



# No Matter What

Erin Nicholas

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*The best doesn't come cheap...and this time it could cost him his heart.*

Adam Steele is good. Good at using his money to get his way. Money always works—until he realizes he can't buy his daughter's way out of her new wheelchair. Three private physical therapists later, he's almost given up on Emily walking again. Then he meets Dr. Jaden Monroe. And his match.

Jaden doesn't know the meaning of the word "quit". But she knows a lot about "fired" after a public blowout with her ex jeopardizes the donation her hospital was counting on. Now the most tempting man she's ever met has made her just the offer she needs to save the new children's rehab wing—one million dollars to rehabilitate his daughter. In return she finds herself making Adam rash promises: that his daughter will walk in time to take the lead in the school play. And that he won't entice her into his bed. No matter what.

But Jaden didn't anticipate a teen whose injuries are more than physical. Or a man so passionate and devoted—and as tenacious as she is. As Adam wears down her defenses with kiss after kiss, the only thing harder than keeping her promise will be keeping a hold on her heart.

Warning: Contains heated arguments that erupt only slightly more often than hot kissing, a new perspective on kitchen appliances, and sizzling sex occurring everywhere BUT the bedroom (though they eventually make it there).

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*Erin Nicholas*

## Dedication

To my mom and dad, who've always believed in me. To my kids and hubby who've eaten more grilled cheese than should be allowed so I can write. And to all the dust bunnies living in my house...welcome to the family! As long as I write, you're safe!

# Chapter One

One-night stands were a lot like apple pie as far as Jaden Monroe was concerned.

The notion of having sex with someone just for the sex had honestly never appealed to her. Like apple pie. Jaden had believed her whole life that she didn't like apple pie simply because she'd never seen or smelled one that tempted her. But the truth was, her senses just hadn't been introduced to the right one. Once she tasted *the* apple pie, she couldn't get enough.

Especially *à la mode*.

The man now sitting at table sixteen near the front door of Big Billy's Bar and Grill was the one that could change her mind about one-night stands. He wouldn't even have to talk. He'd just have to be there, completely naked—of course—with those eyes that had been on her all night.

This guy didn't just look at her, he didn't just watch—he seemed to be studying her, even *appreciating* her, like someone did a painting in an art gallery. He took in every detail of how she moved—and breathed for that matter. She could feel it.

It wasn't creepy, though it probably should seem a little stalker-ish. It made her hot and tingly and a bunch of other things she hadn't been in a long time.

Looking at him now, Jaden couldn't think of one reason why ice cream and sex couldn't go together too. But with this guy it couldn't be just vanilla. It would have to be something much more decadent. Double Fudge Brownie, maybe. Or Peanut Butter Passion. Spread all over him. And she definitely wouldn't need a spoon.

Jaden was so into her thoughts that she didn't notice the full beer mug until the beer came over the rim, drenched her hand and sloshed to the floor.

"Unless you're planning to squeeze all that beer from a sponge into the glasses, pay attention," Billy said, reaching over her shoulder and flipping the tap handle off.

Jaden only had half her mind on swearing under her breath and searching for a towel to dry her hand. "Sorry, Billy, I'm distracted tonight."

"And for the past five months," he grumbled, but he elbowed her gently to one side. "I know you're going through a rough time, which is why I'm not going to make you pay for the three glasses you've broken, the fifteen dollars you've undercharged or the case of lemons that are rolling around all over the floor in back."

He took the very full beer glass from Jaden's fingers and set it on the waitress', tray. "I'll get the rest." Billy grabbed the order pad and started pulling bottles together as he read.

It had been a bad night.

A bad week.

Hell, it had been a bad half year.

Jaden wiped up the excess beer with barely a corner of her mind on the task. She glanced toward table sixteen again. The man was on his cell phone, but his eyes were on her. Which felt good. One small spot of fun and pleasure in an otherwise sucky five months, three days, fourteen hours and twelve minutes.

Playfully, she leaned out over the bar surface, wiping at a non-existent spill. It put her cleavage—more remarkable in the stretchy, gauzy purple top she wore—straight in his line of sight.

She scrubbed for a moment, then glanced up. She was startled into straightening when she found his eyes still on her face, rather than her other assets.

But a small knowing smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

"Four more." Roxanne, half of Big Billy's wait staff for the night, placed her tray of empty beer bottles on the bar. "Apparently turning thirty is thirsty business." She gestured toward the rowdy birthday party occupying the four tables closest to the stage and live band.

Jaden smiled weakly, relieved that Roxy had moved in to block her view of the man. What the hell was she doing showing off her cleavage to some stranger? While she was standing there getting all hot and bothered, he could very well be studying her to determine how best to cut her body up so that the pieces would fit in his freezer.

She shivered. She was comparing him to apple pie while he was working on wording the ransom note.

Jaden laughed out loud at that. He was going to be *so* disappointed when he figured out he was kidnapping someone whose close friends had about seventy-three dollars between them.

"You okay?" Roxy asked, fishing in her apron pocket for a bottle opener.

Jaden rubbed her forehead. Good grief, she couldn't even open beer bottles tonight. It had been a difficult past twelve months for her—professionally and personally—and had gotten downright hellacious in the past five. And while drinking a vat of Amaretto sounded enticing, she wasn't here tonight to relax, drown her sorrows or to celebrate. She was here to help cover her friend Gina's shift while she went skiing with her boyfriend. Which was good. It was simple, it was straightforward, it provided her money and it had nothing to do with her ex-professional life or her ex-fiancé.

"Jaden," Billy said wearily, holding up two large margarita glasses. "Why don't you take a break?"

Jaden looked at the green contents of the glasses that looked barely touched. "What's wrong?"

"They ordered mojitos."

Well, at least she'd gotten the color right. Sort of.

"You know, Billy, maybe I'll just head home."

He looked relieved and Jaden smiled.

She glanced over to table sixteen again as she untied her apron and stuffed it in the laundry basket by the kitchen door. Being at home alone with her thoughts still rated higher than being tied up in the trunk of a car.

But for some reason, the idea of being tied up by the man whose eyes she met again, and whose gaze made even her pinky toe tingle, didn't go in the direction of car trunks so much as four-poster beds. With silk scarves.

She huffed out a breath and wiped her hand across her forehead.

Yep, it was official. She was losing it.

Adam Steele always got what he wanted. And what he wanted was always a good idea.

He watched the petite bartender disappear through the swinging door behind the bar.

He wanted her.

When he'd first entered Big Billy's, the tiny bar and grill on the outskirts of Kansas City, he'd noticed her and assumed it was the hair. It was so blond it was almost white and she wore it short and spiky, sticking up in every direction. On most people it would have looked ridiculous. On her, it fit. Which was absurd, considering he didn't know her at all.

But it wasn't the hair that kept drawing his eye. It was... He wasn't sure. Which was driving him nuts.

"I'm here."

Adam watched as his brother slid into the chair across the table from him, breathless, a bit ruffled, and an hour late.

"How much did you lose?"

"How do you know I lost?"

"If you were winning you would have left the game and been here when you were supposed to be."

Tony gave him an insincere, chagrined look. "Five thousand."

Which wasn't bad in the high stakes poker games Tony played in. Especially since he usually won twice that much.

Adam downed the rest of his scotch. "Let's get going with this. I have a conference call at six a.m."

Adam went to bed early and got up early. It was a habit and he didn't like breaking habits.

"Fine." Tony slung an arm over the back of his chair and turned to look around the bar.

Just then, Adam saw the white-blond hair emerge from the back room. It seemed that every cell in his body went on alert.

She came out from behind the bar and he saw her from the waist down for the first time. And what a view. She was small, barely five foot two and one hundred and ten pounds at the most. But she was toned



and tight. Adam figured that he'd have to lift her to fit against her pelvis to pelvis in standing, but she was small enough that holding her up against the closest firm surface wouldn't be a problem.

"Okay, here goes."

Adam watched his brother rise and walk away from their table, but the realization of what he was doing took a few extra seconds to sink in. *Oh, shit.*

"Excuse me."

Jaden felt someone catch her sleeve in his fingers and she turned. "No problem."

"My name is Tony Steele. I need to talk to you."

Tony Steele was good looking; she'd give him that. And he was smiling at her as if she was the only woman in the room. She supposed that usually worked for him like a dream. But again, it took the exactly right piece of apple pie to get her interested. Besides, she was off the clock. Jaden shrugged her arm out of his grasp.

"Sorry. I'm not interested."

Jaden started to turn away, but he grasped the edge of the bar stool, spinning her to face him. He leaned in close so she leaned back until her shoulder blades pressed against the edge of the bar. He smelled good. She appreciated that, considering how much of her personal space he was taking up, but she wasn't real thrilled at getting the chance to check out his pores up close.

Tony took advantage of her stunned silence to say, "I have to talk to you. I'd like to be nice about it. I'd like to charm you into having a civilized conversation. I'd like to buy you a drink."

"I'd like to be a thirty-six C, but we don't always get what we want," Jaden said as sweetly as she could through gritted teeth.

His eyes dropped to her chest and he smiled a wolfish smile. "I'm not complaining."

"Oh, good. I was concerned that we weren't going to get along."

"I prefer to be amiable about this but I can be a real asshole if I have to be."

Jaden stared unwaveringly across the four inches that separated her nose from his. "I'm not having any trouble believing that."

"*Enough.*" A deep voice broke into their stare down and Jaden's eyes found those of the man from table sixteen. Oh, baby, he was trying to be her hero. Now she was definitely going to have dirty dreams about him.

Tony stepped back. He didn't look thrilled, but rather resigned. Certainly not as if there was going to be any bloodshed on her account.

"Dr. Monroe, this is Adam Steele." Tony made the introductions. "My boss. And my brother."

Jaden's eyes widened as looked from one man to the other. They knew her name. They knew her *title*. No one in Big Billy's ever called her Dr. Monroe. Very few even knew she had a doctorate in physical therapy. Fewer cared.

"Where should we talk?" Tony asked.

These two seemed to care.

Adam held out his hand to her.

Oh, crap. There was no way she couldn't talk to them now. She didn't want to. In fact, she was willing to give up the chance of ever seeing Adam Steele without his shirt on in exchange for *not* talking to them. Nothing associated with being Dr. Monroe had been positive lately. No one who knew her as Dr. Monroe had given her any good news in several months. She had very little hope that this would be any different.

But she was curious. Not just about what they had to say, but also about how it would feel to touch Adam Steele. His hand was still extended, waiting to help her down from the barstool.

It was more than she could resist.

"Your table's as good as anyplace, I guess," she said.

She put her hand in Adam's and let herself enjoy how big and warm and firm it was. Big, warm and firm were excellent characteristics in a man, in her opinion.

Adam took the chair beside her and Jaden concentrated on not noticing that even without looking she knew every move he made.

"I'm here to offer you a job," Adam said without preamble.

She hid her surprise. "I have a job." She gestured at the room in which they sat.

"This is a physical therapy job, Dr. Monroe."

Jaden couldn't cover her surprise quite as quickly the second time. "I don't practice physical therapy anymore, Mr. Steele." She uncrossed her legs and prepared to stand.

"Wait," Tony said. "You haven't heard everything."

"I've heard enough," Jaden told him, rising from the red vinyl seat. "Mr. Steele wants to hire me. And I don't want to work for him. It's pretty simple." She couldn't work for this man. She wanted to smear ice cream on his naked body, for God's sake. There was no way she could stay professional with *that* image in her mind.

"It's for my daughter."

Jaden turned to Adam before she could stop herself. "What?"

"My daughter. Emily. She's in need of rehabilitation. I've chosen to hire a therapist privately, for a number of reasons."

Jaden's eyes scanned his face. He was a dad. Well, that was unexpected... And not making him any less attractive to her. Finally, she said, "Children's Hospital has the best staff of pediatric physical therapists in the Midwest." Not one of whom had ice cream fetishes.

His eyes narrowed and he leaned onto his elbows on the tabletop. "As a matter of fact, I've done some research and I'm inclined to agree with you."

She wasn't quite sure what to do with that. "You are?"

"I would agree that they have *one* therapist who is of the caliber I want. In fact, Dr. Monroe, they have one of the most well-known, most respected pediatric therapists in the country. Or at least they *did* have. Until five months ago."

Her cheeks heated. Crap. He knew even more than she'd imagined. "Mr. Steele..."

"In fact," he interrupted, "*you* are the region's expert in pediatric physical therapy, are you not?"

"I don't..."

He reached inside his jacket lapel and then flipped two photographs onto the table. She picked them up. They were pictures of a girl who was obviously Adam Steele's daughter—judging by the blue of her eyes if nothing else—sitting in a wheelchair. The only difference between the two photographs was what the girl was wearing. "This is Emily."

"She's beautiful," Jaden said quietly.

"Yes, she is."

Jaden looked up, drawn by the affection in his tone. His face softened as he looked down at his daughter. "I don't care about anything more than her walking and smiling again, Dr. Monroe."

The warmth and tenderness she saw in his eyes in that moment stole her breath. She had always been a sucker for devoted dads. Evidently, she wasn't good at learning from past mistakes in that area.

"Has she had *any* therapy yet?" Jaden asked.

The hardness was back in his expression instantly. "Those pictures you're looking at are from before the 'therapists' came to our house and after. You tell me which is which." He didn't even give her a chance to blink. "She's still in her wheelchair, she's still moping around and she's still getting weaker every day."

Jaden didn't like the sarcastic way he said *therapists* but she didn't call him on it. She also noticed that the word was plural. "How many therapists?"

"Three."

She stood blinking at him for a moment. "You've had three therapists for Emily?"

"Yes."

Jaden sat back down. "They quit?"

"They got fired."

She blinked again. "Why?"

"They weren't up to the job."

Oh, boy. Talk about red flags. The truth was, even if Adam Steele was easy going—which he very clearly was not—this was never going to work. He didn't know her whole story, and she was in no mood to share it with him at the moment. "I'm afraid I'm not the right choice for you either, Mr. Steele. I'm flattered, but..."

"Dr. Monroe," he interrupted once again, "I am prepared to pay a million dollars for the private rehabilitation of my daughter. For that amount of money, I want the best. I want you."

One million dollars. Holy...

As if Adam wasn't tempting enough, now he was sitting here stroking her ego *and* waving huge amounts of money around. This was going to take some serious willpower.

"But as you clearly know, I don't work for Children's Hospital anymore."

"I know that you were the driving force behind the building project the hospital undertook last year. I know that the project was to be a new rehab wing. I know that the project was abandoned due to lack of funding. I know that you, personally, worked for nearly six months to raise the funds to finish the project. And that you came up short."

Jaden slumped down into her chair. He'd done his homework. "A million short," she said.

"Exactly."

"What do you want, Mr. Steele, exactly?"

"I want *you* to move into my house and rehabilitate my daughter."

"And in exchange you will give Children's Hospital the money it needs to finish the building project," she filled in.

"I want my daughter to walk again, Dr. Monroe. No matter what it takes."

Somewhere between the words "million dollars" and "no matter what it takes" Jaden had realized that Adam Steele's offer was a dream come true. The half-built addition on the east side of the hospital had been nothing but a concrete shell for months now. She'd had to drive by every day and look at it standing there, the wind blowing against the plastic that covered the spaces where the windows should have been, the bare metal beams sticking straight up out of the ground—a monument to how badly she'd screwed up.

"All right," she said softly.

He looked surprised and relieved. "Then we'll see you in two hours."

"But..."

She watched Adam's eyes narrow and paused until he gestured with his hand for her to continue.

"I want the million."

Jaden held her breath, again. He had to agree to this. He had to. She couldn't do it otherwise. With this job, not only would Children's Hospital get to finish the rehab wing, but the additional funds would come in the form of a personal check from her, not Steele Enterprises, and *not* McCormick Manufacturing.

It would be so sweet. She couldn't wait to see her boss's—*ex*-boss's—face. She'd make sure the paper ran a full page article and picture, too, of her handing the check over with a huge grin. She'd cut it out, enlarge it and mail it to Dan McCormick personally.

Adam finally nodded. "Fine."

She breathed out. Wow.

"We'll see you later tonight then."

"Tonight?" she repeated. "It's already eleven o'clock."

"It's about a thirty-five minute drive from here. I'll send the limo for you."

Jaden gave a puff of frustration in spite of her best efforts. Unfortunately he had a million dollars that she wanted and needed. He also had a daughter who needed her. "That won't be necessary."

He looked irritated. "Then Tony will give you directions." Adam shoved his chair back and stood.

"Fine," Jaden agreed, because really, what else was she going to say? "I'll be there tonight."

He nodded, as if there had never been any doubt in his mind that she would agree, and Jaden stood. He was a very tall man and Jaden couldn't help but notice that even though he'd been inside a bar for well over an hour, there was not a wrinkle or piece of lint to be found on his suit. His dark hair was perfectly groomed and the shine on his shoes was flawless. She had the distinct impression that Adam Steele did not have to try for perfection. It came naturally to him.

She straightened as tall as she could when he extended his hand. She didn't even come up to his chin and she had to tip her head back to meet his gaze. She put her hand in his, and then, he did the most astonishing thing. He smiled. While touching her, while looking straight into her eyes.

And Jaden knew instantly that taking the job in his house with his daughter was a very bad idea.

## Chapter Two

She had stayed in hotels smaller than Adam Steele's home.

The moment Jaden pulled up and parked in the circular driveway, the large front door swung open and Adam Steele himself strode out onto the veranda. "Where have you been?"

With that greeting, she almost slammed her door shut again and headed back to Kansas City. "Am I past curfew?" She was tired of driving, she was a little nervous about the situation in general and she was hungry.

"I expected you two hours ago."

"I got held up at the bar."

Which meant that Billy, Roxy and Renee had cornered her as soon as the Steele brothers left. A few of the regulars had overhead and she was soon surrounded by concerned, adamant friends who didn't think she should go to the Steele estate without a lot more information and perhaps a body guard or two. The most disturbing of the comments, though, was when Renee said, "I saw the way he was looking at you. Like you were a giant ice cream sundae and he couldn't wait to dig in."

Remembering that comment and facing him now, Jaden couldn't keep her mind from wandering to all of the delicious food-related things that had occurred to her since first seeing him.

"I had a lot of things to tie up before dumping my life and moving out here with you." Her tone was sharper than she intended but she didn't like his effect on her or the expression on his face. He looked as if he was doubting his decision to hire her.

"I expected that you would be here in time to..."

"Well, I'm not," she snapped as she removed her purse and suitcase from the backseat of her car. She watched his eyes widen and immediately softened her tone. "I'm sorry. I'm not at my best at the moment. It's been a long day with meeting you, packing, driving out and all."

"I offered to send the limo."

That was all he said.

She just looked at him for a few seconds, biting back sarcastic words. "Yes, you did." She paused again. "Look, I got here as soon as I could. I'm sorry if you had something planned for tonight."

He just watched her and she clutched the handle on her *heavy* suitcase more firmly. *Heaven forbid that he offer to take my suitcase into the house.*

“Fine,” he finally said. “I was anxious to have Emily meet you and for you to get settled. I wanted therapy to start tomorrow morning. Now you’ll—”

“Therapy *will* start tomorrow morning first thing. That’s what I’m here for. I’m not vacationing.”

It was clear from his expression that Adam Steele was not used to being interrupted. She knew that her words sounded more defensive than reassuring but she would not let him imply that she had any other priority before Emily’s rehab. She was here now, to do a job, and she didn’t know how to give anything less than her best.

“I’m glad to hear that, Dr. Monroe. I’ll show you to the apartment. We can get a fresh start in the morning.”

She followed him toward the house but stopped abruptly at the threshold, dropping her suitcase with a *thud*. The foyer was amazing. The ceiling rose above them for three stories and the marble floor spiraled out from the center nearly two hundred feet in every direction. The walls were lined with bookshelves from the floor up to the second-story balcony, and they were filled to capacity.

“Wow.”

He didn’t respond but continued down the hallway that led off at an angle to the left. She quickly gripped the handle on her suitcase and began lugging the bag after him. They continued toward the back of the house, past several rooms and doors. Finally, just as she wondered if her shoulder would survive the weight of the wardrobe choices packed tightly in her bag, he turned into a room at the end of the hallway. It was the kitchen.

Without a word, he crossed the ceramic tile to a wide doorway on the far side of the room. He opened it and then turned to look at her. She wondered what he would have done if she hadn’t been there. He hadn’t looked back once to see if she was behind him.

“This door leads outside. The apartment is that next building over. There’s a bedroom, bath and living room, but no kitchen, so you’re free to use this one. This is the fastest way into the house but you can use the front door as well. Here is your key to the front door of the main house, here’s the key to the apartment and here is the key to the kitchen door.” He handed her three gold keys.

“Thanks.”

She stepped around him and peered into the night. There was a smooth, well-lit stone path leading away from the kitchen door. It was lined on either side with flowers of all kinds and ended at the base of a white wooden staircase. The stairs led up the side of a free-standing building two and a half stories tall. It apparently had a loft from what she could see through the wide window.

“What is the building beneath the apartment used for?” Again, she was reminded of some of the hotels she had stayed in. The apartment, or rather the *house*, looked to be larger than even the nicest suite in the most expensive hotel. The building was obviously very new. Briefly she wondered if he’d had it newly

built just for Emily's private therapist's use. But she quickly dismissed the idea as outrageous. No one built an entire house for someone's temporary use.

"That is a garage for your car and there's room for other storage, if you need it."

"I guess I should go get moved in, so we can start bright and early tomorrow." She was studying the long staircase with more practical eyes now. She was going to have to haul her suitcase all the way up those stairs. Unless...

"Goodnight, Dr. Monroe." He took a step back.

"Oh, *Adam*?" She was careful to emphasize his first name.

He stopped his retreat, a slight frown between his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Is Emily expecting me tomorrow or am I a surprise?"

"Yes, she's...expecting you."

His frown deepened as he hesitated and Jaden wondered if Emily wasn't properly excited about their pending meeting.

"Great. I can't wait to meet her."

He nodded, appearing unsure what to say. "All right. Goodnight, Dr. Monroe." He backed away again.

"One more thing, *Adam*."

She saw him sigh as he stopped again. "Yes?"

"No one calls me Doctor. It's just Jaden, okay?"

"And can I assume that you prefer to call me Adam?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do. Thanks, Adam." She smiled at the resigned look on his face. "Goodnight." She extended her hand toward him, unwilling to let him leave without doing her best to show him that she could be civil and polite even if he could not.

He stepped toward her and took her hand in his. "Goodnight, Jaden."

It was more of a soft squeeze than a real handshake and she couldn't help but notice that his touch lingered.

Something caused a flutter in her chest and she tried to attribute it to fatigue and lack of food. The dark kitchen, lit only by the soft lights from along the pathway outside the door, encased them in a little world of their own and she realized that, lack of sleep or no, flutter or not, she had the sudden desire to hear him say her name like that again.

His voice was low and warm and it seemed as if speaking her name changed the tone slightly. It was more intimate now and she wondered if perhaps she was foolish to insist on being on a first name basis with this man. It was strange how the simple use of her name made her realize how dark his eyes were and how he seemed to fill up the entire room.



She attempted a wobbly smile. He was watching her very closely and she quickly averted her eyes, unsettled by the way he studied her, with one corner of his mouth tipping up as if he was amused by something.

“Jaden?” He asked, carefully emphasizing her name again.

“Uh-huh,” she answered, aware that the tables had very abruptly turned and she was no longer feeling or acting assertive. She stepped back.

He followed. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Her back met the side of the refrigerator, stopping her retreat. His voice seemed to caress her skin and she couldn’t help but bring her gaze back to his face. He was watching her with something new, something in his eyes that was enticing and disquieting at the same time. She couldn’t move, though she definitely felt the need to either lean closer or run away as fast as she could.

She swallowed, her tongue sticking against the top of her mouth. Then she nodded. “Thanks.”

He braced a hand next to her shoulder and leaned toward her. She licked her lips. His attention zeroed in on her mouth and he smiled a slow, lethal smile. Her gaze dropped to his lips.

That’s when the warning bells went off.

“Goodnight,” she managed to choke out. Then she ducked under his arm, slipped out of the kitchen through the side door and made it up the stairs and into the apartment—even with her heavy suitcase—in less than a minute.

Adam watched her go, gratification spreading through him like warm brandy on a cold night.

Three therapists had come and gone. Three therapists who had not had the fortitude that he demanded. Jaden Monroe was going to need the grit he’d seen so far.

But he had reason for his high hopes. The usual things—his money, his influence, his stern glares, or his dictatorial tone of voice—didn’t unnerve this woman.

It was interesting, and very much a stroke to his ego, that when he’d held her hand and then leaned close enough to kiss her—something he’d very seriously considered for a moment—she’d become rattled, turned and run.

Somehow he knew that Jaden didn’t run—or rattle—easily.

He also knew, somehow, that it was very possible she could rattle him just as much.

It wasn’t even seven a.m. yet, but Adam Steele was sitting at the kitchen table with what appeared to be about a week’s worth of work spread out in front of him. Determined to get past her weird reaction to him from the night before, Jaden folded her arms across her stomach and propped her shoulder against the

doorframe. “I didn’t think millionaires got up before the sun. There isn’t anyone to conquer, buy out or exploit this early, is there?”

He looked up, not seeming surprised to find her standing there. “I run every morning at five. I have to get it out of the way so I can dedicate the rest of the day to monopolizing and dominating the world.”

She smiled and responded, somewhat carefully, like testing the temperature of a pool of water before diving in. “I see. You should be careful with your secrets of success. How do you know I’m not here to take over your company and run you out of business?”

“Dr. Monroe, I anticipate that you will be much too busy with my daughter to consider any part-time pilfering.”

She couldn’t help the smile that stretched across her face. After last night in the bar and then here in the kitchen, she would never have expected that Adam Steele could amuse her. It was a pleasant surprise.

“This should give you a place to start with Emily,” he said, changing the subject like turning the channel on a television program that had bored him. He held out a thick folder.

She came forward and took the folder, careful not to touch his hand. She glanced at it, recognized it as Emily’s medical record and tossed it back onto the table. It landed with a dull thud. “I have a place to start.”

He frowned. “Where?”

“Meeting Emily.”

His frown deepened. “That’s her medical history, operative reports...”

“I know. I’ll get to it later.” She turned toward the stove. She was going to do this her way and he needed to learn that from the start. “Do I smell pancakes?”

“Pancakes?” He sounded distracted and when she glanced back at him, he was frowning at the folder on the table.

She crossed to the counter where the large black griddle sat with two bowls of batter next to it. “Do rich people call these something else?”

“I know that you grew up with plenty of money,” Adam retorted, rising from his chair and crossing to the coffee pot.

He sounded serious. “How do you know that?”

“I do my research.”

“You know who my dad is?”

“Of course I know who your dad is. In fact, I’ve met him on a couple of occasions. And, yes, those are pancakes. Blueberry and chocolate chip.”

Jaden didn’t like talking about her father. Her father used her and her mother like an expensive custom-made suit. He brought them out when he needed to look good and then put them away until he needed them again.

He'd literally convinced her mother to have a baby to ensure he would be elected, and then they'd taken family photos, gone on family vacations and he'd shown up at her school programs to ensure he would be re-elected. He was a great senator—he'd done great things for their state term after term. But voters liked their leaders to be normal, which meant married and parental—at least on the surface. She'd been good in the role of vote-getter, at least until she figured out what her father's sporadic, nearly-suffocating-when-it-was-present attention truly meant. Since she'd left home she saw no real reason to pretend that he was more than the man whose DNA she carried and who paid her way through physical therapy school.

"Wow, you must pay the cook well to talk her into making two different kinds," Jaden said, changing the subject of the conversation *and* of her thoughts. "Or is it because you have a guest this morning?" She propped a hip against the counter and watched him fill his cup.

He turned and regarded her as he took his first sip of the fresh brew. After he swallowed he asked, "What makes you think I don't have guests every morning?"

Why the idea of Adam Steele having women join him for breakfast had never occurred to her, Jaden couldn't say. Her gaze flew toward the kitchen door that led to the rest of the house. "Is there..." She stopped and swallowed, trying to regain some composure. "Will there be someone else joining us...you?"

He chuckled and moved toward her. She stood right in front of the cupboard housing the plates and he crowded close to her before stretching up over her head to retrieve one. She drew in a sharp breath and then fervently hoped he hadn't heard. If she stuck out her tongue she could lick the buttons on the front of his shirt and he seemed to linger in the position for a moment before leaning back slightly and handing her the plate. He didn't step away.

"You're my only guest this morning," he assured her. "Do you want some?"

She swallowed hard and said in a little squeak, "Um..."

He smiled and she realized somewhere in the back of her muddled mind, that she was making a fool of herself.

"Pancakes?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes briefly trying to gather her thoughts. "Sure," she finally answered.

"Blueberry or chocolate chip?"

Her eyes opened. "Chocolate chip."

He reached around her, his arm brushing against hers as he picked up the bowl with the right batter in it. "Should only take a few minutes." Then he had to move away to get to the griddle and she actually relaxed and took a deep breath.

Then she realized that he was pouring batter on the griddle himself. "You're going to make them?" She was sure she looked surprised and worried at the same time.

"Of course I'm going to make them. Pancakes are one of my specialties, especially chocolate chip."

Jaden took her plate and moved toward the table. She tried very hard not to be impressed by the millionaire who was now standing in his bare feet, making pancakes.

“You want to meet Emily first?” he asked, resuming their previous conversation as he flipped. “Without knowing anything about her?”

“I plan to know everything I can about her.”

“Her medical record will tell you...”

Jaden held up her hand, halting him mid-sentence. “I’m familiar with medical records, operative reports, labs, blah, blah, blah... The things I need to know aren’t going to be in that folder. I’m going to start my relationship with Emily where any *relationship* starts...with an introduction. After that, Emily will tell me what I need to know.”

“But...” He trailed off as if not sure how to respond to that, which Jaden was *very* sure was unusual. After a moment, he said simply, “I included the other therapists’ reports in there.”

“What the others tried didn’t work, so what good would reading about it do? Besides, like I said, Emily will tell me what I need to know.” She gestured toward the papers the table. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re balancing your checkbook?”

She was pleased to see that he seemed a little baffled by the sudden change of topic. “Yes. Of course.”

“Don’t you have an entire accounting department that can do this kind of stuff for you?”

“I do have an accounting department,” Adam agreed. “But my grandfather always told me to stay physical with my money. He invested a lot but he liked to see and touch the money before he turned it over to anyone else.” He pinned her with a direct gaze. “You know, there’s an important lesson in there.”

“What’s that?” She felt warm and tingly and had no idea why, other than the fact that Adam Steele, the one man she was more aware of than she was of her own skin, was looking at her again.

“Being physical, seeing and feeling what’s around you, is essential to staying in touch, so to speak, with what you desire in life.”

Oh, boy, there was the reason for the tingles. She could tell the double meaning was very intentional, and though she had no idea why he was doing it, he was doing whatever it was very well. She tried to ignore his words and his gaze.

“Looks like you’re having some trouble there, though,” she commented, her tone casual in spite of the nervous tapping of her foot against the ceramic tile.

Adam flipped the pancakes onto a serving platter and crossed the floor to stand behind her chair, leaning forward and brushing her shoulder with his chest as he set the plate down. “There’s a discrepancy.”

Jaden shifted away from him slightly in her chair, admirably keeping on topic. “You’re one of the most successful businessmen in this city, but you have discrepancies in your checkbook...that you can’t find?” She laughed lightly. “I love it. It’s pretty much simple math, Adam. I know they don’t give MBAs to people who can’t subtract.”

He moved to sit right next to her rather than moving back to the chair at the other end of the table. His foot bumped against hers as he stretched out his legs beneath the table. "I'm better at *adding* money to my accounts than I am at subtracting it."

She slid her feet away but smiled. "You got me there."

"How are the pancakes?" He gestured toward the plate next to her elbow.

Cutting off a bite, she lifted her fork to her mouth. She began chewing and then closed her eyes and gave a soft moan of satisfaction. A millionaire who was good-looking, slightly funny and could cook. Who would have guessed?

"It's really good." Her eyes opened. "Thanks."

He coughed lightly and sat a little straighter in his chair. "Sure."

Jaden cut off another bite and wondered why Adam looked uncomfortable.

He leaned forward and slid a piece of paper toward her. "Here is the contract."

"The contract?" she asked around another bite of the best pancakes she'd ever had.

"For your job here. With Emily." He paused. "You didn't expect a contract?"

She shrugged. "I'm not surprised," she said honestly. "You definitely seem like the in-writing kind of guy."

He seemed to be considering that. "You're not an in-writing kind of gal?"

"Doesn't matter to me either way," she told him. "I said I would come and work with Emily in exchange for one million dollars. That's a promise. I don't break promises."

She felt a twinge of grief, and guilt, upon hearing her own words. It wasn't completely true. She had broken promises. It had been eating at her for months. She hated it and she would do anything to make up for it.

Hence, her presence at the Steele Estate right now.

There were people who had depended on her and she'd let them down. She *would* make it up to them. It would take just about one million dollars to do it.

"I'd like your signature by the end of the day," Adam said.

There was a pen lying on top of his stack of paperwork. She wiped her right fingers on her napkin, took his pen, flipped to the back page of the contract and signed her name to the bottom line.

"You don't want to read it?" he asked when she handed his pen back to him.

"Is that contract the only way I get the million dollars?" she asked.

"Yes." His tone and expression were absolute.

She nodded. "And does it talk about me performing duties as a licensed physical therapist?"

"Yes."

"With your daughter, Emily?"

"Yes."

“Then I’ve got the gist. Reading anything smaller than twelve point font gives me a headache.”

One corner of Adam’s mouth almost curved up. Almost.

She let hers curve all the way up. She took another bite of pancakes. “Seriously, Adam, if you make these for me every morning, I might just knock off a couple of thousand bucks.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

His eyes dropped below her chin and then bounced quickly back up. He shifted on his chair, cleared his throat, and shifted again. She took another bite, enjoying what seemed to be Adam Steele’s discomfiture over inadvertently looking at her breast. It was amusing considering the way he’d checked out all of her assets in the bar last night.

She poised her fork over her plate to take another bite, but Adam swept her plate away and carried it to the sink. “Hey!”

“Emily’s up in her room. Up the front stairs, turn right, fourth door down.”

She glanced around the kitchen and then down at herself trying to determine Adam’s problem. She noticed a spot over her right breast where a chocolate chip had evidently dropped. Trying to dab it out with her napkin, Jaden wondered for a moment if that was what had drawn Adam’s eye. It was chocolate. If *she’d* seen that on *his* shirt she probably would have thought about how much she liked chocolate and how chocolate tasted. Which would have led her to thinking about what it would be like to put her tongue on that spot. On him.

She watched as he scrubbed the dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher, then shook her head. No way. A man like Adam Steele wasn’t easily rattled and certainly not by looking at, or even putting his mouth on, a woman’s breast. He’d probably seen and tasted dozens of them.

She scowled and stood. There was *no way* she was going to sit there and think about Adam’s experience with breasts. No way.

Jaden tried knocking. Loudly. Three times.

But no one answered the third attempt either, so Jaden finally turned the knob and pushed the door open.

“Go away.” The curt answer came from somewhere within the dim room but Jaden’s eyes had not yet adjusted to the lack of light.

*So this is how it’s going to be.*

“Good morning,” Jaden said, ignoring the rude greeting. She crossed the room and pushed the curtains back, letting sunlight spill in.

“I said get the hell out of here.”

“Actually, you didn’t. You said go away. Which I preferred because I don’t allow cursing.” Jaden crossed to the second window, not looking at Emily either.

Emily tossed her pencil to one side of her worktable and turned her wheelchair a quarter of a turn.

“You don’t *allow* cursing? Damn, what am I going to do?”

Jaden knew right then that she was being tested.

“You’re going to stop. At least when I’m around.” Finally satisfied with the amount of light, Jaden stood in the center of the carpet and turned slowly. “Doesn’t your dad pay the maid enough?”

The room was a disaster. There were clothes and books and shoes everywhere. Every available surface was supporting a pile of some sort, including dirty plates and used glasses. It was hard to tell which clothes were dirty and which were clean. What didn’t fit on the chairs, desk, bedposts and dressers was spilling onto the floor.

“No one is allowed in this room but me. Not even my father.”

“Wow, I didn’t realized how privileged I was.” Jaden tucked her hands into the front pockets in her sweatshirt. She turned a full circle once more. “Where do I sit?”

“You don’t. You leave me alone.”

“Sorry, kiddo. Snotty and bossy don’t work with me. How about clearing me a spot?”

“Get out. I mean it! I don’t know you. I don’t want to know you. You can go to hell.”

“Good delivery, lots of emotion.” Jaden cleared her own seat by dumping three books, a sweater and an unopened can of cola on the floor and settled herself on the corner of the unmade bed. “And I already told you—no cursing.”

“Listen, lady, you’re starting to really get on my nerves. Why don’t you go downstairs and tell my father that I said he can roast with you?”

“Why don’t you go downstairs and tell him yourself?” Jaden challenged.

“I’m busy.” Emily turned back to her project, dismissing Jaden.

Jaden shrugged and got up from the bed. She knew she had to just wait Emily out. She had to be the tough one at first. Emily was one of those kids who Jaden loved working with the most. There was such reward in healing not only the body but also the spirit. Jaden began wandering around the room, stepping carefully over and around the piles scattered across the carpet. She stopped in front of a set of shelves that displayed a number of framed photographs.

There was a variety of people and events depicted in the photos. Several were of Emily and her friends: one at a lake, one in the snow and one in front of a museum. The last one especially caught Jaden’s attention. It sat high on the top shelf by itself. The ornate gold frame surrounded a picture of Emily and her father. Adam was dressed in a tuxedo and looked incredibly handsome. Emily wore a midnight blue sequined gown and had her arm looped through her father’s. Both were laughing into the camera, obviously happy to be wherever they were and happy to be together.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Emily demanded from across the room, evidently realizing that the silence had not meant Jaden’s exit from the room.

“Looking at your pictures.” Jaden didn’t turn around.

“You know, this is my room. You don’t have any right to be here. I want you to leave.”

Taking the mental picture of Adam and his disarming smile with her—as much as she tried not to—Jaden turned. “Okay, here are your choices. One, you come over here and physically throw me out. Two, we go into the other room and get started. Or, three, you just sit there quietly, ignore me and let me do whatever I want in here.”

“Those ideas all suck.” Emily’s hands gripped the armrests of her chair tightly.

Jaden shrugged. “At least I’m giving you choices. I don’t usually do that.”

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

Even from where Jaden stood thirty feet or more from the girl, she could see tears welling up in Emily’s eyes. Her heart softened and she almost gave in, but the therapist in her that believed firmly Emily needed the tough stuff at first held on. “No, I’m not leaving. I came here to do a job and I’m going to do it.”

“I can’t throw you out.” Emily sniffed once but was clearly unwilling to cry in front of Jaden. “And I’m not going to let you nose through all my stuff.”

