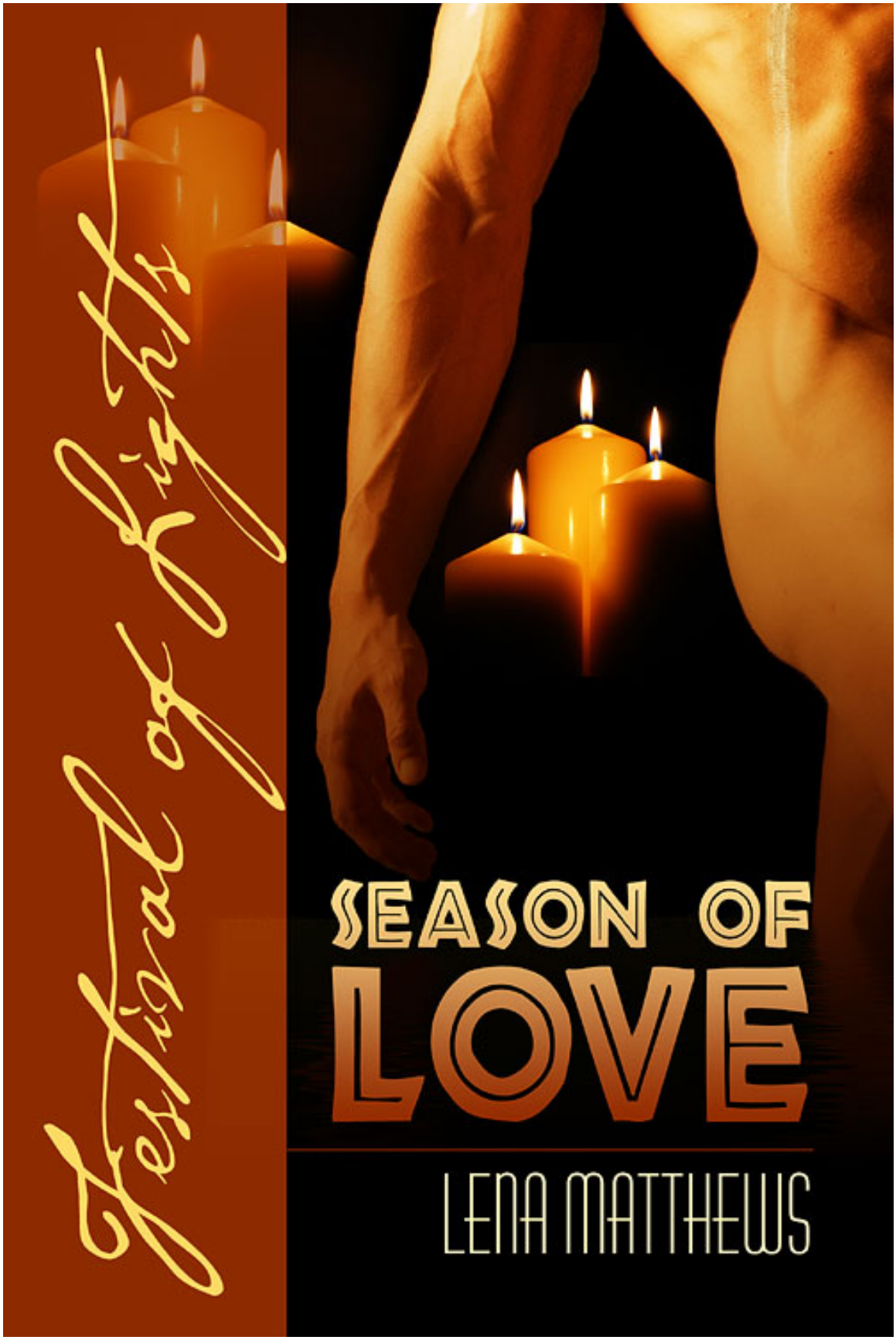
Festival of Lights
SEASON OF
LOVE
LENA MATTHEWS

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS: SEASON OF LOVE

Lena Matthews

LooseId®
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Season of Love

Lena Matthews

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © December 2007 by Lena Matthews

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-599-9
Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Maryam Salim
Cover Artist: April Martinez

Dedication

Dedicated to Amber, who learns something new every day.

Chapter One

"What the hell happened to the tree?" Roselyn Bellamy stared in dismay at the empty space where just this morning her Christmas tree had stood. She had painstakingly hung every single ornament and checked every light twice in her attempt to have the perfect tree. And now in the nine hours she'd been away from home, her work had been demolished, thanks to the guilty-looking dirty blond with the lopsided grin standing in front of her newly decorated fireplace.

"Roz, honey, you're home early," he said accusingly, as if it was an excuse for the travesty taking place in her living room.

"No, I'm not." She carelessly dropped her purse onto the cranberry-tinged love seat as she made her way over to her live-in lover, Clayton Phelps.

Despite the fact the six feet two, muscular high school football coach towered over her by several inches, she wasn't the least bit intimidated by him. He might look like a linebacker, but the way she was feeling right now, she could tackle him into next week.

"I can explain."

"Somehow I seriously doubt it." For the first time since she'd met him three years ago in her chiropractic office, she wasn't swayed by his California surfer boy good looks. His

rakish charm wasn't going to save him this time. This was their first Christmas as a live-in couple and she wanted everything to be perfect.

"Hear me out before you wig out on me."

"I'm not going to *wig* out because you're going to put it all back." She jabbed her finger into his stonelike chest, much to his obvious amusement.

With a devilish grin, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tight against his body. His earthy scent mingled with the Hugo Boss cologne she'd given him as a Christmas present just yesterday.

Damn, he smelled good. But that wasn't the point. Of course, with her standing this close to him, pressed into him, she was having a hard time staying on track. Then the bare corner caught her eyes again and her irritation overruled her lust. "You ruined everything."

"Honey." He spoke slowly, as if it was she who was somehow the dim one. "Christmas is over. You're supposed to take down the tree."

"But not the next day." It was only the twenty-sixth of December. She was allowed six more days at the bare minimum to enjoy her holiday decorations.

"I had to take them down."

"Had to? Why?"

"Because…" Clayton threw his arms wide in a grand gesture beseeching her to notice what he had done. Their dining room table was an artfully decorated display. A black cloth covered the top of her cherry wood table and in the center was a familiar mat and candleholder. "Ta da! Happy Kwanzaa."

"Kwan --" Shocked, she stared speechlessly at the colorful presentation.

