

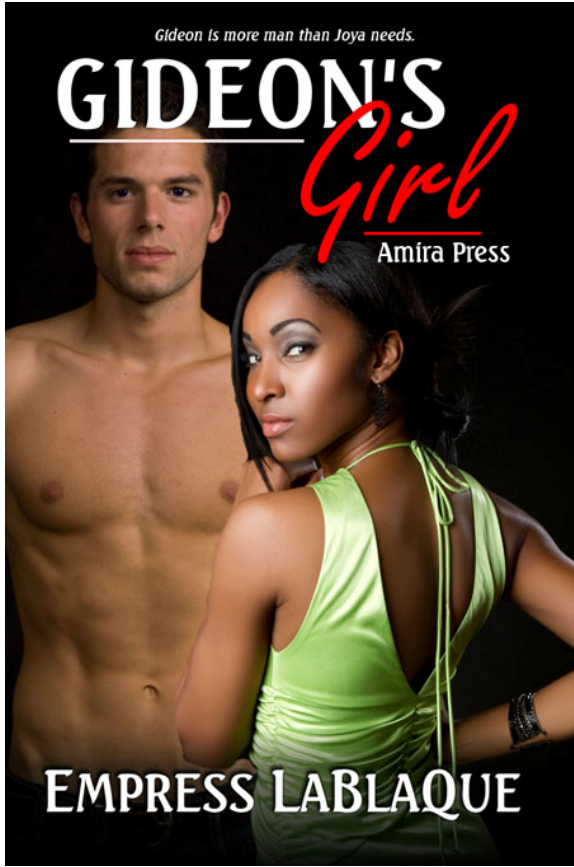
Gideon is more man than Joya needs.

GIDEON'S

Girl

Amira Press

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Gideon's Girl

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Chapter One

The Thanksgiving holidays were almost here, and I needed to perform my civic duty. The Crocket Street shelter was credited for feeding the poor and helping the homeless find jobs. Gazing out the kitchen window, I realized that this winter had been unseasonably cold.

For a month, I had been putting away canned goods for the needy. Now, my food box was overflowing. Even so, I stuffed the last can of corn inside, hoping it would not topple over.

When I felt satisfied that the box would be stable, I went to the bathroom to finish my makeup. Immediately, I tamed my unruly locks. Reddish brown curls surrendered beneath the force of my comb and lay against my small shoulders. Then, I plucked a few stray brows that threatened to destroy my high arch.

Long ago, I discovered that a little makeup always complemented my lightly bronzed skin. Large, elongated eyes came from my mother while romantically kissable lips came from my father. Although, I'd learned to talk with my big brown eyes, my lips reeled in the men. When I was satisfied with my appearance, I reached for my red beret and secured it on my head.

Because I didn't like driving in a coat, I tossed it across my arm, then slid my hand through the strap of my shoulder bag. Gazing over my modest apartment, I wondered if I'd left anything out of the box. After stuffing the cumbersome box into the back of my Chevy truck, I slammed the tailgate. Thank God I had a great job as a court reporter. I had no qualms about helping the needy.

As I stepped inside the truck, I recalled the angry expression on Judge Monroe's face when people took him for a fool. At times, the courtroom could be exciting, and then there were times when it was just downright boring. Mostly, I learned to be patient and listen carefully. Thank God for modern technology.

Adjusting my rearview mirror, I honed in on the towering box sitting in the truck's bed. Now, it was my turn to give back to the community. While I

drove, I recalled the terrible Thanksgiving I'd spent in a shelter. Though I was only five, I remembered the ordeal very well.

While most people were enjoying the joyous holiday season, me and Mama were huddled in a drafty old shelter. It was reminiscent of the one on Crockett Street. However, it was rumored that the Crockett Street shelter was far better. Despite its high rating, shelters in general gave me the creeps.

Nevertheless, a shelter had once been my home. As in years past, I felt obligated to do more than my civic duty. During that time, a middle aged director ran the shelter. He had been a kindly sort with thinning blonde hair and an extended belly. His gray eyes had crinkles in the corners when he smiled, and he always gave Mama extra work. Because we had been living in a shelter, earning money was crucial to our existence.

Daddy had been quite a handsome man. He's been a dark chocolate hunk with curly hair and cunning eyes. Though Mama was a prim lady, Daddy's fixation for reckless women had wrecked our peaceful home. Their constant arguing had grown fierce, and Mama had gotten well fed up. Even though my background had been filled with turmoil, I grew up to be a levelheaded woman. Mother's desire to leave my cheating daddy was quite understandable.

On the night we'd left, we walked past our parked car and took nothing but the clothes on our backs. It was easy to get lost among the crowd of homeless people. Daddy loved me, but he would never look for us in a refuge.

Chapter Two

The shelter was dark and damp. Its walls and floors smelled of decaying mold, chalk dust and dried urine. People were wrapped in layers of scrap clothing as they lay on their cots. It was common to see mix matched gloves or shoes on their hands or feet. Some of the residents had threadworm blankets and some did not. Colds were common among the group. Their insistent coughs echoed from the walls with a thunderous reprieve.

As we settled in for the night, I heard women sniffing and children crying out in the darkness. Occasionally, mice scurried in and out of jagged holes formed in the walls. Alcoholics dressed in soiled coats swore loudly as they tossed and turned on the hard cots.

Suddenly, the terrible creaking sound of the heavy door drew my attention. It opened widely, allowing the crisp night air to creep inside. I guess Thanksgiving was a popular holiday as police delivered yet another family. This time, they brought a scared woman dressed in a hooded coat. She held the hand of a little boy with curly blonde hair. Their expressions were placid, but confused.

The director met the officer at the door. His behavior was frantic. As he neared the doorway, he surveyed uneven rows of misplaced cots in the dimly lit room. It was obvious he was trying to locate a vacant bed. "Officer," he pleaded with upturned palms. "We're already at capacity. Can't you take them to another shelter?"

The police raised the brim of his cap and exposed his rugged face. "Listen, jacko." He grabbed the woman by the arm, then shoved the pair through the open doorway. "They're all full!" Then he stormed, "Just find a spot! It can't be that hard to locate a space for a woman and a kid."

The woman sighed, then gave the officer a sidelong glance. Without saying another word, the officer stepped backward into the misty night, slamming the door as he left. Gazing around the room and seeing the horde of homeless people, the woman looked as if she'd cry.

The director scratched his head. Once again, his eyes raced over the cramped quarters. "I'm sorry Miss—I'm just so sorry." Turning to walk

away, he instructed, "Wait here for just a moment." He walked down the hallway, then disappeared into his office.

Finally, he returned with a large cardboard box. He tore it open and placed it in the corner near our cot. Then, he gave this woman his personal blanket. "I'm so sorry. That's the best I can do tonight. God bless you." He shook his head remorsefully, then turned and walked away.

After removing her hood, the woman and the boy gawked at the sleeping space he'd humbly provided. Reluctantly, they prepared to make themselves comfortable on the cold floor. The boy appeared frightened and stared around the room with terror stricken eyes. His mother stroked his head to comfort him.

I watched as she put his hood on his head, zipped up his coat, and then secured his mittens. When I saw tears streaming down his face, I wanted to cry, too. From his frightened expression, he wasn't used to such surroundings, and then, neither was I.

Although, it had rained earlier that night, I saw the moon shining through a hole in the roof. The pitter plop of rain had filled a five gallon bucket. My mother's body felt warm as I snuggled restlessly against her. The cot seemed very small, and the canvas smelled of mold and old straw.

Mama was a thickly built woman with shapely hips. Though humble and meek, she had strong morals and solid values. Albeit, the unsanitary conditions of the shelter had taken a toll on her. Looking down at me, she whispered, "Happy Thanksgiving, Joya." She twirled her finger around the braid poking from beneath my cap. "I know I left your daddy on bad terms, honey. And this is not the way I wanted you to spend your Thanksgiving."

Thinking like the five-year-old that I was, I used grown up logic. "Mama." I gazed into her glistening brown eyes while she tried desperately to hide her fears. "I know we had a fat turkey at home. And I know we had pretty cakes and pies, too. But you and Daddy were fighting all the time." I pulled my hands from beneath the blanket and cupped my mother's brown face.

"I don't like it when you cry, Mama. You said we'll start over. We'll just take our big eraser and erase all that bad stuff. Then, we can start over."

My mother hugged me tightly and her body lurched beneath her sorrow. "You're my little joy—my little Joya. You'll go far with that positive attitude of yours."

"Mama," I said, wiggling on the rickety cot. "What's a attitude?"

Mama chuckled. "An attitude is your personal outlook on life, sweetie. It's who you are."

"Then I'm a attitude," I boasted.

"Yes, you are." Mama tweaked my nose. "You have a joyous attitude."

I didn't sleep very well that night, however, the nights did get easier. During the day, mama looked for a job while I played with the children in the shelter. The new boy was having a hard time adjusting. He was trying hard to like everyone, but he was much too angry. One day, we left the shelter. I waved goodbye to my friends and never saw them again.

Chapter Three

When I pulled up to the shelter, I sat in my truck and looked through the large glass window. Transients were moving slowly about the building and despair knotted my shoulders. I reached for the door's handle, and drew in a breath. "Here goes." I got out of the truck, walked around to the rear, then lowered the tailgate.

On seeing the mess in the truck's bed, I became mortified. Some of the groceries had fallen out of the box and rolled beyond my reach. The chilling winds made me put on my coat. I hoisted myself into the bed, then retrieved the elusive cans. After restocking the box, I got out of the truck.

While I wrestled with the box, the wind blew my beret askew. Finally, I wrangled the box to the edge of the tailgate. It seemed much fuller than when I'd left home and it was extremely heavy. By the time I reached the glass door, I was grunting like a body builder. Pressing my back against the entrance, I pushed hard and it suddenly gave way.

When I turned around, my groceries threatened to topple. Then, like magic, the box started to rise right before my eyes. Shards of blonde hair and seriously sexy eyes peered over the box as it rose.

A gasp escaped my lips when I discovered my unexpected assistant. His crooked grin encouraged a hard dimple in his cheek. "I didn't mean to frighten you," he chuckled. "You looked like you needed some help."

Because he wielded total control of the box, I cautiously let go, then fixed my falling beret. My smile became so broad, I felt my jaws aching. "Thank you," I stammered. "It-it was falling."

"Yeah." The brilliance of aquamarine eyes shimmered against the dismal tone of the room. "Royalty should never carry heavy boxes."

His insightful words fluttered over me. On seeing his gorgeous eyes, my bladder had constricted, feeling full and uncomfortable. Desirable lips made my heart beat wildly. "This food is for..."

"The residents," he finished with raised eyebrows. "How thoughtful of you." His voice was profoundly deep, its resonance authoritative and commanding.

In response, my temperature elevated and the room became smoldering hot. “Just doing my civic duty.”

While I pulled my coat apart to create a cool breeze, he ran his eyes over the mother load. “If we had more people doing their civic duty, this world would be a better place.”

A smile sashayed across my face as his words slithered down my tailbone. I pursed my lips, then gently blew out mounting tension. “I never thought of that.” Although I admired the cleanliness of the shelter, my mind was locked on this totally together guy. “This is a really nice shelter.”

“Yeah.” He placed the heavy box on a desk in the corner. “I’m proud of it.”

The bleached-out tiled floor drew my attention. “So, you work here?”

