

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Something Worth  
Fighting For*  
LENA MATTHEWS

## Something Worth Fighting For

Lena Matthews

No good deed goes unpunished... And no one knows that better than Tisha Nichols, who, out of the kindness of her heart, agrees to style the hair of her nine-year-old neighbor Cami, so the little girl can look good for picture day. Unfortunately, Cami's adoptive Uncle is far from grateful. In fact he's down right livid...and far too attractive for Tisha's peace of mind.

Love thy neighbor... Is easier said than done, especially when the neighbor in question is a sexy little spitfire who gives even better than she gets. Although Jonah is not the type to say he's sorry, even he can admit when he's wrong. But the ongoing fight to win custody of Cami has made him cautious and mistrustful of people, even those as desirable as Tisha.

What starts as a misunderstanding turns out to be one of the best things to ever happen to them. Unfortunately, not everyone is as thrilled, and Jonah and Tisha must decide if their newly formed family is something worth fighting for.

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Something Worth Fighting For

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# ***SOMETHING WORTH FIGHTING FOR***

**Lena Matthews**

## *Dedication*

Dedicated to Alexis Patterson and all the other missing children who are gone but not forgotten.

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## Chapter One

"I need help."

Tisha Nichols blinked her eyes several times, trying to determine if she was still asleep or if the little girl in front of her, brandishing a hairbrush as if it were a weapon, was real. Stunned, Tisha ran her hand through her sleep-warped hair, not sure what to make of the brown-skinned cherub. She couldn't be more than twelve. The girl was as thin as a reed with skin the color of milk chocolate and ebony hair that stood as if in salute on top of her head. Tisha didn't have a clue who she was or what she wanted, and it was too damn early to care.

If the blaring red lights on her alarm clock were right, it had been seven twenty when the first ring from her doorbell penetrated her consciousness and pulled her out of her slumber to answer the door.

Seven twenty, for Christ's sake. Anyone who knew Tisha knew better than to talk to her before nine, especially on a Sunday or Monday, her designated days off. She'd hung up on her momma for less.

The kid was cute and all, but she was going to have to die.

"Well?"

Taken back by the snotty tone, Tisha raised a brow in irritation. "Well, what?"

"Can you help me?" the little girl repeated, speaking slowly, as if Tisha were dim.

"With what?"

Sighing, the girl waved the brush about, as if the answer was obvious. "My hair of course."

"Of course..." Tisha didn't work out of her home, and she definitely didn't work before ten a.m. "Look, I think you might be mistaken."

"You do your own hair, right?"

"Yes." And for the last eight years, a good portion of the women who came through the doors of Q's Salon, not that Tisha felt the need to give her credentials to a sleep-robbing brat.

"Today is picture day and if I can't get someone to do it, then Uncle J is going to try, and lady, his efforts aren't pretty."

"Look, kid —"

"Cami, okay, not kid. I'm almost ten."

Almost ten, why didn't she say so. She was practically grown. Tisha would have rolled her eyes if she weren't so tired. "Not to be rude or anything, but it's early."

"It's seven thirty."

"My point exactly."

"This is an emergency." Cami's eyes filled with tears, cracking the tough façade she'd been fronting. "I don't want to look bad on picture day. Uncle J tries. Really, really hard, but he doesn't have a clue how to do hair. I can manage ponies fine, but today I want to look pretty. As far as I can tell, you and Mrs. Laine are the only other black people on the block. I was going to ask Mrs. Laine, but her hair looks worse than mine half the time and yours always looks really nice."

Always looked nice? Tisha wasn't sure she'd ever seen her before. "You live around here?"

Cami pointed across the street. "Over there. We moved in a couple of months ago."

Squinting, Tisha looked to where Cami gestured, wondering whom she belonged to. As Cami said, the Laines and she were the only black people on the block. So who did...wait a minute. There was a new guy across the street, but he couldn't possibly be this kid's uncle.

He was white.

Or at least Tisha thought he was. He could have been very, very light-skinned. She hadn't exactly made it over to their house to do the neighborly thing yet.

"You mean the..." Clearing her throat, Tisha tried to think of a delicate way of phrasing her question. "Do you live in the blue house?"

"Yes, Uncle J and I moved in two months ago."

"Oh." That explained nothing. Of course, Tisha didn't require an explanation. This was a colorful world they lived in. Black people came in many different shades, and for all she knew, this little girl could be mixed. Either way, it wasn't her business, or it hadn't been until she'd been woken up. "Did your uncle send you over here to ask me to do your hair?"

"No, he was in the shower when I left."

Not good. "He doesn't know where you are?"

"I left a note. Sheesh, I'm not a child."

Of course she wasn't. "Sorry."

"So, can you fix my hair? Pleeease."

Tisha knew even if she slammed the door in the girl's face right this second and ran faster than time itself, she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. Besides, there was something about the smart aleck she liked.

Furthermore, the girl's hair was a hot mess and there was no way in hell Tisha was going to have the tangled halo on her conscience. "Okay, here's the deal. I'll open my garage door, and we can work in there, in case your uncle steps out to look for you, but you'll owe me."

"Owe you, what?" Cami narrowed her eyes as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"We'll work that out later." Tisha extended her hand. "Do we have a deal?"

After a second of hesitation, Cami gripped Tisha's hand in hers and gave a fierce shake. "Yes, ma'am."

"Anyone who can survive waking me up this early in the morning without me maiming or killing them has earned the right to call me Tisha."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was no way anyone at the shop would believe this. Tisha, normally the Diva of the Salon, was awake, and working in her garage no less, while dishing about the neighbors with an almost-ten-year-old. The strangest part was, she was having a great time doing it.

Cami was a very bright little girl with attitude for days. In a narcissistic sort of way, she reminded Tisha a lot of herself. Even though doing hair on her day off wasn't exactly Tisha's ideal way to spend the morning, she couldn't deny the pleasure she partook from it. There was something very soothing about the steady strokes of a brush in hair. Rewarding, especially when she managed to turn a tangled mess, such as what Cami had been sporting, into a masterpiece.

After untangling Cami's thick hair, Tisha set about parting the ebony mane down the center, separating a small section in the front for bangs, before she began to braid. They had discussed the quickest style she could wear for a few days with the least amount of effort on Cami's side.

The best part was, Cami wasn't tender headed. There was nothing Tisha hated more than working on a kid who whined and screamed every other second. All in all, if she had to perform a favor this early in the morning, then Cami was the perfect child to do it on.

As she began to bump Cami's bangs with the curling iron, a booming voice yelled out from behind her. "I don't believe it."

Surprised at the outburst, Tisha jumped. Reflex and reflex alone kept her from christening the startled girl's forehead with her curling iron. Frowning, Tisha glanced over her shoulder at the angry man standing in her driveway and sized him up.

One thing was for sure, this wasn't a pale-skinned black man. He didn't just have a lot of white in him. He was white. A very good-looking white guy, but a white guy nonetheless. In fact, the only thing black on him was his shoulder-length hair.

"Camille Deseri Mitts, you have some explaining to do."

"Sit still," she ordered Cami, who in reaction to her uncle's tone and words moved to get down from the chair. He might have been the boss of Cami, but Tisha was the one doing her hair.

The man's brows shot into his hairline. From the look of surprise on his face, he wasn't used to his orders being countered. His astonishment didn't keep him quiet though.



"Get over here." His dark brown eyes were snapping mad as he spoke in a low but fierce tone.

"I said, sit still." Tisha made quick work of uncurling the iron and spun around, pissed off now. Wielding the heated curler as if it were a samurai sword, she went off on him. "Did your anger make you stupid or were you born that way?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did you miss the hot metal I held close to your niece's head? Or did the long bright-ass orange extension cord attached to the iron distract you like a shiny penny? I mean, could you be more thoughtless?"

His eyes narrowed and his voice hardened. "I was about to ask you the same thing, lady. Have you heard of the Amber Law? Kidnapping?"

"Kidnapping." Whoa. Nothing cooled her temper faster than the threat of jail time. "No one kidnapped anyone. You're overreacting."

"You lose a kid and see how you act."

Tisha was too annoyed to admit aloud he had a point.

"I left a note," Camille meekly said. Gone was the bold girl from earlier, in her place was a chastised one.

"A glass mirror doesn't give you permission. I do. If you ever..." Pausing, he took a deep breath then slowly released it. "What you did was uncool."

Uncool? And the way he reacted was so cool. Right. Annoyed, Tisha shook her head and began to clean up her mess.

"Sorry, Uncle J." Cami climbed down from the chair and rushed over to her uncle's side. Without hesitation, she threw her arms around him and hugged him with all her tiny might.

"Sorry won't get you off restriction," he said in a gruff tone as he hugged her back.

"Ah, come on."

"You come on," he fired back. "I almost had a heart attack while you were over here playing beauty shop."

Playing. Tisha snorted. They really needed to take their After School Special out of her garage. This was why she didn't do favors. "Okay, now that that's taken care of," Tisha said, garnering their attention. "You can go to school, I can go back to bed, and you, well, you can go to..." Tisha stopped herself from saying more. But she thought it. Boy, did she think it. "Have a nice day."

His body stiffened with anger once more. "Cami, why don't you go wait in the house?"

"Okay." Turning around she flashed Tisha a quick smile. "Thanks a lot for doing my hair."

"You're more than welcome." Tisha made her voice extra sweet to annoy the glaring man even more. And just for kicks, she threw in, "Anytime."

"I'll bring you a picture when they get in."

"You better."

Cami gave a final wave as she started down the driveway. Unfortunately for Tisha's piece of mind, the girl's uncle remained. Tisha waited until Cami was out of sight before she spoke again. "You owe me thirty-five dollars, plus a tip."

"I wasn't aware I had to pay someone to contribute to the delinquency of a minor."

Smug bastard. "No, that part I did for free." Pissed beyond belief, Tisha turned around and stomped to her kitchen door.

Before she could make her grand exit though, he called out, "Hey."

Despite knowing better, Tisha spun around. "What?"

"I think it would be wise if you steered clear of Cami from now on. She needs positive influences in her life."

"Pity she only has you." Tisha slapped her hand on the button for the garage door. When the motor roared to life, the man jumped back, muttering a vulgar curse under his breath as the door began to descend.

"This isn't over, lady."

"The hell it isn't." With that parting shot, Tisha walked in her house and slammed the door behind her. "The hell it isn't."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jonah Glasse pulled into the busy parking lot outside the small building that housed the beauty salon, he released a heavy, disgusted sigh. He didn't want to be here. Hell, he could think of a million and one reasons why he shouldn't be there, yet here he was, nevertheless.

Apologizing was the right thing to do. The only thing to do if he wanted to live in peace and harmony. Cami was a ruthless dictator, hell-bent on making him do the proper thing. Not for the first time, Jonah wanted to curse his deceased foster brother and wife for actually taking the time to rear their kid well.

Not only did Cami have an innate sense of right and wrong, she also, for some unknown reason, felt the need to make sure he always did the correct thing as well. It was as if he were living with a mini Holy Roller at times. If he cursed, she gave him a level look that made him feel about two inches tall. If he left his clothes lying about, she'd shake her head sadly, as if he were breaking her heart. And if he accidentally yelled at their neighbor for doing him a favor, she hounded him day and night.

Jonah knew his life would be forever changed when he was given custody of Cami, he just didn't know it would be this much. Not that he'd do anything different about it now, other than prevent the car accident that had killed her parents, of course.

Gilbert. For the first time in a long time, Jonah could think of his foster brother and best friend and not feel as if the air were being sucked from the room. They'd met when

they were twelve, both sent to live with the same foster family. Although it seemed as if they were as different as night and day, they'd become fast friends. When they graduated from the system at eighteen, they'd stayed in touch, never losing their special bond.

It was so special in fact that not only was Jonah Gilbert's best man in his wedding to Tia, Jonah was also there, pacing the waiting room the day Cami was born. There was no place on earth he'd rather have been. Her birth couldn't have been more important to him if it were his own wife delivering their child.

It was only natural Gilbert had asked Jonah to be the spirited girl's godfather. Although he considered it symbolic, he hadn't really been surprised to discover they'd made it legal as well. And when Cami's parents passed away, he took her in gladly. There was no way he'd ever allow her to enter the foster care system as Gilbert and he had. She deserved better than that.

All kids did.

He mentally shook himself from his negative train of thought. Cami was his now, and he was prepared to do what he needed to be the father figure she deserved.

Which, of course, led him to the reason he now sat in his car, ready to apologize to the lady who lived across the street. All Cami had wanted was to look pretty in her school pictures. Just because she'd scared the daylights out of him didn't mean she didn't have a point. He'd tried to be everything and everyone for Cami, but when it came to possessing the skills necessary to fix a little girl's hair, he was hopeless.

Jonah wasn't too proud to admit he didn't know everything when it came to kids. Hell, Cami was the only kid he did know, and she hadn't come with an instruction manual. Only a mouth. A big one that hadn't stopped yapping since Monday night.

To be honest, part of the reason he was apologizing was to get the little shyster off his back. To make matters worse, she nixed his idea of leaving a note on Tisha's door. No, according to the hip-hop Emily Post, that was rude. Apparently ruder than he'd already been. Cami insisted it had to be face-to-face. So after dropping her off at school, he drove to the address he found online for the salon Tisha had told Cami she worked at. He had already called ahead of time to make sure it was the right place, now all he had to do was force himself to go inside and make nice.

With a heavy sigh, he turned off the car and pocketed the key. He needed to suck it up and get on with the apologizing. It was akin to taking off a Band-Aid – the quicker it was done the better things went.

Jonah sighed as he exited his car. Feeling all kinds of stupid, he headed toward the glass door with the gold embossed Q on the front. Q's Salon. How...quaint, and just his luck, filled to the brim with women. Not only was he going to have to eat crow, he was going to have to do it in front of an audience.

Could the fucking day get any better?

Cowboying up, he pushed open the door and was struck by how the conversation stuttered to complete silence. If that wasn't bad enough, he was the lone man in the

salon, he also happened to be the sole white person as well. He hadn't felt this out of place since he went to Tia's baby shower.

To his extreme discomfort, every face turned in his direction. "Uhh...hi."

"Can I help you?" asked the Latino woman at the reception desk.

"Yes, I'm looking for Tisha Nichols." And saw her nowhere in sight. If he'd driven all the way over here to apologize, the least she could have done was be at work.

She frowned for a moment and then asked, "For an appointment?"

"No, it's personal."

The shop erupted in whispers at his declaration.

"Are you a bill collector?"

Jonah's eyes widened in shock. Were they the only white people who came in here? "No."

The pretty woman tilted her head to the side and studied him. "Are you the po?"

What was a "po"? "No." At least he didn't think he was.

"You know you have to tell me if you are."

"That only works if he's pretending to be a John, Nance," a familiar voice said from behind him. Relief he'd never felt before filled Jonah as he spun around and spotted Tisha standing in the doorway with a small black plastic bag in her hand. From the resigned look on her pretty mocha-tinged face, she wasn't any happier to see him than he was to be there. "I see it is a pig, just not of the police variety."

His relief was short-lived, as was his guilt. "You're as pleasant as I remember."

"Didn't think that was going to change in two days, did you?" Turning from him, she spoke to an older woman sitting by a fern. "You can come back to my station now, Ms. Jean."

He frowned in disgust as she walked right past him as if he were completely invisible, the curious elderly lady hot on her heels. Conversation slowly began again, but this time it was all about him.

He stood there for a moment, wondering what to do as the pointed looks became stares. It was more than obvious she wasn't going to come back and listen to him, which left him one other option.

Irritated, he bypassed the receptionist and headed to the back of the salon. The low murmurs turned into audible gasps as he walked by station after station to get to his prey. When he reached the shampoo bowls, he stepped next to Tisha as she started to wash the woman's hair.

"Are you ignoring me on purpose?"

She turned and gave him a look that would freeze the Sahara. "Would it help if I said yes?"

"I came here to apologize. The least you could do is take five seconds to listen."

"Actually, it's not the least I can do at all." She turned back to her task, muttering under her breath. "Dickhead."

"If you have something to say you can say it to my face."

She shut off the water and turned to face him. Once more the salon became eerily quiet as everyone gave up the pretense of talking amongst themselves and became a full-fledged studio audience.

"You want to hear what I have to say then fine, listen up. I work for a living. These ladies have made appointments and expect to be seen on time. So excuse the hell out of me if I don't bow to the whims of your schedule."

"I sincerely doubt you can't spare five minutes."

Tisha returned her attention to her client, massaging some cream into her hair and covering her head with a clear cap. "Do you now?"

"Yes."

"That shows what you know. You ready, Ms. Jean?"

"Yes, hon."

"Let's get you dry." Tisha helped the other woman to her feet then walked her over to the row of large industry hair dryers. After sitting her under a dryer, she turned it on then headed straight back toward the front of the salon.

Jonah, refusing to be ignored, stormed right after her. "Do you have time to talk now?"

"No. I have another client to start on."

"I don't mind waiting for a few more minutes," he graciously offered.

"I do. Time is money. You want to talk to me, make an appointment."

"Fine." Two could play that game. Jonah walked over to the receptionist desk and smiled politely. "I want to make an appointment, please."

Nance grinned widely and pulled out a large black appointment book. "Who would you like to see?"

Jonah gritted his teeth. They were all insane. "Tisha, please."

"And what would you want to have done?" She held the pen over the book as if this was an everyday occurrence.

"Hair cut, please."

"We might be able to fit you in today, but only if you'd care to wait."

Yes, he could wait. There was no way in hell he was coming back there to repeat this little drama. "How long of a wait?"

"An hour."

Fuck. "That will be fine."

"Good lord." Tisha huffed from behind him. "Come on, Marelly, let's get you going. It looks as if I'm booking up fast."

Blindly grabbing a magazine, Jonah dropped into the seat her client vacated. He had a feeling this might be the longest hour of his life.

## **Chapter Two**

Fuck! He was still here. Just because she was feeling a tad evil, Tisha had purposely turned his hour wait into two and a half hours, yet homeboy didn't leave. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He left for fifteen minutes, an hour ago, only to come back with some snacks, a laptop and his cell phone. From the way he was crowded at the corner table, with the magazines neatly stacked on the floor, he looked as if he might be there for the long run. Which didn't please her at all.

Tisha tried ignoring him, and when that didn't work, she even went as far as to shoot him evil glares every other minute. All her efforts were in vain though, because he was still there. And not only had he not huffed away in anger, he didn't even seem fazed by the extra time she took.

After sweeping up the hair from around her station, she made her way over to the front of the shop and sighed loudly. Once again her attempts to show him her displeasure were for nothing, because he was busy chatting away on the phone.

"White boy. Let's go. You're next." Her unflattering comment earned her a chastising look from Nance, the shop owner and her best friend, but only a marginal sign of comprehension from Uncle What's His Face. "Are you ready?"

Instead of replying, he held up his index finger as if telling her to wait one second, and continued with his conversation on the phone.

No. He. Didn't. "Look, if yo—"

"I'll be with you in one second, Tisha," he uttered between his other conversation. "Do what you have to, man, and get this deal pushed through."

She'd push his deal through, all right. "I'm not wait—"

"Tata, ta, tut." He interrupted her once more. "Almost done. Back to you, Garland. I'll be in the office in two hours. I want the contract on my desk when I get in."

Bewildered, Tisha stared at him with her mouth wide open. She didn't know what surprised her more. The fact he continuously cut her off or the fact she was still waiting for him to finish his phone conversation.

Had the whole world gone mad?

"Okay, I'll see you then." After saying goodbye, he hung up the phone and meticulously gathered his things, taking a few extra seconds to stack the magazines back on the makeshift desk. When he was done, he headed toward the front door, confusing her all the more. Wasn't he the one demanding an audience today? "Excuse me. My station is that way."

"Yes, but my car is that way. I'm going to put my stuff back. It will just take a second."

"So will shaving you bald," she muttered under her breath as he strolled out of the shop.

"I heard that," Nance chided as she came to Tisha's side. The petite Latino woman only reached Tisha's shoulder, but she still managed to be a force to be reckoned with. It was one of the reasons they got along so well. "Are you going to tell me what the heck is going on or do I have to guess?"

"Girl, your guess is as good as mine."

"Let's start easy then. What's with white?"

"I have no idea," Tisha answered honestly. "Do you remember me telling you about the adventure I had in babysitting on Monday?"

"Yes." Nancy's big brown eyes widened as comprehension dawned. "He's Uncle Nazi?"

"In the living flesh."

"Hmm..."

Tisha glanced at Nancy, who was staring at her with a look akin to humor on her pretty brown face. "What?"

"Is there a reason you forgot to mention how handsome Uncle Nazi is?"

"Because at the time I didn't find him appealing. He was yelling at me. Remember? Things such as that tend to make a person ugly really fast in my book."

"At the time?"

Rolling her eyes, Tisha glanced away. Didn't it figure that out of her entire speech, Nance would focus on that one small part?

"Fine, I can admit he's good-looking. If you're attracted to that sort of look."

"You mean the clean-cut, handsome, prosperous look?"

When she put it that way... "Yes, that's the exact look I was talking about."

"Right. And you don't find his type appealing?"

The bell over the door jangled at Jonah's return.

"I'm not saying anything," Tisha hissed as she motioned for him to follow her to her station. Now that he was actually here, she was ready to get him in and out as fast as possible. Once he was seated, she made short work of covering him with the cape.

She was going to be professional if it killed her. She grabbed her comb from her table and began to work it through his dark locks. For an asshole, he had a nice grade of hair she could tell was well-maintained. This was no discount shampoo kind of guy. Of course, he didn't seem to be a women's salon kind of guy either. Especially not one such as Q's, which catered to mostly women of color.

Tisha spun him around until he faced the mirror and met his gaze in the reflection. "What'll it be?"

"Take a little off the ends."



Tisha glanced down at his shoulder-length hair and frowned. To be truthful, if it were up to her, she wouldn't cut an inch off. She'd always been partial to men with long hair, but this wasn't about what she preferred on a guy. Of course, she was willing to bet, given the circumstances, he wasn't interested in having the trim he asked for either. "Let's get serious. You didn't come for a haircut."

"True, but time is money." He tossed her words back in her face with a knowing look.

Bastard. "Are you always this condescending?"

"Are you always this argumentative?" he fired back as rapidly.

"Yes," she said truthfully. Tisha wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine, but she was honest about it. "Let's cut the bullshit and get to why you're here so I can get some lunch. I get really bitchy when my blood sugar is low."

"Was it low earlier?"

"No, why?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and tried a smile. "I think we got off on the wrong foot."

"You think?"

"No. I know we did, and it was all my fault."

"Okay..." Tisha regarded him distrustfully. "And?"

"I want to apologize. I freaked out when I realized Cami was gone, which in turn roused my inner asshole. If you forgive me, I promise to do my best to keep him at bay as much as possible."

"Just at bay?"

"I'm an occasional asshole, not a liar. I'd hate for our budding friendship to start off on a lie."

"I didn't say anything about being friends."

"No, but I was sort of hoping you would. Come on, aren't we the littlest bit even now?"

"How do you figure?"

"I was an asshole on Monday and you were a..."

Tisha reached past him to her table and picked up her scissors then arched a brow. "And I was what?"

"Less than pleasant today," he finished smoothly.

"Less than pleasant, huh? I thought we weren't going to lie."

"Despite what you think of me, know this. I'm not an idiot. There's no way in hell I'm going to call a woman, holding a pair of scissors in her hand, an unflattering name. I might be an ass, but I'm not a dumbass."

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "Can't fault you for that. So did you really want that trim?"

He turned around in the chair until he was facing her again. "Not really."

"I didn't think so."

Placing the scissors on the table, she held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Tisha, your neighbor from across the street. Nice to meet you."

He shook her hand with a smile. "I'm Jonah and I have a precocious almost-ten-year-old niece you might have seen around."

"You don't say?"

"Now that the formal introductions are out of the way, how about we grab some lunch?"

"Lunch. With you?"

"Yes. You might even find you like me once you come to know me."

"Stranger things have happened."

"Is that a yes?" He stood.

Tisha regarded him for a second and swiftly came to a decision. Hell, what did she have to lose? "Yes, it's a yes."

\* \* \* \* \*

After a brief conversation about whose car to take, Tisha agreed to ride with Jonah down the block to a local Italian restaurant. From what he was beginning to learn about the pretty woman, everything was an argument. Not that he thought it was entirely bad. In fact, he found it to be surprisingly sexy as hell.

Suddenly he was very glad he'd taken the initiative to ask her out to lunch. Things had started very badly, but it wasn't the way he wanted them to end. Even though she was a feisty little thing, she seemed as if she was a good person. Something the world lacked. She kindly did Cami's hair, in her garage no less, not only making his little girl feel special but also giving her the one thing she'd been missing for a while—a woman's care.

Cami might not carry his DNA, but she carried his heart, and anyone who was good to her was golden in his book.

They made idle chatter in the car, nothing too deep or serious, which was fine with him. It gave him time to formulate a plan. He wanted to get to know Tisha better, but without coming off as too intrusive or too interested. He wanted to keep things light. Let her get to know him a bit before he pounced.

When they entered the restaurant, a very attractive woman with long, flowing red hair approached Jonah, eyeing him as if he were on the menu she was carrying in her hands. Normally that would have been fine with him, but today he had a guest with him and her predatory glances bordered on disrespect. For all she knew, Tisha could have very well been his wife.

Still, he decided he would be nice, until it was time for him not to be. He sent her a disarming smile as she neared them and placed his hands in his pants pocket to hide the lack of a wedding ring. He didn't come here to pick up anyone or to be hit upon. He just wanted to eat and get to know Tisha a little better. Frankly, he didn't think he was asking for a whole hell of a lot. "I'd like a table for two."

Without sparing Tisha a glance, the hostess zeroed in on Jonah and practically cooed hello to him. "Is the rest of your party here, sir?"

Jonah frowned, a bit taken aback by her blatant disregard of Tisha, who was standing mere inches away from him, but before he could respond, Tisha slid her arm through the loop of his.

"Yes, I am," Tisha said loudly. The hostile stare she sent the hostess dared the other woman to say something.

"Oh." She blinked blankly, as if Tisha had magically appeared before her. Jonah could practically hear Tisha grinding her teeth in frustration at the woman's rudeness, but he had to say, she held it together quite well. She didn't roll her eyes as Cami would have done.

"Follow me." Without sparing them another glance, the woman spun on her heel and stalked toward the dining room.

"I'll follow you all right." Tisha snatched her arm back.

Jonah chuckled and placed his hand on her lower back, guiding her toward where the disgruntled hostess was standing. She barely waited for them to reach the table before she dashed off. "Not one to bite your tongue, are you?" He chuckled as he pulled out Tisha's chair for her.

"Never."

"Didn't think so." He smiled, seating himself. As unprofessional as their hostess was, their waiter was just the opposite. They'd barely sat when he appeared at their table, breadbasket in one hand and notepad in the other. After taking their drink orders, he whisked away as quickly as he'd appeared.

Jonah opened the menu briefly, picked out an entrée then closed it. He was more interested in learning about the woman across from him than in what the daily special was. He waited patiently for her to close her menu before bombarding her with conversation. Before he could begin though, he noticed her look over his shoulder and frown.

Intrigued, he glanced over his shoulder to see what garnered her attention and frowned himself when he spotted the hostess staring in their direction. Maybe Italian hadn't been such a good idea after all. "We can leave if you want."

"Please," she snorted, turning her attention back to him. "I'm not going to allow that malnourished Ariel wannabe to ruin my lunch."

Malnourished. Ariel wannabe. Priceless. "It's amazing what a difference a day makes."

"What do you mean?"

"When you tore me a new asshole in your garage, it wasn't very funny. Yet watching you mad dog her amuses the hell out of me."

"I wasn't mad dogging her."

"Right," he teased. "Just as you were completely in the right on Monday."

"I might be willing to concede if the shoe would have been on the other foot on Monday I might have reacted the same way you did. Might have, mind you. But this crap right here bugs the shit out of me. I mean I was standing right next to you. Right. Next." She snatched a breadstick from the basket, gesturing with the golden-brown edible baton instead of eating it. "Come on, how could she figure we weren't together? As if I would stand that close to someone I didn't know. Not that I know you, but you get what I'm saying."

"I do." As much as the hostess's behavior annoyed him, it truly didn't surprise him. The blindness of others had become more noticeable after he was given custody of Cami. In this day and age, it still surprised him when people were shocked to see a white man with anyone of a different race. He and Cami received so many double glances they began to make a game of it. "But people are how they are."

"No, that's bullshit."