He took her silence the wrong way. "I didn't set it up right, did I? Damn it." Clayton wandered from the room muttering under his breath, leaving her staring after him in his wake.

What in the world had gotten into him?

When he returned he was reading aloud from a creased blue book. “Three red candles on the left. The green candles on the right. And the black candle in the middle.” He brought the book down from his line of sight and did a quick check of the table. “That’s right. Oh, wait. Duh. I’ll be right back.”

Before she could utter a word of protest he disappeared into the kitchen, quickly returning with a bowl of fruit and vegetables and set them on the table. He removed a single ear of corn from the bowl and laid it on the mat. “For the children in the community. Since we don’t have any of our own. Yet.” He added with a wink.

“Clayton…I’m speechless.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. Check your boy out.” Like a grand host, he waved his hand out and introduced everything on the table.

“The *mishumaa saba*,” he said, gesturing to the candles, “are red, green, and black, the colors of the Pan-African flag. The candleholder is known as a *kinara* and the mat is a *mkeka*.”

He was phonically trying to pronounce the words. His attempt was laughable but endearing all the same. “That’s wonderful.”

“See, you *can* teach an old dog a new trick.”

“Babe.” Christmas tree forgotten, Roz made her way over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “This is so sweet.”

“I have my moments.”

“But…” It wasn’t that she was ungrateful he was trying to be culturally sensitive, she just didn’t feel it was necessary. “I don’t celebrate Kwanzaa. I recognize it and respect it, but I don’t do this big celebration or anything.”

“I know, but your family does, and they drop by all the time.”

“So?”

“I want them to, you know, feel welcomed and whatnot.”

"Them or him?" Now everything made sense. Despite her constant declaration that her father's lack of support for their relationship meant jack crap to her, Clayton was still trying his best to win him over. It was a futile mission at best, but he was just as stubborn as her father was.

"Your mom and sister celebrate it as well."

"That's them."

"Just because your father celebrates Kwanzaa doesn't mean you have to boycott it to prove a point."

"I'm not the one trying to prove a point." Before he could argue, she kissed him softly on the lips. "But I thank you anyway. It's lovely."

"Your sister helped."

"Remind me to thank her later." Oh, yeah, she was going to thank Banning, all right. Thank her upside her head.

"Shall we continue with the celebration?"

There were a million things Roz would rather do than to celebrate Kwanzaa, but she couldn't say no. He had gone to so much trouble, for her. As always.

He was the kindest, most caring, giving man she'd ever met in her life. He loved her. He made her feel as if she could do anything, but her father couldn't see that. He was blinded by the color of Clayton's skin. The pale flesh blocked his view to the man inside. Thankfully it was a condition he and he alone possessed. Everyone else in her family welcomed her man with arms wide, and it was because of things like this that they did.

If he wanted to celebrate Kwanzaa, then she would. He was her family now, and they had traditions of their own to start.

"Yes. I'm ready."

Clayton felt like a fool. The information he knew about Kwanzaa could fill a pen cap. He was more than sure he would make a mistake before the week was up and make an ass of himself, but Roz was worth it. She was even worth the curious stares he'd received last week in the Afrocentric stores he visited.

For her, he was willing to do anything, even put up with her closed-minded father. He didn't need Bishop to like him; he just wanted the man to learn to tolerate him, because Clayton didn't plan on going away.

Roz was the one. As cheesy as it sounded, it was true. All of those chick flick movie moments were surprisingly accurate. He didn't hear a symphony playing in the background, of course, but he distinctly remembered the very first time he saw her. He had come to her office on a recommendation from a friend and was waiting for his name to be called when Roz walked into the reception area.

To say he'd been blown away would be the understatement of the year. It took one session to convert him to the Church of Chiropractic, and one smile from her to steal his heart. He had never seen any woman, black or otherwise, as lovely as Roz. She was slender and feminine, with dark brown skin that appeared as smooth as the finest silk, and hazel green eyes. The contrast was almost as intriguing as the woman herself. He was so taken with her, he refused to leave the room until she agreed to go out with him, and lucky for him, she didn't call the cops and try to have him arrested.

Clayton knew, without a doubt, he had to be on his game for their first date. He wasn't just taking out a woman, he was taking out a black woman, and where others might not see the difference, he did. He didn't treat her any differently than he would have any other lady he went out with; he just worked extra hard to not do or say anything stupid.

Lucky for him, it paid off. Not only did they have a good time, she'd agreed to go out with him again. Then again. On their seventh date they'd made homemade pizza, then amidst greasy fingers and laughter, they'd made love.

After dating for two years, he'd finally convinced her they should buy a condo together. Despite the three years they'd been together, her father had never wavered from his position regarding their relationship. Bishop Bellamy only saw things in black and white. Roz was black. He was white. As far as her father was concerned, that was the beginning and the end of the conversation.

Thankfully, the rest of Roz's family had welcomed him warmly into their family. Like his parents, her mother and sister didn't give a good goddamn about anything other than the fact that they were in love. It was with all of their blessings that he happily began to make arrangements to take their relationship to the next level.

This Kwanzaa celebration was important to him, not just because it was their first, but because it was the first of many to come.

"Come on, have a seat, and I'll get you a glass of wine." He pulled out the chair and she raised her eyebrows in wonder, but instead of questioning him she sat.

"A glass of wine sounds good."

Clayton realized she looked tired and stood behind her, massaging her shoulders for a moment.

"Hmm, that feels great."

He leaned down to kiss her on that soft spot where her neck blended into her shoulder, licking at the warm skin. "You should have taken some time off from work."

"Probably, but I didn't know so many people would want to get adjusted this week."

He headed toward the kitchen to pour the wine. "Everyone else is preparing to party on New Year's Eve. They need their backs in working order."

"I suppose."

He returned to hand her the glass of wine and pulled out a chair for himself. "Dinner will be ready in a minute."

"You cooked?"

"I ordered." He grinned sheepishly. Clayton had many talents; cooking wasn't one of them. "It's heating up now. It's going to take a few minutes, but while we wait, we can discuss the principle for the day."

"You're really going all out with this."

"Yes," he said seriously. "I want this to become a part of our holiday tradition. The best of both worlds."

"How many worlds are there?"

"The number is astronomical, but tonight, I'm only concerned with one -- ours."

"*Habari gani.*" She spoke softly, but her words carried weight. She was acknowledging Kwanzaa and everything he was trying to accomplish with his act with those two Swahili words for "what's the news?" It was the official Kwanzaa greeting given each night with its particular response.