Suddenly, he frowned. “Well, yes.” He tugged at his earlobe and nodded absently. “My dad left me this old building. It was a thrift store, once.” He pointed toward the next room where cots were laid out in neat rows. “I got this wild hair to make a shelter, and—well, the rest is history.”

I was thoroughly impressed to say the least. A gorgeous man with a passion for the homeless was uncommon. Few men would have given them a second thought. “So. You did all this?”

He nodded his regal head. “Nice, huh?”

Gazing around the room, I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Yes, it is.”

He extended his upturned palm. “May I give you the grand tour?”

“I don’t know,” I said, pacing nervously. “I really must be going.” My fear of shelters came rushing back to taunt me. Right then, my fright was standing between me and this dangerously charming guy. If I didn’t pursue with my gut, I’d probably never have another opportunity to meet him.

“Maybe next time.” He retreated.

Warring against my emotions, I expelled a loud sigh. “Okay, you’ve finally twisted my arm. But, I’m in a slow hurry.”

The guy stroked his chin and his eyes went dreamy. “Got a stellar date, huh?”

“Date?” Finally, his question registered in my brain. “Oh, a date.” Humbled by his query, I lowered my eyes. “No. I don’t have a date.”

With eyes locked on mine, he moistened his lips and extended his arm. “Shall we?” Eager to touch any part of his luscious body, I placed my arm inside his. “Let me introduce my self. My name is Gideon Knight. And you are?”

“I’m Joya Johnston,” I crooned, almost wetting my pants.

“Joya, huh? Sounds festive.”

Getting control of my wits, I finally answered. “I like it.” We walked down a narrowed hallway toward a large opening.

At times, the building must have been airy and damp as Gideon wore a shirt and tie. Above that, he wore a bulky pullover sweater. He was clean shaven, and his sensual fragrance betrayed his occupation.

“This is our modest cafeteria. Although it seems crude, we can feed over a hundred people at one time.”

“I’m totally impressed.”

Faded Thanksgiving decorations adorned the cafeteria’s wall. Crude turkeys painted in childlike scrawl were held prisoner by well placed tape.

Gideon’s gaze followed mine. “We’re going to retire those decorations one day. It reminds the residents of home—their children and their grandchildren.”

“That’s noble of you.” I looked over the sea of odd kitchen tables. “Do you have this many people to feed at one time?”

“Not usually.” Gideon shook his head, then perched his foot in a nearby chair. He leaned his forearm against his elevated knee and gestured with his hands. “We get a lot of runaways and addicts. Mostly, we get college professors who like living on the streets.”

On hearing this information, I cocked my head to one side with interest. Gradually, a foul smell demanded my attention. I sniffed the air and turned in response. “Something is burning.”

Gideon cut his eyes toward the industrial sized stove. “Their dinner is burning.” He raised a finger. “Eh, excuse me for a moment please.”

Bolting up the steps of the kitchen, Gideon then walked behind the counter. Taking a pair of oven mitts, he pulled a large pot from the burner. After removing the lid, he took a large spoon and stirred inside. "It's going to be fine," he called. "It's only scorched."

My curiosity was eating me alive. I walked over to the half wall surrounding the kitchen. "You're cooking for this center?"

"Yeah, just for today. Although, I'm the director. I have to help out. Right now, I'm looking for a crew to cook and clean."

"Mmmm, I do like a man who knows his way around the kitchen."

"Don't get excited, princess. I'm a klutz when it comes to culinary talents."

Watching Gideon handling the large, heavy pot, I folded my arms and fired yet another question. "How do you keep in shape? I mean, it's obvious you don't have time." Though wearing a bulky sweater, my eyes swept over Gideon's toned physique.

He mopped up a tomato based spill. "That's the best part. I've installed a workout area for the residents. Would you like to see that also?"

I closed my eyes mirthfully, and cheesed at the thought of Gideon pumping irons. "So this is a home away from home."

"Sorta." He tossed the soiled dish towel into a sink filled with soapy water. "You may call it that."

Chapter Four

As Gideon moved about the kitchen, the view was extraordinary. Strong shoulders, a narrowed waist and tight buns were a sight to behold. Though it was winter, his skin held a healthy, tawny glow.

To my advantage, Gideon was easy to talk to. I decided to get a bit personal. "You can't make a living running this shelter, can you?"

Gideon seemed surprised as he replaced the lid on the pot. "Well, actually, no. The shelter is more of a hobby. I'm not suffering financially, and now, I'm giving back to the community."

"What a gracious gesture." Picking up an old magazine, I asked, "Why don't you just hire someone to run the center?"

Gideon walked casually down the steps with rolled up sleeves. He was wiping his hands on a cup towel. "I have a guy who helps out, but I'm a grassroots kinda guy. I like to keep my finger on the pulse of the city."

I fanned the pages of the magazine. "You've selected a dangerous hobby."

Gideon shrugged. "Doesn't bother me. I know these streets, and I know the thugs who rule them."

Smirking mildly, I admitted, "Well, I don't, and I'm getting out of here before dark."

Gideon paused. From his pensive expression, the gears were turning in his head. "May I interest you in a cup of coffee?"

I looked on the table that held a large coffeemaker. Old coffee stains had dried in dark circles. The area didn't appear neat or appealing. A homeless gentleman helped himself to a cup, then walked away stirring his drink. "I think I'll pass this time."

As the man hobbled past, he drew Gideon's attention. He watched the man, then his eyes narrowed. Addressing me, he said, "Excuse me for just a moment." Gideon walked over to the man, then pointed to the desk positioned in the foyer. "Frank, Frank."

The guy turned in response, his blue eyes squinting. "Yeah."

"Did you finish filling out those forms?"

Frank shunned him. "I ain't got time."

Gideon removed the man's coffee, then set it down on the table. "If you aren't going to fulfill your obligations, you've got to get out."

The man reached for his coffee positioned to his left. "Nah, you wouldn't put me out. I don't have anyplace to go."

"What are the rules, Frank?" Gideon removed the coffee again, then grabbed the man by his jacket. He seemed surprised as Gideon ushered him toward the door. "Don't call my bluff, Frank."

Frank threw up his hands in surrender. "Okay. Okay. I'll fill out the stupid apartment papers. But, they ain't gonna let me move in no place like that."

Gideon shook his head. "Frank, I can't help you if you won't help yourself."

Frank's brows drew a frown. "I know you're tryin' to help an old coon like me, but I just need to go to the nursing home."

Gideon patted him on the back affectionately. "The deadline is today, but we'll talk later, okay? Excuse me."

When Gideon turned to walk away, Frank's dim eyes followed him. "Is that the new volunteer?"

He stopped, then turned to address the man. "Why would you say that?"

Frank shrugged. "Well, you were showing her around." He leaned toward Gideon. "You don't usually do that."

Gideon grinned and stroked his chin. "That's a good idea, Frank. Thanks."

While Gideon handled his business, I fixed a coffee, hearing every word of their conversation.

Although I didn't know Gideon, I wondered what he was up to. Straight away, his piercing eyes ripped through me. His gallant stride seemed slow and sensual. Like a stag searching for a mate, his ardent movements had awakened my interest. Growing closer, he moistened his lips and a glint sparkled in his eyes. "I've got a proposition for you."

After hearing their discussion, my eyes widened curiously and I smiled softly. "What are you up to, Mr. Knight?"

He placed his large hand on my shoulder and engaged my eyes. Because he was so close, it was difficult to study his entire face. “Things get kinda hectic around here. I have few volunteers to make this work.”

“Yes...” I said slowly, but flinched nervously.

“Would you be interested in volunteering at the center? It would only be a few days out of the week?”

“Me?” I pointed to myself. “Volunteer?”

Gideon raised a brow. “Why not?” he asked quietly.

Shaking my head, I acknowledged, “I don’t think I’d be a productive worker.”

Gideon shrugged his burly shoulders. “There’s nothing to it. I’ll show you the ropes. I need a little assistance with the paperwork and a wee help”—he suspended his index finger and thumb together—“in the kitchen.”

The kitchen was elevated on a low wooden platform. I cringed. “I don’t cook very well.”

He grasped my hand, then placed it to his heart. “Can these fingers open a can?” He occupied his eyes with mine. “I need you, Joya.”

Feeling his heart beating beneath my touch, I parted my lips. Dang, he was smooth! “Ah, sure.”

Gideon lowered my hand. “We’re all set then. You’ll need to get a health card. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Okay.” I cursed myself, wishing I could have rejected his magnetism. Then, I wondered if I had the ability to resist his charm at all? I guess not. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter Five

Gideon's touch had robbed me of my senses. I backed away from his presence, enjoying this fabulous view. His luminous smile seemed to set his entire body aglow.

The glass door opened abruptly. Because I was backing up, I bumped into a young Caucasian woman, then knocked over a small rack of religious tracts. The woman carried bags of groceries, and staggered clumsily beneath my idle mistake. "Oh, I'm so sorry." I reached out my hand to steady her. "Let me help you with that."

When I extended my hand for assistance, the woman stepped back, then gave me the once over. Her face had torn into a menacing scowl. "Why don't you turn around and watch where you're going?" She leaned to the side to check her right boot. "These boots are expensive. I hope to God you didn't scuff one. From the looks of you, I doubt you'd be able to pay to have even one repaired."

While her blue eyes swept angrily over my form, I apologized again. "I'm so sorry."

Kneeling toward the floor, I picked up the tracts and started to sort them. From my side vision, I saw Gideon reach for the heavy bags of groceries the woman was carrying. As he searched the bags, the woman glared at me as if I were a crack head on a pipe dream.

Addressing Gideon, she rolled her eyes and sneered. "Is she looking for a bed? 'Cause I swear she's two shoes short of being homeless."

On hearing the woman's words, I turned around and glared. Because I'm a damn lady, I didn't want to get crunk in front of Gideon. At that moment, I would have given anything to see the expression on his face.

While crinkling the plastic sacks, I heard him say, "She's a nice person. Don't be so quick to judge."

After I finished stacking the tracts, I looked over my shoulder. Gazing at Gideon, I realized my soul was totally enraptured by his valiant mannerisms. "Bye, Gideon. Goodbye, Frank. You fill out those papers, you hear?"

Frank was watching television and waved me off. “Yeah—yeah.”

Gideon gave a brittle smile, then nodded goodbye.

Don't be so quick to judge was the last thing I heard him say. By helping the homeless, he had already won a place in my heart. Now, he was worming his way into my soul. I'd move into that shelter just to be near him. However, I doubted my heart could stand the strain. Whew!

Chapter Six

I closed the door of my Chevy, reveling in thoughts of being with Gideon. What a wonderful Thanksgiving feast *he* would be. I imagined him naked and perched on an elegantly decorated banquet table. Lying on his side, he'd have elbow and knee bent seductively.

Holiday foods would surround his tawny, succulent body. A delectable honey glazed ham would inadvertently hide his luscious groin area. Charred pineapple rings with cherry centers would make an interesting center piece.

His brilliant eyes would burn though me as he offered me a slice of chocolate cake. I'd put my lips to his fingers, take hold of the cake, then suck the icing from each of his scrumptious fingers. Of course, he'd part his lips, wishing I'd do more. After I'd had my fill, I'd put my chocolate flavored lips on his. Then, we'd churn in his wickedly laced kisses.

He'd lie down, allowing me to pleasure his hulking frame with chocolate kisses. I'd take my fingers and slather icing on the tips of his nipples. Then cover them with stimulating suckles to enhance his pleasure. During this love-play his mast would thicken, throbbing with need. With each suckle, it would jerk under my command.