"Do you think you can change people's opinions?" He was very interested to see what she had to say. Maybe she had a different perspective. Because for the most part, he believed people would do and say what they wanted, even though sometimes they would put on a politically correct façade.

"Some people, no, you're never going to change their opinions. It doesn't mean you have to accept it. If they're bold enough to stare or make snide little comments under their breath, then they need to be bold enough to say it to my face. If I see someone doing that crap, I'm going to call them on it and put it back in their face every time. Life is too short to be fake, you know. Do you feel me?" She finished speaking as the waiter came back to the table. After taking their order, he left once more. "Enough about me and my issues with rude folks—"

"I don't think they're issues at all," he interrupted her. In fact, he found it to be intriguing.

"Well, thank you." She took a sip of her water then glanced down at her watch.

"Do you have another client soon?"

"In an hour."

"Oh." That was a disappointment.

"What about you? What do you do, by the way?"

"I'm a broker."

"Nice." She immediately changed the subject, as most people usually did. Not too many people knew what brokers did, at least not enough to carry on a conversation about it. "So what's the deal with you and Cami?"

Wow. No one ever came right out and asked him like that. Most people hemmed and hawed while trying to think of the politically correct way to inquire about his family.

"Was that rude? Sorry. Normally I'm not that crass. I think I'm off today. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"No," he rushed to reassure her, "it just threw me for a minute. Most people don't ask straight-out."

"Yeah. Those people are fake."

"And you're not?"

"No." She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "What you see is what you get. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"It's a good thing," he assured her.

The waiter came back with their salads, making a show of grinding the pepper. Jonah watched as she practically snatched her bowl from the man before he could begin to season her food.

"So, do you hate the peppermill for some reason?"

"I hate that kind of pepper. It makes me sneeze." She laughed wryly. "You probably think I'm some sort of crazy, rude freak. You haven't seen me at my best, you know." She drizzled on the dressing and then speared the lettuce as she prepared to take a bite.

"Really? Then I guess I need to see you again." He wasn't one to let a perfect opportunity slip through his grasp.

She chewed her food and then swallowed. "Wow, you don't waste any time, do you?"

"Not when I see something I want." Her eyes widened and he smiled. Good, let her think about that for a minute.

"Something you want. Weren't we the Montagues and the Capulets this morning?"

"I'm not one to hold a grudge." Especially once he realized he would rather hold her instead.

"That makes one of us."

"Come on." He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I thought we were going to forgive and forget."

Tisha glanced down at his hand then back at him with a bemused expression on her lovely face. "I don't recall saying all that."

"You thought it though," he teased.

"Did I now?" She smiled. "You're something, all right. I bet Cami has a hard time keeping you in line."

"That makes her try all the harder, I assure you."

"Poor kid." She shook her head in mock sympathy.

"If you feel that badly for her, maybe you should pitch in."

"In your dreams, buddy."

She was right about that.

## Chapter Three

Standing upright, Tisha stretched her aching muscles and wondered for the third time in the last hour why she didn't break down and hire someone to mow her lawn. There was nothing she hated more than sweating. And sweating under the hot, blazing California sun while pushing a stubborn machine across her front lawn was ten times worse.

Agitated, she pulled up the hem of her shirt and wiped it across her damp brow. As she rubbed, she made the mistake of taking in a deep breath, inhaling her pungent funk. "Eww." Tisha dropped the shirt and wrinkled her nose in disgust. She was rank.

Releasing the lever, she shut off the mower and took a step back to assess her work. Big mistake number two. Despite working like a dog, she'd only managed to mow half her front yard. Half. She still had to finish the front, as well as the entire back yard yet to do. Once again it wasn't paying to be cheap.

With a grumble, she stomped over to her open garage and grabbed her water bottle off the trunk of her car. With a twist of her wrist, she removed the top and took a swig of the cold beverage. At the rate she was going, she wasn't ever going to be done. The sad part was, if she was honest with herself, Tisha knew mowing the lawn wasn't a big freaking deal. She just didn't enjoy doing it.

She was a girl. A girlie girl at that, and mowing the lawn was a boy's job. As archaic as it was, Tisha really believed that. She didn't at first. Oh no. Owning her own home was such a momentous thing to her and was the proof once and for all she could do anything she wanted. She'd swallowed the "'I am woman hear me roar'" independence bullshit when she bought the lawnmower. That mantra died out the second she started pushing the damn thing across her grass.

Fuck independence. She was lazy and sweating out her flat iron.

With a self-pitying groan, she recapped her bottle and headed back out into the yard. As she neared her gas-powered nemesis, Cami stopped her bike on the sidewalk in front of Tisha.

Tisha couldn't help but smile at the spirited sprite. She looked as all kids should. Young. Not like one of those little girls pretending to be twenty-five years old, with pounds of makeup taking away from their natural beauty.

Dressed in jean shorts and a vintage T-shirt, Cami looked every inch a child. It was very refreshing. "Hey, kid."

Cami rolled her eyes as she climbed from her bike and propped it up with the kickstand before walking over to Tisha. "It's not kid. It's Cami."

"That's right," Tisha corrected herself. "I forgot you're practically a young adult. Soon you'll be old enough to drive then vote then move out."

"I'm never moving out," she stated emphatically.

That was unusual. Most kids she knew couldn't wait to move out. "No?"

"Nah, Uncle J would perish without me."

"Perish." Who was this kid?

"Yeah, it means to die. It's the word of the day on his calendar."

Cami sounded so grown up, Tisha was hard-pressed not to laugh. "Probably." Tisha glanced over her shoulder at the lawn mower once more and frowned. "You know what, Cami, I think you're onto something. Don't move out. Life only goes downhill from there. You have to pay your own bills, kill your own bugs, catch your own mice and mow your own lawn. Being an adult isn't everything it's cracked up to be." Especially a single adult.

"You don't like mowing your lawn."

"I abhor it." She turned back to Cami and winked. "Look that one up on your word of the day calendar."

"It means hate, right?"

"Hate with a purple passion."

"Wow."

"Oh yeah." Tisha nodded in agreement.

"If you hate it so much, why don't you hire someone to do it for you?"

Tisha shot her an aggravated look. "Because I'm a moron."

"At least you know. Uncle J says some people go their entire lives not knowing how dumb they are."

"Hey!" It was one thing for her to call herself a moron and something entirely different for the pint-sized know-it-all to do it.

"Just kidding." Cami smiled brightly. "I'm going to go check in with Uncle J. He goes postal if he doesn't know where I am every second of the day."

"I remember."

"Yeah, I guess you do." Cami climbed back on her bike. "I'll see you later."

"Not if I die in the next few minutes." Tisha watched as Cami looked both ways before biking across the street to her house. Once she made it to the other side safely, Tisha went back to work on her lawn. Five minutes into the job, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Startled, she released the lever and spun around. To her utter surprise, Jonah was standing before her with a grinning Cami at his side.

"Hey, what's going on?" Tisha glanced from him to his niece then back again. "Wait a minute. If you're coming over here to read me the riot act because she was late checking in or something then you can stop right —"

"No." He smiled. "That's not why I came."



Deflated by his smile and words she asked, "Oh, what's up?"

"A little bird," Jonan glanced down at Cami and winked, "told me you were committing ritual suicide. Slowly."

"It hasn't taken me that long." She only had a third left to do now, of the front yard that was.

"Really? Huh." Jonah surveyed the lawn before turning his gaze back to her. "Then I guess you're probably not interested in my proposal."

"Proposal?" Oh hell yes she was interested, especially if it had something to do with him.

"Yeah. I was about to fix lunch and I was wondering if you might want to switch jobs."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll finish your yard and you can fix lunch for the three of us. I have all the makings over at my house for hot dogs and fries. All you have to do is cook it."

"Really? And you'd do my lawn? Front and back?" Was he for real?

"Yep."

"Why?" Wait! Why the hell was she questioning fate? "Scratch that. Here you go. I'm going to run up real quick and hop in the shower. Then I'll head over to your place."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

"Um, what about me?" Cami asked.

"What about you?" Tisha wasn't sure what the girl was asking. She was too interested in getting into the shower to think coherently right now.

"Who is going to watch me while Uncle J is mowing and you're in the shower?"

The two adults looked at each other and both began laughing at the same time. Leave it to the child to point out their shortcomings.

Jonah stopped laughing long enough to come up with a plan, however. "You will sit on Tisha's step and watch me mow until the front yard is completed. Hopefully by that time she'll be done with her shower."

"Yes." Tisha took over the explanation. "And then you and I will go to your house to prepare lunch."

"Okay." Cami walked up the sidewalk and settled herself on the steps. "Well, let's get cracking."

Tisha fought off the laughter threatening to bubble forth and glanced over at Jonah to find he was in a similar battle. She rolled her eyes at the thirty-year-old masquerading as a child as she hurried into the house.

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After cutting Tisha's lawn, Jonah quickly ran the mower over his own. He figured he might as well get it out of the way now and save himself the trouble later. Besides, maybe if he took longer outside, they would be more likely not to need his help inside.

It wasn't as if he loved cutting grass. Not even remotely, but he liked it a hell of a lot more than he enjoyed cooking. Cami and he lived on takeout and simple dishes that took little time to prepare and held less of a risk of giving them food poisoning. Cami, bless her little heart, didn't complain one bit about it. Of course if he was allowed to eat French fries every other night as a kid he probably wouldn't bitch either.

If he would have given this more thought, he'd have arranged for Tisha to cook a real meal instead of the dogs and fries he had taken out. Maybe they could work something out for next time.

Once Jonah was done with his yard, he wheeled the mower back over to Tisha's house and parked it in her garage. He jogged back to his house, feeling the need for a quick shower before he joined the girls. Mowing the lawn had worked up quite an appetite and all he could think about was eating. That was until he walked into his house and heard Cami's laughter ringing out from the kitchen. Just listening to the lighthearted sound made him smile.

Bypassing the hallway that led toward the bedrooms and bathrooms, Jonah made his way into the kitchen, stopping in the doorway to stare at the sight that met his eyes. Tisha and Cami were standing at the granite island, chopping vegetables and laughing as if they were old friends.

"What's so funny?"

The second he spoke, they looked over at him and laughed even harder. "What?" Jonah glanced down at himself, making sure he didn't have anything out of whack. "What did I miss?"

"Cooking 101 apparently," Tisha teased.

Feigning hurt, Jonah mockingly frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not that bad. Cami, back me up."

"He's not that bad." Jonah sent a triumphant smile toward Tisha that instantly melted away at Cami's next words. "But it's still bad."

Okay, so the brat hadn't complained to him but apparently she didn't have a problem complaining to other people. "Traitor." He walked all the way into the room and stopped on the other side of the island to snag a piece of tomato. The second his teeth sank into the crimson treat he moaned in appreciation. Before he was even finished chewing all of it, he reached for a backup piece. "What's all of this?"

"These are vegetables," Tisha said slowly. "Veg-et-ables."

"Thanks, smartass. I meant, where did they come from?"

"Not your refrigerator," she teased.

The urge to pull Tisha over his lap and give her the spanking of a lifetime rose inside him. "Obviously."

"Tisha grabbed them from her house when I told her we didn't have salad stuff."

"Actually," Tisha picked up a damp cucumber and placed it on the cutting board. "I believe her exact words were. Salad? You mean lettuce and ranch."

"She's had salads before," he protested. Maybe not at the house, but when they went out to restaurants he always ordered the house salad for her.

Unfortunately for him, Tisha was quick on her feet. "The question is, has she had them here?"

"Well, she hasn't lived in this house for too long." He didn't want to seem as if he was a bad guardian for Cami.

"He's right. We've only been here a couple of months. You can't have expected me to eat any salads in that short of time."

Tisha pressed her lips together, but he noticed she couldn't quite suppress her smile. "Hmm, I see. Well then, isn't it lucky I happened to have the salad fixings to remedy that sadly lacking situation?"

"Yeah, it's about time we started having more salads." He was sure the grocery stores sold those in bags. Of course this meant he'd have to remember to actually buy it once in a while, and maybe some of the stuff to go with it.

There really should be a store for single dads where they sold things boxed and ready to go so all he had to do was ask for a week's worth of groceries and the box would be handed over to him, with clear-cut directions on how to cook it. Jonah didn't think he was asking for too much. "We're still having the dogs though, right?" He could eat salad, but he had to have something to go with it. He was a man. Not a rabbit.

"Yes." Tisha glanced at the clock behind him on the wall. "I should probably put those on. I started the fries already, so they should be done by the time the dogs are."

Fries in the oven first. Interesting. "Good plan."

"Eww," Cami crinkled her nose and gave him an odd look.

"What?"

"You stink."

"Gee, you think so?" He lifted his arm and sniffed. "You know what, I think I do."

Cami giggled and then the little brat had the gall to add, "And you're all dirty and sweaty too."

"Wow, I didn't notice. Are you sure?" He stepped closer, pretending he was going to touch her and she screamed and stepped back.

"Yuck. You need a shower."

"Nah...I think I smell good."

"Your nose must be broken."

Jonah brought his finger to his nose and wiggled it. "Nope, feels fine to me."

"Tisha, tell him."

"I don't know." Tisha tilted her head to the side and studied him. "I don't think he stinks."

"You don't?" Cami's surprised voice matched Johan's thoughts.

"No. He smells...manly. It's kind of nice."

"What's manly?"

"Manly means like a man, or having qualities a man would and should have."

"You think my uncle has qualities men should have?"

Jonah wanted to hear the answer to this himself.

"Most definitely." Tisha looked up at him as she answered. Her response surprised and delighted him.

"See." Cami turned to face him. "She doesn't think you're a jerk."

The moment was lost as Tisha turned confused brown eyes his way. "What?"

"Nothing." Jonah could feel his face heating from embarrassment as a conversation he and Cami had a few days back came roaring back to haunt him.

Of course "nothing" to Cami was code for "please talk more". "I was telling Uncle J I thought you were pretty and he should ask you out on a date, but he said you'd probably say no because you thought he was a jerk."

"Did he now?"

"Yes, and he said it was really a shame because he thought you were very prett—" Jonah reached out and pulled a protesting Cami into his arms and placed his hand over her mouth.

"That's not exactly how the conversation went."

"Really?"

Cami protested from behind his hand, causing him to tighten his grip on her. "Yes, and if someone wants to watch television tonight, then someone might want to stop sharing private conversations with other people." As he'd hoped, his words did what his hand could not. It silenced his niece, once and for all. When he was sure his secrets were safe, he removed his hand and his hold on Cami, allowing the grinning girl to step away from him. "Now, before any more of my secrets are spilled, I'm going to go get in the shower and wash away my manly funk."

"Feel free to take your time," Tisha teased. "I'm sure Cami and I can keep each other company with girl talk."

"Lord, I hope not." With his shattered dignity surrounding him like a cloak of darkness, Jonah turned and headed out of the room. Before he could step past the entryway, Tisha called out his name. He glanced over his shoulder at her and said, "Yes?"

"Just for the record. I don't think you're a jerk. Not anymore at least."

Really? Deciding to take advantage of the opening, he asked, "Then you'll go out with me Saturday night?"

Tisha blinked in surprise and then smiled. "Sure, I'd love to. But first, let's do lunch."

"I'll shower and be back in fifteen."

"Sounds like a date."

From jerk to date. Things were looking up for sure.

## Chapter Four

"You're not really going to wear that, are you?" questioned Nance as she shot down the fourth dress in less than five minutes. It wouldn't have been so bad if Tisha had a) invited her for this little impromptu high-school-like gathering or b) gave a rat's ass about the other woman's opinion.

Nance being Nance didn't let either of those reasons stop her from sharing her unwanted opinion. "I think you should pick something else."

Exasperated and tired of the pathetic selection of clothes hanging in her closet, Tisha pulled the emerald, off-the-shoulder tunic dresses from the hanger, intent on wearing it whether her self-appointed fashion critique liked it or not. Jonah was supposed to be at her house in less than twenty minutes and she still needed to do her hair and makeup.

"Are you even listening to me?"

It was hard not to. "No, but that's never stopped you from talking before."

"And it's not going to stop me now." Nance stuck her tongue out as she plumped up one of Tisha's pillows then tucked it behind her back, propping her up on the bed.

"Comfy?" Tisha asked, sarcasm dripping off her words like a leaky faucet.

"Very. Now let's get on with the get on."

Tisha snorted in lieu of a reply. Nance was a firecracker and she never had an opinion she didn't feel free to express. If Tisha didn't love the loud-mouthed Latino so much, she would have killed her ages ago. "Don't you have something better you could be doing?" Her words were muffled by the dress she was pulling over her head, but she was sure her point was made loud and clear. Then again, she was talking about Nance here. When her head popped clear of the dress, she spoke again. "I'm a big girl, mommy. I can get ready for my date all by myself."

"Really? I wasn't sure you would remember how."

Rolling her eyes, Tisha turned back to the closet and took out a pair of black leggings.

"Leggings." Nance gasped. "Who the hell do you think you are, Lindsey Lohan? Put those back. No, burn them."

"That's it." Tisha turned back to her lounging friend and tossed the leggings at her, hitting Nance square in the face. "Get out of my house. No, don't just get out. Stay out and give me back my key."

"Then I'd have no one to bug."

"That's the plan."

"I'm beginning to get the feeling you don't want my help."

"You're just now getting that feeling? I have to work on expressing myself better." Tisha slipped the dress off and hung it back up. The outfit was ruined now, thanks to Nance's comment. If she didn't find something soon, she was going to be forced to go out in what she had on, and that wasn't much. "Pick something out of the pit of despair while I finish getting ready."

"It's about damn time." Nance rose from the bed with a smile and rushed over to the closet.

"You've been waiting all day to do this, haven't you?"

"Girl, I've been waiting since your first date in high school." Nance let out a heavy sigh. "I miss high school. Don't you?"

"Hell to the no." Tisha shuddered at the very thought. She definitely wasn't one of the shiny, happy people who flourished in school. She had been more like a mirage, attending just enough days to pass and not a second more. "Besides, that was so long ago, I'm surprised you remember it."

"Bite your tongue," Nance growled.

"Biting." Tisha laughed as she walked into the bathroom. The spitfire could take a charging bull head-on, but one small crack about her age had her near tears. Someone was not dealing well with turning thirty.

"So where are you guys going?"

"I don't know." She hadn't asked and he hadn't told. For some strange reason that worked for her. Jonah was taking charge of the date, as, in her opinion, all men should, leaving her to worry only about how good she was going to look and how soon she was going to be able to get rid of Nance.

She was still quite surprised Jonah had asked her out. The only bad part was that if this didn't work out one of them was going to have to move, and her credit report couldn't handle another big-ticket item purchase. Still, he was cute, and he loved the dickens out of his niece.

Glancing at her watch, she realized she'd wasted precious time daydreaming. Tisha fixed her hair and makeup in record time, considering the deadline she was under. She stared at herself in the mirror and assessed her efforts, pretty pleased with the results. She had her hair done yesterday, and thanks to the fresh flat iron, it only took a few minutes to flip the back. Her makeup was more dramatic than she usually wore, but still elegant and understated. She sighed, knowing it was time to stop admiring herself and to face the Clothes Queen to find out what she'd be wearing this evening.

Tisha felt as if she'd walked into the *Twilight Zone* when she crossed the threshold from her bathroom into the bedroom. Her bed was covered with what seemed to be almost every outfit from her closet. Nance stood, humming to herself, a skirt in one hand and a top in the other. The other woman shook her head and then, with a gleam in her eye, pounced on a blouse she must have missed in her earlier decimation of Tisha's closet.

"Aha, this is it." Turning around, Nance held it up for Tisha's inspection. As much as it pained her to do so, Tisha had to admit the woman had skills.

The knee-length white A-line skirt with black floral embroidery at the bottom would look great with the black tie-neck halter shirt and black wedge heeled shoes. Of course, just because she liked the choice was no reason to let Nance know. "It'll do."

Then again, this was a woman she'd known for years. Nance wasn't fooled at all. "Girl, please, you know it looks good."

"Of course it does. I bought it." Tisha made a face at her laughing friend as she took the outfit out of her hand and walked over to the full-length mirror on her closet door. She held the outfit up against her body, once more giving it a critical eye.

It was cute and flirty, showed a bit of skin without showing the whole package. It said, "I'm single and free to mingle, but I'm not a ho, so don't get it twisted." It was perfect.

"Are you going to get dressed or stare at yourself all day?"

"You know wha—" Before she could get her sentence out the doorbell rang.

"Let me get that for you."

"Uhh...no." Only god knew what would come out of Nance's mouth if she did.

"What?" The amused woman quirked a brow. "Are you going to answer the door...like that?"

Tisha looked down at the outfit still in her hands then back at her smirking friend. "Good point." She hung the shirt up on the clothing hook and began to remove the skirt from the hanger. "I'm only going to say this once though, Nance. Don't make me kill you."

"What? Don't you trust me?"

Was she crazy? "No."

"Smart *chica*." Nance headed for the door, pausing long enough to toss over her shoulder, "Take your time. I'll keep Uncle Nazi company."

"His name is Jonah," she shouted out, worried now more than ever.

She stepped into the skirt and then pulled the shirt over her head, careful to not mess her hair. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she slipped her feet into the wedge shoes and viewed herself in the full-length mirror. Not too damn bad. A quick spritz of perfume and she was on her way.

As she reached the living room, she heard Nance chattering away. Jonah stood, staring at the smaller woman in awe, as if he couldn't believe someone could talk so much and not take a breath.

"I'm here to rescue you."

He looked up with a smile and Tisha felt a clench in her belly at the look. Ah yes, now she remembered why she'd agreed to this date. There was definitely something here worth exploring.



\* \* \* \* \*

The evening had been a perfect dinner date. The drive to Santa Monica had been relatively traffic jam free and their conversation allowed Jonah to start to develop a better picture of Tisha. Once at the pier, she'd readily agreed to his restaurant suggestion and they enjoyed a delicious meal with a side dish of great conversation. By the time dinner came to an end and they left the restaurant, Jonah was just beginning to feel as if he was really getting to know Tisha, the real woman behind the sass. He wasn't ready for the evening to end, not yet.

"It's still early. Babysitter is paid up until midnight. How about we hang out here for a few minutes more?"

"Are you going to try to win me a stuffed animal?"

"If you like, or we can simply take a stroll on the beach."

"As lovely as that sounds, I'm not sure I'm up to it. I'm a bit tired. I had to work today. Friday and Saturday are my busiest days."

"Are you ready to go?" Maybe this date wasn't going as well as he thought it was. He was having a good time, but perhaps she wasn't.

"No, not at all. I'm not sure I'll survive the walk down to the water. The sand is the hardest part."

"Well, I'll give you a ride on my back until we reach the water."

"Either you're a lot stronger than you look, or I'm a lot heavier than you think," she teased.

"I'm willing to take that chance," Jonah said with all seriousness.

"Do you promise not to drop me?"

"Sweetheart, I think you should worry more if I ever plan on letting you down."

She tilted her head and stared at him with an odd look for a brief moment. "I'll walk...for now."

"The offer will be open-ended."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Walking in the cool night air, Jonah and Tisha strolled on the crowded pier, their voices drowned out by the loud, boisterous crowd. Trying not to get separated, Jonah took her hand, sending a current of energy from him to her. The crowd thinned out as they turned the corner and headed down toward the beach. Once they were free of the horde of people, Tisha tried to release his hand, but he refused to let go.

"Are you going to let loose anytime soon?" she teased, looking over at him.

"I hadn't planned on it."

"I do need it, you know. I've grown attached to it."

"So have I." But to avoid appearing like the besotted fool he was beginning to feel like, he released her hand. Reluctantly. Leaving the main street, they crossed the road and headed down to the beach. When they reached the golden edge of the sand, Tisha

paused to take off her shoes. Not one to be outdone, Jonah did the same, shoving his socks into his shoes when he finished.

Once they were both barefooted, they stepped onto the sand and began their casual stroll.

"Have you lived here long?" she asked, ending the comfortable silence.

"No," he replied, turning the question back on her. "What about you?"

"Yes. I've lived in Southern California my entire life."

"That's a strange concept for me."

"What?" He could see her brow furrow, even in the dimming light.

"Living in one place all my life."

"Move around a lot?"

"Foster kid. Half my life was spent moving."

"That's sad."

"It is what it is, you know?" Jonah shrugged his shoulders as he spoke. Although his childhood had been less than idyllic, he wouldn't change it for the world. He was the man he was today because of the way he was reared. Plus, if he had never been in foster care, he would have never met Cami's dad, nor become her guardian. Everything was as it was meant to be.

"You don't like to talk about it?"

"I don't have a problem talking about it. Dwelling on it is another thing altogether."

"We can talk about something else."

"Like you?"

"That would be a short conversation," she teased. "Born here, raised here, more than likely will die here. The end."

"That has to be the condensed version because I sincerely doubt someone as vivacious as you could be explained that easily."

"As you said earlier, it is what it is." Tisha stopped at the edge of the water and turned to him. The security lighting filling the pier lit the dark night, allowing Jonah to gaze down into her upturned face clearly.

"I don't buy that."

"Why not, because you've decided I'm something...more than I really am?"

"Why don't you just say what you were thinking? You're something special."

"Dinner on the pier, moonlight walk on the beach, flattering comments—if I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to seduce me."

There was nothing Jonah wanted more than to take her home and swathe her body with his, but he would never put Cami or Tisha in the uncomfortable position of the morning after. But that didn't mean he didn't want her. Far from it, in fact. "I would never try to seduce you."

"You wouldn't?" Her eyes widened.

"No. Seduction reeks of sneakiness and deception. When you come to my bed, it will be because you're absolutely sure that's where you want to be."

The look of surprise melted into one of pleasure. "When...not if."

"Most definitely when." He nodded his head to emphasize his point.

"Conceited much?"

"Confident. There's a difference."

"Says you," she said with a little laugh. "Now I see where Cami gets her self-assurance from."

"What can I say, she takes after her old man."

Laughing, Tisha stumbled and caught herself on his arm. The electric current he felt earlier when she touched him zipped through him again, and Jonah couldn't help but grip her tighter and pull her up to him. Looking into her startled gaze, he leaned forward a hair's breadth from her full mouth and whispered, "Damn, you're beautiful."

She licked her lips and took a deep breath. "I see what you mean about when."

"When you agree so prettily, you make it awfully hard not to say I told you so."

"Is that the only thing I make hard?"

"Hell no." Jonah pulled her close to him and said in a soft tone, "You've been making it hard for me all night."

Tisha's smile slowly slid off her face, and the look of laughter swimming in her dark eyes a mere second ago turned into a smoldering look of passion. "I was planning on loving you then leaving you and going on with my life."

"Well, I like the 'loving you' part."

"I don't have time for a relationship." Her insistent tone brooked no argument, but he was never one to follow the rules.

"Make the time."

She sighed heavily and shook her head. "I'm not at the right place in my life for the complications that occur with dating."

Although she was making it abundantly clear she wasn't interested in going any further, he wasn't willing to let this spark die so easily. "It doesn't have to be complicated at all."

"This isn't just going to be great sex, is it?"

At least she knew it was going to be great. "Not if I can help it."

"You're going to be a problem, aren't you?" she said with a wry smile.

"Funny," he said huskily. "I was thinking the exact same thing about you."

## Chapter Five

"This has gone on long enough."

Nance's voice startled Tisha. Lowering the magazine, she looked up to find herself the center of her coworkers' attention. It was midday on a Tuesday, the slowest day of the week for the shop, giving the five hairdressers too much free time on their hands. Tisha was using hers to read while the others were using theirs to gab. And the only thing the women in Q's Salon liked to do more than shop, was gossip. From the expectant looks on everyone's faces, Tisha was the belle of the ball today.

"What?" She closed the magazine and set it down on her lap. Maybe if she played dumb they'd let her off the hook.

"Don't 'what' us." Ava snorted. The tall lanky African-American woman spun her chair around until she was facing Tisha. She was the oldest beautician in the shop, something she felt gave her the right to act like the matriarch of the place. "We want the dirt."

So much for that plan. "Then you need to talk to a farmer because I have none."

"You have none, or you have none you want to share?" queried Nance, astute as always.

"Pick one." Tisha had never been one to share the details of her intimate life before, lord knew, she wasn't going to start now.

"You cannot tell me you've been seeing that fine man for over two weeks now and you still have nothing to share." Freddie shook her head as she wiped down the shampoo bowls at her station. She was the youngest but somehow the most sexually experienced one of them all. "I don't believe it."

"Too bad, so sad for you." Tisha smirked.