“So that only leaves one thing.” Jaden waited for Emily to be the one to initiate the next step.

“Let’s get this over with,” Emily grumbled. She rotated her chair abruptly and headed for the door.

“Great.” Jaden let out the breath she had been holding and followed Emily across the hall.

The single room that had been designated as the workout room was bigger than the entire clinic where Jaden had first practiced. The south wall of the room was made up of windows and the hardwood floor gleamed in the sunlight. A large mat table for exercise was situated in front of the windows. It was approximately three feet off the floor, as wide as a double bed and was padded but firm, ideal for exercising. A set of metal parallel bars to practice standing and walking occupied the opposite wall. A wooden stand in the corner displayed a deluxe set of weights, and there were floor mats stacked against the wall next to it. The last wall of the room was covered with a floor-to-ceiling mirror that spanned the entire length of the wall. None of the equipment looked like it had even been touched.

“Impressive.” Jaden commented as she strolled in behind Emily.

Emily ignored her, stopping in the center of the room.

“The only thing that’s missing is a stereo. I’ll have to talk to your dad about that.” Jaden continued surveying the room, watching Emily out of the corner of her eye. “Why don’t you show me what you can do so far?”

“Like what?”

Jaden crossed her arms. “Like getting onto that mat or into that chair.”



The straight-backed chair had arms and thick, sturdy legs. It was perfect for teaching Emily how to move back and forth from the wheelchair.

Emily looked at the chair, the disgust on her face evident. "I can't."

"Why not?" Jaden crossed the room and sat on the edge of the padded table.

Emily rolled up until her left tire touched the edge of the table near Jaden's knee. She leaned in close and pinned Jaden with a fierce glare. "They cut my leg off because I had cancer. I can't walk or dance anymore. I'm going to lose the star role in the school play and I can't do sports anymore. I can't even get into that chair. I don't have a leg anymore!" Emily's eyes were bright with unshed tears and her face was red with emotion.

Jaden uncrossed one of her legs and leaned toward Emily, looking her straight in the eye. "Keep going. Tell me how you feel. Are you frustrated or angry or scared? What?"

As she looked deeply into the girl's eyes, Jaden was struck by how strongly she felt pulled toward Emily.

"Fine," Emily said belligerently. "It's ugly and it hurts sometimes. I hate it!"

"I don't want to talk about your leg right now. I want to talk about *you* and your feelings."

"I've got friends." Emily continued blinking against the tears that would not leave her eyes. "I don't need you for that."

"Okay, let's talk about what you do need me for. How about getting your butt out of that chair? Your friends haven't been able to do that for you."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about my leg."

Jaden reached out and laid one hand on top of Emily's on the armrest of the wheelchair. She didn't pull away and Jaden took it as a tiny, but optimistic sign. "Getting out of that chair isn't about your leg. It's about what's in here." Jaden tapped a finger against her temple with her other hand. "And what's in here." Jaden's hand splayed across her chest over her heart. "You're not in that chair because you lost your leg, Emily. You're in that chair because you lost the motivation to get out."

One tear finally escaped Emily's long lashes and rolled down her cheek.

"I can't do it." Emily's voice was broken by a sob. "I can't walk."

Jaden took a deep breath and slowly sat back. She removed her hand from Emily's and squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, Emily was staring into her lap where her hands were clenched together. No more tears had fallen and Jaden knew that no more would.

"Okay." Jaden clapped her hands against her thighs. It was time for some tough love. "I guess that means more time for me to play in the pool. You coming?" She stretched to her feet and started toward the door.

"We're done?"

"Evidently. You coming to the pool?" Jaden paused in the doorway as she offered the invitation.

Emily looked shocked for a moment. Slowly anger replaced the surprise. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Right,” Emily said tersely.

Well, anger was better than melancholy, Jaden thought as she changed into her hot pink bathing suit and grabbed a towel. She wanted Emily angry, determined... whatever. Anything but feeling sorry for herself.

## Chapter Three

Jaden finished her final lap and emerged at the edge of the pool. She wiped her hair back from her forehead and took several deep breaths. She turned slightly, and froze.

Adam was reclining in a chair at the side of the pool, legs extended, ankles crossed, hands linked behind his head. And smiling.

She had never been more aware of her body than she was at the moment Adam's gaze swept over her from head to waist. She wore a modest one-piece suit designed for working out rather than sunbathing and yet she felt naked. Adam's eyes drank in every inch not covered by water.

Fighting the urge to cross her arms over her breasts, she forced a smile. "Hi."

He nodded. "Hello."

"Were you looking at—*for*, were you looking *for* me?" she asked. She hated the slip and his knowing smile.

"As a matter of fact I was." He didn't clarify, but then, he didn't really have to.

She moved forward, but stopped at the edge of the pool. "What did you need?"

"I was curious how your first meeting with Emily went."

"Oh."

Jaden eyed the towel and dry clothing lying on the chair to Adam's right. The chair was several feet away from her and much too close to Adam. She would have to get out of the pool, giving up what little cover the water offered, and walk across the deck like a fashion model on a runway—or, more in sync with how her heart was pounding, a captive on a gangplank—to gain any modesty. By then what would be the point of covering up? He would have seen everything there was to see. She would have felt every ounce of self-consciousness and discomfort and, if she was honest, arousal. The way Adam was watching her even now made her feel like she was floating in a warm bath instead of working out in a cool pool. She just wanted to lie back, close her eyes and let the delicious sensations wash over her. The sensations of Adam's hands and...

"How did it go?"

...his lips and...

"Jaden?"

Her gaze flew to his. "Yes?"

His expression was amused, which irritated her.

“I asked how your first meeting with Emily went.”

She swallowed. “About the way I expected it to.”

He didn’t reply right away but kept his eyes on her, which made it very difficult to sneak out of the pool and race for her clothes. She stayed put, in spite of the chill that touched her skin.

“I wasn’t aware that swimming was a part of Emily’s therapy,” he finally said.

“Oh, the pool would be great for her. We could stretch, do strengthening exercises, practice weight shifts.” This she was more comfortable with. Emily and her program—her *job* after all—was something she could concentrate on without feeling breathless and tense. “The pool will definitely be a part of the program.”

“And I assume that Emily will be *accompanying* you in the pool for those activities.”

“Of course.”

“Are you going to get out of there before you catch pneumonia?”

He changed topics so quickly that she blinked a few times before she comprehended his words. “I’m fine.”

“You’re shivering.”

“No I’m not.”

He cocked one eyebrow and Jaden became aware of the shaking of her body.

Fine. She’d get out. She could handle this. She was an adult. She’d faced much more difficult situations in the past. Helping kids regain the ability to walk, helping people find ways to manage their pain, helping children deal with life changing physical ailments—*those* were challenging. Adam Steele was just a guy. A handsome, intriguing, frustrating, sexy... *Oh, for heaven’s sake!*

Disgusted with herself, Jaden came to the edge and braced her hands on the cement to lift herself from the pool.

Adam came to his feet as she emerged from the water. He refused to step away and give her a comfortable space to move around him, as would have been polite. She scooted toward the chair, making a wide circle, doing all she could to avoid touching him as she reached for her towel on the nearby chair. She could smell his cologne and was much too aware of his body heat. Or maybe she just imagined the heat. Or maybe, very probably, the heat was coming from *her*.

She quickly wrapped the towel around her, clasping the front tightly. “I take it you and Emily had a talk?”

Jaden actually felt the drop of water that Adam’s eyes followed as it slid across her shoulder and down her arm. She was fascinated by his captivation with it and she knew she had to get his attention back on topic, *now*.

“Adam?”

“Um...yes.”

“Care to elaborate on that?”

“Um...”

“Adam?” She would have given good money to know the last time Adam Steele had said *um*.

The heater for the pool kicked on with a noisy whir and his eyes refocused on her face. “What did you say?”

“I asked what you and Emily had talked about.”

He crossed his arms and studied her, a stern expression back in place as if it had never left. “She told me about your introduction this morning. She also told me that you didn’t work with her but decided to come to the pool instead.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I brought you here to do therapy *with* my daughter.”

In spite of the cool tone in his voice, she could see that he was upset.

She reached up to squeeze some water from her hair. “I realize that. Emily and I are feeling each other out at this point. I want her to understand that she’s got to meet me partway. I’m not going to do the work for her. I’m only here to help *her* do the work.”

“She was upset. She thinks that you don’t care.”

“It doesn’t matter if I care. Emily’s the one that has to care. And prior to my ditching her for a swim, she wanted me to leave her alone. No, wait, I’m sorry...she wanted me to go to hell. Or so she told me.”

He grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. “She gets pretty mouthy sometimes.”

Jaden didn’t comment on that. “I’m not going to coddle her or beg her, or yell at her, or force her. I’m going to tell it like it is and make her decide what to do. I’m also going to give her every opportunity to say ‘yes, I want to walk’. But until she says that, I’m just waiting with the rest of you.”

“The other therapists...”

“Stop right there.” She aimed a finger at his chest and advanced a step toward him, forgetting her hesitation to be close to him. “I’m not like the other therapists. I’m here now. Just let me do this my way.”

“I was just going to say...” he cocked one eyebrow as he looked down at the accusatory fingertip, then back up, “...that the other therapists already tried force, making deals and coddling.” He caught her hand and tugged gently, bringing her forward. “I was not impressed with their results. I’m looking forward to yours.” He stroked his thumb across the back of her hand.

Jaden swallowed hard and felt her fingers tighten around his, with no conscious command from her, for an instant before she pulled her hand back. “Just for the record, I do care, Adam. I care a lot about what happens.”

He leaned closer and she was acutely aware of his lips and the hunger in his eyes. Her instincts kicked in far ahead of any rational thought and she jerked back, ducking slightly and twisting away. Having his

target move so abruptly threw his balance off and Adam pitched forward. He grabbed for the nearest thing...her arm.

Together they fell into the pool with a large splash.

They came up spluttering a moment later.

"I can't believe you threw me in!"

Adam started laughing in spite of his soaking wet clothes.

She glared at him. "What?"

"I did not throw you in." He wiped his hair back from his forehead.

"Well, you *pushed* me but..."

"If I intended to push you or throw you in, why am *I* soaking wet? I liked this suit."

He was grinning as he spoke and that infuriated her. The first time she had heard him laugh and seen him actually grin, and it was at her expense.

"Then what was that all about? I disagree with you, do something a little deviant by coming to the pool instead of insisting Emily do a bunch of things she doesn't believe in yet and you jump in, pulling me with you?"

"That's not what happened and you know it." He swam to where she was grasping the side.

"Oh? Then what happened?"

"I scared you." He said it matter-of-factly.

"Scared me? What are you talking about?"

"I almost kissed you, you panicked and ducked, I lost my balance and we fell in."

She opened her mouth to reply, then quickly snapped it shut again. Was she more shocked that he thought he made her nervous...or that he was right? She began shaking her head.

He nodded his head in response. "Yes. You panicked when you realized I was going to kiss you. You're scared of me."

"I knew that you were pretty full of yourself the first time we met, but this is way over the top," she declared, but her voice lacked conviction.

She moved to pull herself out of the water and he quickly grasped her upper arm. "I don't think so."

She sucked in a quick breath, but she held still, even as she realized that was probably a bad idea.

"Look me in the eye and tell me that you didn't know I was going to kiss you."

She struggled to swallow as she looked into his eyes. But no words came out. Her gaze dropped to his collarbone and she said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

He smiled and moved an inch closer. She stiffened but didn't move away. "Jaden, just so you know, I had every intention of kissing you a few minutes ago. I don't want there to be any confusion about that."

Hot and cold, numb and tingling all at once. She was amazed what a few simple words could do. Though she also realized that it was the tone of voice, not the actual words, that affected her so profoundly. Several seconds passed before she found her voice and said quietly, "I'm not scared of you."

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "No?"

She shook her head and pressed her lips firmly together, telling herself she did *not* want to know what kissing him would be like.

"You're not nervous at all about my attraction to you and your equal attraction to me? You're not even a little anxious about me kissing you and where that might lead?"

She shook her head again and managed to pry her lips apart. "Even if you did kiss me—and I'm not saying that I think that's a good idea—it wouldn't lead anywhere. I think you should know that up front."

"You're certainly entitled to your opinion, Jaden," he said soothingly, rubbing his palm up and down her arm where he still held her. "But I think that *you* should know up front that I'm very certain, eventually, I *will* kiss you and it *will* lead to something."

He moved in a little closer, making her press her back against the rough side of the pool. "But because you're skittish about this, today I'll settle for this."

He slid his hand down her arm slowly, creating goosebumps in the wake of his touch. Then he took her hand and lifted it to his lips, pressing a firm but gentle kiss to the center of her palm. A shiver went through her and she knew that it did not escape his attention.

He pulled himself out of the pool and shook water from his hair. He stood on the side and shrugged out of his jacket, tossed it onto the chair, pulled his shirt from the waist of his pants and began unbuttoning it. He peeled it off, wadded it into a ball and squeezed water from it. Jaden watched every move, unable to tear her eyes away even when he turned and saw her studying him. He kicked his shoes off, watching her the whole time. She didn't move. But when his hands went to his belt, she shook herself from her daze.

"You're not undressing right here!"

He looked around. "I can't go dripping water through the whole house."

She pulled herself from the pool and stomped to the chair where there was another dry towel. She tossed it toward him. "And I'm *not* skittish."

He began toweling off. "That will make seducing you much easier."

She spun toward him in the midst of pulling on a long T-shirt, only one arm poking through the sleeve. "*Seducing me?*" Her voice was almost a shriek.

Shrugging, he asked, "What did you think all the kissing would lead to?"

"We're not kissing."

"Not right now," he agreed. "But that will change soon."

"This is nuts. Is this the real reason Kathy and Cindy quit?" she asked, naming two of the three therapists who had come and gone from the Steele estate. "Because you were trying to get them into bed?"

Adam frowned at that. “The thought of taking either of them to bed didn’t even occur to me.” The resoluteness in his statement left no room for doubt.

Jaden stuck her left arm forcibly through the T-shirt and finally pulled it over her head and down to cover her body. She crossed her arms and regarded him with narrowed eyes. “But it’s occurred to you with me, after only one day?”

Adam stopped drying off and walked toward her, stopping only when he was close enough that she could see the gold flecks in his eyes. He put one finger under her chin and tipped her head up to look into her eyes.

“Taking you to bed occurred to me the first moment I saw you.”

He *had* to stop doing that. If she lost her ability to breathe and think every time he said something like that, she was afraid she would quickly lose her professional credibility with him. If she hadn’t already. Finally, she spoke. “Maybe that should have come up when we were discussing the job with Emily.”

He dropped his gaze to her lips. “I have every confidence that you can do both very, very well, but if you’re concerned, maybe you would be more comfortable *not* being Emily’s therapist.”

Anger welled up in her so quickly she wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. “You want me to concentrate on *you* rather than Emily?” Then she took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. She shrugged. “Sure, that’s a great idea. You can bring in another therapist to work on her rehab while I have sex with you all day long. In fact, thank you for thinking of it. I was just wondering how I was going to accomplish all of that by myself.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “You would have an affair with me and let another therapist work with Emily?”

She took a step forward, her eyes narrowed, pink staining her cheeks. “You are unbelievable!”

Suddenly both of her hands were on his chest and before he could react, she shoved him as hard as she could.

Jaden stood at the edge of the pool, hands on her hips, glaring down at him when he came up for air. “Of course I will not have an affair with you and turn Emily’s therapy over to someone else! My first and only priority is Emily. You’re just going to have to find another...outlet...for your sexual energy.”

“So you’re staying?”

“That’s what I said.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.” Then she marched to the heavy glass door and jerked it open, turning for only a moment to tell him, “And, just for the record, I’m also not kissing you...no matter what.”

“How’d you get downstairs to tattle on me?” Jaden asked Emily as she entered the family room that afternoon. She had been looking for the girl for nearly twenty minutes. She knew that Emily was hiding out



while—no doubt—enjoying the thought of Jaden wandering through the mansion, lost, unsure of even where to look first or how to find her way back to her apartment when she gave up. But Jaden hadn't given up and Emily's expression clearly communicated how she felt about that.

Emily placed the book she was reading in her lap as she regarded Jaden coolly. "I used the elevator, of course."

"The *elevator*?" Jaden asked. "My, my, this palace is fancier than I thought." She plopped down next to Emily on the couch.

Emily rolled her eyes. "Dad put it in before I came home from the hospital. It's not like we've always had it."

"Oh, I see." Jaden nodded. "Too bad he went to all that trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not going to be using it anymore. It probably cost a lot." Jaden tipped the book to look at the front cover.

Emily sat up a little straighter against the cushion behind her and her eyes narrowed as she asked, "What do you mean, I won't be using it anymore?"

"It's off-limits." Jaden let the book bump back against Emily's thighs.

"You can't make the elevator off-limits! How else will I get downstairs?"

"Like everyone else. The staircase."

"No way." Emily folded her arms against her chest. "I can't. You can't do this."

"Are you going to tell your father on me again?" Jaden taunted, liking the hint of color in Emily's cheeks as her temper rose.

"Dad!" Emily bellowed in answer.

Jaden yawned and leaned her elbow on the armrest, awaiting the arrival of Emily's cavalry. It only took him twenty-two seconds.

"What's going on? Are you all right?" Adam asked his daughter as he strode into the room.

Jaden tried not to notice that he looked good. But it was hard to ignore. Not to mention that whenever they'd been together in the past twelve hours, he seemed to stand too close, look at her too intently and call attention too often to the fact that he was a man and she was a woman. Helping a young girl walk again was a piece of cake compared to ignoring the way her heart sped up whenever Adam walked into a room.

"Jaden won't let me use the elevator. She says I can't go downstairs anymore."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Emily." Jaden straightened. "If you're going to get me into trouble at least quote me correctly. I said you could not *use the elevator* to go downstairs."

"See?" Emily turned pleading eyes on her father.

"Jaden, I don't..."

"Emily doesn't need the elevator," Jaden interrupted.

“How do you propose she get from the second floor to the first floor?”

“By using the stairs.”

“With her wheelchair?”

“Of course not.”

“How?”

“I’ll be teaching her that. You’re welcome to come and watch if it would make you feel better.”

“I want to talk to you in my office. Now.” Adam turned on his heel and stalked through the doorway, not pausing or looking back to see if she was following him.

She did, but only so she could point out that she would not tolerate him ordering her around. She paused in the doorway, turning back to look at Emily. “You coming?”

Emily looked wary. “Why?”

“You’re going to be the main topic of discussion and my plans for you are definitely going to come up. You might as well eavesdrop now and save me the trouble of repeating all of this later.”

Jaden turned down the hall toward Adam’s office. Even being a few seconds late would no doubt irritate him, so she slowed her pace considerably. She didn’t look back but she could hear Emily’s wheels rolling along the marble floor.

“What is this all about?” Adam demanded the minute Jaden arrived in his office.

The desire to kiss her was nearly as strong as the desire to shake her.

He wasn’t sure how much of her he could take.

“You are getting in the way,” she told him bluntly.

She had no idea how in the way he could get. “I refuse to let you do this to Emily.”

“I’m doing this to Emily? She’s becoming an invalid. Don’t you see? She doesn’t need that elevator. You should never have installed it.”

“She can’t go up and down the stairs in that wheelchair. What else could I have done?”

“You came up with a permanent solution to a temporary problem. The more permanent the fixtures—like an elevator—the harder it is for Emily to believe that her disability is short term.”

He leaned closer and glared at her. “Her lack of a leg is not temporary, Jaden.”

She gave a heavy, exasperated sigh. “It’s no wonder she thinks she’s a cripple. You have her labeled as one in your mind and you are treating her that way. No surprise that her rear end is glued to that chair.”

“I did not bring you here to judge me and my decisions. I’ve done my best for her.”

His best had always been enough too. Always. Emily had never had a need he couldn’t fulfill. Until now. He couldn’t give his daughter the only thing she really needed...her leg back.

But he could, by God, give her the chance to have her life back. “I brought you here to make her better.”

“Then let me. You can’t coddle her,” Jaden said. “I know that it must be hard seeing her unhappy and struggling, but you’re not doing her any favors.”

“She’s been through enough already, Dr. Monroe. I want this therapy to help her, not hurt and frustrate her.”

“I thought you were going to call me Jaden,” She said, her irritation clear. “You’ve both been through a lot. But now it’s time to get past it. It’s not going to get better unless Emily gets up out of that chair.”

“Lower your voice!” How could he want to kiss her even more now?

“No, she can hear this.”

Jaden stomped to the office door, which was open only a few inches. She swung the heavy door open as wide as it would go. “Everyone can hear this. Emily is *not* disabled.” Jaden proclaimed at the top of her lungs. “She is not crippled or deformed or anything else. And she *will* walk again. She will go up and down the stairs like everyone else, she will dance again, she will do all of the things that she used to do. As soon as everyone—especially Emily—believes it!”

Adam stalked to where she stood. She whirled to face him again and was clearly surprised to find him so close. Unable to stop himself, he gripped her upper arms and pulled her closer. His voice was thick when he spoke. “Do you believe it?”

Her eyes, swirling with emotion, made him forget that she was there as a professional therapist. Passion like that pulled at his deepest male instincts.

“Yes.” Her voice sounded ragged. “Yes, I believe it.”

He stared at her for another long moment. He wondered what she would do if he pulled her up against his body and showed her how she was affecting him. Then he released her, stepped back and sucked in a long breath.

This woman had the potential to make his life incredibly complicated.

“Dr. Monroe, if this job is more than you can handle, I would appreciate you being upfront about it. Emily’s been in that wheelchair too long. If I need to find another therapist, I’d like to get started.”

Jaden stared at him. “Are you firing me?” she asked.

“No. But if you’re going to quit...”

“I told you just a little bit ago that I’m not quitting, no matter what.”

He considered that for a long while, searching her eyes, trying to gauge her sincerity. She wet her lips, shifted from one foot to the other, and waited.

“Because of the money?” he finally asked.

It took a moment for her to form a response. “No. The money is very important to the hospital, but—no. I’m not going to quit because...”

He was certain that he would know if she fudged the truth, and even a half truth from this woman would disappoint him. He realized that he already had incredibly high expectations for Dr. Jaden Monroe and he wasn't sure if he could take her being just another person who let him down. "Because?" he asked.

"Because I don't think that you believe I can do this. I don't think you believe that I'm the one who will help Emily walk again. And I want to prove you wrong."

He watched her, the air between them heavy with something that felt a lot like expectation. Finally, he gave her a simple nod. She spun toward the open door, where he could see Emily sitting in the foyer, staring at his office door.

"You ready?" Jaden asked the girl.

"For what?" Emily looked wary but carefully kept her tone pleasant.

"To learn to go up and down stairs."

"Um..." Emily glanced up at the long, spiraling staircase.

"Great, I'll meet you at the top. Enjoy your last ride in the elevator."

## Chapter Four

“Come on. You’ll have to get closer if you’re actually going to see anything.”

Adam could think of twelve places he would rather be, and that was in spite of the rather enticing view of Jaden Monroe’s backside he was going to have.

“Fine,” he muttered, feeling almost like he was pouting. Which was, of course, ridiculous considering he was a grown man and intimidating businessman. He wasn’t sure he had ever pouted, even as a child. He shoved his hands into his pockets and moved from his office doorway to the middle of the front foyer. “How’s this?”

Jaden looked at him over her shoulder and smiled. Which made him want to smile back. Which was idiotic. There wasn’t anything here to smile about. He tried to make his expression un-smiling and un-pouting and more displeased, maybe even aggravated. He didn’t like being told what to do, even by a beautiful woman with a spectacular rear view.

Jaden had been Emily’s therapist for less than twenty-four hours and was already driving him crazy. And not in a good way.

His current position standing at the bottom of the staircase, which had never looked quite as huge as it did now, was the perfect example. He didn’t even want Emily to go up and down stairs, not to mention watching her try it. What if she fell? What if she twisted her leg? What if she simply couldn’t do it? Watching her struggle felt like plucking out his nose hairs one by one—painful and ridiculous. Why do it when there was an easier and less painful way of handling the situation?

With the first therapist, Adam had been involved, attending each session, eager to learn what he could do to help. But as Emily tried and failed and became frustrated and bitter, Adam withdrew to his work, unable to watch her struggle and hurting when he couldn’t help. Or worse, when she didn’t want him to.

He hated this. All of it. With the possible exception of Emily’s new physical therapist. Though he did hate what she was doing at the moment.

His daughter sat in her wheelchair on the first landing. She stared at the steps in front of her as if she was at the edge of a volcano about to be sacrificed to the gods within.

“It’s sixteen steps to the bottom,” Jaden said.

“I know.” Emily didn’t look at Jaden as she answered.

“People have actually gone down and *up* stairs with prosthetic legs before this moment.”

“Probably.” Emily still didn’t even blink.

“So this is no big deal.”

“Right.”

Adam thought it was very likely that in her head Emily was calling Jaden all kinds of unflattering things and silently plotting Jaden’s slow, torturous demise. But as long as the things coming out of her mouth were even semi-civil he was happy.

“Here’s how this is going to go.” Jaden moved to the third step down, facing Emily. “You’re going to stand. I’m going to hold on to you. You’re going to put your left foot down first, then you’re going to lean on me when you put your right foot down. Then we’re going to do it again. And again. Sixteen times.”

Emily was staring at Jaden’s shoulder. And was not smiling.

“Your prosthetic foot goes down first. Each time. For now at least.”

No response.

“When you lean on me, it takes some of the weight off your weaker side while you bring your other foot down.”

Nothing.

Jaden sighed and crossed her arms. “I’m not asking for handsprings, or for you to sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl, or even for you to smile.”

That gained a small frown. “I know.”

“Then quit looking like I’ve announced that I’m taking your credit cards away or that you can’t text anyone for a month or some other horrible punishment.”

Emily’s frown deepened and she finally looked up at Jaden.

Jaden softened her tone. “It’s just a set of stairs. Just keep telling yourself that. It’s something you’ve done hundreds of times. It’s something millions of people do, thousands of times a day. Don’t let this freak you out.”

Emily’s chin lifted slightly. “I’m not freaked out.”

Jaden let a moment of silence pass. Then she said simply, “Prove it.”

Without even the slightest hesitation, Emily pushed her butt up off of the wheelchair seat. She stood, swaying slightly, but her expression was determined.

Adam felt his heart begin to race. In excitement, not fear. Emily could do this. Like Jaden said, they were just stairs, something Emily had done a thousand times. This could work.

Jaden could make this work.

Barely aware of what he was doing, he moved closer to the staircase.

Jaden’s hands were on Emily’s hips, Emily’s hands still gripped the arm rests of her wheelchair tightly.

“Step forward,” Jaden urged. “Closer to the step. I’ve got you. Put your hands on my shoulders.”

Emily did as she was told, which in and of itself was a positive step.

Her hands gripped Jaden's shoulders and she stepped to the edge of the step. She pressed her lips together and drew in a deep breath.

"This is stupid," Emily muttered.

"It is," Jaden agreed. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"That's not what I meant," Emily told her.

Jaden sighed. "I know." She pulled Emily forward and Emily took one step, then leaned onto Jaden as she brought her left leg—the one with the prosthesis—forward. "But even with your dad's money, I don't think we can install elevators in every building you may ever want to visit above the first floor."

Emily's lips were pressed into a thin line that could have been nerves, or annoyance. Either way it wasn't happy or poised.

"Now, your left foot first," Jaden coached. "Lean on me."

Emily shifted her weight to her right side and lifted her left foot about three inches off the floor. She attempted to swing her prosthesis forward at the knee, but it didn't move far.

"Come on, Emily. Kick it out," Jaden said.

"I'm trying."

The prosthesis connected just below the knee, with the knee joint itself still intact. That meant the muscles that moved the knee were still mostly intact as well. The doctors had said that would make the prosthesis easier to move and control. But she had to have good strength in those muscles. Sitting in a wheelchair since surgery, refusing to participate in her therapy sessions, certainly hadn't made that happen.

Adam frowned. This wasn't going to work. Dammit. He hadn't realized how high his hopes had been until that moment. He had to be careful not to allow Jaden to build him up for these let downs. There was something about Jaden that made him want to believe in things that he rationally knew didn't make sense. "Okay, sit for a minute," Jaden said after another minute.

Emily started to step back to sit in the chair, but Jaden shook her head and pointed to the step. Emily frowned, but lowered herself to the top step.

"Straighten your leg," Jaden said, squatting down beside Emily.

Emily did it, but could only hold it out for a few seconds.

"Okay, we've got some work to do," Jaden pushed to her feet. "You have to get control of that knee before we can do much more."

"So, I can use the elevator. For now," Emily added.

Jaden shook her head. "Nope. I said I'm going to teach you to go up and down the stairs, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Emily looked dubious, but said nothing.

Adam, on the other hand, wasn't as intimidated.

"It's clearly not safe," he said, stepping up on the first step. "This will have to wait."

Jaden didn't look surprised by his protest. "I'll be sure Emily doesn't get hurt. But that doesn't mean the things I'm going to ask her to do aren't a risk."

Adam put his hands on his hips. Though nothing he did seemed to make Jaden Monroe so much as blink, he couldn't help his habitual attempts to daunt. "I'm not paying you to put my daughter at risk."

"No, you're paying me to make sure she can resume normal activities. Unless you're willing to move to a nice—and I'm sure huge—ranch-style house, then she needs to go up and down these stairs. Somehow."

Adam wanted to demand Jaden see him back in his office. That was where he felt the most in control. It was the room that reminded him that he did, in fact, know a few things and did, from time to time, make good decisions. But they'd just come from his office and it was quite obvious who had won that go-round. "I don't particularly like ranch-style houses," he said.

Jaden smiled at him again. He dropped his gaze to her derriere. When he met her eyes again, her brows were up and she was still smiling. It had been a juvenile attempt to fluster her out of the upper hand she so clearly had. Which had not worked. In fact, she pivoted slightly, putting her "assets" more directly in his sights. She leaned over and Adam rolled his eyes. Even though his brain knew she was simply messing with him, his body didn't care. He still felt his lower half tighten in response.

"The only way to go up and down at this point is on your rear end," Jaden said to Emily.

"On my butt?"

"Yep. You just lower yourself step to step. Going up is the same."

"I'm going up and down the stairs on my butt?" Emily repeated.

"Right."

"That's stupid," Emily announced.

Jaden sat next to Emily on the step and started down in the same way she'd just described. "Come on. Loser has to make the ice cream sundaes."

Emily frowned. Then sighed. Then finally started down after Jaden. By the sixth step she was increasing her speed and Adam stepped back and out of the way to avoid being bowled over. Emily's foot hit the floor of the foyer first.

She was smiling and Adam let himself be amazed. Slightly. It was very early in the rehab process. A smile from Emily was certainly something, but he was carefully controlling his enthusiasm, lest he be let down.

Jaden's shoe touched the floor, but she started right back up. "Down and back," she said.

"You didn't..." Emily abandoned the argument and started back up the stairs, lifting herself with her arms and pushing off with her legs.



They were both breathing a little harder by the time they reached the top and both were smiling. Jaden had clearly won. “That’s okay,” she told Emily. “I’m not picky about ice cream. I love it all.” She gave Adam a sideways glance with a sly smile.

For some reason.

Adam had no idea why she’d looked at him as if they’d shared a private joke but he felt his mouth stretch into a grin anyway. He couldn’t believe that Jaden ate a lot of ice cream. Not with that body.

He also let himself enjoy how the session on the stairs was ending in smiles and lighthearted sexual thoughts rather than tears and disappointment like so many other therapy sessions had.

“So, even if you make a horrible sundae, I’ll probably still eat it,” Jaden continued to Emily. She helped Emily to her feet and held on as she pivoted to sit in the chair.

“You don’t know that I’m not a sore loser,” Emily said. “If I am, I might sneak something gross into yours.”

Jaden laughed. “Such as?”

“Pepper?” Emily suggested. “Or Tabasco sauce.”

Jaden shook her head. “No, no. If you’re trying to get back at someone, you don’t put something in that they can taste and will make them stop eating. You spit in it, or mix dirt into the chocolate sauce or dip their spoon in the toilet.”

“Eww,” Emily groaned, but she was smiling.

As was Adam. “I guess you’re not going to let her win just because she’s a kid and has a prosthetic leg,” he commented.

Jaden grinned at Emily. “Course not. You learn more from losing than winning, generally.”

“Next time,” Emily said.

Jaden nodded. “In a few minutes. After you rest a little.”

“A few minutes?” Emily asked.

“I assume you keep ice cream in the kitchen. Which is on the first floor. Which we are not currently on.”

Emily sighed. “Right.”

Adam knew he had to get back to work. His office was calling. But for some reason he had a craving for an ice cream sundae.

“See ya later, Dad,” Emily said.

“Yeah,” he said, turning reluctantly. “Enjoy the ice cream.”

He glanced back and found Jaden watching him.

“Do you like apple pie, Adam?” she asked.

He shrugged at the strange question. “Sure. Who doesn’t?”

She smiled, another of those mysterious smiles, and said simply, “Well, some apple pies are better than others.”

“I guess you’re right,” he said, confused about the change of topic.

“I think a la mode is probably the best way to enjoy apple pie, though.”

Okay, there was some tie to the prior conversation. “You’re probably right.”

“It’s good for us to agree on these things, I think.” She nodded with satisfaction. Then she turned back to Emily. “Rest time’s over. Let’s go get ice cream.”

Emily didn’t bound up out of her chair, but she didn’t argue either.

Adam turned back to his office as Emily and Jaden began their race down the stairs, satisfied that progress had been made. Emily was going up and down stairs without an elevator, she had smiled—at her physical therapist no less—and he and Jaden both liked apple pie.

Whatever that meant.

It still all felt good.

“Come on, Em, let’s go.” Jaden whisked the down comforter off of the sleeping girl.

“Hey,” Emily grabbed for the warm cover before it could be tossed on the floor. But she wasn’t quick enough.

“Let’s go, I’m in the mood to work. And that means so are you.” Jaden crossed to the walk-in closet and began rifling through Emily’s clothes.

Emily sat up and squinted at the digital glow of her alarm clock. “It’s only six-thirty. You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No way. I don’t kid about this stuff.” Jaden selected a bright yellow nylon running suit and a single tennis shoe from the closet.

Emily eyed the clothing and Jaden warily. “What are we doing?”

“Going for a morning jog.” Jaden dumped the suit and shoe on the bed. She pivoted and crossed to the dresser where she found an elastic band to hold Emily’s hair in a ponytail. She tossed it to Emily over her shoulder.

“Um, in case you forgot, I can’t run.”

Jaden stood in front of Emily’s dresser mirror and straightened the red headband that circled her head and covered her ears.

“What did you say?” she asked Emily.

“I said, I can’t. I can’t go running.”

“I’m sorry.” Jaden turned from the dresser. “I thought I heard you say ‘can’t’. But with this thing over my ears I’m not sure. I did tell you what happens to people who use that word with me, didn’t I?”

Emily looked a little apprehensive as she asked, “What?”

“They do ten push-ups for every time they use it.”

Jaden was sure that yesterday Emily would have scoffed at that declaration. But her standoff with Adam in his office the previous afternoon had made an impression. Emily felt something toward Jaden now that went beyond resentment. Whether it was intimidation or respect, Jaden could not be sure. Whatever the motivation, Emily would listen to Jaden today. And that was enough for now.

“Okay,” Emily said hesitantly. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“How do you think I’m going to keep up with you?”

“You know how to use that by now,” Jaden said, motioning toward the wheelchair parked in the corner of the room. “You just have to roll along.”

Emily still looked doubtful but began pulling the running suit on. As soon as her sneaker was tied, Jaden whipped the chair around and brought it up next to the bed.

“Get in.”

Emily scooted to the edge of the bed, pulled the arm of the wheelchair off and slid easily over into the seat. She replaced the arm, kicked the foot-plate into place with her left foot and rolled toward the door.

“All right, I’m ready,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

Jaden was smiling at her.

“What?”

“You did that very well. Especially considering that just the other day you claimed to be unable to get from the wheelchair into another chair. And not once did I hear anything negative come out of your mouth. I think we’re going to have a good day.”

Emily shrugged. “We haven’t gotten downstairs yet.” She rolled through the doorway without waiting for Jaden.

Soon, they were at the curb outside the mansion. Emily watched as Jaden went through her stretching routine.

“You run every morning?” Emily asked.

“Try to. There are some mornings I’m just too lazy, but I make it out at least five times a week.” Jaden pulled one foot up behind her to stretch the front of her thigh.

“I used to run a lot too,” Emily said. A note of sadness touched her words. “I started running to get in shape for basketball. When I got good, I would run with dad. I could keep up most of the time, but I think that he slowed down some when I was along.”

She was *not* going to think about Adam and how great he and Emily’s relationship seemed. It didn’t matter. It was nice. But had nothing to do with her. Nothing. It did not make him more attractive. It certainly didn’t make him sexier. It was just...nice. Period.

“Let’s go.” Jaden turned toward the driveway and started out at a brisk trot.

Though her thoughts were cluttered, Jaden’s running pace was easy and smooth. Beside her, Emily rolled the wheelchair along over the level cement without incident. But soon, the path grew rougher, with rocks and occasional weeds poking through the cracks. Jaden could see Emily’s determination in her set jaw and the furrows between her eyebrows as she drove the chair across the uneven terrain. Then they came to the first major incline.

Jaden reached the top of the hill before she noticed that Emily was not right behind her. She stopped and glanced back.

Emily sat at the bottom of the hill, her face buried in her hands.

Jaden retraced her steps to Emily’s side. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

Jaden hoped to fire Emily’s competitive spirit. “I’m beating the snot out of you.”

“Big surprise.” Emily refused to look up.

“Should I slow down?”

“I don’t care. I’m done.”

“Not yet. We’ve got at least a quarter of a mile to go.”

“I’m not going any farther!” She lifted her face at last. “You run if you want to but I’m going back. This was a dumb idea!”

“I thought you said you liked going out in the morning like this,” Jaden said. “Would you rather go with your dad?”

“No. I don’t want to go out at all. I said that I like *running* in the morning. This isn’t running. I won’t ever run again. I don’t have a leg.” Emily was glaring at the stones near Jaden’s feet, refusing to look Jaden in the eye.

“You do have a leg.” Jaden brushed her hair back from her hot forehead. *I need to say something inspiring here.* Nothing would come. “It’s sitting up in your room, propped in a corner.”

“That’s not a leg!”

“Okay. Technically it’s a prosthesis. A very expensive one from the looks of it.”

“It’s metal and ugly. I hate wearing that thing!” Two tears chased each other down her cheek.

“Oh, sure, and this *metal* wheelchair is so much more attractive.”

“What does it matter? I’ll never be the same. I used to like running, but that’s not me anymore. I have to just face that.”

