expectations, you have to deal with when you're a couple. Things that were forgiven as friends may be deal-breakers as a couple."

"Such as?" Aaron asked, partly amused and partly curious. They reached his door and he unlocked it.

Jamal waited until they were inside to answer. "Hmm...well, I don't know, honestly, because I've never fallen in love with a friend. Deshae became my best friend *after* I started dating her, so it's different. All I know is I've seen boys who dated friends and it wasn't pretty."

Aaron laughed nervously. "This is *not* the conversation I want to be having before a dinner with my folks!"

Jamal smiled and shook his head. "I don't mean to rattle ya, man; I'm just sayin' things that didn't matter when you were friends definitely matter now. Every relationship a woman has from her twenties on is test-driving potential husbands. Trust. I almost got caught up in the game before I figured it out."

Aaron blushed slightly and shrugged. "It's not that I wouldn't exactly *mind* being Jada's husband..."

"No, but there are people out there—and not just your folks—who would. And it's not just a race thing, either. It's a class thing; it's an age thing; it's a regional thing. It's a whole lot of things that you two probably never even thought of. Just be prepared, man; it's all I'm sayin'."

Aaron nodded, slapping Jamal's hand in thanks. "Make yourself comfortable. Use the phone, raid the fridge, whatever. I promise not to take too long."

He heard the television click on as he went into his room, and he exhaled. Jamal and Zeke made a lot of sense, and though Aaron wasn't nervous, he was definitely more wary now than he had been. He could say all day long that other people's opinions didn't matter, but he would be perpetuating a fallacy. He and Jada didn't live in a bubble, and it would be foolish to think everyone would embrace his relationship with Jada; however, he couldn't run or fight against every single instance of opposition, either. He would have to rely on

Jada's help to navigate those situations, he knew, because she'd, unfortunately, had more practice dealing with antagonistic interactions.

"Why can't we all just get along?" Aaron muttered to himself, pulling out his dinner suit. He eyeballed it, deeming it fit enough without an iron, but hung it in his bathroom while he took a shower to steam out the few tiny wrinkles. He stepped out the shower and stared at his reflection, swiping a weary hand along his face and jaw, but suddenly went back into his bedroom and pressed a familiar speed-dial number.

"Yes?"

"How's it going?" Aaron asked as he sat on the bed. He wanted to give Jada one last opportunity to change her mind. He wouldn't force his parents on her until *she* was ready to meet them.

"It goes...I'm sorry about earlier, Aaron. I shouldn't have snapped at you," Jada said, and Aaron heard Deshae's muffled speech in the background.

"No, honey, it's okay," Aaron said. "You were right. I should've given you more time to prepare."

"It's just...I want you to be proud of me. I want to make you proud."

Just when he thought he couldn't fall any more in love with Jada, she went and said something like that. "Peacocks can't hold a candle to me, baby, and yet, I'm humbled. I don't know what good deed I've done to make you love me, but I hope I keep doing it."

She laughed softly. "Keep being you, baby. I have to go and I'll see you soon. I love you."

"I love you too."

Aaron closed his phone, the conversation pumping him up for the impending dinner. Warnings, cautionary tales, impending drama be damned. His woman loved him and he loved her. That would get them through tonight.

Jada felt Deshae's eyes on her but she ignored them, instead looking at her reflection in the mirror and smoothing out invisible wrinkles of her brand new dress. It was black, A-line, floor-length, and halter-topped with an empire waist. When Deshae had spotted it, Jada's initial thought there was no way the store would have the dress in her size because history showed that a dress Jada really liked didn't come in the double digits she needed. Yet, they'd lucked out, even more so because the dress was on sale. The next hurdle would be trying it on, for the hanger created fanciful illusions about how the dress *should* look rather than how it *would*. Once Jada had, she'd stared at herself dazedly. It was only after Deshae all but broke down the door had Jada woken up from her trance, and when she'd opened the dressing room door so Deshae could see, her friend had grinned and said they were done for the day.

Well, almost done, for when they'd passed cosmetic counters, Deshae, in an unusual girly move, pushed Jada into one of the stools and ordered the works. Deshae hadn't listened to Jada whining about too expensive or unne-

cessary; and by the time the attendant was finished, Jada was glad they'd ignored her. The makeup accentuated the red undertones of Jada's skin, yet remained simple and understated. She didn't look like a clown, and all of the little imperfections had been masked and smoothed away. Jada even bought the blush and the lipstick to show her approval. So what she was out two hundred dollars? Every girl needed to treat herself.

Especially when going up on the chopping block in an hour.

"Are you going to wear your hair down or up?" Deshae asked.

"Up. Looks cleaner that way. I don't have time to straighten it, though—"

"Keep it curly. Makes you look softer," Deshae said, coming up behind Jada and pulling her hair back. "Low bun or high?"

Jada tilted her head to the side, then smiled. "High."

"I was gonna do it high anyway," Deshae said with a wink.

Jada laughed. "I know."

She put on her earrings while Deshae did her hair, and when everything was done, Jada couldn't stop the smile spreading on her face. "I look pretty."

Deshae rolled her eyes and shook Jada slightly. "You *always* look pretty! You just downplay it! It's like you're threatened by it or something..."

It was easy for Deshae to say since she was the traditionally beautiful one of the two. Jada had always envied Deshae's ease with her femininity and the opposite sex—even despite being a teenage mother. Jada had always hid behind her academics and wits because those things she understood and controlled. Yet, for all of her hiding, Aaron had found her, the absolute *last* person she'd ever expected to do so, and she couldn't be happier.

They heard muffled voices from the living area. "I think he's here," Deshae said, squeezing her shoulders.

"Lord..."

Jada started for the door, but Deshae stopped her, giving her an arch look and walking before her. Deshae had to make a production out of everything.

"Damn!"

Concerned, Jada rushed out the room, but when she saw what had captured Deshae's attention, she did a small stutter-step. "Oh, my..."

There was Aaron, hair slicked back, dressed in a tailored, sharp, black suit, and clean shaven. He looked like the man she first fell in love with, and her heart beat hard against her chest.

"Jada," he said softly, a small smile drifting upon his face.

Jada couldn't move, her mind going back to the first time he'd smiled at her like that. It had been her sophomore year and the first day back at the community center. When he'd seen her he'd given her that smile, and she'd paused, captivated by it, until one of her students had given her a hug and broke her from the stupor.

"I...uh...I need..."

"A fresh pair of panties!" Deshae mumbled, fanning herself.

“Shae!”

Jada snapped out of it, blushing hotly, and finally noticed Jamal sitting on the couch.

“What!” Deshae said to her fiancée, placing her hand on Jada’s back and pushing. “We may be engaged, but I ain’t *blind*!”

Jada was heartened to see Aaron’s blush, too, and she cupped his face, whispering, “You shaved!”

“You’re gorgeous,” Aaron said, closing his eyes as her fingers danced over his bare skin.

Jada laughed, rubbing her nose against his, then her cheek against his. “It’s so smooth!”

His arms came around her waist to help her keep her balance, and he tilted his head so his lips brushed hers. “I don’t think I’ll be able to keep my eyes off you tonight.”

“Ditto,” Jada said, and kissed his lips again. “We better go. We shouldn’t be late.”

“But we’d have a *very* good reason, love,” Aaron said, touching tiny kisses along her jaw and neck and bringing her flush against him.

“You are being very bad,” Jada chastised, wondering how she muffled her moan at the feel of him pressing against her abdomen.

“A-hem.”

Aaron wasn’t hurried, though, giving her one last, soft kiss to her chin before separating. “Thanks for the ride, Jamal.”

“No problem,” he said, holding his own woman and giving them a smile. “You two look really good together.”

“Don’t they? I need a picture!” Deshae determined, and flipped open her phone. “Y’all say cheese!” Jada was the only one who did, because Aaron kissed her temple just as Deshae snapped the picture.

The couples said their goodbyes, with Deshae giving Jada her wrap and purse and spouting off all sorts of advice for her to follow, and soon Jada and Aaron were in the Lexus heading to the Westin in downtown Atlanta. The farther they got from her apartment the more nervous she became, but some of her anxiousness dissipated when, while stopped at a red light, Aaron took her hand and kissed the back of it.

She remained calm until he pulled up to the hotel, and when the valet opened her door, the nerves kicked in again. Aaron, however, was by her side instantly, their fingers interlocking as they walked to the elevators.

Sooner than Jada would have liked, they were at the restaurant. She tried not to look around in awe at the decorations, and was more than content to let Aaron take the lead. He was a strong, commanding presence, and she half expected him to tell the host to jump only to be asked in return, “How high?”

With an impersonal, detached air, the maître d’ led them to their table. With each step, dread consumed Jada until it seemed to take physical effort to

place one foot in front of the other. Aaron looked back at her and smiled, squeezing her hand and mouthing, "I love you."

"Enjoy your evening, sir...madam..." the host said, and with a slight inclination of his head, went back to his station. Only one person was at the table, a slightly balding man who seemed just as nervous as Jada, but he stood and gave them a hesitant smile.

"Aaron," he said, holding out his hand to shake. "Happy New Year."

Aaron accepted it. "Keith. Happy New Year. This is Jada Channing."

"Happy New Year," she said, relieved her voice didn't waver and her hand didn't shake as she presented it to the other man.

"Keith Lowman, very nice to meet you." His shake was firm though his palm was sweaty. Jada found herself wanting to make *him* comfortable.

"Are the others here?"

"They should be shortly. Apparently Fiona had a 'wardrobe malfunction' that needed attention." Keith rolled his eyes. "I tried to tell her she couldn't lose twelve pounds in twelve hours..."

Aaron laughed. "Well, while we wait, Jada and I will take a spin on the dance floor." He divested Jada of her wrap and purse and gave them to Keith. "Thanks."

"You're welcome?" Keith said, raising his hand slightly and sighing as they went to the dance floor. It wasn't very full, but not too empty to bring attention to them. Aaron pressed a firm hand between her shoulder blades and brought her close to him, his other hand holding hers to his chest. Jada, unable to meet his eyes, closed hers and rested her head next to their hands, drawing comfort from his heartbeat and the kiss he placed in her hair.

"You are...by far...the most beautiful woman in here tonight," he said after a few moments.

"Flattery," Jada said, smiling but not opening her eyes.

"Truth, honey, truth. People can't keep their eyes off you."

"I'm sure that has nothing to do with beauty."

"Hmm...perhaps you're right. They're wondering how the hell a guy like me got a goddess like you."

Jada laughed, opening her eyes and meeting his. He kissed the tip of her nose and she let out a breath. "This night. It'll be all right, right?"

"I'll do my damndest so that it will be," he promised.

"So will I," Jada said. He kissed her forehead and they went back to their former positions, really just swaying with the music and enjoying each other. Technically, this was their first date as a couple, the first time in public, and though there were stares, Aaron's arms cocooned her to the point she didn't care. She didn't let herself decipher the looks or dig into the deeper meanings of the whispered conversations around them. It felt wonderful dancing with Aaron, and nothing could intrude upon it.

"I see them," Aaron said a short time later, and rubbed her back when she tensed. "We'll stay until the song ends, okay?"

She pulled back slightly. "I don't want to make your parents angry."

"The song's almost over," Aaron said, his fingers twirling a tendril of hair that had fallen from her upsweep. "You really are adorable."

Jada grinned. "Flattery again."

"But it makes you smile," Aaron said. "I like it when you smile." He tucked the tendril behind her ear as the song ended. "Are you ready, love?"

She chuckled dryly. "Not really!"

Aaron winked and tugged on her hand, his smile and confidence giving her strength as they approached the table and his family. "That's my girl."

SIXTEEN

Everything was very polite, suffocatingly so, that Jada felt she could only move in tiny, constricted pulses, as if propriety and decorum had chained her wrists to the table and her ankles to the floor.

In an act of mercy, she sat between Aaron and his mother at the round dinner table, but had to face the tight smiles and cursory glances of the Prescotts and Mr. McKensie. Mr. Lowman still avoided most eye contact, and seemed to be the person to break, quite pathetically, the tension by changing or starting inane topics.

Aaron practically hovered over her, and as much as she was touched by his care and concern, she wondered if he were afraid of her embarrassing him. Granted she was not of their pedigree, nor had she taken etiquette classes as she was sure he and Veronica had, but her grandmother had instilled into her home training, so she could hold her own.

"I'm fine," Jada whispered out the side of her mouth to him, smiling at the others as she took a sip of water.