"You're just being selfish," Gigi grumbled, crossing her arms over her massive chest. The woman had natural triple D torpedo boobs, but could braid hair like no one's business. She was also the nosiest person Tisha ever met and the last person Tisha would ever dish with.

"No, I'm just keeping my private life private."

"This is a beauty shop, girl," Ava felt the need to remind her. "Nothing you do is private where we're concerned."

"It is where I'm concerned."

"Come on, we're not asking for width, length and staying power..." Nance complained.

"Speak for yourself, girl," Freddie teased.

"We just want to know if you know what his width, length and staying power is," Nance continued.

"And why would I tell you four?"

"Because we're your nearest and dearest," Gigi said hopefully.

"Well, one of us," Nance added dryly.

"Still not a good enough reason for me." Tisha was adamant about not sharing too much information about her love life. Or, as the case was in this situation, her lack of love life. Despite the fact she was spending almost every free second she had with Jonah, they had yet to ease past the heavy petting and kissing stage. Not for lack of want on either of their parts, it was just hard as hell to get past second base with a very inquisitive nine-year-old hanging around.

The strangest part though, was she didn't feel any resentment toward Cami. In fact, she'd come to enjoy spending time with the little girl, almost as much as she enjoyed spending it with her very dutiful uncle. Still, a little nookie wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing.

"There's only one reason why a girl wouldn't brag about a fine man," Gigi noted. "And that's because he's not so fine." She held up her pinkie finger and wiggled it back and forth.

The other three women burst out at the insinuation, but to Tisha it was no laughing matter.

"That's not true."

"Aha," Gigi pounced, "so you're saying he's got a decent package."

"I didn't say...look, all I'm going to say is I'm completely satisfied."

"Completely?" Nance asked wide-eyed.

"Yes, completely."

"Well, here comes Mr. Satisfaction. Let's see if he feels the same way," Freddie said.

Tisha turned toward the door in abject horror as she saw Jonah entering the shop. They wouldn't dare, would they? Of course they would. Her saving grace walked through the door immediately following Jonah, however. Cami rushed past her uncle to Tisha and gave her a big hug.

No matter how crass the women were when no one was around, Tisha knew they would be on their best behavior since Cami was there. They might have been a bunch of big mouths, but even they had limits.

She returned Cami's hug then leaned over to get a light kiss from Jonah on the lips. As she expected, the women began to smooch each other and make disgusting sounds, which caused Jonah to chuckle. Somehow, Tisha seriously doubted he would be laughing if he knew the direction the conversation had been heading right before he entered the room.

"Ignore them," she said loudly.

"You can't ignore us, we're fabulous," Gigi declared, to the delight of the others. They began to preen and wax poetic about their wonderfulness, but Tisha just shook her head and turned her attention to the real prize in the room.

Instead of his normal workwear, Jonah was dressed casual, in jeans and a light gray polo shirt. Cami was dressed similarly, but in a pretty pink t-shirt with a ladybug on it.

"Hey, lady, why aren't you in school? Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes." Cami pulled back and made a face. "Today was parent-teacher conferences."

"Eeekk." Tisha remembered those days all too well, and they normally ended with her being sent to her room for a week. "How did it go?" Although the question was directed toward Cami, Tisha glanced up at Jonah to get the scoop. When he gave a small smile and a wink, she let out a breath she hadn't even known she'd been holding. She was so relieved Cami was doing well.

"It was fine," Cami said, giving Tisha the answer she already knew. "It's just stupid. Why give me the day off school if I have to go in anyway to listen to the stupid teachers say how good I am? I could have told him that at home."

"Yes, but just think, now he knows for a fact how wonderful you are and he has to reward you."

"He does?" Cami's eyes widened and she grinned as she turned to face Jonah. "Reward, huh."

"This is your reward, brat, coming to see Tisha."

The peeved look that quickly came over Cami's face made Tisha want to laugh. "No offense, Tisha, but that's not a great reward. I see her every day."

"None taken," Tisha said loudly, trying to squash the chuckles radiating from her coworkers. "Not to put myself down, but I think she's getting a bit gypped myself."

Jonah raised his hands in mock surrender. "We're going to go get ice cream too. Besides, we actually came for more than one reason."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to see about getting Cami's hair braided."

"That's Gigi's department." Tisha pointed to the other woman before Gigi could utter a sound. "If I do it I'd have to listen to her whine and complain about how I'm doing it all wrong, so it's just easier to let her do it."

"Amen," Ava muttered under her breath, a sound echoed by the other women in the shop.

"Okay," he said, moving past Tisha to speak to the other woman.

Tisha watched him for a moment before turning to face Cami once more. The little girl's hair was pulled back in one French braid, a style she'd painstaking taught Cami to do over the course of a weekend. Unable to resist, Tisha reached out and teasingly tugged it, earning her a smirk and nudge from Cami.

"So what's with the new 'do?"

"I'm going to visit my cousins this weekend."

"Visit?" Tisha asked, hopeful. "All weekend?"

"Yes. I'm leaving on Friday and I'll come home on Sunday."

"Oh, that should be fun." *For all of us.*

Jonah returned to her side as Gigi took Cami to start the braiding process. Her body immediately responded to his nearness as she became hyperaware of his every movement. He leaned down, his head so close to her ear that she could feel the warmth of his breath as he spoke. "I hope you don't have any plans for the weekend."

Oh, she had plans all right, and they all revolved around getting some alone time with him, naked. "I do now."

"That's what I hoped you'd say." Jonah sent her a wink before walking back to where Cami was sitting. He spoke softly to her for a few seconds then came back to Tisha's side once more. "I'll be back in a bit, okay."

"Okay." Instead of kissing her goodbye, he merely brushed the back of his hand against her cheek before turning and leaving.

Tisha watched him walk out the door with anticipation of what was to come.

"My, my, my," Nance said quietly from beside her.

"What?" Tisha turned her attention from the departing man to her friend.

"If you didn't have anything to talk about before, you surely will after this weekend."

For once, Tisha agreed wholeheartedly with the other woman, and she couldn't wait for the weekend to get here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah leaned back against the counter as he watched Tisha chopping vegetables. It was a bit selfish on his part that he invited her to a home-cooked dinner at his house, especially since he couldn't cook. But she'd taken it in stride, although she hadn't noticed his slacking yet. Or if she noticed she hadn't said anything, which was even better. He'd really hate to mess up the nice dinner she had simmering in the oven. The smell of the lasagna baking had his mouth watering. He couldn't wait to give it a taste.

"Stop it."

"What?" Jonah glanced from the oven to Tisha, who was openly laughing at him.

"You keep making these little moaning sounds every time you look at the oven. You're acting as if you've never had home cooking before."

"It's just not home cooking," he teased. "It's your home cooking."

"Please, I've cooked for you before."

"Never when it was just the two of us eating."

"Why is that different?"

"It's more sensual." He dragged the word out to emphasize his point.

Tisha chuckled as she shook her head. "It's lasagna."

"Hmm..." Jonah moaned. "Even the way you say it is sexy."

"You're a nut." She tossed a small, diced carrot at him. "Grab the cucumber for me, please."

"Sure." It was strangely comforting how well the two of them worked together, moving around the kitchen to prepare dinner. Of course, most of the time she had to explain what he needed to do. Nevertheless, he was a willing pupil. Still, he stopped for a moment to take a drink and to gaze upon the fine-looking woman in his kitchen.

As usual, Tisha looked sexy as all get out. She wore a shirtsleeve red wrap-around dress that hugged her curves in much the same way he wanted to. If his calculations were correct, he could have her out of that dress with one flick of a button. Nice!

"So, this family Cami is visiting, are they her mother's relatives or her father's?"

"Her mother's cousin." The bitch, he added silently to himself, as he had since the moment he'd met the conniving woman.

"That's nice."

"Not really." He snorted, this time unable to keep the cynicism from his voice.

Tisha stopped chopping and turned to him with a quizzical look. "Oh, you don't like her."

He always heard, "If you didn't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all", so he decided to keep it short and to the point. "No, I don't."

Tisha furrowed her brow. "Then why do you let Cami go over there?"

"Because I have to."

"Because, why?" she insisted, which shouldn't have come as any surprise. Tisha just wasn't the type to let sleeping dogs lie. Apparently, it wasn't in her DNA.

Jonah ran his hand through his hair and sighed heavily. "Because ReShaunda has the mistaken impression that a single man in his thirties has no right to raise a young child, especially when said child is a black female, and not related to him by blood."

"Oh, I see."

Now that he'd started talking about the situation it was as if he couldn't shut up. "Yeah, she fought me in court and contested the will. Now mind you, it's not as if she'd been in Cami's life before her parents died or anything. She and Tia didn't get along. Hell, she didn't even come to the wedding, but she had no problem falling out at the funeral as if she'd lost her mind instead of her cousin." Just thinking about the woman's behavior that day had him seeing red. Poor Cami didn't have a clue how to respond. It was bad enough she'd just lost her parents, but then she had to go and see people acting like fools at the funeral. "She's just not a well lady."

"But you won."

If only that were the case, he'd be a happy, happy man. "Not exactly."



"What do you mean? Cami's living here with you." Tisha scooped the vegetables she'd been chopping into the bowl and began to mix the salad.

"We have joint custody of sorts." He took another sip of his drink, needing the alcohol to calm his overheated nerves. "The judge gave me physical custody and ReShaunda has visiting rights. I have to prove I'm appropriate to raise Cami. We've been doing this bullshit for a few years now and it's getting old. ReShaunda isn't happy with the ruling and she never lets up. She'd do anything in her power to get sole custody and push me out of Cami's life for good."

"What a bitch." Tisha frowned as she turned to face him. "Why can't she just leave you two alone?"

"Because she's a miserable lady who wants the world to be miserable with her. I seriously think she believes she's in the right and I'm in the wrong. She can't look past my skin color or my DNA to see that in my heart Cami is my niece. Hell, she's my daughter. And blood, skin pigmentation, and ancestry have nothing to do with it at all."

"Well, anyone who sees the two of you together knows you two belong together."

He smiled. "Thanks for your faith in me. I ought to take you when we go before the judge in three months."

"I'd go." She looked so serious it made him want to kiss away the frown lines at the corners of her big brown eyes. "Hey, expert witness here, ready, willing, and able to do whatever is needed."

Ready, willing and able had him thinking of things besides meeting with the judge. "You're an expert on us now, are you?"

"Yes." With a wicked little grin on her full lips, Tisha made her way over to him. She took the glass from his hand, set it on the counter next to him and moved into his arms. Jonah brought her in close to him. He placed one hand on the flat of her back, the other on the curve of her ass. "But I'm sure there are a few things I need to bone up on before I take the witness stand. If I'm going to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, then I'm going to need to know every little—"

"Big," he corrected with a slap to her derriere.

She smiled. "Sorry, big thing about you."

"I couldn't agree more." Jonah glanced over to the bowl on the counter then down to the oven before looking back at her. "Skipping dinner sounds very appetizing to me."

"Who needs to skip anything? I picked lasagna because it would take two hours to cook, leaving us plenty of downtime before...and after."

"Two hours...that will just get us through the appetizers."

"Promises. Promises."

It was time to test his theory about her dress. While maintaining eye contact with her, Jonah moved his hand from her ass to her side and unbuttoned the fastening. When the button pulled free, he set her away from him just an inch or two and watched

with supreme delight as the dress parted like the Red Sea, revealing a very sexy red bra and panty set.

"Is this for me?"

"Of course." Tisha took a few steps back then shrugged, allowing the dress to slip off her shoulders to the floor. "You took care of the ingredients for dinner, I thought it only fair I bring dessert."

"Fair is good. Real good." Jonah couldn't tear his gaze away from her. Damn, she was lovely. He thought earlier the ruby-colored dress she wore complemented her smooth brown skin, but it was nothing to the way she looked now. The red was still beautiful against her skin, but it was so much more. "Quick question."

"Yes?" she said with an arch of her brow.

"Is the drool," he brought his hand to his chin and wiped at it, "apparent or is it my imagination?"

"Oh, it's apparent."

"Good. I'd hate to be this happy and not have you know it."

"I know it."

"Wonderful." Jonah took a single step forward, putting him directly in front of her once more, then leaned over and swept her into his arms. His bold move surprised Tisha, who burst out laughing and quickly wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Jonah!" she squealed as he headed out of the kitchen and toward his bedroom. "Don't you drop me."

It was only a few feet down the hallway to paradise, and there was no way he was letting his prize go. "I'm not going to drop you. I'm going to hold on to you forever."

"Is that a promise?" Her question was softly worded as they reached the bedroom door. He didn't answer right away, instead he kicked the door closed behind him and moved to the side of the bed.

"No." He laid her down. "That's a fact."

## **Chapter Six**

Tonight was a long time in coming, but Tisha could already tell it was going to be worth the wait. She licked her lips as Jonah moved away from the bed and turned on the bedside table lamp.

Jonah looked pretty damn good in his clothes. She couldn't wait to see what he looked like out of them. As far as she was concerned, she'd already waited long enough.

"Feel free to undress at anytime," she teased, easing up on her knees so she could do the same.

"In a rush?"

"Oh yeah." Tisha reached her hands behind her back and unbuckled her bra then slipped the straps down her shoulders to free her breasts. Her nipples puckered immediately from a combination of the air and his heated gaze. "Like what you see?"

"To quote you, 'oh yeah'."

He kicked off his shoes and then pulled his shirt over his head, exposing his chest to her wanton gaze. She licked her lips at the thought of tasting the expanse of smooth, muscled skin. Her hands itched to pull him to her immediately, but she controlled herself, knowing they had the whole night to explore one another.

After he slipped his pants off, he pulled open his nightstand and withdrew a square foil wrapper before joining her on the bed. He laid it next to her without saying a word then pulled her over him until she was sitting on his lap, with a leg on either side of him. Before she could make herself comfortable there, Jonah gripped her hips and silently urged her to rise until her breasts were near his mouth.

Laughing, Tisha held on to his shoulders and looked down at him. "Can I help you?"

"No, I can help myself." Jonah moved forward and took a beaded nipple in his mouth.

Her next words were muffled by the moans that escaped as she leaned into his touch and dropped her head back. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to his caress as he took his time familiarizing his mouth with her breasts. He paid each one equal attention, licking, sucking and nipping at the tender tips until she thought she'd go mad from longing.

While his mouth was busy suckling her, his hands moved in an unhurried fashion over her back to her buttocks. He gripped her thong in his hands and pulled it down as far as it would go in the position they were sitting. Then he slipped his hand over her ass cheeks to caress her bare flesh.

The sensations of his mouth on her breasts and his hands on her ass had her yearning for more. Thankfully, Jonah didn't leave her wanting for long.

He released her nipple, and while still holding her, he rose to his feet. Laughing, she tightened her grip on his shoulders as he turned around until he was facing the bed and laid her back down. When he stood again, he grabbed hold of her panties and pulled them off her, stopping her laughter cold. There was a hungry look in his eyes that promised her satisfaction, and Tisha couldn't wait to collect.

"Damn, you're beautiful, but I want to see more."

"Don't let me stand in your way." She spread her legs in an unabashed display, more than willing to allow him to see her fervent desire. Her sex was slick and ready, which apparently appealed to Jonah, who groaned at the sight as he settled between her splayed thighs.

Before lowering his lips, he murmured, "If you taste as good as you look, I might not ever let you out of my bed."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing."

A wicked smile danced across his face. "Never." Jonah parted the lips to her overheated pussy and dipped his tongue in for a taste. Aroused beyond belief, Tisha surrendered to the sinful delight of his mouth. His tongue, his lips, pleased her as none ever had before. Jonah was a patient and giving lover as he feasted between her legs.

Teasing her, he flicked her clit with his tongue in rapid succession before finally taking the heated button in his mouth and sucking. Tisha arched her back and dug her heels into the mattress as he added his fingers to the love game, thrusting them over and over into the deep well of her sex.

The man was a master with his tongue, finding all her sweet spots and teasing them until she was writhing on the bed. Her head rolled back and forth on the mattress as he brought her higher and higher.

Tisha swiveled her hips and held on for dear life to the bed as Jonah fingered her. His touch was like fire to her flame. Unable to help herself, Tisha gyrated on his fingers. Moaning and arching, Tisha rode the orgasm washing through her body like a tidal wave. Her body felt aflame and she wasn't sure if she could take one more second of the intense gratification.

Releasing the sheet, she reached between her thighs and grabbed hold of him. "Jonah, please fuck me..." Tisha begged as she tugged at his hair. She couldn't take another second of this sweet madness. She wanted him inside her. No. She needed him inside her.

"I plan on it."

"No. Now."

Jonah reached up, took her hands in his and pulled them away from his hair, forcing her to release him. He forcefully moved them back to her side and pressed them into the bed. "When I'm ready."

"But I'm ready." Tisha wasn't above begging to get what she needed.

"No, you only think you're ready. Let me show you what ready really is." Jonah slipped his fingers and his mouth back to her pussy and began his sensual assault anew, driving Tisha once again over the edge of reason as he pleased her into another mind-blowing orgasm.

Breathing heavily, Tisha lay limp as Jonah rose from between her legs and pulled his boxers past his bulging erection. She watched him through heavy-lidded eyes until she caught the first glimpse of his cock, then her eyes widened in delight. He was long, thick and hard, just as she liked. If she were a gossip she'd have a lot to tell the girls come Tuesday morning.

Picking up the condom, he quickly ripped through the wrapper and tossed it carelessly on the floor. Jonah took his cock in hand and pumped it a few times before slipping on the condom. She liked the fact he was prepared for the evening and didn't hem and haw about protection. It said a lot about him as man, and made her respect him even more.

"You taste better than I ever could have imagined," he said as he climbed on the bed beside her and positioned himself against the slick entrance of her pussy. "Now it's time to see if you feel as good as I dreamed."

Leaning over, he took her mouth with his. Tisha could taste herself on his lips and tongue as he kissed her. He placed his hand under her leg, raising it higher as he laid his other palm flat on the bed next to her head, all the while feasting on her mouth.

Not to be outdone, Tisha wrapped her legs around his waist and moved her hands to his lower back, loving the feel of his cool skin against hers.

Jonah pulled back slightly as he broke their kiss and moved his hand between their bodies to center his cock. Tisha took the moment to speak softly to him before she lost the little piece of her mind. "I feel as if I've been waiting for this moment forever."

"It's a feeling I know well." Then he thrust deep inside her and every coherent thought she had faded away. Tisha bit back a moan as the onslaught of pleasure rose as rapid as quicksand to swallow her whole. She felt stretched to the breaking point, able to climax at the simplest move. It was almost as if her body had never known pleasure before this night, before this man. The way he filled her felt so right it was scary but also very arousing.

"God," Jonah rasped, putting into words what she couldn't even sound out at this moment.

Her pussy clenched hungrily around his thrusting shaft. Ravenous for more, she shifted and moved her legs up his back. The new angle allowed him to sink even farther inside her cavern, allowing him to fuck her deeper than any man had before.

"Take me," he groaned against her neck. "That's it. Take me."

And she did, giving as much as she got. For every thrust he gave her, she pushed back into him, taking him deeper and deeper, until the thick crown of his cock brushed against her cervix.

Never before had anything ever hurt so good in her life. Tisha bit into her bottom lip in the hope of quieting herself as the pressure built inside her. But Jonah wouldn't allow her to silence her pleasure.

"No. Don't fight it." He bore down on her, fucking her into the mattress until she began to think she was one with the sheets. "I want to hear you scream."

"Jonah..." she cried out as he filled her, and then some. "Jonah...yes...yes..."

He drew back then drove forth once more. And that was all it took. Tisha bucked beneath him, clawing his back with her nails as she came like a freight train.

Instead of slowing to allow her to catch her breath, Jonah sped up, riding her to another mind-shattering orgasm before he too came. "Ohhh...fuck..." Despite his release, he was still pumping away inside her, only slower now and not so fierce. After a few steady strokes, he groaned and leaned forward, resting his head beside her while propping himself up on shaky arms. His breath was ragged against her ear.

"Damn..." Jonah pulled out of her body and turned, collapsing on the bed next to her. Their heavy breathing was the only sound for a few long moments. Reaching over to his nightstand, he grabbed a Kleenex and made quick work of removing the condom before setting it on the table. He then turned slightly to look over at her. "You really should come over to dinner more often."

Chuckling, Tisha turned so she was facing him and laid her head on his shoulder. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"More than words can say." Jonah began to caress her back. "You know wh—"

The phone suddenly rang, interrupting whatever it was he was about to say. Frowning, Jonah glanced at the table. "I need to get that."

"Sure." Tisha sat up, making room for Jonah to do the same.

Instead of answering it right away though, he looked at her with regret-filled eyes. "If this were another time, another place, I wouldn't answer the phone at all, but with Cami..."

Tisha placed her finger over his lips, silencing him. "You don't have to explain at all."

Jonah kissed the tip of her finger before turning and reaching for the phone. "Hello."

Lying back down, Tisha closed her eyes and snuggled into the mattress contemplating a quick nap before dinner. She felt utterly and completely wrung out, but in the nicest of ways.

"Calm down, baby. I'll be right there." At the urgent tone in Jonah's voice, she opened her eyes and sat up as he jumped from the bed.

"What's going on?"

"Cami wouldn't say. She just kept asking me to come and get her."

"What about the visitation rights?"

"Fuck that." Jonah grabbed his boxers and slid them back on. "Something is wrong and I'm going to find out what."

"Not without me you're not." If someone was messing with Cami, there was going to be hell to pay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah couldn't get the sound of Cami's angry voice out of his head as he drove the ten-minute trip to ReShaunda's house in stone silence. Just thinking of what could have possibly upset his girl so much had him seeing red. If ReShaunda said or did anything to Cami she was going to have to deal with him, and to hell with the judge and his stupid-ass court order. No one fucked with his family. No one.

Furious now more than he'd been when he hung up the phone, Jonah willed the lights to turn green on his demand. The longer it took, the more he brooded on the unknown. He glanced at his cell phone sitting in the cup holder, willing it to ring. He didn't want to call back to stir up more trouble, but he wanted to know what was going on.

Was Cami still upset? Had she locked herself up a room to avoid ReShaunda? Was she hurt? The questions picked at his brain like a crow at a farmer's crops.

"Fuck!" he muttered under his breath, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel in frustration. "Turn already."

"You need to calm down before you have an aneurism."

"This is me calm."

"Then be someone else calm because your calm is scary as hell."

Jonah shot Tisha an aggravated look. Instead of backing down, however, she reached over and patted his thigh. "Cami needs you with your head in the right space. If you go over there all Papa Bear you're not going to help matters. Only cause them to escalate."

"That's the problem," he gritted out. "I don't know what's going on."

"And cursing out the light isn't going to get you any answers."

"Your logic isn't appreciated right now."

"Fine. Go."

"Go?" He frowned in confusion.

"Light. Green. Go."

"Oh." Jonah turned his attention back to the road ahead and floored it.

In just a few minutes they reached the subdivision where the evil witch lived. The anxiety and anger he felt subsided a bit when he pulled in front of ReShaunda's house.

The lights shone on the lower floor and he could see a silhouette of someone through the front window. Good. He was expected.

Cutting off the engine, Jonah turned to Tisha, who was reaching for the door handle and laid his hand on her arm. Startled, she turned back to face him, confusion written all over her face. "What?"

"I need you... Will you wait here?" Jonah waited for her to rail at him for bringing her all the way out here then forcing her to stay in the car, but to his surprise, she didn't.

She didn't even look angry. "Of course. Take your time."

"Oh, this won't take long." Just long enough for Cami to get her things so they could go. "I'll be back." Jonah put his hand on the door handle then had a second thought. Acting quickly, he turned around and kissed Tisha. "Thank you."

She smiled, her eyes lit with compassion. "You're welcome. Now go get our girl."

He exited the car and headed up the walk, breathing deeply as he tried to calm himself. Tisha had been right, he needed to be in control here, at least until he knew the whole story. He rapped sharply on the door and then waited a moment before ReShaunda answered.

Her lips thinned with anger when she saw him. From her apparel, Jonah was willing to bet he wasn't the only one getting ready for bed when the shit hit the fan. "This is ridiculous."

"I want to see her." Jonah wasn't going to debate the point with her. He was there for one reason and one reason alone. "Where is she, ReShaunda?"

"Upstairs where she belongs." The angry woman crossed her arms over her chest. "I will not be disrespected in my home. Not by her, not by anyone."

Cami was a mouthy little thing, but she wasn't disrespectful. For his little girl to have done something like that she had to have been provoked. "Let me talk to her."

"Why? You're just going to upset her more."

"More." He tested the word out, not liking the feel of it at all. "What upset her to begin with?"

"Nothing."

"And that's why she called. For nothing?"

"This whole thing is being blown out of proportion."

The longer she stalled the more insistent he became. "It's too late for this shit. Get her now."

"Or?"

Jonah's nostrils flared. "Or I'll do it."

"Uncle J." The front door was pulled open from behind ReShaunda by Cami. Her eyes were bloodshot, as if she'd been crying. "I want to go home."



That was all he needed to hear. Reaching past ReShaunda, he took hold of Cami and pulled her past the irate woman, not caring that the move caused ReShaunda to lose her balance and stumble into the doorframe. "What's going on, baby?"

"She..."

"Oh for goodness' sake," ReShaunda interrupted. "If we're going to do this, let's take it into the house, please. I don't want to upset my neighbors."

More like she didn't want her neighbors to get a feel for the real ReShaunda. "Fine." It made it easier for Cami to grab her stuff that way, anyway. "Inside, Cami."

He spared a quick glance behind at the car before stepping in the house and shutting the door. The last thing he wanted to do was to cut Tisha out right now but he had to deal with this mess. "What happened, Cami?" Jonah placed his hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her and give her strength at the same time.

"She said you weren't my real uncle and that my momma was stupid to let Daddy talk her into making you my guardian."

Not this shit again. "I thought the judge was very clear about certain things we were and weren't allowed to talk about in front of Cami."

"Those weren't the exact words I said."

"Really, what were they?" His words were measured, but he could barely hear from the blood pounding through his veins. This "real" shit was getting old quick.

"I don't even remember now, but I'm sure it wasn't that." And he was more than sure it was. "She's exaggerating."

"I am not. You said I'm going to be moving in here soon and I won't get to see Uncle J anymore."

Jonah had to unclench his jaw to even respond. "Funny, that's not the way I remember the agreement working."

"I said if she wanted she could move in here. Wanted."

"Why would she want to, ReShaunda?" Hell, he was surprised her kids hadn't tried to escape yet.

"To be with her family. Her blood."

"I am her family."

"Oh please, you know what I mean." ReShaunda turned to Cami and smiled falsely at the little girl. "Don't you enjoy visiting your cousins and playing with them?"

"Not enough to move in here."

Jonah tightened his grip on Cami. "Even if she did, it's for the court to decide. Not a nine-year-old."

"I think she should have some say."

"I don't think you'd want to hear what she'd have to say." Jonah was more than convinced Cami would want to live with him. For the life of him though, he couldn't understand why ReShaunda didn't see that.

"Maybe I'd prefer to hear what a new judge has to say."

"There isn't—" Jonah let out a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. This was going to do no good. ReShaunda heard what ReShaunda wanted to hear. "Cami, get your stuff. We're leaving."

Cami must have been prepared because she ran to the steps and back again in seconds, suitcase now in hand.

Moving quickly, ReShaunda blocked the doorway and gave him a hostile glare. "You know I'm well within my legal rights to insist she stays."

"You could try."

"But legally..."

"You could try," he repeated with contempt. "But I'm walking out this door with Cami. Whether I have to step over you to do it is entirely up to you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm stating a fact."

"I'm going to call my lawyer."

Jonah thrust his hand in his pocket and felt around for some change. He pulled out the largest coin he had and slapped it on the hall table. "The phone call is on me. We'll see you in court. Now move. Please." He added the courtesy for Cami's sake, biting back the word "bitch" in the process.

Furious, ReShaunda moved from in front of the door. Jonah didn't wait for her to open it. He did it himself, taking Cami's hand in his to ensure ReShaunda wouldn't try anything stupid. He wasn't in the mood for stupid right now.

To her credit, ReShaunda didn't say a word, allowing him to bypass her and take Cami out of the house. Once outside, Jonah took the suitcase from his niece's hand then bent and whispered in Cami's ear, "Go get in the car. I'll be right there." The little girl ran straight for the car, not looking back to say goodbye.

When Tisha saw Cami coming, she quickly opened the door and embraced the little girl before helping her into the backseat.

"Who's that?" ReShaunda questioned, stepping out behind him.