“No. What you need to face is this—that leg upstairs, the leg you lost, the wheelchair...*none* of that is you. Neither is that arm, or your nose or anything else that’s a part of your physical body. *You* are inside, Emily. It’s all still there.”

Jaden paused and pulled in a long, deep breath. She had not intended to rant at Emily, but the emotions simply spilled out.

Emily sat in silence, her eyes glued to Jaden.

“And another thing.” Jaden’s voice was calmer but her heart still pounded. “That leg upstairs is a gift. It will help you get around like your friends. It will make it so that you can walk and run and jump and dance again. You should be thankful. Some people never get a second chance.” Jaden took a shaky breath as she looked at Emily’s eyes brimming with tears.

“People who lose their eyesight or the function of their spinal cord or their memory because of an accident or a disease don’t get a chance like you have, Emily. No one will know about your leg when you’ve got blue jeans and tennis shoes on. No one will know when you’re wearing your floor length prom dress or your graduation gown. No one has to know unless you choose to share it with them. Think about that. Think about how lucky you are.”

Jaden turned and set off down the path again, jogging in an easy rhythm, and breathing in the clean, fresh, almost-spring air. She and Emily both needed some time and space to let the emotions settle a little.

Twenty minutes later, Jaden jogged up to the front of the estate. Emily was waiting for her on the porch.

“How are you?” Jaden asked as she approached.

“I’m good. How about you?” Emily returned pleasantly.

“I had a good run.”

“Glad to hear it.”

They stayed like that for another long minute, Jaden standing on the pearl white cement that circled in front of the house, Emily sitting in her wheelchair near the porch swing.

Finally, Emily spoke again.

“I’m ready to do some therapy.”

Jaden squinted at her. “You sure?”

“Yes. I’m ready.”

Jaden’s heart leapt in her chest but she kept her expression carefully neutral.

“It’s going to be tough. I’m going to work you hard. Twice a day, sometimes more. You’re going to hate it, sometimes you’ll hate me. Sometimes you’ll even hate yourself.”

Emily nodded her understanding, the light in her eyes only glowing brighter.

“You have to trust me.”

“I do.”

Jaden looked at her for a long moment. Emily was beautiful. Her dark hair fell just past her shoulder blades and her eyes were a vivid blue. Looking into them now, Jaden was jolted back to the day before

when she had looked up into the eyes of Emily's father. Adam's eyes were just as expressive as his daughter's and Jaden remembered feeling completely lost in them and yet, strangely, right at home.

"It will get better. You just have to start somewhere. And I will do whatever I can to make it not quite so horrible," Jaden promised.

Emily smiled a stunning, heartfelt smile and Jaden felt lost again, but in a new way.

"Can we start this morning?"

The session with Emily went surprising well. Better than well. Part of it was an improved attitude, but at the end of the session Jaden couldn't believe that Emily had been just sitting in her wheelchair for two months. She was stronger than expected and she maneuvered the prosthesis with skill that should have required practice.

Emily's motivation lasted throughout the two hours, and at the end of that time, with both of them sweating but grinning, they agreed that Emily would rest for awhile before lunch. They would start again at one o'clock.

Jaden felt light and happy as she let herself into the apartment and promptly removed her shoes. Wiggling her toes in the plush mauve colored carpet, she put her hands on her hips and arched her back working out the kinks. Her eyes roamed over the stack of books on the coffee table that she had brought to read. Some were professional texts and some, most if she were honest, were fiction novels. But nothing caught her interest.

Her eyes found the bulky folder that held Emily's medical history. She remembered how she'd casually taken it from Adam, but she was not nonchalant about it. Not really. It was true that she wanted to start her relationship with Emily with an introduction and getting to know each other, but she knew the medical record would provide some answers to the questions that had built up in the short time she had known Emily... and Adam.

Crossing to the table, Jaden stood and just held the file in her hands. It was heavy. Jaden took a deep breath, walked to the couch and sprawled out, flipping open to the first page. Knowing Emily, having seen her vulnerability and her tenacity, Jaden knew that some of the file would be hard for her to read. It would tell the details of her disease, its severity and her prognosis.

*Name: Emily Elizabeth Steele. Age: 13. Diagnosis: aggressive osteosarcoma.*

Quickly spreading cancer of the bone.

Jaden closed her eyes. She knew that Emily had been diagnosed with cancer. Emily herself had told her that much. But seeing it in black and white on an official medical document made it much more real...and more scary.

Jaden read on.

Over thirty minutes later, she lay the report aside and rubbed her eyes. Emily had been diagnosed after experiencing pain and swelling in her lower leg. At first, the doctors had felt that it was a simple stress fracture incurred during basketball practice. They treated her conservatively with no success. When the pain continued and the swelling increased in spite of the treatment, they finally took an x-ray. That's when they saw the tumor.

*Options were discussed with the family*, the report read. Evidently, the cancer was an aggressive form, the tumor was already larger than they had anticipated and it had the potential to spread rapidly. Chemotherapy, as well as surgery had been presented to Adam and Emily. The physician's report was very clear about Adam's unwillingness to chance anything. If he chose another surgical option that would have spared more of Emily's leg, there was a risk of recurrence. It was also possible that they could miss something. The amputation had ultimately been Adam's decision.

The ringing of her phone jarred Jaden back to the present.

"Hello?"

"Jaden, come on. Let's get to work." Jaden felt the cold lump that had settled in her stomach begin to dissolve as Emily's voice came through the phone line. Emily had been through a horrible ordeal. She had been faced with a life-threatening disease and had lost her leg. But she was on the other end of the phone, ready to take her life back.

"I'm on my way."

Adam jumped as the knock sounded as his office door. Irritated, he sternly told himself to relax.

"Come in."

"Hi." Jaden peered around the door. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes." He motioned her in. As she came fully into view, he found it difficult to swallow. There was simply no denying that he was attracted to his newest employee. There was also no denying how complicated that made things.

"I can come back if you're busy."

"No, it's fine. Sit down."

She perched on the very edge of the chair.

"I've been anxious for your first report. How did Emily do?" He shifted the stack of papers he had been working on to the opposite side of his desk.

Jaden frowned slightly but answered, "Honestly? Not bad once we got past the cynicism and attitude."

His heart ached and he closed his eyes briefly. Emily's life had been turned upside down. From the moment she heard the word *cancer*, Emily had withdrawn into herself. And he knew that all of her current struggles were because of him.

He would never forget the anguish of telling Emily that she was going to lose her leg. But, in the end, it was his decision to make. Lying awake at night, torturing himself over what to do, didn't help. Ultimately time had run out and he had been forced to determine his daughter's fate.

Forcing the memories and emotions to the side, he opened his eyes again. "She's had a tough time."

"I imagine she has." Jaden's voice was soft and sympathetic. "But it's time for her to get on with her life."

"I agree completely. I want her back to normal as soon as possible. I want Emily to walk onto the stage and perform her role in the school play at the end of May. I want people to comment on how they can't tell anything is wrong with her at all."

"There *isn't* anything wrong with her, Adam." Jaden's voice was firm and her eyes dared him to refute her claim. "But I hope you realize that she won't ever be the same."

He pulled himself fully from his mental chaos and focused on the woman across from him. "Meaning?"

"She's been through a terrible ordeal. She's going to be a different person when it's all over. This has the potential to make her stronger. But it will always be with her—the good and the bad. It will always be with you too. The important thing is what you make out of it."

Adam was more drawn to the look in her eyes than to her words. There was compassion and confidence there. He flipped open a manila folder on the corner of his desk and withdrew a sheet of paper. "You can fill this out now or you can take it with you."

She stood and approached the desk, looking at him questioningly as she accepted the paper. He watched her eyes scan the form before coming back to meet his.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Of course not. Is there a problem?"

"Let me get this straight. You want me to fill out a written report every day on Emily's progress in therapy?"

"Yes."

"No." She tossed the paper back onto the center of Adam's desk and crossed her arms.

His fingers tightened around the fountain pen he held. "Why not?"

"It's ridiculous. You don't need a written daily report."

"I don't think that I am asking too much when I request that my daughter's therapist advise me on her progress."

"I encourage the parents of all of my patients to be involved with their therapy. But that's more than receiving written reports."

He studied her for a long moment. In her T-shirt and jeans with her hair soft and curling naturally around her face instead of spiking up from her head she looked more like a college co-ed than a renowned



researcher and nationally respected expert. But her confidence was apparent in her stance, her words and her expressions. He couldn't help thinking that Jaden Monroe seemed capable of making his load of responsibilities a little lighter.

"What do you propose instead?" he asked.

She placed both of her palms on his desk and leaned in. "We're working right upstairs. If you are interested in what is happening you should come up and watch. Or jump in and get involved during the sessions, for that matter. I'm also more than happy to discuss any questions or concerns. But the most important person you should be talking to is Emily. You should ask *her* how things are going and how she's feeling."

He dropped the pen he had been holding like a vise and massaged his right temple. "Fine. Let's discuss. Overall, what is your impression of Emily's rehab potential?"

Jaden smiled. "I'm going to be honest with you. She did great today. She got motivated, but sometimes that adrenaline doesn't last. And at some point she's going to have to be able to motivate herself. But..."

Adam found himself holding his breath.

"...there is a lot of potential there. There's nothing physical she can't overcome. And..." Jaden smiled as if she had a great secret to tell him. "We just finished going up and down your staircase four times. On her feet. With a crutch. She needed help, but it's a great start."

He let her words sink in slowly. "That's..." He was unsure what words to use. After so many negative reports and ambiguous prognoses, he was thrilled to have even a sliver of hope restored.

Finally he settled on, "Thank you, Jaden."

She straightened quickly as if his desktop had suddenly grown hot. "We have a long way to go. But it's a good start."

"It's more than anyone else has done."

"Yes, well..." She cleared her throat. "I'd better get back up there."

It occurred to him that he would very much like to round the desk and see if she ducked again if he tried to kiss her. Those were the only times that she'd been less than completely confident and it would make him feel less out of his element if she were more out of hers.

In the end, though, he kept his seat. "I'll see you at dinner." He wanted to say so much more to her, but nothing sane came to mind.

"Okay. See ya."

She disappeared through the doorway just as Tony swept in. He nearly tripped over his own feet as he turned swiftly to watch her exit the room.

"How's your new physical therapist?"

Tony swung back to face his brother with a grin that told he was thinking exactly what Adam figured he'd been thinking. He was sure that a number of men's eyes had followed Jaden from a room. But even though it was his brother, and Adam himself had been watching Jaden go, he still wanted to put a fist in Tony's face.

"She's *Emily's* physical therapist," Adam said firmly. The last thing he needed was to start thinking of Jaden as his *anything*.

## Chapter Five

Jaden turned the deadbolt on the front door and picked her way down the long dark hallway that led to the kitchen. It was late, but she was in the mood for a midnight snack. In the dark she couldn't see the hands on her watch clearly but she knew that it was long after midnight. Hopefully Doris, the housekeeper, had not discovered her stashed canister of homemade hot chocolate mix and chocolate almond biscotti. If Doris had moved them from the hiding spot Jaden would be going hungry.

There was a soft light glowing above the sink and she was able to find a cup, a spoon and the teakettle for heating the water, then bent to reach into the far corner of the lowest cabinet next to the refrigerator.

"Get the cookies out too."

She jumped nearly a foot. The spoon clattered onto the ceramic tile as she swung around, her body coiled tight for action, her eyes searching the dim room frantically.

She pointed a quaking finger at Adam when she again found her voice. "You scared the life out of me!"

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry.

"What are you doing sitting in here in the dark?" She bent to pick up the spoon, trying to take a few deep breaths and calm her heart rate.

"Waiting for you."

"I'm flattered." She turned to the sink and occupied her shaking hands by rinsing water over the spoon. She wiped her fingers on the dishtowel she picked up from the countertop next to the sink. Finally, when Adam failed to make any sound whatsoever, she said, "It's almost one."

"I know."

She paused. He didn't sound happy. "Whatever you wanted to see me about must be important." She became engrossed in filling the teapot with water and spooning cocoa mix into her mug, rather than face this man who made her jumpy just by breathing, not to mention hiding in the dark and scaring her to death.

"It was important to me to know where you were. Emily said she last saw you around five."

Jaden turned from the counter. "That's probably about right. I left at six, after showering and changing, so yes, our session ended around five."

"We expected you for dinner. Not to mention completing Emily's therapy for the day."

Jaden drew herself up tall. "I *did* complete Emily's therapy for the day. And please, don't concern yourself with whether or not I have dinner. Or breakfast or lunch for that matter." She was getting

defensive and knew that it was obvious in her voice. But for him to insinuate that she would have cut Emily's session short just so she could go out for the evening was too much.

She could not see his face clearly in the mostly dark room and she knew he could not read her expressions well either. Still, she was careful about her body language. Jaden did not want Adam to think that she was nervous about being in the dark kitchen alone with him.

It wasn't that she was scared of him. Though he might intimidate some people, Jaden found herself drawn to the intense, powerful aura that Adam exuded. And *that* was a problem. She didn't want to be drawn to him and, more than that, she couldn't be.

She turned back to her mug and spoon, hoping to suppress some of the frustration and the strange, unwelcome attraction that wouldn't leave her alone no matter the arguments she had with herself.

"Everything that goes on in this house or on these grounds is my concern. You could have left a note." Though his voice was low, his tone indicated a clear underlying irritation.

"A note about what?"

"Where you were going, what time you'd be back." His exasperation came through distinctly.

"Are you always so nosy?"

"Are you always so sneaky?"

"Sneaky?" She stopped the cocoa preparation and turned to look at him squarely.

"You slipped out of the house tonight without a word to anyone about where you were going."

"I didn't realize I was under house arrest. I have things I have to do. And I did *not* 'slip out'."

"A million dollars is a lot to pay for an eight hour work day." He lifted the coffee cup that she hadn't noticed until that moment.

She felt a wave of indignation wash over her but she held her expression stoically. "This is not exactly a typical business arrangement."

A long silence followed her statement.

"You're right." His words took Jaden by surprise. "For instance, any other time I hire someone, I ask a lot of questions about them personally as well as professionally. I like to know about their families, their interests and hobbies. Their habits. I should have asked more questions about you. My primary concern at the time was that I hire the best therapist for Emily."

"You did."

"Yes, but I didn't think beyond the therapy sessions. I didn't fully consider all of the things you would mean to Emily besides being her therapist."

Jaden frowned, wishing she could see his face more clearly. "What do you mean? And what did you mean by 'their habits'?" She wasn't sure why but she felt offended by the comment now that she replayed it in her head.

"I expect Emily will get very attached to you. You are a young, intelligent, successful woman and Emily will likely look up to you."

"And that concerns you."

"Frankly, yes."

"Why?"

He came to his feet in one quick, fluid movement. "Because it's one in the morning and you're just getting home."

*Let him guess and assume about what you were doing. Make him a little crazy for a change.*

"I don't like that you're assuming the worst about me. I haven't given you a reason not to trust me."

He took a deep breath. "Okay, then, I have only one question for you. Where were you?"

She swallowed hard and tried to get a grip on the thoughts and responses that were stumbling over one another in their haste to make it to her mouth first.

"I was out, Adam. That's all you need to know." She added a flip of her hair to emphasize how casual she was about the whole thing.

"Jaden..." He took a deep breath and she saw him consciously work to unclench his fists. It struck her how personal her name sounded from his lips even when he was frustrated. That only increased her aggravation.

His voice slightly calmer, he spoke again. "It is important to me. At least tell me that you weren't—"

"What? That I wasn't...doing drugs? Drinking all night at the bars? That I'm not a call girl in the evenings when I'm not at the hospital? Smell my breath, Adam, if you don't believe me. Diet cola was the strongest thing I had tonight."

He came toward her quickly and she tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. He leaned in, braced his hands on the counter behind her on either side of her hips and took a deep breath.

She held hers. Having him suddenly this close was overwhelming and she fought to remember what they had been talking about.

He reminded her quickly. "How about all of the above?" His voice was lower now, huskier, and his eyes studied hers closely. "How about reassuring me that you wouldn't dream of doing any of those things?"

She didn't like that he doubted her. She wanted to stomp and yell and demand that he believe in her. But at the same time, this might just be perfect. She'd been off-balance since meeting him. He shook her up, as much as she hated it. Clearly her conduct during off-duty hours interested him, and worried him. This might be her chance to turn the tables a bit. Not that getting a man like Adam off-balance would be easy. But it would, very likely, be fun.

"I'll tell you this much. Drugs and prostitution aren't my thing."

He pressed closer and she felt the edge of the counter against her low back. Perhaps it was her decision to try to overwhelm him for a change, but for the first time, when he got close to her, dropped his voice low and looked at her like he wanted to make all of her fantasies come true, she reveled in it.

She found the scent of his cologne and the warmth of the arm braced on the counter beside her appealing rather than aggressive. In fact, this close, she found that his blue eyes, swirling with emotion, were impossible to resist. He was a passionate man. He cared about his daughter, his household, and stood firm in his convictions. It was his unflinching devotion that made her want to know more about him. For instance, what else stirred Adam Steele's passions?

"So tell me, what *is* your kind of thing?"

The huskiness in his voice made her nerve endings dance.

She studied his full lips for a long moment before her eyes traced his strong jaw shadowed with dark stubble. Eventually, she moved up slowly to again meet the midnight blue eyes that seemed to pierce straight through to her soul.

"Arrogant millionaires, evidently."

As his lips met hers, she momentarily stopped disliking anything about him.

Adam's lips were demanding as they moved, leading Jaden along on a stirring journey. But his mouth was warm and gentle, the edges of his lips rough from his late night whiskers.

She slid her arms around his neck and let her knees get just a little weak, let her little sigh escape and held him just a little tighter. There were so many things that she wanted to do and say and feel...

Then he pulled back.

She blinked as if someone had flipped on a fluorescent light in a previously pitch-black room. Slowly her eyes focused on Adam's face.

Adam. Lips. Kissing. Oh, crap.

"Jaden..." His voice was hoarse.

"Don't." She focused on the tiny, opaque button on his shirt collar. She resisted the urge to press her lips together, to relive the surprising, intimate moment for just one more second.

"Don't?"

*Don't ever stop kissing me.*

She was in big trouble.

"Let's just change the subject. In fact, I think I'll even change the scenery. I need to go."

She started toward the door, wishing she could turn the desire in her off as easily as she could the water boiling on the stove. She just had to get away.

"Will you tell me where you were tonight?"

She stopped short. His words were like being doused with a bucket of cold water, cooling every bit of passion she'd felt a moment ago. She whirled back to face him.

“That was what that was? Your way of getting an answer out of me?”

“No. That was my way of regaining control of this conversation.”

“I see.” She glared at him across the few feet that separated them. “Then I’ll remember to duck the next time we have an argument.”

If her comment riled him at all, he didn’t show it. In fact, he lifted a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “We could stop arguing if you would just be agreeable and cooperative.”

That heated her temper even further. “Agreeable *and* cooperative?” Her sarcasm was intentionally thick. “You’re asking a lot, aren’t you?”

“If the time we’ve spent together up until now is any indication, yes.”

*Keep your cool.* Yelling at him would accomplish nothing. Getting fired would hurt both her and Emily. Quitting was out of the question. He wouldn’t believe the truth. So she decided to give in to the temptation to increase his blood pressure to at least half the level hers was climbing to.

She crossed her arms and leaned back against the edge of the kitchen table. “Okay, let’s try this cooperative thing out. What do you want to know?”

He crossed his arms too and leaned back against the kitchen counter “What you were doing tonight.”

“But you already have a pretty good idea in mind what you believe I was doing.”

“You want me to just work off of that assumption then?”

She took a deep breath before giving him a smile. “As a matter of fact, I want you to think about exactly what you’ve been imagining all night.”

He looked incredibly irritated.

“Then I want you to add even more expensive liquor, louder music and less clothing.” She smiled again at his decidedly unamused expression as she pushed away from the table. “And *then* I want you to lie in bed tonight and try to sleep as those thoughts go through your head.”

Adam watched her cross the room, pick up her purse where she’d dropped it near the table and close the door behind her before he summoned any kind of reaction. It was a very profane word.

He braced his hands on the counter top and dropped his chin to his chest.

It had been so long since he’d kissed a woman. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d *ever* kissed a woman like he’d kissed Jaden. But, it was not even the kiss itself that unbalanced him. The mechanism was the same—lips touching, breaths mingling, awareness increasing with each heartbeat. It was how he felt during that kiss that set it apart. Adam couldn’t remember ever feeling the combination of hunger and satisfaction that he felt when he touched Jaden’s lips.

His original plan was to overwhelm *her*. Instead he was the one standing in the kitchen trying to remember his own name.

Jaden was the only person in his life to stand up to him, to tell him when he was wrong, to be straightforward with him. He knew it was a little unusual to find those things appealing. Instead, he should be angry and resentful of her. But in truth, he was relieved. He didn't have to guess with Jaden. He didn't have to read between the lines. And it made her all the more attractive to him.

So, like an idiot, he'd kissed her.

He shook his head in disgust as he climbed the staircase to his bedroom, loosening the buttons on his shirt as he went. He *would* be back in control tomorrow. Tomorrow, he would find Jaden and would convince himself that it was the dim lighting in the kitchen that made her look so irresistible and the lateness of the hour that made her voice so husky. He would wake up refreshed and realize that her hair was *not* the silkiest thing he'd ever touched and her body did *not* fit perfectly against his, and the passion he saw in her eyes was passion for her work and nothing more.

But maybe just for tonight he would let himself imagine having Jaden in his bed, moving against him as they made love, whispering to him in the dark.

Adam's eyes closed easily and he barely registered the cool softness of the sheets, the familiar creak of the mattress springs or the soothing sound of the tree leaves against his bedroom window. All he was truly aware of was that he was moments away from the fantasy he was allowing himself for this one night.

Only one thought intruded on his contented surrender to sleep.

He still didn't know where Jaden had been.

Jaden was good at a lot of things. As it turned out, one of those things was avoiding a man she didn't want to see, even in his own house.

Oh, sure, she saw him in passing. Even spoke to him twice. But Emily was present both times. Since her objective was to avoid being alone with Adam Steele, she felt rather good about the whole situation.

When she was summoned to Adam's office a week after the *thing* in the kitchen—the term she was using because *kiss* was way too intimate for anything that should be happening between her and Emily's father—she almost didn't go. Summoned was a polite word for what he did. He demanded, or better yet, *ordered* her to show up. Tony was sent upstairs to the gym with a sealed envelope while Jaden and Emily worked. Inside was a piece of Steele Enterprises letterhead with a hand written note saying simply, *Come to my office at two o'clock*. He hadn't signed it. Not that it could have been from anyone else. But at least he hadn't signed it *Mr. Steele*. Then again, there was no please, no reference to what he needed to see her about or even a question as to whether two o'clock was a good time or not. Sure Emily was with her tutor every day at two o'clock and Jaden was absolutely certain Adam had every minute of Emily's day entered into his digital day planner, but he could have considered that Jaden might have other plans. In the end, she went only to point that out to him.



“Adam, I think that...” She stopped five feet from his desk and stared.

He was without a tie for the first time since she’d met him and he was smiling broadly at her as he leaned back in his chair, seemingly completely relaxed.

That smile, after the kiss a few nights ago, was lethal.

“Hi, Jaden, thanks for coming.” He leaned forward to rest his forearms on his desk.

Embarrassingly, she had to clear her throat before replying. “What’s going on?”

“I just got off the phone with Emily’s math teacher. The grade on her exam yesterday was a B. She was consistently getting Cs there for a while. She’s very bright and got all As last year but she hasn’t been studying like she should. Now, it looks like things are turning around. I also talked with Emily this morning. She’s happy with her therapy sessions and thinks she’s slowly making progress. Things are going well all around. I’m very pleased”

He was praising *her*, Jaden realized, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about that. It was nice to see him smiling and yet, his happiness over the little bit of progress they had made was enough to make her wonder if he had doubted her abilities in the first place

“I’m just doing my job. And Emily’s bound to make progress with how hard she’s working.”

“Glad to hear it. I hope things continue to go as well.”

She wanted to tell him that of course they would and why would he think anything else, but she held back. There was no reason for her to take every comment the man made as a personal insult. Something about him made her edgy though she couldn’t say exactly why. It wasn’t that she disliked him or even felt that he disliked her. Quite the opposite, in fact. She just felt strangely off-balance when she was around him and that bothered her.

He continued speaking before she could answer him. “Along those lines, I’ve been doing some thinking and wanted to give you a copy of what I’ve put together.” He reached for the side drawer and extracted a plain, manila folder.

Jaden rolled her eyes. She was never going to use a manila folder again in her life.

When he opened it on his desktop, she could see that was one neatly typed page inside. Seemed like a huge waste of a folder.

“I should have done this initially, but at the same time, perhaps having some progress to base it on is good.”

She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Emily’s rehearsals for the play start next week.” He handed her the page and she scanned it quickly, her eyes widening as she read.

*Timeline: attend play practice without wheelchair, 1 week. Walk length of stage with cane, 2 weeks. Walk stage without cane, 3 weeks. complete entire play without limp, 4 weeks.*

"You've got to be kidding." She said it out loud but almost to herself. She was so amazed that she nearly forgot he was in the room.

"Kidding about what?"

She looked up, focusing on the man in front of her, even more astounded as she looked at his serious expression. "This is the timeline you expect me to keep with Emily?"

He frowned, puzzled. "Yes. I've informed the play director that Emily will be back to normal in four weeks." He leaned forward and gave her the look that she was sure many boardrooms and conference tables had seen. "Is that a problem?"

Jaden didn't even know where to begin with what she wanted and needed to say to him. "Adam, I... This is just..." She stopped and took a deep breath. "Yes." She handed the paper back to him.

"Yes? What do you mean?"

"Yes, this is a problem." She sighed. "You brought me here because of my expertise in physical therapy, particularly with children, and now you're going to have to let me use it. I appreciate that you are trying to be more involved and help Emily and me but this is not the way to do it."

"Why not? This is a plan. This is organized."

"Well, it is that," she agreed with a little shake of her head. "But I think that if we put too much pressure on Emily it might backfire. Four weeks isn't very long. Please, Adam, just trust me, here. I have Emily's best interest at heart."

He just looked at her for a long time and she began to squirm slightly.

"Fine," he answered finally. "I'll leave the time frame to you. But—" his tone was uncompromising as was his expression, "—she is supposed to be at practice next week. She says she feels self-conscious in her wheelchair. I want you to get her to the point where she doesn't need the chair to go to practice. That's pretty simple. I also think it would be good for her to be with her friends again. They miss her."

"I'm sure they do. And she misses them. But—" she couldn't keep from pointing out, "—the decision to have her complete her school work with a tutor here at home was made before I was brought on. As for the practices, I just want to be sure this is *her* idea."

"Why would it not be her idea?" His tone was sharp.

Jaden had to resist the urge to touch his hand. The idea that his daughter was struggling, physically and emotionally, with issues he couldn't control obviously bothered him deeply. "That's not what I'm saying," she protested. "If Emily wants to do the play and spend time with her friends then I think it's great. But she has to *want* to. Just like everything else. Ultimately it's up to her. I can't make her walk on that prosthesis and I can't make her care about the play. Neither can you."

"She has to care about something," he said, his voice gruff. "This is why I asked the school to hold auditions for the play before her surgery. It was ahead of when they normally hold tryouts but the school counselor agreed it would give her something to look forward to as she healed. I thought she'd be counting

down the days until rehearsals started. She used to be so popular. She was so social.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “I used to have a hard time keeping her home. She loved shopping with her friends and hanging out, watching movies. But she hasn’t seen her friends since her surgery. Why doesn’t she want to go out?”

“A life-threatening illness tends to change a person’s perspective.”

He stared at her, his jaw tight. “I don’t want my fourteen-year-old daughter to have a changed perspective. The only thing she should be worrying about at this age is learning her lines for the school play and if she’s going to have a pimple for school pictures.”

Jaden wanted to hug him. He was so protective of Emily. He cared so much. “You’re trying to force her to live the life she had before. But things are different now. That doesn’t mean that things are *bad*. She’s thinking about new things, bigger things than pimples. She’s growing up. It’s a little fast, but it’s okay.”

“No.” He stood from his chair and paced to the window. “She’s a kid. She’s going to be starting high school next year. High school is not the real world. There are no bills to pay or responsibilities other than doing your homework. I want her to have parties and football games and sleepovers and hours on the phone with her girlfriends. There’s plenty of time to be grown up. She deserves to have fun.”

“She can still have fun. But she’s never going to have a leg again, Adam. That’s done and it *does* change things.”

He spun around, his eyes narrowed. “Not if I can help it.”

She looked at him for a moment, taking in his defensive stance. If told he had to do battle with the world for his daughter, Jaden knew he would do it. She shook her head. There was no peace within him, however. No reassurance that he was a good father and that Emily would be fine.

She took a deep breath. *She* wanted to tell him everything was going to be okay. But she knew it wasn’t going to be okay on his terms. And until he got some new terms, it wasn’t going to be okay.

She also wanted to kiss him. Which was a bad idea.

“How long did the last therapist stay?”

He looked confused for a few seconds. “Eight days.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Eight days seems like a long time.”

After a moment’s pause, he tucked his hands into his pockets. “I know it seems that I’m being difficult.”

“And stubborn.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “A little stubborn.”

“And demanding.”

His eyes narrowed more. "I demand that my daughter gets better."

"She's already great. And she'll walk again."

"She needs to prove to herself that things can be the way they were."

"I don't know about the play." Jaden surrendered the argument for the time being. "But why don't you let her invite some friends over? Maybe she'll be more comfortable seeing them for the first time on her own turf."

"She hasn't had friends come over here much."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. She's just always gone to their houses instead."

"Gee, you don't suppose they don't want to come over here because of Emily's overprotective, intimidating father, do you?"

Adam raised an eyebrow. "You don't seem to find me intimidating."

"Yeah." She stepped forward, laid the timeline back in the center of the desk and headed for the door. "Good thing for all of us."

Jaden watched over Tony's shoulder as he used the computer mouse to jump over two barrels full of flesh eating acid, dodge six flaming balls of goo and arrive safely at the top of the castle to rescue the fair princess.

Tony swiveled in his chair, fixing Jaden with a huge grin as the computer screen flashed *High Score* repeatedly behind him.

"Okay, what did you want to ask me?"

She glanced back at the monitor once more and shook her head. "Wow. Sorry to interrupt."

Tony glanced at his watch. "Nah. I've been playing for over an hour. Probably time to do some real work."

As he gave her one of his best charming smiles, Jaden could see why there was a different woman's name nearly every week around the dinner table. Tony had the handsome part down pat but the sincerity was sorely lacking.

"Then I'll make my question quick." She watched Adam's brother lift his coffee cup to drink. "What's with your brother?"

Tony swallowed hard. "You call that a quick question?" He set his cup back on his desk.

Jaden dropped into the chair in front of Tony's desk and propped her feet up on the corner. "I'm ready."

"Maybe I should find out what you mean exactly?"

"He's difficult to figure out."

“On purpose.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgement of that likely truth. “I figure no one knows him as well as you do. Tell me about him.”

“His keeps miniature Snicker bars in the bottom left drawer of his desk.”

She smiled. “Not exactly what I meant. But interesting. Especially when the chocolate cravings hit.”

Tony swiveled his chair and propped his feet on the desk, mimicking Jaden’s pose. “What do you want to know?”

“Why is he giving me such a hard time?”

“In what way is he giving you a hard time?” Tony asked instead of answering her question.

Jaden wasn’t willing to admit that Adam had kissed her. That was making her just as crazy as everything else, but for some reason she didn’t want to share that with Tony. Maybe because, even though Adam had said it was to control the conversation, part of her hoped that it was more spontaneous than that.

“He’s constantly upset about something, it seems.”

“Adam likes things a certain way.” Tony shrugged. “His way.”

“But he wanted to hire me.”

“Yes.”

“So why is he trying to make me mad?”

Tony chuckled. “I’m not sure he’s trying. I think it’s just his gift.”

Jaden felt herself smile. She thought that Adam *did* try to make her mad, or crazy, or at least didn’t care when he did.

“Okay, I’m probably not the only one he frustrates.”

Tony lifted his cup in a salute of agreement.

“Like the other therapists,” she said. “I know them all personally. In fact, I hired two of them. I know they’re good. Great, in fact. Why did he fire them? Did one of them smell bad? Show up late? Yell at Emily?”

Tony definitely looked amused. “No. Nothing like that.”

“They just played cards with Emily instead of having therapy sessions?”

He chuckled. “No. They just didn’t make any progress.”

“He hardly gave them a chance,” Jaden protested.

“Adam had very specific ideas about how things should go.”

“With Emily’s therapy?”

“With everything.”

Jaden had no trouble believing that. “The other therapists didn’t do things exactly according to Adam’s plan and he fired them.”

“Yep.”

“But I haven’t done things at all according to Adam’s plan and I’m still here.”

Tony lifted a shoulder. “Something about you has convinced him that you’re the one that should stay.”

Jaden’s heart thudded once hard, then lodged in her throat. Oh, Lord. In that one sentence, Tony had complicated her life more than he could ever imagine.

Adam had kissed her. She’d responded. There was no denying either of those facts.

She’d defied him. A lot. She still had her job. There was also no denying either of those facts.

Did she still have her job because Adam thought she was going to sleep with him? If she did sleep with him, which of course was something she didn’t seem to be able to avoid thinking about, and then got a check for one million dollars, would she be able to face herself in the mirror? Ever again?

No. The million dollars was for Emily’s rehab. If Emily didn’t walk again, Jaden didn’t get paid. It had nothing to do with kissing or sex or any combination thereof.

And by far the best way to be sure about that was not to do any more kissing. Or anything else.

“Adam has had a lot of people disappoint him,” Tony said, interrupting Jaden’s riotous thoughts.

“Oh?” That bothered her. Crazy as it was.

Tony almost looked sheepish as he said, “Definitely.”

“Are you on that list?”

“Unintentionally, of course.”

“There have been people who have disappointed him on purpose?”

“If not on purpose, at least without remorse.”

This sounded like it had the potential to be juicy. “Do go on.” *Please*. Maybe knowing more about Adam would make him easier to understand. Or at least make it easier to not want to strangle him.

“It started with our parents. Then our grandparents. And, of course, Emily’s mom.”

Jaden tried not to sit up all of a sudden and give away how eager she was to hear about this woman. She shifted casually in her chair instead. “What about her?”

“She left Emily and Adam when Emily was only about a month old.”

“Why?” Jaden couldn’t imagine someone doing something like that.

“She didn’t want to be a mother.”

“So, why...”

“The pregnancy wasn’t planned. In fact, from what Adam’s said, they were about as protected against it as they could get other than using surgical procedures. Linda knew that children would get in her way,” Tony went on. “They would take some of the money, and the spotlight, away from her. She was angry from the first minute she knew she was pregnant. She resented the changes in her body, the changes in her habits that pregnancy required. I kept hoping she would feel differently once she actually had the baby but it was even worse then. She completely ignored Emily. She wouldn’t feed her, change her, hold her, nothing.”

Jaden's stomach hurt listening to Tony. She didn't have children of her own and yet she still could not fathom acting the way Tony was describing.

He went on, "For the first month we thought it was postpartum depression and Adam took her to doctor after doctor. Finally, a psychiatrist confirmed that Linda was of sound mind and just didn't want Emily. Adam told her to get out and to never come back. She agreed to terminate her parental rights."

Jaden was stunned. Her heart hurt too. Adam was fiercely loving and protective of his daughter. He had to be. Not even her own mother had taken care of her and he feared for her safety, physically and emotionally.

"I guess that explains a few things," she finally said gruffly. "I can see why Adam is so protective of Emily."

"That's just who he is, Jaden. Adam takes care of people. He doesn't know any other way to be." Something in Tony's tone of voice brought her attention back fully to him.

She watched as Tony fiddled with the pen lying on his desk. "You know," she said carefully. "I overheard you talking with the investors in the den the other day. I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I was impressed. You were very professional and knowledgeable. It seemed as though *you* ran the company. But outside of meetings and negotiations, you hang back, get into trouble, act like a playboy. It's because it allows Adam to feel that he's taking care of you, right? But it's just an act."

"Adam's given his whole life up for me and Emily," Tony said quietly, his eyes back on the pen that was engraved with the Steele Enterprises logo. "I owe him a lot. If helping me out of trouble makes him happy, then a bent fender or a broken heart here and there is easy enough."

"Wait a minute. You're telling me that you date women specifically so you can break up with them and have Adam lecture you?"

Tony shrugged. "Some of them."

"That's a little warped, Tony."

He gave her a self-deprecating grin. "That's my life."

"I think it's great that you care about your brother, but I don't think cleaning up all of your messes is what will make him happy. I think that Adam needs other people as much as anyone," Jaden said. She took a deep breath. "He has gaps in his life too, Tony. We all do. I think friendship and someone to shoot basketball with or talk business with is what he *really* wants from you. He just doesn't know how to ask."

"You think I should start filling in some of the gaps?"

Jaden smiled and nodded. "Yes. I think Adam would love to have a brother and business partner who is equally involved in *his* life."

Tony looked up from rolling the pen back and forth between his two forefingers. The pen stopped. "Okay, Jaden. I'll take the business and brother gaps. Which gaps are *you* going to fill?"

She turned away quickly. “See you later, Tony.” Then she left the room. Because she had no idea how to answer his question.

It took two days for him to work up his courage, but finally Adam found himself standing in the doorway to the gym. He was on a mission to find an escape. He wanted to eradicate all of the thoughts and feelings that Jaden had managed to stir up in the short time she had been in his life. But his office was too quiet and he could hear the dull thump of rock music coming through the floor from the second level where Jaden and Emily worked. He would swear he could hear the echoes of Jaden’s voice urging him to get involved and show interest and encourage his daughter. And, of course, there was the kitchen. He had to only step through the doorway and he could literally feel Jaden’s lips on his own.

So he had run. For the second time in one day. Three miles down the road and three miles back.

“Hi.”

Adam was jerked back to the second floor hallway where he stood watching Jaden and Emily exercise. Now silence filled the air and two pairs of eyes focused on him from the exercise mat.

“Hi,” he returned hesitantly.

Jaden frowned and rose from the table. “Is everything okay?”

Adam mentally shook himself.

“Of course. How’s everything up here?” He stepped through the doorway and gave his daughter a big grin. “Come on now. I’ve worked up more of a sweat than you have. You better get moving.”

“You went running?” Emily asked with a puzzled grin, tossing the ankle weights she had been using to the side.

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t you go this morning?”

His daughter was watching him carefully, alerted that something was amiss if his schedule had changed so drastically overnight. Adam gave her his best indifferent shrug and said, “I didn’t go as far as I wanted to this morning.” *Like Siberia or Timbuktu or just about anywhere that I don’t have to face you two. Maybe a small island somewhere in the Pacific where I wouldn’t have any responsibilities or expectations or people to disappoint.*

“Oh.” Emily didn’t look convinced but she let it go, scooting to the edge of the mat and reaching for her crutches. “What’s next?” she asked Jaden.