"The first sign of discomfort—"

"*You* are the one creating the discomfort right now!"

Next to her, Mrs. McKensie laughed behind her napkin, and Mr. McKensie looked at them curiously.

"Is there something funny, love?"

"*Tesoro* is being a bit overprotective of Jada, and I think it's rather adorable," Mrs. McKensie said, winking at her son. Jada squeezed Aaron's knee underneath the table at his blush, and when he smiled softly at her and took her hand in his, Jada knew all was well.

"That's one way to look at it," Mrs. Prescott said before eating a forkful of salad.

"What's another way, then, Fiona?" Aaron asked, squeezing Jada's hand.

Mrs. Prescott ate more of her salad in response, and Mr. McKensie cleared his throat. "Ah...Jada...why don't you tell us about your parents. What do they do for a living?"

Jada swallowed her sudden nerves. “I was raised by my grandmother, and she was a cafeteria cook for many years. My aunt and uncle, well, technically my mother’s, own a restaurant and I worked there as a cook as well before leaving for college. When I came back to Atlanta, I restarted my employment there.”

“A restaurant! Really? Isn’t that ironic?” Mrs. Prescott said. “Is it as renowned as Ricci’s?”

“It’s only a neighborhood restaurant—family-owned and operated. This past week was very busy because of all the orders for take-home meals. But I love working there; it keeps me connected to the community.”

“Have you thought about expanding?” Mr. McKensie asked, but without the disinterest Mrs. Prescott’s voice had.

“We flirt with the idea, but since most of the ownership belongs to my cousin, it’s not really up to my side of the family. I think everyone likes it just as it is. They like having a hands-on approach to everything. If they make it a chain then they’ll have to hire outside people, and that makes my uncle nervous.”

“And since the ownership isn’t with you, what do you plan to do? Work for your uncle for the rest of your life?” Mr. Prescott asked.

Jada smiled. “Is there something wrong with that? He’s family, and I said he owned *most*, not all. I have a small percentage myself. The restaurant is his life, and I love working there, but no, I don’t plan on doing that for the rest of mine. I’m earning a master’s in education so I can be a teacher.”

“Isn’t that cute?” Mrs. Prescott trilled. “Veronica is a buyer for high-end boutiques, and is well on her way to being a fashion editor at *Glamour*, or is it *Elle*?”

“What grade do you want to teach?” Veronica asked, ignoring her mother’s question.

“Middle school, preferably sixth grade,” Jada said. “That’s one of the hardest transitions kids have to make, not only academically, but personally too. Friends matter more than grades to them, so they need strong teachers then.”

“What subjects?” Mr. Lowman asked, seemingly relieved he no longer had to construct conversation topics.

“English, History, or Social Studies,” Jada said. “I loved all those classes in school, and most of the students I’ve tutored needed help in those subjects.”

“So how do you go from being a cook to a teacher? That’s a bit of a leap?” Mr. McKensie asked.

“Not really. As assistant manager at the restaurant, I have to train other employees and cooks about protocol, so it’s essentially the same thing. Ultimately, it’s about people skills and mutual respect. Yes, I’m in a position of authority, but that doesn’t make me better than anyone else. I give them respect and expect it in return. Everyone learns from everyone else. I discover

so much from my kids at the daycare—like which area of the playground has the best dirt for building forts!”

Everyone but the Prescotts laughed, though Mr. Prescott couldn’t help but grin a little.

“You work at a daycare too?” Veronica asked.

“Yes. Not exactly sixth grade, but Joshua goes to that daycare as well. I’m only an aide, though, so it’s not everyday, but I love the kids.

“And the kids love her,” Aaron said, kissing her temple. “She had them all wrapped around her finger the moment she came into the community center her freshman year.”

“Exaggerating,” Jada said, blushing and ducking her head.

“I believe it,” Mrs. McKensie said. “You light up when you talk about teaching. That type of excitement is contagious.”

“Why did your grandmother raise you, Jane?”

“Jada,” Veronica corrected her mother, rolling her eyes. “Her name is *Jada*.”

“Jada. Sorry, dear,” Mrs. Prescott said, waving her hand absently. “What happened to your parents?”

“My mother died when I was eleven and I never knew my father.”

“Drug overdose?” Mrs. Prescott asked with faux sympathy.

“*Fiona!*” Mrs. McKensie exclaimed, shocked.

“That was *completely*—”

“Cervical cancer,” Jada said, rubbing Aaron’s thigh to relax him. Aaron’s hand slid behind her back and settled at her waist, squeezing. She’d prepared herself for insensitive remarks, but instead of feeling angry and hurt, Jada had to keep from laughing. Yes, it was sad people thought that way, but she couldn’t help but be tickled by the obvious ignorance Mrs. Prescott willingly showed.

“You can get cervical cancer from STDs,” Mrs. Prescott said, arching her eyebrow. “That’s why I tell my daughter to be very careful with the men she chooses. Although perhaps you should get tested, Ronnie, since—”

“Since *what*?” Aaron asked, his voice sharp.

Mrs. Prescott glanced at Jada briefly, but shrugged and cut at her salad before putting another forkful of it in her mouth.

Jada looked down at her own plate, at the tomatoes, romaine, bell peppers, light Italian dressing, and the fork that lay in wait for use. Jada actually felt sorry for Mrs. Prescott. She didn’t know how bad she was making herself appear, how her prejudice was making this physically attractive woman so repulsive. There was a saying she’d told her tutees when she’d been in Boston: “Assumptions make an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me’.” That was exactly what they were doing to Mrs. Prescott.

“I can assure you, Fiona, that I am clean; and if your daughter has the virus, it is not my fault,” Aaron said, squeezing Jada’s waist again.

Mr. Prescott looked harshly at Aaron. “What are you—?!”

"Oh, look, the waiter," Mr. Lowman announced, visibly sweating and smiling far too widely for it to be genuine.

The server received their orders, and Jada felt bad for him when Mrs. Prescott gave detailed and complex instructions of how she wanted her food prepared: no salt, a little parsley, slightly less than medium well. Jada and the waiter shared a look, and she bowed her head to hide her grin. Mrs. Prescott would be getting her meal just as the cook normally made it, and Jada would be damned if Mrs. Prescott noticed the difference.

"Jada Mae Channing!"

Jada snapped her head up, and she smiled broadly at the new arrival. She'd recognize that auburn hair and mischievous smile anywhere. "Mr. Jim!"

Mr. Jim rolled his eyes at the table as he came around and kissed Jada's cheek. "What have I told you about that? You call me Jimmy!"

"Mr. Jimmy—"

"How's Aunt Candy. Did she get the check? I haven't gotten it back in the mail yet, so I was concerned." Jada gave Mr. Jim a look, shaking her head imperceptibly, and Mr. Jim flushed. "Oh! How awful of me. Aunt Candy would tan my hide good if she knew I'd taken leave of my manners! I'm Jim Macey. Mine and Jada's families go way back..."

Way back indeed...

Jada snorted into her glass as Jim made individual introductions. Jim Macey was the son of Rachel Ames Macey, Mr. Joseph's youngest child. Of all the Ames family, Candace had always had a soft spot for Jim, and since Jim and Jada's mother had been close in age, they'd also been close in friendship. Jim knew of the sordid family history, and he let Candace and Jada know he considered them family. Honoring his grandfather's wish by giving Candace a percentage ownership in Ames Peach Pit was one way.

"Well, ain't it a small world or a small world?" Jim asked, squeezing Jada's shoulder. "Y'all the 'McKensie Lowman' of McKensie Lowman?"

"Yes, we are," Mr. McKensie said with a small smile. "It is nice to meet a client of ours. I hope our services meet your standards."

"And then some! Mr. Rawlings is very competent and thorough. He found us an extra twenty thousand dollars at that!" Jim said, shaking Jada's shoulder. "That means more money, Jada Mae!"

Jada chuckled. "So it seems!"

The band started another tune, and Jim grabbed Jada's hand. "Y'all don't mind if we take a turn on the dance floor, do ya?"

Aaron's eyes narrowed and Jada laughed. "It's just a dance."

"Jada—"

"Don't worry! I'll bring her back in one piece," Jim said, winking at Jada as he tugged her to her feet. "She'll be good and hungry when she gets back!"

Jada shrugged helplessly as Jim led her to the dance floor, and slapped Jim's shoulder once they found a spot. "You are *wrong!*"

"Wrong! You know Becca's the one who pointed you out to me, sayin', 'Say, that look awful like Jada over there,' and I say, 'You know, you're right! Wonder what's she's doin' here?'"

"So black people ain't allowed to eat at the Sun Dial on New Year's Eve?" Jada teased.

Jim sucked his teeth, twirling her out and bringing her back into his arms. "Like I said, just like your mama!"

Jada laughed, not losing her steps. "How are the kids? Anna's what, seven now?"

"Yup! And Chris is two. You should bring Joshua over sometime. Anna loves him, y'know."

"I've been meaning to; I actually have gifts for y'all but it's been..."

"I see," Jim said, glimpsing over her shoulder. "Joshie looks just like him."

"I didn't know you were in business with them," Jada said instead.

"I didn't know *you* were," Jim cracked, and Jada slapped his shoulder again.

"I'mma tell Becca on you!"

He scoffed at that. "Becca..."

"Or Grandma!"

Jim's back straightened and he shook his head. "You don't play fair. I'm older'n you, you know. Heck! I'm older'n your mama!"

"Older, schmolder," Jada sang. "You don't scare me!"

"As if I could!" Jim chuckled and twirled Jada again. He wasn't very tall, and he was lanky, very different from most of the Ames men's build; but his face, from his blue eyes to his cheekbones and the freckles that dotted the bridge of his nose, was classic Ames.

"I think we'll visit Aunt Candy tomorrow. We haven't chatted in a long time."

"I think she'd like that."

They didn't speak for the next few moments in favor of dancing and listening to the music, then Jim broke the silence. "They bein' fair to you?"

"They're bein' as expected," Jada said after a minute's delay. "It's nothin' I can't handle."

"They treat you wrong and I take my business elsewhere," Jim promised.

"You don't have to do that—"

"I do. You're family, even if I'm not supposed to say it out loud. Lynn made me promise to look after you and I am; and even if she hadn't, I would anyway."

The song ended and Jada gave Jim a large hug. "You have a very Happy New Year and give Becca and the kids my love."

"Yes ma'am, Jada Mae. Do the same for Joshua. And tell that Aaron of yours we gotta have a good talkin' to. He practically peed all over you tryin' to let me know you were his—"

"Shut. Up!" Jada said through clenched teeth, but her laugh dampened the severity of the order.

"I'll walk you back—"

"I'm all right. You go enjoy your time with your wife," Jada said, and Jim kissed her forehead.

"See you tomorrow then, most likely."

"Yes, sir. 'Night!"

That dance was what she'd needed to lift her spirits. All the insinuations and double-talking Mrs. Prescott was doing about her mother had worn Jada thin, so for Jim to appear when he did revived her. Mrs. Prescott didn't know nothing about nothing, and it simplified things for Jada with how to handle Mrs. Prescott's behavior.

"Kill 'em with kindness," Jada muttered under her breath. After all, dead men told no tales.

Aaron glared at Fiona as the server set down their food, and it wasn't until Isabella pinched his side did he relent.

"Behave!" Isabella whispered.

"Tell *her* that!" Aaron said, not bothering to lower his voice, all pretense of civility gone. It seemed Fiona was *begging* him to take complete leave of his senses and put her in her place, and the only reason he hadn't already was because he didn't want to embarrass the other women. Veronica kept shooting him apologetic glances throughout the dinner, but he didn't return them. She wasn't responsible for her mother.

"Do you have something to say to me, Aaron?" Fiona asked, affecting a surprised look.

"Oh, *please*, Fiona! You're behaving like a shrew! You're only embarrassing yourself, you know."

"Me! What about *you*? Bringing *her* here as if she could hold a candle to *my* Ronnie! She's *fat* for Pete's sake! That's just adding insult to injury if you ask me—!"

"Well no one *asked* you, so keep your opinions to yourself—!"

"Aaron."

Aaron stopped talking, not because of his father's warning tone or his mother's cautionary glance, but because he didn't want to waste words on such a horrid woman. Fiona's opinion meant nothing, and her giving it was irksome.

"This salmon is very good," Keith said, and Aaron barely contained the urge to roll his eyes.

"She certainly seems to know a lot of prominent people," Calvin said. "Do you know how she knows Mr. Macey?"

"I don't," Aaron admitted.