"No one you need to worry about."

"You know, you could have made this a lot easier for both of us if you'd made her stay."

"And you could have made it a lot easier for all of us if you would just let it go. She's mine, ReShaunda. She's where she's supposed to be."

"It will be a cold day in hell before I accept that."

"Then buy a coat, sweetie, because you're in for a long winter." Shaking his head in disgust, Jonah turned and headed after Cami.

"This isn't the end of this, Jonah," ReShaunda called after him.

"I didn't think it was for a second."

## Chapter Seven

After locking up downstairs, Tisha headed upstairs to shower and get ready to go to sleep. It had been a very long day. Parts good and parts bad, and it was time to put both parts to bed.

Tisha had barely settled in bed when the phone rang. Picking it up, she glanced at the caller ID and smiled. "Hey."

"Did I wake you?" Jonah asked. He sounded tired and weary, much to her dismay.

"No, I'm still awake." Tisha took a moment to prop two pillows behind her so she could get comfortable before asking him, "Are you okay?"

"No," he laughed bitterly.

"Is there anything I can do?" She wanted to be there to wrap her arms around him, but she knew he had to be with Cami right now.

"You're doing it."

"What?"

"Talking to me. Being here for me."

Tisha wanted to say "always" but she bit it back at the last second. "That's what friends are for," she said instead, instantly rolling her eyes at the cheesiness of her words.

"Friends." There was a long pause before he continued. "Is that what we are?"

She wasn't really sure where he was going with this so she decided to try to keep it light. "I hope so."

"Let me rephrase. Is that all we are?"

"I wouldn't say 'all'."

"Then what would you say?"

Tisha thought for a moment before speaking honestly. "I'm not sure. 'Boyfriend and girlfriend' sounds a little lame. 'Lovers' seems too simple and common."

"Then maybe we should invent a new word."

"A new word?" Tisha smiled and leaned back more into her pillows.

"Yes. Something that will encompass everything we are."

"What about... 'flovers'."

"Flovers?"

"Yes, friends and lovers combined."

Jonah laughed which made her smile widened in return. "Flovers. That's a good one."

She was glad she had him laughing and the former weariness in his voice was gone. "I aim to please."

"And you do."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you." She could hear the sincerity through the phone line. He wasn't merely spouting platitudes to be polite.

"For making you laugh?"

"For that, and for coming tonight."

"All I did was wait in the car." It wasn't all she wanted to do though. When she saw the look of anguish on Cami's face, Tisha developed a strong dislike for ReShaunda and an almost uncontrollable urge to beat the woman down for the hurt she put both Jonah and the little girl through, but that wouldn't have accomplished anything.

"That wasn't all you did. You were there for me. Something I'm not used to. The only person I've ever really known who had my back was Cami's dad. And when he died, I thought I'd never have that again."

"You thought wrong."

"I guess I did."

After a brief silence, she turned the conversation back to the matter at hand. "Did you get Cami settled in?"

"Yes, and I stayed with her until she fell asleep."

"You're such a good dad." She might not be a mom herself, but she could recognize a good parent when she saw one.

"I learned from mine."

"You did?" she asked, confused.

"Yes, I do the exact opposite of what he did. Starting with just being there." Jonah could have used his upbringing in foster care to blame the world for any and all woes. Instead he was turning around the life of one little girl.

"Good place to start."

"I thought so." Jonah sighed heavily. "Enough about me. Let's talk about something else."

Tisha was happy to comply. "Such as?"

"You and what you're doing."

"I'm lying in bed."

"I like the sound of that." His voice deepened, causing her womb to contract.

"Then you're really going to enjoy the sound of this. I'm not wearing anything but a smile."

"Hmm..." His sexy rumble sent a tiny shiver coursing through her. "That's my favorite outfit of yours."

"I thought you'd approve."

"I wish I was there right now."

So did she. "You and me both." Tisha reached over to her nightstand and clicked off her light before leaning back against her pillows. "What about you? What are you wearing?"

"Pajama bottoms."

Tisha closed her eyes and tried to imagine him. "Do they have something sexy on them, like lips or chili peppers?"

"Chili peppers?" He chuckled.

Tisha opened her eyes at the sound of his amusement. "Okay, it's not as sexy as it would be hot, but you know, paint a picture for me to carry with me to sleep."

"How about I give you something better to carry you to sleep?"

"Like..."

"An orgasm."

"You already did that." Many, many times.

"And I want to do it again."

Her pulse quickened. Man, she had it bad. "How do you plan on doing that?"

"By getting you off while we're on the phone."

Even though Tisha had an inkling this was the direction their conversation was headed, her heart still skipped a beat. "I like the sound of that, but—"

"No buts. I'm not letting you off this phone until I hear you come for me again." His tone brooked no arguments.

"I don't want to be the only one getting off."

"You won't be. Let me go lock the door. Wait for me." As if she had any place better to be. It took only a few seconds before he was on the line once more. "You still with me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you own any toys?"

Tisha glanced over at her nightstand. "Maybe one or two."

"One or two?"

"Or five or six," she admitted begrudgingly.

"Really?" Interest filled the line.

Tisha's cheeks warmed. "I enjoy variety."

"I guess you do." She could hear the pleasure in his voice. "You're going to have to show me your collection one day."

Now that sounded like fun. "It's a date."

"I'm looking forward to it. I want you to take out a toy. Your favorite one."

"My favorite toy is across the street with you," she teased.

"And it's hard and aching for you," he said huskily.

Tisha licked her lips. "Ohh."

"I've been hard since the minute you answered the phone."

The image of his cock hard and ready for her made her mouth water. "That's a long time."

"I'm sure you'll make it worth my time."

"I'll try." Without turning on the light, Tisha leaned over and reached between her bed and nightstand and picked up her Hitachi Magic Wand. It was her favorite sex toy, the one that got her to the finish line quicker than anything else ever had. She sat back in the bed and settled against the pillows. "I have it."

"What did you pick?"

"My wand."

"What's that?" Curiosity laced his question.

"It's a vibrator."

"Describe it to me."

Tisha glanced at the wand and tried her best to describe it. "It's wide with a flexible bulb-shaped head and a pretty long arm to grip it with."

"Long is good, the better for fucking you deep."

She chuckled and disabused him of that notion. "It's not an innie toy. It's for clitoral stimulation only."

"Is that why you enjoy it?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"Yes, and the fact it plugs into the wall."

There was a brief silence. "It plugs in?"

"Yes, which is a good thing because I don't have to worry about the batteries dying at an inconvenient moment."

"Now we wouldn't want that to happen. I'm going to assume it has a cord and you're not straddling the wall or anything."

"Yes," she laughed. "It has a cord."

"Good to know. Are you lying under the covers or on top of them?"

"I have a sheet covering me."

"Take it off. I want nothing touching your sexy brown body but your hands and your toy."

Tisha obeyed without hesitation. "Okay, it's off."

"Good. Spread your legs for me. Open them wide."

Licking her lips, Tisha did as he requested, shivering as the cool breeze from the overhead fan drifted across her heated sex. "They're open."

"Hmm...damn, I wish I were there with you."

"What would you be doing if you were?"

"I'd be lying between your thighs, eating your sweet pussy." She could almost see him licking his lips at the prospect. "Are your nipples hard?"

"They are now."

"Oh...does the idea of me eating you out make you wet?"

Tisha wanted to scream *God yes*, but thought better of it. "Yes, it does."

"Good." His voice was as heated as her body. "I want your nipples hard and your pussy wet."

"They are." She was so turned-on right now just from the husky sound of his voice, she had a feeling one touch of her wand would have her bursting into flames. And she couldn't wait.

Jonah had stood to push his pajama bottoms to the floor with one hand while gripping the phone tight with the other. It was a complicated move that took longer than he or his cock preferred, but it got the job done while allowing him to keep the phone to his ear. He didn't want to miss a single second of tonight's little adventure.

After stepping out of his pants, he lay on the bed and closed his eyes. He lightly began to run his hand over his stomach, slowly easing it toward his waiting cock. Even if it killed him, Jonah was going to make this last, he was going to draw it out and savor it like the tasty treat it was.

"You still there?"

"Yes, baby. I'm here." Jonah ran his fingertips over the rigid length of his shaft before taking his cock in hand. He was hard enough to split wood. "Just getting a mental picture of you in mind."

"How's it working out for you?"

"Good," he said, stroking his erection. "Damn good."

"That's what I want to hear." The sound of her soft voice was almost as good as her hands gliding along his spine.

"You know what I'd like to hear."

"What?"

"You coming."

"Then what should we do about that?"

"I have a few ideas." More than a few.

"Such as..."

"I want you to put the wand aside for now and use your fingers to get your nipples hard."

"They're already hard."

"Because of what we're doing, or because you're cold?"

Tisha let out a soft, dirty, little laugh. "There's nothing cold about me. I feel hot. Scorching hot."

"You're not alone. Even though they're already hard, I want you to tease your nipples. Take them between your fingers and pinch and squeeze them." Tisha let out a soft moan, which caused his cock to jump in response. "Yeah, baby. Just like that. I want to make sure you're completely ready for me. For my cock."

"I wish you and your cock were here now."

"Really. Why?"

"So I could take you in my mouth."

"And do what?"

She gave a husky little laugh. "What do you think?"

"You tell me, baby. In lots of dirty details. I want to hear everything you want to do to me while I stroke my cock."

"And I pleasure my pussy."

"No. Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because I want to make sure you're nice and wet for me."

"I assure you," her dry tone had him smiling, "that won't be a problem."

"Indulge me on this, Tisha, and I promise to make it worth your while the next time we're alone together."

"Hmm...promises."

"You can take that to the bank."

"If you were here right now, I'd drop to my knees before you and take your long, hard cock in my hand. I'd lean forward and engulf you in my mouth and take you as deep into my throat as I could."

"That sounds good." Jonah tried to keep his voice steady and himself from coming at the vivid imagine her words brought to life.

"Does it?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. Almost as good as the little hitch you get in your voice when I'm fucking you hard and deep."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

If he didn't know better, he would have sworn she was smiling. "How about I remind you again tomorrow? And the night after that. And the night after that."

"Better yet, how about you let me move my hand to my pussy?"

"What will you give me if I do?"

"The blowjob of your dreams the very next opportunity we have."

Jonah didn't even have to think twice. "Move your hand, Tisha, and touch your pussy."



"Yes sir."

"Don't tease the caveman in me, baby, with words like that. I might come to like it far too much."

"A little dominant, are you?"

"You have no idea." And it was probably a good thing she didn't. Jonah didn't know if she was ready to explore the darker side of his desire just yet. But there was time. There was lots of time. "I know you have the wand on standby, but I want you to wait before you use it. Right now I want you to touch your mouthwatering, tight pussy."

"Mouthwatering, huh?"

"There should be sonnets written about it." Just thinking about how good her hot sex felt around his cock had Jonah's fist tightening around his shaft. He'd been around the block a time or two, yet in all of his previous experiences he'd never had a woman fit him as Tisha did. It was almost as if she were made for him and him alone. As clichéd as it sounded, her pussy fit his cock like a glove.

"Hmmm..."

"Hmmm?"

"Oh yeah."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm touching myself."

Jonah's mouth watered at the thought. "Now I'm humming."

"And you have me wet."

"Only fair since you've got me hard." Jonah stroked his shaft as he envisioned Tisha caressing herself for his pleasure. "I never thought I would be jealous of your hands, but I am. I wish I was there, touching you. Caressing and filling you again."

"Not so sure you'd want to be filling me right now."

"Why is that?"

"Because you'd have to do it slow and gentle. I'm a bit tender at the moment."

"Don't worry, baby, I can do slow and gentle. I can do any and everything you want."

"Can you fuck me while I'm tied down?"

"Tied down. Tied up. You want it, I'll do it."

"Really, anything?"

"Anything," Jonah insisted. "If it made you wet, turned you on, made you come hard, I'd do it."

"Me too," she said into the phone breathlessly.

"Damn, you sound sexy, baby. Tell me what you're doing right now."

"I'm fucking myself with my fingers. Thinking about you. Thinking about you fucking me again. Thinking about you doing things to me."

"Such as?" Jonah pumped his cock with slow, even strokes as he listened intently to what Tisha had to say. This wasn't as good as being inside her, not even remotely close, but it was still hot. Running the heel of his hand over the head of the mushroom tip, he dampened his palm with his pre-come and used it as lube.

"I'm fantasizing about you tying me up and fucking my mouth with your cock."

That was officially on his list of things to do with her. "You know what I'm going to do after you're done sucking me?"

"No. What?"

He closed his eyes as he concentrated on the sound of her voice and the feel of his hand. "I'm going to move down the bed and spread your legs, and bury my face in your pussy. I'm not going to let up until you've come at least three times."

"Mmm..."

"Then I'm going to untie your hands, flip you over and fuck you from behind."

"Why from behind?"

"So I can spank that sexy ass of yours anytime I want to. Something tells me you're a very naughty little girl, Tisha."

"One who deserves to get punished?"

"Oh yeah, at every opportunity." Who would have ever thought his mouthy little babe would be submissive in bed. "While I'm fucking you from behind, I'm going to get my finger nice and wet and slip it into your ass."

"Fuck, Jonah." In the background, the sound of the sheets rustling could be heard. "I need my wand. Please."

"You ready to come, baby? To come for me?"

"Yes. Please let me come. Please."

He really liked the sound of her begging him. "Then get your wand, baby, and turn it on. Let me hear you get off, baby."

A low, motorized sound filled the lines between the sweet sounds of Tisha moaning his name. "Jonah...yes...ohh...Jonah."

"That's it, baby. That's what I want to hear." He picked up his tempo, stroking himself faster and faster to the beat of her pants. He could tell she was getting closer by the choppy sounds she was making in his ear. "I want to you come for me now, Tisha. Come for me, baby."

As if on cue, her sexy noises grew louder and louder, filling his head as his cock filled his hand.

"Jonah...yes...yes..."

"That's it, baby." He fucked his fist, wishing it were her pussy instead of his hand surrounding his aching flesh. Just when he was close to reaching his peak, Tisha cried

out his name as she came. Her cries of pleasures sent him over the edge. Gripping his cock as hard as he could, Jonah pumped his shaft fast and furious, groaning when jet after jet of come shot out onto his stomach. "Fuck. Baby."

And that was all he was able to get out for a few minutes that was actually intelligible. Lucky for him, he wasn't alone. The only sounds filling the phone line were moans as they both powered down from their climax.

"Have I mentioned I like the way you call to say good night?"

Jonah chuckled. "Let's say I'm glad you didn't have to click over for call waiting or anything."

"Me too. I think I'm going to sleep like the dead tonight."

"Dream of me."

"As if there was any doubt."

"Night, baby."

"Good night, Jonah."

After everything that had gone on today, Jonah was surprised to be able to say that it was a good night. It was all because of Tisha though. She had turned the bad into good with one whisper from her lips. "Good night."

Jonah waited until she hung up the phone before he did the same. He was a mess, his agreement with ReShaunda was a mess, his date night ended in a mess, yet he was grinning and happy. Tomorrow he knew he would have to pay the piper, but tonight he was just going to enjoy the good. And thanks to Tisha, there was more good than bad lately. He would have to find some way of repaying her. And find time to buy some rope.

## Chapter Eight

"Are you awake? Tisha?" Letting out a heavy yawn, Tisha leaned against the doorframe and smacked her lips. Man, she was tired. "Tisha?"

"What?" The impatience as her name was repeated forced her eyes to focus on Jonah, who was watching her with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. "What?"

"Did you hear a word I said?"

"No." Frowning, Tisha gave a halfhearted scratch to her bum and scrunched her brows. Damn, it was bright. "What time is it?"

"A bit after seven."

"Seven!" Now that grabbed her attention and explained the suit he was wearing. "I'm going back to bed."

Without bothering to shut the door, Tisha turned around and marched bleary-eyed back to her bedroom. It was too early in the morning for a booty call. If Jonah wanted to get laid, he would have to come back at a decent hour.

"Tisha."

No matter how far she walked, his voice kept up with her. She took a quick peek over her shoulder and let out a deep sigh. Damn it. He was following her. Grumpy now as well as tired, she sped up and smiled with relief once she entered her room. She was safe.

"I'm not going away."

Okay, maybe not. "No. Too early," she mumbled as she crawled into her bed and pulled the comforter over her head. Hmmm, nirvana. But as quick as she began to sink into the heaven that was her pillow-top mattress, she was yanked back to reality by a comforter-tugging Jonah.

"Still here." His singsong voice grated on her nerves.

Frustrated, Tisha released her death grip on the floral covering, opened her eyes and stared up at a smiling Jonah. "It's too early for sex." To her surprise, he burst out laughing. Apparently that was news to him. "What?"

"Honey, it's never too early for sex."

"Says you," she muttered, too tired to debate.

"What time did you go to bed?"

"Elevenish."

"And you're still tired?"

"You have a point?"

Her snappy response caused him to laugh harder. "You really aren't a morning person."

"I thought you knew that already."

"I guess I didn't quite comprehend it."

"Well, now that you do, scram." Tisha made a grab for the covers but was thwarted by Jonah, who whipped the comforter all the way off the bed. "Ahhh..." Tisha squeezed her eyes tight and kicked her feet in protest, like a child in the midst of a temper tantrum. "I. Don't. Do. Mornings." Why did people refuse to let her sleep? Did Jonah not realize he was taking his life into his own hands?

"Yes. I'm gathering that."

"I'm sleepy."

"So I see. But the quicker you talk to me, the quicker I leave."

She peeked at him. "No sex?"

"Not today." The laughter in his voice almost earned him a smack. "But we will revisit this issue of yours at a later date."

"Fine." She'd ignore him then too. Opening both eyes, she focused on him. She tried hard to disregard how good he looked, especially since she knew she looked like who did it and why. She was still wearing her headscarf, for Pete's sake. And her breath. She didn't even want to talk about her breath. "What do you want?"

"I need a favor."

"Before nine?"

"Technically I don't need the favor until after three."

Now she felt as if she wanted to cry. "And you couldn't have asked later this morning?"

"No, I wanted to ask you before I left for work."

Tisha didn't want to waste time and point out the fact he could have asked her last night when he and Cami were over for dinner. Nooo, for him to do that would have been too much like right. "Ask quickly then disappear."

"This might be out of the flower boundaries, but I want to know if ReShaunda can drop Cami off at the shop today and I'll pick her up later."

That got her attention. "Why?"

"My lawyer thinks it's best we have a designated drop-off spot. This way I don't kill her and risk jail time. It will be just for the next few visits. After last week's little drama, he thinks it's best for all involved, and I have to agree."

Even in her sleep-deprived state, Tisha could see the wisdom of the suggestion, although she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep her hands to herself either. But for Cami, she would try. "That's fine. But I have to know, why is she even going anywhere with her?"

"ReShaunda's youngest is having a gymnastics thingy and she wants Cami to come." Tisha rolled her eyes at the bullshit. "That's exactly how I feel about it. But it's not worth fighting over."

"You're nicer than I am."

"No, I'm not. Trust me. I'm not going to give her anything to use against me."

"Smart move."

"Plus, Cami does care for ReShaunda, and I know she loves the kids, she just hates the crap that goes with it."

"I don't blame her."

"So, you're fine with this?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, honey. I really appreciate it." Jonah leaned forward as if to kiss her, but stopped when Tisha held up her hand to ward him off.

She had three words for him. "Killer. Morning. Breath."

Smiling, he pushed her hand out of the way. "I don't care."

Crazy man. Puckering her lips, she begrudgingly gave in to a chaste kiss but edged her hands between them to push him away after a few seconds. "Must sleep now or risk burning someone's forehead later."

"Fine, Rip Van Winkle. Get your rest." He shook his head as he rose from the bed. "I'll lock up when I leave."

At this point she could really care less. "Good." She rolled over to her side away from him and closed her eyes. Then as a second thought, lifted her hand and pointed to the bottom of the bed. "Quilt."

"I'm getting it. I'm getting it." From the tone in Jonah's voice, he was enjoying this way too much for her peace of mind. She was going to have to make him pay later. But for now she was going to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eleven hours and five customers later, Tisha spotted ReShaunda and Cami entering the salon. When ReShaunda picked Cami up two and half hours earlier, she'd acted as if she were in a rush and could barely spare a second to introduce herself. She'd merely given Tisha a once-over before snottily announcing she was there to pick up Cami.

If Tisha hadn't recognized the other woman from last week, she would have never let Cami go with her. Now she was standing at the door, with her nose turned up as if she smelled something foul, and she had a death grip on Cami's shoulder.

To be honest, she didn't even think ReShaunda was going to come back in when she dropped Cami off. Tisha half expected the other woman to slow down and just push Cami out of the car seconds before she booked it out of the parking lot. But here she was, bold as day, with an attitude to boot.

And Tisha wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Who's that bitch?" Gigi asked softly from over Tisha's shoulder.

"Cami's cousin."

"Hmm," Gigi scoffed.

"Be nice," Tisha warned, speaking to herself as well as to Gigi. After securing the last clip in her customer's head, she removed the cape. "Set her up under the dryer for me, Gigi."

"You need any help with her," Gigi gestured with her head to ReShaunda, "let me know."

"I'm not the one who's going to need help if something goes down, but thanks."

Since ReShaunda didn't look as if she was going to go anywhere anytime soon, Tisha made her way over toward the two of them. She kept her gaze centered on Cami. From what she could see, the girl looked okay. She definitely wasn't as upset as she had been during her last visit. Good, now Tisha didn't have to reach out and touch someone. "Hello," she said in the friendliest tone she could manage.

"Hello," ReShaunda replied, finally moving her hand away from Cami and offering it to Tisha, who took it politely. "I'm ReShaunda Springer, Cami's cousin."

As if she didn't know. "Tisha Nichols, friend of the family."

"Close friend, from what I hear."

Oh, they were going to go there, were they? "Cami, why don't you go drop your stuff off in the back room and get started on your homework? If you get it done before your uncle picks you up," she emphasized the word to rub it in ReShaunda's face a bit, "then we won't have to hear him yammer on about it later."

"Kay." Like the good kid she was, Cami turned toward ReShaunda and gave the woman a brief hug. "I'll see you next week, Cousin ReShaunda."

The other woman returned the hug as she spoke in a false cheerful voice, "Call me if you need anything."

"Okay." With a parting smile, Cami headed toward the back room, stopping to say hello to the other beauticians along the way.

As if in silent agreement, both Tasha and ReShaunda waited until Cami was in the back room before speaking again.

"So," ReShaunda began, "I only had Cami for a couple of hours but she managed to mention your name in practically every other sentence."

"As I said, I'm a close friend of the family."

"The whole family, or just Jonah's?"

"The whole family." Tisha wasn't going to say more than she needed to. There was no way she was going to allow ReShaunda to use her against Jonah. Tisha might have been born at night, but she wasn't born last night. "I live across the street from them."

"How convenient."

Tisha thought so, but she kept it to herself. "Okay then, I have to get back to work."

"Maybe I can come in sometime and you can do my hair. I see what an improvement you've made on Cami's."

"Sure." Tisha wasn't sure if ReShaunda was trying to bribe her, or if she was following that old adage of keeping friends close and enemies closer. "Just let me know when you want to make an appointment."

"What about this Friday?" ReShaunda brought her hand up to her perfectly styled hair and smoothed an invisible strand back into place. "I normally get a wash and flat iron."

"I'm sure I can fit you in. Say four."

"Perfect." ReShaunda smiled. "It will give us time to get to know one another better."

"I can't wait."

"Good. I'll see you then."

Tisha watched ReShaunda through suspicious eyes. She knew the woman was up to something. For the life of her though, she couldn't figure out what.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You did what?" Jonah was so angry he could barely see straight. To say fighting with Tisha was not the way he pictured ending the night would have been the understatement of the year.

"If you're going to keep asking me to repeat myself, we're going to be here all night." From the sound of things, she was as frustrated as he was angry, but to him it didn't matter a good goddamn. She had betrayed him.

"I'm going to keep asking you to repeat yourself until it starts making sense." Jonah rose from the kitchen table and walked around the island, putting several feet of distance between Tisha and him. He needed the space to think, something he realized he wasn't able to do in her presence. Especially in the state he was in right now.

What on earth had possessed her to agree to do ReShaunda's hair? After everything he told her, after the things she'd seen with her own eyes, how could she possibly do anything for the woman who caused so much trouble for him and Cami?

Just thinking about all the ways he'd been fucked over by ReShaunda had his blood boiling. And to think Tisha, a woman he'd begun to have strong feelings for, was treating ReShaunda as if she were a long-lost friend was infuriating. Never had Jonah felt so betrayed. And he'd been abandoned by his family, so that was saying a hell of a lot.

"I'm confused here. Why are you so pissed off?"

Jonah glanced over at her in disbelief. Was she fucking kidding? "Because you made an appointment to work on ReShaunda's hair, that's why."



"Whoa." Tisha jerked back. "Let's get something straight here. She made an appointment with me. I didn't go out and solicit her or anything. She came to me."

"You say that as if it makes a world of difference."

"It does."

"How?" The word came out louder than he intended, forcing Jonah to glance toward the kitchen door. The last thing he wanted was for Cami to come downstairs in the midst of this argument. The poor kid had been through enough already without having to deal with this shit.

"It just does, Jonah." Tisha sat back in the chair, her face was a mask of confusion. "What's your damage?"

"Your betrayal is my damage." Tisha's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, but the look of shock on her face didn't stop Jonah from going on. He was too angry to hold back. "Are you that hard up for cash you have to take a job from my mortal enemy to get by?"

"Mortal. Enemy." Tisha shook her head as if trying to clear her mind. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Do I look as if I'm kidding you?"

"No, you look as if you might be a bit insane though."

"Insane?" His eyebrows went soaring. In what world was she living? Instead of calling him names, she should be apologizing. Then again, maybe she was right. Maybe he was insane to expect loyalty from his woman.

"Yeah." Tisha stared in amazement at him as she rose from her chair. "Don't you think you're taking this to the extreme?"

Crossing his arms, Jonah matched her stare with one of anger. He wasn't even close to extreme. Yet. "No, I don't. You know I'm not really sure how you were brought up, but where I come from, you don't stab a friend in the back."

"Come from." Her amazed stare morphed into one of irritation as she matched his stance. "You mean in the foster home?"

"Yes," he gritted out, refusing to allow himself to rise to the bait. "A place where you learn real quick who your friends are and who your enemies are."

Her rigid stance melted a bit as she tilted her head and regarded him with compassion-filled eyes. He didn't want to see pity from her. He wanted to see the person he had fallen for. "I'm not your enemy because I agreed to do her hair."

"The hell you're not." Jonah was emphatic on that subject. "How could you, Tisha? Forget about me for a second, forget about the fact you I and are seeing one another, and think about Cami. How could you do this to her? How could you befriend this woman after everything you saw with your own two eyes? Tell me that, why don't you?"

"How about I tell you this instead? You're an ass. No, a giant ass. I would never knowingly hurt Cami—or you, for that matter."

"Really, you have a real funny way of showing it."

"I can't believe you. To think I was under the mistaken impression I was doing you a favor."

"Favor!" His definition and her definition of a favor must be utterly different. "Think again, honey."

"Don't 'honey' me, dickhead. You're nothing but a big child."

He didn't want to get into a shouting match with her. In fact, he couldn't understand why she didn't see his problem with what she had done. "Right, because calling me names is so mature."

"It's a lot more mature than what I really want to do."

"What, take the knife out of my back and stab it into my heart?" Because that's exactly what she'd done, although he'd never let on to her how deeply she'd hurt him. He'd trusted her with Cami, and his heart.

"As if you have one."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you." Annoyed beyond belief now, Jonah came around the island and faced off with Tisha, who had moved from the table and stepped toward him until they were a few short feet apart. "Why would you agree to work for her? Why, Tisha?"

"I did it for you, you idiot."

Startled by her declaration, he stared at her in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I wasn't trying to defend ReShaunda. I was trying to find out what she was up to." Tisha took a step forward and jabbed her index finger in his shoulder. "Despite what you obviously think, I'm not stupid, Jonah. I know she's not asking me to do her hair because she's knocked out by how nice Cami's hair looks."

"Oh." His anger deflated as quickly as his shame rose and he had to resist the urge to rub his shoulder. He felt like an ass. Much as he supposed Tisha had declared him to be.

"Yeah, oh. She wants info from me. What kind, I don't know. But I'm sure she wants something. And she's just as big of a fool as you are for thinking I would give it to her."

"I didn't..."