Jaden was still watching him and Adam felt that if he looked at her directly she would read his thoughts. Instead he continued studying his daughter, observing her improved strength as she rose from the table and propped the crutches under her arms. Emily’s natural athletic grace had not diminished even in the absence of one leg.



“Let’s get that leg on for a bit,” Jaden told her, pulling her attention away from Adam only partly. She continued to keep him in the corner of her eye and Adam was careful to avoid eye contact.

Emily went to the corner of the room near the parallel bars and dropped onto the straight-backed chair that faced the bars. She took her prosthesis from its resting place against the wall and swung it around in front of her.

Adam was impressed by the deftness with which she handled the artificial limb. He vaguely recalled the prosthetist instructing them how to pull the sock on over the end of Emily’s leg, positioning the prosthesis correctly, pressing her leg down into it... But he had been so numb that he remembered nothing specific about the process. Now, though, his daughter sat with two legs, looking ready to conquer the world.

“Come on.”

Adam tore his eyes from the sight of his daughter’s smile to focus on the face that had been haunting his dreams at night.

“What?”

“Come help her. She’s doing great.”

Jaden moved toward Emily, and Adam understood that she expected him to follow. He did so, but stopped ten feet from the shining silver bars where Emily practiced standing.

“You steady her hips,” Jaden told him. She crossed her arms and stood resolutely where she was next to Emily but outside the bars and plainly out of position to be of assistance.

“Why don’t I watch this time?” Adam asked, his feet rooted to the wooden floor.

“Just get in there and steady her hips,” Jaden told him. “Em can tell you what to do from there.”

“Come on, Dad, I just need a little boost,” Emily encouraged.

The expression on Emily’s face reminded Adam of how she had looked the night two years ago when she had led him to the far table in the gymnasium to show him the first place ribbon that had been placed on her science project. It was the same look that he had seen when she had presented him with the homemade Father’s Day present when she was five.

How could he deny her?

“Okay, but you’ve got to coach me,” he told her, ducking under the bar and positioning himself in front of her between the two bars she would hold on to for support.

“Just put your hands on my hips. You don’t have to lift me up,” Emily told him. “Just kind-of steady me once I’m up. I have to try to put weight on this leg and I’m a little wobbly.”

Adam swallowed hard but did as she instructed.

“It’s fitting kind-of tight,” Emily said to Jaden.

“Probably swollen,” Jaden told her. “We worked pretty hard yesterday and last night. Did you prop it up?”

“Not for very long,” Emily admitted.

“Did you have it wrapped?” Jaden asked.

Emily bit her lip and shook her head.

Jaden sighed. “There you go. Give it a try anyway and we’ll see what happens.”

“Okay, Dad, on three.” Emily put one hand on each bar and tightening her grip. She shifted so that her feet were placed correctly and took a deep breath. “One, two, three.”

Emily pulled with her arms and pushed with her legs as she stood.

Adam gripped her hips, his whole body tense.

“Ow,” Emily complained quietly, almost to herself. She winced as she leaned to her left, putting more weight onto the prosthesis.

“Honey?” Adam asked anxiously, trying to see her face.

Emily just shook her head as she continued to look down at her legs. She shifted again and picked the artificial foot up from the floor. Adam grasped her more firmly.

“Dad, not so hard.”

“Sorry,” Adam muttered, trying to convince his hands to lessen their pressure.

Emily put her foot back down and leaned farther to the left.

“Ow!”

Emily’s hips lurched backward as she quickly took her weight off the left side. Adam felt his grip slip off of her nylon shorts and he watched as she plopped back into the chair behind her.

“Em?”

She looked up at him. “I’m okay. It’s just fitting tight today.”

He pulled in a breath and made a quick decision. He ducked under the bar and escaped to about fifteen feet away. At that distance, he turned back. Emily was rubbing her knee. Jaden was watching him. She raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

“I, um, need to get in the shower,” he said, gesturing toward the door through which he longed to flee.

“Okay,” Jaden said.

Adam saw clearly that she was not fooled. Jaden knew that he couldn’t handle it.

“Thanks, Dad,” Emily said, glancing up. She even gave him a little smile.

“Sure thing, kiddo.”

Adam kept his feet from sprinting to the door. He was in the middle of the landing on his way to his room when he heard Jaden’s voice.

“Can I talk to you?”

Adam stopped. He wanted to say no. He wanted to claim that he was in a hurry. But, Jaden would probably not hesitate to follow him into the shower to make her point—whatever it was this time. And,

while the thought of having her in his shower was not exactly unappealing, Adam knew he had to face her right now, right here.

“Are you all right?”

Adam turned, surprised by the sensitivity he heard in her voice. He had expected to be reprimanded. He hadn’t anticipated understanding.

“I’m fine.”

“You did all right today.”

“Do you think it will get easier?”

“Sure. It’s tough at first, for everyone. It’s hard to see her struggling and hurting. But it will get better the more you’re around. Come up anytime. The more you—”

“I mean, for her.” He didn’t care about himself. All he wanted, all he’d ever wanted, was for Emily to be happy.

Jaden was quiet for a long moment. Slowly she nodded. “It’s already getting easier for her. You have to understand that it’s not just a physical issue. It’s emotional and mental too. But I think she’s getting closer every day.”

He gave a humorless laugh. “I can’t even hold her up when she tries to stand.”

“She doesn’t need you to hold her up, Adam,” Jaden said. Her voice was quiet but filled with conviction. “She needs to know that she’s the same girl she’s always been even with part of her leg missing. She needs to know that having that prosthesis doesn’t change what’s inside of her. If she knows that, she’ll be able to hold *herself* up.”

Adam swallowed with some difficulty. “Of course she’s the same girl.”

“If you believe that, then don’t be afraid of her.”

Jaden stepped forward and Adam was disconcerted when he felt her hand touch his forearm. “You’re already doing the most important thing for her, Adam.” She squeezed his arm. “All Emily needs is to know that there is someone who will love her no matter what. That’s what we all really need.”

Then, before he could hug her—or more—she turned and went back into the gym.

Which was probably a good thing, though he couldn’t quite remember why.

## Chapter Six

Jaden knew her bare feet wouldn't make any sound on the hardwood floors of the hallway or on the tile in the kitchen but she tread lightly anyway. If no one heard her coming, she would still have the option of chickening out and going out the front door and around to her apartment that way. Knowing it would make Adam happy to have Emily doing something she used to like to do, Jaden had urged her to go to a friend's tonight. She didn't stop and analyze why Adam being happy mattered so much to her. Tony was also out for the evening. So no one even knew she was still in the house.

She stopped one foot from the kitchen doorway and took a deep breath. It was nine o'clock and she would bet all of her money, what little there was, that Adam was sitting at the kitchen table by himself.

This was stupid. She should just go back upstairs. But she couldn't forget the look on his face after Emily's therapy session. She had to make sure he was okay, stupid or not.

"Hi."

Adam turned, his surprise evident. "Hi."

Her eyes noted the book, the glass of milk and the sandwich in front of him. "Peanut butter sandwiches are always good, but they're best late at night."

"Grape or strawberry?" he asked as he stood, flipping the novel shut.

"Excuse me?"

"The jelly? Grape or strawberry?"

"I prefer honey." She finally stepped fully into the kitchen. "I can get it myself."

He watched her for a moment longer than she thought necessary to register her comment. "Honey. That fits." He went to the cupboard by the stove and began extracting ingredients, including a jar of honey.

"What do you mean 'that fits'?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Unique but still sweet," he said not looking at her.

The comment was so unexpected, and made her feel so good, she couldn't have come up with an appropriate response if her life depended on it. She chose to let it go instead.

She settled herself at the table and enjoyed watching him, then tried to stop enjoying it. She didn't doubt for a moment that their attraction was mutual, but that didn't mean she should act on it. Or let him act on it. She should just ignore it. But she couldn't.

She was attracted to Adam Steele. And it wasn't going away.

"I would never have guessed that you would know how to make peanut butter sandwiches," she said, opting to ignore the attraction if she couldn't completely deny it.

"You consider me more the bologna type, I suppose."

Jaden giggled. She couldn't believe it. She never blushed and she hadn't giggled since she was ten. Adam had the ability to make her do both.

"I was thinking more prime rib and lobster. And I would expect that you are usually served rather than being the server."

Adam was generous with the honey and it seemed to take all of his concentration for a moment to get it spread evenly.

"Tony liked peanut butter better than lobster. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that he still does."

"You made Tony peanut butter sandwiches?" She accepted the plate that Adam brought to the table. He had cut the sandwich diagonally twice making four perfect triangles of bread. He set a glass of milk in front of her a moment later, then returned to the stove and filled the teakettle. He seemed to do it without much thought, but she couldn't help but be warmed by the idea that he was doing it all for her.

"Tony went through a phase when he was nine where he ate peanut butter and jelly every day for four months."

She smiled. "And you were in charge of cooking?"

He gave her an offended look. "I certainly was. And I'll have you know that making peanut butter and jelly every day was a complete waste of my culinary talents."

"You're kidding. What's your specialty?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Chicken parmesan."

She stopped with her second peanut butter and honey triangle partway to her mouth. "Seriously?"

"Of course. Cooking is pretty easy if you can read and have taste buds."

Jaden felt the trickle of honey on her thumb but did not look away from him. "You did a lot of cooking?"

"I did all the cooking. The laundry, cleaned the house, helped Tony with homework."

"Wow, your mom had it good."

His expression tightened. "Maybe. I wouldn't know. She wasn't around."

"Oh." She realized that she hadn't thought about Adam being anything other than the successful businessman and devoted father he was now. But he had been a kid. Who had a mom and a dad... At least, she assumed he had. Had they died? Had his mom abandoned him? She had an intense urge to know absolutely everything about him. Which was crazy. And pointless. Why should she care how Adam had spent his childhood? It was Emily's childhood that she should be concerned with. "Where was she?" she asked anyway.

"When they first left, it was Egypt."

“They?”

“She left to be with my father.”

“Who was Egyptian?”

He gave her half a smile. “He’s an archeologist.”

“Ah.” She knew the basics of archeology, thought she’d certainly never known one personally. “I assume he was excavating something.”

“A major find.”

“Like what?”

He almost smiled again. “Every find was a major find. To him.”

“And you and Tony stayed home.”

“Yep.”

“But surely not alone.”

“We came to live with my grandparents.”

“Then your grandmother had it good with you cooking and everything.”

“One month after we moved in, my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. My grandmother chose to care for him here at home. It drained her, physically and emotionally. Tony and I were on our own.” He shrugged. “Cooking, and everything else, was a matter of necessity. After two weeks of TV dinners and having no clean socks for school I realized that somebody had to do something.”

“Now *that* fits my image of you.” She hoped to ease the frown lines that dug into his forehead. “You are definitely someone who takes care of things.” She meant the statement as a compliment but Adam didn’t exactly look as if he appreciated it. She added, “You take care of people all the time, don’t you?”

“I have to.”

“You’ve done a good job.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Do you resent it?”

Jaden almost wished she could take the statement back. Adam’s jaw tightened and he stared into his milk glass.

“Of course not. Tony is my brother. And Emily is my daughter. I don’t resent either of them.”

“You’re sure?” Something in Adam’s denial didn’t ring true. He answered quickly, almost too quickly, as if he was trying to defend himself. “Because it would be natural to wish sometimes that you didn’t have to be so responsible for someone else.”

“I think it’s natural to care about people, Jaden. I think it’s natural to take care of the people who matter to you. Regardless of what you have to give up.”

If he hadn’t added the last sentence, she would have let it go. “What kind of things have you given up?”

The milk glass was very interesting to him again and for half a minute she wasn't sure she was going to get an answer.

"I gave up almost everything that a normal high school boy would do. Tony was three years younger and I needed to be there with him after school and on the weekends. I didn't play football or go on dates. Things like that."

"But you wanted to?"

"Of course." His eyes finally came back to hers. "In fact, I think it makes me less tolerant of him even now."

It was a huge confession and she knew it. Adam Steele did not admit to being less than perfect and it was clear that he felt his bitterness toward his brother was an imperfection.

"Did you want to star in the school play?"

Adam blew out a long breath. He nodded. "Yes."

"And you want Emily to know what it feels like now?"

"I want her to know what it's like to be a kid, to experience those normal things that I missed. Now, the cancer has changed some of that. But I still want her to be happy and have a million good memories to look back on."

Jaden finally replaced the sandwich on the plate and wiped her sticky hands on the napkin by her glass. "Adam, you do realize, don't you, that Emily has to make her own memories? Success and joy come in lots of forms."

"She's a kid, Jaden. Kids don't always know what they want and they often make bad choices. Part of my job as her parent is to help her with those choices."

She was so curious about him, his past, his family, events that had formed him. It should have been a huge red flag. But she continued the conversation anyway. "You've turned out good even without them there, guiding you."

"But they should have been there, guiding me."

"We can't expect other people to supply all our needs, Adam. Just like we can't expect to be everything to the people around us."

"Sometimes we don't have a choice," he said. "Sometimes we *are* all somebody has."

Adam wasn't sure how Jaden had managed to get so close to things he didn't want to talk about and yet, here he was, sitting and talking, making no effort to leave or change the subject. Stranger still, he didn't mind. It was uncomfortable, but not horrible.

"Tell me what happened with your parents," Jaden said.

He watched her lick a spot of honey from her thumb. It was far more interesting than talking about his childhood.

"After my mom got pregnant, my dad tried to teach at the university and settle down, but he was always restless. Finally, when Tony was seven and I was ten, Mom told Dad to go. She told him he should go and dig and be happy. He left for Egypt and she stayed behind to raise us."

"They didn't get divorced or anything?"

"No. In fact they were so in love that my mother was miserable without him. Finally, my grandmother told her to go and be with him and that they would take us in. I'm not sure my mom even blinked before she agreed."

He paused and picked up his milk glass but found it empty. Instead he took a long swig of his coffee. It had been a long time since he'd talked about himself to someone. It had been a long time since anyone had been interested in him personally. He stood and crossed to the coffeepot in an attempt to separate himself, if only momentarily, from the woman who somehow managed to pull so many words and feelings and memories from him.

"Wow," Jaden finally said as Adam refilled his coffee cup. "Where are your parents now?"

The teapot whistled and he retrieved it from the burner and filled Jaden's cup. He brought it to her as he answered, "Israel, I think. Somewhere over there. They move around a lot."

"Thanks." She accepted the mug from him and began stirring. "Are you angry they left?"

He focused on the steam rising from his cup. "Yes. I can't imagine a parent leaving a child."

"We all make mistakes. It's human nature."

"That doesn't make it all right. And we should try to correct our mistakes, shouldn't we?"

"Does that make it all right, then?"

"It helps," he said.

"I think sometimes good intentions matter more than good decisions." She smiled. "At least, that's what I tell myself."

Adam felt more than his eyes drawn to the woman across the table. Something in her voice made him believe that he could spend forever in the kitchen listening to her.

"It's a little tough on a guy's ego when his mom can just hop on a plane and leave without him." He tried to make light of the situation.

"Oh, Adam, I don't think your ego suffered much." She laughed easily, the husky sound filling the room.

He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face in response. Jaden Monroe was a pleasant distraction from melancholy thoughts. "You think I'm pretty sure of myself, is that it?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. You are sure of yourself, your decisions, your opinions, your attitudes, your—"

"Okay, I get the picture. You think I'm arrogant."

"Yes, and stubborn."

He chuckled. "You would know about that."



They drifted into companionable silence, each still smiling as they lifted their cups and sipped.

“Have you always known you wanted to be a physical therapist?”

Adam discovered that he wanted to know about her. He wasn't sure if it was to even the score from disclosing so much about himself or because he found her so captivating. He told himself it was a little of both.

Jaden's eyes focused on the bouquet of lilies in the center of the table and a soft smile touched her mouth.

“Ever since I made Lauren MacIntosh cry in seventh grade.”

“How did that work exactly?” He looked at her smiling fondly at the memory and found himself completely bewitched.

“She was flirting with my boyfriend,” Jaden said. “She was sitting there batting her big brown eyes at him and he was stumbling all over himself to open the door for her.”

“So you made her cry?” Adam couldn't help his grin as he watched Jaden. She was smiling and not looking sorry in the least.

“I marched up to her after class and announced that she had better keep her hands off my guy. She stared at me for a few seconds and then these huge tears started streaming down her face. I felt horrible, of course, and I tried to console her. Then she laughed. I had no idea what to do. I asked her if she was crazy. She said no, she was happy.”

“Happy that you yelled at her or happy about the guy?”

Jaden laughed. “Neither. I was the first person to ever be jealous of her. I was the first person to ever consider her a true threat. She was in a wheelchair, but I treated her like any other girl who was flirting with my boyfriend. That touched her and we were friends from that day on.”

“Who got the guy?”

Jaden grinned broadly at him. “I don't even remember his last name. His first name was Roy. I think.”

Adam laughed out loud at that. “So, you didn't keep the boyfriend, but you got started on your career.”

She nodded. “I learned a lot helping Lauren and I met some other kids through a club she was a part of. Those kids always impressed me. They didn't have all of the physical abilities I did, but they had a lot of things I didn't.”

“Such as?”

“True, do-anything-for-you friends, incredible internal motivation, confidence that who they were wasn't about how they looked or what they could physically do, but also the ability to do more physically than a lot of people assumed.” Her eyes were shining with enthusiasm as she talked. “That's what I really loved. Surprising people, including myself, with the amazing ability of the human body to compensate and overcome disabilities and the even more amazing ability of the human spirit.”

Adam wanted to keep her talking. He loved her voice, the look in her eyes and the few stolen moments where they were just a man and a woman getting to know one another.

"If physical therapy is the perfect job for you," he said, "Why were you working as a bartender when I found you?"

"Tony didn't research that?" she asked.

"If he did, he didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask?"

"I didn't care."

She looked at him for a several seconds. "You didn't?"

"You were the best for Emily. That's all that mattered."

"Why does it matter now?"

It was his turn to think for a minute. "It doesn't," he finally admitted. "I was just curious."

She gave him a little smile. "Then in that case, I'll tell you." She got up to refill her cup. "I resigned. The plan was for that to be temporary." She turned to face him and leaned against the counter. "But then I threw my cell phone at my boss, gave him a black eye, and ended up fired...forever. Then I marched into a public ceremony and called the philanthropist of the year an asshole. Which means no one else will ever hire me." She shrugged. "Except you, of course."

Adam wasn't sure what to say, or do. Blinking seemed to be all he could manage.

"I can't believe you didn't hear about it."

He was thinking the same thing. "I've been...distracted," he said as explanation.

"Still, you must know Dan McCormick. Surely you have acquaintances in common."

"Dan McCormick?" A thought occurred to him. He'd heard Dan had been named something-of-the-year. "Dan's the asshole?"

"Oh, you have no idea," she said emphatically.

"But he was the one you publicly denounced?"

She nodded and sipped from her cup, watching him process what she'd told him.

"Wow."

"Did you know that Dan and I were engaged?"

He stopped with his cup partway to his mouth. "You were engaged to Dan McCormick?"

"How did you know that I was the major fundraiser for the rehab wing at the hospital and came up a million dollars short but *not* know that the million was supposed to be my wedding present from Dan and when we broke up he took the money with him?"

The words, and their meaning, seemed to take an extremely long time to sink in. "Apparently Tony isn't as good at research as I thought he was."

She smiled and sipped again. It seemed she was almost enjoying his shock.

“You marched into the ceremony where he was named Philanthropist of the Year because of the breakup?”

Her eyebrows rose. “I wasn’t at that party because of the breakup.” She looked at him closer, her eyes narrowed. “You think I stormed in there in some jealous fit, or in some poorly thought out attempt to get him back or something?”

It was completely ridiculous that he was relieved when she denied exactly what he’d been wondering about. It didn’t matter to him one way or the other if she was still hung up on Dan. Or at least, it shouldn’t. “Calling a man an asshole, especially in front of esteemed friends and colleagues, would not be the most effective way to say ‘please come back to me’.”

She grinned and Adam found it contagious.

“You want the whole story?”

Did he? He shouldn’t. It shouldn’t matter. Besides, he had stacks of other things to do on his desk. But there was no way he was leaving this room without knowing what had happened between Jaden and Dan. “Definitely.”

Jaden came back to the table and sat, crossing one gorgeous leg over the other and getting comfortable. “After I broke up with Dan, he pulled the funding for the new rehab wing.”

Adam nodded.

“But that wasn’t enough. He had to make it even worse for me. He went to my boss and told him that the hospital could have the money, as long as I no longer worked for them. And I couldn’t be hired back for at least a year.”

Adam felt his eyebrows rise. “So you quit.”

She shrugged. “I’d planned to resign for a year and then come back. But my boss made the mistake of asking why I couldn’t have just kept putting out for Dan until the building was done.”

“Hence the cell phone in his eye?” Adam couldn’t fault her. Throwing objects at other people wasn’t particularly professional, or even mature for that matter, but in this case, her boss was probably lucky that was all that happened.

“Right. It was a good shot too.” She looked anything but contrite. “I thought everything was all right. Construction started again, plans were moving ahead. Then I got a letter from Dan. It said that he was holding back the money he still planned to give.”

Her eyes dropped to her cup and she was definitely no longer smiling.

“What did he want?” Adam asked, feeling his gut clench with dislike for the man before even knowing what he’d done.

“He said he’d give the one million only if I agreed to break off all contact with his son, Cody.”

“Why?”

"Because he could." She shrugged. "To hurt me, mostly. But he said because he was concerned about how my relationship with Cody would adversely affect his own relationship with Cody. Cody was blaming him for not making it work out with me and begging him to convince me to come back."

"So..." Adam prompted, needing to hear the rest.

She looked up at him. "I couldn't do it. Even though it meant the wing wouldn't be finished. Even though it meant I was letting everyone down, I just couldn't break all contact with Cody."

"You loved him."

"I *love* him. Present tense," Jaden said. "I was a part of his life for five years. We thought it was going to be forever. You don't just sign off on someone like that. You can't put a dollar value on a human relationship."

She said it with such conviction, Adam felt his heart kick against his ribs. She believed in standing by the people she loved. How refreshing.

"It was probably selfish, but I said no. Dan pulled the funding." She ducked her head, as if embarrassed. "Which is why it still isn't done and why I'm so glad you came to the rescue."

"And why you called him an asshole at his ceremony."

Her eyes flashed as she looked up. "Philanthropist of the Year. Can you believe that? After doing that?"

"You did the right thing."

"You think so? Because I thought calling him a spineless, manipulative rat bastard might have been better."

Adam chuckled, amazed that she could find humor in the situation. "I mean about refusing to turn your back on Cody."

Jaden shrugged a shoulder. "I know. But every time I drive past that partly finished building I feel guilty. There were a lot of people affected by my decision. And when I miss work, I wonder if I made the right choice, if I could still be there if I'd done things differently."

"If you'd stayed with Dan?" Adam asked with irritation. He hated the idea of Jaden settling for something less than she wanted. Almost as much as he hated the idea of her with another man.

"No." She sighed. "That wouldn't have been the right thing to do. I know that. I just..." She looked up at him with a sheepish grin. "I miss the kids, the work, the reward."

"That's why you're the best choice for Emily."

"Because I was available?"

He smiled. "Because you truly care. Your work isn't just a job."

She just nodded, but she looked pleased with his observation.

To lighten the intimate moment, Adam chuckled. "You know, considering some of our disagreements, I'm thinking I'm lucky I haven't had a cell phone, or a stapler, or something heavier thrown at me."

“It doesn’t surprise you that I did that, does it?”

He tread carefully. “You have to admit that I’ve seen some displays of your emotions since I’ve known you.”

“And you think that I’m always like that?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No. Except for the cell phone incident. Oh, and yelling at Dan in front of a roomful of people in evening gowns and tuxedos. And how I’ve been here. Honestly this is unusual for me.” She seemed bemused and a little annoyed by it.

He chuckled. He couldn’t help it. Her eyes narrowed at the sound but he didn’t care.

Jaden was passionate, but it was clear that she prided herself on controlling and channeling that passion. When it took over and affected decisions, it made her uncomfortable. It might not make him an altruistic person, but he liked Jaden Monroe a little ruffled. Especially if it had anything to do with him. He liked that this job was different for her. She was certainly nothing like any other employee he’d ever had. Or any other woman he’d ever...*anything* with.

“What does that mean?” he asked, wanting to see if she would admit that this situation had her worked up. Because he certainly was.

She opened her mouth. Then looked into her cup. She drank from it, swallowed, set it down and said, “It probably means that I need more sleep.” Jaden pushed her chair back from the table and stood. “I’d better get to bed.”

Jaden took her cup to the sink. On her way across the tile she spoke again. “I like this getting along better. I don’t think I’d have enough energy to fight with you every night.”

“Ah, I’m wearing you down. Good. Maybe I’ll start getting my way around here after all. I’d almost given up.” He went to stand beside her as he also placed his cup in the sink.

He was very aware that they stood in the same spot that they had on the night they had kissed. He found his gaze drawn to her full lips. The bright pink lipstick had been transferred to the rim of her mug but a faint stain of color remained. Her tongue darted out and wet her bottom lip and he was unable to look away.

“Ha. I’ve never met anyone more used to getting his own way.” She followed her quip with a telltale nervous laugh and was staring into the sink rather than looking at him. “Don’t worry. I’m only here temporarily. Eventually you’ll have your castle back and you can run it however you want to.”

He knew that Jaden was teasing him and he was glad to know that she felt comfortable enough to do so. He couldn’t help but ask, “Am I really that bad?”

She pivoted and tipped her head back to look up at him. They stood only a few inches apart and he watched her face carefully.

“I think there may be hope for you.” Her voice had dropped to a huskier tone.

“Does that mean we’re friends now?” He barely resisted touching her cheek.

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re assuming a lot from one peanut butter sandwich, aren’t you?”

He noticed the slight tug at the corner of her mouth. “Yes. For instance...” He leaned in until he could smell her shampoo, and under that, the scent of her skin. “I assume that you want to know more about me, and that you think I’ve done a good job with Emily.” His eyes traced her face from her forehead to her chin. She was breathing a little faster and her cheeks were pink. “Even more, I assume that you are very attracted to me, that you think about me during the day at the strangest times and that you think about me at night—which isn’t strange at all.”

Part of her wanted to pull back and deny the truth. He could see it in her eyes. But part of her, a bigger part, a stronger part, wanted to press closer and finally discover all of the things they’d both been imagining.

She finally spoke. “You should be more careful with your assumptions.”

“I probably should. For instance, I shouldn’t assume that you like me just because you want to make love to me, right?”

Something flickered in her eyes. Maybe it was just surprise that he’d said out loud what they both knew was true. But he thought it was something more.

“And I probably shouldn’t assume that you enjoyed the kissing the other night as much as I did.”

She stared at him for several heartbeats. “I...well, it’s not... I...” She stopped and sighed, turning her eyes to the ceiling. “I do like you, Adam. You’re very frustrating, but I can’t help but like a father who cares so much about his daughter.” She failed to comment on the kissing.

Liking him because of his daughter wasn’t completely satisfying but it was a start. He reached up and cupped the back of her neck with one hand, gently tugging her closer. Her eyes widened, but she stepped toward him. A very good sign. That he fully intended to take advantage of.

“You like me,” he said, stroking his thumb along the side of her neck. He was gratified to see her shiver under his touch. “And you like my peanut butter and honey sandwiches.”

Her lips parted and her breathing sped up as she looked up at him, unblinking.

“I’m very interested in what else you like.” He lowered his head and brushed his lips over the spot on her neck where his thumb had been resting. “For instance, do you like this?” he said near her ear.

She didn’t reply, but her eyes closed and she tipped her head to give him better access. He smiled. He put his other hand on her hip and pulled her close, until they were belly to belly. She certainly didn’t protest.

“Do you like soft kisses?” He pressed his lips to hers gently.

Her hands went to his shoulders and she kissed him back, making his heart thump in his chest.

He lifted his head, breathing hard already. “Or do you like hot, wet kisses?” He tilted her head and demonstrated that as well, stroking his tongue over her bottom lip and then taking advantage of the sigh that parted her lips and granted him access to the sweet, hot mouth he’d been dreaming about.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and rose on tiptoe, striving to be closer. A deep half sigh, half groan purred from the back of her throat. Her tongue met his with abandon and Adam felt the heat stroking his entire body.

He pulled back several delicious moments later, not even close to being done with her.

“And do you like this?” He cupped her butt in his hands and pulled her up firmly against his erection. He rubbed his hard length against her.

Her moan and her eyes sliding closed gave him some indication of her answer. But he wanted to hear her beg him to please, please keep doing it. Or to do more. In specific detail.

“And this?” His hand cupped her breast, his thumb rubbing over her nipple, firm even through the thickness of the sweatshirt she wore.

Jaden arched into to his touch, her hands running down his back to his waist, where she hooked her thumbs through the belt loops on his pants and pulled him closer.

“Do you like satin or cotton sheets?” He lifted her hair and put his lips to the soft skin behind her ear, flicking his tongue over the spot.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He smiled against her skin and rubbed his stubbled jaw along her collar bone, pulling the scent of her deeply into his lungs.

“And do you like the lights on, so I can see every inch of your gorgeous body, or lights off so that we have to go strictly by touch?”

“Uh-huh,” she breathed, tipped her head back as his lips found the pulse point at the base of her throat.

“Do you like king-sized beds with plenty of room for trying different positions, or do you like unconventional places like the bathtub, or the floor, or...” He kissed her again, slow and deep, then lifted his head “...kitchen counter tops?”

“Anything,” she said huskily, her hands now on his butt, urging him closer.

Adam couldn’t remember ever being as hard as he was at that moment. Or having as much fun with a seduction. Usually it was more about the end result, the culmination. But with Jaden, he found himself wanting to draw it out, and out.

“And would you *like* to undress yourself while I watch or would you like me to undress you?” he asked.

Her eyes opened and she swallowed hard as she met his gaze. But then, wordlessly, she pulled back just enough to bring her fingers to the zipper on the front of her sweatshirt. Adam knew exactly what she

was doing without a word from her, and heaven knew he had better ideas for her mouth than talking, but he couldn't help but chuckle at the irony.

"What?" she asked, pausing with the zipper between her breasts.

"I was just thinking that I've wished so many times over the past few weeks that you had *less* to say and now, when I want you talking, you're completely speechless."

She looked intrigued. "You want me talking?"

He smiled. "Yes. Though the topic I'm interested in is fairly specific."

She let one corner of her mouth curl up in what he found to be a very provocative expression. "What topic would that be?"

"What you like," he said huskily.

She paused, then smiled. "Root beer."

He blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"I like root beer."

The mischievous smile she gave him made his eyes narrow playfully. "Tell me you want it poured all over your naked body and we'll be in business."

She laughed. "You just asked what I like."

He leaned in and kissed her deeply. When he lifted his head he said, "Sexually, Jaden. I want to hear about everything you like sexually."

She swallowed, looking less playful now. Her cheeks were flushed. "Oh."

"For instance." His fingers covered hers on the zipper tab and he started to pull. "What kind of bras do you like?"

But there was no silky material appearing as he bared the valley between her breasts. In fact, there was nothing but smooth, tan skin.

"When I'm relaxing for the night, I don't wear a bra," she said, breathlessly.

"Funny," he said, taking in the slight swell just showing on either side of the metal teeth. "You don't appear to have a bra on right now, but I'm not feeling all that relaxed."

She pulled the zipper down the rest of the way and freed it at the bottom. "Yeah, funny."

Adam slid his hands under the hem on either side of her sweatshirt and then drew his hands up, separating the gray cotton as he went. The sweatshirt parted and he skimmed it off her shoulders, his eyes feasting on her firm breasts with the rosebud centers.

It seemed typical of Jaden to stand proudly before him, letting him look at her nipples beaded.

"You want to know what I'd like?" she asked.

He nodded, his tongue feeling twice the size of his mouth.

"I'd like to feel your hands on me." She took his hand and lifted it to her left breast. "Here."



She wasn't huge but he felt her weight settle perfectly into the cup of his palm. She sighed as her nipple pressed into the center of his hand and he abraded it slightly. Then, wanting to elicit more than a sigh, he pulled her nipple between his thumb and first finger, tugging and pressing slightly. She groaned.

"You like that too?"

She nodded.

"What else?"

"Your mouth."

"Ah." No argument from him. He dipped his knees and took her nipple into his mouth. He sucked and they moaned together. His tongue swirled around the stiff tip and he felt her fingers thread through his hair, keeping his head close.

Then he felt her other hand against his fly and he jerked back in surprise.

"I like this too," she said, stroking up and down his length.

His hips pressed closer to her touch even as he said, "See how well we agree on some things?"

Her fingers worked the top button of his pants and the zipper free and then her hand slide in against him, skin to skin. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw against the powerful surge of desire that ripped through him. "Jaden," he groaned.

"Oh, I definitely like the way you say that."

He *had* to make her feel this way too.

He gripped her butt in both hands and lifted her until their pelvises were even and she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He strode toward the closest vertical surface and pressed her back against the side of the refrigerator, right where they'd stood the first night she'd been here.

With the firm surface behind her he had better leverage and he leaned into her. His erection fit along the cleft between her legs and he rocked forward and back, rubbing and pressing.

She groaned and kissed him with enough heat he felt the burn deep in his gut. He tugged on her nipples, she stroked his tongue with hers and Adam let himself lose his mind for a few minutes.

But, as good as this felt, they were quite definitely separated from where they really wanted to be.

He pulled back. "What else?" he panted. "Tell me what you like."

Her big green eyes blinked up at him. She seemed a little dazed. "I um..." She stopped and licked her lips. "I don't know."

He smiled gently and stroked a finger along her jaw. "It's okay. You can tell me. I promise that I'm going to like anything you like."

She shook her head slightly. "No. I mean, I've never..."

A thought occurred to him and his spine went rigid, his hands and hips completely still. He stared at her. "Are you a virgin, Jaden?"

Was it possible for a virgin to put off this much heat, for her body language and expressions and tone of voice to seduce him as effectively as Jaden's had?

She smiled. "No. But it's been a long time and..."

Oh, this he had to hear. "And what?"

"I've never really thought about, or been asked about, what I like. I guess we just did it pretty... traditionally."

He was going to be the first to discover what could make Jaden Monroe beg. He could definitely be okay with that. He bent to kiss her. "I promise you we're going to figure out all kinds of non-root beer things that you like." Another kiss quickly heated things back to the point of boiling and they were soon pressing and grinding against one another again.

Jaden pulled back. "Maybe you could, I don't know, give me some ideas about things I might like. And then I can tell you what I think."

He gripped her butt in his hands and grinned. "*That* is an excellent idea." He knew exactly where to start. He let her feet touch the floor and quickly turned her to face the side of the fridge. He lifted his hand to cup one breast again, sliding the nipple between his two middle fingers and squeezing as his other hand slid around her waist to her smooth, flat stomach.

Without instruction, she braced her hands on the fridge and her head dropped forward. He pressed his lips to the back of her neck. Her skin was so soft and he stroked the silky strip along the waistband of her jeans, loving the way her breath hitched. The soft denim had clearly been worn over and over and the waistband gaped from her waist, allowing some space behind the button at the top. But he could only brush the top edge of her panties before his hand was too wide.

"Do you think you'd like having my hand here?" he asked, his lips against her shoulder.

"I can't imagine why not," she said.

He chuckled. "Let's make sure."

He started to drop his hand from her breast to undo the fastener on the jeans but Jaden beat him to it. She quickly freed the button and he let his hand slide down over the silky front of her panties.

The heat was incredible and he felt the moisture behind the pads of his fingers. "I don't even have to ask if you like this, you know," he said.

"Oh?" She didn't sound like she was paying attention to what he said.

"No. This one is easy to tell." He slid his middle finger under the edge of the panties and found her clitoris. The heat shooting from that finger throughout his body and her groan vibrating to his gut, made every other thought evaporate from his mind except *make her make that sound again*.

He did.

He slid up and down over the sweet spot, and Jaden's breathing changed quickly to panting.

"Adam."

His name sounded great when said like that. “Yeah?”

“More.”

He shifted his hand and his finger slid inside her hot, tight center. He stroked in and out.

“Adam.”

She tried to turn in his arms, but he held her still. “Shh. Go with it, Jaden. Let go. You’ll definitely like that.”

“No. I want...” She tried to turn again. “I want you...”

“I’m right here.” He pressed his pelvis against her butt, feeling only slight relief at the pressure against his erection.

“I want you to feel good too,” she breathed.

He felt her inner muscles begin to contract.

“I feel *very* good right now, I promise you,” he whispered against her ear.

He couldn’t explain it. He would have given almost anything just to thrust inside Jaden once. But there was something about having her in his arms, at his mercy, giving her intense pleasure like this. It was nearly as fulfilling as an orgasm of his own. No one had ever done this to her.

“Adam,” she gasped, her head falling back against his shoulder as her climax overtook her.

He felt her muscles clenching around his fingers and felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him.

She sagged forward as the orgasm passed, letting her elbows fold to rest her forearms on the refrigerator and leaning her head on her arms.

He slowly slipped his finger from her body and wrapped his arms around her, kissing the side of her neck. The bare skin of her back, the way her hair fell against her shoulders, the way her waist curved... The strangest things to find erotic, yet he did. He would have been happy just to stroke his hands all over her body. He would have been happy just to look at her. Spread out on his bed would be best, but he wasn’t picky as long as she was naked. He would have been happy to just hear her call his name like that a few thousand more times.

Crazy.

He was still rock hard and wound tight, yet he felt strangely content. “So, there’s my type of physical therapy,” he said with a smile.

He started to turn her, still hungry to taste and touch her, but not out of control as he’d been before. But she stiffened, her head coming up swiftly. A moment passed and then she whirled around, her hands covering her breasts, her eyes scanning frantically. She found her sweatshirt on the floor and picked it up, shoving her arms through the sleeves and clutching the front together, as she started for the back door.

She didn’t even look at him. She said nothing.

“Jaden, don’t go.” He’d just barely gotten started on everything he wanted to do to and with her.

As she reached the door leading outside, she turned back. Adam breathed a sigh of relief.

“By the way,” she said, “The other night when I came in so late and wouldn’t tell you where I’d been...I was filling in at Big Billy’s. Gina was sick. Nothing wild or dangerous about it at all.”

Surprise kept him from replying, or grabbing her, before she slipped out the door and disappeared. He immediately recognized what had happened. She had offered the information to reassure him.

He also realized that he didn’t need reassuring.

But he did need a cold shower. A very cold shower. Or two.

## Chapter Seven

“That son of a bitch.”

Jaden stared at the health section of the newspaper.

She'd thought the morning after what happened with Adam would be uncomfortable. Tense, awkward, potentially horrifying even. But she hadn't thought pissed-off-beyond-belief would be on her list of emotions.