"*Habari gani, Umoja*." He wasn't a linguist, but he was trying his best, and from the smile she flashed him, his attempts weren't in vain.

Clayton stood and pulled out his lighter. He leaned forward and lit the black candle, and poured wine into the *Umoja* -- unity -- cup, before sitting once again.

The meaning of tonight's principle had weighed heavily on his mind all day. He'd thought long and hard about what he was going to say, but now the time was upon him, he wondered about his phrasing.

He wanted to sound heartfelt, but that wasn't his usual mode of speech. He was more of the "rah rah, you can do it" kind of guy. This wasn't the football field; this was tradition, family, and he wanted it to be just right.

"I had this really long speech planned out on how Umoja meant unity and how we should strive to maintain it with our family and community, but to be honest, the only way we can maintain it with every member of our family is to do different things. In order for

you and your father to have peace, we'd have to break up, and that's just not going to happen."

"Amen."

He smiled at her retort, but continued, "Also not everyone in our community, in our different races, in the world around us, wants us to be together. So what's a couple to do?"

"Tell the world to fuck off."

"True, there's always that." He laughed softly. He might not have a way with words but Roz had no problem getting to the heart of any matter. "Since we have no control over our community or our families as a whole, I'm going to work on maintaining unity between the two of us, because I love you. And I want you to be happy with me. Always."

"I feel the same way."

Clayton stood up and walked around the table until he was standing next to her chair. He held his hand out, grasped hers in his, and pulled her to her feet. "I know you think I'm doing this to get your father's blessing, when in truth it's not even close. This is for us. For you and me alone. A way for us to combine our pasts, present, and future into one."

He let go of her hand, picked up the unity cup, and took a small drink before holding it toward her. "To the family we'll have one day. To the community we'll enlighten with the beauty of our union, and to us."

"To us." Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she took a sip from the cup he held in his hands. "To us."

Chapter Two

"I don't know whether I should kill you or kiss you." Roz lowered her voice as she spoke into the phone. Last night had thrown her for a loop, but this morning she was clearheaded and ready to get down to the nitty-gritty and find out what was really going on.

"Whatever do you mean, sister dear?"

Despite Banning's words, Roz knew her younger sister was the evil henchwoman behind Clayton's holiday plans. Some days she didn't know what was worse, having a father who hated the man she loved, or having a mother and sister who adored him. In their eyes, Clayton could do no wrong. Well, in her eyes too, but that was different; she was fucking him.

"You know what I mean, heifer. Did you put him up to it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The amusement in her tone said differently.

"Liar." Roz settled back against the headboard and pulled the sheet up to cover her breasts, tucking the remaining yellow fabric under her arms.

"And where is my brother-in-law, anyway?"

Roz smiled at the nickname Banning insisted on calling him. "He's in the shower." Which only gave her a few minutes to interrogate her sister.

"Yum."

"Excuse me. You don't see me drooling over *your* man."

"That's because my man is pink and requires batteries," Banning said dryly.

That was not an image she wanted in her mind. "See, that's just more information than I needed to know."

"Why are you calling me? Isn't it bad enough I'm going to see you in two hours at work?"

"I'm calling because I want you to admit you're the reason my house is pimped out in red, black, and green."

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Aha." She pounced. "Like the annoying fly you are, you buzzed around him, filling his head with all your silly meddling ideas and made him decorate the house, didn't you?"

"I don't know if you've seen your muscle-bound linebacker of a man or not, but there's no way anyone can make him do anything. Besides, he came to me, not the other way around."

"Sure he did."

"Girl, please. I'm too busy trying to raise my own little men to be messing around with yours."

Damn. Try as she may, Roz couldn't find any hint of deceit in her sister's voice, which disappointed the shit out of her. If this whole Kwanzaa thing had been Banning's idea, then she could find a way of getting out of it, but since it was apparently Clayton's, she was stuck celebrating a holiday which remindered her daily of her father and his stubborn ways. *Double damn*. "Speaking of your little men, how are my nephews?"

"Bad." Banning's standard answer had Roz grinning. Banning's twin six-year-old sons were like all little boys should be, mischievous and adventurous. They were quickly driving

her sister just as crazy as she'd driven Roz growing up. It was poetic justice, to say the least. "And on my last nerve. Do you know what they did to my vacuum cleaner?"

"No, and I'm not sure I want to."

"They fixed it."

"Fix…I didn't know it was broken."

"It wasn't," she fumed. "They added some little gadget to it, now I need roller skates to freaking vacuum because they turborized it. It has a speedometer, for goodness sake."

"Where did they get a speedometer from?"

"I don't know and I don't want to know. Christmas was just two days ago. Why can't they just play with their toys like normal kids?"

"Because they're your sons and in no way normal."

"Tell me something I don't know. Last ni --" There was a loud banging noise in the background that cut Banning off in mid-sentence as a deafening cry of combined voices screamed out "Mom!"

"Lord Jesus. Girl, I have to go. I'll see you at work."

"Don't you kill my babies."

"I'm not going to make any promises," she said before hanging up.

"Who's killing who?" Clayton asked as he walked into the bedroom.

The steam from his shower powered out from the bathroom doorway, creating a sexy backdrop for the nude man who was toweling his blond hair dry and wearing nothing but a smile. No matter how many times she saw him naked, it never grew old or less enticing.

He was so strong, so muscular it was hard to believe he was made out of mere flesh and bones. His body was like a precious piece of art. One she was happily intimate with.

"Banning's threatening to kill my babies again."

Clayton's brow cocked and he stopped drying for a moment. "I didn't hear the phone ring."

Shit. "You were in the shower. Of course you didn't."

"Did the phone really ring or did you call Banning?"

"Okay, so I called her."

"Why is it so hard to believe I wanted to do this for you?"

"It's not --"

"Right," he interrupted. "You wouldn't have called her to bawl her out for dragging me into this if you truly believed that."

"I'm sorry." Damn, he knew her so well. Her hands pleated the fabric of the sheets as she tried to think of a way to get him unmad at her, and in a hurry. Clayton wasn't exactly the teddy bear he appeared to be to her mom and sister. There was a devilish alpha side to him he showed only to her. One that made her shiver just from anticipation alone. "I guess I do find it hard to believe you'd *want* to celebrate Kwanzaa when I could care less about it."

He came over and sat on the bed, picking up her hand. "I think you've pretended not to care for so many years you've started to believe your own lies. But this is a tradition from your family, and I'd like to incorporate it into our own family traditions."

"You think you know me so well."