"The hell you didn't." Tisha shook her head in disgust. "Really, how stupid do you think I am? If I were plotting behind your back, I wouldn't have told you about it. I would have just done it and you would have been none the wiser. But what do I do? I sit here with you and try to tell you about what happened, just to have you blow up at me without hearing the entire story."

"Tisha." Jonah closed his eyes for a few seconds and silently berated himself. Good lord, when had he turned into such an untrusting fool? Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and focused on Tisha. No longer did she have a look of anger, instead it

was one of disappointment. If he had the opportunity to pick, he would have picked anger over the one she was leveling at him, hands down. "I..."

"Save it." She held up her hand as if to ward off his words. "I didn't have to grow up in a foster home to understand loyalty, Jonah."

"Fuck." Annoyed at himself, Jonah dragged his hands through his hair, contemplating all the many ways he wanted to kick his own ass. "I'm...I don't know what to say." Sorry didn't seem as if it would cover it just right.

"Good, because I don't want to hear it. Cami has an appointment on Saturday. Drop her off in front of the shop. She's welcome inside. You're not."

"Tisha," he groaned as she pushed past him. "Don't leave. Let's talk about this."

She glared over her shoulder at him. "You don't know how to talk, Jonah. Just accuse. Falsely, I might add."

"Look, let me explain."

"I'm going to give you the same opportunity you gave me to explain. Goodbye, Jonah." Without sparing him a further look, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

"Fuck!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. When that didn't appease the rage bottled up inside him, he swept his arms wide across the island, sending the plates and silverware crashing to the floor.

"What's wrong?"

God, could this get any worse? With a heavy sigh, Jonah dropped to his knees and began to pick up the mess off the floor. "Nothing's wrong, squirt. Did you brush your teeth?"

"Yes." Cami stepped tentatively into the room. "Where's Tisha?"

"She went home."

"Already?"

"Yes." Jonah wanted to keep this as simple and straight to the point as possible. "We had a disagreement." He looked up at Cami and smiled. "But it's nothing for you to worry about. Everything is going to be okay."

"Then why is all this stuff on the floor?"

"You may not believe this, but your uncle has a tendency to be a big baby from time to time."

"I believe it, all right."

"Hey." He frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you act like you're my age."

"I do not."

"Sorry, Uncle J, but you do." She cocked her head to the side and shook it as if somehow their roles had reserved and he was the clueless child and she was the

responsible adult. "Do I need to bring up the whole garage blowup? Not your finest moment."

Snorting, Jonah rose to his feet. "Please don't. In fact, please don't ever mention it again."

"No can-do, Uncle J. I'm your kid. It's my job and pleasure to remind you when you screw up."

"Thanks," he said dryly as he pulled her into his arms. "What would I do without you?"

"I have no idea."

"Me either." Sighing, he shook his head and wondered how in the world he'd screwed up so badly. "Think flowers will do the trick?"

"Flowers, candy, jewelry and possibly money."

"Wow." He pulled back and looked down at a grinning Cami. "You're assuming I messed up bad."

"Well, she's not here, and you're throwing things around. I'm thinking this isn't a Hoops and YoYo e-card kind of thing."

"I was afraid you might say that."

"Want me to get your wallet?"

"No, you should get in bed and let me get busy cleaning up this mess."

"Yeah, good luck with that." Cami rose to her tiptoes and brushed a kiss on Jonah's cheek. "'Night."

"'Night." Jonah purposely left the word "good" out. From where he was standing, good had nothing to do with anything in this moment.

## Chapter Nine

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Tisha glanced up from the remains of her very unappealing lunch into Nance's sympathetic eyes. The kind way her friend was staring at her was as alluring as the food she was toying with. She wasn't in the frame of mind for either. That was why she'd chosen to eat her lunch in the small room in the back of the shop instead of at her station, as she normally did. Everyone seemed to get the implication of her action. Everyone that is but Nance. "I'm not in the mood to talk about anything."

"Well, here's the problem with that." Nance pulled out the chair across from Tisha and sat down. "I don't care."

"About?"

"Whether you're in the mood to talk. I'm ready to listen. So spill."

Tisha rolled her eyes but kept right along playing soccer with her fork and cold, hard rice. "Nothing to spill."

"Liar."

"Big butt." Tisha looked up and frowned.

"Hey." The size of her derrière was another sore point for Nance. Just another reason why it wasn't always the brightest choice to get into a sparring matching with a best friend. They always knew the good stuff.

"If you're going to call me names, then..."

"Whatever happened to sticks and stones?"

"They got left outside with all the other childish games."

"Speaking of childish—"

"I don't want to talk about childish." Tisha laid her fork down and sat back in her chair, sullenly crossing her arms over her breasts. "I don't want to talk about anything at all. I just want to sulk and pout and eat massive amounts of chocolate."

"And as your friend, it's my job to prevent that from happening."

"Why?"

"Because when your ass won't fit into your jeans, it will be me you'll be dragging to the gym. So, save us both the trouble and tell me what he did."

"He who?"

"The man whose phone calls you refuse to accept and whose flowers you keep throwing in the trash."

"What makes you think this has anything to do with him?" The words sounded lame even to her, but they couldn't be helped. Tisha refused to admit aloud what she could barely swallow inside. Jonah hurt her. Deeply.

"Because I'm not stupid." Before Tisha could open her mouth to dish out a snappy comeback, Nance narrowed her gaze and pushed on. "No comments from the peanut gallery?"

"Would I ever say something like that?"

"Yes."

Tisha couldn't help it. She smiled. "Good point."

"Just tell me wh—"

Good lord. Was she ever going to let up? "You're like a dog with a bone."

"And I'm going to take a chunk out of you if you don't come clean."

"There's nothing to come clean about." Maybe if she kept repeating the lie it would begin to ring true.

"What did he do to make you cry?"

"I. Don't. Cry." If nothing else, Tisha wanted to make that fact clear.

"Sure you don't."

The look was back. The "I feel sorry for you" look that set Tisha's teeth on edge. "I don't. And I didn't." But only because she forced it back. "He just pissed me off."

"How?"

Sighing, Tisha shook her head and briefly closed her eyes. She knew, without a doubt, Nance wouldn't let up until her questions were answered. Tisha could either give in and tell her or try to dodge her for the rest of her life. Since they worked together, and were best friends, Tisha didn't think her second choice held much water. "By being a guy."

"Normally I would say, 'nough said, but if he was just being a guy, I don't think you'd be this upset."

"He doesn't trust me." Just saying the words out loud had her heart clenching a bit.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. He thinks I'd betray him."

"With another man?"

"No."

Nance raised a brow. "Another woman?"

Tisha shot Nance an aggravated look. "Don't be silly."

"Look, I'm confused here. You have to work with me, woman."

"It's stupid. He's stupid."

"Obviously, if he could think for a second you'd betray him."

"Right." Tisha nodded her head in agreement. Maybe there was something to this talking-it-out thing after all. "He completely went off the deep end because I agreed to do ReShaunda's hair."

"You did what?"

The shock in Nance's voice had Tisha sitting back in surprise. "What?"

"Why would you agree to do that?"

If she had to explain this to one more person, she was going to go off. "To find out what she was up to of course."

"Who died and made you Inspector Clouseau?"

"No one. I was trying to help. Damn. You're acting as bad as he did."

"Hey, I'm not accusing you of betrayal. Just stupidity."

Irritation filled Tisha anew. "You're about to get hit."

"It won't be the first time, and not the last. I get that your heart was in the right place, but I think your brain might not have been. From everything you've told me about him, Jonah hasn't had the easiest life."

"Well neither did Oprah, but she turned out all right."

"Do you want to listen to what I have to say or not?"

"Does it matter? You're going to yammer away no matter what I say."

"True," Nance admitted with a small smile. "Then I guess the real question is, are you going to listen while sitting at the table or lying on the floor with me sitting on your back?"

Tisha had to admit, her friend had a way of painting a picture. "Those are my only choices?"

"Yes."

"Why do I put up with you?"

"Because you love me."

"What's that got to do with anything?" With a long-suffering sigh, Tisha gestured with her hand regally. "Continue."

"Thank you." Nance crossed her arms over her chest, and even though the other woman was shorter than her, attempted to look down her nose at Tisha. "As I was saying, Jonah has obviously not had things as good as you or I have, and the only person he ever truly trusted up and died on him. It's not so farfetched to see why the boy is lacking in the trust department."

"It's not that I don't get it. It's that I don't like it. I don't like that he doesn't trust me. He's basically put me in the," Tisha made air quotes, "other people category. And as far as he's concerned, there's him, Cami, and then the rest of us, who apparently are waiting around to stick it to him."

"Stick it to him?" Interest dawned in Nance's eyes and she smiled a wicked little smile.

"Not like that, sicko."

"What?"

Tisha tilted her head to the side and shot Nance a disbelieving look. "You know what."

"You said it."

"Can we please stay on topic? Jonah is an untrusting butthead, and I don't plan on seeing him anymore."

"Because he messed up once?"

"As you know, 'fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me' is my motto."

"Yes, and we both know how far that's gotten you."

Nance's comment caused Tisha to frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means there are two people in this relationship and both have some personal growing to do."

"Personal growing? Please. I am grown."

"You might be of age, but you're as emotionally mature as Cami."

"The hell you say."

"Tisha, I love you, you know I do, but the only reason you and I are still friends is because I refuse to allow you to push me away."

"That's not true." Tisha felt her cheeks warm under the accusation.

"Yes it is." Nance punctuated her words with a sad little smile. "Your one-strike-you're-out policy needs to be rewritten in the worst way."

"When did this turn from Jonah to me?"

"The second you thought it was all about him."

"It is. I did nothing wrong."

"You're right. You didn't. But if you let him get away, then it's you who's the numb nut and not him."

"All this name calling is getting old."

"As is this pouting." Nance stood and walked over to Tisha. "I know you care for him and Cami. And I must say, family life looks good on you. These last few weeks you've been happier than I've ever seen you. Don't blow it by letting him get away."

"But he's the one..."

"I know. Go to him. Yell at him. Threaten to cut his balls off. Do whatever it is you feel you need to do to make him understand how badly he hurt you then forgive him and move forward. That man is crazy about you and I know you're crazy for him. Don't let him get away to prove how strong you are."

With that parting remark, Nance left the room, leaving Tisha to marinate in the carnage of her now, not-so-high high horse.



Things were a lot simpler before she'd opened her door and allowed Cami to come in. Simpler but definitely not as enriching or enjoyable. Damn it to hell and back. She hated it when Nance was right, and the worst part was knowing her friend would never let her hear the end of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah was done pussyfooting around. Enough was enough already. He'd fucked up the good thing he and Tisha had going for them. No one knew that better than he did, but there was no way he could make it up to her if she didn't let him.

That was the main problem though. He'd been waiting around for her to let him make it better. Stupid move on his part because she hadn't budged from her stance that he was an untrusting asshole.

Not that he could completely blame her. What he had accused her of was low, especially seen now in the rearview mirror of hindsight. Tisha was unlike any other woman he'd ever met before, and she deserved to be treated better than the way he had treated her. He knew it, but he couldn't make it up to her if she didn't return his calls.

Tonight though, he was taking the option of avoiding him out of the equation. Enough was enough already. Jonah was tired of waiting. They were going to talk tonight, whether she wanted to or not. And he was camped out on her doorstep to ensure it happened.

If Tisha wanted him out of her life, then she was going to have to tell him so. To his face. He was an adult and he could take rejection as well as the next person. He was going to say his part first then if she still wanted him gone, he would honor her request. Begrudgingly.

Just as the night air took on a strong breeze, Jonah spotted a car coming down the street. He tensed, as he did every time he spotted a vehicle, then let out a deep breath of resignation when he recognized the familiar automobile.

She was home. It was time to pay the piper.

Jonah waited until her car pulled into the driveway before slowly rising to his feet. He wanted to make sure she saw him before she exited the vehicle so she couldn't accuse him of sneaking up on her. From where he stood on the porch, he could clearly see her expression through her driver's side window, and it wasn't one of extreme delight.

Oh well. If that's how she felt, he was going to have to suck it up and deal with it, but first he was going to apologize. And apologize right.

Hesitantly, Tisha opened her door and stepped out, her purse slung over her shoulder. Showing no fear, as usual, she calmly went up the walkway and stopped just inches away from him.

"Hey." Jonah shoved his hands in his pockets in order to keep from reaching out and pulling her to him as he truly wanted to. God, he missed her. It seemed as if it had been a lifetime since he'd last seen her and not merely days.

"Hey." Tisha's voice wasn't all that welcoming, but she hadn't ordered him off her property either. It was a start. "What are you doing over here?"

"Came to see you."

"Oh." She played with her keys, a gesture that could have either belied nerves or irritation. "How long have you been sitting out here?"

"What time is it?"

Tisha pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and glanced down at it. "Nine thirty."

"Oh, not long then," Jonah lied.

"How long is not long?"

He was afraid she would ask that. "Two hours and fifteen minutes."

Her eyes widened a bit but thankfully she didn't comment on it. Instead, she placed her phone back in her pocket and moved on. "Where's Cami?"

"At home."

His answer caused her to frown with disapproval. "You left her there by herself just to sit outside my house."

"Of course not," he denied, pleased she cared enough about Cami to get upset at the possibility of her being home alone. "I hired a sitter."

"You hired...a sitter." Her bottom lip twitched with unsuppressed amusement. "So you could stalk me. That's a first for me."

"I wouldn't put it that way."

"Really, how else would you describe the constant calls, flowers and the hanging out in front of my home for a couple of hours, if not stalker-like behavior?"

Well, when she put it that way... "The actions of a desperate man."

"Desperate enough to serve me cyanide-laced Kool-Aid then throw me in a well with only a dog named Precious for company?"

"Okay," Jonah was all kinds of confused. "You lost me at the Kool-Aid. I just came to talk."

"Talk," Tisha walked past him and slipped her key in the lock, "isn't necessarily your strongest suit."

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It does." After opening the door, she turned and glanced over her shoulder at him. "You might as well come in."

"Thanks." It was less than welcoming, but right now, Jonah wasn't going to be too picky.

Jonah followed her into her house and shut the door behind him before following her into the living room. After dropping her keys and purse on the coffee table, she sat in one of the chairs, removing any possibility he would be able to sit next to her on the couch.

Refusing to dwell on the bad, Jonah sat on the couch on the side nearest to her. "Thanks for letting me come in."

Tisha shrugged her shoulders as if it didn't matter one way or the other to her. "You wanted to talk. So talk."

"Okay." Where to begin? Jonah had come up with a million and one talking points, tens of thousands of things he'd thought of to say, and yet only one thing came to mind. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know. You said that already."

"Apparently not in the right way or else you would have forgiven me by now."

"Look, Jonah, it's nothing personal, I'm not big on forgiving."

"And I'm not big on giving up, so it seems as if the two of us have a problem." Jonah ran a hand through his hair before continuing. "It's probably the understatement of the year, but I have a few issues with trust."

"No." The mockery of her tone did not go unnoticed. "I would have never figured that out."

Jonah arched his brow but continued on, feathers unruffled. "I'm just going to keep talking here. Feel free to throw in any sarcastic remarks you think might fit at any time." His calm demeanor seemed to take a bit of the wind out of her sails. "I've never been one to lay blame on anything. Being beat when I was kid would no more give me the right to beat Cami than having people lie and mislead me would give me a reason to doubt you. This thing with ReShaunda has me on edge. Losing Cami isn't even an option for me. I couldn't love her any more had she been born of me instead of Gilbert, and like any parent, I put her safety and well-being above all else."

"I ne—"

"That being said," Jonah said loudly, steamrolling right over whatever it was Tisha was about to interject. "If I ever plan to be a decent parent to her, I need to learn how to balance my relationship and responsibility to her with that of any relationship I have with someone else. That someone hopefully being you."

Jonah paused and searched her eyes for any hint she was thawing a bit. Unfortunately, there was still only anger and hurt brimming deep within the brown depths of her heated gaze. "I'm sorry for hurting you. More sorry than I could ever express. I know you would never intentionally hurt Cami or me. I need you to know my reaction to what you said was more of reflex than anything else. I feel a need to protect her first and worry about all else later, which is of course wrong. In my defense, I'm new to this parenting gig. It's going to take awhile for me to figure it all out. I just hope at the end of the day, you're there by my side when I do."

"May I speak now?"

"Please."

"You're stupid."

"O-kay." Not exactly the response he was hoping for.

"Controlling, bossy, and I have to say it, a bit of an asshole."

"Have to?" Jonah questioned warily. "I'm not so sure that was a necessity. Maybe even borderline overkill."

"I don't think so."

"I figured as much."

"And to chance sounding utterly and completely childish, I'm really mad at you."

"For good reason."

"You hurt me and I heard you apologize, but sometimes saying sorry doesn't make it right."

"Then what does? Tell me and I'll do everything in my power to make it better."

"That's just it, Jonah. I don't know if you can." Tisha shook her head ruefully. "Sometimes things take time."

"I can give you time, Tisha, as long as I don't have to give you up."

Tisha stood suddenly and walked over to the front window, looking out on her lawn and across the street to his house. "I don't want to lose you either." Jonah sat up straighter at this first sign of good news. When she turned, however, he sat back again at the confused and hurt look on her face. "But that doesn't mean I'm ready to forgive and forget."

"I under—"

"No, you got to talk, now it's my turn." She sighed heavily. "You said you had issues with trust. Maybe I have my own issues. I don't enjoy being called a liar. And when I feel burned by someone I have a hard time forgiving them. You need to earn back what you stole from me."

"I'm willing to do that." Hell, he was willing to do whatever it took. He had run the gantlet in college during fraternity hazing. He could do this. "You just have to give me a chance."

"I'm willing to do that," she echoed his words with a small smile. "But if you make me regret it..."

Jonah rose, went to her and took her in his arms. "I know. I know. There will be hell to pay."

"Honey," Tisha wrapped her arms around his waist, "hell's got nothing on me."

"I'm not afraid of you, just of losing you."

"Then you better play your cards right."

"You don't have to worry about that." *Ever again*, he added silently. Next to Cami, Tisha was the most important person in his life and he wasn't going to fuck up again.

## Chapter Ten

"Can I ask you a question?"

Tisha pulled back so she could look into his eyes. "Yes."

"Are we okay?"

"We're," Tisha paused for a second to come up with the right word, "okay-ish."

"Which means?"

"Which means I'm still leery, but I don't not want to see you."

"Which parts of me do you not, not want to see?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are we going back to first date rules?" Jonah moved his hand to hers and gripped it tightly. "Hand-holding only, chaste kisses on the cheek and dates with a chaperon and a chastity belt." Then, with a wicked smile, he released her hand and moved it to her ass and squeezed. "Or since we proved we excel at the fighting part, can we try our hand at the making-up part?"

Tisha wanted to shake her head at his manlike behavior, but to be honest, she was more than ready for the kiss-and-make-up part as well. Of course she couldn't just come out and say that. Oh no. She had to make him work for it. "Sex, huh?"

Jonah moved his hand off her ass and held it, along with the other, up in the air. "I'm just asking. I'm perfectly fine with either choice."

"Perfectly fine." Hell, even she wasn't perfectly fine with starting back at the beginning.

"Well...fine-ish," he admitted with a hint of a grin before lowering his hands back to her waist. "Just know, I'm willing to put in the time, in and out of the bedroom, to make things right with us again."

"I see." Not only did she see, she appreciated where he was coming from and where hopefully he was going. The only problem was that although she loved his noble act, she really wasn't feeling it. Tisha wanted him even though she was still slightly pissed, but she refused to be one of those women who used sex as a weapon in the war of love. She was a grown-up, more than capable of putting aside petty differences to get her freak on. Or at least that was the lie she was going to tell herself as she sated her desire with him. "How about we start off in the living room and eventually make our way back to the bedroom?"

"Hey, I'm a self-starter, and more than willing to work from the ground up."

"Look at you, all prosy now." Stepping out of his embrace, Tisha hooked her finger in his belt loop and began to walk backward toward the couch. "A few days ago you couldn't talk around that massive foot of yours."

"I may be slow, but I do eventually learn."

Good to know. When she felt the edge of the couch against her legs, she turned him around until his back was to the couch. "And what was the lesson of the week?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Good." Tisha pushed him lightly and nudged him backward until he was seated then climbed over his lap and sat herself over the large bulge protruding from his jeans. "You'll be at the head of the class in no time."

"I've always wanted to be teacher's pet."

"We can sit around, trading witty repartee all night, or we can make with the loving."

"You know which one has my vote." His hands gripped her hips and he pulled her tight against him.

"How long do we have the sitter for?"

"I can't be gone too long, or else Cami will take it in her head I'm failing big-time and try to sneak out to intervene."

"Then I guess we'll have to make this quick and dirty."

"If we must."

"Oh, we must." She sat back on her haunches, trailing her hand down his chest to the waistband of his jeans. With nimble fingers, she unbuttoned his pants and drew down the zipper. Her hands delved inside, searching for the one part of him that never failed to satisfy her. Just before she reached her hard, sought-after prize, Jonah covered her hand with his.

"Let me." He nudged her fingers away and made quick work of releasing his hard shaft to her hungry gaze. "Keep looking at me like that and this really will be quick."

The way she felt at the moment, the quicker the better. "You say that as if it's a bad thing." Giving in to her desires, Tisha reached out and took his thick erection in hand. Jonah let out a deep groan as she began to pump him. "You carrying?"

"Yes, but you'll have to get up for me to reach my wallet."

"Pity." With a pout, Tisha released his cock and rose from his lap to slip off her shoes and pants. "But hurry."

"In a rush?"

"Yes." If she didn't get him inside her soon, she was going to explode, and not in a good way.

"A woman after my own heart." Jonah eased up and slipped his hand in his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. After taking out his billfold, he tossed it on the couch then pulled his shirt off before shoving his pants down to the floor. As Tisha undressed, she

watched him rip into a condom and sheath himself in record time. Apparently, she wasn't the only person in a hurry.

As soon as he was properly covered, she positioned herself back over him and lined his cock up with her overly saturated sex.

Their moans came out as one, both of them groaning in unison as she sank all the way down on his turgid length. The heady sensation took Tisha out of herself for a moment, preventing her from talking or moving. She was too busy enjoying the feel of being filled by him once more. And from the deep moan drifting up from Jonah, she wasn't the only one. "Damn, baby."

Licking her lips, she looked down at her lover. "Missed me, did you?"

"More than I can ever say."

"Then don't say a word." She began to move on top of him, slowly at first, making sure her pussy became accustomed to his length and width once more before she lost her mind and rode him hard. "Show me."

"My pleasure." Jonah slipped his hands under her shirt and gripped her ass cheeks tightly. Using the strength of his arms only, he urged her up and down, fucking her with long, deep strokes.

The passion between them was as good as she remembered, if not better than the beginning, but Tisha being Tisha, just couldn't let bygones be bygones. Not entirely anyway. "You know you're not completely out of the doghouse, don't you?" Closing her eyes, she tried to concentrate on speaking coherently. "I mean, I still have to run...run you through the wringer, as per the official girl rules...of dating."

"I'm so okay with that." He groaned, digging his nails into her hips. "Just don't stop fucking me."

"Doesn't quite...seem like punishment though."

"Oh, I'm hurting on the inside. Trust me."

Biting her lip to stifle her moan, she gripped his shoulders and used him for support as she rode him. Her thighs ached from the workout she was giving them, but she wasn't going to stop until they both came, no matter how much she knew she'd pay for it tomorrow. Sometimes pain was worth the pleasure that preceded it.

"Ride me, baby. Fuck my cock with this sweet pussy." Jonah held on to her hips, controlling her movements, no longer playing the nice guy. When she tried to speed up, he slowed her down, letting her know in no uncertain terms, who was in charge. "Still in a hurry? Have I mentioned," he groaned, rocking into her, "how much I'm enjoying your idea of punishment?"

"Who's punishing who here?"

"I'm just trying to show you," Jonah dug his fingers into her hips, stilling her frantic movements, "how bad I feel."

"Feel good already then," she begged, wanting him, no, needing him to work her faster on his cock. "And let me come."



"Forgive me first and I'll give you everything you need." He thrust his hips upward as he pulled her down on him, causing her to groan in ecstasy.

"Bastard."

"I know." He began to pump into her faster and harder, stilling her breath with every stroke. "Say it. You know you want to."

"The only thing..." she groaned, "I want is to kill you."

"The only thing?" Jonah slowed down, his threat so obvious it made her want to scream.

"Oh, no, no," she moaned. "Fuck. No. I forgive you. Now please...please."

"That's all I wanted to hear." Jonah gripped her tightly and, in a move that had her head spinning, twisted their bodies until she was lying on the couch and he was above her, pounding into her pussy good.

The new position freed her to just lie back and enjoy the ride. And enjoy it she did. Three to four pumps after they shifted positions, Tisha was coming.

Her orgasm radiated through her body, gripping her tight before the release. Just a few scant moments later, Jonah shouted his own climax as he collapsed over her. Trailing her fingers over his back, Tisha realized forgiveness wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Although Jonah would have loved nothing more than to scoot Tisha over on her couch and spoon her until they drifted off to sleep, he couldn't. He had a little one waiting at home for him, but that didn't mean he had to rush right off.

After easing out of Tisha's all-too-tempting body, he stood and went into the downstairs bathroom and disposed of the used condom. Coming back into the living room, he found Tisha in almost the exact same position she was in when he left, thighs parted, eyes closed, a soft smile upon her lips. Chuckling, he walked over to the couch and stooped over, scooping her up in his arms before she knew what hit her. The second he lifted her into the air, she let out an unholy scream and threw her arms around his neck.

"What the hell? You have to give a girl a warning before you do something like that."

"Hey, Tisha, I'm picking you up."

"Well, I'm awake now, put me back down. You're messing up my glow."

"I'll put you down all right. Right after we're upstairs." Jonah eyed her speculatively. "If I may say so myself, you're looking mighty...tired."

"Can't imagine why, can you?"

"Not a clue." There was a deeply sated look in her eyes, which hadn't been there when she first arrived home, one that made Jonah feel all kinds of proud.

"Well, Jeeves, since you're insisting on throwing your back out, mind dropping me off in the bathroom? I need to shower."

"Only if I can shower with you." He started up the stairs, prized package in hand.

"I'm sure we can arrange something." She tilted her head. "How are you, time wise, I mean?"

"There's time to shower."

"Just...shower?" she asked with an arch of eyebrow.

Jonah stopped outside the bathroom door and lowered her to the floor. "Maybe more."

"I like the sound of 'maybe'," she murmured as she stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light.

"I knew you would." Jonah went to follow her into the room but was stopped by Tisha, who held her hand out to ward him off. "What?"

"I need a girl alone moment in the bathroom for a minute or two. Thank you." She stepped farther into the bathroom and smiled then shut the door in his face. "And don't stand out there and listen to me pee."

Jonah chuckled at her girly behavior. "Prude."

"I may be a freak," she hollered through the closed door, "but I'm not that freaky."

Still laughing, he turned and made his way downstairs to check the front door lock and gather up their clothes. By the time he climbed back upstairs, the door to the bathroom was open again and the shower was running. Jonah made a quick trip to her bedroom to drop the clothes off then joined Tisha in the bathroom. She was already in the shower, all wet and soapy, a sexy combination to be sure.

Steam was just beginning to build as he pulled back the floral curtain and glanced around. The area wasn't all that large, but it would be enough room for the two of them to test the acoustics, and that was good enough for him. Even though he'd come just moments ago, the sight of Tisha's brown skin, all shiny and lathered up, had his cock stirring anew. He watched for a bit as water rained down on her. While he'd been downstairs, she'd gathered her hair and placed it up in one of those plastic hair thingies, leaving her slender neck bare and available. Nice. He'd have to make sure he familiarized his lips with that area.

Just as he began to get into complete voyeur mood, Tisha turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder with a shameless, lustful look in her big brown eyes. "Are you going to come in or stand there and watch me?"

"Can't I do both?"

"Yes, but watch from the inside of the shower. You're letting all the cold air in."

"I wasn't sure if I was invited in yet," he teased as he joined her in the tiled stall. Once he was in, he tugged the curtain closed and took a deep breath, inhaling the pomegranate scent wafting up in the air. "You done with your chick stuff?"

"Shut up." Tisha spun around and smacked him in the chest with a soapy bath scrunchie before turning around to face away from him. "Mind washing my back?"

"Only if I can do the front too."

"You better."

Despite the bubbles foaming over the side of the yellow scrubber, he picked up the scented liquid soap and added even more before replacing the bottle on the shelf. Moving closer to her, he began to meticulously wash her back, covering every square inch of her enthralling brown flesh before pulling her against his body.