"They were very familiar with each other," Calvin continued, raising his eyebrows. "Intriguing."

"Their families are old friends," Veronica said. "Of course they would be familiar."

"Why would Mr. Macey's family be friends with Jamie's? They're clearly of two different worlds," Fiona scoffed.

No one bothered correcting Fiona this time, and Aaron felt she was deliberately disremembering Jada's name.

"Maybe Mr. Macey and Jan's mother had an affair," Fiona speculated aloud. "Oh! I've got it! I'll bet Mr. Macey is Jackie's father! That would explain why she said she never met her father. Her mother did what Jessie did to you, Aaron! They don't know they're father and daughter!" Fiona seemed immensely pleased she'd "solved" the mystery, and Aaron laughed heartily.

"The snow peas are excellent as well," Keith said, pointing to Calvin's plate. "You try them. Excellent."

"Aaron," Alexander said, though he appeared exasperated by the entire dinner.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't aware Fiona had taken up a life of comedy between Friday and now, although I think the nearest comedy club is down on Peachtree..."

"Which Peachtree," Keith asked absently.

"Pick one."

Everyone grew extremely still at Aaron's outburst, and the tension increased when Jada reemerged from the dance floor. The smile she'd been wearing fell into a frown and Aaron stood and approached her.

"Let's go home," Aaron said, grasping Jada's shoulders and squeezing. "I've had about as much as I can take." Zeke's lecture be damned. He wasn't going to sit through this monstrosity of a dinner any longer, nor would he subject Jada to Fiona's rudeness. It was their first New Year's Eve together, damn it, and he knew far more pleasant ways to celebrate it than this.

"I haven't eaten yet, and I'm hungry," Jada said, standing on tiptoes and kissing his cheek. "I've never eaten here, and I'm not leavin' until I do."

Aaron could only stand there slack-jawed as Jada moved around him and sat back at the table. He thought she'd be happy he wanted to leave early considering how upset she'd been when he'd told her about the dinner. He chuckled to himself; he'd never understand Jada...

"I do see the resemblance between you two," Fiona was saying as Aaron sat back down. He snickered at the utter confusion on Jada's face, but he was more interested in watching Fiona hang herself.

"Resemblance? Between me and Aaron?"

Veronica masked her giggle with a cough, and Isabella winked at Aaron. Even Alexander had to work hard to school his features in a neutral position, but the crinkle around his eyes told Aaron his father was amused.

Fiona laughed airily. "No! Not Aaron...Mr. Macey!"

"The wild rice is impeccable," Keith added, nodding at all of them. "This is a fantastic meal..."

"Oh...well..." Jada stammered, then shrugged, turning her attention to her plate. "I think I'll try some of that wild rice, Mr. Lowman."

Fiona's eyes flashed, clearly upset at Jada's dismissal of her topic. Jada didn't usually engage in stupid enterprises, and continuing Fiona's discussion would be one. Aaron smirked at Fiona and tucked into his own meal, nodding as the flavors exploded on his tongue. "You're right, Keith, the salmon is excellent."

Keith smiled at both of them and continued eating, pleased he'd made some headway in steering discussions to safer themes. There was idle talk about the meal, and once everyone had had her fill, a debate about dessert began. Veronica wanted red velvet cake, but when Fiona started reciting the cake's nutritional value, everyone's desire for unnecessary sweets began to wane.

"Mother, I am twenty-nine years old and I have been feeding myself for most of them. If I want the cake I'll get the cake!"

"And end up like Julie over there? I don't think so!"

Aaron slammed his open palm on the table. "That's it—!"

Jada cupped his cheek, and his ire seeped away at her touch. He met eyes with her, saw hers glinting, and grinned, taking her hand from his face and kissing the back of it.

"I love you," he told her.

"Despicable!" Fiona spat, glowering at both of them. "Just *despicable*!"

"Your behavior? Yes, I agree," Jada said simply, linking her fingers with Aaron. "It's been very despicable the entire night."

Isabella, to Aaron's surprise and amusement, started clapping, and drew some attention from the other patrons.

"Izzy," Alexander sighed.

"What?" Isabella asked, folding her hands primly in her lap. "*Jada* is absolutely right!"

"You have *no right* to talk to me like that!" Fiona gasped. "Calvin!"

"But you have the right to disrespect me? My mother? You don't *know* me or her to disrespect us! You may be rich, Mrs. Prescott, but that clearly doesn't buy you manners or basic human decency, now does it?"

Fiona bristled. "I watch the news! I read the newspapers—!"

"The society pages don't count," Jada interrupted, "and neither does *Entertainment Tonight*!"

Isabella clapped again, and Calvin stood, his hand rubbing his wife's back. "I was waiting for it."

"Waiting for what, Mr. Prescott?" Jada asked innocently.

"The 'attitude'. You people are all the same."

"You know nothing about 'my people'," Jada said with a little smile.

"I know 'your people' like handouts. I'll bet you got yourself knocked up so you could have a meal ticket for the next eighteen years. And that dress...how much did that set you back, Aaron? Looks expensive—"

"And where were you when I was going through the list of jobs I have to support myself and my son? I haven't asked Aaron for anything financially! I can support myself and my son just fine—!"

"You work for your *cousin*!" Calvin sneered. "*That's* 'supporting yourself'—?"

"So, what? Nepotism is only a rich thing nowadays? Scared the little people found out your little secret about how wealth is concentrated and hoarded by the few?"

Aaron glanced quickly at his father who merely quirked an eyebrow and ate a bite of asparagus. Though Jada had kept a calm tone throughout the exchange, Aaron heard her anger simmering beneath it. He rubbed the back of her hand to soothe her.

"If I were you, Alex," Calvin said, staring at Jada with flat eyes, "I'd sue for custody of your grandson. Wouldn't want him to become a statistic—"

"You keep my son's name, or any mention of him, out of your mouth," Aaron demanded quietly. He stood and moved behind Jada, giving her support and letting Calvin or anyone else know he wasn't going to back down. This conversation was one comment away from bedlam, and he would protect Jada from it.

"Dad! Aaron! Stop! You're creating a scene!" Veronica pleaded.

Aaron watched a server whisper frantically to the *maitre d'*, pointing in their direction, and he sat down as the host approached.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, sir, we're having a lively debate on which meal was the best—the veal or the salmon—but apparently these fine gentlemen here became a little too involved," Keith said, pulling out a bill and slipping it into the host's palm.

The *maitre d'* looked at Keith as if he were crazy, but bowed his head and went back to his post, the hand holding the bill balling into a fist. Calvin sat back down, jaw clenched, nostrils flaring slightly. Never in his life had Aaron wanted to deck a man so badly, but he knew the punch would be worth the lifetime ban from the restaurant it would surely bring.

"See!" Fiona hissed. "You almost got us removed with your...conduct!"

"I am not the one calling people outside their names or making judgments based off of...*statistics*," Jada said. "You don't like me, and though I've done nothing to warrant it, I understand. There will just be people you dislike because of...energies, personalities, whatever. But I've tried very hard to grant you respect, and the fact you can't even give me that same, little courtesy reflects poorly upon you *and* your family!"

"So it's not bad enough you have to insult me, but my daughter too?" Fiona asked, appalled. "You're nothing but a man-stealing tramp!"

"That's enough!" Veronica said. "Mother! Apologize right now!"

"I'm not apologizing to *her*," Fiona muttered, and crossed her arms at her chest petulantly.

"Aaron—"

"Save it," Aaron said, holding up a hand to still Veronica's words. "You're mother is a grown woman, even *if* my son possesses more maturity in his *pinky* than she does in her entire body."

"Boy, am I ever glad Veronica doesn't have to deal with you anymore!" Calvin said on a dry chuckle. "*She's* ruined you!" he added, jutting his chin toward Jada.

"I'd have to disagree with you there, but I've been disagreeing with you on just about everything tonight, haven't I?" Aaron said, shaking his head. The server returned, asking if they wanted dessert.

"I'll have the red velvet cake," Veronica said, not even sparing her mother a glance.

"I'll have the same," Keith said, nodding. "Anyone else?" No one responded. "Then a bowl of ice cream with fudge. Lots of fudge. Multiple spoons. We'll share—"

"We're leaving," Aaron said, and this time Jada stood with him. "I don't want this New Year's contaminated by your presence."

"Make that six spoons instead of eight," Keith said in a stage whisper.

"I'm sorry," Jada began apologizing to Isabella, but the older woman cupped Jada's face and kissed each cheek.

"You have absolutely no reason to apologize, *bella*," Isabella said. "It was an absolute joy to meet you."

"You too," Jada agreed, hugging her tightly.

"I'll call you tomorrow morning, Mama," Aaron said, kissing the top of his mother's head, then went to Veronica. He crouched so they were eye level, completely disregarding the venomous looks Veronica's parents sent him.

"Well..." Aaron started, not really knowing what to say to her, appreciating her awkward position, admiring her grace despite it. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Aaron...both of you..." Veronica's eyes had skipped to Jada who was still talking to Isabella.

"Yeah?"

Veronica smiled, and though it wasn't the brightest one Aaron had ever seen, it was genuine. "It's as plain as day that you two love each other...and I think that's what makes my parents so angry—" Fiona's sniff interrupted her, and Veronica rolled her eyes. "They'll live."

"You'll forgive me if I'm indifferent," Aaron said wryly, but with a grin.

Veronica winked. "Maybe." They kissed each other's cheeks and Aaron stood, looking at Mr. and Mrs. Prescott.

"Happy New Year," he told them, not caring they didn't return the sentiment. He didn't need their poisonous wishes anyway.

"Happy New Year, Aaron, Jada," Keith said, still perspiring lightly but obviously more relaxed now that the contentious element of the dinner was leaving.

"I'll walk them out," Alexander said, and he presented the way. Aaron placed his hand on the small of Jada's back, feeling how tight it was, and massaged gently. He kissed her temple as they walked, infusing calm into his touch. The dinner was not as bad as it could have been, but they were leaving so it wouldn't get any worse. Alexander asked for their tickets to retrieve their coats, but Aaron was the only one who'd checked a garment.

Soon they were waiting in the lobby as the valet got Aaron's SUV, Aaron standing behind Jada and holding her around the waist, her body close as if fearful she would vaporize into nothingness. She willingly leaned against him, her eyes closed and her fingers caressing the backs of his hands.

"You do realize Calvin will not rest until someone resigns," Alexander said after a few minutes.

"He'll have it first thing in the morning," Aaron said. He didn't want to be involved in a business with the likes of Calvin Prescott, and, by extension, Fiona Lowman Prescott.

"You'd willingly walk away from...your life for her?" Alexander asked. Aaron peeked at Jada, whose eyes were still closed, but her face had grown tight.

"The way I see it, I'm walking toward it, not away from it," Aaron said honestly, kissing her temple again. "I'm serious. Tomorrow morning you'll have a resignation."

"Tomorrow is a holiday."

"Like you know the meaning of the word?"

Alexander grinned a little at that, checking his manicured fingernails. "If there is a resignation, it won't be yours."

"Pop—"

"The name of the company is McKensie Lowman, not McKensie Lowman Prescott. I haven't spent the last thirty years grooming you so you can leave because someone doesn't agree with what you do in your personal life."

"I broke up with his daughter—"

"And yet, the parents are taking it harder than she is. Does that seem a little backwards to anyone else?"

Jada snickered at that, and Aaron hid his smile in her bun. Alexander's green eyes fixed upon Jada, and Aaron squeezed her waist.

"You have much more patience than I, young lady," Alexander said. "I commend you for that."

"Thank you, sir," Jada said, opening her eyes and standing straighter, Aaron's arm still around her.

Alexander nodded. "Hopefully we'll have time to get to know one another better. It seems my son intends on keeping you."

"Keeping, huh?"

Alexander laughed, a real one that made his face appear twenty years younger. "You're going to have your hands full with this one, son!"

"Like yours are full with Mama?"

Alexander's smile softened. "And what a wonderful handful she is."

The valet pulled up with Aaron's vehicle, and Alexander approached Jada, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. "A pleasure, Ms. Channing."

"Happy New Year, Mr. McKensie."

"Go ahead, I'll catch up," Aaron promised, squeezing her forearms briefly. The men watched Jada climb into the Lexus silently, and when Alexander's arm crept along Aaron's shoulder, he grinned. "So?"

"It's not going to be easy."

"No, but didn't you tell me nothing worth something ever is?"

Alexander gently gripped Aaron's shoulder tighter and kissed his cheek. "Happy New Year, son."