"I *do* know you. Just like you know me and because of that, you should have realized I would never allow anyone to lead me to do something I didn't want to do."

"It must be nice to know yourself so well."

"Blame it on the day," he teased with a wink.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't

become a chiropractor instead of a *real* doctor. But dating Clayton was the ultimate betrayal as far as he was concerned.

He argued there were plenty of fine, black men for her to choose from and Clayton was beneath her. She had tried to explain you don't fall in love with the color of a man's skin, but the man. Unfortunately, her father was deaf to her explanations. She'd basically given up long ago trying to please a man who couldn't trust her to make her own decisions.

"Is someone going to tell me what's going on here?" Roz turned her attention to her father, who looked as if he was seconds away from exploding. His posture was stiff and he was practically vibrating with fury. Oh yeah, the shit had hit the fan. "Or should I guess?"

"This…this…man --"

Well at least he was kind enough to admit he was a man, but still… "His name is Clayton, Daddy."

"Has insulted me for the last time." Bishop barreled on as if he hadn't heard a word she said.

"When exactly was the first time?" Clayton asked dryly.

Bishop's gaze cut to Clayton. "You know exactly what I'm referring to."

"No, Bishop, I don't."

"It's Mr. Bellamy to you."

"Daddy." Roz sighed, her frustration mounting ever higher. "This whole thing is just ridiculous. When are you going to accept the fact Clayton and I are in love?"

"When? Never. That's when. Why can't you see he's only using you?"

"Using her!" Clayton's voice hardened. "What the hell would I possibly be using her for?"

"Clayton…"

"No. Forget it." He held his hand up to halt her words. His blues eyes were stony with anger. "You two talk. I'm going to bed."

Clayton stormed out of the room before she had a chance to call him back. His exit only served to fuel her anger. Her lover wasn't one to run from a fight. She knew it had taken everything in him to leave the room and not pursue the argument further. He was giving up, something she'd never thought he'd do, and it scared her.

Angrily, Roz turned back to her father and struggled to maintain an even detached tone. "This is our house. You can't just come in here and insult him."

"He insults me."

"What did he say?"

"His presence in your life is an insult, Roselyn. Your mother and I raised you better than this."

"Than what?"

"Than to live with a man, a white man, I might add, without the benefit of a wedding ring."

"It's 2007, Dad."

"I'm well aware of the year, young lady. Dates change, not morals. What you're doing is wrong."

"You have a right to your opinion, but you have no right to be rude to Clayton in his home. Whether you like it or not, we are in love, we do live together, and we're going to be together forever. You need to learn to get used to him, because he's not going away."

"Is that why he's doing this?" Bishop snorted and looked around the room. "Trying to get into our good graces?"

"He just wanted to do something for me. Is it so terrible he picked Kwanzaa?"

"You're making a mockery out of this holiday."

"How do you figure?"

"This holiday is about family, community, and heritage. He can never know or understand our heritage, and as far as family…that's a joke."

"He's my family, Daddy."

Bishop pounded his hand against his chest. " *We're* your family."

"I love him." As far as she was concerned it was as simple and as complicated as that. "I just love him and there's nothing you or anyone else can do to change that."

"I refuse to accept that."

"No, what you refuse to accept is me." Roselyn gripped the back of the couch hands as tightly as she wanted to clutch his shoulders and shake some common sense into him. "You look around this room and see mockery, and I see a man who is willing to learn about my family, who lives in our community and is proud of, not only his own heritage, but mine as well.

"Clayton isn't black. He's not trying to *be* black, and nothing he can say or do will ever make me less black. He's not the man, but he's my man, and I wouldn't change anything about him, not his skin color, not his ethnicity, for anything in the world."

"I can see there's no talking sense into you." Bishop grabbed his briefcase off the floor and calmly walked around the couch until he was standing in front of her. "I'm going to make this simple for you, because the choice is yours. You can either give up your family or give up this man. I will no longer stomach knowing my daughter is living like this."

In this she would not be moved. She lifted her chin and boldly met his gaze. "No, Dad, the choice is yours. You can either lose a daughter or gain a son."

Bishop's mouth thinned with displeasure, but he said nothing more. With an unwavering dignity Roz knew all too well, her father walked past her and out of the condo. The sound of the door slamming shut echoed through her soul.

"Bye, Daddy." He had given her an ultimatum, but in the end they'd both lost. She'd picked Clayton over her family; now she needed to discover if he was still willing to fight for her.

Clayton held back slamming the bedroom door, but was unable to keep the expletive from exploded forth. "Fuck!"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck, he parroted over and over in his head as he dropped onto the bed in frustration. He was less upset with Bishop than he was with himself. Despite his best intentions he'd let the other man get to him. Common sense would dictate that after three years he'd be used to the other man's views, but damned if he wasn't.

He wasn't naïve enough to believe everyone in his family had blinders on where he and Roz were concerned. There would be certain people in his family who wouldn't be invited to the wedding, but the people who counted would be there.

His parents and siblings adored Roz, and if they ever had reservations, he knew nothing about it, which was the way he preferred it. It was better than all the crap going on in the living room; that was for sure.

Irritated, he rose from the bed and made his way into the bathroom. As tense as he was he knew he would be no good to anyone. Turning on the shower, he adjusted the temperature a step below scalding and began to undress.

"Wonderful. I'm just in time for the show."

A ghost of a smile flickered across his lips before he sent it scurrying along on its way. "Your dad gone?"

"Yes."

He resisted the childlike urge to say "good," and simply nodded his head instead. Gathering up his clothes, he moved past her silently and dumped them into the laundry basket.

"So are you done hiding?"

Is that what she thought? "Wasn't hiding. I just needed a break."

"From me?"

Clayton turned to face her. "Never."

"I feel the need to apologize for --"

"Hey," he interrupted. "You don't ever have to apologize to me for your dad."

"But he's my father."

And that was the only reason Clayton hadn't pummeled him yet. "I know, Roz. He just needs more time."

"I'm done giving him time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean" -- she smiled weakly and stepped up to him -- "from now on, it's just you and me, babe."

"It was never just you and me," he reminded her gently. "We have a slew of love and support."

"Just not his."

"In time --"

"No. You don't understand. I'm tired of waiting." Her pain was clear in her eyes, and she quickly dropped her lashes to hide the evidence. She was unhappy, and the cause of her heartache was the one man she'd relied on for most of her life. But Roz being Roz, she didn't let it hold her back for long. Smiling falsely, she started to unbutton her blouse. "Let's not talk about him any more. Come wash my back."