I'd push the yams out of the way, then mount his mouth-watering body. Shivering with desire, I'd slide my starving core upon his shaft, starting a slow grind. Under my skillful hips, I'd read his torrid face. *Pleasure me, Joya.*

* * * *

What was happening to me? It was obvious I was developing a deep desire for Gideon. With my demanding job and Mama's health, I had enough to think about. At this point, I needed to focus on the errands at hand. The mall was not very far and I needed to make a quick run. Mama needed a few things and her robe was thread worn.

After purchasing these items and having them sacked up, I headed for the nursing home. Mama had been there only a year. Her adjustment was just beginning to take hold.

A massive stroke had left her body in a weakened state. She was unable to talk, walk, or take care of herself. Although I did the best I could, Mama still got bed sores. Because she was a heavy woman, her pressure points took a brutal beating. Nevertheless, I worked every day on my job, and kept her in my little apartment.

One day, the doctor had declared she needed more care than I could provide. Even though a nurse came by every other day, she also needed mild therapy.

The day I put her in the nursing home, I died a little. Mama was my best friend and I missed her so much. Now, I stood over her bed, stroking her silver hair, and fixing the covers around her neck. She grunted and groaned from time to time, but mostly, she talked with her eyes.

During many visits she would cry out of sheer frustration. Now, I needed to be strong. Looking down on my mother's ravaged body, I'd smile to encourage her. However, once I left the room, it was a much different story. Hearing people calling out for assistance, I'd walk briskly down the hallway. My steps would quicken almost to a trot as tears burst forth. *I did my best, Mama. I did my best* were my thoughts as I slammed my palms against the cold glass of the entrance.

Inside the truck, I'd pound the steering wheel and curse. If I had visited Mama on that wintry Sunday, I could have gotten her to the hospital in time. Instead, she lay on the cold floor of the kitchen unable to help herself.

When Mama hadn't answered her phone, I'd felt she was visiting Mr. Greely, the next door neighbor. There were times they'd slip off to the movies or go for a stroll in the park. For some reason, even Greely hadn't bothered to call on her.

I needed to stop beating myself up for Mama's stroke. Even so, I found it difficult to look into her eyes. No wonder I'd kept her near and for as long as I could. Many mornings I'd burst through the doors almost late for court. This was not permissible and the judge didn't even play.

Chapter Seven

When I got home, I curled up on the sofa with a cup of herbal tea. My shoulders were hard as stones and I needed to relax. Dr. Rankin had warned me about being so stressed and I didn't want the headaches to start again.

While the television watched me, my mind ran over the day's events. Because I had a fetish for being organized, I gazed around the room, admiring my skills as an interior decorator. It was just a hobby, but one day, I would decorate a beautiful two story home with my new hubby.

My eyes fell on an oddly placed DVD positioned on the bookshelf. Then, I realized Dalton hadn't packed everything. That was our favorite movie; he probably left it on purpose.

Yes, men were scarce, especially sexy ones. After dealing with Dalton's brown-eyed butt, I was not about to let anyone else come up in here with that kind of drama. Man sharing was not one of my virtues. I couldn't believe he'd actually had that whore in my precious truck.

The thought of her disease infested rump on my pristine leather seats made me cringe. No, Dalton had to get up outta here, and I was sick of his funky dog too, leaving piles of hot mess soaked in my nice carpet.

Then, Gideon ran across my mind and calmness flowed over me. The certain way he moved, the way he barked out demands, the way he was tender, yet firm. All those things turned me on. Being around him was like eating strawberries while having my feet massaged. I felt comfortable, yet strangely titillated. With his aquamarine eyes and broad shoulders, he was a gorgeous piece of sculptured work.

I took an easy sip from my mug, feeling an eerie connection with him. Although, he was confidence wrapped in a blanket of cocky, he seemed familiar. When he'd lifted Frank from his chair, I felt he was a heartless creep. Then, when I realized he was only trying to help Frank, my feelings for him softened. Now, that was my kind of man.

Gideon said he had no financial worries so that was a plus. Obviously, he was refined, but one with the streets. That fact worried me also.

I pulled my blanket over my feet wondering why a wealthy man would open a homeless shelter. Something just didn't add up. He was rough, with a tough love sorta attitude. There was nothing spoiled or pampered about him.

After taking another sip of my tepid tea, my mind fell on the leather booted witch that had flown through the glass door. I hoped she didn't work there. If she did, eventually, we'd tie up. The way she fawned over Gideon was nauseating. Was that her man? Volunteering at the center would afford me the pleasure of watching the two. If she didn't keep Gideon nailed down, he was going to be mine.

Chapter Eight

The day in court was boring, however an evening with Gideon would be strangely rewarding. Exhilarating thoughts made my day brighter. To seem appealing, I wore my dark green slacks and my butter cream sweater. This sweater had a daring, plunging neckline. I'd learned, leave nothing to chance.

After parking my truck, I grabbed my coat, opened the door, and headed for the center. My high heeled boots clicked noisily against the pavement. The frigid winds tousled my hair, setting my beret askew. I pulled my coat together, glanced back at my truck, then continued down the sidewalk.

Fear climbed into my gut. This neighborhood was not safe. Pity, I had to park my truck so far away.

In an alley beside me, four men warmed their hands over a barrel, two more leaned against a building drinking from a paper bag. While they talked loudly among themselves, I secured the purse on my shoulder and scurried along.

Focused on my destination, I waited to cross at the red light. From there, I could see through the large glass windows in front of the shelter. I saw that woman once again. She hung holiday decorations, prancing around as if she owned the place. Already she was working my last nerve.

If her crabby plastic butt started with me today, she was going to feel the hidden wrath of my dad's temper. Mama was a saint, but my dad had no tolerance for bull, and neither did I. Fighting those two personality traits was a constant battle. If I wasn't careful, Dad's temper could send me straight to the penitentiary.

Working the judicial system, I'd barely escaped once. So, I knew what my fate would be. There was no way I wanted to be the girlfriend of some butch who had jugs bigger than mine. Finding a happy medium was hard sometimes. I'm sure Dalton's back had healed nicely from the stab wounds.

What the hell had he been thinking, bringing his woman in my apartment and having sex in my bed? Yes, I'd put some hurt on his ass. It had been a crime of passion. I'm glad he hadn't pressed charges.

Mostly, Mama's personality reigned in my life. Her meekness had opened numerous doors for me, so I preferred her milder mannerism. However, waiting at this red light was aggravating. Through the window, I could see that the witch was pretending she couldn't hang decorations on the top shelf.

To hold her steady on the short ladder, she had placed Gideon's hands around her waist. While waiting on the light, I paced eagerly. Then my ears started to burn. Was I actually going to see her every single day? Hopefully not.

When I reached the center, I pushed the door open with a cheery hello. Gideon seemed pleased that I had arrived. He left the woman standing on the ladder unattended.

"I thought you'd never return," he said, blocking my steps. "Did you bring your health card?"

The woman pretended she was going to fall, but Gideon ignored her. Looking into my purse, I searched for the card. "I'm not going to disappoint you." Then, I gave him my card.

"Excellent." His dimples indicated he was pleased. "I'll copy this, then place it in your file."

The woman cut her eyes toward Gideon. She cleared her throat loudly. I watched as she carelessly tossed an ornamental piece on the floor. It rolled near Gideon's feet. "Gideon." Hearing his name, he turned in her direction. "Could you get that pick for me, please?"

In response, Gideon looked down at his feet. "Excuse me." He picked up the pick and gave it back to the woman. Then, turning toward me, he asked, "Have you met Heather?"

I narrowed my eyes. Under my breath, I managed, "No. I haven't had the pleasure." Walking toward Heather, I extended my hand. She acted as if she didn't see it, and turned her head. Feeling awkward, I frowned at her blatant rudeness. Then, I dusted my hand on my clothes and smiled nervously at Gideon. If he hadn't been standing there, I would have snatched a cramp in her tail.

Gideon gestured toward me, then he pointed toward Heather. "You two will be working together. You're my kitchen pit crew for the evening."

Someplace in my genes, there must have been Irish roots. Steam poured from beneath my blouse when I realized we were a team. Automatically, I knew this would be like tying two cat's tails together then letting them go.

Ignoring Heather, Gideon and I walked toward the kitchen. I turned to look over my shoulder. "How long has *she* been working here?"

Gideon motioned with his thumb. "Who, Heather? About, three or four days. Astounding woman. Excellent worker."

That cow wasn't fooling me. "Three or four days, huh?" *She's probably doing community service for drunken driving.* "Where does she work?"

Gideon stopped walking. "See. That's the beauty of it. Her family owns McGee's Restaurant, McGee's Bakery, and McGee's Grocery Store. She doesn't work anyplace. She's at my every beck and call."

"Hidden motive," I whispered between my teeth.

Immediately, Gideon's gaze fell on my lips. He frowned. "Did you say something?"

"No." Then, I brightened. "What did you say we were cooking?"

"Oh, the menu." He named each item on his fingers. "Let's see, there are childogs, baked beans, chips and mixed fruit."

"Well rounded meal and it sounds easy enough."

Gideon stroked my back with loving glides. "We'd better get to it, princess. It's almost time for the afternoon run."

Gideon tilted his head toward the cafeteria, and my gaze mirrored his sparkling eyes. Men had started to gather at the tables in the cafeteria, and they looked famished. "They're going to stay there until you feed them," he said quietly, "so you might want to hurry. This won't get any better, princess. And soon, it won't be a pretty sight." I imagined the men in a hunger driven uproar and I winced.

After stopping briefly at the kitchen, Gideon then walked toward his office. "I've got to finish up some papers. Knock on my door if you need me."

Standing on the top step of the kitchen, I assured, "I'll take good care of them."

Within seconds, Heather dragged her bony tail to the kitchen. She opened a drawer and reached for a plastic apron. “Prin—cess!” she mimicked ungracefully. “I know what you’re up to, and I’m telling you now—Gideon Knight belongs to me.” She gawked at my butter cream blouse and rounded cleavage. “And that blouse ain’t working for ya, girly.” Heather turned her back and placed the loop of the apron over her head.

I inhaled deeply and summoned my mother’s meekness. Exhaling, I revealed, “Heather. I’m volunteering because Gideon asked for my help. Obviously, you’re not taking care of his needs.”

From the rear, I felt that Heather was scowling. Like a werewolf poised to strike, she swung her head around, and her blonde hair took flight. “I’m taking care of his needs and mine, too. We had a great time at my house last night.”

Opening the industrial-sized refrigerator, I calmly picked up a large package of wieners, then gave her a sidelong glance. “So you told him someone was trying to break in your house, last night. That’s the oldest trick in the book.”

Heather pulled her hair through the loop, then tied the apron. “I did hear a noise.”

“Right, and I’m Beyonce’s hair dresser.” I reached for a hair net to secure my hair.

After reaching for a can of chili, Heather warned, “You’re out of your league, troll. Did you see that smoking hot piece of masculinity? Gideon Knight is a refined, educated man. He wouldn’t give you the time of day. There’s no room in his life for gutter sewage.” When she finished talking she was breathing hard.

While rambling through the spoon drawer, my hand fell absently across a butter knife. A terrible thought ran playfully through my head. I puffed a sigh and chuckled.

Frank meandered toward the kitchen area. He leaned over the half wall that separated the kitchen from the cafeteria. “Do you ladies need any help?”

Heather narrowed her blue eyes and blasted, "You came up here yesterday with that same bull shit! Wait over there just like everyone else. Now, sit your dusty ass down!"