He dragged the scrubber across her beaded nipples, down her flat stomach, into the valley of her parted thighs. He used the tightly gathered netted material as he would his fingers, rubbing it against her clit until she started to beg for more. "God. I'm clean. Very clean."

Jonah lowered his lips to her ear. "Not yet you're not." Stepping back, he tossed the scrubber over his shoulder, replacing the discarded scrunchie with his hand. He slid his soapy fingers down her back to her ass and then between her cheeks, washing the one area she had yet to give him access to. The intimate contact caused Tisha to quickly turn around and face him. "Hey now."

Chuckling softly, he shot her an innocent look, all the while feeling anything but. "I was just doing my job to make sure you're clean."

"That's one area you won't ever have to worry about. Ever. Ever."

"You sound so certain."

"Oh, I am."

"As certain as I am of proving you wrong," he said as he pulled her against him and rubbed her middle against his cock.

"You'll have your work cut out for you."

"I'm up to the challenge."

She pressed into his erection and smiled. "So I see."

"I think you were right."

"About what?"

"You're clean enough." He was done playing. "Turn around."

For once Tisha was quick to comply, moving under the spray as he instructed and rinsing off. When she was free of the soap and suds, she got out to allow Jonah the opportunity to wash. Not willing to waste the little time they had left, he quickly bathed himself before getting out of the shower and joining her in front of the sink.

They towed one another off before walking hand in hand into her bedroom to finish what they started. After their appetizer downstairs, neither one of them was in much of a rush. They took their time, reacquainting themselves with one another's bodies. And this time, when he entered her, he was able to outlast her not once, not twice but three times before he finally succumbed to his own release.

Jonah wasn't sure if it was because of a hectic day of work or the sheer number of orgasms she'd experienced that made her so tired, but by the time he returned from cleaning up in the bathroom once more, she was barely awake. He dressed quietly then covered a lethargic Tisha with her quilt. Sitting next to her, he caressed her face gently as he spoke. "I really hate to come and run, but..."

Tisha smiled sleepily at him and covered his hand with her. "I know. Cami's waiting."

"Yes. The two women in my life are very, very demanding."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way."

"Not at all." Jonah leaned over and brushed his lips across her head tenderly. "I know you still might be mad at me and I know things aren't a hundred percent right with us."

"Okay," Tisha's expression was guarded, but Jonah didn't let it hold him back.

"But I want to...no, I need to tell you that I love you." Tisha stared up at him, wide-eyed but silent. Not exactly the reaction he was hoping for, but not one he was surprised by either. "You don't have to say anything," he assured her. "I just wanted to let you know how I felt."

"And do you want to hear how I feel?"

"Sort of," he said with a small smile.

"I love you too."

"You sure? I mean, I didn't say it so you would have to."

She arched an eyebrow. "Have you ever known me to say something I didn't mean?"

Jonah chuckled. She had a point there. "No. Never."

"Okay then. Just for the record though, we still have things we need to work on." Tisha sat up a bit and kissed him softly before lying down once more. "But I want to work on it."

"I do too." Smiling tenderly, Jonah rose to his feet once more. "I need to head out. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Kay."

Jonah turned off the light and headed downstairs and out the door, locking up tight after himself. Walking quickly, he crossed the street and made his way to his house. After letting himself in, he went in search of the sitter, who was making herself at home on his phone, talking up a storm, as if she'd never received the memo about the invention of cell phones.

As much as it pained him to do so, he withheld the lecture he so wanted to give her about respecting other people's property and paid her with a stiff smile. In truth, he'd never told her hands off the phone, and she had been able to sit on short notice, so Jonah had no choice but to suck it up and move on. Besides, he figured it was better for

her to be talking to her boyfriend on the phone instead of making out with him on Jonah's couch while Cami was upstairs.

After seeing the teen out, Jonah locked all the doors and turned off the lights. Before going to his bedroom, he paused to look in on Cami. Her light was still on, but it was at its lowest setting, casting an eerie glow over the huddled form under the quilt.

Walking over to the bed, he straightened the covers, which were creeping up at the foot and lightly kissed his niece on the forehead. The featherlight touch still managed to wake her though, and she gazed up at him with sleep-heavy eyelids. "You fix it?"

One day they would really have to talk about personal boundaries, he thought with a smile before answering in a long-suffering manner, "Yes, nosy."

"Good." Cami closed her eyes again. "'Night, Uncle J."

"Night, baby," he whispered before brushing his lips once again across her forehead. He stood and turned back toward the door, stopping only long enough to turn off the light, before heading to his own room. Content with his world at large now that he'd resolved things with Tisha, Jonah knew he'd finally be able to get a good night's sleep once more.

## Chapter Eleven

"Your client is here."

Tisha glanced up from her magazine and peered over toward the front of the salon. Standing at the counter, with what Tisha was beginning to believe was a permanent scowl on her face, was ReShaunda.

"Damn," she murmured, closing her magazine. "She showed."

"Did you expect differently?" Nance spoke softly, making sure to keep their conversation, for once, just between the two of them. Because the last thing Tisha needed right now was an audience who could possibly be subpoenaed if things went bad. Wait, who she kidding? Not if, when things went bad.

"Expected, no," Tisha rose from her seat. "Hoped, yes."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have booked her."

There was no maybe about it. "Yeah well, hindsight and all that jazz."

"This is going to end badly."

"Don't I know it." Tisha set her magazine back in her drawer before slipping on her apron. After her fallout and subsequent make up with Jonah, Tisha had gone back and forth about whether or not she should cancel ReShaunda's appointment. Her stance was still that of wanting to gather information for Jonah, but at the same time, she didn't want to risk their relationship further. More importantly, she didn't want to risk her freedom by doing something stupid if ReShaunda went off the deep end and said something unflattering about Jonah or Cami. Client or not, Tisha would beat a bitch down, and this, of course, was where her friend came in. "Nance, do me a favor?"

"Yeah."

"Keep me out of jail," she said under her breath before staring toward the front of the salon.

With a smile she didn't feel pasted on her face, Tisha walked over to ReShaunda.

"Hi, I'm glad you could make it," she lied with a straight face.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

That made one of them. "If you're ready, come on back to my station." As Tisha walked back to her chair, she wondered, and not for the first time, how she was going to make it through this appointment. When ReShaunda was seated, Tisha turned her toward the mirror and stood behind her. "So, what are you looking for today?"

ReShaunda stared at her reflection in the mirror and turned her head from side to side. "I'm not sure. You're the professional. What do you think?"

*How about I pull your hair out by the roots?*

Opening a drawer, Tisha took out a cape, snapped it in the air for good measure, and then placed it around ReShaunda. "Are you wanting to spice things up with something new?" Tisha ran her hands through the other woman's hair, feeling the texture and weighing the pros and cons. "Do you want to add color? I need an idea of what you like."

"No," she said, nonchalantly. "I think I'll stick with what I have. Wash and flat iron will do."

Tisha resisted the urge to roll her eyes. If she wanted the same old thing, why did she even bother coming in? She could have gone to her old hairdresser for that. Oh yeah, right, to probe. "Wash it is."

Silently, Tisha took out her comb and began to untangle the other woman's thick tresses. For an underhanded bitch, she had a nice grade of hair. "Let's go over to the sink."

"Okay."

Much to Tisha's surprise, ReShaunda kept quiet as Tisha washed and conditioned her hair, allowing Tisha to work in silence, as she preferred. After blowing out ReShaunda's hair, Tisha sat her under the dryer to make sure her scalp was dry.

Before Tisha could get back to her station though, she was hijacked by Nance, who not so subtly pushed her over to the chair. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Even though there was little chance ReShaunda would be able to hear her, Tisha still lowered her voice.

"How's it going?"

"It's going fine. Neither one of us have said a word."

"No." Nance frowned. "That sucks. I was hoping for a little something something."

"I thought the goal here was to keep me out of jail."

"It is, but that doesn't mean we can't have a little fun at the same time."

"Trust me, it does." Tisha glanced over her shoulder at ReShaunda, who was perusing a magazine as if she didn't have a care in the world. The woman's casual demeanor was unnerving and so unexpected Tisha wasn't sure how to react. And instead of feeling at ease, she felt more leery than she did before ReShaunda had shown. Turning back to her station, she turned on her stove. "I'm just going to stick to my game plan, and let the chips fall where they may."

"And what's that?"

"To do her hair, listen to her if she chooses to speak, but offer nothing."

"Good plan."

"Thank you." Tisha could only hope she was able to stick to it.

When the timer went off, she retrieved ReShaunda and began to work on her hair. This time though, ReShaunda did not remain silent. "Are you normally this taciturn or did Jonah tell you not to speak to me?"

Tisha looked up and met the other woman's gaze in the mirror. "Jonah runs his business and I run my own."

"That's good to know. I would hate that we couldn't be friendly with one another because of his feelings toward me."

No, they couldn't be friendly for a whole other set of reasons, but that was neither here nor there. "We're all grown-ups here." Tisha glanced back down at what she was doing, not wanting to burn the other woman's hair off...on accident, that was. "No reason we all can't get along."

"My thoughts precisely. Besides, as the two women in Cami's life, I think it's best if we're both on the same page. I mean, at the end of the day, it's really all about her."

"Yes, it is." Tisha put her hot comb back in its slot then placed the curler in the stove. She was trying hard to bite her tongue and do her job, but ReShaunda wasn't making it easy. "Which side do you want your part on?"

"The left."

"Okay," Tisha grabbed a couple of clips and began to separate ReShaunda's hair to curl.

"I have to say, Cami has been looking loads better since you started working on her."

Tisha paused, searching the other woman's words for hidden meaning, finding none, she replied, "Thank you," and got back to work.

"If you could have seen how she looked before they moved over there, you would have been horrified."

From the way Cami looked the first time Tisha had seen her, Tisha was willing to bet ReShaunda wasn't way off base. But she would never admit that. "Jonah did the best he could with the knowledge he had."

"Yes, but his best wasn't good enough."

Hey now. Tisha set the curler back in the warmer, needing something to do with her hand besides smacking the woman in the back of the head. "Maybe not, but he has me now and I assure you, my best is more than good enough."

"I don't doubt that at all." ReShaunda laughed, but somehow Tisha didn't believe it was sincere. "I wouldn't be here if I thought differently, but as a woman, I'm sure you can see my point."

"No, I'm not sure I do." Tisha grabbed the backup curler that had been warming as she used the other one.

"Sometimes a girl needs a woman's touch."

"It depends on the woman."

"Something is better than nothing."

Tisha didn't like the other woman's implication. "Jonah isn't nothing."

"He isn't her father either."



"And you're not her mother."

"I'm the closest thing she has to one."

Tisha opened her mouth to tell her exactly what she thought but snapped it shut. Damn it, Jonah had been right. This was one of the worst ideas she'd ever had. And now she was going to have to admit it to him. But first, she needed to get through this appointment.

"And you have to ask yourself, why is Jonah really so intent on raising her himself."

"Because he loves her." As she curled ReShaunda's hair, she eyed the skin of her neck, wondering if it would be worth it to accidentally burn her. It sometimes happened, even with a professional such as herself.

"Maybe a little too much and maybe—"

"Is it possible to love someone too much?"

"It is if it's not in a...proper way." ReShaunda's tone turned ugly.

Tisha raised her gaze to meet the other woman's in the mirror. "I know you're not even suggesting..."

"Devotion such as his does make one wonder. It's unnatural."

ReShaunda's unsaid nasty accusation had Tisha seeing red. Never before had she wanted to hurt someone as much as she wanted to hurt the woman sitting in front of her. "You know what I wonder?" Some things, some people were worth losing a beauty license and going to jail for.

"What?"

Tisha brushed ReShaunda's hair off to one side. Her gaze centered in on the dark brown skin just begging for a kiss from her curling iron. "If you can get out of this chair before I..." Before Tisha could finish her sentence, Nance grabbed her wrist and pulled her back.

"Tisha, you have a call." Nance tightened her grip on Tisha's wrist. "Why don't you let me finish this for you while you go answer it in the back?"

ReShaunda turned around to face Tisha and smiled. There was an evil quality to the other woman's grin that made Tisha wonder what her true purpose had been in coming. Was it to get information from Tisha, make her doubt Jonah, or do something to get a rise from her?

If it was the first two, she was shit out of luck, but if it was the third, she'd come to the right place. If a reaction was what she was looking for, Tisha would give her one. But not here and not now. Her time was coming though. And it would happen when ReShaunda was least expecting it. Tisha released her death grip on the curler and allowed Nance to take it out of her hand.

"If you'll excuse me," she said to ReShaunda with a frosted smile before turning and walking to the back of the shop and straight out the back door. Pulling her cell

phone out of her jeans' pocket, she dialed Jonah's number by heart. He had barely gotten the word "Hi" out before she pounced.

"Jonah, we need to talk."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah would have loved to say he wasn't the type to say, "I told you so," but luckily for Tisha, he only said it on the inside. There was no doubt about it, Jonah could fly his asshole flag as high as the next person, but even he knew when to keep his mouth shut. And something told him this was going to be one such moment.

Not that he was surprised. ReShaunda was the devil incarnate, and no one knew that better than him, although from the sound of Tisha's voice over the phone, he was beginning to suspect she had a slight inkling now of the hell he'd been going through for the last few years.

Tisha wouldn't tell him anything over the phone, only that they needed to talk. Thankfully his work schedule was free this afternoon because this was one conversation he was looking forward to.

The wait was killing him. Jonah wasn't known for his patience, and the fact Tisha wouldn't give him a single clue was torture in his book. For his lover's sake, he hoped she was able to keep her cool, but after losing his so often with ReShaunda, he wouldn't have blamed her if Tisha hadn't been able to hold it together.

Jonah had even gone as far as to have his lawyer on standby in case something went down. He wanted to make sure they had legal advice and ample time to bury the body and any incriminating evidence if he had to kill ReShaunda for insulting Tisha.

"Mr. Glasse?"

Jonah's secretary's voice broke through his silent review of all the different ways he could destroy the evil bitch. Leaning forward, he pressed the intercom button. "Yes."

"There's a Ms. Nichols here to see you, sir."

It was about damn time. "Send her in." Jonah released the button and rose to his feet. He was halfway across the room when Tisha stormed in.

Her dark eyes were troubled, her mouth pinched at the corners. She had a "just dealt with ReShaunda's shit" look on her face. It was a look he knew well. Stopping in front of her, he reached out and brushed his hand across her satin-smooth cheek. "Hi, honey. How was your day?" Jonah purposely kept his tone light in hopes of easing some of the anger from her tense frame.

Unfortunately, Tisha didn't seem to want to be pacified. Walking around him, she dropped her purse on the chair and turned and faced him, leaning back on his desk. "Okay. Go ahead. Say it."

Jonah smiled. "I have no idea what you're talking about." He did, he so did, but he wasn't saying shit. As angry as she looked, he was afraid Tisha might take her hostility

out on him, and he'd just gotten back on her good side. And the good side had far better advantages than the bad side did.

"Liar," Tisha crossed her arms over her breasts. "Go ahead and admit it. You've been waiting all day to tell me I told you so. You knew that bitch was going to say something to me and I was going to go off on her."

"And did you?" Jonah slipped his hand in his pants pocket and fingered his cell. "Go off on her, I mean."

"Not as much as I wanted to. If Nance hadn't been there, I would have had a Celie and Mister shaving moment with her."

Jonah scrunched his brow in confusion. "A what?"

"Celie and Mister. From *The Color Purple*. You remember the moment when he was making her shave his face and she was about to cut his throat, and the only thing that saved him was Shug Avery coming up behind her and grabbing her hand?"

Jonah nodded "yes" then stopped mid-nod because he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. "No."

"*The Color Purple*. Whoopie Goldberg."

Whoopie? "The chick from *Ghost*?"

"Okay." Tisha let out a loud sigh and unfolded her hands. "I'm so done with you."

"What? Don't get mad because I didn't follow you around that very random tangent."

"I'm not mad at you, I'm mad at me. And ReShaunda. Do you know what..." Tisha closed her eyes for a few seconds and took what appeared to be a deep and calming breath. "Do you know what she said? No, what she implied?"

"No." But he could imagine. That woman had a foul, sick mind. Nothing she could say or do at this point in life would surprise him.

"She implied your feelings for Cami were...the bad kind."

"Bad kind?"

"Yes, the bad 'would the little girl like a piece of candy' kind."

"Oh..." That. Again. Sighing, Jonah sat down in the chair facing his desk.

"Oh?" His lackluster reply was apparently not the one she'd been anticipating. "Just 'oh'? I don't think you know what I'm trying to say here."

"No, Tisha. I know very well what you're trying to say. ReShaunda accused me of having sexual intentions toward Cami." Sick bitch. "Unfortunately this isn't the first time she's made a claim like this."

"It isn't?"

"No, and before you ask, they're not true."

Tisha's foot shot out so fast, he never saw it coming. But he felt it. Man, did he feel it. "Hey," he grumbled, reaching down to rub his smarting leg. "What the hell was that for?"

"That was for thinking you had to tell me it wasn't true."

"I was merely saying..."

"Well, don't. I wouldn't have defended you if I thought for a second you were Chester the Molester."

Her colloquialisms were killing him. "Good to know." Reaching out, he took her hand in his. "Come here."

"I don't want to." Even as she protested though, Tisha put her hand in his and allowed him to pull her onto his lap. "That woman is evil. I mean like really evil."

"I know, honey. I know."

She twisted around so she was looking directly at him. "You said this wasn't the first time?"

"No, she made one of her sick claims to Cami's teacher the year before last, and rightly so, her teacher reported it to the powers that be. Cami was placed with ReShaunda while they did a full investigation."

"Oh my God."

"Double as bad as you think it was then multiply it by five and you'll possibly come close to the level of hell that woman has heaped on me. It didn't take long for them to find out the truth. With Cami being Cami, you know she had no problem setting them straight, but it was still an experience I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy."

"Can't you do anything?"

"I've tried, God knows, I'm still trying, but there's only so much I can legally do. Unless I can prove she's an unfit co-guardian, there isn't a chance in hell I can gain full custody of Cami."

"Then can you sue her for defamation of character?"

"Did she come straight out and say I was molesting Cami?"

"No, but she implied the shit out of it."

"Then no, I don't think I can. But it doesn't hurt to let my lawyer know about today's little venture." It couldn't hurt at all.

"If you need me to testify for you, I will. Or I can push her off a bridge or something, just let me know."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I swear, Jonah, there is something seriously wrong with that woman. It was as if she was baiting me, as if she wanted me to do something."

"Like cut her throat Celie style?"

"Exactly."

*The Color Purple* was going on his Netflix list as soon as he got home. "I think there's something wrong with her. I can't put my finger on it, but she's off. That's for damn sure."

"She scares me. Not because I think she'll do something to me, but because I can see in her eyes she'll do whatever it takes to get custody of Cami. Whatever it takes. Part of me thinks it's not even about raising Cami, but about *you* not raising her. Did the two of you ever have any conflict before Cami's parents died? Is she a spurned lover perhaps?"

Jonah wished it was that simple. "No, eww, never. I barely knew the woman. She's just flat-out crazy. Obsessed even."

"What are we going to do?"

Now that was the question of the hour, and unfortunately Jonah didn't have an answer to it.

## Chapter Twelve

Unlike Jonah, Tisha couldn't sit back and let the cards fall where they might. There were a lot of things she loved about him, but his ability to take things a day at a time was downright unnerving. Tisha wanted a plan. She wanted to know what was going on and when, and he was more content to live each day as ripped from his "word a day" calendar.

Even now, though they'd spent a very wonderful family outing together, the day wasn't as perfect as it could have been. The ghost of Diva Present would soon be driving her nearly-missed-a-burn-mark-on-the-back-of-her-neck self over to pick up Cami for a weekend visit. She was taking the girls to San Diego for the weekend, a trip Cami had done nothing but talk about since getting off the phone with ReShaunda's daughter Erykia two days ago.

Even though it wasn't Tisha's place to say "Nay" it still rankled her Cami was going. Not only because she couldn't stand the woman and didn't trust her, but also for purely selfish reasons. Tisha truly enjoyed being with Cami. In a way, when Jonah began to seriously court Tisha with flowers and gifts, Tisha began to court Cami as well, but with time and a woman's attention. She wanted the little girl to see Tisha wasn't stepping in and trying to take over. Nor did Tisha think she could, nor would she ever want to try to step in the saintly shoes of Cami's mother. At best, she wanted to be Jonah's lady and Cami's friend.

Maybe one day she could be more to the both of them. It was a thought she dwelled on a lot these days but wisely kept to herself. Instead, she busied her hands by folding clothes she didn't want to fold, to help Cami pack a bag she didn't want to be filled.

"What about this?" Tisha looked up from the small suitcase she'd been packing slower than molasses and over to Cami, who held a white sundress in front of her on a hanger, dangling it back and forth. "Do you think I should take this one too?"

"I think what you have here is fine. You're only going for three days."

"The movie star and professor both thought they were going on a three-hour cruise and out of the two of them, only one was able to change their clothes." Cami dangled her dress again. "You know what I'm saying?"

"What I know is you watch way too much TV. No more Nick at Night for you."

"Yes, Mom," Cami said in a snarky tone as she put the dress in the closet then moped back over to the bed and sat with a hang-dog expression on her pretty brown face. "But mark my words, if the opportunity for wearing a white dress comes up on this trip and I'm the only kid there in jeans and a t-shirt, looking like someone's poor relation, I'll have you to blame for the emotional scars that will form over my easily bruisable heart."

*Wordy brat.* Damn she loved her. "Fine. Get it and you better wear it, even if it's to walk from one room to the other." Tisha smirked as the little girl bounced over to the closet to retrieve her treasure. "But that's it. You have enough clothes to last several three-hour trips."

Shaking her head, Tisha picked up the mountain of shoes lying on the bed and eyed them with trepidation. *How many pairs did this child need?* "You're not planning on taking all of these, are you?"

"Uncle J always says to be prepared."

"Easy for him to say, he's not helping Imelda Marcos pack."

"Who?"

"Never mind." It would take far too long to explain and even once she did, it wouldn't mean a thing. "Cami, you're not taking all of these shoes. Pick three."

Eyes wide, Cami stared at hill of shoes in front of Tisha. "Three," she whined. "Come on, could you pick three pair?"

No, but she owned a bigger suitcase. Wait, that wasn't such a bad idea. "I'll be back."

"Calling in the reinforcements?"

"No, the labor." With pep in her step, Tisha left the discount department store Cami mistakenly called a room and headed downstairs to the office Jonah was using as a hideout. After knocking three times softly, she waited for him to say, "Come in," before she entered the room. With the door handle in hand, she leaned against the wood and cast her suspicious gaze upon Jonah who, from the looks of the game playing out on his computer screen, wasn't doing a lick of work. Faker. "I thought you were doing some last-minute work."

"I am."

Tisha frowned. "From where I'm standing it appears as if the only thing you're working on is your game score."

"Don't let your eyes fool you." Jonah flashed her a wicked smirk. "This is just a ruse, my love, to hide my real nefarious work."

"Which is?"

"Plans for our secret weekend alone."

Tisha tilted her head. "We have secret plans?"

"We do now," he stated emphatically.

"How come I wasn't informed about them?"

"Because then the whole secret part would be obsolete."

"I see." The man was a silver-tongued devil, but she wasn't going to push it, especially since she was going to get a secret weekend of fun out of it.

"And now that we know what I'm doing, why don't you tell me what you're doing?"

"I'm looking for another suitcase."

That comment actually had him putting the game on pause. "Another?"

"Yes, and for the sake of all our sanities, it needs to be large."

"What is she packing?"

"Everything, including the kitchen sink."

"I need that sink."

Tisha released her hold on the doorknob and crossed her arms over her breasts. "Then go up there and put a stop to it." She nodded in the direction of Cami's room. "I dare you."

"Please, I pay the cost to be the boss in this house, woman," he grumbled as he headed out the door and up the stairs to put his proverbial foot down. In less than ninety seconds, his proverbial foot joined his other foot as they quickly made their way back down the stairs and led him toward the garage.

Amused, Tisha called out to him. "Where are you going, boss?"

"To get another suitcase."

Unable to help herself, Tisha burst out laughing and she continued to do so until he stormed back into the room, suitcase in hand, a sheepish look on his face. That too was one of the things Tisha appreciated about Jonah. He could take it on the chin and still grin. He was a real stand-up guy, and the more she got to know him, the more she loved him.

Instead of heading straight up the stairs, Jonah walked over to Tisha. "Amused?"

"Extremely."

"Keep it up, chuckles." He leaned and dropped a quick kiss on her upturned lips before pulling back. "We'll see how funny you think this is when it's just you and me."

Tisha trembled. "I can't wait."

"Neither can I. But words to the wise, when Cami gets back from her trip, the three of us are going to have a sit-down. This teaming up against me thing is going to stop."

"We're not teaming up against you." *Not in this instance anyway.* "It's just that great minds think alike."

"Right. Why don't I believe you?"

"Because you're smart?"

"That's what I thought." Shaking his head, he turned and headed up the stairs.

Tisha moved to follow but was waylaid by the doorbell dinging. "Want me to get that?" she called up to his retreating back.

"Please."

"Okay." As quickly as she could, she made her way over to the front door then pulled it open without bothering to peer through the peephole. Big mistake. The cheerful greeting she'd been seconds away from giving their guest dried up instantaneously at the sight of ReShaunda standing there.



The immaculately dressed, sour-faced woman appeared as thrilled to see Tisha as she was to see her. A fact easily avoided had ReShaunda shown up on time. After their little encounter in the shop, Tisha vowed to keep her distance from the cold-hearted woman. Today in particular, since she didn't want Cami to go. As usual, however, ReShaunda found a way to make this visit about her, by showing up early instead of when they agreed.

Even though it went against every fiber of her being, Tisha pasted a smile on her face and held the door open. She would put her rusty good manners to use, even if it damn near killed her. "Good morning, ReShaunda. We weren't expecting you until later."

ReShaunda stepped in. "I didn't know *we* were expecting me at all. Shouldn't you be burning someone at that grubby salon of yours?"

Keeping her smile high and tight, much like the new weave ReShaunda was sporting, Tisha stayed cool. "I took a few days off."

"Then you must be ecstatic I'm taking Cami off your hands."

"Not at all. I enjoy having her around."

"Yes, but think of all the fun things you can do if she's not here." The implication was more than readable in the other woman's sneer. "Just say the word and I can make it happen." She snapped her fingers. "Like that."

The thing Tisha wanted to snap around here was ReShaunda's neck. "Thanks, but no thanks. I like things as they are." Tisha ran her gaze down ReShaunda before meeting her glare once more. "Mostly anyway."

"You let me know if you need me to do anything with that 'mostly' part."

"Oh, I will."

Before any more could be said, Cami and Jonah came into the room, larger suitcase in hand. The sight of his more-than-obvious defeat almost made Tisha laugh, but she held it in, preferring to keep their private joke between them.

"Hi, Cousin ReShaunda." Cami walked over and gave the woman a warm hug.

"Hi, darling. You ready to hit the road?"

"You know it."

"Good, let's go." With her arm wound tightly around Cami's shoulders, ReShaunda led the girl out of the house and toward her car where her daughters were waiting. Once they spotted Cami, they started waving, which prompted Cami to break away from ReShaunda and run to meet her cousins. The girls quickly opened the door to allow Cami entrance and they began to giggle and talk in only the way children can.

Frostily, ReShaunda held her hand out to Jonah. "I can take the bag."

"I don't mind putting it in the car."

"But I mind you doing it. Let's not drag this out any longer than it has to be. Give me the bag."

"How would me putting it in the car be dragging anything out?"

"Fine, then let me put it in clearer terms. I don't want you near my car. Got it? Now give me the bag and let us leave. Or do I need to call my lawyer?"

Pissed, Tisha took a step forward. "No, who you need to call is one-eight-hundred-get-a-fucking-clue, because, lady, you're crazy. It's just a suitcase."

"Was I speaking to you?"

"I sure the hell was speaking to you."

ReShaunda looked past Tisha as if she weren't even there and addressed Jonah. "Get her out of my face before this turns ugly."

"Too late, b—"

"Here." Jonah thrust the suitcase in her hands. "Have her back no later than two o'clock, as per the order. Any later and I'm on the phone with my lawyer, who loves answering my calls. Give me an excuse to bring you to court. I beg you."