Clayton wished she would share her feeling about this thing with her father. Although she was open in every other aspect of their relationship, this was one area Roz was closemouthed about. Instead she held everything deeply inside her when it came to the

other man. He knew she alternately idolized him while holding in disdain his disregard for others unlike himself. He just wished she would open up and talk about it with him rather than pretend Bishop's attitude didn't hurt. Unfortunately, until she was ready there was nothing he could do to force her to talk. He would just have to be there for her and love her unconditionally, two things which were as easy as breathing to him.

"Your wish is my command." Clayton waited until she undressed, then followed her into the shower. Their home was modest by all accounts, with the exception of the shower. The previous condo owners had put in a custom job, with Italian tile, dual showerheads, and plenty of room to move around. It was built for a Greek orgy, or one very horny man determined to make his woman smile again.

Without saying a word, Clayton reached above her and adjusted one of the nozzles so the spray could hit Roz directly. She sighed contently as the hot water bombard her dark flesh, setting her skin aglow. Like him, she loved the water to be as hot as she could handle.

"Mmmm. If I didn't know better, I'd think you started this for me." She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, allowing the water to cascade down the valley of her full breasts.

"Everything I do is for you." Clayton pressed the front of his body against the back of hers. Standing directly behind her, he got the eagle eye view of tempting flesh, and his cock liked what he saw. Unable to resist touching her, he retrieved her vanilla-scented body wash from the ledge and poured it directly into his hands. This was a job for his fingers, not for a sponge.

Stepping back, he lathered his hands, getting them as soapy as humanly possible, and he began his sensual assault on her sleek body. Despite his nefarious plans to take sweet advantage of her, Clayton took his time lovingly caressing her body. With their busy schedules he didn't often get to shower with her. Not like this, at least, when he could spend the time touching every nook and cranny of her sexy brown skin.

Even after three years together, he was still bewitched by the contrast between their skins. He was fascinated with the way his fingers looked against her back as he washed her. And by the way his cock, so pale against the dark valley of her pussy, highlighted their startling distinctions. Everything different about them was what made everything special about them.

Moaning, Roz tilted her head to the side, allowing his massaging fingers access to her neck. "You know, if you ever decide to give up coaching, I can use you in my office, massaging my patients."

"I'd rather save all my massages for you."

"I have absolutely no problem with that."

"I didn't think you would."

Although he couldn't completely call the shower nonerotic, up until this point he'd been able to keep his hands on the business of relaxing her. His good intentions weren't going to last for long, however. As she continued to lean back against him his cock was unconsciously responding to all the stimulation around him.

He slid his soapy hands around her waist and up toward her plump breasts. They were each a little more than a handful and he squeezed gently as he covered the mounds. She stepped back into the embrace, pressing his pulsing cock between her ass cheeks.

"Hmm, that's nice."

It was more than nice. From his angle he could see his pale hands cupping her breasts and the water running over the two of them. With one hand he traced the flow slowly down her stomach until he found her opening. Her lips were swollen and warm to his touch.

"What are you doing?"

The teasing lilt of her voice brought a small smile to his face. "Just making sure you're finger-licking-good clean."

He dipped his hand between her nether lips and caressed her swollen nub.

"You're very…thorough."

"I take pride in my work. But you do know there's only one way for me to assure I did an excellent job."

"And what's that?"

"I'll have to let my mouth taste what my fingers touch."

"I think that could be arranged."

"Oh, I know it can." Clayton moved his hands from between her legs and stepped back and away from her. "Let's trade spots."

"If I have to," she said with a sigh.

"You most definitely have to." As she moved behind him, Clayton adjusted the water nozzle so the spray flowed directly down and not on his back. He turned back to face Roz with anticipation he couldn't deny.

She was such a sexy little thing, and all his. Life just didn't get better than that. He lowered himself to his knees in front of her, and pressed his lips to the flat of her stomach. It wasn't a kiss per se, he just wanted to taste her in any and every way he could. Slowly, he swiped his tongue down past her navel to the hairless mound of her pussy, taking his time to savor every bit of her flavor. He paused to inhale her musky aroma and moaned in appreciation.

"Don't stop there."

Clayton looked up and grinned. His little wanton. "Don't worry. I wasn't."

"Good because for a moment there I was worried. You --"

Clayton silenced her with his tongue, pressing it against her clit. He lapped lovingly at her aroused bud, tonguing her essence with every stroke. Her sweet taste mixed with the vanilla flavor of her soap, overloading his senses.

"Damn, that feels good."

And it tasted even better, but he was too busy slipping his fingers inside her warm depths to comment. He was a man of many talents, and fingering her pussy while he licked her clit was just one of the things he was able to boast about. He was able to multitask, and from the way Roz writhed against him it was a skill well appreciated.

She entangled her fingers in his hair, and used it as leverage to pull him even closer to her. Her guttural moans spurred him on, encouraging him to lick harder and to thrust deeper into her tight channel.

"Ohh…" She sucked her teeth and groaned, gripping his hair tighter in her hand. "Right there. Feels so good."

Clayton pulled his mouth away from her and pressed his fingers further inside her, teasing the sweet spot deep within that turned his headstrong beauty into a pile of quivering, sated flesh. "Right here, baby?"

"Yes. God, yes."

"Are you sure?" he teased.

"Yes, damn you."

"Here and not…" He massaged the small ball of nerves that had taken them a few love making sessions to discover. "…here?"

"Fuck. Clayton!"

Her answering screams were words enough. "That's what I thought."

Roz came alive under his touch, bucking her pussy and begging for more. She was wild, needy, and sexier than any woman he'd ever seen. From the way her muscles tightened around his exploring fingers, he could tell her release was only moments away but Clayton couldn't stop from torturing her just a bit more.

He wanted -- no, *needed* to remind her who she was with and why. "I wish you could see the way your greedy pussy is devouring my fingers. You're so hungry for more I might need to add a third, possible a fourth to your hot little box just to get you off."

"No. Too much."

"I'll tell you when it's too much. Besides, I need to prepare you for my cock. I want to sink deep inside you today. Fuck you hard and fast." His actions almost mirrored his words as he sped up his thrusting inside of her. "Deeper and deeper until you're not sure whether you're coming or going."

"Coming. I'll definitely be coming."

"But not until I tell you to," he reminded her firmly. "This is my pussy and I'll let you know when you can come."

"Please, Clayton. Let me come."

"When I say so."