Aaron blushed at his father's rare show of affection. "You, too, Pop."

The drive to Jada's apartment was just as silent as the drive to the hotel, and when they pulled into the parking lot, there were ten minutes to midnight.

Jada hurried inside because the temperature had dropped considerably since their excursion, and she was sitting on the couch and rubbing her feet when he walked inside. Aaron sat beside her, pulling her feet into his lap and taking over for her. She clicked on the television, turning to *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* special before reclining fully on the couch. After he massaged both feet, he stood and pulled Jada up also, wrapping his arms around her as they swayed to the boisterous countdown coming from the television set and elsewhere in the apartment complex.

"Happy New Year!" came the cheer, and *Auld Lang Syne* blared from television sets while someone set off illegal fireworks in the parking lot.

They smiled at each other, arms growing tighter as they shared their first New Year's Kiss.

If Aaron had anything to say about it, it would be the first of many.

SEVENTEEN

The New Year with Jada's family was completely different from the night before, and Aaron had thought *that* was how a family dinner should be—full of fantastic food, good cheer, well wishes, and genuine love.

He'd laughed so hard when he found out Jim Macey's relationship to the Channings, and endured Jim's "talking to" with good humor, though the older man had given him some very beneficial pointers. One that stood out was that Jada *hated* peaches despite being a small heiress to a peach fortune. A prank Jim had pulled on her when she was three had made sure of that fact.

"I never heard somebody scream so loud! Bet you ain't play hide-and-seek in a crateful of peaches anymore—"

"That's enough—"

"She almost got shipped to Kentucky—!"

"Mr. Jim—"

"Jimmy—"

"Whatever. Shut it!"

"Jada Mae..."

They'd all laughed at Candace's chastisement, and Aaron had much fun kissing her adorable pout from her face.

It had been a tight squeeze in Candace's house, especially with the unexpected, yet welcome addition of the Macey clan, so Jada, Deshae, Jamal, and Aaron had to sit at the "kids' table" in order to keep the main table from being so crowded. Aaron hadn't minded, however, loving the opportunity to sit with his son, enjoying watching Joshua interact with Malcolm, Anna, and Chris. All the women except for Candace had served the food; and though there were more people than originally planned, there was plenty because everyone had brought a dish to complement what Jada and Zeke had prepared at the restaurant. Jada even had asked Aaron if he wanted to invite his parents, but he had told her they had an early flight back to New York.

"There will be other times, love," he'd promised, and the first had been the NFC Championship game two weeks later between Atlanta and Green Bay. Alexander and Isabella had flown down to watch it in the Georgia Dome, and

everyone had been more nervous and excited about the match than about Aaron's parents. Usually, they watched the games in the stadium, but since the McKensies had come, they'd been in the skybox. Joshua had loved it, and spent most of the game sitting and cheering in his grandfather's lap.

His mother had been right—Alexander was utterly charmed by his grandson. From the moment he and Isabella had entered the skybox, Joshua had run and given his grandmother large hugs and kisses. When Isabella had passed Joshua to Alexander, the older man had melted and accepted Joshua's affection with as much enthusiasm as Isabella.

Though the Falcons had lost, there was a small, informal party at Jamal and Deshae's house celebrating the season. Alexander and Zeke had gotten into a long conversation about business while Lisa, Deshae, Jada, and Isabella bonded. The time had passed so quickly that Jada and Joshua had stayed over for the night while Aaron dropped off his parents at their hotel. Just before Aaron left, however, Alexander had reminded him about the upcoming board meeting in New York the next week.

Things had been quiet since that sham of a dinner, and Aaron didn't know whether to be relieved or nervous. There had not been, as Alexander had predicted, any resignations from McKensie Lowman, but Calvin hadn't come to the monthly board meeting—Keith Lowman his proxy. Alexander hadn't seemed surprised by Calvin's absence, and Keith had appeared nervous for it. Aaron had been both. It had been business as usual but with a peculiar undercurrent present, highlighted by clandestine looks in his direction and cleared throats whenever Aaron had spoken or Alexander had addressed him. Aaron had ignored them. He only had to deal with these people once a month, and when the meeting ended, he'd be on his chartered flight back to Atlanta and the people who truly mattered.

Aaron, Jada, and Joshua had fallen into a routine, a familiar and familial habit, the kind that had Aaron thinking of churches and picket fences. Aaron would go work while Jada and Joshua left for school; and when she had to work at the restaurant, Aaron would get Joshua from the daycare. The first time he'd done it, Jada still had been there, but she had to fill in for a sick cook at the last minute and couldn't take Joshua home. The other teachers and aides had stared at him surprised, Jada grumbling something about lust, and every subsequent visit had Aaron leaving with a hot blush and a need to kiss Jada silly. The life was domestic, yet everything Aaron hadn't known he wanted. How could he have been so afraid of this?

How could Jada?

Though she still had her apartment and he his condo, Aaron spent more time at her place than at his, despite the condo being larger. Joshua was used to the apartment; the less abrupt changes for him, the better. Besides, there were only a few months left on the lease; she would have to move eventually...

Nevertheless, Aaron recognized she was still wary—about his father and the Prescotts specifically—but hid it by focusing on her studies and work. Granted the relationship between her and Alexander had improved, and his father adored Joshua greatly, but Jada and Alexander were still too polite, too formal whenever they interacted. His father didn't dislike Jada, but rather had difficulty forging a relationship with someone he'd previously been dead set against. At least they were making an effort. That was the most anyone could expect for now.

Aaron glanced at the clock and blew out a breath. It was Friday and an hour before he had to get off work and pick up his son. Another benefit of his new schedule was that it forced him to have free time. Before Jada and Joshua, he'd lived more in his office than his own place. Then again, who was ever anxious to go home alone to a big, empty penthouse?

As he debated with himself whether to leave and get Joshua early, he received a call. Aaron immediately became concerned, for the only people who had his direct line were his parents and Jada, and they rarely used it unless there was something wrong or needed his attention.

He picked up the receiver. "Aaron."

"We have a problem."

Aaron groaned and slid his hand through his hair. His father's tone only exacerbated his worry, and Aaron sagged in his chair. "What is it?"

"We lost the Burgess account."

He and his father had been working on that account for months, and it hadn't been a headline-making deal because they had been negotiating quietly. Burgess Enterprises owned beachfront properties, golf courses, and ski lodges in the United States, Mexico, and Austria, and having an exclusive account with them meant multi-billion dollar business. The meetings between them had gone smoothly...or so Aaron had thought.

"To whom? And why?" Aaron asked, his pleasant mood officially gone.

Alexander sighed, and Aaron sat straighter. His father didn't sigh. Sighing was a death knell in any conversation with Alexander McKensie.

"Pop—"

"Calvin—"

"Pop," Aaron interrupted, not liking the second sigh that had carried Calvin's name. None of this was making sense, especially since Calvin and Donald Burgess weren't familiar.

"He's suing you for slander," Alexander said.

Aaron pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Did his father say what he thought he said? "What?" Aaron asked, talking into the receiver again. *This was unbelievable...!*

"And Jada. He is suing you two for slander against Fiona and Veronica...and defamation of character—"

"Oh, you've got to be—!"

"And...he's thinking of pressing charges against you for assault."

"Assault! I never even touched the guy!"

"You threatened him..."

Aaron chuckled darkly. Jada should've let him punch Calvin; at least he would've *earned* the damn charge!

"Burgess got wind of it and decided to end all talks with us. I'd heard rumblings about it...but I didn't expect—"

"You should've let me resign when I had the chance—"

"This goes deeper than you, Aaron. This is no longer just about *you* anymore. Calvin wants to save face, and he feels the only way to do that is by dragging ours through the mud. He won't get away with it. This case will be tossed out faster than New York garbage."

But the damage had been done. This loss would be in the *Wall Street Journal*, despite the fact the negotiations between them and Burgess had been private up until now; and if the lawsuit wasn't in the tabloids today, it would be by Monday.

"Does Veronica know about this?"

"She found out when I called her about it. Some days I wonder if she's adopted..."

"Some days I bet she wishes she were," Aaron said dryly, and ran his hand over his face. "So, what do we do?"

"I spoke with our lawyers. They say to wait it out for the moment. I promise once Calvin's ludicrous lawsuit is tossed I'm going to slap him with the biggest suit I can think of—"

"I do *not* want to start a feud with these people, Pop—"

"*They* started it—"

"No, I did when I fell in love with Jada!"

Why resign when you can destroy the company from inside, when you can tar the names of upstanding people who'd done nothing to you? All Jada had done was put Fiona in her proper place, put a mirror in front of the other woman so she could see how ugly she really was. No amount of plastic surgery; hours at the day spa or gym; or designer clothing could hide Fiona's repulsive nature; and if the Prescotts thought they could use a courthouse to do it, they would be sadly mistaken.

"And Keith?"

Alexander cleared his throat. "He's taking a leave of absence...and I think you should too."

"Pop—"

"Don't come into work until this thing blows over—"

"I'm not hiding—"

"You have more to think about than yourself, Aaron."

Jada...Joshua...Suddenly his heart clenched. "Pop—?"

"Lay low...all of you..." Alexander's voice became gruff. "Don't come into the office for a while. Your condo's wireless, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Lay low," Alexander repeated. "I'll call you later with more information."

Aaron stared at the receiver briefly before slamming it onto its base. This past month had been nothing but the quiet before the storm, and he kicked himself for not realizing it earlier. He'd been too content, too happy to worry about what Calvin and Fiona were doing, and if Keith had had anything to do with this...

As much as he didn't want take his "vacation," Alexander had a point. It didn't matter that the lawsuit was bogus—the loss of business definitely wasn't—and after some major fallouts in the industry, the last thing any accounting firm needed was a high-profile scandal.

"Hell hath no fury like parents' scorned," Aaron muttered darkly, and called Jamie and Mrs. Cox into his office.

He told him about his upcoming holiday, and hadn't missed the worried, concerned looks on their faces. Aaron knew to whom they were loyal, and promised himself that upon his return they would both get raises.

"We'll definitely keep you posted, Mr. McKensie," Mrs. Cox vowed, and Jamie nodded emphatically.

"And anything you need...anything at all, you let us know," Jamie said, shaking Aaron's hand.

Yes, Aaron thought as he left the office, *big raises*.

He'd been far too distracted for his liking on his drive to the daycare center, and was partially relieved Jada had already left for the restaurant by the time he arrived. He didn't know what to tell her...if he told her... Though he was on "vacation," neither Joshua nor Jada could just leave and go...where? Italy? Ireland? Some other place that had no ties to the McKensies at all? Did he even *want* to tell Jada what was happening? His father was handling things and maybe...maybe he wouldn't even have to tell Jada he was on leave from the office. That was one good thing about having separate houses—he could go to his condo when he left for "work"; Jada would be none the wiser...

"Yeah, right!" Aaron snorted as walked into the building. Jada was nothing if not astute; she'd figure out his game after the first day! He would have to tell her. He just had to find the right shade in which to color the news.

"Daddy!" Joshua exclaimed once Aaron entered the classroom and ran to his legs. Aaron picked up his son and held him tight.

"I love you, buddy," Aaron breathed into his hair.

"I love you, too, Daddy..."

Aaron drove to Charlie's Grille listening to Joshua's happy chatter about his day. He knew Jada and Zeke would be working, but he needed some sort of normalcy, decency, amid the chaotic perversity that had just entered his life.

"Hey, Aaron...Joshie..." the hostess cooed when they entered, handing the little boy a peppermint as they passed the host stand. Joshua giggled a thank you and Aaron smiled. The first time he'd visited he'd been alone, the focus of murmured whispers and lingering looks. He'd come with a single yellow rose, intent on surprising Jada since he knew how difficult it had been for her to get back in the swing of things, but he hadn't realized his presence might have made things worse.

"There go the daddy," one of the customers had said conspiratorially, looking Aaron up and down with a slight scowl. "Humph..."

But the atmosphere changed when he'd given Jada the flower and a kiss to the cheek, making her melt. After that, the staff and the regulars had become used to his presence for he'd made Friday visits an institution. Aaron was family now, everyone taking cues from Zeke, Lucille, and Harold on how to treat him. That and the fact he adored Jada and Joshua also made it easier for the majority of the patrons bring him into the fold. He'd apparently earned "cool" points for actually stepping up and doing right by them. Someone had even teased, "Once you go black..."

Aaron had chuckled and replied, "Actually, it's once you go *Jada*..." Amid the customers' whooping, Jada had playfully brandished a plastic spork and muttered he should sleep with one eye open that night.