Tisha had no idea how he could be so calm, but she was glad one of them was. Because right now, if things were up to her, she'd be wiping some Vaseline on her forehead and pulling off her earrings. ReShaunda deserved to be served up a whole bowl of whoopass, and Tisha couldn't wait to dish it out to her, one fistful at a time.

ReShaunda snatched the bag out of his hand then called out in a falsely cheerful manner, "Cami, come say goodbye, darling."

Without waiting to see the embrace, ReShaunda walked over to the trunk of her car and popped it open. While she fiddled around back there, Cami raced over to their side, first giving Tisha a hug then Jonah. When she pulled back, she stared eagerly into his eyes. "Call my cell, no matter what time, okay? Promise me."

Grinning, he leaned down and kissed the bridge of her nose. "Will do, little tyrant."

Cami looked over at Tisha and grinned wildly before dashing back to the car. As soon as she was in, she rolled down the window and leaned out. "Any time. Promise."

"I promise," he said as he shook his head. "Now worry less about my life and go have fun in yours."

"Love you, Uncle J. Love you, Tisha."

Jonah raised his hand and waved. "Love you too."

Tisha joined Jonah and wrapped her arm around his waist, leaning into him as she waved back at Cami. "What was that all about?"

"ReShaunda?" His voice trailed off a bit as they watched the woman close the trunk then make her way to the driver's side of the car. "I have no idea."

"No, Cami."

"Oh that...nothing."

"Now why don't I believe you?" she asked as they watched the car back out of the driveway and head down the street.

"Because you're a very smart woman."

Jonah lowered his hand and smacked her on the ass. "Last one in the house has to cook dinner tonight. Nude." Then before she was even through processing his words, he was gone, booking it toward the house.

"Bastard!" she shouted as she took off after him. His head start made it impossible for her to catch up with him, but if it was games he wanted this weekend, then it would be games he got.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah sat on the stool, watching with delight as Tisha finished cooking. He'd spent the entire time she worked slyly relieving her of all of her clothing, one piece at a time. The only concession he allowed her was to wear his shirt, just so she wouldn't burn anything important.

Although she wanted to button it up, he wasn't stupid enough to agree to her request. Instead, he teased himself by glimpsing her luscious dark skin as she moved around the kitchen. The shirt barely covered her ass and every time she reached up to retrieve something from a high shelf he could see the curve of her rear. And what a sight it was to behold.

No matter how many times he and Tisha were intimate, her beauty never failed to blow him away. Her body was a cornucopia of wonder for him. Not only was her shapely form cock-hardening delicious, so was the smooth chocolate satin of her skin. Even now he couldn't help but compare the white shirt that fluttered against her ever so slightly every time she moved to that of her brown skin. Just as he did any night they lay side by side, the moon pouring through the window their only source of light.

Moments such as those, when the only colors that mattered on his personal rainbow spectrum were white and brown, made Jonah realize just how much she meant to him. The idea hadn't come to him out of the blue. It had been something he'd thought about over and over, since the moment they'd gotten back together again. Being apart from her had been unspeakably difficult. And not just for him. Even Cami had been down in the dumps, which only made him realize just how important Tisha was to their family dynamic.

She fit. No, she made them fit together. Things had been nothing but good since the moment she barged into his life, brandishing the curling iron as if it were a weapon, and Jonah realized it was time he let her know it.

"Dinner is served," Tisha announced as she brought the last of the dishes to the peninsula. Despite the orders she'd been working under, she'd still cooked what appeared to be a very good meal. "I want you to know it wasn't easy sautéing onions and bell peppers barely clothed. I have a couple of burns from the oil popping up."

Jonah reached out, grabbed her hand and pulled her around the island. "Maybe I should kiss them and make it better."

"Maybe." Smiling, Tisha wrapped her arms around his neck. "But then the fajitas will get cold, and we wouldn't want that to happen."

Nuzzling her neck, Jonah pressed his growing erection against her lower body. "That's why microwaves were invented."

"So you could have your wicked way with me in the kitchen?"

"Exactly." Jonah slid his hand down her back and under the hem of the shirt, placing the flat of his palm against the soft curve of her ass.

"But what about dessert?" she murmured. From the husky tone of her voice and the way she pressed into his touch, Jonah knew she wasn't putting up much of a fight. "I have the makings for strawberry shortcakes, with fresh whipped cream and berries."

"Whipped cream." Now she really had his attention.

"Yes."

Jonah released his hold on her and pulled back. "You did work awfully hard. We shouldn't allow your efforts to be in vain."

"That's right."

"So let's eat. Starting with dessert first."

"Dessert?"

"Yes, and since you cooked, it's only fair I clean the kitchen."

"Naked?"

"Sure." He laughed. Fair was fair. "Naked, but I hate to dirty up any more dishes than necessary. I guess you'll have to be my plate."

Tisha's eyes widened with surprise. "Plate?"

"Yes." The more he talked about it, the more he liked the idea. "And I'm willing to bet the strawberries and whipped cream will taste extra good from between your legs."

"We *should* do our part for the environment."

"Yes, we should." Jonah bent down and scooped Tisha up. Laughing, she encircled his neck with her arms and held on tightly as he carried her into the dining room.

Moving to the head of the dark oak table, he nudged the matching chair out of the way then sat her exactly where he would have set his plate. "Make yourself comfortable but don't move from this spot. I'll be right back."

"You're the boss," she said with a teasing smile.

"Hmmm...I could get used to hearing that." For a lifetime or two.

With a smile, Jonah headed into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and spotted a clear glass bowl filled with whipped cream sitting alongside a matching bowl piled high with ripe, large strawberries. Smiling, he pulled out the two containers then closed the door with his shoulder before heading into the dining room.

To his immense pleasure, with the exception of moving her arms back behind her to brace her weight, Tisha had stayed exactly as he placed her. She was the perfect easel for his soon-to-be culinary masterpiece. "Anyone ever tell you you look good enough to eat?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Tisha slipped the shirt off one shoulder and parted her legs. "Bon appetit."

*Fuck.* If he thought he was hard before, when she'd been flashing him little glimpses of her delicious body, seeing her in all her glory shot his cock into overdrive. Words alone couldn't describe how overtly desirable she was to him, lounging before him like a sumptuous feast. On the one hand, he wanted to forget all about his plans for dessert and fuck her as he wanted to, hard and fast. But on the other, Jonah wanted to make her as crazy for him as he was for her. Drive her to the edge of madness until she was begging him to come deep inside her.

He smiled wickedly, decision made.

After setting the bowls down, he pulled the plastic wrap off before tossing it carelessly over his shoulder.

"Slob," she teased.

"Shh..." He grabbed a strawberry and pressed it against her lips until she opened and took a bite. "No talking with your mouth full."

Amidst her laughter, he picked up another berry and dipped it in the cream. Then, using it as a paintbrush, he swiped it across her pebbled nipples, one at a time, coating her dark tips with the sweet confection.

Once her nipples were decorated to his satisfaction, Jonah stepped back to take in the provocative, arousing sight before him. The pale whiteness of the cream against the dark brown of her skin made his cock ache. She was the epitome of every sexual fantasy, thought and dream he'd ever had come to life. He didn't know what he'd ever done to deserve her, but he was thankful nevertheless. "Damn, I'm good."

"Yes, you are, but that's a little cold."

"Let's see if I can warm you up." Setting the berry back in the bowl, Jonah leaned forward and took her cream-coated nipple in his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the aroused peak until he'd cleaned it of every last drop.

"I'm feeling warmer already." She moaned, pressing closer to him.

Pulling back, he blew lightly against the damp tip. "Then I guess you don't need me anymore."

"No," Tisha reached out and entwined her fingers in his hair, pulling his mouth back to her breast, "I'd never say that."

"Good." He chuckled, capturing her nipple in his mouth and drawing the tight bud between his teeth. Tisha arched her back, offering her breast up to him like a pagan at an altar.

"God, yes."

Jonah cupped her breast as he pulled away, brushing his thumbs against the damp peak for a few seconds. "Did you like that?"

"Hmm, very much." Her eyes were closed and a small smile hovered over her lips.

"Good." Releasing his hold on her, he reached in the bowl again. "Dessert isn't over yet though."

After dipping another strawberry in the whipped cream, he brought the berry to her mouth and coated her full lips with the white froth before allowing her to take a bite of the ripe berry. "Hmm..." she moaned, closing her eyes as she chewed.

Juice trickled from the red fruit. Enraptured by the sight, he used his thumb to wipe up the excess then slid his fingers between his own lips.

Tisha opened her eyes again and sent him a look of unfettered desire that called to him. It was a look he couldn't ignore a second longer. Capturing her mouth in a searing kiss, Jonah slipped his tongue between her lips and indulged in the erotic taste of berries, cream and Tisha. It was a heady combination that damn near stole his breath.

Before he lost his head and took her where she lay, he broke their kiss and stepped back for a moment to regain his composure.

"Are we done playing then?" Tisha's breathing was as heavy as Jonah's.

"Not hardly." Jonah grasped her by the hips then lifted and set her back farther on the table. "Lie down, bend your knees and open your legs."

"I don't think I can take much more," she said, even as she moved to do as he said.

"Too bad." Jonah ran his hands up her calves then down her thighs, spreading her legs in the process. He kept his touch light and feathery as he explored her body, all the while avoiding touching her sex.

"Jonah. Don't tease me."

"Why not? Don't you like my touches?" He placed a small kiss on the inside of her thigh. From the angle he was at, he could smell her arousal. Her intoxicating scent was so enthralling, it took everything out of him to refrain from burying his face between her legs.

"Please." Tisha arched her back, lifting her hips in invitation. It was one he could resist no longer. Drawing his finger through the white whipped topping, he traced it along the seam of her pussy, mixing it with her own creamy essence. "Jonah..."

"Yes?" Jonah brought his finger to his mouth and licked it clean. Mmmm...better than he'd even imagined.

"Please," she whimpered again.

"Please what, pretty baby?" Parting her lips, he gently ran his index finger and his middle finger against the damp opening of her heated sex. It was light enough they didn't slip into her but heavy enough to get her attention.

"Are you really...going to make me...ask?" She moaned. Her hips undulated toward him, wordlessly asking what she would not.

"I think I am."

"Fine," she groaned. "Please, eat me."

"My pleasure." Answering the plea in her voice, Jonah lowered his mouth to her slick slit and gave them both what they wanted.

Anchoring her hips in his cupped hands, he used his mouth, his teeth and his tongue in every way imaginable to bring her pleasure. Only he wouldn't let her get off. No. He made her earn it with the cries from her lips and the pull of her hands in his hair. He forced her over and over to the brink of release, pulling back just shy of orgasm, wanting the moment to last until neither of them could take a second longer. He made it last until she begged him to finish.

"No more, please, Jonah," she pleaded in a choking voice. "Let me come."

Thrusting two fingers deep within her heated core, he raised his mouth a fraction of an inch and ordered hoarsely, "Come for me, baby. Now," before taking her clit and sucking hard, giving her just the right pressure she needed to soar. Like a fragile shattered plate, she came apart, her body quivering as she chanted his name.

As she lay trembling before him, Jonah straightened and wiped his hand across his mouth. "Dessert was...wonderful. Now I'm ready for the main course."

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Tisha snuggled under the warmth of the comforter and tried to ignore the bright light shining down on her face. It was way too early for her to wake up. The misplacement of the sunlight, combined with the masculine smell of the sheets and the tingling feeling of the satisfaction of a woman who had been well-loved the night before reminded her whose bed she was in.

She stretched her legs and felt the pull of muscles that had gotten quite a workout. Jonah had been relentless this weekend. She lost count of the number of times he brought her to orgasm. The man had made a meal of her body, licking, sucking and tasting every inch of her, and she'd loved every minute of it.

The first night he'd done things with the ingredients for strawberry shortcake the good lord never intended. There was no way in hell she was ever going to be able to cruise the produce section without experiencing a sexual flashback. It was only after exhaustion began to overshadow her orgasms that Jonah allowed her to actually sample the nuked meal she'd made for them earlier.

Last night had been even better. This time it involved a candlelit picnic in the backyard, followed by a rousing bout of lovemaking under the stars. Just thinking of the naughty way he teased her body from head to toe made Tisha smile. If she weren't so lethargic, she might have slipped her hand under the blanket and used her memory and her nimble fingers to get herself off once more. Jonah hadn't wasted a single minute of their weekend alone. He really took the meaning "when the cat's away the mice will play" to a whole other level.

"Good morning, sunshine."

Without opening her eyes or changing her expression she spoke. "Don't let the smile fool you. I still hate mornings."

"But not this morning."

"What's so special about today?" Tisha opened one eye and peered over at Jonah, who was dressed only in gray sweatpants. He was standing at the foot of the bed, holding a tray brimming with food. His dark, shoulder-length hair was slicked back and looked damp, as if he just stepped out of the shower.

"Breakfast in bed, for starters."

"Breakfast?" The man knew her so well.

"Yes, bacon, eggs, and French toast." Jonah turned the tray so she could see the handle of a white coffee cup. "And piping hot, caffeine-laden java."

"Ahhhh." With both eyes open now, Tisha sat up. Maybe there was something to this morning thing after all. After placing two pillows behind her, she raised the



comforter and tucked it under her arms. "I'm ready." She patted her lap for emphasis. "Feed me."

"See, if I knew all it took to get you in a good mood in the morning was a thorough fuck the night before followed by breakfast in bed the next day, I would have done this ages ago."

"We didn't know each other ages ago," she reminded him as she picked up her coffee cup and took a small sip.

He joined her on the bed, sitting down near her lap so they were facing one another, the tray between them. "It feels like it though, doesn't it?"

"What, getting tired of the old ball and chain already?" She smirked as she set the cup down again.

"Not at all. Quite the opposite in fact. " Jonah picked up a piece of bacon and offered it to her, rubbing the tip against her bottom lip suggestively. "Open up."

Wary, Tisha raised her hand and took the piece of meat from him. "I sincerely hope you're not planning on doing anything with that bacon but eating it." She took a bite of the crispy slice before returning the remaining part back to her plate. "A woman has to draw the line with food play somewhere."

"Of course." Smiling, Jonah picked up a small floral gravy boat and tilted it so she could see inside. "But the syrup is an entirely different matter in itself."

Even though his tone was teasing, there was a sudden heat to his gaze that made her quiver. She didn't know how he did it but with a simple look he made her feel as if she were the most beautiful, desirable woman alive. "Jonah. Sweetie. I love you, I really do, but you're going to have to give a sista a second to catch her breath."

"Never." With the tray still between them, Jonah leaned forward to brush his lips over hers. "I'm not going to give you a chance to ever get away from me."

"If you keep fucking me then feeding me like this, I can assure you, I'm not going anywhere."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"I'll hire a pilot to write it in the sky if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary. You can simply say yes to my next question."

"Question?"

In lieu of replying, Jonah picked up the napkin off the tray to reveal a small black jewelry box.

"Ohmygod." She said it so loud and so fast, the three words blended into one. Open-mouthed, she stared like a slack-jawed yokel at the velvet box, willing her brain to begin working again so she could speak, but her mind was too busy tripping over itself to function correctly. Wide-eyed, she raised her gaze to meet Jonah's, who was staring intently at her. "Is that...is that..." Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Tisha tried again. "Wow. I'm in total shock right now. I'm torn between laughing hysterically and throwing up."

His expression shuttered for a moment and his smile went down a watt or two. "Not exactly the reaction I was going for."

"I'm pretty sure it's normal." Happiness and vomit occasionally went hand in hand.

Her answer seemed to relax and amuse him. "So, this isn't necessarily a bad thing." Jonah reached out to tuck a stray hair behind her ear.

"Not necessarily." Bad was nowhere near how she felt.

"I know proposing in sweats over a tray of overcooked bacon and microwaved French toast isn't exactly romantic, but I was hoping maybe you could forgive my lack of finesse as you did my lack of manners the first day we met."

"I..." Tisha raised wonder-filled eyes to stare lovingly at Jonah, who looked as if he too was having trouble keeping his emotions at bay. "I'll overlook it this time."

"Thank you." Jonah picked up the box and opened the top, tilting it toward her so she could see the ring. The sunlight hit the solitaire princess-cut diamond in such a way it almost appeared as if the diamond winked at her. "I'd get on one knee, but then I'd be proposing to the mattress and I wouldn't be able to tell if you said yes or no."

"Is there even a doubt?" Tisha tore her gaze away from the beautiful ring, but it took great effort to do so.

"Maybe a small one." Tisha could hear the small sense of uncertainty in his voice. "As wonderful and charming as I am, I do come with a lot of baggage. I sincerely doubt single fathers fighting for custody of precocious pre-teens are exactly on the most desirable list."

"I guess it would depend on the father and the pre-teen, because from where I'm sitting, it's pretty damn attractive."

"Enough to maybe convince you to say yes?"

"I don't know," she teased, brain firing now on all cylinders. "I haven't actually heard a question yet."

"True." Jonah palmed the ring box and stood then picked up the tray from her lap and set it on the floor before joining her on the bed once more. He pulled the ring out then took her left hand in his. "Tisha Nichols, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Just hearing him say the actual words brought tears to her eyes. Even though Tisha prided herself on being strong, she did nothing to stop the tears from pouring forth. "Yes, Jonah, I will."

Jonah brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her bare finger before sliding the ring on. Without bothering to see if it fit or how it looked against her skin, Tisha slipped her hand behind his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. She could stare later. Right now she had to show her fiancé just how pleased she was.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Were you able to get in touch with her?" Tisha asked when Jonah joined her back at the restaurant table.

"No," Jonah said with a small frown. "It went directly to her voicemail."

They were enjoying their first outing as an engaged couple, but their little excursion wasn't as wonderful as it could have been because there was a black cloud hanging over their heads, in the form of one little girl who wasn't answering her phone. Jonah had attempted to get in contact with Cami since they'd finally untangled themselves, but so far, he'd no luck. "That's not like her."

"No, but I wouldn't be surprised if she put her phone down somewhere, forgot all about plugging it in and now the battery is dead." Jonah paused to take a bite out of his manicotti. "See, this is why a nine-year-old shouldn't have a cell phone."

"Right, as if you let her go anywhere without that thing handcuffed to her wrist."

"You can't be too trusting these days. People are crazy."

Tisha laughed lightly and sat back in her chair. He was so cute when he was doing his whole Papa Bear thing. "People aren't any crazier now than they were when we were growing up. The only difference now is we have better technology."

"Are you suggesting I take the phone away?"

"Hell no." The thought of Cami, out there alone with no backup, in ReShaunda's incapable hands, sent a shiver of revulsion through Tisha. "We need to be able to get in touch with her 24/7."

"That's what I thought." Jonah smirked.

Feeling a little sheepish, Tisha smiled. "I was just saying." It was going to take some time to balance out these new feelings. On one hand, she wanted to let Cami experience the world as it was, yet on the other, she wanted to tether the girl to her and keep her safe from harm.

"Uh-huh. I can see it now. You're going to be as big of a worrywart as I am."

"Probably more so. I know how girls' minds work."

A look of pain crossed his face. "God. Stop. I don't even want to think of that yet."

"Try as you might, Papa, the time will come."

"Thanks a lot, Momma." The emphasis he put on the last word made her pause in thought.

"Momma," Tisha repeated, testing the name out on her lips. "Weird."

"What's weird?"

"Being a momma."

"Too weird? I know insta-family can be a bi—"

"Hush. I'm a fan of weird. I did agree to marry you after all." Not that he was really weird. In fact, he and Cami seemed like the most normal family she'd ever met.

"That you did, but you know," Jonah picked up her hand and placed a kiss against her engagement ring, "the correct way to finalize an engagement is to spend the rest of the weekend in bed. I mean, if we don't, I'm not sure it can technically count."

"We wouldn't want that."

"No, we wouldn't."

"How much time do we have before Cami comes home?"

Jonah looked at his watch then back up at Tisha with a wicked grin. "Long enough."

"Then by all means, let's make this official."

Jonah raised his hand and signaled to the waiter for the check. "Have I told you lately how much I love the way you think?"

"No, but why don't you take me home and show me?"

"It will be my pleasure."

The way he said pleasure made her quiver and Tisha knew it wouldn't be his pleasure alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

After pulling into the driveway, Jonah turned off the engine and exited the car. Smiling he walked around the hood of the car to the passenger side to open the door for Tisha. "My lady."

"Is this the sort of treatment I can expect from my husband-to-be?"

Jonah took her hand and helped her from the car. "Most definitely."

"You want to show Cami what a real man is like, huh?"

"What do you mean?" he asked as he shut the door.

Tisha leaned back against the closed door and slipped her index fingers through the front belt loops of Jonah's pants to pull him closer to her. "My mom always said girls with good fathers look for good men. You're an excellent dad, you treat her so well, love and spoil her to distraction, and now you're turning that same attention on me. Through me you're going to show her how she should expect a man to treat her. In other words, you're going to prevent her from ever dating because men like you don't come around often."

"That's what I'm counting on. I like both my girls where I can see them."

"Think you can handle one more girl, or maybe a boy?"

At one point in time Jonah would have never thought he'd be able to imagine his life with one kid, let alone two or three. But the joy he experienced on a daily basis from rearing Cami, and the mere idea of watching Tisha grow heavy with his child was all the convincing he needed. "I think the only way we'll know for sure is if you give them to me."

"I'm up to the challenge. Are you?"

"Bring it, wo—" Before Jonah could finish his sentence, a gray sedan pulled up behind his car in the driveway. Startled, he turned his head and stared in wonder at the familiar man dressed in jeans and a light blue polo stepping out of the car.

"Who's that?" Tisha released her hold on him and stood straight once more.

"Eddy," Jonah answered as he watched the tall African-American man approach him. "ReShaunda's husband."

"What is he doing here?"

That was a very good question. "I don't know." But he was planning on finding out. Over the course of time that Jonah and ReShaunda had waged their wars with one another, Eddy pretty much stayed in the background. From what he knew about him, Eddy was a good provider, his girls seemed to dote on him and Cami never said anything bad about the man. He and Jonah never had any beef, but at the same time, they were not what he would have called friends either, so this appearance was definitely out of the blue and out of character. Still, Jonah figured it didn't pay to be rude.

"Eddy." Jonah walked toward the other man and held out his hand in welcome. "How's it going?"

"To be honest, like shit." Eddy gripped Jonah's hand in a firm grip and gave a brief shake before releasing his hold on Jonah and shoving his hands in his pants pocket.

"I'm sorry to hear that. What can I help you with?"

"This whole thing with ReShaunda has just gone too far and I'm done."

Jonah didn't know what the other man was talking about, but he could definitely relate to the feeling of being done with the annoying woman. "How about we take this in the house?"

"Yeah, man, yeah." Eddy gave a nervous laugh. "I need a drink."

"Then we'll get you one. Oh, pardon my manners." Jonah turned to Tisha and reached out to pull her into the conversation. "Eddy, this is Tisha, my fiancée."

"Fiancée?" Eddy's eyes widened in surprise he glanced back and forth between the two of them. "Oh congratulations. I...ReShaunda never said."

"She didn't know." Not that it was any of her business. "We just became engaged this morning. But come on," Jonah nodded his head toward the house. "Enough about us. Let's go in."

"Sounds good."

Hand in hand, Tisha and Jonah led the way toward the house. After unlocking the door, Jonah ushered his guest in before he and Tisha stepped inside and he shut the door. The three of them stepped into the living room, and while Tisha and Eddy sat, Jonah made drinks.

Once that was taken care of, he handed Eddy his glass then walked over to the couch and sat down next to Tisha. "So what's going on, man?"

"I guess...I...fuck." Abashed, Eddy glanced over at Tisha. "Sorry, ma'am, for my outburst there. I'm having a hard time figuring out where to begin."

"It's no big." Tisha was quick to assure him. "I've said worse in church."

Jonah chuckled. It wouldn't have surprised him if she had. "Really, Eddy, just go ahead and say what's on your mind. Don't worry about filtering. Tisha can take it."

"It's not Tisha I'm worried about."

"Then who is it?"

"ReShaunda." Eddy closed his eyes and shook his head briefly before opening them once more and focusing his troubled stare on Jonah. The man's normally placid face was doused with pain.

"ReShaunda?" The ease that filled Jonah's heart and stayed from the moment Tisha said yes to his proposal slowly began to slip away. "Is something going on with her I should know about?"

"I..." Eddy hedged.

"You what, Eddy?" Jonah sat up. "If some shit is going down, I need to know. She has my kid with her right now."

Eddy's eyes widened. "She has Cami too?"

"Yes." Jonah's unease was notching up to something much more.

"And you know where they are?"

He better. "Yes. They're in San Diego for the weekend. They're supposed to be back today at two o'clock."

Eddy let out deep relieved sigh and dropped his head. "Thank god."

"Excuse me for interrupting," Tisha said. "But what's going on here? By the way you're acting, it would seem as if you didn't know where your wife and kids were."

"That's because until now I didn't," Eddy admitted as he sat upright again. "I came home yesterday from a business trip, thinking my family would be there when I arrived, only to find all the closets damn near emptied of clothing. Hers and the kids."

Jonah's blood felt as if it had turned to ice. His last conversation with ReShaunda poured forth in his mind, as did her very erratic behavior in the days leading up to the weekend. She'd been almost pleasant on the phone when she requested trading visitation times so Cami could accompany her and her girls on what was supposed to be their little "girl bonding" trip. Then her odd behavior continued once she came to pick up Cami, refusing to let him near the trunk of the car.

Jonah couldn't help but wonder if the reason she didn't want him near the trunk was because there was something in there she was hiding. Like three other large suitcases that would have belied the length of her trip. But no. He was reading too much into things.

For all he knew, Cami's over-packing could very well be a trait she inherited through her and ReShaunda's shared DNA.

"Maybe she just packed a few extra things."

"A few things that didn't include her wedding ring. I think she's leaving me and taking my girls," Eddy nodded toward him and amended, "our girls with her."

"What!" Tisha rose to her feet. "Taking them. Taking them where?"

"I have no idea."

That answer didn't seem to satisfy Tisha. "How did you not know your wife was planning this?"

"Probably the same way I didn't realize my wife was self-medicating with our daughter's Ritalin medication."

"Oh shit." The shock in Tisha's voice matched the same coursing through Jonah's body.

He could feel Tisha's eyes on him, but he couldn't move. He was frozen in his seat by the possibility of Eddy's words.

"Yeah, that's pretty much how I felt when I found out two weeks ago. I gave her an ultimatum. I told her when I got back from this trip she was either going to check into a treatment center or I was going to take the girls and let her self-destruct on her own."

"Seems to me she chose the third option. She took the girls and let you deal with her self-destruction from afar." Even though Jonah knew this wasn't Eddy's fault he couldn't help but blame the man a bit. How was it possible to live with someone, sleep with someone, and not know what a destructive psychopath she was?

"Look, I know I went about this the wrong way." Eddy's voice took on a biting tone. "I just want to talk to her and convince her to come home. I hoped maybe you'd seen her. That maybe she'd said something to you."

"She did." Jonah rose slowly to his feet, his anger rocking him to his core. "She said goodbye to me as she drove away with my child."

"I'm sorry, Jonah."

"Save it, Eddy." Politeness be damned. Reaching into his pocket, Jonah retrieved his cell phone and once again tried to call Cami. Unfortunately, like before, the ringer went right to the message, causing Jonah's heart to tattoo painfully in his chest. With trembling fingers, he hung up the cell.

"Still nothing?" Tisha asked, her soft voice filled with fear.

"No."

"I know this is very unlike me, but I'm going to say it anyway. Let's give ReShaunda the benefit of the doubt." Tisha glanced at her watch then back at him hopefully. "Two o'clock is when she's supposed to be here, so let's give her until then before we flip out."

Jonah reached out and took Tisha's icy-cold hand in his. "Do you really think she's going to bring her back in forty-five minutes?"

"I have to." Tisha's eyes filled with tears. It was a sight Jonah was unprepared to handle. Pulling her to him, he held her flush against his body, absorbing her determination and lending her his own strength. They could get through this together. They could get through anything together. Nevertheless, they wouldn't be complete until their girl was home.

With a deep breath, he pulled away from her but kept her hand in his for support. "In forty-five minutes our daughter is going to walk through that door."

"That's right." Tisha nodded her head as she tightened her hold on his hand. "We're going to laugh about this later," she glanced over her shoulder to include Eddy, "we're all going to feel stupid for overreacting."

"God, I hope you're right," the other man muttered, taking a long drink from his glass.