"Mmm…"

Clayton slipped his other hand between her legs, took her engorged clit between his fingers, and squeezed the bundle of nerves. His actions garnered her attention in a way words never would have. "I said not until I say so."

"Yes. You. Say. So."

He could tell she was mad with desire now. Her breathing was as erratic as her quivering body, but she wasn't quite where he wanted her to be.

"Tell me you belong to me."

"I belong to you."

"Tell me you love me." He punctuated his words with licks to her overheated nub.

"I love you, only you."

"Then." He drove his fingers in. "You." He pulled them nearly all the way out. "Can." He laved her clit with his tongue and thrust deep inside her once more. "Come." Finally sucking her fully into his mouth, he twisted his fingers as his actions and words pushed her over the edge. Screaming out his name, Roz came in a torrent, her body vibrating with the

force of her pleasure. But he didn't let up, continuing his assault on her senses, pushing her through to a second orgasm.

Her cries echoed in the small chamber as she screamed, her words incoherent, but the meaning more than clear. She was his. Her body was his to command.

Chapter Five

How they made it from the shower to the bedroom, Roz hadn't a clue, nor did she care. She was chilled and damp and in desperate need of her man. Thankfully, he was right there with her. His tongue danced across hers as he carried her to the bed in a grand, sweeping manner. Romance wasn't a dying art; neither was how he kissed her. Even from the start, she'd loved the way he kissed. That hadn't changed in the last three years and she was willing to bet it never would.

Clayton broke their kiss seconds before he laid her gently back on the bed. "I'll be back."

"You better." Sitting up, Roz made quick work of turning back the bedding, before moving to the middle of the bed to await his return.

One would think after the very intense and powerful orgasms she'd experienced in the shower, she'd be ready to pass out, but that was far from the case. She felt wired. Alive. Ready for more.

Clayton walked back into the room with a present in tow. From the wicked grin on his face, she knew it wasn't a simple box of chocolate. Thanks to his devious mind, she would never think of Kwanzaa gifts the same way again.

"We haven't lit the candles yet."

"We're rebels. We make our own rules."

"Well, that explains the gifts I've been getting."

"Complaining?" he questioned, brow raised.

Before she spoke he'd been in the process of handing her the gaily wrapped box. *Stupid big mouth*. "Commenting. Only."

"That's what I thought."

When he finally handed over the package she attacked the paper in gleeful abandon. Once free of paper she carefully lifted the lid, revealing brightly colored silky fabric. The colors were vibrant and the material smooth against her hand as she stroked the scarf.

"It's beautiful."

"It'll look even more stunning wrapped around your wrists when I tie you to the headboard."

She raised her head, eyes wide in anticipation. They'd experimented with a lot over their three years together, but bondage was one area they'd never explored, although they had discussed the possibility. Licking her lips, she smiled seductively.

"Why, Mr. Phelps, are you trying to take advantage of me?" Her coquettish tone and batting eyelashes had him cracking up in laughter.

"Damn right I am."

He snatched the box from her hands before she could blink and removed the silk scarf. He trailed the glossy ends over her skin, barely making contact, but it was enough to heighten her senses to the subtle shifts. She closed her eyes, letting herself feel every movement.

When his hand closed around her wrists she opened her eyes to watch him skillfully bind them together before securing her to the headboard.

"I think someone's been practicing."

"I was a Boy Scout. Always need to be prepared."

Roz tugged lightly on the bindings. Although the silk was smooth against her skin, the bonds held tightly. She wasn't going to be free anytime soon.

"Trying to run away already?"

"Never." And truer words were never spoken. She'd been adamant about what she'd announced earlier. As far as she was concerned, it was just the two of them.

"God, you're beautiful," he groaned, as he straddled her supine body. "Remind me again why we never did this."

"Stupidity."

"Oh, yeah. I knew there was a good reason." Clayton leaned over and began to kiss his way down the valley of her breasts, pausing to pay homage to her dark berry peaks with his tongue.

When he laved her tight tip, Roz let out a little groan of her own. Closing her eyes, she arched her back, giving herself over to the pleasure consuming her. Her skin tingled where he touched her, setting her blood ablaze.

Clayton was a very orally talented man. He worshipped her breasts with the same dedication he paid to her pussy only moments ago. Tonguing her, teasing her nipple with nibbles and kisses. Like the determined man he was, he had her going with the simple breast play until she was weak, wanton, and wet from desire.

"I could play with your breasts all day."

And she could let him, but still… "I hope that's not all you're planning on playing with."

Clayton sucked her nipple into his mouth and tugged on it, evoking a moan from between her parched lips. Chuckling, he released her and raised his head so they could see eye to eye. "Why, is there something else you think I should be playing with?"

"Yes."

"Like" -- he licked her abandoned nipple -- "what?"

Evil bastard. Roz growled low in her throat and tugged on the binds that tied her. "One day, you too shall be trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. I'd tread lightly if I were you."

"I'm shaking in my boots."

"Oh, you will be."

"Will I?" His mouth covered hers hungrily, silencing any answer she might have made. Not that she had one. It was hard to think when he kissed her so skillfully.

His lips were hard and ravenous, driving all rambling thoughts from her mind as he kissed her senseless. She succumbed to the domineering power of his embrace, giving herself freely to him. She was his. He was hers. Nothing else mattered.

Just as she began to get drunk off his kiss, Clayton pulled away. He entwined his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back until she was staring straight into his passion filled eyes. Bound as she was, she was completely at his mercy.

"Still think I'll be shaking?" With his free hand, he grasped his cock and centered it at her wet opening.

She could feel his crown brushing against her aching core. Although she'd started the bantering, she was more than willing to abandon the talk for some action. "Who can think at a time like this?"

"Good answer." And as her reward for pleasing him, he pleased her, by surging forth. His cock pierced her, but before she could enjoy the sensation, he pulled back just to thrust in again, this time seating himself fully in her. "Baby…mmm…fuck, baby."

She couldn't agree more. Eyes closed, she gripped the silk scarf as tightly as she could and held on with all her might. She was stretched full and she loved every inch of it. No man had ever filled her the way he did. "Fuck me. Please. Fuck me."

"I plan to, baby," Clayton promised as he grabbed her thigh in one hand and angled it up on his hip so he could thrust down deeper inside her, much to her delight. He knew exactly what to do to drive her crazy.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," she chanted, holding onto the scarf like a lifeline. Never would she have thought the silk cloth would be her anchor, but she used it as such as he pumped faster.