Of course, sometimes he and Jada received rude and racist comments, but those usually came from new customers, and those customers usually earned a one-way ticket out the door. Everyone looked out for everyone else, and right then, Aaron needed to be reminded people like that existed.

"Zeke!" Joshua exclaimed as they reached the dining floor.

"Little Man!" Zeke greeted, kissing Joshua's forehead. He frowned when he spied Aaron. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing I can talk about here..." Aaron said, looking through the service window at Jada. She hadn't noticed him yet, chopping something and giving directions to another cook. "Let's just say today's been a mother of bad days."

"That's impossible—it's Friday! Fridays by definition aren't bad!" Zeke said, allowing Joshua to use him as a jungle gym. "Want anything to eat? On the house..." Aaron wasn't hungry and he shook his head. "Want me to get Jada?"

"No...I just...no. Don't bother her." He wanted to watch her in one of her many elements, watch how at ease and in command she was. Of course, because of his staring, Jada eventually sensed his eyes on her and gave him a smile through the window before leaving the kitchen.

"Hey, baby," she said when she approached the table, frowning slightly and cupping Aaron's cheek. She kissed his forehead softly. "Why do you look so down?"

Aaron yearned to pull her into his lap and cuddle her, but between the table in his way and the fact she was at work, he settled for nuzzling his forehead into her neck instead. "Missed you."

She laughed lightly. "You saw me this mornin', Aaron."

"I can't miss you in the eight hours since then?" Aaron asked innocently, kissing her pulse point underneath his lips.

"Y'all get a room!" came a good-natured demand. Aaron smiled and kissed Jada's neck again before pulling back. There was flour on her cheek and hair, and a colorful array of stains on her apron and uniform.

She was breathtaking.

"I'm almost done with the dinner for us. Jamal came by earlier to pick up theirs...we can go home together if you want? I can follow you?"

Aaron kissed the back of her hand, noticing Zeke and Joshua coming out of the hallway that led to the bathrooms. "That sounds perfect."

"All right." Jada chuckled when Joshua leaned out of Zeke's arms and kissed her cheek. "Give me five, okay?"

She squeezed Zeke's forearm as she went back to the kitchen, and Aaron kissed Joshua's head when he climbed into his lap.

"I'll make it four," Zeke said. "And Lisa and I can watch Joshua for y'all tonight. Looks like y'all could use a quiet evening alone."

Aaron nodded absently and held his son tighter. "That sound good, buddy?"

"Yeah," Joshua said.

Jada had been amenable to the arrangement. Soon they were at her apartment, the takeout put in the refrigerator because Aaron wanted to snuggle in a bubble bath. It didn't matter that the tiny tub had them cramped and close together; in fact, he preferred her curves and warmth as close to him as possible. He held her snugly, watching her big toe worry the faucet and listening to her talk about an upcoming midterm and a rather rambunctious family that had come into the restaurant.

He kept quiet, then, deciding to tell her about the day's developments later. One of them should have a decent Friday.



It was rare for Jada to have a free afternoon. She wasn't scheduled to go to the daycare and Zeke didn't need her help at the restaurant. She stopped by anyway and ordered a meal to go, deciding to take advantage of her freedom and surprise Aaron at the office.

"Returnin' the favor, huh?" Zeke had asked as he packed two barbeque chicken sandwich meals.

"Fair's fair, ain't it?" Jada said with a wink.

She'd never been to Aaron's office, though she knew where it was, and the drive was painless. He'd seemed stressed for the past two weeks, and she wanted to do anything she could to help him relax.

There was a map of offices and floors by the elevators, and she took the elevator to McKensie Lowman's floor. It was a very nice office, and she briefly panicked because she was felt underdressed. Then again, she wasn't here for a formal meeting...

The receptionist was on the phone when Jada approached; but when the other woman gave her a double take, she clutched the takeout bag tighter to her.

"Ah...I have to go," the receptionist said and hung up the phone.

Jada took a deep breath. "Hello, I'm here to see Aaron McKensie?"

The woman's breath hitched, and she scratched the space just above her eyebrow. "Ah—"

"Jada. Jada Channing. I'm...a friend..."

The woman blinked and bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Ms. Channing, but Mr. McKensie's not in right now—"

"Oh! Do you know when he'll be back?"

The woman shook her head and shrugged. "I'm sorry, Ms. Channing, I don't..."

Jada didn't like the way the woman was hesitating, but she smiled at the receptionist and nodded understandingly.

"That's all right. I just wanted to surprise him with lunch. Do you mind if I leave this for him?"

"Oh...ah...he's on vacation..."

Jada's eyes widened. "Really? Since when?" Certainly not since this morning, when he said he would have a busy day at work!

"You didn't know, ma'am?"

"No, I didn't..." Jada didn't like this at all, and gripped the takeout bag tighter. "Um..."

"I can give you a number to call," the receptionist suggested sympathetically.

"Yes, please," Jada murmured, and watched the woman's neat script appear on a crisp linen memo pad. She tore the sheet off and handed it to Jada.

"Thank you—"

"He has your eyes."

"Pardon?" Jada asked, jerking her attention from the foreign phone number she'd just received.

"Your son. He has your eyes."

So the receptionist did know about her. Her tone seemed kind, but that still didn't explain the woman's behavior.

"Would you like this takeout?" Jada asked, putting the bag on the edge of the desk. "There are two sandwiches here—barbeque chicken...I'm not hungry..." She wasn't about to let perfectly good food go to waste.

"That's very sweet of you," the receptionist said and took the bag. "Thank you so much!"

"No! Thank you! Have a wonderful afternoon, ma'am."

"You, too, Ms. Channing..."

Someone had some explaining to do. On the way home Jada called Deshae and asked if she could watch Joshua for the night. They needed to be alone for this discussion.

"Got an early V-day thing planned or somethin'?" Deshae asked slyly.

"Not quite," Jada replied on a forced chuckle. Truthfully, Jada had forgotten Valentine's Day was a few days away; but even at the reminder, she couldn't eradicate the nagging suspicion that whatever Aaron wasn't telling her was nowhere near romantic.

"Well, I can pick him up on my way from work," Deshae promised. Jada thanked her and ended the call, needing to focus more on the road and positive thoughts.

She decided to study to keep her mind occupied, but she did a poor job of it. It was hard not to go immediately into worst-case scenarios, especially when, up until today, she'd thought things for her and Aaron were getting better. They'd become a family, doing boring things like dishes and laundry...arguing about which schools Joshua should attend for kindergarten...giggling about the way Aaron's feet hung off the bed whenever he stretched out completely. This new year had been turning out to be her best year yet, and now this—a secret. What was Aaron keeping from her and why?

After thirty more minutes of faking it, Jada abandoned her books and went to the bedroom. As soon as she fell on top of the pillows she regretted it. She could still smell him. His pillow was still dipped from where his head had rested. The covers on his side were still mussed from when he'd left the bed that morning. She sighed and pulled his pillow to her chest, tears stinging her eyes.

"Everything's fine," Jada told herself, a deep breath seeping out of her. Perhaps he was planning something for Valentine's Day; Aaron was very romantic, definitely more romantic than she was! After years of not having anything but chocolates and flowers from the family, she'd forgotten February 14th was the day for lovers...

It wasn't until a kiss, whisper soft on the tip of her nose, woke her up did Jada realize she'd fallen asleep. Aaron's fingers traced the space in front of her ear and he smiled softly.

"Hey, sleepyhead..." When Jada didn't respond, he frowned and slid into bed, fully clothed in a suit he hadn't worn to work. "What's wrong?"

"I think I should ask you that," Jada said, sliding back so he couldn't hold her as intended. His frown deepened.

"What—?"

"How was work today, Aaron?"

He fell on his back and stared at the ceiling while Jada sat up and looked at him. "Jada—"

"Did you have a good day? Business goin' well? Your receptionist is a lovely woman—"

"Jada—"

"Why you been lyin' to me, Aaron?" she muttered, leaving the bed and avoiding his outstretched hand. Aaron sat up but didn't approach her, and Jada leaned against the dresser, arms crossed at her chest. "Your receptionist could barely look me in the eye, and *then* she told me you were on 'vacation'...I hear Jamaica's lovely this time of year—"

"Jaybird—"

"Don't call me that right now! You betta have a *damn* good explanation for this!"

His posture didn't look as if he were hiding a good secret, a pleasant surprise of candlelight and expensive sweets. "Jada..."

She exhaled slowly and felt her eyes sting again. "You're really scarin' me, Aaron."

He scooted to the end of the bed and held out a hand to her. She stared at him, and he wiggled his fingers. "Baby, please."

She left the dresser and took his hand, sniffing when he tugged her so she stood between his legs. His eyes bored into hers; his large, warm hands settled at her waist and began stroking her sides.

"I love you."

"I don't like where this is goin'," Jada whispered. He starting a conversation like this, with that "as a reminder" tone, did not alleviate her worry.

Aaron flexed his fingers and took a deep breath. "I love you, Jada. I need you to be very clear about that."

"Fine. I'm clear. Quit stallin'," Jada said, bringing her hands to his wrists and grasping them tightly.

He took another deep breath and his shoulders sagged. Jada framed his face and kissed his forehead. "I love you, too, okay? Please tell me what's wrong."

Aaron lifted his face to hers so they were nose to nose and he tightened his arms around her waist. "Calvin Prescott has...sued us for a host of trumped up allegations, not to mention sabotaged a potential account and, in general, been a right nuisance."

Jada's fingers slid into his hair and she cocked her head. "When did this happen?"

He broke eye contact. "Two weeks ago..."

Jada dropped her hands. He tried to get her to stay where she was, but she broke his hold and left the bedroom. Two weeks ago. That was when all the tension had started...probably when his "vacation" had started too.

"Jada—"

"I told you this would happen! Jada hissed, though in this instance she hadn't wanted to be right. She went into the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets and refrigerator. Suddenly she was hungry.

"That's why I didn't say anything, because I knew you'd think that way!" Aaron said, hovering at the kitchen entrance.

"But I'm right—"

"You're wrong!" Aaron insisted. "He's doing this to get back at me...for revenge—"

"There would be no revenge if I wasn't in the picture, Aaron. You coulda moved on with another white girl—she could've been hillbilly whitetrash and he would've been less insulted than you bringing me to that little party—"

"Jada—"

"I told you!" Jada said again, slamming a pot onto the counter, trembling from fear, frustration, and heartbreak. The past few weeks had been nothing but fantasy, and it was so hard to awaken from it to ugly reality. Aaron's arms came around her and she sagged against him. Even in this ugly reality he was still her beautiful glimpse of light.

"We'll get through this, love," Aaron vowed, kissing her temple. "Pop says the suit and the charges—"

"What charges?" When he didn't answer, Jada turned and looked at him. "Aaron Alexander McKensie!"

Aaron told her the story, everything, and the more she heard, the angrier and more frustrated she became. Calvin Prescott was suing them for the very thing he was doing!

"Unbelievable!"

Aaron rubbed her shoulders. "I know, though I have to say I don't think Calvin did this alone. This reeks of Fiona."

"Regardless..."

"We're handling it," Aaron told her, squeezing her. "We won't let them win."

This was all her fault. She'd allowed herself to ignore the internal warning bells—had even convinced her grandmother it would be all right, that Aaron was different...that things would work out. Now his name and his company were being sullied all because Aaron had fallen for the wrong girl...and because Jada had let him.

"You know," Jada said after awhile. "A vacation doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

"Really?" Aaron asked and smiled. "Isn't spring break in March?"

"It is, but that's not what I mean."

Jada saw the moment he realized what she meant, when his eyes became fierce and his hands tensed at her shoulders. “No.”

“No?” Jada repeated, scoffing. “We need to stop now before things get worse—”

“Jada—”

“Aaron!” Jada exclaimed, shaking him. “Your reputation is at stake, your *parents*’, your family’s—!”

“You are my family, Jada. You and Joshua and me...you’re all I need,” Aaron said firmly.

Aaron still didn’t get it, Jada realized sadly. He was so myopic, so content in his utopia that he couldn’t see what was actually happening. He’d told his father he would walk away from his life to be with her, and as sincere as Jada knew he was, she couldn’t let him do it. He needed his reputation; once destroyed, it was difficult to repair. She wouldn’t let that happen because of her.