"Forty-five minutes," Jonah reiterated as he and Tisha took their seats again, angling their bodies so they could see the front door. They stayed in that exact spot, barely speaking a word as the clock crept past two then three then four o'clock. But by the time five o'clock rolled by, they were silent no longer. Tisha was on the phone, calling every number in Cami's phonebook while Eddy dialed his family and friends in hopes they might have seen or heard from ReShaunda.

Jonah called the police himself, relating the news of the missing children with a lump in his throat. When he finally hung up the phone, he walked over to the fireplace to stare broodingly at a picture of Cami. For the third time in his life, he experienced the devastating horror of losing his family. This time, he wasn't sure he could survive it.



## **Chapter Fourteen**

"How's he holding up?"

Tisha glanced over her shoulder and smiled sadly at Nance. "About as well as can be expected for someone who hasn't slept more than a few hours here and there in three days."

Nance shivered then ran her hands up and down her arms as if trying to keep a chill at bay. "I couldn't even imagine."

"Trust me," Tisha turned to face forward again, and stared sight unseen out of the window over the kitchen sink into the empty and dark backyard, "you wouldn't want to. I didn't think it was possible to feel this bad, to hurt this much and still be alive." And if that's how she felt after knowing Cami only a few months, she knew Jonah had to feel a hundred times worse.

Nance set the coffee cups she brought into the kitchen with her on the counter then placed her arm around Tisha's waist and pulled her friend into her for a hug. "Oh sweetie, I wish I knew what to say or do to help."

"You're helping by being here." Tisha leaned into the warmth and support of her best friend. "All of you are." Since Sunday, Jonah's house had been buzzing with family and friends who wanted to help.

From the ladies at the shop to Cami's teachers and classmates, the once-quiet house had come to life, thanks to their concerned friends and family. There wasn't a tree on the block that didn't bear a yellow ribbon or a window in the salon or the neighboring stores that didn't have a reward poster up with a picture of Cami's sunny smile on it. Everyone had come out in full force to bring the little girl home. Tisha could only pray their efforts wouldn't be in vain.

"You'd do it for us if the situation were reversed."

"Let's pray it never is." Tisha wouldn't wish this pain on her worst enemy.

"I saw the officer here earlier. What did he say?"

"Not much." Her voice broke under the weight of disappointment. "They haven't had any leads. For a fucking psychotic drug addict, ReShaunda is playing it smart. She hasn't used any credit cards and hasn't made a play for the border. There's an Amber alert out for Cami, but it will only work if someone spots the car or ReShaunda and the kids."

"What are the chances of that?"

"A little bit above jack crap." Tisha let out a harsh breath. "I swear, it doesn't seem as if it's enough. An alert. Whoop-dee-fucking-doo."

"Honey, I'm sure they're doing the best they can."

"Are they?" The question raged in her mind like an inferno. "Do you know we made it on the news the first couple of days but I haven't seen anything today?" Tisha pulled away and turned around, leaning on the sink for support. "All I keep thinking about is Alexis Patterson."

"Who is she?"

"Exactly." Tisha let out a bitter little laugh. "Do you remember who Elizabeth Smart is?"

"Yes," Nance nodded. "The little girl who was kidnapped in Utah but then later found."

"That's right."

"What does she have to do with Alexis?"

"Everything. Alexis was a seven-year-old who went missing a month and two days before Elizabeth Smart did, but she didn't get a third of the press Elizabeth did. None of them ever do."

"None of who?"

Tears welled in Tisha's eyes as she looked over at her friend. "Black kids. No one cares when they go missing. It doesn't make the front page news, or when it does, it doesn't make it for long. It's as if they don't matter. As if their lives aren't as important or as worthy as everyone else's. And I can't stand for Cami to be put in that category. Dismissible. Unworthy." Tisha wasn't the crying sort, but she could feel the tears streaking down her face. "I can't stand for any child, no matter what race or who they belong to, to be filed away and forgotten. Someone has to care."

"Someone does care. I care." Nance reached out and clasped Tisha's cold hands in her warm grasp. "Everyone in this house cares, and none of us will rest until Cami comes home. We won't let them 'Alexis' her, even if it means we have to stage a coup outside the newsroom."

"A coup, huh?" With her free hand, Tisha wiped her cheeks. "You might get in trouble for that."

"So what? This is my future niece. You're damn skippy someone's going to pay attention. I'm not afraid to go back to jail."

"Please," Tisha laughed, despite the situation in which she found herself. "You've never been to jail."

"But I'm not afraid to go. Those news people don't know who they're fucking with. You don't mess with a Latina's *familia*."

"I guess." Tisha pulled the feisty woman into her arms and hugged her, grateful for the strength her friend was lending in her moment of need. "I love you."

Nance squeezed her tight. "I love you too." The two women remained locked in the embrace for a few seconds longer before Nance finally pulled back. "Why don't you let me finish up in here?"

The offer sounded too good to refuse. "Sure you don't mind?"

"No, not at all." Smiling, her friend gave her a nudge toward the living room. "Go on and find Jonah. I'm sure he could use you right about now."

Tisha wasn't sure if he needed her, but she knew she needed him. "Okay, thanks. I will."

After leaving Nance in the kitchen, Tisha headed into the living room in search of Jonah. Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be found. The living room was far from empty though. Almost every available surface was filled with people sitting or standing around, talking in small groups. There was a long folding table set up, with people on their laptops or cells making calls on Cami's behalf. Even though the support had been strong, it was only three days out, and Tisha couldn't help but wonder if there would still be this many people searching in a week, a month, or God forbid, a year from now.

Filled with dread at the prospect, Tisha made her way through the throng and headed upstairs to look for Jonah. After checking every room and still not finding him, Tisha went back downstairs and out the front door.

The night was cool, so she crossed her arms to keep herself warm as she glanced around, looking for Jonah. It didn't take her but a few seconds to spot him, sitting in his car in the driveway, staring straight ahead as if lost in thought. Concerned, she walked over to him and tried to open the passenger's door, but to her disappointment it was locked.

Bending down, she peered inside and tapped lightly on the window to get his attention.

He didn't immediately respond and she wondered for a moment if he heard her. Before she could make the decision to tap again or walk around to the driver's side of the car though, a soft snick alerted her he'd released the locks. She grasped the handle and opened the door, sliding into the seat.

Jonah turned toward her and the anguish in his face ripped at her soul before he glanced forward once more. Without saying a word, she shut the door behind her, enclosing the two of them in darkness.

So many stupid questions entered her head.

"Are you okay?"

"Do you need something?"

"Is there anything I can get for you?"

Each question seemed dumber than the one before it. Of course he wasn't okay. What he needed was for his daughter to come home. And no, there was nothing she could get for him or do to make this better. Nothing.

The only thing she knew to do was to be with him. Without saying a word, she reached over the console and took his hand in hers. It was only then she noticed the cold metal of the car keys in his hand.

"Where are you going?" she asked, confused.

Jonah moved his hand from hers and placed the keys in the ignition. "I couldn't stay in there a moment longer."

"Were you going to tell me?" She knew this was not the right time to feel wronged, but she couldn't help it. "Were you just going to leave?"

"Yes."

"Yes to what? Yes, you were going to tell me or yes, you were just going to leave?"

"Yes, no, I don't know. Fuck," He raked his hand through his hair. "I just know...I can't..."

"Can't what?"

"Do this."

"What?"

"I can't sit in there with all those well-meaning people who once they feel as if they've done their civic duty, will return home to their children. I can't be in there without her." His voice broke and her heart broke right along with it. "I know you probably think I'm the world's biggest dick. Ungrateful and..."

"Jonah," Tisha called his name softly.

He turned toward her. His eyes were brimming with tears.

Touched by the vulnerability he allowed himself to show, Tisha reached up and stroked his cheek. "Let's go."

"What?" His voice was filled with shock.

"Let's leave. We have our cells." The only time either of them had set the phones down was to charge them, but even then they left them on. "Nance will call us if she hears anything."

"Where would we go?"

"Anywhere that isn't here. We can drive around and look for her. Or we can go to the park where the three of us had that picnic and just sit together and pray."

"Pray?" Jonah let out a harsh laugh. "To who, god? I'm not too sure he exists right now, and if he does, I don't think I want to talk to him."

"Then I'll talk for the both of us." She might not be the type who went to church every week, but she damn well knew god was there, and she would use everything in her power to get Cami back.

Jonah reached out and fingered his keys. "It's probably stupid to drive around but..."

"You have to do something." She understood his need to move, to feel as if he wasn't just waiting for the inevitable.

"Yes."

"Then let's go." Tisha grabbed her seat belt and buckled in. "I'll call Nance on my cell to let her know to hold down the fort for a while until we come back."

Jonah reached out and cupped his hand under chin. "I can't..." He closed his eyes for a brief second as if trying to gather himself. "I couldn't have made it this far, endured all of it, without you."

"You'll never have to be without me and I know that together we will find Cami and we'll bring her home." Tears shone in her eyes, but her voice held the conviction she felt in her heart.

"I hope you're right." He pressed his lips close against hers in a brief but meaningful kiss then settled back in his seat. After taking a deep breath, he turned on the car and put it into gear then slowly began to back down the driveway.

Tisha felt in her pocket for her cell so she could make the call to Nance when Jonah's phone began to ring. He stopped the car and shifted in his seat to grab it. The awkward positioning though caused him to drop the cell at her feet.

"I'll get it," Tisha offered. She bent down and scooped it up then handed it to him.

Jonah glanced at the number on the screen and frowned.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Who is it?"

"I don't know." Clicking the phone on, he brought it to his ear. "Hello?" There was a brief silence followed by a sharp intake of breath. "Cami? Is that you?"

Jonah shifted into park and turned the car off. He couldn't tell if he was dreaming, but if he was, he knew he never wanted to wake. Could it be true? Usually, nothing in his life ever ended well. Things just ended, and normally not in his favor. But this time he was going to hold on to hope for as long as he could. "Cami, honey, is that you?" Jonah reached out blindly and grasped Tisha's hand. He needed something, someone to ground him and keep him in one piece.

"Yes." Even though she was speaking softly, there was no way he could ever mistake her voice for anyone else's.

Cami was alive.

"Oh my god!" Tears fell unchecked down his cheeks as he grasped the phone like a lifeline, thankful just to hear her voice again. "Say something, anything. Let me know you're okay."

"Is it her?" Tisha demanded. "Is it really her?"

"Yes," he mouthed, releasing Tisha's hand to hit the speaker option on his cell. He held the phone between them, knowing she needed to hear Cami's voice as desperately as he did. They leaned forward at the same time, heads banging sharply in their rush to get closer to the missing girl. If it were any other time, it might have been funny, but amusement was the last thing Jonah was feeling. Rubbing his head, he pulled back a bit and spoke again. "Cami, are you there, baby?"

"Yes. I'm here." Even with the phone on speaker, it was still a little hard to hear her.

Acting quickly, Jonah fingered the volume button up on the side. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"No." His heart felt as if it dropped to his stomach. "Are you hurt? Did ReShaunda do so —"

"What did I do wrong?"

Her abrupt question caught him off guard. It took him a second to process what she said, but even when he did, it didn't make much sense. "What do you mean, what did you do wrong?"

"Why don't you want me anymore?"

Confusion yielded to fury. Not want her.

That deceitful bitch. Never had Jonah wanted to hurt someone as desperately as he wanted to hurt ReShaunda. Not only did that conniving psychotic bitch steal his child, she lied to her to boot. "That's not true, not even remotely." Jonah tried hard to keep his voice even and not let his anger overflow onto the line and frighten Cami away. "ReShaunda took you. I didn't give you up. I'd never give you up."

There was a long pause. So long that for a second Jonah thought he'd lost the call, but then to his ever-growing gratitude to god, Cami spoke again. This time her voice sounded choked, as if she were holding back tears. It was a feeling he could more than relate to. "Honest?"

"Honest." He closed his eyes for a brief second and wished the truth of his words would lend her comfort wherever she was. "I love you. We're a team, remember? Us..."

"I didn't want to believe...but I wasn't sure, and Cousin ReShaunda said —"

"It doesn't matter what she told you. It was all lies. I would never ever give you up or ever stop looking for you." Speaking of which, Jonah needed information and fast. They could work on their communication later, when Cami was home and safe, where she belonged. "Now tell me where you are?"

"I don't know. Some hotel. I'm not sure where."

Jonah covered the mouthpiece of the cell and whispered to Tisha, "Call Sergeant Busch and let him know I have Cami on the phone."

"Okay." Tisha grabbed her phone and began to dial.

Satisfied help would be on the way soon, he took his hand off the cell and turned his attention back to Cami. "Is ReShaunda there?"

"Yes, she's in the other room. I waited until she went to sleep and took her new cell out of her purse. She broke my phone. She said it was an accident but I don't believe her."

Neither did he. "Where are you now?"

"In the bathroom. I didn't want her to wake up and catch me."

That explained the muted tone. "Smart thinking. Are the girls okay?" After all, it wasn't just his child missing. Eddy had been beside himself, sick with worry over what his wife had done and concerned about the safety of his daughters.

"Yes. They're asleep too. Cousin ReShaunda keeps making us take medicine at night. I keep telling her I don't feel sick, but she says we have to because of the pig flu." Jonah's blood ran cold at the thought of ReShaunda drugging the girls. Was there nothing she wouldn't do? "Tonight I just pretended though. I waited until she wasn't looking and spat it in my soda can."

"Good girl." He couldn't even imagine the courage it took for her to do what she'd done. He knew if she was going to get out of there safely, she was going to have to go even further. "Cami, I'm going to ask you to do something, but you're going to have to be very brave and very quiet. Can you do that?"

"Yes." She answered without hesitation.

"I want you to try to sneak out of the room and make your way to the office or front desk, whichever the hotel has. Can you do that?"

"I...I think so."

"Good."

Tisha leaned toward him and softly spoke. "I have Sergeant Busch on the line. He's sending a squad over now, but he'll stay at the station to be liaison between us and the police in whatever city she's in."

"Great." Jonah took a deep breath and offered up a quick prayer before continuing with Cami. "Now listen to me carefully. On the count of three, I want you to quietly open the bathroom door and make your way out of the room. No matter what, don't hang up. When you get to the front desk, you tell them your name. Tell them you've been kidnapped, and then hand them the phone. I'll take care of the rest."

"Kidnapped?"

The concept didn't appear to have registered with her and he worried it might be too much for her to handle. "Yes, but it's going to be okay."

"But...but what if she wakes up?" Fear clouded her voice now.

"If she wakes up before you make it out of there, I want you to scream at the top of your lungs and don't stop until someone comes to hear what it's about." He hoped wherever they were staying the walls would be thin enough for her to be heard and someone would care enough to check.

"I'm scared." Cami's voice dropped to a whisper.

"I know, baby, I know. But I also know you're a brave girl and you can do this." He filled his voice with as much confidence as he could muster. All the same fears she had he had as well. Because he knew if ReShaunda woke up and stopped her, Cami might not have another chance to contact him.

"I love you, Uncle J."

"I love you too, baby. Now go on, do what I told you. One. Two. Three."

He closed his eyes and took Tisha's hand in his, holding tightly to her as their daughter made her way to freedom. Together they listened as the door to the bathroom creaked open. As she made her way over to the front entrance, he mouthed

"Pleasepleaseplease" over and over in a silent plea for divine grace. His stomach soured as he envisioned Cami creeping across the room to flee for safety. It was the longest few seconds of his life, and just when he felt as if he would vomit from the stress of it all, he heard the sounds of a heavier door opening and then the pounding of Cami's feet as she started to run.

"Go, baby. Run," he encouraged, not sure if she could hear him but needing to say it nevertheless. They weren't out of the woods yet, but he felt as if a huge weight were lifted off his shoulders.

He heard Tisha say, "She's out," presumably to the sergeant, but Jonah kept his attention focused on Cami. Nothing would be right again until she was safe back with him.

"I need help." Cami's voice was frantic. "My name is Cami Mitts and I've been kidnapped. You need to call 9-1-1 right now."

"What?" A slightly confused and sleepy voice asked, "Is this a joke?"

"No, here, talk to my Uncle J."

The line was empty for a second then filled by a harassed-sounding man. "Hello. Hello. This is Pauly Wonter at the Motel Six in San Ysidro. Tell me what's going on here?"

"First let me tell you this is no joke," Jonah said in a firm, no-nonsense tone. "My daughter was taken three days ago. Her kidnapper is still in your hotel."

The clerk's earlier attempt at professionalism quickly disintegrated and gave away to pure shock. "Oh shit."

Jonah couldn't have agreed more. "Exactly. I need you to call the police and let them know to contact Sergeant Busch of the LAPD. He has all the information they'll need."

"LAPD! Christ on a cross. Is this real? Like really real?"

"Yes," Jonah reiterated firmly. "Very. We're talking life or death here. Time is of the essence, Mr. Wonter. You need to make that call."

"Of course. Of course, I'm dialing now."

That was wonderful, but there was still one more important thing that needed to be done. "And, Mr. Wonter."

"Yes."

Jonah's tone brooked no arguments. "Hide my daughter."



## **Chapter Fifteen**

It was past three in the morning before Jonah and Tisha walked through the door to their home again. Thanks to Cami's bravery and the benevolence of Mr. Wonter, ReShaunda had been taken into custody, hazy but unharmed.

The police told them ReShaunda had been too out of it to really comprehend what was going on. From the contents of her purse, Ritalin wasn't the only drug she'd been popping as if it were candy. Apparently there was something really wrong with her. Everyone on scene agreed, which resulted in ReShaunda being taken to the hospital under police guard instead of directly to jail.

Tisha had a feeling ReShaunda would be spending a lot of time in hospitals for many years to come. Although it would have been her personal preference for ReShaunda to be behind bars, Tisha was satisfied with the other woman being locked in a padded room.

The only thing that could have possibly pleased her more though, would have been if Tisha had been given the opportunity to have five minutes alone with ReShaunda. Just five minutes would have made Tisha a very happy woman. But since no one in their right mind was going to allow that, Tisha had to bide her time because one day, maybe many, many years from now, ReShaunda would be released, and when that happened, Tisha would be there to welcome her home.

Until that day came, Tisha was going to live in the now and be thankful every day for the gift of a second chance they'd been given with Cami.

Despite their late arrival home, the house was packed with friends and family. Cami, who was normally so outgoing and vivacious, was a little overwhelmed by all the attention and spent most of the night smiling into Jonah's side. And seeing how Jonah seemed hell-bent on keeping Cami within spitting distance of him, it worked just fine. Cami had been back only a few short hours, but Jonah had yet to let her out of his sight. Tisha was willing to bet he wouldn't be doing it for a long time to come either.

After agreeing to give an interview the following day with the news crews, who hours earlier seemed not that interested in their story, Jonah quietly excused himself and Cami from the room, leaving Tisha to thank everyone and kick them all out. Not that she minded though. She knew Jonah and Cami needed some time together and she didn't begrudge them a second of it.

With Nance's help, she straightened up and packed the already-stuffed refrigerator with the mounds of food people had brought over. Tisha would never understand what brought out the chef in everyone during a crisis, but she was grateful they wouldn't have to worry about making lunch or dinner for the next few days.

Once everything was put away, Nance left. After locking up, Tisha made her way upstairs and followed the sound of muted voices to Cami's bedroom. From the sweet scent of vanilla permeating in the air and the way Cami was snuggled in her bed, eyes at half-mast, Tisha could tell the little girl was bathed and ready to go to sleep. But as she suspected, Jonah seemed far from ready to let her go.

Quietly, she walked across the room and rested her hand on his shoulder. Without taking his gaze off Cami, Jonah placed his hand over Tisha's. They remained that way, silent and vigilant until Cami's eyes finally drifted closed and her breathing evened out into a calm, hypnotic rhythm.

"We're very lucky, you know." Tisha was a glass half full kind of girl.

"I know, but I still can't help—" Jonah abruptly stopped.

Tisha knew exactly what he was thinking. The "what ifs" still plagued her too. Moving in front of him, she knelt and reached up to stroke his face. "It was awful, I know it was. But she's back with us now. So many parents aren't as lucky as we are." Too many.

"You're right. I know it." He lifted his head and reached out to draw her close. Leaning down he brushed his lips over hers. "What would I do without you?"

"That's going to be one of the questions of the ages because I'm never going to give you a chance to find out."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Tisha rose back to her feet. "Now come on, let's go to bed. We're both tired and we should get some sleep."

"I am tired, but..." Jonah stole another glance at Cami, who was sleeping soundly, unaware of the worries watching over her. "I don't think I can leave her yet. Eventually, but for now..."

As much as she wanted to protest, Tisha knew she'd be talking just to hear herself speak. Besides, it wasn't as if she could blame him. "I understand. I'll be right back." Tisha slipped out and headed toward Jonah's bedroom. Once there, she made short work of stripping the quilt off the bed and grabbing two pillows. When she was done, she returned to Cami's room. "If the mountain won't come to Muhammad..."

"I'm not that stubborn."

"Right," she said as she sat on the floor next to his feet. Tisha propped a pillow behind her then covered her legs with the quilt. "You're not stubborn at all."

Laughing softly, Jonah brushed the back of his hand against the side of her cheek. "You know you don't have to stay in here too."

"You should know by now I never do anything I don't want to do."

"True." A quick smile flickered across his lips. "The floor isn't exactly comfortable and the bed..."

"Jonah." Tisha reached up and pressed her finger across his lips. "Shut up. You're going to wake our daughter."

As predicted, it was an uncomfortable evening. She tossed and turned most of the night, trying her best to get comfortable on the hard, wooden floor. Even though her body demanded the padding of a bed, Tisha stayed in the room with Jonah and Cami, refusing to leave her family's side in their hour of need. Tisha wasn't the only one who slept fitful. Cami's night was also far from restful. At one point during the early morning, Tisha woke to hear Cami whimpering. Before she could rise, however, Jonah was already up and over to the side of the bed. She heard him murmuring softly, calming the agitated girl within a few moments. When he finally returned to the floor, Tisha wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against his back. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," he murmured. "Just a bad dream. I expect they're the first of many to come. As are the all-nighters."

Even though his voice was tired and wary, Tisha knew without a doubt that no matter how little rest he got, Jonah would camp out beside Cami's bed without uttering a word of complaint. "You are such a good dad," she whispered so as not to disturb the sleeping child.

"Some days I wonder." He groaned as he turned in her arms to face her.

"I don't." There were a lot of things in life Tisha questioned, but that wasn't one of them. In fact, the dedication he'd shown to Cami only made Tisha want to see more of that side of him. "I can't wait until we have more."

"More?" His voice spiked as if the very idea was scary. Tisha didn't blame him, but at the same time she refused to let ReShaunda be more than a footnote in the book of their life. "I don't know if my heart can handle it."

"Of course it can."

"Oh...well, maybe. The fact you're an only child is in your favor." Jonah raised himself onto his elbow and peered down at her wearily. "You don't have any weird cousins I should know about, do you?"

Tisha had to think about that for second. "Weird, yes, drug-addicted baby snatchers, no. But they don't live in California anyway, and besides, we're not close."

"How about we keep it that way?" Jonah settled back down beside her. "I think one whacked family member is enough per family."

"I couldn't agree more. Hell, we don't even have to invite them to the wedding."

Jonah stifled a yawn before replying. "Promise?"

"Do I get my babies this way?" she teased.

"Yes." His quick answer had her smiling.

"Then I promise."

"Okay then, but before we think about expanding our brood," Jonah grimaced as he shifted again, "let's think about installing carpet."

"With lots of padding."

"Oh yeah."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of Cami's laughter wafting into the kitchen from the living room brought a smile to Jonah's face. His girl was home. Happy and content as if the last few days had never happened. After a very rough night, where she'd tossed and turned, she bounded out of bed bright and early this morning, in what seemed like seconds after he'd finally gotten back to sleep and asked if she could invite a couple of friends over.

Her resilience astonished him. If he'd gone through the drama she had, he'd still be in a corner somewhere, nursing a beer. But not his daughter. Cami was as happy as a lark. She'd been beaming since the moment she woke up, talking a mile a minute, as if words were going to go out of style. Despite that though, he still had every intention of making an appointment for her with a therapist. Whether she knew it or not, she needed someone to talk to and he was going to do everything in his power to make his family whole again.

Speaking of family, there was still one very important part of his family who'd yet to make it downstairs this morning. From the contented sigh Tisha had murmured happily as he eased her into their bed before coming downstairs, he was willing to bet she wasn't going to be budging anytime soon. It had been a brutal couple of days, and if anyone was entitled to a little sleep, it was Tisha.

The way she'd been by his side through the whole horrible ordeal made him love her even more. And if he hadn't already proposed, he'd have dropped to one knee when she'd brought the pillows into Cami's room last night and done just that. She was a keeper, plain and simple, and he'd be a fool to ever give her up.

"Jonah, breakfast is ready. Would you like me to make you a plate to take to Tisha?"

Jonah glanced over at Margie Valencia, the mother of one of Cami's playmates, and smiled. "Yes please." He looked at the mini buffet on his counter, rubbed his grumbling stomach and moaned. "Make it a big one, and I'll share it with her."

"Will do." Margie smiled and grabbed a plate from another parent whose daughter was in the other room with Cami. When the women had come over with the kids this morning, they'd taken one horrified look at Jonah's rumpled clothes and overly stubbled jaw and ordered him back upstairs to shower.

It was an offer too good to resist. His daughter was home and safe, the least he could do to thank everyone around him was shower. In all honesty, he couldn't remember the last time he had, an admittance that shamed and embarrassed him equally.

When he came back downstairs, feeling refreshed and less gross, they'd already been in the process of making breakfast. For a man like Jonah, who wasn't much of a cook, it was a welcome relief. He could have warmed up something in the refrigerator, god knew, there was enough in there to choose from, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially one bearing hash browns.

After super-sizing the portions on his plate, Margie handed it to him, along with a steaming cup of coffee. "I made it with two sugars and no cream, just the way you like it."

Jonah frowned. "The way I..."

Margie blushed and looked away. "I remember from..."

"Oh," Jonah wished he could recall her being over, but truth be told, the time without Cami was a blur. Her comment though, reminded him there were a slew of people, friends, neighbors and strangers he owed thanks. Somehow, thanks didn't seem as if it were enough though. But it was a start. Putting as much warmth and gratitude in his smile as he could muster, he raised his cup to her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Margie cleared her throat and smiled shyly at him. "Can you call the girls in here to eat?"

"Of course."

With a parting smile, he headed into the living room where he found the three girls huddled together around the coffee table. The sight before him gave him even more hope that things were going to be just fine. The girls were laughing and joking, playing cards, some simple game they'd played time and time again in this very room, in this very spot.

"Ha, ha, I won," one of the girls proclaimed, and the other two groaned with good nature.

"Time for breakfast, girls."

Cami eyed him warily. "Did you make it?"

"No." He winked. "I didn't want to traumatize you more."

"Good." She looked around at her friends then back at him. "It could have been embarrassing."

Jonah chuckled. Yes. Everything was going to be fine. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now go eat before it gets cold."

Laughing, the girls rose to their feet and headed into the kitchen. Instead of following behind her friends automatically, Cami stopped in front of him and peered up at him with her head tilted to the side. "Breakfast that doesn't come in a paper bag, friends before noon. I don't suppose I can expect this sort of treatment every day, huh?"

He pretended to give it some thought. "I'm going to say no, but I'm willing to bet you can milk it for a while."

"Cool." Cami took off after the others but stopped halfway and came back to Jonah's side and wrapped her thin arms around his waist.

The out-of-the-blue action caught him off guard. He did his best to return the embrace while still holding on to the plate and coffee cup. "Not that I'm complaining, but what's this for?"

"Just because," she said, pulling back and looking up at him. "I love you...Dad."

Since gaining custody of her, Cami had always referred to him as Uncle J. It had been something he'd encouraged out of respect for Gilbert, but after everything they'd been through, Jonah was sure his friend wouldn't hold it against him. "I love you too, baby."

Her stomach growled, breaking the tender mood and causing them both to laugh. "Guess I'm pretty hungry."

"I guess." Jonah bent over and dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. "Go on, eat. I'm going to wake up Tisha."

"Good luck with that," she teased. "I peeked in on her before I came downstairs and she was out for the count."

"Yeah, she didn't even budge when I was in the bathroom, showering, but I think this," Jonah held up the plate, "just might do the trick."

"See if you can get her to come down before the millennium," she said before taking off toward the kitchen.

"I'll do my best." Jonah chuckled and shook his head as he made his way up the stairs. His sassy daughter was back home, safe and sound, and his woman was upstairs cuddled up in his bed. For Jonah, life really didn't get much better than that.

## About the Author

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.

Lena welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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