Of course, the man that she wanted a voodoo doll of wasn't Adam.

It was the spineless, manipulative rat bastard himself.

Under Dan McCormick's smug face were the words *New benefactor for children's healthcare in Kansas City*. The man who had pulled his one million dollar donation to Children's Hospital, the hospital that had saved his son's life and had rehabilitated him after his car accident, was now being praised for giving five million to another hospital in town. To start a pediatric rehab program.

Pissed off didn't even begin to describe how she was feeling. She wasn't sure there was even a word for it.

She grabbed her cell phone and punched in her friend Rachel's number. Rachel had been second in command under Jaden at Children's. Now that Jaden was gone, Rachel was the Director of Pediatric Rehabilitation.

“Rachel? It's Jaden.”

“Jaden? It's like six in the morning.” Rachel's voice had the froggy-first-thing-in-the-morning sound to it.

“It's five fifty-four,” Jaden confirmed. “And I just read the paper.”

She heard rustling that had to be bed sheets on the other end of the phone. “The paper?”

“Yeah, the newspaper. The one that's reporting Dan McCormick is an even bigger asshole than I thought.” She picked up a pen and began scribbling on Dan's picture.

Rachel chuckled in spite of the early hour. “I assume that's not a direct quote?”

“What is going on?” Jaden demanded.

“We just heard about it yesterday, hon. But it's true.”

“What about Children's? Now what?” The long rat nose she'd sketched on Dan's face looked good, or at least appropriate. She added a forked tongue sticking out from his arrogant smirk.

Rachel sighed. “That's something else I was putting off calling you about.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Rachel,” Jaden said warningly. “I know where you live.”

“Yeah, well, when you come over bring chocolate and liquor.”

“What is going on?” Rachel was a sunny, upbeat, things-are-always-great person. Her sighs and hesitation made Jaden very nervous.

“The hospital Board is considering a proposal to expand the outpatient surgery department and radiology into the new wing.”

“And...” Jaden felt her stomach start to knot even before Rachel spoke again. She scribbled angrily to color in the noose she’d put around Dan’s neck.

“They’re tired of the building being partially finished. They want it done and used for *something*. They think it looks bad to have it just sitting there.”

Jaden felt every muscle in her neck and shoulders tighten. “So, Rehab is just out? Done? It’s over?”

“No, not officially.” Rachel sounded depressed. “We’re fighting for it. We have patients and their families writing letters. We have some of the doctors on our side. But the fact remains that we don’t have the money and we don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Jaden asked when Rachel stopped.

“We don’t have you,” Rachel said quietly. “You were our fearless leader. You were the one who always had another idea and who always knew what to say. The wing was your idea. You’re the one they listened to.”

Jaden felt like she might throw up. She wasn’t sure what to do. It might be too late. It might not be enough. “Rach...I have the money.”

“What?”

“Well, I *will* have. I’m...working on something.”

“For a million dollars?”

“Yes.”

“You better not be doing anything illegal,” Rachel said.

Jaden chuckled. Sort-of. “It’s therapy. I’m rehabilitating Adam Steele’s daughter, Emily.”

“Steele? As in Steele Enterprises?”

“The same.”

Rachel whistled. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” Wow was one word for it.

“Is it a sure thing?”

The million-dollar question...literally. Jaden put as much confidence into her voice as she could. “Yes. It’s a sure thing.”

“Oh, J.” Rachel sounded choked up. “This is so...great. Wow. I should have known you’d be working on it. I should have known you’d come through.”

Jaden wondered if she’d ever be able to eat again. Her stomach might be in a permanent knot. “Of course. You know how much the hospital and the kids mean to me.”

“I do,” Rachel said sincerely. “I know this rehab wing is your dream. And I know that it’s probably killing you to be away from work this long.”

Rachel shared Jaden’s passion for pediatric physical therapy and everything it entailed. They had gone to numerous conferences, had published two papers and had flown to Washington D.C. to lobby Congress. “It is,” Jaden admitted. “Working with Emily is saving me.”

“Oh, Jaden, this is the best news I’ve had since I had to take over. I should have known you wouldn’t leave us hanging. And I can’t wait for you to come back and take the director’s position back.”

The staff in the rehab department had been handpicked by Jaden. They were more than co-workers. They were colleagues and friends. Who had been let down by Jaden. She added devil horns to the top of Dan’s head.

“We’ll have to work that all out. But right now you’re in charge of keeping morale up,” Jaden said. “Just a little while longer.”

“Jaden, I have a confession.”

“Yeah?” Jaden could barely force words through her tight throat.

“When you told me you were bartending, I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I’m sorry for doubting you. I should have believed that you’d be trying to figure a way out.”

Jaden closed her eyes. She hadn’t figured anything out. If Adam and Tony hadn’t come to her, she’d still be confusing mojitos for margaritas. “I have a confession, too.”

“What’s that?”

“I want this rehab wing for all of you and the kids,” Jaden said. “But I also wanted it to show Bob that he was wrong to not support me. And now I want it so that we can compete against Dan’s new project, and kick their butts.”

“Sounds great to me,” Rachel said with a laugh. “I can’t wait to tell everyone.”

“No!” Jaden said, then softened her tone. “I mean, let’s surprise them when I have the check. I’ll show up with lunch for everyone or something.”

“But J, I have to tell the rehab staff at least.” Rachel sounded almost panicked.

“Why?”

“Mercy is trying to recruit as much of our staff as they can for their program.”

Jaden felt her temples begin throbbing. “*What?*”

“We are the best pediatric staff in the state. They’re contacting our staff members and offering sign-on bonuses and higher salaries...a lot of stuff.”

“Has anyone signed with them yet?” Jaden asked, dreading the answer.

“Not that I know of. But, if they don’t know for sure that we’re moving ahead here, I’m afraid we might lose a few.”

Jaden rubbed her forehead against the threatening headache. “I can’t believe Dan wants to hurt me this much.”

Rachel’s voice was soft and sympathetic when she answered, “I know it’s not exactly the same thing, but I can speak as a friend and colleague when I say that losing you leaves a pretty huge hole, hon.”

Jaden squeezed her eyes shut and felt the tear escape. Damn.

She could *not* let anyone else down. Her staff needed this. The hospital needed this. All the kids who would need to recover from illness and injuries in the future needed this.

And Dan McCormick needed, desperately, to be put in his place.

“Put off telling anyone as long as you can,” she finally said. “But do *not* let any staff leave us.”

She’d chosen, trained and challenged every one of those therapists to make them the best pediatric physical therapists possible. She wasn’t going to let Dan and Mercy hospital—who knew nothing about pediatric rehab—steal *her* therapists or outshine *her* new building.

She’d researched all the equipment, met with the architect, picked out the shade of yellow for the walls. She’d appreciated Bob putting so much trust in her. Though it made his bitterness at the end hurt more.

She’d enjoyed the planning. She loved the time she spent at the hospital and was there more than she was in her apartment most weeks. Planning and designing the new rehab wing had been like decorating her own home. It was a place where people she cared about were going to come and where she wanted them to feel welcome, comforted and safe.

“What are you going to do?” Rachel asked.

She was afraid she was eventually going to have to call the President of the hospital board and let him know that the final million dollars was as good as in the bank. If possible, she wanted to have the check in hand when she made that call.

“There’s one thing for sure: I’m going to get Miss Emily Steele up out of her wheelchair once and for all.”

She had no doubts at all that it was going to happen for Emily. Emily’s school play was still two months away. She just hoped that the hospital board didn’t decide to move forward on changing the plans for the new hospital wing before then.



“Jaden?”

“Well, good morning,” Jaden said with some surprise as she looked up from her hamstring stretch to see Emily roll into the gym. She usually beat Emily to their sessions by at least twenty minutes.

Thank God. She needed a distraction. Badly. She was going crazy from her guilt about the hospital funding, her fury toward Dan, not to mention her lust over Adam.

Adam. She felt her face heat and wanted to curl up in humiliation.

Good grief. He’d fired three other therapists and she doubted that any of the other therapists had so spectacularly failed to be professional and focused

Of course, as far as failures went, having the first orgasm of her life certainly took some of the sting out of it.

As long as she never had to face Adam Steele again. Ever.

“I have an idea,” Emily announced.

Emily was getting more and more into therapy sessions, adding creative touches to their routines and coming up with new challenges. Three days ago she’d brought colored duct tape up and had marked off an obstacle course and then challenged Jaden to a contest. Whoever finished first got to pick the movie they watched this afternoon.

Jaden pulled her foot up to stretch the front of her thigh. “I’m listening.”

“I think we should go to the mall.”

Jaden dropped her foot and stared at the young girl in front of her. “You do?”

Emily’s eyes settled on her lap and she shrugged. “I think it would be fun to get out and I could practice using the leg around a crowd.”

The idea was excellent, but Jaden was still trying to recover from her surprise. She now realized that Emily was wearing lip gloss and earrings. Her outfit was comprised of blue jeans that covered the prosthesis she was wearing without any prompting and a pale green T-shirt with a scalloped neck rather than the usual shorts and tank top. Hearing that Emily was not only interested in going out but also clearly cared about her appearance was encouraging. “I think getting out of the house would be fantastic.”

Shopping wasn’t one of Jaden’s favorite pastimes. It seemed like such a bother. She generally opted for comfortable, loose-fitting clothes that allowed her to get onto and off of the floor with her young patients easily. But today was different.

She couldn’t let this opportunity pass. Venturing out in public for a very normal teenage outing was something Jaden couldn’t resist. It was a perfect plan, in fact. They could easily turn the trip into a therapy session by propelling and maneuvering with her wheelchair in a crowd and around clothing racks, then trying the leg with her crutches to get into dressing rooms and around the tighter spaces between the tables in the food court at lunch time.

Not to mention that it would be therapeutic for Jaden too. It would get her out of the house and keep her from running into Adam in the hallway. Or worse, the kitchen. *Way* worse. She was never going to be able to look at a refrigerator the same way. She was never going to be able to look at *Adam* the same way.

As it was, the memory of his thick, long finger moving on and inside of her kept sneaking up, making her breath catch and her skin flush and her heart race.

She was quite certain that if she saw him today, all of it would come flooding back and she could easily find herself begging him to do it again. Just once. Or twice.

It was a half hour before Jaden and Emily were belted into Jaden's car. Watching Emily get into the car, using only one crutch and her prosthesis made Jaden smile. They were making progress. It might seem small to an untrained observer, but the confidence in Emily's movements and the lack of tension on her face as she moved said a lot about how far she'd come. She wasn't ready to take a stage in a spotlight, maybe, but she was further along than she had been even a week ago.

"Hey, Em?" she asked as she drove.

"Yeah?"

"What play are you doing at school anyway?"

"*My Fair Lady*."

Jaden paused and glanced at her. "*My Fair Lady*?" she repeated.

Emily looked at her. "Yeah."

"Not the one with Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins?"

"Yes." Emily looked puzzled.

"Um..." Maybe she should have asked before this what the play was. It had seemed like a detail. Until now. Now it was...a problem. "I haven't seen it in a while," she said. "But it seems to me that there was a lot of singing and dancing in that one."

Emily rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "Of course. It's a musical."

A musical. Not just a play. A musical. Of course.

"Is there any chance that at your school musicals only involve singing?"

"Only singing?" Emily asked.

"As in no dancing," Jaden said.

"Uh, no. I mean, yes. There's dancing. And singing. We haven't started practice yet, but I had to sing when I tried out."

Jaden pulled in a deep breath through her nose. Then let it out slowly. "Again, it's been a while since I saw it, but I seem to remember that Eliza did a lot of the singing *and* dancing."

"Right." Emily said it slowly as though she was not sure that was the correct answer.

Jaden breathed in and out again. "So, your part in the play, that is actually a musical, involves more than just walking out on stage and saying a few lines."

“I guess.”

Which meant that therapy needed to involve more than just walking.

“Em?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve got some major work to do.”

Jaden found a parking spot at the mall that was a distance from the door without being too far for Emily. She’d left Adam’s handicapped parking permit at the estate on purpose, wanting Emily to walk as far as possible. She was going to shake off this recent development for now. It would be okay. Nothing to panic about. Their plan wouldn’t change much. Emily had to walk before she could dance.

“Okay, Em, here’s the deal. I hate shopping for clothes so you’re in charge of what I buy.”

“Really?” Emily looked at her, her gaze sweeping from the top of Jaden’s head to her shoes. “I hope you brought your credit card.”

Jaden pushed the car door open. “Why’s that?”

“Because I *love* shopping for clothes. Especially with someone else’s money.”

Jaden chuckled as she reached for her purse. Her hand froze a few inches from the strap.

“Um, Em?”

“Yeah?” The younger girl’s door wasn’t even open. Emily hadn’t moved and she refused to look at Jaden.

“Where is your crutch?”

“I left it leaning against your garage door.”

Jaden sighed. It looked like they wouldn’t be practicing on the leg after all. But at least the wheelchair usage would continue to strengthen Emily’s arms. Besides, this was more a mental therapy session anyway, working to get Emily involved in some of her old activities again with confidence.

Jaden moved to the trunk of the car to retrieve the wheelchair. But as the trunk swung up and open all she saw was her gas can, her old picnic blanket, and the ice scraper she hadn’t been able to find the last time her windows were iced over. Great. They were going to have to drive all the way back to the estate. Unless the mall rented wheelchairs. Jaden sighed and slammed the trunk. She might as well check with the mall customer service, but that meant Emily had to stay in the car by herself. Not exactly a perfect situation.

“Em, Tony didn’t put your chair in,” Jaden said coming to the side of the car. She assumed Emily would have enlisted her uncle’s help as usual.

“I know. I didn’t ask him.”

Jaden frowned. “Why not?”

“I don’t need it.”

“But you left your crutches at home,” Jaden pointed out.

“Right.”

“So, how are you going to get around?”

“By walking.” Emily said the words so softly Jaden almost missed them.

Jaden sighed and slid back into the driver’s seat, pivoting to face the teenager. “You’re wearing your leg, but we don’t have crutches or a wheelchair. What’s going on?”

Emily didn’t answer right away but Jaden waited patiently.

“I don’t need the crutches.” Again, the words were almost too soft to hear.

“You don’t?”

“No.” Emily didn’t elaborate.

Jaden fought her sigh this time. “Okay, help me out here. How are you going to get around the mall, Em?”

“I’m going to walk on my leg.”

“Without crutches?”

“I brought a cane.” She pulled the silver cane from alongside the passenger side door where she’d hidden it.

“You haven’t worked with a cane.”

“Not with you.”

“So...you’ve worked on it...”

“By myself.”

Jaden stared at her. “What do you mean?”

It was Emily’s turn to sigh. “I’ve been working on walking on my own ever since that first day, when you showed me how to do the stairs. I finally felt like maybe I could do it. Like I wanted to. I can walk on the leg without crutches pretty good now.”

“You’ve been working on it alone? As long as I’ve been here? No one else knows?”

Jaden was vaguely aware that she sounded as stunned as she felt.

“Right.”

Jaden slumped back against her seat and stared out the windshield. Emily could walk. With a cane maybe but... Emily could *walk*.

Okay. Good. Great even.

Now what?

“When did you work on it?” Jaden asked, still looking straight ahead. She’d been working Emily’s tail off every hour they had together.

“Every night after you go back to your apartment. I’ve only gotten good in the past couple of weeks.” Emily pivoted on the seat to face Jaden. “I’ve gotten stronger, and braver, because of you, Jaden, honest.”

Okay. Well, that was something. At least she hadn't been taking Adam's money for nothing. Almost nothing, but not completely nothing.

Jaden rolled her head to look at Emily. "Why have you been hiding it? Why haven't you let your dad know? Why didn't you tell *me*?"

Emily didn't speak for a long moment.

"Em? What's going on?"

"There are a lot of reasons," Emily finally said with resignation in her voice.

"For instance?"

"My dad. He's felt horrible since we found the cancer."

"Then why have you led him on for so long? You could have been back to school, doing so many things that you want to do and your dad could have felt better a long time ago..."

"I don't want to be back to school."

Jaden sat up a little straighter. "What? Why not?"

"Not yet," Emily added. "Because once I can walk again, everyone is going to think that I can do everything that I used to do. But I can't. I'm not even sure I want to. All that pressure is there, though, especially from Dad. He wants everything to be the way it used to be, and it never will be. It's just easier to not walk."

Jaden felt like she couldn't take a deep breath. The reality of the situation and what she'd discovered was sinking in and she had no idea what to do.

"Em..."

"And I couldn't tell you," Emily continued when Jaden tried to talk. "I wanted to try it before I showed you. Then it was easier than I thought it would be and it got even easier pretty fast. Then I was afraid you'd be upset I didn't tell you. And I know about the money for the hospital. I know that there are a lot of kids who have less than I do. I know that I'm lucky even though I had cancer and lost part of my leg." She stopped for a moment and swallowed a couple of times as if trying to get a handle on her emotions. "I needed you, Jaden. But I thought if you knew about this you would feel like you were done with me and you wouldn't take the money."

"I think that..."

"And I like you, Jaden. I don't want you to leave yet." Emily said this last while staring at her folded hands in her lap.

Jaden's chest filled with about one hundred emotions and she didn't know what to do or how to let any of them out. She thought over everything that Emily had confessed. Emily could walk, so that goal had been met. The more she thought about it, the less shocked Jaden was. Emily had been stronger than she'd expected from the beginning and had progressed quickly. But Emily wasn't done with her rehabilitation

yet. She was willing to put the leg on in her bedroom by herself and for a couple of hours at the mall, but she wasn't ready to walk at school, to dance in the play, to fully take back her life.

Jaden pondered that for a moment. She rested her head against the back of her seat and closed her eyes. She remembered the connection she'd felt to Emily when she first saw her picture. She remembered first meeting Emily. She remembered the first time Emily smiled during a session.

There had been so many great moments, since she'd been with Emily, moments that she felt in her heart. And never once had she felt that this wasn't right, that she wasn't supposed to be here.

Never once had she felt anything but *right* about being in Emily's life.

Jaden did manage a big breath then. She was here to help rehabilitate Emily. Emily wanted to be Eliza Doolittle, and Adam needed her to play that role. They were closer to the final goal than she'd thought, but they weren't there yet.

There was just one problem.

"I like you too, Em. A lot. I love working with you and I don't want to leave yet. But I don't know what to tell your dad. I can't lie to him."

"I know." Emily looked a little dejected. "I don't want to lie to him either, but he thinks that the minute I can walk on this leg is the same minute I'll be up on stage in the spotlight and having sleepovers and going to dances. But that isn't true."

Jaden knew she was right. Jaden hoped eventually those things would be true, but obviously simply walking on the artificial leg wasn't enough. "Yeah, we'll deal with that when it comes up."

She wouldn't lie to him but Adam had never asked Jaden flat-out if Emily could walk on her leg. In fact, all he'd asked her was how things were going. She could honestly say that things were going great and that Emily wasn't done with her program yet. In fact, it was important in some ways that Adam not know that Emily could walk yet. Em was right, he would expect miracles overnight and that would do nothing but hurt Emily...and himself.

"Jaden?"

"Yeah?"

"I know the perfect store to start with."

Jaden pulled her attention fully back to the girl next to her. "The perfect store?"

"For your new clothes. We can still shop, can't we?"

Jaden smiled, feeling a wonderful sense of hope and rightness. Emily *was* going to get better. It was simply a case of refocusing the program.

"I definitely still want to shop."

Emily did beautifully on her leg. She got a little tired and the cane was a definite necessity. They had to stop and rest periodically but they were always able to find a bench or a bookstore with comfortable chairs. The day was successful on several levels. Emily opened up and laughed loud and often. Jaden got more non-baggy, non-cotton clothes than she really needed. And she had time to formulate a plan.

Emily needed confidence before she'd be willing to get up on stage. Of course she needed to improve her strength, balance and coordination too. But that would come with her workouts and practice. The confidence was a little harder to come by.

"I want to make a quick stop on the way home," Jaden told her when they were back in the car, shopping bags loaded in the trunk.

"Pizza?"

Jaden laughed. "Okay, two stops. The first is over at the YMCA though."

"What's there?"

"Some friends of mine are working out and I wanted to say hi. I also wanted you to meet them."

Emily shrugged. "Okay."

Jaden wondered how much she should tell Emily ahead of time. She decided not to tell her anything.

They pulled up to the gym a few minutes later. "They have a wheelchair here we can borrow. Want me to get it or do you want to just wear the leg?" Jaden asked.

"Leg. It's easier."

Jaden nodded, smiling at Emily's decision and explanation. The wheelchair was easier on her physically in many ways, and with it she didn't have to concentrate as hard. But the leg was already on anyway and it was less cumbersome in general. Most of all, if Emily was thinking of it as easier in *any* way, it showed progress.

"Let's go."

They walked into the gym together and Emily abruptly stopped...and stared.

The wheelchair basketball teams were practicing and looked like they were right in the middle of a scrimmage between the men's team and the women's. From the scoreboard it also looked like the women's team was ahead.

"Come on, let's watch."

"What is this?"

"Basketball."

Emily gave her a little frown. "Yeah, I got that part. But they're all in wheelchairs."

"It's wheelchair basketball." Jaden moved forward toward the bleachers. At first, Emily didn't follow, but Jaden didn't turn around. She settled onto the bottom bench to watch and a few moments later felt Emily slide in next to her.

They watched in silence for several minutes before Jaden glanced over at Emily. The girl's eyes were wide and she was watching every move with interest. She was clearly caught up in the action and Jaden smiled. She knew what that was like. She'd been approached to volunteer some time with the team about three years ago, treating their injuries as their trainer. The first day she'd met the group, she'd been equally enthralled, and the team never ceased to amaze her. They were enthusiastic, playing with a lot of cheers and whoops and high fives. The music had a deep bass beat when they practiced and the players encouraged the opposing team members as much as they did their own.

"They're good, aren't they?" Emily asked, not taking her eyes from the court.

Jaden smiled. "They're very good. They were the regional champs last year."

Emily did take her eyes from the game then. "Are they all going to be in wheelchairs forever?"

"No. In fact, a few of them are like you and only use their wheelchairs part time. Others do stay in their chair all the time."

"Wow." She turned back to watch the teams, studying them as if she was trying to figure out who was able to get out of their chairs and who wasn't.

Just then the buzzer went off signaling the end of the game. Everyone on the court applauded, shook hands and cheered. Jaden joined the applause. "Come on. I'll introduce you."

They started across the court toward the team huddle. Tom, the coach, was the first to spot them.

"Jaden! Hi!"

Everyone turned and greetings rang out.

"Hey, gang. Good game."

"Who have you got there?"

With her blue jeans on, no one could see Emily's leg, and her natural grace made it almost impossible to tell that she had a prosthesis. "This is Emily Steele. Emily this is...everyone."

The team went around and introduced themselves, quickly surrounding Emily and pulling her into the middle of the group. Tom remained on the perimeter next to Jaden and watched the exchange. "You were just in the neighborhood?"

Jaden smiled at him. "Kind of. We were shopping."

"When you called last week and said you had this big job with Adam Steele for the next couple of months I didn't think we'd see you for awhile."

"Emily is Adam's daughter."

Tom's eyebrows rose and he watched Emily. "Didn't you tell me it was her leg?"

"Hard to tell isn't it?"

"Very." Tom watched Emily for almost a full minute. "She's fitting right in."

Emily was laughing, with her pant leg pulled up to just below her knee showing off her prosthesis.



Jaden smiled and felt her throat tighten slightly. The group seemed to have accepted her easily and without question. Jaden hadn't really been worried, but she sighed with happiness and just a touch of relief. Then she noticed Chad Owens.

Chad's brother Brian had been in a car accident about nineteen months before and had injured his spinal cord, paralyzing him from the waist down. The high school basketball star had a very hard time adjusting to his situation and the wheelchair basketball team had been his saving grace. The team and his little brother. Chad had attended nearly every practice with Brian. It looked like the tradition had held on.

Chad was standing with the group, his hands in the front pockets of his blue jeans, smiling widely and watching Emily with interest.

"Chad's still coming to practices, huh?"

Tom glanced at the boy and smiled. "He's my assistant. He's in charge of all our exhibition games. He's our biggest PR man."

Jaden had always liked both Chad and Brian. She'd gotten to know the younger brother almost as well as her patient since Chad was there for Brian's therapy session every day after school. He was supportive, encouraging, even driving his brother when Brian most needed it. He was always positive and never let his brother feel too sorry for himself. He was a good kid.

Jaden glanced at her watch. She hated to break the group up, but Adam didn't know where they were and it was getting late. If the other night was any indication, she expected to have some questions to answer when they got back, and being late wasn't going to help.

"Em, you ready to go?"

Emily looked up. She looked very much as if she'd forgotten Jaden was there. "I guess."

"We're goin' out after this, Jaden. You want to come?" This was from Shawna, a beautiful girl who had been born with spina bifida.

"We have to get home tonight. We've been gone for a while already. But how about a rain check?"

Emily looked disappointed, which Jaden thought was a very good sign. She liked the group and felt comfortable with them.

"Okay, but you have to promise to come to practice Thursday." The comment came from Brian, but his eyes were on Emily.

Emily grinned widely and nodded. "I'd like that."

Brian smiled back and then gave his brother a wink. Chad's grin was just as wide as Emily's and he gave his brother a thumbs up.

Jaden quickly figured out that the invitation had been Chad's idea. What had she started here? Still she answered, "Sounds good. We'll see you all on Thursday."

"Hey, Emily," Chad stepped forward. "Maybe I could give you a call before Thursday. I could um..."

“Tell her more about the team,” Brian piped up when Chad trailed off. “We have a big tournament in about a month.”

Jaden didn’t miss the smile that Emily gave both boys. She looked shy but pleased. “That sounds interesting. I’d love to...hear more about the team.”

Chad grinned, Emily grinned and Jaden groaned silently. She was pretty sure she knew exactly what she’d started. She’d known that bringing Emily here would help her see how much these kids had accomplished in spite of their physical disabilities and that they would readily accept Emily and her leg. But Chad would be great for Emily. She was a typical teenage girl. Having a cute, bright, funny boy interested in her would do more for her self-esteem than anything Jaden or Adam or any team of specialists could ever do.

Jaden sighed. She was also pretty sure that Adam was not going to be as enthusiastic about the idea as she was.

Jaden stubbornly refused to label her feeling as relief when she stepped into the kitchen and found it empty later that night. Disappointed also occurred to her as an option, but she shook that off. Adam wasn’t here, which meant that she wouldn’t see him at all today. Which was exactly what she’d wanted. She was in the kitchen for popcorn, period. Popcorn was a great reason to be in the kitchen at nearly ten p.m.

Popcorn also allowed her to avoid the refrigerator. Other than the glances she kept accidentally giving it.

She had just started the microwave and was reaching into a low cupboard for a bowl when she heard, “Nice skirt. Almost covers those hot pink panties.”

She jumped and turned, reflexively covering her rear end with her hands. “Quit sneaking up on me like that!” she exclaimed as she spun to face Adam.

“I’m not sneaking up.” He looked at her with raised eyebrows. “I’m here for a bottle of water. This is where we keep it.”

He gestured at the refrigerator—which she resolutely kept from looking at—then he glanced up at the clock above her head.

“It’s early isn’t it? The guys at the strip club weren’t tipping well tonight?” He seemed grumpy. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, the shirt untucked from his pants and his tie nowhere to be seen. The impeccably groomed dark hair was mussed tonight and he looked...tired.

She frowned at his back as he reached into the refrigerator for a bottle of Evian. Then a thought occurred to her. “I don’t have hot pink panties on.”

Adam chuckled and turned to face her. “I was using my imagination.”

“You imagine me wearing hot pink panties?” she asked before she thought better of it. This was so not the way to keep the topics between them safe and professional.

He twisted the top off the bottle of water and took a drink, watching her the whole time. After he swallowed he shook his head. “Actually no.”

“What do you...” This time she caught herself. “Never mind.”

The microwave beeped, signally that her popcorn was done. Thank goodness. She needed to get out of here. She carefully removed the hot paper bag and emptied it into the bowl beside her.

Adam waited until she was done and then asked. “What do I what?”

“Nothing.” She didn’t look at him, but pretended intense interest in the popcorn kernels she was holding.

“Come on. What do I what?”

She glanced up and could tell that he already knew what she had been about to ask.

Fine. He was the one who’d brought it up.

“What kind of panties you do imagine that I wear?” She was pretty proud about how confident that sounded.

“I don’t imagine your panties at all.”

Well, *that* wasn’t what she’d expected. “You don’t?”

She wanted to add, and why not but censored that before it slipped out. She knew, in her conscious mind, her unconscious mind, her heart, her soul—everywhere—that she should *not* be disappointed by the thought that not even her underwear entered his fantasies. But she was, nonetheless.

Adam came toward her, stopping so they were far enough apart that their toes didn’t quite touch, but close enough that it seemed every molecule of air filled with him. “What I meant,” he said slowly, “is that when I imagine you, it is in nothing at all.”

She blushed. She could feel it and she hated it. Then she tried to swallow. But it didn’t work. Her mouth and throat were too dry. Every sensation from the night before washed over her and she just barely kept from moaning.

“Oh,” she choked out.

His mouth tipped up at the corner. “Would you like to know more about my imaginings?”

“I would *not*,” she said with feigned conviction. “I was on my way to bed.”

“That certainly ties in,” he replied in a slow drawl.

She shook her head. “I don’t think we should talk about this. In fact, I know that we should *not* talk about this.”

“Because?”

*Because it's getting harder and harder to not really, really like this and want more and more and more.* "A lot of reasons," she finally said. "For instance, I am the physical therapist working with your daughter."

"Yes, you are." He took another drink of water.

She watched his throat work as he swallowed and all she could think of was how hot and salty his skin probably was right there against his neck.

"We need to focus on Emily's program." She knew she sounded like she was choking but she'd needed the words to be out loud, in the room with them, for her sake as much as his.

"That's right," he said. "We need to focus on Emily."

"That's right." Jaden nodded enthusiastically, relieved to have him looking slightly irritated instead of seductive. Irritated was much easier to handle. "We do."

"Then let's talk about Emily."

"Great." Anything but panties, or lack thereof, or her bed, or his bed or—

"How'd Emily do at the mall?"

"You heard about that?" She looked genuinely surprised.

"Was it supposed to be a secret?"

"Of course not. I'm just surprised that she told you."

"That she ran up your credit card?"

She paused, then simply said, "Right."

He sensed that Jaden almost said more about the trip. "Was there something else?"

Adam knew that Jaden hadn't initiated the trip to the mall. It had been Emily's first trip off the estate besides her doctor's appointments. She had asked to go and she'd chosen Jaden to accompany her. He could tell himself that it had been because he'd been gone for the day, but in his heart he knew that his daughter would have chosen Jaden anyway.

"Did she happen to mention Chad?"

"Ah, yes, the young man she met tonight who is looking forward to seeing her again Thursday."

Emily had been excited about the group of kids she'd met at the YMCA, how quickly they accepted her. She wanted to make further plans with them. Especially one named Chad.

Monumental moments...that didn't include him. So, yes, there was fear that his daughter would get hurt, or would leave him out of her life, or would no longer need him. And there was jealousy. She had needed piano teachers, and math tutors, and physical therapists, but only to learn information or tasks. She had always needed him for everything else.

"You can't be everything to her all the time, Adam," Jaden said quietly.

A mind reader too. There was no end to Jaden's talents.

"One trip off the estate and you now know all about what she needs?"

Jaden shook her head. "I'm not the one who's making you nervous."

He wanted to deny that he felt nervous. But the woman in front of him had an uncanny knack for understanding him that definitely made him uneasy.

Jaden tipped her head to the side. "I think you're more threatened by Chad than you are by me."

Adam scowled. "Should I be worried about this boy?"

"No. You should be thankful for this boy."

"Is that right?" he drawled. "I guess I skipped the chapter in the parenting book about being thankful for the boy who wants to be my daughter's first boyfriend...and all that goes along with that."

"Is it possible, do you suppose, that there are exceptions to these rules you think you know?" Jaden asked. "Is it possible that Chad is a nice church-going boy who wants to spend time with Emily because she's wonderful?"

"Chad is a teenage boy. No matter where he spends his Sunday mornings, he still has hormones that rule how he thinks the other six and a half days a week."

Jaden rolled her eyes. "You don't even know him."

"I used to *be* him," Adam said with exasperation. "I don't have to know him."

"Are you sure that you're worried about him teaching Emily about these things you think you understand, or are you worried about him teaching her the things that you don't understand?"

Jaden had moved closer and was looking at Adam like she wanted to see everything he was thinking.

He frowned and broke eye contact. "What are you talking about?"

"Crushes. First love. He'll want to take her to movies, and dances. He'll probably want to hold her hand, buy her a birthday present, maybe even kiss her at some point. And you didn't have those things as a teenager. You won't be able to relate to her, because you don't know how it all feels."

If she'd kicked him in the leg he couldn't have been more surprised. Surprised that she was brave enough to say these things to him. And surprised that she'd nailed it on the head.

"This isn't your concern," he said gruffly.

"Fine. Maybe not. But there's more you need to hear before you tell me to shut up," she said stubbornly, tilting her chin up in defiance. "Chad, and the other kids, can teach her to accept her leg, to celebrate what makes her unique, to not be afraid of changing her life, because they've been there too."

"I've given her everything she's ever needed for fourteen years." His voice sounded hollow.

Jaden nodded and he felt her put her hand on his arm. "You have. But she needs more now."

"Things you don't think I can give her."

"No one can give anyone else *everything*, Adam. That's not how it's supposed to be. We're supposed to need other people."

He rolled his shoulders. He didn't like this conversation. He didn't like coming up short ever, and in Jaden's eyes it especially rankled.

"You don't agree," she said.

When he looked down at her she was studying his face. He still said nothing.

"You don't think Emily should ever need anyone but you?"

"She needs you for her physical therapy," he said.

"Yes," Jaden agreed. "But you've hated every minute because it was something you couldn't give her."

"No, not hated. Just..." He had no idea why he couldn't just stand there quietly and let Jaden make her assumptions. It shouldn't matter. It didn't matter.

Adam took a deep breath. He'd never thought this hard about this and he'd never put it into words before.

"I remember holding Emily the night after her mother left. I remember looking down at her and realizing I was all she had. I remember thinking 'please help me do this right'."

He turned and leaned against the counter, focusing his eyes across the room instead of the intense woman he wanted to shake and kiss and yell at and make love to all at the same time.

"In the past fourteen years there hasn't been anything that Emily has needed or wanted that I haven't been able to give her. And I'm damned proud of that."

"You should be proud of the job you've done, Adam. Emily is wonderful."

"But there are things I'm not going to be able to give her."

"That's right. And normal. She'll be fine."

"I'm sure she will," he said. "But what about me?"

"You mean, what are you going to do when she doesn't need you so much?"

"Right."

"You need a hobby."

He shook off the melancholy. Good Lord, it had been forever since he'd revealed so much about himself. "Maybe I do."

"How about golf?"

"I'm terrible."

"Model airplanes?"

He shook his head, letting himself feel amusement begin to replace the angst. "I don't think so."

"Well, what do you like?" she asked, completely innocent.

Or seemingly innocent. How she could stand there, within reaching distance of where he'd made her climax just twenty-four hours before, and ask him about what he *liked* and not realize what she was saying, was beyond him.

Adam grinned. "Blondes with short hair, green eyes and sassy mouths."

She paused for a heartbeat, then an eyebrow arched. "I would think you were talking about me if you hadn't added that bit about sassy mouths."

"That isn't the only adjective I would use for your mouth."

"I shouldn't ask," she muttered.

"You don't have to ask," he said generously. "Sexy, sweet, hot, wet..."

"Oh, boy." Jaden sighed and took a huge, exaggerated step toward the back door. "You keep that up, and I'm going to end up sleeping with you for sure."

"I didn't think that was up for debate any longer."

"You don't want to sleep with the woman who's teaching Emily how to roll a joint and mix a whiskey sour."

"Right." He advanced on her. "I want to sleep with *you*."

She frowned. "I want to sleep with you too."

"I know." He took her hand and tugged her closer.

"Which is problem number two."

He frowned. "How many problems do we have, exactly?"

"Two."

"I know that you want to sleep with me."

"That's one," she confirmed.

"Because?"

"Because I can't tell you no and make it believable."

He chuckled. "Very true." He lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed her knuckles, loving the little sighing sound she made. "What's problem number one?"

"That you're a great dad."

"It's a mark *against* me that I'm a devoted father to my daughter?"

"More specifically that I find that attractive," she clarified. "And that I love Emily too."

Adam stroked his thumb over the back of her hand. "I know you do." Jaden's feelings for Emily were obvious and they made him nervous and thrilled at the same time. "But how can that possibly be a problem?"

A long moment passed and she looked up at him. "That's happened to me before." She swallowed hard. "I mean, it happens a lot, of course. I care about the kids I work with. But one other time, I got too involved and let my feelings get more complicated and..."

He studied her face. She looked miserable.

"McCormick," he said simply. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did.

She nodded.

"You think your attraction to me is because you care about Emily?"

Jaden frowned. “Yes.”

“When I do this...” he stroked his hand up and down her bare arm, “...and you feel the tingles—” he grinned when she glanced up quickly, confirming the tingles, “—you think it’s because of Emily.”

“Well...”

“And when I do this...” he leaned close, trailing his lips over the silky skin behind her ear, “and you feel the heat spread through your body, you think it’s because you care about Emily.”

She licked her lips. “I, um...”

“And when I do this...” He buried his fingers in her hair and pulled her up onto her tiptoes and sealed his lips over hers, kissing her with all of the wanting he’d been trying to contain for weeks.

As if she’d been planning on it happening, Jaden kissed him back. And this time she wasn’t the one who pulled away first.

Adam lifted his head and stared down at her, loving that she was breathing hard, was flushed and looked dazed. “Don’t try to tell me you were thinking about anything or *anyone* besides me just now,” he said, his voice husky.

She pressed her very kissed lips together and just shook her head.

He definitely wanted to pick up where they’d just left off, but they’d also left off on an important conversation that he wanted to continue.

“Tell me about you and Dan.”

She blinked a couple of times, slowly, then lifted her hand to press her fingertips against her lips. Adam smiled what he knew was a cocky smile. He’d just kissed Dr. Jaden Monroe speechless.



## Chapter Eight

Adam let her go, but didn't step back too far. He did slip his hands into his pockets, though, to keep from pulling her back against him. He leaned against the edge of the kitchen table.

Jaden took a deep breath, then looked at the bowl of cold popcorn still sitting on the counter. She picked it up and headed for the trashcan but started talking as she went. "I met Dan when I worked in rehab with his son, Cody. Cody had been in a bad car accident and wasn't expected to walk again."

Adam watched her shake the popcorn into the can and then go to the sink to wash the bowl out. He suspected that she just needed something to do with her hands, but he didn't comment. As long as she kept talking they'd be fine.