“This has been insane—all of it! We reunited; a few days later, you found out about Joshua; a few weeks later, we’re acting like the interracial Cleavers! We got caught up, didn’t allow ourselves to fully think of the consequences—”

“I’m a businessman, Jada,” Aaron interrupted, his voice low, almost a purr. “And in the business world the best deals are made quick, lightning. If you sit around and wait, hem and haw, then another businessman, another company, takes that chance, and *that* company gets rich off of its quick strike while you sit and regret. I sat around and waited the first time. I got a second chance, I struck, and I became the wealthiest man on the planet. You think Calvin Prescott is going to cheat me out my fortune? You better think again.”

Jada closed her eyes, the tears that had been threatening to fall all afternoon finally doing so. He was making this so hard for her! “Aaron—”

“No!” Aaron said, grabbing her wrists firmly and shaking her gently. “No vacations unless they involve a beach, you in a sexy sarong and swimsuit, and me teaching Joshua how to swim in an ocean! No vacations!”

Jada jerked her wrists out his hands and left the kitchen to pace in the living area. Her body wracked with her sobs, aggravated and confused about what to do. There were so many things to consider, so many lives that were affected. She wanted exactly what Aaron did, but they had to do it right and at the right time. What was happening now meant this was not it.

She stopped and stared out of her window into the parking lot where Aaron’s SUV was and had been almost every night for the past few weeks. “I love you, Aaron,” Jada said, mirroring his tone from when he’d first started telling her the news.

A stillness that was anything but peaceful fell. After a while she heard Aaron move, and she jumped when he came upon her back.

“You say you love me,” Aaron whispered in her ear, his voice strained and almost inaudible. “I just wish once in a while you’d show me.”

She stood there and stared out that window for how long she didn't know, looking at the vacant parking space that matched the emptiness she felt inside.

"I am," she whispered before leaving the living area and going back to bed, Aaron's pillow clutched to her chest, his scent lingering and soothing.

Hopefully, it would last through Valentine's Day.

EIGHTEEN

“Daddy’s on business,” was the line Jada used every night to explain why Aaron wasn’t home. The first few days of it, Joshua had been understanding, especially since Aaron had called every night to talk to his son. After two weeks of it, however, it had stopped working, and Joshua cried himself to sleep begging for his father’s return.

She and Aaron didn’t talk much. When she answered the phone, all Aaron said was, “It’s I,” and then she’d pass the receiver to Joshua. They had nothing to discuss as far as she was concerned. He’d had the audacity to think she didn’t show him she loved him, had assumed it had been so easy for her to suggest they’d take a “vacation.” *He* was the one who’d kept the entire situation a secret from her!

Jerk. Stupid, spoiled, shortsighted jerk!

“I miss him!” Jada wailed, her head in Deshae’s lap. She turned her face to Deshae’s stomach. “I’m sorry, baby. Aunt Jada promises to stop whinin’ by the time you’re born...”

The one bright spot in all of this had been the revelation of Deshae’s pregnancy. She’d kept it a secret from everyone—even Jada—until after Valentine’s Day, wanting to tell Jamal first. She was in her third month, but had found out she was pregnant after she’d gone through a second menstrual-free month. The first she’d attributed to stress, with the moving and Christmas being the causes, but January had been easy. Deshae hadn’t had typical morning sickness, but she’d been more tired than usual, and in a wild leap of faith, took a pregnancy test in the bathroom at work.

“August 9th...your baby’s due five days before Aaron’s birthday,” Jada sniffed.

“Jada...”

“How could you *do* that to her?!”

Deshae laughed. “How you know it’s a girl?”

“I’m psychotic that way.”

“That you definitely are!”

Jada slapped Deshae's knee lightly. "I did the right thing, Shae. He lied to me! Jerk!"

Felicia, who was now a lawyer in New York, had sent Jada an online link to a tabloid article that featured her. The story had called Aaron a chocolate fiend and her a chocolate bunny! It'd said she'd seduced him and suckered him into unwanted fatherhood! It'd said she made Aaron break up with Veronica or else she'd sue for child support! It would've been funny had it not been her life...had there not been an unflattering picture of her next to the article with the caption, "the baby mama." She didn't even know how they'd gotten hold of that yearbook picture! Thank goodness the tabloid wasn't popular in Atlanta, but Jada still remained guarded.

"Does Aunt Candy know about any of this?"

"She knows about the 'vacation'...just not the why..."

Jada couldn't tell Candace the sordid details, unable to face her grandmother's disappointment...the questions of why she let a good man like Aaron slip through her fingers.

"When I eat my words, I eat my words, Jada Mae," Candace had said during the New Year's dinner, "but don't you make me choke on 'em!"

"Ma'am?" Jada had asked.

"That Aaron boy...don't you do nothin' stupid an' make me choke on 'em!"

Jada *definitely* couldn't tell Candace!

"You are so stupid," Deshae muttered on a laugh.

She pouted. "Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome!" Deshae sang. Jada settled further into Deshae's lap, worrying the tassels of the pillow she held. "You know you should talk to him."

"Shae—"

"You love him right?" Jada nodded. "He loves you, right?" Another nod. "Then who gives a flyin' flip what anyone else says—?"

"He lied—"

"This ain't about Aaron, Jada Mae. This is about you doin' that stupid 'preemptive strike' again. It ain't work before—what make you think it's gonna work now?"

The first attempt had had moderate success, however. Circumstances had been in her control, every variable accounted for, and yet...not, because she'd underestimated how important she was to Aaron. But now, she knew how much he loved her and their son, how much her family and friends had accepted Aaron into her life, their lives. She'd fallen in love with Aaron even more the past few months, something she hadn't thought possible, but everything still had been within her realm, her vicinity. The adversaries were small, inconsequential to her little world, and even when bigger sharks such as the Prescotts had entered it, she could handle them because they were on *her* turf and she had Aaron by her side.

She'd forgotten there was an entire outside universe, one that had much more impact than she realized. Jada didn't want to be famous, tabloid fodder; she just wanted to be with her lover and their child in the quiet confines of her small apartment and cozy family restaurant. She'd warned Aaron about contentious persons against their relationship, but even she had always anticipated the forays as one-on-one. Personal, in-your-face confrontations she could handle; but court cases, national publicity, the potential degradation of a reputable company that was her lover's family's life's work and blood? Jada didn't think she could be responsible for that.

"It's just a vacation," Jada mumbled.

"A 'vacation' Aaron didn't want—"

"He's bein' far too Pollyanna—"

"And you're bein' too much of a Scrooge! I tell you, if I worried about every write-up I saw about Jamal or me, you can bet I wouldn't be engaged, knocked up, and happy! You gotta pick battles, Jada Mae; but more importantly, you gotta let Aaron fight some of them, gotta believe it when he says you're worth more than any of that other stuff. Or else, why *should* he stay?"

Jada stood and tossed the pillow onto the couch. "I need to pick up Little Man from Grandma's..."

Deshae stood as well and hugged her friend. "You know you gonna hafta pull a Temptations..."

"What?"

"*Ain't Too Proud to Beg*—"

"Shut it."

Jada hummed absently to the soul station on the radio as she drove to Candace's house, half-expecting to hear the hit song, and was a little disappointed that she didn't. When she pulled into her grandmother's driveway, there was a car she didn't recognize in it. She immediately became wary, afraid it was a gossip reporter taking advantage of her grandmother, then became angry. They could mess with her, but her grandmother and son were off limits!

"Hello," Jada called, her voice just kind enough so she wouldn't get a lecture from Candace, then stopped abruptly when she saw the visitor.

He stood, his eyes grave upon her. "Ms. Channing."

Jada looked to her grandmother, silently asking what was Mr. McKensie doing in their house. Joshua was kneeling at the coffee table working on a jigsaw puzzle.

"Hi, Mommy," Joshua said, not looking up from his task.

"Baby..." Jada replied, still staring at her grandmother. Candace's eyes shifted between her and Mr. McKensie.

"Y'all can use the kitchen to talk," Candace offered.

Mr. McKensie presented the way. "After you, Ms. Channing..."

What was he doing here? How did he even know where her grandmother lived? She doubted Aaron had told him, but Candace's address *was* in the Yellow Pages...

Mr. McKensie pulled out a chair for her and she thanked him quietly, sitting down and watching him take the seat opposite her. He practically loomed over the table, his face expressionless and his eyes piercing into her. Jada crouched slightly and averted her eyes from his, from eyes that reminded her too much of his son.

"I must say I'm surprised at you, Ms. Channing," he said after a few minutes.

"Sir?" she asked, eyes snapping to him.

Mr. McKensie shrugged slightly. "I never thought you'd be the type to run." Jada gaped at him. Is *that* what Aaron had told him?

Jerk.

"I didn't run anywhere!" Jada countered. "He walked out on *me*!"

Mr. McKensie narrowed his eyes. "You broke up with him—?"

"I said we needed a vacation," Jada explained, dropping her eyes to the table. She traced an old water stain and frowned. "Until everything got situated...I didn't want to make things worse."

"Aaron's unfocused, moody. Unwittingly, Ms. Channing, you have."

Jada winced and sighed. Aaron, for all of his maturity and poise, could sulk with the best of them; in fact, she'd joked Joshua had inherited that from him. Jada itched to call Aaron, to soothe and apologize and hold him, but he was so angry with her right now. He thought she'd broken up with him for crying out loud!

She didn't notice Mr. McKensie move his chair, and it wasn't until his hand had clasped hers did she look at him again. "Mr. McKensie...?"

"You love my son," he said. "You want what's best for him." He squeezed her hand. "I apologize for making you feel you weren't."

Jada's mind reeled. The last thing she expected from Alexander McKensie was an apology, especially about this! "Sir—"

"Alex," Mr. McKensie said, squeezing her hand again. "There's no need to be so formal with me, Ms. Channing."

"Mr. Alex," Jada amended, not comfortable enough to be so familiar, "I..."

"You love my son and he loves you," Mr. McKensie said. "You want my son to succeed and be the best person he could be, and you think, you've thought, that he could only do that without you. I've not done my part to dissuade you from that notion, and I am sorry."

It was Jada's turn to offer comfort. "None of this is your fault, Mr. Alex. It's not even the Prescotts' fault—" She laughed at Mr. McKensie's incredulous look. "Fine, perhaps they had *something* to do with it—"

"They are horrid people. I'd been so entranced by Veronica I barely paid attention to her parents." Jada nodded and began pulling her hand away, but Mr. McKensie tightened his grip. "I barely paid attention to you."

"That's okay—"

"It's not," Mr. McKensie said. "I didn't really, *honestly*, notice you until the dinner, how relaxed and tender you two were...he looks at you the same way I look at Izzy, and vice versa."

The comparison touched her, and she squeezed Mr. McKensie's hand. "Thank you," Jada said finally.

Mr. McKensie patted hers. "Isabella's birthday is in a few weeks—her fiftieth—and I'm extending a personal invitation for you to join us...along with Joshua, of course."

"In New York?"

"At our Hamptons estate, yes," Mr. McKensie said. "I can arrange everything."

It was a lovely offer, if not a surprising one. "Really?"

"Of course, Ms. Channing. You are family."

Jada closed her eyes at his pronouncement, and to her horror, tears fell down her cheeks. She nodded, her throat too tight to speak, her mind too muddled to think. She was happy and relieved Mr. McKensie had said that. It had seemed they would never be more than civil to one another, that no matter what she did she would always be his second choice for his son. To have Mr. McKensie's support only helped her relationship with Aaron.

A relationship she wasn't sure still existed.

"It's obvious family is important to you, given the way you've made sure to surround Joshua with it, and the fact you didn't want Aaron to lose his," Mr. McKensie said, brushing away her tears.

"Yes..." she sniffled, moved by Mr. McKensie's affection.

"So don't let him," he said, kissing her hand and smiling softly. "Hope to see you there."

He left her sitting there, dazed and weeping, until her grandmother's gentle, rough hand rested upon her shoulder.

"I put Joshua to bed. Figure y'all should just stay here fo' the night."

"Yes, ma'am," Jada whispered, pulling a napkin from its holder and wiping her face with it.

"Aaron's daddy's a fine man." Jada steadied the chair so Candace could sit. "He raised Aaron well."

"Yes, ma'am."

Candace hummed, and Jada put her head on the table. She grew drowsy, her mind full of thoughts she was too tired to sort out.

"Go to bed," Candace said, just as Jada was about to succumb. Jada grinned and hugged her grandmother.

"Love you."

"Love you, too, Jada Mae," Candace said, kissing Jada's cheek and framing her face. She stared at her granddaughter for a moment and shook her head. "He ain't Mr. Joseph, Jada Mae."