I shot Heather a look, mortified by her rude behavior. Trying to appease Frank, I spoke softly. "I'm sorry, Frank. No, sweetie. We don't need any help." I turned to ogle Heather who was fuming. "Thanks for asking. We'll feed you guys"—I lunged at Heather with an irritated scowl—"as soon as possible."

Frank patted my hand and gave a fragile smile. Then, he turned and hobbled back to the cafeteria. When he sat down at the table with the other guys, he gave a full report. "It won't take long, guys." he said, wiping his nose on a desperately soiled hankie.

* * * *

When Gideon emerged from his office, the men were eating and making yummy noises. He rubbed his tired eyes. "Great job, girls. The kitchen is already clean. You guys make an excellent team."

On hearing his acknowledgement, Dad reared his ugly head and I calmed his nerves. "Thank you, Gideon. Kind of you to notice."

Heather cut in front of me, pushing me aside. "I saved you a plate, Giddy. It's in the microwave."

Gideon paused and seemed surprised. "Thank you, Heather. How did you know I was hungry?" Heather turned her head and looked down her nose at me, then she lifted her chin with a snooty expression. She walked down the steps and stood in front of Gideon. "Are we still going to pick up your car this evening?"

He lifted his head and closed his eyes in aggravation. "I almost forgot I don't have a car today. Yes. Let me lock the office, then I'll be ready to go." Looking upward he called, "Joya, could you hold down the fort until we return?"

Heather smirked while removing her apron. "I'll be ready in a minute, Giddy."

Gideon grinned and shook his head. "Heather, you're such a card." Facing me again, he said, "Dave is diabetic. Think you can handle him? He hides candy and eats it when he thinks no one is looking."

"Not on my watch," I said staunchly. "He'll be fine." I dried the large broiler and placed it in the pantry.

After removing her hairnet, Heather shrugged her shoulders and stepped off the platform. "See ya soon, Joya. And, when Gideon returns"—she flicked her fingers as if shooing a stray cat—"you can just let your little ole self out, sugar."

Chapter Nine

The very next evening, I sat at the front desk filling out thank you cards for pledges and donations. When I heard the bell above the door ringing, I gazed upward from my work. Behind a heaving box, a caramel hunk carried groceries. His hair was curly on top, and tapered neatly on the sides. Soon as his hazel eyes fell on me, his expression changed. Slowly, he placed the box on a table positioned to the left side of the room.

"Well hello," he crooned, walking toward my desk. "You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes." I extended my hand. "I'm Joya Johnston. I started volunteering this week."

"My, my, you're a nice addition to this dreary, God-forsaken place."

"Thank you." I stacked my envelopes neatly and prepared for my next set.

His eyes swept over my face, hair and body. "Yes, yes, yes. Nice bone structure—a strapping young woman."

"Well." Taking in his peculiar compliment, I leaned my head to one side. "Thank you again." I nodded.

The hunk grew closer. A lustful humming sound erupted in his chest and trailed off. "I'll bet your husband is proud to have you on his arm *every* Sunday morning."

Knowing where this conversation was headed, I admitted, "You know, I wouldn't know about that."

"Not married, huh? Girl, how did *you* escape the clutches of a good man?"

"That's an easy question. I haven't found that, quote, unquote, good man."

"Ummh." He took a handkerchief and briskly blotted his forehead. "That's just too bad." He folded his arms, making his well manicured nails visible. "I'm Reverend Wayne from the Solid Foundation Missionary Baptist Church on the corner of Crockett Street and Main. We always donate to this center. You know, keeping it real—giving back to the community."

I picked up my pen. "Great, thank you for thinking of us."

"Sweet thang, you're just quite welcome. You know, on Thursday night, we're having a workshop for the singles in our—congregation. We would be honored if you could grace us with your presence."

I shook my head. "I'm committed to work on Thursdays, Reverend. But, it sounds interesting." I leaned over to get more stationery from the bottom drawer. With his lips closed tightly, I heard a sensual moan coming from the reverend's chest.

"Umph, umph, umph. Yes, it is quite interesting, and I'm the teacher, too. I could probably *help* you find Mr. Right," he assured.

"Really?" I replied, fascinated at his deliberate flirting.

"Yeah, girl." He pointed to himself, his fingers adorned with various styles of diamond rings. "I'm single, myself, and I know all the tricks these single men use. They wanna play gimme your phone, hide the bone, then get up and go home." He turned up his nose sympathetically while gazing down on me.

Was this really a man of God? "I see."

About that time, Gideon walked over to my desk and greeted the preacher. "Reverend Wayne." He nodded his head.

Reverend Wayne looked up in surprise. "Gideon Knight, my superlative angel of mercy! How's it going today, bud?"

"Fine today, Rev." Blocking my view, Gideon slid between him and me, forcing the good reverend to back up. "How about yourself?"

The reverend tried to address me around Gideon's large shoulders, but Gideon would move each time the reverend moved. Finally, the reverend stood still. "I was just telling your lovely new volunteer about our new singles workshop on Thursdays." Placing his handkerchief to his forehead, he blotted more sweat. "She said she was too busy to drop by. Now, I'll bet you can fix that little problem, huh?"

Gideon looked down at the ton of work on my desk. "I'm sure we could make arrangements, if she'd like to attend." Gideon looked into my eyes. "We shall see," he said, remotely.

Reverend Wayne reached into this pocket and pulled out his business card. He then reached around Gideon and placed it on my desk. Afterward, he slid the card into my view. "Call me. We'll see if we can help you find the right man."

I giggled jokingly at his outrageous claims. "Oh, really?"

The reverend turned to walk out the door. "Don't forget to call me, okay? I'll see you Thursday night at seven."

Gideon's face was peaceful as he nodded goodbye to the reverend. As soon as the door closed, Gideon picked up the reverend's card, tore it in half, then placed it in his pocket. With a vindictive scowl, he confessed, "You won't need this." As if Wayne had invaded *his* territory, Gideon's voice became jealous and forceful. "I might need to give *him* a call."

I sat gawking. My torn card disappeared, never to be seen again. "Okay," I managed.

Not that I cared, but Gideon had totally blocked any action the reverend might have had. With squared shoulders, he then walked away. "I don't think you'll be available on Thursdays," he called, over his shoulder, "but I'll check the *new* schedule."

Chapter Ten

Every day Heather would find a different reason to steal Gideon away. Her excuses were as long as my arm. I had a feeling he was on to her. Indeed, it was always late when Gideon returned. By leaving me at the center alone, I got to know the residents pretty well. Instead of brooding over his absence, Gideon would find me engaged in a rousing card or domino game.

One particular night, Frank, Dave, and Jess were having a great time. We talked about their lives before the streets. True enough, all three men were intelligent, and at one time, had been gainfully employed. When I looked up, I noticed that Gideon stood in the doorway with a marvelous glint in his eyes.

Immediately, I dropped what I was doing. "Excuse me, guys." I put down my cards, then picked up my purse. "See you all next week. Okay?"

Jess, the only black male at the table, made a brash remark. "Tomorrow, I'm gonna beat the drawers offen that cute little butt of yourn. Who taught you to play lack dat, anyway?"

Jess didn't mean any harm, so I smiled and prepared to leave the cafeteria. "Never you mind, old man," I kidded. "Tomorrow, just bring it."

As I walked past Gideon swinging my rounded hips, he stammered. "Eh, Joya. Do you have a moment? I need your expert opinion on something."

"What is it?" I asked, turning to walk toward his office. Gideon walked slowly behind me.

I heard Jess holler as I disappeared down the hallway. "Ifn I had some of them vi-agree pills, I'd tap that."

When I reached the office door, I realized I had left Gideon standing at the cafeteria. His eyes were narrowed. He had shot Jess a fierce look. While staring at him, I noticed he held his lips tightly and raised a brow, but said nothing.

Then I heard Jess's voice echoing down the hall. "Okay, okay. Sorry 'bout dat. I'm disrespectin' the lady."

Gideon turned his head toward me just as I was stepping into his office. As soon as I walked inside, he came in behind me and then closed the door. "Have a seat, princess," he said while sitting on the edge of his large desk.

As if deeply burdened, he expelled a loud sigh. "Joya. I'm a busy man. I'm not going to beat around the bush."

Excited to be alone with him, I zoned out. Gideon started to state his demands. "Joya, I really need you—every hour. You've got wonderful skills and I believe you have a great ass." Suddenly, his mouth stopped moving.

"Excuse me?" Was I hearing him correctly? "I'm sorry." I said, shaking my head. "What did you say?"

Gideon appeared slightly puzzled. "I said, I really need you to work more hours. You've got wonderful people skills and I believe you'd be a great asset to the center."

"Is that what you actually said?" I leaned forward for clarification. Gideon shrugged under my questions. Hearing those words from Gideon's lips, I was sure my eyes appeared dreamy.

Cocking his head to one side, Gideon managed, "Intriguing. I've never met anyone so eager to volunteer. You're excellent with these men."

"Oh!" I replied, blushing. "You meant volunteering at the center."

He spoke softly. "Ah, yes."

Trying to appear businesslike, I crossed my legs and answered gruffly. "Yes, of course. The center needs dedicated people."

Gideon shook his finger. "You know, I just can't shake this feeling that we've met before."

"You think?" I made myself comfortable in the plush chair. "I don't know where it could have been."

Gideon snapped his finger. "It had something to do with Thanksgiving."

"Now you're way off." I relaxed back into the chair.

"Perhaps, but I never forget a face. Especially one as beautiful as yours."

"Thank you. You have stunning features yourself."

He shook his head pensively. "Thank you. I'll walk you to your truck. Wouldn't want anything to happen to our best volunteer."

I stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Knight. It's dark out and I'd be honored."

Gideon stood up. "Thanks for sitting with the guys."

"It was all my pleasure." When I placed my hand on the door knob, I noticed that the door was jammed. I gave it a yank. "Is it locked?" I tried to twist it again, but Gideon came to my assistance.

"This old building—sometimes the door swells, then gets jammed." I stood to the side as he placed his hand on the knob. His masculine scent was affecting my body in foolish ways.

Suddenly, Gideon unstuck the door, but closed it immediately. He paused, and I looked deep into his eyes. There was a knowing about him. In the dimness of the room I noticed that his rugged features were nothing short of being a male runway model.

As he towered above me, I wanted to know what he was thinking. There were no words, then suddenly, Gideon closed in on my space. Unexpectedly, he backed up. "I didn't bring you in here for that," he admitted. "But, I find you terribly intriguing, exotic, and sensual. What's really going on?"

Gideon took another step backward while I blushed. "I don't know, but I feel it, too."

"So." He shrugged. "What are we going to do about these—these feeling?"

"I don't know," I whispered. My eyes fell on his inviting lips and my breathing grew heavy.

He grew closer. "May I kiss you?"

"Only one kiss."

Gideon lowered his head and I felt the heat of his mouth near mine. Slowly, his soft lips closed in on mine with a vengeance, then he swept me into his arms. Was I dreaming? I opened my eyes widely, then closed them blissfully. Gideon took me on a journey in the land of sexual pleasures.

As he thrashed wildly in my soul, I discovered I was standing on one foot with the other elevated behind me. I had never felt such passion in my life. His breath was as sweet as honey. His member sought mine, elevating my desire into a raging fire.

My breasts pressed against his body, begging for his attention. Between us, our heart beat with one rhythm. Finally, Gideon pulled away and touched his lips. "That was a mistake."