She ran water in the sink. "I worked with Cody for months. Dan was there, every day, by Cody's side. He was encouraging, but firm. It was clear that Cody was the most important thing in his life. And..." She trailed off and paused to get the dish soap from under the sink. She started washing the bowl. "It's so hard to explain. I've worked with many kids over the years and many of them have had devoted parents. But Dan was the first single dad that I truly got to know. In other cases, the mom was always involved even if the parents were divorced or something. But Cody's mom died when he was only three and it had been just Cody and Dan for years."

"You were attracted to Dan because you two had Cody and his rehab in common."

She bit her lip and nodded. "And rehab like that, as you know, is intense. I got to know a side of Dan that no one else had ever seen. And he saw me as the woman who gave his son his life back."

"But that's all it was between you?" Adam definitely needed to know that. The idea that Jaden had been in love with Dan McCormick made his stomach clench. It just didn't feel right to think of another man having intense feelings for Jaden.

"We didn't know it until Cody left for college. But I realized it when I went a week without seeing Dan but had called Cody three times and e-mailed him every day."

"It was all about Cody?"

"Dan was nice to me, charming, took me out to expensive places, is handsome. But yes, my feelings were all about Cody. And Dan's were too, even though he never did admit it."

"What made Cody different from all the other kids?"

She shrugged. "Cody was...*is*...special. All kids are, but Cody and I had a connection. It's hard to explain."

"I've seen a special connection between you and Emily," Adam said roughly.

He was filled with the strangest twinge of jealousy toward Cody McCormick. Was he more special to Jaden than Emily? He knew Jaden cared about his daughter but the way she was talking about the young McCormick made him wonder if Jaden didn't compare all kids to this boy. Adam had never let anyone get close to Emily—and vice versa—but now here he was, upset that Jaden might feel closer to another patient than she did to his daughter.

When Jaden turned to grab the dish towel, she had a soft smile on her face "Yes, it's there with Emily," she said. "In fact—I mean of course it's different since they are two different people—but with Em it's..."

Adam straightened away from the table. "It's what?"

"Different." She shrugged. "It was easier with Cody. He wanted to get better, he wanted to work hard, he soaked up the motivation. He wanted me there."

Adam felt himself scowl. "And Em?"

Jaden smiled. "Em's been tough. She didn't want me here. She didn't want to work at it. She's made *me* work harder from every angle, and that meant I had to decide if it was worth staying."

"You're still here," he pointed out unnecessarily.

"With Em it's like digging for gold," Jaden said, her eyes glowing. "The deeper you have to dig, the brighter the sparkle is when you finally find it."

Adam wanted to kiss her again. It was that simple. Jaden loved his daughter and he suspected Emily felt similarly. "You and Dan never slept together either, did you?" He had no idea how he knew, but he did. And he wanted to hear her say it.

She was clearly startled by his observation. "No. I told him I wanted to wait for marriage."

"Was that true?" Adam pressed, feeling better about a whole lot of things all of a sudden.

"I wanted it to be. But..." She took a deep breath and set the bowl and towel on the counter. "No. It just wasn't..." She looked up, meeting his gaze and squaring her shoulders. "It wasn't anything like it is with you."

Adam felt his mouth start to stretch into a grin.

"Which makes this all worse with you."

That didn't sound so good.

"So, I'm hoping," she went on, "that you will understand that I can't do this and not...tempt me."

He couldn't help but cross the floor and cup the back of her head. "I don't know if I can make that promise."

"Adam," she pleaded.

"Tempting you is just too much fun."

"But it's important."

"Maybe *I* could be important." He hadn't planned to say the words, but he did intentionally tug her forward a step.

"*Emily* is important," Jaden whispered against his lips.

That stopped him. He sighed. "Of course she is."

"Do you really want me this way? Knowing that I want you just because you're a terrific dad to an amazing kid?"

He slid his thumb over her bottom lip. "No, I wouldn't. *If* I believed that."

"*I* believe it."

And that should have been enough. He certainly didn't want her with him if she didn't want to be with him.

"You want me, Jaden. Me. Not Emily's dad. Me." He took her hand and pressed it against his chest. "In the bar, before either of us even knew who the other one was, there was an incredible connection. And that first night in this kitchen, you responded to me. Strongly. And you hadn't even met Emily yet. That had nothing to do with her."

He saw in her eyes that she realized the truth of his statement.

"And last night." He leaned in close and nipped the corner of her lips. "When I was touching you." He nipped the other corner. "When my finger was inside you." He drug his tongue along her bottom lip and felt her lips part. "When I made you come, calling my name." He kissed her long and wet for a moment. "You weren't thinking about anyone or anything but me." He settled her hips against his. "And how well I get along with your clitoris." He kissed her again. "I guarantee it." He lifted his head and looked in her eyes. "And when we make love until neither of us can move, you won't be thinking about anyone or anything else either. It will all be about me."

She smiled, though her eyes were still clouded with passion. "I hope it might be a little bit about me."

"Oh, honey, I promise you, last night was only a hint at how much about you it will be."

He was gratified to see her lips part as she drew a ragged breath. He turned his face to press a kiss into her hand.

"It's late," she said, her voice hoarse. "And if I don't leave right now, that fridge is going to get another workout. And this time it's gonna be *my* hand down *your* pants."

That sounded so good that Adam started to reach for her.

"Emily is still awake," Jaden said, putting a hand on his chest.

Oh, yeah. Emily. Right upstairs. Still awake. With perfect hearing.

"Goodnight, Jaden."

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but in the end she said, "I think I'll try the blueberry pancakes tomorrow." Then she slipped out the back door, shutting it softly behind her.

She would see him at breakfast.

Blueberry-pancake-flavored kisses from Jaden sounded like the perfect way to start the day—every day—for as long as they both should live.

This was getting way out of hand.

And he couldn't seem to mind it one bit.

The players were all in wheelchairs.

Adam stopped in the doorway to the YMCA gym and stared.

Emily hadn't mentioned that not-so-little detail.

She'd met a basketball team at the Y. That was all she'd said. They'd invited her to watch them practice tonight. Those were the details he'd been given.

He watched as a girl positioned her wheelchair at the top of the circle, then propelled herself forward with one hand as she dribbled the ball alongside the wheel with the other. It was awkward, but she managed it. She picked it up and shot as she neared the hoop. A lay-up from a wheelchair. The ball didn't go in, but the girl grinned widely at her teammates as they cheered.

Adam felt his heart thump hard against his diaphragm as the girl turned. It was Emily. Playing basketball from her wheelchair.

What was going on?

When she'd mentioned coming tonight he'd had no idea she meant to play with them. Especially from her chair. He'd hoped she might take a few shots while she was here. Standing up. With Jaden holding on to her.

But she was in her wheelchair. She didn't even have her prosthesis on.

Where was the progress in that? Where was the proof she was getting better?

Where was her physical therapist?

He heard her voice a moment later.

"You'd be better off shooting with your left so you can steer with your right," Jaden called to Emily from sidelines.

Adam stalked to her side.

"Adam." She was startled, but clearly pleased to see him. "What are you doing here?"

"I had a meeting in town," he said simply. "Wanted to drop by and meet these kids."

"She's having a great time. She can dribble now," Jaden said with a wide smile.

"But she isn't playing basketball."

Jaden laughed. "Well, it isn't hockey."

"Come here." He grabbed her hand, ignoring the other people—presumably coaches—standing there.

He didn't stop until they were outside the door in the parking lot.

He didn't waste any time in getting to the point. "I thought that you were trying to get Emily *out* of her wheelchair, not make her more comfortable *in* it."

Jaden smiled. "She does look good, doesn't she?"

"That's not the point." He crossed his arms. "Why are you working with her on basketball in her *wheelchair*?"

"Because she wanted to. The team has inspired her to try new things, take on new challenges. Playing basketball in a wheelchair is not as easy as it looks. It's a good workout for her arms, and aerobically. Plus, she's learning that the wheelchair isn't a bad thing."

"I don't want her to think that the wheelchair is a good thing."

She nodded. "I know. She wants to be able to relate to the kids on the basketball team. That's all."

"Do you really think spending time with this basketball team is good for her?"

"Yes, I do." She took a step closer to him. "Because when Emily plays basketball with the team, she'd making a *choice* to use the chair. Which means that there's a choice to make. She realizes, even if it's subconsciously, that she could be out of the chair too."

"This is part of the plan to get her out of the chair, walking, doing the play and everything else?"

The play. It wasn't that simple. It was a *production*. That was the point. It had to be something more than standing and talking. He had to know Emily could do more than that.

Emily would be singing and dancing in the production. In five numbers.

In fact, just a few days ago Mrs. Murphy, the drama teacher, had called concerned that her star wouldn't be ready. She and Adam had discussed modifying two of the numbers so that the other cast members in the scene could more or less dance *around* Emily as she sang. There was one scene where she had to waltz with Professor Henry Higgins. That could work because the boy playing the Professor, Michael somebody, could help with her balance and support as he held onto her. In fact, Mrs. Murphy had agreed that Jaden should come and work with Michael and Emily together a few times to give the boy some pointers.

But there was one scene where Emily was on stage alone, singing and dancing. They could place a few props—a flower cart, a lamp post, a bench and so on—for her to hold onto, but she would definitely have to move and turn. Gracefully.

The final concern was the spiral staircase she had to ascend and descend—while singing, of course.

"The goal has always been to get her back to the things she wants to do," Jaden finally answered.

"She doesn't need to play basketball in a wheelchair," Adam said, folding his arms.

"She wants to play basketball in a wheelchair, Adam. That doesn't mean that she won't do all the other things you want her to do."

"The other things *she* wants to do," he corrected. "At least, the other things she *used* to want to do."

Dammit. She'd *loved* basketball. She'd played all the time. She'd been fast and tough and smart on the court. It had been a thrill to watch her.

"Are you sure you didn't push her into the play because it was something you figured would be easier for her?" Jaden asked. "You knew she wouldn't play regular basketball this year and you wanted her to do something normal. And now the wheelchair basketball is frustrating you because it's reminding you of the things that would *really* prove she was recovered but that she's not ready for. What, is wheelchair basketball just a half-assed effort in your mind?"

Adam straightened to his full height. Of course the school musical was easier than basketball. Of course he'd thought of that when he suggested it. Of course he'd rather she be able to play ball. But he hadn't forced Emily into any of this. "I suggested she try out for the play to give her a goal, something to look forward to, but Emily went to that try-out of her own free will."

"But when you suggested the try-out, you didn't know what the play would demand from her, or what condition she would be in after the surgery, especially after the previous failed attempts at therapy."

Adam scowled down at her. "Are you telling me she isn't going to be ready?"

No. That couldn't be what she was saying. This was Jaden. She could make it happen. She *had* to make it happen.

Jaden took a deep breath. "I don't know," she said honestly. "If it was just a one or two-act play, she'd be ready. But there are big dance numbers and multiple stage levels she has to go up and down and..."

He stared at her as she described all the things Emily would have to do. He didn't have to listen. He knew it. That was why he'd encouraged the school to make the annual show a musical this year and why he'd financially made up the difference the production would cost the drama department. If Emily could do all of the things the show demanded, in front of an audience, it would be proof to everyone that she was recovering.

"And you signed a contract that states that she will be able to do all of those things on opening night of that production," Adam interrupted. Jaden *had* to do this. He couldn't do it, so he'd found someone—maybe the only one—who could.

That was the problem. If Jaden didn't do it, who would? Was it even possible?

"I..." Jaden stopped. "I did?"

"You remember the contract?"

"Yes. I just...I didn't realize it was so specific."

"The other thing that was very specific was the amount of money agreed upon and that the check was to be written to you." He frowned at her stunned expression. "My contracts are well known for being very detailed. It saves trouble with miscommunications. Usually."

"If Emily doesn't take the stage on opening night in the lead role, I'm in violation of the contract."

“And you don’t get your money. Or your new rehab wing.”

“That’s the beauty of a well-written, thorough contract—it leaves no gray area,” she said. Her voice sounded weak. Her smile was too.

“So, we have an understanding?”

“Absolutely.”

Adam hated the look on Jaden’s face. She looked like he’d just slapped her. But it was her own fault. He’d specifically asked her if she wanted to read the contract. Besides, he was paying her one *million* dollars. He had a right to have high expectations.

And maybe this would keep Jaden from condoning Emily’s time in the wheelchair from here on out.

He hated that thing.

It represented exactly how powerless he’d felt in the situation with Emily’s illness. He wasn’t even capable of moving her from point A to point B.

He probably didn’t need to be so obsessed about the play, but Emily deserved a spotlight. She deserved applause. She deserved the attention and the admiration that would come with it when she took the stage.

As long as it went well.

He hated to think how horrible it would be if she couldn’t pull it off and limped or tripped or, God forbid, fell on stage.

His gut clenched with the thought. Not only would she be humiliated but there was certainly the possibility that she could get physically hurt.

It was Jaden’s job to ensure that none of that happened.

And it wasn’t like he was asking her to do it for free.

“Aren’t you the same lady who stood here and insisted that you knew what you were doing and that I had to let you do it your way?” he asked.

Her chin lifted. “Yes, I am.”

He stepped close so he could look down and meet her eyes directly. “Then do it your way. But *do it*.”

She stared at him for a long moment. Then took a deep breath and said, “I made a promise to you.”

“Yes, you did.” He felt like something heavy was sitting on his chest.

“And not many people have kept their promises to you.”

He didn’t say anything to that. It was true, but he got the feeling Jaden didn’t need confirmation.

“Can I bring Emily into the city next week? I think it would help to work on some things at school and on the actual stage.”

Startled, he said, “Did you just ask me permission for something?”

She narrowed one eye. “How about we call it a statement of intention with a question mark at the end.”

It was a white flag of sorts. Adam decided to accept it graciously. He didn't like strong arming Jaden with the contract but no matter how much he wanted to sleep with her, he couldn't be forgiving of a failure. Emily's rehab had to be the priority. For him and Jaden both.

"Yes, you may bring Emily to the city. In fact, that's a great idea."

"What day do you have business in the city?" she asked.

"Tuesday."

"Weird. That's the day we're going. I think you should stop by the school after your meeting ends."

Weird. Right. "To watch Emily's session?"

His palms got a little sweaty thinking about it. Everything he'd witnessed at the house in her sessions made him jumpy. At school, on stage, in the setting he'd been imagining Emily in for the past few months, there was an added level of pressure. This was what he'd pictured in his mind when he'd first seen her in the hospital bed and then in the wheelchair. He'd turned that into the ultimate culmination. The point where he would be able to breathe deep again and know she was all right. The idea of it not happening at all, or happening with the risk of disgrace for Emily, made him tense and irritated and, obviously, temperamental.

"Or to take us to dinner."

"How about both?" he asked.

"Great. I think it's time for all of us to figure out what Emily can do. For better or worse." Then she pivoted on her heel and headed for the door.

"Do you want me to go pick her up?" Jaden asked Adam for the third time.

"No."

He frowned at her, but she knew his irritation was not because of her but because tonight he had to face that his baby girl was no longer a baby.

"It will be fine. I'm not a child." He focused his eyes back on the TV where the Myth Busters were—big surprise—preparing to blow something up.

"Fine." Jaden lapsed into silence again, pretending to turn her attention back to the *Journal of Pediatric Physical Therapy* she had open in her lap.

Emily had left two hours ago for a pizza party at Shawna's house. They'd said goodbye to her in the family room instead of walking her to the front door, respecting that she was old enough to meet her friends at the door alone. But neither of them had made a move to leave the room since Emily's exit.

The party was a big deal. Jaden wanted to hear how it went right away when Em got home. It only made sense to stay put until Emily returned. She assumed Adam was feeling the same way since they'd settled onto opposite ends of the couch in front of the fireplace as soon as the front door shut.



Of course, Chad was going to be at the party, as was Chad's older brother, Matt, who had agreed to give Chad and Emily a ride. Jaden had been delighted to help Emily pick out her clothes and do her hair for the evening. But that delight had quickly changed to muted enthusiasm and subtle amusement as she watched Adam deal with Emily's departure. Not that she was amused at his expense. But he was so...unlike himself.

It had taken Jaden only five minutes to realize that, even though they were alone in the house with a few hours to kill, she and Adam were not going to be picking up where they left off in the kitchen a few nights before.

There was some tension between them after the contract discussion at the Y a few days ago. She knew that no matter what else Adam felt for her, he fully expected her to fulfill her professional obligation. But it wasn't that it was written in a legally binding document that made Jaden determined to meet Adam's expectations. It was the realization that Emily as Eliza Doolittle was what Adam truly needed to see. It wasn't only Jaden who would fail in his eyes if it didn't happen. It was him. He believed his job was to ensure that Emily had success and happiness. If she didn't, he would feel like a failure.

She didn't have to agree with him to realize what it meant to him. And somewhere along the way her contract to help Emily physically rehabilitate had turned into something more significant for Adam. She had become the first person Adam truly needed that would not let him down.

It was even more pressure than knowing she might not get the money.

But Jaden was hesitantly optimistic now. The past few days of therapy had gone very well. She and Emily had even tried waltzing today. It had been less than impressive, especially since neither of them really knew how to waltz, but they'd ended up laughing and Jaden always counted that as a success.

Even though she'd shaved her legs, used her new body spray and put on one of her few sexy bras just in case, Adam's focus was far away from satin sheets and skimpy underwear.

She looked at his profile. Distracted was a nice word to describe him tonight.

Instead of trying to cop a feel, he was worrying about his daughter, and if Chad was treating her right and...

Oh, okay. Jaden smiled and settled back into the couch more comfortably. Adam was doing just what he should have been doing. He was being a dad.

Jaden sighed. It would be so easy to fall in love with him.

She bolted upright.

Adam turned and gave her a funny frown. "What?"

Jaden bit her bottom lip and stared at him. It *would* be easy to fall in love with him. She should know. She'd done it.

"Jaden? Are you okay?"

She nodded quickly, not trusting herself to open her mouth. If she did, *I love you* might fall out.

“Dad? Jaden?”

Emily’s voice broke into the moment and Jaden nearly wilted with relief. It wasn’t time to tell him she loved him. She had no idea how to tell when it *was* time, but she just knew now wasn’t it.

“Dad?” Emily came into the room, her one crutch propped under her arm, and Adam stood, slowly. Too slowly.

Jaden hid a smile. He was trying to act blasé and not run to her, inspect her from head to toe, give her the third degree, and hook Chad up to a lie-detector test.

“Hi, did you have a good time?”

Jaden was pleased to see Adam reach out and pull Emily up against his side.

“It was great. Thanks for letting me go.”

“Sure. I’m glad you had fun.”

“And Shawna’s mom and dad were there?” Jaden asked, knowing that Adam was dying to confirm the information but was trying to hold himself back.

“Yes. Her mom said she’d like to have you guys come over sometime too.”

“Great.” Jaden had met Shawna’s mother during a couple of basketball games last year. Another fact that had helped to convince Adam to let Emily go.

Then it struck her. Why was it great? Why would she be invited over to Shawna’s next time? She wasn’t Adam’s girlfriend, she wasn’t Emily’s mother. In fact, she didn’t have any connection here once Emily’s rehabilitation was completed.

A strange sadness filled Jaden as she watched Emily and Adam talk. Her own head sounded like it was full of static and she couldn’t make out their words, but she took in every detail. Emily was only beginning on this wondrous road of first love and new friendships and adventures and making memories. Jaden felt a twinge near her heart as she realized that she wouldn’t see most of it. She was in love with Adam, loved Emily dearly, would love to stay in their lives, sharing and celebrating. But she hadn’t been invited.

“I’m going to go up to bed. I need to make a phone call before I go to sleep,” Emily said.

“I’ll walk up with you. I want to be sure that the one air vent you told me about is working tonight,” Adam said. He looped his arm around Emily’s shoulders and they left the room together, just father and daughter.

“Night, Jaden,” Emily called from the hallway outside of the family room.

“Night, sweetie,” Jaden called past the lump that formed in her throat when she realized how much she loved the term family room and how she didn’t belong in it in this house.

Restless, full of emotions she didn’t know what to do with, Jaden got to her feet and started pacing. She thought about going over to her own apartment, but as much as she felt she didn’t belong in the Steele’s family room, she couldn’t bring herself to face an empty apartment.

She stood in front of the fireplace mantel, looking at the photos of Emily from when she was a baby, through toddler-hood, grade school and the past few years. Her high school and college graduation pictures, her wedding photo, and pictures of her children would eventually join them. Jaden would love to see those pictures, would love even more to be there for the events.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, but she finally turned away with a sad sigh. She was startled to see Adam in the doorway, watching her. When they made eye contact, Adam came toward her, stopping an arm's length away. She could see his throat work, but no sound came forth. His eyes wandered over her face and Jaden could feel gentle pressure on her cheeks, her brow, the top of her head and her lips as though he were physically touching her. She also felt a pull toward Adam, like a tiny metal shaving toward a powerful magnet.

"Adam? Are you okay? Did something happen?"

He looked at her as though he were trying, fervently, to decipher a foreign language.

"You drive me crazy, Jaden."

Jaden tried to summon words but none would come. She tried to read his expression but there were too many emotions to distinguish even one with any certainty.

He went on. "You push me. No one else does that. Do you realize that? No one challenges me and stands up to me like you do." He reached for her. He grasped her upper arms gently and stared into her eyes. "And just when I think I'll be overwhelmed by frustration and confusion, I watch and talk to my daughter and realize that...you've worked magic. She's happy. That's all I've ever wanted. And it's because of you."

Jaden stopped breathing. Adam was so close and his words were filling her ears, her mind and her heart.

Adam pulled her up closer to him. "I can't escape. I am always thinking about you. If it isn't because I'm fuming about our most recent confrontation, it's because I'm smiling about something you've said or done, or I realize how thrilled I am over what you've accomplished with Emily. Or it's because..."

Adam stopped himself on the brink of his next words and Jaden knew that she had to hear those words or lie awake at night wondering.

She struggled to get the sound out and finally succeeded. "Because?"

"Because I'm wishing that I hadn't ever kissed you."

She blanched at his admission. That wasn't what she'd expected, or wanted, to hear at all. She tried to pull away, but he held her firmly.

"Because I can't get enough." The intensity in his tone pulled her eyes back to his. His voice dropped lower. "And I'm afraid I never will."

Adam's lips covered hers and Jaden took only a second to decide what to do. Heck, she'd shaved her legs. She melted against him and circled his neck with her arms as she felt his arms around her waist.

Decades, centuries, eons seemed to pass as Jaden relished being close and connected to Adam. It wasn't just her lips that he touched, but also the very core of who she was and who she wanted to be. She was a woman with the need to be desired, cherished and needed, and in those stolen moments with Adam, she was all of those.

Adam pulled back first. But even as his kiss released her, his tender gaze caught hers.

"What are you doing to me?" he asked huskily.

"Kissing you."

"I know."

A faint smile graced his face and she longed to reach up and touch his lips once more. "You are getting to me, Jaden. Like nobody else has or does."

She wet her lips and pulled in a shaky breath. "That's not true. Emily gets to you. Her pain, her happiness...those get to you. You're not as solitary as you'd like everyone to believe."

Jaden pulled a trembling hand through her hair and wondered if she would ever stop tingling.

"But Emily is my daughter. I'm programmed to feel those things. You are my..."

He stopped and she caught her breath. *Please don't say employee. Please don't say acquaintance or houseguest or even friend.*

When he failed to continue, the words just slipped from her lips. "Your what?"

Adam's gaze intensified and Jaden felt herself melting.

"My...fascination."

She felt lightheaded and wondered if it was simply from holding her breath. She didn't think so.

"What is it about you?" he asked.

The back of his fingers brushed against her cheek and she felt her eyes drift shut. He could be so gentle. Under all the power and assuredness there was a man who could stop her heart and bring tears to her eyes with a feather-light touch. Jaden absorbed the feel of Adam touching her for another moment, then opened her eyes and pinned him with a direct stare.

"I get to you because I don't believe all your bull. Everyone else does. They think you're okay all the time, right all the time and strong all the time. But I don't believe it."

Adam gave just a hint of a nod. "I am certainly not strong with you. I can't bring myself to ignore you, kick you out, tune you out...leave you alone."

"Is that bad?"

She really wanted to know. She *had* to know. Did Adam regret what was happening? Was he already sorry for admitting his feelings to her?

"I don't know...is it?" he asked, brushing his thumb along the side of her neck.

That was not enough. That was not what she needed to hear. But, if he could not be honest and straightforward, she would be.

“I don’t want you to leave me alone, Adam.”

He seemed to make a decision. He cupped her face between his two large palms and whispered, “Glad to hear it.”

His lips consumed hers again and she was lost to any sense of time or reality.

She felt comfort and excitement all at once as she leaned into his embrace and absorbed his strength and steadiness. She needed this. She needed him.

Adam’s hands went to her waist and he began rubbing in small, tantalizing circles. The soft knit of the shirt Jaden wore caressed her skin, and the warmth from Adam’s hand and the friction of the action heated every cell, then spiraled outward quickly, igniting her whole body.

She felt his hands on her hips and then he was lifting her, depositing her on the table near the doorway. He stepped between her knees and pulled her close again. She gave in to the feelings. She didn’t have a choice. There was no fighting it any longer. She was in real love for the first time in her life and he was an *amazing* kisser.

Her hips slid back on the table as Adam leaned closer, his lips doing things to her that she hadn’t known lips were capable of. His fingers went to the buttons on the front of her shirt and she felt the material give slightly. She hoped that his mouth would soon follow the path of skin he was baring. She sighed and leaned back, encouraging him in his efforts. His lips did follow to her collarbone and then a few inches more. She leaned back again. She felt him smile against the upper curve of one breast.

“You smell so good.”

“Thanks.” She wasn’t sure she had enough breath in her lungs to make the sound audible.

“You taste even better.”

She smiled and leaned back further. He chuckled, but the sound was drowned out by the crash of a vase smashing against the hardwood floor.

They both jumped, separating as if they’d been shot at. Jaden’s heart had been hammering since Adam’s lips touched hers, but now it felt as if it would burst from her chest. Adam was at least a foot away, clearly trying to catch his breath.

Jaden looked down at the glass pieces littering the floor. “Thank goodness it was empty.”

Adam couldn’t even manage a tiny fake smile. “Jaden,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“Yeah?”

“Could you button your shirt back up?” He raked his hand through his hair and tried to avoid looking at her.

She glanced down and smiled. Her lavender bra barely kept her modest, but she didn’t care. She shifted on the table and gave him what she hoped was a sultry look. “I’m saving your place.”

He backed up two large steps. “Please.”

She frowned at his reaction as she gathered the front of her shirt together and slid to the floor.

“Are you okay?” she asked, refusing to button her shirt back up, which she was sure Adam noticed.

“I shouldn’t have let it go so far.”

Oh, great. The careful, in control Adam had shown up...and his timing stunk. “Because you didn’t want it to?”

“Because I have a young teenage daughter just upstairs. She’s not asleep yet and...”

“And you don’t want her to know that her father is a human being with feelings and interests that extend outside of her.”

Jaden wasn’t sure where the words had come from but they were her honest read on the situation. He didn’t like admitting that Emily had interests and a life outside of the family and home he had worked so hard to build for her, which meant that he felt guilty having interests outside of that unit as well.

“This just isn’t a good time. I’m distracted. She just asked me if she can go to a dance with Chad and...”

“Which is exactly why you should let me take your mind off of things. You can’t spend every second of every day worrying about Emily. Especially when there’s nothing to worry about.”

Adam scowled at her. “You think I should forget all my responsibilities and just rip your clothes off and take you right here on the table?”

*Yes, yes, yes.*

“Of course not. We should go up to my apartment. Where we won’t get walked in on and where we won’t be heard.” She started toward the hallway, still holding the front of her blouse together.

“What if...”

She twirled back around and pinned him with a direct stare. “Listen, I’ve decided to take a chance that I like you for more than being a great dad. At least help me out with this moment of growth and take me upstairs and do dirty things to me.”

“I’d be doing you a favor?” He wasn’t smiling, yet. But he sounded amused.

“Yes. And it would be good for you too.”

“Sleeping with you would be therapeutic somehow?” Now he definitely sounded amused. He was also beginning to look aroused again.

“Yes,” she replied emphatically. “I think making wild, passionate, forget-about-everything-else love is just exactly what you need. Heaven knows it’s what *I* need.”

His eyebrows went up. “Is that right?”

“Since the first day I stepped foot in this house you’ve been coming on to me,” Jaden told him, settling her hands on her hips, which let the front of her blouse gape open. “And from day one, I’ve been responding to it. You’ve promised, more than once, that we are going to have sex. Now, I’ve just spent all evening with you alone in this house, on this couch and you haven’t even touched me inappropriately. It

isn't my fault you waited until Emily got home to finally get something going. Now it's going and it's time to follow through. So come on already." She turned toward the hallway again.

He caught up with her before she'd taken three steps. He grasped her elbow and spun her to face him. "That wasn't very romantic," he chided, in a low voice.

She tipped her chin up to meet his gaze directly. His eyes were burning with desire again and she realized that feeling as if he had to make all the decisions all the time must get tiring. Now she'd made this decision and he was more than happy to follow her lead.

"Sorry," she said, "How's this?" Jaden rose up on tiptoe, wrapped both arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. "I want you, Adam. I want you so much I can hardly stand it. Please take me upstairs and make love to me until I can't move." Then she kissed him with everything she had. All of her passion, her hope and her love poured out.

Adam didn't need a second invitation. He tore his mouth from hers just long enough to stare into her eyes as he said, "Oh, honey, I'll do that and then some."

Adam watched Jaden disappear through the door leading into the apartment and he took a moment to compose himself. It was no longer a question of if he should do this or not. He *was* going to do this. He was going to make love to Jaden. There was simply no way that he could stop now. What he needed was a moment to pull his hormones and emotions together so that he didn't end up taking her in less time that it took to undress.

The truth was, he'd been waiting a long time for Jaden. He'd been attracted to her, as she said, from day one, but something about her, about the promise of being with her like this, made him feel that he'd been waiting...forever. This first time with her—and it *would* be just the first of many—was monumental. He didn't want to put too much pressure on either of them, but it wasn't just his body that was straining to be close to her. His whole being seemed to want to rush recklessly toward joining with her.

He didn't understand it, but he wasn't going to wait another minute trying to analyze it. Jaden was in her bedroom at that very moment and he wasn't going to waste a single second.

The moment he opened the door, however, every thought he'd had about going slow, taking his time, appreciating every inch of her body and every sound she made, nearly flew out of his head.

Jaden's clothes were on the floor in a distinct, arousing trail leading right to the bed, where she lounged against the pillows, completely naked, except for the sheet she had draped seductively over her breasts and hips. The sheet, hiding what he most longed to see, was more seductive than had she been completely naked. The sleek fabric molded itself to her body, showing every curve and valley, yet concealing it at the same time.

He barely remembered to lock the door as he started toward the bed. He shrugged out of his shirt and dropped it on top of the lavender silk panties teasing him from just in front of the nightstand.

“You know your promise for making forget-about-everything-else love?” he asked, standing at the bedside and gazing down at her.

She nodded, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

“I can honestly say that I’m thinking about only one thing right now.”

“The Stock Market?” she asked, shifting slightly under the sheet, which dipped a little over her breasts, exposing the top curves.

“Nope,” he answered, forgetting the question almost immediately as the distinct shape of her nipples pressed against the sheet. He unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, stepping out of them, his eyes never leaving her.

“Tomorrow’s meeting agenda?” She moved her legs a little and the sheet slipped down between her knees, conforming to the long, trim length of her thighs and hinting at the sweet spot between them.

“No.” He pulled his briefs down next, letting them drop to the floor before kicking them out of the way, all the time reveling in the look of passion on Jaden’s face as she saw him completely naked for the first time.

He put one knee on the edge of the mattress near her left hip and leaned in slightly, bracing one arm on the headboard. He hooked the index finger of his free hand at the top of the sheet, right between her breasts and began slowly easing the silk down, letting it glide over her skin, teasing them both.

“Um, are you thinking about...” Her breathless question trailed off as the sheet slid to her stomach, baring her breasts to Adam.

He lifted his hand and ran his index finger from the top of one breast, down, across the tight nipple, to the velvety underside.

“I’m not thinking about that either,” he told her, his voice gravelly as he watched his finger moving against her. She was beautiful and he felt almost detached from the hand moving over her. He felt everything, yet couldn’t quite believe he was finally here with her like this.

Jaden gasped as his finger circled her nipple again. Her eyes closed and her head fell back against the pillows. Adam was touching her, finally, and everything inside of her felt like sobbing and screaming and laughing at the same time. It was too much, too intense, and yet it wasn’t nearly enough.

She licked her lips and tried to speak. “What are you thinking about then?”

He didn’t respond for a long moment and finally she opened her eyes to look up at him. His gaze was hot and his expression very solemn when he said, “Being inside you.”

“Oh, yes, please.” She reached for him and he came down on top of her quickly, rolling them to their sides.



His lips were hungry as if he were trying to drink her in. His hands were insistent and everywhere. They stroked and kneaded and teased, and Jaden thought she would surely die if he didn't hurry and fill the aching emptiness inside her.

She kissed him and touched him, reveling in how hot and hard he was, and filled her hands with anything she could reach. When she cupped his erection, Adam shuddered and Jaden knew that she never wanted him to respond to another woman like that ever. *She* would be the only one who knew his body, what excited and what comforted. *She* would be the only one to ever touch him like this.

That assuredness made her slow her movements slightly to more fully absorb every detail, and she enjoyed even the smallest response he made to her touch. She examined all of him, learning the shape and size and texture of his body. Her lips followed her hand, which were now skimming over his stomach, moving lower and lower, with every intention of learning not just the feel, but the taste of him too.

But Adam grasped her upper arms and hauled her up his body until their lips were almost touching again. "Not that, not yet. I'll never last," he told her huskily.

In this position, the rest of their bodies lined up perfectly and Jaden couldn't help but wiggle her hips slightly, rubbing against him. "Okay. For now."

He groaned and closed his eyes. "Jaden, honey, you're going to kill me."

"Oh, I hope not," she teased, "we haven't even gotten to the *really* good stuff yet."

He chuckled and rubbed his hands up and down her back. He loved how responsive and enthusiastic she was. She wasn't self-conscious or scared. It was clear that Jaden was as expressive in the bedroom as she was in the other areas of her life and Adam knew he would never get bored with her, in or out of bed. He might, however, get very, very tired...but that was something he was willing to risk.

"Going slow with you is almost impossible, you know that?" he told her.

"Who asked you to go slow?"

She was looking at him with a mixture of mischief and passion and Adam found the combination irresistible. He flipped her onto her back, covering her body with his, teasing them both with the way his body fit against hers, *almost* as close as they could get. He propped his elbows on either side of her head, holding himself up to keep from crushing her.

"You're right, no one said anything about slow."

The teasing was gone the next instant when she said, "If you ask me, this has all taken plenty long enough as it is." She bent her knees, slid her heels up toward her hips and tipped her pelvis and just like that Adam was positioned perfectly at her entrance.

He could barely pull in a decent breath as he absorbed the heat and wetness that seemed to surround him.

“I want you inside me,” she whispered, kissing the side of his neck, her arms wrapping around him, holding him close. “Please, hurry.”

He grabbed the condom package he’d tossed on the bedspread and tore it open with his teeth. He tried to use the time it took to roll it on to regain some self control.

“Adam,” Jaden moaned.

Her pelvis tilted again and Adam was lost. His hands grasped her hips and he sank into her, feeling as if everything inside of him was rushing into her as they joined completely, intimately, for the first time. She gasped with pleasure, her back arching, her fingers clutching his shoulders. After just a moment of letting her body adjust to his, she began moving and Adam had no choice but to follow his body’s urgings to increase the tempo, pulling her up toward him as he plunged deeply into her over and over. She kept up, sweating, gasping, encouraging him with her words and hands.

And just when Adam was afraid he would tumble over the peak without her, Jaden cried out his name, her body and hands clutching him closer and tighter as she shattered. His own release was the sweetest sensation he’d ever experienced, and even with passion and pleasure filling his mind, he knew that there would never be another woman in his bed or in his heart.

## Chapter Nine

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Jaden said.

The shadows hid Adam’s face. Still she knew that he was feeling a mix of emotions tonight. Anxiety most definitely. Some excitement, she was pretty sure. Love, however, was predominant. And that made all the difference.

“It will be okay,” Adam answered. His hand skimmed softly over her arm until he met her hand and entwined his fingers with hers. “By the way, you smell as good as you look.”

She smiled. “Thanks. But sweet talk doesn’t change that we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“I know.” He sounded amused.

“But we’re going to anyway?” she asked.

“You know you want to, Jaden.”

She did. Part of her really did. “That also shouldn’t matter.”

“We’ve come this far already.”

He was right. They were more than halfway there. She sighed. “Okay.”

Moments later, they quietly inched open the door at the back of the school auditorium where Emily and the rest of the cast were rehearsing.

It wasn’t truly spying, Jaden rationalized. It was a public place, after all, and it wasn’t like they were ducking behind potted plants.

Suddenly Adam tugged her to the left. Behind a tall stack of boxes at the back of the theater.

“There they are,” he whispered.

Jaden rolled her eyes. Okay, they were spying.

Never mind that Emily had told them both that she wanted the performance to be a surprise for them.

Never mind that Jaden had helped Mrs. Murphy choreograph all of the scenes, making sure Emily had plenty of support so there was nothing to worry about.

Never mind that Em’s play practices were two hours long and she and Adam could be at home. In bed. Together. Like they had been every night for the past two weeks.

She supposed it was her fault. She’d asked him what he wanted to do tonight. It had been intended as a lead in to doing something together. Just the two of them. She’d wanted to have a romantic evening alone. She’d thought maybe he’d take her out for dinner, or for a romantic moonlit walk, or for a horse-

drawn carriage ride. They'd shared a lot of personal information in the kitchen late at night, they were lovers now, and she had hope for the future, but they'd never been on a date.

Now she was racking her brain for something that would lure Adam away from the school before Emily found out they were there.

At least Adam was holding her hand. And there was muted lighting. Sure, it was because the auditorium was dark except for the lights on the stage, but hey, she was getting less picky as the evening went on. This was kind-of romantic. At least they were together. But she'd take the kitchen table at Adam's house or a table in the middle of a fast food restaurant as long as she had his full attention.

Jaden gasped. She'd been anxious for Emily to go out. She'd wanted Adam to herself. Just the two of them. Alone. And it wasn't just about sex. She wanted to talk to him, make memories with him, make him laugh.

Adam turned at the sound. "You okay?"

Amazed, but definitely okay. "Yes," she said breathlessly. "I just had a revelation."

Adam's eyebrow rose. "Anything you want to share?"

She nodded. "Yes." Her lips spread into a large, wide smile. "Definitely."

His lips twitched at the corners. "I can't wait."

"I wanted to be alone with you tonight."