Jada didn't know how long she'd stared at the ceiling while lying in her childhood bed, the very bed her mother had slept in during her youth. Lynn was legend to her—as were Calliope and Dorcas—women Candace told stories about, stories of how they'd chased dreams they never caught, or had caught so fleetingly it hadn't mattered. Jada hadn't wanted to carry out that legacy, but she had been. Now she accepted she didn't have to. The self-fulfilling prophecy she'd placed upon herself like an albatross was costing her, all because she felt guilty for finding the happiness the other women in her family had never found—especially Dorcas. Jada had felt the closest to her great-great grandmother in terms of personality and the choices they'd made, and Candace had never missed an opportunity to remind her of it.

Sure, they'd both fallen in love with wealthy white men; had borne those wealthy white men white-looking children; had both been told they were fools for putting themselves in that situation. The difference between them, however, was Dorcas Ames had never been good enough for Joseph Ames, whether legally or practically, and Dorcas had acknowledged that.

But Jada wasn't Dorcas Ames.

She was Jada Mae Channing, and she was good enough.



"Why is it every time we're at something that's supposed to be happy, you look as if someone has sawed your nads off with a plastic spork?"

Aaron scowled and drank the last drop of his bottled water. "That was graphic and totally unnecessary!"

"Yes...but also accurate!"

Aaron glared at Rodrigo, but admitted his cousin was right. It was his mother's birthday party and part of him hadn't even wanted to come, not in the mood to fake happiness; but this was his mother, and he adored the only one he had. He'd declined the offer to stay at the Hamptons with them, however, needing to be in the city to smooth things over with Burgess. As his father had predicted, the judge had tossed out the Prescotts' groundless suit, and shortly afterwards, Aaron and Alexander had filed a countersuit suing for damages. Alexander also did some housekeeping in regards to the board, and Calvin Prescott and his cohorts had been kicked out the company. Keith had resigned on his own.

"Tia Izzy looks radiant," Rodrigo said, staring out at the dance floor where Isabella and Marcos were. His mother's laugh rang out and filled Aaron with warmth, and he couldn't help but smile.

"She barely looks forty."

"I hope my future wife looks that good at fifty," Rodrigo muttered, taking a sip of champagne. The backyard had turned into Party Central, courtesy of Tía Rosa. They were under a pearl-colored tent complete with a dance floor, bar, and live band. Dining tables surrounded the dance floor for the dinner that would happen later that evening, and a canopied walkway led to the house just in case it rained, but the day had been bright and sunny for his mama.

Nevertheless, Aaron almost choked on his water as Rodrigo's words fully hit him. "You? A wife? Surely you jest!"

Rodrigo winked and set down his champagne. "Of course! Being a bachelor is too much fun!" So saying, he grabbed a passing woman's hand and twirled her while leading them to the dance floor. Aaron snorted, but was a little jealous too. Being a bachelor was torture when you'd found the woman of your dreams and she didn't want you back.

It'd been hard not talking to Jada, not having her in his arms while he slept. His plush, state-of-the-art Swedish mattress was not as comfortable as Jada's hand-me-down one. His penthouse was too quiet without Joshua's toys and his patter. His refrigerator was empty without white cartons of leftover catfish, fried chicken, and barbeque ribs from Charlie's Grille.

He ached to see the late-model gold Acura parked in the garage next to his silver Beemer.

"This yours?"

He gave Veronica a half-smile and shook his head. "Roddy's."

Veronica pushed the glass away and asked the bartender for a fresh drink. "You're not having fun."

"What gave me away?"

She quirked her eyebrows but didn't answer, thanking the bartender when she handed her the glass.

Veronica looked lovely wearing a white strapless dress that hit right above her knees. She wore simple pearl earrings and had her black hair tied back with a white silk ribbon. Her sandals were also white leather with wooden soles.

Veronica chuckled. "You're staring."

"You look nice."

She smiled, her eyes scanning the crowd. "Thank you."

Veronica had been a godsend the past few weeks as they had fallen back into their original friendship. It was proof Veronica was a wonderful person and would always be dear to him. Of course, neither broached the touchy subject of Jada, but she'd kept him focused on everything else.

"My parents weren't too pleased I decided to come."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "They wanted an invitation."

"They thought you'd be *glad* they helped get rid of—"

"Impossible," Aaron said flatly, tapping the empty water bottle in his hands. He would never be rid of Jada, and not just because they had a child

together. She was in his soul, his psyche; he didn't even think death could remove her from him.

"You know you should call her."

"You're on the Jada/Aaron bandwagon, now?"

"I love you, Aaron," Veronica said simply. "We tried—twice. The first time I left you; the second, you left me. I don't think third time's the charm for us, y'know? We would've been good together, though."

"Yeah..."

"But not great, and Veronica Prescott deserves greatness!"

Aaron popped her head lightly with his empty water bottle, then pulled her into a hug. "I love you, too, Ronnie."

"Go call her," she said again when they broke apart. "And if she's not home, leave a message. The party'll still be going by the time you get back."

"And you go dance. You've got the eye of many a bloke here, love."

Veronica quirked her eyebrows again and waved to a potential suitor. "I may just do that..."

He chuckled to himself as he watched her saunter away, then walked to the house so he could have some quiet to make the call. He hovered in the doorway separating the living room and the sunroom, his eyes toward the party but his mind in Atlanta as he made the call.

His face fell when her voicemail came up, the recording too short for him to think of something suitable to say. He froze when the beep sounded, then hung up. He wasn't going to leave a rushed message about this! *She* was the one who'd decided they needed a vacation! *She* was the one who didn't believe in him enough...

Suddenly he was pushed forward, and a vice wrapped around his legs. "What the—?"

That giggle was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, and Aaron fell to his knees. Those little arms moved from his legs to his neck, and Aaron hugged tightly, speechless.

"How—?"

"Daddy, we was on a plane! They said we was miles in the sky! The clouds were pretty..."

Aaron stood with his son in his arms and looked around. It was just he and Joshua, but the preschooler couldn't have possibly traveled alone.

"Buddy, where's—"

"Hi, Ms. Charlotte!"

"A quick lad, ye are!" the housekeeper said, waving a finger at the boy. Joshua laughed and slid down his father's frame. "I turn around for a second and poof! Smoke!"

"I saw Daddy," Joshua explained, tucking his hand into Aaron's. Aaron grinned and squeezed.

"Well, ye wanna see yer grandma? She's been waitin' to dance wit' ye!"

“Grandma!” Joshua squealed and went with Charlotte outside.

Aaron went into the kitchen instinctively. Jada was there, her hair in a French braid, her makeup minimal, wearing a rust-colored sheath dress. She was standing next to one of the cooks and watching with focused, learning eyes as the chef cooked the main course. She pointed and asked questions, clearly fascinated by the cuisine and its preparation. The chef didn’t appear bothered by her curiosity, but rather excited someone was so interested in his craft.

God, how Aaron had missed her.

Jada then looked up, gave him a small smile, and touched the chef’s arm to tell him she was leaving. When she approached Aaron, he stuffed his hands in his pockets so he wouldn’t grab her and kiss her breathless.

“Hey,” she said quietly, clasping her hands before her. She seemed so young, as if they were back in Boston and she’d just come into the community center for the first time. He’d had no idea how important she would become back then, and remained in disbelief of it even now.

“You’re here,” he said dumbly.

“Personal invite from your father,” Jada explained.

“Does Mama know?”

“We got in yesterday night...”

“Wait—you’re staying *here*?”

“Yes...”

No wonder his mother had been disappointed when he’d declined to stay!

“Ah...” Jada began, shifting her weight before leaving the kitchen. Aaron grasped her elbow and led her deeper into the house. The library was a good place for them to talk: quiet, private, and not too far away should someone need them.

But right now, he needed answers, needed *her*.

He closed the door behind him once they entered but allowed Jada to keep her distance. She looked around the room, clearly impressed by the floor-to-ceiling bookcases and the large leather sofas. She stood in front of one and looked at him.

“I’m sorry.”

Aaron walked further into the room, but not too close to her. “You are.”

“For not believing I was good enough for you...I’m sorry.”

“That’s...interesting...” It was an odd apology; was she being sarcastic? He didn’t think so, not by the grave expression on her face or the way she fidgeted. He sat on the arm of the couch, now close enough to touch, but he didn’t.

She met his eyes and breathed deeply. “I thought...if we took a break, a ‘vacation’, it would give us—you—time to handle things...and maybe think about whether or not you *really* wanted to be with me—”

“So it was a test?”

“Not a test,” she asserted. “An out.”

"For you or for me?"

She licked her lips and looked at her hands. "Both..."

Aaron laughed humorlessly. "You actually think so little of me that—?"

"Aaron, I live a quiet life. The only people who know me are my family and the people I work with. To see my name in the tabloids freaked me out; to realize that you were being sued because of me made me feel *horrible*! The only thing I could think was you could do so much better than me; you could be with someone who wouldn't embarrass you—"

"You don't—"

"I felt I did. And then my nice, innocuous, anonymous world was shattered—with lies and malice...you need a woman who could handle that, and I didn't think I was she."

Aaron scoffed. "It's amazing how you give yourself too much credit and not enough simultaneously." At her curious look, he explained. "Anything that goes wrong, you're the first to take complete responsibility, even when it couldn't possibly be your fault. Anything that goes right, you had nothing to do with it, or worse—it was an accident or a mistake!"

"Aaron—"

"If loving me is an 'accident' or a 'mistake'...don't bother—"

"It's not—!"

"And if you think me loving you is an 'accident' or a 'mistake'...that's even worse."

She glared at him. "I wouldn't be here if I did!"

He grinned at that. There was the gumption he'd been missing; here was the woman who could be so assured in herself and in her abilities. He stood and pulled her to him, resting his forehead against hers as his arms melded with her body. They fit like a sunset over the ocean.

"I'm sorry," she repeated on a whisper, snuggling into him. "I'm sorry for thinkin' I wasn't good enough."

"I'll forgive you only if you promise never to think that way again."

She pulled back and smiled at him, and he cupped her face, his thumbs fanning her cheeks. "I promise. And if I slip again, feel free to shake some sense into me. Lord knows Deshae did!"

He chuckled and kissed her lips gently. "And I promise to never give you a reason to think that way."

Jada kissed him more firmly. "Vacation over."

"Good. It was the worst vacation ever in life." Aaron pouted. She giggled and ran her thumb over his lips.

"I'll make it up to you," Jada vowed, and he waggled his eyebrows. "Aaron! Really!"

"It's been six...*long*...weeks, Jada...and you feel...so...*good*..." He inhaled her scent and growled, holding her tighter. "I know it's Mama's birthday, but you got me very interested in one nine months from now."

“Whose birthday’s in nine months?”

Aaron picked her up and kissed her soundly, leaving the library and going up the stairs. “Joshua’s little brother or sister!”

Jada gasped, then laughed in the crook of his neck. “You are so bad!”

“Yes, but you’re good enough for me,” he replied, looking at her with soft, loving eyes as they reached his bedroom.

“The best,” she agreed, kissing him sweetly.

They made love slowly, reacquainting themselves with each other and their love. She fell asleep afterwards, content, loved, and snuggled against him; but Aaron remained awake, unable to stop touching her, reaffirming her presence.

“The very best,” he whispered, kissing her forehead and then joining her in slumber.

NINETEEN

Jada woke up disoriented, suspended in the space separating dreams from reality. She felt as if she were on a rowboat in turbulent waters, but as she gradually came to, she realized two pairs of hands were shaking her.

“Wha—?”

“Mommy, I peed in the bed.”

Joshua’s contrite face swam into her vision, and just behind him was Aaron’s of concern. “You did?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t feel it, love. The bed’s soaked!”

She braced herself to rise, then felt the saturated sheets herself. “Yuck...”

Joshua giggled and scrambled out of bed. “Sorry, Mommy! I’ll go get towels...”

Aaron came to her side and helped her sit up. “Did he have another nightmare?” she asked. Joshua had been having them recently and had decided to sleep with them that night for comfort.

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it’s not like him to have an accident anymore.”

“True,” Jada agreed and took a deep breath. The muscles in her back were sore, and she stretched to work out the kinks.

“You all right?”

“Yeah—” Suddenly a sharp pain ripped through her body and she gasped, gripping Aaron’s hands tightly. When it subsided, she chuckled nervously. “No...”

Aaron blinked, slack-jawed. “Was that a—?”