I shook my head and pleaded. "No, Gideon. It wasn't a mistake. I wanted it, too."

"Yes, it was." He stroked his hair and walked away.

"What's wrong?" I cried urgently.

"I had no idea your body would be so volatile. I promised myself that nothing would come between me and this center." He placed his hands in his pockets, obviously hiding a vivid erection.

"Gideon, it's all right."

"No. You don't understand. This center means the world to me." He pointed toward the cafeteria. "These people mean the world to me. I don't take my commitment lightly."

"Gideon, we're only talking about one little kiss. We both enjoyed it."

"Yes, a little too much." Gideon folded his arms. "Okay, Joya. It's confession time."

"You have something to say?" I asked lowering my body toward the chair.

Gideon stroked his chin. "Eh, yes." He leaned against the desk and crossed his legs, his bulge in noticeable view. "Joya." He blew a puff of air. "I asked you to volunteer here because I wanted to see more of you. After seeing you for over a week, I can hardly keep my eyes off you."

You're loving, kind and generous. And you have a *hell* of a body." Gideon shrugged. "I go home and think of nothing but you. Your hair, your exotic, dark brown eyes, your cute little nose. And those lips—oh my God." He cast his eyes toward the floor and shook his head.

I was more than pleased by his confession. I wanted to leap toward the ceiling, but I played it cool. "What about Heather? She loves you."

"Heather—how can I say this nicely? She's an ass."

I gasped. "I thought you two had a thing going."

"No, there is no *thing* between us."

"But..."

“But, Heather has issues. She’s spoiled and I know she has her meat hooks out for me.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

He opened the door. “I am going to do—nothing. That’s her problem. I didn’t lead her on.”

We walked into the hallway, past the cafeteria, then slowly up to the locked glass door. Gideon reached into his pocket for the key. Afterward, he unlocked the door. “I swear, I hate to see you leave. I wish we could spend more time together.”

“The judge won’t be so happy if I’m late in the morning. And tomorrow, I absolutely need to visit my mom.”

Gideon raised both brows. “Fine. I can get someone to help Heather in the kitchen.”

“Are you sure? I can help, but I’ll have to leave immediately afterward.”

“No, Joya. Go visit your mother.” He placed a kiss on my forehead. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Eleven

Gideon was right. Those weeks *had* been filled with pleasure. The residents gave me unspeakable joy. Seeing Gideon each day was sheer ecstasy. When it came to the Crockett Street Center, he was almost angelic in his approach. I was not totally fooled by Gideon's angel wings. When need be, his temper needed a strong bridle.

Next week was the countdown to Thanksgiving. The center was abuzz with activity as people donated foods, clothes and money. Mama would be proud of my accomplishments. Most of all, I loved watching Gideon in action. He loved children and he loved his job. Each night Gideon would see me to my truck. Then he'd call as soon as I'd get home.

In the center, Gideon had a difficult time keeping his hands off his princess. When I'd look up from my work, I'd catch him staring. Often, I'd blush with embarrassment. The residents were beginning to notice our attraction. Some of them even encouraged our behavior.

Gideon said Jess had been washing out his coffee mug when he saw him watching me in the gym. Because the gym was free, I'd work out sometimes before leaving for home. Jess had seen Gideon leaning against the wall and thought he needed a good lecture in romance. "Boy," he said, in his raspy voice. "You been looking at that gul and lookin' at that gul. Why don't you ask her out? She's a purty thang and it don't matter ifn her tan is darker than yourn."

When Gideon shared this experience with me, I burst into laughter as he mimicked Jess perfectly.

Often, we'd steal passionate moments by hiding in his office. Unaware of the love growing between us, others would walk idly by. Our passions grew so strong it was obvious we both needed release.

* * * *

One night, I left the shelter and headed for home. Heavy petting with Gideon had left me frustrated. This traditional occupation had to stop. His

kisses left me irritated and bothered. Like a bitch in heat, I needed relief. There were times when his kisses alone had train-wrecked my passions. This practice left me mildly relieved, but pissed. His misplaced fingers had also brought similar relief. But, I needed to actually feel his body against mine.

My urges prevailed, so how was Gideon handling his sexual tension? Obviously, his member was always rock hard as it was pressed, massaged, and rolled between us. Did he somehow wield stronger self control?

My answer came within seconds. Soon, as I pulled up to my apartment and shut off my lights, a pair of headlights pulled in behind me. When I opened my truck's door, the lights were so bright, I shielded my eyes. On the driver's side, the darkly tinted window slowly descended.

I recognized Gideon as the driver and my heart flooded with joy. Walking toward his car, I remarked, "What a pleasant surprise. What are *you* doing here?"

Gideon smirked and his dimples deepened. "I can't help myself. Your body is emitting strong distress signals. It's time for me to render my civic duty."

"That's really sweet. Come inside."

Gideon shut off his motor and opened his door. "Hey. It's the least I can do."

Reading Gideon's mind, I glowed with sensual overtones. "You're looking for relief, aren't you?"

"In the worst way, princess. My loins are constantly on fire, and only you can extinguish this flame."

Smiling sweetly I admitted, "You might not like what I have to offer."

Gideon sighed. His eyes skated across my rounded cleavage. "If you make love the way you kiss..." He shook his head. "I'm in for a pleasant surprise."

I widened my eyes with sincerity. "To be brutal and completely honest, I do need you, Gideon. Please come inside."

After unlocking the door to my apartment, Gideon Knight walked into my domain. Gazing around the room, he stated, "Nice apartment. I wish we could keep the center this clean."

After placing my purse on the table, I confessed, "I'm sure you didn't drive across town to talk about the center."

"No, I didn't. But I'm trying to take it slow. I know women don't like being rushed."

I placed my arms around his waist and pulled him close. "Oh," I droned, kissing his lips, "and who told you that?"

Gideon returned my kiss with a familiar embrace. "It's a known fact. Women like being pursued. So, tonight, I stalked a sizzling trail of passion and it led me directly to you."

He placed his warm lips near mine. This time, they parted with anticipation. "Considering the fact that you're a busy man, I'm honored that you're part bloodhound," I teased.

Gideon became serious. "Princess, I want you, and you want me." His aquamarine eyes searched mine for approval.

I stepped backward. "The bedroom is this way," I said quietly, beckoning him with my finger. Just the thought of having Gideon in my bedroom and my body started to salivate.

Gideon trapped me against the bedroom door. He placed his fingers into my palms and forced my hands open. "Joya I know there's nothing romantic about what we're doing, but I can't take this anymore." His lips touched mine even as he spoke, their moisture adhering to mine. "Don't judge me, but I can't sleep at night, thinking of you. This has got to stop, or start, or something."

I placed two fingers to his lips, then whispered. "Shh, let's make love."

Gideon placed me tenderly on my bed. Looking into my eyes, he unbuttoned my blouse. "Every day, your kisses set me on fire, then you'd walk away." Pressing his member firmly against my lower abdomen, he admitted, "I hardly think it's fair to walk past me swinging those hips. And I don't think it's fair when you place those fragrant, appetizing melons, under my nose." He bent his head and kissed my cleavage. "I love the way you pull your hair up, exposing your graceful neck—that drives me insane." He gathered my tresses into his hands and laid them aside. Then, he nuzzled my neck, moaning deep in his throat.

"If Jess wishes he could get it up, then what do you expect of me." He raised my skirt, stroked my thigh, then placed his shaft tightly against my lace panties. After circling his shaft against my outer core, our clothes became damp with mutual desire.

Gideon dropped his eye toward my lips, his hips moving with continuous motion. "Your lips look as if they're waiting for my kiss. All these things disrupt a good night's sleep," he groaned. "In order to sleep tonight, I need a hair of the dog that bit me."

"Gideon," I moaned, enthralled in passion. "If you don't use protection, I'll get pregnant through my clothes," I joked.

Gideon opened his eyes and elevated himself upon his elbows. "You are so right."

After getting undressed, Sir Gideon swathed his sword in protection. He then separated my folds, and proceeded to fill my passage with his weapon of choice. My lips parted as he inched his way toward my treasure. Finally, he thrust his hips, casting forth his goods with fervor.

I wrapped my legs around Gideon's narrow waist. He fed my hunger with perfect strokes. Tearing at his back, I pushed my hips in unison. Soon, my cavity became slick, sloppy wet, itching for satisfaction.

Gideon stopped. After withdrawing, he then cleaned his weapon, and turned me over on my knees. With my round rear facing him, he grasped his member and placed the head near my waiting core.

He grabbed my hips and slowly pulled my tight passage upon his swollen mast. The moment he entered, the sensation was explosive, and the rewards were immediate. My lips parted, as he separated my passage from a different angle. Feelings were so intense, I released on impact, flooding the passage with rivers of cream.

When Gideon finally reached bottom, he pulled out and plunged forward. Immediately, he held me still while he filled my space with his seed. "I'm sorry," he moaned while stoking my round rear. "I've never ever had a piece this hot." He withdrew and plunged forward again. "This is simply unbelievable." He ran his strong hands over my naked skin. "Does anyone else know how good this is? Shit!"

Chapter Twelve

At the center, Heather had her suspicions, but I didn't care. She didn't own Gideon. I watched her play silly games to win him over. He'd grin, showing his rich dimples, then wink at me. That wink told me he was on to Heather's antics, but I still wanted her gone.

On Tuesday, Heather pulled the biggest stunt of all. She saw Gideon talking with a codes inspector. After he left, she moved in for the kill. "Giddy, I'm having a Thanksgiving party on Wednesday night. I know you'll be there. Bring your swimming trunks."

Gideon seemed dazed, but drew back. "My swimming trunks? It's freezing outside."

"I have an indoor pool," she sassed. "I think it's a novel idea to have a pool party for Thanksgiving."

Gideon chuckled and folded his arms. "Intriguing."

With my net on my head, I stirred the corn, hoping Gideon would reject her invitation. He didn't.

"That's a fascinating idea, Heather. I believe I will come. Of course you've invited Joya, right?"

As if she had been hit in the face with a pie, Heather stammered, "Err, Joya. Well, no. I assumed she wouldn't feel comfortable around people like us."

He narrowed his eyes. "People like us?" he questioned. "What exactly does that mean?"

"You know. Caucasian, wealthy, well bred."

"No, I can't say that I understand, Heather."

A silent cheer erupted from my soul as I listened to Gideon's cocky comebacks. He pressed Heather even more. "What are you saying, Heather? Are you saying that Joya is not good enough to attend your party? If that's the case, then neither am I."

Heather tugged at her hair. "I'm not implying she isn't good enough, mind you. It's just that." She tossed her hair and paused. "She probably doesn't own a real bathing suit."

Gideon stepped forward and crowded her space. "Why don't you ask her? She's standing right there beside you."

Heather turned to face me, and I didn't make it any better. I folded my arms, stretched my eyes, and waited for her forced invitation. "Joya—would you come...to my party?"

Leaning closer, I said, "I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

"Oh, come on, guys." She stamped her foot. "This is so unreasonable. Why don't I just ask all the residents to come, too?"

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the back of the cafeteria. People were yelling and screaming so loudly that the confusion was deafening. Gideon burst through the crowd. "What's going on in here?" he asked, pulling two men apart.

"He stole my watch," Dave yelled, almost trembling with rage. "That was my father's watch and he'd better return it."

The young teen lunged at Dave. Gideon gnashed his teeth and made distance between them. "He's a liar. This is my watch, old man. You wish you had a watch this nice."