Adam looked apologetic as he squeezed her hands. "I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to be alone with you too. I just couldn't help checking on her. Maybe we can get back and have some time before Emily gets home."

Jaden slowly shook her head, still grinning. "It doesn't matter. It's just good that I wanted it. And I'll still want it, every day, whenever it's possible."

"That all sounds good." He tipped his head to the side. "What am I missing?"

She wanted to laugh, hug him, dance around, celebrate. "I never wanted to be alone with Dan. I never initiated it. I would be nervous every time. And it rarely came up. Cody was always a given. And we were both totally comfortable that way."

Adam moved in close until she could feel his warmth reaching out to her.

"I thought we already established that I am different from Dan."

"Of course." She laughed, happy and confident. "You are. Very much. And my feelings for you are very different. My feelings for you are about *you*. Not Emily. I wanted her to leave tonight." She grinned a little sheepishly, not sure how Adam would take that announcement.

He moved in even closer. "We've spent a lot of alone time. In the kitchen, in particular. We've gotten to know each other without Emily involved."

He was completely right. And it further amazed her. This was wonderful. She was in love and even better, she could trust that it was real.

She never wanted it to end. “Dan never asked me how I got interested in physical therapy,” she went on. “He never told me about his childhood. All our conversations were about the present, superficial stuff, and Cody, of course.”

Adam leaned in, his breath on her lips as he whispered, “Trust me. I want to know everything about you, Jaden,” just before he kissed her.

The kiss was sweet and clinging and full of promise—of more kisses to come, the love making that was in their future, the times when it would be just the two of them and that would be more than enough.

Music erupted from the stage and they separated, smiling.

She had to tell him. Her heart was too full. It would burst if she didn’t let the words out. “Adam, I’m in love with you.”

He cupped her face in his hand, staring at her, looking amazed and happy and... content. “I’m in love with you too,” he said softly.

Jaden felt her eyes fill. “I want to be in your life. For a long, long time.”

He bent and kissed her again. “Good,” he said when he lifted his head.

She hugged him, resting her cheek against his chest, absorbing his strength, warmth and the feel of being exactly where she belonged.

“Look who’s down front,” he said after a moment.

She turned to look. Chad was sitting in the middle seat in the front row. “Did you think he’d leave after he talked his brother into giving her a ride to practice tonight?”

“No. I’m torn between being pleased with his support and worried about how quickly this seems to be moving,” Adam admitted.

Jaden hugged him. “If you weren’t worried about that, it’d be something else.”

He sighed in agreement and resignation over his daughter’s first love interest. “There she is.”

Jaden turned and saw where his attention had shifted. Emily had just stepped out from the wings. Jaden’s heart swelled. “She looks beautiful, doesn’t she?”

“She’s...she’s...walking.”

Adam sounded like he was choking and Jaden glanced at him quickly. His expression was mystified and he was barely breathing.

Slowly, but surely, the truth dawned on Jaden. Emily was walking without her crutches, clearly without help from anyone or anything...much to Adam’s surprise.

Jaden took a deep breath. This was part of what Emily had wanted to surprise him with on opening night. “Isn’t that what you expected?”

Adam turned to her. “You said you were coming to practice to help make the adjustments she needed. I assumed you were making accommodations so she could do her part without walking. Or that you were finding ways for her to sit, or hang onto things, or hang onto people.” He glanced at the stage, then back at

Jaden, swallowing hard. “I mean, I’ve seen her walk around the dining room table, but she always leaned on the table or chairs. And I’ve seen her walk with you. Holding on.” He faced the stage. “But now she’s *walking*. By herself. Actually walking.”

Just then Emily did a little dance step. It wasn’t huge. It was nothing like what was coming up. It was just a step-ball-change that went along with the music right then and Mrs. Murphy thought it was cute. But Jaden almost grimaced at the look in Adam’s eyes. He was clearly oscillating between disbelief, joy and pain.

“I told you she’d do the play,” Jaden said, her voice a little hoarse. “Her part requires walking, and dancing, so—” Jaden shrugged, “—she’s walking and dancing.”

He cleared his throat. “I guess... I mean...apparently, Chad is good for her. I thought that he was just making her happy, but...it looks like he’s working miracles.”

Chad? Jaden frowned trying to figure out how he’d jumped to Chad. She looked at the back of the boy’s head. Chad was here, front and center, and Emily was clearly fine with that. While she’d wanted Adam to wait, to not see the show before she was ready. She’d wanted to surprise Adam, but he was clearly seeing it as an acceptance and comfort with Chad that didn’t extend to her father. The one who had been there for her through it all.

Jaden did grimace this time. Adam was dealing with the new information about his daughter’s recovery and was assuming that Chad was the motivation behind it. Maybe she should just let it go at that.

“She’s been getting stronger every day and her attitude has been so much better,” Jaden said. “It was all progressing toward this.”

“And Chad was the missing piece. I guess I should have gotten her a boyfriend a long time ago.” Adam’s tone was bitter and there wasn’t a glimmer of a smile when he glanced to where Chad sat watching Emily. “Here I was getting her the best doctors, getting her the best physical therapists, getting her an *elevator*. And all along all she needed was a boyfriend to impress.”

“Adam, there’s a lot to it. Walking again wasn’t just a matter of physical ability, it was attitude, spirit, trust...”

“Money?”

“Excuse me?”

“Was any of it about money, because that’s obviously all I had to offer. It’s all I ever have to offer.”

He was hurt, Jaden realized. Maybe because he hadn’t known about the huge improvements Emily had made, but more because he felt that he’d had no part in it. “That isn’t true,” Jaden protested. “You loved her, you encouraged her, you were there through everything.”

“Until now. She’s barely told me anything about Chad. Now he’s here and she’s walking, singing, dancing. I’m not involved with this new, obviously very important part of her life at all.”

“She knows it bothers you. She knows that you’re jealous of Chad and she doesn’t want to rub it in.”

“And why shouldn’t I be jealous?” Adam asked, his voice rising in volume. “In just a few weeks, he’s done everything I’ve been working on for months. For him, she’s obviously willing to try and work hard.”

“It’s not like that. Everything you’ve done all along has played a part in this.”

Adam shook his head and stared at the stage. “I would have done *anything* to get her walking again.”

Jaden felt the tears stinging her eyes. It was awful to watch him struggle like this, but he was going to be furious if she told him the truth. He would be hurt knowing that Emily had been walking for months without sharing it with him, but was it worse for him to think that this new male in her life was the reason? She just didn’t know. But she couldn’t lie to him and she couldn’t keep the truth hidden any longer.

“You said that you wanted it to be so that no one could tell anything was different about her.”

He nodded.

“Think about her. She’s a teenage girl with her first real boyfriend. There’s nothing more normal than that. Her leg is the last thing on her mind when she’s with Chad. She’s living again, laughing and making good memories. Isn’t that the most important thing?”

Adam dragged his hand through his hair. “Of course.” He sighed deeply. “Yes. I just wanted to at least be there. I gave up thinking I would be the one to inspire her, but I wanted to be there when she had the breakthrough.”

Jaden’s heart ached for him. Not only that he was hurt now, but that he’d given up thinking he was important to Emily. “Adam, there’s something you should know. Chad isn’t the one who got Emily walking. She was walking before she met him.”

Slowly he shifted his gaze to her face. He looked at her for a long time. Then, “You did? And you didn’t tell me?”

“No, it wasn’t me either.”

“I don’t understand.”

Here it was. She didn’t have a choice now. She had to tell him. And she had to face his reaction. Another deep breath should help.

It didn’t.

“She started walking on her own.”

He just stared at her for several seconds again. Jaden’s announcement seemed to take an extremely long time to sink in. Finally he asked, “When?”

“A while ago. I didn’t know about it until we went to the mall the first time.”

“That long ago?” He looked stunned. “Why didn’t she tell me? Why didn’t she want to celebrate this?”

“She wasn’t ready. Like I said, it was about more than just physical ability. She got stronger and improved her coordination and relearned her gait pattern. But in her mind and heart she wasn’t ready to walk. And she wasn’t ready to face all of the things that would mean.”

He shook his head, looking perplexed. He looked back to where Emily was listening to something the director was saying, then back to Jaden. Then back and forth again.

Realization dawned on his face and his eyes narrowed. “You knew.”

It wasn’t a question. The full truth had finally sunk in. The accusation in his eyes was clear. Jaden pressed her lips together.

Before she could come up with the right words—whatever they were—Adam repeated his statement. “You knew. You’ve known since you went to the mall and you didn’t say anything.”

“I promised Emily I wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“She wasn’t ready.” Jaden’s heart was lodged firmly in her throat. Only a few minutes ago he’d said he was in love with her. Now he was glaring at her, obviously convinced that she’d betrayed him. She took his hands in hers. “You wanted her to jump back into her life, to be normal, as if nothing ever happened. But something *did* happen and she needed time to deal with it and decide who she was and what she wanted to do.”

He shook off her touch. “You should have told me!” Anger had obviously replaced the shock. And it was all directed at her.

“I...”

“You should have told me,” he said again. “*I’m* the one paying you.” He poked himself in the chest. “You are working for *me*.”

She felt her eyes widen. “This isn’t about the money.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“I saw the article in the paper about McCormick’s donation to Mercy. I know what that means to you. I know the Board at Children’s is starting to get antsy to do something with that building. You need the money to finish it. Badly.”

That made her stop in the midst of what she was about to say. Dread filled her mind and heart. She shook her head. “This job was a dream come true. It meant that I could make sure that building was finished and everything I said would happen did. But it became so much more than a job. Emily is so much more than a job.”

She looked toward the stage as Emily approached the middle of the song. Jaden knew the show almost as well as Em did by now. This was where the choreography required more than just walking amidst the prop furniture. Emily had stepped up two steps to the front door of the set. Now she was supposed to continue singing as she came back down those steps into the living room. But she stopped on the top step. She was still singing, but her eyes were on the steps, not the empty chairs where her audience would sit in eight days. She hesitated.



For the moment, Jaden forgot Adam and their argument. She held up her hand to stop Adam's words. Something was wrong with Emily.

"Come on, Em," Jaden whispered with a slight frown. There was no railing and no props nearby for Emily to use, but she'd done the maneuver with poise and without hesitation a number of times. Going up had gone smoothly. It was true that stepping down was more of a balance challenge but it was only two steps. It should have been a piece of cake.

Emily was already in the part of the song where she should be beside the couch where she was supposed to flop down dramatically.

"Is she okay?" Adam asked, obviously aware that something wasn't going according to plan.

"I don't know. She just has to step down."

Emily started to step down, but she went with her strong leg first, opposite of how she was supposed to do it. Which she knew. Her prosthetic leg wasn't quite strong enough to let her down easily and she pitched forward. Her strong ankle turned on the edge of the step and her leg crumpled underneath her. She landed in a heap on the floor.

Cast members rushed from both sides of the stage toward the center, Chad was out of his seat and onto the stage in the blink of an eye and Jaden was down the aisle and up the steps before she even realized her feet had moved.

"Em?"

She was hiding her face, but she looked up when she heard Jaden's voice. "Jaden?" There were tears tracking down her cheeks. "What are you doing here?"

"What happened?"

"My leg twisted." She wiped her right cheek.

"Emily." Adam's deep voice stopped all the commotion around them.

"Dad?"

"Are you hurt?" he demanded, kneeling next to her on one knee.

"Um." She sniffed and rubbed her knee where her prosthesis attached. "I'm not sure."

Jaden pushed the hem of Emily's floor length pink dress up so she could see Emily's leg. She started prodding the area. "Any of that hurt?"

"Not really."

Emily's leg looked normal, the prosthesis was fine. Her other ankle was sore to touch and slightly swollen, but it was clearly a mild sprain. She'd have a few bruises tomorrow, but overall she was fine.

"Okay, let's get you up." Jaden stretched to her feet and held out her hand.

Emily visibly hesitated. "I'm not sure I can."

"Yes, you can," Jaden said. Emily was clearly shaken. It was understandable. But she had to get over it. "Come on. Get up."

Emily bit her bottom lip and rubbed at her ankle.

Jaden squatted back down next to her. "Emily, look at me." When she did, Jaden said firmly, "You can do this. Get up and do the scene again."

Emily glanced at the steps. "I can't. My leg isn't strong enough."

Jaden took Emily's chin between her thumb and forefinger and forced her to meet her eyes. "It wasn't your leg. It was your head. You thought about it too hard and you panicked. You can control that. So, do it again."

Emily's eyes widened just before Jaden felt Adam's hand on her upper arm. He tugged her to her feet. "Leave her alone."

They had a crowd of teenagers around them, but it was clear that Adam didn't care any more than Jaden did. This was an important moment. Not only did Emily need to know that she could get back up after the fall, but her fellow cast members needed to see her finish the scene. As did her dad.

Jaden shrugged out of his grasp. "No. She's just scared."

"For good reason. She just fell."

"Come on, Em," Jaden said. "Get up."

Emily looked at her father.

"Let it go, Jaden," he said decisively. "Come on, Em. I'll take you home."

"If she doesn't get back up now and do it again it will be even harder next time."

"Stop pushing her!" Adam demanded angrily.

"Stop babying her," Jaden shot back. She knew his reaction was part fear from seeing Emily fall and part left over frustration from their argument. She felt the same way. Not to mention the habit he had of stepping in to override her decisions.

"She's done." Adam bent and hoisted Emily to her feet, wrapping his arm around her waist to support her.

Jaden rolled her eyes. Just a little bit ago he'd been impressed with her walking. Now he was practically carrying her. "The rest of the cast needs her so they can keep practicing."

"Her understudy can do it."

"*Emily* needs to do it. The play is next weekend."

"She isn't ready."

"Bull!" Jaden exploded. "She's more than ready. She had one misstep. She'll learn from it and won't do it again."

"She. Isn't. Ready," Adam said.

"She has to be ready. Opening night is eight days from now."

"Then opening night will have to happen without her."

Jaden stared at him completely flabbergasted. Emily was looking at him with a similar expression.

“You mean she’s done for good?” Mrs. Murphy, the first person to brave inputting into the situation, asked. “She’s quitting?”

“Evidently,” Adam said. “I’m sorry. I know you’ve done a lot of work with her. But we’re pushing too hard.”

“You’re wrong.” Jaden put her hands on her hips. “She’s ready. *You’re* the one who isn’t. You’ve been talking so big all this time about how you want her to have normal experiences and be able to do all of these wonderful things you didn’t get to do. But now you realize that some of those things might leave you out. Now you realize that you’d rather keep her at home, safe and tucked in, where you can be the center of her universe.”

Adam’s mouth was a thin, firm line. Jaden almost took the words back at the look in his eyes. She knew she’d hurt him, but while it might be painful, it was still true. She bit her tongue and folded her arms across her stomach to keep from reaching for him.

He nodded once. Then he let go of Emily, made sure she was balanced, and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket.

Somehow Jaden knew what he was doing even before she saw what was in his hand.

His checkbook.

Jaden’s eyes burned with unshed tears and she couldn’t breathe as she watched him write out a check. She knew exactly what it would say.

One million dollars paid to the order of Dr. Jaden Monroe was handed to her a moment later.

“Now you don’t have any reason to protest my decision,” he said coolly.

She looked up into the face of the man she loved. The man who was breaking her heart. “I don’t want this.”

“What do you want?”

“You to trust me. With Emily. With *you*.”

Something flashed in his eyes and for a moment she thought he would step toward her. Instead he said, “You do want that money. You made a promise to a bunch of people. Now you’re holding the way to keep that promise in your hands.”

Jaden resisted grabbing his arm, but she wanted to desperately. And to never let go.

“I made a promise to you too. I told you Emily would star in this play.”

Adam shrugged, his eyes cold. “I’ll get over it. I’ve had a lot of practice.”

She didn’t want that to be true. She didn’t want him to get over it—over her. Because she knew she would never get over him.

She looked down at the check in her hand. That was a lot of zeroes. She saw the unfinished building in her mind, then the sketches of the finished space that hung in her office at the hospital for months. She

saw Dan's conceited face and then the faces of dozens of kids who'd gone through therapy at Children's. She wanted that building. She wanted to keep that promise. She wanted this check.

She sighed. Then ripped the check in half. Then in half again.

She handed the pieces to Adam. "I'm not done with *this* promise yet. We have a week before this play opens."

He looked irritated but he nodded and took Emily's hand. "In that case, I'm sure Emily's understudy will appreciate all your help. But you can consider your contract with us fulfilled." He turned his daughter toward the stage exit.

Emily glanced back over her shoulder at Jaden, obviously resistant and confused.

Jaden smiled, somehow, and motioned at her to go with her dad. For now.

It didn't happen often, but when Adam Steele was wrong he was *wrong*.

Not one damned thing had been fulfilled between them.

Yet.

Adam took his seat just before the house lights went down. The seat to his right was empty. Strange for the front row.

He flipped the program open to Emily's bio and felt his stomach tighten with anticipation. Emily had been insistent not only that she would take the stage as planned, but also that he call and apologize to Mrs. Murphy. She hadn't, however, mentioned anything about Jaden since the day she'd fallen on stage.

Mrs. Murphy had. When he'd finally called three days later to apologize for overreacting to Emily's fall she'd made sure that he knew Jaden was meeting Emily every day after school to continue work on her rehab program and the play.

He'd sent a check to Jaden via messenger the next day.

It had come back to him ripped in half.

Someone settled into the seat next to him just as the lights went down.

He glanced over, expecting to see another parent.

Instead, his heart stopped.

Jaden sat there, her eyes resolutely focused on the heavy burgundy velvet curtains in front of them.

He looked back to the front as well.

He needed to say that he was sorry, but with her there beside him it seemed sadly inadequate. He wanted to say a hell of a lot more than that. He wanted to say he'd been an ass and thank her for the miracle she'd worked and tell her that he'd missed her every single day and night since she'd been gone.

He certainly wasn't going to say "good evening" as if nothing had happened. But he also couldn't lean over, grab her and kiss her the way his body was screaming for him to do.

This wasn't the time or place to say I love you. But that was all his brain could come up with and he had to wonder if it mattered. She'd come into his life because he'd hired her. He'd needed a physical therapist. She was a physical therapist. She'd needed a huge sum of money. He had, and was willing to part with, a huge sum of money. It had been very up front and fully understood. The sex and laughter and arguing and falling in love had all been unplanned and complicating.

She hadn't called him, hadn't written a nasty note to go with the ripped up check, hadn't even come back to the house. Emily and Tony had packed up her stuff and driven it to her.

Maybe she was glad to be away from him after the way he'd acted. He'd treated her badly that day. Maybe she regretted falling in love with him. Maybe it was better just to ignore everything.

Of course, he hadn't been able to ignore how much he missed her when he was miles away at the estate, buried in work. Now that she sat right next to him, the scent of her body spray tempted him, her shoulder brushed his and she crossed her legs, showing an expanse of skin he itched to touch. It was impossible to ignore that he still wanted her with an intensity that he knew he'd never find again. And loved her. More than he could have ever imagined.

Adam took a deep breath and willed the curtains to open. He had self-control. He had discipline. He could sit next to her for a couple of hours and not do anything but watch the play, smile and applaud. He could act as if Jaden was what she should have been all along: a therapist he'd hired for a job, which she had completed. He sighed. Damn. He still owed her money. He reached into his jacket.

"I swear to God, if you try to give me a check right now, I'll murder you in front of all these people."

He glanced at Jaden to find her eyes still straight forward and her teeth gritted.

Not exactly the first words he thought he'd hear from her when they saw each other again. "But the job is done," he said, keeping his voice low so as not to be overheard.

"I can barely deal with sitting next to you right now. The last thing I want is you *paying* me like all I did was work for you and now you're done with me," she hissed.

"You were..."

She turned to him, her eyes narrowed. "Don't say it."

"But..."

"Don't." She put a finger against his chest. "I was *not* just an employee, Adam. And by the way, you can't *afford* to pay me for some of the stuff I did for you."

He looked at her. Her sass hadn't diminished a bit. Which made him feel better. She wasn't *just* anything. "There will never be a time when I feel done with you," he said quietly.

She stared at him, her mouth open, clearly shocked.

He couldn't help it. He still liked striking Jaden speechless.

"But you do need the money," he said.

She swallowed and turned to face forward. "That isn't the most important thing."

“Yes, it is.”

“No. The most important thing is about to happen up on that stage.”

He knew that Emily mattered to Jaden. He knew that she wanted Emily to succeed. “So, what? You’re donating your time and work with Emily?”

She snorted. “Right. You’re about as far from being a charity as anyone could get.”

He smiled and turned to face front.

“I don’t want a dime until you’ve seen Emily up there doing what I promised you she would be able to do,” she said.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a nickel. He set it on her knee. “Then consider that a down payment on the promise I’m sure you’re going to deliver.”

Her retort was interrupted—which was probably fortunate for him—by the curtains finally lifting. The house lights darkened completely, the spotlight brightened and the music swelled, then faded.

The scene opened and as Emily strode onto the stage into the center of the spotlight and began her first line, Adam found himself completely choked up and unable to pull his eyes from the image of his daughter.

But when Jaden slipped her hand into his, he held on tight.

The first act concluded with Emily in the middle of the stage, just as she’d started. The spotlight slowly faded and the house lights came up as the curtain swung closed.

Jaden wiped her eye, and turned to Adam. She hated this, but she had to get across town to the basketball tournament where the wheelchair team was playing. She intended to see the rest of the play tomorrow night and again the day after. Emily knew that she planned to leave at intermission and understood. In fact, Emily had been disappointed to miss the tournament herself. Chad been torn between the girl he was starting to care for and the brother who he’d always supported. He’d planned to do the same thing Jaden was doing, but his brother needed help getting ready for the tournament.

In the end, Emily had told them both to go to the tournament.

“She’s doing an amazing job, Adam.”

“Thanks to you.”

She shook her head. “Stop it. I don’t have time to get into this with you right now. I have to go.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking surprisingly relaxed. It was like a different man was sitting next to her now. The tension had been rolling off of him in waves since she’d taken her seat.

“Ladies’ room?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no.” She hesitated. Adam would likely not be pleased that she was leaving, especially when it was for the basketball team that he’d been less than enthusiastic about from the beginning. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

He frowned, his fingers tightening on hers. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes. Emily knows. I’ll see the whole thing tomorrow night.”

“Where are you going? This is what you’ve been working for all this time.”

She smiled. “Not really. I’ve been working for Emily all this time. Now she’s able to do whatever she wants. And she knows it. I’m satisfied.”

“And you’re ready to move on.” His tone was flat and he withdrew his hand from hers.

She frowned. “I’ll be here tomorrow night.”

“And what about after that?”

“There’s a matinee on Sunday. I already have my ticket.”

He huffed out an impatient breath. “I mean after that. After the play is over. Then there’s no more reason for you to be around.”

Her frown deepened. Adam Steele was absolutely the most frustrating man she’d ever met. One minute he was throwing her out of Emily’s life and now he was ticked that she wasn’t going to be there. “If you mean a reason for me to be around Emily, there’s only one—we’re friends. I care about her, I love her. You can bet I’ll be around. But yes, I have other things I need to do too.”

“Fine. Go.” He turned to face the front, crossing his arms, looking very much like a petulant child.

“There’s just one thing.”

“What?”

“I’ll take that check now.”

His narrowed gaze didn’t leave hers as he withdrew his checkbook, scribbled his name on the signature line and tore it loose.

“You’re not going to fill in the amount?” she asked, accepting it.

“I trust you.”

The three words vibrated through her. She felt like laughing and crying. “With your money, maybe.”

She stood, slid the folded check into her pocket, grabbed her jacket and left.

The lights flashed signaling that Act Two was about to begin. Adam settled back into his seat, trying to relax. Of course, relaxed was one thing he’d very rarely felt in association with Jaden Monroe.

She drove him nuts. He trusted her. He did. He hadn’t demanded she stop showing up at school to work with Emily. He’d trusted that she’d be here tonight. He hadn’t known Emily had placed their seats

right next to one another, but he'd been sure that Jaden would be present. He trusted her when she said that she loved Emily. It was quite obvious.

It wasn't his fault if she didn't know that he trusted her. It wasn't.

Well, it probably wasn't.

The music came up, the lights went down and the heavy velvet curtains rose grandly. *Thank God.*

Eliza Doolittle was seated on the sofa. She was listening to Professor Higgins rant as he paced around the room.

But Adam didn't hear the lines. He heard nothing over the unrelenting, repeating words *what is going on?*

The girl on the sofa was completely opposite of Emily in every way. She was short and plump with curly blond hair and a huge, easy smile. It wasn't until the hero approached her and called her the heroine's name that Adam finally accepted that Emily's understudy was playing her part in Act Two.

*Where is she? Where is she?*

Something had to be wrong. Was she sick? Had she gotten hurt? Had the stage fright set in late? He stood quickly, pacing down the front row, anxiety growing with each step. As he turned up the aisle, his eyes landed on the seat that Jaden had occupied just a few minutes ago. The empty seat.

He stopped and stared. Had Jaden known? Had she known that Emily wasn't finishing her part? Where had Jaden needed to go?

People frowned and started shifting to try to see around him. He strode to the back of the theater and then made the sharp right that would take him to the door leading backstage. He tried to keep his steps quiet and voice down but it was a struggle. He immediately zeroed in on Mrs. Murphy, Emily's drama teacher and the director of the play.

"Where's my daughter?" he demanded in a voice that just barely qualified as a whisper.

"Mr. Steele." The woman was clearly surprised to see him.

"Where is Emily?"

"I don't... I don't know..." Her eyes darted around the backstage area. "We were wondering the same thing. I finally had to send Amanda out," she said, naming Emily's understudy.

"You don't know?" Adam asked. "She was just here. She did Act One."

Mrs. Murphy had clearly recovered a bit from the shock of being confronted. "I'm aware of that Mr. Steele. But when it was time to take places for Act Two, no one could find her."

"And you didn't think to check on her?"

The director drew herself up taller. "I have an entire cast of kids to keep track of along with a rather elaborate musical production going on here in front of an audience of two hundred. I sent my assistants to look for her but no one could find her and we couldn't stall any longer. I let the principal know and he asked security to look for her."



"Mrs. Murphy?" Two men in uniform approached. "We've searched the building. Emily Steele isn't here and no one seems to know where she is. We also checked her father's assigned seat, but he isn't there."

"I'm Adam Steele, Emily's father," Adam said authoritatively. "You've searched the entire building?"

"Yes, sir. Even areas that were locked to the public."

He turned his back on the security personnel who was conferring with the director. He quickly punched Tony's cell number. His brother was just getting back into town from a business trip to Orlando tonight and was planning to see the play tomorrow night.

"Have you heard from Emily?" he asked before his brother had even finished saying hello.

"No. Why?"

"She isn't at the play. I don't know where she is." As he said the words, they fully sunk in. He didn't know where his fourteen-year-old daughter was. All he knew was that she was not here where she was supposed to be.

"What do you want me to do?" Tony asked.

"I have no idea." Adam hated that. It rarely happened that he didn't know what to do in a situation. But, in the past year it had happened so much where Emily was concerned, he wasn't sure why he was surprised.

"Just be at home," Adam finally said. "Be at home for her in case she comes home or calls."

"Will do."

Just as he disconnected the call, he heard the beep signaling an incoming text message.

He held his breath as he punched the button to display the text.

*"Dad, I'm okay. I wanted you to see me on stage. But this isn't where I want to be. I love you. Em."*

"She texted me," Adam said, interrupting the security guard's report to the principal. "She left the building, of her own free will."

"Do you want us to make a report to the local authorities, Mr. Steele?" the principal asked.

"That's not necessary," Adam said. "I'll find her."

The chances that she was with Jaden, or that Jaden at least knew where she was, had just multiplied in his mind. Which made him feel better. Frustrated, irritated and staggered, but strangely relieved at the same time.

Emily had wanted to leave. Jaden had apparently agreed with her. And they'd kept it from him.

"Please let us know if there's anything we can do."

"Of course."

Sure, if they'd mentioned Emily didn't want to finish the play he would have protested. Which both Emily and Jaden would have known. So they'd conspired against him. It wasn't right.

But of all the people Emily could disappear with, Jaden would be his first choice.

Besides, he had found arguing with Jaden quite stimulating. And there was a king-sized argument coming from this.

As he started down the hallway toward the exit he rolled his head, hearing his neck pop, and considered calling Emily. But he knew she wouldn't answer. He had to call Jaden. She might not answer either, but it was worth a try. His thumb poised over the numbers. Then he realized...he didn't have Jaden's number.

Tony probably had it, he supposed, or could get it but Adam hadn't needed it while she'd lived at the estate and they hadn't spoken again, not to mention exchanging phone numbers, before she'd left eight days ago.

He also didn't have her home address.

But he did have connections.

## Chapter Ten

Jaden climbed the stairs to her apartment wearily.

As soon as she'd arrived at the basketball tournament she'd been informed that Chad hadn't shown up. His brother, Brian, had finally confessed that Emily had called Chad and asked him to come pick her up at school. Chad hadn't asked any questions before taking off.

Jaden couldn't believe that Emily had left the play at intermission. She knew that Adam had to be going crazy. Jaden had thrown herself into figuring out where Emily was. If she was with Chad, Jaden trusted that she was safe. But Adam wouldn't be okay until he saw Emily in person, in one piece and smiling.

Jaden had called everyone she could think of, gone everywhere she could imagine trying to find Emily. With no success.

Where could she be?

"Jaden."

Adam's voice made her heart trip, even though she believed it was only an illusion. An auditory hallucination brought on by stress, fatigue and that she was completely in unrequited love with him.

"Jaden."

She turned away from her door, honestly expecting to see Minnie, her neighbor across the hall who made different cookies every single day of the week. Today was Friday. They would be peanut butter.

But Adam was standing there. In the flesh. Real. Touchable. Kissable. Without a peanut anywhere to be seen.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you'd heard from Emily. Or if she was here, by chance."

Jaden felt her mouth drop open. "No, of course not. You think I would condone her leaving the play?" She was appalled he would think that of her. She twisted to unlock her door, then swung back around as a thought occurred to her. "You didn't think *I* helped her leave, did you?"

"Does it matter that *I hoped* she was with you?" he asked.

Something in his tone made her pause. "And you didn't think I would call you if she was?" she finally asked. "I knew you'd be worried."

That seemed to stump him for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I guess I didn't think about it one way or the other."

That was very unlike him. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, then gave him a quick nod and opened the door. She gestured for him to precede her into her apartment.

Jaden sighed. She was annoyed with Adam for thinking that she would actually harbor his daughter like a fugitive, but she couldn't ignore that he was likely worried sick and her heart tightened slightly. His daughter, the light of his life, was missing.

Emily was missing.

"She's obviously not here. Now what?"

Adam shook his head. "I have no idea."

"Coming to my apartment was the only plan you had? You didn't think beyond that?" That was also very unlike him.

"I just wanted to get here."

"You were that sure I would be hiding her here?"

"No." He stepped forward with a frown. "Because you make me feel better. Because you love her too. And she loves you. She's safe with you. And I *wanted* her to be here."

Unexpectedly, Jaden's throat tightened. "Why did you want her to be here?" she asked quietly.

"Because I...trust you."

For just one moment Jaden let her heart believe that he'd almost said love instead of trust. But she would take trust. That was more than he'd been willing to give her the other night. A lot more.

"You do?"

He nodded. "I knew it, but I didn't admit it to myself until I found out Emily was gone. I've been praying ever since that she was with you. You're the only person besides me that I would totally trust to take care of her."

Getting emotional now was a bad idea. First, they had to concentrate on Emily and that she was gone. Secondly, if she thought he had softened toward her and it was only brought on by his worry over Emily, Jaden's heart would break—again.

"I wish she was here too. But she's not and we need to find her. Let's think. Where else would she go?"

Jaden was talking as she went into the living room to find a pen and paper. Adam followed close behind.

"I don't know where else she would go. Who else would she..."

His head snapped up as Jaden whirled to face him, watching the realization sink in. Jaden quickly held up her hand trying to halt Adam's inevitable vow to kill Chad. "Hold on. Just calm down. Think about it, at least she's safe. Everything will be all right."

He stared at her. "Say that again."

"She's safe with Chad, I'm sure."

“No,” he shook his head, coming closer to her. “Tell me everything will be all right.”

Something in his eyes and voice made Jaden step across the space remaining between them. She put her hand against his chest. “Everything will be all right.”

A shiver seemed to pass through him and then Adam was hugging her. “Now tell me that everything will be all right between us too.”

Jaden wrapped her arms around his waist and settled her cheek against his shoulder. This felt so good, so right. But she couldn’t quite bring herself to say that it would all be all right.

“I don’t know if I can,” she said honestly.

“Jaden, I love you.”

Her heart squeezed hard in her chest, making it hard to breathe. She wanted to hear those words, but she had to know that they were unconditional.

“It isn’t that simple.”

“Actually, it is.” He tightened his arms around her.

She never wanted to leave his arms. But she had to. She pulled away, stepped back and hugged her arms across her stomach. “No. Because it isn’t just you and me. Emily and I have a relationship, Adam. It’s separate from you and you can’t be jealous of it or this will never work.”

“I know you love her. And she loves you. It could never work without that,” he countered.

She shook her head. “Those were just words and they’re easy to say right now when you’ve seen her on stage and you’re worried about where she is. But can you be okay with her wanting to be with me sometimes, maybe more than she wants to be with you? Will you be okay if she sometimes asks my opinion, but not yours? Can you let me give her advice or permission or discipline that you don’t agree with?”

He stared at her. “I...think so.”

She needed more than that. “That’s not good enough. I can’t be in your life, but not in hers.”

“But you can be in hers and not in mine?” he asked, his frustration obvious.

She sighed. She had to give him an honest answer. “Yes.”

Jaden’s phone rang just then, startling her. She turned away from Adam and dug her cell phone from her front pants pocket.

“Hello?”

“Jaden, it’s Chad.”

“Emily’s with you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Jaden glanced at Adam and nodded her head so he knew Emily was all right. “What were you thinking?” Jaden exclaimed. “You can’t help a fourteen-year-old girl run away.”

Jaden put her hand on Adam's chest and pushed, keeping him back when he would have grabbed the phone from her. She felt his heart pounding and longed to turn and hold him again. But right now, Emily had to be their priority.

"I didn't. I was at the game and she called me and told me she needed to leave. What was I supposed to do? I picked her up and we took a drive. We talked things out."

"Where are you?"

"At her house."

"At the estate?" Jaden was surprised.

"Yes, I talked her into going home. Then no one was here."

"Her dad's here. I don't know where her uncle is." Jaden turned a questioning look on Adam but he just shrugged.

"Right." Chad sounded worried, probably rightfully so. "Should I stay here and wait?"

Jaden knew that Chad wanted her to tell him it was fine to leave, but if Chad wanted to be a part of Emily's life, facing Adam now was his best hope.

"Yes, you should."

"Is he going to kill me?"

Jaden turned to look at Adam. He looked surprisingly calm.

For Adam's benefit, and Chad's, she said, "Chad, you were there for her when she needed you. I know that Adam understands that you care about Emily. He'll be grateful that you brought her home."

"Okay." Chad didn't sound at all sure.

"It will be all right," Jaden said. Again, she was talking to both men, meeting Adam's gaze directly. "Everything will be okay."

Jaden hung up a moment later and Adam started for the door. He had it open and his car keys out of his pocket before he turned back. "Are you coming?"

Jaden swallowed. She wanted to go with him so much. She wanted to be a part of this, part of the reprimanding and the hugging, more than a friend, part of the family. But she wasn't. She couldn't handle being a part of it for a few hours at a time here and there.

"No. I just want to talk to Emily for a few minutes. You go ahead. Have her call me, okay?"

Adam hesitated, almost as if he was going to disagree with her. But in the end, he just nodded. "Okay."

There was a strange expectation hanging in the air between them. He hadn't asked a question and she wasn't sure she had the answer anyway, but she had to try to explain.

"I can't go back to the estate with you, Adam. Not if it's not to stay. I can't handle leaving again."

"Was it hard leaving this time?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "The second hardest thing I've ever done," she admitted.

“What was the first?”

She took a deep breath and decided to tell the whole truth. “Realizing that I’ll love you forever, whether we’re together or not.”

He didn’t say anything to that, but stared at her for a long moment as if he was trying to memorize everything about her. Then he gave a little nod and her heart broke. He agreed. She couldn’t go back with him and she was destined to love him forever.

Adam called himself several names that Jaden should have had the privilege of calling him. What was he doing? He smacked the steering wheel.

He ran a multimillion-dollar business, was generally considered intelligent and successful and had many important people seeking his advice and input. Yet when it came to the biggest, most important thing in his life, he blew it. *I think so.* That was his answer. Unbelievable.

He *was* intelligent, he insisted to himself. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, he knew exactly what he’d done wrong. He should have just told her that she was the one he wanted to be there for Emily when he couldn’t be. And even when he could be. By his side for everything. He knew Jaden would take care of his daughter because she loved Emily as much as he did.

Just being there with Jaden, worrying *with* her had been a comfort. Holding her in his arms had felt right. It was exactly what he wanted to do through all the bad times that were inescapable in life. But there would be good times too, and he wanted to hold her then too.

Why hadn’t he told her he wanted her to be the one he shared *everything* with, good and bad, for better or worse, including the joy and confusion and insecurity of Emily growing up and so much more? Why hadn’t he told her that yes, of course she could have a relationship with Emily, and he trusted her to love and support his daughter as much as he did?

He realized the answer as he pulled into his driveway. Simply telling Jaden how he felt would never be enough. He would have to show her.

Jaden wrapped a towel around her wet hair and slipped into her bathrobe. She didn’t want to answer the door, but whoever was there wasn’t going away. The knocking had changed to pounding and hadn’t ceased in the last two minutes.

“All right, all right,” she muttered as she tracked wet footprints through her bedroom and into the hallway. She looked through the peephole as she twisted the deadbolt, but stopped mid-twist, stunned.

She recovered the next second and yanked the door open. “Emily! What are you doing here?”

Emily’s smile was wide, as was the suitcase that sat at her feet. “Hi.”

Oh, no, this couldn't be good. "Don't even tell me that you ran away again," Jaden said, as she reached out and grasped Emily's wrist, pulling her into the apartment. Then she stepped out and grabbed Emily's suitcase. Her *heavy* suitcase. "What's in this thing?"

"Two weeks' worth of clothes and shampoo and stuff," Emily replied happily.

"Clothes? Two weeks? What's going on?"

"Here." Emily handed Jaden a long, cream-colored envelope with the Steele Enterprises logo stamped in the corner. Her name, however, was scrawled across the front in Adam's handwriting.

"What's this?"

"An explanation." Emily put her purse down and went to her suitcase. "Can I put this in your extra room?"

"I...um...okay. I guess so." Jaden ripped the envelope open and began reading. A minute later, her eyes wide and her heart thumping crazily in her chest, she read *Love, Adam*.

Emily returned just as Jaden was re-folding the letter. "Does it make sense now?"