Tilting her up, he rode her harder, fucked her deeper, urging her on with every stroke of his hard cock. He was relentless in his passion and he didn't stop until she was riding the precipice of her release.

"Clayton…ohh…"

"Come for me, baby. Come."

Crying out his name, Roz did just that, but she fought it every inch of the way. She held back, trying to keep her passion under wraps until she just couldn't fight it any longer. Then the levee broke. She came screaming, pulling with all her might on the scarf. Her orgasm ripped through her, stealing her strength, her breath, and her ability to move with its powerful grasp.

Clayton was moments behind, powering into her over and over until he too came, gripping her thigh tightly in his hand. His body shook above hers as his release washed over him.

"God!" Eyes closed tightly, he shuddered and pumped twice more before groaning and dropping his head onto her chest.

His body trembled in the aftermath, and for the first time since he tied her, Roz regretted her hands being bound together. She wanted to caress him and comfort him. So she did it the only way she could. With her words. "I love you."

* * * * *

The chair was comfortable, the overhead music unobtrusive, and the waitress at the country club café had made his cup of coffee perfectly. Nevertheless he was ill at ease. While he waited for Bishop to finish his last hole on the golf course, Clayton wondered for the hundredth time if he was doing the right thing.

It was the day before *Kuumba*, the second to last day of Kwanzaa, and he was no closer to winning Bishop's approval than he had been the year before, or the year before that. In fact, their relationship was ten times worse, thanks to the debacle from two days ago.

The Bellamy family had been at odds since the night Roz confronted Bishop. It was no surprise Banning automatically took Roz's side in the feud. Surprisingly though, from what Banning had told Roz, their mother did as well, which Clayton was sure didn't win him any points with Bishop. Tomorrow the entire family was supposed to gather together for the *karamu*, the Kwanzaa feast, but at the moment it didn't look as if Bishop or Roz would show up. In fact, if he didn't get things ironed out and fast, what he'd hoped would be their first Kwanzaa together might be the last.

Despite what Roz had said to him over and over, Clayton knew beyond a reasonable doubt that her father's opinion of her mattered. She might not want to admit it, but she sought his approval, and secretly he wondered if she could ever be completely happy with him if it meant causing a rift in her family. He'd like to believe she would, but being right wasn't worth it if he ended up losing her in the process.

Roz was everything to him. If he had to swallow a little pride to ensure her happiness, so be it.

As he raised his coffee cup to take another drink, he spotted Bishop strolling through the café, flanked by two older gentlemen. Clayton sat his cup down and rose from his seat, his gesture gaining the other man's attention. The easy going smile that had just seconds ago graced his face fell away instantly.

Not a good sign. Clayton moved around the table and walked over to Bishop, who was glaring at him with disdain. “Mr. Bellamy, I’d like a word with you.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.”

“For?”

“I’d want to speak with --”

“No.”

Arrogant bastard. “Five minutes of your time is all I ask.” When the other man didn’t budge, Clayton tried again, this time hitting below the belt. “For Roz. Surely she’s worth five minutes of your time.”

“Five minutes. Outside.” Bishop turned on his heel and strode from the room, his countenance shaking with what Clayton could only describe as fury. Once outside the older man turned all that vehemence toward him.

“Did you come here to gloat?”

“Do you really think it makes me happy to know she’s estranged from her family because of this argument with you?”

“I’m the estranged one. My own wife won’t talk to me. My daughters are mad at me, all because I’m doing what’s right for my family. Protecting them like any man would.”

“Roz doesn’t need protection from me. I would never hurt her.”

“I doubt that very seriously.”

“Why?” He had to know. “In the three years we’ve been together has she ever come to you or your wife to complain that I’ve mistreated her in any way?”

“Just because you haven’t hurt her doesn’t mean you won’t.”

“There’s no guarantee if she was dating a black man she would never be hurt either.”

“Not by society.”

"My actions should be what's in question, not those of others."

"Fine, let's talk about your actions. You're shacking up with my daughter."

His turn of phrase soured Clayton's stomach. "What's the big deal about us living together?"

"You know what that tells the world?"

"No, what?" Bishop sneered at Clayton's words, as if he'd been expecting the question.

"That the black girl is good enough to warm your bed, service your needs like a whore, but not good enough to marry. You disrespect her with your actions, with your lack of actions."

Clayton ran his hand through his hair and began pacing. He should have known. It wasn't just a race thing; it was a generational one as well.

"I love your daughter. I want to marry her."

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"Believe this." Clayton sank his hand into his pocket and removed the jeweler's box. "I came here today to ask for your blessing. I plan to ask for Roz's hand in marriage, but I want you to approve. She needs to know her father won't hate her forever if she decides to say yes."

Bishop looked stunned. Clayton wasn't sure if it was due to the fact he had made the man's arguments a moot point or because he'd had the gall to ask for his permission.

"So I'm supposed to just say yes and make your life easy, is that it?"

Of course not, what was I thinking? "That would be nice, but somehow I doubt you'd do anything to make my life easy."

"You've got that right."

"Fine, then tell me what you need from me and I'll do it. I'd do anything to make Roz happy, including making sure she reconciles with you."

"You can't turn back time. The two of you are already living in sin."

"I plan to rectify that as soon as possible. It was never my intention to make her look less than worthy in your eyes or in anyone else's. We moved in together because we couldn't stand to be apart. I always planned on making it a permanent thing and with your blessing I can do that. I can't change the past; I can only promise you the future will be different."

"Pretty words and empty promises."

"I'm going to marry your daughter, sir."

"With or without my approval, I suppose."

"No, that's where you're wrong." Clayton slipped the ring box back into his pants pockets. "I won't ask her to marry me until we have your blessing. I love her. I'd do anything for her, even kiss your ass for the next twenty years to prove to you I'm for real."

"I don't want you to kiss my ass."

"No, what you want is for me to go away, and that's just not going to happen. Think about this: you pressured Banning into marrying the father of her children. Did it make her happy? No. Did the fact he was black ensure they would have a long-lasting marriage? No. You interfered once and your youngest daughter paid for it. She did what you wanted. Married who you picked out and still it didn't work. I want to make Roz happy." He fingered the box, seeing all his plans falling to the wayside. "But if you really think I'm not the man for her, then I won't propose, but know this Bishop, you and you alone are the reason for that. It's not because I don't love her. It's because I love her too much."

"I will not compromise my beliefs for my daughter."

"Of course not," he fired back, annoyed.

"Do you really think you'd do things differently if this was your daughter we were talking about?"