Dave insisted, "It's mine, I tell you. He's going to use it to buy crack." He pointed his finger. "You damn crack head!"

The teen danced about with his chest stuck out. "You don't know me, old man. I'll cut your throat wide open for lying on me."

"Then just cut me," Dave scoffed. "Cause you've got my watch. It's rare. It's been passed down for generations."

"I done warned you, old man!" The young man lunged at Dave while Gideon held him at bay.

Dave yelled loudly, "Show him the inscription—show it to him. It's mine, I tell ya."

From where I was standing, I saw the young man lunge forward again. Then, I saw a horrifying glazed expression on Dave's face. He caught his chest, leaned forward, then immediately went down.

I started to scream and rushed down the steps. "He has a knife!"

Gideon looked down at Dave while the young man struggled to get away. Finally, he broke free. Gideon knelt and lifted Dave's head. "Oh my God."

He turned toward the door while the teen welded his knife and sliced at anyone near.

Two old men went after him, but he hit the door running. I rushed to help with Dave. While I looked on him, compassion filled my soul. Dave was just a scruffy old man. Although we had the facilities, he probably hadn't had a bath in months. His dim blue eyes and scraggly teeth gave him a unique personality.

Gideon said nothing as he looked on Dave. Suddenly, he spoke up. "You're going to be all right."

Dave closed his eyes. "I know. 'Cause I'm not feeling no pain, right now." He opened his eyes, licked his lips, then grasped Gideon's arm. "You done been good to me, boy. God is gonna bless you fer dat." Suddenly, Dave closed his eyes, then Gideon closed his.

When the ambulance arrived, Dave was gone. As they were placing him on the gurney, Gideon finally stood up. His hands were soaked with Dave's blood. I left his side long enough to get him a soapy towel. Although he appeared stunned, he needed to wipe his blood stained hands.

I gave him a towel, then put my arms around his waist. In return, he held me tightly. "It's going to be all right," I whispered. When Heather saw me caressing Gideon, she threw up her hands. It was not my intention, but round two went to me.

Chapter Thirteen

Dave's death had put a damper on the Thanksgiving holidays. I did my best to keep everyone cheerful. Gideon appreciated my enthusiasm. Dave had no family left, so Gideon paid for his burial.

It was a quiet evening service. There were few of us to send Dave home. Gideon looked down on Dave's prepared body. He was dressed in a gray suit and clean shaven. His curly hair lay in gorgeous silver locks.

Gideon was dressed in his black suit, and I was wearing my black dress. Together, we said our farewells.

On that day, I saw yet another side of Gideon, a spiritual side, a strong leader, a pillar in the community. He spoke eloquently over Dave's remains as his love for the homeless lived and breathed.

We prepared to leave the cemetery, dreading that tomorrow would be Thanksgiving. I shrank at the thought of being without Dave's impish grin. His encouraging words always touched my heart.

After a bout of unnatural silence, Gideon finally decided we needed a break. "We need to eat something, princess," he said as we sat idly inside his car.

Placing my hand on his thigh, I addressed the sorrow in his eyes. "You were excellent up there. I'm sure Dave heard every word. You've been so busy, seems we haven't eaten in days."

He cranked the car and backed out of the cemetery. "Let's drive down to the lake and eat there. I love the water in November. The trees are bare and shedding their leaves. It's altogether a different feel than during the summer months."

Placing my hand on his, I whispered, "I'd love to go with you, Gideon."

We ate a quiet dinner in the restaurant on the lake. Although Gideon was pensive, I knew he'd soon come around. All in all, I enjoyed his company. While admiring him across the table, I was struck with a wonderful thought. *We're going to make an excellent couple.*

After we finished our meal, we put on our heavy coats and walked along the mucky winter shore. The air was damp and the night was bitterly cold.

Bare trees holding eerie shapes bowed gently in the frigid winds. Though dried leaves rustled around us, I felt safe with Gideon.

We buttoned our coats, turned up our collars, and gazed upon the water. It was peaceful and calm. Before I knew it, Gideon had pulled me into his arms. "Let's sit down, princess. I have something I *need* to tell you." He pointed to a concrete picnic table in the distance.

I was very concerned, as Gideon seemed serious about this matter. We walked over to the table. Though it was covered with leaves and twigs, we sat amid them. From where we were sitting, there was a stunning view of the moon as it shimmered off the water.

While we sat side by side, I placed my head on Gideon's shoulder. "What's on your mind, Gideon?"

"Us," he uttered quietly.

As he gazed upon the water, I searched his face. "What about us?"

Gideon's rich voice echoed off the water and vibrated in my ears. "There's something I need to tell you—about me."

I smiled softly. "Is it really bad? Because, right now, I can't take anymore bad news."

"No." He shook his head. "But it's very important."

"Okay." I made myself comfortable on the hard table. "What's so important?" I placed my hand on his thigh and admired his moonlit profile. It had been a few days since I'd seen the jovial nature of his deep dimples.

Gideon exhaled. "I wasn't always well off."

"No?" I narrowed my eyes, wondering where this conversation was going.

"No." He placed his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. "When I was a little boy, my mother married this man. This man wasn't my father, but he was a wonderful individual."

"That's good." I nodded. "So what's the problem?"

"Well, this man came into an inheritance. Right now, I'm living on *that* inheritance."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. I wish I didn't have to work."

"Yes, but when I found out he had willed me that old building, I just had to give back to the community."

"But that was a noble thing to do. I still don't see a problem."

"The problem is—my dad, Rufus, my mom's husband, ran a shelter many years ago. He was the kindest man I've ever known. My mother never suffered for anything. Rufus always took care of our needs."

"That's a sweet story, Gideon. Now, that didn't hurt a bit. Did it?"

"Joya, Rufus found us at a shelter—just like the one I'm running now."

"Woah." Stunned, I leaned backward to study his expression. "So you're saying that..."

"I lived in a shelter myself. I understand what being homeless means."

"Oh my God, Gideon. You've done so well for yourself."

Gideon cast his gaze toward the sky. "You know, I try hard to make that shelter work."

I patted his arm. "And you've done an admirable job. I know, because we lived in a shelter for a time, too."

Gideon removed his hand. He lifted my chin and turned my face toward him. "You're kidding me."

"No." I shrugged. "I understand what it means to have no place to go, too." Gideon kissed the coldness in my hands, then he rubbed them briskly between his. His touch warmed my soul. "It was a Thanksgiving I'll never forget."

"Thanksgiving, huh?" Gideon narrowed his eyes. "It was Thanksgiving?"

"Yes. I'm not sure where that shelter was located. I think it's gone now."

"It was on Tally Street," he said coldly.

"Yes." I pointed at Gideon. "I think it *was* on Tally Street."

"I'll never forget the night we walked into that shelter. I was scared to death." He closed his eyes in remembrance and shook his head.

"Yeah." I bumped his leg with mine. "Me, too. But Mama made it all better."

He grinned softly and stroked my arm. "Mothers are like that. The place was so crowded that Rufus had to put a cardboard box on..."

My eyes widened with surprise. "The floor next to our cot."

Gideon frowned, and turned to face me. "What are you saying?"

I drew my shoulders tightly. "I'm saying that—I was the little black girl on the cot next to you."

Without saying a word, Gideon got up from the table and walked in front of me. "I'm not understanding." He unbuttoned his coat and placed his hands in his pockets. "Could you repeat that, again?"

"Fine." I winced, then spoke slowly. "I'm the little girl who wiggled her nose at you on the cot. You were crying, your mom was crying, and your tears—made me cry, too." A tear rolled down my cheek in memory. He wiped it away, and kissed my eyelids.

Shaking his head briskly, Gideon stated, "That's unbelievable. We were both in the same—shelter?" His eyes were filled with elation. They glistened brightly in the moonlight.

Placing my arms around his neck, I sniffled, then sought his eyes. "It was Thanksgiving day. I remember that vividly. We walked past our nicely prepared dinner and left my dad. Every Thanksgiving, I get weepy."

Gideon shook his head slowly. While the wind blew his hair, he gently kissed my cool lips. "I never wanted to spend Thanksgiving alone. But Mother died two years ago. After that, Rufus just lost the will to live. A year later, I buried him also. Rufus always treated us like gold."

My arms were still locked around his neck. "Gideon, is this some sort of sign? Were we fated to be together?"

He kissed my forehead affectionately, then placed his head against mine. "I really don't know, Joya. Was it sheer coincidence that brought you to my shelter?" Gideon pulled me near. "I think not. I've got to have you in my life."

"May I be honest with you, Gideon?"

"Please." He kissed my lips.

I wiped away a forming tear. "It's time."

Gideon shrugged. "Should I know what that means?"

"It's time to let go."

"Of the center?" He retreated.

“Let someone else run it for a while. Your life is passing you by. You’re getting older, and one day, you’ll be lonely.”

“Joya, you’re a wise woman. But I’ve dedicated my life to that center. We both understand that commitment. But, if *you* stop working there—there would be no more me. You’ve brought joy into my life, princess. Now. If you’ll allow it, I’m going to bring joy into yours.” When our lips finally met, there was new meaning in our passions.

Chapter Fourteen

Gideon finally took my advice. Away from the center, our relationship blossomed with excitement. Meeting me was just what he needed to live again. Now I was standing in his fabulous home, waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. "Come on, Gideon. We're going to be late."

"I'll be right down," he finally called. "Patience is a virtue, princess."

"Yes," I yelled up the stairs, "but my virtue is wearing thin."

At last, Gideon leaped down the steps in his ill-fitting Santa suit. I held my hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter. "You look a hot mess, Gideon. You aren't going to fool anyone with that terrible suit. It's too small, and couldn't you find a better looking beard?"

Gideon patted the pillow he used for his belly. "It came with the suit. You don't like it?"

"Let's see." I tiptoed and kissed him on the lips. "No, it doesn't do a thing for me."

"Come here, you." Gideon tickled me and I rolled in laughter. Then, he grew quiet. "Merry Christmas, princess."

Realizing that fate had brought us together, I smiled. "Merry Christmas, Gideon." Our lips met in a passionate exchange.

When Gideon finally let go, Santa had gained a little weight. "Ho-ho-ho," he chuckled. "I think it's time for a little Christmas cheer."

I grabbed him by the hand and proceeded to lead him to the car. "Oh no. We're late as it is. I've already packed your gift bag. Now, let's get in your sleigh and ride!"

While I drove Gideon's car, he sat in the passenger's seat and practiced being jolly. After a few familiar miles, we finally arrived at our destination. Gideon fixed his long, silver wig, then he put on his Santa hat. "Do you think I look authentic?"

"No," I admitted, parking the car, "but who cares? I love you anyway. Itchy beard and all."

* * * *

When Gideon stepped inside the shelter, the children charged him with all they had. Through his ho-ho-ho's, he laughed uncontrollably. Leaning against the wall, I watched the residents and their children, enjoying the holiday surprise. Gideon passed out gifts, gave hugs, received kisses and extended the reach of his love.

Over the years, Gideon had denied himself simple gratification. Now, he took pleasure in them ten fold. Extreme happiness rang out in his unbridled laughter. Once he had been a teary little boy living in a shelter, then he'd become a man driven to create success in the lives of others. Gideon's life was unfolding like a hallmark movie, and so was mine. Through my laughter, I wiped tears of sheer delight.

It was hard to tear Gideon away from the children. Even the adults hated to see Santa go. By the time we started to Gideon's house, he was exhausted, but happy.