“At least now we know it wasn’t Joshua who wet the bed,” Jada said dryly.

“Oh...”

Joshua ran back into the room, as many towels as he could hold in his small arms, and plopped them on the bed next to Jada. “I’ll dry—”

“Baby love, call Uncle Jamal and Auntie Shae okay?” Jada looked between her two men and smiled. “It’s time.”

Joshua’s eyes widened and he bounced excitedly. “For real this time?”

Jada nodded and grinned. “For real.”

Joshua snuck between his parents and kissed Jada's belly. "See you soon!" he whispered, then ran to the other side of the bed where the telephone was.

Aaron knelt before her, one hand against her abdomen and the other cupping her cheek. He opened and closed his mouth, trying to say something, but all he could do was smile and mouth, "I love you."

Jada nodded again and kissed his forehead, understanding his speechlessness. It had been a whirlwind past year, starting right after Isabella's birthday party. Aaron hadn't returned with Joshua and Jada back to Atlanta immediately because he had more "business" to settle—among which was starting paperwork for the internship program, "McKensie-Lowman Immersion Initiative"—but he'd promised to return soon. It wasn't until three weeks later in mid-April that Aaron had made it back down south, though this separation hadn't seemed nearly as long as the first one because she and Aaron had spoken every night and had usually fallen asleep on the phone.

Their cell phone statement had been ridiculous that billing cycle.

A month later for Mother's Day, Aaron had flown his parents down so Isabella could meet Candace, and they'd had brunch at Charlie's Grille. On the way back to the apartment, however, Aaron had made a detour into Deshae and Jamal's neighborhood, but instead of stopping at their house, he'd kept driving until he got to the cul-de-sac at the end of the street.

"Welcome to our new home," he'd said, kissing Jada's cheek as she'd stared dazedly at the large, gorgeous, three-story brick structure.

The house Aaron had bought was at the head of the cul-de-sac, and they actually owned all the property around the curve—no other houses shared it. There was enough privacy so Jada didn't have to worry about nosy neighbors, but not too private that they seemed self-segregating. The inside of the house was spectacular: five bedrooms, five baths, a theater in the basement where she, Joshua, and Aaron could spend countless hours watching Disney movies; a Great room, a dining room, and a kitchen where she didn't turn and slap herself because it was so small. She'd never had so much space in her life, and Jada almost thought Aaron was being wasteful.

"We'll need the space in the future, love," he'd told her, winking and putting Joshua on his shoulders as they went into the house. Deshae and Isabella had squealed and gushed on her behalf, but Jada had focused more on what Aaron had said.

Future.

The next three months had been idyllic, featuring Deshae and Jamal's marriage and the birth of their daughter Iman within a three-week period. Deshae and Jamal's wedding had been very private—so private that it had been in a courthouse with only Jada, Aaron, and Malcolm as witnesses. Deshae hadn't wanted wedding pictures full of belly, so they'd decided their first anniversary would be the ceremony they should've had—only if Deshae weren't pregnant *again*...

A few days after Iman's birth had been Aaron's birthday, but they'd celebrated it quietly—an intimate dinner for the two while Zeke and Lisa looked after Joshua. They'd broken in the dining room, though Jada had been reluctant to disturb the clean beauty of it. They'd had porterhouse steak with snap beans, mashed potatoes and gravy, and cornbread for dinner; and for dessert, a chocolate mousse birthday cake complete with a single burning candle—all prepared lovingly by Jada. After he'd blown out the candle, she'd teasingly asked what he'd wished for while cutting his slice of cake.

"For you to marry me," he'd replied, and presented her with an exquisite, three-stone diamond engagement ring. Jada had stood there frozen, her fingers full of chocolate as the gems from the ring caught the light shining from the chandelier overhead. Aaron had pulled her into his lap and asked again, his voice low, trembling in her ear, and the only thing she could do was nod, her body stock-still and her fingers gripping the knife that hovered over an abandoned cake. He'd kissed her in adoration and relief, and the pair had unwittingly found another way in which to break in the dining room.

Jada still blushed when she saw the dining room table.

"What are you thinking of, sweetheart?" Aaron asked, pulling her out of her memories. Joshua was giving a rambling, drawn-out story of the past five minutes, and Jada chuckled.

"Your last birthday," she said, rolling her eyes when he grinned.

"That was one of the best of my life—"

"Because you got laid?"

"But it was a *special* lay," Aaron clarified, "that's when we created the little one here." He rubbed her tummy before bending his head and kissing it. Ironically, they'd discovered Jada's pregnancy on her birthday two months later, which she'd spent miserable and ill because of her morning sickness. She wouldn't let Aaron touch her all day, blaming him for her having such an awful birthday.

"He gets sex and I get nausea!" Jada had moaned to Lisa who'd come to take care of her. Aaron had taken Joshua and stayed with Zeke while Jada spent the night bemoaning her existence, but by the time Aaron and Joshua had returned the next day, the trio was very happy about the upcoming arrival. Now that time was here, but everyone seemed strangely calm—

Except for Deshae, who was currently screaming into the phone.

"Mommy, I can't understand what Auntie Shae's sayin'."

"I don't think she can, either," Jada cracked with a chuckle and tried to stand. Aaron immediately got to his feet, almost lifting her from hers. "Aaron!"

"You need to take it easy—"

"For the next coupla hours it ain't gonna be—"

"Hours!"

"The labor's just started, honey. I have plenty of time—" Another contraction robbed her of speech, and she bent over in pain. When it passed, she panted. "Maybe not..."

"Joshua, tell Deshae we have to go. We have to get Mommy to the hospital..."

Sooner than Jada thought was legal, they arrived at the hospital amid Aaron's constant questions of how was she doing and Joshua's ditty of "Mommy's Having a Baby." Zeke and Lisa were already there, and Deshae, Jamal, and their kids brought up the rear.

"Grandma—?"

"She's with Mama and Dad at home," Zeke explained, taking her hand and squeezing. "We'll call them as soon as the baby's born."

Joshua remained with Zeke and the others as Aaron and Jada went to the delivery room. Aaron had secured a private suite, one more accommodating than the typical, sterile hospital room. He practically smothered her as she changed into the hospital gown, and instead of lying down as Aaron wanted, Jada paced. It felt better when she moved.

"Are you sure you don't—?"

"Shut up, Aaron! I've done this before!" Jada snapped as another contraction hit. *Jesus, but they hurt!*

"Yes, but I haven't."

Jada was crying by the time the contraction ended, though not from pain. She burrowed her head into Aaron's chest and sobbed. "I'm sorry..." Just because she was in labor didn't mean she could be insensitive!

"Uh-uh, no. No crying now, okay?" He framed her face and wiped away her tears. "I just want to be there for you and make you as comfortable as possible—"

"I'm pushin' a watermelon out of a pea-hole! 'Comfortable' ain't gonna happen!" Aaron turned a little green at the image, and Jada giggled. "Wuss."

"Wuss, huh?" Aaron said, standing straighter and holding her closer. "That's not what you said last night..."

"Ahem."

Both jumped, and Aaron hid his grin in Jada's hair. "Dr. Sharpe..."

Dr. Colleen Sharpe was a colleague of Lisa's and one of the best OB/GYNs in Atlanta. She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Don't you 'Dr. Sharpe' me! She's here about to have a baby and here you are tryin' to make another one!"

Jada laughed, reclining on the bed at the doctor's insistence. "I called him a wuss."

"All husbands are when their wives go into labor," Dr. Sharpe said with a smirk. "And y'all are newlyweds too? That's why there're two beds in here instead o' one!"

Aaron kissed Jada's temple as Dr. Sharpe continued her examination. That past New Year's Eve Jada and Aaron had made it official in the backyard of

their house. *Tía Rosa* had done the decorations, and it had been a small ceremony with family and a few close friends. Just as the clock struck midnight, the preacher had pronounced them husband and wife, and Joshua had been curled asleep in his father's arms as they had their first kiss as a married couple.

"This baby is anxious to come out," Dr. Sharpe said after she finished checking Jada. "I hope y'all didn't have any Memorial Day plans..."

"Are you kidding?! As many false alarms this baby's given us!" Aaron said. The baby was a week overdue as it were; everyone had wondered if it would ever come!

Another contraction came upon her and Jada groaned, her hands gripping the guardrails of her bed so tightly she thought she'd leave indentations. "That *definitely* wasn't a false alarm!"

"They're coming faster," Aaron breathed, his eyes dilated and his face pale.

"You. Bed," Dr. Sharpe said to Aaron, pointing to the free bed, then turned her attention to Jada, "and you, spread your legs. Time to make you a mama again."

Jada didn't know how long she pushed, but the pain had been excruciating; and if it hadn't been for Aaron eventually settling behind her, holding her hand and whispering encouragement, Jada would've lost her will.

"You're doin' beautiful, Jada," Dr. Sharpe said. "You only need about three more pushes—"

"Three?!"

"Aaron..."

"I can't take this..."

"*You?* You had the fun part! *I'm* the one doin' all the work now!" Jada growled right before pushing as instructed.

"I see the head! C'mon, Jada, two more!" Dr. Sharpe coaxed.

"I'm tired..."

"No, Jada. You can do this. Only two more pushes and you can hold your brand new baby, okay?" Dr. Sharpe promised.

Jada closed her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks, and Aaron kissed them away. "I'm right here, love. You're not alone. I'm right here and I love you."

Jada focused on Aaron's voice as she worked her body to the limit. When she did her final push, Jada sagged against Aaron as Dr. Sharpe pulled the baby from her body.

Tense, too quiet moments followed, and just when Jada started to panic it happened—a tiny wail, the first sound the newest McKensie ever made.

"It's a boy," Dr. Sharpe announced reverently. "A healthy baby boy with a head full of red hair..."

Jada chuckled weakly and limply patted Aaron's knee. "The milkman had red hair, y'know..."

Aaron laughed and hugged her gently. "Wench..."

When Dr. Sharpe put the baby in her arms, Jada was overwhelmed with love. Like his older brother, he had more of his father's coloring and features, but tempered with amber eyes, and curly auburn hair. Their son gripped the finger Aaron offered and they sighed.

"I'll go deliver the good news," Dr. Sharpe said, and Jada nodded, unable to lift her eyes from her son.

"You're two for two, Mrs. McKensie," Aaron whispered, pressing a long kiss to her cheek. "He's beautiful."

"Yes..." The pain, the false alarms, the fatigue and illness—if all of that took the perfect human being she held, she'd gladly endure them again.

Joshua tore into the room, grinning widely and climbing upon the bed to see his new sibling. "What is it?"

The parents chuckled. "It's a boy. You have a new baby brother," Aaron said, sliding his fingers through Joshua's hair.

"He's tiny!"

"So were you when you were born," Jada said.

"I was that small?!"

"Yes, but he'll grow up big, and you two might even be as tall as your father..."

Joshua's eyes became huge. "Whoa!"

They watched the baby blink; smiled when he yawned; and cooed when he became fussy.

"Charles," Jada said, looking at Aaron. "Charles Augustus Channing McKensie."

"Charles Augustus," Aaron repeated. "That's a damn fine name."

"After my great grandfather and the month he was conceived," Jada said, trailing a finger along the tiny nose. "But Chaz for short. This boy doesn't seem the stuffy prep-school type."

Chaz pumped a fist as if in agreement, and everyone laughed. The others came in to see the newest addition, Aaron being the proud papa and showing off his son to their visitors. Phones were shoved to Jada's ear—one time for Candace, who blubbered too much for Jada to understand; and another time for Aaron's parents, who promised to be in Atlanta soon. Little Iman seemed irritated she was no longer the center of attention, and Jamal carried his bawling daughter back to the waiting room.

"You did good, Jada Mae," Deshae whispered as she kissed her forehead, and everyone vowed to return first thing tomorrow morning. Jada had been kissed, hugged, and pictured out by the time the guests left.

"You did," Aaron agreed, picking up her hand and kissing it. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you."

“You need anything, love?” She shook her head and Aaron kissed her hand again before going down to the nursery to watch their son. Jada was exhausted, sore, and more than a little sleepy, but above all, she was content. She never imagined her horizon would be so lovely.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Savannah J. Frierson is a 2005 graduate of Harvard College with concentrations in African and African-American Studies, and English. *Reconstructing Jada Channing* was initially her senior creative thesis, a novella she worked on with acclaimed novelist Jamaica Kincaid as her advisor, and it earned her the Dorothy Hicks Lee Prize for the most outstanding thesis concerning African or African-American Literature.

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