The question stopped him cold. Without a doubt he knew he'd do anything to protect their child, including running off someone who he thought was unworthy of her, even if she

was in love with him. It was a revelation that made him rethink a lot of what he believed. It also made him understand and respect the man a little bit more.

"There's no way I can change your mind, is there?"

Bishop didn't answer. Tired and knowing he'd done everything in his power to alter the other man's perception of him, Clayton threw caution to the wind. He pulled the ring from his pocket and handed it over to the surprised man. "When you're ready, I'll ask her. There's no doubt in my mind you love her and want what's best for her, so when you're ready, you give this back to me and I'll propose."

Clayton turned to walk away, but was stopped by Bishop's hand on his arm. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Turning back, he faced the man who held the key to his entire happiness in his hand. "Not at all. I know you're wrong about me, I just hope I'm right about you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it." Clayton pulled his arm from his grasp and walked away.

Chapter Six

"You passed on a quiet evening at home in front of the fireplace for this?"

Clayton chuckled as he steadied the vase on the table that Roz's nephew, in his haste to answer the door, sent spinning. "And miss this? Never."

"Then you're crazier than I thought," she teased, as she took a sip from her glass of wine. This wasn't exactly the way she would have preferred to spend her New Year's Eve, dodging twins and wolfing down her sister's collard greens, but Clayton had been adamant about them attending Banning's Kwanzaa feast. "Are you sure I can't convince you to fake being sick?"

"No."

"I'm not wearing any panties."

He whipped his head around so fast to look at the hem of her short black dress he damn near broke his neck. When his heated gaze met hers she could tell her ploy had worked. He cleared his throat and brought his closed fist to his mouth and coughed softly. "You know…hmm…I do feel a bit of a tickle in my throat."

"Imagine that." She grinned. *Men. They're so easy*.

"Grandma. Grandpa." The cry from her nephew brought Roz's attention away from fake-coughing boyfriend and toward the front door, where her mother and father were standing.

Banning walked over to them and slipped her arm through hers. Roz squeezed her sister's arm, thankful for all the support she could get.

To say she was amazed her father had shown up was putting it lightly. "Up jumped the devil," she said in awe.

"Ummm…" Clayton leaned down and spoke in a softer tone. "Black to white translation, please."

"She means" -- Banning, in all her nosy glory, butted right in -- "will wonders never cease. Is that white enough for you?"

"Yes. Thank you," he said dryly.

"No problem. Now go on you two. Go say hi."

With unwanted help from Banning's propelling arms, Clayton and Roz walked over to her parents. Roz felt as if she were walking to the firing squad. Although her father had shown up, it was no guarantee he'd be pleasant, or even civil for that matter.

Clayton took the initiative to speak when it looked as if no one else would. "Welcome to the celebration."

He held his hand out to her father, and much to her surprise, for the first time ever, her father accepted it without hesitation. Shocked, she glanced at Clayton, who was staring wordlessly at her father, much in the way she was looking at him.

"Sir." Clayton took his hand from her father's and stuck it in his pocket. "We're glad you two could make it."

"Yes, Daddy. Very glad." If he could make a timid first step, she could bridge the rest of the distance. With tears in her eyes, she reached out to her father and hugged him to her.

When his strong arms clasped around her she was transported back to her childhood, where her father could do no wrong and was the center of her existence.

"Well…" Bishop, not one to be overly affectionate, clumsily patted her back. "Thank your mother; this was her idea."

"Right," Marilyn Bellamy said, rolling her eyes. "All my idea."

"It doesn't matter whose idea it was. I'm just happy you made it." Banning joined the group at the entryway. "Now that we're all here we can get this party started."

With Banning's prodding, the entire family headed toward the dining room where they proceeded to light the candles.

Bishop remained standing as everyone sat. He picked up his wine glass and cleared his throat. "Kwanzaa to me is more than a holiday about family traditions and culture. It's about what binds a family together. Every year I read the *tamshi la tutaonana*, but this year I thought I would change things a bit. In the last day or so, I've been thinking a lot about family and what that means to me. Basically, I've come to the conclusion that family means love. Unconditional love and support. Being able to love someone despite what they say or do."

Disappointed, Roz looked away, sure her father's comment was directed at her. "I'm truly blessed because despite the things I've said or done, my family continues to love me. Even when I'm sure it's not easy."

"You can say that again," Banning murmured under her breath. Roz looked back up at her father, barely able to contain her joy. He was offering the olive branch. He was being the man she always knew he was.

"I'm not too old or set in my ways to say I'm sorry and admit I'm wrong. Tomorrow is the New Year and I would like to start it on a new foot." Bishop turned his attention to Clayton. "Clayton, you asked me for my blessing and I'll give in on one condition."

Blessing? Roz turned her questioning gaze to Clayton. "What's he talking about?"

"Shut up, girl." Banning kicked her under the table. "Let the boy talk."

"And that is?" Clayton asked.

"You accept my apology."

"I can do that."

"Good." Bishop gave a nervous laugh. "Then I'll sit down and you can have the floor."

"Okay." Clayton stood, taking her hand in his. "I didn't exactly plan to do this like this, but here goes. Roz, I love you and I too would like to start 2008 anew, with you as my soon-to-be bride."

Roz felt a buzzing in her head and realized she was hearing her heart thundering inside her chest. Her sister and mother were bawling but she was clear-eyed as she watched with awe when he pulled a small box from his pocket and flipped open the lid. Brilliant light stabbed her eyes as she caught sight of the diamond nestled within.

"Roselyn Bellamy, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

As if there were ever any doubt. With a grin she couldn't erase no matter how hard she tried, Roz stood up and threw herself into his arms.

"Well…"

"Yes, yes, yes, I'll marry you."

Teary-eyed she glanced over at her father, who was watching them with a wide smile of his own. "I love you," she mouthed to him. A sentiment he returned just as silently.

Her father's acceptance of the man she loved was the best Kwanzaa gift she could have ever been given, and she was going to treasure it for the rest of her days. Because he was right, family meant love, and she had that in abundance.

THE END

Lena Matthews

Lena Matthews spends her days dreaming about handsome heroes and her nights with her own personal hero. Married to her college sweetheart, she is the proud mother of an extremely smart toddler, three evil dogs, and a mess of ants that she can't seem to get rid of.

When not writing she can be found reading, watching movies, lifting up the cushions on the couch to look for batteries for the remote control, and plotting different ways to bring Buffy back on the air.

Visit Lena on the Web at www.lenamatthews.com.