* * * *

A Christmas CD had made the drive home pleasant. While I drove up the long driveway, my wonderful man laid his head against the headrest and dozed.

I imagined us as husband and wife. In a few years we'd probably have children, twins, perhaps. They'd ravage our decorative Christmas tree in a state of madness. Excitement would be ringing from their tender lungs. I visualized Gideon tossing his son into the air, the sweetness of toddler drool streaming down his muscular arms.

Together, we had gotten through the Thanksgiving holidays. With Gideon in my life, my burdens became lighter. Tomorrow night, there would be a Christmas party to attend. There was no doubt, if I was not in Gideon's life, he'd still be plodding away at the center. Now, he was alive, and this time, with another purpose.

Chapter Fifteen

Gazing at my sleeping lover, I realized just how much I adored him. Although I hated to wake him, we had to go inside. "Sweetheart, wake up." I shook him gently.

With eyes closed, he smiled. "I wasn't asleep, princess. I was just being grateful for having you in my life."

"Really?" My heart missed a beat at his poignant words.

He turned to face me. Then, he stroked the side of my face with the back of his hand. "Joya, you mean so much to me. When we visit your mother tomorrow, don't forget the gifts. She raised a wonderful daughter."

"Thank you. I'm glad you don't mind spending time with us."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." He reached for the door's handle. "So the doctors say she's improving, huh?"

"Yes, isn't that wonderful?"

As soon as we got inside, Gideon removed the silver Santa's beard. I stood at the bottom of the stairs, my body ready to be loved. "Leave the beard, Santa." I placed my foot on the next step, then looked at Gideon, who was standing behind me. "You've been a naughty boy."

Gideon grinned. "Yes, I have. I must be punished straight away."

"Bring it on, you bad little boy." I sashayed up the stairs with Gideon in hot pursuit.

"Hold on a second, I'm getting the champagne." He walked back down the stairs, then out to the kitchen.

From the bedroom, I crooned seductively, "Don't be long."

When Gideon reached the bedroom I was perched against his pillow with two velvet ribbons attached to each breast. Below, I had on a naughty thong. "Forget the champagne," he said, closing the door.

Santa placed the champagne on the dresser and crawled onto the bed. "What a wonderful Christmas present." He removed his black boots. Because I didn't want to destroy the rented suit, I waited for Gideon to remove it.

After a few moments, he met me on the plush comforter. I pushed his chest with my hand. He laid down with complete trust.

"I want to play a game." I stood up and walked seductively toward the dresser. Spinning my hips with a saucy motion would get Gideon's attention. When I turned, I saw he was watching. Immediately, he broke into a large grin. Taking in his groin, I realized he had erected a tower in my honor. I gasped. "So soon?" I questioned, shaking my finger.

Turning my back, I got four pieces of red ribbon from the top drawer. After displaying the ribbons, I walked back to the bed with Gideon smiling broadly. When I reached for his right hand, he gladly obliged. After kissing his finger tips, I tied his wrist to the bed post.

Afterward, he placed his left hand into position without my prodding. Using the red ribbon, I secured his beautiful ankles to the foot of the bed. Finally, Gideon was spread eagle. He complained lightly. "What are you doing?"

I placed my finger across my lips to cease the talking. He obeyed. When I was sure he was secure, I reached into my tote for my black satin handkerchief. Then, I tied his mouth shut. Gideon could still see what I was doing, so I tied a blindfold over his aquamarine eyes. Because his dimples were indented, I could tell he was grinning beneath the gag. Even so, he was completely submissive.

With Gideon naked and spread eagle, I prepared to have my way with him. This was a game I called *touch*. However, only I knew the rules. If I pleased an erotic zone, his moans of ecstasy would guide my actions.

When Gideon was secured, I quietly shifted my weight upon the bed. Although he was totally nude, he still didn't seem the least bit vulnerable.

As in my wildest fantasies, I pulled out a tube of chocolate frosting. Because it had been refrigerated, it was very cold. I squeezed a dollop of the cold frosting around his nipples.

Gideon flinched, then expelled a groan. I watched his nipples grow firm and tight. Getting to my knees, I trailed the cold frosting over his belly and he lurched forward with a sharp moan. Once inside his thighs, he tightened his hips in response.

I squeezed the contents of the tube on my finger. After removing the gag, I then slid it across his lips. At that point, it was difficult to finish my task. His rosy lips looked so inviting that I put down the tube and placed my lips on his. Immediately, the results were very rewarding. Gideon raised his mouth in response to my touch. As if our kiss was all that he'd get, he thrashed wildly inside my mouth transferring his potent juices into my orifice. Our kisses alone were powerful enough to cause premature orgasm. A fluttering sensation below my abdomen told me to stop the kiss. No way I wanted our encounter to end like this. Backing away from the sweetness of his lips, I then placed my lips against his nipples. He gently rotated his hips and let out a moan. When I raised my head, his toes had curled beneath my touch.

Slowly, I trailed along his belly, devouring the sweet, cool chocolate. His mast waved back and forth as a dog would wag his tail. The tip turned crimson, expanding with passion.

Turning around, I placed my mouth on his inner thigh. My succulent rear was near his face. As if sensing a bitch in heat, his tongue lunged forward with a sweeping motion. While his tongue searched my folds, I quivered, moaning loudly.

Gideon's groans of pleasure drove me to the edge. I closed my eyes, and parted my folds, enjoying his capable expertise.

Once again, I felt my passions fighting to be released. By easing back onto his luscious mouth, I teased myself a little more. His proficient prodding would soon bring me to ruins. I tossed my head, licked my lips and shuddered.

Before my eyes, Gideon's shaft grew tighter with veins bulging. It jerked angrily, searching for release. Feeling selfish, I soon gave him the attention he craved. When I cooled his hot flesh, Gideon gnashed his teeth, almost ripping his strong arms from bondage.

It was obvious I had struck gold. After teasing him within an inch or orgasm, I slipped my swollen passage upon his shaft, devouring it inch by inch.

Gideon flexed his muscles and tore at the ribbons. He was snatching, grunting, and bucking wildly. "Joya, let me go," he called. "I can't take this, princess." Hearing his demands, I turned up the volume on my hips and placed my fingers across his lips. "Not fair," he muffed, turning his head from my grasp. His hips skidded off sync and, finally, his right arm broke free. "Damn it, Joya! I said, stop!" He quickly untied the other hand. "Untie my feet. I'm going to show you how to play dirty pool."

I crawled to the foot of the bed and untied Gideon's feet.

He all but stood up in bed. "Come here, woman!" he growled forcefully. Gideon grabbed my hips and pulled my tight passage upon his mast. In a blatant act of revenge, he put his hips in high gear while I cringed and tried to hold on. His hips rotated, thrusting with fervor.

Suddenly, he was all over me, sending sensual vibrations pouring through my body. Now, I was hanging on for dear life. What had I done? Was I making love to two men at once? Nothing on my body was neglected.

He bent me into an odd position, then siphoned frothy juices from my body. There was no doubt, I was out of my league. It was obvious Gideon had allowed me to play my little game while, all along, he was the master of my fate.

While I fought the urges that threatened to end our passions, Gideon tossed me as one would a rag doll. He grabbed my hair and poured his might into our lovemaking.

Every part of me was alive with sensation. My passions were flooding the sheets. I had absolutely no control of the situation. Finally, his name trembled from my lips as my flood gates opened with a vengeance. "Gggiiiddecoo."

"That's what I thought," he spat gruffly. "Call my name!" Then, as if pumping a Winchester rifle, Gideon shot his steamy rounds into my wrung out body.

Chapter Sixteen

While I basked in Gideon's arms, my peaceful thoughts were broken by a strange noise. I glanced at Gideon, however, he had drifted off to sleep. His appearance was almost angelic so I didn't want to disturb him. On hearing the noise once again, I sat up in bed and listened. Suddenly, there was a crash. "Gideon," I whispered. He moaned. "There's someone in the house."

Without hesitation, Gideon sat up. "Did you hear a noise?"

"Yes, down stairs. Just listen." This time, there was no mistake, the noise was louder. Gideon was wearing his boxers. He picked up his short silk robe, then he reached in the nightstand and retrieved a revolver. I frowned with disapproval. "Where did you get that?"

"I'm never without protection, princess. Especially in my home."

Gideon walked out of the bedroom and slunk quietly against the wall. Down below, he heard someone around the Christmas tree. I tiptoed behind him. "They're stealing our presents, Gideon."

"Shh," he whispered. "I can see him. Go back in the bedroom. Call the cops."

"I've called them already."

"Okay, go back inside." Gideon eased down the stairs cloaked in stealth mode. He held his gun poised. When he reached the lower step, he eased from it, then leaned against the wall. From the top of the stairs, I surveyed the unwanted intruder. He was robbing us blind. The DVD player, a Wii, and a laptop were stacked neatly in the foyer, and ready for pick up.

The intruder was a slender black male wearing a dark hoodie. There was a ski mask over his face. From time to time, he raised his head to glance up the stairs. Because it was dark, I was well hidden in the shadows.

Suddenly, the robber became spooked. He grabbed the black trash bag he was loading and pulled it toward the door. In a flash, Gideon was on him.

"Put your hands behind your head. The cops are outside."

The man looked toward the door while I switched on the lights. "Man! Shit! You called the cops."

Gideon gestured toward the clock. "I see you're right on time."

"What?" the man yelled nervously.

Gideon insisted. "Remove your mask."

"Man, you must be outta your mind. I'm not removing nothing."

"Remove it!" Gideon yelled with narrowed eyes.

The guy lowered his hands to remove his mask. "Okay, man. Don't shoot."

Slowly, he pulled off his mask. When it was completely off, Gideon grimaced. I recognized our intruder and was also taken aback. Our bold prowler was Mike, Dave's assailant. From Gideon's rigid stance, he was not happy. "I knew I'd see your ugly face again. You like to take advantage of old men. Well, guess what? I'm *not* an old man."

"But you gotta gun. I'm not armed." He raised his hands over his head, then laced his fingers behind his neck.

Obviously, he had been arrested before. "Don't trust him, Gideon," I called, walking boldly down the stairs.

Gideon refused to take his eyes off the guy. "Dave was a sweet old guy. And you wasted him for a cheap watch."

Mike shifted his weight. "If I have enough cheap watches I can take care of what I need." He paced nervously, and seemed to be looking for a way out.

Gideon narrowed his eyes. "Please give me a reason to waste your worthless ass. Move! Go for your weapon! Or just breathe hard! I'll splatter your ass all over my clean living room."

"I not gonna move, man. 'Cause I heard about you—you crazy." Nervously, he cast his eyes toward the door once more.

"You'd better believe it. What are you looking for?"

"If I don't come out in a few seconds, man, my buddy is coming in to get me."

Grinning, Gideon cocked his head to one side and replied, "Really? Well, guess what? Your buddy isn't coming to help you. He works for me, and he delivered you—right on time."

"What?" He pranced anxiously. "I've been set up?"

"That's what I said. You've been set up, Mike. And right now, I'm not particularly fond of paying for your room and board. I'd rather end it all, right here, and right now."

"Naw, man!" Mike's brows drew a frown. His expression was exaggerated by fear.

"Hey." Gideon shrugged. "The way I see it, you broke into my house."

Mike shook his head. "Come on, man! You set me up!" He shifted his weight to his left foot.

"You had a choice, Mike, but you took door number two instead."

The doorbell rang. I closed my robe and went to answer. Gideon spoke firmly as I walked past. "It's James. Let him in."