Jaden shook her head. "No."

Essentially, from what Adam's letter said, he was going on a two-week-long business trip and was hoping Emily could stay with her because—and this she had in writing—he didn't trust anyone with Emily's welfare more than her.

"Dad wants to show you that he trusts you completely."

This was very out of character for Adam. The most important thing in his life, the thing he protected even beyond reason, was Emily. And now he'd just dumped her on Jaden's doorstep for two weeks.

"How did you convince him to let you stay here? This was *your* idea, right?"

Emily shook her head, still smiling. "Nope. Dad had it all worked out when he first told me about his trip. Personally, I think he's taking the trip to have an excuse to leave me here with you...to prove his point. He hasn't taken an overnight business trip ever."

"This is okay with you?"

Emily fell onto the couch and kicked a sandal off, wiggling her toes. "Are you kidding? Of course this is okay. I get to hang out with you, listen to your CDs, borrow your clothes...go out with Chad."

Ah, test number one. Jaden sat in the chair just to the left of the couch. "Hold on. I don't know about Chad. What did your dad say about dating while he's gone?"

The idea that Adam was gone in the first place had still not fully sunk in, but Jaden couldn't let Emily take advantage of her befuddlement.

Emily shrugged. "Nothing."

"Come on, Em. I know your dad. He had to give you some rules for while he was away."

"Honest. All he said was that I was supposed to listen to you. You're in charge, Jaden."

This *really* didn't make sense.



"Maybe I should call him." Jaden reached for the phone. This was too weird.

A moment later, her call had been transferred to his cell phone voice mailbox. She didn't leave a message, not knowing what to say.

"Where is he?" she asked Emily. She could call his office number or the house number.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Is he home or in his office?"

"He isn't at home or in his office. He left this morning before I was awake. We talked about all of this last night. Tony dropped me off here. I don't know where Dad is right now, for sure."

Jaden had to wonder if Adam was suffering from a brain aneurysm or something.

"Where's he going? I'll leave a message to call me."

"He wouldn't say where he's going."

Now she was almost certain of the aneurysm. Or mental illness. Either way it wasn't a pretty picture. What was going on? "He didn't leave you a phone number where you could reach him in an emergency?"

"He said I wouldn't need it. He said you would take care of anything that came up."

Jaden took a deep breath. "So, you're telling me that your dad, Adam Steele, the most overprotective father in the world, did not send along a list of dietary requirements, doctors' phone numbers, rules including bedtime and number of hours of homework each night?"

Emily grinned. "Nope."

"I'm totally in charge. He's not going to be calling each night to check-in?"

"I doubt it."

"I'm calling his office." Jaden grabbed the phone again and punched the number.

"You don't believe me?" Emily asked.

"I believe you. I'm going to see if somebody's checked your dad into the hospital yet. There's obviously something very wrong with him."

A few minutes later, Jaden hung up the phone, completely frustrated. Adam had managed to find one person in the world more stubborn and infuriating than he was...and he'd hired her for his answering service.

"I guess that's it. You're here and we're on our own for two weeks," Jaden said. She slumped back against the couch cushions. "Or at least until your dad comes to his senses, shows up here, and takes you home."

"It will be fun," Emily said, turning to face Jaden cross-legged on the couch. "Maybe we could go look at dresses."

Jaden rolled her head to look at the young girl beside her. Her heart swelled with love. "Dresses?"

Emily grinned. "Wedding dresses."

"Wedding dresses?" Jaden asked, her eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

“Aren’t you and Dad going to get married?”

Jaden’s heart tightened painfully. “Oh, honey. I told you the night before I left the estate that I will always be in your life but I won’t be part of your family.”

Emily frowned. “But that was before Dad said he loved you and everything.”

Jaden couldn’t breathe for several seconds and her eyes stung. “Sweetie, your dad...”

But she didn’t know how to explain it, so she just shook her head.

“He told me last night that he loved you and wanted you to be with us forever.”

Jaden just stared at her. Love. Forever. Had Emily said that?

Emily’s eyes widened. “He told me but hasn’t told you?”

Jaden swallowed.

He was showing her.

He was giving Emily up to her to show her that he trusted her...and loved her. Because he knew that she wouldn’t have believed him if he’d said he loved her before proving it.

“The minute I read his letter I knew it,” Jaden said, realizing it was completely true.

“He said it in the letter?”

“Not word for word. But he didn’t need to,” she said softly.

“You’re going to get married, right?”

“He hasn’t asked me.”

“He will.”

“Maybe.” Jaden realized that she really, really wanted that.

“Or you could ask him.”

Jaden looked at Emily. *You could ask him.* She could. She’d been proposed to once, Adam had proposed to someone once. But she had never proposed and he’d never been asked. It might be nice to switch it up this time.

Oh, yeah. She could totally do that. In fact, the more the thought bounced around, the surer she was that she *had* to do it. She wanted to show Adam that she wanted this, wanted *him*.

“What color are you gonna have the bridesmaids wear?” Emily asked, mostly oblivious to the riot of emotions within Jaden.

Jaden couldn’t help the huge grin that stretched her lips. “Whatever you want.” Jaden watched Emily’s eyes grow big and her smile widen. “You’re the only person besides your dad that I need standing up front with me.”

She didn’t last even six days.

Adam's brother had been sworn to secrecy about where Adam was staying, but Tony loved his brother and niece and, as it turned out, was crazy about cheesecake. After half of a turtle cheesecake had disappeared from his plate, it only took five minutes of begging by Jaden and Emily for Tony to cave and give up all the information about Adam's trip.

Not even an hour later, Tony was making plane reservations and Jaden and Emily were packing.

"You're going with us?" Jaden asked when Tony came into the front foyer carrying an overnight bag.

"I'm usually the one who covers these out-of-town meetings," Tony said, looking offended.

"Of course," Jaden acknowledged. The arrangement had allowed Adam to stay home with Emily. She should have assumed.

"Besides I haven't seen my brother speechless too often in my life and this will definitely do it." Tony grinned and Jaden was glad she was going to have him for a brother-in-law.

"Great. Were you able to get our seats all together?" Last minute reservations tended to be whatever the airline had left.

Tony looked at her funny. "Well...yeah. It's our plane."

"Your plane?" she repeated dumbly.

"Steele Enterprises' corporate jet."

Oh. She also realized that she had no idea how much money her hopefully-future-husband had. Which was fine. But a little unnerving when faced with flying on a corporate jet.

"Didn't Adam take the plane?" she asked.

"Yes. It's coming back for us. Without telling Adam, of course."

"What if he needs to come home suddenly?"

"What would he come home for? You, me and Em are all right here. It's not like any of us is going to call about an emergency involving one of the others, and we're the only things he could justify coming home for." Tony chuckled. "I'm sure staying away this long is already killing him, but he'll make himself stay there to prove to you that he meant what he said about trusting you."

"Do you think he's worried about Emily?"

"No. I think now that he's finally realized and admitted that he's in love with you, staying away from *you* is killing him."

Jaden liked the way her stomach flipped when Tony said that Adam was in love with her. It was real. She knew that. But hearing it out loud was just not getting old.

Twenty minutes later they were on board a private jet that made the ones she'd seen in movies look like junk. But she was too excited to get to Adam to really soak it in.

"How much longer will it be?" Jaden asked, fidgeting in her seat. She looked out the window where sheets of rain pelted the ground...and the airplane she sat on.

"As soon as it's safe," Tony repeated for the third time. "Calm down. We'll get there." He was sitting across from her, one ankle on the opposite knee, a novel in his lap. Emily was stretched out in a seat toward the back with her headphones on, watching a movie on her portable DVD player. They both seemed completely at ease.

"It's not like some other woman is going to propose to Adam tonight if you don't get there first."

"Not funny." She pinned him with a frown. "I should have brought that cheesecake over days ago. I'd already be there, be engaged and be planning my wedding."

"How about we avoid a plane crash if at all possible," he said, looking over the top of his book. "If that's okay with you?"

She sighed and stared out the window.

"Oh, hey Jaden, I have something for you, by the way." Tony leaned over the arm of his chair and pulled an envelope from his briefcase that lay open on the seat next to him.

"Okay." She frowned. If Tony was trying to distract her, she appreciated it, but sincerely doubted it would work.

He handed her the envelope. "I know it's more than you were planning on."

Jaden gave him a puzzled look but tore open the envelope and withdrew a piece of paper.

A check, to be more specific.

For two million dollars to be very, very specific.

"What is *this*?" She looked up at Tony who was giving her a silly grin.

He leaned forward and said in a stage whisper, "If you take that to a bank, they'll turn it into money for you."

She smiled. "I'm aware of that. Why did you give me this?"

"Because you need it. Children's Hospital needs it. And because I want both you and Adam to be sure that you're not with him just because of the money."

She felt slightly offended. "I am *not* with him just because of the money." In fact, she hadn't deposited Adam's check. She hadn't even filled anything in on it. Yet. She would, eventually, of course. The hospital did need the money. But for some reason she just couldn't bring herself to fill the check in.

"I know that," Tony said.

"Adam knows it too."

"I want *you* to know it."

She thought about that. Then she decided that she appreciated it. "I'm madly in love with your brother, Tony."

"Good." He lifted his book back in front of his face. "He deserves it. And you'll do a good job of it."

She glanced down at the check with a smile. Then she realized what she was looking at. "What's T.S. Enterprises?"

“My company. T.S. Tony Steele,” he said without lowering his book.

“You have your own company?” Jaden was so surprised that she barely noticed the plane’s engines rumble to life.

“Yeah. I’ve been investing for a while now and made some great moves.” He turned the page in his book.

“Does Adam know?”

Tony lowered the book. His expression was a mixture of amusement and exasperation. “Adam thinks that I’ve been gambling. I guess in a way the stock market is a gamble. But I wanted to make a success of it before I told him.”

“He’s been giving you the money then?”

“No, not all of it. The portion that I’ve ‘borrowed’ from him I’ve put in his name. He owns forty percent of my company. He’ll be getting some pretty good returns this time next year too.”

Jaden was seeing Tony in a new light and she was thrilled with the idea that she would get to witness Adam seeing his brother this way. Tony was not the scatterbrained playboy that Adam thought he was.

“Hey, Tony,” she asked, “if you didn’t need to borrow money from Adam why did you? Especially when you knew that he was thinking the worst?”

“I wanted to pay him back somehow for everything he’s done for me. He would never let me *do* anything for him or give him money back so instead I made him an investor.”

“I would be thrilled to have you as a part of the rehab building project, Tony,” she said sincerely.

“A large part of my decision is because it’s your project. After what you’ve done for my brother and niece you deserve to have your dream come true too.”

Her eyes filled. “Oh, Tony, my dream is coming true. But it’s a lot bigger than that building and will last a lot longer.”

He barely made it seven days. Adam strode toward the boardroom at the end of the hallway, grateful that today he had somewhere to be and that the meeting would likely last most of the morning. He fully intended to be the new owner of the publishing company, Seaside Press, just outside of San Diego, at the end of the day. But, he also intended to draw the meeting out. His “vacation” was driving him nuts.

He constantly wondered how Jaden and Emily were, what they were doing, if they missed him. He especially wondered about Jaden. Emily was likely having the time of her life living in Jaden’s apartment, staying up late and eating as much ice cream as she could stand. It was definitely Jaden he thought about most. Did she understand what all it meant that he had left Emily with her for two weeks? Did she miss him and realize that spending the rest of her life with him was the only option?

He had the most romantic proposal he could think of planned out for the night he got home. He had the ring in his pocket right now, in fact. The ceremony could be large or small, extravagant or simple. The flowers could be any color under the sun. They could be married in a church, Town Hall, the garden or on a hillside. Heck, he'd marry her in the back alley of a run-down honky-tonk if that's what she wanted. As long as she agreed to marry him and said "I do" as soon as possible, the rest didn't matter.

"Good morning, Mr. Steele."

"Good morning, Cynthia." Adam gratefully accepted the cup of coffee that the receptionist handed to him. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes, everyone," she confirmed with a huge smile. "Do you need anything before you go in?"

"I think I've got everything in the file," Adam said, indicating his briefcase. "Why don't you order an early lunch for us though?"

"Something special?" she asked.

Adam shrugged. "Sure. We can celebrate. What did you have in mind?"

"Champagne?"

Champagne for a business meeting? Adam was pleased about the purchase and he thought that Seaside Press was equally glad, but champagne?

"I'm not sure we need to go to that length. Or am I missing something?" he asked. Cynthia was one of those valuable employees who was versatile, intelligent and had been with the company for a very long time. He would follow her lead if she thought the company would appreciate champagne.

"Why don't you go in and you can let me know in a little while what you want to do about lunch?" she suggested, walking to the boardroom door with him.

He was still puzzled. "Okay."

Cynthia turned the knob and opened the door for him.

The animated conversation around the conference table ceased as Adam stepped in to the room. He smiled at the table-full of Seaside Press administrators. "Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Mr. Steele," David Morgan, the president of the company, answered.

Adam placed his cup on the table and took his seat at the head. "Did Cynthia pass around the agenda for everyone?"

There was a murmur among the participants and Adam looked up from shuffling his papers.

David spoke up again. "There's been a request to adjust the agenda, Mr. Steele."

"Oh?" Adam looked around the table. "Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem. Just a...development," Morgan answered.

"Okay. What's the development?"

“I think I can answer that.” The voice was female and came from the end of the table on the right side... and was very familiar. He saw her for the first time when she leaned forward to rest her forearms on the table.

“Jaden?” He felt his jaw drop and his eyes widen.

“Good morning, Adam,” Jaden greeted cheerfully.

She stood and he noticed her bright red business suit. Her hair was also pulled back and arranged into a very professional style, making her almost blend in with the executives around her. Almost. She shone and Adam felt himself getting lost in her smile even from several feet away.

“What are you doing here?” He also stood.

She came around the table and stopped beside him. “I came to see you.”

“How did you...”

“Tony.”

“Why didn’t you call?” He didn’t mind a bit that she’d shown up in person. It just seemed like a logical question.

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Here?”

“I couldn’t wait.” She laid her hand on his arm, looking up into his eyes. “Is that okay?”

He felt as if her hand was burning his skin through the sleeve of his jacket and he had to clear his throat. He was so incredibly happy to see her.

“Of course, it’s okay. Should we go somewhere and talk?”

The actual purchase of the company would take about thirty minutes, with signing the papers and all. Adam had intended to stretch it out with a presentation on his plans and goals for the company, but that could wait.

He watched Jaden wet her lips.

That could *definitely* wait.

Having her here could mean only one thing... She’d forgiven him and did love him. She wouldn’t travel all this way and rush over to see him if it was anything else.

“I don’t want to interrupt your meeting,” she said, glancing around the room with a smile. “I just came to ask you to marry me. Then I’ll go.”

Adam barely noticed the wide smiles and delighted gasps that erupted from the people around the table.

She’d just proposed to him.

“I was planning on asking *you*.”

“It doesn’t matter. You want to marry me, I want to marry you. It doesn’t matter who brings it up first, does it?”

She was smiling at him, all of her love in her eyes, and it took every ounce of self-control that Adam possessed to not pick her up and carry her out of this room and into the next one where he could have her all to himself.

“But I still want this to be memorable.” He fished in his jacket pocket and extracted the black velvet ring box he’d been carrying around for eight days.

“You have a ring? Here, with you?” Jaden’s eyes were wide, as was her smile.

“I have *the* ring here with me. This is the ring that I want to see on your finger every day for the rest of my life.” He opened the box and withdrew the diamond ring he’d picked out with Emily the day before he’d left for California.

Tears were running down Jaden’s face by the time he was finished. He bent his knees to bring his eyes on level with hers “Jaden, will you marry me?”

She threw her arms around his neck. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Applause erupted around the table and the boardroom door flew open. Emily threw her arms around them both.

“When can we go home, Dad?” Emily asked. “Jaden has the whole wedding set up.”

Then Adam concentrated on Jaden again over the top of his daughter’s head. “You set up the whole wedding?”

“For the minute we get home. Like I said, I couldn’t wait.”

Emily disentangled herself from Adam’s arms and accepted a glass from the tray of champagne and sparkling cider that Cynthia brought in.

Adam pulled Jaden close and whispered for her ears only, “Did you plan the honeymoon too?”

She smiled, but shook her head.

“Then I’ll be very happy to take care of that.”

The ceremony was held three days later in the garden on the estate at sunset. The ceremony was simple and the guests were limited to those very close to Adam and Jaden.

Tony was the best man and flirted with all of Jaden’s friends and co-workers from the hospital, married or not. The entire wheelchair basketball team was there and, on Chad’s arm, Emily looked nearly as radiant as Jaden did. Jaden’s parents were there, Adam’s parents were not, but they sent their blessings and promised to come home to visit soon. They were, in fact, in Israel.

And Cody was there.

“I can’t believe you came!” Jaden exclaimed when she saw him.

“How could I stay away?” Cody caught her in a huge bear hug, lifting her feet off the ground.

“But how did you know?”



“Mr. Steele called me himself. In fact, he paid for the ticket. I couldn’t say no to that.” He grinned. “He said he was sure it would mean a lot to you if I was here.”

Jaden sniffed and kissed his cheek. “He was right.”

Cody hugged her again, then tucked her under his arm and headed for the cake. He’d probably already had two pieces. “Hey, I was going to ask you...”

“Yeah?” Jaden took a cup of punch.

“Who’s the cute bridesmaid?”

Jaden swallowed her punch down the wrong pipe. She coughed and wheezed for a few seconds as Cody patted her on the back. “Tell me you’re kidding,” she groaned when she could breathe again.

“I slipped in late and didn’t get a program for the ceremony,” he said. “Who is she?”

“That’s Emily. Adam’s daughter.”

Cody’s eyes widened. Then his grin widened. “Oh, really.”

Jaden swatted his arm. “You’re too old for her.”

“To date, probably. But I could dance with her.”

“And flirt? I don’t think so.”

“You’re right,” he conceded. “I’m too old to flirt with her. But...” He stuffed a big bite of white cake layered with raspberry filling into his mouth and chewed.

Jaden watched him suspiciously, not willing to take another mouthful of liquid before he told her the rest of his thought.

He finally swallowed, then took Jaden’s punch cup and drained it. “I could dance with her and fill her in on all the stories I know about you.”

Jaden was already shaking her head as she said, “I don’t think...” Then it occurred to her that Cody didn’t have anything personal or embarrassing on her. “What would you tell her?”

Cody looked down at her from his six-foot-one-and-a-half inches. “How terrific you are and how lucky she is to have you as a mom.”

Jaden immediately started crying, something she’d admirably been able to avoid except for a moment of choking up as Adam said his vows. She hugged Cody tightly. “I love you, you know. I always will.”

He hugged her back. “I know.”

And that was all she needed to hear.

A few hours later, which seemed like an eternity to the two newlyweds, Adam pushed open the door to what was now *their* bedroom and turned to scoop Jaden up into his arms.

She laughed, “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t want you getting away.”

She began unbuttoning the top button on his shirt. “Now why would I do that?”

“Just making sure.” Adam swung her feet to the floor and kicked the door shut behind them. His hands immediately went to the little bows holding Jaden’s dress on her shoulders. As her dress fell to the floor and his shirt was pulled from the waistband of his pants he said, “You know what I think we should do?”

“I hope you’re going to say ‘make wild, passionate, forget-about-everything-else love’ or we are definitely *not* on the same page here.”

“Well, it’s related.”

Her stockings quickly joined the growing pile of clothes at their feet.

“Okay, what do you think we should do?” She pushed Adam’s shirt from his shoulders.

“I think we should have a baby.”

Jaden froze. “A baby?”

“Do you want to have children?” Adam asked, his hands cupping her face so he could look into her eyes.

“Yes, I guess, I mean... I didn’t know if you would want to. You’ve already got Emily.”

“We’ve already got Emily. But she’s part of the reason I want more. I love being a father. I just didn’t think I ever would be again, because I didn’t think I would ever find someone I’d want to share that with.”

Jaden’s eyes filled with tears of happiness. “I would love to have a baby with you, Adam. Maybe more than one.”

He lowered his head and gave her a brief, tender kiss.

She smiled up at him through her happy tears. “You’re such a great father. I hope that I’m even half as good a mom.”

Adam wiped the tears away with the pads of his thumbs. “You are already a terrific mom.”

Jaden didn’t think she could get any happier than she’d been standing under the first evening stars, saying her vows to Adam and hearing his words of love. But knowing that Emily was hers too, and that Adam wanted to have more children with her, made Jaden’s heart feel like it would burst.

She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands. Then she looked down, first at herself and then at Adam and laughed. “I can’t believe I’m standing here with you, nearly naked, and I’m *crying*.” She tugged on his hand, pulling him toward the bed, her heart, mind and soul full of love and happiness, making her almost giddy. “Let’s get started practicing for this baby-making thing we’re gonna do.”

“If practice makes perfect,” Adam said following his wife down onto the sheets. “Then I bet we’re pretty darned close to perfect by morning.”

## About the Author

To learn more about Erin Nicholas, please visit her at [www.ErinNicholas.com](http://www.ErinNicholas.com). Send an email to Erin at [Erin@ErinNicholas.com](mailto:Erin@ErinNicholas.com) or subscribe to her newsletter to keep updated on news, appearances and fun at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ErinNicholas/>

Join in the fun with Erin, other authors and readers at Nine Naughty Novelists at <http://ninenoughtynovelists.blogspot.com/>

Look for these titles from Erin Nicholas

*Coming Soon:*

Just Right

*A guy. A girl. A Chihuahua. Two of them will find the love of their lives.*

## Venus in Blue Jeans

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Coming off a broken engagement to a lying charmer, all bookstore owner Docia Kent wants is a fling, not a long-term romance. And for her fabulously wealthy and fabulously nosy parents to butt out of her life for a while. The Texas Hill Country town of Konigsburg looks like the perfect place to get both. Especially when she gets a look at long, tall country vet Cal Toleffson.

Cal has other plans for Docia. One glance at the six-foot version of Botticelli's Venus, and he knows he's looking at the woman of his dreams. Now if he can just fend off the eccentric characters of Konigsburg long enough to convince her romance isn't such a bad idea.

One night of mind-blowing sex isn't the only thing that leaves them both stunned. With Docia's bookstore under attack, Konigsburg suddenly doesn't seem so welcoming. Once again she finds her trust tested—and is left wondering if she was ever meant to have a happily ever, after all.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Venus in Blue Jeans:*

Cal took a moment to look at her. Her copper curls floated around her face and shoulders. Her white silk blouse hung slightly open, so that he could see a sliver of peach-colored lace peeking out. Her deep green eyes met his, and her face was suddenly illuminated by their light.

Venus.

His gut tightened almost as much as his groin. *Oh, yeah. Nothing like a little performance anxiety to pep things up.* As he watched, Docia's lips edged up slightly, and another jolt hit his solar plexus. Whatever doubts might be assailing his mind, his body was definitely ready to go for it.

He reached for her, then slid his fingers into the silken softness of her hair, pulling her gently toward him, lowering his mouth to hers. Her lips had an echo of sweet wine. His tongue plunged deeper into her mouth, touching, exploring—teeth, tongue, warm, wet depths. She gave a small purr of pleasure as she turned her body against his, slipping her arms around his neck and pressing her soft breasts against his chest.

Cal moved his hands downward, sliding them beneath the edge of her blouse, touching, stroking. Smooth, satiny flesh. Silk warmed by Docia's body. His hand cupped her breast so that it filled his palm like a ripe peach. He flicked his thumb across her nipple, feeling it jut hard against his fingers.

"God, Cal," she murmured.

Her hands moved down from his neck. Then she pulled his shirt free and slid her hands underneath, brushing across his chest. One palm rested for a moment on his heart while a warm fingertip pressed against one nipple. Threads of heat flowed from where her fingers touched him.

He shifted his shoulders, pushing her back against the sofa cushions. The soft mounds of her breasts pressed against his chest again. His shaking hands fumbled at the top button of her blouse, trying to slip the small fabric-covered disk through its hole and failing. Then her cool fingers covered his, and the button slid free.

And the next and the next.

Cal looked down at peach-colored lace and silk outlined against the shimmering paleness of her skin underneath. His breath caught in his throat. "Docia, you're so beautiful."

Even as he said it, he knew how miserably inadequate the words were. *You're exquisite. At this moment, you're everything I've ever desired in a woman. I've never touched anyone like you before. Please God, don't ask me to stop.*

When she spoke, her voice was a hoarse whisper against his ear. "Cal, we can't do this here."

For a moment, he was lost, trying to find his feet again. Had she suddenly developed second thoughts? And if so, why right now, in the name of heaven!

"What?" he murmured. "Why not?"

Docia giggled, a quick throaty sound against his chest. "We can't both fit on this couch. Not two people our size. Gravity alone is going to do us in before we get much further."

"I'm glad one of us thinks this is funny," Cal muttered and then snickered. In another moment, they were both chuckling breathlessly, their foreheads pressed together.

Docia pushed against his shoulders. "Come with me, Doc. I have the greatest oversized bed you've ever seen. I promise we'll both fit into it with plenty of room left over."

The bed was big enough for the two of them, plus three or four other average-sized citizens of Konigsburg. Not that Cal was eager for a sextet at that particular moment. A stack of red and blue pillows covered one end of the bed. Tall posts supported some kind of white canopy overhead.

Cal wasn't really noticing the details right then—he had too much he needed to do, like breathe.

And he couldn't seem to stop touching her.

Even as he reached for the remaining buttons on her blouse, he couldn't help grazing his fingers along the smooth white skin of her collarbone, his thumb sinking into the small indentation at the base of her throat.

Docia laughed softly, emerald eyes shimmering in the semi-dark, then pulled the blouse from her shoulders and dropped it behind her. "Your turn."

He took hold of the bottom of his shirt and pulled it over his head, wishing he'd worn something with buttons too, so that he could have taken it more slowly, let her see a little bit of him at a time. Clothes made him look more normal. Without them, she'd see him the way he really was.

One of his girlfriends in Kansas City—Karen, was it? Maybe Janice—had referred to him as her “great, hairy beast”. She’d meant it affectionately. Cal hadn’t felt the love. But the image had always stuck in his mind after that.

King Kong was about to enter the bedroom.

Docia caught her breath as he dropped his shirt to the floor beside her blouse.

She’d never seen a chest that broad before. His pectorals curved down to his flat stomach muscles. A thick pelt of dark hair covered the surface, arrowing down to the waistband of his pants. He looked primal, like a warrior, like someone who’d lurched out of the forest seeking a mate.

Not that he’d have to do much seeking from what she could see. He could probably just crook his finger and a dozen potential mates would come tripping through the woods without further ado.

She forced herself to breathe in and out while she sorted through appropriate adjectives. Magnificent. Glorious. Spectacular.

“Wow.”

*Oh, very good, Docia. Four years of college English and that’s the best you can do?*

Cal raised his eyebrows, questioning.

Docia couldn’t stop herself. She reached toward his chest, burying her fingers in the dark, crinkling hair, touching the point of one brown nipple with her pinky. She heard his quick inhale.

His eyes looked slightly glazed. “Now you,” he gasped.

Docia’s fingers dropped to the button at the waistband of her pants, and suddenly her shoulders stiffened. Right then, she could remember every one of Allie’s scones she’d consumed over the last month, not to mention all those plates of tapas Lee had fed her, laden with cheese and olive oil. And then, of course, she also remembered Donnie’s cracks about her love handles.

*Oh well, maybe some men like doughy hips.* And she couldn’t do much about spot reducing at the moment. She was who she was, after all. She’d learned that much over the last couple of years.

Docia pushed her pants down to the floor and stepped out of them defiantly. At least she had on some of her better underwear.

Cal watched her for a heartbeat or two, his eyes hooded. Then he stepped toward her, raising his hands to cup her breasts. Docia closed her eyes, feeling the warmth spread outward as the rough calluses of his palms rubbed across her skin. Heat stretched over her body and down to her thighs. His fingers moved and the catch at the front of her bra opened. Her breasts slipped loose as he pushed the straps from her shoulders.

And she stood in front of him, wearing only a scrap of peach-colored silk at her crotch.

Cal stared, his pulse racketing in his ears. There she was again—Botticelli's Venus with her wild red curls drifting around her face and shoulders. Perfect breasts, high and full. Waist narrowing to a gently rounded stomach. Long, creamy thighs stretching to muscular calves.

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.* If he was dreaming, this was when he'd wake up, hard and aching.

"Your turn," she whispered.

He came down to earth with a thump. This was it. The point at which some of his past sexual encounters had come to an abrupt halt. The time when he'd need to get enough blood back into his brain to soothe, to reassure, to explain that, after all, size was relative and bodies did adapt to each other.

But he might as well get it over with.

He unzipped, pushing his slacks and underwear down together, feeling himself spring free. No point in delaying the moment—he wouldn't get any smaller.

At least he profoundly hoped he wouldn't.

Docia's gaze was riveted on his groin. She stared at his cock, as he'd known she would. His throat was dry with wanting her. Somehow he had to figure out how to say all the things he needed to say to get past this moment. All the encouragement and reminders about how well they'd fit. How they were made to fit together. How if she lost her nerve now he'd probably go jump off a cliff somewhere.

She reached for him suddenly, before he realized what she was doing. Cool fingers wrapped around his shaft, measuring him, sliding lightly down the length of him.

"You're very big." Her voice sounded husky.

Cal swallowed, nodding. Even if he tried to speak, he figured his voice wouldn't be more than a croak. And he wasn't sure he could speak at all as long as her hand stayed where it was currently.

And then she grinned, eyes sparkling. "Fortunately, so am I."



*Once burned is all it takes...*

## Burn for Me

© 2009 Dee Tenorio

*A Rancho Del Cielo Romance*

Twelve years ago, Raul Montenga left home to live life on his own terms. Yet for just as long, his nights have sizzled with erotic dreams of Penelope, the girl he left behind. Enough is enough. It's time to find out if the sparks are real, or all in his head.

Not that he expected a warm welcome, but her cold shoulder and icy rejection sting more than he cares to admit. So he's more than a little surprised to find her tomboy daughter standing nervously on his porch...claiming to be his child.

Dr. Penelope Gibson's worst nightmare isn't that her daughter wants to know her daddy. It's facing—and keeping at arm's length—her biggest youthful mistake. Now he's back and the feelings she'd thought frozen solid are melting fast. Along with her inhibitions, her clothes and her better judgment.

Problem is, Raul's not content to stop at getting acquainted with her daughter. He wants it all—Penelope's love, her body *and* her soul. After twelve years building a life without him, though, she's not sure she trusts him—or herself—enough to try.

*Warning This book features a wildly hot Latino firefighter dead-set on a mission to seduce. Contains bad words, fiery tempers and scorching sex. Oven mitts required.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Burn for Me:*

He stared down at his daughter—*his* daughter, a thought that in and of itself was growing less incredulous and more exactly what he wanted—and knew in that moment that his life was about to change irrevocably. If he wanted, he could still back away. Keep Chloe at enough of a distance that he could be her friend, give her access to his family but not really change much. He'd work at the firehouse, finding all the meaning in his life in the work there, and keep longing for something more in his heart.

Or, he'd become her father. Be someone to guide her and protect her. Be more to her than he'd ever managed to be to anyone else.

The ease with which he made the decision should have startled him, but it didn't. Like snapping that chain around her neck, the pieces fell together inside him and the lock was set. They still had a long way to go, of course—no kid of his should be expected to live in a room this perfect—but at least he knew he wanted the experience. Wanted to be part of this. *Wanted.*

He tapped the lamp a couple of times to turn it off and reached for the door handle. Penelope stood there, raising her chin when he waited for her to walk out first. She was stubborn, something he should have realized years ago, but some things didn't change no matter how deep in denial a person wanted to go.

Faced with waking up her daughter or standing there staring at him for eternity, Pen finally let go of the door and walked ahead of him into the hall.

Satisfied, Raul pulled the door shut, silencing the chimes by pressing them to the door. The door directly across from Chloe's could only belong to Penelope. She caught him looking, he could tell because she bit her lip. Tempting, very tempting, to stroll over there and discover what secrets the elusive Miss Gibson had in there, but they had talking to do first.

Raul shook his head and pointed to the stairs. Was that relief or disappointment on her face? It wasn't a question he could let himself think about. Much. He forced himself down the stairs, listening for her footsteps in his wake.

It took a while, but Penelope finally came. She walked into the living room where he was putting the poker back on the hearth stand. Vents closed, door closed upstairs. Now, finally, he could lay into her.

Except when he turned, he didn't see the hard-shelled woman who had stood on his parents' deck and told him to back off. This Penelope was worried. Afraid. Of him.

His anger curdled in his belly. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Pen," he growled.

"I know." And then she backed up a step and crossed her arms.

"Now that's just fuckin' unfair." So what if he sounded like a ten-year-old. "You were ready to rip my balls off and serve 'em for dinner earlier. But now that we're alone, you act like I'm going to hit you or something. I thought you were better than that."

"I've had almost five hours to think about what you were going to say. You've always been somewhat...demonstrative when you're upset. I've never seen any value to yelling myself hoarse. So no, I'm not looking forward to this." He could practically see frost coming out of her mouth as she spoke.

"You didn't care about my demonstrations at the house."

"At the house, I was angry."

"But you're not anymore." Of course she wasn't, she'd had her say. And her say had been six kinds of insulting, each and every one of them telling him to keep his distance. Just thinking about it pissed him off all over again. "How convenient for you."

Her mouth twitched and some life snapped in her eyes. "I had every right to be angry. You were giving your family the wrong impression. On purpose."

Damn right he'd done it on purpose. "I was being attentive and you were giving everyone the cold shoulder because things weren't going your way. I hate to break it to you, *querida*, but you don't have all the answers and you're not the only one with something to lose in this situation. Those people are all going to play an important role in her life now. That means they'll be part of *your* life, the same as me. Treating us like shit will kind of get in the way of that."

She rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t treating anyone like anything. I was staying out of the way because the whole point was for them to accept Chloe. *Chloe*. Why weren’t you giving her the grand tour, introducing her to the relatives, instead of finding new and inventive ways to excuse putting your hands all over *me*?”

He focused on the first accusation...for now. “I did. For as long as she stayed still for it. Unlike you, she likes people and dove right in.”

Color flooded her cheeks in a rush. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” he said, taking that step forward she’d put between them and another two besides, “you’re getting more and more like your mother with every damn day and it’s getting on my fucking nerves.”

She froze, her eyes widening while her mouth fell slightly open. He could just see the tops of her teeth, perfectly white and even.

“What the hell happened to you, Pen? Do you even see the way you’re becoming like her? You freeze people out, shut off your emotions and act like you’re too good to be bothered. You’re thirty-two fuckin’ years old, but you’re locked up in clothes and restraints like some goddamned retirement-home lady. You used to talk about the way you’d be when you grew up. That you’d go away and do things, make a difference with your life. Everyone knew you were just waiting to grow up and get out from your mother’s control, but you haven’t. And it’s wrong for you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes, I do.” He walked up to her now, invading her space, almost wrapping his hands around her shoulders, he wanted to shake her so much. “You don’t think I paid attention, but I did. I knew you. I knew who you were under the frills and the manners and all that other shit she used to make you do. You used to *laugh*, Pen. I haven’t heard you laugh once since I came back. Not a real laugh. It wasn’t loud, wasn’t crazy, but fuck, at least you did it. When the hell did you lose what made you special?”

That finally seemed to snap her back to reality because she put her hands on his chest and shoved. “You happened, Raul. *You*. I spent fifteen years throwing myself at you because I couldn’t seem to help it and you never cared.”

He let her move him, shock at her emotional explosion muting his earlier frustration. She pushed again, as if she thought she could throw him across the room instead of a single step backward.

“Finally, finally, when I thought you felt something for me, all that happened was a horrible drunken fuck in a closet. A *closet*, Raul. Nameless, faceless and completely forgettable.” She pounded at him, enough that it actually hurt this time. Or was that only because of what she was saying? “You left and you never looked back. You *destroyed* me. Does that make your ego feel better? I thought I lost everything the day you left, and I’ve spent the rest of my life proving myself wrong. Proving to myself—if no one else—that you don’t matter anymore, and you know what, I’ve done a hell of a job.

“So excuse me if I’m not special enough for you anymore. Maybe it was the pregnancy afterward that took a little of the shine off. Or do you think it was surviving medical school with an infant? It could have

been the pointless relationships I tried to have every now and again, each one a little more depressing than the last. Or maybe, just maybe, it was living with my mother's unflagging disappointment my entire life because at every single turn, I've lived up to everyone's lowest expectations.

"And by the way, yes, she's a bitch, okay, but she's *my* bitchy mother and if you want my respect for your family you'd better damn well have some for mine. Either way, *you* do not get to decide if I'm special, Raul. You made your mind up a long time ago that I wasn't—"

The kiss muffled her words. She shoved at him again, but he didn't let her go. She had to stop talking. Because everything she was saying was ripping his chest open. He licked at her lips, taking her fists into his hands and holding them still. She kept trying to hit him, but eventually she stopped fighting. Instead he felt her lips soften, part and then the darting touch of her tongue against his. She stroked, a warm, wet invitation that he'd have to have been dead for three days to turn down.

Letting go of her hands, he cupped her face, gentling his touch but unable to tamp down the hunger. His body hardened for her, pushing against her. Her palms slid down his chest, burning a trail to his waist, where she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled his hips closer. Flush, their bodies strained into each other from chest to knee.

The kiss slowed, became an exploration. He tasted her lips, drawing the full curve of the bottom one into his mouth before delving back inside to stroke her tongue with his. His senses filled with her, the taste of her, the scent and the feel of her. She met him kiss for kiss, rising up on her toes to get that little bit closer.

When the kiss finally broke, he still held her face cupped in his hands, but the angry fire in her eyes had cooled, the cobalt color shimmering with unshed tears. With unabashed want. Her lips pink and swollen, open and moist enough for him to want to pull her right back in.

She stared at him, looking almost tormented. "Why can't I hate you?"

Wouldn't everything be easier if she could? He touched her lip with his thumb, caressing it carefully. "Probably the same reason I don't think I can let you go tonight."

He thought she'd get angry again, but all she did was sniff and blink back her tears. Her poise threatened to return, and with it he knew would go any chance of touching her. Kissing her again. Making love to her, which he'd just told her he meant to do.

A good man would have released his hold and left. A good man would tell her she deserved better than the way he'd treated her all her life. But if there was one thing Raul knew about himself, it was that no one in their right mind would ever call him good.

"Don't make me let you go, Pen. I won't be able to."

Penelope didn't pretend to misunderstand. Or lie and say she didn't want him just as much. "What about Chloe? I don't want—"

"I'll be gone before she wakes up."

She glanced down at the couch, a flicker of distaste making her flinch.

“Your bed.” She was going to stop expecting the worst from him one of these days. He’d see to it. Starting tonight. Swooping down, he scooped her up to his chest and headed back to the stairs.



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