"James?" I questioned, touching the door knob. I opened the door and a large, black male dressed in black stood poised.

He filled the entire doorway and Mike cringed. "James? You lied! You told me they were gone for the weekend. You told me your name was—was Easy!"

Gideon chuckled. "Yeah, well Easy flushed you out for me. Now you've got breaking and entering to complement your murder case."

Mike cast his eyes toward the floor. He was a nineteen-year-old drug addict. At times, he'd lived in the center. Gideon had placed him under his wing. However, when he'd murdered Dave, Gideon showed him no mercy. Instead of letting the police do their job, he'd hired James to track him down. Now, Mike's life depended on Gideon's leniency.

I'd had no idea Gideon had taken matters into his own hands. For that, I was grateful. James walked inside the door, and Mike looked as if he'd cry. Profanity trembled from his lips as James took pictures of him and the robbery situation.

Finally, I saw blue lights flashing against the blinds on the window. The police had arrived. Gideon grew solemn as they cuffed Mike and dragged him away. He shook his head. "So much potential. What a waste," he said, scowling.

From the tension in his temples, I could tell he was clenching his teeth. As Gideon processed this information, I stroked his tight shoulders and said nothing.

Chapter Seventeen

Gideon took care of all my needs. He never ceased to amaze me. As time progressed, I realized that the man I loved had a Bad Boy image. Though he loved me dearly, there was a part of me that couldn't predict what his boundaries were. If anyone harmed me in any way, my avenging angel would handle them accordingly.

Gideon said he had his fingers on the pulse of the city, and I found that to be true. At times, he scared me. What he did was *not* illegal. He had a true passion for the homeless. However, something was just not right.

* * * *

My black Chevy was my pride and joy. I kept it waxed, clean, and the rims were impeccable. One night, I was preparing to leave the center. Gideon had made a habit of walking me to my vehicle. He unlocked the front door, and we started toward my truck. However, across the street, two teens were trying desperately to break into my ride.

On seeing the novice thieves, Gideon chuckled. "Intriguing. Give me your keys and wait here." He pushed me back inside the center. I cracked the door, wondering what Gideon was up to this time. In the past, I'd been astonished by his unpredictable behavior.

Gideon walked toward the truck with his hands deep in his pockets. His stride was regimented, yet casual. When he walked away from the center, his expression seemed serious. Addressing the boys, he called, "Here, use the keys." Then, he tossed my keys toward the teens.

One teen stood up from his task. "This ain't your truck."

"It doesn't matter," Gideon said, grinning. "It belongs to my girl."

The teens humbly apologized. "Man, Gideon, hey, we're sorry, bro. I mean, like, we didn't know."

"That's what I thought," he said firmly. Gideon pointed two fingers at the boys. "Now, if I catch you two anywhere around this area again, I'm putting a bullet in both your asses. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

And that's the way it was. I was Gideon's Girl. On the streets, I heard the whispers. *That's Gideon's Girl*, they'd say.

* * * *

The New Year came in with a bang. There was food to prepare and parties to attend. Gideon and I were standing in line at the grocery store when an older Caucasian broke in front of me. Although he saw Gideon, he didn't know we were together. In a deliberate display of rudeness, he shoved my shopping cart out of the way and got in front of me. He mumbled, "Niggers" and, "in the rear" in one breath.

I gasped, not believing what I was hearing—the nerve of some people. Before, I could face Gideon, he had laid hands on the man. He grabbed him by the collar, then ushered him toward the end of the line.

During his journey, the man cursed, having left his cart in front of mine.

While Gideon walked the man along, they engaged in what appeared to be *casual conversation*. "What's your name?" Gideon asked.

"The name is Bob. Bob Miller," the man said, trembling.

"Well, Bob—Bob Miller." He pointed to me. "That's my girl. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah. I understand," he said, briskly nodding his head.

"The next time you think you're better than someone else, you'd better think twice, okay?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Everyone has rights. I'm sorry."

Gideon patted him hard on the back of the head. "Good. Now, have an exceptional New Year, okay?"

Not wanting to make a scene, I ignored Gideon's behavior and placed my items on the counter. When Gideon returned, I cringed. "Gideon, please," I begged through my teeth. "Let's not make a scene."

Gideon pulled his coat apart and placed his hands in his pockets. Sarcasm flew from his lips. "What? I didn't hurt him. I just led him to the rear of the line."

“You said more than that,” I retorted, closing my wallet.

“Oh, that. I just told him who you are.”

“And who am I?” I sassed, staring into his mischievous eyes.

Gideon extended his arms with upturned palms. “You’re Gideon’s Girl. Need I say more?”

Chapter Eighteen

Almost every weekend, I'd spend the night with Gideon. His home almost became my home. I knew every nook and cranny. Although, I loved spending time with him, my mother's care came first.

On this particular morning, I prepared Gideon's usual breakfast. He seemed aggravated that I had to pack my things and go home on Sundays.

His eyes followed me around the kitchen. "So, tell me again why you can't stay, princess. I mean, don't you like it here?"

I placed his breakfast before him and kissed his forehead. "Sweetie, I've got to go home. I have things to take care of. I love you, but other things need my attention right now."

He picked up a slice of bacon and took a bite. "I know," he said while munching, "but you could return to me when you're finished. Instead, you'd rather go to that dismal little apartment in the city."

"Honey, that's my home and it's closer to my job. I don't know why you have such a problem with that."

Gideon took a sip of his coffee and shrugged. "It's just that I miss you when you're gone."

I cupped his clean shaven face. "I miss you too, sweetie, but I have obligations."

"I'm part of your obligation," he stated flatly.

I grinned, lifted his chin and kissed his lips. "I know. We have this conversation every Sunday. You've got to get used to that fact—I work and live in town."

Gideon squinted. "Quit."

Shaking my head, I admitted, "I think you've had too much coffee. Now you're really talking out of your head."

His tone seemed defensive. "I'm always clear."

"Most times," I said, stroking his shoulders as I walked away.

Gideon's eyes followed me toward the sink. "I know I need *you* with me."

Turning on the water, I retorted, "Gideon Knight, you see me at the center almost every evening. Don't you need some air?"

“What I need is you.”

“I’m flattered—I really am.” I rinsed out a few dishes. “But we can talk about this later.”

“Later, huh?” Gideon picked up his fork and played with his breakfast. “How can I make you stay?”

Exhausted from the same old conversation, I puffed a loud sigh and turned. “Gideon, please.” I reached for my tote and moved toward the front door. Gideon got up from the table and followed, as usual.

I’d grown accustomed to him trapping me against the front door. He placed his arms around my neck. “I want you—to stay.”

“Gideon. Not again.” I pushed him away and turned toward the door.

“Stay,” he said, unyielding.

“No.” I tapered my eyes and tilted my face toward his. “I can’t.”

“Stay.” He kissed my lips and I reveled in the passion.

When he released me, I swooned. “Gideon,” I stammered. “What’s wrong?”

He reached behind a flower arrangement positioned by the door in the foyer. He pulled out a red velvet box and my eyes grew large. Afterward, he placed the box before my eyes and opened it slowly. “Stay,” he said for the last time.

Inside the box, an engagement ring sparkled. It shimmered like nothing I’d ever seen. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Finally, I uttered, “Ohhh mmmmyy.” My hands started to tremble and tears filled my eyes. “Yes.” I nodded. “I’ll stay,” I repeated, blubbering loudly. “Yes, Gideon Knight. I will stay.”

“Forever and ever?” Gideon removed the ring and placed it on my finger.

Admiring my ring, I repeated, “Forever and ever.”

Gideon kissed me again. “Now, put down those bags and let’s plan a wedding.”

“How, why?” I was so excited that my speech did not match the mounting adrenaline. “This is the day I’ve dreamed of. However, I never expected a proposal like this.”

"You have two dates to choose from. February fourteenth, or February fourteenth."

I slugged him playfully. "So, that's my choice. But this is January and February fourteenth is just around the corner. There is no way to plan a wedding..."

The doorbell rang. "Excuse me." Gideon released me and walked toward the door. He gazed at his watch. "Right on time."

When he opened the door, two gorgeous blonds stood ready with catalogs, swatches and patterns. "These," Gideon nodded, "princess, are your wedding planners."

I was shivering with joy. "My wedding planners."

Gideon bowed like a prince. "Yes, and the church is already reserved. The announcements are ready and the invitations have been printed. If you had said no, I'd have had to eat the expenses."

"You have this much confidence in me?"

"Joya." He took my hand. "You're the little girl who shed tears when I was scared. You did your best to make me laugh when your heart was also breaking. Those little turkeys that hung on the cafeteria wall—we made those together."

I placed my hand over my mouth. "Those were our handprint turkeys."

"Yes." His eyes glistened and his dimples deepened. "That was your hand, Joya. And the larger hand—was mine. When I found them in an old bag, I just couldn't part with them." He opened his hand widely and we placed our palms together. "I have no doubt in my heart. We were meant to be, princess."

I hugged Gideon tightly. Tears were streaming down my face. When I looked behind him, I saw that my wedding planners were also crying. Right then, I fainted dead away.

Chapter Nineteen

When I woke up, I was in Gideon's bed. Sitting beside me he declared, "Okay, no more surprises for you, young lady. I had no idea you were prone to fainting."

I stretched my eyes and frowned. "Gideon, so much has occurred in my life since I met you. I can't imagine something so wonderful happening to— to me."

Stroking his arm, I poured out my heart. "I love you so much that I have no words to explain how I feel. You absolutely adore me, and I know that. Gideon, I'm a black woman, sweetheart. You've only known me a few months. Are you sure you want to make that kind of commitment?"

Gideon appeared pensive. He kissed my forehead. "Princess, before you walked into my life, the center ruled my every heartbeat. You were right, I was getting older and I didn't let anyone come between me and that center. Then, one day, you came along with your kissable lips, your big, bright eyes, and your red beret. That day, I was completely smitten.

"On the night we discovered we had been at the same center, I knew you were a woman who could understand me. Understand my moods, understand my likes and dislikes. No, I'm not the typical wealthy man. Although I have a masters degree, I've have a great deal of street sense. There was no way I wanted to spend my life with some spoiled little rich girl like Heather. We have more in common than you think, Joya. When I watched you interact with the residents, I knew I wanted you in my life. One day, you became Gideon's Girl." He picked up my hand and placed it to his heart. "Now, I'm entrusting my life to you, Mrs. Knight. That's a big responsibility. I'm loyal, temperamental, and crass. Can you handle that?"

"Yes, Gideon Knight. I *can* handle that."

* * * *

On February fourteenth, I became Mrs. Gideon Knight and we couldn't be happier. Occasionally, we both volunteer at the center, but this time, we

do so with common sense. Jess forgets Gideon is my husband and he still talks out of turn. Gideon found Frank's daughter and he moved out of the center.

However, Reverend Wayne is a stubborn sort. Having a black and white issue, he hasn't given up on me. If Gideon only had a clue, the reverend would mysteriously relinquish his position at the Solid Foundation Missionary Baptist Church on Crockett and Main. Nobody messes with Gideon's Girl.

The End

About the Author

Empress LaBlaque considers herself a connoisseur of fine romance. She can find romance in any situation and enjoys writing across genres. Her love for writing dates back to high school where her studies took a back seat to her writing. As punishment for her lack of attention, her teacher pulled her forward and demanded she read her paper. He admitted her story was good, but sent her to the office anyway. Here's to you, Mr. English and thanks. Website: empresslablaque.com.